



Broken SEAL

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Category: Romance, War

Description: Lincoln O'Brien worked hard to become a Navy Seal only to get hurt during his third mission. While recovering from his injuries, he gets letters from a pesky, do-gooder high school teacher.

Letters he can't seem to ignore and can't resist reading over and over. Connecting has never been his strong suit. When he writes back to ask her not so kindly to quit, he's surprised and annoyed when she doesn't.

High school teacher Joy Espinoza believes in being the energy you want to attract and creating the change you want to see in the world. Everyone around her thinks it's because she can't help herself. But only her new pen pal sees the truth. Sees why she does what she does.

He might think he's a broken Seal. His scars marked on his skin while hers are invisible to the naked eye.

Are they better together? Or will they be too scared to break the seal at a first real love?

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prologue

Lincoln 'Linc' O'Brien

"Here's your mail, handsome." The petite blonde nurse winked at me. I nodded, my lips pinched. What was it with the women in my life being too happy, too bubbly?

Not that I actually had a woman in my life.

I didn't have to glance at the crisp envelope in my hands to know who it was from.

Joy Espinoza.

"Thanks." My voice sounded raspy from not talking very often, but that was nothing new. Before my injuries took me out, benching me from my Seal team, I was a quiet motherfucker. It was just in my nature.

You could ask my older brother, Chuck. I'd been that way since I was small. Not that he would take a call from me. It had been forever since we had spoken. Hell, he had no idea I was laid up in a military hospital in San Diego. But that was neither here nor there.

I held the bright white envelope and stared at the front of it for a long minute. I tried to fight the urge to rip open her newest letter and devour it like some savage bookworm. Letter after letter, ten to be exact, on the daily, this sickeningly sweet, dangerously positive high school teacher had written me before I finally caved and wrote her back.

Angry and frustrated with the turn my life had taken, I had been a grade-A major asshole in that letter. Asking her what kind of Rainbow-Brite Care Bear hybrid had crawled up her ass. Didn't she get the point when she didn't receive a letter back after three? After five? I'd told her she was obviously fucking clueless if she'd wasted her time writing ten letters to a complete stranger. That she needed to stop.

The moment the letter was gone and sent, I'd regretted what I had written. But without a way to take it back, what was done, was done. I'd thought that would be the end of it. I'd simply pushed one more person out of my life, and I was better for it.

I was a bitter asshole and didn't want to deal with anyone.

I had shut everyone out, including my buddies on my team. But Joy Espinoza was relentless. To my surprise, three days later, I received mail.

Joy had written back. Letting me know how glad she was that I had obviously enjoyed reading them since I knew the exact number of letters she'd written. Then she went to talk about her day at work and life as if I hadn't been an incredible asshole.

As if nothing.

As if we were best friends.

The girl was a nut.

After that, there was no way I could resist and had been writing back ever since.

Two months of letters sat in an empty Kleenex box beneath my bed. I stretched trying to ignore the ache in my shoulder. The stitches and grafts didn't pull as much as they had over my torso the way they did when I first arrived. I was lucky. Not only was I

living and still kicking, I would most likely be able to return to my team. I was just a stubborn self-centered asshole who liked shaking his fists at life.

But who would blame me?

Life was a bitch and had never been all that kind to me. First, it'd taken my best friend, my neighbor, at eight years old. Fucking cancer. Then life had ripped me a new one when my homelife fell to pieces. My parents had passed, leaving my older brother and me basically alone in the world. He had stayed in our hometown, was now a mechanic at a local shop. He had always liked getting his hands dirty under the hood of a vehicle, no matter what kind. But I knew why he hadn't gone off to live his life.

He'd stayed close to watch over me. Because I'd been a nuisance. A bad luck charm.

I wasn't going to stick around and watch life take him away from me, too. The moment I was able to, I got away. Determined to be the one who left. The second I turned eighteen, I enlisted into the Navy, doing everything and anything to become a Seal. And in doing so, I created an even bigger wall between Chuck and me.

The tips of my fingers traced her pretty writing. The way she'd addressed it was pretty. It swooped and swished, almost like fucking art. I'd asked her about it, and she said it was something called lettering. She had taught herself because growing up, she'd had the ugliest penmanship between her and her sisters. Karma, the middle one, would make fun of her.

I shook my head. Lettering. Who the fuck had time to learn to do that kind of shit? Not me. Nope. That's not why I had a notebook underneath the box of Kleenex that had pages of cursive wording. Mostly Joy's name written in it. But no matter how hard I tried, it never looked as good as hers. The woman was a fucking genius when it came to that shit.

I opened the envelope carefully, and my lips thinned in a weak attempt not to smile as confetti in the shapes of crescent moons and stars tumbled out. In all their glittery blue, gold, and silvery goodness.

“Fuck,” I cursed to myself as I sat up in bed, grabbing a fistful of the bits she’d stuffed in the letter. I always forgot to check if she did this shit. Liar, a little voice whispered in the back of my head. You like it when she does this.

Not that I would willingly admit it.

I held a star between my fingers as my lips twitched before I took out her letter.

Hey Grumpy. That’s what her letter started off with. The nickname made my lip twitching move into a smile. A small one, but it was there, nonetheless.

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Hope your day is going amazing! Remember to be nice to the nurses around you today. You attract your vibe. So, lay off on the asshole pills and maybe, just maybe, try to smile. At someone. Even if it's at yourself in the mirror. Haha. You know you think I'm hilarious.

Damn it, I did.

You did notice I gave you my number a week ago, right? I mean, a hello text would be nice. Unless you don't get bored, which, hey, maybe you don't. Anyhow. I'm around if you want to talk or text. Just don't hate me if I don't hold my breath waiting for you to. (Insert sarcasm, in case you didn't notice it.)

While you wait to admit I'm your new best friend and you're dying to hear what I sound like. Is my voice squeaky like Minnie Mouse's perhaps? Or raspy like Scarlett Johansson's? (Yes, I totally had to Google the right spelling, in case you were wondering.) Let me tell you about my day.

And she did.

She told me about her students. How one class had raised their grades by twenty percent, how a student was sending a care package to their pen pal. How she admired this student. He was a hard worker and didn't have a lot, so he was selling candy bars to get money together to buy shit to send. Throughout her letter, she kept things light. Easy.

But something about it ate at me. She didn't talk about herself. She hadn't shared more than what was going on with her in the last two weeks.

And it had been bugging the hell out of me.

My head ran wild with possibilities. What if she met someone? If she did, for whatever reason, she didn't want to share that with me. I didn't know why she would think I would care.

She wasn't mine.

I swallowed hard, all the while trying to ignore the tightness in my belly at the thought of some other man wrapping his arms around her. I stood up and shook my blanket off, brushing the confetti off as I looked at the sparkly mess on the ground. I grabbed my phone and snapped a pic of it. The sun streamed into the room, almost as if spotlighting the mess on the floor, bringing out the blues and golds from the little pieces of paper.

I looked at it and went through my camera roll. Picture after picture of the little surprise messes her letters left behind littered my phone. I brought her name up on my phone, and without thinking, I pressed Call.

"Hello!" a soft voice lyrically sang in my ear. It felt like all of a sudden, time had slowed down. Like all the prissiness I'd felt about the mess melted away and no longer mattered. All because of one five-lettered word.

"Hello?" she called out at again. I opened my mouth to say something, anything, but it was like my brain wasn't connected to my vocal chords in that moment. "Hello? Who is this?" I was like a fish out of water. Shit. I should hang up!

What the hell was I doing?

"Karma? Very funny, Karma. Quit being a weirdo. You know that shit creeps me out," she complained, and I could almost picture her moving around her room. "I

won't be able to sleep, and I'm gonna call you and keep you up," she muttered, and I coughed a chuckle away.

"I don't think your sister would appreciate that," my voice rumbled, and there was no missing the hitch in her voice.

"What?" she whispered.

"It's not Karma," I clarified. She made a choking sound.

"Well, I can hear that." I could almost make out the smile in her voice. "Hi."

"Hey." My heart felt like it would beat out of my chest as I waited for her to say something.

"Who is this?"

"Do you have more than one pen pal you like to drive crazy with confetti and glitter? Because I gotta tell you, I'm a jealous guy." I was met with nothing but silence and crickets. I winced at myself. Had I come on too strong? Too much?

I was about to apologize when she burst into laughter.

Loud and boisterous.

Carefree.

Easy.

"No. you're my only one. Pen pal, I mean." I liked the sound of that. Her only one.

"Hello, Lincoln O'Brien."

Fuck me. My dick started to come alive behind my joggers at the sound of my name coming out of her pretty little mouth.

“Linc.” I cleared my voice. “My friends call me Linc,” I added. Not that my friends had been around lately with how surly I’d been. Even Rowdy, who had the patience of a saint, had stopped coming by.

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“Linc,” she repeated softly. “I wasn’t sure you would ever call.”

“Yeah. I’m not much of a talker.”

“I don’t know, you seem to be doing pretty well so far,” she complimented. My cheeks burned as I tried not to preen.

“Well.” I cleared my throat. “You made a mess again,” I noted, and she giggled.

“But it was stars and the moon, Linc! You can’t be mad at that. They’re too pretty to feel pissy when you look at them, right?”

“The janitorial staff probably hates me.” I ignored her question because we both knew she was right.

“Hmm, if they do, it’s not the glitter and confetti they get annoyed with. Maybe it’s your sunny disposition. Do you smile, perhaps? Say good morning?” she inquired. My lips twitched. She was sassy just like I had imagined. Better.

“Funny girl,” I muttered and loved the soft laughter that chimed from her. “How are you?” I asked, and the laughter died down.

“What do you mean? Didn’t you get my letter?”

“I did. That’s why I’m calling,” I huffed, rubbing the back of my neck.

“Twenty percent!” she shared happily, the smile in her voice and pride clear as day.

“Can you believe that!”

“That’s great, Joy.... But are you okay?” I asked again, and the other end of the line went quiet. I could hear the soft brush of her breath, so I knew she was still there.

“What makes you think something’s wrong?” she asked defensively.

“Nothing. Forget it,” I shook off and then frowned. No. I needed to know more than I needed to breathe. “You haven’t talked about you.”

“Yes, I did. I told you about work and my students and—”

“You didn’t say anything about yourself, Joy,” I cut her off. My tone sounded way too stern, but I couldn’t help it. “Are you seeing someone?”

“What?” She laughed. “Am I—” she started to repeat, but I cut her off again.

“Well? Are you?” I asked, sounding every bit of the asshole I was.

“What if I was, Linc?” she asked quietly. “Why would that matter? You don’t even like writing to me.” Fuck! I hated that she seriously believed that. She had no idea how much I loved each one of her letters. Whose fault is that, dipshit?

“Hmm,” I huffed. “That’s not true,” I finally added, giving her a little bit, breaking the awkward silence that had fallen between us.

“Really? You asked me to stop writing—”

“That was over twenty letters ago,” I clipped, and with those few words, I gave even more away.

“You counted?” Of course, she didn’t miss that. My girl was too smart for that. Too observant. My girl? She wasn’t that.

Fuck, she had no idea what I looked like.

But I did.

I took out her picture from my pants pocket. Ever since she had sent it, I’d carried it on me.

My eyes gravitated toward the woman in the center. Right between her two sisters, there she was. Her curvy body made my mouth water. What would she feel like in my arms? In the photograph, she was beaming at whoever was taking the picture. Her dark eyes almost shut with how big her smile was.

And I felt it in my chest.

From the first moment I had laid eyes on Joy, it felt like the mechanical thing in my chest was no longer working on demo mode. Just doing its job to get through. Fuck, who was I kidding?

She’d shocked me to life through the first ten letters, and especially after when she responded to my asshole one.

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I was most definitely in trouble now that not only did I know what she looked like but sounded like as well.

“Linc? Lincoln, did I lose you?” Never, I wanted to say.

But I couldn’t find the balls to, so I grunted, “I’m here.” I reassured her and then kept sharing my own observations, “You haven’t mentioned anything about you. Anything real, at least in a bit.” Two weeks to the day. “I called to make sure you were okay.”

“Oh—”

“And since you’re good with messing with me, you’re obviously fine. You just didn’t want to share, and that’s fine, too. If you’re seeing someone, that’s none of my business. We’re just...” The words alluded me. Friends? “Pen pals,” I scratched out and waited for a beat. But she didn’t say anything, and an ugly feeling started to form in the pit of my gut.

“Is that all we are?” she asked quietly. I had to clamp my teeth down. “Forget that I asked that. I, umm... I—” She sighed. “I think I got a little caught up, umm, with writing and sharing with you. I wasn’t sure if you liked even writing back or just felt obligated—”

“I don’t.”

“You never commented on my stuff, like, about me. Only about my students and things, about, well... everything else.” Shit. Had I done that? “So... I figured I would cut it out. Not give you something you didn’t want since I was already being pushy

and intrusive.”

“You weren’t,” I grunted and sighed, sitting down. I rested an elbow on my knee with my cell still pressed against my ear. My gaze drifted out the small window in my bedroom. “Your letters... they make my day better,” I confessed. “I’m sorry I didn’t say that before.”

“You don’t have to say that.”

“One thing you gotta know about me, Joy, right here and right now, I don’t ever do or say anything I don’t absolutely mean.”

“Oh. Okay,” she whispered. “What’s something else I should know about you?”

“I’m a dick,” I blurted, and she laughed. Again, the sound made me feel like I was ten feet tall. Like she was slowly brightening my life with color. “I’m serious,” I added because it was the god’s honest truth.

“I know.” She giggled then caught her breath. “I’m not seeing anyone,” she shared. “In case you were wondering.”

“Hmm,” I grunted as relief washed over me. “Good.”

“Good?” she repeated, making me realize I had said that out loud.

“Yeah. Too many assholes out there,” I mumbled, and when she made that magical sound again, I found I didn’t mind the way my lips seemed to twitch upward.

And just like that, the ice broken with a hint of something more laying low between us, we started talking. A lot. So much I didn’t notice the minutes tick away into hours and then some.

“I’m glad you called.” She yawned after a while of talking, and when I looked at the wall clock in the hospital room, my eyes widened.

“Shit, it’s ten,” I noted. “I kept you up too late.”

“It was worth it,” she said. Warmth rushed through me.

Somehow, I, the guy who didn’t talk and kept to himself, had been on the phone for over four hours. And it hadn’t felt like that at all. It’d felt like I had somehow blinked, and the time had gone by too quickly.

“I don’t want to but should probably get to going. I still have to prep my lunch for tomorrow and fold a load of clothes.”

“Right. Shit, I’m sorry, Joy.”

“Don’t be. I’m glad you called... you made my day, Linc.” And fuck, that felt good. But then I frowned, wondering if my little bubble of rainbows and butterflies who was always so busy being the energy she wanted to attract ever had someone doing the most they could for her.

“I’m glad, sweetheart. Especially since you make everyone else’s.”

“I doubt that,” she humbly turned down. I was already shaking my head even though she couldn’t see me.

“You’ve been making mine from the day you sent me that first letter,” I shared. There was a moment when the line went silent. Completely hushed with nothing but the sound our breathing slightly heavier. Shallow.

“Well, umm, call me or text anytime,” she said. She almost sounded a little nervous,

shy, for the first time.

“I will,” I promised.

I hadn’t lied when I told her before that I didn’t do or say anything I didn’t mean.

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Joy

Linc: Hope you have a nice day.

I licked my lips as my fingers hovered over the reply bar.

Me: Morning. I typed it out quickly, adding a sunburst emoji and pressing Send before overthinking things too much. I had no idea what to make of my grumpy pen pal.

Lincoln O'Brien. The man was a mystery to me. One that despite not knowing what he looked like, intrigued me. Called to me in a way I had never expected.

Knowing I would easily stare at my phone for his response, I forced myself to shove my phone into the pocket of my knee-length skirt.

I looked out at my classroom and forced a smile on my face. I loved teaching. I loved showing these kids early on that they were capable of making a difference in the world. Of being the change they were so hungry to see outside of school. To brighten someone's day cost nothing but a smile. Don't get me wrong, I wasn't naïve, even if I sounded like it. I knew firsthand how hard it was to do what I preached.

Today was the first time in my career when I didn't want to be there. I'd never felt that way. Not even when I had stubborn students I hadn't won over yet.

But as I sat at my desk, waiting for the bell to ring, all I wanted was to be back in my living room on the phone with a deep-voiced grin.

