

A FATE SERIES NOVEL

AGAIN

A man in a dark suit and sunglasses is shown in profile, looking down. The background is a city skyline at sunset, with a warm orange and yellow glow. The man's face is partially in shadow, and his sunglasses reflect the light. The overall mood is contemplative and dramatic.

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Desert Heat

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AGAIN

(Fate #4)

Elizabeth Reyes

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Again

Elizabeth Reyes

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To Gilbert and Olivia,

The love in your hearts will always keep you together

Even while apart.

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Prologue

Sydney

It took all of thirty seconds to figure out whose bed Sydney was in and whose gorgeous ass cheek was peeking out from just under satin sleep shorts. In the following seconds, the memory of what they'd done last night, while choppy, began coming to him. Against his better judgment, he'd agreed to come back to her apartment to finish celebrating their birthdays—*safely*.

The faint ache of the headache he knew he'd have for the rest of the day, or at least all morning, made him squeeze his eyes shut. They flew open the instant he felt movement in the bed.

Shit.

She'd be up soon, and things would no doubt get awkward. His only saving grace was they were both dressed. Well, sort of. His shirt was unbuttoned, and visions of her playfully undoing the buttons while giggling, her mouth so close to his he could almost taste it, had him squeezing his legs together. It was bad enough he'd woken with his usual morning wood. This *was not* helping.

The thin silk camisole and satin sleep shorts she'd slipped into last night after stripping out of what she'd called her frumpy work clothes left little to the imagination. Once again Sydney was assaulted with the visual of her perky tits with nipples so erect they practically tore through the fabric of the tight and almost see-through white camisole. The tiny shorts barely covered the swell of her plump ass.

Squeezing his eyes shut, he muttered under his breath then threw the blanket she'd kicked off back over her. He had to before he had a full-blown throbbing erection like the one that had tortured him most of the previous evening.

This wasn't the first time he'd woken in the bed of someone who he hadn't anticipated ending up with. But it was the first time he had with someone he considered a dear friend. He'd thought about what it would be like to have her under him far too many times; he'd just never anticipated it would *ever* happen, especially not like this.

Sydney may've had a bit too much to drink last night, but he was nowhere as drunk as she'd been. He'd made sure he stayed in control. Things had gotten pretty intense—pretty damn heavy even—but luckily, drinking alcohol in excess as they had last night was a foreign concept to her. It was why he'd agreed to come back to her place initially. She'd already been pretty lit when they left the bar, and he was certain he was just bringing her home to make sure she passed out safely in her bed. He just hadn't anticipated her being so persuasive and getting him to agree to hang out a little longer, getting playful, things getting heavy, and then his passing out with her.

Just because *he* remembered the details didn't mean she would. In fact, he was pretty certain she wouldn't, and maybe that was a good thing. Now he wondered if he should even mention everything she'd done, said, and admitted last night when the liquor kicked in. He couldn't be sure how she'd react, but he knew her well enough to know she'd be a little embarrassed, maybe even mortified.

With that in mind, he considered the possibility of sneaking out. It seemed like an ideal plan. He could grab his things, slip out her bedroom sliding glass door, and then later he could call and ask how she was feeling. He'd say he made sure she got home safely then left and that was that. If she remembered anything, it would be even choppy than how he recalled it. She'd been close to passing out when she made one of her more profound admissions. She might even think she dreamed some of it.

It was perfect and he slid out of the bed carefully—quietly. He began tiptoeing around the room, gathering his things: the shoes she insisted he take off and the tie she'd done a little dance with that lay on the floor now next to her three-inch heels. He'd forever have the visual of her prancing in those sexy-as-shit heels.

Feeling his cock come alive again, he grabbed the tie, muttering to himself. "Just grab your shit and get out."

The sound of a knock in the front room made him freeze in place. His mind raced. Was that what he thought it was? A knock at her door? The

doorbell rang this time, and she sat up, her eyes wide with confusion. She glanced around the room. Sydney watched her facial expression, catching the moment it all came to her, and she gasped, bringing her hand to her mouth.

“Nothing happened,” he said in a loud whisper just as another knock followed at her door and he pointed. “Someone’s at your door. You expecting someone?”

The moment he asked, it came to him: the charity walk she’d be doing this morning—with her *boyfriend* and the rest of her family and friends.

She jumped out of bed, covering herself as if she were naked, but she was still in the attire she’d so audaciously pranced around in for him last night.

“Sissy!” her sister called out, knocking a little harder. “You in the shower or something?”

“We got you coffee.” Hearing her brother’s voice made his stomach drop even further.

But what really gave his gut a kick was her boyfriend’s voice. “I got your favorite, babe, fresh poppy-seed muffins.”

“Oh my God!” she gasped again, throwing on an oversized sweatshirt.

Already one step ahead of her, Sydney finished picking up his other shoe and coat from the chair on the side of the bed. His wallet on her nightstand was a reminder of what he’d begun to consider last night. He would never take advantage of a girl, especially not a good friend. But with the way she was acting last night—the things she’d admitted in her inebriated state—he’d begun to think he might not be able to talk her out of doing what she’d been so hell-bent on doing. It’d been a moment of utter weakness on his part. For a fleeting instant, he’d considered that, if he couldn’t change her mind, he certainly wouldn’t reject her. The least he could do was make sure they used protection. Thankfully, it hadn’t come to that, but now here they were.

“I’ll go out the sliding door,” he said just after she called out for her boyfriend and siblings to give her a minute.

She nodded in frantic agreement. “I’m sorry,” she said in a hushed voice.

“For what?” He stopped to look at her.

“I don’t remember much, but I do remember I was the one who insisted we come back here. This is my fault.”

Sydney shook his head, narrowing his eyes as he took one last look into those beautiful, anxious eyes. “Don’t worry about it.” He smiled. “If I hadn’t wanted to, I wouldn’t have. And for the record, you may not remember, but we had a good time. At least I know I did, but I’m pretty sure you did too.”

Her face flushed and she smiled timidly, so different from her behavior last night. He almost laughed, but he didn’t. She looked embarrassed enough.

She walked him to the sliding door where she thanked him again for understanding, squeezed his arm, and said she’d call him as soon as she got the chance. Sydney walked through the pool area and into the other side of their apartment complex. The entire way up the elevator and down the hallway to his apartment he was lost in thought.

She’d shared with him last night some of the truths about her relationship with *her man*. Even if she hadn’t said it outright, her actions screamed far louder than any words she could’ve ever said.

She wanted Sydney just as much as he wanted her.

Had she meant everything she’d said? Or had it been just sexual desire brought out by the alcohol? No fucking way. He clenched his jaw.

One thing he knew about his relationship with his *best friend* was that would *never* work. He’d never been one of *those* men, the kind that felt the need to stake their claim on the girl they loved—own her. He’d always thought the idea of such thinking was ridiculous, insulting to the girl. Even when he’d been married, he’d never felt he *owned* his wife.

But last night changed everything. Seeing her the way he had and witnessing the fire in her eyes when she’d gotten a glimpse of the undeniable erection her dancing had given him—one so obvious even his slacks couldn’t hide it—he knew one thing. If he ever got his hands on that hot little ass—fucked her the way he *thought* he could only dream of doing—she’d be his.

No if, ands, or buts about it. He finally understood that carnal need to claim the girl you loved and make sure *everybody* knew it. There’d be no looking back if they ever went there, so if she was thinking that’s all it could be, she was dead wrong, and he’d told her so. Unfortunately, he was sure she wouldn’t remember. That was when her last words came to him. She’d said them as he’d indulged her by pretending he was getting into bed with her, and he’d be holding her to them even if she didn’t remember

because he'd seen the look in her eyes when she'd said them. Just as he had when he said them too, she meant them.

Then she'd passed out.

Sydney smiled. She was so beautiful even passed out. He hadn't been able to tear himself away from lying by her side, staring at her—listening to her breathe—until he passed out too.

He made it to the door of his apartment and reached in his pocket for his keys. Instantly, he felt the panic. He reached in his other pocket and searched his coat but felt nothing. Then it came to him. They were right where he'd put them down next to his phone on the table *in her kitchen*.

His head fell back, knowing his sneaking out the back door had been all for nothing. As much as he wanted nothing more than to be with her now—make her his—she was still his dear friend, and he cared about her deeply. He'd never do anything to purposely cause problems or put her in an awkward position in front of her family, even if he knew the truth now about how she felt. Sydney's keys and phone would be the first things her boyfriend would see sitting on her kitchen table. She'd already mentioned the guy wasn't thrilled about her friendship with Sydney.

“Fuck!”

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Meeting you was Fate . .

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Chapter One

18 months prior

“Is this the big-time exec?”

The sun was just beginning to set, and Kendra, Sydney’s secretary, had already called it a day. He’d been sitting at his desk, staring at numbers on his screen for too long. He was done.

Sydney smiled, sitting back in his chair and spinning around to take in the view of beautiful downtown Los Angeles from his office window. He and Lynn still checked in with each other every few weeks, even after all these years, even more so via social media. Yet every time he heard her voice again, it felt like it’d been way too long. Only this time he got the feeling he knew why she was calling, and he frowned sadly.

“Hey, how are you?”

“I’m good,” she said, and he could practically hear her smile despite what he was certain she might be calling about. “But I’m calling because you said you wanted to know as soon as they set a date for the services.”

“Yeah, I had a feeling that’s why you were calling.” He spun around to face his desk again and grabbed a pen. “How’s the family doing?”

“They’re taking it pretty well,” she said. “It’s not like it was a surprise. His battle with cancer had gone on pretty long. Just sucks that he was so young and had little ones, you know?”

Sydney nodded, pressing his lips together. “How’s his wife doing?”

“As well as expected, I guess. I haven’t talked to her, but Angel went over to Romero’s because they’re having the repast at his place. Mando always said he didn’t want his funeral to be a sad thing. He wanted a backyard barbeque afterward, with booze and music. The whole nine yards. You know those Romeros.”

Smiling yet feeling a little bittersweet, Sydney knew what she was talking about. He’d met Romero, Lynn’s husband’s friend, and the rest of

her newly extended family at her wedding years ago and then again at some of the gatherings she'd invited him to since.

She began giving him the information regarding the services. They were all in the next couple of days. He let her know he probably wouldn't make all the services but he'd be sure to attend at least one.

"I'm surprised you're not jetting all over the world. I had a feeling you might not be able to make any on such short notice. I'm sure Romero would understand if you couldn't."

"No, I'm pretty much here in LA for now. Feels good actually," he said, undoing his tie. "It's nice to be in one place for longer than a few weeks. But, no, I gotta go to this, Lynni. Mando and his wife were always real good to me. He's gonna be missed, and I need to give Cristina my condolences in person."

Mando was kind of a distant relative of Romero's whom Sydney had first met way back at Lynn's wedding. Since they were both in the IT field, they'd hit it off right away, talking work and what not, but then they found out they had even more in common when they started talking about sailing. They stayed in touch, and Mando had invited him out sailing with him and his wife and kids a few times. Up until then, Sydney had only sailed recreationally, taking excursions or even renting a sailboat. It wasn't until Mando encouraged him to look into getting his own that he did.

"Well, it sucks that it has to be for this," Lynn said with a sigh, "but I'll be looking forward to seeing you again. It's been too long."

That pulled Sydney a little out of the melancholy he'd begun to feel about Mando's passing, and he smiled. He was long over the fact that Lynn was the one who got away. He was genuinely happy for her. Every time he spoke with her, she couldn't sound happier. He saw her so infrequently now that just the thought of being around her still made something inside him stir. He was mature enough to admit now that a part of him would always love Lynn—as he shouldn't. But that same mature part of him knew he'd never do a damn thing about it. It was way too late for that. She was happily married to a man who *adored* her. They had a beautiful family now, and she deserved every bit of her happy life. So it was okay that the thought of seeing her after so long made him smile.

"I'm looking forward to seeing you too."

"If you have a choice, see if you can make the repast. It'll be right after they go out in his sailboat for the spreading-of-his-ashes ceremony, which I

won't be attending. We can hang out for a little without the whole clan there, just some of the other moms and Romero's uncles because, like me, they don't do sailboats."

For some reason, that made Sydney smile even more. Lynn was a mommy three times over now, not just a mommy of babies anymore. She had kids. Her oldest was *school age* even. She was a soccer mom, driving a minivan. Damn.

They spoke a little longer with Lynn catching him up on some of her kids' stuff, but then she had to go. The drive home was a pensive one. It was much longer than his normal drive home. Going way out of his way, he took Wilshire all the way out to Pacific Coast Highway, one of his favorite drives when he was in that pondering mood.

He wasn't sure if Lynn's call tonight had made him a bit nostalgic or depressed. He hated feeling sorry for himself because he had a damn good life. Most men would envy him, but he couldn't help wondering if maybe he'd be happier if he'd settled for the life his ex-wife Sheena had wanted. He'd gone over this in his head a million times. Each time he came back to the same conclusion. It wasn't that he didn't want the family, the soccer mom wife, the minivan, and the whole bit. He just hadn't wanted it with Sheena.

Sheena was feisty. It was what initially had attracted him to her: her spunk. She had plenty of it, and, at first, he thought it cute, an attractive quirk. But after years of being with her, he realized that spunky could easily convert into argumentative—very argumentative and confrontational. He should've known. Even his mom had argued with him that how could he *not* have known what he was getting into when he fell for a third-year law student.

In hindsight, however, he also knew his mother was partially right about something else. Sheena hadn't been his first serious relationship that failed. For years, he'd been hoping to find someone who could replace Lynn in his life. She'd been his best friend since the sixth grade. She was everything he could ever ask for in a girl. Not only was she beautiful in every way, she had something so much more that he loved. Lynn knew him better than anyone else did. Even after all these years, she could nail it on the head when something was bothering him.

Sydney had yet to meet anyone who *got him* the way she did. He never met anyone he could have so much fun with doing nothing more than

hanging out and chatting. She was so down-to-earth, and the way she laughed at her own jokes, or rather her attempts to tell them, would never get old. The thought had him chuckling now.

Still lost in his thoughts even as he got to his apartment building and entered the elevator, he barely noticed the young girl in there. It wasn't until he pressed the button to his floor that he even turned to look at her. Though her pretty face was familiar, he was fairly certain she was new to his building. He'd only seen her in the recent weeks, so he smiled politely, motioning to the small laundry basket she held against her waist.

"That time of the week, huh?"

Her eyes widened as if she hadn't expected him to address her, and she nodded a bit timidly, pulling a strand of hair behind her ear.

"Yeah," she said softly. "I just hope the laundry room is not as packed as it was last week."

The elevator came to a stop just as a long, low, buzzing noise started, and she seemed to freeze. The noise turned into a high-pitched squeal and ended in a sudden chirp that could only mean one thing.

Flatulence.

It almost didn't sound real. It was too long and drawn out, but judging by how beet red she suddenly was, Sydney could only assume it was her. Since they were the only two in the elevator and he knew it wasn't him, it could only mean . . .

He had to refrain from smirking because the sound had been so ridiculous, but she looked so mortified Sydney didn't have the heart to. Though the glance he gave her was so quick he hadn't been able to make out whether she was getting ready to cry or burst into laughter. Without another word or even glance in his direction, she rushed out of the elevator as soon as the doors opened, nearly colliding with the couple waiting just outside.

Finally, he allowed himself to chuckle until he remembered that, if any lingering odor remained, anyone getting in now would think it was him. But curiously, no odor was present. None at all. In fact, the smell in the elevator was quickly overpowered by the couple who walked in after the girl had rushed out. One or both were obviously smokers.

By the time he reached his apartment and what happened in the elevator sank in, he couldn't stop laughing. He wondered what he might say or do

the next time he ran into the poor girl. She seemed so young—couldn't have been more than eighteen, nineteen.

The apartment building was too expensive for a young girl like her to be living alone—even if she had a roommate her own age. So he could only hope she might be visiting a family member or something because he was certain he wouldn't be able to refrain from laughing the next time and anytime he saw her from then on.

Still laughing, he checked his texts. Lynn texted him in response to his earlier text confirming he'd be attending the repast on Friday. He'd duck out on his plans to get together with Diane. Another lawyer. What the hell was wrong with him? But in his defense, Diane wasn't nearly as argumentative as Sheena. Still, seeing and hanging out with Lynn beat out hanging with Diane any day, even if he knew his night wouldn't end with a *bang*.

He texted her back, laughing once again about the elevator incident and knowing full well Lynn would get a good laugh when he told her about it Friday.

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Coincidence? Maybe. Who knew?

Sydney had to do a double take the moment she walked into Romero's backyard. *Elevator girl*. He looked around to see if anyone was waiting for his reaction. What happened in that elevator was still hilarious and so far out to him he had to wonder if maybe he'd been punked. But how? No way could anyone have timed what happened in the elevator so perfectly. And why would they?

He'd already told Lynn about the incident, and she just about busted a gut hearing about it. Even now, he had to smirk when his and elevator girl's eyes met. Yep. No doubt about it. It was her. Curiously, she didn't look nearly as mortified as she did that day. A thought crossed his mind momentarily. Maybe he should have mercy on her and not smile even bigger. Maybe act like he didn't recognize her. But despite her looking a little embarrassed, not to mention as surprised as he did that they were in the same backyard more than two hours away from their apartment building in Los Angeles, she smirked.

Clearly, she was over the embarrassment and could appreciate the humor, but Sydney thought there might be more to this. Even *he* would still

be more embarrassed than she appeared now.

Even more surprising, after stopping to talk to a few people, she walked straight to him where he'd been briefly left alone by Lynn. Lynn's oldest had gotten a sudden bloody nose, and she'd run off to help clean him up. Most of the other guests, like elevator girl, were still arriving.

Smiling even bigger, Sydney watched as she approached him. She was very young and *very* pretty in a sweet kind of way. The first things he noticed looking at her this close and eye to eye, unlike in the elevator where he'd only glanced at her sideways, were her eyes. They were the kind that smiled even if her mouth didn't. Though, in her case, her mouth was smiling pretty big now. He'd noticed the curves the day she'd rushed out of the elevator, and now he had an even better view. Nice curves, perfect in all the right places, but again she was obviously very young. Getting a more detailed look at her face now, he also confirmed what he'd thought even that first day. She was *way* too young for him to be looking at her in any other way.

"Just so you know," she said, already laughing and bringing her hand over her lips as she approached, "that day in the elevator? That was *not* me."

"Well, it wasn't me," he retorted immediately, smiling just as big.

"No. I mean it was my phone," she said, and even her laughter was sweet—genuine—and she was really laughing now, much as Lynn had when he'd told her about it. "My brother rigged my ringtone that day," she said between laughs. "I didn't know it until that moment in the elevator. Oh my God"—she laughed even more—"of course this could only happen to me. I just spent the last few days vigilantly dodging you every time I saw you in the building and planned on doing so for the rest of my *life*. And now here you are." She glanced around the yard curiously. "Who do you know here?"

Her blunt honesty and the fact that she could laugh so wholeheartedly at herself were refreshing. He'd been worried for a moment she might not mention it and they'd have an awkward introduction with both trying to pretend what happened in the elevator never had.

"I'm Sydney. I'm a friend of Lynni's," he explained as her laughter began to calm, but she still wiped tears from the corners of her eyes. "Lynni Fierro." He shook his head quickly, snapping his fingers. "I mean Moreno. I've known her since she was still Fierro."

Elevator girl still seemed lost. Then it hit him, and he shook his head again, feeling like a dope. “I’m sorry. I forget almost no one but me and my mom call her Lynni. You probably know her as Sarah. Angel’s wife?”

She nodded, immediately acknowledging she knew Sarah. “I’m Emilia,” she said, extending her hand out to him. “This is my cousin Moe’s house. Mando was my”—she paused to think about it for a moment—“second cousin? It’s complicated,” she added with a smile. “But we were related.”

Sydney shook his head, remembering how half this family referred to Romero as Moe, even though he couldn’t remember why. “Well, I’m so sorry for your loss. I’d known Mando for a few years now. I’d gotten pretty close to him and his wife. He was a good guy. It’s a shame he died so young.”

Her face went a bit somber, but she smirked again then brought her hand over her mouth her eyes going wide. “I’m sorry. It really *is* sad.” She sat down next to him, glancing around as if she just remembered they were at a repast and here she’d been laughing from the moment she first reached him. “My heart’s broken for his wife and kids, but this is *exactly* why I tore out of that elevator without explaining about my ringtone. I’m terrible about laughing at the most inopportune moments. Once I get a case of the giggles, I’m hopeless and it’s so bad. That day I already knew I was going to laugh so much I’d make an even bigger ass of myself than I already had. Oh, gosh.”

She turned to Sydney when Romero walked into the backyard, holding the arm of an elderly woman. An equally elderly man held her other arm. Sydney’s eyes went from Emilia’s to the somber elderly couple then back to Emilia’s sweet eyes.

“They’re Mando’s parents, *Tia* Perla and *Tio* Chuy. They *can’t* see me laughing. It would be so disrespectful, especially given how hard *Tia* is taking Mando’s loss.”

Emilia glanced back at them quickly then turned back to Sydney. Those sweet smiling eyes were not helping her cause, but they sure made Sydney smile. He looked over her shoulder and watched as Romero helped *Tia* Perla into her seat. The woman was sniffing and dabbing her eyes with a handkerchief. The hefty older man with her, *Tio* Chuy, while he appeared saddened, was a bit more composed than she was.

“I have to clear my head before I go over there and talk to them,” Emilia said just as Lynn walked over.

Lynn seemed understandably confused since Emilia was sitting so comfortably next to Sydney and still trying desperately not to laugh.

“Do you two know each other?” she asked as soon as she sat down on the other side of Emilia.

Immediately, Emilia’s hand came over her mouth and her brows pinched. Now he understood why he hadn’t been able to tell if she was about to cry or laugh when she ran out of that elevator. The brows pinching together so tightly almost looked like she might cry, but instead she muffled her laughter under her hand. That only made Lynn look even more confused.

“The elevator girl I told you about,” Sydney started to say before Emilia gasped.

“Oh my God, you told her?”

Lynn’s eyes grew big and even more confused, and then she turned to Emilia. “No!” She turned back to Sydney. “Fart girl? In the elevator?”

Emilia’s eyes did that thing again. The same thing they’d done in the elevator that day. She looked like she might cry, but she slapped her hand over her mouth and muffled her laughing then was barely able to say it.

“Fart girl?”

“I didn’t call you that!”

Now he had two girls at a repast busting up. A place where people were grieving for Christ’s sake! They were both in tears but not the appropriate kind. Emilia’s pinched brows looked like she might be crying—only she was laughing her fucking ass off!

“Stop it,” Sydney whispered to them, glancing around.

“Did he,” Emilia asked, “call me fart girl?”

“Elevator girl,” he said before Lynn could respond.

The giggling continued as Emilia explained what happened. Even then the laughter only continued, but they managed to bring it down a notch.

“*Tia Perla*,” Sydney tried to remind them, shaking his head in Emilia’s aunt’s direction, “is still devastated, and she might hear you two.”

“You’re fart girl?” Lynn asked.

“I didn’t call you that!” Sydney reiterated as Emilia looked at him again, the smiling eyes now narrowed together in a still painful attempt to keep it together. He’d never seen anything like her expressive eyes. They could smile without her smiling, and at the same time her brows could pinch together so tightly like someone crying. It was as sweet as it was funny.

Only unlike Lynn and Emilia, he was too worried about being disrespectful and didn't laugh with them. Emilia hadn't been kidding when she said she was terrible about laughing at the most inopportune moments.

When things finally calmed down and Emilia, whom Lynn referred to as Emi, went back to explaining the ring-tone thing to Lynn, the hysterical laughter was at least brought down to shushing laughter.

Angel, Lynn's husband, came over as the girls were still trying to calm themselves.

"Sydney," he said with a smirk, "always the trouble maker. You do know this is a repast, right?"

Sydney stood up. "Holy shit! These two," he said, shaking Angel's hand.

"You don't have to tell me." Angel smiled even bigger, shaking Sydney's hand firmly. "I don't know which is worse. Look at them." Angel pointed to the girls as they both hugged each other in a clear effort not to laugh. "They're pathetic!"

They finally got past the laughing as Lynn and Angel's other family members joined them. For a while, Sydney was separated from *Emi* while he caught up with a few of the others he hadn't seen in a while. Then she came over and took a dramatic, deep breath.

"Okay, I think I'm composed enough to go talk to *Tia Perla* now."

"You sure?" Sydney asked apprehensively.

"Yes." She nodded. "I talked to her at the hospital the day Mando passed, but I really should go over and say something to her now." She glanced back at her aunt who, for the moment, was sitting alone. "Look at her; she looks so sad."

"I haven't given his parents my condolences either," Sydney said, peering over at the solemn old woman. "I should go talk to her too, but"—he glanced back at Emi—"I don't know if I wanna go with you."

She turned back to him with a playfully offended smirk. "No, c'mon," she said, touching his arm. "I'll be good. I'm not gonna laugh in the poor mourning woman's face. Give me a little credit."

"Go," Lynn nudged him. "You'll be fine. I'd go with you guys, but I have to check on the baby."

Sydney followed Emi, who walked over to where her aunt sat. The moment the woman saw them approach, her expression fell and Emi hugged her.

“Ay, *mija*. My heart hurts so much.”

Emi kept her arm around the woman, nodding. “I know,” she whispered. “It’s so hard when they’re taken too soon.”

“*Too* soon,” her aunt repeated.

Sydney leaned in and held his hand out. “I’m so sorry for your loss, Mrs. Romero. I was a friend of Mando’s. He’s going to be missed very much.”

“Very much,” Mrs. Romero said, taking his hand and cupping it in between her own. “Parents should never have to bury their own children. I just don’t understand why he was taken from us so young. I’m still so angry with God. I prayed and I prayed.”

She began to cry as Sydney’s own throat began to tighten. Glancing at Emi, he could see she too looked a little teary-eyed now. They exchanged a sad glance as her aunt continued.

“I kept asking God, ‘Why my Armando? Why Lord? He’s so young and he has little ones who need him here. *Why?*’” She fisted her hand in the air as her words got angrier. “I said take Chuy if you have to take someone!”

Emi’s head jerked up, and her eyes met Sydney’s in wide-eyed panic. Her lips quivered as her eyes pinched in that familiar way like she might cry but not the appropriate way.

“Chuy’s lived his life. My Armando still had so many years ahead of him,” her aunt went on, and Emi covered her mouth, closing her eyes and shaking her head, but Sydney could see she was losing it.

He touched Emi’s shoulder, and she wrapped her arms around his waist, burying her face at his side, shaking as her aunt continued with her argument with God.

“Chuy’s overdo anyway with all the drinking and smoking that man does.”

Emi tightened her grasp on Sydney as she laughed, but Sydney could tell she was trying to make it sound like crying. It was a struggle even for *him* not to crack a smile, so he just nodded and, at one point, squeezed his eyes shut, thankful Lynn hadn’t walked over with them or they would’ve all been goners.

Finally, the woman stopped with her rant and patted Emi’s shoulder. “There, there, *mija*,” she said, wiping her nose with her handkerchief. “We just have to be strong and trust that the Lord has his reasons for who he takes and when.”

Nodding, Emi finally looked up, her eyes still dripping with real tears, but Sydney knew better. She took a deep breath, pressing her lips together before attempting to speak. Emi managed a few consoling comments before excusing them both, and they walked away.

“Oh my God,” she gasped when they were far away. “Take Chuy?” She giggled. “Who says that? I almost died!”

“You’re gonna get yourself all worked up again,” Sydney warned.

She nodded quickly, taking a deep breath. “I know. I know.” She turned to him and touched his arm. “Thank you, by the way, for letting me pretend to cry on you back there.”

“You’re welcome,” he said with a chuckle. “I’m just glad she stopped when she did. I wasn’t sure how much longer you could pull off the crying act.”

“Oh, not much longer at all.” She laughed, shaking her head. “I should’ve been ready for something like that from my aunt.”

It amazed Sydney how quickly this young girl he knew nothing about before a few hours ago, except that she was the elevator girl, had warmed up to him so quickly. What was crazier was how fast *he* felt so comfortable with her. The kids and the rest of the family kept Lynn busy, the person whom he thought he’d be spending the most time with today. Instead, he was now spending most of his time with Emi, and he was content with that.

Slowly, he met all her family, including her brothers. One of them Sydney felt a little star struck by: A.J. “Rage” Romero, the star catcher for the San Diego Padres.

Ironically, he was the youngest of her brothers but physically the biggest. Meeting A.J. was a little unnerving at first, but he seemed as down-to-earth as Emi and the rest of her family—especially when Emi let A.J. in on her elevator moment with Sydney. A.J. had been the brother who’d rigged her phone. It was almost weird to see such an otherwise intimidating-looking guy known as Rage laugh so heartedly hearing the story.

So far, Sydney knew Emi had three older brothers and an older sister. Both her parents were dead, and all her siblings resided in the San Diego area. He’d been right about something else. She *was* young—only nineteen and the *baby* of the family.

“So how’d you end up in Los Angeles?” he asked as they took a seat at one of the picnic tables under a canopy.

“I go to ESU,” she explained. “Why I live in that luxury building you and all those other suits live in is a long story. I started school last year but had to come home after a few months, and the only way this family would let me go back was if I agreed they could put me up in that ridiculously priced building with all its security and such.”

Before Sydney could ask about the long story, a familiar-looking girl holding a toddler sat across from them, smiling big. “Livi told me you were seeing someone now,” she said, addressing Emi. “I didn’t know you were bringing him today.”

Sydney exchanged glances with Emi. As comfortable as she’d been the whole time, she suddenly seemed a little embarrassed.

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## Chapter Two

### **Emilia**

“No,” Emi shook her head, feeling her face heat. “This is Sarah’s friend Sydney.”

Rosie turned to Sydney then smiled even bigger. “Oh, okay. I thought you looked familiar. I remember you. I’m Rosie,” she explained as little Ruby squirmed in her arms, “Vince’s wife.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Sydney said, nodding and reaching out his hand. “I thought you looked familiar too. Sal’s sister-in-law too, right? How’ve you been?”

“Good,” she said, shaking his hand then letting Ruby down. “Making babies.” She patted her belly. “I just found out another one’s on the way.”

“That’s right,” Emi stood up and walked around to hug Rosie. “Livi told me. Congrats.”

A commotion ensued as Alex and Valerie walked in with their brood. “Ooh, you two look cute,” Valerie said as Romero and his wife Isabel approached them.

“I knew *you’d* like it,” Romero said, smiling smugly and dusting off his vest then tilting his fedora at her. “You can look, but you can’t touch, Val.”

Alex gave him a glare as Valerie and Isabel rolled their eyes.

“My cousin,” Emi quipped. “He’s such an ass.” Both Sydney and Rosie turned to her curiously. “You know they all go way back, right? Well, a couple of months ago at Alex’s twins’ birthday party, someone brought up how Valerie and Romero kissed in high school. I guess Romero had forgotten all about it, but now he won’t let it go. He just loves rubbing it in *every* chance he gets.”

They turned to see Romero and Isabel posing for Valerie as she attempted to take a photo of them in their near matching outfits. They did look cute: Isabel in her high-waisted, pinstriped pencil skirt and long-

sleeved white button-up blouse and Romero in his pinstriped slacks gray vest and long-sleeved dress shirt.

“I don’t want you saving this so you can zoom in later, Val,” Romero said with a smirk.

Sarah and Angel, who were standing next to Alex, laughed while Alex half smirked half frowned.

“Pan up! Pan up!” Romero continued to tease with a huge grin. “My eyes are up here. Don’t be so obvious, girl.”

His wife nudged him with her hip, laughing.

“Easy, *Ramon*,” Alex finally said as everyone around them laughed.

“This family . . .” Emi shook her head. “It’s a good thing my aunt and uncle are inside now. I swear. No respect.”

Sydney’s eyes widened. “Wow,” he said, smiling big and making Emi laugh.

“That’s different,” Emi said, feeling her face heat and remembering how she’d pressed her face against his waist while holding on to a body that’d been much harder than she’d expected.

The guy also smelled as delicious as he looked. She cleared her throat, getting back to his comment, when she realized how quickly her thoughts had gotten away from her. “How could you not laugh at that?”

Emi turned to Rosie and told her about the “Take Chuy!” moment they’d had earlier, and, within seconds, she was at it again, though she did glance back at the door a few times to make sure her aunt wasn’t coming out. “And this is why I didn’t bring Darren today.” She shook her head, still giggling. “I just started seeing the guy. No way is he ready for this family.”

As unexpected as it was to meet Sydney that day under those circumstances, even more unexpected was the impression he made on Emi. From what she’d previously gathered even before the dreaded elevator incident, she thought he was a bit of a snob. Albeit a perfectly groomed snob with charcoal eyes that could melt icebergs, but a snob nonetheless. That wasn’t the first time she’d been in the elevator with him. Just the first time he’d acknowledged her. He was usually reading something on his tablet or too busy on the phone, having some kind of high powered conversation, to notice her.

His tailored suits were clearly expensive as was the rest of his wardrobe from his shoes to his watches and cufflinks. Even his sunglasses looked like they cost a small fortune. Couple that with their obvious age difference, and

he was the kind of guy she thought she could never relate to. Yet here she was feeling just as comfortable with him as some of the guys she'd dated in the past few months. Maybe more so.

Aside from all that, there was something so charming and sweet about him. Like how genuinely saddened he'd become after they'd talked to Cristina. Emi hadn't been exaggerating when she'd said her heart was broken for Cristina and Mando's kids, but she'd made note of how Sydney gulped as he'd hugged Cristina tightly.

"Seriously, Cristina," he'd said, holding her hand as Cristina had wiped the tear that dripped from under her glasses. "If there's anything, *anything*, you need, please don't hesitate to call me. Okay?"

It'd been more than a few minutes after they'd spoken with Cristina, and he still appeared lost in his thoughts, visibly upset for Cristina.

"You okay?" Emi asked, cautiously after they'd been sitting back at the picnic table where they'd eaten earlier, and he still hadn't said a word.

He glanced at her wearily then forced a smile. "Yeah," he said, clearing his throat. "Just sucks so badly. Their kids are so young, and now they'll grow up without their dad."

"I know," Emi whispered with a frown.

They'd sat for a few more quiet moments until Uncle Manny's wheezing laughter and his wife's snorting had them chuckling again.

As if meeting Sydney this way wasn't ironic enough, things got even more ironic a little later. "So are you hanging around for the rest of the weekend?" Sarah asked, all bright-eyed. "Tomorrow's our combined spring birthdays' party. This one's at Sal's place."

"I can't," Emi said with a frown. "I drove out here with A.J. He just finished a series against the Dodgers. He's my ride home, and he needs to be at LAX tomorrow afternoon to fly out with the rest of the team to New York."

Sarah started to pout but then stopped and smiled. "Sydney's staying until tomorrow night so he can make the party. If you don't *have* to be home early tomorrow, you two can drive back together." She turned to Valerie. "Isn't that crazy that they live in the same building?"

Valerie's eyes widened in agreement, but then the two got caught up talking about some of the details of tomorrow's party.

Emi turned to Sydney, who stared at her blankly then shrugged. "You're more than welcome to ride back with me."

By the time the gathering at Moe's was over, it was settled. Not only would she be spending another day with Sydney, the man whose first impression of her was "fart girl," but she'd also be making the more-than-two-hour drive home with him Saturday night.

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As expected and as usual, the party that following day was over the top. But Emi had to admit it was pure genius that they'd thought to do it this way every year now. If they had a party for every one of the kids in the combined Moreno and Romero families, there'd be a party every weekend of the year.

Emi was still trying to wrap her head around her new and unlikely friendship with Sydney. After knowing him for less than two days, she felt like she'd known him much longer—at least a few months. She also still couldn't get over how he was nothing like what she'd imagined him to be. Of course, that could have everything to do with how he became aware of her to begin with. *God*, she'd never live that down.

She'd also been wrong about another thing. Sydney was well-spoken, and his professional standing said enough about his level of education, but he wasn't the least bit pretentious. Something told Emi he had every right to be. He hadn't worn a suit to the kids' party on Saturday, but even in his laid-back attire—jeans and a short-sleeved open dress shirt over a white T-shirt—he still exuded an air of classiness. The kind that just screamed well bred. He couldn't be vulgar if he tried. Even his insistence that he hadn't called her fart girl spoke volumes. Any of the other guys in this family would've owned up to it, and the name would've probably stuck with her for good.

Because Sydney and Emi were two of the few at the gatherings not paired up, they kept ending up together. He was supposed to be Sarah's friend—her guest—yet here they were again eating their food together. Emi chalked it up to everyone being too busy serving and feeding kids, which made her curious.

"So I take it you're not married since you're here alone?" she asked as she dipped her tortilla into the delicious chicken *mole* Grace had made.

He shook his head and waited until he was done chewing. "Nope, not anymore."

“Oh, but you were,” she said. “I was wondering since you seem to be the same age as all these baby-making machines.” She tilted her head. “Any kids?”

“Nope,” he said again with a strange smile. She couldn’t make out whether it was pensive or maybe a bit regretful. “I keep changing my mind about whether or not that was a good thing—that my ex and I held off starting a family. At my age, I should be at least thinking about starting one.” He glanced around. “As you said, just about everyone else my age is already way ahead of me. Here I am not even close. Who knows? Maybe it’s too late for me even. But at the same time, I’m grateful to not have to be dealing with being a part-time dad or custody issues.”

“Too late for you?” Emi asked, her jaw dropping. “Are you kidding? You can’t be a day over thirty.”

“I’m twenty-eight.” He smiled. “Twenty-nine in a few months. And let me tell you time flies after you hit the big twenty-one. Seems like that was just yesterday, and now here I am, pushing thirty already.”

That surprised Emi, not that he *looked* older than twenty-eight. He just *seemed* older—more mature than the average twenty-eight-year-olds she was used to. Maybe now that she knew him better that would change. Before this weekend, she would’ve thought him a young-looking thirty-five or so. He just seemed so put together. Intimidating even.

Powerful.

That was the word she was searching for. He looked not just like a boss but a boss’s boss, the guy who made everyone in the office nervous when he stopped by to visit. At her school, her professors were all so sure of themselves, but their demeanor seemed to change if the dean ever dropped in to listen to one of their lectures. Emi always assumed anyone who held that kind authority—power—had to be at *least* in his mid-to-late thirties.

“I have a cat,” he said.

That surprised Emi and she tilted her head, smiling. “You do? You don’t strike me as a cat person.”

“I’m not,” he said with a smirk. “I’ve always been a dog person, but I sort of got stuck with Homer when my elderly neighbor Earl up the hall died suddenly. Homer was his pride and joy, and when I went to give his daughter my condolences the day she was over at his place packing up his things, she told me Homer was gonna have to go to the shelter. She and her grandkids, who lived with her, were allergic. Homer was ten at the time, so

I figured he didn't have much time left himself. I knew Earl wouldn't have wanted him put in a shelter, so I took him in, and three years later, he's still around and healthy as a horse."

Emi smiled, feeling her heart warmed by Sydney's kindness. Before she could comment on that, Sarah sat across from them. Angel stood by her side. They were free for a moment from their kids. Sarah looked a bit worn out. Emi could imagine all the work they'd put into getting a party this over-the-top together. "I'm gonna grab a beer," Angel said. "Anybody want anything?"

"I'll take a glass of wine please," Sarah said, tapping his hand on her shoulder.

"Got it. How 'bout you, Syd? You wanna beer?"

Syd said he'd take one, and then Angel turned to Emi. "Sorry, Emi, but if your brothers catch me bringing you booze, they'll hang me. I can bring you anything else though."

"I'm good," she said, tapping her plastic cup of soda.

As soon as he walked away, she leaned into the table closer to Sarah. "Please. Like my brothers could ever claim they didn't drink before they were twenty-one."

"Do they watch you as closely as Angel and his brothers watched their sister once upon a time?" Sydney asked with that big perfect smile—yet another flawless thing about him.

She was beginning to wonder if there was anything not perfect about the guy. There wasn't a hair out of place. Earlier she'd even noticed his nails appeared almost manicured. They were so neatly groomed.

"They used to," she admitted, taking a sip of her soda. "But I'm nineteen now, living on my own. So they need to get over it."

"Nineteen's still a baby." Sarah smiled.

Emi laughed softly, her laughter feeling a bit disingenuous for some reason. "Well, if my brothers knew some of the things their *baby* sister has done, their hair would fry."

Sarah's brows lifted, full of playful curiosity, and Emi didn't miss the strange look she got from Sydney. She felt her face and neck flush, and she took an even longer sip of her soda, feeling ridiculous now. That's *not* how she'd meant for that to sound. She was just being facetious. Why? She wasn't even sure, but talk of her being so young and a baby had sort of irritated her. Not that she was getting any ideas about trying to impress

Sarah's friend in any way. Sure, she was younger than he was, and his first impression of her had been just a fluke. They didn't have to make her out to be *that* lame and immature. Only now her stupid comment may have just confirmed that.

She cleared her throat, attempting to backpedal. "I mean I've had alcohol before and stayed out way later than I'm sure they imagine I'd stay out. Stuff like that." She smiled at Sarah, glancing at Sydney as Angel returned with their booze. "You know my brothers. That alone would fry their hair."

"Uh huh," Sarah said with a playful wink. "Don't worry. Your secret is safe with me."

"What secret?" Angel asked, sitting down next to Sarah.

"If I tell you, it won't be a secret," Sarah said, pecking him on the lips before taking a sip of her wine.

"Ooh secrets," Valerie said, plopping down in the seat next to Angel.

Her husband, Angel's brother Alex, took the seat next to her. "Who's telling secrets?"

Emi glanced up and met Sydney's eyes as he smirked as if he knew she was squirming in her seat now and why. "So what are we talking about?" her sister Livi asked as she sat down next to Emi, placing a plateful of food in front of her.

"Secrets apparently," Alex said, taking a swig of his beer, and Livi's eyes brightened.

Emi's head spun, thinking of how to change the subject, but before she could, Sydney did.

"If you all knew what I did, you'd know there are no secrets." They all turned to him curiously, and Emi was relieved. "You know what they say about big brother, right?" he continued, now that he had their attention. "I can't give you guys the details, but I'll just say this. It's *all* true," he said, lifting a brow and taking a sip of his beer.

"Oh, that's right," Sarah said. "You would know, wouldn't you?" She turned to the rest of them to explain. "Sydney works for the people who design the satellites and stuff."

"We're not the only company," Sydney explained.

"But you're contracted by NASA. That's huge, and"—she turned back to everyone with a big smile like a mother or in her case more like a sister

would wear when bragging about a brainy sibling—“Sydney was just recently promoted as one of their top execs.”

Again Sydney smiled humbly and corrected her. “Executive in charge of the IT and design department, not the entire company.”

“The whole company is about designing, Sydney,” Sarah argued.

Clearly, she *was not* letting him off the hook or allowing him to undervalue himself for the sake of modesty.

“Sydney was wooed away from his previous highly impressive company, which flew him all over the world. I’m just saying Syd”—she turned and smiled at him proudly—“it is a big deal no matter what you say. Anyway”—she turned back to Angel and Valerie specifically—“if anyone knows about satellite tracking and all that stuff, it’s Sydney.”

“But like I said, I can’t say too much,” Sydney reiterated. “All I’m saying is, if you ever plan on doing anything shady, be aware anything and *everything* can be tracked. Right down to the color underwear you wear and your whereabouts at *all* times.”

“So what about those planes that go missing and those long-ass murder trials?” Alex asked. “If big brother knows everything, why can’t they find a missing plane or skip a lengthy and expensive trial and just nail the murderers from day one?”

“Politics, lawyers, money, and lots of red tape,” Sydney said, tapping his beer bottle with his bottle cap. “And that’s all I can say.”

“Wow,” Valerie said, shaking her head.

Thanks to Sydney the conversation took a sharp left from the direction Emi’s stupid comment had it turning. She glanced at Sydney again as everyone else began discussing the latest murder trials in the headlines. His smile was innocent enough, but the twinkle in his eye said he knew he’d saved her from an uncomfortable moment. And not a minute too soon because her brothers had since joined the conversation. That would’ve been fun, having to explain the ridiculous insinuation that came out all wrong in front of them.

After spending a few more hours around Sydney and Sarah, Emi was curious about his relationship with her. While Angel seemed fine with it, Emi knew this bunch well. She couldn’t imagine him being okay with his wife having such a hot single friend she was so fond of. There had to be more to this.

The ride would be interesting for two reasons. She had a ton of questions for Sydney, but at the same time she didn't want to come across as too nosy. Still, she had two whole hours to make *small talk* with her new friend and neighbor.

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Chapter Three

Sydney

“Why do you call Sarah, Lynni?” Emi asked.

They’d barely pulled away from Sal’s driveway, and she hadn’t even finished securing her seatbelt. Sydney had to smile. He’d been right about noticing her watch him and Lynn curiously earlier.

“It’s her middle name,” he said simply.

“Yeah, but you’re the only one who uses it. Why?”

He shrugged as he slid his sunglasses on. “When I met her, she introduced herself as Sarah Lynn, and I just thought she looked more like a Lynn. Over time as I got to know her better, it turned into Lynni.”

“And you two are just friends. You’re not related in any way?”

“Nope,” he said, feeling the need to take a deep breath. “Just friends.”

“Wow.” Emi sat back in her seat. “So you’ve known her since before she was married, right?”

“Long before.” This time he gripped the wheel a little tighter. “We were kids in sixth grade when we met.”

“Really?” She turned her body to him again as she’d been doing in the beginning when she’d asked her first question about Lynn. “That long, huh? Did you two ever . . . you know—?”

“Never,” he said before she could finish. “We were each other’s best friends in Arizona. Then she moved out here just before starting senior year in high school and met Angel. The rest is history.”

“But you two still keep in touch after all this time,” she said, stating the obvious. “That’s nice.”

She sat back again, staring ahead, though Sydney could only see her through his peripheral vision. They were at a stoplight and he could turn to face her, but even with his dark sunglasses on, he didn’t want to risk her

noticing the tension he felt anytime this subject came up, even after all these years.

It was true. He was over Lynn—had been over her for years. He just wished he could get over the “could’ve beens” every time he saw her. While he was happy for her—she was living a blissful life—he still couldn’t shake the feeling that it could’ve been him with her. Not Angel.

Emi pointing out how nice it was that they were still friends after all this time couldn’t have come at a worse time. Sydney knew, just like every time he was around Lynn, in a few days he’d be over it. He’d move on and back to the real world, pushing all regrets aside. He’d expected the ride home today to be a thoughtful one revisiting old memories. He just hadn’t expected to be discussing them with anyone.

Of course, his unexpected companion home would ask the million-dollar question. “Any particular reason why you and Sarah never dated? Or am I making assumptions? I mean I know you said nothing ever happened, but did you two ever even maybe date?”

“Nope,” he said again, trying not to sound too curt. “We were just good friends—best friends actually. We didn’t want to ruin that, so we never did.”

“That’s sweet, but I didn’t think that’d be possible, especially given how good-looking both of you are.”

Sydney smiled bittersweetly. It was nice to hear a young, attractive girl like Emi think he was good-looking. But it still didn’t take from what her first comment made him feel. No, it wasn’t possible. Obviously, for Lynn it had been, but not for him.

“Well, thanks,” he said. This time he did glance at her with a smile. “I don’t know. Maybe it’s because neither of us had siblings and we spend a lot of time pretending we were each other’s. So it was too weird to think of each other in any other way.”

Not true.

He tried to mask his unease. Just thinking about the amount of time he’d spent back in the day thinking about Lynn in much more offensive ways than a sweet sister, made him frown. Of course, he hadn’t in over a decade. It was hard enough fantasizing about his single best friend, whom he was *not* supposed to be thinking of that way. Why torture himself by fantasizing and coveting another man’s wife?

“I think it’s neat that you two have stayed in touch even after all these years. I would’ve imagined that her just moving to another state alone

would've jeopardized it. Her getting a boyfriend should've severed that friendship even further. I mean, heck, I moved just two hours away, and I hardly ever talk to any of my friends now. And it hasn't even been a year that I've been gone." She shook her head, looking out into the sunset as he got on the freeway. "But then I guess I've always been a little on the anti-social side. You're a way better friend than I am. That's for sure."

For a moment, Sydney considered telling her the truth about why he'd never dated Lynn then thought better of it. Just because she lived in his building now didn't mean her staying there was a sure thing. She'd already mentioned moving back home once. He'd managed to go all these years without telling Lynn what he'd really felt for her way back. Why chance this little girl getting homesick again, moving back, and spilling the beans?

That made him curious, and it was a good way to get off this topic. "Speaking of you moving away, you said you'd moved out to LA last year but had to move back. Why was that?"

"I'd originally moved into the dorms," she said, staring out the window. "Then there was this *incident*." She shook her head. "I suppose when you stand back or hear about it as a third person it does sound awful, but it happened so fast and with such minimal damage—to me anyway—it didn't feel like such a big deal."

He glanced at her. Now *she'd* spiked his curiosity. "What happened?"

"I was attacked," she said so nonchalantly Sydney had to do a double take. "It was just this homeless guy at the park where I was running early one morning. I'm not even sure he was going to try to do anything to me like rape me or whatever. I'd seen him at the park before. He'd always try and say something to me, but I'd pretend I didn't notice. I had my earphones on most of the time and would just keep running. The administrators at school had warned us about the homeless people in the area when we'd had our first orientation. They told us never to engage with them. For the most part, they were harmless, but some could get angry or nasty, and I guess that morning he was angry. At first, I didn't even call it an attack, but my brothers and sister insisted that was what happened. So now I have to call it that. I was *attacked*."

The traffic began to slow, giving Sydney a chance to turn to Emi again. It did seem like this was something that hadn't fazed her as much as it should've.

“I felt someone touch my arm,” she continued. “It did startle me, but turning to see his face so close to mine was even more startling, and I guess I yelped or something. That startled him but also made him mad, and he grabbed my other arm. All I remember is how bad he smelled and that he called me a bitch when I tried to pull away from him. I’d just started to struggle with him because he wouldn’t let go when, fortunately for me, a guy running not too far away saw the whole thing and came to my rescue. The last thing I remember about the *attack* was seeing the homeless guy smile just before he grabbed my boob.” She shrugged, surprising Sydney when she chuckled. “Turns out the runner who saw the whole thing was a local boxer on his morning run. He beat the *crap* out of the guy. It’s not like he even beat him a whole lot, but those punches he landed were all it took, and the guy was knocked out cold.”

She took a deep breath, turning to Sydney with a wince. “When my brothers found out, they freaked out. We’ve had kind of a bad string of things like this happening in our family. My brothers didn’t even want me to come to school out here in the first place for that reason, but ESU has always been my dream. They begged me to come home until they could figure something out. All kinds of ridiculous things were discussed—they moving out closer to keep an eye out for me or hiring a body guard since A.J.’s making stupid money now in the big leagues—but I refused. Finally, we came to a compromise. I’d let them pay for an apartment in that astronomically priced apartment building as long as they didn’t get a full-time bodyguard for me or move out there. I guessed it was one of the most exclusive in Los Angeles with a high level of security because of some of the high-profile people who live there.” She turned suddenly with a smile. “Did you know Scarlet Brendon from CSI Blues lives in our building?”

“Yep.” Sydney smiled with a nod. “I’ve had drinks with her.”

“Get out!” she said, making Sydney chuckle.

“I’m serious. She’s real nice too.”

Maybe if he knew Emi a little better, he might share what else he’d done with and *to* Ms. Brendon. For now, he’d be a gentleman and keep that to himself.

“Louie Vick lives there too.”

“The chef?” she asked excitedly.

Sydney decided that rather than get back into the heavier subject of her attack he’d tell her about all the other high-profile people who lived in their

building.

When Sydney had first moved there several years ago after his separation with his ex-wife, he'd done so for practical reasons. His office was just a few miles away. But after living in a high rise in Tokyo for months, he'd become used to the hustle and bustle of living in the middle of a busy city. Living in this building wasn't the first time he'd had a chance to rub shoulders with celebrities either.

"When I lived in Germany for a few months, I lived in the same building with David Hasselhoff and got to chat with him a few times. Nice guy."

Her brows came together in confusion. "Who?"

"*The Hoff? Knight Rider. Bay Watch,*" Sydney offered, feeling old as she tapped her phone's screen furiously.

"Hasselhoff," she said, sliding her fingers over the screen of her phone. "Oh him!" she said, turning back to Sydney, those big bright eyes of hers making him breathe in deeply. "He used to do *America's Got Talent*, right?"

"Uh, maybe, I don't know."

"Yeah, that's the guy, and I watched some of the comedy roast they did of him. The name just didn't ring a bell."

Sydney had never even watched an episode of *America's Got Talent* or a current celebrity roast. He felt stupid now for bragging about having chatted with *The Hoff*. Leave it to a nineteen-year-old to make Sydney realize how lacking his knowledge of current pop culture was. Admittedly, Hasselhoff was before even Sydney's time, but the concept of a car that could talk, drive, and think for itself was appealing to tech enthusiasts of all ages. So *Knight Rider* had kind of a cult following by tech geeks.

Aside from the news and the history and documentary channels, he hardly even watched television. He'd had no idea Scarlet was a celebrity and a pretty big one at that until after he'd slept with her. She'd said it was what she'd liked most about him: the fact that he'd been drawn to her just for her and not for her celebrity. Though he wouldn't say he'd been drawn to Scarlet for her personality alone. He could admit now the woman was beautiful with a kickass body to boot, and *that* was the main draw when he'd first laid eyes on her. Even after getting to know her a bit better, he hadn't felt much else but physical attraction. But that was beside the point. Point was she was on one of the highest-rated detective dramas on

television and he'd never heard of her before the night he met her. Talk about being out of it when it came current pop culture.

He decided to not brag about the other celebrity he'd flown in first class with: Alex Wolfe, the host of *Generation Tech*, one of the few television shows he did watch often. If Emi didn't know who *The Hoff* was, Sydney was certain she wouldn't be too impressed with a tech show host—if she'd even heard of him. Even Lynn hadn't had a clue who he'd been talking about when he texted her to tell her.

"I knew a lot of high-profile people lived in our building, but I had no idea how many."

"Oh, yeah, and a lot more that aren't necessarily celebs," Sydney said, "like CEO's of some big companies, Hollywood behind-the-scene big wigs, big-time screen and song writers, etc."

He wouldn't mention that, in the tech world, he was a bit of a celebrity himself. Earlier at the party, Emi had already mentioned wanting to change email service providers because the one she currently used wasn't user-friendly at all. She said she'd lost emails too many times because of it. Anyone *that* tech-challenged to not be able to deal with one of the easiest email providers would likely not be impressed by his techy celebrity status, not that he was trying to impress her. He'd just save himself the embarrassment of her possibly thinking he was *trying* to show off his geek.

As they neared their building, Sydney began to wonder if he should exchange numbers or anything with her. Would having friends in common make them friends? Did he even want this to become anything more than a onetime ride back with him? He'd likely not see Lynn again for several months if not longer. Knowing Lynn was the only thing besides living in the same building he and Emi seemed to have in common.

To his pleasant surprise, Emi saved him the awkwardness of debating until the last minute by asking straight out as they drove into the building's parking lot. "So what floor are you on?"

"The twelfth," he said as he pressed the button at the entrance. "You?"

"Tenth. By the pool."

"I have a view of the pool from my bedroom window," he said, looking back at her with a smile.

The question of whether or not they should exchange phone numbers was another one she easily took care of as they got in the elevator. He'd just checked the curious text on his watch he had from Lynn, asking him to call

her as soon as he had the chance, when Emi leaned over inquiringly. “Is that one of those smart watches?”

“Yeah,” he said, looking back down at it proudly. “This one isn’t even out yet. I have a few friends in Japan who work in the industry and get me the occasional prototype. It’s pretty sick all the things it can do.”

“That’s crazy,” she said, staring at it. “But you can make calls on it and all, right?”

“Sure can. It connects to my phone and auto connects to my car speakers as soon as I get in, but that’s not that extraordinary. Most phones do that nowadays.”

“So you can text me from your watch too?”

“It’s easier on my phone, but, yeah, if I need to, I can.”

“Text me,” she said, rattling off her number. “This way we can have each other’s numbers. You know, now that we’re friendly neighbors and all. I did mention I’m not the most social person on the planet, so you’ll be one of the few friends I have out here. *And* if you ever need anyone to come over and feed Homer for you when you’re out of town or something, I’d be happy to.”

“Sure,” Sydney said, typing in her number on the small screen of his watch. Her phone pinged, and he couldn’t help but smirk. “I think I like your other ringtone better.”

Her face flushed just as they reached the tenth floor and the elevator doors opened. “Never again,” she said as she stepped out.

She thanked him for the ride, told him she was serious about not having any friends out here and to not be a stranger, then waved sweetly, mouthing the words *good night*.

Sydney rode the rest of the two flights up to his floor, lost in thought. As sweet as Emi was, he had no intention of getting too friendly with her. Something about her overprotective brothers and her being a friend of Lynn’s didn’t bode well for a friendship with her. Girls that age could be a lot of drama, not that she’d come across as one of *those* girls. He just didn’t see how a nineteen-year-old he had so little in common with could fit into his life.

His watch dinged just as the elevator door opened. Already smiling, he clicked on the envelope from the caller he’d stored as simply *E.G.*

I just saw what you texted. It was nice meeting you too. But that’s Ms. Elevator Girl to you, sir!

He scrolled down and reread what he'd texted her. *It was nice to formally meet you, Elevator Girl.* He considered responding with something as equally playful then decided not to. His first instinct had been right. Getting too friendly with her could potentially lead to trouble, especially since—no matter how young she was—she was undeniably attractive. The last thing he needed was that kind of confusion in his life.

“Nope, not having it,” he said under his breath as he opened his apartment door.

As expected, Julie Anne had once again done an excellent job of cat sitting Homer, a reminder that even Homer wouldn't be an excuse to ever call Emi. Equally expected, Homer went crazy the moment Sydney walked through the door.

“You missed me, boy?” he asked as he finished up with their long playful greeting that had Homer rolling around by the front door and Sydney squatting down scratching his belly.

