



Forever Love-Reimagined

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Description: Prepare to reunite with beloved characters in a tale reimagined with fresh perspective and newfound depth. In this new version of Forever Love, familiar faces return, but their journey takes on a new, captivating form that promises to reignite your passion for their story.

Leia, a free-spirited photographer, is happy on her own and isn't looking for love.

Blake, a fiery attorney, is trying to figure out if her girlfriend, Steph, is the one.

Then fate steps in, causing Blake and Leia to have a chance encounter. What happens next defies logic and intertwines their lives in an unexpected way. Together, they discover the beauty of acceptance and the strength in vulnerability.

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Chapter One

Blake - Monday

Most Mondays were hard to get out of bed, but not today. I was up early and dressed in my I-mean-business outfit. With my white silk Chanel shirt, black pencil skirt, and my black Louboutins, I was ready to kick this day's ass.

Sure, these shoes weren't ideal for walking in and pinched my feet a little, and it was humid outside, causing me to perspire more than I would have liked, but I wanted to soak up the fresh air. However, that wasn't always a given in New York City.

As I inhaled, hoping to clear my mind, the smell of sulfur invaded my nostrils, and I coughed, rethinking my decision not to drive. But I quickly shook that feeling off. Nothing was going to rain on my parade. It was my first day as a senior partner at my law firm, and my life was on the right track.

I had a beautiful house and a gorgeous girlfriend, and at thirty-five, I was the youngest attorney to move up the ranks, and I would only go up from here.

With my coffee in hand, my optimism soared. I'd always been a glass-half-empty girl, but that was changing. I needed to realize how lucky I was and how many things I had to look forward to. I centered myself and zoned out all the hustle and bustle around me. Today was my day, and nothing would spoil it.

"Make way, coming through," a bike messenger shouted as he rode down the crowded sidewalk.

The commotion shook me out of my reverie as people ran to escape a potential disaster. Usually, that would have sent my anger into overdrive, but I was feeling Zen and stopped moving to let him around me. Even though, in my head, that seemed like the polite thing to do, it turned out to be a disaster in the making. With me standing like a statue, people were stumbling over themselves to stay upright.

Feet were flailing, coffees were flying, and my perfect day was turning into a complete disaster. I could tell bruises would form from the elbows that connected with my body. Then the earth started slipping from under my feet, but stable arms wrapped around me, minimizing the potential damage.

As they righted me, I turned to offer my gratitude, but their fingers were like live wires sending electric volts into me. “Ouch.” I pulled back and rubbed the sensitive skin that was tingling. “Thanks for the assist.” I caught sight of my watch and realized I would be late, so I didn’t wait for her response.

I waved over my shoulder as I took off at a walk-jog, but I should have been watching where I was going because if I wasn’t already a mess from being tossed around like a rag doll and all the drinks covering my now see-through shirt, my heel got caught in a metal grate and snapped right off. Maybe this was the universe’s way of teaching me patience. Or maybe it was getting a good chuckle at my expense.

Either way, it didn’t matter because my only option was to hobble into work, or I would be late. As I finally approached the massive gold doors of Wilson, Davis & Sanders. Fresh coffee greeted me, but it only reminded me of the stale coffee I exuded. Maybe I could make it to my office undetected.

But that thought was too good to be true as Ty approached me. “Hey, Blake. Your eight o’clock is in the conference room—” He stopped midsentence and pulled me over to his semi-private cubicle. “What happened to you?” He touched my hair, and I swatted his hand away.

I had to look like a mess, but his expression made me realize it was probably unsalvageable, which caused my anxiety to skyrocket.

“I don’t have time to talk about it. Why are they so early? And what am I going to do?” I hid behind his partition, making sure no one else could see me looking like I was returning from a walk of shame.

“Well...” Ty scrunched his nose as if smelling something gross, which was obviously me. “Maybe we could...” His eyes scanned my messy hair down to my broken shoe. “You could call in sick,” he concluded, and I wanted to scream.

So much for my Zen moment. Steph had been trying to get me to do yoga to help regulate my stress, but my go-to wasn’t to “Keep calm and carry on.” I was more of a “Freak out and lose my shit” person.

“Oh yeah. I might as well tell Greg I couldn’t care less about my promotion and see how long it takes him to rally the other partners against me.” I tried to stuff my thick, messy locks back into the quaffed bun I had them in before the shitshow occurred.

“Stop it. That’s not helping. Why don’t I be your shield while you run into your office? I picked up your dry cleaning on the way, so you at least have another outfit here.”

As much as Ty and I fought like brother and sister, he was truly my best friend and the best assistant I’d ever had.

“Thanks. I appreciate it.”

“Of course you do. That’s why you bought me breakfast.” He smiled as he retrieved my credit card.

We had an unspoken relationship: I would make the money, and he would spend it—within reason. I had to put a cap on it, or he would have no problems letting me be his sugar momma. I held back the vomit that threatened to emerge at the idea of Ty and me.

“Give me that, and now cover me.” I figured he would inconspicuously stand up to his full six-two height, which would have been more than enough to block my five-three body, but I was wrong.

He shuffled his feet from side to side with his arms all the way out like he was playing defense in basketball.

“What are you doing?” I hissed. “You’re going to draw attention to us, which defeats the purpose.”

“I was helping, but if you think you can do a better job without me, then...” He started to walk away, and I grabbed him.

“Just act normal, and I will stay out of sight. Okay?”

“Whatever you say.” He sighed and started taking long strides that my little legs had to work overtime to keep up. We finally reached my office, and I was about to shut the door, but he stopped me. “The suit is on the back of the door, but maybe try to cover that...” He wafted his hand in front of his nose.

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“Noted.” I stared at him while he stood there unmoving. “Anything else, oh wise one?” I was trying not to let my annoyance shine through, but I had no time to deal with his antics.

“In my opinion, you better put on a hat. It doesn’t appear anything is going to fix that.” He tilted his head toward mine, and I pushed him out the door before shutting it. “I’m just saying,” he called, but I didn’t respond.

I rushed to my desk and pulled out some baby wipes. It wasn’t the best alternative to bathing, but it was my only option. I dabbed under my arms, reapplied deodorant, and spritzed myself with Prady Candy. It had hints of caramel and vanilla, and it would either mask or compliment the coffee smell.

After stripping out of my designer outfit that now more closely resembled rags, I slipped on my Versace skirt-suit that I thankfully didn’t have to wear a shirt with because the blazer was high buttoned. The only thing I didn’t have was killer shoes, but I was resourceful and broke off the heel of my other shoe, then proceeded to work on my hair.

I stared in the full-length mirror and realized Ty was probably right. There was no fixing these untamable curls. They were sticking out from my bun as if I had been electrocuted, which sent a shiver down my spine. I had a brief moment of déjà vu but couldn’t figure out what from. I brushed aside that emotion and moved on.

As I took down my hair, the ponytail holder snapped right in my hand, and, once again, I had no choice in what to do. I searched for something suitable to be used as a makeshift hair tie, but apart from a binder clip, I had nothing. My only option was to

unleash the beast and hope I didn't look like the hot mess express.

When I exited my office, Ty stood there chewing on the side of his finger and tapping his toe.

"What is up with you? Did you snort Pixy Stix again?" He had done that on a dare once when we were kids, and I couldn't let it go.

"HA! You joke, but that caused permanent damage to my sinuses." He rubbed the bridge of his nose. "But anyway, this is worse."

"Okay then. Spill it. I don't have time to guess." I tapped my watch, but he was tap-dancing like a child who needed to pee. "Ty!" I placed my hands on his shoulders to snap him back to reality.

"Well..." His chestnut eyes got wide as saucers, and I was trying to imagine what he viewed as worse than burning your nasal cavity.

"Out with it! Are you trying to give me a panic attack?"

"I'm sorry. But Greg is sitting in on your meeting." He rushed his words so fast that I had difficulty processing the information.

Now it was time for me to think, what in the actual fuck? Greg was a senior partner who seemed to have it out for me, and I wouldn't put it past him to try to sabotage me. Maybe that was a bit much, but not understanding his actions led me to expect the worst-case scenario. He didn't even know my clients, and there wasn't anything he could offer in this meeting.

Even though I could have blown a gasket, I pushed those negative feelings down, sucked it up, and plastered on a smile as I entered the conference room with

confidence.

Chapter Two

Leia - Monday

“Leia! Matcha for Leia.”

I rushed to the counter to snag my to-go cup. I loved getting up in time to stop by Tea-Riffic, my favorite little cafe, to grab some fresh-brewed tea before work. It was one of the best things about walking to the studio early in the morning. I could drink my tea in peace and chart the course for my day without my assistant, Haley, trying to fill every minute of my time.

I shouldn't complain because she was the best assistant I'd ever had. I truly appreciated how organized she was, but sometimes, I wished she could take it from a ten to a two. Her nervous energy was so infectious that I found the hustle and bustle of New York City more calming.

After exiting the tearoom, I took a long, deep breath, which wasn't very cleansing because of the car exhaust, but it still cleared my head. The sun was shining, and the buzz of traffic was hypnotizing. As I exhaled, I let all the good vibes flow through my body.

With a little pep, I headed toward my studio, Full Exposure. Being a boudoir photographer was amazing because I made people's fantasies come true. Seeing people go against societal expectations and be themselves was freeing. Even though I enjoyed my work, it wasn't my biggest passion.

I wanted to put together classes to promote queer representation in art and culture. I needed to get a proposal written and find other queer creatives to see if we could offer

more than photography. There was far too much underrepresentation in the artistic realm, and I wanted to get more people involved. But until I developed a game plan, I didn't want anyone else to know about it, especially not Haley. If she caught wind of me doing something without her, she would flip her lid and then suck all the fun out of it.

She was so structured, but sometimes, with art, you had to let things get messy. That was how it worked. I mean, at least, that was what I did. I appreciated the freedom of not having to fit the corporate mold. I could do things my way without giving in to the man.

I scanned the crowd of people in their dresses and suits, and I enjoyed the fact that I could wear ripped jeans and sneakers. Life was too short to be uncomfortable.

As that opinion left my head, I heard someone say, "Make way, coming through!" It was a biker zipping through the sidewalk like he owned the place.

I quickly hopped out of the way and didn't even spill my tea. But there was a flurry of people who weren't as lucky in their high-priced clothes and torturous shoes.

As everyone scrambled to clear the way, someone backed into me, nearly knocking me down. Luckily, I managed to keep us both upright, even though her spiky heel pierced my toe and possibly did permanent damage.

I yelped as I stood her on her own two feet, but when my skin touched hers, it was like the largest bolt of static electricity shot through me. Everything in my body thrummed, but I wasn't sure if it was from pain or excitement. Everything was a jumbled mess, and then she turned to me, causing the entire world to stand still.

She took my breath away when I locked in on those emerald eyes. It was like everything else faded into the background, and she and I were the only people

around. I wanted to speak, but I was frozen in the moment. Then she jerked away and said something, but the pounding in my ears didn't let me hear it. By the time I found my voice, she was gone.

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I tried to catch up to her, but it was almost like she was a figment of my imagination because I couldn't see her anywhere. The only proof I had of her existence was the lingering sensation of her presence all over my body as if she had imprinted on me.

My pulse continued racing even after I slowed down my pace. Her eyes kept flashing in my mind, causing a spark of familiarity, but I couldn't figure out why. I couldn't imagine knowing her and not remembering.

I replayed the encounter in my mind, but as I wished it had happened. This time, as I kept her from falling, I dipped her back, brushing the dark brown curl behind her ear, and let myself get lost in her gaze. I would've studied her face, figured out where I'd seen her before, and how to get in touch with her again. I wouldn't have let her slip through my fingers with only those eyes embedded in my mind.

With my brain still buzzing with excitement, I opened the studio door and was immediately brought back to reality.

"Oh my God, Leia. I didn't think you were ever going to get here." Haley was frantic as if I was late instead of an hour early.

"It's good to see you, too. But as you know, I don't have any clients until 9:30. It's not necessary for me to be here right at 8:00. That is your preference, not mine." I smiled, but she was unamused.

"Well, our office hours are 8:00 to 4:00." She gave me a stern look.

"Exactly. That's the office... which you manage. I come in early to do other things

before work, but that doesn't mean it's necessary." I patted her back, and her perfectly made-up face hardened.

"Fine, but how can I do my job if you're not here for me to assist?" She put her hand on her cocked hip, showing me she meant business.

"I promise you are doing amazing. If I need you, I'll find you. Please stop stressing about the small things. And they are all small things." Honestly, I had no idea what was going through her mind, but if it pertained to work, she needed to let it go.

Business was great, we had excellent ratings on Review Rave, and I still had time to pursue other dreams. Life was pretty damn good from where I was sitting.

"It must be nice not to have a care in the world." She walked over to the table where I had left photographs scattered out. It was apparent she left before me last night; otherwise, there was no way everything would've been in such disarray. She started organizing the pictures, and I wondered if maybe I was the problem.

"I can take care of my own mess. I'm sorry if it stresses you out." I joined her at the table, and I grabbed a picture. When I saw a woman with dark curls framing her face, I had a flashback to this morning.

I was back on the sidewalk, with those green eyes staring into mine. That small woman with the tamed hair, yet it was obvious it was meant to be wild and free. It was hard to connect any dots, but why couldn't I shake her from my mind?

When I heard rushing traffic, horns honking, and a melody of voices spilling in from outside, I lifted my eyes to see Haley pushing the front door closed behind her. The sounds abruptly became a blessed hush again, and she dropped her purse on the floor beside the table. I'd been in my head so much I didn't even realize she had been gone

“Hey, boss.” Haley sounded exasperated. “Are you okay? It doesn’t look like you’ve moved since I left.” She began picking up the mess I had forgotten while stuck in my reverie.

“Yeah, I was doing some mental gymnastics. Trying to plot out my day.” The lie sounded awful, and she wouldn’t believe it, but it was better than telling her the truth.

“Really? Do you care to fill me in so I can update your calendar?” She questioned accusingly.

“Oh, it’s more me figuring out my plans for tonight after work. You have the rest of my day scheduled to a T. I would never mess with your process.”

“You’re so full of it.” She shook her head, but at least it seemed like she wouldn’t pry. “Once we get this place in suitable order, I have a list of what costumes and props the clients are interested in. We can at least get them together for choices when they arrive.” She was back to business as usual, and I needed to get my head there, too.

Even if I could do my job in my sleep, I never wanted to be distracted. I enjoyed seeing the customers’ expressions and working with them to get the best shots possible. It wasn’t about making someone look good; it was making them feel good. And I couldn’t do that if I was phoning it in. I needed them to be excited. The camera captured more than expressions; it caught emotions.

“Sounds good. You tell me what we’re working with, and I’ll figure out some options, but I won’t decide anything until I meet them. I have to grasp their vibe.

“I get that. Nothing can ever be by the book. We have to always fly by the seat of our pants.” She sounded annoyed, but she was smiling, and it was evident she understood my process.

“Art doesn’t come with a handbook. You have to go where the energy takes you.”

“Well, my energy says it likes absolutes and organization. But this job requires me to be a little more lax. And not toot my horn, I think I’m doing pretty well with that.”

I tried to keep my face neutral, as I could tell she was serious. However, if she believed this was loosening up and going with the flow, I would hate to see what she was like in full-on Haley mode. I would keep that in mind, though. I never wanted to make her job harder, and I genuinely enjoyed Haley as a person.

“Hales, you are doing an amazing job. I would be lost without you.” I stood from the table and went to the wardrobe rack. “Now, lay it on me. What are we looking for?”

“I’m glad you see my value. That means a lot to me.” There was a heaviness in her voice, and I wondered if there was something more she wasn’t saying, but she pushed through. “So, we need a sexy businesswoman in stilettos who is hot for her boss.” Her tone was light and airy now, and I wondered if I had imagined the earlier impression.

As I flipped through the clothes, I came across a see-through white button-up, and I was again taken back to this morning. The woman. Those eyes... those breasts. I shook my head furiously. I needed to focus on anything else but that.

I had to get her out of my mind. Maybe meeting someone else would do the trick.

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Chapter Three

Blake - Monday

The meeting progressed smoothly, and the Harrises were happy with the will I had drawn up. They still had to look it over with their kids and would come back to have it notarized, but I didn't have any issues other than Greg being there, acting like a babysitter.

After we wrapped up, I showed my clients out and turned to face him. "Hi, Greg. What can I help you with today?" Even though we both had the same equity in the firm, seniority still mattered, so I would play nice.

We didn't get along too well because he never liked that I made senior partner at such a young age. In fact, he voted against me when I was up for the promotion, and I didn't like him because he was arrogant.

He gave me a complete once-over before showing a disparaging smile. "Interesting style choice today, Blake. Not sure I've seen you with your hair down before."

Nope. I liked to be in control, and that included taming my mane. I wasn't sure what he wanted me to say, so I nodded. I didn't want to prolong this conversation.

"Anyway, that all went better than expected, but I'm glad I sat in to see for myself. It's important to monitor the younger partners. You understand, right?"

That was a lie. He was trying to assert dominance, but I stood there, unfazed, to see if

he'd continue.

"But that's not the only reason I'm here. I needed to talk to you about the upcoming office celebration."

"Oh? What about it?"

"Well, we would like all of the senior partners to attend, and you're the newest and youngest, so I wanted to make sure you put it on your calendar." He pointed to my phone, but it would have been easier for him to email Ty since he was in charge of my schedule.

"Okay. I can do that. When is it?"

"Well, not so fast. I also need you to know what's expected of you. People your age tend to imbibe a little too much at these things. But as partners, we have a level of professionalism to maintain, so please keep that in mind. We want to show the junior attorneys we have team spirit, but we're not sloppy." The way his eyes roamed my body, I wondered if that was a dig at me today.

Not that I could help it. I had to admit I felt reasonably good considering my circumstances.

"Right. Is that all?" I took his brief pause to cut him off to hopefully end this dreadful conversation. Did he honestly think I was that immature, or was he being a prick?

"You're welcome to bring a plus-one, but RSVP and inform Sheila so she can have an accurate head count. That will be all for now." With that, he walked out, probably to make someone else's day worse.

I stayed in the conference room until the lobby was Greg-free, and then headed to

Ty's desk. I needed to fill him in on my schedule updates and unwind a minute. I'd been on the go all morning, and now I could finally let myself process everything that had happened.

On my way to Ty, I stopped by the breakroom to grab coffee and a bagel. After everything that happened this morning, I hadn't had a minute to enjoy breakfast, and my stomach was protesting.

As I approached his desk, I noticed he nervously ran a hand through his hair, making his curls stand up slightly higher. I wondered what was going on, and if it was work-related. My heart rate picked up, and I wasn't sure how much more I could take.

"Hey, buddy," I said nonchalantly, but he was so jittery he almost fell out of his chair. "What's up with you?"

"Blake! Why are you walking over here like a ninja? Usually, I can hear you coming a mile away."

I tried not to take offense to that, especially since he seemed distraught.

"I'm sorry. My mistake for assuming saying hi was a good indicator I was here. Is everything okay?"

His eyes darted every which way except at my face. "Well..."

"Don't start this again, Ty. I have had a rough morning. Let's rip this Band-Aid off and get on with it." I took a sip of my coffee and tried not to cringe at the bitterness of it.

It definitely couldn't compare to the Viennese coffee that I ended up wearing.

“Your mom called and wants to do lunch this week. She put me on the spot, so...”

This time, I couldn't hide my disgust. Moms were supposed to be those who loved you unconditionally and picked you up when you were down, but that was not Constance Flynn. In fact, she was more likely to be the one who knocked me down and then poked me with a stick to make sure I stayed there. Okay, that was a little dramatic, but it wasn't entirely untrue.

Even though I exuded confidence now, it would only take minutes with my mom before she pointed out my flaws and shined a light on all my insecurities.

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“No effing way am?—”

He put his finger over my lips, stopping me from losing my shit at work. “Calm down. I said you were busy this week, but maybe next week.” He acted like that was better, but I wasn't impressed unless he could keep putting her off indefinitely.

“Well, lunch with Mommy Dearest is something to look forward to. It's right up there with the mandatory celebration Greg informed me I had to attend.”

“I'll figure something out with your mom, but I'm not sure I can help you get out of the party. Do you think it's going to be that bad?”

I was sure he would rather talk about that than my mom, so I let the subject change happen. “I don't know. It seems weird to say it's something for us, but then don't give us the choice if we want to go or not.”

“I'll be there, and you could always ask Steph. I'm sure she would love to be your arm candy.” He winked, but he had no idea the emotions that sentence evoked.

Ty was my best friend and had been since we bonded about being the only queer kids out in our middle school. He usually read me like a book, so the fact that he didn't realize my reservations about Steph made me wonder if I should bring it up or not.

“What's that look?” He circled a finger around in front of my face, and I shrugged.

Even though he and I were close, I sometimes struggled with sharing the internal dialogue that ran through my head. On the surface, I was aloof and didn't let many

things shake me. But when I dug deep into my thoughts, I was broken when it came to love.

“Don’t play, coy. I saw what I saw. Is there something going on with you and Steph? Spill the tea, Queen B.” He chuckled, knowing I hated that nickname.

I mean, I didn’t mind it when I thought it was for Queen Blake, but one time he got drunk and told me he called me that for Queen Bitch, and it never set well with me after that. Not that I couldn’t be a hardass at times, but I wouldn’t allow him to call me out on it. Besides, if anyone was bitchy, it was him.

“I’m not playing anything. And what did I tell you about calling me that?” I gave him a severe eyebrow, and he had the decency to look apologetic.

“Old habits. Sorry. So, are you having doubts about Steph?” He wasn’t letting this drop, and maybe I didn’t want him to.

Maybe I should talk to him and see if I was overreacting, but not here where the walls had ears.

“Come to my office?” It wasn’t really a question. There was no doubt he would follow me if he would be getting some dirt.

As soon as we got inside and he shut the door, his face lit up.

“It’s so good we needed a private conference?” His eyebrows danced, and I sighed as I sat at my desk.

“I don’t know if it’s good, but I could use your advice, I guess?”

“Well, that’s obvious. You would be lost if I wasn’t here to guide you. But I’m going

to need more to go on. What gives?”

I sighed. “I’m not sure. I don’t think I’m a relationship person.” I figured that was the best way to describe it.

“I get that,” he said calmly. I wasn’t keen on him agreeing so quickly, but I would let him continue. “Does she know that? I mean, you’re living together. When did you start having concerns?”

I wished these feelings were a recent development, but they weren’t. I never considered myself a one-woman person. It wasn’t that I wanted to play the field or anything; I never understood what love was because of how I grew up.

My parents were in a marriage based on status that was plagued with infidelity. Not to mention all of their disparaging remarks toward each other as well as toward me. Being an only child who felt like I had to earn their love but was never quite good enough to obtain it didn’t start me off on the right path for forging healthy connections. The two of them gave me a skewed perspective regarding dating or love, and I never entirely understood the appeal of relationships.

“I know we live together, and she’s my first serious partner, so maybe I’m just getting cold feet because of it, but there is a nagging voice in the back of my head that is telling me something isn’t right.” It was weird saying this out loud because it made it more real, but it was also freeing.

“Blake, you have to talk to her?” His voice was stern, but he was right.

“Or you could. Maybe find out if she wants out, too.”

He rubbed soothing circles on my back, and I flinched a little. I wasn’t used to him being affectionate. “Not no, but hell no.” The sentimental moment ended before it

began. "Why did you ask her to move in if you had these doubts?"

That was a good question, but I didn't technically ask her anything. It happened by default. Her lease ran out on her apartment a little while back, and since she had nowhere to go, she moved in. She didn't make me unhappy, but sometimes I wondered if we wanted two different things.

She seemed content with getting by in life. She was younger than me and didn't have a steady job. It wasn't a big deal because I had ample money for both of us, but at times it seemed I was more of a sugar momma than a partner.

"I have no idea what I'm even saying." I'm sure it's nothing. I'm sorry I brought it up."

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“Hey. I’m not judging you. I know when you get something in your head, you sometimes overreact. I’m here to be your voice of reason.” He cocked a crooked smile, and I had to laugh. Ty was anything but reasonable.

“Excuse me. You are a fine one to be talking about overreacting. How many times have you broken up with someone because you didn’t like the way his eyebrows looked?” I gave him a questioning gaze.

“First off, that only happened once, and it wasn’t how his eyebrows looked. It was the fact that he only had one. And besides, I’m starting to get serious with someone who has the perfect face and body, and he makes me...” He shivered like he was getting full-body tingles, and I tried to push that thought from my head.

“Oh, really? I’ve heard this before. I’ll give it two weeks.” I wasn’t trying to jinx him, but he was finicky, especially with men.

“You’re wrong. David is the one. He ticks all my boxes and then some.”

“I’m going to stop you right there. I’m happy for you if he’s different. And when I meet him, I’ll be able to tell for myself.” It wasn’t me being skeptical, but sometimes new love made it hard to see clearly, and I wanted to protect Ty.

He was more than my best friend. He was my family. We had been friends since we were 13, and he was the only person who understood how volatile my parents were.

“I’d trust you to pick a man as much as I’d trust a blindfolded pilot to land a plane.”

“You hush. I’m not picking him. I’m vetting him. I have to ensure he’s good enough for my baby brother from another mother.” I patted his cheeks, and he growled.

I was only a couple of months older than him, but I was wiser for the most part.

“Unlike you, I don’t need anyone’s input. I can figure things out on my own.” He snorted, and I hated that he was right; I did want his advice.

“For the record, I don’t need you, either,” I lied, and he saw right through it.

“Okay. But I’m going to tell you what to do anyway. You need to take Steph to lunch and talk to her. Not solely regarding the upcoming party but also concerning the future. You can’t let things eat at you, or the relationship will implode whether you want it to or not.”

As much as I didn’t want to give him the satisfaction of being right, he was. “We’ll see. What’s my schedule like the rest of the day?”

He scrolled through his phone and filled me in on my meetings, most of which could be phone calls or emails. “Basically, you have nothing keeping you in the office right now. So, don’t use your workaholic nature as an excuse, and go talk to your girlfriend.”

“I’m pretty sure you’re not the boss of me. But can you see if I can get a reservation at Perch? Outdoor seating is fine. I’ll give her a call and make sure she can make it.”

“You got it. But if she can’t be there, that means I get to go.” He rubbed his stomach because fine dining was his love language.

“You could always go for me.” I winked before he headed toward his desk.

His laughter echoed as he walked away. But I worried that this day might get worse before it got better.

Chapter Four

Blake - Monday

The waiter at the upscale cafe looked at us expectantly. “Have you ladies decided what you want to order?”

“Yeah, I’ll have the grilled chicken and steamed vegetables, please.” I didn’t have to look at the menu. I ordered the same thing every time.

“Why are you so strict all the time? Why don’t you order something with flavor?” Steph’s tone seemed annoyed by my predictability.

But I’d always been a disciplined eater because my mom had an idea of what was attractive and that was skinny. Therefore, one way I could earn her love was to look the way she wanted me to. When I was ten, she put me on a “cleanse” because she heard it would make me lose weight. Even though I’d never be thin, I prided myself on being healthy... now.

I would always be selective about what I ate. But I never questioned anyone else about their choices, so I wasn’t sure why she cared about mine.

“I stick with what I like. Is it a problem?” This lunch was supposed to be a time to discuss our future, but it bordered on the beginning of a fight.

“It’s not a problem. But why do you come to a place like this and order something so bland? It’s like sightseeing while wearing a blindfold.”

My anger scratched at the surface. Why did I need to defend my lunch choices? There was no point in this conversation. Except for making me believe I was right and we were headed in different directions.

“And for you, miss?” The waiter interrupted, which I was thankful for, so I could compose myself before speaking.

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“I’ll have a bacon cheeseburger and fries with sweet tea. Thank you,” Steph replied with a smirk.

The lawyer in me wanted to point out that she should be more worried about eating like a raccoon raiding a dumpster, but I didn’t want to bring the conversation back. She had said what she did, and I needed to let it go. Life was short, and getting upset over something trivial didn’t matter.

I was here to work on things with her, and I needed to remember that. As I stared into her blue eyes, my heart softened. Steph was gorgeous. She had beautiful dark-red hair and a long, lean body that people, such as myself, would spend hours in the gym for. She had a lot going for her in that department, but I needed something deeper.

We hadn’t gotten to that part of the relationship yet. Most of our interactions seemed more physical than emotional, and if she was “the one,” I needed both. At least, I thought I did.

“So, I’m glad we could do this today. We haven’t spent much time together recently, and I’ve missed you.” With me at the office over fifty hours a week and her pursuing her career of the moment, which at last check was a “social influencer,” we didn’t see each other all that much.

“You don’t seem like you miss me. You practically live at work.”

I didn’t understand why she was being combative. Had I done something to upset her? Was she aware of my doubts about us? There was no way. I didn’t even know I was having doubts until I talked to Ty today.

“I realize I have been busy getting ready for my new promotion, but I’m hopeful things will slow down now.” I reached for her hand, and she surprisingly gave it to me. “I’m trying to secure our future, so I have put in the work now.” Even though I wasn’t sure if she was my future, I needed to include her in my choices because she was my present.

“We don’t live in the future, Blake. I’m right here, and you’re ignoring me.”

Ouch. I never meant to ignore her. I worked a lot, but I always tried to give her attention when we were together.

“I’m sorry I made you feel that way. I want to be better.”

She pulled her hand back and crossed her arms. I wasn’t sure why my apology caused her to put up her walls, but obviously, I was going about this the wrong way.

“Let’s do something together. Anything you want. I can call off the rest of the day, and we can go shopping or hang out.” I smiled hopefully, but from her expression, it seemed like it might have been a little too late.

“I already have plans today. I didn’t think you could take off. Especially not on the first day of your ‘promotion.’” Why she put that in finger quotes, I didn’t understand.

“You’re right. I probably shouldn’t do that. But if it made you realize how much I cared about you, I would.” It was like I was fighting a losing battle here. I wasn’t even sure things would work out for us today, let alone for the party at the end of the week. “But since you’re already busy now. What if you come to the office party with me on Saturday?”

She stared at me with softer eyes and lowered her arms. “What’s the party for?” She sounded interested, which seemed like a good sign.

“It’s a team morale thing I have to attend, but maybe it could be fun? We could get dressed and then go out after, too. It can be our date night.” Somewhere along the line, I lost her. I watched as her face went from “maybe” to “hell no” in a matter of seconds.

“So, our date night is a mandatory thing? I think I’ll pass.”

I rubbed my forehead in frustration. Everything I tried to say was coming out wrong. What was I supposed to do? Why was I like this? Why was she like this? Were we destined to break up?

“The date isn’t an obligation—the party is. But if you want to skip the party and go out with me after, that’s okay, too. Steph, can’t you see I’m trying? I had no idea you felt so abandoned by me.” Was this what I wanted? Did I want a relationship that made me believe I was the biggest fuck-up of all time?

But when I looked into her eyes, I wasn’t ready to give up. “I promise to make time for you. I’m sorry if I let you down before, but now that I understand where you’re coming from, I can do better.” I reached for her again, and she reluctantly took my hand.

“I’m sorry to be so needy. But do you realize how long it’s been since we’ve been close?”

Was it me, or did she say close like she meant more than that? Was she talking about sex? We were consistent with sex, weren’t we? When was the last time... Oh, shit. Had it been that long? I needed to remedy that. I didn’t want us to be roommates, but that was kind of where we were headed. Most nights, I was lucky if she was awake when I crawled into bed.

“How about, after work tonight, we have quality time? I’ll be home before dinner,

and we can do anything you want.”

She scrolled through her phone. “My shift isn’t over until seven, but we could do a late dinner.”

“Oh? I didn’t realize influencers had shifts.”

“Didn’t I tell you? I switched jobs a couple of days ago,” she said casually, and I wondered when the last time was that we had spoken about our lives. How did someone forget to mention something so important? “I’m working at the cosmetic counter at Nordstrom. This could be my calling.” At least she seemed enthusiastic about this new line of work, and I hoped it panned out for her. It would be nice if she had a stable job.

“That’s awesome. I wish you would have told me when it happened. We could have celebrated. But maybe that’s what we’ll do tonight. Would you like to go out? Or stay in?”

“I’ll probably be tired. I’m not used to being on my feet all day. So, staying in would be fine. And we don’t have to do anything special. I’m just really excited to do something I love.”

I understood that all too well. My job was the most important thing to me. At least, it was before Steph. Now that I was with her, I needed to make her my top priority. After all, she was the first person who ever made me consider taking time from work, so that had to mean something.

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“Okay, it will be a low-key celebration.” I would pick up some wine and flowers on the way home. That would probably be a nice gesture.

“Thanks, Blake. I guess I didn’t realize how much I was holding in. This was a much-needed discussion.”

I was glad that she got what she needed out of this. However, I wasn’t sure I had. But knowing what I did now, at least I had direction.

“Here’s your lunch. Please let me know if everything’s to your liking.” The server interrupted our conversation, gave me a pointed stare, and then turned to Steph. “If you need anything else, just ask. Would you like more iced tea?” He questioned as he unabashedly checked her out.

“Uh, yeah, that would be perfect, thank you,” Steph responded with what looked like a flirtatious smile.

Surely, my mind was playing tricks on me. Steph wouldn’t flirt with someone in front of me. Would she? No way. We were in a good place right now—on track. I shook those negative thoughts away.

“Everything looks wonderful. We’ll signal when we’re ready for the check. Thanks.” I said to him dismissively. “So, anyway, back to our conversation. We decided to spend more time together, but you never really answered about the party. Do you think you’d want to go? I’d love to have you come, and Ty will be there.” I added that like it was a bonus.

I took a bite of my chicken, and she looked at her phone again.

“It doesn’t look like I have to work that night, so I should be able to make it.” She still didn’t give me a solid answer, but it was better than a flat-out no. “But I have to head out. I’m meeting a friend before work. I’m glad we could do this.” She had already finished her food before I was even halfway done. “I’ll see you tonight, baby.” She got up and kissed me on the cheek before marching out like she was on a runway.

I sat at the table and continued eating my lunch. That conversation left me a little iffy about where we were, but at least there was hope to be had.

Chapter Five

Leia- Monday

Even though my thoughts were preoccupied, my day continued without a hitch. My 9:30 appointment had been a husband and wife who were looking to get the spark back in their marriage. What better way to do that than take racy photos together? They seemed to enjoy the closeness the photoshoot brought them, and I hoped it was what they needed to fuel their fire. I loved that my studio specialized in tasteful yet erotic shoots because it allowed me to uniquely showcase my artistry.

