



# PENTHOUSE PRINCE

*New York Times & USA Today Bestselling Author*

KENDALL  
RYAN

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# PENTHOUSE PRINCE

*New York Times & USA Today Bestselling author*

KENDALL RYAN

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## ABOUT THE BOOK

Lexington Dane was my brother's best friend growing up.

We did everything together.

He taught me how to throw a punch, how to change a tire . . . and he taught me how to kiss. I fell hard and fast, and gave him all my firsts.

I promised I'd wait for him . . .

But I'm done waiting, because he went off to college and never came back. He took his fancy business degree and moved to New York City, where he promptly became a real estate mogul—turning every penthouse and apartment project he touched into gold.

It's been ten years, and now he's back and needs a favor . . . someone to watch his little girl. That's right, the cocky penthouse prince and heartbreaker extraordinaire Lexington is back with an adorable two-year-old daughter. Guess who he wants to watch her?

I've never been able to say no to him. I might agree to be the nanny for his precious little angel, but there's no way in hell I'm falling for her hot-as-sin daddy.

I could think of about a million other things I'd rather be doing than sitting here listening to my friends bitch about the sad state of my social life.

*Get a rectal exam.*

*Wait in line at the DMV.*

*Clean the toilets at the local diner after chili night.*

Yeah, any of those would rank higher than hearing my friends question me about the last time I went out and did something that was *just for me*.

“Will you guys please just drop it?” I mutter, shaking my head.

“Hell no, we won't.” Bryce smirks, taking another sip of the single-malt Scotch in front of him. I braced for whatever is going to come flying out of his mouth next. “When's the last time you've been on a date?”

I hesitate, curling my hand around the glass in front of me and choosing to avoid their eyes. I knew my dating life or lack thereof would be brought up.

And to be honest, I can't quite remember the last time I took out a woman. At least, a grown woman who wasn't my two-year-old daughter. She and I go out together and do things all the time. Does visiting the pediatrician count? We go to the library story's time, and we take walks in the park. Just this morning, we went to the farmers' market together. We do plenty.

I shrug.

Devin leans forward, putting his elbows on the table. “Better question is—plug your ears, Lesley—when's the last time you got some pussy?”

Bryce's wife cringes but shakes her head at Devin. "You don't have to censor yourselves on my behalf."

Since I settled in New York a few years ago and met Bryce and Devin at my building's gym, we became good friends and regularly meet for dinner or drinks. Bryce got married last year to his longtime girlfriend, Lesley, and now she's a regular addition to our boys' nights.

I heave out a sigh and rub at the sore spot on my neck. "It's kinda difficult with a two-year-old at home."

What they don't understand about that, I'll never know.

Oh yeah, it's because neither of them has kids. There's not so much as a pet goldfish between them.

*Dumbasses.*

They have no idea what my days are like. Wake up at dawn, get my baby girl ready for her day, then work my ass off to create a good life for us, then I basically drop into bed at night exhausted and pass out until my alarm goes off again. My schedule doesn't exactly leave room to wine and dine members of the opposite sex, even if I wanted it to.

"Don't tell me." Devin grimaces. "You haven't—plug your ears, Lesley—fucked anyone since the egg donor."

Lesley rolls her eyes, then gives me a look of sympathy.

That's what they call the mother of my child, *the egg donor*, since she didn't want to be part of Grier's life at all. She never wanted children, and as soon as Grier was born and placed in my arms, she split and hasn't been in contact since. Which is for the best, as far as I can tell. She and I weren't in love, weren't even really a couple. She was just a hot attorney who worked almost as much as I did, and happened to like no-strings sex. What we had worked—until two pink lines appeared on a pregnancy test and then everything turned upside down.

"Your dick is going to fall off from lack of use, man," Devin says with a

smirk.

Not likely. My social life might be dead, but my sex drive sure as fuck isn't. I still jerk it every morning in the shower. Just because I don't have a willing partner doesn't mean I don't get horny. Of course I do. And if these assholes had any tact at all, they wouldn't rub it in my goddamn face.

Bryce waves one hand in my general direction, squinting at me as he says to Devin, "Be nice to the guy. Maybe women just aren't into the whole single-dad, workaholic vibe he's got going on. Plus, he could really use a haircut and that shirt he is wearing is on the questionable side of fashion."

There isn't a damn thing wrong with my hair. I get it cut every four weeks like clockwork, and my shirt? It was black, tailored, expensive as hell and I have had no complaints about it before. Fuck them.

"You guys understand that I'm sitting right here, right?"

Unfazed, they shrug, and continue right on.

I drain the last of my Scotch and stand, tossing a couple of bills onto the table to cover the cost of my drink. "As much as I've enjoyed your running commentary on my love life, hair and fashion choices, I need to get home and relieve the sitter. 'Night, boys. Lesley." I tip my chin toward her.

She smiles at me. "Don't listen to these idiots, Lexington. Any woman alive would be lucky to have you—and the beautiful little angel waiting for you at home."

I chuckle. "Thanks. But she'd better not be waiting up for me at home. If I have to read that *Happy Sunshine Bear* book one more time, I'm going to throw myself out the fucking window."

To a chorus of laughter, I head off into the night.

• • •

"Daddy! I'm awaaaaake!" my daughter hollers from her perch atop my stomach.

I jolt and crack my eyes open, looking first at her grinning face, then at the clock. “Grier, it’s five thirty.” Admittedly, my alarm will go off in only half an hour, but I was up later than usual last night, and I cherish every second of sleep I can get.

She bounces, forcing an *oof* from me. “Hungwy.”

I guess I’m going to have to start getting used to the fact I now have a toddler and not a baby anymore. Ever since I moved her from a crib to a toddler bed, she’s been getting up earlier and earlier, and her morning greetings are not only becoming *earlier* but also *louder*.

“Okay, baby girl, let’s get up and make some breakfast.” I set her down on the floor so I can climb out of bed.

I change her diaper, pour her a sippy cup of milk, and cut up half a banana to tide her over until I can cook her favorite breakfast; eggs. With Grier focused on her favorite cartoons, I check my phone quickly. Seven voice mails, ten texts, and almost thirty new emails. How the hell did so much happen before the sun even rose? But when you own as many properties as I do, it’s to be expected.

I tackle the easiest texts and emails while brushing my teeth and shaving, then take a lightning-fast shower while praying Grier doesn’t do anything crazy until I can get my eyes back on her. When I emerge from dressing for work, she’s careening around the living room, and I notice she’s eaten only two banana slices. But nothing seems broken, and I can’t bring myself to get into a battle of wills right now.

I put the earliest voice mail on speaker and listen while cracking and whisking eggs. It’s the superintendent of my Central Park property, asking me to talk to the AC repairman I contracted last week. I call them, bending my neck awkwardly to keep my phone to my ear while I stir the panful of scrambled eggs.

“Hearthside HVAC, Doug speaking. How may I help you?”

“Good morning. This is Lex Dane, of Dane Properties. Betty said you had some questions you needed me to answer?”

“Okay, let me see here . . .” There’s a rustle of paper in the background. “Have you worked with us before?”

“Yes, many times.”

“What type of repair did you need?”

Frustration rips through me and I exhale out a breath. “I explained the problem when I emailed you last week. The central air isn’t working, and I need a diagnosis.”

“Sorry, but I’m not seeing any record of that conversation. Who did you talk to?”

I rummage through my memory and come up with nothing but a jumbled mess. It’s way too early, I’m uncaffeinated, and I’ve had about a thousand similar conversations this month.

“Whoever responded to my email inquiry. I don’t remember his name off the top of my head. It started with F, I think.”

“Felix? He’s off today.”

*Of course he is.* “Look, I need someone sent out ASAP. I was told this would be dealt with within twenty-four hours, and it’s now been almost three days.”

“There’s no need to get upset, sir.”

My barely restrained temper flares. “I strongly disagree. I have a building full of tenants without air-conditioning, in *June*, and your company can’t get its shi —” I catch Grier staring at me with huge, fascinated eyes. “Uh, *stuff* together. Now, will you be over there by the end of the day, or should I find another contractor?”

A long pause. “I’ll send someone.”

“Thank you,” I reply icily, then stab at the END CALL icon.

*For Christ’s sake.* Can this guy wipe his own ass, or does he need me to help him with that too? The only person who enjoys that privilege is my two-year-old

daughter . . . whose hand is currently, *oh my fucking God*, about half an inch from the glowing red burner on the stove.

My heart kicks into overdrive, and I yank her back. “No!”

Grier’s face crumples, her bottom lip drops, and she howls in outrage.

“We’ve talked about this, baby girl. The stove is for grownups. It’s dangerous, way too hot. You’d get a big, big owie.”

Still screaming bloody murder, she shakes her tiny fists at me. “Bad Daddy!”

“I just want you to be safe, sweetheart.” I glance back to discover that she’s somehow outwitted her spill-proof sippy cup and dumped milk all over the table.

*Shit.* We have less than an hour before I need to drop her off at day care on my way to work, and she’s still unfed, wearing pajamas, and now too pissed off to let me rectify any of those problems. And what the hell is that smell?

*Fuck, the food!*

I shove the pan of burned eggs onto the counter and turn off the stove. My phone rings again, and I snatch it up, ready to bite Doug’s head off—then freeze. It’s not his number on my screen like I expect. It’s my mom’s.

“Hello?” I say, trying to restrain the claws of worry that are already grabbing at me.

Why would she call at this hour? We just had our weekly chat a few days ago, and she said she was feeling fine then. *Calm down, maybe she just wants a favor.*

“How are you, sweet pea?” Mom’s voice is mild and so tired, it makes my heart hurt.

Grier abruptly stops flailing. “Gamma?” she asks, looking up at me with a furrowed brow. She’s too perceptive sometimes.

Sitting down, I pull her close and stroke her soft curls, as much to soothe myself as her. She wiggles a little, but stays with me. “I’m fine. What about you? Are you doing okay today? Do you need something?”

“I just got done talking to my oncologist, and . . .”

“At six in the morning?”

“Yes?” She sounds confused. “Why not? I was right there in the hospital.”

A spike of panic shoots through me, followed quickly by guilt. I totally forgot it was time for her monthly chemo session.

“Anyway,” she says, “we had a long talk, and, well . . .”

My stomach has knotted into a tight, painful ball. “What’s wrong?”

“Well, there’s no easy way to say this . . .” She hesitates, and my stomach twists.

“Mom, just say it.”

She clears her throat. “He estimates about six months.”

The floor falls out from under me. I open my mouth but nothing comes out.

“We always knew this was coming,” she says gently, somehow able to sense my implosion from five hundred miles away. “He told me the prognosis a year ago.”

I take a deep breath and resume stroking Grier’s hair. “I know, but you— I didn’t—” I swallow past the lump in my throat. “You’re my *mom*.” The words sound ridiculous as soon as they’re out. But I don’t know how to say what I’m feeling.

Grier squirms in my grasp with a noise like an angry cat. “Want Gamma!”

“Do I hear the wild goober?” Mom’s smile is audible.

“Y . . . yeah. She wants to talk to you,” I manage to whisper.

I hand my daughter the phone before she can gear up into a full-blown tantrum.

She squeals in delight and starts babbling at top speed while I just stare past her, completely numb. I can’t process anything. I know this is real, this is

happening, it's not a nightmare, but I can't make myself believe it. I don't want to believe it. I can't imagine losing my mom. What the hell do I do? My dad hasn't been in the picture since he split when I was four. It's always been just me and Mom.

As I process that, another thought pops into my head.

*And what kind of a son am I?*

Yes, I made sure she had all the money she needed for the best medical care possible, and I've visited her a couple of times since her diagnosis, but that's not nearly enough. What the hell have I been doing here in New York? My business is here. My life. But now, none of that seems to matter anymore.

I let myself pretend that my hopes would come true, and Mom would defy the odds stacked against her and magically get better, and nothing about our world would have to change. She'd live forever. She'd get to watch my little girl become a woman and be there to offer advice when I consider making stupid decisions. But the universe seems to be set against us. Suddenly, I'm so pissed I can barely breathe—at myself, at the cancer, at the mess that's been made of our lives. Everything is wrong because it was never meant to be like this. At the prospect of doing something instead of just sitting here feeling empty, I absently bounce Grier on my knee as my mind starts churning.

*Action items. Make a list. What needs to get done and in what order?*

Buy a place in North Carolina as close to Mom as possible, hire a moving company, handle all the paperwork that comes with changing addresses, sell my apartment here, find a new oncologist for Mom, and dozens of other details. It's a lot, but still manageable.

When Grier pauses for breath, I say, "May I talk to Grandma again?"

She stares at me as if I just asked her to jump off a cliff.

"Just for a minute." When her eyes narrow, I have a stroke of inspiration. "Is Flapflap hungry? Let's give him some breakfast."

Grier drops the phone in my lap—I grab it before it falls to the floor—and charges off at top speed to fetch her beloved stuffed bat. Tossing him in the washing machine later is a small price to pay for peace, even if I’ll have to figure out a way to distract her from his brief absence.

She does *not* like him put through the washing machine. I learned that the hard way.

Without preamble, I say to Mom, “We’re coming to North Carolina. I’m moving back.”

“What? When? Are you sure? But what about your job?” Mom’s voice is filled with disbelief.

Next to Grier, real estate is my biggest passion. I can’t imagine giving it up. Besides, I’m just not the stay-at-home type. I tried taking extended leave when she was born, and I got cabin fever and went back to work early. The thought of retirement makes me break out in hives. There’s no way I can give it up. I’ll run my company remotely but delegate more so I can focus on the big-picture stuff.

Grier returns with her favorite bedraggled friend in tow and starts mashing a handful of banana slices into his fuzzy snout.

“Lex?” Mom says. “You still there?”

“Sorry, I was thinking. And yes, I’m sure. I can work from home.” And if worse comes to worst and I have to pass ownership on to someone else, I can always try to get involved in the local market. Flip houses and whatnot.

Mom hums in a way that I know is accompanied by a frown. “I’d love to have you close. But you work too much, sugar. I worry about you two.”

*This again.* I restrain a sigh and speed through my counterarguments to every point she’s about to try making. “What can I say? I love my job. It keeps me happy and sane. And before you bring up Grier, I don’t think having more free time while also being miserable will help me be a better father.”

“Well, I don’t understand it,” Mom says as if we haven’t had this exact

conversation a hundred times before. “But if that’s what you’ve decided, then at least think about finding a nice lady to help out. You’ve got your hands way too full.”

“Uh-huh,” I say automatically, and I almost have to laugh. Retreading such well-worn ground makes me feel so much more normal.

“Good. Anyway, I’ll let you go now.” Her voice brightens. “I really am over the moon to know I’ll have you back home. I love you both so much, and I’m looking forward to seeing you and my grandbaby all the time.”

“I love you too, Mom. I’ll keep you updated about the plan.” I hold the phone up to Grier’s ear. “Say bye-bye to Grandma, kiddo.”

“Bye!” she yells before going back to force-feeding Flapflap.

I call the office to let them know I’m telecommuting today, make a new batch of scrambled eggs, deal with my remaining emails while eating, then start making arrangements. As I cross each item off the list, a little weight slowly lifts from me. I have a concrete plan, and I’m putting it into action. I can’t fix Mom’s cancer, but I can at least control this much.

A tiny hand tugs on my pants leg. “Daddy.”

“Hmm?” I surface from my concentration.

Grier thrusts Flapflap forward. “Icky.”

So he is, the fake fur smeared with abundant banana goop and egg crumbs. Grier herself is sporting more than a little mess too.

“I think Flapflap needs a bath, don’t you? Will you come with him so he doesn’t have to be alone?”

She considers, then nods as gravely as an old diplomat. My terms have been accepted.

I take them to the bathroom, turn on the faucet, and undress her while the tub fills. The instant I’m elbow-deep in soapy water, my phone rings from the other

room. I heave a deep sigh.

I hate to admit it, but maybe Mom is right about me needing help. This morning's chaos and stress is part of a pattern, exactly like the majority of mornings since Grier was born two years ago. While I'm a quick learner, I can't be everywhere at once, and there are only so many hours in the day.

Normally, I'd just do my best to roll with it and work harder, but now that I'm changing everything else about our life, why not reexamine this too?

I mentally add one more item to my to-do list. *Hire a nanny.*

Grier busily explores the mountains of boxes filling the living room while dragging Flapflap behind her, as I watch the moving truck pull out of our driveway and disappear into the sunset. Our new home doesn't seem real yet, it's close to Mom, has a backyard for Grier, it's walking distance to the beach. This is going to be a good change for us, even though I'm acutely aware of how much there's still left to do.

"I think dinner comes first, though," I say aloud as I stare at the boxes and wishing they'd somehow unpack themselves. "How does pizza sound, baby girl?"

Grier grins, and claps her hand and making FlapFlap bounced around crazily. "Yeah!"

"You got it."

After ordering and then finding myself with nothing to do but wait for the pizza and watch Grier play on the floor with FlapFlap, I grab my phone and impulsively call my old best friend, Dak. The phone picks up to a blast of music and chatter that sounds like a busy bar.

"Who's this? How'd you get this number?" he says over the noise. "Start talking stranger."

I shake my head at my childhood best friends attempt at being funny. I guess the jab at not calling often enough has been well-earned, though. "Ha-ha," I say dryly. "It's Lex, you dick."

He chuckles. "Lexington Dane, you son of a bitch, I haven't heard from you

in months. What's up, dude?"

I wince at the loud curses—at least Grier doesn't seem to be paying attention—and turn down the speaker volume. "I'm back in town."

"Oh man! How long are you staying? I've got my own bar now. You should come see it."

"No, I mean, I'm back for good. Mom's . . ." This isn't really the kind of conversation I want to have over the phone. "I wanted us to be closer to Mom."

"Gotcha." His voice softens and I know he gets that I don't want to talk about what's going on right now. "Happy to hear you're back in town. How's the munchkin doing these days?"

"She's good. Just as much trouble as ever."

"Nice," he mumbles. "So, now that you're back, when are we getting together?"

I nod even though he can't see me. "We need to catch up and grab a beer." I realize the problem with that as soon as I say it. "Although hanging out might have to wait until I can find a nanny."

"Yeah? I know just who you should ask. My sister goes on summer break today."

*Corrigan.*

Memories over a decade old flood through my mind, as bright and fresh as the days we made them. Corrigan laughing in the passenger seat of my car as we blew around town like nothing else existed. Her hand on my thigh, lips against mine, sneaking a kiss in the back row of the movie theater. Her bare in my bed, her body welcoming me inside for the first time, her face pressed into my neck to stifle her moans. Her smile when she said she wanted to give me her heart.

Her tears when I broke it.

The crushing guilt of that day still weighs heavy on me. Dak clearly has no

idea what his precious little sister and I shared all those years ago because if he did he'd never suggest me coming within a hundred miles of her. I never apologized, never made things right after what I did either. I was young and dumb—but that's no excuse.

Realizing I've hesitated too long, I clear my throat awkwardly. "I don't know, man . . ."

"Why not? It's the perfect solution. She's a teacher. She loves little kids, plenty of experience with 'em, and she won't have a job for the next three months. And you two always got along great." He hesitates for a beat. "Well, until you left for college, anyway. She was really pissed at you for some reason. But that was years ago, she's gotta be over it by now."

I have no idea if that's true. But surely Dak knows his sister better than I do. Besides, even if she still isn't my biggest fan, I know what kind of person she is—caring, patient, fair, honest, and dedicated. I have absolutely no doubt I'd be able to trust her to take care of Grier, and it would certainly save a lot of time and effort in vetting nannies. At least for the summer.

And yeah, maybe there's a part of me that wants to see her again. I want to know how things turned out for her, what she thinks of me, whether we can be friends again. Because I'd be lying if I said I didn't think of her often, and truth be told, I've missed her.

"You've convinced me," I finally say. "What's her number?"

The sweet June breeze blows through my open classroom window, airing out the smell of a year's worth of sack lunches and colored-pencil shavings. June has arrived yet again which means another school year is in the books, putting me at five full years of teaching first graders. As I box up the last of this year's bulletin board decorations, I can't help but get the tiniest bit sentimental. Where in the world has the time gone?

"I think we've got just about everything," I say with a sigh, doing a full sweep of the room for any last decorations or books I might have left behind.

Once my best friend and saint of a clean-up volunteer, Sarah Jo, finishes disinfecting the desks with the wipes I gave her, we should be just about done. Then we can walk out of here and kick off my summer vacation with a much-deserved margarita.

I check my phone for the time—five forty-five—which means we haven't missed happy hour yet. While I'm still looking at my screen, my phone buzzes once, then twice in my hand with two texts from Dak.

Ten bucks says he's wishing me a happy last day of school. That or asking for a last-minute pair of hands at his bar tonight. I'm sure the place will be packed with teachers from this district, toasting to the end of the school year, just like Sarah Jo and I will be doing very soon.

"Quit texting and let's get out of here," Sarah Jo says with a whine, dragging a disinfecting wipe across the ledge of the chalkboard. "I can practically taste the tequila already."

"It's my brother. Just give me a second."

But once I nudge the text open with my thumb, my stomach plummets all the way to the soles of my shoes. I think I'm going to need more than a second. A minute, maybe. Or a few weeks. Actually, no amount of time would be enough for me to fully process this news staring back at me. News I never would have predicted I'd receive.

Hey, IDK if you know, but Lex is back in town.

Lexington Dane. Once upon a time, he was my everything. Now just his name sends my good mood plummeting.

I suck in a slow, controlled breath, pushing down the anger and confusion bubbling within me, then scan the screen to see what else Dak has to say. Turns out, his second text is just as insane as the first.

He mentioned he might need some kind of favor from you.

“Everything okay?”

I snap my head up to see Sarah Jo looking at me, her head cocked and a disinfectant wipe in her hand.

“Yeah, I'm fine. It's nothing,” I lie, managing a tight-lipped smile despite the pounding in my chest.

*Knock, knock, it's me, your heart. Reminding you of how freaking broken I ended up the last time we dealt with Lexington Dane.*

Unconvinced, my best friend narrows her eyes at me. “If it's nothing, then why do you look like you just saw a ghost?”

*Because I did.*

“Dak is just being weird, as usual.” I shrug, avoiding eye contact as I pocket my phone. “He caught me off guard.”

It's not a complete lie. My guard was absolutely, totally down before Dak dropped the atomic bomb of news. My high school boyfriend, the one I gave my

entire heart to, only to have him kick it to the curb on his way to college, is back in town. And apparently, he needs some sort of favor from *me*, of all people. The same ex-boyfriend who I haven't seen or spoken to in ten years. Oh and yep, you guessed it, the same ex-boyfriend who I compare every guy I meet to... even if I don't want to.

So, yeah, that guard that was down? Time to build it all the way back up again and hang up a sign that reads NO SCUMBAGS ALLOWED.

Sarah Jo has a stern look in her eyes as she marches across the room and presses the back of her hand against my forehead. "You feel a little warm. Maybe we should skip drinks tonight."

"No way, José." I duck out of her reach, shaking my head. "I'm fine. And I'll be even better after a frozen strawberry margarita with extra salt."

She looks skeptical, an unamused frown tugging at her lips. But after some gentle pleading from me, she throws in the towel, *um*, disinfecting wipe. "Fine. But only because it's been so long since we've been to Pepe's."

"We were there a week ago," I remind her. "And the week before that."

"Yeah." She scoffs. "And a week is a long time."

With everything boxed away until next year, I wave good-bye to my classroom, flipping the row of light switches one by one until the whole room goes dark. I've dealt with a lot in this little room over the years. Peanut allergies. Lice outbreaks. Skinned knees from recesses gone wrong. All of which I've navigated with the ease of an expert.

But one little text from my brother, three little letters spelling out one name, and suddenly, it's like I forgot how to stand on my own two feet.

I don't know what my problem is. It's not like I'm going to see Lexington. Well not on purpose, anyway. I have absolutely no plans to do him any kind of favor after what he did to me. And even if we do run into each other, my first graders have taught me everything I need to know about the silent treatment. So,

what is there to get worked up about?

In the parking lot, Sarah Jo and I each hop in our cars, and although it seems ridiculous to drive separately, I'm grateful for the alone time. It gives me a few minutes to collect my thoughts about this Lexington thing, without trying to keep a poker face in front of my best friend.

It's weird enough that he's back in North Carolina, but the fact that he needs a favor specifically from me is almost too wild to be true. It's been ten years since we've spoken, and even longer since I've seen him. And if his memory is the same as mine, he has to know how badly he hurt me and it shouldn't be a secret that I would be pissed.

But before our relationship turned to heartbreak, it was different. It was sweet and easy, and everything you'd imagine your first love to be.

I still remember the night things changed between us. It was early October, homecoming weekend at our high school. While every other junior in town was getting ready to go to the big homecoming dance, I was sulking on the couch, barely watching some made-for-TV movie. Upstairs, my brother and a few buddies were drinking beer they'd not-so-sneakily taken from the fridge in our basement. I could only assume Lex was on his way to grab a few more brews when he came downstairs and spotted me, elbow deep in a bag of cheese puffs.

"Weren't you supposed to be at the dance?" he asked, his dark brows knitting together.

I nodded, licking cheese dust from my thumb. "Yeah, but Sarah Jo got food poisoning from the nachos at the football game last night."

"That sucks. For her and for you."

The couch was big, easily seating four people comfortably, but when he sat down, he sat right next to me, so close that his denim-clad thigh pressed against mine. It was enough for my teenage hormones to go into overdrive, so much so that I nearly didn't hear the next thing he said.

“I could take you, if you want.”

My heart started pounding as anticipation rushed warmly through me. I leaned in, unsure if I’d heard him right. “Did you say you’d take me?”

“Sure.”

“I thought seniors were too cool to go to the dance.” I gestured toward the ceiling and the raucous laughter of my brother and his friends upstairs. “Exhibit A.”

Lex lifted a shoulder, the slightest hint of a smile on his lips. “Yeah, but I don’t want you to be stuck at home.” He paused for a moment, weighing his words, then closed his eyes and went for it. “I bet you look gorgeous in your dress.”

Electricity prickled down my spine. Was he being serious? Lex was a senior, not to mention my brother’s best friend. Both of those things made it clear that he was very off-limits. But right then, as he shifted his hand to rest on my knee, all those limits dissolved into dust and floated out the window on the October breeze.

“I—I guess I’ll just have to find another time to wear it,” I stammered. It was my best attempt at flirting, at the time, and although it wasn’t much, it seemed to work.

“Like on a date?” he asked, one brow lifted suggestively. “Do you date?”

“I haven’t, no. But I haven’t really been asked out.”

“Well, I’m asking you out right now. I want to take you out. Somewhere nice, so you can wear your dress and I can see you in it. What do you say?”

The blast of a car horn yanks me from my trip down memory lane and throws me right back into the present, where I’ve totally missed the fact that the light turned green and I’m holding up traffic.

*Oops.* I give an apologetic wave to the car behind me as I pull into the restaurant’s lot, gripping my gearshift a little tighter than usual as I slide it into

park.

*Okay, Corrigan. Time to shake that memory off.*

Yes, Lexington Dane was a sweetheart and a charmer. Emphasis on the *was*. That was before he up and left the state, and my life, without a backward glance. So unless the favor he wants from me is a slap across the face and a kick in the you-know-where, there's not a favor in this world I would do for him.

Inside the restaurant, Sarah Jo has already settled into our usual booth near the back, where she's happily munching on chips and salsa. If memory serves me right, this is our third time here this month.

"Fancy seeing you here," she says, grinning as I scoot into the spot across from her.

"Us? At Pepe's?" I gasp, feigning shock as I dramatically press a hand to my chest. "Who would've ever guessed?"

We're still laughing when our waiter arrives, asking if we have questions about the specials.

"Nope." Sarah Jo laughs, having not even looked at the menu. "I'll have a lime marg on the rocks, and she'll have a frozen strawberry margarita, extra salt."

*God, I love this woman.* No wonder we've been friends our entire lives.

When the server disappears back to the kitchen, we get to work on the chips and salsa, laying down a solid layer of carbs to soak up the tequila we're about to consume.

"So, what's your game plan this summer?" Sarah Jo asks, wiping tortilla chip crumbs from the corner of her mouth. "Are you finally going to download that dating app I've been telling you about?"

I shake my head, holding up a finger while I finish chewing. "No need. I've got a hot date with the library and then I'm putting my booty in the sand at Wilmington Beach for as many days as possible until September rolls around

and I get back to the classroom.”

Sarah Jo rolls her eyes, but lucky for me, our waiter appears with our drinks before she can give me any grief on my extra-mild summer plan that definitely do not include dating apps.

I don't know what she was expecting. It's me, after all. Sure, I had a few flings here and there in college. I even had one semi-serious boyfriend a few years back, until we decided that my teaching schedule and his bartending gig made it too difficult to see each other. Other than that, though, it's common knowledge that I steer clear of the dating pool. I haven't had much steaminess in my life since . . .

Well, since Lexington, to be honest.

I take a hefty sip of my frozen margarita through the pink plastic straw. Maybe if I'm lucky, I can brain freeze that sad reality away. And if not, some tequila might make it a little less painful and I'll forget everything.

“Okay, that's it.” Sarah Jo slams her margarita down hard enough that it splashes a bit across the table.

