



Pretty
VENOM
ELLA FIELDS

Hate to love.
Love to hate.



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For the queens who straighten other crowns.

*If you make someone your world,
do not complain when the ground crumbles beneath your feet.*

ONE



Renee

Fourteen years old

“You look stupid.” His top lip curled into a sneer that I wished made him look uglier. But it only made his brown eyes gleam as they darkened and caused my belly to flip. “The bow,” he said as if I hadn’t already caught on with the way his eyes kept zeroing in on it over the past ten minutes.

“Okay then.” My smile and voice were candy sweet even as my next words soured my tongue. “Well, it’s unfortunate you don’t have a reason to look as stupid as you do. It’s all ...” My hand left its perch on my lap, my crossed feet stretching out on the floor in front of me and swinging side to side. I gestured halfheartedly before letting my hand slap back to my lap as though he really wasn’t worth the effort. “Just the way you are.”

His jaw clenched, but otherwise, he kept his expression neutral.

The grandfather clock ticked at the other end of the long hall as we stared, our eyes locked in a silent showdown.

We were seated in a small alcove in the hall outside his family’s game room where our parents were talking behind the door that had been left ajar.

Upon arriving, I was filled with a sense of annoyance. Why did we have to meet with my father’s best friend from college? Wasn’t it bad

enough he'd forced us to move from New York City to this tiny patch of a town?

No, apparently not.

Apparently, I had to eat dinner with them. Which was an utter snooze fest. I spent it with my eyes downcast, images of my new sewing machine flitting through my head.

It was a bribe. I knew one when I saw one. I'd been trained since the age of five to recognize when someone was trying to pull the wool over my eyes. But I'd wanted that machine since it arrived on the market six months before our move to Trellara, the tiny town that sat nestled alongside Gray Springs.

Along with the sewing machine came half a wardrobe full of new fabric. My parents felt guilty for tearing me away from the prep school friends I had known since I was in kindergarten. Leaving my friends behind would've been a real drag, if they were real friends. But I'd played the role of distressed child and gotten what I wanted. The drama classes my mother enrolled me in years ago helped, even if my acting abilities were mediocre at best.

Even at my age, I knew shallow when I saw it. Takes one to know one and all that. I could be as shallow as they came, and I never denied it. No false pretenses, no hidden agenda. I wanted what I wanted, and when I got what I desired, those things made me smile. Bows, frills, gowns, makeup—it wasn't just material stuff to me. I enjoyed them. My heart warmed with satisfaction when I wore them.

I loved what I loved, and I wouldn't apologize to anyone for it. Especially not Mr. Scowl-a-lot sitting across from me.

Unease stiffened my limbs, and perhaps it was his fault. Or perhaps it was because that night, as we drove up the long driveway covered in overgrown, curving willows, an unsettling feeling overtook me. It grew worse as my parents encouraged me out of the Town Car and up the steps of the museum-size old cream and gray colonial home.

And it hadn't left.

"... With his royal cheekbones, and God, the jawline. Just like Kian's." My mother's voice grated, high pitched and slightly slurred thanks to the two bottles of red with dinner.

Callum's eyes widened marginally, and I barely contained a smile as he figured out what they were talking about.

"Why are you out here listening?" I finally asked.

He shifted on the long velvet chaise he was reclined on, one leg falling to the floor with a light tap. "Why are you?" His tone conveyed boredom, nonchalance, but he wouldn't have asked if he didn't want an answer.

That much was clear about this weird, silent guy. He was the curious type.

"Not my house. Would you rather I wander around aimlessly?"

Glasses clinked from inside the room. "...if they had children, they'd get Renee's beautiful mermaid hair."

Callum snorted. "Mermaid hair?" Those dark eyes roamed over it once more. "More like Hagrid hair."

"*Harry Potter* fan?" I asked, clapping my hands quietly with forced excitement.

All I got in response was a look. A look that said he was ready to either throw something at me or walk away.

He thankfully chose the latter, sitting up and slowly unfolding his tall, lean frame to stand. Relief rolled over me from head to toe. Nothing was worse than being forced to endure something you didn't want to, but it was ten times worse having to feign indifference when someone was trying to slay you with their eyes.

Our parents' chatter droned on. I didn't look as Callum walked away but listened as his clipped footsteps faded at the end of the hall.

For a long minute, I thought he was gone, so I almost jumped when his low, deep, and freshly broken voice traveled to my ears. "They can act stupid over baby showers, names, or marriage proposals, but don't for one second let any of it go to your head."

I kept my eyes trained on the high ceiling with its fancy crown molding, sighing before rolling my head to face him. "Shouldn't the wedding come before children? Or is that your idea of rebelling?"

Looking momentarily shocked, even with the distance between us, Callum paused, then took a few steps closer. "Let's get one thing straight, Mini Mouse. Our mothers are full of themselves. You'd be wise to ignore them, and while you're at it, ignore me. You don't

know me, and I don't want to know you. Don't talk to me at school, hell, don't even look at me."

My eyes narrowed, tiny dots connecting in my head. "Oh, I see."

He didn't want to indulge me by waiting, but I knew he could hear me, my voice trailing after him. "You have a girlfriend? No worries." I laughed airily. "I don't really care."

He appeared around the corner. I heard my parents saying their goodbyes, so I slowly stood, smiling at Callum.

"You don't care?" he drawled, disbelief dragging the words.

"I. Don't. Care." I beamed, adjusting my baby blue capris that matched the bow in my hair. "I wouldn't touch you if you were the last guy in this boring as crap town."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," I reiterated.

A brow rose. "I'm not going to ask why because I don't really give a damn."

"But you do, and I'll tell you why." My hands settled on my hips. "You're a rude, entitled prick who's either overcompensating for something or has some severe daddy issues. Oh, and I only date blonds." I raised a brow at his beautiful mop of dark hair for emphasis.

The door to the game room swung open, and our parents walked out.

"There you are. I thought I heard your voice." My dad grinned, the scent of expensive whiskey rolling over me as he curled a heavy arm over my shoulders. "Ready to go?"

I smiled up at him. "Ready when you are, Daddy."

TWO



Renee

The only difference between my old school and Trelara Prep was that people were less likely to indulge in the things they really liked for fear of retribution. The kind they believed they couldn't crawl back from on the social ladder. It was a discovery I found disconcerting when I signed up for drama class, only to find a handful of names on the sign-up sheet.

Though I wasn't used to their ideals and what they deemed acceptable, I wouldn't let them stop me from doing what I wanted to.

Hilda was the first friend I made after discussing the merits of chiffon, silk, sorbet-flavored lip balm, *Sailor Moon*, and *Harry Potter* standing in line in the auditorium. Ever since, we'd developed a casual friendship that worked for us both.

Hilda was half Asian with silky black hair that rained down her back and curtained her heart-shaped face. Her slightly slanted eyes drew you in, her pink, puffy lips and tiny nose giving her an innocence I wasn't quite sure she deserved. A fierce kind of beautiful was what came to mind when my eyes swept over her small, slender frame for the first time. Her eyes were hazel. The mixture of brown and green prone to glittering when she smiled and dulling when she was annoyed.

"They want to rehearse again at four," Hilda informed me as we strode to our lockers.

“Four?” I sighed, spinning the combination until my locker popped open. “I can’t. My dad has an important dinner guest coming over.”

My father was the CEO of Grant Holdings, and although we’d moved out of state for him to merge the firm with Kian’s, Callum’s father, and for a “quieter, more peaceful lifestyle,” he and my mother still loved to entertain. Perhaps even more than they did when we lived in New York. It was tiresome, but the food was always worth it. Not to mention the new outfits.

“So? Just come for a little bit, that way Clarke doesn’t give you the stink eye tomorrow.”

Clarke gave a mean stink eye to those who didn’t show up for rehearsal, though he didn’t deem it necessary to punish, seeing as most of us were members of the drama club of our own volition. And with the group being as small as it was, he couldn’t afford to scare people away.

I rearranged the contents of my locker, swapping my history book out for the novel I’d dragged to school with me that morning, then closed the door. “No can do. If I’m not home by normal time, they’ll hassle me until I am, and then I’ll have to endure my *mother’s* stink eye throughout dinner.” I raised a brow at Hilda. “Which I fear far more than Clarke’s.”

Indeed, my mother might not be the most nurturing, but she was present, and I knew from watching others with similar families that I was fortunate to have that. Our relationship bordered along the lines of friendship, and no one wanted a friend to be disappointed in them.

And Valery Grant’s cold shoulder would give you gangrene if you weren’t careful.

We said goodbye outside. I sat on the steps, watching Hilda walk into the parking lot, then opened my book.

It was snatched from my hand before I could remove the bookmark. “*The Baron’s Lusty Conquest?*” Callum squinted at the cover as I shot to my feet. “Aren’t you a little young to be reading smut?”

Snatching it back from him, I refused to let my cheeks heat as I deposited it into my bag. “Aren’t you a little young to participate in real-life smut?” He said nothing, his lip curling to the right as his dark

eyes danced. “And mind your own business. I can read whatever I want.”

I descended the steps, glancing around and finding no sign of Annie, my driver.

“Which parts are your favorite?” Callum said from behind me, his warm breath causing my hair to stir and goose bumps to appear. I suppressed a shiver. “Does he rescue a damsel from a dangerous dragon, only to drag her back to his own lair to insert his well-endowed girth inside her warm, wet—”

“Cal,” Tara’s voice penetrated my burning ears, but even though he’d stopped talking, which I was thankful for, he was slow to step back. “What are you doing?”

I turned as Tara’s blue eyes shifted back and forth between us. The cheerleader’s smile wavered as she waited for an answer from her boyfriend.

Callum looked down at me, his brows high on his head as he licked his bottom lip. I held his gaze even though it was doing dangerous things to my stomach. “I caught Renee here reading something a little ... risqué.”

“Risqué?” Tara giggled. “Oh, like, you mean a romance novel?”

Callum still didn’t look at her. “Uh-huh.”

“Who cares. Ready to go?”

Callum’s eyes narrowed, then finally, he looked over at his girlfriend. “I don’t know. I’m not sure it’s a good idea to have a minor reading such things. Not here at Trellara. They’d never stand for it.”

A glance at Tara showed me that she was confused, her lips pinching and her brows crinkling. “I read my mom’s books all the time. And hey, what we do isn’t exactly PG.” A blush appeared, followed by her feet shifting.

Something lodged itself in my throat, but I tried to swallow over it.

Callum’s gaze returned to me, those eyes unreadable as he said, “Yes, but with her parents being my parents’ best friends, she’s practically family. I think it’d be in her best interest to ensure they know about their daughter’s extracurricular activities. Considering they aren’t exactly age appropriate.”

My mom had suggested I read it, so I merely raised a brow, not allowing my annoyance to surface. “Double standards much?”

Tara laughed. “Quit. Seriously, who cares? Are you coming over? Mom’s still out of town.”

Callum’s perfect teeth slid over his bottom lip, gaze steadfast on mine. “Yeah. Later, Mini Mouse.”

Annie didn’t arrive for another full minute. And as I watched Callum and Tara walk over to her driver’s car to make out behind it before finally climbing inside, it turned out to be the longest minute I’d ever experienced.



The next morning, I was immediately called into Principal Farley’s office.

I stood from my seat in homeroom, ignoring the giggles and whispers surrounding me as I righted my gray blazer and grabbed my backpack.

The halls were empty save for a few latecomers who scrambled past me and the rows of dark blue lockers. My feet echoed on the shiny, cream floor. My black flats tapped in time with my slowing heart rate.

I had no idea what I’d been called in for, and I spent the next twelve minutes seated in the waiting area, staring at the gilded clock on the wall, trying to figure out what it could be.

Perhaps it was drama. Though missing rehearsal when it was a voluntary extracurricular activity wasn’t exactly grounds for getting called to the principal’s—

Callum.

Despite our not so great first meeting at the end of summer, he’d kept his distance from me over the short month I’d been here. Why he’d bother to get me in trouble now was beyond my thinking capabilities.

“Miss Grant?”

I stood at the sight of Principal Farley. Her hair in a tight bun, and her bright blue glasses perched prettily on the tip of her small nose. Her smile was warm, but it did nothing to settle my rattled nerves. "Come in."

I did, dumping my backpack between my feet as I took the seat opposite her at her large oak desk.

"It has been brought to my attention that you may be reading something a little inappropriate, not only for your age but also during school hours."

My embarrassment was a swelling hot-air balloon; my cheeks heating so suddenly, I thought they'd burst or catch fire. "Um ..."

She removed her glasses, smiling a tiny smile as she leaned forward over her desk. The neckline on her cashmere blouse gaped, and I thought it was kind of ridiculous that I was getting called in about a romance novel when the principal of one of the most esteemed prep schools in the state dressed like a smutty librarian.

I mean, it was a great look, but it didn't exactly seem fair.

Her manicured hands joined, and I moved my eyes to hers as she said, "I personally love a good romance." She gave me what I thought was meant to be a wink, but I didn't quite know if she was trying to be subtle, or if she'd failed. "However, there's a time and place, and that place is not at school."

"I wasn't reading it here, I swear." I crossed my ankles to stop my feet from shifting, pulling my shoulders back like my mother always harped at me about. "I was reading it on the way to school and put it in my locker to keep safe until I went home."

That was a bit of a lie. I did read it during English when I was supposed to be reading the required material set out for us, but I didn't think it wise to mention that. In my defense, I'd read *To Kill a Mockingbird* when I was ten, and then again when I was twelve.

Principal Farley nodded, reclining back in her chair. "You're a friend of the Welsh family, are you not?"

"I am, yes. Our fathers work together."

Her pink lips twisted in thought. "Interesting. And you and Callum, you don't get along?"

"I knew it," I hissed before I could stop myself.

Principal Farley only smiled. "I didn't say *he* was the one to bring this to my attention."

"You didn't need to," I grumbled, looking over at the large bookshelf lined with her credentials and the thick spines of old books.

"Renee, where did you get this novel?"

"It's not as bad as whatever he likely said it is," I said, bringing my attention back to her.

"I'm not taking the bait." She smiled, looking like she wanted to giggle. "I'm just curious, but you don't need to tell me if it makes you uncomfortable. It's just ... peculiar reading material for a fourteen-year-old."

"I'm not a child," I retorted tartly, like the fourteen-year-old I was. Another smile.

I puffed out a breath, trying not to slouch in the leather seat. "My mother recommended it. We often share books."

Principal Farley's thin brows jumped. "Oh?"

I just nodded.

"Interesting. Well, far be it from me to tell you what to do if your mother is so, how shall we say, lenient."

I refrained from rolling my eyes. In some things, yes, but most of the time, unless it suited her, lenient she was not. "It's just a book. I've never even had a boyfriend." For some reason, I felt the need to defend my mother's actions. But it was true. My mother, for all her faults, trusted me.

Principal Farley did laugh then. A jovial, tinkling sound. "That will change soon."

"Not likely," I muttered under my breath. I had no interest in boys yet. Most were legitimately smelly, loud, or just plain mean and conceited. And one particular boy who came to mind, well, he was just a grade-A asshole. "I'll stick to mature men in books for now. Can I please go to class?"

Principal Farley laughed once more, then stood to walk me outside.

Before she returned to her office, she whispered, "Try the *Highlander's Forbidden Fruit*, it's her best work yet."

Dumbfounded, I watched her strut back down the short hallway,
then smiled the whole way to class.

That's a big fat zero for you, Callum.

THREE



Callum

Fifteen years old

The problem with not liking someone was that it could consume you.

Eat at your mind like a parasite that wouldn't die, no matter how many different ways you tried to crush it.

I sat at the large seventeenth-century-style dining table beneath a chandelier that dripped swirling speckles of light over the room, and I waited.

We ate the usual three-course dinner that our cook, Wanda, made us every Friday night, and by the second course, my father was droning on about the merits of redesigning his office. He'd just had it remodeled last spring.

My mother was all nods and smiles, her eyes dancing between my father's as she absently twirled her fork through the slush pile she'd made of her curried vegetables.

By the time dessert arrived, I was in the clear.

"You're playing Chesterton next weekend?" my father asked, leaning back in his chair and patting his stomach.

Damn it. Lifting my gaze to his, I nodded.

"Does Renee like football?" my mother cut in. "You should invite her to the game."

"She doesn't like football." My father frowned at my quick retort, and I cleared my throat. "I mean, she doesn't seem like the type to

like football.” No, she was all princesses and bows, and apparently into domineering men in romance novels.

My mother’s smile had my hands tensing around my utensils. “I’ll talk to Valery. Maybe we can make a weekend getaway out of it.”

I barely contained my groan, glancing at my father with a look that had him saying, “No, precious. I told the Oswalds that I’d bring you along for our dinner meeting so you can see Erin.”

My mother waved a hand, almost slouching back in her chair. “Did you have to? Erin’s such a bore.”

I zoned out, staring at the crystal vase filled with dusky pink hydrangeas while my father reminded my mother about the benefits of maintaining the right friendships.

“May I be excused?” I asked once my father paused to take a sip of his whiskey.

At his nod, I pushed my chair back, tucking it beneath the table before retreating to the comfort of my room.

The mahogany staircase gleamed as my palm ran over the railing, and my feet carried me to the top. My room was at the far right end of the second level, thankfully well away from my parents’ room, which sat at the top of the stairs, intricate carvings etched into the wood of the opened doors.

The door to my room was much the same except there was only one. The room itself wasn’t even half the size of my parents’, which was fine, considering their room took up a good chunk of the second floor.

Before we moved in when I was a kid, the second floor had eight bedrooms scattered between various sitting rooms and bathrooms. Some of the rooms remained as guestrooms, but my parents decided to create a miniature house for their own room by tearing down walls and completely remodeling their half of the floor.

The attic and Wanda’s room occupied the third floor, along with another room filled with my mother’s many abandoned projects from years gone by.

For a trophy wife, she really did try to spend her spare time wisely instead of sitting idly by as my father turned people’s thousands into millions. Too bad her efforts were always kind of lackluster, and she never followed through.

After taking a shower, I flopped onto my king-size bed and flicked through the channels on my flat-screen TV.

But no matter how hard I tried to get lost in something mindless, my mind insisted on repeating the same questions. *Why didn't Renee tell anyone? Her parents?*

I couldn't figure it out. It was all over school—her reading tastes and how they'd resulted in a trip to the principal's office.

I'd watched her at lunch, seated on the other side of the cafeteria with her drama buddies, yet she never even looked at me once.

Forget her. I needed to forget her. Didn't even know why I cared, or why I even bothered. Something about her just got to me, igniting my blood and causing me to clench my fists. Her stupid bows, fancy pantyhose, and reluctance to care about what others thought about her were driving me insane.

Leaning over, I snatched my phone from the nightstand to call Tara.

I could do with a little dirty talk. That would definitely take my mind someplace better.

Yet my finger wouldn't budge. It hovered over her name, circling like a bumblebee around a flower.

With a curse, I tossed my phone, checked to make sure the door was locked, then shoved my hand down my pants.



Students shuffled past, and I rolled my head back against my locker.

“And this one scene, where he says ...”

Renee was all smiles as Tara relayed the details of the stupid book she'd been reading.

The stupid book that should've embarrassed Renee yet seemed to be attracting the entire female student body for book club meetings in the school halls.

Yes, people had made digs at her about it over the past few weeks, but she'd let it slide off her shoulders. As though she was carved from glittering stone and everything else was water, washing over or around her while she remained resistant. Beautiful. Unchanged.

"Hey," Mike said, stopping beside me to open his locker. "Coming to the team meeting this afternoon?"

"I guess."

"You guess?" Mike shoved a book inside, collecting his phone and wallet before slamming the door closed. "What's up with you?" When I continued to glare at Renee, his gaze followed. "Oh. Man, she's hot."

"She looks like a fucking peacock, prancing around in her frilly socks and ridiculous bows."

Mike said nothing, so I glanced over, finding his eyes steadfast on Renee. My teeth gritted.

"Yeah, but she knows how to wear them."

"What are you? The style police?"

He laughed. "Shut up." Eyeing me up and down a moment, he raised his brows. "Hang on. Do you like her or something?"

My spine straightened, and I forced out a guffaw. "Fuck no. She annoys the crap out of me."

"Why?"

"Why?" I repeated as though he'd asked the most stupid question in the world.

"Yeah, why?" He shrugged, loosening his tie. "Usually there's a reason for not liking someone."

"I don't need a reason," I snapped.

Mike muttered what sounded like, "Bullshit," and shoved his wallet into his pants.

"My parents started it," I admitted quietly. I knew if I didn't give him something, he'd assume whatever he wanted. I couldn't have that.

"Your parents?"

Nodding, I explained, "Our moms. They seem to think it'd be a great idea to eventually set us up."

"How do you know this?" he asked.

I started walking to the cafeteria. If Tara wanted to hang out and talk about some lame book, so be it. Mike fell in step beside me. “Besides the fact that my mother asks me at least once a day about Renee, I overheard them in the game room at the end of summer, drinking and carrying on about it like a bunch of teenage girls.”

Mike chuckled. “They were probably just joking around.”

He didn’t know Valery Grant and Lucinda Welsh. Those two women were queens when it came to getting what they wanted. “They aren’t. Our fathers are merging their firms.”

“Holy shit,” Mike said as we stopped in line. “Is Welsh Holdings in trouble?”

“Not as far as I know. But I overheard them on the phone. Apparently, it’s been their plan for the past year. More lucrative, supposedly. They plan to set up international offices in Beijing and Germany by next spring.”

Mike whistled. “Now that would probably give me reason to be worried, too.”

We ordered and took our trays to the back corner where the team sat. A stern look at Mike told him to shut his mouth on the matter.

He did, thankfully.

I half listened to the guys drone on about some new gaming console while tearing into my sandwich as if it had personally offended me.

Black ballet flats with tiny bows on the toes caught my eye as I stared at the ground after taking a drink from my water bottle.

I didn’t think, just reacted.

Water sprayed from my mouth, landing all over Renee’s white blouse as she let out a pitiful shriek.

“Dude.” Josh, one of my team mates, laughed. “Harsh.”

Ignoring him, I lifted my gaze from the white bra that was now on display for the whole cafeteria to see to those green eyes. Hurt flickered back at me, but only for a heartbeat, and then Renee was dumping the contents of her tray onto my lap.

“Fuck!” I stood, frantically trying to shove the hot macaroni from my pants, my fingers getting burned in the process.

The cafeteria went silent. My breathing became a loud, monstrous sound that I feared moved through the room as though a

microphone had been clipped to my shirt.

“Whoops, sorry. It slipped,” Renee deadpanned, moving over to a table in the opposite corner with her drama club buddies.

“Did she just ...?” Mike asked.

“Jesus.” I looked down at the cheese smears and bits of pasta all over my pants. “I’m going to have to—”

“Miss Grant and Mr. Welsh. Outside. Now.” Mrs. Bennington’s voice boomed above the snickers and whispers.

With a glance at the guys, I shrugged, then grabbed the other half of my sandwich and drink before making my way outside.

“What is the meaning of this?” Mrs. Bennington asked, her voice a low hiss as Renee stepped outside, and the door to the cafeteria shut behind her.

When we both said nothing, she sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose before tossing her arm down to her side. “Detention this afternoon.”

“I have a team meeting,” I protested.

“Not my problem. And head to lost property to find yourselves some suitable clothes. You don’t get a free pass out of school for this.” Her heels clacked on the floor as she stormed off.

I glared at Renee with my teeth grinding, but she only smiled. “You started it.”

“Real mature.”

She laughed, and my mouth fell open at the sound of it. Raspy but sweet. “You want to argue about maturity now? Fine. Let’s do that.”

“I’d rather not.” I straightened from where I’d been leaning against the wall.

“First the book, and now this? What did I ever do to you?” she asked, her voice lowering a few decibels, vulnerability ringing clear.

Ignoring the twist in my gut, I blurted honestly, “You exist.”

She shook her head, about to walk away, when I said, “You do have some nice tits, though. So there’s that.”

Her hand flew up over her head to flip me the bird.

And for a moment, just a moment, I forgot that I hated her so much.

FOUR



Renee

Fifteen years old

Telling my mother about all the ways her dream suitor for me was actually a monster probably wouldn't go over well. I was tempted, yet I knew no matter what I said or how I phrased it, she'd misconstrue everything.

Some part of me wondered if he liked me, and if perhaps the low barbs and hurtful actions were his way of rebelling against it.

That part of me had now been put in its rightful place. Smothered and drowned by the obvious animosity that I refused to let myself be too blind to see.

If spraying me with water wasn't bad enough, spending an hour in an empty classroom where he proceeded to talk football stats with the gym teacher who got stuck with detention duty was what sealed it. Callum didn't say one word to me. They both ignored me, which was fine.

But as I went to leave, I realized someone had stuck fresh gum to the seat of my chair before I'd sat down.

"You should always look where you're parking that big thing," Callum said, smirking over his shoulder at me as he swaggered out of the room.

It was horrifying, pulling his disgusting gum from my backside just enough so that I could leave the plastic chair behind and get home.

Enough. I'd had enough.

He could do what he wanted. I would not back down, but I wouldn't retaliate anymore either. His brand of assholery had a ricochet effect. Affecting other things in my life, piece by little piece.

Hilda was annoyed with me for days due to missing rehearsals yet again no matter how much I tried to explain it to her. My homework was handed in two days late that week, and I had to use my period as some mortifying excuse for why my school skirt had been ruined and tossed into the trash before anyone could see.

Not to mention, I hadn't sewed since.

It'd now been two weeks, and I'd managed to avoid any more run-ins with the asshole. Hopefully, he'd find someone else to set his bad moods on.

I stared longingly at my sewing machine, which was surrounded in fabric from my latest and now discarded idea. A Cinderella-inspired dress for a charity gala that was coming up next month.

"Knock, knock," my mother chirped.

Looking over at the door, I smiled as she walked in with two bags looped over her arm.

She placed them down on my peach-colored duvet, then took a seat next to me. "Happy Birthday, darling."

"Thank you," I said, taking one of the bags and finding swaths of fabric inside it.

"From Indonesia." Her smile was proud as I carefully spread the silk over my lap, then stared up at her.

"You didn't have to do this," I breathed, all the while my fingers kept smoothing over the material. It was so soft, so delicate, I didn't think I'd ever felt something that fine in my life.

"Oh, don't give me that." She passed me the other bag, clapping her hands when I took it from her.

It was filled with novels. First editions. Jane Austen to Nora Roberts. "What's ...?" I plucked out a small cardboard box from the bottom, opening it up to find a shiny Amex.

My mother squeaked, her blood red hair falling out from behind her ear. "You do not want to know the things I had to do to get your

father to agree to this one,” she said, snatching it from me and plucking it out of its nest inside the box.

My nose crinkled. “No, I don’t.”

She laughed. “No more spending caps on your checking account. Isn’t that exciting?”

It was, but it was rare that I spent anywhere near the amount to reach the card’s limit.

“Thank you,” I said again, reaching over to hug her.

“You’re so welcome,” Mom murmured, rocking me side to side before releasing me and fixing her hair. “I do wish you’d agreed to a party, though. It would’ve been a great way for me to meet all your new friends.”

“I don’t have many new friends.”

She laughed as if I were joking, which I let slide. “Shoulders back.” She tapped one of them, lifting my hair to let it fall down my back. “Just because you’re at home and it’s your birthday doesn’t give you permission to slouch.” She stood from the bed. “Your father will be home early. We’ve invited the Welsh’s over for dinner.”

My eyes popped. “What? No.” That was the main reason I’d avoided a party in the first place.

“Don’t make me frown, darling.”

Frustrated and panicked, I whined, “Mom, I didn’t want to do anything.”

“I know, but it’s part business, part pleasure. So let’s just run with it, shall we?” She paused in the doorway. “Have a wonderful day.” She kissed the air. “Smooches!”

With a loud whimper, I hung my head, my shoulders slouching.



“Pass the gravy, dear.” My dad held out his hand as Mom grabbed the porcelain jug and handed it over.

“You didn’t go to school today?” Dad asked after he drizzled the gravy over his slow roasted beef.

“It’s her birthday, Damon. She didn’t have to.”

He gave Mom a look she returned with a look of her own. He sighed, cutting into his food as Lucinda put her cutlery down.

“Callum has a gift for you,” she said, dabbing at her chin delicately with her napkin.

That had me pausing. Callum had barely looked at me since they’d arrived.

I almost coughed. “Sorry?”

Callum smirked, then reached into the breast pocket of his jacket, retrieving a little box and pushing it over the table.

I blinked at it, unsure what game he was playing at now.

“Go on,” my mom said, nudging me with her elbow. “Don’t be rude. Open it.”

Slowly, I reached over the table, taking the silver box and opening it.

Inside sat a locket. My mother gasped, her hand going to her chest as I freed it from the box.

“You should open the locket later,” Callum said, picking up his fork and spearing some vegetables. “You know, when you’re alone.”

Our mothers both made similar sounds of swooning.

With my hand shaking, I deposited the necklace back inside the box and set it aside.

“So sweet,” my mom practically wept.

“I know.” Lucinda smiled, her brown eyes crinkling in the corners. “I might’ve helped him just a little, but what’s on the inside, well, that was all his idea.”

“Do you still have that girlfriend?” Mom asked Callum, no hesitation whatsoever.

My dad laughed. “Valery, leave the boy alone.”

“He does,” Lucinda said with a roll of her eyes. She picked up her wine and took a hearty sip. “Though I suppose they both should have a little fun before they’re shackled to one another for life.”

Our mothers laughed like a pair of old crones, our fathers smiling as if the prospect of an arranged marriage was normal dinner conversation.

One look at Callum had my stomach sinking. His head was down, eyes staring into his food while his fork no doubt left imprints on the inside of his fist.

“Callum, don’t look so forlorn.” Lucinda swirled her wine, taking another sip. “One would think you didn’t have a set of eyes in your head. Renee is stunning.”

“Luce,” Kian said, a stern yet humorous timbre to his voice.

Lucinda waved a hand at her husband. “You’re the one who agreed it’d be a great thing for our families.”

Kian tilted a shoulder. “It would, but leave it be for now. You’re likely scaring them.”

Ignoring him, my mom smiled at Lucinda, whispering none too quietly, “Arranged marriages are all the rage again. Did you hear about the Everton’s boy? He married this tiny wraith of a thing ...”

“Have you got that proposal ready?” Kian, Callum’s father, asked mine, effectively talking over our mother’s voices.

“Yes, it’s here in my office. Though we’ve got a few snags we’ll need to iron out.”

The conversation turned to business, and our mothers quieted, playing the dutiful wives until they could be excused to the parlor for more wine and raucous laughter.

Before that could happen, Rosa appeared with a cake, setting it down on the table, then collected some dinner plates.

My father took the lighter she deposited, lighting all fifteen candles as I felt Callum’s fire-filled gaze on my profile.

“Strawberry cheesecake?” Kian asked, inspecting it as my father sat back down.

My mom smiled. “It’s been her favorite since she was old enough to request it.”

It was true, though after a quick look at Callum, whose tongue was poking his cheek as he drilled holes into my face with his eyes, I worried if I took one bite, I’d hurl up everything I’d managed to eat tonight.

My mother and Lucinda started singing, and I painted a smile on, my fingers toying viciously with the hem of my dress beneath the table. Thankfully, everyone was so lost in their conversations, they

paid no attention to me and the way I left my piece of cheesecake untouched.

No one besides Callum, who licked a smear of cream from his upper lip before excusing himself.

Scooping up the little box, I soon did the same. Callum was nowhere to be found as I strolled down the hall toward the staircase. Unfortunately, I found him upstairs in my room, hands trailing over the fabric on my desk. "You sew?"

I left the door open, walking in and inspecting my room, trying to see what he saw as he looked around. Books piled high on my tall white bookshelf that took up the entirety of one wall. A plush peach-colored rug beneath a small table where craft and fashion magazines sat atop, and a white armchair next to it.

My bed was on top of a small dais, its four white posts surrounded by bright veils of mosquito netting. Not to protect me from mosquitos, but just because I liked them.

I felt like a princess surrounded by luminous curtains, and my raised bed provided me a heart-stopping view of the dense, green woods outside my floor-to-ceiling window.

"I do," I finally said, thinking it was obvious and wondering what he wanted.

Callum removed a lid on a glass jar that held numerous buttons of all different colors, shapes and sizes.

I watched, my mouth agape, as he turned the jar upside down and sent them scattering to the desk and floor. "Whoops."

Vile words curled behind my teeth as anger set my bones stiffening. I swallowed them and asked with too much calm, "What is your problem?"

He set the empty jar down, a few lone buttons rolling across the floorboards to hide beneath the desk.

Without even so much as a backward glance at them, or me, he strolled over to my bookshelves, a low chuckle reaching me as he plucked out one of my comics.

"*Sailor Moon*?" His brow arched as he looked at me. "Really?"

With my teeth grinding together, I concentrated on breathing slowly through my nose. I wouldn't let him pick me to pieces.

“You don’t strike me as the comic book type,” he murmured, tossing it back on the shelf haphazardly. I tensed, hoping it wouldn’t slide off the shelf to the floor.

“You don’t strike me as the type for small talk. What do you want?”

A flash of something I couldn’t name rippled over his features before he schooled them. He stepped closer, and I kept my eyes steadfast on his. “Did you open the locket yet?”

“No, and I don’t want it.” Fed up with the tension and his disarming presence, I marched over to him and shoved the box in my hand to his chest. “Here, take it back. I know your mom arranged it anyway.”

“True,” he said with a smile that was less than comforting. “No need to be rude, though. It’s probably really expensive. A family heirloom.” With another cursory glance around my room, he added, “And it appears you sure do like expensive things.”

“And you don’t?” My hand, still holding the locket, dropped to my side as he stepped away and strode for the door without answering me.

“Call it a peace offering.” He gestured to the locket. “I’m done playing games, Renee. Get your mother to back off and you won’t need to worry about me again.”

I scoffed. “I never encouraged her.”

He raised a brow.

“You don’t believe me?”

A shrug, then, “I’ll believe you when I stop hearing about all their ridiculous plans.”

I leaned back against my desk, staring down at the locket. He wouldn’t believe me no matter what I said or did. “Your ego knows no bounds. I’m not interested in you.”

He remained quiet, but I could still feel him standing there across the room at my door as I stared down at the silver box.

With a sigh, I flipped it open, removing the locket from its soft pillow and staring at the intricate silver engravings on the outside. Unable to help it, a tiny gasp slipped from me. “It really is beautiful.”

Callum made a sound of agreement. “My great-grandmother’s.”

I looked over at him then. A family heirloom indeed. “I don’t have to take it.”

He scratched at his head. “I think you’d find it would cause too much drama between our mothers if you didn’t.”

That was true. My nail caught the tiny latch, flipping it open.

I screamed, the locket flying from my hand as a black spider unfolded itself and jumped at my chest. In a panic, I brushed it to the floor, my heart racing and my breath stalling as I stumbled backward, trying to skirt around my desk.

The spider scuttled away, heading for my wardrobe as a loud crash resounded behind me.

I turned and saw my new sewing machine on the floor. “No!” I fell beside it, taking in the broken casing and twisted needle shank. “No, no. My mom got me this when we moved here. I’d been waiting forever.”

Callum cursed. Enraged, I glanced over my shoulder to find him with a shocked, pinched look on his face. “I didn’t ...”

“You didn’t what? Do that on purpose?” I laughed, my breath catching as my vision blurred. “Get out.”

“Renee—”

“No,” I cut in, standing and whirling on him as fury dried the tears that’d welled in my eyes. “Did you ever stop to think, just for one fucking minute, that I might actually want nothing to do with you? *Huh?* That all your stupid games, the torment, the hateful glares could be unwarranted?”

He didn’t say a word, just stared at me as if he’d been slapped.

“Get the hell out of my room, my house, and my fucking life. *Now.* Before I scream the house down and tell my parents everything you’ve done.”

His lips parted, his hand diving into his thick brown hair before he finally spun and headed out the door.

I locked it behind him, then slumped against it and stared at the remains of my sewing machine with my heart in tatters.

FIVE



Callum

Sixteen years old

“Renee and her parents will be arriving soon,” my mother called down the hall to my bedroom where I was slipping a shirt over my head.

“Fuck,” I spewed the word under my breath.

I’d seen Renee in and outside of school plenty of times, but over the past eleven months, we hadn’t said a word to each other. Not one damn word.

Not since I’d left her in her room on the night of her fifteenth birthday, heartbroken over a sewing machine.

Such a thing would usually make me laugh, yet as I watched her face morph from horror to despair, all I could do was stare. I remembered it all as if it happened just yesterday. Not sure why, but it was something that played out behind my closed eyelids many times and stalked me in the halls and classrooms whenever I saw her.

She never looked at me, didn’t even offer a scowl. Not even at our family’s get-togethers, where she’d dutifully act like the good daughter and ignore our mothers’ continuous chiding with a simple crack of laughter.

I didn’t exist. Even as my name was dragged around school after I called it quits with Tara two weeks after Renee’s birthday. Even

when the girls talked of my philandering ways at parties. Even when I made pass after scoring pass at each of our games.

I was a ghost.

Which was fine because it was what I'd wanted. I wanted to be left alone to live my own life and not have to give in to my mother's fanciful ideas of marriage and two point five kids followed by taking the reins of my father's company.

It was one thing for my father to control my career, but another thing entirely for him to control my personal life. In hindsight, I knew I'd probably overreacted, but I wanted to play ball professionally. And marriage? Marriage was something no fifteen-year-old guy wanted to think about, let alone be forced into.

The backyard was bedecked with twinkling lights, and the band my father chose warmed up on the makeshift stage by the pool. Spying some seats in the corner near the fence, I settled into one and pulled out my phone to log on to social media.

News about the party was all over school. I didn't think my parents quite knew what they were getting themselves into when they decided to throw me a birthday bash for my sixteenth.

My teammates arrived first, laughing and catcalling as they watched my mother bend over by the pool to fix a string of lights that'd fallen to the ground.

"You guys are messed up," I grumbled as they belted me on the back and wished me a happy birthday.

"So many things I could say to that." Mike laughed, taking a seat beside me. "Serious milf."

"Damn right, she is," my dad's voice sounded, making the four of us freeze and look up simultaneously. He grinned, looking at each one of us as he said, "Don't think I forget what it's like to be a teenager. I was barely an adult when you came along." He gestured to me with his whiskey.

He loved to remind me of that. Of how he'd managed to finish college, support my mom when she had me in her junior year, and learn the ropes at what was once my grandfather's company all at the same time.

"Got a spare one of those, Mr. Welsh?" Steve piped up, eyeing his drink.

My dad's grin fell. "Nice try."

He stalked over to where my mother was talking to one of the guys in the band. Fluffing her hair and laughing, she was taken by surprise when my dad looped an arm around her and brought her flush to his chest.

I groaned. "God, really?"

The guys snickered, Mike thankfully distracting me with questions about the kind of car I would get.

"Dad said he's not buying me one until I'm seventeen."

"Why?" Mike grabbed a soda from the cooler, shaking the water from it over the grass.

"Fuck knows, he said something about me being more responsible then."

Steve guffawed. "How much can seriously change in a year?"

At that moment, Renee's parents stepped outside. Renee was slow to follow as she paused between the opened French doors.

"A lot, I guess," Mike muttered, eyes locked on Renee as she adjusted her emerald green cocktail dress. She was wearing black pantyhose and white heels.

Who the hell wore white heels with black pantyhose?

Renee did. The white bow atop her red hair drew your eye as it sat there without moving as if it were superglued to her hair.

She glanced over at us, then immediately looked away.

"Anyone going to say hi?" Mike asked.

When none of us answered, me because I couldn't, he shook his head and made his way over to Renee. My hand clenched around the can of soda, the metal clang barely registering as she smiled up at Mike.

Mike. Since when did she smile at Mike?

The band started, and more guests arrived. After an hour of enduring conversation with my parents' friends and random people from school, we managed to sneak away to my bedroom with the bottle of vodka that Wanda kept hidden beneath the kitchen sink.

"Tara's going out with Jed now, know that?"

I took a swig from the bottle, passing it to Mike with barely a tilt of my shoulder. "Don't particularly care. We broke up fucking ages ago."

Steve belched. "Yeah, but she didn't date anyone for ages."

"Mhmm," Mike agreed. "You were each other's firsts and shit, so I guess it'd be understandable if you still felt something for her."

"We can mess him up after school on Monday," Pat said, his tone casual as he inspected my comics on the bookshelf.

"No need." I sat up from where I'd been lounging on my bed and staring out the window at the pool below.

We were each other's firsts. Some of them, I supposed. Tara was a cool chick, but I stopped feeling anything for her months before I'd finally cut her loose.

"Is Mandy here?" Steve asked. Lying on the rug, he tossed a football into the air and caught it with his eyes closed.

"Mandy?" Pat asked, confused.

"She's in our grade. You seriously don't know her?" Mike asked.

"Nope," Pat said, no fucks given.

I couldn't give a shit who was there. My head felt a little heavy. We were used to drinking every now and then but not straight vodka. I needed to piss. And to get some water.

Out in the hall, the noise of the party tried to break through the thick walls and old arched windows.

I did my business, then made my way downstairs to the kitchen.

White and red caught my eye, and I paused at the foot of the stairs, peering around them to find Renee huddled on the bench seat tucked behind it. She was sewing something.

"Did you ever get your sewing machine fixed?" I hiccupped over the last word, rubbing my eyes as she paused to glance up at me.

It was darker behind here, but I could still see it. Her green eyes blazed a few shades darker, matching the emerald of her dress, for a second, only a split second, before she schooled her features into indifference.

"I did."

"What did you end up telling your mom?" I plonked on the other end of the seat, my thirst forgotten.

"That I saw a spider and accidentally knocked it off the desk."

The way she was freely providing me answers made me smile. "You clever little liar."

“It’s not a lie, though, is it?” She looked over at me for a second, giving me the full effect of her stare. Her pink lips parted, the bottom one fuller than the top. When they joined, they sat perfectly pillowed. A perfect bow.

“Huh?” I scratched at my chest, my shirt, or maybe my skin, itching.

Her brows scrunched. “You’re drunk.”

Not a question, so I didn’t answer it.

She shook her head as she returned to her ... “What is that?”

“A cross-stitch. What, you’ve never seen one before?” She poked the needle beneath the round disc, pulling it through the other side.

Chuckling, I hiccupped again. “I have now.”

I watched her thin fingers work around the disc until I made out a shape. “Roses. Isn’t this something your grandmother would do?”

“My grandmother is in the Bahamas, getting drunk by the pool with men half her age and attending discos every other night. So, no, it’s not something she’d do.”

That made me chuckle again. I drifted sideways, almost rolling into her shoulder as I tried to right myself. “My grandfather died two years ago.” I vomited the words. “My grandma had already left him years beforehand for some younger guy.”

Seeming kind of dumbfounded, Renee muttered, “Oh, sorry.”

“Don’t be. He was kind of a bore and had little patience for me anyway.”

“What about your mom’s parents?” she asked.

I poked my bottom lip out, swinging my head side to side. “They’re okay. They don’t visit much, but when they do, it’s always with awesome gifts.”

Renee was looking at me, her lips curling a little. She wanted to smile, I knew it, and so did she, yet she wouldn’t. “My grandma is kind of the same.”

“The one partying in the Bahamas?”

She nodded. “We don’t see my mom’s parents. They didn’t approve of her marriage, so she stopped talking to them.”

I grimaced. “Well, that sucks.”

Renee was quiet a long moment, then said, “Better not let your parents see you. You reek of alcohol.”

Blinking, I swiped a hand down my face. "You're right about that."

I didn't move, though. Instead, I watched her continuously weave the needle in and out of the material.

"I have a large collection of comic books," I said without much thought.

Renee said nothing, but her fingers paused as she no doubt remembered me discovering her small *Sailor Moon* collection last year.

"DC, *Batman*, especially the *Joker*, are favorites," I continued, then laughed to myself when she remained silent. "If you think you can have a field day by telling everyone, go ahead. You should know by now I don't give a shit."

She blew out an annoyed breath, eyes glued to her ministrations. "I don't care."

I scowled at her small hands, puzzled, but too drunk and too tired to solve it.

People eventually started leaving, laughter and music turning to a quiet hum as I sat, oddly transfixed by the deft movements of those fingers, the concentration that marred her face contradicting her relaxed posture, and the way her tongue would peek out when she needed to give the needle a harder tug.

Footsteps sounded around the corner, and Renee's parents called her name. She tucked the cross-stitch into a little bag that sat beside her, zipping it closed as she watched me.

I straightened, wondering how I'd ended up spending the last half of my own birthday party watching a girl I didn't like take part in a grandma's activity.

A fissure of panic sent the first words I could think of out of my mouth as Renee stood. "Not even going to wish me a happy birthday, Mini Mouse?"

Looking down at me, she stared for a few breaths. Then, without saying a word, she walked away.

SIX



Renee

Sixteen years old

I got out of my sixteenth birthday party thanks to the flu.

And if I was being honest, I'd never been more thankful for a virus in my life.

Not only did I not want the fuss or to play nice with people who pretended to be my friends just to score an invite, but I also didn't want to see *him*.

Weird was the only word my frazzled brain could conjure to describe the few hours he'd sat with me at his own sixteenth birthday. But the weirdest part was since then, he'd tried to smile at me in the halls at school and in line in the cafeteria and tried to get my attention by kicking my chair or tossing paper at me during class.

All of which I ignored.

It was a pity I couldn't ignore his friend, though, who had a habit of finding me after class these past few weeks and talking to me about random things.

"I didn't even know you could put applesauce with it. Strange, right?" Mike said, a cute smile lighting up his blue eyes.

"Uh-huh." I smiled back, not sure what he was talking about. I was busy reading a script for rehearsals tomorrow afternoon. I'd gotten the part of the evil witch in Clarke's twisted retelling of *Snow*

White. He was trying to do it without dwarfs since there were only eight of us in the group. Some of whom didn't always show up for performances.

You couldn't have *Snow White* without the dwarfs, but no matter how many times we'd told him that and suggested other ideas, he'd remained steadfast in his decision to be unique.

Hilda had gotten the part of Snow White, which was apt, and she was eating it up, discussing all the ways I could redesign the typical Snow White dress for her. Admittedly, I was more excited about that than the play itself.

"...And you're not really listening to me, are you?"

I dropped the script to my side, smiling sheepishly. "Sorry, but I've only got another few days to get some lines right, and—"

"And she's just not that into you," Callum cut in, swinging an arm around Mike's shoulders.

Mike scowled, shoving it off.

Mortified, I didn't know what to say. Callum didn't give me much time to say anything, though. "She's into the more rugged types. Blonds especially. Aren't you, Mini Mouse?"

"How the hell would you know what I'm into?"

Callum's top lip curled, displaying a flash of his white teeth. "You mentioned it once. That, and well, I've just got you pegged."

I laughed. "No. You really don't."

His frown made me smile until Mike cut in. "Yeah, I'm gonna jet. I'll see you at practice in the morning." A shy smile was directed at me. "Bye, Renee."

"Bye, Mike," I said, waving slightly.

"Don't feel bad. It's better he knows now than later."

I headed for my car, Callum following and whistling as he ran a hand over the black paint. "Nice. What lies did you need to spin to get this?"

Trying not to roll my eyes, I opened the door and shoved the script and my backpack onto the passenger seat. "Go home, Callum."

"Mini Mouse," he said, voice far too close. Shocked, I spun around, my neck cricking back as he loomed above me, those dark eyes glowing with mischief. "Why do you always ignore me?"

“Do I seriously need to explain that to you?”

His brows furrowed. “That’d be great, actually.”

“Okay, fine. How about the fact that if I acknowledge you in any way, shape, or form, you make my life hell or you accuse me of trying to be your future trophy wife? Oh, and let’s not forget that”—I stabbed a finger at his chest when he started chuckling—“I. Don’t. Fucking. Like. You.”

He stopped laughing, his nostrils flaring as his deep voice lowered. “I’ll admit I might’ve jumped the gun, and yeah, I did some messed-up things, but—”

Brushing off the shiver that wanted to assault me, I straightened my shoulders. “I don’t care. Get out of the way so I can leave.”

A heavy moment settled between us as his eyes scanned my face, stopping on the bow I used to sweep my hair aside in a rush that morning. “You’re really kind of exquisite, but I suppose you already know that, don’t you?”

“Honestly,” I wheezed out. “Do you ever say anything without injecting at least a tiny barb of venom?”

He tsked. “If I remember correctly, you gave me some of your own two minutes ago.”

“I did not. All I said was ...” I trailed off as his grin grew two sizes bigger, making his dimple deepen and the severe slice of his cheekbones more prominent. My eyes shut as I groaned. “Ugh, you’re infuriating.”

Warmth fanned over my cheek as I felt his body step close to mine. “Could make for some seriously hot chemistry.” I went to shove him back when his lips brushed over my skin. “You smell like peaches.”

“And you smell like an asshole. Get off me.”

He stepped back, chuckling again. “Later, Mini Mouse.”

With my blood boiling, I climbed into my car and shut the door, watching him swagger across the lot to a waiting Town Car.



“That’s not how it goes,” Hilda said, shoulders tight and mouth pinched.

“It doesn’t matter.” Clarke waved a hand. “Improvise. Imitation will only get you so far.”

Hilda glared at Tyson, who was playing the prince but had now decided he wanted to be the huntsman. “*World of Warcraft* style,” he said with a grin that was supposed to be menacing. “Let’s make it bloody.”

“Bloody means we’ll have to scrounge up more blood bags, and our budget is already tight.”

“It shouldn’t be.” Tyson looked over at where I was standing in the wings. “Renee is making most of the costumes.”

“Regardless, we didn’t have the funds to start with,” Clarke said. “So unless you want to ask Mommy or Daddy, let’s not get too carried away.”

I’d come to notice in my time at Trelara Prep that these people never stuck to a well-written script. Rather, they liked to just keep bits and pieces from it. At first, it unnerved me, but after watching as an impeccably dressed tree in last year’s performance of Jack and Jill, I had to admit, their ability to make a hot mess out of a traditional story made for a far more entertaining show.

We wrapped ten minutes later, but I stayed back, my sewing kit sitting by me next to the stage as I finished replacing buttons and taking up the hem on a worn maiden’s dress.

“Are you coming?” Hilda asked, making me look up as she shouldered her backpack.

“Where?”

She half rolled her eyes. “Bits and Burgers. We’re all going to get shakes, remember?”

I knew Clarke would stay behind for at least another hour, so I shook my head. “I need to finish this for Alissa, then I’ve gotta get home to finish the math homework we have due tomorrow.”

I threaded some copper string through the needle, tying it off as Hilda’s feet stayed planted in front of me. “What?” I asked.

“You hardly ever hang out with us outside of school lately.”

“You guys want these costumes done, right?” I tried to keep the snark out of my tone and failed.

Hilda snorted. “Seriously, Renee. So boring.”

Then she was gone, and I stared down at my hands, at the dusty dress in my lap, and sighed.

“She sounds delightful,” Callum drawled, startling me.

Lifting his tall frame from the wall he’d been leaning against in the shadows, he strode over and took a seat beside me on the ground, his hair damp and a drink bottle in hand.

I blinked a few times. “What are you doing here?”

“Coach has us running double practice. Thought I’d say hello before I went home.”

It was just yesterday that he’d blocked my attempts of escaping him after school. “Well, say hello and run along, then.”

“Hello, and no thank you. I’m quite happy right here.” His eyes followed my every movement as I shifted the dress and started on the hem.

Let him watch, I thought. What harm could it possibly do?

“Is that your costume?” he asked after a few minutes.

Again, I shifted it in my lap, smoothing the hem with a finger. “No, it’s for Alissa.”

“Alissa,” Callum repeated. “Nope, don’t know her.”

I contained a snort. Of course, he wouldn’t. She was beneath his usual hierarchy. “You should take the time to get to know more of your peers.”

“I’m here with you, aren’t I?” he retorted, voice gentle.

“Not what I meant. You know enough about me, and I don’t care to know any more about you.”

“False and false.”

My hand jerked, slipping as frustration shot through me. “Shit,” I hissed, lifting my finger as a drop of blood bubbled on my skin.

Before I could do anything with it, Callum grabbed my finger and shoved it into his mouth.

My eyes sprang wide, the swiftness of the act and my surprise rendering me dumbstruck as his warm tongue slid around my finger. Something clenched in my stomach, my toes curling inside my shoes as his eyes danced with my startled ones.

He released it with a loud, sucking pop, his fingers brushing over my wrist as he gently situated my hand back in my lap.