I rolled my eyes at myself.

I was hopeless.

I had no clue who the guy was or what he looked like. Not only that, but the man was impossible. My complete opposite. Not that I could judge.

He had been through hell and back. God only knew what he had seen during the mission he'd been injured in, plus the missions that came before. My eyes drifted shut, and I could almost hear his voice in the back of my head.

One thing you gotta know about me, Joy, right here and right now, I don't ever do or say anything I don't absolutely mean.

The words had played on repeat all through the night in my dreams. But in the safety of my dreams, he'd stood behind me, cloaked in darkness. I could almost feel him. His strong body behind my own heated my skin and left me yearning. I had no reference to what he would feel like, but I knew in my gut he'd be warm.

Always so warm and safe.

I shook my head and pressed the back of my hands to my cheeks. I had to snap out of it. He knew what I looked like. I'd sent him two pictures, and he had never commented on them. The only way he could have made it clearer he wasn't interested was if he'd straight up said so. His loss, a voice in the back of my mind perked up. I smiled softly. I knew I wasn't everyone's cup of tea. A little too curvy, too round, with more than a handful on top and junk in my trunk. But I was comfortable in my own skin.

Until he hadn't mentioned anything. Nothing about the pictures or about what I had written about myself. So, I had taken the hint. I had started to filter it out. Telling him

easy things about the life that revolved around me.

Are you seeing someone? His question had thrown me for a loop. I'd started to get too emotionally attached to his letters. I wasn't like my sister Faith, who was now with her pen pal in real life. She and her sexy major were attached at the hip now. They'd had a happy, unexpected outcome.

As much as I wanted to have a similar one, I knew better than to wish for the impossible. My own little secret. As much as I tried to be that energy you wanted to attract, I was terribly pessimistic when it came to myself. Expect the worst and hope for the best. That had been my motto.

Especially when it came to matters of the heart.

Matters of the heart and Linc. I shook my head. I was being silly, adding one and one and getting a million.

"Hey, Miss E!" Gia, one of my best students, waved. I smiled as I mentally tried to brush Linc out of my head. Not that it was easy. No. All day, and even when I got home and settled into bed, he was there. In the back of my thoughts. Always there.

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Lincoln

“Well, everything looks great, Linc.”

“Thanks, Doc.” The shrink studied his file, and when his clear blue gaze met mine, I could feel the frown lines deepen over my brow.

“How did you like writing to Joy?”

“Joy?” I didn’t like the familiarity the doc had in his voice when he spoke her name.

“She’s the teacher heading this new group of pen pals.” He sat back, crossing his arms in front of him, pen in his left. “I was a little worried about her.”

“She’s... bubbly,” I noted. He barked out a deep sound of laughter, one I had never heard from the man since I’d arrived at the military hospital.

“That’s one way to describe her.” He grinned. “You guys still writing?” he asked. I jerked my head with a nod. “Yeah,” I grunted.

“Good.” He smiled and jotted something down. “Do you think...”

“What?” I asked, and there was something about the way he hesitated that didn’t sit well with me.

“Nothing. It’s silly. I shouldn’t.”

“No, ask, please.” I sat up, noticing how much easier every move seemed to feel now. I’d just been signed off by my physical therapist and doctors. My shrink was the last one who needed to sign off before I would be ready to return to my team.

“Do you think she was a good pen pal? Should she be trusted to... head another group?”

“Of course,” I answered immediately, without hesitation. “She’s funny and bright and persistent.” I swallowed hard, trying to bat away the jealousy I felt at thinking she would be writing some other poor fool. Laid up and hurt, he’d more than likely fall half in love with her by the second letter.

Like you did? a little voice chimed in my head. I scowled at the ground.

“Linc?” the doc called, and I met his stare head on. “Was something wrong with Miss Espinoza?”

“No.” I shook my head. “I was just thinking our letters will probably end now.” Shit, I hadn’t thought of that. How the hell hadn’t I thought of that? She would be moving on from her little community outreach project and on to her next one.

“They don’t need to necessarily.” He sat up. “You have some R&R coming up, isn’t that right?” he asked, reminding me of the time I had available.

“I do.” I swallowed. My mind raced a million miles an hour.

“Any plans?”

“Plans?” Originally, I’d planned on just getting back to work. I’d toyed with the idea of going back home, visiting my brother. But it’d been a fleeting thought. “Not really.” I cleared my throat.

“You know, Miss Espinoza’s a very short drive away,” he noted nonchalantly. “Maybe you could meet up for lunch one day?” he suggested as I ran my tongue over my teeth.

“Hmm,” I grunted. I didn’t like the good ol’ doc knowing so much about my girl. She’s not yours! a voice in my head shouted, and I scowled.

“What is it, Linc?” he asked. I rested both my hands atop of my head as I met his eyes.

“She doesn’t know what I look like,” I shared for some forsaken reason. I didn’t miss the way the Doc’s eyes widened before he schooled his features.

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t have a picture of myself,” I muttered. It was true but a lie at the same time.

“And do you know what Miss—”

“Yeah,” I cut him off. It rubbed me the wrong way when he said her name. I would have never guessed I’d have a jealous bone in my body. But I did. Just the thought of the doctor knowing so much about her made the blood in my veins heat up. “She’s beautiful.”

“Well...” His lips twitched. “Maybe asking her to dinner would be a good idea?”

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“Hmm,” I grunted. “I don’t know.” I looked away. I was completely torn about what to do.

“Well, look, Lincoln. We both know you’re officially discharged after this meeting... but if you ever need to talk”—my eyes locked with his—“I’m here. Email or call, or pop in if you want. My door is always open.”

“Doc—”

“It’s just an offer. I’m here. You’re in a good space mentally.”

I laughed roughly, and he watched me closely. “I don’t know what to do about her, Doc.” I sighed, and his scrutinizing stare gentled. Almost softened.

“In what way?” he asked, and I found myself wanting to spill my guts. Damn, the guy was good.

“If I meet her. If I get to see her face to face...”

“The world will end?” he teased. I shook my head, breaking eye contact as I looked out the big window in his office.

“I might... I’ve never...” I groaned. I sounded like a fucking idiot. This was exactly why I didn’t do feelings. Why I never got close. Too many what ifs and shit you couldn’t control.

“You’ve never what, Lincoln?” the doc asked gently, and I swallowed hard.

“I’ve never been... a girlfriend kinda guy,” I admitted, and when our gaze connected, his head tilted slightly as if studying me, trying to figure me out. He crossed his legs, and his light gaze never wavered.

“You mean... you prefer men?”

“No! Jesus.” I shook my head. “Nothing wrong with that, Doc. To each their own. I just mean I’ve never had a girlfriend. Anything serious.”

“Don’t you think that’s skipping a couple of steps?”

“What do you mean?”

“You haven’t met her. Face to face like you said. In real life. You’ve written letters and maybe talked?” he guessed. I nodded to confirm.

“On the phone,” I shared, and he nodded.

“But you don’t know what it will be like in real life.”

“What if... she thinks...” I scrubbed my face. “What if she thinks I’m ugly?”

“Are you trying to ask if I think you’re good looking?” he joked, and I coughed my laughter away.

“No.” I shook my head. “I just... I’m pretty banged up. Scarred up.”

“Like I said, Linc, you never know unless you put yourself out there.”

“Hmm,” I grunted, looking away. “Thanks, Doc.”

“Right. Well...” He scribbled something on the papers he had in his file and handed me the sheet on top. “Like I said, I’m here if you need to talk.”

Just like that, this broken Seal was free.

All I had to do was check in with my commanding officer before I went on R&R.

R&R I was determined on taking now.

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Joy

“Karm!” I groaned as I stared at the bright pink drink in front of me. To my sister’s credit, though, it looked really good. Too good. Dangerously good.

“Drink!” She pointed at the fruity blended cocktail, and I rolled my eyes.

“Fine,” I groaned as I picked it up and took a healthy chug from it. “God! This is good,” I moaned salaciously and watched my sister smile widely.

“Good!”

“Do I want to know what’s in it?” I asked bravely. She shook her head.

“Probably not. But after a couple of those, I’m pretty sure you, of all people, will be able to figure out what to do next.” She grinned before turning and giving her attention to a man at the other end of the bar.

Karma had a couple of gigs she loved to juggle.

Tonight, she was bartending at a brewery in the Gaslamp District. She was one of those people who was amazingly talented at everything they did. I snapped a picture of my drink and posted it on my Instagram, tagging the brewery and my sister’s mixologist page, raving about the delicious goodness she had just created. I had just uploaded it when my phone pinged.

Linc: Having fun? I smiled and rolled my eyes.

Me: Tons. You?

Linc: Getting settled in. What are you up to?

About to drink my brains out. Hmm... I couldn't type that out. Hitting Delete, I went with a safer option.

Me: Hanging with Karma at her job for a little bit.

Linc: Okay. I won't bug. Call me when you get home if you're bored.

"Who are you texting? Faith?" Karm asked. I shook my head.

"No. Umm..." I felt my face heat up, avoiding my sister's gaze.

"Joy?" She leaned closer, and I looked at her and caved.

"Okay, so... remember the pen pal thing?" I quickly rambled out.

"Oh god!" she groaned. "You, too?! You and Faith both! Love bug goners?" she complained, and I laughed.

"Love bug—" I started to repeat and shook my head. "Where do you come up with this?"

"Holy shit. You are not denying it!" She crossed her arms in front of her. "See, Faith I knew this would happen to. She's the romantic one, but you?"

"Gee, thanks." I rolled my eyes.

"You know what I mean! Faith is all about the fairy tale and getting swept up. You're

more grounded,” she explained. She wasn’t far off. But I hesitated thinking about Linc. What I knew about him through his letters and talking to him last night made me like him. Made me yearn for that fairy tale.

But it wasn’t like I could point him out in a crowd.

Heck! He could easily come sit right next to me, and I wouldn’t know it. But he would. He would know me from my pictures. God, that wasn’t fair!

“It’s not like that. Not like Crew and Faith.”

“Then what is it like?” Her smile broadened as she leaned in closer. “Sex? Dirty letters? Sexting?” Her eyes widened more and more with every guess.

“No!” I gasped as I looked around me, but no one was paying attention to us. “Karma, Jesus!

“Look, there is nothing, and I repeat, nothing wrong with any of those things. If it’s not adding to your bag, inspiration, or orgasms, it doesn’t belong in your vida, sis. Straight up.” I blinked for a moment trying to translate my way-too-cool-for-school sister.

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“Add to my bag?”

“Income. Money. Dinero,” she clarified. I felt old.

“Ughh,” I sighed. “I hate when you do that.”

“What?” she laughed good-naturedly as she wiped the counter in front of me.

“When you say things that make me feel like I need to search stuff on Urban Dictionary. I’m getting too old. I can’t keep up with my cool sister.”

“Shut up. You’re not old. You’re only thirty.” She rolled her eyes. “Plus, now you know some fresh slang to share with your students.”

“Karm—”

“But back to you and your pen pal!”

“There is no me and my—”

“Yes, there is,” she noted with a cocky smile. “I know you, Joy. I’ve known you my entire life. You like this soldier.”

“Seal,” I corrected and watched her brighten in front of me.

“Ooo, shut up! A Navy Seal?” She whispered loudly, “Be still my palpitating heart.” She winked. “Imagine some guy like that hottie from An Officer and a Gentleman!”

Ooo!” She fanned herself as she kept going with her crazy story, “Walking into your school all confident and dashing with the big d energy—”

“Karm—”

“And carrying you out!”

“Does he have a forklift?” I teased and watched my sister’s teasing demeanor disappear into thin air.

“Don’t do that. You’re beautiful. Curves are sexy,” Karma reminded me confidently. But she didn’t get it. Out of the three of us, she was the thin one. Thin and beautiful and badass.

“Whatever.” I finished my drink. I was perfectly fine in my own skin. It wasn’t my problem if someone else wasn’t.

“Joy—”

“Don’t,” I muttered under my breath. Five years ago, I’d felt even more confident with the curves I held. No matter how much dieting and exercising, I’d always have an hourglass shape; it was how my body was built. I’d met someone who I’d thought liked them. Appreciated me.

But it’d all been a cruel joke.

“He didn’t deserve you. He shouldn’t have—”

“I said don’t.” I never wanted to talk about my ex. Heartache was inevitable. I knew this.

Everyone had a story of when they'd been shattered into bits and pieces. Mine was no worse. I just hated talking about him. I'd felt like an idiot with how I had been played and then ghosted.

"Can I buy you another?" a deep voice offered behind me, and the hairs on the back of my neck prickled.

I turned to look at a beautiful man standing right behind me. His deep moss-green eyes felt like they studied me closely. He was tall, well, taller than me, but who wasn't? Almost six feet, but probably more like five ten. Broad-shouldered. He was wearing a black button-up with navy slacks. There was no denying the muscular form beneath. His dirty blonde hair was cut close and short. But it was the way he was looking at me that, for a moment, felt like I knew him. But I had never laid eyes on him. He was the kind of man you remembered.

"Oh, I'm, umm," I stuttered. Thankfully, my sister always had my back.

"She'd love one," Karma jumped in. "What can I get you?" she asked him, and I didn't miss the slight twitch to his lips as he took the barstool next to mine.

"Whatever you have on tap."

"Got it." Karma got to work, and I glanced over at him. His eyes were already on me.

"Umm, thank you." I was finally able to string two words together.

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“You’re welcome,” he replied just as my sister set our drinks in front of us and walked over to other clients. She might not have been near, but I knew she was watching like the nosy ass she was.

“Come here often?” he asked. I shook my head.

“Not really.”

“What brought you out today?”

“Oh, umm... a long day at work,” I shared softly. “I, umm, well, I work at a high school, and one of the departments is getting hit with a budget cut.” I squished my nose. This guy probably didn’t care about this and was regretting asking. “I’m here having a drink, and after, I’m going to try to figure out how to rally for it.”

“Problem solver,” he observed, and I laughed.

“Some call it naïve.” I shrugged.

“Which department was cut?”

“Mine.” I laughed as I rolled my eyes at myself. The original reason I’d taken Karma up on her offer to make my yummy goodness. “Not all of mine. But enough where the ones that mean something to me, like community outreach, mindful moments kind of stuff, were hit.”

“Oh, that’s... cool.”

“Cool?” My lips twitched as I broke eye contact to pick up my drink.

“I mean what you teach, not the budget cuts.” He shook his head, and I smiled at him.

“You think it’s lame.”

“Not at all,” he responded immediately. “Someone recently kinda changed my life with stuff like that.”

“Really? How?” I asked, setting my drink on the bar and turning to face him fully. I hadn’t realized he was closer than I’d assumed and somehow ended up between his wide-spread thighs. But if the closeness bothered him, he didn’t comment on it.

“She taught me that you should be the energy you want to attract,” he said confidently, and I stilled for a moment.

Something inside of me was yelling at me that I knew him.

“Have we met before?” I asked, and just as he was about to answer, a loud sound banged.

Glass shattered, and someone was shoved, pushing me right into his arms. But I didn’t fall. Not when he wrapped his arms around me protectively before moving. Putting his larger body between whatever fight had broken out and me. Shielding me. Putting himself between the danger and myself. God, why is that so hot?

Two big, burly guys were pushing one another, getting in one another’s faces when one tossed another glass. For a moment, it felt like everyone stopped and was watching the two tipsy idiots. But as quickly as it had started, it stopped. My sister shouted at the two assholes, somehow getting their attention.

She slammed a butcher knife right into the center of the bar and looked at the two huge guys who were holding one another by the collar of the other's shirt.

"You two done, or do I need to stick one of you with this?" she asked as she pulled the huge knife out. They pushed each other away and took a step back.

A big dude came barreling in, his gaze connecting with Karma's.

"Jesus, woman. A knife! In the bar!"

"Maybe if you were faster on your feet, huh?" my sister responded. Like the total badass she was.

Suddenly, my sexy stranger was in front of me. "Joy, you okay?" he asked, stroking my shoulders while searching my face.

"I'm fine." I shook my head and stilled. "Wait, how did you know my name?"

"Your sister said it," he muttered, waving behind him. "Want to have dinner with me?" There was something in the way he was looking at me, like he was dying for me to say yes. No one had ever looked at me that way.

What about Linc? a voice in the back of my head perked up, and I frowned. Lincoln.