I flinch at her intensity, wiping a cold drop of splashed marg from my cheek. If she's willing to waste booze like that, she must mean business. “What's up?”

“I should be asking *you* that question.” She huffs, folding her arms over her chest. “You've been acting weird since we left your classroom. What's going on? And don't try telling me that nothing's wrong. You're clearly stewing about something.”

Defeated, I sigh. I can't lie to my best friend. And I'm already feeling loose-lipped after a few sips of my margarita, so I might as well break the news now.

“It's Lexington,” I say on a sigh. “He's back.”

Sarah Jo's palm hits her lips with the slightest smacking sound. “No freaking way. *The* Lexington Dane? I thought he was a city guy now, some *penthouse prince* living in the big apple.”

I nod, cringing slightly at hearing her call him by the nickname I'd heard him called in the local media. The day Lexington graduated from college, he booked a one-way flight to LaGuardia Airport and never looked back. Not at North Carolina, and certainly not at me, the high school girlfriend he left in the dust with a hundred questions and not one answer.

“Well, what is he doing here?” Sarah Jo asks, scooping up a heaping helping of salsa with a tortilla chip and popping it into her mouth.

“No clue. All I know is what Dak told me, that he's back in town and he needs some kind of favor .”

I should have chosen my words more carefully, because my dirty-minded best friend hears the word *favor* and immediately starts wiggling her eyebrows suggestively, seemingly forgetting all about my hellish history with Lexington.

“Not that kind of favor,” I say on a groan. I'm not in the mood for her antics right now.

“Then what the hell would he want from you?”

“I wish I knew so I could practice the best way to shoot him down. If anyone should be asking for something, it should be me, asking *him* for an apology.”

Sarah Jo lifts her glass in agreement. “You've got that right. So, what are you going to do?”

“Cross my fingers that he stays as far away from me as possible?” I say. “That's the only plan I've come up with so far.”

She purses her lips, holding back a snicker. “Maybe we can get you a disguise. Like those glasses with the fake nose and mustache, oh maybe even a mullet wig.”

Cue me nearly snorting frozen margarita out my nose. Leave it to Sarah Jo to make me laugh, even in the crappiest of situations.

“But, seriously,” she says, refocusing. “I have to ask this and you've got to give me an honest answer because that's in the best friend code handbook. Do

you still have feelings for him?”

I chew thoughtfully on my straw as I drain the last of my drink. It would have been easier if she'd asked me to explain physics to her, or come up with the meaning of life.

Do I still have feelings for Lexington Dane? I certainly feel something toward him. Anger? Regret? And a whole lot of confusion. My emotions are more blended than this frozen margarita, and I can't tease them apart. There's only one I can identify for certain, and that's anger. So that's the one I'm going with.

“The only feelings I have toward him are strong ones of wanting to jam a screwdriver into his balls.”

Sarah Jo smirks, then finishes her drink. “Well, that's that, then.”

With our glasses empty and our stomachs full of chips and salsa, we pay the check and say our good-byes. I'm an early-night kind of gal with a *one drink in public* limit. That way, I can always drive home, and I'm never at risk of a parent spotting me in a less-than-flattering state. It's one of the many important teacher rules that they don't teach you in undergrad.

“Text me when you get home!” Sarah Jo calls across the parking lot.

I give her a thumbs-up and one last wave before we climb into our separate cars and head off—Sarah Jo toward her downtown apartment, and me to my one-bedroom condo south of the city. She's always preferred to be in the thick of things, whereas I'm a bit more partial to the peace and quiet. That and the proximity to the beach. I wasn't kidding when I said that my only plans this summer are to lie in the sand.

Once I'm back in the comfort of my condo, I shrug off my purse and head straight for my closet, ditching my teacher clothes for an oversized tee and fuzzy lounge shorts.

Yes, it's early and yes, I'm already in pajamas. Sue me for thinking an eight o'clock bedtime on a Friday night sounds awfully good after the day I've had.

With my teeth brushed and my skin-care routine complete, I grab my phone from my purse and head straight to bed. No lesson planning, no grading spelling tests, just scrolling mindlessly through social media until I fall asleep. I freaking love summer break.

But before I can begin this evening's mind-numbing scrolling, a notification stops me dead in my tracks. I have a missed call from an unknown number. And that zip code? I'm pretty dang sure it's from New York. Not only that, but there's a voice mail waiting for me.

My cheeks burn hotter than North Carolina in July as I work up the courage to hit PLAY, slowly lifting my phone to my ear. *Please be a spam call, please be a spam call, please be a spam call.*

That deep, familiar voice buzzes into my ear. "Hey, Corrigan, it's Lex. Give me a call when you get a chance. It'd be great if we could talk."

*Click.* Silence.

That's it. Just fifteen seconds. No real message, no explanation of what in the world is going on. Just the request that I call him back. A request that I'm going to deny.

If only I could deny the fact that the sound of his voice sent that same electricity dancing down my spine, just like it did all those years ago.

*Damn it.*

**A**fter breakfast and the rest of our morning routine, I wrangle Grier into the car and drive to Mom's. When I arrive, the front door is locked, so I ring the doorbell. A middle-aged woman in purple scrubs answers.

I shake her hand. "Hi, I'm Lex, Bonnie's son."

She smiles. "I figured. Your visit was all she could talk about since you called. I'm Gail, her home care nurse. It's nice to meet you. And who is this cutie pie?" She gazes down at Grier, who's clinging to my leg.

"This is my daughter. Grier, say hi."

Grier does no such thing. She just gazes up at the woman with an uncertain look.

Gail takes us to the living room, where Mom is sitting in her recliner, her lap covered with a knitted throw blanket. My heart constricts. Her face looks so pale and drawn, and her hands resting atop the blanket are so thin, and more age-spotted than I've ever seen them.

Grier without any understanding of Mom's health concerns runs over and excitedly climbs onto her lap. "Gamma! Gamma!"

Mom hugs her and peppers her face with kisses, prompting much excited squealing from my little girl. "Oh, I'm so happy to see you both."

I kneel to squeeze her tightly, disturbed by how diminished and frail she feels in my arms. I already knew what was happening, but now that I'm seeing her in person, the reality that she's dying hits me all over again, followed by the guilt and fear.

Six months—more like five by now. We have so few moments left together. How could I have stayed away so long? I spent my twenties building my business from the ground up, pouring all my time and devotion into it, and living the high life in New York City in a penthouse that overlooked central park. And now my business is a success, raking in millions a year, but you know what, I'd give it all up if I could go back in time and have my mom healthy again. I'd give up everything.

"I know," she says quietly into my shoulder. "But it'll be all right, sweet pea. I've lived a good, long life. I'm ready for whatever the universe has in store for me."

I'm not ready. I don't know how I could ever be. But I release her anyway and try and force a smile on my face. She doesn't need to see me frowning. "How are you feeling today?"

"Mmm . . . not the best, but well enough. Do you want anything? Some sweet tea? Gail just helped me bake some pecan snowballs yesterday."

Grier snaps to attention. "Cookie?"

Mom smiles at her granddaughter and her whole face lights up. "You got it, little one. Off my lap first, though."

Grier hops down, and Mom starts to pull the blanket aside.

"Stay there, Mom, I can get it," I say, squeezing her hand gently.

"Nonsense. You're a guest. And exercise is good for me, right, Gail?"

Gail hesitates for a second, then replies, "A little, yes." She and I hold out our hands for Mom to grab.

With our help, Mom succeeds in pushing herself to her feet, slightly but noticeably short of breath, and starts off for the kitchen. Grier runs ahead of her with Flapflap dragging on the floor while Gail and I stay at her side. Gail takes down plates and cups, Mom distributes the cookies, and I handle the heavy jug of tea for her.

When we're all back in the living room and seated with our snack, Mom asks Grier, "Is that your friend?"

Grier pauses from inhaling her cookie to hold up Flapflap toward Mom and shouts, "Bats eat bugs!" before erupting in giggles.

"That's absolutely right. You know a lot about nature." Mom looks back to me. "Oh, I almost forgot—would Grier like your old toys? They're for boys, but I thought I'd ask."

*She still has those?* "I'm sure she'd love them. She doesn't seem to be into baby dolls and girly things. Before Flapflap, her favorite toy was an airplane."

Mom nods in Gail's direction who then disappears down the hall before reappearing with a large cardboard box. Grier gasps in delight and digs into the treasure trove, emerging with a G.I. Joe, which she mashes against Flapflap.

We watch her play for a few minutes before Mom asks, "So, have you thought about what I said last time we talked?"

"Which part?"

"Who's going to watch Grier for you. She needs a woman's influence, Lexington." She gestures to where Grier is babbling and giggling as she dances the G.I. Joe across the floor.

I frown. Although I know it's just because my mom's old-fashioned, I can't help being a little offended at the implication that my parenting is inadequate and I won't be enough for my daughter. "So only women know how to raise children? Or is it because she likes bats and planes and action figures more than dolls?"

"You know what I mean. Her being a tomboy is fine, but you still need help."

"I'm working on it, Mom."

Although Corrigan hasn't returned my call yet. All day I've found myself obsessing over whether I should leave her another one or text Dak or something,

I mentally kick myself again. *It hasn't even been twenty-four hours yet. Calm down and stop acting like a damn lovesick teenager.*

Look at me, a grown-ass man ready to make a fool of himself over someone who isn't even a romantic option. I need to remind myself that this is the same as hiring any other contractor or employee. Something I've done a thousand times before. I should be able to handle this in my sleep and I shouldn't be allowing it to consume my thoughts the way it is.

But Corrigan isn't just another contractor, and I've got the stomach gymnastics to prove it. Even after all this time, my heart still quickens when I think about her.

Mom perks up. "Does that mean you've started dating again?"

I hold back an exasperated groan. "No, Mom, I'm hiring a nanny. I don't have the room in my life for a girlfrie—"

Grier pushes Flapflap and G.I. Joe into my knee. "Look. They're best friends."

*Case in point.* "Very cool, honey," I reply, smiling down at my daughter.

"Are you sure?" Mom asks. "Life is short. You're already thirty. You should really think about your future."

I grimace. "Even if I had the time and energy, it would make me a real . . ." I glance at Grier, who has put the G.I. Joe on Flapflap's back and is wiping them around the floor while making engine noises. "A real heel if I treated dating as a way to find free childcare services. A lot of women don't want to sign up for that stuff by dating a single dad, and I can't blame them for being up front about it."

Mom sighs, looking even more tired. "A lot doesn't mean all. You'll never know who's out there if you don't look."

*Drop it, Mom.* "Maybe, but there's no way I'm getting into all that right now. It's easier to approach this as a business transaction between professionals."

My inappropriate inner voice whispers, *Not that you'd complain if things got*

*a little unprofessional between you and Corrigan*, but I quash it. There's too much history between us, and the fact that I haven't gotten laid in forever is highlighting the good parts while glossing over how it all ended.

Mom sighs. "All right, all right. I know when my advice isn't wanted. I just worry sometimes, sweet pea. You and Grier are the only chicks in my nest."

I smile at her. "I know, Mom. We love you too." Even if she drives me nuts sometimes.

Her answering smile turns into a huge yawn. "Whew . . . I'm so tired all of a sudden."

"Go ahead and have a nap," I say. "I'll make Grier some lunch, and we'll come back later."

"There's a nice park a few minutes from here," Mom says, her eyes already drifting shut.

I gesture for Gail to follow us into the kitchen. As I assemble a peanut butter and jelly sandwich for Grier—my appetite has quickly disappeared—I ask Gail quietly, "How is she, really?"

She presses her lips together. "Well . . . let me put it this way. Today is one of her better-than-average days." She hastens to add, "But not by much. And compared to other patients at this stage, she's doing excellently. She doesn't need oxygen, and her pain and nausea are being managed very well."

I let out a deep sigh as I hand Grier her plate. "I guess that's all we can really hope for."

Gail rests her hand on my shoulder briefly. "I'm sorry. I can't imagine how hard this must be for you. But having her family around is already doing her so much good."

"Thank you," I reply, not knowing what else to say.

She leaves to go watch over Mom. While Grier eats, I pull out my phone to find the park Mom was talking about.

• • •

“Higher Daddy!” Grier yells between giggles.

I give her another push on the swing, making her kick her feet at the deep blue sky and shriek with excitement. Mom was right—this park is nice. Its playground is huge, clean, and features enough equipment to tire out even my little ball of energy.

There are other kids around for her to play with, but not so many that it’s too crowded. Nearby, a group of people are doing Pilates on the grass, and every so often, a jogger or dog walker goes by. I can easily imagine us picnicking under the towering oak trees this summer, crunching through autumn leaves and sledding down the gently rolling hills in winter.

Well, maybe not so much that last one. I chuckle to myself. *Gotta remember we’re much farther south now.*

After a few more minutes on the swings, Grier finally demands, “Done now. Upsies.”

I lift her out of the seat and set her down. She toddles off to the sandbox to begin digging a hole with laser focus.

I sit down on the nearest bench and enjoy the sun, letting my eyes close for a moment. That is, until I hear a voice that itches at my brain with a familiarity I’d never forget.

The woman who’s just passed us with an exercise mat rolled up under her arm doesn’t just sound achingly familiar, she looks it too. The dark blond hair from my memories and the body from my dreams. She’s almost the spitting image of . . .

I jump to my feet. “Corrigan?”

She freezes, then slowly turns around.

I’m not just imagining this. It is her.

And *holy shit*, little Cori's all grown up.

**A**llow me to be perfectly clear—I don't like working out. I think people who say they like working out are lying, or else they're just certifiably insane. I've tried the gym, home workouts, personal trainers and even those fancy barre classes that play fun, upbeat pop tunes. But so far none of them have been my thing.

You know what *else* isn't my thing? Spending nine hours tossing and turning while running through worst-case scenarios of *why* Lexington called me last night. I'm a worrier by nature, but after listening to his voice mail, what I experienced was a whole new level of stress. I'm talking sleepless, *not even melatonin can save me now* stress.

So this morning, when my favorite *What's Happening in Wilmington* blog directed me to this free workout class in the park, I thought I'd give physical fitness one more shot. All in the name of endorphins and sweating out every memory of Lexington Dane so I could attempt to move on yet again.

Now, freshly sweaty from three rounds of intense intervals in the summer sun, I'm feeling a little bit better and a lot out of breath. Luckily, I still have plenty of time to head home and change before I meet Sarah Jo for brunch. As I head back to my car, I tap my smartwatch to get a read on how many calories I just burned to determine if I can justify pancakes *and* hash browns. As I do the mental math of calories burned vs calories about to be consumed, a familiar voice behind me brings my tennis shoes to a screeching halt.

“Corrigan?”

Just the sound of my name in that deep, raspy voice sends a bristle up my

spine, making me stand up a little straighter. I know that voice all too well. It's the same one from the voice mail, and from my daydreams and nightmares over the last ten years. And now it sends my heart rate even higher than it was during that last round of burpees.

This can't be happening. Especially not now, when I haven't washed my hair in three days, and I probably smell like a dirty gym sock.

*Oh God.*

I look down at my oversized T-shirt, which is sticking to me in all the wrong places. Maybe my imagination is playing dirty tricks on me. I should just ignore it and keep walking.

"Corrigan, wait up."

The voice is closer now, and there's no denying it's Lexington. Here, *now*, and quickly approaching.

I chew my lower lip, frantically weighing my options. I could brush it off, pretend I was just stopping to tie my shoe and didn't even hear him. But one glance down at my feet reminds me that I had the foresight to go for a double knot. *Shoot.*

Sucking in a deep breath, I gather up whatever confidence I have and reluctantly turn around.

My heart hammers in my chest and my stomach ties itself in an intricate knot because there he is. Lexington Dane. All six feet, one inch of him, just a few yards away from me. In dark-washed jeans and a plain white tee, he looks every bit as unfairly handsome as I expected.

What I wasn't expecting, however, is the fact that he's not alone. His big, tanned hands grip the handles of a dark gray stroller, and as he slows to a stop in front of me, I get a peek at the precious blond-haired angel inside.

"Um, hello," I manage to squeak out, my gaze fixed on the munchkin in the stroller, who is blinking curiously at me while chewing on the foot of a G.I. Joe

doll.

She's adorable but she's also making me ten times more confused about this whole situation. I've played out dozens of scenarios in my head where I run into Lexington and tell him off for what he did to me. But none of those scenarios involved a child. Crazier yet, a child who totally has his hypnotic blue eyes.

"Hello to you too," Lexington says with an easy laugh. Curse him for being so casual about this awkward as hell reunion we find ourselves in.

"What are you doing here?" I mumble, dodging his gaze as I fold my arms over my chest.

"We're on a walk. It's a public park. This is what parks are for."

I can barely conceal my eye roll. "No, I mean what are you doing in *Wilmington*?"

His voice cracks slightly. "We wanted to be closer to my mom."

"Who is we?" I brace myself for his answer. Here it comes, the name of the woman who replaced me. I can already picture her—tall and thin, and far more metropolitan than I'll ever be.

"Me and this little munchkin."

Leaning over the stroller, Lexington unbuckles her, and then scoops his little blond sidekick into his muscular arms. She giggles in delight as he props her up on his hip, but I'm not nearly so happy about her change in location. Unless I want to look like a complete psychopath, I can't keep staring at an empty stroller. Which means I have no choice but to look Lexington Dane in the eye.

*All right. Here goes.*

Slowly, I let my gaze inch up from the stroller, passing over the fitted white T-shirt stretched tight across his muscular chest, and the dusting of stubble along his angular jaw, until my gaze locks with his electric-blue eyes. It's my first real look at Lexington in over ten years, and although I hate to admit it, the man looks good. Like, *really* good. Almost too good for it to be fair. Especially

considering how disgusting I feel and more than likely look at the moment.

Irony is a bitch.

“Is she your . . .” I gesture between him and the giggly little girl bouncing on his hip.

“My daughter.” With a big, proud smile, he presses a soft kiss into her white-blond hair before tugging at the ruffled sleeve of her tiny pink shirt. “Grier, can you wave hi to Corrigan?”

With some gentle urging, Grier raises one chubby hand and wiggles it at me. “Hi,” she squeaks, then pushes her face into her daddy’s shirt sleeve.

It’s way cute, but I’m too shell-shocked to so much as wave back. I’m busy trying to wrap my head around the fact that Lexington Dane is a *father*. I know I shouldn’t ask this question, but I can’t help myself. I’m too curious.

“Who’s her mom?” My voice is abrupt, and the second the awkward question leaves my lips, I wish I could shove it back inside. I’m curious, of course, but I don’t want him to know that. I don’t want him thinking I’m interested in him or his life. He can sleep with and make babies with whoever he wants. It shouldn’t matter to me. Yet, it does. *Deeply*. And now I’ve just revealed that to him.

The proud look on his face falls into a more somber one. “She’s not in the picture. It’s a story for another time.”

“Oh,” I say, not exactly a witty response, but it’s the best I’ve got.

I can’t help but sneak a peek at his left hand. Sure enough, his fourth finger is bare. Could Lexington really be a single dad? I don’t even know how to begin processing that information.

“Well, I’ve gotta get this one down for a nap,” he says, breaking the uncomfortable silence as he returns little Grier to her stroller. “But you and I should catch up. Swing by later? I just got a new espresso machine that you can help me break in.” His gaze lingers on mine and my body warms under the scrutiny of his blue eyes.

I shift my weight from one foot to the other, eyeing my car in my peripheral vision. “I have plans with Sarah Jo, actually. I should probably—”

“Tomorrow then,” he says, voice softening. “Please?”

I draw in a long breath, holding it behind my lips as I think through my reply.

I could feed him some corny line about him being part of my past, not my present. Or I could muster up an excuse about having plans for tomorrow too. I could even just flat-out tell him no.

But I don’t.

Instead, when I let out that breath I’ve been holding, what comes out is, “Text me your address.”

He arches one thick, dark brow in my direction. “Same number as high school?”

“Same number,” I say with a nod, immediately realizing my mistake. If I still have the same number, then . . .

“Then why didn’t you reply to my voice mail?” He finishes my thought out loud, the tiniest hint of a smirk tugging at his lips.

“I was busy,” I say quickly, my voice wavering ever so slightly.

Lexington’s eyes narrow with skepticism. He’s always possessed the unique ability to know when I’m lying, even when no one else can tell. It looks like that skill hasn’t worn off in the last ten years.

Luckily, I’m not lying about my plans with Sarah Jo this afternoon. We have a twelve thirty brunch reservation, and I definitely need to go home and shower first.

Checking my smartwatch, I wince at the time. “I really have to get going. I’ve got a reservation to make.”

He nods. “Well, it was good to see you.”

“Good to, um, yeah,” I stammer. But by the look in his eyes, I’m guessing he

can see right through that lie too.

After a short drive consisting of me screaming into the silence in my car, and questioning if the last ten minutes of my life were some weird dream, I'm back home.

Not for long, though. After a quick shower and a change of clothes, I'm back in the car in under half an hour, firing off a text to Sarah Jo before I hit the gas.

On my way now. I hope you're ready for some crazy news.

My phone buzzes with her reply almost immediately. No words, just about a million exclamation points. *God, I love this girl.*

We arrive at the restaurant at about the same time, sharing a quick hug in front of the hostess stand before we're taken to a table near the back. Thank goodness we snagged a reservation in advance. There isn't an empty table in this place.

Normally, I'd be bothered by all the noise of a crowded restaurant, but not today. Whatever it takes to drown out the enormous gasp Sarah Jo is going to let out when I drop this bomb on her.

The second we sit down, my best friend props her elbows on the table, leaning into full-on gossip mode. "Okay, spill. What's the big news?"

I fill her in on the details of my run-in this morning, including the fact that Lexington Dane is, much to my dismay, even better looking than he was in high school. And to add insult to injury, my pit stains were half the size of the state of Texas when he saw me.

"Worst timing ever." She groans, her voice brimming with sympathy. "I think you deserve extra pancakes for having to deal with that."

Before she can bury her nose too far in the menu, I hit her with the coup de grâce, the information that takes this whole Lexington thing from weird to wild.

"There's one more tiny thing," I say, pinching my fingers together to form an

itty-bitty space I can barely see through. “Well, not that tiny. But small enough to still fit in a crib, if you get my gist.”

Sarah Jo drops her menu, her brows knitting together. “What do you . . .” Before she can finish the thought, it finally clicks, and her whole face goes totally slack. “No freaking way. Are you telling me he has a kid?”

I nod. “A daughter. But there’s no ring on his finger. So I think he’s a single dad.”

Sarah Jo’s jaw drops as she leans back in her seat, pressing her fingers into her temples. “This is actually too much for me to handle.”

“Imagine finding out the way I did. As if running into him in public wasn’t enough, the guy was pushing her in a stroller. Talk about a one-two punch.” I actually thought my heart was going to stop for a minute there.

“So, what’s the plan?” She cracks her knuckles, a wicked smile tugging at her lips. “Do we egg his house? Or maybe we play the long game and wait till his daughter is in your class? Then you can just, like, teach her the alphabet backward or something.”

I shake my head. “You’re not going to believe this, but he actually asked me to come over tomorrow.”

Sarah Jo’s jaw drops. “Like, to his house? You’re not even meeting up in public?”

I shrug. “He brought up his new espresso machine. How am I supposed to resist that?” I joke, hoping I don’t sound as crazy as I feel right now. My emotions are all over the place.

Sarah Jo just shakes her head at me.

When the waitress swings by moments later, and we both place our orders for short stacks of pancakes and tall cups of coffee. Once our server disappears, though, Sarah Jo leans in even closer, squinting her eyes like she’s trying to get a read on me.

“Be honest. You’re going so you can secretly put laxatives in his coffee, though, right?”

I shake my head. “Not quite. I think I’m just going to hear him out. Maybe if I’m lucky, I’ll get an apology.”

Sarah Jo frowns at me, unamused. “It’s ten years too late for that.”

“Believe me, I know.” I sigh, picking nervously at the corner of a paper napkin. “I have zero intentions of getting involved with this man ever again. But I never got any explanation when he totally disappeared from my life. No closure whatsoever. Maybe this is what I need so I can let go of all this stupid anger and resentment and move on.”

“And maybe download that dating app I keep telling you about?”

I give her a knowing look. “One step at a time, SJ.”

• • •

I’m sitting in my car outside of Lexington Dane’s house. That is definitely a sentence I never thought I would say again.

I used to drive over to his house all the time the summer after my junior year, right before he went off to college. Sometimes we’d cruise down to the beach and just talk. Other times, we never left his mom’s driveway, too busy making out under the cover of darkness. Now, with his mom’s house just down the street from Lexington’s new place, the *déjà vu* is real.

I take a deep breath, trying to slow my clamoring heart. As I walk up the brick path to the front door, I realize that my knees are actually shaking a little.

Why am I so nervous? If anything, Lexington should be the nervous one. He’s the one who made a major mistake all those years ago. All I have to do is keep my cool and try not to unleash ten years’ worth of angry questions on him in front of his daughter because once I start ranting I don’t think I’ll be able to stop.

I press the doorbell, and moments later, I hear the uneven patter of Grier's tiny feet toddling across the floor, followed by the slow, measured steps of her father. When the front door opens, I spot Grier first. She's got on ladybug-patterned pj's, her blond hair gathered into a teeny ponytail on the top of her head. But as cute as she is, the real view is behind her.

If I thought Lexington looked good yesterday, it's only because I hadn't seen him totally in his element yet. He's dressed in all black, from his joggers to his T-shirt to his baseball cap with some team logo I don't recognize.

Okay, I was so not prepared for these hot dad vibes. But if the typical dad bod is supposed to be soft, Lexington is failing at this, because his body is broad and firm, and filled out with more muscle than he ever had before.

A sweet, easy smile pulls at his lips as he runs a hand over the scruff along his jaw. "Good morning. Sorry, we're a little bit slow getting started today."

"Is this still a good time?" I say, holding back what I really want to ask. *Is this seriously how good you look first thing in the morning? Because, fuck me running, this is not okay.*

"Of course. We've been excited to see you all morning." Squatting down to Grier's level, Lexington lays a protective hand on her shoulder. "Do you remember Corrigan from yesterday, love bug?"

Grier blinks her bright blue eyes at me, starts to smile, then squeals and hides her face against Lexington's arm.

"She's shy around new people at first," he says as he stands and motions me inside. "C'mon. I've already got the coffee ground."

Following closely behind him, I step into a house that is shockingly put together for someone who's only lived here a few days. Sure, there are still quite a few cardboard boxes stacked in the corners, and Grier's toys are spread all across the living room rug, but the crisp, clean design he's going for is already emerging.

I trail my fingers along the back of a pale ivory-colored couch. Bold choice for a man with a toddler. *Not my circus. Not my monkeys.*

“Okay, love bug, let’s pick out a toy to play with while the grownups are talking.”

Grier squeals as he scoops her up and carries her over to the center of the living room. “Bat.”

At first, I think maybe Grier is super into baseball or something, but then Grier jabs one finger toward a stuffed bat that looks more like a Halloween decoration than a toy.

“Bat, it is.” Lexington laughs, grabbing the bat and smirking in my direction. “My weird kid, right?”

I smile back, watching as he makes the stuffed bat flap its wings, earning giddy applause from Grier.

It’s crazy to see him like this. This big, muscular man, being so soft and gentle with his beautiful little girl. It almost makes me forget how awkward this whole situation is.

Until yesterday, I hadn’t spoken to him since he broke my heart a full decade ago. Now I’m standing in his house, watching him play with his daughter, who I just found out existed. Strange doesn’t even begin to cover it.

With Grier all settled, Lexington pushes to his feet, sweeping one hand toward the kitchen. “Shall we?”

*Lord, let the espresso give me strength.*

I show Corrigan into the breakfast nook that connects the kitchen and living room, where I can keep an eye on Grier playing while we talk. “Have a seat. I’ll just be a sec. Do you, uh, want any cream or sugar or anything?”

She just shakes her head.

“You sure? This new machine has a milk frother. It’s pretty crazy . . . heh.”  
*Shut up, you idiot.* I might actually be dying here.

My chest aches when I look at her but I can’t tell her that. Can’t tell her how many times I’ve regretted what I did and wanted to beg for her back. But back then, I did what I had to do.

“Nah, black is fine,” she says. A beat passes before she adds, “But thanks for offering.”

I let the noise of the espresso maker cover my total lack of intelligent things to say. *Holy shit, this is awkward.* The other half of the best relationship I’ve ever had is in my house, looking even more beautiful than I remember—which is saying a lot—and is clearly still furious with me.

I keep glancing at her, and then get paranoid I’m being too obvious and drop my gaze again. But I can’t help it.

And if I’m not mistaken, ever since we met at the park yesterday, she’s also been sneaking the occasional peek at me too. I’m so aware of how close she is, how emotionally charged the air between us feels, and I can’t stop myself overthinking what it means every time I feel her gaze on me.

*Just breathe, dude.*

I pour and serve the coffee, then sit down across the small table from her. For a minute, we just sip our drinks, only Grier's happy babbling breaking the silence.

Finally, Corrigan quietly murmurs, "This is good."

I nod. "I'm glad."

She sets down her empty demitasse cup with a harsh clink and raises her eyebrows in impatient prodding. "So . . ."