“Why are you making the costumes?” he asked as if he didn’t just suck my blood like a vampire and cause me to have a prelude to what was bound to be a huge orgasm.

“Um.” After inspecting my finger, which looked as though nothing had happened to it, I tucked some hair behind my ear before picking up the needle and dress. “I enjoy it.”

“For this many people, though?”

“I only need to make three and fix a few others.” I lifted the dress an inch. “Like this one.”

“So, while you’re here, doing this, they’re all out there on their way to stuff their faces?”

“I’m here because I want to be.” Which was true. “You don’t need to be, so you can go now.”

“I’m here because I want to be, too.” He said it so casually with no trace of mockery in his deep baritone. “Did you know that when you’re concentrating, your nose twitches slightly?”

I raised a brow but otherwise ignored him and kept working on the dress.

He pressed some more. “What is it about sewing that you enjoy so much?”

“The silence.” Guilt pricked at my chest as soon as the blunt word filled the air between us, so I continued, “Aside from it being a much-needed time-out, if there’s something I want that I can’t find, I can create it.”

Callum hummed thoughtfully. The sound was deep and awakened jittery flutters in my stomach.

After a long stretch of silence, he started talking again. “I don’t want to take over the company.”

I knew that. Oh boy, I definitely knew that. “So don’t.”

He laughed without any hint of humor. “Not that simple. Dad doesn’t see football as a career, but he understands it can make me some money until I’m ready to take over for him.”

“Talk to him about it,” I said, when what I wanted to say was, *don’t talk to me about it*. I couldn’t, though. His rich, deep voice was

softer, gentler. And I realized it was because he was being himself. And far be it from me to keep anyone from being their true selves.

“He won’t listen. Says I’m too young to understand right now, and that one day, I’ll agree with him.”

“Maybe. And don’t bite my head off for saying this, but maybe he’s right.”

“I don’t care,” he clipped.

I smiled down at the brown and gold fabric. “Okay. And you brought this up because ...?”

He crossed his ankles, sneakers squeaking against the old wood floor. “Because my personal life is mine. I got scared that they’d try to control that too.”

“They?” My shoulders tensed.

“You know who I mean. Our parents.”

The seconds fell like rain as I mulled his words over. Eventually, I murmured softly, “Understandable.”

We sat in silence, and when I finished the dress, I looked over to see his head was inclined toward me, flopping against the wall as though he was about to fall asleep.

“You should go home and go to bed early.”

“Will you join me?” he asked with a groggy smile.

“You wish.” I folded the dress, tucking my needle and thread away and closing the kit.

“Stay,” he said, causing me to sigh and slump back against the wall.

I hadn’t seen or heard Clarke since Callum appeared. The dim lights over the stage casted Callum’s face in half shadow, outlining the deep cut of his jaw and cheekbones.

A handsome boy. Beautiful but like a wolf. He’d charm me, invite me in with sweet words and stomach clenching stares, then leave me half dead on the unforgiving ground.

I knew it, and still, I couldn’t stop myself from staring. Like a drug I’d never taken, my fascination with the danger became an oxygen-depriving thing between us, causing my chest to heave.

“Why?” I finally asked.

Lifting his hand, he kept his eyes on mine, his teeth scraping over his lush bottom lip as his warm skin met my cheek, his thumb

caressing it.

His head fell forward. "So I can do this," he breathed into my mouth. Then his lips were on mine. Soft, careful, and still.

My eyes shut, my heart halting then galloping as Callum melded his lips to mine. Pressing gently at first, he soon urged them deeper, his hand still on my face and his breath tumbling out of him as his lips parted. His tongue peeked out, separating my lips to inch inside just enough to lick my top lip. A strangled gasp left me when he groaned, and I shoved him away, scrambling backward.

My face was a wildfire and his grin the gasoline as he sat sprawled out lazily against the wall. "What, what ...?" I sputtered, blinking and uncertain what to do with my hands, my body, my tingling lips.

Callum stood. "You taste like peaches, too."

I couldn't control my own heartbeat as I stood on untrustworthy legs. His words had me blinded with rage, my hands slapping at his chest as I spewed obscenities at him. "You egocentric asshole. How fucking dare you?"

"What?" He laughed, trying to grab my hands.

"You don't get to just steal someone's first kiss. I want it back." Another slap to his chest. "Now."

He stopped laughing, grabbing my wrists as his face gradually fell. "That was your first kiss?"

I wouldn't be ashamed, not when I was too upset over what he'd stolen from me. "Yes," I said through my teeth, tears smarting.

His hold on my wrists loosened, but he didn't let go. Humor left his eyes, his expression changing into something I couldn't read. "I didn't know."

"You wouldn't," I bit out. "Because you didn't ask. You never ask. You always just assume you know everything."

"You had to know I was about to kiss you," he said, brows furrowed.

I swallowed, taking my hands back. "I didn't ..." I stopped, remembering what happened in those moments before. I guess even if I didn't know, some part of me did. Hoped for it, even. "Forget it," I said, embarrassed.

I went to grab my stuff, but he caught my hand. “I know it might help if I was, but I’m not sorry.”

I huffed out a laugh, swiping at my nose with the sleeve of my blazer. I didn’t even realize I’d been crying.

“I’ve wanted to kiss you since I met you.”

I guffawed. “You’ve hated me since you met me.”

Pulling me to him, he surveyed me carefully as he set his hands on my hips. I let him, unsure why, unsure of anything at that moment. “I didn’t know you,” he said, “but you got under my skin.”

“You still don’t know me,” I whispered, my voice thick.

Grabbing my chin, he lowered his head. “I know enough to know I’ve been an idiot, and anything else I find out about you is just a bonus.”

My walls shrank even more, then it was my turn to make the first move. I dove on him, wrapping my arms around his neck and crashing my lips into his.

“Mini Mouse.” He chuckled into my mouth, his hand gliding up my back and sinking into my hair.

Hating myself as exhilaration coursed through me, I snapped, “Just kiss me.”

SEVEN



Callum

Corridors, closed closet doors, and lowered car seats.

Our mouths were permanently red thanks to desperate lips and greedy tongues. We couldn't seem to eat our fill. I couldn't, and I didn't think I'd ever be able to.

Yet the problematic question arose. What was going on?

"The game's been postponed," Mike said on the way to geography the following Friday afternoon. A week. It'd been a full week since my mouth had first tasted hers, and I was struggling to think of anything besides my next fix.

"Okay."

"Okay?" Mike said, incredulous. "Dude, what is going on with you?"

We took our seats in the back of the classroom, and I lined my pens up absentmindedly on my desk as I said, "Nothing. The weather has been crazy, so I knew we wouldn't be playing."

Mike didn't say anything.

Renee walked in, offering a brief, closed-lipped smile my way before taking a seat next to some blonde in the front row. I frowned at her luscious red hair as Mr. Denson droned on at the whiteboard.

When the lunch bell rang, I cornered her outside, knowing she would be one of the last to leave. Renee didn't shove and hustle. She waited until the path was clear, then she moved.

"Hi," she said, tucking her books to her chest.

“Hi.” I matched her slow stride, my eyes flicking to the students around us at their lockers. “Are you going to sit with me today?”

She didn’t answer me as she stopped at her locker, dumping her books inside and then shutting the door. “Renee,” I hissed.

“Callum,” she countered, her lips curling.

Letting out a loud breath, I asked what’d been brewing inside me all week. “Why is it you seem to avoid being with me in public?”

She blinked, long lashes fanning and making the clenching in my chest ease somewhat. “We ... I don’t know. I guess I thought it wouldn’t be a good idea to let everyone know what we’ve been doing.”

“Making out,” I said. “Touching. Kissing. Say it.”

She backed up against her locker as I pressed into her. Fuck what she wanted; this wasn’t some dirty secret. “Callum, you can’t expect me to just ...” She looked around, swallowed, then stepped around me. “Look, I’ll talk to you after school.”

I watched her walk away, then watched her from where I sat with the guys in the cafeteria, my jaw barely unlocking enough to eat my damn food.

“You look like you’re about to punch someone,” Steve commented, crushing his soda can with a grin.

“He probably just needs to get laid,” Mike said.

Ignoring them, I watched Renee laugh with her friends, my heartrate ticking higher as each minute rolled by.

Shoving my tray away, I took a swig of water and stood. “Later.”

When I stopped at her table, Renee’s friends looked up at me, then at her with mirroring looks of confusion.

“Callum,” Renee said in a low whisper.

“Can I have a word, please?”

With a wary glance at her friends, she nodded and followed me outside.

“Where are you going, Mr. Welsh?” the teacher on duty asked as we approached the doors.

“The nurse’s office,” I said stiffly, shouldering out the doors as the teacher continued to protest behind us.

“Callum,” Renee whispered when I grabbed her hand. “What are you doing?”

I stopped outside an empty classroom, peering into the tiny window on the door before opening it and dragging Renee inside. I closed and locked the door, pushing her up against it.

"This is stupid," I said, watching as her eyes grew. "What's your problem?"

Renee let out a short laugh. "My problem? My problem is this." She gestured between us. "You're so ... so—"

"So *what?*" I growled.

"Bossy! I won't be bullied into being your public plaything."

I stepped back, feeling as though she'd just slapped me. "Plaything?"

"Yes." The hard, hissed word fell from such pretty lips. "It's one thing for you to want to fool around with me, but I'm not about to make it public knowledge. Because we both know that when you're done with me—"

"Done with you?" I asked a little too loudly, unable to believe what she was saying.

"Yes," she breathed, her chest heaving, breasts straining against her white blouse. "Everyone knows since you broke up with Tara that you've had your fair share of ..." She waved a hand. "Whatever, I don't want to get into it. I just don't want to be made public entertainment for all the gossip mongers in this school. Which, in case you haven't noticed, is practically everyone here."

Stepping away, I scratched at the stubble on my chin, pacing back and forth in front of the teacher's desk as I tried to figure out what to say to make her understand that her worries were unfounded.

Renee moved away from the door and deeper into the room as someone walked by outside.

After a few beats, I followed her. "I've never ..."

Renee's brow arched as she tilted her head. "Never what?"

I shook my head, laughing softly under my breath. "I've never even had sex."

Renee froze, blindly dropping into a chair. "But you've ... Tara, the girls."

"Yeah, I've done just about everything else," I said, making her frown. "Just not that."

“Why?” she asked.

“Why haven’t you?”

She nodded, understanding. “Fair enough.”

The clock ticked behind us, Renee’s hand sliding through her hair as she blew out a breath. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?” I moved over to her.

“For assuming.” A dry laugh left her. “But you have to admit, the evidence was there.”

“I know,” I said. “That’s why I’m not mad. It’s there for a reason.”

I took her hand, her skin soft against my callused palms, then pulled her to stand. “I don’t want to get hurt,” she said, voice so low it was a wonder I heard her at all.

“Me neither,” I admitted, eyes connecting with hers. “But that doesn’t stop me from wanting to be with you every damn second I can.”

Her hand tugged mine, her teeth snapping at my lips playfully as I removed my hand to grab her face. “You can be sweet,” she said. “Sometimes.”

My mouth fused with hers, her scent filling my nose and causing the situation in my pants to become a real problem. Her hand reached down, brushing over me and causing my knees to buckle. “Mouse,” I groaned.

Her lips hovered over mine. “We’ll walk out of here together.”

“Fuck yes,” I said, taking her bottom lip into my mouth and reaching up to palm her tit.

“And we’ll stay that way?”

“Not even a question,” I bit out, moving my mouth to her neck, tilting her head back with a fist in her hair. “If I have anything to say about it, which I most definitely do, we’re going to always stay that way.”



According to most people who'd spoken of it in hushed, excited voices this past week, the midnight carnival was supposed to be creepy. Though hosting anything at midnight was bound to up the spook factor, it was all the same as regular carnivals if you asked me.

They'd set up down by the small lake, gray and black tents lining the long stretch of grass that overlapped the sand, only broken up by the rides and vendors interspersed throughout.

"I'm shaking in my boots," I whispered into Renee's ear, making her giggle and her arm clench around mine.

"Quit." Her hand shoved my face away as I tried to nuzzle into her neck. "And I wish you wore boots more."

"Really?" I snorted. "Why?"

Her silence had me glancing down at her. She stared up at me, a coy smile tilting her peach-glossed lips. "Because seeing those jeans lowered around your ankles, scrunched on top of them, would make for some great me time."

"Me time?"

Renee looked over at a group of her friends from school and waved. A few waved back, the one with black hair, Hilda, smiling faintly before turning to her friend. My jaw gritted as I watched them whisper among themselves, and I tightened my hold around Renee's arm.

"Girl time. Often had in private beneath bedsheets."

Even though my cock was rising, there was no way she would get away with not telling me more about this so-called me time. I cleared my throat. "And is it always me you picture when you're having this ... me time?"

Her laughter was husky, reaching all the right places. "Of course."

Feeling smug, I grinned. Then I noticed the twinkle in her eye. "Wait a damn minute. You're lying."

I halted her outside the entrance to the carnival, pulling her to me and grabbing her face. "Unhand me, asshole."

"Not a chance. Who else do you think about?" *Who did I need to make sure disappeared without a trace?*

"Channing," she whispered. "Kit, Jason—"

My hands dropped. "The fuck?"

She laughed again, louder this time, her eyes watering as she stepped away to wipe beneath them. I didn't know what she thought was so funny. She'd just outright admitted to touching herself over some guys ...

"They're actors. All of them."

My shoulders loosened. Somewhat. "I'm not exactly feeling relieved right now."

"Well," she said, moving close and running a long yellow nail down my cheek. "When we get out of here, I'll help you with that."

My nostrils huffed out a petulant breath.

"Callum," she said.

"Mmm, let's go." I turned for the ticket booths, the stars twinkling alongside a weak half-moon.

"I haven't had to think about them since you first kissed me."

I stopped. "Really?"

Her arms slithered around my waist from behind. "Really. Now, are you going to win me a unicorn, or are you going to continue sulking?"

"Demanding Mouse." I turned, tilting her chin up to touch her lips with mine.

"Hey!" Mike's voice interrupted us, and I stepped back, watching as he walked over with Pat and some of the other guys in tow. "Doesn't look so scary to me."

"Right?" Renee said, peering around them to look at the tents.

Steve shook his head. "Nah. When I was a kid, this place was scary as fuck."

Tickets purchased, we meandered through the crowds. Fog crept over the grass, rolling in smoky tendrils that came from a machine.

Mike ditched us to grab corn dogs with the others, and I felt a tremor in Renee's hand. "What's wrong?"

We stopped outside a small black tent, the front opened to the crowd walking by, but the inside dark and lit with only a few glowing candles. "Ten dollars to have your fortune told," a crone-like voice slithered out.

"No," Renee said, "thank you."

I tried to move us on when the lady said, "For you, dear, I'll give you fifty percent off. You don't want to miss what the mother has in

store for you.”

The mother? I scoffed, then looked at Renee, whose face was drawn. “Ignore her, let’s go.”

Her limbs were stiff as we walked away.

“Do you think I should go back?” Renee asked once we’d reached the magician’s tent.

“Not unless you want to lose ten minutes of your life that’ll only cause you to stew on stuff that isn’t real.”

“You don’t believe there could be any truth to it?”

Laughing, I took her face in my hands. “She’s probably just some old woman who lives in her kid’s garage apartment and plays cards all day while watching *Wheel of Fortune*.”

“Lovely,” Renee said, quirking her top lip as color returned to her face. “But I don’t know, I got goose bumps.”

“It’s kind of cold.” I eyed her fuzzy knit cardigan. “Maybe we should go.”

“No. Not without the unicorn you promised me.”

The damn unicorn took me fifty dollars and twelve rounds of hammer slamming to obtain. During which Mike and Pat had found us, and Mike had bought Renee some cotton candy.

Asshole.

I watched her smile at him in thanks as the carnie handed me the gigantic rainbow unicorn. His moustache twitched as he watched me eye Mike with what I knew was an unhealthy amount of annoyance. “You know, you coulda just slipped me a fifty, and I’d have given it to ya,” the carnie said.

I raised a brow, taking it from him none too gently before stalking over to Renee. His rough chuckle followed me, making me bristle even more.

“Here,” I said, handing it to her.

She tore her eyes from Mike, her cotton candy dropping to the ground as she gasped and clutched the unicorn to her, which was almost half her size. “I love him. Oh, my God.”

Mike smirked at her, picking up her cotton candy and tossing it in a dumpster nearby.

“Let’s go make out in the car before we go.” My voice traveled as I meant for it to.

Mike's smile faltered before he nodded at us. "I'll see you guys on Monday."

"Bye, Mike," Renee said absently, patting the unicorn's fuzzy mane.

Joining our friends, I watched him walk off into the thinning crowd with them, then I took Renee around the shoulders and led her back through the aisle of tents and various vendors.

Just as we were about to reach the parking lot, every single light over the area blinked out, leaving everyone in pitch black.

A few people screamed while others gasped and laughed nervously. I fished my phone from my pocket, turning the flashlight on as a group of clowns started making their way down the aisle.

Renee clutched at my shirt, leaning into me heavily. "What the fuck?"

What the fuck was right. I barely blinked, my eyes wide on the misshapen, zombielike masks the clowns were wearing. They carried weapons, the steel of the maces and daggers glinting in the moonlight. Some stood on stilts, others without weapons juggling what looked like balls of fire.

"Are those real weapons?" Renee whispered.

"I doubt it." The clowns silently stalked through the throng of people who'd started to run or stood, much the same as us, off to the side with their jaws hanging open.

They seemed to float by us, eerily, little more than an apparition in their long black cloaks and tattered capes. I exhaled a long breath as they passed.

One turned back, and when he winked through his mask at us, Renee inhaled sharply. "Can we please go."

Not a question, but I wasn't about to argue.

She clung to my arm until we reached the car, where I helped her inside before rounding it. Once in the seat with the ignition on, I glanced over at the tents just as the lights flickered back on.

No sign of the clowns.

The clock on the dash told us it was almost two in the morning, but I wasn't tired at all. "That was a nice party trick."

"Uh-huh." Renee clipped her seat belt on, the unicorn on her lap. "They were freaky as hell."

I snorted, backing out of the lot and waiting behind another car before turning out onto the street.

“Just a bunch of dudes with nothing better to do than fool around in costumes and indulge their inner loser with scare tactics.”

“So scornful.” She tsked. “Where do your parents think you are?”

“At the carnival, then staying out. Wanna sneak me into your place?”

“Sure,” she said without pause, looking out the window at the blurring trees and houses we passed.

I parked her Rover in front of the three-door garage, opting not to open it in fear of waking someone. Upstairs, Renee giggled as I carefully closed her bedroom door. “Chill. They’re not going to hear you.”

“We need to stop this sneaking around crap,” I muttered, kicking off my shoes and flicking the lock on her door. “It’s getting old.”

Switching on her lamp, she hummed in agreement, setting the unicorn on her bed and heading into her bathroom. I undid my jeans, shoving them to the floor as I surveyed her bookshelf.

“I still can’t get over the love you harbor for *Sailor Moon*,” I told her once she’d returned, her face freshly washed and pulling her dress off over her head.

She stood before me in her candy pink bra and panties, and I shrugged off my shirt, stalking over to her to drown myself in the minty taste that lingered on her lips.

Pushing me back, she moved over to the bed. “Keep your briefs on, just in case.” I did as I was told, climbing beneath the mountain of frilly blankets and pillows on her bed, then pulled her to my chest. “And *Sailor Moon* is amazing so get over it already.”

“It’s a dreadful show about a whiny schoolgirl.”

Her fingers drummed gently over my chest. “Ah, see, the fact you’ve gone out of your way to watch that much of it proves that you enjoyed something about it.”

“I did not.” I scowled up at the waves of material hanging from her bed.

“It aired in the 90s, you know.” Her sigh warmed my chest, and I felt my muscles loosen one by one. “We were born a decade too late.”

“I’m fine with that. Now we can watch stuff on demand.”

A quiet laugh. “True. But come on, a magical brooch? I want one so bad.”

The moonlight cascaded across the floor to the bed, highlighting the way her lashes rested over her high cheekbones. I moved a piece of hair off her face. “You have about twenty brooches that would be considered magical to many people.”

“Shush. Don’t bring reality raining down on my dreamy parade.”

“You live such a tough life, princess.”

With her eyes still closed, she smiled. “Admit it.”

“Admit what?”

She settled deeper into me, her arm tightening around my waist. “That you liked it. You’ve obviously watched enough of it.”

My fingers drifted from her back to her hair, playing with the soft strands. “An episode or two.” I didn’t admit that it was after I first discovered the comics in this very room. “No need to watch any more to grasp the sheer clumsiness and stupidity of that character.”

Renee gasped, eyes flying open. “She’s not stupid.” I crooked my neck to raise an eyebrow at her. “Okay,” she conceded. “Sometimes, she’s totally clumsy. But when it matters, she transforms into this awesome crime fighting warrior. And the gloves ...” Another fluttery sigh. “Don’t even get me started on the gloves.” I smirked, and she poked my cheek. “What?”

“You. Your fangirling gets me hard.”

Her laughter was followed by, “Really?”

“Really, so unless we’re going to do something about that, hush.”

She reached over, pulling the rainbow unicorn closer to her back before getting settled again. “Thank you for my unicorn.”


“You’re welcome, Mouse.”

Silence filled the room, my eyes closing as I turned into her and held her to my chest.

“I wonder what future that lady would have laid out for me,” she whispered, sleep saturating her voice.

I huffed, trying to conjure a memory of the old crone to assist in deflating my hard-on. “One that was made up and full of shit.”

Renee hummed, her breathing slowing as she gave into sleep.



The weeks rolled on, and the whispers about us and our sudden relationship eventually stopped, but we didn't. Renee became a permanent part of my life, and it was time to let our parents know.

After school, I waited for her to finish rehearsal to catch a ride home.

"When are your parents buying you a car?"

"In exactly five months and twenty-three days."

Renee laughed, turning out of the parking lot. "For your seventeenth?"

"You're so sweet, remembering my birthday."

She rolled her eyes behind her sunglasses. "Like I could forget. Not with our yapping mothers and your super awesome sixteenth."

"Will you bring some knitting needles to my seventeenth?"

A snort. "If you want."

I reached over, my hand squeezing her thigh and inching higher as she drove through the quiet suburban streets that separated Trellara from Gray Springs. "I most fucking definitely want."

"I'm not so great at knitting."

"Sure, you aren't." I found the lace trim of her panties, and she jerked the wheel.

"Callum," she growled.

"Pull over."

"No." She removed my hand, and I sagged back in the leather seat.

"Fine. What's the plan, then, Mouse?"

Despite the nickname coming about during the time I'd tormented her, Renee never seemed to object to it. In fact, I thought she'd taken a liking to it. Especially when whispered hotly into her ear.

She scowled. "I thought you'd have one."

I snickered. "I was just going to kiss you stupid in front of everyone."

Her lips puckered, but then she smiled that sly smile of hers. "I don't hate that idea."

Renee wasn't all sweet; she was pretty venom wrapped in a sugary bow. Deceptive yet honest at the same time. Underneath, her layers multiplied in ways she didn't often let show on the outside.

"Let's do it, then. Maybe they'll even let us have sleepovers."

Renee laughed as she turned into the long drive of my house, dirt kicking up as she sped past the looming trees toward the fountain in the center, curving the car around it before shifting into park with brute force.

"Hang on a minute," she said, grabbing my arm as I went to jump out.

"What?"

Her teeth slipped over her lip as she glanced at the house, then back at me. "You're not mad that we're giving them what they wanted?"

"Not if it's what I want too," I replied. It didn't appease her, and so I tucked my fingers beneath her chin and whispered, "Mouse, I was fourteen, full of mistrust and raging new hormones. I want this, you and me, regardless of what they want."

Leaning in, she pressed her lips to mine. "Okay."

I jumped out, jogging around the Rover to help Renee down, and she gave me a tiny smile. She never refused the help even though we both knew she was more than capable. She seemed to like having doors held open for her, her dinner paid for—anything—so long as it was me doing those things for her.

"Your bow's crooked." I pinched her ass before opening the doors for her to walk in.

She stopped at the mirror in the entry, tilting her head to see where it sat above her low ponytail, then scowled at me when she realized it was perfect.

I shrugged, chuckling as she flipped me off.

Our mothers were here, as we'd expected being Tuesday afternoon. They spent Tuesdays together at the mall, followed by refreshments at either one of our homes until it was time to head home for dinner.

"Hi, Mom," Renee said, stepping out onto the cavernous patio that overlooked our sprawling pool and the lawn beyond it.

“Darling!” Valery set her martini glass down, all bright smiles as she engulfed Renee into a hug, air kissing her cheeks before turning to me to do the same. “What a nice surprise.”

“Sit, you two.” My own mother gestured to the white wicker lounge chairs opposite theirs. “I’ll have Wanda fetch you some iced tea.”

“I’m fine,” I said at the same time as Renee, who took a seat next to me, keeping a small gap between our bodies.

I closed it as my mother put the little bell down on the glass table next to her martini. Her and Valery looked from us to each other, sharing tight smiles.

“Well, to what do we owe the pleasure of your company this fine afternoon?” Valery asked, sipping primly on her martini.

My mother reclined back in her round wicker chair, her red painted nails tapping at the arm.

“Um, well,” Renee started.

Like a Band-Aid. I linked my hand with Renee’s shaking one and clipped out, “We’re together.”

Their laughter made both of us startle, and a flock of birds took flight from the willow tree behind the pool. Valery smacked her thigh, my mother swiping a finger beneath her eyes.

Renee was staring at them with the same puzzled expression I likely wore. “What’s so funny?” she asked them.

“Oh, Lord.” My mother wept, waving a hand in front of her face.

“You owe me a grand,” Valery said between wheezes.

We waited, our palms growing clammy, until they stopped laughing.

“Care to tell us what is so amusing?” I asked.

“Hmm?” Valery grinned. “Oh, right. No, we already knew.”

I looked at my mom, who nodded and took a hearty sip of her martini. “You knew?”

They both bellowed out another laugh. “Excuse us, we’ve had a few more than we usually do,” Valery said with a wave toward the empty martini glasses on the table, almost sending them to the patio. “But yes, we already knew.”

“How?” Renee asked, straightening and glaring at the two half-sloshed women.

“Call it mother’s intuition,” my mother said. “We knew you’d end up together eventually.”

Renee snapped, “No. You merely wished we would.”

“Yes, we did. But only because we just knew it’d probably happen. And oh, my goodness.” Valery smiled, her eyes warming as she glanced back and forth between the two of us. “Just look at you two.”

My mother nodded, an exaggerated sigh leaving her. “As perfect as we imagined.”

When they high-fived each other, I stood, taking Renee with me to the French doors.

“By the way, leaving your tie in Renee’s car wasn’t the brightest of ideas.”

We stopped on the threshold, and I shot over my shoulder, “That could’ve been anyone’s.”

“Right,” Valery drawled. “Because my daughter lets just *anyone* climb into her car after school. Mouths are made for more than kissing, my dear.” She smiled, and I saw where Renee got it, that carefully veiled venom. “They do a lot of talking, too.”

We left them to their tittering, heading upstairs to my room where I shut the door with a quiet slew of curses.

Renee doubled over by the window, laughter howling out of her in waves that hit me square in the chest. “God, they’re unbelievable.”

My annoyance fading instantly, I flicked the lock and walked over to her with laughter of my own. “Now you can understand why I was so nervous a few years ago, right?”

She wrapped her arms around my neck. Her lips dragged up my throat, stopping near my ear. “Do I make you nervous?” My cock jerked, my hands clenching her hips.

“You make me many things, but nervous is not one of them.” I kissed the tip of her nose. “Did you know that when you laugh, a real laugh, anyone who’s around you stops and stares?”

“Hmm, really?” Her teeth and tongue wrapped around my earlobe, my eyes almost rolling to the back of my head. “That’s nice, but I want to know about these things.”

“Not here,” I managed to croak as she untucked my school shirt and grazed her nails over the curve of my back.

“Why not?”

“Fuck it,” I said, all but shoving her toward the bed where I climbed on top of her.

“Callum?” My mom knocked on the door. “If you need ...” She stopped, her laughter filtering through the wood. My head dropped with a groan to Renee’s neck. “Anything. Be sure to let us know.”

“Oh, my God,” Renee rasped, smothering her laughter with my shoulder.

“That’s why,” I grumbled.

EIGHT



Callum

Seventeen years old

“Why do they call them dreams?” Renee asked. “The word seems so, I don’t know, untouchable. Like the concept is simply daring us to try to reach for them.”

“I think the better word would be goals.”

“Why?”

Blinking lazily, I watched as tiny globs of fading light swayed on the ceiling. “Because goals are achievable, if you try hard enough. And if you fail to achieve them, you get up, and you try again.”

“Is that what football is to you? A goal?”

“Yes. Not just a dream. A goal.”

“A very achievable goal, I might add.” Renee’s smile was evident in her voice. She fell quiet for a moment, then asked, “What about it makes you want it so much?”

I smiled, her head lifting from where it rested on my stomach when I sighed. “It’s ... thrilling. Win or lose, every game is an accomplishment. You’re constantly moving forward, even if you walk off the field feeling like you’ve failed. You’ve achieved something.”

Renee looked up at me, her brows puckering. “What have you achieved if you’ve failed?”

“You gain more knowledge.”

Her smile was temptation in and of itself, a weapon, her bow-shaped lips lined in red. “And with knowledge, more power to achieve next time.”

I stroked my finger over the small bridge of her nose. “Wise little Mouse.” She fascinated me constantly without ever having to do or say a thing. Even after all this time, I needed to know her. Every sacred, hidden part that dwelled inside her. “If you could be one thing in this world that is unobtainable, what would it be?”

She pondered my question for a minute. “Well, what I’d choose to be isn’t of this world. Or any other, really.”

“Humor me.”

“A mermaid,” she said without hesitation, dreamy eyes on the ceiling.

“A mermaid?” I couldn’t hide the incredulity in my tone and remembered when we were fourteen, sitting outside the game room as we listened to our mothers discuss her mermaid hair.

“A mermaid,” she confirmed.

“Care to explain?”

“Well, if you’re going to swim with sharks, better to do it as the loveliest, most cunning creature of the sea.”

“There’re plenty enough sharks right here in the real world.”

She huffed. “Exactly. You can never really escape them. You simply need to best them.”

My dick was about to burst through my school slacks and poke her in the cheek with how hard it was. I tugged her over me, laying my lips on hers.

Renee met me press for press, her tongue just as eager to join mine. I flipped her to her back, and then she was pushing me away. “Wait, you didn’t give me your answer.”

I frowned, my breathing getting heavy. “I wouldn’t be anything that wouldn’t give me the ability to do this. I’m a simple guy.”

“Uh-huh.” She snorted lightly. “A simple guy with expensive taste and an attitude that can go from sweet to indifferent in half a heartbeat.”

“Wrong.”

“Oh?”

“You forgot to add the part about my steely determination ... to get between these luscious thighs.” My head dipped, grazing her earlobe with my teeth. “An achievable, torturous goal.”

“A fox,” Renee breathed.

Unbuttoning her blouse, my mouth climbed down her chin to her neck, feeling her pulse thrum against my tongue. “Hmm?”

“You’d be a fox.”

I chuckled. “Never cross the fox.”

Her laughter was music that my mouth stole.

My phone ringing from my backpack interrupted us. I groaned, realizing I couldn’t ignore it when it didn’t shut up.

“Who is it?” Renee asked, buttoning her blouse and tugging her knee-high socks back into place as I stared at the screen. “Tell them they’re rude, then put it on silent.”

“Mike,” I said. “Team meeting in twenty.”

“What?”

“The game schedule has changed, and Coach wants to fill us in before we play tomorrow night.”

Renee got up from the bed, running her fingers through her blood red locks as she walked over to the mirror in my walk-in closet. “Want me to come back later?”

“Nah, you’re coming with me.”

“Boring, no thank you,” she sang. “I’ll just watch you in all your glory tomorrow night.”

Tilting my chin down, she pried my lips apart with hers and sank her teeth into my bottom lip, tugging it with her as she stepped back. “I’ve got a history assignment due. Text me later.”

I watched her go, then adjusted my hard-on, knowing the next hour would be the most painful of my life if I didn’t rub one out before I left.

So I did.



I tucked my water bottle away, eyes scanning the dimly lit parking lot full of students.

They soon found what they sought in the far corner, standing alone yet looking like she was the most important person here. Shoulders back, red lipstick on, and wearing a green jersey I'd had made for her over summer break. She'd put her own stamp on it, of course, transforming it into a jumper-looking dress with satin edges and my numbers glittering in gold over her chest. Sheer black thigh-highs sat below the emerald green jersey, and black heeled boots finished off the ensemble.

"You're one lucky bastard, Welsh," Pat muttered as I walked past him.

I tossed him a glare that said he'd eat the gravel I was walking on if he didn't look away.

He smirked, but thankfully did as I wanted and hollered at one of the guys behind me.

"Mini Mouse," I said, grabbing the back of her head and kissing her forehead. "You're very distracting." She was all I could see while I played, even if I wasn't looking at where she sat in the stands.

"As are you. You didn't skip showering?" I pulled back, noticing her pout after she'd inhaled a deep breath. "You know I like you sweaty."

A laugh rumbled out of me, and I opened her car, tossing my gear into the back. "Let's go. We can both get sweaty back at my place."

The streets were quiet. I wouldn't have been surprised if half the town was back at school watching the game. We'd played one of our best rivals, barely scraping out on top with two minutes to spare.

"I don't understand how you can have the same two teams play each other more than once," Renee said, her fingers curling around mine as I turned down my drive. The house was dark, only one light glowing through a window downstairs and two lanterns on either side of the doors on the porch.

"Again? We went over this like a month ago."

She grumbled, getting out of the car before I could help her. "You know I have a shit memory sometimes."

We moved inside, the wind gathering speed and sending leaves scattering around the porch.

“You don’t need to know everything about football,” I told her as we made our way upstairs to my room. “I don’t give a shit if you hate it. I don’t like to sew, but I still ...”

“Still what?” Laughter filled her eyes as she dropped her purse, and I moved her back to the bed.

I fell over her on the mattress. “I’m still very interested in you.”

Her eyes shut briefly, then she looked over at the window where the branches were tapping relentlessly with every sweep of wind.

“Did you know that when you’re in a mood, you always look for windows to stare out of?”

She turned those beautiful, large eyes back to me. “I do?”

I nodded, then asked, “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t want to act,” she admitted.

“I know.”

“I can’t tell my mom.”

“Why not?” My finger, twirling a strand of her hair around it, dropped.

“Because ... I don’t think she wants me to have the kind of career where I’m helping the stars rather than being one myself.” She stared up at me, those long red strands of hair like ribbons on my pillows.

I brushed some hair away from her lips, leaning over her on my forearm. “You could be wrong about that.”

“Do you really think so?” She raised a brow.

Mulling over how Valery might take it, I conceded, “Okay, maybe not. But she’s very supportive of your design skills.”

“She is,” she agreed. “But she thinks I should minor in design. Major in drama and theatre arts.”

“That doesn’t mean you can’t do what you want.”

“Says you who will probably need to go pre-law or major in business finance.” She winced, hurrying to add, “Sorry.”

I grinned. “Don’t be.”

She stared up at me, searching my gaze.

I knew what Renee was waiting for—what I was waiting for, too—but I couldn’t bring myself to say it yet, to do it yet. Our mothers

might be social pariahs, but they'd made a habit of knowing our whereabouts and being home when we were since we'd walked out on the patio over six months ago.

"Our parents leave for Beijing next Friday," I said.

"They do. How'd you get out of going?"

"I said we've got an assignment due on Monday."

"Me too," Renee said, then rolled her eyes. "Because we do."

"I know, but what they don't know is that we'll be doing that assignment together."

Her brows narrowed. "We will, will we?"

"Uh-huh."

A light tapping resounded on the door. "Yo! Callum, open up."

Mike's voice had me flopping back to the bed.

"It's open," Renee told him.

A pause before the door opened. "Oh, hey Renee."

Renee propped herself up on her elbows. "Hi."

Mike stalked across the room to the couch, sinking into it with a loud sigh.

"Man, that shit was brutal. We're going to get our asses chewed out on Monday."

"Didn't feel like partying tonight?" I asked, trying not to grit my teeth.

"Nope, Slade's house is a mess. No one wants to hang out there while his parents are renovating. Nowhere to chill." He grabbed an issue of *Sports Illustrated* from the side table and started flipping through it.

I scowled at the ceiling, counting backward from five before I could look at him again.

"Couldn't do that at your place?" I asked. Okay, so the counting didn't work.

Renee whacked me playfully, and I grabbed her hand, nipping her fingers.

"Mom's spent most of today throwing my dad's shit out onto the front lawn, so I didn't really wanna go home."

Fuck.

"I'm sorry," Renee said.

Mike shrugged. "His own fault. Secretaries are not for banging."

“Cliché, too,” Renee added.

Mike gave her a soft smile. “That’s what I said.”

“She’s leaving him?” I asked.

“Oh, no,” Mike said, flipping a page and staring at it as he said, “she owns the house, the cars, and earns more than he does. She’s kicking him out.”

Renee whistled. “Good for her.” She quickly added, “But I’m sorry. That must suck.”

“It’s fine. It is what it is. My dad’s soft, and he’s let her walk all over him for most of their marriage. It was bound to happen eventually.”

I didn’t dare say that I pictured Mike someday ending up in a similar marriage. As soon as the guy got a girlfriend, he was their slave, masseuse, and lover all rolled into one. He knew it, and still, he let them lead him around on a leash until they were done with him.

“You’re welcome to stay here. Plenty of spare rooms.”

He closed the magazine, sinking back into the couch as he tossed it onto the table. “Thanks. I might do that.”

“We’ve got plans next weekend, though.” Renee elbowed me with a glare. “What?” I asked her. “We do. I’m not letting anything mess with them.”

Mike was staring at Renee as her face reddened. “God, Callum. Could you be any crasser?”

“Absolutely.”

Mike laughed, but the sound broke off when I sank my tongue into Renee’s gaping mouth.

She laughed, shoving me away and sitting up to right her hair.

“You know your mom’s sitting down the hall pretending to read a book in the window seat, right?” Mike asked.

“Yeah, I know.”

Renee snickered, then climbed off the bed. “I’m going to go ask her what she’s reading, then head home. Later, Mike.”

“Later, Renee,” he said, watching her hips sway as she continued righting her hair on the way out the door.

I tossed a remote control at Mike’s head, just missing it as he ducked. “Quit staring.”

“What?” He shook his head. “I’m not.”

I gestured for him to toss the remote back, switching on the TV when he did. “It’s obvious. No need to make it worse.”

The stares, casual yet too longing, and the smiles, shy but given to her too often. I saw it. And I wasn’t fucking around the subject anymore.

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“You know what I’m talking about.” Cold, honest words of which he didn’t deny.

“She’s beautiful, Cal, but I’m ...”

“You’re what?” I said, the picture of nonchalance as I flicked through the channels with my arm folded behind my head. But he’d be an idiot to think I wouldn’t lose my mind if he so much as made a move—one wrong move or word in her direction.

“I’m a guy who likes girls, and I can’t help but notice them. Seriously, there’s nothing more to it.”

“Good,” I acquiesced, hoping he meant it.

NINE



Renee

Our parents left early Friday morning, but despite Callum's pouting and tempting touches, I insisted we go to school.

"Nothing like a call from the truancy officer to spoil all our fun," I'd murmured into his ear outside history that morning.

He'd cursed quietly, then gave me a rough kiss before storming down the hall to his own class.

"What's the smug smile for?" Hilda asked as I took a seat beside her.

I opened my book and scribbled today's date at the top of the page. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Yeah, right."

Mrs. Hill shut the door, placing her coffee down on her desk to rummage through her briefcase.

Hilda grumbled, "Is she ever on time?"

"Probably not," I said.

Hilda's gaze burned into my profile. "We're going to Tyson's tonight. You're coming, right?"

I frowned at her. "Um, no."

"Yeesh, no need to be rude about it."

I shook my head. "I'm not. No one invited me, so I made other plans."

“As if those other plans wouldn’t come first anyway,” she muttered beneath her breath.

I heard the words loud and clear.

Yes, Callum took up a lot of my free time, but I’d still made every drama get-together and rehearsal. It was becoming obvious that no matter what I did, Hilda would still find reasons to be pissed with me when she felt like it.

I bit my tongue all through class, but my rage became something I no longer wanted to hold inside me anymore.

“You know what?” I asked Hilda as we were walking out of class. “What’s the real problem here? Because I know me not going to Tyson’s to watch them play some stupid video game isn’t it.”

Hilda’s eyes widened slightly. “I just want to spend time with you. Is that too much to ask?”

“It’s not, and if that were the problem, I’d understand. But I know it’s not.”

We stopped in the corridor, Hilda fidgeting with her notebook. “Forget it.”

“Why? It’s clear something is bothering you—oh.”

A pink tinge colored her cheeks as she stared at the ground. “I’ll see you later.”

“Hilda, wait.” She stopped. “How long have you liked him?”

She looked around, horrified, before stepping closer to me. “Shhh, what the hell? I don’t.”

“It’s okay if you do.”

She laughed, the sound bitter as her cheeks reddened further. “No, it’s not. And I don’t. He’s a snobby jock and not someone I’d ever be interested in. No offense.”

“Well, it sure seems like our relationship bothers you,” I whispered, trying to gentle my tone.

Hilda rolled her eyes. “Whatever. If that’s what you need to tell yourself, go right ahead.”

I chewed my lip as she walked away.



“I think my friend has a crush on you.”

“The Asian one?” Callum asked, parking his Lexus in the garage once it opened.

“How’d you know?”

We got out, Callum opening my door for me and keeping my hand in his once it closed.

“She’s always staring at us, much like someone else I know,” he grumbled that last part.

“That’s ...” I stopped. “What? Who?”

“Doesn’t matter.” Callum smiled that crooked smile that made my limbs liquefy. “You’re hard not to like, Mouse.”

“Yeah, I’m ridiculously charming.”

Walking inside, he tossed his keys on the table in the laundry room, then continued through to the kitchen. “I wouldn’t say charming,” he mused. “Soda?”

“No thanks.”

Backing me into the counter, he swept my hair aside, his hand gripping my neck gently as his thumb brushed over my pulse. “I’d say sassy, intelligent, funny, beautiful, and the property of Callum Welsh.”

Laughing, I poked his dimple. “I’m no one’s property.”

“You’re here, aren’t you?” Raspy, daring words.

Leaning up, I dragged my lips over his jaw. “I’m here because I want to be, not because I belong to you.”

Callum stilled, a long breath whooshing out of him. “Are we about to fight, beautiful? Because you know how that always ends.”

I shivered but stood my ground. “I belong with you, not to you.”

“Sassy indeed,” he murmured, pressing his lips to my forehead. He inhaled deeply, then his arms were lifting me onto the counter. “I had planned a romantic dinner. Maybe a movie, you know, the typical shit.”

“Fuck typical shit. Take me upstairs.”

With a low chuckle, he ravaged my mouth with his, doing as he was told.

The gilded staircase passed by in a blur, Callum’s muscles flexing as he carried me the whole way up them, then down the hall

to his room.

He released me, immediately unbuttoning my blouse as I reached for the fly of his pants.

Clothes off, we stumbled back to his bed, and he climbed over me, his lips and tongue everywhere, his large hands squeezing my breasts. "God-fucking-damn it, I want you so bad."

"Have me then."

"Let me play, first."

He wriggled down my body, lips leaving a tingling trail in their wake and causing my hips to shoot up off the bed when he kissed me *there*. "Fingers," I breathed out. "Need your fingers."

He inserted one, slowly rotating it as his tongue sucked and circled. The crown molding warped and shifted above me as I tried desperately to keep my eyes open.

"So sweet," he rasped. "You're coming, aren't you?"

My thighs quivered, stomach clenching as he inserted another finger. I grabbed fistfuls of his hair, grinding myself into his face without a trace of shame. We'd done it enough times that he was used to giving me what I wanted as I took what I needed.

Callum removed his fingers, trailing them over my stomach and swirling wetness around my nipples before taking the hardened peaks into his mouth. "You want to taste yourself, don't you?"

Still trembling, I didn't answer, just licked my lips, which made him grin before tucking his fingers into my mouth. I sucked, watching his pupils dilate and his broad, smooth shoulders bunch. Wrapping my tongue around them, I grabbed his wrist, slowly tugging his fingers from my mouth as he groaned.

"On your back," I said.

"No, I want inside you, need inside you."

I pushed him down to the bed, wrapping my hand around his long thick girth and rubbing my tongue over the head. "Jesus. You evil wench."

"You say the sweetest things." I laughed around his cock, then bobbed down, taking as much of him into my mouth as I could. He jerked, making me gag before he rolled me off him to my back.

As he rubbed himself over me, his eyes shuttered. "So fucking wet."

I grinned, arching my back. “You did that.”

His answering grin knocked the breath from my lungs, his hips rotating. My hands raced up his arms, nails scraping his back as I pulled his chest to mine.

“Are you sure you want to do this now?” He nipped my neck, nudging his nose over my hammering pulse.

“Are you kidding?” I asked. “We’ve been skirting around this for months. Put it in me already.”

He fell on top of me, roaring a laugh into my ear. The sound—deep, melodious and smile inducing—made me laugh, too.

When his chuckles subsided, he whispered, “I love you.”

It was a big deal for him to admit something I already knew, so I let myself soak it in, rays of warmth cascading over me and causing tears to invade. “I love you, too.”

My hands, which were on his back, felt his long exhale beneath them as his breath stirred my hair. Rising on a forearm, he nestled a hand between us. “Condom?” I asked.

“You’re on the pill. I’ve seen the pack in your bathroom.”

Now was not the time to scold him for his self-absorbed tendencies. I chose to be honest instead. “There’s going to be blood.”

His eyes, a shade darker than their usual chocolate, flared as he leaned in to press his lips to mine, his thick length nudging, then gently pushing inside. “Good.”



Callum righted my crown after leading me to the center of the dance floor.

Purple, green, and yellow streamers hung from the cavernous auditorium, spilling from the roof in loops and trickling waves. Balloons of the same color interrupted the waterfall of color, bunched

together in corners and over doorways. The lights were dim, but not enough that I couldn't make out the smirk that hadn't left his face.

"Stop it," I hissed, batting his hand away.

He planted it on my hip. "You had to have known it'd be us."

"We might be vain, but even that's a little too conceited, Callum."

A broad shoulder tilted. "Perhaps, but I saw it coming."

I hadn't, not by a long shot.

"Smile," he teased. "You know you want to." Lips skipped over my cheek to my ear. "We both know that inside, you're secretly thrilled to have that plastic crown on your beautiful head."

Laughter spilled out of me, my arms clutching his neck tightly. Pulling away, he peered down at me beneath hooded eyes. "There she is."

Him, the music, laughter, chatter, and joy filling the room all sank inside. My blood, my very bones sighing as I stared up at him. "I love you."

His head lowered to press his mouth to mine. "And I you, so fucking much."

My mouth held his hostage as he tried to pull back. I wouldn't let him and ignored the catcalls and whistling from nearby. Nothing else existed for me. Nothing but him, his hands tight on my waist, the warmth from his body, the heat from his tongue—nothing else.

The night grasped time in its fist, hurtling it forward in a flash of dancing, kissing, more laughter, and delicious finger foods.

Hilda was standing by the doors as I grappled with the overzealous silver tulle of my gown, bunching it in my hands as my stomach threatened to bust the ties of the bodice. Too much food, not enough room to breathe.

Worth it, I told myself.

"Hey," I said, a little out of breath. "Having fun?"

We hadn't spoken much in the weeks since our spat after class. But with only a few months remaining of our senior year and the mood that wrapped tight around me, tighter than the Versace gown I was wearing, I realized I didn't want those months to pull us further apart.

We'd never been super close, but she was one of my only friends. And I missed her.

“I guess.” Hilda’s eyes scanned the crown sitting atop my head. “Congrats.”

The word was dry, and it stung. “Thanks.” I smiled even as that sting resonated sharply in my chest. “You look beautiful,” I said.

And she did, swathed in loose, silken green fabric that set her midnight hair aglow. The sharp lines of her heart-shaped face an elegant contrast to her whole ensemble. But those eyes, lined with false lashes and filled with unnamed emotion—they were all fire.

“Thank you,” she said, the words carrying quietly beneath the sound of the music and people behind us in the auditorium.

“Party at Frenchies!” Tyson yelled, pumping his arms in the air, his tie flying over his shoulder and landing on the confetti marred floor as he walked out into the night.

Hilda rolled her eyes, straightening from her perch against the door. “I suppose you’ll be going to that party.”

“There’s another one?” I asked.

Hilda shrugged, glancing over my shoulder and swallowing. “It doesn’t matter. Have a good night.”

“Hilda.” I caught her hand outside, the wind scooping up my hair for my lips to catch. I removed my hold on Hilda’s hand, plucking the hair away. “I don’t know exactly what I did, but I’m ... I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine. Life happens.”

“It does.” I frowned. “But I miss my friend.”

Her laugh was a sour, beautiful sound. “Well, color me surprised.”

“What—”

“You shouldn’t waste time missing something you didn’t have in the first place.”

At my look of confusion, Hilda continued, “You’re just like all of them. Maybe not wholly, but when it counts, where it counts, you’re just like them.”

My hackles raised, shoulders pinned back. “I’m not following. Like who?”

“The rest of the brats at this stupid school.”

My hand released its hold on my dress, nails scoring into my palms. “That’s ridiculous.”

“Says the girl dating the linebacker and all-round American asshole.”

“Look,” I said, my heart racing and my cheeks warming. “If my being with him upsets you ...”

Hilda’s brows crinkled. “Oh, come on.” She stepped backward, a hand at her stomach as she laughed loud and clear into the faces of those moving around us. “God, you think,” she said, sniffing and swiping beneath her eyes. “You seriously still think I’m into your boyfriend? How self-absorbed are you?”

“You don’t need to be a bitch about it,” I muttered.

“This,” she said, her voice still wheezy, “is why I’m thankful as hell I applied to an out of state college.”

“Hilda.” I tried once more as she went to walk away.

“Save it,” she seethed. “I don’t care. I really don’t. You were an okay friend for all of five minutes.” A sliver of a smile appeared as she drew in a deep breath. “It was nice to have known that person.”

Helpless, I watched as she walked into the night, meeting up with some of the guys from drama as they all climbed into a limo parked by the curb.

With my eyes burning, I sucked in breath after breath, determined to keep the tears away. I wouldn’t cry. Not when I’d done nothing to deserve that.

It was so easy to judge, to look in from the outside and assume anything you liked.

That was the problem with window shopping; you never really knew what something truly looked like unless you peeled back the layers and tried on some new skin for a day.

“Sorry, Mike’s throwing his guts up outside. Still can’t hold his dad’s bourbon, no matter how many times he tries.”

I didn’t answer Callum, still staring into the dark lot where the limo’s taillights had just disappeared.

“Hey.” He took my chin in his fingers, forcing me to look up at him as he stepped in front of me. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” I said, swallowing down the unfairness that felt like a damp, cold blanket in the middle of winter.

“Bullshit.” His eyes narrowed, surveying every inch of my face. With years of drama class and a mother who sniffed out lies like a well-trained bloodhound, you’d think I’d be able to hide anything I

wanted from him. Or perhaps he simply looked beneath the surface. Unlike so many others. "Tell me."

He stood eerily still as I whispered the words to him, choking over them as if they hurt more coming out of me than they had when absorbed. "Callum," I said, grabbing his fingers from my chin when he stared behind me, through the night, to nothing. Lost in the anger that I felt roll off him like a looming thunderstorm.

"Let's go," he finally said.

I let him lead me to his car in the parking lot. Let him stuff my dress around me in the passenger seat. His concentration and restraint evident with every stiff move, lingering as we began the drive home in suffocating silence.

"It's okay. It was just a shock, and I feel ... I don't know. Embarrassed."

"Why?" The word was shorter than it should've been.

"Because I thought she had some stupid crush on you or something. I didn't even think ..." I stopped. What I was about to say rang clear between us in the dimly lit interior. It hadn't crossed my mind that Hilda might see me as something different, someone she didn't like at all anymore.

A loud sigh left Callum, then he grabbed my hand, bringing it to his lips to rub over them. Their silky softness were a soothing balm. Something tight inside me unraveled, just enough to breathe easier.

"It's my fault."

"That's why you're so mad?" I asked, snatching my hand back. "It's not. We can't help how other people view us."

