



Irresistible (Neighbor from Hell 11)

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Category: Young Adult

Description: From bestselling author R.L. Mathewson comes the long-awaited Neighbor from Hell Novel...

Irresistible.

There weren't many things that Aidan regretted, but that night he'd spent with the woman that he couldn't stop thinking about was definitely one of them. He'd always been careful, always did the right thing, and now...

Now he had to figure out a way to fix this before it was too late.

Melanie still couldn't figure out how one night could change the rest of her life. She should have done a lot of things differently that night, she should have turned him down, should have spent the rest of the night wallowing in self-pity, but that's not what happened and now, she needed to figure out how she was going to survive this pregnancy with a Bradford doing everything in his power to make her fall in love with him.

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Prologue

“Do you have a band-aid? Because I scraped my knees falling for you,” Aidan said, watching as the incredibly beautiful woman that he hadn’t been able to stop thinking about since he first saw her, smiled.

“Still not the worse pick-up line I’ve ever heard,” Melanie, his brother’s tenant and the woman that he had no business being with, said with a warm smile while Aidan sat there, absently finishing off his drink as he watched her, unable to help but wonder what it was about her that made him nervous.

Nervous...

That was an understatement because she fucking wrecked him. For the past two weeks, Aidan hadn’t been able to stop thinking about her. He’d tried to force himself to forget about her, but he couldn’t, and he had no idea why. He’d never reacted to a woman like this before. Normally if he was attracted to a woman, he simply asked her out and if she said no, he moved on without a second thought. With Melanie...

When he saw Rebecca’s lab results waiting for him this afternoon, he’d decided that it was now or never and used the results as an excuse to go see her. As soon as he saw Melanie, something inside him settled, something that he couldn’t quite explain, but it had him deciding that it was time to stop playing games.

“Do you have a name or can I just call you mine?” Aidan asked, reaching for the shot of tequila that she’d ordered for him and couldn’t help but wonder when the last time that he drank this much was as he downed the shot and signaled for another one.

“I just feel like you’re not even trying,” Melanie said with a pitying look as she picked up her shot, took a sip, and-

“Oh, that’s bad,” she said with an adorable frown that had him chuckling as she finished the rest of the shot with a wince.

“You’re the one who ordered the shots,” Aidan reminded her as he picked up his beer.

“I needed sustenance to help me get through your cheesy pick-up lines,” Melanie said, nodding solemnly.

“They’re not that bad,” Aidan said even though they were, but he was more than happy to repeat the asinine pick-up lines that he’d heard over the years if it made her smile and he definitely wanted to make her smile.

“They really are,” Melanie said, chuckling as she took a sip of her beer.

“Can I follow you home? Because my parents told me that I should always follow my dreams,” Aidan said, making her laugh.

“Do any of those lines even work?” she asked as he sat there, unable to believe just how badly he wanted this woman.

“I don’t know. You’ll have to tell me in the morning,” Aidan said, not sure if it was because of all the alcohol that he’d consumed or the fact that he couldn’t stop thinking about her that had him leaning over and kissing her, unable to wait another minute to find out what it was like to kiss the woman that he couldn’t resist.

Chapter 1

Six Months Later...

"I think I'm going to be sick," Melanie mumbled pathetically even as she shoved another delicious french fry in her mouth while she once again had to question the life choices she'd made that brought her here.

"Really? I can't imagine why," Rebecca, her best friend since elementary school and ex-roommate, said innocently with an equally innocent expression as she sat across the booth from her, clearly enjoying herself. Melanie considered kicking her beneath the table, but right now, that seemed like a lot of work. So, she settled for taking another bite of her delicious french fry instead.

"I ran," Melanie said in a daze, still trying to figure out how everything ha

d gone so horribly wrong so quickly.

One minute, the nurse was calling her name, and the next, she was in her car, tearing out of the parking lot, and debating the pros and cons of taking Rebecca up on the suggestion that she'd made last year and move to Switzerland.

"I believe waddled is a more fitting term," Rebecca, always helpful, added as Melanie absently dipped her fry in ketchup and popped it in her mouth with a tragic groan.

"I panicked," Melanie said, sighing heavily as she stared down at the half-eaten burger on her plate.

"Yes, yes, you did," Rebecca said absently, and Melanie didn't need to look up to know that her best friend was probably licking her lips as she watched her husband do something that caused his insanely large muscles to bulge.

Her best friend had it bad for Lucifer and unfortunately, Melanie couldn't say that she

blamed her. Not that she was interested in Lucifer, because she definitely wasn't into guys who loved to glare, but she couldn't help but notice just how much Lucifer adored Rebecca. It was something that she would probably never have, she thought, popping another delicious fry in her mouth with a heartfelt sigh.

"You can try again," Rebecca pointed out.

"I know," she said, wondering how she was going to be able to go back to that office and face his staff after today.

She already knew that she wouldn't be able to do it, which was probably for the best. Telling Aidan, the asshole that she'd had a one-night stand with that the Morning-After Pill hadn't worked after all wasn't exactly something that she really wanted to do at his office.

Then again, it also wasn't something that she wanted to do when she was six months pregnant, but she didn't have much of a choice in the matter. She'd wanted to tell him sooner, had actually planned on telling him sooner, but things changed when she'd almost lost the baby and the doctor was forced to put her on bed rest.

She'd never been sicker in her life than she had in the last five months. Every day had been pure hell as she'd tried to make it through the day without ending up in the emergency room, terrified that she was going to lose her baby. It had been touch-and-go there for a while, but eventually, they'd been able to get her nausea under control and she'd started putting on weight.

Five days ago, her doctor announced that her weight was good, her numbers were up, and that the baby, a very active little boy, was exactly where he should be, and that it was now safe to leave the confines of her bed. It had honestly been the best news of her life even though it meant that it was time to face the music.

She had to tell Aidan Bradford, the man that had made it clear that he didn't want children that he was about to have one. She'd waited until she knew that the baby was going to be okay before telling him because she honestly couldn't think of anything crueller than telling a man that he was going to be a father when there was no guarantee that the baby was going to survive.

She wasn't supposed to be telling him now, but she didn't want to put this off any longer. She didn't want to be one of those women who tried to keep her child away from their father, which was the reason that she was ignoring her doctor's orders to hold off until after she had the baby. He was concerned about what the stress would do to her. She didn't want to do anything to risk her baby, but she had to do the right thing.

She had to tell Aidan.

"I can go with you if you want," Rebecca suggested with that same worried look that she'd been giving her since this whole thing started.

Melanie shook her head and said, "It's better if I tell him by myself," even though it was tempting to bring Rebecca along as a buffer. Aidan liked Rebecca and probably wouldn't start yelling if she was there, but he would still be angry. She wasn't sure that she wanted Rebecca around when it happened, mostly because her best friend would probably take it upon herself to beat the crap out of him if he made her cry. Melanie also wasn't sure that she would be able to come up with enough money to bail her best friend out of jail.

"When?" Rebecca pressed, which was something that she'd been doing a lot this past week.

"I'm going to tell him," Melanie promised as she popped another fry in her mouth.

“Better do it soon,” Rebecca said with a pointed look at the plate in front of Melanie, which just happened to be the third cheeseburger platter she’d ordered in the last hour and something that would probably give away the fact that she was pregnant with a Bradford soon, “before Lucifer figures it out.”

“He’s going to be mad,” Melanie said slowly exhaling and trying not to think of all the times he’d taken care of her over the past few months, checked on her, brought her food, sat with her, and occasionally carried her to the bathroom when she was too weak to do it herself so that she could hug the toilet for a few hours.

He had no idea that his brother was the father because they hadn’t told him and when he found out that they’d kept him in the dark he would probably never talk to her again. This was really turning out to be the best day ever, Melanie thought dryly even as she had to wonder where her order of pancakes with extra butter, syrup, and bacon was.

“No, he won’t,” Rebecca promised her with a shake of her head. “He’ll just decide that gives him even more rights to be the godfather.”

That was true...

Lucifer did seem rather determined to be the baby’s godfather, Melanie mused, glancing in his direction to find him sitting at the bar, glaring down at a stack of papers, which brought up a completely different subject.

“Aren’t you supposed to be writing a paper?” Melanie asked, returning her attention to Rebecca to find the other woman shrugging.

“I finished it, but he wasn’t happy with my choice of font and felt that my introduction wasn’t exciting enough to capture the reader’s attention.”

Frowning, Melanie absently ate another fry as she glanced back at Lucifer, who was still glaring. “What was your paper on?” she couldn’t help asking.

“Time management,” Rebecca said with a shrug.

“I see,” Melanie murmured thoughtfully, wondering how Rebecca handled Lucifer’s OCD without killing him.

Then again, since she’d benefitted from his OCD over the past few months, she wasn’t exactly in a position to talk. Thanks to Lucifer, everything in her apartment was now organized and she meant everything. From the frozen peas in her freezer to the extra pack of floss in her bathroom, everything was organized by expiration, size, likelihood of use and, in the case of her kitchen, by flavor and texture in addition to all the aforementioned categories.

She’d felt bad at first that he was doing so much, but that quickly changed when she’d realized that he was actually enjoying himself. Whenever she tried to help him, Lucifer would glare at her, point towards her bedroom, and wait until she went back to bed before continuing with his hobby and if she didn’t move fast enough the bastard would call her mother. She still wasn’t sure how he got his hands on her mother’s phone number, but she suspected that the small woman sitting across from her had something to do with it.

“How did you end up spending the night with Aidan?” Rebecca asked, and Melanie had to give her credit because she’d held off asking that question again a lot longer than she’d expected.

With a shrug, Melanie said, “A lot of tequila, some beer, and a few shots of unidentifiable alcohol.”

She decided not to mention that she could barely remember what happened when

she'd left their apartment with Aidan after Lucifer threw them out. She remembered going to a bar, ordering a drink, the feel of Aidan's hands on her as he pushed her up against the wall and kissed her, flashes of what happened once they made it to the hotel, and...

That was it.

The only thing that she remembered with perfect clarity was what happened the next morning when she woke up to find Aidan sitting across the room, glaring at her as he informed her that the condom broke during the night. The conversation that followed was definitely s

omething that she wasn't likely to forget anytime soon.

There was really nothing like struggling with a hangover while the first guy she'd slept with in years made sure that she knew just how much he'd regretted sleeping with her before she'd flipped him off, mumbled something that she hoped pissed him off, grabbed her clothes and left, more than ready to forget about him.

Unfortunately, that's not how things turned out.

"Fine. Don't tell me," Rebecca grumbled as she glanced back at her husband and groaned miserably, "He's getting out the red pen."

"Sounds like you're going to have a fun night," Melanie said absently, not really in the mood to torture her best friend tonight.

Rebecca shrugged. "He's easily distracted."

From the sounds that she heard whenever she walked past their apartment, Lucifer's office, or the supply closet, Melanie had to agree. As she sat there, absently nibbling

on another fry, she couldn't help but wonder if Rebecca would be willing to distract Lucifer when he found out about Aidan.

"Do you think Aidan knows?" Rebecca asked, making Melanie's stomach turn because she honestly didn't know.

"I left before he saw me and I doubt the nurse is going to make a big deal out of a patient ditching an appointment."

The nurse would probably just mention it to the receptionist, who would make a note of it and send her a request for a cancelation fee. They'd probably just tell Aidan that his eleven o'clock canceled and that would be the end of it.

At least, she hoped it would.

Feeling exhausted from her first real trip out in months, Melanie popped another fry in her mouth, tossed one at Rebecca, who was back to ogling her husband, and made her way to the door in the back that led to her apartment. Once she put her code in, the door unlocked with a loud click and she was making her way upstairs and praying that Mojo, the large mastiff with a slight weight problem and a love of naps that she'd adopted with Rebecca a few years ago, wasn't waiting for her at the top of the stairs.

When she finally made it to the second floor, and she refused to think about how long it took her to walk up a flight of stairs, Melanie opened the door, made sure that there weren't any large puddles of dog drool waiting for her, and went into her apartment.

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Her sad, lonely apartment...

Sighing, Melanie tossed her bag aside, grabbed a small bottle of apple juice from the refrigerator and walked towards her bedroom, forgoing her comfortable couch and settled for the bed that she was sick of looking at. It was only for a little while longer, she reminded herself, hating that she was going to have to move soon, but what choice did she have? Renovations were set to begin on the Fire & Brimstone soon, she had a baby on the way, she could barely make it up the two flights of stairs now, and she really wasn't sure how she was going to manage it with a baby in her arms, but most importantly, she couldn't afford the rent by herself anymore.

Grabbing her iPad, Melanie sat on the bed, picked up where she left off with the two-gallon sized Ziploc bag of peanut butter M&Ms that she kept for nights like this, and settled in for another night of trying to find a first-floor apartment with two bedrooms, a garden tub, a gourmet kitchen, a huge backyard with a hot tub, and a landlord who was willing to rent it to her for a thousand dollars a month or less.

Preferably less, Melanie mused with a handful of M&Ms and a wistful sigh

A lot less.

Chapter 2

"I'm dying," Aidan announced dramatically to the large bedroom filled with unpacked boxes, dirty clothes, and empty junk food wrappers that should fill the medical professional in him with shame, but sadly, it didn't.

After a few minutes of staring aimlessly at the stack of boxes that he'd been meaning to unpack, Aidan finally found the motivation to move. With a small sigh, he managed to roll over onto his side so that he could stare at the alarm clock blinking three p.m., reminding him that he still needed to set the time. Groaning, Aidan reached over and grabbed his phone, or at least, tried to.

Instead, he ended up knocking over several empty energy cans, discarded junk food bags, and a half-eaten burger that had somehow escaped his notice, onto the floor. When he finally managed to grab his phone, he released another sigh and tossed the phone over his shoulder.

He was running late, again.

It was six-thirty in the morning and he was already running thirty minutes behind, which meant that he was going to have to choose between taking a shower or grabbing something to eat on his way to work. Since he'd spent last night helping his cousin Trevor gut a house that he was planning on flipping, skipping a shower wasn't really an option this morning.

He was going to have to forgo his usual stop at Dixon's bakery for a "Bradford Breakfast," and get his ass to work on time or be forced to skip lunch and spend the rest of the day trying to catch up with patients. Pretending that his muscles weren't screaming in agony, Aidan got up and decided to move his ass.

He headed towards the small bathroom that he'd been meaning to renovate and rolled his shoulders, trying to work the stiffness out of his muscles. He needed to stop pushing himself, but he knew that wasn't going to happen anytime soon. Thinking about that half-eaten burger that was waiting for him, he flicked the lights on and yawned when the overhead light blew out.

For a minute, Aidan simply stood there, staring up at the busted light before he

shrugged, grabbed his toothbrush, and headed right back out the door, making a mental note to add the busted light to the ever-growing list of things that needed to be done. He walked into the large living room, opened his apartment door, crossed the small hallway that separated the two first-floor apartments, and walked into the other apartment, which he'd planned on renovating when he'd bought the place, and walked into the large living room that he was using for...

Well, he wasn't really sure what he was using this room for since there didn't seem to be a theme amongst all the shit that he'd thrown in here. Yawning, Aidan stumbled around the old mini fridge that had once kept his beer cold during medical school and headed for the bathroom. A few minutes later, he'd relieved his bladder, brushed his teeth, and was shouting several obscenities when he was reminded that the water heater for the first floor still needed to be replaced.

Concerned that he was going to lose his balls to hypothermia, Aidan stumbled out of the small bathtub, grabbed the towel off the floor that didn't look like one of his, and wrapped it around his waist. Ignoring the disturbing odor that was coming off the towel, Aidan headed back to his apartment, tripping over a laundry basket full of what appeared to be clean clothes that his mother must have brought over at some point, and couldn't help but wonder what had possessed him to buy this place in the first place when he'd had a perfectly good apartment to keep all his shit in.

Ten minutes later, he was rummaging through that basket of clothes to find something decent to wear after the search of his apartment had resulted in him adding laundry to the list of things that needed to be done. After scoring a clean shirt and a pair of slacks, he hurried back to his apartment, yanking his clothes on along the way. Once he was dressed, Aidan tore his room apart until he found his cell phone and was then forced to do the same thing for his briefcase in the living room.

Finally ready, or at least secure in the knowledge that he had his keys, he headed out the door, noting that it was trash day and that his tenants had remembered. Putting his

shit down, Aidan quickly grabbed the trash cans spray-painted with the number one on them and dragged them to the curb to join his tenants' trash cans. Deciding that he was making good time, he stopped on the way to work for gas, day-old hotdogs, and an energy drink to help him start his day.

Ten minutes later, he was pulling into work and stealing his father's parking spot. When he reached for his briefcase, a bright yellow stain on his tie caught his attention. With another yawn, Aidan yanked the mustard-stained tie loose and tossed it on the floor to join the others.

Grabbing his briefcase, he got out of his car and headed for the backdoor of his family's practice. Before he had a chance to open the door, it was thrown open and Raven, a nurse who'd been with his family's practice for over twenty years, came stumbling down the stairs, looking absolutely terrified as she shoved a patient folder in his hands.

She didn't say anything as Aidan opened the file, but then again, she didn't need to when the name on the file told him everything that he needed to know.

*_*_*_*_*

"Pancakes or waffles, Edmund?" Melanie asked the large belly that made it impossible to see her feet as she contemplated this morning's choices.

When the baby kicked his displeasure, she couldn't help but smile. "Not a big fan of Edmund, huh?" Melanie asked, deciding against pancakes and opted for the donuts that she'd picked up last night during her impromptu visit to the grocery store when her craving for Cool Whip had compelled her to put on her bunny slippers and hit the store before it closed.

While she was there, she'd decided that it was a good time to go grocery shopping for

the third time this week. It had taken her an hour and two trips, but she'd managed to fit two-hundred dollars' worth of junk food into her car. Thankfully, Lucifer had been outside walking Mojo when she'd pulled into the back parking lot, so she didn't have to worry about carrying all those bags up two flights of stairs.

Once the bags were brought upstairs and Lucifer put them away, he'd joined her on the couch with a bag of cookies and an extra-large tub of Cool Whip and kept her company until sitting up became too much and she had no choice but to go to bed. After that, she'd laid in bed for a while, trying not to think about everything that she wasn't supposed to think about and failed miserably before finally falling asleep sometime around three this morning.

Now, Melanie was awake and determined to have a productive day, one that didn't end with her taking ten naps before dinner. She'd been off bed rest for a week now and needed to get some things done before the doctor overreacted and put her back on it. Five months had been more than enough, Melanie thought as she took a bite of the delicious powdered cinnamon donut and thought about all the things that she needed to do today. She really wasn't looking forward to spending another day checking out apartment lis

tings and trying to figure out a way to stretch her budget a little further.

It had been five months since she was able to work, which meant that it had been five months since she'd collected a paycheck and was forced to live off her savings. Even though her savings account was decent, five months of paying for copays and tests, buying expensive medicine to combat nausea, countless emergency room visits, and the normal costs of living had done some serious damage. She had enough to cover a few more months and hopefully the delivery, but that was pretty much it and that was only if nothing else happened and she was really hoping that nothing else happened.

Normally, Melanie paid her bills with the money that she made from the bigger

projects, like creating programs and databases, and used the money she made from designing websites and apps to pad her savings account, but right now, the big projects were out of the question. She couldn't handle the eighteen-hour days that she usually put in for her projects and there was no way that she could guarantee any deadlines right now.

Smaller projects would be easier to handle and thank god those jobs were easier to come by. Five or six small projects a week should be enough to keep her going until after the baby was born and she had more time for work. Until then, she was going to have to do her best to make this work and be careful about her spending.

Unfortunately, she couldn't seem to control how much she spent on food, Melanie thought with a wistful sigh as she took a bite of the delicious powdered cinnamon donut that she was going to have to get more of. She really didn't want to think about how much she was spending on food. The only thing that was stopping her from having a nervous breakdown over her food bill was Lucifer.

He was always cooking for her, checking on her to make sure that she had enough to eat, and refused to let her pay when she ate at the Fire & Brimstone. She wasn't sure if he was doing this because of her relationship with Rebecca, his lovely bride who lived to torment him, or because they'd become friends in the last few months. The only thing that she knew for sure was that without him, she probably wouldn't have made it this far.

She probably would have-

"Open the fucking door!" a terrifyingly familiar voice suddenly demanded, startling her, which of course, resulted in her dropping her delicious donut on the floor and making her realize that there was a very good chance that she was going to have to make another trip to the grocery store.

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That is, if the man pounding on her door didn't kill her first.

Chapter 3

"Melanie," Aidan said tightly as he stood there, glaring at the apartment door that belonged to the woman that he'd prayed that he would never see again.

"I'm not here right now, but if you would like to leave your name, number, and a brief message, I'll get back to you later," the smart ass hiding behind the door managed to say before adding, "beep," further convincing him that she was out of her fucking mind.

"Open. The. Door," Aidan bit out, enunciating every syllable as he struggled to remember that he was a doctor and that he'd taken an oath not to strangle the infuriating woman that was fucking with his life.

There was a slight pause before she said, "Yeah, I really don't think that would be in my best interest at the moment. So, if you'd like to come back later after you've had some time to calm down then-oh, crap," Melanie finished with a groan when he decided to stop playing games and press his luck and see if the door was unlocked.

It was.

He threw the door open to find Melanie standing in the middle of the room, hugging a bag of donuts against her chest, pregnant, and looking completely surprised to see him. Taking a deep breath, Aidan forced his attention back to the large swell of her belly and had to remind himself that he wasn't an asshole.

He didn't yell at women and he sure as hell didn't yell at pregnant women, but right now, he really wanted to do some fucking yelling. Needing something to do, Aidan rubbed his hands down his face and forced himself to remember that there was an innocent baby in all this, an innocent baby that might be his.

Exhaling slowly, Aidan dropped his hands away from his face and asked the question that he was afraid that he already knew the answer to. "Is it mine?"

Chewing on her bottom lip as she shifted nervously, Melanie slowly nodded.

"I see," Aidan murmured, having absolutely no idea what he was supposed to say to that.

Well, that wasn't completely true, because there were quite a few things that he wanted to say right now, most of them at the top of his lungs. He never should have asked her out after Lucifer kicked them out, but he hadn't fucking listened to the warning bells that had been going off in his head because he'd wanted her.

God, had he wanted her.

She was beautiful, incredibly sexy with an abundance of curves, but it was that damn smile of hers that had nearly dropped him to his knees the first time that he saw her. He still couldn't explain it, but that smile of hers just completely destroyed him. It was sweet, innocent, and so fucking provocative that it had him losing his fucking mind. She should have been off-limits since she was one of his brother's tenants, but he hadn't been able to help himself.

From the first moment Aidan saw her, dragging Rebecca by her ear into one of his exam rooms, he'd wanted her. He'd tried to shake it off, but his mind kept coming back to that smile of hers, the one that she'd given him when he'd walked into the exam room. It had taken everything that he had to focus on his patient and his

brother's demands to fix her.

He'd nodded, taken notes, suggested tests, but his focus had never left the beautiful woman barricading the door and threatening to beat the shit out of her best friend. She was the reason that he'd suggested a house call to give Rebecca the news because he'd wanted an excuse to see her again. Not even her vicious pillow attack, and Aidan really wished that he'd known that the carb addict had promised to give up whatever had been ailing her best friend before he'd announced that Rebecca had celiac's disease, had changed his mind.

If anything, Melanie's over-the-top defense of her best friend, or rather her love of carbs, had made him want her even more. When Lucifer kicked them out of the apartment, Aidan decided that he'd waited long enough and charmed her into having a drink with him. When she'd flashed him that damn smile of hers and tried to blow him off so that she could stay with Rebecca, he'd almost lost his fucking mind and kissed her right then.

More determined than ever, he'd laid on the Bradford charm, suggested a drink and the best apple pie that she'd ever had, and he'd had her. Only now, he wished like hell that he hadn't. He didn't want children, never had and never would and he'd made that perfectly clear during that fateful morning when he'd turned into the biggest asshole on the planet. He never should have talked to her the way that he had, but he'd been hungover, seeing double, sick to his stomach, and panicking as he'd tried to remember everything that happened the night before and failed.

He remembered going out with her, having more than a few drinks, dancing with her, pushing her up against the wall in the men's bathroom and telling her everything that he wanted to do to her as she ran her hands over him, but after that...

It was all kind of a blur.

Feeling the condom break as she'd moved on top of him had quickly knocked him back into reality. He'd always been careful, always made sure that he'd used his own condoms because he knew that he could trust them, but that night he hadn't had any on him.

Instead of using his fucking head and getting a cab to take them to the nearest pharmacy, he'd grabbed a handful of condoms from the restroom at the bar, allowed her to drag him to the closest hotel, and continued making the biggest mistake of his life. The way he'd treated her the next morning had been his second, and something that he would never forgive himself for. He'd been angry, scared, and dealing with the worst hangover of his life and he'd taken it out on her.

He'd been a fucking asshole and hi

s biggest regret that morning was that she hadn't kicked him in the balls before she'd flipped him off and stumbled out of the room because he'd more than deserved it. His other regret was that he hadn't gone with her to the pharmacy to help her get the Morning-After Pill, because clearly, she'd fucked that up and now they were both paying for that mistake.

Speaking of the pill...

*_*_*_*

"You didn't take the Morning-After Pill," Aidan said with a glare pointed at her stomach that she really didn't appreciate.

"Oh, you mean that pill that you recommended for me to take while I had a hangover? The same one that can cause severe nausea? Do you mean that pill?" Melanie asked cheerfully before she shook her head in disgust, grabbed another donut from the bag that she was still hugging, and decided that she'd had enough for one

day.

She didn't care that it was barely ten in the morning or that he deserved some answers, Melanie turned around and began the long waddle back to her room. If he wanted to talk, then he could come back after he'd pulled that stick out of his-

"We can discuss who fucked up the most on the drive back to my office," Aidan said pleasantly as she suddenly found herself walking in the opposite direction thanks to the large arm wrapped around her shoulders.

"We're not going to your office," Melanie said with a sigh and a shake of her head as she tried to duck beneath his arm, but the fact that she was six months pregnant made the move impossible.

Ignoring her failed escape attempt, Aidan continued to lead her towards the large door that she was going to make sure that she kept locked from now on. She tried to shove his arm away, but he simply took the move as an opportunity to pluck the bag of donuts out of her hands, wrap her jacket around her shoulders and before she knew it, he had her in the hallway and heading towards the door that would take her to the stairs that she loathed more than bed rest.

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“Aidan-” Melanie began even as she tried to decide between politely warning him that she was seconds away from making him a eunuch or begging him to stop so that she could catch her breath as they started down the stairs.

“We’ll make a day of it. We’ll go to my office, run tests, take a sonogram, pee in a cup, grab lunch, and while we’re eating you can explain to me why you’ve kept the fact that I’m about to be father a secret. It will be a great time, you’ll see,” Aidan murmured, giving her arm a gentle squeeze as he helped her down the stairs.

“I don’t need any tests,” Melanie managed to get out before she was forced to grab onto the railing so that she could catch her breath.

“Yes, you do,” Aidan said softly.

“No, I-”

“You left the office before the tests came back from the urine sample you left,” Aidan said, making her realize that she’d never asked how he’d found out about the baby.

Swallowing, Melanie looked down at the railing that she was currently holding onto for support and closed her eyes as she prepared herself for the bad news that she already knew was coming.

“You’re bleeding.”

Chapter 4

“What are you going to do?” his father asked as Aidan leaned back in his desk chair.

“I have no idea,” Aidan said quietly as he stared down at the sonogram image in his hands.

A boy.

They were having a baby boy, he thought numbly, wondering when this was going to start feeling real. This morning the only thing that he had to worry about was missing lunch and now...

Christ, he didn't even know where to start.

“Does she know yet?”

“That her doctor's a fucking idiot?” Aidan asked as he shook his head slowly, forcing his gaze away from the proof that things were about to change and placed the sonogram photo back on the desk next to the thick folder that her doctor sent over earlier. “Only what you told her,” he added, sighing heavily as he sat back in his chair so that he could see the disappointment in his father's eyes.

It wasn't something that he was used to seeing. At least, not because of him. He'd seen that look on his father's face more than enough times growing up thanks to all of his siblings fucking up, but never because of him. He'd always been the golden child, the one that didn't fuck up and if he did, he immediately worked his ass off to make it right.

Not this time.

This time he'd seriously fucked up and he had absolutely no idea how he was going to fix this. He would take care of Melanie and their son, provide for them, make sure

that they had everything that they needed, and of course, he would be there to help raise his son, but that wouldn't fix everything.

"I'm going to give you some time to figure this out and do right by that young lady, but you and I are going to sit down and have a talk real soon," his father said, leveling a look on him that told him just how badly he'd fucked up as his father stood up and headed for the door only to pause.

"By the way," his father said, gesturing lazily towards Melanie's patient file, "if I ever find out that you spoke to a woman like that again, I'll knock your goddamn teeth out. Understood?"

"Understood," Aidan said, surprised that his father wasn't doing it now, but then again, they both knew that he had something more important to do at the moment.

"Fix this," his father said, and with that, his father was shaking his head in disgust and walking out the door.

Aidan stared at the file for another minute, thinking about just how much of an asshole he'd been that morning. He...

His father should have knocked his fucking teeth out, Aidan decided as he shoved his chair back and headed for the door. He was never going to forgive himself for what he'd said to her. Because of him, she'd gone through this alone. He should have been there from the beginning, biting his fucking tongue and standing by her.

God, what the fuck was wrong with him?

As soon as she'd stormed out of that hotel room, he'd wanted to go after her and apologize, but he'd been too fucking hungover to think straight. His pride had kept him from hunting her down once he'd realized what a bastard he'd been to her. He'd

found a thousand excuses not to call her over the next few months, but it never stopped him from thinking about her.

He'd lost count of how many times he'd thought about her, how many times he'd found himself picking up the phone to call her only to change his mind, and how many times he'd found himself halfway to the Fire & Brimstone, hoping to catch a glimpse of her only to turn around with some bullshit excuse. He should have kept going the first time he'd found himself driving towards the Fire & Brimstone, knocked on her door, handed her a baseball bat, and let her go to town.

Once she was done beating the shit out of him and he'd apologized, they could have sat down and talked this through. The outcome wouldn't have changed, but at least Aidan would have been by her side from the start instead of being the one delivering more bad news to her.

*_*_*_*

“Melanie? Shit! Melanie, wait up!” the jerk that had scared the hell out of her before showing her to a small exam room with an air conditioner on steroids and handing her a paper-thin exam gown that didn't actually fit her before mumbling something about calling her doctor and promptly pulling a disappearing act on her, which had lasted for five hours, thirty-two minutes and fifteen seconds, said.

Not that he'd left her completely alone. He'd been kind enough to send a nurse in to take her medical history, two different medical assistants in to take her vitals, four to take her blood, three to ask her to sign more release forms, two more to help her prepare for an exam, which to her surprise had been performed by his father, and then another medical assistant to help her after the very thorough examination that had left her on the verge of dying of mortification, before sending in four nurses, two medical assistants, a secretary, and the office manager to tell her that it would only be a little bit longer.

When one of the nurses popped her head back in a few minutes ago to ask her if she could put the paper-thin gown back on so that the doctor could double-check something, Melanie decided that she'd had enough for one day. After somehow managing to pull her shoes back on and tying them without falling over, she'd grabbed her bag, headed for the door, and decided that she'd rather walk the fifteen blocks to get home than ask the lying jerk for a ride.

Okay, so she'd also decided to take the long way home so that she could stop by Dixon's bakery and reassure herself with eighty-five dollars and fifty-five cents, the amount of money that was in her bag, worth of baked goods that everything was okay while she tried to get her doctor on the phone so that she could find out what was going on with her baby. What she hadn't planned on was the jerk, who'd made her stupidly believe that he'd cared before he'd handed her over to his father, running after her.

"Melanie, wait!" Aidan yelled, and because she was six months pregnant and stuck at an intersection, she did just that.

"What is it?" Melanie asked, sighing heavily as she turned around to face the man that was clearly screwing with her.

As she watched him jog towards her, she couldn't help but note the similarities between him and Lucifer. They were both ruggedly handsome, kept their dark hair cut short, had killer green eyes and a flawless tan, they were tall and well-built, and she couldn't help but wonder how two brothers could be so different.

While everyone thought that Lucifer was an asshole, and okay, she'd admit that he had his moments, she didn't really think that he'd earned the title. His brother, on the other hand...

"I need you to come back to the office," Aidan said when he finally reached her side.

“So that you can stick me in another small room where I can catch pneumonia, have my blood drained, and maybe this time you can ask your mom to give me a pelvic exam?” Melanie asked brightly, wondering why he was wasting her time when they both k

new that he didn’t want anything to do with her or this baby.

At least he had the decency to wince, Melanie noted as she turned around and decided that she’d more than earned a side of buttercream frosting to go along with her cupcakes. She didn’t get far before she found her path blocked by the man determined to...to...

Well, she honestly wasn’t sure what his game was, but she was done playing it. Sighing, Melanie moved to walk around him, but since she couldn’t exactly waddle that fast, Aidan managed to step in her way and block her again.

“Look, I’m sorry about that, but we need to talk.”

“Is the baby okay?” Melanie asked, cutting to the chase because that’s all she really cared about.

“Yes,” Aidan said and since that’s all that mattered, she stepped around him only to come to a complete stop with his next words. “But you might not be.”

Chapter 5

“So, this is it,” Aidan lamely said as he opened the door to the semi-empty apartment that he’d somehow persuaded Melanie to look at after he’d broken the news to her that she was now officially back on bed rest.

“Yeah, umm, no,” Melanie said, barely glancing at the apartment before she turned

around and headed for the front door.

“We talked about this,” he reminded her as he reached past her to close the front door before she could walk out and make him spend another two hours arguing about this.

“No, you talked and I listened,” Melanie explained, trying to move his hand away from the door.

“We agreed that this was for the best,” Aidan reminded her as he quickly maneuvered around her and put his hands on her shoulders so that he could steer the stubborn woman back inside the apartment that was the perfect solution to their problem.

Well, it would make things easier at least, he amended a split second later after deciding that nothing was going to fix this.

“Just think of the possibilities,” Aidan said as he managed to get her inside, hoping that she ignored all his shit thrown everywhere and the damage to the walls that the last tenants left behind and focused on all the possibilities.

“I already have an apartment,” Melanie pointed out, which they both knew was a bullshit excuse to get out of this.

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“And you can’t stay there,” he reminded her, already knowing that this was her best option.

“Well, not since a certain doctor put me back on bed rest,” she added dryly with a long, drawn-out sigh as she stepped around a box that he wasn’t sure was his.

“That and my brother is having the building renovated and you have to move out anyway,” Aidan said as he brought her into the kitchen and then immediately wished that he’d skipped this portion of the tour.

“Umm, there’s no stove.”

“I know.”

“And the fridge?”

“The door’s missing,” Aidan said, rubbing the bridge of his nose as he discreetly looked around the kitchen, noting all the damage to the walls and cabinets and started rethinking this plan only to wave it off because this could still work.

“You can use my kitchen until this one is fixed,” he said, deciding that it would probably be for the best if he got her out of this room before she noticed that some of the outlets had been ripped out of the wall.

“Why don’t we take a look at the bedroom?” Aidan suggested, steering her back towards the living room.

“Does it look like this?” Melanie asked, gesturing towards all the boxes and bags he’d thrown in here when he’d bought the place.

“It might,” Aidan hedged, wondering if he should have put this off until he had a chance to fix this apartment, but immediately decided against it since that would have only given her a chance to talk herself out of this.

“Then I think I’m good,” Melanie said with a thoughtful nod as she turned around and waddled, and really there was no other way that he could describe it, towards the door.

“Melanie,” Aidan said, shaking his head with a sigh as he followed her into the foyer and managed to steer her towards his apartment.

“This isn’t going to work,” she grumbled pathetically as she allowed him to steer her towards the mess in the middle of his living room, pretty sure that there was a couch beneath all that crap somewhere.

Mumbling an apology, Aidan made quick work of throwing all his shit aside and shot her a smile when it took a little longer than expected. Once the couch was free of dirty clothes, books, old medical journals, junk food wrappers, and an unopened Twinkie that was going to help make this really fucked up day better, Aidan gestured for her to sit down only to rethink the suggestion when he realized that she was going to have a hell of a time stepping over all the shit now covering the living room floor in order to get to the couch.

New plan.

“Why don’t we have a seat in the kitchen?” Aidan suggested with a smile as he kicked the shit out of his way, wrapped his arm around her and led her towards the kitchen before she could argue.

Once he had her in the kitchen, he-

“Shit!”

-realized that the kitchen was worse than the living room.

“Aidan-”

“One second,” he said, releasing her so that he could shove everything off the kitchen table, knock the stack of medical magazines that he’d been re-reading off a chair before pulling it out for her. “Here we are,” Aidan said, smiling as he gestured for her to sit down.

After a slight hesitation, Melanie sat down while she glanced around the kitchen that he was still in the process of unpacking and cleared her throat. “So, have you lived here long?” she asked, looking a little unsure where to begin as she glanced back at him and moved to place her hands on the table, but seemed to rethink it, and placed her hands on the large swell of her belly, reminding him that he couldn’t fuck this up, again.

“Not long,” Aidan said, deciding that five and a half months wasn’t long enough to unpack all his shit.

“It’s, um, nice,” Melanie said, rubbing the bridge of her nose as she looked around, taking in the half-empty boxes, discarded grocery bags, magazines scattered everywhere, empty water bottles and soda cans covering the counter and filling the sink along with-

Well, it wasn’t important what was in his sinks. What was important was that they had a baby on the way, which was why he’d dragged her back here after announcing that she was back on bed rest. That, and he had absolutely no plans of letting her walk

away this time.

*_*_*_*

“I really don’t think this is going to work,” Melanie said, although she was touched by his offer, she honestly couldn’t see how this was going to work.

“Why?” Aidan asked when it should have been painfully obvious why this was a bad idea.

“We don’t even know each other,” she said, shifting to get comfortable even as she couldn’t help but wonder if there were any Swiss Rolls left in that Little Debbie’s box on the counter.

“I don’t think that matters, do you?” he said with a pointed look at the reason why she was here.

He had a point.

So, she moved on.

“There are stairs,” Melanie said, deciding to use the top reason that he’d used against her earlier to convince her that she couldn’t stay above the Fire & Brimstone anymore.

“Where?” he asked with a frown.

“The front step,” she answered lamely, making his eyes narrow suspiciously.

“There’s only one step,” Aidan said with a smug look that definitely reminded her of his brother.

“Fine, how about the fact that it should probably be condemned?” Melanie pointed out, wondering if he’d thought this through.

“Easily fixed,” Aidan said, still looking a little too smug for her liking.

“Overnight?”

“Probably not,” he admitted with a sigh before adding, “but definitely within a few days.”

“And until then?” Melanie asked, wondering if he had an answer for everything.

As it turned out

, he did.

Chapter 6

“This is it,” Aidan said with flourish as he opened his bedroom door only to have the damn thing get stuck on the disturbing towel that he’d used this morning.

Throwing her another one of those reassuring smiles that was starting to make him feel like a jackass, Aidan discreetly shoved the door harder as he tried to kick the towel out of the way until the door finally flew open and-

“Shit!”

Slammed into the wall, breaking the doorstopper in half and allowing the doorknob to embed itself in the wall and officially making the very long list of things that he needed to do, which he couldn’t help but notice had tripled since this morning. Hoping that she hadn’t noticed, Aidan gestured for her to go inside.

He wasn't exactly surprised when Melanie leaned in, took a good look at his bedroom and shook her head before turning around and making her way back to the front door. Since letting her leave would only be counterproductive to his plans, he quickly caught up to her, wrapped his arm around her shoulders and turned her around.

"I think you're going to like this," Aidan murmured as he kicked the towel out of the way and brought her inside the room that would be hers until he finished fixing the other apartment. For a moment, Aidan considered giving her this apartment and moving in upstairs with his brother, but quickly dismissed the idea since it would only make things more difficult than they needed to be.

"And why would you think that?" Melanie asked, sounding genuinely curious as she took in his bedroom.

"Because it's spacious?" Aidan suggested, taking in the room filled with half-empty boxes, dirty laundry, discarded food wrappers, the messy bed, and wondered if she'd be willing to step into the hallway for a minute so that he could clean this up.

But he knew that if he gave her even half a chance that she would leave and since that would only make things more difficult, Aidan led her to the bed. "Why don't you have a seat?" he suggested, giving her an encouraging smile.

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When she just stared up at him, he mumbled, “Right,” nodded to himself, and made quick work of picking up all the shit on the floor and shoving it into whatever box was closest. In a few minutes, Aidan had the floor picked up, all his shit shoved into random boxes, and the bed somewhat made.

“Aidan-”

“So, the bathroom is right through here,” he said, cutting her off as he opened the bathroom door and flicked the light switch on only to remember that the light was out, which in retrospect, was probably for the best.

Shifting in front of the bathroom, Aidan closed the door, hoping that she hadn’t caught a glimpse of the mess that he planned on cleaning later and said, “So, that’s it. Any questions?”

“I think I’m going to stay with my parents,” Melanie said, already heading towards the hallway and making him hesitate.

He should let her go, but...

That wasn’t really an option.

She was having his child and having a hell of a time doing it. He hadn’t been there for the first six months, but he’d be damned if he missed the next three. With that in mind, Aidan followed after her, surprised that she’d managed to make it down the hallway so fast. Then again, with the way that she was carrying, gravity was most likely a helping factor.

“Melanie, wait!”

“Look,” she said, sounding exhausted as she turned around to face him, “I know you don’t want this baby, which makes me really appreciate what you’re offering here, but let’s face it, neither one of us wants this.”

“It doesn’t matter what we want,” Aidan said because he wasn’t going to lie to her and tell her what he thought she wanted to hear.

She was right. He didn’t want a child, but that didn’t matter, because they were having one. Just because he’d never wanted a child didn’t mean that he wasn’t going to step up and do the right thing. He was going to be a father to his son and take care of both of them. It was as simple as that, but he couldn’t do that if she didn’t give him a chance.

“I don’t know you and honestly, I’m not really sure that I like you,” Melanie said, deciding to go the honest route as well.

“Which is why I want you to move in so that we have a chance to get to know each other before the baby comes,” Aidan explained as he leaned back against the wall, hoping that she would show him a little mercy and let this go for the night. He just needed a little more time to wrap his mind around everything that happened so that he could figure out his next step.

“I don’t think that moving in here would be such a good idea given the circumstances,” Melanie explained, and he honestly couldn’t have agreed with her more, but unfortunately for both of them, he was a Bradford, which meant that he was too damn stubborn to listen to reason.

“Do you really want to move in with your parents?” Aidan asked, already guessing that she didn’t. He had no idea what her parents were like and for all he knew, they

could be great parents and her best friends, but he did know one thing.

