



But of

FORMATION

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ELLA FOX

OUT OF FORMATION

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Out of Formation

Star cheerleader Elena Murray has had a crush on Colin Findlay for most of her life. She was sure he had no interest in her—right up until the night came when they couldn't keep their hands off each other. Unfortunately an unexpected revelation followed by a misunderstanding brought their evening to an abrupt end.

For more than two months Elena believed there was no chance she and Colin could ever be together.

And then he turned up at her university as the new head coach for the football team.

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Chapter 1



Elena - Present

My backpack is in the process of sliding down my arm when Becky Hillstrom—of the acclaimed *Virginia Hillstroms*, she frequently brags—starts one of her infamous inquisitions. The way she fires off questions is in no way surprising since everyone I know jokingly refers to her as The Interviewer. She never stops.

“How was your uniform fitting? Did you get that body butter I told you about with the shimmer, the one that doesn’t smell like alcohol? And last but not least, tell me you took the time to read Julia’s email.”

I nod as I set my bag on the floor and slide into my seat.

“Which one is a yes?” she asks.

I let out a little laugh as I unzip my bag to pull out my iPad, a notebook, and a pen, all of which I set out on the desk.

“Most of the above,” I answer. “My fitting went well—no gains since last year, so I didn’t get any crap from Mandy. The body butter is just as good as you said it would be, I’m so excited I finally found one that complements my apricot and honey body wash. As far as Julia’s email goes, I got it on my way here but didn’t even have time to skim it. Feel like breaking it down for me or should I start reading?”

The way Becky’s face lights up tells me that whatever the email says, it’s exciting and she cannot wait to fill me in. Her expression suggests it’s either significant team news or unbelievably juicy gossip.

When she dramatically leans closer to my desk, I'm sure there's gossip involved. "I freaking *knew* you wouldn't have read it! Honey, prepare yourself because I am about to give you some knowledge."

I snort out a laugh. "Hit me," I joke. No doubt this is gossip based, but I'm betting it's nothing too good because this is the first day of our senior year in college. There hasn't been time for anything exciting to happen with our group since a lot of people only arrived back in town over the last few days.

Since I spent the majority of the last eight weeks camped out on the couch at home trying to get over a broken heart, I've been pretty oblivious. Not anymore, though. As of today, I've officially pulled my head out of my ass, and I am going to get back into the swing of things. No more sad sack me. From now on, everything is going to be positive.

"Coach Adams got fired. F-I-R-E-D *fired*," Becky announces dramatically.

My brows shoot up as I take in the information. Coach Adams has been the head coach of the Tigers for the last thirty years. In this town, he is to football as God is to earth. There's a freaking *statue* of him out in the front quad for goodness sake, and each year there is a parade in his honor after the last game of the season. In the three seasons I've been a cheerleader for the university I've never heard anything less than reverential about him, which honestly has always struck me as a bit weird. Personally, I've always found him a bit pompous and a lot stiff, but that's just me.

Football is a serious moneymaker here. Having a Division I football team and an award-winning cheerleading squad is a big deal to the university, and Coach Adams's high profile has gotten the football team and the cheer squad a lot of money for equipment and travel over the years. Whether he's the warmest guy in the world or not, he's like a religion in this town and on this campus. I can't imagine the athletic department without him at the helm.

The more I think it over, the easier it is for me to conclude that Becky is wrong. There's no way Coach Adams is gone. I'm pretty confident he could run around the quad naked, and no one would say a word.

"Wait a minute," I say, my tone dripping with suspicion. "You're pulling my leg, right?"

Becky shakes her head. "No," she whispers emphatically. "He had an affair with a student last year and then dumped them during the summer.

Apparently, it wasn't the first time he's slept with a student—but it was the first time the student he dumped had pictures and video to share with the administration. It was also the first time Coach Adams was dumb enough to have had an affair with someone who comes from a family full of major donors to the university. Even though technically the student is now an alumnus, it's provable that the affair took place over the course of their senior year."

It's the juiciest thing to happen here since ever. I'm shocked but also endlessly curious about who Coach Adams had an affair with. "*Shut. Up,*" I whisper-squeak. "Does anyone know who the student was?"

When Becky's eyes light up as she grins like a Cheshire Cat I can tell she's been waiting for this very question. "That shitty little ass-grabber, Michael. *Freaking*. Simmons."

Swear, my eyes bulge out of my head for like four seconds. Maybe even five. My brain rejects her assertion in the most definitive of ways. Michael Simmons was one of the biggest douchebags on campus. He graduated last year, but for the three years he was on campus when I was, he managed to hit on or have sex with every girl I know. "There's no way—"

"Bible, this is the truth," Becky assures me. "I thought everything you're thinking right now when I found out. Captain of the football team, future president, Mr. Never-Without-a-Girl-on-His-Arm and voted Most Likely to Have Five Wives is at least bi, if not gay. To say he hid it well is an understatement."

"How is *no one* talking about this on Facebook or Snapchat? Both are like gossip central to this school," I point out.

"It's because the whole thing is just starting to leak out now. By later tonight, social media and the entire campus will be on fire with gossip since we'll all be getting read the riot act this afternoon. A lot of this was covered in Julia's email, which you really should have read on general principle alone considering she's your coach," she says dryly.

I give a sheepish shrug because it's not like I can argue the point. She's right.

"Anyway," Becky continues, "the staff found out in waves. Julia was told to be on campus two weeks ago for an official meeting of the athletic department. She said she knew right away that calling her in before the school year even started meant something was up, and she wasn't wrong. Once she and the other team coaches had the info, they were sworn to

secrecy. Some of what I know didn't get covered in the email, but since she is my cousin, I leaned on her until she gave up what she could."

Becky's eyes sparkle with excitement as she shifts in her seat, her hands sliding over the bright orange surface of her desk. "The bottom line is that we only know about it now because they've canceled all practices today for a mandatory meeting where the dean will be reading the entire athletic department the riot act. Anyone involved in sports here at the college has to attend. They're going to lay the law down about personal relationships with the coaching staff."

I flip my hair over my shoulder as I roll my eyes. "Michael Simmons may have dabbled in some ancient ass but come on," I say dismissively. "Not one of the rest of us is even a little bit attracted to any of the coaching staff. They're all *old*. The college has absolutely *nothing* to worry about."

Becky nods in agreement. "I know," she whispers dramatically. "Like any of us care about geezers who blow up balls all day."

I haven't held on to my virginity to lose it to a random coach—not that I'm saying being a virgin right now makes me smart. In fact, quite the opposite. I've held onto it because I'm an idiot who has spent far too many years focused on one person—the very one who wants no part of my virginity. I've done my best to like other people, including guys here at college that I tried dating but that quickly went nowhere. All of the binge-drinking around campus (and closet steroid use with the athletes) isn't attractive to me at all. Don't even get me started on how many of them don't know how to do laundry. There's a smell in the boy's dorms and apartments that is stomach turning, so staying away from them hasn't been a problem.

Meanwhile, whenever my friends talk about my virginal state, I lie and tell them that I'm holding out for a business type. It's a lie. I have—*um, had, dammit! Why does my brain not understand that it's time to use past tense when thinking of him*—a major crush on a man who is the epitome of the athletic type, and no one else has ever measured up to him in my eyes. Not even close. After the events that went down two months ago, I've decided I need to move on. The harsh insinuation that I'm too young to know what I want was a tough pill to swallow—one that's still giving me indigestion.

No, I need to focus. And right now, I've decided the best thing to do is to set my sights set on what happens after graduation because once I'm out of college, I'll be meeting and interacting with different men. Surely it will

be easier to find someone, right? In a perfect world, Monday through Friday my man will wear a suit, and on Saturdays, he'll wear nothing at all because we'll be busy rolling around in his bed. Sundays will be casual—maybe khaki pants and a button-down that is most *definitely* not sexy jeans that perfectly emphasize a ridiculously sexy ass or a T-shirt that shows off an unbelievably perfect upper body. Certainly not a chiseled jaw with a perpetual five o'clock shadow, perfectly kissable lips and coppery chocolate colored eyes that make me weak in the knees.

Andddd I'm now thinking of *him* again. Dammit!

Picturing that body and those see-through-everything eyes, even for a few seconds, makes my heart beat funny in my chest. I do my best to push those thoughts away. I need not to focus on him anymore. When will that get easier? I'm so lost in my thoughts that I startle when Becky taps my shoulder.

Following the finger she's pointed to the front of the room, I realize our professor is writing something on the board. Shaking off my dreams of a perfect future, I open my blank notebook and uncap my pen to take notes as the first class of my senior year gets underway.

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Chapter 2



Elena- Present

I had to run all the way across campus to make this meeting on time. I'm not even sure how I managed it, but somehow I did. A quick glance around the gym shows that the bleachers are almost full of cheerleaders, football, baseball, soccer, and basketball players. I breathe a sigh of relief when I see that none of the coaching staff are in place yet, which means I'm not going to get yelled at for being tardy. I spot my best friend waving at me from the very front row of the bleachers in the section where the cheer squad is sitting. I hurry across the shiny wooden floor and take the seat he saved me next to him, stretching my legs out in front of me dramatically as I lean into his side. Yes, my best friend is a guy. No, he isn't gay. No, we don't like each other. There's zero sexual tension, and there has never been.

Miles is the yin to my yang. In addition to being the best friend a person could ask for, he's also my cheer partner and has been since we were thirteen years old. I love the camaraderie of the cheer squad in general, but Miles is my person. The two of us are considered to be a big deal in cheerleading circles, which is why we were offered full scholarships to a dozen schools. We narrowed it down to two universities with Division I teams, one Miles wanted and the one I'd had my heart set on from the start. There were two reasons I wanted to come here. First, it's less than twenty minutes from Nanny and Pop's house. Second, it's *his* alma mater and I

idolized him. What can I say—my reasoning on the second thing seemed solid at the time.

In the end, Miles let me choose, which is why we're here, under an hour away from where we went to high school. The university Miles wanted to go to is clear across the country. Especially after the events of this summer, I know we made the right decision in coming here.

On every level, this school has been good to us both academically and physically. In the three years we've been here, we've helped the cheer squad earn half a dozen state and national championships, and for the last three years running we've taken first place in every one of the coed partner stunt competitions.

The trust I have in Miles—as the person who tosses me into the air only to catch me—literally—within the palm of one hand is immeasurable. I've met dozens of fly girls over the years who *could* be amazing but are instead stuck at being “good” because their partners aren't rock solid. That isn't the case with me. In all honesty, Miles is the more talented of the two of us. It takes incredible strength and stamina to throw a one hundred and twenty-five-pound five-foot five-inch girl for hours and hours every day, but he does it without complaint. I enjoy cheerleading, and I always have, but at the end of the day, the reason I've taken it as far as I have is entirely down to Miles.

I grin as he playfully jabs at my side with his elbow so that I don't do something crazy like fall asleep on him, something I've been known to do. The joke on the squad is that I'm borderline narcoleptic. I frequently fall asleep while waiting for the team to assemble and I also tend to nod off at the picnic tables on the quad. What can I say? I like sleep. A lot.

“Are you cooking chicken breasts tonight or am I on my own for dinner?” Miles asks.

After our freshman year when we both lived in dorms, we moved in together into an off-campus townhome his parents rent for him on a month-to-month basis. His family refuses to allow me to pay rent or any of the bills, despite my protests. I make up for it by keeping the house stocked with food and by doing all of the cooking. It's the perfect arrangement for all of us.

I yawn and stretch my arms as I sit up straight. “Don't be a dope, of course I'm cooking. I forgot my afternoon snack, which means I haven't eaten since lunch. Two tablespoons of peanut butter, an apple and a cup of

cottage cheese weren't enough to fill me up. You don't know how badly I wish there were a way to automate the chicken breasts dropping onto our George Foreman grill about eight minutes before we get home. I'm that hungry."

Miles narrows his eyes as he shakes his head. "You know how important the afternoon snacks are," he scolds. "You're off by about two hundred calories for the day because of that. I should've checked your backpack this morning before you left the house."

I shrug, not in the least bit concerned. "Cut me some slack, *Dad*," I say dryly. "I was in a rush this morning and forgot. The first day of school and all, ya know? I solemnly swear that I'll do better tomorrow."

"See that you do," he says firmly. "I'm the one throwing you around all afternoon, and when you're hangry, you turn into a major bitch."

I snort out a laugh as I give him the finger. It's not like I can argue—he's one hundred percent right. I get cranky as hell when I'm starving, and during our official season, I'm hungry almost all of the time because my diet is so strict. I have to keep my weight steady and my core strength on point, which doesn't give me much wiggle room at all. There are no off days for flyers—there can't be. If I gain five pounds, that's five extra pounds that Miles has to balance when he's tossing and catching me. Cheerleading is a far more brutally regimented sport than most people realize.

Since Miles and I spent a fair amount of our free time today texting each other about the gossip with the football team, I'm able to launch directly into questioning if he's heard anything about who will be replacing Coach Adams.

"Just wait until I tell you what's up! I just found out before I sat down—I can't believe you don't know yet. First of all, this has been going on for quite a while. I gotta think the school got lucky that it all blew just after the semester officially ended because it meant the football season was over and they could keep it quiet. They've spent the weeks since it all hit the fan scrambling to find a new coach. The football team was told about this last week, at which time they were warned that if they valued their scholarships, they would need to keep their mouths shut until the announcement could be made. They'd originally offered the coaching job to Mr. Peters, but since he didn't want to move from the assistant coach position, they went outside and found someone else."

I nod as he finishes talking. “Interestingggg,” I drawl. “Any word on the new guy?”

Miles leans in closer with a look of clear excitement on his face. “It’s your... um...” his brow furrows as he pauses. After a second of thinking he makes a dismissive motion with his hand. “Doesn’t matter I guess. I just never know what to call him, so I guess we need to work on that. Anyway, it’s none other than Colin Findlay! Makes sense they went with an alum. Gotta say though if the dean was looking for a way to ward off sexual crushing on coaches, he just failed miserably. I think you might be the only person here who’ll be immune to him.”

My smile feels frozen in place, my stomach is buzzing like I just arrived at the top of a roller coaster and my mouth seems to have become a damn desert. I let out a fake sounding laugh because I know I have to react to Miles’s words, but it’s the best I’ve got.

As far as Miles knows, Colin Findlay is merely a part of my extended family. That’s a very simplistic description of how we’re connected, but it’s the one I normally go with. I know Colin because his grandparents were such a huge part of my life. Miles has no clue that I’ve had feelings for Colin since forever, and I would like to keep it that way especially since he’s asked me a million times who my first crush was, and I’ve always said I can’t remember.

That is one big ass lie because a girl never ever forgets her first crush. That’s doubly true when the crush in question is Colin Findlay. I just never wanted to talk about it because I knew it would get me a ton of side eye and jokes about me wanting someone so far out of my league. Colin is ten years older than I am, after all.

I swallow nervously as my heart skips a beat. Jesus. Of all the colleges in the world, he’s taking a job at mine? And why freaking now of all the times?

The Findlays came into my life when my mother—I use the term loosely—rented the guesthouse on the back of his grandparents’ property. She was there from the time she divorced my dad when I was six until she went off to find herself shortly before I started seventh grade.

During those years unless there was a game, Colin would show up at his grandparents’ house every Sunday to hang out during the afternoon and then have dinner with them. Since the majority of my time was spent in Nanny and Pop’s house, I got to spend a lot of time swooning over Colin up

close and personal. Of course, there was nothing real to it back then—he's ten years older than me and even as a kid I was smart enough to know that little girls in pigtails doing cartwheels on the lawn were hardly going to light up his heart. It didn't matter though because he was always, always nice to me. As a child I idolized him, but around the time I was fifteen, my feelings started to morph into something a lot deeper than that.

Colin has always been gorgeous and he could've been a giant, entitled prick who blew off the annoying little girl who trailed after him and hung on his every word but he never did. Instead, he was kind and engaging, and he never made me feel worthless, something I'd needed back then since my mother spent the years between divorcing my dad and marrying husband number two “finding herself.” I suspect the reality is that what she was actually doing was trying to figure out a way to make me disappear. Her lack of interest in me and the endless caravan of boyfriends strolling in and out of her life had been difficult.

The one good thing about living with her during those years had been the Findlays. Nanny and Pop, as they'd instructed me to call them, were the grandparents every child wishes they had. On the alternating weekend that I wasn't visiting my father, my mom found one reason or another to dump me on Nanny and Pop, and they never hesitated to take me. They were my constants during those years, and I'd missed them desperately when I'd moved forty minutes away to live with my dad.

Fortunately, my dad had been good about allowing me to maintain a relationship with them. He was smart enough to know that cutting off the people I considered to be my grandparents would've gone over like a lead balloon. I'd visited the Findlays every other weekend for at least one night; they were always in the bleachers for my cheerleading competitions—even the ones that were out of state—and they attended both my junior and senior high graduations. They were two of the most important people in my life until nine weeks ago when they passed away within hours of one another.

It was a nightmare, something I'm still struggling to deal with. Nanny passed first, very suddenly in her sleep. The tone of Pop's voice when he called that morning to tell me she was gone is something I'll never forget. If heartbreak were a sound, it was his the way he spoke when he said she was gone. I raced out of my house and drove like the wind to get to Pop so that I could be by his side when the funeral home came to take Nanny away.

Colin arrived less than an hour after me, and his parents showed up about ten minutes after that. We all stood together and prayed as the hearse took Nanny away.

I flash back to that day a lot, looking for a moment where maybe there was a clue that Pop was about to die too, but there's nothing. He was heartbroken and sad, but he didn't seem ill. It was the first—and obviously last—time I ever saw him cry. About two hours later Colin's dad, Carson, picked up soup and sandwiches for lunch and the five of us ate it at the table together. After we finished eating, the men had gone to the funeral home, and I'd stayed behind with Colin's mom because she wasn't getting around well.

As bad as the day had been it only got worse when Colin and his dad walked back into the house two-and-a-half hours later, without Pop. In a voice thick with emotion Colin had been the one to tell his mother and me that Pop had died. We hadn't believed him until he and Carson explained how it happened.

After they'd finished agreeing on all the arrangements, the funeral director had left the room to give his secretary the obituary so she could call the paper. Colin and Carson told us that about a minute or so after the director left the room, Pop, in the middle of nodding his head at something one of them had said, abruptly stood and smiled. "It's time for me to go," he'd said before he hugged his son and then his grandson. "I love you all. Kiss my girls for me."

They understood he'd meant Colin's mom and me, but were confused about why he was talking like he couldn't do that himself. Then he held out his arms as he took three steps across the room like he was going to hug someone.