*Come on, Lex. You asked her here for a reason. Get your shit together.*

I clear my throat. "Right. I guess I should start by telling you why I'm here." I take a deep breath. "Mom's health has gotten pretty bad." I hesitate, then decide to bite the bullet. "She's dying."

Corrigan's eyes grow wide. "What? When? What's wrong?"

"Pancreatic cancer. The kind that's on the rare side. The early symptoms are subtle, so by the time they caught it . . . well, I got her the best treatment I could, but . . ." I realize I'm clenching my hands and force them open. "She's only got a few months left." Every time I say the words, it becomes more real.

"Oh God. Lexington," Corrigan says softly. "I'm so sorry to hear that. Poor Bonnie. I always liked your mom."

I look away under the pretext of checking on Grier. She's chewing on G.I. Joe's leg while crashing Flapflap repeatedly into a pile of blocks. "Anyway, I decided we needed to be closer, to be with her. We should have come a long time ago, honestly, but I screwed up."

"What about . . . after? Will you move back to New York?" Corrigan asks, one eyebrow cocked.

I wonder whether she'd prefer a yes or a no. "I figured we'd stay. I can't keep uprooting Grier, and besides, this seems like a better place to raise a child."

"I see," is all she says.

Corrigan keeps her eyes on mine, and I'm curious what she sees when she looks at me like that. A fuckup? A son trying to stop being so selfish and make amends? Maybe that second one is just wishful thinking.

There's only silence again. Feeling awkward, I drain the last of my espresso.

Soon, I can't take it anymore. "Well? Say something."

"I was more curious about why *I'm* here, Lexington. We're not exactly friends."

"We used to be," I say in a low voice. The words just pop out, but the second they do, I wish I could take them back, because her features harden and her eyes narrow on mine.

"We used to be a lot more than that."

A memory flashes across my mind's eye, playing as vividly as a movie.

Corrigan and me on a warm summer night, sitting on the porch swing behind my house, listening to the cicadas shrill out their love songs, and watching the hunting bats swoop against the bright stars. Holding hands, my other arm around her waist, her head resting on my shoulder. She turned her lovely face up to mine, her eyes shining in anticipation. I bent to her, and for the first time, I pressed my mouth against those full, soft lips. The perfect kiss. And we shared so many firsts after that.

"Did you hear me?" she says, crashing me back to reality. "Tell me what I'm doing here, Lexington. What's this favor Dak was talking about?"

*Well, fine then.*

Part of me was desperately hoping to catch up, to find out where we stand with each other and where the last ten years have taken her. But if she wants to keep it all business, I guess I have no choice but to manage that. It's probably for the best, anyway.

I swallow and rub a hand over the stubble on my jaw. "Well, you're here because Grier needs a nanny, and when I talked to Dak, he suggested you."

“You . . . want *me* to be your nanny,” Corrigan says slowly. “To work for you. In your home. Taking care of your child?”

*Shit.* I can tell she’s not pleased. Actually, that’s an understatement. If she could, Corrigan would be shooting laser beams out of her eyes right now. She looks that ticked off.

“It wouldn’t be full time or anything,” I say quickly, backpedaling. “I just need someone to look after her while I’m working. And sometimes when I take Mom to appointments.”

She blinks at me as if I’ve grown another head. “How on earth could I possibly do that?”

I’m starting to get irritated despite myself. This hostile reaction isn’t what I expected. Dak made it seem like the obvious solution. But the only thing obvious is that I’m an idiot.

“What do you mean? It works just like any other job. I’d give you money, and you’d—”

“Seriously, Lexington? Do I have to spell it out for you? We have a history, and not a good one,” she says, glaring at me.

*Dammit, I’m going about this all wrong.* I take a deep breath to compose myself.

“You’re right. We do, and I owe you an apology. Can we start over, please?”

With a slow exhale, Corrigan averts her gaze. “I don’t know. Can we?”

Swallowing my pride, I say the words I should have said a long time ago. “I shouldn’t have dumped you the way I did. I was young and stupid.”

She watches me closely with narrowed eyes, then asks in an acid tone, “That’s your excuse? That’s all you’ve got to say about it?” She stands and snatches up her purse. “Good-bye, Lexington.”

I grab her hand. “Wait!”

“Why should I?” she mutters, but doesn’t pull out of my grasp.

“Because I’ll tell you the truth.”

She stares at me for a long moment, then finally sits back down, still glaring at me.

I let go of her hand and swallow past my suddenly pounding heart. “I . . . I was scared.”

Now she looks confused, as well as angry. “Of what?”

“Of falling in love. Messing up. Breaking your heart . . . or my own. Of betraying your brother’s trust.” The feel of her hand lingers on my skin. “I was about to leave for college, and I thought trying to do a long-distance relationship for four years would be impossible. And even if we somehow made it work, it’d be over anyway as soon as Dak found out.”

“Why didn’t you just tell me all this back then?” Her voice is fragile, and I hate myself for causing it. “I thought we were happy. I would have done anything for you, and then you threw me away out of nowhere.”

“I didn’t know any of this stuff at the time—I was operating off pure instinct. It took me years to figure it out.” I force a laugh. “Like I said, I was young and stupid.”

She says nothing, barely meeting my gaze.

“It was puppy love, Corrigan,” I say softly. “I didn’t think it would last. I thought that if I let it go on, eventually I was guaranteed to do something dumb and hurt you.”

Her response is barely audible. “You did.”

*Ouch. Fuck.* “I know. And I’m sorry.”

I hurt her. Betrayed her trust. It kills me, even now.

She exhales, loud and shaky. “I have more questions.”

I have no idea whether that means she’s accepted my apology, but I can let it

go for now. “Anything.”

She leans forward, her elbows on the table and her gaze keenly fixed on me. “Who is Grier’s mother? How did this all happen?”

My stomach drops as if I’d missed a stair. “If I tell you . . . will you do it?”

Her eyebrows dart up. “Are you seriously trying to bribe me right now?”

“No. Of course not.” I drag my hand down my face. Along with everything else I remember about Corrigan, she’s still just as tenacious too. “Okay, fine. I promise I’ll tell you everything you want to know. But first, I have something to ask *you*.”

**W**hen my brother mentioned that Lexington Dane was looking for a favor, I was sure I'd thought of just about every possibility, A through Z. Did he need advice? Maybe he needed to borrow my weed whacker? Or, my personal favorite, did he need a ride to the airport so he could turn around and go straight back to New York where he belongs?

But what he's asking is crazier and more demanding than anything I ever could have dreamed up.

"Please at least consider it. I need someone to look after Grier while I work, and I trust you."

I blink at Lexington, half tempted to scrub out my ears to make sure I heard him right. He wants me to look after his two-year-old daughter who, up until twenty-four hours ago, I didn't even know existed? That's a much bigger favor than I could have ever imagined, and one that has caught me completely off guard.

I steady myself by grasping the table, watching my knuckles turn as white as the marble countertops next to us.

"Please be her nanny. It would only be part time," he says, as if that justifies this insane situation. "Just until I can land on my feet. Things are overwhelming with mom right now, and figuring out how to manage my New York properties from afar. I need to know I have someone I can count on and someone I can trust entirely with my daughter."

I stare at my hands, dodging his electric-blue eyes, which I can feel pleading with mine. "I don't know. There are some really great day cares in town that

might be—”

“All the day-care centers are already full for the summer,” he says. “And when I asked Dak, he mentioned that you have the summer off.” Lexington pauses, and when I look up at him, his mouth pulls into a gentle smile. “Congrats, by the way. You’re a teacher, just like you always wanted.”

My mouth opens for a moment in shock before I can snap it closed. Why does he remember my high school dream job? I figured he threw out every memory of me when he left Wilmington.

“I teach first graders, not preschoolers,” I say, turning my head over my shoulder to get a look at Grier.

She’s got a vise grip on that stuffed bat toy, but she seems more interested in our conversation than playing. If she were a bit older, she might have turned away and pretended not to be eavesdropping, but not Grier. She just studies me from across the room with curious blue eyes. “But you’re good with kids,” Lexington says, drawing my attention back to him. “I seem to remember you babysitting your way through high school. Isn’t that how you paid for your homecoming dress junior year?”

I fold my arms over my chest. That’s two *really* specific things he remembers about me from over a decade ago. And it puts a fluttery feeling in my stomach that I can’t quite identify and don’t want to latch onto.

Am I creeped out that he committed such tiny details of me to memory? Or maybe I should be flattered. Either way, the fluttery feeling needs to go away, because apparently it’s affecting my brain. I’m actually beginning to consider this nannying gig. My teacher’s salary could really use a little extra padding over the summer and he said it’s only part time so I’d still be able to get plenty of beach time in. Plus, I really do feel awful about his mom. I can see how much that’s affecting him.

“Listen . . .” He sighs, planting his forearms on the table in a way that makes it really difficult not to admire how toned they are. “I know it’s a big ask, but

I'm really in a jam here. My mom is sick and . . .” He swallows hard, as if forcing down the emotion building in his throat. “I can find someone else, if need be. But Grier’s my whole world. I want her to be with someone I trust.”

I chew the inside of my cheek, letting my gaze sweep from the bill of Lexington’s baseball cap all the way down to the toes of his black sneakers. I can hardly believe this is the same boy from ten years ago. Now he’s a man, all rugged, muscular lines, a perfect contrast to the gentle way he handles his sweet little girl.

One look into those blue eyes, and my mind hums with an old memory. Lex and me, the fall of my junior year, just a week after homecoming weekend, when he asked me out on my parents’ couch while his friends chugged cheap beers upstairs.

He made good on his word, picking me up the next Friday night, making sure Dak was at the football game so Lex wouldn’t be caught taking out his best friend’s younger sister. We got double scoops of chocolate ice cream and walked up and down the beach, chatting about everything under the sun, and eventually, the moon.

And at the end of the night, when the words ran out, he lifted my chin with the tips of his fingers and pressed the sweetest, gentlest kiss against my lips. He tasted like chocolate and salty sea air, and just the feel of his hot breath against my lips sent a tingle straight to my toes.

That first date wasn’t the only first I gave Lexington Dane. In fact, he took just about all my firsts. But we were only kids then. And now he has a kid of his own. A kid he wants me to look after.

I loosen my grip on the table, slowly letting myself return to reality. It would be insane to take him up on this offer. I told Sarah Jo yesterday that I have zero intentions of getting involved with this man again. Taking a job that involves constantly being in his house and around his daughter definitely qualifies as getting involved with him. And how could I be around him all the time, witnessing him in all his hot dad glory, and not feel things? But then again, how

do I say no to him and his adorable baby girl?

“Can I think about it?” I say, breaking the silence between us. It may not be the answer he wanted, or even an answer at all, but Lexington still nods, his eyes understanding.

“Absolutely. My assistant in New York can manage things if I need to take a day or two off, and—”

A generic ringtone blares from his pocket, interrupting his train of thought. He fishes his phone out, his eyes narrowing with concern after glancing at the screen.

“Excuse me for a minute,” he says, pressing the green ANSWER icon and bringing the phone to his ear. “Hi, Mom. Everything okay?”

I step into the living room to give him some privacy, where Grier has, for some reason, decided to cram her stuffed bat between the couch cushions. Fascinated, I watch her use her chubby fingers to poke its wings into the crevice until her stuffed animal is nearly hidden from view.

When she spots me heading her way, she pulls it back out, holding it up to give me a good view of its worn gray fur and button eyes. “Flapflap,” she says with a big smile.

She stares at me expectantly until I take it, but once I do, she holds out both hands to take it back, then hugs it tightly to her chest. Yep, toddlers are officially a mystery to me.

When Lexington walks into the room, I can immediately feel the shift in his energy, and panic is written all over his face.

“Mom’s not doing well. I need to get her to the ER.” His gaze bounces between me and Grier and his watch, and I can practically see the gears turning in his head. “I guess I can bring her with me . . .”

I shake my head, huffing out a sigh. “I . . . can look after her.” The words fly out of my mouth without my brain’s permission.

*Well, so much for having time to think about it.*

His eyes narrow on me, his thick brows pulling together. “Are you sure?”

Am I sure I know what to do with a two-year-old I hardly know, in a house I’ve never been in before? Absolutely not. But I’m not going to tell him that.

“Of course. It’ll be okay. I’ve got her. Just go.”

“I’ll be home as soon as I can.” He glances anxiously at his watch. “An hour, maybe? Hour and a half, tops?”

“Don’t worry about it.” I wave him off toward the door. “We’ll be fine. Just do what you need to do.”

The worry on his face fades into a soft, grateful smile. He pauses for a moment, his brilliant blue eyes locking with mine. There’s something about those eyes that a girl just can’t say no to.

“Thank you, Corrigan,” he says with an appreciative tone. “I’ll pay you for your time, I promise.”

“We’ll discuss it later. Go help your mom.”

With a flourish, he snatches his car keys off the kitchen counter, presses a quick kiss to the top of his daughter’s head, and bolts for the door, rattling off a string of thank-yous as he leaves.

Once again, Lexington Dane has run off on me. At least this time, it doesn’t feel like it’s for good.

But instead of leaving me heartbroken and confused like he did when we were a couple, he’s left me in an unfamiliar house with his single most prized possession—his daughter. Who, by the way, is super *not happy* about his grand exit.

“*Daaddy!*” Grier’s face scrunches up as a shriek loud enough to make a siren jealous pours out of her, her little hands reaching desperately toward the door her dad just disappeared through.

*Crap.*

I suck in a much-needed deep breath. *Okay, Corrigan. If you can deal with twenty-five first graders for five years, you can manage a toddler for an hour.*

And regardless of age, I can think of one foolproof way to dry the tears of any little kid. Or any adult, for that matter. Ice cream. I guess my first date with little Grier is going to be the same as my first date with her daddy.

Crouching down to Grier's level, I offer her a smile. I'm not sure if she'll let me pick her up, but when I wipe the tears from her soft cheeks with my thumb, she quiets a little.

"Do you like ice cream?"

Grier nods, her lower lip still trembling as she sniffs back her tears.

"Well, your dad will be home in a little while, and I was thinking we should get some ice cream while we wait for him. What do you think?"

If there are any house rules about sugar intake, I don't know about them yet. Granted, we didn't exactly have time for a full rundown on house rules before Lexington sped off to take care of his mom. But still, ignorance is bliss, and bliss is a big scoop of cookies and cream.

So I pull Grier into my arms, giving her a little tickle under her arm, which helps her giggle the tears away. *That's better.*

We'll get our shoes on and be eating spoonfuls of ice cream by the beach in no time. But I hardly make it two steps toward the door before Grier lets out another shriek. This one is shorter and more urgent.

"Flapflap!"

It takes me a second to register what she's talking about, but then she points to the dingy gray bat toy.

"Ah yes, how could I forget?" Hoisting her farther up my hip, I lean down and grab the bat, handing it off to Grier. "Does Flapflap like ice cream?"

She smiles, shaking her head. “No! Eggs!”

“Right, of course. Because all bats eat eggs.”

I stifle a laugh as I head off in search of Grier’s shoes. I guess I’ll be figuring this out as I go.

**W**orry grips me as I ask where to find my mom, then rush to the hospital room at the end of the hallway. When I enter the room, Mom's sitting up in bed, listening to a doctor.

“—just to make sure,” the doctor is saying, then glances over to me. He looks fiftyish, with more gray than black in his hair, an impressive mustache, and has a strong Southern accent. “Ah, you must be her son. Please make yourself comfortable.” He gestures to the lone chair in the corner of the room opposite Mom's bed.

I might explode if I have to sit still. “I'll stand, thanks.” At his tight-lipped expression, I add, “I'll stay out of the way, I promise. What happened?”

As I move closer, she looks even smaller and paler than last time I saw her, and my heart jumps when I spot a bandage on the back of her head.

He narrows his eyes slightly. “She had a nasty fall. Fainted and hit her head on the way down.”

*Fuck.* I should have been there. Should have hired more nurses to watch her round the clock, instead of just having Gail come by three times a week. It's a mistake I'll have to rectify immediately.

Mom moves her arm in a gesture that I think is supposed to be waving off my anxiety, but her hand only lifts about six inches from the hospital blanket. “It was nothing, sugar. I had my alert bracelet on. As soon as I came to and realized I was bleeding, I called the ambulance. They're going to fix me up right as rain. I'm perfectly fine.”

“Passing out and cracking your skull open doesn’t sound like nothing to me.” The words come out much harsher than I intend. “And what do you mean, as soon as you realized? If you hadn’t seen blood, would you have just gone on with your business and not called 9-1-1?”

Her doctor nods. “Fortunately, you don’t seem to have a concussion, Mrs. Dane, but your son has a point. Even for a young, healthy person, one has to take head injuries seriously, and in your condition . . . well.” He sucks his teeth loudly. “Anyway, as I was telling her when you came in, her fainting was probably just a side effect of chemotherapy. But on the off chance this is a warning sign that her cancer is progressing faster than expected, I’ve ordered some tests and a consult with her oncologist. Just to rule things out and to find out what we could be facing.”

I force myself to nod and act like a reasonable, civil adult, instead of screaming and breaking everything in the room like I want to do. “I understand. How long do you think it’ll take before the results come back? I’ve got someone watching my daughter.”

The doctor rubs his chin. “Three, maybe four hours would be my guess.”

Looks like I’ll be using that chair after all.

After he leaves, I drag the damn thing over to her bedside, sit down, and take her hand, disliking how limp and cool it feels.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to snap earlier,” I say quietly. “It’s just . . . you worry me sick, Mom. You don’t take your health seriously enough.”

“It worked itself out in the end,” she says, giving me a weak smile.

Before I can blow up, she continues.

“I don’t mean to cause you trouble, sugar. Everything changes so fast, is all.” Her smile falters, and for a second, I can see just how much effort she pours into staying positive. “I can’t keep up. One day I can still do all kinds of things, and the next, *poof*. I can’t.”

I don't know what to say other than, "I'm sorry. That's awful."

It's not enough, of course. But I don't have the words to fix this situation, and that kills me.

I lace her thin, knobby fingers with mine. This hand used to be the one that steadied me, not the other way around. Used to belong to a superheroine who handled our lives with ease, and now . . .

"But enough about all that." A mischievous twinkle appears in her eye. "You say you found someone, hmm?"

"What?" Then the abrupt topic change processes. "Oh. For Grier."

*She's definitely not for me. I blew that chance ten years ago.*

"Yes, Mom, I found someone to watch her, but you might laugh when you hear who it is. Corrigan."

"Dak's baby sister? She was such a sweet girl—and so pretty. You picked a winner." Mom beams at me. "I'm glad you've gotten back in touch with her."

Her tone makes me suspicious. Is she just in matchmaker mode, or is she implying that she knows more than I thought she did about our relationship? But Mom's words are innocent enough that I can't interrogate her without tipping her off that I'm hiding something myself.

Finally, I decide to keep it vague. "Yeah. She's a teacher now, so Dak thought she'd be a good fit for nannying Grier." Not that she's actually agreed to it yet. I sort of ran out of my house like a madman . . .

Speaking of which, I should check in with her. Maybe she can bring Grier here and leave her with me or something. It won't be fun to keep a toddler entertained in a hospital room for over three hours, but that's my problem, not Corrigan's.

With my free hand, I reach into my pocket . . . and my stomach plummets.

It's not there. My pocket is empty. Where the hell is my phone?

As soon as I ask myself that question, I know the answer. There's a crystal-clear picture in my head of my phone lying on the kitchen counter. I forgot it at home in my rush to leave the house.

I massage my forehead with bruising force while silently repeating every curse word I can think of.

• • •

It's already dinnertime when I screech into my driveway, slam the brakes, and rush out of the car in a near panic.

"An hour," I mutter to myself. "Hour and a half, tops."

It's been *six fucking hours*. God, I'm the actual worst.

How could I trap Corrigan for the entire day into a job she didn't even want to do? I'll have to pay her overtime—no, double. And do something extra nice for Grier too, to make up for leaving her with Corrigan without giving them a chance to get to know each other first. I might trust Corrigan to the ends of the earth, but to Grier, she's a total stranger.

I barge through the front door and race inside, expecting to hear the mother of all wailing meltdowns . . .

Only to be greeted with laughter. And not just Grier's giggles, but Corrigan's too.

I follow the sound into the dining room, where Grier is in her high chair with Flapflap squeezed in by her side. Corrigan sits next to her, singing the *Jaws* theme while guiding a small forkful of spaghetti toward her.

"Daa dun . . . daa dun . . . dun dun dundundundun . . ."

Grier's eyes are huge, rapt with anticipation, her little mouth open.

Corrigan raises her voice for the grand finale. "Doodle-oo!"

Grier squeals in delight, banging her little fists on the tray, and Corrigan pops the fork right into her open mouth with a grin.

I'm transfixed. Until now, I've only seen Corrigan frowning, or angry, or guarded, or wearing a carefully neutral expression at best. The sight of her happy, affectionate smile is like a blow to my chest.

But it's not just her beauty. The scene I'm witnessing is so domestic, so tender. It should seem weird, but everything about it feels . . . *right*, in a way I've never experienced. Coming home to her and my daughter, sitting at the table, bathed in the warm glow of the fading sunlight feels so fucking right and I don't deserve to feel this swell in my chest.

Emotion gets stuck in my throat.

I'd be lying if I said I hadn't imagined what it would be like to introduce my daughter to the only woman I've loved. However, it's harder than I imagined.

Finally noticing me, Grier shouts, "Daddy!"

Corrigan startles, jerking around like she's been caught, and her smile vanishes, shattering my reverie. "L-Lex. You're back."

Interesting. Lex. Not Lexington. Just like she used to call me Lex back when we were together.

"I'm sorry it took me so long." I drag one hand through my hair.

Corrigan stands and wipes her hands on a dish towel. "We were just finishing up dinner. How's your mom?"

"She's fine now. After running some tests, the doc sent her home." I stare at them for another second, aware that my brain seems to be working only in slow motion. I think I'm in shock. "You fed Grier."

Corrigan looks at me like I'm an idiot, which maybe I am. "Yeah. It was getting late, so I decided to make dinner. I whipped up a little spaghetti. No big deal."

"Thank you." The obvious finally occurs to me. "I didn't think we had the ingredients for spaghetti."

“You didn’t. I asked Dak to go to the grocery store and grab what I needed. I would’ve gone myself, but you didn’t leave a car seat, so I couldn’t take Grier with me.”

“Oh. Right.” There are a hell of a lot of things I didn’t do. My guilt resurfaces. “I’m really sorry for taking so long. I left my phone here so I couldn’t call and then time just got away from me. What can I do to help? Is there anything left to do that I can take care of?”

“Well, between the ice cream, the finger-painting, and the spaghetti sauce . . . I would say she needs a bath.” She looks at Grier and pokes her chubby cheek. “Don’t you think so, sweetie? You decorated yourself, didn’t you?”

Grier grabs her finger. “Yeah. I make me pretty.”

“You’re always pretty, baby girl.” Then I process what Corrigan actually said. “I have a finger-painting set?”

Corrigan shrugs. “You do now. We stopped at the children’s toy store on the pier when we went for our walk.” She points to the doorway leading into the kitchen. “She’s quite the artist.”

I step back to look, and sure enough, a colorful portrait of pink and blue smears is now hanging on the fridge. “Are these flowers?” I ask Grier.

Grier frowns at me as if it’s obvious. “T-Rex princess.”

I bend down to kiss the top of her head. “Oh, of course. How silly of me. She’s the most beautiful, ferocious dinosaur royalty I’ve ever laid eyes on.” Not technically a lie—I’ve only ever seen this one.

“Oh, right, I almost forgot,” Corrigan says. “I figured you might be hungry, so I made enough spaghetti for the three of us. Your portion’s on the stove. It should still be warm.”

My stomach growls on cue. I was so wound up with anxiety about Mom and Grier and Corrigan, I haven’t paused long enough to even register my body’s needs before now.

And that soft feeling is back. Probably just because I haven't had someone around to take care of me in a long time. "Thanks. Let me just get Grier cleaned up, and I'll walk you out."

Corrigan shocks me again by saying, "There's no rush. Why don't you give her a bath, and I'll finish cleaning up here?" She stands up as if it's already decided.

Still somewhat dazed, I follow orders and take Grier upstairs.

This is all so much newness to navigate. I've been a single dad since day one, so it goes without saying that I never had a partner. Never shared household responsibilities with anyone at all before, let alone someone I'm insanely attracted to *and* have an intense history with. It's surreal . . . but feels natural at the same time. Once again, it's like a snapshot from an alternate reality. An enviably cozy, contented life.

*Fucking snap out of it, Lex. She's not here to play house with you.*

Maybe I'd have a life like this if nineteen-year-old me hadn't been such a cowardly dipshit. But that's not how it went down, and that's not what's happening now.

Corrigan is just doing what needs to be done for Grier's sake. I shouldn't get used to this illusion of a shared home, and I definitely shouldn't let myself be seduced by its warmth and get wrapped up in what could have been.

"So, what did you and Corrigan do today?" I ask Grier while soaping her up. "Tell me everything."

"Yummy ice cweam. Seagulls said *aaah!*" She cracks up at her own noisy bird impression.

"Sounds like a great day by the beach," I say. "And you painted too. Was that fun?"

"Yeah. Messy paint. I made big picture." She flings her arms out to illustrate, pelting me with drops of soapy water.

“I saw. A masterful portrait of Her Highness, the great Princess T-Rex.”

“No, Daddy, it Flapflap playing in da sky.”

This time I’m the one who laughs. “Oh, you’re right. Sorry.”

I keep encouraging her with commentary as I scrub, rinse, and towel her dry. Her merry jabbering puts a smile on my face and melts away my stress about Mom’s health.

And if I strain my ears, I can just barely hear Corrigan working away downstairs.

God, she’s already done enough, but I couldn’t bring myself to tell her to go when she was willing to stay a little longer. Plus, I’d like to talk to her out of earshot of Grier before she leaves.

I spray detangler and comb out Grier’s curls. I learned the hard way that her hair must be brushed after her bath, otherwise it’ll tangle into a snarled mess.

As I dress her in pajamas, Grier says with big, solemn eyes, “My like Cor-gan lots.”

“Me too, baby girl,” I reply. *Way too much.*

“Say night-night?” Grier asks.

“Yeah, Corrigan has to go home. But we’ll . . .” There’s no guarantee we’ll see her soon, or ever again.

“No,” Grier says shrilly. “We give bye-bye!”

“Okay, sweetheart. Come on,” I say as I hoist her into my arms.

By the time I’ve reached the last stair, she’s already half asleep, her head heavy on my shoulder. I round the corner . . . and I’m astounded again. Everything is spotless and back in its proper place, except for the foil-covered plate she set out for me at the table, complete with silverware and a napkin.

Corrigan herself is waiting for me by the door with her purse. She looks beautiful.

I bring Grier close, and she reaches out to touch Corrigan's arm.

"G'night," Grier manages to mumble before her head drops back onto my shoulder, where she nestles in close, pressing her face to my neck.

"I'll write you a check as soon as you decide your rate," I whisper. And whatever figure she names, I'll top it with a generous bonus. "I really can't thank you enough for today. You seriously saved my skin."

Corrigan runs her fingers through Grier's hair. "It was no problem. I mean, when you first left, I kind of wanted to castrate you," she whispers back, smiling. "But it was your mom. You couldn't exactly ignore her. Besides . . . Grier is a really sweet little girl and we had a lot of fun today."

"She is. She's my whole world." I hesitate, then think, *Fuck it—nothing ventured, nothing gained*, and take the leap. "And I need you, Corrigan. There's no one else I'd trust."

She looks away, swallows, and I'm so prepared to hear *absolutely not* that I almost don't catch her murmuring, "I'll do it. Text me the details." And with that, she's gone without another word.

I take Grier back upstairs, lay her gently in bed, and return to eat my dinner.

It's the best spaghetti I've ever tasted.

**L**et me state the obvious—two-year-olds are a lot of work.

Don't get me wrong, Grier is absolutely precious. Sure, it took a while for the shock of the whole situation to fade, but once I had her wandering along the beach with her tiny hand in mine and the other with a death grip on a strawberry ice cream cone, something in my brain just switched. Yes, I wanted to chop Lexington's balls off the second he walked out the door, but by the end of the day, I was actually a little bummed to be leaving my new bite-sized bestie behind.

Of course, that went away the second I slid into the driver's seat of my car, when exhaustion hit me like a freaking tidal wave. I'm talking about a level of tiredness that no amount of coffee from Lexington's fancy new espresso machine could fix. The kind of exhaustion that makes you wonder if caffeine pills are such a bad idea and, more importantly, if Lexington is superhuman for doing this whole parenting thing all by himself.

How in the world is he managing to raise his daughter by himself while running such an enormous real estate business? And why is Grier's mom not taking some of that responsibility off his hands?

My mind churns with questions the entire drive home. But by the time I step through my front door, there are only two things on my mind—my comfy pants and my bed.

Yes, it's only eight p.m.

Yes, the sun is still out.

No, I do not care. Judge me if you must.

Between navigating awkward small talk with my ex and putting in a good six hours of emergency babysitting, I need a full eight hours of sleep more than I need oxygen right now. As I lug myself up the stairs, I picture a sleepy little Grier, nuzzled up in her daddy's bulky arms, too tired to even say good-bye to me tonight. That's how I feel right now. Only I don't have a big strong man to carry me to bed. Just my two very exhausted legs.