Not many people wanted to move back in with their parents once they got a taste of freedom.

“What do you want from me, Aidan?” she asked, shaking her head in surrender.

“Melanie, I-”

“I don’t get you, Aidan. I really don’t. One minute, you’re charming and sweet and the next, you’re ditching me so that your father can give me a pelvic exam. Then, when I’ve had enough you chase me down, tell me that you can’t find the source of the bleed, that my blood pressure is elevated and my blood levels are off and then, when I’m genuinely freaked out, you suggest that I move in with you and you actually expect me to jump at the chance to do it?”

“Well, I-” he started to explain, but she cut him off, clearly not done tearing into him yet.

“You’ve got to be kidding me!” Melanie said with a disbelieving laugh that kind of killed his ego a little bit there, and unfortunately, she wasn’t done. “Because of you, I’ve had to handle the last six months on my own when you should have been by my side, holding my hand and telling me that everything was going to be okay. Instead, I had to handle this on my own, because my doctor was worried about how the stress from telling you that I was pregnant was going to affect the baby,” she said, confirming his suspicions of why she’d kept the news from him, which also confirmed his opinion that her doctor was a fucking idiot.

“I wish you would have told me, Melanie,” Aidan said quietly, knowing that it wasn’t enough.

“Really? So that you could have passed me off to your dad sooner?” she asked, blinking up at him as he tried not to wince.

“I can’t be your doctor, Melanie,” he said, hoping that she would understand.

“Oh, I understood that. What I don’t understand was how you could promise to hold my hand one minute and the next, you pulled a disappearing act and left me to sit in that room by myself, scared out of my mind that something’s wrong with my baby!” she snapped, her voice breaking at the end there as the first tear rolled down her cheek.

“I...” Aidan began only to shake his head, disgusted with himself. “I keep fucking this up,” he groaned, rubbing his hands roughly down his face.

“And that’s exactly why I don’t think it’s a good idea for me to move in. You told me that I needed to go on bed rest, which means that I am going to need help, not someone who breaks his promises.”

“I’m sorry, Melanie,” Aidan said, rubbing the back of his neck with a weary sigh and wondering why he kept fucking up every time he was near her. “I wasn’t abandoning you on purpose. While my father was with you, I was tearing through your file, making phone calls, and running tests. I wanted to make sure that you and the baby were okay, but I only ended fucking this up again.

When she hesitated, he continued.

“I understand that you don’t like me, and I don’t blame you. I’ve given you enough reason to hate me, but that doesn’t change the fact that we’re having a baby and we owe it to him to get to know each other so that we can do this right. I think the best way for us to do that is for you to move in,” Aidan said, only to rush to continue when she opened her mouth to cut him off. “You can’t do this on your own and I

know that you have friends and family that you can count on to help you. I also know that I don't have any right to ask, especially after the way that I treated you, but I would really like a chance to make this up to you and to prove that I'm not an asshole."

When she didn't immediately tell him to go fuck himself, Aidan took that as a win and pressed his luck. "And if it doesn't work out, then we'll figure something else out, but I would really like the chance to be there for you and the baby," Aidan said, promising her everything short of marriage.

He didn't love her, didn't know much about her other than the fact that she had a smile that had once driven him out of his fucking mind. It wasn't enough to build a lifetime on. Even though he'd been raised to do the right thing and that meant marrying her, he couldn't do it, not when it meant doing something that he swore that he would never do for all the wrong reasons.

Unlike the rest of the men in his family, Aidan didn't want to get married and have a family, and he did whatever it took to make sure that it never happened. He didn't form attachments, take unnecessary risks, or come within ten feet of any woman that could tempt him into wanting more.

Until Melanie.

"Please, Melanie. Give this a chance," Aidan said, praying that it was enough when she shook her head with a sigh of resignation and said, "I know that I'm going to regret this."

"But you'll give this a chance?" he asked, holding his breath as he waited for her answer, surprised to realize just how badly he wanted her to stay.

"Fine, I'll give it a chance," Melanie said, giving him a look that told him just how

many more chances she was willing to give him after this.

Absolutely none and he couldn't blame her, which meant that he was going to have to do everything he could to make sure that he didn't f

uck this up again.

Chapter 7

Don't look!

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For the love of everything that's holy, don't open your eyes! Melanie inwardly screamed at herself, praying that the crazed man cursing to himself as he continued rummaging through the room didn't realize that she was awake.

Hoping that Aidan was too busy to notice, Melanie slowly turned over onto her side, absently noting that although the bed was smaller than she was used to, it was surprisingly comfortable.

Then again, should she really expect anything else from a doctor?

Besides cleanliness, she amended as she cracked open an eye so that she could watch as Aidan stumbled around his messy bedroom, tearing through boxes while she lay there, curled up on her side, praying that he found whatever it was that he was looking for before he realized that she was awake and decided to "take care of her," because she honestly wasn't sure that she could take much more of this.

"Shit!" Aidan snapped from the bathroom where he'd moved the search, making her immediately close her eyes and pray for a miracle.

Maybe she should make a run for it, Melanie thought, debating the pros and cons of opening her eyes so that she could weigh the risks of trying to make it to that door before he realized that she was awake. The terror that poured through her at being tucked in again had her laying there, squeezing her eyes tightly shut, and anxiously awaiting the moment when she heard the front door click shut behind him.

"Shit!" he whispered harshly as she heard him stumble back into the bedroom where she was currently laying in terror, the same bedroom that he'd stashed her in last

night before his reign of terror had begun.

She should have never agreed to this, Melanie thought, desperately trying to resist the urge to crack open an eye so that she could see what he was doing, terrified that she'd find him standing by the bed with another tray of freshly cut vegetables or holding a blanket, ready to tuck her in again. The only thing that she knew was that agreeing to stay here had been a mistake, one that was probably going to end with her being smothered to death, which brought up another terrifying thought.

What if he was standing there waiting to fluff her pillow again?

A shudder tore through her at the memory of waking up in the middle of the night to find Aidan standing over her, waiting for the moment when he could fluff her pillow. It had honestly been one of the most terrifying experiences of her life. When she'd screamed, and really, who wouldn't have screamed? he'd simply smiled, murmured something that sounded like an apology and began fluffing her pillows while she laid there, trying not to make any sudden moves.

If she made it out of here alive, and it was looking less likely by the second, she was going to learn to keep her big mouth shut. God, what the hell had she been thinking when she'd agreed to this?

In her defense, Melanie hadn't expected all that much from him. She figured that she'd stay here for a few nights so that she could honestly say that she'd given him a chance and when he realized that he wasn't interested in playing nursemaid that he would happily pack her off to her parents. What she hadn't expected was for him to embrace his new role with a smile and a psychotic break with reality.

She'd barely had the words out of her mouth, agreeing to give this a chance when she'd suddenly found herself plopped down on a large box with a bottle of lukewarm water and a Twinkie. While she sat there, trying not to think about where he'd found

the Twinkie, he'd rushed around the bedroom, tearing through boxes until he found clean, at least she hoped they were, sheets and quickly made the bed.

Before Melanie had a chance to blink, she found herself standing in the bathroom, holding one of his shirts, a pair of boxers, and a flashlight. She'd barely managed to pull the boxer shorts on before she found herself back in his bedroom and tucked in for the night.

Or so she'd thought.

After he'd tucked her in so tightly that she'd barely been able to breathe, never mind move, he'd given her another one of those smiles that he'd probably perfected for his patients, tore the blankets loose and tucked her in again. After that, he'd disappeared for a bit, made a lot more noise and recited a few more curses before returning to the bedroom, struggling to carry the seventy-inch television that he'd swiped from the living room.

When she'd offered to help him, or at the very least move a few things out of his way so that he didn't get hurt, he'd glared at her until she laid back down, pulled the covers up and once again pondered her life's choices. After he'd dragged the nightstand over to the other side of the room and decided that it wouldn't hold the television, he'd disappeared again only to return with the large bureau that she'd spotted in the hallway earlier covered in boxes and clothes, into the room, kicking everything out of his way as he went.

Once Aidan had the television plugged in, he dug through his room until he found a legal pad and a pen, moved to sit down on the bed next to her only to rethink it and sat down on the floor where he ignored her so that he could consult with medical journals to help him make a grocery list. When he'd finished with his list, he'd handed her another bottle of lukewarm water, turned on the television, and promptly disappeared.

Exhausted, she'd shaken her head, sighed heavily and closed her eyes. It seemed like only minutes later that she woke up to find him checking her vitals. Before she had a chance to panic, she'd found herself being herded towards the bathroom where she barely had time to wake up before she once again found herself tucked back into bed.

Once he'd assured himself that she was settled in, he'd placed a tray filled with yogurt, raw veggies, and a plate of scrambled eggs on her lap. She'd taken one look at the healthy offering, gagged, shook her head, shoved the tray off her lap, slapped a hand across her mouth, and rushed towards the bathroom and that's where she stayed until he'd rummaged through her purse and found her anti-nausea medicine.

As soon as she felt that her stomach was settled, she'd given him a wobbly smile, accepted his help and returned to the bedroom only to turn right back around and found herself once again kneeling on the cold tile floor in the dark bathroom while Aidan sat there, awkwardly rubbing her back as he read, "What to Expect When You're Expecting," on his iPad.

While she'd knelt there, hugging the toilet, he'd snuck back into the bedroom, cleaned up the mess, and had the bed turned down and waiting for her by the time she'd finished embarrassing herself. As soon as he'd tucked her back in bed, he'd disappeared again, leaving her lying there, curled up on her side, trying to ignore the sounds of Aidan tearing apart the apartment next door as she absently noted that the apartment had thin walls.

At some point, Melanie fell asleep only to be startled awake several times throughout the night when he checked on her, brought her snacks, piled more blankets on top of her, tucked her in, fluffed her pillow, brought her more water, and shoved unsweetened applesauce at her before returning to whatever he was doing next door. About an hour ago, Aidan came back, grabbed a towel off the floor, disappeared, shouted a few obscenities, and stumbled back into the room a little while later as he struggled to pull his clothes on.

It was at that point that Melanie felt that it was best for everyone involved if she pretended to be asleep. Now she was laying there waiting for him to leave so that she could relax and maybe rethink her decision to stay here, not because she thought that he was going to neglect or abandon her at this point, but because she was terrified that he wouldn't.

She really wasn't sure that she could handle any more unsweetened applesauce at this point.

*_*_*_*

"Damn it," Aidan bit out with a resigned sigh as he pulled on the shirt that he was hoping was clean and rushed over to his front door, praying that whoever was knocking hadn't woken up Melanie only to follow that with, "It's too fucking early for this," when he opened the door and found Rebecca standing in front of his door with several large suitcases by her side.

"We should probably have that talk," the small woman that had proven the existence of evil over the last five months said with a smile that had him taking a step back and somehow resisting the urge to look over his shoulder for the trap that she'd most likely set for him, but he'd learned never to take his eyes off the woman standing before him.

Oh, had he fucking learned...

For the past five months, she'd taken great joy in finding new and interesting ways to make his life a living hell. It had started with karaoke but had quickly escalated to "accidentally" knocking a variety of liquids onto his lap at family gatherings, releasing crickets in his apartment to drive him out of his fucking mind, stealing his wallet and then having Black Jack Pizza deliver food that he couldn't pay for so that he was forced to watch them walk away with his precious pizza, sending him glitter

bombs, and signing him up to gay dating sites, which wouldn't have been so bad if they hadn't decided that he was too boring to be gay.

Bastards.

But now it seemed that he knew why she'd been going out of her way to make his life a living hell, Aidan thought, sighing heavily as he rubbed his hands roughly down his face. She'd been protecting her best friend and-

"I held back," Rebecca said with a shrug.

"What?" Aidan asked, unable to help but frown down at his sister-in-law.

"It could have been worse, but to be honest, my heart really wasn't in it," Rebecca admitted with another shrug as he stood there, deciding that it was probably for the best if he didn't wonder about that statement.

"I see," Aidan murmured as he glanced back at his closed bedroom door.

"So, about that talk. Why don't we go have it in the hallway?"

Nodding, he reluctantly followed her out into the hallway.

"What exactly did you want to talk about?" Aidan asked as he closed the door behind him.

"How about the fact that you knocked up my best friend? Unless you wanted to discuss the weather," Rebecca said, blinking up at him. "Did you want to discuss the weather?"

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“I’m going to take care of her,” Aidan said, hoping that would be the end of this discussion so that he could check on Melanie and find a way to push back his appointments this morning without giving his father another reason to be pissed at him.

Nodding, Rebecca said, “I already figured that out with the kidnapping.”

“Then what would you like to know, evil one?” he asked, sighing heavily as he rubbed the back of his neck.

“You know that this isn’t going to end well, right?” Rebecca asked absently as she pulled her phone out of her backpack, already bored with this conversation.

“What isn’t going to end well?” Aidan couldn’t help but ask as he dropped his head back against the wall and closed his eyes, beyond fucking exhausted.

He’d spent most of the night trying to clean the other apartment only to come to the realization that it was going to need a complete gut job. Once Aidan realized that there wasn’t much that he could do until he ordered a dumpster and got his hands on some tools, he’d spent the rest of the night going through Melanie’s file, checking on her, and trying to figure out how he was going to make this work.

“She’s not going to marry you,” Rebecca said, making him frown.

“I don’t remember asking,” Aidan pointed out with a sigh as he glanced over at her.

“That’s probably for the best,” she said, texting something on her phone. “Because

you're not her type."

"I see," he murmured thoughtfully, "and what makes you say that?"

Not that he was interested in Melanie any longer because he wasn't, and even if he was, that wasn't an option anymore. Not with a baby on the way. This was going to be difficult enough, but he was curious about a few things.

"Many things," Rebecca said with a shrug.

"Not planning on clearing that up?"

"No, but you know what I've been wondering?" she said, sounding bored as she leaned back against the wall while he stood there, narrowing his eyes on her.

"What's that?"

"How you're planning on fixing this?" Rebecca asked, throwing him a curious look.

"I'm already taking care of everything," Aidan promised her, hoping that it was enough, but of course, it wasn't.

"Really? Then you figured out why my best friend who used to tell me everything refuses to tell me what's wrong or why she always looks like she's about to cry?" Rebecca asked as he tried to figure out how to answer that only to shake his head with a sigh as he admitted, "I have no fucking idea," because he honestly had no fucking clue what he was going to do about that.

Chapter 8

"Oh, damn!" Melanie whispered, searching frantically for somewhere, anywhere, to

hide, but there was nowhere to go unless she was willing to crawl beneath the kitchen table and she wasn't, not when she wasn't sure that she would be able to get back up again.

"Melanie?" Aidan called absently as he strolled into the living room while she looked frantically around the messy kitchen for a way out, taking in the piles of dirty clothes, grocery bags, trash, and stuff that she didn't really want to think about, but there was nowhere to go.

Except for the backdoor, she amended with a groan a few seconds later when she spotted the perfect escape too late.

"What are you doing out of bed?" Aidan asked with a frown, tossing aside two large suitcases that looked like the ones that she threw in the back of her closet a few years ago.

"Why am I out of bed?" Melanie asked, hoping to buy herself some time while she tried to think of a reasonable explanation that would explain why she, a woman who was supposed to be on bed rest and taking it easy, was in the kitchen searching for food when he'd left her with a lifetime supply of baby carrots and celery sticks by the bed this morning.

"Is everything okay?" Aidan asked, immediately coming to her side and-

"Are you checking my pulse?" she asked, not really sure how she should respond because this was definitely a first for her.

"Yes," he said absently as he released her hand, grabbed a black stethoscope off the back of a chair, dislodging a stained tie, raised her shirt, and placed the cold metal end of the stethoscope against her stomach while she stood there, deciding that yes, yes, this was in fact weird.

“Why aren’t you in bed?” Aidan asked, shifting his attention to another spot on her belly.

“I was hungry,” Melanie reluctantly admitted as her stomach growled, reminding her that she was here for a reason. She didn’t care if it was in the form of cookies, Pop-Tarts, donuts, or day-old bread as long as she got her carbs and she got them soon. The only thing that she cared about was making the vicious cravings driving her out of her damn mind go away.

“Well, that’s why I’m here,” Aidan said, gesturing towards his room with an understanding smile.

“Oh, thank god,” Melanie mumbled as she allowed him to lead her back towards his room, relieved that she was finally going to get some real food.

“Let’s just get you tucked in. Then, I’ll go grab you some oatmeal and maybe a bran muffin and be back before you know it,” Aidan said, giving her that well-practiced smile that almost made her miss something important.

“Oatmeal?” Melanie asked, praying that she’d misheard him because she honestly didn’t think that she was going to survive another hour without real food.

“Mmhhh,” Aidan murmured absently as he pulled his phone out of his pocket and started going through his emails.

“I see,” she murmured as realization hit.

He was determined to treat her like a patient and that just wasn’t going to work for her.

*_*_*_*

“Aidan?”

“Hmm?” he murmured as he scrolled through his emails, forwarded some to his secretary, deleted some, flagged others all while debating running out to get some fresh prunes to add to Melanie’s breakfast and grabbing some pancakes and eggs for himself.

Christ, he could go for some pancakes.

And home fries.

Maybe some bacon.

“Aidan?”

“Yeah?” he asked, double-checking his schedule to make sure that there weren’t any last-minute patients added to his day.

“I don’t want oatmeal.”

“It’s good for the baby,” Aidan said absently, forwarding an email to his father, who wasn’t talking to him at the moment and-

“I’m going to say this once and only once,” Melanie said as she wrapped her small hand around his tie and gave it a tug so that they were almost eye to eye. “Do not come between me and my food or I will hurt you.”

“I-”

“I will hurt you, Aidan. If you shove one more baby carrot or freaking plain, fat-free yogurt at me, I will tear you apart with my bare hands,” she bit out with a glare that

told him that she'd start with his balls.

"I-"

"I'm not one of your patients," she informed him.

"I-"

"So, stop treating me like one," Melanie said before abruptly releasing his tie, turning around and waddling towards the bed only to pause to give the tray of fresh veggies that he'd left for her a look that made his balls pull up tightly in fear before climbing back into bed, curling up on her side and glaring at him with a look that dared him to offer her another baby carrot.

He opened his mouth to point out that she needed a wide variety of fruits and vegetables during her pregnancy, but the look she was giving him had him quickly shutting his mouth and clearing his throat. "What can I get for you?"

In seconds, the glare was gone and in its place was that beautiful, sweet smile that had knocked him on his ass the first time around.

Oh, fuck no...

"I could really use a Bradford Special from the Fire & Brimstone," Melanie said while he nodded in agreement because he could definitely use one of those as well.

*_*_*_*_*

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Maybe she shouldn't have threatened to hurt h

im? Melanie thought as she shifted her attention from the plate piled high with pancakes that he'd handed her a few minutes ago to the man sitting on the floor, doing something on his iPad as he absently ate an egg sandwich that she was kind of hoping that he wasn't going to finish. She opened her mouth to apologize again but decided against it since he'd ignored her last apology and instead, said, "Thank you for breakfast."

"You're welcome," Aidan said absently as he picked up a file by his side and checked something before returning to his iPad and leaving her sitting there, struggling to come up with something else to say only to realize that she had absolutely no idea what to say to him.

As she sat there on his bed, Melanie realized that she really didn't know anything about him. She had no idea where he'd gone to school, why he'd wanted to be a doctor, what he liked, what he didn't like, or any of the thousands of things that she should really know about a man that she was about to have a baby with, and by the looks of things, he wasn't in any rush to fill in the blanks for her.

She really wasn't sure how they were going to do this, but for her baby boy, Melanie would find a way. She vowed then and there that as long as he wanted to be in her baby's life that she would do everything within her power to make it work only to lick her lips hungrily as she watched him put his sandwich back down on the tray of hash browns that looked really good.

"That must be Rebecca. She said that she was going to swing by and drop off more of

your stuff this morning,” Aidan said, shoving a hash brown in his mouth as the sounds of the doorbell echoed throughout the large apartment.

“Okay,” Melanie said absently, licking her lips as he grabbed another hash brown, stuffed it in his mouth, and abandoned that egg sandwich that had her stomach growling as he headed for the door.

She looked down at the large stack of pancakes on her plate and then to the sandwich that was sitting there on a lonely wrapper, clearly going to waste, and-

“Son of a bitch!” Aidan yelled, which was followed by the sounds of Lucifer snapping something inaudible at him along with the sounds of a pained grunt that made her realize something important.

His sandwich was getting cold.

“I told Lucifer about Aidan,” Rebecca announced as she strolled into the bedroom and dropped several large bags from Dixon’s bakery on the bed before strolling over to Aidan’s abandoned sandwich and picked it up.

“I figured,” Melanie said, ignoring the grunts, groans, and inaudible shouts coming from the other room as she accepted the sandwich from her best friend, who she loved more than anything in the world at this moment. “Is he mad at me?” she asked as she toyed with the wrapper, not really sure that she could take one more person being mad at her right now.

“Son of a bitch!” Lucifer shouted.

“No. Do you want something to drink?” Rebecca asked.

“No,” Melanie said around a bite of Aidan’s sandwich, “I’m good.”

“You bastard!” came Aidan’s shout as Rebecca nodded and joined her on the bed.

“He’s taking it well,” Melanie said, taking another bite as she took a peek at what was inside all those delicious smelling bags.

Rebecca nodded. “Yeah, he’s really excited about being an official uncle and godfather.”

“Congratulations, asshole!”

“You mean bastard!”

“I can tell,” Melanie murmured in agreement as she savored the last bite of Aidan’s sandwich, wondering if Aidan would mind if she finished off his hash browns. When she heard the gasp of pain and plea for a quick death, she decided to help herself.

Chapter 9

Monday

“Okay, let’s do this,” Melanie said with a determined nod as she pulled the fresh bag of peanut butter M&Ms that Rebecca dropped off a little while ago closer, stacked her pillows, laid down, realized that she couldn’t exactly breathe in that position, shoved her pillows back, sat up, shifted a bit, shoved her pillows back again, shifted again until she finally gave up trying to get comfortable, grabbed the television remote and started the first Indiana Jones movie.

“This isn’t so bad,” she said, shoving a handful of M&Ms in her mouth even as her gaze strayed to the laptop sitting idly on top of one of the boxes in the corner.

Maybe she could write a little code, Melanie thought right around the time that she

decided that it would probably be for the best if she laid back down since sitting up was no longer an option. Placing her hand on her belly, she shoved the pile of pillows over, curled up on her side, and sighed with relief when she was able to breathe again.

Telling herself that was fine, more than fine, she focused her attention on the large television in front of her and decided that losing herself in an Indiana Jones movie marathon, only the first three since the fourth one didn't exist in her mind, was exactly what she needed. Grabbing another handful of peanut butter M&Ms, she shoved them in her mouth with a resigned sigh, shifted a bit, swallowed, and at some point, returned to staring at her neglected computer.

She missed working, missed having a purpose in life other than making it to the bathroom in time.

Speaking of the bathroom, she should probably start waddling in that direction. Tossing another handful of candy in her mouth, Melanie paused her movie, struggled to sit up only to give up, wiggle to the edge and allow gravity to do the rest.

Once she was up, Melanie waddled towards the bathroom, shuffled past Aidan's dirty clothes, sat down on the potty only to realize five minutes later that she didn't really need to use the bathroom when her son shifted off her bladder. Once she finished washing her hands, Melanie headed to the kitchen and grabbed a bottle of water, a small bottle of apple juice, and after a slight hesitation, she grabbed one of the bags of food that Rebecca dropped off this morning and slowly made her way back to Aidan's bedroom.

Once she was there, she went through another ten minutes of trying to get comfortable only to give up, lay awkwardly on her side, and opened the bag only to groan in defeat when she realized that the bag she'd grabbed was filled with condiments, plastic utensils, rolls, and hand-wipes.

Too exhausted to go back to the kitchen, Melanie broke open a small packet of honey mustard, dipped her roll in it and sighed, hoping that tomorrow was better.

Tuesday

She missed her nightly baths, Melanie thought with a heartfelt sigh as she laid there on the cold bathroom floor, staring ahead at the small bathtub that she would kill to soak in as she waited for the last of the nausea to finally go away. Closing her eyes, she slowly exhaled, and-

“Melanie?”

-realized how late it was. Praying that she didn't do anything to tip off the man determined to nurse her to death, Melanie dragged herself to her feet, headed back to bed, climbed in, settled back against the pillows only to curse and curl up on her side, and tried to act natural.

“How was your day?” Aidan asked absently, walking into the bedroom and tossing his tie aside as he came to check on her.

“Fine,” Melanie said, biting back a sigh as she forced herself to lay there as Aidan went through his five-minute routine to make sure that she was okay. When he finished checking to make sure the baby was okay, he tossed the stethoscope back over the headboard, pulled her shirt back down, and went to tuck her in only to frown when she reached down and beat him to it.

“I picked up dinner from the Fire & Brimstone and dessert from Dixon’s. Is that okay or do you want something else?” Aidan asked, already pulling out his cellphone and heading for the door as he compared her vitals with yesterday’s.

“Thank you, that sounds wonderful. How was your-” Melanie started to ask, but he

was already walking out of the room and she found herself alone, once again.

Wednesday

“Oh, my god, why would anyone post something like that?” Melanie mumbled to herself, careful not to wake the man passed out in the other room on the couch as she watched a video on Facebook in horror.

“That’s just a

ll kinds of wrong,” she said, even as she swiped to watch the next video on her phone.

Wincing when her baby boy landed a solid kick to her ribs, Melanie absently rubbed her belly as she rolled over onto her other side and tried to get comfortable only to give up with another sigh. Resigned to spending another sleepless night with only Facebook to keep her company, she forced herself to ignore the cramp in her back and her swollen legs that kept her up most of the night.

It probably wouldn’t be so bad if she could at least work, but that wasn’t a possibility as long as she was stuck on bed rest. Aidan told her that they might let her get off bed rest in a few weeks, but she wasn’t holding her breath. She was probably going to be stuck in this bed until her baby boy was ready to make an appearance. She just wished that it wasn’t three months away.

“Oh, crap!” Melanie whispered somewhat frantically when she heard movement in the other room. Hands trembling, she struggled to shut her phone off and shoved it beneath her pillow, closed her eyes, and prayed that he wasn’t coming in here to fluff her pillows.

When she felt the blankets being moved a minute later, Melanie couldn’t help but cringe. After what felt like an eternity, the blanket was brought up to her shoulders.

She felt him gently sweep her hair away and-

Aidan checked her pulse, making her lips twitch.

Once he was done, Melanie heard him walk away. As soon as she was sure that he wasn't coming back, she pulled her phone back out, returned to Facebook, noted the time, and hoped that exhaustion took over before she got desperate and started looking at Bieber memes to pass the time.

*_*_*_*

Thursday

"How's life as a kept woman working out for you?"

"I hate you," Melanie said, sighing softly as she laid there, unable to find the strength to properly torment her best friend today.

"That good?" Rebecca asked as she climbed onto the bed and curled up on her side so that they were facing each other.

"It's the best," she said dryly, trying to force a smile and failing miserably.

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Sighing, Rebecca reached over and pushed a strand of Melanie's blonde hair out of her face. "That bad?"

Shrugging, she said, "It's fine."

"You could move in with us," Rebecca offered, and as much as she would love to say yes, she couldn't do that to her best friend.

She'd married the man of her dreams, had a restaurant to renovate, was going to school, and Melanie wasn't going to mess that up for her. After all the years of bullshit that Rebecca had endured, she deserved a little happiness and Melanie was going to do her best to make sure that she got it, which meant slapping a smile on her face and saying, "It's fine, really. I'm just tired."

For a moment, her best friend didn't say anything, but then she nodded with a sigh and said, "This is probably the most boring conversation that we've ever had."

"Without a doubt," Melanie readily agreed.

Friday, Saturday, and so forth...

Too depressing to mention.

Chapter 10

One Month Later...

“I. Will. Kill. You,” the angry pregnant woman that had four minutes left growled from the bathroom while he stood there, shaking his head because this just wasn’t going to work for him.

“You have three minutes,” Aidan said, deciding to use the fourth minute as a buffer to ensure that he had her safely back in bed before he had to leave for work.

“Oh, my god! Are you standing outside the bathroom again?” Melanie demanded, not really sounding all that happy to have him there. “We talked about this!”

“You might need help,” he pointed out when it really should have been more than obvious that he was here to make sure that everything went smoothly.

“Go away!”

“I can’t do that,” Aidan reminded her as he glanced down at the daily schedule that he’d created with Lucifer’s help after the two of them had broken out a couple of ice packs and Advil to make sure that he didn’t fuck this up again after the large bastard had congratulated him on the baby by beating the shit out of him.

“I’m not a patient!” Melanie snapped, again.

“I know that,” he said, staring down at the schedule that they’d come up with and wondering why she was having such a hard time getting on board with his schedule. After three weeks, she should have this thing down, but unfortunately for him and his schedule, the stubborn woman fought him every inch of the way.

“No, you don’t!” she snapped, and since she was clearly still upset that he hadn’t given in to her demands for donuts this morning, he ignored her and focused on everything that he needed to do today.

“Aidan?”

“Yeah,” he said, thankful for the distraction.

“Are you planning on treating me like a patient for the next two months?” she asked, clearly not ready to drop this.

“I’m not treating you like a patient,” he said, even though he had a bad feeling that he was doing exactly that and for one very good reason.

He didn’t know how to act around her.

“What would you call it?”

“Taking care of you,” Aidan said, not pointing out that treating her like a patient was the only thing that helped because he honestly had no idea what he should say to her.

He couldn’t really treat her like an ex, because they’d only had a one-night stand. He also couldn’t call her a friend, because even after a month he barely knew anything about her. The only things that he knew about her was that she was stubborn, had an appetite that put his to shame, had an addiction to carbs that actually frightened him, and was just as uncomfortable around him as he was around her.

Whenever they were in the same room, it was...awkward.

Working on her apartment helped. Now after he took care of her and made sure that she was eating enough and staying hydrated, he could go work on her apartment and spend the rest of the night trying to figure out how he was going to raise a child with a woman that he had absolutely no idea how to talk to.

“I can take care of myself,” Melanie pointed out from the bathroom when she was

supposed to be waddling back to bed.

“And you’re two minutes over the schedule,” Aidan pointed out, scrolling through his schedule and noting that he was scheduled to work a shift in the emergency room tonight.

Shit!

“Is there any chance that Rebecca can come over to help you with dinner? Or maybe your mom?” he asked, kind of hoping to avoid her mother since the woman liked to pretend that he didn’t exist. Not that he didn’t deserve it, but still...

“Yeah, I’m sure one of them can stop by,” Melanie said after a slight hesitation, making him wonder if he should ask his father to cover for him so that he could take care of her, but since his father was already picking up his slack at work so that Aidan could check on her during the day, he didn’t want to push his luck.

“Good,” Aidan said, sighing as he checked the schedule for the rest of the week and amended his previous question. “Is there any chance that one of them could come help you with dinner for the rest of the week?”

“I’m sure it will be fine,” the woman that was now making them run five minutes behind schedule said as she opened the door and proceeded to waddle towards the bed, leaving him to follow after her and nodding like an idiot, because he had absolutely no idea what else he should say to her.

*_*_*_*_*

Perhaps she should have called Rebecca like she’d promised? Melanie thought with a groan as she slowly, because there was no other way that she could do it, sat back against the bathroom wall and closed her eyes as she struggled to catch her breath.

She definitely should have called her mother since her mother would have refused to leave until Aidan came home just so that she could get the chance to ignore him again.

At the very least, she should have brought her cellphone with her. Out of habit, she'd left her cellphone on the nightstand, which was only ten feet away, but it might as well be a hundred miles away right now. Resigning herself to sitting there until Aidan came back, and she really hoped that he was coming back soon, Melanie shifted to get more comfortable.

She was sick to her stomach, exhausted and ready to call it a day, curl up, and go to sleep. But, she couldn't do anything more than sit here, waiting for the nausea to stop so that she could get her butt back into the rather comfortable bed that she was stuck in until her own bed was moved into her new apartment, the same apartment that she really wasn't sure that she was going to be able to afford.

Right now, it was a dump, but once it was cleaned up, there was no way in hell that she was going to be able to afford a first floor, two-bedroom apartment, within walking distance of downtown. At least not without working, and that was out of the question right now. She'd tried to get some work done today, but since sitting up was no longer an option working on her computer hadn't worked out so well for her.

The only thing that she was able to do now was to lay on her side, curled up, staring at the television as she counted down the days until the big day and hope that her baby boy didn't keep her waiting. Laying around waiting for the big day to come and hoping that she didn't go broke before then kept her up most nights, her sore back and legs kept her up the rest of the time.

It probably wouldn't have been so bad if she was still able to take her nightly bath, but she'd gotten to the point that she couldn't get in and out of the tub without help and she wasn't comfortable asking Aidan for help, which was stupid. Besides the fact

that he'd clearly already seen her naked, he was also a doctor, but she just felt weird asking him for help. He was already doing so much for her and she hated asking for more.

A few minutes after Aidan left this morning with a murmured, "I'll see you tonight," she'd found herself nibbling on one of the celery sticks that Aidan kept in the fridge on the off-chance that she accidentally wanted one, hoping that it would be enough to take the edge off her hunger. Instead of bringing her relief, it had filled her with the sudden need

to become better acquainted with Aidan's bathroom. She shouldn't have touched the celery and if she lived through this, she never would again.

In fact, if she survived this pregnancy she'd be willing to give up vegetables, more than willing, Melanie thought with a pathetic whimper as her stomach gave another violent growl and she wasn't sure if it was demanding food or trying to make sure that she never touched another vegetable for as long as she lived.

Definitely never touching another vegetable, Melanie decided, leaning heavily against the bathtub, wishing that she were somewhere other than in the bathroom, surrounded by a month's worth of Aidan's dirty clothes. She really wished that-

"Oh, my god!" came the startled voice, pulling her attention to the older woman standing in the doorway, holding an empty laundry basket and looking genuinely surprised to see her.

Closing her eyes, Melanie sighed with relief, hoping that whoever this woman was that she would put that empty laundry basket to good use and free her from the terrifying mess surrounding her so that she wouldn't be forced to pass out near a pile of Aidan's dirty socks.

Chapter 11

“Hold still,” Aidan said, chuckling when his sister Kenzie stuck her tongue out at him, but at least she’d stopped squirming so that he could examine her arm.

“I am holding still,” Kenzie said absently as she glanced down at her phone, looking completely bored while he sat there, trying to decide if she was going to need stitches. God, he really hoped that she didn’t need stitches because he wasn’t sure that he’d be able to handle that today.

“How’d this happen?” he asked, pressing a clean gauze pad against the gash running down her arm.

“She fell through a rotted floor,” Trevor, the bastard lounging in his desk chair, said, making everything in him go still.

“You fell through a floor?” Aidan asked, shifting a glare to his cousin to find Trevor frowning down at the sonogram picture that Aidan had framed of his son.

“Who’s this?” Trevor asked, nodding towards the framed picture.

“Why didn’t you call an ambulance?” Aidan asked, ignoring the question and wondering what the hell was wrong with his cousin as he grabbed a penlight and focused on his sister, checking her pupils to make sure that she-

“I fell through the first floor into a crawl space three feet high and landed on my feet. No worries,” Kenzie explained as she pushed the penlight out of her face.

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“Now, back to this,” Trevor said, holding up the framed photo. “Who’s this?”

“None of your business,” Aidan said since there was no way in hell that he was going to tell his cousin about his son before he had a chance to tell his mother, who would then tell everyone that she’d ever met that she was about to have another grandchild, thereby saving him from having to do it. He just needed to figure out a way to break the news to his mother that he’d had a one-night stand with a woman that he barely knew and got her pregnant without her killing him.

Shrugging, Trevor put the frame back down and returned to rummaging through his desk. When he found Aidan’s stash of cookies, he leaned back in the chair and popped a cookie in his mouth as he shot Aidan a curious look that he ignored as he finished cleaning his sister’s cut.

“When was your last tetanus shot?” Aidan asked, praying that it had been recent, otherwise...

“I don’t need one,” his stubborn sister bit out with a murderous glare that dared him to argue.

“I see,” Aidan murmured, unwrapping a fresh gauze pad even as he sent Trevor a look that he prayed the large bastard understood. With a nod, Trevor popped one last cookie in his mouth and stood up, ready to do what needed to be done. Applying one last gauze pad to her arm, Aidan stood up as well and headed for the door, praying that Trevor didn’t fuck this up.

“No needles, Aidan. I’m not kidding,” Kenzie said, returning her attention to her

phone, trying to play it cool, but he didn't miss the calculating glance she kept shooting his office door.

"No needles," Aidan lied as he closed his office door behind him and headed down the hallway as he contemplated calling a few of his brothers and cousins to give him a hand with this when his father stepped into the hallway.

"Wait...what are you doing? He said no needles!" Kenzie yelled, right around the time that a pained grunt reached his ears and Trevor muttered a curse.

"What's going on?" his father asked, shooting Aidan's closed office door a questioning look.

"He said no needles!"

"Is Kenzie here?" his father asked with a frown.

"She fell through another rotted floor," Aidan said with a sigh as he rubbed his hands down his face, wondering if he was about to get another lecture when his office door was thrown open. Shooting him an accusing glare, Kenzie came running out of his office and headed for the exit, but she'd barely made it two feet before Trevor was there, grabbing her and taking her to the floor with a pained grunt when she went for his balls.

"You said no needles!" Kenzie yelled somewhat desperately as she tried to squirm her way free and just when he was about to help his cousin hold her down, the phone call that let him know that he'd fucked up again, came.

*_*_*_*

"Your prescriptions will be ready in a few minutes, Dr. Bradford."

“Thank you,” Aidan murmured absently, not bothering to look up as he sat there with his head in his hands as he finally faced facts.

He had no fucking clue what he was doing.

None.

The only thing that he knew was that he kept fucking this up. He had a woman that he barely knew counting on him, a baby on the way that still didn’t feel real, and his mother waiting to yell at him at home and he was fucking clueless how to fix this. He just needed to-

“I wipe my own ass,” came the proud announcement that had Aidan looking up to find a cute little boy wearing Superman footie pajamas standing in front of him, nodding solemnly.

Lips twitching, Aidan said, “Me, too,” as he raised his hand for a fist bump that the little boy happily tapped with his tiny fist.

Nodding, the little boy said, “That’s ‘cause we’re big boys.”

“It really is,” Aidan agreed.

“I don’t need tampons,” the little boy added.

“Me neither,” Aidan said, chuckling.

“Mommy does,” the little boy said, gesturing absently behind him.

“I see,” Aidan said, smiling as he watched the little boy shift his attention to the Spiderman band-aid on his hand.

“My cat’s mean, see?” he said, holding up his hand for Aidan’s inspection.

“That must have hurt,” Aidan murmured with a sympathetic nod.

“It did. I almost died,” the boy readily agreed.

“You’re lucky to be alive,” Aidan said, nodding in agreement.

“I know,” he said, nodding as he climbed onto the chair next to Aidan.

“Where’s your mom?” Aidan asked, glancing around the store for the woman in question.

“Wondering why the store doesn’t carry super tampons,” the little boy said, shrugging it off as he helped himself to one of the free prescription magazines.

“I’ve wondered that myself,” Aidan said, watching as a woman, who looked completely fucking exhausted, hurried over with a baby in one arm and a handbasket in the other.

“Timmy, what did mommy say about walking off?” she asked with a resigned sigh.

“That it was going to drive you to drink one day,” Timmy said, making Aidan bite back a smile as the woman’s eyes narrowed on the little boy and her lips twitched.

“It really is,” she said before shifting her attention to Aidan. “I’m sorry if he bothered you.”

Aidan opened his mouth to answer when Timmy said, “He wipes his own ass too, Mommy.”

“Umm, that’s nice,” she murmured before clearing her throat and asked, “Are you ready to go?”

“Did you find your super tam

pons, Mommy?” Timmy asked as he obediently climbed off the chair and joined his mother, who was currently turning an interesting shade of red.

“No, no, I did not,” she murmured, looking embarrassed.

“Does that mean that you’re gonna have to use those diaper thingies again?”

“It was nice to meet you,” she said with a wince, not quite able to meet Aidan’s gaze as she turned around and headed towards the front of the store while Aidan sat there, wondering if his son was going to torment Melanie like that and found himself chuckling because his son was a Bradford after all.

Oh, shit...

He was having a son, Aidan realized as he sat there and-

“Timmy! No, Timmy, wait! Don’t pull your clothes off in the store!” came the heartfelt plea as Timmy, in all his glory, ran past Aidan towards the bathroom with a, “I have to pee!” while Aidan sat there, unable to help but smile because he was having a son.

Now, he just had to figure out how he was going to do that with a woman that he had no fucking clue how to talk to.

Chapter 12

Perhaps she should call for help?

“You had a one-night stand?”

Perhaps not, Melanie thought with a heavy sigh as she slowly scooted closer to the faucet so that she could drain the cold water that was slowly turning her into a prune. Doing her best to ignore the argument going on in the living room, Melanie closed the drain a few minutes later and added more hot water as she debated her next move only to realize that she didn’t really have one.

“Mom-”

“We raised you better than that!” his mother yelled, cutting off whatever Aidan had been about to say and making Melanie wince in sympathy because this conversation was eerily similar to the one that she’d had with her parents after she’d told them about the baby.

Except for the crying that is, she amended a few seconds later, noting that no one was crying or screaming hysterically and telling Aidan that he’d ruined his life. Lucky bastard, Melanie thought as she leaned back only to sit right back up when her baby boy expressed his displeasure with a well-placed kick to her ribs.

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“Okay, okay,” she said with a wince, placing her hands on her belly as she sat up in the tub, really wishing he’d stop kicking her for five minutes so that she could relax. It was bad enough that he kept her up all night, but he really didn’t need to wreck the first bath she’d had in over a month, Melanie thought miserably as she shifted to get comfortable only to stop with a groan when her baby boy started kicking again.

“Come on, sweetie, just let mommy relax for a minute,” she said, closing her eyes and slowly exhaling as she waited for him to calm down, but she had a feeling that she was in for another long night.

“Is there something that you want to tell me?” Aidan suddenly asked, taking her by surprise and making her realize that the yelling had stopped.

When she opened her eyes and found Aidan sitting on the edge of the tub, watching her, she realized that yes, yes, she did, in fact, have several things that she would very much like to tell him.

*_*_*_*

“Shit!”

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Melanie demanded just as Aidan ducked out of the way of the shampoo bottle only to get nailed in the chest by a soaking wet facecloth.

“Melanie, I-shit!” he finished with a grunt as he was forced to once again duck as he stumbled back out of the bathroom, slamming the door shut behind him just as the

bottle of conditioner made contact with the door.

“Learn to knock!” the ungrateful woman snapped, while Aidan stood there, glaring at the door as he yanked his soaked shirt off and tossed it aside.