"We can. I can." His jaw was steel as he gritted out, "And I've done nothing but take what I want since I started attending this cesspit of a school."

"You've changed," I reminded him. And he had. He was never a bad person, just a lost boy who was trying to find his own sense of gravity in a world determined to shift him someplace he didn't want to be. He'd found a way to compromise, and in that compromise, he found a sense of peace.

"Not before it was too late."

"You've never hurt anyone."

To that, he chuckled, humor lacking. "I've hurt plenty of people."

I suppose he had, yet I still frowned. I felt like I'd been shut out and locked inside a box that shouldn't even exist.

Silence returned until we reached his house. The lights were off, save for the one at the end of the long hallway that met the sprawling staircase. Being after midnight, his parents were likely in bed, which was confirmed when we walked past their closed doors and continued down the hall to Callum's room.

He toed off his expensive leather shoes, his bow tie joining them on the floor before he got to work shrugging out of his tuxedo jacket.

After tossing it on the armchair in the corner, he ran a hand through his hair, sending strands every which way. "I've been a dick. This isn't about me."

Kicking off my heels, I kept my mouth shut and dropped my purse on the settee by the window, then removed some pins from my hair.

"Here," he said, coming up behind me as I gazed outside into the moonlit depths of his pool and the gardens surrounding the yard. Gentle fingers effortlessly pried at bobby pins, some hidden beneath the tangled curls of my hair. He shifted my hair aside when he finished. Though the crown remained.

He set the pins on the windowsill, his hands meeting each other over my stomach as he placed a kiss on my now exposed neck. "You're beautiful, inside and out."

"I know I'm not perfect. I can be a real selfish bitch."

He didn't deny it, which only made my lips tilt. "Yes, but you're honest. You haven't changed; you've grown. You're yourself. The bad, the good, and the unbearably beautiful. Combined, they make you something anyone would covet."

My spine straightened at his words, my heart hardening. "Maybe she was no friend at all. Maybe she never really was."

"She's undeserving," he whispered, kissing the curve of my shoulder and neck. "Anyone who can't see what I do doesn't matter."

We stood there a long while, his lips happy to visit the most delicate parts of my neck, my hands glued to his at my stomach as I let his words, and my own, heal the wounds that'd almost knocked me off my feet.

He was right. And I shouldn't have to apologize or feel guilty for who I was.

“Take me to bed,” I whispered, turning into him after untold minutes had passed.

“Gladly, but first, I’d like to peel this dress off you with my teeth, then sink my fingers inside your warm—”

Fusing my lips to his, I cut off his vulgar words. Words that never failed to ignite a fire so hot, it threatened to consume every part of me in one pounding heartbeat.

He didn’t use his teeth, but his hands moved swiftly over the bodice of the gown. In a matter of seconds, the dress lay in a pool of silver around my bare feet. His dress shirt next to it, ripped from his body.

The moonlight shone over Callum’s bare torso in luminescent waves. He was magic. Every muscle, every defined square of his abdomen, and every smooth expanse of his skin—all of him, magic. But as my gaze dragged upward, aligning with his face, it was his heart that shined through those eyes.

A heart that matched my own, beat for breathless beat.

A glimmer lit his gaze as it shifted to my hair. “The crown stays on.”

TEN



Callum

Eighteen years old

Glasses clinked, guests mingling in our dining and sitting room, the latter attached to the opened doors of our patio.

Walking outside the large French doors, I found Renee's mother fussing over her while a tiny smile tilted her red lips. The silver bow sitting on the side of her head caught the moonlight, drawing passersby's eyes and my own for a split second too long. Her gown was simple. Elegant. A mixture of silver and navy blue that hugged her curves respectfully, paying special attention to her ass.

My hand brushed over the navy blue lace that sat atop the silken silver material, and Valery stopped her coddling to pat my cheeks. "Aren't you just too handsome." A passing waiter drifted by, and she sailed after him, a dainty hand snatching a glass of champagne without him even noticing.

"Having fun?" I asked Renee, my lips brushing her soft cheek.

She beamed. "Bored to tears. When can we leave?"

Our backs were to a small garden, and my palm squeezed her plump ass cheek, causing her breath to catch. "Not until after dinner. Unfortunately."

Her hand snuck beneath my tuxedo, curling around my hip as she tucked her head under my chin. "There's that weird guy over

there, the one who's supposed to be the new head of security at the firm."

My eyes searched the sprawls of people in the yard, landing on the guard dressed in a crinkled coat and a worn-out pair of pants that barely touched his boots. His eyes met mine, and he winked.

Shocked, I tore my gaze away. "He winked at me."

Renee laughed, the sound smothered by my skin, and I breathed in her sweet scent, wishing we could've been anywhere else.

"Supposedly, he's dating Mike's mom. That's how he managed to score the job."

Mike's mom had been hitting the dating scene hard. A little too hard, if the father of one of our teammates was any indication. He was married, and poor Jethro, our quarterback, was now stuck in the crossfire of yet another Trellara couple at war.

"As long as he's single."

"He has no money," Renee said, untucking her head to look around at the partygoers. Clients, employees, and friends of our families were all here to celebrate the new foreign branches of Welsh Grant Holdings.

"How do you know?" I wrapped my arms around her middle, pulling her back to my chest. "Just because he dresses like a ..."

"Like a hobo?" Renee offered.

I laughed. "Yes, though maybe he doesn't care."

"No, it's not the way he dresses. It's his attitude."

I said nothing, waiting for her to elaborate. Renee was observant, calculating at times, though she sometimes needed space to string her musings together.

"His posture is easy, relaxed."

My hands rubbed her stomach. "Mmm."

With a shiver, she continued, "His eyes, they sparkle. His smile is genuine, always evident in his eyes and his happiness in his loud, abrasive laugh."

"Yes. No one with wealth could ever possibly laugh a genuine laugh."

She tipped her head up to glare at me. I smiled, kissing her before she snatched her lips away. "But really, it's the old beat-up Toyota he drives, the clear surprise over his new surroundings since

entering our fathers' employment, and his coupon collection that really gives him away."

I knew her smile was proud without having to look. I squeezed my arms around her waist.

"You're wondering why Mike's mom has taken up with him then?"

"Aren't you?"

Her voice was soft, like velvet, but I knew she wasn't afraid of anyone overhearing. No, she was trying to coax me into telling her my thoughts.

"You want me to tell you that true love happens for anyone?" I asked. "Because I already believe that, clearly." I squeezed her gently again for emphasis.

"No," she murmured, stepping away from me. "But I do think lust can happen for anyone."

With her hand wrapping around mine, she led me over to the outdoor sitting area, where servers were starting to make the rounds with more drinks and hors d'oeuvres.

We took a seat on the small swing chair in the far corner of the patio, but we should've known that it wasn't enough to stop our mothers from making a spectacle of us.

We'd made it through our fathers' thank-you speeches before they approached. Slowly and with warm smiles stretching their faces as my mother tapped a knife on her champagne glass.

She tucked some blond hair behind her ear, forcing a giggle when someone catcalled to her from out in the yard.

"To our husbands, the most wonderful men in the world." She and Valery raised their glasses, countless others doing the same with loud cheers.

Once they'd settled, Valery said, "And let's not forget our children. Our beautiful, almost grown children." She sniffed delicately, and my stomach sank at the look of horror on Renee's face.

They were going there.

I swallowed the last of my stuffed crab, taking Renee's hand in mine and squeezing it.

"Renee, Callum," Valery called. "Come over here, sweethearts. Let everyone see your beautiful faces."

I stood first, whispering to Renee when she wouldn't move. "Better to get it over with quickly. I've got you."

With a jerk of her head, she rose, her palm already clammy in mine.

Claps and smiles greeted us as the gathered crowd stood around the large patio, behind us in the doorway, and down on the deep green lawn.

My mom came to my side. Valery to Renee's. "Admittedly, Valery and I had joked about it once the Grants moved to town. About how we'd love to see these two end up together one day."

"Joking, right." Valery snickered. "We prayed to every fashion god out there, willing to sacrifice our beloved bags for the cause if we had to."

Laughter ensued, and ever the fans of the dramatic, our mothers waited for it to die down before continuing.

My mom raised her glass. "But we didn't have to. It seems these two found their way to each other all on their own."

"Thank God," Valery said, tilting her head theatrically toward the night sky.

I glanced around the audience, looking for my father or Renee's. The only two people who could stop this embarrassment from further reddening Renee's cheeks.

"Will there be a wedding?" someone called out.

My father stepped outside, pausing when he saw the crowd and our mothers, the two of us sandwiched between them.

"Will there be a wedding," Valery scoffed, taking a long and rather unladylike sip of her champagne before bellowing as she lifted her glass into the air, "Of course, there'll be a wedding!"

More shouts and laughter, even some clapping. My father approached, wearing a sheepish grin on his face.

"The biggest damn wedding this town has ever seen," my mom hollered, falling away from my side when my father wrapped an arm around her waist.

"To the prince and princess of Welsh Grant Holdings!" Valery echoed, causing a chant to start, the words following us as I plucked Renee from her mother's grasp and tugged her inside, waving halfheartedly to everyone over my shoulder.

“This is insanity,” Renee hissed at me as we climbed the stairs.

“I know,” I muttered, smiling at one of the cooks who passed us, heading down the stairs.

Inside my room, I locked the door, Renee removing her hand from mine to pace the rug in quick strides.

Her hands went to her hair, plucking the bow out and throwing it onto the dresser, her fingers tangling in the red waves. “Unbelievable.”

It was definitely the worst they’d ever done, but I kept my mouth shut, loosening my bow tie as I watched Renee.

“It’s like what we want doesn’t even matter.”

I scowled at the black bow tie in my hands, then tossed it to the floor before undoing my cufflinks. “I didn’t realize the idea of marrying me was so terrible.” I’d meant to say it jokingly, but it didn’t come out as intended.

Renee whirled on me, her feet planting her in the center of the room. “It’s not that.”

I looked away from the remorse in her eyes, stung and unable to hide it. I walked over to my bed, dumping the cufflinks on my bedside table and sliding my tuxedo jacket off my arms to rest it over the ottoman at the end of the bed.

“Callum.” Renee’s hand slid around my waist.

“What?”

“Look at me.”

Drawing in a breath, I carefully set it free, ridding some of the tension in my shoulders. Then I turned around.

Her hands, soft and gentle, reached for my cheeks, her thumbs rubbing beneath my eyes. “Such long lashes. I wonder if our children will inherit them.”

I refrained from rolling my eyes. “You don’t seem to like the idea of marrying me, and I refuse to give you a child if that’s the case.”

She laughed, and the sound broke my irritated spell. I looped my arms around her, cradling her head to my chest and inhaling the sweet scent of peaches that lingered in her hair.

“Lie down,” she whispered, pushing at my chest.

I let myself fall backward onto the bed, the music and laughter from downstairs a fading thought. “What do you intend to do with

me?”

Her fingers worked the clasp of my pants, then the fly, tugging them down with my briefs. “I plan to have my way with you.”

I pouted. “That could make me feel better. Marginally.”

“Oh?” She wrapped her hand around me, and I wheezed out a breath between my teeth. Her hair fell around my face in ribbons, tickling and mesmerizing as I caught her gaze. “And what would really make you feel better?”

Her hand stroked, gently at first, then a firm squeeze that had me groaning when I didn’t respond. “Marrying me.”

She stopped moving. In fact, I think she stopped breathing. “What?”

“You heard me,” I bit out.

“You’re serious about this.”

I held her stare. “I am.”

“Callum.”

“No.” I pulled her hand away, turning us until she laid beneath me, all dancing green eyes and perfect furrowed brows. “You are going to marry me.”

A laugh spilled out of her. “Oh, am I?”

“Yes,” I said.

A confused flutter of her lashes. “I want to. I hope that one day, we do. But there’s that part of me that still doesn’t want to give them what they want.”

“One day?” I asked, incredulous.

Her eyes widened, searching mine. “I don’t understand ...”

“We’re both eighteen. Summer has just begun, and soon, we’ll be out of here.” Renee lay as still as stone for an unbearable amount of time that had my heart ticking faster and faster as each second passed. “Say you will.”

“And what?” She laughed out. “We’d just run off to Vegas?”

I dropped my nose to hers, smiling. “Too cliché.”

She exhaled a choppy breath. “Then how?”

“We’ll apply for a marriage license, drive as far out of town as we can, maybe find an old church. You can make your own dress. It’ll be ours. Just us. No one else pulling the strings or weaving the

threads.” When I reared back, tears were flooding her eyes. “You don’t like that idea?”

She shook her head, and I tried to stop my heart from falling. “No, no. I love that idea. So much.”

Relieved, I took her lips with mine, our tongues dueling as her hands slipped into my hair.

Renee pulled away. “We can’t ever tell them,” she whispered. “They’d disown us.”

I grinned. “So we won’t.”

ELEVEN



Renee

Two months later, we made a three-hour trip to the small town of Willowmina, where we found a tiny old church and a reverend who walked us through our vows with a stern look of disapproval etched on his face.

We didn't care. We'd done it.

Something for us.

That morning, Callum gifted me a *Sailor Moon*-inspired brooch, but in blue instead of pink. "Something new, something blue. And here ..." He kissed me, long and hard. "Something borrowed, for I'll need it returned. For the rest of our days."

All by ourselves, we'd managed to make a memory saturated with excitement, promise, a small amount of fear, and a lot of love. One that would stay with us always.

"I belong with you, and you only," were the only vows we'd come up with. But they said everything we needed to.

My dress was made in the quiet confines of my walk-in closet whenever my parents weren't home and kept stuffed in an old box until the time came to pack it into the back of Callum's car.

Now, I marveled at the beauty of it in the fading afternoon light on the church steps. The sweeping curls of intricate white lace interspersed over the silken ivory skirt beneath. The white lace veiled

the skirt only. The ivory bodice was strapless, tiny beads raining down my chest and stomach in shimmering waterfalls.

“You’re glowing,” Callum commented, his hands in mine as he stood on the step below me, which had our eyes, nose, and mouths at perfect level.

“I’m ... I don’t think I’ve ever felt so happy.” My chest felt too full, as though it’d burst if this day got any better.

“Oh, my goodness,” someone shouted.

We turned our heads to find a short, curvy woman with brown hair below the steps.

She dropped her shopping bags on the pavement. “Do not move!”

Callum tensed as she reached into her purse, moving in front of me. “Oh, rats. I can’t find it. Here,” she said as she straightened, walking over to us. “Give me one of your phones, and I’ll take a photo of you two.” She glanced around with a secretive smile on her face. “Seeing as you’re clearly here on your own. You can’t not have your picture taken when you’re both looking so beautiful.”

I smiled at her in thanks as Callum passed her his phone.

“Take her hands again. Yes, just like that.”

We posed as the woman took photo after photo, and I was grateful for her when we reached his car and I began flicking through them.

“We didn’t even get her name,” I mused, zooming in on a picture of Callum and me smiling into each other’s faces as he started the car.

“I don’t think she cared too much,” Callum said, shifting into gear and backing out of the small gravel lot of the church.

He took my hand in his, leaving it there as he sped through town toward the highway.

“We need to find somewhere to change.”

“They won’t be home until tomorrow,” Callum said.

“I still don’t think it’s a good idea to risk one of the cooks, cleaners, a neighbor, *anyone*, seeing us like this.” I plucked pins from my hair, which I’d worn half up with an ivory bow at the back of my head. I removed that too, carefully placing all of it in his glove compartment.

“You’re right,” Callum said, grudgingly.

I smiled, squeezing his hand. “You better get used to saying that a lot.”

He pulled off the highway, continuing down a tree-lined road for a few miles until we saw an old charming bed and breakfast.

“Shall we honeymoon in style?” he asked, holding his hand out for mine after opening my door.

I placed my hand in his, using the other to gather the gown of my dress. “We shall.”

We both laughed as he grabbed the bag that held our change of clothes and walked across the lot.

The bed and breakfast appeared to be made from a mixture of old wood and gray and black stone. Towering floors and windows loomed above us as we approached the front entrance.

A little bell signaled our arrival, and a large man with wire-rimmed glasses strutted out, taking our names and money before handing over a key.

“Is this place haunted?” I couldn’t help but ask as I looked around the small entryway. A low fire was burning even though it was approaching the end of summer, and a number of old portraits decorated the gray walls.

A cat raced by, jumping up onto the counter as the man said, “No more haunted than any other establishment passed down through many generations.”

“How long has this place been here?” Callum asked as the man led us up a rocky staircase that grew wider as we reached the top.

“Since 1910.” The man opened a door that creaked as he shuffled in after us, hurrying to the blinds to open them.

He fluffed the pillows, dust motes dancing as he glanced around before giving a nod of approval. Whether it was to the room or himself, I wasn’t sure. “Right, I’ll be downstairs if you need anything.” He pointed at a string on the wall by the bed. “You can tug that for room service, though I must warn you not to do so before six in the morning. My wife doesn’t like to be rushed.”

He left, closing the door gently behind him.

Callum wasted no time, dropping our bags and his jacket to the bed before sweeping me off my feet and carrying me into the

bathroom where a large claw-foot tub sat on a raised slab of dark tiles.

He set me down on the edge, then got to work rummaging through the soaps beside the sink before turning on the bath water. "I'm only getting in if you do as well."

"You can bet your fine ass I'll be getting in. Stand," he said, unbuttoning his white dress shirt.

"Getting bossy already? It's hardly been two hours." I stood anyway, smirking at him as he glared at me.

"Keep testing me. You know how hard it makes me."

"Shut up and undress me," I sassed, turning around as he approached.

His hands deftly untied the bodice, spreading it open enough to lift the dress up and over my head in one swift movement. "No garter?"

"You can tear off my panties instead."

With a low chuckle that set my thighs clenching, he turned me around and did just that. Bending low, he pulled them down far enough to slip his finger inside me, keeping it there as his other hand dragged the scrap of white lace down my legs.

"Callum," I breathed as his finger twisted, my shaking legs opening wider.

"What?" He stared up at me, eyes filled with wicked intention.

"I want my husband inside me."

Removing his finger, he then removed my strapless bra, eyes roving over me as he took off his shirt, belt, and charcoal fitted pants.

He climbed in first, then held his hands out, helping me into the tub to straddle him. The tub was big, but there still wasn't enough room, and so I pressed him to my entrance and sank down.

"Always so impatient," Callum panted the words between his teeth.

I took his face, rolling my hips until I was filled completely. "You knew this before you made me your wife."

His hand squeezed my hip, lifting me, then slamming me back down, water slapping the edges of the tub. His other hand palmed my cheek, moving my head to meet his lips. "And I wouldn't want you any other fucking way."

Our mouths crashed together, my heart rising and rioting at having this man as my husband. My heart's greatest wish and enemy all wrapped up in one charmingly sly bow.

"I love you," he rasped, nipping my bottom lip and licking it.

The water splashed, the tap still running behind me. "I love you."

He slid us forward. "Turn it off now so I can still see these." He cupped my breasts, skating his fingers around my nipples.

Reaching behind me, I shut the water off, the movement making us both groan.

His arms slipped around me, pulling me flush to his damp chest. "You can't see them like this," I teased.

"No." His smile was so endearing, my heart trembled. "But I can see this." His hand dived into the back of my hair, tilting my face down to press his forehead to mine. "I could stare at you all day, every day, for the rest of my life and still feel my heart race every time."

Oxygen was hard to find. "Liar. You just like feeling my breasts squished against you."

A chuckle. "That too."

His mouth fused with mine, and my hips started rolling. His other hand was still around my hip, helping us both get lost in the sensations, in each other.

Our breathing turned ragged, echoing into our mouths. My whimpering had his eyes blazing like black coal as he watched me climb closer and closer. "Yes, Mouse. Come on your husband's cock."

He swallowed my cry as my body shook over his, his hips pumping upward, making me delirious until finally, he stilled. My lip was clamped in his teeth as he came with a series of grunts.

"I have no regrets," he panted, pecking my lips. "None."

I laughed, squealing as he flipped us over, water overflowing and cascading to the floor.



My fingers twirled over the tiny hairs on Callum's chest, my head resting in the crook of his arm as the small flat-screen TV on top of the dresser played an old episode of *Top Gear*.

It was just after twelve, and I had a sneaking suspicion Callum was about to pass out.

I was tired, completely worn out, yet I couldn't sleep. My smile refused to fade. This kind of happiness was the kind I was unwilling to part with so soon.

Though, I supposed I wouldn't have to.

My smile grew, a sigh leaving me. *Husband*.

A bang reverberated through the wall, startling my eyes open. Still hanging on the fraying, early fringes of sleep, it took me a second to sit up.

The bang sounded again, and this time, Callum groaned, cursing softly as he peeled his eyes open. "The fuck is that?"

"I have no idea." I glanced around the dark shadows of the room, no light besides that of the TV.

Callum pulled me back down to his chest, rolling until my head was tucked beneath his chin and my nose in the column of his throat. "Sleep, probably just the people in the room next door."

I tried but was unsuccessful due to the scuffling sound I heard in the wall. A rat, maybe. But then a weird tapping sound ensued, and I'd about had enough. "Nope, fuck this." I rolled over and switched on the lamp.

"What?" Callum rasped, blinking away from the sudden light.

"Shhh, listen." I pointed at the wall.

Callum gave me a look that said I was being crazy when nothing happened, then grabbed the remote to switch off the TV.

"Get back here. This place is old as shit. It's probably filled with vermin."

"Vermin ghosts?" I asked, slipping beneath the covers.

He chuckled, pulling me to him once more. "I'll protect you."

"Whatever. I'm keeping the light on."

Half an hour ticked by, my eyes wide open and staring at a patch of peeling paint on the ceiling.

Then, from outside, came the sound of a door slamming repetitively.

“Holy shit.”

Callum woke up again, flinging back the sheets just as our door creaked open. “Put your clothes on, we’re getting the fuck out of here.”

My hands shook as I quickly tugged on my jeans and a red blouse. I refused to move from the bed, shoving my ivory peep-toe wedding heels on as Callum raced to the bathroom, returning with my dress and his clothes.

He fished his keys out of his pants pocket, checking to make sure he had his phone and wallet while I zipped the bag and glanced around the dimly lit room.

Another sound of scuffling from the wall had Callum’s eyes narrowing. “Let’s go.”

He took my hand, peering out into the hall before pulling me from the room and racing toward the stairs. The lights in the hallway had been lit when we’d gone downstairs to order some food earlier but were now all out. The cat was nowhere to be seen as Callum tossed the room key on the counter and pushed open the huge old doors.

I’d never felt so grateful to be outside in my entire life. Sucking in quick breaths, I dived for the passenger door when he unlocked the car, then tossed the bag into the back seat where he was hastily shoving our wedding attire.

Once in the car, Callum backed out into the middle of the lot, stopping to stare up at the dark structure. He exhaled a loud breath. “Well, that was romantic.”

We sat in silence as he drove, quietly freaked out until we reached the outskirts of town and hit the highway. Only then, with every mile we put between us and the bed and breakfast, did some of the fear that’d rattled my bones fall away.

“I demand a do-over,” I said once I’d found my voice.

We both laughed, a shiver rolling off us as we reached for one another’s hands.

TWELVE



Callum

“Do you think they’ll miss us?”

I glanced over at Renee, then flicked on the blinker to turn down Main Street of Gray Springs.

Coffee shops, restaurants, a laundromat, and an ice-cream parlor were a few of the stores that caught my eye before I rounded the bend to the string of apartment buildings on the connecting street.

“I’m not sure,” I muttered, searching for a vacant spot. We’d probably left home a little late, but our families had kept us busy with numerous farewell dinners and parties. Never mind we’d only be attending college forty minutes away from home; they acted like we were going off to war.

And despite our secretive smiles, and the panic we’d felt in the days after we got married, they never found out.

“You’re right. Our moms will probably just max out their credit cards sooner from boredom.” She pointed at our complex. “Park in the garage.”

“No because then it’ll be too cramped getting everything out.”

“Better than circling around the block,” she sang sarcastically as I turned out of the street and ran the loop again.

I shot her an annoyed look, which she returned with a mischievous smile.

“Say it,” she said when we drove down the ramp into the underground garage of the apartment building a few minutes later.

“Not a chance.”

She snapped her gum, giggling softly as I parked in visitor parking and got out. Renee jumped out before I rounded the Rover. “When are we going back to get your car?”

“Ray’s driving it up tomorrow.” I opened the trunk, grabbing some of the boxes that’d been wedged in like Tetris blocks.

“How will he get home?” she mused, pulling a box toward her and dumping her handbag on top before lifting it.

“Careful, that’s got a heap of clothes in it.”

Her look told me to shut up.

I blew out a breath. “And I don’t know. Bus maybe.”

“I’ll drive him.”

I laughed as I shut the trunk, grabbing the two boxes I’d hauled out, and headed to the elevator. “Public transport won’t kill him.” If anything, it’d give him something to do. Ever since I’d gotten my car, Raymond, my family’s driver, wasn’t needed as much. And he only worked for a few other families.

“I’ve read plenty of reports that say otherwise.”

“I knew there was more to those magazines than fashion and raunchy sex stories.”

Renee pulled her keys out, locking the Rover before swiping a card that had the elevator doors opening. “Never assume, my love.”

We stepped inside the mirrored interior, glancing around. “Do you find it weird that we never even viewed this apartment first?”

Renee shrugged, checking her teeth in the mirror. “Nope.” She rubbed her lips together. “You know our moms. If something better existed this close to campus, they’d have found it.”

We rode all the way to the top floor, the doors opening to the penthouse suite.

Renee set her box down, unlocking the doors and holding one open with a dramatic bow for me to walk ahead.

“You’re lucky I love you.”

She guffawed, smacking me on the ass.

We set the boxes down, then explored the open plan living area, kitchen, and dining room. It was fully furnished with a mixture of black wood and white leather. The couches black, and a white chaise by the glass floor-to-ceiling window that overlooked campus

and half of town. The dining table was stained so dark, it appeared black, with white leather dining chairs and a fresh tumbler of hydrangeas perched in the middle.

“Ugh, I’ve been looking at them all my life. Get rid of them.”

“My thoughts exactly,” I agreed, taking her hand. “After we’ve explored the bedrooms.”

There were three, if you counted the office that was big enough to be a bedroom. The spare room filled with a white queen-size bed and matching armoire. The main bedroom had the floor-to-ceiling window, and a black leather bed with a matching ottoman at the end.

Cushions were scattered expertly at the head of the dark patterned bedspread. The bedside tables made of the same leather with brass handles.

“Jesus, they didn’t skimp on the fancy, did they?”

“No, they did not,” I said, blinking rapidly as I took everything in.

Renee’s hand left mine, and she walked through the room. “The bathroom is almost as big as the office with a fucking spa bath and a bench in the shower.”

That last bit had me following to see for myself. Indeed, inside the shower, that was big enough to house an orgy, sat a marble bench along the dark tiled wall. “That’s going to be useful.”

Renee belted out a laugh, spinning to plant her hands on my chest.

I stared down at her, and this girl, this young woman filled with fire, melted in my arms.

My hands palmed her ass, and I lifted her to the vanity, fingers brushing over the tattoo on her thigh. We didn’t get rings because that would be too obvious, even on a necklace. So we got small tattoos, the first letter of our names on the side of our thighs.

“I can’t believe we’re here.” She pressed her lips to my chin, then glanced out the window. “Do you think we’ll regret picking a place so close to home?”

We’d applied for many different schools, but Gray Springs was the only one we’d both gotten accepted to, and I was offered a place on their football team.

“Don’t worry, I plan to have the locks changed first thing tomorrow morning.”

Another laugh, then her lips were on mine, and I was drowning in her.



“Did you expect it to be this brutal?” Toby wheezed out between breaths, hands on his knees as he bent over. “Because I sure as fuck didn’t.”

We’d barely been here two weeks, and already Coach had us running drills like we’d been here a month. “I expected ...” I stopped, trying to catch my breath as I all but fell to the grass. “I expected it to be hard, yeah. But expecting it doesn’t mean shit when your lungs are close to collapsing.”

“A-fucking-greed,” Paul said, moaning a few feet away on the grass as he stretched his hamstrings.

“Do I hear whining?” Coach bellowed, lifting his clipboard to shield his eyes from the rays of the early morning sun. “What do we do with whiners, here?”

“Ax ’em.” The words rose in a collection of exhausted voices.

“Damn right, we do. Hit the showers.”

Afterward, I found some of the guys outside as I was pulling out my phone to read a text from Renee.

“I don’t know about you guys, but I need me some fucking bacon,” Burrows said, slinging his gym bag over his shoulder.

Quinn yawned as he rounded the corner and saw us standing there. “Did someone say bacon?”

“Yeah, let’s roll,” Paul said, swaggering away from the gym with what looked like more energy than I thought all of us had combined.

I hesitated, knowing Renee was making pancakes. It was Tuesday. She’d decided Tuesday was a miserable day of the week, and the only way to make it better was to start the day with pancakes.

Burrows slapped me on the shoulder, and I tucked my phone away without reading the message.

This being married in college thing was hard, though not for the reasons some might think. Yes, there were gorgeous women around. I wasn't blind; I just wasn't interested.

What I was interested in was figuring out a way to keep my shit to myself.

It was easier at home, being that we'd only had to stay another month before coming here.

Now, though? Well, as I sat around the table in the cafeteria, watching my teammates scarf down breakfast as though they'd never seen food before as we shot the shit, I felt incredibly young and old all at once.

"You guys should come round tonight after the team meeting. My roommate, Carl, got a new Xbox."

Mumbled sounds of agreement met Ed's suggestion as everyone finished their food. Ed eyed me, and I ducked my head, shoveling more egg into my mouth.

"What about you, Welsh?"

I lifted my head, frowning as though I was mulling it over. "I might be hanging with Renee."

"Your girlfriend?" Toby asked, fingers tapping on the tabletop as he smirked at some girls walking by.

Orange juice and water would spray all over the table if I were to tell them I was going home to my wife. "Yeah."

Ed scoffed, making a noise that sounded like a whip cracking.

I laughed, trying to play it off. I didn't care for being made fun of and wouldn't fucking stand for it, but this was all so new, and if my father taught me anything, it was that first impressions counted. And never to give anyone a reason to doubt your worth to them.

"Shut up," Quinn said. "I've gotta hang with Lex."

"Gotta?" Toby asked, smiling wide.

Quinn tossed a piece of toast at him, which he caught and tore a bite out of.

Burrows laughed. "Poor fucking guy, hanging with his hot as shit girlfriend. What a chore."

Ed gestured to me with his cup. “You seen Welsh’s girl?” He whistled. “Now that’d be some serious high maintenance.”

I scowled at him, frustration making my toes curl in my runners.

Paul threw a dirty napkin at Ed. “You don’t say shit like that about another guy’s girl.”

Ed shrugged, flicking the napkin away, but mouthed, “My bad.”

“You know what?” I said, taking a quick sip of my water. “Count me in.”

Ten minutes later, we went to class, saying we’d meet up later this afternoon.

After physics, I finally remembered to pull out my phone, finding three messages from Renee.

Mini Mouse: Where are you?

Mini Mouse: Your pancakes are getting cold.

Mini Mouse: Okay, well, could you at least text me to let me know you’re okay?

The last one came through two hours ago, and I cursed, stepping off the pebbled path to quickly tap out a response.

Me: Sorry. Ended up getting something to eat with the guys after practice. I’ll see you tonight.

I tucked my phone into my pocket and went home to change before heading to the team meeting.

THIRTEEN



Callum

Stepping out of the elevator, I unlocked the door, wincing as it shut with a bang behind me.

I dropped my keys and phone on the countertop, heading to the fridge in search of water.

A few beers and pizza had turned into eight beers, at least, and a few slices of pizza.

Grabbing the glass jug, I drank greedily as I heard soft footfalls coming up behind me.

I set it on the shelf, cringing when I remembered I hadn't texted Renee to let her know I would not be home tonight.

Squaring my shoulders, I dragged in a quiet breath before turning around and closing the fridge. "Hey, beautiful."

She was wearing a lacy peach tank and matching panties. My eyes slowly dragged up her body from the tips of her red painted toes, up and over the perfect globes of her perky tits, and stopping at the sour twist of her pretty lips.

Moving a smile into place, I stepped closer and hooked my arm around her waist. "Missed you," I whispered, inhaling the scent of her hair as my lips ghosted over her cheek, stopping at her bare shoulder. I rubbed my lips over the soft skin, feeling her relax a little.

"You wouldn't need to miss me if you saw me," she said, a sharp, sweet bite in the whispered words.

“I’m sorry. I should’ve sent you a text, but I didn’t plan to stay long, then I just lost track of time.”

“Uh-huh. You reek of beer.” She tried to push at my chest, but she couldn’t move me if she tried.

Bending, I picked her up, setting her on the counter and maneuvering her legs around my waist.

“Callum,” she groaned, my hardness hitting her softness as I pulled her flush against me.

I grinned down at her, resting my forehead on hers. “It’s okay. You can stay angry. We haven’t had angry sex in a long time.”

“You can’t just—”

My mouth meeting hers cut her off, and she only froze for a second before her fingers were diving into my hair and her lips were opening for my tongue.

I snuck my fingers between us, moving her panties aside to caress the softest part of her. She shivered, tensing her legs around me. My teeth scraped over her tongue as I parted her, testing her warmth with the pad of my finger.

And when my jeans hit the floor, her hands reaching to put me inside her, I knew I would soon be forgiven.



“Callum, off. We’re going to be late. Again.” Renee shoved me, and I humored her by rolling onto my back. “Don’t you have practice?”

“Already been.” And now, I planned to sleep.

My shoulder was jerked, eyes popping open. “Hey, you have ten minutes to make it to the other side of campus.” Renee’s brows furrowed. “What’s up? Are you sick?”

We’d been at Gray Springs for over a month, and the class schedule was fine, though admittedly kind of boring, but it was the training that was catching up to me.

“Never been worked this hard before.” Renee raised a brow, and I conceded with a grin. “Well, shit. Maybe I have.”

“Practice is that bad?” She stood, tossing her hair forward and gathering it into a high ponytail.

“Yep.”

Green eyes softened, then skirted down my bare chest. “I wish I could say I felt sorry for you. But I’m liking the view way too much.”

She squealed when I caught her wrist, pulling her back down to the bed and over my chest.

“My miniscule high school bulk wasn’t good enough for you?”

Her teeth punctured her lip as she rose onto her forearms. “Every part of you is good enough for me. Especially”—she rocked over me, feeling me hard and wanting beneath her—“this part.”

“You wicked woman,” I whispered.

Her nose bumped mine. “You love me.”

She got up, too fast for me to stop her, and checked her reflection in the mirror. “I’ll see you later.”

“Wait,” I said, sitting up, the sheets falling over my bare waist.

Her ponytail swung as she left the room. “No. No kisses, or we’ll never leave.”

“Renee,” I warned with a growl.

She was already gone, the doors to our apartment closing twenty seconds later.

Sighing, I stretched my arms above my head, then dragged my sore ass to class.

There was no point in driving, my first class being closest to our apartment building than all the rest. I jogged, wincing at the stretch of my tender muscles, but still arrived five minutes late, earning me a look of disapproval from the professor that’d probably make others shrink.

I offered the stern woman a crooked smile and slumped into the first seat I saw.

“Yo, Welsh,” Burrows, one of the guys on the team, whisper-hissed once the professor got lost in the numbers on her whiteboard.

I turned, just enough to let him know I was listening, my pen poised in my hand.

“There’s a party this weekend. Huge. Danny is hosting it for all the freshmen.”

We’d been to our fair share of freshman parties already. Well, I had. But college parties were different. Thinking about my sore body and the rigorous training routine Coach had us under, I said, “Where?”

“An old house he’s leasing off campus. Give me your number, and I’ll text you the address.”

Returning my attention to the front of the room, I slid my phone from my pocket and handed it back to him.

FOURTEEN



Renee

“No, I haven’t seen it yet.” I nodded to the barista, taking my latte and hightailing it through the waiting crowd inside the Bean Stream.

“You have to see it. It’s marvelous. She really does look ten years younger.”

I hit the sidewalk, the autumn sunshine bright and my sunglasses at home on the kitchen counter. “Shit.”

“Renee,” Mom scolded. “Are you even listening?”

“Yeah, yeah. Naomi Watts looks marvelous.”

She tutted. “Don’t be such a bore. You’ve left the nest, and now I have nothing to do but fish through magazines, get my hair and nails done, and go shopping.” She paused. “Maybe we should get the kitchen remodeled.”

“So basically, you’re doing the same things you did when I was home.” I quickly checked the time on my phone, picking up the pace when I realized I only had five minutes to spare.

“Now that you mention it, I suppose I am.” A quick laugh tinkled in my ear. “How do you always know how to make me feel better?”

I barely contained a snort. “Years of practice. Hey, I have to go. I’m about to head into class.”

“Right, have fun. Give Callum smooches from me.”

With a roll of my eyes, I hung up, taking a long sip from my too hot latte and wincing as my tongue and the roof of my mouth

protested.

The towering dorms and old buildings loomed in front of me, old and gray. The lawn was a glowing deep green, surrounded and interrupted by vibrant gardens probably tended to more than my mother's hair and nails.

Admittedly, when I'd opened the acceptance letter, I was just happy to be attending the same school as Callum. It wasn't until our last weeks at home that the worry set in. Gray Springs wasn't known for their performing arts department. Though they did have one, it was small.

Design was where my heart longed to explore, but if I didn't take any drama classes, my mother would likely have a tantrum. She'd said when I was a child, dressing up in her out of season clothes and telling her my dreams, that no one wanted to be the help when they could be the star wearing the help's designs.

Those words stayed with me because I guessed she had a point. Too bad I wasn't a great actress. I knew my heart had to be in it for me to make it a career, but it just wasn't. Not only that, but no matter how rich and well-known one's parents were, it didn't garner you any lasting favors in that industry. Once you were in, it was up to you.

And if it were left to me, I'd be kicked off the first Broadway show I was fortunate enough to land a role in.

A girl approached me outside the English building. "Renee, hey."

"Hi," I said, continuing up the stairs.

"You don't remember me?" she asked. "I sat next to you last week and saw you at a party a few weeks ago."

I glanced at her, offering a small closed-lipped smile. "Sorry, no." Callum had frequented a lot of parties already—*part of being on the team*, he'd said—but I'd only tagged along to a few and usually left a few hours in. I didn't know anyone well enough yet. Only him and Mike, and Mike was busy finding his feet in this new world, too.

The girl's face fell. "Oh."

I took a seat in the back, quickly drinking my coffee before the professor showed.

The girl sat next to me, reeking of cheap perfume and accidentally bumping me with her elbow as she got her stuff out of her bag.

“Sorry.” She cringed.

Wiping the dribble of coffee from my chin, I kept my annoyance to myself and asked, “What’s your name?”

“Kristy.” Her hair was burnt orange, and her blue eyes held a nervous gleam.

“Kristy,” I repeated, trying to think of something else to say. “I like your hair.” Yep, that was sad. In my defense, it’d been a while since I’d had friends, especially of the female variety.

“Thanks.” She beamed. “Us redheads, we need to stick together.”

“Is that so?” I couldn’t help but ask.

She nodded eagerly, clicking her pen. “You going to that huge party this weekend? We should totally get ready together.”

“Haven’t heard of it.” Lies. I had. I was tired of parties, though. Tired of not getting to spend enough time with Callum. College was no joke. I had a research paper to turn in on Monday, not to mention sleep and hopefully some sex to catch up on.

“It’s supposed to be for freshmen. Everyone will be there.”

“Haven’t they already thrown enough parties for the freshmen?” I would know. I’d attended one weeks ago, and Callum another just last week. Without me.

“Yeah, it’s so awesome.”

“Uh-huh.” Callum had a game on Saturday. The first official one for the season. “My boyfriend has a game, so I’d have to speak to him first.” Lies again. I did what I wanted, but I wasn’t sure if I wanted to commit to this party.

“Callum, right?”

The professor walked in, placing his laptop down on his desk and starting it up.

“Right,” I confirmed, a little unnerved by how much this girl knew about me when I knew nothing about her. Perhaps that was my own fault.

“He’s ... wow.” She giggled, a soft yet irritating sound. “And he’s on the football team?”

“He is.” I’d just said that he was playing a game but bit my tongue to keep from biting those words out.

The professor clapped his hands once. “Okay, everyone. Books open, pens ready. We’ll be taking notes from one of the classics

today.”

Kristy leaned in, whispering, “Let me know about the party.”
I didn’t plan to, but something had me saying, “Sure.”



A day later, it was Callum’s birthday and almost midnight when I finally heard the door slam closed and keys being tossed to the kitchen counter.

I didn’t get to see him that morning. When I woke up, even after setting my alarm an hour earlier, he was already gone. A message had arrived on my phone in the evening, informing me that my boyfriend would be attending a small get-together with the team, and that he’d try not to be home too late.

My plans foiled, I put his present away, then ran myself a bath. Desperate to rid the tension that insisted on ruling my body as each day sped by since we’d arrived at Gray Springs.

It worked. I’d gotten out, finished a good chunk of my paper, and ordered in before watching *Game of Thrones* while doing a unicorn cross-stitch. Yet no amount of hot water, distraction, and Chinese food could stop the tension from returning, slamming into every one of my limbs when Callum came stumbling down the hall to our room.

“Well, Happy Birth—why do you smell like a cheap whore?”

Callum belted out a laugh. “What?”

I kept facing the window as he tried to turn me. He eventually succeeded, dark eyes narrowing and studying my face. “What the hell, Renee?”

“You stink of cheap perfume.”

His thick brows scrunched, and he reared back as though I’d offended him. “Seriously?”

“Do you think I’m mistaking the smell for something else?” I scoffed. “Yes, seriously.”

He laughed, almost tilting over on the bed as he slurred, "You're being crazy."

I sighed. "Go to sleep."

He did. What felt like thirty seconds later, his snores were filling the room.

"Happy Birthday," I murmured to the dark.

The next morning, I woke with a pounding head from having stayed awake most of the night, listening to Callum snore, hoping that I could internally talk myself out of feeling like I was getting left behind somehow.

I wasn't successful, and feeling stubborn, I dumped his present on the counter, then made breakfast for myself.

I was putting my bowl in the dishwasher when Callum walked into the kitchen shirtless, bleary eyed, and rubbing the back of his head. "Christ, those guys sure know how to drink."

I hummed, shutting the dishwasher.

I felt his eyes on me as I put the cereal back in the pantry. "What was up with you last night?"

Slowly, I closed the door, then turned around. "Well, it was your birthday yesterday, wasn't it? I wanted to see you and did so for all of five minutes."

"I know, fuck." Callum pinched the bridge of his nose. "I'm sorry."

Chewing my lip, I moved over to where his present sat on the counter. "Here."

Smiling, he eyed it a moment, then looked at me. "You know I don't need presents."

"You know I don't care, and I'm going to buy them anyway."

He huffed, taking a seat on a stool. "So, we're okay?"

Were we? Regardless of him ignoring me on his birthday, it still felt like he was being pulled away from me. I couldn't let it go, and we were married. We couldn't bottle stuff up, not when we'd promised to spend the rest of our lives together.

I leaned my palms on the granite countertop and met his gaze. "Why don't you invite me out with your friends anymore?"

Tilting his head down, he studied a speck of cereal on the counter. "It's ... I don't know." He ran a hand through his hair. "You get bored. Plus, it's a guy thing."

I stood back from the counter, a harsh puff of breath leaving me. “A guy thing, right.”

“Renee.”

Stopping in the doorway, I turned around. “What?”

“How about instead of being a bitch, you tell me what’s actually wrong?” he asked. “Is it the fact I didn’t ask you to come with me? Or that I wasn’t home to open another one of your outrageous presents? I won’t apologize for the former. I’m sorry, but I’m allowed to do shit without you.”

Hurt rattled through me, followed by defeat. I walked away, needing to mask it. “Okay.”

No matter what I said, I came across as needy and smothering. Was there any point in trying to explain why I felt this way? Probably not. My lips mashed together with frustration in an effort to stop the tears from spilling.

“Mini Mouse,” he said, voice soft as he followed me into our room. I stood in front of the mirror, pinning my hair back as he wrapped his arms around me and whispered into my ear, “I’m sorry, okay?” When I said nothing, his hold tightened. “You know, it’s not attractive, this sudden insecurity.”

My eyes shut, and I turned in his embrace, opening them to stare up at him. He stared back, neither of us willing to back down in our silent battle.

“You know what else isn’t attractive?” I whispered, watching his eyes dart to my glossed red lips. “A husband who forgets he’s married.”

Feeling him tense, I moved out of his hold to grab my purse, snatching my phone and chucking it inside.

“Renee,” he snapped as I walked out of the room.

I made it to the door and slipped my feet inside my boots before he grabbed me and spun me around to face him. “Yes, I attend stuff where loads of girls are. Yes, I know I spend too much time with the guys. Yes, I know all that might piss you off. But I can’t quit doing what I want to do just to make you happy.”

I looked down at the wooden floor, feeling the will to fight fall away from me like a dying wind. “I’m not asking you to do that.” I was merely trying to ensure he didn’t forget about me.

Silence fell, then he grasped my chin, tilting my face to look me in the eye. “About the birthday present, I’m sorry. I bet I’ll love it, I’m just hungover and grumpy as fuck. But I love you, ’kay?”

Forcing my best smile, I nodded. “Love you, too.”

I left him in the apartment, waiting until the doors to the elevator closed before allowing my shoulders and smile to fall.

FIFTEEN



Renee

The crowd was insane. Screams and shouts echoed through the stadium as the team jumped all over each other, sweat bouncing off their heads as they removed their helmets.

It was nothing like high school.

The lights, blinding. The noise, deafening. The atmosphere, drenched with excitement.

And as I watched the team march off the field, disappearing into the small tunnel that I guessed led to the locker rooms, I realized there'd be no more post-win or lose kisses.

He couldn't run over to the grandstand, even if he wanted to.

My heart dropped. So many things I thought I wouldn't miss about high school were already coming back to bite me in the heart.

Refusing to let melancholy seep into my already exhausted body, I stood and made my way outside, standing amidst the crowd of students and families who were either making plans for the rest of the night or waiting for the team.

Callum was one of the last to come outside, which didn't surprise me. He liked a long shower after a game, and if we weren't going to this party, he'd likely have gone home and taken another. With me. Though, that was before.

I was trying not to be bitter about it and said I'd tag along to the same party Kristy had mentioned as his teammates would all be

going, freshman through to seniors. If he wouldn't include me, I'd include myself. I trusted him—of course, I did—I just loathed that I needed to keep reminding myself of that alarming fact.

"Mini Mouse, you look tired." Callum grabbed my cheeks, lifting my head to kiss me.

I kissed him back, uncaring of our audience. He was mine, and I was proud.

"Never too tired to congratulate you, superstar."

He grinned against my lips. "I love you."

Kissing him one more time, I stood back and grabbed his hand. "How did it feel?"

He shook his head, his smile unwilling to leave his face as we walked to his car. "Intense, amazing, and just ... everything."

"Everything," I echoed, taking a seat when he opened the door for me.

He was caught by one of his teammates, and I smiled when they knocked on the window, waving at me, then wound it down.

"I don't think you've met." Callum jabbed a finger at him. "This is Paul; you'll see him later."

I eyed Paul a moment, and remembered seeing him at a party. He was gorgeous, white gleaming teeth against dark brown skin. "I'm sure I will. Nice to meet you, Paul."

"My, my, Mike was right. She's like a duchess or some shit, man."

Callum snickered. "She's got sharp talons; you'd be wise to remember that."

I grinned, rolling the window up as they said goodbye.

"Mike's going too, then?" I asked once Callum was inside the car.

"Yeah, he said he'd meet us there."

He'd been over to our place once or twice since we'd arrived here, but other than that, I hadn't seen much of him. He'd chosen to attend Gray Springs to stay close to his mom, who was apparently still a little unhinged and liable to keep swapping boyfriends if he didn't keep an eye on her.

"What crap has he been saying about me?"

Callum's smile faltered. "It was weeks ago. Some of the guys were asking questions."

Sensing that Mike still got under his skin where I was concerned, I tried to ease the frown from his face. “A duchess?” I scoffed. “I’m kind of offended.”

“Pay the peasants no mind.” He grinned. “You know you’re a queen.”

I laughed. “Exactly.”



“Another,” Kristy cried, taking my cup and refilling it.

I drank, smacking my lips together after I’d drained it. “Beer is disgusting.”

“You won’t care soon enough.”

And she was right.

I felt good. As though more and more weight lifted from my shoulders with each drink, the pressure vacating my chest. I’d drank a little here and there in high school, but never enough to get drunk.

“This blows.” I spun around, the room tilting a little, its occupants unrecognizable to me. “I’m gonna go find my guy.”

Pushing my way through the crowd, I squinted, peering, probably too closely, at any tall guy with dark hair. My stomach roiled, and suddenly, everything felt like it was suffocating me. Sweat dotted my forehead, and I swiped it off, walking toward the back door.

“Mouse.” Callum looped an arm around my waist as I descended the back steps.

“There you are.” I smiled up into his face.

“You reek of beer,” he murmured.

“You reek of sexiness. Let’s go find a room; there’s plenty of them.”

“Renee!” Kristy cried from somewhere behind me.

“Ugh, I can’t shake her.”

Callum squeezed me, chuckling. “Shhh, she’s coming.”

“Come dance,” Kristy whined, pulling on my hand. “Oh, hi Callum. Great game.”

“Thanks,” he said, letting me go. “Go. Have a little fun.”

“Staying with you is fun,” I argued with a pout.

He brushed my lips with his fingers, then leaned down, brushing them with his mouth. “Go on, I’ll be out here for a while anyway.”

I glanced around, finding most of the team outside. He would, which would probably be boring. Back inside we went, Kristy tugging me the entire way until I snatched my hand back. She changed the song while I got another drink, and an old R&B tune filled my ears.

“Oh, yes!” I threw my hands into the air, beer sloshing down my arm. “Gross,” I muttered, then promptly drained the cup and tossed it on the floor. Hips swaying, I took Kristy’s hands as I joined her in the middle of the room.

We danced, laughing when we almost tripped over our own feet or mixed up the words to the songs. I’d forgotten just how nice it felt to have a friend. Another woman to have fun with, joke around with, and spend time with. Even if it’d never involved this much alcohol before.

“Shake it, ladies!” one of the guys on the couches yelled.

I glanced over, seeing Mike sitting with some other guys I’d yet to meet.

After giving him a small wave, I turned and grabbed Kristy’s hand. “I need to pee.”

She pulled her hand away, dancing her way out of the room. “One more drink first.”

I ignored her. The room blurred as I vacated the crowded living room. I steadied myself on the dining table, wondering if I should take a seat for a little while, then decided I wanted Callum.

I made it outside, squinting into the darkness and gripping the railing of the long porch. A smile stretched my face as I found him in the back with a bunch of guys. Releasing the railing, I carefully made my way down the stairs when more people came into view.

Girls. Loads of them surrounding the team. Two of which were standing by Callum. No. I stopped, and someone shouldered by me. Not just standing around him, one was reaching up to touch his hair, running her nails through it and making his eyes shutter briefly.

The perfume, the time spent not with me, but elsewhere. *Always* elsewhere.

We wouldn't be a cliché. Some young couple who'd made a stupid decision that eventually fell apart.

We couldn't be.

And so I turned away before I saw any more, feeling my heart slam against my sternum with every sloppy step I took back inside.

The tears blurred my vision, but the urge to pee took over, and after one more drink, the urge to vomit, too.

"I think I need water." I set the plastic cup down, swallowing and taking a few quick breaths.

"Don't be a baby. We're just getting started." Kristy poured another drink from the keg on the table.

I had no idea how much we'd drank by that point. I'd lost count, which didn't bode well. And it was clear Kristy was more accustomed to heavy drinking than I was.

"Not a baby," I slurred, rising from the seat and cringing as my bladder raged. "Be right back."

I stumbled down the hall, asking anyone who'd talk to me where the bathroom was. They all pointed at the end of the hall, which I couldn't or refused to believe. The line was a mile long.

With a groan, I dragged myself to the stairs, clinging to the railing as I climbed them.

There really were a lot of rooms up there, I discovered as I opened closed doors, ignoring the curses from the occupied bedrooms.

Finally, I found the master bedroom, which was blissfully empty. Not that I'd have cared at that point. It had a toilet, and I needed that and some time alone more than my next breath.

I almost cried with relief, wobbling on my feet as I let my panties slide down my legs. Afterward, I struggled to right my blue and white swing dress, my head shaking to try to rid the dizziness. Once I thought I was good, I washed my hands, then stared in horror at my reflection.

