



Lodged

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Category: Romance, Billionaire Romance

Description: Her memories are lost, but he won't leave the past behind...

All I ever wanted was to get my degree, live life in a big city, then return home to my small town.

That was the dream, and it was on the horizon.

Until I met him—my hot, unassuming lab instructor, Gio Bianchi.

As labs go by, I grow more curious about him and the possibility of us being more.

When we finally move past hiding and sneaking around in fortuitous encounters, the holidays are upon us. We decide to spend them with our families before sharing our happy news— that love has lodged itself in our hearts.

But our luck runs out, and an accident separates us, wiping away the last four years of my life. Making me forget so many painful memories and the man who now stands before me...

Still, life has a few more tricks up its sleeve. The future may not be so grim ,because Gio remembers what we shared and won't give up so easily—even if it means making me fall in love with him again.

Will the love Ruin and Gio once had be enough to restore the future they'd planned, or will one moment in time seal their fates forever, taking away the one thing they wanted most?

Lodged is book two in the Kinsmen Billionaires Series. Each book is a standalone with an HEA, and the books should be read in order. Please see inside for the content warning.

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Chapter 1

Gio Bianchi

It never gets old. It doesn't matter how many times I've been a teaching assistant, I always get butterflies the first time I enter the lab to introduce myself to a new class. This semester, I'm teaching Environmental Technology Lab IV, a class geared toward juniors. I always enjoy seeing their growth as they advance in their studies—from the clueless and eager freshmen to the more determined and driven juniors and seniors.

“Good afternoon, everyone. I'm Giorgio Bianchi. I'm a doctoral student in the Forestry Department, and I'll be your instructor for this lab. I like calling the roster on the first day so I can put a face to the name,” I inform my eighteen students, a smile on my face.

As always, the moment I say “roster,” their faces morph from boredom to mild panic—it's like a wake-up call. One by one, I call their names, and they answer with a quick “here” or “me.” I'm about halfway through when I spot a very unique name:Ruin MacAllister. I scan the room, and my gaze lands on a gorgeous girl timidly raising her hand.

What the fuck am I doing thinking about a student as gorgeous?

Her long, red hair is in a braid, and her eyes are the prettiest shade of green—soft and clear. A few freckles adorn her face, making her look younger, more like a freshman, though she must be around twenty-one as a junior. She's looking at me like she's

trying to figure out the meaning of life, and I hold all the answers. A few students start whispering, and the spell between us is broken.

“Here. I’m sorry,” Ruin says as she fixes a few strands of hair behind her ear. I clear my throat and continue calling names. Once I’m done, I go over today’s experiments, and the students take out their lab manuals and get to work.

Releasing a deep breath, I take a seat at my desk. In the four years I’ve been a teaching assistant, I’ve never looked at a student with that kind of intensity.

Get it together, Gio.

“Gio, could you please help us?” a student calls me to her workstation. I nod and give her a quick smile as I approach her and her lab partner.

“Everything okay? I ask them as I push my safety glasses back against the bridge of my nose.

“I can’t seem to understand these instructions in the manual. What is a beaker?” My eyes go wide, and my eyebrows shoot to the sky. How is she a third-year student who doesn’t know what a beaker is? It’s sitting right in front of her. Her lab partner giggles, as Alyssa, the girl who asked for help, bats her lashes at me. That’s when it hits me—she’s flirting with me. It’s not the first time a student has done something silly to get my attention.

I release a deep breath and give her a pointed look. As much as I enjoy interacting with my students, I don’t want anyone to think I’m here looking for a hookup. All my life, I’ve been told I’m easy on the eyes, but flirting—let alone breaking the rules—has never been my strong suit. As the oldest sibling, I grew up as the responsible, determined, and serious one of the bunch. My brother Luca, on the other hand, has always been the Casanova.

“Here, this is a beaker. That one is actually the size we need,” Ruin interrupts, holding the beaker up in Alyssa’s face. I chuckle but quickly cover it with a cough.

“Yes, that’s correct, Ruin. Thank you,” I tell her, and her cheeks immediately turn red—almost as red as her hair. She’s a vision.

“No problem, Mr. Bianchi. I just figured it was something simple I could help with,” she says with a shrug. Then she returns to her bench, right across from where I’m standing, and starts talking with her lab partner. I nod at Alyssa and her classmate as I make my way back to my desk.

“Damn. Ruin had to come and ruin it,” I hear Alyssa say as her friend explodes in laughter. I close my eyes and count to three before addressing the entire class.

“I understand this is a long lab, and I’m okay with you all taking breaks when the experiments allow it...” The room immediately quiets, and I feel all eyes on me. “...but under no circumstances will I allow any horseplay or backtalk in this room.”

Everyone looks confused except Alyssa, her friend Abby, and Ruin. Two of them look furious, while the other gives me a thankful smile.

“We are all adults here, and I expect you to act like it. Backtalk isn’t acceptable, and won’t be tolerated in this lab.” I give Alyssa a pointed look, and she immediately lowers her gaze. I make eye contact with a couple of other students to make sure we’re all on the same page, and then return to my desk and take a couple of deep breaths.

I’ve always been easygoing, and I’ve never used my stern voice with any of my students. But somehow, this girl, Ruin, is triggering something inside me. It’s better if I don’t figure out what it is—she’s a student, and the less I think about her, the better.

Needing to get my mind off a certain redhead, I sit down to analyze data for a paper I'm working on. The last one I need to publish before I graduate.

Yeah, let's focus on this. It's time for me to graduate.

The lab continues without any more silly questions, and the three hours go by fast. As hard as I try not to, I steal glances at Ruin whenever I think no one is watching. To my surprise, I've caught her staring at me a couple of times, too. Coincidence? Innocent curiosity? Fuck, why am I even thinking like this?

I shake off the thought, feeling ridiculous, as the students start packing up to leave.

Clearing my throat and standing up, I address the class again. "As some of you finish your experiments for today, please remember the lab report is due at the beginning of the next lab, and it must be submitted individually." I look around, making sure everyone understands what I said. Even though it's in their class syllabus, many students will feign innocence and pretend they didn't know they needed to submit their lab reports. "If you need help, I have office hours on Wednesdays, or you can email me as well."

"Bye, thank you," a student named Scott says on his way out. I nod at him with a smile.

When the lab is finally empty, I walk by each station to make sure no one left dirty labware or any personal belongings behind. I've seen one too many AirPods, cellphones, and hoodies in my time as a teaching assistant.

"How did the lab go?" Professor Smith asks as I leave the classroom. He's the director of the environmental program and my boss.

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“It was fine, you know how it is. Most students are ready to dive into their experiments, some are clueless, and a few are just taking the lab because they need the credits to graduate,” I reply with a shrug, tilting my head to the side.

My mind is still stuck on a certain redhead with the brightest smile and the most unique name I’ve ever heard. I can’t stop thinking about what it must have been like growing up with that name—the teasing, the endless bullying. And yet, how amazing she must be to be smiling the way she does, despite it all.

When I was growing up, people were bullied for the silliest things—their names, what they brought for lunch, where they lived, or what they wore. I hope it wasn’t like that for her, but kids can be cruel when they want to be.

“You have a pretty good assessment of your students, and it looks like you’re becoming more comfortable in your teaching role. Do you see yourself pursuing a career in academia, Gio?” Professor Smith asks as he rearranges his glasses on the bridge of his nose and rests his hip against a bench across from where I’m standing.

I inhale a deep breath before answering. Even though I’ve loved doing this teaching assistant gig, I’m not sure it’s the only thing I want to do with my degree. The environment is constantly changing, and it’s of utter importance to me to understand how I can help keep the balance between human development and nature.

“To be completely honest, I’m not sure.” I wince at my own words, knowing that’s not the answer he’s expecting. I’m about to graduate; I should have my career path clear by now.

To my surprise, Professor Smith chuckles as he comes closer to me. “It’s normal to not know which way to go, Gio. Don’t sweat it. Maybe you’d be interested in a postdoctoral position in my lab while you decide? Food for thought.” He pats my back as he makes his way out of the lab, and I’m left speechless. I thought he would be disappointed in me. I guess there’s no tougher critic than yourself.

As I’m making my way back to my desk to collect my bag, I catch sight of a folded paper on the bench where Ruin and her lab partner were working. The paper is intricately folded into the shape of a bird. I pick it up, and upon closer inspection, I realize it’s a crane.

Hmm, interesting. I wonder if Ruin made this.

I’m about to toss it in the trashcan near the door when I notice writing inside. Carefully, I unfold it, and it says, “Kelly Riddle is a badass.” I chuckle and internally berate myself for thinking it was something related to Ruin. It serves me well for thinking about students when I shouldn’t. Once I’ve tossed it, I head to Main Street for food. I’m starving, and there’s a shawarma with my name on it.

Chapter 2

Ruin MacAllister

“Dumb, Ruin, you’re so dumb.” I berate myself as I step into my apartment. I live in one of the campus housing villages with three other roommates.

“Hey, Ruin, what’s up?” Evelyn, one of my roommates, greets me from the couch in the living room as I walk in.

“Ooph, I didn’t see you. Hi, Eve,” I say as I grab my chest with my hand, startled by her unexpected presence.

“So, why are you dumb?” she asks, a huge grin on her face. Evelyn is my closest friend here at school—she’s majoring in business administration, while I’m majoring in Forest Management.

“Nothing, I just left my favorite pen at the dining hall. By the time I went back, it was gone.” I pout for good measure, and Eve cracks up.

“Oh, your lucky pen? It’s okay, I’ll get you a new one, and since it’ll be a gift, it would still be the lucky one,” she states as if she has solved a huge mystery and is content with the result. She then turns her back to me and unpauses the movie she was watching when I came in.

God, I’m going to hell. Now I will have to toss my pen so she doesn’t realize I was lying. There’s no way I’m telling her that my new lab instructor makes my insides melt. Gio Bianchi is an angel on earth. He’s tall, with just enough muscle to show he takes care of his body, but not in that gym-rat way. His blond hair flows effortless, in soft waves on top, shorter on the sides. Blue eyes as clear as the Caribbean and a sharp jaw I’d love to lick and nip at in equal measure.

My stomach decides to make an unholy sound, yanking me back from my daydream. I try to cover it with a cough. Great—besides being dumb, I’m also the worst liar. Sigh. I quickly go to the kitchen and grab a bottle of water from the fridge before disappearing into my room. I don’t want Eve to continue questioning me, so I run and hide in my private solace.

The apartment is nice and comfortable; the common area is the kitchen and the living room. It might feel crowded at times, but I love living here. The kitchen is the first thing you see as you enter, with a breakfast bar dividing it from the living area. We have a huge TV—a present from Michaela’s dad. Her family owns a tobacco farm in the eastern part of the state; needless to say, they are loaded. Each of us has our own room, and there are two bathrooms—Evelyn and I share one, while Michaela shares

with Charlotte, our other roommate. Even though I'm twenty-four, I get along with the girls pretty well. They've never questioned why I started school later than everyone else.

Once I'm in my room, I toss my backpack on the floor and flop onto my bed. Like the creeper I am, I pull out my phone and look up Gio Bianchi on the university website. According to the info here, he's in the last year of his PhD. He came from Argentina and has won numerous teaching awards while excelling in his research. Wow, he's the whole package: smart, dedicated, and hot. After swooning a little bit more over his official picture on the school website, I get a text notification from my twin sister, Rain.

Rain: What's up, loser? You still coming home this weekend?

I chuckle at her endearment. It never fails to make me smile.

Ruin: Hi, love. I don't think so *frown emoji* I already got a ton of homework for next week.

Rain: What? This is your first week of school. I knew you should have stayed at the community college here. *smh emoji*

Ahh, there it is. My family loves me—I know that—but they never waste a chance to tell me what they think about my decision to come to Raleigh to finish my college degree.

Instead of getting into a never-ending argument, I switch topics.

Ruin: How's Mama doing?

Rain: She's good. She'll be bummed you're not coming, though.

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Ruin: Fall break will be here before you know it, and I'll spend a whole five days at home.

Rain: Yeah, yeah. Two more months... I miss you, sis.

Ruin: It's only been three days since I came to Raleigh *laugh emoji*

Ruin: But I miss you, too. You sure you can't take a weekend off and come visit?

Rain: And who would help Mama with the diner? You know I can't do that to her.

I hate that our lives changed so much after Daddy passed. Rain quit college so she could help Mama run our family diner.

Ruin: I know, I know. I love you, sis.

Rain: Love you too.

Chapter 3

Gio Bianchi

"It's finally here," I murmur to myself as I grab the letter from my mailbox in the tiny office I share with other grad students in the environmental department. With six desks, there's not much space to wander around or have any privacy, but I enjoy having an office on campus. I quickly pocket the letter, and after dropping my book bag on my desk, I rush across campus to get a coffee before I start the day. The walk

is quiet; the campus is almost empty, with the first class at eight in the morning and it's only seven. The air is already humid, even at this early hour, and I can't wait for the weather to cool down. Unfortunately, we're in the middle of summer, and it will be a while before the leaves change color and I can enjoy the crisp morning air.

The ringing bell as I enter the coffee shop pulls me out of my thoughts. The intense coffee smell mixed with that of warm bread puts a smile on my face. It doesn't matter if it's cold or hot outside; my morning coffee can't be skipped.

"Morning, Gio. The usual?" one of the baristas asks as I approach the counter.

"You know it," I reply with a smile. I've been coming here for so long that everyone who works here knows me and greets me by my name. That's what I love about living in Raleigh—it has all the perks of a big city but is small enough to get to know people on a deeper level.

After paying and leaving a couple of bills in the tip jar, I scan the cafe to pick a spot to sit down. I don't even know why I do this—I always sit on the loveseat by the bay window. There's an electric furnace in the middle of the cafe, and even though it's off during summer, it gives a cozy vibe to the place. There are also bookshelves with well-loved books ranging from textbooks to sci-fi, to fantasy, and even romance novels. I usually don't have much time to read things that aren't research-related, but I do enjoy looking at the titles and spines from time to time.

The barista places my coffee and croissant on the counter, and after murmuring thanks, I head toward the loveseat. I usually engage in conversation with whoever is manning the store, but more customers arrived while I was wandering around. I don't like interrupting them while they work.

Once I'm situated, I take the envelope out of my back pocket, and with butterflies in my chest, I unfold the letter and take a deep breath before reading it.

Wolfe University

The Graduate School

Mr. Giorgio Bianchi

With this letter, we inform you about your doctoral thesis defense presentation on November 1st at two in the afternoon. It's your last step before you can apply for Fall graduation. Your committee members have been notified, as well. An auditorium will be assigned at a later date.

Please let us know if there's anything we can help you with.

Regards,

Sue Berkoff,

Graduate Student Services

"Fuck yes!" I shout, fist-pumping the air.

"What's all the commotion about?" Penny asks, taking a seat next to me. I cover my face with the letter and grin like a lunatic even though she can't see me.

"Are you going to tell me or no, Giorgio?" she says, emphasizing my full name, knowing I hate it when people do that.

Penny was actually the first person I met at grad school orientation. She came for her MBA and stayed to pursue a PhD in economics. Her mom is from Colombia, so we instantly clicked—our shared Latino roots made it easy for me to connect. I've always been a bit of a loner and not great at making new connections. I adore my

siblings, and the few friends I have I consider family, but opening up to others has never come easily.

Contrary to what everyone thinks, Penny and I are best friends—there's never been an urge to explore anything romantically. I've never admitted this to anyone before, but I've never felt theseo-called "butterflies" with anyone in my life. I often wonder if there's something wrong with me, but instead of worrying about it, I've simply devoted myself to my studies and making sure my siblings are okay and thriving.

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“Yes, I’ll tell you, Penelope María,” I say as I remove the paper from my face, just in time to see her rolling her eyes at me. “I got the notification for defending my dissertation.” I’m practically oozing with pride.

“Aww, this makes me so happy! We’re finally leaving this forsaken town.” Mischief dances in Penny’s amber eyes as mine fill with fire.

“I’ll never understand how on Earth you chose to come to this forsaken town and spend four years of your life here when the world is your oyster. Literally.” I raise my hands and shoulders in question, watching a smirk spread across Penny’s face.

“We’ve had this conversation so many times, dear Gio,” Penny starts, taking a bite of my croissant and setting it back down as I stare at her, mouth agape. The audacity. “Daddy might be a rich motherfucker, but he wouldn’t accept any of his precious kids attending any other school that isn’t his beloved alma mater,” Penny finishes as she tries to snatch my croissant—or whatever is left of it—from the plate, but this time I’m prepared, and I eat it in one single bite.

“You’re no fun. Now what am I going to eat?” Penny asks with a pout as I grin with my mouth full of buttery goodness.

“You know you can buy your own, right?” I ask after taking a sip of my coffee. It’s perfection—the right cream-to-coffee ratio.

“But if I buy my own, it’ll be too much, and I need to watch what I eat. But if I just share yours, it’s the right amount!” Penny exclaims, as if this is obvious knowledge.

“You know I don’t understand girl math,” I say, shaking my head in mock indignation. Penny cackles at my comment, and suddenly, all eyes are on us. I’m laughing, too, when I lock onto a set of clear green eyes. I knew I’d see her tomorrow in the lab, but seeing her outside of class makes it extra special.

I get up from the loveseat and make my way toward the counter. I need to buy a couple of croissants before Penny becomes cranky and has a bad day—or at least, that’s what I tell myself. As I approach where Ruin is waiting for her order, I notice the flush on her face, her rosy cheeks dotted with freckles like a beautiful constellation.

“Hi, Ruin, fancy seeing you here,” I say once I’m close enough to her. A pleasant aroma of apples and honey invades me, and I can’t help the smile that forms on my face. Of course, the girl with red, fiery hair and rosy cheeks would smell like red, delicious apples.

“Oh, Mr. Bianchi. Good morning.” I grin at her greeting, and her eyes immediately squeeze shut. Now, not only are her cheeks red, but her neck is, too.

“I’m so sorry. Professor Bianchi,” she corrects herself, biting her lip. “No, wait, that didn’t sound right either.” She huffs in exasperation, and after taking a deep breath, tries again. “I’m just trying to be polite and trying to greet you in a respectful way, but so far, it all sounds so old and antiquated.”

Ruin covers her face as she finishes her sentence, and a genuine belly laugh rolls out of me. She looks so cute, all flustered. Ruin peeks through her fingers, and my laugh calms down, transforming into a huge smile. I cross my arms and stick my hip out, waiting for her to uncover her face.

“You’re not upset with me?” she asks hesitantly.

“Why would I be? You were simply trying to be polite. And I might be many things, but being insecure about my age is not one of them.”

A sheepish laugh escapes her lips as she rearranges her perfectly braided hair. “Oh, Mr. Bianchi, you’re truly the kindest. I’ll see you tomorrow in the lab.” She grabs her to-go cup and gives a two-finger salute before power-walking toward the exit. This girl is so intriguing.

Shaking the thoughts out of my head, I order the croissants and head back to the loveseat, where Penny sits, raising an eyebrow in question.

“What?” I ask as I take a seat next to her, offering her one of the croissants.

“Who was that, and when are you going out on a date?” I choke at Penny’s question.

“What the hell are you talking about?” I take a huge bite of my fresh croissant, hoping it’ll give me time to avoid answering what I know she’s asking.

“The pretty redhead. You,” Penny says, pointing first at the door, then at me. “I mean, hello—I could feel the chemistry between the two of you from here.”

When I don’t say anything, she presses further.

“And don’t try to deny it, Giorgio. It’s the first time in four years I’ve seen you smiling at a girl like that.”

I know she’s right. I’ve never felt so captivated by a girl before, but there’s nothing there. Ruin is just a nice girl. And my student. That’s all there is.

“Oh, Ruin? She’s one of my students this semester,” I finally say, trying to sound nonchalant.

“Oh, forbidden love—I like it.” The sass in her tone is palpable. She’s enjoying this way too much, and I cannot go there. She’s right—it’s forbidden. I cannot engage in a relationship with a student, especially when I’m so close to graduation.

“You just read too many romance novels. There’s nothing there, Penny,” I say, finality in my tone. She shrugs as she eats her croissant, and I release a deep breath. I think I’m finally off the hook.

Chapter 4

Ruin MacAllister

August came and went, and it was just so hot. It never gets this hot in the mountains, so it would definitely take me a while to get used to the weather in the Piedmont. I still haven’t been able to make a trip back home to visit my family. I’m hoping I’ll be able to go Labor Day weekend, but there’s just so much to do here that I barely have time to breathe. Even though it was my choice—my dream, really—to come to Raleigh to get my bachelor’s degree, I miss Azalea Creek tremendously. Some might say I’m a silly small-town girl, but when you have everything you need and more with the most gorgeous mountain views, there’s really no need to leave.

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That's why I decided to pursue a degree in environmental management—so I could move back home after graduation and work for the forestry department, helping care for the magnificent Blue Ridge Mountains.

“Ruin,” my labmate, Kelly, whispers as she elbows me in my belly. I bend in pain; I wasn't expecting her to take my breath away, but here we are.

“Ms. MacAllister, are you okay?” Oh crap, now I understand why Kelly was elbowing me. I must have missed something Gio said. Transitioning to calling him Gio instead of Professor Bianchi was an adjustment, but I like Gio better—it fits his personality better than the stuffy “Professor.” Plus, he's corrected a few people in the lab when they call him Mr. Bianchi, asking them to simply call him Gio.

“Umm, yes. Yes, I'm okay. I'm sorry I wasn't really paying attention.” I try to fix my hair, but the moment my hands touch my braid, I remember I'm using latex gloves, so instead of relaxing, I stress out even more. Great, I'm making a fool of myself. Alyssa snickers on the bench across from me, and it takes everything in me not to glare at her. But I won't engage; she's not worth it.

“It's okay, I just wanted to know if you could describe the process of using a pH meter. But I can ask someone else,” Gio says, scanning the lab for any students willing to answer his question. I immediately raise my hand.

“I can do it,” I say with a little more enthusiasm than necessary, and the entire class chuckles. Ugh, I'm such a nerd. When I look at Gio, his eyes are narrowed to slits, he's not having my antics.

“When we started this lab, I mentioned I wouldn’t tolerate any sort of disrespect or funny business in this class. Let’s behave like the adults we are.”

Damn, why am I suddenly feeling all flustered by his stern voice? Ugh, this is not the time nor the place to be having spicy thoughts about my hot lab teacher.

I’m actually used to being made fun of—you don’t get to be named Ruin and grow up without any sort of bullying at school. But all that teasing just gave me “thick skin,” as my mama says. I don’t care what others think or say about me—I vibe to the beat of my own drum.

“Ruin, whenever you’re ready,” Gio says, stepping aside to give me space in the middle of the lab, where several pH meters are arranged and ready to be used.

“As we learned in class this week, a pH meter checks the amount of free hydrogen atoms in a given solution. What we are going to do today is to check the pH of several soil samples taken across the state. After taking at least six points of data for each sample, we will try to guess what the soil is being utilized for—lawn, crop, or forest.”

When I look around, the entire class is looking at me, waiting for what I’ll say next. Gio gives me a nod with a smile, so I continue, “After turning on the pH meter, all we have to do is to calibrate it with two different solutions: one with a pH of 4, which means it’s acidic, and another with a pH of 9, which means the level is basic. After we get the electrode clean with distilled water, we proceed to check the pH in each of our samples, making sure to clean the probe between samples to prevent cross contamination.”

I finish, and when no one speaks, I start to feel nervous. I instinctively try to fix my hair again, but then I remember I’m still wearing gloves, and my hands freeze in midair.

“Excellent job, Ruin. If I don’t watch out, I’m going to lose my job as your lab instructor,” Gio says with a grin, and the entire class chuckles. I feel the rush of blood going up my neck and face and quickly head back toward my lab bench, where Kelly is sporting a Cheshire cat smile.

“Don’t you dare start,” I warn her, but she knows me; I’m not mad. I just don’t want her to say what she’s been saying every single lab for the past month. We’ve had several classes in the past, and we get along pretty well.

“What? That Gio is utterly and completely smitten with you?” she teases, and I facepalm as I groan.

“You’re the worst. One of these days, someone is going to hear you, and they’re going to start a rumor that we won’t be able to stop. He’s a professional and a kind instructor to everyone, not just me.” I try to make her see how badly this little joke could backfire, but she’s relentless.

“It’s not like he’s the dean or the department head. He’s just a lab instructor, and no offense, but I bet you two are close in age. It’s not like this is an indecent age-gap affair.”

The moment Kelly says “affair,” the entire class decides to fall completely silent.

Crap.

Gio clears his throat and makes his way toward us. Great.

“Ladies, I don’t mind you chatting while working, but please keep the topics PG. It’s none of my business to know if any of you are having an affair—or any other activity that’s not related to environmental management.”

Even though Gio speaks in a kind tone, I'm mortified that he now thinks I'm displaying and participating in indecent behavior. When he turns to go back to his desk, I glare at Kelly, but she simply laughs. I shake my head; there's really not much I can do.

After I'm done with the experiment, and Kelly and I have compared notes, I pack my bag and notice I'm the last one in the lab.

"Oops, I'm sorry, Gio. I didn't realize I was keeping you here," I say as I wash my hands in the sink.

"Not a problem. There's technically fifteen more minutes left before the lab is over," he says simply. And I, like an idiot, just stare at him. He's so damn handsome.

"Right, thanks anyway, Gio." I wash my hands, and after drying them quickly with a paper towel, I head toward the door.

"Ruin, wait."

I stop but don't turn around, feeling nervous about what he might say.

"I'm sorry if I embarrassed you. That wasn't my intention. It just felt awkward to have Kelly talking about an 'affair' and not call you both out after I've called out others for similar conversations."

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I thought he was going to say he was disappointed in me or something, but of course, this guy is kindness personified. I turn around with a smile on my face, and he immediately beams, noticeably relieved. This guy should really be on a GQ magazine cover or something. His eyes sparkle like two bright stars against the night sky, and his unruly hair is a perfect mess; I've seen him pass his hand over his head at least a hundred times today, but somehow he still manages to look amazing.

“You, uh, didn't. I'm used to worse things than being laughed at. You're always so nice and kind. And I'm not...” I shake my head because I'm just rambling; I'm not used to losing my words. I'm usually very well-spoken—a skill I developed from reading so much from a young age. My parents didn't go to college; my dad was a blue-collar guy. He worked hard and was always busy, but he loved to read. Every Sunday, he'd solve the newspaper crossword puzzle, making it a family affair. My older siblings would help with the dictionary, and Rain and I would try to guess words—or even make them up sometimes. Sunday mornings at home were the best.

“That's the thing, you shouldn't be used to being ridiculed. You are an amazing person, Ruin. Never forget that.”

He turns on his heel, and I'm left there by the lab door in awe. No one outside my family has ever been this nice to me.

Chapter 5

Gio Bianchi

It's two months before my dissertation presentation, and I've been crunching

numbers and running experiments over and over again to make sure my data is solid. I know all my data by heart—the methods I used, the variables, the statistics, and even the potential errors. Everything. I'm pretty sure if I had a roommate, they would say I recite my experiments in my sleep. It's the only thing I think about. I'm obsessed.

Good thing I live by myself.

In the first year of my doctorate degree, I rented an apartment just outside of campus, and I really enjoyed being able to walk to and from campus most days. But after investing the trust fund my grandpa left me, I came across more wealth than I could have ever dreamt of. At first, I thought I would be able to live a comfortable life without worrying about money.

But as time passed, I kept making more money in the trading market, and I didn't have the time or knowledge to keep up with my fortune. Luckily, my best friend is a financial wizard. Penny became my financial advisor two years ago, and I'm one of the top 10 most coveted billionaires in the world, according to Forbes.

Having such a large capital is both a blessing and a curse. I despise the spotlight—all I wanted in life was to be able to own a nice house and a good car, be able to visit my siblings often, and have a good enough financial cushion—enough to live comfortably if I ever lost my job, and until I found a new one.

But Penny is a shark and lives for the thrill of investing and making money. In the two years she has been managing my money, I went from a few hundred million dollars to three and a half billion. I've donated a lot, but somehow, Penny always manages to grow the gold pot again.

My most recent donation was twenty percent of my fortune to the State of North Carolina to build a science park—a place where all universities in the state could send

scientists to conduct research or utilize the facilities to optimize their experiments. I made the donation anonymously, of course. But I've kept tabs on the usage and development of the project, and they've broken ground already. It fills me with joy to know that I was able to help so many people excel in their work. Work, that in most cases, will have a direct impact on the betterment of humankind's quality of life, or on the conservation of the environment, which is my passion.

Penny: Hey, boss, do you have time to chat today?

Speak of the devil. I've been avoiding her like the plague all week. I know she wants to talk about investments and numbers, but all I have on my mind is my dissertation.

Gio: No. You know my assets better than anyone. Could you please handle them like you've been doing and fill me in at the end of the month?

Penny: It's the end of the month, boss.

Fuck, I honestly don't have time or head space for this.

Gio: Please don't call me boss. It makes me feel old, and we're the same age. I'm working really hard to have my manuscript ready before defending my dissertation. Can we please deal with this later?

Penny: Fine. I was simply trying to take your mind off of your dissertation, but yeah, I'll see you around.

Gio: Thank you! You're the best.

Lifting my arms into the air, I stretch my back, turning my head side to side to stretch my neck muscles, as well. When I check the time on the computer, I realize it's three in the afternoon, and I haven't had lunch. I don't think I had breakfast, either. The

ungodly sound my stomach decides to make at that exact moment confirms I'm correct. I have to go find sustenance, since I haven't been to the grocery store this past week, either, thanks to the dissertation consuming my every thought.

I grab my keys and wallet on the way out, and as soon as I close the door behind me, a wave of humidity hits me. I can't wait for the fall weather. How many times have I said the same thing in the past month?TMTC—Too Many Too Count.

My place is located two blocks from Main Street, and I always enjoy the walk and looking at all the unique houses in the area.

This is an "old" neighborhood in the sense that houses are either Victorian-style—like mine—or twentieth-century bungalows. One of my favorite parts of living here is the plant life people have in their gardens: a mixture of azaleas, roses, and native species. In fact, there's an amphitheater in the heart of the neighborhood, surrounded by a beautiful rose garden.

I'm about to cross the street when I hear someone crying. I stop to listen better since it's not unusual to hear toddlers crying around here. I think the amphitheater holds a story time for kids once or twice a week. But this cry sounds like it's from an adult. I know it's none of my business, but I go investigate anyway.

Even if I had fourteen million guesses as to who I'd find crying in the bushes, I never would have guessed it was someone I knew, someone who's been running through my mind on a loop. The person I find crying uncontrollably is one of my students—Ruin. Her unmistakable red hair is dancing with the wind, the sunrays hitting it through the shadows the tree top creates. She's wearing a burgundy dress, which contrasts beautifully against her creamy skin. Her back is to me as she sits at the bottom of the amphitheater, her chest rising and falling as she continues to cry. I make my way to her slowly—I don't want to startle her.

When I reach her, my shadow falls over her, and she quickly wipes the tears before looking up at me. as her gaze meets mine, a mix of panic and surprise transforms her face. I offer her a kind smile, though I'm sure I'm one of the last people she wants to see while crying her heart out.

“Gio, hi,” she says as she stands up. Once she's at her full height, I can appreciate the dress she's wearing. It has a vintage vibe with a damask print, sleeves that widen toward her wrists, and a flowy bottom. As she turns fully, I notice her brown suede boots when they click against the concrete—she looks stunning, even when her beautiful face is blotchy from crying.

“I'm sorry for interrupting you, but as I was heading to grab a bite, I heard someone crying and wanted to see if I could help.”

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Her face softens, and I release a breath, knowing she's relaxed a bit.

"You are so kind, Gio. But I have to be honest, I really didn't want anyone to see me like this." Her voice breaks on the last words, and she covers her face with her hands as she sits down again. I settle beside her, patiently waiting for her to calm down again so we can talk.

It hurts me to see her so distraught. "I understand if you want to be alone, but if there's anything I can do to help you—even if it's just listening—I'd be happy to," I tell her sincerely. I always care about my students, and for some reason, she's special to me.

"If you really don't have anything else to do than listen, then yes, please. I'd love to vent." I smile brightly at her, but my stomach decides to remind me how hungry I am at that exact moment. Heat rises in my chest. I don't think I've ever been so embarrassed in my life about my physiological needs.

"Oh, that's right. You were on your way to get something to eat." I'm about to tell her I can wait when she continues, "If you don't mind you can eat one of my granola bars. I really don't want to run into anyone I know right now." She gives me a tentative smile, and my grin widens.

"I'd love that granola bar," I tell her, and she reaches for her backpack. Our hands touch as she passes it to me, sending a shot of electricity shoots down my spine, and raising goose bumps all over my body.

"So," she begins as she readjusts her hair behind her ears. "It's a long story, but I

started school at a community college near my hometown. I was finally able to transfer to Wolfe this year, and although I'm loving the experience of being in a full four-year research university, I miss my family terribly." Ruin lowers her gaze at her admittance.

"Hey, there's nothing wrong with missing your family. I miss my siblings more than words can say, and they're not just a drive away," I admit with a shrug as I take a bite of the granola bar, which is surprisingly delicious.

"Oh, where are you from?" she asks, her face transforming with curiosity.

"I'm from Argentina. I moved here four years ago." Her eyes widen, and I chuckle.

"South America?" she asks, and I nod with a smile. "But that's so far away," she says, her voice barely above a whisper.

"It is. But I really wanted to come and study here." I smile remembering the day I got the acceptance letter. It was a cold, dark winter day, but as if the sky were playing matchmaker, a ray of sunlight blasted through the clouds just as I opened that letter. It was one of the happiest moments of my life.

"And here I am complaining to you. I'm sorry, Gio." Her eyes zero in on the ground, the realization of her self-perceived dramatics evident.

"Hey," I reply gently, hoping she'll look at me. When those green eyes meet mine, I'm mesmerized. They're clearer for some reason. I need to find a precious stone of that exact same color so that I can categorize them. I've never seen anything so beautiful.

"Anyway, tell me about you. I'm guessing you're really close to your family?" She nods. "And what's the issue? Do you have things to do this weekend that are keeping

you from going for a visit?" I press further, wanting to know if there's anything I can do to help.

"Well, that's the thing. I was going to leave today after my last class. I even had everything packed, but then my car wouldn't start." Her eyes fill with tears again, and it takes everything in me not to hug her and tell her everything is going to be okay. That's probably the most inappropriate thought I have ever had with a student. Get a grip, Gio.

"My place isn't too far. We can grab my car, and I can give yours a jump start." She shakes her head, and I'm really confused as to why she's not accepting my help.

"No, Gio. My car is beyond repair. I bought it right before I moved here. I knew it was used and well-loved, but it seemed to be in good enough shape to go back and forth a couple of times per month. But today, when I went to start it, it just...poof." Ruin makes an explosion sound, and my eyebrows shoot up.

"It would be a little funny, if I wasn't this sad." She chuckles at the memory. "I turned the key, and the car shook a little. Like rattling. I panicked, so I pressed the brake harder, but then smoke started coming out of the hood, and all I could think was that my car was going to burn my apartment building down." I know this isn't funny, and even though right now we seem like we are just two friends chatting away, I'm her instructor. I cover my mouth with my hand and clench my jaw to keep from laughing. I would have been freaking the hell out, too.

"So I got out of the car as fast as I could, then I ran to one of the emergency posts." She pauses and looks at me, making sure I know what she's talking about. I nod so she can continue her story—I know those posts. They are all around campus, and they are connected to campus police, so in case of an emergency, you simply press the blue button instead of calling 911.

“All I could think of saying was, ‘Smoke is coming out of my car! Please help.’ By the time the firefighters arrived, there were a lot of onlookers, and I was beyond mortified watching the fire department soak my little car down.” My protective instincts kick in, and I give Ruin a one-arm hug. She immediately closes the distance between us and rests her head on my chest.

“I felt so embarrassed. There I was, a twenty-four-year-old woman, fresh out of the mountains, trying to make it in the big city—but no. Fate had other plans for me.” She sniffles, and I press her harder against me. I shouldn’t be so aware of how well she fits with me, but her body is molded to mine. And it feels nice to have her this close.

“I know it was not a stellar moment, but there’s really nothing to feel embarrassed about. It could have happened to anyone. And if someone dares to judge you for that, it says more about them than it says about you,” I tell her, determined to put a smile on her face. She lifts her face from my chest, ever so slowly. Her hair is a little messy, but she gives me a shining smile. At that moment, I don’t think—I simply speak.

“I’ll tell you what. Let’s go to my place, and I’ll lend you my car for the weekend. I don’t need it anyway. And I think it’d be really good for you to see your family.” I don’t tell her that it’s not my only car—but that’s irrelevant at the moment.

“What? I could never accept that,” she says, sitting a little taller. I like her tenacity. She’s not one to take things for free. And there are so many more things I want to ask her—I want to know everything about her. But right now, I know seeing her family will do her a lot of good.

“Why not? I’m offering to help you just like I would any of my students. I know you’re going to see your family. You’re not going to use my car in illegal races. Right?” I say with a smile, and she chuckles. Damn, it makes me feel incredible

knowing I put that smile on her face. The moment I catch up with my thoughts, I frown. What the fuck is wrong with me?

“If you’re sure,” she says hesitantly.

“I’m positive.” I stand up and offer her my hand to help her up. She grabs her backpack and then accepts my hand.

“You know, I came to this place because I love the flowers. Not really thinking that the roses only bloom in the spring. But for some reason, this place always brings me peace,” she shares as we make our way up the stairs.

“Funny you should mention that. It has the same effect on me, too. It’s actually one of the reasons I got my place nearby.” I like the fact that we have things in common, and it’s not lost on me that she mentioned she’s twenty-four. She’s more mature than the average college student. No wonder I’ve been drawn to her since the moment I first saw her.

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We make it back to my place in no time, and I open the garage door with the remote fob I have in my pants pocket. It's an under-house garage since my house is on a hill and was built at an angle. When the door is fully open, I look at Ruin, and her mouth is agape. I try not to chuckle, but it is pretty endearing to see my life through other people's eyes.

"Do you have a roommate?" Ruin asks, curious.

"No, it's just me," I say as I cross my arms over my chest.

"So that means you have more than one car."

"Yes," I answer simply; there's no point in hiding it.

"But these cars are expensive," Ruin says as she takes a couple of steps into the garage and passes her hand over the hood of my dark gray Range Rover.

"They're just cars." I'm trying to get her mind away from the fact that this car alone probably costs more than her entire four years of education.

"No, Gio. I cannot drive this," she says, shaking her head.

"Please go see your family. Do it for me." She looks at me inquisitively. "Yes, do it for me. You get to see your family this weekend—something I can't do with mine." I don't tell her that I could just take my private jet and fly to Santiago to see my siblings. I just really want to do this for her.

“You’re definitely the nicest person I’ve ever met.” She flashes me a bright smile, and hope forms in my chest. She’s going to take me up on my offer. Why am I so hell-bent on this? I don’t want to go there right now. I know I’m breaking a lot of rules, and being so close to defending my thesis and graduating, it’s something quite stupid to do, but at this moment, I don’t care. I’m not taking advantage of her, and I’m not taking her grades hostage because of this. I’m simply helping someone out.

“I promise I’ll drive as safely as I can. And I’ll bring it back on Sunday night.” I nod and smile at her, silently closing our deal.

“Thank you so much, Gio. I’ll never be able to repay you this favor,” she says as she lunges to hug me. She takes me by surprise, so we stumble a couple of steps back. But the moment I hug her back, everything feels right in my world.

“There’s nothing to repay. You’re welcome.”

Chapter 6

Ruin MacAllister

After leaving Gio’s place, I drive around campus for a while to get comfortable with the car. I needed a relatively safe space with slow speed limits to test my abilities driving such an expensive car before taking it out on the highway. It feels amazing, and it’s so easy to drive. Nothing like my old Ford, which always rattled when I used the breaks.

Before going home for the weekend, I head back to my apartment to grab my things. Luckily, I was able to save my stuff before the firefighters came to douse my car. When I get to my apartment, all the girls are gathered in the living room.

“Ruin!” Evelyn exclaims. “Are you okay?” she adds as she gets up from the couch

and rushes to hug me.

“Yes, I’m okay. Just utterly embarrassed.” As I hug her back, my shoulders sag, letting her embrace comfort me. I wish I had hugged Gio longer, but I didn’t think it was appropriate—even though it felt so good to be in his arms, his warmth slipped through his gray sweater and into my skin.

“Oh, babes, there’s nothing to be embarrassed about. We were just worried sick. With all the people wandering around, we couldn’t find you. When we texted you and you didn’t reply, we thought something had happened to you,” Charlotte says, hurrying to hug me too.

“I just needed some time alone to process everything, you know?” I tell them sincerely, and they all nod. I’m glad they get me. I honestly hit the jackpot with my roommates.

“So what are you going to do now?” Everly asks, and damn, I’m going to hell. I’m going to have to lie to her once more.

“That’s the other thing I was doing. I went to the insurance company to file a report and they lent me a car.” I internally cringe at my lie—who in their right mind is going to believe that I got a Range Rover as a loaner for my totaled Ford? I also make a mental note to actually go to the insurance office on Monday after classes. Maybe there’s something they can do to help?

“Oh, that’s awesome. At least you’re still going to be able to visit your family. I know you really wanted to go this weekend,” Charlotte says, and I nod with a smile. I’d rather not say anything else that may lead to more lies.

“Thank you all for keeping an eye out for me. I’m going to head out before it gets too dark to drive.” I give them a little salute as I make my way to my room. Once I close

the door behind me, I exhale a deep breath. If I thought this was hard, I can't imagine how I'm going to spin it with my family when I get home. After making sure I have everything I need—clothes, toiletries, my laptop, and books—I check my phone, and I silently gasp at the amount of missed calls and texts. Most are from Rain, with a few from River and Miles, and even Mama. "Holy hell," I whisper. Do they know what happened to my car? But how? I didn't tell anyone, and I don't think any of my roommates have their numbers.

Deciding to handle all this mess after I get on the road, I grab my bags and close the door to my room behind me. I say goodbye to the girls before making it to the parking lot and packing my stuff into Gio's car. What a surreal day.

After I connect my phone to the car system, I look for my favorite playlist. I love country music at any time of the year, but during the fall, it just hits differently. Maybe it's the cadence in the singer's voice and the beautiful lyrics about love, but combined with the crisp air and the trees losing their leaves, it makes it a beautiful combination. Once one of my favorite songs plays in the background, I take a deep breath and try to make sense of this day. What are the odds of Gio finding me on the amphitheater steps? Out of the thousands of people at Wolfe University, it had to be him—the most attractive man I've ever seen.

Growing up in Azalea Creek, everyone knew everyone. Although I had a high school boyfriend, Tim, I knew he wasn't my forever. After three years together, we decided it was best to be friends and let each other pursue other interests. He went to trade school and now works with my brother, Miles, who has a construction company.

The two years I studied at the community college in Pine Shores, the town closest to Azalea Creek, I had a couple of dates here and there, but nothing serious. And even though I wouldn't say Tim or any other guy I've gone out with is ugly or unattractive, none of them hold a candle to Gio Bianchi. The way his blond hair curls on the top gives him a boyish look, perfectly contrasting the sharp lines of his jaw. But his

eyes—those eyes are like two pools on a warm, sunny day, shiny and bright.

By the time I come out of my daydreaming, I notice I've driven out of the city, and I'm now two hours into my drive. Needing to stretch for a little bit and a restroom break, I look for the next rest stop. It doesn't take me long to find one, but when I pull into the parking lot, I reconsider getting out of my car—it's deserted. I wait a few minutes, trying to get the courage to get out, when my playlist cuts off, and the ringtone I have set for my sister, Rain, starts playing through the car's sound system. Oh crap, I had absolutely forgotten I still didn't tell my family about my day. I hit connect on the touch screen.

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“Hello?” I say tentatively.

“Ruin Josephine MacAllister, where the fuck are you?” My sister's voice booms in the car, and I cringe at how loud it is. Damn, she used my full name too. I must be in deep shit.

“Hey, Rain, I’m at a rest stop trying to be brave and get out of the car to use the restroom,” I tell her honestly, letting the way she yelled at me slide. I’m sure they are all worried.

“A rest stop? So you’re still coming?” she asks, voice low with concern.

“Of course I’m coming, why wouldn’t I?” Now I’m curious to know what they know.

“Well, River got a phone call saying your car was totaled, and we all freaked out. We thought you were injured or something.” I can’t believe what Rain is saying; if her voice wasn’t so distraught, I’d think she was joking with me.

“Who called River?” I’m able to ask after a couple of silent beats.

“The insurance company called me, Ruin. Where are you? Are you safe?” The deep voice of my eldest brother fills in the car and a pang of guilt takes place in my chest. I should have let them know from the get-go. I hear Rain in the background asking River to give her the phone back, but we all know it’s a moot point. The car is in his name, and I’m an approved driver on his insurance. Ugh, why didn’t I think of this?

“Yes, I’m fine. I’m sorry I didn’t call earlier, but I didn’t know the insurance

company was going to call you. I figured I could explain everything when I got home,” I say, hoping it will help calm their nerves a bit.