My pictures may have been a bit of a niche market, but I was surprisingly busy. I booked out weeks in advance and made more than enough money to fund my carefree lifestyle. I’d never been one to bend to societal norms, and my work was no different. There would always be those who opposed the sexual nature my job promoted, but the joy and sense of freedom it brought my clients made it all worth it. After I wrapped up the last shoot of the day, Haley booked the next appointment with the client and then locked the door behind them.

“Hey, boss. I’ll put the props and costumes away. Are you going to start editing tonight?”

“I think I’ll call Shannon to get together for a drink and try to have a relaxing evening. This day has been odd, to say the least, and I could use some normalcy.” I also needed to talk to my bestie about my strange run-in today and see what she thought it meant and how I could get her out of my head.

Shanny was always down for refreshments and the potential to hook up with someone, so I had no doubt she’d meet me at our favorite bar. I still had to finish putting my equipment away, but I figured if I texted her now, it would give her enough time to meet me.

Me: Double Shift in thirty?

I’d barely hit send before the three dots on her end started dancing around.

Shannon: I’m already here.

Me: Don’t leave with anyone before I get there, and save me a drink. I need to talk.

Shannon: Can’t make any promises. There are some rather fine ladies here tonight. Hurry your ass up!

Well, that settled it. I would leave the cleanup until tomorrow. “Haley, I’m heading out for the night. Do you have any plans?” After the words were out of my mouth, I realized that might have sounded like an invitation, which I wouldn’t mind her coming along, but she didn’t seem like the lesbian bar type.

“Adam and I might watch a movie or something, I’m not sure what he’ll decide on. He is so opinionated about what we do.” She chuckled and slightly rolled her eyes.

“One minute he wants to watch a movie, the next minute he wants to go out to eat, then he wants to?—”

“Let me stop you right there. Since you’re not sure what he wants to do, why don’t you forget about putting all this stuff away and figure out your evening? We can both come back in the morning—8:00 a.m. sharp, and take care of this mess.”

“Oh, I don’t mind doing it now. That’s what you pay me for. Besides, your first client is coming in early to look at their prints. You do have them all laid out, right?”

“Yes, Mom. I’ve finished all my homework. Now, can I go play with my friend?” I asked jokingly.

“Hey, I’m your assistant, and what good would I be if I didn’t remind you of your obligations? Just doing my job. If you don’t like it, too bad. I’m not letting something slip through the cracks. My anxiety won’t allow it.” She shrugged her shoulders in a “what can you do” manner.

“All right,” I said, knowing she was right. “I’ll be bright-eyed and bushy-tailed tomorrow morning. Have a good night, and please don’t work too long.” I unlocked the door and headed out. I was ready to meet Shannon and possibly someone else to help me clear my head.

When I got to Double Shift, I saw Shanny sitting at the bar. I’d recognize her short blonde pixie anywhere. She appeared to be chatting up some Kristen Stewart lookalike.

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I walked up behind her and wrapped my arm around her shoulder. “Hey, babe. Who’s this?”

The girl appeared shocked, and I felt terrible for clitterferring, but I hoped to talk to my friend uninterrupted.

Shannon threw my arm off her shoulder and tried to smooth things over, but the younger woman had already left, probably scared that I was a scorned girlfriend who’d take out my rage on her. Shannon turned on me so fast that she probably caused herself whiplash. “What the fuck, Lay?”

“I’m sorry. But if we have something serious to discuss, it’s okay to clam jam, right?”

“No, that’s so far from right it’s left.” She shook her head, but I could tell she wasn’t mad.

“I missed you. Can I buy you a drink?” I smiled and waved to Iris, the barkeep.

“You better buy me a drink, and I missed you, too. What’s going on?”

I ordered a rum and Coke and a scotch for her before sitting down. “Something weird happened today, and now I’m stuck in this feeling.”

The bartender placed two glasses before us, and Shannon took a long drink before responding.

“Weird, how? And what feeling?”

I proceeded to fill her in on the incident and how the whole morning was chaotic.

“That sounds pretty typical. There are inconsiderate twats all over New York. So, what did you need advice on? How to get back at the asshole who hit everyone?”

“No, Ms. Impatient. I was getting to the part that troubled me. The woman who backed into me is causing all these feelings to stir. I don’t even know what they are, but I keep having flashbacks of her eyes, and they lock me in a trance. It’s like time doesn’t move, and all I can think about is her.” I heard how bizarre that sounded and worried Shanny wouldn’t believe me.

“Lay, I’m going to give it to you straight. Seeing a beautiful woman is exciting, and wanting to explore that is okay. But what you’re saying sounds like an obsession is about to happen. That can’t be healthy, especially when you know nothing about her or where to find her.” She had a point, but this was more than that.

I couldn’t explain because I didn’t understand it myself, but it was like her eyes were calling me. I was so glad I kept that part to myself.

“But it wasn’t just an attraction. I mean, I didn’t even see her completely. It was like a magnetic pull to her. When I close my eyes, I can still feel her and smell that mango scent—it’s like she’s with me.”

She sighed. “If that’s the case, look around and see if anyone catches your eye. It just might be the girl since you know nothing about her. And if it’s not her, tell yourself it is and move on.” Her advice wasn’t unfounded, but it wouldn’t be that easy.

I’d never experienced this kind of connection to someone where they preoccupied my mind. If I was honest, most of my thoughts were about work or my passion projects, which changed often. I never had serious girlfriends because I didn’t think I could devote my time and attention to another person.

I wanted to make whoever I was with a priority, so I preferred to stay single until I could give more of myself to someone.

“Maybe you’re right. I’m probably tired, and my mind is trying to fill in gaps of reality.” I took a long pull from my straw and realized I was about to down my entire drink.

“Look. We’ve all had that instant chemistry with someone and considered taking them home. It happens, but there are plenty of fish in the sea, so you don’t have to get hung up on the one that got away.” She flourished her hand around the bar as if showcasing her point. “You’re good-looking, successful, and fun. Take your pick; any of these women would go home with you.”

“Yeah, I guess. But it seems wrong trying to hook up with someone while thinking of someone else.”

“Again, you have no idea who you are thinking of, so let it go. Find someone who is here, who wants to be with you, and then they can take over your thoughts.” She patted me on the back and stood up. “Now, as much as I want to keep talking about your non-issue, I’m going to take a lap and see if I can help anyone else tonight.” She waggled her eyebrows, and I shook my head.

“Okay. I’ll be here for you if you need a wingwoman.” I ordered another drink and figured I would see where the night took me.

“I know you are. But you need to focus on you. Get out of your head and get someone real into your bed.” She laughed at her rhyme.

I shook my head. “I’ll be fine. But I want you to be safe.”

“I’m always safe.” She tipped up the last of her scotch and set the glass on the bar.

“I’ll talk to you tomorrow, and I want all the deets.” She winked, knowing full well I wasn’t a kiss-and-tell person.

I sipped on my drink as I made eye contact with a woman across the bar. Although her eyes couldn’t begin to compare to the girl from this morning, she was here now and walking toward me.

“Hey,” she breathed out once she reached me.

“Hey, yourself.” I stayed on my stool and patted the one next to me for her to sit.

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Once she sat down, she gently trailed her finger over my forearm. “I like your tattoos.” Her gaze bored into me, but it didn’t affect me the way Green Eyes did.

“Thanks.” I studied her skin to see if she had any visible ink, but she didn’t. “Do you have any tattoos? Or just an affinity for others?”

“None for me, but I know beauty when I see it. I’m an artist.” She continued her appreciative stare as she roved my entire body. “I’m Aria, by the way.” She slid her hand down my arm until it was inside mine.

“Aria, the artist. I’m Leia. It’s a pleasure to meet you.” There was an interest there, but it was nothing more than physical. There wasn’t that all-encompassing desire, but I wasn’t ready to write her off.

“I don’t normally do this, but do you want to go someplace else to talk, or maybe more?” Her forwardness led me to believe she wasn’t looking for a fairytale ending—maybe just a happy one, which was fine with me.

As long as we were on the same page, I didn’t mind having fun with someone. I didn’t want a situation where I couldn’t give them what they wanted.

“I have a place where we could talk.” I held her hand tighter and helped her off the stool.

I looked for Shannon to tell her I was leaving, but she was deep in conversation with the girl I box-locked earlier, so at least I didn’t have to feel bad. Things would end up how they were supposed to.

Chapter Six

Blake - Monday

Once I finished lunch, I headed back to work and locked myself in my office. My conversation hadn't settled my nerves about my relationship with Steph, and I couldn't talk to Ty right now because I was afraid he would make things more complicated by asking questions I didn't have answers to. So, I buried myself in billables until it was time to leave.

At quarter to seven, I closed down my computer and headed out. Ty had left over an hour ago, so at least I no longer had to dodge him as I left the building. A cool breeze blew through the air, bringing the smell of Chinese food from next door. It wasn't my favorite, but my stomach growled, and I wondered if I should pick up some takeout.

I wasn't sure what she would want for her celebratory dinner, but I thought a surprise might be better than calling her. She loved a little barbeque place three blocks over, so I went there. If I could show I was thinking about her, maybe she would see that I was trying to put her first. When you'd been single most of your life, it was weird having to consider how your actions could affect your partner, even when you weren't around them.

After picking up some ribs, chicken, and every side on the menu, I stopped by the only liquor store. The choices were limited, but I found a nice Bordeaux that paired well with ribs.

By the time I was done with my errands, it was twenty after seven, and I hoped we would arrive around the same time. I didn't want her to think I wasn't keeping my word.

With my hands full, I juggled opening the door and called out, "Steph, you home?" I

sat everything down on the entryway table as I walked inside and kicked off my heels.

I scanned the room and didn't see her, so I listened...nothing. I must have beaten her here, but that was okay. It would give me time to pour her a glass of wine and plate the food. But first, I would get out of this suit and into something more comfortable.

As I made my way to our room, I started stripping off my clothes so I wouldn't waste time. But when I opened the bedroom door, I saw Steph on the bed, with her long legs crossed like she was waiting for a meeting to start—except she was completely naked.

“Whoa!” I stood in my bra and skirt, wondering if I was dreaming. “When you said you wanted to stay in, I didn't realize this was what you meant.”

She uncrossed her legs and leaned forward with her elbows on her knees. Accentuating her cleavage. “Did you have a better way to celebrate?”

I swallowed hard. This was not where I saw the day going, but I wouldn't fight it.

“It's your day, and I want you to have whatever you want.” My nipples hardened and rubbed against the lace of my bra.

She was breathtaking, and when she walked toward me like a lioness would its prey, I questioned how I had kept my hands off her for so long.

“What I want is you.” She leaned in so close that her bare breasts pressed against me, causing goosebumps to cover my body. “Let me help you out of these clothes.” She reached around my back, unsnapping my bra, and the moisture built between my legs. With each piece of clothing she removed, she made sure to brush her body against mine, causing me to be weak in the knees.

“Why don’t we take this to the bed?” she purred.

I wanted that so badly, but I remembered the mess from today, and I couldn’t do anything before I showered. As much as I didn’t want to put her off, I wouldn’t get out of my head until I was clean. “Can you give me five minutes to rinse off?” I pleaded, and she smirked.

“Why waste any time apart when I can join you?” She led me to the bathroom without waiting for me to respond.

I loved that she was taking the lead, but I wanted her to know how much she was desired. Recently, my actions made her believe I was indifferent, and I needed to show her that wasn’t true.

As we moved into the bathroom, she started the shower, steam filling the room. I followed behind her, placing my hands on her hips and kissing her shoulder.

She was a good four inches taller than me, but it was the perfect height if we were facing each other. With little urging, she spun around, and I brought my lips to her neck. She leaned her head back as a form of permission. She growled as I roamed down her body until I reached her perfect breasts.

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As the shower continued to heat up, I took one nipple into my mouth and sucked as I gently squeezed the other. The sounds coming from her made me think she was as ready as I was.

“The water’s probably warm enough. You still want to join me?” The look in her eye told me there was no question. I stepped into the walk-in shower and let the spray hit me as if washing away all the stress from earlier in the day.

No sooner than I got inside, Steph was on me. Her mouth covered mine as she pinned me against the wall. She pushed her body into me, and her hands slid down my sides and settled on my ass. She pressed one of her thighs between my legs and pulled me closer. She moved closer, urging me to take what I needed from her. I rubbed my throbbing clit on her leg as her lips made their way to my ear.

“We have some lost time to make up for.” While making sure there was no distance between us, she slid her fingers over my center, and with a few slow strokes, she’d given me a release I didn’t even realize I craved.

How did I let it get this off between us? She deserved an attentive girlfriend, and I was ready to be one. Trading places with her, I backed her up until she was seated on the bench. I would show her body the devotion it had been missing.

As I leaned in, the water pelted my back, and I nibbled on her earlobe before sliding my tongue down her neck. Once I hit her collarbone, I sucked lightly on the pulse point. My hands roamed her body—I wanted to touch every inch of her. I dragged my short nails down her stomach as I got on my knees. When I gazed up at her and saw her eyes pleading with me, I hated that I hadn’t realized how distant we had been.

This was my time to prove what she meant to me. I moved my head lower, then slowly peppered kisses from her calf to her hipbone. Then I lifted that leg over my shoulder to give myself better access as I swirled my tongue in circles around her clit.

She arched her back, grabbed my hair with one of her hands, and whimpered as I continued caressing her lips. When I slid two fingers inside her, she involuntarily moved into me. As I glided my tongue up her wet folds, I curled my fingers inside, hitting her sweet spot. She pulled my head back so I was looking her right in the eyes as she screamed out in ecstasy.

When she finally came down, I placed her leg back on the shower floor and carefully made my way to standing. When I was upright, she joined me, pressing her lips to mine before pulling my tongue into her mouth and deepening the kiss. I wanted to get lost in that moment, but she ended it before I could.

As both of us slowed our breathing, I thought of all the things I should say, but all I could come up with was, “I’m so sorry, Steph.”

“I believe you.” She kissed my nose, and I hoped I saw forgiveness in her eyes. “Sometimes, life gets in the way of things. But if we make an effort, it doesn’t have to.” She was right—relationships took work, and it was time to step up.

“I will always want you. You’re my first relationship, and I’m unsure how to navigate sometimes, but I promise I will try to be better for you.”

“Good. That’s all I needed to hear.” She smiled, but it didn’t seem she would return the sentiment. “Now, you finish cleaning up, and I’ll wait for you in bed. This was just our warm-up.”

She exited, and I stayed under the warm water, trying to let the worries leave my body. If I could let go and live in the moment, this could be a night to remember.

The bass was so loud it reverberated through my body. I had no idea where I was, but I was being dragged through a throng of people. My feet were moving on their own accord until something forced me to stop in the middle of a dance floor.

This woman was moving her hips in front of me, and my heart hammered in my chest. I couldn't see her face, but I recognized her essence. My pulse was racing, and I had a drive to be near her—to touch her. But the way she swayed her body was hypnotizing, and I couldn't move. Then everything disappeared.

I jolted awake and turned to see Steph sound asleep. She appeared so peaceful, and after last night, I hoped my mind would have been more at ease, but I knew in my heart that she wasn't the woman in my dream.

Chapter Seven

Leia - Monday

After leaving the bar, I brought Aria back to Full Exposure. I was glad to see Haley hadn't stayed too late, and we would have the place to ourselves. I unlocked the door and turned off the alarm while she came inside and looked around, seemingly in awe.

“Umm, Leia? Where exactly are we, Leia?”

Her eyes locked onto something through the partition in the studio, and I couldn't help but follow her gaze. To my surprise, I saw a set of handcuffs glinting in the light, secured tightly to the headboard. “Well, I can see how this might look, but I'm a photographer. I take boudoir-type photos. I have tons of props and sets so individuals or couples can come in and act out their fantasies for me to capture the moment for them to use later.”

She stared at me warily, and I sometimes forgot how society trained us to believe

anything sexual was dirty.

“I promise they’re classy and sensual at the same time. I could show you, if you’d like.”

“Show me?” She seemed curious as she headed toward the bed and sat down. “What did you have in mind?” She ran her fingers over the fur of the cuffs.

I tilted my head and held my hands up as if framing her inside. “I could get my camera and?—”

“I don’t want you behind a camera. I want you next to me.” She patted the bed as her deep-red hair fanned over her shoulders. Her alabaster skin almost glowed in the studio lights.

She was a contrast to the woman this morning, but I wasn’t trying to find a double. I needed something different—someone different. Aria was stunning, and even though I didn’t have that magnetism to her, there was something I wanted to explore.

“I’d love to join you, but are we talking just for tonight?” I never wanted to lead anyone on, and I couldn’t give more of myself than I had.

“Leia, are you trying to U-Haul me?” She quirked a playful brow.

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That put my mind at ease. She seemed to be a like-minded woman who wanted to live in the moment and enjoy some company.

“I don’t think I’d have much room for a truckload.” I scanned the room as if to say this is my only space.

“Well, it’s a good thing I pack light.” She lay back on her elbows, spreading her legs wide enough for me to see up her skirt—she wasn’t wearing any panties.

I could only imagine what she’d look like sprawled out, fully naked, and quivering at my touch. The corner of my mouth hitched up as I glided toward her. Once I reached the bed, she scooted to the middle to give me room.

She gave me a come-hither look, and I hovered over her prone body, straddling her but not putting any weight down. I gazed deeply into her eyes as she lightly bit her bottom lip. I studied her, wondering if a spark would happen. I slowly let myself come down on top of her while I laid her back.

“You don’t have to be so gentle. I won’t break,” she purred, and I pushed all the prior thoughts from my head.

This wasn’t about a forever love but about making memories tonight. I moved down to my knees and took her skirt with me. She had a little red landing strip that was like a beacon for her slick, wet center.

I kissed the apex of her pussy, and she rocked her hips into my face. She appeared more than ready for where things would go. And all I wanted to do was make her

happy and give her a picture-perfect night.

It was so hot that my clothes clung to me. There were bodies all around as I moved back and forth to the music, but they weren't paying attention to me at all. It was like I was the only person in the middle of the dance floor, and the rhythm cascaded inside me.

I didn't know where I was. I hadn't seen this place before, and the music wasn't in English. My hips moved to the beat as if I had heard this song a million times. I tried to understand the words, but the bass vibrated so loudly that I couldn't make anything out. Wait, or was it the blood pounding in my ears?

Before I could figure out what was happening, my body started pulsing with energy. It wasn't something I was familiar with. I tried to sway to the music but couldn't seem to move. It was like my feet were covered in concrete boots, keeping me stuck in the moment. Someone touched the back of my arm, and I could tell she was here. The run-in on the street flashed through my mind. Those green eyes stared at me, shimmering.

I wanted to call out to her, see her, touch her—anything. But as I tried to move, everything went black.

I bolted upright as sweat ran down between my breasts, and my heart crashed against my chest wall, seemingly trying to escape. I scanned my surroundings, only to realize I was still in the studio prop bed—alone. There was a note on the pillow next to me.

Leia, thanks for a wonderful night. You're a restless sleeper, so I left, but give me a call if you ever want to have an encore performance.

She signed it with a heart and her number.

I didn't usually do sleepovers anyway, so I wasn't offended that she bed and fled. I was actually glad she wasn't here when I woke up. Even if she didn't want anything serious, how would I have explained that I was dreaming about another woman? A woman who, for whatever reason, I couldn't get out of my mind? A woman who appeared to be calling out to me, and I could no longer fight it.

It seemed the only way to shake her from my thoughts was to find her.

Chapter Eight

Leia - Tuesday

That dream had me shook. Was this a sign? If it was, I needed more information. The only thing I had to go on was her eyes and hair color. And as quickly as she walked out of my life, she could easily be a phantom of my imagination. There was a strong possibility I was losing my mind.

But the dream seemed so real, and even though there was a spark when she and I touched, it became more of a firestorm since I woke up. I wasn't sure what that meant, but this energy inside of me might explode if I didn't channel it.

Last night's escapade with Aria was fun, but it hadn't helped anything, and my only option was to go where the universe was taking me. I wish I had more direction than just those mesmerizing green eyes.

But since I was running on little to no sleep, I couldn't begin to think about anything until I got some wake-up juice. I didn't like coffee, but today would be an extra-caFFEinated day. I would snort the coffee grounds like a line of coke, but I wasn't sure it would have the desired effect, so I'd have to suck it down and move on. I had a busy day ahead of me, and I didn't have time to be dragging ass.

A good thing about bringing your one-night stand to your work was that you didn't have to worry about being late the next day. The bad thing? You were still in the same clothes from the night before, and your assistant, who hated your outfit when it was fresh, would loathe it after it took a ride on the jolly trolley.

Luckily, my style was that fresh-out-of-bed look on the regular. Maybe Haley wouldn't even notice. I scoffed to myself because I wouldn't get that lucky. If she was anything, it was meticulous.

After starting the pot of coffee, I looked around the studio to make sure I had everything cleaned up and no remnants of last night were lying around. After I made the bed, I rushed to my office and found a T-shirt I must have left before. I quickly threw it on to be less conspicuous when Haley arrived.

As I was trying to tame my freshly fucked hair, she breezed in, looking like the perfectionist she was.

"Hey, boss. What are you doing here so early? I figured I'd have to text you when I got in to remind you about your appointment." She rushed around the studio like a little Tasmanian devil, moving things I'd already put away.

Was this what she did every day? I should probably give her a raise.

"Don't you remember I said I'd help clean up before? I'm true to my word, so I woke up early and came in to get started. However, it looks like you have a system. Is me being here messing with your Feng Shui?" I stepped to the side so I wouldn't get hit in her frenzied exploits.

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“No. You’re not in the way. I like things to be... organized.” She smiled but didn’t slow down. “If you want to help, you can pick up the props that were left out last night.” She pointed toward the desk but then froze. “What happened to the bed? It wasn’t even used in the shoot yesterday.”

Holy hell. What was wrong with the bed?

“It looks like someone slept in it.”

“Oh, I was lying on it before you got here. I was up early today and decided to rest a bit. Did I not make it right?” I asked in earnest because I couldn’t see a problem.

“Hospital corners, boss.” She rushed over, gently nudging me out of the way.

I stared as she went to work, pulling the comforter down, straightening, and tucking the sheets to the point that an Army sergeant would be proud. Then she lifted the comforter back over it and flattened out every wrinkle with iron-like precision.

Damn. Now I saw the difference. What I did, a toddler could’ve done. I was going to do something special for her today. I’d grab her a coffee when I went out.

“So, is there anything I can help you with, or would I be most helpful by not helping?” I did a little half-smile with a quirked eyebrow that said I was kidding, but hopefully, it also showed that I’d like to do something somewhere else out of her warpath.

She eyeballed me, and I suddenly felt very naked. “Are you wearing the same jeans

as yesterday?”

I figured she would notice. But at least I had on a different shirt, so maybe I could play it off. “I have several pairs of these jeans because they fit like a glove.” I stared at myself in the mirror and thought the fib worked.

“Right. It doesn’t matter. Let’s get this place in tip-top shape so the clients don’t think you live here.” She had no idea how close to the truth that was.

“All right. You tell me what to do, and I’ll do it.” I was glad for a subject change. I wasn’t ready to get into a deep conversation about my personal life.

She grunted, and I was unsure what I’d done. “If I have to tell you what to do, I might as well do it myself,” she snapped, which was out of character.

“Okay. I didn’t want to do something wrong and make extra work for you. You seem to have a process that I haven’t grasped yet.” I held up my hands in surrender, and she hung her head.

“I’m sorry, Leia. I got into a fight with Adam last night, and he said something similar that triggered me.”

Haley and I were close, in that boss-employee sort of way, but we never really opened up about our lives outside of work.

“Hey, I’m so sorry. I’m here if you want to talk about it.” At least, if we were focused on her problems, I wouldn’t have to figure out my own stuff.

“No. This is unprofessional. I didn’t mean to say anything.”

“Look, Haley. I get that we work together, but we can be friends, too. I’ve got a good

ten years on you, so I have experience. Let me have it.”

She eyed me skeptically, but she must have seen my sincerity because she broke down and cried out, “I think Adam is going to leave me.” She covered her face with her hands as she sobbed.

I was very uncomfortable because I hated seeing people cry. I also didn’t know how to make things better for her because I’d never been in that situation before.

“What makes you say that?” If I had a little more context, maybe I could better help her.

With tears streaming down her cheeks, she said, “I caught him watching porn.”

This wasn’t my area of expertise, but didn’t all guys watch porn?

I needed more information. “Was it gay porn?”

With that comment, she snapped her head up to make eye contact. “Why would you ask that? Do you think he’d rather be with a man than me?”

So, that was the wrong question, and I possibly made things worse. “Of course not. I was trying to understand why you were so upset.”

She was still sniffing, but at least her tears were drying up. “I was crying because I caught my boyfriend watching other women have sex.”

“And he didn’t want to have sex with you?”

“No, I just got there. I’m sure we would’ve had sex had I not seen that.”

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“So, he still wants to have sex with you?”

“Yes. We have sex at least once a week. So I don’t get why he was watching porn.”

I had to stop my mind from wondering if she had their sex life on a schedule.

“Maybe he was bored. Or horny. But if you’re both happy in the bedroom, does it matter?”

“Are you kidding me? Of course, it matters. He was watching other women...naked. Why wouldn’t that bother me?”

“Have you ever found someone besides him attractive?” I mean, I didn’t know Adam well, and if I was honest, I thought she could do better, but he probably shouldn’t be crucified for this.

“That isn’t the same thing.” She was defensive, but she wasn’t exactly wrong.

“Okay, but did he cheat on you?”

“No.”

“Did he blow you off for porn?”

“No. But if he was happy, why would he need that?”

“Do you do things that make you happy that don’t involve him?”

“Again, that’s not the same.” She was a little more indignant.

“Why? Maybe he enjoys it in his free time. Just because it’s not something you would do doesn’t mean it’s wrong for someone else to do it.”

“Oh, so you think he would be okay with me watching naked men?”

“Honestly, I don’t know. Have you asked him? If he was hypocritical about you watching porn, then I’d say you have a leg to stand on. But if he doesn’t care, then I think you might need to tell him why it bothers you, if you even know the reason yourself.” That sounded like logical advice, but she didn’t seem convinced.

“Haley, you’re entitled to your emotions, but is it possible there’s something else troubling you, and it’s not the porn?” I hoped I got my point across without making her feel like her reaction was wrong, but it seemed like there was a deeper issue.

“Maybe you’re right. I was so upset last night that I ran out and haven’t seen him since. But I probably should talk to him. Thanks for listening to my meltdown. I really appreciate it. Sometimes, having an outsider’s perspective can help you see things differently.”

“Of course. You’re not alone. And if I can help you in any way outside of cleaning the studio, I will do it.” I smiled and nudged her elbow.

She headed to her purse and pulled out a compact, but she still looked flawless, even after crying.

Once she was satisfied with her presentation, she turned to me. “Okay. You’re off the hook. I’ll finish getting this cluster cleaned. We only have about fifteen minutes until the client gets here.”

I surveyed the room and honestly didn't have any idea what her neurotic mind saw, but if it made her happy to organize the space, she could have at it. "All right, Hales. You work your magic, and I'll lay out the prints. Once we're done with our eleven o'clock, I'll grab lunch and coffee for you. Anywhere you want." I gave her my brightest smile.

She returned the gesture, but I could see the gratitude in her eyes. Something had shifted in our dynamic, and she was becoming someone I could trust with more than just work.

Chapter Nine

Blake - Tuesday

After leaving Steph in bed, I came into the office early because I needed space. The dream left me so unsettled that I either had to distract myself or figure out my feelings.

When I arrived at work, Ty was already standing inside my office updating my calendar, and it seemed like the best option was to address my stress.

"Will you close the door?" I asked Ty, and he happily did.

"What's the goss?" He was as bad as a schoolgirl at a slumber party.

"There's no goss. I just needed to talk to you for a minute."

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He pouted as he sat down. “Work stuff?”

I should have toyed with him a little longer since he was being a baby, but I had other things to do.

“No. Something weird happened last night, and I need to figure out how to handle it.”

“I love weird. Okay, go.” He propped his elbows on his knees with his face in his hands.

I blurted out the dream before I thought better of it.

When I finished, he was leaning covering his mouth in shock. “So, who was it? Was it Steph? I bet it wasn’t Steph.”

I didn’t like him knowing it wasn’t Steph before I even said it. I wondered if he thought that because of our conversation yesterday or if he didn’t think Steph and I belonged together, either. That would be something I would have to ask a different day.

“She probably wasn’t a real person. I mean, it was just a dream? But you’re right, it wasn’t Steph, that much I’m sure of. This person had light-brownish hair, and it was shorter. Nothing like Steph’s strawberry-blonde mane. But it doesn’t matter. It didn’t mean anything, right?” I wasn’t sure why I needed his two cents, but I did.

The longing for the person was so real, and it was as if I ached to be with them. The guilt of knowing I didn’t feel that way about Steph was gnawing at me.

He stroked his chin as if he were thinking, and I fought the urge to tell him just to say it. “I’ve heard about this before. They’re called something like ‘vivid dreams.’ And from the sounds of it, they are sparked by real events. So maybe it does mean something. Maybe you’re dreaming about someone you’re supposed to be with.”

His words did nothing to absolve me from my fears.

“That’s ridiculous. I haven’t even met anyone new to dream about. Unless this person was my sixty-year-old client in disguise.” I was confident there was no way this was Mrs. Harris.

“No one said it had to be a person you recognize. Maybe it’s someone your subconscious knows.” He was getting oddly philosophical, and I worked under logical reasoning.

“Nope. I think after our conversation yesterday, I was so in my head about my relationship, and after I had sex with Steph last night, my mind went a little off the rails.”

He scrunched his face as if disgusted. “For the record, I don’t need to hear how you bumped uglies. That’s something I’ll have to bleach from my brain.”

“That’s your own fault for picking that piece of information to focus on. But like I said, my mind was playing tricks on me, and now I’m feeling bad about it.”

“Whatever you think. You asked my opinion, and I told you, but you do you, boo boo.”

I swallowed my annoyance and pushed out a smile. Zen, Zen, Zen. “Thank you for listening, Ty. You’ve been a big help. Can you please pull the files I need for today?”

“Okay. I see how it is. I’m not wearing my friend hat anymore. It’s back to ‘yes, boss, I’ll get right on it, boss.’” He half curtsied, half bowed.

“You’re ridiculous.” I laughed at him as he walked out of my office.

Once he was gone, I reclined in my chair and picked up my stress ball, one of about twenty I’d gone through this year alone. As I was thinking about my day and what I needed to accomplish, my mind kept wandering back to last night.

The sex with Steph was pretty amazing and also a stress reliever, but I couldn’t stop thinking about that dream. That intense sensation... What was it? Desire? Surely not. I mean, if Steph didn’t float my boat, I had to be straight. She was gorgeous.

And this person in my dream, I had no clue what she looked like. It couldn’t mean anything... could it? No. This was stupid. Ty put these crazy thoughts in my head, and now I was questioning things that didn’t even matter. I needed to focus on work. Then, tonight, I would concentrate on Steph.

I turned on my computer and organized the documents for my clients today. Ty had scheduled two consultations that would take place later this afternoon. Right now, I would draft a prenup and power of attorney for review. Hopefully, it would be a pretty light day, and I’d get home at a decent hour because Steph and I could use some more quality time. I was afraid to think about what would happen if I—

“Knock, knock,” Greg announced as he tapped on the door.

This was not what I needed today. I let out an exhale as I said, “Woosa” under my breath.

“Greg, please come in.” I motioned toward the wingback chair but hoped he didn’t take that as an invitation to stay awhile.

He walked in and sat down. Then he proceeded to pick up a picture of Steph that was on the small end table next to him. “So, I dropped by to see what your schedule was like today.” He gave me a forced smile as he put the photo back.

I wanted to tell him to stop checking out my girlfriend, but it didn’t matter. Let him be jealous.

“I have a couple of consults this afternoon. Did you need something?” Why did I open that door?

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“Actually, yes. I have a client coming in around six o’clock tonight, but something came up, and I have to leave early today. Personal issue. I’m going to need you to cover it. It’s a basic trust. This is the initial intake, so you have to get their asset information and who the grantor and beneficiaries will be. You’re aware of what info to get, right?” His condescending tone was enough to cause a fire inside me, but I managed to tamp it down before exploding.

“Of course. That’s what I get paid for.” I hoped he couldn’t hear the contempt in my voice.

“Great. I’ll draw up the document for them and see it through; you won’t have to worry about that. I’m sorry to spring this on you, but since you are the newest partner... you understand.” He sat there with a smug grin as if waiting for me to argue.

“I get it. And I’m more than happy to cover for you tonight. I hope you’re able to handle your personal matter.” I stood up as if to signify this little chat was over. He seemed to get my drift and followed suit.

“Since I’ll be working late tonight, I should probably grab some food. So, if there isn’t anything else...” I let that hang there, hoping he would take the hint to leave.

He headed toward the door while I leaned against my desk, arms folded across my chest. “No. That’s all. I should be back tomorrow, and we can discuss it then. I’ll have my assistant contact yours to schedule a time that will work for both of us.”

With that, he exited my office, and I let out a sigh mixed with “Woosa” again, but it

wasn't helping.

I went to find Ty sitting at his desk, talking on the phone. "Yeah, okay. Yes, I'll check her schedule, certainly. Okay. I'll put you down for Thursday the 24th. Toodles."

"Toodles? Are you a ten-year-old girl? Who in God's name says 'toodles'? What was that even for?"

"Don't hate me." He held up his hands, and I realized my day was about to get worse.

"Don't make me hate you, and I won't." I had lost all patience after holding back so much with Greg.

"I'm sorry. It was your mom again, and you have a lunch date set up with her in a couple of weeks. Maybe you should call her more. She said she misses you." He let out a manic laugh, and I wanted nothing more than to scream "fuck my life."

"Whatever. That isn't even worth a response. You can figure some excuse out later to cancel."

"Blake. If you cancel, she'll just call back. Why don't you bite the bullet and get it over with? At least that should hold her off for a few months." He was right, but that didn't make it easier for me.

Seeing her every quarter was overkill. Once a year would do, and I could throw in a couple of cards.

"I don't have time to get into my issues with Mommy Dearest. Don't worry, I'll figure out how to handle it." Even though Ty was aware of some of the stuff my mom had said to me, I never let him see how much she actually wounded me. I was good at

saving face and wouldn't change that now.