“I was only trying to help!” he snapped back, toeing his shoes off so that he could shove his body wash-coated pants off.

“You can help from out there!”

“Really?” he couldn’t help but ask. “And how exactly were you planning on getting out of that tub?”

There was a long pause before Melanie asked, “Is your mother still here?” sounding really fucking hopeful.

“No,” Aidan bit out, with a glare at the door as he mentally went over everything that had been within her reach and realized that she still had a can of shaving gel and her bottle of conditioner left.

“Stop being so damn stubborn and let me help,” he said, shaking his head in disgust even as he couldn’t help but wonder why she was being such a big baby about this.

“No!”

“Melanie, you need my help,” he reminded her, which should have been more than obvious to the stubborn woman after today’s incident.

“I’m fine,” the irrational woman mumbled, making him shake his head in disbelief because she was anything but fine.

“Melanie, you’re not fine,” Aidan said, running his hands roughly down his face as he tried to figure out what to do with the damn woman.

“Everything’s fine,” Melanie stubbornly argued as he calculated the risk to his balls and decided to chance it because he wasn’t having this conversation through a door.

“Are you going to let me help you?” he asked after a slight pause, hoping that she’d make this easy for him.

“Is there any chance that you’d be willing to call Rebecca or my mother to come help?” she asked as he opened the bathroom door and strolled inside with, “Not a chance in hell.”

Ignoring her startled scream, Aidan grabbed a large towel on his way over to the bathtub, reached down, pulled the plug, threw the towel over his shoulder, and reached down and helped her to her feet before she could slap him. He decided that it would be for the best for everyone involved if he kept his movements professional and his gaze north of the most amazing pair of breasts that he’d ever seen in his life.

Just when he thought he’d lose the battle and release a groan that would make this situation a hell of a lot more complicated, he ignored her sputtered protests, wrapped the towel around her, grabbed her hand, and led her out of the bathroom. From there, he managed to get her into one of his tee-shirts, a pair of his boxers, and into his bed without her tearing into him.

Deciding that he’d put this off for long enough, Aidan climbed into the bed next to her, pulled her into his arms and said, “Now, let’s have a talk, shall we?”

“And we couldn’t have this talk somewhere else?” Melanie asked, squirming as she tried to sit up when he shifted back, pulled her against him so that she was laying on her side with her head on his shoulder, and-

“Oh, my god!” Melanie gasped, closing her eyes with a groan even as she snuggled closer.

“Better?” Aidan asked, feeling his lips twitch.

“You have no idea,” she practically moaned as she snuggled closer to him.

“You ready to talk?” he asked, reaching over with his free hand, and after a slight hesitation, placed it on her large belly.

“About your manhandling ways or the fact that you have a death wish?” she asked with a dreamy little sigh, making him wonder if they should hold off on this conversation until after she had a chance to get some sleep, but then he remembered who he was dealing with here and decided that his best bet was to have this conversation now.

“I was thinking that we could talk about all those things that you’re keeping from me,” Aidan drawled, absently noting that she’d gone still against him as he felt their baby push against his hand.

“What are you talking about?” she asked after a slight hesitation, damn near making him roll his eyes because she knew damn well what he was talking about.

“All those things that you told my mother, but for some reason decided not to tell me,” he said, still angry with himself for not realizing that she was having so many damn problems.

“I didn’t want to bother you,” she grumbled sleepily.

“And is that why you didn’t tell me that your nausea medication wasn’t working anymore or that you were having problems sleeping because you didn’t want to

bother me?" he asked, unable to help but smile when his son pushed against his hand.

"I had it handled."

"By passing out on the bathroom floor?" Aidan asked, gently rubbing her belly as he settled back and closed his eyes.

"I was taking a break."

"And the bathroom floor seemed like the best place to do that?" he asked, chuckling.

"Yes, yes, it did," Melanie mumbled as she snuggled closer.

"Comfy?" he couldn't help but ask.

"Quite," she said with a little snuffle that had his lips twitching.

"You want to tell me anything else?" he asked, more than ready to call it a night even though they had one last thing that they needed to discuss.

"Not really," she mumbled sleepily as she laid her arm across his chest.

"I see," he drawled, matching her yawn with one of his own as he struggled to stay awake, but the feel of her in his arms and his son pushing against his hand was slowly lulling him to sleep.

"Good," Melanie mumbled her agreement and as he felt her relax against him, Aidan realized just how badly he wanted to make this work and not just to do the right thing anymore, but because he wanted his son.

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“Oh, come the fuck on!” came the rather angry shout from what sounded like the other apartment as Melanie laid there, trying to come to terms with the fact that she was a snuggle slut.

She wished that she could say that it had been a fluke and that she’d passed out in his arms from exhaustion and that once she woke up and realized what happened that she’d put some much-needed space between them...

She really wished that she could say that, but she couldn’t.

When she woke up the first time to use the bathroom, she’d quickly waddled back to the bed and practically threw herself back in his arms and when he didn’t snuggle up fast enough for her liking, she may have growled, cried, or a terrifying combination of the two. The next time she had to get up, it had taken her baby three kicks to her bladder to get her to leave his arms and only then because he’d become somewhat concerned when she’d started crying hysterically and helped her to the bathroo

m.

When he’d made the mistake of getting out of bed to get her a drink and a snack...

Well, it was probably for the best if she didn’t dwell on that mortifying incident, Melanie told herself with a pitiful sigh as she thought about what happened when his alarm went off this morning and he’d announced that he had to get up for work only to once again decide that was a moment that was better left forgotten. That brought up another interesting question, shouldn’t he be at work?

One glance at the alarm clock told her that yes, yes, he should most definitely be at work right now. Then again, she should probably be staring at the television right now, but she was too distracted to pretend to care and it was all thanks to the man banging on something in the other apartment.

She had no idea what to make of him anymore. She should hate him, but she just couldn't do it. It had only taken her a day to realize that he wasn't really an asshole and that morning in the hotel room had just been a really bad day for him, one that should have gotten him slapped, but definitely a bad day. It also didn't hurt that Lucifer had said as much after he'd finished congratulating Aidan.

Don't get her wrong, it was great to know that Aidan wasn't really a jerk, but that's pretty much all she knew about him. That and he probably shouldn't be in charge of tucking their son in at night, Melanie thought, smiling only to end up sighing when the man that she couldn't quite figure out came walking into the room, pulling his grey tee-shirt off in the process and tossing it aside as he headed for the mini-fridge that he kept well-stocked for her.

As she lay there, admittedly enjoying the view, she couldn't help but wonder what she'd been thinking when she'd agreed to go out with him that night. Not that it was really hard to figure out why any woman would say yes to Aidan Bradford, Melanie thought as she ran her eyes down his back, mesmerized by the way the golden muscles moved as he grabbed a Gatorade, tilted his head back and took a drink.

He was incredibly handsome, there was no arguing that, Melanie thought as her attention shifted south to the low hung pants and well-shaped ass that had her biting back a sigh. He had a really nice ass, but sadly that wasn't why she'd said yes when any other time she would have said no or why she'd decided to see just how drunk she could get. If it hadn't been for Adam, she probably never would have given Aidan a second thought, because he was so far out of her league that it wasn't even funny.

It had been three years since Adam realized that she wasn't the one and two years since she was able to say the same. Getting over him had probably been the hardest thing that she'd ever done in her life, but she'd managed to do it. At least, she thought she had until her mother called her to break the news before Melanie's sister Caitlyn had a chance to tell her.

Adam had finally popped the question.

Granted, Melanie hadn't known that her sister was dating the man that she'd thought that she would spend the rest of her life with, so finding out that he was marrying her sister had come as something of a shock. As it turned out, her family hadn't wanted to say anything to her about Caitlyn and Adam and risk upsetting her until they knew if their relationship was going somewhere.

So, while she'd sat there, listening to her mother tell her how everything would be okay and that this was probably for the best for everyone, she'd felt like her world was crashing down around her. The great news was that Adam was finally going to be part of the family and everyone was relieved that Caitlyn was finally settling down. While her mother started talking about the wedding, Melanie thought of all the reasons that Adam had given her when he broke up with her and realized that he'd been describing her sister the entire time. Caitlyn was outgoing, beautiful, thin, loved to travel, always up to going out and try something new, she was playful, affectionate, always doted on whatever guy she dated and did all those things that Melanie didn't.

She'd been with Adam since she was sixteen years old. He'd been the first boy that held her hand, kissed her, and every other first that counted, and she'd always thought that he would be her last. At some point, things changed or maybe it was the fact that she hadn't changed that was the problem. Adam wanted more and she hadn't been able to give it to him, but apparently, Caitlyn had.

After her mother finished explaining that they all needed to accept this and try to be understanding for Caitlyn's sake, Melanie hung up the phone and sat on the couch, feeling numb and that's when Aidan knocked on the door to give Rebecca her test results. She still wasn't sure how he did it, but within minutes he'd charmed a smile out of her and made her forget all about that phone call. It was probably the reason why she'd agreed to go out with him instead of blowing him off and spending a few hours killing time downstairs at the Fire & Brimstone, wondering how she was supposed to get through the next year with a smile on her face.

It was definitely the reason why she'd consumed so much alcohol in one sitting, she thought as Aidan turned around and she couldn't help but take him in from his messy sweat-soaked dark hair down to his incredibly handsome face, taking note of the intense green eyes watching her, and down to that amazing chest and set of abs that she'd cuddled up with last night down to that perfect "V" and the dark happy trail that disappeared behind the fly of his pants. She couldn't help but wonder what the rest of him looked like.

It was wrong, so very wrong to wonder about something like that given the circumstances, but Melanie just couldn't help herself. She thought about that night a lot, but no matter how many times she'd tried to remember what he'd looked like or what he'd felt like, she never could. Adam had been average, a decent and considerate lover, she would say even though she had nothing to compare it with. So, of course, she would be curious about the only other man that she'd slept with.

Melanie wondered what they did, what he'd done to her, and what she'd done to him, and if he'd done that thing that Adam used to do with his-

"Are you okay?" Aidan asked, frowning down at her as she forced herself to look away before she made this situation awkward.

Okay, even more awkward than it already was, Melanie amended a second later as

she cleared her throat and mumbled, “Yes.”

Nodding absently, Aidan finished off his Gatorade and tossed the empty bottle in the trashcan that she’d asked Rebecca to sneak in for her in an effort to curtail his messy ways, before grabbing another bottle and announced, “Your apartment’s finished,” to which she reacted like any woman in her situation would.

She wiggled her way to the edge of the bed and sat up.

Chuckling, Aidan reached over and helped her to her feet. After murmuring a, “Thank you,” Melanie waddled her way through his apartment, navigating her way around the messes that he’d left here and there, and straight out the door, across the small hallway, and into-

An apartment that she was never going to be able to afford.

“Rebecca helped design it,” Aidan said, which explained why the apartment walls that had once been off-white covered with stains, dents, and holes were now a warm grey accentuated by white trim and black doors. The stained carpet that had given the apartment a musty odor was now gone and in its place was a beautiful wood floor with accent rugs to protect the floor from her furniture, which at some point in the last month had been moved in.

“You’re going to love the kitchen.”

She was afraid of that.

When he wrapped his arm around her and guided her towards the kitchen, Melanie did her best to ignore the white wainscoting that lined the walls, the beautiful cast iron light fixtures and walked into a kitchen that she would have happily killed for. The damaged linoleum floor that had once lined the kitchen floor was gone and its

place were Spanish tiles that surrounded a beautiful French styled kitchen island that had her breath catching.

“If you don’t like anything, I can change it,” Aidan offered while she stood there, taking in the new cabinets, granite countertops, and black stainless-steel appliances that

made up her dream kitchen.

“Let’s go see the bathroom,” he murmured, wrapping his arm around her and gently pulled her out of the room that she never wanted to leave.

“Bathroom?” she mumbled distractedly as she allowed him to lead her back through the living room and-

“Oh, god,” Melanie choked out as she stepped inside the large bathroom and took in the black marble shower, the freshly tiled floor, two-person sink only to whimper when she spotted the large garden tub in front of her.

Before she could lovingly caress the tub that would make all her dreams come true, he was leading her back out of the room, through the living room and-

“This is the nursery,” he said, opening a door to reveal a large carpeted room with freshly painted blue walls and before she could step inside, his arm was wrapped back around her, and he was bringing her to the room next to it.

“And this is your room,” Aidan announced as he opened the door to the beautiful bedroom with soft lilac walls, all of her things lovingly set up in the room, and by the bed, the most beautiful bassinet that she’d ever seen.

“What do you think?” the man that had done an amazing job to make a home for their

son, asked.

Licking her lips, Melanie said the only thing that she could, “I think I’m going to be sick.”

Chapter 14

“I’m fine,” the woman that was slowly driving him to drink said from where she lay, curled up in a ball on the floor he’d installed last week, hugging a bath towel against her chest, and looking absolutely miserable.

“Yeah, you’re a rock,” Aidan said dryly as he sat there, trying to figure out how he kept fucking everything up.

One thing was clear, they couldn’t keep doing this.

“Aidan,” Melanie mumbled, averting her pale baby blue eyes as a pink blush crept up her neck and stained her alarmingly pale cheeks, “I-I can’t afford this apartment.”

“I’m not expecting anything,” Aidan said, biting back a sigh as he sat there, trying to figure out how he kept fucking this up.

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He'd never had any problems talking to anyone even when he was a kid and could barely get a word out without mangling every single syllable in the process, but whenever he was around her...

She made him nervous and he had absolutely no idea why.

"I wouldn't feel comfortable with that, Aidan," Melanie said, clearing her throat awkwardly before adding, "I think it might be for the best if I stay with my parents for a while. At least until the baby comes," and if she'd actually sounded like that's what she wanted, he would have let her go and figured out another way to make this work.

But it was the way that she said it that had him closing his eyes and saying the one thing that he prayed would change her mind.

"I used to wet the bed."

"Ummm..."

"When I was ten, my brothers paid me two dollars to wear my mother's bra, took pictures, and then charged me twenty dollars not to show my friends."

"Well, that's-"

"You know those marshmallow peeps?" he asked with a heavy sigh.

"Um, yeah?"

“They freak me the fuck out,” he reluctantly said, admitting his secret shame.

“I see,” Melanie murmured thoughtfully before asking, “Is there a reason why you’re telling me all this?”

Nodding, he said, “It’s my five things.”

“You’ve only told me three things,” she pointed out, sounding amused.

“That’s because I’m pacing myself,” Aidan said even as he opened his eyes so that he could reach back into the tub and turn the water on.

“For...?”

“Well, I don’t want to rush things.”

“And telling me five completely random things about yourself at once would be rushing things?” Melanie asked, blinking up at him.

Sighing heavily, he said, “Yes, yes, it would.”

“Okay, should I take a moment to prepare myself for the two earthshattering revelations that are about to come?”

“That would probably be a good idea,” he said as he moved so that he could drop the stopper and fill the large bathtub.

“I’m not sure if my heart can handle all this excitement,” Melanie said, smiling as she carefully sat up with his help.

“Are you ready?” Aidan asked, helping her to her feet.

“Do I have a choice?” she asked as he adjusted the water.

“I’m afraid not,” he said with a helpless shrug before admitting, “Once, when my brother Garret refused to share his sandwich, I convinced him that he was invisible.”

“Wow,” Melanie said, shaking her head in wonder before asking, “And how long did that last?”

He shrugged. “A year, give or take a few months, but by then, Arik and Reese had convinced him that he was adopted.”

She chuckled. “You’re so mean.”

With a heartfelt sigh, Aidan said, “True, but that wasn’t the worst thing that we did to him.”

“I probably don’t want to know.”

“That might be for the best,” he admitted with a shrug.

“Okay, so what’s the fifth completely random bit of information that I absolutely must know about you?” Melanie asked with a teasing smile.

“That,” Aidan said, shooting her a wink as he shoved his jeans off, “I love baths.”

*_*_*_*

“Well?” the man that had somehow charmed her into taking a bath with him by using weird and somewhat disturbing trivia asked as he wrapped his arms around her and placed his hands on her belly.

“Well, what?” Melanie murmured, somewhat distracted by just how incredibly comfortable she was.

After spending the last few months struggling to get comfortable, she was in heaven. It only confirmed her earlier suspicions that she was a snuggle slut, but at the moment, she simply didn’t care. She never wanted to leave this tub, Melanie thought with a sigh as she shifted to get more comfortable, murmuring a, “Thank you,” when Aidan adjusted her tee-shirt to keep her covered.

“Your five things,” he said as she leaned back more, resting her arms on his boxer-short-clad thighs.

“And why exactly are we sharing five things, might I ask?” Melanie asked, unable to help but smile as she watched Aidan absently trace circles on her belly over where their baby boy was moving.

“We’re getting to know each other.”

“And we’re doing that by sharing five completely random things?” she couldn’t help but ask as she laid her head back against his chest.

“Mmmhmm, I thought it would be for the best if we went with the accelerated version,” Aidan murmured, chuckling when their son kicked his hand.

“I see,” Melanie murmured, her lips twitching with amusement as she asked, “Then shouldn’t sharing a bath be considered part of this accelerated program?”

He sighed heavily. “I’m starting to think that you don’t want to share any deep dark secrets with me.”

“And what would these deep dark secrets consist of?”

“The usual, your favorite color, favorite ice cream, your most mortifying secret so that I can blackmail you with it at a later date. The usual,” he said, making her smile.

“I don’t know. Telling you what my favorite ice cream is might be going too far.”

“But, you’re okay with sharing your most mortifying secrets?”

“Oh, absolutely.”

“Sounds reasonable.”

“That’s what I thought,” Melanie said, nodding solemnly.

“What’s the first item on your list?” Aidan asked, shifting so that he could gently rub his hands over her belly.

“I don’t know if you’ll be to handle my deep dark secrets. They might scar you for life.”

“I’m willing to take that risk,” he said, chuckling.

“As long as you know the risks,” Melanie said, sighing for effect before admitting, “I believed in Santa Claus until I was fourteen.”

“I see,” Aidan murmured thoughtfully before asking, “And how did you manage to pull that off?”

“Denial,” she admitted.

“And the Easter Bunny?” he asked.

“I think it would be for the best if we moved onto my second completely random thing,” Melanie said.

“You’re probably right.”

“I usually am,” Melanie said, nodding in agreement as she shifted to get more comfortable.

“I’ll try to remember that,” he said, chuckling.

“You really should,” she said with a nod before asking, “Does that count as my second thing?”

“Are you stalling?”

“Absolutely.”

“Second thing or I pull the plug,” the devious bastard said.

“Fine,” Melanie said, making sure to sound put out before she admitted, “When I was six, I tied my sister up and locked her in the closet.”

“Older or younger?”

“Older.”

“Impressive,” Aidan murmured, and she couldn’t help but nod in agreement since Caitlyn had been in mid-tantrum mode when she’d pulled it off.

“And your parents?”

“Conveniently forgot to punish me,” Melanie said with a sigh, reminiscing about that slice of pumpkin pie that her father snuck into her room for her later that night.

God, she could go for pie.

And some ice cream.

“And your third thing?”

Sighing heavily, she said, “I’m afraid that I’m too weak to go on.”

Chuckling, Aidan said, “You’re a devious little thing, aren’t you?”

“Yes, yes, I am,” Melanie admitted with absolutely no shame whatsoever, not if it got her pie.

Chapter 15

“Okay, let’s have it,” Aidan said as he handed her the large bowl overflowing with the pumpkin pie and the extra creamy French vanilla ice cream that the devious little thing talked him into getting for her.

“Is that from Dixon’s?” Melanie asked with a hopeful expression that

had him chuckling as he joined her on her bed, absently noting that this bed was bigger than his, but not as comfortable.

“Of course,” he said, settling in even as he did his best to ignore just how fucking exhausted he was.

For the past month, he’d been getting up an hour early to check on her and take care of her before racing off to work only to rush back during his lunch break to check in on her, going back to work and putting in another five hours before rushing back, taking care of her for the night, and putting in another five or six hours working on her apartment every night or working a shift at the emergency room before finally passing out on the couch only to do it all over again the next day.

Unfortunately, that’s pretty much how his days had always been. He’d drag his ass out of bed, head to work, work through lunch, work until it was time to head out, pick up a shift at the emergency room or help his brothers and cousins with whatever they had going on before heading home and crashing and doing it all over again the next day. God, he couldn’t even remember the last time he went out on a date. He was really looking forward to the next two weeks, Aidan thought as he closed his eyes

only to find himself on his stomach and hugging a pillow a minute later.

Frowning, he looked up to find Melanie taking a bite out of a sandwich that he didn't remember making before she said, "And it was really embarrassing, but I eventually got over it," with a shrug before saying, "Okay, your turn."

"My turn for what?" he asked, unable to help but frown when she said, "Your next five things."

"It's still your turn," Aidan pointed out with a yawn as he turned over onto his back.

"After I just shared my pain?" Melanie asked, only to shake her head. "No, no, I just couldn't go through that...not again."

Narrowing his eyes suspiciously on the woman as she finished off the sandwich that looked really good, he reached over for his phone and-

"I've only been asleep for ten minutes," he pointed out as he tossed his phone back on her nightstand.

"Ten brutal minutes where I shared my pain," Melanie said with a snuffle and a heartfelt sigh that had his eyes narrowing on her.

"Start sharing or I eat the rest of the pie," Aidan said, tempted to steal the little brat's sandwich, but since he already knew just how dangerous it was to come between her and her food, he settled for glaring at her.

Shrugging, Melanie said, "I finished that off five minutes ago."

"You owe me three things, woman," he reminded her.

“Will you get me another pie?” she asked, pausing mid-bite to throw him an assessing gaze that told him what would happen if he said no.

Since he valued his balls, he nodded.

“Fine. I used to stuff my bras,” Melanie said with a shrug as she returned her attention to her sandwich while he laid there, admittedly staring at her large breasts clad in only a tee-shirt, trying to figure out why she would ever have to stuff her-

“I should probably mention that I was ten at the time and stole my mother’s 40DD bras and stuffed them with my brothers balled-up gym socks and toilet paper.”

“I see,” he said, forcing himself to shift his attention away from her breasts and back onto the sandwich that-

Was long gone, Aidan realized with a reluctant sigh as he climbed off the bed, grabbed her empty plates and headed for the kitchen where he quickly loaded her plate into the dishwasher before making his way to his apartment where he made another sandwich, grabbed a bottle of juice, and a bowl of grapes and headed back to the woman who was now sitting in the middle of the bed, hugging a pillow against her chest and shooting him a sweet smile that he simply couldn’t resist.

“So, since you’re skipping work and all...” Melanie said with a hopeful smile, gesturing towards the spot behind her where she’d piled all the pillows but one against the headboard.

“I took two weeks off,” Aidan said, placing everything on the nightstand before climbing on the bed and sat back so that she could sit between his legs.

“Really?” she asked as she settled back against him and sighed with satisfaction.

“Figured we could use some time to get to know each other,” he said before asking, “Comfy?”

“Mmmhmm,” Melanie mumbled absently as she closed her eyes and settled back against him.

“Your fourth thing?” Aidan asked, not really expecting much as he reached over for his phone.

“When I was five, I decided to turn the basement into a pool,” Melanie said as she continued to shift and wiggle while he checked his text messages to make sure that everything was going smoothly with his patients. “And for some reason, my father wasn’t happy,” she said, making his lips twitch.

“I can’t imagine why,” he said dryly, making her chuckle.

“The goldfish seemed happy.”

“I bet they were,” Aidan murmured, placing one arm around her as he pulled her closer.

“They really were,” she said, nodding solemnly. “Until the cat decided that it could swim. But thankfully after that, my father decided to install a pool in the backyard, so everything turned out for the best.”

“And the goldfish?”

“Preferred the bathtub as it turned out,” Melanie said, making him chuckle.

“And your fifth completely random thing?” Aidan asked, shifting his attention to a text message from his sister, letting him know that she would have her revenge.

She was just so damn cute, Aidan thought as he responded by sending her a picture of the biggest needle that he could find on the internet, even as he couldn't help but worry about her. He never should have agreed to keep his mouth shut. Maybe if he hadn't, she never would have-

"I don't know if I should tell you this or not."

"Oh, then you should definitely tell me," Aidan said, tossing his phone aside so that he could focus on whatever earth-shattering announcement the woman that he was beginning to realize was so much more than a pretty smile, said.

"That does seem like sound logic," Melanie murmured with a nod before taking a shaky breath and announcing, "I'm a Yankees fan," and god help him because if he didn't think that it would have seriously fucked up their chances of making this work, he would have kissed her right then.

Chapter 16

"That doesn't count."

"It really does," Melanie said, nodding solemnly as she swiped to the next page of the iPad that Aidan handed her a few minutes ago.

"It really doesn't," Aidan said, shifting behind her so that he could write something down in his notebook before adding, "Next page."

Nodding, she swiped to the next page of her file and landed on what appeared to be a lab report. "Why doesn't it count?" Melanie asked, taking a bite of one of the many Hostess pies that Aidan ran out to get for her at the gas station down the street after a craving woke her up at two this morning.

“Goes against the rules,” Aidan said, writing something down before he reached over and grabbed her small bottle of apple juice off the nightstand and handed it to her.

“Wait. What rules?” Melanie asked as she accepted the bottle.

The long-suffering sigh that followed had her lips pulling up into a smile. “The rules that we discussed last night.”

“We did?” she couldn’t help but ask as her attention shifted to the lemon Hostess pie on the bed that looked especially delicious as she took a sip of her apple juice.

“We did. We really did,” Aidan said as he gently caressed her belly through her shirt as he wrote something else down.

“Was I awake when we discussed these rules?” Melanie asked as she handed the apple juice back and focused on finishing her Hostess apple pie so that she could move onto that lemon pie.

“Probably not,” Aidan murmured, placing her bottle back on the nightstand with another, “Next page.”

“I see,” she said, swiping to the next page.

“Did you want me to refres

h your memory?” Aidan offered, making another note.

“Well, that depends,” Melanie said, finishing off the last bite of apple pie.

“Depends on what?”

“Are the rules negotiable?” she asked, reaching for the lemon pie.

“Well, now that depends on whether you’re going to share that with me,” he drawled as she looked down at the lonely lemon pie in her hand and-

“So, what are these rules?” Melanie asked, holding up the delicious treat that she would prefer not to share.

Chuckling, Aidan ripped open her pie for her. “Well, the first rule is that you can’t tell me something that I already know.”

“But you didn’t know about my obsession with baked goods,” Melanie said, frowning as she took a bite of the lemon pie and-

Oh, God, that was so good, she thought on a moan.

“Lucky guess,” Aidan said dryly.

“What’s the second rule?” Melanie asked as her gaze shifted back to that pile of snacks and she couldn’t help but notice how delicious the Hostess chocolate cupcakes looked.

“Next page,” he said, writing down another note. “No lying.”

“Does that really need to be stated?” Melanie asked with a sad shake of her head.

“Fair enough. How about this then? Out of every five things, you have to tell me one thing that nobody else knows,” Aidan said, making her frown.

“But I tell Rebecca everything,” Melanie said even as she had to admit that there were a few things that she’d kept from her best friend over the years...

“Looks like you already broke the second rule,” he said with a tsking sound and a,
“Next page.”

“And you know this how?” she asked as she swiped to the next page.

“Doctor’s intuition,” Aidan said, making another note.

“Is that even a thing?” Melanie asked even as her lips pulled up into a smile as she looked at the sonogram picture of their son.

“It’s the reason I went to medical school.”

“That is a good reason,” she agreed, nodding solemnly as she took another bite of her lemon pie and couldn’t help but wonder if there was any spaghetti left in the fridge.

“I thought so,” Aidan said, chuckling as he gently caressed her belly. “Now, about that first rule...”

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“You really expect me to tell you all the things that I wouldn’t tell my best friend?”

“Only the good stuff,” Aidan said, making her smile.

“What about the boring stuff?”

“We should probably skip that stuff. I mean, I don’t think it’s a good idea to make things awkward,” he explained in a lazy drawl as he made another note.

“No, no, we wouldn’t want that. It might make things weird,” Melanie said, chuckling as she shifted to get more comfortable and couldn’t help but notice just how good he smelled. It was one of the first things that she’d noticed about him. The second had been his eyes. She knew that most women would have probably noticed how incredibly handsome he was, but there was just something about his eyes...

“And we wouldn’t want that,” Aidan said, chuckling as he stopped rubbing her belly so that he could swipe back to the previous page.

“Ready for the next rule?” he asked, returning his hand to her belly so that he could continue appeasing their son, who was finally giving her a break.

“Should I prepare myself?”

“You might want to.”

Melanie finished off her pie and reached for the package of chocolate cupcakes and held them up so that he could open them for her. Once they were open, she placed the

package on the bed next to them, picked up a cupcake, took a bite, and nodded. “Okay, I’m ready.”

“Are you sure?”

“I mean, can you ever really be ready when it comes to something like this?”

Chuckling, Aidan wrote something else down. “True. Then I guess there’s no reason to put this off any longer,” he said only to pause for effect before adding, “Questions.”

Blinking, Melanie paused mid-bite of the chocolate cupcake that really was delicious as she tilted her head back so that she could frown up at the man that really made a comfortable pillow. “Questions?”

“They’re expected. Next page,” he murmured distractedly as he wrote something else down.

Speaking of questions...

“What exactly are you doing?” she asked as she picked up the next cupcake.

“I’m calling in a favor,” Aidan said absently as he glanced down at the notes that he’d made from her chart.

“What favor?”

“The asshole who screwed over my brother is a pediatrician,” he said, making her frown because there was only one other doctor associated with the Bradford clan that she knew about...

“You mean McDreamy?” she guessed correctly judging by the muttered curse that he bit out.

“Isn’t that from a TV show?”

“I watch a lot of television,” Melanie explained with a nod as she glanced down at the dwindling pile of treats and realized that she wasn’t going to make it through the night.

Not with only two Twinkies and a box of Ding Dongs.

“He’s not that good looking,” Aidan bit out.

“He really is, though,” Melanie assured him as she tilted her head back so that she was looking at him.

“I’m hotter.”

“Are you really, though?” Melanie asked with a sympathetic wince.

“How do you know about Roger?” Aidan asked, narrowing those incredible green eyes that she liked so much on her.

“I love gossip,” she said, nodding.

“You love gossip?” he asked, frowning in confusion.

“I live for it,” Melanie admitted with a heartfelt sigh.

“Really? What did you hear?”

“Sorry, I can’t tell you,” Melanie said with a sad shake of her head as she focused her attention back on that pile of treats that she needed to replenish before tonight.

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t gossip,” she said absently as she considered her options.

“But you love it?”

“More than anything,” Melanie said, nodding.

“Fine. Then at least tell me why you hate him?”

“Because I’m sworn to hate him.”

“You didn’t ask?”

“Why would I ask?” she asked, frowning in confusion.

“Why wouldn’t you ask?” Aidan countered.

“That’s not how these things work,” Melanie said, sighing heavily with a sad shake of her head.

“Why not?”

“There are rules,” Melanie said, wondering why this was so difficult to understand.

“What rules?”

“Sorry, I can’t talk about that,” she said, which was a shame really because he

probably wouldn't hate McDreamy so much if he knew-

"I'll never understand women," Aidan said, shaking his head with a heavy sigh as he grabbed the notebook and tossed it on the nightstand along with the pen.

"Probably not," Melanie murmured in agreement.

"Fine. Then at least tell me your next five things," Aidan said, placing both of his hands on her belly.

"I thought it was your turn," she said, tilting her head back to send him a hopeful smile.

"You thought wrong," Aidan said with a mock glare.

"Does my obsession with gossip count?"

"Not unless you tell me what you know," Aidan said as his lips pulled up into a sweet smile when their baby pushed against his hands.

"I'm afraid that I can't do that."

"What if I promised to get you pie afterward?" he offered.

"After what?" Melanie asked even as she couldn't help but wonder if a steak and cheese sub with extra mushrooms came with that pie.

"After the asshole leaves," Aidan said, making her gasp.

"McDreamy's coming here?" she asked, already wiggling, shifting, and a weird combination of the two, towards the edge of the bed.

“The asshole is coming over to take a look at you. Why?” he asked, moving his leg out of her way even as he reached over to help her.

“I have to go change!”

“Wait. Why?” Aidan asked, moving to sit up.

“Because McDreamy’s coming!” Melanie said, grabbing her phone on the way to the bathroom, wondering if they had enough time to get that pie first.

Chapter 17

“Thank you for inviting me,” Rebecca said with a heartfelt sigh as she grabbed another Hershey Kiss from the large Ziploc bag that she’d brought with her and unwrapped it.

“You’re welcome,” Melanie said, popping a Hershey Kiss in her mouth as she glanced from the man standing next to him, frowning as he stared at Melanie as though he was trying to figure out how he knew her, to the small woman standing in the corner, who was glaring at the asshole next to him while Aidan stood there, regretting so many things, but he had no fucking idea where to start.

“Explain to me why he’s here again,” Kenzie, who’d dropped by a few minutes ago for her follow up appointment, asked as she gestured towards Roger, who was still staring at Melanie.

“To entertain us,” Melanie said as she popped another Hershey Kiss in her mouth while her partner in crime nodded in agreement and murmured, “He really is,” making the bastard’s lips twitch.

“Where do I know you from?” Roger asked, throwing Melanie a curious look before

he focused his attention on the iPad in his hands.

“Rum and Coke,” Melanie said with a solemn nod as Aidan watched Roger suddenly go still.

“No one else knows,” Rebecca said, shrugging it off as Roger’s gaze flickered to Kenzie before focusing back on Melanie’s file.

“Knows what?” Kenzie asked, earning matching blank stares from the duo on the bed.

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“Knows what?” Melanie repeated back, blinking innocently.

Eyes narrowing, his sister studied Melanie for a moment before shifting her attention to Rebecca and then back again before slowly nodding with a murmured, “I see.”

“That will make this easier,” Melanie said, nodding solemnly.

“It really will,” Rebecca agreed with a sympathetic smile before the duo shifted their attention back to Rog

er and gestured for him to continue.

“Now, where were we?” Melanie asked as she popped another Hershey Kiss in her mouth.

“We were about to be entertained,” Rebecca said, sending a hopeful look in Kenzie’s direction.

“I just have one question,” Kenzie said, gesturing lazily around the room. “What exactly is going on here?”

Popping another Hershey Kiss in their mouths, the duo looked at him. “Can I see you outside, Kenzie?” Aidan asked, trying to figure out how he was going to explain this.

Actually, what he was really trying to figure out was why his mother hadn’t told everyone yet. His brothers had barely managed to get the words out, letting their mother know that she was about to be a grandmother when she’d started spreading

the word, planning baby showers, and sporting a “World’s Greatest Grandma” tee-shirt.

For the past two days, nothing. Not one word, email, or any of his brothers or cousins coming over to fuck with his head, which meant that his mother was fucking pissed. He’d worry about how he was going to make this up to her later, Aidan decided as he moved to step out of the room when the woman who lived to torment him decided that she wasn’t done fucking with him.

“You didn’t tell her the news, pookie?” Rebecca asked, blinking innocently.

“What news?” Kenzie asked right around the time that Melanie closed her eyes on a groan and said, “Don’t,” to her best friend, but Rebecca being evil and all...

“Yeah, what news, Aidan?” Rebecca asked with a calculating look in her eye as she popped another Hershey Kiss in her mouth.

“I’m going to be a father,” Aidan said, shifting his attention to find Kenzie frowning at him before she slowly glanced at Melanie and-

“I’m sorry. Could you repeat that?” Kenzie asked, throwing him a questioning look because she knew better than anyone that he’d never planned on having children.

“He’s going to be a father and I’m going to be a godmother,” Rebecca said, tossing another Hershey Kiss in her mouth.

Kenzie opened her mouth and-

“Wait. Why do you get to be the godmother?” Kenzie demanded with a frown.

Pursing her lips up with a thoughtful expression, Rebecca asked, “What’s her name?”

as she gestured towards Melanie, who popped another Hershey Kiss in her mouth with a heavy sigh as Kenzie stood there, frowning and-

“Fair enough,” Kenzie said with a slow nod.

“Moving on,” Rebecca said, shifting her attention back to Roger. She placed a Hershey Kiss in her mouth as she gestured for him to get on with it only to sigh heavily when Kenzie said, “I didn’t even know that you were seeing anyone.”

“You’re really making this too easy,” the epitome of evil said with a shrug and a sad shake of her head.

“We’ll talk about it later,” Aidan said, feeling a headache coming on.

“You don’t want to talk about it now, pookie?” Rebecca asked with a calculating look in her eye.

There was a sigh and then, Rebecca was glaring at Melanie when her best friend took it upon herself to shove a handful of Hershey Kisses in Rebecca’s mouth before she could make this worse. With a regal wave, Melanie said, “You may continue,” as her best friend was forced to sit there, glaring at her as she finished eating the chocolate that had been shoved in her mouth.

“How are you feeling, Melanie?” Roger asked as he continued looking through her file.

“Bored out of my mind,” Melanie said even as she shoved another handful of chocolate in the little troublemaker’s mouth when she opened her mouth to fuck him over.

“How have you been sleeping?”

“Okay,” Melanie said, not quite able to look at him as she shifted and cleared her throat while Aidan narrowed his eyes on her.

“Nausea?”

“Better,” she said, still not quite able to look at him as she answered.

“I can’t help you if you’re going to lie to me,” Roger said, glancing up to find Melanie worrying her bottom lip between her teeth.

“It’s still pretty bad,” Melanie reluctantly admitted.

Nodding absently, Roger said, “Your doctor’s a fucking idiot.”

“That’s what I’ve heard,” Melanie said with a solemn nod.

“What do you think?” Aidan asked, hoping that they could do something to make this easier for her.

“Her numbers look better since your father changed her meds and so does the baby, but I’m concerned about the fact that she’s spent a majority of her pregnancy on bed rest,” Roger said, swiping back to one of her earlier lab reports.

“I told her to get off her lazy ass,” Rebecca said with a sad shake of her head and a sigh as she shoved another Hershey Kiss in her mouth.

“You lying bitch,” Melanie bit out with a glare. “You locked me in my room and gave that obscenely large bastard that you married my mother’s phone number so that he could tattletale on my ass anytime I got out of bed!”

“Again, with the lies?” Rebecca asked with a heartfelt sigh and a pitying shake of her

head before she added, "I'll pray for you."

"Eat gluten, bitch," Melanie said, making Rebecca's lips twitch.

"Can we focus, ladies?" Aidan asked, biting back a sigh even though he was secretly pleased that Melanie was feeling well enough to banter with her best friend, something that he'd noticed that she hadn't done since she came to live with him.

"I want you off bed rest immediately," Roger explained as he swiped to another lab report.

"I can do that," Melanie said, nodding solemnly.

"Don't overdo it and take naps when you're tired, but I think it would be in your best interest and the baby's if you were more active. Go for walks, go swimming, keep it simple, but your best bet is sex," Roger murmured absently.

"Sex?" Melanie asked, frowning in confusion.

"It should alleviate most of your problems with the added benefit of improving blood flow, recovering some muscle tone that you've lost while on bed rest, reduce stress, improve sleep, and help with some of your pain and discomfort as well as help strengthen your pelvic muscles, which is what we want," Roger explained while Melanie sat there, once again avoiding looking in his direction.

"When's the last time you had sex?" Roger asked, shooting Aidan a questioning look as Kenzie absently nodded with an, "I'm just gonna go wait out in the living room mostly because I really don't want to know the answer to that question."

When she left, everyone glanced at Rebecca as she popped another Hershey Kiss in her mouth with a mumbled, "I'm good where I am."

“A little over seven months,” he reluctantly answered with a pointed look at Melanie’s belly.

“And before that?” Roger asked, looking back down at her labs.

“A year and a half,” Aidan admitted, having a bad feeling where this was going.

“And I assume that you’ve been tested?”

“I’m clean,” Aidan said, watching as Roger absently nodded before glancing down at his watch.

“There are a lot of benefits for sex during pregnancy, but it’s up to you, Melanie. Unprotected sex with the father is preferred because of the benefits from his sperm. I can email the articles to Aidan if you’d like to take a look at them. For right now, I think the most important thing is to get you off bed rest and get you moving again. I’d like to see you weekly at this point to keep an eye on your labs and to make sure that everything is progressing correctly,” Roger explained as he handed the iPad back to Aidan.

“O-okay,” Melanie mumbled weakly and just like that, Aidan knew that any progress that he’d made with her was gone.

Chapter 18

Maybe it was infected? Kenzie wondered as she stared down at the fresh bandage that she wrapped her arm in this morning. When it continued to itch, she decided that she should definitely run before Aidan could stick her with another needle. Decision made, she moved to get to her feet only to find herself ge

ntly pushed back down on the couch and the man that she couldn’t seem to get away

from sitting down on the coffee table in front of her as he carefully began removing her bandage.

“What did you do this time?” Roger asked as she sat there, forcing herself not to think of all those things that she’d told herself to forget.

“Fell through a crawlspace,” Kenzie said, wondering how it was possible to hate someone this much.

Absently nodding, Roger removed the gauze pad and winced in sympathy when he saw the gash on her arm. “You’ve got to be more careful, Kenzie,” he murmured, gently turning her arm over so that he could get a better look.

“I’m fine,” she said, moving to pull her arm away only to have him tighten his hold around her arm and-

“Are you ever going to forgive me?” Roger asked as she found herself looking into the dark blue eyes that were going to haunt her for the rest of her life.

She opened her mouth to answer him only to find herself frowning when Rebecca answered for her. “Probably not,” her sister-in-law that really seemed to enjoy screwing with people’s heads said with a sad shake of her head.

“Then again,” Rebecca continued as she headed for the front door, “she doesn’t know that Missy lied in that letter and that you never touched her. Then there’s the fact that you only did what you did to save Reese from making the biggest mistake of his life because you felt guilty about that secret that we’re not supposed to be talking about.”

When Roger narrowed his eyes on her, Rebecca added, “Melanie doesn’t gossip. I was there, which is why I think you’re an idiot,” with a shrug as she walked out the door, making the decision that Kenzie had been struggling with for the past year

easier.

It was time for her to leave and this time, she wasn't coming back.

*_*_*_*

“I shaved my legs,” the man that she'd been trying to figure out how to explain, as politely as humanly possible of course, that she didn't want to have sex with him, said.

“I'm sorry, what's this now?” Melanie found herself asking, still not quite able to look at him at the moment because she actually did want to have sex.

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Just not with him.

Okay, so that wasn't entirely true, Melanie admitted to herself. It was just that she was fat, bloated, and...

She just...

She just couldn't do it.

She couldn't sleep with a man that she barely knew.

Okay, so clearly she could, Melanie thought, biting back a wince as she glanced down at her large belly, but that had been with the help of a lot of unidentifiable alcohol and a knee jerk reaction to finding out something that she really should have seen coming. Caitlyn wasn't happy unless she got what she wanted. She'd been that way since they were kids.