“Fuck, okay. At least now we know you’re okay.” He releases a breath, and I feel a little more guilty. “How much longer before you get home?”

I look around, but all I see are trees. I know I’m on the highway, but I don’t remember seeing an exit for a while.

“I’m not sure, I think I still have a couple of hours to go,” I inform him, and he huffs. It’s funny how well you can know a person. I know right now my brother is passing his hand over his scruff while mulling over the information I just gave him. It’s what he does when he’s figuring stuff out.

“Are you sure you are okay to drive? Or should we go meet you there?”

“What? No, River. I’m fine. I’m an adult, remember?” I assert, a little exasperated at his question. I know he means well, but this is getting out of control.

“River, just let her drive home. We’ll talk to her when she gets here,” I hear Granny say, and I know this conversation is over. As much as River is the oldest, Granny always has the last word.

“Be safe, and share your location with Rain. That way we can go get you if something happens,” River says before passing the phone back to my sister. I know what he isn’t saying: in case you have an accident like Daddy did all those years ago. I can tell he’s not happy, but there’s not much I can do at the moment.

“So yeah, everyone is here losing their minds. Be prepared for a roasting when you get home,” Rain says, and I can’t help the laugh that escapes me.

“Oh, and now she’s laughing! You’re the worst, Ru,” she teases, and I smile at her way of showing she cares.

“I love you too, Rain,” I say as I disconnect the call.

Before heading toward the restroom, I share the location with Rain, just as River asked me to. That way, if something happens to me, at least they’ll know where to find my body. I’ve seen one too many horror movies where the main characters get taken away while in a wooden, abandoned area.

I’m making great time in this car; it’s incredible how fast it is. If I keep up this pace, I’ll be home half an hour before I was expecting. When I see the exit to Azalea Creek, a huge sense of relief washes over me. As much as I love the experience of living in Raleigh, this will always be home, and I can’t wait to move back.

Just as I see the town lights, a red light starts flashing on the car console, and I freak out. I ease the car to a stop and park before trying to figure out what’s going on. I was so close to making it home. Damn it.

“Call from owner,” the speaker announces, and I freeze. Gio is calling? I press the red light, and his deep voice fills the car.

“Ruin?”

“Hi,” I say in a breathy tone. I want to say it’s because it’s been a long day, and I’m dead tired, but the truth is, it’s not just only his looks that make my knees go weak.

“Hey, how’s everything going? I’m sorry I called you through the car. I just wanted to make sure you were okay, and I didn’t have your number,” he says quickly like he’s nervous. Is he nervous about talking to me?

“Oh, yes. Everything is fine, I’m finally a few minutes away from home,” I assure him, and I can hear him exhale a deep breath.

“Great, I don’t want to keep you. Have a great time. I’ll see you on Monday, then,” he says before the car goes silent.

Hmm, he hung up. I don’t think too hard about how he called through the car or why he sounded nervous. I just need to get home and ease everyone’s nerves.

“Ruin Josephine MacAllister.” A voice fills the living room the moment I step into my parent’s house. It’s all dark, so I squint my eyes, trying to see who’s there, but it’s cloudy outside, so there’s no moonlight to help me.

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“River?” I say in a low voice, trying to see if he speaks again. But instead, the lights turn on, and after taking a couple of seconds to adjust, I take in the sight in front of me. It’s almost comical. My entire family is sitting on the big couch in the living room. Granny, Mom, Rain, and Merlin—my youngest brother—are on the couch. River and Miles, my oldest brothers, are each perched on an arm of the couch.

“Hey,” I say as I give them a little wave, suddenly feeling the blush rising up my neck to my face. I’ve never been the subject of attention in my family. I’ve always been “the good twin,” the one who obeys and doesn’t get in trouble. Meetings like this are usually for Miles and Rain. I’d add Merlin, but being the baby of the family—seven years younger than Rain and me—he gets away with a lot of things we older kids never did. For instance, his curfew is two hours later than ours ever was. He also doesn’t have many chores around the farm, maybe because by the time he was old enough to help, we older kids already had a system in place.

“Hey? Is that the way you say hi to your family after having us worried sick about you the entire day?” River snaps me back from my memories with his stern big-brother tone.

“I’m sorry,” I say, lowering my gaze and pressing my nails against my palms as guilt for making them worry suddenly tightens my chest. I know they were all anxious, and after what happened to Daddy, I should have been more considerate.

“It’s okay, darling. Just tell us what happened,” Mama says in her sweet voice, and I instantly relax. Giving her a thankful smile, I take a deep breath and tell them everything that happened. From the moment my car started billowing smoke to when the firefighters arrived and a crowd gathered around me, I felt so overwhelmed I had

to go to a quiet place.

“Fuck,” River mutters to himself, but everyone hears him. It’s eerily quiet in the house. “I’m sorry, Ruin. We should have gotten rid of that piece of garbage long ago,” he assures me as he ruffles his hair—a sure sign he’s restless.

“No, it’s okay. Look, I’m fine,” I tell him as I move closer to him. I hate that my brother feels responsible for every single thing that happens to any of us. “Nothing really bad happened.” He raises his gaze to me, and my lips turn up in a sweet smile. I notice the lines on his forehead disappear when he looks up at me and sees I don’t have any bruises. “We can see what I can afford with the little bit of savings I have left.” I shrug as I move toward Mama to give her a hug.

“Okay, we’ll go in the morning, then,” River says as he stands from the sofa arm and makes his way out to his cottage. Hmm, he didn’t say goodbye. Interesting.

“Okay, I’m going to hit the hay, too, now that we know Ru is safe and sound at home,” Merlin says as he gets up from the couch. He comes closer, and embraces me—it’s funny how the baby of the family towers all of us. At six foot four, he’s the tallest MacAllister. As he heads off, Rain slides into his spot, and I take the seat between her and Mama.

“WahWee, is that the rental the insurance lent you?” Miles asks from the window, where he is looking outside like an old gossip lady. I take a deep breath because I know I cannot lie to my family—I need to tell them everything.

“Well, not exactly. Remember I said I had to go to a quiet place to calm myself? As I was sitting there, crying my eyes out, one of my professors happened to walk by. When he saw it was one of his students, he approached me, and I told him what had happened.” I pause and look around, trying to gauge their reactions. Miles stands with his arms crossed, a shit-eating grin on his face. Ugh, I know he’s going to give me

hell for this.

“Hmm, what a nice guy. Are you sure he doesn’t want any special payment?” He raises his eyebrow, and Mama immediately admonishes him.

“Miles, stop stirring the pot. I’m sure Professor...” my mom trails off.

“Bianchi,” I fill her in.

“Bianchi has no malicious intentions with Ruin. Why can no one be an honest-to-God, upstanding citizen these days?” Mama asks, raising her voice the tiniest bit. She’s usually so calm and collected, so I’m surprised to see her like this.

“I’m sorry, Mama, I shouldn’t have presumed. It’s just if it were me, I wouldn’t have lent my Range Rover to a college student.”

“A what now?” Granny asks, and I chuckle at her. I thought she was asleep since she hasn’t said a word since I came in.

“Wow, sis. I didn’t realize teachers did so well at Wolfe University,” Rain says after squeezing my leg and going to stand next to Miles by the window. When she sees Gio’s car outside, she whistles.

“It’s an expensive car, I gather,” Mama says, and both Miles and Rain nod in unison. My hand goes to my face—Lord, please make it stop. I just want to go to bed and for this to be over once and for all.

“And you’re sure he’s a bonafide man?” Mama asks as she pats my hand.

I place my head on her shoulder in response. “Yes, Mama. He’s the best.”

“Well, he’s not only bonafide, he’s got a thing for Ruin.” My eyes grow as big as saucers at Granny’s words.

“I knew it. I knew something was fishy here. No one in their right mind would lend a quarter-million-dollar car to a student without strings attached,” Miles says, a wide grin on his face.

I roll my eyes at him as I stand up and go stand next to Rain. “You know nothing, Miles. I’m not even sure why Granny said that. All I know is that Professor Bianchi is a nice man. He never mentioned any type of payment or favor in return. He only said he wanted me to come see my family since he can’t visit his.”

“And why can’t he visit them? Is there something wrong?” Rain asks what I’m sure everyone in this room is dying to know.

“Ah, he’s probably the black sheep of his family,” Miles chirps. I can’t take it anymore, I smack him on his chest.

“Oouch.” He winces, and it just makes me laugh. He loves being dramatic.

“No, goofball. He’s not a black sheep. Professor Bianchi is actually from Argentina, and his family lives in Chile. So as you can imagine, it’s not a trip he can make on a weekend,” I explain, and Mama instantly relaxes.

“I wouldn’t say that’s the only reason,” Granny says, mischief dancing in her eyes. We all turn to look at her, waiting for her to keep talking. She puts her hand in one of her dress pockets and starts looking for something. I already know where this is going, but I want to see what she says.

“Ah ha, here it is,” she says after struggling for a while to take it out. She raises her hand, holding a tarot card for all of us to see. Rain and I are trying to stifle a laugh,

while Miles covers his mouth.

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“Oh, here we go,” Mama says, and Granny glowers at her. Miles can’t keep his face straight any longer. He bursts out laughing, but Granny is on a mission, so she plows through.

“That’s right, the New Love card came out for Ruin today when I was asking the angels about all of my grandchildren,” Granny says with a triumphant smile. “Really? And what about me?” Rain asks, ready to hear what Granny comes up with.

“Nothing, I fear. You have to actually go out and get a life so the angels can see something, my dear.” Miles starts laughing uncontrollably, bending over and gasping for air.

“Har har,” Rain says before smacking him on the head, which only makes him laugh harder.

“I think that’s enough for tonight. Why don’t we let Ruin rest? We have a big day at the farm tomorrow,” Mama says as she helps Granny off the couch. Rain starts whining, and I give her a side hug.

“Let’s go, Raindrop. We have to rest.” She hugs me back, and we make our way to our rooms, perfectly in sync, like always.

“G’night, Miles,” I say as we disappear down the corridor.

“Night, RaRu. Happy you’re home.”

Hearing that familiar nickname for me and my twin, settles any lingering nerves I had

about the day. I'm home.

I wake up bright and early, and after putting on my work clothes, I grab a quick breakfast and head out to help on the farm. The Apple Festival is fast approaching, which means harvest season is upon us. We need to make sure the trees are healthy, and the apples are happy and growing to avoid any surprises during harvest.

"Morning, Ruru. Ready to work?" River greets me as soon as I reach the barn.

"You know it." I give him a little salute, and he chuckles.

"Good. Why don't you come with me today and help me water the trees? It hasn't rained in over a week."

"Of course. Who's on pruning duty today?" I ask, even though I already know the answer.

"Merlin and Miles," River answers with a sigh, and I giggle.

"Do you trust them not to over prune the trees?" River gives me a pointed look.

"If they fuck up the trees, I'll prune their balls." I cackle at my brother's response, and he laughs as he adjusts his hat.

"Okay, enough fun for today, Ruru. Let's go get some work done." I nod at River, and after hitching the water tank to his truck, we head to the furthest part of the orchard to start watering the trees.

As crazy as it sounds, I've missed all the hard work. It feels good to be back.

Chapter 7

Gio Bianchi

“Okay, class, remember, I’m available during office hours and by appointment. Don’t get a low grade in your lab reports just because you didn’t want to put in a little extra effort. Midterms are approaching fast,” I say, and I can feel the collective disappointment. I know this is a required class, but for the life of me, I cannot understand the lack of motivation some students have. I try to make it fun and interactive as much as the class material allows.

“I’ll be there tomorrow, Gio. I have so many questions,” Alyssa says in a playful tone as she waves on her way out. I give her a curt smile and quickly try to make eye contact with someone else—anyone but her. Her flirting is insane. I need to ask other TAs if they’ve had the same experience with her because it’s uncomfortable.

One by one, my students leave until there’s just one left. Her hair is a red braided mess, and I have the sudden urge to fix it for her—to take all the exhaustion from her body and melt it away. Somehow, her body language tells me she’s tired—her shoulders are slumped forward, her back hunched, and her movements slow as she finishes packing her belongings.

“Bye, Gio, have a good evening.” She’s holding her laptop to her chest, and I’m curious why she didn’t put it in her backpack. Does she have assignment overload?

“Bye, Ruin. I’ll see you around.” She smiles at me, and I swear her eyes light up. Damn. I need to remind myself I’m her instructor and nothing more—I shouldn’t be noticing if her eyes light up or not. Before I can think better of it, I hurriedly pack my stuff in my bag and rush to catch the elevator with her. We’re on the sixth floor, and although I usually take the stairs to get my steps in, I want to spend a few more minutes with her.

“Hold the elevator!” I shout as the doors began to close. I put my hand in between

them just in time and they jerk back, allowing me inside. When my eyes meet hers, her pupils dilate, and a faint blush colors her cheeks.

“Oh, hi, Gio. Long time no see.” We smile at one another pleasantly. I don’t want to make her self-conscious, so I divert my gaze to the control panel.

“Any plans for dinner?” I settle on a light topic, hoping she’ll talk to me some more. I love her voice—it’s sweet and breathy.

“Not really. I still need to go to the grocery store, but I’ve been so busy since I got back. I haven’t had a chance to do much other than study.” She starts playing with her hair, and for some reason, I think she’s uncomfortable. But why?

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“I’m sorry, Ruin. Did I say something wrong?” I need to know if her change in demeanor is because of me. Fuck, of course, it is. I’m her damn teacher, she must feel intimidated.

“No, not at all,” she hurries to say as she holds my hand, and I jerk in shock. Her touch is electric. She lets go as quickly as she grabbed it, but I can tell she’s as surprised by our connection as I am.

“You could never say something to make me uncomfortable. It’s just I’m still a little embarrassed about you lending me your car.” She lowers her gaze, and my mind drifts back to Monday, when I was chatting with Penny in my office, and Ruin walked in to return my key.

“Excuse me, is this a good time?” Ruin’s face peeks through the door, and I try to stifle my laugh about Penny’s weekend adventures. We try to get together on Mondays for coffee to catch up.

“Ruin, hi. Of course, come in.” She enters and closes the door before turning toward my desk.

“Hi, I’m sorry to interrupt. I just wanted to give you this back. Thank you so much.” She doesn’t even meet my gaze as she speaks rapidly. She offers a wobbly smile to Penny and is out the door before I can react.

“What was that? Fraternizing with a student?” Penny makes a tsk sound as she shakes her head.

“Come on, Pen. You know me better than that. She needed a favor, and I was happy to help, that’s all.” I get up from my chair and quickly catch up with Ruin.

“Hey, Ruin,” I say as I place my hand on her shoulder. She stops walking but doesn’t turn to face me.

“I’m sorry I interrupted, Gio. I didn’t know you had a girlfriend.” I chuckle, but Ruin tenses. Fuck, can I be more stupid?

“Penny? No, she’s not my girlfriend. Come on, let me introduce you.” For a moment, I think she’s going to leave, but she turns around and gives me a curt smile. Is she jealous?

When we walk back into my office, Pen looks at me with those sharp, amber eyes of hers. I hold her gaze; I have nothing to hide. She then looks at Ruin and smiles big as she gets up from the chair.

“Ruin, this is Penny. My best friend,” I say as I introduce them. Penny is the first to extend her hand, and Ruin takes it. Why does this have to be so awkward?

“Nice to meet you, Ruin. Gio, I’ll see you later. I don’t want to be late for my next class,” Penny says as she makes her way to the door and waves before leaving. I scratch the back of my neck, not really knowing what to say next.

“Do you have time to chat?” I ask her as I sit back down. She smiles and takes the seat Penny just left.

“How did it go this weekend? Did you have a good time?” I ask her, pocketing the fob key she just returned to me.

“Yes, it was great. I was able to spend time with my siblings and my Mama. I did

things around the orchard. It was a good break.” I smile at her. I didn’t realize her family owned an orchard.

“An orchard, huh? That must have been so cool growing up.” I ask, wanting to know every single detail about her life.

“Yeah, my family was one of the founding families in our little town, and my ancestors had a small patch of land, which, with time, kept growing and growing as the family was able to buy more parcels around it. Then my grandpa started an orchard, since the climate is perfect for apples to grow, and it was something he felt passionate about,” she says, clearly more relaxed than when she came in. I don’t want to make a big deal about Penny or ask her if she is jealous—I’m enjoying getting to know more about Ruin and her family, so I do something I’ve never done with any other student before: I tell her about my grandpa.

“That’s awesome, I didn’t grow up in an orchard, but my grandpa had a lot of land in the Argentinian pampa. He bred horses.” Her eyes grow big with surprise.

“Horses? That’s amazing. It must be beautiful down there. We have a few horses, and I enjoy helping take care of them, but breeding horses sounds so cool.” I nod at her, and for the next thirty minutes, we continue to talk about our families and stories about when we were little. It is astonishing how many things two people from such different places have in common. Not only do we love the outdoors and the same music, but we also love our families deeply and have the best memories with our grandparents.

After that moment of awkwardness, I felt we had a great time chatting on Monday, so maybe we need to do that again? “Are you having dinner at the dining hall?” I ask as the elevator doors open on the ground floor. I hold the door open for her, and throws a grateful smile my way before exiting.

“I suppose I am. It’s the closest place to grab a quick bite.”

“Great, I’m going there, too.” Something like surprise transforms her face before she masks it. Why on Earth did I say that? I never go to the dining hall. I need to say goodbye and part ways before Alyssa or someone else sees us together.

“So which classes have you so busy these days? I know for a fact it’s not my lab.” I give her a playful smile, and she bites her lower lip. Fuck, my dick stirs in my pants. This has never happened before. I should be bidding her good night and running the opposite way, but the need to get to know her is greater than my moral compass, it seems.

“I’m trying to get a minor in parks and recreation, so needless to say I have way more on my plate than I can handle.”

“That’s impressive,” I praise her. Do I think she’s taken on too much for one semester? Yes. Do I think she can handle it? Absolutely.

“Do you think so?” she asks in a low voice, almost shy.

“Ruin, I’m definitely a fan.” A deep laugh bubbles out of her tiny frame and catches me by surprise. Seeing her so free and happy, her body finally looking less stressed, makes me want to join her. So I laugh, too.

We make it to the dining hall in no time, and after spraying hand sanitizer on our hands, we each grab a tray. I motion for her to get in line ahead of me. She curtsies, and I can’t help the way my lips turn up. She makes me feel incredible, like what I do or say matters.

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Once we pile food onto our plates, I scan the room for a table. Surprisingly, there are not many people around—we have plenty of options, but I'll let her take the lead. I don't want to choose a cozy, far from everything table and make her feel uncomfortable.

When we get to the register, I cut in front of her and show my student ID. "I'm paying for both meals," I tell the cashier, who gives me a knowing smile.

I decide to play dumb and murmur my thanks as I turn back to look at Ruin. She's frowning at me, and I can't help but chuckle.

"What?" I ask, heading toward the sitting area.

"You didn't have to pay for my meal. Thank you," she says, sitting down at the exact same table I'd been about to suggest.

"It's nothing. You're welcome." I wave my hand dismissively as I take a seat across from her.

"It's not nothing, Gio. You didn't have to do that."

Now it's my turn to blush; I feel my face growing warm. Instead of saying anything else, I grab a forkful of salad, busying myself with my food and hoping we can switch topics—I don't like being the center of attention. I practically inhale my salad as Ruin carefully cuts her chicken.

"So Ruin, it's okay if you don't want to talk about this, but I'm curious to know why

you transferred to Wolfe?” I ask what I’ve been dying to know since I learned she’s twenty-four and a transfer student. Yes, I looked at her student records. I know—I’m the least ethical TA ever.

Wiping her mouth and placing her utensils on the side of her plate, then folds her hands together on top of the table and smiles softly. “Well, to put it simply, I’m from the mountains. My family has lived in the same town for generations, and I always wanted to see what was outside of those mountains.” I nod in understanding. I’ve always had the same feeling, the same call to see what was beyond Argentina.

“The members of my family who have gone to school, went to a community college in a town nearby. So that’s what I did.” She pauses, and I can tell that whatever she’s going to say next is painful—her relaxed pose is gone, and her shoulders are raised to her ears. She seems tense, like she’s bracing herself for a blow. “But when Daddy passed away, my world crumbled. We have always been a tight-knit bunch.” Her voice grows thick with emotion. Forgetting that we are in a public place and that I’m her teacher, I lean toward her and grab her hands. She gives me a wobbly smile, and I squeeze her hands, letting her know she’s not alone.

“I’m so sorry, Ruin,” I say in a low tone.

“Thank you. I don’t think it will ever be easy to talk about this. But I feel it’s an important step.” I give her a reassuring smile, and after a bite of her chicken, she continues. “Daddy was working the field, but he needed to go to town for something. My oldest brother, who was always working with him, offered to drive, but Daddy was adamant he was the one who needed to go.” She clears her throat and takes a sip of her drink.

“My brother decided to check the truck and give it a tune-up before Daddy left, just to make sure everything was running smoothly. You know how old trucks can be.” I nod at her, letting her know I’m listening, and she continues. “Daddy left home, and a

heavy storm came out of nowhere. A couple of hours later, we got a phone call from the sheriff. Daddy had been involved in an accident and didn't survive."

A stray tear runs down her cheek, and I quickly wipe it away. "After mourning and feeling miserable for a while, I decided I needed to live my life the way I wanted—before it was too late. When I spoke with my family about transferring, they were very supportive. So here I am." She smiles, her shoulders relax. A huge grin spreads across my face as I shake my head in wonder.

"See, Ruin? There's at least a million reasons to be your fan, and I only know a few. I can't wait to learn the rest." Her eyes widen as a beautiful crimson blush spreads from her chest all the way up to her forehead.

My heart skips a beat every time I think about all the things this girl makes me feel. I need to figure out why she's the only person on Earth who stirs my insides this way.

Chapter 8

Ruin MacAllister

I guess time flies not only when you're having fun, but also when you're busy as hell. It's been a month since classes started, and it's time for our first set of exams. I've practically set up camp at the library, deciding to leave all the distractions in my apartment and truly focus on studying. And I'd say I've achieved my goal, except my very hot, very intriguing lab instructor has been at the library a lot these past few days, too.

I don't think he's following me. From what I've heard, he's writing his dissertation—I cannot even fathom how stressful that must be. I've seen him a couple of times at the cafe on the ground floor. The first time, he just smiled at me after grabbing his order and disappeared into one of the elevators. Today, he surprised me

by paying for my order before I even told the barista what I wanted.

It's not unheard of for teachers to be kind to their students, but I can't help but think that maybe, just maybe, he's a little into me. I mean, he has done so much for me ever since we met. Not to mention how much I enjoy chatting with him.

There's only one person I trust to help me figure out this conundrum, and I need to text her ASAP.

The library has study rooms that you can reserve for as many hours or days as you want, and anticipating that I was going to need one, I reserved a room when the semester started. After placing my pumpkin-spiced latte and cinnamon muffin on the table, I close the door and take my computer and books out, setting up my mini office.

After taking a sip of the glorious fall concoction, I exhale a contented breath. Letting the delicious flavor fill all my taste buds, I feel a sense of comfort that very few things bring me—all is right in the world. I think if all I could drink for the rest of my life was pumpkin-spiced flavored, I'd be a happy person.

Ruin: Hey! Do you have a minute?

I fire up a text to Rain—I need her thoughts on Gio. I don't trust anyone at school enough to share my budding feelings.

Rain: Hey, loser. What's up?

Ruin: Wow, aren't you the sweetest sister ever?

Rain: Only the best for my little sis.

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Ruin: You're only five minutes older than me. *eye roll emoji*

Rain: Still. I'm older.

Rain: So what's up?

Ruin: I need your advice on something. But you have to promise me you'll keep this between us.

Rain: Hmmm, why do I have the feeling I know where this is going?

Ruin: Ugh. Promise me!

Rain: Fine, I promise not to tell anyone. So long as it's not something that can harm you.

I love how protective my sister is.

Ruin: I promise there's nothing bad. At least not too bad.

Rain: Spill!

I bark out a laugh. I can picture her forming a tight line with her lips as she widens her eyes, her nostrils flaring as she starts to get frustrated.

Ruin: So, remember I went home in that fancy car?

Rain: Yes...

Ruin: Well, it turns out I've not only had dinner with my teacher, but now he just paid for my coffee and muffin.

Rain: Yuck, are you dating an old, creepy dude?

My phone falls from my hands as I bend in laughter. I guess I haven't given her enough info, and she's stereotyping Gio.

Rain: Gross. I mean, it's your call. But gross.

Ruin: First off, he's not old.

I find myself replying immediately, defending Gio.

Ruin: I think he's only a couple of years older than us.

Rain: Okay... *eyes emoji*

Ruin: Yeah, he's a teaching assistant. He's finishing his PhD.

Rain: Ohhhhhh. Ohhhhhh. Tell me more.

Ruin: Well, I don't know.

Rain: What do you mean you don't know. Why are we talking about him then?

I bite my nail as I ponder Rain's question. Why am I making a big deal about this? I cannot lie, I enjoy chatting with him. He's not only hot, but he's damn smart and sexy. But the way he treats me—he's attentive and kind. He's the whole package.

Rain: Hello?

Ruin: I like him.

Sigh, it feels good to admit it.

Rain: And? What are you going to do about it?

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Ruin: That's the thing. I don't know.

Rain: Color me confused.

Ruin: Well, I'm not sure if he's just being nice or if he likes me back.

Rain: Oh, that's easy to figure out. Ask him out.

Ruin: Are you crazy? I'm pretty sure there's a rule against fraternization between teachers and students.

I see the dots on the screen, telling me Rain is typing. But it's taking her a while. This should be good.

Rain: Hmmm. Desperate moments call for desperate measures. I know you, Ru. You won't relax until you know if there's something between the two of you. Isay you ask him out— if he says no, then you have your answer.

It sounds so easy, but if he says no, I'd not only be mortified by the rejection, I'd also have to see him at least once a week until the semester ends, and it'd be awkward as hell. No thanks, I don't think I can do this.

Rain: What happened? Are you going to chicken out? You're a MacAllister, for Christ's sake. We don't back down from a challenge.

I smile at the screen. Daddy used to tell us that all the time. "We are MacAllisters, our ancestors didn't leave their land to come in search of a better life for us to be

cowards.”

Ruin: You’re right. I need to know, one way or another.

Rain: Attagirl. *fire emoji*

Ruin: I love you, Raindrop. I’ll catch you later.

Rain: Back at ya, little sis.

Chapter 9

Gio Bianchi

I’ve turned in my dissertation to my adviser, and as soon as I leave his office, a sense of relief washes over me. I’ve been sleeping only a couple of hours a day to meet my deadline. It’s amazing how productive I can be when I’m under stress. Like clockwork, when I make it to Main Street, my phone pings with a text.

Vicente: You alive?

Vicente is one of my brother-in-laws, technically Luca’s, but close enough. He lives in London, and from time to time we check up on each other. Being the oldest siblings, I think we share a bond none of us share with our siblings.

Gio: Hi. Yes! Dissertation submitted. I can finally breathe.

Vicente: Excellent! Let’s celebrate.

I chuckle at his text—he’s the epitome of the uber rich bachelor. Fierce in the boardroom and a playboy in his personal life.

Gio: What do you have in mind? My time is limited.

Vicente: Of course it is. Come to London for the weekend—it'll be fun.

“Who are you texting?” a voice says next to me, and I jump.

“Fuck, Penny. You scared the living daylights out of me.” My hand goes to my chest as I try to calm my racing heart.

“I’m sorry. How did it go?” she asks as we start walking down the street, looking for a place to grab lunch.

“Good. Now I wait to see if Dr. Smith approves it, then I can move forward with my dissertation defense.”

“Congrats! So who were you texting?” she asks, trying to look at my phone, but the screen has gone black.

“Nosy much?” I ask, a smirk on my face.

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“Oh, come on. Is it the cute redhead?” Penny asks with a knowing smile. I make a frustrated sound at the mention of Ruin. I can’t get her out of my head, and the guilt of being attracted to a student is eating at me.

“No, it isn’t her—it’s Vicente.” I glance at Penny and catch her raising an eyebrow in question.

“One of my brother’s brother-in-law.”

“What a mouthful.” She chuckles.

“Anyway, he’s asking me to go to London for the weekend. But I don’t know,” I share with her as I open the door to the Lebanese restaurant that we love coming to.

“Let’s go.”

“Let’s go where?” I ask, confused.

“To London, of course. Isn’t he the one who lives in London? I need a weekend in a big city.” I feel my eyes widen.

“Why do you look surprised? You know how much I love to travel,” she says with a shrug.

We pay for our food, and I get a wooden sign with a number so the waiter can bring our order to our table.

“I just didn’t know you wanted to go to London, that’s all.” I take a sip of my raspberry tea and glance around the restaurant. I tell myself I’m not looking for anything in particular, but I know I’m looking out for someone. I didn’t see her this morning at the library and as strange as it is, I miss seeing her. I miss her red, wavy hair, her light green eyes, and her gorgeous smile.

“Earth to Gio.” Penny waves her hand in front of me.

“Yeah, you’re right. We need a weekend somewhere else.” I take my phone out of my pocket and quickly fire a text to Vicente, letting him know I’ll be in London this weekend.

“Fuck yes!” Penny shouts at the exact moment the restaurant falls dead silent. She tucks her head in, and I stifle a laugh, hoping not to attract even more attention.

The flight to London is uneventful. Penny drinks way more champagne than I think her body can handle, but by the time we land, she’s fresh as a daisy.

There’s a Rolls Royce waiting for us on the tarmac, my last name visible on a whiteboard. When I approach the gentleman holding the sign, he does a double take, clearly not sure if I’m the person he’s waiting for. I’m not unfamiliar with this kind of reaction. Most people think that billionaires dress in expensive suits or luxury brand loungewear. But I’m not your typical billionaire—I favor Converse over Christian Louboutin shoes and comfortable shirts, jeans, and pants over Brioni suits.

I offer the gentleman a kind smile, and he shakes out of his stupor. “Mr. Bianchi, what a pleasure. This way, please.” I let Penny get in the car before me, and once we’re inside, I release a deep breath.

“I hope Vicente doesn’t have anything too crazy planned for this weekend.”

Penny elbows me playfully, and I wince at the attack.

“What was that for?” I ask, rubbing my side.

“You’re no fun. We didn’t cross the pond just to do the same things we do at home. I hope Vicente goes all out to show us around.” I roll my eyes at her, but I know she’s right. I came to loosen up a bit. I needed it after being a hermit while finishing writing my dissertation.

When we get to Vicente’s place, someone takes our bags inside while I help Penny out of the car. Vicente is waiting for us at the entrance.

“Gio, what a pleasure. I told myself I wouldn’t believe you were coming until I actually saw you with my own two eyes, standing in front of me.” I extend my hand in greeting, but Vicente pulls me closer for a hug. Hmm, the few times I’ve met him he has been aloof and proper. This is a new side of him.

“Oh, I see you didn’t come alone.” He shoots a flirty smirk to Penny who bats her lashes in return. Oh God, if these two hook up, I don’t want to be in the way.

“Yes, this is Penny, my best friend.” I motion to her, but Vicente already has her hand in his and is bowing to kiss it. I snort, and Penny glares at me, while Vicente is fully focused on her.

“So, Vicente, where are you taking us tonight?” Penny asks, always straight to the point.

“I was thinking you could freshen up, then we could have dinner at one of my favorite restaurants in the city. After that, we’ll see where the night takes us.” I internally groan. Why did I think things could be different this time around? As nice as he is, Vic is a playboy through and through.

“Oh, I like the sound of that. I’ll see you boys in a little bit.” Penny disappears to the second floor of Vicente’s mansion, glancing back to blow us a kiss before disappearing.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were bringing company this weekend?” Vicente tells me once Penny is out of sight.

“I wasn’t planning on it. She saw me texting you and decided she wanted to tag along.” I shrug as I follow him into his studio. Vicente’s place is everything you’d think a billionaire’s house should be: opulent, grand, and lavish, with marble floors, intricate ceilings, and furniture in dark, rich colors.

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“You look like you need a drink. What’s going on?” Vic asks, and I smile at him. He’s always been quick to assess—sharp.

“I’m going to confide in you, but please don’t laugh.” Vicente raises his eyebrows as he hands me a glass of scotch. We clink glasses, and I take a fortifying sip.

“I think I like one of my students,” I say in a low voice, embarrassed by my admission.

“You like men, then? I don’t see the big deal,” Vicente says matter-of-factly, and I can’t help but grin at my friend.

“No, no. I don’t like men. But I agree, there’s nothing wrong with that.” I hurry to assure him. “My student is female, and I’m not supposed to fraternize with my students. It’s just wrong.” I give him a pointed look, hoping he’ll understand the undertone of my confession.

“Oh shit, and the student is Penny? Oh, fuck. I’m so sorry, Gio. I should have put two and two together, you bringing her here and all. I promise I’ll back off.” Vic places his glass on the desk he’s leaning against.

“No, boludo. Penny is truly my best friend. That’s all.”

“Then what’s the bloody deal?”

A Chilean using British slang has me howling. “Bloody? Who are you? I thought you were going to say, ¿y qué tanta huevía? like any normal Chilean would.”

This makes him laugh, and he almost spits out the drink he just sipped. I enjoy seeing my friend loosen up a bit since he's usually in CEO mode. Being the next in line to become the head of the Godoy Group, he handles millions of dollars in deals every day, so it's always high stakes.

"You, more than anyone, would understand. We're not just living in countries that aren't where we were born—we're also speaking a whole different language 24/7." I nod and smile at him, fully understanding what he's saying.

"Anyway, I don't know how to get her out of my head." Vic has a blank expression on his face, and I sit there, waiting for him to say something—anything. But we're just staring at each other like two complete idiots.

"It's against the university's code of conduct to fraternize with a student. I'm in a position of power since I need to grade her progress. It's not fair to her," I explain again, and Vicente's expression doesn't change. I release a frustrated breath.

"And what's the problem? You're a fucking billionaire. I'm sure you can fix any issues that might come up due to you having the hots for a student." My frustration is slowly turning into anger. I'm sure many people operate under those thoughts, but I'm not one of them.

"No, man. I would never do that." I shake my head as I take another sip of the scotch, suddenly thinking I need a refill to continue this conversation.

"Gio, I get it. You're a good man. But you just said you've never felt this way before. You have to act on it." I relax at his words. I know he means well, but the thought of breaking the rules gives me goose bumps.

"Fine, let's think things through. What would be the worst case scenario?" His face immediately transforms into CEO mode.

“I could get fired, not to mention that if they remove my visa and deport me, I’ll never be able to finish my PhD.” Vicente’s face hardens, his jaw clenching as he thinks.

“Well, we would never let that happen. I’m sure my team would find a way around it. And also, what do you mean you’re still on a student visa? You need to apply for citizenship immediately.” He’s not wrong. I know that’s something I’ve delayed long enough, but now that I’m about to be done with school, I need to ensure that I can stay permanently in the United States. “But let’s say that the other alternative is to hold off your arousing feelings until she’s no longer your student. Do you think you can manage to wait,” he pauses, thinking how long that would be.

“Until December,” I fill him in.

“Oh, so three more months. I mean, you’ve waited what, twenty-nine years? I’m sure you can wait three more months,” Vicente declares like he has solved it all, and I sigh. The truth is, I don’t know if I can.

“You’re right. I’m just being dense. I can definitely wait.” With a triumphant smile, Vicente finishes his drink just as there’s a knock on the door.

“I’m ready,” Penny sings-songs, opening the door wide. She does a little twirl, showing us her little black dress.

“Don’t you look charming,” Vicente tells her with a smile. Penny curtsies and giggles. I don’t want any part of...whatever this is between them.

“You kids have fun. I’m going to rest,” I tell them as I approach Penny to give her a kiss on her cheek. “You look gorgeous. Remember to be safe.”

She gives me an appreciative smile. “Always.”

I pat Vicente on the back before I head toward the second floor. It's not my first time visiting him, so I already have a bedroom assigned to me. All I want is a hot shower and a good night's sleep. I can't wait to explore the museums tomorrow.

I'm toweling myself off as I come out of the ensuite, the tiredness from the trip finally sinking in. I see my phone lighting up, and I frown, confused. No one ever calls me or texts me. Except my siblings—I hope they're safe. My frown deepens when I notice a text from an unknown number.

Unknown: Hi, Gio, this is Ruin.

"No way," I say as I let my towel fall to the ground and lay down on the bed. Looking at the message, it was sent not too long ago. Passing my hand over my face, I weigh my options. If I reply, I know there's no way back. I'll be consumed by talking to her on a more personal level, but if I don't get back to her, she might think I'm not interested and won't talk to me ever again. It takes a lot of courage to text your teacher.

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Gio: Hi, Ruin. How did you get my number?

Her response doesn't take long.

Ruin: Oh, it was on the lab syllabus. I hope it is okay to contact you.

Gio: That's right. I forgot I had added it there.

I feel so dumb right now, asking stupid questions. She must regret contacting me. I take a look at my naked body, and I feel even worse. Who texts someone while naked? "Ugh," I groan at myself.

Ruin: Anyway, I'm going to cut to the chase. I was wondering if you'd like to go to the State Fair with me?

Wow. How do I reply to that? It's like someone was overhearing my conversation with Vic and decided to send over the ultimate temptation. I wasn't sure if she saw me the same way I see her. I've tried to be as professional as possible while in the lab, and we have only spoken a couple of times outside of it. I guess this is the push I needed to pursue something with her?

"Pursue?" I whisper to myself. It's not like I'm going to marry her before the semester ends. She's just asking about going to the State Fair.

Calm your horses, Gio.

Ruin: I'm sorry, I shouldn't have asked. I'll check to see if it's not too late to cancel

this lab. Again, I'm so sorry, Gio.

Fuck, I guess I didn't reply fast enough, and now she thinks I'm not into her. She must be mortified.

Gio: No, no. Wait. Please. I'm just trying to gather my thoughts.

I inhale deeply and slowly release it. I feel my dick hardening, my face getting warmer. My hands are shaking. A cold sweat runs down my neck onto my chest. What the fuck is going on?

I read her text over and over. Holy shit, I'm dumbfounded by her boldness. I'm definitely her fan. But fuck if I'm not scared shitless. The consequences of going out with her right now could be devastating for the both of us.

Closing my eyes, I raise a silent prayer to Abuelo Bianchi, I know he'd know what to do. I need his wisdom to guide me somehow.

Gio: I'd be lying if I said I don't want to go to the fair with you, but we are in a tricky position at the moment. I don't want you ever to feel pressured by me—being your lab instructor and all. The school has clear rules in regards to fraternization between teachers and students.

I inhale a deep breath before continuing to type. I hope she took the hint—I'm giving her an easy out if she's had second thoughts. I don't want her to get in trouble because of me.

Gio: As it is our luck, I'm currently out of town. But I believe the State Fair will still be going on next weekend. If we both just so happen to be at the same place, at the same time, I guess we couldn't be blamed for doing something forbidden since it would be a coincidental encounter.

“What the hell are you doing?” I ask myself after I press send. Starting to feel too self-conscious about my nudity, I get up from bed and put on the first thing I find in my carry on—a pair of black sweatpants.

The phone screen illuminates with Ruin’s message. I quickly grab it and read.

Ruin: I guess it’d be purely coincidental if we end up at the Ferris wheel on Saturday at five in the afternoon.

Gio: I guess so.

Ruin: Good night, Gio.

Gio: Sweet dreams, Ruin.

Ruin doesn’t text back, so I guess our “non-date” is set. I pray to everything holy that there are no students around to catch us riding the Ferris wheel, and especially that following my gut doesn’t turn out to be a monumental mistake.

As expected, Penny and Vicente didn’t return until early this morning. I’m sure Penny will be sleeping the entire day, but I’m ready to go out and be a tourist for the day. Vicente will probably frown at me for not taking one of his drivers, but no one knows me here. I just want to enjoy the day without the fuss of someone following my every move.

My first stop is the Tower of London, a majestic castle nestled in central London. I snag a quick pic, and without thinking much about it, I send it to Ruin. Her reply doesn’t take long.

Ruin: Unless I’m hallucinating, that doesn’t look like any place in the US.

I chuckle at her response but love that she got back to me so quickly.

Gio: You're not hallucinating. I'm in London.

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Ruin: Oh, wow. How long are you staying?

Gio: I'm heading back home tonight. I just came to see a friend.

Ruin: Oh, fun! What else are you planning to visit today?

Gio: Not sure. I want to walk around and find something good to eat. Maybe a football stadium.

Ruin: You mean soccer?

Gio: lol, yes.

Ruin: That's what I thought. Are you a fan of a particular team in London?

Gio: Not really, but I'm a football fan in general.

Ruin: Oh, gotcha. If I ever visit London, I'd love to go to the Sky Garden.

Gio: Hmmm, I've never been. I'll have to check it out.

Ruin: Yes! And send pics from there. *smile emoji*

Gio: Will do. *salute emoji*

I spent the rest of the day walking after visiting the Sky Garden, where I took an insane amount of pictures. The first one I sent to Ruin was from the view in the

restaurant, which was glorious. Her reply made me laugh until tears spilled from my eyes.

Ruin: Love the view, but I kinda wanted to see a certain hot teacher in the frame also
blush emoji

After that, I sent her every single picture with me in it, and she loved them all. I can't wait to go to the fair next weekend with her. I got her a few souvenirs from London—I hope she likes them. As I visited each place, I couldn't help but think about how much I want to experience them with her—someday soon.

Before I know it, I'm heading back to Vicente's to grab my things and head home. His disapproval is evident as soon as I walk in the door and announce my plans.

"Are you seriously leaving now?" Vicente asks, not hiding his disappointment.

"Yeah, I have to be back at school tomorrow," I say, even though I don't teach until Wednesday, so technically, I could stay a couple more days.

"But we didn't go out. We didn't even have dinner together. Nothing." Guilt and embarrassment hit me, and I can't meet his gaze.

"I'm sorry, Vic. Next time I'll come with more time to spare. This was a lightning trip. And I did warn you I wasn't in the mood to party..."

"No joke," he says with a humorless chuckle.

"Are you ready to go, Pen?" I ask my friend as she shakes her head, and I frown.

"Actually, I decided to stay a couple more days, and Vicente was gracious enough to offer me to stay here at his place." I study her as I search for any indication that she's

staying to spend time with Vicente, but I don't see anything out of the ordinary.

"Are you sure?" I ask.

They both answer in unison, "Yes."

The perfect timing makes me chuckle.

"Okay, I'll send the jet back for you when you're ready to head home," I tell Penny, and she nods with a grateful smile.

"Nonsense, I'll have my jet take her home whenever she's ready," Vicente says, leaving no room for argument.

"Thanks, man. I owe you," I say as I give him a bro hug.

"Yes, you do. Now, go and become a doctor so we can finally take you out of that damn school."

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We all laugh, and after I hug Penny and double check that she's okay staying, I go back to the airport. On the entire flight to Raleigh, I find myself daydreaming about a certain redhead who, in such a short time, has become a very important person in my life.

Chapter 10

Ruin MacAllister

Exam week is over, and I'm in the elevator on my way to environmental lab. I haven't seen Gio since that time I saw him at the library. I still cannot believe I texted him asking him out. And furthermore, that he said yes.

I know it was a rookie mistake to text him—leaving a trail that can later incriminate us wasn't my brightest idea, but I really needed to ask him. And not doing it in person gave me the courage I needed. But now, seeing him at the front of the room as I walk into the lab, I don't feel so courageous anymore—my hands are clammy and my heart is racing.

“Good afternoon, class. Today's lab is pretty straightforward. We're going to check a set of contaminated water samples, and we'll determine which compounds are present in each sample. I'll be at my desk if anyone has any questions.”

Gio starts the lab, and my heart skips a beat at the sight. He's wearing a plain gray tee, jeans, and black Converse shoes. I think he has Chucks in every single color of the rainbow, and I don't think I've ever seen him wearing a pair twice. I know for most people, Gio would be an okay guy to look at, but for me, he's everything. His

relaxed stance, casual clothing, and smart gaze make me hot and tingly in all the right places. And his eyes... How can I describe that color?

“Cobalt,” I murmur. My lab partner looks at me, confused. “Oh, nothing. I was just thinking of how to describe a pretty shade of blue.” She nods and smiles at my explanation, and I release a breath. That was close—I can’t let anyone know I’m falling for our lab instructor. What I’m beginning to feel is not only, oh, he’s hot and good to look at; it’s more like I really enjoy talking to him and want to spend more time with him, kind of thing.

I’m ruined. I giggle at my joke, only to find everyone looking at me. My lab partner’s eyes are wide, as if to say, What the heck is wrong with you? I feel my face grow warm. Oh, Lord. I want to dig a hole and hide for the rest of my days. I didn’t realize I said that out loud. Now, Gio must think I’m crazy.

“As I was saying, I’m going to finish grading the exams, and I’ll post them to our portal as soon as possible—hopefully by tonight.” A collective groan fills the classroom, which makes Gio chuckle. I shake my head in an effort to get rid of my thoughts, and after a deep breath and straightening my shoulders, I dive into running the experiment with my lab partner.