"But let's get out of here. It's lunchtime, and since you're my best friend, you're coming with me." I waved him on, and he hesitated. "Don't worry, I'm buying."

A huge smile crossed his face as he jumped up. "Okay, sounds good. I'm starving."

"Well, you better eat a lot because Greg has us covering a late meeting while he takes care of a 'personal issue.'"

"Personal issue, my ass," Ty mumbled, and I pulled him out of the office so we could speak freely.

"What does that mean?" I asked once we were a safe distance from listening ears.

"Shelia told me he has a poker game tonight. And since he couldn't bill much for the initial meeting, he wanted to dump it on someone. I didn't realize that someone was you, but I should have. He doesn't seem to like you much." He shrugged. "But what can you do? So, where are we headed for lunch?"

"I can't believe that guy. If I had known?—"

"I'm gonna stop you right there. If you'd known, you wouldn't have done anything differently. You pretty much have to make nice because you're still the low man on the totem pole. So, buck up, buttercup, and let's grab some food. Something expensive to lessen our pain."

I rolled my eyes. He had no shame whatsoever.

The sun was bright in the sky as we continued walking toward downtown. There were people everywhere fighting to get to their destination. An array of scents

mingled together: street food mixed with exhaust and the occasional hint of blooming flowers.

“Do you ever want to leave New York?” I had no idea where that came from, but I had a thought of being somewhere less hectic—like a cabin in the woods.

“Not really. I mean, our entire life is here.” He looked at me questioningly.

“Yeah, but wouldn’t being out in the middle?—”

I was suddenly motionless, and the world was fading around me. Birds were chirping, and a cool breeze was blowing off a body of water... a lake. I looked around, and I was in the wilderness, alone, but she was present—the girl from my dream. I tried to speak, but my voice caught in my throat. I turned to see where she was. Who she was. But nothing.

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Then firm hands were gripping my shoulders, shaking me. Someone was trying to get my attention. And as quickly as the sensation started, it stopped.

“Blake!” Ty’s voice brought everything into focus.

I was back on the sidewalk, and everything was right in the world, except for the curse words thrown at me for being in the way.

“What are you doing?” Ty kept shaking me. “Why did you stop in the middle of the crowd? People had to dodge you, and the words spewing out of their mouths weren’t ‘excuse me.’” He chuckled as he guided me away from everyone. “Were you possessed?” he joked, but I wasn’t sure he was wrong.

“Ty, you’ll never believe me. I don’t even believe me.”

“Let’s go inside here and talk.” He opened the door to a little shop called Tea-Riffic to get us away from the lunch rush.

I scanned the place, and seeing that it was empty, I appeared safe from eavesdroppers.

“You can tell me anything, Blake. I’ll always believe you. Even if I laugh at you first.” He could never be serious, but that had always been our friendship.

“It’s hard to describe. This weird sensation came over me like I wanted to get out of the city and go off-grid. Then, the next thing I knew, I was in the woods by a lake with a cabin.”

“That’s it? You just went into a daydream about the great outdoors?” He seemed skeptical, and I needed to tell him the rest of it or it wouldn’t make sense.

“That’s not only it. She was there.”

His eyes widened. “She as in not Steph she?”

I sighed. “Can you please stop bringing that fact up? We don’t know if she is real, but I can always tell when it’s her because the same sensation comes over me. It’s like I’m frozen, but everything inside me is alive, buzzing with excitement.”

“That’s bizarre. Do you think something triggered it?”

“Honestly, I have no clue. But I need to figure it out to ensure it doesn’t happen again. It was like I had no control over my body, which would be horrible if it happened while I was with a client.”

He ran a hand through his wavy hair. “There has to be a reason for it, so I doubt it would randomly happen when you were with a client. Maybe we should do some research. Maybe it’s like astral projection or something.”

“That sounds like fake news, and I don’t believe in that. I’m guessing it’s more from a lack of sleep and possibly low blood sugar, which is why I need sustenance now. Let’s leave this weird little shop and get some food and drinks.”

“All right, but now I’m in the mood for a steak dinner!” He cheered, and I laughed.

“How about steak tacos?”

He groaned. “Well, that sucked the wind from my sail, and not in a good way, either. But I guess I’ll settle for that... now. But you can buy me some margaritas after.

Besides, drinking might help trigger an ‘episode,’ and we can figure out who or what is messing with your subconscious,” he said with a shit-eating grin on his face as if my predicament was his entertainment.

“As much fun as it sounds to have you analyze me, with absolutely no experience dealing with something like this, I will have to take a hard pass. I’m already afraid Steph will be pissed I’m working late, and I don’t want to make it worse by coming home shithammered. So, you’ll have to fly solo tonight. Let’s grab our food and get back to the office before anything else odd can happen.”

We ordered our tacos and then headed back to strap in for what I imagined would be an utterly uneventful night that Greg weaseled out of just to flex his seniority.

Chapter Ten

Leia - Tuesday

My morning sessions flew by, and Haley seemed to be in much better spirits, which I was happy about. She was usually very strict with our schedule, but she managed to take a break, and we even joked around a bit, which was nice.

Once lunchtime hit, I was ready to get out of the studio. I was still dragging from my restless night, and my caffeine fix from earlier was wearing off. I’d told Haley I’d pick her up something special, but she picked a food truck just down the street so I could get some fresh air, which was much needed.

As I soaked up the extra vitamin D, I was wistful for a lazy day, sitting on a dock, reading a book away from everything and everyone. I’d never done anything like that before, but I had a sense of peace at the thought.

I inhaled deeply and exhaled slowly as I continued my walk. It wasn’t far to Juan-der-

ful Tacos, but Tea-Riffic was closer, so I decided to treat myself to a highly caffeinated and hard-to-find Pu-Erh tea. After grabbing my drink, I exited the shop, but then my reality turned into a reverie while everything became a distant backdrop.

I didn't understand what was happening or why, but I was now staring at a hammock on a dock overlooking a lake. As I tried to figure out where I was, the wind blew, and a decadent scent of sweetness filled the air. It reminded me of a bakery, but when my heart began thundering inside my chest, it was obvious she was here. A current surged between us, and my feet took off with a mind of their own. She was pulling me toward her, and the anticipation of seeing her again was killing me. But in a blink of an eye, it was all over.

I gasped as if I had been holding my breath. I turned around; the peacefulness was gone, and so was she. I was standing on the sidewalk, watching everyone in their own world, not paying attention to anything outside themselves. A longing sat deep in my belly, and I was unsure how to get rid of it.

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Was she close to me? Did I miss her because of some stupid mind movie that took over my brain? Or was this all mental exhaustion, and none of it real?

How long was I in that trance? I needed to return to the studio, so I rushed to Juan-Der-Ful Tacos and picked up Haley's favorite taco pizza, but I was too wired to eat. My body was tingling, and goosebumps were covering my skin. If I didn't know any better, I'd assume I was coming down with something, but nothing was wrong outside of the odd sensations coursing through me.

After returning to work, I wondered if I should talk to Haley about what had happened, but I wasn't sure we were there yet. Even though she had opened up to me about a personal problem, Shanny might be better suited to handle my issue. At least she had some understanding of the situation, and I trusted that she'd offer support without resorting to extreme measures.

The rest of the day went just as fast as the morning had. As much as I tried to stay present while shooting, I found myself drifting. I needed answers because I couldn't go on like this—just phoning it in. As soon as the last session ended for the day, I packed up my things, hoping to get home and do some research or something, but Haley caught me one foot before freedom.

I didn't want to dodge her, but I also didn't want to have an extensive conversation. I was at war with my brain right now.

"Boss." She stared at me expectantly but didn't say anything else.

Had I done something wrong? Should I have known what she needed?

When I was finally tired of pupil wrestling, I prompted her. “Yes?”

She rushed toward me, throwing her arms around my neck. As quick as the hug started, she moved back as if embarrassed. “I’m sorry. I wanted to say thank you. You have given me a lot to consider, and I would have been in my head all day if it weren’t for you.”

It was good that we chatted before the incident at lunch, or I probably wouldn’t have been much help. I had a twinge of guilt inside me that I wouldn’t divulge my problem to her. But there was a positive shift between us, and it was nice. She was like the little sister I never had, and having one more person in my corner was never a bad thing.

“Don’t mention it. I’m always here to offer insight if I can. And if I can’t, at least I’m good for a laugh.” If life taught me one valuable lesson, it was this: if you couldn’t appreciate the journey, was it truly worth the adventure?

“I hope you know I’m here for you, too.” She smiled, and before I could stop myself, I spouted everything that had happened like it was word vomit.

Her mouth hung open, and I wondered if I had made a colossal mistake.

“Obviously, I’m kidding,” I finished, after basically telling her I was a time traveler or something just as absurd.

“Leia, that didn’t sound like a joke. Is this person calling out to you?” She didn’t mock me at all, which was surprising.

She might be a better choice than Shanny.

“Can that happen?”

“Definitely. It seems like your soul is connected to hers, and you’re remembering those past experiences. It’s so romantic.” She giggled, and now my skepticism was high. She was living in some fairytale and those didn’t exist.

“Maybe it would be romantic if I could meet her, but since I have no clue who she is or where to find her, I guess it will all just stay in my dreams.” Even though Haley didn’t razz me about what I thought was happening, she probably wouldn’t be much help.

“That’s it!” she exclaimed, but I had no idea what she was so excited about.

“Okay?” I questioned.

“Dreams. Why don’t we try to guide your dreams and see if you can find out more about this mystery woman? We will be like sleepy sleuths.” She made a Charlie’s Angel pose, and I shook my head.

“How can anyone guide their dreams? That doesn’t seem plausible.”

“Ye of little faith, Lay.” Her giddiness was almost infectious, but I was still unsure what she had in mind. “It’s called lucid dreaming. You are the director, actor, and audience all in one. So, you can guide yourself back to a place where you know she was at.”

“But I don’t even know what she looks like. How would I make that up?” It didn’t seem like it would work, but I guess it was better than anything I came up with on my own, which was I had a tumor causing me to hallucinate.

“Maybe your mind will fill in those blanks when you dream of her. And then, we can put out an APB!” She was getting carried away, but at this point, I had nothing left to lose.

I needed to be in control of my life, and right now, I was at the mercy of these visions.

“Okay, so how to do it?” I wasn’t even sure this was safe, but Haley knew more about it than me, so I would have to trust her.

“Well, I haven’t done it myself, but I’ve read about it. And it sounds simple. You start by falling asleep naturally, but set an alarm to wake up after four hours. Once you’re awake, turn on some calming music to relax your mind. Then try to go back to sleep, but focus on guiding your thoughts to her. What do you think?”

Did I say what I thought out loud or stick to something polite? “Umm, I guess I could try that sometime.”

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“Let’s do it tonight. I don’t have any plans. I’ll help you.” She went to the bed and pulled down the covers. “You can sleep here, and I’ll read a book on my phone. Then I’ll wake you up when it’s time.”

She put me on the spot, and I didn’t see a way out. But since she seemed more knowledgeable than me, maybe it was better that she was here for it.

“Are you sure? Don’t you need to make up with Adam?”

“I texted him earlier while you were with a client. We are okay. Besides, you were here for me when I needed you, and I want to return the favor.”

“Okay. Let’s do this.” I set my stuff back down, and even though it was early, my body collapsed on the bed.

“All right. I’ll spritz some lavender around the room to set the mood and then turn off the lights.” Who carried around a lavender mist?

“Do whatever you need. Tonight, you’re the boss.”

She chuckled as she fluffed my pillow. “Oh, Leia. I think we both know I’m always the boss.”

That was a fair statement, but I shook my head, expressing my disagreement.

“You’re not the only one good for a laugh.” She tried to play it off, but I was pretty sure she was serious.

After she put the pillow back down, I tucked myself under the covers and drifted to sleep without any problems. I was exhausted mentally and physically, but surprisingly, the lavender was quite nice. It didn't seem like I was out long before Haley played gentle music and woke me up.

My mind was blank and ready to be manipulated. I took some deep breaths and closed my eyes, remembering the girl from the incident. Her piercing green eyes, her dark hair, the way she made me feel inside. Then I thought about the dance club and the lake and our connection.

The next thing I knew, music was blaring, and my body was gyrating to the beat. It was like my first dream. People everywhere, but not really there. They were like props. Maybe I was the director of this movie. I turned around to see if I recognized anyone, but it was all just blank stares. If I was in charge, I wanted to see her—touch her. Where was she?

My hips still swayed involuntarily, but then they stopped as if I had become a statue. She was near—a tingling sensation ran through me. My heart was like a jackhammer in my chest. I couldn't move, but then she was there. Her hands were on my hips. Everything inside me was about to erupt, but just like before, it was gone before I could react.

“No!” I screamed.

Haley came rushing over to check on me. “Leia,” she breathed out. “Are you okay? What happened?” Her concern was comforting, but my disappointment was insurmountable.

This might be a lost cause.

Chapter Eleven

Blake - Tuesday

I had called Steph to tell her I would be late, but she didn't answer. I wasn't sure if she was mad or genuinely missed my call. Since last night was our first time together in a while, I didn't want her to think I had already stopped trying.

The meeting with Greg's client was so simple an associate could have handled it, but I didn't want to be bitter. I had to prove myself, especially to Greg, because he didn't think I deserved to be where I was. I wasn't sure why he felt that way, but he obviously did. I always busted my ass in everything I did. That was why I finished top of my law school class and became my firm's youngest senior partner. But none of that mattered if I didn't continue to show up.

I had to do that in all aspects of my life, which was a new realization. I had always put school and work at the top of my list, but I now had Steph in the picture, and I needed to show up for her, too. This was all new to me, but I would do it.

Once I got all the notes updated in the system for Greg, I headed out. It was later than I wanted, but Steph still wasn't answering her phone. I was beginning to worry, so I picked up some of her favorite Chinese food as quickly as possible and went home.

When I unlocked the door and shouted for Steph, the only answer I heard was sniffing.

I set the food down and rushed to the couch. "Hey, babe. What's wrong?" I asked, wrapping my arm around her shoulder while she sobbed. "Are you okay? I've been trying to call you." I pulled her into me, and she buried her face into my neck.

"You can talk to me. I'm sure it will all be okay." I lightly caressed her back, hoping it was providing her comfort. I didn't have a good role model to show me how to be sympathetic, but I wanted to be here for her. "Can you tell me what happened?"

She sniffed uncontrollably before pulling back to look at me. “I... got... fired,” she breathed out, which wasn’t what I expected.

“Oh, babe. I’m so sorry.” I genuinely was, too. Even though she changed jobs frequently, she did seem more excited about this one than others. “How’d that happen? You were so happy there. Why don’t we sit at the dinner table, eat some Chinese, and you can tell me all about it?” I pulled her back into my chest as she soaked my shirt with what I hoped were only tears, but I was almost certain I wasn’t that lucky.

“They said they didn’t need my services anymore.”

Wow. That seemed sudden and harsh, and I wondered if there was more to the story. But I guess it doesn’t matter now, though.

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“I understand. Sometimes things don’t go as planned, but when a door closes, you can always jump out a window.” Case in point. That advice sounded awful, but hopefully, she would understand what I meant.

She pulled away from my embrace and stared at me, confused, and I couldn’t blame her—I was doing shit at this. “Did you tell me to jump out of a window?”

“No! I meant that if a door closes, you could always save yourself by climbing out the window. Like if the house was on fire, going out the window would be good. See? Nobody is jumping from anywhere. That could be dangerous, silly.” At least her being perplexed by my superb counsel had stopped her tears for now.

“What are you even talking about?” She shook her head, exasperated.

“Honestly, I have no idea. I was trying to reassure you, but I didn’t do well. I’m sorry.”

She studied me, but her face was softer, and a slight smirk crossed her lips. “You did better than you think. This is the first time I stopped crying since I found out.”

I took my thumbs and wiped the stray tears off her cheeks. “I wish you would have told me sooner.” I wasn’t sure why I had said that. It wasn’t possible for me to leave work early, but I could have at least had a conversation with her.

“I was so upset. I couldn’t talk.” Her blue eyes glistened, and I couldn’t tell if it was from prior tears or if hope was shining through. “But you have made things better.” She leaned in and brushed her lips against mine.

It took me by surprise, but it was nice. The gesture was sweet—at first. But before I could fully respond, she was deepening the kiss.

I wasn't sure where she was going with this, but I'd let her take the lead. I placed my hands on her hips but didn't urge her to move. She freely straddled one of my legs before pressing her thigh against my center.

“Whoa,” I whispered. “Do you want to eat and talk some more? I care about you, and I want you to be okay.”

She inhaled deeply and then slowly released it. “I want you to make me feel better than okay.” She stared at me with an intensity that caused my insides to heat.

“Now?” I wasn't sure if she wanted to forego dinner for a second night in a row, but she stood and reached out to me.

“Yes. Right now.” She pulled me up to her, and her eyes appeared an almost midnight blue.

“How about I run you a bath and grab you a glass of wine?” That sounded like a stress reliever.

“How about you take me to the bedroom and do that thing with your tongue where I can lose myself in the moment and forget everything else?”

“Your wish is my command.” I smiled, lacing our fingers together before leading her to the bedroom.

When we walked inside, she immediately pulled her shirt over her head. My gaze started at her round and supple breasts, which were slightly bigger than a handful but perfect for a mouthful. She wasn't wearing a bra, so I could see the excitement in her

nipples. Then my eyes traversed her body down to her long, lean torso. She had lines going down her sides as if she worked out daily. Once she removed her yoga pants, my entire body responded.

She was flawless, and sometimes I wondered how she saw me. I worked out and ate right, but I was also a few years older than her, and no matter what I did, my physique would never look like hers. Before I could get too far in my head, I unbuttoned my shirt and tossed it next to hers.

Wearing only my bra and skirt, I glided toward her. It took no time for her to help me into my birthday suit. Once I was naked, I picked Steph up and tossed her down on the bed. She peered up at me, and it was like nothing else in the day had mattered.

I immediately climbed on top of her, my legs on either side of her hips. I grabbed her arms and pinned them above her head as I sucked her earlobe into my mouth. She loved it when I did that, and I whispered, “Are you ready for a night to remember?”

“More than anything.” She rocked against me, and her wet heat rubbed against mine, and I was ready to taste her.

But before I made my way down her body, she bucked her hips and flipped our position.

She had never pulled that move before, and she was stronger than I realized.

Now, topping me, she said, “But I want to do you first.”

I hadn’t seen that coming, but I wouldn’t fight it. I loved that she wanted to take the reins.

She kissed me firmly while her hands toyed with my fully erect nipples. I closed my

eyes as pleasure and expectation consumed me. She lowered her mouth to my breast, and I arched my back in encouragement, then... I was suddenly no longer in my bed?—

Reality shifted. Foreign music was pouring through the air. The place was full of people, yet their faces remained unseen. My feet moved across the dance floor like a puppet on a string. This was very familiar to me, but I wasn't sure why until I saw her moving her hips in that mesmerizing way.

This was the woman from my dream, and it was like I was being pulled to her by a force stronger than myself. Before I even realized it, I was standing behind her, holding her hips tightly.

My eyes scanned the tattoos that covered part of her neck and her whole right arm. She had short, messy hair, and I wanted to grab hold of it. As I held her against me, my heart was in overdrive, and it wouldn't slow down. I needed to see her, to know who she was. As I was about to turn her around?—

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“Blake. Blake. What the fuck is going on? Are you sleeping right now?” Steph was furious and shaking me like a rag doll.

“No! No, I’m not sleeping. I swear. I think I blacked out. Babe, I’m not sure what happened.”

“Blacked out? That’s what you’re going with?”

I was flustered, but I couldn't find the words to describe it. “It’s like I’m not here but in another place. And there’s this person who keeps drawing me in.” Oh shit. That didn't sound good.

Her eyes turned to slits, and I tried to keep her with me.

“Wait. Please.”

But she, not so kindly, slapped my arm away and climbed off. She jumped out of bed and picked up her clothes on her way to the bathroom. She didn’t say one word before slamming the door.

I smothered my face in a pillow and screamed, “Fuck!”

It seemed like hours, but in actuality, only five minutes had passed before Steph emerged from the bathroom, fully dressed and still one hundred percent pissed.

“Steph, let me try to?—”

She cut me off with a see-you-never look, grabbed her pillow, and stormed out of our bedroom, shutting the door with enough force to shake the pictures on the wall.

I wasn't sure where she was going, the spare room or the couch, but I wasn't about to follow her. This was something that would have to wait until morning. I hoped she'd calm down by tomorrow and I could make it up to her, but I wasn't sure if this could be fixed.

Chapter Twelve

Leia - Wednesday

After the lucid dream, Haley and I left the studio and headed our separate ways. We didn't have any early clients, so I told her to take the morning off. Once I arrived home, I slept reasonably peacefully, considering everything that had happened. Even though the sensations in my dream were stronger this time, I wondered if the entire experience was a product of sleep deprivation.

Now that I was fully rested and no longer zombie-like, I decided to focus on something that was within my control—like my proposal to get a queer community of creatives together. Aria popped into my mind as I was trying to think of potential classes to offer and people to reach out to. She said she was an artist, and she had also given me her number. But would that be weird?

It wasn't that we didn't have a good time, but would seeing her again after a sexual encounter make her assume I wanted to have a repeat performance? I didn't make a habit out of turning a one-nighter into something longer. Relationships required me to give parts of myself that I wasn't capable of at the moment. I wanted to focus on my future, and right now, I didn't see another person in it.

I'd revisit the Aria thing later. Since I didn't have a starting point yet, getting her

involved was unnecessary. I first needed clear-cut goals and budget information before I could even begin searching for potential grants.

I checked the time, and I had slept so late that this project would need to take a backseat for now. I had to get ready and head into the studio. Luckily, my just-out-of-bed look was my go-to, so I was fairly low-maintenance. I grabbed a black V-neck and a pair of light-colored skinny jeans. I was out the door after brushing my teeth and running my hand through my hair.

While walking to the studio, I tried not to let my mind wander and see if I could find the green-eyed beauty from my dreams, but it was challenging considering it had been in this vicinity when we first met. But as I got closer, my phone rang, distracting me from my thoughts.

“Hey, what are you doing?” Shanny’s voice rang through the speaker, and it was odd she called in the middle of the day.

“I’m on my way to work. What are you doing? Don’t you have to work today?” Shanny had a stressful job as a public relations executive, so I found it odd she would have time to chitchat.

“I’m on my way to meet a client, but it’s about a thirty-minute drive, and I wanted to check in with my bestie and see how the other night went. I saw you sneak out with some redhead, but when you didn’t fill me in yesterday, I was wondering what happened.”

Of course, that was the question of the hour for her. Shannon and I had similar lives, but we focused on different aspects. I was concerned with my job and doing things that would make an impact on the world, and she loved her job but loved the ladies more—especially the younger ones. But to be fair, they seemed very keen about her, too, so it wasn’t an issue.

“I don’t kiss and tell.” I rolled my eyes as if she could see me.

“You realize you just did, right? But I won’t press. I just wanted to see if you would be up for drinks tonight. I met someone on Flirt Magnet, and wanted to see if you’d come and make sure she doesn’t cut my skin off and wear it as a bodysuit.” She laughed, but she was always a little nervous using dating apps. She was more old school, but the younger women weren’t always cruising bars for hookups, so she had to get with the times.

“I’m certain you’ll be fine, but if it will ease your mind to have a bodyguard, I’ll try to get off at a reasonable time. Can I message you when I’m finished for the day?” As much as I didn’t think my assistance would be needed, I did feel a night out sounded like a good idea to give myself a break from everything.

“Thanks, Lay. I’ll catch you later.”

“Adios.” I ended the call and had a chuckle. “She is something else.” I shook my head as I entered the studio.

“Who is?”

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“Fucking hell!” I clutched my phone to my chest as Haley popped around the corner. “You scared the hell out of me.”

“I scared the hell out of you? You came into the studio, talking to yourself, when you don’t even have an appointment for another,” she glanced down at her watch, “hour. I fail to see how it was me who did the scaring.”

“Right, but I had told you to take the morning off.”

“It’s eleven o’clock, boss. I did take the morning off.” She continued setting up the camera for our shoot later. “But are you okay after your dream? Is it that girl you were talking about?” She seemed much more candid, and I wasn’t sure if it was good or bad.

“No. I don’t even know if that woman is real. I was talking about Shanny.”

“That girl is one hundred percent real. You didn’t make her up in your mind. You had a physical run-in with her. She probably lives in New York. You’re going to find her.” She did live in a dream world.

“Okay. Let’s take this optimism down a notch. I’m not sure if I want to find her. What am I supposed to do if I did? It’s not like I’m in the market for a relationship. Maybe we would have a great night together, but then what? I would keep dreaming about her for the rest of my life? It would be better if I washed my hands of this and moved on.”

“Just remember this: there are no accidents in life. Your canvas is being painted as we

“speak, and you have to trust that a masterpiece is unfolding.”

“I’m going out on a limb here. Did you make up with Adam?” She was far too upbeat about my love life not to have a fairy tale of her own.

“As a matter of fact, we did. And you were right. I might have overreacted. When I asked him about it, he said he was watching for ideas for us. He worried I wasn’t getting as much out of sex as he was, and he wanted to see if different positions might work better. So, it was kinda sweet.”

That sounded like a lie, but I wouldn’t be the one to burst her happiness bubble. “See, I told you. You just needed to talk.”

“I’m not going to go into detail, but let’s say I did much more than talk.” She appeared flush from telling me this secret or remembering the event.

“Yes, definitely keep the specifics to yourself. But I do care about you, Hales. And I want the best for you.” I strolled over, hugged her around the shoulder, and squeezed her tight like I would my kid sister.

“And I care about you. That’s why I’ll pray your dream woman becomes a reality.” Her sincerity was heartwarming, but I didn’t need any manifestation on my part.

I was more than capable of creating my own happy ending. “Do whatever floats your boat. I’m going to grab the lenses I need for the first shoot. Is there anything else you want me to bring up?”

“Nope, I got it under control. I pulled the outfits Mrs. Wilson said she wanted to use for her husband’s calendar.”

I picked up the scantily clad Game-of-Thrones-type costume. “Well, this should be

interesting.”

“I wish I had the confidence to do something like this for Adam. He would love it.”

I stared quizzically at Haley. She was in her early thirties at the latest and drop-dead gorgeous. I couldn’t imagine why she wouldn’t have the confidence.

“Hales, you need to be more self-assured. You could have any man or woman you wanted.” I wasn’t sure why I threw that in there, but she appeared offended.

“First of all, I’m 100% straight. And secondly, the only person I want is Adam.”

“Okay. But no one is 100% anything. Sexuality is fluid. Definitives are lies we tell ourselves.” I tapped my finger to my temple as if I’d dropped a nugget of knowledge.

“So you’d sleep with a man, then?” Damn, she got me there.

“Touche. But you have to admit, women are like works of art.”

“I can admit if a woman is attractive, but that doesn’t mean I’m attracted to her. Therefore, I’m not fluid.” She seemed certain of that, and I dropped it because I could admit when I was uncertain. “Now, why don’t you check your lighting because the client will be here shortly.” She spun on her heel and headed toward the desk.

I engaged my filters and strategically positioned the reflector to create the perfect ambiance for the shoot. By the time I finished, the bells rang out over the door as who I assumed was Mrs. Wilson walked in. She was probably in her midsixties, wearing a trench coat. I smiled to myself because this would be a fun session.

After twelve costume changes, including wigs, we had over a thousand pictures for her to choose from. As one of my more mature subjects, she sure was up for anything

and flexible enough for many different poses. I was excited to go through and edit these pictures and get the perfect calendar put together.

“Mrs. Wilson, I had a great time. I hope you’re as happy with how they turn out as I have been taking them. I’ll get them edited and have a spread for you to choose from in two weeks. Is there anything else I can assist you with today?”

“Honey, after what we’ve been through, Mrs. Wilson is way too formal. Please call me Joan. I’m so excited to see Johnny’s face when he looks at what we did. I hope it doesn’t send him to the hospital.” She cackled as she batted my arm. She was a feisty little thing.

“Well, I hope they’re everything you wanted and more. I can’t wait to start reviewing them. Haley will call when they’re done, and we can schedule a time for you to review them.” I ushered her toward the door because I was running a little late with her session going an hour over schedule, but I couldn’t stop when we were in the groove. Even though this was a job, I was still an artist at heart, and I couldn’t rush that.

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She tied her trench coat tightly and waved on her way out the door, smiling brightly. I was going to remember Mrs. Wilson for a long time coming.

Chapter Thirteen

Blake - Wednesday

Waking up to an empty bed was a reminder of how screwed up last night was and how my explanation may have been less than stellar. Even though I had no control over what happened, I realized Steph would blame it on my subconscious mind and think it meant something it didn't. And how could I explain it to her when I didn't understand it?

After our fight, I hadn't bothered putting on clothes, so I went to my walk-in closet to get dressed. Since I worked late yesterday, I had Ty reschedule my morning meetings for this afternoon, which worked in my favor now because I would attempt to make up with Steph.

I put on Steph's favorite black lace-trimmed Alexander McQueen suit, hoping she would be more receptive to my apology. They always said to dress the part, and I wanted to show her I was the remorseful girlfriend.

I did a curly, messy bun instead of my usual slicked-back version to finish my look. I left a few strands to frame my face, giving me a softer, more approachable appearance. Now, it was time to begin begging for forgiveness.

While exiting the room, I found Steph snuggled on the couch, still sleeping. She

looked so peaceful I didn't want to wake her, so I continued to the kitchen. If I made her breakfast and coffee, that seemed like it would start us off on the right track. Since chocolate chip pancakes were her favorite, I decided to try my hand at those.

I wasn't known for my cooking skills because I was never taught that. When I was younger, we had someone else prepare our meals, so I didn't have a lot of experience. I would have loved to make things from scratch, but I wasn't sure I had the time or talent, so I grabbed a pre-made pancake mix and some chocolate chips to add in. Once I mixed all the ingredients, I poured my first attempt at a heart shape into the warm skillet.

While I waited for that side to brown, I proceeded to the espresso machine and had it make a couple of macchiatos, another of Steph's favorites. Once I got the drinks started, I darted back to the pancake and flipped it. But I was too late. It was slightly burned and looked more like a butt than a heart.

After I made a few more, I at least figured out that when it bubbled on the top, it was ready to flip. Even though they still didn't resemble the shape I wanted, I hoped it was the thought that counted. I grabbed a tray with a couple of plates, put the pancakes on them with some warm syrup, and placed the coffees next to it. The couch was empty when I headed into the living room to present my peace offering.

I walked toward the bedroom, and I could hear the shower running. I knocked lightly before opening the bathroom door while keeping the food steady. It being unlocked seemed like a good sign, so I entered, placing the tray on the countertop.

"Steph, I made breakfast—the works. Heart-shaped chocolate chip pancakes with a macchiato. Are you interested?" The water continued to run, but there was no other response, so I continued. "I hope you realize how sorry I am. I would love to sit down and talk about it."

The shower shut off, and I saw her hand snake out and grab a towel—still no words. I waited, hoping my silence would coax her into speaking.

Finally, “You want to talk? Okay, why don’t you tell me how you wound up comatose while I was on top of you about to blow your fucking mind? How not into it do you have to be for that to happen? And who was this other person? Is she who you want to be with?”

“Whoa, Steph. Please listen to me. This other person probably doesn’t exist. Besides, you’re the only one I want to be with. I’m trying to show you that. I would’ve been present the entire time if I had control over the matter. I was the one who wanted to take your mind off things, remember? And instead, I made you feel... unwanted?” I questioned.

“No! I felt stupid. What sober person blackouts in the middle of sex? That could be the most embarrassing thing that ever happened to me.”

“Babe,” I said, grabbing her shoulders to turn her to face me. “If anyone should be embarrassed, it’s me. I feel like a monkey’s ass. I wish I could’ve stopped it, but that wasn’t even the first time it happened. I had a similar episode when I was getting lunch with Ty yesterday. It’s as if I’m being pulled into another dimension. I understand how suspect that sounds, but that’s the only way I can describe it.”

“So now you’re like a time traveler or something? What the actual fuck, Blake? I’m not an idiot?”

“I know that. But I swear to you, it’s true. Will you come with me while I finish up something at work? Then we’ll spend the rest of the day doing whatever you want.” I pulled her towel-clad body closer to me, and she came reluctantly. I rested my hands on her hips and stared into her eyes, hoping my sincerity would win her over.

She licked her lips while glancing at my mouth. “I guess I can come with you, but if you stay longer than an hour, I’m taking an Uber somewhere else.” Then she leaned in, pressing her breasts against mine, and whispered into my ear, “You can go, but leave the food.”

“Okay. I’ll wait out here for you. Tell me if I can help with anything.” I wasn’t sure what I could do for her, but I thought I should offer.

When I entered the bedroom, I realized I had left my food with her but wouldn’t knock and ask for it back. I’d go hungry before I risked annoying her. I was happy she agreed to give me a chance.

Forty-five minutes later, we were at the office. It had only taken Steph five minutes to get ready, but she seemed to want to punish me by making me wait for her to eat all the pancakes, including mine. It amazed me how she could do whatever she wanted and still look like she was ready for a photoshoot. She had one of those faces the camera loved. Who was I kidding? The camera wasn’t the only one who loved her. She turned heads everywhere she went.

Right then, a thought came into my head about a potential present for her birthday next month. I wondered if I should get us one of those sexy couple photoshoots. That could be fun and romantic. I was pretty sure she would enjoy it. I needed to see if Ty could help me get that set up.

We walked inside the office silently, and Ty was the first person we saw.

“Hey, Ty. Thanks for clearing my calendar yet again. I’ll email the clients to inform them that I’ll work late to fit them in. But right now, I’m here for the sit-down with Greg to review last night’s client forms. Then Steph and I are taking off for the day.”

“Ooh, whatcha doing? Something fun?” He was so nosy.

“We are having some quality time.” I didn’t want to go into details about anything that had happened yet.

“Sorry, I asked.” He looked nauseous, and I realized he thought that was code for sex. “You can head into your office. Greg said he’d meet you there, you lucky duck.” He laughed while doing some weird form of finger guns. Then he turned to Steph, “Hey, girl. You’re looking fresh.”

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“Thanks. And that’s after a night on the couch?” She would probably tell Ty everything while I was gone, but it was likely better that way than me being around.

Maybe he could explain things to her so she could understand this wasn’t my fault.

I reached my office and sat at my desk as I heard, “Yoo-hoo. Can I come in?” Greg stuck his head through the door, but his body stayed hidden behind the frame, and I couldn’t help but picture him in a guillotine. That escalated quickly in my mind, and I needed to change my mood. So I smiled and waved him in.