If she saw something that she wanted, she'd do whatever it took to get it and unfortunately for everyone around her, Caitlyn usually wanted what someone else had. When they were little, that meant having to deal with tantrums, shouting, crying, and waiting until Caitlyn finally passed out when she held her breath until she got what she wanted. As she got older, she'd figured out how to get what she wanted without having to resort to tantrums. She'd learned how to get what she wanted with coy smiles, false flattery, and-

Melanie never thought that Caitlyn would do something like this to her. She should have known better, she thought with a sigh only to frown when she suddenly found

herself looking down at the man helping her with her shoes.

“Umm, what are you doing?” Melanie couldn’t help but wonder.

“I considered waxing, but that just seemed like a lot of work,” Aidan said, instead of answering her.

“Umm, waxing?” Melanie asked as he finished tying her laces before standing up and helping her to her feet.

“Shaving seemed easier,” Aidan said absently as he took her hand in his and led her to the door.

“I’m sorry. I’m a little confused. Why are you telling me this?” Melanie asked as he handed her bag to her.

There was a heavy sigh and then, “It’s my next five things, woman. I’m really gonna need you to try to keep up here.”

Biting back a smile, Melanie asked, “And is there a reason why you shaved your legs?”

“My brothers are assholes,” he asked, opening the door for her.

“That’s what I heard,” she murmured, nodding solemnly as he led her to his car and helped her inside before closing the door.

“They convinced me that I had a better chance to get on the football team if I shaved my legs because it would make me faster,” Aidan explained as soon as he opened his door and climbed in.

“And did it help?” Melanie asked as she buckled in.

Chuckling, he said, “Not even a little bit.”

*_*_*_*

“I demand to see the rule book,” Melanie said, crossing her arms over her chest as she narrowed her beautiful blue eyes on him as he finished his burger.

“We discussed this,” Aidan lied, mostly because he felt that it would be in his best interest if they moved away from this subject.

“We really didn’t,” she said with a sad shake of her head as she plucked a dessert menu off the table.

“We really did, though,” he said as he followed suit and grabbed a menu, hoping to change the subject but the beautiful woman across from him refused to let it go.

“Can you really start telling me something and then stop? Doesn’t that go against the rules?” she asked, throwing him a teasing smile that he liked a little too much.

“I changed my mind.”

“Can you really do that though?” Melanie asked, looking thoughtful.

“It’s in the rule book,” Aidan said, admittedly pleased that she was smiling and seemed comfortable with him again.

For a moment there, he’d been worried that they were going to have to start over and they didn’t have time for that, not with a baby on the way. He had less than two months to figure out how to make this work and he couldn’t afford any delays. He

might not have planned on having a family, but he had one now and he was going to do everything within his power to make this work.

He wanted to be part of his son's life and he didn't want to have to go through the courts to make that happen. He wanted to be able to see his son whenever he wanted, wanted to be there for birthdays, holidays, and everything in between. He didn't want to have to settle for seeing his son every other weekend, alternate holidays, and argue over who was going to have him in the summer. He wanted to be there for his son, making sure that he was taken care of and knew that he was loved, and he wanted to do this with Melanie.

They were in this together.

When Trevor's dad stopped coming around, Aidan had only been four years old, but he remembered the look on his cousin's face whenever his father was mentioned. He remembered those times when Trevor's father actually showed up to family events, the screaming over visitation and child support, the crying, and the way that it had destroyed his Aunt Sarah.

She'd struggled to raise Trevor on her own, worked two jobs to keep food on the table, and had bent over backwards to do everything to make it work for Trevor. She'd pleaded with Trevor's father to show up and held Trevor when he didn't. They'd struggled and Aidan didn't want that for his son. He didn't want his son to hate him or cry when he wasn't there, wondering what he did wrong, and he sure as hell didn't want to be the reason Melanie cried.

"Can you produce this rule book?" Melanie asked, propping her chin on her fist as she considered her options for dessert.

"I'm afraid that you're going to have to trust me," he said, debating between the chocolate cake and pumpkin pie.

“Then I’m afraid that you’re going to have to tell me why you had a Jonas Brothers poster on your bedroom wall when you were fifteen,” she said with a sad shake of her head and a heartfelt sigh.

“What if I just bought you one of every dessert instead?” Aidan said, hoping to use her love of carbs against her.

Without missing a beat, Melanie said, “Make it two,” letting him know that they were going to get along just fine.

Chapter 19

A Week Later...

“Veto,” Melanie said with a heavy sigh, wondering when he was going to start taking this seriously.

“What’s wrong with Gage?” Aidan asked as he settled back against the side of the tub as he shifted his attention to the stack of patient files next to him.

“Pet Semetary,” she said as she settled back in the tub, enjoying the hot water as it slowly worked its magic on her sore muscles and swollen feet.

“Are you going to keep vetoing names based on movies and television?”

“Yes, yes, I am,” Melanie said, feeling her lips twitch when he released another long-suffering sigh.

“You’re high maintenance, woman.”

“I have been told that,” Melanie admitted as she closed her eyes and felt herself relax.

“What do you think of Chris?” Aidan asked.

“As in Chris Hemsworth?” she asked only to sigh wistfully when she thought of the incredibly hot actor that-

“Veto,” Aidan bit out, making her frown.

“Wait. You’re vetoing your own suggestion?” she asked, opening her eyes to find him staring down at the file in his lap.

“Yes,” he murmured absently as he picked up another file.

“What if I vetoed your veto?” she couldn’t help but wonder.

“I’d veto that,” Aidan said, making her chuckle.

“What about Drew?” Melanie asked as she reached for the apple juice he got for her and took a sip.

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“Drew Bradford?” Aidan murmured, testing the name and...

Melanie realized that she was going to have a different last name than her son. It was something that she’d never really thought about until now. She’d always thought she would meet the right man who would sweep her off her feet, they’d fall in love, get married, have a family, and grow old together, but that hadn’t happened. It might never happen, she realized, unable to help but smile as she felt her baby boy push against her stomach.

&

nbsp; “You like Drew, baby boy?” she asked, placing her hands on her belly, chuckling when he pushed against her hands.

“Does he like it?” Aidan asked, shifting so that he could reach back and place his hand over hers without looking, respecting their unspoken agreement that allowed her to take a bath without dying of mortification.

“I think he does,” Melanie said, smiling.

“Then Drew Bradford, it is.”

*_*_*_*

“Why are we watching this?” Aidan couldn’t help but wonder as the small woman bundled up in a shitload of blankets next to him absently took a bite of the blueberry cake donut that he’d been eying for the past hour.

“Research,” Melanie said absently with a nod that had him looking from her to the crime show that they were binge-watching and back again.

“Research?” he repeated only to sigh with relief when he saw what time it was.

“Time for another walk,” Aidan said, hitting pause before tossing the remote aside.

“But I didn’t find out why the acid didn’t work on the body yet,” she said with a disappointed sigh as she reluctantly saved what she was working on before closing her laptop so that he could set aside the laptop table that he’d picked up for her yesterday when it became apparent that her old one wasn’t pregnancy-friendly.

“You’ll just have to wait until after your walk,” Aidan said even though there was no way in hell that he was going to be able to sit through four more hours of this.

“Fine,” Melanie mumbled with an adorable pout as she pushed the blankets off, carefully got to her feet and waddled towards the bedroom to put her shoes on as he found his gaze lowering to her generous ass and-

He forced his attention back to the article that he was reading, reminding himself that sex wasn’t an option, something that Aidan had to remind himself at least a hundred times a day. He didn’t think that it was a good idea to cross that line, not if he wanted this to work. It didn’t matter how good she felt in his arms at night or how much he’d thought about her since that night, she was off-limits. Unfortunately, even knowing that nothing was going to happen didn’t stop him from thinking about that night

The only thing that he remembered about that night was just how fucking good it felt when the condom broke. He’d never felt anything like it. The feel of her tight sheath wrapping around him as she’d moved on him, the feel of her walls had been like warm honey, caressing the tip of his cock with a wet kiss as she’d moved on him and-

Deciding that it was a bad idea to sit here thinking about it, Aidan stood up and headed towards the bedroom to see if Melanie needed any help. He walked into her bedroom and found himself sighing, just fucking sighing when he spotted the woman that was supposed to be getting ready so that they could go for a walk, curled up on the bed, fast asleep.

For a moment, Aidan debated waking her up, but since he already knew that wouldn't end well, he decided to let her sleep. He should probably use this time to catch up on patient charts or finish reading all those articles that were waiting for him on his iPad, but she needed sleep and he knew that she slept better in his arms. At least, that's what he told himself as he took off his clothes and tossed them on the chair. Once he was down to his boxers, Aidan carefully climbed in bed behind her and wrapped his arm around her as he reminded himself one more time that nothing was ever going to happen.

*_*_*_*

There was something seriously wrong with her, Melanie decided, somehow managing to stop herself from nodding in agreement as she laid there, closing her eyes as she bit back a moan that would probably make this awkward.

Not that she really thought that was possible.

God, he felt so good, Melanie thought as she struggled against the urge to push back against the very large thing that she was doing her best to pretend didn't feel good pressed against her bottom. She should move, she told herself only to amend that by reminding herself that she shouldn't push back, because that would be wrong.

So very wrong.

Okay, she was going to move, Melanie told herself even as she allowed herself

another moment to simply imagine all the possibilities only...

It wasn't possible.

Sex wasn't an option.

At least, that's what she kept telling herself, but since neither one of them had brought sex up since McDreamy suggested it, she wasn't entirely sure. No, she was definitely sure that sex wasn't a possibility, Melanie told herself even though she really, really wanted to have sex.

She'd never wanted sex as much as she had in the last few weeks. The first six months had been spent trying not to think about what could happen if her doctor couldn't figure out a way to get her morning sickness under control. Now instead of wondering if she was going to make it to the bathroom in time, she found herself thinking about sex.

All. The. Time.

Most of the time, she was able to distract herself, but late at night when she had problems sleeping, that's all she could think about. She wondered what would happen if she pushed back against him, how good it would feel to have Aidan run his hands over her before he slid his hand between her legs and-

She told herself that it was never going to happen.

Chapter 20

Two Weeks Later...

"Don't overdo it," came the warning from the man that didn't trust her for some

reason.

“I won’t,” Melanie said, blinking up at Aidan as he continued to glare down at her.

“That’s what you said last night,” Aidan said, and although it had technically been this morning when she suddenly felt the need to reorganize the nursery, she decided, mostly because of that glare, not to point that out.

“And now it’s done and I can relax,” Melanie said, also deciding not to mention that it was done because Aidan had been forced to help her when he’d discovered her sitting in the middle of the nursery, crying hysterically because she couldn’t decide which side the changing table should go on.

“Then why did I find you eying the kitchen cabinets a few minutes ago?” Aidan asked, narrowing his eyes on her as he shoved his iPad in his briefcase, and thankfully, had decided to stop worrying about going back to work and leaving her here alone.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Melanie said, deciding that she probably shouldn’t tell him that she planned on reorganizing the entire kitchen while getting some much-needed baking in since that would only end with another lecture on taking it easy that she didn’t need to hear because she planned on taking plenty of breaks.

“Don’t leave that couch, woman,” Aidan said, pointing at the couch that she was currently cuddled up on with all her favorite blankets, her laptop, and snacks.

“I thought I was supposed to get more exercise?” she reminded him as she took a sip of her chocolate milk.

“I’ll be back at lunchtime to take you for a walk. So, until then, don’t leave that

couch,” Aidan said, shooting her a glare as he grabbed his bag and headed for the door only to stop, glare one last time and finally leave while Melanie sat there, shaking her head with a sigh, wondering why he didn’t trust her as she pushed her blankets aside and climbed off the couch.

The man definitely had trust issues, Melanie thought with a sad sigh as she headed into the kitchen and decided that she should surprise him with cupcakes...and brownies. Definitely brownies, Melanie decided only to turn right back around when she realized that she forgot her iPad in her bedroom. Twenty minutes and a bathroom break later, she was walking back into the kitchen, searching through KaseyCooks.com for recipes and trying to decide between two different brownie recipes.

After some much-needed soul searching, Melanie realized that she didn’t have a choice in the matter. She had to make them both. Decision made, she poured herself another cup of chocolate milk, grabbed the mixing bowls and set to work. Twenty minutes later, she had both pans of brownie batter in the oven and somehow found herself grabbing a mixing bowl for chocolate chip cookies wh

en she suddenly got a craving for oatmeal raisin cookies. That somehow led to a craving for lasagna, fettuccini alfredo, and buttermilk biscuits, which eventually led to her standing in the middle of the kitchen, hugging her cookie spatula against her chest and struggling not to cry as she watched the timer, waiting for the moment when she could go curl back up on the couch and pass out.

Unfortunately for her, she still had thirty minutes left on the lasagna and twenty on the apple crisp that she’d decided to make to go along with the homemade French vanilla ice cream that she’d made while the cookies were cooling. Really wishing that she’d taken a break after making the cupcakes, Melanie released a sniffle as she reached over and helped herself to one of the aforementioned cupcakes and-

“Dr. Bradford?” came the somewhat desperate words followed by pounding on what sounded like Aidan’s door. Curious, Melanie broke off a piece of cupcake and headed to the hallway to see what was going on.

“I-I will kill you,” the small woman with long curly black hair pulled back into a ponytail and sporting a Black Jack’s tee-shirt bit out as she glared at the large incredibly handsome man wearing a Bradford Construction tee-shirt that Melanie had seen around the Fire & Brimstone.

“Aw, aren’t you an adorable little thing?” the man that could only be a Bradford said as he reached over and patted the angry-looking woman on the head.

With a murderous glare, she slapped his hand away with a, “Don’t make me kill you.”

“That hurts, pumpkin,” the man said with a heavy sigh as he absently reached over and plucked the cupcake out of Melanie’s hands and finished it off in one bite while she stood there trying to make sense out of what just happened and when she did...

“Oh, shit,” he said, eyes going wide as he took in her bottom lip trembling to the large swell of her belly and back again before adding another, “Oh, shit.”

“What is wrong with you?” the other woman demanded as she slapped the white envelope in her hand on Aidan’s door with some tape before walking away, shaking her head in disgust.

“Many things,” he murmured absently as he focused his attention on Melanie. “I’m sorry.”

“My,” snuffle, “cupcake.”

“I’m really sorry,” he said, holding his hands up in surrender. “My name’s Arik and I’m an asshole.”

Snuffle, “I know,” Melanie said with a sad nod as she turned around and headed back inside, not really surprised when Arik followed her.

Deciding that she’d more than earned a break, Melanie sat down on the couch and curled up in her blankets. When he opened his mouth, most likely to apologize again, she simply raised her hand and pointed towards the kitchen. Frowning, Arik followed the gesture and-

“Oh, my god,” he said in a reverent whisper when he saw all the food.

“Timer’s about to go off,” Melanie said as she tried to get comfortable only to give up, struggle to get back to her feet and waddled towards her bedroom.

Thirty minutes later, she was curled up on her side where she decided that she would wait until Aidan came home so that he could-

“You’re clearly carrying a Bradford,” Arik said with a thoughtful expression on his face as he walked into the room with two plates overflowing with food and sat down on the bed next to her.

“Who are you?” he asked as he placed one of the plates down on the bed next to her.

“Melanie,” she said, picking up her fork and took a bite of fettuccini before adding, “Rebecca’s bitch,” making his lips twitch.

“And Aidan’s the father,” Arik guessed correctly as he reached over and helped himself to one of the bottles of water that Aidan left on the nightstand for her.

“Yes,” Melanie said, shifting her attention to one of the biscuits he’d buttered for her.

“Does my mother know?”

“Yes,” Melanie said only to wince when the baby kicked her, forcing her to try to sit up.

Without a word, Arik placed their plates on the nightstand and when she kept struggling to get comfortable, he grabbed the pillows from the other side of the bed and stuffed them behind her.

“And my mom’s pissed,” he correctly guessed while Melanie was forced to shift, wiggle, and groan as she tried to get comfortable.

“You could say that,” Melanie said, once again forced to give up trying to get comfortable and settled for lying there, sighing unhappily until another kick to her ribs had her once again moving, shifting, sighing, and shifting again.

“Are you comfortable?” Arik asked, sounding amused.

Now that he mentioned it...

Chapter 21

Are you going to tell me what you’re doing here?” Aidan asked when another minute

went by and his eleven o'clock appointment continued to sit there, glaring at him.

"I don't want to talk about it," Jason, his asshole cousin and the reason that he felt a migraine coming on, said in a harsh whisper.

"Look, Jason, I-"

"I can't keep living like this," Jason said with a sniffle.

"Like what?" Aidan asked, sighing heavily as he pinched the bridge of his nose even as he had to hand it to his father because the man definitely knew how to make his life a living hell.

While Aidan had been trying to make sure that Melanie had everything that she was going to need today, his father had been busy making sure that Aidan knew just how pissed he was. He'd switched out Aidan's caseload and hand-selected every patient that Aidan had to see today, making sure to keep his schedule open later this afternoon to cover sick visits, lice, and walk-in emergencies that could be handled with an ice pack and a few Advil.

"I just need a moment," the asshole that he got stuck with thanks to his father, said with a shuddering sigh as he wrapped his arms around himself.

"Please don't make me kill you," Aidan said, hoping that his cousin cut him some slack and got to the point because he honestly wasn't sure that he could handle this today.

"You insensitive bastard," Jason whispered with a sniffle before releasing a shuddering sigh as he raised his hand and pointed one damning finger towards the small woman sitting quietly in the corner where she was reading on her Kindle. "She's trying to kill me!"

“We talked about this,” Haley said, not bothering to look up from her Kindle as she pushed her glasses back up her nose.

“I don’t know how much more of this I can take,” Jason said with a sad shake of his head that had Aidan reaching for the small pack of Excedrin in his pocket that he’d grabbed when he’d realized who his next patient was.

“Take what?” Aidan asked as he pulled his cellphone out of his back pocket and checked to see if Melanie texted him only to bite back a groan when he saw the message waiting for him.

“All the dirty things she does to me,” Jason said with an accusing glare at Haley.

“This again?” Haley asked with a sad shake of her head and a bored sigh as she swiped to the next page.

“Yes, this again!” Jason snapped while Aidan popped the aspirin in his mouth and swallowed them dry.

Deciding to take advantage of his cousin’s bullshit, Aidan checked his schedule, noted that his next appointment had been canceled and that he didn’t have anything scheduled until two o’clock. That gave him enough time to take Melanie out for lunch, something that had him praying that his cousin took pity on him and cut the bullshit so that he could go see her.

“You’re overreacting,” Haley said, still not bothering to look up from her Kindle.

“Maybe we should let the doctor decide that.”

“Maybe you should tell me what’s going on,” Aidan countered, knowing that this could go on for a while.

“Happily,” Jason said with a glare at his wife before shifting his attention back to Aidan. “She’s pregnant and refuses to listen to reason,” Jason said, taking Aidan by surprise.

“You’re pregnant?” Aidan asked, glancing back at Haley to find her smiling that same smile that Melanie wore when she told him that they were having a boy. That smile told him everything that he needed to know. Melanie already loved their son and would do whatever it took to keep him happy and safe, which he was counting on.

“Yes, which means that she should be taking it easy and keeping her dirty little hands off me!”

“Did your doctor tell you to go on bed rest?” Aidan asked, glancing back at Jason to find the large bastard glaring at him.

“I don’t fucking care what he said. She should be resting,” Jason bit out.

“I see,” Aidan murmured as he glanced back at the cute little thing that had somehow managed to put up with his cousin’s bullshit for the last fifteen years and asked, “Are you having any problems?”

“Just him,” Haley said, gesturing lazily towards the man gasping in outrage.

“I’m the love of your life!”

“Well, I won’t really know that until my second husband,” she pointed out with a shrug and a sympathetic wince that had Aidan biting back a smile.

“Like you’d ever leave me.”

“At least, not without a backup plan,” Haley mumbled thoughtfully with another shrug.

“Oh, my god,” Jason said, shaking his head in disgust. “That’s been your plan all along, hasn’t it? You were just using me for my body!”

“Pretty much,” Haley said as a text alerted him to the fact that his reprieve was finally over.

*_*_*_*

“There’s no pleasing that woman!” his cousin Theo snapped as he stumbled out of Melanie’s room, struggling to pull his shirt on as Aidan stood there, wondering why his family was here.

Dropping his bag by the door, he took in his siblings and cousins sitting around Melanie’s apartment, the bags of food from the Fire & Brimstone and Dixon’s Bakery, and catering pans filled with food covering every available surface and found himself focusing back on Theo, who was now pouting in the corner with a plate of food in his hands.

Curious, Aidan headed towards the bedroom, ignoring Lucifer’s mumbled, “This just isn’t going to work for me,” as he walked past the nursery, the glares that his family was sending him, and found hi

mself wondering why his brothers were in bed with Melanie. Actually, what he was wondering was why Danny was half-naked in bed with Melanie in his arms.

“You know who we should call?” Kasey asked from where she was curled up in her husband’s arms next to the bastard that Aidan was going to kill.

“Roger,” Zoe, who was sitting on the floor between Trevor’s legs, said.

“God, can that man snuggle,” Kasey said with a dreamy sigh that had her husband glaring down at her.

“He really can,” Necie said, nodding in agreement as Aidan shifted his glare to Melanie and realized that she was struggling to get comfortable and looked beyond fucking exhausted.

“Get out,” Aidan said, already reaching for his tie as he toed off his shoes.

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Danny opened his mouth to say something but saw the murderous expression on Aidan's face and decided to keep his mouth shut while he carefully climbed out from behind Melanie. Before her back hit the pillows, Aidan was there, climbing in behind her and wrapping his arms around her.

"Looks like the Bradford curse is in full effect," Danny said, sending him a wink as he grabbed his shirt off the chair and pulled it back on before helping his wife to her feet.

"The curse is bullshit," Aidan said, even as he continued to glare at the bastard.

"Then how do you explain that?" Danny asked, gesturing towards Melanie, who was already sound asleep because the men in his family believed in bullshit tales passed down from generation to generation meant to fuck with their heads.

"She's exhausted," Aidan said, in no fucking mood to deal with his family's bullshit beliefs today.

While most of the men in his family believed in this happily ever after bullshit...it just wasn't for him. He'd never had time for anything more than a casual fling, never been interested in anything more than that. He'd always liked his life and the freedom that came with it, but he had to admit that he liked this too.

"If you say so," Danny said, shrugging it off as he headed towards the door only to pause as he said, "Someone will be back tomorrow to stay with her while you're at work. We're still figuring it out, but we're going to make sure that she isn't left alone again."

“Thank you,” Aidan said, relieved that he wouldn’t have to worry about her anymore as he closed his eyes and felt himself drift off to the sounds of his brothers chuckling and murmurs about the Bradford curse.

*_*_*_*

“I lied about having my period for a year to get out of gym class,” Melanie found herself admitting when she opened her eyes to find Aidan glaring at her.

When he didn’t say anything, she moved on with, “When I was six, I tried to convince my parents that we’d be better off trading my sister for a puppy?”

That was followed with, “I’ve never been able to get past the first level of Tetris because I panic?” when he continued to glare.

Biting back a wince, Melanie said, “I love to cook.”

“And?” Aidan bit out.

“I may have overdone it,” she admitted when his eyes narrowed on her.

“We had an agreement,” Aidan said, looking pissed even as he reached over and gently pushed her hair out of her face.

“I know, but there were extenuating circumstances,” she said with a nod, really hoping that he was willing to leave it at that.

He wasn’t.

“And what exactly were they?” Aidan asked as he shifted so that he was lying on his side, facing her.

“I wanted to surprise you?” Melanie said with a hopeful smile as he placed his hand on her belly.

“And I was definitely surprised to find you in bed with my brothers,” he said, making her wince.

“I can explain that,” Melanie said, even though she had no idea how she was supposed to do that.

“And I can’t wait to hear it,” Aidan said, gently caressing her belly as she opened her mouth to explain what happened only to close it, frown, sigh, and finally admit, “They weren’t as comfortable as you.”

“I see,” he murmured, sounding thoughtful as he continued caressing her belly, looking lost in thought as she laid there, watching him.

He really was handsome, Melanie thought, as she reached over and ran her fingertips along his jaw, enjoying the feel of his stubble against her fingertips. He was also kind, sweet, and nothing like the man that she’d first met. When she’d first met him, he’d been charming with an equally charming smile, saying all those things that every woman wanted to hear and-

She liked this Aidan better.

She liked the fact that he didn’t always know what to say and when he did smile, they came easily. She liked the fact that he went out of his way to make her feel comfortable, teased smiles out of her when the nausea medication didn’t work and she wasn’t sure that she could take anymore, and held her, promising her that it was all going to be worth it when they got to hold their son.

“I have to tell you something,” Aidan said, leaning in to press a kiss against her

forehead.

“What’s that?” she asked, wondering how such a simple kiss could feel so good.

“My mother invited us over for dinner Friday,” he said, sighing heavily.

“Why do you look like it’s the end of the world?” Melanie asked, unable to help but frown and not really seeing what the big deal was.

“Because they also invited your family.”

Chapter 22

“We don’t have to do this if you don’t want to,” Aidan said, glancing from the man that looked like he wanted to kill him back to Melanie only to find her digging through the shopping bag filled with a large assortment of candy bars and Hostess treats that he’d been forced to pick up when she’d calmly explained in minute detail what she would do to him if he didn’t get her a snack to hold her over until dinner.

“Do you think we have time to go back and see if they have any more Hostess lemon pies?” Melanie asked, worrying her bottom lip as his attention was once again drawn to the large man with a Marine tattoo wrapped around his forearm as he continued sitting there, glaring at Aidan as he absently drummed his fingertips against the armrest of his father’s favorite chair.

“How have you been, Mr. Robinson?” Aidan asked, only to end up biting back a sigh when Melanie’s father continued glaring at him.

Aidan turned his attention to the woman sitting across from him and decided to focus his attention back on Melanie when her mother narrowed her eyes on him. When he found Melanie debating between a Hostess cupcake and a Hostess apple pie, he

couldn't help but smile when she mumbled sadly, "I can't decide."

"Ah, you shouldn't be eating that garbage," a petite blonde said with a disapproving sigh as she reached over and-

"Don't make me kill you," Melanie said, not bothering to look up as she continued debating between snacks as her mother said, "Leave her alone, Caitlyn."

"It's not good for the baby," the woman that he'd heard so much about, none of it good, said with a pointed look at the snacks in Melanie's hands as she pulled a man with a sheepish smile on his face towards the loveseat by the window and sat down, snuggling up against his side before his ass had a chance to hit the cushion.

"The baby's fine," Aidan assured her even as he couldn't help but wonder what she was doing here since Melanie's parents told them that she couldn't make it.

"What are you doing here, Caitlyn?" her mother asked, looking confused while her father released a resigned sigh.

"Why wouldn't I be here?" Caitlyn asked with a perky smile as she laced her fingers with the man who hadn't stopped staring at Melanie since he'd walked into the room.

"Because you weren't invited," her father said with a glare still locked on Aidan.

"Why wouldn't we be invited?" Caitlyn asked, looking confused as she flipped her perfect honey blonde hair back over her shoulder.

"It's fine," Melanie mumbled absently as she handed him the lemon pie so that she could continue searching through the bag.

“This is our daughter, Caitlyn and her fiancé, Adam,” her mother said as Aidan noted the way that Adam looked at Melanie and-

“After four years, we’re finally getting married!” Caitlyn said with a sheepish smile as she held up her left hand and gave her ring-finger a pointed wiggle.

“Jesus Christ,” her father said, rubbing his hands roughly down his face as the forced smile on her mother’s face froze and Melanie...Melanie briefly paused in search for the perfect snack to glance up at the happy couple and mumbled, “Congratulations,” before focusing back on her bag of treats. Aidan sat there watching her, noting the way she bit her bottom lip and the way that she gripped the plastic bag tightly in her hands.

“Why don’t we go have a look at the box of my old baby stuff that my mother left in my room?” Aidan suggested as he reached over and took Melanie’s trembling hand in his.

“Ooooh, I love baby stuff!” her sister gushed, moving to stand up and join them only to sit back down with a pout when her parents shot her matching glares.

With a gentle tug, Aidan pulled Melanie to her feet and led her out of the room and headed upstairs. By the time they made it to his old room, she was crying and for the first time in his life, he wanted to fucking kill someone.

“God, I’m such an idiot,” she said with a humorless chuckle as she wiped at the tears streaming down her face.

“No, you’re not,” Aidan said, watching as she walked over to the double bay window that he used to spend hours at when he was little, watching as the other kids played while he tried to work up the nerve to ask if he could join them.

He never did.

“Yes, I am,” Melanie said, shaking her head in disgust as she wrapped her arms around herself.

“Why’s that?” he asked as he closed the bedroom door.

Shaking her head, she said, “Because I should have known this would happen.”

Nodding absently, Aidan leaned back against the door as he debated giving her a moment, but that wasn’t really an option, which meant...

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“Did Lucifer ever tell you that I used to have a speech impediment?”

“Not right now, Aidan,” Melanie said, wiping angrily at her face as he pushed away from the door and crossed the room.

“It was actually pretty bad. I couldn’t form a coherent sound until I was four and that was after two years of speech therapy. All the specialists told my parents that they should probably start looking into special needs schools and resign themselves to the fact that I would probably never be able to talk,” Aidan began as he joined her at the window.

“My parents refused to give up on me. Every day my mother would wake me up with a smile and told me just how much she loved me. Then she would spend the rest of the day talking, just talking about anything and everything so that I could hear how sounds were made. She’d talk about her day, share random thoughts, read everything she could get her hands on out loud for me, cookbooks, brochures, signs, the disturbing notes my brothers’ teachers sent home, and when she ran out of things to talk about, she’d start all over again. At the end of the night, she would tuck me in bed, beyond fucking exhausted, and tell me that she loved me again.”

“My brothers would help, too. They’d read their comic books to me, tell me about their day, and tell me how they were going to fuck each other over,” he said, noting how her lips twitched as she wiped away the last of the tears.

“As soon as my father came home, he’d pick up where my mother left off. He’d throw me over his shoulder and start telling me about his day, the cases that he had, the medicine that he’d prescribed and why. The days that he filled in at the

emergency room were my favorite. He'd tell me the best way to do a suture, the things to watch out for, and the tricks he'd taught himself to keep his hand steady. I decided before I could talk that I wanted to be a doctor."

"By four, I could choke out sounds and by the time I started school, I could mumble gibberish that my mother swears to this day that she could understand. My teachers tried to work with me, but they'd end up getting frustrated and would ask me to lay my head down on my desk whenever they couldn't understand me."

"What about the kids?" Melanie asked as they stared out the window.

"The ones in my class were fine. The principal had a talk with them on the first day of school and asked them to try to be understanding. They took that as leave me alone. The other kids weren't so understanding. For the most part, they left me alone because of my brothers, but--"

"Kids can be cruel," she said softly.

"Yes, they can. They mocked me every time I made the mistake of opening my mouth and made my life a living hell. It made me work harder, made me desperate so that every night I would come home and practice my sounds until I passed out. I thought it was helping, but it actually made everything worse. I mangled sounds, struggled to get them out, and started to get more frustrated."

"No one in my family said anything. They acted like it was no big deal, so I never realized that I was saying my brother Christopher's name wrong until the kids at school said something. I called him Lucifer and when they made the mistake of making fun of me for it, he beat the shit out of them and told them that it was his name," Aidan said with a fond smile, still remembering the way his brother corrected anyone that got it wrong, even the principal. That had been a fun phone call for their parents.

“What happened after that?” Melanie asked, glancing up at him.

“I stopped talking,” Aidan said with a sad smile as he reached over and gently caressed her cheek, wiping away the last tear.

“Why?” Melanie asked as he stood there, wondering why he’d never noticed just how beautiful her eyes were before.

“I tried to give up, but Lucifer wouldn’t let me. Every day, he’d drag me out of bed early, sat me down at the table with a bowl of Lucky Charms and one of Kenzie’s baby books and worked with me until I started talking again. It’s the reason why if you hadn’t chosen him to be Drew’s godfather, I would have,” Aidan said as he caressed her cheek, wondering if he’d ever felt anything this soft before just as his mind wandered to that night again.

As he stood there, caressing her cheek, Aidan told himself that it didn’t matter what happened that night, but even knowing that it was a mistake, he found himself moving closer, unable to help but wonder if he’d told her how beautiful she was, if he’d taken his time to run his hands over her body, or if he’d-

“I don’t remember what happened that night.”

Chapter 23

“What?” the man gently caressing her cheek, asked.

Licking her suddenly dry lips, Melanie found herself admitting, “I don’t remember what happened that night, Aidan, but I know why I drank too much and went out with a man that I barely knew.”

“Your sister,” he guessed, only...

“Adam,” she said, watching as understanding dawned as he dropped his hand away with a nod.

“You’re in love with him,” Aidan said, rubbing the back of his neck as he turned away from her with a curse.

“I thought he was the love of my life,” Melanie said with a sad smile, knowing that she’d been wrong. While Adam had been telling her that he loved her, he’d apparently been doing the same with her sister.

Four years...

“What changed that?” Aidan asked, watching her as he leaned back against a beautifully polished bureau with his initials carved into an intricate design across the top board.

“Caitlyn,” she said with a careless shrug.

“How long were you with him?” he asked, pulling his tie loose.

“Since I was sixteen and it ended three years ago. I didn’t know they were together until-”

“That night,” he finished for her with a nod of understanding before adding, “I was the rebound.”

“I’m sorry, Aidan,” Melanie said, having absolutely no idea what else there was to say to make this right.

If she hadn’t reacted to the news the way that she had or said yes when she normally would have said no, they wouldn’t be in this situation and Aidan-

“You make me nervous.”

“What?” Melanie asked, unable to help but frown as she watched him push away from the bureau with a nod.

“You make me nervous, Melanie. Have from the start. I don’t normally have problems talking to women, never have, but you...” Aidan said softly with a slow shake of his head, “you make me nervous and I have no fucking idea why. You’re the reason why I wanted to give Rebecca the news at home because I wanted to see you.”

“You did?” she found herself asking as she watched him walking towards her, biting back a wince when their baby boy chose that moment to kick her, demanding attention.

“Yes,” Aidan said softly as he placed his hands on her large belly and gently ran his hands in a soothing motion, instantly calming their baby boy. For a moment, neither one of them said anything as he continued gently caressing her belly and then, “I made a lot of mistakes that night, Melanie, and if I had to do it over again, I would do things differently, but I would have still asked you out.”

“Why?” Melanie asked, watching as he slowly looked up to meet her gaze.

“Because you make me nervous,” Aidan said as his gaze dropped to her mouth and-

“Dinner’s ready,” came the announcement that drew her attention to the doorway to find his father leaning back against the doorway with his arms crossed over his chest, watching them.

With an unreadable look in his eye, Aidan gave her belly one last caress before dropping his hands and stepped away from her as his attention once again returned to that large bay window overlooking the front yard. Frowning, she glanced back at

Ethan as he stepped into the room with a reassuring smile and a, “We’ll be right down.”

Not sure what else she was supposed to do, Melanie nodded as she headed downstairs and immediately wished that she’d stayed upstairs when she saw who was waiting for her at the bottom of the stairs.

Adam.

/> *_*_*_*

“You can’t fuck this up, Aidan,” his father said, sighing heavily as Aidan stood there, absently nodding.

“Trust me, I know,” he said, rubbing his hands roughly down his face, wondering what the hell was wrong with him.

For the past month and a half, he’d been careful around her, trying not to do or say anything that would make this more difficult than it had to be and then tonight...

“She deserves better than to be toyed with,” his father said as he joined Aidan by the window.

“I’m not toying with her,” Aidan said, shaking his head because he might not know what the hell he was doing, but he knew that this wasn’t a game to him.

“Then what are you doing?” his father asked, throwing him a curious look.

“I honestly have no fucking idea,” Aidan said even as he had to admit that he was wondering about that himself.

“Do you want her?”

“God, yes,” he said, wishing like hell that he didn’t.

“Then what’s the problem?”

“Drew,” Aidan explained, slowly exhaling as he leaned against the windowsill.

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“I’m sorry. Who’s Drew?” his father asked, looking confused.

Smiling, Aidan said, “Our son.”

“Drew Bradford,” his father said with a pleased smile.

“I don’t want to mess this up for him.”

“What makes you think you’re going to mess this up for him?” his father asked, leaning back against the other side of the windowsill.

“Jeff,” Aidan said with a heavy sigh as he watched his father frown.

“Trevor’s father?” Ethan asked before shaking his head and explaining, “You could never be like that asshole.”

“I’m terrified of missing out on my son’s life. I want to watch him grow up and I won’t be able to do that if I fuck this up.”

“I don’t know Melanie that well, but from everything that your brother and Rebecca have told me about her, that’s not something that I think you’re going to have to worry about. She loves Drew and wants you in his life,” his father said as Aidan glanced back outside.

“I don’t want her to hate me,” Aidan said softly.

Nodding, Ethan pushed away from the wall with a, “Then don’t give her a reason to.”

Chapter 24

“How are you holding up?” Adam asked with a pitying look on his face as he reached over to-

“Please don’t touch my bitch,” Rebecca, whom Melanie would really like to point out that she absolutely adored right now, said, pushing Adam’s hand away as she smoothly stepped in front of Melanie.

Blinking, Adam noticeably swallowed as he took a step back and started to look over his shoulder only to stop and focus his attention back on Rebecca as though he was afraid to take his eyes off her. “What are you doing here?” Adam asked, noticeably struggling not to look over his shoulder as he took another step back.

“Why wouldn’t I be here, sunshine? Didn’t you miss me?” Rebecca asked, blinking innocently as Melanie stood there, watching as all the blood drained out of Adam’s face as he mumbled something, cleared his throat, and-

“I didn’t hold back,” Rebecca said, shrugging it off as Adam opened his mouth to say something only to decide against it.

With a muttered, “Excuse me,” he fled the room.

“I really don’t understand what you saw in him,” Rebecca said with a heavy sigh as she grabbed Melanie’s hand and pulled her in the opposite direction. Melanie glanced back over her shoulder in the direction of where Adam disappeared and-

Found herself wondering the same thing as she watched him step back into the foyer with Caitlyn hanging onto him. Once upon a time, she’d thought the world of him, but now, Melanie really couldn’t help but wonder why. When she was sixteen, she thought that he was incredibly handsome, sweet, and everything that she could ever

want in a man. But now...

She couldn't help but admit that they'd never had anything in common. While she'd always been happy working on a computer, wrapped up in blankets while sitting in front of the television with a pile of junk food by her side, he hadn't. He wanted more, wanted to travel the world, and wanted the best of everything. He spent too much money, cared too much about what other people thought of him, and if she was going to be honest, being around him had always left her feeling exhausted.

"I hope you're hungry," Mrs. Bradford, or Mary as she'd been asked to call her, said with a polite smile and a nervous glance when they walked into the large dining room, reminding Melanie that she had bigger problems to worry about than a man that really wasn't worth her time.

"Everything looks wonderful," Melanie said as she took in all the food covering the large dining room table.

"Thank you," Mary said after a slight hesitation, making Melanie bite back a wince as she tried to figure out how they were going to get past the fact that Melanie had a one-night stand with her son.

"What did we talk about?" Lucifer demanded as he walked into the room, carrying a foil-covered plate with a glare aimed at his mother.

"Many things?" Mary said as she sat down at the head of the table and absently gestured for Melanie to sit down next to her. Knowing that she didn't have a choice, Melanie sat down and resigned herself to getting through an incredibly awkward dinner when Adam sat down across from her with Caitlyn by his side.

"You had gluten next to my wife's food," Lucifer bit out as he placed the foil-covered plate on the table in front of Rebecca, who was busy shooting Adam a smile and a

pinky wave that had him turning an interesting shade of red.

“What? No, I didn’t. I’m very careful about that,” Mary said, looking confused.

“You had the plate of rolls within ten feet of her food, woman,” Lucifer said, narrowing his eyes accusingly on his mother as he sat down on the other side of Rebecca. When she opened her mouth to argue, Lucifer bit out, “I measured.”

“You always were a difficult child,” Mary said with a sad shake of her head as Melanie sat there, glancing around the table for those rolls, knowing that she was going to need carbs to get through this meal.

“He really was,” Ethan easily agreed as he walked into the room with her parents by his side.

When her parents saw that Adam was sitting across from her, their eyes narrowed, and her father moved to take a step towards him when Aidan stepped into the room. He barely spared Adam a glance as he said, “Move down.” Clearing his throat awkwardly, Adam forced a polite smile on his face and did just that, giving Caitlyn no choice but to move down so that their parents could sit across from Melanie.

Once that was done, Aidan walked around the table, pulled Rebecca’s chair back, picked her up, and deposited her on Lucifer’s lap before his brother could kill him. He sat down on the recently vacated seat next to her while Rebecca kept her gaze locked on Adam as she shifted to get more comfortable on her husband’s lap. With a heavy sigh, Lucifer grabbed her foil-covered plate and placed it on the other side of him before depositing Rebecca on the chair next to him as she continued watching Adam’s every move.

“Everything looks wonderful,” her mother said as Melanie glanced over at Aidan’s mom and-

Did she just move her chair closer? Melanie wondered as Mary murmured a “Thank you,” and gestured for everyone to start eating. Telling herself that she’d imagined it, Melanie glanced at her father and-

Once again found herself wondering if Mary had just moved her chair closer to her when she looked back at Aidan’s mother to find her sitting there with an innocent expression on her face and...shifted closer, making Melanie’s lips twitch. This was definitely an interesting family, Melanie thought as she glanced back at her father and-

“M-may I?” came the softly whispered words that drew Melanie’s attention to find Mary weakly gesturing towards her belly.

“Of course,” Melanie said, barely getting the words out when Aidan’s mother was there, placing her

hands on Melanie’s belly with a gasp and a, “Who’s Grandma’s little boy? You are!” Mary said excitedly while Melanie sat there, not really sure how to respond.

“Poor thing held off as long as she could,” Dr. Bradford said with a sigh, drawing her attention only to add, “She was afraid of scaring you off,” at her questioning look.

“Oh, I love you! Yes, I do! I love my sweet baby boy!” Mary said with a pleased smile as Drew pushed against her hand in greeting.

“What’s his name?” Mary asked, glancing up at her.

“Drew,” Melanie said, unable to help but relax when she saw the huge smile on Mary’s face.

Nodding, Mary returned her attention back to Melanie’s large belly. “Grandma loves

you, Drew! Yes, she does!” Mary said with a huge smile when Drew pushed against her hands. “Are you Grandma’s little baby boy? Yes, you are!”

There was a heavy sigh and then, “Let her eat, woman, my godson is hungry.”

“Don’t bother me while I’m talking to my sweet little baby boy!” Mary snapped, earning a grumble, but Lucifer smartly kept his mouth shut and left her alone.