After about an hour into the lab, I ask Kelly, “Do you want to take a break?” She shakes her head. I shrug and remove my lab coat to wash my hands before making my way out of the lab. There’s a vending machine in the break room, so that’s where I’m heading. I need something sweet to get me through the next couple of hours before I can have a real meal.

There’s a huge table in the middle of the break room with about eight chairs, a fridge, and a microwave for those who bring their own food. Of course, the vending machine is next to the door. A huge window faces the road, which is always busy with traffic, but beautiful oaks line the sidewalks.

I jerk back as I enter the room. Gio is in front of the window, his back to me. He's quietly munching on something, and even though I'd love to chat with him for a bit, I know it's not the smartest idea.

After recovering from my shock, I look for change in my pockets to get a candy bar. Gio looks back at the noise, and the moment our eyes lock, I feel my insides burning. His face softens into an easy smile, and I can't help but smile back.

"Having a good day?" he asks as he moves closer to me. For some reason, I can't form any words, so I nod and smile.

"Hungry?" I nod again.

He takes his student ID from his back pocket and buys a couple of treats from the vending machine. I'm confused by what he's doing since he's already eating a granola bar. He bends down and grabs another granola bar—exactly like the one he's eating—along with a Snickers and a pack of Nerds Gummy Clusters. When he stands up to his full height, he opens his hand, offering me the snacks. I shoot him a grateful smile and grab the granola bar and Nerds, my fingers lightly grazing his palm in the process.

"My favorites," I tell him as I open the Nerds first.

"Good to know," he says with a wink as he leaves the Snickers bar on the table and leaves the break room. Once he's gone, I release the breath I didn't know I was holding. Gio Bianchi is a vibe—he got me all hot and bothered by just the mere touch of his palm against mine, leaving me acutely aware of his effect on me.

I check my phone and see it's ten past five. I'm late. I hope he doesn't think I'm a no-show, but the line to enter the fairgrounds was insane. I left home at four, thinking it'd give me plenty of time. But boy, was I wrong. I'm still not used to the crowds

here in Raleigh or how long it takes to go from one place to the next. Back home, everything we need is within a fifteen-minute drive, tops—unless, of course, we need to go to another town.

Once I get through security, I make my way to the Ferris wheel. It's the tallest attraction at the fair, which is why I told him to meet me there. When I arrive, I see a line that goes around and around. It'll take me forever to find him. Feeling discouraged and frustrated, I start making my way along the line, hoping to see a tall, beautiful blond man. I feel my phone vibrate in my hand, and when I look down at the screen, a wide grin spreads across my face.

Gio: Keep walking, I see you.

I lift my eyes, but I don't see him yet. There are just too many people around, and I'm starting to feel overwhelmed. After walking for a few more minutes, I come to a halt. Gio is standing at the front of the line and has a huge smile on his face. Today, his Chucks are light gray, the same color as his sweater.

"Fancy seeing you here," he says, and I giggle.

"Likewise." I close my eyes, taking in this moment. I still can't believe I'm here with him. On a date. Can we even call it a date? When I asked him out, he said it would be a coincidence if we met here. I'm not sure if he was playing or covering his tracks in case someone at school gets their hands on our text exchange; regardless, I'm ecstatic this is happening.

"Are you ready?" he asks, pulling me out of my thoughts.

"For what?"

"To ride the Ferris wheel, of course. We're next in line." My eyes widen in surprise, I

didn't think we were actually going to ride. "Are you afraid of heights? Did I muck it up already?" he asks, frowning with curiosity. I hate that I'm making him doubt himself.

"No, of course not. I just wasn't expecting to actually ride the Ferris wheel. I've actually never done it before," I tell him honestly, and understanding visibly washes over him.

"It's okay. I promise we'll be safe." He gives me a reassuring smile as he places his hand on the low of my back, guiding me toward the pod. Once we're seated and the kid who manages the ride has fastened the security bar, Gio moves in place, getting comfortable. He's so tall that his right leg presses against my left one. The heat radiating through his jeans lights my skin on fire. I'm wearing a dark green corduroy dress that reaches mid-thigh, leaving my bare legs exposed. This pod is tiny, and his tall frame makes it feel smaller, but I'd be lying if I said it bugs me. I'm enjoying every single second of being so close to him.

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“I got you a little something from London.” A small bag materializes in Gio’s hands. I guess I’ve been so entranced by his presence that I didn’t notice he was holding something.

“Oh wow, you didn’t have to,” I say in a small voice, not really sure how to react to his thoughtfulness.

“I know, but since you mentioned you’ve always wanted to go to Sky Garden, I figured I’d get you something from there until you can go visit yourself.” My heart instantly melts a little. I take the bag from him and grin like a kid in a candy store as I open it. There’s a beautiful keychain of Sky Garden inside and a little note.

“A gift voucher for one thousand pounds?” I whisper-shout, and Gio throws his head back, laughing.

“Yeah, as I said—a little something and a voucher, hoping that one day you can go...” His blue eyes are fixed on me as he finishes, “...with me.”

His generosity makes me speechless, so I simply nod as I hold his gaze a little longer. I could get lost in those eyes.

“So you’ve never done this before?” he asks, and I’m thankful he decided to switch topics.

“Yeah, the fair we have every year in my town is pretty small; there are no big attractions like this one. It’s mostly local vendors, a few contests, and animal races. That kind of stuff,” I say as I look at those cobalt eyes of his. He’s staring at me with

such intensity that I would be on the ground if I weren't already sitting down.

"I'm sorry, I know staring is rude. But I cannot comprehend how we are here. Together." Gio voices my thoughts, and that makes me smile.

"I've been thinking the exact same thing." I tuck a piece of my hair behind my ear as I move my gaze away from his, trying to breathe a little easier.

"I need to be honest with you, Ruin. This has never happened to me before." I can hear the sincerity in his voice, it's raw and real. As I think about what he just said, I can't help but admire how open and vulnerable he is right now. Another guy could have lied and said he has gone out with students before—but not him. It only reaffirms what I already think about him.

"Somehow, I know, Gio. From the first moment I saw you, I had this sense of peace around you. Like I knew you'd never hurt me." He places his huge hand on my knee, giving it a gentle squeeze. A shot of electricity runs through me at the contact of his skin with mine. When I lift my gaze to his, and his eyes shine bright—full of emotion. He shoots me a wobbly smile and inhales deeply.

"I'm not sure what's going on between us, or where all this is going, but I'm thankful it's with someone as special and unique as you." I'm speechless, unable to comprehend what he sees in me. "Tell me about your family. Have you talked with them since you visited? I guess we need to catch up." I'm grateful for the change of topic; I don't think we're ready to talk about anything too deep, yet.

"Oh yes, of course. I speak with my twin daily and at least every other day with my Mom. They're all hard at work before winter comes."

Gio smiles. "And how did it go? I know we've spoken a couple of times after that, but you never told me what they said about your car issues," he says, waiting

expectantly for me to continue the story.

“My entire family was waiting for me in the living room. As it turns out, the insurance company contacted my oldest brother, River, who was beside himself. I didn’t make things easier by deciding to wait until I was home to tell them everything.” Gio winces and I laugh. “I know, it was pretty bad. But in my defense, I’m a twenty-four year old woman. You’d think my family would trust me enough to solve my own problems.” Gio nods and smiles, which makes me feel better about myself.

“Yeah, I mean. I’m the oldest sibling of three. Isa, the youngest, is twenty-two and is about to graduate from college.” He pauses, looking to the horizon. I can tell by the smile on his face that he’s fond of his siblings. And I love that he seems to be as close to them as I am to mine. “As hard as it is, I try mybest to let her make her own mistakes. That’s how you learn, you know?” Gio shrugs, and I know exactly what he means.

“What is she studying? Is she a scientist like you?” I ask, wanting to know everything about Gio and his family. He chuckles and shakes his head.

“No, no. She’s working on a degree in art. My middle brother, Luca, has a degree in communication but he ended up buying a vineyard and now runs it with his wife in Chile.” My eyes grow big as saucers. A vineyard? They must have a lot of money to be able to afford something like that. I sense Gio tensing, and I immediately shake off my surprise. It’s none of my business to know how much money his family makes, and it’s definitely not a first-date kind of topic.

The Ferris wheel stops, and we get out of the pod.

“What do you want to do next?” Gio asks me as he helps me down the stairs.

“Hmm, let’s see. Are you up for a turkey leg?” I say, looking at the food options around us.

“I thought you’d never ask.” He grins, and we head toward the line to order our food.

“I know it’s not the healthiest, but fair food is so dang tasty.” I chuckle at his assessment.

“I completely agree. Fried food is delicious. Have you tried fried oreo ice cream?” He raises a brow at me, and I raise my hands in surrender.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t want to assume,” I say shyly, and he elbows my arm playfully.

“Because I’m a foreigner?” he asks, and I feel my face warming up. “I’ll have you know, I love North Carolina, and it’s been a joy to live here for the past four years. Traveling to beautiful destinations, trying delicious food, not to mention how nice and welcoming the people are. Actually, I don’t think I ever want to leave.”

A smile spreads across my lips, he’s such a nice guy.

“Amen, brother,” a guy ahead of us in line turns back and says to Gio, who blushes a deep red.

Once we get our turkey legs and sweet tea, we find a spot to sit down and eat. We both focus on our food and enjoy each other's company in comfortable silence. We end up sharing a funnel cake and oreo fried ice cream after we devour the turkey legs, which were huge.

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The night slowly falls upon us, and a beautiful array of oranges and purples transform the sky. We walk around some more, talking about everything and nothing in particular. I don't want this date to end.

"Getting tired?" Gio asks. I stifle a yawn as we watch a pig race. I can't believe how cute these little piglets are. They are all wearing a different color bow tie, and their prize for winning is a huge pile of food.

"No, I think I'm in a food coma," I tell him honestly, and he smiles down at me, those eyes of his shining bright again. There's no better feeling in the world than to be cherished by this man because that's exactly how he makes me feel with his attentiveness.

"Come on, let's do one last thing before we call it a night." I internally whine at the thought of the night being over, but we've been here for hours, and the fair is the busiest on the weekend. We've been very lucky no one has spotted us so far.

"This is what you want to play?" I ask, surprised at his choice of game. He smiles like a kid in a candy store, so I nod and get ready to shoot some aliens. The attendant gives us the air guns, and we both get in position. I look up at Gio, but the buzzer goes off—it's go time. I focus as hard as I can on knocking down as many aliens as possible. But this game must be rigged—the damn aliens won't go down! The buzzer goes off way too soon, and I pout as I give the air gun back to the attendant.

"Which prize did you want to win?" Gio asks, and I point to a cute husky plush toy. "How much for that dog?"

“Oh, no. You don’t have to buy it,” I say, grabbing him by the arm to pull him away from the tent, but he’s not budging.

“That one is two hundred.” The attendant grins at Gio, and my eyes almost pop out of my eye sockets.

“What? There’s no way.” I start to protest, but Gio takes his wallet out of his pocket. Before I know it, I have the most adorable husky plushie in my hands.

“Thank you,” I murmur as I bring the toy to my lips. It’s so soft and cuddly.

“You’re welcome.” Gio grins at me, and I melt at his attention.

“What are you going to name it?” he asks, curiosity transforming his face.

“Cobalt. Reminds me of someone’s blue eyes.” Understanding dawns on him, and he gives me a sweet smile.

Chapter 11

Gio Bianchi

Gio: Thank you for an amazing time, Ruin. I hope you had as much fun as I did.

I send a quick text to Ruin after I get home. For a moment, I thought I’d follow her to her place to make sure she made it safely, but I took the Range Rover with me, and I didn’t want to risk being seen in the car I lent her the other day.

Ruin: I did. Thank you for everything.

Gio: You’re welcome. I guess we’re going to have to do it again, huh?

I facepalm after I send the text. She's going to think I'm a creep. I definitely need to work on my game. I'm so lame.

Ruin: Definitely! Good thing there are so many fun places for us to visit in the city.

Thanking my angels that Ruin just ran with it and didn't make fun of me, I reply instantly.

Gio: You're right. Maybe we should visit the Natural History Museum next weekend.

Ruin: Yup, I think I'll be there on Saturday at one in the afternoon.

Gio: Sweet dreams, Ruin.

Ruin: Night, Gio.

"You're lucky you're my best friend," Penny says loudly as she takes a seat next to me at the cafe where we always get together on Monday's to catch up on things. I wince because even though I left her with Vicente over a week ago in London, I haven't seen her since.

"I'm sorry, I know I'm the worst, but if I didn't trust Vicente, I wouldn't have left you there." I take a sip of my coffee, and she smiles.

"I'm not a kid, boss. I told you I wanted to stay a few more days, and Vicente was the perfect host," she says as she goes for my coffee, but I swiftly remove it from the table before she can grab it. She glares at me, and I laugh.

"I take it things went well?" I ask after taking another sip of my coffee.

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“Oh, they did, but not the way you’re imagining.” Penny grabs a bite of my croissant, and I frown in confusion. “Well, I had a great time, and Vicente is indeed a great host. But nothing happened between us.”

“Oh, I wasn’t thinking that.” I hurry to assure her as I feel my face growing hot.

She chuckles. “Don’t sweat it, Gio. I’m not going to lie—I think Vicente is attractive, but the moment we got to Ecstasy(that’s the name of the place we went to), he couldn’t take his eyes off a woman there. I think there’s something going on between them, but I didn’t feel it was my place to pry.”

I bite my nail as I search my brain for anything Vicente might have mentioned about him seeing a woman, but I can’t recall anything.

“So if he was preoccupied, what did you do?” I ask honestly, but the look Penny gives me is comical as hell. She raises a brow in question as if saying, Have we met yet? “Well, I did what I always do. I had a great time. It turns out, Ecstasy is a private club for the one percent, and most of the men there were wonderful to talk to. Some of them even kept up with me on the dance floor.” My eyebrows shoot to the sky. That’s actually impressive—Penny is a great dancer.

“I’m glad you had a great time, and I’m sorry again I didn’t go out with you. But as it turns out, I got a message from this girl...” I trail off, not wanting to say Ruin’s name in case someone can hear us.

“Oh. The redhead?” Penny’s eyes light up, and I can’t help the grin that forms on my lips.

“Yeah. We went out over the weekend. It was amazing.” Penny shrieks and jumps up and down in her seat. I chuckle at her excitement.

“Are you going out again?” she whispers, and I nod as I take another sip of my coffee. She shrieks again and I shake my head as I smile. “What? Can’t I be happy for my bestie?” She smacks my arm the way she always does when she’s happy about something. “Gio, this is fantastic. A nice girl is what you were missing in your life.” My heart warms at my friend’s words.

“It was just one time, I don’t want to get ahead of myself.” I close my eyes, trying to carve these words in my heart: I cannot fall for my student. I need to at least wait until after the semester is over.

“Gio. Look at me.” Penny places her hand on my forearm, and I open my eyes. “Don’t close yourself off to the possibility of something special because of your duties. Yes, you’re in a position of power, but I know you, and I know you would never take advantage of that.” I know what Penny is saying is true, I would never abuse my authority. But going against the code of conduct makes me ache in places I didn’t even know existed. I pride myself on being a righteous man. And this behavior is definitely the opposite.

“Speak of the devil,” Penny murmurs, and that’s when I see her—Ruin, standing in line to order. My body lights up like a firecracker on the fourth of July. I adjust in my seat, feeling my jeans tightening. I try to act normal, but I’m the worst actor on Earth. Penny is trying hard not to laugh at my miserable failure to play it cool.

When Ruin spots me on her way out, she smiles and gives me a little wave but doesn’t come to where I’m sitting with Penny. A part of me is disappointed that she didn’t come over, or that I can’t go and give her a hug, but I know it’s the smart thing to do.

“And that face right there tells me you have to pursue this, Gio.” I glance over at Penny, who’s watching me intently. I release a sigh. Ruin will be my demise.

“Now onto the not-so-fun part.” I groan at Penny’s words.

“I’ll try to make it as painless as possible. Your fortune has increased by three hundred and seventy million in the past quarter.”

“Jesus Christ, Penny. What on Earth did you invest in?” I ask her, bewildered.

“Nothing illegal, of course.” She waves me off like it’s not a big deal.

“Is there a way to hold off investing more for the rest of the year? I need to figure out where to donate more, and right now I’m completely focused on finishing my PhD.” Penny gives me a knowing smirk, and I shake my head. I know I’m lying, I’m also thinking about the red hair goddess who has captured my every waking thought.

“You’re the boss, boss. If you want, I can set up a document with some potential charities that you’d be interested in supporting.”

“You’re the best.”

“I know.”

I couldn’t really talk to Ruin during the lab today, always trying to avoid being caught ogling her. Damn, it’s never been this hard to act professionally. I’m curious to see if we’re still up for our non-date this Saturday, so I decide to text her after taking a shower and having a bite to eat.

Gio: So about this weekend.

Ruin: What about it?

Gio: Are we still up for it?

Ruin: I can't wait to totally randomly meet you at the museum.

Gio: Same. Have you ever been before?

Ruin: No.

Gio: Oh fun, then I get to show you all my favorite exhibits. Do you like rocks?
Gems?

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Ruin: Yeah, there are a couple of mines near my town that I've visited in the past, and it's a lot of fun.

Gio: The minerals exhibit is pretty nice, and I love that the rocks there (mostly) were found right here in North Carolina—maybe we'll even see your town's name.

Ruin: That would be super cool.

Gio: Can't wait.

Ruin: Me either! Good night, Gio.

Gio: Sweet dreams, Ruin.

It's just after one in the afternoon, and I park my car and jump out to head to the museum. I'm running a few minutes late, and I hate the thought of Ruin wondering if I'm going to show up. Unfortunately, I'm not a multitasker, so it's either I run to the museum, or I stop and text her that I'm running late—I choose to run.

When I get to the museum's entrance, the little air I have in my lungs gets knocked out when I see how beautiful Ruin looks. Her back is to me, she's wearing a pair of loose jeans that hug her waist and an oversized forest green sweater that hangs from one of her shoulders, giving me a peek of her creamy, soft skin. Her hair is shining under the midday sun, a vibrant siren red, warning me of the danger this woman represents.

I slowly make my way to her, enjoying the view and committing it to memory. She

turns, and her smile blinds me with the force of a thousand suns.

“Hey, I thought for a moment that maybe we had spoken about different museums,” she says with a chuckle as she fixes her hair behind her ear. It takes me a moment to speak since I literally had to catch my breath.

“No, you had it right. I just didn’t realize there were going to be construction crews downtown over the weekend. It feels like Raleigh is under perpetual expansion,” I say as I ruffle my hair, and she giggles. “Are you ready?” I ask her as I place my hand on the low of her back, she smiles and moves closer to me. I wish I could wrap my arm around her, but it’d be harder to remove in case we see a student here.

The first floor has lots of cool exhibits, from fossils and embalmed animals, to gemstones and displays showing the evolutionary timeline. We take our time, observing each and every single object. The next exhibit is about the Outer Banks, and as I see Ruin completely entranced in all the facts about the islands, an idea forms for fall break.

The longer we’re in the museum, the more comfortable we feel with each other. The last thing I have on my mind is being careful not to show too much PDA, I’m simply enjoying a Saturday afternoon with my girl. Fuck, not yet.

When we reach the second floor, we visit an area that takes us back in time to a science lab from the early twentieth century. For some reason, it is completely empty—I guess the kids and families would rather spend their time with the dinosaur fossils and bug animatronics than learn how science was done back in the day.

“Oh look, this is so cool,” Ruin says as she grabs my hand and takes me to an entire section of tree trunks, all native to North Carolina. Each piece has a little tag specifying the species and where in the state it was collected. My little nerd heart could sing right now. I love that I get to share this level of nerdiness with a girl—I’ve

never experienced this before.

“Did you know the state’s tallest tree is a Pignut Hickory?” she asks, excited by this fact.

“I had no idea, but I wonder where it is in the state. It’d be cool to hike to see it.” She turns around, her soft hands resting on either side of my neck. For a moment, I freeze. I wasn’t expecting her to get so excited over my comment, but I guess it takes a nerd to know a nerd.

“I’d love to go on a hike with you.” She breathes against my chest, and even though the little voice in the back of my head tells me I shouldn’t kiss her in public, my desire to taste her lips is stronger, pulling me to her.

I lean down slowly, asking her with my eyes if she’s okay with this. When her eyes flutter closed, the little self-control I had snaps. I close my own eyes, getting ready to kiss her.

“Professor Bianchi, is that you?” My eyes widen in horror at that voice. Fuck, this isn’t happening. I release a deep breath as Ruin removes her arms from around my neck and turns around, covering her face with her hair. I slowly turn around, widening my stance to block Ruin from view, my back pressed against hers. Forcing a flat smile, I face Alyssa, who’s grinning like the Cheshire Cat.

“Oh, hey! What’s up?” Holy crap, could I sound more idiotic? I don’t even talk like this. Is my brain short-circuiting?

“So glad to see you outside the classroom, professor,” Alyssa purrs as she takes one step toward me. I stiffen.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Did I interrupt something?” she says as she tries to look around me to

see who's behind me.

"Actually, yes," I tell her, my voice stronger now. Her eyebrows rise in surprise but she tries to quickly mask it with a chuckle.

"Oh, okay. I see." She takes a step back and turns around to leave, but not before giving me a saucy smile as she says, "I'll see you in class, professor." She gives me a little wave and goes on to the next exhibit.

When she's out of sight, I turn to hug Ruin, who's pale as a ghost. "Do you think she saw my face?" Ruin asks against my chest.

"I don't think so, but your hair is a dead giveaway." She groans, and I place a kiss on the top of her head.

"Maybe she didn't recognize me since I always wear dresses in school?" Hope pours out of Ruin's tone, and I honestly don't know what to say, so I just continue to hug her.

"I'm going to have to burn these clothes as soon as I get home."

I chuckle at her dramatics. "Don't you dare. You look good enough to eat in them." She hugs me tighter, and before we can get carried away, we sneak out of the museum using the emergency exit.

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“Look at us, sneaking out of places like two criminals.” I laugh at her joke, and she curtsies. We stay outside, looking at each other not really knowing what to do or what to say next. The moment is gone since we’ll be looking over our shoulders at every turn.

“I guess I’ll see you in class,” she says as she starts walking backward.

“I guess so,” I say as I shrug and put my hands inside my pockets, feeling awkward as hell that I couldn’t kiss her when we were clearly both dying to do so.

Once she’s turned the corner, I start walking toward the parking lot. A long cold shower awaits at home.

“Gio. What’s up? Glad you finally showed up.” My brother Luca greets me as his image fills my phone screen.

“Hey, baby bro. How’s everything going?” Luca flinches at the term of endearment, and I chuckle.

“I’m twenty-five years old and a married man, boludo. I’m not a baby anymore.” He groans and whines, which only makes me explode in laughter.

“But you’ll always be my baby brother,” I continue, riling him up more, and he groans in frustration.

“You’re making it really hard to like you, Gio. I wonder why I even called you in the first place.”

“I’m sorry, I just couldn’t pass up the chance to give you some shit. What’s up?”

“My wife is wondering if you’re coming for Christmas, and I decided to call and check on you instead of texting.” My eyes widen in surprise—it’s not even October, and they’re already planning Christmas?

“Well, I’m planning to defend my dissertation sometime in early November, then I’m graduating in December.” I pause, thinking about Ruin and how I’m planning on dating her after I graduate. But she seems to be close to her family, so I’m sure she’ll spend her break with them. I don’t think it’ll be wise to meet them so soon. “Count me in, I’ll be free during winter break.”

“Excellent. I’m glad we’ll get to see you somewhat soon.” Luca nods while he thinks, and I’m wondering what else is going on. Can he tell I’m developing feelings for someone? “You know I’m not as smart as you, so excuse my ignorance. But should we attend your dissertation defense or something? It sounds like a big deal.” I love my brother—always trying to be present, just like I was for him and our little sister, Isabella.

“Nah, you can watch the stream if you want, but it’s definitely not required.” He exhales a long breath, and I chuckle.

“No offense, Gio but I could already see myself trying to keep up and being completely lost,” he says as he scratches the top of his head.

“Hi, Gio,” Karina, Luca’s wife, chirps as she comes to stand next to him.

“Hi, Kari, how’s it going?” I smile at her. She’s been a great influence on my brother and has helped him become a better man.

“You know, trying to keep this one in line.” She shrugs, and Luca looks at her, fake

hurt in his baby blue eyes. I can't help but laugh at their relationship dynamic. When Luca pouts, Karina rolls her eyes but gives him a chaste kiss, which he then deepens in 0.2 seconds. I let them have their moment because now that I've hung out with Ruin, I understand how much you can feel for someone.

"Sorry, Gio, I didn't mean for this to get X-rated," Karina says, her cheeks turning crimson. I just wave her off—I'm used to my brother's antics.

"Anyway, I just wanted to say that we're so incredibly proud of you, and we'll be there for your graduation. Just let us know the date when you have it." I nod at her with a smile, suddenly unable to form words. My family might not look like a traditional family, but it sure is awesome.

"Okay, big bro, now that Karina is back from the field, I have some matters to attend to with her. We'll talk soon." Luca disconnects the video as Karina starts giggling. It doesn't take a genius to guess what's going to happen next in his office.

For the first time in my life, I find myself wishing I could have what my brother has—a happy, healthy relationship.

Chapter 12

Ruin MacAllister

We still have at least half the semester to go, and being around Gio without giving away how much I'm into him is getting harder and harder. I feel like a love-sick puppy, or in calf love—as Granny would call it. Gio is going over the lab experiment for today, but my mind is somewhere else—on that Ferris wheel where I was hoping he would kiss me.

"Any questions?" I hear Gio ask the class, but no one speaks. I think we're at a point

in the semester when everyone knows what to do independently.

As I'm about to start working on today's experiment, I notice Alyssa's shit-eating grin, and it's directed at me, which is immediately suspicious. Does she know I've been chatting with Gio? Oh, hell.

"Oh, haven't you heard? Ruin, the goody two-shoes transfer girl, has the hots for the teacher," Alyssa whisper-shouts as soon as Gio leaves the lab. Collective giggling and chuckling bubble up throughout the class, and my face grows hot. I can tell I'm blushing hard. My lab partner gives me a look that says, Are you going to let her talk shit about you? And that's when my brain kicks in.

"Are you projecting, Alyssa? Because last time I checked, you're the one who melts everytime Gio is in the room. You ask the dumbest questions just so he can get close to you." I raise a brow in defiance, and now it's her turn to blush.

"Oh, Ruin can fight," one of the guys says, and everyone starts chanting, "Ruin, Ruin, Ruin." I guess Alyssa's little attempt to embarrass me backfired. Suddenly, the lab goes dead silent, and it doesn't take me long to figure out why. Gio is back. I'm pretty sure he knows what's going on because his face is stern.

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“At the beginning of the semester, I made my expectations clear—not just for academics, but for behavior. Sadly, everyone on this floor could hear the ridiculous accusations being thrown around in here.” I lower my gaze, ashamed—because, yeah, it was silly. Alyssa set the bait, and I fell for it.

“Ruin, Alyssa, please come with me,” Gio says and leaves the room, not even waiting for us. I remove my gloves and lab coat and rush to meet him outside of the lab, Alyssa trailing behind me.

“Ladies, I don’t know what’s going on, but it has to stop. I have no intention of letting my classroom become a gossip corner. I’ve been teaching for four years and have never had to deal with this kind of behavior,” Gio says, visibly exasperated. I can tell he’s really trying not to yell, his hands clenched in tight fists.

“I’m sorry, Gio. Mr. Bianchi.” I correct myself, just in case Alyssa says I’m being too informal. “I know I have no excuse to behave the way I did. I shouldn’t have reacted to Alyssa’s false accusations.” I lower my eyes as I say the words, I know she would see the lie in my eyes.

“Yeah, Gio. I’m sorry, too. I just thought it was a silly joke,” Alyssa says with a chuckle. Oops—that’s the wrong thing to say and do.

“Joking about people’s private lives is despicable and distasteful. I thought I was dealing with adults here, but clearly I was wrong.”

Alyssa is breathing hard, clearly trying to keep the tears from spilling down her face at Gio’s harsh words.

“I’m going to set the example and behave like an adult. I’m not going to report you to student affairs for defamation or harassment. But I do expect your behavior to improve drastically, or else I’ll be forced to tarnish your student record.” Gio’s words are hard, and his tone leaves no room for argument.

I nod at him, and he nods back. Alyssa goes back into the lab, tears streaming down her cheeks.

Once she’s out of earshot, I ask him, “Harassment?”

Gio motions for me to follow him, and we go to the break room.

“Yeah, she came to my office hours earlier this week to ask the most minute things and tried to touch me while asking me out. I’ve been too patient with her, but when I heard her going after you, I had enough.” His expression relaxes, and the Gio I know starts to come back. I hate that he’s dealing with this, though. Now I’m even more upset at Alyssa for going after him.

“Are you alright?” he asks as he grabs my wrist, making small circles with his thumb against my pulse point. I shiver at the touch, but give him a reassuring smile.

“I’m a real tough kid,” I say with a shrug.

“I can handle my shit.” He doesn’t skip a beat, and I’m shocked he knows I was actually quoting a song. “What can I say, I enjoy Ms. Swift’s music, too.” He smiles and starts walking backward toward the lab. Every day he surprises me more and more. I’m shamelessly falling for my lab instructor, and I couldn’t be happier about it.

I walk back into class with my head hung low, trying to play the part of the reprimanded student. I don’t need or want any more drama and gossip from the other

students.

As I get ready for bed, my phone buzzes with a text, and a flock of butterflies takes flight in my belly. I hope it is who I think it is. When I grab my phone, a big smile spreads across my face.

Gio: I just wanted to check in and make sure you're doing okay.

Oh, my goodness, this man.

Ruin: Yes, I'm good. I told you I'm a tough kid.

Gio: I know, but I still wanted to check in.

Gio: Or maybe it was an excuse to get you to text me? *shrug emoji*

I laugh at his playfulness.

Ruin: I don't think you have to work so hard for one of my texts anymore.

Gio: Really? *evil emoji*

Ruin: Really. Did you have any issues after the lab? Did anyone ask what all the commotion was about?

Gio: No, I made that part up to get you and Alyssa out of the lab. I really wanted her to know she needed to stop going after you.

I feel bad that she ended up crying today, especially since I really did go out with Gio. But at the same time, I'm upset she's been trying to make a move on him.

Ruin: Okay, I'm going to completely switch topics. I really don't want to keep talking about her. What's your favorite season? I feel like your answer will make or break us.

Gio: Wow, okay. Harsh. No pressure, Gio.

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I bark out a laugh.

Gio: Can I take a few minutes to think before I answer? I don't want to get it wrong.

He's a goofball, and I love him for it. Wait—love? Where did that come from?

Ruin: Clock's ticking...

Gio: Fine, I'll answer, but I want it to be known that I was rushed to answer, so if my answer is wrong, you know why.

A big smile spreads on my lips as I see the three dots dancing on my screen.

Gio: In Argentina, we get all four seasons, so it wasn't a big change for me when I moved here. But I have to say my favorite is fall. The colors and the crisp air are something special. Spring is a close second.

Ruin: I regret to inform you...

Gio: What? No, this isn't fair.

Ruin: That fall is my favorite season, too!

Gio: Ahhh, you scared me.

Ruin: I gotcha! *laugh emoji*

Gio: That you did.

I continue to laugh and smile in equal measure as we stay up texting all night long.

It's been a long day, but I'm finally done, and I'll be going to my hometown this weekend, so I'm in good spirits. When I get back to my apartment, I'm stunned by the sight—red, orange and yellow mums, sunflowers, dahlias, and roses are everywhere. It's a sea of fall-colored flowers, and the apartment smells divine.

“What's all this?” I murmur as I get closer to the largest bouquet, where a small card is tucked inside.

Ruin,

Happy First Day of Fall.

I wish I could spend it with you, but alas, this is life.

Looking forward to seeing you soon,

Cobalt.

“Holy crap, Ruin. Who are you dating, and where can I get one? Look at this place,” Everly says as she comes out of her room. I can't help but grin at the note. He remembered. Last time we went out, I told him everything about home—how much I love fall and the Apple Festival. Though we haven't gone out since then, our text exchanges keep me on my toes. His messages are so thrilling, and the warmth in his words is intoxicating. I love getting to know him.

“Ruin?”

“Oh, sorry. It’s a guy from home. No one you know.”

“Damn, and he sent all this? I thought you were going home this weekend.”

“I am, but I guess he wanted me to know he was thinking of me on the first day of fall. It’s my favorite season.”

“I guess so,” she says, grabbing an apple from one of the arrangements. There are apples and pumpkins along with the flowers. I can’t believe Gio did all this for me.

“I mean, this is super cute but what kind of name is Cobalt?” I chuckle because she’s right. Cobalt is a unique name, and there’s no way I can tell her it’s the name I gave the husky plush Giogot me because it reminded me of his eyes. Another thing he remembered.

Heading to my room with the note and an apple in hand, I get goose bumps all over my body at the sight—there are even more flowers in here. A basket on my bed catches my eye, filled with a set of candles, a cute mug, a soft blanket, and all the ingredients to make my favorite pumpkin-spiced latte. Putting my backpack on the floor, I get comfortable in my bed before texting Gio.

Ruin: What did I ever do to deserve you?

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I send a selfie, smiling while hugging Cobalt, with all the flowers behind me. I don't think anyone has made me happier in my life. This is amazing. He's amazing.

Gio: Actually, I think I'm the one who should be asking that. I just wanted to make sure you know that, even though we can't be out in public, you're important to me. I think about you every minute of the day.

How is he even real? I'm glad I'm lying down in bed; otherwise, I'd be a big puddle on the floor.

Ruin: Any chance you'd like to join me this weekend in my hometown for the Apple Festival?

Gio: You know I'd love to, but I think it's best if the first time I meet your family, I'm no longer your teacher.

I know he's right, but it still stings. I want to spend as much time with him as possible.

Ruin: I know.

Gio: But next year, I'd love to go with you, and maybe when you come back, we can have another fortuitous encounter.

Ruin: Oh, I'd love that. Where do you think it'd be?

Gio: Well, since fall break is coming up, I thought we could take a couple of days and

head to Corolla...

Oh my, this is getting serious, isn't it? Or am I making a bigger deal in my head than it actually is? I don't know if it's appropriate or not to ask, but going to the Outer Banks isn't cheap, and I'm not swimming in money. Is he expecting me to chip in for the trip? Either way, I'm so excited. I'll ask Rain to lend me some money.

Ruin: Definitely. I'd love that.

Gio: Excellent, I'm looking forward to it then.

Gio: Sweet dreams, Ruin.

Ruin: G'night, Cobalt. *heart emoji*

Chapter 13

Ruin MacAllister

It's a beautiful fall day in the North Carolina mountains. The air is crisp, the leaves are beginning to change colors, and you can feel the buzz in the town—today is Apple Festival Day.

“Good morning, Rusty,” River greets me with the nickname he's had for me since I was a tiny baby. He comes to stand on the porch next to me, a cup of coffee warming his hands. “A little airish this morning, I reckon,” he continues, and I chuckle. I love it when my brother uses the colorful Appalachian dialect. Airish is the word we use when it's a little cold outside.

“Yes, but it's still nice.” I breathe it in before taking a long sip of my own coffee. I brewed the one Gio gave me the other day.

“Where did you get this coffee? It’s really good,” River asks. I know where all this is going, but I’m still not ready to tell him about Gio.

“One of my roommates gave it to me,” I lie. I’m going to have to start writing down all my lies just to keep track of them.

“Hmmm. When you get back, you’ll have to ask her where she got it, because now I feel like we need to buy more.” I smile and nod at him.

Silence falls upon us, and I let myself enjoy the taste of my first pumpkin-spiced latte of the season with the most beautiful sight right in front of me. Our orchard spans over two hundred acres, with beautiful trees lining up and down the mountains as far as the eye can see. River’s busiest season is the harvest, and I’m sad I won’t be here to help this year, but once I graduate, I’m planning to move back. I love being near my family.

“Are you ready, Ru?” Miles comes out to join us, and I smile at him. We have a band, and every year, we perform at the Apple Festival.

“You know it,” I reply as I take another sip of my latte. Tonight will be epic. River and Miles play the guitar and banjo, Rain plays the drums, Merlin plays the violin, and I sing. We’ve been doing this since we were little, so we usually don’t need to rehearse much. Whenever we want to add a new song, we practice individually first, and then we come together to give it the MacAllister touch, as River calls it.

During the day, I help Mama and Rain in the family booth. We sell everything apple: pies, butter, and apples by the bushel. Mama and Granny spend the week before the festival baking and preparing the apple butter. People come from all over the state to our fair, even though it’s not the only Apple Festival in Appalachia.

Newcomers and locals alike stop by to say hello and buy from our stand. Rain and I

are beyond busy—we switch between being the cashier and fulfilling orders.

River is always mingling and talking business with other local farmers, while Miles and Merlin help run the games section.

Last year, Granny volunteered Miles in the kissing booth. My poor brother ended up kissing over a hundred women. And as much as he likes to joke around, I know he felt it was a little too much. But Granny insisted the church needed a new sound system, and Miles needed to help fund it since he's the one who makes her pray the most.

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This year, Merlin volunteered to work on the dunk tank because the high school juniors were in charge of it. He and his best friend, Meadow, are taking turns getting dunked, and I love how cute they look together. I hope one day soon he realizes he's head over heels for her.

"Ruination, long time no see." I roll my eyes at the nickname. I would recognize the sleazy idiot who calls me that anywhere. Steve Haddock, my high school boyfriend, always loved to call me that. I hated it, but somehow, I believed him when he said it was because I had "ruined him for any other girl." Ha! Joke's on me—I caught him kissing Payley McGee under the football field bleachers during our homecoming dance. And sure enough, they ended up having a shotgun wedding not long after we graduated. Now, they have three littles, and he's still as vexing as six years ago.

"Oh, but if it isn't Haddock in the paddock," Rain says as she approaches us.

"Rain," Steve greets her with a curt nod.

"What do you want, Steve?" Rain asks him, cutting to the chase.

"I just wanted to say hi to an old friend. Last I heard, Ruin was living the life in the big city." Steve plays with the toothpick he has between his lips, and I can't help but shiver in disgust. He looks so slimy.

"Well, you've said hello already. So unless you're going to buy something, we need you to move along because the line is backing up." I try to cover the laugh that bubbles up with a cough, but I don't think I did a good job because Steve is glaring at us now.

“Bye, Steve, it was good seeing you. Say hi to the missus and the kids for us.” I wave at him and he turns around and leaves, almost running. Rain and I explode in laughter.

“I can’t believe the nerve of that guy, coming to say hi to you. What was he thinking? That you were going to be his new side piece?” Rain asks as I elbow her in the ribs.

“Eww, take that back, Rain MacAllister. There’s no way I’ll ever be anyone’s side piece.”

“Praise the lord,” Granny says behind us, and we both jump.

“Granny, didn’t anyone teach you not to sneak up on people like that? We could have had a heart attack,” Rain admonishes her, but she dismisses us with a hand wave.

“I was doing my tarot reads but had to come see Ruin because this card came for her when I asked the angels.” I look at her confused. “Honey, when the angels want to speak to me they don’t care who’s in line. They just speak.”

Granny takes a tarot card from her apron pocket and hands it to me. It’s a pink, with golden letters that reads: Romantic Feelings. The image shows a couple, almost kissing. It’s cute, but I have no clue what Granny is talking about. Rain snatches the card from my hand, and I laugh.

“You think I’ve lost my marbles, but the angels don’t lie. And that man you met back in Raleigh is the real deal, honey. Trust me.” Granny pats my hand as she takes the card from Rain’s hands and heads back to her booth.

Rain looks at me. “Spill it, sister.” I know I’m blushing because I can feel my face getting warm.

“Later. Look at the line we have now.” I dismiss her quickly, but my twin is relentless.

“Good thing I know where you live, Ruin Josephine. This conversation isn’t over.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it.” I smirk at her as I greet a customer.

It was another amazing day at the fair. Once we sold out all of the pies and butter, Rain and I walked around to see what others were selling. We passed wood statues, homemade lip balm, and kettle popcorn. I got a huge bag of salted caramel popcorn and was enjoying it until Miles decided it was his. He took it right out of my hands and ran. I chased him all over the fairgrounds until he started throwing popcorn back at me. There was a point where I was laughing so hard that I couldn’t keep running after him.

“Miles, give that popcorn back to your sister,” Mama says in her mom voice. Miles stops running so I can finally catch up to him. He doesn’t give me the popcorn back, though; he goes straight to hug Mama, who melts in his embrace. Mama is such a softie.

“I’m sorry, Mama. I promise it won’t happen again,” Miles says as he sticks his tongue out. I just cackle at his childishness.

“Are you two done playing around? It’s almost time to perform.” River comes to where we’re standing, and Miles sobers up real quick. After hugging Mama and Granny, we make our way to the makeshift stage.

“Are you all ready?” Mr. Tate, the town’s mayor, asks us before our time to sing. River looks each of us in the eyes, and once he’s done his round to ensure we’re ready, he nods at the mayor.

“Alrighty, up you go. I’ll introduce you all after I officially close the fair.” We take our spots on the stage as Mr. Tate thanks everyone for their hard work and for making the Apple Festival another successful event in Azalea Creek.

“And to close the fair with the best band around, I give you the MacAllisters.” The crowd explodes in cheers, and I smile at them as I take the microphone from Mr. Tate.

“Good evening, Azaleans. How are we doing?” I ask, and everyone cheers louder. “I can’t hear you! Did you all have fun?” Everyone shouts this time around, and I nod at the crowd as I smile, letting their energy and enthusiasm run through me.

“Are you all ready for some good ol’ music?” I look at Rain to start the count, and my siblings start playing a song by Shania Twain. I sway to the rhythm, enjoying myself like I always do when I’m on stage with my brothers and sister. When I start singing, everything around me fades, and I lose myself in the words.

This has been such an amazing day. It’s great to be home. The only thing missing is Gio. But all I can do for now is to hope that his words become a reality and that next year, he’ll be here with me.

“Okay, Ruru. Time to spill,” Rain declares as she gets in bed, turning on her side so we’re facing each other.

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“Remember my teacher? The one who lent me his car?” Rain nods with a huge grin on her face.

“Well, we’ve gone out a couple of times.” I giggle and kick my feet in the air as Rain jumps up from her bed.

“Shut up! You’re dating an older man?” she asks as she gets back in bed with me.

“Ew, no. Gio is like thirty,” I tell her, and she nods as she bites her lip.

“Okay, tell me more. What does he look like? Why do you like him? Where have you guys been? Tell me everything.”

I chuckle at her enthusiasm, but I can’t help but get excited as I begin to share.

“He’s tall, with blond hair—shorter on the sides and longer on top. Sometimes it curls, which is so hot. He has the most gorgeous shade of blue eyes. They are dark, vibrant, but when he’s happy, they turn lighter.”

“Have you guys kissed?” she asks eagerly. I groan, and she frowns. “Why not?”

“Well, he’s my teacher, and even though I know he likes me, it was me who asked him out first. I think he was going to wait until the semester was over to ask me out.”

“No way. The man is a saint.” I chuckle at her assessment. “And from what we can tell, he’s rich.” I nod because I honestly don’t think anyone on a teaching assistant salary alone can afford a Range Rover.

“And he’s handsome and smart.” Rain keeps going, and I nod. “And he’s in love with my little sister. Oh my goodness, I can’t wait to meet him!” Rain shouts, and I cover her mouth with my hand.

“I don’t want to tell anyone until after the semester is over. I don’t want them to get the wrong idea about him. You know?” Rain nods, understanding dawning on her, and I remove my hand from her mouth.

“And that’s not all.” Her eyes grow big. “He asked me if I wanted to spend a couple of days with him in Corolla,” I say, way too giddy to contain myself.

“The Outer Banks?” I nod, and Rain whistles. “Yup, he’s loaded.”

“Well, that’s the thing. I don’t know if he’s paying or if we’re going dutch.” Rain rolls her eyes.

“What?”

“Ruru, do you really think that a man who drives a Range Rover is going to ask you out and is going to make you pay half?” I ponder her words, and I think she’s right. I haven’t even told her about the amount of flowers he sent me the other day. That must have cost at least a couple of grand.

“You’re right. Silly me.” I roll my eyes at her as I blow raspberries. I don’t doubt he’ll cover everything, but I feel like I should be contributing somehow. I’ll have to talk to him about it next time I see him.

“I’m always right, darling.” She winks at me, and we both laugh. I’m so lucky to have Rain in my corner.

“The semester will be over in, what, eight more weeks?” Rain wonders, and I nod.

“I can’t wait to meet him. I need to give him the twin seal of approval, but from what I’ve heard and the way your eyes light up, I reckon he’s one of the good ones.”

We hug, and I can’t help feeling overly grateful, loving this little sisterly moment too much.

I can’t wait to see those cobalt eyes again next week.

Chapter 14

Gio Bianchi

“Gio, do you have a minute to chat?” Dr. Smith queries when he pops his head in the lab after class. I hope this is not about the rumor Alyssa tried to spread—I don’t think I would be able to lie to him. And I don’t want to spoil my days off with Ruin either, since we’re leaving tomorrow morning.