"My God." I patted my cheeks and tried to run my fingers under my smudged eyes, wincing as I poked my eyeball with a fingernail instead. It was no wonder he was looking elsewhere.

You could only stare at the same face, spend a certain amount of time with someone, and feel backed into a corner with no exit in sight for so long before you acted out.

Mike's face appeared in the mirror. "Renee, you okay?"

I sniffed, trying to hide my breaking heart. "Help me, I look like a horse's ass."

Mike laughed, grabbing my hand when I spun around too quickly. "You're beautiful, and you know it."

I laughed too, shaking a finger at his face. "And you're drunk, mister."

"Nowhere near as much as you."

"Touché." I pulled out of his grip, teetering into the wall. "Ouch," I grumbled, rubbing my arm.

Mike took my hand. "You okay?"

I looked up at him, blinking when his features doubled. "I think I drank way too much."

"I think so, too." He laughed, then sobered. "I saw. When you, um, walked outside earlier."

Shocked, I let out a weird mix of snort-laughter, feeling utterly ridiculous. Embarrassed. "God, I must look so stupid."

"No way." Hands grabbed my cheeks. "Never," he whispered.

Then his lips were on mine, and I was still laughing. The laughter was sucked back down my throat as his soft lips moved, trying to open my mouth. They felt strange, foreign, and I didn't know how the hell this had even happened, which made me laugh again as I pushed him away. "Jesus, Mike. You can't kiss me."

He rubbed his forehead, looking pained. "Why not?" His eyes searched mine, his message loud and clear. Why shouldn't he kiss me if Callum was downstairs, doing whatever it was he was doing?

It's not attractive, this sudden insecurity.

"Can you keep a secret?" I asked Mike.

He nodded, lips tilting.

Indignation and anger burned within me, making my hands shake as I leaned closer and grasped his cheeks. "I'm sad and so fucking angry," I whispered to his lips, my head swimming, eyes blurring.

"You can take it out on me," he whispered back, lips now touching mine again. "It's what we do, isn't it?" A sad note of humor

yet he was right.

It was what we did.

Maybe, I thought as my lips crashed into his and he pulled me toward the bed, *there was a reason people stepped out on each other*. Betrayed one another.

Maybe it didn't mean you didn't love someone anymore.

Maybe it simply meant you loved them too much.

SIXTEEN



Callum

I woke up on someone's lawn.

Not really, but it was close enough.

"Dude, no," I heard someone groan.

I tried to move my sluggish limbs off the lawn chair. The firepit was blackened, and three of the guys were still asleep. Toby was actually on the lawn, curled up on his side.

"This was ..."

"Messed up," I supplied for Quinn, who nodded, shielding his eyes from the morning sun.

"Shit, did you guys sleep out here?" Mike asked, rubbing his eyes as he stepped out onto the porch.

"Sure did. Go hard or go home, motherfucker." Burrows punched the air, then yawned.

"I think I'll be going home," Quinn said, standing.

Renee. Panic gripped my heart, causing me to follow him on unsteady legs to the door.

She was walking into the kitchen, her face paler than usual and a wobble to her step. "Callum?"

Relief slammed into me, strong and hard. I grabbed her, wrapping my arms around her. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to fall asleep. I can't even remember how the hell it happened."

"That fucking beer is what happened," Paul said, lifting his head from the kitchen counter he was hunched over. "Holy fuck. I need

some fatty food, stat.”

“You okay?” I asked Renee.

“Yeah.” Her voice was a little hoarse, and she cleared her throat.

“Can we please go home?”

“Sure. Later, assholes.”

Mumbles followed me in answer as we walked outside. “We need a cab.”

Renee fumbled in her dress pocket for her phone, calling one and telling it to meet us at the end of the street we were walking down.

“Where’d you sleep?” She didn’t typically stay long at parties, and hadn’t attended many with me. Though that was probably my fault.

“I woke up upstairs in one of the rooms,” she said quietly, too quietly.

“Are you mad? I’m sorry, I didn’t think it’d get so—”

“Out of control,” she finished for me.

“Yeah. I was a dick to leave you like that.”

“No, I’m not mad. Just tired.” With a sharp laugh, she said, “It’s my fault. I got way too drunk.”

I set a long exhale free. I knew I’d been an asshole lately. Waking up outside someone’s house unsure of where my wife had gone only hammered that home. I made a mental note to turn down the next party invitations that came my way.

Birds tittered up high in the trees as a few cars drove down the street. Renee’s hair was a mess, her makeup smudged to hell, and something crusty was down the front of her dress.

“So you’re okay?”

She nodded, waving the cab down once we reached the curb at the end of the street.

The drive back to our apartment was quiet, the cabbie chewing on tobacco and hitting radio stations every thirty seconds, which was hell on my pounding head.

When he pulled over outside our building, I gave him a twenty, then helped Renee out. “Wanna go get something to eat?”

She glanced down at herself and winced. “No, I just want to shower and sleep.”

Fair enough.

Once inside, I stripped my clothes off, about to follow her into the shower when the door was shut in my face. I turned the handle, but she'd locked it. "I'm too tired."

"Okay, but we don't have to—"

"I'll be out soon."

Frowning, I shrugged, heading to the kitchen and tearing into an apple while I waited.

She emerged ten minutes later, hair wrapped in a black towel turban and her face so clean it looked red. She opened the fridge, grabbed a bottle of water, then retreated to our room.

I tossed the apple core and made quick work of washing as much of the hangover from my body as possible before joining her in bed.

Looping my arm around her waist, I pulled her back into my chest and kissed her neck. "You sure you're okay?"

A long pause before she whispered, "Let's not do this ever again."

I smiled. "Agreed."



We spent Sunday sleeping. Well, I did. Renee had a paper due that she labored over, complaining about the lack of pain relief we had until I went to the tiny drug store on Main Street to get her some.

I grabbed some of the tampons she usually used too, just in case that beast was on its way. I had a feeling it was, due to how she was acting.

Monday morning, I left her in bed sound asleep, wishing I could wake her and slip inside her from behind. But I didn't want to poke the bear unless she wanted me to.

I had a feeling she didn't, so I took my shit for class with me and decided I'd shower at the gym.

My phone rang just as I was walking to training, and I saw I had three text messages I hadn't read yet.

Ignoring them, I hit answer. “Cal,” my dad said.

“Hey.” He must’ve been overseas, calling me before six in the morning. He was a workaholic, sure, but never one to start making phone calls until he’d had three shots of straight coffee.

“How was the game? Sorry I couldn’t make it. I’m out of town until the end of the month.”

I didn’t know why he still bothered to apologize, considering he stopped making my games in high school after merging the firm with Damon’s, Renee’s dad.

Though I supposed I should’ve been grateful he cared enough to apologize. *Should’ve.*

“We killed it; the team is a great mix.” I went on to tell him about the preseason game that was two weeks ago, some of the guys, and the celebration after, to which he made grunting noises, probably while he was going over emails on his phone.

“Sounds good. Listen, we’ve got a charity gala when I return. It’s one we sponsor, and your mother is putting in a lot of work ...”

I zoned out, approaching the gym and flicking my fingers at Paul who was already hitting the weights. Overachiever if there ever was one. After the weekend we’d had, I was surprised everyone had shown up.

They were there, half passed out in the locker room, drinking shakes, or slowly getting their shit together.

“...Friday night. So you’ll need to maybe head home right after class.”

Whoa. I stopped him when I connected the dates. “Dad, I have a game then.”

“So? This is business, Cal.”

I gritted my teeth, ignoring the urge to hang up. “Yeah, but I’m not in high school anymore. This is my ...” *potential career*, I didn’t say.

He knew it anyway. “This firm is your future, Callum.”

“Dad,” I said, my voice a whisper as I unlocked my locker. “The season has just started, so there’s no way I can skip a game. I’m sorry, but I just can’t.”

He sighed, letting me hang for a moment. “Fine. But you can’t keep doing this. Family comes first.” He hung up, and I sneered at

my phone before tossing it into my locker and grabbing my gym shorts.

Coach walked in just as I was tugging them on over my sneakers. “Heard you ladies had a jolly old time this weekend.”

Toby smirked from where he was reclining on the bench. “You could say that.”

“Fifteen laps, Hawthorne.” When Toby just gaped at him, he barked, “Twenty. Beat it.”

Toby shook his head, mumbling under his breath as he made his way out of the room.

“I don’t know what you’re all smiling at. You’re joining him. Then, if you’re lucky, I might sit you down and give you hell.” At everyone’s frozen stances, he cursed. “What are you waiting for? A fucking written invitation? You think one win makes you God’s gift to the football universe and you can slack off? Get out of here.” His eyes bulged. “Now.”

We bailed, trying to muffle our laughter as we ran laps around the field.

“Holy hell, I’m gonna die. I just know it,” Burrows whined once we hit lap twelve.

“Remember that next time you decide to drink your body weight in beer,” one of the seniors, Heath, said with a laugh.

“Fuck you. Like you haven’t.”

“Difference is, I can drink you under the table and still run laps around you, pig boy.”

“You fucker.” Burrows was off, chasing after Heath with way more energy than I thought he had. “My daddy ain’t even a pig farmer anymore!”

“Yeah? You sure talk like he is.”

Quinn caught up with me, smiling and shaking his head.

Coach sent us back into the training room once we hit lap seventeen, and I was extremely fucking thankful. My lungs were burning.

There was no reprieve. We hit the weights instantly while he barked about all the damage we’d probably done to our bodies and how long it’d take to repair it.

“Fucking brutal,” Paul said, wrapping a towel around his waist once we’d all hit the showers.

Some of the guys were laughing in the corner, but I paid them no attention. I didn’t have time if I wanted a huge meal before class. I needed fuel to keep from collapsing.

“Welsh, your girlfriend sure is pretty.”

I frowned at Heath’s mocking tone, then glanced at Mike beside me, who shrugged and shouldered his bag before walking outside.

“Yeah, wish I had a friend with a girl like that who didn’t mind sharing,” Jason, one of the other seniors said, eyes on the door Mike just walked out of.

“I don’t know what you fuckers are talking about, but I’m out.” I left to the sound of their laughter, pulling out my phone once I hit the parking lot.

I almost skidded over the asphalt when I opened the text from an unknown number.

The ability to breathe ceased to exist as I saw the photo of Mike.

Who was in bed with my wife, wrapped around her naked body like he had every right to do so.

SEVENTEEN



Renee

Thoughts swam and knitted together, then unraveled before I could bring them to the surface.

What have I done?

It was the ever-present question that'd followed me around since I woke up in that stranger's bed Sunday morning. Everything was a blur. The last thing I remembered was Mike's lips on mine as he moved us to the bed.

Lips on my neck, callused fingers trailing up my legs. "Always wanted to do this ..."

Everything after that ... well, I'm not so sure I wanted to remember. It was one thing to have done something that terrible but another to remember it. To be able to torture myself with it over and over.

But not knowing was some kind of fucked-up torture in and of itself.

In the minutes and hours since, my stomach constantly churned. I'd turned my brain inside out for more memories, searching and waiting for them to appear. Even if I didn't need them to know how astronomically I'd screwed up, I couldn't stand that some horrible part of my life, whether it was minutes or hours, was just missing.

I'd awoken with Mike's arms around my waist, his breath stirring my hair as I slowly blinked back into reality.

Comfortable, intimate. As though he had every right to touch me.
And it was me who'd given him that right.

Yet when I'd sat up, looked at him, and breathed the words, "We didn't," only to see panic pinch every inch of his face ...

I couldn't believe it. I refused to. And I'd said as much, but my words had shattered in the stale air of the room at the shake of Mike's head and the remorse filling his eyes.

I'd scrambled off the bed, trying to keep the tears from arriving as I'd hastily thrown on my dress and looked for my shoes.

Mike's, "I'm sorry," stalked me all the way out of the room and hadn't left me since.

Bile was a permanent taste in my mouth.

I had to talk to Callum, yet every time I tried, my throat would close and the foggy memories I contained suddenly became so unclear. What could I tell him when I didn't even know the answers to all my own questions?

I never thought I'd cheat on someone, let alone someone I loved. But I had. I'd kissed Mike enough to end up in bed with him. I remembered that much, and apparently, we'd ... *no*, I couldn't let myself even think about it.

I couldn't tell Callum. I couldn't not tell him, either. For all the ways my decision felt justifiable at the time, it wasn't. I'd made a mistake. Acted out of anger and hurt when I was in a stupidly vulnerable state.

As it turned out, I didn't need to tell him.

I hadn't seen Kristy all morning, but judging by the sneers and the whispers that threatened to engulf me in their razor-sharp teeth, everyone else knew the answers I sought.

Late that afternoon, I sat in a corner of the library, tears streaming silently down my cheeks as I tucked my knees to my chest and pretended to read. Waiting. I couldn't put it off any longer, but I couldn't bring myself to rush home to ... what?

What would I find?

It was Callum. He loved me. He knew me. He'd know I never meant to do this, and that I'd never let myself make the same mistake twice. He'd forgive me, if not right away, then eventually.

He was my husband.

I needed to get my shit together and remember that. He knew me better than I knew myself. He'd know that no matter what I did, I wouldn't have done it under any other circumstances.

Pathetic.

It all seemed so stupid and pathetic.

Sniffing, I swiped beneath my eyes and kept my head down as I exited the library to a dark, twinkling sky.

You're a queen.

The voice had my head snapping up, shoulders tilting back, and my steps evening out. I could do this.

I was Renee Welsh.

And I was more than the sum of my mistakes.

Confidence bloomed inside me like a flower slow to unfold, petals gleaming with every bit of new strength I found. Those petals scattered on a phantom breeze, disappearing as I stepped out of the elevator and inside the doors to our apartment.

Boxes sat in the hall and the living room. My clothes, purses, shoes—everything, tossed haphazardly inside them.

I felt my face drain of color as my heart thumped and skidded. "Callum?"

Nothing.

Stepping around the boxes, I walked down the hall to our bedroom and found him sitting on the side of our bed.

He looked down at his hands that were between his knees, his voice tight. "You can stay here tonight, but after that, you're on your own."

"Wh-why?" Asking why was redundant when we both knew, but I couldn't find any fucking words. I laughed nervously. "Shouldn't we at least talk first?"

His eyes blazed as he stared up at me. He stood, taking a step toward me, then stopping. "Talk about what? How everyone on this fucking campus knows that my friend, my fucking teammate, had his way with my too drunk girlfriend?" He stopped, letting out a clipped laugh. "No, wait. *My fucking wife.*"

Unable to help it, I flinched. "I don't know what you've heard, but I can't even remember what happened."

His jaw clenched. "Right. That's convenient, isn't it?"

My chest was going to cave in, my breathing too shallow, my eyes stinging with too many unshed tears. "It's the truth."

"The truth? So you don't know if you got too drunk to say no? Huh? Did he rape you, then?"

I flinched once more, and he swallowed but didn't apologize for the harsh words.

"He didn't."

His hand raked through his hair in a vicious sweep. "Jesus Christ."

"I didn't mean—"

He snapped, growling, "Shut up and fuck off."

"No, you can't just throw me out. Aren't we worth more than a drunk mistake? A misunderstanding?"

Callum grabbed his phone, planting it in front of my face for me to see a picture of myself. In bed. With Mike. I looked naked even though I'd woken up with my strapless bra still on. My panties, though, were nowhere to be found. My head was on Mike's chest, and his arm was around my waist. "How the hell is that a misunderstanding?"

I swallowed over my panic; I wouldn't let it win just yet. "It's not. But it's also just a picture, Callum."

"A very telling picture, wouldn't you agree?"

"Who sent it to you?"

A bitter laugh left him. "Not that it matters, but it just so happens that your new friend did."

The pounding of my heart stalled, faltering as the blows seemed to never end.

"Callum," my voice wavered, "I don't know what happened, all of what we did exactly, but—"

"I think it's pretty obvious, don't you?" he sneered. "And you've hardly denied it."

"Because I know I messed up. We ..." I paused. The disgust and confusion in that piercing gaze made me want to shrink into the corner of the room. "I can fix this."

He shook his head. "You really can't."

I took a step toward him. "I can, just—"

“I don’t even want to fucking look at you!” he roared, forcing me back three steps. My throat swelled as I watched his chest heave, and he scrubbed his hands down his face roughly. “There’s no coming back from something like this. Please, I mean it, just get out of my sight.”

He wasn’t my Callum anymore. My husband or my friend. No, in a matter of hours, we were swept back in time to a place where he was filled with nothing but animosity and distrust all over again.

And looking into his dark eyes, the tension rolling off him like a brewing thunderstorm, it became obvious that he’d made up his mind. Nothing I said or did would change it.

Not tonight.

“I’ll sleep on the couch.” I walked over to my side of the bed, grabbing a pillow and keeping my eyes trained anywhere but on him as I strode out of the room.



Sleep, something I easily fell into before arriving at Gray Springs, was elusive.

My alarm rang once before I turned it off, eyes crusted with tears and my head throbbing.

Callum had left for practice an hour and a half ago. I’d heard him in the kitchen briefly before the door slammed shut.

I got up, staring at the boxes, the huge TV, my magazines that were once scattered all over the coffee table now in a pile in the foyer.

He didn’t waste any time.

I showered and collected miscellaneous items from our bedroom that he’d forgotten in his haste to add with my stuff. Including his birthday present, which he never got around to opening.

If he wanted me gone, fine. There was little I could do about that right now. Hopefully, with a bit of time, he’d realize I never set out to

intentionally hurt him or ruin us. That it was all a giant mistake.

Opening my nightstand drawer, I pulled out the picture I'd had framed after we'd gotten married. The one that woman had taken for us where we were smiling into one another's faces.

Happy. Whole. Complete.

He knew me. Knew my heart. He should know better than to think one drunken night could break what we have.

Resolved, I tucked the picture back into the drawer. We'd been careful not to tell anyone. No one knew but us.

Would this be the same? I wondered as I tried to mask my puffy eyes with some concealer. Would this be something our parents couldn't find out about?

Maybe I was clutching at straws, but Callum wouldn't want to face that kind of music.

I smiled the first real smile I'd smiled in days, quickly putting on some mascara before taking my makeup bag to one of the boxes out in the living room.

I poured myself some orange juice, then proceeded to make some calls.

I'd stay in a dorm. My parents might check my spending habits, and they'd see if I were leasing an apartment elsewhere or staying in a hotel for a prolonged period.

Luckily for me, a few girls in the dorms had a room to themselves. Unlucky for them, one of them would now be sharing with me until this mess got straightened out.

As I was putting the juice away, a large piece of printer paper stuck to the fridge snagged my attention. Words hurriedly scrawled across it in black marker said to be gone before he got home.

I sucked in a sharp breath, then I grabbed my purse and made my way to student housing.

EIGHTEEN



Renee

I skipped classes that day to finalize my housing and secure a room in a hotel five minutes away from campus. I paid in cash and ate a whole bag of pretzels and a small bag of strawberry licorice.

The tears tried to escape, but I wouldn't let them and did my best to push them back. I still had enough hope and enough shock left to desensitize myself for the most part.

For the most part.

They made silent tracks down my cheeks while I was sleeping. I woke to find my cheeks damp and my nose blocked, feeling betrayed by my own body.

I didn't give my heart permission to grieve. So it took what it needed when I wasn't able to stop it.

The next morning, I got a call saying a dorm room had been arranged, but I went to class. Even though it was the last thing I felt like doing, I couldn't let this ruin everything.

Afterward, I began the awesome task of carting my boxes from the back of my Rover up three flights of stairs.

I'd never once regretted my clothing addiction or my collection of purses and shoes I needed to match any outfit I wore until that afternoon.

Sweating and breathing embarrassingly hard, I dumped all my boxes outside the room closest to the stairs and found parking for

my car in a small lot behind the dorms.

I was brushing my hair back from my face and preparing to knock when the door opened, and a blonde poked her head out. "Oh."

"Hi, looks like I'm your new roommate."

She looked less than pleased, and I couldn't blame her. It'd been well over a month since classes had started, which I found to be frightening, and she probably thought she was in the clear on the roommate front.

How could a matter of weeks change everything? No, not weeks. One night.

Edging back into the room, she offered a weak smile. "I'm Hannah. I guess it'll be cool to have someone to hang with."

Hang with.

I was done making new friends, but I didn't have the energy, nor the inclination to share that with Hannah. "I like your hair," I said, my tone bland as I stepped by her and glanced around the shoebox-size room.

It was as big as my walk-in closet back home. But it was clean with minimal cosmetics and books lying around. Two beds were on opposite sides of the room with nightstands next to them. A desk sat by the window, and two small dressers near the ends of the beds. I'd be lucky if my shoe collection alone fit inside the tiny wooden ensemble.

I sighed, thinking I might have to keep a few boxes in my car for the time being, then unpacked as much as I could fit into the drawers and the wardrobe. An old wardrobe I had to share with Hannah, who'd already filled most of it and made lots of huffing noises when I started pushing her things to one side.

She sat on the bed, flipping through a magazine the whole time, so I didn't know what else she expected me to do.

"Oh, my God. Is that last summer's Diane Pearl?" Hannah gasped, finally getting off her bed and snatching the wedged heel from my hand to inspect it from various angles.

"This past summer, yes. And aren't they to die for?"

"Yes," she said with emphasis. "Like I'm for real dying, it's actually hard to breathe." She carefully set the shoe on her pink duvet, fanning her face with her hands.

I tried not to snort, taking the last set of heels out and carefully situating them on top of the rest. There was no room, so I had to stack them on top of one another on the bottom of the wardrobe. I prayed they wouldn't get scuff marks.

"You know what? I think I won't mind having you here. We can totally swap shoes," Hannah said, passing the wedge back to me.

I looked at her side of the wardrobe, noticing a lot of her clothes and shoes were out of season but still gorgeous. "Perhaps," I said tightly.

I'd just been dumped by my boyfriend of almost three years, husband of three months, for a crime I never would've dreamed I'd commit, and there I was ... talking about footwear instead of my weeping heart.

Priorities.

Not that I would anyway. It was bad enough that most of campus knew, and the fact that this girl hadn't mentioned anything was a huge relief.

Hannah rambled on about all my clothes, shoes, and the many places in the world she'd love to visit for their fashion.

Safe. Already, I knew this girl's inner workings, watched her mannerisms, and deemed her safe. It was scarily easy to assess a person's personality sometimes, especially when they had no qualms about laying it all out in the open for the world to dissect.

There'd be no more Kristys. No more Hildas.

Just me, myself, and I until I found a way to get my husband back.

After braving the communal bathroom for a shower, I fell asleep thinking of runways instead of dark eyes filled with betrayal.

For that, I was thankful for this new non-friend.



Three days passed before I finally thought he might be willing to speak with me.

Although I'd soon realize three years might not be long enough.

People mess up all the time, I reminded myself as I waited outside the science building, my Prada sunglasses doing nothing to keep the glare from watering my eyes.

I wouldn't just give up and fade out of his life. We'd weathered our families' drama and the gossip mongers of high school—we were us. I was his wife. We'd taken vows.

Vows that I'd broken.

My tongue felt thick as the doors opened, and students came rushing out. He didn't see me at first, his head was down, eyes pinned on his phone. I waited until he hit the white pebbled path, then stood.

He saw me then, tucking his phone into his pocket as he stared at me. Only a small patch of grass and rocks separated us, and I could still see it. The dark shadows beneath his eyes, and the stiffness to his shoulders.

He started walking, and I followed. Followed him all the way to the outskirts of campus where he stopped at the set of lights to cross the street to our apartment building.

His apartment building.

I made it across before he whirled on me, his voice deceptively aloof. "Should've known you wouldn't end up sleeping in your car. Far too resourceful for that."

Squaring my shoulders, I tried to smile but couldn't. "A little cramped." This wasn't permanent, but still, I wanted to see if I could scare him a little. "I moved into a dorm room."

He blinked slowly, then nodded once. "Good, enjoy."

My mouth gaped as he walked toward the entrance of the building. "Callum, wait."

He didn't, so I scurried over the pavement, almost tripping in my haste to stop him from reaching the doors. From disappearing out of my line of vision. "Please," I said.

He sighed. "I'd rather not."

I moved in front of him. "I'm sorry. I never meant to ... do something like that. Ever."

He seemed to be biting his cheek, making those stark cheekbones draw my gaze. I missed him. It'd only been days, but I missed him so much my body swayed as my eyes soaked in his features.

"But you did it anyway."

"I'm ..."

"Sorry?" He laughed a cold laugh. "I bet you are. But you're not understanding. Your words are wasted here. We're done."

"We're not."

His brows shot up, and he shook his head as he stepped closer to hiss, "We. Are. Fucking. Done."

Grappling for something to say, anything to say, I came up short. "We're married, Callum."

"People get married and divorced all the time. I'll see that that's taken care of. Now run along already." His eyes roamed over me from head to toe, his jaw working overtime. "Just looking at you makes me feel sick."

"Don't," I wheezed out, eyes smarting. "Don't say those things or act like this."

I knew better than to think this was him. He was lashing out, which was understandable.

"You'll have to excuse me for finding it a little too hard not to hate you after what you've done."

"You don't mean—"

"Enough." The word cut through the air, through me, like a serrated knife. "Forget getting a fucking dorm room, you should leave Gray Springs."

A tremor ran through my hands, a single tear escaping as he disappeared inside the tinted glass doors.

NINETEEN



Callum

Spending your life shrouded in the finest things this world has to offer always comes with a price. My debt was now paid.

Lust, lies, secrets, deceit. Our world was full of it all.

All except for those elusive things that couldn't be bought.

Trust.

You couldn't unfold something that'd been scrunched into an unrecognizable ball and doused in super glue. It would never look the same, no matter how much you longed for it to.

There'd be creases where there were once smooth edges. Tears where something once fit together so seamlessly. Let's not forget the fear that with the slightest wrong move, it'd become ruined all over again.

No, trust was something I'd always thought a fanciful notion. The idea that you could single-handedly rely on someone else without hesitation and without a thought was uncanny.

And there was nothing like being reminded that I'd been right, and from a very young age at that. Perhaps that was why I'd given in to the urge to go after something I couldn't seem to shake off. Because for a life-changing moment, I'd thought I was just young and stubborn, and that maybe it was wrong not to take chances. Not to live and learn to love.

It was fun while it lasted, but that fun now left a stain I couldn't seem to wipe off.

“Welsh, spot O’Rourke.”

At Coach’s command, I snapped out of my thoughts, dropping my weights to the ground and staring daggers at the back of his bald head.

“I’ve got lunges to do,” I protested. Anything not to have to go near the slime that had infested my life.

“Think I give a crap? He’s got no one to spot him, so just do it already.” He stormed over to the other side of the gym, taking notes on his clipboard as he watched Paul and Quinn.

I’d managed to avoid the asshole. I knew that if I got too close to him, I’d likely rip his head clean off and stomp on it.

If Renee thought she’d seen some of my wrath, she’d think herself lucky if she knew of the rage I felt when I looked at Mike.

He’d been my friend since grade school. Our mothers on the same charity committees and school fundraising boards. He’d eaten a bug sandwich I’d made in the sandbox outside in the fourth grade. A test I’d made him take if he wanted to be worthy enough to be my friend.

He’d taken two bites before hurling into the sandbox, other kids watching on with laughter ringing through the springtime air. He thought he’d failed and almost started crying. The fact he’d even done what I’d asked had meant he hadn’t failed, and we’d been best friends ever since.

He’d always been too soft for his own good, which made some tiny part of me worry for him. You didn’t survive in our world without hardening your heart to a certain degree.

But maybe it was the soft ones you had to look out for in the end.

“Better do as he said, man,” Toby said beside me. “I’d do it for you, but ...” he trailed off, shrugging and bending to tie his sneaker.

But Coach would get suspicious and probably try to pull me and Mike into the same room for some fucked-up intervention. He didn’t like anything messing with the player’s heads. You left your shit off the field, and you had each other’s backs.

Cursing colorfully beneath my breath, I walked over to where Mike was adjusting the weights on the bench press.

Satisfied, he laid down, startling when he saw me looming over him. “Cal...”

“Don’t talk. Lift or fuck off and do something else.”

Mike swallowed but did as I said as I got into position. Never one to argue, but apparently one to sneak into bed with someone’s wife.

My fists clenched as I watched him struggle, beads of sweat rolling down his temples. Did he break a sweat when he fucked my wife? Did he even think about me when he took advantage of someone who didn’t belong to him?

I belong with you, not to you.

My teeth grinded, toes curling so hard in my sneakers that an ache shot through my feet. It was a nice distraction from the one that resided in my chest. I doubted that’d ever fucking leave.

“Cal, talk to me,” Mike panted between lifts.

“You really don’t want that.”

A push of breath, his arms shaking as he lifted again. “I do. I fucked up—”

“You’re saying you admit to fucking ...” I swallowed, eyes closing briefly before I rasped, “Renee?”

His eyes shuttered. “We were drunk.”

I stepped back, rage funneling through me and rendering me breathless, blind, as Mike struggled to make the tenth rep. “Shit, help.”

I could hardly see him, hardly place where I was. Something had filmed over my eyes; my ears filled with the thunderous noise of my heartbeat.

One of the guys cursed, then Burrows was running over and lifting the weights back onto the bar. Burrows turned on me, my vision clearing enough to see Mike staring at me in horror. “The fuck, man?” Burrows glared.

I said nothing, grabbed my bag, and stalked out of the gym. Coach called after me, but I ignored him, jumped into my Lexus, and sped out of the lot.

Parked in the dark, abandoned parking garage of our ... *my* apartment building, I turned the ignition off and stared at the brick wall in front of me. My hand shook as I lifted it to my mouth and bit down on it.

They’d wrecked me. Annihilated any shred of what once was.

I belong with you, and you only.

Vows were useless words. They meant nothing, especially not to her.

She was a liar. A beautiful, manipulative liar. Deep down, I'd always known what she was capable of. I just never thought she'd set her sights on destroying me.

A ragged breath left me, warming my fist as my teeth drew blood. It was squeezing, this *thing* in my chest. Wrung out, twisted, and it hurt so much I couldn't breathe.

My cheeks grew wet. My breathing labored, grunting pants as I tried to sniff back the evidence of what they'd done.

I didn't know how long I sat there, trying to control the uncontrollable. It could've been minutes or hours. I was underground, no light to be seen than that of the rows of florescent ones hanging from the ceiling outside the garages.

Swiping at my face, I hung my head.

I couldn't do this, yet, at the same time, I couldn't see a way out of *this*. Falling in love changed you bit by bit in a way you didn't realize until that love had left you suffocating in the remaining pieces of who you once were.

If this was what I had to live with, what I had to endure ... I was afraid it'd kill me slowly.

I lifted my head, staring at that same brick wall, taking note of the cement holding all the bricks together. Fortifying the very foundation of this building.

Strength. How did you find it when there was nothing to hold you together, to provide you with any ounce of real support?

You'd be a fox.

Never cross the fox.

In the days since, I think it was the first memory I'd had that didn't threaten to send me buckling over.

I sniffed, opening my door as my lips twitched.

Never cross the fox indeed.

TWENTY



Renee

“But it’s your birthday tomorrow,” my mother whined. “If that’s not a good enough excuse to come shopping with me, then I don’t know what is.”

I was correct in my assumption that Callum wouldn’t blab about our business to our parents. At least, he hadn’t yet. “I know, but with finals approaching, I need to study.”

I listened to her sigh and then rant about some new member on one of the committees she ran before I was finally able to hang up the phone.

“We should hit that party down on Frankston tonight,” Hannah said, filing her nails at the desk by the window.

I wished she wouldn’t, as I actually liked to use the desk to study. Something Hannah never seemed too invested in.

Phone still in hand, I pondered her question as I started flicking through Pinterest for new ideas. It’d been weeks since I’d sewn anything. Not even a glance at my box of half-finished cross-stitches that were living in the trunk of my car could rouse any interest.

“Who’s going?” I asked, closing the app and sitting up on my bed. I didn’t deign to decorate my side of the room. It was only temporary, so there wasn’t much point.

After inspecting her nails, Hannah started counting off groups on her fingers. “The lacrosse team, the football team, the—”

“Okay.” I cut her off, determination firing through me as I stood. “I’m in.”

I was zipping up my lavender tunic dress and slipping my feet into my white peep-toe heels when she finally asked, “So did you really cheat on your boyfriend with his best friend?”

Hannah fluffed her blond locks, swiping a finger beneath her eye as she stared at her reflection.

“I thought you’d never ask,” I muttered dryly as I checked my clutch to make sure I had cash in there.

“I’ve wanted to. It was all anyone talked about for the whole week you moved in.”

With a clang, I snapped my clutch closed. “So why didn’t you?”

Hannah shrugged, peeling a cardigan off the hanger in the wardrobe. “You seemed all mopey and stuff. You still kind of do. No offense.”

My brows rose, but I kept my mouth shut. Mopey. The last thing I ever wanted to be called was *mopey*. If I thought keeping my chin up and wearing my favorite shade of red could hide what was simmering beneath, I was wrong.

Nothing to be done about it now but try to do better, I supposed.

“It doesn’t matter; it’ll all fix itself eventually.”

“Uh-huh,” Hannah murmured, sounding unconvinced.

I didn’t let that affect me. I couldn’t.

I’d learned many hard lessons since arriving at Gray Springs. But the one that stood out with horrifying clarity was that I never realized how much of myself I’d given away. Not until it became clear that my survival hinged on getting her back.

And the key to that girl was him.

But when we reached the frat house, ivy crawling all over the exterior like a leafy serpent, and walked inside, I wondered if I could ever truly stop this from affecting me.

He was there, standing around the pool table with a few guys I didn’t recognize, and a girl beside him.

My heart bounced into my stomach, the wind momentarily knocked out of me.

It never occurred to me that he’d do this. That he might seek retribution in a way that shook any belief I had.

Yet he was doing just that.

“Look, it’s your ex, right?” one of the guys said, followed by laughter as they all turned and saw me standing in the hallway.

Callum’s eyes locked on mine, and I tried; with everything in me, I tried to beg him with one look not to destroy me. I should’ve known it would only give him further fuel to do just that.

He looked down at the girl, who was biting her nail, glancing warily at me and then back at Callum. “She doesn’t matter anymore, don’t worry.”

Despite the music and the distance, his words traveled. Or maybe it was just my ability to read his lips, his thoughts, as though I’d lived inside him for far too long.

“Prove it,” one of the guys said with a snicker.

Callum sent a glare his way. The guy merely shrugged, sipping from a plastic cup.

“I don’t need to prove shit.” But his arm wrapped around the girl, and he walked her over to the far side of the room, taking a seat with her on a couch tucked in the corner.

“Hey, there you are. This beer is warm. Gross, but here,” Hannah said, passing me a cup.

I took it even though I knew I wouldn’t drink it. I doubted I’d ever drink again, then glanced back at Callum.

His gaze was a dare, one that told me to go right ahead and make a mess of myself again.

I looked down at the beer, then lifted my eyes to Callum before tipping the contents of the cup behind me into a small hipster looking cacti that sat on a shelf in the wall. Without sparing him another glance, I followed Hannah.

When we reached the kitchen, I feigned disgust, pretending to spit the beer out. “Ew.” I turned on the tap, tipping the empty cup upside down over the sink. “That’s so bad.”

Just the scent of it was enough to transport me back to a night that started out not so differently from this one. My stomach curdled.

Hannah laughed, linking her arm through mine and dragging me through the large house and up the stairs. “Wanna get high instead?”

“No, thanks. But you’re welcome to.” I eyed the living area upstairs, where only a few people sat around, playing video games,

drinking, and talking. "I'll hang out here for a while."

"Okay, I'll be back in a few."

Spying an empty futon in the corner, I took a seat on it, not wanting to invite conversation. I'd wait until Hannah came back, then I'd leave. My skin felt like it was tingling, itching, knowing I was sitting above the room Callum was in with another girl. Not knowing what he was doing had my legs crossing and uncrossing, and my hands fidgeting with the skirt of my dress.

Quit slouching and don't fidget. Chin up, shoulders back, smile on.

I'd never been so grateful for my mother's nagging. Or the drama classes I'd taken through school. I might not have been anything special, but I knew how to fake it enough until I hopefully made it.

I don't need to know what he's doing, I tried to tell myself.

But I knew all too well that not knowing was worse. I needed facts, needed to quell the swirling of my thoughts.

"Renee?" Oh, shit.

Mike approached with a tentative smile on his face and leaned against the wall next to where I was sitting. My hands shook. I didn't want to be sitting when he was standing over me. I'd made myself vulnerable enough around him for one lifetime.

I stood. "Can I help you?"

He frowned, looking down at his beer for a second before returning his blue eyes to me. "I just ..."

"Let me guess, Callum is still friends with you, but I've been kicked to the curb, and you want to apologize." I twisted my lips, pretending to think about it. "Don't waste your breath. Apology not accepted."

I went to move around him when he gently grabbed my bicep. "He hates me, too."

"Then why are you here? Talking to me?"

His lip sandwiched between his teeth, he took his time staring at me before saying, "Because I was hoping you might be, so I could talk to you."

I shook my head, and his grip on my arm as I thought about what I could do with this. "You should be talking to him and straightening this mess out."

Mike licked his lips, gaze darting to the ground a second.

“You haven’t even tried, have you?” I all but screeched.

“I have, but it’s not that simple.”

“You’re damn right it’s not. I can’t even remember what happened, Mike.” I paused to gather some composure. “Tell me, please. Tell me exactly what happened.”

Laughter rose from the floor below us, cheering and hooting following it, as Mike’s eyes dug into mine. “Does it really need explaining, Renee? I’m sorry, but I don’t regret—”

“Stop.” I closed my eyes, confusion clouding everything I wanted to say, but it was pointless. Looking at him again, disgust swept over me. Not for him, but at how we’d wound up here. All three of us.

An idea formed then. As ludicrous and wrong as it was, I was desperate, and I wasn’t afraid to show it when I grabbed his arm and said, “You could talk to him, tell him nothing happened, that, I don’t know, someone must have photoshopped the image. Something. Anything to fix this.”

“Renee,” Mike whispered, his hand rising to cup my cheek. “I *have* spoken to him.”

I swallowed, feeling stupid. “You didn’t even try to deny it, did you?” My voice cracked, and my eyes stung with the threat of tears when Mike just stared at me, lips pinched tight. “Why?” I hissed.

He hissed back, “You know why.”

“No,” I said with a humorless laugh. “I really don’t. This goes beyond—”

“Because I love you.” The blue of his eyes darkened, and I’d never seen his jaw harden quite like that. Never heard his voice sound so rough.

“You don’t.”

“I do,” he said vehemently. “And because I do, I’d try to fix it, I swear, but I’ve already made it worse.”

“You don’t love me,” I said, stunned.

His hold on my cheek tightened. “Renee.”

“No, you don’t. You simply want what you can’t—”

“This looks cozy.”

Callum’s voice reached into my chest and squeezed. I clenched my eyes shut, screaming at myself in my head when I thought about

how this must look. Bad, with barely enough space for another body to slide between Mike's and my own, and his hand on my cheek, really bad.

I turned, Mike's hand falling away as I looked at Callum.

"It's not—"

"What it looks like?" He chuckled, eyes lighting with intoxication and disbelief. "Sure." With a nod at Mike, he said, "You already know this one is bound to stray, so good luck keeping a leash on her."

With that, he stalked down the hall to the stairs, leaving me there with a useless heart that wouldn't stop its incessant whining.

"Renee, he's just hurt."

"You don't think I know that?" I spat at Mike, then drew in a long breath. "Just ... stay away from me."

I tried to ignore the pain that flickered over his face at my words and walked to the stairs. Hannah was walking up them as I descended. "I'm going back to the dorm," I told her.

"Okay, bye," she said, continuing up the stairs.

I didn't want friends, and I tried to remind myself of that as her nonchalance shocked me. It shouldn't; no one really gave a damn about anyone but themselves.

It was my own fault for continuing to think that someone could be different from all the rest. I should've known we're all fickle, selfish creatures better than anyone by now.

I reached the bottom of the stairs when I saw Callum again. He was at the end of the hall, and the brunette he was with earlier plastered against the wall as their hands roamed and their mouths no doubt met.

I watched, making myself endure the torture, for it needed to be witnessed. To sink inside my defiant brain and send a message to my heart. If someone has control over your heart, the worst thing you could do was make an enemy out of them.

And like a fool, I had.

He lifted her, her ankles crossing above his ass and causing one of her shoes to fall off. She broke away from him with a giggle, then saw me standing there.

She whispered something to Callum, and his back straightened. Then, with a wink in my direction, he stalked down the hall to where

the bedrooms were with her still attached to him.

TWENTY-ONE



Renee

Christmas arrived. It was one thing not to go home for Thanksgiving, but there was no way I could skip Christmas without someone knowing something was up.

My mother was beside herself that I'd chosen to volunteer at a homeless shelter rather than go home and spend time with them.

I hadn't really planned on volunteering, but after I'd used it as an excuse, guilt nagged at me. And so I actually did. Not at a homeless shelter, but at a soup kitchen near campus.

Close enough.

Callum had been having fun, of that I was sure. Not only had he made a habit of frequenting more parties since our split, but he'd made quite a name for himself among the female population at Gray Springs.

"Fox indeed," I'd murmured, watching him grin that devious grin of his at a lovely little blonde one morning after everyone had returned from Thanksgiving break.

He could do what he wanted. There was no way for me to stop him. At this rate, I doubted anything could. And so after that first night of drowning my pillow in tears, I refused to let myself cry like that again.

He was just fucking them to fill the void I'd left. The hurt I'd inflicted. Because he'd loved me. And I had to believe this was his

way of coping. It was too dangerous to think of it as anything else.

The roads were wet, the sky gray and filled with fat clouds that hovered ominously as I drove into town. Small houses and modest yards soon gave way to sprawling blocks of land, shrouded in trees, or shaved fancy hedges to show off the expanse of their loaded bank accounts.

I pulled into the drive, my heart leaping at the sight of the white two-story home I never thought I'd miss so much. My mother raced out, barely waiting until I'd parked to draw me into a hug and then slapped at my upper arm. "You're staying right here for Christmas." When I laughed, her lips puckered. "I'm serious. It's been so boring."

"Lovely to see you too." I got my stuff out of the trunk, quickly closing it when I realized some of my boxes were still in there. Shit. I'd have to find a storage place where I could pay in cash.

"Your father is the worst, working even more than he used to. I need a vacation at some point."

"I'm sure he does, too." I hefted my leather mustard tote to the porch, then returned for my handbag.

"I'm considering getting a job, that's how bored I am."

"Yeah? What do you want to do?"

"Is that all you brought?" she asked, scrutinizing my bags.

I couldn't tell her that I didn't need to pack any more since some of my belongings lived in my car on a permanent basis. "Yes, I have stuff here still."

"Oh, right." She waved a hand, then grabbed my handbag and walked with me inside the house. "And I don't know what I'd do."

"There's a nice nursing home in town," I said, dropping my bag at the base of the stairs. "You should volunteer there; they're probably always looking."

"No. Old people can get smelly."

I took my handbag from her. "So can young people."

Her lips twisted as though she didn't believe me. "Enough about that. Did you buy me something amazing?"

I decided I'd already had enough of her company and grabbed my tote to head upstairs with. "Maybe. You'll have to wait and see."

"Where are you going? We need to have tea and gossip."

"Later, I want to unpack and get settled first."

“Bo-ring,” she sang, her heels clacking on the floor as she wandered off.

Had anyone been around to hear it, the sigh that left me when I stepped inside my room was almost embarrassing. I dumped my bags by the wall, then walked over to my desk where my sewing machine once sat.

Now it was in a box under my bed in my dorm room. Collecting cobwebs, no doubt.

My bed was made as though I'd never left. The rainbow netting peeled back to the posts and the pillows all nestled together on the ruffled peach duvet. My unicorn, the one Callum won for me, sitting front and center.

Stepping up onto the dais, I ran my hand over the satin material, scrunching my fingers over the ruffled frills when I reached them. I sat down, looked over at my bookshelves, and almost let the sorrow back in when I saw a *Sailor Moon* comic sitting where Callum had last left it out on the shelf.

Mom must have ordered our cleaner to dust around it. She could get sentimental like that.

Still, I couldn't tell them, and I wondered if Callum felt the same. It was one thing for them to want us together in theory and another to actually take it a step further and get married.

If they found out we'd fallen apart, especially in the way that we had, they'd find out everything.

There was no way I could deal with that. Not right now.



“I’ve never liked eggnog. It’s so weird.”

“Agreed,” I said into my tea as we sat around the fire in the sitting room.

My father was responding to emails as my mother sorted through all the jewelry she'd received, placing it carefully into her new jewelry

box.

The diamond earrings I'd gotten her had made her clap and squeal like she was a kid again.

People could say what they wanted about her, and I'd likely agree, but I loved her. Something that had become more apparent since I'd gotten home three days ago. She could make me smile with an ease I'd never encountered before. My father too, I guessed from watching the way he watched her open her gifts with such obvious delight.

"No eggnog will be served. I've declared it."

"I like eggnog," Dad said, eyes steadfast on his phone.

Mom stabbed a finger at him. "Not once have I seen you drink it."

He shrugged. "But if the option to have it is removed, I'll probably want it."

My mother looked at me with a brow poised high. "Such is the way with men."

I laughed into my tea, wrapping my hands tight around my mug as I stared at my gifts lined up in front of me on the floor.

New cross-stitches, albums to store my designs, bundles of material, stationery, a necklace, ribbons and bows, and the list goes on.

"Kian said they'll be here for lunch, too, instead of dinner," my dad called as Mom went to leave the room.

"Damon, a little more warning would be nice."

"Why?"

Mom huffed. "Because I haven't washed my hair since yesterday morning, and this room is a mess."

"It's Christmas," my dad said, looking up from his phone. "And you always look beautiful, you know that."

Mom blushed, her protests dead and buried as she happily flitted out of the room. Dad winked at me, then returned his attention to his phone.

I started cleaning up the wrapping paper, getting far too much satisfaction from scrunching it into a ball and tossing it all onto one couch.

"How are classes going?" Dad asked.

“Well,” I said, bending to dig out a rogue piece of paper that laid half hidden beneath an armchair.

“You’re taking theatre?”

“I am,” I said. I stacked Mom’s things on the coffee table, then started gathering mine to take to my room.

“You don’t have to. You know that, right?” His voice was low, but it still shocked me.

“What?”

He actually rolled his eyes. “We both know you didn’t join drama clubs for the reasons your mother wished you would.”

“I ...” A small laugh slipped free. “But then, I don’t know what else I should do.”

Dad put his phone down, rising from the couch and collecting his presents. Mostly gift cards to various golfing stores, a new watch, some ties, and new dress shirts. “You’ve always known what you wanted to do.”

I had. “Just because you love something doesn’t necessarily mean you need to make it your career, though, does it?”

He stopped moving then, turning to me with eyes much greener than my own. “You’re afraid you won’t love it then. Is that it?”

I shrugged.

“I don’t love what I do, but I do love one thing.” He smiled, no need to say anything further.

Smirking, I said it for him. “Money.”

He chuckled me under the chin. “You have time. But pretty soon, you’ll need to spend it doing the right things and thinking long-term.”

After he’d left the room, I pondered his words for the next few minutes until I remembered what he’d said earlier.

Callum would be here soon. Or maybe he wouldn’t bother showing. I hoped he did. Not only for selfish reasons, but also to ensure our parents stayed in the dark.

I hadn’t gone near him in weeks, only looked on from afar. Preservation had me slinking around like a fool. It was one thing to know what he was doing, but another entirely to see it all the time.

I wasn’t sure if I could handle it. Seeing him today, or any day, just yet.

Yet I wasn't sure if I could handle the alternative, either. The one where he didn't show up, potentially sending our worlds tumbling into further chaos.



A text came through right before they were due to arrive, and my hands shook as I opened it. It'd been too long since I'd seen his name flash on the screen of my phone.

Callum: Are we playing pretend?

Me: If you want.

Callum: Oh, I want. I get the best of both worlds then, don't I?

I scowled at the message and another one followed shortly after.

Callum: ... or should I say best and worst.

Me: Just don't do anything stupid.

Callum: So many things I could say to that. See you soon, Mouse.

I tossed my phone, and it landed on my nightstand with a clatter as I stalked to my bathroom.

If he wanted to play games, he'd get a game.

I dressed in a skintight red dress, paired it with sheer black thigh-highs, then stepped into my black heeled boots. Red lipstick would probably have been too much, but after I shouldered on my faux fur shrug, I put it on anyway.

Familiar with my eccentric fashion choices over the years, my parents said nothing about my ensemble. Though my father did say that I might get cold. I'd merely shrugged, wanting to tell him that I was used to the cold by now.

They arrived five minutes before we were due to sit down and eat.

No one cared about their tardiness, especially not me when I caught sight of Callum. Dressed in black slacks and a button-down blue shirt, he was ever the good son when requested of him. The top two buttons were undone, exposing a tantalizing taste of his sun-bronzed skin. I'd learned long ago that hours of training helped him maintain a year-round tan.

As everyone else exchanged greetings, he stalked toward me, his steps faltering as his eyes roamed my body.

My lips tilted, and my blood ignited when I realized I could touch him. I could touch him, and he couldn't stop me. Not here, and not after we'd both agreed to this.

It seemed he'd realized my thoughts a second before I pounced, his jaw clenching before he forced his most aristocratic smile into place. "Mouse," he breathed the word as my hands slid up his chest and righted his already straight collar.

I didn't even say hello, just grinned, watching his eyes narrow before I lifted to my toes and caught his full bottom lip between mine. He stiffened beneath my hands, then his own moved to my waist, holding me.

He was holding me. I wanted to sing it to the world, but instead, I gently moved my lips over his, wiping at them afterward to remove lipstick that wasn't there.

Our mothers were cackling over something, our fathers busy talking as they walked farther into the house. I took his hand. "Come, I have something for you."

"You really shouldn't have," he said between his teeth as I stopped in the sitting room and knelt beneath the gigantic tree, making sure he got a nice view of my behind.

"I wanted to," I said, honesty coating my words as I handed his present to him. "It's actually your birthday present. You never opened

it.” His brows drew together as he watched me, but I smiled and nodded at it. “Go on, there’s no spiders. Promise.”

He huffed, lifting the lid and peering inside to the stack of comic books I’d been collecting since last Christmas.

“Renee,” he said, shutting the lid without even looking at them properly.

“What? Are they the wrong ones?” I’d done that in the past, as my knowledge of DC and Marvel only extended so far.

He shook his head, then turned, tossing the box on the couch before leaving the room.

My breath hitched as I looked at the discarded royal blue box and its gingham ribbon, the lid knocked off to the side from the impact.

I moved to the couch when I thought I had my emotions under control. Placing the lid back on, I took the box to my room where I took a few minutes to fan my face and remind myself that I’d be okay.

It was a stupid idea, anyway. I should’ve just thrown them out. As we’d gotten older, and he had the means to buy whatever he wanted, he started caring less about presents.

I couldn’t seem to get enough air into my lungs as we all sat down for lunch, our parents smiling and joking while I toyed with my food.

When everyone was almost done, Callum’s foot nudged mine beneath the table. I looked up, hoping my expression was blank.

“Eat,” he mouthed, eyeing my food and then our parents.

Right. Couldn’t have anyone asking questions.

I ate. The tender meat and slippery salad felt as though it’d get stuck in my throat from trying to force it down. I took small, measured sips of water, trying to wash them down.

“Callum says you two have one of the best places on campus,” Kian said, shoving a forkful of salad into his mouth and chewing as he waited for my response.

I took another sip of water to buy myself time. “We do, yes.” I glanced at Callum, who was staring intently at his food. “You can see most of Gray Springs from the floor-to-ceiling windows that surround half the apartment.”

Kian smiled at me, then at his son, nodding. "We'll have to visit. God, how time gets away from us. Before we know it, you'll be seniors, and we'll still be saying we need to visit."

I could see the panic in Callum's eyes as his head rose, but the rest of his face stayed neutral.

"We'd love to have you," I said, then changed the subject to the firm. "The new offices are still going well?"

"Oh, yes," Kian said, glancing at my father, who nodded, looking pleased that I'd asked.

"The one in Germany?"

My dad beamed. "Indeed, that one took a while to establish. But it's turning more than it's losing now."

I smiled, listening as he and Kian continued to tell me about the new software they'd incorporated, and their dreams of one day being able to step away a little more. The glances they shot Callum, especially Kian, couldn't be ignored. Yet Callum stayed quiet, resolute in his nonchalance. Or so he'd like them to believe.