"My Gracie," he'd said.

Colin and his dad were understandably confused about why Pop was talking to his wife like she was there. They never got to ask what was going on since the next thing they knew, Pop crumbled to the ground, dead. He was just there and gone from one minute to the next. Colin performed CPR, and the paramedics were there within minutes, but it was too late.

Losing two of the most significant influences in all of our lives rocked our worlds, to say the least. Because of that, I'll never be sure if what happened in the days that followed was just a moment of insanity brought on by grief. The only thing I can say about that is it didn't end well.

Before the drama between us, Colin was the person I fantasized would be my husband someday. Some might say that it was nothing more than a case of hero worship or even wave it off as some form of weird attraction because he was once a big deal in sports. He'd been drafted about four seconds after he graduated from this university and was then in the NFL for three years before a torn ACL sidelined him for good. He took two years off after that and then went back to school one state over to earn his MBA. After graduation, he took a job there on the coaching team. Granted, coming here isn't a big move—it's only about a two-hour drive—but it is a big surprise. Why he's picked up his life and moved here is a mystery—one I'll likely never get an answer to, considering the way things stand.

Realizing that Miles is staring at me because he's expecting a response, I shrug and toss my hair over my right shoulder in a disaffected way. "That's, uh, great," I offer weakly. "It'll be... nice to see him and say hi," I lie. "How's the team about all of this? Excited?"

Miles shrugs. "They're kind of all over the place from what I'm hearing. Coach Adams was like fucking royalty here—they all looked up to him. To find out that he was cheating on his wife with a student didn't sit well. I mean, it's a Division I team, and no one wants to fuck with success. It's a big old mess."

"I wonder why Colin took the job," I say, thinking out loud. "I didn't know he'd even thought of coming... um, home."

Miles is only half listening to me because he's suddenly busy eye-fucking Stella, one of the female soccer players who just sat down across the way on the bleachers. "It's possible that he's going back," Miles says in a distracted sounding voice. "It's a trial contract—the school is understandably wary about committing to anything in the wake of what Adams did—so right now it's only for one season. I'm sure he'll tell you all about this at some point. I'm surprised he didn't call to tell you this. I guess there hasn't been time. Dude's been single for a long time—maybe he finally found a serious girlfriend."

Miles has no idea how those two throw-away sentences just sliced at me, and I do my best not to let it show on my face but the truth is that inside I feel like I just got kicked in the gut. I don't know what I'll do if Colin is dating since the very idea makes me ill. The last serious girlfriend he had, Amy, was in the picture from around the time I was sixteen to sometime before Christmas about two years later. He hasn't brought anyone else home

for any family events since Amy, and Nanny and Pop had both commented that he was holding off on dating until it felt real. If he's dating again now, that's not good.

Forcing myself not to think about the possibility of him having found the future Mrs. Findlay in the weeks we haven't spoken, I focus on the other issue—the fact that he didn't call or write to tell me he was coming. Granted, I'm the one who didn't take his calls for several weeks but this is big news. You'd think he'd have found a way to let me know. At the very least he should've had Sam or Lolo—his two best friends—call to give me a heads up.

I'm a mess and staying in this seat is costing me. Apparently I have acting skill I never knew about. Taking a deep breath I try to pump the brakes on the million scenarios that are going through my head right now. Colin is here. At my school. And Miles is right too in pointing out that he didn't bother to call, text or email any heads up.

My thoughts come to a screeching halt as my skin breaks out into goosebumps and I get a tingling feeling in my stomach. Turning my head to the left, I'm not surprised to see the Adonis I've had a crush on since I was just a kid walking into the gym with a group of other coaches as well as the president of the university and two of the deans.

The amount of nervousness I'm feeling right now is on a whole other level. My palms are clammy enough that I have to wipe my hands nervously against my jeans, never taking my eyes off of Colin as he makes his way to the center of the court.

I've never been so glad to be dressed well in my life. I put a little extra effort into my appearance this morning since it's the first day of school for this year and I started the day with that whole new year new me, mantra. My short sleeved aqua colored dolman top shows off my tan, my white skinny jeans make my legs look long and lean, and the teal colored Converse I'm wearing make the outfit cute and day appropriate. I even took the time to barrel curl my hair this morning, so it's down and styled in beachy waves. I'd be dying of shame right now had I been foolish enough to schlep my butt in here in sweats and one of my team T-shirts.

I fiddle with my small gold hoop earrings—a gift from the Findlays for my thirteenth birthday— as I watch Colin talking to someone from the athletic department I don't recognize. I can't take my eyes off of him, but he hasn't so much as looked in this direction. I'm somehow crushed that I felt a

change in energy within the gymnasium as soon as he entered, yet he doesn't notice me sitting here, not fifteen feet from where he's standing. He *knows* I'm a cheerleader here. That he doesn't appear to have even the slightest bit of curiosity about whether I'm in the gym is horrifying, all things considered.

The butthurt grows when he never looks my way at any point during the meeting. Not when the president and the dean take turns speaking, not when the head coaches each take a minute to assure everyone that all rules will be followed, and not when he himself is introduced to say a few words. It's as if my portion of the bleachers don't even exist, and that stings. Whatever connection I believed we had was nothing more than temporary idiocy. As the university president speaks, I force my gaze away from Colin, determined to ignore his very presence on earth.

"In closing, I want to reiterate that this is very, very serious. If any of the rules about student/staff behavior are violated, the staff member will be dismissed *immediately* and the student will face expulsion. There is no middle ground on this. Be mindful of these rules when the normal athletic schedule resumes tomorrow, and everything will be fine. Break them and you'll feel the consequences immediately."

I've never heard Rothstein speak so firmly about anything. Normally he's an uptight but fairly affable type of man. Not today. Clearly, this whole thing with Coach Adams was a game changer. Pun intended. But right now I care about none of that because I'm too busy being salty about Colin's complete and utter obliviousness to my presence on this earth, even though I am one hundred percent certain he knows I go here since I told him myself.

"...feeling some Italian dressing as the marinade for your chicken tonight. You cool with that?"

Shit. I've been so focused on my anger for the last few minutes that I forgot where I am. Shaking it off, I look up and find Miles staring down at me expectantly.

"Uh, yeah, sure," I agree as I hastily stand and grab my peach colored wristlet from the bleacher. "Italian dressing it is. I'm also going to make some broccoli and a baked potato for us to split so if you'd take charge of throwing together a salad, that'd be tops. Maybe after dinner, we can watch an episode of *Modern Family*."

Miles throws an arm around my shoulders and pulls me into his side before dropping a kiss on the top of my head. “No can do tonight, baby girl. After dinner I’m going to Stella’s to *study*,” he jokes, only loud enough for me to hear.

Leaning in closer to him, I look up and give him puppy dog eyes as I push my lip out and pretend to pout. “Should I worry? I’ve heard if you use it too much *it falls off*,” I joke.

Miles tosses his head back and laughs, which draws the attention of pretty much every girl within fifty feet. Since we were thirteen years old, Miles has always been one of the most popular and most sought-after guys I’ve ever known. He gets more ass than Lazy Boy, but somehow he doesn’t have a man-whore reputation. I suspect this is because he’s kind, funny, and doesn’t treat girls like dog shit to make them do his bidding.

I’m not blind—he’s a smoking hot twenty-one-year-old version of Alexander Skarsgård. Blond haired, blue eyed, six feet tall, muscles for days, clear skin, perfect teeth, a sexy jawline *and* a sense of humor. On top of all that he’s rich as hell, drives a Mercedes and has impeccable manners. People often suspiciously ask us how he and I have never hooked up. Our answers are the same—we’re like siblings. I understand that he’s attractive, but I have absolutely no interest in him, and I know he feels the same way about me.

“You’re a nut,” he jokes. “You wanna stop and say hi to Colin—”

“No!” I squeak. “I mean, not now. I’m sure I’ll see him later. I’m so hungry right now I could eat your arm. No time to chat. He looks busy anyway.”

Miles chuckles and nods as he guides us toward the exit. I breathe an inward sigh of relief that he bought my excuse. As far as Miles is concerned, Colin isn’t on my radar—nor has he ever been. I mean to keep him oblivious to the reality. If he knew how I really felt—and what’s gone on—he’d be grilling me on the daily.

As we make our way to the double doors that lead to the hall, I get the strongest sensation of being watched. I refrain from turning back for as long as I can, but just as we get to the doors curiosity gets the better of me, and I look over my shoulder.

My mouth goes dry as I stumble, eyes wide as I realize that the person looking at me is Colin. Standing with his arms crossed over his chest he’s watching me with narrowed eyes. Even from this far away I can see that his

jaw is clenched. I barely have time to blink before Miles is tugging me through the doors, but I keep looking back over my shoulder at Colin until the large silver door closes behind me, cutting off my view.

Judging by the anger on his face, I'm guessing seeing me was not a highlight of his day. Great—this is just what I need. It's bad enough that I've never gotten over him. Having to now live in the same town as him is going to be hard—and his obvious displeasure with seeing me is going to make it worse.

After parting ways with Miles in the parking lot, I head for my white Honda Accord Coupe. As I get in and buckle my seatbelt, my cell phone chimes to alert me to a text. Lifting it out of my purse I lift it up to see who it's from. My eyes widen when I see Colin's name on the screen.

Colin: **House. 7pm. Tonight.**

Well, shit.

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Chapter 3



Elena - 9 Weeks Ago

It's so foreign to be here in Nanny and Pop's kitchen without them around. How can it be that they're both just... gone? I bite my lower lip to keep it from trembling as I finish towel drying the large chafing dish. Earlier this afternoon it held the mountain of chicken cutlets the caterers dropped off when we got back from the cemetery. After setting the plate on the area of countertop I've designated for dry dishes, I turn and pick up the final clean platter from the dish drainer and start swiping across the glazed surface with the dishtowel. A hint of a smile plays on my lips as I conjure up an image of Nanny telling me to let the darn things drip-dry. Naturally, thinking of her gets me emotional. Setting the platter and the towel down, I rub my hands over my face.

I startle when I hear a noise from behind me. Spinning around, I see Colin. His black suit jacket is gone, his gray tie is loose, and his white dress shirt has one button undone. His left shoulder is propped against the door jam, and his right hand is comfortably in his pocket like he's been in that position for a while.

Although Colin looks tired—or tuckered out, as Pop used to say—it does nothing to diminish how attractive he is.

His gentle smile causes my mouth to go dry. “I told you not to worry about any of this until tomorrow. Why am I not surprised that you didn't listen?”

I can feel a faint blush spreading across my cheeks as I run a hand over the smoothness of the updo I spent a hell of a lot of time perfecting this morning. "I tried but I just couldn't... Nanny always said that dirty dishes left overnight become the next day's science experiment."

He smiles then, the first one I've seen since the day started. No one ever warns you about just how emotionally draining funerals are.

"She pulled that on me too," he chuckles. "I grew up convinced dirty dishes were the first step to damnation. You know it was just her way of teaching us all to be tidy, right? Science experiments on dishes take more time than a night on the counter."

I gesture toward the window over the sink that looks out to the guesthouse I once called home. "Since my mom was a slob I know exactly how long it takes for the science experiment to happen," I sigh. "Without your grandmother to guide me, I'm fairly certain I'd have wound up just like my mother."

He takes his hand from his pocket and lifts it to the back of his neck and begins to rub at it. "She was a mess," he agrees. "Pop told me if it weren't for you, they'd have booted her out within the first three months."

My brows go up as I lean back against the counter, bracing my hands on the coolness of the granite as I stare at him. "They knew that early on she was like that?"

Colin snorts as he nods. "Couldn't have missed it. Hell, even I knew, and I only caught glimpses. My grandparents..." his voice cracks on the word.

I watch the way his throat moves as he swallows and looks away. He closes his eyes for a second or two, the silence stretching between us before he looks back at me. "They both adored you," he says. "A mess in a house they didn't live in was a small price to pay to have you here where they could see you nearly every day."

My hand goes to my mouth, and I do my best to cover a choked sob as the enormity of his statement hits me. I thought I couldn't love them any more than I did a minute ago, but I was wrong. I'd give anything right now to hug Nanny and Pop one more time and tell them how much they mean to me. Colin crosses the room to me and puts his arms around me as I try my hardest to hold back my tears.

I've cried more in the last few days than I have in the last ten years. Consequently, I've also had Colin hug me more than at any other point in

my life. It's the most pleasant kind of torture, to be held by the man who has long been the object of my affection. The comfort he's offered me in the days since his grandparents passed has been invaluable. I'd be lying if I didn't admit that in addition to the safety and security I find in his arms, I'm also having one of my lifelong dreams fulfilled.

My four-inch heels give me enough height that I'm only three inches shorter than his six-foot-two-inch frame. This allows me to tuck my head under his chin as I take a few measured breaths to get myself back together before I finally feel strong enough to stand up straight. His arms loosen, but he doesn't let me go. When I look up, I find him looking down at me. There's an expression on his face that makes me feel weak in the knees. I nervously run my tongue along my lower lip only to forget how to breathe when his eyes drop to my mouth and his nostrils flare. Holy crap—is Colin attracted to me?

“Leni,” he says huskily. “I wanted to wait—”

The sound of a throat clearing interrupts the moment. Colin’s arms drop as he steps away from me to turn toward the kitchen door. Leaning to the left, I see one of the crew from the party rental place that provided the outdoor seating for the luncheon.

“We've got the tent, tables, and chairs loaded into the truck, Mr. Findlay. I just need you to initial here, and we'll be out of your way.”

“Right, sure,” Colin coughs.

His tone is slightly harried, and I can see the tension in his frame as he walks to the door and accepts the tablet the man is holding out to him. He initials quickly with his finger before he looks back over his shoulder at me with an expression I can't possibly decipher.

“I'm going to walk him to the door and then head upstairs to shower, okay?”

He waits for me to nod before he turns and walks away. Watching him retreat, I can't help thinking about him in the shower—and the fact that we're now alone in the house. For the last four nights, his parents were here as well, but they left directly after the luncheon today since his mom—Mariana—has her four-week post-op checkup tomorrow from her recent knee replacement.

This means that for the first time in my life I'm sharing space with Colin and no one else is around. My room—the one Nanny and Pop

decreed was mine within months of my meeting them— is two doors down from Colin's, the large hall bath the only thing separating our rooms.

After wiping down the kitchen counters and folding the kitchen towel over the handle of the dishwasher, I head upstairs. As I walk past the exterior wall of the bath that Colin and I share, I hear the water running through the pipes. The sound makes me think of him in there, naked, and I feel hot and flushed. I quicken my steps and fling the door to my room open, hurrying inside before closing the door softly behind me. I roll my eyes at myself as I meet my reflection in the full-length mirror on the back of the door. You'd think I just went through some Mission: Impossible obstacle course to get up here.

Laughing at my idiocy, I kick off my heels, pull the pins out of my updo and toss them onto my dresser before heading straight for my bed and dropping backward onto it, arms out wide. Across the room, the door to the Jack and Jill bath Colin and I share is firmly closed. In all the years I've stayed here, we've never had a bathroom run-in, not that I haven't fantasized about it. When we're in the house at the same time we know to knock twice on the door before opening it, and the system has always worked.

Rolling my head from side to side on the bed, I inhale the clothesline-fresh scent of my crisp white bedding. For a second or two it's like nothing has changed and Nanny just had them hanging out in the yard, but then the reality hits all over again. Nanny and Pop are really gone now. The thought of them immediately causes a lump in my throat. Sitting up, I scoot myself back on my bed and settle into a comfy spot so that I can rest my head on a pillow and look around at the one place I've ever felt utterly secure in. Here, I've always known I was loved. Here, I've had no question about my importance.

I love my dad, but a part of me will always be hurt that he spent so long pretending that my mom was parenting. On the other hand, if he'd been more pro-active I wouldn't have had this. And this has been my everything, at least until now. I'm trying my best not to focus on what it will be like not to have this bedroom anymore. The room itself hasn't changed since the year I was eight when the four of us painted it a pale lime green that I'd been obsessed with. I can still remember the way Colin's eyes went wide as he took the lid off the can and saw the color for the first time.

Looking back over his shoulder at me, he smiles. He's always handsome, but his smiles make it over-the-top. "No pink for you, I see," he

teases.

*I scrunch my nose as I set my hands on my hips. "Pink is for babies, Colin. Lime green is for big girls. **Cool** big girls."*

He chuckles as he pours some of the paint into the paint tray Pop set up on the tarp covering the plush cream-colored carpet. "I can't argue with that logic, Little Bird," he jokes. "After all, you are the coolest."

Obviously, he wasn't attracted to me when I was a child, and that didn't change when I was a teenager. For about five seconds during our summer vacation two years ago I'd thought he was looking at me differently, but later I dismissed that as being wishful thinking. Today, down in the kitchen, there was palpable sexual tension between us and I don't know what to think about it. I mean, what's the deal? Should I be dying of embarrassment because he was about to rebuff me— or was he feeling the attraction as strongly as I was? Of course, I wish for the second, but with my luck, he was just about ready to walk on hot coals to get away from me.

I haven't slept well because I've been too keyed up about the sudden loss of Nanny and Pop. The last few days were a flurry of activity to get ready for the funeral. Colin's mom and I spent the first two days I was here creating photo memory boards to display at the funeral home. Then yesterday Colin, his parents and I all worked together to make some of the food for the luncheon. A lot of things we had been able to order from the caterers but before Pop passed he'd mentioned that he wanted to make some of Nanny's favorite dishes. We'd gone all out to whip up several of both their favorite dishes.

Colin and his dad spending five hours out in the yard grilling chicken and ribs while his mom and I whipped up Nanny's favorite blueberry tarts, cherry cheesecake bites, and a five-layer honey-coconut cake. Now that the funeral is over it's like the exhaustion of it all is hitting me in one giant wave. I can't stop yawning, and my eyes keep drifting shut. I love sleep more than most people do, but this kind of tired is on a whole other level.

Forcing myself not to nod off just yet, I stand up and take off my dress, bra, and thigh high stockings. Too tired to hang any of it up or go to the hamper in my closet I drop it in a pile on the floor before I grab the fluffy coral colored throw at the end of my bed. After getting back into a comfortable position on my bed, I pull the throw over me so that I can take a short nap to recharge my battery.