“Of course, Dr. Smith. What’s going on?” I square my shoulders, like I’m preparing myself for impact.

“Why don’t you follow me to my office? I think it’d be best to be away from prying ears.”

I inhale deeply. I’m so fucked. Why did I ever think I could pull off dating a student? I should have waited until after the semester was over, as I originally planned. But to be fair, I don’t think I could have stayed away from Ruin much longer—the way electricity runs through us everytime we’re close is mindblowing.

Dr. Smith motions for me to take a seat across from his chair, but I shake my head. I have too much pent up energy accumulated, and I need to keep moving.

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“It was brought to my attention that a rumor is circulating in the environmental department, and as you could imagine, I was shocked when I heard my star student, Gio Bianchi, was involved in ‘dating a student’ allegations.”

I look him straight in the eye, even though I’m internally cursing at the fact that maybe Alyssa recognized Ruin after all. If I’m going to go down for this, I’ll go down with my head held high. I can figure out something else to do with my life, I just need to make sure Ruin doesn’t suffer because of this.

“I don’t want to know if the rumors are true. To be honest, the less I know, the better.” My eyebrows arch in surprise, and Dr. Smith chuckles. “Oh, Gio, I’ll let you in on a little secret—we’ve all been there, done that at some point. Don’t look so surprised. We are only human, after all. And even though the school has policies against fraternizing between faculty and students, the rules for you are a little less clear since technically, you’re a student, too.” I release a breath, and Dr. Smith chuckles.

“I’m willing to bend the rules for your benefit, since, from what I’ve seen, you haven’t shown her any favoritism or made special concessions for her.”

“What are you saying, Dr. Smith?” He smiles as he comes to stand in front of me.

“I’ll grade her work, and you’ll continue to be her teacher.” I open my mouth but no words come out.

“I have a feeling she’s special to you, this is not a fling.” I nod because I’m still speechless, and he’s not wrong.

“If this were another situation—if you were just having fun, or if she were a minor—it would be a completely different story. But I know you, Gio. You’re a good man.”

“Thank you, Dr. Smith. I honestly don’t know what to say.”

“Don’t mention it, and please try to be less obvious in class.” He pats my back and makes his way back to his desk. I nod and smile at him as I leave his office.

“Thank you, Abuelo,” I say in a low voice, not doubting for a second that my guardian angel is behind my luck.

Last night, I pulled an all-nighter, and surprisingly, it wasn't for work. I was making sure these next couple of days with Ruin will be unforgettable. I hope she likes everything I've prepared for us. I told her to meet me at one of the private hangars of the airport. If she was confused by my request, she didn't mention it. That's another thing I need to talk to her about, though it feels weird as all hell to say, “Oh yes, by the way, I'm a billionaire.” That's just not my style.

I got here earlier than the time I told her—I wanted to make sure everything was ready for us to go. When I see her coming down the escalator, my heart speeds up. She looks stunning with her hair down in soft waves, framing her gorgeous face. She's wearing a burnt orange dress with a small white floral print, a sweetheart neckline, and a brown sweater. She usually wears suede boots, but today, she's wearing Doc Martens—the perfect mix of sweet and sassy.

I rush to meet her at the bottom of the escalator, and when our eyes lock, no words are needed. I'm sure my eyes mirror hers, full of emotion.

“Hey,” I whisper when she's in front of me.

“Hi,” she says in a breathy tone, and I wonder if she’s tired.

“You look stunning, Ruin,” I tell her honestly. She smiles, and I get lost in those clear green eyes.

I notice her chest rising and falling rapidly. My protective instinct immediately kicks in.

“Is everything okay? You seem a little out of breath.” She turns a pretty shade of pink, and my stupid brain catches on—maybe she’s excited to see me.

“Yes, everything is fine. I’m just happy to see you,” she says as she tucks a piece of hair behind her ear.

I grab her hand and place a kiss on the back of her palm. “So am I.” Her blush intensifies. If I keep looking at her, my dick is going to be standing at attention, and we’re not there yet.

“This way.” I place my hand on her lower back and grab her bag.

“Wait, I’m so confused. I thought you said we were going to Corolla.” She stops walking and looks up at me, her green eyes darkening.

“And we are. I just thought it’d be better if we flew there instead of driving for five hours.” Her lips part slightly, and I have to fight the sudden need to feel them against mine. “Come on, everything is ready to go,” I say, holding her hand in mine. When our fingers intertwine, it feels like I’ve found a piece of myself I didn’t know was missing. Her soft, delicate hand fits perfectly in mine. I give it a gentle squeeze, and she squeezes back.

“Gio, I must confess something,” Ruin says as soon as we’re seated, and the pilot

tells us to get ready for takeoff.

“What is it?” I ask, trying to figure out if there’s something amiss.

“This is my first time flying, and I’m really nervous,” she admits, not meeting my gaze, and my heart warms seeing her so vulnerable.

“I was nervous the first time I flew, too. But I can assure you, we’re completely safe.” She nods, but her face is pale.

“Come here,” I tell her as I open my arm, and she buries her head against my chest—a deep sigh leaving her body.

Flight time is less than an hour, and once we were in the air, Ruin starts to relax a bit, but the majority of the flight was spent in comfortable silence. When we land, we get in one of my cars—a Mercedes Benz GLS—that I had previously arranged to be left at the airport for us.

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“Gio, I hate to be so nosy, but I can’t help but wonder—is that airplane yours?” Ruin asks, moving uncomfortably in her seat. I give her a smile as I get ready to let it all out.

“I was wondering when this would come up.” I glance at her, making sure she’s paying attention. She gives me a sweet smile that calms my nerves. It’s not everyday I have to tell the girl I like how much money I have.

“I don’t think there’s a way to say this without sounding awkward or cocky, so I’m just going to say it.” I take a deep breath before saying the words out loud. “I’m a billionaire.” Silence fills the car, and I can only guess what’s going through Ruin’s mind. I briefly take my eyes off the road and glance at her—she is in pure shock.

“Please say something.” I chuckle nervously.

“How... I mean, wow.” Ruin chuckles as she shakes her head.

“I’m not going to bore you with all the twists and turns, but my grandpa left most of his land and money to me and my two siblings when he passed away. Once I officially became an adult, I started investing my share. When I moved here, I met Penny, who became my financial advisor. That’s when my assets skyrocketed.” Another round of silence falls upon us, but this time, I don’t feel as anxious. It’s all out in the open now.

“That’s impressive, Gio,” she says easily, and I release a deep breath. “I feel so incredibly unworthy, though. Here you are—one of the smartest people I know, not to mention a freaking billionaire. And what do I have to offer?”

I give her a pointed look as I press the button to open the gate to my house.

“Don’t you ever refer to yourself like that, Ruin. There’s so much more to you. Can’t you see you have me hanging on your every word? Every move? I don’t think one life will be enough to spend with you.” She chuckles nervously, and I turn to face her once I’ve parked the car.

“Come on, let me show you around. I can’t wait for our getaway to start.” I get out of the car and jog around to open the door for her. “Thank you,” she tells me with a bright smile as she holds my hand.

“Always.”

The moment we step into the house, I hear Ruin’s gasp. “Gio, this is incredible,” she gushes as she twirls around the living room. I grin at the sight—I’ve come to realize that Ruin’s happiness is my happiness, and I’ll make it my purpose in life to see that smile on her face every single day of our lives.

“Are you hungry?” I ask her as I walk toward the kitchen. This place was the first big purchase I made after becoming a billionaire. I fell in love with the view. The entire first floor has glass windows instead of walls. The marble floors were imported from Italy, and I remodeled the entire house. I wanted to have a state-of-the-art gourmet kitchen, hoping my siblings would come and visit one day. But having Ruin here is even better.

“Oh my goodness, Gio. I feel like a broken record wooing and wowing at every turn, but what’s all this?” Ruin comes to stand next to me, and I wrap my arm around her shoulders, pulling her flush against me.

“Well, I wasn’t sure if you had breakfast this morning, so I thought we’d have brunch.” Her eyes light up, turning the lightest shade of green.

“Thank you, Gio. To be honest, I didn’t eat anything because I’m not a morning person, and I’m not usually hungry until I’mstarving.” Her face turns pink again, and I could kiss her right now—she looks so cute. But there’s stuff to talk about before we get to that point.

There’s a buffet-style spread of food: pumpkin pancakes, apple cider donuts, scrambled eggs, hash browns, and fresh fruit. There’s also a coffee bar and a chocolate station. I put a little bit of everything on my plate, while Ruin piles hers with pancakes, topping them with whipped cream and caramel sauce. A smile spreads across my face as I watch her enjoy plating the food.

“Here, let me make you the most delicious pumpkin-spiced latte you’ve ever tasted,” she says as she puts her plate down and gets to work. She starts by brewing espresso in my fancy Nespresso machine. Then she froths the milk, and for the pumpkin sauce, I am surprised when she makes it from scratch. Once all the ingredients are ready, she pours each of us a cup and tops it with whipped cream and pumpkin spice seasoning. I give her a thankful smile when she hands me my cup, and I moan after taking a sip.

“This is delicious, thank you.” She does a curtsy, and I bite my lip. Taking a deep breath before speaking, I try to calm myself. We’re not there yet.

“Do you want to eat outside? I have space heaters.”

“That would be lovely.” Once we sit down on the patio, I enjoy a few sips of my PSL before digging into my food.

“How did you prepare all this? I’m amazed.”

“A company on the island offers things like this, preparing homes for guests to arrive. I decided to take it easy today and have the day planned for us. I figured tomorrow we could cook together.”

“I love that idea. What else do we have planned for today?” she asks after taking a huge bite of her pancakes.

“Patience, sweetheart.” She stops chewing, and I freeze.

“Was I too forward?” I ask, suddenly unsure if we’re on the same page here.

“No, it just caught me by surprise since you’ve said we needed to take it slow.” That sweet blush starts rising from her chest to her cheeks, and I can’t help it, I close the distance between us and place a kiss on her forehead. Ruin’s breath caresses my neck, and fuck if I don’t feel it all the way down to my cock.

I clear my throat as I create a little distance between us, needing to clear the air on a few things before I can actually kiss her.

“Yes, I’ve been adamant about us taking things slow and waiting until I’m no longer your teacher. But Ruin, the more time I spend with you, the more I want to get to know you and experience everything with you.” I release a breath as I look up at the sky—a beautiful, bright, sunny day with clear blue skies on this fall day at the beach.

“I had a conversation with Dr. Smith yesterday.” Ruin tenses.

“Are we in trouble?”

I smile and shake my head. “No, on the contrary. Even though a relationship between us is frowned upon, Dr. Smith offered to grade your assignments. So, even though we still can’t be seen in public, if something were to be said about us, I’m no longer in charge of your grades. Technically, I’m not breaking any codes at school.”

Ruin gets up from her chair and lunges at me, so I hug her—inhaling her apple and honey scent is like hugging fall.

“Oh, Gio, this is the best news ever. I’m so thankful Dr. Smith is on our side, even though I can’t help but think Alyssa went and told him about us.”

I chuckle at her excitement, but I’d be lying if I said I’m not equally happy.

“Yeah, I have the same feeling about Alyssa, but I can’t prove she’s the one spreading the rumor. And Dr. Smith is an excellent mentor. He said he knew me, and knew I’d never get involved with a student to try and take advantage of her, but something tells me it was more than that.”

“What do you mean?” Ruin frowns, confusion transforming her face.

“Well, I hate to think this way, but I’m sure the donations I’ve made to the program played a part in his decision to help us out. I’m not proud of it, I’ve never donated money to gain any favors but...”

“You’re the best man I know, no one will second-guess your motives.” I smile at her

compliment.

Once she moves back to her seat, we finish eating before heading out toward the beach, at her request.

“Are you kidding me right now?” Ruin says as she takes off running toward the pumpkin patch I had set up for us.

“I couldn’t go with you to the Apple Festival in your town, so I thought it’d be great if we could have our own private festival today.” Ruin squeals in delight, and my heart bursts with pride. I made her this happy.

“So, where do you want to start?” I ask her, and she looks around, taking in all the booths.

“Let’s go bobbing for apples first.”

I nod with a smile and motion for her to go ahead of me. I should have known she’s a pro; she got seven apples in one minute. I clap at her impressive record as she jumps up and down in excitement.

“Okay, Bianchi, your turn.” She points with her thumb to the basin full of apples as she moves away to give me room.

“Ohhh, sassy Ruin came to play.”

“You have no idea.” I swallow hard at the innuendo. Fuck, I’m playing with fire, but I can’t wait to go up in flames. A picture of Ruin bobbing her head while sucking my dick forms in my head, and I try to adjust the growing bulge in my pants. I think I’ll need to go for a swim in the cold ocean to cool off.

The girl who's manning the booth sets up a timer, and once she says go, I go down hard and try to bite an apple, but they're slippery. Ruin made it seem way easier. When the timer goes off, I've only managed to get two apples out of the basin, and Ruin raises her arms in victory. Meanwhile, I'm fighting for my life trying to catch my breath.

We end up playing cornhole, pumpkin ring toss, and an agility race, which to no one's surprise, Ruin beats me every single time. There's also a DIY scarecrow and a pumpkin-carving station, where we spend most of the afternoon. After carefully selecting the pumpkins we were going to carve, I decide to make a robot-looking pumpkin, and Ruin goes for a more traditional jack-o'-lantern.

As the sun sets, the breeze turns chilly. After thanking the people who worked at our festival, we head inside.

"This is the most magical date I've ever had. I usually don't get to enjoy the festival much back at home, since I'm working most of the day at my family's booth," Ruin says, her eyes glinting under the lights. The admiration I have for this woman keeps growing. Her sense of duty to her family is similar to the one I have for mine. She could rebel and say she wants to act her age and enjoy the festival, but instead, she chooses to help and put her family first. I'm happy I can give her some of those donated moments back.

"I'm so glad you think so, but the day isn't over yet." Ruin gives me a puzzled look as I get closer to her and hug her into me.

"What do you think about dinner with some music?"

"Ohh, what kind of music?" Ruin asks, intrigued.

"I hope you like country," I say, trying to play it cool. I remember in one of our text

exchanges, we spoke about our favorite artists.

“Are you kidding me? I love it.” My smile is wide at her words. I motion for her to follow me to the beach. The crew I hired has already cleaned up the festival supplies and set up a tent with a bonfire just outside. Fairy lights twinkle around the perimeter, casting a warm glow over a comfy couch covered with fuzzy blankets. A nearby table is stocked with pulled pork BBQ and apple cider.

Ruin turns around and mouths, “This is incredible,” and I just keep smiling. I never knew making someone happy would be so rewarding.

There’s a small stage, and Turner Scott—my favorite country singer—is looking right at us, a warm smile on his face.

“Good evening, Miss MacAllister. Do you have any requests tonight?” Turner asks a very blushing Ruin as he strums his guitar.

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“Oh my goodness, Gio. He knows who I am,” she says, giddy with excitement.

“Of course, he does. I told him I needed to impress a girl, and he asked me all about you.” Her eyes shine with unshed tears, and I cradle her face in my hands.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” I ask as I get lost in her eyes.

“Nothing, absolutely nothing,” she says as she covers my hands with hers. “It’s just that you’re this incredibly amazing man, and honest to God, I don’t know what I did to deserve you.” I press my forehead against hers, breathing her in, letting her warmth run through me.

“We’ll have time to talk later. Why don’t you answer Turner’s question first.” She gives me a curious look but nods with a beautiful smile. She asks Turner for a song, which happens to be my favorite. He starts singing, and Ruin snuggles close to me. I cover our legs with one of the blankets, and I thank the stars for giving me the chance to make memories with the woman who awakened something in me I thought I would never have.

The evening unfolds as Turner performs some of our favorite songs along with a few requests from other artists. After dinner, Ruin asks Turner if she can sing a song with him, and I’m stunned when her voice fills the beach—raspy and intense. Her tiny frame transforms as she tells a story, not only with her voice but also with the way she moves her body. I’m transfixed.

It’s only when the chorus hits that I realize which song it is: Willow. When she sings “that’s my man,” she points at me, and I move toward her like a moth to a flame.

When the song ends, I hug her and kiss the top of her head. We stay there, enjoying each other's company, as Turner sings one last song.

Ruin and I dance on the sand, the breeze making us shiver as the bonfire warms us up.

It's the perfect ending to a perfect night.

Chapter 15

Ruin MacAllister

By the time Turner says goodbye after taking a couple of selfies with us and signing autographs for me and my family, the bonfire is almost out. As much as I've enjoyed being outside on the beach, I'm ready to go inside and get cozy with Gio by the fireplace in his living room.

I can't believe I've had the best day with him, and we haven't even kissed yet. I hope that changes soon, though, because I'm going to implode if I don't taste his lips.

"Would you like to go to bed, or do you want me to get the fireplace going?" Gio asks, and I could swear he sounds a little nervous. I wonder what conversation we are going to have and why he is anxious about it. I hope he's not about to tell me he has a wife and kids in Argentina waiting for him.

"You read my mind, I was hoping we could spend some time by the fireplace."

Gio smiles, clearly pleased with my answer, and guides me inside his place.

The lights are soft, and even though the French doors and windows are closed, I can still hear the waves crashing onto the beach. I'm a mountain girl through and through,

but I'm loving this time with the ocean. Maybe I'll ask him to bring me again next summer.

"Would you like anything to eat or drink?" Gio asks as the fire starts crackling.

"I'm good for now."

He nods and goes to the kitchen, busying himself.

"I don't want you to think I'm an alcoholic or anything like that, but I need a little bit of liquid courage for our conversation," he says. For the first time, I can tell he's visibly nervous— his hands are shaking.

"Gio, what's going on? You're scaring me. What is it that we have to talk about?" I ask him as I make my way to the kitchen, needing to be close to him. He closes his eyes and takes a few deep breaths.

"I'm sorry. The last thing I want is to make you feel uncomfortable, but what I'm going to tell you is not something I share openly." He grabs a glass of wine in one hand and my hand in the other.

"Please, take a seat."

He motions for me to sit next to him on the big couch, and I do. I'm too stressed out about what's on his mind to relax. I press my legs together, my hands clamping on my knees. Gio takes a big gulp of wine, savoring it. The way his Adam's apple bobs hits me right in my core with a shot of desire.

"So, as you know, I'm the oldest of three siblings." I nod with a smile, letting him know I'm listening.

“I don’t want to bore you with my family history, but basically my parents checked out on us when I was eighteen. I had to become the parental figure for Luca and Isabella.” Gio’s gaze is down, a hint of shame in his tone.

“Oh, Gio. I’m so sorry you had to go through that. I could never fathom growing up without my parents. I know River, my oldest brother, would have done an outstanding job raising us, but I love Mama and Daddy so much.” He reaches for my hand, and I squeeze his.

“Yeah, I can tell you come from a loving family. I’m thankful you’ve had that support throughout your life.” He smiles a sad smile before continuing. “I can’t say everything has been bad or hard, because Abuelo Bianchi made sure my siblings and I had a healthy trust fund to live comfortably and to pursue our dreams. But all this to say, when I had to take care of my siblings, I forgot about taking care of myself. I devoted my time to make sure Luca and Isa were well and thriving.” He releases a frustrated sigh, and I’m still wondering where he’s going with all this.

“Gio, what is it that you’re trying to say? You’re an incredible man. I don’t think there would be anything you could say that would make me not want to be with you,” I tell him honestly, and his eyes widen, going darker. I squirm in place, suddenly overwhelmed by the sexual tension between us.

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“Fuck it,” is the last thing Gio says before he lunges and pulls me in for a passionate kiss. And fuck, it’s right; I feel my skin burning everywhere he touches me. It’s like he’s been holding back, and suddenly, something inside him snapped.

His lips tangle with mine, his tongue seeking access as his hand goes to the back of my neck, pulling my hair. An involuntary moan escapes me, and it’s all Gio needs to deepen the kiss and start exploring my body. When his hand reaches the neckline of my dress, his fingers leave goose bumps on my skin as he trails the entire cleavage—seeking permission. I’m too enthralled by his touch, his taste, his scent, to nod my agreement or to let him know it’s okay. Then, Gio stops abruptly.

“Am I being too forward?” he asks, trying to catch his breath as he sits back down in his spot. I turn my body to face him and pass my hand over the scruff on his jaw. He’s usually clean-shaven, but this look is sexy on him.

“No, of course not. I was just so lost in what we were doing, in how good I was feeling by your touch that I didn’t think of saying it out loud.” He releases a sigh as he scrubs his face with his hand.

“This is what I was trying to tell you, sweetheart.” His gaze is so intense, I feel like I could get lost in his eyes forever. “I have zero experience.”

When his words hit my brain, I can’t help the way my eyes widen. He chuckles, a soft blush appearing on his face.

“What are you saying?” I whisper, feeling the need to tread carefully.

“What I just said, I have zero experience with women. I’m a virgin.” I don’t know why, but my heart warms at his confession. Here he is—this smart, thoughtful, amazing, sweet man—thinking I’d stop seeing him because he’s a virgin.

“So what? The way I see it, it’s actually better for me.” He raises a curious eyebrow, and I smirk at him, feeling sassy and more confident than I’ve ever felt. “I can show you what I like, explore every kink known to man, and learn what we enjoy. We can create our own ritual.” Gio’s eyes turn hungry, and I press my thighs together, seeking some friction.

“I like the sound of that,” Gio says in a husky tone as he grabs me by my waist and pulls me over to straddle him.

“I see you’re ready for your first lesson,” I tell him as I press my core against his hard cock and rock slowly back and forth. Gio sucks in a breath through his teeth, like he’s trying not to blow his load, and that makes me hotter for him. My nipples are two tight pebbles, hungry for attention.

“I am, Miss MacAllister.” He throws me a dirty smirk, and I grow wetter.

“Oh, that’s right, I’m the teacher now. How the tables have turned.” I bite my lip, waiting to see if he will try to kiss me again, and my hungry man doesn’t disappoint. He captures my lips and sucks hard. We both moan, and I start rocking against him, chasing the sweet relief, even though I know I need to take it slow and show him what I like.

I grab his hands without breaking the kiss and place one on my ass and the other on my breast.

“Fuck, Ruin. You feel so perfect in my hands,” Gio says against my lips, and I pull his face closer to me in appreciation—I don’t want this feeling ever to stop.

He's kneading my ass and pulling me closer to him, seeking the same relief I am. His other hand pulls my dress down ever so slowly, exposing my breast, my taut nipple standing at attention. Gio is quick to lick and nibble at it, then he takes it between his thumb and index finger and starts toying with it.

He pulls back, his gaze fixed on his fingers playing with my nipple. I guide his head gently toward my chest, and it's all the invitation he needs. He sucks on my breast, and I arch my back, pushing my breast deeper into his mouth. He's so thorough in his exploration I think I might come just by him sucking my tit alone.

"You're doing such a good job, Gio. Don't stop. Please," I say in a breathy voice, and he sucks harder, the sudden pain sending a shot of pleasure straight to my core. He releases my other breast from my dress and gives it the same attention. My moans grow louder, my movements more erratic, but I don't care. I'm too far gone to think about anything else that isn't Gio and all the things he's making me feel.

Gio's hand moves ever so slowly from my ass to under my dress, and I open my legs wider, giving him all the access he needs. When he finds what he's looking for between my legs, he inhales deeply and starts trailing kisses from my breasts up to my neck. "You're so wet, sweet girl. Does that mean I'm doing a good job?" Who would have thought that Gio Bianchi had a praise kink?

"Such a good job, Blue." He smiles against my skin, and I chuckle.

"Blue?" he asks, pulling gently at my ear.

"Yes, Blue. My blue. Cobalt is your code name, but I like calling you Blue when we're together," I say, kissing his forehead, then his cheek, until our lips unite again.

"Make me come, Blue."

Gio's thumb finds my clit, and I buck. He presses, drawing circles, while his middle

finger nudges at my entrance. I pant, and Gio swallows all my little cries. He increases the speed, and it doesn't take long for me to fall off the proverbial cliff. And he doesn't stop until my body is limp.

"Do I get an A, Miss MacAllister?"

I chuckle at his question. "I'd say B-plus for effort." I bite my lip to hold back a laugh as he shouts.

"What?" My laughter bubbles out, and he takes his hand off my core and starts tickling me mercilessly. "Take that B back," he demands, laughing just as hard.

"No way, I'm the teacher. I get to give whatever grade I think is fair," I say, trying to catch my breath.

"I need a second opinion. This is not fair."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Bianchi. My class, my rules." He huffs, and I grin wide at his playfulness.

"And what's this about a second opinion? I hate to break it to you, but I don't share." The playfulness is gone from his face, replaced by a stony expression.

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“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it like that. I don’t ever want to share you, either.” I’m stunned at my jealousy, but Gio is different. It didn’t hurt me when Steve left me for Paisley McGee, but Gio would be another story.

“So, what you mean is you want a retest?” I look at him, and his eyes sparkle as he visibly relaxes.

“Yes! I want to retest. ” He buries his face in the crook of my neck, and I tilt my head, giving him more room. He pins me down on the couch with his body, as his lips find mine. This is going to be fun.

Last night was so perfect, but Gio thought it’d be best if we slept in our own rooms. I think he wanted to take care of his hard-on without me watching. I don’t need to have sex right away with him; he made me come last night with his fingers, and it felt so good. But I’d be lying if I said I wouldn’t love to go all the way with him.

This morning, I decided to do some yoga on the beach. The sunrise was stunning, and I loved the background noise of the waves as I focused on being thankful for being here with him. Once I made it back inside, I got to work in the kitchen, preparing breakfast. As I plate some eggs and biscuits, I feel a strong body behind me, caging me in.

“Good morning,” I say as I press my back against his front.

“Smells good in here,” he says, taking a whiff of my hair. I’m not sure if he’s talking about me or the breakfast I prepared, but whatever it is, I can’t help but feel his words in my core.

“I saw you at the beach through the windows—was that yoga?”

I nod, grabbing his arms and wrapping them around me. I want to enjoy this time with him as much as possible—I’m not sure when we’ll get the chance to escape reality.

“I’ve been thinking,” he says against my ear, and goose bumps travel all around my body.

“I’m listening.”

“I would like another lesson before breakfast.” I turn with curious eyes to face him.

“What do you have in mind?” Gio smirks, then suddenly lifts me off the ground and places me on the countertop.

“I want to taste you.” My lips part at his words, and my body is ablaze. I simply nod my agreement. Even though he’s blushing, he smirks at my response and opens my legs to stand closer to me. As soon as his lips touch mine, a little moan escapes me, and Gio bites my bottom lip.

“Fuck, sweetheart. You don’t know what that little moan does to me.”

“Show me.”

He doesn’t need to be told twice. He takes his shirt off, and his gorgeous and sculpted chest is on full display for me. I graze my fingers over his abs, and he clenches at the contact.

When I go to explore his biceps, I notice a wolf tattoo on his left arm. It’s beautiful. I trace it with my fingers and he says, “When you wanted the plush Husky, Cobalt,” he

smiles at the memory, “I knew we were meant to be. I’ve always loved wolves, and Huskies are so similar.”

I place a soft kiss on top of his tattoo. “I feel it too, Blue.”

Gio starts removing my yoga pants and stops mid-thigh. “Is this okay?” he asks, his chest rising and falling rapidly.

“More than okay.”

He nods with a smile. “I don’t want to get another B-plus,” he murmurs, and I throw my head back, barking out a laugh.

I can’t believe he’s still thinking about the grade I gave him last night. My laugh dies quickly when he moves my panties to the side, and his tongue slides through my core.

“Oh my god,” I say in a throaty tone as my hands go behind me for support. I can feel Gio smiling against my core, and the next thing I feel is his tongue playing with my clit. I start panting, feeling needy and ready for more.

“Am I doing a good job, Miss MacAllister?”

“Yes, but it’d be best if you remove my panties.”

Gio rips off my emerald green lace panties, and I whine—they weren’t cheap.

“I’ll buy you one in every color,” he says before lunging for my pussy and sucking my clit, hard. My arms give out, and my back hits the cold marble countertop—I don’t care how cold it feels; Gio has my insides on fire. My hands find his hair, and I tug him toward me. He understands the urgency of my movements, and his mouth leaves my pussy only momentarily, as one then two of his fingers enter my channel.

“Oh, Gio. This feels so good. Don’t stop.”

He continues his assault on my sensitive clit, and I clench, making it harder for his fingers to go in and out of me.

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“Call me Professor Bianchi.” Gio’s raspy voice vibrates against my clit sending a shiver through my pussy.

“Professor Bianchi, make me come.” And that’s all it takes, Gio sucks at my clit almost painfully as a third finger enters me, and I feel so stretched. It’s bliss. A pleasure wave washes over me, and I ride every single bit of it.

“That was an A-plus performance,” I say, trying to catch my breath. He chuckles, tickling my clit, nearly giving me a second orgasm.

Chapter 16

Gio Bianchi

This past month has been torture being with Ruin in the same classroom and not being able to be near her. I should have thought about this with my actual head, but I was dying to spend time with her and those couple of days in Corolla were incredible. Our chemistry has been off the charts, and kissing her and making her come was bound to happen. Ever since I tasted her, I’ve been addicted—her nectar is sweet and spicy, a combination that drives me out of my mind.

We’ve been spending every free moment we can together. Even though it hasn’t been a lot, between her class workload and my preparation for my dissertation defense, submitting my paper, and keeping up with teaching, there’s not much free time left. But we’ve made the best of it. She’s spent a couple of nights at my place, and we’ve been practicing, but we haven’t done the deed. I feel like if I’m this far gone only tasting her, the moment I make her mine, I will no longer be able to pretend she’s just

my student. Because the truth is, Ruin has become my everything.

I'm graduating tomorrow, and my family is expected to arrive tonight. I'm thrilled they all are coming—my siblings, Karina, my sister-in-law, and her siblings. I wish I could introduce them to Ruin, but I don't want to tempt the devil when we are so close to being officially able to date in public. Just one more week before I turn in the lab grades, and I'll make her mine. Mine.

My phone vibrates with an incoming call, and it can only be one person.

“Hello?”

“Boludo, are you picking us up, or do we need to get an Uber? We've been on this damn plane for eight hours— my ass is fucking flat,” Luca says in an exasperated tone, and I cackle at his theatrics.

“Calm down, Luca. I'm waiting for you guys in my hangar. I think it'd be good exercise for your ass to walk here.”

“Yeah, yeah. What number is it again?”

“Three.”

“Okay, we'll be there in a minute.”

I pocket my phone as I make my way out of the lobby toward my Range Rover. I haven't seen my siblings in months, and I'm so happy they were able to make it.

“Gio!” Isa squeals as she runs toward me, arms wide open. I grab her midair and turn around with her. I can't believe she's graduating next year.

“Hey, little sis, how are you?”

“Great, so excited to be here. But it’s freezing. Can we go to your place now?” she says between chattering teeth, and I chuckle. It’s summer back in Chile, but here, winter hasn’t even started yet. I hug and kiss Karina on her cheek next, then my brother Luca tries to lift me but complains I’ve gained weight—the bastard.

“Where are Vicente and Gabo?” I ask as I start driving toward home.

“In New York,” Karina says in a sharp tone. I can tell she’s not happy about it.

“How come?” I ask as Luca shakes his head no.

“Oh well, let’s see. Raleigh isn’t big enough for their big, fat egos. They said they couldn’t find a ‘good enough’ hotel for the night, so they’ll be flying in the morning before the ceremony.” I press my lips together, trying not to say anything that can make Karina more upset at her siblings, but Isa doesn’t catch the vibe and opens her mouth.

“Oh, so they both said that? Because it sounds to me like Vicente is calling the shots.” I hear Luca take in a breath through his teeth, and Karina transforms in the back seat.

“Of course, it was Vicente who had the brilliant idea. He even suggested we all spend the night in NYC, but no—Luca is a good brother and decided to spend time with his siblings. Mine? No, I don’t matter to them. I’m sure they’re partying the night away at some gentleman’s club.”

I grip the steering wheel tightly, I really want to laugh at Karina’s outburst, but I know I’d only make things worse.

“Well, at least you have us, Kari. You’re a Bianchi, and we love you.” My sister turns around to look Karina in the eyes.

“That’s so sweet, Isa. I love you guys, too, but yeah, it stinks that my brothers didn’t stay here.”

“But hey, aren’t we all spending Christmas together? That’s in just a couple of weeks,” I say, trying to cheer her up.

“You’re right. I’m just being a spoiled brat. It’s your brother’s fault.” We all explode in laughter as Luca tries and fails to defend himself. He spoils her rotten.

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Once we get to my place and everyone is settled, we order pizza and wings and spend the night playing Risk and Pandemic—two of the games Luca, Isa, and I used to play growing up. After several hours of playing, and no end in sight for Risk world domination, we all seem to resign collectively.

“I know we just spent a million hours on a plane, but I’m tired. Is it okay if we call it a night?” Isa asks as she gets up from the couch, yawning and stretching her arms.

“Yeah, I’m tired too. Let’s go, guachito,” Karina says, extending her hand to Luca. They both head to their room after saying good night.

“It’s an early morning tomorrow, so rest as much as you can. It’ll be cold, so dress accordingly,” I tell Isa after walking with her to her room. After a good night hug, I go to my room and fall asleep, as well.

“Good morning, Dr. Bianchi. Are you ready?” Vicente greets me outside the arena as we gather together before taking our seats for the ceremony. I hug him, then move to hug Gabo.

“I heard Raleigh wasn’t good enough, and you both decided to have a night in the Big Apple?” I say in a teasing tone, and Vicente rolls his eyes.

“Kari will never let us forget that one. I just wanted to party, you know? It’s not like we’re on this side of the pond every weekend,” Vicente explains, and I laugh.

“Yeah, we’re each other’s wingmen. I’m not sure why she’s so ruffled up by it. She’s already married,” Gabo says, and I point at him.

“That’s exactly why she feels left out. It doesn’t matter that she’s happily married to Luca, you’ll always be her bros.” They both shake their heads, but I know they get it now.

“Professor Bianchi?” I hear my favorite voice, and I freeze. I turn around, and Ruin is there, with a small gift bag in her hands.

“Hey, I wasn’t sure you were coming,” I say, feeling awkward as hell. I can’t hug or kiss her, let alone introduce her to my family. There are tons of people around us.

“I wasn’t going to miss my favorite teacher’s graduation,” she says, and Vicente whistles, which causes her beautiful creamy skin to turn the prettiest shade of pink. “I’m sorry, I just wanted to give you this. Congratulations.” She hands me the gift bag and smiles at me. Then she turns around to leave. I try to stop her, but my arm freezes midway—I know it’s not smart. Just one more week, and I finally get to be with her everywhere.

“Who was that?” Gabo asks as Ruin vanishes in the crowd.

“One of my students,” I answer, trying to sound unaffected.

“A student, my ass. She had heart eyes for you,” Vicente says as he smacks his hand on my chest.

“Not here.” It’s all I say before I pocket her present in my gown.

“Oh. Oh. I know! Isn’t that?” Vicente starts to talk, but I give him a glare, and he snickers—the bastard.

“I’ll see you all after the ceremony,” I tell them as I make my way to find my seat.

As I sit down next to some of my classmates and fellow doctoral students, a strange feeling invades me. I'm so close to finishing such a monumental chapter of my life. I came to the United States pursuing a dream—to become a Doctor of Philosophy—and I'm about to fulfill it. I guess part of what I'm feeling is pride—pride in completing a five-year degree—but at the same time, there's fear. Fear of the unknown, of what comes next. Sometimes I feel guilty for feeling this way. Life has been more than generous to me. I have no rational basis to feel afraid or anxious. I have everything I could ever dream of. Technically, I don't even need a job, I could easily live off of my investments for the rest of my life, but I'm only twenty-nine years old. I'm too young to retire. I don't want to get a job because of my billionaire status; I want a university to hire me because of my capabilities as a researcher and as an educator.

Ugh, the life of the rich and famous.

As I wonder about what my next step would be, I take a look at the crowd that came today to celebrate all of our accomplishments. I'm hoping to catch a particular shade of red hair, but there are too many people. I hope she's still out there and realizes she made my day just by being here.

Chapter 17

Gio Bianchi

Today is the day. It's eight o'clock on a cold, frigid December morning, and I'm about to hit send to confirm all of my students' grades. One click, and I'm officially done being Ruin's teacher. One click, and I get to claim her in front of everyone.

After hitting send and making sure the grades have posted in the university system, I send her a text.

Gio: Good morning, sweetheart. What time are you done?

Ruin: Good morning, Blue. I have my last exam at ten in the morning, then I'm free.

Gio: Have you packed yet?

Ruin: Yes, but it'd be so much easier if you told me where we are going.

I smile at the screen. I love surprising her. I'm taking her to New York. Vicente and Gabo were talking about how much fun they had, and I can't wait to take my small-town girl to the big city.

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Gio: Just pack the warmest clothes you have, and if you don't have any, we'll buy some there.

Ruin: Ugh, I'm sure I'd do better in my last exam if I knew where I was being taken after it.

I laugh at her attempt to get me to spill my secret.

Gio: Nice try, Miss MacAllister. Too bad I know you're beyond ready to ace that test. I'll see you in a couple of hours.

Ruin: Fine. See you soon. *heart emoji*

This past week, she's been studying nonstop, and I even quizzed her when she came over. She's as smart as a whip. I know she'll get straight A's this semester.

I park my car right outside the building where she's taking her test, enjoying a cup of the magical Pumpkin Spice Cocoa Ruin made for me. She made a batch and left it in my fridge, and I love this thing. I see her as soon as she walks out the door—she's wearing a cream wool coat, jeans, and black boots, and her red hair is braided. She looks so gorgeous. I smile at her as I get out of the car and walk around to open her door when someone gets between us.

Alyssa.

"I fucking knew it!" she shouts, and I see the horror transform Ruin's beautiful face. I'm done being nice and polite.

“Alyssa, hi,” I say, stepping around her to take Ruin’s hand.

“So the transfer girl was really fucking the hot teacher,” she spits, anger and disgust dripping from her tone.

“I am not going to tolerate you or anyone else referring to Ruin in those terms. She’s not my student now, and it’s none of your business what we do any longer.”

“But—” Alyssa is quick to protest, but I’m faster.

“But nothing. There’s nothing to say or do against us. We are two people who met at school. Nothing more. If you want to make a big deal out of thin air, the joke’s on you because no one will pay attention to a girl who went to my office several times and explicitly told me to improve her grade in exchange for sexual favors.”

Alyssa’s face is pure shock.

“That’s right, and unlike you, I have proof of your harassment. Try to stir up something against us and see who ends up laughing in the end,” I tell her in a tone that doesn’t leave any room for quarreling. I move toward my car, guiding Ruin in front of me. There’s no way I’ll leave this snake to try and harm my girl. Once Ruin is in the car, I walk around to the driver’s side, but not before giving Alyssa one last warning glare. She just stands there, stunned into silence.

“Are you alright?” I ask Ruin as I start driving toward her apartment.

“Yeah, just in shock. Who would have thought she was still hung up on us?”

I release a deep breath as I nod. “There are crazy people everywhere. Part of me feels bad we lied, but at the same time, there’s no part of me that could regret being with you. No matter how things started,” I tell her as I place my hand on her thigh.

“True, I don’t regret anything that brought us together. Forbidden and all. I wouldn’t change a thing, either.” I glance at her quickly, and her eyes are shining.

“Same, beautiful.”

“So, are you going to tell me where we are going?”

I bark out a laugh. “Patience. You’ll know soon enough.”

I park the car and make my way around to open the door for her. We make it to her apartment in no time, and when I ask her about her suitemates, she tells me they’re all gone for winter break. The place is small but clean and neat.

When we get to Ruin’s room, I’m in awe—it looks like an autumn wonderland, with beautiful photos of mountains and forests, and her bed is covered with a handmade quilt. I can tell it’s handmade because no two squares look the same. It must have taken a long time to sew.

“You made this?” I ask as I touch the quilt.

“No, my Granny.” Ruin smiles, grabbing some toiletries and shoving them in her bag.

“I can’t wait to meet her.” “I know. I can’t wait to introduce you to the family,” she says excitedly.

“We’ll have one week before school starts in January, I figured I can go then.” Ruin nods and smiles as she closes the zipper of her bag.

“Ready?” She nods again, and I grab the bag to take it outside.

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Two hours later, we're landing in New York City, and Ruin can't believe it. She's looking out the plane window like a kid who's about to meet Santa.

"Mr. Bianchi, welcome," the chauffeur greets us as we deplane. I smile at him and pass him our bags as I help Ruin get in the car.

"Gio, is this real?" she asks, her eyes shining with unshed tears.

"Yes, sweetheart. We're spending a couple of days in the Big Apple." She hurries to hug me as the car starts moving. I hold her close to me the entire drive—we're staying at the Plaza, and Ruin can't stop looking everywhere with rapt admiration.

"Look, Gio, it's snowing. So magical." I place a kiss on the top of her head. Everything is magical with her.

By the time we check in, it's getting dark, and I'm starting to get hungry. Ruin is wandering from room to room in delight, telling me this is the biggest hotel room she's ever stayed in.

We're staying in one of the penthouses, which has two floors and a private terrace. I can't wait to use every single nook and corner of this place with her.

"Do you want to order food, or do you want to go for dinner somewhere?" I ask, watching as she taps her lips in deep concentration.

"Is it okay if we stay in tonight? Explore the city tomorrow?" she asks, hope rising in her voice, and I smile at her.

“Of course, we’ll do anything you want.”

She comes closer to me and gives me a quick kiss. I know if I deepen it, we won’t eat, and I need to make sure she has energy for tonight. Now that I’m done studying, I’ve been doing some research about how to please my woman, and I can’t wait to try a few tricks with her. Ruin gets the menu from the coffee table, and her eyes widen at the amount of options available. I chuckle, but sit next to her so we can order together.

Once food has been sorted out, I set up a bath in the massive tub. I can’t think of anything more relaxing than taking a bath with Ruin as we watch the city lights from the top.

“Gio, this is breathtaking,” Ruin says as she enters the bathroom, taking in the glow of all the candles I have lit around the tub.

“I agree.” I hug her close to me. “You are breathtaking.”

Her eyes sparkle like two light green gems. Her smile turns mischievous as she removes her sweater and her jeans easily, and I swallow at the sight. Ruin is wearing a dark red bra that her breasts are nearly spilling out of it. Her lacy thong is the same color and barely covers her pussy. Fuck me.

“Sweetheart,” I whisper as my fingers trail circles around her nipples, which harden at my touch.

“I figured I’d wear something pretty for our first time,” she says in a breathy tone as I capture one of her nipples with my mouth through the flimsy fabric.

“I wanted to get you all relaxed and wet in the tub before making love to you, but I don’t think I can wait that long.”

“Then don’t wait,” she says. I grab her by her ass and unceremoniously carry her into the bedroom. Her sweet giggle makes my dick twitch. Placing her gently on the bed, I kiss her and her moans make my cock drip precum. Fuck, I can’t blow my load just by kissing her, I need to think about something else before I spoil our first time.

Slowly, I untangle our lips, I want to take my time worshiping her body, since she’s been so patient with me—taking only what I’ve been willing to give.

But I guess she’s done waiting because she guides my head down to her chest.

“As you wish,” I tell her before I rip her bra off with my teeth.

“Oh wow, that’s hot as fuck.” She arches her back in appreciation, and I suck at her pebbled nipple. She’s soft and sexy, everything I needed and didn’t know I wanted. I play with her other nipple as she starts bucking her pelvis, seeking friction. I switch my mouth to her other breast, and I give it the same treatment. Once she starts whimpering, I take it as my cue to trail kisses down her middle and feast on her sweet pussy.

“Is this what you wanted, sweetheart?” I ask, blowing cold air against her clit. She pulls my hair, putting my mouth where she wants it. A deep rumble grows inside me as my nostrils fill with the sugary scent of her arousal. After entering her with two fingers, I start lapping and sucking at her clit. Her walls start clenching, and I add a third finger. Ruin’s little pleasure sounds have a direct line to my dick, so I slow my pace to calm down my very eager shaft.

“Gio, don’t stop. I’m so close.” I raise an eyebrow at her, and when she looks down at me, she puffs a frustrated sigh. “Please, Gio, don’t stop.” I give her a smirk and nod, then get back to work. “You’ve gotten so good at playing with my pussy. I’ve craved this all day.”

Apparently, I'm a sucker for good praise, because her words spur me to go faster and suck at her clit harder. When Ruin starts bucking, I know her orgasm is about to ripple through her, so I use my thumb to add pressure on her clit. My girl shoots off, crying out my name. I hold my breath to avoid coming on the spot.

Once Ruin's breathing has calmed down, I kiss her, letting her taste her release in my mouth. "Are you ready?" I ask her as I look her in her eyes.

"Yes," she says before claiming my lips again. As much as I want to be inside her, I break the kiss and grab a condom from the nightstand, where I placed them while unpacking.

"Here, let me," Ruin says as she takes the packet from my hand and rips it open with her teeth. I inhale a sharp breath. I have to think about something else—world hunger, the Amazon deforestation, climate change, otherwise, the moment Ruin touches me, I'm going to explode in her hand. She sheaths me in one swift motion as she kisses me tenderly. She pumps my cock, once, twice, and I can't take it anymore. I push her down and cover her body with mine.