“It’s fine,” Melanie said, painfully aware of the man sitting next to her who hadn’t said anything to her since he’d walked into the room.

He’d said that she made him nervous, but god, did he make her nervous. She liked him, liked spending time with him, but she loved the way that he held her at night, and she didn’t think that she could ever get enough of-

“Wait. I thought we were going to be the godparents,” Caitlyn said, drawing everyone’s attention.

“It’s honestly like you want me to make you cry,” Rebecca said with a sad shake of her head as she removed the foil off the gluten-free meal that her husband made for her with a sigh.

“Why do they get to be the godparents?” Caitlyn demanded with a pout as she crossed her arms over her chest.

Unable to help but frown, Melanie couldn’t help but ask, “Why would you think that I would pick you?”

“Ah, because I’m your sister?”

Blinking, Melanie asked, “And?”

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“And we should be the godparents,” Caitlyn said, sending Adam a look that told him that it would be in his best interest to say something.

“Lucifer and Rebecca are Drew’s godparents,” Aidan said evenly as he reached for the platter filled to the brim with pot roast and began loading Melanie’s plate for her.

“Why?” Caitlyn demanded with a pout only to clear her throat and drop her arms when Aidan said, “Because I said so.”

Chapter 25

“You know what I’ve been thinking?” the epitome of evil asked while Aidan sat there, unable to take his eyes off Melanie.

“That it would probably be in your best interest to avoid going near religious relics so that you don’t burst into flames?” Aidan asked absently as he watched Melanie smile down at the photo album that his mother handed her a few minutes ago.

“No, but that’s probably a good idea,” Rebecca said with a heartfelt sigh and a nod as Aidan sat there, trying to tell himself that this was a bad idea.

“Then what have you been thinking?” he absently asked as he shifted his attention to the right and immediately wished that he hadn’t when he spotted his mother and brother locked in another glaring match over who was planning the baby shower.

“I was thinking that you might want to stop staring at her,” Rebecca drawled as Aidan once again found himself watching Melanie.

“And why’s that?” Aidan asked, still debating what he should do about her.

“It’s getting creepy.”

“Then what would you call what you did to Adam?” Aidan absently asked, not that he was complaining since it had chased the asshole off along with his pain in the ass wife before her parents had enough of their oldest daughter’s bullshit and left as well.

“Part of my process,” Rebecca said, shrugging it off.

“And what’s that?”

“You don’t want to find out,” Rebecca said with a pointed look that he easily ignored.

“Is that a warning?” Aidan asked, glancing back over to find his brother and mother still locked in a glaring match.

“It’s a promise,” Rebecca said, leveling a glare of her own on him.

“Is this the part where you tell me to back off?” Aidan asked as he helped himself to one of the large cupcakes that his mother picked up from Dixon’s bakery as he considered the small woman watching his every move.

“I would never do that,” Rebecca said, blinking innocently before adding, “but that doesn’t mean that I won’t make your life a living hell if you do anything to hurt her.”

“So, you’re fine if I decide to see if this is going anywhere,” Aidan said, taking a bite of the delicious cupcake as he watched his mother send his brother one last glare before she left.

“I didn’t say that, now did I?” Rebecca said, cocking an eyebrow as she reached for

one of the gluten-free brownies that his mother picked up for her.

Nodding, Aidan murmured, “True,” as he glanced back at his brother and decided that he really didn’t have a choice.

“Glad we have an understanding,” Rebecca said with a sniffle as she took a bite of her brownie.

“Me, too,” Aidan murmured thoughtfully before finishing his cupcake and tossed the cupcake wrapper on her lap. When she picked it up with a frown, Aidan shot her a wink as he said, “Oh, god, you didn’t eat that cupcake, did you, Rebecca?”

“Wait. What? No, I didn’t-” she started to say, but it was too late.

There was a heavy sigh and then, “I told you to be careful.”

With a frantic shake of her head, Rebecca pointed towards Aidan, “No, no, no, you don’t understand, he-”

“I told you that wasn’t gluten-free,” Aidan said with a sad shake of his head as Lucifer walked over with another sigh. He plucked the cupcake wrapper out of her hand and tested a small crumb left behind. Sighing heavily, he tossed the cupcake wrapper aside with a glare before reaching down and grabbed his wife before she could run, and she definitely looked like she was about to run.

“He set me up!” Rebecca said, sounding desperate as she was forced to grab onto the back of her husband’s shirt when he threw her over his shoulder.

“That’s just the gluten talking,” Aidan said with a pitying look that earned a murderous glare.

“You’ll pay for this!” Rebecca bit out only to wince when Lucifer said, “It’s going to be a long night.”

“Hope you feel better,” Aidan said, shooting her a wink as he got up and decided that it was time to see where this was going.

*_*_*_*

“I know this place that has the best apple pie you’ve ever had,” Aidan said as he plucked the photo album that she’d been looking at off her lap and placed it on the coffee table before offering her his hand.

“What are you doing?” Melanie asked even as she reached up and placed her hand in his.

“Using your love of carbs against you,” he said with a boyish smile as he released her hand.

“And why would you want to do that?” she asked as Aidan cupped her face in his hands and leaned down, slowly brushing his lips against hers in an achingly sweet kiss with a murmured, “Because I want a do-over.”

“A do-over?” she found herself asking weakly as Aidan ran his fingertips along her jaw before dropping his hands so that he could take her hand in his.

With that smile that she couldn’t resist, Aidan nodded as he used his hold on her hand to pull her towards the door. “I thought it would be a good idea.”

“Why’s that?” Melanie asked as she found herself being led outside.

“Because I don’t remember that night either,” he admitted, taking her by surprise.

With a sigh, Aidan opened the passenger side door for her as he added, “I don’t normally drink that much, but I was really fucking nervous that night.”

“Oh,” she mumbled, unable to help but frown as she carefully climbed into the car.

“Exactly,” Aidan said with a nod as he closed her door and walked around the car while she sat there, wondering if this was a good idea.

They were just starting to become good friends and she didn’t think it was a good idea to risk that, Melanie told herself even as she sat there, unable to take her eyes off him. This was a bad idea, she tried to tell herself, nervously licking her lips. As soon as he was in the car, she was going to tell him that, she decided with a weak nod as she pulled the seatbelt across her lap and buckled in.

Definitely a bad idea, Melanie told herself as Aidan opened the driver’s side door and-

“It’s your smile,” Aidan said as he climbed into the car.

“What?” she asked, unable to help but frown.

“It drives me out of my fucking mind.”

Chapter 26

“Why don’t I remember this place?”

“Because we never made it this far,” Aidan said as he opened the door to the small diner that he’d somehow managed to keep a secret from his family.

He still wasn’t sure how he’d managed to pull it off, but he was just glad that he did.

This place helped him keep his sanity during the last year of his residency. It's where he came when he needed to clear his head, had a bad day, or needed to figure out how he was going to tell one of his patients something that they didn't want to hear. It was also where he came after that morning when he'd fucked everything up with Melanie.

"Ah, the bar," Melanie murmured with a nod of understanding, making him wince.

"We should have skipped the bar," he said as they stepped inside the small diner.

"Probably," Melanie mumbled absently as she looked down at her belly with a sad smile and-

Made him realize that he was already screwing this up.

Taking her hand in his, Aidan leaned down and whispered, "I don't regret Drew."

"You don't?" she asked, worrying her bottom lip between her teeth.

"Not even a little bit," Aidan promised her as he led her towards his favorite booth in the back of the empty diner.

After giving her hand a reassuring squeeze, he waited for her to sit down before he sat down across from her and-

Realized that he had absolutely no fucking idea what he was supposed to say to her and judging by the way that she stared helplessly at him from across the table, he wasn't the only one. For several long, painful minutes, they sat there, staring at each other until she cleared her throat and said, "This is a nice place."

"Yes, it is," he said automatically and then...

Nothing.

Several awkward moments later, Aidan regretted not taking them back to that bar because he could really use a fucking drink right about now. God, he was fucking nervous, he thought, rubbing his hands roughly down his face. It didn't seem to matter that they'd been sleeping in the same bed for the last few weeks and that they were having a baby, he couldn't think of anything to say, making him wonder if this was a bad idea. Maybe they should-

"I watched American Pie when I was eight," Melanie said, drawing his attention to find her reading a menu.

"What?" Aidan asked, dropping his hands away.

"Well, part of it anyway," she said, squishing her face up adorably. "My parents thought it was a family movie."

"I see," Aidan said, feeling his lips twitch.

"The name was misleading," Melanie said as she looked over the burger options.

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“And how long did it take your parents to figure out what it was really about?”

With a sad shake of her head, she flipped the menu over and said, “Thirty seconds. That was followed by ice cream and a lot of awkward mumbling as they tried to explain the birds and the bees to us.”

Chuckling, Aidan sat back against the booth and felt himself relax. “I’m sure that went over well.”

“It really didn’t,” Melanie admitted with a sigh. “I had a lot of questions.”

“You were a devious little thing, weren’t you?” he asked, unable to help but smile as he pictured her as a little girl with pigtails, terrorizing her family.

“I really was,” Melanie said, nodding.

“I can only imagine the type of hell that you and Rebecca put your parents through,” he said with a sympathetic wince.

“I’m not allowed to talk about that.”

“Why’s that?”

“The contract.”

“What contract?” Aidan found himself asking as he watched her, noting the way that her pale baby blue eyes lit up when she teased him.

“I’m sorry, but I’m afraid that I’ve already said too much,” Melanie said with a sad shake of her head.

“That bad?” he asked, chuckling.

“It really depends on who you ask,” Melanie said as she looked over the dessert menu.

“So, I probably shouldn’t ask your parents?” Aidan said, watching as her lips twitched before she managed to pull it back so that she could say, “Oh no, you should definitely ask them,” with a straight face.

His eyes narrowed on her as he asked, “Trying to get me killed?”

“That depends,” she said, looking thoughtful.

“On what?”

“On whether or not you lied about that pie.”

*_*_*_*

“What’s this?” Aidan asked, shifting the bags in his arms so that he could pick up the white envelope off the hallway floor in front of his door.

“A very angry woman wearing a Black Jack’s tee-shirt, who was visibly struggling against the urge to kill your brother, taped it to the door earlier,” Melanie explained as she lovingly ran her fingertips over the bakery box in her arms.

“What did the asshole do now?” he asked, sighing heavily as he opened the envelope and-

His lips twitched right around the time that Melanie decided that she'd waited long enough. With a flick of her hand, she opened the cover and found herself staring down at four of the most beautiful cupcakes that she'd ever seen in her life. As she debated which delicious morsel to start with, she opened her apartment door and headed to the kitchen. By the time she placed the box on the counter, she'd narrowed her choices down to the yellow cupcake with buttercream frosting and the one with chocolate fudge frosting.

That was followed by her deciding that it just wasn't fair to either cupcake to choose. By the time she grabbed a plate, Aidan was there, grabbing the chocolate milk out of the fridge for her.

"Rylie has offered to pay two hundred dollars more a month if I'm willing to help her bury the asshole in a shallow grave," Aidan said, chuckling as he grabbed a glass for her.

"That's a good offer," Melanie said, taking a bite of her cupcake and nearly groaned.

"It really is," he murmured in agreement as he opened the box of pastries that he'd picked out.

"What happened with Rebecca?" Melanie asked, unable to help but notice that the lemon and apple pastries that he'd picked out looked especially yummy tonight.

With a sad shake of his head, Aidan said, "She professed her undying love for me."

"Is that why she's been texting me since she left, letting me know that she has no other choice but to make your life a living hell?" Melanie asked, nibbling on her cupcake even as she continued to stare at that delicious looking pastry.

"She's taking it hard," Aidan said with a sad shake of his head as he picked up a

lemon pastry and placed it on her plate. Without a word, she abandoned the rest of her cupcake and focused on the lemon pastry that was going to be the perfect way to end the night.

Well, almost perfect.

For the past three hours, all she could think about was that kiss, that sweet, simple, incredibly sexy kiss that he'd given her earlier and just how badly she wanted him to kiss her again.

If it was meant to happen, then she'd let it happen and if it wasn't...

She wasn't going to force it.

As she stood there, Melanie was surprised to realize just how badly she wanted this to happen. They were having a baby and the last thing they needed to do was to make this thing between them more complicated than it needed to be, but she couldn't stop thinking about that kiss.

She never thought such a simple touch could feel so good. It had her wondering if he'd kissed her like that before and immediately understood how she'd ended up spending the night with him because there was no way that she would have been able to stop kissing him.

"It does seem that way," Melanie absently murmured in agreement as she looked up to find him watching her. "What's wrong?"

"We forgot something."

"What's that?" she asked, unable to help but frown as she-

“The awkward kiss goodnight,” Aidan said, already reaching for her.

“We could skip it and go for a confusing handshake and the promise that we’ll do this again sometime?” Melanie said, smiling as she went to him.

“We should definitely do that,” Aidan murmured in agreement as he wrapped his arms around her.

“We definitely should,” Melanie said as she reached up and cupped his face in her hands. He leaned down and brushed his lips softly against hers once with a murmured, “Give me ten minutes,” before walking away, leaving her standing there, realizing just how badly she wanted this to happen.

Chapter 27

“What’s going on?” the woman that he couldn’t stop thinking about asked as Aidan lit the last candle.

“My do-over,” Aidan said as he placed the small box of matches back on the bureau before he reached over and hit play so that Paula Abdul’s song Rush, Rush filled the small bedroom.

“Do-over?” Melanie asked as he turned around and found her standing in the doorway, taking in the candlelit room with the shyest fucking smile that he’d ever seen.

“Don’t tell me you forgot?” Aidan said as he walked over to her and took her hand in his.

“Refresh my memory,” she said, adjusting the large towel wrapped around her with her other hand as he

pulled her into the room.

“We danced that night,” Aidan said as he pulled her into his arms.

“I see,” Melanie said as she kept hold of the towel with one hand as she wrapped her other arm around his shoulders.

“I hate dancing,” he found himself admitting as he pulled her closer.

“Then why are we doing it?” Melanie asked as she absently ran her fingers through his hair.

“Because,” Aidan said as he leaned down and brushed his lips against hers, “I love dancing with you.”

“You remember dancing with me?” Melanie asked as he pulled one of his arms back so that he could place his hand on the side of her belly as he moved her around the room.

“I remember that I never wanted to let you go,” he said, pressing a kiss against her forehead as he felt their baby boy push against his hand.

“You are a smooth talker, Aidan Bradford,” Melanie said as she pulled him down for a kiss.

“Yes, I am,” Aidan said, smiling as he met her for a kiss that had him struggling to remember that they needed to take this slowly.

It was the same reminder that he’d told himself when he heard the shower turn on and he had to stop himself from joining her, but god, did he want to fucking join her. For several minutes, he’d stood outside the bathroom door, debating walking into that

bathroom so that he could run his hands over her as he kissed every inch of her body.

“That’s two,” Melanie said, brushing her lips teasingly against his as Aidan felt her pull his tie loose.

“Two, what?” Aidan asked as he felt her small fingers work his shirt open.

“Of the five completely random things that you owe me,” she said as he pulled his shirt out of his pants so that she could push it off him.

“Then, shouldn’t I get credit for three things?” Aidan asked as he reached up and pulled her towel loose when he felt her hand work his belt free.

“No,” Melanie said, smiling as he dropped her towel.

“Three more things, hmm?” Aidan murmured as he moved her closer to the bed.

“According to the rule book,” Melanie said, making his lips twitch as he sat down on the edge of the bed and pulled her closer so that he could press a kiss against the large swell of her belly.

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“I want you,” he said with another kiss as he reached down and began pulling his shoes off as she ran her fingers through his hair.

“That’s one,” Melanie said as he stood up so that she could finish pushing his pants down as he cupped her face in his hands and kissed her.

“You drive me out of my fucking mind.”

“That’s two.”

“I never stopped thinking about you.”

*_*_*_*

“Your turn,” Aidan said as he helped her climb onto the bed.

“I think about you, too,” Melanie admitted as he guided her to sit back against the pillows.

“That’s a good start,” Aidan murmured as he carefully climbed onto the bed and sat down next to her.

“I want you, too,” she found herself saying as he leaned over so that he could kiss her as he said, “Better.”

“I really want you to touch me,” Melanie said against his lips.

“Much better,” Aidan said as she felt him run his hand down her thigh and then-

She groaned softly. “I really like that.”

“What else do you like, Melanie?” Aidan asked as he slowly ran his fingers between her legs.

“You,” she said on a soft moan as she reached up and cupped his face in her hands.

Groaning, Aidan deepened the kiss as he ran his fingers over her, teasing her until she found herself spreading her legs apart. He took his time touching her, tracing her slit with his fingers, groaning when he parted her lips and found her wet. His fingers felt so good, Melanie thought even as she bit back a disappointed sigh as she waited for him to pull his hand away only to moan when he continued touching her.

When she was with Adam, he would only touch her to make sure that she was wet, and once she was, he would stop touching her. It used to leave her feeling frustrated and disappointed. She’d always wanted more but never knew how to ask. At least, she never knew how to tell him in a way that would actually make him listen.

As she laid there, kissing Aidan as he ran his fingertips over her clit, teasing it with soft touches that had her breaths coming a little faster, Melanie had a feeling that he would never have a problem doing all those things that she liked. When she felt his fingertips slide over her core, she couldn’t help but moan.

“Do you like that?” Aidan asked against her lips.

“Yes,” Melanie said, running her fingers through his hair, encouraging him to keep touching her as she sat there, unable to help but moan.

“We need to slow down,” Aidan said even as he turned his hand and slowly slid his

finger inside her.

“We really do,” she readily agreed as she continued to kiss him as she dropped one hand so that she could slide it over his leg and-

Ripped a groan out of Aidan when she wrapped her hand around him only to moan when she ran her hand over him. He felt so good, Melanie thought. She liked the way that he felt in her hand, smooth and hard at the same time, but she loved the way his breath caught as she slowly ran her hand over the tip.

It had been so long since she touched a man like this. She forgot how much she liked it, Melanie thought as she ran her hand back down him, enjoying the way that it felt to touch him even as she couldn't help but moan as Aidan continued to slide his finger inside her.

“I don't want to rush this,” Aidan said, pressing his forehead against hers as they continued moving their hands over each other, unable to stop.

“Then we should slow down,” Melanie said, licking her lips hungrily, unable to help but moan as he slid a second finger inside her.

“We really should,” Aidan agreed even as he shifted out of her reach so that he was kneeling in front of her with his knees on either side of her and her legs resting over his as he pulled his hand free and-

“Oh, god,” she whispered when she felt the tip of his cock move between her legs.

“Tell me to stop,” Aidan said, reaching past her to grab hold of the headboard as he continued to tease them both.

She opened her mouth to do that, but the problem was that she didn't want to stop.

For once, she didn't want to overthink this and do the smart thing and play it safe. She wanted this, she wanted to be reckless, to give in, and she definitely wanted him.

"Don't stop," she said, pulling him back down for a kiss.

With a groan, Aidan released himself so that he could wrap his arm around her as she felt him slowly push inside her. He felt so good, Melanie thought as he broke away from the kiss so that he could press a kiss against her chin as he watched her with an expression that had her wrapping her arms around him and pulling him back in for a kiss that turned hungry as soon as their lips touched.

Tightening his hold around her, she felt him shift lower and-

"Oh, god," Melanie moaned against his mouth when he rolled his hips.

"Is this okay?" Aidan asked, breaking off the kiss so that he could kiss his way down her neck.

"More than okay," Melanie said, unable to help but moan as he continued rolling his hips. It had never felt like this before, had never been this good before, she thought on another moan as she reached down and grabbed hold of the comforter.

Licking her lips hungrily, she closed her eyes on a moan as she felt Aidan push inside her. God, he was big, she thought as he stretched her. He felt so good, Melanie thought while her hands fisted in the comforter as she felt the last inch slide inside her, stretching her as he filled her. When she felt his lips touch her neck, she dropped her head back, giving him better access only to release her hold on the comforter so that she could wrap her arms back around him when she felt him move.

So good, Melanie thought on a moan as he continued to move, rolling his hips with shallow thrusts as the sounds of their moans and the sound of the bed creaking with

every roll of his hips filled the small bedroom. She'd never had sex without a condom before, not even when she was on birth control and Adam begged her, but as Aidan moved inside her, she couldn't help but lick her lips.

She could feel just how hard he was, the veins standing out along his cock, and the tip...

Oh, god...

The tip was large, soft, and felt so good as he moved, sliding inside her only to end up waiting to slide back in her when he rolled his hips back. It felt so good pushing back inside her, Melanie thought only to groan when she felt her breasts brush against Aidan's chest as she cupped his face in her hands and pulled him down for an achingly sweet kiss that had him slowing his movements as she lost herself in his arms.

"You have no idea what you do to me, do you?" he whispered against her lips.

Before she could answer, Aidan was deepening the kiss and making it difficult to focus on anything else until the kiss turned desperate and she realized just how badly she needed him to move faster as a desperation that she didn't quite understand took over. She needed this, needed him, and couldn't seem to get close enough to him.

She broke off the kiss so that she could watch him as he moved. His eyes locked with hers as his expression softened and he continued to move, rolling his hips as she sat there, unable to look away even as she realized just how close she was to falling in love with him.

Chapter 28

Maybe he imagined it? Aidan thought as he pressed a kiss against Melanie's bare

shoulder as he closed his eyes only to find himself opening his eyes seconds later when he felt it again.

Curious, Aidan pressed one last kiss against her shoulder as he shifted away from her so that he could look down and felt his lips twitch as he watched Melanie's generous ass wiggle back against him. Chuckling, he moved closer so that his body was wrapped around hers and pressed a kiss against her shoulder as he asked, "Can't sleep?"

"Well, I could if I had a little help," the little tease said as she gave her ass another pointed wiggle that had him sliding his hand down to her hip and over one cheek so that he could give it a squeeze.

"What kind of help did you have in mind?" Aidan asked even

as he rolled his hips, grinding the cock that she'd teased against her ass as she moaned.

He loved her ass, loved her body, the way she reacted when he touched her, the way she moaned when he whispered all the things that he wanted to do to her in her ear, the way her breasts felt in his hands, the way her wet pussy gripped him as she screamed his name, and couldn't help but regret all the time they'd wasted. He should have done so many things differently, Aidan thought as he kissed her shoulder.

"You know what I want," Melanie said, pushing back against him.

"Tell me," Aidan said, grinding his cock against her soft bottom. He pressed another kiss against her shoulder as he cupped her large breast in his hand so that her hard nipple was sliding between his fingers as they continued to tease each other.

"You," she groaned as he shifted so that the next time that she pushed back, he was

forced to close his eyes and bite back a curse as the move had his cock slowly pushing inside her.

She was so wet, Aidan thought, pressing a kiss against the back of her neck as he gave her breast a gentle squeeze that had her moaning. Sex had never felt this good before, never left him completely satisfied one minute only to leave him desperate for more the next. He'd never wanted a woman the way that he wanted her, needed her, and thought that he'd fucking lose his mind if he couldn't touch her.

It wasn't just about sex.

He couldn't explain it, but being around her made him realize that there had been something missing in his life. He'd never thought there was something missing, but then again, he'd never slowed down long enough to find out. He'd always liked to stay busy, always needed to have something to do, and had always preferred to be around other people, which was probably why he bought this apartment house because he hadn't been able to stomach the idea of coming home to an empty house. Since Melanie moved in, he'd found himself looking forward to coming home. He liked being near her, loved holding her, and truth be told, he fucking loved spoiling her.

*_*_*_*

Sniffle. “The baby’s hungry,” Melanie said, deciding to chance a second sniffle and a slight pout because she didn’t want to risk overdoing it as she allowed her bottom lip to tremble...slightly.

Aidan paused mid-bite of the toast smothered in peanut butter and strawberry jelly to narrow his eyes on her. When his gaze dropped down to her belly, she knew that she had him, but just in case...

Sniffle.

His eyes narrowed as he handed over the piece of toast that was really going to hit the spot after the plate of spaghetti and the stack of grilled cheese sandwiches that he’d made for her. With a satisfied sigh and a murmured, “Thank you,” she accepted his offering, took a bite, and couldn’t help but groan.

As she stood there, nibbling on the toast that was really delicious, she couldn’t help but wonder if he’d be willing to make her more. That thought quickly turned to wondering what he was doing when she suddenly found herself picked up and carefully placed on the kitchen counter. As she helped herself to his glass of chocolate milk, she watched Aidan walk over to the kitchen table, grab a chair with a sigh before carrying it back into the kitchen and place it in front of where she was sitting.

Curious, Melanie finished off the slice of toast that had really hit the spot before helping herself to the other slice as she watched Aidan sit down on the chair in front

of her. With another sigh, he reached up and carefully dragged her to the edge of the counter, pushed up the large shirt that she'd borrowed after their shower, and kissed her thigh.

"What are you doing?" she couldn't help but wonder as she sat there, watching as he turned his head and kissed her other thigh.

"Nothing," Aidan mumbled, but as she sat there, nibbling her tasty treat, she couldn't help noticing that this didn't feel like nothing, especially when he leaned forward and did something that she would really like him to do again.

"Oh, god," Melanie mumbled as she sat there, gasping as she felt Aidan run his tongue between her legs.

"Next five things," he said, making her frown only to make her moan his name when he teased her clit.

"Umm, right now?" Melanie asked, really hoping that they could do this later when she wasn't distracted.

"Mmmhmm, right now," Aidan said, shifting his head to the side and-

"I'm afraid of Teddy Ruxpin!" she blurted out, really hoping that he didn't make her explain the incident that resulted in her sleeping with her parents for an entire year because she didn't really feel like reliving that terrifying moment. At least, not without the guidance of a trained mental health professional.

"Why?" Aidan asked, making her shake her head because there was just no way that she could relive that moment and-

"My brother replaced the Teddy Ruxpin tape with the tape of demonic noises that he

borrowed from the community center after Halloween, snuck into my room at two in the morning, and hit play!" she found herself admitting on a rush and a groan when he slid his tongue inside her.

"What else?" he asked as he leisurely licked her out.

"Maybe we could talk about this later?" she asked, trying to catch her breath only to end up slapping her hand on the counter behind her and lean back with a moan when he ran his tongue back up to her clit and-

"I switched my sister's shampoo bottle with Nair after I found out that she was making someone's life a living hell at school!" she found herself admitting on a groan as her back arched and she found herself threading her fingers through Aidan's hair when he did that thing that she was really starting to love.

"What else?"

"I rearrange the condiments and menus at the Fire & Brimstone when I'm bored just so that I can see how long it takes for Lucifer to notice," she admitted, really hoping that he didn't tell his brother that she was the one doing that.

That earned a chuckle and another, "What else?"

"I've been sending Rebecca's parents glitter bombs and elephant poop anonymously for the past ten years through a website I found. I send them a special care package every time they do something to make her cry."

"Good," Aidan said approvingly before adding, "What else?"

"I-I don't know. I can't think straight right now," Melanie managed to get out as she licked her lips hungrily as she struggled to focus only to end up moaning his name

when he slid his tongue back inside her.

“One more,” Aidan said as he pulled his tongue out and-

“I didn’t know that Clark Kent was really Superman until I was fifteen!”

He paused and then, “That’s just...that’s just sad.”

“I know,” Melanie admitted with a sad nod only to end up moaning his name when he rewarded her by doing that thing that she definitely loved.

*_*_*_*

“You’re evil,” Aidan told the beautiful woman tormenting him as he laid there, unable to help but groan as she finished settling on his lap so that his poor dick that she’d teased slid the rest of the way inside her.

“You know, I have heard that before,” Melanie said, nodding solemnly as she leaned back so that she could place her hands on his thighs to help support her.

“I bet you have,” he said, running his hands over her thighs with a groan as he laid there, running his eyes over her, taking in the devious smile that she was trying to bite back, her large breasts that he couldn’t seem to get enough of, and the large swell of her belly and couldn’t help but wonder if he’d ever seen a more beautiful woman in his life.

“Look,” the devious woman said with a soft sigh and a sad shake of her head, “I didn’t want to do this, but you really left me with no choice.”

“I really didn’t,” Aidan murmured in agreement only to groan when she shifted to get more comfortable.

“That will make this easier,” Melanie said, nodding absently as she shifted again, this time on purpose.

“I’m sure it will,” Aidan said, running his hands over

her thighs as he watched her move on him.

“I’m going to need you to tell me your next five things,” she said, rolling her hips and tearing a groan from him when the move caused her to grip his cock just right.

“Right now?” Aidan asked, repeating her response to his demands earlier.

“I’m afraid so,” Melanie said with a solemn nod that had him biting back a smile.

He released a weary sigh and then...

“We could do that...” he said, letting his voice trail off as he noted the adorable frown as he folded one arm behind his head as he slowly slid his other hand up her thigh.

“Wait, what are you doing?” she asked, frowning as she watched his hand disappear between her legs before she dropped her head back with the sexiest moan that he’d ever heard as he brushed his thumb over her clit.

“Your next five things,” Aidan said, watching as she licked her lips as she struggled against the urge to move on him.

“It’s your turn,” she reminded him.

“Is it really?” he asked, slowly running his thumb between her legs.

She opened her mouth only to nod as another moan escaped her.

“Your five things,” Aidan said, biting back a moan of his own when her hold on his legs tightened and she shifted, grinding down on his cock.

“I really hate you,” Melanie muttered with a groan.

“That doesn’t count,” he pointed out, licking his lips as he watched her.

God, she felt so fucking good...

“Fine! A couple of years ago, all the waitresses at the Fire & Brimstone were doing a diet pool and they let me join,” she began only to shake her head with a wince as she suddenly sat up and placed her hands on her belly, letting him know that this position was too much for her.

“Are you okay?” Aidan asked, reaching for her only to have her wave away his hands as she crawled off him, stole the pillows from behind him, placed them on the bed, leaned over with a sigh and wiggled her ass in demand, making his lips twitch.

Knowing better than to deny her anything, Aidan got on his knees behind her, carefully grabbed hold of her hips, and-

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There was a soft moan and then, “That’s better,” Melanie said as Aidan knelt there, slowly exhaling as he slid inside her and-

“And I didn’t want to give up carbs, but I also didn’t want to lose. So, I may have umm, made a few tactical decisions that I kind of feel bad about,” she said, making him frown as he tried to figure out what she was talking about only to chuckle when she admitted, “I left baked goods, chocolate, and candy in the breakroom every day and made sure that all the healthy options quickly found their way to the dumpster out back.”

“Did you win?” Aidan asked, running his hands over her back.

“No,” came the sadly mumbled answer. “My love of carbs ruined my chances.”

“All that for nothing,” he said, chuckling only to groan when she gave her ass another pointed wiggle.

“I know,” she said with a snuffle and another wiggle that had him deciding that they could finish her five things later...much later.

Chapter 29

She was going to be sick, Melanie thought as she opened her eyes and found Aidan sitting across the room, watching her and reminding her of the morning that she wanted to forget. Swallowing hard, her grip tightened around the comforter as she laid there, waiting for him to say something that would destroy her only to feel herself relax when his lips pulled up into a devastating smile.

“Good morning,” Aidan said as he stood up and walked over so that he could lean down and make everything better with an incredibly sweet kiss.

“What time is it?” she asked as she reached up to run her fingertips along his jaw.

“A little after twelve,” he said, pressing a kiss against her chin.

“I slept late,” Melanie said with a heavy sigh even as she had to admit that she wouldn’t mind going back to sleep only to end up deciding that being awake definitely had its benefits when she felt Aidan’s hand slide beneath the covers and cup her breast.

“You had a late night,” he said, kissing a path down her neck as his hand gave her breast one last squeeze before sliding down over her belly and-

“Oh, no,” Melanie mumbled as the reminder that she’d slept in late had her struggling to sit up.

Without a word, Aidan moved so that he could brush his lips against hers one last time before he helped her sit up, handed her one of his shirts so that she could pull it on while he helped her stand up. Once she was on her feet, she mumbled a quick, “Thank you,” winced, sort of cringed, and prayed that she was able to waddle her way to the bathroom before she made this morning truly memorable.

Twenty minutes and an empty bladder later, Melanie walked back into the bedroom, freshly showered, hair combed, and teeth brushed to find Aidan lounging on the bed, reading something on his iPad. Without a word, she walked over to the bed, somehow managed to climb onto it without losing her towel and then promptly moved between his legs, laid back, closed her eyes, and felt herself relax.

God, he was comfortable, she thought as Aidan wrapped his arms around her.

“Better?” Aidan asked, placing his hands on her belly.

“Yes,” she said, sighing with relief as she laid there, more than ready to have this baby.

“Only two more weeks,” Aidan said, reading her mind.

“I feel like I’m ready to explode,” Melanie said, making him chuckle as she placed her hands over his.

“It will be over before you know it,” he told her as he pressed a kiss against the top of her head.

“Promise?” she asked because she wasn’t really sure that she was going to be able to make it another two weeks.

“Promise,” Aidan said with another kiss before they fell into a comfortable silence. For a while, they sat there as Aidan caressed her belly while she closed her eyes and simply enjoyed being in his arms until it was time to get back to reality.

“I have to go back to work,” he said, not sounding any happier than she was about it.

“I know,” Melanie said, wishing that they could spend all day like this. She’d never been big on cuddling before, but then again, that probably had something to do with the fact that no one had ever held her the way that Aidan did. He made her feel safe and cherished, something that she’d quickly become addicted to.

“I don’t want to leave you,” he admitted with another kiss, making her smile.

“But you have to go to work,” she said, biting back a disappointed sigh.

“I have to go to work,” Aidan said, sighing before adding, “and I have a double shift at the hospital that I couldn’t get out of afterwards.”

“So, I won’t see you until tomorrow morning?” she said, understanding probably better than most people would since up until seven months ago she’d been a workaholic as well.

She’d never had time to slow down, never wanted to because she’d loved what she did. It hadn’t always been that way. When she was in high school, she’d been forced to choose between taking theatre and a programming class, which really hadn’t been much of a choice given how much she hated musicals. She’d regretted her decision within the first five minutes of class. That had been followed by asking to go to the front office and finding out that there were no other options.

It had taken her twice as long and required her to stay after school for extra help, but by the end of the first semester, she’d earned her first F and an unhealthy hatred for all things computer related. That had been followed by her marching down to the front office and demanding that they let her take the class again next semester.

After a thirty-minute meeting with the school psychiatrist to make sure that she wasn’t on the verge of a mental breakdown, they’d reluctantly allowed her to take the class again with an offer of letting her take double gym classes instead if she changed her mind. With a glare that may have been a bit too much at that point, she’d headed to the library and took out every book on computers and programming that she could get her hands on and read them over Christmas break, determined to pass that damn class.

At the end of Christmas break, she’d somehow managed to hate the class even more, and by the time progress reports came out next quarter, she wanted to curl up into the fetal position and stay there all while she was tempted to give up. She still wasn’t sure how she’d managed it, but somehow, she’d made it through that class with a C-

and found herself signing up for another programming class.

By the time she'd graduated high school, she'd fallen in love with programming and had been teaching herself skills that they hadn't offered in school, which had led to designing websites, databases, apps, and a few dozen tech skills that had allowed her to support herself by the time that she was nineteen. She loved what she did and always looked for jobs that would challenge her. When she wasn't working, she was reading, researching, and trying out new ideas.

Over the past few months, she'd been too sick to do even that. After Drew was born, she was going to have to work her ass off to catch up on everything that had changed in the past few months, which unfortunately in this field, was going to be a lot. She'd figure it out, Melanie thought as she reluctantly sat up so that Aidan could leave.

"My brother Duncan is in the living room so that he can keep an eye on you and keep you company until Arik gets off work. He's going to crash on the couch if you're okay with that," he said as he climbed off the bed.

"It's like you don't trust me," Melanie said with a sad shake of her head.

"Because I don't," Aidan said, chuckling as he leaned down and brushed his lips against hers with a, "Behave."

*_*_*_*

"Dr. Stanford to curtain one," came the PA announcement as Aidan dropped down into an abandoned wheelchair and pulled his phone out of his pocket only to smile a few seconds later when he saw the text message Melanie sent him earlier. He started to reply only to realize just how late it was.

Shit!

He'd planned on calling her earlier but the intoxicated fourteen-year-old currently yelling, "I'm Super

man, bitches!" as security carried him back to his room and the stabbing that came in a few hours ago had kept him busy for most of the night. He'd been hoping to stop by the apartment and see Melanie before his shift at the ER started, but he'd been held over with a new patient who'd showed up in tears because she was having problems and her old doctor wasn't listening to her.

He'd sat down with her and went through all her medications, ran tests, and was able to figure out the problem. That led her to thanking him and telling him all about her new grandbaby, which had Aidan showing her the sonogram images of Drew that he carried everywhere and telling her about his son.

Only two more weeks, he thought, unable to help but smile as he sat there, wondering if Drew was going to end up having his mother's addiction to carbs or-

"There you are! I've been looking everywhere for you!" someone said as a plate covered in aluminum foil was placed on his lap.

Frowning, Aidan looked up and found himself trying to figure out who the woman smiling down at him was. When she noticed his frown, she playfully rolled her eyes and said, "It's Caitlyn. Melanie's sister."

"Of course," he murmured, biting back a sigh and forced a smile as he picked up the plate and stood up even as he couldn't help but wonder what she was doing here.

"I heard that you were stuck working here tonight and I thought it would be a good idea to stop by and say hello and to see if you needed anything," Caitlyn said with a sweet smile as she gestured towards the plate in his hands.

“Thank you. That’s really nice of you,” Aidan said, sliding his phone back in his pocket.

“It’s a grilled chicken salad,” she said before squishing her face up in what she probably thought was an adorable expression as she added, “I figured that you could use a break from cafeteria food.”

“I usually grab something out of the vending machine,” he said, still trying to figure out why she was really here at eleven o’clock at night.

“I figured that I should bring you something to eat since I know that Melanie would never think of doing something like this,” Caitlyn said, smiling only to pout when “Dr. Bradford to curtain six,” was announced over the PA system.

“Melanie is eight months pregnant with my son, so I’d probably spank her beautiful ass if I caught her out this late since she needs her rest. Thank you for dinner,” Aidan said, thankful for the reprieve as he placed the plate down on the nurse’s station and headed towards the back, hoping that she was gone by the time that he was done.

“What the hell happened?” Aidan asked when he walked into exam room six and saw his brother Reese lying on the stretcher with a bag of ice pressed against his shoulder.

“We told him not to do it,” Mikey, the adorable little girl that his brother adored, said with a sad shake of her head and a pitying sigh.

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“We really did,” Sebastian, her partner in crime, his cousin Trevor’s son, and a boy that he’d been worried about until Mikey came into his life, said absently from where he stood on the other side of the stretcher, reading a book.

With a mock glare aimed at his stepdaughter, Reese said, “I fell out of a tree trying to rescue a kitten for the little pain in the ass.”

“That you adore,” Mikey added for him with a solemn nod, making Aidan bite back a smile as he stepped around his niece and began examining his brother.

“Looks dislocated,” Aidan said after examining Reese’s shoulder before checking to see if there was any other damage that they had to worry about.

“He tried to pop it back in,” Mikey said with a sad shake of her head, making Reese’s eyes narrow as he muttered, “Traitor.”

“That didn’t end well,” Sebastian said.

“Not at all,” Mikey added while Aidan glared down at his brother.

“Where’s Kasey?” Aidan asked, wondering why Reese’s wife wasn’t here tormenting her husband, something that she really seemed to enjoy.

“She doesn’t know that we’re here. She thinks we’re asleep in my room and that he’s working in his office,” Mikey said, sighing heavily as she climbed onto the stretcher so that she could sit next to Reese and hold his good hand.

At Aidan's questioning look, Reese said, "I didn't want to worry her."

"I'm pretty sure that she was worried when she saw you fall out of that tree," Sebastian pointed out, earning a glare.

Nodding, Mikey said, "That was concerning."

"It really was," Sebastian said, climbing onto the stretcher so that he could sit next to Mikey.

"I don't think all that yelling helped either," Mikey added, looking thoughtful.

"I thought he was going to cry," Sebastian said, which earned a nod of agreement from his partner in crime. "Me, too."

"You're both evil," Reese said, closing his eyes on a resigned sigh.

"Did you lose consciousness?" Aidan asked.

"No," Reese said as Aidan shifted his attention to Mikey and Sebastian for confirmation.

"No, but there was a lot of swearing."

"I learned a lot of new words tonight," Mikey readily agreed.

Cracking one eye open so that he could glare at Mikey, Reese muttered, "Brat," before closing his eyes again.

"I already knew that word," Mikey said, making him chuckle as he checked Reese's pulse to make sure that his arm was still getting good blood flow.

“It’s true. She did,” Sebastian said as Aidan stood there, unable to help but wonder what it would be like to have a little girl who loved to torment him.

Chapter 30

“Look,” Arik said with a charming smile that probably got him whatever he wanted, “Aidan will never find out. This will be just between us. What do you say?”

“Step away from the pancakes,” Melanie said, narrowing her eyes on the man that kept her company all night and had already managed to devour three batches of pancakes, an entire pan of muffins, a dozen scrambled eggs, and two pounds of bacon.

“I thought you loved me,” Arik said, pouting as he reached for the plate piled high with pancakes and-

“Get out,” Aidan said, shoving Arik out of the way seconds before she found herself pulled into his arms.

“You ungrateful bastard!” Arik said in gasped outrage as she found herself being led out of the kitchen as Aidan brushed his lips against hers with a groan.

“What are you doing up so early?” Aidan asked as he guided her into the bathroom.

“I couldn’t sleep,” Melanie said, already reaching for his tie.

“You need sleep,” he said, breaking off the kiss just long enough so that he could reach down and push her oversized flannel pajamas off as she pulled his tie free only to grab onto his shoulders so that she could step out of her pants when he bent down to help her.

“I need you,” Melanie said, reaching down to cup his face and pull him back up so that she could kiss him.

“You have me,” he promised as he tore his shirt off and tossed it aside before reaching down and pulled his belt loose while he toed off his shoes. By the time that she pushed his pants and boxers down, he had her shirt off and was pulling her inside the shower.

“I made you dinner, but the warden wouldn’t let me bring it to you,” she said as she found herself turned around and facing the wall.

“Good. I don’t want you anywhere near the hospital right now,” Aidan said as he reached past her and grabbed her favorite body wash off the shelf.

“It doesn’t matter anyway because Arik ate everything as soon as I turned my back,” Melanie said, her breath catching when she felt his hands slide down her back.

“Amateur,” Aidan said softly as he kissed her shoulder.

“I know,” she mumbled sadly because she should have expected it.

“And you made me breakfast this morning,” he said, sounding pleased as he ran his soapy hands over her back.

“Yes,” Melanie said only to gasp when his hands slid

around and found her breasts.