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Chapter 4



Colin- 9 Weeks Ago

I like to believe I'm a decent guy, but right now I'm questioning just how accurate that is. The reason for this is the five-foot-five-inch chestnut-haired beauty who's fast asleep on the bed I'm standing next to. For the record, my intentions coming in here were above board. It's been three hours since I saw Leni in the kitchen and it's well past time for dinner. I texted and called her cell multiple times and then spent a solid minute knocking. When I got no response to any of that, I started to panic. Granted she sleeps at every available opportunity but usually she's easier to wake up. I'm sure the fact that my nerves are still stretched taut after losing Nanny and Pop on the same day played into my panic as well. A series of worst-case scenarios had been playing on a loop in my head as I'd opened the door with the intention of making sure everything was okay. It was supposed to be quick—just a check-in. And then I saw her, and something other than my brain took over.

The bright throw she's got over her may have started out covering her entirely, but right now the top of it is resting just above her belly button, which means she's completely exposed on top. I've been standing here for a good two minutes now fucking transfixed by her unbelievably sexy tits—firm and perky with dusty rose-colored nipples that I'm dying to taste. Then there's her beautiful as fuck face. Poets could write volumes about her lush lips, but I'm no scribe, so all I can say is that Angelina Jolie needs to be

jealous of Leni's mouth. I've spent the last few days jerking off to it multiple times a day because of this girl. Hell, I've spent the two years since the family vacation we took the summer after her freshman year of college getting off thinking about her. I come the hardest when I imagine her lips stretched around my cock as I come into that hot little mouth. Jesus *fuck* I want that.

To get myself under control, I look away from her, then swallow back a groan when my gaze drops to the floor, and I see black silk stockings and a sexy black bra there. I'm so hard right now I can barely fucking think straight, and my dick is all but chanting her name. If I weren't wearing fitted boxer briefs under my black sweatpants, my cock would be tenting out like Pinocchio's nose. The impulse to wake this sleeping beauty up with a kiss is almost impossibly strong.

Closing my eyes, I fist my hands and breathe deeply, nearly losing what little resistance I have as her delicate apricot and honey scent permeates my senses—the same smell that almost had me breaking down and fucking her on the kitchen floor just a few hours ago. I breathe through my mouth and start counting backward from one hundred. By the time I get to eighty-two, I'm in a better place. Cracking my eyes open just enough to be able to see, I quickly grab the blanket and position it over her so she's covered and then tuck it around her. Stepping back, I clear my throat and watch her for a reaction. Nothing. I shake my head in wonder at just how out she is and then reach out to nudge on her shoulder.

"Time to wake up, Little Bird."

The little moan she lets out blows my control to smithereens, and it only gets worse when she licks her lips. I can't decide if the universe is trying to reward or torture me right now. She mumbles unintelligibly when I shake her shoulder again. When she cracks open her eyes and smiles dreamily, I forget to breathe for a second or two.

"Mmm, Colin," she says, her voice husky with sleep.

I damn near fall to the fucking floor. Yeah. This isn't a reward. I'm officially being tortured.

"You have to get up, baby," I croak in a voice that sounds like I just spent fifteen hours in the desert without water. And fuck my life, I just called her baby out loud. I normally save that shit for when I imagine pumping into her tight little cunt. The thin cracks in my resistance are quickly becoming a fucking chasm.

She blinks a few times and yawns sweetly as she goes to sit up. My hand shoots out lightning fast and settles on her shoulder to keep her in place. As soon as I touch her, her eyes go wide. Ah. Now she's awake.

"Pretty sure you're naked under there," I say before I take my hand away.

"I—what? How do you know?"

The expression of confusion on her face shouldn't be sexy, but it is. I shrug as though I'm unaffected as I very fucking reluctantly take two steps back. "I don't know for sure, but your clothes are on the floor, so..." I trail off, letting the implication hang in the air.

"Oh," she murmurs. "Oops."

I swallow thickly as I look away, doing my best not to focus on how badly I want to fuck her through the mattress. "I came in to make sure you were okay," I explain. "I haven't seen you in three hours, and you weren't answering your cell or your bedroom door."

She blushes and bites her lip, a visual I immediately file in my spank bank. "Wow," she says in a breathless sounding voice. "I passed out."

"It's understandable since on a normal day you could sleep anywhere. Today was far more emotionally exhausting than normal. I fell asleep after my shower for about an hour."

I don't mention that in addition to being emotionally wiped out I'd also been wholly spent after I jerked off and came twice in the shower in response to holding her in my arms earlier. The feel of those sweet little tits pressed against my chest was like a hit of pure lust. Thinking of the way she felt in my arms isn't helping me calm down. I know that if I don't get the hell out of this room immediately, I'm going to need to take care of business again. It's a wonder my palms aren't callused and my dick isn't chafing at this point.

"I'm going to go heat up dinner for us so that we can eat something before we go to Benny's to meet Lolo and Sam."

"Ah," she says with a smile. "Thank you for waking me. I'd have been really upset if I slept through SamLo time. I'll be down in a few."

I nod as I take another step back. "Any particular requests from the leftovers?"

She considers for a few seconds. "A piece of barbeque chicken, a cup of Spanish rice and some of the Caesar salad, dressing on the side."

"No macaroni and cheese?"

Elena loves macaroni and cheese, and Lolo made the world's best for the funeral luncheon.

"Can't do it," Elena says with a disappointed sounding sigh. "When we go to the bar with Lolo and Sam I'm going to treat myself to a drink or two. The calories add up. I can't get off course going into this last season."

I hate when she deprives herself of food that she loves. I don't know why it bothers me since it's not as though she starves herself—she's got curves and she's strong and sexy as fuck—but it does. It's admirable that she's so hardcore about maintaining an exact weight because of cheerleading, but sometimes I'd like to see her eat without worrying about it.

"I'm going to whip up our plates while you get ready for our SamLo time," I say as I turn and head for the door. After leaving, I close it behind me and let out a deep breath, silently giving thanks that I survived having a nearly naked Elena within touching distance. Lolo and Sam would tell me that my self-control is beyond stupid at this point, but I disagree. As much as I value their opinions, they're wrong about trying to push me toward Elena before she graduates.

Lolo (short for Lauren) and her wife Sam (short for Samantha) have been my best friends since further back than my memory even goes, which is to say we were hanging out in our cribs together. We grew up in the same neighborhood, so we've always been a trio. For years people would joke that I'd end up with one or the other, but I've known since at least ninth grade that they were going to wind up together—even during the hard times when they were both trying to pretend they weren't gay. As my longest and dearest friends, there aren't any secrets between us. Not because we haven't each *tried* to be secretive about a thing or two, but because we see through each other. This means they are *well* aware of my Elena obsession. I'd been fairly certain they'd tell me I was insane once they figured it out, but that didn't happen. Instead, they're both supportive of it. Whether because they both adore her or because they're sappy-ass romantics at heart, I don't know.

Elena is a one-in-a-million-girl, the kind people search for and never find. She's gorgeous, compassionate, kind, smart and she makes me laugh like no one else. The future I want has her in it—at the very center of it—and there's nothing I won't do to make that happen. The plan—and I'm trying to stick to it—is to wait until Elena graduates college before I make

my play for her. I've been damn firm about that until this afternoon in the kitchen when I almost buckled. Without a doubt, I know that the second we see Lolo and Sam at the bar their Colin-radar is going to ping like crazy. I already know I'll be forced to explain just how close I came to caving in today before the end of the night.

College was where I sowed my wild oats, and I know it was a fundamental transition for me between being eighteen and being a fully functional adult. Trying to tie Leni down would've meant depriving her of the experience, and as much as it has killed me, I believe she needed that. I also didn't think getting into what would primarily be a long-distance relationship with her would've been right. I'd have burned with jealousy sitting in my apartment one state over while she spent her days with frat boys. No, the right thing to do is to let her enjoy all of that without having to worry about a thirty-something boyfriend.

I've come this far—it won't be much longer now. Only one more school year separates me from making my play for her. The way I feel about her isn't small or temporary—if she'll have me I mean to make this permanent. Less than a year now, I remind myself. As I head down the stairs to the kitchen I chant *I think I can; I think I can* in my head.

For the first time in the two years since I realized how deeply I feel for her, I'm not sure I believe that chant anymore. My once iron will is cracking by the hour.

Chapter 5



Elena- Present

My stomach is in knots as I pull down the drive at Nanny and Pop's house and park my car next to Colin's black Jeep Grand Cherokee Trailhawk. This is the first time I've been to the house since the day things blew up and I left in a huff, which also means it's the first time I've been here since the days following the funeral. The emotion of knowing that Nanny and Pop won't be inside is colliding with the anxiety of having to see Colin again and both are making me feel less prepared to deal with this.

Gathering up my courage, I turn off my car, get out and inhale. The scent of Nanny's heirloom roses soothes my soul enough that I'm able to feel a bit calmer. I can do this. Hell, I have to do this because it isn't like I can avoid him forever. We own a home together, after all.



NIGHT After The Funeral

"Yummy," I groan as I set the sugared lemon I sucked after taking a lemon drop shot down on a bar napkin.

"Good stuff, right?"

I grin and give Lolo the thumbs up. “Delicious,” I answer. “In fact, I might even have another.”

“You should slow your roll so you don’t wind up praying to the porcelain god later.”

Lolo, Sam, and I all burst out laughing at the same moment.

“In the last two hours I’ve nursed one beer and now I’ve taken one shot. I’m not anywhere near drunken puke status,” I assure him.

“Funny that you haven’t had a peep to say about the two beers I’ve had or the three fingers of Glenorangie in my glass right now,” Sam points out.

Colin looks abashed for a fraction of a second before he grins and makes a dismissive gesture. “I’m fairly certain that Irish whiskey runs through your veins,” he jokes. “We all know you could drink at least half this bar under the table without breaking a sweat.”

Sam raises her glass in a mock toast. “Factual,” she concedes before taking a sip. “Doesn’t change the fact that a beer and a shot aren’t going to put your Little Bird down, though.”

Colin coined the nickname Little Bird for me during the first year I lived on the Findlay property. He’d started calling me that because I used to swing on the elaborate wooden swing set the Findlays had installed in the yard for me for hours on end. He used to joke that I spent more time in the air than on the ground—something that became even funnier when I took up cheerleading and became a fly girl.

Sam and Colin have some kind of weird stare-off for a few seconds before he inclines his head at her in concession.

It’s not like he can really deny it since it’s very noticeable that Colin is protective of me—more so in the last few years than ever. For some reason he seems to worry more now than he did at any point in time before.

“Who’s up for a game of pool?” he asks.

I’m up and off my bar stool in a blink. “Me! I’m breaking.”

The three of them laugh in unison. “Of course you are!” Lolo snorts. “We don’t call you the ball breaker for nothing.”

I shrug as we begin walking back to the game room that holds four pool tables, six pinball machines and three dartboards. On the weekend, the bar is jam-packed but since it’s a weeknight we’re able to go right to an empty table.

We pair off as we always do—Team SamLo and Team ColEna. We’re evenly matched and we all play the same way because Pop is the one who

taught us how right at his prized mahogany pool table in the basement.

The way we do it is that after the first round the top two players on either team play each other. Colin and I win the first round but since he sank more balls, he's facing off against Sam. After taking a seat at one of the pub tables against the wall, Lolo and I place an order with the waitress for two more lemon drop shots. After the waitress goes to the bar to put in our order, Lolo turns her attention to me.

"Are you ready for tomorrow?"

I scrunch up my nose in confusion. "What's tomorrow?"

"Will reading," she reminds me.

I nod. "Oh, yeah. I was more worried about getting through today. Honestly, I was surprised when Sam's dad said I was included in it at all."

She frowns as she traces her index finger in an infinity pattern on the tabletop. "It's always hard, even when you know what to expect. After my father died and everything was said and done, the thing that hit me the hardest was the will reading. It made it final for me—more than the funeral, even. I'm not sure why."

"I can see that," I say as the waitress slides our two shots onto the table. After paying her, we quickly clink shot glasses before downing the deliciously cold shot and sucking on the sugar-covered lemon wedges to finish the drink off. For the next few minutes, we sit and cheer on Colin and Sam as they blow through their lightning round of pool. When it's all over, Sam is the victor. They high-five before they start going about the re-setting of the table. Once they hang the sticks back in place on the wall, they stand huddled together to talk instead of coming directly to the pub table Lolo and I are at. As the minutes pass without them coming back, I turn to Lolo for a read on the situation. "It looks like they're discussing world peace."

She snorts and watches them for about two seconds before she shrugs. "They're wrapping it up now," she declares.

I see no signs that they're anywhere near finished but damn if she isn't right since they're headed back this way. The three of them read each other so well it's a little like dealing with triplets who have groupthink.

Lolo and I stand from our seats and grab our purses as they walk our way. Although Colin and I have nothing on our agendas, Sam and Lolo both need to work in the morning and it's after midnight now. Even though I took a three-hour nap, I feel exhausted. The last lemon drop shot has me feeling languid, so I'm mostly quiet as we walk to the parking lot. After

exchanging hugs with the girls, Colin and I settle into his car. I love being in the car alone with Colin, especially at night when it's like being in a little cocoon. His Dave Matthews Band playlist is on and right now "Satellite" is playing through the speakers. I yawn as I lean back against the headrest.

"Sometimes I wonder if you'd be able to sleep around the clock if no one woke you up," he says.

"Maybe," I chuckle as my eyes drift shut.

The sound of his car door closing wakes me up a few minutes later. I have just enough time to take my seatbelt off before Colin opens the door for me. "Thought I might have to carry you in," he says.

His husky voice causes an immediate surge of desire to race through my body. Anxious to hide my stiffening nipples I lean forward and grab my purse. Since my bra isn't padded and I'm wearing a fitted off-the-shoulder emperor blue top, I know damn well that they're visible. I clutch my purse to my chest as I step out of his car. The second I put my foot down, I realize my error. Because I didn't look down, I didn't notice where Colin's feet were. The hands I'm clutching my purse with immediately go wide as my foot goes out from under me and I try to balance myself as I start to fall. Colin grabs me and keeps me from going down entirely, but I can already feel my ankle swelling.

My purse is now down on the asphalt but I couldn't care less because my ankle is throbbing. I know this feeling well since I've sprained my ankles cheerleading half a dozen times over the years. The good news is that I've got a few ankle braces upstairs in my room here, so at least there's that. Clutching at Colin's shirt, I look up at him.

"I dropped my purse and I think I sprained my ankle. I'll need to lean on you to make it into the house."

"The hell you will," he growls.

Before I can ask what the heck that means, he's swinging me up into his arms. I startle when he tilts me back and says, "Grab the purse, Little Bird."

Once I reach out my free arm and grab my purse, he closes the car door with his foot and strides toward the side door. This is the one door that Nanny and Pop allowed him to install an electronic door lock. They'd both chosen to eschew the keypad in favor of a traditional key but Colin and I both favor entering the code. When we get to the door, I quickly press the buttons to unlock it. Inside the house, he takes me directly to the living room before setting me down on the couch.

“First let’s get your shoes. Then you can elevate it and I’ll go make an ice pack,” he says as he helps me into a comfortable position. My shoes are easy to remove since I’m wearing a simple pair of slip on leather sandals. Tossing the shoes to the side, Colin crouches down to check out my foot. I hold in a shiver when his hand wraps around my lower leg just above my ankle. Lifting up gently, he looks at the ankle. I’ve got on a pair of black jean shorts and the warmth of his palm against my skin feels electric.

“It’s definitely swollen,” he says quietly. “Are you certain it’s just a sprain? We can head to Urgent Care to have this checked out.”

I shake my head. “It’s definitely a sprain. Sadly I know the feeling well. After I ice it for twenty minutes, if you can take me upstairs so I can pull out one of the ankle braces I keep here. I never wear them to bed but if I’m awake, I can use it for a few minutes.”

He nods as he grabs two of the decorative pillows on the couch and uses them to elevate my foot. “I’m going to go grab the ice. Do you want me to bring you back anything else?”

“Two ibuprofen would be great.”

He returns two minutes later with the ice pack, the pain relievers and a bottle of water, which he opens before handing it to me. I make quick work of swallowing the ibuprofen as he carefully places the ice pack on my swollen ankle.

“So you’re an old hand at sprains?” he asks as he sits down on the wooden coffee table. The way he’s chosen to sit allows him to keep the ice pack in place. I’m selfishly enjoying the way he’s taking care of me.

“It’s kind of an occupational hazard. It’s one of the reasons I’m okay with the upcoming season being my last. It takes a toll in a lot of ways but for me, the biggest issue has been my ankles. You’d know better than anyone how hard any sport is on the body,” I point out.

He lets out a dry laugh as he nods. “So true. I loved football, but I’m not sure I’d have played professionally if I’d known going in that I’d be tearing my ACL. Even though I had surgery, I’ll need to be careful with it for the rest of my life. There’s a reason pro-ballers get such big paychecks. Between the back, knees, ankle, tendon, and head injuries, most players aren’t lucky enough to rock a fifteen-year career like Tom Brady.”

“Do you miss it?”

Colin shrugs as he moves the ice pack a bit to the right. “Not as much as I might have had I not wound up coaching. I still love the game—it’s just in

a different way now.”

“Do you plan to stay where you are?”

“Coaching jobs in Division I teams aren’t a dime a dozen. Right now I’m there but if something else came up…”

I swallow and look away, a flutter of panic in my chest as I consider what it would feel like if he moved across the country. I’ve tried not to focus on it, but I’d be lying if I said I’m not scared about what the loss of Nanny and Pop will mean about our future. Will I still see Colin or will we fade out of each other’s lives? I don’t want to lose him, ever.

“Hey,” he says softly as he sets his free hand down on my leg. “Where’d you go?”

I sniffle and try to regain my composure as I swipe my fingers under my eyes. “It’s just me being a crybaby,” I answer. “I was just wondering how often I’ll get to see you now, especially if you took a job thousands of miles away. I’m… scared. It feels like my whole world is crumbling around me.”

“Hey, hey,” he says soothingly as he gets off the table and crouches down next to me so we’re face to face. “I’m not going anywhere, Little Bird. If anything, in two or three years you’ll be sick of just how much you see me.”

“Never,” I answer, my voice trembling.

When he leans in close and pulls me into his arms, I think my whole world stops turning for a second. I sigh in contentment as I wrap my arms around him and return his hug. Somehow he maneuvers around so that he’s sitting on the couch with me in his lap—all without disturbing my ice pack.

Being held by Colin is like relaxation in a bottle. I yawn as my eyes flutter shut. I smile as I breathe in the smell that’s so distinctly Colin—Calvin Klein One cologne mixed with his natural scent. There’s nothing more comforting.

Colin’s chest rumbles beneath my ear when he says, “You’re tired.”

I nod and snuggle in closer as he shifts forward. “Grab the ice pack and hold on,” he says. I grab the top of the pack and hold on as he stands with me still in his arms. I’d pay really good money to do this every day of my life. I don’t want this to end at all. Now more than ever I need this feeling.