"Sweetheart, I'm about to officially claim you as mine," I whisper in her ear as I guide my cock to her warm core.

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“Yes, please.” She widens her legs, granting me more access. My cock isn’t small, so I enter her inch by inch, giving her time to adjust to my size.

“Fuck, Blue. You feel so good,” Ruin says as she massages my shoulders, her fingers pressing hard against my muscles. Once I’m fully in, I heave a deep breath. In this moment, nothing else matters, other than being one with her.

“I’m home,” I whisper against her lips as I thrust deeper into her, and she moans. I start pumping in and out slowly, sensually, taking my time committing this moment to memory. Ruin is the first, and if everything goes as planned, the last woman I’ll ever make love to. She meets my thrusts and presses the back of her feet on my ass, silently asking me to go deeper. I happily oblige. I slowly pick up the pace as I kiss her hard. Ruin whimpers, and her walls start pulsing against my cock.

“I don’t want to come before you, sweetheart. Come for me,” I say between ragged breaths, and she claims my mouth again. I can tell she’s about to jump off the cliff, so I find her clit with my thumb, pressing gentle circles, and that’s all it takes. Ruin’s face is pure ecstasy, and it’s glorious. It’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen. I thrust inside her two more times before I’m jumping off the cliff with her.

“I love you,” I tell her once my breathing has calmed down a bit. Ruin smiles up at me and holds my face in her hands.

“I love you too, Gio Bianchi. Much more than I ever thought I could love someone.”

I kiss her again and again. I’ll never get tired of hearing those three little words spilling from her plump lips.

Once I get rid of the condom, I refill the bath since the water had cooled while Ruin and I were making love. Now we're in the tub, enjoying the view, glasses of wine in hand.

"I know a trip to New York wasn't on the bucket list you gave me, but I thought it would be fun to have our first time in a place like this," I say, remembering the thoughtful present she gave me for graduation. She made a picture with all the things we've been talking about doing together while on our dates. Not only can she sing, her drawings are also beautiful and full of details. I don't think there's anything Ruin can't do.

"Oh, I'm so glad you liked it. I wasn't sure what to give to someone who has it all." There's a hint of shyness in her voice, and I turn her face so she can see me.

"It was the most thoughtful present I've ever received. I can't wait to cross all those items off the list with you." She pushes her back to my chest, and I embrace her, savoring the closeness.

"How does it feel to be officially done with your first semester of junior year?" I ask her, taking a sip of my wine. We're sitting inside the tub, Ruin has her back to me and is playing with the bubbles on my legs.

"Not much different from the relief of being done with school while I was attending community college." She shrugs, and I get it. School is demanding, no matter where you go.

"That's fair. How about your plans for when you graduate? Are you still hoping to find some sort of work back in your hometown?" She sighs and takes a sip of her wine. Then she gets a chocolate-covered strawberry, takes a bite, and feeds me the rest. I nip at her fingers, and she chuckles. I love how easy everything is with her. I've never experienced this level of intimacy with anyone, and I can't imagine doing

it with anyone else.

“Yeah, that’s still the plan. I want to live near my family, but...” She trails off, and I wonder what’s going on in her head.

“Hey, come here. What’s the matter?” She turns around and straddles me.

“Well, it’s just that now there’s you. Us.” She points at me then herself before placing her hand on my chest.

“And you’re not sure about us?” I ask her, suddenly worried that she might say she doesn’t see things long-term with me.

“What? Of course I am, but I’m not sure if you want to move back to Argentina, or move to Chile with your siblings,” she says softly. If we weren’t this close, I’d have missed it.

“Sweetheart, I don’t want to scare you off by being too forward, but my place is wherever you are. If you want to move back home, we’ll build a home together in the mountains.”

Ruin doesn’t say anything, she just presses my lips to hers, sealing a promise of forever. My dick finds its new favorite place and glides inside Ruin without any friction. She starts rocking, water sloshing over the edge of the tub and extinguishing a few candles. The scent of the candles mixed with the smoke gives the room a cozy feeling, making it seem like we’re in a campground.

“I love you, Ruin,” I tell her against her lips as she continues to ride me. Fuck, it feels so good to finally being able to admit my feelings for her out loud.

“I love you, too. Always,” she says with so much emotion in her voice that I feel it

deep in my soul. I grab her hips trying to guide her, but my girl wants to be in control. She picks up the pace, and her perky tits start bouncing in place. My mouth drools at the sight, so I give up control for the pleasure of sucking her breasts. When my lips make contact with her nipple, she moans, and I suck it harder. But Ruin doesn't complain, she just gets louder and louder until she freezes in place. I thrust inside her so deep, we both come at the same time.

"That was just..." Ruin trails off as we both come down from the high of pleasure together.

"Fuck," I say as I close my eyes, berating myself.

"What's wrong?" Ruin asks, panic in her voice.

"We didn't use a condom, I'm so sorry." She chuckles, and I open my eyes.

"It's okay, I'm on the pill, and I haven't been with anyone in a long time. I'm sorry I just wanted you inside me. I should have asked if you were okay going bare." I release a deep breath against her neck.

"Oh, baby girl. It was amazing, I just didn't want you to think I was being irresponsible." She gives me a sweet smile and a kiss. Before things turn heated again, I remove myself slowly from her core and help her get out of the tub. I towel her off, and once I'm dry, too, I take us to bed where she falls asleep in my arms.

Chapter 18

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Ruin MacAllister

Gio is leaving for Chile tomorrow, and even though I'm excited to see my family and spend Christmas with them, my heart aches for how much I'm going to miss him in the two weeks we'll be apart. We've been inseparable since we came back from New York—it was a magical time, but I'm happy just to spend time with him in a more low-key environment.

My family has been asking nonstop what's keeping me from returning home, since they know the semester is over. Rain is the only one who knows what I've been up to. I don't want to have to explain to my brothers I've been in a blissed fuck-fest with my boyfriend.

Rain: Just confirming you're still alive and planning to come home tomorrow.

I smile as I read Rain's text.

Ruin: Yes, "Mom." I'll be there tomorrow.

Rain: Good, I can't wait to hear all the details of all the fancy shit you've been doing with your hot, rich boyfriend.

I cackle. I've sent her pictures of our trip to New York and Gio and I on his jet. She's dying to meet him.

Ruin: A lady never tells.

I love riling her up.

Rain: Good thing you're not a lady, then. Plus as your twin, I have special insider credentials. I gotta live vicariously through you.

I bark out a laugh. I miss her.

Ruin: Gio is back, I'll see you tomorrow.

Rain: Say hi from me. And remind him he has to pass the twin test before I approve of you dating him.

I laugh harder as I text her a couple of eye roll emojis.

"Who are you texting?" Gio asks as he leans down to give me a kiss.

"Rain. She was just making sure I'm still planning on going home tomorrow." I pout, and Gio kisses it away.

"Sweetheart, don't be sad. Let's enjoy these last few hours we have together before our break." I frown at him. "You know what I mean. I'm not saying breakup, maybe I should have said vacation?" I smile at him as he scratches his head, confused.

"Where were you? I thought you were done at school?" I ask him, noticing the bags he's carrying.

"I was picking up dinner." He lifts up the bags. "I figured tonight's meal should be special."

I love how attentive he is, always making me feel cared for.

“What did you get? Smells good.”

“I got our favorite dish from Amore.” My stomach growls at that exact moment, and Gio and I chuckle.

“Here, let me help you,” I say as I stand from the couch, but Gio lifts the bags higher.

“No, sweetheart. Let me take care of you.”

I give him a peck on the lips as he heads toward the kitchen to plate our food. Amore is an Italian restaurant right off campus, and we love getting takeout from there.

Gio dresses the table, sets up two candles, and there’s even music coming off the house sound system. Another magical night with this incredible man.

“I want to make a toast,” Gio says, raising his glass. “To you, Ruin MacAllister. The woman who came into my life like the wind, ready to lift me up and fulfill my life with so much love and happiness. I can’t thank the stars enough.”

My eyes start to water, feeling his words in my heart. He gets up from his chair and wipes the tears from my face, giving me a sweet kiss while taking something out of his back pocket. It’s a long velvet box. I press my hands to my chest, waiting with anticipation. When Gio opens the box, I gasp. It’s a beautiful gold necklace, but what has me mesmerized is the stone. It’s a beautiful light green, heart-shaped gem.

“Gio, this is stunning. Is it jade?” I ask him as he takes the necklace out of the box. I lift my hair so he can put it on.

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“Yes, this stone in particular is imperial jade—one of the rarest gems to ever exist.” I brush the stone with my fingers, enjoying the cool feel on my skin.

“It’s beautiful, thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” he says, placing a kiss on the back of my neck, and I melt against him.

We enjoy our food and talk about all the stuff he’s bringing home for his siblings. We went shopping while in New York, and I was surprised when he offered to let me get presents for my siblings, as well. At first, I didn’t want to, but I knew they’d all enjoy something from the big city, so I accepted. I got fancy scarfs for my brothers, the softest sweaters for Mama and Granny, and a gorgeous wool coat for Rain. I liked it so much, Gio got it for me in every single color they had available.

“What are you thinking about so hard over there?” Gio calls from the kitchen where he’s preparing the cannolis and coffee.

“The truth?”

“Always.”

“How much I’m going to miss you.” My voice breaks, and I hate it because I’ve never been a clingy person—I know he’s not leaving forever, and we’ll be able to FaceTime and text all the time. But he has buried himself so deep inside me, I feel like I’m not the same person when he’s not near. And that thought excites me and freaks me out in equal measure.

“Sweetheart.” He leaves the cannolis on the countertop and closes the space between us in two quick strides. “I love you, Ruin MacAllister. I promise we’ll go visit your family together as soon as you have the first break at school. I’m going to miss you, too, but I know it’s a short period of time we’ll be apart compared to the rest of our lives.” I let his words sink in, like a balm for my aching heart. I don’t know why I am so scared to lose him. Maybe it’s because I’ve never felt so much for someone before.

“You’re right. You’ll be back before we know it.” I give him a wobbly smile, and he kisses me tenderly. I wrap my arms around him and my heart starts to calm. I can feel his love in every single touch—gentle, full of purpose.

“What do you say—want to ditch dessert and let me have you instead?” His grin is wicked. I love when he gets all playful.

“Yes, please, Professor Bianchi,” I say in a breathy tone, and I can feel the bulge growing inside his pants. He loves role-playing.

“Hmm, my baby girl wants to play,” Gio says as he grabs my ass, pressing me against his desire. “Are you going to be a good student and do as I say?”

I nod, unable to form words when I’m so lost in the haze of being loved by him.

“I need to hear your words, sweetheart. I need to know you’re giving your teacher consent to bury himself so deep inside you, you’ll feel me even when we’re apart.”

A shot of electricity runs through me as Gio’s words light me up from the inside out.

“Yes, Professor Bianchi. I consent.” Gio guides us to the closest couch in the living room and starts undressing me with such reverence that I feel goose bumps all over my body. Sex with him has been toe-curling amazing, but this is a new side of him, and I’m excited to see what he has in store.

“Hmm, look at you, pretty girl. So primed and ready to take my cock,” Gio says, removing my soaked panties. “Too bad you’re going to have to beg me for it.” I whimper as his fingers graze my clit. “Do you want to come on my tongue first, baby girl?” I nod, and he raises a brow.

“Yes, Professor Bianchi.”

“Good girl.” Damn, when did he get this playful? I’m about to combust, and he hasn’t even touched me yet.

Gio starts trailing wet kisses on my legs, forming circles with his tongue as he reaches my inner thighs. I squirm on the spot, anticipation coursing through me. He bites my clit, and I jump off the couch. Fuck. He didn’t ease me into things. The shocking part is that I enjoyed it. He rubs my clit with his fingers, and I moan.

“Did you like that?”

I nod and give him an unintelligible murmur. I never knew pain could be so hot.

“Good. Let’s try this next.” Gio slaps my pussy, and the sting sends a shot of pleasure to my core so intense I see stars.

“More,” I hear myself say as I open wider for him to continue punishing my hot and very bothered pussy. He licks and sucks at my clit before slapping it again, and this time my moan is louder.

“Fuck, Ruin. Look how wet you are for me,” Gio purrs as he paints my navel with my release. I’m enjoying this too much, and Gio can tell, because he pushes two fingers inside me and keeps lapping and tugging at my clit. I buck, seeking more pressure, and Gio inserts another finger, and it feels like heaven. Next thing I know, I’m coming so hard, I hold his head in place to ride my pleasure wave until the end.

Once I've calmed down a bit, he gets up and gets rid of his pants and boxers in one swift move. His sweater is gone next. His thick cock is standing at attention. He looks so hot and masculine, I feel the need to take him in my mouth. So I do just that.

“Such a good girl. Taking Professor Bianchi's cock,” he breathes as he grabs my hair and wraps it around his hand, pulling me to take all of his cock in my mouth. I gag at the overwhelming incursion, and he freezes. “Is this too much?” he asks, his voice laced with concern. I shake my head and release him with a pop.

“No, Professor, I was just surprised. But I'm enjoying having your cock in my mouth.” I lick his head and then lick my lips, showing him how much I'm enjoying what we're doing.

Gio's head goes back as he murmurs, “You're perfect, Miss MacAllister.”

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I get his cock back in my mouth and start bobbing my head as he thrusts as deep as he can go. I'm enraptured by how good he's commanding me, when just a month ago, he was a shy virgin who was scared of finding his release before I found mine.

"Don't stop, baby girl. I want to feed you every single drop of my cum."

I suck him in harder as he increases his pace. I can't wait to have my mouth full of his tart release. When Gio roars, I know he's getting close. I grab his balls and massage them gently, and my man comes in my mouth—it's a glorious sight to see him come undone under my touch.

"Did you enjoy it?" he asks as he rubs my cheek and helps me stand up.

"Every single drop," I say as I clean a drop of cum from my lip and lick it clean. His dick twitches, and I arch a brow in question.

"Are you ready to come on my cock?" he asks, a gorgeous mischievous smirk blooming on his face.

"Blue, there won't be a day in this lifetime when I don't want to ride your cock." Gio burst out laughing.

"Let's go make love, baby girl." He sweeps me off my feet and carries me bridal style to his room. I love how he treats me. I can't wait to spend the rest of my life with this man.

Gio Bianchi

Ruin left this morning when I drove to the airport. We had to take the same route for a while, and all I wanted to do was follow her all the way to her town. It's incredible how attached I am to her after only a couple of months being together.

Once the plane takes off, I take my phone out and shoot off a text to Penny since I haven't talked to her in a while.

Gio: Happy Holidays! I'll see you next year.

Penny: Excuse me, who is this?

Gio: Har, har. I know I've been a little MIA. I'm sorry.

Penny: A little? The moment you got a girlfriend, you forgot you had friends. The audacity.

Gio: I'm sorry, I just wanted to spend what little free time I had with Ruin before the break. She's going back to her hometown, and I'll be in Chile.

Penny: Aww, poor Gio. A couple of weeks apart feels like the end of the world now.

Penny: Seriously, though. I'm happy for you. It was about time you found a woman worthy of your love.

Gio: Thank you! I feel damn lucky, that's for sure.

Gio: How about you? Do you have any fun plans for the holidays?

Penny: I'm spending Christmas with my family, and then we're flying to Vale for a

ski trip.

Gio: That sounds fun. We'll have to catch up when I get back.

Gio: Everything going okay with my investments?

Penny: Yes, boss. Not much to report since you really didn't want me to invest more, but you're still as rich as you were last night.

Gio: Good, good. We'll have to talk about some charities and what not.

Penny: You got it. Have fun!

My hands itch to send a text to Ruin, but she must still be driving. I don't want to distract her. I'll send her a text once I arrive in Santiago.

"Hey, finally. Karina, look who's here." My brother Luca greets me as soon as I enter his villa.

"Hey, little bro. How are you?"

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“Good, and great now that you’re here. Come on, you’re just in time for dinner.” He grabs my bag and takes it to the room I usually stay in. It’s a beautiful summer evening in the Maipo Valley. The vines are starting to flower, and soon there will be grapes. I love how peaceful it is here.

“Inés,” I say as I walk into the kitchen and see the woman who has been more of a mother to me and my siblings than our own.

“Oh, mi niño. Come give me a hug.” She opens her arms, and I go to her immediately, a tear slipping down my face.

“Ha, little boy? No, Inés. This one is finally an adult,” Luca says, and I chuckle, wiping away my tears. It’s hard to get emotional when my brother is around.

“He finally got a girlfriend, Inés. Can you believe it? He had to go all the way to the United States to find love—who would have thought.” Luca shakes his head in mock disbelief as Isa and Karina roll their eyes at his theatrics.

“You’ll tell me all about her later, but let’s eat before it gets cold.” Inés motions for all of us to take our seats. Luca starts passing plates, and my mouth waters. There’s matambre and milanesa. I don’t think I’ve had these in over a year..

After dinner, we all go to the patio to enjoy the breeze and a fernet. As I gaze at the beautiful mountains covered in vines, I can’t help but think about the mountain girl who stole my heart. My phone vibrates with an incoming call—I love that even with thousands of miles between us, we’re still connected somehow.

“Hey, sweetheart.” I answer my phone as I move away from everyone

“Is this a good time?” she asks hesitantly, and I hate that she still hasn’t realized that I’ll always be available for her.

“Of course, we just finished dinner and were relaxing outside. About to open presents in a little bit. How’s it going over there?” I ask her as I make my way through the vines, letting the warm summer breeze run through my fingers.

“It’s been fine. We had dinner earlier, and I told my family about you, even though I still didn’t tell them you used to be my teacher. They’re all excited to meet you once you come back.” I smile at her excitement.

“I can’t wait to meet them, too.” I rub the back of my neck, silence falling between us.

“Blue, what’s wrong?” she asks hurriedly.

“I miss you. I wish you were here with me, meeting my family. Enjoying this beautiful weather, learning about my food and culture. And I feel like an asshole for missing you and wanting all those things, because I know you love your family, too, and wanted to spend time with them.” I blurt out everything that has been bubbling up in my chest since we kissed goodbye a week ago.

“I miss you too, so much. And it’s funny because I’ve been feeling the exact same way. I wanted you here with me instead of going to see your siblings, and that makes me feel like I’m a bad person.”

“I guess next year we’ll have to plan better and try to be in one place for Christmas and another for the new year. Or maybe we spend Thanksgiving with your family and Christmas with mine since we don’t celebrate Thanksgiving.” I chuckle at the fact

that I'm already thinking about the future.

"Yeah, we definitely have to plan better next year. One thing I'm one hundred percent certain of is that I don't want to ever be apart from you this long." I heave a deep sigh in relief as her words fill me with her love.

"Same, baby girl."

"Ruru, who are you talking to? Is that your mystery boyfriend?" I hear a deep male voice in the background and chuckle.

"Ugh, sorry. That's Miles being a nosy brother."

"He sounds like my brother, Luca," I say, and we both laugh.

"Did you call me?" Said brother comes to stand next to me with a fucking grin on his face.

"No, I was just saying Ruin's brother sounds as nosy as you." I try to walk past him, not wanting my call with Ruin to end just yet.

"You wound me, big bro. Here, let me talk to her." He tries to snatch my phone, but I move farther away from him.

"No way, man. I don't want her to realize how crazy my family is just yet."

Ruin explodes in laughter on the other end of the line as I hear Miles say, "See? even our families are similar. You should have invited him over."

"Can I please have some privacy?" Ruin sternly requests, and I can picture the way she's looking at her brother.

“Karina, please come get your husband,” I shout, and my brother whines, making me laugh.

“You had to out me, huh? Since when do you need my wife to help you get rid of me?” Luca asks, and I can’t stop laughing.

“Since I know she has you by the balls, little bro.”

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He makes a face that says, yeah you're not wrong, then turns to leave, but not before shouting, "Thank you, Ruin, for giving my brother a chance. I'm sorry we weren't properly introduced at the graduation ceremony. Maybe you and Gio can come over for spring break." Luca gives me a military salute as he makes his way back to the patio.

"I'm sorry about that," Ruin and I say at the same time, and we laugh.

"Well, at least our families are happy for us," she says with a yawn. When I look at my watch, I see it's past midnight there. It's two in the morning here, but we're more active at night, so I'm still not ready to go to bed.

"It's been a long day. What do you say we catch up some more tomorrow?" I suggest, and she yawns again.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to yawn. I'm enjoying talking with you, but after helping shovel the snow off the roof and all the food I had for dinner, I'm suddenly exhausted."

"I understand, no need to apologize. We'll talk tomorrow. Sweet dreams, baby girl."

"Sweet dreams, Blue. I love you." "I love you, too."

Chapter 20

Ruin MacAllister

Now that the snow storm has finally passed, the orchard looks like a winter wonderland. Bundled up, I'm ready to head out for a morning walk with Rain.

"Where are you two going so early?" Mama asks from the kitchen as she sips her morning coffee.

"Good morning, Mama," Rain says as she goes to get a cup of coffee for herself. "Rain here decided she wanted to snap a few pictures of the orchard with all the pretty snow before it melts, and I told her there's no way I'd let her go by herself." I roll my eyes as I fix my scarf but then go hug Mama.

"I don't know why she thinks that just because I've been in Raleigh for five months, I forgot how to walk these mountains," I say as I hip check Rain out of the way to get some coffee for myself.

"Well, I think it's a great idea for you two to go out, just like when you were little," Mama says with a chuckle. Rain's gray eyes light up with mischief, and we exchange a silent look, just like we've done since we were kids. After kissing and hugging Mama again, we go outside.

"It's fucking freezing," Rain says the moment we close the door behind us.

I look to the right side of the porch, where there's a thermometer, and it reads 15°F.

"Yup, it's fucking freezing. Let's get moving."

We start walking toward the path River and Miles cleared yesterday, but more snow fell overnight, so the path is less visible this morning.

"You know I love spending time with you, but couldn't you get some stock pictures to send to Gio?" Rain says as her white breath comes out of her mouth, and her teeth

chatter.

“I could have come out by myself. I know I can do a pretty picture on Canva, but the truth is, I’m going crazy without him.” I breathe out with a resigned sigh. “And before you tell me anything, I know we’ve been together for a short period of time, but he’s just that special. I’m happier when he’s around. We could talk about any topic for hours on end,” I share with my sister as we start climbing a small hill with a lot of effort. We’ve easily got one foot of snow to trek through. “And yes, I love spending time with you all. But... I feel I’ve had my fill of family time, you know?” I bite my lip, waiting for Rain to say something—I think I went a little too far with my last comment and hurt her feelings.

“I get it,” she finally says, and I breathe a sigh of relief. “I mean, I know what you mean. Not that I get it, like, I’ve been in your shoes. You know what I mean.” She throws her hands up in the air, and we both chuckle.

“He’s your person, Ruru. And I’m so happy you found him. He seems just as smitten with you.” I grin wide at her words.

“Yeah, he’s it.” There’s nothing more to add—Gio Bianchi is everything I’ve always wanted.

We reach the top of the hill, and when I look back, the mountains stretch out, beautifully coated in white, fluffy snow. The trees are beautifully dusted, and our family house looks imposing as the only man-made structure on the horizon. I truly hope Gio and I find a way to make these mountains our home, because as much as I want to see the world with him, there’s no place like home.

After taking a few pictures of the gorgeous landscape and a few selfies, Rain and I start our walk back home. At least this time we have a path to follow instead of making one.

“Think fast!” I hear River say as a snowball smashes into Rain’s face.

“River!” Rain shouts as she dusts the snow off her face, and I throw my head back in laughter. A snowball hits my back, and I immediately stand up straight from the impact. When I turn around, a grinning Merlin is looking at me as he makes another snowball.

“Seek cover,” Rain shouts, taking me out of my stupor, and I run to hide by River’s truck. I’ve spotted River and Merlin, but I need to find Miles before he finds me, because he’s the most lethal with snowballs. I try to make as many snowballs as I can, but I’m not fast enough. Before I can make five snowballs, River is already in front of me, holding at least a dozen snowballs and rapidly firing them at me.

“Ahhhh!” I scream as I try to move away from him, my snowballs long forgotten.

“Yup, she’s still our Rusty alright,” River says with a cackle, and I stick my tongue out at him. I gather enough snow to make a giant snowball and throw it at him, and it’s an epic explosion all over his big frame.

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“Ohhhh, the River has frozen,” I say laughing as I run away to find another hiding spot. From the corner of my eye, I notice Rain and Merlin in a monumental face-off. This is exactly what I needed—goofing off with my siblings.

“Freeze, in the name of the law,” Miles says as I come closer to his hiding spot; he’s behind the barn where we keep our horses.

“I don’t see any law here,” I say as I run across the field, getting closer to where Mama grows her vegetables during summer.

“Guys, I found Miles! Behind the barn!” I yell, hearing the sound of heavy steps approaching.

“You snitch,” Miles says as he runs behind me, throwing one snowball after another. I slow down, not being able to contain my laughter. I go down on the ground and try to make a snowball as quick as possible. By the time Miles is right behind me, I have made a huge snowball. I turn around to throw it, and Miles starts cackling. I throw it directly into his mouth, and he chokes on it. It’s hilarious to see his face going from pure joy to shock. All of the snowballs he was carrying fall to the ground unceremoniously as Miles goes down, too. By the time he starts to recover, all my siblings have caught up with us, and we all start throwing snowballs at Miles.

“Oh, how the mighty has fallen,” River says as he places his foot on top of Miles’ snow-covered back. We all melt in a fit of laughter, with Rain wiping tears from her eyes.

“Ok, ok. You all got me. Yay,” Miles says as he gets up from the ground. “Last one

to make it home has to cook breakfast!” He takes off, and we all run behind him. Surprisingly, Merlin is inching close to Miles, but as he gets to the first step, River shoves him into the mountain of snow that he cleared from the front and Merlin ends up getting home last.

“Not fair. You all ganged up against the youngest of the family,” Merlin pouts, taking off his frozen jacket and boots in the mudroom. We laugh at his dramatics. When he realizes no one is feeling sorry for him, he storms toward the kitchen as he shouts, “Fine! Cereal for everyone.” A collective groan echoes around us. I had a hot and tasty breakfast in mind—not cold milk and cereal.

“Come on, little one. I’ll help you,” I say as I grab the back of his neck in a comforting touch.

“Thanks, Ru.” He hugs me, and right at this moment, the pain of missing Gio subsides—it feels right to be home.

After breakfast and helping River clear the driveway all the way to the gate, I decided to brave the roads and head to Pine Shores, the town next to ours, to try and find a cute souvenir for Gio. I’ll be going back to Raleigh in three days, and I can’t wait to see him again. From what he has told me, he’s been buying a ton of presents for me, and even though I can’t buy him a lot or something expensive, I want to get him something that makes him think of me when we’re not together.

The roads are clear but slippery, so I’m hoping by the time I have to go back home, the black ice will have melted with the sun. I park in one of the few spots available in downtown Pine Shores—most of the parking is occupied with snow piles. I fire off a quick text to Gio to let him know I’m thinking about him.

After pocketing my phone, I make my way to Main Street to see which stores are open. The bakery, hair salon, and trinket store all have their lights on. I head toward

the trinket store, Highland Treasures, and as soon as the door chimes above me, I feel at home. Country music plays in the background, and a balsam scent invades my nostrils. I look around to see where the smell is coming from, and I see a big candle burning by the cash register.

The store is arranged into sections: handmade crafts, blown glass vases and ornaments, books, and candles. I wander through the store, looking for something that makes me think of Gio. When I get to the blown glass section, I spot a collection glass animals—and sure enough, there’s a wolf. It’s not too big, so it’d be perfect for him to keep in his office. Just like he gave me Cobalt, I can get him this little wolf, and we both will have something similar that’ll remind us of each other. After paying and getting it wrapped in pretty handmade paper, I head back to my car, but not before stopping at the bakery to see which goodies they have.

“Good morning,” a nice lady greets me as I stomp my boots on the doormat by the door. I don’t want to leave snow marks all around the bakery that will become puddles later.

“Good morning. Is there anything that has just come out of the oven?” I ask her, approaching the main display case. “Everything looks delicious,” I murmur to myself as I see muffins, several kinds of cookies, donuts, and pies.

“These cranberry and orange muffin tops just came out of the oven.” The lady points at a huge muffin.

“A muffin top?” I ask her as I frown in curiosity.

“Yes, to most people, the top part of the muffin is the most delicious since it’s the crispiest. So I decided to make muffin tops—same delicious flavor, but instead of a tall muffin, we have a wide one,” she says, beaming.

“That’s genius,” I say as I get a whiff of the warm goodness she’s describing, and my mouth waters.

“I’ll take one to go and a Fruit of the Forest pie, please.” She nods at me with a smile. I look for my wallet to pay and notice my phone is bright with a notification. A huge smile forms on my lips.

Gio: Hey, beautiful. Vicente and Gabo are leaving for Europe tomorrow, so we’re having a boys’ day. I think we’re going car racing and then dinner at a country club or something. I’ll send pictures. I love you and miss you.

My goodies are ready, so I quickly pay and put my phone in my bag as I make my way to my car. I’ll text him back once I get home. When I get outside the bakery, I notice it’s snowing again, but it isn’t heavy yet.

Placing the baked goods on the passenger seat and my bag on the floor, I turn on the radio and slowly make my way onto the highway. A song by Turner fills my car, and my mind goes to that magical night when Gio brought Turner to his beach house to sing for us.

I’m going down the mountain, and the black ice hasn’t completely melted yet. I press the break gently, trying to avoid sliding, but somehow, the car starts gaining speed instead of slowing down. Panic rises in my chest as I press harder on the brake, but nothing happens. The brakes aren’t working! My heart pounds, and my hands grow sweaty against the steering wheel.

When I feel the car sliding toward the precipice, I panic and veer hard toward the other side of the road. Luckily, that lane is empty.

“Don’t panic, Ruin. You got this,” I keep telling myself as I try to slowly make it back into my lane. I’m completely focused when a loud horn blares, startling me. My

eyes bug out, and I'm blinded by the brightest lights I've ever seen. I swerve, but it's a sharp curve, and I lose control.

The car spins, and then there's a violent impact. My body leaves the seat as the car tumbles down the mountainside.

Chapter 21

River MacAllister

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Night has fallen, and there's no update on Ruin's whereabouts. I scratch my beard as I think of where she could be. I've called all of my contacts around town, and no one has seen her. It's not like her to go out and not let any of us know if she's going to stay out longer. I don't want to bring it up with the family because I don't want them to call me obsessive and crazy. Again. I had enough of that when Dad's accident happened. "Oh, River, it was an accident. That doesn't mean we all are going to have accidents, too." I remember Miles saying as I checked his car brakes. I did it for all of my siblings every day for a year after Dad's passing.

Mama and Granny had to give up on driving because there's no way I'd let them drive by themselves anymore. And since Merlin was just starting high school, I'd drop him off and pick him up. I became their chauffeur, and although it was exhausting to do it on top of the orchard chores, it was the only way I felt good enough with myself to sleep at night.

"What's the matter, son?" Mama asks as she pats my cheek with her warm and soft hand. I smile at her as I release a deep breath.

"It's about Ruin, isn't it?" My shoulders sag in defeat as I bow my head.

"Yes, Mama. I'm freaking out. She's not back yet, and it's snowing again." Mama makes small, soothing circles on my back as she takes a seat next to me.

"Oh, River. You need to let your guilt go, son. We all miss your father every day. I'll love him until I breathe my last breath, but life goes on. We can't let guilt and remorse take place in our hearts." Mama says it with such tenderness that I start to cry.

“It was my fault, Mama. He asked me to help him check the brakes, and I did a crappy job.” I cry harder as the memory of Dad giving me a thank-you hug before climbing into his truck hits me with a truckload of guilt.

“I was married to your father for twenty-five years and dated him five years before that. There’s no doubt in my mind that he never thought—not even for a second—that the accident was your fault. He loved you so much, River. He loved your siblings as well, of course. But you, River, were his little buddy ever since you were born.” Mama hugs me, and I cry on her shoulder, letting her words comfort me. It’s not the first time she’s said them. We’ve had many conversations like this since Dad passed away, but I’m starting to think I’ll never hear them enough.

“Thanks, Mama,” I say, wiping my face and giving her a wobbly smile.

“Any time, son.” She kisses the top of my head and gets up to help Granny, who’s calling for her.

My phone vibrates in my pocket, and a cold shiver runs down my spine. It’s an unknown number, but something tells me I need to pick it up.

“Hello?” I say, silently praying that this phone call isn’t about Ruin.

“Is this River MacAllister?”

Fuck. Here we go.

“Yes, this is him.”

“We found your information listed as Ruin MacAllister’s emergency contact. She had a car accident and has been admitted to Highlands Regional Hospital in Asheville.”

“I’m on my way,” I say and disconnect the call. “Fuck!” I yell so loud, I feel the house shaking underneath my feet.

Miles and Merlin come rushing into the studio, eyes wild—a mix of curiosity and panic in their gazes.

“Ruin was in an accident,” I say, passing by them on my way to the mud room to put my boots and jacket on.

“What? What do you mean?” Merlin asks, pulling his hair and walking in circles. Miles is nowhere to be seen—I’m sure he’s in shock.

“What’s going on?” Rain and Mama come in next. Mama has a hand on her chest, and I don’t want to look her in the eyes and tell her that I was right. That Ruin is in a fucking hospital.

“Ruin is in the hospital,” Merlin says out loud, and I hear Mama’s painful sob before she collapses. Merlin and Rain hurry to help her as I silently wipe a tear off my face. I need to put on my big brother hat and go check on Ruin.

“I’m coming with you.” Rain gets up from the floor, and Merlin carries Mama to the living room.

“The hell you will. I need you here, taking care of Mama and Miles. I think he’s in shock.” Rain grabs my arm and directs her sharp gaze to me.

“And I have to take care of them because I’m a woman? Fuck that, Ruin is my twin. Merlin can take care of them.” I sigh, knowing there’s no way I’ll make Rain change her mind. She and Ruin have that spiritual twin bond that’s beyond comprehension.

“Fine, hurry up,” I tell her as she gives me a grateful smile. I head to the studio,

looking for Miles, but he's not there anymore. I check the kitchen next and find him preparing the kettle for some tea.

"Rain is coming with me. Please take care of Mama." Miles nods, and I head toward the door.

"River," Miles calls me back. When I turn around, he has a sad smile on his face. "Be safe."

I give him a smile and a nod in return.

Rain is waiting for me by the door. We're both quiet, nervous energy surrounding us.

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“How bad is it?” Rain breaks the silence as we make it to the interstate. Her voice is laced with panic.

“Not sure. They only said she had been in a car accident.” I don’t tell her I’m assuming it was bad since it was a medical worker who called instead of Ruin herself.

“Do you think she was with that boyfriend of hers?” I ask through clenched teeth. I’d fucking kill that bastard if he’s the reason my sister is in the hospital.

“No. As far as I know, he’s overseas visiting his family. Ruin went to Pine Shores to look for a souvenir for him since she’s planning to head back to campus right after New Year’s,” Rain says, and my anger toward the boyfriend turns into sympathy.

I wonder if Rain has a way to communicate with him. If he truly loves Ruin as she says he does, I’m sure he’d like to know she’s been in an accident.

Rain and I remain quiet the rest of the drive. When we pass by Pine Shores, we notice tire stains on the ground, and a huge area of the forest has been cleared—the site of Ruin’s accident. I inhale a sharp breath as I see Rain’s eyes misting up. It’s a miracle Ruin is still alive.

As soon as we arrive at the hospital, Rain and I rush to the emergency room.

“We’re Ruin MacAllister’s siblings,” I say to a nurse who’s behind the information desk. She looks at me over her glasses and types something on her computer. Rain starts tapping the desk, the telltale sign she’s getting anxious.

“She’s in the intensive care unit. I’m paging Dr. Davies. He’ll come to speak with you shortly.”

I murmur a thanks as I guide Rain toward the sitting room. I motion for her to take a seat, but she shakes her head. We’re both restless.

As I look around the waiting room, there’s not too many people. Which could be a good thing, meaning the doctors can give their full attention to Ruin.

A man who looks like he’s in his mid-forties approaches me with a tight smile on his face.

“Dr. Davies,” I greet him as I extend my hand. We shake hands, and he clears his throat. Rain grabs my arm, bracing to hear whatever the doctor has to say next.

“Are you River MacAllister?” I nod, and he opens his tablet.

“Your sister, Ruin, is under my care. She was brought by an ambulance after the fire department spent a couple of hours chainsawing her out of her car.” I inhale a deep breath as I feel Rain clawing her nails in my arm. “From what they can tell, her brakes failed, and she was on the wrong side of the road when an eighteen-wheeler appeared. There was black ice on the road, and she couldn’t stop. Her car got hit by the truck and went down the mountain.” The doctor falls silent, and from the corner of my eye, I notice Rain trying to keep her tears from spilling over.

“How is she? Can we see her?” Rain asks, almost in a whisper.

“Unfortunately, Ruin is unconscious at the moment. We had to induce a coma to help her heal faster. She has several broken bones, and her brain is significantly swollen. She’s lucky she’s still alive.” Rain can’t hold her tears any longer, and she buries her face in my chest. I take a couple of deep breaths, clenching my jaw as I think about

what to do or even say next.

“I suggest you both go home and come back in the morning. There’s no telling when Ruin will wake up.”

“No. We’re spending the night here,” I tell him, and Rain nods in agreement. Dr. Davies nods, and we shake hands.

I pull Rain into a tight hug. I need to be strong for my family and call Mama to tell her what happened to Ruin.

Chapter 22

Gio Bianchi

It’s been hours since I texted Ruin, and she hasn’t gotten back to me. It’s not unusual for her not to text right away; I know she’s with her family. But the message is showing it’s been read. She never leaves me on read.

“Everything okay?” my sister Isa asks as she comes to stand next to me.

“Yeah, I just haven’t heard back from Ruin,” I say, a nagging feeling taking over my chest.

“Ugh, don’t be so dramatic, Gio. I’m sure she’s just busy. You guys always talk at night, right?” I nod at her, taking a couple of deep breaths.

“I’m sure she’ll have a fun story to tell you tonight.” Isa pats my back before slipping back into the pool. We’re on Luca’s patio, enjoying some pool time before the boys and I go to a racecar speedway to have some fun. I shake my head, trying to get the nagging feeling out of my mind.

“You’re right, Isa. I’m sure everything is fine.” She smiles at me as she swims toward Karina.

“Big bro is pussy whipped!” Luca shouts before cannonballing into the pool. I chuckle, deciding to try to relax, and jump into the cool water as well.

Gio: Good morning, sweetheart. Is everything okay? I miss you.

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Gio: Please let me know everything is fine.

Gio: I'm leaving in a couple of hours; I'll be in Raleigh tonight.

Gio: I love you.

It's been twenty-four hours since Ruin read my message, and I still haven't heard back from her. When I call her, it sends me straight to voicemail. And the messages don't show as delivered anymore. I hope I'm making a big deal out of nothing, and when she gets back to me, she doesn't think I'm a motherfucking clinger. But something just doesn't feel right.

"Are you sure you have to leave?" Isa asks, worry lines etched across her face.

"Yeah, I need to go find her. This isn't Ruin."

Isa releases a deep breath as she massages my shoulder. "You'll find her. I'm sure all this is a misunderstanding."

I give her a grateful smile as I get a text. My heart skips a beat, thinking Ruin is finally texting me back, but it's just my pilot letting me know we've been approved for takeoff.

"I'm sorry for cutting my visit short, Isa. I promise I'll be back soon, and I'll bring Ruin with me." She gives me a smile and a hug. "Would you drive me to the airport? I don't need Luca's humor right now."

Isa winces but gives me a nod. “Yeah. Luca has been a little extra with his jokes. I’m sorry, Gio.”

I smile at her, not wanting to say anything else about the subject. I know this is how my brother deals with stress, but I’m not in the mood for it.

Gio: Just landed. Are you still in your town?

Gio: Do you think I can go see you? I know you were planning to stay a couple more days there before coming back to Raleigh.

I toss my phone to the passenger seat as I drive home. My brain is a mess, I don’t even know where to start to look. I still can’t believe how stupid I was; in all the time we spent together, I never thought to ask her town’s name. All I know is that it’s in the mountains. There must be at least two hundred towns. Fuck.

Once I make it home, I head directly for my bed. I didn’t ask the cleaning service to come while I was away, and I’m glad I didn’t because my bed still smells like her—apple, cinnamon, and Ruin.

I take off my shoes and cover myself with my blanket, inhaling her scent deeply. My lips quiver as tears run freely down my cheeks. A hole the size of the galaxy forms inside my chest. It feels like I’ve lost the part of me I didn’t even know I had until her. She’s gone and has taken my heart with her.

It’s been a week, and there’s still no sign of Ruin. After a couple of days of unanswered calls and texts, I called the phone company. After a lot of begging (and bribing), I learned her line has been disconnected. It’s no longer active. As if she doesn’t exist anymore.

But what if she changed her number because she didn’t want to hear from me

anymore? What if she went home and realized that giving me a chance was a mistake? And wasn't strong enough to tell me, so she decided to simply ghost me?

"Ahhhhh!" I shout in frustration. All the what ifs and uncertainties are killing me inside. I'm supposed to start working tomorrow as a postdoctoral researcher in Dr. Smith's lab, but I'm in no mental state to do so.

My doorbell rings, and I curse. There's only one person it could be. And it isn't Ruin.

"What do you want?" I say as I open the door and head back to the living room, not waiting for the answer.

"Hello to you too, friend," Penny says with sarcasm dripping from her tone, and I roll my eyes.

"Gio, this place is a mess. You smell." She trails off as she scrunches her nose. "You smell ripe and ready to be tossed in the garbage can." She covers her nose, and a small smile forms on my face. "Babe, you can't keep this up. One week of self-pity is enough. You need to pick up the pieces and move on," Penny says in a gentle tone—I know she means well, but each of her words is like a knife cutting my soul.

"I love her, Pen," I manage to say before my voice breaks. I don't remember eating much since coming home, so I'm weak and tired. All I want to do is sulk on my couch all day. I've been browsing the websites of every mountain town, trying to guess which one is hers. But I don't even know where to start.

"Gio," Penny calls me back to reality. "If you want to look for her, I'll help you. But as your friend, it's my duty to tell you what I think." I close my eyes as I shake my head. I know what she's going to say, and I don't want to hear it. She pats my back instead of speaking, and I shoot her an appreciative smile.

“Have you talked to your family?” I shake my head. I don’t want to worry them with my current state, knowing how far away they are and how little they can do to help me.

“Babe, you can’t clam up. At least let them know you’re alive and just need some time off from everything.”

I nod. I know that’s the right thing to do. Too bad my brain isn’t in charge anymore, it’s my heart. And all I want right now is to find Ruin Everything else can wait.

“Why don’t you shower while I pick up this mess and call in some takeout?” Penny asks as she gets up and heads to the kitchen. Releasing a deep breath, I do just that. It’s time I find her.

“So, while you showered, I did a quick search and found there’s an orchard that belongs to a MacAllister family in a town called Azalea Creek,” Penny says as I come into the living room, still toweling my hair.

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“Did you just Google that?” I ask, perplexed and she nods. “I mean, I know Ruin doesn’t have social media, but damn. How did I not think of that? I’m such an idiot. I don’t deserve to be called a Doctor of Philosophy, I can’t manage a simple Google search.” I sit next to Penny, feeling useless and defeated.

“Okay, enough with that. You’re not thinking properly, and that’s normal, Gio. You just lost someone important. Don’t be so hard on yourself,” Penny says, a gentle smile on her face. I don’t think I’ve ever been so thankful for being Penny’s friend than right now.

The doorbell rings, and Penny gets up from the couch to open the door. She comes back with bags and quickly sets up a spread of Chinese food on the table. We eat in silence, but I’m slowly starting to feel human again.

Once the leftovers are neatly organized in the fridge and the kitchen is spotless, Penny grabs her coat and makes her way to the door.

“Hey, Pen.” She looks at me with curious eyes. “I wanted to thank you for coming over and helping me out. A plan is starting to form in my mind, and you helped make that happen. So, thank you.” Her curiosity transforms into wariness, and she goes back to sit down on the couch.

“What’s that plan, Gio?” she asks with a sigh.

“Well, I’m going to go to their orchard, of course.” Her eyes widen, and I continue telling her my plan. “Pen, I need answers. I cannot know where she lives and not go talk to her.”

“Are you sure that’s the best course of action? Maybe you should test the waters first.” I know she wants to protect me and be cautious, but I need to know what happened.

“No, Pen. I’m heading to Azalea Creek,” I say in a tone that leaves no room for argument. She sighs and gets up from the couch. I get up with her, and she gives me a hug.

“Please be careful. You know I’m just a phone call or text away.”

Once Pen is gone, I do some Google research on my own. I need to talk with Dr. Smith, and then I need to go get answers.

Chapter 23

Gio Bianchi

After Penny’s intervention at my house, I decided to ask Dr. Smith for a month off before starting to work as a postdoctoral researcher in his lab.

I need to try to find her. I know it won’t be easy but if I don’t do it, I’ll keep asking myself “what if” for the rest of my life.

“Dr. Smith, hi,” I say instead of knocking on his door as I walk inside and take a seat across from me.