Even Homer was a constant reminder how wrong for each other he and his ex-wife Sheena had been. While he'd never been a cat person before Homer, he did like pets. Most of his life he'd grown up around Great Danes. The building allowed pets, and he'd considered getting a dog when he first moved in. Maybe not a Dane because the lack of room to run in the city was unfair to those big animals, and Sydney didn't have the time for the long walks a dog that large would require, but even a smaller breed would've been cool.

His entire marriage he'd gone pet-less because Sheena hadn't wanted to be bothered with pets.

“I'm not an animal person. I'm sorry,” she'd said when he suggested they get a dog. “They're messy and stinky and just too much of a hassle.”

She'd offered to get a fish, as if a fish tank with cold-blooded animals he could never cuddle with came even close to man's best friend. The words *best friend* reminded him of Lynn's text. He read it again and decided to text her instead of calling just to be sure it wasn't too late for that now.

Just got your text. Is it too late to talk?

Seconds later his phone rang. He sat back on his sofa, wondering if something was wrong. It'd been years since he and Lynn spoke this often. He'd just been around her for the better part of two days, talked to her earlier in the week, and now here she was calling again.

“Hey, how was the drive?” she asked, sounding cheery enough.

“Good,” Sydney said, still wondering about her call. “We didn’t get any traffic and Emi was good company, made the trip seem shorter.”

“She’s such a hoot, isn’t she?”

Sydney smiled, remembering how impossible it was for Emi to control her laughter even at a repast. “Yeah, she is.”

“Listen. She’s the reason why I’m calling. I can’t tell you how relieved her siblings were to hear someone I know so well lives in her building. They asked if you’d mind me giving them your number.” She spoke a little faster as if maybe Sydney might balk at that. “Only because, well, you know, she’s the baby and all, and they worry about her being so far. Not sure if she mentioned what happened last year. Did she?”

“She did actually,” Sydney said, closing his eyes.

“Oh, good. Then you know why they’re so anxious. They wanted to get her a bodyguard, which she absolutely refused.”

“Understandably so,” Sydney said, sitting up slowly.

“I agree,” Sarah said immediately. “And please don’t think anyone is asking *you* to be one to her or even keep an eye on her. She might be their baby sister, but she *is* an adult. They just said there’ve been times when they haven’t been able to get a hold of her for like the whole day, and after the scare they had last year, they start to wonder if maybe they need to drive down or something. It’d be nice to know someone nearby that they could call before having to take the drive all the way down there. If you knew what that family has gone through, you might understand better.”

“That’s fine, Lynn. Give them my number,” Sydney said before she felt compelled to tell him more about Emi’s family.

Already this was turning into more than he’d anticipated. It also felt contrived. He had no intention of calling Emi or making any special visits to her apartment just to tell her about her siblings now having his number. And he was fairly certain neither Lynn nor her brothers would be letting Emi in on this either. From the sound of what she’d shared with him today, Emi already thought her brothers a bit overbearing and overly anxious about her well-being.

He’d agreed to Lynn giving them his number and hoped they’d never actually call, but that was it. He didn’t need to get any further involved. Emi had mentioned living here for months now. Before the elevator incident,

he'd only noticed her a few times. After today, he'd be going back to seeing her only whenever he happened to run into her.

Emi was sweet enough and likely harmless, but Sydney knew better than anyone that a friendship with a girl was *never* that simple. Add an overbearing family and Lynn, who he'd have to answer to if ever any drama occurred. No thanks. He'd leave well enough alone and just keep things as they were before this weekend.

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Chapter Four

Emilia

“Ugh!”

If Emi could fling her laptop across the room, she would. But she couldn't. She knew her options, but she didn't like any of them.

She could go down to the building's Internet cafe and use one of the computers there to type the damn paper due in just three days, but then she'd still have to deal with this stupid laptop. One of her favorite things about her one day of online courses a week was that she got to stay in her pj's all day and not leave her apartment like with her all her other classes. If she was going to have to rely on the Internet cafe for her computer access, it defeated the whole purpose, and she'd have to get showered and dressed just to do homework.

Her second option was she could text her new friend, neighbor, and tech genius to see if maybe he could figure out what was wrong with the damn thing. She'd planned on texting him eventually to say hello, but she hadn't planned on contacting him this soon after their unexpected weekend together. It had only been a week since they'd gotten back. She didn't want him thinking she was making excuses to text him or hang out with him.

There was no doubt the man had it going on. She didn't know a whole lot about him, but she knew all she needed to know. He was single, well off if he lived in this building, and a near genius from what Sarah had mentioned, not just at the party in front of him, but after he'd left for his hotel the night of the repast. Not just when it came to technology either. Sarah had gushed about his musical talent. Apparently, he played the saxophone and had once upon a time played in a symphony orchestra.

From the looks of him, the man likely had many a woman making excuses to see him—be around him. The last thing she wanted was for him to think she was one of them.

That left her with her only other option, one she *really* didn't want to do: call one of her brothers, who'd likely offer to buy her the latest and greatest most expensive laptop out there.

It wasn't that she didn't appreciate her brothers and her sister. Emi loved them all dearly. As much as she complained about them being overbearing, she still missed them all the time. She missed the feeling of being surrounded by family. But she needed to stop being so dependent on them. It was part of the reason she insisted on coming back to school—alone—even after last year's incident.

Being able to attend ESU without it being a financial burden on her family was a dream come true. They could more than afford to put her up in this building, pay for her tuition, and even asked her not to get a job because they wanted her to concentrate on school one hundred percent. She had an allowance for Christ's sake, a generous one. They encouraged her to use it because she knew they feared she just might be tempted to get a job and that would mean her being out and about more. All the more chance that she might be abducted or attacked again—one of their biggest fears, given what they'd all been through already.

Emi got it. She understood the fear. She lived with the same fear for them. Two of her brothers were firefighters. Every time she watched a news story about a fallen or hurt firefighter, she'd switch the channel because she could hardly stand the thought of one of her brothers ever getting hurt. All three of her brothers had scary tempers. Nathan had already been in trouble for it once. A.J., famed as much for his *rage* as he was for being a triple threat in his sport, seemed to have the hardest time getting a handle on his. It was part of his celebrity now as a well-known baseball player. Of course, she worried that one day that rage would get the better of him.

Livi was the one she worried about the least. They'd had their major scare with her once, and Emi could only pray they'd never have to go through something like that with her again. Thankfully, she was now married to a man equally as protective as her brothers. She was more than well taken care of.

Deciding that she'd deal with this without calling her brothers, she bit the bullet and texted Sydney. Once he saw her laptop, he'd know it wasn't something she was making up or using as an excuse. It really was all screwed up. She wouldn't even stick around either if he agreed to look at it.

Just drop it off and ask him when she should pick it up. She'd pay him when he was done, take her laptop, and be on her way.

Her text was simple enough. She *was not* going to over think this. He was an easy going guy. The idea of having a friend like him in the building was a pleasant one—like being around her brothers at home. It might even help with the overwhelming homesickness she felt too often.

Hey! I'm having issues with my laptop. Sarah said you used to fix computers on the side. Maybe you still do? I'd of course pay you.

Twenty minutes later she'd just about given up hearing from him when she got the text and clicked on it. She chided herself for the stupid butterflies just seeing his name on her screen gave her.

Sorry. I was at the gym. Sure, bring it by in a few. I'm in 1208. I'm just going to jump in the shower, but I should be out in about ten or fifteen minutes.

Pleased with herself for having handled that perfectly well all on her own without having to get her brothers involved, Emi walked into her bedroom to also take a shower. Her pajama day was over. But at least if Sydney fixed her laptop it wouldn't be her last pajama day for a while as she'd feared.

Twenty minutes later she was at his door, freshly showered and dressed in jeans and a tank. He opened the door and invited her in. Emi walked in, trying not to fixate on how casual he looked compared to all the other times she'd been around him or seen him in the building. Even his casual appearance at the kids' party that past weekend didn't have anything on the basketball shorts and snug black T-shirt he wore now. His hair was still wet, and he wasn't as clean-shaven as he normally was. Without all the layers of clothes he usually wore, Emi could now appreciate the impressive muscle he was packing. Okay, she'd admit it. The man was sexy as hell.

Still Emi was certain he had more than his share of women falling all over him. He didn't need another one, and she didn't want him to see her that way. It was a decision Emi had made almost as soon as she realized how wrong she'd been about him at the repast. It was further confirmed the next day at the kids' party and again on their two-hour drive home.

She'd established a rule before she'd even met Sydney. She wasn't going to date or even have a meaningless fling with anyone who lived in the same building. She didn't want to spend her time avoiding anyone. And the

last thing she needed was to have to explain to her brothers why she needed to move. With Sydney, it was a double whammy. Even as she'd stared at his kissable lips and perfect teeth at the repast and kids' party, she couldn't help but think of how awkward some family gatherings might get if she allowed so much as a fling.

What she *had* looked forward to almost immediately, after having such a pleasant time with him, was spending *more* time with him.

As friends.

Even though he wasn't married, she was certain a man like Sydney was at least already seeing someone. But he'd already had a friend that was a girl for *years*. Obviously, the idea of being friends with a girl platonically was one he'd be open to. Hopefully. For now, she'd focus on one thing: getting her laptop fixed.

"Starts up fine," she explained as she set it down on his countertop and hit the start button. "Then once everything is up and running, it just goes into this safe mode and I can't do anything. I Googled on my tablet what the problem might be, went through all the troubleshooting steps, and nothing."

"Did this just happen today?" he asked, glancing down at the screen that was starting up.

"No. This happened last week, but I hadn't tried to fix it until the last couple of days because the due date for a paper I need to write is sneaking up on me now. I'd been doing everything else on my tablet, but I need this for my paper."

Sydney hit a few keys on it, getting it to immediately go to another screen, a black one where he typed in a few words and numbers. It reminded her of the IT guys at her school who so easily figured out what she'd been trying to remedy for hours.

"Just tell me if you think it's fried or if you think it's fixable."

"No, it's definitely fixable."

Sydney didn't even look up. He typed a few more things, and that's when Emi made her move. As much as she would've liked to stick around longer, she had to make it clear this was not an excuse to be around him.

"So I can let you be, if you think it's gonna be a few minutes and come back for it," she offered, hoping he might suggest she stick around. "I don't wanna be in your way or anything."

Now he looked up from the screen, his brow going up, and her eyes were instantly distracted by the swath of thick lashes over his eyes. "You're

not in my way,” he said, but just as she began to get her hopes up, he continued. “But, yeah, if you wanna go get something else done, you can come back for it. I should have it ready for you in an hour, hour and half tops.”

“Uh,” she said a bit unsure then decided to just do as she’d first planned and leave. “Okay, so do you charge by the hour or how does this work?”

His eyes narrowed and he shook his head. “I’m not gonna charge you. This is nothing. I gotta let it run its course, so it’ll be sitting here doing its thing on its own for the most part.”

“Well, I gotta repay you somehow.”

The moment she said it she felt her face warm. Their eyes met for a second without either saying anything. *God* that’s not how she meant for it to sound. “I know!” she said quickly then started to the door before he’d see her blush. “I’ll be back in an hour and a half. Or if it’s done sooner and you need to go somewhere or something text me, and I’ll run up for it.”

She didn’t even turn to look at him when he said he would. She just rushed out the door.

“Idiot!” she muttered to herself the moment she was far enough away from his door.

Once back at her apartment she decided she *was* doing way too much over thinking about this. She’d had friends who were guys before. It was a simple concept. You treat them just as you would any of your girlfriends. Easy peasy. The problem with Sydney was he was so damn good-looking. As laid-back as he was, being around him was still a bit daunting, not to mention breathtaking. She’d been silly enough to think that he’d be less intimidating out of his power suits despite how down-to-earth he was.

“Those muscles and lips and dreamy lashes, oh my. Alright,” she began one of the pep talks she often gave herself as she mixed the flour, poppy seeds, and the rest of the ingredients in a bowl. “Be yourself. Act just like you would when you’re around Livi or your brothers. Don’t look at him as a guy—an incredibly handsome guy—with yummy muscles and bedroom eyes that make you tingle in places you have no business tingling. Think of how easy it was to laugh and hang around him at the repast and the party. The drive home that seemed to be over in a flash. This is the same guy. Don’t ruin this.”

Her phone rang just as she was about to begin pouring the mixture into the muffin pan. She would’ve ignored it, but it was her sister, and she

needed a reminder of how to have a normal conversation like the one she was hoping to be able to have with Sydney when she picked up her laptop.

“Hey, sissy,” she said, answering and putting her on speaker.

“You busy?” Livi asked.

“I’m making muffins, but I have you on speaker. What’s up?”

“Have you talked to A.J.?” Livi asked, sounding a little too excited.

“Not today. Why?”

“Guess who’s in negotiations to sign with the Padres next year when he’s a free agent?”

Emi thought about that for a moment, licking muffin mix off her finger. Who would have Livi this giddy? “Dave Wright?”

“No,” Livi said, lowering her voice. “Who were we just drooling over last time you were here and we were watching the game on TV?”

Emi laughed. “You’re gonna have to be more specific than that.”

“What were we saying the Padres need badly?”

“A shortstop,” Emi said then stopped and gasped. “Oh my God, Sylvester Sabian?”

“*Double S* for double the sizzle!” Livi squealed.

“Ssssss!” they both said at the same time then broke out laughing.

Emi leaned back against the counter, wiping her hands with a towel.

“Are you serious? A.J. told you or did you hear this on TV or something?”

“I heard it on TV and called A.J. immediately afterward. He said they’re definitely negotiating with Sabian. Can you imagine?”

Their whole lives Emi and her siblings had all been big sports fans. It’d been customary for Emi and Livi to fall in love with the players. They each had picked out their fantasy husbands in high school, but Sly Sabian was a young recent standout both for his game and for his looks. Much like A.J. had been picking up sponsors in a lot of the sexier types of merchandise, so had Sabian. Sabian’s latest was a beer commercial that had him stranded on a desert island. In it, he wore a baseball uniform tattered in just the right places to show off his perfectly toned body. Emi and Livi had drooled over it the last time Emi had gone home and they’d been watching one of A.J.’s games on TV. A.J. had brought home fellow team members for the family to meet in the past. So a good possibility existed that they might be entertaining *Double S* himself one day.

“No, I can’t imagine,” Emi said, placing the muffin pan in the oven.

They gushed about it a bit more with Livi filling her in on some of the other gossip she'd read about *Double S* and the latest in the news about their own brother *Rage*. As usual, when she and her sister got on the phone, the time flew. It was nearly an hour later when they hung up, and the muffins were ready and cooling on her stove top.

Talking to Livi had taken a bit from the angst she'd been feeling after seeing Sydney again, something she hadn't expected given how comfortable and easy it'd been to talk to him this weekend. As she carefully placed the still warm muffins in a small basket then covered them with a kitchen towel, she decided to shake it off. This was what she'd been most taken by with Sydney in the first place: her ability to just be herself around him without feeling the least bit self-conscious. She was ruining this by over thinking it.

A few minutes later she was out her door, basket in hand, and on her way to his place. When she got to his door, she took a deep breath and knocked. He opened it quickly, taking her breath away—again. Lifting the basket, she showed him the gift she came bearing.

“I made muffins.”

“Muffins?” he asked with a somewhat confused smile.

“Yeah,” she explained as she walked into his place. “I do a lot of baking when I'm at home. Cooking too. Comfort foods for my brothers and stuff. But I'm not good at proportioning down to cook for just me, so I rarely make any of the things I make back home here. Muffins are one of them. They only last so long unless you freeze them, and I don't like freezing them.”

Emi realized she was rambling, but it was better than getting all tongue-tied and feeling uneasy.

“Now that I have a friend in the building, maybe I can cook more often and share.” She smiled, glad he was smiling now too as if he approved of her suggestion. “I haven't made muffins in a long time. I hope I got it right.”

“They smell delicious,” Sydney said, leaning over the basket.

“They're poppy seed,” Emi said, smiling proudly. “They're my favorite, but”—she tapped the side of her behind—“if this bubble butt gets any bigger, I'm gonna have an even harder time finding jeans that are comfortable and don't look like mom jeans. Not that I'm complaining about it. I like it just fine. My sister and I both inherited the big booty from our

mom. She taught us early on to embrace it. In time, she said, we'd come to love the attention it got us." She laughed softly, lifting the towel to peek in on the muffins. "I'm not there yet—the loving it part—but I won't knock it either. I'm not one of those girls who dreams about a stick figure. I like a little junk in my trunk."

Emi took one of the muffins and brought it to her nose. It did smell heavenly. When she glanced up at him, she wasn't sure what to make of the strange expression on his face.

"Well?" she asked. His eyes widened, and she shook her head, confused. "Aren't you going to try them?"

His expression softened a bit as his Adam's apple moved with an apparent swallow, distracting her so easily.

"I will in a minute," he said, turning his attention back to the laptop in front of him. "I think this is done. I just want to make sure it's all good once it reboots again."

"What was it?" she asked curiously.

"A virus," he said. "I took the liberty of uploading a different type of virus and spyware protection software. The one you had was outdated, and this one I uploaded for you is as foolproof as you can get."

Emi was back to feeling the way she had that past weekend, comfortable around him. She even bit into her muffin, smiling, relieved until he added one more thing.

"I should know." He winked, making *her* swallow hard this time. "I designed it."

"You did?" she covered her mouth, and he handed her a napkin.

"Well"—he lifted and dropped a shoulder—"it wasn't all me, but it's one designed by the previous company I worked for, and we all had a hand in perfecting it."

Emi wished she wasn't such a tech idiot. She might have more to say or add to that other than "that's so cool."

She watched as Sydney clicked the keys on her laptop like the obvious pro he was, and a few minutes later, he glanced up and smiled. "Good as new."

"Oh, thank God," Emi said as she glanced at her screen saver and smiled.

It was a photo of her and her siblings, Livi's husband Lorenzo and baby Enzo included. In it, Emi was squatting in front of them all with one arm

around Livi's dog, King.

"That's an awesome-looking dog," Sydney commented as he picked up one of her muffins. "Is it yours?"

"No." Emi shook her head. "He is awesome but way too high maintenance for me. He's my sister's. She's a pet groomer, so she can more than handle him. Keeps him looking immaculate all the time."

"I was gonna say," Sydney said, glancing back down at the photo again, "he looks like it would take a ton of work to keep all those dreads from knotting up and becoming a mess."

"It does"—she clicked on the photo gallery icon—"but Livi's talented when it comes to what she does, and she trained his locks early on." A window popped up with more photos and she smiled. "See. That's what he looked like when he was a puppy."

"Oh wow. I would've never thought that was the same dog."

"Yeah, and he's just the sweetest thing." She clicked on another folder, blushing when a set of selfies popped up.

It was an old folder from when she was younger. Why she still had those stupid photos of her making pouty faces and trying to look sexy she didn't know, but it annoyed her as much as it embarrassed her.

"That you?" he asked, and she turned to see him smirking as he bit into the muffin.

"Yes," she admitted, unable to hide her own smirk. "A long time ago. I don't even know why I still have those."

"Couldn't have been that long ago," he said, standing up and off the breakfast stool he'd been sitting on. "You look the same."

"I was very young," she said, looking back at the photos.

"You *are* very young," he pointed out. "You want something to drink? That muffin made me thirsty." He opened the door to his fridge and studied its contents for a moment. "I've got milk, juice, water, and I could make you a cup of coffee if you want."

"I'll take water. Thank you."

Emi closed out of the embarrassing photo file. He'd just handed her the bottled water when his phone rang. "Give me a sec," he said, answering it and taking a few steps away.

Taking advantage that he wasn't within view of her laptop, she clicked on that folder again to examine her old selfies. She didn't remember how old she was, but she remembered she was in high school when she took

them. Over two years ago. She *did not* look that ridiculously clueless still. Did she?

“I’ll meet you there in an hour. Sounds good.”

On that cue, Emi began shutting down her laptop. As soon as he was off the phone and her laptop had shut down, she started putting it away in the carrying case.

“I’ll get out of your way now.”

“No rush,” he said as he took a swig of his glass of milk. “That’s what’s cool about living in this area. Most of the time when I go out for drink like this, I don’t even have to drive. I’m meeting someone in an hour, but it’s a five-minute walk from here.”

“That’s what I like about living in this area too,” Emi agreed. “Of course, I can’t enjoy any of the trendy bars yet, but I can indulge in all the restaurants and shopping.”

“That’s right. You’re just a *baby*,” he teased, flashing a smile that showed off his perfect teeth, reminding her how right she’d been.

Emi’s place was a mess compared to Sydney’s. She could see now even his apartment was perfect. His car had been spotless too. Emi’s car was full of books, fast food wrappers, receipts, and cups. She wasn’t a slob. The junk in her car wasn’t much different from the junk in most people’s cars. Although at the moment her kitchen looked like a flour bomb had gone off in there. For the most part though, she was tidy enough. She just wasn’t anywhere near as organized as Sydney was.

“Don’t you start calling me that too.” She zipped up the computer bag, lifting a brow at him.

“Well, for a baby, you make some kick-ass muffins.” Sydney took another bite, nodding in approval. When he was done chewing, his brows lifted “You make these from scratch or out of a box?”

“I make everything from scratch.” She lifted the strap over her shoulder and smiled. “But thanks. I’m glad you liked them. I really appreciate you doing this for me. I just wish I could do more to pay you back.” She frowned, angry at herself that she’d gone there again. “Oh I know,” she added quickly, before he could put too much thought into what she’d just said. “I’ve been craving chicken dumpling soup. You like it?”

“Not sure I’ve ever had it,” Sydney said, shoving the last piece of muffin into his mouth.

“*What?*” Emi’s mouth fell open. “Oh, I’m making it now. I hadn’t because just like with the muffins I can never make just enough for myself. I’d make way too much, but now I can bring you some. I make a kick-ass chicken dumpling soup, adding my own Mexican flare to it. You’ll be begging for more.”

Sydney smiled sweetly, saying he’d look forward to it, and Emi left, feeling much more at ease than the first time she’d walked out of his place.

“See,” she said to herself, feeling very satisfied as she walked down the hall toward the elevator. “You have a new neighbor and friend and someone who can help you eat all that food you’ve been holding off making. A *friend*. Easy peasy.”

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Chapter Five

Sydney

As the months passed, a few things Sydney had suspected about Emi and her family were confirmed. First of all, her brothers *had* contacted him in regards to Emi—more than once now. Fortunately, on both occasions, Sydney knew for a fact she was fine because one of the times she'd just left his place and the second time he'd been out by the pool with her. Apparently, she didn't answer her phone or respond to their texts when she was around Sydney.

Second, the reason he'd had her over to his place when he'd vowed to keep things as distant as possible with her, was that he'd found it impossible to not just go along with what had begun to happen. The thing about Emi was, as unfriendly and anti-social as she'd professed to be, she was comfortable around Sydney and got even more so with every interaction they had. The only plus on what could possibly turn into an awkward situation as they began to get closer and hang out more, was Darren, the guy she mentioned at the repast she'd begun seeing.

Since she was comfortable talking to Sydney about Darren, Sydney figured maybe she did see him like one of her older brothers. He was Lynn's longtime trusted friend, who was safe to talk to about these kinds of things—someone more experienced than she was—and she'd sought his advice a few times. She'd asked for his male perspective, and he'd happily obliged.

Sydney was now seeing someone too, and after nearly a year of knowing Emi and having her around—*often*—it felt far less dangerous than what he'd initially been nervous about. He was beyond any of those fears now. Emi was a bright young girl with lots of different ideas about what she might do with her future, and she enjoyed discussing them. As Sydney would've guessed from a girl her age, she'd since confirmed none of those

plans included a serious relationship anytime soon. Even Darren, her on-and-off boyfriend this past year, was just a fun guy she admitted she had zero intentions of getting serious with. Sydney now believed, as sweet and as likeable as she was, there was no danger of him developing feelings for Emi as he had with Lynni.

Admittedly, he'd never laughed as much as he had since he'd started hanging with her. But just as he thought from the very beginning, it wasn't just her age. She was level-headed and mature enough that he could spend time with her without feeling like he was hanging with a kid. They were just in way too different places in their lives for him to even consider anything more than a friendship with her. While Emi was dating *guys* for the fun of it—Darren wasn't even her one and only—Sydney didn't even consider seeing someone more than once unless he thought she had potential for being *a real prospect*. At almost twenty-nine, he didn't have time to put any effort into something that wasn't going to amount to anything. So either the women he dated knew it was just for the night—for one thing only and with no other expectations—or they were in *agreement* and also interested in more than just one night. But he wasn't about to play games with anyone he wasn't interested in more with.

Not that he was accusing Emi of doing that with these guys. She just didn't seem too serious about either of the two guys she'd been juggling, yet she continued to see them—Darren more so than the other one, Steve something or other.

“Are you taking Cheryl this weekend?”

Sydney glimpsed up from his tablet. He was sitting at Foams, the coffee shop in their building, reading an article about the possible acquisition of his company by another bigger company based out of New Zealand. It took a moment to register what Emi was talking about: *The Taste of La Jolla* food and wine festival that weekend. He hadn't been to one in years, and Lynn invited him every year. This year they were ending it with a big bash Sunday evening at the original Moreno restaurant. It was the anniversary of when they'd first opened.

Emi sat down in the chair across from him, holding her book bag on her lap.

“I haven't decided,” he said then sipped his coffee, glancing down at his tablet. “You taking Darren?”

“God no!”

That made Sydney smile as he peeked up to see her unzip her book bag and pull out a wallet.

“No way,” she reiterated, digging into her wallet for money. “You know what my family is like. It’s not even about them being so loud or that I’m embarrassed by them or anything. It’s just I’ve told you what my brothers are like. They’ll ask a million questions about anyone I bring home. If I were serious, I wouldn’t mind so much. It’s inevitable, and when the time comes with the right guy, *when* I’m ready for something that serious, then I will, but right now? Not happening. Things between Darren and me are so hot and cold all the time. He is so not worth the inquisition.” She looked up once she had her money in her hand. “What’s there to decide about with Cheryl? I thought you two were getting serious?”

“I said that?” he asked, trying to remember if he ever had.

“Well, no, but”—she stood up and took a few steps toward the register then turned back to him—“I just assumed. You’d been out with her more lately than anyone else.”

She turned her back to him to put in her order, allowing Sydney a nice long perusing stare. She wore slacks that unintentionally accentuated what she endearingly referred to as her *bubble butt*. Like everything else, Emi spoke of it so openly and without a trace of bashfulness. It was why Sydney felt like he’d known her for longer than just under a year *and* why it seemed no subject was off limits between them—for her anyway. Maybe it was the first impression she’d made on him that’d made her feel like they could skip the whole demure and modest getting-to-know-each-other phase of their friendship. She’d skipped right over that part. He still remembered the very first time she’d mentioned it. She’d said it as casually as if she were talking about her earlobe or wrist or some other less unmentionable body part.

It was the first time she’d ever stopped over at his place. That’s how early on Sydney knew his plan of keeping his distance was not going to go his way. It started off with her telling him about how much she loved baking. Next thing he knew she was talking about her bubble butt and how she couldn’t make such large meals unless someone would help her eat them or it’d get bigger. Sydney had glanced up at the muffins but dared not glance at her butt. He’d had zero intentions of touching on the subject of her *bubble butt*. Then she’d gone on about how her mother had told her sister to embrace it or something. That in time she’d enjoy the attention.

Since then he'd had plenty of peeks at that plump ass of hers, but now he could really take a moment to admire it. Her mom had been right on the money. Hot *damn*, it was nice. She may be young but without doubt had the body of a *woman*.

His intentions of keeping his distance had gone up in smoke because, ever since those first visits to his place, Emi had been back plenty more times. Apparently, from what she explained, she was used to always being around her big family. While her brothers could be overbearing, she actually missed them being in her business all the time and having someone always there to watch TV and even movies on lazy Sunday afternoons with.

Emi had taken to texting either Saturday or Sunday after having gone out the night before and swearing she'd either never drink again or stay out so late or both. She was usually in a lounging mood and always asked if he wanted to hang out—maybe order takeout and watch a movie. But it wasn't limited to the weekends. Even during the week now, she often offered and made them lunch or dinner, which he'd since gotten quite used to and looked forward to now. Since being on his own, he ate out way too much, so home-cooked meals were a welcome treat. She didn't just bake sweets. She was into baking casseroles and making what she called comfort foods, something she'd done often for her brothers

Emi had so seamlessly made herself a fixture in Sydney's life she'd never even given him a chance to protest or try to do anything to evade it as he'd first planned to. It happened so fast he'd had no choice but to just go with it or come up with a reason why he couldn't, but he had to admit now he enjoyed having her around. The only thing he had taken the time to do was make a few decisions about this new and unexpected friendship. As much as he told himself it was innocent and harmless, it still felt too weird to go to her place. For some reason, it felt better to mention to Lynni when she asked if he'd seen or talked Emi lately that *she'd* dropped by or that they'd ordered and shared a pizza at *his* place.

So far, Emi had made all the moves in the friendship. Even after knowing her for nearly a year, Sydney had every intention of letting her keep making them. He knew he was probably just being overly cautious, but he was old enough to know better. He didn't want to be accused of anything by anyone. Allowing this young girl to come over and hang out, vent, and discuss her worries about her future or even get his perspective on

her love life was one thing. Making himself comfortable over at her place would feel just too awkward—wrong.

Emi was still conversing with Shayla, the girl behind the counter, someone both he and Emi knew well enough now since they both frequented Foams so often. He took advantage of her longer than normal time at that counter to study her a bit more. This was a new look for Emi. Normally she dressed casually for school: comfortable jeans and a cute figure-hugging matching top. The only times he'd been privy to seeing her dressed up were the weekend he formally met her at the repast, the party the next day, and then a few times he'd seen her either on her way out to a date or just getting back from one.

All those times, especially the first weekend around her family and friends, he had neither the inclination nor the curiosity to take a longer gaze. Now he eyed her subtly over his tablet. She had an interview today for an internship at The Staples Center. Sydney had coached her last night since he often interviewed new hires and interns. She was as nervous as she was excited, but he'd told her she was sure to get it. She had everything companies looked for in new hires: the dedication, the willingness to learn, but mostly the enthusiasm. Emi wasn't just the bubbliest person he'd ever met. She had more enthusiasm than anyone he knew. He'd explained to Emi last night that looking professional was über-important, and she'd mentioned her black slacks and the silk top she wore now. She looked professional alright, but damn if she didn't also look good.

As young as she was, Sydney had become more aware lately of what a young *adult* she actually was, not a kid or young girl. A full grown sexy *woman*. For months, she'd been talking about the weirdness of not being a teen, as if turning twenty was any kind of real milestone. She still wouldn't be legal to drink. Yet, taking in the curve of that ample behind, Sydney was reminded yet again of what she *was* legal for. He too embraced her nice ass and had shamefully been doing so for some time now. But that was normal. He may respect her as a friend, but he was still only a man.

He cleared his throat, glancing around when he realized just how hard he'd been *embracing* those curves. Somehow no matter how many times her behind had caught his attention in the past, he hadn't been ready to see her like *this*: all done up and looking so damn sexy.

His eyes jolted back to his tablet, his fingers still at his temple as he pretended to be engrossed in his reading once again when she turned back

to him.

“So if you decide to take Cheryl this weekend, would it be too weird if I tagged along for the ride?” she asked with a wince. “I’d hate to take such a long ride alone.”

Sydney looked up at her, sipping his coffee, then shook his head. “I don’t think I’ll be taking her.”

“Why not?” she asked curiously, taking the seat across from him again.

He shrugged. “It’s a whole weekend thing. Not sure I’m ready for that yet. Too soon.”

“Too soon?” Emi scrunched her nose as she took the lid off her coffee and blew on it. “It’s been months since you started seeing her.”

Smiling, Sydney nodded. “Need I remind you that you’ve been seeing Darren even longer and you still don’t think it’s time to bring him around your family.”

“That’s different,” she said, making Sydney laugh softly.

“How’s it different? He’s your *boyfriend*, right?”

“Sort of, but unlike you, I’m not looking to get serious. Bringing him home to meet my family would give him the idea that I am. You, on the other hand”—she brought the steaming cup to her mouth and took a cautious sip—“you’re looking for Mrs. Right and you said it yourself. Cheryl has a good head on her shoulders, *and* you’ve dated her more than once, something you said you only do if you’re hoping for something deeper than just a fling.”

Sydney peered at her as she took another cautious sip of her hot coffee. “I never said I was looking for Mrs. Right.”

Emi nodded, wiping her mouth with a napkin. “Well, since you said you should be looking to start a family and that maybe it was too late for you, I just assumed.”

She must’ve seen the look of confusion on Sydney’s face as he tried to remember when he’d ever said that. It was true, and more than once the thought had crossed his mind, but he didn’t remember telling Emi this.

“Way back at Mando’s repast,” she said, and then her eyes narrowed. “Or maybe it was the party the next day. Anyway, when I asked you about having kids, you said you should be thinking about it. I remember because I thought you were nuts to think it might be too late for you, and”—she brought her hand to her mouth, the gasp as overstated as her expression—“you *are* going to be *thirty* this year.” Her expression morphed into a

mocking smirk as Sydney stared at her, unimpressed with that little performance. “I just thought because of all that you might be moving things further along with her.”

It was hard to believe that it had only been a year. He never imagined he and Emi would be this close this fast. A year ago he never would’ve imagined them sitting at Foams, doing what had become their normal morning ritual before starting their weekdays now and her talking so freely about his love life!

“Yeah, well,” he said, standing up and gathering his things. “Just because I’ve gone out with her more than once now doesn’t mean she’s *the* one.”

“Hmm,” she said as she flung her book bag over her shoulder.

“What?” he asked when she didn’t say anything else.

“Nothing.”

The smirk she wore was too telling, something else he’d since picked up on about her. Even though it had been nearly a year now, it was still a relatively short time for her to already conclude she knew him better than he’d ever believe or admit she did.

From day one, Emi had been an open book, sharing with him about her personal life. Maybe she had gotten a few things out of him here and there, but he was far more particular about just how much he shared. Still, she seemed to have the idea that she knew him better than he thought.

“Emilia,” he said in that stern voice he reserved for her when she was being a brat. “You never *hmm* for no reason.”

She giggled, leaning into him playfully as they walked out of Foams. “I just think maybe you like this girl more than you’re admitting.”

Sydney smiled, feeling triumphant, but wouldn’t let Emi in on that. Clearly, she didn’t know him nearly as well as she professed, because she couldn’t be further from the truth. Cheryl was a nice girl. She did have a good head on her shoulders, and while the sex was more than satisfying, after years in denial, he’d finally admitted it. He was still doing what he’d done for too long. He was waiting to feel what he once had for Lynn. But he was beginning to think maybe that was a once-in-a-lifetime thing. Maybe he was only ever meant to feel something like that once in his life and he’d missed the boat. While he was fairly sure he’d been in love with his ex-wife at some point, in hindsight, he knew with all certainty he’d never felt for her what he’d once felt for Lynn.

There was no other way to explain it, except that she'd completed him. For as long as he could remember, every significant moment in his life, when she'd been a part of it, would've felt less meaningful had she not been present to share it with him. When his father had passed so suddenly, Lynn was already married. Yet having her fly out to be at his and his mother's side had somehow made that horrific experience a little less excruciating.

Even now, she was usually the first one he texted or called to tell about anything momentous that happened to him. If she was ever second, she was only second to his mother. Growing up, he'd always been exceptionally close his mother. Once his life turned into a flash of flights, hotels, and conference rooms in opposite ends of the world with an endless array of professional responsibilities, it was hard to stay so close, but he still tried. Often times he called her first when something big was going on.

"I like Cheryl well enough," he said as they walked through the parking lot of their building. "But a whole weekend thing feels like a bit much just yet."

"You've already spent a whole weekend with her," she retorted.

"I knew you'd say that." He shook his head, smiling. "But that was different. I didn't plan it that way. I passed out at her place, and the next day she insisted on making me brunch, and then we spent the day"—he smirked but was unwilling to say it—"*lounging*."

He turned just in time to see her roll her eyes, and he couldn't help laughing.

"That's even more serious than spending the weekend strolling a food festival." She dug in her bag until she came up with her keys and laughed too. "Heck, I'd spend the weekend with Darren at a festival like this, just for the food."

Sydney chuckled, pulling his own keys out of his pocket. "Yeah, but the weekend I spent with her was more of a fluke. I wasn't bringing her around to meet more of my friends. As you said about Darren, it might send the wrong message, one I'm not sure I want to be sending yet."

"Okay," she said in that telling voice of hers again. "We'll just have to agree to disagree." They began parting ways. "Oh, hey, they're supposed to tell me today if I'm in for the internship—"

"You're in," he said before she could finish.

She smiled big now. "I hope so. If I am, I think I want to do something a little special tonight. You have plans?"

Sydney thought about it for a moment. He did, but . . . “I’m free,” he said without giving it further thought.

“Oh, good.” She smiled even bigger. “Meet me by the pool around six? I’ll order pizza. You bring the beer.” He lifted a scolding brow. “Oh, please.” She laughed. “I’ll be twenty-one this year, and it’s not like it’d be my first beer.”

“Alright,” he said, biting his tongue because the words “it’s a date” nearly slipped out. “Six it is,” he said instead. “Pizza and beer poolside because I *know* you got this.”

He shook off what her even bigger smile did to him. He’d known from day one at the repast Emi had the kind of smile that warmed you instantly.

“Good day, my friend,” she said as she always did every morning when they parted ways.

“Good day. And I’d wish you luck, but you don’t need it. You got this.”

The moment he was in his car he made sure his phone auto connected to his blue tooth. He’d make this call before he put too much thought into it. It was no big deal; he’d just reschedule. This was a big deal to Emi, and she was his good friend now. He thought about that for a moment. In a little less than a year, she’d pretty much become one of his *best* friends.

Oh, for crying out loud. Who was he Forrest Gump now? He hit speed dial as he pulled out of the parking structure. “Bubba was my best good friend,” he muttered in his best Forrest voice then laughed. “Morning, Cheryl” he said a little too cheery. “Listen. I’m sorry but something’s come up last minute that I can’t get out of tonight. Maybe we catch that movie another day?”

By the time he reached his office, he’d snuffed out any bothersome thoughts about canceling with Cheryl to spend time with Emi—again. Emi *was* his good friend now, and she’d been nervous about this all week. Now that it would finally be over and she could relax about it, she *should* celebrate and do something *different* for the occasion. So she wanted someone to help her celebrate. That’s what friends were for, right?

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Chapter Six

Emilia

Adjusting her sarong around her waist, Emi glanced up at the sound of the pool gate opening. It wasn't Sydney. She'd waited until she was at the pool area to text him, letting him know the pizza had arrived and to meet her there. She wanted to get there before him and adjust herself—the bikini—accordingly.

They'd hung out by the pool before, but it'd been too cold to get in the water. The times they'd hung out before hadn't been planned either like tonight. Each time she'd been out there reading when he'd shown up to sit and talk with her for a little while. The first time he'd said he saw her from his window and, since he wasn't doing anything, decided to come out. Since she was trying to make it a point to not invite herself over to his place too much, every time she'd gone out there to read since that first time he showed up, she'd secretly willed him to look out his window and see her. He didn't *every* time, but more often than not, he had.

Emi hated being alone. As tight as her family had always been, it was the one thing she disliked the most about going away for college. Her only friend out here besides Sydney was a schoolmate, Deandra. But she lived clear out in East LA. She had to take the train into school during the week. Then there was Darren. At the moment, things with Darren were on the outs. She'd meant it when she'd told Sydney that morning that she wasn't looking for anything serious *with Darren*. The idea of a serious and committed relationship with someone she really cared for, someone who left her breathless and made her heart skip a beat when she least expected it, didn't seem so objectionable anymore.

Darren, however, didn't do any of those things for her. It was why, despite seeing Darren for over a year and even sleeping with him now,

she'd yet to invite Darren back to her place. She'd told him this was her brother's place and he lived with her.

Technically, she hadn't lied. A.J. *was* the one paying for her apartment. His name *was* the one on the lease. And he *did* stay with her when he was in town. Of course, that was only every few months when he played the Dodgers because even when he played the Angels he said it was too far to drive back to downtown LA to stay with her. Darren didn't need to know all that. In fact, she hadn't even told him who her brother was. A.J. had warned her early on about keeping that to herself.

"There's too much shit that comes with being famous or even being related to someone with a little fame," A.J. had said to her and her other siblings. "I'd hate for any of the negative stuff to affect anyone in my family."

The concern went both ways. The last thing Emi wanted was to have any haters or her scorned exes tainting *A.J.* online in any way just to get back at *her*. She was even happier now she never told Darren who her brother was because lately he'd begun to talk about things getting more serious, while she, on the other hand, was thinking of calling the whole thing off with him. It'd begun to feel wrong stringing him along, though she'd always made it clear she wasn't looking for anything serious. Still, she wasn't looking to hurt him.

"Do I even have to ask?"

Emi glanced up as even the sound of Sydney's voice by the gate made her heart flutter. He opened the gate and entered, carrying a small ice chest. He wore swim trunks and a tank top. It was the first time since she'd met him that she'd seen his bare arms and shoulders. She'd seen as far up as his upper biceps when he'd worn short-sleeved T-shirts but never his entire bare shoulders. As expected, for someone who had every other part of his life so under control, his physique was no exception.

Very nice were the two words that came to mind as she took him in.

"I'm in!" she announced cheerfully.

"Was there ever any doubt?" He smiled sweetly, putting the ice chest down. "Congrats."

To her surprise, he leaned in and hugged her lightly. Caught off guard, Emi lifted her arms around him, resting her hands on either of those strong shoulders she'd been admiring. He smelled as good as he always did.

“Thank you,” she said, leaning in and taking in his fragrance with her eyes closed. “What cologne are you wearing?”

“Same one I was wearing last time you asked.” She opened her eyes just in time to see him smirk. “Creed Royal.”

“It smells so good.” She inhaled again. “I’ll have to look into getting my brothers some. I’m sure they’ll like it.”

But there was more to it, and being *this* close to him, she couldn’t deny it any more. It wasn’t just the freshness of his cologne. It was the other fragrance she’d come to love when she was ever close enough to smell it—that delectable scent she wasn’t sure how to label. It was just his special blend of masculinity. It was a reminder that, as well as she knew him now, there were still things about him as his friend she may never get to explore, a thought she didn’t like to ponder too much because it made her a little sad. She’d been pondering a bit too long because she didn’t notice how he was staring at her now too.

Feeling her face flush, she cleared her throat and took a seat by the table with an unlit fire pit in the middle. “So are you getting in the water? I see you have your swim trunks on.”

“Yeah, it’s warm enough. I thought maybe I’ll take a dip, but first this.” He sat down next to her, leaned over, and opened the ice chest, pulling out a bottle of champagne and two champagne flute glasses. “I know you said beer, and I brought a couple of those, but I thought the occasion called for a little of the bubbly.”

“Ooh, champagne and pizza.” She giggled, taking the glass he handed her. “Fancy! I was beginning to feel kind of silly making such a big deal about this. It is just an internship.”

“At the Staples Center,” he said, lifting a brow. “I’m sure they had a boatload who applied. Trust me. We get a ton, and when we weed them out, we take only the ones who highly impressed us.”

Her jaw dropped. “You didn’t tell me this the other night.”

Sydney laughed as he popped open the champagne bottle. “You were nervous enough. Point is this *is* a big deal. Don’t sell yourself short. You earned the right to be proud and make a big deal of it. *And* this is gonna to look awesome on your resume.”

He filled her champagne glass halfway then his own and set the bottle down on the table. “To your bright future.” He held his glass up and Emi

clinked it, her heart swelling the tiniest bit seeing how genuinely proud he seemed. “This is just the beginning.”

“Thank you,” Emi said, bringing the glass to her lips and sipping, and then raised her eyes in surprise. “This is good.” She leaned in to read the label on the bottle. “Bollinger.” Glancing up at Sydney, she took another sip. “I know nothing about champagnes except the only other time I’ve taken a sip was at a wedding. I didn’t care for it. But *this*, I like.”

“It’s my favorite actually. Let’s see how well it pairs with”—Sydney reached over and opened the box of pizza—“pepperoni and black olives. Ooh, good choice of toppings.”

“I remembered seeing some left over in your fridge one time.”

He glanced up at her as he took a slice from the box. “Really? I haven’t ordered pizza in months.”

She shrugged, leaning over to grab a slice for herself. “It was a while back, I guess.”

They talked some more as they refilled their flutes a few more times and ate more pizza. By the time the bottle of champagne was half gone, the wind had picked up a bit and a chill was in the air, so lounging in the pool was out. But since they still had some champagne left, they decided to turn the fire pit on and hang out a while longer.

Hanging out with Sydney was so different from when she hung with Darren. She’d tried not to compare the two since her relationship with each was so different. It wouldn’t be fair. With Sydney, she never experienced any unease or feelings of what she should or shouldn’t say. Like when she complimented him or vice versa, there was never anything questionable about it. Telling him he smelled good—more than once now—might be considered flirting with any other guy, not with Sydney.

Emi *sort of* got how he and Sarah managed to remain friends and only friends for so long. For Emi and Sydney, it was simple—cut and dry. He was beyond dating pampered young girls who still didn’t have much of a clue what their future held. Emi had never even had a real job, not since her high school stint at Little Caesars. This internship was the closest thing to one. Her rent and bills were paid for her. She didn’t even pay for her own car insurance. And there was a reason why she was always so willing to just hang at his place instead of hers. One glimpse of her apartment and he’d know just how unorganized she was compared to him.

She hadn't been privy to his closet, but from the look of his pantry and refrigerator, she was sure his closet put her cluttered one to shame. The man labeled the containers in his pantry. They were all neatly lined up too—tallest in back so everything was clearly visible. The cold-cut drawer was used just for that. Cold cuts were organized in containers and labeled with expiration dates. He didn't even have a junk drawer in his house, or rather he did—at least that's what he called it—but it was neater than most of her regular drawers. Sectioned off and all. Emi had at least three junk drawers at her place. All of them looked like her purse exploded in them and were hopelessly messy.

But aside from that, their lives were that different as well. At twenty-nine, Sydney was the epitome of structured. His entire life was set. He was ready for the next big step in his life—marriage. Emi didn't care what he said now; he'd said it before.

On the other hand, while she'd recently decided a relationship with someone she truly cared about wasn't so unheard of, she still couldn't even make up her mind what to major in. She'd been sure she wanted to get into something in law but had since changed her mind. Now she wasn't sure if she wanted to get into the medical field or engineering. She was all over the place; it was almost embarrassing to talk about. It was probably the only thing she steered clear of when speaking with him, just because it made her feel dumb.

“You know what I don't get?” she said as she held one hand over the fire pit to warm it. “How you and Sarah never fell for each other.”

Glancing at him over the champagne flute Sydney had just refilled, she saw it. It was fleeting and he seemed to catch himself, so it was gone just as fast as it'd appeared. A flash in his eyes had her sitting up straighter and peering at him. In the past months, she'd thought she'd imagined his getting a little weird whenever she brought up the subject of his friendship with Sarah.

He shrugged. “We just never did.”

“Oh, wow, you're lying,” she said, bringing her hand over her gaping mouth. “Something *did* happen.” She practically gasped with a mixture of excitement and a surprising unease. “Does Angel know?”

“Nothing happened,” he said firmly and a little too seriously, considering she was already giggling—nervously. “Ever. But Angel had his doubts for a long time, so I'd appreciate it if you don't go around starting

rumors. Took forever to get that guy to be cool with the fact his wife has such a close male friend.”

“Are you kidding me?” Emi asked. “You really think he’s *cool* with it? I mean not that I know anything or saw anything the one time I was around you two. But no man on this planet would be completely cool about someone like you being his wife’s best friend. If anything, he probably tolerates it. After all these years, I’m sure he doesn’t have much choice. Clearly, if Sarah ever had a choice, she made it years ago and stuck with it, but you’re leaving something out. All this time I thought it was too weird that nothing ever happened between you two. I mean obviously”—she swung her finger back and forth between her and Sydney—“it’s possible for a guy and a girl to be *just* friends. But you and I are just too different. It’d never work.” She felt that familiar slight pang in her heart just saying it but continued. “You and she, though, were the same age. You’d known her for years. And nothing? Please.” She tilted her head. “C’mon what gives? I can see it in your eyes. You’re holding out on me.”

Sydney stared at her for a moment before taking a drink of his cup. “If I tell you—”

Emi gasped before he could finish but brought her hand over her mouth again, pretending to try not to laugh at her own silliness, but secretly felt confused about the unease she was feeling.

“If I tell you, this stays between you and me, okay? You can’t tell *anyone*, not your sisters or brothers, Emi. I mean it.”

“I knew it!” she said, staring at him. “This sounds so juicy already,” she added with a big smile in an attempt to mask all the other confusing emotions she was suddenly feeling. “I promise I won’t tell a soul. Tell me! Tell me!”

“Nothing happened,” he said finally, giving into a smirk and shaking his head. “I hate to break it to you because it’s the truth. *But*”—he took another drink from his flute, his expression going a little harder—“maybe I did have feelings for her once upon a time. Maybe there was a time I’d hoped for more.”

“So why didn’t it?” Emi asked, confused.

“Well”—he lifted and dropped a shoulder—“for the longest time, she insisted we were and always would be *just* friends. Her mom’s the one that brought it up first as we got a little older in high school and we were still spending so much time together—a lot of it alone. Her mom started getting

nervous that, you know, we might start getting ideas about doing *other* stuff. Lynni was really defensive about it, and after hearing her repeat again and again how *ridiculous* the notion was that anything more could ever happen between us, I decided I should keep my feelings to myself. By the time it started feeling impossible to hide what I felt for her, the timing was just bad. Lynn's mom got in some legal trouble, and Lynn was stressed and freaked out about it. Then her mom had to do some jail time, and since her only other family was out in San Diego, Lynni had to move to her aunt's, our senior year in high school. It was supposed to be temporary until her mom got out of jail. Lynni moved under protest. She'd begged her mom to let her stay with my parents and me, but her mother refused. So when she left, she told me that once she turned eighteen and could do what she wanted, regardless of what her mom said, she was moving back to Arizona to finish out her senior year. She was so miserable in the beginning and going through so much I didn't want to complicate things for her any further by telling her my true feelings. I figured it was best to wait until she got back. Neither one of us counted on her meeting Angel."

"Oh, my God," Emi said, staring at him and shaking her head. "So you never told her?"

"I still planned on telling her," he explained. "At first I thought Angel was just some fly-by thing, and he seemed to make her less miserable about having to move, so I thought it was a good thing that she had a distraction. She kept insisting she was still coming home once she turned eighteen. At the time, I'd begun to see someone too, someone who helped to distract *me* and keep *my* mind off Lynni and her new boyfriend."

Emi watched as Sydney stared out at the shimmering moon's reflection in the pool's water. "You still have feelings for her," she said, staring at him.

"No." He shook his head immediately. "I still care for her, yeah. I always will. She is and always will be my good friend. But I'm over what I once felt for her."

"Are you sure?" Emi stared at him skeptically. "You seem really thoughtful all of a sudden."

"I just hadn't thought about that time in my life in a while. It all happened so fast." He turned to Emi and their eyes met. "I had my chance. Angel actually broke up with her because of me."

"He did?" Emi felt her eyes go wide. "So he knew you had feelings for her?"

“He suspected I did. *And* he suspected she had feelings for me. Didn’t buy the whole ‘we’re just friends’ bit, especially since she’d been telling him from day one that her days in San Diego were numbered because she had to get back to Arizona—to me.” Sydney chuckled. “It’s long and convoluted, but because my name could also be a girl’s name, he had the idea the best friend she’d gushed so much about was a girl. So when he found out I was actually a dude and that she’d kept that bit to herself when she realized he might not understand our friendship”—Sydney shook his head, smirking weirdly—“well, let’s just say the shit hit the fan. He was kind of a dick about it too—refused to even hear her out at first. I guess I could see why he was so pissed but mostly insecure about our relationship. He was half right anyway. Only back then I wasn’t about to admit it even to him. She came out to stay with me over Christmas break that year while they were still broken up. It was when I knew for sure Lynn was as hopelessly in love with him as I was with her. I knew at that point I had nothing on him. He’d been her first everything, and she was miserable without him. Anyway, as you can see, he ended up coming around, and by that point, things had moved along with the girl who’d been distracting *me*. So I actually encouraged Lynn to stay in San Diego. I knew she didn’t want to leave him. I’d be going away to college later that year anyway. She’d have no one in Arizona but my parents while her aunt, her cousin, her new friends, Angel, and his whole tribe were in San Diego.” He shrugged. “It all worked out for the best.”

“That’s sad, Sydney.”

“No, it’s not. It’s just fate,” he said, downing what was left of his champagne. “Angel is who she was meant to be with. The guy’s crazy about her too, so I’m happy for her. Oh, and another thing. As an only child myself, I can relate to the desire she’d always had of having a big family. I always wondered what it’d be like too. Of course, the way I felt about her back then, it wouldn’t have mattered to me if I ended up with someone in as small a family as mine. I’m sure that’s not what attracted her to Angel initially, but in the end, she got everything she ever dreamed of: the man of her dreams and a huge family that keeps getting bigger. Happily ever after. It’s what everyone wants, right?”

Emi nodded, feeling for Sydney. She wanted to say “but how about you?” only he already seemed a little down just talking about it. No matter

how happy he said he was for Sarah, it still had to smart every time he saw her. Emi couldn't even imagine.

"So she never even knew." Emi said, thinking out loud.

"Nope," Sydney said matter-of-factly. "And she never will. There's no point. Angel knows," he added, surprising Emi.

"He does? Or do you mean you know deep inside he knows?"

"No, I mean I told him." Sydney chuckled, reaching into the small ice chest and pulling out a beer. "You ready for a beer?"

Emi shook her head, staring at him. "I'm still working on this." She held up her champagne. "You told him?"

"Yeah, when we were all still in college."

The wistful way he spoke of those days was bittersweet to watch. His eyes would get so full of emotion but in a good way more often than poignant. Emi wasn't entirely convinced he was completely over Sarah, but one thing was for sure. What she'd begun to think months ago about him was confirmed in the way he spoke of how he felt for Sarah. He was without a doubt one of the kindest most loyal people she'd ever met, and she felt blessed to have him as a friend.

He told her about how, even after the dust had settled and Angel accepted Sydney as *Lynni's* best friend, it took Angel a long time to truly accept it. Emi didn't interrupt to tell him she was now convinced of what she'd suspected before they'd had this conversation: that even now Angel was likely not completely on board with Sydney and Sarah's close relationship, especially now that Angel knew Sydney had been in love with Sarah once upon a time. Even Emi could already tell this would change the way she'd look at Sarah from here on. How lucky can one girl be? It was almost maddening.

Sydney continued telling her about when he transferred from Columbia to ESU their junior year. Evidently, it'd been a little too close to home for Angel, who'd gotten used to and appreciated Syd attending school clear across the country.

The girl Sydney mentioned distracting him from Sarah when she first moved out to La Jolla turned into his girlfriend, Carina. They were together for years in college. Both attended Columbia. But he explained that, like Angel, she too had issues with his close friendship with Sarah.

Of course.

Finally, years later, after yet another argument over the amount of time Syd spent on the phone with Sarah, Carina gave him an ultimatum: her or Sarah. Syd chose Sarah, and when Sarah had questioned him about the breakup, he'd been honest. In turn, when Angel asked Sarah about it, she was honest too.

“My relationship with Carina had run its course and I knew it. I wasn't about to give up my friendship with Lynni for her. Lynni never gave up on it for Angel.” Sydney laughed. “And that guy *did not* make it a secret that it was what he would've *loved*. So once I was back here in California and without a girlfriend, texting and talking to Lynn a little more often than I had when I was with Carina, and even though Lynni explained it to him the way I had to her, I got a phone call from Angel. He asked me point blank if I was or ever had been in love with her, and I told him the truth.”

“What did he say?”

While this entire conversation fascinated Emi, she was still trying to figure out why the whisper of unease hung in the air the whole time. Emi had heard Sydney slip and refer to Sarah as Lynni as opposed to Lynn in the past. She even heard him call her that the one weekend she was around them and on the phone a few times. She'd never thought much of it, but today it'd begun to get annoying. She hoped she wouldn't make it too obvious this weekend when she'd be able to witness to them together again. Sydney continued to explain how he told Angel it was up to him if he wanted to tell *Lynni* the truth about how he'd *once* felt about her or not but assured him once and for all he had nothing to worry about. Sydney knew Angel was the love of her life. He wouldn't dream of trying to compete with that. As far as he knew, Angel had never told her.

No one finished the final beer in the small ice chest. The champagne had been more than enough for Emi, and Syd explained he didn't like drinking beer too often. He was more of a mixed drink or wine kind of guy but beer could never go wrong with pizza. It was late and they had school and work early the next morning.

They walked back to the elevator where Emi continued to quiz him about his and Sarah's past. The unease was still there and then it hit her. As sure as she'd made it sound earlier when she said it would never work between her and Sydney, she'd begun to question that lately. Now this was absolute proof of something she'd always believed. Guys and girls could never be *just* friends. Even when Sydney first told her he and Sarah had

only been just friends and nothing had ever happened, she'd had her doubts it was so cut and dry. She supposed exceptions were possible as she'd once thought was the case between her and Sydney. That like she'd told him earlier, their friendship was *totally* different.

That belief was based heavily on the fact that Sydney seemed mature and strong enough to handle a friendship with no feelings attached. His relationship with Sarah all these years had been proof of that. Emi had already begun to accept that fact that maybe she could have a crush on him but his willpower would be enough for both of them. There'd never be any temptation they couldn't overcome that might ruin things.

As they neared the elevator where they'd part ways, Emi finally let him off the hook and stopped asking about Sarah. Instead, she leaned against his arm, taking in his delicious scent once again.

"Thank you for the champagne. That was really sweet of you. *And* for indulging my nosey self with your secret. Don't worry. My lips are sealed." She zipped the imaginary zipper across her lips.

"No worries. It was my pleasure to help you celebrate. I'm proud of you and that's what friends are for, right?"

The doors to the elevator opened just as Emi glanced up and gazed into his eyes. "Yes, they are. Good night, my friend." She smiled, feeling the familiar flutter of her heart as he stepped into the elevator. "Meet you at Foams in the morning."