We're pen pals, his voice repeated, and it was like a lightbulb turned on. He had been adamant about how no one forced the guy to do anything. He'd never mentioned anything about my picture, and that was enough of a clue to know he wasn't interested in me that way. I was being silly harboring a crush on a faceless man I had only spoken to on the phone once.

"Dinner sounds good," I found myself agreeing. Maybe it was the adrenaline from

the fight or the drinks I'd had or both, but whatever it was, I was going to run with it. Take a chance. "Do you like food trucks?" I suggested, and he nodded.

Quickly, he took care of the tab, and I waved goodbye to my sister, not missing the way she mouthed HOT before we left.

We stepped out of the bar, and when I looked up at him under the moonlight, I paused. His hand took mine in his, and he looked at it and smiled. The man had been so serious inside, but his smile, it made my heart not only pitter-patter but melt slightly.

"Where to?" he asked. I licked my lips. Not because I wanted his gaze to drop to my mouth, which it did, but because I was nervous. "That way." I pointed with my free hand, and we started walking.

Neither of us said a word, but it was comfortable. Like we somehow knew one another.

Lincoln

My heart felt like it was going to bust out of my chest.

Tell her! a voice in my head was shouting at me, but I couldn't find how.

How the hell was I going to explain the truth when the truth felt too coincidental?

I had let my buddies Rafe and Rowdy talk me into heading into the Gaslamp District with some of the guys from our team. They wanted to have a drink to celebrate my discharge. Since it was a weekday, the bars hadn't been crowded, and it had been nice. We'd drunk, bar hopped a little. Then I'd received an alert on my phone. She had posted something on her Instagram. Yes. I followed Joy on social media. Her posts always made my day better. When I checked it out, I noticed the brewery she was at was only down the street from where I'd been with my team.

She was so close, I hadn't been able to stop myself. Something came over me, and before I knew it, I was telling the guys I'd be back and hurrying out on my own mission.

As my feet ate the pavement, I had told myself I would only be watching her from afar. If I approached her and told her who I was after she had texted she was hanging with her sister, I would have looked like a stalker. A creeper. I didn't want to freak her out.

I was only going to steal a glimpse of her in real time even though her picture was folded in my pocket, never far from me. Just a small taste for myself.

I should have known better.

Hell, carrying her picture in my pocket no matter where I was should have been a hint that seeing her for reals would have wrecked me. Ruined me. But I'd been stupidly short-sighted when it came to what seeing her would do to me.

I'd stood in the background and watched her.

I doubted I'd blinked once since I'd spotted her at the back, too afraid to miss an expression or smile. The more I watched her and her sister talk, the weaker I became. Foolish, really. I'd spent my life after my parents' passing keeping my distance from people.

But Joy was my very own brand of kryptonite.

A weakness I would happily give in to, to have her soft gaze on mine. Just looking at her had breathed life into me in a way I had never felt. Not only was I turned on by her curvy frame and sexy hair that tumbled down her back, but fuck, I just wanted to be around her. Right and center to have all her attention.

I'd watched the multitude of expressions wash over her, but when the delicate slope of her shoulders stiffened from whatever they were talking about, something came over me. Protective possession washed through me. Before I knew what I was doing, my feet were taking me right over to her, and when her eyes connected with mine, I'd offered to buy her a drink.

I had never been so damn unprepared. The moment our gazes locked, I was thrown for a roller coaster of a loop. I'd known she was beautiful. I'd stared at her picture for countless hours, watched her social media like a hawk. But fuck me, when her eyes locked with mine, my knees buckled.

Not only that, but I'd been certain she recognized me even though there was no way that was possible. She had no clue what I looked like, only what I sounded like over the phone.

"Are you from San Diego?" she asked softly, snapping me out of my thoughts as we ate.

She'd led the way to a parking lot full of food trucks. Each one looked better than the last. It'd been a tough choice, but we had settled on kabobs and falafel from a Mediterranean spot.

"No." I shook my head. "I'm from up north. Uh, Gratitude Peaks."

"I know where that is!" She smiled brightly. Of course, a girl like her would have heard of it. "They have a single's week a town over." She smiled, and I had to stop myself from scowling like a jealous lover. I didn't like the idea of her knowing that area because of that. Has she gone?

"Yeah," I mumbled, "that's a new attraction in Kismet Cove." I remembered my brother mentioning something about it.

"Those cities sound..."

"Made up?" I guessed and basked in the light sound of her laughter.

"A little bit. Like something off the Hallmark channel." She squished her nose adorably before she took a bite of her falafel. I watched as her eyes shut and she let the sexiest tiny little moan slip past her perfect lips.

Fuck! I could have easily come right then and there in my pants like a damn teenager.

“So good,” she groaned, opening her eyes. Her brown ones locked with mine, and I watched as her olive skin took a golden hue. There was my girl, blushing in front of me, and I loved the sight of it. “Sorry.” She shook her head, breaking eye contact as she avoided meeting my eyes.

“Nothing to be sorry for. Foods meant to be enjoyed.” I picked up my beef kabob and took a bite, groaning as the bold flavors blossomed on my tongue. It was delicious, yet I knew she would taste better.

“What do you do?” she asked. I coughed as I picked up a napkin and wiped my lips.

“A little of this and that.” God, I was terrible at avoiding a subject. I hated lying. “I’m on vacation right now.” R&R technically, but it was the same thing.

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“Vacation in San Diego.” She smiled. “Nice.”

“Would you like to be my tour guide?” I blurted. She tilted her head as she watched me.

“What makes you think I know the area?” she asked, her lips twitching. I shrugged trying to tamp down the nervous energy. Shit, I couldn’t tell her she’d told me she had been born and raised in the area in the letters we’d shared.

“You’re a teacher here,” I noted, carefully side-stepping my mistake, hoping she would fall for it. I had no idea why I didn’t just come out and tell her it was me. “That alone means you have to know the area better than me.”

“Hmm. True.” She smiled easily as she sat back. Something came over me, and my hand covered hers. “Umm.” She blushed again, and fuck, I wanted to kiss the apples of her cheeks. “I guess I could. Tomorrow is a half day at school. Where would you like to go?”

“Umm...” I swallowed. Shit, I was getting in over my head. I hated lying, but I had I already gone too far with this mix-up?

Would she forgive me?

Then there was the vain side of me. I wanted her to know me. The man.

Not the wounded Seal who had lashed out like an asshole through his first letter. The one who had been too chicken shit to tell her how fucking beautiful she was when she

sent a picture of herself. The asshole who had been too scared to let her get close until it was too late, because Joy Espinoza was already too close. She was buried deep under my skin and beneath the muscle. She was in my fucking soul. Her hand moved, and I laced my fingers with hers.

“You know what?”

“Hmm?” I asked in a complete trance as I let myself drown in the pools of her dark sparkling eyes.

“I just realized I don’t know your name,” she brought up. I opened and shut my mouth. This was the moment I told her.

“I’m Li-Linus,” I corrected.

“Li- Linus?”

“Just Linus.” I cleared my throat. Jesus, this was getting worse by the minute.

First, I hadn’t told her who I was right off the bat, and now I was making up a fake name! What the hell was my problem?!

“Just Linus,” she repeated, and suddenly, I never hated the sound of any other name more. I wanted to hear her say my name, damn it. “Well, just Linus, you know I’m Joy.”

“High school teacher Joy.” Woman of my dreams.

“Yeah,” she laughed softly. “What do you think about the San Diego Zoo? The Wild Animal Park is always a great place to discover, or if you wanna go to the beach—”

“Fuck,” I cursed and watched as her smile dropped. “I can’t do this,” I confessed and watched her try to keep the mood light as she picked at her falafel.

“Do what? The zoo? I mean I get it; it’s sad to see them all caged up in a way, but—”

“Keep lying.” I felt like an asshole. Not only was I cutting her off, but I was completely risking everything.

“Lying?” she repeated, her body still as she looked at me.

“My name’s not Linus, Joy.”

“Oh.... Okay, what is...” Her voice drifted to nothing as a heavy silence fell between us. I rubbed my eyes with the back of my palms, and when I dropped my hands and our gazes connected, I knew.

I knew she knew.

“Linc?” she whispered with wide eyes. Suddenly, Joy stood, and I jumped up, not as quick as I would have wanted but fast enough not to let her get too far.

“Wait! I know! Shit! Please don’t go.” I grabbed her hand and didn’t let go when she halfheartedly tried to pull it back.

“Is this a joke?” she asked as she looked around, almost as if she was expecting someone to jump out from the shadows.

“No. I just—”

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“How did you know I was at the bar?”

“You posted it,” I shared and frowned. “You should be more careful about posting your location,” I scolded, knowing very well I was putting my foot in my mouth.

“Why? Because some crazy creeper might pop up out of nowhere? There is no way you got there that fast. Were you following me?”

“No! Look,” I exhaled, “I know this is going to sound like a crazy coincidence, but I was only a couple bars down. With my team. I was released today, and they wanted to celebrate.” I blurted everything out as quickly as I could manage. “I saw you were close by and—”

“And stopped by and lied to me.”

“I— Fuck. Look—”

“I don’t understand.” She shook her head, pulling her hand away, and I begrudgingly let her go. “This is too much. You don’t even like me, and now you show up.”

“It was a coincidence.”

“Even so. Maybe it was. But you didn’t say hi. You don’t even like me.”

“Stop saying that!” I clipped, and the cutest little lines formed over her brow. Fuck, why was I getting so damn turned on pissing her off?

“Why? It’s true!” I hated she thought that. Without thinking, I reached for her. My hands at her hips pulled her close to me, flush against me.

“Joy, that’s the furthest thing from the truth you could get!” I gritted. “God! You drive me crazy!”

“Good.”

“Good?” I repeated. Frustration and sexual tension broke free, swirling in my veins. She felt too good right in front of me. A breeze washed through us, giving my overheated body some relief. “No, that’s the last thing it is.”

“Well, sorry,” she mumbled, but I could feel it.

She wasn’t scared of me. Her nipples were poking through the material of her bra and top, grazing against my chest. My hands stroked her lower back, and I dropped my face a little further.

“I can’t sleep. I can’t think. Not without you being in each and every thought.”

“Obsessed much?” she sassed, slightly breathless.

“You have no idea.”

“It’s really you?” she asked as she pulled back. I braced, ready for her to push me away, not that she did. Her hands rested at my chest and slid up to cup my face as she looked at me.

“It’s me,” I confirmed. Before my accident, I’d never been self-conscious about my looks. I was an okay-looking guy. But the scars that lay beneath my clothes had me doubting myself.

“You’re kinda cute,” she observed with a small teasing smile. “You should have just told me who you were.”

“I know. I kinda... I’m not the greatest with people.” Her lips twitched.

“Linus?” Her brow rose, and I shrugged.

“I freaked,” I confessed, making me feel completely exposed. And not in a good way. My only saving grace was the way her eyes softened as she stared at me.

“Why? It’s just me,” she whispered as her thumbs stroked my jaw line. Just her. She had no fucking clue just how important she was. How much she had shaken up not only my life but my world. All due to her letters. And I could only blame myself for being that much of an asshole I was.

“I got discharged today.”

“I see that.” She bit down on her lower lip. “You didn’t mention that last night,” she softly observed. Her hands dropped to my shoulders.

I rested my forehead against hers. “I didn’t want you to stop writing to me,” I confessed. She rolled her eyes before pulling back completely, and my body missed hers immediately.

“That’s silly.” She shook her head. “I’d still write.”

“Can we start over?” I asked, hoping to god she would give me a chance. Praying I hadn’t lost my shot and she would walk away. Her shoulders rose and dropped, and my heart sank as she started to turn around.

I’d fucked up.

She was walking away.

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Joy

I started to turn back, my hand extended when I caught a glimpse of how distraught he was. He thought I was walking away?

“Hi,” I shyly started off, “I’m Joy.” My hand shook slightly as he processed what I’d been up to. “My sisters always say I’m too cheesy.” I shook my head nervously. “I wasn’t walking away. I was just play—” My words stuttered to a halt when I watched the relief wash over him.

But he didn’t take my hand.

Nope.

For what felt like the longest two seconds ever known to man, we just looked at one another, standing only about a foot away. Then he moved. Faster than The Flash. The sexiest, most handsome man I had ever laid eyes on moved close and wrapped his arms around me. Pulling me in for the best hug. Ever! He held me tightly, almost painfully so, but I held on to him. His spicy, woodsy scent engulfed my lungs, and goodness gracious, I had never breathed in anything better.

I hugged him back, and we stood there for a moment. How long, I wasn’t sure, because all I knew was when he pulled back, I knew no matter how long, it wouldn’t have been enough.

“I’m Lincoln. My friends call me Linc.”

“Linc.” I smiled broadly. “Linc, would you like to go for ice cream?”

“I’d go anywhere with you, my Joy,” his voice rasped. My eyes widened.

His Joy.

He probably didn’t mean it. Not really. Lincoln was being cute and sweet. I shouldn’t take that claim seriously, but damn, it was impossible. Especially when his large hand took mine and our fingers tangled up together. We walked to the old-school ice cream truck after we picked up our trash from dinner.

I kept stealing glances as we waited in line. My hand in his much bigger and warmer one, we were standing close enough our arms kinda brushed against one another.

He was really there.

Lincoln.

My grumpy Navy Seal was just... there. Next to me. Holding my hand!

“Do I have something on my face?” he mumbled, stroking his clean-shaven square chin.

“You follow me on Instagram?” I blurted. His gaze dropped to the ground as his cheeks heated and turned the cutest shade of pink. I’d made the sexy Navy Seal blush! “You’re really here,” I noted with a smile. “I still can’t believe it.” I shook my head, and his serious expression didn’t change.

“Why?” His question almost sounded like a growl, but it didn’t turn me off or scare me. It did the opposite.

“Uh... because I didn’t think you liked me,” I pointed out.

“Babe...” He winced.

“You all but ordered me to stop writing to you,” I reminded him.

“But you kept on writing.”

“So did you,” I reminded him, and his lips twitched before he shrugged. He looked out toward the truck, probably scanning the menu. “Why?” I asked the one question I hadn’t been brave enough to put down on paper.

“What?” The question seemed to take him by surprise as he turned his attention back to me.

“Why did you write?”

“I regretted writing that first letter,” he shared honestly and rubbed the back of his neck before pulling me in to toss his arm over my shoulder, tucking me into his side.

“I really am sorry about that.”

“You don’t—”

“But I do... I’ve been in a dark place. You helped me see that.”

“Since your injury?”

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“Since...” He breathed in and exhaled slowly. He watched me for a moment and then shook me up when he spoke, “A while. A long time. Since my best friend died from cancer.”

“Oh.” I pursed my lips. I hadn’t expected him to share something so important. “I’m sorry. When— how long—” I shook my head. “Sorry, I shouldn’t—”

“We were eight.” I blinked, and my eyes filled with tears.

Eight years old.

I couldn’t imagine what that felt like. The pain and confusion of losing your best friend so young. Not only that but seeing them wither away.

“Cancer sucks,” I whispered as my nose stung.

“Hey.” He pulled me back into his arms, and I felt his lips at the top of my head. “Don’t be sad. Not for me.”

“I’m sorry. I just... I can’t imagine... you guys were so young.”

“Yeah.” He cleared his throat, and we moved up as the line got shorter. “Life sucks sometimes.”

“Yeah.” I sighed, wrapping my own arm around his waist and breathing in his scent. I wasn’t normally the type to be so touchy-feely with someone I had just met, and especially not with men who looked like he did, but there was a familiar undercurrent

when I was around him. It was like I'd known him longer than the couple of months of sending letters back and forth.

"But you showed me I needed to find the good," he added. I blinked as I looked up.

"Me? But I didn't do anything special."

"You have no idea how special you are." Oh, boy. My knees went weak at his words, and I couldn't tear my eyes off his mossy ones. "But you will," he added under his breath. I was dying to ask what he meant by that, but we were at the front of the truck and had to order.

* * *

"That's me." I pointed toward my house as he pulled up carefully to my drive.

I had taken an Uber to see Karma. When Linc found out my plans to take one back, he insisted he drive me home after we had walked around eating our ice cream cones.

"It's a great place," he noted as he looked at my little Spanish-style two-bedroom, two-bath home. It was painted a crisp white with a terracotta roof and dark brown accents.

"Would you like to come in?" I asked. He looked at me. His hand was still in mine since he'd grabbed it at the first red light we hit and had never let go.

"Joy." The hesitation in his voice was clear, and there was no hiding the disappointment I felt.