He carries me up the stairs and down the hall like I weigh nothing. My heart pounds at top speed as I try to form words. I know that what I’m about to ask is nuts and perhaps even selfish but I can’t not ask.

“I don’t want to be alone yet,” I blurt anxiously. “Would it be okay for me to chill out in your room with you on the bed and watch some TV until the ice melts?”

Did I mention that the ice pack is insulated and thus will take forever to melt? Although I can’t see his face, I couldn’t miss the way he gulps. “Of course,” he says after a beat. “Anything you need.”

When he strides into his room and sets me down on his bed, I just about combust. How many years have I wanted to be in Colin’s bed? I idolized him as a child, crushed on him as a tween-ager, and then I developed stronger feelings around the time I was fifteen. They’ve only grown as time has gone on.

He’s gentle with me so as not to jostle my ankle as he uses one of his pillows to elevate my foot before he comes around to the other side of the bed and sits down with his back against the headboard. Picking up the remote from the bedside table he turns the television on before handing it off to me.

“You choose. Whatever you’re in the mood for is good with me,” he says.

I raise a brow at him as I accept the control. “You sure about this?” I ask in a teasing tone. “We both know I’m going to take you right from a Sports Center rerun to Nick at Nite.”

“S’all good,” he chuckles as I turn the TV on and do exactly what I said I would. The Fresh Prince is on, which is one of my favorites. I settle into Colin’s side with a smile, enjoying the fact that his bed is a queen size. This means there’s really no room for us to be separated. I can’t contain my giant ass grin when he lifts his arm and wraps it around my shoulders, bringing me in closer to him. I don’t think I’ve ever been this comfortable in my life.

Chapter 6



Elena- 9 Weeks Ago

I feel like I'm in a daze as Colin pulls the car up to the curb and jumps out to get me from the bench I'm on just outside of the offices where Nanny and Pop's will was just read. He's tried to carry me around all day, but for the most part, all I need is an assist to get around. The swelling on my ankle was about eighty percent gone this morning, which is good. Right now I'm so gob-smacked that I'm a little tempted to ask him to carry me over to the car. I won't, but the desire is there.

He watches me carefully as he covers the distance from the car to me. He's been monitoring me closely ever since the reading of the will. Right now I can't say I blame him. I use him for support as I stand, letting out a deep breath as we begin the short walk to his car. After helping me into the passenger seat and buckling me in, Colin shuts my door and walks around the car. Sliding into the driver's seat, he looks over at me.

"You okay?"

"I don't really know," I say softly. "I never, ever expected them to leave me anything at all, much less half of the house."

"They loved you," he says, "and that house is your home. You love it as much as they did—as much as I do. I have no doubt that's why they left it to both of us."

I nod as I bite my lip and look away. I'm touched and emotional about the whole thing, but I'm also scared to death.

“What’s upsetting you about this, Little Bird?” he asks, his voice full of concern.

Focusing on the dashboard, I reach out and brush away a speck of dust.

“Do you think your parents will be angry when you tell them what the will said?” I blurt, finally giving voice to what’s stressing me out.

“What?” he asks in a tone of complete surprise. “No, Leni. Absolutely not.”

Reaching out he softly grips my chin and turns me to face him. “They already know, honey. My dad is the one who told me what to expect, and they aren't angry at all. It makes sense to them, too. Dad already has a house of his own. He and my mom got all of the cash assets my grandparents left behind. Things worked out the way Nanny and Pop wanted, and there's nothing wrong with that at all.”

I breathe out a long, relieved breath as I lean back against the headrest. “You have no idea what a relief that is. Losing any of you—”

“Never,” he vows. “I really wish you wouldn’t worry about this, Little Bird. None of us are going anywhere.”

Words seem so inadequate right now. All I can think to say is, “Thank you.”

Reaching out, Colin takes my hand in his and laces our fingers together. I do my best to keep any surprise from my face as he brings our hands to his lips and kisses the back of mine. “There’s nothing to thank me for,” he says quietly. “I need you just as much as you need me, Leni. Don’t ever forget that.”

I hate to admit that in a lot of relationships in my life it's always been hard for me to truly let go and trust in actual permanence. Granted my dad is in my life now, but he wasn't super-reliable during the first years after the divorce. I view his commitment to me as something he feels he *has* to do as opposed to something he *wants* to do. But with Colin, I have faith. If he says he’ll be there, he will be.

When he places our entwined hands back on my leg and doesn't move to sever the connection, I look out the window to hide my smile. The way he has been here for me these last few days is nothing short of perfection. I spent the entire night in his bed last night and woke up this morning snuggled against him, and he never made me feel weird about it. Instead, I felt warm, protected, content and completely at home. I also felt desired—

but I'm almost afraid to believe that's the case. But right now looking down at our hands, I think I might be right.



COLIN HASN'T LEFT my side at all today and to say that I am enjoying this is a vast understatement of facts. After a dinner consisting of more leftover funeral food—a really delicious baked chicken casserole and a tossed salad—we're now setting up camp in the living room to binge watch *Stranger Things*. We've both been dying to dive into it since people are constantly raving about it so now is the perfect time to give it a try.

He sets me up on the couch first and then uses pillows to elevate my foot on the coffee table. Twisted ankles are a common enough occurrence for me that I barely feel it (and the brace I'm wearing is a huge help), but I'm not about to turn down the TLC from Colin. After turning off the lights and cuing up the show, he settles in next to me—close, but not as close as I want him. I make it through almost the entire first episode before I work up the courage to scoot in closer. He doesn't hesitate to lift his arm so that I can settle into the nook of his arm. Setting my head against his chest, I grin as my heart melts.

As episode two starts he begins running his hand up and down my arm. Immediately the tension in the room rises exponentially, and I'm more and more certain I'm not the only one who feels it as each second passes. Taking a breath for courage, I snuggle in closer as I set my hand down on his jean-clad thigh. He freezes for half a second before he turns his head and looks at me. Because my head is on him, we're now super close to one another—close enough for me to feel his breath as it skates across my lips.

I shiver at the way his coppery brown eyes flash in the dim light. “Leni,” he groans. “Do you know what you’re doing?”

I'm nervous about taking such a massive leap of faith, but I'm doing it anyway. Taking a deep breath, I climb into his lap, careful to keep from hitting my ankle. “Yes,” I say, my voice firm and clear. I'm scared I've gone too far until his hands grip my waist and the heat of his palms warms my skin through the loose cotton of the spaghetti strap dress I've got on.

“Fuck, baby,” he rasps.

Goosebumps break out over my entire body when I see the desire in his eyes. I clench my thighs and bite my lip as I lean in closer, anxious to take the next step. I've dreamt of kissing Colin for years and right now I'm inches away from having that dream become a reality.

"Give me that sexy little mouth," he orders as he uses his hold on my waist to bring my lower body in snug against his.

Jesus, he's hard—and it's all for *me*. My clit throbs and my sex clenches as I slowly lean forward, the hem of my dress raising as I do. His eyes are hooded as he watches me getting closer and closer. Just before I reach his lips, he raises his hands from their position at my waist and takes my face between his hands, halting my movements. I clench again, loving the way he takes control.

One of our phones buzzes on the table behind me but neither of us looks. Ignoring the buzz, he guides me in close enough to kiss me, but stops just short. I open my lips to say something—probably to beg—but I lose all my words when he uses his hands to tilt my head before he begins tracing my lower lip with his tongue. The sensation is so erotically charged I can feel my temperature rising. Unable to stop myself I open my lips and touch my tongue to his. He lets out a harsh groan and bucks beneath me, his hard cock rubbing against my sex through his jeans and my underwear. I whimper as he deepens the kiss, holding me tightly as he does.

I've been kissed before but never, ever like this. This feels like a claiming—a declaration of ownership and I'm absolutely not complaining about that. Lost in the sensation, I hold onto his shoulders as I lean in as close as I can. My nipples harden as I shamelessly rub myself against his chest, moaning as he tears his mouth away.

His breath is as ragged as my own, the sound of both filling the room. Somewhere in the background *Stranger Things* is still going, but all I can think about is Colin.

"Need to touch you," he rasps.

"Yes," I agree without hesitation. "Please."

He drops his hands from my face to my shoulders, toying with the soft thin straps of my dress.

"This dress might not survive," he says.

I bite my lip and let out a husky sound as I grind down on his cock.

"I don't care about the dress."

It's like pouring lighter fluid onto a fire. His hands drop from my shoulders to the hem of the dress. "Lift up," he orders.

The way he takes control is making me crazy. My clit is throbbing, and my nipples have never been harder. Balancing on my knees, I lift my bottom, holding still as he raises the hem to my waist. "Sit and raise your arms."

I do as instructed, shivering as he whips the dress over my head allowing the cold air to brush over my skin. His eyes flash fire as the dress drops, and he realizes that I'm naked from the waist up since there was a sports bra built into the cotton dress. My breasts are a small B cup, but my worry that he might be disappointed is quickly forgotten when he slides his hands up my torso and stops when he reaches them. The combination of his hands on my skin and the look of raw desire on his face as he stares at my tits throws my already aroused body into overdrive.

"Perfection," he growls as his hands move around to my back. I shiver as he begins sliding them ever so slowly down my spine. When he reaches the top of my underwear, he moves a bit faster, gripping my ass in his hands. "Put your hands on my knees and arch your back."

When I comply, he leans forward and licks my right nipple. The heat of his tongue against the stiffened peak is everything. Needing a better grip, I let go of his knees and transfer my hands to his shoulders one hand at a time. He groans as I rock back and forth against him, the friction of his hard length beneath his jeans hitting me just right. It feels like my body is on fire internally as he divides his time between my breasts, licking, sucking, and gently nibbling each one. Every scrape of his jaw against my sensitive skin is like a thousand points of pure sensation.

I groan when he lifts his head and looks up at me. "Kiss me," he says.

When our lips fuse, the kiss is one hundred percent carnal, so perfect it takes my breath away. There's an intensity to this that goes so far beyond anything I ever imagined—and believe me, I've spent hours dreaming about what this moment might feel like if it ever happened. I'm grinding on him faster, the need inside of me so acute that all I can focus on is the pleasure. I tear my mouth from his and let out a tortured sound when he traces his fingers over the top of my simple pink cotton bikini panties. When he slides beneath the elastic, I damn near forget how to function. I watch his face as he focuses on the sight of his hand touching my skin beneath the cotton and nothing has ever looked sexier.

“Fuck, Little Bird,” he groans, “you’re so wet.”

My breath leaves me in a whoosh when his middle finger starts rubbing circles against my clit. “Colin, so good,” I whimper.

“I knew it’d be fucking perfect to hear you calling out my name. Only thing that’s going to make this any better is getting to taste this little pussy,” he murmurs.

I squeak in surprise as he stands up, spins around and lays me down on the couch. Grabbing the sides of my panties he drags them off of me in one fluid motion, leaving me completely exposed to his gaze.

“So motherfucking perfect and sexy,” he says as he gets onto the couch between my legs. Raising my right leg, he sets my ankle up on the back of the couch so that it's elevated. Once he's satisfied with my comfort, he slides his hands beneath my ass and raises me up. I barely have time to blink before his mouth is on me.

It’s almost embarrassing how loud I’m being as he works me over with his tongue, but judging by the way he’s watching me with heated eyes as he does it, I know he’s enjoying every second. The feel of his stubble against my sensitive inner thighs is incredible.

“Oh Jesus,” I gasp as his tongue swirls faster. Reaching down, I thread my fingers through his hair, holding on as he sucks my clit into his mouth.

“Colin!” I cry, my body beginning to tremble as he applies more pressure. “Yes! Now!”

The orgasm hits me hard, the magic of it racing through my veins as he slows down and moves his tongue from the very tip of my clit but doesn’t stop licking me. I let out a gasp when he slides his finger against my opening, slowing circling it. Lifting his head, he grins devilishly as he slowly starts pushing inside.

“You’ll like this next one even better,” he promises, “but the one after that where you come all over my dick will be your fav—”

His sudden stop confuses me. Looking down, I see him staring up at me wide-eyed.

“What is it?” I ask.

“You’re a virgin,” he whispers.

Right at that moment, I realize I’m feeling his finger against the evidence of that very thing. I nod and cock my head. “Does it matter?”

His eyes bulge out almost comically. “*Does it matter?*” he asks incredulously. “Leni, this isn’t at all what—”

The sound of the kitchen door opening stops everything on a dime. “Since you didn’t text back with your order we got you hot fudge sundaes,” Lolo calls.

“Stay in the kitchen!” Colin yells.

Scrambling off the couch, I grab my dress and underwear and race for the stairs, ignoring the twinge of my ankle.

Somehow he gets rid of Sam and Lolo without me seeing them. I wonder what they thought when he called out for them to stay in the kitchen, but assume I’ll never know. When he knocks on my bedroom door and says we need to talk my stomach plummets.

Everything he says after that is nothing but a series of words that tell me one thing—he thinks being with me would be a mistake.

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Chapter 7



Elena- Present

As I turn to walk around my car to go to head to the house, Colin opens the side door. I swallow thickly as his gaze connects with mine as I cross the driveway and then brush past him at the side door, which he holds open for me. I wrinkle my nose as I smell something unfamiliar to the house hanging in the air but then forget all about it as Colin continues to hold my gaze as he closes the door behind him.

“I was afraid you wouldn’t come. I’m glad you’re not avoiding me anymore.”

My pulse speeds up as I spin on my heels and cross my arms over my chest.

“You think *I’ve* been avoiding *you*?” I ask, my tone one of clear disbelief. “That’s rich, all things considered. You’re the one who said I needed to focus on myself and finish out college—all while I begged you to reconsider. Then you disappeared into thin air and stopped calling or writing.”

He sighs and leans back against the door.

“Don’t twist things around, Little Bird. I called you *every day* for three weeks, and you didn’t answer the damn phone even once. I let up because I could see you were angry and needed time to stew.”

“You’re damn right I was angry. You made it seem like my being a... a virgin,” I continue after a pause, “somehow made me defective. You have

no clue how humiliating that was. Yeah, you called but after the way things shook down, you should've realized why I wasn't answering. I was embarrassed. And what? Now you're just—" I gesture to the room around me "—here?"

"Yes, I'm here. I'm *home*," he stresses. "But to be perfectly blunt, today hasn't gone the way I'd hoped, and I've spent the hours since you left the gym wondering if I'm too damn late. Is there something you want to tell me, Leni?"

I don't know what the hell that means, and I'm too agitated to decipher it.

"Too late for what?" I snap. "You didn't even see me in the gym today! I might as well have been invisible, and I wasn't even fifteen feet from you. Not once did I see you looking through the crowd for me even though you had to know I was there. Do you have any idea how badly that hurt?"

Putting his hand up to the back of his neck, he rubs at it as if he's stressed. "Of course I knew you were there, Leni. I always know where you are, even if you think I don't. You have no idea how fucking difficult it was not to look your way today, but it had to be done. If I want to keep this job—and keep us in the position of living in this house full time—I needed to keep to my end of the agreement, which was something I was hoping to discuss with you. Meanwhile none of that really fucking matters right now after what I saw in the gym this afternoon."

I'm so confused I must look like Britney Spears judging the X Factor, and it's surprising that there are not little birds circling my head. "What did you see in the gym this afternoon?"

Colin frowns as he drops his hand from behind his neck. "Miles was all fucking over you, Leni. It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that you've transitioned from just friends to—" he grimaces as he looks away "—Lovers," he finishes a second later.

Did I say I was confused a second ago? Back then I was only slightly off-kilter. Now I'm stunned.

This big lug is so exasperating! After admitting to actively ignoring me in the gym, he pulls this craziness out of his ass?

"Miles is my best *friend*," I remind him. "Always has been and always will be. He is not now, nor will he ever be, anything other than that. It'd be like you sleeping with Sam or Lolo. We're no more and no less affectionate

than you are with them. There's nothing sexual between the three of you and nothing sexual with Miles and me. He's like a brother—"

I get no further because in the blink of an eye he's covered the space between us. With one arm he pulls me against his chest. His free hand traces the curve of my face as he leans in close and covers my mouth with his. If I live to be one hundred and nine, I'll never get over the way it feels to be kissed by Colin Findlay because he owns me with each and every one.

My senses are overloaded with Colin—the taste, the feeling of his muscular body beneath my fingers, the scent that I'm insanely addicted to. I haven't seen him in weeks, but there's absolutely no discomfort. Being in his arms is where I feel most at home.

I shiver as he threads his fingers through my hair just above the nape of my neck, the gesture proprietary, and oh-so-him. I grumble as he lifts his lips from mine, unwilling to break the connection. Taking control, I reach up, grab his chin and pull him back in to extend the kiss. His warm chuckle tells me that he has no problem with my forcing the issue.

Suddenly we're moving. It's my turn to laugh when I feel the counter behind me. Gripping my waist, he lifts me up and sits me on the edge before pulling his lips away again. Raising his hands, he cups either side of my face and looks at me.

"God, I fucking missed you. These past two months have been torture, baby. If you ever spend so much as two minutes avoiding me again, I'm going to lose my shit."

I can't help narrowing my eyes. "You're the one who told me we were making a mistake," I remind him.

"How you took it is not at all what I meant to say," he growls. "You make it sound like I said I didn't want to be with you and *nothing* could be further from the truth."

"Well, that's what I heard," I admit. "To me, every word out of your mouth sounded an awful lot like someone who wanted to get as far away from me as possible."

"What I was trying to say back then—apparently poorly—was that I didn't think it was fair to *you* to start a long distance relationship. You kept your virginity for a reason, and I didn't want to do anything to take away from how monumental that is. Making love and then being separated from you wasn't okay with me. You're young and in college and I'm—"

I raise my hand between us and slap it over his mouth. "I swear if you say old I'm going to pitch a fit. The argument was ridiculous then, and I guarantee it'll be the one thing in this room that hasn't aged well if you say it again."

He chuckles before nipping at my palm playfully so that I'll remove my hand. "What I'm saying is that I want a lot from you, Leni. I needed you to have the option to wait, especially once I knew you were a virgin. Me living two hours away and you dealing with college douchebags hitting on you all the time wasn't how I wanted us to start our relationship."

My eyes go wide at his use of the *R*-word.

"Relationship?" I ask with an endless well of hope in my tone.

"You see me here right now?" he asks.

I nod.

"I came home for you because I'm in love with you. Relationship is way too fucking tame a way to describe what I want us to share."

A huge smile breaks out on my face as I lean in closer. "I love you, too," I murmur.