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Chapter Seven

Sydney

Just like the first time they had driven this long distance together, Sydney ignored all his calls, sending them to voicemail. But halfway to La Jolla that weekend he got a call from Cristina, Mando's widow. He had to take it.

"Give me a sec," he said as he hit the answer button on his steering wheel.

Her voice came over the speakers. "Hey, Sydney," she said when he answered.

"Hi, Cristina. How are you?"

"I'm good. I was just calling because the last couple of gatherings over at the Moreno's you didn't make it. I was wondering if you were making it out this weekend."

"I am actually. Halfway there now."

"Oh, good. I have something I want you to have. I almost mailed it out last week but then remembered the restaurant's anniversary thing and thought maybe you'd make it this time."

Sydney glanced at Emi, whose eyebrows lifted curiously, but he smirked, shaking his head, so she'd know there wasn't anything about his friendship with Cristina to be curious about.

"You gonna be at the anniversary thing? Or did you need me to swing by your place?"

"No, I'll be there Sunday. I'll just take it with me. It's nothing big. Just something I know Mando would've liked for you to have. I found it this past year when I was going through some boxes in the garage."

Sydney pressed his lips together, remembering how that felt having to sort through your deceased loved ones things. "Cool," he said, feeling bad that it'd been too long since he'd last called to check on her. "I look forward to seeing you. Everything fine? The kids doing okay?"

Cristina explained everything was fine but cut the call short, saying she'd let him be since he was driving and they'd talk Sunday at the restaurant.

"I didn't realize you and Mando were that close," Emi said once Sydney was off the call.

"Yeah, he was real stand-up guy too. Damn shame he had to die so young. When he told me he was dying and how little time he had left"—he shook his head, looking out the window feeling emotional, so he cleared his throat—"I couldn't believe it. It brought back memories of my dad dying so young. So I promised Mando the last time I was able to talk to him that I'd keep an eye out for his wife and kids. She's got a big family and all. Probably doesn't need me too, but I still try to call or text to check on her every few weeks or so."

"Well, that's something I can certainly relate to," she said with a weak smile. "I lost my both parents suddenly too. How'd your dad die?"

"Brain tumor," he said, staring straight ahead, pondering for a moment the fact that, in this entire year and as much as he and Emi talked, neither had shared about the deaths of his dad or both of her parents. "He was diagnosed at a young age with it. My mom said he was thirty-two. It was benign, and the doctors didn't even see any need for surgery. Then one day ten years later he woke up and couldn't feel his legs. He was rushed to the hospital where the puzzled doctors tried to figure out what was wrong with him. Two days later he was dead. The doctors had kept a close eye on him those ten years he'd had the tumor. It'd barely grown the whole time. When he'd last been checked six months prior to dying, everything had been normal. Turns out the tumor, for reasons unknown, had begun to press against a nerve, the nerve in charge of sending feeling to your legs. In the two days he spent in bed at the hospital, they said he developed a blood clot that ultimately did him in. Of course, they said the change in his tumor must've happened in the months leading up to this because they weren't about to admit they'd missed something on his last checkup."

Sydney shook his head as he turned to glance at Emi, who, as usual, seemed to be hanging on his every word. It was just one of the things he found so endearing about her. Just like when he'd told her the truth about his past feelings for Sarah, he had her undivided attention.

Even while talking about something this heavy, just one look at those profoundly curious eyes made him smile. "My parents had me when they

were only seventeen. So even though he was forty-two when he died, he at least didn't leave any small children behind. Yet my mom still had a *really* difficult time dealing with losing him so suddenly and unexpectedly. I saw the pain she endured, and I wish it on no one. I know Mando's death has got to be hard on Cristina. It's why I feel this *need* to stay in touch and check in on her."

"Wow," Emi said exhaling. "I'm sorry about your dad. I can't even imagine." She shook her head as if to take it back. "No, I guess I can. Only with my parents it was different. They both went missing for some time before we found out they were gone. So there was this added element of desperate hope that they'd be found alive."

"Missing?" Sydney turned to her, understanding now why neither of them had shared such heavy stories. "What happened to them?"

"The worst thing was it didn't even happen to them together. We had to go through the whole waiting and hoping thing twice. My mom was murdered," she said as she said many things, as if what she'd just said wasn't shocking to hear. "She was found strangled in an alley after she'd gone missing for over a week. She worked several jobs, and one of them was bartending at a bar in the evenings. They said the man who was convicted of her murder had become obsessed with her and waited for her one night after her shift."

Sydney still felt speechless but spoke up anyway when she didn't go on. "I think Lynn mentioned something about Romero's aunt going missing and then later being found dead way back."

"Yeah, it's been a while. I'd just started high school. It was a really tough time for us because not a year later my dad disappeared," she explained further and now Sydney felt glued to *her* words. "His wasn't a murder or anything like that. He had a bad heart and was on a business trip up north when he went missing. Never arrived at his hotel or the meeting he was going to. They found him in his car at a truck stop. His credit card receipts showed that was the last place he'd purchased anything. Since it was a truck stop in the middle of a long stretch of nothing, they think anyone that had seen him must've assumed he was just taking a snooze because he used his card there two days prior to being found."

"Holy shit," Sydney said, turning to her again. "Here I thought I had it bad."

“No, yours probably was a lot worse than mine. I mean my mom’s was a million times worse than my dad’s passing. Don’t get me wrong,” she said quickly. “I loved my dad and all, but he hadn’t lived with us in years. We lived in Dallas, and when my parents divorced, he moved out to California. So it’d been years since I’d had him in my life on a regular basis. In fact, I rarely saw him, so it wasn’t too hard to get used to him being out of our lives for good. But he was no deadbeat. He paid child support up until the day he died since A.J. and I were still minors. And it was why we ended up moving to San Diego. He left us his house and a good chunk of change.”

The conversation on the way to La Jolla had been interesting. While it was understandable why neither would be eager to share this harsh part of their lives, it just demonstrated, especially after also confessing about his real feelings for Lynn back in the day, how much his friendship with Emi had progressed. She’d since quizzed him again about Cheryl, insisting things had to be getting more serious than he admitted and questioned if maybe he wasn’t a little commitment-phobic. The only thing he’d admitted was that, yes, so far Cheryl had been the only girl he’d dated lately that he *might* consider a relationship with. But he wasn’t there yet.

Arriving at the street festival with Emi felt a little weird. Strolling through the crowd proved a little tricky, and occasionally Emi had reached out and grabbed his shirt to keep them from getting separated. At one point as they maneuvered through a crowded area, she’d held on to his lower arm, which felt awkward, so Sydney had just slipped his hand into hers. It almost felt as if they were a couple like the many around them. As much as he would’ve liked to just keep her hand in his because it felt perfect—it was such a simple gesture, yet feeling her soft delicate hand in his had his heart racing—he was afraid to spook her. So the moment they were out of the crowd he’d let go and neither commented about it.

They’d gone straight to the festival because her brothers were both working and her sister Liv was down there helping out. Apparently, she and Sal’s wife’s sister were best friends now, and Liv agreed to go down to help out since they were always so busy.

They stopped at a few of the food stands to buy samples. Sydney shook off the unease of possibly having spooked Em, remembering how back in the days before Angel and even a few times afterward he and Lynn had held hands on occasion. Yet they’d never been romantic at all.

Lynn hadn't been lying when she said each year the festival got even bigger. The place was *packed*. They stood under the shade for a while, listening to a band playing at one of the stages. "She's good." Emi turned to him wide-eyed as the girl on stage belted out an Adele song.

"Yeah, she is."

He flinched when he felt someone tap his lower back. He and Emi turned to a smiling Lynn and Valerie. "When did you guys get here?" Lynn asked, hugging him then Emi.

"Just got here a few minutes ago," Sydney explained as he hugged Valerie. "We were making our way down to your stand next."

"We're playing hooky for a little bit," Valerie said, smiling big as she held up a beer cup.

"It's our break actually," Lynn clarified. "We've been here since this morning. We were due."

She, too, held a cup in her hand. Sydney didn't even have to ask; he already knew it was wine. Lynn didn't do beer. She suddenly turned to Valerie, eyes wide open. "Is your friend here?"

Valerie's eyes opened just as wide as she slipped her hand in her pocket and pulled out her phone. "Good question. Let me text her."

Lynn turned to Sydney with a playfully remorseful expression. "Don't get mad, okay?"

"About what?"

"Valerie has a single friend who we sort of told about you."

Sydney began rolling his eyes, holding in a groan.

"Hear me out, okay? She's been divorced for a couple of years. She's the IT girl at Valerie's office. Super cute, no kids, *and* she enjoys sailing."

"And long walks on the beach?" Sydney laughed.

Lynn giggled, rolling her eyes playfully in Emi's direction. "Doesn't she sound perfect?"

"Yeah, so why is she single?" Sydney asked.

"Same reason you are," she said, taking a sip of her wine with a smirk. "She just hasn't found the right person. I haven't actually met her, but I've seen pictures. She's super cute."

"Yeah, you said that already," Sydney smirked skeptically.

"Her name is Lucy. Look," Valerie said, holding out her phone to him.

Emi leaned in with him to study the photo. She *was* cute. "She looks really young."

“She does,” Valerie agreed, putting her phone back in her pocket. “And she is but not *too* young. She’s twenty-four, a tech genius, and she practically squealed when she realized the single tech friend I was talking about was you.” Valerie’s brows bounced as she sipped her beer. “She’s already a fan. That’s probably her.” Valerie pulled the phone out of her pocket again.

“Isn’t that crazy?” Lynn said, smiling widely, her attention going from Sydney to Emi. “Valerie just thought because you’re both single and techy you might hit it off, and come to find out she knows all about you and thinks you’re *hot!*”

“She couldn’t make it today after all,” Valerie informed them with a frown after reading the text, “but she says she’ll be there tomorrow at the restaurant.”

“Perfect,” Lynn said.

“Don’t I get to weigh in on this?” Sydney asked.

“No,” Lynn and Valerie said at the same time then laughed.

“What’s there to weigh in on?” Valerie asked. “You just meet her and talk a little. If you hit it off, you exchange emails or tap phones or whatever two techy people do. It’s not like this is a private blind date. We’re all gonna be there. I’ll just introduce you two. No big deal.”

Sydney gave Valerie an unconvinced look. He hadn’t prepared for anything like this. He’d looked forward to just catching up with Lynn and the gang, not an awkward blind date. And he didn’t care what they said. It sure as hell sounded like one, a setup anyway.

Curiously, Emi hadn’t said much the entire time. She wasn’t one to stay quiet so long, but he supposed she couldn’t add much to this conversation since she didn’t know anything about Lucy.

They returned to the huge setup Moreno’s had at the food festival. It was easily the largest one there. So many people were working it Sydney had to wonder who was back at the actual restaurants.

They entered the back where Angel, his brothers, and Romero were playing dice against the curb. “Aren’t you guys supposed to be working?” Emi asked.

It was one of the first things she’d said since they started walking back to the tent together. The guys all turned and greeted him and Emi. “I didn’t know you were coming down,” Romero said to Emi. “Did A.J. come with you?” he asked, looking behind them.

“No, I came with Sydney.”

Romero eyed Sydney, a bit questioning, and then nodded. “That’s right. You two live in the same building.” Just like that he was off to the next subject. “You hear about Sabian?”

Sydney saw not just Emi’s eyes go wide but also her sister’s. She’d just joined them. “Did he sign?” Liv asked before Emi could answer.

“Sure did,” Romero smiled, smug. “Seventy-seven big ones over the next three years, but he’s worth every penny. Your brother’s going to the World Series this year. Mark my words.”

Emi and Liv squealed so loud they had everyone’s attention.

“Who’s Sabian?” Lynn asked.

“Who’s Sabian?” Romero asked obnoxiously loud.

“Easy,” Angel said, shoving him as he walked by him and pecked Lynn.

“Only the best shortstop the big leagues have seen since Jeter,” Romero said, ignoring Angel’s shove. “Between him, A.J., Marcelo Banks, and Prieto, we might be looking at a dynasty team here.”

“Is he the hot one that plays for the Royals?” Valerie asked.

Alex turned, narrowing his eyes on his wife, and she blew him a kiss with a big smile. “I’m just asking.”

“Yes, that’s the one,” Emi said a little too excited. “And we might actually get to meet him now.”

Valerie’s jaw dropped. “I hadn’t even thought of that.”

“Yeah, well don’t start,” Alex said with a playful glare.

Romero smirked but continued, quoting stats and arguing his theories and predictions for the Padres’ *dynasty* team.

“Relax,” Alex said, his face souring. “He’s good, but not *that* good.”

“Are you kidding me?” Romero said, getting fired up the way Sydney had seen him do plenty of times.

Sydney noticed the difference between Livi’s and Emi’s interest and excitement about this versus Lynn’s and Valerie’s. Valerie had already wandered away and made herself a plate of something. Lynn turned to Sydney, losing interest as well. “You hungry?”

“A little,” he said, glancing around. “Whatcha got?”

“Let me show you,” she said then turned to Emi. “Emi, you hungry? Syd’s gonna eat.”

Emi barely glanced their way to say she was fine for now and got right back to listening to Romero still talking about Sabian’s stats. “The guy

batted over four hundred almost the entire season last year.”

Sydney could understand why Emi and her sisters would seem so excited about this news. Romero was right about one thing. The Padres did have a damn good chance of at least making it to the World Series this year with Sabian, A.J., and those other guys he’d mentioned. If A.J. were Sydney’s brother, he’d be just as excited.

After making Sydney a plate with several of the samples on the menu, they stepped outside the hot tent and stood under the shade of a tree behind the tent while Sydney ate.

“I talked to your mom the other day,” Lynn said, sipping the cup she’d been holding that whole time. “Well, texted. She’s getting better about responding. We went back and forth for a little bit.”

“Oh, yeah?” Sydney asked, surprised.

He knew Lynn still stayed in touch with his mom even after all these years. But he thought it was just through Facebook, the *only* social media his mom subscribed to.

“I texted her earlier in the week to let her know about the festival. Last time I saw her, she asked me to remind her the next time it came around.” Lynn glanced behind him as if to check for something. “She asked about Emi.”

Sydney coughed, taking a swig of his water but managed to not have the cough attack he thought he might. “What about her?” he asked casually, but like Lynn, he discreetly lowered his voice too.

Lynn shrugged. “Just asked what I knew about her. She said every time she’s talked to you lately you mention Emi and that you seem different these days. Happier.”

He narrowed his eyes at Lynn but kept eating, not wanting to let on how uncomfortable he suddenly felt. “Happier? Did she think I was depressed or something?”

“I dunno,” Lynn said, but Sydney knew her too well.

She knew *exactly* why his mother had asked, and it was why she brought it up now—Emi wasn’t around to hear her.

“Emi lives in the same building as I do. She’s around a lot, so I guess I’ve mentioned it a few times to my mom. I’ve been seeing a lot more of Cheryl lately.” He made sure he threw that in because he could see it in Lynn’s eyes. She knew why his mother had asked and was probably

wondering the same thing herself. “But I don’t think that makes me happier or anything.”

“That’s right. I forgot about Cheryl,” she said, her eyes widening.

Obviously!

“Does Emi know about Cheryl?” Lynn asked, her voice once again lowering.

Sydney laughed, more out of exasperation than anything, but he also wanted to make a point how ridiculous the question was to him. “Yeah. Why wouldn’t she?”

“Oh, I don’t know.” Again with the innocent little shrug. “She’s normally so cheery and talkative, and she got a little quiet after hearing about the setup we have for you and Lucy tomorrow. I almost felt bad like maybe you haven’t told me something about you and her—”

“Nope,” he said before she could even finish that last statement. “Nothing like that *at all*.” This time he did the innocent shrug. “I’d tell you if there was. But there isn’t. I’m seeing Cheryl, and Emi’s seeing someone too—has been for over a year.”

“Really?” Lynn tilted her head, her beautiful green eyes shimmering up at him. “Funny, I’ve never heard her talk about a boyfriend, and she’s never brought anyone to any of the family functions, aside from you, that is.”

Sydney smirked now. “Lynn—”

“I’m just saying.” She smiled a little too smugly. “She never has. And then your mom talked about how often *you* mention Em and how you seem happier. It wouldn’t be unheard of, you know. You don’t have to get all defensive about it.”

“I’m not getting defensive about it,” he said, taking a bite of his fish taco in an attempt to not sound as bothered by this as he really was.

He chewed slowly, swallowed, and then took a swig from his water bottle. “And I know it’s not unheard of. It’s just not true,” he said simply.

“Good enough,” she said.

But it wasn’t and Sydney knew it. Lynn wasn’t going to let this go. Only now she had him thinking. He thought he’d imagined Emi being a little too quiet about their Lucy talk. Lynn had noticed too? He dared not ask her. He could already see the wheels in her head spinning.

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Since Lynn and Valerie had been there all morning, they left with their husbands less than an hour after Sydney and Emi arrived. A good thing too because Liv had left before them, and Emi promised she'd go by her place later that evening before heading to her brother's home.

If Lynn knew Sydney would be spending the next few hours strolling the festival with Emi then heading to her sister's to hang out with them since Liv had invited him too, he was certain Lynn would be smiling smugly again. Especially since slipping his hand in hers as they made their way through the crowds happened several more times. A few times he left it there even after they'd broken through the crowd. Their eyes had met during one of those instances, but neither said anything, and Sydney refused to make more of the twinkle he'd thought he'd seen in her eyes.

They ate until they couldn't eat anymore then watched a few of the bands playing. Sydney tried not to think about his conversation with Lynn. He also made note of what his mom had said and would make sure to tone down how much he mentioned Emi from then on. He hadn't realized he'd done it so much his mom was questioning it. But he seemed happier?

So she was fun to hang out with. Big deal. He was seeing Cheryl. Was no one listening? He was certain he'd mentioned Cheryl to his mom at some point.

They'd talked about many things during their time at the festival: the food, the music, and Sabian signing with the Padres. Sydney had been right. Emi said all her siblings were excited about the guy signing and the season that just started. She'd gotten a few texts from her brothers during the festival. They were all jazzed about it.

Curiously, it wasn't until they were in the car, putting on their seatbelts, when she brought up the setup between him and Lucy the next day.

"So if you hit it off with Lucy, is that it for Cheryl?"

Sydney glanced at her casually, cursing the fact that his talk with Lynn today along with the innocent hand-holding they'd done made Em's question—one that normally would've felt like any of her other questions—feel *different*.

"I don't know," he said, pulling out of the parking spot. "I guess it all depends. I'm not looking forward to meeting her like this. They pretty much put me on the spot. It feels like a blind date—something I hate—but what was I supposed to say?" He shrugged with a frown. "We'll see how this goes. But if you're asking if I'd see them simultaneously, no, I don't do

that. I'm sure Cheryl wouldn't appreciate knowing I'm dating someone else on the side."

"You know when I go out with other guys it's only when Darren and I are on a break."

Sydney nodded, not sure why she felt the need to clear that up, but he supposed his comment made her want to.

"Okay," he said.

"What does that mean?"

He turned to her with a smirk, but she wasn't smiling. "What do you mean? It means okay."

"Are you getting all judgy on me?"

"Judgy?" he asked, feeling oddly amused because she'd never gotten pissy with him before. "No. When have I ever gotten judgy with you?"

"It just sounded like you were trying to say something with that '*I don't do that*' comment and then your '*okay*' like, '*whatever you say*.'"

Now he *had* to laugh. He'd thought her adorable on many occasions, but he never thought someone's pissy side could be adorable. "I didn't say it like that." He turned to her as they came to a stop. She stared straight, ahead her brow sharply arched. "Are you seriously upset with me?"

"I'm just wondering if all this time you've thought less of me for seeing other guys while I've been off and on with Darren. Makes me wonder what else you've been judging about me."

"I haven't been thinking less of you," he assured her. "And who am *I* to judge *you*? You've said from the beginning you're not looking for anything serious with Darren. You're young. You *should* be weighing all your options, playing the field. Good for you. Things are just different with Cheryl and me. That's all I meant by '*I don't do that*.' Trust me. As open as our friendship has always been, I'd think you'd know if I was judging you."

She finally turned to him, the corner of her lip tugging slightly. "Oh," she said then winced. "Sorry. Defensive much?"

Sydney shook his head but laughed. "You're too much."

Within minutes, they were back to their usual banter. But something felt different. It was irritating as hell. Were a few comments from Lynn and something as meaningless as holding her hand—albeit it sped up his heart rate *every* time—really going to have him analyzing everything Emi said from here on? He'd since decided whatever reaction she'd had to them trying to set him up was a fluke. She'd teased him a few days ago about not

admitting he was feeling more for Cheryl. She'd known about every date he'd had in the last year. Not once had he noticed any strange reactions or mood swings from her about it. Just like he'd never had issues when she told him about Darren or any other guys she dated. Why would *this* bother her?

Clearly, Lynn still had his mom's thoughts in her head and, like him, was probably watching Emi too closely now. *He* refused to. It was ridiculous.

Her sister's home was bigger than he'd expected. She lived in a gated community with nothing but other huge homes in it. But then Emi explained Livi didn't just have overbearing brothers to deal with now. Her husband Lorenzo was just as protective. "Like with my apartment and because of what our family endured with my mom and all, he too wanted to make sure Livi and the baby are in a well-secured area when he's not home with them. Lorenzo runs a highly successful business, so he spared no expense."

"A.J. already has a photo shoot scheduled with Sabian," Livi said as soon as they were in her house and she'd hugged Emi again.

"You're kidding me," Emi said just as giddily as she'd been about this at the festival earlier that day.

Livi's husband, Lorenzo, invited Sydney to come watch television with him while the girls chatted in the kitchen. It made this feel even more like what his mom and Lynn were insinuating. He hated to admit it, but the thought didn't seem like such an implausible one anymore. Still, he focused on the game Lorenzo was watching.

Emi and Livi walked in the room. Emi held a baby in her arms. "Hey," Lorenzo said, smiling big. "Little man's up?"

"He sure is," Emi said in a coddling voice. "He's excited about the whole Sabian thing too."

Emi sat next to Sydney, and he leaned in to look at the little chubby dude. He couldn't be more than a few months old. "He looks like you," Sydney said to Lorenzo.

"Yes, he's a Moreno through and through." Emi sighed as if disappointed. "He even has a dimple. I'll see if I can get him to smile so you can see it." Emi started cooing.

"You know," Liv said, smiling big, "I saw a photo of the last two girls Sabian dated. They both had something in common."

Emi glanced up from the baby and stared at her sister. “What’s that?”

Liv tapped her behind, and Sydney could see now what Emi had meant about her and her sister having the same bubble butt. “Big booties.” Her brows bounced up and down, reminding him of Valerie today.

“*And?*” Lorenzo asked, not even trying to hide the annoyance.

Liv laughed. “He’s only twenty-three, perfect for Emi, honey. She *does* have a lot of booty for him to notice.”

Lorenzo rolled his eyes. “Here we go.”

Liv sauntered over and sat on her husband’s lap, kissing him sweetly. “I’m just saying. It could happen. Imagine that? We’d have two ballplayers in the family.”

Emi laughed then gasped. “Oh look! Look!” she said, pointing at baby Enzo.

Her laughing had made him smile, and there it was: just like Lynn’s husband and all his siblings, a dimple deep into his chubby cheek. Only difference was he had just the one. Angel and his siblings all had two, one in each cheek. Sydney had spent years hating dimples. But he smiled now at *Little Man’s*. On him, it *was* cute.

They all talked sports, the food festival, and the baby, and Sydney hadn’t even realized the talk of Sabian and Emi’s and Liv’s enthusiasm about meeting the guy were beginning to irritate him until he caught himself rolling his eyes. Luckily, no one else had caught it.

As it got later and they began talking about leaving, Liv turned to Sydney. “Where are you staying, Sydney?”

“I’ll get a room,” he said.

“What?” she asked, surprised. “With everyone you know here?”

“I’ve always gotten a room.”

Not necessarily true. One time way back he stayed at Lynn and Angel’s until he decided he’d feel more comfortable at a room on his own.

“I used to travel so much I accumulated a lot of free nights with different hotel chains, mostly the Hyatt. And there’s one right by here.” It was the same line he’d been feeding Lynn for years. Liv still seemed unconvinced or like she felt bad. “From where Emi says your brothers live, it’s right by there actually, so it all works out.”

They said their good-byes and left. Sydney kept having to squash the thought of how much it felt like he and his *girlfriend*—one he’d just spent an awesome day with—were leaving her sister’s house. Worst yet, it felt

more comfortable than any other girlfriend's family he'd ever visited. Visiting Sheena's family had never felt this pleasant and comfy either.

Halfway to her brothers' home, Emi turned to him. "It does seem silly that with my brother's place being so huge you'd waste your free nights at a hotel."

No way.

Sydney turned to her, not sure how to respond to that, but he had to draw the line somewhere. This was too much.

"I mean if you thought my sister's house was big my brother's is even bigger. A.J. had no choice but to invest his money. With no write offs, he was getting killed with taxes. The beach spread he bought is enormous. And tonight all my brothers are gone. I'll be in that ginormous house all by myself. Only reason I didn't stay at Livi's is because I was looking forward to having breakfast ready for them tomorrow morning when they get home like old times. But you'd actually be keeping me company if you stayed there with me tonight."

She made a silly pleading face that had him laughing nervously. Even that expression was adorable on her, damn it.

"I don't know," he started to say. "Won't your brothers mind that I stay with you overnight?"

"It's not like we'll be sleeping in the same bed," she said, her voice too cheery as if she already knew she was getting her way with this. "There're plenty of empty guest rooms you can choose from. It'll be fun," she added with a big smile, "like a sleepover."

*Great.* Just what he needed. But as usual, Emi's smug smile said it all. She already knew it. This *was* happening. Like all the other decisions and rules he'd made when it came to his relationship with Emi from day one, he was about to go against his better judgment and go along with whatever she instigated. Because it was all a part of this innocent *friendship*.

Damn it all to hell.

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## Chapter Eight

### **Emilia**

This was the first time Emi had brought a friend back to this house since her brother had purchased it last year. Escrow closed just weeks after she'd moved to Los Angeles the first time, so not even her high-school friends, who she'd pretty much lost touch with already, had seen it. And she didn't trust any of her new friends to let them in on this part of her life. Well, none but Sydney.

It was what she loved about the dynamic of their friendship. It was free of any complicated what-ifs. She didn't have to worry—like with Darren—that things might sour someday and she might have to deal with a hateful ex who might spread stuff about her family's private lives. But it was what she loved about Sydney all around. Even if things would somehow sour between them, she knew in her heart he didn't have a hateful bone in his body. Already she could say with all certainty he was the best friend she'd ever had.

Emi pushed the less certain, yet gnawing, thought away, the one that made her invite him to stay overnight with her in the first place. She was trying to make up for the knee-jerk reaction she'd had in the car just after leaving the festival. She wasn't even sure why she'd reacted that way to his "I don't do that" comment. Except for the times he'd slipped his big hand into hers, which had her insides going nuts, the rest of day had felt off for some reason, despite the great time they'd had at the festival.

Bringing Sydney back to her brother's place seemed like a good way to end things on a more positive note, one that would dispel any possible notion he may have that she'd been upset with him in any way, for *any* reason. God forbid he should think that, after a few instances of handholding, things were already changing in their friendship.

Her plan had almost worked. It'd been late when they got back to her brother's house. By the time she was done giving him the grand tour of the place, it was way too late to stay up and keep chatting, so she'd showed him to one of the guests rooms, and they called it a night.

Emi decided to take a shower in her room and hadn't bothered to close the bedroom door since she'd planned on changing in the bathroom. It wasn't until halfway through her shower that she realized no towels were in that bathroom.

"Damn it," she muttered after standing in the shower, trying to drip dry for a few seconds before stepping out.

She grabbed the only things she had to cover up with, her pj's: a short set and her undies. But she didn't want to soak her pajama shorts and camisole, so she put on her panties only and stepped out into her bedroom quickly.

"Whoa!"

Sydney's voice made her freeze and clutch her hands in front of her. He was at her door and for a moment stood there staring at her as stunned as she felt. Then he seemed to snap out of it and turned his back to her immediately.

"I'm so sorry," he said as she scrambled to grab the bedspread and cover herself with it. "I went out to get something from my car and got lost trying to get back to my room. This place is huge."

"It's okay," she said, trying not to sound as befuddled as she felt. "Your room is two doors down to the right on the right-hand side."

"Thanks," he said, taking a step then stopping but not turning to face her. "Again, Em, I'm sorry."

"No worries, really."

After the weird day they'd had, Emi didn't want things to feel even weirder when they awoke. So she threw the cover-up she usually wore over her bathing suit over her pajama shorts and camisole and walked over to his room. His door was half open, and a light was on in his room, but she still knocked. "Come in."

Emi almost froze again when she entered. He was sitting on his bedspread, wearing basketball shorts and nothing else. His bare chest and abs were just as she'd imagined—as perfect as everything else about him. But she was here to make things less weird not worse, so she tried not to react or stare too hard.

“Listen. I just wanted to make sure you’re not feeling weird or bad about walking in on me. I know it was an easy mistake. It took me a while to get used to this place.”

“Well, I did feel pretty stupid”—he smirked—“but I’m glad you know it wasn’t intentional.”

“Oh, I know it wasn’t,” she assured him, still unwilling to just say good night and leave.

A part of her was so tempted to walk all the way in, sit with him, and chat as she knew they could easily do for hours. But another part of her, the one making her so confused lately, didn’t trust herself to not want to do something inappropriate. Like touch him. Not just his hand either as she’d done today at the festival. The thought of running her hands over those abs and chest had her lady parts tingling—again.

“Okay,” she said when she realized she’d zoned out staring at his abs and he wore a strange smirk now. “Glad we got that straight. See you in the morning downstairs for breakfast.”

The smirk morphed into a sweet smile. “Good night, Em.”

Emi said good night and walked out, rushing toward her room. “Yeah, that fixed things right up,” she muttered under her breath.

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The next morning she’d been up early so she could get breakfast started before her brothers got home. Thankfully, no lingering weirdness remained between her and Sydney. He’d ambled into the kitchen, and to her relief, everything felt just as it always did.

Her brothers had been pleasantly surprised to see her and the grand breakfast she had for them when they did arrive but were even more surprised to see Sydney with her. Emi had been quick to explain when she saw the expressions on their faces after she informed them Sydney had spent the night.

“I thought it was silly for him to pay for a hotel when we had more than enough room here for him. Might as well get some use out of all those guest rooms.”

Unpredictably, her brothers had both nodded in agreement, and before another word was uttered about Sydney spending the night, they were back to the subject of the awesome lineup for the Padres this season.

So Sydney's spending the night with her and her having to inform her brothers about it, despite last night's hiccup, had gone smoother than she'd expected. Even after breakfast when he'd excused himself to go shower and change and she was left alone with her brothers, they didn't admit to any *true* feelings they might've held back. To her surprise, Isaiah even seemed pleased about his being there. His only comment after Sydney left the room was, "Yeah, it would've been dumb for you to be here all alone last night and for him to pay for a room with all the extra rooms we have here."

Then Nathan added, "Let him know he's welcome to stay anytime he comes down here."

Emi had stared at them for a moment as they all cleared the kitchen. It almost felt like she was in the *Twilight Zone*. Her brothers were never this agreeable when it came to the guys in her life. But she supposed it made sense in this case. Everyone knew she and Sydney were just good friends—nothing more.

They all left in separate cars to the restaurant's anniversary shindig. Isaiah had a date he was picking up, and Nathan had somewhere to go afterward. It was just as well. Emi and Sydney would be heading back to Los Angeles directly after they left Moreno's anyway.

As always on a Sunday, but even more so for today's special occasion, Moreno's was *packed*. Mariachis strolled around as busy servers and hostesses rushed around them. Emi and Sydney walked up to one of the banquet rooms reserved for family and close friends. It was set up the same as downstairs: buffet style with their own personal musical trio walking around playing music and singing.

Almost immediately, they were met by Sarah and Valerie. After saying their hellos to a few more people, Sarah showed them to the tables where Moe and his family, Emi's uncles, and most of the Morenos were all sitting. They hadn't been sitting long before Cristina came over to say hello to them.

Emi found herself watching the conversation between Sydney and Cristina a little closer than she would normally. The thing she'd mentioned finding in Mando's boxes turned out to be a fog bell for his sailboat.

"It's all brass," Cristina explained. "He'd ordered it online, said he was going to give it to you for your birthday last year. He mentioned having something engraved on it, the name of your boat maybe. I don't know. Then he got sick and everything sort of just got put on hold. I don't even

remember it coming in the mail. He must've gotten it, put it aside, and, after his diagnosis, forgotten it."

"Totally understandable," Sydney said, examining his gift with a smile. "This is really nice."

Sydney had since taken Emi out a handful of times on his sailboat. She didn't know a whole lot about boats, but she did know his boat didn't have a name. He'd told her he was waiting for the perfect name to come to him and it just hadn't yet.

Emi studied them closely as they spoke, but nothing she'd suspected was confirmed. Once Cristina had gone back to her table, Emi felt silly and nosey about watching them so closely. Since he was so touched by her situation, the idea had festered from that first day at the repast that he might have another interest in her. That coupled with the phone call he'd gotten from her when he'd hardly mentioned Cristina at all this entire year had made Emi *curious*.

Cristina had only been gone a few moments when Valerie and Sarah came over. After their initial hellos, he was quickly whisked away because Valerie said she had *someone* she wanted him to meet. Valerie and Sarah stayed with Sydney and the girl she presumed was Lucy, a tall girl just a few inches shorter than Sydney. She was blond and skinny with almost no curves at all, just a few things Emi knew, for a fact, were not Sydney's type. Emi ate and chatted with the family all the while sneaking glances at Sydney and Lucy, who'd sat down to eat together at the table she'd been at when they first walked him over to her.

Emi thought Sydney would chat with the girl for a little bit then make his way back to where she sat with her family. Instead, Valerie joined them at their table for a while where they all chatted even longer. All three got up and exited the banquet room. From the looks of it, because Valerie was pointing at things on the wall and ceiling the whole time even as they walked out, it seemed she was giving them a tour. The restaurant really was quite impressive.

Nathan and Isaiah, who didn't talk on the phone with her as often as Livi, quizzed Emi as they always did on school, her apartment, and her car. She informed them everything was fine and she was moving right along with her school work. She told them more about the internship she'd be starting that week when she got back to Los Angeles. Since she was still undecided about her major, she'd chosen to try and get into the Staples

Center as a generic intern, and she could still get credit for practical professional experience. At the same time, she was once again floundering about yet another major possibility—communications.

She'd requested the possibility of shadowing the broadcasters at different sports and entertainment-related events. The Staples Center had a host of different venues going on all year long. There were also a lot of perks being an intern there.

"That's so cool," Rosie said.

"It sounds so interesting and fun," Liv added, smiling.

"Doesn't it?" Emi asked, feeling a little more excited each time she spoke about it.

Sydney, Valerie, and Lucy re-entered the banquet room all smiles. Emi watched as Valerie went her separate way and Sydney walked Lucy back to her table. He then proceeded to sit down with her even as Valerie left them alone again. For someone not into blondes and who'd mentioned more than once how he fancied girls with curves, he seemed awfully smitten with *Lucy*.

"Is that his girlfriend?" Livi asked, pulling Emi's attention back to her own table.

"What?" Emi asked, taking a sip of her water cursing her already heating face.

The question made Rosie and Sal's wife Grace, who thankfully were the only ones within hearing distance and paying attention, turn in Sydney and Lucy's direction. That only made Emi's face heat further. She had no choice but to glance casually in Sydney's direction again and shrug. "No, but I think Valerie is trying to set him up with her friend. Someone she works with, I guess."

"Calm down, Max," Moe said with a laugh, making them all turn. "Look at this guy. He's a minute away from getting his period."

Everyone laughed as Max retorted and thankfully their obnoxiously funny debate took the attention away from Sydney and Lucy.

"And how do *you* feel about that?" Livi asked.

Emi turned to Liv now, surprised to see the arched brow and a little stunned by the question. Especially since her sister had lowered her voice as if to keep the question just between the two of them.

"What do you mean?"

Livi's eyes narrowed, but she glanced around. Moe and Max's loud debate still had everyone's attention. "Seems you two have gotten pretty close. You brought him over last night, and you seemed so comfortable with him. Even Lorenzo commented on it. Then he spends the night with you—"

"In a guest room," Emi interjected a bit too sharply, feeling alarmed by where this seemed to be going. "He's just my friend, Liv, my very good friend."

"And that's what I thought despite everything else I've picked up on from you lately, but then I see you stare daggers at him and his little friend over there and—"

"I was not staring daggers!"

Was she? What the hell was wrong with her? She'd never had issues hearing about him and Cheryl or anyone else he'd ever dated for that matter.

Livi's expression softened as she wiped her mouth with a napkin. "Okay, maybe I just misread your expression. Relax."

"If anything," Emi added because she felt like she *had* to and because it was the only way she could explain it even to herself, "maybe I just got a little too used to having him to myself all day yesterday. He didn't sound too wild about being set up for this. Thought it would be awkward. So I'm just surprised he's been over there this whole time. But that's it."

That *was* it. She'd never been good about sharing. Up until today the entire trip he *had* been all hers. It just felt a little weird now to be . . . ignored—forgotten about. If someone had tried to set her up with anyone today, she was pretty sure she would've made her way back to her friend and trip companion sooner than this. It just seemed a little rude.

As if her middle-school attitude about her best friend not paying attention to her hadn't been obvious enough, things only got worse. Valerie and Sarah sat down with her and Livi. "I think they're hitting it off," Valerie said, looking in Sydney's direction with a big smile.

Now Emi had to sit there and pretend she felt as excited about this as Valerie seemed to be. Valerie told them all about how *thrilled* Lucy had been about this all week.

"She was so bummed yesterday when she wasn't able to get out of some family obligation to make the festival." Valerie glanced back at Sarah with a big smile. "She said it would've been a perfect and romantic *first date*"—

Valerie made air quotes with her fingers—“to remember forever if they do hit it off.”

Emi smiled when Valerie glanced at her. The thought was as much a relief as it was annoying. If that had been the case, Emi would've had no choice but to bum a ride home with her sister or someone else, and she would've missed out on strolling the festival the rest of the day with Sydney yesterday. She *would not* have even considered being a third wheel on Sydney and Lucy's romantic *first date*. If she'd been caught practically pouting today about being ignored by him for a little while, she for sure would've been obnoxiously obvious about having to miss the rest of the festival while *Lucy* got to enjoy it with Sydney.

“You know him best, Sarah,” Valerie said, pretending and failing miserably to not be so noticeable about watching Sydney and Lucy. “What do you think? You think they're hitting off? I think he likes her. His eyes practically twinkled when I introduced him.”

Turning to Sarah, Emi did her best to not look as interested in Sarah's response as she really felt. *Why* the hell was she being like this? The man had a girlfriend back home. Who cared if he met someone else who he might hit it off with?

“Oh, I don't know,” Sarah said, glancing at Sydney, her eyes bouncing off Emi then back at Valerie. “He's sweet to everyone. It's hard to tell from just watching him. He's such a gentleman no matter the circumstances. But he *has* always been partial to brunettes.”

Valerie turned to Sarah, her brows furrowed. “Didn't he have a blond girlfriend way back?”

“Well, yeah,” Sarah said, meeting Emi's eyes.

Emi glanced away when she realized she was reacting again without thinking.

“But he didn't end up with her,” Sarah countered. “And he did end up marrying a brunette.”

“Whom he divorced obviously,” Valerie said with a smirk. “I don't think that really matters. Alex swears he was always partial to brunettes and never even dated blondes”—she fluffed her blond tresses—“and look who he ended up marrying.”

Emi took a deep breath, deciding to not clam up as she had yesterday when these two told Sydney about Lucy.

“He looks like he’s enjoying the company,” Emi said with a sweet smile, took a sip of her soda, and turned casually to see Sydney laughing with Lucy.

“He does, right?” Valerie asked, smiling smugly. “If anyone would know him best, it’d be you two, right? She’s going to be so excited.”

Emi began to jerk her head back but caught herself when her eyes met Livi’s first. Her sister was studying Emi again, so she smiled. Before she could say anything, Sarah did.

“We can’t tell if he does from just watching him, silly,” Sarah said, laughing softly. “Don’t get the poor girl’s hopes up just yet. In all the years I’ve known him, he’s as particular about the women he dates as everything else in his meticulous life. I think he’s gotten finickier with age. Not to rain on your parade or anything, I’m just dampening your expectations so you’re not too disappointed or anything. *If* he does like her, it’ll be awhile before he’s analyzed it to death. I told you he *has* been seeing someone.” Sarah turned to Emi this time. “He’s still seeing Cheryl, right?”

Emi nodded, refraining from smiling as she suddenly wanted to, and then turned to Valerie. “Yes, he still is actually,” she said simply, innocently, as she bit her tongue to refrain from what else she wanted to add—that just yesterday he’d pointed out that, yes, he was still seeing Cheryl, and, no, he wouldn’t date two women at once. But it already felt like Liv was watching her too closely.

Her sister knew her better than anyone did; albeit they weren’t as close lately as they once had been. Ever since Liv moved out with Lorenzo then married him and was now experiencing motherhood, she’d been too busy to notice too much about Emi as she normally would. At least that was what Emi had thought until Liv’s “despite everything I’ve picked up on you lately” comment.

Emi was certain she’d be getting a call from her big sister this week, inquiring if everything was okay. She didn’t need to add more to Liv’s suspicions than what she knew was there now.

“You see,” Sarah said, smiling at Emi but glancing quickly away to address Valerie. “The man can give Sal a run for his money when it comes to being anal about things. This is not something he’ll be deciding overnight. As long as I’ve known the guy, he likes to take his time, get to know the girl.” Emi thought she saw Sarah side glance at her, but she

directed her next comment at Valerie. “He waits for the relationship to develop before he’s sure, so don’t hold your breath.”

Valerie’s lip pulled to the side. “Well, so far it looks promising. I’ll just keep my fingers crossed.” She turned to Emi, smiling, then back to Sarah. “You two, keep me posted. I have to check on the kids.”

Sarah stuck around for a little bit, making small talk, before she, too, had to go find her kids. Thank goodness for kids. To Emi’s relief, Liv too got busy when the baby woke, and the conversation shifted as everyone fawned over baby Enzo.

By the time Sydney walked over *with* Lucy to introduce her and ask Emi if she was ready to go, they’d been there for *hours*. He’d spent the entire time with Lucy, and Emi did her best to not look or act as annoyed by that as she felt.

Lucy was a bit of a chatterbox. She also laughed a lot, but it seemed more of a nervous laugh than a genuine one. And it wasn’t cute either. It reminded Emi of that girl in the reruns of *Friends*: Chandler’s *annoying* ex-girlfriend, June or Janice something or other. The more Emi heard it, the more grating it got.

They went through the slow process of saying good-bye to everyone. When they finally departed, they still weren’t alone. Lucy walked out with them. This was why she’d been sure if Lucy had shown up yesterday Emi would’ve skipped strolling the rest of the festival. She felt like an invisible third wheel as Lucy chattered on excitedly about Comic Con and how fun it would be if they went together.

Sydney and Lucy, that is.

While Lucy had been nice enough, Emi hadn’t missed the way her brow arched ever so slightly and her eyes swept over Emi when Sydney introduced her as his good friend and neighbor then added, “We drove out together. We always do when we drive out here.”

As if they’d done this more than twice. So the entire excitable conversation Lucy had had with Sydney felt exclusively for him. Lucy *was not* implying the three of them would have fun together at Comic Con. As if being around them and hearing that irritating laugh for longer than the time it took them to walk outside wasn’t excruciating enough.

By the time they reached Sydney’s car, Emi refrained from rolling her eyes every time Lucy laughed and especially when she pointed out how good he smelled—twice. She’d even texted herself the name of his cologne

so she wouldn't forget it. When they got to his car, Lucy was quick to address Emi first, smiling big and expressing how *very nice* it was to have met her.

It was polite enough, but Emi felt dismissed by the farewell. Sydney had already clicked to unlock the doors to his car. They'd all heard the beep. So when Lucy turned to Sydney with a gazing smile and waited, Emi took the hint. She said good-bye, got in the car, closed the door, and gave herself a quick emergency pep talk under her breath.

"Do not sulk. Do not pout. Don't you dare snap. This is almost over."

She felt as furious with herself as she did confused. What the hell was going on with her? She'd sat and listened to Sydney talk of Cheryl plenty of times without feeling the least bit annoyed by it. In fact, often times she stuck up for Cheryl when Sydney seemed to poke fun or find fault in something Cheryl had done, said, or didn't do.

Sydney and Lucy were outside for a while, as if the hours they'd spent talking at the restaurant hadn't been enough. Emi squeezed her eyes shut, refusing to even glance their way. The last thing she needed was to turn to see him kissing her good-bye or something that might push her back into that weird mood she'd gotten herself into yesterday.

After what felt like forever, the door finally opened and he got in. Immediately, her senses were overwhelmed with the fragrance of him—the scent she'd grown to love now. She'd actually taken a sweatshirt he'd lent her and held it hostage. She'd give it back to him eventually. She just enjoyed the soothing effect the smell of him had on her when she wore it around her place.

"Sorry that took a while," he said, his voice sounding a little strange.

She turned to catch him, watching as Lucy pulled out of her parking space, headed to the exit of the parking lot, then finally turned onto the street and out of sight. Emi was this close to asking if, after one meeting, he really couldn't get enough of her, if that was why they had to sit and stare until she was completely out of sight, even though she was certain there was no way she'd manage say it without sounding bitchy.

To her surprise, before she could, he groaned loudly, and she turned to see his head fall back against his seat. Her mind raced curiously, not sure what to make of it.

"What?" she asked, almost afraid to hear the answer.

“Longest fucking hours of my life,” he said, shaking his head, and instantly, Emi felt the anxiety begin to drain from every tensed muscle in her body.

“Really?” she asked, a bit skeptical but could already feel the ends of her mouth curving upward. “I got the impression you had fun with her. You certainly spent enough time with her today.”

“That’s because she wouldn’t let me leave.” He put the car in gear and began to pull out. “From the very beginning, she was all about ‘I could hardly believe it when Valerie told me I’d be spending the *whole* day with you.’” His attempt to imitate Lucy’s annoying voice made Emi smirk even as she watched his brow go higher and get stiffer with every word he said. “And do you know in the middle of it all she pulls her phone out and tells me to check my phone. I do and a text comes in with a picture of three of her cats. Valerie didn’t give her my number, I didn’t give her my number, she never even asked for it, but she already had it. Said with all her tech knowledge and friends, she had her ways. Who does that? She pretty much admitted she stalked the shit out of me this week so she’d have plenty to talk about, and *fuck* if she didn’t talk nonstop.”

Emi laughed now, covering her mouth and offering a forced sympathetic look when he turned and glared at her. In all the time she’d known him, she’d never seen him so annoyed. He went on a little more about all the times he’d begun to excuse himself or come up with a way to get away from her and she’d ask something complicated he couldn’t just give a quick answer to. Something she’d likely rehearsed.

“Her ex-husband left her for another woman,” Sydney continued as if that was a given. “He left her for his older boss. A woman almost fifteen years his senior with four kids and a ton of other baggage was more appealing to him than Lucy was and can you blame him? Did you hear her laugh? Merciful God in heaven, I was getting ready to poke my own eardrums out with my fork.”

That was it. Emi burst into laughter. She’d heard Sydney cuss before, but seeing him like this was hilarious. Sydney finally gave way to a smirk.

“That’s so mean,” she said then added, “but I won’t be a hypocrite. I cringed each time I heard the laugh all the way back to the car. I can’t imagine having sat there for hours listening to it.”

He continued telling her more about the rest of the conversation he’d had to endure. He did admit there were parts that weren’t too bad. Emi had

been right about Valerie giving them a tour of the place. It was why all three of them had gotten up and were gone for a while.

Sydney had finally gotten past talking about the most exasperating hours he'd spent in years when his phone rang, and up on his dash the name Lucy popped up.

"No way," he said, staring down at his dash. "Are you kidding me?"

"Answer it," Emi said, giggling.

"Hell no!" His brows arched even further. "I'm telling you the girl doesn't shut up."

Before he could protest further, Emi hit the answer button on the dash and covered her mouth so Lucy wouldn't hear her laugh. If looks could kill, Sydney's glare would've had her shriveled up like a swatted fly in the passenger seat, which only made her want to laugh more. She slapped both hands over her mouth as Sydney's brow arched high, though she could see the corner of his lip twitch.

"Hey, Lucy," he said, shaking his head at Emi.

"Hey, it's been too long," she said then laughed, and Emi felt her brows pinch tight as she struggled to hold in the laughter.

Funny how less than a half hour ago that same laugh made the hair on the back of her neck stand. Now she was in danger of laughing out loud because of it.

"What's going on?" Sydney asked then glanced at Emi as they came to a stop, and his expression softened at the sight of her continued struggle not to laugh.

"I was just driving home and remembered I got a voucher for two nights in Vegas at the Bellagio Hotel. I thought maybe you'd want to go."

The sight of Sydney's reaction to that, a mixture of horror and dismay, made Emi laugh.

Sydney turned to Emi, his revolted expression once again softening, but he shook his head adamantly, one finger over his puckered lips. For just a second, Emi lost her train of thought at the sight of his puckered lips. Then Lucy asked who was laughing.

"That's Emi," he said with a smirk as her eyes widened. "You're on speaker, but she's on her phone too."

"Oh" was her only response. Then out of nowhere that laugh came again, and Emi pressed her palm against her lips, squeezing her eyes shut.

“So, what do you say? We get a choice of shows too: Jersey Boys, something called Le Reve The Dream . . . ooh, Chippendales!”

The laugh was even more obnoxious this time, and Emi hit the end button then fell back in her seat and just let it out.

“I’m sorry,” she said in between laughs as she caught her breath. “I’m sorry. Just say you got cut off or something. I couldn’t take it anymore.”

“Do you see what I’m talking about here?” he said, pointing at the dash. “We’ve met once. I was honest about seeing Cheryl too. I had to be. No way did I want her to get the impression that I was free, ready, and willing for *anything*. So she invited me on a weekend getaway not an hour after our first introduction? Who the hell does that?”

His phone rang again, Lucy’s name popping on the dash, and he sent it to voicemail. Emi actually felt bad for Lucy now. If she hadn’t hit answer in the first place, the girl wouldn’t be thinking that Sydney hung up on her now in the middle of her trying to sell the weekend getaway with her. Now he was sending her call to voicemail to boot. If that wasn’t a big hairy hint, Emi didn’t know what was.

To her surprise, his phone rang *several* more times. He sent it to voicemail each time. His expression had begun to harden until the third call back where he finally had to laugh.

“Un-fucking-believable,” he muttered, shaking his head, but thankfully laughed as he sent it to voicemail again.

There was another beep several *minutes* later, indicating he had a voicemail, which could only mean one thing. Whatever she’d left for him to listen to was *that* long. It was tempting to tell him to play it, but Emi already felt mean.

The last thing he said about Lucy was that he’d have to call *Lynni* when he got home and hope she’d agree to break it gently to Lucy that he wasn’t interested. Maybe she’d just stop calling him and he’d be done with this as painlessly as possible.

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Chapter Nine

Sydney

Whatever Sydney *thought* he'd picked on from Emi or might've changed between them during their trip to La Jolla was gone almost as soon as they got home. In fact, on the drive home, things felt back to the way they'd always been. He had to agree that their being this close would raise eyebrows. Emi was who he spoke to and saw more than anybody else he knew now. Even his buddies at work, whom he had a few beers with and played a few rounds of golf with a few times a month, didn't see him as often as Emi did.

It was just their norm now like family members or even if he had a close male friend who lived in the same building. But the one thing he knew wouldn't be gone so easily was something he hadn't stopped thinking about since it happened: the vision of a near-naked Emi. Her curves were as mouth-watering as he'd imagined they'd be. His spinning around when he finally snapped out of it that night hadn't just been for the sake of giving her privacy. He'd panicked when he felt how fast his dick had hardened. He could only pray now she'd been too stunned to notice. Her coming into his room afterward to let him off the hook had been beyond relieving. At first, he thought he'd imagined it, but now he secretly hoped that, based on Emi's reaction to seeing him shirtless, she was having visuals too.

The Monday after they'd gotten back from their trip, Emi had come over to tell him about her first day at her internship. She'd been excited and just wanted to share. She also let him in on something else.

"I broke things off with Darren—for good this time."

Sydney glanced up at her from where he was sitting on his front room sofa. She was just coming back from the kitchen where she'd served herself a second helping of the turkey meatloaf sandwiches she'd made tonight.

"Why for good this time?"

She plopped down on the sofa chair across from him and took a bite of her sandwich, making Sydney wait until she was done chewing, swallowed, and took a swig of her soda.

“It was beginning to feel wrong,” she admitted, though that wasn’t what she’d said this weekend, but he dared not go there again. “I know I only dated other guys when we were on a break, but I’d also been sensing something else from him lately. He wants more. I’m just not ready for more, and while he claims he’s willing to give me my space, I know if he knew about me seeing other guys he’d be hurt. I’m not looking to hurt anyone. I just need to get my shit together first. I’m all over the place, so I thought it’d be better if I made a clean break.”

“How’d he take it?” Sydney asked.

“As good as always. I tried to make it clear that this was for good, but I get the feeling he might be thinking this is just like all the other times and we’ll eventually end up back together. Only I have no intention of doing that this time.”

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That was a month ago. Since then, it seemed she’d made the right call at the right time. Her summer school courses and her internship had taken up so much of her time even Sydney had begun to miss her. If she still had Darren in her life, he would’ve seen even less of her.

Luckily, work kept him busy as well. The company was launching a few long-awaited software updates and making some major changes. Talk of the company being acquired by another much more public company was still being rumored, though Sydney knew it could take months if not years to happen. Still, it made for a lot of added executive and nervous shareholder meetings to attend. Long days turned into evenings, getting him home later more often.

Lucy was still calling. He’d already told Lynn he *was not* interested. Ironically, she, too, thought the whole invitation to a Vegas getaway after meeting him once was pretty funny. Sydney had tried to sound appalled but failed to pull it off once she started laughing.

She’d already assured him she passed the word on to Valerie. Yet Lucy was still calling. He knew it was rude as shit to just completely ignore her, but this wasn’t the first time he met someone like her. This was the only way to handle women like Lucy. He *did not* want to encourage her.

Showing even a little kindness or civility was enough when it came to women like her, so he steered clear of answering any of her calls.

It was another late evening for him. Emi had texted him earlier to tell him to text her when he got home—no matter how late. It was just after eight, and after getting his regular greeting from Homer at the door, Sydney put his stuff down, undid his tie and cufflinks, and texted Emi. He left the front door unlocked when she texted back immediately saying she was on her way up to his place. He'd barely had enough time to put his things down in his bedroom when he heard her enter his front room.

"I'll be right out," he called out after hanging his shirt and slacks and changing into a pair of basketball shorts.

As soon as he walked out into his front room, he saw her giddy expression. "Guess who I met today?"

She'd been meeting a few different celebrities down at the Staples Center and even another in the building recently. He took a moment to think about it. Who would she be this excited about? Basketball summer league was well underway, so he took a stab at it.

"One of the Clippers or Lakers?" he asked.

"No, but he *is* a big league player," she said, bringing her hands to her mouth.

Sydney thought about it for a second and then was inundated with a strange annoyance. Trying not to show it, he swallowed hard, walking over to his refrigerator. He didn't want to be facing her when he said it.

"That Sabian guy?"

"Yes!" she said a bit too squealy even for her. "Can you believe it? I had lunch with him!"

Sydney turned back to her, surprised. He'd imagined maybe her brother had just introduced her. "Lunch?"

Emi pointed at the Tupperware bowl on the counter. "I made enough blue cheese pasta and chicken to share," she said. "I thought you'd be home earlier." Then she proceeded to tell him more about her lunch with Sabian. "It wasn't just him and me. A.J. was there too," she explained, taking a seat at the kitchen counter.

Sydney poured a glass of wine to go with his pasta. He offered her some, but she passed, saying she'd had way too many calories today already but continued excitedly about her lunch.

“My brother had told me about this terrific place he ate at in West Hollywood. I told him to let me know next time he went, so he calls me and asks if I’m free for lunch. It was my pajama day, but when he mentioned the restaurant he was going to, I said okay. Thank God he happened to mention he’d have a friend with him or I might’ve gone even bummier than I did, but I at least straightened my hair a little and wore some makeup.”

There was no hiding the excitement, and Sydney smiled with her as she continued telling him about how surprised she’d been to be picked up in a Maserati—Sly Sabian’s Maserati—only to get in the car and realize who was driving. “I think I blushed a hundred times. I’m sure his first impression of me was of a complete blithering ass.”

Sydney knew a worse way she could have made a first impression, yet he’d still thought her adorable, but wouldn’t bring that up in the middle of her highly animated account of the lunch she’d had with the guy.

“Surprisingly, he’s way more down-to-earth than you would expect someone so famous to be.”

“I don’t know about that. Your brother’s right up there with him, and he’s one of the most laid-back guys I’ve ever met.”

“I know, but I guess because I know my brother I expect him to be that way with me and any of his friends. I just . . .” She inhaled wistfully. “At first, it was weird sitting at the restaurant with him. People kept staring at us, which isn’t a first for me. It’s happened plenty of times when I’ve been out and about with A.J. But it was even worse today. Then, suddenly, I was so lost in conversation with him I sort of blocked out all the gawkers.”

She explained that, as usual, a few people were brave enough to hit A.J. and Sabian up for their autographs and even a photo. “I can’t even imagine being that famous. I’d hate having to always be *on* and look decent. As it is, I felt completely underdressed and like I should’ve done more with my hair.”

Sydney glanced at her hair. He’d been around her enough to know that, if she had straightened her hair as she said, the curls had made their way back now. He preferred curls over the straight hair look on her, though either way she was adorable. It was almost annoying. They weren’t even tight spirals or anything just soft curls that bounced off her shoulders and back. He wondered but wouldn’t ask what she’d worn. If it was the jeans, tank, and slip-on wedge sandals she wore now, he was sure Sabian had *embraced* her curves, the same way Sydney couldn’t help doing himself

now as his eyes roamed her body freely since she'd stopped her excited storytelling to check her phone. Her jeans more than amplified what he now knew for a fact were crotch-tightening curves.