"Or not." I forced a smile before letting go of his hand and reaching for my purse on the ground in front of me. "Thanks for making a crappy day better."

“Even though I lied?” he asked. I thought about it for a moment even though I didn’t need to. I somewhat understood why he’d done it.

“Yeah. Just don’t do it again.” I winked and reached for the door handle to get out when his stopped me. His hand on my thigh felt warm and strong, slightly calloused. I looked over my shoulder.

“Wait,” he rasped and swallowed hard. My heart stilled for a moment with hope he’d changed his mind about coming in, not completely ready for him to leave. “Let me get your door.”

“Oh.” Well, he wasn’t staying, but it was sweet for him to offer. “Thanks.” I relaxed and watched as he got out. I lost sight of him as he walked behind the car. I breathed in his scent one more time in case this was the last time I ever saw him.

We’d talked and laughed while we’d walked around the Gaslamp District. It hadn’t been a date or anything. It had been two people getting to know one another just a little better. There was a weird pull toward him I knew could get me in trouble. I hadn’t lied when I said I kind of understood why he hadn’t introduced himself off the bat. But when we had bumped into his friends, it’d made his story a little easier to believe. We’d been in the same area by chance.

And he’d wanted to see me.

My door opened, and I slid out. Quietly, we walked to my door. There was a heaviness in my heart I couldn’t explain. It made no sense why I was a little sad about him leaving. We’d just met face to face for the first time.

“Thanks again.”

“Right.” He squeezed my hand, confusing me even further. “I’ll text you.”

“Sure.” I smiled tightly, not sure I believed him. I wanted to, but when guys didn’t take you up on your offer to hang out a little longer or gave weird mixed signals, like holding your hand and opening doors for you one moment then being a little distant the next, it left you confused.

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Get your head on straight! a voice shouted in my head. I let go of his hand and grabbed my keys from my purse. I opened my door and smiled over my shoulder.

“Drive safe.” I smiled, and he nodded.

“Alright, then.” He jerked his chin and walked down to the drive and toward his car.

I stood there, at my bright red door. He waved one more time, and when I smiled at him, his face was serious. He slipped into his car and started it. Something inside of me was still hoping he’d get out and rush over to me like a scene in a romcom. But life wasn’t like that. There was no grand moment where the guy went after a girl he’d just met.

Instead, he backed up, down my driveway. I wasn’t going to stand there and watch him leave. I forced myself to move, walk inside, and shut the front door before he drove off.

I turned on the lights and took my shoes off by the door, moving barefoot through my quiet home.

I’d met him.

The guy who had caught my attention with his grouchy, almost bitter-sounding letters. The faceless man I had been daydreaming about for the last couple of months. I’d been silly. Completely. I walked into my kitchen, picked up a green apple, and took a bite.

“Way over my head,” I mumbled as I went to my living room, grabbing the TV remote. He wasn’t going to call. He was way too handsome and lived in a whole other world. One filled with missions and laced with danger.

He might have held me close and held my hand, but he hadn’t done more than that. At my age, I knew better. I might love to try to find the good in every situation, and I did wholeheartedly believe there was good in almost everything, but I had learned a long time ago that when a person showed you who they were, to believe them.

Actions spoke louder than words.

I wasn’t sure what Lincoln was saying yet, but I knew better than to hold my breath.

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Lincoln

I'd driven to my small apartment on base and hadn't stepped out of my car.

I was simply sitting there.

Staring out at the building in front of me. But I wasn't looking at the beige walls and slightly darker doors. No. All I could see was Joy.

Joy and her pretty face.

Joy and the disappointed look she'd given me when I'd turned down her offer to come inside. Fuck. I rested my head on the steering wheel and shut my eyes, and Boom! There she was. Curvy and warm, her soft floral scent lingering at the forefront of my mind and just barely in the interior of my car.

Fuck! If I could bottle up her scent, I'd be a billionaire.

I'd tried to be a gentleman.

I knew exactly what would have happened if I'd stepped foot into her place. I hadn't wanted to risk it. But did I tell her that? No! Because I didn't know how to tell her how I felt. Fuck! How could I be thirty-six and so damn emotionally stunted?

My phone rang, and I smirked. Speaking of emotionally stunted. My brother. Chuck. I'd let his calls go to voice mail the last couple of weeks, but something came over me. I answered it.

“Hey,” I muttered, resting the back of my head on the headrest.

“Hey. How are you?” There was an edge to Chuck’s voice.

“Fine, you?” I muttered like nothing had happened. Like I hadn’t been laid up in a hospital the last couple of months because Chuck didn’t need to know that. I’d mention it in passing next time we saw one another because there was no hiding the scarred-up skin down my chest.

“I’m...” He paused, and his hesitation caught my attention.

“What’s wrong?”

“Wrong? Nothing, man, I just... Look, I heard you were in the hospital,” he blurted out. I sighed. Guess there was no mentioning it in passing anymore.

“I was.”

“Jesus, Linc!” he exclaimed. I winced, feeling like an ass. “You couldn’t call?” The concern in his voice was clear as day, and I felt like a bigger asshole than I already had .

“I didn’t wanna worry you. I’m fine.”

“You’re fine? You didn’t wanna...” I heard his sharp intake of air like he used to do when I would get on his nerves. Probably counting to ten in his head to find a reserve of patience for his little brother. “You’re my family, Linc.”

“I know,” I softly agreed as I sat back in the driver’s seat. I wasn’t going to argue like I usually did. I knew I’d fucked up.

“You’re the only family I got left,” he strained. I swallowed hard.

“I just... I’m on R&R. Maybe I will head home for a couple of days,” I tossed out an olive branch hoping it would work because I didn’t want to argue with my big brother. Not right now. Not after obviously fucking up.

“That would be good.” He sighed and then cleared his throat. “Maybe you can come up and meet your future sister-in-law.”, he added quietly.

Silence fell between us.

Chuck was a great guy. Solid, salt of the earth. But he had been like me. He didn’t do long term or commitments. And now he was saying he was getting hitched? Just like that?

“You’re getting... married?” I asked, my stomach heavy. With what I wasn’t sure.

“Yeah, man. You remember Suri, Angelo’s sister?”

“Little sister!” I laughed.

“Linc,” my brother warned, and I sat there trying to process it.

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“Shut the fuck up!” I exclaimed. Suri’s older brother had been best friends with Chuck. “Little Suri? Aren’t you way too fucking old for her?” I teased.

“Shut the fuck up,” he grunted. “I love her, Linc.”

“It’s serious,” I observed. It had to be for him to be thinking about happily ever afters.

“Yeah. Mom and Dad serious, Linc,” he added. My eyes shut slowly and stayed shut.

Overwhelmed with emotions, all I wanted to do was shut down. It was too much. I was happy for Chuck. He was a good man. A great brother. Way too good of one to be stuck with the likes of me. He deserved the kind of happiness our parents had shared.

“They really loved one another,” I noted, even though I knew he knew it.

“They did. They loved us, too,” his voice rasped, heavy with emotion.

“Right,” I muttered. “Too bad they left.”

“They didn’t leave, Linc. They didn’t leave us. They died,” my brother corrected, and I fought from scoffing.

“What’s the difference?”

“The difference?” he repeated gently, and the line went quiet between us. “Are you

serious right now?" he asked with an edge in his tone.

"I—" I paused. I never talked about this shit. But for some reason, I needed to at that moment. "Yeah, Chuck, I am."

"Linc, Mom and Dad would have done anything not to leave this world to have just one more day, hell, one more hour with us. Don't you know that?"

"I guess... I just... it's hard." My voice cracked. "It wasn't fair."

"I get that, too. You were younger, and after they died, I was barely keeping my head above water working to keep a roof over our heads. I wasn't there for you... to talk about things and—"

"That's fine... I wasn't a talker."

"Still aren't. Though I think this is the longest I've kept you on the line since you left for the Navy."

"Probably." I laughed, opening my eyes. I was a little more relaxed. "Hey, man, look... umm, I'm sorry about all that, Chuck." I was being sincere, too. "I didn't make it easy on you."

"Don't worry about it. It's in the past."

"Right..." Of course, he would forgive me as easily. I had always been able to count on Chuck.

Chuck, who was marrying his buddy's sister.

Chuck, who was in love and in a relationship.

If I asked anyone for help, right then and there, it would have to be him. “Hey, umm, can I ask you something?”

“Anything. I’m always here for you, Linc.”

“With Suri... How did you know you... umm...”

“Loved her?” he guessed, and I grunted. “I just did. When I would think about my life without her, it sucked. I didn’t want that version. I mean... I could. It would have been the same, but you know... not as good as it is with her. She makes me want...” He paused as if collecting his thoughts.

“What?” I felt like I was on pins and needles waiting for him to finish.

“She makes me want to be a better man, Linc.” I made a noise so he’d know I was still listening, but fuck, I felt his words. Deeply.

That was exactly what I felt when it came to Joy.

“Have you...”

“What?”

“Met someone?” he asked gently, and I scoffed. It was a knee-jerk reaction. “Right,” he muttered, and not sharing felt wrong.

“Yeah,” my voice cracked. I cleared it. “I think I’ve met the one,” I added without hesitation. Whatever doubts I’d had were quickly melting away, slipping through my fingers as I gave in to what my heart and soul wanted.

“What’s she like?” he asked, and where I usually told someone to buzz off, I didn’t.

“She’s...” I paused, and it was like a damn broke.

I couldn’t shut up.

I told him everything about my sweet Joy.

From the first letter, the exact number of letters, to tonight showing up at the bar she’d been in and not telling her the truth off the bat. He let me talk, laughing at me and how stupid I’d been.

I caught him up to how I’d found myself sitting in my car on base, full of regret for not having kissed her.

And Chuck just listened.

Laughed at the glitter and confetti messes her letters had left me with time after time.

I even shot him a couple of the pictures I had taken of the ground. By the time I was done, I felt a little lighter.

Happier.

Less muddled up.

“What do you think I should do?” I asked my big brother for advice for the first time since I asked him what tie I should wear for my high school graduation.

“Do you love her?” he asked without judgment, and I was nodding before the three-letter word slipped past my lips.

“Yes.”

“Then... if you’re up for it—”

“What do you mean, up for it?”

“Linc, you just got discharged. Your body—

“Is fine. Just... scarred up.”

“Right, but are you tired?” he asked cautiously.

“No. I mean...” I was. I was exhausted, but at the same time, I was invigorated. “I’m fine.”

“Call her.”

“Shouldn’t I just go over there?” I asked, the urge to see her again, to breathe the

same air as her so damn overwhelming.

“You up for the drive?”

“If it means I’m gonna see her, yes,” I quickly responded, and it surprised me.

There was fierceness in my voice I’d never heard before. And that’s when I realized I wasn’t freaking out about connecting too much with someone. About tangling my life with hers. Because somehow, through letters, we’d already done that. There was no fighting her getting under my skin because she was already there. Bone deep.

“Well... there you go. I think no matter what I tell you, you already know what to do.”

“Thanks, Chuck.”

“Just... if you do this, be clear. Communicate.”

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“I—”

“Before you go on the defensive, I am only saying this because let’s be real. It’s not either of our strong suits. But it’s important. Especially if you’re serious about her.”

“I’d rather chew my leg off than hurt her,” I rasped seriously. Communicate. Hmm, can I do that? Just lay it all out?

“Well, that was graphic.” He chuckled and then cleared his throat. “I can’t wait to meet her, Linc.”

“Soon.” I smiled as I started my car up because there was only one place I wanted to head out to.

An empty apartment was the last place I wanted to be.

* * *

Her neighborhood was quiet and peaceful. Only a couple of streetlights lit the street up. Not enough for my liking but sufficient.

I wanted to do nothing more than get out of my car, walk up to her porch, and knock on her door. But fear took over. Shit.

I’d walked into war zones and situations where the chances of me walking out were against me, but I had never blinked.

Yet, as I sat there, all the words and enlightenment I'd felt when talking to Chuck had faded. I was nervous. Over a woman. No, that wasn't true. If that had been the case, if Joy were just any other woman, I wouldn't have even bothered. But Joy was so much more. She was the one.

I knew if I got out and knocked on her door, that would be it.

Game over.

She'd fucking own me. Heart and soul. Who the hell was I kidding? She already did.

But what if she didn't want me?

Would I be a sad sack from there on? Looking on from the shadows, lurking, hoping she would one day give me a chance? Why would she want to give me one? After how I'd acted. Never telling her exactly how I felt. I'd been an idiot.

"Grow a pair," I whispered to myself. It was time to walk the line, to stand in the fire and pray I didn't get burned down to nothing but ash.

Why would she even want you? a voice whispered in the recesses of my mind, and I frowned at myself. I was a thirty-six-year-old man who was emotionally broken on the inside and seriously scarred up on the outside. Sure, I was in shape; I had to be to do what I did. But it wasn't pretty. I knew very well just how mangled up my torso was under my shirt.

And Joy, well, Joy was perfect. Inside and out.

"Shoot your shot," I grunted at myself as I slipped out of my car and quietly made my way to her door. I raised my hand to knock when my cell pinged. I slipped it out of my pocket and looked at the screen.

My Joy: Are you going to come in? Her text read, and I breathed out easily.

She knew I was there. She knew I was there and hadn't called the cops for being some kind of weirdo. That had to count for something. Right?

I knocked and waited.

The porch light above my head came on. Dim golden light brought the place to life as her front door opened slowly.

Then there she was.

Looking like a curvy angel on earth with her hair down and wearing a gray robe that hinted at the beautiful body that lay beneath, cast in the soft yellowy hue of the light above.

"Hey," my voice rasped as I stared at her.

Fuck, Joy was pretty. But seeing her like that, ready for bed, all soft and curvy, she looked like a wet dream come to life. "Hey," she whispered. I blinked for a moment. There was no missing how guarded she was. She was probably confused and hurt.

"I know its late, but..."

"What?" she cut me off. Not rudely, no, my Joy wasn't capable of rudeness, but she was making it clear she was not one to be toyed with. And I fucking loved that about her. Add one more thing to the list.

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A list I was sure would be never-ending.

“I forgot to tell you something... when I dropped you off earlier.” My voice sounded hoarse in my own ears.

My hands clenched at my sides. They ached to feel her. Fuck, I wanted to touch her. Hold her. Kiss her.

“Oh?” Her eyes widened, and I watched, completely captivated by the way the tip of her pretty tongue poked out and licked her top lip. “What?” Her chocolatey gaze was weary as she stared up at me. My girl. So damn brave and giving. I stepped forward, relaxing my hands as they found their way to her hips. “Linc?” she whispered softly.

My hands felt good on her, and by the way she blushed and her eyes dilated, I knew she thought so, too. Right. Like two pieces coming together and fitting the way they had always meant to be. Together.

“Your first letter made me mad,” I blurted out, and she blinked. It hadn’t been what I’d meant to say; it had just come out. “You were so happy, bubbly, full of life, it fucking jumped off the pages and made me... not feel so mad. I hated that. So, I ignored it. Then I got more. Each damn day. But by the third letter, Joy, I was hooked. That’s when you sent the one with—”

“Confetti,” she whispered, and I nodded.

“I took a picture of the mess. I took a picture of each and every mess you made me make. I don’t know why, but I did. And while I waited for your next letter, I would

look at them and feel... happy. Connected. Like you'd done this little thing for me to add color and light to my life. Me. A grumpy son of a bitch who had pushed everyone away because he was pissed at life for giving him one pile of bullshit after another."

"Linc, I don't know what—"

"I wrote to you after I had a nightmare," I confessed, feeling like a bigger asshole. "Everything." I swallowed hard as the nightmare flashed in the back of my head. My eyes clenched shut before I forced them to open and lock onto hers, so all I could see was her. "From my best friend to my parents to my brother getting stuck having to raise me, becoming a Seal to getting hurt. To seeing friends of mine..." I shook my head. "I was an ass and shouldn't have written that shit to you."

"Linc—" she started to say, but I pulled her in closer. She gasped, and we both knew why.

She'd felt it.

There was no hiding the effect she had on me. Fuck, just thinking about something as simple as her name had the blood in my body rushing south.

"I knew I liked you before that picture, but after... you fucking killed me. Your curves and smile. These eyes." My left hand moved up to gently cup her face. "Jesus, Joy, you obliterated my heart."

"I don't, I mean I'm sorry, Linc, I'm not following."