“Gio, hi. Welcome back. Did you have a good time with your family?”

“I did, thank you,” I answer without meeting his gaze.

“Is there something wrong?”

“It’s Ruin,” I say. Dr. Smith releases a sigh and rearranges his position in his chair.

“Did you guys break up? I hope this isn’t going to cause any problems.” He raises an eyebrow.

“She vanished.” His expression turns confused.

He clicks something on his keyboard, and after a few minutes he says, “Interesting.” When he looks at me, his expression is unreadable. “She canceled this semester.”

“She did?” I ask, trying to get any morsel of information I can.

“Well, I’m not sure if she specifically did, but it says she’s no longer a student here. Her records are confidential now.” Fuck, I know money talks, but I’m not about to bribe the school. That’s beneath me.

“Dr. Smith, I truly hate to ask you this, but is there any chance I can take a month off before I start my work here?” He looks at me as the wheels of his brain turn. When I think he’s going to tell me to fuck off and find another lab to work in, he speaks.

“Gio, I understand these are extenuating circumstances, but please know I cannot give you more than a month. When you come back to this lab in four weeks, I need you to be able to pick up where you left off last year. There are deadlines to meet and papers to write.” I let out a big breath of relief. I understand what he’s not saying: he has made many exceptions for me, but I need to start producing results. All the money in the world means jack shit if you don’t have data to present.

“Thank you, Dr. Smith. I promise I’ll be back on time and ready to work.” He nods at me with a smile as I get up from the seat and make my way out of his office. I need to go home and come up with a plan to find Ruin.

“Hey, Gio. How’s it going?” Vicente asks on the other end of the video call.

“Hey, man, here trying to come up with a plan to find Ruin.” Vicente stops whatever he was doing and faces his phone fully, giving me his undivided attention.

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“Oh, she ghosted you, then?”

“No,” I answer immediately. Vicente simply stares at me. “Ugh, I don’t know,” I say as I rub my face with my hand.

“Gio, I appreciate you. You know that. But man, you are a fucking billionaire, smart as all hell. What the fuck are you doing pining for a girl who left you on read?” Vicente says in his no-nonsense tone, and I internally groan.

“I don’t know if she ghosted me. I don’t know if something happened to her. I don’t know anything, and it’s killing me inside,” I tell him what’s been on my mind. He releases a deep breath and moves from his desk to a small bar in his office.

“And what’s the plan, what do you want to do?” Isn’t that the billion-dollar question.

“I want to go look for her.”

“Do you know her hometown?” I nod, and Vicente downs his drink.

“So, what—are you planning to knock on every single door in that town? Do you know the population?”

“I did my research—I have the address to her family’s orchard,” I answer.

“And you’re going to do this in the middle of winter?” I wince as I hear Vicente voicing my thoughts.

“It sounds crazy when you say it out loud.”

“Because it is fucking crazy, Gio,” he says and then turns his gaze to me. “Believe me, I say this with love: cut your losses and move on, or hire a fucking professional.” I close my eyes, trying to let his words sink in, but there’s no way. I have to do this myself. What if someone finds her and she doesn’t want anything to do with me? I need to hear that directly from her.

“I don’t know, man. There’s definitely a lot to think about.”

Vicente nods in agreement.

“I’ll be here whenever you want to vent, but please be safe,” Vicente says, and after a brief goodbye, I disconnect the video call.

Heading to the kitchen to get a drink, I stumble upon the pumpkin-spiced cocoa mix Ruin made—it tastes so good, but if she’s not here, I don’t want it. I toss it in the trash and get a glass of whisky instead. If I ever taste the damn cocoa mix, it’ll be because I found her, and she’s here with me.

The trip to Azalea Creek hasn’t been easy. They get actual snow here in the mountains, and I’ve never driven in it—except for the rare time Raleigh gets snow, and not only the roads collapse but the grocery stores run out of toilet paper, bread, and milk.

Vicente asked if I wanted him to come for moral support, but the thought of having the posh Vicente Godoy driving a truck along the Blue Ridge Parkway makes me laugh.

“Abuelo Bianchi, please give me a sign to not give up,” I say as I park my car in downtown Azalea Creek. There are a few stores open and a warm cup of coffee

sounds amazing—it's 15°F outside (-9°C), and even in the warmth of my car, my balls are freezing.

“Good evening, may I have a croissant and a coffee to go?” The lady smiles at me and after ringing my order, she takes off to prepare it.

When she comes back with my food, I take my phone and show her a picture of Ruin.

“I'm sorry to ask, but is there any chance you know this girl?” She looks at my phone, then at me and shakes her head. I squint my eyes at her. How can she not know Ruin? From what I recall, Ruin said her family is well-known in town.

“Are you sure?” I press, but the lady doesn't budge. She ignores me and asks me to leave instead. I deflate at her hostility and head back out to the car to eat my snack before I head to another store to ask for Ruin.

While eating my snack in the car, I study the town. It's a quaint little place surrounded by mountains. Its streets are still decorated for the holidays, and the piles of snow are neatly organized. Pretty impressive.

Once I'm done eating, I head back to the streets. There's an apothecary, and my mind immediately goes to Ruin—she would love a place like this.

Rosebay Apothecary is charmingly decorated with what I assume are pictures of the town back in the day. Horse carriages, vintage trucks carrying a load of apples, people out and about at a festival bring its history to life.

“Can I help you?” A lady comes out of the back of the store, wearing a white lab coat, and her hair is up in a neat bun. I hadn't really paid attention to everything they sell here, but it's a mix of candles, ointments, creams, and soaps. I wonder if they're handmade on site.

“Yes, hello. I hope I don’t sound strange, but I’m looking for someone, and I wonder if perhaps you know her.” The lady straightens her back and gives me a curt nod. I feel quite uncomfortable. I don’t want to sound like a stalker, but for people who don’t know me, I’m sure that’s how I look. “This is her. I met her back in Raleigh, but she mentioned she’s from a town in the mountains, and I’d like to reconnect with her.” The moment the words come out of my mouth, I know I sound like a psychopath. Fuck.

“I’m sorry, I’ve never seen her,” she says, her demeanor immediately changing.

“Are you sure?” I ask, because there’s no way Google has it wrong. I saw with my own eyes that her family’s orchard is in this town.

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She releases a breath and motions for me to follow her. Even though I don't know her, the fact that she's willing to talk with me makes hope bloom in my chest.

We walk to the back of the store and into her office. A small desk, a chair, and file cabinets bursting with receipts and all sorts of papers fill the cramped space.

"I don't know what your intentions are, coming and asking for her, but for some reason, I feel like you don't want to harm her. If you wait here, I can find someone who can give you answers," she tells me as she stands with her arms crossed over her chest.

My eyes immediately fill with unshed tears. Fuck. I'm finally getting closer to knowing what happened to Ruin. "Yes, I can assure you I have the best intentions for her."

She nods as she motions for me to sit down. "Wait here. I won't take long." She closes the door, and I hear it lock.

Oh shit, why did she lock me in? I decide to text Penny and let her know where I am and what's going on, in case she has to send the police to find me. After the most excruciating and slow ten minutes of my life, the door unlocks and in comes the woman who I spoke with. Behind her is a tall man, his hair is not as red as Ruin's, but I can definitely see a resemblance. This must be River or Miles.

"Miss Dorothy says you're looking for my sister," the man says, not even introducing himself.

“Yes, I’m Gio Bianchi. Ruin’s boyfriend.” He stiffens at my words and turns to face the lady who’s looking at us with rapt attention.

“Miss Dorothy, I beg you please don’t say anything you heard to anyone. As you can imagine, we’re trying to protect Ruin as much as possible.” She simply nods at his request with a smile, and then he turns to look at me. “Please, follow me. There’s stuff to talk about.”

I nod at him, and follow him out of the store. The sun has completely set, and the chilly air hits my face.

“Do you need a lift?” he asks, and I shake my head. I can’t seem to form words at the moment. “Follow me, there’s a diner a couple of blocks away.” I nod and head to my car. I remember Ruin mentioning her family also had a diner. Why didn’t I go there to begin with?

Ugh, this brain fog has to go.

Once I park, I go inside the diner. The man turns the sign to “Closed” and locks the door. A woman, who can only be Ruin’s sister, Rain, comes out of the kitchen and looks at me, stunned.

“Hi, I’m Rain,” she says as she extends her hand for me to shake, and I happily take it.

“Fuck, I’m sorry. I’m River, Ruin’s oldest brother.” He extends his hand to me, and I shake it as well.

“Do you want anything to eat or drink?” Rain asks, and I shake my head but give her a grateful smile.

“Let’s take a seat then,” River says, and we all go to the nearest table. River and Rain sit across from me, and I look at them expectantly.

“I’m going to get to the point,” River says and then clears his throat. “Ruin had a car accident.”

All the blood drains from my face as a shiver runs through my body.

“Is she...is she dead?” I say quietly, almost afraid hear the answer.

“No, oh God, no,” Rain rushes to assure me, and I release a deep breath.

“She’s currently in a coma. According to the authorities, it’s a miracle they were able to rescue her.” I clench my jaw at River’s words. I did almost lose her.

“Where is she? Can I see her?” I ask, needing to see her with my own eyes.

“That’s the issue and the reason we haven’t contacted you, Gio,” River starts to talk, and I already don’t like where this is going.

“We don’t know how long it will take for her to wake up from the coma, and once she’s awake, we don’t know what state she will be in. She sustained multiple fractures and a concussion.” I close my eyes as my left foot starts shaking uncontrollably. Not even in my wildest dreams did I think my Ruin would have gone through something like this.

“But I need to see her. I love her.” I open my eyes in time to see River closing his and Rain’s starting to fill with unshed tears.

“She loves you, too, Gio. All she did during break was to talk about you and how much she missed you. But right now, it isn’t wise to disturb her. We need her to

heal,” Rain says in a calm tone. Deep inside me, I know that’s the best thing to do, but I’ll die without her. It’s that simple.

“But if she’s in a coma, how would I disturb her? I understand you are her family, but she’s my everything. Is she getting the best possible treatment? Or do we need to transfer her to Chapel Hill or Durham?” I say, feeling like I’m coming back from the fog and taking the reins of the situation.

“She has a good medical team here; they all graduated from Chapel Hill,” River says, and I nod.

“Does her insurance cover everything she needs?” River doesn’t say a word, but Rain shakes her head.

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“Alright, I’ll stop by the hospital on my way out of town and make sure they give her the best treatment no matter the cost.” Rain gives me a wobbly smile, while River stares at me, studying me.

“Thank you, Gio. Truly,” he finally says, and I nod at him.

“And I’m also going to ask if it’s possible for me to see her. I’d rather hear it from the professionals,” I say. Seeing River’s face harden, I quickly add, “No offense, but I really need to be with her.”

Rain nods, and River stands up. “Then I’m going with you. I need to make sure Ruin is safe.”

I know he won’t back down, but I won’t either. I’m going to go see my girl, no matter who’s there.

I nod at him and Rain, then stand up, shake hands, and head out with River to see the love of my life. Finally.

“Yes, hello. I’m here on behalf of the MacAllister family,” I say once I get inside the hospital and point at River, who’s next to me. The nurse looks away from the computer and looks at me, so I continue talking. “I’m also here to take over Ruin MacAllister’s account.”

She frowns, and I roll my eyes. I hate that sometimes I don’t express myself correctly. “What I mean is, from now on, I’m going to cover absolutely all of her expenses. I want Ruin MacAllister to have the best possible care.” River stiffens next

to me, but I don't look at him. I'm taking care of Ruin now.

Understanding dawns on the nurse. "But do you understand we are talking of potentially a million dollars or more?"

I nod. "Yes, as I said, no matter the cost." I pull my black Amex from my wallet, and the nurse gives me a few forms to fill out.

Once I'm done and everything is set, I ask, "Is there any chance I can see her?"

She stands up from her chair and comes to meet me on the other side of her desk. She looks at River, then at me. "This isn't protocol, but since you're paying for her stay here, I can give you two minutes to see her."

River nods, and a big smile spreads across my face. "Thank you."

River and I follow the nurse in silence. Once we make it to Ruin's room, the nurse repeats, "Two minutes. I'll be waiting right here." I nod and step inside, not even looking at River, who stays outside with the nurse.

The moment I see her, pain stabs me in the chest. She's connected to so many machines, with a tube in her mouth. Her beautiful face is covered in bruises.

"Oh, sweetheart. What the fuck happened?" I cry out as I place my hand on hers. She doesn't move, but I know she's alive because of all the sounds coming out of the machines.

"I thought I lost you, Ruin. Please come back to me. To us," I say, silently crying.

Suddenly, the monitors start beeping frantically, and I feel Ruin's hand move under mine. My eyes widen in shock as her face transforms with terror. She's looking at me

like she doesn't recognize me—like I am a complete stranger, someone to fear.

The door bursts open, and the nurse and River come barreling inside.

"I knew this wasn't a good idea!" River shouts as the nurse starts working on settling Ruin. Ruin moves her hand away from mine, and while she's trying to say something, but only muffled grunts and screams come out of her mouth since the tube is obstructing her vocal cords. I put my hands on my head and start pacing the room, I can't believe I caused this. Why is she having this reaction to me?

"You two, out of this room. Now!" a doctor comes in and yells at River and me. We leave the room in silence, not even glancing at each other.

"You need to leave, Gio. I appreciate you taking over the medical bills. I really do. But we can't afford to have Ruin go through this again until she's healed."

"I'm not going anywhere until I speak with the doctor." River grunts his disagreement but doesn't push for me to leave.

When the doctor finally comes out of Ruin's room, River and I stand in front of him, waiting for his report.

"What happened, doc? Is she okay?" River is the first to speak.

"She's fine. We gave her a sedative, and we induced the coma again. I'm not sure what triggered it, but it's best if it doesn't happen again. She needs to rest and heal." I feel River's eyes burning into me, but I ignore him, fully focused on the doctor's words.

"Is she going to remember this?" I ask, worried I hurt her without meaning to. Why was she terrified when she woke up? Was it because of me? Why did she didn't

recognize me? Fuck, this is harder than I thought.

“It’s hard to say at this point, but I can’t stress this enough—she needs to rest.”

“I understand. I’ll be on my way.” I leave the hospital in silence and leave my heart with her.

Chapter 24

Ruin MacAllister

I slowly open my eyes, and my eyelids feel heavy, as if I haven't opened them in a while. I blink once, twice. When my vision comes to focus, I notice my left foot is in a cast, and it's immobilized in a sling. My left arm is in a cast, too. What the hell happened?

I try to speak but nothing comes out when I open my mouth. I clear my throat and try again—still nothing. I look around the room, and I'm alone—a feeling close to panic takes over me, and I shudder. Where's my family?

I fist my hands, but I can only feel the right one and notice I have something in it. When I press it, a beeping sound invades the room. Taking a couple of deep breaths, I feel pain in my chest. Moisture blurs my vision. How did I end up here?

"She's awake," I hear a nurse say as she enters the room. "Hi, Miss MacAllister. How are you feeling?" the nurse asks, kind eyes looking at me.

I point to my neck and shake my head.

"Oh, it's okay. Your throat must still be sore from the ventilation tube."

My eyes widen in surprise. Tube? Why? I need her to tell me what happened.

"The doctor will be right in. He'll tell you more." She pats my hand and moves to the machines I'm connected to.

“Miss MacAllister, welcome back. I’m Dr. Davies.” The doctor greets me as he looks at his tablet.

“She seems unable to speak,” the nurse tells him. He pauses what he’s doing, places the tablet on the foot of my bed, and sanitizes his hands. Then, he pulls a penlight from his coat pocket.

“Can you open your mouth, Miss MacAllister?” I do as he asks, and he gets closer to me, looks inside my mouth, and then clicks his tongue. “Yes, your throat looks somewhat swollen. Let’s give her something for that.” He looks at the nurse, and she nods, leaving the room, I assume, to get the medication.

“Do you write with your right hand?” I nod. “Good, we’ll bring a whiteboard so we can communicate with you.” I smile at him. I need to know what happened.

A couple of minutes later, I hear a commotion outside. The moment my room door opens, a gaggle of people comes barreling inside.

“Oh, she’s awake. Thank the heavens,” Granny says as she raises her hands.

Next, I see Mama and Rain, their eyes puffy and red, like they’ve been crying for a while.

“Ruin, my little girl. Thank God you woke up,” Mama says before breaking into a sob. Rain hugs her and helps her sit down next to Granny. I try to speak, but it still hurts, and nothing comes out. I feel so frustrated right now.

The nurse comes in with a cart of food and water. Oh good, my stomach feels queasy, but I think water would be great. It might help my throat.

“Here’s the board. Let me know if you need help writing,” the nurse says, handing

me a small whiteboard and a black marker. I smile at her and try to open the marker, but doing everything with just one hand is hard. Rain takes the marker from my hand and removes the top before handing it back to me.

I know my sister; she's trying to be strong because Mama is already crying, but her face is tense, like she's trying to contain her feelings. She holds the board for me so I can write. My handwriting isn't pretty, but I hope she understands it.

"What happened?" Rain reads aloud from the whiteboard. She glances at Mama, and they exchange a silent conversation. I write again and tap the board with the marker, prompting Rain to read, "What's going on?" Rain takes a deep breath and sits on my bed, grabbing my hand.

"You were in an accident. It was after Christmas. You went to Pine Shores, and on your way back, you lost control of your car." I frown, unable to remember anything Rain is describing.

Why don't I remember?

There's a knock on the door, and Dr. Davies enters.

"Hello, everyone, as you can see, Miss MacAllister is awake, but we still need to run some tests before you can visit her for longer," he says in an assertive tone. Rain nods as Mama gets up and stands closer to me.

"How long are those tests going to take? And why isn't she able to speak?" she asks as she cradles my face in her hands. I immediately start crying, a mix of relief and sorrow invading me. Something really bad must have happened for me to be this banged up.

"We're not sure how long it's going to take her to be able to speak again—this is a

day-by-day case. You need to remember, she was in a coma for a while.”

My eyebrows shoot up, and I tap the whiteboard to get their attention.

Dr. Davies turns his gaze to me. “Miss MacAllister, you were involved in a car accident in late December. From what the firefighters and the police were able to deduce, you lost control of your car as you were descending the mountain. A tractor trailer was coming the opposite way, and it hit your car. You went tumbling down the mountain. As bad as the accident was, it was a miracle the firefighters were able to rescue you and bring you to the hospital.” My tears continue to fall, and Mama wipes them away, but it doesn’t matter.

How long has it been since the accident? I write next, and Rain shows the board to the doctor.

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“Six weeks. It’s February now,” he answers.

Where are the boys? Daddy? I write next, and Rain frowns. She shows the board to everyone, and Mama goes pale. I frown, shaking my head. What’s going on?

“Miss MacAllister, do you know what year it is?” Dr. Davies asks calmly.

I erase what I’ve written with my hand and write, 2020.

“What’s going on?” Granny asks.

The doctor tells them he needs to speak with me privately and to please leave the room. They all kiss my forehead and leave, promising they’ll return as soon as the doctor allows them back in.

The nurse walks into the room as Dr. Davies pulls his tablet out.

“Miss MacAllister, I’m going to ask you a few questions, and you can write the answers down. Are you ready?”

I nod in agreement.

“Can you tell me your name?”

Ruin MacAllister.

“Very good. How old are you?”

I turned twenty in August.

“Where do you live?”

Azalea Creek?

“Who do you live with?”

Mama and Daddy, Granny, River, Miles, Merlin, and my twin sister, Rain.

“What do you do for a living?”

I help around our orchard and in our diner. I also go to school.

“What do you study?”

Biology.

“Where do you study?”

Highlands Community College.

“What’s the last thing you remember?”

I look around, trying to think, but nothing comes to mind—everything is foggy.

“It’s okay. Things can be blurry for some time after a head injury. As I mentioned earlier, it’s a miracle you survived the accident. We had to put you in an induced coma to help with the brain swelling. There’s nothing to worry about.” Dr. Davis gives me a curt smile. He says something to the nurse that I can’t quite hear, and when he leaves the room, the nurse moves closer to check my vitals.

“Would you like some water?” I nod, and she brings me a glass of water with a straw. She places the straw on my lips, and I take a tentative sip. The water going down my throat feels amazing; it’s like, little by little, my body is coming back to life. After a few more sips, the good nurse sets the glass back on the cart.

“Now that you are awake, we need to schedule some physical therapy. As you can see, you broke a few bones, but they’ve been healing nicely. We need to start working on your mobility, and once the casts come off, more therapy will be needed so you can start walking independently.”

My hand hurts from writing. I guess I’ll have to do physical therapy even for the hand that didn’t break.

“How much longer will I be here?” I try to use my voice. Even though it comes out low, the nurse smiles brightly at me when she hears me.

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“That depends on how well you progress. But you don’t need to worry about that now.” She pats my hand as she makes her way to the door.

“Try to get some rest. I’ll come back in a little while to check on you.” I nod at her, feeling somewhat tired. I don’t think I’ve been awake for even an hour, but my head hurts. I need to take it slow, just like the nurse said.

The next morning, after Dr. Davies checks in, my entire family comes to see me. Granny and Mama are the first to enter the room. Granny brought my favorite blanket she sewed for me, and I smile at her.

“Thank you, Granny.” Her smile is big when she hears my voice.

“Oh, honey. You can speak now, how wonderful,” she says as she covers me with the blanket and gives me a kiss on the cheek.

“Good morning, sweetie,” Mama greets me next, and one by one, all my siblings hug me, or at least try to. It’s hard with these damn casts. They all gather around my bed, and I frown.

“Where’s Daddy?” It’s so unlike him not to come to see me.

“Ruin, there’s something we have to tell you,” River speaks. When I glance around, everyone has sad looks on their faces. “Yesterday, the doctor confirmed that you are suffering from amnesia.” I inhale a sharp breath because what on Earth did River just say?

“After speaking with Dr. Davies, we decided it was best if we gave you the news. It seems that you don’t have memories of the last four years of your life.” I grip Mama’s hand tight as I absorb River’s words. Four years?

“What aren’t you saying, River?” He looks at Mama, and she gives me the slightest nod.

“Daddy passed away four years ago, Ruin. A lot has happened since.”

I feel my body go limp as everything fades to black.

“Miss MacAllister, welcome back.” A doctor I’ve never seen before greets me as I open my eyes. It’s dark now, and my family is nowhere to be seen. Did I dream that they were here and gave me the worst news of my life? I look at the doctor with a blank expression.

“Do you remember the conversation you had with your family?” I nod at him.

“I’m going to get straight to the point. You’re suffering from retrograde amnesia. It’s a type of memory loss caused by abrain injury. In your case, the car accident you were involved in resulted in severe trauma, not only to your extremities but also in your brain.”

“Do I have any chance of recovering my memories?” I ask. I don’t want to miss four years of my life permanently.

“That’s a question that has no definite answer, Miss MacAllister. Unfortunately, it varies from person to person. The only thing we can focus on at the moment is your physical therapy, and we can provide therapy with a psychologist if you would like. My professional opinion is for you to focus on your body and rest. With time, your memories might come back to you.” The doctor gives me a tight smile and leaves the

room.

The nice nurse I've seen a couple of times now is nowhere to be found. Maybe she's only on the day shift.

Rain enters my room, and the smell of what she has in her hand immediately puts me in a better mood.

"Mama sent you your favorite food," Rain says as she removes a Tupperware container from a paper bag.

"Hmmm, Carolina blackened trout with veggies and rice." I love Mama. "I don't care that we're going to leave this hospital smelling like fish, it's so damn good."

Rain chuckles at my eagerness to eat Mama's food, but all I've had today is crackers and water, and I need real food now. The moment the first bite of flaky, warm, buttery, lemony fish hits my senses, I moan, and Rain barks out a full laugh. It's good to hear my sister laugh after the day I've had. I'm sure these past six weeks have been hell for all of them, not knowing if I was going to wake up or not.

I make quick work of polishing off the food, and my sister stares at me in shock.

"What?" I ask her, grabbing water from the food table in front of me.

"Nothing, I just have never seen you eat like this." Her voice wobbles, and her eyes fill with emotion. Rain is the strongest of the two of us. It's definitely hard seeing her break like this. I place the glass back on the table and push it away from me, making room for Rain to sit down next to me.

"I hate seeing you like this, Raindrop," I say, and she flashes me a sad smile.

“I’m just so fucking thankful you woke up, Ruin. I cannot imagine my life without you,” she says as tears start falling down her cheeks. I join her, silently crying, wishing I could remember everything that happened—that I hadn’t gotten in that damn accident. But this is the reality I must face now.

“What was I doing in Pines Shore?” I ask her as I wipe the tears from my face. Rain lies down next to me—it’s a tight fit, but we’re used to sharing our beds more often than not.

“The doctor said it’s not appropriate to fill you in about the last four years. He said that it might actually cause more stress because you can’t remember. He said it was best to let the memories come back with time,” Rain says in a low voice, and I whine in frustration.

“So what are you allowed to tell me? Is it true Daddy is gone?” She nods as she places her head on my right shoulder.

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“Yeah, Daddy passed away four years ago. It was rough for all of us, but we’re doing better now.”

“How is it fair that I get to live that kind of sadness twice?” I ask out loud, even though I know no one has the answer to that. Rain covers my right hand with hers, silently letting me know that I’m not alone.

“What else can you tell me? Did I finish school?” I mean, I’m twenty-four now. If everything went according to plan, I graduated two years ago. Rain inhales a deep breath; whatever she’s going to say next is going to send me spinning—I can feel it.

“Actually, you took a break from school when Daddy passed away.”

“What? So what was I doing now? Did I go back to school?”

Another pause.

“Yeah, you transferred to another school,” Rain says. Is there more she can tell me? I need to know.

“To my dream school?” My sister doesn’t say anything, doesn’t move. I’m not even sure if she’s breathing anymore. “Rain?”

“Yeah, you were in Raleigh.” A sharp, stabbing pain hits my chest, and Rain notices immediately. She gets up and studies me with worried eyes.

“Why, Rain, why? You know how much I wanted to go to Wolfe University. Why do

I get to live my dream, and then it's taken away from me?" I start crying again, and this time, I don't want to stop—life is cruel and has decided I'm its victim.

"Ruin, please don't cry. Maybe when you're feeling better, you can go back to Raleigh. Maybe by the time you're walking again, you'll have your memories back, and you'll be able to go for the fall semester," Rain tells me as she rubs my hand between hers. Comforting me. I give her a smile as I try to take deep breaths.

"But right now, please let me brush your teeth. I don't know if the entire hospital smells like trout, but your mouth sure does."

I throw my head back in laughter. Even though every single bone and muscle in my body aches, it's good to laugh this hard after everything I've been through—and everything that lies ahead.

Chapter 25

Ruin MacAllister

It's been a week since my casts came off, and the pain and discomfort are excruciating. Since I broke my shoulder, wrist, and ankle, not to mention a couple of ribs, the therapy has been very painful. I think it'd be easier if I was motivated to get better and go on with my life, but what life do I have to go back to? Not remembering the last four years feels like the ultimate slap in the face. I can't go back to school because I don't remember any of the things I've learned—I would have to start over. Right now, that's the last thing I want to do.

The doctors thought I should stay in the hospital for the first four weeks of therapy to be more comfortable while getting my mobility back, but I was beyond tired of seeing the same four plain walls. I asked if I could start doing therapy remotely, and Dr. Davies decided to compromise—two more weeks here at the hospital, and then I

could go home.

I'm heading home today, and it's bittersweet. On one hand, I'm happy to finally be among my loved ones and with my things, but at the same time, I wonder if I'll remember any of the things I have in my room as mine. I don't even want to think how home will feel without Daddy being around.

"Hey, hey, Ruru," Miles says in a chirpy tone as he comes into my room with a wheelchair in tow. I smile at him, and then River comes in next.

"Ready to go home?" River asks, so many emotions dancing in his eyes.

"River, I'm okay," I lie, but he's always carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders, and this was an accident. It was no one's fault.

"River, cut it out. Remember what the doctor said," Miles says as he smacks River on the head, and I laugh. Miles always has a way of cutting the tension in the most stressful situations.

"Right, let's go home."

They both help me out of bed, carefully easing me into the wheelchair. River grabs the few belongings I have here. I didn't want them to bring anything from home—I wasn't sure if I'd remember it or not.

"Now, don't go all Grand Theft Auto, Miles. Be careful," River warns.

But Miles, being Miles, speeds up, shouting, "What was that? I can't hear you."

I laugh all the way to the parking lot.

On the drive home, I tried to prepare myself for the wave of emotions I would feel. But the moment I set foot in the house, everything hit me all at once. The house is the same, yet it feels different. We have the same sectional sofa in the living room, the one we used to squeeze in for family movie night while eating popcorn. But now the pillows look fresh, and everything is tidy. We've grown up.

The same familiar smell of apples and leather lingers in the air, and I can picture Daddy clear as day. I close my eyes and go back to a time when he used to take his lunch break in the middle of the afternoon just to be around when we came home from school.

"Ruin, sweetie." Mama rushes from the kitchen to greet me.

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“Hi, Mama,” I say with a big smile. I want to hug her, but I have crutches, and I’m still learning to maneuver with them.

“Good Heavens, who thought it was a good idea to send Ruin home with crutches in the middle of winter when the roads are slippery with ice?” Granny says as she joins us in the living room, and everyone laughs at her bluntness.

“That’s what I said, Granny, but the big boss over here said there would always be one of us around to help her. So she should be good,” Miles says as he points his thumb toward River.

“Well, it’s the truth. Ruin can’t be left alone, so we’ll take turns being around to help her. Rain made a spreadsheet showing who’s in charge of Ruin and when.”

I know my family means well, and they love me as much as I love them, but I hate feeling like I’m another chore to them. They all have jobs to tend to, and I’m adding to the pile.

“Sweetie, you know this is no hardship for us, right?” Mama says, taking my crutches and giving them to Miles to put away. “I prepared your bedroom to keep you as comfortable as possible. Good thing it’s on the first floor.”

“Ruin, darling, think about it this way. Now Granny has a companion to take naps and wobble around the house like two drunken gals,” Granny says, settling into her favorite comfy chair by the window where she spends most of the day knitting or reading her tarot cards. I shake my head, amused by the things Granny comes up with. It’s good to be home.

I've been going to the hospital three times a week for the last month. I'm in therapy for all of my broken bones. We started with my shoulder because I would need to move my arm and hands to help with my ankle exercises.

The pain, sweat, and tears were a great reminder of what I went through and how hard things can be. Mama or Rain helps me the other four days at home. The family room has been transformed into a mini gym, and I love sharing it with my napping gal. It's incredible how much mobility Granny has regained after doing the exercises with me. She says she feels like she's in her fifties again.

I have the same therapist every session, so it's been nice to build a relationship with him. Nick is kind and friendly, but he doesn't take bullshit from anyone. During the first couple of sessions, I thought I'd have to quit. The pain was awful, and I just didn't have the drive to do it. But Nick held me accountable, and as the days went by, the exercises got a little easier.

"I don't work with quitters, Ruin," he said once. "If you're here, it is to get better, not to simmer in what you think is a miserable life. Believe it or not, plenty of people out there would give anything for the chance to walk again, and they simply can't. So, if you won't do it for yourself, do it for them."

That was the last time I complained. He was right. Even though I'm going through a rough time, I have my family's support. With time and therapy, I can get back on my feet—literally.

When I got home from the hospital, I wasn't sure if Rain had taken things from my room or if I'd always had so few belongings. But the moment I walked in, one thing immediately caught my attention: the cutest stuffed animal—a husky with a tag that reads "Cobalt." I don't remember when I got it or if someone gave it to me, but it feels special. I don't think I've slept with a stuffy since I was nine or ten, but holding Cobalt at night makes me feel safe and cared for.

Lately, I've started bringing him everywhere with me. Remembering how I got him has become my main focus, and as the doctors said, the memories could come back at any time.

Chapter 26

Gio Bianchi

Out in the great outdoors is where I find solace, where my soul can finally be.

Out in the great outdoors is where I hope to find you, waiting for me, my sweet love.

But as the days go by, the hope fades and is replaced with sadness and regret.

I crossed twenty-five bridges to find you, I would burn them all to have you.

But the truth is, there is only one bridge between you and me, the bridge that links your heart with mine.

You will live in me forever, Ruin Josephine. You gave me a reason to fight.

As I say goodbye, I say it with a heavy heart and a shattered soul.

I trust that one day, our bridge will bring us back to where our souls entangled and our love began to grow.

My love for you will never fade. The memories will remain forever in my heart.

Because the true ruin is to roam this road without you by my side.

As I write these words, tears fall, splashing onto the pages of the notebook Ruin gave

me on graduation day. All the bucket list items she mentioned will remain as proof of the love we shared.

Tomorrow is the beginning of another chapter in my life. One where I go back to who I was before I knew life could be in technicolor.

Chapter 27

Ruin MacAllister

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:35 am

It's been three months since I moved back home—three months of intense therapy, and I'm finally mobile enough to do things by myself. I still don't remember anything, but it's okay. The doctor said it was still too early to lose hope, so I remain optimistic about getting my memories back.

I joined Mama and Rain at the diner. Spring is in full swing, and it's usually a busy time with tourists coming to hike and camp in the Blue Ridge—they always need an extra hand.

“Ruin, dear. Why don't you come here before we open?” Granny calls me as she shuffles her cards.

I chuckle but happily take a seat next to her. Part of working here means trying to stay off my feet as much as possible.

As Granny continues to shuffle the cards, I hold in my hand the necklace I wear every single day. It was one of the few things I had with me when the firefighters rescued me. It's the most beautiful jade pendant. When I asked Rain if she knew how I got it, she said she had no clue. And maybe she doesn't, but it must have been special to me since I was wearing it the day of the accident, and I'm not big on wearing jewelry.

“Choose a card, dear,” Granny says, and I do as I'm told. She grins at me as she turns the card.

“Calling in your soulmate.” The card reads, and I frown.

“Do I have a soulmate?” I shake my head as I try to get that thought out of my mind.

If I did, he would have been at the hospital along with my family.

“He’ll be here before we know it, Ruin. And you better be ready to get your feet swept off the floor,” Granny says as she continues to grin. Her giddiness is contagious.

“What are you talking about? I don’t have a soulmate,” I say, not wanting to open another door I don’t have the key for.

“Patience, dear, he’ll be here in due time,” she says as she gently pats my hand, and I shake my head. Getting up with the help of my cane, I move toward the front of the diner to open the door.

Customers start trickling in, and I greet them with a kind smile.

What if Granny is right? What if my soulmate is about to show up?

That night, once we’ve made it home, I notice Merlin seems a little nervous. Did he ask Meadow out? Would he tell me? As much progress as I’ve made in all these months, my siblings still treat me like I’m broken. And maybe I am, but I don’t want to be treated with kid gloves. I just want to feel normal again.

“Hey, Ruin, is it okay if I come in?” Merlin asks through my closed door, and I chuckle.

“Of course, come on in,” I tell him, and his boyish smile peeks through.

“What’s up?” I ask, more giddy than necessary because Merlin immediately flinches. “Is there something wrong?”

I start to worry as he comes to sit in a chair by my bed. He ruffles his hair and

releases a deep breath.

“So, you know how I just graduated, right?” I nod, and he continues. “And you know I got accepted into the community college.” I wonder where he’s going with all this.

“Yes,” I say, and he bites his bottom lip, like he’s about to say something I won’t like.

“Well, the thing is, that’s not the only place I got into.”

I arch a brow in question, and he covers his face with his hands.

“Merlin, whatever it is that you have to say, it’s okay,” I tell him as I try to pry one of his hands off his face. He tentatively opens an eye, and I smile at him.

“Okay, here goes nothing.” He squares his shoulders and shakes his head. “I got accepted into Wolfe University, and I really want to go, but I’ll only go if you’re okay with it.”

It takes me a moment to comprehend what he just said, but the moment it registers in my brain, my eyes well up with emotion. Still, I’m smiling big at my little brother.

“Oh my gosh, I’m so proud of you, Merlin Joshua. Come here, give me a hug.”

He releases the breath he was holding as he steps forward to hug me.

“Did you tell me you were applying to Wolfe before the accident?” I ask him, suddenly wanting to know everything about my little brother going to college. His eyes turn sad, and his gaze leaves mine. It’s all I need to know.

“Hey, don’t feel bad,” I say, bumping his chest with my elbow. “If anyone should

feel bad, it'd have to be me. How can I forget about such amazing news? I mean, look at you—the youngest MacAllister going to a big university.” I beam at him, hoping he can tell I’m genuinely happy for him. But I won’t blame him if he doubts me, I’ve been sulking in my sadness these past months. It’s time I dust off and start living again.

“Are you sure you’re not mad?” Merlin asks, and my heart melts at my brother.

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“Why would I be mad?” I ask him, wanting to know everything that’s in his head.

“Well, because you used to go there, and it’s your dream school, and now you’re back home.”

“Yes, it’s my dream, but now I get to share it with you. We don’t know what the future holds, and maybe I’ll be able to go back next year. We could be roommates, even.”

His face lights up at the thought.

“Thank you, Ruin. You’re the best. I’m so incredibly happy.” He hugs me again, and I hug him hard.

“The feeling is mutual, little bro,” I say, ruffling his hair.

“I’m not so little; I’m going to college!” he shouts as he gets up from my bed and fist-pumps the air on his way out, nearly running into Rain.

“I see Merlin told you,” Rain says, closing my bedroom door behind her.

“Yeah, I’m so proud of him,” I tell her as I hug Cobalt next to me.

“Same.” She scooches next to me, and she just lies there, quiet—which is not her usual MO.

“What’s going on, Raindrop?” I nudge her with my elbow.

“I’ve been thinking.”

“Oh, oh. That’s dangerous,” I say with a cackle.

“Shut up, Ruru,” she huffs, clearly frustrated.

“Okay, I’m sorry. I’ll calm down. What is it?”

She releases a breath. “I was just thinking, how awesome would it be if we both go back to school together.” My eyebrows shoot to the sky. I didn’t think Rain was interested in going back to school. She’s a talented cook, and up until now, I thought she was happy working at the diner. But what do I know? I don’t remember the last four years of my life.

“I’m sorry I don’t remember if we’ve had this conversation before, but have you thought about what you would like to study?” I ask, hoping not to hurt her feelings.

“Please don’t feel bad. It’s kinda fun to tell you things for the first time again.” Rain gives me an easy smile. “I’ve been thinking about getting a culinary degree. I mean, it would only make my food more amazing.” She shimmies her shoulders, and I laugh.

“Does the community college offer that now?” I ask because I don’t think they did when I used to go there.

Rain shakes her head. “No, it would mean you and I would have to move.” She gives me a pointed look, and I catch what she’s trying to say.

“You want to move to Raleigh? I thought you never wanted to leave Azalea Creek.”

“I would move for you,” she tells me in a low voice, and now everything makes sense.

“You don’t have to do that, Raindrop. I’m finally finding my footing here. I’m starting to come to terms with the fact that I might never remember anything from my time in Raleigh, and that’s okay. I’m alive, and I have my family. What more could I ever ask for?” Rain’s eyes fill with emotion, and I hug her.

“I just don’t want you to miss out on anything,” she says with a watery smile, and I grin at her.

“And what could I be missing? If something important was there, it would have followed me here. Let’s just focus on me being fully mobile again. I don’t want to use a cane forever.” I chuckle, and Rain laughs.

“Hey, but you’re twinning with Granny. I’m actually feeling left out.” I bark out a laugh. Oh, how I love my family.

Chapter 28

Gio Bianchi

I’ve been working nonstop at the lab. Since I’m neither taking classes nor teaching, all my time is spent doing research—which, to be honest, I thought I was going to enjoy more. The days are quiet, and the nights are even worse—I’m on autopilot, because I know the moment I stop and think about my life, I’ll collapse—and I’m not sure I’ll be able to get back up.

Penny is the only one keeping me sane, checking on me constantly and taking me out so I don’t die from loneliness in my place.

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Rain contacted me a couple of months back to tell me Ruin was awake, a little tidbit I already had since the hospital kept me informed of Ruin's progress. The news she had to share, though, was painful. Ruin is suffering from amnesia and doesn't remember the past four years—so she doesn't remember me. Which explains her reaction to waking up in a hospital to a stranger holding her hand.

The doctor recommended the family avoid overwhelming her with details about her past. Despite all of this, I was ready to fight and argue that being by her side might actually help. However, after a long conversation with Dr. Davies, the one in charge of her case, and consulting a couple of neurologists for a second opinion, I agreed to give her more time to recover before returning to Azalea Creek to see her. I also couldn't bear to cause her the same panic I saw in her eyes that day in the hospital. The memory of that look on her face, coupled with the memories of how she used to lovingly gaze at me, still keeps me up at night. So, I've been patiently waiting. But the truth is, life is not worth it without her. I'm reaching my breaking point.

"Good morning, Gio. I was hoping to find you here." Dr. Smith comes into the lab, which is unusual for him these days, and a young guy is with him.

"I just wanted to introduce you to Merlin. He's an incoming freshman and asked for a chance to work in the lab during summer to gain some experience. I thought you would be the perfect mentor." Dr. Smith pats me on my back as a shy Merlin comes to stand next to him.

"Nice to meet you, I'm Gio." I extend my hand, and Merlin shakes it. I swear my mind is playing tricks on me because Merlin looks so much like Ruin—it's crazy. The same fiery red hair, the same nose. I must be imagining things.

“It’s great meeting you, Dr. Bianchi. I’ve read your papers, you’ve done tremendous work.” I chuckle at his formality; I’m not used to being called doctor; I’m just Gio. But I’m impressed he has read my work.

“I was about to head out for a coffee. Would you like to go with me?” I ask Merlin, who gives me an appreciative smile.

“Well, welcome aboard, Merlin. I’ll leave you two to it.” Dr. Smith waves as he wobbles back to his office.

“So, Merlin. Where are you from?” I ask as we take the elevator.

He shuffles in place, maybe a little anxious. “I’m from a small town in the mountains. It’s called Azalea Creek. I’m not sure if you’ve ever heard of it.” My heart skips a beat, but I try to mask my shock. Could he be related to her?

“Never heard of it,” I lie through my teeth as we leave the elevator and head to the coffee shop on the main floor of the building.

“I don’t mean to be rude, but I’m curious. Where are you from? Your accent is cool,” Merlin says in a shaky voice, and I chuckle. Yeah, he’s definitely nervous. If it was my first day at school and my boss invited me to get coffee, I would be nervous, too.

“I’m from Argentina. But I’ve been here for a while,” I tell him as we get in line to order.

“Wow, that’s so cool. I don’t think I’ve ever met anyone from South America before.” His face turns red, and I can’t help but feel he looks like Ruin when she blushes. I quickly shake my head, pushing that thought out of my mind. I’m just seeing what I want to see.

“So, why did you choose Wolfe University? I’m sure you had other options?” I change the subject, and Merlin’s thankful smile lets me know it was the right move.

“I didn’t have many options, to be honest. I’ve always wanted to come here. You know, coming from a small town, the big city always has a certain appeal. Plus, I was offered a partial scholarship to play soccer.”

We say our thanks to the barista as we get our coffees, and I can’t hide my surprise at his revelation.

“Soccer? You should have started there, Merlin. That’s awesome, congratulations.” He gives me a sheepish smile, and I chuckle.

“That’s right, Argentina is the current World Champion,” he says, and my inner Argentinian beams with pride.

“Yup, the feeling of seeing your National Team win the World Cup is indescribable. Maybe one day, you’ll be the one bringing that honor to your country.”

“Ha, no, Dr. Bianchi. I need to graduate and go back home to help my family out.” I frown at him.

“I don’t mean to pry, but what do you mean?” I ask, suddenly curious to know more.

“Well, even though my family owns an orchard and does well, we’ve been hit with big medical bills in the past few years that have put the farm in danger. I’m the youngest of five siblings, and they think I don’t pay attention, but the truth is, I want to help my family keep the farm.” He looks at me, worried that he shared too much and that I might not be interested. On the contrary, I’m all ears.

“So, how are you planning to help your family?” I ask, and he raises his eyebrows. I

need to know—because if he’s related to Ruin, as I suspect, I thought I was already helping with all of the medical bills. What’s going on?

“I’m not sure yet, Dr. Bianchi,” Merlin says, his frustration evident, “I’m just thinking if I make good money, maybe we can pay all the medical bills, and we can focus on the farm again.”

If he is who I think he is, I’d be frustrated, too. From what Ruin mentioned, her family is one of the founding families of Azalea Creek—they’ve been there for generations.

“I’m sorry to ask, but did you say you have five siblings?” I ask, sipping my coffee to occupy myself while Merlin answers.

“No, I have four siblings. I’m the fifth child. River, Miles, Rain, Ruin, and me.” I freeze in place. Fuck. How is this possible? What a small world. This is definitely a sign that I need to go and see what’s happening there.

“Are you okay, Dr. Bianchi?” Merlin asks, and I smile at him as I release a deep breath.

“Yes, I’m perfectly fine. I was just thinking. I have two siblings, and me being the oldest, I always try to protect them. I can see why your siblings are possibly leaving you in the dark regarding all the issues at hand. They probably want you to focus on school and have fun.” Merlin gives me a smile as he nods.