As his lips cover mine, I don't think I've ever been happier—until a dose of reality slaps me upside the head. Tearing my mouth from his, I grimace.

"But what about the university? They made it very clear today that if anyone gets caught, shit will hit the fan. I don't want you to lose your job!"

"They can't catch us doing what they already know about," he says dryly.

I cock my head and wrinkle my brow in confusion. "What?"

"As soon as you ghosted out of here like a thief in the night I knew I needed to do whatever it took to move here permanently. I might've said it wrong, but the thought behind my words was right. Long distance relationships are hard, and I didn't want that for us. Two days after you left, I heard about Coach Adams from Sam's dad. Mr. Lewis is tight with President Rothstein, so he didn't hesitate to sit in as a consultant on some of the legal aspects of the separation between the university and the coach. He put my name forward as a candidate and Rothstein and Dean Pritchard were immediately interested because I'm alumni."

He's ever so gently rubbing his hands up and down my sides as he speaks which is making it just a bit difficult to follow along.

"I stretched the truth a little during my interview and told the dean that you and I have been together for a long time. I kept to the truth when I told

him it's so serious that we own a home together."

My eyes go wide with surprise. "You did?"

"I knew it was the only way to get them on board. They needed to be aware that we aren't having some tawdry affair, and that settled it for them. If you were anything other than a senior, or if I were your teacher or coach, it would've been a harder sell. In the end, they made the exception because the cache of having a former member of the NFL who also happens to be an alum was too damn perfect for them to pass up. Rothstein asks that we keep it respectful and not flaunt the relationship on campus, but otherwise we're good to go."

I can't contain the shit-eating grin that is spreading across my face. Colin moved here for me—for us. Holy shit there's an *us* now. This is happening. We've said the words. We're in love, and now we're together.

"So we'll get to see each other a lot now that you're home," I say happily.

"Hope so," he says with a strangled laugh, "since I'm thinking we'll be living together."

Holy crap. He's really, really serious about this. No hesitation at all.

"Really?" I squeak, the excitement I'm feeling very apparent in my tone.

"Yes, really. When you love someone you want them with you all of the time. That's how I feel for you, Leni. Our future starts now. In fact, I have something to show you."

Lifting me from the counter, he carries me through the kitchen and the living room and then up the stairs. The scent I noticed when I first walked in gets stronger as he goes up the stairs. I've only ever smelled something like this in a new home. I open my mouth to ask him what it is only to lose the train of thought entirely as he crests the top of the stairs and I see the hall which has been freshly painted. The carpet is gone, replaced by beautiful espresso hardwood floor. The biggest shock is that where once there were two doors on the left side of the hall—one for his bedroom and one for mine—there's now a set of double doors in the middle, where the wall for the bathroom used to be.

"What did you do?" I whisper.

He laughs as he comes to a stop in front of the double doors. "I made us a home, Little Bird. I knew neither of us was going to want to move into Nanny and Pop's room—so I had some work done. This is our master and I

turned what was their giant room into two smaller rooms. It worked out to be an even swap, space wise.”

When he turns the handle to our bedroom—holy shit, Colin and I have a bedroom—my jaw drops. It’s absolutely positively perfect. The espresso floors are accented with a giant area rug that sits under a black four post king-sized bed covered in the most gorgeous duvet set. The furniture and the linens are just some of the things I’ve been coveting at Pottery Barn for the last year. I sniffle at the same time I laugh because this tells me Lolo and Sam helped decorate. They know how much I love Pottery barn because I spent weeks shopping with them when they redid their house last year.

“It’s perfect,” I murmur, my voice thick with emotion. “You did all this in eight weeks?”

He snickers as he carries me through the room to a large barn-style door on the wall. When he slides it to the left, I find myself looking into the world's most stunning bathroom.

“Not eight weeks, baby. It was five from beginning to end up here. They’ll be here next week to run the hardwood all throughout the downstairs as well but all the furniture and décor down there is on you. I think Lolo and Sam were ready to fucking strangle me having to guide me through it up here.”

I giggle as he sets me down in the middle of the bath. Running to the glass shower wall, I let out a long sigh of contentment as I open the large door in the center. The massive bathtub takes up a large portion of the right side, but the entire left is dominated by showerheads on the ceiling and the walls. There's a long bench and tons of insets for shampoo, conditioner and body wash. This couldn't be more perfect. For years I've dreamt of having a separate wet room, and now, I have one. Looking over my shoulder at Colin who has been assessing my reaction, I wiggle my eyebrows. "Get ready to spend a *ton* of time in here," I tease.

“I’ve *been* ready,” he answers huskily.

I walk out of the wet room directly into his arms, hugging him tightly. Standing on my tiptoes, I rain kisses on his face. "You did really, really good."

Chapter 8



Elena- Present

"**Y**ou keep doing that, and we won't make it into the closet," he says huskily.

I'm all for clothes but if I'm picking up what he's putting down correctly I really, really want not to make it into the closet right now.

"I'll take door number two," I say cheekily. "Show me. It's fine with me if we don't make it into the closet until much, much later."

Colin laughs, grips me by the waist and lifts me up and off of my feet in one fluid movement. I laugh and wrap my legs around his torso as he carries me into the bedroom. Into our bedroom. As much as a part of me is screaming 'pinch yourself bitch, this can't be real life'—I know down to my marrow that nothing has ever been more real. I've never been more grounded in reality even though my feet feel like they'll never touch the ground again.

We both laugh when he rips the comforter down before dramatically plopping me on our bed so that I bounce a little. "Mm," I grin. "Comfy. I think I'm going to love this bed."

Coming to the edge of the bed he stands between my legs before placing his hand behind my neck as he grins down at me. "I think you're going to love the things we do in this bed even more," he says. The promise in his voice makes my nipples hard.

"Kiss me," I say, just loud enough for him to be able to hear.

"Always," he answers before swooping in and doing just that.

Again, the way this man kisses is a form of art. I lose myself in it completely, many minutes passing as we learn each other all over again. Kissing Colin is like coming home and walking through fire. When he lifts his head and breaks the kiss, I'm breathing like someone who just ran a 5k. I start to pout but quickly stop when he tugs at the hem of my shirt before he starts pulling it up. Raising my arms up, I let out a happy sound when he pulls it over my head before tossing it toward the end of the bed. Crouching down, he pulls off my Converse and my ankle socks before standing.

His eyes blaze with unchecked desire as he takes in my periwinkle pushup bra. "You're so gorgeous," he groans. "Did you know that ever since the summer we went to the beach at the end of your freshman year I've been fucking obsessed with you?"

Approximately eight trillion butterflies take flight in my stomach. "Really?"

He looks into my eyes as he nods. "You're without compare, Leni. One day you were just as you'd always been. The next, you were everything. It scared the ever-loving fuck out of me at first because of the age difference. Now I just love you too much to care," he admits as he traces circles over my stomach with his right index finger.

I lift my hand to reach out and cover his. "I love you too. So, so much."

The rest of my clothes and then his are peeled away layer by layer between soul deep kisses that mean more than any words ever could. When I get my first look at Colin naked, I lose my breath. Clothed he's spectacular. Naked, he's a god. If I were an artist, I'd paint pictures or chisel his likeness out of marble. When he spreads my legs and starts trailing kisses down my naked body, I feel combustible. The first time he did this I didn't know what to expect. Now that I know how good his mouth feels on me, I can hardly wait to retake the ride.

The first swipe of his tongue against my center has me arching my back and crying out his name. "Fucking love the taste of you," he growls as he slowly pushes a finger inside. A few minutes later he adds another. I feel stretched and full with just the two fingers, but I know that in a few minutes I'll be feeling a hell of a lot more than that.

He's playing with me now—getting me to the point where I'm about to come before he backs off and leaves me wanting more and I'm so turned on it hurts. By the fifth time he does it, I'm ready to explode.

"Please," I beg on a keening wail. "Make me come."

I hear him groan as he swirls his tongue over my clit faster, applying the perfect amount of pressure. My body races toward ecstasy as I chant, "Don't stop, don't stop, don't you dare stop."

When he comes up over me without letting me come, I let out a harsh sound. "Please, please," I beg.

Settling between my legs, he rubs his cock back and forth against my clit. "You want to come, Leni?"

I nod, the movement frantic. "Yes," I whimper.

He stops the back and forth movement to grip his cock and place it at my entrance. Feeling him there, knowing he's about to be inside me is heady stuff. I grasp his shoulders and look into his eyes as he slowly moves forward. My eyes go wide as I feel him making his way in.

"Start making circles on your clit," he rasps.

My hand is a little shaky as I reach between us to do it. All of his work has left me slippery and desperate for release, which means I'm more focused on that than the impending pain.

"Elena," he groans as he sinks deeper. "Fuck, Leni."

I move my fingers faster, clenching around him as he moves his hands to my waist. "Now," he growls.

When he surges forward, I lose my breath for a second or two before I gasp for air. Keeping one hand on my hip, he slides the other between us and takes over rubbing my clit. With my hands free, I grip his back and hold on as he starts rocking in and out. The feeling of him so deep and so full inside of me is like nothing I ever could have anticipated.

Soon the bed is rocking beneath us as he picks up speed, his fingers and his cock working together to make me insane. "Colin," I gasp as he pumps deeper and harder. "Oh, fuuuck," I whimper. "Like that. Right thereeeeeee!"

The way it feels to come with him inside of me is indescribably good, but it gets even better when he yells my name and finds his release. The heat of his cum is so intense that it makes my orgasm stronger.

"Fucking so good," he groans as he jerks inside of me.

When it's over, he stays inside me for another minute or two, kissing along my neck and murmuring about how much he loves me before pulling out. The feeling of losing him is not my favorite. Lying down at my side he pulls me into his arms and kisses me softly.

"That was the best I've ever felt," he says. "Fucking loved coming inside you, Leni. Know I'm putting it all out there, but I have to tell you, I can't wait to fill you up when you aren't on birth control."

My eyes widen in surprise. "You want to have a baby?"

"Yeah," he answers with a grin. "About four seconds after you graduate I'm going to start begging you to let me knock you up. Fuck," he laughs. "Even thinking of you pregnant is making me hard again."

My smile has to be big enough to be visible from space. "Kids," I murmur.

"The whole nine yards, baby. We're going all the way."

Yes. Yes, we are.

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Chapter 9



Elena- Present

I get three steps inside the front door before I hear an exaggerated cough. Looking toward the couch, I'm not surprised to find Miles lounging on it.

"Lucy, you've got some 'splainin to do."

"Um, what do you mean?"

"Don't play dumb. My antenna went up the second I got the text from you at ten last night letting me know you were spending the night at the house. That you're prancing in here just after dawn wearing a hoodie that's for someone much, much taller than you—someone with a penis I'm guessing—is a dead giveaway."

So much for sneaking in and avoiding this conversation until later after I've loaded up on coffee. Colin and I were up off and on all night, touching, talking... and making love two more times. I've never been happier but I'm exhausted, and I admit that I'm anxious about having this conversation with Miles. If he's mad about my misleading him for so long, I don't know what I'll do. Letting out a long sigh, I brace for the coming inquisition.

"Well—"

"And what stands out for me about this deviation from your normal pattern of behavior," he continues, completely ignoring my attempt to speak, "is that Colin's home. Well, that and the fact that the hoodie you're

wearing is from his previous university. Anything you want to say about that?"

The jig. Is. Up. Without hesitating another second, I haul ass across the room and plop down on the couch next to Miles.

"Don't be mad," I say pleadingly.

He shakes his head, tosses an arm over my shoulders and kicks his feet up on the coffee table. "I'm not mad, I'm relieved. You have any idea how many times over the years I've tried to get you to admit you were crushin' on Findlay? Probably hundreds. I'll give you credit—you played it so cool that I started to doubt what I'd been able to see with my own eyes. Doubted it so much that I was half convinced you were secretly in love with me and just couldn't say it. Talk about a fuckin' nightmare, E. I love you to death, but I couldn't lay pipe in you."

I shudder and make a gagging noise as I slap my hand down on his leg. "Love you sooo much it's borderline ridiculous— but if your p ever even tried to come near my v, I'd die. Incest is not best. I don't even care that technically we're not related—you're the only brother I'll ever have. And also the only one I'll ever want, too," I throw in for good measure.

He throws his head back and laughs. "Kiss ass. I'll forgive you on one condition."

I'm no fool. His conditions are always crap, and I know it. "How much is it going to cost me?" I ask suspiciously.

"It's free. My laundry hampers are overflowing, and they've got your name all over them."

I love Miles, but my God is it annoying how much he hates doing his wash. He's got four giant hampers in his closet—the fact that he's saying they're overflowing means there's like six hampers worth of laundry. Total pain in the ass but if it gets him to forgive me for being a tool, I'll drag it to the house now that I have a laundry room and have it all finished in less than two hours.

"Just confirming— once I do the laundry you'll forgive me for being a dummy?"

"If that laundry is clean, folded and put away, I'll write the whole thing off. But from now on, no more secrets. Ever."

"None," I vow.

Miles holds out his free hand, pinky extended. Lifting my right hand, I chuckle as we pinky swear.

"Now I'm going to put it to the test," he announces. "You still a virgin?"
My face feels hotter than a bottle of fresh hot sauce. "Nope."

"Heh." He laughs. "Guess I'm going to have to start calling you teacher fucker."

"Hey! He's not a teacher."

"Semantics," he retorts. "He's off limits as hell, and if you get caught, he's losing his job."

"You're wrong about that."

"How?"

I spend the next ten minutes filling him in on everything that's gone down, pinching myself from time-to-time as I realize that this is all happening.



ELENA

Six Weeks Later

"BABY, did you move my lucky hat? I put it here on the counter before I left for work this morning. I need it for game day tomorrow, but now it's gone."

I chuckle as I peek my head out our bedroom door to yell down to the kitchen. "It's up here. Come get it."

Hearing his footsteps on the stairs, I race across the room and jump up onto our bed, positioning myself, so I'm sitting right at the edge facing the door. Naked—save for the hat on my head.

"Trying to steal my—"

His words fade away when he sees me. I giggle when his giant smile morphs into a predatory look. "Fucking look at you," he growls as he crosses the room to me.

I hold out my hand, halting his movements. "Get naked and wait for further instruction, Coach."

"You taking charge today?"

I grin and wiggle my brows. "I so am."

He groans before he quickly divests himself of his shoes, socks, team shirt, black athletic pants and gray boxer briefs. As always, he takes my

breath away. Naked Colin might be my very favorite thing in the world.

"What now?"

I crook my finger at him in a come-hither motion. When he reaches the bed, I motion for him to stop before I reach behind me and grab a pillow. Climbing off the bed I walk around to stand in front of him before I drop the pillow on the floor and get down on my knees. He watches me through hooded eyes, his expression reverential as he takes off the hat I'm wearing and tosses it over his shoulder.

"Seems like I'll be needing hair grip," he growls.

I lick my lips slowly as I stare into his eyes and slowly begin running my hands up his thighs. "Looks that way," I agree.

When I reach his upper thighs, I gently scratch my nails down a few inches before repeating the maneuver on the way back up. Just when I'm back where I started I lick my tongue over his swollen head to collect the pre-cum at the tip. His cock jerks against my tongue as a gravelly sound escapes his throat. His gaze is trained on my tongue as I trace circles over the tip. "Fuuuuck," he groans.

Opening my mouth I slide forward, taking in a few inches of his thick length. His hands thread through my hair as he swallows thickly. "Baby. God. Fuck."

Wrapping my left hand around the base of his shaft, I twist it up and around in time with the up and down motion of my head. With my right hand, I scratch my nails against his skin. The inside of his ankle, the sensitive spot just above his knee, the top of his inner thigh and then his pubic bone all make him crazy, as evidenced by the way his breath is coming in gasps and his fingers are tight in my hair.

"Oh God," he gasps as I take him deeper, sticking out my tongue and breathing through my nose so that he can hit the back of my throat. I start moving faster, watching as his eyes turn to liquid fire. Seeing how much he loves this gets me so, so wet. Needing to touch myself, I stop scratching at his skin and slide my hand between my thighs. I shiver as I rub my clit while he fucks my face, moaning as sensation races through my body.

"Stop! Stop," he growls as he pulls himself out of my mouth.

Lifting me up from the pillow he spins me so that I'm facing the bed. "Hold on," he orders.

I shiver as I grip the comforter. He wraps his left arm around my waist at the same time he rubs his cock against my opening. "So goddamn hot,"

he groans. "So fucking wet. I can't wait to feel this all over my dick."

"Colin," I gasp as he slowly surges forward.

"Love watching your tight little cunt taking my cock," he says in a gravelly voice. "Looks so fucking good wrapped around me, baby."

"Oh God," I cry as he pulls out and then slams back in, deep.

Settling his hands at my waist, he starts pushing and pulling me back and forth. The slap-slap-slap of skin on skin fills the room as he fucks me harder and faster.

Letting go of my right hip, he brings his hand between my legs and starts rubbing my clit. It's so good I can barely breathe. Arching my back, I scream out his name as I feel the first flutters of my orgasm starting. Knowing I'm there, he focuses on what he calls my sweet spot. "Colin," I moan. "I'm coming. Oh fuck, I'm coming!"

As my pussy clenches around him, I feel him jerking inside of me. "Baby, fuck," he yells.

The heat of his cum inside me makes me shiver and moan louder as my orgasm crashes through my body. He fucks like a goddamn machine when he comes, burying everything he has to give deep, deep inside of me. When it's over, he pulls out, turns me around and puts me up on the bed before he gets on next to me, takes me into his arms and starts kissing me.

After several minutes of making out, he raises his head and smiles down at me. "That was one hell of a welcome home, baby. Have I told you lately how much I fucking love you?"

I grin as I run my hands over his cheek scruff. "It's been at least an hour since the last time you said it."

He laughs as he drops another soft kiss on my lips.

"Love you, Leni."

Wrapping my arms around him, I snuggle his chest and smile. "Love you, too."



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Epilogue

Elena- 5 months later

"Sometimes I still find it hard to believe you moved out one day after school started and left me home alone," Miles sighs.

Looking across the island to where he's seated, I shrug and continue slicing the yellow squash, zucchini, and baby carrots I'm about to put into my vegetable steamer. When I finish cutting the last vegetable, I gesture toward him with the tip of knife and smirk.

"I moved out, but it's hardly accurate to say I left you all alone considering you live out in the guest house Monday through Thursday nights," I point out. "You get all the home-cooked meals and reminders to study to keep you on track and then Friday through Sunday you get to act like a fool without me giving you the stink eye. It's perfect for both of us—me in particular since I no longer have to hear *the ohhhhh, Miles* chorus," I mimic in a breathy voice, "nine zillion times each week through your bedroom wall. The last five months have been *phenomenal* without that making my eardrums bleed at regular intervals," I joke.