“Did you miss me?” he asked, using his hold on her breasts to pull her closer so that her back was pressed against his chest and she could feel just how much he’d missed her.

“Yes.”

“What did you miss about me?” he asked in a seductive whisper as he moved his hands over her breasts, gently kneading them in his hands as he kissed the side of her neck.

“Everything,” she found herself admitting as she reached back so that she could hold onto his hips as she stood there, unable to help but moan as her head dropped back against his chest.

“Tell me five things,” Aidan said as he ran his soapy fingers over her nipples.

“No,” Melanie managed to get out on a moan as she licked her lips and said, “your turn.”

“My turn?” he asked, sounding thoughtful as he pressed another kiss against her neck.

“Yes,” she said only to sigh with relief when he ran his hands down to her belly and instantly calmed the little boy that had kept her up all night.

“I missed holding you. I missed seeing your smile. I missed feeling Drew push against my side when he wanted attention. I missed the way that you manipulate me into running out and getting you pie, but mostly, I missed the way that you moan my name when I’m inside you,” Aidan said, punctuating his words by grinding his cock against her bottom and leaving her with no other choice but to moan.

“Just like that,” he whispered approvingly as he continued to grind against her as he ran his fingertips over her skin, tracing a path over her belly and down her hips until he reached back and placed his hands over hers. With another kiss against her neck, he wrapped his hands around hers and placed them against the shower wall as hot

water ran down her back.

“What did you miss about me, Melanie?” Aidan asked, releasing her hands so that he could run his hands down her back.

“This,” she said as he ran his hands down her hips before gently gripping them so that he could pull her back and-

“You missed this?” he asked as he slowly slid inside her.

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“God, yes,” Melanie said on a moan as she spread her legs further apart so that she could push back against him.

“What else?” he asked with a kiss against the back of her neck as he slowly pulled back.

“I missed being in your arms.”

“Better.”

“I really missed the pie that you let me manipulate you into getting,” Melanie answered with a solemn nod.

“I bet you did,” he said, chuckling only to groan when he pushed back inside her.

“I missed the way that you touch me,” she admitted on a groan as he pressed a kiss against the back of her shoulder as his hands found her breasts again.

“Much better.”

“I missed the way that you feel inside me,” she said, licking her lips when he pushed back inside her, filling her completely.

“Is that all you missed about me?” he asked after a slight pause.

Smiling, she shook her head as she dropped her hands away from the wall and leaned back against him so that she could reach up and cup the back of his neck and pull him

down for a kiss as she said, “I missed you, Aidan.”

“Are you sure?” he asked, brushing his lips against hers as he wrapped his arms around her.

“Yes,” Melanie said even as she realized how much she’d really missed him.

Last night, she hadn’t been able to sleep and found herself curled up on the couch, binge-watching movies on Netflix with Arik and hadn’t been able to stop thinking about Aidan. She’d missed him so much, missed his smile, his touch, and...

She’d missed him.

“What do you want, Aidan?” she couldn’t help but wonder as she stood there, trying to tell herself that falling in love with him wasn’t a mistake, but the truth was, it terrified her.

She didn’t know what he wanted, what he expected, or if this even meant anything to him, but she knew that falling in love with him might end up being the biggest mistake that she’d ever made. She honestly couldn’t think of anything more foolish than falling in love with a man that told her that he wasn’t interested in anything more than a quick fuck.

But as she stood there in his arms, she couldn’t help but notice the difference between the man that he’d been that morning in the hotel and the man that he was now. She also couldn’t help but wonder if she was just seeing what she wanted to see or if he was doing this out of guilt over the baby and-

“I don’t want to be the rebound.”

Chapter 31

“What?” the woman in his arms asked, sounding confused.

“I don’t want to be the rebound,” Aidan repeated.

“You’re not,” Melanie promised him as she brushed her lips against his.

“Then what am I?” he found himself asking the one question that used to make him lose interest in a woman before the last syllable had a chance to leave her lips. He’d never been interested in more, never made a woman think that he was, and he always made sure that they knew exactly what he had to offer. But now...

He wanted everything.

“I honestly don’t know, Aidan. What do you want?” Melanie asked as she ran her hand down his jaw

“I want everything that you’re willing to give me,” he said as he leaned back down and-

“Oh, god,” she moaned when he shifted inside her, so he did it again, slowly rolling his hips so that he could push back inside her.

He slid his hands over her breasts. “You have no fucking idea how much I want you, do you?” he asked against her lips as he continued to slowly roll his hips.

“I thought about doing this all night,” he found himself confessing as Melanie leaned forward so that she could slap her hands back against the wall.

He released her breast so that he could place one hand on the wall next to hers as he reached over and cupped her other breast as he wrapped his arm around her. “Do you know how many times I thought about you last night, Melanie?” Aidan asked, kissing

the side of her neck.

“I thought about you more,” she said, making him smile.

“Did you?” he asked, slowly continuing to fuck her.

“Yes.”

“I don’t think that’s even possible,” he promised her as he kissed her shoulder only to find himself frowning when she pulled away from him.

Before he had a chance to ask her what was wrong, she was pushing him back against the wall. Once she had him where she wanted him, she grabbed hold of his hand and carefully knelt down on the shower floor, and-

“Oh, fuck!”

-watched as she turned more than half of his fantasies into reality as she leaned forward and pressed a kiss against the tip of his cock. When she followed that up by running her tongue over the tip, he found himself groaning. Definitely better than he’d imagined, Aidan thought as he watched her take the tip in her mouth and-

Definitely better, Aidan thought, closing his eyes as he pressed his head back against the wall while pleasure coursed through his exhausted body. That felt so good, he thought, licking his lips when she ran her tongue over his cock before taking the tip in her mouth and had him groaning as she slowly took the rest of him in.

He should stop her, but he was too fucking tired to fight this.

As he stood there, groaning with every slide of her mouth over his cock, he couldn’t help but notice how much better this felt with a woman that he couldn’t seem to get

enough of. It wasn't just sex or a way to get off as he killed time. Every touch, caress, and kiss felt better with her because he fucking wanted her.

God, did he fucking want her, Aidan thought as he opened his eyes and found himself watching her as she wrapped her hand around his cock and she slowly took him in her mouth with a moan, letting him know just how much she liked doing this. For several minutes, he stood there, watching her. She was so fucking beautiful, Aidan thought as her grip tightened around him and she allowed her teeth to lightly graze the underside of his cock as she pulled back and-

Had him shouting her name as he felt his cock swell up and his balls pulled up tight seconds before intense pleasure tore through his body. Before the last tremor tore through his cock, he was reaching for her. He pulled her back up to her feet, turned her back around and slid his too-fucking sensitive cock back inside her with a groan as he reached around her and placed his hand on her breast as he wrapped his arm back around her and slapped his other hand on the wall next to hers.

"Oh, god," Melanie mumbled as he fucked her, grinding his cock inside of her as he did his best not to lose his fucking mind.

She was so fucking wet and tight, forcing his cock to harden to the point of pain, but god was it fucking good. He squeezed her breast in his hand, loving way that it felt when her nipple slid across his fingers and couldn't wait for the day when he was able to feel it pressed against his chest as he fucked her. He couldn't wait until he could crawl between her legs and-

"Aidan!"

Lose his fucking mind.

Chapter 32

“What are you doing?” Melanie asked, unable to help but smile as she opened her eyes to find Aidan watching her.

“Waiting for you to wake up,” he said, leaning over to brush his lips against hers.

“Why do I have to wake up? I need sleep,” she mumbled pathetically because she honestly wasn’t sure if she was going to be able to find the strength to leave this bed. Not after yesterday...and last night...and this morning.

They’d been very busy.

“Does this mean that you don’t want to spend the day with me?” Aidan asked, pressing a kiss against her forehead.

“Will I have to leave this bed?” Melanie asked because she liked to know if she was required to get dressed so that she had plenty of time to mentally prepare herself for the task ahead of time.

Chuckling, he said, “Yes.”

“What are we doing?” she asked as she snuggled closer, deciding that she was going to have to leave this bed in steps.

“We’re going out on a date,” he told

her, wrapping his arms around her.

“Really?” she asked, unable to help but smile.

“Mmmhmm, figured that we should get a few dates in before the baby is born since we won’t be able to do this for a little while after he’s born,” he murmured.

“Where are we going?” Melanie asked, moving to sit up after deciding that it would probably be for the best if she started the long process of getting ready now.

“Well, I thought we’d-”

“Oh, you didn’t tell him?” came the question that drew their attention to the doorway to find Rebecca standing there, shaking her head with a pitying sigh.

“Tell me what?” Aidan asked only to grunt a few seconds later when Rebecca joined them by dropping down on the bed between them with a satisfied sigh.

“We’re spending the day going baby shopping. Planned it months ago,” Rebecca said, stealing Aidan’s pillow as Melanie reluctantly got up.

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As much as she would love to spend the day with Aidan, she couldn't do that to her best friend. They'd planned this months ago, set it as a goal to look forward to during those times when she didn't think that she'd be able to pull through. It had given her something to look forward to. For a moment, just a brief moment, she considered asking Rebecca if they could reschedule, but she couldn't do that, not after they'd waited this long.

"I'm sorry, Aidan," Melanie said, worrying her bottom lip.

"Don't worry about it. We'll do something tomorrow," Aidan promised her with a warm smile as he climbed off the bed and headed to the door.

"Okay," she mumbled, biting back a disappointed sigh.

"Go pretty yourself up for me, bitch," Rebecca said, making her lips twitch as her best friend gestured for her to move her ass.

"Yes, dear," Melanie said mockingly as she grabbed some clothes and headed to the bathroom, hoping to see Aidan on the way there so that she could at least get a goodbye kiss before she left.

Yes, she was apparently that pathetic, but she didn't care.

When she didn't spot him on the way to the bathroom, Melanie bit back another disappointed sigh and forced herself to focus on having a good time today. She'd been looking forward to going baby shopping and today was the day. For the past seven months, she'd had her eyes on a few things, debated between several themes,

and had been toying with the idea of saying the hell with it and ordering everything from Amazon, but somehow, she'd resisted the urge.

She was probably going to end up ordering most of it online, but she still wanted to go and see all that baby cuteness. With that in mind, Melanie quickly showered, got dressed in record time, and made her way back to the bedroom so that she could wonder where Rebecca was when she spotted Aidan lounging on the bed, waiting for her.

"Where's my bitch?" she couldn't help but wonder.

"She had to leave. Something came up at the Fire & Brimstone," Aidan said, shrugging it off as he climbed off the bed.

"Oh," Melanie mumbled, unable to hide her disappointment because she'd been looking forward to looking at baby onesies and-

"Ready to go?" Aidan asked as he took her hand in his and gave it a gentle squeeze before heading towards the door.

"Where are we going?" she asked even as she told herself to look on the bright side, at least she got to spend the day with Aidan after all. Determined to have a good day, she grabbed her bag and-

"I thought we'd go baby shopping. Unless you wanted to do something else?" he asked, throwing her a questioning look.

"We could do that, I suppose," Melanie said, smiling as she headed for the door, waddling as fast as her sore feet could take her and leaving him with no other choice but to come with her or risk being dragged.

It was baby shopping day!

*_*_*_*

“It’s not fair,” came the saddest fucking mumble that he’d ever heard.

“I know,” Aidan murmured sympathetically as he did his best not to smile mostly because he didn’t think that it was a good idea to piss off the heavily pregnant woman sniffing sadly as she lovingly caressed a pink onesie.

“It’s so cute,” Melanie mumbled sadly.

“I know it is, baby,” Aidan agreed as he leaned down and kissed her cheek.

Sniffle.

“I love it so,” Melanie said, glancing from the pink onesie that he was going to have to buy for her to the selection of adorable baby girl items that had caught her attention twenty minutes ago when they’d walked into the store.

“The baby stuff for boys will be just as cute,” Aidan promised her as he tried to figure out how to use the scanner that the sales associate gave them.

“Why are you lying to me?” Melanie asked with another sniffle as she plucked the scanner out of his hand and began working her magic.

“It seemed like the best option at the time,” he said, relieved when she finally waddled out of the girl’s section that even he had to admit was just an overabundance of cuteness.

“Why are we making a wish list?” Melanie asked as she handed the scanner back to

him.

“Because my mother somehow found out that we were going baby shopping,” he said, which of course, meant that Rebecca had somehow managed to escape the closet in the basement that he’d locked her in.

“We don’t get to buy anything today?” Melanie mumbled sadly, drawing his attention to find her lovingly caressing an emerald baby blanket.

“You can get whatever you want,” Aidan promised her as he reached over and picked up the blanket and placed it in an abandoned carriage.

Sniffle. “I love that blanket,” she said, grabbing onto the carriage and pushed it towards the boy’s section.

“I know you do, baby,” Aidan said, unable to help but smile as he watched her as she made her way through the boy’s section, lovingly caressing this, sniffing as she picked up a teddy bear onesie, and shaking her head with a heavy sigh when she spotted the neon green onesie with red sparkles.

For the next half hour, he dutifully followed behind her, placing her selections in the carriage for her and searching through piles of clothes looking for the color and sizes that she wanted. He’d added a few selections of his own along the way. An hour later, they were standing in the stroller aisle and he had to admit that it was seriously fucking overwhelming.

“But I don’t run unless someone’s chasing me,” Melanie mumbled sadly as she took in the first ten strollers that had been designed with the athletic mom in mind before adding, “or unless I see Ronald McDonald.”

“Ronald McDonald?” Aidan asked, wrapping his arms around her.

There was snuffle, and then, “I really don’t want to talk about it.”

“That goes against the rules,” Aidan pointed out as he placed his hands on her belly so that their son could say push against his hands.

“I’m not talking.”

“Then I’m afraid that I’m going to have to punish you,” Aidan said as he pressed a kiss against her neck.

“Do what you must,” Melanie said with a snuffle that had his lips twitching.

“Fine. Then no more pie,” he said, loving her little gasp of outrage.

“He freaks me out!” Melanie blurted out not even a second later.

“Is that it?”

“Isn’t that enough?” she countered.

“I suppose,” Aidan murmured, sounding thoughtful as he glanced around them, taking in all the strollers and wondered how they were supposed to figure out which one they needed when the epitome of evil joined them.

“You,” was all Rebecca said when she spotted them.

“Is everything okay at the Fire & Brimstone?” Melanie asked as Aidan locked eyes with the woman that was in over her head as he pressed one last kiss against Melanie’s neck.

“It’s fine,” Rebecca said as a smile that could only be described as evil graced her

adorable face before she glanced over her shoulder, drawing Aidan's attention to his brother, who looked rea

lly fucking pissed for some reason.

"You locked my wife in a closet in the fucking basement?" Lucifer demanded, getting in his face.

"Oh, my god, you locked her in a closet?" Melanie asked, sounding shocked for some reason as she stepped out of his arms.

"Yes!" Rebecca hissed as Aidan stood there, shaking his head sadly.

"I didn't have a choice. Not after I found out that she planned on having a beige color scheme for the baby," Aidan said with a helpless shrug and a sigh, pleased when Melanie was forced to turn her head when a noise that sounded suspiciously like a snort of laughter escaped her.

"What?" Lucifer demanded, immediately forgetting about him to focus on his wife. "You were going to subject my godson to beige?"

"No, wait, I-" Rebecca began, but sadly, she was in way over her head on this one.

"And she said that we should just pick out the cheapest crap for the baby since he would just outgrow it anyway," Aidan added, mostly to ensure that his brother took over for them since it would just make this easier.

With a glare aimed at his wife, Lucifer reached over and snatched the scanner out of Aidan's hand. "We are going to have a very long talk, woman," Lucifer bit out, narrowing his eyes on his wife before his attention shifted to the scanner in his hands and-

“This just isn’t going to work for me,” his brother said, sighing heavily at their selections before clearing everything, grabbing the carriage, and heading down the aisle as he carefully considered the stroller options.

“You’re going to pay for that,” the epitome of evil said, drawing his attention back to find Rebecca standing in front of him, glaring up at him.

“Am I though?” Aidan asked, reaching over to pat her on the head, mostly to piss her off.

She slapped his hand away as she nodded, “Yes, you will. I held back last time, but now,” she said, slowly shaking her head, “you’ve asked for it.”

“Interesting,” Aidan murmured, nodding thoughtfully before asking, “Have you ever wondered why my brother was never able to fire you?”

“Oh, he tried, but he couldn’t do it,” Rebecca said with a smug little smile that was too fucking adorable for words.

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Chuckling, Aidan leaned down and whispered in her ear. “He held back because he wanted you. You have no idea what Bradfords are really capable of because everyone has held back, but I’m not going to. God, you and I are going to have so much fun together,” he whispered, before straightening up and sending her a wink that had her starting to look over her shoulder only to rethink it.

Wise decision, Aidan thought as he decided to do the one thing that would ensure that his brother kept the little pain in his ass out of his way for the rest of the day.

Chapter 33

“That was the meanest thing that I’ve ever seen,” Melanie said sometime later, nodding solemnly even as she had to admit that she was impressed, a little terrified, and definitely turned on.

“What was?” the man that had effectively ensured that Lucifer wouldn’t let Rebecca out of his sight for the rest of the night, absently asked as he parked the car.

“Umm, nothing?” she said, deciding that it was probably in her best interest never to mention it again.

“I hope you’re hungry,” Aidan said, drawing her attention to-

“We’re at a buffet?” Melanie asked, admittedly confused since the last she’d heard, every buffet restaurant within fifty miles had banned the Bradfords, more specifically, the men in the family.

“The owner’s son had an accident last year and I was able to help them out,” he said, shrugging it off.

“And he took the ban off you,” she guessed.

“Yes, he did,” Aidan said as he climbed out of the car and quickly made his way around to her side to help her.

“Thank you,” Melanie said as she leaned up and kissed his chin.

“You’re very welcome,” he said, taking her hand in his and-

“You didn’t really think that we wouldn’t find out about this, did you?” Jason, an incredibly handsome man and Aidan’s cousin, if she remembered correctly, asked when they turned around.

“You have some explaining to do, little brother,” Danny, who she had to admit was a pretty decent snuggler, said as Duncan joined him while Trevor, who had snuck into the Fire & Brimstone a total of fifteen times before the ban was lifted, stood there glaring.

“You really do,” Jason said, folding his arms over his chest.

“I think the real question is, did I really care if you found out?” Aidan asked, stepping past them.

“Watch your back, traitor,” Jason called after them as Aidan pulled his phone out of his back pocket and sent a quick text, which was followed a few seconds later by an, “Oh, shit...” from Jason that had her glancing over her shoulder to find him staring down at his phone, swallowing hard as he followed that up with another, “Oh, shit.”

“What did you do?” Melanie asked as Aidan opened the door for her.

“What makes you think I did something?” Aidan asked, blinking innocently as he walked into the restaurant behind her.

“You’re evil, aren’t you?” she asked, only half-kidding.

Chuckling, he leaned down and kissed her. “Yes, I am.”

Nodding, she said, “That’s good to know,” even as she felt that should have been mentioned in one of his five things. At least, she knew enough never to cross him, Melanie decided only to frown when she heard a little boy yell, “Uncle Aidan!” as an adorable little boy came running towards them and launched himself at Aidan. He caught the little boy and picked him up as the the little boy wrapped his arm around him.

“Look! I’ve got an Ironman arm now!” the little boy said excitedly as he raised his prosthetic arm.

“That is one cool looking arm, Cody,” Aidan said, smiling warmly as he placed Cody on the counter so that he could take a closer look at his arm.

“It has superpowers and everything!” Cody said with an excited smile only to frown when he added, “But the light doesn’t work and it’s starting to pinch a little.”

“Well, I know someone who can help with that if it’s okay with your dad,” Aidan said, throwing a questioning look at the man standing behind the counter, who was sending nervous glances towards the parking lot where Aidan’s brothers and cousins stood, glaring.

After a moment, he reluctantly nodded.

Aidan pulled out his phone and sent another text before placing his phone on the counter so that he could give Cody his undivided attention as he explained all the powers his special arm held. Smiling, Melanie shifted her attention to the wall covered in plaques and framed newspaper clippings and-

Couldn't help but chuckle when she saw the sign bolted to the wall with "No Bradfords Allowed" etched in metal before she shifted her attention to the large newspaper article framed on the wall.

She felt her stomach drop when she read the heading. "Local Doctor Risks Life to Save Child from Fiery Crash."

"They couldn't get him out," Cody's father said, joining her.

"What happened?" Melanie asked, glancing over to find Aidan smiling at the little boy.

"My father-in-law was driving Cody home last year and he had a heart attack. The accident was pretty bad. They ended up pinned between a truck and a bus. My father-in-law passed away instantly. A few witnesses managed to get him out, but they couldn't reach Cody. His arm was trapped, pinning him in the wreckage and then the fire started, and they couldn't get close enough to help Cody," he explained.

"And Aidan saved him?" Melanie asked, glancing back at his father.

"He more than saved him. He crawled into what was left of the car while it was on fire. He managed to get Cody's arm free, but it was beyond saving. By the time he got Cody out, he'd stopped breathing. Somehow Aidan got him back. He stayed with Cody, working on him in the hospital, got him into the O.R., and kept going. He stayed with Cody in the ICU all night, took care of him, and made sure that he pulled through. He didn't leave Cody's side until he opened his eyes a couple of days later."

“I didn’t know that,” Melanie said, glancing back at Aidan to find him carefully removing Cody’s prosthetic arm so that his brother and cousins could look at it while Duncan pulled a handful of gauze pads out of his medic bag.

Helped him with an accident, Melanie thought, biting back a sigh. Not only was he incredibly sweet, kind, funny, and devious, but he was also humble. He was such a good man.

“Who’s that?” Cody asked, gesturing towards her.

“This,” Aidan said, smiling as he reached over and took her hand in his, “is my fiancée, Melanie.”

Before she could react at being called his fiancée, Cody was asking, “You’re having a baby?”

“A little boy,” Aidan said, smiling hugely only to frown when Cody worried his bottom lip. “What’s wrong, little man?”

“Did...did you keep your promise?” Cody asked, glancing at her belly. “Did you name him after me like you said you would? You told me in the hospital that if you ever had a son that you would-”

“Name him after you,” Aidan finished, closing his eyes in resignation and slowly exhaled before he said, “Cody, I-”

“He did,” Melanie said with a warm smile for the little boy, “Cody Drew Bradford.”

“Really?” Cody asked, smiling.

“Really,” Aidan murmured absently as he looked at her with something in his

expression that had her swallowing hard and looking away before she did something that would give away just how much she loved him.

Chapter 34

He'd fucked up again, Aidan thought as they stood there in the long line that didn't seem to be moving, waiting to buy their tickets while he tried to figure out how to fix this. He wasn't sure what she was more pissed about, the fact that he'd called her his fiancée or the fact that she'd been cornered into changing their son's name, but he knew that she was pissed. She hadn't said a word to him in over two hours never mind looked at him and he had no fucking idea how to make this right. The only thing that he knew was that it was killing him knowing that he'd hurt her.

He opened hi

s mouth to apologize only to find himself struggling not to smile when she suddenly said, "I switched out my brother's bottle of lotion for glue because he pissed me off. I thought he would end up getting his hand stuck to his arm."

"I see," he murmured as they stepped up in line, "and I'm guessing that's not what happened."

"No, what happened was a lot of screaming at two in the morning and finding out that my brother knew how to get around the parental controls on his computer," Melanie said with a sad shake of her head.

"Did he ever figure out that it was you?" Aidan asked, glancing at her.

There was a sad sigh and then, "For some reason, everyone thought that Caitlyn did it."

“And why would they think that?” he asked, chuckling.

Blinking, she said, “Because I told them that it was her?”

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“God, you were fucking devious,” Aidan said, unable to help but smile as she took his hand in hers and gave it a reassuring squeeze as she admitted, “Still am.”

“That’s good to know,” he said, glancing back at the line to find that it stopped again.

“I can see that it would be,” Melanie murmured in agreement before she asked, “Why didn’t you want children, Aidan?”

When he didn’t say anything because he had no idea what to say, she said, “Rebecca and I weren’t allowed to be in the same class, so I would just go to her class every morning and sit with her at her desk until the school got sick of trying to separate us and let us stay together.”

“My parents tried to enforce their rule of no sleepovers on a school night for a while, but then they met Rebecca’s parents and decided that those rules didn’t apply to us. They even put an extra bed in my room and pretty much adopted her by the time that she turned ten. She stayed mostly with us, spent holidays and vacations with us and her parents really didn’t care. I’m pretty sure that if my parents had asked to adopt her that they would have said yes, but Rebecca didn’t want that. I think she always thought that they’d come around one day.”

“Some people aren’t meant to be parents,” Aidan said quietly.

“No, they’re not,” she murmured in agreement before asking, “Is that why?”

“No,” he said, shaking his head.

“Then why?”

“Because I knew that I would never be as good as my parents and I couldn’t stomach the idea of giving my children anything less than what I had,” he explained only to frown when she said, “You’re an idiot.”

“What?” Aidan asked, glancing down at her.

Nodding, she said, “You’re definitely an idiot,” with a heavy sigh that had him narrowing his eyes.

“I’m just as surprised as you are,” Melanie said with a sad shake of her head before once again adding, “But you’re definitely an idiot.”

When he continued to glare, she said, “You’re going to be an incredible father,” shrugged, and then mumbled sadly, “I wish they had pie.”

That was followed by, “Or cake. God, I could really go for a slice of cake.”

When she worried her bottom lip and glanced at the line of stores on the other side of the street, no doubt looking for any signs that would indicate that they sold cake, he found himself saying something that he should have said a long time ago.

“I’m sorry.”

“For what?” Melanie mumbled absently as she continued searching for that cake, looking really fucking hopeful.

“I never should have talked to you the way that I did. Even as I was saying it, I wished that I could stop and take it back. I have no fucking idea why I did it other than the fact that you scare me, Melanie. Have from the first moment that I met you

and when I realized just how badly I'd fucked up, I panicked. There's no excuse for it and if I could go back and take back every word that I said that morning, I would. I am so sor-" Aidan said, only to cut himself off with a groan when she grabbed hold of his shirt and pulled him down for a kiss that had him struggling to remember where they were.

Without a word, Melanie tightened her hold on his shirt as she stepped back, taking them out of line and leaving him with no other choice but to go with her, terrified that if he stopped kissing her that-

"Oh, my god! Look who it is!" a painfully familiar voice said, reluctantly drawing their attention.

As they broke off the kiss, Aidan kept his eyes locked with Melanie's, letting her know that this was far from over. After a slight hesitation, they broke apart, but he didn't let her go far. He took her hand in his and ran his thumb over the back of her hand as they faced her sister.

"Oh, my god! It is you! What are you guys doing here?" Caitlyn asked as she grabbed onto Adam's arm with an excited smile while Adam stood there, glaring at Melanie and looking seriously pissed off for a man that was engaged to another woman.

"We were going to see a movie," Melanie said, moving closer to him with a wince as she placed her hand on her belly and-

"Oh, thank god," she mumbled a few seconds later when he placed his hand on her belly, instantly calming their son, who apparently wasn't fond of his aunt. Not that he could blame him, Aidan thought even as he couldn't help but notice that Adam's glare had followed the move.

"You really should be back on bed rest, Melanie," Caitlyn said, nodding.

“I’m fine,” Melanie said, placing her hand over his right around the time that the muscle in Adam’s jaw began to tick.

“What are you looking for?” Caitlyn asked, drawing his attention back to find Melanie once again searching for the cake that he was going to have to get for her.

“Cake,” she mumbled absently only to end up pouting when she didn’t find anything that looked promising.

God, she was just so fucking cute, Aidan thought unable to help but smile as he leaned down and kissed her cheek. “If we leave right now, we might be able to make it to Dixon’s before they close,” he said, smiling when Melanie suddenly turned and began waddling towards his car, dragging him behind her with a murmured, “Goodbye,” and-

“I really enjoyed talking to you last night, Aidan. I hope you were able to enjoy the dinner I made for you,” came the announcement meant to fuck him over.

Chapter 35

“When I was six years old my brothers convinced me that I could get cooties by taking a bath,” Aidan said as he opened the door for her and helped her out of the car when all Melanie wanted to do was go home and curl up with her blankets and forget the last hour ever happened.

“Of course, I didn’t believe them,” Aidan said, leading her around the front of the car where his headlights were lighting up the empty back parking lot of Dixon’s bakery. He pulled his phone out of his back pocket and placed it on the hood of his car as Brian McKnight’s “Anytime” began playing.

“So,” he said as he pulled her into his arms and began moving them slowly to the

sounds of Brian McKnight singing one of her favorite songs, “they waited until I fell asleep before they proceeded to cover me in red paste that hardened overnight and left a rash. No matter what my parents said after that, they couldn’t convince me to take a bath. For about a month, I refused to go near water, which of course, my brothers found hilarious until my parents threatened to withhold dessert until I took a bath.”

“How long did it take for them to convince you to take a bath?” she found herself asking as he pulled her closer.

“I had about thirty seconds before they grabbed me and dragged me outside so that they could hose me down,” he said, making her lips twitch until he followed that up with, “I’m not interested in your sister’s bullshit or whatever fucked up game that she’s trying to play. I don’t want her, Melanie,” he said, making her chuckle without humor because that was eerily similar to what Adam used to say.

He used to say a lot of things, used to tell her that he loved her only...

He’d lied.

It made Melanie wonder if any of it had been real. It also made her wonder why she hadn’t care

d when Caitlyn started smiling when she saw Adam or why it never bothered her when Adam couldn’t seem to look away from her sister. But it bothered her when she saw the way that Caitlyn looked at Aidan tonight.

“And the little prick used to say all those things, didn’t he?” Aidan guessed correctly, sighing heavily as he-

“How about this? I want a woman who fucking adores carbs, hogs the bed, kicks me

in her sleep, and has a generous ass that I can't get enough of," he said, making her smile until-

"Wait a minute," Melanie said in gasped outrage when she realized what he said about her ass, but he wasn't done.

"Is willing to violently attack me to get her hands on my food, hoards blankets, refuses to share food, is beyond fucking demanding in bed, and did I mention has a generous ass?"

Lips twitching, she said, "Yes, I believe it's been mentioned."

There was a heavy sigh and then, "It really should be mentioned. Now, where was I?"

"You were giving me reasons to kill you?" Melanie supplied dryly, which earned her a kiss on her forehead, somewhat appeasing her.

"Right," Aidan said, nodding before adding, "she also needs to be too fucking stubborn to listen to reason, sneaky as hell, and she needs to drive me out of my fucking mind."

"And that's more important than having a generous ass?" Melanie found herself asking, loving the sound of his chuckle as he leaned down and kissed her only to glare when he mumbled, "No, the generous ass is definitely a deal-breaker."

"You do realize that I'm probably going to lose weight after the baby is born, right?" Melanie felt the need to point out.

"Are you planning on giving up carbs?" Aidan asked, sounding thoughtful.

"No."

“Then I’m not really worried about it,” he said, making her smile as she felt herself relax in his arms.

“I’m glad to see that you have your priorities straight,” Melanie said as he moved his hand to her belly as they continued dancing slowly.

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“Priorities are important,” Aidan said, gently caressing her belly as she laid her head against his chest and closed her eyes.

“They really are,” she murmured, smiling when he leaned down so that he could kiss the top of her head.

“You were wrong,” Aidan said after a slight pause.

“About what?”

“He wasn’t the love of your life.”

Chapter 36

“What did we talk about, woman?” Lucifer demanded as Melanie tried to get comfortable on the lounge chair that she’d been ordered not to move from, but her back was killing her.

“She’s going to kill him one day,” Rebecca said, sounding thoughtful as Melanie gave up trying to get comfortable and settled for watching as Lucifer’s mother glared at him.

“Probably,” Melanie agreed, biting back a wince when more pain shot down her back. Maybe she should go inside? she thought only to immediately dismiss the idea when she remembered that Caitlyn was still in there.

“Everything okay?” Rebecca asked, sending her another curious glance, something

that she'd been doing since they arrived a few hours ago.

"Everything's fine," Melanie said, forcing a smile as she did her best to ignore the cramp tearing through her back.

"You're not a very good liar," Rebecca reminded her with a heavy sigh as she glanced around the large backyard filled with Bradfords, her family, and friends and sighed again. "Where is he?"

"Who?" Melanie asked, deciding that it was time to curl up on her side.

Yup, definitely time to lay on her side, she thought as the next cramp stole her breath.

"She's right. You are a bad liar," Joey, who'd joined them an hour ago only to promptly bury her nose in a book, said, not bothering to look up from her book as she turned the page.

Shawn, the teenage boy sitting on the ground between them playing Minecraft on his iPad and Joey's BFF apparently, asked, "Why is she hitting him?" making them frown as they looked back at Lucifer.

"That's gonna leave a mark," Rebecca said, sounding bored as they watched Mary throw one last hamburger bun at Lucifer before storming off.

"This isn't over, woman!" Lucifer called after his mother only to curse under his breath and turn to run when she abruptly stopped, turned around, and-

"That's definitely going to leave a mark," Melanie said, sucking in a breath when the next cramp tore through her back, making her really regret her decision to lie to Aidan and tell him that she was fine. When she felt the warm hand wrap around hers, she glanced over to find Shawn holding her hand as he stared down at the iPad in his

lap and decided that she was definitely going to have to steal him because she could always use an extra BFF.

“I’m getting Aidan,” Rebecca said, moving to do just that only to sigh heavily and drop back down on her chair when Melanie said, “Don’t. I just overdid it this morning. It’s just a backache.”

Mary and Lucifer had worked so hard to throw them a baby shower and she didn’t want to ruin it. She also didn’t want to give Aidan another reason to fuss over her. Over the past week, he’d been fussing over her, taking care of her, and glaring, god the glaring was going to get him killed, every time she so much as lifted a finger to do anything.

Which was why she’d been forced to get up in the middle of the night so that she could rearrange all the baby clothes they’d picked out last week because she knew that he would never let her do it. At least, that’s how she’d explained why she was up at two in the morning to him when he found her sitting on the floor, surrounded by baby clothes, crying incoherently because they were all so cute. She was actually hoping that they could forget that moment ever happened, Melanie thought, biting back another wince.

“What are we supposed to do then?” Rebecca asked when another cramp tore through her back.

“Just...just distract me,” Melanie said, slowly exhaling.

There was another heavy sigh and then, “Fine. We’ll gossip.”

“I love gossip,” she felt the need to point out.

“I know you do, sweetie,” Rebecca murmured, joining her on the lounge chair so that

she could reach over and take her other hand in hers. “Where should we start?” Rebecca asked, sounding thoughtful as Melanie forced herself to open her eyes so that she could consider their options.

When she saw the incredibly hot guy, and yes, he was somehow hotter than Aidan and Roger combined, that had stopped playing touch football with the rest of the Bradfords so that he could sit down and play tea with the cutest little girl that Melanie had ever seen, she nodded in his direction. “What’s his story?”

“Devin Bradford,” Rebecca said with a heartfelt sigh as a little boy walked over and dropped himself across Devin’s lap. “Single father of two, twins Dustin and Abbi. He owns Bradford Creations. They make furniture with secret compartments and specialize in creating hidden rooms. From what I heard, he doesn’t date and has absolutely no plans on changing his mind until the kids are adults.”

“Really?” Melanie asked, digesting that piece of information as she shifted her attention to Aidan’s brother, Garrett. “What about him?”

“He’s systematically torturing our neighbor out of revenge,” Joey said without bothering to look up.

“Hmm,” Melanie murmured as she shifted her attention to her right only to wince when she spotted Adam walking towards her and-

Gasped as she released the hands trying to comfort her, grabbed hold of the edge of the lounge chair, and screamed the only thing that she could think of as excruciating pain tore through her stomach.

*_*_*_*

“I think they’re planning on killing you,” Arik said, not really sounding like he cared

as Aidan stood there, biting back a sigh as he tried to figure out something to say to them only to decide against it when Melanie's brother Lucas, a Marine who was on leave so that he could be here for Cody's birth and the seriously pissed off man that had explained in minute detail what he would do to him if Aidan even thought about hurting his sister, narrowed his eyes on him.

"They really do," Duncan said, helping himself to the platter of sandwiches and not really sounding all that concerned.

"Not that you could really blame them," his father said as he helped himself to the brownies as Aidan gave up trying to smooth things over with Melanie's family and shifted his attention to Kenzie, who was in another glaring match with Roger. Neither one had said anything for the past hour, they just...glared.

"That's getting creepy," Connor, his cousin Rory's husband, said as he helped himself to another brownie.

"It really is," Trevor agreed as Reed grabbed the platter of vegetables and placed them back in the refrigerator with a murmured, "Joey can't tolerate the sight of celery without getting sick," making Aidan frown because-

"There you are!" came the announcement that had Melanie's family muttering, "Jesus Christ," and Aidan looking for the closest exit.

"What can I help you with, Caitlyn?" he asked only to bite back a curse when she plucked the plate out of his hand and began filling it.

"You shouldn't have to do that. This is your day," she said with a teasing smile that had his family sending him curious looks and her family shifting their glares to her.

"I'm fine," Aidan said, grabbing another plate with a forced smile and started filling

it with all of Melanie's favorites, again.

"I was actually hoping to get a chance to talk to you. I-"

"Aidan!" came the pain-filled scream that had him dropping the plate on the floor and shoving his brothers out of the way so that he could race towards the back door with Melanie's brother on his heels.

He shoved the back door open and-

"Aidan!"

He spotted Melanie curled up on the lounge chair where he'd left her, holding onto the side as she bit back another scream. He was across the lawn in seconds and-

"Drugs!"

Melanie demanded only to follow that up with, "I'd really like some drugs now!"

"I know you would, baby," Aidan said with a sad smile, pushing her hair back as he placed his hand on her belly.

"T-take him out, Aidan," she said on a pained gasp as she closed her eyes, blindly reached down, grabbed his hand, and-

Made him realize that it was time to move their asses when she forced him to bite back a grunt of pain when she squeezed his hand, hard. He waited until she was done before he leaned down and whispered, "Let's get you out of here," as he kissed her cheek.

There was a snuffle, and then, "Yes, please."

“I’m going to pick you up now, okay?” Aidan said softly as he reached down and-

“I never fucking touched her!” came the announcement that had them all looking back towards the house as Kenzie stormed out of the house with Roger right behind her.

“Wait, I changed my mind,” Melanie said, licking her lips as she moved to sit up only to gasp in pain.

“Time to go,” Aidan said, picking her up carefully and headed towards the driveway as Kenzie stormed off in that direction as well with a, “I don’t care!”

“We need to talk about this,” Roger said, grabbing her arm to stop her and-

“Seriously. I-I’m good. Let’s just stay here and see where this goes,” Melanie said, sounding really fucking hopeful and making him chuckle as he leaned down and kissed her.

“Please?” Melanie said, watching as Kenzie yanked her arm free and-

“Stop walking away from me!” Roger snapped, which was followed by Kenzie giving him a one-finger salute as she headed towards her truck and-

“Goddamn it, Kenzie, I love you!”

“Seriously. I’m good. Just put me down anywhere,” Melanie said, absently gesturing towards the lawn as every Bradford within shouting distance watched Roger’s every move.

“You can’t keep walking away from this, Kenzie!”

“Watch me!”

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“You’re my wife, goddamn it!” came the shouted announcement that had Aidan sucking in a breath as he watched his sister go still and-

“I am begging you, Aidan. Just put me down so that I can...oh, god,” Melanie mumbled on a pained gasp that was followed by, “Her water just broke,” from his father, who moved ahead of them so that he could open the car door for them.

“No,” Aidan said, glancing over at Reese as Roger’s words sank in and when they did, he headed towards his one-time best friend as every Bradford followed suit.

“Someone tape this!” Melanie said as Aidan carefully shifted her in his arms so that he could place her in the car. “Or take notes! Really good notes!”

Chapter 37

“She’s fully dilated,” the nurse by Melanie’s legs informed Roger as he leaned down so that a nurse could place a band-aid over his eyebrow that was probably going to need stitches as another nurse finished helping him with his gloves.

“How are you holding up, Melanie?” Roger asked as Aidan stood there, torn between killing the bastard who’d fucked his sister over and begging him to do something to make this better for Melanie.

There was a pained gasp, and then, “I’d really like some more drugs.”

“I don’t think he can wait any longer,” Roger said, shooting her a sympathetic smile as he took his place in front of Melanie as the nurses double-checked to make sure

that her feet were locked in place in the stirrups as a team of nurses prepared for the arrival of their son.

“That’s what I thought,” Melanie bit out, gasping as another contraction tore through her as her hand tightened around his.

“What did Kenzie say?” she asked Roger, making Aidan’s lips twitch despite the fact that he was scared out of his fucking mind right now.

“You mean before or after I was welcomed into the family?” Roger asked dryly.

“Both,” Melanie said, nodding.

Chuckling, Roger shook his head, “She still won’t talk to me.”

“Can’t really blame her,” Melanie said, laying her head back as she squeezed her eyes shut.

“No, I can’t,” Roger murmured absently.

“Did you explain Missy?” she asked, making Aidan frown.

“She doesn’t care,” Roger said, gesturing for the pediatric team to get ready.

“You couldn’t let Reese marry her,” Melanie mumbled only to wince, tighten her hand around his, and gasp in pain.

“No, I couldn’t,” Roger murmured in agreement as Aidan reached over and wiped away another tear as it rolled down Melanie’s beautiful face.

“I-I’d really like this to be over now,” she mumbled around a choked sob.

“It’s almost done, baby. I promise,” Aidan promised her as he leaned down and brushed his lips against hers. “In a few more minutes, we’ll be holding our baby boy.”

“Can I have more drugs? Because I’d really like some more drugs,” Melanie said, gasping in pain.

“I think it’s too late for that,” Aidan said, brushing his lips against hers one last time before he found himself saying, “You’re so beautiful.”

“Oh, my god...am I dying?” she asked, panicking and making him chuckle.

“No, you’re not dying,” he assured her with another kiss.

“Then why would you tell me that at a time like this?” Melanie demanded, throwing the sheet covering her bent legs a terrified look that had him sighing because he should have fucking known that she would make this difficult.

“Did I ever tell you that you’re a brat,” Aidan asked, chuckling.

“Did I ever tell you that I actually kind of hate you,” Melanie asked, blinking up at him.

“Is that because of the whole crippling pain thing?” he murmured thoughtfully.

“It might have something to do with that,” she admitted, making him smile.

“And if you weren’t currently experiencing the joys of childbirth?” Aidan asked, watching Roger out of the corner of his eye, hoping to distract her from the pain until it was time.

“I’d probably still hate you.”

“Is that because I wouldn’t let you stay and see what happened next?” he asked, watching as Roger sent him a nod, letting him know that it was time.

“Well, I mean, it might have something to do with it,” Melanie murmured only to gasp in pain and tighten her hold around his hand.

“It’s time,” Roger announced right around the time that Melanie began shaking her head.