Upstairs, I hurry through my bedtime routine, which includes a few additional steps tonight. It's not every day I wash pasta sauce out of my hair and have to scrub finger paint from beneath my nails. I guess I should start getting used to this, though. I accepted this nannying job, after all.

Once I'm feeling fresh and clean again, I slip into a pair of comfy pajama pants and a tank top. Two seconds later, I'm beneath my fluffy white duvet, letting out an audible sigh of relief as soon as my head hits the pillow.

Time for some much-deserved me time. Maybe I should zone out and fall asleep watching some dumb reality show. Or I could finally start that book that's been gathering dust on my nightstand.

But before I can make up my mind, my phone buzzes on my nightstand with a text from Lexington.

Are you sure you're a teacher and not a chef?

My brows push together as I text back a string of question marks, but he replies right away with a spaghetti emoji, an equals sign, and a flame emoji.

A smile tugs at the corner of my lips. *So this is how we're communicating now? Emojis?*

I guess I'll play along. Scrolling through my emoji keyboard, I hunt down the chef, the shrugging guy, and the girl tossing her hair. No use acting humble. My pasta game is killer.

He shoots back the *laughing so hard you're crying* emoji before switching back to real words.

Seriously, though. The food, the finger-painting, everything. You're magical. You're like freaking Mary Poppins or something. I don't know what I would have done without you today. I owe you big-time.

I picture myself floating through the sky on a magic umbrella, waving at a chimney-sweep version of Lexington below. It actually makes me laugh out loud. I shake my head, still chuckling to myself as I type out my reply.

IDK, I don't have a magical bag like Mary Poppins does, but I guess I do have a few tricks up my sleeve.

His response comes almost immediately.

Yeah? I can't wait to see.

I stare at his text, reading and rereading it. Am I overthinking this, or did that seem vaguely flirty? And worse yet, did I kind of like it?

*No. Bad Corrigan.*

I'd better stop this thing before it starts. And the best way to do that is to keep this all work, no play.

I'm headed to bed. Let's discuss schedules and payment tomorrow.

I hit SEND, congratulating myself on my save. *Good work, me.* Nothing cutesy or flirty about discussing wages.

But once again, my phone buzzes with a reply that throws me off.

You'll be worth every dime. Sweet dreams.

With a sigh, I flip on DO NOT DISTURB mode and set my phone facedown on my nightstand.

Tomorrow is a new day with a fresh perspective, and hopefully, it'll bring some answers with it. Luckily, I think I know just where to go to get them.

• • •

While Lexington was off having a real-life baby, my big brother, Dak, had a baby of his own. A two-thousand-square-foot baby complete with a pool table and the lingering scent of cheap beer and fried food. Yes, my brother is the proud owner of one of the most popular bars along the beach, and he treats that thing like it's his child.

It's just after two in the afternoon when I push open the door and step into the dimly lit Dak's Place, scanning the bar for its namesake. A handful of lifeguards are at a booth near the back having a late lunch, and a few regulars are making good use of the pool table, but the big crowd won't come for a few hours yet. Which means my brother has plenty of time to chat, and hopefully put a few of my questions to rest.

"What's up, li'l sis?" Dak waves to me with a dishrag from behind the bar. "Did you come to help me dry dishes?"

"Actually, I'm here for cheese fries. But I'm happy to help out."

As I hop up onto a bar stool, Dak calls out my order to the cook, then tosses me a dishrag of my own. He grabs a few freshly washed pint glasses and slides them across the bar, which is built entirely out of repurposed surfboards. With its chill, beachy vibes, Dak's has become sort of a staple for both tourists and townies.

"So, how's the summer-break life?"

"I slept in till eight fifteen this morning," I say, unable to keep myself from bragging as I grab a pint glass and stuff the towel inside. "So I'm practically a night owl now, right?"

My brother, who famously slept in well past noon every weekend of high school, chuckles. “Congrats, you made it past the ass crack of dawn, you psycho. I don’t know how you survive those five a.m. alarms during the school year.”

I let the jab go. It’s all part of the brother-sister banter that’s normal for us. “How are things here?” I gesture to the bar, noting that it’s even cleaner than usual. “It looks great in here, by the way.”

His eyes brighten. “I have to keep it looking good since Lex is swinging by soon. I can’t believe he’s never been in this place.”

“And I can’t believe he has a daughter.” I meet Dak’s eyes, and his brows scrunch together.

“You didn’t know about Grier?”

I shake my head. How is he surprised right now? Every time Lexington’s name’s been brought up for the past several years, I’ve shut the conversation down, as fast as I possibly could.

“How long have you known?” I ask.

Dak’s lips form a tight line as he flips through the calendar in his brain. “Two months before she was born, I think. Maybe three. I just remember that they let the gender be a surprise. Personally, I was hoping for a boy so they could name him Dak Junior.”

“They? So Grier’s mom was closely involved?”

A snicker leaks out from behind his smug smile. “Uh, yeah, she was involved. Do you know how babies are made? It takes two to tango, you know..”

I roll my eyes so hard, I’m slightly nervous they may never come back down. “You know what I mean, Dak. I’m asking what the story is. You know, was she a girlfriend? Or . . . a wife?”

“What’s it matter to you?” His tone is gruff as he folds his arms over his toned chest. “For the past ten years you’ve practically plugged your ears every time I mentioned Lex. Now you suddenly want to know all the dirty details of

his life. What gives?”

Okay, so I guess he did notice that.

I straighten and finish drying another glass. *Play it cool, Corrigan.* “I think it’s reasonable to want to know the origin story of the little girl I’m suddenly responsible for.”

Dak lifts a brow, his lips barely hinting at a smile. “So you took the nanny gig?”

“I guess so.”

“What do you mean, you guess so? Either you accepted it or you didn’t. Which is it?”

“I’m not answering your questions if you aren’t answering mine. Whatever happened to Grier’s mom? Was she, like, a criminal or something? Or did he end up a dad the old-fashioned way—somebody left baby Grier on his stoop in the middle of the night?”

Dak shakes his head. “Two very interesting theories, drama queen, but they’re both wrong. It’s not my story to tell, though. You should just talk to Lex about it.”

I squirm on my bar stool, remembering how I so blatantly asked about Grier’s mother when I first ran into Lexington in the park. A move that bold might not bear repeating. But if I can’t get any answers out of Dak, I might not have a choice.

“Yeah, maybe I will,” I mumble, sliding the now dry pint glasses back across the bar to him. “Thanks.”

“No, thank *you*,” he says. “For helping out here and for helping out Lex. He really needs another set of hands, and I know you could always use some extra cash in the summer.”

“Speaking of, what’s the family and friends discount on those cheese fries?” I ask, giving him my best puppy-dog eyes.

Dak chuckles, tossing his dishrag over his shoulder as he shakes his head.  
“For you? They’re on the house. A favor for a favor.”

When the doorbell rings, Grier shrieks and runs ahead of me to the front door. I hold back a laugh as she stretches to reach the knob, fails, and turns to pout at me like I purposely put it too high. Have I mentioned that my daughter is pure sass?

“It’s okay, love bug. Daddy’s here to help,” I say as I pull open the door, expecting Corrigan.

Grier stomps her chubby little feet in a rapid display of frustration. “Me wanna do it!”

“Hi. What’s the problem?” Corrigan asks, brows scrunching as she takes in the scene—me trying not to smile and Grier obviously mad.

“She just . . . uh . . .” I trail off when I actually get a look at her. *Holy shit.* The sight of Corrigan makes my breath catch in my throat.

Her outfit isn’t anything flashy—a pale blue striped tank top and a pair of cotton drawstring shorts—so no reason for me to be struck dumb. And yet here I am, acting dumb as hell.

I clear my throat and try not to stare so obviously at her cleavage and those long, bare legs. She’s *stunning* dressed in so little. And . . . I realize belatedly, she’s still waiting for me to answer. *Smooth, Lex..*

“She’s mad she’s too short to answer the door.”

“Oh, I see.” Corrigan smiles at Grier and bends over to talk closer, which doesn’t make it easier to stop my gaze from lowering, but I force my eyes off her tits. “I understand. It’s tough when you want to do something and you can’t,

huh?”

For a second, I’m reminded of what Mom said in the ER two days ago, and it sobers me like ice water.

That is, until Grier crosses her arms over her chest and says, “Yeah. Don’t like it.”

Corrigan smiles warmly down at Grier and ruffles her hair.

I shift my weight, moving aside to let Corrigan in past the door. “She’s been really looking forward to seeing you.”

“Aw, that’s so sweet. I’m excited to hang out with her today too.”

She offers Grier her hand, and Grier latches on with her biggest, most heart-melting grin. Corrigan flashes one back, then looks to me.

“Just to go over it again real quick, you’ll be back at noon, and she’s already had her breakfast, but she’ll need a midmorning snack in an hour?”

“Exactly. And this time I remembered my phone and left the car seat, so you can go out if you like.” I grab my laptop bag, and out of the corner of my eye, I catch Corrigan giving me what seems very much like a once-over. I’m too tempted not to turn and ask, “My outfit okay?”

“What?” She jerks her gaze up, her cheeks slightly pink. “Uh. Yeah, I guess it’s fine. .”

I smirk. “Good to know.” It’s just jeans and a polo. There’s clearly something about my appearance that’s distracting, but I have no idea what it could be. “Okay, see y’all soon.” I drop a kiss onto Grier’s cheek and head out.

I drive to a coworking space in town where I’ve rented a small private office. Initially, I thought about just going to a coffee shop, but I decided to try this setup first, in the hopes that cutting distractions would let me work faster and get back to focusing on Grier sooner. After I handle the fresh crop of emails that sprang up overnight and make a few necessary phone calls to my property manager, accountant, and lawyer, I settle into reviewing financial analysis

reports.

Or at least, I try to. My eyes keep glazing over and my thoughts keep drifting back to home.

*What will Corrigan and Grier do today?*

I can't shake the feeling that I'm in the wrong place, that I'm missing important time. And this is more than the usual *I should be there* parental guilt. My restless gut—not to mention my libido—is pushing me toward Corrigan too.

I check the clock. Almost another full hour has passed, and I haven't absorbed a damn thing, let alone started drafting my own response. I guess cutting down distractions only works when it's not my own mind trying to betray me.

*Fuck it.*

I stand and begin packing up my computer and papers. I've checked off all the things that have to happen during business hours, so I can do the rest tonight after Grier is in bed. A little sleep deprivation won't kill me.

When I get back home, I'm greeted with the unfairly adorable scene of Corrigan on the couch, brushing Grier's hair, while Grier sits on the carpet between her knees, playing with Flapflap. They both turn at the sound of the door opening.

"Daddy home!" Grier looks back and forth between us, clearly torn—which I'm not totally sure how to feel about—then clambers up and runs over to hug my leg.

I shift quickly to keep her from clobbering me in the nuts, and lift her into my arms. "Hi, baby girl."

Corrigan blinks at me, surprised. "You're back?"

"Indeed I am." I set Grier on the floor and ruffle her hair.

I admit, I'm a little jealous at how fast her loyalties became divided. After all,

for two years it's only been us against the world. I'm only a little jealous, though. Mostly it just takes a load off my mind to know how well she and Corrigan are getting along in such a short amount of time. And there's that same flash of sweetness, of peace, that comes with seeing them together.

Corrigan chuckles. "Wow, I wish I could work that fast. Grading would be a snap."

I rub my neck awkwardly. "It's not that. I just couldn't concentrate and decided I'd try again later. I was wondering if you . . ." I don't know how I'm going to finish that sentence, but fortunately, an idea leaps straight out of my mouth. "If you two wanted to go to the beach. I've not taken her yet."

"You definitely should. She loved it before—and we barely went off the pier that time." Corrigan stands and starts toward the door.

"You could join us."

Her brow creases in confusion. "Oh. All three of us?"

"Do you have other plans?" I'm probably not playing fair, because of course she doesn't have other plans. Her afternoon was supposed to be spent watching Grier.

Corrigan stays quiet for a second, not answering me. I'm not sure why, but I need her to say yes.

"Don't worry, I'll still pay you for your time. You already set aside your day to come over here and all."

"Well, why not?" She pauses, frowning. "I didn't bring a swimsuit, though."

"Grier and I don't have any either. Well, technically I do, somewhere in one of the boxes in my room." I wave my hand in their general direction. I managed to shrink the disaster zone last weekend, but actually finishing unpacking will take a while yet.

I leave Grier with Corrigan while I quickly change into cargo shorts and sandals. When I head back to the living room, this time I'm definitely not

imagining the way Corrigan's gaze seems to drink me in. *Interesting.*

After I assemble a quick picnic lunch and load up the car with the hundred and one things a toddler needs to go on an outing, then get Grier buckled in, we're off.

At the beach, we put on sunscreen in the parking lot. Getting Grier done is a lot easier with two people—one to hold the squirmy toddler, and one to apply the cream.

After buying her a plastic bucket and shovel on the pier, we weave through plenty of spread-out towels on the sand before finding an unclaimed spot to put down our blanket and basket. I'd forgotten that beach season around here starts the instant school lets out.

Taking note of how huge Grier's eyes grow at the sight of the ocean, I ask, "Should we check out the water?"

Her rapturous smile says it all.

Corrigan and I take off her shoes and socks, then bend to each hold one of her hands and help her step through the very edge of the lapping waves. Every time the cool water washes over her feet, she squeals and dances.

I glance over her head to Corrigan, only to find her already looking at me, and something intense and searching in her eyes paralyzes me. I can't bring myself to break our shared gaze and I only look away when she does.

After Grier has had her fill of the ocean, we spend a little while just lounging in the sun while watching Grier dig a hole and occasionally gasp when a tiny crab scuttles past.

Eventually, I ask, "What should we do next?"

"Hmm . . . how about a sandcastle?" Corrigan says, smiling at Grier.

Grier cocks her head. "Castle?"

"Just like the ones in your princess books, love bug. Except we make these

ones out of sand, see?” I demonstrate, scooping wet sand into her bucket and upending it to form a messy but functional tower.

Grier squeals and wriggles in excitement, reaching out. “Gimme bucket!”

“Don’t you want help?” I ask.

Grier shakes her head firmly. “No. Me do it.”

*I see we’re on a roll today as far as stubborn independence goes.* I chuckle. There are worse personality traits.

“Are you sure?” Corrigan asks Grier. “If you tell us what to do, we can make a much bigger castle than if you had to do everything all by yourself.”

Grier considers, clearly intrigued by the idea of bossing adults around, then nods.

We get to work helping Grier build towers, and decorate them with pebbles and dune grass according to her exacting standards. The sight of Corrigan playing and giggling with my daughter coaxes out a laugh of my own. Plus, my kid is just really adorable.

Corrigan glances at me, a smile still pulling at her lips. “What?”

“Nothing. It’s just, I guess some things never change. You always did love the beach.”

She gives me a strange look. “You seem to remember an awful lot about me.”

My tongue is suddenly tangled with itself. “Well, you made a big impression on me.”

She quickly turns away. Her cheeks seem pink, and I can’t tell if it’s anger, or just the sun, or something else I don’t dare to name.

No, it can’t be that last one. I can hear her voice in my head as clearly as if she’d spoken aloud. *Evidently not a big enough impression to make you stay.*

But what if that *isn’t* how she feels? We never did get anywhere conclusive about that part of our past. Maybe she’s forgiven me—well, probably not, but

accepting my apology and moving on from it seems within the realm of possibility. She did listen to what I had to say, and she agreed to work for me.. it's something I guess.

Mentally, I shake my head. It's not like I can ask her outright to confirm whether this is just wishful thinking or not. If I'm wrong, it'll ruin the tentative truce between us and send us back to square one. Besides, what difference does it make whether she likes me or just tolerates me because I'm paying her to look after my daughter? Everything is different now. Our relationship is strictly professional.

Well, on my end, it's far from that. I can't lie to myself about the way my body reacts to the sight of Corrigan's bare legs, her curves, her smile, her dark blond hair shining in the sun. Even just her eyes meeting mine sparks electricity down my spine and straight into my groin.

But professional is what it should be. That's what's best for Grier.

This silence has stretched on too long. I cover up the awkward moment by asking, "Are you getting hungry?"

Corrigan shrugs. "I could eat." She looks to Grier, her mouth quirking. "How about you, little architect? Break for lunch, or keep bringing your artistic vision to life?"

Grier stares at her, then at the castle. "Want food now." She drops her toys and toddles off toward the picnic basket.

Corrigan laughs and, getting to her feet, scoops my sleepy angel into her arms. "No? You're not tired at all, not even the littlest tiny bit?"

"Huh-uh." Grier shakes her head lazily, her lashes fluttering.

Corrigan winks at me, and *oh God*, it does way too much to all my organs, but I take it for the purely practical cue she almost certainly meant it as. I gather up the basket, the blanket, and all of Grier's stuff, and start back to the parking lot as Corrigan follows with Grier.

By the time I've unlocked the car, Grier is down for the count, her head lolling heavily on Corrigan's shoulder. She only lets out a barely audible mumble, popping her thumb into her mouth as Corrigan maneuvers her into her seat like a rag doll and buckles her up.

At home, when I take Grier upstairs to bed, Corrigan surprises me by following. Together, we watch my sleeping daughter for a minute.

Finally, Corrigan says, so quietly I almost don't catch it, "Today was nice."

"It was." It's been a long time since I've had a casual day of fun like this, and even longer since I spent one with Corrigan. "Although now I've got sand in places a man should never have sand. I seriously need a shower."

Her mouth quirks. "Well, let me know if you need any help."

I can't resist the opening. "Showering?" I ask, smirking.

"N-no, I meant with Grier," she stutters, looking away. "Just text me."

I clear my throat. "Right. I will."

After I walk Corrigan back down to the front door and she's gone, I let my head thud gently against the frame. *Wow, Lex, great job keeping your shit together.*

She's only been officially working for me for one day, and I'm already losing my grip on sanity. I clearly need to get laid ASAP. But it won't be with the hot-as-fuck babysitter. Nope, definitely not.

*Dammit, what a disappointing thought.*

“**H**ola! Hola! Hola!”

The sounds of Grier playing in the living room echo throughout the house, loud and clear, even over my working in the kitchen. I guess she’s getting G.I. Joe and Flapflap in the spirit of taco night. After almost four hours playing in the sandbox at the park today, you’d think she’d be more worn out than this. But no. My little ball of energy is wide awake, despite me having already changed her into her pj’s.

“And what does *hola* mean, sweetie?” I call into the next room, wondering how much actual learning she did today, and how much is just her repeating what she heard me say.

“*Hola!*” I hear her squeal, followed by the familiar thunk of G.I. Joe being tossed against the couch.

Poor G.I. Joe. That girl really puts him through it.

Stepping away from my homemade pico de gallo, I crane my neck to see into the other room, double-checking that G.I. Joe was the one hurt, not Grier. Sure enough, she’s happy as a clam, swinging Flapflap around by one wing.

“*Hola!*” she says, waving to me. “*Hola* is hello!”

Holy cow, she actually does know what it means. This toddler officially knows one tenth of the Spanish words I know, and three of mine are *mas*, *cerveza*, and *por favor*, which I’m certainly not about to teach her. Still, helping her learn something new does my teacher heart good, and listening to her make her toys repeat *hola* back and forth to each other does *my* heart some good.

“Whatever you’re cooking, it smells amazing,” a low, husky voice calls from down the hall, and Grier hops to her feet, squealing at the sight of her daddy.

Honestly, I can’t blame her. One look at him in that fitted navy blazer, and I could squeal too. It only gets better once he takes it off and unbuttons the cuffs of his white button-up, pushing the sleeves up to his elbows.

What is it about a man’s forearms, specifically *this* man’s forearms, that’s so freaking sexy? And when said sexy forearms pluck the pj-clad toddler up off the floor, holding her tight against his hip? The whole situation has me split somewhere between an “aww” and a “goddamn.”

“How was your day, baby girl?”

I hurry back toward the kitchen, biting down on my lower lip to keep from answering. That was not directed at me, no matter how much I secretly would have liked it if it were. I should really stick to my *pico de gallo*.

“*Hola, hola, hola!*” Grier babbles at her daddy, her *holas* getting louder as Lexington follows behind me.

I look up from my slicing to see his brows knitted tightly together. “Do I have a bilingual kid now?”

“That would require hiring a nanny who knows more than ten words of Spanish,” I say with a grin, adding a bowl of homemade guacamole to the spread of taco fixings I’ve laid out across the kitchen island. “I was just trying to use taco night as a learning opportunity.”

“*Hola* is hello!” Grier says proudly to her daddy, her smile spanning the full width of her face.

My smile is just as big. “You’ve got yourself one smart cookie there.”

Grier whips her head back toward me, her blue eyes suddenly wide and wild. “Cookie?”

Lex and I exchange a long, knowing look before bursting into laughter. Smart as she is, this little munchkin is still completely dessert driven.

“No cookies yet, love bug,” Lex says gently to a suddenly disappointed Grier. “But, hey, these tacos look just as tasty, don’t you think?” He pauses, looking back to me with narrowed eyes. “You know you don’t have to cook, by the way. This is above and beyond what I’m paying you for.”

I shrug as I head for the sink and rinse any remnants of avocado off my hands. “I enjoy it. And it’s one less thing for you to worry about.”

“Well, at the very least, you have to stay to enjoy this,” he says, motioning toward the spread. “As long as you don’t have other plans, that is.”

“My other plans would involve leftovers and an early bedtime,” I say. “And I can never say no to tacos. It’s a rule I live by.”

“Smart girl,” he murmurs with a chuckle.

While I situate Grier in her high chair with her trusty friend Flapflap, Lex takes the lead on building the perfect taco for her, all the while regaling me with a story of their last trip to a Mexican restaurant in New York. Apparently, one-year-old Grier had quite the thing for putting black beans up her nose, and dipping her fingers into the queso.

“Kids are weird.” He shakes his head, adding a two-year-old’s portion of ground beef to the flour tortilla.

I have no idea why I’m staring at him. But Lexington Dane is the lead contender for the hottest dad in the world award.

When he looks my way, I blurt out the first thing that comes to mind. “Don’t worry. As someone who teaches first graders, I can say for certain that they just get weirder.”

The three of us settle in at the table, and dinner flies by in the blink of an eye, or, more accurately, two flaps of Flapflap’s wings. Grier insists on wrapping her stuffed bat inside a tortilla, then proceeds to howl with laughter so raucous that I’m sure we’ll never calm her down for bedtime. At the first sight of a yawn, Lex snatches the opportunity to start winding things down.

“Someone’s probably about ready for bed, huh?” He reaches over and tousles Grier’s white-blond hair, earning him a pout.

“No!” She huffs, jutting her lower lip out. “I don’t wanna!”

Lex and I both sigh in perfect unison. We should have known she wouldn’t go down without a fight. He props his forearms on the table, giving me another chance to grapple with why in the world his forearms are such a turn-on.

Leaning in closer to his daughter, he offers a solid proposition. “What about this, love bug? I’ll read you two stories instead of one tonight. How’s that sound?”

Grier’s face twists up as she considers the offer, but apparently, it’s not up to her standards. “No. I want corgi.”

I turn toward him, hoping he’s prepared to crack this code, but the look on his face tells me he’s just as confused as I am. It’s not until Grier jabs a finger in my direction that we understand what she’s talking about.

“Corgi,” she says again. “Corgi reads stories.”

“I guess that’s me.” I chuckle, pushing my plate away and pressing to my feet. “Silly me. I thought I was the nanny, not the family dog.”

Lex snickers at my joke, but when it’s time to actually take the little goober to bed, he’s entirely serious. “You can head home if you want. She doesn’t always have to get her way.”

“It’s not a problem.” I scoop the little sleepyhead out of her high chair and bounce her against my hip. “Put your feet up for a bit. We’re gonna go read about the dragon and the dodgeball game, right, kiddo?”

I look down at Grier, catching her as her yawn turns to a sleepy smile. We’re halfway up the stairs when the sound of Lex’s voice calling after me stops me midstep.

“I owe you the world, Corrigan.”

Just hearing my name in his sweet, resonant tone freezes me in my tracks, a tingling feeling spreading from the arches of my feet to the tips of my ears. *Jeez, I need to shake this.* I told myself I wouldn't get mixed up with this man again. Which means no tingly feelings. Ever.

"It's fine, really," I call back, trying to convince myself as much as him.

Yes, I'm playing house with an ex, but I'm getting paid for it. It's fine. Totally normal. No strings attached. Employee and boss. *Totally* fine. Even if the sound of my name in his deep voice does all sorts of things to me that I wish it wouldn't. I need to ignore it all and remember how much he hurt me. Because I truly believe I wouldn't handle another broken heart caused by Lexington Dane.

After one more read-through of *Dragons Play Dodgeball* than I promised, Grier is sound asleep, meaning my workday is nearly done. All that's left to do is the dishes.

I tiptoe down the stairs, half wondering if the ground-beef pan will need to soak. But by the time I make it to the kitchen, the dirty dishes have already disappeared from the sink, and I can barely hear the low hum of the dishwasher churning faintly.

It looks like someone went ahead and did my work for me. And that someone is standing in the middle of this freshly cleaned kitchen, balancing two long-stemmed wineglasses in one hand and a bottle of chardonnay in the other.

"What's going on?" I ask in a hushed voice. Sound travels with these vaulted ceilings, and the last thing I want to do is wake up Sleeping Beauty.

Lex tips his head toward the sliding glass door, the low-hanging sun shining a glimmer into his bright blue eyes. "It's a nice night. I thought you could help me christen the patio."

I fold my arms over my chest, not sure if I should believe him. "You've lived here two weeks and haven't used it yet?"

"Haven't even opened the sliding glass door," he says quietly, almost

sounding embarrassed. “Our beach day yesterday was the first relaxing thing I’ve done since moving here, what with Mom and work and settling in.”

“Right,” I murmur, shooting him an apologetic smile as my stomach twists into a knot tight enough to impress a Boy Scout.

*Duh, Corrigan.* This man is trying to balance a real estate empire with a two-year-old daughter and a terminally ill mother. He hasn’t had the time to lounge around and put his feet up.

“Anyway, the last owner left some patio furniture behind. What do you say we break it in?”

I chew my lip, carefully considering the offer.

This definitely extends beyond my nannying duties, although I’m not one to say no to a glass of chardonnay. But one-on-one time with Lex seems awfully dangerous. Throw wine in the mix, and the whole situation has *bad idea* written all over it.

The warm, hopeful look in his eyes is making it borderline impossible to say no. Swallowing the nervousness creeping up my throat, I nod, deciding that one glass couldn’t hurt.

Lexington muscles open the sliding glass door, and I follow him out onto the patio, the brick pavers cool on my bare feet despite the thick, humid air.

Summer heat in North Carolina can be punishing, but then there are nights like these, where the sky looks like a watercolor painting, and the air smells salty from the ocean breeze. I’d endure all the humidity in the world for this. It’s one of the many, many reasons I never left Wilmington.

We settle into the two wrought-iron chairs at the edge of the patio, and Lex wastes no time uncorking the bottle, filling each glass with a generous pour. He holds one glass out toward me, and hesitantly, I take it, trying to ignore the little spark of heat that leaps between our fingers as they brush.

“What should we toast to?” Lex asks.

“To Grier?”

The suggestion earns me a wide, genuine smile that spreads all the way to his eyes. “To Grier,” he says, lifting his glass toward mine. “And to you. I’m so grateful to have you looking after my daughter, Corrigan.”

*Clink.*

I take a long sip, letting the crisp, oaky flavor wash over me. Wow, this stuff is good. Far from my usual five-dollar bottle, my go-to for making grading spelling tests more tolerable.

“What is this?” I lick the flavor from my lips as I eye the unfamiliar label on the bottle. Whatever it is, it looks as expensive as it tastes.

“You like it? It’s been gathering dust for years. Something I picked up at some wine shop in Tribeca.” His usual confident tone wavers slightly as his gaze shifts away from mine. “It’s, uh, it’s been a while since I’ve had anyone to split a bottle of wine with, if you know what I mean.”

My chest tightens, every nerve in my body suddenly alert. *This is it, Corrigan. The perfect opportunity to reopen the conversation he’s been avoiding from the beginning.*

I gulp down a second, larger sip of wine, praying the liquid courage will kick in quickly.

“Will you tell me about Grier’s mom now?”

It’s quiet between us, and for a moment, I think Lexington is going to flat-out say no. But then he nods, his throat bobbing as he swallows a hefty sip of wine.

“There’s not much to tell, to be honest. I told you, she was never in Grier’s life. She was ‘the egg donor,’ remember?”

I roll my eyes at the reminder of that stupid nickname. Men can be so gross sometimes. “Yeah, I remember. But I still want to know the whole story. You promised you’d tell me everything. I’m cashing in on that promise.”

Lexington chuckles, shaking his head. “You’re as stubborn as always, Cor. But I guess you deserve to know. She was a lawyer living in New York, at the time. We’d been seeing each other for a few weeks, but it was never anything serious. And then, well, she got pregnant. I thought we were being careful, but I guess not careful enough.”