"What are you two doing over the rest of break, then?" Mom asked, eyes swinging back and forth between me and Callum.

"Um," I started.

"We're kind of tired from finals, so we might spend a night or two here, then head back to rest."

"Already?" Lucinda's hand went to her pearls as she set her glass of wine down. "You need to stay a few days longer. We've missed you."

"Football," I said, rolling my eyes playfully. "Training starts back up in a few days. They don't give them a lot of downtime at Gray Springs."

My father nodded while Callum's shot him a look of disapproval. He ignored them as he set that dark gaze on me.

I looked down at my plate. "I'm beat. May I please be excused? I think I'm going to go read something mindless for a while."

My father waved his hand, my mother smiling when she saw Callum rise from the table too.

We both left the dining room to the sound of their hushed voices and then laughter.

"You're a fantastic liar."

At his cutting words, I paused halfway up the stairs, about to say something, then snapped my mouth shut.

He followed me into my room, the door closing behind him. “What, cat got your tongue?”

“No one has my tongue,” I said, pulling off my shrug before taking a seat at my desk to unzip my boots.

“Uh-huh.” Callum walked over to my bed, looking as though he was contemplating lying down on it, then started pacing the rug instead.

“You can go, you know.”

“Really? And have them think I didn’t want to see you? They might be self-indulged, but they’re not fools.”

I tugged my boots off. “Whatever. Use the back entrance and call a cab. I thought there’d be some people you might want to visit.”

Feet pausing on the rug, he grinned at me. “Ah, so now you bring it up.”

“When else was I supposed to?” I asked, standing. “All you do is ignore me, acting like I don’t exist when we both know you feel differently.”

Callum scratched at his head, a quiet laugh whispering out of him. “You think it’s a game?”

“It’s not?” I stepped closer, slowly, making sure his eyes caught every movement I made.

“You cheated on me, and we broke up. I can do whomever I want.”

My throat closed over. I swallowed harshly and blinked, a smile moving into place. “That’s fine.”

He squinted, hands sliding into his pockets. “It’s fine, is it?”

My finger found a button on his shirt, toying with it before dragging down his chest. “We both know what you’re doing.”

A hoarse laugh erupted from him. “Yes, fucking other women.” I flinched, and he caught my wrist. “Oh, no.” He feigned a distressed look that contradicted his scathing voice. “Does that sting? Does it make your conniving bitch heart shrivel up even more inside your chest?”

His ire, his arrogance—it tinged the very air I struggled to breathe as I stood before him, unwilling to cower. Staring up at him, I

fluttered my lashes. “Does it help? Fucking them? Or do you still think of me?” At his smirk, I continued softly, “Do you think of me every time you’re with them? When your eyes shut at night and you get the urge to slide your hand over and around your cock?”

He clucked his tongue, voice layered in warning. “Careful, Mini Mouse.”

My fingers curled, hearing the nickname. “Why?”

His eyes looked black as his jaw worked. “Because otherwise, I might just tell you how they moan over said cock.” His head lowered, warm breath stirring my hair. “How they clench tight around it when they come, whimpering like addicts chasing a high.”

My eyes shut, my voice a wisp. “Callum.”

“Though none of their cunts feel as wet, feel as tight, feel as fucking perfect as yours.”

Air flew into my lungs, and I exhaled raggedly before turning my head, our lips a breath apart. “You ...?”

“No.” His chuckle was dark, sinister. “I don’t want you, but I could have you if I did. Isn’t that right?”

“Go to hell,” I whispered, my heart sinking.

“Already been there. It’s not as bad as people say it is once you learn how to survive.” He pressed his lips to my cheek, inhaling deeply before dropping my wrist.

The door opened soundlessly, and then he was gone, his footsteps fading as he no doubt used the back entrance to leave.

TWENTY-TWO



Callum

After suffering through lunch the day after Christmas, I made my escape as soon as the cutlery hit the empty plates. My parents didn't ask questions, and I'd have been alarmed at how self-absorbed they really were if I didn't notice my dad eyeing me as I darted up from the table as soon as Renee's foot brushed mine beneath it.

The weeks stumbled by, gusts of biting January wind singed my cheeks as I pushed myself harder at training, curled into myself tighter when alone, and said nothing about how I really felt to anyone.

Valentine's Day arrived, and with it, a slew of smiles and wandering hands.

My brain urged my cock to life, to quit this weird hibernation it'd forced me into since Renee handed me those comic books at Christmastime. Since she said those fucking words that haunted me.

Do you think of me every time you're with them?

And I hadn't until she'd cursed me. They were an escape. All of them. A way to shut off my thoughts for a few hours and get a little fucking reprieve from the agony in my chest. The one that grew worse every time I locked eyes on those green ones or saw a flash of red hair.

Or had to look at my so-called friend.

"Welsh, wait up," Toby's voice sounded behind me.

Stopping outside my apartment building, I whirled around on the sidewalk as Toby tossed a coffee cup into a trash can and jogged over.

“Knew you lived in the fancy one, but the penthouse?” His eyes lit. “I won’t believe it till I see it.”

I sighed, shifting my bag over my shoulder. “Not in the mood. I have shit to do.”

He eyed me. “Oh yeah, like pretend you’re over your girlfriend while secretly jerking your gherkin over a pair of her panties that you keep hidden in your sock drawer?”

I felt my eyes bulge before I quickly plastered an annoyed scowl on my face. “Whatever.”

He followed me inside, our sneakers squeaking over the recently polished tiles.

In the elevator, I jabbed the button and held my key against the security scanner until the red light flashed. Toby whistled, but otherwise stayed quiet until we’d reached my apartment.

“Holy shit, dude.” His arms swung wide at his sides as he walked into the living area, his gym bag falling to the floor with a thump. “You live like a motherfucking king.”

“Uh-huh,” I said, leaving my bag in the small foyer and heading to the fridge. “Soda? Juice? Water?”

“Water, thanks.”

I got the jug out, pouring us two glasses as Toby perused the apartment. I tilted my glass back, swallowing the lot in three mouthfuls before putting the jug I’d usually just drink straight out of back into the fridge.

I’d gotten used to being here on my own, and Sally, a cleaner who I’d recently discovered liked giving head, came twice a week. Usually on my fingers after she dumped her cleaning shit at the door.

She never let me fuck her, which was strange, but given my hot and cold relationship with my equipment as of late, it was probably for the best. There’s nothing worse than not being able to get it up during sex. Especially when lips move faster than the speed of light. After one rather embarrassing incident, which I’d thankfully been able to pass off as being too drunk, I’d found it easier to feed myself lies via the form of hot mouths instead of foreign bodies.

I'd give up chasing the escape for a while if it weren't for the fact that it'd give Renee what she wanted. And she clearly didn't care about what I'd wanted when she'd opened her—

"I don't know if we can be friends anymore, man."

Thankful for the distraction, I left the kitchen to find Toby in the hall where I handed him his glass.

"Don't break my heart. You know it's sensitive."

He chuckled, gesturing to the framed poster of the Joker used in cinemas back in the eighties. "DC," he tsked, stabbing a finger at his chest. "Marvel man, right here."

My brows crinkled as I stepped back, kind of stupefied. Toby always gave off an air that said he didn't give a shit, the kind of guy girls knew was bad news with just a look at him.

This, however, was unexpected. "Well, well." I cracked my knuckles, backing up to my bedroom. "I've got something for you then, ex-friend."

I walked into my closet, ignoring the fact it was more than half empty, and opened the bottom drawer of a small chest of drawers.

What I saw when I opened it made my heart freeze.

An old photo of Renee from when we'd first started dating, her eyes bright as she smiled at the phone I was holding.

"She's beautiful, but I'm not looking to be on the receiving end of your death glares."

I pushed the photo away, clearing my throat as I grabbed the stack of comics beneath it.

Rising, I handed them to him. "Here, you can have them."

Toby's mouth snapped open, then shut a few times, eyes blinking down at the stack. "I can't take these." His gaze met mine. "They're worth a fortune."

"So sell them. I honestly don't care."

Renee had gotten them for me before she'd learned the difference between Marvel and DC.

"Sacrilege." Toby shook his head. "You can't sell these. They're priceless artifacts."

I laughed a real, honest to God laugh. And man, did it feel good.

Toby was watching me as we stepped back out into the living room. "You okay?"

I slumped onto my couch, grabbing the remote from the arm and flicking the TV on. "Yeah, I'm fine."

Toby hummed, carefully situating the comics on the coffee table before taking a seat on the opposite end. "I'm just saying, if it were my girlfriend who fucked up like that, I'd probably still be pretty messed up, too."

Wife. No one knew the extent of what we were, and somehow that made it so much harder to camouflage how I felt. "It was months ago. I've moved on."

"Fucking chicks is great." He stretched his legs out, crossing his ankles as I settled on ESPN. "But all anyone has to do is see the way you look at Mike, like you still want to kill him, and know that you haven't actually moved on."

I barely refrained from gritting my teeth. "There's no other way I can look at him."

He scoffed. "If you don't love her, then yeah, us guys are usually pretty good at getting over shit like that when no feelings are involved."

"If you say so."

Toby's feet swung side to side as he rubbed his brow. "You do know he said he didn't do anything?"

I twisted my head back. "Seriously?"

Toby nodded. "That's what he's told us." He paused, meeting my gaze. "But he hasn't told you that."

"Quite the fucking opposite, not that it'd matter anyway." I turned back to the TV, pondering, trying to figure out why ...

Toby beat me to it. "Probably so the rest of us don't alienate him any further than we already have."

The lingering anger roared, threatening to choke me if I opened my mouth again. So I didn't. Half an hour flew by, the game coming to an end as my eyes started to drift closed.

"I'll see myself out." Toby stood, grabbing the comic books. "And for what it's worth, you're allowed to be pissed about it still. I know I would be." He opened the door. "But maybe, if you can't let go, things can be fixed."

The door shut, trapping his words inside my apartment where they tormented me.

What she'd done was unfixable, not to mention what I'd done since then.

Something as broken as we were ... there was no repairing that.

TWENTY-THREE



Renee

Summer arrived, and with it, a whole new appreciation for soft pinks and creamy lilacs.

I double-checked my reflection, righting my cream dress before slipping on my lavender sandals.

After everything that'd happened, I was ridiculously behind with school and had spent the past few months holed up in my dorm room or the library, trying to catch up and make sure I didn't flunk finals. I couldn't allow that to happen if I wanted to veer in a different direction in the new school year.

My bedroom door opened, and my mother waltzed inside with a gasp. "I want that dress."

"You'll have to wait. I need it today."

Her nail tapped her chin before she held her finger up. "Wait."

Walking inside my closet to my coat rack, she pulled one of my white scarves free.

My eyes stung as she looped it around my hair, tying it in a bow to sit on the side of my head. "I haven't seen you in your bows since you arrived home last week."

And if I had it my way, she wouldn't. "I think I've outgrown them."

She tsked. "Nonsense. We're leaving in five minutes."

Summertime meant charity galas we couldn't use school as an excuse to talk our way out of. Though I wished Callum would leave

the excuse-making to me. I'd almost slipped when my mother had called me to ask how he was faring after the stomach bug that had kept us away from his dad's birthday. It would've been nice if he'd at least given me some warning, but I suppose that would've been too much to ask, considering he still acted like I was a ghost he needed to ignore on the rare occasion I got near him.

Today, Welsh Grant Holdings was holding a charity auction ran by our mothers and some of our fathers' colleagues' wives down by the lake. It felt like I'd been waiting for this since I drove back into town, wondering if Callum would text me about keeping the ruse up.

A part of me was terrified he didn't want to bother anymore. And not because our parents would find out, but because it was my last line of fire to him. I couldn't let it burn out.

There hadn't been as much talk of his philandering ways as there was before Christmas. I took that as a small win and let it fuel me toward the finish line of our freshman year.

Also known as the worst year of my life.

Dramatic, yes. Whatever.

We arrived with a half hour to spare, and my mother spent that time checking all the arrangements and decorations. If there was one thing she excelled at, besides spending money, it was organization. She was there at dawn this morning with the other volunteers, setting everything up before coming home to get ready.

"Val, darling, it looks fabulous," one of her friends said, air kissing her cheeks while clutching a glass of champagne.

I didn't need to check the time to know it was still late morning. Time and alcohol didn't much matter when it came to most of the women here. In fact, I was sure it was time that had most of them drinking.

I was next, kissing the air and giving sugary sweet hellos as more and more people flocked around us. All too soon, the auction was about to begin, and I still hadn't seen Callum.

Finally, as everyone settled into their seats and the auctioneer stood behind the podium, testing the mic, I saw him standing in the parking lot, a look of defiance etched on his face.

His father was heading for his seat, and I knew he'd likely just chewed Callum out for something he'd done wrong. Whether it was

for arriving late or something else, I didn't know. I was just relieved to see him there.

Ignoring the stare I could feel coming from my mother, I walked over to him. He met me in the middle, out of earshot of everyone, yet still close enough that we needed to plaster smiles on our faces.

Mine wasn't forced, but his looked as if it cost him severely to maneuver into place as his eyes looked anywhere but at mine.

"Were you late?"

He adjusted his shirt sleeves. "No, I just sat in the car for too long than is socially acceptable."

I nodded, reaching out to grab his hand. He let me. He couldn't not let me. My smile bloomed, and the effort it took him not to scowl at me was evident in his granite jaw.

"Wanna get out of here?"

His dry laugh made my heart falter. "Let's take a seat and get this over with."

We did, and I kept his hand in mine the whole time, fingers tracing the calluses. Some I knew from memory, and others were new enough to make my chest constrict. How many new memories was he making without me?

His hand was tense, as was his whole body next to mine, but he soon relaxed. If it weren't for the way he got up as soon as the auction came to an end, and everyone dispersed, looking for food and more beverages, then I would've actually believed he didn't mind it.

And maybe, he didn't. Not as much as he wished he did.

I watched, standing with my mother's group of chattering friends as he talked and laughed at all the right times with some of our fathers' clients.

When he made a move for the shoreline, I struck, making my excuses and keeping my shoulders back as I followed.

He kept walking, and soon, we were far enough away from the event that it was barely a blip on the horizon. My sandals were starting to rub against my skin, but I gritted my teeth against the pain, knowing that he knew I was following, yet he didn't stop me.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Go back. Your company isn't wanted."

He took a seat on a picnic table behind a smattering of overgrown trees. I took a seat next to him, making him sigh. "If you didn't want me here, you would've told me long before now."

"Don't talk."

"Why?"

"You really were the kid who asked why all the time, weren't you?"

I tilted a shoulder, heeling off my sandals with a slight wince. Callum cursed, picking up my foot to inspect it before he'd realized what he'd done.

He went to push it away when I rushed to say, "Please don't."

Eyes on mine for what seemed like the first time today, he said, "Been a while since someone touched you?"

I smirked, and his eyes darted to my lips. "Wouldn't you like to know." I looked down at his pants, noticing the way he was bulging against them. My hand snaked down, brushing over him. "You do know that you can't ignore me forever."

His chest heaved, rough fingers trailing up my ankle, higher and higher until it felt like I had no breath left to exhale in my lungs.

The skirt of my dress lifted, and our eyes stayed locked. "Do you still get wet thinking about me?" he asked. "Do you even get wet for them at all?"

My face grew warm, my breathing labored as he reached my panties and ran his finger down the center of me, rubbing over the material and then pressing.

He groaned at what he found, then I was on his lap, his hands unzipping his dress pants to free himself. "Put me inside you and don't make a fucking sound."

Shifting my panties to the side, I did as I was told, hardly believing this was happening. The tip of him entered, and I winced. It'd been too long, but he didn't know that and grabbed my hips, slamming me down on him and causing me to whimper.

He didn't care, and when my mouth sought his, he grabbed my face, stuffing it into his neck as he effortlessly moved me over him.

I didn't object or complain. Not when I was getting more of him at that moment than I'd had in months. His breath was heavy, blowing

my hair as his hands bruised my hips. Punishing. He was punishing me. But he was also giving me something.

Hope.

All was not lost if he couldn't touch me without wanting to fuck me.

And fuck me he did, lifting me up and down, milking himself in a heated rush.

The discomfort fled, leaving room for pleasure to roll down my spine. Quiet breaths sailed out of me, making him groan, and they only got louder the closer I came to falling into him completely.

He didn't let me.

He came, filling me with a cadence of curses that seemed to tear out of someplace dark inside him. His grip on my hips loosened, then he lifted me off him, deposited me on the table, and got up, zipping his pants as he walked away.

I watched him go, tempted to slip my hand beneath my panties to finish myself off.

Callum might've been an egotistical prick, but when he actually cared, it showed.

He was trying to show me he didn't care.

I stood, fixing my dress and inhaling deeply as he became a dark speck on the shoreline, moving farther and farther out of reach. All the while, he was still dripping down my thigh.

Tears pricked my eyes, but I ignored them, plucking my scarf from my head and using it to clean myself as best I could.

Letting the material fall through my fingers, it flew toward the water as I slipped my sandals on and headed back.

"Where'd you go?" my dad asked when I found them near the makeshift stage.

Mom slapped his arm. "Leave her be. You were young once."

He scowled at my appearance, and I quickly smoothed my hands over my hair, a wave of embarrassment slamming into me.

"Young, but not stupid."

I frowned, feeling the sting of his words, but I refused to accept them.

I might've been desperate, and I might've let myself be used like some old toy Callum wasn't quite ready to give away yet, but I'd

allowed it to happen.

The smile I gave my dad was full of forced remorse. The kind a foolish girl in love would offer her father. "I'm sorry, Daddy. With finals, we've both just been so busy."

He sniffed, then nodded, wrapping an arm around mine and my mother's shoulders as we made our round of thank yous.

He could think I was stupid.

And Callum could think I was desperate.

But I knew exactly what I was doing.

TWENTY-FOUR



Callum

It was going to be the longest summer of my life, I thought as I gripped myself and pumped the last of my orgasm from my shaft into the bathroom sink.

She was so hot, so ready, so needy for me, and fuck if I could ignore that.

There was no way I could ignore that. I'd been trying for the past week, and here I was, zipping up my jeans for the second time that day.

Apparently, nothing was wrong with my cock anymore, so long as Renee was involved.

Shaking my head, I sighed, shucking off my jeans and replacing them with my gym shorts.

I'd go to the gym. Sweating it out was the only other option left.

Some of the guys, Pat mainly, texted me every few days, wanting to catch up. I wanted to, but it was knowing who was likely with him, and that Pat could potentially find out Renee and I had split, that stopped me.

That was, if Mike hadn't already told him.

I knew Mike, or at least, I thought I did. It wasn't his style to spread rumors. Then again, I didn't think it was his style to set his sights on my wife.

Snatching my keys, I tucked my wallet into my pocket and made my way outside, then decided to ditch them on the porch and started

jogging down the drive.

Fuck the gym.

Fuck it all.

I turned out onto the road, jogging for miles until the town center came into view, my thoughts hiding, my body too exhausted, too spent, to do anything other than what I was forcing it to.

A car honked, scaring the shit out of me. "Cal!"

I slowed to a walk, my breathing ragged as Steve's truck approached, roaring and kicking up dirt as he pulled over. "Get in, man."

Giving a halfhearted wave, I clipped out, "I'm good, need to keep at it."

Pat leaned over him. "Get the fuck in the car, asshole." He was smiling, but he was serious.

With not much else to do other than ignore them, I opened the door and climbed into the back.

The door shut with half a second to spare, Steve hitting the gas hard and throwing a U-turn that had me sliding across the seat. "Jesus, fuck."

"That's what she said." Steve snickered.

Pat turned around as Steve sped down the backroad toward my place. "Where you been, dick for brains?" His brows pinched. "We've been trying to call you almost every day."

Steve plucked a joint out of his center console, lighting it. "Yeah, woulda came round, but didn't wanna seem too desperado. Thought maybe you weren't coming home for the summer."

"I've been tired and held up with charity shit."

"That was a week ago."

"Right," I said, thinking that it felt like it was just yesterday. A long pause filled the truck, along with the cloying scent of marijuana. "You couldn't wait until I was out of the car? I just ran fifty million miles."

"Nine, actually." Steve was a numbers man. He always knew the most uncanny shit when it came to them. "And my truck so I do what I want."

Pat mimicked him in a whiny voice, and Steve flicked ash on him.

Never mind that this truck was worth more than some people's houses—these guys didn't give a damn. They'd never had to, so why

start now?

“You seen Mike?” Pat asked, to which I shrugged and said a quick no. They thankfully didn’t ask any more about him.

“Anyway,” Pat started, turning back to face me. “We found you just in time. Party tonight at Steve’s place. His mom’s back in rehab.”

“No shit,” I said, my gaze flicking to Steve, who seemed unfazed. “She okay?”

Steve shrugged. “She’ll do what she has to in order to keep my dad happy.” He scoffed. “Meanwhile, he’s two towns over, fucking his side piece.”

“Smooth,” Pat said, sarcasm heavy in his tone.

Steve gave way at the stop sign. “It is what it is, brother. The main thing is, the house is stocked, and I’m ready to let loose. College can kiss my white ass.”

“Speaking of, how’s it been there with Renee glued to your hip twenty-four seven?” Pat asked me as we turned into my drive. “You’d be missing out on some fine tail, that’s for sure.”

I smirked to hide the twinge of guilt in my chest. “Thanks for the concern, but we’re fine.”

“She’d give it to him on the regular,” Steve said, inhaling a drag of his joint as he sped around the fountain outside my house, then slammed on the brakes. “You only gotta see the way she looks at Cal to know that.”

Pat cursed, slugging Steve in the arm. “Respect, asshole. Get a little some of that.”

“Whatever, Cal knows I’m right. See?” he asked. “Not even disputing it.”

My jaw was clenched shut, and I barely opened it enough to say, “Thanks for the ride, assholes.”

I jumped out, closing the door.

“If you’re not over by nine, we’ll send someone to collect you. Oh, and bring Mike,” Pat hollered out the window as Steve hit the gas, rocks and dirt spraying in his wake.

After collecting my wallet and keys from the porch, I went inside and headed straight for my room where my phone sat on my unmade bed.

Me: Party at Steve's. Be ready by eight.

I tossed my phone down, ignoring the chirp it made as she responded, and hit the shower.



Renee was waiting outside on her porch, legs and hair glowing in the fading light of dusk. Judging by the slight tan and the new freckles on her nose that I glimpsed as she climbed inside my car, she'd been spending time in the sun.

Where and with who?

Her scent was everywhere, making it hard to breathe without wanting to punch something.

I hardly looked at what she was wearing, but I knew it was short due to the glance I got of her legs. My teeth ground together, and I feared if we kept this shit up for too long, they'd be nothing but chalk by the end of college.

"I was surprised to hear from you."

"Really?" I asked, my tone snide as I turned out onto the main road.

"Okay, so I thought I might've heard from you before now, but I'm not going to be picky about it."

Her confidence made my fists clench, anger coursing through me. Too bad it was no match for the way it made my blood hum with arousal. "Well, a deal is a deal."

"A deal?" Her intrigue loud and clear, she shifted in her seat to face me. I kept my eyes on the road. "And pray tell, what is this deal exactly?"

"You know what I'm talking about," I said in a low voice.

"Hmm, maybe. But ..."

Her hand reached out, straightening the sleeve of my T-shirt. My muscles seized at the purposeful touch of her soft fingers. "I think we should make it sweeter."

“How so?” I asked before I could help myself.

“You don’t like me, that’s fine. I understand why.” Her voice wavered on those last words, then she cleared her throat. “But you don’t need to like me to fuck me. And we both know you like to fuck me.”

“Renee,” I warned, driving down the dirt road that led to Steve’s house. She knew what hearing those words from those lips did to me.

“Callum,” she teased.

Ignoring her, I parked haphazardly on the sprawling lawn, getting out and slamming the door closed. “I shouldn’t have even invited you. It’s not necessary to continue with this bullshit in front of my friends.”

“Isn’t it?” she asked, closing her door and linking her arm through mine as her eyes darted over the yard. I followed their direction to where Mike was walking inside with a case of beer.

“Fuck you,” I spat, wrenching my arm from hers and locking my car. I knew what parties at Steve’s place could get like, and no one fucked anyone in my car unless it was me.

I pocketed my keys, walking ahead of Renee over the dry lawn and up the stairs.

If Renee was hurt by my words, she definitely didn’t act like it.

Theatre major. Right. She could say she couldn’t act as many times as she wanted, but I knew better. After all, I’d believed a lie for years.

We pushed between people, ignoring catcalls and shouts from old friends, stopping once we reached the backyard where Pat, Steve, and fucking Mike were reclining in deck chairs by the kidney-shaped pool.

Renee came to a stop beside me. “Surreal, isn’t it?”

I wanted to ignore her. I wanted it bad enough to drill a hole into my tongue with my teeth. “What?” I finally sighed out.

“How a year can pass and not much changes.”

I grunted, the sound followed by a cold chuckle. “Wrong, Mouse.” My eyes swung to hers, ignoring the way they sparkled with hope. “Everything that matters changes. It just takes some longer than others to realize it.”

Her shoulders sagged, but she was quick to square them and smile at Tara when she approached. Thankful for the reprieve, I sank into a chair next to Mike, smirking at the way he bristled as his eyes darted from me to Renee and back again.

“Problem?” I asked.

His raised brow made me want to punch him. He took a swig of beer. “Nope.”

The guys shot the shit for a while, Tara and her friends joining us and climbing over seats and laps. All except Tara, who stood beside me as I watched Renee talk to one of the guys who used to be in her drama club at Trellara.

“College looks good on you, Cal,” Tara remarked, leaning in to brush her hand over my hair.

Renee had eyes in the back of her head, going eerily still before throwing a glance over her shoulder at Tara, who giggled and dropped her hand.

“Thanks,” I finally said. “How’s George West?”

“Such a drag.” She rolled her eyes. “I swear to God, everyone grows serious way too soon. No one parties like we did here at home.”

“You got that right,” Steve agreed, snapping open a beer and swallowing half of it in three long pulls.

Tara babbled on about her plans for a psychology degree, but I wasn’t listening. I wasn’t even trying to listen as I saw Mike stroll over to Renee, who stepped away from him like he had German measles.

“Back in a minute,” I muttered, vacating my seat.

Renee’s eyes were wide with panic as she saw me approach.

Something twisted inside my stomach, and I swung an arm around her waist. “Come on.”

“The fuck are you two playing at?” Mike whispered, eyes darting around the yard.

“None of your damn business, so fuck off.”

Mike chuckled, irritation clouding his eyes as he ran a hand through his hair before letting it slap back down to his side. “Really, Renee?”

I was two seconds away from tackling him into the pool when Renee smiled and said sweetly, "Excuse us, we have people to see."

Mike scoffed, eyes hot on our backs as I directed Renee back through the crowd and inside the house.

"Where are we going?" she whispered and stopped at the base of the stairs.

I yanked her hand, and she followed me up them, waiting until I found a spare room. My blood roaring in my ears, I all but pushed her inside it, and she stumbled toward the bed. "Callum, what the hell—"

Flicking the lock, I didn't let her finish, and really, I doubted I'd let her finish ever again. "Get on the bed on your knees. Panties off, dress up."

"What?"

"You heard me."

Her nostrils flared, but I knew she'd do as I asked. Knew she'd like doing it too.

Unzipping my jeans, I watched, palming my throbbing erection as she went a step further and took her dress off too. I stepped forward, smacking her bare ass.

Renee yelped, a red handprint blooming on her milky skin.

"I didn't say take the dress off." She went to turn around, but with my hand between her shoulder blades, I pushed her forward until her cheek pressed into the satin duvet.

"Wider." I slapped the insides of her thighs until she spread them.

My fingers fluttered over her warmth. The urge got the better of me, and I dipped one inside. She moaned, rocking her hips.

I pulled it free, sucking her from it and pulling her ass back to meet my cock. In one thrust, inside I went, my head rolling back as her heat held me enraptured.

Gathering her around the waist, I hauled her up until her back met my front. My fingers gripped her chin, turning her mouth to mine as my other hand found her clit, circling it and pressing, repeating it over and over as I spoke. "Have they touched you here like this?"

"T-they?" she stuttered, eyes fluttering as I jerked my hips.

"Yes, they," I gritted. "I'm not an idiot." She tried to shake her head, but I held it still. "Do they make you feel this good?"

When she simply moaned, her thighs starting to tremble, I shoved my thumb inside her mouth, shaking her head gently. "Answer me."

"No, you ... only," she panted.

My hands fell away at those words, and she fell to the bed as I gripped her hips, pumping mine until all I could feel was her, all I could see was relief, and all I could hear was her breathy moans and the wet smack off my balls meeting her slick flesh.

Fucking her like this unearthed all the good memories we had, obliterating them one by one.

I knew then that I couldn't torture myself all summer, and I couldn't hook up with anyone else without someone potentially finding out.

The need to come barreled through me, but I pushed it back and grunted out my next words. "This cunt might've been used by other assholes, but this summer, it's mine. Got it?"

A whimper was her only response, and I stopped moving, waiting for her to reply. "Okay," she said, trying to work herself on my shaft. "Okay, got it."

"Summer only."

"Summer only," she repeated breathlessly, and much to my dismay, she tumbled over the edge. It had me following, and I groaned loudly, not giving a fuck if anyone heard. In fact, I wanted them to hear.

Tucking myself away, I watched Renee right her bra and pull her panties on before gathering her green sundress from the floor. "I'll be downstairs. Find me when you want a ride home."

Her eyes flew up to me as she paused, questions filling them.

I ignored them.

Mike was waiting outside in the hall, murder stamped all over his face as I threw the door open on Renee, who was still pulling her dress on.

I slapped him on the shoulder. Hard. "She's all yours, buddy. But I'd give her an hour. She's probably a little tender."

Mike's mouth dropped open. "Are you fucking serious ...?"

Walking away, I whistled as I strolled downstairs, knowing that for all Renee had done, she wanted me too much to renege on our deal

by fucking Mike again.

TWENTY-FIVE



Renee

In swift, sweat-inducing waves, the heat of summer invaded, making our twice weekly meetups hotter than I'd anticipated. Part of me felt ashamed for letting him use me like he did. He wouldn't kiss me and wouldn't even fuck me unless it was in a position where my eyes couldn't find his.

But I'd done this to myself, and I decided how much I could handle as a result of it.

"Darling, you really should do something about your hair." Mom ran her fingers through the ends, sipping her iced tea next to me on the porch swing. "Split ends for days."

Having Callum wrap the strands around his fist, tugging ruthlessly at said hair two nights ago wouldn't be helping matters, either.

Yet getting a haircut was low on my list of priorities. And nobody was more shocked about that than me.

School returned the following week. A new year, a new start, yet besides the sex, nothing had really changed with Callum. Would he dismiss me once we returned? Or would he carry on using me as he saw fit? I hoped for the latter, even if it was starting to wear thin on my fraying strength.

The alternative, having him act as though I didn't exist, wasn't an option.

And that was exactly what happened.

No texts, no phone calls asking in a cold voice to meet him outside. Nothing.

Two weeks later, I found myself watching him walk to class with two of his football buddies. I hesitated for all of a second before I moved, almost stumbling on the pebbled pathway in my pink and cream wedges as I made haste for the science building.

“Callum,” I called, trying to slow my breathing.

He paused at the base of the stairs, squinting as the sun shined down on the beauty of his face. His head shook, then he turned to walk inside.

“Don’t you dare,” I hissed, not caring if anyone could hear. “What’s going on?”

With a jerk of his head, he gestured for his friends to go in, then faced me. “What do you mean?”

I blinked, unsure what it was exactly he was confused about. “Us. I mean, I haven’t heard from you in weeks.”

He raised a brow, a low chuckle leaving him. “Summer only, remember?” Eyes like dark chocolate raked over my high-waist denim jeans and soft pink T-shirt. “I’m certain I made myself clear,” he stated, gaze flicking to mine, then immediately flicking away. “So quit calling me, and Jesus fuck, don’t stalk me around campus.”

“You won’t last,” I said, my voice confident even though my throat burned. “We both know it.”

The withering look he shot me would’ve sent me to my knees if I weren’t wearing three-hundred and fifty-dollar denim jeans. My lips pinched together as he swaggered inside the building and left me at the bottom of the stairs like the discarded toy I was.



Pens and papers filled bags as the professor clapped his hands, calling an end to the lecture. Everyone rose from their seats, and I did the same with a yawn that I tried to smother with my hand.

Outside, the sky was painted gray, and I hurried my steps, not in the mood to have my freshly washed hair tampered with by the rain.

I slowed my steps outside my dorm when I saw some of the guys on the team lingering on the sidewalk, tossing a football back and forth. Mike was leaning against a car and looked up, his lips moving into a hesitant smile. I ducked my head and kept walking, not stopping until I reached my dorm.

"... going to swallow it, aren't you? Good girl," a familiar voice groaned through my dorm room door, which was sitting slightly ajar.

My heart slammed painfully, beating so hard I thought it'd bruise my chest cavity. Bile filled my throat, yet I still pushed the door open, still watched as Callum's eyes hit mine, then his head fell back against the wall by my bed, and he came down Hannah's throat.

Hannah swallowed, leaning back on her knees to wipe her lips as Callum put his softening cock away and zipped up his jeans. "Thanks," he said, chucking her under the chin, then moving for the door.

I didn't move, could hardly breathe, which forced him to squeeze by me, giving him the chance to whisper, "Do not fuck with me, Mouse. You won't win in the end."

His spiced cologne filled my senses, making the urge to cry harder to ignore as I felt him disappear down the stairs behind me.

Hannah was wiping her chin with a wet wipe, grimacing with wide eyes as I stepped inside and closed the door soundlessly. It was one thing to hear about him sleeping around. That was fine. I didn't have to see it, which meant I didn't have to really believe it.


I thought I knew my husband, but I'd been a fool.

"Renee, he came here asking for you. I-I didn't know where you were, and I told him that." Hannah took a long breath. "Then, then he just, well, said he needed to deliver a message."

I raised a hand, biting my lips as I unpacked my textbook and notes from class. "Message received. Don't mention it again."

It wasn't her fault she was attracted to him, and it wasn't even his fault for acting out in such a way. It was mine. All mine. And I'd have to take it, add it to the pile of hurt inside me, and lock it away.

I'd have to.



“Girl, you have got to come to this frat party tonight,” Hannah said while dousing her hair and our room in hairspray.

I turned the page of the latest edition of *Vogue*. “I’d rather not. I’ve had a gutful of rich, entitled men.”

To say that things had been weird since I walked in on her with my husband’s dick in her mouth would be a whopping understatement. I’d expected remorse, apologies.

There’d been none.

Hannah made a tutting sound. “But they’re so fun, so sexy.”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Your ex should be there,” she teased, no fucks given about what she’d done with him. Though one would think you’d use their name after swallowing their semen.

The word *ex* grated on my last nerve. It was true we were separated, but she didn’t know the half of it. No one did, and I wasn’t about to explain. It’d make no difference to someone like Hannah who took what she wanted, especially if she didn’t think she’d get the opportunity again. I suppose, in that way, we were kind of similar.

And I liked knowing exactly what to expect from her now. No more nasty surprises, thank you.

“I’ve had a gutful of him, too.” It was true. I’d tried talking to him, and when that had failed, I’d tried using my body to worm my way back to him, hoping that he’d eventually soften toward me. Nothing worked. “Stubborn man,” I mumbled, sighing and closing my magazine.

“He does seem stubborn,” Hannah mused.

I didn’t mean for her to hear or comment on that, so I shifted the subject. “Ever had a boyfriend?”

She puckered her lips at the mirror, turning her face this way and that. “Not one that’s lasted more than a week. Why?”

“Just wondering.” I frowned. “Why only a week?”

She laughed. “I guess because they want in my pants and I let them way too soon.”

“I’ll say,” I said, checking the time on my phone. Guilt gnawed at me when she didn’t respond. “They don’t try to get to know you?”

Hannah tsked like I was naïve. “I don’t want them to. I like my weekly boyfriends.” With a wink, she grabbed her clutch and made her way to the door. “Text me if you decide to come.”

The door shut before I could answer, and I spent an embarrassing amount of time staring at it as though it’d tell me what to do.

I hadn’t been to a party since we arrived back on campus. I’d taken new classes this semester, deciding to major in design and applied arts. The flexibility awarded to me was worth the hassle of filling out an insane amount of forms and almost losing my meager partial scholarship. Not that I needed it. Someone else could surely do with the help more than me.

I looked at the time again.

My fists and heart clenched at the thought of Callum spending yet another night surrounded by, and most probably with, a bunch of women who weren’t me. He couldn’t do that.

Fuck his warning. If he needed to let out his frustrations, he would do so with me. Lord knew I had plenty of my own that needed dealing with.

Thirty minutes later, I was weaving between bodies, my eyes hungry and my heart determined. I found him walking down the hall, thankfully by himself, and strode right up to him.

The loud music and bass sent vibrations through my body as I planted a hand on his chest and pushed him against the wall. “Renee—”

Leaning on my toes, and with help from my five-inch pumps, I snagged his bottom lip with my teeth, only releasing it to whisper, “Do you really think I’m just going to let you act like I don’t exist?” His eyes darkened, narrowing to slits. “Use and abuse me all you want, but you don’t get to decide when our time is up.”

“Really?” he asked, sarcasm heavy in the whispered question.

My hand reached between us, my fingernail running over the evidence of his want for me. “Really.”

His lips crashed into mine, and my heart sang with victory as he picked me up and moved toward the stairs. His teeth sank into my

lip, drawing blood as we reached the landing. His hands gripped my ass, and my dress bunched around my waist.

A few catcalls followed us, drowned out by the slamming of the door that he pressed me up against. "Let's get one thing straight, you don't call the fucking shots, Mouse."

I released a breathy laugh into his mouth, my nails scoring into his neck. I felt him shiver. "Keep telling yourself that."

He growled, lips hard and firm on mine. I'd missed them, oh my God, how I'd missed them. So he could use them as a weapon too. I'd happily bleed out just to have them touching mine again.

Shouts and hollers from the party raging downstairs met my ears as I tugged at his shirt, wanting to feel his skin. Desperate to. He let me tear it off, then tossed it behind him. My greedy hands absorbed silken warmth over hard steel.

Then my dress was wrenched higher and Callum's jeans tugged over his ass, my heels digging into his flesh as he hoisted me up against the door and sank inside me.

His lips tore themselves from mine, his hands squeezing my thighs so hard, they'd leave bruises, as he slammed me into the door, over and over. "You're going to leave me alone after this, Mouse."

My eyes shut as I chased the pleasure swimming through my body. "No."

Teeth plunged into my neck, and I moaned. "You fucking will. We can't keep doing this."

I didn't answer him, couldn't if I wanted to. My orgasm came running, unleashing itself just as Callum grunted and cursed, hips stilling.

He withdrew from me so fast, I braced against the door, dizzy on unsteady feet.

I cleaned myself up with some tissues I found on a desk piled high with food wrappers and miscellaneous textbooks, tossing them into the tiny trash can next to it after. To my surprise, Callum was still standing at the door, pants done up and his head lowered as he dug his fingers into his hair.

I would've given anything to know what he was thinking at that moment, but when he opened the door, I righted my dress and

simply followed. Something I was getting rather tired of doing.

“Hey,” I said.

Maybe it was the soft tone of my voice, or maybe, he was too lost in his thoughts to argue, but he stopped at the top of the stairs. My arm wound around his waist as we descended them, and he tugged his shirt down.

Something had changed. Something about him was different from the last time we’d been together. Terror coursed through me. I needed his anger, his hatred. His indifference would mean the end of everything.

That couldn’t happen.

“I love you,” I whispered into his neck.

He froze at the bottom of the stairs, and for a heart stopping second, I thought it was my words that made him do so, until I saw his gaze chasing two girls walking toward the kitchen. A blonde and a brunette.

Panic. There was something akin to panic in his eyes.

“Callum, what—”

“Not now, Renee.” He pushed me away, looking as though he was about to head after those girls.

With my heart threatening to disintegrate, I asked him, “Which one is it?”

His somber disposition upstairs made sense. It made sense if he’d found someone else. And the most laughable thought of all flitted through my brain... now he knew what it was to make a mistake.

Only, I was now the mistake.

“This won’t happen again,” he said before disappearing into the crowd of students in the living room.

TWENTY-SIX



Callum

I met a girl.

A freshman. She was a natural blonde with a flamboyant nature that had me pausing to reassess what it was I'd planned to do with her. At first, she was merely a tactic to get Renee off my back. I couldn't get her out of my head, my heart, and my damn life if I kept giving in to her every time she situated herself in front of me.

It was too bad the girl I met was also my teammate's ex.

Now, there's a bro code for sure. But Quinn and me, we weren't exactly tight, and well, he had a girlfriend, Alexis.

How was I supposed to know he was in a similar situation to me? He'd never said anything and still wouldn't. Instead, he chose to growl and glare at me any chance he got, knowing that his hands were tied.

The thing was, I was a self-centered prick. Always had been and probably always would be. And Daisy, she was a means to an end the first time I laid eyes on her. Easy to fuck with and more than easy on the eyes.

Yet after one trip to the movies, and one attempt at kissing her, my plans unraveled before me in the form of a broken girl still very much in love with her ex-boyfriend.

Part of me was annoyed that I couldn't seem to catch a break in shaking Renee, but most of me was just confused. Daisy was genuinely good, something I discovered after only ten minutes of

being around her. Even if she wasn't in love with Quinn, I didn't know if I could've found it in me to use her as I'd planned, self-centered bastard or not.

After taking Daisy to the movies, I'd hemmed and hawed about calling to take her out again. I guess I liked her. I just wasn't sure in which capacity, and if it was worth taking advantage when I didn't know because she wasn't in any state to be making decisions about her dating life.

"You're cruising for one hell of a bruising, Welsh," Paul said, slamming his locker closed.

"Tell whoever it is to take a number. I've got shit to do." I zipped up my bag, slinging it over my shoulder as I left the locker room.

"For real, you invited her to the game and then kissed her in front of him?" Paul whistled. "You have balls, man."

"He's got a girlfriend." My teeth gritted.

Paul laughed. "That don't seem to matter too much to him."

After the movies with Daisy, I didn't see her until the last frat party I'd attended. The one where I'd let Renee send me spiraling into her orbit all over again. The very same party where she'd seen me walking downstairs with Renee with what we'd just done hanging above our heads like a guilty cloud.

"I felt bad, okay," I admitted once we reached the cafeteria. "And I didn't know it was Quinn she was messed up over until after I'd already taken her out."

Paul ordered bacon and eggs on toast, and I decided to opt for the same. We moved over to the waiting area, grabbing utensils and napkins. "Still, I'd stay clear. Unless"—he looked at me then, eyes surveying—"you really like her."

A sigh heaved out of me. "I don't know if I do." Which was kind of true. What I did know was that she was a cool chick, and I didn't mind hanging out with her.

"Right," Paul said. "But now you do know, and kissing her at the game was just low, dude."

"I did it ..." I stopped, almost admitting that I did it because Renee was there, waiting by the doors as the team walked out, and I'd walked right by her as if I didn't see her.

As if that could ever actually happen. I'd see her with my damn eyes closed.

I continued when we got our food and found a table. "Like I said, I invited Daisy to the game because I felt bad."

"For hooking up with Renee at that party after taking Daisy out?" Paul shook some salt onto his food. "You kiss her for the same reason?"

His eyes were bright with humor, but I knew he was wondering what the fuck I was doing. That made two of us. "I don't even know anymore."



Summer was fast fading into fall, the wind burning my chapped cheeks, courtesy of training in the frigid air at the butt crack of dawn all week. The only thing I wanted right now was a hot shower, my own shower, and maybe a nap before I had to get to biology in two hours.

Walking into my apartment, I dumped my gear and ripped my jacket and shirt off on my way to the bedroom, leaving them trailing behind me. My gym shorts were next to go, and that was how the red-headed bombshell found me, stark naked with my pants around my ankles, as she laid on my bed in cream lace lingerie. "Good morning."

I looked around, shaking my head, certain I was dreaming or having a nightmare. "What the ... what the fuck are you doing?"

Her lips puckered into a forced pout as she stretched out on her stomach, arching her back like a cat as her red hair slipped over her milky shoulders and breasts. "I thought that'd be pretty obvious, no?"

"Renee," I said, at a loss for words, frustration mixed with arousal muddling my head. Both of them. "Please, get out. Now."

"But you haven't taken your present yet."

Christ. Her confidence had never frustrated me more. "And I'm not going to. Leave."

I walked by the bed, slamming the bathroom door closed behind me and locking it.

Under the hot spray, it was all I could do to keep my palms flat against the tiled wall and away from my raging hard-on.

That fucking woman would be the death of me.

I washed slower than usual, hoping that by the time I got out, she'd be gone, taking all temptation with her.

She was, and as I wrapped the towel around my waist, swiping water from my face, something on the bed caught my eye. A card. I left it, rummaging through my drawers for jeans and a clean shirt. Eventually, curiosity got the better of me, and I snatched it up, opening it to a paragraph of her perfect handwriting.

Happy Birthday, asshole.

I didn't bother with a present. Not after what happened last time I tried that.

So I offered something you'll actually take myself.

Also, we missed our first anniversary, which is fine, being that you banged my brains out the night after anyway. And of course, I didn't think it would be wise to rub the vows I'd broken in your face.

But I wanted to remind you, seeing as you seem to constantly forget, that I love you.

That I'm sorry.

And that I'm still here.

Maybe one day, you'll forgive me.

Maybe you won't.

Either way, I'm yours, and yours only.

Again, Happy Birthday. x

Mini Mouse.

The card was a scrunched mess flying at the floor two seconds later, then I was storming out of the room, down the hall, and into the kitchen. Where I found Renee waiting, dressed in a long fur coat and fur-lined boots by the door. "You have got to be fucking kidding me."

"You read it?"

"Is that why you're still here?" My nostrils flared. "To make sure I read it?"

She shrugged, her teeth sliding over her lip. "There are many reasons why I'm here, most of them stated in the card."

"This ends. Now." I stepped closer until we were almost nose to nose. "I don't know how you got in here ..." I stopped, eyes closing. Of course, I didn't need to know of the many countless ways she'd have found her way in here after I'd changed the locks. "But you know you're not welcome. For fuck's sake, just move on."

"I can't." She sniffed, and an incredulous laugh left her. "Don't you see that? I messed up, I know that. Everyone knows that, but I can't just move on. The amount of effort you put into hating me only proves that you can't either."

"What?" My laughter was bitter, dry, and mocking. "You seriously haven't had enough yet?" When she just stared at me, her luminous eyes shining with tears, I continued, my voice like gravel, "Quit pushing, Mouse, because I'll keep pushing back."

She sniffed. "Like you could do any worse. The blonde, really?" she whispered, trying to mask the emotion strangling her vocal

chords.

“That’s none of your business, and as for doing worse,” I paused, letting the sincerity in my gaze bleed into hers, “is that a challenge? Because you and I both know that’s not fucking true.”

I opened the doors, gently shoving her out of them. She stumbled toward the elevator as I slammed them closed.

TWENTY-SEVEN



Renee

Lost was one word to describe how I felt in the weeks following my last-ditch effort to seduce my husband into letting me in again.

Failure. It was a complete and utter failure.

I couldn't let that stop me, but I needed time. Time to decompress and shake off the sorrow that seemed intent on finally creeping in. I'd pushed it away for so long, I thought I'd won. I hadn't. Not yet.

I also needed time to get through finals without failing those, too.

Sitting at the table with my family and the Welsh's the day after Christmas, I had to wonder if he ever really cared at all? Callum's eyes were downcast, but a convincing smile lit his features whenever a question was directed at him.

"I don't believe you'll have any trouble," Kian observed, pushing his plate away and thanking Rosa when she came to remove it from the table.

"I don't know," Callum mused, finger dancing around the edge of his glass as he stared at his father. "There were rumors, but scouts have yet to show this year at all."

"Probably for the best," Kian said, sipping his whiskey neat. "You can't afford to get drafted early. You need your degree."

Callum's jaw clenched. "Right."

Kian was right indeed, and Callum knew that, but his desperation to follow his own dreams would make an offer far too tempting to

turn down.

I picked up my water, taking a slow sip as I let my eyes slide over Callum's face. Typically clean shaven, it was odd to see that he hadn't bothered today. Stubble shadowed his square jaw, and my thighs met beneath the table as I pondered the feeling of it on my skin.

As if sensing what I was thinking, Callum's gaze lifted, but not his head, making his lashes butt beneath his brows. He squinted, that dimple appearing when he smirked at me before looking at my mother when she asked him about the apartment.

"It's fine," Callum said, then added, "Sally takes great care of it."

My glass slipped from my hand, falling to the table with a thump that made heads turn my way. "Sorry," I muttered. "Slippery fingers."

"Indeed," Callum murmured, and I wanted to thump him.

He was doing the cleaner, too? Jesus Christ.

Rosa came around the table with a towel to mop up the spilled water. I thanked her, then pushed my chair back, asking to be excused and not waiting for an answer.

"We're exchanging gifts in the parlor soon," Lucinda called after me.

I stopped in the doorway, turning around and painting a small smile on my face. "I won't be long."

In the downstairs bathroom, I stared at my reflection, the milky pallor to my skin, my defined cheekbones more prominent, and my hair, curled yet still flat.

Lifeless.

As though who I was had been seeping out of my pores every day for the past year, and it was starting to show.

Dropping my head, I closed my eyes and inhaled deeply. I set the breath free, and my shoulders loosened marginally. Unaware of how long I stood there, my eyes steadfast on the drain, I straightened when voices moved down the hall.

Just get it over with. Half an hour more of playing nice. Acting like everything was just fine when, in reality, it was so far from fine, it was getting harder and harder to breathe.

Not to mention, it was kind of difficult to do that when Callum seemed to have given up caring about the rouse altogether.

Something that wouldn't go unnoticed for too long.

Settling into a wingback armchair in the parlor, I watched everyone open their gifts, my own that I'd purchased two days before sitting on the small oak table next to a cluster of hydrangeas.

Callum looked from them to me, then directed his gaze to the hearth where a small fire was crackling. He needn't worry that I might've tried something elaborate again. I'd simply re-wrapped the comics I'd repeatedly tried to gift him.

With a warm smile, I collected my presents, leaving them wrapped at my feet as Callum accepted mine from my mother. He shook it, then looked over at me, a brow raised.

I looked away and rose from the chair. "I'm not feeling too well. I don't think dinner agreed with me."

I apologized profusely, giving Kian and Lucinda a hug. "Nonsense, go lie down. Cal will bring your presents upstairs for you," Lucinda said, then returned to her mound of cashmere sweaters, imported coffee machine, and jewelry.

Callum's footsteps sounded behind me, his leather oxfords clipping over the wooden boards. I opened the door, gesturing for him to go ahead without looking at him.

He set the presents down on the ottoman at the end of my bed, and I started removing the pins in my hair, followed by the earrings that my father had given to me yesterday.

"I got you something," Callum said.

I scoffed, turning to face him and ignoring the way the low light of the room made his chiseled features more distinctive. "You shouldn't have."

"No," he said, placing a rectangular black box wrapped in a gold bow on top of the stack. "I should've done it a long time ago."

With a wink, he meandered out of my room. I closed my door, then against a million voices screaming not to, I approached the present pile, plucking the ribbon off the black box and lifting the lid.

My hand flew to my mouth, a scathing breath sucked into my lungs as I beheld the contents.

He'd finally done it.

Divorce papers.

Attached to them was a small sticky note.

It's time to end this properly.

After it's settled, we can tell our parents it's over, and they never need to know we were married in the first place.

We aren't kids anymore, and I'm tired of the games.

Let it be done.

The box fell to the floor, papers skidding over the rug as I muffled the sound of finality with my hands.



Returning to school felt bittersweet.

It would've been nice not to have to be in the same vicinity as the man who broke some essential part of me, yet I also couldn't stand to spend one more minute in the confines of my parents' home where memories chased me down every hall.

Maybe it was time. Though who knew when the right time was to give up on the one thing you wanted more than anything else in the world.

Most would say never. Most would probably call me a fool who should've quit wasting her time months and months ago.

Either way, I didn't do well with taking orders. I'd sign his precious papers. When and if I was ready.

I marched past the surly desk attendant, who actually showed up today, ignoring everyone as I walked upstairs to my dorm with my head down. I had a ton of designs to finish sketching, and me and sketching, well, we didn't exactly see eye to eye.

I had to work at this harder than I thought I would. I couldn't just create whatever I saw in my mind's eye, and I knew that, but actually having to design it first had me freaking the hell out about possibly flunking in the one area I couldn't afford to.