“No, no, no, no, I changed my mind. He can stay where he is,” Melanie mumbled with a whimper that broke his heart.

“It will be over before you know it,” Aidan lied to her as the nurses moved to help her sit up.

“I-I really don’t think I can do this,” Melanie mumbled.

“You’re going to be fine,” Aidan promised her as Roger said, “I need you to start pushing now.”

“I would really rather not do that right now,” Melanie said, sending him a pleading look that nearly fucking destroyed him.

“Cody needs you to push,” Aidan told her, holding her hand as he watched her.

“O-okay,” she whispered with a firm nod as she licked her lips and screamed as she tightened her hold around his hand while a contraction tore through her body.

“Okay, take a deep breath and get ready for the next one,” Roger said as Aidan stood

there, unable to look away from Melanie as she struggled to get through the next contraction.

“You’re doing great,” Aidan told her as he kissed her forehead.

“Almost there,” Roger said as Aidan stood there, praying that she made it through this only to close his eyes and release a shaky breath when he heard his son cry a few seconds later.

*_*_*_*

“He’s so sweet,” Mary said with a watery smile as she leaned down and kissed Cody’s forehead.

“Your five minutes are up,” Lucifer said, gesturing for her to hand him back over.

“No, it’s not,” Mary said, smiling d

own at her newest grandchild.

“It is. I counted,” Lucifer said, once again gesturing for her to hand the baby over.

“Ethan?” was all Mary had to say apparently to get her son to grumble something under his breath and return to his spot by the wall where he stood, glaring at his mother.

“He’s so cute,” Melanie’s mother said, smiling hugely as she reached down so that could run her hand over Cody’s peach-fuzzed head.

“You did great,” Rebecca said as she climbed onto the bed next to Melanie and-

“We’ve decided that we’re going to try to have a baby!” Caitlyn announced with an excited squeal and a huge smile, drawing everyone’s attention and-

“I’m pregnant,” Rebecca said, quickly drawing everyone’s attention back to her, earning a murderous glare from Caitlyn and a hollow, “What?” from Lucifer.

Nodding, Rebecca said, “I’m pregnant,” as she gave Melanie’s shoulder a squeeze as she did her best to bite back a smile.

“Oh, my god! Another grandbaby!” Mary said with a huge smile as everyone began congratulating Lucifer and Rebecca.

Well, everyone except for Caitlyn, who continued to glare for another minute before she stormed out of the room. Adam watched Melanie with that same unreadable expression that he’d had on his face since this all started as he pushed away from the wall and went after Caitlyn, who was probably already in mid-tantrum because she hadn’t gotten the reaction that she wanted.

“Are you really pregnant?” Melanie whispered only loud enough for her best friend to hear.

“Well, I mean, you really didn’t give me much of a choice, did you? I can’t have my godson grow up without his best friend, now can I?” Rebecca said as Lucifer made his way to Rebecca’s side and leaned down so that he could kiss her as he said, “God, I love you,” while Melanie found herself looking at Aidan again.

He hadn’t said anything since Cody was born, and to be honest, it was actually starting to scare her a little. Maybe she was overreact-

“Everyone get out,” Aidan said quietly as he looked at her, but it was enough. Within minutes, everyone that had come to see the baby was gone and-

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“Leave my son,” Aidan said, making his mother sigh heavily as she reluctantly placed Cody back in his bassinet with a sadly mumbled, “He’s just so cute,” before his father eventually managed to drag her out of the room and once they were alone...

“Do you have any idea how much I love you?” Aidan asked as he pushed away from the wall and walked over to Cody’s bassinet so that he could pick up their son as she sat there, trying to remember how to breathe.

“No,” she said, mostly because he’d never told her that he loved her before.

“I’m in love with you, Melanie,” Aidan said, smiling down at their son as he sat down on the bed next to her.

When she opened her mouth to respond, he said, “I don’t want you to say it, not now and not until you realize just how much I love you. Then, you can tell me.”

“And until then?”

“I’m going to do everything that I can to make you fall in love with me.”

Chapter 38

Two Months Later...

“If I mean anything to you, anything at all, you’ll sleep through the night so that mommy can get some much-needed alone time with daddy,” Melanie said with a

hopeful smile only to sigh when pale green eyes continued to glare up at her.

“Did I mention that I love you?” she asked as she moved to take the bottle away only to have Cody grab hold of the bottle with his little hands, narrow his eyes on her, and continue to suckle.

“You are so demanding,” Melanie said with a mock glare that he really didn’t seem to appreciate.

“That is one terrifying glare,” Aidan said from the doorway, drawing her attention to find him standing there, watching them with that smile that he’d been wearing since Cody was born and god, she wanted him, Melanie thought, biting back a sigh.

Over the last two months, she’d found herself falling more in love with him and all she wanted to do was to be able to show him how much he meant to her. When she found out that she was pregnant, the only thing that she could think of was his reaction to the condom breaking and...

She’d been terrified to tell him about the baby, afraid of how he was going to react when he found out only to have him destroy every last fear that she had and turned out to be an incredible father, a kind man, and one of the best friends that she’d ever had. He was always taking care of her, holding her hand, hugging her, and kissing her as he whispered how much he loved her in her ear. He didn’t complain about her carb addiction, the long hours that she spent working or try to change her into something that she wasn’t. Most nights after he tucked Cody in, he’d grab his iPad and join her on the couch while she worked, reading articles and answering emails just so that he could spend time with her.

“Why don’t you go relax? I’ll put him down,” Aidan offered, already moving to take Cody, whose face lit up when he saw his father.

Knowing how much Aidan looked forward to this time with Cody, Melanie reluctantly handed the little traitor over. Not that she was taking this personally, because she wasn't. She was glad that Cody loved his daddy because Aidan was a great father, but had he carried Cody for nine months and had his vagina ripped in two to give him life? No, but that was fine, Melanie told herself as she watched Cody snuggle up in his daddy's arms, close his eyes with a smile and make her decision to randomly ground him when he was fifteen that much easier.

Not caring that she was pouting, Melanie walked into the kitchen, grabbed a Hostess apple pie out of the drawer where she kept her stash, walked into the living room, plopped down on the couch, pulled her blankets around her, and promptly dropped over onto her side so that she could glare at the television for a little while as she tried to figure out what she was doing wrong.

Maybe she should just tell him that she was ready to have sex? Melanie thought as she watched the man that she would really like to have start doing all those things that she really loved again, crouch down in front of her. "I'm gonna go to bed," Aidan said as he leaned over and kissed her forehead, making her bite back another sigh.

"I'll be there in a minute," she said, watching as he walked away.

Maybe she should have told him that the doctor cleared her so that they could have sex? Then again, since Roger probably already told him...

She was going to spend the rest of the night overthinking this, Melanie decided with a sigh as she shoved the blankets aside, climbed off the couch, and headed towards the bedroom, pausing to check in on Cody, who was already fast asleep, and found Aidan in bed. After double-checking the baby monitor, Melanie climbed into bed, curled up on her side, and-

"Sorry," Aidan murmured with a small kiss against the back of her neck when he was

forced to shift back away from her when the erection that kept her up most nights accidentally brushed against her bottom.

Biting back a scream of frustration, Melanie climbed back out of bed with a mumbled, “Be right back,” and headed to the bathroom, seriously wondering how much longer it was going to be before she lost it only to groan when she walked into the bathroom.

“Wow, that’s sexy,” she said, unable to help but cringe when she saw her reflection in the bathroom mirror and...was that baby spit up on her shirt? Yes, yes, it was, Melanie thought, rolling her eyes in disgust as she stood there, taking in every soul-crushing detail from her hair that she was pretty sure that she’d washed two days ago, to her man-brows, oversized tee-shirt, baggy sweatpants, and realized that she had some work to do.

*_*_*_*

God, she was fucking killing him, Aidan thought reaching down to run his palm over his trapped erection before he realized what he was doing and forced himself to stop, With a groan, he rolled over and couldn’t help but wonder how much longer he would be able to take this before he fucking begged to touch her.

Two months...

Two very long months of chaste kisses and touches and he was ready to fucking explode. When he’d talked to Roger two weeks ago and found out that Melanie had been cleared for sex, Aidan had rushed out of his office, shoved his father out of his way, ran to his car, risked a speeding ticket, and finally made it home in record time only to find her passed out on the couch with Cody fast asleep in his bassinet by her side and realized that he would continue saving money on hot water for a little while longer.

For the past two weeks, he'd been waiting and watching for any hint that she was ready, but so far, nothing. Absolutely nothing. He'd considered bringing it up, but he didn't want to push her if she wasn't ready and she definitely wasn't ready, Aidan thought, biting back a disappointed sigh when he heard the shower turn on.

Resigning himself to another long night, Aidan rolled back onto his side, reminded himself that he had a plan and somehow managed to fall asleep. Sometime later, he woke up when he felt Melanie climb back into bed. When she was settled, he reached for her only to frown when he found himself touching bare skin. That was followed by a groan when he found himself pushed onto his back and Melanie climbing on top of him seconds later.

Her mouth found his as her breasts brushed against his chest and-

"Fuck," was torn from his lips as she settled on top of him so that he could feel just how wet she was through his underwear when she pushed back against him.

"Are you sure?" Aidan asked even as he grabbed hold of her generous ass that he'd missed and pulled her down against him.

"Please don't make me kill you," came the response that had him chuckling until she deepened the kiss and started to move against him.

She felt so fucking good, but he knew that she would feel better in a few seconds, he decided as he snaked his hand between their bodies and reached inside his underwear so that he could pull his cock free. Within seconds, she was rubbing her pussy against the underside of his cock and moaning his name.

Definitely ready, Aidan thought even as he reminded himself that they had to take this slowly. It had only been two months since she had Cody. She was going to be sore and-

They b

oth froze when they heard it, the sound of Cody grumbling in his sleep over the baby monitor. For what felt like an eternity, they both laid there, staring at the baby monitor, waiting to see if Cody was going to wake up or go back to sleep.

“Quick,” Melanie said when Cody fell back to sleep a few seconds later.

Biting back a curse, Aidan wrapped his arms around her and rolled her onto her back, settling between her legs with an, “Oh, fuck...” Aidan groaned long and loud when the tip of his cock slid inside her.

She was so fucking tight, he thought before amending that to tighter seconds later when he was forced to pull back and push back inside. She was definitely tighter than before, Aidan thought as she pulled him back down so that she could kiss him. When she released a pained gasp a moment later, he went still.

“Are you okay?” Aidan asked, pulling back just far enough so that he could look at her.

“It’s fine,” Melanie said, moving to pull him back down for a kiss, but...

He didn’t believe her.

Shit!

“No, no, no, wait! I’m fine. Really, I just...oh, god,” Melanie began to panic when he pulled away only to moan as she threaded her fingers through his hair and spread her legs further apart when he’d pulled out of her so that he could bury his mouth between her legs.

God, he'd missed this, Aidan thought on a groan when he ran his tongue between her slit. She was so fucking soft and sweet, he thought, watching her as he did it again. He'd loved pregnancy sex, loved the way that she couldn't seem to get enough, and the way that she demanded that he fuck her morning, noon, and night, but he wanted this.

He wanted to be able to watch her as he licked her pussy, wanted to be able to kiss her as he fucked her, wanted to be able to do a hundred different things that he'd never had a chance to do with her without having to worry about hurting the baby. Now that she'd had the baby...

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He was going to do everything that he'd imagined doing to her and so much more, Aidan decided, sliding his tongue inside her as he watched her lick her lips hungrily. As she moaned his name, he fucked her, sliding his tongue inside her only to pull it free so that he could run it up to her clit and make her roll her hips, desperate for more.

*_*_*_*

Oh, god...

A gasp escaped her as Aidan slid his tongue back inside her, causing her back to bow off the bed only to make her moan his name seconds later when he did it again. She forgot how good this could feel, Melanie thought as her breath caught.

The sex had been good when she was pregnant, but it had also been severely restricted, a bit awkward, and had left her struggling to catch her breath, but now...

God, now she realized what she'd been missing.

She'd never knew that it could be this good before, Melanie thought as she rolled her hips, slowly riding his tongue as Aidan took her hands in his and entwined their fingers together. She'd never had any complaints about sex before, but it had never been this good. She didn't know how to explain it, wasn't even sure that it was possible, but as she laid there, closing her eyes as Aidan ran his tongue back over her clit in a swirling motion, she couldn't help but moan.

For several minutes, Aidan simply licked her, groaning when she rolled her hips

against his mouth only to moan when she mumbled his name in a half-plea as pleasure spread through her body and she found herself pulling on his hands, needing him. With a groan, Aidan ran his tongue over her one last time before he allowed himself to be pulled away.

He released her hands so that he could slowly move up her body, kissing a path up her body as she wrapped her arms around him, and-

“God, you feel good, baby,” he groaned as he slid inside her while she slowly exhaled only to bite her lip when it stopped feeling good.

It really hurt, Melanie thought as she buried her face against Aidan’s neck as he pulled back and slowly slid back inside while she laid there, squeezing her eyes shut while she reminded herself that she knew this would happen. It was only temporary, she told herself, biting back a sob and-

“Look at me,” Aidan said softly as he pulled back so that he could look at her as he continued to slowly slide inside her only to pull back after he’d slid a few inches inside her. “We’re going to take this slowly, okay?”

“Okay,” Melanie said, nodding as she released a shaky breath.

“A little at a time,” Aidan promised as he continued moving, sliding a few inches inside her only to pull back and do it again, slowly getting her body used to him again. When he felt her body relax, he would push in a little more, slowly working his way inside her until finally, he was exactly where he needed to be.

“Better?” he whispered as he rolled his hips, grinding his cock inside her in a move that had her spreading her legs further apart for more.

“Yes,” Melanie whispered, pulling him down for a kiss as he continued to tease her,

making her want more until she couldn't take it anymore and-

"God, I love you," Aidan whispered, sending her over the top as she opened her mouth to tell him that she loved him too only to have her words cut off with a harshly whispered, "Not yet, not until you're sure," as she had to wonder what was stopping her from saying it.

Chapter 39

"You're not ready yet."

"I'm more than ready," Aidan assured his father as he closed the small black box that he'd been carrying with him for the past two months, waiting for the perfect moment to ask Melanie to marry him.

Tonight was the night and everything was going to be perfect.

"And the Bradford curse?" his father asked, throwing him a questioning look as he reached over and helped himself to Aidan's fries.

"Doesn't matter. She deserves better," Aidan said because he wasn't about to let two hundred years' worth of bullshit ruin this.

He was going to do this right and that meant getting down on one knee and begging the woman that he couldn't live without to marry him. He was done waiting. He'd been hoping that she realized just how much he loved her by now only to realize that he needed to show her. He'd fucked up every step of the way to this point and he refused to fuck this up, too.

"Bradfords don't propose," his father said, getting right to the point.

The men in his family didn't believe in proposing because proposing meant that you were still thinking clearly and you weren't out of your fucking mind in love. He loved Melanie. There was no doubt in his mind and as much as he would love to drag her in front of the nearest Justice of the peace and make her his, he couldn't do that to her. She deserved it all, a proposal, her dream wedding that was going to cost him a fucking fortune, and a romantic honeymoon where he would show her just how much he loved her.

"This one does," Aidan said, glancing down at his watch and realized that he needed to move his ass if he was going to get out of here early and have a chance to do this right.

"It won't end well," his father said, sighing heavily as he helped himself to the rest of Aidan's fries.

"I can't fuck this up too," Aidan said, grabbing his stethoscope off his desk.

"Do you remember when you were little and I told you what happened when I made the mistake of asking your mother to marry me?"

"Yes," Aidan said because it wasn't something that he was likely to forget anytime soon.

While most families liked to tell scary stories around the fire, his family liked to share fucked up stories about all those times that a Bradford ignored the curse that had been haunting their family since his great-great-great-great-grandfather Robert made the mistake of pissing off his neighbor and all the fucked up things that happened when they did. He'd heard tales of what happened when Bradfords met the one, made the mistake of proposing, and all those terrifying tales of when they tried to take their wives on a honeymoon before their first anniversary.

When he was a child, those stories use to keep him up at night, having him deciding that he would

never-

“I held back,” his father said, shrugging it off as he moved on to Aidan’s abandoned burger only to add, “Your mother didn’t think it was a good idea to tell you everything. She was afraid of scarring you kids for life or something,” at Aidan’s questioning look.

“How could it have been worse?” Aidan asked as a tingle of apprehension rode up his spine only to dismiss it because everything would be fine. He just needed to make sure that he was careful.

“You know that scar that your mother has across her right palm?”

“Yes,” Aidan said only to swallow hard when his father gave him a pointed look that had him wondering if this-

“I’m sorry, Dr. Bradford,” MaryAnne said, drawing his attention to his office door to find her holding up a patient file, “but you have a new patient waiting for you and she said that it was an emergency.”

“What’s going on?” Aidan asked, following her into the hallway where she handed him the patient file and gestured to the exam room at the end of the hall.

“I don’t know. She wouldn’t say,” MaryAnne said with a helpless shrug.

“Okay, that’s fine. How’s my schedule after this?” Aidan asked over his shoulder as he made his way down the small hallway.

“Your three o’clock appointment had to reschedule,” she said as Aidan glanced down at the file in his hands, noted the “Jane Smith,” on the folder. Frowning, he opened the door and really wished that he hadn’t when he spotted Melanie’s sister sitting on the exam table, holding a paper gown against her chest, and-

“Oops!”

Turned around and left, closing the door behind him when she dropped the paper gown with a feigned gasp and a coy smile, deciding to use this time to make sure that everything was ready for tonight.

*_*_*_*

“Don’t even fucking think of it,” Arik bit out only to curse as he ducked out of the way and-

“So, does he know?” Rebecca asked, popping a Hershey Kiss in her mouth as they sat there, watching as Arik made the mistake of ducking left instead of right and-

“Goddamn it!”

-ended up covered in what looked like ranch dressing as Rylie, who really seemed to hate the large Bradford that went out of his way to piss her off, reached inside the bag with Black Jack’s written across it-

“Knows what?” Melanie asked, biting back a yawn as they watched Arik get hit in the chest with a large Caesar salad.

“That you’re in love with him,” Rebecca said, sounding bored as they watched Arik move to grab the bag away from Rylie only to rethink it, curse, and-

“Oh, come on!”

“He won’t let me tell him,” Melanie said, unable to help but smile as she glanced down at Cody, who was sitting in his bouncy chair, to find him turning his head so that he could watch his uncle try to duck out of the way of a large pizza only to smile around his bottle when it nailed Arik in the chest.

“I see,” Rebecca said, sounding thoughtful before she asked, “and that seems normal to you?”

“Nothing about this is normal,” Melanie admitted, sighing heavily as she leaned over so that she could kiss Cody’s baby toes.

Keeping his eyes locked on his uncle, Cody wiggled the toes on his other foot in silent demand, making her lips twitch as she moved to kiss his other foot. He was

such a sweet baby, Melanie thought, unable to help but smile as she watched him close his eyes and fall asleep with a small smile playing on his lips.

“True,” Rebecca murmured absently as she leaned back as they watched Arik trip over the curb to get away from Rylie’s food assault only to end up getting shoved to the ground, having the small woman that he should probably stop antagonizing straddle his stomach, grab a handful of fries, and shove it in his face.

“I’m scared,” Melanie finally admitted.

“Because of Adam?” Rebecca asked, sighing heavily.

“Yes,” she said only to frown when Rebecca closed her eyes and said, “Please, tell me that you’re not still in love with that asshole.”

“It’s not that,” Melanie said, shaking her head with a sigh as she moved to take Cody’s bottle away only to have her son open his eyes, glare, grab hold of his bottle, and commence suckling as his attention once again went to Arik as Rylie shoved one last handful of fries in his face before she got up, muttered something that had Arik’s eyes narrowing dangerously on her as she grabbed her delivery bag and stormed off.

“That doesn’t really answer my question,” Rebecca said as she got up and walked over to the outside faucet, turned on the water, and-

“Goddamn it, woman!”

-began hosing Arik off as she waited for an answer, one that Melanie wasn’t sure how to give her.

“No, I don’t love him. I don’t even think that I like him to be honest,” Melanie said, moving over so that Arik, who was now completely drenched, could storm past her

and head inside where he would most likely spend the rest of the night trying to come up with a way to get back at the small woman that was providing them with countless hours of entertainment.

“And you’re afraid that you’ll end up hating Aidan, too,” Rebecca guessed as she tossed the hose aside and joined her on the front step.

“No, I’m afraid that he’ll end up hating me,” Melanie said with a sad smile as Rebecca wrapped her arm around her and-

“Please don’t make me kill you,” her best friend said, giving her shoulder a comforting squeeze that she really didn’t find all that comforting at the moment.

“Is there a reason why you’re threatening me, waddles?” Melanie asked, turning her head so that she could watch her best friend’s eyes narrow dangerously on her.

“I don’t waddle.”

“Not yet...”

“I really do hate you,” Rebecca said, nodding solemnly.

“The feeling is mutual,” Melanie said, unable to help but smile when Rebecca glared.

“Don’t screw this up because of what Adam did. Aidan is nothing like him and would never hurt you,” Rebecca said, giving her shoulder another squeeze that had her frowning.

“I didn’t think you liked Aidan.”

Rebecca dropped her arm away and grabbed her drink as she cleared her throat and

mumbled, “I may have, ummm, underestimated him.”

“What makes you say that?” Melanie asked, watching as Rebecca threw a nervous glance over her shoulder.

“Many things,” was all Rebecca said as she took a sip of her drink.

“You’re not going to tell me, are you?”

“I’d really rather not talk about it if that’s okay with you,” Rebecca mumbled as she started to look over her shoulder again, rethought it, cleared her throat, and said, “Stop overthinking this and tell the man that you love him so that you can put him out of his misery.”

Chapter 40

Maybe this was a bad idea?

Definitely a bad idea, Melanie decided as she glanced around the empty waiting room and decided that it was a bad idea to bother Aidan at work. Definitely a bad idea, she thought, worrying her bottom lip as she glanced over at the white door that led to the back and found herself shifting nervously in her seat as she slowly exhaled.

She could do this.

She could definitely do this, Melanie told herself, following that up with a firm nod only to realize that she was shaking her head and eying the exit again. That was followed by telling herself that she was overthinking this and decided that as soon as Aidan opened that door that she was going to tell him just how much she loved him and-

“I told Dr. Bradford that you were waiting,” the very friendly receptionist said with a warm smile before she closed the privacy glass and Melanie decided that she should probably go since she was a coward.

Decision made, she grabbed the brown paper bag filled with takeout from Aidan’s favorite burger place that she’d picked up hoping to distract him, carried it over to the receptionist desk, placed it on the counter with, “Can you please give this to Aidan. I um, have to go,” before quickly making her way back to her seat, threw her bag over her shoulder, grabbed Cody’s car seat, noted that he was still asleep, and rushed out the door, only to sigh in relief when she spotted her car, and-

“What are you doing here?” came the unexpected demand that had her berating herself for not moving her ass faster.

For a brief moment, Melanie considered asking her sister what she was doing here, but since she really didn’t care...

“I can’t believe you turned out to be such a bitch,” Caitlyn said, somehow managing to say the one thing that would make Melanie slowly turn around, telling herself that there was no way that she could have heard her sister correctly, not after everything that she’d put her through over the years.

“I’m sorry, what was that?” Melanie found herself asking.

“I really just don’t understand how you could do that to someone,” Caitlyn said, shaking her head in disgust.

“Who am I doing what to?” Melanie asked, glancing down at Cody to make sure that he was still-

“Trying to force Aidan to marry you,” Caitlyn snapped, making her frown.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Melanie said since they’d never even talked about getting married, something that she’d been afraid that he would insist on when she was pregnant. As much as she loved Aidan and would love to spend the rest of her life with him, she couldn’t marry him because of Cody.

“You are so full of shit! You got pregnant on purpose to get back at me.”

“No, I didn’t,” Melanie said, shaking her head because she would never do something like that.

“Do you really think that I’m the only one that figured it out? It wasn’t difficult to count back nine months and figure out what happened,” Caitlyn snapped, shaking her head in disbelief. “I get that you weren’t happy about finding out about Adam and me, but going out and getting pregnant on purpose to try to get back at us is just pathetic. It’s been three years, Melanie, you really need to move on and get over it. Adam wasn’t in love with you, hadn’t been for a long time

, and every time he tried to tell you, you went out of your way to make him feel bad so that he stayed until he finally got sick of you and now, you’re doing the same thing to Aidan.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” Melanie said, shaking her head as she forced herself to turn around and head to her car, afraid that she would finally give in to urge to slap her sister, something that she’d promised her parents that she would never do no matter how much Caitlyn pissed her off.

But god, did Caitlyn have it coming...

“Oh, but I really do. When I was walking to the exam room to get my checkup, I heard Aidan and his father talking in his office. He’s going to ask you to marry him because you got pregnant and he wants to do the right thing. He doesn’t deserve to be

used like this. You need to do the right thing and let him go. This just isn't right."

"He loves me," Melanie said firmly, reminding herself that Caitlyn was just trying to cause problems because that's what she did.

That's what she always did.

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 6:36 am

“Really? Then what about the Bradford curse, hmm? I heard all about it at the baby shower, which makes me wonder why Aidan is really proposing,” Caitlyn said as Melanie watched her sister head across the small parking lot to her car as she stood there, telling herself that she should forget about this only to end up pulling her phone out of her pocket and sending Rebecca a text message, hoping to figure out what was really going on.

*_*_*_*

“What’s the Bradford curse?” Melanie asked as soon as he opened his office door to find her sitting on his couch, holding a large fast-food cup in her hands and watching him with a sad expression that told him that she already knew.

“Where’s Cody?” Aidan asked, closing the door behind him before he walked over to the couch and sat down next to her.

“With your father,” Melanie said as he reached over and pulled her onto his lap, careful of the large drink in her hands as he helped her move until she was straddling his lap.

“The curse doesn’t matter,” he told her, leaning down so that he could steal a sip of her drink as he placed his hands on her hips.

“That’s not what I heard,” Melanie said, worrying her bottom lip and looking so damn lost as he stole another sip, trying to buy himself some time to figure out how to explain this to her without her realizing that his family was clearly fucking insane since he felt that it would be in his best interest to wait until after they were married

before she found out.

“Who told you about the curse?” Aidan asked, wondering which one of the assholes that he was related to had tried to fuck him over.

“Caitlyn overheard something mentioned about the Bradford curse at the baby shower,” she said as he struggled against the urge to tell her what he thought about her sister as he took the cup from her.

“And she felt the need to tell you,” he guessed, sighing as he took another sip, finishing off her drink before he reached over and placed it on the side table.

“She did,” Melanie mumbled sadly with a small nod as he reached up and cupped her beautiful face in his hands.

“I love you, Melanie, and I want to spend the rest of my life with you, but we’re going to do this the right way,” Aidan said as he leaned in so that he could brush his lips against hers. “Tonight, Lucifer is going to watch Cody while I take you out for an incredibly romantic dinner where I’m going to spoil you with white roses, champagne, and chocolate while I tell you just how much I love you. After dinner, I’m going to take you to an insanely expensive hotel where I’m going to spend the rest of the night spoiling you in every way imaginable before I make love to you and before the night’s over, I’m going to get down on one knee and ask you to marry me.”

“What about the curse?” she asked as she leaned in and kissed him.

“It doesn’t matter, Melanie, because you and I are doing this the right way. I owe it to you,” he said, wrapping his arms around her as he struggled not to yawn. “We’re going to do this right and that means engagement parties, getting stressed over planning the perfect wedding that is going to cost an arm and a leg, a white dress,

beautiful church, a stale wedding cake, and an obscenely expensive honeymoon to the destination of your choice where we don't leave the hotel room the entire time."

"You would really do that for me?" Melanie asked, sitting back on his lap with a shy smile.

"I would do anything for you," Aidan said as he leaned back in and-

"That's really just not going to work for me," Melanie said, sighing heavily with a sad shake of her head, leaving him confused as she climbed off his lap. He raised his arms to stop her only to have them fall back down as he found himself struggling to keep his eyes open seconds before everything suddenly went black.

Chapter 41

"You drugged me," the man that she'd been starting to worry about said, sounding understandably pissed.

"I mean, technically, you did it to yourself since you stole my drink," Melanie felt the need to point out as she turned the car off and decided that perhaps now was the best time to head inside to the room that she'd rented a couple of hours ago while she'd been killing time waiting for him to regain consciousness.

"Why?" Aidan asked as he rubbed his hands over his face with a groan.

"Tradition," Melanie said, nodding solemnly when he dropped his hands away so that he could glare at her as he asked, "Where are we?"

"Somewhere in New Hampshire," Melanie said as she opened her door and climbed out, deciding that perhaps now was not the best time to tell him that they were lost since he'd just use that against her.

“What are we doing in New Hampshire?” he demanded as he climbed out of the car and-

“I, umm, should probably carry Cody in,” Melanie said since he was having problems standing and all, she decided when his legs gave out and dropped him on his ass.

Decision made, she grabbed Cody’s bag and threw it over her shoulder before she grabbed his overnight bag, and-

Made another executive decision, one that had her giving Aidan a hopeful smile as he reached past her and took Cody’s car seat. She sent him a hopeful smile as he grabbed the travel playpen, threw it over his shoulder, and sent her another glare that had her grabbing the overnight bag that she’d packed for them, swallowing hard, and deciding that now was probably a good time to play the quiet game.

That decision lasted until they were in the painfully slow elevator that was stopping at every floor and she realized that now was probably a good time to say something, mostly because he hadn’t stopped glaring at her.

“Have I mentioned that I’m in love with you?” she asked with a hopeful smile only to end up worrying her bottom lip between her teeth when he narrowed his eyes on her.

“I had help?” Melanie said, deciding to test the waters to see if selling out her accomplices would save her ass.

Since that didn’t seem to help her, she decided to move on with, “Did I mention that I love you?”

Was that a growl?

Yes, yes, it was...

Swallowing nervously, Melanie started to look over her shoulder to see what floor they were on only to rethink that decision and went to plan B, but since she didn't actually have a plan B, she decided to ramble.

“Proposals and weddings don't work in your family. Every single Bradford marriage that started with a proposal ended in divorce and as much as I would have loved a church wedding, I'm not willing to take the risk,” she said in a rush, nodding for some reason as she gestured here, there, and everywhere, really hoping that he would stop glaring at some point.

He didn't.

No, what he did was stalk forward when the elevator ding announced that they'd arrived at their floor and forced her to move or...

Well, since she had no plans of finding out what that or was, Melanie stepped off the elevator and sent a silent thank you to the desk clerk that had given them a room near the elevator. She grabbed the keycard

out of her pocket, opened the door, and-

“Did my father tell you the rest of the rules?” Aidan asked, sounding bored as he placed Cody on the bed so that he could set up his playpen.

“He might have,” she said, watching as he finished setting up the playpen before taking Cody, who was still asleep, from his car seat and made quick work of changing his diaper and put him down in his crib with his favorite blanket.

Once, he was tucked in...

“Then you know that this doesn't work unless I lose my fucking mind, don't you?”

Aidan asked as she found herself backing up towards the bathroom.

“He might have mentioned something to that effect,” she mumbled only to bite back a wince when she felt her back hit the bathroom counter.

“What else did he tell you?” Aidan asked as he placed his hands on the counter on either side of her, effectively trapping her as he leaned in and ripped a moan from her as he kissed her neck.

“That you’re a stubborn pain in that ass that doesn’t listen,” Melanie said, loving the sounds of his chuckle as he pressed a kiss against her jaw.

“Anything else?” he asked as she felt his hand slide between her legs and-

“I-I don’t remember,” Melanie said, struggling to focus as he rubbed his palm between her legs.

“I see,” Aidan murmured, sounding thoughtful as he continued to move his hand between her legs. “We’re getting married, Melanie, but we’re doing it my way.”

“And what way is that?” she found herself asking as her head fell back, giving him more room as he kissed his way back down her neck.

“Pick a date,” he said as he rubbed his hand harder between her legs.

“Tomorrow,” Melanie said, licking her lips only to find herself turned around in his arms so that she was facing the mirror.

“That’s not going to work for me, sweetheart,” Aidan said, running his hands over her stomach as he pressed a kiss against the side of her neck.

“That’s your only option,” Melanie said because she refused to back down.

She didn’t care if this “curse” was real or not. She wasn’t about to take any chances, not when it came to Aidan. She loved him and she wanted to spend the rest of her life with him. She didn’t care about anything else.

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 6:36 am

“What did your sister say to you?” Aidan asked as he ran his hands up her stomach so that he was cupping her breasts in his hands.

“Oh, you really thought that I would let her screw with my head? That’s so sad,” Melanie said with a pitying sigh and a sad shake of her head that ended with a moan when he gently squeezed her breasts. Caitlyn had crossed the line with her one last time, leaving her with no other choice but to do the one thing that she’d never allowed herself to do before.

She told on her.

Oh, had she tattletaled her ass off today.

She’d told her parents everything. It was something that she’d never done before because she knew that it was always better to handle Caitlyn on her own since her parents would just ground her sister, giving her a chance to make everyone’s life miserable. No, when it came to Caitlyn, Melanie either took care of her sister on her own, or she simply ignored her. Over the past couple of years, she’d ignored her sister...

Until now.

Now, Caitlyn had finally pushed her too far. So, Melanie did what any self-respecting woman her age would do, she told her parents all those things that Caitlyn didn’t want them to know and quite a few things that her sister probably thought she’d forgotten about.

“Then what are we doing here?” he asked, using his hold on her to pull her back against him.

“Because I want you,” Melanie said, unable to help but moan as he gave her breasts another squeeze before he slid one hand back down her stomach.

“You already have me,” Aidan promised her as he worked her pants open so that he could slide his hand inside her panties.

“Then it shouldn’t matter when we get married,” she said, struggling not to moan when she felt his hand slide between her legs.

“It matters.”

Chapter 42

“Open the goddamn door, Melanie!” Aidan bit out as he glared at the locked bathroom door.

“Are you going to marry me tomorrow?” came the reply after a brief pause.

“No,” he bit out, because they were doing this the right way no matter what the stubborn pain in the ass that had somehow managed to take him by surprise and locked him out of the bathroom, said.

“Then I’m afraid that I can’t do that,” Melanie said right around the time that he heard the shower turn on.

After one last glare at the locked bathroom door, Aidan checked on Cody to make sure that he was asleep before he pulled his shirt off and tossed it aside as he dropped down on the bed so that he could glare at the ceiling. He didn’t fucking care. They

were getting married in a church whether she wanted to or not, and she would not ruin his fucking special day!

Now that he thought about it, this was perfect. More than perfect, because he could still make this work. Tomorrow, they'd have breakfast in bed, enjoy a long shower, take Cody out for the day, and then, he'd bring her back here for a romantic dinner, a bubble bath, and then he'd ask her to marry him, set a date, and try to figure out how he was going to pay for this fucking dream wedding without going broke.

It was going to be perfect.

Absolutely fucking perfect, Aidan decided only to curse as he reached over and grabbed the phone before it had a chance to ring again and wake up Cody.

"Hello?" Aidan said, answering the phone as he glanced at the playpen and sighed when he saw Cody watching him.

"I'm sorry to bother you, but we have a gentleman down here asking to see Miss Robinson," the front desk clerk said, making Aidan wonder which one of his asshole relatives was here to help Melanie.

Probably his father, Aidan thought as he glanced at the bathroom door before his attention shifted to his son and-

"Tell him that I'll be down in a few minutes," he said, already reaching for the diaper bag.

"I will. Thank you," the front desk clerk said before Aidan hung up so that he could make a bottle for his son, who was watching his every move.

Definitely a Bradford, Aidan thought, chuckling as he finished making a large bottle

before scooping Cody up in his arms. He decided that it would probably be better if he handled his father now before the bastard drugged his food again and he fucking knew that his father was the one who'd drugged Melanie's cup. Sneaky bastard, Aidan thought as he headed downstairs, contemplating tossing one of Cody's dirty diapers in the back of his father's car.

It would serve the traitorous bastard right, Aidan thought as the elevator doors opened and-

"Where's Melanie?" the last person that he'd expected to see, demanded before Aidan had a chance to step off the elevator.

"What are you doing here, Adam?" Aidan asked as he stepped off the elevator, noting the other man's messy hair, the panicked expression on his face, and the small black box in his hand.

"I need to talk to Melanie," Adam said, glancing past Aidan, looking hopeful only to curse when he didn't see Melanie.

"No, you need to talk to me and tell me why you're here," Aidan said, stepping in front of Adam when he moved to step on the elevator.

"I messed up," Adam said, stepping away as he raked his fingers through his hair. "I never should have left her."

"That doesn't explain what you're doing here," Aidan said, hoping for the other man's sake that he was talking about Caitlyn.

"Caitlyn's parents showed up and tore into her, told her that if she wanted to marry me that she was on her own because they weren't going to give her a dime after everything she'd put Melanie through only I didn't know what she was doing. I had

no fucking clue,” Adam said, shaking his head as he paced back and forth in front of the elevator even as he continued to send anxious glances towards the closed elevator doors.

“What does that have to do with us?” Aidan asked as he shifted Cody in his arms when his son began fidgeting.

“I’m in love with Melanie,” Adam said, gesturing helplessly towards the elevator with the hand that still held that small black box that had Aidan’s stomach turning.

“And fucking her sister was really the best way to show that?” Aidan demanded.

“I messed up! I never should have listened to Caitlyn. I never should have given up on the best thing that ever happened to me, and I never should have-”

“Come here,” Aidan finished for him.

*_*_*_*

“I dropped a bedpan on my first patient,” came the announcement as soon as Melanie opened the bathroom door to find Aidan sitting on the bed, watching her.

“Umm, that’s unfortunate?” she said absently as she tried to figure out how she was going to manage to drag him down to the courthouse in the morning without throwing out her back.

Maybe she should-

“You know the Scooby-Doo theme song?”

“Sure?” Melanie said, unable to help but frown as she adjusted the towel around her

as she glanced over at the playpen to find Cody asleep.

“I used to hum it while I took tests. It creeped my professors out,” Aidan admitted as he stood up.

“I can see why,” Melanie said, nodding solemnly.

“I know every Justin Bieber song by heart,” he said, leaving her with no idea how to respond to that one.

When she opened her mouth, he cut her off with, “Every. Single. One.”

“I’m in love with you, Melanie,” Aidan continued as he walked over and pulled her into his arms. “I want to spend the rest of my life wondering if you’re going to wake me up at two in the morning to get you pie.”

“I really will,” she admitted, making his lips twitch because she felt that he should understand what was expected of him upfront.

“I know,” he said, smiling as he leaned down and brushed his lips against hers before he pulled back and-

“Adam’s downstairs with an engagement ring, hoping that you’ll take him back,” he told her as Melanie stood there, struggling to make sense out of what he was saying only to realize that there was no way that they could avoid this conversation.

“I’m sorry, but I’m really going to need you to go back to this Justin Bieber thing,” Melanie said, making his eyes narrow on her.

“They’re catchy tunes,” he bit out.

“But, are they really though?” she asked with a pitying look.

“Yes,” Aidan bit out between clenched teeth.

“I see,” she murmured thoughtfully as she considered him and...

“I don’t think I can marry you,” Melanie said, wishing that she’d known about the Bieber thing before she fell in love with him.

Live and learn, Melanie thought with a sigh and a sad shake of her head.

“We’re getting married in the morning,” Aidan said evenly as he picked her up and threw her over his shoulder.

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“I’m really not sure that’s going to work for me,” she said as she found herself tossed on the bed.

“We’re getting married in the morning whether you like it or not, so stop trying to wreck my special fucking day!” Aidan said, making her roll her eyes even as she couldn’t help but smile.

“What if I already have plans?”

“Cancel them,” he bit out as he yanked her towel away.

“Do I have to?” Melanie asked, making sure to pout as Aidan reached down and pulled his belt loose only to stop and...

“What about Adam?” he asked, making her frown.

“What about him?”

“He’s downstairs waiting for you,” Aidan said, making her blink.

“That’s nice,” she said slowly, not really sure why he thought that she would care about a man that had cheated on her with her sister and ended things by telling her that she wasn’t good enough for him.

“Good answer,” Aidan said as he leaned down and whispered in her ear, “I know this place that has the best apple pie that you’ve ever had...”

Epilogue

Five Wonderful Years Later...

“What did you do to my mommy?” Cody demanded with an adorable glare as he folded his small arms over his chest.

“What’s wrong with mommy?” Aidan asked his five-year-old son, who was normally his little BFF, as he carefully shifted his sleeping baby girl in his arms, careful not to wake her up as he glanced at the clock and noted that it was nearly midnight.

“Didn’t I tuck you in five hours ago?”

“We know it was you,” Tyler bit out, ignoring his question as he hugged his teddy bear tightly against his small chest before he followed that up by mouthing, “We know,” making Aidan’s lips twitch.

“Are you going to tell me what’s wrong with mommy?” Aidan asked as he carefully put Jayne back in the bassinet that he’d kept by his desk since they bought the house five years ago.

“Are you going to tell us what you did to Mommy?” Cody countered back, narrowing his green eyes on him.

“You know that you’re supposed to be my best friend, right?” he reminded his son with a mocking glare of his own.

“I’m a mama’s boy,” his son said proudly with a firm nod that was matched by his little brother, making Aidan chuckle as he shifted his attention to Lucifer, who was over here so that he could use their kitchen to test a recipe for the Fire & Brimstone since he no longer allowed gluten in his house after they’d discovered that his

children also had celiac disease, as he sat there, glaring down at his phone. “Watch your godchildren for a minute.”

“Fine,” Lucifer said, making sure to sound put out as he tossed his phone aside and grabbed the Harry Potter book off the coffee table that he’d been reading to the boys, who looked torn between glaring at Aidan and finding out how Harry Potter managed to beat a dragon. When Lucifer settled back against the couch and opened the book, the boys sent him one last glare and quickly made their way to the couch and climbed onto Lucifer’s lap.

Knowing that they were in good hands, Aidan decided to go find his wife. He checked the kitchen to see if she was there only to absently note that his brother had rearranged the kitchen, again, checked her office, the family room, and eventually found himself heading upstairs so that he could check the nursery only to chuckle when he spotted his two-year-old son passed out on his bed with one of the chocolate cupcakes that Melanie made earlier clutched firmly in one small hand. Aidan had been wondering why he hadn’t been with his brothers.

After carefully extracting the cupcake from his son’s hand, Aidan grabbed a box of baby wipes and cleaned the buttercream frosting off Benjamin’s face and hands before he tucked him back in, unable to help but smile as he leaned down and kissed his baby boy’s forehead. He was such a sweet little boy, Aidan thought as he ran his fingers through his son’s hair, pushing it out of his face before he stood up and went to find his wife.