"And get this," she said. Sydney glanced up to catch the breathtaking smile and the twinkle in her eyes. "He hinted about maybe *hitting me up* next time he was in town."

Sydney moved his neck around, trying to rid the kink he was suddenly feeling, and glanced down at his food, unwilling to continue peering into those overly excited eyes.

"*EEK!*"

Sydney had never seen or heard her do that. It was one of the few times he'd seen her show her age. Though, in her defense, he'd heard Sarah and even his own mother have similar reactions when excited, most notably when he'd told them both about his leaving his previous company for the bigger opportunity. Still, Emi was doing this over some guy?

Sydney glanced up again, forcing a smirk as he rolled his eyes in a playful teasing way to mask the slight irritation it made him feel. But he supposed it was a common fan girl reaction. She *had* told him many times about what huge sports fans her entire family had always been.

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Two things happened in the following weeks. Neither had anything directly to do with the other, but somehow they felt connected. First, Emi had come over just days after her lunch with Sabian to squeal about him hitting her up on her social media. He'd seen something she'd posted on one of A.J.'s pages. He hadn't recognized her pseudonym but did recognize the profile picture. Next thing he knew they'd exchanged texts and were even talking on the phone. Soon after that she was obsessing about what she'd wear to go with him to some charity softball event he was attending at Dodger Stadium. Curiously, A.J. wouldn't be there. He had other obligations that day. So while Emi wasn't referring to it as a date, Sydney was.

The guy could've taken anyone. Why would he invite Emi if he weren't interested? Sabian had been the one who *sought* her out, not the other way around. Anyone who reaches that kind of celebrity status in life with access to and the interest of just about any girl in the world doesn't seek out any one in particular, unless he's interested, especially for a public event with paparazzi speculating about his and his mystery-girl's relationship.

Then a couple weeks later Sydney received a curious text from someone he hadn't heard from in a while. He was still pondering it when a soft knock sounded at his front door. It surprised him. For months now whenever Emi texted to say she was on her way up, he'd just unlock his door and she usually walked in. He almost yelled for her to come on in then thought better of it, remembering Lucy's stalker tendencies. Even in a building with this high security, he wouldn't put it past her to somehow figure out how to get in.

He walked to the door and peered into the peephole, smiling when he saw Emi in her softball outfit. He opened the door, feeling a little breathless at the sight of her.

"Hey," he said, unable to refrain from smiling so big. "I'm surprised you didn't just come in."

Her eyes widened; then she shook her head. "I'm so freakin' nervous about today."

"Why?"

"I don't care for my photo being taken, and from what Sly warned me, there's gonna be a lot of that."

She smoothed her girly short Padres jersey, which to Sydney's relief bore her brother's number, not Sabian's. "How does this outfit look?" Emi turned for him with arms out. Since her hair was in a ponytail sticking out of the Padres ball cap she wore, he was able to see that the jersey did, in fact, say *Romero* on the back and not *Sabian*. Why he was so hung up on that he wasn't sure, but he was a little too relieved by it.

He'd been distracted momentarily, taking in her ample ass in her sleek-fitting yoga pants. They hugged that bubblicious ass so nicely he felt something shift in his pants, and he cursed himself, walking back toward the kitchen.

"Looks good," he said as he reached the kitchen. "I especially like the cap." He turned back to her once he was safely behind the kitchen counter where he could casually make sure what had happened in his pants wasn't too obvious, but he couldn't help smiling. "You're adorable, Em."

She stared at him for a moment, looking as stunned as he suddenly felt.

He hadn't even thought, before the words had just spilled out. Hoping she wouldn't read too much into them, he took the two steps toward his refrigerator and opened it. "So what time does this thing start?"

It was a Sunday afternoon, and typically, if he hadn't made plans with Cheryl, he'd be hanging out with Emi for at least part of the day. He didn't have plans with Cheryl. She was doing a family girl thing with her mom and sisters. But he'd yet to respond to the matter of that curious text he'd received.

"He should be here to pick me up in about a half hour." Sydney turned to see her wiping her hands on her pants. "My hands keep getting all sweaty. I hope he doesn't try to hold them."

Clenching his jaw, Sydney turned back to the refrigerator. Just the other day she'd insisted this wasn't a date. Now she was talking about them holding hands? So what if when Sydney had held her hand it was harmless. They were friends. Best friends. She hardly knew this guy. It'd been refreshing the past few weeks not having to hear about her and Darren or anyone else for that matter. He didn't realize just *how* refreshing it'd been.

Refusing to comment on that because he didn't trust for it not to come out wrong, he focused on something else. "Since when do you not like your picture taken? I seem to recall a computer file full of selfies." When he turned to her, he had to smirk. It's what he needed: a change in topic—mood.

She crossed her arms in front of her, giving him a playful glare. "I was fifteen or sixteen in those photos, Sydney. I'll be twenty-one soon, in case you've forgotten."

"God, don't remind me," he said, pulling a bottle of water out of the fridge.

He motioned to ask if she wanted one, and she nodded, so he tossed her one. "That's right." She smiled. "You'll be turning the big thirty this year right around the time I'll be celebrating my big twenty-one. Those are pretty significant milestones. We should do something."

"It's still months away," he said, and as if on cue, her phone pinged.

She glanced at it and her face said it all. The mixture of nerves and excitement as she texted back were undeniable. "He's here!" she said, rushing to the door and stopping at the intercom when it rang.

Taking a hard swig of his water, Sydney watched as she pressed the button. "I'll just meet you downstairs; you don't have to come up." She turned with a wince at Sydney. "Was that rude? I mean there's no point in him coming up when I can just meet him down there, right?"

"Makes sense to me."

“Okay. Okay,” she said again, double-checking herself in the mirror before leaving.

“Hey,” Sydney said, forcing a smile. She turned back to him with curious eyes. “You look fine. Relax and enjoy yourself.”

Nodding, she took a deep breath before opening the door. “I’ll text you when I get home to tell you about it.”

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Chapter Ten

Emilia

The conversation Emi had had with her sister that morning had been longer than their typical calls usually lasting for at least an hour. They'd gone over all of Emi's concerns. This was exciting. This was *the Sly flipping Sabian!* They'd gone back and forth, mostly texting, and had a total of two phone calls so far.

Emi's concerns were basic. Unlike her brother who had a stigma and made it into the headlines often and on occasion the tabloids, Sly didn't make headlines for his temper. He made them for the big endorsement deals he signed and for the different celebrities, often fashion models, he was seen with.

Typically, after all the squealing died down, she would've thought this through and said no. No matter how good-looking, rich, and famous *he* was, even he wasn't worth stressing out her brother. But as Sly had explained when she'd hesitated to accept any of his invitations, it made sense. "You're sweet. You're easy to talk with. I felt comfortable with you even that first day I met you, and you're not all Hollywood. I'm not looking for arm candy to show off at the charity event, not that you don't have the looks for that, but you're so much more than that."

She'd still hesitated, unable to even imagine herself around other celebrities. The only charity events she'd attended with A.J. were a few visits where she'd accompanied him to the children's hospitals for the Make-A-Wish Foundation. But it was usually just him and maybe a few other players making the rounds to visit kids whose wishes were to meet them. Paparazzi and other Hollywood celebrities weren't involved. Sly then made an even more profound plea.

"I just signed a record-breaking deal with the Padres. I'm signed for at least three years. You're Romero's baby sister. I like the guy. Trust me. I

would not be taking the chance of messing up my relationship with someone I'll be forced to be around for the next three years, least of all *Rage's* baby sister, just so I can get my freak on. Not to be an asshole or anything, but you're forcing me to point this out. Let's face it. I could make a phone call and have several girls at my beck and call if that's all I wanted. But I don't, not for this kind of thing anyway. I'm just looking to hang out, Emilia, with someone sweet, who I already know I can have a nice uncomplicated friendship with."

Then, of course, just when she was beginning to calm, he added the heart-stopping open-ended comment. "Whatever happens down the line, we'll play by ear. You just have my word I won't be making any promises I can't or don't intend to keep."

Liv and Emi had dissected that last comment down to every word because it's what girls do. She hadn't even mentioned this to Sydney. He'd for sure think her silly for digging so deep into the comment.

Her sister thought it meant he was hoping more would happen—more than something meaningless that would sic all three of her brothers on him no doubt.

Emi thought it was just his way of warning her he wouldn't be making any promises, which was fine by her. Judging by her pounding heart as she rushed out of the elevator, she wasn't sure she could handle anything more than just a friendship with the guy.

As usual, he was in the lobby with a small crowd already around him, a few guys and two girls. He excused himself the moment he saw her. The curious glances she got from the small crowd turned her insides. She *did not* understand how famous people did it. This was nothing, and already she felt flushed, knowing she had so many eyes on her.

Sly looked as sexy as usual in the Padres jersey he wore with jeans. It was the strangest thing. She noticed this about him the day they went to lunch. Unlike Sydney, he wasn't perfect, not in a natural way. Obviously, he could afford to clean up extremely well. He had expensive clothes, ridiculously expensive cars, and bright white teeth that looked just a little too white as if he'd had them redone recently. If his place and car were neat, she knew it was because he paid for them to be kept clean.

With Sydney, it was more like that was just the type of perfect he was. It was a lifetime of being so particular and meticulous about everything he did—every choice he made. As attractive as Sly was, his obvious

imperfections were, in a way, refreshing. He had a scar just under his hairline. Like her brothers, his language was not quite as clean as Sydney's, not that Sydney didn't drop the occasional F-bomb or even a few other unholy curse words. It was just that, despite all his fame and riches, Sly was clearly less refined.

He'd held her hand the whole way to his car, but it wasn't until she was inside it that she realized she'd just spent the entire introductory portion of their day together comparing him to Sydney. She tapped her forehead as he closed the door and circled the car.

"Stop it!" she hissed at herself. "*What* is wrong with you?"

That morning she and Liv had spent a good portion of their conversation discussing how she should react if he held her hand. Casual? Not make a big deal of it? Some people didn't consider hand-holding a big deal, like Sydney obviously. When it finally did happen with Sly, what did she do? Her mind immediately focused on his callused hands—a rugged man's hands so unlike Sydney's. She'd teased him enough about his hands being perfectly manicured, which he adamantly denied doing.

Emi remembered how she'd touched his hands, and while they felt soft in comparison to a rugged working man's hands, they were still strong. Masculine. She remembered the visuals she'd had of having his hands on other parts of her body, gliding over her in the painstaking way he did everything: slowly, thoroughly, perfectly.

"You okay?"

She snapped out of her thoughts, feeling her face flush. "Yeah." She managed not to gasp. "I was just thinking about a school assignment."

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Everything Sly had said when he'd given her the speech to try and convince her he wasn't looking for anything more with her but to have an uncomplicated innocent good time was true. He'd been a complete gentleman who tried nothing more with her than just holding hands. Though he did compliment her a lot and flirt in a sweet way but tried for nothing else—until the evening ended.

The event had been just as he warned: full of celebrities and paparazzi. Because this was a charity event, he told her not to worry about rude paparazzi, not inside Dodger Stadium anyway where the event was taking place. Outside, the ones not invited were a few who inquired about who she

was. Emi regretted wearing her Romero jersey because, immediately, she was asked if she was related to him or just a fan.

Sly had already told her she didn't have to answer anything. Just smile and walk past them. At the actual event, no one asked such nosey questions. Mostly, they interviewed Sly, asking him a few questions about the event: why was he there and other baseball-related questions. What were his predictions on the season? Did he think they had a chance at the play-offs or even the World Series?

The entire time he'd held her hand it felt more like he was just trying to assuage her, make her feel comfortable in an environment she obviously wasn't used to. She even did what she'd told Liv she *refused* to do—took a few selfies with some of the other celebrities, but only because each time she'd gasp about someone he'd smile and say, "Let's go and meet her or him."

Then it was always Sly who offered to take a photo of her and said celebrity. The game was a big funfest. Comedians were funny, real players like Sly downplayed their talent or, in his case, knocked one out of the park when the comedian pitching heckled him a little too much. But it was all in fun.

Afterward, they headed to Original Tommy's in Los Angeles for chili burgers. Sly seemed surprised that she wasn't aware he was born and raised in Los Angeles. "I'm so glad this place finally got a drive-thru," he said as he drove through it. "I couldn't come here for a long time because it would take just way too long to get through the crowd."

Emi didn't want to burst his bubble, but his driving a Maserati through the drive-thru here had plenty of people turning heads, many of whom she was certain had recognized him even behind his dark glasses. Luckily, none approached the car, and they were out of there quickly.

He drove back to Griffith Park, where they got out and sat on a bench. Again, like everywhere else they went, they turned heads. He'd even taken off his jersey just in case someone was on the fence about who he was; he didn't make it easy for them.

Just like when she'd gone to lunch with him and A.J., being around him was so much easier than she'd expected. She began to understand why he was so down-to-earth. Like A.J., he came from humble beginnings.

Emi found herself refraining from laughing as often as she normally did. She was afraid she'd come across like Lucy, laughing nervously and

becoming annoying. She covered her mouth with her napkin, remembering Sydney's comment about wanting to stick a fork in his ear.

When she glanced up, her eyes met with Sly's deep blue ones. Sly was a tough guy. He reminded her of a blue-eyed version of his brothers: sweet deep inside, but on the outside tough as nails. At the moment, she saw the sweetness in Sly's eyes.

"You have gorgeous eyes," he said, wiping his mouth then tilted his face with a sweet smile. "There's something about you I can't put my finger on. At first, I thought it was just because you were A.J.'s sister. By default, that makes you a good girl. And by good girl I just mean someone I can trust. You'd be surprised how many girls have tried to come into my life with ulterior motives."

Emi's brows rose in curiosity and concern. She thought of her famous brother, who could be such a hothead but at the same time had a heart of gold and could easily fall for someone unscrupulous with ulterior motives.

"Yeah," Sly said with a nod and a frown. "I was warned, but I still had to learn the hard way." He chuckled. "My mom always said the hard way was my favorite way to learn. Lucky for me, it left me a little jaded, and now, believe it or not, I tend to gravitate to good girls—at least the cute ones, who are almost guaranteed to be good girls."

He winked, biting into his cheeseburger as her heart pitter-pattered. This should've felt more like a dream come true. For the better part of the day, Emi had "*Double the Sizzle*" Sabian flirting with her, calling her cute, and gazing into her eyes. Sometimes he didn't say anything for a few unsettling moments. It happened in the elevator on the way up to her apartment, and she thought her heart might explode.

Thankfully, he'd already promised he was just escorting her up. That he wouldn't *dream* of trying to get himself invited in. "This might seem fast to you, but like I said before, there's something about you and . . ."

He'd pulled out his phone in the middle of his little speech. In the car, he'd begun to tell her about what A.J. had said to him when he told him about wanting to ask Emi to the event.

"At first, he didn't say a whole lot, just stared at me very seriously. Kind of scary." He laughed. "I explained that I thought you were cool and that we'd been chatting online and on the phone."

That didn't surprise Emi. As hot tempered as A.J. was, unless he was at the point where he was going off on someone, he was the least vocal of her

three brothers. “All he said that day was if you were okay with it he was and that he trusted me.”

Now he tapped his phone as they walked out of the elevator. “I thought I’d gotten off a little too easy when I first told A.J. Then I got this text from him this morning. I guess he thought it over a little more.” Sly showed her the text from A.J.

**You’re my friend and teammate, and I meant it when I said I trust you. Just remember this is my baby sis and my family comes before EVERYTHING to me. Give her my love and have a good time today.**

“Now that’s not exactly a threat”—Sly laughed after Emi read it and felt her face flush—“but I certainly ain’t looking to piss this guy off.” After laughing some more, he cleared his throat and, for the first time the whole day, seemed nervous then added. “In all seriousness though, Emilia, it’s not all because of who your brother is. *I* don’t wanna ruin what already feels like something I could definitely be into for the long run. So I’ve every intention of taking this slow. Whatever *this* turns out to be.”

Of course, Emi wasn’t surprised by A.J.’s thinly veiled threat. But she was even more surprised at Sly’s complete honesty and how up front he was about the whole thing. His words had also made her entire insides tingle. This whole experience felt surreal, like some kind of dream but mostly because of who he was and also by how quickly this all seemed to have snuck up on her. Her mind had seemed muddled lately between school, her internship, and trying to figure out why she constantly felt something gnawing at her.

They got to her door, and he turned to her curiously. “I could’ve sworn the room you had me buzz started with a twelve.”

“Oh it was,” she said, digging in her purse for her keys. “I’d gone up to my friend Sydney’s place and was there when you got here.”

She glanced up at him and tried not to freeze when she saw the way he was looking at her, like he was ready to say good-bye, but how he’d do it was what made her nervous. Her insides had been going wild most of the day, but there’d been a series of explosions in the last ten minutes alone. Sly had held her hand the whole way back to her apartment and now he stood, smiling at her.

“I had an awesome time today.” His eyes drifted from her eyes to her lips.

“I did too,” she said, trying desperately to focus on his eyes. “Thank you for inviting me. That was definitely a first for me.”

He squeezed her hand, licked his lips then closed his eyes and let his head fall back with a small groan. Emi laughed nervously, not sure what to make of that. His eyes opened, and they were immediately on her lips again. “I said I wouldn’t,” he whispered as he stared at her lips. “I said I’d be good and not even try to kiss you, but I want to so badly.”

Emi’s stomach completely bottomed out. She had no idea how to respond to that. Instinctively, she licked her own lips and his eyes widened a bit.

“Is that a go-ahead?” He mouthed the next word as his facial expression pleaded. “*Please!*”

Without giving it much thought because she was afraid she’d regret it, she nodded softly, and next thing she knew *Sly Sabian* was kissing her. Not just any kiss either. At first it was soft—sweet—cautious. But once their tongues got acquainted, he went for it until he visibly had to force himself to stop.

Even after he pulled away, he kept his eyes closed but took a deep breath and smiled, saying something even more surprising than his passionate kiss. “Just like I imagined *all* day.”

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## Chapter Eleven

### **Sydney**

Weeks. It'd been weeks since Emi's first date with Sabian. At least three weeks. It could be four. Over a month already? Fuck. Sydney's efforts to stop obsessing about the length of time she'd been talking to the guy now—almost every night—had finally begun to work because he'd actually lost count. Until that moment, that is, because she'd just texted him to say good night, something she'd only started to do recently. More and more nights they weren't spending together, partly because of the amount of time she spent on the phone with Sabian now—usually in the evenings—but mostly because Sydney had been keeping himself busy.

These last three nights were the first he'd spent not hanging out or even chatting with Emi in a row. He hadn't then, but he might now have to admit that he'd been keeping himself distracted. Ever since he'd broken things off for good with Cheryl a few weeks ago, hearing about how things were progressing between Emi and Sabian had become increasingly harder to stomach. The only solace he had was that Emi was still saying she wasn't ready for anything serious. With Sabian's schedule, it was nearly impossible for them to see each other unless he was playing in town, which he wasn't scheduled to do until a month from now.

Sydney wasn't even sure why he'd need solace. Sabian was a good guy. At least from everything she'd told Sydney about him so far. If anything, he should feel happy for Em—his best friend.

Sabian was far more put together than Darren. This guy didn't do any of the things rich celebs his age usually did. No drugs, he hardly drank, and all the stories in the tabloids about him and all those celebrities and models he dated were bullshit. Since their first date, Emi had since seen him one time. He was just too busy for all the partying the tabloids said he did. Emi knew this firsthand. She'd told Sydney from the very beginning it was the

bittersweet thing about her brother achieving his dream of making it to the big leagues. She hardly got to see him during the regular season and not much during the off season either. The career pretty much kept them busy on and off season.

As much as Sydney hated to admit it, there were no two ways around it. Sly Sabian was a good guy. Not only did he do a ton for charity, as if his career didn't keep him busy enough on the off season, he spent weeks sometimes longer at the youth camp he and his parents had founded for underprivileged kids. Something he told Emi he wished there'd been more of when he was growing up.

So far the only negative thing about Sabian, if Sydney could even call it that, was his reaction to Emi's best friend and neighbor. Like Angel, Sabian didn't buy that any man and woman could be that close without there being anymore going on. At least in *one* of their heads.

Sydney had thought it ironic when she told him that Sabian, too, had thought she was speaking of a girlfriend the first few times she'd mentioned Sydney. The moment she realized it, she said she was not about to do the Sarah-in-high-school thing and not clarify. Sabian had also wasted no time in making *his* feelings about their friendship clear.

He didn't like it.

Sabian hadn't said it in so many words, neither had Emi. But from what she *had* told Sydney, it was pretty obvious. When she first told him, it was meant to be a sort of a funny "Oh, guess what" type of anecdote.

"Sly did the Angel tonight," she'd said, a week after that first date with him.

The evening she'd told him, she'd come by Sydney's place later than her usual evening time because once again she'd been on the phone with *Sly*. But she'd texted Sydney earlier to tell him she was bringing him dinner and for him not to eat. So Sydney had waited for her. It took him a second to figure out what she'd meant by *did the Angel* then realized she was talking about Lynn's husband. As they sat at his kitchen counter eating the delicious meal she'd prepared, she explained further.

"I mentioned that I was making baked ziti for dinner. When he asked how I make a dish like that for one person, I told him I didn't—that most of the time when I made these kinds of dishes I was cooking for two. For me and *Sydney*."

Sydney had glanced up at her casually as he chewed his food, doing his best to hide the exultant feelings that last sentence stirred up. He already knew where the rest of the story might be going.

“I’d mentioned making stuffed crepes on Sunday then spending the rest of that day lazing around and watching movies at your place, so he asked if you ever cooked or if it was always me. Only he used the word *she*.” She’d laughed softly, clearly thinking this wasn’t a big deal at all. “At first, it didn’t even register, but when it did, and I thought of the misunderstanding that nearly broke Sarah and Angel up—”

“It *did* break them up,” Sydney reminded her.

“Oh, yeah,” she said without a flinch. “Anyway, I clarified as soon as I realized, and he was surprised at first. I just thought it was funny that he’d think the same way as Angel.”

Sydney had peered at her that evening, waiting for more, but she didn’t offer much else. He hadn’t asked for more either but wondered if by that she meant that he didn’t believe a guy and a girl could be *just* friends or that he assumed the *friend* she spent so much time with was a girl.

Sydney figured she hadn’t said more for either of two reasons: Either Sly had said something she’d decided was better she *not* share with Sydney or that, at the time she *clarified*, Sly thought it too soon to say too much about it. The latter seemed more realistic. He couldn’t imagine why she would keep anything from him, so Sydney let it go.

The following weeks, especially after Sabian came by to see her for the first time since their first date, the guy had made a few other telling comments. One of them Sydney had the pleasure of hearing for himself. The day Sabian was picking her up for a second time Emi had gone up to Sydney’s place again to get his opinion on her outfit just before Sabian arrived. Just like the first time the guy had texted her to tell her he was there. In her anxiousness to get Sydney’s opinion, she’d forgotten she’d told Sabian to ring her at her apartment when he showed up. He texted her to say he had and she wasn’t responding.

Security in the building was set up so that only someone in the apartment you rang or buzzed could buzz you in. So she texted him back with Sydney’s apartment number *again* and told him to buzz her there instead. To her surprise, he rang not buzzed, meaning she had to answer. She did and his first sentence was “Did you forget I was coming?”

The inflection in his tone was undeniable. It'd been a challenge to not smirk and to appear as confused as Emi had when she turned to Sydney with that adorably puzzled expression then responded. "No. I'm ready. I'll buzz you in."

Sydney wanted to laugh because she obviously hadn't picked up on *why* Sabian had asked if she'd forgotten about him.

She'd since made a few more comments about her thinking Sabian was a little like Angel when it came to Sydney. Only unlike Angel and Lynn way back, even when they first started dating, Emi insisted she wasn't officially *seeing* Sabian. She sounded as unsure about wanting a relationship even with Sabian as she had with Darren.

"It's only been two dates," she'd said after the second date with Sabian. "We haven't made any promises or even discussed it. For all I know, he could be seeing other girls at all the other cities he stops at."

That seemed highly improbable to Sydney, especially considering Sabian's time restrictions. But again Sydney was doing his best to not obsess about it. Frowning as he did often these days, he glanced down at the text he'd gotten earlier.

**I'm going to sleep like a baby tonight thanks to you! =)**

Even before Emi had gone on that first fateful date with Sabian, an old friend had begun to text and call Sydney again, one he'd lost touch with for a while: Scarlet Brendon. During her television show's season's hiatus, she'd been on location overseas filming a movie. She'd been back for months now. She'd explained it all, but if Sydney had to be honest, he'd barely noticed her gone that past year. It wasn't until Emi's free time was no longer all his that he realized just how much time he'd devoted to her on almost a daily basis. How reliant and content he'd become with her being the person he spent most of his down time with. He still had his regular go-to acquaintances that were in full agreement that what they did together was just to fulfill each other's *needs* and nothing more, but he'd completely neglected his usual friends and all but lost touch with them.

Except for Scarlet. With her career in high gear, she, too, had mentioned how a social life was nearly impossible. It was why she liked the convenience of having a *friend* in the same building. With that said, he'd decided, after several evenings of waiting to hear from Em to no avail, to respond to Scarlet's texts. When he told Em about reconnecting with Scarlet

after not mentioning her for so long, she'd been surprised though not nearly as excited as the first time he'd told her about knowing her. Apparently, being with a celebrity herself and rubbing shoulders with more because of him, had worn out the novelty of it.

Scarlet had been his company again tonight, and he'd been standing there staring at himself in the mirror for a while. The distraction he'd thought would alleviate his growing anxiousness was doing nothing of the sort. If anything, it made him feel like an asshole.

"Alright," his reflection said to him, "time to man up and admit it." Sydney stared at the unrelenting irritated face that stared back at him. "Congratulations. You've done it again. You've fallen for your best friend, a girl who's been saying over and over that she's in no way ready for any kind of relationship. None. Not even with Mr. Fucking Perfect. And why would she be? She's not even twenty-one yet. So now what, you idiot? You continue to avoid her so you don't have to hear about her little flings but drive yourself nuts thinking of her even when . . ."

Shaking his head in frustration and full of shame, he pressed his lips together, thinking about that. Each time he'd been with Scarlet these last three nights he'd thought of Emi the *entire* time. Tonight he'd nearly grunted out her name as he drove into Scarlet with a purpose. "It's not the same as with Lynni," he muttered. He picked up his phone and read the other text he'd gotten earlier from Emi.

**You're probably still busy. But if you're up by chance give me a call. I've been having trouble falling asleep lately, so I'll probably be up for a while. If not, good night, my friend. I'll see you in the morning at Foams. =)**

No, he wasn't busy anymore. He was tempted to tell her to come up because, after only three nights of not having her there to hang out with, it was alarming how much he missed her. She'd been at his place later than this, but she'd come up way earlier, and the time just got away from them. But not once had he asked her to come up this late.

Since he was done brushing his teeth, he took an aspirin to relieve the tension headache he felt coming on. Then he walked out of the restroom without responding to his annoying reflection. He put his phone on the charger next to his bed and got under his down blanket. He'd bought Em one earlier that year because she mentioned how soft and *delicious* it felt after sitting on it one of the few times she'd stepped into his bedroom.

But he'd only purchased it because they were on sale at Macy's and because Emi said she never knew how to pick out that kind of fancy stuff. Not just because seeing her entire face light up did things to him now he couldn't begin to explain.

"You lying sack of shit," he muttered as he attempted to get comfortable under his blanket.

After a several minutes of tossing around in his bed, the impatience turned into exasperation, and he was beginning to feel like a kid throwing a hissy fit. He finally kicked the blanket off, sat up taking a deep breath, and ran his fingers through his hair. Squeezing his eyes shut for a moment, he took another deep breath then glanced at his phone. So he'd call her and chat for a little bit.

Big deal.

If neither of them could sleep, what was the point of both them lying in bed tossing and turning? The only times he'd spoken to her in the last few days were at Foams in the mornings. But their talks had been short, and she hadn't mentioned Sabian much. Even when he'd seen her reading out by the pool yesterday, he'd refused to go out and hang with her. Hearing her mention the guy had kissed her had been grating as shit, and Sydney wasn't so sure he'd managed to hide it because she changed the subject quickly enough.

Still, how bad could chatting with her for a little before hitting the hay be? He tapped the speed dial button before he could give it another thought. She answered just after the first ring.

"Hey, you're up," she chirped.

Sydney glanced at the time on his phone, already smiling just from hearing the sweet sound of her voice. He hadn't realized it was almost midnight. His evening with Scarlet had gone on a bit longer than he'd planned.

"Yeah, I'm having trouble sleeping myself."

"Work stressing you out?"

"Nah," he said, lying back down on his bed, "just one of those nights where I can't seem to get comfortable. What about you? Something on your mind?"

"Hmm," she said, making Sydney curious.

He hadn't actually expected her to say she was stressed. It was more of a courtesy follow-up to her question.

“I wouldn’t call it stressing out. Just trying to decide if I made a mistake or not.”

“About what?” he sat up against his headboard, pulling a pillow behind him.

“Sly.”

Sydney froze, not sure what to say, so he didn’t say anything. He just waited, gripping the phone a little tighter.

“He’s my boyfriend now.” She said it so simply and matter-of-factly Sydney hadn’t even had a chance to wrap his head around that before she continued. “Long story short, he said his publicist had been inundated with calls ever since he brought me with him to that charity ball game. He said since he considers himself to be seeing me he wanted to know if I’d be okay with his publicist confirming that he’s in a relationship with me. I said okay because, considering how often I get to see him, what’s the big deal? The season is well underway, and unless I fly out to see him, I probably won’t see him for at least another month. I think I can commit to that without it affecting my life too much.”

Sydney was speechless. He’d told her once if he was ever going to judge her she’d know it. So he had to be careful to choose his words right. He’d only seen her pissy side once, and while it was amusing, he didn’t want to upset her. It wasn’t so much that he was judging but that she didn’t often sound as naïve as her age suggested. But at the moment, it was exactly how she sounded: naïve as shit.

“You really think having Sabian as your boyfriend isn’t going to affect your life?”

“He’s not giving them my full name, just my first, and he’s not mentioning A.J. is my brother. My brother’s pretty famous, and being his sister hasn’t affected my life much.”

Sydney didn’t miss the air of defensiveness in her voice. He’d never forget the cute little arched brow in his car on the ride home from La Jolla when she’d accused him of being *judgy*. He could practically picture her expression, and it almost made him smirk. But before he could think of a proper response, because he knew he needed to tread lightly, she continued.

“Actually, I think this works out perfect,” she said, her tone still packing a punch.

If she were talking about anything else, Sydney might’ve even been smiling by now, but she wasn’t, and what she was saying flattened any trace

of a smirk as she went on.

“The way I see it, it’s a win-win situation. I may not be ready for a full-blown commitment, but I do enjoy dating and going out and having fun. What girl wouldn’t enjoy time with Sly?” She laughed, but it wasn’t her usual genuine laugh. He knew her too well now to know the difference. This was forced. “Seriously, I’d be crazy to pass this up, especially since this relationship fits perfectly into my schedule.”

For a minute, it almost felt as if she were trying to convince herself as much as she was trying to convince him. The only comfort this gave him was that this still meant she wasn’t all that into the guy. At least he knew, despite who this guy was, she was in this for the same reasons she’d been into Darren. Just for the fun of it—nothing more.

Deciding it’d be better if he just let it go, he said something he knew would surprise her. “You make a good point.”

She was quiet. Speechless? If visions of how else she’d be having *fun* with the guy once he had a little more time to spend with her weren’t still assaulting his brain, Sydney might’ve smiled. Instead, he ground his teeth so hard he had to remind himself how much he’d been doing that lately. He was bound to break a tooth, at least do some serious damage to his enamel if he didn’t stop.

“You still there?” he asked, closing his eyes and pinching the rim of his nose.

“Yeah,” she said, letting out a frail laugh. “I’m just surprised. I guess I was expecting more of a debate.”

“No,” he said as nicely as possible. “It makes sense. Maybe a long-distance relationship is something that’ll work for you.” He took a deep breath and tried to get the next words out as genuinely as possible. “I’m happy for you. This is exciting. Your sister must be going nuts.”

“Not really,” she said with the same feeble laugh as before. “You’re the first person I’ve told.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. It’s just so . . . It hasn’t sunk in yet, I guess. I’m just gonna let it simmer for now because you’re right. My sister will make a big deal of this and it’s not. Not yet anyway.”

Just as it had happened almost the entire taxing conversation, before he could say anything, she spoke again.

“So what’s been keeping you so busy? You and Cheryl work things out?” she asked.

Thankful for the change in subject, Sydney inhaled before answering and sat back against his headboard again. “No,” he said, letting his head fall back, and stared at the ceiling. “That’s pretty much a done deal. I’d never really felt anything for her from the beginning, and like you with Darren, I was beginning to feel like I was stringing her along.”

“Oh,” she said, sounding a little surprised. “So what *has* been keeping you so busy? Work?”

“Yeah, work’s been a little grueling lately,” he admitted then added something he hadn’t planned on telling her until after her new boyfriend declaration. “Scarlet’s been in town lately. I’ve hung out with her a few nights this week.”

He wasn’t sure why he hadn’t planned on telling her. It was just one of the few things, even as close as they’d become, he wasn’t comfortable talking to her about now. For whatever reason, talking to her about Cheryl seemed okay, easy enough. Maybe it was because Cheryl had never taken up so much of his Emi time. Like Sabian’s, Cheryl’s schedule was tight, especially when she was working on a particularly tough case. He also did a whole lot of canceling with her to hang around Emi instead. It was how he knew she wasn’t the one. That hadn’t been the case with Scarlet these past couple of weeks.

Sydney hadn’t even noticed Emi had gone silent until she spoke again but not before another forced-sounding laugh. “It’s weird to hear you call her Scarlet. She’s so Scarlet Brendon to me. Like Channing Tatum or Jennifer Lawrence. You don’t just call them Channing or Jennifer.”

Doing his own impression of the forced laugh, Sydney ran his fingers through his hair. “Yeah, well just like Sabian, once you get to know them, referring to them by both names sounds weirder than using just one.”

“So I take it you two are getting serious? I mean I haven’t hung out with you in days. I’m assuming she’s who you’ve been busy with?”

“The last three nights, yeah, but I wouldn’t call it serious. She just wants to lie low for a while,” he explained. “She was gone for so long, and the promotional tour for the movie that releases later this year is going to be grueling one. She’ll be gone again in a few months, so she said she wants to enjoy being home right now. Having someone in the same building she can hang out with is convenient for her.”

It was the truth. Scarlet was glamorously beautiful, sweet, and fun, but no way was Sydney getting any ideas of anything serious with her. If he thought Emi naïve for thinking her relationship with Sabian wouldn't be complicated, Sydney would be downright stupid to think a relationship with Scarlet outside of what they were doing now would be anything *but* complicated.

His other line beeped, and the alarms in his head went off the moment he saw it was his mother. She never called him this late unless something was wrong. "Listen. I gotta take this call, Em. I'll call you back if I'm not off too late." He barely waited for her to say okay before clicking to the other line. "Mom," he said as soon as he clicked over. "What's going on?"

"Everything's fine," she said, though her shaky voice said just the opposite. "It was just a little fire."

"What?" He stood up immediately. "A fire?"

"Yes, but it's out now. It was just a small fire in the garage," her voice suddenly broke. "No one got hurt," she continued even through her crying. "The firefighters had it out in ten minutes flat and there was minimal damage. They said it could've been a lot worse. But I'm fine."

"So why you crying, Mom?"

"It just scared the bejesus out of me," she said then took a trembling breath. "But I'm good now. I promise. I wasn't even going to call you until tomorrow."

"Did they check your vitals?" he asked, already rushing to his closet. "You could be going into shock, Ma."

"No, no," she said, sounding a bit more composed. "They checked everything. It's just that it happened so fast, and I'd held it all in all this time. Hearing your voice made me emotional. That's all."

"I'll be there in a few hours," he said, already tapping away at his tablet. "But don't wait up for—"

"Sydney, honey, no! You don't have to come down."

He'd traveled so much he had booking flights down to an art. With another tap to his laptop, he was done. "Already booked my flight." He glanced down at his arrival time with a frown. "I'll be there about two-forty in the morning. *Do not* wait up for me."

Of course, his mother tried to protest some more, but he convinced her there was no way he could cancel his flight now and he was coming

whether she thought he needed to or not. He could feel the onset of that tension headache he'd felt earlier really coming on now.

He'd been so lost in thought it barely registered when the elevator doors opened and he saw a teary-eyed Scarlet clutching her purse.

"Hey?" he said, puzzled as he stepped in with her. "What's wrong?"

The second he was close enough she leaned against his chest and cried but didn't explain. When they reached the lobby, they got out, and she inhaled deeply and began to tell him about her ongoing feud with her celebrity mother.

"I turned my phone off when I got to your place earlier tonight. So when I got home I got the news, and it's all over TV and the Internet." She sniffled some more even as she wiped at her eyes with a tissue. "She's written a tell-all. Advanced copies are already out, and in it, she talks about a lot of the private things about my life: My therapy growing up. My dad's affair years ago that she forgave him for, but now that he's dead, she's going to run his name through the mud! An incident I had with a family friend when I was in my early teens and he tried to rape me. Very personal things she had no right to share with the world. It's not even out yet, and it's all anyone's talking about. It fucking trended even. I can't turn on a television or check the Internet and not see something about it."

Sydney shook his head, feeling for her, but he wasn't sure what he could say to try and console her. "Don't worry about the trending crap. That's only until the next big story comes along, and you know that'll be in about an hour." He pulled a strand of hair away from her eyes. "Where you going?"

"I don't even know," she said. "I just feel like I need to get away. I've already called my producers and told them I'm not coming in for the next few days. I was planning on having my driver just drive and we'd stop and get a room when he's too tired to keep driving."

"Why don't you come with me?" he asked without hesitation.

He explained about his mother's fire and how he was flying out to check on her and to make sure all the insurance crap was taken care of.

"She'll probably need a new washer and dryer since it was what caught fire," he said even as they walked out together. "She said there's minimal damage, but it's still gonna require tending to. I don't want her dealing with all that on her own, and she hates for me to send *strangers* to handle things

for her. I'll probably be there for a few days, but you can fly back whenever you want. She lives in Flagstaff, perfect small town to get away to."

"Oh my gosh, it does sound perfect," she said, smiling for the first time since he saw her in the elevator tonight. "But are you sure you don't mind? I could get my own room. I wouldn't want your mom to feel like—"

"She's a big fan of your show," Sydney said, shaking his head. "She'd kill me if I didn't insist you stay at her place. And there's plenty of room."

Since her driver and car were already there, they got in, and Sydney looked up his flight and saw that, as expected, a flight at this hour had available seats. Scarlet insisted on paying for her own flight, though she said she wished they could drive. "It doesn't matter what time of day it is, paparazzi are always at LAX."

Sydney smiled at her sympathetically without saying anything, and she leaned her head against his shoulder. Of course, he'd never tell her this, but this was just another reason why he'd never consider a relationship with someone this famous. Instinctively, his thoughts were once again on Emi.

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## Chapter Twelve

### **Emilia**

Maybe if Emi had been given a choice, she would've held off longer telling her sister about Sly. But she wasn't. Not even a whole day after she'd just finished telling Sydney how *not* serious she was taking her relationship with Sly, she had to pretend the opposite for her sister's sake.

Already she'd been left to wonder the whole day about who had called Sydney so late the night before that he had to take the call. Usually, it was just the opposite. He'd mention he had a call from someone but was ignoring it. It always made her smile, especially when a few of those times he'd mentioned it was Cheryl calling.

Emi knew now why it never bothered her to hear about Cheryl. Sydney had always made his interest in her or lack thereof all too obvious. Knowing how often he'd prefer to hang out with or continue chatting with Emi than his own girlfriend made her insides mush. Of course, she never pointed out that she noticed. She was afraid it might make him feel weird and stop doing it.

Scarlet Brendon was clearly different. Emi was the one getting blown off now. Sydney admitted he'd been hanging out with beautiful starlet that whole week instead of Emi. Knowing it was probably her again last night that he'd cut their call short for—even after he'd spent the evening with the woman and hadn't spent time with Emi in days—had her nearly choking up. As much as she wanted to deny she was feeling any kind of jealousy, her sister calling to check on her that day had been the straw that broke the camel's back. The day had started off crappy enough when Sydney never showed up at Foams.

She'd texted him to ask if he was running late, and he hadn't responded until after lunchtime. That was only to say he had to fly out to see his mom

in Arizona on a whim and he'd explain it to her when he got back in a few days.

"How we doing?" Livi had asked when Emi answered her phone that evening.

"Good," she'd said, glad that her studying was keeping her busy and her mind off Sydney and *Scarlet*.

"You sure?" Livi asked, making Emi put her book down and sit back on her sofa.

"Yeah. Why wouldn't I be?"

"I know you always get a little defensive, but I know you too well, sissy," Livi said in her best big sister coddling voice. "I don't care how much you say you don't have a thing for Sydney. I think you do. Just a little bit," she added quickly. "So I was wondering if you're okay with all this talk on the news and Internet about him and Scarlet Brendon."

Emi felt her eyes nearly bug out and her heart rate spike, but she had to play it off. "I know he's been seeing her. She lives in our building. I told you, remember? But I didn't realize they were talking about them on TV."

She popped off the sofa and practically ran to her room to grab her tablet. "It's just photos of them at LAX last night," Livi explained. "I guess there's this big thing going on with her mom's new book or something. They're desperate to get a statement from her, so, of course, they had someone waiting at the airport in Flagstaff when they arrived. There's footage of them walking out to their waiting car. I didn't know he was seeing her."

Emi stared at the photos of them entering LAX hand in hand then the short clip of them striding through the airport in Flagstaff. Again, Sydney held Scarlet's hand protectively, and he looked incredibly handsome doing so. Despite Scarlet's celebrity, the way the headlines billed Sydney's resume seemed so much more impressive.

## **Scarlet Brendon dating Sydney Maricopa, chief technology operating officer of 4B, One of the world's leading satellite and software designers.**

Emi gulped, staring at the photo. In all the times he'd spoken of any girls he'd gone out with, even Cheryl, she'd yet to witness seeing him with any. It was one thing to hear about it, but she'd known, even back when

she'd had to watch him with Lucy the Clinger at Moreno's restaurant's anniversary party, how unpleasant it was. This was beyond unpleasant.

"Emi?"

Her sister's voice jolted her out of her thoughts, thoughts that had her throat constricting already, and it made her angry. She had a boyfriend for crying out loud. And this was her good *friend*.

"Yeah?" she said, trying to sound as casual about this as she'd started.

"I knew it," Livi said with even more certainty.

"Knew what?"

"Did you not just hear a word I said?"

Obviously not. "I was reading," Emi explained, her eyes still glued to the photos of Sydney and Scarlet.

"I said Rosie is the one who sent me the first link about this earlier," Livi explained. "She said she asked Sarah about it when she spoke with her today, and Sarah told her there was a fire at Sydney's mom's house yesterday but he hadn't mentioned anything about Scarlet Brendon. All Sydney had ever mentioned about her in the past was that she lived in the same building and they'd had drinks once upon a time, but she had no idea he was seeing her and certainly not that he was serious enough to take her home to meet his mom. He didn't tell you either?"

Emi had really missed all that? She thought about it for a moment. So she wasn't the only one he'd been vague with. She checked her phone in vain to see if there were any more texts from him or even calls. None.

"Emi, talk to me," Livi said in her coddling voice again. "I'd hate to think you're hurting and—"

"I'm seeing Sly now," Emi said, swallowing hard, before her sister said something that might hit a nerve and have her blubbering. "I was gonna tell you, but I was letting it simmer. It still feels so unbelievable, but, yeah, he asked me to be exclusive the other day and I agreed."

Her sister was quiet for a moment then gasped. "Are you serious?"

"Yes!" Emi said, trying to sound as excited as she should be.

She filled her sister in on her relationship, reminding herself to squeal in all the appropriate places of the story. It amazed her as much as it alarmed her how differently she felt now when talking about Sly. She'd since pushed the tablet away, not wanting to obsess about the photos any longer, but her heart felt heavy.

As if on cue but right on time, her other line beeped with Sly's incoming call. "That's him," she said cheerfully. "Time for our evening chat."

Livi giggled cheerfully, making Emi promise to call her back as soon as she could and tell her everything. She was still acting miffed that Emi hadn't told her sooner.

"Hey, babe," Sly murmured as soon as she answered. "I've been thinking about you all day. I don't know how much longer I can go without seeing you. When's the next time you have time off school? I can fly you out to my next game. I'm dying here."

Emi thought about it for a second. Between school and her internship, she didn't often have too many days off in a row, but she did have a couple coming that weekend. She'd secretly hoped to spend a lazy Sunday, maybe even an entire weekend, hanging with Sydney. From what she gathered now, if things between him and Scarlet were getting serious enough that he'd *take her home to meet his mom*, any lazy weekends he'd have from here on he'd likely be spending with her instead.

"Where are you playing this weekend?"

"Chicago. Are you free?" Sly sounded so excited it made her feel guilty that she wasn't nearly as excited.

"I am Saturday and Sunday, but I have to be back by Sunday night."

"Done!" Sly said. "That'll be perfect, too, because Saturday's is a morning game. We can have a late lunch with your brother, but then after that, you're *all* mine."

Emi plopped down on her bed, doing her best to focus on Sly. What the hell was wrong with her? This was Sly Sabian she was on the phone with. *The* Sly Sabian was excited about seeing *her* this weekend. Why couldn't she jump on board and be as excited as he was about it? As excited as Livi was? As excited as this would've made her over a year ago?

She knew exactly why, but she was just going to have to get over it. After reading Sydney's official and utterly impressive title, it further confirmed what she'd thought from the beginning. No way could she keep a man of his intelligence and worldly experience interested in her piddly interests. No way was she opening up that can of worms—risk making things awkward between them when he turned her down nicely—and very possibly losing one of the best friends she'd ever had.

Besides, what she'd been saying all along was true. She still had her life, her future to figure out. As much as she'd like to think that agreeing to

a long-distance relationship with Sly wouldn't complicate her life too much, she knew better. Already it felt like it just might. Before today, she'd planned on just staying home and relaxing, having an uncomplicated weekend being lazy and hanging out with her best friend, whom she missed terribly. Now she'd be in Chicago, making huge decisions she knew were coming like *would she be sleeping with her new boyfriend?*

~\*~

## Sydney

The night Sydney and Scarlet arrived in Flagstaff he'd showed her to the room she'd be sleeping in almost immediately. As expected, his mom had been as surprised as she'd been excited, but it'd been too late to chat. Sydney tried taking a quick assessment of the damage in his mom's garage. It wasn't nearly as bad as he imagined. His mom had gotten lucky they caught it as quickly as they did.

It was no surprise she grilled him about his relationship with Scarlet, one she had no idea about. Sydney had told her about meeting Scarlet and even having drinks with her way back, but he hadn't mentioned anything more since. He explained about the drama going on with Scarlet's mom's tell-all book and how her coming along on this trip was not planned. Hell, his jumping on a plane to Flagstaff had barely been planned. But he'd told her the truth. Only instead of using the phrase *hanging out* because it's how he usually described his time with Emi and this was different, he said he'd been *seeing* Scarlet.

What *did* surprise him was her line of questioning after they'd gotten done talking about Scarlet.

"What about Emi?" she asked in that singsong tone of hers when she was trying but failing to not seem obvious.

"What about her?"

Sydney had walked around the garage, pretending to continue to assess the damage. He knew better than to look his mom in the eyes when discussing anything he wasn't being completely forthcoming about. He was as good as she was at covering up even the slightest of insincerities.

Since his trip to La Jolla where Lynni let him in on his mother's thoughts about his relationship with Emi, he'd talked to his mom a few times about it. Each time she'd said Emi sounded like sweet girl, someone

she'd like to meet. As much as he'd tried to cut down on mentioning Emi when he spoke to either his mom or Lynn, he somehow always let something slip. It was impossible not to. Up until a few weeks ago, she was who he spent most of his time with and spent most of his time thinking of; although, the latter hadn't changed much.

"I'm just wondering what she thinks of your relationship with Ms. Brendon."

"It's Scarlet, Mom," he said with a smirk but was mindful to not get caught in his mother's prying eyes when saying the next part. "She thinks it's cool." He shrugged. "Like you, she was a little star struck when I first mentioned it"—way back when he'd *first* mentioned having had drinks with Scarlet. This time when he'd told Emi about seeing Scarlet, her reaction to the news seemed unpleasant, but Sydney knew better. She'd just finished telling him what she'd agree to with Sabian. The guy was her fucking boyfriend now. "But then she's seeing someone pretty famous herself. Sly Sabian."

He finally turned to his mom, and she'd stared at him blankly, so he laughed and explained who Sabian was. Thankfully, that seemed to do the trick, and they were back to the subject of insurance claims, appliance shopping the next day, and the cleaning crew he'd have to hire to come clean up the mess.

The week was full of surprises. First, he'd been surprised, though he shouldn't have been, about Scarlet's deciding to stay with him at his mom's for the next two and a half days. In hindsight, he knew now she'd just been trying to stay out of the limelight.

Lynn had texted him a few times to check on his mom and ask how bad the fire had been while he'd been at his mom's place. But when he got home, her call and blunt questioning had come as another surprise.

"Tell the truth" was the first thing she'd said when he answered.

"Okay." Sydney smirked, thinking she was going to grill him about whether or not he'd slept with Scarlet or anything else related to her. She had, but it wasn't what he'd expected. "Are you seeing that TV star because Emi is seeing Sly Sabian?"

"What?" He laughed more out of nervous tension than anything.

"Don't you lie to me, Sydney Maricopa. Why hadn't you mentioned your dating that woman to me before? I know you don't tell me about *every*

girl you date, but I know you would've told me about something this big. What are you hiding?"

"Nothing." He laughed again. "I haven't been seeing her very long is all, and her coming with me to Flagstaff was completely unplanned."

Once again he found himself explaining about Scarlet's family drama and how he'd run into her in the elevator on his way out to the airport.

"Hmm," she said, sounding unconvinced.

He was almost afraid to ask, but he had to. "What do *you* think I'm hiding?"

"I don't know," she admitted. "It's just that I know you and I are proof positive that it is possible to have a friend of the opposite sex with nothing more to it. But there's something about you and Emi."

Alright, she had his interest. The two women who knew him best in the world were onto something he thought he'd been doing a pretty good job of hiding. This was a worrisome thought because lately it'd begun to feel like Emi knew him as well as Lynn did, maybe even better now since she spent more time around him than Lynn had in well over a decade. He needed to know what they were seeing so he could make sure to tone the hell down whatever it was in front of Em.

"Different like how? She's a good friend now, and we've gotten pretty close because I see her a lot. But that's it. Aside from the fact that we have friends in common and live in the same building, Lynn, we have little else in common."

"That's not true," she countered. "You said she liked sailing."

He opened his fridge with a smile, remembering the last time they'd gone out on his sailboat. "She had a good time," he admitted.

"You're both single."

"Not anymore," he reminded her.

"That's just it," she said. "First, you're both single, and suddenly you're both in relationships with these high-profile people. Like the same week even. That's so coinkydinky. How did that happen?"

"Technically," he explained as he sat down on his sofa, "I'm not in a relationship with Scarlet. The tabloids came to that conclusion on their own, but I've only been hanging with her for a short while. Her Hollywood life is way too complicated. Not for me. I'll enjoy her company while she's around, but like she left before, she'll be gone again soon, promoting her movie. I'm not the waiting-around type."

His nose should've shot out like Pinocchio's, straight through the television screen a couple of yards in front of him. For years back in high school, he'd waited around for Lynn, hoping for the perfect moment to present itself so he could let her know how he felt for her.

Emi was different. All the reasons he'd had before he could overlook now: the age difference, their worlds being too different. After a year of being around her, he knew none of that mattered. But there was still the matter of her not being ready for the kind of commitment he'd require—*demand*—if he'd ever consider trying to go there with her.

It was the one thing she'd made clear from the beginning. She just wasn't ready for anything like that. The last thing he wanted was to pressure her into anything until he knew she was ready, and he wasn't about to agree to a half-assed relationship with her. The fact that she wouldn't even consider a serious relationship with Sabian—a guy he'd seen and heard her squeal about more than once—spoke volumes. No way would she be willing to commit to anything with Sydney.

"All I know, Sydney, is I watched her the day you were here and you hung out with Lucy."

"God, don't remind me."

Lynni laughed suddenly, making him smile for the first time since the beginning of this conversation. "Seriously though," she pressed on, "even before the day at the restaurant when it was so obvious she couldn't keep her eyes off you and Lucy, she'd been weirdly quiet when Valerie and I told you about setting you up the day before."

"She didn't know anything about Lucy at the time," Sydney countered. "What could she add?"

"Okay, fair enough, but can I just ask you something then?"

Bracing himself, Sydney took a deep breath. Clearly, Lynni's call had not been without a purpose, and she wasn't going to let this go until she got to it.

"Go ahead," he said, closing his eyes.

"How do *you* feel about Emi?"

"I like her," he said confidently. "She's a very sweet girl, and she's fun to hang with."

"Sydney?" Normally, Lynn's tone would've had him smirking; instead, it made him frown. "You know that's not what I mean. Sweetie," she added, her voice going sugary as it always did when she was trying to make a point

about something she knew he disagreed with. “I just know you too well. I’ve noticed it. Your mom has too. You seem so chipper when you speak of Emi. You were so tense and stressed out for a while when you were still deciding if you’d made the right choice taking this job in Los Angeles. Like every other big decision you’ve ever made in your life, I thought for sure you’d be questioning this one for much longer than you did. Then suddenly it seemed to be the least of your worries. Your mom said the *exact* same thing. Instead of obsessing about every little aspect of your new position like you’d been doing for weeks, suddenly Emi was all you could talk about. I was happy for you. So was your mom. I kept waiting to hear you say it. Admit you’d fallen for Emi.”

She paused for a moment as he pondered what she’d just said. Had he really been that obvious? “I still get the stress headaches, you know. In fact, I think you’re giving me one now.”

Lynn giggled even though he was serious. He was massaging his temple now just thinking about everything she’d dumped on him. “What do you want me to say, Lynn? That I’m attracted to her? Okay, I can admit that. She’s a beautiful *young* girl. I’d be blind not to think so.”

“And you enjoy her company.”

Sydney could practically hear the self-satisfied smile Lynn was likely wearing at that moment, but he’d go along with this. He knew Lynn well enough to know she knew she’d hit the nail on the head. It was too late to back down now.

“I do. And you’re right. She has been a pleasant distraction, but that still doesn’t take from the fact that she’s a twenty-year old student—”

“Almost twenty-one,” Lynn chimed in before he could finish.

He pressed his lips together. He should’ve known this debate wouldn’t be an easy win for him. Still he kept on. “Yeah, the same week *I* turn *thirty*.”

“Oh my God, Sydney, what difference does a number make? You said it yourself you’re not just attracted to her. You like her and enjoy the time you spend with her.”

“Lynni, she’s said it over and over again. She’s too young and not ready for any kind of committed relationship.”

“Yet she’s with the baseball player now.”

“You know why?” Sydney stood up, unable to sit anymore and aware he was raising his voice. “She’s with him because he’s too busy to ask too

much of her. She admitted the only reason she agreed to the exclusive relationship with him was because she could handle a long-distance romance where she wouldn't have to put too much into—”

“Why are you raising your—?”

“We are too different, Lynni. Way different.”

“Sydney—”

“The guy's a baseball superstar.” He paced the room now, aware he was getting hot and not understanding why. “A heartthrob for fuck's sake, and she still doesn't want to—”

“Now you're cussing?”

“I'm just saying if a guy like that can't make her think differently—”

“Oh, so he's better than you because he's a baseball player?”

“Have you seen the guy?” Sydney asked, holding his fingers to his now throbbing temple and squeezing his eyes shut.

“I had a feeling you'd say that, so allow me to throw your words back at you. Words you said to me once up on a time.” Lynn sounded almost as worked up as he felt. “I don't have to see him because I've seen you, okay? Have you looked in the mirror lately? Does that sound familiar to you?”

He tried to put a memory to the words, but nothing was coming to him.

“When I first met Angel, I didn't think he could be into me because of his popularity in school, and that made you angry. Do you remember that?”

Again it was vague. Mostly he remembered feeling jealous as hell hearing her talk about Angel but trying desperately not to show it *and* to be the supportive best friend she needed so much at the time.

“Look. All I'm saying is it's obvious you two are feeling more for each other.”

“It doesn't matter. Even if she is feeling what I am, she's made it clear. Serious committed relationships are not in her near future.” He plopped back down, feeling a little calmer. Or drained. “You know me, Lynni. As long as I don't have feelings for someone, the friends-with-benefits things can work. Emi just means too much to me now. I wouldn't be able to put my feelings aside if I let anything more happen between us, and I like her too much to risk making things awkward if I suggest we do.”

He heard some loud laughter and screeching in the background then Lynn telling the kids to settle down before she spoke again. She took a deep breath. “I knew it wasn't just me trying to romanticize this thing.” She no longer sounded self-satisfied as she did earlier. She sounded worried. “I

guess that makes sense to not want to risk ruining your friendship with her if you really believe she means it when she says she's in no way ready for the kind of relationship you'd consider with her. Just remember one thing. Remember that obstinate high-school senior so long ago that moved to La Jolla with only one goal in mind. She was determined to focus on one thing and one thing only: getting back home to Arizona. You know better than anyone when all that happened I was *absolutely* determined to get back home and that *nothing* was going to stop me. Then I met Angel." She took another deep breath. "Just because she says she's not ready to fall in love doesn't mean she has a clue what she's talking about. I know I didn't. You don't just schedule your heart to be ready for love, Sydney. When it happens, it happens whether you're ready or not. I don't profess to be a love guru or anything of the sort." She laughed softly. "God knows I've made my share of mistakes. But all I can say is that I know what I saw in her eyes this last time you two came down. It's the same thing I hear in your voice when you talk about her. Maybe, just *maybe*, it's what's keeping her from wanting to commit to anyone else. She might not even realize it herself."