When it came to things I cared about, I couldn't have any more failures.

I went inside, determined to forget, even if it was just for a little while, and got my things ready for a shower.

Hannah was still skating on thin ice, no apologies, but eager to do anything I suggested. She didn't realize that ship had sailed, and she was better off jumping overboard. I had no use for her other than not to look like a social leper by showing up to parties on my own.

"We're not drinking beer," I said firmly, plucking the bottle of vodka from my purse and pouring a drink in the messy kitchen.

Hannah didn't object, grabbing a bottle of Coke from the fridge and topping off our drinks.

"Cheers," she said with a forced smile, directing it at Tina as she approached.

"Oh, you have to let me raid your wardrobe already," Tina gushed.

I poured her a glass too, handing it over without a word.

Hannah waved a hand. "Half designer, half outfits she's made herself, I die every time I open the doors to our wardrobe."

I listened to them chatter about my clothes, thinking that I should've felt more about the admiration. I felt nothing.

And so I drank, ignoring the fear that slithered through me.

Fear was a selfish bitch with too much control, and I refused to relinquish any part of me to her anymore.

We stayed in the kitchen, taking seats on stools and watching the party come to life around us as gossip swam from Hannah's lips to Tina's ears. Hushed whispers, loud laughter, and a lot of "no ways" and "he did nots."

By the time I'd finished my second drink, warmth engulfed me in its familiar arms, and I slowed down. Never again would I end up in a position like the one I'd been in over a year ago. Lesson learned. One that I would pay for until the end of my days.

The reason for that walked past, stopping when he saw us and then walking over. "Hey," Mike said, leaning against the counter next to me and folding his huge arms across his chest. "Haven't seen you around in a while."

"Been lying low," I said into my cup, a sinking feeling filling my stomach as those blue eyes laid themselves on my face. Would I ever be able to look at this man without feeling it? I didn't think so, but it'd be nice.

Mike nodded as if he understood, and I guess he'd probably be the only one who would.

The girls chattered on behind us, Mike's gaze on mine like a brand I wanted to peel off my skin. In another life, if I hadn't met Callum, I'd be putty at his feet. He had the kind of looks that said he wasn't only your good-looking boy-next-door type, light brown hair slightly mussed, eyelashes for days, and piercing blue eyes that made you feel important whenever they landed on you, but he was also good. Kind, attentive, and apparently in love with me.

God only knew why.

I didn't believe it, but some would say they wouldn't believe I was still in love with Callum after all that'd happened, yet there I was ... I took a large gulp of my drink.

"You and Cal ..." he started.

Ugh. I shook my head, swallowing and setting the empty cup down. "No."

"Oh," he said. "I thought ..."

"I know." I nodded, drawing in a long breath and setting it free. "I tried, right?" I looked up at him, smiling sadly.

His expression stayed blank but softened. "You made a mistake, and I'm sorry that I was part of that. I don't know if I've said that, but

... I should have. I'm sorry."

"Me too," I said. "I mean, you'd been friends for years. One night, one stupid night, and it's all ruined."

Quiet fell between us as we stared, the music and voices filling the void like white noise. "Would you consider something for me?"

I raised a brow. "Maybe."

"Go out with me." When my mouth fell open, he hurried to add, "Just once. Just one time to see if this wasn't actually such a big mistake, and maybe, just maybe, it happened for a reason."

I barked out a very unladylike laugh, imagining my mother's face souring as I did. "Or maybe, I got black-out drunk and we both did something stupid as a result of it."

Mike tilted a shoulder. "At least think about it."

I stared down at the counter a long moment, thinking of a way to shut this crazy idea down when a laugh I'd know as well as my own traveled over to me.

Glancing up, I saw Callum giving some girl a piggyback ride through the herd of people outside the kitchen, her dark brown hair streaming behind her as she clung to his neck.

He didn't even see me, which hurt a thousand times worse than having him simply ignore me.

Pain rattled through my chest, making my next breath, my next thought, and my next seconds, hard to bear. How long could I keep doing this?

Mike took my chin, turning me to face him, his thumb brushing over my bottom lip.

Mike. I could go out with him. Just once. There was nothing else for me to use, no other tools left, anyway. A thought that made me feel horrible, but not enough not to say, "Okay. One date."

His smile lit up his whole face, and for a brief second, I couldn't look away. Leaning down, he kissed my forehead. "I've gotta jet, but I'll text you."

I watched him go, feeling oddly alone while surrounded by friends. "Come to the bathroom with me, Renee."

Feeling like I was floating outside of myself, I nodded and followed Hannah upstairs, then stared at the wall as we waited in line and she typed a text to someone on her phone.

Hannah's turn came, and one look inside had me thinking I'd rather go home early than get anywhere near that germ-fest.

I leaned against the wall, pondering Mike's words, his touch, Callum's sincerity about wanting to forget me, and startled when a door slammed closed.

I turned, seeing Pippa, who I shared a class with. I also might have interrogated her not too long ago during said class. But in doing so, I'd seen something I didn't expect to.

Loyalty, and a fierce one at that, for her friend Daisy.

Priceless. Having a friend like that would be priceless. And I was all about collecting priceless things.

Unfortunately for me, some things couldn't be collected. Or were better left alone so that you didn't have to face the dilemma of having someone let you down by killing your expectations.

She and Daisy were the girls Callum had stared at the last time we were together at the frat party.

If it wasn't obvious before, the shocked look on Pippa's face made it obvious that she didn't frequent parties all that often. I held back a laugh. "See something interesting?"

She swallowed, meeting my gaze. "I guess you could say that."

I did laugh then, but it shattered into fragments on the ground as I looked away. This girl, what I wouldn't give to be that naïve.

"Callum's here," she stated, and she would, after I'd made it obvious by interrogating her in class that I was still in love with him.

"I know," I said.

Quiet. Then she asked, "Is there a bathroom up here?"

It clicked then, what she was doing. Searching for her boyfriend, the troubled wide receiver and Callum's friend. I knew where she'd likely find him. Although I could've probably kept it to myself to save her from getting upset, I didn't think that was what she would've wanted. "If you're looking for Toby, try the den downstairs."

Heat infused her cheeks. "Thanks. I do need to use the bathroom, though."

The door opened and out walked Hannah, looking pale as she said, "God, it's a mess in there. Like, I legit think some asshole peed all over the wall."

That made me smirk. "It's all yours," I said to Pippa.

“On second thought, I’m fine.”

I looked from her to Hannah. “I’ll meet you downstairs.”

Hannah lifted her shoulders, tugging at her tiny skirt as she walked down the hall to the stairs.

“Is that the one who blew your ex?” Pippa asked.

Shocked, I tried to think about how the hell she’d know that. Then I remembered at the start of last semester, talking about it none too quietly with Hannah in the dorm bathrooms.

“I knew someone was listening.” I smiled because I did on account of seeing the closed stall door behind me in the mirror. “So I turned up the volume, so to speak.”

Pippa raised a brow. “Not true then?”

Opening my clutch, I said, “Oh no, very much true.” I shoved a stick of gum into my mouth, chewing as I searched for my lip gloss. “I’ve got some great friends.”

“Why are you still friends with her?”

I swiped some gloss on, rubbing my lips together as I pondered how to answer that. I figured honesty would work best. “No one wants to be alone.” Though I didn’t know if I could get anymore alone, really. “And at least I know what to expect from her.”

“That’s sad, dude.”

Maybe, but it was important to me. I tucked my gloss away and closed my clutch. “Life is sad. Better to know your enemy well than not know a friend at all.”

Pippa seemed to hesitate, then said carefully, “You should hang out with me and Daisy some time.”

I scrunched my nose. Even if Daisy wasn’t interested in Callum, it seemed a little crazy to me. Especially after I’d seen her as a threat. “With the girl who kissed what’s mine?”

“She didn’t know you or anything about you. She wasn’t your friend and didn’t owe you a damn thing.”

All true. Never mind that Hannah had wrapped her lips around his dick, Pippa was talking about something more real than what Hannah and I had. I wasn’t entirely sure that’d work.

That was if they even decided they liked me after spending more than five minutes in my company.

Yeah, probably better not to get my hopes up. “Thanks, but I don’t know if that’s such a great idea.”

“Suit yourself.” Pippa eyed the bathroom with a crinkle in her nose, then made a move for the stairs.

My hand clenched around my clutch, something akin to regret making my limbs tense. I had nothing left to lose. Nothing that mattered. Of that I was certain. “Pippa.” She turned her head to look at me over her shoulder, and words, ideas, everything—failed me. I shook my head, feeling ridiculous. “Never mind.”

How was it that I was forced to fake it through luncheons, dinners, numerous events, and plays, yet when it really mattered, I couldn’t choke out the right thing to say?

With a longing sigh, I made my way downstairs.

TWENTY-EIGHT



Callum

“Off,” I said to the chick who was making an abysmal effort to rouse my sleeping cock.

“What’s the matter?” she asked, swiping a finger below her bottom lip. “I can keep trying.”

“Not to sound like a moron, but really, it’s not you, sweetheart. It’s me.”

Her eyes grew. “Oh.” A smile tilted her lips. “You like guys? Because I know someone who’d be down to—”

“A guy won’t fix it, but thanks for the offer,” I said dryly, doing up my pants and checking to make sure my phone was in there.

“Whatever.” She shifted her top into place and slipped her feet back into her heels.

Sitting up, I watched her go, then wiped a hand down my face in exasperation. I was starting to worry that soon I wouldn’t even be able to rub one out at this point.

I went downstairs, finding Quinn in the living area with Daisy and Robbo. “Hey,” I said, slumping into a chair by the window.

Quinn looked over at Tina, who was still fidgeting with her top as she came downstairs. “I hate to say it, but—”

“Then don’t,” I said, snatching the remote and flicking through the sport channels.

Quinn and Robbo got up to help Burrows with a load of pizza boxes, and Daisy leaned forward. “You okay?”

I quirked a brow, tossing the remote down and reclining back in the chair. "Fine, why?"

Her brown eyes slid over me. "You just seem ... tense."

I was. It was fucking February for Christ's sake, and still, no signed papers had reached my lawyer's office. The one I had to pay double in cash to keep this quiet from my family and Renee's.

"Wanna give me a massage?" I bit my lip.

Daisy laughed. "Shut up. I'm being serious."

"I know," I said. "But I don't feel like being serious right now." I swung my gaze behind me to the kitchen, then back again. "Where's Toby and Pippa?"

Daisy started fiddling with her hands, crossing her legs on the couch. "At the townhouse, I guess."

Bad day. More like bad weeks. Ever since Toby got kicked off the team at the start of the season, he'd been doing his best to avoid us. I understood that it would suck in a way I couldn't even fathom, but with the way he could be ... it was concerning.

"He's doing okay?"

Daisy hesitated, then shut her mouth as the guys moved into the room with the pizza. "Where have all the chicks gone?" Burrows asked, shoving a slice of pepperoni into his mouth. "With the exception of Daisy, it's a damn sausage fest now."

"They heard you were here and joined me upstairs," came Paul's response as he walked into the room with two girls following him, their hair and clothing mussed. "I'm fucking starving." He took a box and both girls into the kitchen.

Burrows' jaw was hanging open, eyes blinking over and over. "How?"

"He's charming," Daisy supplied, and Quinn gave her a look. "What?" She shrugged, taking a slice of cheese pizza. "He is."

"True. He could charm the hair off a gorilla," I agreed.

Daisy laughed, and Quinn rolled his eyes. Things had gotten better between Quinn and me, especially since he and Daisy had finally gotten back together before Christmas. It made sense, them being together. In a way that made me feel kind of bad for trying to mess with it. Kind of.

I grinned at Daisy, who shook her head and reached up to adjust her glasses.

“Fuck off already,” Quinn finally snapped, tossing a gaming controller at me. I caught it and set it down beside me.

“You’re a dirty dog, Welsh,” Burrows said as he chewed, chuckling.

I shrugged. “If he didn’t get so riled up, I might consider stopping.”

Quinn gave me a look that said he called bullshit.

I had no interest in Daisy, nothing outside of friendship, but he deserved to be kept on his toes after what he’d done to her. Call it obvious, but I wasn’t a big fan of betrayal.

“Get your guitar out, Robbo. I wanna learn a tune or two.”

Robbo, a freshman on the team, paused mid bite of pizza. “What?” he mumbled around it, then chewed and swallowed. “You can’t be serious.”

Burrows looked affronted. “Oh, I’m dead serious.”

I pulled out my phone, checking my email while they chatted.

“But ... why?”

There was one from my dad. An application to intern at their company this summer.

“Why do you think? For the ladies. Duh.”

“It won’t make a difference,” I muttered, scrolling through the email. Why the hell would I have to apply? And if I would be saddled with the company, I didn’t want to waste my remaining freedom there in the meantime.

“Shut up, cock face. We aren’t all loaded like you.”

I exited out of the app, leaning forward to pocket my phone as the door opened.

“Or him,” Burrows said, throwing his thumb over his shoulder at Mike.

Mike hesitated for only a minute before taking a seat on the floor and grabbing some pizza.

“Going to chip in, rich boy?” Burrows asked.

“Huh?” Mike asked, a slice of pizza dangling from his traitorous fingers.

“You can eat, but it’ll cost ya,” Burrows said, flinging himself back into the couch. “Just saying.”

“On that note,” I said while pulling a fifty from my wallet. I tossed it on the table as I stood. “I’m out. Later, assholes.”

“See?” Burrows’ voice followed me as I left the room. “It’s only cool having friends with money if they pay up.”

TWENTY-NINE



Renee

February bled into March.

News of what happened to Pippa's boyfriend and Callum's friend, Toby, circulated campus, dying down in recent weeks.

Mike texted me weekly. Either sending an emoji or funny picture. I suppose that was his way of letting me know he was still waiting. And me ... I didn't quite know what I was waiting for anymore. I no longer had the desire to use him, but I could sure do with the distraction.

So one Friday morning, in the middle of English lit, I texted him back a place and time.

Which was how we came to be seated in a cozy Italian restaurant just outside of campus.

"Where are you staying?" I asked Mike. I knew he'd leased a house nearby, but I wasn't sure where.

He twirled some spaghetti around his fork. "Mom got me a place about five minutes' drive away. Her idea of trying to keep me out of trouble." He smirked. "She didn't realize it was a mistake until the cab charges showed on my credit card bill."

I smiled as he shoved his fork into his mouth. "At least you're being responsible, you know, not driving home while you're ... drunk." God, just saying the word around him pulled fractured memories to the surface, ones I'd tried so hard to keep smothered.

Leaning over me, breath hot on my neck as his hands opened my thighs.

It would seem that even after he'd gotten what he wanted, he still hadn't lost interest. I realized then that maybe he was serious about this after all. About me.

I returned my attention to my carbonara. "How is your mom?"

"Better," he said, sounding relieved. "Her and my dad are discussing reconciling. For the sake of the business, of course."

"Of course," I said.

"You look beautiful," he said after a few minutes of quiet eating had passed. His soft voice had me looking up at him beneath my lashes as I patted my chin with a napkin.

I was wearing baby pink jeans and a cream peasant blouse, cream heels with satin ribbon that looped around my ankles to match. My hair was down, flowing in natural waves down my back, and I'd kept my makeup light, paying the most attention to my lashes.

"Thank you," I murmured, sliding my eyes over his blue button-down and noticing the way he'd left the top few buttons undone to display a glimpse of his tan skin. "Blue suits you."

He smiled. "You don't need to compliment me."

"No," I said. "I mean it." I lifted my fork, swirling it in the air a little for emphasis. "It makes those blue eyes hard to ignore."

Said eyes seemed to hood at my words, and his hand reached over the table, carefully removing the fork from my fingers and setting it down.

Frozen, I watched as he turned my hand over, dissecting how small it looked compared to his large one. His skin was warm and smooth with only a few rough calluses on his fingertips. "You and Callum, you're definitely over?"

Drawing in a deep breath, I let it carry my words as I exhaled, scared I wouldn't be able to force them out otherwise. But it was time. "Definitely over."

His hand closed around mine, squeezing it gently. "Took a while to let go?"

"You could say that." I laughed, feeling slightly embarrassed as I looked back on all the time I'd spent not letting go. If I was being

honest, I still hadn't completely. But as I said, it was time.

After staring at the strawberry cheesecake on the dessert menu, I went along with Mike's suggestion to share a large piece of rich mud cake. He tried to feed me and laughed good naturedly when I shot him down.

"Will you do this with me again?" he asked, helping me into my pink cardigan as we rose from our small booth by the window. I looked outside, the moon a misshapen semi-circle drowned out by the glow of the stars. When my eyes dropped to the street with words about to leave my mouth, I saw him.

Standing by his car, talking on his phone, Callum looked over before I could move. His eyes narrowed as if he wasn't sure it was me with the distance and window between us. When realization set in, he grinned, shaking his head as he got inside his car.

Mike returned from paying the bill, and I knew he was waiting for an answer. But as I watched Callum's Lexus speed off down Main Street into the night, all I could do was nod.

I didn't think Mike even saw him, something I found myself feeling grateful for, and I wasn't exactly sure why.

Mike drove, ping-ponging questions at me about my parents, music, and classes. For once, I got sick of talking about myself and was relieved when he pulled up outside my dorm building.


He helped me out, ever the gentleman, and pressed his lips to mine before I could process that he was even moving. They were soft, rubbing against mine and trying to pry them open. I laughed, pulling away. "You sneaky shit."

Mike's cheeks tinged a little beneath the glow of the streetlight. "I had to."

"Uh-huh," I said, smiling up at him. "Next time, let a girl get a breath mint in beforehand, especially after dinner."

"It doesn't matter, you taste ..." He looked down at the ground, rubbing the back of his head.

His bashfulness made me move. I grabbed his cheek, tilting it down to press my lips to it. "Thank you for tonight," I whispered, then left him on the sidewalk, smiling the whole way upstairs.



Tuesday after our date, I was in the library when Callum dumped himself into the seat across from me at the table. “Going on dates,” he said. “Another part of your plan?”

Taking my time, I looked up from my textbook, sighing and clicking my pen. “Not that you’d believe me, but no.”

His voice lowered. “Then why haven’t you signed the papers?”

I bit my lip, looking outside the clear windows at the sprawling campus beyond. The air still carried an icy breeze, but the campus was lit with the colors of spring. Flowerbeds and shrubbery bloomed, broken up by the green grass, cream-colored rock pathways, and gray buildings. It amazed me how so much change, so much sadness, could be born from a place capable of so much beauty. “Is Toby okay?”

Callum didn’t respond for a long minute. “As far as I know, yes. Now answer my question.”

Toby had apparently tried to commit suicide or OD’d. I didn’t know the details, only heard the rumors. My heart panged when I thought of Pippa. Headstrong, seemingly unflappable Pippa.

And looking at Callum, the way his dark eyes burned feverishly on me as his jaw worked, my stomach fizzed with bubbles of regret for all that I’d tried to accomplish. I’d made a mistake, and some mistakes couldn’t be repaired, but fuck him for continuing to hammer the nails into the coffin that contained all we’d had.

I began packing up my things when his hand slammed down on top of my book. “Renee.”

“I’ll sign them, okay?” I snapped, blood rising to my cheeks as my frustration and need to get away from him intensified. “If that’s what you really want, I’ll sign them.”

He blinked, slowly dragging his hand back across the table. “I do.” He paused, watching as I packed away my things. “Send them to the address on the form.”

“Will do.” With my short response lingering between us, I grabbed my bag and slung it over my shoulder, leaving him behind.

Back inside my dorm, which was thankfully vacant, I pulled out the black box and the papers inside it that would end this disaster of a marriage.

He might have been the sun I couldn't help but orbit around, but he didn't warm me anymore. Instead, he'd made it his mission to leave me locked inside the chilled shadows of our past.

A place even the strongest could only survive for so long.

Without even reading them, I picked up a pen from the desk and signed them.

THIRTY



Renee

The following weekend, I took Mike up on his offer for a second date. Had I have known what that second date would entail, I might've thought twice before blindly saying yes.

"Where are we going?" I asked, watching the lights from campus fade as we drove through the residential area of Gray Springs.

"Um, well."

I pinned a glare at Mike. "Well?"

"There's kind of this party the team is throwing. I need to go, but I also wanted to take you out."

Realization hit me full force. "My, my." I eyed his profile under the dim interior lighting of his car. "You're a lot more devious than I gave you credit for."

His eyes widened, and he glanced over at me briefly. "Pardon?"

"You know exactly what I mean," I said curtly. "Callum will be there."

Mike's chuckle was drenched in wariness. "He will be."

"You want to rub this in his face, don't you?"

He blanched, then rushed to say, "No." When I remained silent, he sighed. "Okay, maybe a little bit. I'm sorry."

"Don't be," I said, turning my attention to the window again. "Two birds, one stone. Well played." Annoyance trampled over my stomach, but I kept my expression void and said nothing else.

He seemed at a loss for what to say, staying quiet until we'd parked down the street from a house that was lit up like it was the Fourth of July. Cars lined the street, people streaming between them, coming and going from the house, or drinking out the front of it.

Mike took my hand, helping me out of his Maserati before locking it.

Uncertainty traveled down my spine, making my hand tremble in Mike's steady hold. People watched us approach and quickly looked away. Or maybe it was just my paranoia that had me thinking they were watching us.

Inside, the scent of tobacco mixed with that of sweat and alcohol. I resisted the urge to pull my hand from Mike's to scrub my nose, my other holding my tiny Chanel purse.

I almost slipped when one of my black heeled boots stepped in something wet as Mike led me into the throng, clearly searching for his friends. My palms started itching, and still, I let him hold my hand.

It didn't matter anymore. It couldn't matter anymore.

The guys were where I predicted they'd be, outside around a fire pit, girls clamoring for their attention, and even some of the guys from the lacrosse team.

"Well, shit," Quinn muttered, turning away as we approached.

Daisy was with him, and I couldn't bring myself to look at her. Not because she'd kissed my husband, or soon-to-be ex-husband, but because her innocent eyes, combined with the guilt that was pressing down on my shoulders made me feel ten sizes smaller. It took too much strength to keep them pinned back when Callum turned away from Burrows, his eyes growing as they fell on us.

"Look what the cat dragged in," Burrows jeered. Paul punched him in the arm. "Ouch, fuck. It's just a figure of speech, shit."

Callum's nostrils flared and Mike's arm slipped around my shoulders, his hand gently moving my hair aside as Robbo started up conversation with him about some band that was playing downtown next weekend.

Callum's gaze burned, and for reasons I couldn't name, my eyes refused to unlock from his. It felt as if he wouldn't let me.

Mike only left me to get a drink, offering me one before he did, which I declined, and I continued to stand awkwardly by his side once he'd returned.

After what seemed like an hour, my feet were starting to hurt, and Mike suggested we take a seat. There was only one available, and his suggestion implied I sit on his lap as he lowered himself into it. I could feel Callum watching my every move as I shifted on the grass, my eyes skirting around the crowd, looking for an out and finding nothing. Nobody.

"I'll be back in a minute," I finally mumbled to Mike, uncaring if he didn't hear me, and making an escape before he could stop me.

Inside, I could hardly breathe, rising on my toes to peer over heads as I tried to find someplace where I might be able to gather my bearings for five minutes. I didn't dare think of using the bathroom.

A group of girls walked into the kitchen, one of them Kristy, who'd ratted me out to Callum. She stopped laughing at whatever her friend said when she saw me standing there, her head dropping as she whispered something that had her friend glancing over her shoulder.

Screw this, I thought. Spying the laundry room behind them, I pushed past, probably a little too hard, and shut myself inside it.

Right before I managed to lock the door, it was pushed open, and I was shoved back into the wall. "What the fu—"

Callum flipped the lock, stepping close and looming over me like he had a right to. "What the fuck is this?"

"What?" I asked.

"I said enough of the games."

"Jesus Christ, Callum. I know," I sighed. "I sent the papers this morning."

His brows met as he licked his lips. "You did?"

I nodded, trying not to inhale the sharp spice of his cologne.

He blinked three times before taking a step back and running a hand through his thick hair, making it stand all over the place. A scathing laugh rumbled out of him. "So you're not playing at anything? By being here with him?"

"No, I'm not."

In an instant, he shot back over to me, his voice dark and low. “I know you,” he said, eyes darting to my mouth. “Do you really think I’m going to believe that? After all you’ve done?”

My heart’s pounding made my voice shake. “You just don’t want to believe it.”

He laughed, disbelief ringing clear in the sound and his expression. “You don’t want me anymore then? Hmm?” His hand grabbed my hip, fingers shifting over the silken material of my geisha inspired dress. “Have you let him have you again yet?”

My hesitation to answer was answer enough for him. His head ducked, causing mine to tilt and hit the wall with a thud. His nose glided over my neck as he rasped, “Where have your bows gone? I never see you wear them anymore.”

I tried to mask the loud intake of breath I took at the thought of him still paying attention to me. Tried and failed. “In a box in the back of my car.”

Callum hummed, his tongue snaking out to lick my jumping pulse as his hand tightened around my waist. “Have you let him kiss you again?”

“Callum,” I said.

He hissed, head lifting to stare down at me, giving me the full effect of his anger. “You have.”

Before I could say anything, his lips dived into mine, prying them apart savagely, our tongues meeting.

Music pounded through the door, and over it the sound of voices entering the kitchen. I panicked when I heard one voice in particular and tried to push Callum off me.

“...Crazy, man.”

“Callum,” I growled when he refused to move.

“Shhh.” He pressed a hand over my mouth, pushing me into the wall with his lower body as my eyes bulged and his head cocked to the side.

“Is she worth it?” a voice I didn’t recognize asked. “Messing with bro code like that means it’s gotta be worth it, right?”

Mike groaned. “What is this shit with bro code? I didn’t even fuck her. I might have been a dick about it all, but I’d never touch a chick

who'd just vomited her guts up before practically passing out in front of the toilet."

My stomach roiled, and my head swam. Callum's hand tensed over my mouth.

"So you didn't even touch her? You told Cal you did, not to mention that fucking photo."

Callum's chest heaved.

"Because he's a dick who didn't deserve her. Ever since we got here, he started treating her like shit."

The guy chuckled, mumbling something I didn't catch.

Mike continued, "I mean, we made out a little on the bed, yeah, then she started to cry and said she needed to puke, and game over." He laughed. "I knew she was drunk, but I had no idea how bad until then. Her fucking panties were laying on the ground in front of the toilet for Christ's sake. Like she'd lost them after using it. No way. She was too much of a hot mess. After I got her out of her puke-covered dress, I held her while she cried herself to sleep." A heavy silence infiltrated the laundry and the kitchen. Then Mike asked, "Have you seen her? I swear I saw her come inside."

"Nah, man. Try the bathroom down the hall maybe."

"Will do. Oh, and keep all that to yourself. I still haven't found a way to, you know, straighten it out with her yet."

Whoever he was talking to didn't respond verbally.

Callum's hand fell away from my face as he stumbled back into the washing machine.

I slid down the wall to the floor, my chest rising higher and higher with each breath I struggled to take.

"Mouse," Callum started, lowering to the floor in front of me. "Look at me."

I couldn't. I couldn't see anything other than visions of that night sailing through my mind, still unable to connect them all. "I didn't." I sniffed, tears tickling my cheeks before I swiped them away, unaware they'd even leaked from my eyes.

"You didn't," Callum repeated, rising and pacing the laundry like a caged animal.

I watched his boots, their squeak on the tiles helping me to measure my breaths evenly.

I didn't sleep with Mike. I didn't even fool around with Mike. All I did was kiss him. Which was still wrong, but all of this ... it'd all been a lie.

Months. So many months of my life spent believing and trying to make up for something that never happened. The worst part was I should've known myself better. I should've known with certainty that I wouldn't do something like that. And I didn't know a damn thing.

"I have to go." Grabbing my purse that'd fallen next to me at some point, I got up from the floor.

Callum grabbed my hand, halting me before I could open the door. "Wait," he said, exhaling roughly and looking as though he'd just woken up from a nightmare. "Just ... just wait."

Wiping beneath my nose with my wrist, I pulled my hand free and offered a watery smile. "Do you know how many times I've asked you to do that?"

He shook his head, eyes pleading.

"I need out of here. Don't follow me." I pulled my phone from my purse, walking to the front of the house to call a cab from outside.

THIRTY-ONE



Callum

Never in my life had I felt so confused, so betrayed, and so stupid, all at once.

The deep blue of Renee's dress floated behind her as she dashed through people cloistered among the living room, then disappeared down the hall and outside.

My feet couldn't carry me fast enough, and I soon started pushing and shoving my way through people to get to her.

Mike saw me in the hall. And I told my aching fists that we'd deal with him later.

People were scattered throughout the front yard, on the steps, and on the porch, but I didn't care.

"Renee," I yelled as she power walked, almost jogging, to the curb.

"What's going on?" Mike asked behind me.

I stopped, and so did Renee, her phone pressed to her ear as she looked around the street.

Mike grabbed my shirt. "Callum, fucking hell."

I spun around, my fist colliding with his nose and sending blood spraying over his chin and shirt as he stumbled down onto the grass.

I leaped on top of him, grabbing him by the neck of his shirt and wrenching him up to see the fury in my eyes. "You lying piece of manipulative shit," I growled, voice guttural as the words scraped out of my throat. "You had the hide to tell me, to tell her, that you had

your way with ...” Unable to finish, I shoved him to the ground, my fists hurtling into his jaw and cheekbone, one after another until Robbo and Paul pulled me off him.

“It wasn’t like that,” Mike wheezed, wincing as he rolled over on the grass to spit blood from his mouth.

I strained against Robbo and Paul’s hold, roaring at the piece of filth. “You’re fucking dead, you hear me? Dead.”

“There’s more to it than that, Cal. I’m sorry I fucked it all up. Big time, but I never actually planned to. It just happened.”

“It just fucking happened? I’ll fucking gut—”

“Hey, hey. Come on.” Paul grabbed my face. “Let’s go get a drink, settle down a bit, yeah?”

“I don’t want a fucking drink,” I said, wrenching myself from his iron clad hold. “I want to fucking kill him.” My head was spinning, breath hurtling out of me faster than I could inhale it.

“We know, man. We know.” Robbo released me when we saw Mike down the street, a fading silhouette climbing into his car.

Then I saw her, still standing by the curb. My limbs loosened, my heartbeat dropping as my anger fell and made way for waves of insurmountable regret.

Frozen, she stood. Her green eyes like watery beacons as she stared at me. A cab pulled up, and before I could force my numb body to move, she was climbing inside, and it was driving down the street.



The floor beneath me seemed to drop and morph every time my feet moved over it.

Back and forth they went, my hand tugging furiously at my hair as every fucking thing that’d transpired that night disrupted the reality I’d once thought so real.

It wasn’t. Not all of it, anyway.

Sleep curled its warm embrace around me sometime after four in the morning, but it didn't stay long.

The things I did, the things she didn't do, and the things she *did* do, all tearing apart my mind. Coffee permeated the air as I made cup after cup and stared out the floor-to-ceiling windows in the living room.

In the end, the only conclusion I came to was that we'd both fucked up. Everything.

I knew why I had. But Renee ... although she didn't sleep with him, why did she even let him that close?

We made out a little, yeah...

For fuck's sake, *why?*

One thing was for certain—I wouldn't get any answers by locking myself inside my apartment. My phone beeped in the bedroom, and I all but leaped over the couch, jogging down the hall to get it.

It was a text from my lawyer, confirming an appointment for next Saturday morning.

I pulled up his number, hitting the loudspeaker button as I rummaged through my drawers for a change of clothes.

His secretary put me straight through. "I've finally got the papers. I was going to call you—"

"No need. Tear them up." I pulled off my shirt, chucking a fresh one on.

A booming silence, followed by, "What? I'm not sure—"

"You heard me." My teeth clamped together.

He sputtered, "But it's just about finalized."

"Is it?" I asked, impatience funneling through me as I grabbed my wallet. "Finalized?"

"Well, no, but—"

"Good. Leave it be and you'll still get paid. I'll drop the money off later this week. Thanks for your time." I grabbed my phone, disconnecting the call as I went to the bathroom to freshen up.

THIRTY-TWO



Renee

Tears leaked from my eyes all night, leaving red puffy pillows beneath them when the sun ascended into a blue sky. I padded down the hall after my shower, feeling an odd sort of detachment from myself.

I'd heard of people getting black-out drunk to the point of not remembering a thing, and I knew that was what had happened, yet I'd ignored that part of me that said to dig deeper. That maybe I hadn't gone that far.

Or had I? Perhaps my actions, my desperation to prove it in ways that *could* be proved, was that part of me screaming to be heard. Regardless, I'd done things I didn't think myself capable of. That night with Mike, and in the months afterward.

My excuse could be that I was a spoiled brat, used to getting what I wanted at any cost, but I knew better. When you have no way of fixing something and have nothing left to lose, failure seems incomprehensible. Leaving desperation your only companion.

Wrapping my robe tighter around me, I closed the door to our dorm, ignoring Hannah who laid sprawled over her bed, chatting on her phone. I put my caddy away and ran a comb through my wet hair, wishing I had the energy to blow-dry it, but I was depleted. I needed coffee and away from this place. For just a little while.

Unfortunately, that couldn't happen with the end of the school year approaching.

My phone rang on my dresser. I ignored it, knowing it was probably Mike. He'd called me ten times since last night, but I didn't want to hear it. Not yet. Possibly not ever.

I swiped some lotion on, paying attention to the puffiness beneath my eyes, then put a bit of mascara on as my phone lit up again.

Hannah grunted with annoyance, mumbling something to whoever she was speaking to on the other end of her call. Taking my time because I was feeling unnaturally petty this morning, I dragged myself over to my dresser and snatched my phone to turn it off.

It wasn't Mike's name on the screen, though. It was Callum's.

My thumb hovered, then hit accept. "What?" I asked quietly.

"I'm outside, that's what. Let me up."

I looked over at Hannah. "I can't do that."

"You can't, or you don't want to?" He sighed when I didn't answer. "Please, just give me ten minutes."

With a huff, I said, "You have five." I tossed my phone down and went downstairs to let him in.

Callum was leaning against the doors. I opened them without warning, and he almost stumbled inside. "Mouse."

"Come on, I'm not staying down here looking like this," I said, catching his smirk as I turned back for the stairs. "My roommate's here," I said right before I swung open the door, Hannah turned and gaped at us, eyes whipping between Callum and me.

"Uh, gotta go," she said to her friend, hanging up the phone.

Callum gave her a curt nod as I took a seat on my bed, and Hannah blushed before muttering something about needing to go to the library.

We waited until she'd put her shoes on and grabbed her bag, the door shutting behind her as Callum navigated the small space between our beds. He picked up some papers, books, and opened and closed my drawers.

"Stop it."

With a toe-curling grin lifting his full lips, he came forward, knees bumping into my bed as he stared down at me. "Where are all your things?"

“Storage.”

“We need to talk.”

I wrapped my arms around my middle. “So talk.”

He reached over, skating a finger down my cheek, then curling it around a damp piece of my hair. “You’re tired.”

“That’s college life for you.”

He huffed, losing his hold on my hair when I scooted back toward the wall. “I don’t even know where to start.”

I nodded, linking my fingers together in my lap over my pink fluffy robe. “Yeah.”

He took a seat on the edge of the bed, his eyes swimming with a million fleeting thoughts. I looked away. “Maybe we could start with you telling me how you ended up with Mike in that room in the first place?”

Memories whirled and dissipated, my teeth sliding over my bottom lip as I stared at my fidgeting hands. “I was in there to use the bathroom.”

Silence rained down on us.

“How about ...” He cleared his throat. “How you ended up kissing him?”

That much I did remember, and even though it was too little too late, I still let the truth fall past my lips. “I remember staring at my reflection in the bathroom, and I saw him in the mirror. I was that drunk, I must’ve left the door open.” I shook my head, frowning. “He just ... kind of did it. One second, I was looking at him, I think I was laughing, and the next, he was kissing me.” A withering smile hitched my lips, my voice catching. “I remember telling him he couldn’t do that. We laughed, and I ... don’t know. I was upset. Angry.”

Callum sat stone still, eyes down cast. “With me?”

“Yes,” I whispered. “So frustrated, scared, and worried. It felt like ...”

“Like what?” He looked up, catching my gaze.

My lips wobbled, and I blew out a long breath. “Like you were eventually going to forget all about me. It was already happening, and I got sick of watching it. Watching the girls touch you. Sick of feeling helpless to stop it. I was just another forgotten trophy wife in the making, and that killed me.”

“Renee, no. I was an idiot. I know that, and I’m sorry.” Callum groaned. “It’s no excuse, but I’d just started with the team. It was all new and different, so much more than I could’ve anticipated. I just needed time.”

I sniffed, my smile sad. “I know. I think I even knew it then, but I’ve always been selfish.”

“So ...” He paused, weighing his next words for a beat. “You kissed him to get back at me?”

My eyes shut to keep the wetness at bay. “I think so. To take back some control maybe. I’m not sure. All I know is that I was hurting, way too drunk, and I lashed out.” I opened my eyes. “I’m sorry.”

“You haven’t ...” He swallowed, his voice thick as he said, “There’s been no one?”

“No one,” I confirmed. “Ever.”

His head dropped into his hands. “Fuck.”

We let the silence infiltrate once more, my head falling back against the brick wall as I stared over at the window by Hannah’s bed. The sun was shining. Luminous light spilled into the room in slanted rays that made dust motes dance around the fabrics in the room.

“There’s no way out from here,” I said, voice quiet.

Callum moved, his face in front of mine and filled with enough determination, hurt, and ... affection to make my mouth fall open. “There’s always a way out.”

I coughed out a wet laugh. “We’ve both blocked every exit, like the experts we are.” I grinned at him, whispering, “We’re stubborn like that.”

His eyes slid to my mouth, and a small smile softened them. “I know.” He leaned forward, lips moving for my forehead. My blood seized as their smooth warmth met my skin. “So what do you do when there’s nothing left, nothing but love?”

I closed my eyes as soon as that word reached my ears, my heart, my soul. Unable to bear hearing it after all this time. “Nothing.”

Callum sat back on his haunches and took my face in his hands. His scent, the mint from his toothpaste on his breath, clouded everything. “We made vows.”

“And we broke them,” I reminded him.

He’d broken me in ways that were only just starting to catch up with me.

“Then let’s see if we can fix it.”

My heart cracked at the eager desperation in those brown depths. What I would’ve given, sold, ruined to see that mere months ago.

On a shaken whisper, I said, “Vows are only words. Words that hold no weight without trust.” You could love someone until your final breath, but unless you could trust them, love wouldn’t let you keep them.

“We can learn to trust again,” Callum said. “And I trust you, I do.” He nodded as if that would make me believe him.

And therein lay the problem—I wasn’t sure if I could ever believe him again. Not after what had happened to cause me to lose belief in myself. “You don’t, and you’ve proven that.”

He dropped his hands. “The evidence was there, Renee. What did you expect me to do?”

“Not nearly all the things that you did,” I said before I could stop myself. Sighing, I crawled off the bed and opened the door. “I’ve signed the papers, and I really am sorry. We’ll tell our parents when we get home for summer break if you want.”

He was standing on the rug in the middle of the room.

“Callum.”

“I don’t want that,” he said with a quiet rasp.

Knowing it would do me no good to look at him, I kept my gaze trained on his black boots. “Please, this is what I want.”

“Not long ago, I was all that you wanted.”

I did look at him then, eyes burning with tears. “What we want isn’t always good for us, or what we should have in the end, and this is why I’m asking you to leave.”

With his thumb swiping over his bottom lip, he stared down at the ground a long moment, then snapped his gaze to me as he strode to the door. “You’ll change your mind,” he whispered into the top of my hair.

I slammed the door behind him, then slid beneath the safety of my duvet.



It hits you in small, sharp doses. Splitting you apart and tearing slowly until you're fraying at the seams.

And when I was left in tatters, there was only one thing to do. The only thing I could do.

Stitch. Repair, reform, and create magic from something that was nothing but rags.

For that was what I needed. Nothing short of magic could help me. But magic was bound by strength and that was hard to come by when you'd overindulged yourself as I had.

The packages arrived daily at first. Gift vouchers to some of my favorite retailers and online fabric suppliers.

Then came the flowers, jewelry, and a set of keys to his apartment.

Our apartment, it had said on the note.

As the weeks dragged on, I started handing them all off to Hannah. All of it except for the keys. I stuffed those in a lock box I kept hidden between the wall and my mattress with other sentimental items. Such as our wedding photos, the locket that once housed a spider, and my brooch.

I didn't want his presents, and if I was being brutally honest with myself, I wasn't even sure if I wanted him. So I kept studying and kept ignoring his texts and the lingering looks he sent me if I happened to see him on campus.

By the end of May, summer fell over Gray Springs in a suffocating blanket, making everyone eager to finish the year and leave.

I was in the cafeteria when he finally decided to corner me. I didn't know if it'd ever occurred to him before then that actually talking to me might work better than trying to appeal to my greed.

He stopped at the table where I was seated. “The silent treatment. Another one of your games?”

I slammed my drink down on the table, getting up and tossing it into my handbag before grabbing my sandwich.

“Wait, I was kidding.”

“Not funny and not waiting. Enjoy your summer.” I made haste out the doors, the heat engulfing me in its dizzying embrace. In an instant, he was in front of me. I stopped, rolling my eyes. “Move, already.”

“No.”

I squinted at him, my eyes watering without my sunglasses thanks to the position of the midafternoon sun. “Stubborn asshole.”

“Listen,” he said, ignoring my frustration as he stepped closer. “I need to intern for the company over summer, so I won’t be around as much.”

“Good,” I clipped. “I’m thinking of going to Fiji with my mom anyway. Is that all? I really want to eat now.”

Callum’s brows knitted. “You’re avoiding me. And I want you to stop.”

I scoffed. “No, but what I am doing is trying to move on with my life. Which, if I remember correctly, is exactly what you wanted me to do not long ago.” I skirted around him. “Let me know when you’re free, and we’ll tell our parents. Bye.”

He caught up to me again. “Renee, fuck. Haven’t you been getting any of my gifts?”

“Yes. I’m sure Hannah will be thrilled if you keep sending them. She wants new shoes to match the Prada bag.”

A loud laugh barked out of him. “Jesus.”

My dorm building came into view, close yet too fucking far away.

He stopped walking as I neared the steps. “I’ll stop sending them, but you can’t ignore me forever.”

I smirked at him over my shoulder. “Is that a challenge?”

The answering smirk he gave me haunted me all the way upstairs until I slammed the door and finally ate my lunch.

THIRTY-THREE



Callum

Driving home, a yawn tore out of me, the overgrown trees and rock-flecked road stretching ahead in a line that never seemed to end.

Shame had become my new friend, moving in and making itself at home, rendering me incapable of making one confident decision. Sending Renee gifts was a cowardly attempt at redemption, but I could hardly face my own reflection after what I'd done, let alone face her with the kind of determination she deserved.

And though I knew she deserved far better than me, I still wasn't capable of completely submitting to defeat. Didn't think I ever would be.

I was stuck at a crossroads of my own making. The problem was, all roads led to her. And despite all my sickening attempts to prove otherwise—to her and to myself—they always would.

I picked up my coffee cup from the center console, wincing when I realized it was empty, then set it down as my phone rang through the speakers of the car.

"Hi, I'll be home in ten," I told my mom.

She didn't say anything.

"Mom?" I asked, frowning down at the display quickly.

"I'm here, one second." A door shut in the background, her voice barely above a whisper as she said, "I called to warn you."

My frown turned into an uneasy smile. "Of?"

"Your father and I, we know what you did."

She could be talking about so many things. Slowly, I blinked, hitting the brakes and turning into town. “Care to elaborate?”

“I’m not happy, in fact”—she sighed—“I’m really, really heartbroken.”

I bit my lip to keep a laugh at bay. “And what’s caused this?”

“You and Renee. Rosa found a sticky note in Renee’s bedroom yesterday when she was giving it a thorough clean before she arrived home for the summer.”

My foot eased off the gas, my face paling. I cleared my throat. “A sticky note?”

“You’re married.”

Fuck.

I swiped a hand over my face, then pulled off the road half a mile out from home, dirt spraying, rocks pelting, as the car came to a sudden stop.

“Cal? Did you hear me?”

“Yeah,” I said, shaking my head as a tired laugh left me. “I heard you.”

Silence filled the car, the afternoon sun beating down over the road and threatening to penetrate my tinted windows with its force.

“You’re not denying it.”

“What’s the point?” I said as soon as I thought it.

“Your father is mad, Callum. Like I don’t even know what to do with him kind of mad. The kind of mad we rarely ever see.”

“I’m sorry.”

She urged on a whisper, “Being sorry will do nothing, get home and help me fix this.”

“Will you forgive me, us, then?”

A shrill laugh filled my car, then she hung up.

Cursing repetitively, I pinched the bridge of my nose as I tried to think of what to do next. There was no point in avoiding this, and we were fools to believe we could carry on with it for so long and think that no one would ever find out.

I pulled up Renee’s number as I turned back out onto the road. As expected, it rang out. I dialed again as I turned into my driveway, the shade from the leaning trees and the car’s air conditioning doing nothing to stop the sweat from beading on my neck and forehead.

No answer.

Parking, I snatched my phone, and I got out of the car, leaving my bags in the trunk.

Dad was in his office, and I didn't even get two raps on the door before he barked, "In."

He didn't look up from his laptop as he waved a hand to the olive green leather armchair that sat in the corner of his office.

I sat, and his head rose, his eyes full of so much rage that my hands clenched together as I struggled to hold his gaze, listening without choice as he instantly laid into me.

"... company in dire situation."

"How?" I interrupted his tirade. Not to be a smartass, but because I genuinely wanted to know.

He slammed his laptop closed. "Clients will ask why my teenage son was allowed to run off into the sunset and wed his girlfriend right under our noses, yet none of us knew. Do you know how bad this makes us look?"

I understood what he was saying. But that was the thing about being a teenager. Just a few years could make all the difference. Back then, we thought we knew enough, or perhaps we didn't care enough. Now, with adulthood bearing down on us as each month passed, clarity and understanding made me empathize with what was being said.

"If we can't control our own children, then how the hell do they expect us to control their millions?"

Funnily enough, after all that'd happened, and all that still might come, I couldn't bring myself to regret a single moment of those years, those hours, or those minutes that I spent with Renee. Most assuredly not the day we promised forever. Just us.

"Weren't you hoping we'd one day get married?" I drawled, finally able to relax a little into the plush leather.

"Yes, one fucking day," my dad spat, raking a hand through his graying hair. "You two were already a couple. That was more than we could've hoped for. I'm not so much an asshole as to push you into something as serious as marriage before you're ready for it."

He got up, his hair a disheveled mess as he grabbed the decanter and poured himself a drink at the mini bar on the side of the

room. He wasn't a daytime drinker, but I kept my mouth shut, eyeing the disarray that was his desk. Papers were everywhere, some had fallen to the floor, and two empty coffee mugs sat precariously near the edge of the mahogany wood desk.

"I don't know what you want me to do or say here," I finally said, feeling his eyes on me as he tossed back his drink.

He laughed, the sound bitter and short as he moved to lean against the front of his desk. Papers crumpled behind him, but he didn't care. He crossed his arms, staring down at me with a sardonic grin that looked much like some of my own, and had my stomach tightening.

"That internship ... you're doing it in Beijing."

Shooting up from my chair, I balked. "What? Why?"

I watched as his face fell. "Some dodgy shit is happening there, and I want eyes on it."

I shook my head. "I'm the worst person to send. You should send people who know what they're doing."

"I have. They arrived last week, but you're joining them. All you need to do is play the prodigal son who's interested in learning the ropes and keep your eyes and ears to the ground."

When I went to object again, he held up a finger, his tone curt. "It's not up for debate or discussion. You're going."

My mouth dropped open, and I snapped it closed, teeth gritting. Renee would be home today or maybe tomorrow, I didn't know. I just knew that I'd planned to make the most of this time, and he was ruining those plans before I'd even begun planning them. "I can't," I tried one more time, almost pleading as I stared at him.

His tone didn't soften, and his gaze didn't waver. "Yes, you damn well can. And after what you've done, you will."

THIRTY-FOUR



Renee

Arriving home, I was immediately accosted by my mother before I'd stepped one foot out of the car. Words spewed from her mouth in an unintelligible flow of fury.

How could you. You just had to steal the one thing, the one fucking thing, I've been looking forward to for years. To spite me, to make sure I had no part in it.

She'd cancelled our trip and had barely spoken to me in the weeks I'd been home. I had half a mind to go someplace else. Except there was no place else for me to go. They'd taken my credit card, capped my spending allowance, and my father wouldn't even look at me. That was if he was even home.

Mom blamed me for that, too. Apparently, he was under enough stress before I decided to unleash this bomb upon them and ruin their dreams. Her dramatic words would've made me laugh if she wasn't being completely serious.

To make matters worse, Lucinda and Kian hadn't been over once since I arrived home. No dinners, no cocktails outside on the back porch that always ended up with them in fits of giggles over nothing.

Nothing. It was as if we really had ruined everything.

We. I scoffed, flipping through clothing racks in a vintage designer shop downtown. Callum wasn't here. His internship, the

one I thought meant he'd at least be home sometimes and I'd need to find ways to avoid him, was in Beijing.

That was what I'd been told, and I wasn't about to ask questions. I could only endure my mother's stink eye and my father's intimidating silence for so long. Still, it seemed unfair that I was left behind to deal with the fallout. No matter that I knew he would've much preferred to be here, too.

It was for the best, and it would've been fine, except now, that impossible and ever-moving force seemed intent on catching up with me. I'd be damned if I let it. I'd come this far, and I could keep going. He'd broken my heart too many times to count, but I wouldn't let him break me.

So there I was, avoiding not only that, but the cloud of tension that radiated between my mother and myself with a little early back to school shopping, when I ran into someone I didn't expect to see.

"Renee," a familiar voice said with a gasp, a stream of long black hair appearing in my peripheral.

Hilda.

Stunned, I dropped my hand away from the velvet 1970s gown. It smacked to my side as I blinked sporadically. "Uh, hi." I shifted a smile into place, trying to mask my shock and the worry that still ate at me from years ago.

Hilda smiled, her white teeth flashing behind glossed lips. Her face had thinned out, making her high cheekbones erupt in a way that drew your eye and made you think of a Victoria's Secret lingerie model. "I was hoping I'd run into you one of these summers."

I couldn't help but ask, "Why?"

She shifted her bag over her shoulder, stepping closer to me and giving me the full effect of her hazel eyes. "To apologize, I guess." A nervous laugh snuck out. "I'm sorry I was such a moody thing in high school."

"Oh." I sucked in a breath, weighing her words. *She's being nice*, I told myself in an effort to rein in my inner bitch. "You weren't that bad."

"Don't even try that," she said, waving her hand with another laugh. "Besides, the Renee I knew told it like it was. Don't tell me you've changed that much."

I laughed, tucking some hair behind my ear. “No need to worry about that.”

Her smile faded, her teeth catching her lip. “I was seeing this guy when I started at Emington, and when we broke up, I, well, I fell apart.” Wetness filled her eyes, but she beamed once more. “Anyway, I was such a mess, my parents forced me to start seeing someone, or else they’d pull my tuition.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, at a loss for what else to say.

“It turned out to be a blessing. It would seem I have a lot of, um, insecurities. They can result in mood swings, severe resentment, and other nasty things.”

I nodded, thinking that made sense as I looked back on the girl I once knew. A girl who seemed a world away from the one standing before me. “I’m glad it’s worked out, then.”

Staring at me a long moment, she shook her head. “Me too. Hey, I’d love to grab a coffee, maybe catch up.” She shifted her bag over her shoulder again. “You can tell me all about Gray Springs, Callum, and what I’m sure is the start of a fantastic career in design.”

I didn’t want to talk about any of those things. Not only because I had nothing good to share, but because looking at her, the eager, trusting light in her pretty eyes and that hopeful smile, I just ... couldn’t. “I’m sorry, but I need to get home. My mom is expecting me.”

Without looking at her, I stormed out of the store and went straight to the parking lot.



My phone buzzed for the sixth time that day on my dresser, a sound I shouldn’t have heard over the noise of my sewing machine. I ignored it—ignored him—just like I’d managed to do all summer.

Before leaving school, I’d pulled out the machine from beneath my dorm room bed and hauled it into the back of my car. I thought

it'd be a good distraction and at the time had no idea how much I'd need it.

"Renee," my mother said, knocking lightly on my door. "Come downstairs please."