"You're fucking gorgeous," I cleared up, and there was no missing the surprise on her face. "And I looked like... like a patched-up GI Joe doll," I clipped.

"Lincoln, don't you know? You're easily the most handsome man I've ever seen,"

she said as her hands rested on my chest, one hand right below my heart. A heart that was ready to jump out as it tried to reach out and hand itself over to her.

“Under my clothes, my skin...” I hesitated, not knowing exactly how to tell her about the mess that lay beneath my shirt.

“I have stretch marks,” she blurted and then winced. “I know they don’t compare to your scars and what you went through, not even close. I just mean... I get self-conscious of them. We’re not perfect.”

“You are,” I gritted through my teeth before resting my forehead down on hers, hunching my back to reach her as I stared at her. “To me, Joy Espinoza, you’re the most perfect ray of sunshine to ever cast its way on me. And like a greedy fucking vine, I’m greedy for you, Joy.”

“Lincoln.”

“I’m not perfect. I’m broken inside and out. I’m a grumpy son of a bitch, but I can try. You make me want to be better. I just need a chance—” I couldn’t say another word when the tips of her fingers moved to my lips.

“I’m not perfect. I’m pretty messed up, too,” she whispered, dropping her hand and letting it skate down my arm until our fingers touched and I took her hand in mine. “Maybe, I don’t know...”

“What?” My Adam’s apple bobbed as my chest rose and fell. My body tingled with anticipation. Looking down at her and the way her lips moved to the sweetest, shyest little smile, I knew. I knew life would never be the same again.

“Maybe together, we could try and be a little less...chipped,” she suggested, and hope bloomed like a rose in spring. Bright and full.

“Together,” I repeated, and she nodded. “You saying you’ll give me a chance, Joy?”

“I didn’t know you wanted one.”

“I do. Fuck me,” I groaned, resting my forehead against hers again. “All I need is one. Please. I won’t let you regret it,” I vowed. Looking in, I could see someone thinking I was fucking crazy. Insane. Making those kinds of statements to a woman I had virtually just met, but what I felt for Joy was the real deal. I knew it in the depths of my soul.

“Promise?” she asked so softly I almost wondered if I had imagined it. But I knew with the way she was looking at me she’d said it.

“I promise you, Joy. I’m yours until you don’t want me anymore.”

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“This is crazy!” she surprised me by exclaiming while taking a step back into her place. I followed her, shutting the door behind us, closing us in inside the safety of her home. “There is no way you could mean that!”

“Why?”

“You haven’t even...” Her ears turned pink, and I tilted my head, watching her closely.

“What? What haven’t I done, Joy?” My voice sounded foreign in my ears. Hoarse and deep, full of emotion and something else. Possessiveness.

“Kissed me,” she blurted. She was embarrassed about pointing that out, but I could see the stubborn way her chin was set as she looked up at me. How could she think she was anything less than perfect? She was not only beautiful and smart but so damn brave and not afraid to say what she needed to.

“You saying you want me to kiss you, baby?”

“Linc, I just, ugh!” she clamored. I reached for her. Her body relaxed in my arms, and I wasn’t even sure she realized she did that. “How would you know you’d want me for that long when you haven’t even kissed me?” she laid out again. My eyes shut as I breathed her in. Joy filled every one of my senses but one.

“Tell me to go home, and I will step back and leave, Joy.”

“Linc.” Her eyes searched mine as if she was trying to see if I was being serious.

“Not forever. I don’t think I have that in me. But long enough to give you time to think.” I swallowed. “But if you tell me to stay, to kiss you,”—I inhaled deeply because suddenly, I was breathless—“I’m gonna do that and so much more,” I warned, but by the way her eyes dropped to my mouth, I knew she didn’t take it as one.

“More?” she whispered as her chest scraped against mine. Every one of my nerve endings was keenly aware of just how close this woman, my woman, was to me.

“More,” I confirmed. “One taste, and there is no way I’d be able to stop. It’s why I couldn’t kiss you earlier. I should have, though. I should have walked you to your door and kissed you until our lungs burned,” I rasped, letting her go, my hands bunched in tight fists at my sides. “I hadn’t told you about how I felt, and I was scared,” I admitted. Fuck, I’d never done anything like that. Baring my soul left me feeling raw, exposed.

“You?” She seemed surprised. “There is no way anything scares you,” she whispered, doodling shapes on my chest.

“You do.” I swallowed. “What I feel, how fast everything is falling into place.” I shut my eyes and shook my head. When I opened them, her wide brown eyes were set on my green ones with nothing but warmth, kindness, and love. So much love I wanted to float in the pools of her gaze. “It feels nothing less than real, and I’m afraid I’m fucking this up before it starts.”

“Shut up and kiss me,” she whispered, and like a lovesick fool, a beggar to do her bidding, I pulled her in the last couple of inches and dropped my lips to hers.

They touched hers, and for a moment, I froze. I tried to soak in the feeling of them. Soft and plump as they gently danced against mine. I wanted to take it slow. Make it sweet and romantic for her, but I was a weak man. My control broke, shattered into

pieces, starving for me. I coaxed her lips to open wider. My hands moved to her face, tilting it just right so I could control the kiss. Her face under my hands felt soft, satiny, like precious crystal.

She gasped, and I used that to my advantage to plunge my tongue into her mouth. Her taste bloomed on my tongue, and I groaned. She was fucking exquisite. She held on and gave as much as I took. My girl matched my need, just as greedy for me.

“Linc,” she moaned, and I didn’t think twice as I walked her backwards right toward her couch. I sat down and pulled her onto my lap.

“Fuck, goddamn, baby, you feel good sitting on me, beautiful,” I grunted and loved the shade of pink that her face turned.

“Am I too heavy?” she asked quietly. I shook my head.

“Hell no! Never. Not possible.” I groaned before my mouth sought hers out. Kissing her, tangling my hand into the back of her satiny tresses, I tugged them slightly and loved the glassy, lust-filled way she stared back at me before I licked her neck.

“So damn sweet,” I mumbled against her skin as I nipped and nibbled. Her own hands held my head in place, stroking my hair as if silently begging me not to stop. “You like that, my Joy? You like me tasting you? Kissing you like you deserve?”

“Lincoln,” she whimpered, giving me more access to her neck. I smiled against her soft vanilla-scented skin.

“I could live off how you taste, baby girl.”

“Shit,” she hissed as my teeth scraped against a particularly sensitive spot beneath her ear, and rolled her full hips against my cock. She felt amazing. Nothing had ever felt

better.

“You’re so big,” she observed breathlessly. “Linc, we should—” I stilled and pulled back to look at her.

“You need to stop?” I asked, but she shook her head.

“No,” she answered confidently. “But, umm... we need to talk.”

“What is it?”

“Well, umm...” She licked her lips, and my eyes dropped to them. Puffy and red. Swollen from my mouth on them. My cock lurched forward, straining behind my jeans.

“Was this too much?”

“No, umm, you see...” Her gaze dropped down to my chest, and it almost felt like she was avoiding me.

“What is it?” my voice rasped.

“I don’t have a whole lot of, umm, experience.” I froze and watched her a little closer.

“Okay,” I sounded slowly.

“I’m not a virgin, but, umm... I just haven’t done much.”

“Joy—”

“I was with one person, and he hurt me. But that was a long time ago.” She started to ramble quickly, obviously nervous.

“Shh,” I tried to quiet her down. “First off, how did he hurt you?” I asked, trying not to scare her as the anger of someone touching what was mine fucked with my head.

“It wasn’t like that kind of hurt. He just, umm...” And again, I lost her eyes. She wouldn’t meet my gaze, and I hated it. My fingers pressed under her chin so she would look at me.

“Talk to me, baby girl.”

“I was a bet,” she blurted out quickly, and my body went stock still. “Like, you know, screw-the-fat-chick kind of bet.” My teeth grinded as I tried not to let anger get the best of me. “He played me. It was one of those things.”

“No, baby, it’s not one of those things. Guys like that, they have no idea what kinda treasure they have in their hands, what they let go of because their dicks are too small to see past their nose.”

“You’re being sweet.” Her lips twitched slightly as her hands stroked my jawline.

“I’m being honest. I’ve met guys like that. Assholes who think their shit doesn’t stink. Playing with women and their feelings.” I shook my head with disgust. “But trust me when I tell you that karma’s a bitch, and it always bites them in the ass. And regret’s a motherfucker.”

“I like you, too,” she blurted as her chest rose and fell slightly, brushing against mine. “In case you were wondering.”

“Fuck.” I rested my forehead against hers and breathed in her air. Sweet and clean. “I should go home,” I rumbled, trying to do the right thing. Pulling my head back, I tucked a stray hair behind her ear. I opened my mouth to ask if I could see her the next day, but she beat me to it.

“Stay,” she asked, sitting straighter on my lap with renewed confidence. “Umm, we don’t have to, if you don’t want to, but—”

“If I don’t want to?” I asked, swallowing hard. She shifted slightly, rolling her hips just right to rub the soft apex between her thighs against my rod.

“I want you, Linc. I’ve never... I’ve never been surer about anything in my life,” she said confidently as she stood. I missed having her body on mine immediately.

I followed her and stood, taking the hand she extended as she led me to her bedroom. Fuck, she could have been leading me to the deepest parts of hell, and I would have followed like a lost puppy. She wanted me. She wanted me as much as I wanted her. My eyes followed the sway of her hips as we made it to her dimly lit bedroom, where she turned to look at me and licked her lips. Silence had fallen between us. But it wasn't bad. Hell no, it was nice. Comfortable and slightly familiar. My hands fisted at my side, not brave enough to touch her. Not yet at least.

“Are you sure about this, Joy?” I asked, my voice deeper than usual as my skin tightened all over my body.

“I’ve never been surer, Lincoln.” She reached for my hand and kissed the palm before I relaxed it and breathed in.

Being in her room was surreal.

A feast for all my senses.

The air smelled sweet, just like her. So sweet I could almost taste it. And fuck, looking at her in those cute pajamas, that's all I wanted to do. My hands moved to her shoulders, and carefully, slowly, I disrobed her. The robe she'd been wearing came off and pooled on the ground next to us.

“You have goose bumps,” I noted. “You want me to stop?” I asked. She shook her head as she breathed in. “I need the words, baby.”

“Please don't stop,” she whispered. A deep guttural sound rumbled through my chest as I pulled her in closer, kissing her silky flesh, pulling the tiny strap down the slope of her shoulder.

“I'm gonna take everything off your beautiful body, Joy. Every stitch of clothing so I

can see you. All of you,” I promised and felt her tremble beneath the tips of my fingers.

I didn’t stop until I’d completed my mission and had this beautiful curvy goddess standing in front of me as naked as the day she was born. “Fucking gorgeous,” I grunted as I backed her up and helped her to the middle of the bed.

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“Are you not taking anything off?” she asked as she looked up at me, and just as I started to lift my shirt up past my navel, I stopped.

“Umm, remember, it, uh, looks worse than it is,” I grumbled self-consciously. But when I met her gaze that was filled with nothing but anticipation and warmth, it filled me with courage to take my shirt off, tossing the tee over my shoulder.

For a moment, she sat up, drawing my eyes to her large breasts and the way they jiggled. “Lincoln,” she whispered, and before I could back up, her hands were on me. Not just tracing and touching my scars but my entire torso. “You’re just... wow... you’re like a Viking,” she whispered, and a broken chuckle bubbled out of me.

“What?” My lips twitched.

“Strong and powerful,” she said with awe as her palms rested on my biceps. “Like a painting,” she whispered, almost like she was talking to herself.

“Joy—”

“You’re perfect.” She met my eyes bravely, head on, not hiding an ounce of her affection and honesty.

“Fuck,” I cursed as my hand tightened over her hip.

With every word that slipped past her lips, she unmanned me. Putting pieces she hadn’t broken back into place and sealing them with gold. I settled myself on her side, my hand sliding down her body.

“Tell me when it’s too much,” I whispered, dipping my head down to kiss her shoulder, and I watched as her head fell back onto her pillow, getting comfortable as she let me explore her body.

Joy

I felt like I had melted into a puddle of goo. Right in the center of my bed. My legs shamefully opened wider. For him and for myself.

“Fuck!” He breathed in deeply, almost staggered. I knew he could smell it. My cheeks flamed with embarrassment. There was no missing the thick scent of my arousal. It was heavy in the air between us. But the way his chest rose and fell, almost as if he was gulping in air, like he couldn’t breathe in enough of it, made me feel sexy in a way I’d never felt. Surer of myself.

His fingers stroked from my sternum to my collarbone and dropped back between my breasts.

“You’re so soft, baby.” His hand moved to one breast and plucked a hardened nipple. I gasped. The sensation moved through me straight to my clit, and my legs started to close, just a smidge, just to get some kind of relief, but Linc was fast. So fast.

Quickly, his free hand moved to my thigh to pry it open.

“Uh-uh.” He shook his head, his molten eyes locking with mine. “Keep them open, baby girl.” God! Why was the way he talked to me so alluring?

My pussy clenched. I felt so empty, achy, needing so much more from him. There was no way I could hide it. Especially when a soft whimper of need slipped past my lips.

“Lincoln, please.” I wasn’t exactly sure what I needed, but I had no doubt in my mind he would deliver.

“You need me, Joy?” he asked with a wicked grin on his face. “Stay still,” he ordered. My breath hitched in the middle of my throat. “That’s a good girl.” He winked as his hand gently squeezed my left breasts, taking its weight and dropping it carefully to pay the other the same kind of attention. “Such pretty titties, Joy. Fuck.” His nose flared and that wicked look turned wolfish. “My sweet little Joy likes it dirty, doesn’t she? Fuck.” He shut his eyes, and when he opened them, they raked down my body.

I could almost feel his gaze like a touch. One that felt like a trail of fire on my skin. I was hot to the touch and wound up tight.

“Do you have any idea how many times I imagined this? Jerked myself off to this exact thought? You lying here perfectly still like my good girl, like a beautiful feast for me to enjoy?”

“Lincoln.” I swallowed, trying not to squirm. “You did?” I asked before I could stop myself. He nodded.

“Countless times,” he confessed, and I bit down on my lower lip. “Do you know how many times all I needed to do was look at that fucking picture, and I’d get painfully hard?”

“Shut up. You did not.” I chuckled incredulously.

There was no way that was true. He shifted, taking his hand off my body before he reached for something in his pocket. My eyes widened when he handed it to me. My picture. The one of just me I’d sent him. Folded in quarters. Soft and worn. Almost as if...

“I carry it with me everywhere. I always have it in my pocket. I have the other one in my wallet.”

“Really?” I asked. I knew I cared about him. Even as a faceless pen pal I exchanged letters with. But this whole night had been wild.

I had no doubt that tonight, this whole day from finally meeting him, him not kissing me and leaving to showing back on my doorstep, to him being in my bed with me completely bare for him, was a turning point.

Good or bad, life would never be the same after this.

Good, a little voice whispered in the back of my head. This can only be good, she assured me, and I knew it was right. There was no way a man could fake the way he was looking at me.

“Love me, Lincoln,” I requested softly, unashamed and confident.

Whether this would turn out to be one stolen night or a lifetime of them, I would ask for what I wanted. Heck, what I deserved. His eyes shut as he pressed his forehead against mine and we shared the same air.

“I can’t say no to you.” His words made my lips tingle, and before I could say another word, his mouth touched mine and he kissed me.

Hard and hungry.

It wasn’t sweet and soft or pretty. No. We needed one another too much. It was like a lit match had been tossed into dry brush. We ignited, hot and fast. His large body moved between my hips, and both of our hands raced to work his belt. We undid it together, smiling as we kissed, teeth scraping and noses bumping, but god, it was

beautiful. Perfect.

Until his hands took my wrists and stopped me from reaching the hard, long prize he had hidden behind his faded denim.

“Wha-what?” I panted as I searched his eyes.

“Wait.” He breathed in. His nose flared. Lincoln looked like he was holding on by a thread.

“Why?” I whined. He shook his head, but there was no missing the slight twitch to his lips. His hands moved mine over my head, still holding on to my wrists, as I looked up at him.

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“When you have a gourmet meal in front of you,”—his lips dropped a kiss on both my cheeks; in this position, my breasts brushed against his chest, and the hair on his only made me feel needier—“you savor it,” he rumbled against my chin before his lips dropped to my collarbone. “Take your time enjoying every morsel. I’m gonna let go of your wrists, but keep them up there,” he ordered. My body felt like a live wire. Exposed and trembling as sparks flew from me.