There was more screeching in the background and then Angel's voice bellowed. Before Sydney could respond to her last statement that left him dazed, they were off the phone.

The unanticipated development that not only had he officially admitted to himself that he'd fallen hard for Emi but that someone else knew about it now too, should've been the biggest surprise that week. But nothing could've prepared him for the confusing-as-shit conversation he'd have next—with Emi.

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## Chapter Thirteen

### **Emilia**

There were only two clips and a couple of stills of Sydney and Scarlet: the same photos that were taken of them leaving LAX, the short clip of them arriving in Flagstaff, and the even shorter clip of them arriving a few hours ago at LAX again. All of which Emi had fixated over for hours.

On the other hand, endless photos, videos and even interviews of Sly with women it'd been rumored he'd dated in the past surfaced. While Emi had skimmed through some of the most recent articles, not once had she scrutinized any of the articles about him as she had the few about Sydney. Many were about the drama going on in Scarlet's family, but none of that interested Emi. She'd forced herself to stop refreshing the few articles that did mention Sydney and tried to stop thinking about it, but it was impossible.

The more she thought about it, the more irritated she got. Sydney had become one of her closest friends *ever* this past year. Emi *thought* he felt the same. No way could she be mad about his spending time with Scarlet or whatever the hell else he'd been doing with her these past few weeks. Emi just thought he might've called her first or even asked *her* to accompany him on what she knew was likely somewhat of a stressful and unexpected trip. It was what friends were for, right? If she got a distressful call about one of her family members, she knew who'd be the first person she'd reach out to.

Her *best* friend.

Not Sly who she'd only been seeing for a few weeks. It didn't matter that Sly was technically her boyfriend now. Sydney was who she'd want by her side.

She stared down at her phone at the only other exchange they'd had since his vague text the day he left where he said no more than he had to go

to Arizona and he'd tell her about it when he got back. In two and a half days he hadn't bothered to call her once, but he did have the *graciousness* to text her again the second day he'd been gone to explain a little more about what he was doing in Flagstaff, which only served to enrage her further. She reread the exchange again as she'd been doing ever since.

**In case you hadn't heard, my mom had a small fire in her garage the other night. She's fine, but you know I worry about her, so as soon as I found out, I flew out to be with her.**

Even now, reading this still irritated her. She hoped he hadn't analyzed her response the way she'd been analyzing everything he'd sent her or the articles online.

**So you took Scarlet with you?**

Emi was only glad now she hadn't responded in all caps as she'd originally wanted to. The way it read now didn't quite have the punch it carried when she first wrote back to him, tapping away at her phone furiously as she'd swatted warm tears away. She realized now she'd probably overreacted, but everything at that point had just mounted, and she'd been feeling incredibly hurt.

Even his "in case you hadn't heard" comment was irritating to no end. At first, she hadn't thought much of it, but after much obsessing, she'd come to the conclusion that it could mean only one thing. While he hadn't bothered to tell her about it until a day later and chose to ask Scarlet to be with him during his mini family crisis, he'd obviously told someone else the whole story, most likely his number-one best friend—*Lynni*.

It hurt that while she gave him such importance in her life he'd think so little of her that he hadn't bothered to even tell her he was leaving. And it was only after *she'd* texted him first to ask where he was that he bothered with his vague-as-crap text.

By the time he'd texted her to tell her he was home—*hours* after the photos of him arriving at LAX had been posted—it almost hurt to turn down his invitation to come up and hang out so he could tell her about his ordeal. But she didn't want to chance getting as emotional with him as she'd felt the entire last two days.

**I'm waiting for a call.**

His response was immediate, and she hated herself for being tempted to give in. “Big girl, Em. You can do this,” she whispered as she stared at his text.

**So wait for it up here.**

It didn't help that her “waiting for a call” response was total BS. Sly had an evening game tonight. He wouldn't be free to talk for at least another thirty-forty minutes. Before she could give into the temptation, stalk to his apartment and possibly make a stupid blubbering ass of herself, she decided she'd just call him. She'd since decided she'd be honest. This had nothing to do with her being jealous of Scarlet, even though she could openly admit now—to herself—that she was *utterly* jealous of Scarlet. But she'd accepted almost from the time she'd met Sydney she'd always be secretly jealous of any woman lucky enough to be romantically involved with him. This wasn't about that. This was about him undermining what she considered such a special friendship. They shared a bond. She told him just about *everything*. How dare he not even bother to shoot her a quick text to, at the very least, tell her he wouldn't be at Foams in the morning.

Already feeling herself getting emotional, she took a deep breath, shook it off, and hit speed dial.

“Hey.” His deep cheery voice nearly choked her up. “You coming up?”

“I can't,” she said her voice a near whisper. “I have to wait for this call.”

“You can't take it here?” he asked then quickly added. “You okay?”

“Yeah, I'm fine,” she said, lifting her chin as if he could see her. “It's just that, you know, I don't know how long I'll be and it's kind of private.”

“Oh, okay,” he said. “So I'll just tell you about it over the phone. You can do that, right?”

“Yes,” she whispered again.

“Are you sure you're okay? This call you're waiting on, it's nothing bad, is it?”

“No.” Again as if he could see her, she shook her head in an effort to sound more convincing. “Nothing bad. Just, you know, the usual.”

He paused before he started but then began telling her about the call he got from his mom late in the evening when he left. Hearing his mother cry had alarmed him enough that, no matter how much she assured him it was no big deal, there was no way he wasn't flying out ASAP. He got as far as

telling her about how lucky her mom had gotten. It could've been a lot worse.

That was when the words just flew out. The emotion that had been building the entire last two weeks had begun to peak when she'd found out about him being in Flagstaff with Scarlet. Now hearing him tell it so nonchalantly, they'd reached a boiling point.

"Why didn't you call me to tell me about this sooner?"

"About the fire?"

"Yes," she said, willing the huge knot in her throat to go away. "I thought we were closer than that. I was worried that morning when you weren't at Foams and—"

"Emi, I got the call after midnight. I just grabbed a bag and took off. I didn't have time to—"

"But you had time to ask Scarlet to go with you."

"That's a whole other story."

"Does Sarah know about this too?"

"Yeah, but that's only because she texted me when she saw the photos of me with Scarlet at the airport."

"I gotta go," she said, ready to hit the end button before the stupid knot in her throat gave way.

"Wait. Whoa! What's wrong with you? Is it the call you were waiting for? Sabian? Call me when you're done."

"No, it's not the call, *Sydney*. I just gotta go."

Before he could say another word, she hung up and gave into the emotion, wiping angry tears away. Tears she suddenly realized she'd been holding in for days, probably weeks. She put her phone down, ignoring it when it rang, and hurried into her bathroom instead.

How stupid was she to get so worked up over *this*? So Sydney hadn't called his little best friend to check in and he took Scarlet home to meet his mom. Why did it matter now? She'd always known the day would come eventually. The day one or both of them would meet a significant other. Naively she'd thought maybe they could all be friends. Hang out and go on double dates. At the moment, she didn't think she could stomach being in the same room with him and anyone else. Watching the video of him holding Scarlet's hand over and over had been proof enough that a scenario like that was out of the question.

She bent over the sink and rinsed her face, letting the warm water run for a while until she'd splashed enough water over her face she felt cleaned up enough. The moment she turned the water off she heard the loud knock in her front room.

Grabbing a towel from the rack, she wiped her face down, rushing out into the front room. She slowed when she heard Sydney's voice on the other side of her front door.

"Emi, you there? Can we talk?"

"*Shit!*"

She glanced around her front room and kitchen. It wasn't nearly as organized as his place, but it was neat enough. With a deep breath, she shook away what just hearing him say her name did to her. "Just a minute," she said as she stopped in front of a mirror and double-checked her face. "Damn it!"

Rinsing her face only cleansed it. It didn't do a thing for her red puffy eyes. She couldn't let him see her this way. She walked over to the door and spoke through the crack.

"I was about to get in the shower," she explained without opening it.

"Can I talk to you for just a sec?"

"Yeah, go ahead," she said, rushing to one of the cabinets in her kitchen where she sometimes kept eye drops and fumbled through it, but she couldn't find them.

Sydney was silent for a moment, and then she heard him again. "Are you gonna open the door?"

Slumping her shoulders, she tapped at the top of her cheeks just below her eyes as if that might alleviate some of the puffiness and returned to the door. She took a deep breath before unlatching the lock then opened it with a smile.

His eyes immediately narrowed when he saw her. "Are you crying?"

"No." She spun around, leaving the door open for him to enter behind her. "Your text woke me up from a nap. My eyes always look like this when I first wake up."

She turned when she reached her kitchen counter and smiled again.

"Did I do something wrong?" he asked.

"No," she said at first then changed her mind. He was here in her apartment for the first time since she'd met him—because she'd hung up on him. There was no way around this but to be honest. "Maybe I woke up in a

bad mood,” she said with a shrug. “I guess I just wondered why you wouldn’t bother to call me sooner. You probably would’ve been the first one I called if something like that happened in my family is all.”

“I, uh . . .”

He turned to close the door to her apartment. It felt odd to see him in her apartment for once. He seemed out of place. “I’m sorry?”

Lifting a brow, she glanced up and their eyes met. “Don’t be.”

Her voice was back to a whisper like when she’d spoken to him on the phone. She felt stupid now. How could she just expect him to automatically feel for her what she did for him? It was silly.

“I have three brothers, Sydney”—she lifted and dropped her shoulder and glanced away, unable to look at him anymore—“and a sister who I’m very close to. Feelings of entitlement come with being so close to someone; you expect them to call immediately if something’s going on. I guess it crossed over to you and it hurt—pissed me off a little—that it’d be days later when you finally tell me about something like this. Don’t worry about it. I guess we’re not as close—”

“Hey.”

His hand on her arm surprised her. She hadn’t realized he’d been standing so close. She glanced up at him as his expression softened. “We *are* that close. I’m sorry I hadn’t called sooner. It all just happened so fast, and I figured I’d be home soon enough to tell you all about it in person. It was what I had planned for tonight.” To her surprise, he outstretched his arms. “Forgive me?”

Swallowing hard, she nodded, smiling, and went in for the hug. What she expected would be a quick, obligatory, and apologetic hug turned into him wrapping his big strong heavenly arms around her tightly in what felt more intimate—meaningful.

Instinctively, she slipped her arms around him, further sinking into the warmth of all that was him. She leaned her face against his chest, inhaling deeply. As usual, he smelled amazing, and *Jesus*, she knew she’d missed him, but she hadn’t realized just how much until that moment. The embrace, the moment, felt too good—*too* perfect—almost as if he knew this is what her body, heart, and soul had been needing all these torturous days away from him. But how could he? On the phone, both today and the night he’d left, he seemed clueless to what she might be thinking—feeling.

Taking another deep breath of Sydney, Emi felt like she could stay there forever if he let her, but sadly he pulled away.

A feeling of guilt washed over her as she heard her phone ring and wanted nothing more than to ignore it and spend the rest of the evening with Sydney. The wistful expression on Sydney's face—one she was certain matched her own—flattened as he glanced around for her phone.

“There's that call you were waiting for.”

Emi had no other choice but to nod and start toward her phone. She'd already made it sound like the damn call was too important to miss.

“But we're okay now, right?” Sydney asked as she reached the phone on the table in front of her television. “Or do I still need to make it up to you? We can go sailing this weekend.”

She clenched the phone, feeling the stab of regret in her heart. Her weekend was already scheduled. She'd already promised her time to someone else:

Her boyfriend.

Glancing back, she considered sending the call to voicemail, but she didn't. Sydney had just spent the last six days with Scarlet. She'd be stupid to think that just because she'd guilted him into giving her such a blissful hug she should start blowing Sly off for him. It'd be dumb, not to mention wrong. Sly didn't deserve that.

With a lift of her finger, she asked him to give her a moment while she answered. She told Sly she'd be just a second before bringing the phone to her hip.

“I won't be here this weekend,” she said, trying not to sound as disappointed as she felt. Sydney's eyes narrowed in question, so she answered before he could ask. “I'm flying out to Chicago. The Padres are playing the Cubs. But maybe next weekend?”

Understanding and something else swept over Sydney's face instantly, and he nodded. As if she'd just dismissed him, he started to her door. “I'll see you in the morning then.”

“Sydney,” she said before he could walk out the door. He stopped and glanced back at her blankly. “We're good,” she said softly and smiled.

He nodded but said nothing more before leaving. She waited a few seconds before bringing the phone to her ear again. “Sorry about that.”

“Maybe next weekend, what?” Sly asked, ignoring her apology.

The question surprised her. She'd given little thought to Sly hearing her short exchange with Sydney. "Sailing," she said simply. "He has a sailboat. I've gone out with him before on it. He was asking if I wanted to go out this weekend, but I won't be here."

Emi wasn't naïve. She knew what she was saying to Sly so casually would not be taken as lightly by him. He'd made a few comments about her friendship with Sydney in the past. The suspicion in his tone tonight hadn't been missed. But as she had from the very beginning, she was setting a precedent. Sydney was her good friend, one she'd planned on staying close with no matter what changed in their lives. Though, these past couple of weeks had been eye-opening for sure. Staying friends with Sydney, *no matter what*, would be far more of a challenge than she'd imagined.

"Did you make dinner for him again tonight? Is that why he was over?"

"No," she said, clearing her throat and glad she could be honest about this. "He'd just stopped by actually. I hadn't seen him for almost a week. Do you know who Scarlet Brendon is?"

She heard him whisper the name. "Sounds familiar."

"She's an actress," Emi explained. "Pretty famous too. She's on *CSI Blues*, but she's also done a few movies. Anyway, she lives in the building, and he's been seeing her lately. They were all over the Internet and tabloids these last couple of days when he went away with her. Since I hadn't seen or talked to him in days, he came over to tell me about it."

"Is that right?" he asked, his tone losing a bit of the intensity she'd heard it in earlier. "Believe it or not, I don't follow the tabloids much."

Emi smiled, feeling a little devious that her revelation about Sydney seeing someone else and her having not seen or talked to him in days had been perfectly timed. She plopped down in her bed, feeling emotionally drained and ready for a change in subject.

"So when you and him go sailing, does he bring his girl or is it just the two of you?"

The thought hadn't even crossed her mind when Sydney had offered. Surely because he mentioned *making it up to her*, he'd meant just the two of them, but Sly had a point. The thought made her insides tighten.

"The times we've gone sailing in the past he wasn't seeing her yet." Again she was glad to be able to be truthful about this. "But I suppose now that he's seeing her, there's a good chance he'd bring her along. Only like yours, her career keeps her real busy."

The uncomfortable silences between her and Sly were prevalent whenever the subject of Sydney came up. Clearly, this was not a fun subject for him.

“But you’ve met her, right?”

“I haven’t,” she said, closing her eyes because she had a feeling the topic she was hoping they’d move away from was about to go a lot longer.

“Really? But she lives in the same building? I thought you spent so much time with this guy.”

This time Emi cleared her throat away from the phone so he wouldn’t hear her. She didn’t want him to think this topic was making her uncomfortable.

For just a moment, she considered addressing his “you spend so much time with this guy” comment but instead decided to ignore it and answer his real inquiry: *why* she’d yet to meet Sydney’s *girl*.

“He told me about having hung out with her way back, but she was gone for a long time, filming a movie. They picked up where they left off just recently, so I just haven’t. But I’m sure I will soon.”

Not if Emi could help it.

Again another uncomfortable silence ensued. Emi was sure he was trying to decide if he believed that entirely. Emi and Sydney were supposed to be each other’s best friends. Yet neither had met each other’s significant others? It wasn’t like either had been in said relationships that long. Still, she had to admit that, up until that last bullshit statement she’d made so coolly about being sure she’d meet Scarlet, she’d never given it much thought. A year ago when Sydney told her about having had drinks with Scarlet, Emi would’ve jumped at the chance to meet her. Now the thought of meeting her and possibly being witness to any open affection between the two made her skin crawl.

“Maybe the next time I’m in Los Angeles I can meet Sydney,” Sly finally said. “I’m curious now. I’ve heard so much about him.”

There was an edge to his tone. He wasn’t just curious, but Emi would go along, and hopefully the conversation would move on to something other than Sydney. “Sure. He’d probably get a kick out of meeting you.”

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## Chapter Fourteen

### Sydney

To say Sydney was using Scarlet was a bit harsh. It's what he kept telling himself. Scarlet was in full agreement that their arrangement was lighthearted and free of any obligations or need for explanations. No promises or commitments had been given. Both could come and go as they pleased, and neither owed the other a thing. Sydney never even asked her about her social life outside of the time she spent with him. But the weekend Em had spent with her *boyfriend*, Sydney had overdone it. He needed Scarlet to help keep his mind off Em. Scarlet had just been a convenient diversion but, more importantly, a willing participant in his marathon weekend of unquenchable lovemaking. Only calling what they'd done in his apartment all weekend *making love* was a gross misinterpretation of the truth.

Unquenchable however, was exactly what it'd felt like. Despite the undeniable pleasure of it, no matter how many times and how hard he'd nailed Scarlet, not once had he satisfied the ultimate goal—to squelch any thoughts of what Emi and Sly might be doing that weekend.

The day he hugged Em a few days before the weekend she left, he knew it was a mistake the moment he'd pressed his body against hers. He hadn't meant to, but it just happened, and once he had her in his arms, he'd had to go for it. Everything that had been happening up until then—everything he'd been denying to himself—was confirmed. Up until then, he'd only admitted to being attracted to her. He'd used the phrase *fallen for her* loosely, as in, if she were game, he'd be willing to give a relationship with her a try despite their differences. Lynn had been right. Age was just a number, and as long as they enjoyed each other's company—felt what he finally had to admit he felt for her—nothing else mattered.

What he had to admit after that day was that he didn't just enjoy Em's company. He craved it. Only it was becoming more than a craving now. He *needed* her around, needed to see that smile, hear her laughter, and listen to her voice as she spoke so openly about everything, even about the things that troubled her most. It was what had him slipping his arms around her the day she'd been upset with him. Their friendship was undeniably as special to her as it was to him. She'd compared him to her siblings, the people in her life he knew meant the world to her. It was part of the reason why he hesitated to move forward and be honest about what he was feeling.

The past few weeks had been absolute torture when she wasn't around. He could deal with knowing she had a fucking boyfriend because, even after her weekend with him, she was still speaking in terms of "this is only for fun" and "for now." He didn't dare ask her if she'd been intimate with Sabian yet. After she spent an entire weekend with the guy, Sydney could only assume she had. His only consolation was their conversations lately consisted more of her worries about her future and her lack of direction than they did about her new relationship.

What he couldn't deal with was the amount of time her new relationship was taking from their time together. She hadn't been with Sabian again since that weekend in Chicago with him weeks ago. But the evenings or even weekend afternoons they spent together were always cut short now because she had to get home in time for his Skype calls.

Sydney had begun to do to Scarlet what he'd done to Cheryl for months before he had to cut her off completely because he'd felt too much like a dick. If given the choice, he'd blow Scarlet off in a heartbeat to spend the time with Emi instead. Even knowing that if he chose Scarlet his time with her would without doubt have a much-needed, stress-releasing happy ending, the choice was always clear. While those happy endings with Scarlet, usually multiple times in one night, were physically satisfying, mentally and emotionally he was always left discontented.

Once again he'd given into the need to be around Emi. Listen to her laugh. Gaze at the adorable crease in her forehead as she concentrated doing what she did best. Cook.

"I just don't know," she said as she prepared yet another dinner for them in his kitchen. Homer circled her feet below as he always did when she was over now. The poor guy had it as bad as Sydney now. He couldn't get

enough of her either. “Not a single career option jumps out and grabs me like my siblings all had happen to them. It’s so frustrating.”

Sydney stood there, leaning against the counter, studying her as she effortlessly put everything together then plated it like in all those cooking shows she’d gotten him into. “Ever thought of culinary school?” he’d asked as she garnished the dish.

She’d glanced up at him, her eyes a bit bright. “Yeah, but it seems like such a long shot, and I’ve only ever cooked for my family and for fun.”

“And for me,” Sydney pointed out as he reached for one of the shrimp.

Emi smiled, watching as he brought it to his mouth. He chewed slowly, closing his eyes as he savored the perfectly seasoned and cooked shrimp.

“That’s delicious, Em,” he said as he opened his eyes and meant it.

“Honestly, I think you’re getting better and better. It’s not such a long shot. I think you’d make an excellent chef. Or”—he reached for the glass of wine he’d poured himself on the counter—“you could always open up your own restaurant. The Morenos could be your inspiration. They started from scratch literally. Selling tacos on a corner until they moved up and bought a taco truck. They saved enough to lease a place and the rest is history. I don’t think any of them have a culinary degree either.”

“Rosie’s sister Grace does,” Emi countered, continuing to sauté the shrimp in the pan. “And I’m pretty sure most of the head chefs at their restaurants do too.”

“Okay, maybe now they do, but they didn’t start that way. It started with a dream. A passion. Something their parents enjoyed doing. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you more in your element than when you’re cooking or even talking about it. You know what they say.” He paused to sip his wine. “The happiest people in the world are those who are doing what they love for a living.”

There was a twinkle in her big brown eyes, followed by that big beautiful smile of hers, the kind that could light up an entire room and swell Sydney’s heart in the process. She appeared to be ready to respond to that when her phone pinged in the front room, distracting them both momentarily.

“Hold please,” she said, licking her finger clean then wiping her hands on her apron. “That’s gotta be my sister. Sly’s in the middle of a game.”

Sydney kept his eyes on her the whole time as she walked to the front room and pulled her phone out of her purse. Inevitably, he felt the familiar

twitch in his crotch as his eyes lowered down to admire her groan-inducing ass. He'd toned it down in his head for too long, mentally referring to her *bubble butt* as nice, *very nice*, and nicely accentuated by her slender waist. Months ago he'd finally just admitted it to himself. Her ass was fucking perfect. He'd never considered himself an ass man, but holy shit, hers had the power to make him rock hard just thinking about it, especially because his mind would inevitably go back to that visual of her nearly naked in her brother's home.

On that thought, he adjusted his already thickening cock casually before things got embarrassing. He took another sip, eyes still on her, but they moved upward as she tapped her phone screen a few times then her eyes lit up again.

"He's so bad," she said with a big smile. "He's not supposed to be using his phone during a game."

Instantly, Sydney's heart deflated. Just as quickly he felt his smile flatten too. Down below was another story. The adrenaline he was feeling, the heat of the jealousy that coursed through him, had his cock getting even harder. The urgency to claim Emi as his once and for all consumed him.

"I didn't think they let them take phones into the dugout," he said in an attempt to sound calm and unruffled.

"They don't," she said, glancing up still smiling, and then looked down at her phone again as she texted something back. "He could get fined even, but he says they all do it. As long as they sneak into the clubhouse without anyone noticing, they're okay. This isn't the first time he's done this."

Normally, he ignored his own phone when Emi was around. But given the circumstances, he needed the distraction, so he walked over to the kitchen table when he heard it buzz. Still grinding his teeth, he picked up the phone and skimmed through the many emails he had and varied messages from his secretary to his golf buddy and his mom. He stopped at the few messages his mom had sent, reading quickly through the stuff about the work on her garage being nearly done and how good it was looking. It damn well better be almost done. The insurance claim had taken long enough. She attached a photo and he studied it, frowning when he saw the color they painted the wall that had burned didn't match the rest of the walls exactly.

Moving on to his mom's next message, he started to skim until he got to the last few sentences and froze.

**I finally got to see a photo of Emi. She's lovely. I told Lynni the last time we chatted I'd yet to see her. So she forwarded a photo of Emi online recently with her baseball boyfriend. Even Lynni agreed Emi didn't look very happy in it.**

Even when Emi had attended that charity event with Sabian way back, it had never occurred to Sydney to look it up and see if he'd find any photos of the two. He wondered now if the photo Lynn had forwarded to his mother was from the charity event or the weekend she spent with him in Chicago.

Pressing his lips together, he inhaled deeply because he wasn't sure if he'd be looking it up or not. Judging from his reactions lately from just hearing her mention him or even knowing she was texting him, he wasn't sure he could handle it.

He was in the middle of reading a text from Scarlet, inviting him up later tonight for a glass of wine, when Emi's voice got his attention. He hadn't even realized he'd gotten caught up with his phone for so long she was already back in the kitchen serving another plate.

"Anything important?"

He glanced up at her as she looked back over her shoulder at him. "Not really, just a few emails and texts." He placed his phone back down on the table and started toward her. "Work, my mom, Scarlet."

Emi's brow rose, and she immediately turned back to the food she was plating. "Oh? Is Scarlet in town?"

"She is," he said, leaning against the counter, watching how meticulously she adorned the plate, just like on all those shows they often watched together. "But she won't be for long. She leaves day after tomorrow to kick off a promotional tour for the new season of *CSI Blues*. Then she's going home to Cape Cod to see her parents. She'll be gone for weeks. She did suggest I meet her out there for my birthday in a few weeks. I'm considering it—"

"But you said we'd celebrate our birthdays together this year."

Their eyes met as Sydney tried in vain to remember when he'd said that. "I did?"

"Last year," she said so matter-of-factly he almost smiled, "when we went out for ice cream our birthday week. We checked the calendar then and saw that our birthdays were during the same week again this year. Well"—she shrugged and distracted Sydney for a moment when she licked her finger again—"yours is on a Friday, but mine is that Tuesday, still

technically during the same week. You said since this year was pretty significant for both of us, if we hadn't made any plans by the time they rolled around, it was a date."

Sydney vaguely remembered that conversation, but as remnants of that exchange slowly came to him, he seemed to recall it was more of a playful suggestion. At the time, he hadn't even been sure he'd still be friends with Emi a whole year later. So much could happen in a year. It surprised him that she'd not only remember it but hold him to it.

"The only plans I have is a charity walk that Saturday. The whole gang is coming to LA for it, including A.J. and Sly," Emi explained as she lifted both plates and carried them over to the kitchen table. Sydney followed, grabbing a few napkins and silverware. "Afterward, we'll all go out to eat and hang out until A.J. and Sly have to fly back to Cincinnati."

"Oh well, that doesn't sound like you have plans at all." Sydney chuckled as he downed what was left of his wine.

"But I'm free Friday evening. We can do something when you get out of work," she said, smiling cautiously. "I'll be twenty-one, so we can go anywhere. A bar even." Her eyes brightened. "My first ever."

The thought of being a part of Emi's first anything was a pleasant one and he smiled.

"Yeah?" she asked, looking adorably hopeful.

"I haven't agreed to Cape Cod yet," he said as he took the seat across from her at the table.

That tiny lift of her brow appeared again, as she placed the napkin across her lap. The same curious lift he'd seen often in the past few weeks. At times, he'd thought maybe it meant something, mostly because it only ever made an appearance when she was being sassy, usually in a playful way, but lately it had more of a kick to it, *and* he'd noticed it was most prominent when Scarlet was mentioned.

He peered at her for a moment curiously. "What?" she asked when she noticed him looking at her.

"Nothing." He speared one of the shrimps on his plate with a fork. "I just thought you were gonna say something. You looked like you were."

When she didn't say anything immediately, Sydney glanced up at her again. She was moving the brown rice around on her plate aimlessly. "You and Scarlet getting serious?"

The brow was arched again even as she continued to move her rice around without looking up. Sydney was certain if he'd mentioned to Lynni the amount of times that cute little brow arched sharply any time the subject of Scarlet and him came up, she'd immediately assure him Emi was jealous. Maybe she was. It was a realistic possibility. God knew he'd felt like putting his fists through a wall anytime he was forced to visualize Emi with Sabian. Hell, just knowing she was leaving his place every day to go cozy up in bed and talk to the guy had him so tense he either ended up at the gym downstairs to let out some steam or in Scarlet's bed.

"No," he said, rubbing his temple with a frown. "I told you her Hollywood life is not one I'm interested in being a part of."

He tried to smile as their eyes locked, but the beginning of one of his tension headaches made it hard to. He stood up to grab an aspirin. "I've had a tiny taste of that life and let me tell you"—he turned to look at her as he opened the aspirin bottle leaning against the counter—"it's not for me. She knows this and she's cool with that. She's not looking for anything serious either."

Emi's attention turned to the aspirin bottle in his hands. "You've been getting a lot of headaches lately," she said. "Maybe you should see a doctor."

"Already did," he said as he grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge.

"What did he say?"

"Not much. He ran a bunch of tests, did some blood work, but I haven't heard back yet." He shrugged it off as he returned to the table. "I've always had them. They come and go, usually flare up when I'm stressing. Tension headaches."

"But you're not stressing right now, are you?"

He thought about that for a moment. No way would he admit that he started feeling it tonight the moment she got that text from Sabian. No doubt it'd get worse when she left to take the guy's call. "There's a lot going on at work, but an aspirin usually does the trick."

After a few more spoonfuls of the delicious dinner she'd prepared, the subject was changed to his suggestion earlier that she might consider culinary school. He loved seeing how that brightened her entire face.

"Scarlet has a cousin who's a chef back east," he said as he sat back, his hand on his full and satisfied stomach. "She says he loves it. As a matter of

fact, it was one of the places she wanted to stop in if I went out for my birthday.”

There was no denying it now. The brow lifted *every single* time Scarlet’s name was mentioned. Sydney hid his smirk behind his glass of wine, not wanting her to see what a fucking kick he got out of this now.

“I think maybe she’s more serious about this relationship than you think.”

Feeling his eyes narrow, he stared at her as their eyes met. “Why’s that?”

“Well, first she invites you back to her home.” Her eyes opened wide in exasperation when Sydney didn’t seem fazed by that. “*Hello?* Asking you to meet her family is pretty significant, don’t you think? But now you’re saying she also wanted you to go by and meet her cousin? More family.”

“She didn’t say I should come out to meet her *family*,” Sydney explained. “She just said I should go out there so she could help me celebrate my birthday. She felt bad that she wouldn’t be here for it.” Sydney stopped when he saw it and called her on it. “Did you just roll your eyes?”

“No.” She shook her head with a smirk.

“Yeah, you did.” He chuckled.

“Maybe. I don’t know.” She stuffed the last spoonful of rice on her plate into her mouth and smiled at him smugly.

Sydney waited patiently for her to finish chewing then swallow. He wasn’t about to let her off the hook. The entire time he kept his eyes on her, squeezing his legs together as her lips wrapped around her water bottle then sucked down half its contents. When she was done, she took her time wiping her mouth, that playful brow still slightly arched, and finally spoke again. “I just think it’s kind of silly of her to feel bad. Does she really think you have *no one* else to keep you company here but her? She *does* know your best friend lives in the same building, right?”

“She does.” Sydney stared at her, fighting the urge to smirk.

He was getting more than a kick out of seeing this side of Em—enjoying it—until her phone pinged in the front room, reminding them both that their time together was nearly up and *why*.

Maybe if the thought of her rushing out of his place soon just to curl up and chat all night with Sly wasn’t so galling, Sydney might have bitten his tongue. Maybe if the internal jealous turmoil he had to deal with so often now wasn’t so brutal, he would’ve thought better of his next comment, but

it *was* brutal and he just reacted. Both ignored her phone as he continued to stare into her playful almost twinkling eyes.

“She knows all about you, Em.” That made her smile. “But the kind of celebrating she has in mind isn’t anything she imagines I’d be doing with you, so no need to take it personally.”

She made no effort to hide her reaction to that. The twinkle was instantly replaced with what could be described as a struggle, a struggle to conceal what she likely wanted to say. Instead, she stood up abruptly.

“Can’t argue with that,” she said, lifting her plate from the table.

Okay, maybe he *was* an asshole. He’d already established that she didn’t enjoy hearing about his time with Scarlet. He sure as hell appreciated Em sparing him any intimate details of her time with Sly.

“I gotta go,” she said, rinsing her plate before placing it in his dishwasher.

“Don’t worry about the dishes,” he said, feeling like a total dick because he’d obviously pissed her off.

Only this confused him. She had a boyfriend: Mr. Perfect, who she gladly rushed home to every day to talk to all night no doubt. Why would she care so much about what Sydney did with anyone else?

She turned to him with a forced smile. “Let me know if you do decide to stay home for your birthday. We’ll plan something.”

“I’m staying,” he said without the slightest hesitation.

This made her freeze in place and stare at him. The glare in her eyes eased up and gave way to a weak and almost embarrassed smile. “Yeah?” she asked, the pitch in her voice going up just slightly, and he nodded, smiling back. “Good. It’ll be fun.”

She grabbed her purse, and after accompanying her to the door and saying good-bye, he leaned against the door, muttering to himself. This would only get worse before it got better.

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## Chapter Fifteen

### **Emilia**

“I’m curious,” Livi said as Emi continued to apply her makeup. “What did your *boyfriend* have to say about you going out to celebrate your birthday with Sydney tonight?”

“Not much,” Emi said, getting closer to the mirror as she applied mascara and trying not to giggle about how involuntarily her mouth always opened into a perfect O shape when she did. She glanced down at the cell phone on her bathroom counter. “I mean I can tell he doesn’t really dig the amount of time I hang out with Syd, but there’s nothing I can do about that, and he can’t openly complain. Sydney was my friend long before Sly came along. I’ve been completely honest with him about my friendship with Syd. He can’t accuse me of anything. Sydney and I have never even playfully flirted. And just like all the other times I’ve hung with him, tonight we’re just two friends going out to celebrate our birthdays together.”

“You gonna drink?”

“Probably.”

Livi started going into one of her big-sister lectures about being careful and not overdoing it. How even if she drank before, Livi herself was notorious for having a low tolerance for alcohol and Emi likely did too.

“Then you should be glad it’s Sydney I’m going out with tonight. He’s one of the most responsible people I’ve ever met. I’ll be in good hands.”

“Did you tell Sly that?”

Emi laughed, staring at herself in the mirror. “No. I didn’t.”

“What are you wearing?”

“Khakis,” Emi said in a silly lowered voice, trying to sound like the guy on the insurance commercial.

Her sister laughed. “Well, that sounds hideous!”

They both laughed now, and Emi couldn't get over how giddy she felt about tonight. She'd been in such a good mood all day. Her entire family and friends she hadn't seen in a while were all coming down tomorrow—not to mention her superstar boyfriend she hardly got to see—and she'd be spending the day with all of them. As happy as that made her, it didn't even compare to the excitement she was feeling about tonight.

She surveyed her outfit again. Thankfully, she had access to a private bathroom in one of the execs office at the Staples Center. On Sydney's suggestion, she'd taken the train that morning. The piano bar they'd be meeting at was just a few blocks away from the Staples Center. He was taking a cab even though he said he had no intention of getting *drunk*. As usual, he was being his ever-responsible self.

Only now she was left with no choice but to wear her stuffy intern clothes. Though what she'd worn today wasn't as stuffy as she normally dressed. Today she'd worn a pencil skirt she'd chosen especially because it accentuated her curves and a silk cream-colored long-sleeved button-up blouse, one Sydney had mentioned was pretty a few weeks ago.

Not that she was trying to look good for him. But they *were* going out to a bar tonight, her first ever twenty-one-and-over bar. She wanted to appear as sophisticated as she imagined the older crowds being. This wasn't some hip-hop place either. It was a swanky piano bar and restaurant Sydney said he'd frequented in the past with his exec friends.

The description of her outfit to her sister was toned down considerably. Livi knew Emi all too well. She didn't want her annoyingly perceptive sister to ask why she'd put so much thought into her outfit. Already Emi knew Liv was on to her. Like an idiot in the last couple of weeks, Emi had made some uncalled for catty remarks about Scarlet. But then her sister was the brat that instigated the remarks in the first place by pretending to admire Scarlet for being one of the few women in Hollywood who'd had zero work done to their bodies.

Infuriatingly, Sydney had let it slip that two of Scarlet's *biggest* assets were significantly enhanced. So Emi had been quick to scoff at her sister's comments. Of course, her sister had called her on it, asking if maybe she wasn't a little jealous of Scarlet, and as usual Emi had been all too transparent.

Once off the phone she got her things together and rushed out. The nerves began to build as she crossed the street toward the area with all the

trendy restaurants and bars. That's when she saw him. He was walking toward her, still in his *chief executive* attire. He still wore his coat, and just as he did when she had to pretend every morning when they met at Foams that seeing him in his suits didn't leave her winded, he looked amazing. The man was a walking wet dream, something straight out of a GQ magazine. It was such an odd thing to experience. She'd been in Chicago just over a month ago with her famous boyfriend—someone who was very nice on the eyes—yet not since she first met Sly when she was star struck had she felt anything remotely close to what she felt now.

This was *Sydney*, someone whom she'd felt incredibly at ease around from the very beginning, the man she spent many a weekend lounging in his apartment with. Almost every night lately she'd been with him giggling, cooking, pigging out, and sharing some pretty embarrassing secrets. Why was she suddenly so breathless with anticipation? When she was close enough to smell him—smell the fragrance she'd been admiring for over a year—she thought she might melt into a puddle right there.

"You look amazing," he said, outstretching his hand to her.

"Thank you," she said, feeling her face heat and heart race as if this was their first ever meeting.

Without giving it much thought, she slipped her hand into his. The entire area was crowded with a sea of bodies rushing in every direction. She could only assume that, like at the La Jolla food festival, he took her hand in his so that they could stay together. She'd held plenty of guys' hands including Sly Sabian's. Yet she'd never experienced the tingling all over her body she'd felt the first time Sydney held her hand and was feeling again now from his gripping her hand a little tighter.

"I invited a few of my friends from the office to have a drink with us." He glanced back at her as they walked. "I hope you don't mind."

She did. It was a little disappointing. She'd looked forward to having him all to herself tonight. And, yes, she was well aware now she had some major issues when it came to sharing Sydney with *anyone*—even his co-workers. But she smiled, assuring him she didn't mind.

They carded her at the door, and it was a strange feeling to know she was actually legal to get into the place. The bar was as swanky as she expected. The guy at the piano was playing a catchy song she didn't recognize, but it livened up the place. The overly accommodating waitress escorted them to their table, referring to Sydney as Mr. Maricopa the entire

time. Emi caught the way the young blond waitress eyed her casually and how her eyes had dropped to look at their entwined hands.

It wasn't until they were sitting that Sydney let her hand go to peruse the menu. "They have appetizers if you're hungry."

"I'm not really."

He looked over the menu at her, and she could hardly believe she'd never noticed just how *incredibly* sexy he was. She had, but not like this. She'd always thought him handsome. Good-looking. Impressively intimidating. Maybe it was her hand already missing the feel of his skin against hers, but she was caught in his smoldering eyes as he smiled. "I think you should have something, even if it's just finger food. You're not used to drinking, and you don't want the alcohol to sneak up on you."

She nodded, feeling almost in a trance. "Okay." The single word was practically a whisper.

"Good girl," he said with a smile, and again she felt like she was in the presence of an entirely different man from the one she'd gotten so close to this past year.

A couple of guys dressed similarly to Sydney only not nearly as impressive as he was arrived, and Sydney introduced them as his coworkers. These were men she'd normally feel beneath simply because they, too, carried themselves with an air of elegance and sophistication beyond any of the *boys* she normally dated. They were *men*, the kind that ordered cognac and talked politics and stocks. Yet all of them appeared to be trying to get in Sydney's good graces.

Emi was introduced as his good friend and neighbor. "We're celebrating her birthday too," Sydney added each time, and they, of course, all wished her a happy birthday.

As more of his co-workers arrived, Emi found herself scooting closer and closer to Sydney to make room for everyone. The women who arrived eyed her curiously but were courteous. The longer they were there Emi began to realize these weren't just his co-workers. They were his subordinates. Emi had never known him to have or even talk about these many friends or acquaintances, but after hearing several of them refer to him as boss or chief, even sir, it made sense that, if he'd mentioned it, they'd all make an effort to show up to the bigwig's birthday celebration.

More than halfway through the evening, Emi was feeling quite tipsy and yet neither she nor Sydney had paid for a single drink. Everyone at their

table seemed to be competing to order and pick up the next round. She was in complete awe of him now. This was a side of him she suspected existed but was surreal to actually witness: the powerful side of Sydney. They were in a relaxed atmosphere having drinks, and yet he seemed in command of the group. When he spoke, they all listened intently. When he made a joke, though he was witty and she'd laughed just as genuinely, the entire table erupted into laughter, and yet he seemed completely in his element. Like being the center of attention in this otherwise refined group of people was the norm for him.

Sydney would lean over every now and again, giving her goose bumps when she felt his mouth and warm breath so close to her ear. "How you feeling?"

"Good." She nodded as she had each time with a big smile.

Each time she'd lean in to tell him something, her hand would touch his thigh until it finally stayed there. Their eyes had met, but neither said anything, and when she smiled a bit goofily, he'd just shake his head and smile.

By the time the whole place was singing along with the piano guy, Emi had slipped her hand back into Sydney's. He hadn't protested, only squeezed her hand every now and again before leaning into to ask her again how she was feeling and if she was enjoying herself.

Toward the end of the evening she noticed she was sipping water. Somehow Sydney had managed to switch their drinks to water without her noticing.

"Hey!" she said, lifting her glass of water. "This isn't booze."

He squeezed her hand, laughing, and then leaned in until their foreheads were touching. "We're drinking water in between drinks now so you're not hurting tomorrow."

"But it's my birthday. Yours too," she said, mindful of not slurring though it didn't feel like she was doing a great job.

Pulling away from her forehead, he smiled. "I know, sweetheart," he said, and she felt her eyes widen and heart swell at his use of the term of endearment. Then they dropped down to his perfect lips. "We'll get you another drink when you finish your water."

"You have very suckable lips." The moment she said it she brought her hand over her mouth but then pulled it away. "No, I'm not taking it back."

You do and there's nothing wrong with me telling you that, right? It's the truth."

"Thank you," he said with a smile. "And, no, there's nothing wrong with you saying so. But maybe when you finish your water we can get going? You have to be up early tomorrow."

"Did I just blow it?" she asked, feeling a mountain of regret.

"No"—he shook his head adamantly—"not at all, but it's getting late." He looked around, and it wasn't until that moment that she realized half the people who'd been sitting with them were gone. "And you have a busy day tomorrow."

"But I'm not done celebrating." She did her best not to whine, but she really wasn't ready for this night to be over.

"We can finish celebrating back home."

Emi couldn't help but smile. Home. As in *their* place. The place they'd been hanging out at so comfortably for over a year. "Okay." She smiled once again, falling into a trance in his gaze.

He wasted no time asking for their final check. The waitress smiling and chatting with him while she took his final payment was irritating as *fuck*, and Emi was glad they were out of there quickly or the liquid courage she was feeling might've had her saying something rude and completely uncalled for.

~\*~

## Sydney

The cab ride back to their building was easier than Sydney had expected. Emi started to knock out against his shoulder. She was so sweet; it wasn't like what he'd thought it might be. The entire night at the bar was a challenge. He'd never been so exasperatingly unable to control his out-of-control cock, not even back in middle school. Every touch, every graze of her hand against his thigh, even when they'd just held hands, had been torture. Luckily, the place was loud, packed, and he'd had a table to block the tent in his pants.

Sydney cursed at the car that cut off their cab, making the cab driver brake suddenly, and Emi's head lifted from his shoulder. "Are we home yet?"

"Almost," he whispered, willing her to go back to sleep.

If she did, there was less danger of her wanting to continue celebrating. Her “suckable lips” comment still lingered. He was certain she’d likely forget all about it by tomorrow, but *he* wouldn’t, and damn it if it wouldn’t just add to the growing fantasies he’d been having of her lately. Blocking out the visual of her sucking his lips would be nearly impossible now.

They reached their building, and by the time he was finished paying the cab driver, Emi seemed to pick up a second wind. She swayed where she stood, smiling big. “I have something I wanna show you,” she said as her beautiful eyes twinkled. “Ooh!” she said as if she’d just remembered something. “I bought champagne the other day. It’s chilling in my refrigerator. We’ll hang out at my place for once.”

Sydney took a deep breath, knowing this was *not* a good idea. “Emi, it’s past midnight.”

She pouted, giving him those big puppy dog eyes as she did often when she always got her way and they’d end up watching some chick flick instead of the sci-fi one he’d proposed. Of course, he couldn’t say no.

In the elevator, she leaned against him, and he hoped that meant she was getting tired again. “Thank you so much for staying home tonight, Sydney,” she said, running her hand over his arm. “I know you could’ve chosen to spend this weekend with *her*. So it means a lot to me that you decided to stay and spend your birthday with me instead.”

As if the choice hadn’t been a given. “No need to thank me, Em. I had a blast. I’m glad I stayed.”

She gazed up at him, and their eyes locked for a long moment, making Sydney’s breath catch, until the elevator stopped and the doors opened. “Let’s go,” he said.

They walked down the hallway to her apartment with Emi’s arms locked in his. The moment they were in her apartment Emi’s second wind was in full swing. She rushed to her kitchen, first connecting her phone to the speakers and then turning on the music. Sydney winced at the loud music. She did have neighbors next door, above and below. Thankfully, she turned it down a bit before opening her cabinets. “Not only did I buy my first ever bottle of champagne but my first set of champagne glassware,” she announced happily.

She brought out the glasses first. To Sydney’s relief, she hadn’t gotten the flute-style long kind that held a lot more. She’d gone for a trendier, smaller-than-normal saucer style. Even still, one thing he’d noticed about

Emi not just tonight but when they'd shared a few glasses of wine in the past was she was a lightweight. After just a few glasses of the bubbly, she began to hiccup, which, in turn, made her giggle.

Sydney smiled as she pinched her nose and took a deep breath, holding it until she leaned into him. "You okay?"

She exhaled with a burst then waited for a moment and smiled. "All gone," she said, pouring herself and Sydney some more champagne.

The song changed to something more upbeat, and she began dancing. "Oh my God, this is my jam!" She danced over to the speakers and upped the volume.

Sydney sipped his champagne, trying to not get too caught up in her beautiful ass swaying back and forth as she spun around in her kitchen. "C'mon, birthday boy, dance with me."

Tugging on his tie, she pulled him away from the counter where he'd been leaning. Sydney smiled in relief when she put her glass down, but the relief was fleeting because she brought her arms over her head and danced seductively for him, closing in and moving her body slowly against his. Her fiery eyes stared into his as she began to undo his tie. "Loosen up, Sydney. It's your birthday!"

The music stopped suddenly when her phone rang. She rushed over and pushed a button on the phone. The ringing stopped, but the music didn't start up, and Sydney watched her confused expression as she held her hand over it to try and figure out what she'd done. He was about to walk over and help her figure it out when the voice came through the speaker.

"Emi?"

Sydney froze in place as her face jerked to look at him, wide-eyed. Before he could motion for her to just hit "end," she brought her finger to her lips. "Hey, Sly."

"Are you home now or still out?" he asked.

"I'm home." Sydney took a long deep breath as he watched her close her eyes. "Just got home a few minutes ago."

"How was it?"

"Good. But I'm really tired."

"I won't keep you long then. You can tell me about it tomorrow. I just needed to hear your voice before I went to bed. Jesus, I can't wait until tomorrow. I know with your family there we can't do anything, but we have to plan another weekend, babe." He made a noise that sounded like a groan,

and Emi's eyes widened again as she fumbled to pick up the phone, but infuriatingly, Sabian went on. "Just thinking about Chicago gets me all—"

The music came back on as Emi continued to tap at the screen, stalling before she had to look up at Sydney. He was actually thankful for that. He needed a moment himself to calm the uncharacteristic fury that swarmed his insides. This shouldn't surprise him. The guy was her boyfriend, and she'd spent the weekend with him. But hearing what he'd suspected all along made him worry he might say something stupid—demand something which he had absolutely no right to do—or worse. Give into the into the utter temptation of going along with what was beginning to happen before that call came through. Take advantage of Emi's inebriated playful mood to seduce her and take her right there in her kitchen. Claim her because, God damn it, every moment he was around her now it was what she felt like to him. *His*.

Sydney was momentarily distracted from his caveman thoughts when she began swaying her hips again. Finally, she turned to face him, the playfulness in her eyes again. So this is how we were going to play this? Ignore the elephant in the room. Instinct had him thinking, *Fuck that! Either we talk about this shit or I'm out of here*. But it was a completely unreasonable thought. It was just the insane jealousy doing the thinking, and as much as his heart had claimed her, he'd just heard confirmation that she belonged to Sabian more than she did to Sydney.

The only consolation was that Sabian's girl was looking at him the way she had all night. Like *he* was the one she wanted to be with. Even before she'd begun to drink tonight, he'd seen it in her eyes. Felt it in the way she'd gazed at him. Drunks didn't lie and she was making a few things crystal clear at the moment, though he knew better than to go along, damn it. His eyes roamed up and down that enticing body that, despite that last interruption, had his dick going hard again.

Emi danced up to him again, playing with his tie. Sydney said nothing but stared into her eyes, still clenching his jaw. She ended up taking his tie off and began dancing with it playfully. "These clothes are way too stuffy." She tugged at her blouse, bringing it out from where it was tucked into her skirt. His heart nearly burst through his chest when she began to unbutton it in a striptease kind of way, swaying her hips from side to side. Already his cock was completely ready to go in his pants.

“What are you doing?” he asked, his eyes glued to her hands that unbuttoned each button.

Unbelievably, she giggled. Once her blouse was unbuttoned, Sydney sighed in relief again when he saw the white cotton camisole she wore underneath. Continuing to sway her hips, she pulled the blouse off and spun it around in the air until she tossed it aside with another giggle. “I’ve never stripped for anyone,” she said, laughing even more when she’d apparently seen the look in his eyes. “I’m not going to for you, silly! Well”—she spun around, looking over her shoulder at him with that same smoldering gaze she’d started off her dance with—“not all the way anyway.”

Dancing around the kitchen, she used his tie as a prop. She brought it around her waist and then lowered it slowly over the ample swell of her glorious ass. “Oh, I know!” she said then rushed over to the speaker and phone on the counter. “Bring the champagne and glasses. I forgot about what I wanted to show you.”

Glad for the disruption and the fact that she turned away, giving him a chance to adjust his crotch, Sydney began gathering the two glasses and the champagne bottle. He cleared his throat then glanced up and froze. Emi was headed for her bedroom in a rush. She stopped at the door and glanced back at him with a smile. “C’mon. I really want you to see this.”

He started toward her slowly, doing his best to remain calm and gather his thoughts. This wasn’t something quick she planned on *showing* him. She’d taken the music with her and asked him to bring the champagne. Whatever it was she was going to *show* him she planned on being in her bedroom for a while.

Sydney reminded himself that Emi was a good girl. So she’d had a little too much to drink and she’d lost a bit of her inhibitions. That wasn’t unheard of, especially in an inexperienced young girl. But she wouldn’t just cheat on her boyfriend. And Sydney would never dream of taking advantage of any girl, regardless of age or experience. Least of all Emi. Only she was going to be harder to resist than most. Just holding her hand did things to him he hadn’t felt since his high-school years with Lynn.

He shook his stiff shoulders and arms as he neared her bedroom door. “Loosen the fuck up,” he muttered under his breath. “It’s just innocent celebrating.”

When he walked through her bedroom door, he saw her at her dresser, setting up the speaker and phone. A new song with a sensual rhythm and

beat started up, and so did her hips. She swayed them, peering over her shoulder at him with those impassioned eyes—eyes that would be the end of him if she didn't stop looking at him that way.

She pulled something out of a drawer, but the movement of her hips never slowed. If anything, it got more and more provocative as the music sped up. "I need to get out of this skirt," she said, working the zipper on the side of her waist, nearly making Sydney's heart stop.

His expression must've reflected just how terrified the thought of her undressing in front of him made him because she skipped the giggling and all out laughed. "I'll be back," she said, taking the champagne glass from him as she sashayed by him on her way to the bathroom.

Sydney knew it was the bathroom because her bedroom was set up just like his; only difference was she had a sliding door that opened up to the pool area. He walked over to the sliding door, taking deep breaths. "You can do this. Just be cool and polite, and the night will be over before you know it."

"What do you think?"

Sydney braced himself but was instantly breathless when he turned to take Emi in from top to bottom. She'd replaced the skirt with a pair of tiny satin sleep shorts. Almost immediately, he noticed she'd also rid herself of the bra she'd been wearing under the camisole. His heart thudded at the sight of her perky tits and nipples that practically begged to break through the thin material. She may as well have been wearing lingerie that accentuated every one of her abundant curves, but that wasn't the worst part. She was pointing downward, and his eyes roamed down legs that seemed to go on forever until he saw what she was really referring to:

A pair of glittery blue-and-white stilettos.

Seeing her in her sexy sleep clothes had been enough to make him rock hard again. The shoes had him holding his champagne glass a little lower in an effort to block the throbbing bulge he was sure had to be visible even through his slacks. Luckily, she was still looking down when he glanced up at her for a second.

His eyes returned to her shoes as she moved her leg sideways to show off the sides of each the stilettos. One side displayed a white star while the other had the word Cowboys written in blue and white, equally shimmering glitter all the way from the top back end of the shoe to the bottom front open-toed end.

“You like them?”

“Very nice,” he said as she attempted to walk in them cautiously.

“My sister sent them to me for my birthday,” she said, smiling brightly. “She has a pair just like them. I told you we’re big fans.”

She slowed when she began to wobble, holding her champagne glass out in front of her for balance, and began to giggle again.

“Careful,” he said, holding out his hand as she got a little closer to him. “Those look dangerous.”

“I just need to get used to walking in them,” she said, reaching for his hand, and he took it. Instantly, she laced her fingers in his, making him swallow hard, but he focused on making sure she was stable.

Emi attempted to dance in the ridiculously high shoes. “My sister and Valerie are naturals in these. Valerie gets *down*,” she said, shaking her hips in a lowering motion to the upbeat music playing now. Sydney held her hand tightly, making sure she was okay. “Whoa!” she said, leaning into him as she nearly lost her balance.

With his champagne glass still in his hand, Sydney reached around her slender waist, feeling the soft satin against his skin as her body leaned against his. She looked up at him, her smile waning slowly, and then took a sip of her champagne. “So this is what it feels like to be Scarlet around you.”

“This is what it feels like to be Sabian around you.”

“Not really.” She drank the rest of her champagne, making no attempt to pull away.

Sydney was thankful that the angle he held her in was slightly sideways so other more penetrating parts of his body weren’t pressed up against her.

“I’ve only been around him once since we became”—she lifted her hand to make an air quote—“an official couple, and my brother was with us almost the whole time.”

That confused Sydney. Clearly, they’d done more, but he refused to ask about the comment she’d obviously cut off before Sabian could finish.

Now she pulled away from him, though Sydney held her hand firmly as she took the few steps to where the champagne bottle sat. She poured herself some more and then refreshed the glass he’d been babying the whole time. Her foot bumped his and she looked down.

“You should take off your shoes, Syd. Get comfortable.”

“No,” Sydney said, shaking his head. “That’s cool. I’ll probably be leaving soon anyway.”

She stopped sipping her champagne and pouted. “What? But we’re having fun.” With that, she began moving her hips slowly again. “Dance with me.”

“I’m telling you,” he said, trying to keep his eyes on her face and not look down at anything he was certain would further the situation going on in his pants, “you’re gonna regret this tomorrow morning.”

“I’d never regret doing anything with you.” She slowed the rhythm of her hips and stared into his eyes. Before he could respond to that, she added. “I love you, Sydney.”

His heart walloped even as his head reminded him that she’d had way too much to drink. Glancing away because he had to, he cleared his throat.

“It’s okay to tell your best friend you love him, right?” Emi squeezed his hand, giving him no choice but to stare into her eyes. Beautiful eyes that gazed at him in a way that made his heart swell.

“Yeah, it’s okay.”

“Because I do,” she said, her voice softening into a whisper. “It was why I was so hurt that you didn’t call me first when you left to see your mom a few weeks ago.” She took a step forward, bringing her body against his again. “Do *you* love me?”

“I do.” The words flew out without thought.

With heels so high they were nearly eye to eye now, Emi brought her lips dangerously close to his. He could smell the champagne on her breath, feel the warmth of her breath against his mouth, and he was sure she could feel if not hear his heart pounding in his chest.

“Say it,” she whispered against his lips. “Tell me you love me.”

“Emi,” he said breathlessly as he closed his eyes, trying desperately to fight the urge to taste her mouth. “We’ve both had a lot to drink tonight and —”

“No,” she said, squeezing his hand again. “I’m not saying this just because I’ve been drinking. I really do love you, Sydney. You’re the best friend I’ve ever had.”

He nodded in agreement. If she was going to put it that way, then he could agree completely. “Okay. I mean it too. I love you.” He tugged her hand toward the bed. “But I really think you need to get in bed. You have a long day tomorrow.”

“Stay with me,” she said as she brought one knee onto her bed.  
“Please?”

“That’s not a good idea,” Sydney said, his heart beating even more rapidly now. He lifted the down blanket, remembering how anal he’d been about picking the perfect one for her when he bought it.

“But I’ve had one of the best nights of my life. You staying with me would make it perfect.”

She started to slide in the bed but wouldn’t let go of his hand. “You have a boyfriend,” he reminded her even as he felt his jaw tighten. “I don’t think he’d—”

“I don’t love him,” she said, her sweet eyes searching Sydney’s. “Do you love Scarlet?”

“Not at all.”

Again the words flew out without thought, and he felt like kind of an asshole about being so quick to say it with such conviction, but it was the truth. If love, *true* love, was what he felt for Emi right that moment, then he was certain he’d never felt it until now.

Emi smiled, tugging at his hand. “Then say you’ll stay.”

It hurt to do it, but he had to. As much as he’d wanted to, he knew he shouldn’t. Sydney shook his head. Emi would be asleep soon anyway; he could see it in her heavy eye lids. And she’d likely not remember any of this conversation.

“You have a boyfriend, Em. And I know you—”

“I’d break up with him,” she said, lifting her head, her dreary eyes trying to focus on Sydney’s. “I’d do it to be with you if you asked me to.”