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“Yeah, I know. River is super protective of all of us. I know he means well, but I’m not a kid anymore.” He tells me as he blushes again.

We continue to chat about school and expectations in the lab while we finish our coffees. Tonight, I need to start working on a plan to go to Azalea Creek and find some answers.

Gio: Hey, friend, do you have time to chat tonight?

Penny: We really need to stop doing this.

Gio: Doing what?

Penny: Getting together only when you need a favor.

Gio: What? I would never.

Penny: Ha! Good to know your humor is back, at least.

Gio: I’m sorry. I know I need to be a better friend.

Penny: Do you want to come over?

Gio: I feel like eating out. Glenwood Avenue?

Penny: Heck, yes! See you at Maria’s at eight.

I hate not being there for Penny lately, but I'm thankful she understands. I can't think of anyone more capable of helping me come up with a plan to save Azalea Creek from evil investors.

"Hey ,stranger." Penny greets me as she kisses me on the cheek.

"Hey." I give her a hug and say, "I'm sorry I've been a crappy friend."

"I forgive you. I know I'd be a mess, too, if the love of my life vanished." I wince at her words—it's time I tell Penny everything.

"I'm sorry, you know I don't sugarcoat anything. And even though I didn't meet Ruin personally, I know what she meant for you." I smile at her, and we make our way inside Maria's. It's a Cuban restaurant, and the food is to die for.

After ordering our usual—mojitos andropa viejawith black beans, rice, and plantains—Penny gives me a pointed look. "Do we need to talk about business now?" I ask, and she chuckles.

"Yes, boss. It's best to get to it." I nod at her and thank the waiter who just brought our mojitos.

"So, I actually found Ruin months ago," I tell her and sip the sweet and minty drink.

"Shut up!" Penny shouts as she smacks me on the chest. I laugh at her dramatics but shake my head.

"When I went to Azalea Creek in the winter, I met with two of her siblings, and they told me she had been in an accident and was in a coma."

Penny inhales a sharp breath. "But when you texted me you just said a lady had

locked you in an office,” Penny says, and I feel like crap because I didn’t update her.

“Yeah, well, she went to get River, Ruin’s oldest brother.” Penny’s face is unreadable so I decide to continue talking. “I told them I was going to cover all of her medical bills; I wanted Ruin to have the best care possible. They agreed, and after a lot of back and forth, they let me see her in the hospital.”

Penny takes a sip of her drink, and I do the same. Reliving all those memories is as painful now as it was to live through them all those months ago.

“When I went to Ruin’s room at the hospital, she woke up in a panic. The horror on her face when she saw me standing next to her—it’s a memory that has been woven into my soul.” Penny grabs my hand and gives it a little squeeze, and I give her a grateful smile before continuing. “Her doctor advised against any encounters that could upset her and hinder her recovery, so I reluctantly agreed to back away. But when Rain, her sister, contacted me to let me know she was awake, she also told me Ruin had amnesia. After consulting with the doctor, it was advised to not overwhelm her with her past.”

I close my eyes, feeling the pain those words caused me and how living without her has been hell. “I agreed to leave her be, but you won’t believe what happened today.” Penny looks at me with those big, expressive eyes of hers.

“A kid joined my lab today. He’s a freshman and wants to gain some experience in the lab before the semester starts in the fall.” I look at Penny, and her whole focus is on me, so I continue. “He’ll be shadowing me to learn the basics of working in a science lab, and I invited him to have a coffee, you know, to get to know each other better.” Penny’s eyes turn mischievous, and I immediately know what she’s thinking.

“Stop it, you know what I mean.”

“I didn’t say a word,” she says, batting her eyelashes.

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“You didn’t have to.”

“Anyway, we started talking about his hometown and his family, and I don’t know... things were getting too coincidental, so when I asked him his siblings’ names, he said: River, Miles, Rain and Ruin.” Penny’s mouth is ajar.

“Exactly,” I tell her with a triumphant smile.

“Did you ask his last name? Is it the same as Ruin’s?”

“Damn, I forgot.”

“Dude, what kind of detective are you?” she says as she rolls her eyes.

“Not a very good one,” I answer as I get my phone out. “Luckily, Dr. Smith emailed me his contact info.” I open the mail app, and when I check Dr. Smith’s email, a huge smile stretches my lips.

“Yup, it’s MacAllister.”

“I mean, there’s definitely more families with the MacAllister last name, but the chances of them having a Ruin MacAllister are slim.” I nod in agreement as our food arrives.

Before continuing our talk, we both dive in. The plantains are sweet and crisp to perfection, the beans are full of flavor, and theropa vieja, a marinated shredded beef, melts in my mouth. It’s delicious.

“Okay, so what are you going to do with this information?” Penny asks as she calls the waiter for a second mojito. I shake my head and order water instead.

“Here’s the kicker. Merlin, that’s my student’s name, mentioned he wants to get a good job to help his family because they’ve been paying lots of medical bills lately, and they’re at risk of losing their orchard.”

“And you’re planning to go to their town and offer to pay their bills? I thought you had already done that.”

“Well, I was just thinking about going to her town and assessing the situation. Talk to Ruin, see how she’s feeling. I mean, it’s been six months since the accident. Maybe she doesn’t remember that she was terrified to see me back in January.” I shrug, suddenly feeling like my plan is the weakest in the history of getting a girl back.

“I agree. You need to speak with her in person, see what happened. But also, you need to be prepared for her to tell you to fuck off. What if she doesn’t have amnesia anymore, and for some reason, doesn’t want to see you?”

I’m not feeling great about my odds. My jaw clenches at the thought. There’s no way she can send me away—I’m still in love with her.

“Yeah, we’ll see,” is all I say.

“Ohhh, Gio Bianchi is ready to fight to get his girl back,” Penny sing-songs.

“Damn right, I am. I have never loved anyone the way I love her.” I close my eyes, thinking about everything I got to experience with Ruin. And how happy we were together.

“Well, you let me know how I can help. I’ll be ready for sidekick duty.” We clink our

glasses and toast to new opportunities and the power of friendship.

Gabo: Hey, is anyone available?

Vicente: Hey, bro. What's up?

Gabo: I'm still in Sweden. Just got word we can lift off after a terrible storm. But Bella is in Geneva. I was supposed to be there to attend a gala with her.

Vicente: Aww, she's mad at you because you chose work over her?

Gabo: Fuck, I don't know. But neither she nor her security team can be reached.

I'm at work and have decided to check my phone since I have some downtime before I need to continue the experiment I'm running. That's when I found a message thread with Vicente and Gabo. My blood leaves my head when I read what Gabo is saying—my sister is missing? Before I jump to conclusions, I send a text to the group.

Gio: What? What do you mean they can't be reached?

Gabo: Yeah, we can't find them.

How on fucking Earth did my sister go missing when she has two bodyguards with her 24/7? And who would take her? My mind starts racing with possibilities.

Vicente: I'm on my way.

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Gio: Me too.

Luca: Fuck you, Gabo. I told you to take care of her. I can't leave Karina alone; she's due any day now.

Luca: You all better keep me posted.

My sister, Isa, has been spending the summer in Italy with Gabo, our brother-in-law. And now she's missing. There's no way in hell I won't join the search to find her. Even though Gabo feels responsible for her and has mobilized his entire security team, I'll always feel responsible for my siblings.

My plan to get Ruin back will have to wait until we find Isa safe and sound.

Chapter 29

Gio Bianchi

Turns out someone from Luca's past had kidnapped Isa. Sometimes, I feel like my life is a telenovela. I mean, this guy, Max, even tried to blackmail Karina, Luca's wife, back when Luca first met her. Luca ended up unmasking him and buying his family's vineyard. Years later, the guy hadn't moved on and decided to take it out on Isa to hurt Luca.

The crazy thing was he knew about Ruin. I mean, I only told my family and close friends about her—about us. But how he knew about her is beyond me. Maybe he hired a PI and had the entire family under surveillance? He didn't have all the details

right, but the fact that he even knew about her makes my skin crawl at the mere thought of someone watching us. I guess it's time to get serious and hire a security detail. Now more than ever, since I'm all in on bringing Ruin back into my life.

What Max wasn't counting on was Gabo Godoy and how fiercely protective he was of my sister. They make a fantastic couple, and even in the short period of time they've been together, Gabo has made it abundantly clear how much he loves my sister and what he's capable of doing to protect her.

I ended up meeting with Gabo and Vicente in Geneva, where Max had taken Isa hostage. Gabo hired a private team to help free Isa—it was like something out of an action movie. Thankfully, we got Isa back safe and sound, and Interpol arrested Max. I suspect he'll be behind bars for a long time. I went back to Italy with them for the night in case Isa needed me. The big brother in me needed to make sure Isa was safe and taken care of. Gabo did that and so much more. I'm happy they got together this summer. Now, both of my siblings are in good, healthy relationships.

It's time for me to exhaust every single option to get my Ruin back, even if it means making her fall in love with me again.

"Dr. Smith," I greet my mentor as he enters the lab.

"I take it your sister is safe and sound?" I nod as I release a deep breath.

"Yes, she's shaken by the events, but she'll be okay. It's definitely a relief to know she's in good hands," I say as I think about how Gabo held Isa in his arms and how her face transformed with relief when she saw him.

"That's good! Well I'm glad to have you back. What do you have in mind for the semester?" Dr. Smith asks, and it's now or never.

“Dr. Smith, I’m so grateful for the opportunities you’ve given me. Coming to this country, to this university, has impacted my life in ways I never thought possible.” Dr. Smith sighs and takes a seat on my high lab chair.

“I knew this day was coming, you’re ready to fly solo. Aren't you?” I give him a small smile.

“It’s more than that, Dr. Smith. I need to find myself. I need to figure out what I want to do with my life before I can keep working.” He gives me a knowing smile as he nods.

“I don’t blame you, Gio. You’re not the typical scientist. There’s more to you than meets the eye.” Dr. Smith pats my back as he gets up from the chair. “Thank you for everything, Gio. Don’t be a stranger, and come visit us again.”

I give him a half-side hug and head toward HR to terminate my contract. After that, I’m going to student services to set up an endowment for Merlin MacAllister. I want him to focus on school and soccer, not on worrying about helping his family.

I’ve got that covered from here on out.

Driving the winding roads to Azalea Creek during summer is a completely different experience than it was last winter. The vegetation is green and lush, and the mountains honor their name, stretching in blue as far as the eye can see.

The first order of business is to get a hotel room. I don’t want to rent or buy a house until I have more clarity of what the future holds.

The town’s hotel sits neatly on the closest street to the highway. The building is well-kept and has a charm that can only come with the passing of time. “In the Clouds,” I read the name aloud before opening the door to enter. A small bell chimes as I step

inside, and I'm welcomed by the warm aroma of freshbread and coffee. Although I truly enjoy both things, I find it odd to encounter those scents in a hotel lobby. To the left is a cozy sitting area, and to the right, a coffee station. A pot of freshly brewed coffee sits next to a tray of bread and cookies—explaining the delicious smell.

“Hello, welcome. May I help you?” A lady walks from the back of the hotel. She looks like Ines, my nanny, and has a welcoming smile on her face.

“Yes, hi. I need to rent a room?” Ugh, I'm definitely not used to doing this in person. Why did I say it like a question?

“Yes, of course. What brings you to town?” the lady asks as she goes to her desk and takes a folder from one of her drawers. This is really old school.

“I'm visiting for a while, and I'd like to get more accustomed to the town and the surrounding area.” I smile at her, but her friendly demeanor immediately changes.

“Accustomed to what?” Fuck, that's right. I need to be careful about how I express myself here. If the way the people denied knowing Ruin back in January is any indication of how protective they are, I need to tread carefully.

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“I’m sorry, I’m not expressing myself clearly. I plan to apply to be a professor at the community college and would like to see if Azalea Creek is the place I want to call home.” I release a breath when I see her smile kindly again.

“That’s excellent, new blood to teach all the younglings in the area.” I nod with a smile, thankful my little white lie got me a place to stay.

“What’s your name, dear?” I extend my hand to introduce myself.

“Gio Bianchi, nice to meet you.” She holds my hand in both of hers.

“I’m Calista Ford, but everyone calls me Callie.” I give her a smile and try to retrieve my hand from hers, which makes her chuckle. I take out my credit card, and the moment she spots my black AmEx, her eyes bulge.

“Oh, my. I don’t think I’ve ever seen this kind of card before.” I blush and clear my throat.

“I have cash, too, if you prefer,” I offer.

“Oh, no, dear. I can’t wait to tell the gals I have a fancy young man staying in my hotel.” She winks at me as she takes a tablet from one of the drawers and adds my card info into her system.

“Here you go, Mr. Bianchi. I put you in room 105. Please let me know if there’s anything I can assist you with.” She winks at me as she gives me my card and points me toward a hall I assume will take me to my room. I thank her and head there to get

a shower and change; I want to be presentable in case I see Ruin in town. When I enter the room, I'm pleasantly surprised by the way it's decorated. There's a queen bed with what looks like a soft, breathable white comforter and at least ten neatly arranged pillows. A small table with a lamp and an office chair looks like the perfect place to set up my computer. A huge window offers a view of the garden on the side of the building. This is more like a house renovated to be a hotel—I'm really liking this homey vibe.

It's still nice and bright outside, even as the evening falls upon us. I decide to walk from the hotel to Main Street, where the MacAllister's diner is located. The Rustic Spoon's menu is full of comfort food goodness. I can't wait to try their hush puppies.

From the outside, it looks cozy and inviting. White trim windows and planters with red and purple flowers adorn every window. There's a big sign in one of the windows that reads, "Come in, get a bite, and take a peek at your future with a reading from Granny MacA." The sign has a drawing of an old lady holding a tarot card, looking like a hellion. I chuckle at the image. I don't think I know anyone who reads tarot, but Granny MacA looks like she's a hoot.

The moment I enter the diner, the aroma of pork BBQ and hush puppies hits me, and I'm in heaven.

"Hey, there. I'll be with you in one second." A voice that I know all too well says, and suddenly I feel weak. I hold onto the wall for support. Ruin works here? I follow her with my gaze as she disappears behind the kitchen door. I shake my head, not sure if that was really her or if my head is making her up. I thought she still had amnesia. What is she doing here?

She's wearing black yoga pants and a black T-shirt with the Rustic Spoon logo—nothing like she used to wear when we were together. When she returns from the kitchen, she's holding a big tray with plates and glasses filled with what looks like

tea and water. With a smile, she effortlessly delivers the food, and after placing the tray on a side table, she comes my way with a smile on her face.

I'm astonished. How can she be so casual? Is she really going to pretend we don't know each other? Or maybe she still has amnesia.

"Hello, I'm sorry for the wait. Table for one, or are you waiting on some friends?" Ruin says in an upbeat tone, her eyes on me as she waits for my answer. Which, of course, is stuck in my brain—because how is this real life?

"Are you okay?" she asks, her face transforming with worry lines. I shake my head again as I close my eyes. I need a moment. I knew I was going to see her on this trip, but nothing could have ever prepared me for her to treat me like a complete stranger. It hurts more than words can say.

"Yeah, I'm fine. I just need to sit down," I finally tell her.

"Of course. Please, follow me." She leads me to a table near the kitchen, there's a nice window by it. It looks secluded from the other tables. Maybe she wants to talk to me privately? A glimmer of hope starts blooming in my chest. After she places the menu on the table, she goes into the kitchen again, and I take a seat.

"Here, maybe some water will help you." I take the glass from her hand and nod my appreciation. Our fingers touch, and even though I feel goose bumps rising on the back of my neck, I can't look her in the eye. I still can't believe the way she's treating me. I take a big gulp of water, then another, trying to take a deep breath, but I can feel Ruin's gaze on me.

After a few uncomfortable beats, she clears her throat. "I'll be back in a few minutes to see if you're ready to order."

She disappears, and I don't look back to see where she went. I need to gather my thoughts before I can ask her what the hell is going on. I wonder who I should text—Vicente and Gabo, or Penny? Gabo is probably busy taking care of my sister. Vicente will likely be out and about in London. There's only one person who will reply to my text right away.

Gio: You won't believe what's going on.

Penny: Your student's sister is not your Ruin?

Gio: Something even more ludicrous.

Penny: Just say it, Gio, I don't do well with surprises. Or suspense.

Gio: So, I'm at this diner in Azalea Creek, and Ruin is my waitress, but she's acting like she doesn't know me.

Nothing, not even the three little dots appear on my screen. What the hell?

Gio: Penny?

Penny: OH SHIT, SHE STILL HAS AMNESIA THEN.

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Gio: That was exactly my reaction.

Penny: Have you tried to ask her what the fuck?

Gio: I haven't been able to, I can barely look at her. I'm literally speechless.

Penny: Do you want me to come to Azalea Creek?

Gio: I don't know, Pen. I mean, unless she took acting after she left Raleigh, she seems like she genuinely doesn't know me. So I need to see if I can finally talk to her and start asking about her accident. I just know it won't be tonight. I'll have to gain her trust again.

Penny: I know it might be hard, but the only way to find out what's going on is by asking her straight out.

Gio: Thanks for listening. I'll keep you posted.

I put my phone away just in time as Ruin steps up to me, a curious smile on her face. I can't stop avoiding her eyes anymore. When our gazes lock, I feel something click inside me—like the very first time I saw her in my teaching lab. This is definitely my Ruin, and it breaks my heart that she doesn't remember me.

“I'm sorry, do you mind if I take a seat for a second? I shouldn't be on my feet for long periods of time, but then I decided to work as a waitress.” She blows a piece of stray hair from her face, and it takes everything in me not to reach out and tuck it behind her ear.

“Are you alright? I apologize in advance, but why do you need to take breaks?” I ask her as I feel my hands start to sweat and my heart race with anticipation.

“Oh, it’s nothing. I just need to take it easy on my left ankle, that’s all.” She waves my concern off and stands with her pen and notepad, ready to take my order. I haven’t even checked the menu, but I’m not ready to stop talking to her.

“What would you recommend?”

She taps her pen on her lips as she thinks. “Well, I’m a little biased because I love everything my sister cooks, but if you have a big appetite, I’d recommend the Big Ole Platter. It has a little bit of everything from our menu.”

I look at her intently, recognizing every single freckle on her beautiful face—the soft curve of her eyebrows, the gold specks in her green eyes. She moves closer to me, and I stay there, immobile. She wipes a tear from my cheek—I hadn’t even realized I was crying—and that brings me out of my stupor. I take her hand in mine, and we stay frozen for a moment in time. I place a kiss on her hand, and she jerks back.

“I’m sorry,” we both say at the same time, chuckling in unison. I nod at her to go first, and she smiles as heat rises up her neck.

“I’m so sorry, I never do that—wipe tears off strangers. I don’t know what came over me.” She lowers her gaze, and I’m thankful for it because her words cut through my chest like a dagger.

“It’s alright. Actually, I think I’m going to pass on dinner tonight,” I say as I take my wallet out. She rushes to wave her hand, trying to prevent me from paying.

“It’s okay, truly. I’ll come back soon to try that platter,” I assure her with a smile as I leave a couple of bills on the table and head outside. I don’t want her to see me break

down.

Chapter 30

Ruin MacAllister

The moment that handsome guy leaves, I rush to the kitchen to tell Rain about him.

“Rain, come quick.” She takes a pan off the heat and washes her hands, drying them as she approaches me.

“What is it?” she asks as I pull her toward the side door that leads to the alley. By the time we get to Main Street, the handsome guy is turning the opposite direction.

“There. Do you see that guy?” I ask her, excitement rushing through my body.

“What about him?” she asks with a frown.

“Well, he came to the diner just now. I’ve never seen him in my life, but I swear Rain, he’s the most handsome guy I’ve ever seen. And his accent?” I gesture with a chef’s kiss. “I’m not sure where he’s from, but oh my gosh, Rain. He had me all hot and bothered.”

Rain snorts as she rolls her eyes at me. “You’re crazy”

“No Rain, I’m telling you. There’s something about this guy. We even had the weirdest encounter.” Rain stops walking and folds her arms across her chest, looking at me in the eye.

“Nothing bad, stop it.” Now, it’s my turn to roll my eyes. “He was just looking at me like he knew me, and after staring at me for a bit, he started crying. I think it was

involuntary because he didn't realize he was doing it until I wiped a tear off his cheek." Rain widens her eyes in horror, and I bark out a laugh. "Then I better not tell you that he kissed my hand after I did that."

"Do we need to call the sheriff?" Rain asks, going full protective mode.

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“No, I’m telling you it seemed like he knows me.” Rain stays quiet for a second.

“What did he look like?” she finally says.

“Why?” Is this guy someone I know?”

“I’m just curious.” Rain won’t budge, but I’m tired of playing by the rules and doing everything the doctors say.

“Rain, tell me. Did I know this guy?”

“If you don’t tell me what he looks like, how am I supposed to know?” My heart races at the possibility of him being someone I know.

“So, if I tell you, would you let me know if he’s someone I know?” I ask, desperate to get answers.

“Ruin, you know I can’t do that,” she says, frustration evident in her tone.

I release a deep breath. “It’s okay. It’s not like I would remember who he is if you told me anyway,” I say as I make my way inside, my eyes full of unshed tears.

“Ruin, wait.” Rain holds me by my shoulder, and I turn to face her as I wipe my tears away.

“You know what the doctor said—we can’t tell you anything about your past.” Rain repeats what I’ve heard from every single member of my family for the past six

months, every time I ask about my time in Raleigh or what life was like after Daddy passed. And I understand they think they're helping me, but I'm going crazy not knowing who I am or what I did for the past four years of my life. I've had enough.

"It's okay, Rain. We need to head back anyway. There are customers to attend to," I say, stepping inside and taking a few deep breaths before returning to the diner.

I've been so focused on regaining my mobility that I've neglected my memories. Once I get home and take a shower, I power up my laptop. It's new, since my old one, along with my phone and apparently most of my belongings, were lost in the accident.

I didn't have many social media accounts, and every time I search my name, not much comes up. It tracks with who I am—a quiet person who mostly keeps to herself. How I wish I was different and had lots of social media posts to look at and try to remember. I wish I had a picture of the handsome guy I saw today, or at least his name so that I could look him up. I wonder if he's staying in town or if he was just a passerby.

Thinking back to my conversation with Rain, I go to the university's website. Maybe there's a picture of him? I check the entire environmental science department page but had no luck. There are only pictures of the faculty, and he's not one of them. Maybe he was a student, and we were friends?

I'll have to wait and see if he comes back like he said he would so I can ask him.

"Can I come in?" Rain asks as she opens my bedroom door. I smile at her, and she takes a seat next to me. "I'm sorry about earlier today," she says as she rests her head on my shoulder.

"I'm sorry, too. It's just been six months, and I still don't remember anything. I want

to feel like I'm myself, you know?"

"I know. I'm so sorry you're going through this." We stay quiet for a while, then she takes my computer from my lap.

"Here, let's see what Dr. Google says about tips to get your memories back." I chuckle at her because I've done that same search many times before.

"Wow, this is so helpful," Rain says with a snort. "Not."

"Read an old diary, look at old pictures, listen to music." Yup, I've tried all those. I heave a sigh.

"Well, I don't think your taste in music has changed much. What do you want to put on?" she asks as she places my laptop on my desk and takes her phone out of her pocket.

"Hmmm, I don't think I've listened to Turner Scott in a while." Rain freezes for a moment, then she nods and looks up his music on the app. The first notes of my favorite song fill the room, and I grab Cobalt, settling into my bed. For some reason, hugging Cobalt while asleep brings me comfort. I wish I knew how I got him. I inhale a deep breath as I fall asleep, and a vision of me dancing on the beach to this tune comes to mind.

What a beautiful dream.

Chapter 31

Gio Bianchi

There's a ring in my bedroom, but I have no clue where it's coming from. I've looked

everywhere, but it just won't stop. It stops, then starts again. Is there a landline around here? When I open the bottom drawer on the nightstand, I see it—an old-school phone.

“Hello?” I say, grateful the intrusive noise is gone.

“Mr. Bianchi, good morning. You have a guest in the lobby.”

What? Could it be Ruin?

“Good morning, I’ll be right over. Thank you,” I say as I hang up and quickly throw on a fresh T-shirt and my jeans from last night. I wish I had had more time to get ready—if it’s Ruin, I don’t want her to see me like I just woke up.

When I enter the lobby, a beautiful redhead is waiting for me. She’s wearing tight jeans and a Rustic Spoon T-shirt like the one Ruin was wearing last night, but it fits her much tighter. She has a full sleeve of tattoos on her right arm, and her eyes are gray. It's raining.

“Oh, wow. It’s really you,” she says in a stern tone.

“Hmmm, I’m sorry. I don’t follow,” I tell her in a hushed tone; I can feel Miss Callie looking at us with rapt attention.

“Would you like to take a walk with me? I promise I’m not a creep.” I nod and tell her I’ll be right back—I just need to put on some shoes.

As I make my way to my room. Rain says, “And don’t get any ideas in your head, Callie. I know how the grapevine works in this town, and I’m not interested in Mr. Bianchi in that way.” I can only imagine the face Miss Callie gave her because I can hear her chuckle all the way to my room.

“Okay, so what’s going on?” I ask once we’re out of the hotel, skipping the pleasantries. She blushes and extends her hand, and I shake it.

“That’s exactly my question, Gio. What’s going on? What are you doing here?” As nice as I am, I’m ready to tell Rain what’s what.

“I came for Ruin. It’s been six months.” I shrug like it’s obvious why I’m here. She puts her hands in her pockets and raises her shoulders to her head as she inhales a deep breath.

“First of all, yes I know it’s been six months, but we had a deal. We can’t overwhelm Ruin with her memories.” She gives me a pointed look, but I’m not going away, not this time.

“I’m not here to overwhelm her, I just want her to get to know me again.” Rain’s eyebrows raise almost comically, but I refrain from laughing. I don’t want her to tear me a new one.

“Yeah, that’s what I’m worried about. She mentioned meeting a handsome guy yesterday, and I knew it had to be you.” Rain shoots me a glare, and I trip over my own foot.

Ruin said she met a handsome guy?

“So, I didn’t imagine it. She truly didn’t recognize me; she still has amnesia,” I say more to myself, but Rain nods.

“Yes, Gio. I don’t want her to stall in her recovery process. You need to give her space,” Rain says solemnly, and I feel like I’ve been stabbed. I can’t give Ruin more space without being near her.

“I’m sorry, Rain, but that won’t be possible. I promise I won’t mention anything about our past, but I want another shot. I’ll start slow, I won’t push for anything, but I want to be in her life again. If I have to make her fall in love with me again, so be it.”

Rain doesn't say or do anything. She simply stares at me.

"Okay, I know how much you love her, and I know she loved you. I'll allow you back into her life, but Gio, I'll be watching," she tells me, her face void of emotion, and I nod.

"Deal." I reply, though I would do it regardless of whether Rain approved or not.

"You came back." Ruin greets me as I enter the Rustic Spoon. Her smile illuminates her face and is contagious. I'm smiling big at her; there's nothing I wouldn't do to see that smile every single day.

"I told you I would." She leads me to the same table as yesterday.

"Here's the menu. Can I get you some water in the meantime?" I nod as she makes her way to check on other tables. I'm not sure how long it would take me to get used to the fact that I know how she tastes, and she doesn't even remember me, but I need to play my part.

When she returns, she has a glass of water on her tray for me. Even though all I want to do is pull her close, have her sit beside me, and tell me everything I've missed in these past six months, I can't. Instead, I thank her and order the platter she recommended yesterday.

She gives me a pained smile, and I frown. "Oh, it's nothing. Some days my ankle hurts more than others, I'll be fine," she says casually as she goes into the kitchen, but I can't help noticing her limping. My blood boils at the fact that she's working full shifts on her feet while still recovering. I need to find a way to make her share the details of her accident so I can offer my help.

"Here you go. I hope you enjoy it. Let me know if there's anything else I can get for

you.” She brings me a huge plate of food, and my stomach immediately growls. I close my eyes as I feel the heat rising through my face. Her chuckle does something to my insides, but I know we’re not there yet.

“Thank you, this looks delicious,” I say. She stays in front of me, hugging the tray close to her chest, her eyes fixed on mine as she bites her bottom lip.

I gaze at her. She’s so beautiful it hurts. God, how was I able to live without her?

“Would you like to sit down?” I ask her, and she looks around the diner. She smiles and then sits.

“There’s not too many people here. I think it’ll be okay if I take a five-minute break,” she says, her eyes never leaving mine. “This might sound awkward, and I apologize in advance, but I need to ask you something,” Ruin says, exhaling slowly.

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I can never say no to her, but I know I can't lie. I just hope she isn't about to ask something about the past. I take a deep breath and take a sip of water to steady my nerves.

"Yeah, sure," I say, trying to sound nonchalant. She exhales again, a nervous chuckle escaping her pretty lips.

"Okay, here goes nothing." She squares her shoulders, and I offer her a reassuring smile.

"Is there any chance we've met before?" My heart skips a beat at her question, but I try to mask it quickly with a cough.

"I'm sure if we had met, I'd remember you," I say, watching her shoulders sag. I just hope if she ever gets her memories back, she'll forgive me. She needs to know this has been as hard for me as it's been for her. Life without her isn't living.

"Thank you for going along with my question. I just felt I had to ask." She shakes her head, as if clearing her thoughts, and when her gaze meets mine again, I smile at her—careful not to say anything that might force me to lie or evade the truth.

I take a forkful of eggs and biscuits covered in gravy. Goodness, this is delicious. I close my eyes and lift my head, savoring my food.

"That good, huh?" Ruin asks, and I nod.

"So good. You weren't lying," I tell her as I grab more food.

“Yeah, Rain is an excellent cook,” she tells me with a smile.

“Is she your sister?” I ask, showing my interest in getting to know her.

“Yeah, she’s actually my twin.”

“How was growing up with a twin?”

“She’s my best friend. You know, I love all my siblings, but my relationship with Rain is special.” I nod at her while I keep eating. This is so damn good, I can’t stop. No wonder why every time Ruin cooked for us, it was so good. They both must have a gift.

“Yeah, I can see that. I’m actually the oldest of three, and even though I love them, I feel responsible for them more often than not,” I say, and she gives me a knowing smile.

“Oh, I can totally see that. That would be my brother, River—always taking care of others. You have that same aura about you,” she says, looking at me intently. A second later, her eyes widen. “Oh no, that came out the wrong way! I mean, I don’t think about my brother in that way.” She quickly covers her face with her hands, and I chuckle.

“Hey, you didn’t say anything wrong,” I tell her as I sip my water.

“But now you know I think you’re cute. Ugh.” I laugh, and she groans.

“I think you’re cute too, Ruin. We’re even.” I reach across the table and trace my fingers over her forearm. Goose bumps rise on her skin, and she removes her hands from her face.

“Thank you for not letting me drown.” She smiles at me as she gets up and checks on her customers. I promised I wouldn’t overwhelm her, so after paying the check, I give her a wave and return to the hotel.

Today went great—it felt like how things were in the beginning. I’ll definitely be back tomorrow for more, and for as long as it takes.

I heard back from the community college, and they’re interested in meeting me to see what I have to say. I might not be a wizard with numbers like Penny, but I know I have enough to offer them, and not just financially.

“Dr. Bianchi, what a pleasure. Thank you for reaching out.” The community college president greets me in his office.

“Mr. Bates, thank you for making time in your schedule to see me.”

“What can I do for you? I’ll be honest, I’m curious why someone with your credentials is interested in working at a small community college like ours.”

“This is where my life is now, and I would like to help the community in any way I can. I plan on developing a curriculum for an environmental program and fund it. I believe it’s of utter importance to have such a program in the area, to help the mountains and their people to make the best use of the resources around us.”

Mr. Bates raises his eyebrows. “That’s very altruistic, Dr. Bianchi. I cannot begin to express my gratitude. If you have a written proposal, I’d like to share it with the board of trustees, and we could go from there.”

I smile big. I feel like I’ve finally found my calling.

“Absolutely. I’ll have my team send you all the necessary documents.”

“This is amazing. Thank you so much, Dr. Bianchi, for thinking about our school. This is going to change so many lives for the better.” Mr. Bates gets a little teary-eyed, and I can’t help it—I feel his emotion washing over me, too.

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“My pleasure. I’ve been looking for ways to do the most good, and this is certainly one of them.” We shake hands and after some small talk about the weather and the upcoming festivities in the area, we say goodbye.

I leave the college campus with an extra pep in my step. I need to call Penny and let her know we need to send an official proposal to get the ball rolling.

“Hello there, how are you today?” Ruin greets me, and I follow her to what’s quickly becoming my usual spot at the diner. She looks extra tired today, with dark circles under her eyes. I wonder what happened?

“I’m excellent. How about you?” I ask, hoping she’ll tell me, but tonight, the diner is particularly busy.

“Hanging in there. It’s been a long day.” That’s all she says before leaving me at my table with a menu. This time, I decide to actually look at it rather than ask her for suggestions—I don’t want to add to her plate if she’s feeling tired.

“I think I’ll have the chicken and waffles tonight.” She smiles at me and writes down my order in her little notepad. “Do you think you can take your break with me again tonight?”

She bites her bottom lip, assessing the diner. “Yeah, I need a break. I’ll be back with your food in a jiffy.” She heads toward the kitchen, but she’s limping. Fuck, I hate feeling so useless right now. I’d wait tables for her, but I know she’d have lots of questions about my interest in taking care of her when we’ve only known each other for two days.

She comes back with my food in no time, holding a drink for herself—a milkshake. It looks so decadent that I can't help but ask, "What flavor is it?" I point to it with my fork.

"Oh, it's Fruit of the Forest," she says, taking a sip before moving the large glass toward me, gesturing for me to try it. I give her a grateful smile and take a sip. A low moan escapes me after the intense flavor of raspberries, strawberries, and a hint of rhubarb hit my taste buds.

"This is delicious," I tell her as I push the milkshake back to her, and she giggles.

"Why, thank you. I'm actually the one in charge of making the milkshakes," she says proudly.

"I'll keep that in mind. I'm definitely ordering one tomorrow." She smiles over her milkshake while I eat a bite of my food.

"I hope I'm not intruding, but I was wondering if you're okay? I couldn't help but notice you're limping a little."

Ruin winces, and I panic. Fuck, I'm going too fast for her.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have asked," I hurry to say, but she waves me off.

"No, no. It's okay. Actually, it feels nice to talk about this with someone who isn't related to me." She drinks from her milkshake and looks me straight in the eye. "I had an accident back in the winter." She pauses, and I stop eating, giving her my undivided attention. "I can't remember why, but apparently I was coming back home from Spruce Falls, and my car brakes stopped working. I lost control, and the road was slippery. As I was sliding side to side, a truck came on the opposite side of the road, and I went down the mountain."

That must have been so scary. No wonder she lost her memories. I wipe a stray tear off her face, and she smiles at me.

“Anyway, I got several broken bones and had to do a lot of physical therapy to walk again, but I still need more therapy. My insurance decided I’ve had enough, so I don’t get it as often as I need anymore. But I had a session, and that’s why you see me limping. I’m just too tired.” She shrugs like it’s not a big deal, but I can’t believe she has to deal with this.

“Is there a way to hire more waiters? At least on the days you have therapy, so you can get some proper rest?” I ask, the wheels in my brain already turning, formulating a plan to get Ruin everything she needs.

“I don’t think that’s feasible at the moment. My family still has a big debt from when my dad passed, and I don’t want to add to their plate. She lowers her gaze, and I reach for her hand. She squeezes my hand and tries to smile, but it comes off as crooked. “I know we don’t know each other, but I feel at ease when you’re around. Thank you for listening.” She gives my hand one more squeeze and gets up to go on with her job.

I need to speak with the hospital again. The way they phrased it to me when they told me Ruin was out of the hospital made it sound like she didn’t need anything else. I’m fucking livid at the thought I could have been helping her with physical therapy and didn’t do it.

It’s been nearly a month since I moved to Azalea Creek, and I’ve come to the Rustic Spoon every single night for dinner. I thought about coming for breakfast and staying all day to work from here, but I’d be distracted all day, and Ruin likely wouldn’t appreciate being stalked.

“Evening, Gio. What do you feel like tonight?” Ruin asks me as she leads me to my

table.

“Why don’t you choose for me this time?” I ask with a smile, and right on cue, she blushes. She nods and makes her way to the kitchen.

It’s Wednesday, and it’s slower than usual. Maybe the summer crowds are starting to thin out as we get closer to the school season.

I’ve been working on the curriculum for the environmental program at the community college. As expected, the board of trustees is overjoyed with my generous donation and is working tirelessly with the town of Spruce Falls to get approval for the addition of a new building on campus.

When Ruin comes back with a tray full to the brim, I frown, and she laughs.

“It’s a slow day, and since you asked me to choose your food, I thought you wouldn’t mind if I joined you.”

“I love when you have time to join me.” I wink at her, and her blush deepens.

“You two should join me after dinner,” Ruin’s grandma tells us from a table across the diner, and I smile at her. Granny is a local celebrity. I’ve come to know her in the past couple of weeks. She likes to go to the diner every day and read the tarot to whoever would listen. The townspeople and tourists alike come for food and stay for the laughs. Some people say she’s pretty accurate, and others just shake their heads in amusement.

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“Granny, I don’t think Gio here has time for your silly game,” Ruin tells her grandma as she pops a fry into her mouth.

“Actually, I’d love to learn what’s in my future,” I say as I give Ruin a mischievous smile. She laughs and shakes her head.

“Oh, you don’t know what you just agreed to,” Ruin warns with glee in her voice.

As promised, once we’re done with our dinner, I join Granny at her table. Ruin excuses herself to help her sister in the kitchen. Granny has a small tablecloth with zodiac symbols, a crystal ball with electricity inside, and a few gemstones. She has paid a lot of attention to all the little details. As she looks at me, she shuffles a deck of cards.

“I see my granddaughter didn’t want to join us.” I smile and shrug, not really sure what to say. “It’s okay, I wanted to speak with you alone, anyway. You look at her like a man in love.” I inhale a deep breath as my jaw clenches. I’m not sure how much I can share with Granny. “It’s okay, dear. I won’t tell Ruin.” She pats my hand, and I exhale.

“Thank you,” I tell her as I prepare to open my heart. “Ruin and I were together before her accident.” Granny holds my hand and gives me a kind smile, all playfulness is gone. “When I came to Azalea Creek in the winter, River and Rain told me to stayaway, but I just couldn’t do it any longer.” My voice breaks, and my eyes fill with unshed tears. Granny’s eyes mirror mine.

“But now that you found her, I’m here to tell you that she’s worth waiting for. Things

are going according to plan. You just have to be patient,” she says, taking a card from her deck. The card reads *Worth Waiting For*, with a picture of a couple hugging each other. I look at it, confused.

“I thought you read tarot?”

“I do, but I read the angels cards to my family.” She gives me a knowing smile, and I nod.

“Thank you so much, Granny. What do I owe you?”

She waves me off. “You’ve already paid. We haven’t seen Ruin smile this much since before the accident. You just keep coming and making her happy, alright?”

I nod at her with a smile as I get up. “That’s the plan.”

She extends her arms, and I lean down for a hug.

“Okay, Granny. That’s enough. I’m sure Gio has things to do,” Ruin says as she steps out of the kitchen, and we all laugh.

Chapter 32

Ruin MacAllister

Not sure how this happened, but I finally feel like things are looking up. Two weeks ago, the physical therapist said insurance had approved more sessions, so now I have three per week. Even though my ankle and shoulder hurt afterward, I can tell I’m gaining more mobility. I also get those days off from work since Rain was able to hire two more waiters. Again, I’m not sure how, but she says we can afford it.

Then there's Gio. He's been coming to the diner every single night, and I don't know why, but I feel drawn to him—talking with him is easy. He listens, he doesn't ask more than I want to say, and he puts a smile on my face every single time. At first, I was a little worried. Talking with him felt so natural that I wondered if maybe something was wrong with me. But then, as I got to know him, he's just a genuinely nice guy. He works at the community college but decided to live in Azalea Creek.

“Raindrop!” I shout as I walk into the diner's kitchen. We're closing in half an hour, so the kitchen is officially shut down.

“What's going on?” Rain turns to look at me, and her face transforms the moment she sees me.

“You won't believe it,” I tell her, and she grins wide, just like me. “Gio, the guy who has been coming every night?”

“You mean the guy who has the hots for you? What about him?” I roll my eyes at her but can't help but smile at her description of Gio.

“Yeah, him. He just asked me out.” I squeal in excitement, and Rain joins me.

“Finally,” she says, and I frown.

“What do you mean?”

“Ruin, the guy has been coming for dinner every single night for a month, it's clearly not for the food.” I frown deeper.

“Hey, you're an excellent cook. He told me so.” Rain rolls her eyes.

“Yeah, but that's beside the point. He comes to see you, to spend time with you.”

“How do you know that?” Rain’s shoulders sag at my question.

“I love you, but I can’t believe how obtuse you are sometimes. Have you ever seen me sitting down with him or having dinner with him? No. He hasn’t asked for me to compliment me about my cooking skills. He asks you if you want to join him, not me, not any of the other waiters. You.” I feel my face burning, but it’s true. He never asks for anyone but me.

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“You’re right. And as excited as I am about going out with him, I wonder if maybe I was seeing someone before the accident. What if I’m cheating on someone by going out with Gio?” I say quietly. I’d hate to hurt someone’s feelings like that.

Rain’s face turns serious. “If you were dating someone, don’t you think they would have been here since you woke from the coma? I think you should forget about the past and enjoy the present.” A bolt of electricity runs through me as I imagine going out with Gio.

“Where is he taking you?” Rain asks, and I feel butterflies take flight in my belly just at the thought of spending time alone with him.

“He only said we needed the entire day, and to wear something warm,” I tell her, and Rain wiggles her eyebrows at me. “Don’t look at me like that. I don’t think I’m ready for more than a kiss.”

She hugs me as she speaks again, “I think that man is in no rush. He only wants to spend time with you.” I wonder how she is so sure about it, but I don’t ask. I just enjoy having my sister being my number-one cheerleader.

“So, Ruin has a date,” Rain shares with the family at breakfast the next morning, and my eyes shoot daggers at her.

“Is that so? Who’s the guy, and when can I talk to him?” River says, and Miles raises his hand.

“I’ll go with you to speak with him, Riv. We need to make sure he knows he can’t

mess with Ruin.” Miles cracks his knuckles, and I roll my eyes.

“You guys know I’m twenty-four, right?”

“We know, darling. But is it smart to go out with someone?” Mama asks

“What do you mean? It’s not like I’m mentally ill, Mama,” I say in a defensive tone, and Mama sighs.

“We just want to make sure you’re being safe, Ruru. We just don’t want you to get hurt,” Miles says in a serious tone. I know they mean well, but I’m tired of being cocooned under their wing. Plus, Gio is the nicest guy I’ve ever met.

“She’ll be fine. Rain and I can vouch for the guy. He’s a regular at the diner.” Granny speaks up, and everyone turns to look at her.

“How come I’ve never seen him?” Mama asks, a smile appearing on her face.

“He comes for dinner every night, Mama. You’re long gone by then.”

“I’d feel better if I had a chance to talk to him. Where does he work?” River says, and I know he’s not going to let this go easily.

“He works at the community college. He’s working on developing a new curriculum.” I share what Gio told me the other day, pride filling my chest.

“Well, at least he sounds smart. He couldn’t be that bad, Riv,” Miles says with a shrug as he takes a bite of his breakfast. River releases a deep breath.

“Fine, but I still want to meet him at some point,” River says as he continues to eat. I shoot a pointed look at Rain, and she just shrugs.

“What? You can’t blame them for looking after you. And I’m just so excited you’re going out, Ruru,” she says in a more playful tone. I can’t help but feel giddy about it, too.

Gio asked if it was okay to pick me up at home. Even though I wanted to avoid the awkwardness of him meeting my brothers, I said yes because it’s better to get that out of the way. He’s here at ten in the morning, on the dot, and when I open the door, he has three beautiful flower bouquets in hand.

“Good morning,” he says with a bright smile.

“Morning, Gio,” I tell him as I gesture for him to come inside.

“These are for you.” He gives me the largest bouquet of the three, a stunning mix of daisies, sunflowers, roses, chrysanthemums, magnolias, and mums.

“It’s a sunset bouquet. It reminded me of your hair,” Gio says as I take in all the gorgeous shades of orange and red.

“It’s beautiful, thank you.” I raise onto my tiptoes and give him a kiss on the cheek. I immediately regret it as my ankle screams in pain. Someone clears their throat behind me, and I know my brothers are here.

“You must be Gio,” River says as he extends his hand.

“I am. Nice to meet you,” Gio says, and River shakes his hand but doesn’t tell him his name. A silent conversation passes between them, but I don’t think too hard about it; I know River is just measuring Gio up.

“This is my brother River, and this is Miles.” Gio gives me a grateful smile as he removes his hand from River’s and shakes Miles’ hand.

“Nice to meet you both,” Gio says, and an awkward silence falls upon us.

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“Anyway, these are for your mom and Granny.” He passes me both bouquets, and I give him an appreciative smile. I make my way to the kitchen to put the flowers in vases, but as I enter, I can’t help but chuckle. Mama and Granny are by the door, eavesdropping.