He strolled to the empty seat and tried to recline back, only to be met with unforgiving stiffness. Even the chair didn’t want him to stay.

“I have an important client this afternoon. So, I’m going to jump right in. The Thompsons’ trust was basic. I got their paperwork filled out, and you will find all my notes on the shared drive. Is there anything specific you need from me?” I was trying to be professional but succinct.

“Honestly, I haven’t checked the drive, but I will. I just wanted to make sure everything was handled.” He smiled smugly, and I fought the urge to send daggers his way.

“I think you’ll find I did everything by the book.”

“I’ll let you know if you didn’t.” He stood up, and I was glad he initiated the ending of the meeting. “And do I need to join you and this client later?” He stared at me expectantly.

“I appreciate the offer, but I think I’ve got it handled. It’s an off-site meeting, and I’m confident in my ability to seal the deal.” I got up from my desk and moved toward the door, hoping he would follow. “You can schedule another appointment with Ty if you need anything else.”

He gave me a tight smile as he walked out. I thought I was home free, but he stopped and turned back toward me. “I’m watching you, Blake. You better dot all your I’s and cross all your T’s.” Then, after his threat, he marched away on his high horse without giving me a chance to respond—not that I had something to say out loud.

He had it out for me, but I couldn’t figure out why. I watched him get on the elevator before leaving my office to check on Steph and Ty. When I arrived at Ty’s desk, I saw Steph sitting on the edge, staring over his shoulder at the computer. His fingers flew across the keyboard, and they seemed up to something.

“Hey, what do you two have cooking over here?” I questioned nonchalantly, but they both appeared startled.

“Just trying to help,” he responded without taking his eyes off his screen.

“I’m still not convinced there’s an actual problem.” Steph’s tone sounded annoyed, and I wasn’t sure what I had walked into.

“Help with what?” I asked, confused.

“I’m researching your ‘episodes.’ Steph told me it happened again last night.”

“Oh yeah? In your expert opinion, what did you find?”

“Well, there are various theories, and some of them seem plausible.” At least Ty didn’t think I was faking it.

Steph sighed heavily, but I chose not to respond because it was obvious she didn't believe me.

"Like what?" I asked Ty as my mind went to the worst-case scenario. "Is it a disease?"

"No. It's possible, but there are other things that it could be, too. Maybe it's brain trauma or an emotional disorder," he spouted indifferently.

"I'm sorry. How are those better?" I questioned.

"Isn't any reason better than not knowing?" He shrugged, but I wasn't convinced.

Steph reached for my hand, and her comfort was shocking. She had been so mad before. It was odd to see this softer side. "Do you think it's serious? Should she get checked out?"

Her concern warmed my heart, but I couldn't let myself go down that path.

"Maybe it's stress-related? Work has been difficult lately, and with the promotion, it's like I'm under a microscope." Especially now that I was in Greg's cross-hairs for some reason.

"It didn't say anything about stress, but I'll keep looking. There has to be some logical reason." I appreciated Ty's positive outlook, but I suspected he wouldn't find an answer.

Whatever was happening to me wasn't normal.

"Thanks, buddy. But don't spend too much time on it. I'm sure these were isolated events and will pass soon." I hoped he couldn't hear the shakiness in my voice. The

last thing I wanted was for him to worry about me because that would only make me more nervous.

“Whatever. I’m on a mission. Especially since you called off work. What else will I do while I wait here and answer phones?” he joked.

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“Okay.” I shook my head at him, then turned to Steph. “Hey, would you go to the car for a second? I need to talk to Ty about some upcoming appointments, but you can search for a place to eat while I finish up.”

“Sure thing. Don’t be long, though, or I might not be waiting.” She chuckled, but it seemed humorless. “Later, Ty. I’ll see you at the party on Saturday.”

Ty offered a finger wave. “Yep, sister from another mister, I’ll be there.”

Well, at least she still planned on coming with me. So that seemed promising.

As she trotted off to the car, Ty turned to me with laser eyes. “What’s going on? You were transported during... in the middle of...” He started gagging, and I thought he would make himself puke. “Sex,” he finally whispered, and I rolled my eyes.

“Unfortunately, yes, but I have no clue how it happened. What did Steph say? Was she super pissed?” I figured she was, but I’d like to hear his perspective.

“Let’s say she was... skeptical. But I tried to fill her in about the time I saw it happen, and I told her there was no way you were faking it. I’m not sure why she thought you would be anyway.” He seemed as confused as me.

“Exactly. What would I gain from that? Especially when it happened. I mean, if we were in the middle of a fight, that would be a better time to dissociate. Not during?—”

“Don’t finish that. I’m still trying to scrub that image from my brain.”

“Calm down. But did she seem to trust you?”

He shrugged. “Not sure. It almost seems like she hopes it’s something medical, but I didn’t get into the pseudoscience because there was no way she’d believe that.”

I had no idea what those theories were, and I wasn’t sure I was ready to hear them, either.

“The answers don’t matter right now. The good thing is Steph still wants to go to the party with me. So that’s what I’m going to focus on.”

“There is that, I guess. But I need to know if this dream was like the one from lunch or like the first time it happened or something different.” He crossed his legs like a beauty queen and waited for my response.

“I can’t take too long, but it was like the first dream on the dance floor, but this time I did see some things. She had a sleeve of tattoos, but I don’t remember any specifics. I was still drawn to her, and I touched her.” I shivered as the memory swept through me. “Ty, it was so real and... electric. I don’t understand what is happening, but I have to make it stop. There is no way Steph would forgive me again if this woman keeps dragging me away.”

“Is she aware it’s a woman, and does she know this connection you seem to have?”

“No, she doesn’t know it was another woman. I said it was a person who was calling to me. But that still set her off. And, honestly, none of that means anything because it’s probably not real. But I need to nip these dreams in the bud so they don’t become another cliterference in the future. Steph isn’t going to let me forget it anytime soon, and we were finally getting things on the right track. I don’t want to derail our progress.”

“Maybe I need to dig somewhere deeper than Google? I’ll hit the library after work. There has to be a reason this started happening, and if we can find that, I’m sure we can stop it.”

“Thanks, Ty. Even though I give you a lot of shit, I appreciate you. Oh, one more thing. I want to get Steph and me one of those sexy photoshoot sessions for her birthday next month. Could you look something up and get it scheduled? I’d owe you big time!” I wrapped my arm around his shoulder and gave him a side hug.

“All right, all right. Enough lovey-dovey stuff. I don’t like sentimental and appreciative Blake. It makes me think you’re dying. I’ll take care of the pictures for you. Is there anything else you need from me today? I might knock off early to get a jumpstart on the search.”

“Nope. You’re good. Take off whenever you want. You can have the calls transferred to your cell in case something comes up. Love ya,” I professed as I headed toward the exit.

“Right back at ya.”

I smiled as I walked out the door and said a silent prayer that all this nonsense would end soon and Steph and I could forge a path forward.

Chapter Fourteen

Leia - Wednesday

We ended the day with a thuple acting-out elaborate S&M role play. The pictures were so sexy I almost needed to take five during the shoot to cool off. When I finished putting away the whips and chains from the last session, I found Haley taking down the backdrops.

“Hales, you can head out and continue to make nice with Adam.” It wasn’t that I didn’t want her to stay, but my brain was too cloudy, and I had promised Shanny I would try to meet her tonight.

“Oh, I’m going to more than make nice. I have a different kind of surprise for him. But I’ll finish my job first.” She winked, and I wasn’t sure when she crossed to this level of sauciness. Maybe the last shoot did something to her, too.

“On that note, let’s wrap this up quickly.” I wanted her to leave here while she was rearing and ready.

It only took thirty minutes to have the studio presentable, and that was fine with me. Tomorrow was an editing day, and I didn’t have clients scheduled. So, hopefully, I could enjoy tonight and clear my head.

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“All right. What do you say we get out of here?” I wasn’t really asking as I was already setting the alarm to leave.

“Okay. I can finish all this in the morning.” Haley wasn’t happy with the lackluster clean-up, but she didn’t argue.

After we left the studio, we went in opposite directions. As I walked to Double Shift, I texted Shanny.

Me: On my way!

Shannon: Sounds good, but change of plans.

Me: Still meeting at the bar?

Shannon: Yep. I’m already here! She gave me a winky face emoji.

As I walked into Double Shift, I saw Shannon alone at the bar. I grabbed the seat next to her and sat down.

“Hey, what’s the change of plans?” I waved to the bartender to get a drink.

“The girl I was supposed to meet canceled. So, I guess I’ll look around here.” She shrugged as she took a drink from her straw until she slurped the bottom of the glass.

“Are you okay?” Something seemed off.

“Do you ever wonder if there’s something more to life?” She was getting existential. It might have been the alcohol talking, but I understood the sentiment.

“Like more than hooking up?” The bartender brought me a drink, and I took a sip.

“Yeah. What are we doing? It’s like I’m going through the motions, but I’m not living.”

“All right, we need to get out of our heads and do something exciting?”

“That sounds good to me. What did you have in mind?” She perked up, and I loved seeing her smile.

“What if we get tattoos? You always wanted one. So...”

“Umm... that seems like something Young Shannon would’ve done. Adult Shannon thinks that might hurt, and it’s permanent.”

I gave her a playful nudge to the ribs. “Adult Shannon, huh? Is that the same Shannon who, two weeks ago, almost burned her eyebrows off by trying to take a flaming shot?”

“To be fair, that wasn’t my fault. I didn’t know you were supposed to blow it out first. Not to mention, I was super drunk at the time.” We both laughed at her antics.

“Right. But I have to say, drinking fire seems like it would hurt way more than a little needle. Come on. Even if you don’t get one, at least come with me?”

“All right, all right. I’m saying no to the tattoo but yes to the going with you part. What’s got you so excited about this right now, anyway?”

I shrugged, not really wanting to get into the reason. “This idea popped into my head today, and it’s begging to get out. I can be like a dog with a bone sometimes.”

“I hate to tell you this, but you’re like that all the time. Let me settle up my tab, and we can walk over. Do you have to have an appointment?”

“Usually I do, but I figured I’d see if Toni had any openings, and if she did, I’d take it as a sign that it was meant to be. If not, sleep on it.”

“You and your signs. If I didn’t love you so much, I’d probably say you’re nuttier than a fruitcake. Well... I do say that, but I still love you.” She laughed and blew me a kiss as we each paid the bartender so we could leave.

The tattoo shop was only a few blocks away from the bar. We opened the door to Altered Skin, and I spotted Toni right off. Her half-shaved head and purple hair were conspicuous, but she pulled it off. It complemented her eyebrow, nose, and lip rings. She was badass and also the best tattooist around. When she looked up, I waved, and she motioned me to her station.

“Girl, what brings you in tonight? And who’s this fresh meat?” She gave Shannon an appraising look, and I’d say Shanny was digging it. My eyes darted back and forth between the two of them, and they didn’t even seem to notice I was still there.

I cleared my throat, and Shannon was blushing as she turned her head toward me. I gave her a shit-eating grin as I went to answer Toni’s question. It was unusual to see Shanny flustered, especially around someone more age-appropriate.

“I was going to see if you had any openings tonight. I realize it’s last minute, and I can make an appointment for another time if you’re booked. But I had this idea floating around, and I want to bring it into existence.”

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“I had a cancelation, so it’s perfect timing. What did you want to get? Do you have a picture or something?”

“No, I don’t have a picture. But could you draw it if I describe it to you?”

“Is that a real question? Not to sound cocky or anything, but these make magic happen.” She wiggled her fingers, staring directly into Shannon’s eyes with a presumptuous smile.

Shanny appeared hot and bothered by Toni's attention, and it was nice to see her in better spirits from earlier. Even if she wasn’t getting a tattoo, it seemed like she was getting something from this visit.

“Well, why don’t you start talking? I’ll sketch, and then you can review it, and we can make changes as we go?” Toni said, finally focusing on me.

“So, can you draw anything?” Shannon asked as she batted her eyelashes in Toni’s direction like a smitten kitten.

Now, I had to hold back my shock. I’d never seen her this way before, but it seemed to be exactly what she needed.

Toni took a step closer and placed her hand on the small of Shannon’s back before she said in a low voice, “I like to think I can do everything. Stick around afterward, and I’d happily show you some of my best work.”

I was pretty sure I saw Shannon’s knees buckle. Apparently, I was a good

wingwoman without even trying. But it was time to get down to business, and they could continue ogling each other later.

“Well... do you want me to start now?” I urged their flirt session along.

“You got it.” Toni winked. “Do you mind waiting in the lobby?” She nodded to Shannon.

“Oh, sure.” Shannon appeared hurt.

“I’m sorry, babe. But there is no way I can get work done with you around.” Toni’s compliment put the blush right back on Shannon’s cheeks.

“You’re a sweet talker.” Shanny fluttered, then gave me a quick hug and a longing glance at Toni before heading to the couch.

While Shannon was out of earshot, Toni leaned in. “What’s her story?”

“You’d be stupid not to get to know her.” I wasn’t super close with Toni, but she seemed like a good person, and if she could make Shanny love-struck, I wanted them to have a chance.

“There’s something different about her. She gives me goosies.”

I laughed because they both had it bad. Toni didn’t look like the type to say “goosies.” But sometimes people bring out different sides of us.

“But let’s get down to business, yeah?” Toni shook her arms out and grabbed her sketchpad.

I did my best to describe my vision and hoped to make it a reality. Toni took in

everything I said, and she also had some cool ideas to add. Once she sketched it out, I couldn't take my eyes off it.

This image was calling out to me for some reason, and I was ready to memorialize it on my body forever.

Chapter Fifteen

Blake - Wednesday

Upon reaching the car, Steph had a smile on her face, which made me optimistic that she was in a forgiving mood.

"Hey, babe. You look happy." I squeezed her hand as I sat in the driver's seat.

Steph shrugged but just stared at her phone.

"Have you picked a place to eat?"

"I'm in the mood for sushi." She didn't look at me as she responded. Sushi was one of my least favorite foods, so it seemed deliberate.

I had hoped her prior concern might have lessened her anger, but I was wrong. I didn't want to make any waves, so I agreed.

"Sushi is good with me. Have you decided what you want to do afterward? I'll take you anywhere."

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But she tapped away on her phone as if she were writing a novel. Eventually, she turned to face me. “I don’t think I’m up for much.” She sighed.

I was getting frustrated because I honestly wasn’t sure how to make things better. Relationships took work, but she seemed to be thwarting my efforts, and I was helpless. The only thing I could do was allow her to make the choices and see where it went.

“If you don’t want to do anything, we don’t have to. I’ll let you decide. I want you to be happy, babe.”

Her eyes softened, and she set her phone on her lap. “Thank you, but I’m not very good company right now. I have a lot on my mind.”

“That’s okay. Why don’t we talk about it? We could always grab the food and return to the house where there won’t be any distractions.”

She smiled, but it didn’t seem to reach her eyes. “That sounds good. Why don’t we grab some Italian and go home?”

Now, she was choosing my favorite food? Maybe she realized my genuineness, and she was ready to make nice. But I wasn’t going to be selfish. I had a lot to make up for. Not just the incident, but I realized I hadn’t put in enough effort before. I’d never had to think outside of myself, so this didn’t come naturally to me, but after our lunch date, I had to make a change, or I would end up like my parents—in a relationship of convenience.

“We aren’t getting Italian. You want sushi, and I want you to have it. We can eat while curled on the couch, talk, watch TV, or whatever. I want to spend time with you, and I don’t care what we do as long as we’re together.”

Her only response was to pick up her phone and talk to someone else. I glanced at her, and she didn’t take her eyes off what she was doing. She giggled, and annoyance bubbled at the surface because she wasn’t involved in our conversation at all.

“Do you want to share what’s so funny?”

She cleared her throat. “Nothing. Sushi is fine. And hanging out at home works with my schedule.”

Her schedule? Was she making other plans? Did she have some other place she wanted to be?

I had to shake off my negative feelings, or I was bound to start an entirely different fight. “All right. Food, then home it is.”

We grabbed a few California rolls, some shrimp tempura rolls, and sashimi before going back to our place. I was trying to give her what she wanted, and hoped she would put an end to this hot-and-cold game she seemed to be playing.

After placing the food on the coffee table, I snuggled onto the couch. Steph eventually joined me, carrying the bottle of wine from last night. She poured each of us a glass, then set them next to our plates. She finally sat down on the far end of the couch and immediately grabbed her phone, letting her fingers dance across the screen.

Everything about this day was off, and it seemed like a lost cause. I wasn’t the type to give up on things, but it also shouldn’t be this hard to apologize to someone you

loved and who supposedly loved you.

“Babe, if you have someone else you’d rather talk to, please don’t let me keep you.” I was afraid that I came off passive-aggressive, but I didn’t want to be with someone who didn’t want to be with me.

She set her phone face down on the table and glanced in my direction. She cocked her head to the side like a questioning pit bull. “Does it bother you that I’m talking to someone else?” Her tone was sharp, and it felt like she wanted a reaction from me.

“No. I’m not bothered by it. But we don’t have to do this right now if you’re busy. I’ve been trying to make up with you, but it feels like you’re not open to that. I understand if you need time to cool off or be alone. I don’t want to push you, but I hope you realize I’m truly sorry.”

“Look, I said I wasn’t mad before, but I was wrong. The more I think about it, the more upset I am. You saying you were drawn to this other person made me believe you weren’t attracted to me anymore.”

That wasn’t true at all. I thought she was as beautiful as the day I’d met her. But I didn’t want to cut her off.

“Not to mention how complacent you are in this relationship. Before a couple of nights ago, were you even aware of how long it had been since we had sex? It was three weeks, Blake. Three weeks, you didn’t even touch me, except to sometimes give me a kiss goodnight.” She exhaled deeply, but I was pretty sure she wasn’t finished and instead was picking up steam.

“Yeah, you’re making an effort now, but how long will that last? I need attention and to be desired, but I’m not sure you can give me those things. Our situation is difficult right now because I’m between jobs, and you’re working so much, but things have to

change, or I'll find someone else to give me what I want. We've been together for a while now, but I think it's time to discuss where we see this going." She concluded her discourse, and I realized the hurt was deep.

"Babe." I reached for her hand, but she shook me off. "I'm so sorry I've made mistakes. I never meant I was 'drawn' to someone else. It was like I was being pulled by something." That wasn't entirely true, but maybe I could trick my brain into believing it.

"You're gorgeous, and I'm not sure where this doubt comes from, but I want to make things right. I've been absent recently because I had to be. Not because I wanted to be. And I know you're also struggling because you lost your dream job. But we don't need to start throwing out ultimatums, or whatever it is you're insinuating." The last thing I wanted was to be a pawn in a game.

"I'll be here for you—always. And I want to know if I'm not giving you what you need. But if you can't talk to me and instead want to make me jealous, that's not okay with me. Besides, I don't get jealous."

Her eyes turned to slits, at my last sentence, but it was the truth. I had to fight my entire life not to be like my parents, and that included how I handled my issues head-on instead of making it a battle over power.

"Blake, do you even love me? Do you see us being together for the long haul? Or did you ask me to move in with you because my lease was up?"

It was true. We turned into something serious by accident, but I would do anything to make it work once I was in it. However, since this was my first time in a committed relationship, I wasn't doing the best job, but that didn't mean I didn't love her.

"If you have to ask if I love you, then I must not be doing something right." I hung

my head because I never wanted her to question my intentions.

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“You haven’t done anything special for me in a long time. And you might not realize this, but I have options. Other people hit on me all the time.”

I was certain that was true, but she said it like a threat, which only added fuel to my fire.

“Like right before we left your office, that guy Greg came out and was chatting me up.” Her words were like a slap to the face, and I wasn’t sure which was worse, how I made her feel, or that she believed Greg would treat her better.

“Are you interested in him?” If that was the case, there was nothing I could do. I wouldn’t go to war for someone’s attention. That wasn’t who I was, and I already began pulling away from her.

“No, Blake. I’m not interested in him. I’m just saying I have other choices, and he seems very willing to shower me with attention. He’s been texting me all afternoon, which is more than you’d even think of doing during the day. I don’t want to be your fallback. I want to be your number one.”

The words were out of my mouth before I fully processed them. “Steph, we need some time apart.” My head wasn’t in a good place, but seeing Steph right now made me physically ill.

“Wait, Blake.” She held my arm to keep me from getting up. “I don’t want you to leave, but I’m tired of feeling like you’re with me out of comfort instead of desire. I wanted you to see I was worth fighting for.”

“Steph, I don’t do games. I want open and honest communication. And I’m truly sorry if being comfortable and happy with you were bad things. When we talked at the café on Monday, I thought we’d gotten back on the same page, but it appears we both need to figure some stuff out before we have this conversation.” I stood up, and this time she let me.

“I need some fresh air. We can discuss things later.” I grabbed my shoes and started toward the door. I wasn’t sure where I was going, but I wouldn’t stay here with her any longer.

Me: Ty, I need you. Can you meet me at The Wine Bar?

Ty: Sure. When?

Me: NOW! I typed in all caps so he would understand the severity.

Ty: OMW

I was already sitting at the bar when Ty grabbed the stool beside me.

“Babe. What’s going on? Shouldn’t you be with Steph?”

I shook my head as I waved the bartender over and asked for a Corona Fog. It was a beer and tequila kind of night.

He sighed, pushing the drink away. “I haven’t seen you like this before. Tell me what happened in the two hours since you left?”

I reached for the drink, but he slapped my hand away. “Your tastebuds will thank me later. Now spill it.”

I wanted to be mad at him for telling me what to do, but he was right. That drink was nasty, but I was in a self-loathing place right now.

“She wants to fuck Greg.”

Ty began coughing incessantly. I hoped he wasn't choking because I wasn't in a place to give him the Heimlich. Eventually, he composed himself and cleared his throat.

“I'm sorry, what? Greg who? Your nemesis?”

“The one and only.”

“Has she seen him? Talked to him? How? Why?” He gagged, and those were my sentiments, too.

“They met outside while you and I were talking about my episode. And according to her, I wasn't showing her I cared enough. They exchanged numbers, and in a few hours, he gave her something she needed—attention. They've been texting continuously since I left work.”

“That's bullshit! She can't seriously believe that. She was probably trying to get under your skin.”

“It doesn't matter because I'm done. I can't be with someone who plays these games with me. Especially after all this time together.”

“Girl, it's obvious you're upset. But you should cool off before making any decisions. I'm not saying what she did was right, but you said it yourself. You've been with her a long time. Maybe let's take this afternoon to drink some good stuff and not this horse piss.” He waved toward the undrunk Corona Fog before ordering two glasses of

Chartogne.

At thirty dollars a glass, I'd be picking up the tab tonight. Oh well. I needed alcohol therapy. When we got our fancy champagne glasses, we cheersed.

“Thanks for coming, Ty. I do need to take a breather before saying something I don't mean. I honestly want to hang out with you and forget about this drama.”

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“Good! Because guess what? I looked in the library right after you left, and I have the perfect idea of how you can figure out who your mystery dream girl is.”

I took a sip of my drink but stared at him expectantly.

“Hypnosis.” He leaned back in his stool and waved his hand in a there-you-have-it way like he’d solved all the world’s problems.

I repeatedly blinked, waiting for his actual response, but when he didn’t continue, I said, “Have you lost your ever-loving mind? I’m not getting hypnotized. What would I even ask them to do? Can you help me find this stranger in my dream? I don’t know anything about her except she has tattoos, which don’t ask me what they are because I haven’t seen them in detail, and she has short, messy brown hair. In fact, I’m not even sure she’s a real person, but if you could conjure her up in my mind, that’d be tits and gravy, thanks!”

“Okay, snarky ass. I thought the hypnotist might help open your mind so you could explore the hidden parts. You might have met this person, but your subconscious has blocked it. Under hypnosis, you’re more susceptible to let your inner wall down and discover what is hiding.” He sounded confident about his idea, but I wasn’t buying what he was selling.

“Yeah, that sounds absurd. I’m rational so there has to be a reasonable explanation for what’s happening. I want to figure it out, but I don’t need someone controlling my thoughts and actions to do it.”

“Blake, don’t be so stubborn. How about this? You let me take you to a reputable

hypnotherapist and see what happens. If it doesn't work, you're only out an hour of your time and probably a couple hundred bucks—not the end of the world. But if it does work, you might find this time-sucking mistress.” He drank the rest of his champagne and pushed his glass away as if signifying that was his finale.

I gulped down my drink and ordered another round. If I was going to agree to this sham, I needed to be plied with lots and lots of booze.

Chapter Sixteen

Leia - Thursday

I woke up wondering if I would regret doing something so hasty last night. But as I stared at my fresh tattoo through the Saran Wrap, I was at ease.

I always enjoyed being spontaneous, but I'd never gotten permanent ink on a whim. Every tattoo I'd ever gotten had meant something to me, and when this one popped into my mind, I had to look up the definition because it wasn't even English. But I had a Field of Dreams moment that if I got this, she would come to me.

The foolishness of that idea wasn't lost on me, but there were so many unexplainable things happening, so I decided not to question it. Regardless of whether the tattoo would be a beacon for my green-eyed dream queen to find me, I still loved it, and I was glad I did it.

Technically, I didn't have to go to work today, and I told Haley to take the afternoon off. But sometimes editing was easier on my big-screen monitor than on my laptop. And since the place should be quiet, I might get more work done.

After putting on presentable clothing, I walked to the studio. It was another sunny day, which always gave me an extra serotonin boost. The food trucks were cooking

up a cacophony of flavors, but somehow they were appetizing. Maybe it was because I hadn't eaten yet, and my stomach was tricking my nose. Regardless, after passing several places, I decided to feed the beast that was grumbling so loudly I would have been embarrassed had I not been on a crowded sidewalk in New York.

I wasn't sure what to get, but something caught my attention, and I had to check it out. A little truck I had never seen before was off to the side. It was painted green, white, and red and called "Into Italy." As I got closer, the fragrant notes of garlic and fresh bread had my mouth watering.

After perusing the menu, I settled on a Pizza Napoletana because I thought it would hit both savoriness cravings and a baked doughy treat. Now, I wouldn't have any interruptions when I began my editing. I made my way to Full Exposure, ready to start my day.

When I unlocked the door, I noticed the alarm was disabled, and the place was still a mess. I wasn't upset that Haley hadn't come in, but I was almost certain I had set the alarm last night. With everything that had been happening, I might have misremembered.

I flipped on the lights and tossed my pizza toward them before I realized who was coming at me.

"Oh, my god. Leia, what are you doing?" Haley swatted away the box, and my food fell to the floor. The gooey cheese dripped on the tile, and my stomach protested as the smell of basil permeated the air.

"Me? This is the second time you've scared the shit out of me when I didn't expect you to be here. What are you, a ninja?"

She laughed, but it sounded more nervous than humorous.

“By the way. What are you doing here? Obviously, not work.” I cocked a brow as I scanned the place, trying to figure out what she was up to.

“I was about to start working, but I arrived right before you. Then you came in, startling me. Why don’t you get set up in your office, and I’ll bring you a cup of tea before I clean up?” She was more fidgety than a squirrel on a caffeine high.

I walked toward her and looked over her shoulder as she grabbed me by the elbow, presumably steering me away from something she didn’t want me to see.

“Whatcha hiding?”

“What do you mean?”

I gave her a look, and she crumbled.

“I’m sorry.” She broke down, but I was confused.

“Sorry?” Finally, I sidestepped her and saw props on a messy bed.

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“We don’t even have any clients today, and we didn’t use this stuff last night. Is there another reason—” I stopped myself when I saw the blush creep up her neck to her cheeks.

“I’m going to work in the back. If you could clean this mess up when you get a chance, that would be great.” I wasn’t sure what she was up to until I skated past her and saw a foot sticking out from under one of the backdrops.

I didn’t want to embarrass her any more than she already appeared to be, so I ignored the manly toes aimed pointedly in my direction and kept walking.

A few minutes after firing up my computer, I heard the bells from the front door ring, and then Haley appeared in my doorway with a sheepish expression.

“Yes?” I questioned, but I picked up on her uneasiness right off.

“Boss, I’m so sorry. That was completely unprofessional of me, and I promise nothing like that has ever happened before, nor will it ever happen again,” she told on herself, but I wasn’t surprised.

“Haley, I’m not mad. I don’t care if you act out some fantasies here when we don’t have clients. You’re an adult. Do what you want. I’m sorry I ruined your fun. I wasn’t aware you had this in you.” I smiled, but she still appeared anxious.

“Honestly, I’m tired of being so inhibited. Adam suggested I take the lead, and the only thing I could think of was how Joan, a woman in her sixties, was so carefree with her body, and I wanted that to be me.”

“Haley, sometimes we can get into our own heads. People judge each other all the time, and that judgment can suppress us. Cause us to live more sheltered lives. But the thing is, when we start living for ourselves and not out of fear of what others might say, that’s when we’re liberated. You don’t ever have to worry about me criticizing your life because I care about you, and as long as you’re happy, that’s all that matters to me.” I wasn’t sure what kind of upbringing she had, but by the way she always worried, it made me wonder if she wasn’t ever allowed to express herself freely.

“I appreciate you being so understanding, and our talk about the porn thing helped me dig deep inside and figure out what was bothering me. I had to ask myself what was going on. And I was jealous. Not that I thought Adam wanted me to be more like those girls. But that I wanted to be more like them.” She looked down at the ground, and I hated how self-conscious she was.

“You shouldn’t let other people’s opinions affect your happiness. You can do whatever floats your boat as long as you aren’t hurting yourself or anyone else. I’m on your side and support you always, even if you want to top your boyfriend in the studio when no one is here.” I chuckled as I gazed at her, hoping she realized my sentiment was sincere. “I’m going to get back to work, but please take the rest of the day off. If I need anything, I can manage it myself.”

She finally made direct eye contact with me. “Leia, even though you’re my boss, you truly are a wonderful friend, and I appreciate everything you do for me.”

“I’ll always be here for you. Now, seriously, go enjoy your sexual freedom.” I tried to shoo her away, but she stopped and stared at my arm.

“Holy shit. Did you get a new tattoo?” Her eyes were laser-focused on the Saran Wrap.

As proud of it as I was, I wasn't ready to share it with anyone else yet. A part of me wanted to keep it a secret between me and the girl from my dreams. I wanted her to see it first. That was a foolish idea, but I couldn't stop thinking about it.

"Yes, I got some new ink last night."

"I can't see it because it's wrapped, but what is it? How long have you been planning this? I don't ever remember seeing that on your schedule." Her words came out rapidly, and there would be no dodging this.

"No, this was a spur-of-the-moment decision. It's a puzzle piece with a saying in it. I felt like doing something different. It's not a big deal, though."

"You never get a tattoo without putting an extreme amount of thought into it. I find it hard to believe it isn't a big deal. It's a permanent fixture on your body. It has to mean something to you, but I won't push the issue if you don't want to tell me. Although I'm here if there's anything you ever want to talk about."

"I appreciate that. But I promise you, this was a whim—nothing special. Okay?"

"Yeah, okay. Well, I can't wait to see it tomorrow. You'll show me then, right?"

"Sure. Now, for the last time, get out of here. I have stuff to do, and you have some fantasies to act out." I said, waggling my eyebrows because it would make her blush.

Her face was red as cherries, and she said, "All right. I'll leave you to it and see you tomorrow. We should have another calm day, too. You only have one shoot at 9:00, and then the couple from last week is ready to review their shots. That isn't until 3:00, so you'll have the afternoon to do more editing if you need to."

"Sounds good. Thank you." I waved her on, and she smiled as she left the room.

I pulled up the first session I was going to review. Haley talking about Joan made me want to start with her. She was so much fun to work with, and her personality would come through in the pictures. There were bound to be some gorgeous shots.

I examined the first picture of her in a dark-haired wig and warrior-type outfit. For sixty-ish, she looked damn good. There wasn't much touching up that needed to be done besides the basic brightness and contrast to ensure the right colors popped. But something changed as I was ready to scroll to the next pic. The computer flashed, and I was no longer looking at Joan's pale-blue eyes; instead, piercing green eyes were staring at me.

I heard music playing, as hands clutched my hips. It only took me a second to realize it was her. She spun me around, and I saw her whole face: dark curly hair, flawless bronze skin, succulent lips, and, of course, the most tantalizing eyes I'd ever seen. She touched my tattoo and smiled. It was electric.

She was calling me, begging me to find her. I wanted to etch this vision into my brain, but it vanished before I could.

I rubbed my temples, trying to get her back. I closed my eyes, hoping to trigger the flash again. But when I opened them, all I saw was Joan gazing back at me in her various Game of Thrones costumes. How was this happening?

I brought up a different session, hoping it would give me another glimpse of her. It was a couple from a few days ago. They were lying in bed, and she had her head on his chest, gazing into his eyes. It was such a sweet picture, and warmth flooded my body, remembering how much they loved each other. But I couldn't focus because I only wanted to see her again. I needed to study her—more than a passing glance.

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Should I try to lucid dream now? It wasn't smart to try something I wasn't very familiar with, especially without someone else around. But I was grasping at straws and desperate to get back to her.

Then, in an instant, there was a person in an Amish-style hat before me. We were on a farm. The noise of animals floated through the air from the distance. I didn't recognize the woman at first, but when we locked gazes, it was her.

What was going on? The only thing that was the same were her eyes. Was this what she really looked like? Before I could wrap my head around anything, she disappeared again.

"Am I having a stroke?" I said out loud to make sure I could still talk. I took several deep breaths to clear my mind. Was this a hallucination or something? But these images appeared to be real—like I was looking at a person, not just a vision of her.

I was about to shut my computer down when someone else appeared. In front of me now was a redheaded woman in an old-timey nightgown. Her fair skin and freckles were nothing like the previous people, but again, those magnificent orbs were unmistakable. Even if the body changed, she hadn't. I didn't understand how or why.

When she tripped and landed in my arms, my heart jumped into my throat, and I never wanted to let her go. The way our bodies melded together was natural—perfect. But like the other visions, she was gone, and I was left empty-handed.

I slowly blinked and willed for something to come back, but my mind was a montage of images I couldn't organize. I needed to get out of here and try to figure out how to

bring her back. I believed the first vision was her in this world because the hair was the same as I remembered when we ran into each other that morning. But there had to be a reason for the other women, too. I just didn't have a clue what it was.

How had my life become a jigsaw puzzle, with each piece leaving me a fragmented story I couldn't unravel?