She didn't wait for me to look up from the half-pleated skirt before disappearing. Pulling it out, I tied off the thread, carefully draping the skirt over the back of my chair after turning the machine off.

They were seated in the living room. The TV was off, and my father's phone perched on his knee as he sat statue-still beside my mother.

I took a seat on the opposite couch, clasping my hands over my knees, not daring to talk before they did. The tick of the old grandfather clock made the hairs on my arms rise, my feet itching to fidget over the oriental woven rug beneath them.

My father broke the silence. "We've spoken with Kian and Lucinda, and they've informed Callum."

I blinked. "Informed him of what?"

My father swung his gaze up from the floor, leveling me with a look that made me sink back into the couch. "Of your wedding. You will keep this quiet." He raised a brow. "Seeing as you two have apparently managed to do so for this long, you shouldn't find it too taxing."

I waited, my scattered thoughts trying to connect the words he wasn't saying.

"You'll get married again," Mom supplied matter-of-factly. "If news gets out, we'll say the first one was intimate. Family only. Arranged to better the company's future."

"But it shouldn't because you'll keep your traps shut," my father clipped, leaning forward and tossing his phone to the coffee table. "Being that it's the end of summer, we'll give you until next summer to wrap your spoiled little heads around the idea." A look at my mother had him adding, "It'll also give Valery and Lucinda adequate time to organize everything to their liking."

My mother gave him a thankful smile, and my spine straightened.

"This is why we did it," I snapped, losing sight of the fact we weren't even together anymore. "This ..." I waved a finger between

them. “We didn’t want to get married under anyone else’s terms but our own.”

“And I suppose you also dislike the terms you’ve lived by all your life?” My dad arched a brow. “The ones that allow you to buy whatever you wish, do whatever you like—to a certain degree—and grant you opportunities for your future others could only dream of?”

My shoulders drooped, and my mother tsked. Even pissed off, she had an uncanny eye for bad posture.

I pulled them back, then stood. “Is that a threat?”

My father leaned back into the couch, offering a grim smile. “You’re free to do as you wish, but don’t come crying to me when you can’t afford to do so.” At the paling of my face, he sighed. “Renee, is it really too much to ask for? Come on, you’re both almost adults now. Be reasonable. A beautiful wedding isn’t something to gripe about.”

He was right, but he didn’t know. I sniffed, looking down at the rug, defeated. Perhaps the only way to stop this train wreck was with the truth. “I didn’t care about it then, and I still don’t. We aren’t even—”

“Enough,” my father said, standing and buttoning his suit jacket. “Your mother will be in contact about it during the new school year. Make sure you play nice.” With a sharp look at me, he grabbed his phone and left the room. “Enjoy your last few days at home.”

I looked at my mom, who was biting her bottom lip as she stared at a perfectly stacked set of coffee table books. “Will this make you happy?” I snapped, feeling so many things yet unable to gather any of them into one feeling or into the right words.

She looked up at me, a hesitant smile tilting her red lips. “Oh, I’m still not ready to forgive you.” She stood, plucking at her pencil skirt. “But it’s a start.”

Filled with disbelief, I watched as she left. I collapsed back into the couch, wondering what Callum would make of all this. Then I remembered, they’d apparently informed him.

He knew and obviously hadn’t put up much of a fight or told them the truth.

He’d left that up to me.

The dark olive walls seemed to swell. The room, this entire house, becoming too small. I dragged myself upstairs, turning on the TV in my room as loud as I could get away with, then stripped out of my clothes.

In my bathroom, I yanked open the shower door and turned the taps until the water rained down on me in scalding jets.

Grabbing my loofah, I held it to my mouth, slid down the cold tiled wall, and screamed.

THIRTY-FIVE



Renee

I left home the next day and stayed in a cheap hotel, binge eating and watching reruns on TV until I could gain access to my dorm room the following morning.

I made a mental note to talk to my parents—especially while they thought they’d won with this whole wedding fiasco—about raising the limit on my checking account. With two years still left at Gray Springs, I couldn’t see myself surviving in a space smaller than my bathroom back home, and with a girl who no doubt resented my mere existence. It was time I finally got my own apartment.

The team had a preseason away game the first weekend back, and I hadn’t seen Callum since I ran into him outside the library a few days prior. He’d been with a friend, and I’d kept walking as soon as he saw me. He’d called after me but didn’t follow.

Confusion, anger, and a restlessness I couldn’t name took hold, making the days fly by, and the nights drag on as I stared at the popcorn ceiling, listening to Hannah mumble in her sleep.

One morning, I found myself sitting in my car outside the Bean Stream, a small café on Main Street, staring at the car parked in front of me when I saw Pippa walking by.

She’d stopped dead in her tracks, her back stiffening as though she’d seen a ghost.

There was no ghost, just her boyfriend, or maybe ex-boyfriend, Toby.

Feeling dumbstruck and wanting to help, even if it was partially to distract myself from my own problems for a little while, I'd wound the window down and told her to get in, taking her to school.

She'd been tight lipped about Toby, what had happened with him overdosing months ago, and what'd happened with them since. Not that I could blame her. And as I left her standing outside the science building, I wondered if that'd be the last I'd see of her for a while, or if we'd happen to cross paths again.

We didn't, so a few weeks later, I took it upon myself to visit the ice-cream parlor she worked at under the guise of needing someone to go shopping with. She took the bait, but my plans were foiled by a dog. I found it sad really, that my life had deconstructed piece by piece in a way that made rescuing some stray, probably flea ridden, dog the highlight of my week.

Perhaps it was the universe's way of saying I'd eventually have to deal with this compounding pain that doubled each time I heard or thought of his name, instead of trying to run away from it. I wasn't sure, but I didn't agree with the universe. Not one bit.

Besides, thinking back to when I saw Hilda over the summer, I didn't know if what I was seeking was a friend. Even if Pippa was different from any so-called friends I'd had in the past.

Thanksgiving had recently come and gone, and my refusal to go home was met with, "That's fine. We're going out of town for a mini vacay."

Friends. Men. Family.

Time and time again, I was shown how useless they were and how alone I was.

I kicked the vending machine, cursing as pain flared in my big toe. "Stupid mother of a fucking thing." I winced, leaning against the wall beside it to remove my black leather ballet flat. "Goddamn it," I said quietly, eyeing the scuff mark on the toe of the shoe. "Of course, I ruin a two-hundred-dollar pair of shoes right now."

"Is there ever a good time to ruin a two-hundred-dollar pair of shoes?"

I fell to my butt in shock, wedging my shoe back over my throbbing toe as my eyes drifted up Pippa's tanned legs. Her green eyes were filled with humor, but the wry smile had me thinking she found my apparent state of distress a little alarming.

"Hey," I said, dropping my gaze to the ground and laughing. "Don't mind me, just having the typical argument with a vending machine."

"Ah," Pippa said. "Yeah, I find myself in a similar position on a monthly basis."

I laughed again, unable to stop it, and then tears started running down my cheeks. "Ugh, shit."

Pippa crouched down in front of me. "You okay?"

"No, this mascara isn't waterproof," I mumbled, swiping furiously at my cheeks. "Make it stop, please."

"Whoa." Pippa grabbed my cheeks, laughing a little. Looking at me as water cascaded down my face, tickling my lips and chin, she murmured, "Come on."

Pulling me off the ground, she steered me out the back entrance of the cafeteria and into the fading sunlight.

"Where are we going?" I asked as I kept my head down and tried to blink away the tears.

"You'll see. I don't know what's going on," she said, once we'd left campus and were crossing the street, "but maybe it'll help if you tell me."

My heart almost climbed out of my mouth when I saw the apartment building we were headed toward, but then Pippa directed me inside an older building next door. It was smaller and had no elevator, but after climbing two sets of stairs and being led inside, I realized why I hadn't seen her around the girl's dorms lately.

She had her own place.

It wasn't huge, but the living area was spacious, the late glow of the sun streaming inside and bouncing off the white walls and old, comfortable looking couches.

"Sit," she said, leaving me to fall onto one of said couches as she left the room.

I stared at the small flat-screen TV, glad that my reflection couldn't be made out. My cheeks felt sticky, my heartrate was taking

forever to slow, and my nose was stuffed.

Pippa returned with a tub of Ben and Jerry's and a box of tissues. "Here." She dumped them onto the small wooden coffee table in front of me, then went to the matching TV unit and opened a drawer, plucking out a DVD a moment later.

I leaned forward, pulling a handful of tissues free from the box and checking the ice-cream flavor as I blew my nose. Loudly and uncaring. It was mint. "Don't you ever get sick of ice cream?"

Pippa straightened, tossing the DVD case on the TV unit before dumping herself onto the other side of the couch. "Funnily enough, nope." She flicked through the channels until the opening credits started. "Callum?" She tossed the remote and looked over at me.

I nodded. "Among other things."

Pippa's gaze burned into my profile as I stared at the screen. "Finally caught up with you, huh?"

"I guess so," I said, biting my trembling lip as my eyes shut over more looming tears.

"Jesus Christ, let it out." Pippa pulled me to her. "Let it out and then let Noah make you feel better."

"Noah?" I asked, sniffing.

"Dear God, you've never watched *The Notebook*?"

When I didn't say anything, she mumbled, "Oh, man. You are going to feel like a brand-new woman after this."



"Wow," I breathed.

"Yup."

I slapped my cheeks. "Like, wow."

"Yup," Pippa repeated.

"I've used all your tissues," I said, eyeing the pile around me.

Pippa laughed. "Feel a bit better?"

I gave her a cautious look. "If I say yes, will you kick me out?"

She laughed again, then got up to get her ringing phone. “Toby,” she said to me. “I’ll be back in a second.”

I started gathering the clumps of tissues surrounding me, getting up to toss them into the small trash can I found beneath the kitchen sink. While I waited for Pippa to finish on the phone, I looked around.

I was eyeing her bathroom with envy—not that it was state of the art, but it was a huge step up from the communal bathroom in the dorms—when I heard her say goodbye, giggle, say goodbye again, and then her footsteps behind me.

“You guys are back together, I take it?”

“We are,” she said, relief and something akin to happiness in her voice.

“That’s good.” I sighed, turning around and following her back into the living room.

“Wanna tell me all of what happened yet?”

I didn’t know if I could, or if I wanted to, but looking into her green eyes as she settled cross-legged on the couch next to me, I didn’t find a trace of malice or curiosity. Only concern. Which had me reaching for the tissues again as I told her everything.

And I mean everything. From the time I first met Callum, to our runaway wedding, to the trouble I had letting go when we started college. The doubts, fights, and what happened with Mike. Or what had supposedly happened with Mike. And then I told her what’d transpired since.

The cussing she let loose was so colorful, I snort-laughed, blubbering into a scrunched ball of tissues.

The moon had appeared, shining alongside the stars through the opened curtains. Pippa stared at me a long while, her mouth opening and closing. “I ... well, shit.”

“I know,” I said, swiping my nose. “It’s all too ...” I thought of a word to describe it, but all that came to mind was, “Too much.”

“I’ll say,” she said, then took my hand in hers. “I like Callum, but he’s a dick, and there’s no excusing that. And married? Holy ever-loving hell.”

“You can’t tell anyone about that,” I said, panic bubbling when I realized I’d said those words out loud to someone new. Regardless

of whether I thought I could trust her, it still terrified me after keeping them locked inside for so long.

Pippa gave me the kind of stink eye that said she was offended I'd even had to say that.

I smiled. "Thank you."

"Still," she said, a hesitant lilt to her voice now. "He acted out thinking you'd, well, had sex, or at the very least, messed around with another guy."

A pitiful sound left me. "But I did. I kissed him, and I don't know, the details are murky, but I know there was some touching on his part."

Pippa's lips thinned in response. "Mike took advantage."

He had, but I'd never pin the blame solely on him. "I messed up, but shit, I never thought I'd do something like that."

"You were drunk, Callum kept hurting you, and it seems like somehow you knew," she said, her voice softening. "You knew that you would've only taken it so far. You just got too plastered to remember how far that was."

My hands scrubbed over my face, fingers coming away with black smudges from my mascara. "Do you know how horrifying that is? Having no memory of something? Have you ever been that drunk?"

Of course, she hadn't. Which was confirmed with a small jerk of her head. "It'd freak me out, though. For sure."

"Yep," I said, my lips cracking around the word.

We sat in silence a long while, listening to the quiet strain of her TV playing the DVD menu.

"But your roommate giving him a blow job," Pippa eventually said, followed by a guffaw. "I can't even with that."

"Uh-huh." Flinging myself back into the soft, worn couch, I looked around her living room as a sigh slowly eased the tension from my shoulders. "I need a place of my own. Stat."

Pippa hummed, and when I looked over at her, a mischievous twinkle filled her green orbs. She leaned forward a little, eyeing me up and down. "How do you feel about cleanliness?"

THIRTY-SIX



Callum

I tried to listen as Coach bellowed orders at us while my mind unraveled and my head pounded.

The sleepless nights started in Beijing, and they'd followed me back home. The office there was air tight, and I wasn't sure what my father even wanted me to look out for. It was hard to get involved in anything when I was their designated coffee and lunch collector, relegated the lowliest of tasks.

For three months, I did as I was told, keeping my mouth shut and my ears and eyes open. I was looked upon with no suspicion, only impatience. My best guess was that no one wanted one of the CEO's kids running around, reporting on their business.

Yet that was what I did. Much to my father's satisfaction. I'd told him anything and everything I thought might be useful from the sidelong glances that lasted too long to the locked room on the top floor of the sky-high building. I had no idea if any of it would prove helpful, but my father seemed grateful for any detail and had told me to keep it up.

Then one day, before he hung up the phone, he decided to leave me reeling.

There'd be another wedding, and all was going ahead for next summer.

Renee continued to dodge my calls, and maybe it was for the best. How could I ask or even think another chance might work when

so much baggage and destruction created a chasm between us? After all the shit I'd put her through?

It killed me that despite all that, I still longed for another chance. For her.

But longing leads to misery, and she'd suffered enough. So I kept my head down, trained, studied, and all the while, I quietly hoped that something might help us or provide an answer.

"Let's go," Coach yelled.

We all got up, stretching and jogging slowly out of the locker room, through the small tunnel, and out onto the sidelines of the illuminated field.

"You good?" Quinn asked, nudging me as he stopped beside me and stretched his hamstrings.

Blowing out a breath, I glanced up at the grandstands, which were already full, and nodded. "Yeah, I'm good."

Quinn gave a nod of his own, turning to Ed to run through the game plan.

I looked across the field to our opponents, then glanced around. The Christmas wreaths, tinsel, and lights a reminder that in a week's time, we'd all be going home for Christmas break.

The wind screamed through the tunnel, whistling and causing goose bumps to rise on my bare arms. I pulled my helmet on, jogging on the spot until we all gathered into a huddle.

"Ax 'em," left our mouths on a hoarse yell, adrenaline ratcheting higher as the stadium roared the same words.

Running into position, I shook my head. My feet shifted, hands clenched and unclenched at my sides until the whistle blew, and we were off.

My father could say what he wanted about football not being a sound career choice, especially when I had a company worth billions for the taking. And he was right, but nothing could chase your feelings, your thoughts, or your frustrations away quite like the scent of perspiration, the sound of teamwork, or the feeling of your heartbeat vibrating through every limb as you pushed your body, your mind, into hyper focus. Together, we became something much bigger than ourselves. We were a collaboration of dreams and hope,

leaving self-fulfillment behind for something greater as we all worked together in unison to achieve a combined goal.

Win.

And if you didn't, you damn well knew you gave it your all trying.

My breath plumed in front of me as I gunned through the offensive line.

I was taken down, the wind sailing out of me, and my helmet flying with the impact.

Opening my eyes, the pounding in my head intensified as I tried to make out the blobs standing over me. Before my vision cleared, the pain registered, and instinctively, I grabbed my arm.

What felt like an eternity but was probably only a few minutes later, the blobs morphed into faces, and a guttural sound left me as I was maneuvered onto a hard stretcher and carted away from the field.



An incessant beeping reached inside my subconscious, forcing my eyes open against the sharp light. I shut them, wincing as I tried to make out where I was and why I felt like I'd smoked too many joints after drinking too many beers.

The sound of movement had my head snapping over to my left. Too fast. My head swam for a moment.

Green eyes stared at me. A pink lip slipped between a set of straight white teeth.

"Mouse," I croaked, a lopsided smile lifting my lips.

When all she did was stare at me, I tried to sit up, and then she moved, rising from her chair to gently push at my chest. "Don't move too much just yet."

I laid back down, still smiling up at her beautiful face. "I think I know why they call them dreams."

“Callum,” she warned softly. “You’re on a pretty high dose of morphine.”

That would explain the groggy feeling. Ignoring her, I continued, “Because in your dreams, everything and anything is possible. And in mine, you’re with me. Always with me.”

Renee blinked, smiling a smile so sad that I wanted to remove it from her face and demand her to try again. It didn’t belong there. No sad smiles belonged on a face like that. I tried, and then pain scorched a hot trail of fire through my arm.

She tsked, carefully pushing my casted arm back into its sling.

“What happened?”

“The game. Apparently, you were taken down pretty hard.” Her lips thinned as she looked at the cast over my lower left arm, then they parted as her gaze met mine. “Fractured ulna,” she said, gesturing to the bottom of my arm without touching it. “The doctor said it was a clean break, so no surgery, but you’ll be in one of these bad boys for a while.”

I swallowed, dragging my eyes from the white covering my arm. Worry gnawed at my conscience at the concern etching Renee’s brows into a tight line. “It’s okay,” I told her.

Another sad smile. “As I said, morphine. But yes”—she nodded, a slight breath drifting through those bow-shaped lips—“you’ll be fine for next season.”

“Oh,” I exhaled, as it registered with the force of a sledgehammer to the gut. “Right.” I swallowed again, and Renee left my side. Panic made me say, “Don’t ...”

She merely pointed at the water pitcher, then poured me a glass. Registering the beeping monitor, I tried to slow my heartrate down. “Here,” she said, propping another pillow behind my head, then placing the plastic cup in my right hand.

I sipped, inhaling her peachy scent as she leaned away and took a seat on the chair in the corner of the room.

Yes, I’d fucked everything up and was undeserving, but it was still there. The concern brimming in her gaze. Everything she felt remained right there, hidden, but only partially. The subtle tilt to her chin. Her limbs, usually graceful, now stiff and careful, much like her words.

She was still mine, and if we weren't capable of letting go, then it was time I cut the bullshit and did something about it.

"I'm glad you're here," I said, lowering the empty cup to my lap.

She stared down at the ground, then looked out the window behind my bed. "They called me once you arrived in the ER because I'm still listed as your emergency contact. So I'm assuming you never did file for divorce."

"I did, but I changed my mind." Lips twisting, I murmured, "Does that upset you?"

She didn't answer but drew in a long breath, gaze still glued to the window.

I tried to think of something to say. Anything to stop her from leaving or saying something I didn't want to hear. "The team? Did they win?" I remembered the lead up to the game, the ambulance doors closing before I was administered enough drugs to pass out, but everything else was stained with fog.

Renee shrugged. "Not sure, but most of them are downstairs. I could find out if you like?"

"No," I said, not wanting her to leave.

I stared at her, the way her eyes shifted over everything in the room to avoid looking at me. Her pink jacket was draped behind her over the back of her chair. Her long-sleeved brown dress resting over her black legging covered thighs in elegant ripples.

"Your hair is up," I said, noting the messy bun. She only ever wore her hair up if she was extremely hot, or if she was extremely stressed out.

"So it is," she murmured, eyes finally connecting with my own.

My chest heaved as I watched her lashes lower and rise over her green eyes. "We're getting married again, did you know?"

Laughing a shocked laugh, she bit her lip, looking down at her brown boots. "About that ..."

"Knock, knock." A nurse appeared at the door, a friendly smile on her round face. "You're awake."

She walked into the room, checking things on the monitors around me and taking notes. After squirting some hand sanitizer onto her hands, she came over to the side of the bed with a thermometer at the ready.

“I’ll just wait outside,” Renee said.

The nurse clucked her tongue, lifting my uninjured arm to stick the cold device in my armpit. “No need for that, just doing some checks. But it is getting late and you’ll want to be back in the morning when the doctor does his rounds.” She peered at Renee over her shoulder. “You know, to discuss things.”

Renee sat back down. “Things?”

I quirked a brow at the nurse, and she grinned. “How you’d leave any room this man is in is beyond me.”

Renee scoffed. “Don’t let him charm you. He’s a serial flirt.”

“She’s a liar.” I winked. “And she’s probably going to kick up a stink about caring for me.”

“What?” Renee choked out.

The nurse spun around, her sneakers squeaking over the floor. “You’re his wife, no?”

Renee laughed nervously. “It’s a long—”

“He will need someone to take him home and help him in the first week or so. The doctor won’t discharge him if he doesn’t think he’ll be provided with adequate support after an injury like this.”

“Right,” Renee said dryly, her arms crossing beneath her beautiful tits as she narrowed an eye at me. “Don’t worry, he’ll be fine.”

Seemingly appeased, the nurse gave me a wink of her own before checking the beeping thermometer. She left a minute later, the door clicking shut behind her.

“Well played, husband.”

At my affronted look, Renee rolled her eyes. Chuckling, I settled back into the mound of pillows, eyes closing against my will. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, wife.”

THIRTY-SEVEN



Renee

He looked so angelic when he slept. As if nothing and no one could touch whatever flitted through his mind to disrupt the peace that'd settled over his face.

My heart still thumped wildly in my chest when I remembered the voice on the other end of the phone line, telling me there'd been an accident, and that my husband was in the ER.

I'd raced over to the university hospital, uncaring if I got my first ever speeding ticket.

Some things had a way of making you forget the aches and pains you'd been harboring. In an instant, they were forgotten, replaced by urgency and soul-trembling fear.

Now that I could see with my own eyes that he was okay, that he would be okay, at least physically, the fear vacated, making room for those aches and pains to resurface one bruising memory at a time.

"Hey," a voice sounded at the door.

I looked over, finding Daisy with Pippa peeking over her shoulder.

"We snuck in," Daisy said on a loud whisper.

Pippa rolled her eyes. "He's on the ward, visiting hours are only just ending."

Daisy looked like her plans had been crushed but came in when I offered a small smile, Pippa following. They both stood by the wall,

eyes on Callum as I rose from the chair, my muscles protesting at the sudden movement.

“How is he?” Pippa asked.

“Flirting with the nurse and already making demands of me.”

Daisy giggled, smothering it with her hand as Callum shifted. “He’s fine, then.”

Her face sobered as she looked down at me, almost half a head taller than I was. “I’m sorry.”

“What for?” I asked, yawning.

Pippa mumbled what sounded like, “Here we go.”

“For you know.” Daisy gestured to Callum. “I didn’t know he was married.”

I laughed softly. “No one did. Don’t sweat it.”

“But I ... we, you know.”

“You kissed him?” My gaze shot to hers, and her wide brown eyes had me fighting back another laugh. “He’s done worse than that since we separated, and ...” I looked at Pippa briefly, who smiled. “You didn’t know me, or even know about me.”

Daisy’s shoulders fell with obvious relief. “Still, I’m sorry.”

When I nodded, Pippa asked, “So his arm is broken?”

“Yeah,” I said. I’d filled everyone in when I went downstairs earlier. “He’ll be out for the rest of the season, which I don’t think he quite comprehends just yet.”

We chatted briefly before they said they were going to go home, most of the team having left after I’d told them the news. I said goodbye, closing the door behind them.

“Come here, Mini Mouse.”

Startling at the sound of his voice, I walked back over and got him a drink of water. “How long have you been awake?”

“Long enough to hear the ridiculous conversation between you three.” He took a long sip, passing me the cup back. “I’m glad,” he said as I set the cup down next to the pitcher of water.

“Glad?”

A small smirk appeared. “That you’re friends.”

I plucked at the hem of my dress, taking a seat again as I pondered how to tell him what I had to say. “I, um, moved into Pippa’s apartment last weekend.” My feet jumped alongside my

heart as I met his curious gaze. “She needed a roommate, and I, well—”

“You don’t need to explain shit to me,” he said, tone gentle yet vehement.

“I know. I just didn’t want you to think ...” *it was another one of my games.*

He caught what I didn’t say, cursing beneath his breath. “Would you please come here?”

“No,” I said firmly. “You need to rest, and I need to head home.”

“Renee, don’t go.” He moved to sit up.

I hissed at him, “Lie down. You can’t threaten me with injuring yourself further.”

Grinning, he said, “Whatever works.” His smile fell, and he cleared his throat as he looked around the room. “You can’t sleep here, though, can you? Not on that tiny ass chair.”

“You really are fine,” I murmured, standing and collecting my bag. “If you need to have the last say in things. Good night, Callum. I wish you a speedy recovery.”

I tugged the door handle when he asked, “You won’t come back tomorrow?”

My eyes shut, my hand pushing the door handle down as they reopened. “No.”

I stepped out of the room before he could say anything else.



Guilt outweighed any other feeling I had the next morning as I slept in and ate a late breakfast. Pippa was already at the pound she volunteered at every Saturday morning.

My fingers were traitors that kept pressing my phone, insisting I look at the time.

I couldn’t and wouldn’t go back. He didn’t need me, and he wasn’t allowed to need me.

Then who else does he have?

Ugh. I got up and took my bowl to the sink, making sure I rinsed it before placing it in the dishwasher. Pippa liked things to be kept a certain way, which was fine. I wasn't a slob, but it did take a little getting used to. That and I wanted to make sure this transition went as smoothly as possible by not stepping on her toes and pissing her off.

She seemed fine, though, and only slept at the apartment maybe three nights a week. And when she did, Toby usually accompanied her. I didn't mind him. In fact, I found his honesty and shifting demeanors fascinating. What I wasn't a fan of was listening to people have sex.

That kind of kink just didn't do it for me.

They tried to keep it down but usually failed, resulting in me hitting play on the little phone dock to listen to music that I'd had tucked away in storage. Or the radio. Anything else.

My parents had lifted the limit on my checking account but hadn't yet agreed to reinstate access to my credit card. I'd deal, seeing as there was more than enough money in my account to pay rent, buy food and clothes, and survive comfortably for at least five years.

Ten past ten.

I groaned, then stomped to my room, throwing open the sliding mirror doors and revealing the overflowing contents inside. There was hardly enough space, but I'd make do. After all, it was a huge improvement from the ramshackle half of a wardrobe I'd had in the dorm.

Pippa had helped me after I'd moved my stuff in, packaging up clothing and items I no longer needed from storage, then came with me to drop it off to Goodwill.

I grabbed my cream ballet flats from the tower of precariously stacked shoes on the floor, closing the doors as I slipped my feet inside and grabbed my keys.

I wouldn't overthink what I was doing.

Especially when I had no idea what I was even doing.

When I arrived, Callum was sitting up, watching the news on the small TV attached to the wall and eating a sandwich.

I closed the door and his hand lowered, his jaw pausing mid chew as he watched me stride to the chair I'd sat in most of last night and take a seat.

"Hi," he said, swallowing his mouthful, then smiling. "You came back."

"Just to get you home," I told him sternly, inspecting the cherry-colored paint on my nails to keep from looking at him.

"I'll take it."

I sat rigid in the chair, listening to the newscaster talk about a bank robbery as Callum finished eating. When the silence he was goading me with became too much, I asked, "How are you feeling?"

"Okay," he said instantly. "I mean, it sucks that I won't be able to play." I looked at him then, watching him stare down at his arm, which was resting over his stomach. "Not to mention the rehab I'll probably need to do when this thing comes off. But I'll survive."

My shock was a palpable thing, morphing my face into something that made him chuckle when he looked over at me. I'd expected anger and frustration, and rightfully so. Football was his dream. His goal. And having that tampered with, even if it was merely an interruption and not a dead end, should've granted a much different response.

Then I remembered he'd been as high as a kite yesterday, and I raised a brow. "You still on morphine?"

He nodded. "Low dosage now, though. Doc said the pain will be manageable with some strong painkillers at home."

"Doc," I laughed out, not being able to stop it.

Callum tilted his right shoulder. "He's all right, and he said I could go home." He looked over at the papers on the small table next to his bed.

"Oh," I said, feeling wretched that for a little while, he hadn't known how he'd do that exactly. That I hadn't been here.

"I was going to call one of the guys, but you showed up right after he left, so ..." He chewed his lip. "Ready when you are, Mouse."

Shaking my head, I told him I'd be back soon and went to go speak with one of the nurses at the desk outside. If I was taking him home, I wanted to know exactly what it was he needed, so I wouldn't feel this itching guilt over him being by himself.

The same nurse I met yesterday told me that everything I needed to know was on the paperwork back inside his room.

Feeling my cheeks burn a little, I gave her a crisp thank you and went to collect the patient.



“Now, she said not to take this one during the day.” I picked the packet up off the coffee table. “And I’d listen, no matter how much pain you’re in. You don’t want your final statistic exam to be riddled with drug-induced musings.”

“Noted,” Callum said, flicking through TV channels as he settled on the couch.

I walked back into the kitchen, putting away the nighttime medication and ignoring the way my stomach tightened as my feet tapped over the familiar floors. I’d never really gotten the opportunity to get comfortable in this place, and nostalgia for what could have been tugged at my heart.

I didn’t linger, grabbing my bag that I’d dumped by the door and slinging it over my shoulder.

“Whoa, wait,” Callum said.

My hand reached inside my bag for my keys, then I realized I’d left them on the kitchen counter. “What’s wrong?” I asked distractedly, trying to find my lip balm inside my bag as I snatched my keys.

“Stay.”

Every part of me stopped moving, breath sailing out of my lungs in a wheeze at hearing the plea in that one word. He’d barely said anything to me on the short drive home, just stared out the window at the blurring, dry winter scenery, and waited in the car as I ran into the drug store to grab his pain medication.

I cleared my throat, not wanting my voice to betray me as I asked, “Why?”

He looked down at his sweatpants, which he'd changed into in the hospital before leaving. One of the guys had brought his gym bag from the stadium to the hospital. "I might need your help."

I shoved my keys into my bag, letting it flop at my side, smacking me in the leg. "You don't—"

"I do." His head rose, dark hair sprinkling onto his forehead as he shoved his hand through it. "I need to shower, and I don't know how I'm going to get a plastic bag over this ... thing." He lifted his casted arm, wincing a little. "And trying to get dressed one-handed is not as easy as I thought it'd be."

"Callum."

With a low laugh, he stood, teetering a bit. I moved instinctively, but he merely smiled and walked over to me, his bare feet doing weird things to me.

Feet, really?

Poking the inside of my cheek with my tongue, I stood my ground as he approached and stopped right in front of me, grasping my chin. "I know I don't deserve it, but we both know I'm a selfish prick who wants what he wants regardless." Brown eyes held mine captive, searching them for a way in. "Stay with me. Please."

A stuttered breath trembled past my lips. "For how long?"

"I'd like to say forever, but I'll settle for this week."

"No," I said, stepping out of his hold and righting my bag.

His brows knitted, shoulders drooping.

"But maybe," I started, internally kicking myself, "I can check on you for a few days?" When his lips began to lift, displaying those dangerous white teeth, I raised a hand. "Just to help you, then I'm gone."

He nodded. "Whatever you want, Mouse."

THIRTY-EIGHT



Renee

“Stupid, self-absorbed, manipulating dick.” I slammed the hair dryer down on the vanity, jumping when Pippa and Toby appeared behind me in the doorway.

“Yeah, baby. Tell us how you really feel.”

Pippa kicked Toby, who laughed, wrapping an arm around her shoulders to kiss her cheek before disappearing out of view.

The apartment door closed a second later. “I didn’t realize you guys were home.”

“That might be because you’ve been in the kind of mood that doesn’t allow for outside interference since arriving home yesterday.”

Sighing, I ran the brush through my half-dried hair, giving up and putting the hair dryer away beneath the sink. “I have to go back over there.”

“Have to?” Pippa asked, following me into my bedroom.

I scowled at her as I picked up my outfit from the bed, wondering why I even cared what I wore. That answer was simple enough. I’d always cared, no matter who I was seeing or where I was going.

“Okay, so, you have to,” she said, humor twisting her voice. “Why’s that?”

Unfazed that Pippa was watching, I stripped out of my robe, tugged on a bra, then the champagne colored tunic and gray tights.

“He needs help with things. Like showering and dressing.”

She didn't care about my clipped response. "That actually makes sense. How's he handling it, the whole not being able to play for a while thing?"

I tugged my hair from beneath the collar of the dress, moving to the mirrored closet doors to check my mascara before adding a light berry colored gloss to my lips. "Fine," I said with a snort. "Which doesn't make a whole lot of sense but whatever. Not my problem." I smacked my lips together, depositing the gloss back inside my makeup bag on the dresser.

Pippa laughed.

"What?" I groaned, then rushed to mutter, "Sorry, he's just ... ugh, frustrating."

"He gets to you even after all this time. No need to apologize." She straightened from the doorjamb. "Have fun."

Those two words haunted me from our apartment to the one next door. My skin felt as though it was irritated by the cotton covering it as I rode up to the penthouse suite. Callum had buzzed me in without waiting to see who it was that was requesting entry.

Smug asshole.

The doors opened, followed by the doors to the apartment, showcasing Callum in all his glory as he stood before me in nothing but sweatpants that sat salivatingly low on his defined hips.

"Now," he drawled. "I know it's going to be hard, but I wouldn't come near me until I've scrubbed this masterpiece clean. I fucking stink."

A laugh spewed out of me and interrupted the staring contest I was having with the packed abs of his stomach. "I'll try my best."

"Atta girl, I have full faith in you," he said, not moving so that my arm brushed his as I walked inside.

"Let's do this then." I dumped my bag then rummaged through a drawer in the kitchen for a plastic bag.

"Already got it prepped," he said.

I closed the drawer, straightening to find sticky tape and two plastic bags on the counter.

He stood breathlessly still as I wrapped his arm, then chuckled as I wrapped it again, double checking it to make sure no water would

touch his cast. "Maybe you should try to keep it out of the shower, just in case."

"Or maybe," he said, mint flavoring my lips from his breath as he lowered his head and whispered, "you should join me and scrub every inch of me clean, just in case."

With a pat on his stomach, I then pushed him back a step, wiping my hand on my dress as though the feeling of his smooth, hard skin had scalded it. "Less talking, more walking."

I waited in the bedroom, sitting on my hands to keep from rummaging through his things as I listened to him curse and grumble in the bathroom. Dust layered the dresser and nightstands, and specks of things littered the carpet.

When a crash sounded, I leaped from the bed, tearing open the door to find him sitting on the bench seat in the shower, trying to squirt body wash onto his loofah.

He looked up when I opened the shower door, and I took the wash and the loofah from his hands, water spraying my arm as I quickly squirted a heaping dose onto it. "That should do it."

I capped the body wash, leaving it on the bench seat and carefully stepping back out of the shower.

He was still sitting there, watching me with that annoying crooked smile on his face as I dried my hands and arm as best I could on a plush towel. "Do I need to monitor you?"

He bit his lip, glancing down at his growing manhood before smirking at me as he stood. "If you'd like."

With a roll of my eyes, I placed the towel on the vanity for him and left the bathroom, leaving the door ajar. I stopped dead in my tracks when I caught sight of the photo on his nightstand, my feet slowly coming unglued as I made them walk over to it.

It was a picture of us. The one from our wedding day where he was staring down at me with his forehead on mine. The same picture I'd left behind. On purpose.

Confliction swelled my throat, and I moved away from it, heading back out into the kitchen to check the pantry and fridge.

They were almost empty. I sighed, and the buzzer rang just as I heard Callum get out of the shower. He came down the hall, trying to wrap a towel around his waist.

“Here,” I said, gesturing for him to come to me so I could tuck the towel in. Beads of water cascaded down his chest, the fabric catching and absorbing them. “Um.” I cleared my throat. “I’ll get that, then I might grab some groceries.”

Callum nodded, turning back for the bedroom as I hit the intercom. “Who is it?”

“Delivery for a Mr. Callum Welsh?”

Puzzled, my finger slid off the button after pressing it to let them in. I opened the doors to the apartment to find a guy wheeling a stack of crates out of the elevator.

I didn’t know if he’d ordered food, or if I needed to sign, so I simply said, “How much do you need?”

The guy laughed, lifting the crates and taking them inside. He whistled as he caught sight of the floor-to-ceiling window, lifting bags out of the crates and placing them on the counter. “No need, lady. They’ve already been paid for.”

At a loss for what to do, I started putting the milk, juice, eggs, and bread away as the guy wheeled his cart back into the elevator.

On top of one of the bags was a note that said, “Hope the missus is taking good care of you, buddy. We’ll leave you be, but here’s a token of our love.”

Signed by Toby, Paul, Ed, Quinn, and Burrows.

“Wow,” Callum said, taking the note from me and laughing as he stuck it on the fridge beneath a magnet. “Those sweet fucks.”

“Sweet indeed.” I meant to say it sarcastically but couldn’t.

Callum tried to help put the stuff away, but I waved him off, and he retreated to the living room, falling into the couch and closing his eyes as if taking that shower had cost him a lot of energy.

After putting the last of the food away, I collected the bags, bundling them up to store away. Then I spied the dirty dishes in the sink and blurted, “Where’s the cleaner?”

“Huh?” Callum asked, opening his eyes and glancing at me as I walked out of the kitchen. “This place is kind of a mess,” I said while eyeing the stains on the coffee table that looked like dried milk and coffee.

“Oh, yeah. I fired her.”

I didn't need to ask why, I already knew, and instead gathered some damp towels, wiping down the coffee table before starting on the dishes.

"Leave it," Callum said.

When I ignored him, he came into the kitchen, shutting off the water and doing his best to dry my hands with one hand. "I didn't ask you here for this."

"Then why am I here? You wanted help."

A dark brow lifted as he patted my hand, then tugged me closer, dropping the towel to shift some hair away from my mouth. "You know that's not why I want you here."

A thousand thoughts tried to make themselves heard, but my lips refused to move as he held me enraptured with his eyes alone.

His phone rang, and I dragged my eyes away, finishing the dishes as he talked to who sounded like one of his teammates while scowling at me.

Once done, I moved into the bedroom, collecting his dirty clothes from the hamper and taking them to the laundry room that sat next to the main bathroom in the hall.

"I gotta go," I heard him say. "Will do. Thanks, later."

A hand tugged at my dress while I was bent over shoving his clothes into the front-loading machine. "Mouse, fuck. Stop it."

He tugged me back, bending down to finish the task himself. When he struggled with the detergent, I snatched it from him, pouring it into the dispenser before knocking it closed with my hip and depositing the bottle on the shelf.

"Point made," he huffed, traipsing after me down the hall as I went to hang up his wet towel in the en-suite bathroom.

"Seriously, quit it and come sit down with me."

"That's not a good idea," I said, walking by him and coasting back down the hall.

"Says who?"

"Says me."

He chuckled, and I spun around, glaring at him and stabbing a finger into his bare chest. "Stop it, and for crying out loud." I dropped my hand. "Cover that shit up."

"I need your help for that."

“Convenient, wouldn’t you say?”

He shrugged, and I growled, hearing him chuckle yet again as I moved into the bedroom and tugged open his drawers.

A box of condoms greeted me. I froze for a heart-sinking second before slamming the drawer shut and moving onto the next one, finding a shirt.

“Renee,” he said from behind me.

“No, I don’t want to.”

“You don’t even know what I was going to say.”

I shook my head, trying to swallow down the revulsion that’d pooled in the pit of my stomach at seeing those condoms. “I know enough.”

I gathered his shirt, gesturing for him to bend over so he could push his head through the hole. He snatched it from me, tossing it to the ground as he cornered me against the drawers. “How about less avoiding and more talking?”

“There’s nothing to talk about,” I said, my voice all breath as he loomed over me. “There’s no point, Callum. There’s ... just too much.”

Tipping my chin up, he swung his eyes between mine, regret weighing his lips down. “Then why is there still so much left between us?”

“History.” I swallowed over the word. “We have history, but that’s what it needs to remain.”

“It doesn’t, and you know it.”

I scowled. “Let me go.”

Eyes imploring, his voice turned whisper-soft. “I haven’t used them, haven’t been”—he blew out a warm breath—“haven’t been able to do that in a long time.”

“But you still did,” I said, voice resolute even as I struggled to hold his gaze.

His eyes shut, and he shook his head, a laugh croaking from him. “I-I can’t even describe how badly I wish I could take that back. Take back everything I’ve done; how much I regret everything I did to hurt you.”

My body stiff with shock, and the urge to hear more, I waited. Waited and tried to keep from holding my breath as my heart roared

with fury.

“I’m sorry.” His hand cupped my face, thumb soft on my cheek. “So fucking sorry. Nothing I say will justify what I did. Nothing. But I ...”

“Callum,” I started, my throat constricting. I needed to get out. Out of his hold. Out of the apartment that taunted me with what-ifs. Out of the sorrow that shined back at me from his eyes.

“No. I loved you, I *still* love you. I never stopped.” As his voice broke, his next words ended on a whisper. “Loving you was killing me, and I just wanted to stop.”

“I can’t do this,” I rasped. “Let me go, please.”

His voice deepened, hardened. “You’re scared. You don’t trust me, and I don’t blame you, but you can try. You just need to start by talking, letting me back in.”

I shoved his hand down, anger overtaking the hurt pricking at my chest. “That’s the thing, Callum, I don’t fucking want to. You’re clean, and you have food. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

I managed to push back the tears until I was back inside Pippa’s place, my bedroom door locked, and the music turned up as loud as it’d go.

THIRTY-NINE



Callum

Regret slid over my bones, my hand shaking as I ran it continuously through my hair and stared at the TV until I passed out in the early hours of the morning.

The look in her eyes was all fear, but that fear was there for a reason.

She didn't want to talk about us, yet she didn't quite know how to leave me alone, as much as she tried to show otherwise.

Not to sound like a cocky shit, but well, who was I kidding? I was, but I also knew Renee. My perception of her had been tampered with after what she'd done with Mike, but it was my own misgivings that made me believe the worst.

When you grow up with people who mask lies beneath cash and veneered smiles, it was easy to think the worst. Easy to become a cynical, entitled dick.

When we started college, I'd dumped her in tumultuous waters, expecting her to make it ashore while I concentrated on my own survival. Too focused on what I wanted, needed, and had to do, I'd just expected her to be there, existing in the background.

Renee couldn't survive in the background. She didn't need to be front and center, but she needed her fair share of time in the limelight, and rightfully so.

Our undoing was my fault.

The afternoon sun bloomed bright rays across the wooden floor, the flecks of dust and miscellaneous specks reminding me that I should really hire another cleaner.

My leg bounced, my arm twinging with a relentless pain that I'd probably be able to ignore with painkillers. Sitting around idle and stewing on my own mistakes and desires wouldn't do me an ounce of good.

Half an hour later, I switched off the vacuum cleaner to untangle the cord in time to hear the buzzer. I let Renee up, my eyes taking their time to travel over her long orange jean clad legs and fluffy gray sweater with a white bow in the center as she stepped out of the elevator.

I smirked when my eyes reached her face and found her cheeks tinged pink as she scowled at me, her mermaid hair flowing around her face in soft waves and draping over those voluptuous tits.

"Stare your fill?"

Smirk still in place, I bit my lip. "Turn around so I can see the view from behind, then I should be good for a few minutes. And you have keys, remember."

Tugging her purse from her shoulder, she ignored me, her sweet scent invading my nostrils as she walked past. She stopped right outside the kitchen, her white Chucks squeaking on the floor. "You're vacuuming?"

Twisting my lips at the shock in her voice, I closed the doors before moving in behind her. Gently, I gathered her hair aside to hover my lips over the bare skin between her neck and shoulder. "Does that really shock you so much, Mouse?"

Goose bumps pebbled at my voice, at my breath hitting her skin. She stepped away. "Yes, it really does."

I glared at her back, watching as she surveyed the living area. "Not only have you never done it before, but are you forgetting you broke your arm not even four days ago?"

"How hard can it be?" That was a lie. Doing a lot of things one-handed was hard. Especially using the monstrosity that sat before Renee on the floor, cord in tangles and the head turned upside down.

Renee sighed, unraveling the cord.

“Hey, you’ve never done it either.”

She gave me a look that said I didn’t know shit, switching it on and finishing the job much better than I would’ve been able to.

I could watch her ass in those jeans as she moved around the apartment for hours, but I knew I should probably do something a little more productive and got started on fixing us some smoothies.

“Strawberries and banana for the lady,” I said, sliding Renee’s tumbler over the counter after she’d put the vacuum away.

She narrowed her eyes at it, then me, moving her hair away from her flushed face as she took a seat on a stool. “Thanks.”

I shoved the blender into the sink and rinsed it. I’d figure out how to clean it later.

If Renee was surprised that I took a seat next to her with my own drink, she didn’t show it. A tiny moan left her as she swiped at her lower lip, setting the half empty glass down. “Good God, that’s good.”

I hid my smug smile by taking a lengthy drink, watching her stare at the stainless-steel fridge as she finished her own. “You’re quiet.”

“I’m ...” She shook her head. “Never mind. You have a follow-up appointment before Christmas break. Don’t forget.”

“I won’t,” I said, scratching at the stubble on my chin.

The noise dragged Renee’s attention to me, finally. “Wanna watch a movie?” I blurted, her brows rose, and I hurried to add, “Your pick.”

Her tongue peeked outside her mouth, pushing at the corner of those full, pert lips. My cock stiffened. “Okay.”

“Seriously?” I asked five minutes later when Renee selected something called *The Notebook*.

“You said my pick.” She kicked off her Chucks and settled on the other end of the couch with a cushion in her lap as she crossed her legs.

I scrubbed a hand over my eyes, then quickly quit my grumbling. I was just glad she was here, so if I had to suffer through some love story, I’d do it and try not to fall asleep.

For a while, I tried to surreptitiously watch her as she watched the movie. The way her arms clenched around the pillow during a scene

that had her sighing, the way her eyes gleamed with tears, and the way they dried and shined when she smiled at the TV.

“Did you know that when you get emotional, your eyes lighten to a bottle green?”

It was as if she'd forgotten I was there, her head snapping back to look at me as her lips slowly parted.

Grinning at her, I turned my attention back to the movie and felt her staring at me for a weighted few seconds before she did the same.

At the end, Renee laughed at my expression, which I guessed I hadn't done a good enough job of blanking. “You sap,” she said, tossing the pillow at me.

I caught it, clearing my throat. “Whatever.” She stood, and I conceded, “It was all right, I guess.”

She scoffed, about to slip her feet into her Chucks. “It was epic.”

“As epic as *Sailor Moon*?”

She paused, turning to me with a tilt of her head. “I refuse to choose between them, and you can't make me.”

I raised my hands in supplication. “Okay.” Chewing on my lip, I asked, “I think we can find some episodes, wanna watch?”

“*Sailor Moon*?” She grinned.

I nodded.

“I knew you liked it,” she said. I wasn't a big fan, but I kept my mouth shut. Anything to get her to stay a while longer. “But I should go.”

“You don't have any more finals until Thursday, so you can stay.”

Renee guffawed. “So sure of yourself, and how do you know that?”

I wasn't about to tell her that I'd sent Daisy a text, asking that she find out via Pippa. “I have my ways. Sit, I'll order in.”

She hesitated for half a minute, then slumped back on the couch. “One episode.”

Three episodes and two containers of Chinese takeout later, Renee was half asleep, her head drifting dangerously close to my shoulder.

“What are we going to do?” she asked with a yawn.

“About?” My feet swung side to side where they were perched on the table, my uninjured arm behind her head, resting atop the couch cushions.

“You know, the wedding.”

Oh. “I don’t know.”

Renee hummed, pulling at a loose thread on the cushion. “Do they know you’ve hurt yourself?”

“I haven’t spoken with my parents much since Thanksgiving, so no.” Blowing out a breath, I laughed dryly. “I’m certain that if I told Dad, he’d make it clear how dangerous the sport is, using it as a tool to sway me.”

Renee reached out, plucking a piece of lint from my pajama pants. Her hand there and gone. Touch there and gone. I wanted it back. “I’m guessing interning for him hasn’t changed your mind.”

My chest rose as I puffed out a laugh. “The fuck of it is that if he’d quit doing that, he might not even need to sway me. Being in his office over Thanksgiving, meeting with some members of his team as we discussed the Beijing office—it was interesting. The responsibility, the power, and the never-ending clock ticking above their heads as they ran from each day to the next was kind of ... alluring.”

Renee turned her head, our faces close enough that I could lean forward and snatch her lips with mine. “Alluring,” she murmured. “I like that word.”

“Mouse,” I whispered. “Do you know that when you look at me, my heart still acts like I’ve just finished a ten-mile run?” Her lashes bobbed as her gaze roamed over my face. Courage funneling through me, I admitted, “I’ve done this all wrong. I know that. The truth is, I don’t know how to make you forgive me when I honestly don’t know if I’ll ever forgive myself.”

Her eyes shone with unshed tears, and I was cursing every god that ever existed that my left arm was out of action and I couldn’t use it to touch her.

As if she knew that, Renee blinked, smiling gently before she sat back and got up. “You should call your parents. As much as it doesn’t seem like it sometimes, they do care.”

I sat forward as she started for the door. “And you? Do you still care?”

I didn't think she'd answer, and so I sank back into the couch when her voice, barely above a whisper, floated to my ears before the door shut behind her. “You already know the answer to that.”

FORTY



Renee

“Yes, Mom.” I shut my textbook, placing it on top of the stack beside my bed. “I know but too much brown would drown out the ivory and cream.”

My mother made a clicking sound with her tongue, then sighed. “You’re absolutely right. Okay, leave it to me.”

She hung up before I could even say goodbye, leaving me to stare at my phone in a stupor. It was easier to carry on with her plans, even if I still somehow had to find a way out of this wedding.

My mom and Lucinda didn’t care that it wasn’t until next August. They were two buzzing bees with a purpose that made me feel kind of bad about the fact I’d be ruining their plans.

At least, that was what I kept telling myself.

Still staring at my phone, another text came through. He seemed to go from one extreme to the other. Sweet words followed by playful innuendos.

Callum: Renee, Renee, come over to play.

With a smile tempting my lips, I tossed my phone down. Keeping it casual thanks to studying most of the night, I shrugged on a long black cardigan over my leggings and long yellow T-shirt that had the letter R embroidered on it by yours truly.

I opted for my Chucks again, hoping like hell that Callum had coffee as we were out and I didn't feel like making a public appearance at the Bean Stream. That would require more effort with my ensemble, and I didn't have the energy today.

Being on campus had been interesting, to say the least. For the most part, the team had kept pretty quiet about the discovery of our marriage, but it was bound to leak eventually. And judging by the few double glances on the way to my last final, it'd begun.

I went to hit the buzzer, as per usual, when I paused and instead, fished the set of keys out of my purse that Callum had given me months ago. The same ones I pretended didn't exist while carting them to and from different purses and bags since I'd moved into Pippa's place.

Looking at my messy bun, tired eyes, and slouched posture in the mirror of the elevator, I was starting to wonder if I was the reason I was exhausted.

"Mini Mouse," Callum drawled, his voice raspy as if he'd just woken up. "You used your keys."

I set them down on the counter with my purse, lifting a brow at the mess he'd made of his breakfast. Cereal was scattered over the countertop, milk puddles around his bowl. "Something wrong with your right hand?"

He grimaced as he looked at the mess. "No, but I was ..." I waited, and he sighed. "In pain."

I scowled, marching over to the medicine basket I'd put on top of the microwave and inspecting the packets. He'd hardly touched any of them. "I've taken some, okay? I'm fine now."

I set the basket down. "Callum, why haven't you been on top of it?" It clicked then. "You're worried?"

Running his finger through some milk on the granite counter, he licked it from his finger. "So what if I am?" He got up, taking his bowl around to the sink, and I realized his shirt was on backward. Jesus.

"You've been going to class and everything in pain?"

He turned on the water, rinsing the bowl. "I've only had a few. My last exam is tomorrow."

Tomorrow was the business finals, which I only knew due to Pippa taking them. Callum was pre-law, or had been, unless that'd

changed. “You’ve changed to business?”

“I was doing both,” he admitted. “But yes, I’ve changed it to my major.”

Wow. His dad had given him two options, and I was surprised he’d followed them both without much protest. Though after yesterday’s conversation, maybe I shouldn’t have been. Now that he’d taken a closer look, he sounded genuinely intrigued by what our fathers did for a living.

“Okay. Still, if you’re in that much pain, take some damn meds.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He winked, closing the dishwasher after putting his bowl and our glasses from yesterday afternoon in.