“I would,” he whispered back, leaning in close enough to kiss her, confident that she wouldn’t remember any of this, “but I don’t do part-time, half-assed relationships, sweetheart. The day I make you mine . . .” He paused, staring deeply in her eyes. Drunk or not, he could feel it in her words, see it in her eyes. She meant it when she said she loved him and more than just a friend. Meant it when she said she’d break up with Sabian for him, and suddenly he knew he’d stop at nothing to make her his, but only on his terms. He didn’t think it was too much to ask. No way would he agree to anything less. “The day I make you mine,” he said again, swallowing hard as he lowered his eyes to her lips, “you’ll be mine and *only* mine, completely and utterly committed. So until you tell me you’re ready

for something that serious, I can't let anything else happen between us. It'd be torture for me, Em."

She stared at him for a moment, blinking in slow motion, and then brought her hand behind his neck. "Stay with me," she whispered as he gave into her pulling him closer and kissed her lips softly.

He stopped to lick his lips but couldn't help going in for another one. Kissing her felt so incredibly perfect he knew he should stop but couldn't. Their tongues entwined in perfect rhythm as if they'd been doing this forever until it got so frenzied he was sucking her tongue and he knew he had to stop. He pulled his lips away, breathing hard, and stared at her.

She smiled, inhaling deeply as her eyes closed. "I love you, Sydney."  
"I love you, Em."

He lay down next to her, staring at her beautiful peaceful face as she fell into a deep slumber. All the days, weeks, and months leading up to this he'd told himself he could deal with being just friends with her. With the sweet taste of her mouth still on his tongue, he knew now, without a doubt, he had to make her his. It'd be a challenge because somehow he didn't think she'd admit to everything she had tonight once sober. And even as honest and blunt as she'd been tonight, the one thing she didn't say—despite her pleas that he stay with her tonight and her offer to break things off with Sabian for him—was that she'd be willing to commit like he needed her to.

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**Falling in love with you was beyond my control...**

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## Chapter Sixteen

### **Emilia**

It took a millisecond to confirm that what woke Emi was her doorbell and not just something she'd been dreaming. In the next second, she saw *him*, Sydney, standing by her bed, half-dressed, staring at her with the same alarm in his eyes as the one she was feeling in the pit of her gut. She brought her hand to her mouth and gasped when the memory of last night assaulted her.

“Nothing happened,” Sydney said, holding up one hand in front of him and pointing to her front room. “Someone’s at the door. You expecting anyone?”

Emi had barely jumped out of bed, covering herself when she saw what she was wearing. Then she heard the voices calling out to her: first her sister, then A.J, and then, *good God*, Sly. In a complete panic, she grabbed a sweatshirt and threw it over her head.

Just as quickly Sydney scrambled around her room, picking up his shoes from the floor and his wallet from her nightstand. In a composed voice she knew was meant to calm her, he said he'd leave through her sliding door, which meant no one would see him or know he'd spent the night with her—in her bed.

Feeling the slightest relief but at the same time guilty because she remembered being the one who insisted on coming back to her place when he didn't seem so eager, she began apologizing until he stopped and peered at her

“Don't worry about it.” He smiled so sweetly her heart doubled over. “If I hadn't wanted to, I wouldn't have. And for the record, you may not remember, but we had a good time. At least I know I did, but I'm pretty sure you did too.”

A visual of her shamelessly dancing for him in the skimpy clothes she'd woken in made her face flush. She forced a mortified smile, feeling like an idiot. Sydney said nothing more, but the smirk on his face only furthered the heat that had already set her cheeks ablaze.

She walked him out, thanking him and apologizing again, feeling terrible about having to throw him out the back sliding door. As soon as she closed the door, she rushed out to the front room, thankful the sweatshirt she wore—an old high school favorite she'd swiped from her brother Nathan—was long enough to cover the skimpy satin shorts she wore.

To her horror, not only was it A.J., Livi, and Sly who stood outside her door but her two other brothers, Nathan and Isaiah, and her brother-in-law Enzo as well. "I overslept," she gasped, opening the door all the way so they could all come in. Each one stopped to hug her as they entered.

"Hey," Nathan said with a big smile, staring at her sweatshirt. "The fighting Cougars. I haven't seen that sweatshirt in years."

"That's 'cause I took it from you years ago," she said, hugging him. "I'm sorry I overslept. But I can get ready in under fifteen minutes."

"You have time," Sly said, hugging her a little longer and tighter than the rest of her siblings, but he peered at her once he pulled away and lowered his voice. "What happened last night? You hung up on me."

Emi's eyes opened wide in a panic. "I don't remember talking to you," she whispered, bringing a hand to her disheveled hair. "I guess I had too much to drink."

"You said you'd just gotten home and were real tired," he said, searching her eyes a bit suspiciously. "I guess you fell asleep."

She nodded, wracking her brain as the faint memory of hearing his voice in the kitchen came to her but not much else.

"Just let me use your bathroom real quick before you jump in the shower, Em," A.J. said, already rushing into her bedroom.

Her heart rate sped up, remembering the champagne bottle and two glasses in her room, not to mention the stilettos still sprawled out at the foot of her bed. Liv, Enzo, Nathan, and Isaiah began setting down the coffee cups and muffin box they'd walked in holding on her kitchen table when one of their phones went off, buzzing loudly against the tabletop.

"Did you get a new phone, Emi?" Liv asked, reaching for the still-buzzing phone as Emi's heart nearly gave out. "This is a nice one."

"That's huge," Nathan said, staring at it. "What is that an iPhone?"

“Sydney must’ve forgotten that last night,” she said, reaching for it and feeling all eyes on her suddenly. Sly’s especially bore through her.

“Sydney?” Isaiah asked.

Her two oldest brothers were probably the most out of the loop about her friendship with Sydney, since she talked to them least.

“Yeah,” she said as casually as she could, reaching for the set of keys on the table as well and feeling her heart accelerate even more. “We went out to celebrate our birthdays last night. He stopped by here so I could show him something on the way back. I’ll have to get this back to him later today.”

Liv was staring at her, eyes wide, as if she’d just figured out why Emi must’ve slept in late. Her attention dropped to the keys in Emi’s hands now, her eyes going even wider. Even her husband Enzo’s expression was a strange one.

“I get to meet him today, right?” Sly asked, making Emi bring her attention back to him.

“Um, you know I didn’t even think to ask him if he’d be joining us today.”

“Why wouldn’t he?” Nathan asked. “Isn’t he like a real good friend now? I’m sure Sarah will be glad to see him. Aren’t they related?”

Emi swallowed hard, feeling and seeing Sly’s penetrating stare in her peripheral vision as she turned to Nathan. “No,” she said, clearing her throat. “They’re not related, just longtime friends, but yeah”—she nodded, looking back at Sly whose expression had gone a bit hard—“I’ll let him know.”

“I really wanna meet him, Emi.” The inflection in Sly’s tone was unquestionable. This wasn’t a request. He was telling her now more than ever he wanted to meet the guy she spent so much time with: the guy she cooked dinner for often, who took her to her first bar ever, who was with her last night when she’d hung up on him, and who kept her up so late she’d slept in.

“I’ll let him know,” she said, rushing to her room as soon as A.J. walked out. “I’ll take the fastest shower in the history of the world. I promise. Just give me a few minutes.”

The second she locked her bedroom door she rushed to her closet and pulled a pair of flip-flops on then rushed out the sliding door, sneaking out as quietly as possible. Still tugging at the bottom of her sweatshirt and not

caring what a bum she looked like, she rushed through the pool area and into the building across from it then to the elevators, tapping the up button impatiently.

On the way up, she wracked her brain to try and remember everything that happened last night but more importantly what she might've said. The few times she'd drunk in the past she'd proved to be an open book with no secrets. "God." She brought her hand to her face. "What did I say to him?"

Whatever it was it couldn't have been too bad. He seemed fine enough when he left that morning, even smiling a bit too satisfied. She prayed maybe she'd just flirted because one thing that had come to her clearly was all the stupid dancing she'd done and trying to walk in those damn shoes. Emi glanced at his phone, feeling nose-y. She could only see the preview of the last text he'd received and who it was from. It was one dated yesterday and very late in the evening. As if seeing Scarlet's name wasn't enough to turn Emi's stomach, the preview was even more nauseating.

### **My body's craving you again . . .**

It was all Emi could read. The rest was hidden, and even though she knew his password, because he'd given it to her in the past more than once when she wanted to check something on his phone, she refused to be *that* nose-y. Still, it was enough to frazzle her as if she didn't have enough on her mind already. She'd never once asked Sydney for any details about his relationship with Scarlet. So while she was pretty sure he'd slept with her, this was the actual proof she could've done without.

Once out of the elevator, she rushed out and hurried down the hallway. As she turned, it surprised her to not see Sydney standing outside his door. She sort of expected he might be waiting for her to bring his keys. How else would he get in?

As she reached his apartment, she slowed when she heard female laughter coming from inside his apartment. It made the hair on the back of her neck stand, and she wondered if maybe Scarlet had already rushed down to appease her body's craving. Feeling her face heat only this time it wasn't from mortification, she knocked loudly at Sydney's door. Within seconds, he opened it, holding a bottle of water, still looking as disheveled as she felt, but fully dressed in shorts and a T-shirt.

"You forgot these," she said, shoving his phone and keys at him, reminding herself she had no right to be upset, yet the jealousy she was

feeling was a living thing.

“Yeah,” he said with a wince, taking them from her. “I didn’t even realize until I got to my door that I’d forgotten them.

“How’d you get in?”

“Julie Anne.”

A young girl in ridiculously short shorts and a tight T-shirt with a plunging neckline that showed off the cleavage from her fake tits sashayed up behind him. She was even sluttier looking than Emi remembered and exactly why she’d insisted on taking over Homer’s cat sitting. Sydney turned to Julie Anne. “You out of here?”

“Yeah.” Julie Anne smiled at Emi then turned to Sydney, rubbing her big tits against him as she moved in for a quick hug. “I’m meeting someone for breakfast. You’re lucky you caught me. But don’t be a stranger. Call me. I miss hanging with Homer”—she walked two fingers up Sydney’s arm with a galling coy smile—“and you.”

“I will.” Sydney smirked and thanked her again, calling her a lifesaver.

Julie Anne sized Emi up before smirking as she walked past her. Emi felt her insides warm and her brow lift as she turned to watch Julie Anne leave, ass cheeks hanging out of her *hooker* shorts. She turned back to Sydney. The disgust she felt knowing Sydney had likely slept with the whore was impossible to hide, so Emi didn’t even try.

“Why does she still have a key to your place?”

Sydney shrugged, leaning against his door. “I just never took it back, but it’s a good thing I didn’t, right? I might’ve been standing outside waiting for you all this time.”

“All this time?” she asked a bit exasperated but mostly irritated as hell that Julie Anne still had his key. “You left my place what? Ten minutes ago? I hope you took your key back.”

If he tried to hide it, he didn’t do a very good job because Emi could see Sydney was enjoying this, so she did her best to appear a little less ruffled than she felt.

“I didn’t,” he said, looking all too smug, “but I will if you want me to.” That surprised her, and she wondered if he was being serious. Before she could ask, he had an inquiry of his own. “Did they see my phone and keys?”

Emi nodded, explaining as quickly as she could that she’d just been honest about his stopping by last night but saying he must’ve forgotten his

phone. “They didn’t ask about the keys. Probably assumed they were mine.” Then she remembered. “Sly wants to meet you.”

The playfulness in his face vanished, and Emi didn’t miss the way his eyes narrowed. “*Why?*”

“I told you he’s never been too hot about me having such a close guy friend, and he’d mentioned before about wanting to meet you the next time he was out this way.” She frowned. “I spent the evening with you last night and stayed up so late I overslept. Then I have no choice but to admit you were over at my place last night, and well”—she shook her head, feeling incredibly stupid—“he said he really wants to meet you, and my brothers were all like, ‘Yeah, why wouldn’t Sydney come? He’s a real good friend of yours, right?’ Nathan even pointed out that Sarah was going to be there and she’d be happy to see you. I just think it’d be kind of weird if you *didn’t* show up the one time my boyfriend is going to be there.”

“You *want* me to be around you and Sabian?” he asked, his expression going almost as hard as Sly’s had back in her apartment. “Watch you and him . . .”

He turned away, but she didn’t miss the way he clenched his jaw. Her brothers did it often when they were pissed, so she knew it well. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” he said, turning back to her and staring at her a little too hard for a moment without saying anything. “You know what? Sure. Why not? Text me where and when, and I’ll be there.”

Feeling a little confused and nervous about his strange demeanor, she peered at him. “Why are you saying it like that?”

“Like what?” he asked, his arched brow even more telling of this odd behavior.

“I don’t know”—she tilted her head, trying to put her finger on it—“like you really don’t want to. You don’t have to—”

“Oh, I want to,” he said, the corner of his lips twitching as it often did when he was being playful. Only at the moment it felt like anything but good-natured. “Text me. I’ll be there.”

It was too weird and she would’ve questioned him further, but she didn’t have time. Everyone back at her apartment thought she was in the bathroom, taking the fastest shower in the history of the world.

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As expected, just like in Chicago when they'd been around A.J., the most affectionate Sly had been so far was he'd held her hand. It was only the times they'd been asked to pose for a photo that he'd wrap his arm around her waist and pull her to him. He'd snuck in a few kisses when her brothers weren't watching.

Emi was thankful that Sly admitted he wasn't entirely comfortable doing all he wished he could do in front of her siblings—most notably A.J., who was his good friend now. When they finally got a moment near the end of their walk, she braced herself. They'd all made a pit stop at the bathrooms, and she and Sly were alone for the first time all day. She was certain he'd take advantage of the moment to kiss her a little more as he had in Chicago when they'd been alone in her room. She kept reminding herself this was her boyfriend. She hadn't given in to sleeping with him yet, but what they had done in Chicago came pretty damn close. Somehow she didn't think she'd ever go there with him again. Hell, just holding his hand felt wrong now.

A little more about what happened last night in her apartment and bits and pieces of what she and Sydney talked about had come to her. She didn't remember exactly what was discussed, but she somehow remembered how she'd *felt*, completely enamored and incredibly turned on by Sydney to the point she could practically feel the ache between her legs now. She'd felt that same ache most of the night, particularly at the piano bar when she'd sat so close to him she couldn't resist rubbing his hard thigh. Feeling his big hand hold hers and inhaling his incredible fragrance each time he leaned in to whisper something in her ear had been a welcome agony. She also remembered feeling tempted to turn her head and kiss him. *God*, she'd been dreaming of it, imagining what it would feel like, for months.

Her biggest worry was that she could've easily done or said too much about what she felt for him now. That morning at his apartment further proof of how impossible it was for her to hide what she was feeling for him materialized. Her attempts to quell the scathing jealousy she'd felt seeing that *whore* rub up against him had been pathetic at best. She shuddered to think what she might've said to him last night. Her mind kept going over his reaction to her asking him to hang out with them today. It was almost as if she'd slapped him in the face with the suggestion. "*You want me to be around you and Sabian? Watch you and him . . .*"

Something had definitely changed overnight, but he'd assured her nothing had happened. Still, why did being here today with Sly feel so wrong?

To her surprise, instead of doing what she thought he might do and sneak in a few more deeper kisses and maybe even do some of what she'd allowed him to in Chicago, Sly used the time instead to inquire more about last night.

"So what was it you wanted to show Sydney back at your place last night?"

It caught her completely by surprise, and she felt stupid for not anticipating the question. No way was she telling her boyfriend she'd brought another guy back to her place to watch her prance around in stilettos—shoes so obscenely high her sister jokingly referred to them as fuck-me shoes.

Originally, she'd planned on *telling* Sydney about the shoes, maybe showing them to him in the box, not modeling them for him and certainly not in the skimpy outfit she'd worn last night all the while dancing around like a shameless stripper.

"I, uh . . ." She swallowed hard, unable to think of a single thing that would make sense or sound believable at least not to her. "I'd told him about the birthday gift my sister sent me," she said, trying to buy time until she could think of something to say her sister bought her.

"And what was that?"

A teddy bear. A watch. An espresso machine, *you amateur!*

All of these would've been perfectly acceptable, yet she knew without a doubt she wouldn't be able to pull any of them off. She *sucked* at lying, and she knew it'd be especially hard to do so with him looking at her the way he was now.

"Emi, you wouldn't happen to have a Band-Aid, would you?"

Emi turned to see her sister's pained expression as Enzo helped her limp to a nearby bench. One look down and Emi could see the bloody knee. "What happened?" she asked, completely alarmed and already rushing to her sister's side.

"My clumsy ass tripped on something."

"It's the stupid design on the ramp up to the bathroom," Enzo said, rubbing Livi's back. "I can guarantee you you're not the first one to trip on that half-assed cement job."

Enzo's words struck a chord with Emi even as she dug in her small back pack for something to wipe Livi's knee with. *Half-assed*. Why did that remind her of last night?

"Here you go." Sly handed Enzo several wet paper towels.

"What happened? Rosie asked as she and her husband Vince approached.

Enzo gave them his angry version of Livi's spill. Emi had to smile. If her brother-in-law could kick the ass of the guy who did the half-assed cement job, she knew he would. One by one the whole gang came over to check on Livi.

Within a few minutes, Enzo announced they were done with the walk. "I need to get her somewhere where we can ice her knee."

Livi pouted. "I'm not finishing the walk?"

"No, babe," Enzo said, frowning as he scrutinized her knee some more. "This thing's already swelling up."

"Yeah," Isaiah agreed. "You need to get off it, Liv."

"You can go back to my place," Emi offered. "But you're coming to eat with us, right?"

"Yes, of course," Livi said without even checking with Enzo.

They decided where that would be: an Italian restaurant not too far from where the walk had taken place at Griffith Park. Thankfully, the conversation shifted from Liv's injury to Sarah and Rosie pouting about feeling guilty that none of them had brought the kids because so many parents were doing the walk with strollers and little ones in wagons.

There was also talk of the restaurant they were going to be eating at as they all continued their walk without Liv and Enzo. Sal and Grace were raving about it. Grace, who was head chef at one of the Moreno restaurants, knew her stuff and had been the one to suggest it. She said it was high-end enough to attract celebrity and high-profile customers but it was also casual enough that there was no dress code. Their casual walking attire would be fine.

Remembering Sydney's suggestion, Emi began quizzing her about culinary school. She'd since researched the highly accredited culinary program at ESU, but the thought still scared her.

"Culinary school, Em?" A.J. had asked after overhearing her tell Grace she'd been considering it.

Since Liv and Enzo had taken the SUV they'd gotten to the park in, they all had to split up and jump in one of the other several SUVs the Morenos and her cousin Moe had driven up in. It was a tight squeeze, but they all fit. Sly and Emi ended up in Sal and Grace's SUV along with Angel, Sarah, Rosie, and Vince.

The conversation stayed on culinary school and the different options Emi could consider. It wasn't until they got to the restaurant that Sydney's name was even brought up again.

Emi had hoped Sly would let it go and forget about reminding her to text Sydney the name of the place they'd be eating. His words were beginning to haunt her. "*You want me to be around you and Sabian?*"

No.

No, she didn't.

Not at *all*.

Even though she couldn't remember all that they talked about last night, she sensed they'd had a moment, some kind of breakthrough. Or maybe she'd said something that would have Sydney looking almost disgusted about her even suggesting he be around her and her boyfriend now.

Clearly, something had changed, and as soon as she was able to get Sydney alone, she was getting to the bottom of it. In the meantime, she just had to get through this day with Sabian. She'd begun to think maybe Sly had forgotten about reminding her to text Sydney with the location. Then Angel, the *last* person she would've thought would be thinking of Sydney, brought him up.

"Did you tell Syd where we're gonna be?" he asked Sarah.

"I did," Sarah said, pulling her phone out as they parked in the restaurant's parking lot. "But let me send him the link with their website just to be sure."

Sly glanced at Emi, squeezing her hand, and she smiled even as her heart rate began to accelerate. "Finally, I get to meet this guy."

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Chapter Seventeen

Sydney

Sydney's first thought when he'd agreed to attend Emi's birthday dinner and have to watch her around Sabian was *Scarlet*. He could easily convince her touchy-feely ass to be his date. If he was going to have to deal with having to watch Emi and her boyfriend, then Emi could deal with this.

He'd wear Emi's favorite suit and that cologne she loved so much and walk in hand in hand with Scarlet looking every bit the Hollywood diva that she was. It'd be perfect—perfectly tense.

It was a dick move and he knew it. Emi had asked him to come along, not because she wanted to flaunt her boyfriend in front of him, but because she needed to save face after what happened that morning. Regardless of the fact that going back to her place was her idea, he'd willingly gone along with the whole thing. He was just as much to blame for how things ended up.

His bringing Scarlet to this dinner would be for no other reason than to rub his relationship into Emi's face. As much as he hated the thought of seeing her with Sabian, the thought of hurting her, even if she didn't admit it, was worse. He couldn't do it to her. But he did have a plan B if need be.

As he walked into the restaurant, he checked himself out in the reflection of the glass door. He *had* worn Emi's favorite suit and her favorite cologne of his. He might not be a dick, but there was only so much he could take, and plan B seemed like a viable one.

Lynn was the first to greet him, getting up and hugging him. He was two for two when she complimented him on his suit *and* how good he smelled.

“Damn, Syd”—Romero laughed from across the table—“thanks for making us all look like slobes by showing up in a suit and tie.”

Sydney smiled, touching his tie casually. “I have to be somewhere after this or, trust me, I would've dressed down.”

He circled the large table, purposely taking the long way around so he'd greet Emi and Sabian last. Valerie and Alex sat closest to Emi and Sabian. When he reached Valerie, she smiled big. "Where's your girlfriend?" she asked. "I was hoping I'd get to meet a real A-list Hollywood movie star."

"She couldn't make it," he said, not bothering to correct her calling Scarlet his *girlfriend*. "She had some interview to do, but I'll see her later on tonight."

Trying not to be too obvious about the deep breath he took before he turned to Emi, he smiled big as their eyes met. "Hey," he said, leaning over to hug her as if he hadn't seen her just that morning."

"Hi. I'm glad you made it," she said with a timid smile then touched Sabian's arm. "I'd like you to meet Sylvester Sabian. *Sly*"—she turned back to Sly—"this is my friend Sydney. The one you've heard so much about."

"I have." He stood and reached his hand out to Sydney while putting his other hand on Emi's shoulder. "Hey, nice to finally meet you."

"Likewise," Sydney said, shaking his hand. "Obviously, I've heard a lot about you and not just from sportscasters either. Emi's told me a lot about you too."

Not really but he'd embellished for the sake of hiding the fact that seeing another guy touch her felt even more unpleasant than he'd anticipated.

He fucking *hated* it.

Thankfully, before he could start working the enamel on his teeth, Sarah showed him the seat she'd saved him next to her and Angel—directly across from Emi and Sabian. *Fantastic*.

He hadn't even finished taking off his suit coat when Valerie and Sofie started grilling him about Scarlet. "So what's she like?" Sofie asked. "I heard she's a diva—not from any reliable source or anything—just from what I read when in line at the supermarket. The tabloids always have something mean to say about her."

"She's actually very nice," he said as he sat down. "It's what I like about her best. When I first met her, I didn't even realize she was a celebrity."

"No way." Valerie gasped. "You didn't know who Scarlet Brendon was?"

"Nope." He shook his head and smiled at the waitress who handed him a menu. "I never would've guessed she was one, if she hadn't told me, because of how down-to-earth and sweet she is."

Lynn had let him know they'd all already ordered when she saw the waitress on her way back to the table. So he put in his order but played it safe, asking only for a glass of wine and a salad. He'd glanced in Emi's direction a couple of times, and both times Sabian had been whispering something in her ear a little too cutesy. He knew it wouldn't take much more to have him making a quick and dirty exit.

Sydney kept any conversation he made with Emi and her boyfriend as generic as possible. He asked both Sabian and A.J. about the team stats and what they thought their chances were of making it to the play offs—all the sort of stuff you'd ask someone who played professional baseball. In turn, Sabian asked him about his line of work. Sydney kept that as simple as possible as well.

Eventually, the conversation was brought back to the subject of Scarlet. "So are you two getting serious?" Sofie asked as she reached for the bread basket in front of Sydney.

He handed it to her, not sure her asking this was good or bad. But he figured he'd spared Emi having to see him with touchy-feely Scarlet. He'd allow himself to answer this not so truthfully because it *was* necessary.

"I don't know. I was beginning to have my doubts because of the whole celebrity Hollywood thing. I didn't think I'd have the patience for it. But it's not so bad."

The waitress dropped off his glass of wine, and he thanked her, taking advantage of the moment to glance in Emi's direction. She was moving the food on her plate around, but her sweet little brow was at it—nicely arched already.

Hiding the smirk behind his glass, he almost felt bad going on about this, but this time even Eric, Sofie's husband, inquired about Scarlet. "You met any of her celebrity friends yet?"

"Nah." Sydney shook his head. "It's why I think maybe I can deal with this. She likes hiding out, laying low, and staying out of the limelight on her down time. Unless she's promoting something, she stays away from all those ritzy parties. I'm sure I'll meet them eventually, but I haven't yet."

They asked a little more about her until Emi's sister Liv announced it was time for the gifts. She brought out a bag from under the table and handed it to Emi. "But you already got me something," Emi said, taking the bag.

“This one’s from all four of us and, uh . . . someone else,” Liv explained and her brothers all smiled smugly.

Emi glanced at them all a little suspiciously then at Sabian, who shrugged in innocence. Sydney smiled, praying it wasn’t going to be anything too uncomfortable for him. He watched Emi peek into the bag before pulling out the tissue and looking inside. It was just a card. As she opened it, something fell out, landing on the table. She picked up what looked like a small card or photo, smiling curiously—confused—then smiled even bigger. “Oh my God, how adorable! Whose dog is—?”

“Read the card,” Liv said anxiously.

“Happy birthday, Mommy,” she read out loud then gasped, bringing her hand to her mouth. “I can’t wait to meet you.” Her face jerked up to her sister. “You got me a dog?”

Liv nodded excitedly. “A little teacup Yorkie like the ones you always said you wanted. I figured it could keep you company since you’re so far from home.”

Emi hugged her, squealing, as Sydney breathed a sigh of relief. She quizzed them about where the puppy was, how old, and the gender. Liv explained it was a boy, he was about ten weeks old, and they’d put him up at a doggy day care center nearby for the day. The photo of the pup got passed around. She told Emi they’d pick the puppy up as soon as they were done with the dinner and that they had a loaded trunk with all the accessories Emi would need for him—including food. Then she added, “And you have a free groomer for life!”

All the girls made the usual oohing and aahing noises as the photo got passed along, saying he was adorable. Sydney laughed when it got to him. The puppy *was* adorable, but they’d already stripped the poor thing of his dignity. He wore a tiny striped sailor shirt and a matching sailor hat. Liv wasn’t kidding when she said teacup. The puppy was actually *in* a teacup. Homer would have a field day with this little guy.

When Sydney’s salad was brought out, he was able to enjoy it without the tension he’d been feeling in his gut from the moment he arrived. The gift opening kept Emi busy and unable to engage with Sabian as they had been earlier when Sydney tried desperately not to look at their annoying ear whispering. That alone had him clenching his teeth. He’d had no idea coming into this today this would be such a challenge.

Everything was going smoothly, and Sydney had even finished his salad. It appeared the gifts were all done. A.J. had even begun to say he and Sabian had to get going to catch their plane. Sydney was home free. Then Sabian spoke up. “Wait. I still haven’t given her my gift.”

A.J., who’d begun to stand, sat back down. Sydney’s hand reached for his wine glass, his jaw getting a workout once again. Even though everyone else was still ordering drinks, this second glass of wine was definitely Sydney’s *last*.

“Alright, so . . .” Sabian cleared his throat. “As you guys know, even though Emi and I have been seeing each other for a couple months now, we’ve hardly been able to spend any time together.”

“Good,” Nathan said with a smirk.

Everyone chuckled, and Sabian shot him a playful glare but continued. “Good thing for you my schedule makes it almost impossible. *But*, and I wanted to do this in front of you guys,” he said, eyeing her brothers then Liv, “because I know she’s your baby sis, and even though she’s all grown up now—”

“Not really,” Isaiah said, and there was even more laughter.

“C’mon, man! I’m nervous enough,” Sabian said then continued with the worried act, making Sydney seriously anxious. “With the All-Star Break next week, I have three whole days off.” He fist pumped then frowned, shaking his head at A.J. “I know it’s bullshit that we didn’t make the team, but we know it’s all politics.” He turned back to Emi as he pulled out a folded envelope from the pocket in his shorts. “It’s only three days and two nights, but I remember you saying you’d always wanted to go to Maui.”

Emi’s eyes widened just as Sydney’s stomach dropped. *Hell* no, this wasn’t happening. Her smile was a strange one. Then the, “Oh wows” and “How romantic” comments from around the table seemed to make her smile bigger, and she hugged Sabian, touching his face then pecking him. It was quick but far from painless, and that was it for Sydney.

“I haven’t actually booked it,” Sabian said, giving Sydney an ounce of hope, “because there are options I wanted you to choose from first, and I wasn’t sure if you could take the time off from your summer classes. But I’m hoping you can.”

As what looked like a small pamphlet of whatever excursion he had planned was passed around, Sydney stood up and started putting his coat on.

“You’re leaving too?” Lynn asked since A.J. had already started making his round of good-byes.

“Yeah, I have to,” he said just as his eyes met Emi’s.

He couldn’t quite make out the expression she wore. Maybe she was as disappointed as Lynn sounded or *something*. Faced with the possibility of Emi going away to Maui for three days with this guy, Sydney went ahead with what he’d decided not to earlier: plan B.

“Scarlet wouldn’t say what exactly she had planned, but I know it involves going out of town because she told me to pack a bag and make sure nothing was in it that would hold us up at the airport.”

“Oh wow,” Sofie, who was near enough to hear, said, “how exciting!” She turned to Emi with a laugh. “You guys are gonna have to tell us all about your birthday trips as soon as you get a chance. We can all live the exotic impulsive jet-setting lives of celebrities vicariously through you two.”

“How long will *you* be gone?” Emi asked.

Her expression was a bit more telling now. Any excitement over her new puppy or trip to Maui vanished. She actually appeared troubled.

“Not sure,” he said, pulling his keys out of his pockets. “But she did ask if I could take some time off work this week. I told her I probably could.”

The troubled expression in her eyes turned into a hurt one, and Sydney had to wonder how much of what happened last night she remembered. With Sabian going around the table to say his good-byes to everyone, Sydney stared at her now.

“Didn’t you two just go away not too long ago?” Valerie asked this time then thankfully addressed her next question to Lynn because Sydney couldn’t bring himself to look away from Em. “You said he made the tabloids when he was leaving or arriving at the airport.”

“That’s when he went to see his mom.”

“Oh!”

The conversation turned momentarily to his mother and how she was doing, forcing Sydney to turn away from Em and address their concerned questions. But to his surprise, it was Emi who brought the subject back to his leaving. “Will you be bringing Homer over to my place?”

Before he could answer, Sabian was at her side, slipping his hands into hers. “I gotta go, babe. A.J. already called to have a car pick us up.”

Nathan and A.J. walked out ahead of him, saying they were getting the carry-ons out of the SUV they'd thrown them in.

Instantly, Sydney felt his jaw lock. He watched as she turned to her boyfriend and nodded then turned back to Sydney. "I can watch Homer for you. I'll introduce him to Oliver," she said with what Sydney knew was a fake smile. It was nowhere near as natural as the beautiful one he'd grown to love. "It's what I'm naming my puppy. Homer and Oliver will be best friends now."

Sydney swallowed hard, refusing to look down at her and Sabian's entwined hands. He debated whether or not to tell her he was good. Lie and say he'd already asked Julie Anne to do it. He'd seen how disgusted Emi had been with his former cat sitter that morning. But he was having trouble thinking straight, and he wanted nothing more than to just get the fuck out of there, so he nodded.

"Don't leave then," she said, her eyes almost pleading with him. "I'll be right back."

Sabian said good-bye to Sydney, telling him once again how nice it'd been to meet him. All the talk of Sydney's *girlfriend* Scarlet had clearly made Sabian feel better about Sydney's *friendship* with Emi.

"I need to ask you something about the key to your place before you leave," Emi said as she started to the exit with Sabian.

Sydney's eyes dropped to her hand holding Sabian's and he cursed himself as the jealousy overwhelmed him. She was going outside to kiss her man good-bye, and Sydney was left there to wait for her like an idiot.

"Everything okay?" Lynn asked, breaking him out of his infuriating thoughts.

"Dandy," he said, touching his temple where the migraine that started much earlier was pounding now.

"Are you still getting those headaches?" she asked, her concerned eyes searched his.

"Only when I'm feeling a little tense," he explained.

"Have you gone back to the doctor for that?"

"Yeah, they ran more tests, and my tension headaches were upgraded to migraines." He frowned.

"So what are you feeling tense about, Sydney?" she asked, glancing at the entrance then back at him.

“Nothing.” He smiled, despite his pounding head. “I’d forgotten about it being upgraded from tension headaches to migraines, so I take the tension thing back.” He forced another smile, glad for the sudden loud laughter at the table so he wouldn’t have to look into Lynn’s inquiring eyes anymore.

Already she was eyeing him strangely. If anyone besides Emi was able to tell that Sydney felt like exploding despite his desperate attempts to hide it, it’d be Lynn. He wasn’t just angry at Emi; he was furious with himself. Why did he wait so damn long? Why hadn’t he just reminded her this morning about last night, damn it? And why *the fuck* had he thought that after the year they’d had, but especially after last night, he could do this today?

He focused on the guys at the table, all looking and still laughing at something on Romero’s phone screen.

“Sarah,” Angel called out to her, still laughing. He waved her over to see whatever it was they were getting such a kick out of.

At that moment, Sydney realized why he’d been stupid enough to think he could deal with seeing Emi with her boyfriend. He had mistakenly assumed since he’d always been able to handle seeing Lynn with Angel it would be the same with Em. Not so *at all*. Further proof that he’d never felt for anyone what he was now feeling for Em. Not even with Lynn had he ever felt this kind of torment when seeing her with Angel.

The biggest difference by far was that, as much as he’d loved Lynn in the past, he’d never once considered her *his*. As far as his heart was concerned, it’d claimed Emi months ago. She *was* his now, and after last night, to hell if he was going to just stand there and risk losing her. After last night, it should be clear to his dumb ass that he already had her. If that meant having to step it up and do whatever it took to claim her, so be it.

“Go ahead,” Sydney said when she turned back to him, her expression a worried one, so he smiled to reassure her. “I’m fine really, just in a hurry. I gotta get out of here. I’ll meet Em outside.”

He gave Lynn a quick hug and waved at everyone else, asking Lynn to explain why he left so abruptly then stalked towards the exit on a mission.

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Chapter Eighteen

Emilia

Taking advantage of the longish walk her brothers had to the SUV to get A.J. and Sly's bags, Emi stood with Sly just outside the entrance, her mind made up.

"I know this is not a good time to do this Sly, and we have so little time right now." She squeezed his hand as his eyes narrowed in on hers. "We can talk more about this later on the phone, but I wanted to let you know at least one thing in person. This isn't gonna work."

He shook his head as surprised as she knew he'd be. "Why? Is it because we hardly—?"

"It has nothing to do with anything but the way I feel. You've done absolutely nothing wrong. I just should've been honest with you earlier. I apologize for that, but my heart is somewhere else, and I didn't even realize it until just recently."

"Sydney," he said immediately, staring at her and dropping her hand. "Did something happen last night?"

She nodded. "Not physically," she said almost positive that was a lie based on the flashbacks she'd been having all day. "But being out with him last night felt different from all the other times I'd spent with him, and it just forced me to admit what I'd begun to suspect." She'd spare him the fact that her feelings had been growing for Sydney since *day one*. "I feel terrible, Sly. I really should've said something sooner, but I hadn't admitted it even to myself until now. I don't even know for sure how he feels. I just know it isn't fair to you to continue with this relationship."

Nathan and A.J. came around the corner, laughing, each pulling a rolling carry on. The car had arrived, and while Emi still felt a huge knot in her belly, she did feel slightly relieved. There was still the matter of Sydney

going away with Scarlet soon. But she'd made up her mind about one other thing. She had no choice now. Either way she risked losing Sydney.

If he didn't feel for her what she did for him, she'd already lost him. Hearing him speak of Scarlet as if she'd suddenly grown on him scared the hell out of Emi. That he was actually going away with her for days and even taking time off from his precious work had her drowning in jealousy. She knew now, no matter how much she cared for her dear *friend*, the days of her feeling just friendship for him were over.

Once her brothers joined them, Sly didn't say much more, other than he'd call her, before getting in the car. She waved at A.J. and a somber-looking Sly as they drove away. The emotion she was feeling—knowing in a few minutes Sydney would be gone on a romantic getaway with his beautiful actress girlfriend—suffocated her.

"Emi," she and Nathan turned to see Sydney at the entrance of the restaurant. "Can I talk to you for a moment before I leave? Alone?"

Nathan turned to Emi then nodded. "I'll wait for you inside."

The second her brother entered the restaurant Emi felt the boulder in her throat give, and she brought her hand to her mouth just as the first tear dripped down her cheek.

"What's wrong?" Sydney asked, taking a few steps closer to her.

She shook her head, glancing down at the ground, feeling like a coward. Sydney was suddenly too beautiful to even look at. It hurt too much now, knowing he'd be leaving her soon to be with Scarlet.

"I love you, Em," he said, making her jerk her head up. "Please tell me those tears are because you love me too and you don't want me to go."

"I love you, and I don't want you to go!"

The words flew out without hesitation, but she still searched his eyes even as her heart pounded in her chest. Could this really be happening?

The moment she saw the smile she jumped into his arms, feeling like a child. He barely flinched, even as she wrapped her legs around him kissing him frantically.

"Sabian," he said between kisses, "has got to go, Em."

"I just broke up with him," she said, pulling away, but still held her hands at either side of his neck as he looked up at her, surprised. "I did." She nodded, smiling big, and then laughed. "I couldn't be with him anymore, knowing I love you." She kissed him again and again. "I love you so much, Sydney." She pulled away again, staring into his beautiful

profound eyes. “Say it again,” she whispered, the tears blurring her eyes again but for a much better reason this time. “That you love me.”

“I love you.” Mimicking her, he said it over and over again even as he put her down and hugged her tightly.

“And you’re really not going anywhere with Scarlet tonight”—she pressed her lips together—“or anywhere *ever* again, right?”

“Only place I’m going tonight is back to your bedroom so you can dance in those shoes for me again.” He dropped his hand down from her waist and caressed her ass over her shorts, squeezing his eyes shut. “Jesus, I’ve been dreaming about doing this for over a year.”

Emi giggled, feeling the familiar ache between her legs start to throb as it did so often around Sydney now. “I’ve been dreaming of you doing so *much more* to me than just that.”

Sydney leaned his forehead against her and smiled. “What the hell have we been waiting for?”

Emi smiled big, just as she felt him press his erection against her upper thigh. Her panties would be soaked if they didn’t leave soon. “Let’s go then.”

Before she could start her mad dash back into the restaurant to grab her things, he squeezed her hand with a suddenly serious expression that had his brow arching a bit menacingly. “We need to discuss a few things first though.”

Nodding quickly, still excited, she kissed him again before making that dash back into the restaurant. She had a feeling what he might want to discuss. It was part of the flashbacks she’d had today and why Enzo’s use of the phrase “half-assed” had reminded her of last night. Sydney didn’t do half-assed relationships, something Emi could totally get on board with.

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The drive back to their apartment building was pure torture. Of course, they had to deal with the usual nightmarish Los Angeles traffic. Emi had run back into the restaurant just as they were ordering another round. She explained quickly that she had to get back to her place before Sydney left to catch his plane, giving them some cockamamie story about the key she needed to his place since she’d be cat sitting for him.

Her siblings, but mostly Livi and then Sarah, had all given her strange, puzzled looks. This was a dinner for *her* she was running out of. These

were also her siblings, the ones she adored and didn't get to see nearly as often as she'd like. It was unlike her to do something like this, but she apologized profusely, saying Sydney would miss his plane if she didn't leave ASAP.

"I'll see you in a little bit though, right? This isn't good-bye until next time. You guys are bringing me Oliver once you're done here. So I'll see you in a few."

That was another reason why the crawl of a commute to get back to her place, where Sydney could do to her all she'd been fantasizing he'd do to her, was such a torment. She'd hoped they could back in time to have a couple if not several rounds of fun before her siblings arrived and she'd have a new fur baby to care for.

At this rate, they'd be lucky if they'd have time for one round. And God, the very thought had her puddling in places she could hardly wait for Sydney to touch. The only good thing about the long exasperating drive back to their building was Sydney had taken that time to discuss what he said they had to before moving forward. She'd been right.

"You have to understand, Em. If I do this, it's not like when I do this with just any girl—or even Scarlet."

Emi's hand had been roaming up and down his hard thighs. In some of the flashbacks she'd had today, she remembered nearly gasping last night when she saw the massive erection trying to break through Sydney's slacks. Thinking about how soon she'd have her hands and possibly her tongue on it had given life to a naughty idea, something she might have to resort to if this drive didn't start moving.

Until he mentioned *her* name. Emi's hand had frozen in place right on his thigh just as it'd begun to roam to another place she could see was now hard too. Only Sydney mentioning what he'd done with other girls—or *even* with Scarlet—had nearly killed the mood.

He turned to her when he realized he'd struck a nerve. "I'm only mentioning this, Em, because I need you to understand what *this*"—he slipped his hand into hers, the one she'd begun to recoil—"means to me. I'm not even sure how to explain it without sounding too over-the-top—without scaring you."

"Scaring me?"

"Let me finish, please." They were moving again but still at a snail's pace, giving him time to turn to her often with those big dark profound eyes

as he spoke. “When I’d come to the conclusion that I was in love with Lynni, I was hopeful. Hopeful that maybe she was in love with me too and we could work something out and be each other’s forever. Later, when I met my ex-wife, I went into the relationship *hopeful* again—open-minded that we’d fall in love, get married, and that she’d be all I ever needed. With you, I feel *none* of those things.”

A bit alarmed Emi stared at him, bewildered. This wasn’t where she thought he was going with this. They’d come to another stop, and he was staring at her again so seriously he was beginning to scare her. “What do you mean?” she asked her voice almost shaky.

“I mean all those times I wasn’t sure what to expect. Would it work out? Could I truly be happy *forever* with them? With you, I already know. There is no hoping, no trying to stay open-minded that you *could* be the one for me. I already know it, Em. I’ve known it for months. Not only do I know with all certainty that you’re the one I’ve been waiting on my *entire* life, I now know I could never be happy without you. If I do this, I’m going into this with the idea that I’ve found my soul mate. I’m *done*. The only hope I’m feeling now is that you’ll be taking this just as seriously as I am. I know you’re young—”

“Not too young,” she blurted out, her throat already constricting from everything he’d just said to her.

“But you’re not ready for—”

“I am ready!” she said again then brought her hand to her mouth with a smirk, feeling silly.

“Look.” He smiled, touching her face sweetly. “I’ll be honest. When I first met you, though I was physically attracted, I thought we were in way too different places in our lives. It would never work. But I’ve since gotten to know you, and I’ve fallen in love with everything about you. I know we’re completely compatible now. I just don’t want you rushing anything in your life for me. It’s not what I’m asking. You may need to catch up with things like life experiences, your career, etc. And I’ll wait for you as long as I have to: years, decades, however long you need. I’m just saying I can’t do this if you’re not taking it as seriously as I will. I don’t want what you gave Darren and Sabian.”

“I wasn’t in love with either of them,” she said, kissing his hand. “Not even close. And I’m beyond ecstatic to hear you say you’re taking this so

seriously. This isn't just a first for you. It's a first for me too. I love you, Sydney, and I promise you I wouldn't have it any other way."

The sudden smile that broke through his hardened expression made her smile too. It was almost impossible to believe this man she thought so perfect, so unattainable, a man she'd fallen so hopelessly in love with, was saying he loved her too and wanted to be with her *forever*. There weren't just butterflies going wild inside her, an entire fireworks show was going on in there. She could hardly sit still.

As they reached their apartment building, Emi's hand had begun to roam again. The image of his tented pants last night was even easier to remember now that it was happening again. Touching him over his pants made her heart race. She could hardly stand it. She wanted to—needed to—touch him already. And not just over his pants.

"Em," he grunted as she squeezed softly over his pants.

They were in the parking structure, and she giggled when he accelerated past the usual five-mile an hour limit he normally adhered to.

"I'm not gonna be able to walk into the building like this, you know."

"Well, we'll have to do something about that." She started to unzip him as he pulled into a parking space.

"What are you doing?" He gasped.

Emi glanced around, making sure no one was around, before turning back to his erection out of his pants now. "Dealing with the *situation* the best way I can."

She leaned over and did what she'd been daydreaming of all day. That visual she kept having from last night had been unrelenting all day. This was by far the best and *only* way she'd silence the burning need to taste him. Wrapping her hand around his thick girth, she smiled at the gasp that escaped him. "*Sweet, Jesus.*"

That made her giggle, but she still licked the pre-cum on the tip, loving the taste of his salty sweetness. Sydney sat back and groaned when she worked her tongue around the shaft then started sucking softly. Her hand stroked him in rhythm with her mouth, sucking softly at first then a little harder. Deeper.

She'd done this a handful of times in her lifetime but had never enjoyed it as much as she was this time. He was so big and tasted so damn good, but something about knowing this was Sydney made it even better. He was like candy in her mouth, and she wanted to swallow him all up.

Taking him in all the way slowly, she held her hand at the bottom to avoid gagging herself. Sydney fingers were in her hair as he groaned louder, and she sped up and took him even deeper. More and more of the heavenly saltiness began to spread in her mouth. “I’m close, baby,” he said breathlessly, but she wasn’t about to pull away and miss out.

Emi had never swallowed, but just like everything else with Sydney, somehow she knew she had to—she’d enjoy it. “Em, I’m gonna come,” he said almost frantically to which she just nodded and continued to enjoy having him in her mouth.

With a grunt, Sydney stiffened, and Emi smiled as she swallowed down every bit of his hot sweet juices. She’d been right. It was a hell of a turn-on, and unlike some of the things she’d read from girls who hated this, she *loved* it. Licking him clean, she greedily made sure she took every last drop as his erection began to go flaccid.

Sydney’s hand had moved down to her back, but she’d loved the way he’d fisted her hair as he’d come—another turn-on she was sure would be become one of her favorite things. Emi glanced up at him with a smile. “Now you can walk through the building.”

He’d been sitting back with his eyes closed, looking very satisfied—like he was ready to fall asleep even—but her words had his eyes opening and he smiled. “I just need a moment to get the feeling back in my legs.”

As she sat up, he stopped her before she could pull away and kissed her. “I’ve never felt so happy in my life.”

Emi felt her heart double over but couldn’t help smirking. “That good, huh?”

Sydney laughed out loud, letting his head fall back. “Okay, bad timing, but you know that’s not what I mean, brat.” Emi stared at him, smiling wistfully. This still felt surreal to her. “Seriously, Em,” he said, his expression earnest again, “in my thirty years of experience in this world, I always knew something was missing. I just didn’t realize it was this significant. This is just the beginning.” He caressed her face, looking deep in her eyes and choking her up. “And already I feel like my life is complete. You’re everything I didn’t even know I was waiting for but can’t live without now.”

Emi wrapped her arms around his neck tightly, understanding even at her *young* age what he meant. She pulled away and touched his face, leaning her forehead against his. “Maybe it is my age. I’ve never felt like

anything was missing in my life, but I do know exactly what you mean now. It's something I started feeling weeks ago, maybe longer, when it felt like I was beginning to lose you. I'd never been so frightened about the prospect of anything in my life. The fear had been growing for some time, but I didn't realize it until today. So I may be younger than you, Sydney, but trust me when I say I know exactly what you mean when you say you know with all certainty you've found the one, because I know it too."

Sydney kissed her so long and deep, so sweetly. Emi didn't even care that their kiss was going on so long it could mean they weren't going to have time to do much more before her siblings arrived. Having Sydney kiss her like this *finally* made her realize just how long she'd been waiting for this.

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## Chapter Nineteen

### Sydney

It was awkward, but as usual, Sydney was incapable of refusing Emi anything. He doubted now he ever would. As expected, they hadn't had time to do much more than some heavy making out when they got back to her room. But even that was beyond blissful and almost hurt to have to stop. Her siblings had arrived at her apartment not long after Sydney and Emi had.

Worse, Sydney got as far as doing what he'd been dreaming about for so long. He'd slipped his hand in her shorts and got to caress that beautiful ass of hers *finally*. It'd given him the biggest boner ever, one he'd had to calm before her siblings came up.

Emi had decided she was telling her siblings about them now. She said they'd wasted enough time and wanted their being a couple to start as soon as possible. And that meant telling everyone about it. The sooner the better.

Considering all the talk he'd done at the restaurant about Scarlet and her having spent the day with her *boyfriend*, Sydney thought it'd be awkward. He would've preferred they wait at least a few days before she called and told them, but she gave him that doe-eyed expression he was powerless to argue with.

Sydney was in her kitchen when they arrived. Liv held the puppy Emi immediately adored. Her husband and Nathan and Isaiah brought in all the other stuff Liv said they'd brought for *Oliver*. Sydney smiled, feeling like an idiot when they all turned to look at him inquiringly.

Nathan finally asked what he knew they were all wondering. "Didn't you have a plane to catch or something?"

"Nope," Emi answered for him as she walked Oliver over to Sydney and handed him to him. "I know this is gonna sound weird to you guys, but I broke up with Sly today just before he left. You were right," she said to Liv,

who seemed as stunned by the news as everyone else did. “Sydney and I are in love—have been for weeks.”

“Months,” Sydney said, knowing it was even longer.

Emi turned to him and smiled. “Yes, months”—she turned back to her siblings and said something that surprised Sydney—“but we only just admitted it to each other last night.”

Liv smiled and her husband smirked. Her brothers’ expressions on the other hand hardened a bit. They eyed Sydney suspiciously. “What about Scarlet Brendon?” Isaiah asked.

“It was never anything serious and it’s over now.”

“Yes,” Emi said, leaning against him. “Just like things are over between Sly and me.”

“So just like that?” Nathan asked. “You were leaving on a trip with her earlier, and now you’re here with my sister?”

“There was never any trip,” Sydney said, hating to have to admit it. Even Emi turned to him in surprise. “I only said that so I could get out of there as fast as possible. I couldn’t stand being around Em and Sabian anymore.”

Emi stared at him for a moment before explaining some more to them about this being something that had happened over the year they’d known each other. Both had been afraid to admit their true feelings, but they’d become impossible to deny anymore. She’d felt terrible about having to break things off with Sly, especially after his invitation to Maui, but she had to do the right thing.

“And you’re happy?” Liv asked, smiling big.

Emi brought her hands to her mouth, smiling big. “I am.”

“Then that’s all that matters now.” Liv rushed over to her and hugged her then hugged Sydney, mindful not to mush Oliver. “I’ve heard nothing but good things about you, Syd, not just from Emi but Sarah and anytime your name’s been brought up by anyone else. I’m trusting I won’t have to come after you if you do anything to hurt my baby sister.”

“Oh, he’ll have plenty of people coming after him,” Nathan said in a not-so-playful tone.

But Isaiah, who was closest, smirked, reaching out and giving Sydney a bro hand shake. “He’s known Emi for over a year,” he said, turning back to Nathan. “I think he knows what he’s getting himself into.”

“I sure do,” Sydney said, smiling as he turned to look at Nathan.

Nathan's hardened expression finally softened into a smirk and he nodded. Fortunately, with Oliver squirming in Sydney's arms, the subject was changed back to him. Emi went through the things Liv bought for her new baby, laughing and playing with Oliver and all his new toys.

Oliver pooping right in the middle of her front room had her brothers on their feet. "And on that note," Isaiah said laughing, "we're out of here."

"Yeah." Liv laughed also as she stood up. "I gotta go pick up *my* baby. I miss him already."

As little as their new relationship was discussed, Sydney had a feeling Emi hadn't heard the half of it yet from her siblings. They'd probably grill her about it later and rightfully so. Sydney could understand if they had any misgivings. Their age difference was pretty significant, but he'd never been so sure about anything in his life. He had no worries. In time, they'd be convinced of just how much Emi meant to him now.

The second they were gone Sydney was all over her. Their lovemaking however would have to wait. To his exasperation, Emi had to clean up poop and then set up Oliver's little bed, water bowl, and potty pads in her room.

Oliver had only just curled up in his little bed, and Emi was still staring at him. "Isn't he the most adorable thing you've ever seen?"

"Yeah, adorable," Sydney said, pressing his erection against her from behind and kissing her neck. "Real fucking adorable," he said as he sucked her neck.

She turned around, wrapping her arms around him, and he picked her immediately. "I need a shower," she said against his lips. "I hardly broke a sweat today, but still, it was a five-k walk in the hot sun." She sucked his lower lip. "I feel icky."

Sydney lowered her to the floor. He'd since removed his long-sleeved buttoned shirt and had been lounging in his wife beater shirt and slacks. "I'll join you," he said, unzipping his pants, and Emi giggled.

"Okay!"

They rushed into the bathroom together, undressing as they scrambled. The moment she pulled her blouse and bra off and Sydney was privy to her beautiful bare and perky-as-fuck breasts, he knew there was no way in hell he was waiting. Not even until they were in the shower.

Sydney put a hand on one breast and his mouth on the other and sucked that hard nipple, squeezing the other with a moan. Emi ran her fingers

through his hair already breathless. “I feel your tongue *everywhere*,” she said, gasping as he sucked even harder.

Sliding his hand down, he moved to her other breast as his fingers made it into her panties. He smiled against her nipple as he felt how hot and wet she was. She moaned when he slid his finger over her wet clit. “Do you feel it here?”

“Yes!” she said breathlessly, arching her back against the sink he now had her leaned against.

Sydney continued sucking her breast as he slid her panties off her and brought his finger over her wet pussy again. He could hardly stand, seeing her completely naked like this. The sight alone had his dick dripping already.

He continued to slide his finger over and over, slowing and rubbing at just the perfect spot that made her moan. “Oh my God,” she said breathlessly. “It’s too soon.”

“It’s never too soon,” he said as he rubbed her slick slit gently, feeling her entire body begin to tremble. He brought his lips to her mouth, wanting his mouth on hers when she came. “Don’t hold back, baby,” he teased, sliding his finger down to her dripping opening then back up to her clit. “But I could slow it down if you want.”

“No!” she said, swaying her hips in invitation for him to keep doing what he was doing.

Devouring her mouth, he pushed his finger even deeper in her but gave her clit what her entire body seemed to be begging for now with his thumb. Once again she trembled, holding on to him for dear life as she pulled her mouth away from his to gasp.

“Oh!” she cried out as she swayed against his fingers. “Right there,” she said as he continued to play with her pussy until she was coming hard and crying out.

He kissed her even as she moaned in his mouth. “Beautiful,” he said against her lips. “Ga damn, I almost came myself.”

He tugged at her bottom lip as she continued to try and catch her breath but smiled, eyes closed, in that drunken way he knew so well when it felt *that* good. Pressing his throbbing cock against her naked body, he kissed her again. “I need to make you mine,” he whispered against her lips, “right here, right now.”

Her eyes opened, and she smiled as she had so often last night. The burning desire in her eyes was undeniable. She'd just come and she wanted him inside her now. "I wanna watch." Sydney's eyes narrowed on her, confused, but before he could ask, she turned around and bent over the sink, looking up at him in the mirror. "I wanna see the moment you make me yours. Watch as you explode inside me."

One look down and Sydney felt ready to explode already. He groaned, squeezing her voluptuous ass with both hands. "Jesus!" he said, closing his eyes as she lifted even higher for him. "I need a condom."

Emi brought her hand back and held his arm before he could move away. "I'm on birth control," she said, and that nearly killed it for him as thoughts of her and Sabian assaulted him until she added, "I have to be. It regulates my cycle. You said you always use one. I trust you." Their eyes met in the mirror and she smiled. "I don't want anything between us."

The red haze that'd begun to cloud his thoughts cleared, and he smiled though his heart still pounded. The thought of her with anyone else had him plunging into her from behind with a purpose. He felt a little bad when she gasped and he realized how tight she was. But in the next second, she was moaning with pleasure, so he continued to make her his, knowing it wouldn't be long at all. Just looking down at her perfect ass made him want to come right there, so he stared into the mirror instead.

Emi glanced up, and seeing that look of profound pleasure in her eyes was worse than looking at her ass. He came with groan as he buried himself deep in her. "Ga damn!" he grunted as he felt the strength in his legs drain along with his dick.

He hadn't expected to come so much, not after what she'd done to him in the parking structure. They sure as hell would need a shower now. Once in the shower they kissed softly, sweetly, holding each other for long periods under the warm water. She felt perfect in his arms, as if their bodies were made to hold each other. After what had just happened over the sink and what she'd done earlier, Sydney hadn't expected anything more than sweet kissing to happen in the shower. But all it took was a little lathering soap and Emi's hand on his cock again, and he had her up against the shower wall, crying out in pleasure once again.

By the time they got to her bed, where Sydney had originally thought all the action would happen, they were both spent. Sydney lay there, holding Emi, even after she'd fallen asleep so peacefully, and stared at her as he had

last night with no doubt in his mind now. Just as he told her earlier, Emi was the soul mate he hadn't even known he'd been waiting for all these years.

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The sight of Emi in her sun hat, glasses, and the purse she now carried Oliver everywhere in, made Sydney smile. He didn't think it possible, but every time he looked at her now, she was more beautiful than the last. She walked in, carrying a picnic basket, one he knew was likely full of delicious treats for their sailing excursion today.

Sydney was packing a small ice chest with water bottles, grapes, and a bottle of wine. His phone was on the counter, and he had Lynn on speaker.

"Hi, Sarah," Emi said as soon as she realized who Sydney was chatting with.

"Hi Emi," Lynn said just as cheerfully. "I hear you're going sailing again. Good luck! Sydney's never been able to convince me to get on that thing. I have this thing about the deep sea and all its creatures. I'll stick to the beaches. Thank you very much."

"But it's so much fun," Emi said, placing the basket on the counter and wrapping her arms around Sydney's waist. "And so romantic."