Chapter Seventeen

Blake - Thursday

Why, in the name of sweet baby Jesus, did I drink so much? I peeled my eyelids open and examined the situation. I was at Ty's house, which calmed me because I wasn't sure what decisions I would have made if left to my own devices last night.

I swallowed, which was as painful as shards of glass scraping down my throat. I needed aspirin and something to drink. As I slowly stood up, the room was spinning, and nausea swirled in the pit of my stomach. But I managed to fight the urge.

I lurched into the kitchen but only made it as far as the barstool before I had to sit down. I held my head in my hands as tiny cloggers appeared to be doing a jig inside my brain.

"Ouch." Ty came bebopping into the kitchen, looking like a cheerleader with too much pep. How the hell was he prancing around with a smile on his face when I appeared to be death warmed-over?

"How are you so chipper?" I was envious of him right now.

He handed me a water from the fridge with some ibuprofen. "I wasn't the one who was drinking champagne directly from the bottle all night." He laughed, and the noise

caused me to flinch.

“How much?” I questioned because that didn’t sound like me, but yesterday was an exception, not a rule.

He bit his lower lip as if he was scared to say.

“Tell me?”

“Two bottles.”

“No wonder I’m in hell. Did anything else happen?”

He appeared sheepish as he turned away from me.

“Ty. Please tell me. I don’t have time for piecemeal.”

He exhaled deeply. “You begged our Uber driver to stop at Taco Bell. I said it was a bad idea, but you argued that a Cheesy Gordita was calling your name. You paid him fifty bucks to get one.”

I stared at him quizzically. “I’ve never wanted Taco Bell in my life.”

“Well, you did last night. But it turns out, you wanted more than one thing.” He covered his mouth to hide his smirk.

“What do you mean? What else did I get?”

He started to waffle, but I gave him my “don’t fuck with me” glare. “A Chalupa and a Locos Tacos Supreme.” His words came out so quickly, it took a minute for my brain to catch up.

“Are you serious? There is no way I ate all that.”

He nodded emphatically. “You did. Took them down like a vacuum. But it appeared to sober you up because you walked into the house by yourself and passed out on the couch while I climbed into my comfy king-sized bed.”

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“Why did you let me do that?” I shouldn’t be mad at him because I made the choice, but I wasn’t coherent—he should have been my guardian ad litem, and looked out for my best interest.

“A pack of wolves couldn’t have stopped you from devouring that food last night. And I wasn’t about to lose a finger trying. Besides, you need to live a little.”

This wasn’t what I would call living. If anything, death could probably take me at any minute. “I need to shower.” It was the only thing that might make me human again.

“That’s a good idea.” He waved his hand in front of his nose, and I unassumingly sniffed myself, but I didn’t smell.

“You’re a jerk.” I socked him in the arm but immediately regretted it because the hostile movement made my head want to explode.

He rubbed the offending spot. “Jeez, Ali, I was kidding. Why don’t I run you home, and you can sleep it off?”

I nodded, then I had a slight panic attack. What if Steph was there? I didn’t want her to see me like this. She would for sure think something had happened last night, and I wasn’t ready to start another fight or talk about the first one.

“On second thought, let’s do a drive-by, and if Steph’s car is gone, I’ll go in. But if she’s still there, would you run in, grab the stuff I need, and bring me back here?” I all but pleaded.

“What, you don’t want Steph to see you in all your glory?” He chuckled, and I was about to smack him again but had learned that lesson.

“I’m not ready to see her, okay?”

“All right. I won’t make you beg.” He moved toward the garage, and I followed.

We climbed into the car, and he looked at me. “Please don’t refund your tacos in my car.”

“I’m fine.” I scowled at how much I ate, but there was nothing I could do about it now. “So, did anything else of importance happen last night?”

He backed out and headed toward my place. “Do you remember me setting up an appointment with a hypnotherapist for you on Monday?”

“A what?”

“Yeah, you decided hypnosis would help you uncover who the girl in your dream is. You mentioned it might be a repressed memory or something. You were all gung-ho about it last night.”

“That sounds nothing like me. You’ll need to cancel that because I’m not going. It sounds hokey.”

“Blake, don’t be like that. I already made the appointment and cleared your calendar. What harm could come from it? You might figure something out. Isn’t that what you want? You said you wanted to find out who she was and what was causing the dreams. Isn’t it worth a try to see if Dr. Hahn can help?”

I sighed. “Ugh. I guess I’ll do it. But I’m not happy about it.”

“Girl, are you ever happy?” He laughed, and I gave him a sideways glare, but his comment didn’t deserve a response.

I had been working on myself a lot lately and wanted to be more positive. But it seemed like as soon as I was, shit hit the fan. There was a reason for my hard shell; it kept me safe. And now that I had let down my guard, I exposed myself to vulnerability. I didn’t like it. I needed to become the Queen Bitch Ty thought I was. No, I didn’t want to do that either. I was so confused.

As he continued to drive, I rested my head against the seat while gazing out the window. He was singing with the radio to some pop song I’d never heard. What was I going to do? Even now, after sobering up and having time to cool off, I still wasn’t ready to forgive Steph. Something in my gut was telling me she wasn’t the one for me.

We had our issues, but I genuinely hoped we could make things work if we tried. But that might be the blinders. We all saw what we wanted, and I guess I didn’t care enough to look deeper. What was it she said? I was complacent.

Steph was beautiful, but sometimes she was volatile and vindictive. Was I only with her because she was physically attractive? No, there had to be more. I mean, we had fun together, although those times were becoming fewer and farther between with our clashing schedules.

Would I even be sad if she moved out? It would be weird, but that was about all I came up with.

“Earth to Blake.” Ty was waving his hand in front of my face, trying to get my attention, and I swatted it away.

“What are you doing?”

“We’re here—at your house. Steph’s gone, so I was trying to get you out of my car because I need to meet David. But you had that thousand-yard stare, and I was afraid you were catatonic again. You didn’t get pulled back into a dream, did you?”

“Oh, no. Sorry. I guess I zoned out. I didn’t even realize we’d stopped.”

“I gathered. Hence, why I was trying to get your attention. Anywho, it looks like you’re in the clear. Do you need anything from me before I go?”

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“No, I’ll be fine. When you get in the office, if anyone asks where I am, tell them I had an off-site meeting. I’m going to turn my phone off and sleep the rest of the day. After my much-needed shower, that is.”

“Babe, you don’t worry about a thing. I got you. And if I see Greg, you want me to accidentally, on purpose, trip him?”

I shook my head and laughed. “I love you.”

“I love you, too. I’ll try to keep my distance from him, but it’s fair game if he comes to me.” He quirked an eyebrow as if asking for permission, but I didn’t respond. “We’ll devise a plan later when you’re well-rested.”

I leaned in and hugged him. “Thanks. I hope you have fun with David. I’ll talk to you soon.”

“Oh, before I forget, do you want David and me to pick you up for the party? Or are you still going with Steph?”

“The ship with Steph has sailed. I’d love to ride with you guys. Besides, I need to vet David before the party starts.”

“Oh yeah. I keep forgetting you haven’t met him yet. You’re going to love him.” He smiled dreamily, and I was so happy for him.

“I’m excited to see what the rave is all about. I’ll call you after my hours of hopefully uninterrupted sleep. Later, baby boy.”

“Peace out, little momma.” He blew me a kiss as I left.

After heading inside, I went straight to the shower, shedding my shoes and clothes on the way. It was nice to have the house to myself. I wasn’t sure where Steph was, but I was glad I didn’t have to talk to her right now. I hopped into the shower and allowed the water to bombard me like scalding BBs, substituting the pain inside with physical discomfort.

Once I rinsed off all the negativity, I got out, put my PJs on, and brushed my teeth. I was like a new person, and I crawled between my Egyptian cotton sheets to hibernate. As soon as my head hit the pillow, I was gone?—

I would recognize this music anywhere. I’d heard it twice before when she called to me, and I was right back where we’d left off from last night. My hands rested on her hips, and this time, I drew her near, allowing her to melt into me. I throbbed all over, but it settled in my center. I was so drawn to her, and it was as if I no longer had free will.

I turned her around in my arms and finally saw her face-to-face. I was so disappointed that I didn’t recognize her. I didn’t find out anything useful. Why was this exquisite woman dominating my dreams?

As I studied her blue-gray eyes and crooked smile, my breath hitched, but I didn’t find any answers. My fingers traced the outline of a tattoo on her upper left arm—a puzzle piece with something written inside. The words appeared to be Italian. I touched every stroke and burned every color into my mind. I had to remember “ti trovero” because it seemed like a clue.

When I touched her, it was as if I was finally whole. I didn’t realize I was missing something until this moment. This didn’t appear to be a dream, but if it was, I didn’t want to wake up.

But I didn't have a choice. Everything changed, and she was gone. I was no longer on a dance floor; instead, I was surrounded by stables and horses. When I stepped outside, chickens were clucking around, and cows were in the pasture. What was happening?

There was a tug on my heartstrings and she was here, but where? I didn't have to wait long for that answer. A force stronger than myself urged me in the direction of a woman wearing a bonnet and gingham-style dress, feeding cats. It didn't appear to be the same person from the club, but her expression was full of joy, and when I looked into her eyes, my heart fluttered. I didn't understand why she looked so different, but it was definitely her. Her full lips and dimples were gone, but she still had that same heart-stopping smile.

I searched my body and noticed my naturally olive skin was now sun-kissed but paler. I touched my head, and I had a bonnet on as well. I ran my hands under the hat and my hair was straight and fine, nothing like my normal thick, curly mane. It wasn't my body, but it was me—like her. She wasn't the same, but her essence was. It was like I had known her my entire life. The desire to intertwine our fingers and run off into the sunset consumed me, but the fleeting moments slipped away, leaving only memories and longing behind.

The beautiful outdoors passed in a blur, and I was now in a four-poster bed with a canopy of curtains draped over the top. I scanned the room for clues and surmised I was in a very old house with rock walls. Was this a castle?

I stood up and walked to a vanity with a mirror. I hesitantly stepped toward it and almost screamed. My face was so not my face. I had porcelain skin, pale eyebrows, and red hair. The face reflected at me was unfamiliar, but my eyes were definitely mine. They were green, with the slightest bit of yellow toward the center.

I glanced at my outfit—a floor-length nightgown with long cotton sleeves but lace

around the neck and wrists. It was something I'd expect to see in a period piece.

As I exited the room to find out more about the situation, I collided with someone in a silk corset-style dress with an embroidered hoop-style skirt. She wrapped her arms around me to keep me from falling, and there was an instant jolt. It pulsed through my body, and I locked eyes with her. Yes, it was her. Those icy-gray eyes stared straight into my soul, and there was no other word to describe it except—mesmerized.

She gave me an easy smile that made me weak-kneed and a little damp between my thighs. I wanted to say something—anything. But I stood there, mute. It was as if my legs were made of Play-Doh, and I'd collapse if she weren't holding me up. I was putty in her hands to mold however she desired. She grasped me tighter, and I leaned into her, willing and ready to be hers. She opened her mouth, and I wondered if she was going to speak or kiss me. It didn't matter which because I was ready for more?—

My eyes flew open, and there was a loss—she was gone. My heart pounded in my chest as if I had been running after her. I rolled over, and my shirt stuck to me. I was tangled in my sheets, and sweat covered my body. I needed another shower. Then I slid my hand down my pants, only to be met with a different kind of wetness.

“Holy hell. That was more than a dream.”

Guilt pooled inside me because of how strong my emotions for this person were. If I had any questions about Steph before, I didn't anymore—this was the end. I couldn't continue our relationship when every ounce of my body wanted to be with this other person. Even if she wasn't real, my feelings were—and that was scary as hell.

Chapter Eighteen

Blake - Saturday

It was the day of the work party, and I hadn't spoken to Steph since I walked out after our fight. I still wasn't sure where she was staying, but she never contacted me, either. I had some realizations about our relationship, and we needed to have a discussion, but I would let future me deal with that.

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Tonight, I wanted to forget all my problems, including her. I was already uneasy about my dream a couple of days ago, and I found it hard to focus on anything else. Since she didn't greet me last night in my sleep, I began to wonder if my sheer exhaustion caused it, and nothing was as real as I had believed.

But for now, I would worry about the present, which included getting through this party. Ty was picking me up, and I only had an hour before he and David would arrive, so I needed to get ready. I worked from home yesterday and spent most of today doing paperwork and catching up on emails.

After getting out of the shower, I put on my makeup and went into my walk-in closet to pick out something to wear. It wasn't a super dressy occasion, but sometimes couture brightened me up when I was down. Not wanting to be overdressed, though, I settled on a green Mac Duggal with a thigh-high slit and plunging neckline. The satin gown was gorgeous and sexy, which was something I needed to help me overcome this apprehension that was bubbling under the surface.

Once I was ready, I texted Ty. I was excited to meet David because I hadn't seen Ty this into someone in a long time. I hoped they could make it work because Ty deserved happiness.

I sat on the couch and waited for them. While I was playing on my phone, there was a knock on the door. I answered it, and Ty was there in a black suit with a red-and-white polka-dotted tie. His normal messy curls were slicked back with gel, and he looked like a movie star.

"Holy shit, Batman. You're looking good." I nudged him with my elbow.

“Well, of course.” He spun around like Michael Jackson. “I could wear a potato sack and still look fine as hell. You, on the other hand, are dressed like Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman*.” He laughed as he stared at the slit that would show my goodies to the world if I moved in the wrong direction.

“You’re a jackass. This dress is sultry. Don’t be jealous, but as soon as your boyfriend comes in, he might switch teams.”

“Ha! You’re delusional if you think for one second David would want you over all this,” he said, waving his hands in front of his body, and I rolled my eyes.

I needed this banter. It was easing my prior tension, and I no longer dreaded the night.

Just then, David walked in, and his mouth dropped. He stuck out his hand for me to shake, and when my fingers reached his, he brought them up to his lips for a kiss. “You must be Blake. Ty didn’t tell me how stunning you were. That dress is gorge, and that color with your eyes, my God, you’ll turn heads.”

I gave Ty an I-told-you-so smirk, but he ignored me.

“Did you hear that, Ty? I’m going to turn heads.” I slid my hand out of David’s. “It’s so nice to meet you. You could’ve walked right out of GQ. What on earth are you doing with Ty?” I winked, jokingly.

I had to admit, David was attractive with his surfer-boy appearance: blond hair, broad shoulders, and tan skin. He wore a three-button red blazer with white linen pants and black velvet Louboutin loafers. He had style, to say the least. Together, he and Ty were looking all sexy and matchy. If I didn’t love Ty so much, I’d hate him right now.

David blushed at my comment. “It’s so nice to meet you, too. Ty talks about you so much that it’s like I already know you.”

“Is that a good or bad thing?” I quirked a brow at Ty, and he shrugged.

“The two of you banter, but believe me when I say that man adores you.” David smiled at us both, but again, Ty appeared indifferent.

“David, you’re going to give her a bigger head than she already has.”

I smacked Ty’s arm. “I take offense to that. I don’t have a big head—just big hair.” I laughed, and the two of them joined in.

“You ready to blow this pop stand?” Ty offered his elbow, and I laced my arm through it. Even with my three-inch heels, he still towered over me.

Before we headed out, David took my other arm, making it a three-way chain. When we got to the car, he offered me the front seat next to Ty, but I was fine sitting in the back. And, like a gentleman, he opened my door for me.

“Thank you, David. You’re so sweet. Ty, I’d say he’s a keeper.”

“You’re not telling me anything I haven’t already said.” Ty immediately reached for David’s hand before putting the car in reverse.

As we made our way to the Plaza, Ty looked in the rearview mirror at me. “So, were you able to get rested from your bender? You said you’d call me sometime, but all I got were work texts. And since you didn’t come into work yesterday, I figured I’d corner you tonight.” He joked.

I wanted to talk to him, but I had been too busy playing catch-up.

“Oh my God. I completely forgot to tell you. Umm, should we discuss this later?”

“Girl, if you had more dreams, I need to hear about them now. David knows what’s going on. Sorry, but I have to talk to someone about your soap opera life.”

I guess it shouldn’t surprise me, considering Ty seemed to be in love with him. What would it hurt if he knew?

“Well, I guess we can’t unsay what you said, so I’ll jump right in.”

David turned around to look at me. “Blake, for what it’s worth, I wouldn’t tell a soul your secrets. I realize we just met, but I promise you, I’m sincere. Would it help if I told you a personal story?” He continued to make eye contact with me, and he had such an inviting smile I couldn’t do anything but melt. I saw why Ty was taken by him. He seemed like such a genuine person.

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“If Ty trusts you, so do I. Besides, I can usually read people pretty well, and something in my gut is telling me you’re honest. You don’t need to give me ammunition to hold against you. Unless, of course, you want to share, then I’m all ears.”

“Well, if you’re up for a good story later, remind me to tell you about tortilla shells, hiking, and nature calling.” His face lit up with what appeared to be mischief.

“All right. I’ll hold you to that.” I chuckled. “So, I’ll bring you both up to speed about what happened. Ty, as you’re aware, I was hanging badly, and I needed ten days of sleep. When I got home, I took a shower and then crawled into bed?—”

“Okay, sister. We don’t have that long before we arrive, so why don’t you skip to the good stuff?” Ty interrupted me.

“All right. Sorry. Anyway, I fell asleep and immediately went back to that dance floor from before. This time, I was able to make out so many more details. I got to touch her again, and oh my God! She had a tattoo with something written in Italian, and I meant to look it up but forgot.” I immediately pulled my phone out of my clutch and typed into Google Translate, “Ti trovero.”

“Well, are you going to leave us hanging or what? What was the tattoo? What did it say? Did you see what she looked like?” Ty rapid-fired at me.

“Hold on a second, eager beaver. I was looking up the meaning of the words. So, about the tattoo, it was a puzzle piece surrounded by these vibrant watercolors and said, ‘ti trovero’ inside of it. My Italian is a little rusty, but I recognized the language

immediately. I Googled what it means, and it's, 'I will find you.' Do you think it has something to do with me?"

"Girl, I need more information. Then, we'll dissect the significance. What else happened?"

"Okay. The tattoo had my attention, but I was breathless when I turned her around to face me. She was androgynous, with high cheekbones and just-out-of-bed hair that was probably styled that way but looked effortless. Not to mention her almost silver-colored eyes that were like pools I wanted to swim in. I don't think this person could exist, but she was very lifelike in my dream. Now, here's where it goes off the rails a bit."

"You think this has ever been on the rails?" Ty asked disbelievingly.

"Whatever. This is where it gets squirrely, okay? So, after I see her, I'm transported to a new place and time in my dream, and there's someone else. She was completely different from the woman I'd seen previously, but when we came face-to-face, she had the same aura and the same eyes. Even though the body and features were different, it was her. And it happened one more time. Oh, not to mention that my body changed, too. I was redheaded and pale in one of the visions." I laughed, but saying that out loud sounded like I was losing my mind.

Ty held up a hand, and David peered at me earnestly from the front seat.

"Wait a minute. So, you changed bodies, yet it was still you?" Ty said as an almost knowing look crossed David's face.

"Blake, I'm not an expert by any means, but it sounds like this person you saw in your dream was you in a past life. That might be a little out there, but sometimes, when we get glimpses of things that seem real to us, and we don't remember living it,

it's a memory from a previous life. This woman might have known you before, and now you're fantasizing about her because you're supposed to meet in this life." David was so genuine in his assessment, but he also appeared a little in awe.

"Why would I just start dreaming of her?"

"Well, there are different possibilities, but the ones that make the most sense are either you crossed paths with her in this life, and it sparked your memories, or maybe something is wrong, and her soul is reaching out to you for help."

"Okay, but if I met her in this life, I'm certain I would've remembered her. She's jaw-droppingly gorgeous. There is no way I would've seen her and not noticed."

"Then maybe her current soul needs help, and you're somehow connected to her from another life."

"Let's pretend for a second that's even a possibility. How will I track her down? When I dream about her, I don't get a lot of answers. And, if she's in trouble, I'd probably need to find her quickly, right?"

"We're here, and we should continue this convo another time. But if you go to the hypnotherapist appointment on Monday, she might be able to help." Ty chimed in for the first time in a while.

I wasn't ready to stop talking, but I didn't want any of this information to leave this car.

"Okay. Let's go in and try to have a good time. At least this should be a drama-free night. No Steph. Hopefully, no time-lapses and no drinking. I'm going to enjoy a night off from everything." I was ready to spend time with Ty and David and eat a good meal.

My life was more like a telenovela with all the unexplainable stuff going on, and I was ready for something more conventional.

We'd been sitting down for about thirty minutes when a server came to our table to take our orders. I got Island Duck with Mulberry Mustard and Honey-Glazed Carrots, while Ty and David ordered Butter-Basted Rib Eyes with Garlic-Roasted Mashed Potatoes.

The night was going well, and I was having fun. But that all changed when I turned my head toward the door and saw the last person I expected or wanted to see right now: Steph. And she wasn't alone. Greg had his arm wrapped around her waist and the phoniest-looking smile plastered across his face.

"Holy shit. Did you—" Ty stopped midsentence, probably noticing where my eyeline was.

"Breathe," I said out loud, hoping my lungs would heed my advice, but my chest tightened.

Had they been loved up since our fight? It wasn't that I cared, but the entire scene seemed like a ploy. I wouldn't give either of them the satisfaction of thinking they'd affected my night.

I turned my attention back to my table. "So, David. Let's hear the tale of the tortilla shell."

He laughed. It was sonorous and how I'd imagine Santa Claus would sound if he didn't ho-ho-ho. "Well, I'm not sure if it's appropriate at the dinner table. Why don't you come and dance with me, and I'll regale you with the story while I spin you across the floor?" He stood and held out one hand while tucking the other behind his back as if he were Prince Charming.

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“That sounds wonderful. Ty, are you going to be okay left to your own devices?”

“Of course.” His eyes never strayed from Steph, and I worried he was plotting some form of revenge. “Now, you two have fun because I’m sorry, baby, I don’t dance.” He cocked an eyebrow David’s way, but there was a tenderness in his expression—something Ty didn’t show to anyone.

I grabbed David’s hand, and he slipped it into the crook of his elbow. He turned his head over his shoulder and blew Ty a kiss, then led me to the dance floor. There was an orchestra playing, and it was quite elegant. David was a phenomenal dancer and such a strong partner.

He leaned in close to my ear as we drifted to the rhythm of the music. “So, do you want to talk about the elephant in the room?”

“I guess it surprised me to see her and with him of all people.”

He held me tighter, and comfort coursed through me. “Ty has told me a lot about you and your history with both Steph and Greg. I have to say, it seems like those two deserve each other.” He spun me around, and I spotted Steph staring daggers at me.

I wasn’t sure what she had to be angry about, but if she was mad, I didn’t care.

“Everything’s so surreal. I mean, I was with Steph for a long time, and she was my first serious girlfriend. One would assume the breakup would’ve devastated me, but the truth is, I’m apathetic. It might be different when her stuff is gone, but right now, all I want to do is forget about her.”

“Does the girl you’re dreaming of have anything to do with your lack of emotion for Steph?”

That question caught me off guard because it hadn’t even crossed my mind. “Not that I’m aware. I mean, that woman may not even be real. Steph and I had real problems before. She basically told me she needed more than I gave her. Like I didn’t love her good enough. And maybe I didn’t. To be honest, I’m not sure I’m capable of truly loving someone.” I didn’t mean to get so deep, but that was something that was in the back of my mind and only perpetuated by Steph’s behavior.

“Maybe you should talk to her? Clear the air, so to speak?” The song was wrapping up, and I didn’t want to leave the contentment of his arms, but he was right. I did need to speak with her.

“David, thank you for listening to me. I can see why Ty is in love with you.”

He stiffened, and his expression seemed to transform from ease to shock. “Loves me?”

Oh, shit! Did I spill the beans? I needed to do damage control. “Of course he loves you. I didn’t mean in love with you.” I hoped that covered my colossal foot-in-the-mouth comment.

“Oh.” Now he looked... disappointed?

“Wait. Are you in love with him?”

“Please don’t tell him.” He put a finger up to his mouth, and I nodded my agreement. “It’s too soon to say anything. But when you brought it up, I got excited.”

“Oh, David. You’re a wonderful man and perfect for Ty. If, and that’s a big if, he

isn't in love with you right now, he will be soon. You don't have anything to worry about, and I cross my heart I won't say a word."

"Blake, I'm so glad we finally met. You and I are going to be as thick as thieves." He winked at me and then gave me a hug. "Thank you so much for the lovely dance. I do hope we can do it again before the night is over." He took my hand and kissed it before walking back to the table where Ty sat playing on his phone.

I took a deep breath and headed toward Steph, who was still glaring at me while Greg held on to her like she was his captive.

"Hi, Steph. I was wondering if we could chat for a minute. Outside?"

Greg stopped talking to turn to me. "Blake. Good to see you. Did you bring anyone tonight?" He arrogantly scanned the room.

"Nope. I came with Ty and his boyfriend, David. I wasn't planning on staying long anyway. Could I borrow your date for a second?" I gave him a tightlipped smile, all the while biting my tongue so I didn't accidentally let any of my built-up rage out.

"I'll be back in a sec, honey." Steph leaned in and kissed Greg on the cheek.

I stared up at the ceiling, quietly exhaling, "Woosa." Then I headed to the door, and Steph followed close behind. Once we were outside, I confronted her. "What are you trying to do, Steph?"

She appraised me, her eyes stopping on the deep V of my neckline. She had a lusty expression that I'd seen before, but I needed to keep this conversation strictly business.

I snapped my fingers. "Eyes up here."

“Oh, come on, Blake. It’s obvious why you wore that dress. And it wasn’t so people would look at your eyes. I’m showing you I appreciate your effort.” She ran a finger over my exposed collarbone, causing my body to respond involuntarily.

I grabbed her hand and threw it off. “Seriously, Steph. What are you doing here?”

“I came to see you. Why else would I be here?”

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“Oh, right. You’re here for me. ‘I’ll be back in a sec, honey,’” I said in a completely sardonic tone.

“Did that bother you?”

“Oh my God, Steph. This isn’t a game. You aren’t going to make me jealous by fucking Greg. Look, I wanted to tell you it’s time you moved out. I’ll stay at Ty’s tonight and tomorrow, and you can get your stuff out before Monday. Whatever you don’t take, I’m giving away. Deal?”

“You’re kicking me out? Baby, we had a fight. But we’re not over.”

Was she serious? There was no getting through this. She had to see we weren’t supposed to be together.

“Steph, it has been over for a while. You said it yourself. I didn’t give you what you needed, and you were fine getting it elsewhere. It turns out I’m fine with that, too. You can have all day tomorrow to get your things. You only really had clothes and toiletries anyway. Then you can text me when you’re done so we won’t have to run into each other again. I’m sorry it had to end this way, but I think you’ve let your true colors shine, and this is for the best. It was nice knowing you.”

“Blake, wait. How can you flush two years down the drain without a second thought? I loved you. I mean, I still love you. Doesn’t that mean anything to you?”

“Steph, you don’t love me. If you did, you never would’ve showed up with Greg. You would’ve called or texted me to apologize after our fight. You wouldn’t have

immediately jumped into the arms of the one person who has it out for me.”

I paused to keep myself from blowing up. The fire inside wanted to come out, but once I had it under control, I continued. “I’m sorry if you think this is salvageable, but I don’t. I hope you and Greg have a nice life together.” Without giving her a chance to respond, I went back inside to find Ty and David.

At least being with them might calm me down because my heart was in overdrive right now. I wasn’t sure if the conversation upset me or relieved me, but I believed something better would come my way if I only kept moving.

Chapter Nineteen

Blake - Thursday

It had been almost two weeks since Steph moved out. At first, it worried me that I might’ve been a bit hasty with my decision, but the fact I was happier than I’d been in a while made me realize how much drama she brought into my life.

In these past couple of weeks, I’d been able to focus on work and getting ahead. Missing Steph didn’t even cross my mind, which caused a mix of negative emotions, but it also gave me clarity because I had made the right choice. I’d never envisioned myself with anyone long-term, and Steph wasn’t the exception.

What had me pausing, though, were my feelings about the girl in my dreams. Since Steph had left, my dreams lasted longer and became more frequent. I’d grown a powerful emotional connection to this woman, although I had no idea who she was. I couldn’t remember specific conversations, and we were never intimate, yet I was complete when we were together.

I saw exhilarating lives play out before me, and I sensed them, too, as if they were

mine. The scenes unfolded lifetimes of love and joy, and I ached to find my way back to them. I wished my subconscious could give me something that would lead me to her in this life, but I was starting to wonder if the dreamworld was all we'd have.

My phone beeped, shaking me from my reverie. I leaned over my desk to pick it up, only to see it was a text from my mom.

Mom: Are we still on for lunch today?

I groaned.

Me: Oh, yeah. I forgot. Where?

Mom: I scheduled it with your assistant a long time ago. It should be on your calendar.

Me: It is. I didn't have it pulled up. Tell me where to go, and I'll meet you.

Mom: Le Coucou?

Of course...it was across town and super upscale.

Me: What about Michael's?

At least that was within walking distance of my office.

Mom: I wouldn't be caught dead there. Aquavit at 12:00. I will make a call.

I guess that was the end of the discussion. I wished Ty would have gotten me out of this, but we had been busy with a plethora of other things.

My mother and I had a difference of opinions on pretty much everything. I hadn't spoken to her since Steph moved out, and I wasn't looking forward to that conversation. I was sure she'd be happy, though, as she always referred to Steph as "that harlot" for reasons I never understood. But it was one more thing for her to criticize me about not being settled down, not being a mother, not being the quintessential woman. Knowing her, she'd have a blind date set up for me, with a man, no doubt, before lunch was over.

It was 12:03 when I walked into Aquavit, and I would get an earful. Her motto was: "If you're on time, you're late," and being late was inexcusable. I saw her sitting at the back of the restaurant, and I tried to creep as inconspicuously as possible to her table.

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She glared at her watch as I approached. “Nice of you to join me. I thought I told you twelve o’clock.” She stood, kissed me on each cheek, and gave me the world’s most awkward hug, leaning the top half of her body over to double pat my back as if I’d mess up her clothes if I got too close.

“Yes, Mother. I’m a couple of minutes late, but I had to find a parking spot as I drove from the office. If we’d gone to Michael’s, I could’ve walked.” I gave her a closed-mouth smile and sat down.

“Well, I’m not sure who raised you, but Michael’s isn’t an acceptable establishment. They only serve American food.”

“The nerve. A restaurant in America serving American food. How do they stay open?” I hated how snarky I got when I was around her, but she could set me off with a look.

“Don’t get lippy with me, Blake. You could stand to be more selective about where and what you eat.” She scrutinized me with disapproving eyes.

I wasn’t sure what she didn’t like, but she’d tell me. She reached out and touched the curls that framed my face.

“Honey, why do you let your hair get so unmanageable? Do you not have a good stylist here? I will put in a call.”

“Mother, there is nothing wrong with my stylist. I’m perfectly happy with her. I left my hair down today because, for once, it wasn’t humid, and I didn’t think it looked

bad. What don't you like about it?" I furrowed my brow as I awaited her response.

"Don't make that face. You'll cause more wrinkles than you already have. It looks like your Botox hasn't done a good job."

"I haven't gotten Botox, but thanks for telling me I should." I wanted so badly to roll my eyes and act like a petulant child, but I sat there across from her and smiled as she continued her appraisal of me.

There was a reason I didn't spend much time with her. If I subjected myself to her insults on the regular, I would have no self-worth at all.

"Oh, well, I'd say it's time. I can make a call. I will set you up with my doctor, who is wonderful. I mean, look at me. I could pass for your sister."

"Yes, you look great, Mom." And she did. She didn't have a wrinkle on her or a hair out of place. I supposed, to her, I did come across as a street urchin, even though my outfit cost upwards of \$3,000.00. How I dressed and who I was would never fit the mold she'd created for me.

I worked so hard to be the perfect daughter growing up. All I wanted was my parents' approval, and all I ever received were backhanded compliments at best. For the longest time, my heart hurt from not being good enough, but then I realized their opinions or expectations didn't define my worth. I had to live for myself. But there was still that little girl inside who couldn't stand up to her mom. She struggled with letting her emotions get the best of her.

I had gotten lost in my feelings and zoned out. When I looked up at her, she was staring at me as if expecting a response.

I wasn't about to start a fight, so I said, "Sure, Mom," having no idea what I had

agreed to.

“Perfect. It looks like I can get you an appointment with my doctor and hairstylist next month. I will call your assistant to set it up.” She was scrolling through her phone, probably checking her calendar to put another browbeating session on the books as well.

“Wait, what? No, that’s not necessary but thank you. I’m okay with my wrinkles, and there is nothing that can control my hair.”

Her expression was either one of shock or disgust. It was hard to decipher any emotion from her unmoving face, but the fire behind her eyes gave me an indication.

“Don’t be ridiculous, dear. There is no need to go around looking like that.” She swirled her hand in front of me as if it were a magic wand that would transform me into the daughter she actually wanted.

“Right. Well, this has been super fun, but I got a message from the office. I need to leave. I’ll have to get a raincheck. I’m sorry.” I scooted my chair back to stand up. When I grabbed my purse to leave, she reached for my hand.

“Blake, are you upset about something?”

I tried to stay as neutral as possible because I didn’t want her to realize the impact she still had on me. “Of course not, Mother. I have important business to take care of.”

“I didn’t even get to ask you about Stevie.”

“Well, since I don’t know anyone by that name, that was a quick conversation.” I turned on my heel and hightailed it out of there. I think that woman took ten years off of my life, or at least my self-esteem.

I decided to head back to work, even though seeing anyone seemed almost unbearable. I had so much repressed aggression I didn't want to take it out on anyone. But Ty was the only person who understood me, and he always had my back. He was more family to me than my blood. But if he ever scheduled another lunch with Mommy Dearest, I'd make him come with me to teach him a lesson.

As I walked through the door, I saw Ty sitting at his desk like he was daydreaming of unicorns and butterflies. He had this Pollyanna outlook on life ever since he and David exchanged the L word—love, not the show. His eyes met mine, and he appeared to sense the rage radiating off of me.

“Hey...” He clenched his teeth, and I could tell he was scared. “Was it that bad?”

“Well,” I peeked at my phone, “it's 12:37, and I'm here.” Wow. It was amazing how she triggered me so badly in less than thirty minutes. That had to be a record. But those minutes were enough to last me another year. It would take that long for my ego to build itself back up.