“Or what?” I sassed. No clue where the boldness was coming from, but we were both more than enjoying it.

“You don’t wanna find out, baby,” he promised darkly as his lips moved down between my breasts, littering kisses down to my belly. Swiping his tongue around my navel before his face was so close to exactly where I needed him, it was almost embarrassing.

“Linc, umm...” I squirmed but stopped immediately when his eyes connected with mine, shooting me a look.

“Do you need me to stop?” he asked, and I hesitated. Not because I didn’t want him there but because I wasn’t sure of what to do.

“I’ve never... umm, this... you, umm, going...” His eyes flared with understanding. And for a moment, I was afraid he’d stop everything. He’d realize I was so horribly unexperienced for someone my age and figure I wasn’t worth the effort. I was a lost cause.

But he didn’t.

Lincoln surprised me at every turn.

From how we finally met to everything he'd confessed about how he felt. God. Why hadn't I given the man more credit?

"Good," he huffed, settling in between my thighs. "I like knowing I'm the only one who's done this to you. One and only. Heels on the mattress," he ordered, and I quickly did what he asked.

God, I was spread-eagled in front of the man whom I had fallen in love with without looking at and showing him everything. "Hot damn," he grunted. "I knew you would be pretty, but fuck me." His fingers moved between my lips and spread me open, and before I could even say his name, his tongue laved at me.

Slit to clit, he licked me slowly. Deeply groaning with pleasure as he tasted me. Savored me. My toes curled as warmth pooled all around me.

"Linc." I gasped when I felt his lips move further down, licking my other hole before moving back to giving my pussy the attention it was crying for.

Every swipe of his tongue and every brush of his finger teasing my entrance had me squirming. Writhing below him as I kept my hands above my head.

"Lincoln," I whined and cried. His name repeated like a chant that seemed to egg him on.

And when I was on the verge, so close to the precipice of an orgasm, he pulled back. Smiling like a Cheshire cat, his green eyes warmer and darker than before as he watched me take his middle finger. Slowly, he moved inside of me, and my lips parted as a silent cry came out. "Yes!" I hissed.

“You like that, my Joy? Do you like me fingering this pretty pussy?” He kissed my thigh as I nodded, my eyes shutting on their own when he added another.

The sweet burning stretch didn’t relieve the need I was clawing up against. No. It only amped it up. He played my body like a concert cellist with his fine-tuned instrument. Bringing me higher and higher. Adding another finger and letting his thumb skim over my other hole. It felt dirty and sexy, and I was too far gone with lust and desire to think twice about it being wrong. I was too far gone. I didn’t want him to stop, and I told him so. I begged and pleaded.

He gave as good as I got.

Harder and faster. And when he hooked his finger, pressing against the magical spot inside of me, one I had thought was make-believe because I’d never found it, I burst. Stars and fireworks glittered behind my eyes as pleasure swept over me. My pussy clenched and sucked at his fingers, drawing him in deeper until I was completely spent.

Nothing but a boneless, sweaty, panting mess in the middle of my bed. I gulped for fresh air and pried my eyes open.

“I’ve never come that hard.” I laughed. Slight tremors of pleasure still trickled through me.

“Good. Only me,” he mumbled as he stared at me.

“Fuck me, Linc.” I lifted my legs and watched as his Adam’s apple bobbed.

He jumped out of bed.

Not to leave, but to kick off his shoes, socks, and jeans.

And I watched. Afraid to blink for missing a moment. And when he was completely bare, he looked more like a warrior than ever. His thick, long cock strained proudly, almost bobbing against his belly button as it stood. The clear drop at his thick tip made my mouth water, wanting to taste him and return the favor. Serve him with just as much pleasure he'd given me. But I knew that would have to wait with how he was looking at me.

“You ready for this, Joy?” My mouth dried as his hand took hold of his shaft and he stroked it. Once. Twice. Three times. I nodded, and his jaw clenched. “We can wait,” he offered. “You deserve romance and candlelight and—” I knew he was trying to be a gentleman, but I didn't need that.

“Shut up and love me, Lincoln,” I snipped, and his lips twitched.

“Bossy,” he mumbled under his breath. Returning to me fully naked, his body was a piece of art. Every jagged scar told a story, every freckle and muscle an adventure.

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“I might not last long,” he warned, and as my senses returned to me, I noticed it. He was nervous.

“I might not either,” I confessed

“I’m serious, Joy.” A muscle under his eye twitched, and my hands moved to cup his face. My touch almost seemed to relax him, and I loved that. “Look.” He swallowed, his stare still serious. “It’s been a while and, umm...” He cleared his throat. “I might pop off way too fast.”

“Because you haven’t had sex in a long time?” I asked, trying to follow what he was trying to tell me.

“No. Because it’ sex with you,” he answered, and I smiled just as I moved up a little to kiss him. “Baby,” he groaned. I opened my eyes, widening my legs enough to feel him.

Right. There. Heavy and thick. Wide.

“Oh god,” I moaned, “Love me, Linc.”

“I do this, fuck,” he growled, “I wanna be selfish.”

“Do it,” I goaded, and his nose flared.

“I want you bare,” he confessed. I blinked as I processed what he was saying.

Bare.

Unprotected.

Skin to skin, with nothing between us.

God, that sounded amazing. The few times I'd had sex had always been with a condom. The idea of Lincoln filling me, stretching me completely bare, had every inch of my body tingling.

It was crazy.

We hardly knew one another. I knew better.

I taught my students to make better choices than I was about to. I'd always thought it was so easy to just stop and practice safe sex, and that would be it. But I had never felt this way. I'd only had one partner, and I hadn't been this comfortable with him as I was with Linc. Linc, a man I had just come face to face with less than twelve hours ago.

But in the moment, none of the reasons why having him fuck me bare, with nothing between us, was wrong mattered.

I wanted that.

For the first time in my life, I didn't give a damn about the consequences.

"I'm on the pill," I shared and felt him bump against me.

"I'm clean," he rasped. "While I was in the hospital, I was tested and—"

“I trust you,” I whispered and meant it.

As I stared at his mossy green eyes, I knew I trusted him completely.

Mind, body, and soul.

But most importantly, my heart.

His eyes shut again, as if he was trying to keep himself in check. I didn’t want that. I wanted him wild. Savage. A warrior taking exactly what he needed the way he wanted it.

“Fuck me, Linc,” I moaned and was rewarded with a guttural sound that seemed to emanate from deep inside of him, making his muscular chest vibrate.

“This isn’t going to be fucking,” he grunted as his dick bumped against my entrance. I was soaked and swollen, so sensitive, and needed him so badly I could hardly stand it. “I’m gonna love you. Today, tomorrow, fuck me, always, my Joy. My sweet, sweet Joy.” He pushed forward, and my lips parted as I felt him move.

His thick tip entered me, and I gasped. “Just like that. Always love.” He pulled back and thrust forward, powering through, giving me every single inch. I buried my face in his chest. “Even when I’m rough, it’s going to be loving you.” He exhaled roughly, keeping himself still inside of me, giving me a moment to adjust to his size. His lips touched my forehead, silently coaxing me to look up at him.

And I did.

Our eyes locked, his body started to move. Strained over me, he slid in and out of me easily with how slick and sticky I was for him.

“So wet,” he grunted as his hips moved and rolled. My head fell back against the pillow.

“Linc,” I breathed.

“You like that, don’t you, baby? Hold on,” he ordered. “My shoulders.”

And I did.

I held on, and he fucked me hard, powering through thrust after thrust as he savagely made love to me. It was primal. A basic instinct. One my body was more than prepared for. Ruthless loving.

“Like that shit, Joy.”

“Come for me, Lincoln. Fill me up,” I whispered into his ear before nipping at it.

“I’m right there,” I panted, and I was.

I was about to come. He picked up speed. Angling just right, he slid against that magic spot, his spot, the one he’d discovered and claimed. One that had me gushing. The sound of our bodies slapping, coming together the soundtrack of our lovemaking. I wanted that moment to last forever. No matter what tomorrow would bring, I’d

always have what he was giving me. Bringing me higher and higher, closer to falling until there was no stopping it.

I shattered. My pussy milked him, drawing him in deeper as my fingers dug into his back. Lost in euphoria, I had just started to float back to myself when I felt him. His own release and grunt. Warmth filled me, triggering another orgasm, a smaller one but nonetheless as beautiful. We clung to one another. Both of us sweaty and breathless, fighting to catch our breath. He rolled off, and I froze. Would he push me away now that he'd had me?

With time, I'd learn to never doubt Lincoln.

He pulled me into him, wrapping my body around his, his arms around me as he kissed the top of my head. We lay there in comfortable silence. His hands stroked my back, and when he pulled back to look at me, something washed over me.

My heart and soul were safe with him. His hands moved between my legs, and I blushed as he felt his seed coating my legs. "Let me clean you up," he whispered against my lips. I nodded. He dropped a sweet kiss before he stood, grabbed his shirt from the floor, and came back to me, settling in next to me as he carefully cleaned me and kissed my nose.

"Be mine." It was more of an order than a request. My lips twitched.

"Yours?"

"My woman, my girlfriend. Whatever you wanna call it. Just tell me I'm yours. That you'll give me a chance to love you."

"Lincoln." I sighed dreamily. "How can I say no to that?" I whispered as his hand moved between my sensitive folds.

“I need the words.”

“Only if that means you’re mine,” I negotiated. His head dropped. His nose nuzzled against mine.

“I’ve been yours, Joy. You just didn’t know it.”

“Ditto,” I answered before yawning. We got comfortable, and before I knew it, sleep took me away to the sweetest dreams I’d ever had.

Lincoln

I woke up slowly, coming out of a deep, restful sleep in longer than I wanted to admit. I blinked, taking in the room as the night before came barreling to the forefront of my mind.

Joy.

My sweet Joy.

She moaned softly as she turned in bed, giving me her back. Her very bare back. I felt my lips move upward into a smile. I rolled into her and held her close. Joy's sweet ass snuggled into me and my morning wood.

Fuck. The feeling was too good.

But I had to wait.

Give her some time, because last night, we'd both been insatiable. I'd woken up to her lips at my neck, her hand stroking me. I'd asked her if she was horny, and she'd nodded shyly. I'd rolled over onto my back and enjoyed her stroking me a little longer before making her ride me. Bucking up into her until she had screamed out my name. And I hadn't stopped. I'd pulled two orgasms from her before I'd let myself finish deep inside of her. In the back of my mind, I knew I was playing with fire. The pill wasn't a hundred percent effective. It was a risk, but fuck me, I wanted her pregnant. Round and ripe with my baby growing inside her. Tie her to me in every way possible.

The possessiveness flowing through me was insane. So much I hardly recognized myself, but I wasn't questioning it. She was mine, and I was hers. Somehow, I shut my eyes and relaxed, letting the sound of her breathing lull me back to sleep.

I woke up twenty minutes later to an empty bed. And I didn't like it. I missed having her naked body within reach. I stood up and stretched, picking up my jeans and tossing them on before I went to look for her.

She was in the kitchen, beautifully disheveled, her hair wild and free as she cooked. I took a small moment watching her. The sight of her alone made my day better. She turned, almost as if sensing me staring, and when she smiled at me, I was a goner. I stalked over to her and picked her up carefully, moving us away from the stove as I stole a long, wet, passionate kiss.

"Morning," she whispered with a smile as she looked at me, her legs wrapped around my waist, her hands cupping my face.

"Best morning ever." I winked as I set her back on the ground, dropping one more kiss to the top of her head. "What can I do?"

"Do you know how to make coffee?" she asked, and I grinned.

"Do I know how to make coffee?" I repeated, feeling carefree and at ease. "Hells ya, I do," I told her, pulling her back toward me, loving the way she blushed.

"Coffee is in the cabinet over the machine," she pointed to the teal coffee maker.

We got to work and shared breakfast together, with her sitting on my lap.

"I could get used to this." She grinned at me, and I smiled broadly. I'd never felt this way. Not once, not even close. "I wish I could stay home with you today," she

sighed, relaxing in my arms. I kissed her forehead.

“It’s only a half day, right?”

“Right.”

“How about I meet you here after work?” I suggested and watched as her eyes brightened.

“I’d like that.”

“Good.” I kissed her, and we both stood up, “I’ll clean up. You go get ready.

“I can help, Linc.”

“I don’t want you to get to work late.” I winked as I took our plates to her sink before I sat her beautiful ass on the table and ate her out until she was screaming my name.

“You have that look on you,” she observed with a shy little smile before biting her lip. She knew what I was thinking and liked it. Fuck, she was perfect.

“I’ll get us tickets to the Wild Animal Park. We can go walk around and have dinner there.”

“Really?” She smiled brightly. I nodded, feeling like the king of the world by making her happy with my suggestion. “I’d love that,” she added softly, and I kissed the tip of her nose.

“Good. It’s settled. I’ll get the tickets and meet you here after you get home from work.”

“Deal.” She winked. “I better get ready.”

“Go. I’ll clean up.”

“Okay. I’ll be fast. We can leave together.

“Sounds good, baby.” With that, I watched as she sashayed out of the kitchen, her hips making my mouth water as she headed toward her bedroom. I had to count to ten to force myself not to follow her and make her really late.

Once the dishes were done, I grabbed my shoes and my dirty shirt and went out to her drive to grab a clean one.

She stepped out dressed for the day in the sweetest sundress. My mouth watered as she made her way to me.

“You cannot wear that,” I rumbled, loving the way she laughed.

“Why not?”

“You look way too fucking sexy. Like that sweet teacher who you wanna dirty up.”

“Mmm,” She bit her lower lip as she pressed her front against mine. “Maybe you can do that to me later?”

“After the animal park.”

“Or we could just...” She wagged her brows. Fuck, she was tempting.

“No,” I croaked. “Gotta take my girlfriend on a proper date. What kind of boyfriend would I be if I didn’t?”

Her eyes softened, and she stood on the tips of her toes, her hands at my abs as she reached my lips and kissed me.

“Did I agree to being your girlfriend?” she sassed. I chuckled, nodding as I held the back of her head with my hands.

“Hell yeah, you did,” I growled, sealing it with a kiss.

I walked and opened her door and made sure to remind her to text me she got to school safe and sound before I got in my own car and drove back to my place on base. I felt like I was on top of the world.

But it all came to a halt when I saw my buddy and teammate Rowdy Hawkins at my door. I knew what that grim look on his face meant without him having to say another word.

“Hey, man, I know you’re on leave—”

“But you guys need me?” I guessed, and when he nodded, a sinking feeling hit my gut. I have to leave. “When?” I asked, my voice strained.

“We’re wheels up in two hours.”

“Shit,” I cursed, running my fingers through my hair before unlocking the front door to my place. He followed behind me.

“I know it’s last minute.”

“It’s the gig, right?” I asked, looking over my shoulder.

“That it is, man.” He nodded.

“Let me get my shit.”

“You seem different.” He frowned, and I rolled my eyes. “Better now?” he asked as I stepped into my bedroom, grabbing the duffle I always had ready to go in case of these kinds of circumstances.

“What do you mean?” I shouted back.

“You seem... I don’t know... less assholish.”

“Assholish?” I repeated, shaking my head. “Is that a word?” I teased.

“Dude, pretty sure, you look it up, your face is one there as an example,” he joked back. I laughed roughly. He was probably right.

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“I was in a shitty headspace,” I told him, hefting my duffle over my shoulder as I walked back to the living room. “I’m better now.”

“Yeah? How? Don’t tell me you’re going to therapy?”

“Joy,” I answered and swallowed hard.

Fuck. I had less than two hours before I had to leave. Time was of the essence. There was no way I could go say goodbye to her. I couldn’t call her because she was at work already, and her phone was probably on silent. Shit.

“Joy?” he repeated, tilting his head. “You mean happiness?”

“Joy, like my own goddamn miracle,” I muttered, lost in my head trying to come up with a way to let her know I had to leave. Shit. Fuck! I had to leave her. I’d just found her. Lady Luck hated me. I’d never had a problem just picking up and leaving. I’d never questioned it. Hell, I had always looked forward to it.

“I’m lost.” He looked at me like I was talking in tongues.

“My girl.” Fuck, that felt good to say. She was mine. And I fucking hated that I had to leave.

“Your... wait. You’re dating someone? When did that happen?” The shock was crystal clear on his face. “Is this an actual woman or some weird sex doll you have in your closet?”