“Accidents happen,” I say, doing my best to suppress my teacher voice. “No matter how careful we are.”

“I tried to make it right, though. I told her we could figure out joint custody, or even try to make a relationship work. Give the baby the life he or she deserved. But she couldn’t have been less interested in either of those ideas. Next thing I knew, she was looking into adoption agencies. She said she never wanted to be a mom.”

“But you wanted to be a dad?”

He scrubs a hand through his dark hair, a sheepish smile tugging at his lips. “I mean, yeah. I didn’t envision it happening like this, but hell, life doesn’t always go as planned. And my conscience couldn’t let me just walk away.”

With that, he takes a hefty swig of his wine, so I follow suit, draining what’s left in my glass. It sends a warm, pleasant tingle radiating through me. Maybe wine was a good idea after all. It’s certainly taking the edge off this conversation.

“So she gave you full custody then?” I can’t help but press. No way am I letting this conversation fizzle out without getting every detail that I can from him.

“We didn’t make anything official until a few months after Grier was born. You know, in case she changed her mind. But she didn’t. Last we spoke, she was preparing for a big case. She’s one of New York’s top trial attorneys. I guess that’s kind of hard to do with a toddler.”

My chest constricts with an unexpected bit of jealousy. “Oh. So you two still talk?”

“No, not really.” Lex’s laugh cuts through the tension, and for the first time since this conversation began, I feel like I’m not walking on eggshells. “Not like there was bad blood between us or anything. But after she signed the paperwork, it was just me and Grier from then on.”

“Grier and Lex versus the world,” I murmur, pouring myself a tiny bit more of my new favorite chardonnay.

“And Corrigan,” he says. “Grier and Lex and Corrigan versus the world. I couldn’t be doing this right now without you.”

I shake my head. “No way. You got this far on your own. I’m just lending a helping hand where it’s needed.”

“Maybe. But Grier sure has taken a liking to you. My mom has been saying from the start that she needed a woman in her life. I guess she was right.” He pauses, a hint of a smile pulling at his lips. “Don’t tell my mom I said that. It’ll go to her head.”

I cross my heart. “Your secret is safe with me.”

It’s quiet between us again, but this time, the silence is easier. Comfortable, even.

It reminds me of the nights we used to spend walking the beach back in high school, our fingers intertwined. Sometimes we’d chat away about whatever it is teenagers talk about. But other times, the only sound between us would be the crashing of the tide. If I hold my breath, I swear I can hear it now, even from a quarter mile away.

I’m so laser focused on listening for that distant sound that I hardly catch the words coming from the man right beside me. Something about dinner? That can’t be right. We already ate.

I turn his way, refocusing my attention. “I’m sorry, I didn’t catch that.”

There are those warm, hopeful eyes again. They’re an even brighter blue in this light. And they cut right through me as Lex repeats the words I swore I

misheard.

“You and I should get dinner sometime. Just the two of us.”

I blink a few times to be sure I’m not imagining things. Is the wine going to my head, or is he asking what I think he’s asking?

“Are you . . . asking me out?”

“As long as you want me to be.” He shifts in his seat, leaning in a bit closer to me, close enough that I catch a whiff of his woodsy cologne. It’s earthy and sweet, with notes of honey and leather.

But beneath that is a more familiar smell, a clean, masculine scent that’s pure Lexington. Because after all, beneath the grown, handsome man in front of me is the same Lexington from high school. The same boy who took my heart and cracked it wide open. And I just can’t go down that road again.

“Well, I don’t.” I sigh, which makes Lexington’s blue eyes widen.

“Oh. I . . . I’m sorry, I must’ve been reading this wrong. I thought . . .” He pauses, gathering his thoughts. “Do you not feel the connection between us?”

“Of course I do.” I sigh again, my voice dripping with exasperation. “But I’m here to watch Grier. That’s all. I’ve been down that road with you before. And if you remember, it was a dead end for me.”

“I already apologized for that,” he says, his voice husky and sterner now that he’s on the defense. “We were young and dumb. And I’m sorry.”

“*You* were young and dumb,” I say firmly, correcting him. “I was young and heartbroken because *you* disappeared on me and gave up on what we had. You gave up on me. I’m the one who was left in the dust.”

His thick, dark brows draw together. “I thought . . . we talked that out. I was hoping you forgave me.”

“Forgiving and forgetting are two different things, Lexington. And I can’t just forget ten years of complete silence from you.”

I set my glass down on the table before pushing to my feet, which carry me straight back inside without missing a step. If he has anything else to add, I don't hear it over the blood pounding in my ears.

I'm going home. And this time, I'm the one leaving without saying good-bye.

I flip through the massive stack of papers. “Can you go into a little more detail about this part?” I ask the representative, pointing to a firmly worded clause. “I’m not yet as familiar as I’d like to be with this state’s laws.”

I’m currently in a title company office, closing on the first piece of real estate I’ve bought in North Carolina—a beachfront investment property I hope to rent out to tourists. Grier sits on the floor near my feet, munching animal crackers and mashing her fingers against the screen of her tablet. After Corrigan shot me down so thoroughly last week, I wasn’t exactly in a hurry to call her, and besides, this bit of business is easy and fast enough to permit splitting my attention.

“Of course,” the closing agent replies. “It just means that you—”

“Look.” Grier tugs at my sleeve. “Daddy, look-it.”

“Hang on, baby girl, Daddy’s working. I’ll only be another ten minutes.” I switch my attention back. “Please continue.”

“Daaaddyyyyy!” Grier hollers.

I shoot an apologetic glance at the closing agent, who smiles and looks down at Grier. “What is it?”

She points proudly at her tablet screen, which displays an array of bouncing shapes in various colors. “Square is red.”

“That’s right! Very good job. But next time, unless it’s an emergency, wait until Daddy says we can talk.” I turn back again. “Sorry.”

The guy chuckles. “I completely understand. I have a nephew about her age. Now, as I was saying . . .”

After I’ve finished signing paperwork and shaken all the congratulatory hands, I load Grier and her stuff back into the car. It’s been a couple of days since we visited Mom, and we make our way there now.

A new, short-haired nurse in blue scrubs opens Mom’s door, one of the three extras I’ve hired since Mom’s accident. “Lexington, right? I’m Dawn. Listen . . .” She lowers her voice to a murmur. “I’m afraid your mom isn’t doing well today. She’ll need to rest soon.”

I nod calmly like the words don’t send a little chill squirming around my gut. “Thanks for the heads-up. We’ll try to keep things short.”

Dawn heads to the corner with a book, and I appreciate the illusion of privacy. As we come in and sit down, Mom does indeed look exhausted and sick.

Grier clambers into Mom’s lap and stares into her eyes, her forehead crinkled with concern. “Gamma need a nap?”

*God, even a two-year-old can tell.*

“Soon, honey . . . but not quite yet. I can see my two babies for a little while.” Mom kisses Grier on both cheeks, exaggerating the smacking sounds to make Grier giggle. “So, what have you been up to, Lex?” Her voice is soft, barely above a whisper.

“I just came here from closing on a beach house. It’s a beautiful Victorian style. Great view of the water, not too hard to access from the highway, bay windows, and four bedrooms. It has great potential. I just have to hire a couple of contractors for some repairs and renovations, and it’ll be ready to rent out. I think tourists will love it.”

“Wonderful. I’m sure it’ll be a great investment. You always did have a nose for business. And how is Corrigan working out?”

“Uh . . .” As always, my mom zeroes right in on the thing I most don’t want to talk about. “Well, we had a little disagreement a few days ago, so I’ve been —”

She gives me a troubled frown. “That’s too bad. What about?”

The idea of telling Mom I tried to ask Corrigan out, let alone the reason she rejected me, ranks somewhere between eating needles and catching on fire. “Just a . . . personality conflict type of thing. I was being stupid.” That part isn’t inaccurate.

Now Mom’s frown is one that tells me she knows I’m lying, but she’s letting it go. For now, anyway. It’s highly likely I’ll be grilled again when I least expect it.

“Do you think she’ll still look after Grier for you?”

Oh hell, that possibility hadn’t even occurred to me. What if Corrigan never wants to see me again after I made her comfortable?

“I really hope so,” I say truthfully. Even if there’s zero chance of us dating again, I still want her in my life. I’ll take being “just friends” any day. I have very few of those in this town after being gone for so many years.

Mom presses her lips together. “I’ve been turning it over and over in my mind, Lex, and I think Grier needs a mother, not a nanny.”

I heave out a sigh and glance over to where Grier’s now playing with the lace doilies on the coffee table. “Mom, we’ve talked about this. I don’t have the time and energy to devote to a girlfriend right now, and I definitely don’t want to use one as free childcare. That’s just where my life is now.”

And after everything Corrigan has told me about how my dumbass behavior has made her feel, on top of how things went with Grier’s mother, I’m starting to doubt whether I’m even cut out for long-term romantic relationships at all. The evidence would point to *no*.

*Fuck.*

“*Lexington.*” Despite the fatigue in her voice, Mom’s voice sounds the sharpest I’ve heard from her in years. She rests her hand on my arm, locking eyes with me. “Get your act together. Take your time, do things right, but remember you have a daughter to think about.”

I stiffen. “That’s exactly what I’m doing. She always comes first. That’s why I—”

Mom yawns hugely. “Oh dear, pardon me. I’d love to talk more, but I’m afraid I’m fading . . . naptime really sneaked up on me.”

I nod, my jaw muscles tight. “That’s fine, Mom. Rest. We’ll see you again soon. Tomorrow, if you’re feeling up to it.”

She nods once.

I pick up Grier and head to the door, glancing at Dawn, who is putting on a very convincing show of being totally absorbed in her book. I feel angry all over again at airing our dirty laundry in front of a stranger.

At the last moment before I go, I turn back to say, “Feel better soon, Mom.”

She nods and raises her hand in an attempt at a wave. “Thank you, sugar.”

My mind buzzes with somber thoughts as I drive home, too many things crashing over and over one another and making my blood pressure rise. I don’t know what to think anymore. Trying to figure my life out by myself isn’t working. I need someone to talk to. I’m not sure if what I need is a distraction or a serious hashing-out session or what, but I need *something*.

*Shit*—I realize I’ve hardly talked to Dak since I came here. I completely forgot to follow up with him, let alone hang out. And if anyone can give me an insider’s perspective on Corrigan, it’s her brother.

When we get home, I get Grier set up with her favorite toys and call Dak. It only rings a few times before he picks up.

“What’s up, Lex?”

“Hey, man, sorry I took so long to get back to you. I was wondering if you wanted to come over for a beer.”

“Sure, I’m not doing anything right now. Or if you want, we can have a few rounds on the house at Dak’s Place—I know the owner pretty well.”

I snort. “I have to watch Grier. I can’t take a toddler to a bar, even if it is yours.”

“That’s cool. I wanted to see your new place anyway. You free now?”

“Yeah.”

“Be there in twenty.”

“Cool. See you soon.” I hang up.

By the time I’ve cleaned up the kitchen and picked up the mess of books Grier’s dumped into the middle of the living room floor, there’s a knock on the front door. Grier toddles over with Flapflap in tow, but when I open the door to Dak, she glues herself to my leg.

He sets down his six-pack and squats, smiling at her. “Hey there, sweetie. You must be Grier. My name is Dak.”

“Hi,” she says in a tiny voice, then immediately hides her face.

“It’s all right, love bug. Dak is Daddy’s oldest friend.” I stroke her hair soothingly. “Do you want to watch Totoro?”

That does the trick. She detaches with a yell of “Monsters!” and runs to the couch, scrambling up onto it, then grins expectantly at me.

Dak laughs. “Funny kid.”

“Yeah, she likes just about any weird creature or flying thing. That bat she’s dragging around is her all-time favorite toy.” I start the movie and put Dak’s beer in the fridge. “Let me show you around.”

I try to make the tour quick to get my eyes back on Grier sooner, though I can’t keep myself from expounding on the features that originally made me want

to buy the house, like its large, sunny bedrooms.

Dak gives me a knowing grin. “You sound like you’re trying to sell me this place.”

“Yeah, it’s a habit.” I take him back to the breakfast nook, then snag a couple of his beers from the fridge. “By the way, you didn’t have to buy beer. Not that I’m complaining, but I already had some here.”

“I figured, since you didn’t ask me to bring anything, but I wanted you to try this. It’s local, small-batch . . . we just started serving it at the bar, and I’ve been pretty excited about it.”

I raise my eyebrows and smirk as I hand him a bottle opener. “Wow, you’ve turned into a connoisseur. I remember a time you’d drink any slop you could get your hands on.”

“You were right there drinking it with me,” Dak says, cracking his beer open. “And it was high school. Of course we weren’t gonna be picky. We didn’t know any better.”

“Speak for yourself. I knew it was horrible, I just wanted to get drunk more than I wanted to save my poor taste buds.” I open mine and take a drink. “You were right, this is good. Hey, you know what talking about bad beer reminds me of? Playing basketball with the guys in the parking lot on Sycamore.”

“Oh man, I haven’t thought about that in years. Yeah, we’d go there with Kyle and . . . Chet or Chad or whatever his name was, and all their brothers, and play until we got too sunburned and hungry to keep going. But we didn’t drink there.”

“We drank with them at the summer bonfires. Like the time a certain person crashed us all into the side of a building.”

He lets out an uneasy chuckle. “Don’t remind me. I was sweating like a pig when I bought that building from Mr. Gibbs, hoping he didn’t recognize me.”

“No sh—stuff? That’s where your bar is?” I laugh. “Okay, now I really do

need to fit a visit into my schedule. See if I can find the dent in the wall.”

“Dick. Maybe I should rethink those free rounds.” He takes another drink. “Why’re you talking like it’ll be hard to find the time? Just ask Corrigan over here for a few hours.”

“That’s . . . true.” I can’t get into how complicated things have become, and all the doubts Mom inspired in me, without revealing too many secrets that he might murder me over. “So, she’s mentioned that she’s been nannying Grier?”

“Oh yeah. Corrigan really seems to like her.”

“Grier likes her too. It’s been going really well.”

*Except for the last time when I fucked it all up.*

Dak smiles, obviously pleased. “Great to hear. I knew she’d be the perfect fit for the job.”

“By the way,” I say, trying to sound as casual as possible, “what’s she been up to since I left? We haven’t gotten much chance to shoot the breeze while she’s busy with Grier.”

He shrugs. “Not much. Working, hanging out with Sarah Jo, helping me out at the bar sometimes. Her job demands a lot of her time, but she loves it.”

“That’s good. She always wanted to teach, and I’m glad it panned out for her. Lots of people, they dream about a job and then it turns out nothing like they expected.” I drink while deciding whether I dare to push further. “Does she . . . have a boyfriend or anything?”

“You’re asking if my sister is single?” Dak shoots me a confused look.

My heart rate picks up. “Just making conversation.”

“Gotcha,” he says slowly, but he still sounds thrown off. “I’m kinda glad. You and Corrigan together is a pretty bizarre mental picture.” He laughs as if the idea is totally ridiculous.

I can’t help being offended. “Why? What’s so weird about it?”

“Isn’t it obvious? We’re like brothers, dude—that’d make her your sister.” He grins at me. “What’s all this about? Has playing house together made you catch domestic feelings?”

He clearly thinks he’s just messing around.

I take the plunge and, straight-faced, shatter my shield of plausible deniability. “Would that be a problem if I did?”

Dak blinks at me for a second, then chuckles again, but it sounds uneasy this time. “Your sense of humor sucks, man.”

I level my gaze at him, keeping a neutral expression. “Then I guess it’s a good thing I’m not making any jokes.”

Another stare, much longer and more frowning this time. “You’re serious.”

“That’s what I’ve been saying,” I say testily.

“Why the hell are you asking me about Corrigan?”

“It’s just a question, Dak. We’re all adults here.” I shrug, trying to act casual, but my heart is pounding.

“No offense, Lex, but I’m not sure how much faith to put in that. You don’t exactly have the best track record when it comes to women.”

It’s a low blow. Yes, I spent my twenties fucking around and ended up with a kid I never planned on, but *fuck*.

“I like to think I’ve done right by Grier.” My voice is low, dangerous, challenging.

“You have. But caring for a two-year-old isn’t the same thing as having a successful relationship. I think you know that and you’re playing dumb on purpose just to—” Dak abruptly gets up and sets his still half-full bottle on the table. “Sorry, I should probably go. My shift starts soon.”

“Thanks for the beer,” I reply flatly.

When he’s gone, I lock the door behind him and pour out his beer into the

sink, feeling more agitated than ever.

*Well, that little chat didn't fucking help.*

**A**t eight a.m. on the dot, my alarm clock blares with its familiar deafening cry. And for the first time in years, I slap my hand onto the snooze.

It's not like me to be sleeping in, but it's also not like me to stay up half the night thinking about a guy. But that's exactly what I did last night. Lexington Dane has been occupying my thoughts almost one hundred percent of the time since the night I turned him down. Also known as the last time I spoke to him.

And the silence between us has had two major effects on me.

The first is that it has me brainstorming an unending list of questions. Is Lex mad at me? Hurt? Am I still Grier's nanny? Am I ever going to stop obsessively checking my phone, hoping to hear from him?

And as if that wasn't enough, see exhibit B, the second, more dangerous effect.

You know that old saying, *absence makes the heart grow fonder*? Well, my heart is growing fond, all right. A little too fond. As in at least *one sex dream about him a night* fond. And while I know that saying *no* to a date with him was the responsible thing to do, it seems like my sex drive isn't feeling particularly responsible lately. Yay for me.

Eight minutes pass in the blink of an eye, and there goes my alarm again, screaming that it's time to get up. With a sigh, I shove off the covers and turn my alarm off, then immediately reach for my phone, hoping to see a notification from Lexington.

But no, just a few news notifications and a text from Sarah Jo, double-checking that we're on for lunch tomorrow.

I fire back a quick response to her, then hold down the side button until the screen goes black. My phone needs a time-out. Or rather, I need a time-out from my phone. I need to unplug and stop wondering about Mr. You-Know-Who. And I'll never get out of my head if I don't get out of the house. Luckily, I know just the way to do it. It's too beautiful out to worry the day away, and in my experience, there isn't a problem in this world that a little sunshine and ocean air can't wash away.

I do a load of laundry, and then hop into the shower with my hair up in a messy bun so I can shave my legs. As I finish the few remaining chores around my apartment, I hatch a plan about how I can spend my day.

With my chores done, I march over to my closet, change into my go-to baby blue bikini, and slip on a gauzy white cover-up. It takes me a few minutes to dig up last summer's beach bag from the back of my closet. There's still a tube of suntan lotion in there, along with a very expired bag of trail mix. Shame on Last Year Corrigan for not properly cleaning this thing out.

After tossing the trail mix into the trash, I pack my bag with all the essentials—a fluffy pink towel, sunscreen, and my favorite well-worn paperback I've read every summer for the past five years. All the perfect ingredients for a beach day to get my mind off of this whole Lexington situation. I'm going to lay out, reread this fluffy chick-lit book, and get my tan on. This day is going to be a stress-free zone. No Lexington. No drama.

On my way out the door, I snag my oversized sunglasses, then pile my things into the passenger seat and zoom off toward the beach. It's a quick drive, and I find the luckiest parking spot right by the ice cream parlor where Lexington and I had our first date all those years ago. Which, of course, has me feeling all types of things about him again.

*Ugh.* Maybe if I can go one full hour without this man crossing my mind, I'll treat myself to a scoop of double-chocolate fudge.

My flip-flops slap against the sidewalk as I make my way toward the sand, scooping out a little stretch of beach to call my own. But a certain set of familiar broad shoulders and a low, throaty laugh send my stomach bottoming out to my kneecaps.

*You've gotta be freaking kidding me.*

He may have his back to me, but there's no mistaking it. That's Lexington Dane, sitting smack dab in the center of the beach on a striped green beach towel, his cupped hands scooping sand into the pink plastic pail in Grier's tiny fist.

I can't help the enormous sigh that escapes my lungs. Suddenly, the concept of a stress-free day is a sad, distant memory. So much for my double-chocolate fudge.

Before I can say *screw it* to my beach day and bolt back toward my car, Grier spots me, her face splitting with a big, giddy grin. She drops the plastic pail, sending sand spilling all over the towel as she claps her hands together with glee. "Corgi!"

*Well, no turning back now, I guess.*

Lexington follows his daughter's gaze over his shoulder, pulling his aviator sunglasses off to get a better look. His blue eyes twinkle as a genuinely surprised smile breaks out across his face. "Well, hey there."

I wiggle my fingers in a little wave, trying desperately to ignore the giddy feeling buzzing behind my rib cage.

*No, Corrigan. We're not supposed to be excited to see him.*

Why is my heart not getting the message?

It takes some serious willpower, but I manage to pull my attention away from Lexington (in a pair of swim trunks, no less) and go back to combing the beach for a tanning spot. Preferably somewhere far in the opposite direction of the adorable daddy-daughter beach day happening in front of me.

But then I feel a tug on my swimsuit cover-up. Grier has her fist wrapped around the fabric, grinning up at me from behind her teeny-tiny heart-shaped sunglasses. I imagine Lex picking this out for her in a baby boutique and my heart squeezes.

“Up!” she demands, stretching her arms to the sky. Goodness, she toddled over here fast.

Of course I comply, scooping her into my arms, because I just can’t say no to this little munchkin. As much as I could use the day off, I can’t pretend like I haven’t missed her and her daddy these past few days.

“Hi, sweet girl.” I grin down at her, and Grier giggles.

I head toward Lexington, all the while getting an earful from Grier about the sandcastle they’re building. Although she pronounces it more like *san-capple*. Part of me hopes she’ll never fully master her words. Her mispronunciations are so freaking adorable.

“I believe you lost this,” I say, teasing as I lower Grier back onto the towel next to . . .

*Holy smokes.* Next to shirtless Lexington. Seeing him from the back was one thing, but from the front? Nothing could have prepared me for this.

*Fuck. The man is gorgeous.*

I can immediately feel the blush creeping across my chest and cheeks, and I pray to God that these giant sunglasses are covering at least part of it. Or maybe I could pass it off as a sunburn or something? Anything that would keep him from knowing that one look at his firm, chiseled pecs has me redder than a summer sunset.

Sure, I saw him shirtless plenty of times when we dated. During sexy times, yes, but also during normal day-to-day moments. Like when he and my brother would come in from shooting hoops in our driveway, both of them sweaty and smelling worse than a boys’ locker room in June.

He was toned then, but he was also young. A boy.

But the Lexington Dane in front of me now is all man. And I mean *all* man. I literally have to look up at the sky to keep myself from counting his abs. Not that I need to. I know for a fact there are six of them, each chiseled and firm.

If this is a dad bod, well, sign me the heck up.

To make this uncomfortable moment even more awkward, Grier decides to chime in with her thoughts on the situation. “Daddy, Corgi so pretty!”

*Oh sweet Jesus.* Of all the things she could say right now, did she have to go with that?

But Lexington just chuckles, ruffling Grier’s windblown hair. “Yeah? I think she looks good in blue too.”

*Wait. Blue? But my cover-up is white.*

I glance down, double-checking that I’m not losing my mind, only to discover that the sunlight is shining through the thin white fabric just right. My little blue bikini—and everything else it doesn’t cover—is fully on display. And by the way Lex clears his throat into his fist and subtly adjusts his swim trunks, I’m thinking he may be enjoying the view quite a lot.

*What. Is. Happening?*

“Grier, honey, why don’t you go fill up the bucket with water?” he says, picking up the pail and handing it over to his daughter. “Wet sand will be better for our *sancapple*.”

He shoots me a knowing sidelong glance, and we both have to conceal our laughter. Luckily, the little one doesn’t catch on. She just toddles the short distance to the water, trying and failing again and again to capture the tide in her little pink pail.

“Sorry that my daughter doesn’t understand the concept of a day off.” He chuckles, an apologetic smile tugging at his lips. “You, uh, you do look good in blue, though. She wasn’t wrong about that.”

There's that blush on my cheeks again. This time it's accompanied by a quick surge of heat between my thighs.

Am I seriously getting turned on in public right now? With his daughter a couple of feet away? *Pull it together, Corrigan. You are stronger than this.*

"Th-thanks," I stutter. "And you look good in . . . uh. Not a shirt."

*What. The. Actual. Heck.* Did I just say that? The second the words come out, I feel every drop of blood drain from my face.

I'm a heartbeat away from bolting back to my car and pretending this whole encounter never happened, but then Lexington's low, sweet chuckle fills the air. He smiles, pats the spot on the towel next to him, and shifts over to make room for me. And I don't know what to do other than take a seat. So I do.

"She's loving living this close to the beach." He tips his chin in the direction of his daughter, who is inspecting a seashell in the palm of her hand. "Don't eat that!"

At the sound of her daddy's voice, Grier flings the shell into the water, then grabs her bucket and toddles back our way.

"You'll have to take her to Dak's place sometime. Maybe early in the morning, before the party crowd shows up. I bet she'd love the surfboard bar."

Lex nods in agreement, watching as Grier settles back in next to us and returns to working on her *sancapple*. "Good idea. She'd get a kick out of that."

It's quiet between us for a moment, and I focus on drawing lazy circles in the warm sand with my fingertip. Anything to keep from ogling his half-naked body again. Before long, Lexington cracks the silence wide open with a sentence I totally wasn't expecting.

"I mentioned to Dak that I asked you out."

I flinch, my brows pushing together into a tight line. "What? Why did you do that?"

He lifts a shoulder. “Because I’m trying to be more honest. Life is too short to keep things from people, you know?”

My chest tightens at the sadness behind his words. He’s thinking of his mom, I’m sure. No wonder he’s been so *seize the day* lately, what with asking me out and all.

“Well? How’d that go?”

“Not great,” he says with a sigh, his gaze glued on Grier, and I can’t tell if he’s supervising or just trying to avoid eye contact. “He basically said my track record with women is awful, and to stay away from you. So that’s where we’re at.”

I stifle a laugh. That sounds like Dak, all right. “Suddenly, I’m remembering why we hid the whole *us dating* thing from him in high school.”

“Yeah, but we were only kids then. I wouldn’t let his opinion stop me now.” Lex pauses, then finally shifts his gaze toward mine, his blue eyes only bluer against the ocean behind him. “If you were, you know, reconsidering.”

I bite the inside of my cheek, wondering how much to say and how much to hold back. If he’s trying to be honest, I suppose I should too. Swallowing the lump of nerves in my throat, I squeeze my eyes shut and come right out and say it.

“I like you, Lex. I really do. But . . . I have a date this Saturday.”

He blinks, his brows shooting up his forehead. “Oh?”

“Yeah. He’s a fifth-grade teacher at my school. He asked me out right before the school year wrapped up.”

“Oh,” he says again, this time with more disappointment in his tone, maybe even a twinge of jealousy. “Um, I hope it goes well.”

“Me too,” I say firmly. And I mean it. At least, I think I do.

This teacher is cute, tall, and great with his students. No, maybe he’s not quite

Lexington-level hot, and he's never made the butterflies in my stomach flap quite the way Lex has. But he's also never hurt me before. There's no messy history. A clean, easy start could be just what I need.

"Daddy, look!"

Grier's piercing squeal breaks through our awkward moment, sending both of our heads swiveling in her direction. I couldn't tell you when or how it got there, but suddenly she's pulling a big clump of seaweed from out of her swim diaper.

"I swear, you take your eyes off a two-year-old for one second . . ." Lex grumbles to himself as he pulls his little girl into his arms, taking the seaweed from her tiny fist and flinging it as far away as possible. "Love bug, we don't put things in our swim diaper. Not seaweed. Not anything."

I bite my lip, holding back laughter. Kids never fail to crack me up, especially this little munchkin. I love my first graders, but I think I'm really starting to develop a soft spot for toddlers.

As I listen to Grier's babbling while her dad wraps her in a towel, my chest suddenly feels tight. I can't shake the story of Grier's mom, how she didn't feel any connection with her or have any desire to keep her in her life.

How could anyone not want this sweet little angel? I mean, just look at her. She's a little blond beach burrito, all snuggled up in that towel, her bright blue eyes blinking curiously at the world around her. Just being around this little girl makes my life brighter.

It's one more reason why I can't get mixed up with her dad. No matter how hard those butterflies in my stomach are flapping their wings, or how insanely hot his dad bod is.

Because Grier is already one of the highlights of my summer, and if things got messy with her dad, she would end up hurt. She's already lost out on having her mother in her life. The last thing she needs is a revolving door of women coming in and out of her father's life.

**N**ormally, I fall asleep in only a few minutes, exhausted by the demands of work and toddler-herding, but tonight I stare into the darkness for what feels like hours. My head is spinning, replaying the day's events over and over.

Corrigan's smile, her body in that swimsuit, the land mines of our conversation about my chat with Dak, the unbearable sexual tension, how natural it felt playing with Grier together . . . and then the bomb Corrigan dropped.

A date. She's going out on a date in less than forty-eight hours. And he's another teacher, a teacher at her school, so they're sure to have tons in common. Sure to get along just fucking fantastic. *Bastard*. Who is this asshole, anyway? I should have asked for his name so I could snoop online.

Abruptly, I sit up. *What the hell am I thinking?* Of course I shouldn't have.