"I can see how it would be romantic," Lynn said. "But I'm just too chicken. Anyway, I'll let you guys go on your romantic sailing trip now. I just saw a story about 4B Global's acquisition on the news and was curious since Sydney had mentioned it a while back but hadn't lately. You guys have fun."

Sydney kissed Emi, aroused the moment she pressed her body against his. "God, you're so fucking adorable," he said, touching her sun hat.

She chewed her bottom lip. "You like it? I knew I should've gotten you one."

"You're adorable in it, but I told you I don't do hats."

"But you'd look so good," she pouted.

Sydney kissed then sucked her pouty lips. "No, I hate wearing hats," he whispered then laughed when she pouted again. "What is it with you women and hats? You know to this day Cristina says she still gets choked up when she sees a guy wearing a fedora because Mando owned so many and wore them often at *her* request."

He saw the strange pinch in her brows; then she seemed to remember something and the brows went up. “Acquisition?”

It took him a second to figure out what she was talking about then remembered Sarah’s call. “Yeah, the company’s been talking about it forever. It’s just finally looking like it might actually happen.”

With his hands all over her ass, Sydney could already tell they wouldn’t be leaving his place without a quickie. He pulled off her hat and kissed her deeper.

“What does that mean?” she asked in between kisses.

“Means we may have a new headquarters in New Zealand soon.”

He started to slip his hand in her shorts when she flinched back. “Your company is moving to New Zealand?”

“Part of it will, but not me.” He smiled. “They still want everything here to stay as is. It just means the company would be even bigger and the new headquarters will be out of New Zealand now—not Texas.” He shrugged. “I’ll probably get sent out every now and again, but I’ll still be stationed here.”

“That’s kind of a big deal, isn’t it?”

Sydney stared at her lips. “I guess.”

“Why hadn’t you told me?”

“Because it’s not going to affect me much. It shouldn’t affect you either.”

“But you told Sarah.”

Her pinched brows made him smile. Even when she was practically pouting, she was fucking adorable. God, he loved her. “Babe, she even said I *mentioned* it to her a while back. It’s not that big a deal.” He pecked her again. “Boring work stuff. There are so many other things I’d rather talk to you about.” She stared at him but didn’t say anything, so he searched those beautiful eyes. “What’s wrong with you?”

“I just . . .” She shrugged, looking away.

Sydney couldn’t help but smirk, wondering if she could possibly be feeling a little jealous of Lynn. This wasn’t the first time she’d questioned something he’d told Lynn about but hadn’t told her. More boring stuff. The last time it had to do with his IRA. Only reason he’d even mentioned to Lynn in the first place was because she’d asked about it. She and Angel were in the process of making some bank moves. But he dared not suggest she might be jealous.

“I know what you need,” he said instead, lifting her so suddenly in his arms Oliver barked.

Sydney hurried her into his bedroom even as she giggled and pretended to protest. He took the purse with Oliver in it and put it on the floor, letting her pup out. “Go play, Oliver,” he said, already tugging Emi’s shorts down. “Syd’s gotta play with Mommy for just a little.”

“Sydney!” She giggled as he pulled her shorts and panties right off and nudged her onto his bed. She sat down on the edge as he went down to his knees and spread her legs. “Lie down, baby. I’ll give you what you need right now.”

She did as she was told, and Sydney went right in, licking between her folds from bottom to top, smiling when she arched her back. “Is that what this pussy needed, babe?”

“Yes,” she said, squirming as his tongue flicked her clit.

Sydney smiled even bigger. “I knew it.” He spread her with his finger and fucked her with his tongue until she was moaning then stopped for a moment to stare at the beauty of her dripping slit. “Every time, baby. I’ll fix whatever’s bothering you just like this *every* time.” He groaned before taking her clit in his mouth and sucking a little harder.

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Chapter Twenty

Emilia

For months, life had been blissful. Emi hadn't expected anything less. She felt stupid that she'd waited that long to get the courage to admit, not just to Sydney but to herself, that she was utterly in love with him. Even his mom, who'd never met her, had known for months that they were in love. Sydney and Emi flew out to Flagstaff, where he introduced her as his soul mate, and his mother's response had floored her.

"I knew you were out there and it was just a matter of time before he found you." She'd held her arms open wide to hug her. "I've known it from the moment he first told me about you. You're the one."

Needless to say his mother was all for the relationship. Emi had never felt so welcome so quickly into anyone's life. They'd even ironed out the few wrinkles that over the first few weeks of their relationship had needed ironing out, like both of them agreeing to be honest about their feelings and any jealousy they might be dealing with—something neither of them should be feeling but inevitably did. Emi hated to admit she thought her age and immaturity compared to Sydney's worked against her sometimes. It was the only thing she feared could possibly be the cause for problems between them.

Her growing insecurities.

Everything else between them was perfect. When Sly had called her a couple of times at first because he wanted a longer explanation of their break up—something she admitted to Sydney she'd sort of offered the day she broke things off with him so abruptly—Sydney had listened to her tell him about it calmly. Albeit he was noticeably tense and a bit irritated when she'd told him how long she'd been on the phone with him. She hadn't thought forty minutes was too unreasonable until he told her about his

fifteen-minute chat with Scarlet and how Julie Anne had come by for five or ten minutes to visit with Homer.

Emi had been *livid*. Though she'd done her best to not show her immaturity compared to Sydney's composed way of handling his anger. Even Homer had gotten a few nasty glares from her when Sydney mentioned how excited he'd been about seeing Julie Anne. Fat little traitor! Sydney had reassured her easily enough, and just like when he'd calmed her about his call with Scarlet, their first argument ever—about Julie Anne still stopping by his place to flaunt her obnoxious assets—had ended in bed with Sydney *calming* her once again in his very special way.

The second time Sly had called had been harder to tell Sydney about. But they'd agreed to pure honesty, especially when it came to this kind of stuff. She'd kept the conversation short enough, even telling him she didn't think it was a good idea for him to keep calling her. She was going to be telling Sydney about this last call, and she was certain he wouldn't be too accepting of them staying friends after that particular conversation.

As hard as it was to tell him about it, even then he was so much better about dealing with any kind of jealous emotion than she was.

She'd begun spending multiple nights at his place, though they still hadn't discussed any possibilities of moving in together. Emi was okay about keeping things as is. Getting that close to him did scare her a little. She already felt so completely and hopelessly in love with him, and that was terrifying. His composure about the things she was sure would have her stomping her feet like a child and wanting to throw a tantrum made her feel like he had the upper hand.

Like the night she had no choice but to tell him she'd spoken with Sly again. She'd gone up to his place right after she'd gotten off the phone with Sly to put together a mandarin chicken salad for them. They were in the kitchen with Sydney doing his usual, following her around, incapable of keeping his hands off her.

Sydney stood behind her, kissing her neck as she put the salad together, his erection unabashedly making itself known against her ass. Emi had to smile, feeling that all too familiar ache between her legs. She was never there for more than a few minutes before his erection made its stiff appearance.

But before he let any time pass, before Sydney could ask her why she hadn't told him sooner, she just blurted it out. "Sly called today."

Sydney stopped mid kiss trail on her neck but didn't pull away. "For what?" he said against her neck.

Even that was impressive. She would've already been pulling away, her insides well lit if he told her Scarlet or any of his exes had called *again*. She didn't even like to admit that hearing he'd spoken to *Lynni* for *a while* was a little galling now. She finally understood why Angel had once upon a time been irritated by Sydney referring to her as Lynni. It *was* a little too sweet.

"He said he just wanted to talk"—she squeezed her eyes shut before adding the last part—"because he misses me." Now Sydney pulled away, and she turned around to face him, touching his arm. "I cut the call short. I told him that it probably wouldn't be a good idea for him to keep calling me even as just friends since he was admitting to still having feelings for me and I'm with you now."

"What else did he say?"

For a moment she considered lying, but she figured she may as well be completely honest. "He said he's feeling all *twisted*—whatever that means—that my breaking things off with him the way I did really caught him by surprise and now I'm all he ever thinks about." Sydney's expression hardened further, but before the brow could go too high, she slipped her hands in his. "I apologized for hurting him but made it clear my heart belonged to you now. He said he'd respect my wishes but wanted me to know he'd be there if I ever needed him. And then we hung up. It was that short."

Sydney stared at her for a moment that had her holding her breath and then he kissed her. "Good girl." He nipped her bottom lip then spun her around and pulled her shorts down, bending her over the counter roughly.

Instantly aroused, she moved the food out of the way and moaned when she felt his fingers inside her. "Perfect," he growled into her ear then let her suck his two wet fingers so she could see for herself just how wet she was.

The arousal was so swift, so overwhelming. If she weren't certain he was about to, she'd beg him to fuck her. She kicked the shorts at her ankles away and spread for him, lifting her ass in the air, and then cried out when he slammed into her. "Yes!" she said, gripping the side of the granite countertop with one hand. "Oh my God, yes!"

With her other hand, she played with herself as he taught her to do in this position, and already she could feel it building. The more it built, the louder she cried out until her legs nearly gave out on her as the amazing

climax pummeled through her, spasm after spasm. He slammed into her one last time with a loud groan then stood there gripping her waist tightly as he came inside her.

After a few moments of both of them trying to recover and catch their breath, Sydney leaned in from behind and whispered into her ear. “Just needed to remind you your heart’s not the only thing that belongs to me now.”

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Gut feelings are usually pretty spot on. Emi’s always had been anyway. From the first day she’d formally met Sydney at Mando’s repast, she’d thought his relationship with Cristina a bit odd. She’d been doing better about her insecurity issues even whenever he mentioned having chatted with Cristina *again*.

It seemed he did at least once a week. Of course, it’d since been established that Sydney had one of the kindest hearts of anyone she’d ever met. He was genuinely just checking up on her. While it made Emi a little uneasy, she trusted him completely. He’d always been upfront and honest about his relationship with Mando’s widow. So Emi had since concluded that the unease she felt when he’d tell her about yet another phone conversation he’d had with her was just her petty and unreasonable jealousy.

Then one evening, while they were having dinner, he gave her the unnerving news. “I invited Cristina and the kids to come sailing with us this weekend.”

The bite of food Emi had been working on practically soured on the spot. But she was determined to be mature about this.

“Did you?” she asked as she picked up her glass of water and took a swig.

“Yeah, I didn’t realize they hadn’t gone out since Mando had gotten sick. He was the sailor, not her, so when she mentioned it today, I thought the kids might enjoy going out with us this weekend.”

Hearing him say that with such genuine benevolence made her feel guilty about the jealous feelings that the thought of sharing him that weekend with Cristina stirred up. “That’s sweet of you,” she said, reaching out and squeezing his hand. “I’m sure they would enjoy it.”

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Seeing Cristina and the kids and how well they were all doing that following Sunday *had* been pleasant. Being witness to one of Sydney and Cristina conversations was quite another thing. The revelation about just how close he was to Cristina was unsettling to say the least. The things they spoke of were things he didn't even talk to Emi about—nothing bad or incendiary—but listening to them discuss things she and Sydney never spoke with Emi about was a little daunting. Things like the pros and cons of public schools vs. private schools for her kids then retirement accounts *in depth*. The detailed explanation of how she'd rolled Mando's IRA and pension plan into trusts for the kids had Emi's head spinning.

When they started talking about each other's education, Emi started sinking in her seat. Here they were, talking about their impressive advanced degrees and things so far into their future like retirement plans, and after two years in college, Emi still hadn't even decided on a solid major.

Then there was the stuff about Cristina's family therapy. Sydney had anchored the boat so they could enjoy the sunset over a glass of wine and some snacks for the kids. Emi had been beyond relieved when Sydney finally switched from the subject of Cristina going back to school for her PhD until they moved onto a completely different one, a gut-knotting subject for Emi.

"What about everything else?" Sydney asked, glancing down to the stern of the boat where the kids had gone to explore then turned back to Cristina. "The kids doing better?"

Emi had watched as the two exchanged a look. Sydney seemed to have caught himself as if maybe he shouldn't have asked in front of her, but Cristina shook her head as if to say it was fine. She then turned to Emi. "I've had some issues with Mickey, my oldest. He got violent a few times at school and got into some other trouble. I hadn't told anyone in the family because it just felt too personal and asked Syd not to say anything. But I'm homeschooling him now and we're doing family therapy. It's been tough," she said, her face suddenly scrunching, but she got it together quickly and took a deep breath.

Sydney was immediately on his feet and sat next to her, bringing his arm around her shoulder. "I'm good," she assured him. "These are actually

tears of joy because he really is doing better. It's just hard to have to keep it together *all* the time, you know?"

"You shouldn't have to," Sydney said, staring at her very seriously. "I've told you to call me anytime, Cristina."

"I know." She nodded. "You're a good friend and godsent, Syd. But things are looking up. It's why I decided to go back for my PhD, starting this fall. Mickey will be going back to school then. Both he and the therapist think he's ready." She took a sip of her wine and smiled at Sydney then Emi and held her wine glass up. "To taking it one day at a time."

Emi smiled sympathetically, holding out her wine glass. "To Mickey doing better."

The wine went down hard. The knot in her stomach grew by the second as she'd watched Sydney continue to speak positively and continue to console Cristina with his arm still around her. Two things were screaming out to Emi. Cristina hadn't wanted to share something so personal with the family, but she'd share it with Sydney? And Sydney had this all out relationship with this woman, one Emi had been completely in the dark about. She knew she wasn't just being paranoid anymore.

As promised, Sly hadn't called since that last time. For some reason, the day she'd spent listening and watching Sydney's interaction with Cristina had her thinking about Sly as the day finally came to an end.

Sydney's reaction to Sly's call was . . . not disappointing. The last thing she wanted was to try and make him jealous. She hated that tense feeling she'd gotten at the pit of her stomach both times she'd had to bring up Sly's calls. "Annoyed" was probably a better word to describe how well he'd handled the calls both times, a glaring reminder of *poorly* she dealt with her insecure heart. Today, for example, seeing how engrossed he could get in his conversations with Cristina had the green-eyed monster screeching inside of her.

Everything else about their relationship so far had been perfect, and Emi knew she had to get a grip. Unless she wanted to risk him rethinking just how compatible they really were, she needed to cut the shit out. She didn't want to make herself crazy, but she knew it was a definite possibility that the novelty of their romance would eventually wear off and he'd see her for what she felt like: a petty and immature girlfriend, undeserving of a man like Sydney.

Unable to help herself, she had to address it the moment they were alone and on the road. “I didn’t realize you two were that close,” she’d said on the drive home.

“I’d gotten real close with both her and Mando the year before he got sick,” Sydney explained. “The year things got bad I did more talking to her than him since most of the time he was out of it.” He paused to take a deep breath, and Emi had been able to see just how hard Mando’s death had been on him, yet he’d almost never spoke about it—with Emi. “It was brutal. The only thing that makes it a little easier to bear is knowing what a strong woman Cristina is. My mother was a lot older than Cristina when my dad passed, and she didn’t have little ones to deal with on her own, and even she didn’t bounce back and just roll with the punches the way Cristina has. I guess necessity will do that to you. But I still hate that she’s all alone.”

Emi’s first thoughts were maybe she’d bounced back so much faster than his mom did *because of* Sydney. If they were so close that she’d confide so much about her personal life—stuff she didn’t even confide to her family—technically she wasn’t alone. Having Sydney’s shoulder to cry on, even before her husband died, was likely a huge and welcome comfort to her. Too welcome. But Emi kept her thoughts to herself.

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Weeks later Emi still hadn’t shaken the unease, especially because she thought she’d noticed a change in his mood lately, noticed him being a little distant. She hadn’t wanted to be that difficult, jealous girlfriend, so she hadn’t said anything. She watched as he walked out from his bedroom now, phone still in hand. He seemed pensive as he often did lately. He walked to the kitchen cabinet and pulled out the bottle of his migraine headache pills.

“You stressing about something?” she asked.

“No. It’s not even a bad one. I just don’t want it to go there.”

Emi nodded, continuing to dice tomatoes for the salsa she was making. “Who called?” she asked, not looking up.

“Braydon,” he said, walking over and kissing her cheek. “I’ll have to go out of town this Thursday.”

Braydon was one of the other executives where Sydney worked, one Emi was beginning to resent. From what Sydney had told her, Braydon should be doing his share of all these trips for this acquisition they were still trying finalize. It seemed lately Sydney had taken on the brunt of the out-of-

town trips, something Emi *hated*. She knew it was his job, but being away from him for even a few days was torture.

“How long will you be gone?” she asked, trying not to whine.

“Until Saturday.” He kissed her neck from behind. “Maybe Sunday. I’ll call you and let you know as soon as I know.”

The rest of their evening was as satisfying as usual. With him having to leave in two days, she decided to stay the night again when he asked her to. Even that she’d analyzed to death. Normally, he begged her to not leave. This time it felt more like a suggestion because it was late and he knew she had a change of clothes at his place for school tomorrow.

After another amazing evening of lovemaking that had them both sleeping soundly early on, Emi got up about midnight to use the bathroom. On her way back to bed, she noticed his phone blinking and not plugged in. He’d need it charged for the morning, so she grabbed it off the dresser so she could place it on the charging mat he had on his nightstand. Before she reached his nightstand, she glanced down at the phone, which had lit up when she touched it. It was locked, but she could see the preview of the last text he’d received hours ago—from Cristina. She could only see the preview, but it was enough to have her insides on fire.

**Sweet dreams, Syd. Call me . . .**

Her entire life she’d known her brothers were hotheads. It wasn’t until lately that she’d started to justify her own out-of-control-jealous emotions on her genes. It ran in the family, and she’d known she wasn’t just being jealous. She’d just never been exposed to anything that would *piss her off* this bad. This wasn’t all paranoia. She could feel something change in Sydney lately, and this just confirmed it.

Normally, she’d respect Sydney’s privacy and not read his messages even though she knew his password, but this piqued her curiosity. She rushed back into the bathroom. Once there, she tapped his password onto the keypad furiously.

**Incorrect password (nine attempts remaining)**

She did it again and got the same message. After the second time, she was certain it was her outrage that had her typing so fast and hard she was getting it wrong, but after the third time, it hit her. He’d changed his password.

Her stomach plummeted. The only reason she could think of why he'd change it was that he didn't want her to have access to his messages anymore. *Why?*

Her mind raced, reviewing the conversation she'd already gone over and over the night they got back from their day out sailing with Cristina and the kids and she tried so hard to not be that insecure girlfriend.

Bringing her hand to her face, Emi gasped as the reality sank in. What Cristina had gone through—losing her husband so young—was tragic. Emi felt for her. She did. But if this bitch was coming after her man, widow or not, Emi would be telling her where she could stick all her sweet dream texts.

She felt her heart thud with a mixture of anger, seething jealousy, and, at the same time, dread—dread of further confirming how poorly she was at handling her insecurities. It was the only thing that kept her from waking him and demanding to know why he'd changed his password and why the hell Cristina was sending him these maddening texts. She stalked over to the Sydney's nightstand and put the phone down, annoyed that her setting it down a bit loudly didn't wake him. She crawled in next to him and stared at him, wishing she could somehow stare a cramp into his neck.

The rest of the night would've been one nightmare after another for sure *if* she'd been able to sleep. It was especially irritating because she had finals tomorrow. She *needed* to get some sleep. For hours, she'd tossed and turned, thinking back to everything Sydney had ever mentioned about Cristina. Every single thing he'd ever said about her was positive. Praise even. The more she thought about it, the more exasperating it felt. She'd finally fallen asleep an hour or so before she had to be up. Sydney, however, had slept like a rock the entire night.

It surprised her to wake up in an empty bed. Most of the time it was Sydney's roaming hands, fingers, and sometimes even his tongue that woke her. She heard his voice in the front room and realized he was on the phone. Checking her own phone, she could see it was time for her to get up.

Sydney walked back in the room with a strange expression. He seemed surprised to see her up. "Something wrong?" she asked as he walked by her, not reaching out to touch her or even pull her to him as he normally would.

"Yeah." He frowned as he set his phone down on the dresser. "That meeting I had to be at on Thursday got moved up. I have to be there by this afternoon."

“What? Why?”

Again she did her best not to whine. She hated how she had to put so much effort into behaving like an adult. Sydney seemed to be in awe of Cristina for being so strong after losing her husband at such a young age and having to raise her kids all alone. Emi hated herself for already feeling choked up about the mere thought of her boyfriend leaving for a few days. But she knew it was more than just hearing he’d be leaving sooner than he thought that had her choking back the emotion.

“I don’t know. Shit happened and they want to do things sooner.” He grabbed his tablet and started toward the door again.

“Will you still be gone until Saturday?”

“I don’t know, Em.” He snapped as he’d never snapped at her before.

His tone was an irritated one—impatient. She was getting on his nerves, and he was making no effort to hide it. He stopped abruptly before leaving, and Emi felt a sudden hope that he’d caught himself and was walking back to apologize. Maybe hug her and kiss her because she needed that so badly at that moment.

Instead, he walked to his phone, checked something on it, then put it back down on the dresser and rushed out of the room without saying another word or even looking at her.

Feeling a bit breathless and a little confused about what was happening, Emi rushed to his phone. It hadn’t timed out yet, and as underhanded and anxious as she felt that he might walk back in and catch her, she continued to tap away until she got to his texts. She froze when she got to the texts between him and Cristina. First because the partial text she’d read last night was gone. He’d deleted it. Then because of all the other interactions between them. The way his phone was set up she could see every interaction he’d had with her. He’d called Cristina that morning, though the length said one minute, which meant she probably hadn’t answered. Then Emi noticed the longer call he’d had with Cristina—last night. When? Emi had been there the whole evening. The only phone call he’d been on was the one he took in his bedroom with Braydon.

Then it hit her. He’d lied. She double-checked the time, and sure enough, it was around the time she’d arrived and was making the salsa in his kitchen. No calls from Braydon around that time. Her heart sped up even more when she realized this was the call he said Braydon informed him about having to go out of town—again.

She scrolled through the other texts between him and Cristina. There were tons. All were harmless about her kids and more stuff he and Emi never talked about: insurance policies, the construction she was having done at her home. Then her eyes stopped at one. It was a response from Sydney to Cristina.

**You're an amazing woman. I know you know this.  
You have to.**

Emi nearly dropped the phone when it suddenly rang in her hand. The screen switched from the text she was reading to the pop-up of who was calling.

Cristina.

Sydney walked into the room and slowed when he saw her holding it. She held it out to him. "It's Cristina."

He took it without comment. "Hey," he answered. "Yeah, hold on."

Their eyes met for one fleeting moment, and if she weren't mistaken, he still looked irritated. Without saying anything, he started to the door. Apparently, he didn't want to have this conversation in front of her either. A sudden dread overwhelmed her as she watched him leave the room. No way was she keeping this in anymore. She had to confront him—find out what the hell was going on between him and Cristina.

But what if he admitted it? What if this was her worst nightmare come to life? What if the novelty of being with Emi had worn out? What if, after being with her, getting the physical need out of his system, the one he said had begun to feel like an obsession, he realized that's all she had to offer him? Realized that someone more his age and with more experience in everything, like Cristina, was far more mentally stimulating and compatible for him?

Was it possible this *business trip* he was taking was actually a getaway with Cristina? *You're an amazing woman.*

"No!" Emi shook her head, feeling the hot tears well up in her eyes. "He wouldn't do that."

She rushed to the door, remembering that very first time she'd snapped at him, way back when she'd thought he was judging her for dating two guys at once. "*I don't do that.*"

He'd been adamant about that. He didn't even see someone on the side when he was just dating someone. Cheryl had been a woman he said he broke things off with because he'd never felt anything for her. Even then he said it felt wrong to lead her on. Sydney was *in love* with Emi. Despite all her stupid insecurities, she knew this for a fact. She saw it in his eyes, felt it in his kisses and when he made love to her. It was undeniable. His love for her was as palpable as Emi's was for him.

Rushing to the door even as the tears started streaming down her face, she was determined to get to the bottom of this. There had to be a valid explanation. To her surprise, the apartment was empty. She glanced around and even walked out onto his balcony. He'd left the apartment for even more privacy? His keys and wallet were still on the counter, so he couldn't have gone far.

Emi scuttled back into the bedroom and picked up her phone. She hit speed dial, swatting the tears away. Her call went straight to voicemail, and an auto response text popped up on her screen, saying Sydney was unavailable and to call his secretary if it was urgent.

She was overcome with the sudden urge to fling her phone across the bedroom, but she threw it on the bed instead. Remembering the damn final she had today had her looking down at the screen at the time. She wondered now if she should just skip it. This felt a million times more important. So the work she'd put in all summer would be all for nothing. If her heart wasn't already aching, that might feel a little more devastating.

But this could be nothing. She still held out the tiniest bit of hope that this was all just a misunderstanding. What if he got back, explained himself, made her feel incredibly stupid for jumping to such unthinkable conclusions? She'd flunk her summer course for nothing.

Since she had to wait for him to get back anyway and there was no telling when that would be, she decided to jump in the shower. Once in there, the flood gates opened. She had to let it out, crying openly, though she kept it as quiet as possible, but she needed to. She'd be a mess when she finally confronted him, and she wanted to have at least a little composure.

In there much longer than she anticipated, she finally was able to calm herself and step out of the bathroom, a little put together. She'd expected to see him in the bedroom, getting things ready for his *business trip*. The very thought sickened her. But he wasn't there.

Surprised, she threw on a pair of panties and one of his T-shirts that hung from the bedpost. The smell of him alone was enough to get the tears going again. She hurried out into the front room, but he wasn't there either. Could he still be on the phone? Then she saw it—the bare kitchen counter. His keys and wallet were gone now.

This only panicked her further, and now her heart pounded. That tiny bit of hope she'd held out that maybe she was just being paranoid was crushed. He left without saying good-bye?

Hurrying back into her room, she made a beeline straight to her phone on her bed, the flicker of hope staying alive when she saw the message indicator flashing. The flicker got stronger when she saw the text from Sydney or rather "*My Sweetheart.*"

**Sorry I couldn't wait for you to get out of the shower. I had to go. I'll call you later.**

Hitting send immediately, Emi felt the boulder at her throat again. The text was far from hopeful or even satisfying. Zero emotion was expressed in it. No "I love you" or even "I miss you" as he usually included in just about any message he ever sent her. Once again, the call went to his voicemail, shooting her another instant auto response text.

This time she did what she'd felt like doing all morning and stomped her feet like a child, letting out an exasperated groan that turned into a screech before sending off her text to him.

**ANSWER YOUR PHONE! WE NEED TO TALK!**

She gave it a few minutes then tried again only to get his voicemail and the stupid auto response text again. The anxiety she was feeling now that this was actually happening was too much to bear.

The text she'd begun to write him was getting too long. She wanted him to know exactly what was going on in her head. Hear what she was feeling even if it meant leaving him a blubbering voicemail with all her ridiculous theories. If she was wrong—completely off—he'd call her immediately and clear things up, at the very least respond with a text assuring her she was wrong and he loved her as she did him. That everything would be okay and they'd be together forever like he'd been promising her from the moment they declared their love for one another.

So she called and waited for the inevitable to happen. When it did, she cleared her throat, though there'd be no hiding her crying.

“Sydney, we need to talk. I need to know what’s going on with you. I know it wasn’t Braydon who called you last night. I know it was Cristina.” She paused to take a trembling breath. “I know you deleted a text from her last night and that you talk and text her way more than I ever imagined. Please tell me it’s not what I’m thinking.” Her voice broke, and she took a few deep breaths to try and get herself together again. “Please tell me nothing is going on between you and her. My heart is completely breaking. Please call me.”

She hung up and lay down on his bed, feeling numb. This wasn’t happening. With the phone at her chest, she lay there for minutes, the sniffing turning into crying the longer the time passed and no call or response came from Sydney. A sudden ping made her flinch and gasp as she looked down and saw she had a text from him. As much as she’d been praying even as she cried that she’d hear back from him, she was terrified to read his text now. But she took a deep breath and clicked on the envelope. The short length of it was enough to break her heart before she even read it. Then she did.

**You’re right. We need to talk. But I can’t now. I’ll call you later.**

It was like a stab through the heart. The pain was *that* unbearable. He may as well have said she was right about everything else too.

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## Chapter Twenty-One

### **Sydney**

There wasn't a single gut-wrenching emotion Sydney hadn't experienced in the last two days: guilt, anger, heartache, confusion, utter despair, and now a strange numbness—but above all guilt. The only thing that helped him trounce it—a little—was that he knew he was doing the right thing. He had to. Emi didn't deserve this.

Her heart would be broken, but she was young. In time, she'd get over him and move on. A girl like Emi would have many prospects waiting for a chance with her. She already had one good one. He was counting on remembering that when he spoke with her today. So he'd stay strong and not give into the guilt.

The tears would be inevitable. He'd been preparing himself for them by listening to her messages these past few days. She'd had two days to let it sink in. Two days to accept it. By the time he spoke with her today, she'd likely be past the heartache and have moved on to the anger. At least he'd been hoping that when he'd decided to not return any of her phone calls. In the last voicemail he'd gotten from her, she sounded beyond enraged.

Judging by all the other calls he'd gotten, she knew now. All she needed was to hear it from him. Let him have it. Then it would be over.

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## Chapter Twenty-Two

### **Emilia**

Two entire days passed after the only text Sydney had bothered to send Emi and no call—not that day or the next. Emi had done so much crying she didn't understand how she could still have any tears left. But she did. She had plenty.

All she kept thinking was how could this be? How could *he* be so cruel so out of the blue? After reading the stupid auto response so many times, she did just what it said to do. She called his secretary. Emi already knew. The text Sydney had sent was clear enough. She just didn't understand how it could be true. And yet hearing it from his secretary had still been earth-shattering.

Emi wasn't sure what she'd been expecting. Maybe it was because, even after all the facts she'd gathered in the past forty-eight hours, she still didn't believe it. Until she heard it directly from him, her heart refused to.

The conversations she'd had in the past two days with key people in Sydney's life played out in her head over and over. First his secretary.

"4B Global. You've reached the office of Sydney Maricopa. This is Kendra speaking. May I ask who's calling?"

"Emi," she'd managed to whisper. "I've been trying to reach him on the phone and haven't been able to. It's urgent that I speak with him."

"I'm afraid Mr. Maricopa will be out of the office for a few days, but I can see that your message gets to him as soon as possible."

"Is there any way to reach him where he's at?"

"No, I'm afraid not."

"You mean to tell me there are no phones where his meeting is?"

"No ma'am. Mr. Maricopa is not in a meeting. He's taking a few personal days off. But I'd be happy to take a mess—"

"Personal days?" Emi's heart nearly stopped. "Did he say for what?"

Even as prepared as she thought she'd been, it was still a slap in the face. Emi had practically crushed her phone in her hand as the secretary had once again regretfully informed her she wasn't at liberty to say *why* he'd taken the personal time off.

Emi didn't even remember if she'd said good-bye before hanging up. It was at that point that the festering anger began to bubble over. The resentment from what he was putting her through had begun to replace the heartache and taken front and center. She welcomed the anger; it was much easier to deal with than the pain. Though her emotions had since gone back and forth as the whole nightmare played out.

Not ten minutes after getting off the phone with Sydney's secretary, Emi had scrolled through her phone furiously and called Sarah. "Have you heard from Sydney?"

Sarah had been quiet at first, giving Emi hope she might have. It turned out it just took Sarah that long to figure out who she was speaking to. "Um, no," she said, deflating Emi's hope instantly. "Not since last week. Why? What's going on?"

"Has he ever mentioned anything to you about him and Cristina?" Infuriatingly, her voice had broken from just saying *her* name.

"Cristina?" Sarah asked, sounding confused and a bit alarmed.

"Yes," Emi's voice squeaked. "Mando's widow. I think he's having an affair with her."

Emi had gone on to explain first through helpless tears, but soon she was spitting out the angry words about Sydney's lying. How he said he was going on a business trip but she now knew there was no such business trip. The texts and call logs she'd found between him and Cristina. How, for weeks, she'd thought maybe she was just being paranoid and what his response was when she left the voicemail calling him out on it.

"It's the only response I've had from him since he left yesterday morning. He's ignored all my other calls and texts."

Sarah had been stunned silent for a moment; then she finally spoke. "I don't even know what to say except that's so not like him. Emi, I've known him almost my whole life, and I can tell you with all certainty I've never known him to be a cheater or condone cheating. Most importantly, I've never seen him or heard him so happy since the two of you got together."

"Do you have Cristina's phone number?"

"I don't think so, but I could get it."

“Can you please?” Once again she’d turned into a blubbering mess. “And maybe call him or text him. He might answer your calls. Tell him I desperately need to talk to him.”

“I will,” Sarah said quickly. “Oh, honey, I’m so sorry this is happening. Please stay strong. Sydney’s a good guy. I just can’t imagine him doing something so hurtful.”

“I can’t either,” Emi said, sniffing as the pesky hope lingered in her heart again just hearing Sarah—the only other person that knew Sydney as well as she did—wasn’t buying this either.

Sarah had called back a few minutes later only to tell her Sydney hadn’t answered her calls either. “I texted him too. I’ll let you know as soon as I hear from him. But I did get Cristina’s number.”

Of course, Cristina hadn’t answered either, and Emi hadn’t left any voicemails, nor had she texted her. It was morning three and Emi felt like a zombie. Her throat was raw, her stomach rumbled from lack of food, but the last thing she could think about was eating anything, and she was completely sleep-deprived. The only other person whom she’d spoken to throughout this was Livi. She’d made her promise, even throughout all the sobbing, to please not tell her brothers what was going on. Emi knew they hadn’t been thrilled about the idea of her and Sydney to begin with. They were skeptical about the age difference but had eventually given in, especially given how happy Emi sounded every time she’d spoken to them since. She knew now not only would they say they told her so, if they saw how this was destroying her, they’d be out to kill Sydney.

The last thing she wanted was to send A.J. or either of her other two brothers, who were just as bad, into a rage that would likely land them in jail. Her sister had predictably been beyond concerned and equally outraged on Emi’s behalf but, at the same time, like Sarah and Emi, was as baffled as they were about this whole thing. It just didn’t make sense.

Emi’s summer classes were over. She hadn’t told Liv she blew off her finals for this, but her sister knew the next few weeks before the fall semester started were wide open for her. Livi begged her to come home. She hated to hear her so heartbroken and know she was alone. Technically, she wasn’t all alone. Oliver had been sharing her sleeping or crying area for the past two days. She’d even gone up to check on Homer a few times, but as soon as she had his food and water ready and cleaned out his litter box, she left. Just being in Sydney’s apartment now hurt too much.

She'd refused to leave Cristina a voicemail because she wasn't ready to say, "You can have him," as she knew more mature and stronger-minded women would've already done. She was ready to get a few things off her chest, so she called again, expecting to get her voicemail.

Hearing her say hello had taken her so completely by surprise she almost hung up. But she gathered herself quickly enough and sat up on her sofa.

"Cristina?"

"Yes?"

The thought that Sydney might be there sitting near her listening to her take Emi's call made her chest heavy, but she swallowed hard and forced herself to speak. "Is Sydney with you?"

"No. He should be home soon."

"Was he with you these last few days?"

"Emi, honey, I think—"

"Don't call me that. Don't you dare call me that," Emi said, glad the pain was taking a backseat to the anger. "Just answer the question. Was he with you all this time?"

Emi heard her take a deep breath. "I really think he should be the one —"

"I thought you were my friend!"

"I am," Cristina said firmly.

Emi scoffed loudly, gripping her phone, but she refused to cry. She wouldn't give the bitch taking her man the pleasure of hearing her cry. "Then if you're such a friend, *Cristina*," she said through her teeth, "be honest. Were you with *my* boyfriend these last couple of days?"

Silence.

"Were you?" she asked loudly but mindful not to work herself up so much she'd be crying angry tears again.

"I only answered so that I could let you know he'll be home any minute now. I spoke with him about a half hour ago. He said he was almost there."

"Is that a yes?" Emi squeezed her eyes, already knowing the answer.

"Yes," Cristina whispered.

"Did you sleep with him?" *Fuck*, she was crying again!

"I'm not answering that," Cristina said, sucking what little air was left in Emi's lungs out. "I think you and him have a lot to discuss."

Emi didn't even realize she'd stopped breathing and just stood there staring into space until she heard the knock at her door. She sucked a big chunk of air into her lungs, feeling like a fish out of water minutes away from death then clicked the end button on her phone.

"Emi, it's me," Sydney said from outside her door. "We need to talk."

As painful as it was to hear Cristina confirm what she'd been dreading, she was glad she'd spoken to her. There was strength in anger, and she knew now she was going to need all the strength in the world to get through this next conversation.

Feeling strangely calm, she approached the door. After a long deep breath, she reached for the doorknob and turned it. The moment she opened it and saw his beautiful face looking down at her so repentantly, she was overcome with a mixture of rage and excruciating pain.

Before he could say a word, she slapped him so hard the pain shot right down to her elbow, but she welcomed the pain. She needed something to drown out the crushing blow to her heart.

"You bastard!" she cried. "You lying, cheating, *fucking* bastard! How could you!"

The moment he took a step forward, she practically jumped back, not wanting him anywhere near her. Sydney stepped in quickly, closing the door behind him.

"What is it you want to talk about?" she screamed through her tears, her voice completely hoarse now. "How you've been having an affair with her all this time? How many times you fucked her these past few days?"

"I didn't," he said, and for all the hysterical crying she was doing, she believed him.

"Then what were you doing with her?"

"I just needed time."

"For what?" she demanded.

"I'm sorry, Em. I should've done this sooner. I just didn't think—"

"Do what?" she asked, feeling a complete panic sear through her.

She'd just slapped him, called him a lying, cheating bastard and accused him of fucking someone else, yet her heart was still holding out hope this could somehow be fixed? What the hell was wrong with her? Why wasn't she telling him to go to hell?

Searching his equally tormented eyes, she knew why. He loved her. Despite everything that had happened in the past two days, the adoration in

his eyes, the same one she saw when he kissed her, held her, made love to her, was still there. It was full of pain, but he hadn't stopped loving her just like that, gotten over her like she'd begun to fear. It was as impossible as it would be for her to get over him.

"I should've told you I was falling for her."

It was happening again. Somewhere between her lungs and her mouth, her breath was stuck. When she was finally able to string a few words together, she asked, "You're in love with her?"

"Yes," he said, but she was staring into his eyes, and she saw the insincerity, and she shoved his chest as hard as her two hands could.

"Why are you doing this?" she yelled, shoving him again. "Why are you lying to me? Why are you trying to hurt me?"

"I'm not," he said, making no attempt to block her still swinging hands. "I'd never want to hurt you. I just—"

"Then why are you lying!"

"I'm not lying, Em. I fell in love with her—"

"Liar!" she screamed, feeling hysterical. "Stop saying that. You *can't* love her just like I can't love anyone else. I'll *never* love anyone else because I'm in love with you—just like you love me. We're soul mates, remember? You said it yourself."

Sydney grasped her flinging hands in an attempt to calm her. "I know I did, but shit happens, babe."

"Shit happens?" she screamed. "Shit happens?" She tried in vain to come loose from his hold because suddenly she wanted nothing more than to slap him again. "Is that really how you're explaining this *bullshit*? Shit happens!"

"I never thought I'd fall for her, Em. I didn't think things would go this far."

"How far?" she asked, searching his eyes.

He'd already said he hadn't fucked Cristina; he wasn't going to take that back too. Was he? Take it back like all the times he'd swore he'd love Emi *forever*.

"That I'd fall for her like I have." He glanced away for a moment then met her eyes again "I didn't think I'd be forced to make such a hard decision."

Even as another knife was plunged through her heart, the jealous fury overpowered it. "You don't have to!" she said, yanking away from him, and

he finally let her go. “I’ll make it easy for you.”

Her chest heaved as she stared at him now, and even then she still saw it. It didn’t matter what he was saying to her, how many times he told her he’d fallen for someone else. She still saw what she’d seen and felt just the other night, the night before the nightmare started when he’d made love to her last. Sydney was still as hopelessly in love with her as she was with him.

She took a step forward and saw the moment of weakness when he closed his eyes. Even if he was feeling torn between two women, which Emi’s heart still refused to believe, she *could not* understand how he’d make such sudden decision. *Why* he was doing this?

As he tried reaching for her hand, she saw it again the moment he closed his eyes. He, too, was hurting about all this. But when she was close enough, she saw something else flicker in an instant. His brows furrowed and his eyes went a bit harder. It scared her, but she was still certain about one thing he wouldn’t—couldn’t—do.

“Look at me,” she said, her lips trembling as the anger drained away replaced with a sudden overwhelming terror. “Tell me you don’t love me anymore.”

Her eyes were momentarily distracted by the movement of his Adam’s apple as he, too, swallowed back emotion. “Em, don’t do this.” His words were a strained whisper.

“Say it,” she demanded. “I wanna hear you say that you don’t love me anymore.”

He glanced around uncomfortably, his hardened expression somewhat beaten down. Emi stood her ground, knowing that even if he didn’t say it, they still had a mountain of obstacles to tackle before this could be fixed. But it’d be a start.

What scared her most and what she’d been trying not to think about these last few days and weeks was the only way this would make sense: if he’d begun to fall for Cristina the *amazing woman* before Mando had even passed. That once Mando passed and Sydney spent so much time on the phone with her—consoling her—he’d been falling even harder. Maybe all the time he’d thought it inappropriate to pursue her because it was too soon since Mando died, and now here he was confirming just that. Emi’s heart beat wildly, terrified about the possibility that he might actually say he didn’t love her.

His head lowered slowly until they were nearly forehead to forehead, and then he stopped, his red-rimmed eyes looking into hers with conviction. “I don’t love you anymore. I’m sorry.”

Her mouth fell open as her heart completely shattered. She stared into what felt like soulless eyes now. His beautiful eyes had never looked at her so coldly before, and as much as her heart didn’t want to believe it, she had to now.

“Get out,” she whispered, using every ounce of strength she could muster to not fall apart.

After everything he’d just said to her—taken from her forever—she had to hold on to the tiniest bit of dignity she had left.

“Em, I’m—”

“Get out,” she screamed, and he rushed away.

The moment he was out the door she threw herself on her sofa and cried hysterically. Never in her life had she imagined feeling the kind of pain she felt at that moment. She cried so hard it was hard to catch her breath sometimes. There were moments she feared she was having some kind of mental breakdown because she thought she might lose her mind. How in the world would she ever get over Sydney? How would she ever get over hearing him say the worst thing he could ever say to her?

As much as her sister had assured her before they’d hung up that, no matter what happened, she’d get through it—they’d get through it together—this was something Emi knew she’d *never* recover from. Ever.

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## Chapter Twenty-Three

### **Sydney**

A week after that horrible day, when Sydney had been forced to break Emi's heart as he had, he finally returned Lynn's calls. That whole week he'd responded with vague texts. He wasn't ready to talk about this yet even now. The only reason he was calling her now was because he'd gotten a call from Isaiah, which he didn't answer, then a text asking if Emi was with him. She wasn't answering her phone or returning anyone's texts, and they were getting worried. It worried Sydney, but not too much. He'd heard from her that day for the first time since the day he'd ended their relationship, and she'd been drunk.

It wasn't unheard of to get drunk when you were depressed. His ass had the night he got back from breaking things off with her and several more times since. Stone cold drunk. He told himself it was the only reason why he'd cried each time. Sydney had never been a crier. Even when his dad passed, he'd shed a few bitter tears, but mostly he kept it together for his mom's sake. He'd cried so much this past week his own drunken reflection had finally told his bitch ass to man up and grow a pair already.

If this was how he was handling this, it was understandable why Emi wouldn't want to take her siblings' calls in that condition. Sydney hadn't answered her calls, but she'd left a series of short messages. In each one, she'd slurred and cussed like a drunken sailor. From the sound of it, she'd likely passed out. Knowing Emi, it hadn't even taken an entire small bottle of wine for her to get that hammered. But in between angry messages, she'd left ones where she'd sobbed, choking Sydney up in the process. It'd be a while, if ever, for him to get past feeling the dark despair himself. He'd already had his moments of weakness, but he forced himself not to call her. He hadn't gone down to check on her when he got Isaiah's text. He refused

to give her any false hope. As heart-wrenching as this was, his mind was made up. This was for the best.

Telling her he didn't love her had by far been the hardest thing he'd ever done, but he'd be damned if he'd ever do it again. He'd stupidly thought that would be the most difficult part about this whole thing. That after that it was all downhill and things would slowly start to feel better. She'd move on, be happy again with someone else as she deserved, and the pain would subside with time. But the pain had only gotten worse with every day that passed. This wasn't how it was supposed to be. The immense hole he felt in his heart had gotten bigger with each day that passed. The idea that somehow this would get easier felt more impossible now than it did a week ago.

Lynn had called a few hours prior, but he'd wanted to wait until he was home to talk to her. It'd be a challenge, but he had to get through this conversation without letting Lynn in his head. He gathered himself as best as he could then, finally, called her.

"Oh, thank God!" was how Lynn answered her phone. "Are you guys okay?"

"I'm fine," he said, closing his eyes.

"What about Emi?"

"Not sure. I haven't talked to her in about a week." *Or slept or eaten much or felt like living.*

"So it's true?"

"That we broke up? Yeah."

"Why? Please tell me what she suspected isn't true. You didn't have an affair with Mando's widow, did you?"

"It's not an affair," he said, squeezing his eyes shut because like Emi he was certain Lynn would call him on his next statement. "I fell in love with her. It couldn't be helped."

She was quiet for a moment and then said, "Okay, so what's the real truth?"

Sydney had to smirk, though he didn't feel the least bit amused. He'd just known all along that if anyone would question this, it would be Lynn.

"It is the real truth. I've been getting closer to her for a year now, and I didn't even realize it was happening."

"For the last year, you've been hopelessly trying to deny the fact that you were falling for *Emi*," she reminded him then gasped. "Did you tell her

you're in love with Cristina?"

"I did. I had to be honest with her, Lynn."

"Oh, Jesus. She was inconsolable when I spoke with her last, and that's when she was just *suspecting* you might be doing something with Cristina. How did she take it?"

"Not very well," he said, wincing as he remembered.

"Her siblings haven't been able to get a hold of her today. You have any idea where she might be?"

"Home. She's probably passed out," he said simply. "She'll be fine. She called me a few times today and left a few drunken messages."

"What did she say?"

"I'll spare you the details," he said with a frown as he poured himself a glass of wine. "I'll just tell you this. It wasn't very Christian."

"This isn't funny."

"Who's laughing?"

He certainly wasn't, not even when he'd listened to Emi's drunken rant mimicking his and Cristina's conversation about public schools vs. private schools. She'd lowered her voice extra low when she loosely quoted him, making him sound extra stupid. "You can't just assume private schools are academically superior. Factors, demographics. Ooh, listen to me. I'm so smart. Blah, blah, blah."

"Are you home now too?" Lynn asked.

"Yeah." He put the wine bottle back into the refrigerator and started toward the front room.

"You're going to have to tell me the truth eventually, Syd. But right now, I think you should either get out of there or *do not* open your door if someone comes knocking."

"I am telling you the truth," he said, sitting back in one of the lounging chairs in his front room. "And what are you talking about don't open my door?"

"Sydney Maricopa, if you think for a second I believe that you just up and left Emi for another woman when just weeks ago you told me you had no idea life could be this good, you are out of your mind."

Sydney took a deep breath. "I did her a favor, Lynn. She's probably better off with Sabian. He'd take care of her, give her a good life. They could grow old together."

"And she can't do that with you?"

He took a drink of his wine but didn't respond to that.

"What is going on with you, Sydney? I can only imagine the pain she's feeling right now, but what I can't for the life of me understand is *why* you'd so coldly do something like this. This isn't you."

Sydney pinched the rim of his nose, letting his head fall back. "God damn it," he muttered.

"What?" she demanded.

"This is *exactly* why I hadn't wanted to talk to you. Why I hadn't returned your calls."

"Why?" she asked with just as much conviction. "Because you knew I'd call you on your bullshit."

"Yes!"

"I knew it! So what is it? *Why* are you doing this, Sydney? Why are you breaking that poor girl's heart?"

"Because I had to," he said then added something he knew Lynn would believe. "I had to do the honorable thing."

"Sydney," she said, her voice going a bit cautious. "Did . . . did you get Cristina pregnant?"

The loud knock at his door startled him, and he remembered Lynn's earlier warning. "Someone's at my door," he said, setting his wine glass down on the coffee table.

"Don't open it!" she said too alarmed.

"Open up, Syd!" A guy yelled from the other side. "I wanna talk to you."

"I think it's A.J."

"Oh, my God!" she gasped. "*Do not* open that door."

Sydney rolled his eyes, standing up. He got that Em's brother would likely be pissed that he'd broken his sister's heart, but what was he going to do? Come at him for not wanting to be with her anymore? They were both adults. They could talk this out.

He walked to the door as Lynni continued to urge him not to and reminded him of A.J.'s reputation of being a hothead. How all of her siblings had been going nuts that day trying to get a hold of her.

"Relax," he said as he unlocked the deadbolt and reached for the doorknob. "He said he wants to talk."

He'd barely turned the knob when the door was pushed open, and A.J. grabbed him by his shirt. "What the *fuck* did you do to my sister?"

Sydney stumbled back as her other two brothers rushed in behind A.J. and attempted to pull him off Sydney. Chaos ensued for a moment as Sydney tried to get loose from A.J.'s death grip on his shirt and the brothers yelled and cursed at each other to calm the fuck down while A.J. continued to demand what he'd done to Emi.

When he was able to pull free, he took a step back as Isaiah and Nathan struggled to hold A.J. back.

"I didn't do anything but break things off," Sydney said calmly. "It just wasn't working out."

"So just like that?" A.J. asked, trying even harder to break free from his brothers. "You tell her you love her, have your way with her for a few months, and then just dump her?"

"That's not—"

Isaiah spun around and charged Sydney this time, backing him up against the wall. Sydney didn't try to fight him because, unlike A.J., Isaiah didn't look like he was out for blood. Isaiah looked *pissed*, but he also looked like he had more on his mind than just murder. He held one menacing hand up to his youngest brother, so A.J. stopped and waited.

"I don't know what's going on," Isaiah said, right in Sydney's face. "All I know is that my baby sister is downstairs so drunk she can barely talk. She won't stop crying, and the one thing she keeps saying is your fucking name. I'm a reasonable man, and I've been told you're a good guy, Syd. If all this drama is over a breakup, then we'll deal with it—deal with her. But God help you if I find out you willfully set out to hurt my sister." He gripped Sydney's shirt even tighter. "If I find out you played with her heart just to get what you wanted when all along you knew you'd be tossing her aside once you were done, I'm coming back for you."

Sydney nodded, staring right back into Isaiah's eyes, and then turned to her other two brothers. "Fair enough." Isaiah stared at him a moment longer before releasing his shirt. "Look. I'm sorry she's hurting, but I can assure you this was in no way planned. Emi's a sweet girl. I do care about her, and I'd never *willfully* hurt her. It was why I broke things off when I realized things weren't working out."

Isaiah motioned to his brothers to start back to the door. As fast as they blew in, they were blowing out. Isaiah stopped at the door and turned back to him. "One thing. I know a thing or two about breakups and heartache. Only this is a first for her. Clearly, she's not taking it well, but *you're* old

enough to know better. *Do not* dick her around and go back and forth, getting her hopes up for no reason—”

“No, fuck that!” A.J. said, turning back in a flash. “He’s done. Look at him.” A.J. stabbed a finger in Sydney’s direction. “Does he look broken up to you?” He motioned to the front room. “Over here enjoying a glass of wine and shit?” He glanced down at Sydney’s phone still in his hand with a look so disgusted, for a moment, Sydney thought he might spit. “He’s probably already talking it up with his new chick. Hell no!” Isaiah placed a cautious hand on his brother’s chest as A.J. continued. “I better not find out you’re sniffing around her again. You don’t want her anymore? That’s fine, *Syd*. She don’t need your ass. But that’s it. You had your chance. You’re cut off. *Done*. Consider yourself warned, asshole.”

Without another word, they all turned and walked out. Sydney stood there, feeling an even more profound weight on his already heavy heart. Not that he’d hoped for any kind of reconciliation between him and Emi. No way was that going to happen, but he’d at least held out hope that maybe someday they could enjoy an occasional chat. They *had* been *best* friends before anything else happened between them. This just sealed the nail in the coffin. Any kind of relationship with Emi was out of the question now.

It wasn’t until A.J.’s comment about him being on the phone with his new chick that Sydney realized he’d never hung up on Lynn. He brought the phone to his ear, surprised to hear noise on the other end. “Lynni?”

“Holy cow, Sydney.” Lynn gasped. “What’s gonna happen when they find out *why* you broke things off? Obviously, they still don’t know or that would’ve been so much uglier.”

“She won’t tell them.”

Seeing just how accurate her brother’s nickname really was, Sydney knew she’d never tell them the truth. Not because he thought after what he’d done to her she’d be looking to protect him, but she *would* want to protect her brothers, especially A.J., from doing something that would land him in jail and possibly ruin his career or even his future if he was angry enough. No doubt that guy had it in him to follow up with his threats. Sydney had seen the irrepressible fire in his eyes, in all three sets of eyes when they’d glared at him. No way would Emi fan those flames.

“Sydney, you left her for their cousin’s widow. I agree. I don’t think Emi would tell them either. If I actually believed you were in love with Cristina,

I'd be more worried. You hurting her that way would be a death sentence for you and a life sentence for one or more of Emi's brothers. Please tell me by doing the *honorable* thing it isn't something completely undeniable"—she lowered her voice—"like that you had an incredibly stupid moment of indiscretion, got Cristina pregnant, and now you're doing right by her and marrying her or something. It's the only thing I can think of that would explain any of this."

Sitting back in his chair, Sydney took a deep breath, knowing he should've never called Lynn. Of course his luck would be so *fucked* that her brothers would show up right in the middle of his conversation with her. That she'd hear every word of that confrontation. But who was he kidding? It didn't matter if he'd waited months to finally return her calls. She knew him too well. She'd never believe he wasn't still, and probably always would be, hopelessly in love with Emi.

"Listen to me, Lynn. Before I say anything, let me make something perfectly clear, okay? My mind is made up. Things are over between Emi and me. Even her brothers are going to make sure of that now. But I need you to promise me that, *no matter what*, this never gets back to Emi or anyone that might tell her. Understood?"

As expected, she went silent. He didn't expect her to immediately agree. But it was a little too quiet on the other end. No usual squealing or laughing kids in the background. No Angel's voice or kid's music like earlier, and he wondered for a moment if their call had been dropped. "Lynn?"

"I'm here," she said.

"It's so quiet."

"I'm in the garage. I don't want anyone interrupting this."

Squeezing his eyes shut, Sydney got back to what he was saying. "You promise? It's the only way I'll tell you because I know *you'd* never betray me. *No matter what.*"

"Before I promise, because you're making me nervous and I'm not sure that I want to, can you just answer two simple yes or no questions for me?"

Lynn knew him too damn well. He knew whatever the questions were she'd likely already figured out a few things. But he was sticking to his guns. He wouldn't tell even Lynn unless she could absolutely promise to keep this to herself. "Go ahead."

"Do you still love her?"

"With all my heart," he said without hesitation.

He heard her breathe a sigh of either relief or frustration, probably a little of both. She was quiet momentarily as if to take that in, before she asked the next question. “Did you cheat on her?”

“No.”

“Then *why* would you hurt her the way you have?”

“That’s three questions,” he pointed out as he took a deep breath. “And before I can answer that, I need you to promise this stays between us, Lynn. I mean it. This *cannot* get back to her or anyone that might tell her *ever*.”

“How can you ask me to promise that, Sydney? Obviously, if you still love her, with all your heart, my keeping my mouth shut could potentially compromise your happiness? I don’t think—”

“Lynn, you have to,” he said firmly. “All I can tell you before you promise is I *need* for her to hate me.”

“She’d never—”

“Are you gonna promise or not?” He leaned over, wiping his open palm down his face, exasperated because he hadn’t meant to snap at Lynn. He was done hurting people he loved. “I just . . .” he said before taking deep breath. “I need to be able to talk to you about this and know I don’t have to worry about you betraying my trust.”

“You know I’d never do that.”

“Then promise me.”

There was a moment of silence before he heard her inhale. “I promise,” she whispered.

Smiling and feeling bittersweet, Sydney sat back on his sofa because he knew he could trust Lynn to not break her promise. Still, it was little consolation. He swallowed hard, trying to think where the best place to start would be.

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**Only two things are indestructible, not by time  
nor distance:  
True love & hope. . .**

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## Chapter Twenty-Four

### **Emilia**

#### ***One year later***

At first, Emi had actually considered not following what she now knew was her dream by not enrolling in culinary school. She'd feared it would be too painful of a reminder of who helped her finally figure it out. But after months of not being able to go a single day without thinking of him anyway, she realized everything would always remind her of him regardless. It seemed almost everything she did, ate, watched on TV, even the songs she heard on the radio, reminded her of Sydney. Music was so bad she'd boycotted listening to music as much as she could those first few months.

It'd taken only a week after he so heartlessly dumped her to realize there was no way she'd be able to continue living in that building. The day she'd seen him in the lobby was the first day she'd left her apartment since the breakup. She quickly hid so he wouldn't see her, but it was all it took to break her. She'd gone back to her room and drowned her sorrows in alcohol. It was also proof of what she'd thought was impossible. One thing could make her feel more miserable than the way she'd already been feeling: booze.

She hadn't touched the stuff since. After nearly downing an entire bottle of wine that day, and it still wasn't numbing the pain, she'd considered taking a handful of sleeping pills. Her siblings didn't know about the pills because she'd never told them, She hadn't wanted to kill herself, just numb the pain. But in hindsight, she knew now the former could've easily happened.

Her siblings hadn't even needed to know about that. The state they found her in had been alarming enough for them to insist on bringing her

home with them. The next day she'd explained about the breakup. Sort of. The most she clarified with her brothers about it was that the quarreling—something she and Sydney had *never* done—had just gotten to be too much. She could tell they thought she was being overly dramatic about the whole thing. As far as they knew, she'd technically only been with Sydney a few months. She was young, immature, and going through her first breakup with her first *real* boyfriend.