He rolls his eyes and waves away my complaint. "I see what you're saying, but I'll always be a little salty that you never confirmed he was your jam until five minutes before you announced you were moving out."

For the most part, he's joking, but he takes some pleasure in giving me shit for being a secret keeper. "First of all, I did eleven loads of laundry for you that afternoon. Second, I feel like this is why you're the yin to my

yang," I say sweetly as I turn the steamer on. "You've always over shared, and I was too embarrassed to admit being in love with an older man I thought I had no chance with."

"Really?" My favorite voice laughs as he walks in the side door. "I think we both know it was *me* who never stood a chance, Little Bird."

Colin and Miles greet each other by way of the traditional bro lifted chin gesture before my man makes his way directly to me like a heat-seeking missile.

"Missed you," he says after kissing me stupid.

I smile as I rub my fingers over his sexy stubble. "It's only been four hours since I saw you in your office," I remind him.

His shit-eating grin makes me blush. Although we've never flaunted our relationship, we've made good use of his private office many, many times.

The sound of fake gagging from the counter makes us both laugh. "That's my cue to leave," Miles says. "Text me when dinner's ready."

After the door closes behind Miles, Colin pulls me in for a real kiss. We put the next half hour to good use up in our bedroom, just the way I like it.



Colin- 2 years later

"Look, Gracie—Daddy's home!"

I will never, ever tire of hearing my wife's voice or the sound of our eleven-month-old daughter calling out, "Da-dee, da-dee," happily as she sees me come around the corner into the living room. Gracie is sitting on Elena's lap, smiling and waving to welcome me home from work. Pulling my phone from my pocket, I slide my finger across the screen and pull up the camera. I take a few pictures— by this I mean somewhere in the neighborhood of ten, which is par for the course anytime I start taking photos, which is often. There's no possible way I can ever take enough pictures of these beauties.

Setting the phone on the end table, I crouch down in front of Elena and open my arms, laughing as Gracie throws herself into them. My daughter is so much like her mother; fearless in the way she takes every leap always knowing someone will catch her before she can hit the ground. I've had to

let go of giving her Uncle Miles shit for tossing her around the air because it makes her too happy for me to be a dick about. It's not like he doesn't have a stellar track record of keeping my girls from being hurt.

When I married Elena two days after her college graduation, I never imagined I could love her more than I did right then. I was wrong. Having Gracie—a part of both of us—has only brought us closer together. After accepting and returning a dozen sloppy baby kisses, I lean forward and kiss Elena's growing belly before arching my neck up to kiss her. The slide of her tongue against mine is the perfect welcome home. Any motherfucker who tells you that they don't find their wife sexy as fuck during pregnancy is a douchebag. Elena is always gorgeous—always—but Christ is it hot watching her body go through the stages of pregnancy. It's absolutely the reason behind her being six months pregnant when Gracie isn't a year old yet. If I have my way, Elena will be knocked up again sometime next year—and then one more for good measure a year or so after that. We're both only children, but we both agree that we want our own family to be bigger than that.

Our kiss comes to an end when our daughter's tiny baby fingers poke at our faces. We break apart laughing and Gracie giggles along with us as I stand and then sit down next to Leni. With our daughter comfortably settled on my lap, I turn to face my wife.

“How’s Connor doing?” I ask as I run my free hand over her belly.

The feel of our son kicking from inside her stomach never gets old. I was mesmerized by it the entire time Grace was in there, and that is equally true with Connor.

“Any thought we had about him being like Pop since he’s named after him is quickly fading away,” she jokes as she sets her hand down over mine. The sparkle of her engagement and wedding rings a visual reminder of some of the happiest days of my life. “This kid is a kicker—just like his dad. I won’t be surprised if he’s born wearing a team jersey.”

I can’t help my laugh. “Like father, like son. Guess that means we’re in for it.”

Leni smiles as she leans into me and sets her head on my shoulder. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Neither would I. Our home is filled with love and through our children, the legacy of my grandparents and the love they had for me and, more

importantly, for this beautiful and amazing woman that I am so fucking lucky to call mine, lives on.

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About the Author



Ella Fox is the USA Today Bestselling Author of Consequences of Deception, The Hart Family series & many other sexy and exciting books.

Ella is an avid reader, lover of music and all around goofball. She grew up loving to read. That's not surprising considering the fact that her mom is USA Today Bestselling Author Suzanne Halliday!
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I Don't

Chapter One



The timing of the interruption was impeccable, so I wasn't about to complain. Hours spent slumped over a computer were hell on my spine. I was delighted for an excuse to take a break and look away.

I quickly rolled my neck from side to side to alleviate some of the tension while reminding myself that I'd wanted a nine to five job. The shrill tone sounded a third time before I picked up.

"This is a case of perfect timing," I yawned. "I desperately needed to stretch and look away from my monitor."

"Uh, Ava?"

My left brow arched at the uncertain tone of Ben's voice.

"That's my name, don't wear it out," I answered dryly. "I feel like you already knew that since you're the one who called me. What's up?"

"There's... well, a man is on the phone for you."

I assumed it was my boss, a man who was a perfectionist unlike any I'd ever known. Whenever he called, it was because something was not to his exacting standards. I wondered if I'd inadvertently messed up a column in

one of my spreadsheets. I tried so hard, but like every other employee at Keeping Track, I had been on the receiving end of more than one talking-to.

I stifled a groan. "It's Mr. Gretchen isn't it?"

The sound of Ben's elevated breathing filled the silence. "Um, no," he answered, "this is most definitely not Mr. Gretchen."

"Well, since you're acting weird I have to assume it's someone unusual. Is it the President? Bill Gates? Oh, wait. I know. It's Ryan Reynolds. If I've told him once, I've told him a dozen times not to call me at work—"

"Not even close. This man—he says he's your fiancé."

All the blood left my head, and my heart stopped beating for several seconds. When it resumed pumping, I tried assuring myself I was asleep. Yep, that had to be it. I was having a nightmare. With my free hand, I pinched my thigh, only to wince at the twinge of pain. I wasn't dreaming.

I chanted 'no, no, no' in my head as I struggled to take in enough oxygen to be functional. I was nowhere near ready to deal with him. Surely he wouldn't have tracked me down at work. With me gone, he had to be using the opportunity to explore the bachelor life and live it to the fullest. I'd assured myself he'd be busy dealing with his social calendar that thinking of me would be impossible.

I embraced denial like it was my job. There was some kind of mistake or whoever was on the phone wasn't him. Maybe it was some other man calling for an entirely different Ava. Of course! Yes, that was it. That could happen, right?

"His voice," I whispered. "Does he sound—"

"Spanish?" Ben supplied. "Yeah."

I'd been about to ask if he sounded like a stubborn son-of-a-bitch, but Spanish told me what I needed to know. The phone fell from my hand, clattering loudly as it hit the desk. I fumbled frantically, knocking a container of pens over in the process. My pulse raced as the pens scattered across the desk haphazardly. My fingers seemed to be made of butter, and my dexterity was gone, so picking them up was impossible. I abandoned the pens and grabbed the phone, clumsily hitting myself in the cheek with it as I brought it back to my ear.

"Please tell me this is just a prank," I pleaded.

My voice sounded shaky even to my ears. I was grasping at straws, and I knew it, but right then I was holding out hope some tabloid hack had found me. In my panicked state, it was the preferable option.

“It’s not,” Ben insisted. “Besides, it’s not like I’d know to make this joke seeing as how over the course of the six weeks you’ve worked here, you never added anyone to the approved caller list. I realize you’re an introvert but not putting a fiancé on your list seems a little odd.”

My heart thundered as I tried to get my bearings. They were, of course, nowhere to be found. It was always like this when it came to him. My inner compass always pointed me in one direction—straight to Mateo Cruz.

“I’m not,” I denied shakily. “Engaged,” I clarified.

The six-carat emerald and diamond engagement ring hidden in a pair of jeans on a shelf in my closet said otherwise, but having possession of it wasn’t my choice.

No matter how hard I’d tried, the stubborn jerk wouldn’t take it back. Even when I’d resorted to outlandish and ridiculous measures, it hadn’t made a bit of difference. In a fit of desperation, I’d once hocked it for ten percent of its value. I woke up the following morning to a courier at my door with the ring. Two days later I donated it to a children’s charity. That time I got it back within six hours, along with a thank you note from the charity for my generous cash donation.

I suspected even if I tossed it to the bottom of the ocean like elderly Rose in the Titanic movie, it would find its way back to me within twenty-four hours.

“Well, the man on line one disagrees which means he must be nuts. You want me to tell him to get lost?”

I half-considered it for a fraction of a second, even imagined how easy it would be to bury my head in the sand and allow a male receptionist to tell my former fiancé to shove off. Only as I played the rest of the possible outcomes through my head did I admit defeat. Mateo Cruz was an unstoppable force. He wouldn’t go away simply because I refused to pick up the phone.

My sigh was one of resignation. “No. I’ll deal with it.”

I clutched the handset tightly as I disconnected with Ben and did my best to prepare myself for what was coming. I sat stock still with the phone held over my heart as I made an attempt to corral my emotions. After about five seconds of breathing in and out, I accepted reality—it wasn’t going to work. With an aggravated sound, I steeled myself as much as possible and pressed the button to take the call.

“This is not a welcome surprise,” I snipped. “What do you want, Mateo?”

I hoped my voice didn’t betray my panic. I thought I sounded somewhat normal, but Mateo knew me better than anyone. He was so finely tuned to my every action; I suspected he’d known I was anxious before I’d uttered a word.

“You have had your space,” he announced. “Now it is time for us to talk. In person.”

The sound of his voice hit my veins like a drug, chipping away at my resistance and destroying my determination in a nanosecond. I wondered what was wrong with me that I couldn’t seem to erect a wall between my heart and my former fiancé. My right knee jiggled at what seemed like a million miles an hour as my grip on the phone tightened to the point of pain. Under no circumstances could I be face to face with him. If a simple phone call threw me off, a meeting would be catastrophic.

My heart thundered in my chest like I was about to have a go in the Thunderdome. “Absolutely not,” I hissed. “I have zero desire to see you, ever. Go away, Mateo. I don’t want to speak to you.”

My teeth ground together when he chuckled as if I’d said something pleasant or kind.

“Ah, mi amor. This is good,” he murmured. “You have no idea how relieved I am to hear your fire returning. It killed me to see you so lost.”

The way his voice reawakened my craving for him terrified me. For nine weeks I’d assured myself daily that I was learning to feel less. Within forty seconds, he’d disabused me of the fantasy. A frisson of alarm raced up my spine. There was no way I could meet up with him face to face. If his voice could still elicit the response it did, I’d be done for in the same room with him. No. I needed to stay on offense. Meeting up could not happen.

“Don’t talk as though you have any idea what’s going on in my life,” I muttered.

“I know plenty, mi tesoro.”

My teeth ground together as I swallowed past the lump of emotion in my throat. His term of endearment was like an arrow straight to my chest. He was lying—I wasn’t his treasure.

“How about we talk about what I know,” I said defensively. “For example, I knew before I even picked up the phone that you’d still be an overbearing know-it-all piece of—”

The telltale sound of the call disconnecting before I could finish my sentence brought me up short. Pulling the phone from my ear, I stared down at the receiver with a mixture of shock, disbelief, and, shamefully, disappointment. He'd hung up on me without warning. I'd expected him to argue, but he'd given up without a fight. That wasn't the Mateo I knew.

I was still trying to reconcile my disappointment a minute or so later when the door to my tiny office flew open and banged against the wall, rattling the framed photo of Barcelona that hung just inside.

"I tried to explain to him that you're unavailable but *he won't listen*," Ben screeched.

"And I told him to mind his damn business," a too familiar voice growled. "No man tells me I can not see you, Avelina."

My eyes went wide as Ben moved aside and Mateo strolled into my office as though he'd done it a thousand times, his green eyes flashing fire as they locked onto mine. Nothing had changed. With one look, we were the only two people in the universe. A million butterfly wings fluttered inside of my stomach and chest as I licked my lips and tried to get my bearings. Mateo's eyes stayed on me for countless seconds before he jerked his head in Ben's direction, breaking the spell with the reminder that someone else was in the room.

"Tell him to get out," he commanded.

I knew I should tell Mateo to go pound sand, but I was busy trying not to have a damn heart attack. Relieved to have an excuse to look away from him, I turned my attention to Ben.

"You can go," I said. "I'll deal with Mr. Cruz."

Mateo cursed under his breath, muttering in Spanish about putting me over his knee. I felt my cheeks flush pink as I forced myself not to respond.

I was thankful Ben didn't understand Spanish because he'd have been more scandalized than he already was. It was apparent he had no idea what to do since his eyebrows seemed to have permanently relocated to the top of his hairline.

"Are you sure?" he asked as he took two steps backward.

As anxious as I was, I still had to stifle a choked laugh. When it suited him, Mateo had that effect on people.

"I have him under control," I assured Ben.

My words were nothing but bluster. I most definitely did *not* have him under control. I was in no way prepared to deal with Mateo Cruz, and

without the benefit of any warning, I was thrown even more off kilter.

Mateo chuckled darkly, a low rumble of sound I felt in my core.

“Tienes todo de mi,” he murmured.

He’d said I had all of him. My heart slammed against my chest like it wanted to break out and go to him.

The door closed behind Ben with a soft snick, and I had no doubt he would be running from office to office to tell everyone what was going on. Word would spread like wildfire, and within five minutes all one hundred and forty closet-sized rooms on the floor would be abuzz. Many of my co-workers would be waiting with bated breath for Mateo to leave so they could descend on me to demand details.

I gritted my teeth and glared at him as I crossed my arms. I’d had my job for six weeks and had only just started to settle in. That was all a thing of the past. Although I was fairly certain Ben hadn’t recognized Mateo, I had no doubt someone else would. Once that happened, all bets were off. After all, it wasn’t every day a gorgeous billionaire bachelor showed up at the office to claim his errant fiancée.

I Want



“I’m so sorry we didn’t get a chance to spend any time together,” Emery sighed, a frown marring her perfectly smooth face. Even without any makeup on she was stunningly beautiful.

Although she was two years older than me, Emery had been my best friend and counterpart since the day I’d met her when I was a terrified four-year-old who had just been thrust into a situation I hadn’t been prepared for. We’d lived next door to one another and had always been there for each other, no matter what. I’d been devastated when she left Lakeport, primarily because I hadn’t expected it. She’d gone from high school senior to international sensation in what felt like the blink of an eye.

Her rise had come when she’d been approached after a high school talent show by the director of *Bytes*, an insanely popular show about computer hacking vampires that had been about to launch on cable. The rest, as they say, was history. She’d done a screen test, and four weeks later she was filming in Los Angeles. From there she’d gone from supporting character to breakout star of the show within one season. The show had

aired its final episode two months ago, and now Emery was going on to do her first feature film.

The exasperating thing to me was that Emery didn't enjoy acting. She originally did it for the money, but at a certain point it took on a life of its own. I constantly told her that she should take the money she'd earned and bounce so that she could do what she loved, which was horticulture. That was her dream, but she felt too beholden to the people who'd helped her get where she was. I suspected they manipulated into her staying, but I couldn't make decisions for her.

Besides, who was I to talk? I'd never enjoyed school and I'd always known I hadn't wanted to go to college unless college started offering a multi-prong fashion, makeup, food prep and arts and crafts degree. I wanted to do hair and makeup while also learning how to cook and make intricate crafts— but I didn't want to be a chef, a hair stylist, a makeup artist or a full-time crafter because choosing one meant giving up the others. That limited my choices and left me on the fence about what to do with my life.

The only thing I knew for sure was that I wanted to be independent so that the people who had given up everything for me wouldn't have to worry about taking care of me ever again. I'd graduated high school at loose ends, unsure of exactly how to proceed. And then, Emery stepped in. At the barbeque to celebrate my graduation she told me she needed a house sitter for six weeks while the show filmed in Europe and asked if I would be interested.

It was like dangling a carrot in front of a rabbit. I'd jumped at the opportunity without hesitation, and it was the best decision I'd ever made. It launched an unexpected career that paid me a good amount of money, most of which I was able to sock directly into the bank. Without rent or utility bills hanging over my head, I'd amassed a healthy savings account. That allowed me to put money into my love of food, fashion, and crafts, and now I had a secondary online career that was paying off, too.

Of course, Emery took precedence over all my other clients. Three years in I worked for her every time the opportunity presented itself. Since I stayed with her anytime I was between jobs—something that was becoming more and more rare—it wasn't a surprise that I felt most at home at her Malibu rental.

“The studio set up an interview they need me there for, hence the earlier flight,” she said, halting my trip down memory lane. “I'll be mostly off the

grid because the location is so remote, but on Saturday I get to stay in town and stay in a hotel, which supposedly means access to reliable internet. If you've got something that isn't time sensitive you think I need to know, just Facebook message me. I'll FaceTime you as soon as I get to my computer each week. My business manager is on alert that any call from you is high priority so, in case of emergency, he's your go-to."

I assured her with absolute confidence that I had it all under control. She exhaled with relief and hugged me tightly before climbing into the back of the black stretch limo that would be taking her to LAX.

Her boyfriend, Elliot, a screenwriter, was already seated inside, talking on the cellphone that was always in his possession. Elliot and Emery became a couple over the course of the previous six months. They'd met at a club on the night of her twenty-third birthday, and he immediately set about wooing her. Two months later they were sleeping together, and a month after that, he'd moved in. I made an effort to be polite to Elliot, but something about him didn't sit well. At thirty-eight he was significantly older than her, and on top of that, he had four ex-wives.

Four ex-wives was excessive in my opinion. I said as much to Emery, and her response had been that LA was different. No kidding it was different—but not *that* different. Marriage was a commitment, full stop. To have tried and failed four times within a decade was a flashing neon sign about Elliot, as far as I was concerned.

No children had resulted from any of the marriages and all the exes were actresses, which some might say was normal for a man who worked in the business. Personally, I found it off-putting. I also had my suspicions about the timing of their meeting—conveniently just as the movie he'd written was being cast. She swore that she hadn't felt pressured into it, but I'd read the script myself and it wasn't anything to write home about.

On top of all that, I thought it was weird that he'd moved into her place. From what I saw he treated her okay when he wasn't on his cell phone, but I often wondered why she let him stay. It was, after all, her rental home. "I'll take care of everything," I assured her.