*Get a grip.* They're going on one date; it's not like they're getting married. And even if they were, I sternly tell myself, she has the right to do whatever the hell she wants. I'm not her boyfriend. She doesn't have any obligations to me. She's a grown-ass woman, and I need to act like a grown-ass man.

He probably isn't a single dad.

*No, dammit, stop this!*

I'm acting like a lunatic, and if I keep sitting alone in the dark letting all this shit rattle around my mind, I'm going to become one. I need to talk this out with someone who doesn't have any skin in the game, unlike Mom or Dak. Someone

who can commiserate with me and maybe offer some advice.

I grab my phone and open the group text with Bryce, Lesley, and Devin.

**LEXINGTON:** Hey, guys, is anyone still up?

Surprisingly—or maybe not, given that none of them have kids—it’s only a few minutes before Devin replies.

You forget all about your big-city friends?

I type, Sorry I’ve been AWOL for so long, a lot’s happened since I left. I actually wanted to talk about some of it.

**BRYCE:** Sure, what’s up?

I type out my reply. So, do you guys remember Corrigan?

It’s Lesley who responds first.

**LESLEY:** Your old high-school sweetheart? Yeah. Did you run into her?

I chuckle and decide to come clean. A little more than that . . . I hired her as a nanny.

**DEVIN:** OMG, dude, I can’t tell if you’re a genius or a moron.

His message is accompanied by a cry-laughing emoji.

**BRYCE:** You still into her?

**LEXINGTON:** Way too much. And even though she’s still mad about how I fucked up our relationship when I left, I’m pretty sure the attraction isn’t one-sided. I’ve definitely caught her checking me out. Like today, when we were at

the beach.

**LESLEY:** See? I told you there'd be women into the single dad scene.

**I huff out a sigh and start typing again.**

**LEXINGTON:** But a few nights before that, she said no when I asked her out, and today she said she had a date this weekend, and now I'm losing my shit.

**I shift on the mattress, worried for a second I've said too much. But I've never had to censor myself around them before, so why start now?**

**BRYCE:** Spoke too soon, Les.

**LESLEY:** How did that come up? Did she just bring it up out of the blue or what?

**LEXINGTON:** I said I asked her brother what was going on with her, dating-wise—

**BRYCE:** Why the hell would you tell her about that? Or do it at all, actually?

**LEXINGTON:** Summarizing makes it sound worse than it was. It seemed like a good idea at the time, just let me finish. So I said her brother didn't like the idea of us dating, but I didn't care what he thought, the only important thing was what she thought. And that's when she told me about the other guy.

**BRYCE:** Oof, shot down twice.

**DEVIN:** I have one question for you . . . when's the last time you got laid?

**LEXINGTON:** What's wrong with you? Is my sex life all you ever think about?

**DEVIN:** Shut up and listen to me. This is very important. You need to get some post-nut clarity before you make any more decisions about this chick, or else your dick is going to keep calling the shots, and that'll be bad for everyone involved.

**I snort and shake my head. My friends are idiots, but there's a kernel of truth to Devin's advice.**

**BRYCE:** I never thought I'd say this, but I agree with Devin.

**DEVIN:** Hey!

**BRYCE:** It's obvious you haven't been thinking clearly about this situation.

**LESLEY:** I get it. It's confusing that she acts like she wants you and then says she doesn't or can't or shouldn't or whatever. But sometimes we get horny for people who aren't right for us. And it seems like that's true for both of you.

**LEXINGTON:** Believe me, I know. I know I should try to move on. But I just can't let her go.

**And I know they're just trying to be helpful, but this situation, my feelings for Corrigan are not about hormones or being horny.**

**BRYCE:** You've really got it bad, huh?

**LESLEY:** I'm sorry this is so rough. I don't really have any good advice.

**LEXINGTON:** No, talking has helped. Thanks, guys . . . I'll think about it more tomorrow. For now, I'm going to have a glass of whiskey and try again to get some sleep.

• • •

"Ooh, it all looks so tasty, I can't decide," Mom says, poring over the café's menu.

Gail smiles. "Your appetite's really improved." The hot, humid breeze ruffles our hair, and she lays one hand on the drink menu so it doesn't blow away.

"I'm glad," I say, part listening, part figuring out what to order for myself and Grier, and part trying to stop her from launching herself out of the high chair at the bear-like dog resting by the next table. "I think this was a good idea."

Our original plan for today was to go over to Mom's place and cook brunch for her, but when we found her feeling great for once, I decided, *Fuck it, let's seize the opportunity*. I couldn't remember the last time Mom and I went to a restaurant together, and I knew we'd never been on a family outing with Grier in the mix.

Not to mention, I'm painfully aware that Mom doesn't have many more chances to do nice things like this—the three of us need to make memories together while we can. So even though I've spent the last two nights unable to fall asleep until unholy hours, I'm glad we're putting in the effort.

"Doggy!" Grier says loudly.

"I know, love bug, it's a dog," I say. "What do you want, Gail?"

Gail shakes her head. "I ate breakfast before my shift started, so I don't need

anything.”

“I asked what you wanted, not needed,” I say with a smile. “I insist, get whatever you like. My treat.”

“I can come back,” someone says.

Keeping one eye on Grier, I look to find our waiter standing by. “I’m ready if you all are.”

“Sure. I’ll have the . . .” Gail glances at the menu. “Basic egg-white combo and a coffee.”

I say, “Coffee for me too, and the—”

Grier glares at me. “Daddy, doggy!”

Nodding to Grier, I quickly finish our order, ordering eggs for me and pancakes for my daughter.

The waiter turns to Mom. “Coffee for you as well, ma’am?”

“Oh, I wish I could, but coffee’s started giving me a stomachache lately. I’ll have iced tea, please, and the spinach eggs benedict.”

He takes our menus and departs just as Grier hits the end of her patience with being ignored and releases an earsplitting howl of “*Doooooggiiiiiiiiieee!*”

The old man at the next table lets out a warm, gravelly laugh. “That’s a powerful set of pipes. Would your little princess like to meet Hamburger?” he asks me. “He’s very calm.”

Giving up, I lift Grier out of her seat and set her down. “I think she might explode if she doesn’t.”

She screams with glee and buries her chubby fingers deep in the dog’s plush coat. True to his owner’s word, the dog barely moves, except to lick her cheek—prompting another loud squeal.

“Gentle, love bug, you’ve got to be gentle with animals,” I say. “How would you feel if someone pulled your hair?”

Grier pauses to process this, then continues mauling the dog, only a little less fiercely. He doesn't seem to mind, based on how his tail thumps a rapid beat on the concrete patio.

Gail asks the old man, "So, Hamburger?"

"My granddaughter named him. She's thirteen now, but she was only . . . oh, about your little one's age when he was born."

"How darling," Mom coos.

Hamburger is a good sport, but when the food arrives, Grier loses interest in tormenting him and toddles back to me. "Hungwy."

"Now seems like the right time to get going. It was nice meeting you all." The old man touches his hat and leaves, the dog matching his sedate pace.

"You too. Have a good day," I reply as I lift Grier back into her high chair.

"This looks wonderful." Mom takes a large bite and her face breaks out in a wide smile. "And it tastes even better."

The conversation is as pleasant as the food and early summer weather. Lighthearted chatting about the TV shows we've seen lately, the cute or funny things Grier has done, the novel series Mom's been working her way through. For a while, there's no such thing as cancer or even my troubles with Corrigan.

"So I'm really looking forward to finding out what's going to happen between the duchess and that one knight," Mom says, sipping her tea. "Oh, but would you listen to me, going on and on. How has your work been?"

I shrug. "Pretty much the same as ever—crazy busy, but good. I've been riding hard on the New York guys, and things seem to be going fine up there. Some contractors are coming to work on the beach house starting tomorrow, and I think it'll be ready to rent in less than a month. I've also been looking for a good place to buy downtown."

"Wonderful. And how's Corrigan? Did you two ever make up?"

*I should have known this was coming.* “Everything’s fine,” I say, not knowing or caring whether it’s a lie. Desperate for any way to steer the conversation in a different direction, I ask Grier, “You wanna tell Grandma about all the fun stuff you’ve done with Corrigan?”

Lighting up, she says, “We do sketti and ice scweam and paint big picture lotsa messy paint and make a castle ’n dig sand and water *so big* on feet and . . .”

She babbles on excitedly, her words coming faster and faster until even I, with all my practice at “Grier-ese,” can barely understand. Gail looks completely lost.

When Grier finishes, Mom says slowly, “All right, I think I got the parts about food and art.”

Laughing, I summarize. “The three of us have been to the beach a couple times, and she loved it.”

Mom’s brow furrows in confusion. “Three? You’re paying Corrigan to look after Grier, but you’re also looking after Grier yourself?”

*Shit, I revealed too much.* “That only happened once.” I’m aware that I sound ridiculously defensive, but I can’t turn it off. “And I think it was helpful to have an extra pair of hands there. The second time at the beach, we just ran into each other by chance.”

“Oh, I’m not criticizing you—far from it. I’m pleased as punch to hear you’re enjoying quality time with your two girls,” Mom says, beaming.

*The hell?* “What do you mean by that? Corrigan isn’t *my girl*.” No matter how much I wish that were the case. “She’s my employee.”

Mom gives me a *look*. She has many looks, and I know most of them pretty well, but this one is complex. A contradictory mix of *you’re such a fool sometimes*, and *you’re smart enough to figure out what you need to do here*.

I’m too tired to try to decode her meaning. If she has a point to make about Corrigan, she can say it. “What?” I ask tersely.

“Nothing at all.” Mom takes a delicate bite of her eggs benedict.

*Nothing, my ass.*

Fortunately, before we can get into it further, my phone rings.

“One sec,” I mumble as I pull it out of my pocket. “Let me check this . . .”

The name on the screen definitely isn’t work-related.

“Corrigan?”

“Lex!” she shouts loud enough for the whole table to overhear. “I’m really sorry to call you out of nowhere but my car won’t start and I have to be at the dentist in forty-five minutes and I tried calling roadside assistance but my membership expired literally two days ago and Dak isn’t answering his phone, he’s probably still asleep or forgot to turn on his ringer *again*, and Sarah Jo’s gone to friggin’ Wyoming to visit her parents, so I didn’t know who else to—”

I reflexively put my hand up, even though she can’t see it. “Hey, slow down, don’t worry about it. Send me your address, and I’ll be right over.”

“Are you sure? I can call a tow truck.” At least she’s calmed down enough to pause for breath again.

“I’m not going to make you pay an arm and a leg for towing when I’m right nearby. Seriously, it’s fine.”

Standing, I look to Mom and Gail. “Sorry, I have to go help Corrigan real quick. Should I bring Grier or would it be okay to leave her here?”

Mom shakes her head. “We’ve got her.”

I nod, and press a kiss to the top of Grier’s head. “Stay with Grandma.” I glance at my mom with appreciation. I’ll be back in . . .” I check the map link she sent me. “Twenty minutes. Here’s my credit card in case the waiter wants our payment.”

Ignoring Mom’s renewed *look*, I jog out to the car, and a few minutes later, I pull into the parking lot of an apartment building that looks like it’s seen better

days. I drive slowly around until I spot Corrigan standing next to a small silver hatchback with its hood standing open. I maneuver as close as I can, pop the latch on my own hood, and get out.

Corrigan is wearing a pale blue sundress and strappy tan sandals. Her long bare legs are tanned, and her hair lifts in the breeze.

Shielding her eyes from the sun with one hand, she turns and gives me a little wave and a nervous smile. “Thanks for coming.”

“Of course. Should I take a look?” I tip my chin toward her car to keep myself from looking at her legs again.

She nods. “It’s just a dead battery, I think.”

“I have jumper cables.” Turning, I open the trunk of my car and pull them out.

“Sorry about dragging you out here on such short notice,” Corrigan says behind me.

“It’s not a problem.”

After I hook up our batteries and I start my car, I let it run for five minutes, during which I watch Corrigan waiting in her driver’s seat. Getting paranoid that I’m staring too much, I look away, look back, and repeat.

Finally, I yell, “Try it now.”

Corrigan’s engine struggles, then kicks over and growls. She sticks her head out the window to give a celebratory whoop. “It worked!”

“Great. Now just sit tight and keep it running for at least half an hour. I’ll take these back.” I turn off my ignition and get out to unlink our cars.

“Thank God. I didn’t know *what* I was going to do.” She flashes me a relieved smile that makes my stomach do gymnastics.

The back of my neck feels hot and I rub it, feeling both pleased and awkward. “Seriously, it was nothing. Consider it payback for saving my ass with Grier

while Mom was in the ER.” I finish and loop the cables over my arm.

She shakes her head with a wry *heh*. “That time doesn’t count. You paid me actual money for that, so you don’t need to do me any favors.”

I inhale deeply and take the leap. “Well, if you really feel indebted, maybe you could come over and hang out tonight? We’ll order a pizza, do some finger-painting with Grier . . .”

Her face falls into a frown. “I can’t. I have my date.” Her tone is a little irritated, but it’s mixed with something else. Regret? But that’s probably wishful thinking.

“Right,” I mutter.

Of course. I knew that was happening. I haven’t been able to forget it for a minute since she told me.

Some stupid, desperate part of me was hoping that the guy got food poisoning or something and canceled at the last minute. Or that she’d woken up one morning and thought, *Actually, I changed my mind. I’m totally cool with that little ripping-my-high-school-heart-out incident now—let’s go on a date!*

Corrigan gives me a small, almost shy smile. “But thank you for rescuing me. I really appreciate it . . . and you.”

“Anytime,” I say, and mean it.

• • •

“Sorry about that,” I say as I sit back down at our table. “I hope Grier didn’t make too much of a fuss.”

Gail smiles. “No problem. She was a perfect angel.”

In a tone that pretends to be innocent but is blatantly laden with meaning, Mom says, “Seems like you care a lot about that girl.”

Downplaying it, I shrug. “She needed help, so I helped. It was just the decent thing to do. Stop reading so much into every random detail of what happens

between me and Corrigan.”

Mom coolly raises her eyebrows. “Yes, helping is decent, and I’m proud I raised a good boy who doesn’t think twice about it. But if it were anyone else, would you have immediately dropped everything and rushed over like you just did? Or would you have just paid for a repairman to go out and handle it?”

Her words knock the wind out of me. I protest weakly, “Maybe I would’ve for a total stranger, but there’s a big difference between a stranger and what you’re insinuating. I’d do the same for Dak or any other friend.”

But we both know Mom sees straight through me. Although her logic doesn’t hold up, her intuition is spot-on.

There’s no arguing with her or with myself. I’m in so far over my head, it isn’t even funny.

**O**uch! I drop my curling iron into the sink with a clatter, shaking out my hand to cool off the burn. When was the last time I did my hair, and why did I think I could pull off these loose waves without a tutorial? Those are two questions I may never have the answer to.

One thing I do know for sure, though. Tonight is the night the pale yellow wedges I impulse-bought last summer come out of their hiding spot in the back of the closet. Why? Because for the first time in half an eternity, I have a date. And just because my day began with a zapped car battery and an emergency rescue mission from my ex-slash-boss doesn't mean it can't end on a higher note.

I pick up the curling iron again, sectioning off a portion of hair and wrapping it around the barrel. But when I pull the iron away, it looks like someone tried to feed my hair through a jammed copy machine. *Awesome.*

So much for looking like a ten tonight. I guess I'll just have to pull out my straightener to get myself back on track. If only that track was heading toward Lex's place for pizza night with Grier, not toward a mediocre Italian place with a guy I hardly know.

Before my flat iron has warmed up to a usable temperature, my phone buzzes with a calendar reminder. Just thirty minutes until I'm supposed to be at the restaurant.

I finish my hair and take another glance in the full-length mirror. The white sundress falls to my knees, and I straighten it over my hips. With a sweep of

pink lip gloss and a final shot of hairspray, my confidence is renewed.

I'm Corrigan freaking Stewart, and tonight, I'm throwing out my usual *first-grade teacher* vibes for full-on *first-date bombshell*. I'm ready to stop thinking about my history with Lex and start writing a brand-new story with someone new. And I think Keagan just might be the guy for the job.

For starters, we have a ton in common. We're both teachers and . . . okay, that's actually the end of the list so far. But that's because I've never interacted with him outside of school. Tonight, that's all going to change. We're going to get a couple of eleven-dollar pasta entrees, split a bottle of wine, and totally hit it off. I can just feel it. This is the start of something completely new for me.

I arrive at the restaurant at six o'clock sharp, but thanks to an incredibly chaotic parking lot, it's a few minutes after six by the time I finally step through the doors. The date-night crowd is out in full force tonight, with just about every table spoken for. If Keagan is here already, I won't be able to spot him among the masses.

"Reservation under Keagan Anderson?" I ask the hostess, drumming my fingers nervously against my clutch. "I'm not sure if he's here yet."

"That's me!" a voice that's louder than seems appropriate shouts over the ambient music.

I snap my head in its direction, locking eyes with my date. He's tucked away at a small table next to the kitchen.

The hostess gives me a sweet, almost apologetic smile before leading me to our table, where Keagan is waiting with a bottle of wine and a bread basket that, by the looks of it, he's already combed through for all the good rolls.

"Hey there, Corrie. Nice of you to finally show up."

I cringe at that absolute no-go of a nickname, but before I can correct him, he jumps to his feet, maneuvering around the table to pull me into an ill-advised side hug. Suddenly, this feels less like a date and more like dinner with a

coworker.

*Sigh.* We're not off to a great start.

Once we've both settled into our seats, I have a chance to get a real, honest-to-God look at my date for this evening. And I hate to be mean, but he's not as good-looking as I remembered. Maybe it's just his sunburned cheeks that are throwing me off, but I also don't recall him having that receding hairline. For bonus points, his normally clean-shaven face is a mess of patchy stubble. It's like the hair on his head said *see ya* and relocated to his jawline. But maybe I won't notice after a glass or two of wine.

"Hope you're good with red." Keagan gestures to the uncorked bottle in the middle of the table. I recognize the label immediately—this is the same brand of cheap five-dollar wine I pick up when I'm grading papers.

"Of course," I lie, then fill up my glass and take a good, long sip.

It takes a lot of willpower, but I manage not to visibly wince at the taste. I'm getting notes of friend vibes and dead dreams. Rudely, my taste buds choose now as a good time to remind me that, less than a week ago, I was drinking a fancy-pants chardonnay with a much better-groomed man. A man that makes my heart rate shoot up, despite the short leash I try to keep my body on when he's near.

"How's your summer going?" Keagan asks, pulling me back into the present.

*Jeez.* Since when am I the kind of girl to fantasize about another guy while on a date? I really need to pull it together. I'm being rude.

"It's been great so far," I say, forcing a smile. "What about you? Are you missing your kiddos?"

"Not even a little." Keagan chuckles, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "I'm not actually a huge fan of kids."

I blink at him, waiting for him to admit that he's making a joke, albeit not a very funny one. Instead, he just smiles sheepishly from behind his wineglass.

“You’re kidding, right?” I ask on a nervous laugh. He has to be. Who in the world would go into education without being truly passionate about kids?

Much to my surprise and complete confusion, Keagan shakes his head. “I was originally in school to be an engineer,” he says, swirling his wine around inside his glass as he gazes up at the ceiling. “I wanted to work on planes. But it turns out those classes are, like, really hard. I was failing out of the program and needed to find a new major, and fast. Luckily, I’d already passed a few of the prerequisite courses for a degree in elementary education. So, here I am.”

He finally returns his gaze to me, shooting me a big, cheesy smile, as though the crazy talk coming out of his mouth was the most normal thing in the world. Meanwhile, my fingernails are digging tiny trenches into my palms.

“So you became a teacher . . . by accident?” My voice is strained, but it’s all I can do to keep from snapping at this guy in the middle of this perfectly mediocre restaurant.

“Not really by accident. It was more just like a backup plan. Those who can’t do, teach, right?”

His nasally laugh makes my stomach uneasy, so I settle it with a long, slow sip of this terrible cabernet, and fix my gaze on his hairline to keep from having to look this jerk in the eye.

“Personally, I think the people forming the minds of our future generations shouldn’t be doing it just as a backup plan,” I reply curtly. Frankly, I shouldn’t even dignify that overused teacher joke with a response, but I’m not just going to sit here and act like my profession is a punch line.

Keagan’s brown eyes widen to twice their normal size. “Wow, you, uh, really care a lot about this.”

“Of course I do,” I mumble, pinching off a bite of bread and popping it between my lips. Maybe if I’m chewing, I’ll be able to hold back all the snarky comments I’d like to spew across the table right now. Plus, the sooner the food is gone, the sooner this first date finishes dying its slow, painful death.

“Well, I think that’s really great. I’m hoping to get back into working with planes someday. Maybe I’ll become a pilot or something. But until then, having the summers off is nice, right? Two-month vacation.” He holds up a hand across the table, like I’m supposed to high-five him or something. After a solid ten seconds of me ignoring it, he dejectedly pulls it away.

“I’m working this summer, actually,” I say. “Nannying.”

As soon as the words come out of my mouth, I regret them. The last thing I need is for Keagan to ask any questions about Grier, or worse yet, her father, who has been occupying my thoughts nonstop for this entire date.

I reach for my menu, trying to busy myself with selecting an entree instead of continuing the conversation about my summer employment. But just the word *spaghetti* reminds me of Lex and our entirely emoji-based conversation.

My heart squeezes at the memory. Can I do a single thing, *anything*, without him waltzing through my mind?

I swore turning Lex down was the right decision. But now, sitting across the table from my complete dud of a date, I’m not so sure. Keagan is cute enough, smart enough, a decent overall guy, I guess. But being around him . . . I feel nothing. Add in the fact that he doesn’t like kids, and I just can’t see a future with this guy.

I glance up over my menu, catching my date in the middle of the not-so-subtle act of scratching his balls, and I sigh.

Maybe Keagan isn’t the man I’m looking for after all. I need someone nurturing and strong, yet sensitive. Someone who values my work in the classroom. I’m not just looking for any old guy to spend the night with anymore. I’m looking for someone I can build a life with.

I’m looking for a man like . . . Well, like Lexington Dane.

“Uh, hello? Corrie?”

For the second time tonight, I reenter reality with a jolt. A reality where,

unfortunately, I zoned out staring across the table at this guy, making a less than savory face.

“Please, it’s Corrigan,” I mutter, burying my face in my menu again.

A wicked smirk tugs at his lips, his brown eyes narrowing in a challenge. “What, you don’t like it, *Corrie*?”

Good Lord, for a man who doesn’t like kids, he sure acts a lot like one.

I drop the menu, folding my arms over my chest. “No, I don’t. You can’t just give someone a nickname without even knowing them. What if I called you ‘Kegel’? Would you like that?” I smile a little, proud of my own joke.

Unfortunately, Kegel here takes that as permission to press things even further. He props his elbows on the table, leaning in closer than feels comfortable. “I don’t know,” he whispers, sweeping his tongue over his lower lip. “Does that mean you’re thinking about me being between your thighs?”

“Enough.” With a huff, I shove up out of my seat.

I take back everything I thought about him being a half-decent guy. He’s a jerk who deserves to have the rest of this glass of crappy wine thrown in his face. But I’m not going to do that. Not even crappy wine deserves a fate that dire. Instead, I’m just going to get out of here as fast as humanly possible.

“I don’t think this is going to work out.”

With a quick “see you in the fall,” I grab my purse and put these beautiful wedges to work as I hightail it straight to the door. I don’t even bother to look back before click-clacking my way straight out to the car and gunning it home, turning the radio up all the way to drown out my own thoughts.

*What an absolute creep. I can’t believe that man is allowed to work with children.*

Back at home, I dejectedly remove my shoes, returning them to their rightful place in the back of the closet, then change into my pajamas and wash off my makeup. My new Saturday night plans involve ordering Chinese for delivery and

watching TV until I fall asleep on the couch.

But just as I'm pressing ORDER on my kung pao chicken and crab rangoon, a text from Lex pops up on my screen.

Did you make it home safe?

I can't suppress my smirk as I type out my response. Does he really think he's being sneaky by asking me that? I know what the real question is, and I'm not afraid to call him out on it.

Are you actually wondering that, or are you just trying to see if my date went into overtime?

Lex's response comes right away.

Is there an option C, all of the above?

I let out a loud belly laugh. "Well played. Well played."

I'm safe at home. Thanks for checking.

I set my phone down on my coffee table and reach for the remote, ready to scout out tonight's binge watch. But before I even get a chance to press the power button, my phone buzzes again with his reply.

Maybe if I had even an ounce of chill, I'd let the text sit and make him wait for a minute or two. But I can't deny it—I really want to talk to him. And the giddy feeling in my stomach agrees. Unfortunately, when I swipe open his text, he's looking for details on my evening.

How'd the date go?

I tap my thumb against the side of my phone, choosing my words carefully. It feels more than a little weird to be texting Lex about a date with another guy, but if he specifically asked, I guess I can accommodate him.

It was fine.

Just fine? he replies.

I pause, questioning the sanity of giving him any more details, but with a date as bad as tonight's, I have to tell *someone*. Maybe I can just give him a general idea of the night.

It was fine. We went to Luigi's, but he turned out to be kind of a dud.

Luigi's? Isn't that a cheap chain place?

A smile pulls at my lips. I figured that would be the detail he'd latch onto. Before I get a chance to reply, he shoots me another text.

If that's the best he can do, you're better off with someone else.

I heave out a sigh, staring blankly at my phone.

Lex is right. I *would* be better off with someone else. But the only *someone else* on my mind lately is the one I shouldn't want.

I haul in Grier's last bag, once again amazed by everything a toddler needs for an overnight stay. "Am I forgetting anything?"

Mom chuckles. "I can't imagine what else there could possibly be."

"She's had her afternoon snack, so you have plenty of time to cook dinner if you start soonish, and she should be set after that. But since you might stay up past her usual bedtime, I packed a couple of applesauce cups just in case, but you'll want to give her those before her bath because she'll get—"

"You already said all that five minutes ago, sugar," Mom says gently, interrupting.

Practically vibrating with anxiety, I look at Dawn. "And you're sure you're okay with this? If not, I can take Grier right back home, no problem, and you can keep the extra pay."

She's clearly amused. "I promise it's fine. I already agreed to help out, and I love kids."

Grier grins at me from her throne, a.k.a. Mom's lap. "Me 'n Gamma sumba . . . subber . . . summer party!"

"Yes, my sweet pea, we're having a slumber party. And it's a summer party too." Mom kisses the top of her head. "We're going to play fun games and eat yummy snacks—"

Grier wriggles and flaps her arms and shrieks in Mom's embrace, absolutely ecstatic.

“—and Daddy definitely doesn’t have to worry about us, so he should just leave us to it and enjoy his night off.” Mom gives me a pointed look, smiling.

I hold up my hands in surrender. “All right, all right, I’ll stop hovering and go. Have a good time, and don’t hesitate to call if you need anything.”

When I get home, the house seems huge and empty and dead silent without my little spark of energy shooting all over the place. It hasn’t hit me until now that this will be the first time we’ve ever been separated for so long.

Tomorrow morning, I’ll pick her up and hear about all the fun she had with Grandma, and will bring her back home to our usual routine. And tonight . . .

“Now what?” I ask aloud, and laugh at myself.

I’ve barely had any free time at all for over two years, let alone twelve uninterrupted hours, so I’ve forgotten all the stuff I used to fill that free time with, and I’m drawing a blank. Eventually, I remember there was an interesting-sounding movie that came out last month. I search my streaming services until I find it, pour myself a splash of bourbon on the rocks, and sit down to watch. But I’ve gotten maybe ten minutes into it when there’s a knock at the door.

“Christ, never a moment of peace,” I mutter, getting up to answer it.

But my annoyance evaporates when I find Corrigan on my porch.

“Hi,” she says, holding up a large shopping bag. “Sorry for not texting or anything, but I just saw this at the store and I thought it would be great for Grier.” She looks around me, scanning the dim living room. “Where is she? Did you put her to bed early?”

“She’s having a sleepover at Mom’s tonight.” I take the bag and look at the box inside. It holds a tiny stepstool with an attached potty seat, bright purple and decorated with dancing cartoon monsters in a rainbow of colors.

“I figured she’s about the right age to start potty training soon, so I thought it’d be useful to help her climb up there.” Corrigan smiles.

“Wow, thank you. This’ll make my life a lot easier—and the design’s just the

kind of thing she loves.” How like Corrigan to buy a gift both cute and practical. I try not to read too much into the fact that she was clearly thinking of me, as well as Grier. “How much do I owe you?”

She holds up her hand. “No way, don’t even think about trying to pay me back. Count it toward Grier’s next birthday or something.” Her gaze flicks over my shoulder again. “What’re you watching?”

“*Terminal Honor 3*. Just a dumb action flick, but it’s not the kind of thing I can watch with Grier around, and I figured it’d go well with bourbon.” An idea pops into my head, and I voice it before common sense can ruin it. “Want to join me?”

She considers, then slowly says, “You know what . . . why the hell not?”

After stashing her gift in the dining room, I pour an extra drink and set it on the coffee table, then sit down next to her on the sofa.