“At least it was over quickly?” He seemed like he was trying to calm me down, but I wasn't ready yet.

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“It was over because I lied and said I had a work emergency. But I’m telling you, if she calls again, I don’t care what you have to do, but it’s a hard no.” I didn’t want to take it out on him, but he needed to understand the seriousness.

“You got it. I will start making a list of plausible lies to throw her way.” He seemed genuinely sorry that I had to go through this today, and if my blood wasn’t still boiling, I probably would have hugged him. “Do you want to talk about what happened? Was she pissed about your makeup, your weight, or your choice of lovers?”

“Strikeout. She was on about my hair and my need for Botox. We didn’t have time to get into anything else, but I’m sure any or all of those topics would have come up. I think she’ll be calling to schedule me for an appointment with her doctor and hairstylist, even though I told her no. If she does, appease her and say you’ll do it, but there’s no chance I’m going. I don’t have the energy to argue.”

“All right, chica. Tell me if I can help with anything.”

“I’ll be fine. I’m going to keep my head down and continue working. Since Steph moved out, I’ve been able to get a lot done, and the other partners are taking notice. Tom stopped by my office the other day to tell me, ‘Keep it up.’”

“Girl, everyone has noticed. You’ve been like the Energizer Bunny up in here. Do you spend any time at home?”

“You mean besides when I’m dreaming the most perfect partners into existence?”

“You, hoochie. Are you holding out on me? We haven’t really talked since the office party, which has been way too long. Tell me more.” He propped his elbows up on his desk and put his chin in his hands like he was getting ready to hear the juiciest gossip of his life.

“There isn’t much to tell that you don’t already know. Except now, the dreams are almost every night; they’re lasting much longer and are more graphic.” His eyes widened, and I shook my head. “Not sexually graphic. I meant detailed. The places I’ve seen in my dreams are so vivid and beautiful. The lives I’m living with her evoke too much emotion in me not to have happened. Nothing about this makes any sense, but what David said about our souls somehow being connected seems true. Wherever or whoever I am, she finds me and, as corny as it sounds, completes me. I always thought I understood what happiness was. But until her, it was like I was living my life under a dark cloud, and then she came along and was the sunshine that finally allowed me to see. Ty, I’m officially losing it.” I shook my head in disbelief at my cheesemo description.

“Blake, as much as I want to make fun of you, and believe me, I really really do, I can’t because I totally understand. The situation is a little different for us because I’ve met my person in this life, but the way you describe this woman is how I feel about David. I’m nauseated at how sappy we are, but I’d rather be like this than have a constant parade of meaningless flings.”

“I haven’t done one-nighters in a while either, but I get it. The thing that scares me the most is what if I never find her in this life? What if my dreams are all I get?”

“Oh, hon. We’ll figure it out. Do you want to try the hypnotherapist again since you’ve dreamed of her more? It might work better now.”

The first time under hypnosis turned out to be a total bust. I didn’t learn anything about her or myself. “I’m remembering and reliving what appears to be a multitude of

lives. It always starts with me as me, but then I go through a progression of different places and bodies, but my emotions never waver.”

“If dream you finds her, then you’ll find her in this life, too. When two souls are destined to be together, it would take a force of nature to keep them apart.”

“I’m not going to hold my breath, but I’ll continue to enjoy my nights, and hopefully, one of those dreams will give me a clue on how to find her.” I was very wistful, but I tried to force a believable smile, not sure if it was for Ty’s benefit or mine. If only real life were a fairy tale, and she’d left some breadcrumbs for me to find my way to her, but nothing was that easy.

Ty gave me a sympathetic slug in the arm as if to say, “You got this,” but I wasn’t sure he believed it, either. It was exhausting to ponder over the impossible situation I found myself in, so I chose to set it aside. I was ready to put my nose back down to the grindstone and get some more work finished.

I went to my office and sat down in front of my computer. I quickly scrolled through my emails because that took the least amount of brainpower for me, but it was something that had to be done.

As I was reading the subject lines, I saw one that caught my eye: Just a reminder of your appointment tomorrow. I didn’t have anything on my calendar, and I had never heard of the sender . But my curiosity won out, and I opened it to see what it was.

Dear Ms. Flynn,

This is a friendly reminder of your appointment at Full Exposure tomorrow, Friday the 25th, at 2:00 p.m. We look forward to seeing you and your partner. Please give us a call or respond to this email to confirm or reschedule. We hope to see you soon.

Sincerely,

Haley

Full Exposure? What the hell was that? I never made an appointment with anyone. I did a quick Google search to find out that it was a photography studio specializing in “Making your fantasies a reality.” Oh my God. This was probably the shoot Ty scheduled for Steph and me.

I needed to cancel because there wasn’t any reason for me to keep the appointment, but I found it intriguing at the same time. Maybe it would be fun to act out a fantasy. Who was I kidding? That wasn’t me. But I also didn’t want to cancel because they’d be out money and probably couldn’t fill the spot on such short notice. I should go to at least pay them.

Since that was settled, I replied with my confirmation and prepared to work late again so I wouldn’t feel bad about leaving early tomorrow. Even if I didn’t do a complete photoshoot, I thought maybe I’d piddle around downtown after paying for the session. I’d been working so hard that a long weekend seemed like a just reward.

But my mind kept wondering what it would be like to do a role-play session with the girl in my dreams—the things I’d do to her. My God, I needed to get this out of my head ASAP if I was planning on getting any work accomplished at all.

It was so weird to think how someone I didn’t even know could consume my thoughts at any time. Maybe I should start dating? That idea made me physically sick to think about, so I pushed it away and focused on work until I could get home and submerge myself in her.

One more reason I was horrible at relationships—I’d rather be with someone in my mind than in real life. I was utterly hopeless.

Chapter Twenty

Leia - Thursday

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It had been a couple of weeks since I got my tattoo, and it only took Haley a day to realize my tattoo had something to do with my dreams. She was convinced that the stars would align and this green-eyed beauty would reveal herself. But until then, she helped me work on lucid dreaming so I could conjure her almost nightly.

It was weird letting Haley offer me advice in the romance department, but she was right. I could strengthen my connection with this woman in our sleep, and if my feelings were real, there was a chance hers were, too. Even though it was typical for our appearance and location to change, our love never did, which gave me hope that I'd find her in this life. But I quickly got discouraged because I had no idea how.

Work had slowed down some recently, which I was okay with because it gave me time to finish my proposal and apply for a few grants from different entities. I wanted to see my idea put into action, and that gave me a break from analyzing my dreams too much. But now it was a waiting game to see if my proposal would get accepted.

Until then, I had been spending most of my spare time at the studio because I didn't like to be alone unless I was sleeping. It seemed like there was an emptiness inside of me, and I needed to fill it. I tried to keep busy, but there was only so much I could do in my office.

Usually, I would have hung out with Shanny, but she and Toni hit it off like a house on fire, and I was happy for her. She deserved to find someone who was more than a fly-by-night. But then that left me to my own devices, which meant my mind would wander to her.

As I sat at my desk, staring at my computer, Haley knocked on my door.

“Hey, boss.” She stood there expectantly.

I waved her in. “What’s going on?”

She had a troubled expression. “I wanted to check to make sure everything was okay. We haven’t been swamped the past couple of weeks, but you’ve been back here every day. Is something wrong?”

“Oh, no, nothing’s wrong. I’ve been a little preoccupied with a side project. That’s all. I appreciate your concern, though.”

“Is there anything I can help you with? I mean, I’ve been rather slow up front, too. I’m here if you need me.”

Haley was quickly becoming a sounding board for me, and she would help me with anything.

“Why don’t you shut the door and take a seat?” I motioned to the chair in front of my desk.

Her eyes widened like a baby deer. “Okay. Are you letting me go?”

“What? No! I need your opinion on some things.”

“Oh, thank God. I love this job, boss. And I love working for you. You about gave me a mini-heart attack.”

“Calm down. I couldn’t run this place without you. I’m not letting you get away from me that easily.” I chuckled and relaxed in my chair, hoping she would, too.

“I’m glad to hear that. So, what can I help with?” Her voice was much calmer.

“I’m not sure if there is anything we can do, but I can’t stop thinking about finding the girl from my dreams. Is it a losing battle?”

Her eyes sparkled as she shook her head. “No! It’s very romantic.”

She appeared to be one hundred percent on board, and her excitement was infectious.

“So, what details do we have about her?”

Even though Haley was the one who taught me how to lucid dream, I never talked to her about the specifics of them. They seemed too personal to share with anyone.

“That’s the problem. I’m not sure what she looks like... but maybe.” I shrugged, and she blinked.

“Maybe?”

“Well, I’m pretty sure. But the dreams are constantly changing. It appears there are numerous lifetimes that we’ve lived.”

“Okay, so how do you know which one she is?”

“Well, we usually start as ourselves, and then things evolve.”

She nodded like everything I was saying made complete sense, and I realized she was the right person to talk to. “You think you could describe what she looks like?”

“I can do you one better.” I reached down to my briefcase and pulled out a sketchpad. “Here.” I handed her the picture I had drawn. “I’m not the best artist, but I do have an eye for things, and I tried to capture her essence.”

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“Oh wow. If this is what she looks like, no wonder why you’ve been dreaming about her.” She fanned her face as her cheeks turned beet red, but I decided to let that go.

I didn’t want to embarrass her, and I had more important concerns. “I’m definitely taken by her, but do you think if I run this through a program and make it more picture-like, we could put it up somewhere and see if anyone recognizes her?”

She bounced up and down like she had won the lottery. “Oh! You mean like missed connections? Oh my God. And then we could do one of those meet-cute videos, and you two could go viral. This is seriously like a scene from a movie,” she squealed.

“What is missed connections? Will that work?” It seemed odd it would be that easy.

“It’s a section in the classifieds where someone can post messages hoping to reconnect with a person they met but didn’t exchange information with. Regardless if it works or not, it’s at least worth a try.”

I didn’t have any other ideas, and she seemed hopeful, so I was game. “That sounds good to me. But Haley,” I stopped and gave her my serious eyes, “if this works, there will be no videos of any sort.”

She waved her hand as if swatting that comment away. “Don’t be ridiculous. There is no if. I believe this girl is your soul mate, and I have no doubt you’ll meet her.” Haley had this enamored look on her face, which I wished would rub off on me.

“I’ll try to keep that hope alive. But I haven’t been that lucky in the past.” I laughed mirthlessly.

“Yeah, but you haven’t been with her before, right?” She had a good point.

Hopefully, she would end up in my arms soon. At least she would tonight in my dreams, but I wanted to trust it would happen in this life, too.

Chapter Twenty-One

Blake - Friday

Each night, I craved the sweet release of sleep to wash over me. My time with her was an all-encompassing love that surpassed any expectations I had, yet there was a frustration building inside of me. We weren’t sexual in the dreams, and I had a growing need to be with her, even though this was a fantasy.

She’d altered my heart, and it would never be the same. It was like when I was near her, it beat like a jackhammer. When I was touching her, it flip-flopped, and when I was away from her, it ached like a physical pain. Waking up each morning to an empty bed was getting harder and harder. Each dream was becoming more realistic, and the loss when she was gone was becoming excruciating. Honestly, my heart couldn’t take much more, but at the same time, the dreams came unwillingly—not that I wanted them to stop. It was better to have her in some way than never to have her at all.

My alarm sounded early today so I could get a head start, but there was a sadness knowing it would be a full day before I could be with her again. I almost called into work, but I had things to do, and at least it would offer me a distraction.

I went to the office and jumped right into work. I needed to prepare for an upcoming court appearance on a probate proceeding, and I had a few documents to review before handing them off to the client. But as I sat at my desk, my head wasn’t in the game.

As I thought about my life, I realized I didn't have control over any of it, and that caused my anxiety to rise. Work was always a constant and never seemed to let me down, but it also didn't give me that rush it used to. Before these dreams started, I played it safe and did everything the way I was expected to. But now, I was ready to do something for myself—but I wasn't sure what that entailed.

I stayed close to my comfort zone, but look where that got me—married to my work and rendezvous with a phantom in my dreams. How depressing was that? As I was sinking into a pity party, my computer beeped with a reminder: Full Exposure in 1 hour.

Yesterday, I was satisfied with paying the fee and leaving, but now, I was emboldened. This was what I needed to get me out of this funk. I needed to do something daring and fun. I didn't have anyone to take these pictures for. But this was something to treat myself.

I started packing up my stuff to leave. After I shut down the computer and turned off my light, I closed my office door to insinuate I wasn't returning.

When I walked down the hall to tell Ty goodbye, I ran into Greg, who had a scowl on his face.

"It doesn't look like closing time?" He tapped his watch and tsked.

"I have an appointment in a few minutes, so I have to get going."

"Is it for work?" He was so condescending, but I didn't have to answer to him.

I put in more than my share of hours for the week. "No," I said matter of factly because I was tired of cowering to him.

“No? Well, that doesn’t look too good for a senior partner to quit early on Friday. I mean, lower-level staff might view that as you don’t appreciate them. So, you might want to reschedule for a time when you aren’t working. Okay?”

“Greg, I appreciate your concern, but no one will complain about me taking off at 1:00 when I already have more than fifty hours for the week. But if you’re worried about it, I can talk to some of the other senior partners and see if they have any objections. If they do, I’ll cancel. Would that make you happy for me to call a meeting to discuss it?”

“Blake, I’m not sure where you get off thinking my opinion doesn’t trump yours, but it does. If I say cancel, then you cancel. Got it?”

Just then, Tom, another senior partner, walked by, and I stopped him to join in on the conversation.

“Hey, Tom. How are you?”

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“Oh, I’m doing great since you helped draft those last three wills I needed to go out this week and never would’ve gotten done without you. Your hard work hasn’t gone unnoticed or unappreciated.” Tom winked at me and offered a warm smile. Then he turned to Greg as if he had only now noticed him standing there. “Greg, how have things been for you?” He asked in a less enthusiastic tone than he had for me.

I smiled smugly at the idea that the other partners had a similar perception of Greg as I did.

“Everything is great, Tom, thanks for asking. I’ve been busy because my girlfriend moved in with me.” He gave me a side-eye, probably trying to gauge my reaction, which I showed no emotion.

“Oh, well. That’s nice. I meant, how is work? Have you been staying busy at all? I noticed your billables were down this month. Is that an issue we should discuss at the upcoming partners’ meeting? Or will your personal life slow down, and you’ll get them back up?”

Damn, Tom. I gave him a mental high five.

“Well, they’re not low enough to bring up in a meeting. Did you realize Blake was taking the afternoon off?” Oh my God, he was tattling on me.

“Blake, that’s wonderful. You deserve a break. You’ve been doing so much around here, and your billables are up by thirty percent this month alone. I sincerely hope you’re doing something fun!”

I fell in love with Tom right then, and I smirked as I stared right into Greg's angry eyes. The negative energy radiating off of him was almost palpable.

"Well, Tom, Greg. I hope you both have a lovely day. I'll be seeing you on Monday. And, Tom, if you need any more help at all, don't hesitate to ask. I'm always here." With a pep in my step, I departed, leaving them to, hopefully, discuss Greg's poor performance. But, in all honesty, I didn't care because I was on my way to do something adventurous, which excited me.

As I exited the office, the sun covered my skin in a warm glow, and my mood improved by the second. After finding out that the studio was only a few blocks away, I decided I would walk there. It was funny that I'd never even heard of it before, but I'd probably passed it hundreds of times.

With each stride away from the office, my anxiety improved until my heart started thumping so vigorously against its cage that I worried it might find itself on the sidewalk. What was happening? Was this my body's way of protecting me from doing something I shouldn't? Sweat was trickling down my back, and my breath was shallow.

I wanted to turn around, but my legs wouldn't allow it. As if I was having an out-of-body experience, I continued walking until I saw the sign that read, "Full Exposure." I stood in front of the door and stared. Was I scared? Or was this nerves? But as much as my body was telling me to flee, my heart was pulling me in.

I opened the door to enter, and something hit me like a wrecking ball right in the stomach. I couldn't breathe. I saw an arm with a puzzle piece and the words "ti trovero" staring back at me, but the face was hidden behind some pictures.

"Hi, are you Ms. Flynn?" A bubbly blonde came bounding toward me, and I didn't respond.

Nothing worked—not my mouth, my feet, or my brain. I was locked in that moment with my eyes on the tattoo I’d seen in my dreams for weeks now.

“Do I know you?” The blonde asked questioningly, but again, I stood there like a statue.

When the person revealed their face from behind the pictures, we gazed into each other’s eyes, and it was her.

As if she were polarized, I gravitated toward her like a magnet, cupping her face and pressing my lips against hers. This wasn’t a peck, either. It was a full-on-toe-curling kiss. I’d found her, and the pent-up sexual frustration from my dreams was pouring out right here in the middle of this studio.

There was a hunger as I tentatively slid my tongue to her lips. But she must have felt it, too, because she opened without any hesitation. I glided my hands to the back of her head, twining my fingers through her messy hair. I thought the dreams were life-changing, but this was earth-shattering.

I couldn’t get enough of her. I slowed the kiss down but pulled her closer as I deepened it. I had never had a desire like this before. I wanted every piece of her for myself. My heart fluttered around like a butterfly, and I never wanted this to end.

Eventually, my mind caught up to the rest of my body, and I backed away. With my hands now back on her cheeks, I leveled my breathing and gazed into those steel-colored eyes that I was more familiar with than my own.

“Wow,” I whispered.

“Holy shit. You’re real!” I let go of her face and twisted toward the blonde who had shouted.

“Excuse me?” I said to the girl.

“Oh, I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to break up this magical moment. You’re here, and Leia, she’s real.”

My head swiveled back to Leia. The corners of my mouth couldn’t help but raise. “Leia?” I questioned while she stared at me as if words had evaded her.

She cleared her throat. “Hi,” she breathed out.

“Hi. I’m Blake.” I was like an awkward teen on a first date. “What does she mean that I’m here with you for real?” I asked.

“Well, Blake, I want to start by saying I love your name. Also, this might sound incredibly bizarre, but I might have been dreaming of you?” She said it hesitantly, but it was no question.

“That doesn’t seem as bizarre as a random stranger coming up to you and trying to kiss your face off.”

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Blondie laughed so loud she snorted.

“You’re not a stranger.” Leia’s smooth voice brought my attention back to her.

“No.” I shook my head. “And I’ve been wanting you for what seems like forever. I’m so sorry to jump you like that.”

“Please, don’t apologize. That was some greeting, and I’ll burn it into my mind like the rest of you.” Her eyes roamed my body, exposing me, but in the best way.

“Well, since I’m your 2:00, I was wondering if we could go someplace more private to talk instead? I have an idea of who you are from my dreams, but I’d like to learn about this you. Would that be okay? I promise to keep my hands to myself.” I smirked but hoped she wouldn’t hold me to that.

Her eyes never left me. “Of course we can get out of here. Do you want to grab a drink or something? I think if we go to a private place, it won’t be your promise I’ll have to worry about.”

She was right. There was no way we would get any talking done if we were alone.

“Lead the way. I’ll follow you anywhere.” And I meant that.

Now that I had her and gotten a taste, there was no way I was ever letting go.

Leia - Friday

“Haley, we’re going to Double Shift. There isn’t anything else scheduled for today, right?”

“Nope, boss. You two go and get acquainted,” she said in a suggestive but excited tone as she bounced up and down on her feet with her hands covering her mouth.

I was happy she didn’t have a phone in her hand recording anything. However, that was some meeting, and it definitely would have blown up the internet.

“Thanks. You can close up early if you like.” I winked at her.

“Okay. I might do that unless you’ll need something?” She eyed Blake for a second, and I wasn’t sure what she was getting at.

“I’m good.”

Haley then turned to Blake. “She’s special, and if you hurt her, I promise it’ll be the last thing you do,” she said in a half-protective, half-joking way that made me want to roll my eyes but at the same time hug her.

“I have no intention of doing anything like that. You have no idea how much I’ve been waiting for this.” Blake was staring right at me as she responded to Haley’s semi-threat.

“Are you ready then?” In a completely natural way, I reached for her hand, and we interlocked our fingers.

My heart took off at a sprint from that small, intimate gesture, and I was sure anyone could’ve seen it pounding under my shirt. I wanted to know everything about her but

was too stunned to speak as we walked to the bar. Nothing in this world could describe my emotions when I was with her. I had no idea I could feel this way while I was awake, and I craved for this moment to last forever.

We strolled into Double Shift and took a seat. I wasn't sure if we were getting drinks or not, so I glanced over at Blake, who was already staring at me.

“What?” I cocked a questioning brow.

“Nothing.” She reached up, running her thumb along my jaw and then over my lips. I wanted so badly to suck it into my mouth but found the inner strength not to. Then she drifted to my tattoo and traced the outline. “Tell me about this. I saw it in my dreams and wondered if it was something special.”

I loved the touch of her skin on mine. She caused a ripple of excitement to course through me.

“I got it a few weeks ago. This voice kept calling—trovami, which means find me. It was the first time I heard it, so I googled its meaning. But once I read the definition, it seemed like it was you calling out to me, and I was compelled to answer. This was the first time I believed I was missing something—or someone. And I hoped this would show you that I was trying to find you.”

She licked her lips. “My God.” She exhaled a deep breath. “I can't believe we're here and not in a dream.”

“That makes two of us. I think it was destiny when we first met, but the dreams are what kept us together.”

She shook her head incredulously. “What do you mean? We've never met, not in this life. I would've remembered you.” Her intense gaze locked on me.

“We didn’t have a proper introduction, and I didn’t get a clear look at you, either. But that day, when the bike messenger drove through the sidewalk, I was the one who kept you from falling.”

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“Really? What makes you think that?”

“Well, your eyes and your essence.”

A blush appeared creeping up her neck, but it was possibly the lighting. There was a hint of vulnerability in her eyes, and she was the sexiest person I’d ever seen.

“I, surprisingly, get that. I could recognize you in every dream, regardless of how you looked.”

“So, it appears we had the same dreams? Where we changed bodies?” I didn’t quite understand how that worked, but it was nice to be able to talk to someone else who experienced it as well.

“Yes. It was so weird to me at first, but then my friend said it might be us from past lives, and that was the most logical explanation I had, so I went with it.” She tucked a loose curl behind her ear, and I was so smitten.

My body responded to every movement she made, and I memorized every detail about her.

“That makes sense, considering it seems like I’ve known you forever.” I had a strong suspicion that she had the same emotions as I did.

“But I didn’t just see you when I was sleeping. You were all-encompassing to me.” I guess that answered my question.

“That is mutual.”

“And they were never really dreams to me. They were too realistic to be called that. It was almost like I was living a different reality.”

“You’re my soul mate,” I blurted before realizing that might have come off too strong. “I mean, we could be.” I tried to dial it back a little.

She didn’t speak. She kept her appraising eyes on me, and I was afraid I scared her off.

Finally, she licked her lips while staring at mine. “There’s no maybe about it. We are connected in a way that surpasses logic.”

I reached for her hand and squeezed it. “Tell me this is real life?” I had an overwhelming urge to touch her as if she might vanish, like in my dreams.

“There couldn’t be anything more real than us.” Those green eyes took my breath away, and all I wanted to do was hold her in my arms and never let her go.

“Tell me everything about you, from your favorite childhood memory to your biggest fear. There isn’t anything you could tell that I wouldn’t be interested in. Even though I believe we belong together, I don’t want to skip any part of this relationship. That includes those get-to-know-you questions.” I brought her hand to my chest and placed it on my racing heart. “No one has ever made me feel like this.”

“I understand that all too well. Why don’t we go back to my place and spend all night talking?” She stood with my hand still in hers. “And I mean it. I don’t want to mess this up by jumping in headfirst. We will take things slow until all of our questions are answered.”

I never thought in a million years I would be so excited for someone to say they didn't want to have sex, but knowing that this could be my forever love changed my perspective entirely.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Blake - Saturday

I rolled over and stared at Leia, curled up on the floor next to me. I brushed her cheek, subconsciously checking that I was awake and she was really there. She moved and groaned, and she never looked cuter.

I wasn't sure what time it was, but we had stayed up until sunrise talking, and we must have fallen asleep on the living room floor. My body was protesting being on this hard surface, but I didn't want to get up. Instead, I scooted closer and wrapped her arm around me like a big spoon. Her chest rhythmically rose and fell, and it was like a metronome as my breathing matched her pace.

We had discovered numerous details about each other, but those seemed insignificant compared to the overpowering emotions inside, which rendered any words she could or couldn't express irrelevant. Knowing that she wasn't in a relationship, she didn't have kids and wasn't sure if she wanted them, and that she was five years older than me were tidbits of information that I enjoyed learning, but none of it changed my opinion.

Everything inside of me called out to her, and it was the first time I was ever at peace in someone else's company. We fit together like a puzzle, and it was almost scary how fast I had fallen. My guard was up when I was with Steph, and it took me a while to tell her I loved her. When I think back, it seems like I had to try to convince myself it was love.

I wasn't saying I loved Leia after a day together, but it was true. I always read that love found you when you least expected it, but I wasn't sure if that was the case. It seemed more like love found me because my person found me. I never imagined an emotion this strong could be real. But there was no fighting it when the right person came into your life.

This was what Ty was talking about. I thought I understood before, but it hits on an entirely different level now that I was here in her arms. She stirred, and her breath was hot on my neck.

"Good morning," she whispered against my ear, and I had full-body goosebumps. She stretched her long limbs, and I kept my back snuggled into her arms like a koala. "What time is it?"

"I don't know, and I don't care. I don't have to work, and all I want to do is forget about the rest of the world." I rolled to face her, and her eyes stared at my lips.

As much as we were drawn together, we did good about keeping our hands to ourselves last night, but looking at her now, I wasn't sure I would have the same control. If it was possible, she was more attractive just waking up.

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“Oh yeah? We could arrange that. But I definitely can’t stay down here all day.” She exhaled deeply, then stood up.

I immediately missed her touch, but it was probably for the best. We both agreed to do things right and take things slow. My body ached for her, but I didn’t want to burn red-hot only to have it fizzle. That was sort of what happened with Steph. We had an initial attraction, but that seemed to have faded. I wanted what I had with Leia to continue to grow stronger with time.

She reached out her hand, and I let her help me. As I stood next to her, I couldn’t keep my hands off her. I wrapped my arms around her waist and laid my head against her chest. She was a few inches taller than me, but somehow, we flawlessly complimented each other.

Her lips brushed the top of my head, and it was the first time I felt at home in someone’s arms. “Can we stay like this forever?” I laughed, but I was only half-joking.

“You think that’s funny, but I have already pictured a future with you so many times. If you’re not my forever, the universe got it wrong.”

My knees weakened with her words. This was too perfect—she was too perfect. Then self-doubt started creeping into my brain, but I wouldn’t let it ruin this.

“No one got this wrong. This is where we’re supposed to be. So why don’t we get some coffee and breakfast and continue our chat?” I needed to keep it simple for now. If I let my thoughts run away from me, I might self-sabotage.

She scrunched her nose in an adorable way. “I hope this isn’t a deal breaker, but I don’t like coffee.”

My mouth hung open in shock. “Are you kidding? How do you get through the day? Have you ever had good coffee?”

If I were drinking something from a drip coffee machine, I wouldn’t want it, either. But from my espresso maker, it was sinfully delicious.

“I normally get a caffeinated tea, but I’m sure you don’t have any.” She shrugged but didn’t appear disappointed.

“Well, we could run and get some if you want.” I didn’t want her to miss out because of me.

“Nah. I’d rather stay here, like you said. I can drink whatever you’re having. I promise I’m not as pretentious as that sounded.” She laughed, but I didn’t think that about her, anyway.

“All right. I’m going to have a macchiato. Would you like that or something less sweet?”

“Whatever you make is fine. I promise. But sweet coffee is better than bitter.”

We headed into the kitchen, and she looked around. I didn’t give her the tour last night, but she seemed impressed with my place.

“Would you like me to make something while you get the coffee ready?”

The question caught me off guard. I had never done anything that domestic with someone else before. Even when Steph and I lived together, our lives didn’t

intermingle.

“I mean, you don’t have to, but if you want?—”

She cut me off by opening the cabinet where the pots and pans were, and she pulled out a cast-iron skillet. I stood in awe watching her go exactly where she needed to. It was like she had lived in this house before. I never remembered any of our dreams here, so it was strange how at home she was.

“Don’t worry about it. I want to pamper you, too. That’s what partners do.” She squeezed my hips as she brushed by me on her way to the fridge, and everything about this woman was a fairy tale.

Luckily, I had gone to the grocery store, so I had food, but I wasn’t sure what she would make. I watched as she pulled out eggs, cheese, onions, peppers, mushrooms, and spinach. This was the perfect breakfast made by the percent person, and I could have watched her all day.

I didn’t want to bird-dog her, so I went about my business getting the coffee ready and let her do her thing. The richness of espresso filled my nose but was soon replaced by the savory aroma of sauteed vegetables.

I glanced over my shoulder while she whisked the eggs in a bowl with a towel over her shoulder. This wasn’t her first rodeo, and I loved that we could share this moment. It held a sense of déjà vu. I wasn’t sure if it was from the past or if I was seeing a flash of my future, but this was better than any dream.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Blake - Friday

Time seemed to have slipped away unnoticed. A mere month had passed since I first walked into that studio and met Leia, yet I struggled to recall my existence before her. It was as though all the chapters of our past lives had converged to create this precise moment.

I had always been cautious about getting too close to someone, but with Leia, it was like I couldn't resist being wholly consumed by her. If I wasn't with her, I was thinking about her, texting her, or planning our next adventure. My appetite for her was insatiable, which scared me, but I tried not to get into my head about it and enjoy the ride.

The dynamic of my relationship with her was vastly different from mine and Steph's. I struggled to keep my hands to myself with Leia, which I found difficult since we had decided to take things slow. Our feelings were so powerful that we consciously had to rein them in.

As I sat at my desk, thinking about this roller coaster I was on, Ty knocked on the door, bringing me back to the present.

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“Yoo-hoo.” He came in without an invitation, but I didn’t mind the distraction.

“What’s going on?” I took my feet off my desk and leaned forward. I needed to get into my professional mode.

“I want to meet Leia,” he blurted, and that wasn’t what I had expected at all.

Ty was my best friend, but so far, I hadn’t wanted those two worlds to collide. My time with Leia never seemed like enough, and the thought of sharing her with anyone else didn’t sit well with me yet. That was selfish, and I would have to get over it, but I wasn’t sure I was ready.

“And I want you to meet her, too. You and David, but we’re still in the discovery stage, so I need some time.”

He squinted as if he was trying to see through me. “I’m pretty sure you’ve discovered all of her and then some.” He cocked a defying brow, but he couldn’t have been more wrong.

Leia and I spent all of our time talking and enjoying each other’s company. We wanted everything to be right before we moved forward to a more intimate relationship.

Instead of filling him in on our abstinence, I decided to ignore the comment. “What are you up to today?”

“Deflection, eh? I’ve seen that game before, and I’m not playing it. David and I want

to have lunch with you and Leia tomorrow. I won't take no for an answer." He crossed his legs as if daring me to argue.

"I'm not sure we can do that, but I'll talk with her and see. Is there anything else I can assist you with?" I wasn't sure why I was speaking to him like a client, but I figured it was better to be matter-of-fact than to give him any wiggle room.

"Nope. Not good enough. You're the one who always says we have to look out for each other, but how can I do that if I don't see you or meet the woman in your life? Besides, you brought me on this ride, so I should at least see how it plays out."

He was right. Leia was important to me, and so was he. I shouldn't keep them away from each other. But there was a small part of me that worried he might see something I didn't because I was so consumed by her. What if he brought up red flags that I had ignored?

I tried to shake that negativity from my head. There was no way Leia had red flags. She was my soul mate. We had already spent lifetimes together. Surely, we were destined to be together, so we couldn't mess that up. Right?

"Blake." He snapped his fingers, and I realized I had zoned out. "What's with that rabid raccoon look right now?"

"I don't have a look." My voice was tight—almost defensive-sounding. "I'll ask Leia tonight if she can meet you and David tomorrow." He wouldn't let this drop, so I was probably better off biting the bullet.

"Ask now. I'm afraid once you get home and get distracted, you'll forget." The way he said distracted made me believe he meant something sexual, but again, I wasn't going there.

I texted Lay, but I didn't think she would respond right away. She didn't always have her phone around like I did.

"Happy? I'll give you her answer later. Now, may I get back to work?"

"What's going on with you? You seem like you're on edge about something."

My mind was giving me whiplash thinking about how my forever could be heading to a possible demise. Since I met Leia, I never imagined we could end, but it was weird how quickly that idea crept into my head. Did that mean something, or was I looking for a reason to stress out? My overthinking brain found comfort in the chaos.

"Seriously, girl. Talk to me." Ty's concern was enough to break me free of this mind-loop.

I sighed heavily. But figured I would be better off talking it out. "Before you came in, I was lost in excitement because of Leia, but then a niggling doubt came into my head, and now I might be sick."

"What's the worry about? You afraid you'll mess things up because you don't have experience with healthy relationships?" He said that so nonchalantly that he must have had those fears.

"I wasn't specifically thinking it would be me who fucked things up, but you do?" Now, my brain wouldn't shut off, and every worst-case scenario played like a feature film.

"No way. Even if you did fuck up, the way you always talk about how amazing Leia is, I'm sure she would forgive you." His words weren't very reassuring to me.

"Right, well, I don't want to think about it. And now you can't meet her. I am too

anxious, and I need to figure my shit out before you put any more negative thoughts in my head.”

Just then, my phone beeped.

Leia: I can’t wait to meet them. What’s their favorite meal? I’ll cook!

Wasn’t that perfect? She seemed so excited there wasn’t a good excuse to get out of it.

“Please don’t be like that. There’s nothing wrong with you, and you’re not going to fuck anything up. I didn’t mean to put you on edge. Relationships have always been a bit scary for you, and that is trauma from your past.” He could try to calm me down all he wanted, but the words were already out in the universe, and there was no taking them back.

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“It doesn’t matter. Leia wants to meet you, so I guess we’re on for tomorrow.” I tried to flatten the worry lines on my forehead, and I realized my mom was probably right about the Botox—especially given my current state.

Ty stood and quickly sat on the corner of my desk facing me. “You need to be positive. I can tell this relationship is different for you because you’re different when you talk about her. You light up like a kid on Christmas morning.”