"I know you will. This is such a great arrangement, Kaya. You'll never know the peace of mind you being here watching my boy gives me."

"You know how much I love him," I smiled. "Relax, have a safe trip and remember to have fun and enjoy life in rural New Zealand. It sounds amazing."

Something flashed in her eyes as she bit her lip and darted her gaze to Elliot before looking back at me. "I'll be hanging with this guy for two months without cell phone or internet interruption. I'm sure it's going to be great," she murmured.

I wondered about the way she'd said it but then wrote it off to her being frazzled about the earlier flight. I knew all the time they spent apart and the hours and hours he spent on the phone, on the computer or out at meetings drove her nuts. I also knew they hadn't had sex in nearly three months, which was another red flag for me. She'd told me in our last Facebook chat that she was hoping the two months away would boost their relationship. I had my doubts.

"Oh! I almost forgot to remind you," she said with a snap of her fingers. "The house next door is finished, and it was a hub of activity last week with furniture deliveries. Word in the neighborhood is that it's a vacation home and Donna from down the block says some people arrived two nights ago. I haven't seen or heard anything yet myself but she's never wrong so don't be surprised when you hear signs of life on the other side of the wall. It shouldn't affect you, but I didn't want you to be caught off guard."

"Got it. Noise from next door is not a reason to panic since humans live there now."

We both laughed as we finished saying our goodbyes. Elliot stopped talking on his cell phone just long enough to lean forward, lift his chin in my direction and mouth *later* before the door closed. Elvis and I stood and watched as the limo pulled down the drive and out the gate, which I made certain closed behind it before I turned and walked back into the house.

I spent the next hour unpacking my clothes in the beautiful peach and white guest room I always stayed in at Emery's house. It was a cozy room with a beautiful view of the yard. Once I had myself all squared away, I went outside and saw to topping up Elvis's metal water pails. He danced around the yard beside me, drinking a bit from each one after I added fresh water to it. By the time I'd finished the business of settling in I was starving, so I took a break and ate a hummus and chicken wrap at the kitchen island while I leafed through the new HGTV magazine I'd grabbed from the living room. I was just cleaning up after myself when my cell phone rang. I smiled when I saw the name on the display.

"Hi, Gigi!"

"Hi, Sunshine. Just checking to make sure that you got to Emery's okay. You know how Dean and I worry."

My heart warmed just hearing her voice. "I'm here, safe and sound," I said cheerfully. "How about you two? Headed to Key West tonight, right?"

About six months after my high school graduation Gigi and Dean sold their house, bought an RV and got out onto the road. They'd always dreamed of exploring the world, and now they were doing it. I'd gotten my sense of adventure from them. They'd been to thirty-two of the fifty states in two and a half years, and they seemed to be enjoying every minute of it. Currently they were slowly working their way back to California to spend a few days at Emery's with me before they flew to New York to embark on a one hundred and thirty-four-night cruise aboard the Queen Mary 2.

"We made such good time that we arrived in Key West this morning, a whole day ahead of schedule. Dean's already made friends, of course. We just love this RV park living, honey. Such a feeling of community at these places."

I grinned at the excitement in her voice. More than anyone in the world, Gigi and Dean deserved to be happy and free.

"It might feel that way because Dean can make friends anywhere," I chuckled.

"It's true," she laughed. "Thank goodness I've got Dean because you and I both know without him around I'd get lost in my reading and forget to talk to anyone but you."

Gigi read spy novels like it was her job. Every few days Dean would text me a new photo of her reading, some new American backdrop behind her. If it weren't for her iPad, their RV would be crammed to the gills with books.

"You perfectly complement each other," I agreed.

"I know that's true, but right now he's driving me nuts," she groused with a dramatic sigh. "He's getting impatient, so I'm going to hand the phone off to him now. I don't know why he doesn't just call you himself since he always takes it from me before I get to say anything."

There was some shuffling in the background before Dean's voice was on the line. "Gigi knows perfectly well that I hate this stupid phone. I can never figure out how to find the damn contact list without dialing someone by accident. The amount of time I've spent making small talk with people I never meant to call is appalling."

I snorted out a laugh as I leaned against the Spanish Talavera tiles on the counter in front of the window at the kitchen sink. Everyone knew Dean hated small talk with a passion, so misdialing was an annoyance. I grinned while I gazed out the window and watched Elvis wander from pail to pail.

“You could get you a phone without a touchscreen you know,” I pointed out for the millionth time.

“But then I wouldn’t be able to play the Candy Crush,” he answered, “and I’m three stars all the way through level four hundred and eighty-two, Sunshine.”

Dean took Candy Crush very seriously. He’d play the same level dozens of times until he had a three-star score. Gigi joked that he could probably have bought a luxury car with the amount of money he’d put into buying in-game items.

“Well we wouldn’t want you to lose that,” I agreed.

“Damn straight,” he laughed, “so you’re now safe and sound at Emery’s. Anything new there?”

I shook my head, even though he couldn’t see me. “Not that I know of. We didn’t get to talk because they bumped her to an earlier flight. She seemed fine, though.”

“She still with that old dipshit?” he asked bluntly.

I bit back a laugh. “Mm-hmm.”

Dean let out a harsh sound. “That girl has always been too damn accommodating. She’s worth more than some old dirtbag who’ll never appreciate her.”

“Dean!” I scolded. “He’s thirty-eight. That’s hardly old.”

“There are a few kinds of old, Sunshine. There's physical age, there's mentality, and then there are road miles. That idiot's taken so many people around the block the warranty is about to run out. I hate to see her with someone so damn unworthy. If you ever show up with someone like that, I won't hesitate to load up my BB gun and chase him away.”

I giggled, the image of Dean taking shots at someone with his Red Ryder BB gun not hard to conjure up. He was very protective of me, something I was incredibly grateful for.

“You have *nothing* to worry about,” I answered firmly. “I won’t get into any more relationships until I’m twenty-five. I can take care of myself. I don’t need anyone else.”

He sighed heavily, my stance about dating something that frustrated him to no end.

"Some day you will," he said firmly. "And if that day comes before you're twenty-five, I hope you give the guy a chance.

"I've never met anyone who even made me pause," I responded.

"I love that you're headstrong, Sunshine, but I worry that you'll let something good slip through your fingers."

I chuckled as I unwrapped a watermelon Jolly Rancher and popped it into my mouth. "If that happens it would mean the person wasn't really the love of my life."

"Honey, you know age has nothing to do with love. Whether you're twenty-five or fifty-nine, the only thing that matters is that it's real and you've chosen well for yourself. What if what could've been the love of your life slips through your fingers because you're too damn stubborn to take a chance?"

Dean and I had the same discussion whenever the subject of my dating came up. We both knew where we stood on it and I didn't see anything changing. He wanted me to be happy, but I knew what happened when people got into relationships when they were too young. I diverted his attention away from the subject as I always did and we moved on to talking about the RV Park they were at in Key West. Once we'd finished talking, he gave the phone back to Gigi, and I spent a few minutes talking to her before we wrapped up our conversation.

After getting off the phone, I went upstairs and changed into my bathing suit, an adorable one-piece navy blue suit with a dark red bandeau accented bodice. It was vintage in style, which I loved. I'd been so happy when I found it on the clearance rack at Walmart. I may have danced a little jig in the aisle. Finding something cute and cheap was a thing to celebrate. I'd done a whole haul video for my subscribers after my last trip to Walmart, and it was one of my most popular videos to date.

I applied a liberal amount of high SPF coconut-scented sunscreen and then took up position on one of the plush loungers by the pool. If there were a better time to housesit than the beginning of summer at the beach, I couldn't imagine what that time would be.

After I slid my sunglasses into place, I played with the control on the lounge until I was in the most comfortable position to soak up some rays. It was a gorgeous day in Malibu. The sun was high in the sky, the warmth of it

against my skin a most welcome feeling. With each passing minute, I relaxed a little more as the soothing sound of the waterfall wall that ran along the side of the pool lulled me into a state of Zen. Before long my eyes started to drift shut and a few minutes after that I'd nodded off.

I woke up to the sound of Elvis shrieking, which had me up and off the lounge like a shot, my sunglasses toppling to the ground as I frantically searched the yard for him. I started to sweat when I didn't see him in his regular perch atop the waterfall wall.

"Elvis? Elvis!" I called as my eyes darted around the yard. My stomach dropped when I realized he wasn't around.

"Where are you?" I yelled frantically.

When I heard the shriek again, I realized the reason I couldn't see Elvis was that the sounds were coming from the other side of the wall, the one that separated Emery's property from the extra-large mansion next door. The fact that the people living there were unknown worried me. What if they were animal haters? My anxiety spiked because I had no idea what kind of reception I was going to get when I asked them to let me in to find Elvis. Without another option, I pulled on my swim cover-up, slipped into my white flip-flops and raced from the yard.

I ran down the driveway at high speed, the slap-slap-slap of my flip-flops against the Spanish pavers an annoyance that only heightened my anxiety. I cringed when I heard Elvis shrieking again, causing my worry to grow exponentially. By the time I flung the wrought iron gate built into the exterior wall at the end of the drive open to get out to the street I was sweaty and out of breath.

The exterior of the house next door was on lockdown, and the gate was closed. Emery's place had a gate, but the neighbors were double the size and taller by about two feet. The wrought-iron masterpiece was blacked out so that there was no visual access to the property. I frantically pressed the button on the intercom outside the gate, but no one answered.

My eyes darted around as I tried to figure out a way to gain access to the yard. The wall that separated the two properties offered no line of sight, and I couldn't find an entrance gate on the wall.

Chills raced down my spine when Elvis shrieked again. I panicked, thinking that he could be wrapped up in something, trapped with no way out. Emery would be devastated if her little man got hurt, the very thought of which made me ill. With no other alternative, I grabbed onto two of the

wrought-iron bars and tried to lift myself up. I got a good grip, but my flip-flops couldn't get any purchase because of the slippery back panel on the gate.

Frantic with worry I kicked the flip-flops off, grabbed onto the metal bars and started maneuvering my way up. It felt like an eternity passed while I worked my way up the gate, bit by bit. It hurt like a bitch, and I knew my hands were going to feel raw later, but I didn't care. Elvis needed me, which meant any pain was incidental. Although he didn't belong to me, I loved him to death, and I thought of him as family. The thought of something happening to him made me sick.

I was a sweaty and out-of-breath mess when I reached the top. The ornate arch only had one reasonably safe spot for me to sit on, so I carefully finagled my way to it and straddled the gate. It was as painful and uncomfortable as you'd expect, and I definitely wouldn't recommend it. Having metal digging into my softest area wasn't ideal. As bad as my level of discomfort was, my anxiety was the bigger issue. I freaked when I looked down the side of the gate into the neighbor's driveway. The back of the gate was smooth, and there were no metal bars for me to use as leverage to get myself down. If I fell from the gate, I knew I'd be in an incredible amount of pain when I hit the Spanish pavers below. I searched the driveway and huge front yard for any signs of Elvis, but he was nowhere to be found. For all intents and purposes, I was well and truly screwed.

"Elvis!" I yelled. "Buddy, I'm here! Where are you?"

A new sound cut through the air—only it wasn't from Elvis. No, the new noise was one that made my stomach drop as I looked back toward the street and saw a police car at the end of the driveway.

It was, without a doubt, the worst possible scenario. I was trapped atop a gate to a house I had no business trying to gain access to. I prayed I wasn't going to be spending my first night in Malibu in the slammer as I watched the officer get out of the car. Although his gun hadn't been drawn, he had his hand on his holster, which didn't give me a warm fuzzy feeling.

"Miss, would you care to tell me why you're on top of that gate?"

I raised my hands for a second to show that I wasn't a threat and then quickly had to grab back onto the gate because I wobbled. I realized if I didn't play my cards right I'd either fall off the gate or wind up in jail—and neither option appealed. "I swear I'm not trying to break in to rob the

place," I assured him. "My best friend's little baby is in there, and I need to get him."

"This baby managed to crawl over a wall onto private property?"

I shook my head. "Oh, no, of course not. He would've flown and jumped."

I could tell he thought I was on drugs or just completely crazy because his expression was dubious.

"You're after a little fella that flies?"

I opened my mouth to explain what the little fella *was* but didn't get the chance because someone back on the other side of the gate began bellowing in Spanish.

"¿Que diablos esta pasando aquí?"

I started at the sound of the strong male voice but kept my eyes on the officer, afraid to turn away. After all, he had the gun. I'd have kept my attention glued to him if Elvis's shriek hadn't cut through the air again. When I heard that I whipped around to face the neighbor's house. Unfortunately, my movements were too fast and my perch atop the gate too precarious. I screamed as I lost my grip and toppled to the side, headed for the pavers.

I landed on something that sure as heck didn't feel like solid ground. It took a second for me to realize I hadn't fallen all the way to the pavers because someone with strong arms who smelled mouth-wateringly good had caught me.

"Dios mios, eres hermosa," he muttered in a low voice.

I lifted my head to respond, but no words came when I found myself looking at a man with eyes the color of the blue orchids Emery grew in distressed copper pots along the rear wall of her sunroom.

Seconds passed in silence, neither of us moving or speaking. I'm not even certain I was breathing as a sensation spread through me unlike anything I'd felt before. It was like being unbearably hot and insanely cold at the same time, my system in some kind of overload.

I forgot all about everyone else in the world for countless seconds because all I could think about was finding out who was he and where he'd come from.

Sin's Temptation Excerpt

Sin's Temptation
An Erotic Intentions Novella
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Chapter One

“Even though this piece is about your business success, I’d be remiss if I didn’t ask you some personal questions.”

I was lucky the interview was being conducted over the phone and not face-to-face because it meant I could roll my eyes.

“Fire away.”

“I can find no record of you having a steady girlfriend, at least not since you became a success...”

I waited, not surprised when there was no elaboration. Interviewers loved to ask leading questions. I didn't fall for that shit.

“That isn’t a question,” I said dryly.

“Oh! Well...” the reporter on the other end of the line spluttered for a few seconds, seemingly unable to think of how to frame his question.

I let him flounder. Cruel? Maybe. I didn’t care. I wasn’t about to help him. People were nosy as fuck, and I thought the question was completely unnecessary. The only reason anyone gave a damn about my relationship status was due to my wealth. If I were a janitor, no one would have cared.

“What I’m trying to ask is, do you have a girlfriend?”

I couldn’t contain my snort. “No,” I answered unapologetically.

“Is there a particular reason why?”

Again, I rolled my eyes. I loathed the way people felt entitled to dig in for answers to stupid questions.

“This is where you want me to say something along the lines of I haven’t met the right woman yet,” I snickered. “Sorry to disappoint but that isn’t the case with me. I don’t do relationships because I think it would be shitty to let someone believe for even a second it might lead to marriage.”

I shuddered as I said it. The concept of marriage made me seriously uncomfortable. Agreeing to commit to one woman for the rest of my life? Not fucking happening. I’d never met anyone I wanted to spend a month with, much less a lifetime.

“You’re anti-marriage?” the reporter queried.

“Not for anyone who wants that life,” I answered. “It just isn’t for me.”

I’d seen the dark side of marriage, knew all too well what the fallout looked like. To the depths of my soul, I had no desire for it, and I didn’t believe for a second that anything or anyone would ever change my outlook. I was successful beyond my wildest dreams, and I wasn’t dependent upon or beholden to anyone other than myself. I was in control and I damn sure planned to stay solo. Besides—I liked variety.

“In your position, I wouldn’t want to settle down either,” he said enviously. “You’ve got it damn good.”

My lips quirked and I nodded to myself. It was the most accurate thing he’d said since we’d gotten on the phone.

“Life is great,” I confirmed.

The interview concluded shortly after that. With it behind me, I was able to relax and focus on the drive. Twenty minutes later my system was cranking Guns n’ Roses ‘Paradise City’ as I guided my black Range Rover into a parking spot at the rear of my store, Erotic Bent. It was a beautiful day, and I’d rather have been working at my record store by the sea than at the sex shop, but digging through vinyl wasn’t on the agenda. Instead, I’d just driven for a bit less than two hours to get from Malibu to Riverside.

The online component of my business made up for almost three-quarters of my yearly earnings, but the brick and mortar stores were still significant. I owned ten shops in Southern California, which meant sometimes I had no choice but to make those shitty drives. I cared about my company, and I wanted my employees to know I was hands-on.

Still, I wasn’t excited about having to spend the day sitting with my accountant to go over financials for a yearly internal review. The saving

grace was that if all went according to plan, it would be my only face-to-face interaction with him until he generated his report.

My chief bookkeeper could've handled it, but I liked to make sure everyone knew who was in charge. People assumed it was easy being as successful as I was since in a lot of ways my products sold themselves. They couldn't have been more wrong. I'd never been one to sit on my laurels, and I didn't see obscene wealth as an excuse to be lazy. As a thirty-four-year-old billionaire, I could've sold or delegated everything, but I hadn't. I'd gotten to where I was with a lot of hard work, and I was proud of it. Work was my one long-term commitment, and I was fine devoting my life to it.

After getting myself in the right frame of mind to look at numbers all day, I turned off the engine and climbed out of the car. Closing the door behind me, I clicked my key fob to arm the system and then headed into the store. It was just after ten in the morning, which was a busy time. People tended to assume that sex stores saw the most action at night, but that wasn't the case. The morning was when most people found it easiest to sneak off to buy their sex toys.

In ninety percent of the marriages I knew of that were sexless (or damn near so) involved either the wife withholding sex or the husband completely ignored his partner—something our clientele reflected. We did a brisk business with unsatisfied suburban moms. They came in once the husband left for work and the kids were in school, looking for something to end the monotony of being neglected sexually by their man. They came in for plastic fantastic, and sometimes, if there were a connection, I'd give them the real thing. After it was over, I'd leave and never contact them again, which was just what we both wanted.

The narrative about women not wanting one night—or one afternoon—is dead wrong. It isn't just men who have needs. There's no one more willing to have it be a one-time thing than a woman who just wants to be touched. I aimed to please, and quite often they rode me like they were auditioning for the rodeo after they sucked my dick like their last name was Hoover. I was of the opinion that if their husbands didn't want someone else to be giving their woman dick, they needed to get the fuck on it and do it themselves. I might have been anti-commitment, but I enjoyed women and took tremendous pleasure in making them happy.

When I entered the store, I stopped at the end of the dildo aisle, grinning when my eyes settled on an attractive woman tracing her finger over a package containing Big Barry. Barry was a nine-inch long, wrist-thick cock that drove women wild. My attention stayed on her as she licked her lips, her fascination with Big Barry more than evident.