“Shut up.” I shook my head. “I need to tell her I’m leaving, man.”

“Well, do that in my truck because we gotta get going. Gotta pick up Collins.”

I was typing out a text message when Rowdy’s phone rang, and our attention moved to our commander ordering us to the airfield asap; someone else was picking up Collins. In the rush and adrenaline, I didn’t realize I never pressed Send before powering down my phone.

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Joy

A little over a week later

It's been a week since Lincoln disappeared.

Well, a little over a week. Nine days, to be exact. But who is counting? Me, that's who.

God, I should have known better! I scolded myself. All week, all I'd wanted to do was curl up into a ball on my couch and stare off into space.

But I hadn't. It wasn't who I was, nor was it the woman my mother raised me and my sisters to be.

It took me about eight hours of waiting around to hear from Linc to let the truth settle in my gut. He stood me up. There was no other explanation. Especially when I texted and my messages went unread, and whenever I called, I went straight to voicemail.

I'd been burned once, but this time felt worse. So, I did what any woman in my position would have done after thinking she'd met the one and he ghosted her. I called my sister. Karma had come over with ice cream, and I'd cried on her shoulder until I fell asleep on my couch.

I couldn't get myself to go into my bedroom.

I knew if I stepped foot in there, I'd be able to smell him. I'd see my bed and

remember exactly how good it'd felt to be tangled up with his body. I'd stayed on the couch for two days before I went in and grabbed the bed sheets and tossed them into the washing machine.

Fake it until you make it had been the motto of the week.

I'd pasted a smile on my face and tried, unsuccessfully, to not think about the Navy Seal who had wreaked havoc on my heart. I was sad. Heartbroken. Nothing had ever felt this way. How the hell I had fallen in love with a man I'd just met face to face, I had no idea. But I had. So stupidly fast. Like a naïve schoolgirl, I'd fallen for his sweet words and soft touches.

Too bad I was nothing more than a game to play.

A way for him to kill time before god only knew what came along.

He's not like that! My heart tried to stand up for him, but my brain batted it away. If he wasn't a Casanova playing, a manwhore, where was he? What happened?

I shook away all the questions and tried to be present in the moment.

It was a warm Sunday evening, and I was sitting around the big table my dad built in the backyard of my childhood home for occasions just like this. Family dinners when his daughters came home, and we all ate together.

My eyes moved to my parents sitting next to one another like usual whenever we gathered around the table. A knot formed in the middle of my throat at the sight. Of the beauty of having someone by your side, through thick and thin.

Always.

Not someone who just vanishes into thin air.

Lincoln O'Brien was a jerk. But beating myself up about it wasn't going to help.

"Hey." Faith leaned in, and I turned to look at my little sister sitting next to me. She was so happy she seemed to glow. And it was all thanks to the Marine sitting next to her.

"What's up?" I smiled at her, but I knew by the concerned way she was looking at me there was no fooling her. She knew me too well for that.

"So, Crew has a friend," she started to say, but a rough laugh bubbled out of me as I shook my head.

"Oh boy," I groaned, "Faith—"

"He's super nice and so funny!" she added, and I winced.

"I'm fine." I was meant to be alone. The two guys I'd taken a chance on had taught me that lesson.

One using me to win a bet, and the other... god, freaking Lincoln. I should have known better. Maybe love wasn't in the cards for me? Maybe I was just meant to be the cool aunt once my sisters had kids. I'd be fine with that. It's safer, my brain reminded me, and my bruised heart stayed unusually quiet.

"Think about it. He's sweet and really cute."

"Hook him up with Karma," I joked, but she just stared at me.

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“Karma would chew him up and spit him out,” she teased, but I didn’t have it in me to smile back. “She told me what happened.”

“I guessed that,” I muttered seriously, sipping my water. My eyes moved toward Karma, but she knew better than to look in my direction. Blabbermouth!

“Wanna talk about it?”

“Not even a little bit,” I added because it would spoil her good mood. She might be my little sister, but the three of us were super protective of one another.

“You called us on the way to work. You sounded so happy. I thought—”

“Faith.” I sighed. “I’m fine. Everything’s fine,” I interrupted because I wasn’t ready to have a moment at my parents’ house. It was bad enough that Karma had spilled the beans to Faith, and something told me she’d blabbed to our parents as well.

“Joy—”

“Faith. It’s fine,” I repeated. It wasn’t. But it wouldn’t help anyone if I spontaneously burst into tears. I was the oldest. I kept those things to myself.

“Okay...” she gave in. “But just think about it.” She was relentless.

“Faith.” I shot her a look, and she gave me puppy eyes before resting her head on my shoulder.

“I just want my sister to be as happy as I am,” she whispered. I looked over her shoulder to the man sitting next to her. Sure enough, Major Crew McCabe’s gaze was set softly on my sister with so much love in her direction it made me smile.

“I’m happy you two found one another. That’s good enough for me,” I told her sincerely, meeting her gaze, and she smiled.

“It happened because of you.” That was kind of true. I had talked my sister, both of them, into joining the pen pal program, which was how Faith and Crew’s paths crossed.

Just like Linc’s and mine. I swallowed hard. No. Not just like that because lightning didn’t strike twice.

I hugged my sister and got up to go inside. The wine bottle on the table had finished way too quickly. It was Sunday, and I was officially on summer break. I was going to let myself drink way too much, quietly wallow in my broken heart, and make Karma’s big mouth drive me home.

“There you are,” my dad said, stepping into the kitchen, raising an eyebrow as he took notice of the bottle of wine in my hands.

I was thirty years old, yet for some reason, I still felt like an eighteen-year-old getting caught underage drinking. “We were running out.” I lifted the bottle and shrugged. My dad looked at me for a beat and nodded.

He walked toward me, took the bottle, and looked at the label.

“Good choice,” he murmured, settling it on the counter before turning to look at me. My dad was tall, six one with a full head of hair that much to my mom’s dismay was still mostly dark. Somehow, her crazy shenanigans hadn’t made him go gray. “I think

we can do better than this,” he muttered as he reached the top cabinet where I knew he stored the hard liquor.

“Margaritas?” he suggested as he brought down one of his best tequila bottles. “Your grandpa used to say that tequila cured everything,” he muttered. I rolled my eyes.

“Who snitched?” I asked even though I had a feeling I knew.

“Karma,” my dad answered. He never lied to us. That had been a family rule in our household. “But she did it because she’s worried,” he added, and I sighed.

“How about we skip the lemonade and get Mom’s blender dirty and just let me have shots?” I negotiated and didn’t miss the way his lips twitched with humor.

“You should have gone into business,” he teased, and I laughed. “Wanna talk about it?”

“No,” I repeated and frowned. I was close to my dad, and I didn’t like keeping things from him. “Love sucks,” I whispered, biting down on the inside of my cheek to keep me from crying. My dad nodded as if he understood.

“Sometimes. But sometimes, there’s an explanation to everything.”

“You would think that, but—”

“This...Lincoln? That’s his name?”

“Jesus, Karma and her big mouth!” I groaned. My dad’s deep laughter filled the room.

“Lincoln is in the Navy?” he asked, not dropping the subject.

“A Seal.”

“Impressive.”

“Eh,” I muttered, trying not to think about Lincoln and his green eyes. Lincoln asking me to be his.

“Maybe there’s an explanation? Of why he...”

“Ghosted?”

“Is that what it’s called now?” he asked as his lips twitched.

“Karma has a really big mouth,” I mumbled as I leaned against the kitchen counter. She was totally going to drive my drunk ass home tonight! “If there is, why hasn’t he called, Dad?”

“Well...” He reached for two shot glasses, setting them on the counter. “Did I ever tell you how glad I was I only had girls?”

“That’s not true,” I scoffed with a smile.

I watched my dad scratch his chin and sigh. “It is! Boys, sure, you have someone to keep your name going for another generation... but they grow up to be men.”

“Right,” I said slowly, not following where he was taking it.

“And some, no, that’s not true, a lot of us, the majority of us are extremely slow.” He shook his head. His gaze moved outside, and I didn’t need to look at the direction to know he was looking at my mom. “Especially when it comes to matters of the heart.” His lips twitched, and his eyes connected with mine. “I almost lost my chance with your mom.”

“Really?” My sisters and I had heard countless stories of our parents and when they’d dated, but this was something new.

“Yeah. I was so stupid.” He shook his head. “Dumb as a bag of rocks, honey. I can’t tell you enough how stupid your old man was. Thankfully, though, your mom gave me a chance.”

“Hmm....” I sighed.

“All I’m saying is, don’t shut the door on this guy just yet.”

“Really?”

“Really.” He served two shots and looked at me. “Need training wheels?”

“Not since I turned twenty-one,” I sassed, and he coughed a chuckle away. He handed me a shot glass and lifted his own.

“This won’t solve the problem,” he added, trying to parent. I smiled.

“I know that. Two shots max,” I promised, and he nodded.

“Chin-chin, mija.” Our glasses clinked, and we took our drinks.

“If he shows up, give him a chance to explain.”

“I don’t think he will.”

“You never know. Karma said he...”

“What?”

“He asked you to be his girl.” My dad watched me for a moment. I breathed in and out slowly. Damn Karma! “A man like that, in the military, older, settled, they don’t say shit like that unless they mean it, mija.”

“Dad, if he magically appears on my doorstep, I’ll listen to what he has to say.”

“Promise?” he asked, already pouring us another drink.

“I promise.”

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“Good.” He smiled and hugged me, kissing the top of my head. “You deserve the world, Joy. You’re a good woman. If he doesn’t see that, it’s his damn loss.” My smile watered a little, and he frowned. “None of that!” he exclaimed, letting me go to pour us another shot and handing me my drink.

As I watched him, I thought to myself that even though I had crappy luck when it came to dating, I was lucky with the kind of dad I’d been blessed with. Because of him and his example, I knew what I deserved and didn’t.

* * *

I broke my promise to my dad.

I’d had way more than two shots of tequila.

Especially after Karma and Faith brought out the karaoke machine. But I knew by the way he’d hugged me and helped pour me into Karma’s car, he wasn’t mad at me. I was singing old mariachi songs since the tequila had loosened my inhibitions and I’d let the music take over. God help me. If Karma or Faith had recorded me and my crazy-ass rendition of Selena’s No Me Queda Mas.

I groaned as I plopped onto my couch, too tired and hungover to even reach for the remote control. Not that turning the TV on would be the greatest idea. It could be on mute, and it would probably feel too loud.

“Tequila cures everything, my ass,” I mumbled under my breath as I lay on the couch. A knock sounded at the door, and I frowned. I got up and opened it, ready for

it to be Karma or Faith, completely shocked to see the man on the other side of the door.

“Lincoln.” I swallowed, frowning, feeling completely off kilter.

“What the hell, Joy?”

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me,” he grunted, and I blinked. Taking in the sight of him. His brows were narrowed, eyes locked with mine as his hands rested at his lean hips.

He almost seemed... mad.

“Why do you look mad?”

“When I hear my girl telling me to go to hell, you bet your ass I’m gonna be pissed.”

“Excuse me?” I whispered, but when he opened his mouth, I put my hand out and he didn’t say a word. In the recesses of my mind, I remembered that phone call. I’d called and left him a very drunk voicemail while Karma drove me home.

“You left without saying goodbye.” He opened his mouth, but I jerked my head. “YOU ghosted me. For nine days,” I clarified as calmly as I could. “I don’t know why you’re here, but you can get in your car and drive back wherever you came from. Because I am not the kind of woman you play stupid little mind games with.”

“Joy, it wasn’t—”

“I don’t care.” I crossed my arms in front of my chest. “I wasn’t lying when I told you I didn’t have that much experience with men and sex. But just so you know, for

whatever poor woman crosses your path next, you don't need to lie. If you had told me all we had was that one night, that would have been fine." I pressed my lips together. "I didn't need sweet words for you to get between my legs, Lincoln. But you had your fun and—"

"Baby—"

"Don't," I clipped, cutting him off. "You disappeared. You didn't call or text—"

"I know. I thought I had." He ran his hand through his hair. "Please let me explain," he pleaded, and I blinked.

I wanted to know what had happened.

Not only had I promised my dad I'd let Lincoln do that, my heart and brain both did because they'd been at odds over him since he'd left.

"You have two minutes," I clipped, holding on to attitude I had no idea where it was coming from. Attitude that was more like Karma than me.

"I got back from your place, and I had a mission to go on. I texted you, or I thought I did, before I shut my phone off. I landed an hour ago." My eyes skimmed his wrinkly clothes, noticing he was in cargos instead of regular clothes. "I heard your voicemail and came right over here after Rowdy dropped me off," he confessed honestly.

I wasn't sure if it was the hangover or the fact I'd been holding in tears all week, but I broke down and cried.

Right. In. Front. Of. Him.

Lincoln

I watched as her beautiful face crumbled into tears, and I didn't hesitate to move. I took Joy into my arms and held her close as she sobbed into my chest. Her body shook as the pent-up emotion purged from her body. I hated it was my stupid fault she was crying.

"I'm so fucking sorry, baby," I apologized into her hair, breathing in her scent, feeling like the biggest jerk in the world. "Please don't cry, my Joy." I tried to put myself in her shoes, her vanishing into thin air after the night we'd shared and the promises we'd made. Fuck, I would have crawled out of my skin. "I'm so damn sorry." I stroked her back, and she pulled away. Her brown eyes red and swollen as she blinked, I wiped away tears that escaped.

"You didn't ghost me?" she asked. Her pretty lips wobbled.

"No. God, no." I shook my head. "I am an idiot. I thought I'd pressed Send. I swear to you, Joy. I'm so damn sorry, baby."

"I thought—" She hiccupped. I picked her up and thanked my lucky stars she let me. She instinctively wrapped her legs around my waist as I stepped into her place, kicking the front door shut behind me. I sat down on the couch and held her against my chest for a long time. Stroking her hair and back until she calmed down. When she looked up at me, she seemed embarrassed.

"What?" I asked as I fell into her dark stare.

“I’m sorry I cried like that. I don’t—”

“Shh.” I shook my head, kissing her forehead. “I’m sorry for putting you through that. I should have called you, left a voicemail, written a fucking letter. Anything more than a text. Especially since that was our first mission.”

“Our first mission?”

“As a couple.” She opened her mouth, but I cut her off. “And don’t dare tell me we’re not a thing. We are, Joy. You and me. You gave me that,” I reminded her like an asshole. “Now, I know I fucked up. You thought I ghosted you, but I swear I didn’t. I want you. Want us.” I wasn’t bashful about pleading my case.

My heart thundered against my chest.

I’d made her cry.

She had thought I’d played some kind of sick mind game with her. Used her. Fuck, I was so angry with myself I wanted to kick my own ass.

“I won’t mess up again,” I promised. “I hadn’t planned on getting called in. And when we go and are on a mission, there is no reaching out to anyone.”

“I know.” She sniffled. “You’d explained that in your letters.”

“We will put stuff in place, so this never happens again. I swear. I’m yours, Joy. Please tell me you’re still mine,” I begged, pride and ego long gone. With every second that ticked away as she looked at me without saying anything, fear started to fill every inch of my being.

I’d lost almost everyone I had ever loved and had somehow survived. But I knew if

she didn't give me another chance, that was what would break me, leave me a shell of a man.

"Please." My voice cracked.

"Linc."

"Joy." Her fingers pressed against my lips as her other hand touched my chest. "I love you," I murmured against her fingers, and they dropped. Her brown eyes widened, and I breathed in and exhaled slowly. "It's fast, and it is more than okay if you're not there yet. But I do, Joy. I love you, and I will wait for your heart to catch up."

"I love you, too," she whispered. My body went hard, stock still beneath her touch. "That's why this week was awful. I fell in love with you, and you just poof." She snapped her fingers, and I rested my forehead against hers.

Joy loves me, too.

"I swear to you, baby, that will never happen again."

"It better not, or I'll kick you," she threatened halfheartedly. I couldn't wait any longer without searing my mouth to hers and stealing a kiss.

"We'll work," I promised as I pulled away, grabbing ahold of her face. "I promise you we will. You're it for me, Joy."

"Lincoln." She licked her swollen lips, and I smiled.

"Tell me you believe me. We will make it work. I know my life's complicated. My job takes me away at the drop of a hat, and I can't give you that many details—"

“Shut up,” she murmured, kissing me passionately, pulling my lower lip into her mouth and letting it go. “Life doesn’t make sense without you. We’ll make it work.”