And from that moment on, I do not retain a single goddamn thing about this movie. I’m far too painfully aware of the exact distance between us, the occasional faint whiffs of sweet floral shampoo I catch, how her tight leggings show off every curve of her ass and those long legs, and how fucking badly I need to touch her.

“Hey,” she murmurs, her voice like honey. “I dare you to drink every time something blows up.”

I snort. “We playing truth or dare now?”

“No, inventing a drinking game. I’ll do it too.” She raises a challenging brow in my direction.

How can a guy say no to that? “You’re on.”

As if on cue, a car explodes into an inferno. She laughs, and we each knock back a sip.

Long before the movie is over, I realize two very important things. One, that we’ll both probably be dead if we keep this game up. And two, bourbon does

fuck-all to distract me from Corrigan's unfair sex appeal. The stirring in my pants is a testament to that fact.

"Hey, do you want to play truth or dare for real?"

She blinks at me, then laughs. "Is this high school?"

"You can always say no."

"Hmm . . . sure. Sounds fun." She rearranges herself on the sofa, this time facing me, one leg tucked under her. "Truth or dare?"

I rub my chin, which by this late hour feels like sandpaper. "I choose . . . truth."

She punishes me with an exaggerated frown. "Wuss. Okay, let me think." She considers for a while. "What's your biggest turn-on?"

*Every single thing about you.* "It's a tie between nice legs and dirty talk."

She gives me a look. "Come on, that's it?"

"You didn't ask me to write a novel." I chuckle. "Your turn. Truth or dare?"

"Truth," she says primly.

"Hey, you can't criticize me for choosing truth and then choose the same thing."

Her only response is to stick her tongue out at me. Call me crazy, but even that I find sexy. I can't help but wonder if I kissed her right now, if she'd taste like bourbon.

Searching for a suitable revenge, I ask, "What's your most embarrassing moment?"

"That's easy," she immediately says. "As a student teacher, I called one kid the wrong name for a month, and when he got up the courage to correct me, I automatically said, 'Oh shit, I'm so sorry,' in front of a whole class of first graders *and* my mentor."

I offer her a sympathetic smile. “Damn. That does suck.”

“Sarah Jo still makes fun of me for it at least once a week.”

I chuckle and shake my head at her. “My friends in New York would do the same thing.”

She opens her mouth, and for a second I think maybe she’s going to ask me about my friends, about my life in New York, but then her mouth closes and some unreadable expression flickers in her eyes.

The moment passes and her smile fades. “Truth, Lexington . . . Did you love me?”

I swallow hard, my throat bobbing with emotion. “Of course I did.” When she doesn’t respond, but her gaze drops to my lips for the briefest moment, I blurt, “I dare you to kiss me.”

Her gaze jumps up to meet mine. “What?”

“You heard me.” I scoot a little closer. If she refuses, I promise I’ll drop it, stop pushing her, but I can feel it. There’s still something between us, no matter how hard she tries to deny it.

For a second, I’m certain she’s going to say no. But then, with an expression like she’s bungee jumping for the first time, she leans in and touches her lips to mine.

It’s soft. Barely a kiss at all.

But she doesn’t withdraw after a second like I expect. She just . . . lingers, but I don’t dare advance—not yet. Everything in me clamors for more, and when she shifts closer, I finally give in and open to her.

And another miracle happens. Her lips part too.

I eagerly take the invitation to touch my tongue against hers. She lets out the smallest, softest sigh, and if it would have been possible to stop before, I sure as hell can’t now.

*Fuck.*

Every horny teenage fantasy I ever had about Corrigan rushes to the surface. My arms tighten, pulling her closer toward me. The feel of her soft breasts pressing against my chest drives me insane. I nibble her lip, and she nips back a little harder, and suddenly we're devouring each other, the kiss devolving all at once into a hot, messy feast of lips and tongue. My body reacts accordingly, growing hot and hard.

Her feel, her taste, her smell, her sounds of pleasure and desire, it all brings decade-old memories and emotions rushing back with the force of a late-summer hurricane. But at the same time, everything is an intoxicating surprise. She's changed, grown up into a woman, and I'm eager for the experience of learning everything about her all over again.

My hands roam, eager to linger over every detail both familiar and new, every curve, every inch of creamy skin. I run the pad of my thumb down the column of her neck, stopping until I can cup the weight of one breast in my hand. She rewards me with a soft but rough noise that jolts straight down my spine and into my dick.

*Okay, slow the fuck down, Lex.*

I pull back, breaking our connection, and Corrigan makes a small confused noise. Her eyes flutter open, and everything I see reflected in them makes my heart throb.

Desire. Hunger. Certainty.

She wants this as much as I do.

But it's not just a beautiful woman I'm seeing before me. I'm seeing her, the true her she hides from the world. I'm seeing the possibility for something real developing between us, something even bigger than what we shared before.

My mouth moves to her neck, where I leave open-mouthed, sucking kisses.

Corrigan squirms. "Lex . . ."

Lex, not Lexington.

“Too fast?” I murmur, praying she’ll tell me it’s not, that she wants to keep going.

When she breathes out the word *no*, I almost die of happiness on the spot. It’s rare for me to have a kid-free evening, and to spend it with Corrigan—doing *this*, of all things—is a dream come true.

She touches my chest, her fingers flexing into the material of my T-shirt. I haul it off over my head. Her tank top comes off next, and I have to bite the inside of my cheek to keep from groaning.

Her breasts are high and full, nearly spilling over the cups of her delicate lace bra. She’s gorgeous. And I still can’t believe she’s letting me touch her.

“Shit,” I murmur, filling my hands with her breasts. “God, look at you . . .”

Corrigan arches, her eyes drifting closed as I rub my thumbs across her nipples. A small choked gasp pushes past her parted lips. With a mischievous look, she bites her bottom lip and begins unbuttoning my jeans.

*Holy unexpected plot twist.*

My cock jumps, eager for her touch. And when her hand pushes past my boxers and touches my bare skin, I groan out my relief.

“Wait.” My voice is little more than a deep rasp in my throat.

Her fingers still, and she meets my eyes with a look of confusion.

“As badly as I want this, and believe me, I do . . .” I draw in a deep breath. “This isn’t *all* I want. You know that, right?”

Her eyes meet mine. “You really want to discuss this *now*?”

She has a point. Her hand is inside my underwear. Is this really the time to negotiate things between us, and risk the possibility of her walking away? But I have no choice.

“Go out with me.” The words tumble from my lips. I turn her face toward

mine and press my lips to hers. “Please.”

Without missing a beat, she nods. “Okay. One date. For old time’s sake.”

My relief is instantaneous. Then Corrigan wraps my aching dick in her fist and treats me to a slow stroke.

“I should probably warn you . . .” I’m breathless, desperate, and can hardly get the words out. “I haven’t had sex in a *very* long time.”

She gives me another confused look. “How long?”

It doesn’t even occur to me to try to hide the truth from her. “Since before Grier was born.”

Shock is written all over Corrigan’s face. I can tell my answer surprised her.

The media in New York dubbed me the *penthouse prince*. Wealthy . . . handsome . . . one of the city’s most eligible bachelors. But the truth was so different. I’m a single dad, not the playboy everyone assumes.

I don’t date. But I want Corrigan to be the exception to that rule . . . if she wants to be.

“Then this is going to feel really good.” Her mischievous smile returns, and my head drops back onto the sofa as her hand begins to move.

“Oh *fuck* . . .”

With two fingers under her chin, I tip her mouth toward mine and devour her with kisses. With my other, I help Corrigan shimmy out of her shorts. She’s sitting on my couch now wearing only a bra and a pair of panties, and she looks good enough to eat.

But since her hand is still moving inside my boxers, I return the favor, touching between her legs, circling her clit as she moans and shifts closer.

Miraculously, she seems to remember exactly what I like—firm, quick strokes—and much too soon, I can already feel myself edging closer to my climax.

When I put my hand over hers, slowing her, she meets my eyes with a look of confusion. “That feels so good. But I’m going to make a mess,” I say on a shaky exhale.

Without a word, she slides to the floor between my parted knees and brings her mouth to my swollen cock. If I was worried about embarrassing myself before, with the wet heat of her tongue on my cock, now it’s game over.

I gather her hair in my fist and watch her work, her mouth moving over me in slow, languid kisses and sucks. It’s erotic and sexy, and wow, I still can’t believe she’s doing this.

“That’s it.” My voice is a rough pant.

I reach down to touch her breasts, pinching one nipple through the thin fabric of her bra. I feel her shocked little gasp vibrate around me.

“*Fuck*. Corr—” I groan. “Gonna come.”

She eases her mouth down, swallowing me as I erupt. The feelings of pleasure are so intense, a bolt of white light momentarily blinds me.

When she rises to her feet, I pull her forward until she falls into my lap, her knees pressed into the cushion on either side of my thighs. It’s the perfect position to tease and touch and linger over all of my favorite spots.

I tug down her bra, exposing her breasts, and capture one perky tit in my mouth. And when I sink two fingers deep inside her, Corrigan begins to unravel.

I haven’t forgotten a thing. The way she feels, the sounds she makes, the things she likes. When I find the spot that makes her moan, she begins riding my hand, little jerks of her hips as she seeks her own release. And then she’s almost there—right on the edge. One more kiss and she comes apart, her body trembling as the waves crest over her.

Satisfied and breathless, she melts into my arms, resting her cheek against my chest. We just fit—her soft, sensual body against mine. I can feel her heart throbbing as she rests against me, and a smile lifts my lips.

This is so *not* what I planned for tonight, but I can't deny how happy I am at the change in plans. I don't want this moment to end, but all too soon, it does. She climbs from my lap, straightening her underwear and bra, and begins to get dressed.

We finish our drinks as the credits roll on the movie.

"I guess we missed the ending," she says, glancing at the screen.

I smile. "We did." *And it was so worth it.*

When I walk her to the front door, Corrigan doesn't linger. I want to kiss her good-bye, but she's already opened the door and is stepping outside, digging inside her purse for her key fob.

"I'll call you about that date," I say as she wanders down the stone path to her car, which is parked under the swath of light coming from my garage carriage lights.

"Good night, Lexington," she calls up to me.

"Night, Corrigan," I say, just before she slips into the driver's seat.

**L**ast night was one hundred percent *not* what I expected.

Showing up at Lex's house uninvited was a bold move, I admit. But what I thought would be a quick handoff of a present for Grier turned into a *very* grown-up game of truth or dare, a steamy hookup session, and a date for tonight.

Yeah. Life comes at you fast sometimes. I'd like to thank courage, bourbon, and *Terminal Honor 3*.

Now I'm digging my date-night wedges out of the back of my closet for the second time this week, and I can't help but think of how proud Sarah Jo would be if she knew. Two dates in less than seven days, and I didn't even have to resort to that silly dating app she was pressuring me to download.

Sure, the first date was about as romantic as a flaming dumpster rolling down a hill, but even that night served its purpose. One night with Mr. Wrong opened my eyes to what I really need in my Mr. Right. And if my gut feelings are right, Mr. Right may also be Mr. Right in Front of Me.

I guess I'll find out tonight.

Setting my wedges down on my bedroom floor, I step into them one at a time, trying to ignore the pinch on my pinkie toes. Less than an hour of wearing these bad boys the other night, and I still managed to develop the worst blisters of my life. That's how out of practice I am in the high-heel game.

I try out a few tentative steps, biting the inside of my cheek to keep from cringing at the pain. *Power through, Corrigan*. It'll be worth it to see the look on

Lex's face when he sees how amazing my legs look in these.

Speak of the devil, my phone buzzes on my nightstand, and when I totter over like a newborn baby deer to check it, Lex's name flashes on my screen, causing my stomach to squeeze into a tight little ball.

*Gosh, I'm so lame.* One unexpected round of sexy time on the couch, and suddenly I'm acting as giddy as I did back in high school. But all that giddiness turns into panic when I read the two-word message he sent.

Bad news.

*No, no, no.* This can't be happening. After all his failed attempts to ask me out, I finally said yes—and now he's going to be the one to call it off?

Panic rises in my throat as I sit on the edge of my bed, typing out a string of question marks. Instead of a text back, my phone buzzes with an incoming call. It hardly vibrates once before I pick up.

"Hi, what's wrong?"

My mind races in a thousand panic-driven directions. Is it Grier? Or his Mom? Or maybe he's changed his mind and decided we're too dangerous together after all.

There's a muffled sigh from the other end of the line. "Grier's sick," he says, sounding defeated. "I'm so damn sorry. It's nothing serious, just a runny nose and a cough, but with Mom's weakened immune system, I can't risk having her over there."

A long sigh of relief leaks from my lips. *Thank goodness.* A case of the sniffles is a lot easier to deal with than the worst-case scenarios I was imagining.

"Maybe we can reschedule?" he says with the tiniest bit of hope in his voice. "She'll probably be over this in a couple of days, maybe a week, tops. Rain check?"

My chest squeezes as I remember what he shared with me last night. How he

hasn't slept with anyone since before Grier was born. I may think *my* dating life is difficult, but he's the one who's responsible for another human being. Add taking care of his mom to that to-do list, and it's no wonder his love life has been nonexistent. I'm not about to be just one more thing he has to juggle.

"Rain check declined," I say firmly, kicking off my wedges and jumping to my feet. "Because we're still having our date tonight."

Lex pauses, and I can practically hear his brow furrowing through the phone. "Corrigan, I can't just leave Grier on her own in—"

"So I'll come over," I say quickly, wedging my phone between my ear and my shoulder. "We'll order takeout and watch a movie. Maybe we'll actually even pay attention to this one."

The line is quiet for a long moment, but when Lex eventually speaks up, his voice is hesitant. "You . . . you wouldn't mind that?"

"Of course not. I think that sounds like a perfect first date. And to be honest, I really, really didn't want to wear those heels tonight anyway."

A groan rumbles low over the line. "Jesus, no fair. Now I'm picturing your legs in heels."

"I hope for your sake Grier isn't within earshot right now," I say, scolding him with a smirk tugging at the edges of my lips.

"Don't worry, she's resting in her room," he says with an easy laugh. "I'll save the dirty talk for when you and I are alone."

Once we hang up, I hang my dress back in my closet and change into denim cutoffs, a slouchy pink tee, and a pair of comfy sandals that my feet instantly thank me for. Then it's a quick, familiar drive across town to Lex's, where the door swings open before I even get a chance to ring the bell.

"Hey there, gorgeous."

In dark-washed jeans and a fitted black tee that hugs his shoulders just right, Lex looks way too good for a man who's been taking care of a sick two-year-old

all day. In fact, I'd say he was date-night ready, if not for the toddler snot smeared on his shirt. And, of course, the grouchy-looking Grier propped on his hip.

"Can you say hi to Corrigan, love bug?" He bounces Grier a little to get her attention, and she manages half a smile and a tiny wiggle of her fingers. Then it's right back to zombie mode, complete with a sad little whimper.

*Poor thing.*

"Looks like someone's about ready for b-e-d."

As if on cue, Grier sniffs twice, then yawns. Yep, it's lights out for this one.

I follow Lex inside and straight up to Grier's room, where the usual mess of toys is now joined by a full-blown kiddie pharmacy. There's a big purple bottle of cough syrup on the dresser and, oddly, a box of fruit snacks next to it.

Lex must notice me eyeing them and quickly offers an explanation.

"She'll only take the cough syrup if I give her those afterward." He nods toward the fruit snacks, then shakes his head. "What can I say? The kid drives a hard bargain."

"Gummies?" Grier perks up between sniffles as her dad tucks her in. She's only recently graduated from the crib to a big-girl bed, and I can't help but smile at how sweet and small she looks snuggled up under the light pink quilt.

"No, sweetheart. You already did your medicine. You'll get more gummies tomorrow. Now, what story should we read?"

Without even glancing at her bookshelf, Grier blurts out the answer I've heard a half dozen times. "*Dwagons Play Dodgeball!*" It's immediately followed by a coughing fit.

"Cover your mouth, honey," Lex says gently. "Like this, see?" He demonstrates by fake coughing into his own elbow, and Grier mimics him exactly, right down to the pattern of his coughs. It's pretty darn cute, to be honest. Like father, like daughter.

“Quick learner, as always,” I say, pulling the familiar blue board book from the shelf and handing it to Lex.

A proud smile breaks out across his face. “Yep. That’s our girl.”

As quickly as the words come out, his eyes deepen with instant regret.

Not *his* girl. *Our* girl.

There’s a long, awkward silence as he takes the book from me, but instead of addressing his slipup, he ignores it, sliding in under the covers next to Grier and starting the story.

Meanwhile, another story is playing in my head. A very different story. One where Grier is *ours*, not just Lex’s. And to my surprise, it’s not as scary of a thought as it should be.

“Cor?” Lex looks up at me with an easy smile. “Do you want to join us?”

*Yes. In every way.*

Lex guides Grier to scooch over a bit, making enough room for me on the edge of the bed. Even in her zombie state, she insists that I get under the covers too, tugging at the sheet until I oblige.

“Grier sandwich,” I say with a laugh, cuddling in extra close. “Now, where were we?”

Two and a half reads of *Dragons Play Dodgeball* later, Grier is finally sound asleep. It takes some light gymnastics for us both to get out of bed without waking her, which only leads to more laughter that we have to muffle, but we eventually make our escape without her batting an eyelash.

Before long, we’re back in the same spot on the couch as last night, this time with a bottle of wine and two take-and-bake pizzas Lex rustled up from the back of the freezer.

“Thanks again for being so flexible about tonight.” Lex smiles as he pulls an extra-large piece off the pizza stone and plates it for me. Despite his ten years in

New York City, the man hasn't lost the "ladies first" manners they teach us down here.

"It's really no big deal," I say, accepting the plate and lifting the slice to my lips. There's still steam rising off it, so I blow a cold stream of air along the hot, gooey cheese, looking up just in time to catch Lex staring at my lips.

"You know how kids are. One second she's bouncing off the walls, the next . . ." He takes a deep breath, rubbing the tension out of the back of his neck. "That one is unpredictable."

"Some of the best things in life are unpredictable," I murmur, blinking up at him with a knowing look.

He responds with a soft, easy chuckle. "Yeah, I'd say a lot of good, unpredictable things have been coming into my life lately." He pauses, his gaze momentarily dipping down to my legs. "Speaking of which, I want an IOU on seeing you in those heels."

My eyes can't help but roll as I try and fail to suppress a smile. "Don't act like you've never seen me in heels before."

"I don't think my senior prom over a decade ago counts," he says. "Plus, your dress covered them anyway."

I nod, setting my plate on the coffee table and grabbing a napkin for each of us. "I still can't believe Dak bought that we went just as friends."

"Listen, you know I love Dak like he's my own brother, so it's with nothing but total respect that I say this."

Lex pauses, his eyes darkening as he glances around the room, as if there were anyone around to hear him. Then he leans in close to me, like we're a couple of high schoolers gossiping in the back of study hall.

"Your brother?" he whispers behind a cupped hand. "He can be kind of a dumbass."

A laugh explodes out of me, loud enough that I have to smack a hand over my

mouth to keep from waking our little patient upstairs. Once I get myself under control, I give Lex a playful shove with both hands.

“You’d better hope I never tell him you said that,” I finally manage to say on a strained laugh.

“Yeah?” Lex lifts a brow in a challenge, shifting closer to me on the couch.

All at once, the mood changes, the sexual tension between us as thick as the humidity of an August night. He reaches toward me and tucks back a loose strand of my hair, causing my goose bumps to run wild as the pads of his fingers linger on the tender skin behind my ear.

“Well,” he finally says softly, his tongue sweeping over his lower lip. “You’d better not tell him about this either, then.”

Sliding his fingers to the back of my neck, he draws me into him, closing the space between us with a slow, open-mouthed kiss that sucks the air right out of my lungs.

*Holy God in heaven, this man. One kiss from him, and I’m putty in his hands.*

He coaxes my tongue into his mouth, sucking and massaging it with his, and I moan into him, planting my hands against his firm chest. It’s all I can do to find some semblance of balance in this moment where I feel like I’m totally and completely falling.

When he pulls back, it’s only a fraction of an inch, barely enough space to catch his breath as he grabs my hand and lowers it from his chest to his zipper. The kick of his erection against my palm sends a gasp tumbling from my lips.

“Do you want this?” He growls, tilting his hips against my hand.

“Y-yes,” I stutter. “But here?”

“Bedroom.” He pulls away, nodding toward the staircase. “It’s next to Grier’s room, though. We’ll have to be quiet.”

“Our parents never caught us back in the day, right?” I remind him. “I think I

have plenty of practice in keeping quiet.”

He chuckles, running one hand along the scruff on his cheek. “Yeah? Well, I’m going to try to make it as hard on you as I can.”

Dropping one last kiss on my neck, he pulls me up from the couch and straight upstairs to his bedroom. Despite all the time I’ve spent in this house the past few weeks, this is my first time in Lex’s room.

But now is no time to look around. My eyes are fixed on the man in front of me, who’s peeling off his shirt and backing me against his bed. No sooner have I sat down on the edge than Lex sinks to his knees, freeing me of my shorts and panties in one swift motion.

“Please,” I beg, my voice a harsh whisper as he plants infuriating kisses along my inner thighs.

“Hmm?” His calm blue eyes gaze up at me, content to watch me lose my mind each time his lips brush against my skin. “You want something?”

“You,” I say on a sigh. “Please.”

With that, he pushes my legs all the way apart and dives into me, his tongue parting me with quick, furious strokes.

*Good God in heaven.* It’s been ten years too long since this man was between my thighs. As he sucks and licks at my core, my body tenses against him, my breath quickening into short, shallow pants.

“Lexington,” I say softly, hardly able to speak. “I’m so close.”

He hums his approval against me, then sinks two thick fingers inside me, pulling a gasp from my lips. This man remembers everything about me, every curve and sensitive spot, and more importantly, exactly how to make me come undone for him.

With one last crook of his nimble fingers, all the tension in my body comes to a head, spilling out of me in white-hot waves. The high lasts for a long, sweet moment, but before long, I’m back on earth, spread across his sheets in an

exhausted heap.

Before I have time to catch my breath, he's joined me on the bed, an undeniable hunger flickering in his eyes.

I know that look. It was in his eyes the first time I saw him again, all those weeks ago in the park. But back then, none of this made sense. It's been weeks of this push and pull. Constantly slapping myself on the wrist for thinking there could be anything between us again.

But now that he's looking at me with those perfect, hungry eyes, none of it matters. It's just Lex and me, right here, right now.

I know what he wants, and I want it too.

Corrigan swore she wanted her first time to be with me, before I left for college. And though I was in love with her, I refused. Because while I did love her, I also knew that things would change once I moved away for school.

I guess I should clarify. I refused—at first. But eventually I gave in. Because a naked and willing girl in your bed trumps everything else at age nineteen.

Maybe I should regret what we did, but I can't bring myself to. Our first time together felt like it was meant to be. It was perfect. Although nothing is as perfect as the way Corrigan feels in my arms right now.

I never knew sex could be this good. I greedily drink in everything I've craved so desperately for the last ten years—Corrigan in my bed, naked beneath me, the bliss of her hot, tight body squeezing my cock, her soft, sweat-damp skin against mine, the air thick with the sounds of her pleasure. And her beautiful brown eyes, sweeter and warmer than melted chocolate, shining on me like I'm her whole world.

But could I be? Could I be lucky enough to have that kind of love twice in a lifetime?

With my mouth fused to hers, I slowly sink deeper. Her hips lift, finding an angle that makes her shiver with pleasure.

She makes a sound that's drenched in desire, and I love it. Then she moans out my name, and it's the best thing I've ever heard.

“Yes, baby. Fuck, it's so good.”

I can't help but move faster, pushing her closer to her release. It's all I want. I've waited years for this.

She says my name again and comes apart, her body gripping mine in wave after wave of exquisite pleasure. I groan aloud as my orgasm slams through me.

We collapse together, panting. I head from the bed to the en suite bathroom to remove the condom and wash my hands, and then I'm back where I belong—in bed with Corrigan.

The need to keep her close still burns, and I gather her into my arms to hold her against me. As we cool off and our breathing slows, the peace of an indescribable afterglow descends, loosening tensions I hadn't even known were gripping me, and everything is warm and serene and perfect.

We lie there together for several minutes, and I lazily stroke her arm that's draped over my chest. This feels right.

*Stay here with me.*

But before I can get the invitation out, Corrigan says, "I should probably go. If I'm around in the morning, Grier might ask questions that are hard to answer."

Unable to argue with that, I mutter, "Whatever you want."

I help her find all her clothes, watch her cover up the gorgeous body I just worshiped, and walk her downstairs.

She opens the door, then says, "Well . . . good night," with a smile I never want to stop looking at.

Then she gives me a kiss, soft and lingering, and before I know it, she's gone.

And me? I go back to bed alone.

• • •

I wake up to something yanking my hair. Hard. Still half asleep, I let out a grunt of discomfort and confusion.

“Hi, Daddy,” Grier says cheerfully, then starts tugging at my cheek as if she’s trying to stretch taffy.

“Good morning to you too.” I pry off her tiny, surprisingly strong hand and sit up to look at her. Even after attacking me, she’s cute as hell, grinning and bright-eyed with her pale hair all mussed and sticking up in crazy directions. “I’m guessing you want breakfast.”

Bobbing her head, she says, “Hungwy.”

“Then let’s get you something to eat.” I stand up reluctantly, still able to smell Corrigan on my sheets. But that’s only a small consolation for my empty bed, the cold spot where she should be.

Last night was mind blowing, and I hate that she had to sneak out instead of sleeping over. I wish we could have woken up in each other’s arms and cooked breakfast together, fed Grier, played with her—shared the closeness of all the little things that make up a life. But that’s not how it worked out, and today I’ll be doing all those things by myself. As usual. And I’m trying not to feel bitter about that.

On autopilot, I heat up sausages, butter toast, wash grapes, and get Grier set up in her high chair, my head filled with nothing but Corrigan. What’s she doing today? How does she feel about last night? How soon can I see her again?

*There’s an easy way to find out the answers to all these questions, idiot. Grow some balls and ask her.*

“Daddy, icky!” Grier yells.

I look up from my plate, which I notice is half-empty, even though I don’t remember eating anything. “What’s wrong?”

“Icky!” She flings her toast away. Naturally, it lands butter-side down. At least the floor is tile in here.

“We don’t throw food on the floor,” I say, then realize that I gave her buttered toast when I know damn well that she hates butter, which is, of course, insane.

Butter is amazing.

“Sorry, love bug. Daddy was distracted and made a mistake. I’ll fix it. But you should still use your words and be patient instead of throwing stuff, okay?”

I give her fresh toast, her favorite jelly-topped version, and we finish breakfast without further incident.

After Grier is dressed and absorbed in playing, I reach for my phone—then put it down, instinctively thinking, *No, I shouldn’t act too clingy*. Then I think, *Fuck playing games*, and pick it up again, but sit there frozen for a minute trying to figure out what to say.

Finally, I just hit CALL and hope the right words come on their own.

Corrigan picks up after a few rings. “Hello?”

“Hey, it’s Lex.”

“I know. Your number’s saved in my contacts.” Her voice sounds amused and . . . *happy* is the most fitting descriptor I can think of.

“Right. Um, how are you?” I ask.

“I’m fantastic.”

“I agree,” I say, chuckling. “So you . . . about last night, you don’t . . .”

“Regret it? No.” Her answer is quick and her tone absolutely certain.

Relief floods through me. *Thank God*.

Keeping my voice low, I say, “I’m glad to hear that. I had an incredible time, and I wanted to make sure you did too.”

“I definitely did. But it’s sweet of you to check up on me.”

I take a deep breath. “I know you said *one date*, but I thought I’d ask if you’d be interested in hanging out again? Maybe we could grab lunch?”

Lunch is the most nonthreatening meal there is. She can’t say no to lunch, right?

“That sounds nice. I’m actually not doing anything today, if you have time.”

“Yes,” I say immediately. I can figure out how to rearrange my schedule after I get off the phone. “How about noon at Hazel’s Cafe? I went there with Mom the other day, and the food was great.”

“Sounds good. Text me the address, and I’ll be there.”

• • •

We take advantage of the warm, but not yet oppressive sunshine with a patio table. Not long after we order, who should pass by on his way out but the old man with the huge dog. Grier gasps and flails until Corrigan takes her out of her high chair and puts her down.

They pet Hamburger together, with Corrigan occasionally delivering gentle admonishments when Grier gets too rough in her enthusiasm, but the dog wags his tail regardless. The sight of them together is calming. Corrigan really is amazing with kids.

As we watch them enjoy themselves, the old man says to me, “Now I see where the little one gets her looks.”

It takes a second to process what he means. Corrigan and I lock wide, alarmed eyes with each other.

“She’s not Grier’s mother,” I say. “She’s . . .”

She’s what? I don’t even know if this is a real date, let alone if I can say we’re *dating*.

The old man clears his throat. “Oh, I see. Pardon me. I only meant to compliment your lady friend, not bring up any awkwardness.”

I shoot a questioning glance at Corrigan.

She just smiles, although she still looks a little uncomfortable. “It’s all right. Thank you.”

“You all have a nice day, now,” he says as he leaves.

For a minute, we just sit and listen to the sounds of the birds and the wind rustling the tree that shades our section of the patio. I place Grier back in her high chair while Corrigan wipes both Grier's hands and her own with hand sanitizer.