I grabbed a cloth, cleaning up the milk and cereal from the counter as Callum left the kitchen.

I turned off the tap after washing my hands, then patted them dry on a dish towel.

When he didn’t return, I looked around for something else to do, something that would explain away my presence here when really, he seemed to be doing okay.

I found him in the study, fishing through some comics on the shelf. “Holy shit,” I breathed, running my fingers gently across the spines. “When did you do this?”

Rows upon rows of them lined the shelves, and when I turned, I saw the books I’d left here in boxes in the closet now sitting along the bottom shelf. I hadn’t brought many, just my favorite classics and romance reads, as well as some of my favorite issues of *Vogue* and other various design magazines.

“You like it?”

The dark wooden shelves lined the length of the wall. “It’s ... amazing,” I said beneath a breath. I stumbled back a step when my eyes skirted the walls, landing on one of the limited-edition comics I’d gifted him for the past two Christmases.

“You’ve ...” I sniffed, eyes smarting as I smiled at the bright, slightly worn cover in a frame mounted to the wall. “You’ve finally accepted my present.”

Callum tucked his hand into the pocket of his jeans, a pained sigh leaving him. “Something I should’ve done ages ago.”

We stood in silence, staring at the framed comic book, hardly breathing. Then his fingers brushed mine. I allowed it, and even let him rope his pinky finger around mine.

It was unbearably easy to make someone your enemy, to brush them off and discard them as if they'd never meant a thing to you. But what it would've cost him to fire that kind of hatred toward me again, even if I'd deserved it, I didn't know.

Because standing beside him, I just couldn't imagine taking one step into the future without him. Without forgiving him.

A truth I felt utterly defeated by.

"Did you know that when you frown, your upper lip moves to the side, just a fraction?"

His decadent voice slithered inside my chest, my heart thrashing like a caged beast.

Smiling, I pulled my hand away from his. "I didn't realize I was frowning. Mom would have a shit-fit."

"Probably. Especially if she heard you say 'shit-fit.'" He grinned, bopping me on the nose. "Too much time with Pippa will corrupt you."

"Corrupt?" I teased, turning my eyes up to his.

His own eyes thinned. "I like that word on your lips."

"You like many things on my lips," I shot back.

He licked his lush bottom lip, stepping closer to me. "Don't tease unless—"

Looking at his white shirt, molded to his chest, I cut him off. "Your shirt's on backward."

I left the room to the sound of his laughter, his footfalls sounding behind me as he stopped me in the hall with a hand on my wrist. "Help me put it on right. Please?"

I watched him remove the sling, tossing it to the floor. "I'm sure you can do it yourself."

When he just stood there waiting, I rolled my eyes and lifted the shirt off him, carefully pulling it over his casted arm last.

He bent his knees, pushing his head through the hole and patiently waiting for me to move it over his injured arm before putting his other arm through the sleeve. "It's already broken; you can't do much worse with a little T-shirt prodding," he jested.

“Shut up.”

Chuckling, he looped his uninjured arm around my waist, and my mouth hung open as he whispered, “Did you know that even though you probably won’t ever forgive me, I’m still a fucking fool for you, and I love you?”

“Callum,” I warned, my hands pressing against his hard pecs.

His mouth took mine, lips pushing mine open for his tongue to enter.

My gasp was swallowed, my hands moving to his face, holding it to mine like at any moment, he’d tear it away. He tasted like Lucky Charms, and mint, and him. All him. The him I’d been longing for, craving, and begging for. It was right before me for the taking.

And I took, my tongue sweeping inside his mouth, and my teeth catching his lips. Sucking, exploring, desperate for more.

At the sound of his ringing phone, I tore my mouth away, stumbling back into the wall.

He reached for me, hunger lurking in his stare and emanating from every divine inch of him, but I shook my head, trying to un-fog it. “You should get that.”

“Mouse,” he called after me, following me to the kitchen where I grabbed my things.

“It’s fine,” I said, my voice all nerves as I refused to look at him. “I’ve got one more final tomorrow, and I really need to study.”

His voice trailed after me as I hightailed it out the doors, smacking the button on the elevator. “You can’t run from this, from me.”



The memory of his mouth, his tongue, his teeth, *him*, had me feeling too many things to capture into one single entity. Joy warred with fear. Doubts tried to squash relief.

How could getting the one thing you'd wanted for so damn long leave you feeling so unsure?

Maybe I wasn't unsure of him. For all his faults, I knew. I felt it when he said he loved me. I'd known it all along, even if he'd done his best to show me otherwise.

It all began and ended with me.

Pippa cursed out in the hall, and I shoved my notes aside at the sight of her in my bedroom doorway. She'd only just gotten home a half an hour ago and ran straight past my open door, locking herself in the bathroom to shower. "I'm so sorry, I forgot to tell you that my..."

"Pippa," a voice boomed at the same time a knock did on the apartment door. "Open up, we have keys."

"Your mom is here," I finished for her.

Pippa winced, quickly tying her long brown hair up into a high ponytail as she jogged on the spot. "Yes, and I overslept at Toby's place. I've barely had time to pack."

"Need a hand?" I asked as the sound of the door unlocking reached us.

"No, but maybe a distraction?" Her lip was pinched between her teeth, green eyes full of desperation. "Just five minutes. I don't need her asking embarrassing questions about my suddenly unorganized life."

Laughing a little nervously, I got up from my bed. "I'll see what I can do."

"Thanks so much. You're the best and I owe you," she said in a mumbled rush as she sped away and locked herself in her room.

I quickly checked my hair, then righted my cardigan as I stepped out into the hall.

Pippa's mom was taking off her shoes, and when she looked up, recognition smacked into me. "You must be Pippa's roommate. I'm Terry." She hurried over, then paused, peering up at me curiously. "Do I know you from somewhere?"

"Uh."

"Fucking hell," came from the door, as Bruce, the dog Pippa and I rescued, raced through, his leash dragging behind him. Who I guessed was Pippa's dad heaved out a breath in the doorway,

scowling as he came for the dog, who'd stopped in front of me. Bruce sniffed my legs and nudged them with his wet nose before moving farther into the apartment to explore.

"I'm glad he seems to be doing well," I said, at a loss for what to say as Pippa's mom scuttled after Bruce, grabbing his leash and pulling him back with her.

"Well is one way to put it," Pippa's dad said, holding his hand out. "I'm Mitch. You must be Renee."

"Hi. Yes, I am." I let him shake my hand gently in his warm grip. "I was there the day Pippa found this guy." I peered down at Bruce, who was sitting against Terry's leg, looking rather chastised as she frowned down at him, muttering to him about his behavior.

"Where is she?"

"In the bathroom. I'm sure she'll be out in a moment. Drink?" I asked, gesturing down the hall. They followed me into the living area. "It's a bit of a trek, isn't it? The drive here from Willowmina."

"Only a few hours," Mitch said, falling into the couch and grabbing the TV remote.

"Mitch," Terry snapped.

He looked up at her. "What? The game is on."

Terry rolled her eyes, joining me in the kitchen as I put the kettle on. "We're out of coffee, but we have tea."

"College life," Terry mused, washing her hands at the sink. "And we're fine, thanks dear. We stopped for a bite at the most darling little café outside of town." Drying her hands, she hung up the towel and leveled her curious eyes on me. "I swear I know ... oh!" Her hand went to her chest as a smile hitched her lips high into her cheeks. "Yes, I took your picture. Oh, my goodness."

Shit. I looked down at the tea bag I was dunking into my mug. The kettle clicked, and I poured some water in. "A picture?" I asked as though I wasn't sure what she was talking about.

"Don't give me that baloney. You got married. I took your picture on the steps outside Reverend Sander's church."

I could feel the blood drain from my face, Pippa's voice barely reaching my ears as she left her room and greeted Bruce with loud enthusiasm.

I turned to Terry. "I'm not ..."

She stepped closer, grabbing my cheeks. "I could never forget that gown. This hair, or those eyes. A living dream, that's what you looked like." She dropped her hands. "Pippa! You didn't tell me your friend was married."

"What?" Mitch all but yelled.

"Oh, for Christ's sake," Pippa said.

Terry flapped her hands, and I stood in the entryway of the kitchen, not sure what to do. "Settle down, honestly. And you should've seen this girl's gown. I swear, if you marry that boy, Pippa, you're getting one just like it."

Mitch scowled at Terry, but she ignored him.

Pippa glanced over at me, a brow raised. "What the hell is she talking about?"

My cheeks puffed as I blew out a large breath. "Let me finish making my tea and I'll explain."

Terry clapped her hands, dropping to the couch next to Mitch.

Pippa came into the kitchen, watching me stir milk into my tea. "You don't need to tell them."

"She was there," I said, then laughed. "Which is crazy. But it was definitely your mom who took our wedding pictures."

Pippa nudged me gently, smiling as she joined her parents.

Terry used her hands to talk, almost smacking Mitch in the face half a million times as she described my dress, Callum's tuxedo, and how she thought I might've been pregnant.

"No baby then?" She surveyed the apartment with vigor.

"No," I said, almost choking on my tea. "Um, it's a long story."

"What other story do two people really need other than being in love?" Pippa said, scratching Bruce behind his ear, his tongue lolling out the side of his mouth. "She doesn't need another reason just because she was eighteen."

Mitch looked like he disagreed but bobbed his head side to side. "I guess."

"Anyway, the weather was beautiful. Wasn't it spring?"

"Summer," I said, my mind cartwheeling back, feeling the sun heating my arms outside on the church steps. But it was no match for what I felt as I stared into my future. At that moment and every one after, he was the sun, and I was the moon cursed to follow.

A curse I'd have accepted until my dying breath without protest. I sipped my tea, blinking at the coasters on the coffee table.

"And he's here too then, I assume?" Terry asked, standing from the couch as Mitch turned off the TV and stretched his arms over his head.

"He is, yes." I placed my tea down and followed them to the door.

"Why do you not live with him?"

"Ter," Mitch groaned at the same time Pippa cursed.

Terry shrugged. "Just curious is all."

Smiling thinly, I said the first and only thing that might make sense. "We like our independence, especially while we're trying to study."

Terry's mouth popped open, then she winked. "Gotcha. Okay, well, it was lovely to meet you. Merry Christmas." She grabbed my shoulders, pressing a loud kiss to my cheek.

"Same to you." I waved at Mitch as he took Bruce from Pippa, who went to grab her bags. "Have a safe trip," I said, giving Bruce a quick pat and pulling my hand back quick as lightning when he went to slobber on it.

"I'm so fucking sorry," Pippa said, hauling a duffel bag to the door as her parents disappeared. "But hey, how is he?"

"Callum? He's fine," I said, looking at the ground.

"Renee."

"Hmm?" I pinched my lips between my teeth, looking anywhere but at Pippa's face.

"Okay, what happened?"

My head reared back, and Pippa laughed.

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, my God. Shut up and tell me. I need to go, but I'll stand here until you do."

Leaning into the wall, I picked at my cuticles. "He's ... I don't know, trying?"

"Uh-huh."

I lifted my head. "And it's, well, I don't know what I should do."

Pippa grabbed my arms, stilling my fidgeting hands. "This is what you wanted, right?"

"Yes."

“Take what you want.”

Such simple words. “But he’s done so much. I’ve done so much. There’s too much to try to move past, and what if we can’t do that?” I knew I was rambling yet couldn’t stop myself.

Pippa’s hands dropped as she picked up her bag. “All you can do is take a chance. Some people deserve to stay in the past, and others flat-out refuse to. I should know.” She smirked. “It’s up to you where you go from here.”

“Wouldn’t it be nice,” she mused when I just stared at the opposite wall, “to be as untouchable as we wished we were.” Her voice lowered, eyes gentling as I met her gaze. “You’re allowed to make yourself vulnerable again. Especially for the right people.”

I stood in the hall long after the door had closed behind her, her words echoing through the narrow space.

Padding back down the hall, I reheated my tea and went to my room, where I sat on my bed and pulled up a google search, looking for Hilda’s email.

FORTY-ONE



Callum

Trying to dry myself awkwardly with the towel, I almost jumped when I heard something slam inside the bedroom. Covering my manhood with it, I ran into the room and halted on the carpet.

Water dripped from my hair onto my cheeks as I saw Renee packing one of the duffels I kept stored in the spare room.

It was open on the bed, and she was dumping shirt after shirt, socks, jeans, and briefs into it before finally lifting her head. “Oh, hey.”

“Hey indeed.” I looked down at the towel covering my dick, then asked, “Care to tell me what you’re doing?”

“No need to cover yourself,” she said, moving into the closet and coming back with a black wool sweater. The one I usually donned at family dinners to appease my mother. “I’ve seen it all before, and if I have it my way”—a twinkle lit her eyes as she smiled up at me beneath those weapons she called lashes—“I’ll be seeing it whenever I want.”

I dropped the towel, words failing me. “Again, what’s going on?”

“You’re a little slow this morning. I’m taking you home with me for Christmas.”

“You are?”

She marched over to me, grabbing the towel and gesturing for me to lower my head. I did, and she ran it through my wet hair. “You’ve still got suds in it.”

“Still adjusting to this one-handed shit.”

She pulled it away, patting it over my chest and arms then slowly moving down my body, pausing when she caught sight of the tiny R tattooed on my thigh. My heart throbbed. The plush material and her face so close to my cock had it rising, almost poking her in the cheek.

“You want to give this another try, right?” she asked.

Without pause, I said, “Fuck yes, I do.”

She stood and removed the bags from my casted arm. “Well, stop asking questions and let’s get you dressed. The roads are going to be busy heading out of town.”

I stared down at my stiff cock, groaning when I saw her smirking. “You don’t get these lips or any part of me near that until you’ve earned it. Now move it.”

Blinking rapidly, I licked my lips, trying to catch up with all that was happening right now. My heart was beating double time, and my brain couldn’t keep up.

“I love you,” I said when she came back over, holding out a pair of briefs for me to step into.

“I know.”

I didn’t ask why she didn’t say it. Renee was stubborn, but if she didn’t love me in some capacity, then she wouldn’t be here.

She evaded my every advance to get my lips on hers, flitting around the apartment with purpose to collect the pain medication, my bag, and then checked that all the switches were off.

Out on the street, her Rover was parked by the curb, and I took my bag from her as she struggled to lift it into the trunk.

She huffed but stepped back as I pushed it inside next to her bags, then shut the door. Before she could move away, I caged her against the car, fixing my lips to hers like I’d been desperate to since she walked out of the apartment two days ago.

“You have me,” I told her, my lips moving over her cheek, her head tilting back. “You only from here on out. I swear.”

Her bottom lip shook as she blinked, a tear sliding over her cheek. I kissed it, threading my hand through her hair to devour her mouth.

“Looks like someone is feeling better,” Toby’s voice came from behind me.

Renee squeaked, and I tore my lips away, glancing over my shoulder to see him standing with his hands in his jean pockets, his lips twitching.

Pecking Renee on the forehead, I stepped up onto the sidewalk and gave him a half hug due to the arm. “I’m fine.”

“You look it,” he said, wagging his brows.

Renee laughed, and Toby flicked her a wave that she returned before getting into the car and starting it.

“I’ve gotta say, I don’t know if there’d be a guy who’d look as happy as you do, knowing he can’t play ball until next season.”

“Other things matter more.”

He kicked at some leaves. “They sure do. Heading home?”

I nodded, feeling a foreign sense of relief washing over me at the word. “I am. When are you leaving?”

“Tonight,” he said. “I have an appointment I can’t miss, then I’m out of here.”

“To Pippa’s?”

Toby shook his head. “Heading home to see my dad first, and we’ll go see her and her family the day after Christmas.”

“Thanks for the delivery, by the way.”

Toby shrugged, checking the time on his phone before sliding it into his pocket. “Shit, I’m gonna be late. Don’t mention it. I’ll see you next year.”

With a laugh, I called out goodbye as he jogged down the sidewalk. I watched him go a minute, then looked around the street. The quiet that had settled over Gray Springs, over me, had the smile staying on my face as I climbed into the car. Where my wife was waiting for me with a smile of her own.



The fire roared in the hearth, Valery and my mother chatting quietly as they sipped champagne. My dad and Damon entered the room, placing their glasses of whiskey down on the table and removing their jackets.

Renee's leg bounced, and I stilled it with a hand on her thigh. A tight smile was offered to me when I glanced down at her. It was fair that she was nervous, considering our past two Christmases together hadn't exactly been all that great. But she'd soon see that was where they'd stay. In the past.

My mom handed tiny little gift bags to Renee and me, and we opened them to find a set of keys. "What?" Renee said, dragging her eyes away from the keys to my mother, who looked at Valery with a secretive smile.

Valery snickered, winking at us. "For your own place. Seeing as you'll both be married soon, you can't continue spending summers or visits here. You'll want your own space."

My father piped in, "It's just a three-bedroom ranch home down the road, so don't get too excited."

"Too excited?" Renee asked, laughter spewing from her. "This is ..." She blinked down at the keys, shaking her head.

"Fantastic. Thank you," I said for her, nodding at my parents and smiling at hers.

My dad reclined back in the armchair, gesturing to me with his drink. "How long are you out for?"

I hadn't ended up telling them about the break until we'd arrived home, and my mother accosted me with slaps on my good arm for not saying anything. My father had just widened his eyes, then said he was glad it wasn't worse before changing the subject.

I lifted a shoulder, shifting my casted arm over my stomach. "They said a couple of months in this, then some physical therapy. But I'm not rushing into it. I'll return next season and give it the time it needs."

Damon nodded in approval. "Good thinking, you don't want to do any lasting damage."

"That's exactly right," my mother said, grinning at me. "Okay, time for the rest of the gifts."

Renee took my set of keys, depositing them with hers into the one bag and setting them next to her on the couch before getting up to hand out gifts to everyone.

I hadn't managed to get any shopping done for everyone this year, but Renee told me on the way that, as per usual, she had it covered.

When everyone finished, I leaned forward, plucking the one thing I had managed to buy from my pocket.

"Of course, you'd save the best for last," my mom drawled as I stood in front of Renee, then lowered to one knee.

Our mothers barely kept their gasps quiet, which made me smile as Renee's eyes popped.

I suppose they were glad we were doing it the right way, in their opinion anyway.

But what they didn't know—which was fine—was that I was doing this for her. A show of promise and sincerity, and the intention of swapping bad Christmas memories for the start of great ones.

I kept my words low, knowing my parents might hear but knowing it was important I say them anyway, and flicked open the velvet red box. "Mini Mouse, you're my greatest foe because you're my greatest love. There's you and you only, and I ask that if you accept this ring and become my wife, that you don't forget our past transgressions." I paused, reaching up to wipe tears from her cheeks.

She batted my hand away, gesturing for me to continue.

I chuckled. "But instead, remember them, so that we never make the same mistakes again. You and your forgiveness are all I need, if you'll allow me to have both?"

"Yes, yes," she croaked, knocking the box from my hand and sending the ring to the floor as she grabbed my face and peppered kisses all over it. I fell forward, letting her whisper her yeses as I laughed into her chest. Then her lips found mine, and I didn't know for sure, but I had a feeling that was when our parents left the room.



We waited until my parents went home before retreating to her room and shutting the door.

Renee grabbed the collar of my shirt, tugging me closer to pop open the buttons, her lips moving to my neck, my diamond ring glinting on her finger.

I groaned, my head falling back, but I had other plans, and pressed my hand on her shoulder. "Wait," I said, drawing in a deep breath. "I have plans."

"Do they involve us in that bed over there?" she asked, jabbing her thumb over her shoulder. "If so, less talking, more stripping."

I chuckled as she stepped forward to undress me again. "No. The fair is back."

Confusion swept her brows together. "The midnight carnival?"

"Yeah."

She still looked puzzled. "And you want to go?"

I grabbed her hand, bringing it to my lips to kiss. "I thought it might be fun. Who knows when it might come back."

We changed into warmer, more casual attire, and donned our coats before making the short drive down to the lake.

"Are you going to buy me another unicorn?" Renee asked as I took her hand in the parking lot and she locked the car.

"Buy?" I scoffed. "I won you that unicorn fair and square."

"Uh-huh." She smirked, and I tugged her to me as she said, "I don't care how you got it; it was the desire to put a smile on my face that counted."

As people walked by us and the winter air colored our cheeks, I kissed her. The warmth of her mouth and my own turning the blood in my veins to lava.

"Come on," she breathed out, pulling back. "Let's see what it'll take this time."

We walked through crowds, the game and food stands in different places than where I remembered them being last time.

Renee froze outside a small tent that reeked of incense, and I halted, backtracking to find the same lady who read people's fortunes sitting on a crate with her hands around a thermos.

“Ah,” she said, lips lifting and eyes gleaming. “Fate always finds a way around the universe’s pesky attempts at disruption.”

When I glanced down at Renee, unsure if she really wanted to listen to this drivel or if she was scared, I found her smiling at the woman.

“You’re right.” Renee slipped her hand inside her coat pocket, pulling out a set of earrings worth thousands and setting them on the woman’s makeshift table. “Thank you.”

“W-what? No need for payment,” the woman sputtered, her shrewd gaze darting from the gold twinkling beneath the candles to Renee’s face. “You didn’t even sit to have a reading.”

Renee just winked. “But if I had, it would’ve been worth its weight in gold.” She yanked at my hand, and I tore my eyes away from the woman, falling in step beside her as we weaved through a group of loud teenagers.

“They were a gift from last Christmas, weren’t they?”

Renee shrugged. “I have enough jewelry to last a lifetime. This lifetime and the next if I include my mother’s. I don’t need them.”

“But you loved them,” I said, frowning as I remembered her showing them to my mom.

“Loved,” she said, pausing in front of a food stand and inspecting the menu. “Other things matter more.”

We shared a corn dog as we walked, Renee insisting I walk along the edge of the walkway so as not to have anyone bump my arm. A few familiar faces had me pausing or waving, but we didn’t run into any old friends.

We were rounding the corner, approaching the same vendor where I’d won Renee’s last unicorn when she let go of my hand to approach the stuffed toys lined up and hanging from the truck.

Then the lights flickered, and my pulse sped. Not this shit again.

Renee shot a startled look at me over her shoulder, then they went out. Every single one of them. Murmurs, whispers, and giggles drifted through the air as the fog crept from the ground and the sound of a light scream, followed by a laugh traveled up the walkway from the parking lot.

“Renee,” I called and got no answer.

Sliding my phone from my pocket, I switched on the light.

“Hey, you’ll ruin the effect dude. Have some respect,” some idiot with dreadlocks said behind me.

I shot him a bemused look, then shined the light over the game stand, the carnie lighting a smoke as it reached him. “Red hair?” he asked me. I nodded, and he pointed around the side of his truck. “Think I saw her go that way.”

“Thanks.” I kept the light on, ignoring the stupid ass clowns that were making their way through the crowd behind me, and wound through trucks and cars. Carnies were sitting behind them, drinking around small firepits by the lake.

Walking down the grass stained sand, I heard a curse and muffled squeal from the public restrooms, and immediately shot into a run, ignoring the pain that flared through my arm.

“... need to listen.”

I stopped dead in my tracks when I saw Mike, Renee’s head in his hands as he bent over her. “Your stupid friend sent you a text the morning after you spewed your guts up, and threatened you, asking for money. I replied and told her to fuck off before deleting the messages, thinking she didn’t have shit because we didn’t really do anything worth threatening you for.” Mike laughed. “But turns out she did, and I followed along, taking the opportunity. I’m sorry ...”

Something red caught my eye. A clown mask lying on the ground behind Mike’s booted feet. My shocked body flew into action, marching forward.

“... but you know why I did it, and what I did isn’t anywhere near as bad as what he did to you. You’re making a mist—”

“I think you’re done here.”

Mike turned, his hands falling to his sides as Renee looked down at the ground. He laughed, eyeing me up and down. “Dude, I don’t think you’re in any state to be telling me when I’m done doing anything.”

“Really?” I arched a brow and took a step forward. “Because I’m not worried about what state I’m in. At fucking all.”

Mike’s nostrils flared. “I’m not the enemy, Cal. I just ... I liked her, okay? You knew it, too. I know you did. And you fucking took what you wanted, not even caring that someone else was interested first. I’m not the asshole here.”

“I disagree. You came here dressed as a fucking clown just to talk to her. Fuck off, Mike.”

He swung, and I ducked, chuckling as I stayed exactly where I was, and he found his balance.

He spat at the ground, shaking his head as he took a step backward. “We were friends.”

“Until you fucked it all up.”

“But you’ll forgive her?” he asked, incredulous.

“Yes. Turns out, she didn’t have any sinister plans. She merely got sucked into yours.”

Muscles tensed, we stared at each other, waiting for the other to say something or back down. And looking at him, I realized I wasn’t even angry anymore, just annoyed that he was trying to make up for his fuckups in the worst possible way. “Go home, Mike. You’ll find your own person one day. Then you might realize what a miserable excuse for a friend you’ve been.”

The lights came back on, showcasing Mike’s clenching jaw as his teeth no doubt grinded. Only then did I discover that Renee wasn’t there anymore and cursed. I looked around, trying to see if she was standing nearby, waiting somewhere.

“Where’d she go?” Mike asked.

“No idea,” I muttered, then looked off in the distance, catching a tiny flash of red hair farther down the lake, down near the picnic tables that sat among a cluster of overgrown trees and gardens. Without a second thought, I turned my back on Mike and followed her.

Renee was sitting on top of a picnic table, and I joined her. “This is the same table you first hate fucked me on.”

I looked down at it with a cringe. “So it is.” Then I sighed. “What happened?”

She blew out a loud breath, seeming as though she was shaking off the shock of the night. “He grabbed my hand when the lights went out, and I thought it was you. I couldn’t see much at all. Then when he stopped outside the bathrooms, and I heard his voice, caught sight of the mask he removed ...”

There was no need to explain the rest. I said as much, telling her that I was there.

Renee sniffed, and I reached for her. "Come here."

"You're not mad?"

The moonlight shone down on her worried eyes as she climbed onto my lap. "Why would I be?"

She frowned, then shook her head. "I'm sorry, I didn't—"

I cut her off with my mouth, dragging my teeth over her plush bottom lip. "Take off your leggings, unzip my pants, then lift your dress and fill yourself with me."

Renee looked around for a second before doing what I told her to.

Slowly, her heat enveloped my cock, inch by delirious inch. My head fell back, and her hands slid into my hair, nails running over my scalp as she carefully worked me all the way inside her.

With my hand moving to her hip, I caught her lips, breathing into them, "I love you, Mouse."

Her voice hitched. "I love you, asshole."

Chuckling, I kissed every inch of her smile, then shifted my hips. Renee's legs became a vise around my waist as I rocked into her, and she grinded down on me.

Our hearts thumped against our chests, the moon our only witness as she came undone, and I reveled in every beautiful moment of it before letting myself follow.

FORTY-TWO



Renee

The midmorning sunlight graced the room in rainbow rays of light that bounced off my wedding gown. The same one I'd worn on this very day three years ago.

I'd taken it out of storage, reworked some of the beading, and added ribbons to the bottom of the ivory bodice that rained down alongside the white lace material of the gown.

Smiling at my reflection, I tilted my head for my mother to slide another pin into my hair, which had two thick pieces pulled back to meet behind my head. "You really should've gone with the updo. Then we wouldn't have to keep fussing over it."

"They are more elegant," Lucinda said, staring into another mirror that sat in the corner of the room. She licked a finger and ran it over her hair—which was plastered to her scalp in a tight bun—smoothing what didn't need smoothing. "Why did you leave it out again?"

"I wanted to," I quipped, sliding my lips together and inspecting my teeth for lipstick stains. I was wearing a nude pink on my lips and very light makeup. Special attention was paid to my lashes, making my green eyes seem larger than ever before.

Lucinda snickered, rummaging through her purse and spritzing some perfume on from a tiny vial. "Oh, here." She swung her purse over the crook of her arm, righting the neckline of her floor-length, skintight, glittering gray gown, then set a small box on the chair

behind my mom. "I'll see you downstairs." After kissing the air, she left the room, the door shutting with a quiet click behind her.

"Nervous?" Mom asked.

I snapped my attention away from the box and back to her reflection in the mirror as she fussed with my dress. "Not at all."

Did I want this? No, not particularly. But after the misery and despair of the years prior, it seemed fitting. Like a second chance, almost. And I wasn't one to dismiss a second chance anymore.

"Well"—she sighed, stepping back and tapping her chin as she inspected me from every angle—"I, for one, am glad you two eventually worked things out."

"What?" I asked, unable to mask the shock in my tone.

Placing her hands on my shoulders, Mom eyed me in the mirror. "Darling, the only thing we didn't know about was your little secretive marriage." She tsked. "Which we'll let slide due to teenage hormones."

I scoffed, and she waved me off, collecting the box and opening it.

Returning, she pressed a familiar brooch into my gown. "From Callum, and shoulders back. Jesus Christ, what has happened to your posture?" She clucked over me for a minute as I stared down at the brooch with tears looming. The same one I wore at our first wedding.

I blinked rapidly, beating them back. There was no way I'd let them ruin my makeup. "I have to be the only girl who gets married twice before she's even graduated from college."

"Experience, honey. At least you two will have a better chance of making it."

We both laughed, and then she grabbed my cheeks, pressing her nose to mine and staring at me with tender eyes. "I waited, I watched, and I'm proud of you."

"For being a desperate fool, trying to win my husband back?" I rasped, my brows gathering.

Lifting her head, she smoothed her finger between my brows. "No frowning. And I'm proud because you're a true fighter. Someone capable of rising from the ashes of their own making and becoming even stronger."

“Thank you,” I managed to choke out.

She rubbed my upper arms. “Just like your father.”

I stared at her wet eyes, then shook my head. “Maybe. But I like to think I get the good stuff from you.” I winked.

Mom stared at me, her lips wobbling before she fanned her face. “Oh, look what you’ve done.”

Laughing again, I waited as she grabbed my veil and maneuvered it into place.

A knock sounded on the door. “Are we ready?”

“Come in,” my mom said.

The door creaked open, Pippa, Daisy, and Hilda rushing inside and giggling as they quickly shut it.

Hilda had responded to my email almost immediately with her phone number. We’d caught up for coffee last Christmas break and had stayed in contact ever since.

“Some of the guys came up here not too long ago,” Daisy said, explaining their giggling.

“You forget that we’ve been married before,” I reminded them.

“I don’t think I’ll ever forget that,” Daisy mumbled, making me grin.

“You look stunning.” Hilda walked over, her dark hair pulled back into a waterfall of curls. Pippa and Daisy donned the same hairstyle and dresses. They were good sports about it, heeding my warning that Lucinda and my mother would likely control every single thing they wore today, right down to their undergarments.

Their dresses were light brown, more of a glimmering gold when the sun hit them.

Pippa was flipping open the box on the chair that had transported the brooch I was wearing. She snapped it closed and joined Daisy, who was running her fingers over the beading of my dress. “This is so intricate. You made this?”

“She did,” my mom said, pride evident in her voice. “She’s going to be the most unique designer the world has ever seen.”

“Or maybe just the state,” I quickly said, trying not to get emotional over her words yet again. “Which is fine with me.”

“Achievable goals, I like it,” Pippa said. “Ready to marry the guy you’re already married to?”

Hilda tried to hide her laughter with a cough and failed. My mother patted her on the back, her lips puckered with annoyance, no doubt from Pippa's blunt reminder.

"More than ready," I told them.

I was answered with smiles before they all helped me downstairs.



I peeked outside the window of the small entryway, watching Callum's cousin help their grandparents into seats in the first row.

The Trellara country club was an array of white, cream, and brown. Crystal vases filled with fresh wildflowers were scattered everywhere the eye could see, and chandeliers twinkled from every room. The ceremony was being held outside in the garden, the chairs bedecked with brown satin bows, and creamy yellow petals spread among the white that littered the path to the altar.

To where Callum stood, hands behind his back, shoulders squared, and a luminous smile drawing uncountable eyes as he laughed at something Toby said beside him.

My bridesmaids walked ahead, leaving me with my father whose Italian shoes clipped on the marble floor as he walked over in a crisp black tuxedo.

"You look nice."

His teeth flashed, eyes lighting with his megawatt grin. "I should be the one saying that to you." Clearing his throat, he shifted some of my curled hair over my shoulder. "I was hard on you about the wedding thing."

My lips pursed, but I waited as he continued, "It's not only your mother and Lucinda who wanted this for you two. Did you think I'd let my only child get married and be okay with not being there to see it?"

"I'm sorry," I said and meant it, feeling guilty for never having thought about it like that.

“I suppose you’re allowed to be selfish when you love someone.” Still smiling, his eyes danced over my face. “Which is why I don’t feel bad about you giving me what I want.”

With a laugh, I beamed up at him.

“Here,” he said, handing over a threadbare blue handkerchief from his pocket. “It was your grandfather’s and his father’s before. The tradition is to pass it down to each son in the Grant family. To have them give it to their brides, but”—he blew out a breath—“you’re everything I could’ve hoped for, and I’ll be damned if that isn’t a good enough reason to give it to you. As useless as it may seem.”

My fingers glided over the soft, worn material in my hand, then I tucked it away into the hidden pocket of my gown. “Something old and something blue,” I whispered.

“Right.” The orchestra started up, and my father held out his arm. “Let’s get you married, for the second and hopefully, last time.”

Callum’s eyes widened when he saw me, his lips rubbing over each other as he shifted on his feet. I half wondered if he was nervous, but then he grinned, winking at me as I slowly approached, and he took me from my dad.

With a calmness to his movements that made my trembling hands feel like an embarrassment, Callum took something from Toby. I sucked in a breath at seeing my bow, the one I wore at our first wedding and had left in his glove compartment. “Turn around,” he said.

I did, closing my eyes to stop tears from escaping as he carefully lifted my veil and slid it into my hair.

“Look at me,” he said, his voice deep and gentle.

When I did, he grinned once more. Only this time, his eyes shined with tears that I knew he’d refuse to let fall. Slowly, he blinked, then took my hands and smoothed his thumbs over them to quell their shaking. “Much better.”

The celebrant asked us to repeat after her, and we did, eyes and hands locked, a crooked smile on Callum’s lips that I wanted to kiss off his face.

As we stood there, the impossibility of the moment washed over me.

That even after they'd torn your heart to shreds and used it as a weapon against you, you could still love that same person with a ferocity that bordered on magic. And maybe that was the crux of it. Love was magic. Capable of making you believe the impossible was always possible.

But it wouldn't hold two people together, no matter how fiercely they felt for one another.

No, it was true that vows were only words, and love was only a feeling. No matter how strong.

It was our actions, our experiences, and the guidance of past mistakes that would glue what was ruined back into one slightly misshapen yet beautiful piece.

And as he said, "I do," and I repeated after him, exchanging rings with giddy smiles, I knew that if we were to break again, the only thing that could hold us back from fixing us would be ourselves. And we'd already learned the hard way not to let anything else interfere.

"Mouse," Callum rasped, lifting my cheeks for his lips to meet mine.

"There's no shaking me now," I retorted, absorbing his laughter with my mouth as cheers and music engulfed us.

After having our photos taken, we sat down to a three-course meal inside. My mother and Valery's speeches were predictably embarrassing but also heartfelt.

"At least there's no more mention of prince and princess," Callum whispered into my ear, feeding me a bite of rich strawberry cheesecake.

Licking the sugary sweet cream from my lips, I forced an offended look onto my face. "That's because we're the soon to be king and queen."

He kissed me, something he'd been struggling not to do despite our company, and murmured, "When I take you, I want you to keep the veil and shoes on."

"But of course," I said, nipping his lips.

Pushing his chair back, he held out his hand for mine and escorted me to the dance floor as the violins pierced the air with a hauntingly soft melody.

With my arms around him, I moved my head to rest on his shoulder. His arms tightened around me as he rocked us side to side. I blinked, staring at all the guests as they watched us and talked among themselves, and absorbed everything.

This was real. The one thing we'd tried to avoid yet wound up appreciating. The beauty in the aftermath. The unpredictable ebb and flow of fate, if such things could be believed to be true.

Callum's lips whispered through the strands of hair on top of my head, his chin resting there as he said, "This was strangely perfect, wouldn't you agree?"

"Yes." My gaze found his teammates sitting at their table. Burrows was gyrating his hips as he gulped champagne to Paul's encouragement. Pippa and Daisy were in fits of laughter over something as they strode toward the table.

Once I would've said that fate was something only you created, and now, I saw it as something else entirely. A grand plan that you could try to fight against or fight for, but if it was meant to happen, it eventually would. That didn't mean you didn't need to work for it. It just meant you had a little help when you least expected it.

"But all of this ..." I closed my eyes. "We both know it doesn't erase anything." The words tumbled out of me, soft but honest. If we stood a chance at facing the future together, words that mattered could no longer stay trapped inside us.

"No," Callum agreed. "But it's a reminder." Lowering his head, his nose glided over my skin and he pressed a kiss to my cheek, right beside my ear. "To keep trying to get it right, even when we're getting it wrong."

EPILOGUE



Callum

Ten years later

“The files for the meeting tomorrow are on your desk,” Penelope said, pushing her glasses up the bridge of her nose as she hurried down the hall to catch up to me.

Shoving my arm through the sleeve of my jacket, I nodded and hit the elevator button. “Thanks, and the Hilton documents? They left a message saying they were waiting on the transfer to be finalized.”

Penelope’s eyes widened. “Uh, I’ll get on it right now.” Then she was racing back down the hall to her desk before I could stop her.

Chuckling, I carried my briefcase inside the elevator, hit the button for the parking garage, and pulled my ringing phone from my pocket.

“Callum Welsh,” I said without checking who it was.

“Are the Hilton documents finalized?” my father asked.

With a roll of my eyes, I stepped out of the elevator when the doors reopened. “I’ve just had it taken care of.”

The lights of my Rover flashed as I unlocked it and swung open the door. I tossed my briefcase in, the Bluetooth connecting when I started the car, catching the tail end of my father’s next sentence. “... kept waiting.”

“I know, it’s fine. You need to relax,” I said, clicking my seat belt on before backing out and speeding out of the garage of Welsh

Grant Holdings. "Retirement doesn't suit you."

Damon and my father had retired four years ago. Well, semi-retired.

"Semi-retired," he reminded me once again.

"Uh-huh." I smirked out the windshield, cursing as dusk faded fast into night. A look at the dash said I'd be late if I didn't step on it. "Take up some more golf or use that yacht you just had to buy; I've got it covered."

He chuckled.

"Lucy's recital starts in twenty minutes," my mother's voice hollered in the background. "We're just pulling up. Where are you?"

"I'm on my way," I said, hanging up before she could badger me about how late I might be. Not if I had anything to say about it. My daughter was her mother but had the attitude of her father and didn't hesitate to let someone know when she was pissed off.

I hit the highway, speeding down it until I saw the exit for Trellara and veered off.

As far as the eye could see, cars lined every possible inch of space outside the private elementary school. I cursed again, driving around the block twice before driving up onto the grass in front of the school. They could take up any issues they'd no doubt have about it with me later. I was more scared of my kid than I was them.

My phone vibrated in my pocket, but I ignored it when I saw Renee peeking her head out from backstage inside the auditorium, her phone pressed to her ear. Relief loosened her features, and she waved a hand at me to hurry up.

I strode by a group of teachers, parents everywhere taking a seat, and saw my girl standing in a corner backstage. Her arms were crossed over her chest, a pout on those bow-shaped lips, and her red hair in a high ponytail that had strands falling around her made up face.

"Since when do princesses look so angry?" I asked.

"Daddy!" Lucy turned, tossing herself into my arms and almost sending us to the floor.

Laughing, I picked her up and kissed her rosy cheeks.

"You'll ruin my madeups," she sassied, pushing me away with a hand on my nose.

I looked at my wife, who was dressed in skintight black jeans and a shimmery, loose-fitting gold top that rippled beneath the meager lighting and draped off one shoulder.

She stepped away from one of the mothers she'd been talking to and wrapped an arm around my waist. I gave her my mouth when she rose onto her toes to quickly kiss it. "You hear this girl?"

Renee grinned, then fussed with Lucy's bright yellow tutu and purple leotard.

"You're only five," I told Lucy. "You don't need makeup anyway."

She held up six fingers. "Six next week, ya know."

"That's next week, and I don't need reminding." With another kiss, I set her down.

"Why?" She placed her hands on her hips, her green eyes scrutinizing me. "You need to be reminded so you don't forget."

"I doubt you'd let that happen, sweet girl," Renee said.

Leaning into me, she quickly kissed me again before directing Lucy to the stage with the other little girls and a few boys.

I moved out into the audience and took a seat beside Mom and Valery as Lucy's kindergarten class took the stage.

"Is this supposed to be *Alice in Wonderland*?" my dad leaned over Mom to ask me.

Mom pushed him back, eyes steadfast on the stage as she recorded the show on her phone. "Shhh."

He rolled his eyes, and I shrugged. I had no idea, but fuck if I couldn't stop myself from smiling at the sight of them all trying their hardest to get the dance moves right. Concentration marred Lucy's face, her eyes darting to the side of the stage where Renee was probably hiding in the curtains, trying to reenact the dance.

Wouldn't be the first time. Ever since Lucy could walk, all she'd wanted to do was dance. So we indulged her at the age of three.

When they bowed, everyone stood, clapping and cheering as the kids looked upon us all with disbelieving smiles. We watched a few more acts before I finally got to sneak backstage to where Renee was helping Lucy change.

"Lucinda Valery Welsh, stop that. You have the most beautiful hair I've ever seen."

“I happen to agree,” I said, leaning on the doorjamb as I watched Renee comb out Lucy’s curls. “What’s brought this about?”

“Daddy, some boy made fun of my hair.”

Renee tried to laugh it off but stopped when she saw me move closer, my shoulders tensed. “Some boy?”

Lucy nodded. “Yeah, Timothy.”

My fists clenched until my knuckles cracked beneath my thumbs. “He still here?”

“Oh, my God. Stop it,” Renee said, tossing the brush into her bag and grabbing Lucinda’s hand. She waved at some other mothers, then tried to grab my hand. “Let’s go.”

“Not so fast,” I said. “I think I would like to meet this Timothy.”

Renee’s brow arched. “Callum,” she whispered, “he’s five.”

I shrugged. “Gotta quell it while they’re young.”

She laughed, walking down the hall. “You’d know, right?”

Lucy broke free of her grasp and ran to me with her arms in the air. I picked her up. “Was you a bully, Daddy?”

“Well,” I hemmed. “I wouldn’t say ...”

“He was,” Renee interjected, “but he apologized.”

Lucy studied me as we walked into the auditorium and met up with our parents.

“You looked fabulous, darling girl,” my mother cooed, taking Lucy from my arms.

My father poked her in the cheek. “Like a little fairy.”

“I’m not a fairy. I’m a princess.”

Valery snorted, then took Lucy and kissed both her cheeks twice. “And what a beautiful princess you are,” Damon said, bending to do the same before Valery deposited her on the floor.

Renee took her hand again. “Time to get you home and fed.”

“McDonald’s?” Lucy asked.

When Renee gave her a stern look, Lucy turned to me.

Fuck. “Sure thing, princess.”

Renee slapped my arm, and we said goodbye to our chuckling parents.

I made sure Lucinda was strapped into the back of Renee’s car, then made the drive to McDonald’s on my own.

Twenty minutes later, I pulled into our three-bedroom ranch gifted to us by our parents years ago. Renee had developed a serious attachment to it. Although we'd outgrown it and had the money to move into something ten times bigger, she refused to.

The thought of leaving a place filled with only good memories had me agreeing. Even when I stubbed my toe on toys that littered the living room and any available space in the house.

My headlights illuminated the double garage as I drove into it and parked between a Barbie bicycle and Renee's Range Rover. She'd upgraded to white when we found out she was pregnant with Lucy. I grabbed the food and got out, leaving my briefcase behind.

Walking into the kitchen, I dumped my keys and eyed the mail on the counter as I set up Lucy's dinner. Renee and Lucy's laughter, coming from the bathroom, had me smiling as I shoved french fries into my mouth and began opening some of the mail.

Bills, bills, a check for Renee, more bills. She'd started up her business online after college and worked part time at Welsh Grant Holdings until it took off enough to pay for the finer things she liked to buy. Never mind that I was playing for the Cowboys at the time and could've helped her. Beautiful, stubborn woman.

My football career lasted all of three seasons before I threw in the towel when my dad had a heart attack—which was part of the reason they'd chosen to retire. Or, my bad, semi-retire. Renee had not long had Lucy, and I was sick of constantly being away from them anyway. So when my contract expired, I came home, eager to get my hands dirty and learn more about the company before I took over.

When I got to the last letter, I almost choked on my next mouthful of fries.

An invitation fluttered to the bench.

"Wedding?" Renee asked, helping Lucy up onto a stool at the counter. "Whose is it?"

When I didn't respond, she walked over, peering at it from beside me. "Oh, no way."

We hadn't heard a word from Mike since college. We'd tolerated each other until he was drafted at the end of our third year. Last I

heard, his career ended before it even took off, and he was helping his mom by running an out of state branch of her IT company.

“He’s getting married,” I said.

“Who?” Lucy asked, chewing with her mouth open.

“And to her, wow.” Renee laughed, leaving my side to dig out her wrap from the takeout bag.

“Who?” Lucy asked again.

“Alexis, though. Didn’t see that one coming. She’s not ...” I frowned.

“Meek enough for him?” Renee suggested, swiping ranch from her bottom lip. “I think he’s showed us already that they aren’t his type.”

Feeling that familiar anger rise within, I grabbed the invitation and tossed it into the trash.

“Who?!” Lucy shrieked.

“Hey,” Renee scolded.

Lucy waved her hands in exasperation. “So answer the question.”

Renee turned to the window to hide her laughter. “An old friend of Daddy’s,” she said, collecting herself.

I paused in unwrapping my burger, shooting her a glare.

The look she gave me said to leave it at that.

Fine.

“You gonna go then, Daddy?”

“Nope.”

“Why not?” Lucy asked as she tried to tug the toy that came with her meal from its wrapper.

Renee sighed but didn’t push, moving around the counter to sit beside our daughter. Taking the toy, she opened the wrapper and set it up for her.

The sight of the two of them next to each other never got old. My queen and my princess.

The thought of putting another child in my wife’s belly tempted me on a weekly basis, but we already had our hands full with one.

And that was probably our own fault for spoiling her as we did.

“Because I don’t want to.”

Lucy grinned, displaying a missing tooth and half-chewed food in her mouth. "You really are mean, Daddy."

Renee quirked a brow. "He's not mean." She paused, winking at me. "He's charmingly honest."

Lucy looked puzzled, then clearly decided she didn't care enough to ask more questions and returned her attention to her food.

Renee cleaned up as I took Lucy to brush her teeth and tuck her into bed.

In her room, the cross-stitches Renee had done over the years adorned the cherry pink walls in gilded frames. Her bed was littered with beady eyed toys, covered in a patchwork princess quilt, and surrounded by unnecessary hot pink mosquito netting.

"How can you sleep with all these guys staring at you?" I pulled her sheets up to her chin, and she rolled over, resting her cheek on her hand.

"Cause they're my friends."

"Is that so?"

She tried to roll her eyes. "Yup." Then she gasped and turned, realizing she hadn't gone through the good night routine with them yet.

Smiling, I watched as she did her thing.

"Good night Fergus, Lilly, Monty, Tiger, Paulette, Stephanie, three-horned Bill ..."

She took a break to yawn, and I waited until she laid back down before saying, "You looked like you had fun tonight."

"Oh yeah," she said. "I mean, it's kind of hard but so much fun."

"Right." I laughed.

"You should try it sometime," she said followed by another yawn. "I'm sure Mommy would love to see you dance."

I nodded, making no promises on that one, then brushed her beautiful hair from her face and kissed her good night. "You tell me if this Timothy kid bothers you again, okay?"

Almost asleep, she mumbled, "Sure, Daddy."

Renee was rubbing a towel through the wet ends of her hair when I walked into our bedroom.

"Ready to show me how you dance, baby?"

Unbuttoning my shirt, I huffed. "You heard that."

“Yep,” she said, arms slithering around me from behind and pulling open my shirt. Her hands glided over my skin, and I almost shivered as she whispered, “You know I fucking love it when you dance.”

Shucking my shirt off, I turned, and she got started on my pants. “Do you now?”

With her lip between her teeth, she nodded, lashes fluttering.

“Get on the bed.”

I finished undressing, watching as she unwrapped her robe to reveal every exquisite inch of her. Her wet hair left droplets on our white sheets, and I groaned, closing the door as she ran a hand down her stomach and between her legs.

“Which husband am I getting tonight?”

I stalked toward the bed. “The one who wants your hand away from your cunt.”

Her excitement rang clear in her eyes as I leaned on the bed and roughly spread her knees.

We might’ve been able to move past the fuckups we’d made in our younger years, but that didn’t mean we both didn’t enjoy certain parts of that time. A fact I’d discovered two months before our second wedding when Renee had all but screamed with frustration over my too gentle lovemaking.

Sometimes she wanted gentle. Sometimes she wanted wicked and mean. But she knew, no matter what roles we played, I loved her through every second of them.

She was gleaming, drenched, my finger dragging down her center before tunneling inside.

Her hips bucked, a breathy yelp rising into the room.

“Shhh.” Removing my finger, I ducked my head and licked a long line through her folds, then dipped my tongue inside. She writhed like a mewling cat as I lapped up everything she gave me. When her legs shook, her quiet moans turning to hoarse breaths, I sat up. “Turn over and hold the headboard.”

Her tits bounced as she rolled and crawled up the bed. She’d barely touched the wood before I grabbed her flesh with rough fingers, then slapped it.

“Fuck,” she cried yet wriggled that pert ass toward my aching cock for more.

Watching my handprint bloom on her skin had me aligning myself, unable to wait any longer. Grabbing her hips, I sank inside and seated myself with one thrust.

Renee panted, her hands gripping the headboard so hard, her knuckles were white.

Watching her, feeling her heat wrapped around me, I decided I wanted to meet in the middle and gathered her to me.

Renee’s brows wrinkled with confusion as I sat on my haunches and pulled her back to my chest, turning her chin to catch her mouth. “What ...?”

“I need your mouth,” I said, taking it as my hands reached for her tits. I squeezed, and she rocked over me.

“Touch yourself,” I whispered into her mouth. “Touch yourself while I’m fucking you.”

One hand snaked down, her eyes reaching mine and staying there as she began to pant heavy breaths onto my parted lips.

Beautiful. Graceful. Feline. Powerful.

Even the bad days we shared had me appreciating everything about her. Her determination to shine even when I’d pissed her off. Her ability to forgive me within hours after I’d said something stupid.

“Did you know that I consider myself the luckiest asshole alive because even when you have every right to hate me, you still love me?”

Renee grinned, breathless as I continued to push in and out of her. “I’ve already told you, there’s no getting rid of me.”

“I love you.”

Her eyes widened as she climaxed, and I took every exhale, every moan, every tight twinge of her cunt, before filling her with my cum.

My enemy, my ally, my best friend. She was love in its rawest form. Everything I needed wrapped in one multilayered bow.

One that I refused to let unravel ever again.

THE END.



Curious about Quinn and Daisy's story?

I thought he'd always be mine,
even when I was forced to say goodbye.

We were never meant to let go,
but it happened anyway.
Too bad I didn't know someone was waiting to take my place, or I
would've held on a lot tighter.

Two years later, we were exactly where we'd always planned to be.
I'd kept my promise.
He'd forgotten all about his.
Not only had he moved on, but the person he'd moved on with was
my best friend, leaving me to begin college with a broken heart.

I guess this is the part where I'm supposed to tell you some other
guy stepped in, repaired my shattered pieces, and made me smile
again.

This isn't that kind of story.

My heart might have been broken,
but it refused to fall out of love.

[Suddenly Forbidden](#)



Want to know more about Pippa and her troubled wide receiver?

Toby Hawthorne was an enigma.
One I didn't factor into my college plans.

I wasn't looking for love.
I wasn't not looking for it either.
And in that state of in-between, he found me.

Unaware of the battle he fought everyday, I fell fast.
By the time I found out, it was too late.
Because I wanted everything.
Every broken, lost part of him.

I knew I couldn't fix him.
I could only love him.
But I should've known better than to think that was enough.

[Bittersweet Always](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Ella Fields is a mother and wife who lives in Australia.

While her kids are in school, you might find her talking about her characters to her cat, Bert, and dog, Grub.

She's a notorious chocolate and notebook hoarder who enjoys creating hard-won happily ever afters.

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