He tipped my chin to look at him in the eyes. “Don’t self-sabotage because you’re afraid you are like your parents. You are nothing like them. And just because Steph turned out to be two-faced, it doesn’t mean that Leia will. Haven’t you seen all of her faces by now anyway?” He chuckled, and things seemed lighter.

I sighed even though he was right. “But the aftereffects from all those people still linger inside of me, and my biggest fear is that they will come out.” If I ever made Leia feel the way my parents did about each other, I wouldn’t be able to forgive myself. What if I wasn’t fully ready for this all-encompassing love?

He let go of my face and shook his head. “You are a lawyer. You can be level-headed. And I’ve never seen you so smitten over anyone. You’re not going to put her through the same things your folks did. I don’t believe it at all. Have you ever brought it up to Leia? Your relationship with your family?”

She and I had talked about everything, but I never fully expressed the hurt and resentment that was still inside of me from my childhood. I hoped it wasn’t an issue, but I realized it might be. Those negative feelings seemed to be lurking on the periphery, waiting to come out.

“I could probably address it more.” I exhaled deeply. “Thanks for this chat, Ty. I guess I have a lot to think about.”

“Shut it off. There is nothing you can do about it now. So, don’t let this take hold, okay?” He said that like it was so easy to do, but I understood his sentiment.

“You’re right. I’m going to dive back into work. Give me a ring if you get the POA back from the Sutherlands, and I will get everything finalized.” If I got through this day, maybe I would discuss things with Leia tonight, and all of this nonsense would float away.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Leia - Friday

“Hey, Haley. Lay wasn’t expecting me, but I needed to talk to her, so I decided to pop in.” Blake’s rich voice echoed from the front of the studio, and I couldn’t wait to see her, but I wasn’t sure what she needed to talk to me about.

We hadn’t chatted much at all today besides the text asking me to have lunch with Ty and David tomorrow.

“Oh, she’s editing a shoot. Do you want me to go get her?”

“No. If she’s busy, I’ll call her later.”

“Don’t be silly. She can be finished for the night. I’m surprised she hasn’t come out here anyway. I’m sure she can hear us!” Haley’s voice now sounded as if she spoke through a megaphone.

“Would you calm down? I was wrapping up.” I strolled to the front of the studio and

noticed Blake's nervous energy. I walked over, wrapping my arms around her waist. "Are you okay?" I leaned in and kissed her cheek.

She nodded, but her eyes told a different story.

"Babe?" I hoped she would tell me what was going on.

"I came to see what you wanted for dinner tonight." The words didn't ring true at all, but if she wasn't ready to talk, I would give her time.

I brushed a stray curl that never seemed to want to be tamed behind her ear and smiled. "Whatever you want is fine with me. Just as long as I get to spend time with you." Being near her gave me a sense of completeness, and nothing else seemed to matter when she was around.

I was falling fast—probably too fast. But feelings didn't have schedules. They came out of nowhere and could turn your whole world upside down in a good way, or they could slowly drain the life out of you. There was no way to predict them, but you always knew they were around because they didn't hide from you.

I had tried to ignore them for a while now, especially not knowing where Blake stood, but as I held her in my arms and studied every detail of her face, I was a goner. There was no hope for me. I was in l-o-v-e with this woman, and it should've freaked me out, but instead, it excited me. I had dreamed many lifetimes with her, and each one was more perfect than the last. I believed in my heart of hearts that in this life, right here, right now, the best was yet to come.

She quirked a brow in my direction. "Now it's my turn to ask, are you okay?" She stood on her tiptoes and gave me a peck on the lips. "It seemed as if you hadn't heard me."

“Sorry, my mind was wandering. What did you say?”

“I asked about pizza?”

“That sounds perfect. Let me go shut down my computer, and then we can jet.” I left Haley and Blake to carry on while I collected my things.

Blake and I still hadn’t introduced each other to our friends. She seemed very hesitant about it, but I was so happy when she asked me about tomorrow. Since she was having me meet Ty and David, I was more comfortable asking her to hang out with Shanny and Toni sometime, as well as Haley and Adam. She’d only talked to Haley here at work on brief occasions, but they seemed to get along, which made my heart happy since Haley had turned out to be more of a friend and an employee.

“So, do you have plans for the weekend?” Blake asked Haley while I continued to tie up my loose ends.

I tried not to eavesdrop, but they weren’t any too quiet, so the conversation floated around the studio, and I couldn’t help but hear.

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“Oh, my boyfriend and I are going on a little getaway. He said he was tired of the city, and we needed some alone time. He has this cabin upstate. Well, it’s not technically a cabin. It’s a house made with bricks, not logs, but it’s secluded and small, so we always call it a cabin.”

I chuckled to myself at how Haley chattered away, but Blake seemed to be following along with an “Oh really” and “I get what you mean” thrown in for good measure.

“But anyway, we were planning on going there to relax and unplug. I think we could both use time away, and there isn’t anything better than cutting off from the outside world. It’s crazy how we all rely so much on technology, and frequently, it’s at the expense of nurturing personal connections.”

“I get that. I hope you two have a safe and fun time.” Blake sounded sincere, and I was pleased that she was concerned for Haley’s well-being.

She constantly surprised me with her charm, and it was one more reason I had fallen so hard for her.

As I rejoined them in the front, I saw Haley with her arms wrapped around Blake, who appeared shocked by the display of affection but still returned the gesture.

“Do I need to worry about you two?” I said, hoping to save Blake without making it obvious she was slightly uncomfortable.

Haley jumped back at the sound of my voice. “No, boss. I was telling Blake thank you.” Haley seemed worried that I was serious.

“I know. I was kidding. Why don’t you get out of here so you can pack or whatever else you need to do before your getaway?” I patted her on the back.

“Oh, that’s okay. I like to finish my work before leaving.” She was way too hard on herself, and she needed to learn to accept gifts when they came.

“Nope. You are not staying any longer. I’m kicking you out.” I picked up her purse and handed it to her. “I want you to enjoy yourself. Blake and I will close up, and whatever isn’t ready for Monday, I’ll take care of it this weekend.”

“Boss...” Haley pleaded, but this time, Blake cut in.

“Go on. You do so much. Let Leia show you her appreciation. You deserve it.”

For some reason, Blake saying it made the difference, and Haley took her bag, hugged me, and said, “Thank you both. I’ve never had friends who cared so much about me.”

My heart hurt hearing that. Blake and I would need to hang out with her outside of work. I was getting the impression Adam was her sole source of companionship.

“You’re a very special person, Haley. I’ve always got you.” I moved out of her embrace. “Why don’t we all head out now? I don’t like you walking out by yourself.”

As I punched in the code for the alarm, Haley switched off the lights, and we all walked out before I locked up.

We escorted Haley to her car and then parted ways. She drove off to Adam’s, and Blake and I left to grab food. With her warm fingers laced through mine, my pulse began racing as I thought about how much I wanted to say to her, but I wasn’t sure if I’d have the courage.

Once we got back to Blake's place, we ate our New York-style pizza and then sat on the couch to drink a glass of wine. While discussing our days, I contemplated telling Blake how I felt, but I noticed something still seemed off with her.

I took a small sip and waited to see if she would speak. When she didn't, I asked, "Is there something wrong?"

She appeared startled by the question. "What? No. I'm sitting and talking about work. Same as you." Her tone was a little higher than expected, and it seemed like she was holding back.

"Okay. I wasn't accusing you of anything. But you're acting a little different, and I wanted to check in. You're even doing that thing where you chew on your bottom lip, which usually means something is bothering you." I reached over and grabbed her hand. "I'm here if you want to talk about anything. I mean, there is nothing off-limits."

She squeezed my fingers and sighed. "I appreciate it." She finally seemed to calm down a bit and gave me a shy smile. "Nothing is bothering me, per se. I talked to Ty today, and I guess I've been a little in my head."

I wasn't sure what that meant. In her head about us? About work? But she didn't elaborate.

"I'm all ears." I wondered if I gave her another chance, if she would fill me in.

"You meant to say that you're all mine." She set her glass down and cupped my cheeks, pulling my lips to hers.

She slid her tongue to the seam of my mouth, and I could tell she was deflecting, but I wasn't sure why. I let her deepen the kiss for a moment, but I couldn't let things get

carried away. Even if she wasn't ready to talk, I had some things I needed to say.

She seemed confused by me moving back, but I took her hands in mine to calm her nerves.

As I gazed into those green eyes that held so many memories, I inhaled deeply, trying to calm my racing heart.

“Blake, I...” This was the perfect moment to say my feelings, but I froze. “Am excited to meet your friends.”

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Her face fell for a second, and I realized my mistake. I stopped kissing her to tell her I wanted to meet her friends. She probably thought I was blowing her off, but now wasn't the time to drop the L bomb on her when she appeared to be struggling with something.

She had been preoccupied all night, and when I told her I loved her the first time, I didn't want to say it—I wanted to show it.

“Do you know what they want? I can get the stuff tomorrow morning before I come over.” Maybe if I kept the conversation going, she wouldn't worry about the abrupt change.

“It should be a lot of fun. And Ty will eat any meat, no pun intended.” She chuckled, but it was flat.

“I'm sure he will.” I laughed to lighten the mood, but it was still heavy. “How about hamburgers, brats, and veggies? I can grill out.”

“Sounds perfect.” Again, her words didn't match her tone.

I rested my forehead on hers, hoping the gesture would allow her to open up. If not, maybe I could somehow read her thoughts, but that didn't work.

“Are you sure something isn't bothering you?” I tried one more time, but I had to believe when she was ready, she would talk.

“I promise. It's been a long day, and I need to sleep.”

I wasn't sure if that was a hint for me to leave, but I took it as such and stood up. She held my hand, and I wasn't sure if she wanted me to help her or if she was going to ask me to stay. But then she was on her feet, leading me to the front door.

As I was getting ready to leave, I stopped and faced her, skimming my fingers down her cheek. She leaned into my touch, then brought my hand to her mouth and kissed my palm. Then I pulled her into my arms, hugging her tightly as I inhaled the scent of her mango shampoo.

My mind swirled, and my heart fluttered. I kissed the top of her head, and she buried her face in my chest. We would have to talk soon, but tonight didn't seem like the right time. I pulled back enough to press my lips to hers. I offered her the gentlest kiss goodnight and said my goodbyes.

I wasn't sure what had been hanging in the air, but I had no doubt in my mind that we would figure it out. I didn't believe anything had the power to destroy our destiny.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Blake - Saturday

I woke up after a restless night's sleep. I couldn't help being apprehensive about today. Leia was asking me what was wrong yesterday, and I should have been honest about my past trauma, but I also hoped that the more I was around her, the more those fears would fade.

But when she pulled out of our kiss, my anxiety rose. It seemed she had something on her mind, too, but she didn't say. She could have been nervous about meeting Ty. It was a big step in our relationship, and she understood how important he was to me. I wondered if she was having cold feet about it.

Then I worried that if she was fine and I mentioned my concerns, she might wonder if I was having second thoughts about her, which couldn't have been further from the truth. Discussing all of this with her would be for the best, and if she were my person, which I believed with my entire being to be true, she would understand. But I needed to talk to her before Ty was around.

After the awkwardness of last night, I wanted to smooth things over before putting her in the hot seat. Ty was a loose cannon, and I wasn't sure if he would grill her or not, but I didn't want any unresolved feelings between us.

I decided I would surprise her with breakfast, and we could even go for a peaceful walk in Central Park. It would be nice to soak up some sun and have quality time together.

After taking a quick shower, I left my hair down to air-dry, and I drove to The Donut Hut. I didn't normally eat sickeningly sweet treats, but with her, everything seemed more relaxed, including me. So I grabbed a couple of her favorite cronuts. She had introduced me to them, and I couldn't lie; I was addicted. I also picked up tea for her and coffee for me, and then I headed to her place.

I took a calming breath and knocked on her door.

She opened it immediately, leaning against the frame with her arm. "Hey, you." She eyed me as she moved out of the way to let me in. "I didn't realize you were dropping by this morning. Is everything okay?"

I should have blurted it out then, instead, I walked inside and said, "Yeah. I'm super-duper." Super-duper? Who the fuck would say that? She would think I'd lost it. "I mean, I'm swell." Could I get any worse? I cleared my throat. "How are you?"

"I would say I'm super-duper, but I'm somewhere between there and swell." She

snickered, and I wanted to kiss her so badly just to shut her up.

Instead, I nudged her in the arm. “You caught me off guard.”

“By asking if you were okay? I’ll have to remember not to do that again.” I could tell she wanted to laugh, but she covered it with a sexy smirk.

“No. It was by the way you looked at me. It was distracting.”

Her gaze lingered on my eyes and caused my internal temperature to rise.

“How exactly did I look at you?” She continued scanning my body before zeroing in on my lips.

“Don’t act?—”

Before even finishing my thought, her mouth claimed mine. She had her hands around my waist, bringing me closer to her warm body as she pressed her lips to mine. My mind was swirling. I wanted to get lost in this kiss, but we needed to talk. Eventually, I put the make-out session on hold for a second to catch my breath and gather my thoughts.

“You think that’s going to make me forget how ornery you are?”

“It did for a second. But that’s not why I did it. I needed a little taste of you to start my day off right. I couldn’t help myself. You have no idea how much I want to begin every day with your lips on mine.”

Now wasn’t the time to bring up anything negative. She was being sweet and didn’t appear to have any doubts about us, so I didn’t want to bring her down.

“I’m sure that could be arranged.” I winked, and my heart skipped a beat, wondering if I was making promises I couldn’t keep. My face must have given me away because she tilted her head and examined me.

“If you don’t want to kiss me good morning, it’s not a deal-breaker. We can wait until we brush our teeth if that’s what you’re worried about.”

It was awful making her think my worries had anything to do with her. She was truly perfect, and I wanted to show her that, but was she too good to be true? Was I wearing rose-colored glasses that were blinding me to what our future would look

like?

“Stop it. I don’t care if we have bad breath or not. We will definitely start our days off together.” I forced a smile to push the doubts away.

Being with Leia was the best part of my day, and if I could have more of it, why wouldn’t I? But that would also change the entire dynamic of our relationship, and I wasn’t sure if I was ready for that. Why couldn’t I say those words?

“And I thought for today, we would sit and enjoy these cronuts and drinks then go for a walk?”

“Aww, thanks, babe. That sounds delicious.” She grabbed some paper towels and sat at the table, and I joined her.

We ate in companionable silence, and I reached for her hand. She intertwined our fingers immediately, and everything was so natural. This could be our lives, but then a flash of my mom screaming at my dad popped into my head, and I pulled back.

“Are you ready to go?” She took my action for being done, so I nodded and stood. “Alrighty. Let me get rid of the trash, and we can head out.”

After she grabbed her phone and keys, we left, hand in hand. As soon as we got outside, the wind blew my mane around, and I felt free—lighter. I inhaled deeply, then tried to exhale my past.

Once we made it to the park, I was better, and I was breathing easier. But instead of clearing the air as I had planned, I pointed out random trees and animals as if I was on the Discovery Channel. Fortunately for me, Leia went along with it and didn’t make fun of me. She even picked a tulip and tucked it behind my ear, which I found endearing.

When we finished our nature walk, we went to the store to get food for lunch. We had ended up spending so much time piddling around that we had to rush back to my place to get ready for Ty and David.

Typically, when I had company, I tried to go all out, but Ty loved me no matter what, so I didn't mind we weren't doing anything fancy. He would eat anything, and he told me hamburgers were David's favorite, which worked out for our plan to grill. I sliced up the veggies to grill and some extras for a salad, while Leia grilled. As I brought plates to the table, the doorbell rang.

"Lay, is the stuff on the grill ready? I'm going to answer that." But there was no response. That was weird. Maybe she didn't hear me.

I went to the front, only to realize she had gotten the door. For some reason, that caused my anxiety to rise, and I wasn't sure if I was ready for this. Why was I so nervous? Was I worried Ty would find red flags and cause me to worry more? Possibly.

"It's so nice to meet you. Girl, I've been telling Blake we should get together for weeks. She said you weren't ready yet, but I'm glad this is finally happening." Ty had his hands on Leia's forearms as he talked to her without taking a breath.

Leia appeared slightly confused but seemed to follow along okay.

I stood in the kitchen doorway, watching from afar but ready to step in and save her if need be. This wasn't how I expected them to be introduced. But it was going okay.

I silently moved closer as Leia responded, "Yeah, Blake and I both wanted to get better acquainted first before we involved our friends." She covered for me.

Oh my God, I was in love with her. That was not what I needed to pop into my head

when I already had these other things weighing me down. I shook those thoughts away as I approached Leia, sliding her out of Ty's vise grip.

"Hey, buddy. Where's your better half?" I threw shade at Ty, but he didn't argue.

Just then, David walked in holding a bottle of wine, grinning his perfect smile.

"It's so good to see you," I said excitedly because it was the truth. "David, this is Leia. Leia, this is David." I gave them a proper introduction, and David stuck out his hand toward Leia, and she shook it.

"It's very nice to meet you. I have heard wonderful things about you." He kissed the back of Leia's hand, which was customary for him because he was a true gentleman. Leia, however, seemed a little uneasy at the gesture, but she recovered quickly.

She gently removed her hand from his before responding. "It's great to meet you as well. Blake has said very lovely things about you. Both of you, actually." She eyed Ty and David and gave them her best smile that would make any woman's heart want to stop. They, however, didn't seem as fazed as I was.

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“I have nothing but wonderful things to say about Blake, too.” David handed me the bottle of wine. “This is for you. I wasn’t sure what you liked, but the owner of the winery said this was their number one seller.” David’s thoughtfulness was swoonworthy. He had a lot of the same qualities as Leia.

That was a weird thought, but when it came down to it, I guess Ty and I were alike, too.

As we walked to the dining room, I placed the bottle on the table and then went to grab the food.

“Hey, babe. Could you grab the wine and opener for me?” I asked as I set everything down.

She strolled over and kissed me on the cheek. “Of course. Does anyone need anything while I’m up?” She was always so considerate and asked that every time she got up. It didn’t matter where she was going. If she was on the move, she’d get whatever you needed, and it was another reason I loved her.

“No, we’re good. But you can spill some tea if you want. Blake has been a locked safe that I can’t crack.” Ty spoke loudly as Leia walked into the kitchen.

She returned with the wine and opener and raised a questioning brow in Ty’s direction. “And what tea is that? I assume you’re familiar with Blake. So, you want me to tell you my secrets?”.

“Not just you. I’m curious what your intentions are with my friend.” He chuckled, but

the heaviness that had lifted off my shoulders for a minute was back with a vengeance.

“Ty! You are not my dad,” I scolded, but Leia sat beside me, resting her hand on my thigh, sending calming vibes coursing me.

How could her touch work like a sedative and relax my entire body?

“It’s okay, babe. My intentions are to continue dating Blake, and hopefully, one day, we’ll have what we had in our dreams. I want to take things slow, but I could see a wedding in the future if we continue down this path.”

I swallowed hard. Marriage wasn’t something I ever believed in. It seemed more like a contractual agreement between two people and not a show of love.

“Ha! I’d love to see that!” Ty scoffed, and my face went white as a sheet.

Why would he say that? He was aware of my stance on marriage, but to say it out loud when I hadn’t discussed it with Leia yet was the worst thing he could have done.

Leia appeared confused. “Do you not see a future with me?” she questioned, and that was the last thing I wanted her to think.

“No! That’s not it at all. I’ve already seen so many futures with you, and each one was better than the last. But marriage...” I was unsure of the best way to describe it, so I let that sentence float in the wind.

I wasn’t ready for this conversation, but I had put it off long enough. “Is marriage that important? Isn’t the commitment to each other what matters?” Surely, she didn’t need a wedding to prove that what we had would last throughout this lifetime.

She moved her hand from my leg and seemed a little stiff. “To be honest, I never thought about marriage before you. Blake, I wanted to tell you this last night, but I fell in love with you before we even met. I want to spend my life not only telling you I love you but showing you. If you don’t want to get married, we don’t have to. But?—”

“Lay, I love you, too. I wish we had this conversation before. I didn’t want our first time saying those words to be in front of other people.” In my peripheral vision, I could see Ty staring like he was watching a made-for-TV movie, but I refocused on Leia.

She sighed, and I could see her eyes glistening a little. “I don’t care who is around. I’m just glad we finally said it. I didn’t like holding back because I was scared I was moving too quickly. But when it comes to the heart, you can’t put a time limit on things.” She leaned in and kissed my forehead.

That gesture always turned me into jelly. The gentle caress of her lips against my skin offered me comfort and safety.

“I’m sorry the idea of marriage triggers me. But I told you about my parents. It has tainted that kind of union for me.”

“I just want you to be happy. And if I can be the person to make you happy, that’s all that matters.” Her voice sounded different, but maybe it was all in my head.

We continued with lunch, but I couldn’t help but think the energy had shifted.

After Ty and David left, I hoped to have more time with Leia and continue our earlier conversation. Even though we had exchanged I love yous, we still needed to discuss things.

Then we could physically express ourselves. We had both been hesitant to do it, but tonight might be the night.

As we were cleaning up the mess from lunch, I saw her staring at her phone, and she had a confused expression.

“Hey?” I tried to get her attention to see if I could read her better.

She slid her phone into her back pocket before giving me a booty bump and smiling.

“What do you want to do?” I walked into the kitchen, and she followed.

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“Actually, I think I better head into the studio and clean up before Monday?” She put the leftovers in the fridge, and I wondered if she was leaving because she was upset.

“Do you want company? I’d be more than happy to help you.”

She shook her head and sighed. “Nah, babe. It won’t take me long, and I have to check on the status of another project. You stay here and rest. It’s been a long day.” She brushed my wild hair from my face, and her grayish eyes appeared to be staring into my soul.

“Okay. I’ll see you tomorrow then?” I didn’t want to be selfish when she had other things to do, but I was crushed she didn’t want to stay.

“Of course. And, Blake, I love you.” She brought her lips to mine and gently massaged my tongue with hers but pulled back before I could have a full taste.

“I love you, too. Forever.” I wanted her to be secure in the fact that my commitment to her wasn’t changing—marriage or not.

“All right, beautiful. I’ll talk to you soon.” She winked and headed out.

But all my brain could focus on was the fact she had used the word “talk” instead of “see.” Was that a slip-up, or did she do it on purpose? Why did I have to overthink everything? This would probably be another uneasy night.

Leia - Saturday

I hated leaving Blake after such an emotional day, but when I got the rejection email from The Queer Creative Arts Center, I was disheartened. I didn't open their letter to read why, I saw their "We regret to inform you..." and stopped. If I had continued, I would end up ruining a good day with Blake, and I didn't want that.

After meeting Ty and David and saying we loved each other, it seemed like we were in a good place. The marriage thing took me aback. I didn't understand it, but it wasn't a deal-breaker.

We had talked about her family, but not on a large scale. It was mostly that her parents were unhappy, and they made her question her self-worth. That made my blood boil because Blake was more than I could have ever hoped for. I couldn't imagine anyone not seeing how amazing she was, especially not her parents. However, the people close to us often failed to recognize our true identity, instead projecting their own assumptions onto us.

But Blake and I could talk about all those things another day when my head was clearer. I didn't want my sullen mood to affect any conversations about our future. No matter what we decided, we were destined to be together.

As I journeyed to the studio, I attempted to brainstorm ideas on how to persuade the organization to reconsider my proposal, but without understanding their reason for rejecting me, I was searching for answers blindly. Once I arrived, I rushed back to my office and fired up my computer. It didn't take me long to realize it was a generic rejection letter that didn't offer me any advice on what to do. They said to apply again in the future.

I kicked my feet up on my desk and reclined in my chair. It wasn't the only place I had applied for a grant, but it was the one I thought I had the best chance of getting.

This was beyond devastating, but it was out of my hands.

As I closed my eyes and tried to figure out my next steps, I heard: “Hootie-hoo.”

I popped my chair up so fast I nearly fell out. Shannon stood in the doorframe, laughing at the sight.

“What in the world are you doing here? How did you get in?”

“I had lunch with Toni, but she had a client after and had to leave. As I was walking by, I saw your light on and checked the door, only to find it unlocked, so I let myself in. You really shouldn’t leave it open like that. You could get robbed or even killed.” She plopped down in the empty seat in front of my desk.

“Right. You should stop watching the ID Channel. Anyway, what’s up?”

“Do I have to have an excuse to want to see my friend?”

“No, but I haven’t heard much from you since you and Toni started dating.”

“Well, that goes both ways. I haven’t even met this Blake woman, and the only thing I know about her is that you believe she’s your soul mate.” She crossed her arms as if daring me to argue.

“That’s fair. She and I have been in a love bubble.” Shanny's eyes widened as soon as the words were out of my mouth.

“Are you in love?” Her shock wasn’t unfounded, considering I hesitated to use that word unless I genuinely meant it.

I swallowed and nodded. “We exchanged those words today.”

She scooted to the end of her chair. “Then what are you doing here?”

I hadn’t told Shanny about my project, and now that I got my first rejection, I wondered if it was a hopeless idea. I shrugged, not sure what to say.

“Lay. What is going on? Are you having second thoughts about dropping the L bomb?”

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“No! Blake is my person, and I want a future with her, no matter what that looks like.”

“Then what’s the sad panda face for?”

I rolled my eyes. She always had a way with words. “It has nothing to do with Blake. I received some bad news, but it will be okay.”

She jumped up and sat on my desk. “You’re not dying, are you?”

“That went from zero to hundred pretty fast. Um, no. At least, not to my knowledge. It was a work thing, but I promise, it’s no big deal. I didn’t want my bad mood to bring Blake down.”

“I get that, but if she’s your person, she would want to be there for you. Through the good and the bad.” Apparently, booed-up Shanny was a relationship guru.

I scoffed. “You’re probably right.”

“That’s obvious. But I want to be here for you, too.” She stared at me with her crystal eyes, and I smiled.

“I appreciate that. But until I have good news, I’d rather keep this to myself if you don’t mind.”

“That’s fine. As long as you come to me if you need something.” She quirked a brow in my direction.

“I will. So, tell me more about you and Toni. I’m not sure I’ve ever seen you like this about anyone before.”

She got this goofy grin on her face, and I wondered if that was how mine looked any time I talked about Blake.

“Toni is... different.” She giggled, and I had to hide my amusement so she would continue. “She is so attentive in the bedroom and takes direction. I’ve never been with such an intense lover.”

A pang of jealousy washed over me because I wished to show Blake that kind of affection.

“And she has her shit together. It’s refreshing not having to pay for everything or being the only person without roommates.”

Did she really expect anything less when she typically dated women right out of college? Of course, I’d never say that out loud.

“That’s amazing, Shanny. I’m so happy for you. You two seem very compatible.” I was glad to see her with someone who was her equal.

“So, tell me about you and Ms. Thang.” She wagged her eyebrows, and I stared at her blankly.

“Don’t call her that.”

She held up her hands in surrender. “Sorry. But seriously. You love her, and I have no deets about your relationship. How did you get there? What’s she like? How’s the sex?”

How did I know this conversation would turn to that? It wasn't a topic I was fully ready to discuss since, for one, we hadn't consummated our relationship, and for two, Blake and I hadn't even talked about it.

Our first thoughts on sex were that we would take things slow because we didn't want to jump into things and potentially blow up our relationship. But now that we had spent so much time together and exchanged I love yous, I was almost a little gunshy about it because it had been such a long time coming. It seemed like everything had to be perfect now, which was a lot of pressure.

Not only had it been a very long time since I slept with someone I loved, but I had never experienced this kind of intensity towards anyone, and it almost made me feel inadequate. What if I didn't portray my love the way I wanted? What if we weren't sexually compatible? How would that affect our relationship?

"Did you go down a rabbit hole?" Shanny's voice broke me from my wild thoughts. "You've seriously been staring into space for the last five minutes."

"You asked what I love about Blake." I let out a satisfying breath. "The list is exhaustive, but for a start. She is smart and sassy. She doesn't take a lot of shit from anyone, but she also has a heart of gold. She doesn't like to show vulnerability, but with me, she lets her guard down and invites me inside. She has so many great qualities, and the more I find out, the harder I fall." I had never been so sappy in all my life, but the words poured out of me from my soul.

"Wow. So, who cries first after sex?" Shanny laughed, and I shook my head.

"Why do you have to be a jerk?"

"Come on. I was kidding. But really? How is it? Being in love is supposed to make it that much better. Is it true?"

“I’m not one to discuss my private life.”

“Okay. I won’t press the issue, but nod if I’m right.”

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“All right. Get out. I need to work.” I shooed her off my desk.

“Hey! I gotta have something to look forward to. But, if I’m honest, I don’t know if I could handle it being much better than it is right now.”

“Bye!” I waved at her, and she rolled her eyes.

“I’m leaving, but I want us to get together soon. I miss you!” She blew me a kiss.

“I miss you, too. How about the four of us get dinner this week?”

“Even better. Text me later. Love ya!”

“Love you, too,” I called out as she walked out the door.

I probably shouldn’t have been alone tonight. And Shanny was right. I should lean on Blake, but I didn’t want the night that we said I love you to be tainted by my sadness. I would text her to tell her what I was thinking.

Me: Hey, babe. I hope you’re having a good night. I think we need to talk. Can I see you tomorrow?

The three dots started dancing around, so I would wait for her response.

Blake: Definitely. Is everything okay?

Me: Yeah. I have some stuff on my mind. I love you.

Blake: Okay. I love you, too.

I didn't want to keep things from Blake and maybe she could even make me feel better about missing out on that grant. But I'd never shared my goals before, and sometimes, I wondered if I was out of my depth.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Blake - Sunday/Monday

As predicted. I had another lousy night's sleep. After Leia's text yesterday, I was worried that she was more upset than she was letting on. She said we needed to talk, which I was pretty sure was universal for breaking up, but I didn't want to jump to conclusions. Since my mind could be my worst enemy, I called for reinforcements—Ty.

“Thank you for coming here.” I blurted as I opened the door to see Ty and David standing there with coffee and sad smiles. “I'm sorry to call you over here so urgently, but I'm losing my mind.”

They followed me inside, and I shut the door behind us.

“Slow down. What's going on? You didn't give me enough information to formulate a strategy. All you said was Leia wanted to break up, and you needed to fix it. What happened?” Ty tried to calm me down, but it was David's embrace that finally slowed my racing heart.

I pulled out my phone to show him her text. “Look.”

“Well, what did she say when you called her?” Ty questioned, and I was confused.

“What? I didn’t call her?”

He sighed heavily. “You’re concerned she wants to break up, and you don’t call her?”

“No! She said she wanted to talk today. I didn’t want to put her on the spot. But now I’m freaking out. I can’t let her dump me. I love her. Like so much my body aches when she’s away from me.”

“Okay, okay. Is there anything that would cause her to want to break up? What she wants to talk about might not have anything to do with the relationship. David, the voice of reason, stepped in, but Ty quickly cut him off.

“It’s probably the marriage thing. She did seem a little off after that comment.”

I didn’t want him to say that because that was already my fear. But he was probably right. “Well, I can’t take it back now. What should I do?”

“Talk to her about it and explain your reasons. I’m sure she’ll?—”

Again, Ty couldn’t let him finish. “What you need is a grand gesture!” He jumped in, and I looked at David, who shrugged.

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“What do you mean?” I wasn’t opposed to doing something for her. I loved her, and she needed to know how serious I was.

“You need to go all out. Shower her with love. Rom-com style.” His eyes were darting back and forth like he was searching for answers.

“I still believe that having an honest discussion—” Poor David was ignored like Charlie Brown’s teacher.

“A scavenger hunt!” Ty shouted as proud as a peacock.

I stared at him disbelievingly. “A scavenger hunt? Why would I do that?”

“Why wouldn’t you do that? Anyone would be impressed with a scavenger hunt. Putting clues all over New York only to have her end up with you as the prize. That’s genius!”

“Okay. Hold on.” I rubbed my temples trying to push the idea out of my brain. “I got it!” Now I sounded like Ty.

“You have what? I gave you a golden idea. You didn’t need to come up with anything.” He crossed his arms defiantly.

“Well, your idea might have been golden, but mine is platinum.” I beamed.

“What does that mean?”

“What if I do a scavenger hunt, but the prize is... me?”

“Do you hear yourself? I literally said you were the prize.”

“No, you simpleton. I mean, the prize is me asking her to marry me. Like she gets me forever.”

“Yes!” he said excitedly. “Why didn’t I think of that?” Ty and I jumped up and down like we had won the lottery.

“Blake, is this a little rash? Didn’t you say the idea of marriage triggered you?” David came in with his logic, bringing our excitement down a notch.

“You’re right. But there is nothing I fear more than losing Leia, and marriage didn’t seem so scary if it was to her.” And a smile played across my face at the thought of waking up next to her for the rest of our lives.

“Before, I viewed it as a contract because that was how I grew up. You only got married if it was mutually beneficial for you. And the thought of that made me sick. It was transactional and had nothing to do with commitment.” I shook my head, thinking about my parents. “But just because that’s all I’ve seen, doesn’t mean that’s how my marriage has to be.”

“When you think about being married, what does your heart tell you?” David asked earnestly.

“I’ve never thought about marriage until now, but when I picture my life, she’s always in it, and that makes my heart dance. I don’t need to marry her to know she’s my person and I won’t be with anyone else. The difference is, I want to marry her because she’s my person. We’ve been together for many lives over, and I want the same in this life. Is that a ridiculous fantasy?”

Ty and David stood there with tears in their eyes, and I couldn't help but join them.

"So you're sure? This is what you want?" David wrapped his arms around me and Ty, making it a group hug.

"I have zero doubts."

"How can we help?" Ty questioned.

"Well, I'll start writing clues and then you give them to the places?"

"Sounds good. We'll split it up to make it go faster," David responded.

"Yeah, but don't send her too many places, or you'll be waiting a long time before she shows up."

"Good point. I can't believe I'm going to do this," I squealed. "Oh my god. I need to get a ring."

"You're fine. Text Leia and see what time she's coming over. Then we can figure out if we have time to do it all." Ty handed me my phone.

"You're so smart, buddy." I shot off a message, but the response I got back wasn't what I had hoped for. "She said she can't make it today, but she loves me and will talk to me tomorrow."

"Oh, babe. Do you think it's a sign not to do this?" Normally, I would have agreed with Ty's words, but why would she say she loved me if she was breaking up with me?

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“No. Something probably came up, and we will talk about it tomorrow. After the scavenger hunt.” I smiled and kept my positivity high. It was so unusual for me to be this hopeful, but Leia brought out the optimist in me.

“Okay, girl. Let’s get started, and at least you have a little more time now.” Look at Ty being all optimistic.