*Smart.*

When our meals arrive, Grier immediately scoops up two fistfuls of oatmeal and stuffs them into her mouth, smearing most of it all over the lower half of her face. We can't help chuckling despite the mess. Grier looks so proud, grinning at her attempt to feed herself.

"Try your spoon," Corrigan says, gently wiping off Grier's nose and cheeks with her own napkin. "That might work better."

This time, the sight of her caring for Grier hits me even harder than usual. Something deep in the back of my mind whispers, *What would it be like if that man had been right?* The thought provokes a flurry of strange feelings—not good, exactly, but far from bad. And although I quash it, refusing to acknowledge anything, I can't quite ignore it either.

The rest of the meal passes in a blur of bliss. It sounds cheesy, but I love this. The lingering glances and stolen touches between Corrigan and me. And the sweetness of seeing the two most important ladies in my life so happy with each other.

When Corrigan bumps her knee against mine, I dare to caress her leg under the table and am rewarded with a mischievous smile.

She murmurs with a sultriness that makes my skin tingle, "After Grier's down for her nap, maybe we could—"

Grier grabs at Corrigan's sleeve and shouts, "Mommy, juice!"

The word crashes into us like a wrecking ball. The carefree atmosphere vanishes.

Stunned, I turn to look at Grier. Corrigan also watches her, her eyes steady

and intense, ready to hang on whatever she says.

“Gimme juice.” Grier reaches for the cup that’s just out of her grasp.

I fight to keep my voice calm. “I’ll get you more in a second, love bug, right after you tell me what you called her.” I point to Corrigan. “Please. Who is that?”

Grier frowns at us as if she can’t believe how dense we are, then says again, too clear to deny it, “Cor-gan Mommy.”

She hasn’t said that word before. But every time a cartoon mommy comes on the screen, I cringe, and have been waiting for this. Maybe to Grier, any woman who takes care of you, cleans your hands, and plays with you is called Mommy?

It’s sweet and heartbreaking and impossible, and I have no idea what to say to Grier. How do you explain the truth to a two-year-old?

Corrigan still hasn’t said a word. I tentatively touch her hand, only for her to pull it away. Under her breath, she says, “When we get back, we need to talk.”

*Fuck.*

I nod, feeling a little numb.

We quickly finish our meals. I don’t know about Corrigan, but eating the rest of my food feels like forcing dry sand down my throat. Without another word, we drive home.

Once we get Grier settled down to nap, I follow Corrigan back downstairs, where she says quietly, “We have to stop this, Lex. It’s not fair to Grier. We’re obviously confusing her.” Her voice cracks, and she looks down at the floor. “I can still be your babysitter, but that’s all I’ll be. No more sharing meals, no more going on outings together, no more sex. It’s not healthy.”

I just stand there staring at her, struggling to think. What the hell can I say to that?

I was just as disturbed to see Grier confused about who her mother was. I’ve

always known I'd have to explain to her someday, when she was old enough and the time was right. But I always thought I had a long while, so I never worked out how best to approach that conversation. And now I'm afraid it'll need to come sooner rather than later.

At the same time, hearing Grier call Corrigan *Mommy* also triggered a wave of that sense of rightness, of how things could be, should be.

And the idea of losing Corrigan again, this time before we were even really back together, makes me feel like punching something.

Corrigan swallows hard, looking away and blinking fast. "I'm sorry. I have to go." Before I know it, she's turned and headed out the door.

The sound of the latch closing jolts me. The shock of losing her now, as an adult who has much more at stake, is so much more painful than it was all those years ago.

And I know it's entirely my fault.

Careful not to wake Grier, I carry her to the car and strap her into her seat. As much as I'd like to tear off straight to Corrigan's place, I have no idea how long our conversation will take or what kinds of things we'll need to say that Grier shouldn't overhear. So instead, I head to Mom's.

Dawn answers the doorbell, blinking in obvious confusion.

"Lex? What a wonderful surprise," Mom calls from her recliner.

As I come inside with Grier conked out on my shoulder, I get close enough for Mom to see the somber look in my eyes, and her face falls.

"Is everything all right?" she asks in a low voice.

"Yeah, it's fine," I say softly, deciding it's best not to get into it right now. "Sorry for not giving you any warning, but can you watch Grier for a couple of hours?" I ask, erring on the side of extra time, just in case. "I just, uh . . . one of my contractors just called, and I have to go meet him at the property immediately."

"Well, I'm always happy to see my grandbaby . . ." Mom looks at Dawn, her brow furrowed. "But would you be okay with that? I don't want to impose."

"It's fine with me," Dawn says, her voice quiet like ours.

"Thank you so much," I whisper with a sigh of relief. "Sorry again. I'll pay you double for these hours."

Dawn's eyes widen. "You don't have to d—"

"Really, I insist. It only makes sense, since you'll be looking after two people.

And I promise I'll come back as soon as I can." Hopefully, I won't be an emotional wreck when I do, or I'll have to finally answer Mom's questions about Corrigan and me.

"Is there anything she needs?" Dawn asks.

"I'll bring her bag in, but right now she's in the middle of her afternoon nap, so she should just sleep for most of the time," I say as I pass her gently into Mom's outstretched arms.

As if on cue, Grier stirs, mumbling, "Gamma?"

Mom chuckles softly. "Yes, sweet pea, Grandma's here." She settles Grier in her lap and rubs her back soothingly until her breathing starts to slow again. "Shh . . . that's a good girl. Sleepy time now." Looking up at me, Mom whispers, "Good luck with your business. But in the future, try not to work so hard, okay? I worry."

"Thanks, Mom. I'll try."

I'll definitely need that luck—this meeting is the most important I've ever had. I head back out the door and shut it quietly.

I drive to Corrigan's apartment and check the labels on the mailbox by the entrance when I arrive. After locating her name, I stride up the stairs two at a time to her apartment. I knock twice and wait.

Dressed in a pair of cotton shorts and an oversized T-shirt, Corrigan pulls open the door. "Lexington?" She squints against the afternoon sunlight. "What's going on? Is something wrong?"

The words leap out of my mouth. "What if I want it all?"

She blinks at me. "What are you—"

My grand gesture of pleading for her heart is sure off to a roaring start.

Trying again, I say, "What if I want to make what Grier said come true? What if I want us to be a family and share a home together?"

Corrigan's eyes fly open wide with shock. "You . . . you don't know what you're saying," she chokes out, even as she takes a half step closer. "You couldn't even handle the responsibility of having a girlfriend back when I knew you, let alone—"

"I've changed," I say, willing to beg her to believe me. "I've had ten years to grow up, to think about what I missed out on. To miss you. I'm not some commitment-phobe, immature boy anymore. I'm a man now, and I'll act like one."

Taking a chance, I grab her hand.

"I know what's on the line here, Corrigan. I lost you once, and I never want to feel the pain of that again. More than just playing house, I want you in my life. Move in with us. Be Grier's mommy. Be my everything."

I've just bared my soul and laid my heart on the line, and the heartbeats that tick past silently are filled with uncertainty.

She looks away, her eyes glistening, worrying her lip so fiercely I'm afraid it might bleed. But she doesn't pull her hand out of mine. "I don't . . . how would that even work? How do we know it'd be okay?"

"We don't. We'd just have to have faith and figure things out along the way."

I know it's probably not the assurance she was hoping for, but I'm not sure what to say, and there's no way I can allow this chance to pass by. I can't let her just walk away again.

Her chuckle is uncertain, but her gaze on mine is steady. "Lex . . . we can't just jump straight in. This is a huge decision."

I nod once, solemnly. "It is, but it also feels like the easiest decision in the world. For me, anyway. I want a future with you, Corrigan. And I'm asking if you want to see where this goes as much as I do."

Her eyes lift to mine again, seeming to weigh whatever expression I'm wearing. But she's so quiet, I barely breathe. When she finally speaks, her voice

is tiny, heavy with emotion.

“I’m afraid, Lex.”

I let out a deep sigh. “Me too. I’m . . . terrified.” Mostly of losing this shot with her. A weird little chuckle escapes me. “But I still want to try. Do you?” I wet my lips. “Please, just answer me this one question. Do you love me?”

“It’s not that simple . . .”

“Yes, it is. Everything else is just details, and we can work them out together. Tell me, and if you don’t share my feelings, I’ll drive back home right now and never bother you again. Do you want to be with me—with Grier?”

Corrigan’s eyes brim with unshed tears, and she lets out a small, wet sniff. “That’s playing dirty.”

But she’s laughing through her tears and stepping into my arms, and I finally understand what people mean when they talk about their heart singing.

*This must be a dream*, I think, squeezing her tight.

Then her lips meet mine, and I know it’s not. We kiss deeply, locked together in her doorway, pouring into it all our joy and fear and cautious hope, and the love that will get us through it all.

The dance of our tongues quickly grows hotter and needier until she grabs my hand and pulls me inside. It strikes me that I’ve never seen her apartment before. What little I glimpse of it is snug furniture, cheerful bright colors, and cozy pastels, so very *Corrigan*. But then we’re in her bedroom, her scent surrounding me, and when she pulls me down on top of her, everything else vanishes.

“Touch me,” she says urgently.

I couldn’t say no, even if I wanted to.

We undress each other, hurried and hungry, but at the same time like we’re revealing something sacred. Our clothes fall away, and our hands roam each other with eager, tender caresses.

“I need you,” she whispers, or maybe the words are mine.

I can feel my heart beating everywhere she touches me. Her own heartbeat flutters in her neck against my lips, through her breast under my fingers, and the tender flesh between her legs trembles when I lave my tongue over it. I gorge myself on her until her body trembles and she’s moaning helplessly, and she suddenly pushes me away.

“I want to come with you. Please, Lex,” she says, gasping.

I rush to pull on a condom—my hands are shaking too, just as much as she was—but finally I manage and then I’m sinking into her. She welcomes me, draws me deep, and I mold my body against hers, wrapping my arms around her, needing every inch of us to be connected. Something inside me cracks, and everything I’ve been holding back for the past ten years comes flooding out.

“Oh God, Corrigan,” I say on a groan. “I love you. I’ve always loved you.”

A sob escapes her, but I can feel her wide grin against my neck as she murmurs, “I love you too, Lex.”

With those words, I’m hers forever. My heart feels as full as the day Grier was born.

Corrigan’s legs tighten around me, and her fingers tangle in my hair. “Ever since you came back, I’ve been telling myself I hated you, but that was bullshit. I was just scared. Scared to trust you, let you back in, and scared to admit how desperately I wanted to.”

“There’s nothing I regret more than leaving you behind. I promise I won’t make that mistake ever again. This time I’ll do right by you and never hurt you again. We’ll be together for real.”

“I know. I can’t wait.” She kisses me, gulping for breath between tears and giggles.

I kiss her back, deep and possessive, and too bursting with relief and elation for words. I’ve won back what I thought I’d lost forever. What I’ve always

longed for, but dismissed as an impossible dream. Here, enfolded by Corrigan's body and heart, time ceases to pass, and I suddenly know with crystal-clear certainty that my first love will be my last.

We move together like we were made for each other—and I'm certain we were. Together we ride the growing waves of ecstasy until they crest and overwhelm us, and we drown together in joy. And when they carry us to the warm, radiant shore and we're basking in the afterglow, sweat cooling on our skin, I feel like I'm finally home.

She snuggles closer, nuzzling into my chest. I hold her with one hand and stroke her hair with the other, inhaling her scent. We stay like that for a long time until she says, muffled, "So, who wants to break the news to Dak?"

It startles a laugh out of me, and she laughs too, quaking against me, and we crack up together.

Corrigan lifts on one elbow and meets my eyes. "Gimme a couple of days. I'll figure out how to bring him around to the idea."

"He'll get over it," I say. "We're all adults now—we can do whatever we want."

And it feels absolutely true, like something I know deep in my soul—certain and unwavering.

Earlier, I said I wanted to have it all, yet I was still unsure of the details, anxious about just how we'd fit all the moving pieces together. But now, any difficulties seem so far away and easily conquered. Everything is possible so long as Corrigan and I can face it together. I have no worries anymore, only happy anticipation of what the future will bring us.

She rests our foreheads together. "When you talk like that, I can't help but believe you."

I sigh, smiling. "The real question is how to tell Mom she was right all along. She'll never let me hear the end of it."

“Why am I not surprised to hear Bonnie tried to pair us off?” she says with a chuckle.

We stay entwined for a little while longer, savoring the peace of her bed. But the moment can't go on forever.

Telling myself we'll have plenty more to come, I murmur, “I hate to cut this short, but I have to go pick up Grier soon. Do you want to come home with us? We can eat leftover lasagna for dinner, and have a real sleepover this time.”

Corrigan's mouth lifts in a contented smile I want to see every day for the rest of my life. “I'd love to.”

It's Friday night at the Dane household, and in many ways, things are business as usual. The dishwasher is humming, washing the dinner dishes while I wipe down the counters. Meanwhile, Lex and Grier are settled into their usual spot on the living room carpet, surrounded by her favorite selection of G.I. Joes. The same as every other Friday that's come and gone this summer.

But there's one little detail about tonight that's not so ordinary—tonight, I'm not here as the nanny. I'm here as Lex's girlfriend, and we have a date planned for this evening. Meaning, unlike every other Friday this summer, there's a brand-new babysitter sitting on the floor across from Lexington, getting the full rundown on bedtime routines and house rules.

"Are you sure you can handle this?" Lex asks for what has to be the hundredth time. "Do you need me to run through emergency contacts again?"

Dak rolls his eyes, resituating Grier in his lap. "Which part don't you think I can handle? The part where I'm put solely in charge of a two-year-old, or the part where my best friend is dating my sister?" There's a smirk on his lips, and I have to suppress my own laugh.

He's right, though. We snagged the best babysitter in the greater Wilmington area, second only to me, of course. My brother is no professional nanny, but any man who can swiftly handle a crowd of drunks at last call can certainly handle watching a toddler for an hour or two.

"Both, I guess," Lex says, lifting a shoulder. "But I was referring to Grier."

"She'll be fine, honey," I whisper, stepping carefully through the minefield of G.I. Joes to give Lex's shoulder a reassuring squeeze. "Besides, these two have a

ton in common. They're both stubborn, and they're both experts at giving us a hard time."

"Exactly!" Dak gives us a huge grin. "This babysitting thing is kid stuff. Literally. Play with some G.I. Joes, make sure she gets her teeth brushed. Easy peasy, lemon squeezy."

"Sure," I say, trying to restrain my sarcasm. "We'll see if you're still saying that after your fourth read of *Dragons Play Dodgeball*."

At the mention of her favorite story, Grier perks up, her wide eyes flickering with excitement. "Dwagons?"

Lex and I exchange a quick, knowing look and an equally knowing laugh. I think we both could recite that book forward and backward at this point.

"No dragons yet, love bug." Lex scoops Grier up from Dak's lap, planting a good-bye kiss on her plump cheek. "It's not quite bedtime. You've got to drive Uncle Dak crazy for another hour first."

He sets her back down on the carpet, and as if totally understanding the *drive Dak crazy* suggestion, she immediately grabs Flapflap and lobs him straight at Dak's head.

"Holy sh—shoelaces." Dak barely catches himself, rubbing the point of impact above his ear. "What the heck was that for?"

"Flapflap flies!" Grier shrieks, reaching for the plush bat again, and whips it his way a second time. This time, Dak has the foresight to duck.

A chuckle rumbles low in Lex's chest as he pushes to his feet. "If you hadn't noticed, my daughter may have a future as a pitcher."

"Yeah, yeah. You're lucky you're cute," Dak grumbles, ruffling Grier's hair, then gestures to the two of us. "And you two are lucky you're so cute together, or else this would be a whole lot weirder."

A relieved smile pulls at my lips. Coming from my brother, that's a glowing endorsement. "Thanks, Dak." I reach for Lex's hand, and he pulls our interlaced

fingers to his lips, brushing a soft kiss against my knuckles.

“Yeah, yeah.” Dak cringes, waving the two of us off toward the door. “Just because I approve of it doesn’t mean I’m ready to see you two being all couple-y yet. Go do that somewhere else, all right?”

With one last round of good-bye kisses for Grier and final instructions for Dak, we’re out the door, and date night has officially begun. I can hardly believe it.

Lex presses his key fob twice, unlocking his car in the driveway, but still insists on opening the door for me.

I slide into the warm leather interior, and instantly, everything feels right with the world. It only took ten years, but I’ve finally ended up back where I’m supposed to be—windows down, fiddling with the radio as Lexington Dane’s designated shotgun rider. He has a much nicer car than he had back then, and we’re older now, but the way my heart squeezes in my chest with one look at him hasn’t changed a bit.

With one hand draped over the steering wheel, Lex slides on his sunglasses and speeds out of the driveway toward the beach, racing the sun that’s sinking lower in the sky.

“We’re going to make it just in time for sunset,” he says over the sound of wind whipping past our open windows, his smile reaching all the way up to his aviators.

“Let’s make sure we don’t get pulled over for speeding first,” I say, teasing.

He reaches across the console to give my thigh a squeeze, but instead of pulling away, he leaves his hand resting on my thigh, his thumb brushing against the hem of my sundress and tracing slow easy circles on my skin. “If we get pulled over, I’ll just tell them the truth.”

“Which is?”

“Officer, I’m rushing so my girlfriend and I can see the sunset.”

A laugh bubbles out of me at his dumb excuse for speeding, but it doesn't slow the blush spreading across my cheeks. I can't help it. Every time he uses the g-word around me, I'm as giddy as the first time he asked me out, all those years ago on my parents' couch.

Lex slows to the speed limit as we approach our destination—the ice cream shop on Wilmington Beach. He ran a dozen date ideas past me this week, but it only felt right to come back to the place where it all began. The line curves out the door, which isn't out of the ordinary for a slightly cooler summer night like tonight, but I don't mind the wait. It gives Lex and me plenty of time to reminisce on the nights we used to spend here way back when.

“Remember that time you dropped your ice cream in the sand the second we stepped out of here?” He gives my side a playful squeeze, and my mouth quirks up in an easy smile at the memory.

“I sure do. You turned around, went right back up to the counter, and bought me another one. Like the gentleman you are.”

He pauses for a moment, his brow furrowed, then snaps his fingers. “One scoop double-chocolate fudge, one scoop of cookies and cream. Right?”

“No way. You remember my exact order?”

A proud, wide smile breaks across his face. “Of course I do. I don't forget the important stuff.”

“I'm not sure my ice cream order qualifies as important,” I say with an eye roll, but he just shakes his head in protest.

“I strongly disagree. I think everything about you is important.”

When it's our turn at the counter, Lex repeats my order to the teenage girl wielding the ice cream scoop, adding on a double scoop of strawberry ice cream for himself. The same as Grier's order when I brought her here, if my memory serves me. Like father, like daughter.

In exchange for our two sugar cones, Lex pulls a crisp fifty-dollar bill from

his wallet and hands it to the girl behind the counter, insisting she keep the change. She's just as wide-eyed with disbelief as I am, but Lex laces his fingers with mine and tugs us out of line before any of us can get another word in.

"That was quite the tip," I murmur as we stroll out the door and toward the beach. It's a gorgeous night, the gentlest breeze barely stirring the sand beneath our feet. Nights like this only come around once or twice a summer here in Wilmington. I guess even Mother Nature is on our side tonight.

"I always feel bad for teenagers working those kinds of jobs," Lex says. "We were young, broke high schoolers once too, you know?"

I nod. "I remember all too well."

"I spent so many years working those minimum-wage jobs, and now that I'm lucky enough to be doing as well as I am, I might as well spread the love around a bit." He pauses to take a generous lick of his ice cream. "Who knows? Maybe that ice-cream scooper girl will be the next big thing in real estate."

"The penthouse princess," I say, grinning.

Lex chuckles, weaving one arm around my waist and pulling me in for a soft strawberry-flavored kiss. "Actually, that role is filled, thank you very much."

As the sun inches toward the horizon, we wander down the beach, our fingers intertwined, laughing and kissing until both the daylight and the ice cream are gone. It's the epitome of a perfect night, the kind of night I'd like to relive for the rest of the summer.

And I just might.

In fact, I might spend the rest of my summers like this from here on out. I may have let Lexington Dane slip away from me when he was just a boy, but he's a man now, and I don't plan to ever let him go.

We find our way back to the car, placing bets the whole ride home as to whether Dak will be passed out on the couch. Lex insists that he'll be wide awake and raiding the fridge for sloppy joe leftovers, but I'm not so sure.

Turns out, we're both right—when we get home, we find him snoozing on the living room sectional, a cold, half-eaten sloppy joe on the coffee table.

I gently shake him, and he startles awake, muttering something about Dinky the Dragon catching the ball. Yep, somebody has been introduced to Grier's favorite board book.

"Toddlers, man," he grumbles, rubbing the sleep from his eyes with one hand while digging his keys from his pocket with the other.

Once we've shoed Dak out the door, we tiptoe up the stairs and peer through Grier's cracked door to check on our Sleeping Beauty. Despite his bemoaning how tough tonight was, Dak seems to have done a pretty good job. Grier is sleeping soundly in her favorite ladybug pajamas, her little chest rising and falling with easy breaths.

"God," Lex says softly, shaking his head in disbelief. "I can't believe I'm related to that angel."

"And I can't believe I get to be her mom."

I press up on my toes, brushing my lips against his cheek. Lex holds me there, steadying one firm hand against the small of my back as he captures my lips in a longer, deeper kiss, the kind that sends quick pulses of heat shooting through my veins. It's the kind of kiss that maybe we shouldn't engage in with his daughter ten feet away, even if she is asleep.

Lex must be thinking the same thing, because the next thing I know, he's scooping me into his arms, swallowing my surprised gasp with his lips as he carries me into his bedroom and drapes me delicately across the end of his bed.

"God, you're beautiful." He stares down at me with wonder as his fingers work open the buttons of his shirt, exposing his tanned, chiseled chest to me one inch at a time. "But I think I lied to you before."

I freeze, my eyes narrowing to slits as I assess the wicked smile settling on his lips. "What do you mean?"

“You’re not the penthouse princess,” he says with a growl, tossing his shirt aside and pinning me against the bed. His breath is hot and hungry against my neck as he trails his lips along my collarbone, leaving little chill bumps in his wake. “You, my dear, are the penthouse queen.”

And with that, I’m lost in him. In his words and his heat and his hungry, demanding lips.

I want him. Tonight and every night.

For the rest of my life.

# EPILOGUE

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## LEXINGTON

*Two years later*

“**Y**ou gotta hold still, honey, or Mommy can’t turn you into a dragon,” Corrigan says gently, struggling with Grier’s costume.

It’s a bit of a complicated getup. We suggested a few alternatives that were easier to get into, but the moment Grier laid eyes on the shiny green dragon on proud display at the costume shop, her heart was set on it and accepted no substitutions. *At least it has an easy flap for potty time.*

Grier manages to calm down a fraction, but she’s too excited to fully stifle her wiggles. And who could blame her? It’s her first Halloween since starting preschool, which means her first time dressing up for class. And on top of that, later tonight there will be trick-or-treating.

It’s a lot for a four-year-old to handle. But, of course, Corrigan’s got the patience of a saint and handles it all like a champ. Just one of the many things I love about her. She’s definitely made my life better in every way possible. When we got married last year, I thought I couldn’t possibly be any happier, but little did I know I’d fall more in love with her each passing day.

“I’ll come help,” I call, setting down my spatula beside the panful of sizzling eggs.

But Corrigan waves me off when I get close. “I’ve got this.”

I chuckle and back away slowly. I know that determined look in my wife’s eyes. Sometimes she wants me to swoop in and save the day, but most times she really does have it all handled. After all, the woman manages a classroom of

thirty first graders on a daily basis. One four-year-old is a piece of cake.

“Mommy? Am I a pretty dragon?” Grier asks, looking down at her costume-clad self.

I glance over from the counter where I’m plating eggs, and my heart squeezes at the sight of them crouched together. My daughter hasn’t outgrown her love of all creepy and crawly animals, but she’s started to become aware of the other little girls in her class who are into the whole princess scene. As far as I’m concerned, she can be whatever her little heart desires.

Corrigan softly touches her cheek. “You’re the best little dragon in the whole, wide world. Beautiful *and* strong.”

Grier’s smile widens.

While Corrigan and I eat and go over the logistics of our day, Grier races around the table, roaring and flapping her sequined wings and yelling, “I’m breathin’ fire!” at the top of her lungs. I picture a roomful of preschoolers all acting out their costumes at maximum volume, and wince in sympathy for Mrs. Ledford.

“She looks even cuter than she did as our flower girl,” Corrigan says.

“Some things never change,” I murmur, and she meets my eyes and gives me a soft look. “Are you eating enough?”

“Lex.” She frowns at me.

I hold up one hand. “I know. I know.”

She’s asked me not to worry. When I bought all the baby books and prenatal vitamins and started quoting the blog posts I’d read, Corrigan shut me down in a hurry. She wants to do this *her way*, which has been decidedly chill and low stress.

What can I say? I’m just excited to experience the pregnancy alongside her.

With Grier, it was so different. My ex and I didn’t live together, and to be

honest, there wasn't all this excitement in the air. There was a lot of uncertainty. Of course, it all worked out in the end because I got my sweet baby girl.

We haven't told Grier yet about her new little brother or sister yet, since Corrigan's only three months along, but we plan to soon.

After finishing my last bite of eggs, I wipe my hands on the napkin and push my plate away. "I'll be done with the closing for the Mount Hill property by four."

Corrigan nods. "Perfect. I can't wait for tonight."

I give her a surprised look. "That excited for trick-or-treating?"

She chuckles. "Sorta. Actually, I've just been craving those chocolate-peanut-butter-cup thingies."

I laugh and shake my head at her. "Then you shall have them." I make a mental note to stop at the store on the way home and grab some extras.

Corrigan turns that bewitching smile on me and reaches over to squeeze my hand. "All the changes ahead of us . . . there's nobody I'd rather go through them with, Lex. I love you."

I bring her hand up to kiss it, my lips brushing the cool, smooth gold of her wedding band. Our first anniversary was just a few months ago. I still haven't stopped being awed at the fact that Corrigan is actually my *wife*, that our life together is real and not just an amazing dream, and I hope I never will get used to it. It feels like I just placed that ring on her finger yesterday . . . and yet it also feels like we've been married since the beginning of time, her presence a comforting force that I can't remember living without.

"I love you too. And I can't wait to see them all together."

Corrigan rises to her feet and begins clearing the plates away. "Now, if you're done eating, let's take a picture for Grandma."

"Even though we're seeing her in less than eight hours," I say under my breath.

My wife gives me a *look*, so I promptly shut my mouth.

“We’re gonna carve pumpkins and brew witches’ slime,” Grier says to me while executing a little dance around the kitchen.

“Absolutely, and it’ll be great.” I scoop her up. “And then what?”

“Trick or treat, smell my feet, gimme somethin’ good to eat!” A renewed burst of wiggles and giggles springs out of her.

“Dinner first, but you’ve got the gist.” Corrigan steps beside us and fiddles with her phone until all three of us are onscreen, then taps the button. “There. And . . . sent. To Dak and my parents too.”

Grier squirms. “I wanna goooooo.”

“First you gotta brush your teeth, then we’ll leave.” When I let her down, she crams one last apple slice in her mouth and scampers off to the bathroom. I look at Corrigan. “Speaking of Mom, do you remember when we told her about us?”

“Oh yeah, every detail. The first thing out of her mouth was, ‘I’m so happy you’re all settled now.’” She chuckles. “As if she knew what was coming the whole time, and we were just dragging our feet getting to the good part. Then she told you, ‘Now hurry up and propose so I can see you two married before I go. Can’t miss my only child’s wedding, even if I have to come with a bald head and wheelchair and all.’”

I laugh aloud. Little did we know, she didn’t need to be in a rush at all. Everyone except Mom was surprised when she lived long enough to see us married, well past the six months she’d been told, but even she hadn’t expected to just . . . keep going.

The cancer started slowly shrinking away shortly before Grier’s third birthday, and two months ago, Mom’s oncologist declared her officially in remission. And not just healthy either, but strong and fit as a fiddle. She’ll be playing with Grier and cheerfully meddling for many long years to come, and I’m so happy she gets to stick around and be part of our lives. When I first got

that phone call in New York from her with the grim news, I never expected so many happily-ever-afters were in store for me, but I love that I was wrong.

I bring my arms around Corrigan and pull her close. “Love you, sweetheart.”

She brings her mouth to mine for a soft kiss. “If you really loved me, you’d drop off those peanut-butter cups to me at lunchtime.”

I chuckle. “Understood, wife of mine, understood.”

• • •

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you so very much to my wonderful readers! You make all of this possible, and even though some days are stressful, I don't take a single minute of that for granted. Thank you!

I'm so grateful to my amazing team . . . you guys are incredible. At the risk of leaving someone out, I will just say it takes a village, and I'm so glad you are part of mine.

Big squeezes to my husband, John, for the unending support he provides. Biggest praise of all—thank you, God, for blessing me so richly, for letting me share my God-given talent of storytelling with the world, and providing me with such opportunity. I pray that each and every one of my readers will find his or her own happily-ever-after.

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