“Thank fuck,” I groaned as I took her shirt off and she pulled at mine. Before we knew it, we were naked, her sweet curvy body over mine as I watched her take me. Sinking down, taking every inch I had to offer.

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“Fuck!” I groaned, my head hitting the couch. “So wet,” I murmured.

“It’s your fault,” she whimpered as she bottomed out and sat still. Her brown eyes on mine, I cupped her face and peppered it with kisses. “You’re perfect. Mine. Show me I’m yours.”

“How?” she asked as she rose on her knees beside me, letting me slide out of her, leaving only my tip inside of her.

“Ride me, baby girl. Ride me hard and fast.” She nodded at my instructions, giving me exactly what we both needed.

My hands roamed her body. I couldn’t get enough of her. I needed to touch and kiss every inch of Joy. I tugged at her perfect nipples before taking one into my mouth and groaning around it, feeling her squeeze and tighten around me.

“Lincoln.” She started to cry out as her speed picked up, her movements jerkier.

I pulled my mouth off her throat and watched her get lost in nothing but pleasure. Her body clamped down. Euphoria washed over her beautiful face as her pussy clenched around my cock, sucking me in deeper, milking me. I was so fucking weak, unable to hold back my own release. I spilled myself inside of her. Ribbon after thick, sticky ribbon of my cum filled her up until we were both completely and thoroughly exhausted, clinging to one another as we caught our breath.

“Wow,” she gasped, resting her cheek on my chest. My eyes shut as I tried to engrain this moment to my memory. “Every time is better than the last,” she murmured, and I

swallowed.

“I love you, Joy.” My voice sounded deep in my own ears. “You’re mine, and I’m yours,” I rasped as my hand stroked her hair. I could feel the way she smiled against my skin before dropping a kiss over my heart. Over the spot that belonged to her and only her.

“I love you, too.” She pulled her head back so she could catch my eyes. “No more disappearing.”

“Never. I promise.”

“Good.” She yawned.

“Tired?”

“A little.” She sighed, and I noticed the dark circles under her eyes. I’d done that. I hated that I’d put her through the week I had. But I would make it up to her. I’d do anything for Joy. “But I don’t want to move,” she groaned. I laughed, wrapping my arms around her once again.

“Then don’t. Let’s stay like this all night.” My cock started to liven up at the thought of staying buried in her sweet pussy, and when she gasped, I knew she didn’t miss it.

“Really?” she asked, pulling back slightly, rolling her hips, testing me out. A groan bubbled out of me.

“I missed you.” I swallowed as her hands moved to the back of my head.

“Maybe we can go to bed later?” she whispered against my mouth, and I moaned when she did this little thing with her hip.

“Later works for me,” I rasped as my hands held on to her hips.

It wasn’t until much, much later that I carried her to her bedroom, and another two hours after until we both fell soundly asleep.

Lincoln

It was almost noon when she started to stir, and I got the honor of watching her start her day. She woke slowly. Her brown eyes fluttered open, and for a moment, her relaxed, pliant body stilled. Froze. Her eyes blinked, taking in the sight of my chest in front of her before they roamed up my neck until they caught mine.

“Morning, baby.”

“Morning.” She licked her lips and relaxed.

I hated that she’d braced when she realized she wasn’t alone in bed. I wondered if she regretted letting me into her bed so quickly after our misunderstanding. My careless mistake.

“Are you okay?”

“Mmm,” she moaned, stretching like a cat, brushing her chest against mine, and I didn’t miss the way her puckered peaks brushed against me.

“Regrets?” I asked. She simply shook her head.

“None.” She added, “You?”

“Never,” I answered honestly and fiercely. “I’m really sorry I didn’t press Send. I swear to you, baby, I thought I had. You could ask Rowdy. I was a fucking mess when I powered my phone back up and heard your voicemail and realized my

mistake.”

“Things happen.” She shrugged, but I lost her eyes for a second and knew she wanted to ask me something. “What is it?”

“Does that happen a lot? Missions where you have to just pick up and go?”

“Sometimes.” I swallowed, knowing very well the job I’d worked my entire military career for might cost me the one woman I couldn’t live without.

“That’s pretty intense.”

“It is.” I nodded and sighed, holding her pretty face in my hands. “But I will always come home to you.”

“Always?” She tried to shake me off, but I didn’t let her. Instead, I sat up and brought her over me, one leg on each side of my thigh.

“I know I’m coming on strong. Saying always and telling you exactly how I feel about you.” I swallowed hard. “I’m kinda ashamed to tell you I don’t have a clue how the hell to do this.”

“This?”

“A relationship. Forever. I’ve never met anyone I thought would be that for me. Who would get to me like you have.”

“Linc—”

“I’ll work tooth and nail to earn your trust, Joy. I swear it. I’m not stupid enough to think it won’t take work, but I’m fine with that. I’m here for the long run,” I vowed.

Her eyes turned glassy. “Don’t cry, baby.”

“I thought you used me, but...” She hiccupped, and I held her tightly until she calmed down. “My heart didn’t want to believe you played me.”

“Because I didn’t. I wouldn’t,” I reassured her. “I’m not going anywhere,” I promised, but a heavy weight settled in the pit of my gut.

I wasn’t going anywhere.

Until I got called into another mission.

Being a Seal had been my dream. My mission in life. But it came with its own risks. It was never guaranteed you’d make it back, no matter how easy some missions were. You always put your life on the line. I’d never cared.

Not until I found my Joy.

I held on to the woman in my arms, the most precious gift I had ever been sent, my gift for everything I’d been through, and breathed in the soft scent of her shampoo. It filled my lungs, and that weariness started to wash away.

I knew I had changes to make.

Big ones.

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And soon. Because when I put my ring on her finger, planted my kid in Joy's belly, I didn't want to miss a thing. Not an argument about flowers I didn't give a shit about for a wedding I didn't need but more than likely she'd want. Not a doctor's appointment and not a kick.

I wasn't going to miss a moment.

I'd had a goal, a plan for my life. I'd been hurt. Scarred up, my body a mangled mess, but I was still here. Still alive. Every step that had taken me to getting hurt, to almost breaking me, had led me to Joy. I would have never met the burst of sunshine she was if I hadn't.

I was lucky.

As I sat in bed with the woman of dreams I'd never been brave enough to dream, I realized just how lucky I was. Sure, life had thrown me curveballs. Had taken people I loved and cared about, ripping them away from my life. But it had given me a lot of good, too. I'd accomplished goals, becoming a Seal and serving my country. I had a great brother, who always had my back.

Now, I had a new goal.

A new dream to work toward.

Create a family and live out my own happily ever after with the most beautiful woman I'd ever laid eyes on. A woman I was lucky was giving me a chance.

Joy

I was back home on a Sunday evening at my parents' backyard for family dinner. I still couldn't believe that two weeks ago, I was so heartbroken yet now, I was on the top of the world. The handsome man sitting next to me had a little something to do with that.

I turned my attention toward him as he talked to Crew about something or other. They were relaxed drinking a beer. I caught Linc's gaze, and he winked at me before plopping a kiss on my forehead and returning to his conversation. My mom and sisters were talking about who knew what, and my eyes moved to my dad.

He'd been weirdly quiet all day. As a father of three grown women, you would think he'd be excited to have two of his daughters in relationships. Especially since none of us had brought anyone home before. Or at least not anyone of great significance.

But maybe that was the case. My dad knew these guys at the table had the potential of sticking around and becoming the sons he'd never had.

Crew was older than my baby sister, and I assumed maybe my dad was having a tough time with that.

"Joy, can you grab another bottle?" Karma asked sweetly. I laughed, standing and making my way to the kitchen. It took me a little bit to find the bottle of red Karma wanted, but it was probably because I'd snuck into my mom's cupcakes.

When I returned, I noticed Linc wasn't where I'd left him. Instead, he was at the far

end of the yard by my mom's rose garden with my dad. They shook hands, and there was something about the way Lincoln carried himself. He looked almost relieved.

"Hey, baby, need me to open this?" he asked when he reached me, and I nodded.

"Thanks." I grinned. "You okay?" I asked, and he nodded.

"I am. You good?"

"Yeah, wanna sit down?"

"I'll be right there. Can you serve Karma a glass before she gets cranky, though?"

"Sure." He chuckled, and I watched as he went back to the big wooden outdoor dining table.

But I didn't follow him. I kept walking toward my dad, who was still by the roses.

"Hey, Dad. Everything okay?"

"Yeah, just full. Like usual, your mom made too much."

"You grilled."

"What she bought," he pointed out, and I giggled. My dad put his arm over my shoulder, and I looked up at him.

"I like him," he announced quietly but seriously, and something about it caught me off guard. "After I saw you last time, well... you know. I was worried."

"It was a misunderstanding."

“He apologized for that,” my dad shared. My eyes widened.

“Dad!”

“What? I didn’t make him say sorry.”

“Oh god!” I groaned and felt my dad’s body shake beside me.

“I wasn’t sure what to think when your mom told me you’d met this guy like Crew and Faith did.” I looked up at him, not completely following what he was saying. “Through letters.” He laughed, shaking his head. “In this day in age, where you swipe right and left, my girls went old school.”

“Not all of them,” I reminded him. We turned just in time to see Karma double-fisting two glasses of wine. “Looks like it will be a while before she settles down.”

“Maybe,” he muttered, but there was a twinkle in my dad’s eye that made me wonder if he knew more than he was leading on. “Do you know something I don’t?”

“Snitches get stitches.” He winked, and both of us laughed. “Go hang with your man.” He hip-bumped me, and I rolled my eyes.

“My man?” I repeated sassily. The old man frowned and pointed at me.

“Joy, be the energy you want to attract.” I smiled and relaxed into his hug before walking away.

My dad had told me that every morning before school. By the time I reached the table, it hit me. I realized how a motto like that could have such a crazy ripple effect. Not only on one person’s life but those around you.

Lincoln's hand claimed mine, his fingers twined with mine, and the warmth in his eyes when our gazes connected made my heart flip inside my chest. Somehow, someway, we'd manifested this. We'd found our way to one another. It wasn't the usual way or conventional, but it made sense for us.

And that was all that mattered.

epilogue 1

Joy

I pressed my lips together tightly as I watched out of the kitchen window. My amazing, handsome, crazily stubborn husband was building a tree house for our kids in the backyard. I watched as he and his brother, Chuck, argued while my two sisters' husbands stood and watched them from off the side.

Our kids were getting older and needed a space to hang out. Preferably outside. When I'd mentioned it to Lincoln, he'd been all over it but had quickly brushed off my suggestion of buying a premade kit. He had insisted he could build one without the need for instructions.

One positive was that it was entertaining as hell.

"Knock, knock!" Faith walked in with a file of papers in her hand.

"Hey! You need to watch this." I giggled, pointing out the window, and her laughter joined mine.

"I heard. That's why I'm here," she announced, handing me the file. "I got the kids in the van, but I'll see you tomorrow?"

"Sunday dinner." I nodded. Sunday dinners were a tradition my parents still had in place. "What's this?"

“Crew bought some pre-made plans off Etsy, had me print them out. He said if he didn’t, the kids would be graduating college before the tree house was built.” I coughed because that sounded about right.

“Thanks, babe.”

“Anytime.”

“Drive safe!” I called out just a moment before the front door shut.

I caught Linc’s eye and waved him over. With a scowl on his face, he came in, leaving his brother and brothers-in-law outside.

“Babe, please—”

“Here.” I handed the plans to him and turned around, but his arms caught me around my waist. He looked at the plans and frowned.

“You’re lucky the guys are here, or else I’d put you over my knee.”

“That wasn’t me. Crew had Faith print them out.” I laughed. “But we can pretend I thought about doing that, and you can still spank me later,” I flirted and watched his eyes darken.

“Deal,” he muttered.

“It’s just to make your life easier.” I sighed. “Suri is almost here with the kids. I’m gonna get lunch started.”

“Thanks, baby.” He kissed me, and I watched as he walked out. Damn. I hated when he left, but I loved to watch him go. Especially in those old jeans.

I walked into the den of our house and sat next to Suri, who grinned at me.

“How’s it going?” she asked. I widened my eyes, shaking my head. Chuck’s wife was pretty awesome. Funny and sassy, she fit right in with my sisters and me. My only complaint was that they lived a little far from us and we didn’t get to see them as often. I turned my attention to a very pregnant Karma.

She was on her third pregnancy but fifth kid. It still shocked me seeing my wild child sister as a mom of two sets of twins and another baby on the way.

As the middle Espinoza sister, Karma had always been so quiet. Keeping most of her things close to the chest. Yet she had always been so adventurous and seriously anti-relationships, until she hadn’t been.

Faith and I’d had front row seats to Karma finding love when she did. And honestly, if I hadn’t lived it, I wouldn’t have believed it.

But that wasn’t my story to tell.

“Lunch should be ready in a couple of minutes,” I shared, and almost instantly to the announcement of food, Karma’s stomach growled.

“How about some ice cream?”

“Cookies and cream?” she asked. I smiled broadly. That had always been her favorite.

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“Of course! I got you.” I missed her hair, and she frowned but didn’t complain too much since I was getting her a snack.

A couple hours later, the guys walked in sweaty and shirtless with tool belts, and I couldn’t tear my eyes off Lincoln. His chest was sun kissed and glistening with a fine coat of sweat covering his muscles and scarred skin.

The sight always sent tingles up and down my spine. I was almost tempted to punch myself to remind myself he was indeed all mine.

He wasn’t a Seal anymore, but he was an instructor for the Navy and worked out every day.

We’d been lucky that we hadn’t had to leave San Diego, but I wasn’t naïve. I knew it was a possibility one day, and so did our two kids.

If we did, our little family would be ready.

Because that’s what we were—a family.

A team.

Together.

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epilogue 2

Lincoln

I took a healthy chug from my beer and settled back on the patio chair Joy had insisted on us buying.

Like usual, my wife had been right. The furniture was the shit. Comfortable, especially after the long day I'd had.

The tree house had been a pain in the ass, but it'd been built thanks to my brother and brothers-in-law.

The kids would be pitching in and painting tomorrow. Another thing Joy had insisted on letting them do. I'd tried to talk her out of it, but the moment the kids caught wind of it, there was no way I could have told them no.

Which only meant one thing—the grass below the tree house was fucked.

My lips twitched upward. I didn't mind.

Life was messy.

But some messes were worth it.

I knew that firsthand. I looked at my cell phone. The date had me smiling.

It had been ten years to the date since I had received that first letter from my pretty wife.

Ten years.

Fuck. A whole decade. I shook my head with a smirk on my face. The saying 'Time flies when you're having fun' was not wrong. It felt like I had blinked when I finally claimed my girl and asked her to marry me. Then I blinked again, and we were expecting our first and then our second.

Now I was staring at a tree house I'd helped build.

Ten years since a letter had changed the direction of my life for the better.

Thinking back, I couldn't believe how broken I'd felt even though the doctors had reassured me time and time again that I would physically recuperate.

But back then, on the inside, I'd felt messed up, more than chipped.

Joy's letters had given me so much. Unknowingly, she had helped change the way I looked at life.

I had lost and had to deal with a lot. More than a kid at any age should have to face.

But with Joy's love, I had also been able to see I'd had a lot, too.

A career I loved and a woman who looked at me like she really believed I was able of hanging the moon regardless of what I was doing.

And that included a tree house for our kids and their cousins.

In the light of Joy's love, I'd been able to break the seal on life. I felt more alive than

ever. Every day that passed was brighter and better than the last.

Not that shit didn't happen.

It did.

We had our share of tough times.

Highs and lows were a given when it came to life. But I was able to see the beauty in every season, and I couldn't wait to see what happened in another ten years.

"Hey, babe!" Joy called out. "Can you grab the mail before you come in?" she asked, and I nodded. I was exhausted and more than ready for a shower, but the mail was an easy way to help my wife. I walked out to the front of our house and grabbed the mail.

I looked through it. Mostly ads and junk, but my body froze at an envelope in my hands.

Joy's familiar handwriting on an envelope, addressed to me. With a stamp and everything.

I opened it and started to bark out laughter when glitter and confetti fell out.

Fuck, my wife was amazing.

Yeah, this was one mess I seriously didn't mind. With a shit-eating grin, I glanced back at the house she'd helped make a home.

I wasn't broken anymore.

With Joy, I was whole.