He checked the boys’ room, the playroom and finally, checked their bedroom only to find himself drawn to the closed bathroom door. When he opened the door and found his wife sitting in the tub, hugging her knees against her chest, looking a little lost, he wasn’t surprised, and to be honest, he wasn’t exactly surprised to find the pregnancy test on the bathroom counter either.

“Did you look yet?” Aidan asked, walking over to the sink and had a look.

“No,” came the softly mumbled reply.

“Do you want another baby?” he asked as he looked back up to find his wife watching him as she admitted, “Would you be mad if I did?”

Chuckling, Aidan walked over so that he could lean over and kiss his wife as he said, “I want two more,” making her lips twitch.

“Two more girls,” Melanie said, knowing him so damn well.

“Mmmhmm,” he murmured in agreement as he reached into the water so that he could place his hand over her belly. “Looks like we only have one more to go.”

“I guess we do,” Melanie said, smiling as she reached up and cupped his face in her wet hands as she kissed him.

“What gave it away this time?” Aidan asked against her lips as he reached down and pulled his shoes off.

“I saw a carrot,” she said with a wince, making him chuckle as he made quick work of emptying his pockets.

“We should stop buying them,” Aidan said, already making a mental note to get rid of all the raw vegetables in the house, something that he’d learned to do as soon as they found out that she was pregnant to help cut down on the time she spent dealing with morning sickness.

“We really should,” his beautiful wife readily agreed as she reached for his tie.

“You know it’s your turn, right?” she said as he pulled his shirt free.

“Is it?” Aidan asked, unable to help but smile.

“It really is,” Melanie said, nodding solemnly as she pulled his tie free and dropped it to the floor seconds before his shirt joined it.

“Did I ever tell you about this one time when I fell in love with this beautiful woman that drove me out of my mind?” he asked, deciding that he’d waited long enough as he climbed into the tub when she reached for his belt.

“I don’t know, I think that might be against the rules,” Melanie said as she used her hold on his belt to pull him into her arms.

“What if I promised to get you pie?” Aidan asked, placing his hands on the back of the tub as he kissed the woman that had turned his life upside down with a smile.

Sneak Peek at...

Finally: A Neighbor from Hell Novel

Devastated: An Anger Management Novel

Tall, Dark & Furious: A Pyte Sentinel Novel

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About the Author

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Finally

A Neighbor from Hell Novel

Prologue

Well, this was unfortunate, Charlie thought as she stood there, taking in the large man standing in front of her, noting that he was soaking wet, covered in flour and what appeared to be cocoa powder, his tie was burnt, his shirt was destroyed and he had absolutely no idea who she was, which was understandable since he normally went out of his way to avoid her.

That was confirmed

seconds later when that familiar expression that she was used to by now crossed his features, the same one that told her that he was trying to figure out where he knew her from as his gaze darted down to her shirt, the one that she wore every day to work, the same one with “Bradford Creations” printed across it. Frowning, he took in her “nerd” glasses, her curly chestnut hair pulled back into a ponytail before looking down to her Harry Potter watch and-

That was apparently enough to jog his memory.

“What can I help you with, Charlie?” Devin Bradford, her boss for the past five years and the reason why she no longer left food unattended in the breakroom, murmured absently, frowning as he reached down and pulled a pink jump rope that had somehow managed to wrap itself around his legs off and tossed it aside.

“I’m not really sure,” Charlie mumbled, suddenly regretting not taking that two-bedroom apartment on Cedar Street that smelled like garbage, kitty litter, and other things when she had the chance as she glanced back down at the post-it note in her

hand to make sure that she had the right address.

She did, which meant...

“You’re here for the in-law apartment,” Devin said with a pained sigh as he rubbed his hands slowly down his face.

“Maybe,” Charlie murmured, mostly because she really didn’t think that this was a good idea, not with her quitting and everything. Not that he knew that she was quitting, and since she had no plans of telling him until she was ready, she felt that it would be in her best interest if she got back in her car, drove to work, and spent the rest of the day hiding in her office with the hopes that he would forget this ever happened. Then again, maybe she was worrying over nothing, Charlie thought as she stood there, blinking up at the large man glaring down at her.

Maybe not, Charlie thought, when he said, “This isn’t fucking happening.”

“Okay,” Charlie said as she bit back a sigh of disappointment because she’d been counting on getting this apartment.

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If she was going to make this work, and god, she really hoped this worked, she was going to need a cheaper apartment. She didn't want to give up her two-bedroom apartment, but she didn't really have a choice right now. Well, she did, but since she'd let Ben talk her into setting a deadline to get her company, that she was still trying to figure out a name for, up and running within the year, she had to do this. The only way that she was going to be able to do that was by saving enough money to make this happen and that meant cutting back on her expenses.

She'd already canceled her cable, figured out a way to cut her cellphone bill in half, switched her car insurance, canceled all those memberships that she'd told herself that she would use one day and never had, Googled ways to cut her utility bills in half, set a budget and at some point she would start sticking to it, gave up those expensive creamy Frappuccinos with an extra shot of butterscotch and chocolate syrup that she liked so much, and fully planned on cooking more so that she wasn't dependent on takeout. As much as she hated to do this, getting a smaller place would help her reach her goal faster. This apartment was three hundred dollars cheaper than the rest of the apartments that she was considering and would definitely help, but it didn't look like that was going to-

"I quit!" the small woman covered from head to toe in flour and green glitter said as she tightened her hold around the tan handbag covered in black magic marker and ran for it.

"Shit!" Devin said, looking anxiously over his shoulder before glancing back at the small woman as she tripped over her feet and-

Quickly picked herself back up as she threw a panicked look over her shoulder,

released a terrified scream that kind of freaked Charlie out a bit, and kept going as Devin bit out, “Shit!” again. After one last look over his shoulder, he went after her. For a moment, Charlie simply stood there, watching as the small woman ran towards her car only to rethink that plan when she spotted Devin coming after her and took off down the street crying, “You can’t make me go back in there!” as she went.

Wondering if she should expand her search to include rooms for rent, Charlie slipped the post-it note back in her pocket, turned around to head to her car only to turn right back around again and invited herself in when she heard a child say the magical words, “We’re gonna need matches.” Once she was inside the house that looked like it had been hit by a tornado, Charlie carefully made her way towards the sounds of cabinet doors shutting, stepping over toys, crayons and Legos as she went. When she opened the kitchen door, she fully understood the reason why the small woman ran screaming from the house.

*_*_*_*

“This isn’t fucking happening,” Devin said as he stood there, forced to watch as the woman that he hadn’t been able to convince to give this another chance tore out of his driveway, leaving a cloud of dust behind in her wake.

What the hell was he going to do now?

He was going to panic. That’s what he was going to do, Devin decided, as he walked back inside his house, pulling his phone out as he went and began scrolling through his contacts, trying to figure out how he was going to convince his mother to put off her vacation for another day so that-

“What’s your favorite dinosaur?” he heard Dustin ask as he opened the kitchen door and found the small woman that he’d spent the last five years avoiding gently working her fingers through his son’s soapy hair only pausing long enough to add

more shampoo before she continued.

“That’s a tough one,” Charlie said with a thoughtful frown as Dustin, who never sat still, calmly sat in the large kitchen sink, waiting for her to answer him.

“I’m going to put down T-Rex,” Abbi, his baby girl, said from where she sat on the counter, wrapped in her favorite Mickey Mouse towel with her wet hair neatly combed and a clipboard with one of the rental applications that he’d printed out for the in-law apartment on her lap.

He’d been putting off renting out the in-law apartment for a while now, but with the kids getting older and Bradford Creations growing, Devin didn’t have much of a choice. He needed help, which was why he’d been hoping to rent the apartment to a college kid or a middle-aged woman in exchange for low rent and a few hours of babysitting a week. What he hadn’t expected was for her to show up.

Devin didn’t know what it was about her, but since the day that she showed up for an interview wearing an Indiana Jones tee-shirt and the cutest fucking smile that he’d ever seen, he hadn’t been able to stop thinking about her. Within the first thirty seconds of meeting her, he’d realized that hiring her would be a mistake. He’d planned on thanking her for coming in and tossing her resume in the trash as soon as she left only to find himself sending her a text, telling her that the job was hers before she made it to the front door.

It had been a mistake, one that he’d been regretting for the past five years and it had nothing to do with her job. He wanted her. God, did he fucking want her. It didn’t matter how many times he reminded himself that he couldn’t have her, he couldn’t stop thinking about her. It was the reason why he’d turned the second-floor storage room into her office and avoided the breakroom when he knew that she was in there because he wasn’t supposed to want her.

He'd made a promise to his children when they were born and he planned on keeping it. That meant avoiding the small woman that never should have caught his attention in the first place. She was nothing like the women that he used to date. She was a short, plump little thing with an unhealthy obsession with Harry Potter and the bluest fucking eyes that he'd ever seen.

"That's a good idea," Charlie said with one of those warm smiles that he tried not to think about most days as she finished working the glitter out of Dustin's hair and gestured for him to cover his eyes.

"What's the next question?" Dustin asked, obediently covering his eyes so that Charlie could rinse his hair.

Frowning, Abbi glanced down at the application and said, "What's your favorite ice cream?" making Devin smile.

"Hmmm," Charlie said, pursing her lips up in thought before adding, "that's a tough one, but I think I'm gonna have to go with chocolate chip cookie dough."

"That's Daddy's favorite, too," Abbi said, nodding solemnly as she scribbled something on the application with a green crayon.

"Are the brownies done?" Dustin asked, reminding him of the reason that they were in this mess in the first place.

"Almost," Charlie said, glancing over at the oven as the scent of warm brownies caught his attention.

"What about the muffins?" Abbi asked, making him frown.

She'd made muffins?

God, he fucking loved muffins.

“Five more minutes,” Charlie said, making him realize how much time he’d wasted trying to convince the babysitter that hadn’t lasted the week to come back.

“Are you going to take the apartment?” Dustin asked as Charlie picked up a facecloth and began working on removing the glittery-paste mess from behind his ears.

“That’s up to your dad,” Charlie said, rinsing the facecloth as he stood there, thinking of all the reasons that this was a bad idea, but one look at his smiling children’s faces had him doing something that he already regretted.

Coming May 2020...

Excerpt from:

Devastated: An Anger Management Novel

“Oh, my god, please make it stop,” Kylie muttered with a tragic sigh as her cell phone continued to chime.

She wanted to cry.

She really did but crying would require energy that she didn’t have right now. Besides, she was going to need all her energy to drag herself out of bed and see what the horrible man wanted.

Why did she have to sign those papers?

Damn Big Daddy and his love of...

Well, she wasn't exactly sure what he'd been on when he'd burned the apartment building down, but whatever it was she cursed it for putting her in this situation. Even as she struggled to keep her eyes open long enough to

sit up on the bare mattress that she'd passed out on a few hours ago, she knew that the fault was hers and hers alone. She'd made a deal with the devil, literally, and now she was paying for it.

Another chime, this one somehow more persistent than the last, had her whimpering pathetically as she reached for her phone. For a moment, she simply held the phone in her hand, praying that this nightmare would end, but the next chime destroyed her dreams and had her sitting up with a groan.

Office in twenty minutes.

Worrying her bottom lip, Kylie glanced from the text, demanding her presence back down to the bare mattress that she never wanted to leave. After a few seconds of indecision, she took a deep breath as she forced herself to climb off the bed and not look back as she made her way to the bathroom, terrified that if she caught even a glimpse of the pillow-top mattress that she would lose this battle.

But God, did she want to lose, Kylie thought with something close to a whimper as she managed to drag herself the rest of the way to the bathroom. Once she was inside the large room that was twice the size of her last apartment, she made quick work of using the bathroom, doubling up on tasks whenever possible so that by the time that she stepped inside the large shower stall her teeth had been brushed, her hair combed, her vitamins taken, her nails had been quickly filed down to a smooth, efficient length, her clothes were laid out for her alongside a fresh planner, pen, and notebook to help her stay organized. All that was left was for her to do was to step beneath the ice-cold spray of water and choke back a scream or two as the brisk water gave her the shot of adrenaline that she so desperately needed.

Once she was wide awake and feeling energized, she finished her shower, fixed her hair, got dressed, placed her planner and aforementioned items in her messenger bag and headed for the door, ready to face the day with five minutes to spare. As Kylie hurried down the stairs, she contemplated making a quick trip to the kitchen and grabbing a yogurt and a breakfast bar to get her through this meeting, but something told her that he wouldn't appreciate the delay.

Hoping that he wouldn't make a habit of holding meetings before the sun came up, she paused by the double doors leading into the large office that she'd spent three hours cleaning yesterday, closed her eyes and took a deep breath before pasting a smile on her face, opening her eyes and-

"You're late," Mr. O'Mallery announced as he walked past her.

Kylie considered pointing out that she still had two minutes left, but then she remembered what happened the last time that she'd corrected one of her bosses and decided to let this one slide. As she followed him into the large room, she resigned herself to the fact that she was most likely going to have to get used to biting her tongue a lot.

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At least, for the next year, Kylie thought as she sat down on the only available option to her, a metal folding chair that was placed directly in front of the only real piece of furniture in the room, a large desk. Hunter walked around the desk, glaring at her the entire way and sat down in a large leather chair that looked a great deal more comfortable than the one she was currently perched on.

When she realized that he wasn't going to do anything more than sit there and glare at her, she gave him what she hoped was a pleasant smile, clicked open her pen, and looked at him expectantly as she waited for his orders. He continued to keep her waiting until, with a sigh that could only be described as bored, he leaned back in his chair, crossed his arms over his chest, and gestured with a nod towards the planner on her lap as he asked, "What the hell is that?"

Although Kylie didn't think it was a good idea to take her eyes off him, mostly because of that whole anger management thing that he had going for him, she forced herself to follow his glare.

"My planner?" Kylie asked, hoping that it was her beloved planner and not her presence responsible for that expression on his face, because she really wasn't sure that she could beat him to the door. The reminder that she was working for a large, muscular man with an anger problem had her second-guessing her decision to stay.

Anger. Management, Kylie reminded herself, trying for a bland, yet polite, expression as she waited to see how this was going to play out. When he didn't jump over the desk and go for her throat, she took that as a win and waited for him to continue. When he just sat there, glaring at her, she tried for a small smile only to quickly bite it back when his eyes narrowed even further.

For several long minutes, Hunter didn't say anything. He just sat there, watching her, and making her wonder if they'd accept a personal check for that ten thousand dollars or if she should plan on making a quick run to the bank and get that in cash when he finally spoke.

"I have thousands of employees, clients, vendors, and contacts that you will be responsible for. That means that you need to have their phone numbers, addresses, email addresses as well as access to their files. So, tell me something, Miss Jenkins, how exactly do you plan on doing all that with a ten-dollar planner from Wal-Mart?"

"Carefully?" Kylie said before she could stop herself and she really wished that she'd been able to stop herself.

*_*_*_*_*

So, she was a smart ass, Hunter thought as he waited for her to stop staring down at the cheap planner on her lap. As he watched her, he couldn't help but wonder if that planner was her pride and joy. When she lovingly caressed the imitation leather with her fingertips, he realized that this was the saddest fucking thing that he'd ever seen in his life.

"Do you need a moment or can we get back to work?" Hunter asked when it looked like she was going to break out a snuffle and reminisce about better days.

She cleared her throat and looked up. "What would you suggest, Mr. O'Mallery?" Kylie asked, slipping back into her minion role.

"That you join the twenty-first century," Hunter suggested as he held his hand out.

When she only sat there, frowning at his hand, he wiggled his fingers in demand. "Your phone."

“It’s upstairs,” she answered with that same robotic smile that he was starting to find deeply disturbing.

“What is it doing upstairs?” Hunter demanded even as he pushed away from his desk and headed towards the stairs.

“I don’t use my phone while I’m working.”

“That’s real fucking helpful,” Hunter said evenly as he took the stairs two at a time.

“Mr. O’Mallery?” Kylie called hesitantly when he reached the landing.

Since he never made a habit of explaining himself, he ignored her and headed towards her room. In three long strides, he was in her room and heading for the nightstand where he found-

“What the hell is this?” he asked in confusion as he picked up what he prayed was a joke and looked it over.

“My phone,” Kylie said, sounding embarrassed as she should be.

“It’s a flip phone,” Hunter said, turning the ancient relic over in his hands as he tried to make sense out of what he was seeing.

Could this thing even send texts? he wondered as he flipped the cellphone open to find a tiny screen. This thing had to be fifteen years old, he thought absently, as he started hitting buttons, curious to see what it could do. In a few seconds, he discovered that it wasn’t much. It could make calls, text, receive emails, and surf the web...sort of.

“Could I have my phone back, please?”

“No,” Hunter said, fascinated that anyone in this day and age could get by with a phone like this.

As he searched through her phone, making note that there were only three contacts, a small collection of emails and even fewer texts, he couldn’t help but wonder how much memory something like this had. His calculator probably had more memory than this thing, which would explain why she didn’t have much on it. Then again, he amended a few seconds later, maybe there was a reason for that.

“Is this your personal phone?” Hunter asked, because he liked to have his suspicions confirmed.

“It’s my only phone,” Kylie said calmly, but he detected a slight he

sitation in her voice, one that was very telling.

Hunter glanced up from her phone to take in the cheap skirt suit that she wore, noting that while it was obviously clean, it didn’t fit her. He quickly took in the rest of her belongings, two small bags that she’d probably picked up at a thrift store, neatly placed by the door. He didn’t have to look in the bathroom to know that she probably only had the basics, hairbrush, nail clippers, toothpaste, etc.

In a few minutes, he knew everything that he needed to know about the small woman who was sharing his sentence with him. She was a neat, no-nonsense kind of woman, and most importantly, she was desperate. She wasn’t going to cause him any problems, but just to make sure...

Hunter looked down at her phone again, noting that the only contacts were the D.A.’s office that hired her on his behalf, a number for a pizza place, and her old landlord. There were no emergency contacts or anyone listed as “Mom.” That made him curious.

“Are you an orphan?” he asked, moving onto her emails.

“No,” Kylie answered after a slight hesitation.

This was even more depressing than her contact list. Having seen more than enough, he closed the phone and tossed it on the bed. When he looked back down at the cute little thing doing her best not to look embarrassed, he realized something very important.

She needed him a hell of a lot more than he needed her.

Available Now

A Sneak Peek at

Tall, Dark & Furious

A Pyte/Sentinel Novel

Prologue

Massachusetts Bay Colony - Maine Territory

1665

“Where are you going, Trace?”

Trying not to panic, Trace shut the door before any sunlight could spill inside the small one-room cottage. Licking his suddenly dry lips, he turned around and held up the small leather-bound book his father gave him this morning after his trip into town.

“I was hoping to go down to the river to read, Father,” Trace said, forcing a smile that he hoped would convince his father that everything was fine.

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Ethan sighed heavily as he sat on the room's only bed and ran his fingers through his unruly shoulder-length hair. "Why don't you stay here and read?"

"I don't want to disturb you, Father," Trace said, wishing he'd lit a candle since he couldn't tell from the dim light given off from the small fire in the hearth if his father was still angry.

"Trace," his father said in a warning tone, "tell me that you're not going to see her after what happened yesterday."

"No, Father," he said, lying to his father for the first time in his life, but he didn't have a choice. If he'd listened to her in the first place, no one would have known that they'd been spending time together. He'd been too stubborn to listen and now, thanks to him, she was in real trouble.

"Why do I have a feeling that you're lying to me?" his father asked warily as he pulled his breeches on.

"I'm not," Trace said weakly, shifting his gaze to the dirt floor, because looking his father in his eye while he lied made him feel sick to his stomach.

"We need to talk," his father announced after a short pause, making Trace's eyes shoot up at the all too familiar announcement.

"But we've only been here four weeks, Father. You promised we'd be able to stay longer this time," he pointed out almost desperately because he didn't want to leave the only friend he'd ever had.

While living with his father was wonderful, it was also very lonely. For the first fourteen years of his life, his father had taken him all over Europe desperate to keep him safe. He'd searched everywhere for answers, taking Trace with him as he did his best to keep Trace's existence a secret. When Trace was six years old, weak, sick, and barely bigger than a toddler his father became desperate to save the child that his wife had so desperately wanted and did something no other vampire would have dared.

He'd kidnapped a priest who'd sworn allegiance to the Sentinels, the group of altered humans placed on earth to keep humans safe from vampires, demons, and shifters. With one move, his father had signed his own death warrant, but he hadn't cared. The only thing that mattered to Ethan was keeping the promise he'd made to his wife and protecting their child.

For three weeks, he'd kept the priest prisoner in a cave a mile away from the little tavern where he'd left Trace in the care of a local whore. His father had paid her to ignore her customers and focus on his son with the promise of an excruciating death if she'd failed him in any way. Night and day his father questioned the priest, careful to keep Trace's existence a secret.

The priest refused to answer. At first, his father had been patient with the old man, hoping to coax the holy man out of the answers he desperately needed. It wasn't until the whore stumbled into the cave, carrying Trace who'd taken a turn for the worse that his father had lost control. He'd attacked the priest and threatened to turn him if he didn't tell him what he needed to know so that he could save Trace.

The threat worked. The priest quickly explained that children like Trace were not human, something his father had feared since his birth. He'd also explained that Trace was a Pyte, the unnatural product between a vampire and a human woman. He'd explained that a Pyte would remain weak unless he was fed blood along with a human diet and if he ever reached his sixteenth year he would go into a deep sleep

and wake up changed into a true immortal with absolutely no way to kill him. The priest had refused to tell Ethan anything else. Instead, he'd pleaded with Ethan to kill Trace before it was too late.

As Ethan struggled with what the priest told him, the terrified whore pulled a small dagger from between her breasts and tried to stab Trace through his heart. She would have succeeded if the priest hadn't screamed for her to do it when she'd hesitated. Ethan lunged for her, taking the dagger in his shoulder and before she could scream for help, he'd ripped her throat out.

Using the dead whore's dagger, he'd slit his own wrist and carefully fed his blood to Trace, praying the priest hadn't lied to him. For two days straight, his father held vigil over him while the priest prayed for his death. Once Trace managed to open his eyes, his father had been determined to do whatever it took to keep him safe until the day that he would no longer need to worry about him.

Ethan had kept his word to the priest even though he knew by doing so that he was unleashing a world of hell on the two of them, but he hadn't been able to bring himself to hurt a man of God no matter the reason. He'd made the priest promise to give them a day's start before he alerted the Sentinels. Once the promise was given, he'd freed the priest, grabbed Trace, and fled. They'd barely made it out of the village before the Sentinels came for them.

From that point on, his father kept Trace hidden from everyone, too afraid that someone would figure out that Trace was the small boy that the Sentinel Council was looking for. They'd moved frequently, searching for others like Trace and finding nothing more than rumors and old ghost stories meant to frighten small children into behaving.

No matter how many nests he came across, Ethan couldn't find anyone that had come across another Pyte before. They'd stayed as long as they could, but once a Master

caught wind of Trace's existence they were forced to run. Most Masters viewed him as a potential threat and wanted to kill him, but others wanted to keep him to find out what he could do for them once he hit his immortality.

Once they'd overstayed their welcome in Europe, his father purchased passage for the two of them to the colonies. They'd both instantly fallen in love with New England. Although it was already a well-loved area for many demons and shifters, vampires were reluctant to settle in the colonies since it would have been more difficult to hide what they were. It would have been safer for them to stay in Europe where they could move more freely, but his father hadn't wanted to take any more chances.

For the past two years, they'd enjoyed a sense of freedom they hadn't known in Europe. They mostly stayed in small villages, which Trace preferred. When they were in the towns like Boston, Trace hadn't been allowed to leave their room, but here he could go wherever he wanted, whenever he wanted as long as he avoided the shifter Packs that sometimes crossed the area.

He'd made a point of going outside every day, enjoying the sunlight on his skin while he still could. In a matter of days, weeks, or months he was supposed to make his transition and then the sun would be lost to him forever. It was the same reason that his father had settled them here even though it meant that he had to travel most of the night to the nearest town to feed.

For years, Trace had been counting down the days until his sixteenth birthday. Once he hit his immortality, which according to that priest should be soon, his father would no longer have to worry about him and could return to Europe where life would be easier for him.

Trace had already decided that he wouldn't be returning to Europe with his father, not after the warning the priest had given them. Once he underwent his transformation, he was going to move away from everyone and everything. He'd feed on rats if that's

what it took because he refused to be the monster that he was destined to become.

“I know that I promised that we could stay here, but after yesterday you have to realize that’s no longer possible. It’s not safe here,” his father explained. “They’re shifters, Trace. You know how they feel about our kind.”

“But, father, Mary doesn’t care about any of that,” Trace said, and when his father opened his mouth to argue he rushed on, “and they don’t know about you. They think I’m here by myself. As long as I stay away from the rest of her Pack and take the long way home through the swamp, we’ll be safe.”

His father went still. “The Pack knows about you?”

Trace reluctantly nodded, shifting anxiously as his father’s blue eyes flashed silver. Trace didn’t need any light to know that his father’s fangs had dropped as well.

“You told me they didn’t see you!” his father snapped, coming to his feet.

Trace stepped back

from his father. He knew his father would never hurt him, but even knowing that didn’t stop him from stumbling back from him when his father released a vicious growl. He’d seen what his father was capable of and knew that he never wanted to be on the receiving end of his father’s temper.

He swallowed hard.

“I-I t-think they spotted me when we were by the stream, Father. Mary told me to run, but I think it might have been too late and that’s why they struck her, but she didn’t tell them about me!” he promised.

Ethan rubbed his hands over his face, muttering something that Trace couldn't hear.

"Father?" Trace said, taking a tentative step forward.

"You fool!" Ethan roared, slamming his fist down on the small table and breaking it into a dozen pieces before he stormed towards Trace. Before Trace could back away, his father grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him.

"Her loyalty belongs to her Pack. Not you! She's already told them about you!" his father snapped, shaking him harder. "Do you have any idea what they'll do to you once they get their hands on you?"

"The full moon isn't for another two weeks, Father! I'm safe!"

He knew they'd have to leave before the next full moon when every shifter in the region would be able to turn, because they'd be able to hunt them down. During those nights, they'd have to move to the city where it would be safer since shifters avoided humans on those night to keep their existence hidden. But once it was over, they could come back and he could keep Mary safe.

"You're not safe," his father bit out through clenched teeth. "Their Alpha can change at will. He can hunt you down when I'm not there to protect you, you fool!"

His grip tightened on Trace's shoulders as he closed his eyes, almost as if he was the one in pain. "Please tell me that you didn't tell her what you are."

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Trace winced as pain shot through his shoulders. “She promised not to tell,” he said softly.

“You fool!” Ethan roared, slamming Trace into the door.

“She’s my friend!”

Ethan backhanded him, knocking him against the wall, and destroying what little hope that he’d had left that his father would understand, making him realize that he no longer had a choice. He had to save her before it was too late.

“Oh my god...” his father said, looking horrified as he moved towards him. “Trace, I’m sorry.”

Trace shifted to his right and yanked on the short rope, pulling the door open and flooding their small cottage with sunlight. His father hissed as he was forced to retreat to the far side of the cottage where the sun couldn’t reach him.

“Don’t!” his father yelled.

“I’m sorry, Father, but I have to make sure that she’s okay,” Trace said as he slammed the door shut and took off for the woods.

Trace could still hear his father screaming his name when he reached the woods. He looked up at the bright afternoon sun, noting that he would only have a few hours before his father would be able to leave the cottage and come for him. That was more than enough time to make sure that Mary was safe before he was forced to say good-

bye. He needed to explain things to Mary and make sure that she knew that he'd be back for her once he reached his immortality so he could take care of her.

Maybe she'd run away with him and his father, Trace thought as he navigated his way through the thick swamp. That way he wouldn't have to wait until he reached his immortality. The more he thought about it, the more he liked this plan. He knew that his father wouldn't be happy, but once he saw how sweet and gentle Mary was, he'd be more than happy to help keep her safe.

This could really work, Trace thought with a surge of excitement, quickening his pace, eager to find Mary and tell her. A half hour later, he stumbled through the thick foliage, gasping for air and grinning hugely when he spotted Mary sitting by the stream.

She looked up at him as he stepped out of the woods, making him frown when he realized that she wasn't smiling. She'd always greeted him with a smile and a warm embrace, but now she looked nervous. He swore softly. Of course, she was nervous. Her Pack would punish her if they found them together again.

"I'm so glad you came, Trace," Mary said, brushing back those golden locks that he'd dreamed of running his fingers through.

"Of course, I came," Trace said, reaching for her only to find her stepping back out of his reach. "Mary, what's wrong?" he asked, taking another step towards her.

"Nothing," she said, smiling brightly.

"Are you hurt?" he asked, running his eyes over her face, her well-worn brown dress, hands, and bare feet and sighed with relief when he didn't find any bruises or cuts marring her beautiful pale skin.

“Why would I be hurt?” Mary asked, stepping away from him as she toyed with her apron strings.

He reached out and gently took her hands in his, refusing to allow her to pull away again. “Mary,” Trace said, looking into her eyes, “I saw him strike you.”

She shrugged it away as if it were nothing. “I broke a Pack rule.”

“What rule?” he asked, frowning when she pulled her hands free.

“Mary, what-oomph!” The air rushed out of his lungs as he dropped to the ground, barely able to register Mary’s pleased smile as he watched the large wooden mallet race towards his head, again.

Chapter 1

Westdrom, Maine

Present Day

“Charlie! Oh my god, don’t pee on that!” Sam pleaded as Charlie raised a dark furry leg and gave her a pointed look that could only be taken as a threat.

Sam pulled on her old fluffy pink bunny slippers as she eyed her brother’s pain in the ass German Sheppard that he’d left with her when his unit had been deployed two months ago. She pointed a finger at him, trying to look stern as she said, “If so, much as a drop hits that staircase, you will never have another slice of pepperoni pizza.”

The dog eyed her for a moment before shifting his attention to the two-story colonial house’s original staircase that she’d spent last weekend sanding. The wood was bone dry and would happily absorb every drop Charlie gave it and then Sam would have to

come up with the ten thousand dollars needed to replace the staircase, something that she'd been hoping to avoid.

Slowly, ever so slowly, Charlie lowered his leg, his eyes never leaving hers, looking for a reason to go through with the threat. Sam stood up, putting her hands on her hips and said, "That's right, buddy. You better remember who controls the pizza in this house."

Charlie huffed as he padded past her to the front door. Sam was just about to run upstairs and grab her flannel bathrobe, but then shrugged and followed the horrible dog that hated her outside. It wasn't as if anyone was going to see her in her brother's old Superman pajamas out here. They were ten miles from town and their nearest neighbor was eight miles away and was only here during the summer. She could walk around naked all day and never have to worry about another soul seeing her, except maybe for the deer that liked to walk around the small clearing in the backyard.

She didn't bother grabbing Charlie's leash since the dog would take that as a challenge and drag her out back through thorns, weeds, and over the rocks in the stream before he happily dunked her ass in the mud, again. He seemed to really enjoy making her life a living hell, something that she'd reminded Nathan of numerous times before he'd left. Each and every time, he'd sigh heavily and tell her that it was all in her head and that Charlie loved her.

Her eyes narrowed on the dog as he showed her SUV tire a lot of love. The entire time he stared at her, daring her to say something about it. She narrowed her eyes on him as she bent down and picked up an old slimy tennis ball. Standing up slowly, she held it up.

"Uh-oh, does Charlie want his ball?" Sam asked in a syrupy sweet voice as she moved the ball from side to side, smiling as the little bastard's eyes narrowed on his favorite ball. Just when he put his leg down and crouched to spring at her, she pulled

he

r arm back and let the ball go flying through the trees and thick brush. “Go get it!”

The dog threw her one last dirty look that promised all sorts of retaliation before he took off through the brush where she hoped he finished his business. He had a nasty habit of leaving his little “packages” as her Grandmother Powers used to call them, around her truck. She didn’t care what Nathan said. She wasn’t paranoid.

That dog was out to get her.

Wiping her hands off on her pajama pants, she walked back into the house, untangling the necklace that Nathan had given her when they were kids from her hair as she decided this would be the perfect opportunity to enjoy a hassle-free breakfast. It was something she hadn’t had since she moved in with Nathan after she’d left Craig.

It was funny how four months ago her biggest problem was Craig throwing the newspaper away before she could read it. Their mornings together had been quiet, relaxing, and comfortable. The only thing that interrupted their quiet routine had been talk of the wedding. The wedding that should have happened two months ago but didn’t thanks to Craig and the cashier at Anne Marie’s Bakery.

Apparently, Craig liked his coffee with a little something extra and Beth provided it. Of course, their breakup probably wouldn’t have been so bad if the two of them hadn’t stumbled out of the employee bathroom with their pants down around their ankles for everyone to see, including Sam. Then again, she probably would have survived that humiliating moment if Craig hadn’t taken the opportunity to announce to one and all that she was horrible in bed. That had also led to him pointing out that she was too damn fat to turn any man on.

Instead of yelling at him, or at the very least bitch slapping him, Sam had been left speechless. Later, of course, she'd thought of a hundred different things she should have said. That always happened to her. She was really horrible at handling confrontation, which was probably why her high school debate teacher handed her a library pass the second week of school with a pitying look and told her that she could skip class for the rest of the year. It had been humiliating, but at least she didn't have to worry about passing out and hitting her head on the podium, again.

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Nathan, “the gifted one” as she liked to call him, never had to worry about trying to figure out the right thing to say at the right time. He was smooth, confident, funny, and if anyone was stupid enough to piss him off, he usually just beat the hell out of him.

The only good thing about the news of her humiliation spreading through the small town like wildfire was that it brought Nathan to the bakery where Sam hadn’t been able do anything more than sputter and pray that she didn’t add to her humiliation by passing out. Her brother simply strolled into the bakery, nodded in greeting to a few friends before coming to stand next to her. He’d looked from her red face to Craig’s lipstick smeared mouth and wrinkled clothes and smiled like it was Christmas morning. Although Nathan had been disappointed that it had only taken one punch to knock Craig out, she’d honestly never seen him happier.

He’d actually whistled a jaunty tune as he’d put his arm around her shoulders and led her out the door, but not before he’d drop-kicked Craig in the stomach for good measure. That really seemed to make his day. Not even the four hours they’d spent packing up her junk and moving it out of the small house she’d shared with Craig during one of the hottest days of the summer had dampened his mood. For weeks afterwards, she’d look over at him when he sighed dreamily and found him once again smiling fondly.

Sam flicked on the kitchen light as she walked into the dark room. Why anyone would build the kitchen on the south side of the house, she would never know. Granted, whoever built this house probably hadn’t foreseen two generations of Powers ignoring the upkeep of the property.

She walked over to the large porcelain sink and yanked open the yellowed curtains, revealing what should have been a beautiful sight. Instead, all she saw was a large ratted nest of briars, old leaves, and twigs with just a hint of sunlight peeking through. She groaned as she reached over and turned on the coffeepot that she'd been forced to buy when the old one caught on fire. It was just another sad reminder of all the work that was waiting for her.

Not that she was really complaining. Thanks to all the work around the house and property, she was able to stay busy when she wasn't working at the hospital. It made pretending that she didn't have a social life by choice that much easier, because no one would believe that she had to rush home right after work every night because she missed Charlie, the bane of her existence.

She reached over the coffee pot and opened the cabinet that had seen better days and sighed when the handle broke off in her hand. Without batting an eye, she tossed the rusted handle onto the counter to join the rest. She opened the cabinet and reached inside for the box of blueberry pop tarts and almost cried when all she found was an empty box.

Damn it.

She'd have to settle for strawberry pop tarts, her second favorite. She'd really been looking forward to starting her day with some blueberry goodness. It was fine, Sam thought with a sigh, placing her breakfast tarts in the toaster. At least she could look forward to eating her breakfast in peace without a hundred-pound hound from hell stealing her food.

Just as the mouthwatering aroma of heated synthetic strawberry filling and icing hit her nose the light in the kitchen flickered out. Her eyes automatically shot to the coffee pot that had just been warming up and ready to spurt out the lifesaving elixir only to find the red light off.

Sam grumbled as she grabbed the flashlight off the counter and extra fuses for the fuse box and headed for the pale-yellow basement door that had been the star of most of her childhood nightmares. It figured that the one time she needed Charlie he was off terrorizing squirrels. It didn't matter that she was a grown woman, she hated going into the old cellar.

Always had and always would.

It was creepy, dark, and gave off a sinister vibe no matter what Nathan said. Of course, he'd never been scared of the cellar. Nothing ever scared him. When they used to come here as kids to visit Grandma Powers the little bastard used to hide down there, leaving Sam to Grandma's cheek pinching, reminiscing about better days, and prune remedies. Hours later he'd come back upstairs smiling, covered in dust and picking spiders off his clothes and god, how she'd envied him.

The one time she'd spent more than five minutes in the basement had been life altering. Her grandmother sent her down to the basement for a jar of prunes for a snack when neither of them could find Nathan, who'd smartly ran off after their father dropped them off earlier that morning. At the time, Sam had dreaded the basement and the prunes in equal measure. It wasn't until she had the jar of prunes in her hand that her hatred for the basement won out. Her grandmother, eighty at the time, had forgotten that she'd sent eight-year-old Sam downstairs two minutes earlier and shut the basement's only light off, closed the door, and promptly bolted it shut.

Several things occurred during the memorable ten hours that she'd stayed locked in the basement. Her fear of spiders and all things creepy took on a whole new level of terror. She'd also discovered that the old basement was soundproof, given that no one heard her screams. She would have kicked the door at the top of the stairs, but she hadn't been able to find the narrow passageway that led to the stairwell in the pitch-black. It was also when she'd discovered that the basement was haunted, which had only taken five seconds of listening to the eerie growling coming from the wall that she hadn't imagined no matter what Nathan says, to help her come to that conclusion.

It was also one of the reasons why she avoided going down into the basement whenever possible.

Of course, her inability to deal with anything stressful was probably her least favorite development from her time spent in the basement, hence the passing out at damn near everything. It was kind of funny how she could handle working a trauma and even help put someone back together, but any hint of embarrassment, confrontation, or stress had her hitting the floor. What made it worse was that everyone knew about her problem. It had made her a target all through school and made her the town joke on more than one occasion. It helped that her brother was the town's golden boy, but not by much.

No one respected her, especially at work. She'd lost count of how many people she'd trained had been promoted ahead of her over the years. Even though she had the least amount of patient complaints, put in more hours than anyone else, and had more training and experience under her belt than anyone in the emergency department, it didn't seem to matter to Dr. Adams. When she'd worked up the nerve, and also made sure that she was sitting down just in case, to confront him, he'd pointed out that he was afraid that she'd blackout during an emergency even though it had never happened. Not once in the seven years she'd worked as a nurse.

She paused in front of the thick oak door, half-hoping to hear Charlie's scratching demand to be let in so that she wouldn't have to do this alone. It really was the only thing the dog was good for, Sam decided. Knowing there was no other choice when she didn't hear the annoying bastard's demand to be let back in, Sam took a deep breath, opened the door, and told herself that ghosts weren't real. Knowing that standing here wasn't going to help, she reached out and placed her hand against the smooth stone wall as she navigated the steep stone stairs.

Admittedly, the cellar was well put together with its old-fashioned workmanship. It was the one thing that didn't require Sam to spend her hard-earned money to fix. Whoever built the stone cellar really knew what they were doing. None of the rocks

were falling out or even cracking. It remained cool in the summer and winter, and thankfully, had never flooded.

At the bottom of the stairs, she shifted to the side so that she could walk through the small passage that led to the cavernous basement. When she reached the end of the passageway her foot caught on something and she stumbled the rest of the way.

“Damn it!” she muttered, catching herself before she fell.

“Who the hell is that?” a man’s voice demanded, making her heart skip a beat as dread filled her.

Sam’s eyes widened when she realized that the normally dark basement was

brightly lit by sunlight, flashlights, and her grandfather’s old lanterns. Her eyes shot from a group of six men, several of them holding sledgehammers, to the wide-open cellar doors that she hadn’t been able to open in years. Her eyes shot to the pile of broken rocks by their feet and then up to the hole in the wall to her left.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” she demanded before common sense kicked in and once it did, she froze on the spot.

Six men had broken into her house and were tearing her cellar apart with sledgehammers. Her breath caught when she heard the telltale click of a gun being cocked. Correction, six armed men had broken into her basement.

“Drop the flashlight,” a large man with short curly red hair said, aiming a gun at her.

The flashlight and the box of fuses hit the floor before the last syllable left his mouth. She even put her hands up without being asked to. She wasn’t a wimp, but she also wasn’t stupid. One woman against six armed men in the middle of nowhere wasn’t exactly hope-inducing.

“Grab her,” he said, gesturing to two large men who didn’t look particularly happy to see her. Sam went to take a step back and take her chances when the men grabbed her roughly and dragged her over to the red-headed man.

“We really didn’t need a fucking complication with this,” he grumbled, rubbing the back of his thick neck as he shot her an accusing glare like this was somehow her fault.

Sam licked her lips nervously. “Listen, I don’t know why you’re here tearing apart my storm cellar, but I think there’s been a mistake. You have the wrong house,” she said, using the same calm, reassuring tone she used when she worked in the emergency room.

He looked around the basement and shook his head. “No, this is the right basement,” he said as he gestured to a large flat grey stone just above the small hole in the wall they’d created. Sam looked at the initials carved into the stone and frowned. She’d never noticed them before. He reached over and ran his fingers over the R first and then the T.

He tapped the spot. “I carved my marker the day we finished building this cellar.”

“Um,” she cleared her throat, trying to figure out a way to say this tactfully, “this cellar is over three hundred years old,” she pointed out.

“Three hundred and fifty-four to be exact,” the man said with an amused smile.

Okay...

“What I meant to say is that clearly you didn’t build this cellar. So, you’ve got the wrong house,” Sam rushed to explain when black spots started to dance around her vision. Passing out right now was not a good idea, she told herself, fighting it with everything she had as she looked him over.

He didn't look a day over thirty and she already knew that her grandmother had never hired anyone to work on the cellar because there had never been a need. So clearly this man had either just carved his initials into the rock before she'd spotted them or he was insane.

She was gonna go with insane, Sam decided, slowly exhaling as the black dots multiplied and threatened to drop her on her ass.

He sighed heavily. "Look, I don't have time for this. My mate's being a bitch and won't get off my ass until I check on something. Unfortunately, you walked in on something that you shouldn't have seen. Granted, we would have taken care of you before we left," he said with a careless shrug of his shoulders as she fought to process what he'd said.

She tried to take a step back only to have her arms yanked roughly behind her back and her hands tied together. Someone kicked out her legs, causing her to drop to her knees on the stone floor, sending sharp pain through her knees and legs.

"I'm sorry about this, little human," the man said as he pulled back a large fist.

"No!" she cried out seconds before she was struck in the temple. She fell backward, slamming her head against the stone floor with a sickening crack as her world went black.