They had no idea.

Livi was the only one who knew the real truth. Thankfully, she'd had the sense to not tell them what she knew about the breakup before they reached her place that day. All she'd said was the last she'd heard was that Emi and Syd had broken up and Emi had been feeling *down*. Epic understatement if there ever was one.

Not even when her mother passed had Emi needed anti-depressants to get her through some of the most brutal days. She knew it wasn't shameful to seek help if you needed it. But she hadn't told *any* of her siblings about getting a prescription for them. Not Livi because she'd worry too much, and if her brothers knew, they'd figure out there was more to the breakup than she was telling them. Emi already knew about them paying Sydney a visit the day they found her piss drunk in her apartment. If they knew the real reason, there'd be hell to pay. It was the last thing she needed on top of the permanent heartache she was still dealing with on a daily basis.

Emi was now attending the same culinary school where Sal's wife Grace had graduated from. They'd also offered her a job at the restaurant. She waited tables, but when they weren't too busy, they gave her a shot in the kitchen and she'd be eternally grateful to them for it. Between that and school, it kept her mind preoccupied.

For almost the entire year since her breakup with Sydney, she'd managed to avoid being around Sarah *too* much. The first time Emi had spoken with Sarah after moving back home was beyond awkward and equally painful. It was clear Sarah knew the whole truth. Emi had sort of held out hope she might shed some light or hope on the situation. She did, after all, know Sydney better than anyone else. But all she'd done was express her regret about the breakup and offered a shoulder to cry on if she ever needed one. No thanks.

There was no greater reminder of her biggest heartache than Sarah. It was why, ever since the breakup, Emi avoided attending any of the gatherings

where she was certain Sarah would be. Of all the things that were a constant reminder of Sydney, Emi had to admit she was grateful for one—the most annoying—technology. Because of technology, she'd never memorized Sydney's number. He'd been on speed dial since day one. Though she knew she could easily get his number again if she needed to, deleting all his contact info and blocking him from all her social media on her phone and computer eliminated the biggest risk. She'd given into too many temptations those first few weeks: to call, text, or stalk his online pages. So she'd deleted and removed completely from her life anything that had to do with him.

As the months passed and she hadn't heard a single thing from him, not even a measly text to ask how she was or say hello, she finally accepted she'd been right. It hurt like hell, but, clearly, she'd been far more into him than he'd ever been into her. She forced herself to stop hoping that he'd eventually call and say he'd been a fool. That like her he'd never *ever* feel complete again unless they got back together.

The one thing she'd refused to do, and had even snapped at her siblings for trying to suggest it, was go out and meet someone else. She hadn't the slightest doubt that she'd never feel for anyone what she had—what she still did—for Sydney. She knew he'd moved on, but she wasn't ready to. Not that she felt in any way that she needed to remain loyal or remotely faithful to him, she just wasn't ready to tackle that hurdle yet.

The one thing she'd finally agreed on was the possibility of hanging out with Sly. He was still calling and texting her even after all this time. She'd heard some stuff about him seeing someone new, but when she'd spoken to him again a few months ago, he confirmed that they were all just rumors. His complicated schedule was still keeping him from any serious relationships. He also admitted he was still holding out hope she might come around and agree to give things a shot with him. Emi had told him flat out she wasn't ready for anything serious, at first blaming her new and busy schedule. But just weeks ago, she'd agreed to get together with him when he was in town for dinner and a show—as friends *only*. That part she'd made perfectly clear.

Emi knew all too well the horrific pain of being led on by someone, only to find out later his heart was somewhere else. She'd never wish that on even her worst enemy, least of all *be* the one inflicting such pain. Even if in no way the pain could possibly be compared, she'd already sort of done it

to Sly once. She was not about to go into even a friendship with the guy without being *perfectly* honest with him. Maybe once she was over Sydney she could consider more with Sly, but she still wasn't.

In an effort to not appear *that* pathetic, she'd left out the part about how long she thought it might be until she was ready: a very *long* time, if ever. Though her head had finally accepted that her future didn't include Sydney, her heart had yet to put out that pesky little spark of hope.

Despite her efforts to avoid Sarah, near tragedy had forced Emi to see her. Sarah had been in a car accident this past year. A bad one. She'd been T-boned in an intersection. From what Emi had heard, it was by the grace of God that she'd been alone. Whoever might've been in the passenger side with her would've likely been killed. But even Sarah had been badly injured. For a frightening moment, they thought she might not make it. Thankfully, she had, but it'd been a long road to recovery. She'd been in the hospital for weeks. Emi had gone to see her twice during that time, and both times she'd dreaded the possibility of running into Sydney. Fortunately, she hadn't either time. Both times Sarah had also been surrounded by family, and the subject of Sydney hadn't even been brought up. What she'd dreaded so much, Emi got through unscathed.

Now she had even more to dread. She'd gotten the phone call from Grace a little over a week ago. The way Grace had asked her that day there was no way of getting out of this. As usual, Grace always sounded busy when Emi spoke with her over the phone. She started off by asking if she had the weekend of the twentieth open. Emi had checked, knowing this was work-related.

Emi was free.

Grace asked if she had anything school-related that she might need to tend to that week that might keep her from being able to come in during the week. It was a catering job and she'd need to prepare all week.

Emi didn't. She was done with this module of her course and was wide open that week.

Grace even made her double-check to make sure her brother didn't have any games in town she might be attending as she and her siblings often did.

A.J. didn't. He was on the east coast that entire week.

Grace then asked about certain dishes and techniques needed for a few things she had in mind on a catering job. When Emi told her she had been

trained on those techniques but could use the practice, Grace said this would be the perfect opportunity for her to brush up on said techniques.

When it was all said and done and Emi was locked in to be Grace's personal assistant during this *very special* catering gig, she let her in on something else.

"Since this is family and we don't anticipate anyone complaining, I'll let you lead the job," she said, sounding excited for Emi. "Don't worry. I'll be there the whole time to make sure it all runs smoothly."

"Lead the job?"

"Yes!" Grace had said, sounding even more excited. "I hate to admit it, but over the years, I think my husband's anal retentiveness has begun to rub off on me. The last two chefs I'd hoped to groom so that I can take more time off and be home with the kids have been such a disappointment. But I've been watching you. You're a natural, Emilia. I think you can more than handle this. It's a big job mostly because of the size of it. You know this family and *all* the Romeros will be there too. Angel wants everyone there."

Emi couldn't believe that, after hearing Grace mention her leading the job, the first part of that statement had gone right over her head. *Since this is family. Angel wants everyone there?*

"Who?" Emi began to ask nervously as Grace said something quickly in Spanish to someone in the background. "Who is this party for?"

"Angel decided last minute to do something bigger than the norm for his and Sarah's anniversary this year." Grace asked her to hold and spoke quickly in Spanish again as Emi often heard her speak in the kitchen at the restaurant. "Oh, and before I forget, you can't say anything to her in case you see her before then. This is a big surprise. It's why Angel can't do the catering himself. The whole family is going all out. Poor Angel was so scared when she was in the hospital. So now that she's better, he wants to celebrate in a big way. I'm so glad you can do this, Emilia. This works out perfectly, but listen. It's a madhouse here. I gotta go. We'll talk more about this when you come in."

With one blow, Grace had just knocked over everything Emi had worked so hard to build back that whole year: her self-worth, the ability to get out of bed, convinced that today would be better than yesterday, and the idea that she could be happy without needing *him* in her life. Albeit it was all built on about as shaky ground as a house of cards, but she'd at least gotten a few rickety levels up.

For days, she'd brainstormed about how to get out of the job—the party. She was certain Sydney would be there. Maybe he'd even show up with Cristina. Who was she kidding? Emi would never survive this. After months of saying she was good now, she had this, she was woman watch her *roar*, she had no choice but to admit the idea of just seeing him again was enough to have her tapping out and begging for mercy. Not roar like a powerful woman who'd bounced back beautifully.

It seemed everything was against her. It was a last-minute idea, so the invitations had gone out on short notice. All three of Emi's brothers were working with no way of getting out of it. Livi, Lorenzo, and baby Enzo were taking what Livi said was a much-needed mini vacation with Vince and Rosie—one that was already paid for and non-refundable. Not only would Emi be on her own at the party, Isaiah had made a remark that made it even harder for her to try to feign the flu or death or something.

"I'm glad you'll be there, Emi," Isaiah had said with much relief in his voice. "You know one of the guys that were on the call for that accident Sarah was in, worked overtime at my station about a week later. He talked about it, and when I told him I knew her and how she was doing, he'd been shocked she made it. He thought for sure she was a goner, the accident was so bad. Damn straight Angel would wanna celebrate big. It's a good thing at least one of us will be there to represent."

Since Livi had been the only one who knew just how hard Emi had taken the breakup, she couldn't even share with her about her dread now. Emi was afraid and fairly certain Livi would cancel the weekend cruise she'd looked forward to for weeks now.

Emi had no choice but to suck it up and hope *leading* the catering job would keep her preoccupied enough she'd barely even notice if Sydney did show up. By the end of the first day of preparing for the party that weekend, she found out just how wrong she was. Her leading the job meant being in charge of the food that would be prepared properly and making sure all the ingredients were ordered on time. Enough of everything was cooked in the timely manner it needed to be the day of so that it was hot at just the right time. So most of what she was in charge of was *before* the party even started.

"The best part about this is, unlike a regular catering lead because this is family, once you're done with all this stuff"—Grace pointed at the perfectly

organized list of duties she'd be in charge of—"the rest of the job is up to the servers. You can sit back with the rest of us and enjoy a job well done."

Emi was doomed.

It was then that she'd actually started Googling twenty-four-hour bugs, something she could come up with last minute so she could get all the work done beforehand because she didn't want to leave Grace hanging. Then at the last minute she could make a dramatic run to the bathroom or something and pretend to puke her lungs out.

It wouldn't be too hard. The idea of being in the same backyard—the very yard she'd first formally met Sydney at, because the party was at her cousin Moe's—was enough to make her queasy.

By the end of the week, she'd changed her mind half a dozen times. She tried to convince herself this was what she needed. Final closure. Seeing him again and possibly with Cristina would be a good thing. It would finally smother the life out of that last little flicker of hope that so stubbornly refused to die. She nearly had a panic attack just thinking about it.

Grace had told her normally, as the lead chef in charge of a catering event, she'd be required to wear her chef's uniform, but because of the circumstances she was free to wear whatever she would've worn otherwise. She could check up on the crew while at the party just to make sure everything was running smoothly, but for the most part, Grace wanted her to relax and enjoy the party like all the other family members there.

"All the real work will be done before the food even leaves the restaurant," Grace had happily informed her.

The day of the event, the preparing at the restaurant couldn't have gone more beautifully. After leaving the restaurant once everything was done and being loaded onto the catering truck, Emi had gone home to change and get ready. She didn't need to be, but she wanted to be there to help oversee the setup. She also hoped it'd be less rude to leave early if she'd been there early.

It took a few changes before she decided what she'd wear. She went with a simple baby blue cotton summer dress. The dress was harmlessly *cute*, high-waisted and a bit flared at the skirt. It was strappy but in no way provocative. She wasn't even sure *he* would be there today, and she hadn't dared asked. But she'd decided, just in case, she'd at least help him remember what he was missing.

On any girl with a normal-sized ass, the dress would be nothing more than cute. Innocent even. On Emi, that was exactly what it looked like from the front. The flat beige sandals she wore were equally sweet and innocent with little flowers that wrapped around her ankles. She'd even worn her hair up in a loose French braid, one that looked like she put minimal effort into, with a few loose strands here and there. She wore nominal makeup, enhancing only her lashes and plump lips, remembering how much her natural look turned *him* on. No one *else* could accuse her of trying to look sexy. With all that on the surface, no one would dare even insinuate she'd chosen such a sweet outfit and ensemble to entice or tease anyone.

The view from behind would be just as sweet and innocent except for the ample flare of the skirt in just the right place. It was still a cute innocent outfit to anyone not imagining what might be under that skirt. But for someone who didn't have to imagine—someone who knew *exactly* what was under there and what kind of panties might be adorning that ample flare—it might be a little torturous.

It's what she was counting on.

Okay, maybe it was a little immature. But after the year she'd had, she figured she could indulge in a little fun. Only her stomach was so knotted up by the time she arrived at Moe's, she doubted anything about today would be fun.

After checking on the food service and Grace giving her the thumbs up and an excited smile, she was free to socialize. Glad Sarah and Angel hadn't arrived yet, she walked over to where Sofie, Valerie, and Moe's wife Izzy sat."

"Hey, you!" Sofie said as soon as she saw her. "Don't you look adorable."

Emi smiled, hugging them all quickly one by one. She explained about her siblings' whereabouts then sat down. She wondered if they'd all been coached not to ask about Sydney because not a single one did, not that she was complaining. It was just another poignant reminder of how over that part of her life was.

She'd only been chatting with them for a short while when Grace walked over. "They're on their way," Grace said, smiling big. "Sal just walked out front to make sure no one is straggling out by their cars or anything. Everyone who said they were coming should be here or wait until

after three so they don't spoil the surprise if they get here right when she's arriving."

Emi's stomach knotted up worse than she thought it would when she saw Cristina and her kids walk in. She hadn't seen or talked to her since she'd spoken with her on the phone that awful day. It wasn't as if she'd kept in touch with her after Mando had passed. Even before he died, they had never been all that close.

Having to finally face Cristina didn't even compare to watching Sydney walk in behind her, talking to Sal. He was just as beautiful as Emi remembered him, and she expected to be breathless the next time she saw him. She expected to feel emotional. But slapped in the face was not something she'd anticipated feeling. Cristina wasn't even walking with him. She'd been sidetracked by Uncles Manny and Max as Sydney and Sal continued walking past them.

Emi's earlier thoughts that week of possibly feeling queasy when she saw him weren't as exaggerated as she'd once thought. She felt sick to her stomach all of a sudden, but not for the reasons she'd thought then. Yes, it was breathtaking to see him after more than a year. Yes, her heart was already racing, and she felt her throat swelling almost immediately. And, yes, her mind was already trying to come up with a way to escape as soon as possible. But something else made her breath catch.

Sydney was dressed as casually as you'd expect someone to be dressed for a backyard summer party. A loose fitting white linen shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows and a pair of beige pants. What Emi's eyes were glued to almost from the moment she saw it was the beige fedora. It coordinated with the outfit well enough. It was like something you'd see a groom wearing at a romantic wedding on a hillside overlooking a breathtaking view of an exotic beach. The only thing missing was the cigar in his hand. Of course, he'd look amazing in it too. But a fedora? It was so unlike him.

The memory of his saying he hated wearing hats and how Cristina loved them nearly strangled her. As jealous as Emi knew she'd be if she ever had to be witness to Sydney with another woman, for some reason, this was so much worse.

Cristina still hadn't caught up to him. It didn't look like she'd be going to either the way she was working her way around Uncle Manny and Max's table and chatting it up. And Sydney didn't appear to be concerned about

her whereabouts. He continued to walk and talk seemingly without concern alongside Sal.

The moment Sal spotted Grace he headed toward her table—with Sydney. Emi swallowed back the unreasonable jealousy that consumed her over the fedora. So what if he'd worn it for Cristina? His walking in with her had just confirmed something much more heart-wrenching. It appeared Sydney had made the right call. Emi had also been right all along. She didn't have what it took to satisfy a man like Sydney. Here she hadn't been able to hold his interest for more than a few months, yet more than a year later, he was still with Cristina—someone he was clearly more compatible with. And Emi was going to get all choked up over a stupid hat?

Her sister's angry words rang loudly in her head suddenly. Way back when they still talked about it, Livi, who'd been as baffled as Emi by Sydney's sudden change of heart, had asked if Emi had in any way seen it coming. As blindsided as Emi had felt, she pathetically admitted through tears that, while there were no signs leading up to his breakup, a part of her had secretly begun to worry she wasn't enough for a man like Sydney.

"That's ridiculous, Emi," Livi had practically spit. "Don't you ever dare let our brothers hear you say that. They were adamant from the beginning Sydney wasn't good enough for their baby sister. Did you forget he's a divorced man? I never agreed with them before because I liked the guy and it was obvious how much he meant to you. But now that he's hurt you, I will. If anything, Em, *you* were the one settling for damaged goods."

Emi sat up straight as Sydney and Sal approached. Jesus, damaged goods never looked so incredible in her life. Glancing back in Cristina's direction, Emi was more than relieved to see her sit down next to Aida, Uncle Manny's wife.

*You can do this.*

Emi could. She knew she could. Just not all at once. Having to say hello to Sydney and be cordial without turning into a blubbering mess would be one thing. Doing it while he stood there holding his girlfriend's hand—the one he'd left Emi for—was quite another.

The girls all greeted Sydney as he came around the table and kissed each one on the cheek, saving Emi for last.

"How are you, Em?" he asked with a smile that felt as forced as her own.

"Good. Thank you."

The moment their eyes met she glanced away in a panic. It was proof of the one good call she'd made this past year, moving back to San Diego. Seeing him like this every day would've been absolute torture. She never would've made the progress she had if she'd stayed in Los Angeles. It was very little progress, seeing as she could feel her insides crumbling and her throat constricting already from just being around him this one time.

She turned to Sal and responded to his greeting. "Nice to see you too."

Sal's fragrance was a nice one too, but it didn't even compare to Sydney's, not with all the painful memories it brought back. It was almost maddening. Didn't he realize what wearing her favorite cologne might do to her? Had he no mercy?

Emi gave Sofie her full attention when she asked about the butterfly bracelet she was wearing. Touching the tiny silver butterflies, she swallowed hard, concentrating on her conversation with Sofie. All the while she mentally willed Sydney to walk away—at least sit on the other side of the table—not stand there so close where his cologne might put her completely over the edge.

When Sydney didn't walk away, instead stood there right next to her continuing his conversation with Sal, Emi stood up. She had to make a run for it before she hyperventilated. Of course, Moe would motion to everyone at that very moment to stay put.

"They're here," he said with a smirk, pointing toward the front of the house. "Angel's gonna bring her back through the driveway." Moe turned back in the direction of Emi's table where she stood now—right next to Sydney. "Are we supposed to say anything in particular when he brings her back here?"

"Happy anniversary," Sal said.

People starting coming out the back door of Moe's house. First Angel's parents then, as if this couldn't get any worse, Mrs. Maricopa—Frances—Sydney's mom.

"There she is," Sal said to Sydney.

The fact that his mom had never once bothered to call her, to at least express her regret about the breakup, had just added insult to injury. The woman had been so adamant that Emi was Sydney's soul mate. Clearly, she'd been wrong, but in a small way, Emi held her partially responsible for that annoying flicker of hope that refused to go away. Seeing her now only made the growing lump in Emi's throat all the more unbearable.

Sydney was so close to Emi their arms brushed, making her flinch. She was going to lose it. There was no doubt about it now. It was just a matter of when and how. She *had* to get out of there and soon.

Stepping away from Sydney as casually as she could, Emi clapped her hands, forcing a smile as Sarah and Angel walked in. She stood there clapping with her fake smile as Sarah was hugged all around by everyone. As the girls started toward Sarah, Emi followed without so much as another glance in Sydney's direction and steered clear of Frances. She'd say hello and good-bye, apologize to Grace for not being able to hang around longer but she was suddenly feeling ill. She knew it was unprofessional, but she wasn't lying. She really did feel ill.

As she waited impatiently for the mob surrounding Sarah to clear, Manny came over and hugged Emi. She lied, saying she was going to walk over and say hello once she was done greeting Sarah and Angel. She was in the middle of explaining why none of her siblings were there when Angel was suddenly free and Manny outstretched his arms for him.

"Happy anniversary, you tatterdemalion."

Angel looked at him strangely just as Moe walked up to them, rolling his eyes. "Get the fuck out of here with that shit, Manny. It doesn't count unless you use it right." Moe turned to Angel and Emi, shaking his head and laughing as he lifted his thumb in Manny's direction. "He got a stupid app on his phone that gives him the word of the day. Thinks it's gonna make him sound smart or something. Only he don't bother looking up what the word means before he uses it."

"Stop being such a tatterdemalion, you asshole," Manny said just as Sarah turned to them, and suddenly Manny smiled amiably. "Happy anniversary, sweetheart."

"Emi, I thought that was you." Emi's stomach plummeted when she turned to face a smiling Frances. "You look so pretty." Frances held her arms open, and Emi had no choice but to lean in for a hug. "Honey, I'm sorry I never called you," she said, pulling back to face Emi, her expression full of regret. "With everything that's been happening this year, I didn't even realize you and Sydney had broken up. With him so far away, I just assumed you two were still together. When he finally did mention it, he said it'd been months and made me promise to not call because it'd just open up old wounds, but you don't know how many times I've wanted to."

Emi nodded, trying desperately to swallow back the ever growing lump in her throat. The situation only got worse. Sarah walked over and said hello to both of them.

“Oh my goodness, even you made it out here, Frances,” Sarah said, hugging her, then turned to Emi and hugged her too. “I can’t believe they did this.”

As if things couldn’t get worse, Sydney walked up to them and hugged Sarah first then his mother but stood next to Emi. “How was your flight out?” he asked his mom.

“Good,” she said, swatting him playfully. “I told you I don’t need first class.”

“It was business class,” he explained. “I get good deals.”

The mixture of Sydney’s cologne and just him, which usually got Emi’s lady parts feeling all kinds of funny stuff, now felt lethal. It’d be the end of Emi if she didn’t make her exit soon. Having him this close she could almost taste him didn’t bode well for her ready-to-break emotions.

“I’m glad you two are at least still friends,” Frances said. “It’s a shame things didn’t work out, and I know you didn’t want me to, but I was just explaining to Emi how with all the craziness of this past year I hadn’t had a chance to—”

“Mom,” Sydney said with that tightening of his jaw that was so telling of him getting tense. “Not now.”

As hard as she tried to avoid it, Emi’s eyes ended up meeting Sydney’s once again. It was fleeting and barely discernable, but Emi caught it: the tiniest waiver in his suddenly hardened eyes. They softened as their eyes locked, and she saw in them what she’d seen so many times during their good times just before he kissed her or told her he loved her. There’d even been times when she’d woken to him staring at her in that same way.

It was more than she could take, and the knot at her throat gave. “I gotta go, Sarah,” she said, turning to Sarah and cursing herself for not being able to get through this. “Give Grace my apologies, but I’ll call her.”

“Grace?” Sarah asked, understandably confused, but the confusion morphed into concern. “Emi, are you okay?”

Emi dashed away without answering. She’d have to explain later, but there was no way she could stand there even a minute longer. What an idiot she’d been to think seeing him today would be a good thing! That this would give her the closure she needed.

Already she knew she'd get zero sleep tonight and she'd be back to crying herself to sleep for days, probably longer.

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## Chapter Twenty-Five

### **Emilia**

The entire blurry drive home all Emi had been able to think about were the sleeping pills in the bathroom cabinet. She'd taken one occasionally on some of her worst nights. Today the thought of taking a handful to help wash away the unbearable pain had been almost too tempting. She sat on her bed now, hours after she'd gotten home, completely exhausted from the crying.

"It's over, okay?" she whispered as she stared at her empty bottle of water. "You made it. You didn't even touch the wine this time. You're stronger because of this. Accept that as a good thing. Progress."

The only reason she'd even dragged herself out of bed and into the kitchen was because her body was begging for more fluids. She was halfway there when she heard the first ping on her phone and she ignored it. She'd check it when she got back to her room.

Even though she didn't feel the least bit hungry, she forced herself to eat. The whole day she'd been so tense and busy with the catering stuff she hadn't eaten anything. Sydney had done enough to her already. She wasn't going to let him make her sick too.

After heating up half a bagel and smothering some peanut butter on it, she grabbed a banana and a couple of bottled waters from the fridge and headed back to her room. Halfway there she heard her phone ringing and figured it was one of her brothers, or maybe even Livi, calling to see how the party had gone. In no hurry to tell them about it, she didn't rush to try and answer. It stopped ringing just as she entered her room.

To her surprise, it was a number with a weird area code she didn't recognize. Dropping the phone on her bed, she didn't think anything of it. Then she froze as her heart rate sped up. She set her food and waters down on the bed and picked up the phone again and stared at the number. It was

an Arizona area code. Remembering her phone pinging earlier, she tapped the small unread text she had from the same number and read it.

**Emi, is it possible for us to talk? There's something very important I need to discuss with you, and I don't care how upset this may make my pigheaded son. It's imperative that I tell you about it.**

The text was as intriguing as it was disheartening. Whatever it was Frances wanted to discuss with her, Sydney didn't want her to. Yet Emi's heart was already fluttering with that same obstinate hope. Emi thought back to how pleased Frances was with their union way back. Was it possible Frances was just being a meddling mother trying to get her way in her son's love life? As flattering as that was, it was the *last* thing Emi's heart needed, tenuous but dangerous optimism.

Emi stood there staring at the text debating on how she should respond. *If* she should respond at all. Then her phone pinged again. Frances's second text popped up right below her previous one.

**I'm outside your home. I know you were upset when you left. You might be asleep now. But I'll give it a few minutes before I leave. You can call me later. I just hoped to do this in person. If you're reading this, I do hope you'll give me a few minutes of your time.**

Beyond curious now, Emi texted she'd be opening the security gate for her then rushed to slip on her flip-flops and threw a sweatshirt over her head. One glance in the mirror and she knew Frances would know just how upset seeing Sydney had made her because her face was one puffy mess. But there was no sense in trying to clean herself up. Already she could feel the stupid lump in her throat gearing up for another inevitable cry.

She walked down the back stairs to where Frances would be driving up into the large circular driveway. Frances was already there and out of her car, leaning against the passenger door. To Emi's surprise, she looked upset herself. Her eyes were red and a bit puffy too.

"Is something wrong?" Emi asked, slowing down as she walked toward Frances, who didn't move away from the car.

Frances nodded, alarming Emi further. "Sydney hasn't been honest with you, Emi. He hadn't been with me either. He knew I'd tell you and now here I am. I just wish I'd known sooner."

"You mean about Cristina?" Emi asked, hating how powerless she was to keep her stupid lip from quivering. "He *was* honest," she said, her voice already straining. "He was brutally honest."

“No.” His mother shook her head. “He’s not in love with her, Emi. He loves you.”

Emi crossed her arms in front of her. The disappointment she was feeling was almost too unbearable to take, but the anger that swept over her now drowned out the pain a little. So Sydney hadn’t told his mommy the ugly truth.

“He’s been with her over a year now, Frances,” she said, trying not to sound too bitter, but his mother needed to accept this too. “He told me he’s in love with her. That he didn’t love me anymore.” She swatted the tears away even as Frances continued to shake her head with that same pained expression. “He wore that fucking fedora for her today. He *hates* hats, but she loves them.”

*Why she* was so hung up on that she didn’t know, but she was. Strangely, that softened Frances’s expression. “Is that what you think?”

“I know it, Frances,” she said, swatting more tears away, glad that her siblings weren’t here. They might be rude to his mother even though she didn’t deserve it. It wasn’t her fault her son turned out to be such a coldhearted asshole. She was just being as hopeful as Emi had been for too long.

“Oh, honey, that hat has nothing to do with her. I don’t even think he knew she was going to be there.”

Emi scoffed humorlessly, glad for the rage she was suddenly feeling. She needed it now more than ever. “They walked in together!”

“Okay, I don’t know anything about that,” Frances said quickly. “But, please, listen to me. I thought you knew about everything that’s been going on—that your break up was completely unrelated. It broke my heart today when he told me that you didn’t know. That he didn’t want you to—”

“I *do* know,” Emi cried out. “I know about it all and this has to stop now. It’s over, Frances. He doesn’t want me.” The words took her breath away, and she struggled to get the rest out. “I need to accept that and move on. You do too.”

“No,” Frances said, touching Emi’s arm gently. “He does love you.”

“Stop it!” Emi said, recoiling away from Frances’s hand. “This isn’t helping me. I know you think it is, but—”

“That hat he wore,” Frances said, her voice a little louder, “was to cover the scar.”

Emi stared at her, not understanding, as her chest heaved, and she tried in vain to compose herself. “Scar?”

“He had a procedure done last week,” Frances continued, her expression back to that pained one she wore earlier. “Last year he was diagnosed with a benign growth in his brain like the one that took his father’s life. He told me about it immediately, but he never told me it was why he broke up with you.”

Emi’s mouth fell open as she brought her hand over her mouth, barely able to catch her breath.

“He didn’t tell me he never told you until today. He didn’t want you to suffer the fate I did—the same fate Cristina did—to have to lose a husband at such a young age and possibly leave you with a family to care for all by yourself. He knew your love for him wouldn’t let you just walk away from him, so he took matters into his own hands, and now he’s even more convinced he did the right thing.”

Shaking her head, Emi was almost afraid to ask. “Why?”

“The procedure he had done was because the growth is now a tumor. They went in last week to check if it’s possible to remove it in its entirety or if it’s too risky.”

“And what did they find?”

“It’s removable, but there’s a risk, one he’s going to take. Today, when I begged him to tell you—that it wasn’t fair to you because I know you’d want to be there for him—he was adamant about it. He doesn’t know I’m here, Emi.” Frances took a long trembling breath. “His surgery is in a few days. It was why he came today. He wanted to see you one last time in case . . .”

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## Chapter Twenty-Six

### Sydney

Sydney was dead and in heaven now, despite how much pain he'd inflicted while still alive. Everything his mother had said about heaven and angels was true. He felt no pain, and the angel smiling at him was exactly what his mother had told him to expect. She was in the form of the most beautiful creature he could ever imagine. He'd been listening to her magical voice for a while now. Her song, like words spoken in his ears, said everything he wanted to hear.

"I love you so much."

It was the one phrase she repeated most often. His mother had also said his angel would be his choice completely. He could choose her and everything about her. It was how he knew he was in heaven. She sounded exactly as he'd have her sound. Staring at her now even through the haze, she looked exactly like what he pictured. She was *beautiful*—more than beautiful—and Sydney didn't just love her; he *adored* her. He'd been trying to tell her so for a long time, but he couldn't speak. Couldn't move his lips. All he could do was stare at her in awe as she smiled down at him with that same loving expression she had the entire time.

It was absolute bliss to look in those beautiful eyes. He felt his hand and arm being elevated, and then he saw it was her lifting it to her mouth, and she kissed it gently several times before placing it against her cheek. It was soft and warm, and he wished to God he could sit up and hug her. Take her in his arms.

"I . . ."

Only the one word left his lips and she froze. Her eyes widened as she stared at him.

"What is it?" she asked, sounding a little alarmed. "Are you in pain?"

Finally, Sydney was able to move as he shook his head slowly then tried to speak again. “No.” Her other hand was at her mouth now, and then she kissed his hand again. “I love you,” he said then smiled because he’d been dying to say it for so long. “My God, I adore you.”

Her face scrunched suddenly, and everything began to fall apart. She was crying. He didn’t mean to make his angel cry, and then a dull ache started up in his head. This was heaven. There wasn’t supposed to be crying or pain in heaven.

She took a gasping breath as she brought his hand to her face again and wept openly now. Suddenly, her head was on his chest as she continued to cry. Then another person appeared: another woman, though she wasn’t nearly as beautiful as his angel. Then his mom was there, smiling down at him also crying.

“You’re gonna be just fine,” she said as she, also, brought her trembling hand over her mouth.

His angel lifted her head from his chest and smiled. “Yes, he is.” She leaned in and kissed his lips softly as he closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

*Heaven.*

“And when you are and I get you home,” she said, her lips still grazing his, “I’m gonna *kill* you.”

Sydney’s eyes flew open just in time to see her smirk even through her tears. The other woman just behind her, the one he didn’t recognize, caught his attention when she lifted something white in the air. It took him a second to realize it was a bed sheet. His sheet. He was lying in a bed, not floating on a cloud in paradise, and suddenly a pair of cold fingers on his cock made him flinch.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Maricopa,” the woman said. “I just needed to make sure your catheter is still in place.

*Wait a minute!*

This wasn’t heaven. The dull ache in his head began to throb and he winced. “Here,” his angel said, handing him a small gadget connected to some kind of wire. “Press it if you need it.”

“What is it?”

She smiled big, turning to his mom. “The slurring is completely gone.” She turned back to Sydney; her bright eyes made his heart swell. “It’s for the pain, baby. You press it if it gets too bad.”

With the throbbing kicking in, Sydney pressed the button without asking. It wasn't until his muddled mind began to clear the tiniest bit, making him remember where he was and that Emi was sitting in his room, not an angel in her image, that he thought to ask. "What's in this?"

His eyes followed the wire that was actually a small tube connected from his arm to a bag hanging by his bed.

"It's morphine," the lady who he now gathered was his nurse said as she adjusted the bag and made notes on a clipboard. "But only so much can be administered, no matter how much you click. So don't worry about overdoing it. Click away."

"Shit," he said as he felt the instant heaviness in his eyelids.

"What's wrong," Emi asked.

"It's gonna knock me out." His words were already slower.

"It's okay. You need to rest and . . ."

Emi's words began to float away. Sydney wanted to say he didn't want to be knocked out. He had questions—lots of them. Like why Emi was there? And what did she mean when she got him home? She didn't really think he was going to let her take on the burden of nursing him back to health or that he'd changed his mind about not wanting her to deal with his unpredictable future? But it was too late. Within seconds, he was back to floating in the clouds, and his angel was whispering in his ear again. "I love you so much."

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Sydney's mother was the last of his visitors to leave days after his release from the hospital. With everyone coming and going, this would be first time since he'd been awake and in his full cognizance that he'd get a chance to speak with Emi alone. The pain meds he'd been taking even after he'd left the hospital still kept him a little loopy. With the pain being much easier to take now, Sydney had refused to take them since early in the morning. He needed to have a clear mind when he had this serious conversation with Emi.

Obviously, Emi knew all about his health now, and from the looks of it, she had no plans to walk away. Yet despite his inability to keep his hands and lips off her and how complete his life felt with her back in it, he still had his reservations about this.

Judging by the fact that she hadn't left his side since he woke from his surgeries, Sydney had a feeling his mentioning this would not go over well, but he had to at least try.

Emi had walked his mom down to the car that was picking her up to take her to the airport. She walked back into his apartment, sat down next to him, leaning her elbow against the sofa, and shook her head for a moment without saying anything. The corner of her lip lifted as she tilted her head. "Can I kill you now?"

Sydney took her hand in his. "Em, I still don't think—"

"Don't you dare," she said, snatching her hand back. "Don't you fucking dare."

"Em!" he said, surprised at her use of profanity.

"Do you have any idea what you put me through?"

"I'm sorry."

"No, sorry doesn't even begin to cut it, Sydney." Her eyes were welling up, and he reached for her hand, but she pulled away. "How could you just decide something that huge for me? How could you possibly still think I'd ever agree to that?"

"Because it was too much to ask—"

"Too much to ask?" she said, raising her voice. "That I stand by the man I love in his hour of need? For better or for worse, remember? We may not be married yet, but I love you with all my heart." Her voice cracked, but she shook her head as if she were angry. Her voice betrayed her, and she took a deep breath, lifting her chin. "And another thing. Your mother told me everything, but there some things she didn't have the answers to, and I want them now. Did anything ever happen between you and Cristina?"

"Never."

"But you were with her those two days you were gone just before you broke up with me. Cristina told me you were."

"At the time, she was the only one who knew about the tests I was having done." He sat up straighter, tempted to reach for her hand again but decided against it. After bouncing back from that moment where she almost lost it, she did look ready to kill him. "I didn't wanna say anything until I knew for sure because I knew you'd worry, but I had to talk to someone about it. I figured she knew better than anyone how to deal with waiting on those kinds of terrifying test results. The morning I left I got the call confirming what they found. I called to tell her. I was scared out of my

mind. If you recall, I was supposed to leave days later, but they wanted me to come in ASAP for more tests. When they told me I had a growth that could potentially turn into a tumor, the only thing I could think about was you. I'm still worried about it. I'm already older than you, Em. How fair is that to you if what happened to my dad—?"

"It's not going to," she said firmly. "You had the surgery. They removed the whole thing."

"There's no guarantee that it won't come back."

"Nothing in this world is guaranteed, Sydney!" She shook her head, exasperated. "Who's to say I won't be kidnapped and killed like my mother was? Or that I won't get hit by a truck tomorrow. Even if they knew you only had a few years or months left, this is *my* decision to make. This is where *I* want to be. You've already taken a year I could've been spending with you from me." Her face crumpled. "You're not taking even a single day from me again."

Sydney wrapped his arms around her, hugging her tightly. "I'm sorry, baby," he said, feeling himself get choked up. "I thought I was doing the right thing."

She pulled away, her brows pinching together. "Could you have been any more brutal?" She wiped at her eyes. "I mean, Jesus."

"I know. I know," he said, feeling like absolute shit. "Trust me. It hurt me just as much—"

"Oh, I beg to differ!" She pulled away even further, but he was glad to see she didn't look so broken up anymore. "But you know what? This is as good a time as any to just be honest. I'm not comfortable with your relationship with Cristina. Did you stay with her those two days? Because she did say you'd been with her."

"No," he said, shaking his head and squeezing her hand. "I did go see her on the second day, mostly because I needed to talk about everything. On top of the news I'd just gotten about the tumor, I was completely torn about whether or not I should tell you. She thought I should. She said the alternative would be too painful, but I thought it was the only way to save you years of misery. Maybe you and Sabian could even patch things up and you might have a chance of a better future than if you stayed with me. I told her what I'd be telling you about me and her. Because of that message you left me, I knew it was what you were already thinking. And that text, the one you said you knew I deleted . . ." Emi's eyes widened as if she'd just

remembered. “I did delete it because in it we’d gone back and forth about the tests I was having done.”

“*That’s* why I’m not comfortable with your relationship,” Emi said wide-eyed. “I knew I’d forgotten something. Well, that and the amount of other texting I saw you did with her. *Not* just about your tests either. But that particular one was a little too syrupy about sweet dreams. It turned my stomach. And then you showed up with her to Sarah’s anniversary party.”

“I didn’t go with her,” Sydney said, confused why she’d think that.

“Yes, you did.” Emi frowned. “You two walked in together.”

Sydney thought about it then remembered. “I saw her drive up just as I was walking in and waited for her. Then Sal came out to do a sweep of anyone still hanging out there and we all walked in together. But I didn’t arrive with her.”

Emi still didn’t look impressed, and that sweet little brow of hers practically twitched.

“After a year of thinking you were with her, sleeping with her, *in love* with her, which was all your doing, you’ll just have to excuse any attitude you get from me whenever her name is brought up again—for the rest of your life.”

Sydney smirked. “Well, that might not be long.”

Emi threw the sofa pillow at his lap. “That’s not funny, Sydney!”

“It was a little.” He laughed as he reached for her hand, even as she pulled it away defiantly.

“No, it isn’t,” she said, finally giving in and letting him take her hand. He did and kissed it, smiling big as she continued. “You can be all Mr. Pessimistic if you want, but this year proved that I’m an optimist through and through. As annoying as it was at times, my heart never once gave up hope that you and I would get back together. The doctor said he’s confident they got the tumor all out. Yes, there’s no guarantee that it won’t come back, but there’s no guarantee *I* won’t get a tumor either. I choose to believe it never will happen. But even if it does,” she said, inching her way closer to him, “I’m. Not. Going. Anywhere. So don’t you dare ever do something so cruel to me again.”

Sydney wrapped his arms around her again, kissing the top of her head. “I’m so sorry, Emi. My intentions were never to be cruel. I just thought if I made you hate me it’d be easier for you to let go. The thought of leaving you alone too soon just scared the hell out of me, Em. It still does.”

“You’ll never leave me,” Emi said, pulling back to look at him. “Not for this. Not ever again.” She touched his face softly, smiling even as her eyes began to well again. “Even if something were to happen to one us, my love, we’ll always be together. I know this because that entire grueling year without you, not once did you ever leave my heart.”

Sydney cradled her face in his hands, staring at her as he thought about what she’d just said. “I know now what it’s like to live with the prospect of losing your life, and let me tell you, Emi. It was nothing compared to agony of having lost the best thing that ever happened to me. Life without you didn’t even matter to me anymore. When I woke in that hospital, before I realized it was you sitting there talking to me, I thought I’d gone to heaven and you were the angel waiting for me. I was so happy, baby,” he whispered as his words faltered, and he took a deep breath. “The torment was finally over.”

She smiled as the tears spilled down the side of her face. “The torment *is* over,” she whispered back, getting comfortable on his lap as she straddled him. “We’ll never be apart again.”

“Never *again*,” he whispered.

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Epilogue

Emilia

Emi stood there staring at the words painted in big fanciful letters on the side of Sydney's sailboat, her heart swelling by the second.

My Sweet Angel, Emi.

"Years ago I never would've believed anyone who told me I'd one day have Lynn's husband's name painted across the side of my sailboat."

Emi turned to Sydney, her mouth still hanging open. She punched him playfully on the arm then wrapped her arms around him. "It's not his name, though. It's mine and I love it."

For the past six months, he'd been making up the year before his surgery to her. In pure Sydney perfectionist style, he'd gone above and beyond. In some cases, she'd thought he'd gone too far. He'd taken a downgrade on his job so he could transfer to 4B's San Diego offices and be near Emi, even though she insisted it'd be easier and less of a hassle for her to just transfer to a culinary school out in Los Angeles.

"You kidding me?" he'd said with a big genuine smile. "With a family as big as yours out here? Why would I pass up living nearby them so we can enjoy every gathering, not just one or two big ones a year?"

It'd been a downgrade at first, and she'd felt incredibly guilty—not to mention the enormous pressure—that he'd left such a prestigious position when she still couldn't make up her mind about her future. She knew for sure she wanted to cook. She just kept teetering between focusing squarely on food or specializing in being a dessert chef. But Sydney had been adamant.

"I guess a brush with death, coupled with a taste of living without you, helped me appreciate what the most important thing in life is. It's not money. It's not some job or my professional image. It's about enjoying life, and I know one thing for a fact now. As long as I'm with you, I could be

flipping burgers somewhere and I'd still be happier than having all those things without you."

As heartwarming as it'd been to hear him say that, it was still unnerving that he'd made such a sacrifice just to be near her. So she'd been beyond relieved and unbelievably even more impressed by her perfect boyfriend when the company practically begged him to take back his previous position. They'd offered him even more money, and they were even catering to him by agreeing to let him take the position out of whichever office he preferred. After only four months of him not running the show, they were lost without him.

"Climb aboard the *My Sweet Angel, Emi*," he said, holding out his hand to her as she climbed onto it.

She handed him her basket and climbed up with him. Okay, he'd done enough. He'd taken a downgrade in his job and moved to San Diego. Even if he did get it back, he couldn't have known they'd be begging him to take the position back, there in San Diego. He'd cut down his communication with Cristina to checking in with her once a month or so. He kept Emi up-to-date about anything that had to do with his health. He'd showered her with romantic gifts for months too: from flowers to surprise candlelight dinners and weekend getaways and *many* sweet love letters and cards just because. He'd even insisted on apologizing to her siblings, though they still didn't know the whole truth and never would. Sydney, of course, had won them all back.

While she loved everything he'd done, she got it. He was sorry for having put her through what he had and wanted to make up for it. But she needed him to stop feeling guilty and just enjoy their time together without the need to go out of his way. She didn't want it to start to feel like a chore.

They were out on the open ocean—she'd come to love the invigorating smell—when he slowed the sailboat down and decided to anchor a little sooner in the day than he normally did. She turned to him curiously from where she was lying out on the deck. "Kind of early, isn't it?"

"Yeah, but there's something I wanna give you, and I can't wait anymore."

"Sydney, baby." She smiled, pulling herself up on an elbow, despite the slight exasperation she felt. "I love the gifts and everything you've been doing, but you don't need to keep getting me stuff and doing things for me. Let's just forget about the past and look forward to the future without out

you buying me something every five minutes.” She laughed nervously. “You’re gonna start resenting feeling obligated.”

“You’re joking, right?” he said as he made his way back to where she was now sitting up. “I live for that smile. Making my angel happy would never feel like an obligation.” He leaned in and kissed her sweetly. “It’s my pleasure.”

Emi smiled back, convinced now she’d never stop feeling her heart double over every time he called her that and gazed at her that way. “That’s just it, babe,” she said, touching his face. “You don’t have to buy me anything or go out of your way. Just being with you and hearing you say you love me is enough to keep me happy.”

He kissed her back softly then sat back and pulled out something from his pocket. When he held out the ring in front of Emi, she immediately felt the warm tears flooding her eyes, and she brought a hand to her mouth.

“I know you’re not ready for marriage yet,” he began, but before he could go on, she sat up even more and wrapped her arms around his neck.

“I’m ready to be with you forever, Sydney.” She pulled back to look in his eyes. “I knew it the moment you said you loved me.” He stared at her as surprised as she knew he’d be, so she explained even as she wiped the tears away. “I may not be sure about a lot of things when it comes to my future, but one thing I know with all certainty is, no matter what I decide, I don’t want any of it without you.”

While he smiled big, his eyes searched hers for a moment, still a little unsure. “So you’ll marry me? Like soon?”

“I’d marry you now if we had someone on board who could do it.” She laughed but felt the familiar uncontrollable quiver of her lips.

“It’s settled then,” he said, slipping the beautiful diamond ring on her finger. “I thought you’d want to wait, and I was willing to, no matter how long, but if you’re all for it now, hell, we’ll start planning this thing as soon as we get home. I’d love nothing more than to make you my wife as soon as possible.” He glanced up at her and his smile waned a little. “But why are you crying, sweetheart?”

She shook her head, wrapping her arms around his neck again, and took in a deep breath of him, before speaking against his neck. “Because I’m an idiot who cries about everything, especially when it comes to you.”

He pulled away and wiped her tears gently with his fingers. “You’re not an idiot,” he said, kissing her softly. “You’re my beautiful angel.” That only

made her brows pinch and her stupid lip tremble even more. “I know what you need,” he whispered, laying her down as her eyes widened.

“No,” she said completely wide-eyed as he began to slip her bikini bottom off. “We’re out in the open.”

“Look around, Emi,” he said, glancing around and then up. “Nothing but ocean and blue sky for miles and miles.”

Emi was already tingling everywhere as she glanced around and saw there wasn’t another boat in sight. Sydney was already positioning himself between her legs, and then she felt him spread her with his fingers. That alone had her breathing accelerating. Then she felt his tongue, and as usual, it was like a lightning bolt. Her back was instantly arched, and she moaned in delight, closing her eyes.

“Is this what you need, baby?”

“Yes!” she gasped breathlessly as he flicked his tongue on the most perfect spot. “Oh, God, yes.”

He was quiet for a while as his tongue worked its magic, slowing and then speeding up, licking, sucking, then flicking as her entire body quivered in appreciation.

“Oh, that feels so good,” she said, slightly embarrassed that her legs were practically twitching around his shoulders.

“I can hardly wait to be doing this to my wife.”

“Your wife,” she murmured, staring up at the crystal blue sky, letting it sink in even as her body began to tremble uncontrollably. “Mmm,” she said as the buildup began to peak, and she swayed her hips to the rhythm of his tongue. “Mrs. Maricopa,” she said, coming completely undone, and she cried out.

Sydney licked her a few more times, making her cry out even louder until he had mercy on her and kissed her one last time before crawling up next to her.

“You’re so good at that,” she said, smiling at him, still trying to catch her breath.

He smiled, kissing her softly, and then glanced around. “Still not a boat in sight.” He turned back to undoing the top button of his shorts with that smolder in his eyes that had her wanting him so soon just after she’d come. “Let me show you what else I’m good at.” He sat up and pulled off his shirt.

She sat up, looking around. “Right here on the deck?”

He nodded with a wicked grin. “Something tells me this is going to be our new favorite thing to do.”

The thought of him fucking her right there on the deck in broad daylight was a strange kind of turn-on she’d never felt before, and she smiled back just as wickedly. She lay back down. “I guess the first time with my new *fiancé* should be extra special.”

In an instant, he was naked, and his beautiful hard body was on top of her. “Fiancé.” He smiled, staring into her eyes. “But I know I’ll like *husband* even better. Welcome to the rest of your life,” he whispered, kissing her gently, then slid into her, making her groan.

“I promise you . . .” She gasped as he buried himself inside her. “No matter what happens, I *need* you in my life forever.”

He stopped, staying there *deep* inside her as he stared into her eyes. “I need you too, Em, more than you’ll ever know. I finally got this right,” he said, beginning to sway in and out of her slowly. “And I’m sorry, but I intend to prove to you every day of my life for the *rest* of my life that I fucked up and nearly lost the best thing that ever happened to me and it’ll *never* happen again.”

“Never again,” she said, letting her head fall back, spreading her legs wider and lifting her hips, wanting him in deeper.

Sydney obliged with a groan. “Never again.”

The End

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Excerpt from Defining Love

Read why readers are calling *Defining Love* a refreshing different spin like none they'd ever read in a romance novel.

Henrietta, aka Henri, isn't gay or in love with her gay best friend and lover, Edi. But because of her deep-seated abandonment issues she gives into the relationship out of fear of losing her. Then she meets Aaron and is instantly drawn to him.

Aaron is torn between his high school sweetheart—now fiancée—and what he's feeling for his young employee Henrietta. The instant connection he feels with her is like none he's ever felt.

Cheating is not an option for either. So what happens when that draw, the connection, becomes impossible to ignore?

When we'd arrived at my house, I'd been more than relieved to see Bea and Henrietta weren't there. Since Bea's car was out front, I figured Henrietta must've gone with her on one of her walks. It wasn't as if Henrietta working for me was a secret or that Mia had never met her. Since I'd brought Henrietta on, Mia had dropped by exactly two times. As far as I knew, she didn't have an issue with Henrietta, my sister's friend, working for me.

Mia knew me well enough to know I'd never cheat on her. I'd never given her reason to be insecure about Henrietta or any other girl in the entire ten years we'd been together, but she'd since made a few telling comments about Henrietta: "She's very pretty." or "She must be single or her boyfriend would be picking her up instead of you having to drive her to and from work so often." Each time I responded with an indifferent "I guess" or a disinterested shrug. I could've told her I knew she wasn't single—that she was actually in a relationship *with another girl*. I know it would've relieved Mia from any doubts she might be having about my spending time around my young *pretty* employee. But I had to respect

Henrietta's request that I not share with anyone about her personal life. So I hadn't.

Technically, I had nothing to hide. I'd done nothing wrong. It just made me nervous to have her around Henrietta too much. Mia was too perceptive. So when she called earlier to say she and her cousin Ruth were stopping by my place during business hours, I wasn't thrilled. But what could I say? I'd jumped the gun before she even explained why she was calling and said I had to go home to get started on work ASAP. My haste to avoid delaying my time with Henrietta further backfired on me. Mia and Ruth were working on a collage for her cousin's wedding reception and wanted to stop by and search through some of the old photos I had.

I was now standing behind them at my desk, looking over their shoulders as they opened my box of old photos when Henrietta suddenly rushed in my office with a huge smile. The smile noticeably waned the moment she saw Mia and Ruth.

"I'm sorry," she blurted, freezing at the door. "I didn't know you were —"

"That's okay," I said before she could apologize further. "Something going on?"

"No." She shook her head as her face flushed. "I just . . . it's about the EPG. I had an idea." She took a step backward. "But I can tell you about it later. I didn't mean to—"

"No, no," Mia said quickly before I could. "If it's about work, by all means, go right ahead. Don't mind us. We're just looking through some old photos. Pretend we're not here. We'll be quiet," she added with a whisper.

I would've suggested we leave and talk somewhere else, but Mia's comment was too obvious. She wanted us to stay. Had we left my office, she would've wondered why.

"What is it?" I asked a bit curious.

Henrietta had only come to my office a handful of times. None of those times had she rushed in there as she had today, smiling so big. If Mia and Ruth hadn't been there, I likely would've been smiling just as big.

"I, uh . . ." she started a bit apprehensively. "I was watching the news this morning. There was a fire at an apartment building in Lansing . . ."

She explained about the guy replacing her smoke detectors and what he'd said about being sure the apartment likely had no working smoke detectors and why. It had reminded her of my dilemma.

“I remembered you saying one of the biggest selling points of the EPG to big companies is the tax breaks they get and the discounts they get on their insurance,” she added as that smile she’d walked in with resurfaced. “It got me thinking. If smoke detectors being ripped out in these apartment buildings is a big enough issue for the property owners, since the EPG can be installed in undetected areas of the building and most tenants wouldn’t even be aware what they are or that they’re even there . . .”

Most of what she was saying about making the tax and insurance breaks selling points were things I’d already begun to look into. Though I hadn’t thought as broadly as she was thinking: the value to a property owner of the anonymity of the EPG versus a smoke detector. Replacing a smoke detector was relatively cheap but not for real estate investors who owned hundreds of buildings around the country that could add up to tens of thousands a year. She’d actually started to research other things I hadn’t looked into, such as how to get on counties’ and states’ lists of approved products that would satisfy certain mandated safety measures in commercial buildings.

It was fucking brilliant, and I knew now why she’d been smiling so big when she first walked in, but mostly I couldn’t get over how excited this made her too. Seeing her beautiful eyes shine so bright actually made me feel giddy. *Giddy*.

I was a grown ass man. I’d never even used the damn word in my life much less felt it. And so profoundly. I had no business feeling giddy!

When she said she could show me some of what she’d found online, I excused myself from my office immediately. I didn’t miss the way Mia and Ruth exchanged glances, but there was no way she could turn this into anything more than what it was—one hundred percent business. Never mind that I’d never been so tempted to hug and kiss someone in my life.

Henrietta spoke excitedly as she typed and clicked on different pages and quoted articles regarding safety regulations in different counties in Michigan alone.

“This is just the tip of the iceberg,” she said as she clicked on a spreadsheet with different data from all the different counties and states.

She stopped when she noticed I was staring at her. It was the strangest thing. “You did all this?”

The excitable smile she’d been wearing all this time flattened into more of a timid or embarrassed smile and she nodded. “I could hardly wait for

you to get here, so I had to keep myself busy somehow. I figured it'd be easier to show you if I had it all in one place.”

Then something happened, the same thing that had been happening all too often lately. I was instantly distracted at the sight of her teeth sinking into her bottom lip. My eyes dropped to her soft wet lips and stayed there too long, but I couldn't look away. When I finally did, it was only then that I realized how close I was now sitting next to her. So close I could smell the fragrance of whatever shampoo she wore—her skin. My hand was next to hers on the desk. Without even thinking, I grazed her finger with mine. The touch was so miniscule, so insignificant, yet I could see it in her eyes—eyes that tried as desperately as I mine did to hide *something*.

And then the words spilled out of my lips before I could give it another thought.

“I could hardly wait for you to get here too.”

My sister, walking out from the bathroom in the hallway, snapped me out of my trance. If it hadn't been for that, even with Mia in the house, I might not have been able to fight the temptation to cradle her face in my hands and kiss her.

The door to my office opened, and Mia's and Ruth's voices further pulled me out of my trance, and I gulped in a big chunk of air. I turned to Mia and Ruth as they entered the back room.

“We got the ones we need.”

Mia waved a stack of photos at me even as her eyes bounced back and forth from me to Henrietta. The reminder of just how close I'd been sitting to her had me scooting away slightly.

“Don't worry. I'll get these back to you as soon as I make copies,” she said.

I stood up, pushing the seat I was sitting in back to the other desk where it belonged.

“You don't have to,” I said, glancing up at her. “You can keep them.”

She gave me a strange look, glanced at Henrietta one last time, and then turned back to me with a lift of a brow. “Walk me out?”

I nodded and followed her out. We weren't even out of the house when she turned to me with a purpose.

“She cheered you right up.”

That confused me. “*What?*”

“I’ve never seen you switch gears so fast,” she hissed in a lowered voice as we hurried out the front door as if maybe she didn’t want Ruth to hear her. She stopped out on the front porch and glowered at me. “It was disgusting. My stomach literally turned watching you two.”

“Cheered me up? Switched gears?” I asked, doing my best to sound as clueless as I could because not only was my heart still racing, my stomach was turning now too. “Who said I was in a bad mood before she got here?”

“Well, you haven’t been that happy to see *me* in years.”

And there you had it. Mia was officially on to me. *Fuck!* “What? *Stop.*” I put on my best soured expression, shaking my head, and reached for her hand, pulling her to me as she tried to walk away. “Mia, don’t, okay?”

“Don’t what?” she asked even more annoyed.

“Don’t do this. She’s my little sister’s friend.”

“Do you think I’m blind?” she asked, and I pulled her even closer to me even as she tried to squirm away. “Do you know how humiliating that was for me?”

“What was?” I asked, pulling back.

Had she seen my exchange with Henri? But before she could answer because I was almost afraid to hear it, I tried to explain.

“She had a good idea. A damn good one. You know how I feel about this business, Mia. You know anything that’ll move it forward excites me. Her *idea* excited me, babe. Not *her.*”

She stared at me for a moment without saying anything then pulled away. “I’ll see you tonight. Unless”—she turned back to contemplate me then toward the front door—“you’re working late again.”

“I’ll pick you up early,” I countered.

Without another word, she got in the car with Ruth, and I watched them drive away. The inevitable was happening already. After what happened inside between Henrietta and me and with Mia being upfront and honest as usual about her feelings, two things were clear. Whatever it was that I was feeling for Henrietta—happening between us—it wasn’t going away. If anything, it was intensifying in a way I no longer had *any* control over it.

In answer to Mia’s question earlier, she wasn’t blind and that meant one thing. I’d have a big decision to make a lot sooner than I anticipated before things *really* got out of control.

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About the Author

USA Today Bestselling Author, Elizabeth Reyes, was born and raised in southern California and still lives there with her husband of almost twenty-one years, her two teens, her Great Dane named Dexter, and one big fat cat named Tyson.

She spends eighty percent of time in front of her computer, writing and keeping up with all the social media, and loves it. She says that there is nothing better than doing what you absolutely love for a living, and she eats, sleeps, and breathes these stories, which are constantly begging to be written.

Representation: Jane Dystel of Dystel & Goderich now handles all questions regarding subsidiary rights for any of Ms. Reyes' work. Please direct inquiries regarding foreign translation and film rights availability to her.

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