It was as I started walking toward the bored housewife that I saw my fork in the road.

I'd taken maybe two steps when I realized there was someone on the other side of the woman holding Big Barry. Said woman instantly faded away as my eyes trailed hungrily over the features of a girl holding a five-inch suction-cupped cock in her hand. The pounding of my heart thudded in my ears like the sound of waves crashing onto the beach. Anxious to see the rest of her, I stepped to the side so that the woman I'd been intent on talking to, the one who had instantly become an inconvenience, was no longer blocking my line of sight.

The instant I could see the girl from head to toe, my cock went solid. Never in my life had the blood left my fucking head this fast. It was so abrupt I was dizzy for several seconds.

She was one of those girls—you know the ones. At first glance, they look old enough to get into the club, but on closer examination, you realize they're jailbait. I'd have been completely oblivious to it if she hadn't been wearing the uniform for public school students in California.

Somehow she made the khaki skirt look sexy as hell. Even her simple white polo shirt looked good. Her lustrous dark hair was in a ponytail that fell to just below her bra line. My eyes traveled hungrily over her neck as I grappled with a damn near overwhelming desire to bite and suck on the sensitive skin there, knowing it would make her wet. I couldn't get over just how stunning she was, and I was only seeing half of her.

The side of her face I could see was perfection; flawless skin with puffy pink lips that I knew would look oh-so-fucking-good wrapped around my cock. The hunger I felt for her was instantaneous and all consuming. I was desperate to touch, to taste, and to devour her.

I remained completely entranced until it hit me that I was not the only one staring at her. When I looked up, I saw a man at the other end of the aisle studying her appreciatively. I hated the way he was looking her over like he was imagining doing X-rated things with her.

My response was swift. Over my dead fucking body would he ever lay one finger on her. With an urgency that startled me, I stepped forward and touched her arm.

“Hey—”

When she looked up and our eyes connected, I lost everything.

Every.

Fucking.

Thing.

Her beautiful blue eyes had me completely enthralled, and the world around me felt like it tipped over. The shift was thunderous. Up close I felt as if I'd been starved of her for the entirety of my life. I wanted her so badly I'd have fucked her right there in aisle six if she'd said it was okay. Of course, I'd only have done so after I got rid of anyone else who might have seen her. I knew down to my fucking marrow that she belonged to me. I also knew I'd drag any motherfucker who tried to touch what was mine straight down to hell.

The color on her cheeks and the sweet way she licked her lips made my dick twitch in my pants. I ached to kiss her, to taste her sweet lips and explore her mouth. I growled low in my throat when I glanced over her shoulder and saw two more men looking at her appreciatively. Anxious to get her away from their leering, I took the suction-cup dick from her hand and tossed it down on the shelf.

“You won't be needing that,” I rasped. “Come with me.”

There was a dreamy smile on her lips as she looked up at me. “Okay,” she said breathlessly. It seemed like she was as enchanted by me as I was by her, which pleased me to no end.

She inched closer to me before she abruptly stopped and shook her head as if to clear it.

“Wait! I don't—” she swallowed as her eyes darted around the store anxiously. “Who are you?”

Realizing I'd scared her, I raised my free hand and gestured reassuringly. “Don't worry, you're safe. I own this store,” I explained. “I want to take you back to the office area because we need to talk.”

Just to talk, I reminded my cock. The fucker thought she was true north, and he was more than ready to go home.

Her brows rose in surprise. “You're Jordan Sinclair?” she asked.

My name on her lips was heaven. I didn't know how I felt about the fact that she had clearly heard of me, though. It bothered me that she knew I owned porn stores.

"Yeah," I admitted gruffly. "That's me."

"Oh... okay," she said with a hesitant smile. "I'll go back to the offices with you."

The instant she agreed, I was moving to guide her up the other end of the aisle, away from the gawkers. I walked us straight into the back, stopping when we got into the hall so I could ask her some questions.

"What's your name?"

"Natalie Farrar," she answered softly.

Fuck me, I thought. This girl.

This.

Girl.

She was like a goddamn dream.

A dream that could've become a nightmare if someone aside from me had approached her out in the store. It wasn't outside the realm of possibility that someone would've followed her out to the parking lot. The very thought made me angry. Not with her—with them. Schoolgirls were like crack to creepers. A tidal wave of worst-case scenarios hit me all at once, each one more disturbing than the last. Why the hell did I own sex stores? And more importantly, why was she inside one of them?

"Are you ditching school to buy sex toys?"

Her cheeks flushed as she giggled nervously, a sweet sound with a little bit of husky thrown in.

"No, I'm not ditching school," she assured me.

I raised an eyebrow as I stared down at her skeptically. Nothing about her facial expression indicated she was lying, but the evidence pointed to the contrary. "You're wearing a uniform and it's way too early for school to be out for the day," I pointed out.

Natalie shook her head. "I promise, I'm not ditching. I only had to go in this morning to empty my locker and turn in my textbooks."

I assumed she meant she was moving, which made me feel sick. I panicked, wondering if she was leaving the state. I couldn't let that happen. Forcing myself to calm way the fuck down, I inhaled and exhaled a deep breath as I assured myself I'd figure out a way to stop that shit.

Slightly calmer, I'd focused on getting some answers. I'd needed to know more while also getting across to her that she had no place in a sex shop.

"If you were just looking for a way to pass the time, you should've gone to the mall or something. You're too young to be in this store," I pointed out. "What were you thinking? You could have been—"

My sentence trailed off when the door to the meeting room opened. Turning my head, I grimaced as my accountant, Robert, stepped into the hall. Before I could tell him to fuck off so I could finish talking to Natalie (who was way too fucking young, I kept reminding my dick) he grinned and walked our way.

"Hey, Jordan! I see you've met Natalie. She'll be shadowing me for the next six weeks for her Senior Project."

I blank stared him as I processed his words. My first reaction was relief that she was a senior. Granted, she was still much younger than I, but at least in a few weeks, she'd be out of high school and on her way to college. I'd been worried I was lusting after a tenth grader. Knowing that wasn't the case was a weight off of my shoulders. Whatever my wait time would be—and I would've waited a lifetime if I had to—I knew it wouldn't be years.

Still, her being a senior didn't excuse Robert bringing her to the store. My anger was a living, pulsing thing beneath my skin. He'd been a fool to bring her into the store.

"Do you realize how reprehensible it is for you to have brought a minor to a fucking sex store?" I hissed.

Robert's hands flailed frantically as he shook his head. "No! God no! She's eighteen, almost nineteen. I would never."

As good as that news was I still wanted to throttle him. She shouldn't have been exposed to men leering at her while they were in the middle of doing a porn and lube run. I was not okay with the way they'd been looking at her— so clearly imagining her naked. Wanting to touch and defile her. The thought made me sick.

"Do you fucking realize she was out there on the floor, and perverts were looking at her?" I seethed. "You put her in danger!"

Robert had a very deer caught in the headlights look about him.

"Natalie! I told you not to go out there," he said in a voice full of exasperation. "She shouldn't have done that. I didn't—"

Unfortunately for Robert, I'd been getting more and more agitated thinking about what could've happened to her. Someone could've touched her, a thought that made my blood boil.

"Where are her parents and why are they allowing her to come to a goddamn sex store for school? What the actual fuck?"

At that moment I was so pissed I could've spit nails. Natalie needed protecting. I was feeling territorial and fucking angry that no one was caring for my girl the way she deserved.

That's right.

Mine.

All. Fucking. Mine.

No one who wasn't me would ever touch her again. I'd just met her and already I was thinking about spending the rest of my life inside of her. She belonged to me, full stop.

That was insane, but what was crazier was my dick sending out a claimed vibe. I could almost hear the fucker yelling that he was hers and only hers. Forever. Even then, only minutes into knowing her, I knew I'd never touch another woman as long as I lived.

"It's just her mom, and she's away on business until after Natalie's graduation," Robert explained. "Nat lives right above me and even though she's old enough to live alone, we're keeping an eye on her while Jane is gone. This worked out perfectly because I can be involved. Don't worry, she isn't going to disclose anything about the store, man. The high school won't know which store she shadowed me in. I work for a variety of retail stores, and they already know that for confidentiality reasons specific brands and locations can't be divulged. No one will ever realize she was here."

Her mother being away on business was bullshit. What kind of parent left her kid before graduation? Maybe if it were anyone else, I'd have been okay with the whole thing. I'm not sure. The only thing I knew with absolute certainty right then was I was not about with Natalie being there.

"I give zero fucks about what the school knows or what they approved. I only care about her safety and *I'm* not cool with this. Natalie can't be here or any of the other stores," I bit out tersely.

Robert's face went a shade of green as he gaped at me. "This is a graduation requirement for her," he exclaimed. "After today she doesn't

even go back to class anymore. I need to sign off and verify that she was observing and learning about business math and retail pricing structures.”

“I won’t cause any trouble,” she promised.

My gaze immediately went back to her. I’d been trying not to look directly at her in the hopes my dick would let out a little of the goddamn concrete it seemed to be full of. No such luck.

The way she looked at me told a story. Her eyes were dilated, her cheeks flushed. She was ripe for the picking and knowing that didn’t soften my dick one little bit. In fact, my looking down at her and seeing evidence of her attraction to me made the fucker drool. If I hadn’t been wearing skin tight boxer briefs and black pants, I’d have been on the verge of humiliating myself with a stain. I gritted my teeth and steeled myself from imagining coming on her, in her, or down her throat. My need for her was ferocious and it was growing bigger by the minute.

Natalie could promise until the cows came home, and it wouldn’t change a damn thing. She was trouble whether she intended to be or not.

“You can’t help it,” I said softly.

I didn’t want her there, in the store, but I also knew I couldn’t send her away never to be seen again. There was no fucking way I was letting that happen. Not when I’d just found her.

“I won’t be able to graduate if I don’t do this,” she said pleadingly.

I was barely holding onto my shit knowing she’d been out on the floor and she’d only been there for a few minutes. I knew if I backed down and tried to roll with it for six weeks, I’d go insane. She couldn’t be in the goddamn store, and that was that.

My mind scrambled as I tried to figure out a solution. Everything I thought of involved keeping her with me, permanently.

Right where she belonged.

The way I was feeling toward her was pure caveman. I tried to think business and solutions but kept getting distracted by thoughts of holding her in my arms while she slept.

Bottom line, I was not letting her go. She stayed with me, no matter what. The only reason Robert was still standing right then was because he was gay. If I thought for a second he’d had lustful feelings about her; I’d have fired him on the spot.

From the very first instant, Natalie was reshaping my world. I’d never felt so territorial about anyone or anything before.

A grin spread across my face when a solution finally occurred to me.

“She’ll come work with me,” I announced.

A breathy little gasp escaped her.

“I will?” she questioned.

I looked her over, checking to see if she was against the idea. As much as I wanted her, if she didn’t feel safe with me or had indicated in any way that she didn’t want to go, I’d have figured out another way. From the very first moment, she came first, no matter what. She still looked nervous, but she didn’t look like someone who didn’t want to go. Quite the opposite, in fact.

“Yes,” I confirmed. “You’ll love it.”

“My project has to relate in some way to business math,” she said anxiously. “If you won’t let me into the store...”

“I own more than just sex stores,” I explained. “We’ll be working at my record store. I sell vinyl to collectors.”

Robert choked out a laugh of disbelief. “Jesus, Jordan. You live damn near two hours away,” he squeaked. “Do you know how fucked it is to ask her to drive back and forth from Riverside to Malibu for six weeks? That’s at least four hours in the car every day! The junker she drives would probably explode on day one. That’s not cool, man.”

I shut him down with a withering look, angry that he in any way questioned how far I’d go to keep her safe. I calmed down by reminding myself of what I knew for a fact. Mainly, that I was his biggest account, which meant he didn’t want to fuck with me. He’d only been my accountant for sixteen months, but I paid a fuck load for him to be at my beck and call. He was making more than he’d ever earned before and I knew he loved the job. Without me, he’d make sixty percent less a year, which I knew gave me leverage. The certainty that he was questioning me purely because he cared for Natalie was the only thing that kept me from snapping his head off.

“That won’t be a problem since she’ll be staying with me. This way, she won’t need to go back and forth at all. She doesn’t even need to bring the car with her. I’ll take care of her,” I stated calmly.

I planned to make it permanent, fast. In addition to coming with me (and never stepping foot into one of my sex stores again), she would not be driving a car referred to as a junker. I would do whatever it took to make damn sure my girl only ever had the best from there on out.

I'd have been worried and maybe even scared of how desperate I was to claim her if I hadn't inherently known I wouldn't be able to go on without her.

Robert's jaw dropped as he realized what I said. "Stay with you?" he sputtered. "That's crazy! You don't even know her."

What was crazy was just how wrong he was. On a cellular level, I knew everything I needed to about her. And the most important fact was that I needed her with me. She was mine and I was hers. Both were facts.

"She'll be more than safe with me," I assured him.

"Of course she would," he said in a conciliatory voice. "I wasn't saying she wouldn't be, but... I mean come on, man. You don't think it would be weird having a girl you don't even know underfoot?"

I didn't. I knew she wasn't going to be underfoot. She was going to be at my side. She was going to be cared for. She was going to be worshipped. And she was going to be under me, taking my cock. Not wanting to show too much of my hand to Robert in case he decided to do something stupid like attempt to keep her away from me, I decided to try being calm. If it didn't work, I'd be throwing down. One way or the other, she was leaving with me.

"If you want her to get the work experience for the senior project, it's the only way I see to make it happen. That's on you, though," I bluffed. "If you're cool with her failing I'll just butt out of it."

"The decision is mine. I want to go with Jordan," Natalie interjected firmly.

As she spoke, she stepped in closer to me, close enough for our arms to touch. I stifled a groan and tried not to move. The closer she was, the more I wanted to hold on to her. It felt wrong not to be anchored to her in some way—holding her hand or wrapping my arm around her waist. In my entire life, I'd never had even one second where I felt like that way toward *anyone* until she exploded into my life.

Robert looked back and forth between us dubiously. "Sweetie, are you sure? You don't know him."

"I know you've said he's a dream to work for, and he's quickly become your favorite client," she answered. "He's someone you do business with, not a stranger."

Robert was conflicted, which meant it was time for me to allay his fears. Somehow I needed to do it without straight up lying, too. I was not about to

fucking tell him he had nothing to worry about as far as me touching her went. Even if he believed me, I knew I'd be busted pretty damn fast since I had no intention of keeping her a secret. I wanted everyone to know she was mine—and vice versa.

“Look, she'll never be safer than she's going to be with me,” I assured him. “My house is massive, so it's not like I don't have the room for her. She's going to live in the lap of luxury, right above the beach while being pampered to within an inch of her life. I promise Natalie won't want for a thing. Anything she wants is hers.”

I meant that literally. If she'd asked me to build her a rocket made of Unicorn hair, I'd have found a way.

Lifting his arm, Robert rubbed the back of his neck and let out a long breath.

“I know she'll be taken care of,” he assured me. “Without a doubt. Don't think for a second I believe otherwise. It's just weird that the two of you have never even spoken, and you're asking her to move in with you for almost two months.”

I had to bite my lip to keep from pointing out that *I wasn't asking*.

“I'm trying to be helpful,” I said. “She can't be here, man. You should've seen the looks she was getting out there. This is no place for someone like Natalie.”

He grimaced and looked away. “I swear I told her not to go out onto the floor,” he groaned.

“He did. Don't be mad at him,” Natalie said pleadingly, biting her lip as she stared at me with a worried expression.

Looking down into her gorgeous face, I once again realized there was nothing I wouldn't do to make her happy. I wanted to give her the fucking world. The idea of denying her anything was abhorrent. Fortunately, in that moment, I had the ability to settle her mind easily.

“I'm not mad at him,” I said soothingly.

Her smile was like sunshine, so hot I could feel the heat coming from it. I'd do anything to make her smile at me just to bask in the glow.

“Thank you, Jordan,” she murmured.

I wanted to tell her she never had to thank me for doing what came to me as naturally as breathing, but our conversation was interrupted by my bookkeeper, Roslyn, stepping into the hall.

“Hey,” she called out cheerfully. “Are you guys coming in or do we now do hallway business?”

“Plans have changed,” I answered. “You’ve got everything under control, and you don’t need me here. I trust you enough to know there’s no reason for me to micromanage. You and Robert have at it. Give me a rundown at the end of every day and if there’s anything I need to do, I’ll get on it.”

Ros stumbled, her eyes widening as she gaped at me for a second. She looked shocked but ecstatic as she shook her head in wonder. “Wow,” she laughed, “I guess miracles do still happen. I never even hoped... I mean. Wow,” she said again. “Yes, I’ve got this. I’ll give you a detailed briefing each night.”

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell her I wouldn’t be devoting hours to talking things over, but I let it go. If I started showing my caveman cards there in the hall, Robert could have decided to block me and I didn’t need that at all.

“You’ll do great,” I said sincerely. “Head on back into the meeting room. Robert will be right there.”

After Ros had walked away, I turned my attention back to Robert.

“Well?”

He shook his head. “Not like I’ve got much choice. You’re right. She shouldn’t be around the store. I didn’t think it would be a problem, but I can’t fault her for being curious. Besides, she’s an adult. I can’t hold her against her will.”

I breathed out slowly, forcing myself not to show how relieved I was by his acceding to my plan. I was one step closer to having Natalie where she belonged—which was with me, but I knew I needed to do something else to get him totally on board.

“How about you and Eric come out to the ‘Bu in a couple of weeks?” I offered. “We’ll hit the beach and barbecue. It’ll be a fun time.”

When Rob’s face lit up, I knew the invitation had been the right move.

“That’d be great,” he answered enthusiastically. “I’ve heard your house is epic.”

For what I paid to build it, it damn well better have been.

“It is, and there’s tons to do. You’re welcome to stay over in the guest house.”

“Wow! That’s awesome. We’d love to.”

“I’ll email you, and we can pick a weekend.”

Just like that, I had him in the palm of my hand.

More importantly, I had Natalie.

“Make sure you email your mom and tell her about this,” he said to her.

“I will,” she assured him.

I was miffed neither one of them expressed any concern about Natalie’s mom hitting the roof when she found out about the new arrangement. I knew for damn sure I’d have a fuck of a lot to say if my daughter up and moved in with a stranger. Granted, my intentions were better than good, and I planned to take care of Natalie forever, but still. A parent should’ve been worrying about her.

I stood by silently as Robert and Natalie spent a few minutes talking about how he’d need to check her mail while she was gone. After she gave him a hug and a kiss goodbye and assured him she would text him later that night, I shook his hand and then escorted her out of the store.

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