This was the sign. She was giving us the time we needed to make this proposal perfect!

Monday morning was here. Who would have thought, but last night, I slept better than ever. I was lighter and ready to talk to Leia and sweep her off her feet.

Ty and David delivered all the cards yesterday except the first one. I called Tom to inform him I would take a personal day today, and he was more than happy for me. He said I worked too hard, and with my billables as high as they were, I should expect a bonus come the end of the quarter.

Everything was coming up roses for me, and I couldn’t explain it. For once, it seemed like I was living my life the way I was supposed to, and I was excited for what was to come.

My heart was frantic inside my chest. It was getting closer to the time, and my anxiety was in overdrive. I was holding the little blue box with the channel-set baguette diamond ring. When I saw it yesterday, it called out to me. It was sleek but sexy, like Leia, and I hoped she would love it as much as I did. I’d never been this nervous or excited in my entire life.

After getting dressed, I got a text from Ty.

Ty: The eagle has landed.

Me: WTF?

Ty: I was trying to be stealthy. You ruin all my fun. I dropped off the first note, and I'd say you have a good hour before she finds you.

Me: This is a good idea, right?

Why did I have to be so neurotic?

Ty: Of course it is. Besides, it's too late now.

That didn't ease my fears, but he was right.

Me: What if she says no?

Ty: What happened to Upbeat Blake? Stop putting negative energy into the universe.

Me: I'm preparing myself. If she says no, I won't ever recover.

Ty: She's not going to say no. She loves you, and you're the most amazing person. She's lucky to have you in her life.

Me: Thanks, Ty. Did David tell you what to write? HAHA.

Ty: I can be sweet, too. But, yes, he is next to me.

I couldn't help but laugh. I loved them both so much; regardless of who said what, I

was doing better.

Me: Thank you, both. I'll tell you how it goes.

Ty: We don't need all the dirty deets. The highlights will suffice!

I shook my head as I laughed.

Me: If you don't hear from me tonight, it's good news!

I put my phone away and took some grounding breaths. This was it. There was no turning back, and even though I was nervous, I knew I didn't want to. My future was Leia, and all I wanted to do was move forward—with her.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Leia - Monday

Monday was rough. My proposal was rejected by the other two organizations to which I had applied, and I was beyond crushed. Again, none of them gave me any indication as to why. I wanted to puke.

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I was supposed to see Blake yesterday, but I wouldn't have been good company, and Haley came back early because she had another fallout with Adam. So, by the time I comforted her, I had forgotten about my own issues, and it seemed like a better idea to talk to Blake when I had a fresh mind.

But since I was upset about canceling, I had flowers sent to her office—lilies—her favorite. I hoped it would make up for my absence. I also wanted to do something special for her tonight, so on the card, I invited her to my place for dinner.

The flowers should have been delivered by now, but I hadn't heard from her. Maybe she was waiting for me to call or text first? Before deciding what to do, I heard the bells above the door up front ring.

“Excuse me. Hi, I don't know you, but you're fabulous, and I was wondering if you could help me.”

Someone was talking, and they sounded familiar, but I wasn't sure who it was. I figured I'd hang out in the back and let Haley get rid of them.

“Aww, thank you!” she gushed, and after this weekend, that compliment probably meant even more. “How can I be of service?”

“So, I'm looking for someone. Her name is Leia, and I have something vital to deliver to her.”

“Oh my God. Is she being sued? Are you trying to serve her?” Haley and her extremes.

“Honey, no. I’m a friend of Blake’s, and I’m on a mission. Is she here?”

“Yeah, she’s in the?—”

I finally joined them up front when I recognized the voice. “Ty, what’s going on? Is she?—”

“Thank baby Jesus. I was afraid you wouldn’t be here, and I’d have to put on my private dick hat to track you down.”

“Why did she send you? Is she hurt? Or upset?” Now, it was my turn to imagine the worst.

“Is there something in the air here? Why are you two wound so tight? Take this.” He handed me an envelope that had my name on it with a heart dotting the i.

“What is this? Did she get my?—.”

He clapped his hands together like he was brushing them off. “Look, my job is done. I assume you can figure it out when you open it. Ciao, ladies.” He blew us a kiss and gave Haley a tiger growl, which she blushed and giggled at, and then he left.

“Who’s Ty? He seems fun.”

“He’s Blake’s best friend, and he definitely grows on you.” Even though I had only met him once before, from the way Blake talked about him, he was someone we could trust.

“What are you waiting for? Open it up. Let’s see what he brought you.” Haley squealed like a kid on Christmas day, and I was glad to see her in better spirits after yesterday.

It was hard seeing her upset about Adam yet again. She had told me they made up this morning, but I worried he would keep disappointing her. However, that wasn't my choice to make, so I kept my mouth shut and continued to be a supportive friend.

Since she seemed to include herself in this, I didn't want to tell her no. So I opened the envelope and pulled out a piece of paper. In typed letters, it said:

GO TO THE STORE WHERE YOU GET YOUR TEA,

RIGHT OUTSIDE IS WHERE YOU FIRST MET ME.

"Oh my God! Oh my God!" Haley squealed in a voice that dogs could probably hear.

"What are we 'Oh my Godding'?" I could tell it was a riddle, but I didn't understand what it was for.

"Do you seriously not know? It's a scavenger hunt. She's sending you to places that meant something in the relationship, only to end with you finding the prize."

That sounded sweet. I wondered if it was in response to my flowers. "What's the prize?"

"That's what we'll figure out once we go to Tea-Riffic?" Again, it seemed she was already along for the ride with or without my permission.

Her expression was so full of hope and excitement that I didn't want to bring her down.

"All right. Turn the sign to 'closed,' and let's go." I set the alarm and locked the door. I wasn't sure where this would take me or how long I'd be, but I guess I'd find out.

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Haley and I set out to Tea-Riffic. When we arrived, a lady was helping a customer, so we waited in line. When it was our turn, Haley jumped right in.

“Excuse me. This might sound weird, but do you have something with the name ‘Leia’ on it?” As if this was her game to play, she beamed at the worker and batted her eyelashes.

The woman behind the counter brightened and smiled broadly as she pulled out the envelope and handed it to Haley. I yanked it out of her hand so quickly that the lady frowned and gave me a disapproving look.

“I’m actually Leia. Thank you for your help.” Not that I needed to explain myself to a total stranger.

I tugged Haley out of the shop to read my next clue. We stopped on the sidewalk, away from everyone, and I pulled out the note:

RIGHT AFTER I TRIED TO KISS OFF YOUR FACE

WE WENT TO TALK AT THIS PLACE

“I remember that. She went all-in on you.” Haley chuckled, and I allowed myself to get lost in that moment for a second.

“Yes. How on earth could I forget that kiss? And after we’d gone to Double Shift.” As we walk-jogged to the bar, I had to admit, I was getting excited. What was Blake up to? I was dying to find out.

Before we entered, I grabbed Haley. “May I do the talking?”

“Sure thing, boss. I can’t help that I’m eager!” She shrieked.

“I know, hon. But I’d kinda like to take the lead on this, if you don’t mind.”

“You got it! I’m your trusty sidekick.”

I approached Iris, the barkeep, who waved an envelope in her hand. Oh, the joys of being a regular.

“Leia, it’s been a while. I’m guessing you aren’t here for a drink?” She smirked at me, then eyed Haley before handing me the letter.

“Not today, I’m afraid. But I’ll be back—soon. You can count on it.”

“You better. Things haven’t been the same without you and Shannon around.” She turned her appraising gaze toward Haley. “You should come, too. I’m pretty sure we haven’t met.”

“Oh, I don’t normally come here. I’m helping Leia out,” Haley responded, but not in her normal bubbly self. She seemed more reserved—maybe uncomfortable since it was a queer bar.

I wasn’t sure why, but I didn’t have time to dissect it right now.

“Well, you guys are always welcome,” Iris said to both of us but kept her focus directly on Haley.

I eyed them both, then grabbed the envelope. “Thanks, Iris. We’ll come back soon. The whole gang.”

I then removed the next clue:

WHERE WE GO FOR BREAKFAST, AND IT DOESN'T SUCK

GET YOUR LAST RHYME FROM THAT FOOD TRUCK.

This was an easy one. "Anytime we get together in the mornings, we always hit Rolling Guacamole."

Haley appeared to want to say something but shook her head and walked on. I, for one, was happy. I wasn't in the headspace for a deep conversation.

As we continued walking, Haley finally broke the silence. "Do you have any clue why she'd do something so romantic for you?"

Was she being romantic or just cute?

I shrugged. "I thought this was something fun. But you think it means something more?"

"Boss, please. You can't be that daft when it comes to grand gestures. She's making a statement. And whatever it is, I bet the ending is big."

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After I'd been MIA recently, I hoped she wasn't leading me to slaughter.

"But it's probably a good surprise, right?"

"I can't imagine it being something bad. I mean, you didn't do anything wrong, did you?" She elbowed me like she was kidding but looked at me as if expecting an answer.

"Umm... I don't think I did anything wrong, exactly. I haven't spoken to her much recently."

"Because of me?" She sounded genuinely concerned, and I didn't want her to think she was the problem.

"No. Not because of you. I was supposed to go to her place yesterday, but you're my friend, and you needed me."

"But you told her that, right? That you were with me?"

"I don't think so. I said something came up, but I told her I loved her, and I would see her today. And I even sent flowers to her work with a sweet card."

"What if she's not at work today?" Her eyes widened, and I hadn't thought of that.
"Boss, when was the last time you talked to her?"

"We had lunch with Ty and David on Saturday, and I left a little after that, but I texted her Saturday night and yesterday."

“Wait a minute. You haven’t seen or spoken to her, besides texts, in a day and a half?”

“Technically, no, but I’ve been in contact and let her know I was thinking about her.” I shook my head at how selfish I had been by not letting Blake in.

She was the best thing ever to happen to me, and I didn’t want her to see me so disheartened. My fear of her seeing me as a failure had kept me from leaning on her. Why was I afraid she would look at me differently? I was probably worried it would make it more real to me if I said something.

“Leia, this doesn’t sound like you at all. You love that woman so damn much. Why were you avoiding her?”

Why was Haley so observant?

“I’m not sure.” I hung my head.

“Look. You need to put your fears aside and focus on opening up to Blake. What you have with her is special. You are that couple who makes everyone else sick by how cute you are together. If she was worried, she probably wouldn’t go through all this to ask.”

God, I hoped she was right. There wasn’t anything I could do now but continue to the food truck and see what was in store.

When we arrived, we were the only people there.

“I’m sorry to bother you, but do you have an envelope with the name ‘Leia’ on it?” I asked the man behind the window.

“Sure do, sweetheart. You her?”

I chuckled because how else would I have known about it if I wasn't her? But I kept that thought to myself.

“Yes, I am. May I have it?”

“Sure thing.” He winked at me before handing it over.

I immediately ripped it open and yanked out the paper:

GO TO THE PLACE WE LIKE TO WALK

THE ONE WHERE I TURN INTO BINDI IRWIN WHEN I TALK

(OUR BENCH)

“What does that mean?” Haley couldn't stop laughing, and a huge smile crept across my face at the memory.

“We went to Central Park on Saturday, and I thought we would talk, but for some reason, she kept blurting out the kinds of trees and animals around. She was so cute doing it that I couldn't help but join in.”

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“All right. Let’s see what this surprise is. The anticipation is killing me!”

Haley took off, and I almost sprinted to catch up to her. She knew where the park was, but she had no idea where “our bench” was, so I wasn’t too concerned she’d find out before me, but I still didn’t want to risk it.

Once we got to the park, I took a left, and Haley followed close behind. We were almost out of breath, but it was worth it. When I came around the corner to our bench, I stopped dead in my tracks. I had to Heisman Haley to keep her back, and she ran right into my arm before she realized we were there.

The scene was heart-stopping, or more accurately, the opposite. My heart beat so incredibly fast that it could have stopped from overexertion.

Blake stood in front of the bench in the sexiest dress I’d ever seen. It was short and black, with a V that went to the middle of her stomach. Her hair was down and wild, the way I loved, and she beamed at me but then appeared shocked. I followed her eyes, and she was staring at Haley.

I realized this was a private moment, and it was time to say goodbye. “Hales, thank you so much for your help today, but I think I got it from here. Go home, and I’ll call you later.”

“What? I can’t see the surprise?”

I cocked my head, and she bowed out gracefully. She leaned in and hugged me. “You better call me ASAP. The anticipation is killing me!”

“Okay. Bye.”

Then I faced Blake again, and my heart was back in sprint mode. I walked toward her, trying to calm my nerves, but I never once took my gaze off her. I was totally, irrevocably hers, and I was going to tell her.

Chapter Thirty

Blake - Monday

Oh my God. What was Haley doing here? I couldn't do this. Not in front of her. What if Leia said no? I had to abort this plan now! This was a bad idea.

But then I saw Leia striding toward me with a purposeful look on her face, and my excitement kicked into high gear. When we locked eyes, nothing was more right. This was where I was supposed to be and what I wanted to do.

“Hey,” she whispered in that husky voice of hers that made my insides liquefy.

“Hey, yourself. I see you solved the puzzle?”

“I did, but I wasn't sure if this was going to be a good ending or not. I owe you an apology.” She smiled sadly, and I hated that she was holding on to those emotions.

“An apology for what? You didn't do anything wrong. This was sort of my way of showing you I was sorry.”

She shook her head. “What did you do wrong? I didn't let you in on what I was going through, and that was why I had been so quiet.”

“Because you were upset about the wedding stuff?” I probed, but she appeared

confused.

“What wedding stuff?” Her response gave me pause.

“What were you talking about?”

“We can talk about my stuff later. Did you at least get my flowers?”

I was lost: “Her stuff,” “flowers.” None of that made sense to me.

“No. I was planning this, so I have been running around. But sit with me?” I laced my fingers with hers, and she brought my hand to her lips, kissing the back of it.

As we sat down, the comfort inside of me soared. Being with her in this place was like a never-ending dream, a perfect forever.

“You are so breathtaking,” she exhaled as she rested her forehead on mine. “I can’t believe how lucky I am to have found you.”

“Technically, I found you,” I teased, but I understood what she meant.

“This was the sweetest thing anyone has ever done for me. Since you didn’t get my gift, you wouldn’t realize I was planning on making you a nice dinner to make up for missing out yesterday.”

“You don’t need to make anything up to me. But I’m not going to say no to dinner if that’s still on the table. But I do have something I want to talk about first. If you don’t mind.”

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She smiled at me and nodded. “You can talk to me about anything, Blake. I want us always to be open and honest.”

I stared directly into her gray eyes that had stolen my heart lifetimes over. “Lay, there is nothing I wouldn’t do for you.” I started and thought about getting down on one knee, but this dress was for seducing, not proposing, so I’d have to improvise. “Do you mind standing up for this?”

She cocked her head to the side before agreeing and getting to her feet. I kept hold of her hand, even though mine was now shaking. I stared up at her as she questioningly gazed down at me.

“So...” My heart was like a woodpecker beating at my chest. I counted to ten backward, trying to slow my pulse. “Lay, we’ve lived lifetimes together in our dreams. And, at the time, it made me jealous. I saw how happy we were in those visions, and I wanted that in this life, but I’d never felt that before—ever.” I exhaled those negative thoughts.

“But that changed when I met you. Not only was I happy, but I was whole. It wasn’t that you completed me. It was that you helped me to be better. I love the person I am when I’m with you. And that was something I struggled with my entire life.” This was getting too deep, and I needed to bring the focus back to us.

“My parents made me believe marriage was a farce—something of a chore. And I never wanted that because I didn’t want anyone beholden to me out of obligation. But what I realized is we aren’t my parents. If we stand up in front of our friends and family to tell them we’re spending the rest of our lives together, it’s because we want

to, not because we need to.”

“Blake?” Leia stared at me expectantly, and I was getting ahead of myself.

“I’m saying I want to wear a gorgeous dress and have you in a sleek tux and tell the entire world that you’re mine and I’m yours, and we are spending eternity together. So, Leia Rain Carlson, would you stand up in front of our family and friends and make them so jealous of what we have together?”

I reached in between my breasts, and I saw Leia’s eyes go wide as they followed my hand. I smirked as I pulled out the ring I had tucked inside my bra and held it up to her finger.

“What do you say? Would you be up for this ride with me in this life?” My hand was shaking as she locked eyes on the ring.

She didn’t move or speak, and I was thinking I over shot. What if it was too soon? Maybe I should have waited longer than one day after saying I love you. But nothing about this relationship went by average timelines.

Finally, she sat back down but still didn’t take the ring from me. As defeat coursed through my body, she grabbed my face and pressed her hungry lips to mine. She kissed me so fervently that I almost dropped the ring, but I didn’t care. I wanted to take it all in—to take her all in.

After what seemed like hours of making out, she eventually pulled away, catching her breath.

“Blake, I can’t for one second tell you how much you mean to me.” She kissed me again, but she didn’t let me get lost in it this time. “I’m sorry I was absent yesterday and ducked after lunch. I should have told you I was dealing with some disappointing

news at work, but I kept it to myself. And then Haley needed me, and I was wrapped up in her drama. All I wanted the entire time was to be with you because you are the calm in my storm. And I want to be your co-pilot on this journey. I trust you to take the wheel, and I'll follow your lead." She glanced at the ring again and smiled.

"So, that's a 'yes'?" I moved the ring closer to her finger.

"It's without a shadow of a doubt, yes. I want you for as long as I can have you."

I slid the ring onto her finger. "Forever. You can have me forever." I leaned in and kissed her soft and slow before pulling back. "I don't want to be presumptuous, but would you like to celebrate this special event at my place? Possibly in my bedroom?"

She jumped off the bench, taking me with her. "My house is closer. Let's go."

We barely made it to Leia's room before her mouth was on my neck, and her fingers were unzipping my dress.

"God, I've wanted you for so long, Blake."

She moved her lips to my collarbone as she slipped the strap down my shoulder. My eyes rolled skyward, and my body went weak in her arms, but she held me tightly against her so I wouldn't fall. Her fingers trailed down my back, which caused a ripple of goosebumps in their wake.

"I'm going to take your bra off. Are you okay with that?" She tipped her head down to make eye contact with me. All I could do was nod, but she kept staring. "Blake, I want to make sure this is what you want. Please say the words."

"Take me," were the only words that came out, and that was the green light she needed because, within seconds, I was standing there in my panties. My dress and bra

were lying in the chair beside her bed, and she appeared ready to pounce.

Her lips were back on my neck and moving down to my chest before I noticed she was still clothed.

“Babe, why aren’t you naked?”

She stopped devouring me and ripped her shirt over her head. After she unsnapped her bra, she let them both fall to the floor. My eyes widened as I stared at her small but scrumptious breasts. This grabbed my attention, and my mouth couldn’t stay away.

She let out a slight moan, and my hands made their way to the button of her pants. I moved my mouth down to her stomach as I dropped to my knees and slid her jeans down to her ankles. I gazed up, and her breathing was irregular while she stepped out of her pants, kicking them to the side.

I gently traced my fingers up her legs until I was tickling the inside of her thigh. She was still in her boy shorts, and I ran my tongue lightly over the middle of her wetness, making her knees shake a little. The expression on her face was one I wanted to burn into my mind forever. Her eyes were closed, and her mouth was slightly open as she stuttered something I couldn’t make out.

“What was that?” I licked harder this time, and she ran her fingers through the back of my hair, holding my head in place.

“I said more,” she exhaled between ragged breaths.

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“Oh, babe. I’ll give you anything you want.” I hooked my fingers in the waistband of her underwear and pulled them down while my thumbs brushed against her center. She shuddered, then discarded them with the rest of her clothes. “Will you lie down?” I asked.

She scooted until her legs hit the edge of the bed and pushed herself onto her back but stayed reclined on her elbows, watching my every move.

“Flip over?” I said it as a question, but it was more of a demand.

She did so without complaint, and I trailed my tongue from her calf up to her ass and gave it a playful bite. She squirmed a little, but I had a feeling she liked it. As I continued moving up her body, I lightly dug my nails into her back, dragging them all the way to her hair. She moaned as I tugged her head to the side to make room for me to nibble on her neck.

Then, I took this opportunity to claim her mouth with mine. My tongue danced with hers as I tightened my grip on her hair. Finally, I released my hold, and she flipped onto her back. I was now astride her front, and I would take full advantage. With my soaked panties, I was grinding against her wetness.

“Blake, I’m ready. Can you take off your thong?” She had lust in her eyes, and I was ready, too.

I did as she asked and then lowered myself onto her. Having her body against mine without a barrier between us was better than anything I could have imagined. I wanted all of her at once, but I also wanted to savor this moment because this would

be the only first time we would get.

I slowly spread her legs and glided one finger inside as I continued rubbing against her. When I was getting ready to add another finger, she moved underneath me.

“I love you. And I love that you’re taking your time, but I need you—now!”

She swiftly removed my hand before flipping me on my back. She had tugged me to the edge of the bed with my legs hanging off before I realized what was happening. When I looked down and saw her between my legs, my pulse took off at a rapid speed. When she brought her mouth to my center, I thought I might pass out.

My God, her tongue was like magic. She was inside me before licking between my folds, then darting back and forth across my clit. My brain couldn’t register the pleasure fast enough before she was on to the next spot. When she reached over to her nightstand, pulled out a small pink vibrator, and turned it on, I tensed in anticipation. I wasn’t sure my body would handle much more stimulation.

But she started with my inner thighs, gently teasing a ticklish spot while continuing to work me with her tongue. Then she moved it to my opening and barely put it in. I bucked my hips, urging her to go deeper, but she tsked me like I was an insolent child.

What the fuck happened to now? But I let her stay in control.

“Do you want me to fuck you, Blake?”

My eyes popped open. I liked where this was going.

“Yes.”

“Yes, what? I need you to say it.”

“I want you to fuck me, Leia. I want you to fuck me until I don’t remember my own name.”

“I can arrange that.” She was off, pushing the vibrator deep inside me as she continued sucking my clit. Her free hand held my hips down as if she could tell I would float away if she didn’t. As she moved the toy in and out harder and faster, my lids fluttered shut. “Open your eyes. I want you to look at me when you come.”

Bossy—I liked it. I willed my eyes open as spots danced around, but I focused on her as she played my body like a violin, using her tongue as the bow. I reached behind her head and tugged her hair a little. She smirked as she continued pleasing me.

When she went even faster, I couldn’t hold off any longer—pleasure ripped through me like waves, and I was screaming her name. I forced my gaze to stay locked on her, and I said, “I love you,” as I was coming down from the best orgasm I’d ever had in my life.

She removed the vibrator but continued to indulge me with her mouth until my breathing leveled out. Then she started kissing my stomach, up my rib cage, until she reached my nipple, where she swirled her tongue around. Finally, taking it into her mouth, she lightly bit and sucked until my body was involuntarily responding with a throbbing between my legs again.

She continued her journey and was now fully on top of me with my lower lip between her teeth.

“Do you know how good you taste? I’m going to need to do that again in the very near future.” Before I could respond, her tongue was on mine, and I was lost in the thought of having this woman for the rest of my life.

I had no idea what I did to deserve this level of happiness, but I was looking forward to many more lifetimes together.

Epilogue

Blake - Sunday (Six months later)

“So, how has married life been treating you?” Ty questioned while seemingly scrutinizing me.

I couldn't keep my lips from hitching up at the corners. Not because we were “married,” but because I immediately pictured Leia in that slim-lined white tuxedo jacket with a lacy corset underneath with form-fitting pants, and the thought took my breath away. It had only been two days since we tied the knot, but I was pretty sure I had a smile plastered on my face ever since.

“That shit-eating grin says enough.” He chuckled.

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“I can’t help it. I think my face is permanently like this now.” My cheeks hurt, but I didn’t care at all.

My mom would scold me for causing more wrinkles, but I didn’t have a good RBF like her.

“So, what about you, Leia? Are you still deliriously happy?” Ty questioned.

“This is the first time Blake and I have put clothes on in two days,” Leia responded, and Ty groaned.

“I didn’t need that mental image. But I’m glad you two decided not to greet us in your birthday suits.” He got up and went to the kitchen.

Just then, the doorbell rang.

“Lay, you want me to grab it?” I questioned.

“I checked the Ring. It’s Shannon and Toni. I’ll tell them to come in.” Which she did through the app.

The two of them entered the house holding hands while Shannon held a bottle of wine in the other.

“Hey, everybody. The party is here!” Shannon whooped, which was true because Shannon did like to party.

I was so glad I had the last six months to get to know her and Toni. They were so cute together, and it wouldn't surprise me at all if they took steps toward moving in or marriage even. It was weird how we all found our person at the same time in our lives.

We were still waiting on three more people to arrive at our we-are-leaving-for-two-weeks-on-our-honeymoon party. Leia and I both agreed we could take one night off from our sex-a-thons to socialize with our friends since we'd be in Greece and incommunicado. I was sure we would see the sights, but I was looking forward to discovering more of her body on a different continent. While I was lost in my own world, the doorbell rang again.

"It's Haley. Come In." Leia announced, and Haley walked in with Adam in tow.

"Oh my God, can you believe I've never been here before? Thank you so much for having us. We're so excited!" Haley exclaimed while Adam looked like he'd rather be anywhere else but here. I didn't know him that well, but he never appeared too thrilled.

"We're glad to have you," I responded.

"But hopefully, this won't be our place for long. We're on the lookout for something else," Leia called out from the kitchen.

I had sold my place and moved into Leia's after getting engaged, but we wanted something to call "ours."

"Well, this place is great. If you're looking to sell it, I might be interested." Haley turned to Adam, who stared blankly as if he wasn't even listening.

"I'll keep that in mind." Leia walked in and wrapped her arm around my waist.

As I was about to shut the door, David strolled up, holding a huge bouquet.

“Wow, gangs all here,” I acknowledged now that the final three had wandered in.

I motioned for Haley and Adam to take a seat. Haley fit right in talking to Shannon and Toni while Adam was doing something on his phone.

“Thank you so much for having me.” David hugged me before handing me a beautiful bouquet of lilies. “These are for you and Leia.” I grabbed the flowers from him and headed into the kitchen area to put them in water.

“What do you have for me?” Ty asked as he came up to David, sticking out his cheek.

David wrapped his arm around Ty’s waist and kissed his dimple. “I gave you my heart. Do you need anything else?”

Ty pointed to his lips, and David gave him a peck.

Leia joined me in the kitchen to get the food, and I grabbed a bottle of wine.

“Is there anything you need help with?” David asked.

“I think we’re good. We were waiting for everyone to arrive. Now that all of you are here, we can sit and eat.”

We brought the goodies to the table, joining the rest of the group.

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After everyone sat down, we stood there with Leia's arm wrapped tightly around my waist. My body reacted, and I didn't trust myself being in such close proximity to her. But it had been too long since we'd been alone, and I craved her touch so much I was willing to risk it.

When I made eye contact with her, she quirked her eyebrow, and it was as if she was reading my mind.

She raised her wineglass to propose a toast. "Friends. I know you're here to celebrate our big trip, but I also have some exciting news." She looked at me as if asking for approval. "Blake and I are starting a non-profit. We don't have everything worked out yet, but we want to offer free classes to LGBTQ+ youth to learn about the creative arts. It is something I'm passionate about and something Blake is fully on board with. And if you all want to volunteer any time or energy, we kindly accept."

I was so proud of her for wanting to make a difference in the world, and I couldn't be more excited to start this program with her. Since neither of us wanted children of our own, this would be our baby together. Everyone seemed excited as they clinked their glasses together and cheered.

"We are so lucky to have you all in our lives, so thank you for loving us so much. Please enjoy the food and the company. Dig in." She put her glass down as everyone started filling their plates.

I locked eyes with her one more time to make sure we were on the same page, and she discreetly walked down the hall, leaving the party to start without her.

I pretended like I was getting food while everyone else appeared deep in conversation or already eating. I did one glance to ensure no one was paying attention, and then I scurried down the hall. As I was trying to find Leia, an arm grabbed me, pulling me into the bathroom. Once I was inside and the door was closed behind us, she had me pinned against the vanity.

“My God, you look gorgeous.” She kissed my collarbone as I tilted my head back to give her more room to maneuver.

“How’d you know I was going to follow you?”

“It was in your eyes, and I wanted the same thing.” She tugged my shirt over my head, and I was standing there in my bra. Her fingers were playing with my nipples over the material. I was throbbing between my legs. She turned me to face the mirror, then reached around, unbuttoned my pants, and slid them down to give her room to maneuver.

My ass pressed against her as she entered me from behind.

“I was right. You were ready for this.” She’d pushed one finger inside me, and I gasped. She moved her other hand to cover my mouth as she locked eyes with me in the mirror. “We have to be quiet and quick. Can you come for me?”

Since I wasn’t able to speak, I nodded.

She continued thrusting in and out of me. “We’ll go soft and slow later, but right now, I’m going to fuck you in this bathroom until you have to bite your lip to keep from screaming my name. I want you to come hard and fast.”

While still fingering me, she removed her hand from my mouth and slid it down to play with my clit. That was all it took, and we both watched as I came undone.

I was writhing at her touch while floating in an ocean of ecstasy. She held me tighter as I rode out the wave of pleasure. I was pretty sure we weren't stealthy, but I didn't care. I loved this woman, and I wasn't about to hide that. Once I came down from my orgasm, she removed her fingers from inside me.

"Your turn," I stated as I faced her, topless and my pants still at my ankles.

"Not now, sweetheart—tonight. I couldn't wait another second to get my hands on you."

She moved around me to the sink to wash up, and I held her from behind. We looked at each other in the mirror again, and I got up on my tippy-toes to kiss her shoulder.

"I love you, and I love us. I can't wait for this honeymoon. I'm going to fuck you all over Greece. We might even get banned for indecency." I laughed as she tilted her head toward me and gave me a sweet kiss.

"I love you, too, and this life together is only beginning." She dried her hands on the towel, then gave me a little spank. "You walk out first, and I'll come a little later." She picked up my shirt and handed it to me while I pulled up my jeans.

I slid it over my head. "Yeah, you will. Over and over again if I have anything to say about it." I raised my eyebrows up and down while smirking.

"Go on, you sex fiend. I'll see you in a bit. Try to be cool, okay?"

"I'm always cool. No one will be the wiser." I opened the door to slip out and ran right into Ty.

"Well, well, well. What have you been up to?"

“Me?” My voice cracked, and Ty looked even more skeptical.

“Yes, you. If I walk in the bathroom, will I find Leia?”

“No! She isn’t in there,” I said louder than needed. “But the toilet is broken, so I’d use a different bathroom.” I tried to shoo him away.

“I just need to wash my hands,” he countered.

Just then, Leia opened the door and patted Ty on the shoulder. “It’s all yours, bud.” She smiled smugly and went to join the party in the dining room.

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“I knew it!” He pointed at me accusingly, but I wasn’t ashamed.

“So what? We had a quickie. Can you blame me? That woman is intoxicating.”

“Well, I can’t confirm that because I’m allergic to cats, but I’m happy for you. And I won’t tell anyone.” He mimed, zipping his lips. “But my intuition is never wrong.”

“Thank you, and I’m happy for you, too. David is the best. And you’re going to run out there and tell him.” I walked down the hall and heard him cackling, and I figured I was right.

After dinner, we all sat around while Ty regaled us with the story of Greg getting the boot at work. I never thought he would get fired after being there for so long, but he had let his personal life take precedence over work. I didn’t know if Steph was still a part of that life, but I honestly didn’t care.

Greg showed his true colors when Tom told him it was time to go, and he threw a tantrum. Seeing a grown man stomp and cry and scream about how this company would be nothing without him made me realize I had been right about him all along.

As the night was winding down, I had one more surprise I wanted to do. I’d texted Toni before she came to tell her my plan, and she was more than willing to help. It was hard to be sneaky with so many people around, so I decided to do it in front of everyone.

“Hey, all. I want to thank you again for coming. This has been an awesome night, and we really will miss you.”

“Let’s be real. I doubt we’ll be a second thought in your mind while you and Leia are... seeing the sights,” Ty chimed in, and I laughed.

“That’s probably true, but we do love you and we’re glad you made it. I asked Toni for a special favor tonight, and I want you all to witness it.”

Toni brought out her tools and laid them on the table. “You ready?”

“As I’ll ever be.” I was excited but also a little nervous. I’d never been a fan of needles, and the thought of them being repeatedly jabbed into my arm was making me second-guess my decision. But seeing the look on Leia’s face made my fear dissipate.

“Sweetheart, what are you doing?” Lay questioned.

“I’ve asked Toni if she’ll give me a tattoo that connects to your puzzle piece. I want it to be your match. That way, when we walk side by side, they’ll fit together—like us. Yours says, ‘ti trovero’ or, ‘I’ll find you.’ Mine will say, ‘mi hai trovato’ or, ‘you found me.’”

Tears were welling up in Leia’s eyes. She rushed to me and took my face in her hands as she placed the sweetest kiss on my lips.

“You mean everything to me, and you don’t have to do this. I’m not going anywhere.”

“I’m not doing this out of obligation. I’m doing this because I love you, you complete me, and I want a piece of you with me at all times.”

She gazed into my eyes and then kissed the top of my head like she always did. “You don’t have any idea what this means to me.”

“Well, it means a lot to me, too—possibly even more. Babe, before you, I was walking around on my own as if I didn’t need anyone or anything. I thought I was happy, but I had no idea what happy was. You made me see things with brand-new eyes. With your love, you chiseled away my protective wall, and I opened my heart to you, which has been, hands down, the best decision I’ve ever made.” I stared into those beautiful, misty eyes.

“Everything always leads back to you. Life without you wasn’t really living. Love without you wasn’t really loving. And being without you is no longer an option. You’re mine, and I’m yours—in the past lives, in this life, and for all the future lives we get. But when we meet again, our souls will look back at this moment right here, and know that we had the greatest love of all.”

There wasn’t a dry eye in the house, not even Ty’s.

"You are the sun that brightens my days and the moon that guides my nights. I’d be lost without you." Leia wiped the tears off my cheeks and studied me one more time.

“Let’s get this show on the road!” Ty yelled, and it was obvious he was trying to play off his emotions. “You might be crying for a different reason once it starts.” He chuckled, and I gave him a warning glare.

Needless to say, this was a night I would never forget. It was full of laughter, fun, love, and Ty losing an eyebrow, but that was a story for another time. What I would remember the most was the feeling I had every minute I spent with Leia. And I said a special thanks to the universe for letting me get to relive that over and over.