“I thought you wanted to meet him, Mama,” I whisper, and she shakes her head.

“I didn’t want to scare him away with all the attention. I’ll meet him when he drops you off later today.”

I make quick work of putting the flowers in water and join Mama and Granny, just in time to hear Gio say, “I know you don’t know me, but my intentions with Ruin are pure. She has told me about her accident, and I’ll let her set the pace—I’m not in a rush. All I want is a chance with her.”

Oh, this man—how can he be so amazing?

“She told you?” River asks.

“That’s good, Riv. It means she trusts him,” Miles says next.

“Listen, I have a younger sister. I’d give my life to protect hers. There’s no way I would hurt Ruin.” There’s a silent pause, and I look at Granny and Mama. They whisper for me to go save Gio. I nod, and after checking myself in the mirror one last time, I head back to the foyer.

“Have fun you two. We’ll have to go out for a drink one of these days,” River says as

he shakes Gio's hand again. Gio nods and shakes Miles' hand, too. He then places his hand on the low of my back and guides me to the door.

Once we're in his car, he starts driving and glances my way.

"You look stunning, Ruin. I'm sorry I didn't say it earlier."

I bite my lip as I smile. I wish I could remember if I was flirty with guys before the accident or not. But the way Gio makes me feel, I want to jump him and let him kiss me senseless.

"You look pretty dapper, too." He gives me a wink, and I melt inside.

"So you told me to dress warm, but it's not officially fall yet. I'm a little confused." He chuckles at my question and reaches for my hand. His warm hand engulfs mine, and I feel safe and protected.

"Well, we're going a little high today." I frown, and he chuckles. "We're riding a hot air balloon."

I open my eyes wide and squeal in excitement.

"Not that I remember everything, but I think this is the coolest date someone has ever taken me to," I tell him honestly. A pang of sadness hits my chest. It's not fair to Gio that I'm still obsessed with remembering my past when he treats me like I hang the moon.

"I know you really want to get your memories back. Heck, if I were in your shoes, I'd feel frustrated, too, but I'm glad I'm the one you get to make new memories with." His words settle in my chest, and the warm, fuzzy feelings bloom again.

“You’re right. I need to live in the present. And I’m thankful I’m here with you.” I squeeze his hand, and he squeezes mine back.

The rest of the drive passes in comfortable silence as Gio takes us to the fairgrounds, one of the few flat areas in town. A crew is already waiting for us. Gio helps me out of the car, and my jaw drops at the sight: a huge hot air balloon is being prepared for takeoff. The basket is large enough to fit four people, and from what I can see, it’s stocked with blankets and a picnic basket.

“Gio, I’m in awe. This is simply amazing. Thank you,” I say, hugging him hard. As soon as his arms wrap around me, I inhale deeply, and my senses are hit with the perfect mix of cinnamon spice and him.

“You’re welcome. Just wait until you see the views from up top.” He kisses the top of my head, and we make our way to meet the crew. After a crash course on things to do and not to do while in the air, it’s time to board. Even though I’m excited, I’m a little nervous, too.

“It’s okay, sweetheart. I wouldn’t put you in danger. These people are professionals, and there’s a team waiting for us at the vineyard we’re going to.” Gio gives me a reassuring smile, and I nod at him. As the balloon is released from the safety sticks, we start going up, and I hug Gio.

“I’m sorry. I just really want to hug you.” I can feel his chest vibrate with laughter.

“You won’t hear me complaining.” I hold him closer, and he squeezes me tight. I love this feeling of being surrounded by him.

Once we’ve gained enough height, the pilot tells us it’ll be smooth sailing for about thirty minutes until we start our descent. I exhale slowly and gently untangle myself from Gio. Placing my hands on the rail, I take in the view: an endless green tapestry,

with various shapes and textures forming the lush canopy of the Blue Ridge mountains.

“This is breathtaking,” I say quietly as I enjoy being here with this amazing man.

“It truly is,” Gio says ,and when I look at him, his eyes are on me.

We chat about his project at the community college, and I tell him about my progress in therapy. The time goes by way too fast, and before I know it, we’re landing in a gorgeous vineyard. The main house looks like an Italian villa, and I can’t believe he took me here.

“Did you know I love Italy?”

He shakes his head.

“Well, I’ve always wanted to visit,” I tell him as we make our way to the villa.

“Maybe one day we’ll go,” he says nonchalantly, but my heart latches onto his words. I hope so, too.

“Welcome to Villa Tuscany,” a girl, probably around my age, greets us as we enter the main floor of the villa.

“You must be Ruin and Gio. What a pleasure to have you here today.” She shakes our hands as she leads us to a table with six wine bottles lined up alongside tasting glasses. “My name is Aria, and I’ll be your wine tour guide today.”

She beams at us, and I smile back. I don’t see anyone else around. Did Gio plan this to be an exclusive tasting? How much does this cost?

One by one, we taste the wines produced in the vineyard. Each has its own subtle notes and unique production time.

“I really like this Bella Misto,” I tell Aria as I finish my second glass of the delicious wine.

“That’s actually our best seller. The perfect blend of fruity and mineral notes makes it the ideal wine to go with any meal,” she replies.

I reach for another refill, but Gio intervenes. “Easy, sweetheart,” he says, and I give

him a sheepish look.

“Why don’t we grab a bottle of Bella Misto for our lunch? Then we can head back home.” I smile at his idea, and Aria opens a bottle for us. Gio grabs it, along with two wine glasses in one hand, and takes my hand with his free one.

“Where are we having lunch?” I ask, confused. I thought we would eat inside the tasting room.

“It’s a beautiful, sunny day. I thought you’d like to eat in their gazebo.” Gio points to a white gazebo that sits atop a hill, surrounded by a wildflower garden. Inside, a table and two chairs are already set for lunch.

“You are so thoughtful,” I tell him as I grab his arm and pull him closer to me. “Thank you so much for taking such good care of me.”

He kisses my hair, and I feel the butterflies in my belly again.

“You’re welcome. I thought about laying out a blanket for a picnic, but then it dawned on me that it wouldn’t be the smartest idea to put too much weight on your ankle as you get up from the blanket.”

He truly takes care of me. Butterflies take flight in my stomach as I get lost in the thought—how is it possible that I’m having lunch in such a beautiful setting after a hot air balloon ride with the most handsome, smart, and all-around amazing man I’ve ever met in my life? How is this real? Maybe after the hardest moment of my life, the universe has decided to give me a reprieve and sent this angel my way.

He pours our wine, and we enjoy a spread of Italian treats—everything from pasta with meatballs, to lasagna and even gelato. It’s a feast.

“Do you think we can walk around the vines before we head home?” I know he’s asking if my ankle can handle it. I had therapy yesterday, and even though I’m a little sore, I don’t want this date to end.

“I would love that.” He gives me a big smile, and we head toward the rows of vines at the bottom of the hill. There’s a nice breeze making them sway. The birds are chirping, and the smell of dirt and fragrant flowers mix in the air. It’s the perfect day, and I’m not sure how I got this lucky. Being here with a man who doesn’t care about my flaws or shortcomings, who wants to spend time with me, and who lets me be me. I always thought this only happened in the movies, but I guess I’m living my own.

“Where did you go?” Gio asks, bringing me back to the moment.

“I was just thinking how much I’m enjoying being here with you—and how lucky I feel to have met you.”

His eyes soften as he gently places my hand in the crook of his elbow.

“I have no words to describe how happy I am to be here with you, Ruin. I feel like I’ve been looking for you my whole life.” His eyes fill with emotion, and I smile at him because I feel the exact same thing.

He wipes the moisture off my face and leans down, brushing a featherlike kiss on my lips. I feel electricity going from his lips to mine, and I want more. Without thinking about whether I’m going too fast or being reckless, I press my hands against his chest and grab his sweater, pulling him closer to me. Gio groans as I feel his dick pressing against my middle. The kiss grows passionate, almost desperate. I can’t get enough of him.

Slowly, Gio starts to break the kiss, and I whimper. He chuckles, and the vibration does delicious things to my libido, which until now had been non-existent.

“It’s not our last kiss, sweetheart. I can promise you that.” He gives me a peck on the lips, and we continue our walk.

I can’t wait to tell Rain how amazing this day has been.

Chapter 33

Gio Bianchi

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As promised, River and Miles reached out to grab a drink with me. I know River wants to intimidate me, but I'm not scared. Ruin is the love of my life, and even though he is a few years older than me, I know what I want and what I'll do to keep Ruin by my side. I should have spoken with him when I talked to Rain, but I was just happy to start seeing my girl again.

When I dropped Ruin back home, River and I exchanged numbers. He texted me the details of the only bar in town and told me to meet them at eight o'clock. I get there right after having dinner with Ruin. As much as I love spending time with her, eating out every day all day is getting old. I need my own place so I can cook and have more privacy. Miss Callie loves asking questions.

"Gio, hey," Miles says as he takes a seat next to me at the bar. I lift my chin at him, and the bartender comes over to take his order.

"River is parking; he'll be right in." I nod and take a sip of my drink.

"Listen, I know he can be a little intense, but he's just trying to look after Ruin. As you can imagine, the entire family is still very shaken up after her accident." I can understand that. But I need to remind them who I am so they can trust me.

"Hey, Gio, thank you for coming." River pats me on the back as he sits on the other side of me.

"I'm happy I finally have the chance to speak with you both," I tell them as their drinks are delivered. I guess the bartender knows what River always orders. "I have already spoken with Rain and Granny, and I spoke to River about this back in the

winter,” I say as I look at Miles, “Ruin and I were a couple before the accident. We met at the university, and we were very much in love. I am still in love with her. And it broke me into a million pieces when I couldn’t be with her after she woke up from the coma.”

“Fuck,” Miles says, taking a big gulp of his beer. “So you’re her teacher.”

“I was her lab instructor, yes. I’m five years older than her, and I never used my position to manipulate her or try to control her. We were two consenting adults.” I take a sip of my water, regretting I didn’t order something stronger. I’ve never done well under scrutiny.

“You stayed away for six months, like Rain and I asked. Why did you show up again?” River nearly shouts, and I raise my eyebrows. Miles stands up from his barstool and moves to stand next to River.

“Be nice, River. Ruin is clearly smitten with him.” River sags in his seat and nods his agreement, so I continue speaking.

“After I spoke with you and Rain, and after what happened at the hospital, I kept my word. I didn’t want to interfere in her recovery, but after six months, I figured I’d try my chances and see if I could make her fall in love with me again.”

River and Miles nod, understanding evident on their faces.

“You’re a good man, Gio. Ruin was so in love with you. Even though she never mentioned your name, she would talk about her boyfriend all the time.” I smile at Miles’s honesty. “I’m sorry we didn’t look for you after she woke from the coma, but once the doctor said we shouldn’t tell Ruin any details about her past, we focused all our energy on helping her get back on her feet.”

I nod at him; that makes total sense.

“I don’t blame you or anyone, really. It was just an unfortunate series of events. I’m just thankful Ruin is alive and thriving, and I get another chance with her.”

Miles clicks his glass with mine, and I smile, waiting to see if River will join, but he’s still clenching his jaw.

“Why did you speak with Rain and Granny before speaking with me?” he asks, and I shake my head. Does he think I didn’t follow the family hierarchy? Well, too bad.

“Rain came to look for me at the hotel the day after I first went to the diner. She was clear about the family’s wishes for me to stay away from Ruin, but as I explained to her, I’m done waiting. I can’t keep from spending time with the love of my life.”

He closes his eyes, and I feel his pain.

“Look, I’m the oldest of my siblings, and I can tell you, I understand how you’re feeling right now. We feel responsible for everything and everyone, but I can also tell you Ruin loves you and speaks highly of you.” He raises his eyebrows as he releases a breath.

“She does?” I chuckle at his disbelief. I nod at him, and he shakes his head. “Damn, I need to chill a couple notches, huh?” He chuckles, and Miles raises his glass.

“Amen, brother, fucking finally.” We all laugh at that. “River, we’re not kids anymore. You’re not alone; we’re a family, and we help each other.”

River nods as he gulps his beer.

“Yeah, I need to work on letting go.” Miles pats him on the back, and I ask for

another round of drinks.

“I’m not sure if Ruin told you about our father, but he passed away four years ago.” He looks at me, and I nod at him. I remember that conversation as clear as day.

“Ever since, I have taken the reins of the orchard. Mama kept the diner afloat, and Rain has been helping her. I think at some point, we’ll all agree to transfer the diner to Rain. It’s her passion.” Miles nods in agreement. “But I became the responsible adult, you know? If anyone needed anything, they would come to me. And I didn’t mind because that’s my job as the eldest brother. I wanted to help Mama as much as possible.” He pauses to take a sip of his beer.

“And then Ruin decided to move to Raleigh. Even though I was hesitant about her moving so far away, I didn’t say anything because I knew she was an adult, and it had been her dream since she was young.” River starts playing with the condensation on his cold glass, and I’m not sure where he’s going with this.

“I took her to buy a used car. I knew it wasn’t the best, but I thought it was safe enough.” I clench my jaw, preparing myself for what’s coming next. “Turns out, I didn’t do a good enough job checking the car, because next thing I know, I’m getting a phone call that my sister has been in an accident, and we need to go to the hospital to see her.” His voice breaks, and I gulp my water. I don’t blame him for what happened, but I can see why he’s blaming himself.

“River, you need to stop blaming yourself for every single thing that happens to us,” Miles tells him, and River shakes his head.

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“Oh, okay, so are you going to also take credit for Ruin meeting Mr. Hotshot here and falling in love?” I chuckle, and River tries really hard not to, but a small smile forms on his lips.

“If you’re going to blame yourself for the bad stuff, you need to take credit for the good stuff, too.”

“I agree with Miles.” River shoots me a glare. “To a certain degree,” I explain. “You did your best helping Ruin get a car; it wasn’t your fault the brakes broke or that the truck hit her car. As much as we want to be in control all the time, we simply can’t.”

He releases a deep breath as he slowly nods.

“Now that we have cleared the air, I need to ask for a favor.”

“We were doing so well.” Miles shakes his head, and I chuckle.

“I’ve decided to move permanently to Azalea Creek, and I need a place I can call home. Nothing too permanent as I want to build Ruin’s dream house on a piece of land I just bought, but if you know of any good places in the meantime for me to get, I’d be grateful.”

River stays quiet, assessing me. I’m not sure when he’s going to be able to trust me, but I’m in no rush. As long as Ruin is safe and happy, I have all the time in the world for him to come around.

“You’ve come to speak with the right person. I have a small construction business,

The Twisted Orchard.” Once Miles says the name of his business, I chuckle. It suits him.

“I’m about to finish remodeling a farmhouse not too far from downtown. I can take you there tomorrow so you can take a look.”

I give him a grateful smile. “I appreciate it, Miles. Let me know what time, and I’ll meet you there.” We clink our glasses and take a sip of our fresh drinks.

“Since you’re in construction, I need something else from you. How long would it take you to build a fairground if there were no budget restrictions?”

Miles sputters his drink, and the bartender gives him a pointed look.

“I’m sorry,” Miles says as he hurries to grab a bunch of napkins to clean the bar. “Are you a millionaire or something?” Miles asks after he has cleaned up.

“Something like that.” I shrug as I sip my drink. I don’t like speaking about my finances, but in this case, it’s almost a must since I have to explain how I can afford to pay for a fairground to be built in record time.

“I’ll be damned. Ruin hit the jackpot.”

I chuckle at him as River gets up from his barstool and smacks his brother on the back of his head.

“What do you have in mind, Gio?” River asks as he crosses his arms in front of his chest.

“Well, I know how important the Apple Festival is to Ruin, and I kinda want to recreate our first date. Before the accident.” I add, and they both nod.

“You really love her, don’t you?” River asks quietly.

“With everything I am,” I answer honestly.

“In this family, we help each other. Don’t worry, Gio. We’ll make it happen.”

I nod and smile at him as Miles lifts his glass and shouts, “Yes!” before downing his beer.

River shakes his head at his brother’s antics, but I’m just relieved her family understands how much she means to me. I think River just gave me his blessing.

Chapter 34

Ruin MacAllister

I wake up sweating and disturbed, and my heart is beating fast. I look at the time on my alarm clock on the nightstand, and it’s only three in the morning. I sigh as I try to catch my breath—I’ve had more vivid dreams lately. Some of them, I can see myself and people I know, like Rain and Gio, and others where I’m just watching from the outside. I can’t tell if this is the way my memories are coming back or if I’m just dreaming.

In tonight’s dream, I was with Gio in New York. It was Christmas time, and we were exploring the city. It felt so real—the way he held my hand, the way he smelled.

I take a little notebook from my nightstand and write as many details as I can remember. These might all be dreams, but if they are my memories coming back, I want to have them on paper. In case I forget again. I smile as I replay the dream I just had. Gio and I were at a hotel that could oversee Central Park—it was magical.

Stretching my back, I stifle a yawn and try to go back to sleep; I promised Gio I'd help him move into his new place since tomorrow is my day off. I need to rest as much as I can.

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“Good morning, Gio.” I greet him as I hand him a coffee I made for him. He takes it, smiling at me. I wish I could kiss him, but we’re outside of my house, and I can feel eyes on us from behind the curtains. I don’t want them all rushing outside and start asking questions.

“Good morning. This smells delicious. What is it?” I smile at his compliment.

“Oh, it’s my secret coffee pumpkin spice mix.” He takes a sip and closes his eyes, savoring the dark and spicy concoction.

“So good,” he says as he leans down and gives me a kiss on my cheek.

“Gio, you’re here,” Granny says as she joins us on the porch. He hugs her, and she latches onto him like her life depends on it.

“Granny, why don’t you take a seat?” I gently try to pull her away from Gio, and she gives me the side-eye.

“I see you’re marking your territory, dear.” I blush at her as I shake my head. Gio takes a sip of the coffee to hide his smile. “But don’t worry, my prime has passed, and this one is head over heels for you,” Granny says as she points with her thumb to Gio.

One by one, my entire family joins us on the porch, and I wonder what’s going on.

“So, we heard that it was Gio’s moving day, and we all would like to help.” Miles takes the lead.

“Oh, that is such a generous offer, but there’s no need. Really. A moving company is bringing all my furniture, and Ruin and I can put things away,” Gio says, and I want to die. I love my family, but sometimes they’re a little too much.

“But that’s not an issue; we can all help arrange things in their place. That’ll make work lighter and go faster. You don’t want to overwork Ruin, do you?” Rain gives him a pointed look, and once he sighs and nods his agreement, a grin spreads wide on her face.

“Great, let’s go,” Miles says, and we all say our goodbyes to Granny. Gio and I take his SUV, and River, Miles, and Rain pack into River’s truck and follow us.

“I’m sorry about my family,” I say in a small voice, and Gio reaches for my hand.

“There’s nothing to be sorry about. I like your family. It reminds me of mine.” I don’t think we’ve spoken much about his private life; he’s always asking about mine.

“Would you tell me about them? Your family?” He gives me a quick glance and nods.

“I’m originally from Argentina. I grew up in a town two hours south of Buenos Aires, the capital.”

That’s fascinating. I made a mental note to ask him to take me there one day.

“I’m the oldest of three siblings—Luca and Isabella.” He smiles at their mention. “Anyway, they moved to Chile a few years back since Luca met a girl and fell in love. Isa was still a tad young to be by herself in Argentina.” He turns into the driveway to his new place.

Miles did a great job with this place in record time. The farmhouse is white with

black trim. A huge truck is delivering furniture, and I can't wait to see what Gio picked.

"How about your parents? Why would your sister be by herself in Argentina?" I ask him as he parks his car.

He gives me a sad smile and says, "I'll tell you all about them another time." He presses a kiss against the back of my hand. "Why don't we go help your siblings?" His smile turns up, and I nod at him. I wonder what happened to his parents, but I know we'll have time later.

"Everything looks great, Gio. Is it all brand new?" Rain asks. We enter the house as the movers remove plastic from the furniture.

"Yeah, I wanted everything to blend in with the environment. I've never had a farmhouse before and wanted someone to feel comfortable around here." Everyone snickers as they glance at me, and I bury my face in Gio's shirt.

"Ruin and I will take care of unpacking the kitchen; you boys do the heavy lifting," Rain says as she grabs my arm and pulls me toward the kitchen. It's an open-concept space with a ceiling of exposed wood beams and a wooden chandelier that brightens the entire room. The cabinets are made of dark cherry wood, and the countertops are made of white quartz. It's simple, yet sophisticated.

"This kitchen is gorgeous, Ruru. Do you think you'd move in with your man?" Rain asks, removing pots and pans from a box. I scoff at her.

"We've been together for like a month, and I still don't have my memories back. I don't think we're at that stage yet." I busy myself organizing the silverware, and Rain stands up next to me, crossing her arms over her chest.

“What do the memories have to do with anything? If I had a man eating from the palm of my hand like you have Gio, I wouldn’t care about the past.” I shrug and continue my task as Rain goes back to organizing more stuff around the kitchen.

“I had a dream last night,” I say, and Rain comes closer to me. “It was Gio and me in New York. The details were so vivid. I’m not sure if it was really a dream or a memory.” Rain doesn’t meet my gaze; she seems nervous somehow.

“Did I know Gio before the accident?” I ask her, my voice almost a whisper. She shakes her head and scoffs.

“No, I mean. I don’t think so. He’s new to town.” She returns to her chores, and I dismiss my suspicions. Rain would never lie to me.

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The house has five bedrooms, six bathrooms, and a studio—not to mention a three-season porch, along with a spacious living room and dining room. By the time we add the finishing touches, it's the evening, and we all are exhausted.

"I apologize it took us so long to get this place ready. Are you all okay staying for dinner?" Gio asks as we all crash in the living room.

"Oh, are you going to cook for us?" Rain says, her gray eyes sparkling.

"Yes, I would like to prepare one of my family recipes if that's okay with you all." He looks around, and my siblings nod, excited to try something from Gio's culture.

"I can bring Mama and Granny, if that's okay?" River asks as he stands.

"That would be great, thanks, River." He leaves, and we all get up to help with cooking, but Gio carries me back to the sofa.

"You need to rest your foot, sweetheart." He kisses me on the forehead, helping me lie down and propping my foot up with several pillows. "I'll handle dinner with Rain and Miles."

I give him a grateful smile. I'm glad that the living room is close to the kitchen. Since it's an open-concept plan, I can still join their conversation.

"Are you sure you don't want to rest with your sister, Rain? Miles and I can make quick work of the dinner if you want to rest," Gio offers Rain, and I fall for him a little more for being so considerate of not only me but my family as well.

“And miss using this state-of-the-art kitchen? No way.” Gio chuckles as he starts taking the ingredients out.

“Okay, I’ll make the pasta. If you guys can prepare a salad that would be great,” Gio asks them.

“I’ll make the salad,” Rain peeps. “Miles, see if you can find ingredients for a drink. We need to make a special toast to Gio’s new place.”

“Oh yeah, let me see if Gio has the ingredients for a Moscow Mule. Otherwise, I can run real fast to the local mart. I think it’d be great for this time of the year.”

My heart swells with happiness at the scene—my boyfriend and my siblings enjoying each other’s company while working together. I can’t help but hope we have many more days like this. Days when Gio and I host my family for Sunday dinners, and hopefully, one day, his family will be able to join us, too.

Chapter 35

Gio Bianchi

The Apple Festival is just a few weeks away, and everything is going as planned. Miles has been working hard to get all the rides in place, even hiring a larger company from Charlotte. But I’m happy everything is moving toward having the fairgrounds ready for the festival.

It was one of the things Ruin paid the most attention to while coming up with our bucket list. Even though I know there’s no certainty, I hope this will help trigger her memories. I know she’s been having more and more vivid dreams lately.

Right now, I’m working on another item on our bucket list; I can’t wait to surprise

her. This one is one I'm particularly excited about.

"Hey, Penny. How's it going?" I ask my friend as her image comes up on my phone.

"Gio!" she shouts, way too excited for so early in the morning. But she looks like she's on her exercise bike.

"I see you're busy, so I won't take too much of your time. I just wanted to confirm that everything is set as we discussed?" She gives me a pointed look, and I wince. Sometimes I forget how dedicated Penny is to her job, whether it is growing my fortune or helping me surprise Ruin.

"Yes, boss. Everything is good to go. I hope you have an unforgettable night with your girl." Penny winks at me as she disconnects the call, and I smile, heading off to get everything for my date with Ruin today.

"Hey there, Gio," Ruin's mom says as she opens the door for me.

"Hello, Ms. MacAllister."

She hugs me as I step inside. She pats me on my chest. "Please, call me Jossie."

I nod and smile as I look around to see if Granny is up so I can also say hello.

"Ruin will be out in a minute; she's still deciding what to wear for your date today." Jossie chuckles. I can hear Ruin shushing her mom from her room, and I chuckle. Does Ruin have bionic hearing?

"Hi, Gio. I'm sorry I made you wait." Ruin comes out wearing a dark pair of yoga pants, a dark green Henley, and a pair of tennis shoes. She looks comfortable and beautiful.

“It’s no bother, I was just making small chat with your mom.” I grin, and Ruin rolls her eyes playfully.

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“Yeah, I’m sure you’d love to know all my embarrassing details, but that’ll have to be saved for another day. I cannot wait to see what you planned for us today.” Ruin places her hands together as she gives me a bright smile.

“Let’s go then. I can’t wait for our date to start either.” We say goodbye to Jossie, and I hold Ruin’s hand, guiding her toward the door.

When I’m about to help her inside my car, Granny comes out to the porch and shouts, “Have fun, lovebirds! And remember, don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.” She cackles, and Ruin and I share a chuckle as we get into my car, and I start driving.

“Okay, can I please know where we’re going now?” Ruin practically begs as she bats her eyelashes at me.

“Well, since the weather is changing, I thought it’d be fun to go for a hike. We could see the early foliage colors and have a nice picnic surrounded by nature.” I share my plan, hoping she’ll be as excited as I am. But Ruin doesn’t make a peep; she’s just staring out the window.

“We can do something else if you prefer,” I say, wondering if I fucked up with this idea and hoping she’ll say she wants to do this, knowing damn well I’ll do whatever she wants.

“No, no. That sounds fun. It’s just that...” She trails off with a deep sigh. I grab her hand and give it a squeeze, letting her know I’m listening. “It’s just that I haven’t hiked since before the accident, and I’m nervous. What if my ankle breaks again, or what if I can’t handle the hike and we get stranded in the middle of the forest?” Her

voice turns low as she speaks, and I hate that my smart, strong girl doubts herself.

“Sweetheart, do you trust me?”

“I do,” she answers immediately, no hesitation. I give her a wink, and she blushes. That’s my girl.

“I made sure the path we’ll be walking is easy and has some of the best views in the area. I also packed an emergency backpack with food, first aid items, and even a satellite radio in case we need professional help.” I glance at her briefly since I’m driving, and her face has gone from worried to happy. The lines on her forehead vanish.

“Thank you, Gio. Seriously, I’m so thankful we met.” She pulls my hand to her lips and kisses the top.

“Trust me, I’m the lucky one here.” She smiles at me as we continue to drive to our destination. Hopefully, we can make it to the spot I’ve planned for the night—and she likes the surprise I have for her.

“Oh, Gio. I know this place. Did you know I love this trail?” I shake my head but don’t meet her gaze. We’re at the Mount Mitchell visitor center, and after doing some research, I learned about the different trails that lead to the summit, and one that leads to a beautiful clearing. Of course, I made some calls and some generous donations, and voilá—we have exclusive access to the trail and clearing for the next twenty-four hours.

I help her out of the car, and after grabbing my backpack and something for Ruin to use on the hike, I lock my car and walk toward her.

“What’s that?” she asks, a frown marring her forehead.

“A cane. I thought you could use one to help support your body while we walk.” I asked around town for a woodcrafter, and they directed me to Mr. Gilbert. He handmade this one especially for her. He knew her height and assured me this would be great for her. By the look on her face, I’m not so sure anymore.

“Did I overstep? I’m sorry. I thought I was doing something helpful. Here, let me take it back to the car.” I smile at her, letting her know I’m not upset. I just want to make her happy. When I grab the cane, she doesn't let it go.

“No. Don’t take it back. I actually think it’s a great idea.” Relief washes over me, knowing I didn’t mess up our date.

“I was just in shock because it’s been eight months since the accident, and my family and everyone in town think I’m back to normal. Thanks to the extra physical therapy sessions, I think I am getting close, but I still don’t feel completely like myself. Somehow, you see that, you see me. Thank you.” She closes her eyes. I’m trying hard not to cry, and I close the distance between us, holding her close to me.

“I love you, Ruin. You’ll always be my number one priority.” She looks up at me, and her green eyes shine with love. She doesn’t need to say it; I can feel it. I grab her chin between my thumb and forefinger, and she parts her lips—all the invitation I need to kiss her. This isn’t how I was planning to tell her I’m in love with her, but I guess not everything can go according to plan. She tastes like sweet apples and completely mine. I could get lost in this kiss forever and die a happy man, but I have big plans for us today. Reluctantly, I break the kiss, and Ruin whimpers. Fuck, how have I missed those little noises she makes.

“This way, sweetheart.” I guide her toward the start of the trail. The path is clear of debris, thanks to the town’s Boy Scouts. I promised them tickets for the rides at the Apple Festival, and they were happy to earn them by doing a good deed.

She walks a couple of steps ahead of me, and I see her give the cane a try. The more comfortable she feels using it, the more speed she gains. After ten minutes of walking, she's at a pretty good pace. I catch up with her after snapping a couple of pictures of her walking surrounded by trees, rocks, and the changing leaves; it's a beautiful sight.

"How are you feeling?" I ask as soon as I'm walking by her side. Her face shines with perspiration, and her breathing is somewhat fast, but her smile is big, and her eyes are so bright they could light up the entire mountain.

"I'm feeling incredible. Thank you for doing this, Gio." She reaches closer and gives me a quick peck on the lips. I chuckle at her excitement. I feel like the best boyfriend in the world right now. I put that smile on her face.

We reach a small creek with a picnic area big enough for us to sit down for a moment. I pull a blanket out of my backpack and help Ruin sit down. Once I know she's comfortable, I grab two water bottles and two granola bars.

"Can we really be this in sync? These are my favorite bars, and I don't think I've had them since before..." She trails off, and I know what she means. I hate that the accident is still a sore topic for her. Maybe she needs to see someone to talk things through. I make a mental note to revisit that topic at a later time.

We enjoy the snack in comfortable silence, relishing the sounds of nature—the water running down the mountain, birds chirping in the distance, twigs falling from the trees. The first hints of the changing leaves appear on the trees—yellows and some oranges are the most prominent now. The colors will be in full swing in a couple of weeks, just in time for the Apple Festival.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" Ruin asks with a pleasant smile on her face.

“It truly is,” I answer honestly. Even though I wasn’t born here, I’ve come to love this area.

“Do you see yourself setting down roots here?” she asks, a hint of nervousness in her tone. I know exactly where she’s going with this.

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“I do. There’s no other place I’d rather be.”

“You do?” She opens her eyes as wide as saucers, and I chuckle.

“Why do you look so surprised?” I answer her with another question, something I don’t usually do, but I want to know what’s on her mind.

“Well, you bought everything new for the farmhouse.” I nod for her to continue, but she readjusts her position and starts playing with a strand of her hair.

After a moment, she continues. “I thought you were going to move your stuff here, but maybe you kept your other place because you want to move back at some point.” She shrugs and lowers her gaze, and I immediately kneel in front of her—my sweet Ruin.

“Sweetheart, look at me.” Her gorgeous green eyes find mine in an instant.

“There are many things we haven’t discussed yet since our relationship is new, and I want to think we have all the time in the world to get to know each other, but the reason I kept my other house is because I want to have a place in case we need to go to the city. I have many other properties, and I’d love to take you to all of them at some point, but the place where I want to settle is right here, beside you.” She smiles and drops her head to my chest. My arms instinctively wrap around her, drawing soothing circles on her back.

“Thank you for always saying what I need to hear,” she says, and I hug her tighter. “I’m not sure what I did to deserve you, but I’ll be thankful for you every single day

of my life,” she tells me, her voice thick with emotion.

We stay like this—I’m not sure how long—but I’ve never felt more at home than when I’m holding Ruin close.

We continue the hike as the sun sets, and Ruin throws me a curious look.

“Shouldn’t we be returning to the parking lot? I’m not sure it’s safe to hike in the dark.” I smile at her as I reach for her hand.

“I have one more surprise before our date ends. If you don’t like it, we’ll head back to the car. I promise.” She nods and smiles as we continue to walk. If everything is set as I requested, we should be at our glamping spot in about five minutes.

When we reach the clearing, I hear Ruin’s gasp, and a grin parts my lips.

“Oh my goodness, Gio. Is this what I think it is?” She practically squeals in excitement.

“Maybe. What did you have in mind?” I ask nonchalantly.

“Are we spending the night here?” I nod at her, and her squeal can be heard all over Appalachia. I throw my head back in laughter, and she smacks me gently on my abdomen.

“Ouch!” I fake cry, and she rolls her eyes at me.

“I didn’t hurt you. I’m just so excited,” she says as she rubs my abs gently. Before my dick can notice, she picks up the pace, and I need to speed up to keep up with her.

I asked Penny to find an old Volkswagen van, and I had it remodeled as a tiny mobile

house. The final product is even cooler than I envisioned. String lights are strung around the van, and when I press the fob, the van purrs to life.

When I open the door for Ruin, we step inside to find a kitchenette and a seating area that can be transformed into a queen-size bed. The best part is that we can stargaze from the comfort of the bed.

“This is fantastic; I’m so excited for this little adventure.” Ruin brings her hands to her chest as she grins from ear to ear. I give her a chaste kiss, but she gets a hold of my lips, and the kiss turns heated in two seconds. Ruin explores my back with her hands, and I let mine roam down to grab her ass. I press her close to me, and my dick makes its presence known. She moans at the contact, and my dick jerks in reaction. I know I need to let her dictate the pace, but I want to bury myself deep inside her, so I can feel the way her pussy pulses against my cock again. It’s been a long damn time.

We continue to kiss for a while until I pull back. Ruin pouts, and I kiss the pout off her gorgeous lips, which are swollen from our makeout session.

A faint noise comes from the driver’s seat, and Ruin freezes.

“We’re alone, right?” I nod as I try my hardest not to smile.

“Okay, so what was that sound?” There’s a little whimper again. “That! Did you hear it? Please tell me I’m not crazy.” Ruin looks at me frantically. I can’t wait for her to find out.

“I think it came from the front. Do you want to go take a look?” Her horrified expression makes it really hard for me not to lose my composure and laugh, but after a couple of breaths, I’m back to my nonchalant self.

“What kind of boyfriend are you? Why are you telling me to check for noises instead

of protecting me?” I can’t hold it any longer; she’s cute even when scared.

“Sweetheart, please, just go and see.” She squints her eyes at me but then decides to check for herself. She moves slowly from our seats to the front of the van. I stay in my seat but take my phone out so I can take a video.

“Gio, is this a present?” she asks as she tries to pick up the box, but it’s a little heavy, so she just decides to leave it there.

“I think you need to open it.” My grin is wide, and now she’s grinning too.

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“Oh, I love surprises,” she says as she removes the top of the box, only to be greeted with a lick on her face. I got her a Siberian husky.

“Oh my goodness, Gio. How long did you have this handsome boy here waiting?” She pouts as she helps the dog out of the box and immediately hugs him.

“Not long at all. Someone delivered him when we were minutes away.” Her eyes mist over, and she happily hugs the dog as he peppers her with kisses. Now that I think about it, maybe it wasn’t my brightest idea to get her a dog the first night we’d be spending alone since the holidays.

“How did you know I love huskies?” she asks as she sits back next to me, the dog following her obediently.

“A little bird might have told me,” I confess, and she stares at me.

“What? I wanted to make sure I wasn’t going to screw it up, so I asked your siblings.” I raise my hands, and she sighs.

“See? You’re the best.” She straddles me and my hands slide to the small of her back. When she leans down to kiss me, the dog starts nudging my hands off Ruin with its nose. Ruin looks around, giggling, just as I let out a groan.

“I’ll name him Cobalt. I have a plush animal, and it’s also a husky. I don’t know who gave it to me or why I have it, but I hold it close to me every night when I go to bed. For some reason, it makes me feel at peace.” My throat clogs with emotion. Even though we were apart and she doesn’t remember our time together, I feel, in a way,

like I've been with her all this time, giving her comfort through Cobalt.

"I think I need to get on with prepping dinner before it gets too dark," I say as I kiss her.

"Sounds good," she says, grabbing her can and heading outside the van with Cobalt. "I'm going to walk with Cobalt for a few minutes. Is that okay, or do you want me to rest?" She glances up at me through her eyelashes, and I chuckle.

"You know me well. I'd like for you to rest, but I know you want to take care of Cobalt, so maybe after your walk, you and him can lie down for a bit?" She nods, and after a quick kiss, I get to work washing my hands.

I grab the steak from the mini fridge I had Penny order for us— skirt steak marinated in chimichurri sauce. I also prepare two huge potatoes to bake on the grill. After setting up the portable grill outside the van, I get it going and place the steaks and potatoes on it. Once everything is cooking, I prepare a quick salad and leave it in the fridge.

"Do you want some water? Or maybe tea?" I ask Ruin as she returns to the van with a happy Cobalt. Maybe he did need to pee or something.

"I'd love some tea, it's starting to cool down." I smile and nod as I get warm water for her tea.

"I didn't realize you liked reading romance," she says as she waves a book. I have no idea where it came from.

"I don't. I mean, I have nothing against it, but that book isn't mine."

"Hmm, funny. I wonder how it got here?" Ruin asks, and an idea forms in my head.

Penny is an amazing friend, but she can be a little too in your face when she wants something to happen.

“I’ll be right back; I’m going to check on the steaks,” I tell her as I pass her the cup of tea, and she smiles appreciatively.

Once I plate dinner, I take out a bottle of wine, and Ruin claps excitedly. I love how excited she is about the little things. “Oh, this is the wine I loved back at the winery we went to,” she says when she sees the label, and I kiss the top of her head. “Thank you, Gio. Somehow, each date with you is better than the last.”

“Let’s make a toast,” I say as I sit across from her on the small table. She raises her glass, and her eyes shine bright with anticipation.

“To a lifetime of dates, each better than the last.” Her grin is wide as we click our glasses. She takes a sip of the wine and closes her eyes as she lets the flavor invade her senses.

“Perfect ending to a perfect day. Thank you so much again, Gio. I know I sound like a broken record, but I’m so thankful for you and everything I get to experience with you.” I lean in and give her a soft kiss, not being able to form words to tell her everything I have on my chest. Cobalt enjoys his dinner, as well, and once he’s done, he comes to sit quietly next to Ruin.

After dinner, I clean up and tie the trash securely in the kitchenette. Then I set up the portable potty outside the van, and Ruin’s sigh of relief makes me chuckle.

“As much as I enjoy camping, I was starting to think that we needed to head back to use the restroom. I don’t want to do my business in the bushes when it’s dark.” She turns an adorable shade of pink after her comment and makes a quick exit from the van. I shake my head in amusement.

We lie down on the bed, the moonroof giving us a perfect view of the clear sky studded with bright stars.

“This is so peaceful. I love it here,” Ruin says, rubbing small circles on my chest.

“Maybe this is something we can do in my three seasons porch at home?”

“I love the idea,” she says as she lowers her hand down my chest and starts toying with the band of my boxers.

“Sweetheart, you know where I stand on the matter.” I chuckle at my lame joke about being hard all the time when she’s around. “But don’t feel like something has to happen tonight. I’m happy as I can be just holding you tight all night.” I pull her closer to me and inhale deeply as she releases a breath.

“I don’t want you to think I don’t want to be with you, but I’d like to wait a little longer to go all the way. Do you know what I mean?” she asks quietly, and I help her settle on top of me.

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“How about you lead the way tonight. We’ll do as much or as little as you want.” She smiles and pulls my bottom lip with her teeth. Cobalt raises his head from the bed, and I chuckle.

“Maybe I got you a dog that’s a little too protective. He’s even trying to protect you from me.” Ruin chuckles but then tells Cobalt to go to sleep in a serious tone, and somehow he follows her command.

“I love that you got him for me. Where did you find such a well-behaved dog, anyway?”

I move in place as I make myself comfortable; the kissing session is going to have to wait a little bit longer.

“Once I knew you wanted a husky, I started looking around and found a rehoming place for adult dogs. Their owner didn’t want him anymore because he sheds like crazy.”

“What? That’s stupid. Why would they get him in the first place? Didn’t they do their research on huskies before they got him?” She huffs a frustrated sigh and then suddenly covers her mouth with her hands. “Oh my goodness, he had owners, and I just decided to call him Cobalt. What’s his real name?”

Before I can even answer, Cobalt is next to us, trying to nuzzle his way onto the bed. “I think he responds to the name just fine.” I chuckle. Ruin gives him a peck on his head and takes him back to his bed.

When she comes back, she removes her clothes and leaves on her bra and panties. She's wearing a simple black cotton set, but she still manages to look breathtaking. I make quick work of removing my clothes as well, and we spend all night kissing and exploring each other's bodies under the stars.

I wake up in the middle of the night when Ruin starts talking in her sleep. At first, I can't quite make out what she's saying, but as I listen closely, my heart skips a beat.

"I love you so much, Blue. You and only you, forever."

Could it be that she remembers who I am? Did Cobalt trigger more memories? We'll see if she calls me Blue in the morning.

"I love you too, baby girl. You and only you," I whisper against her hair as I drift off to sleep with a big smile.

Chapter 36

Ruin MacAllister

It's Apple Festival Day, and I'm so ecstatic. The town is abuzz with the remodeling of the fairgrounds. No one has been allowed a peek, and I'm bursting with excitement to see how everything looks. Miles has been working so hard lately that we barely see him at home. I'm not sure who's behind all of this, but I have an idea. Ever since Gio came to town, everything seems brighter. Or maybe I'm just so down bad for the man that I think he's behind every single good thing that happens.

It feels nice to see all my siblings starting to find their way again. Rain is in complete charge of the diner now as Mama has decided to take a much-deserved break.

Merlin is doing great in Raleigh. Between classes and soccer, he doesn't have much

free time, but from what he has shared, he's enjoying every minute of it. He said he would try to make it for the festival but didn't want to get our hopes up. I really want him to come, since we're singing tonight, and it wouldn't be the same without him. River's still working hard on the farm, pretending he doesn't need anyone. I just wish he could find someone to get through to him and help him heal.

"Ruin, are you ready? Come see the dress Mama made for you." Rain comes into my room wearing a gorgeous green shirt with a square neck, puff sleeves, and a corset over it, paired with jeans and her Doc boots. I hope my dress is in the same fabric as Rain's shirt because I'm obsessed. It has a beautiful and delicate pattern. I'm actually surprised she's wearing it since she likes to dress more edgy. I guess that's why she added the corset on top. She's stunning.

"Yes, let's go," I say as I glance in the mirror again and adjust my hair before heading to Mama's room.

"There you are, dear," Mama says, coming over from the table where her sewing machine sits. She hands me a dress made with the same fabric as Ruin's shirt. I quickly undress and put it on. It has the same square neck and hugs my body, but the sleeves are long and have an imperial cut.

"It fits me like a glove, Mama. Thank you," I say as I smooth the dress down my middle and onto my hips. "I think I'm going to pair it with my brown boots."

Mama and Rain share a look.

"What?"

"Maybe you should wear more comfortable shoes?" Mama says, worry in her tone.

"I'm fine. Remember I went hiking with Gio a couple of weeks ago? The therapy has

been really helping. I feel strong and back to normal.” At least physically. Now, if only my brain could unlock my memories, that’d be great.

“Oh, how can we forget you guys went hiking and then spent the night in a remodeled van? I want to find a man just so I can ask Gio to let me use the van,” Rain says, and Mama and I burst out laughing.

“What? It was a cool thing for Gio to plan.” I nod as I wipe the tears from my eyes. Only Rain would want to have a one-night stand just to use a cool van.

When we get to the fairgrounds, the view takes my breath away. It’s the most gorgeous place I’ve ever seen. All the booths and rides have the same color theme—rich reds, pinks, and oranges mixed with white and gray to give it the perfect autumn vibe. There’s a carousel, a Ferris wheel, a small pavilion, a row of food booths with every option imaginable, and another set of booths for games. This place is magical.

“Do you like it?” Gio whispers behind me. I jump and place a hand on my chest. When I turn to look at him, he looks worried.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you,” he says, but I hurry to shush him with a kiss.

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“You did this?” He just grins, his eyes searching for clues to what I might be thinking. “I’m absolutely in love with this. It’s the most amazing fairgrounds I’ve ever seen.” I cross my arms around his neck, and he lifts me as he turns us around. I giggle, feeling all the love this man has for me pouring out of his chest and seeping into me.

“And I would spend every single penny I own to see that smile on your face, every single day of our lives.” This man says the most romantic things. He lowers me to the ground and gives me a quick kiss.

“Ruination, I wasn’t sure that was you,” Steve chirps, and I feel Gio tense up, his grip tightening on my waist.

“Oh, I’m sorry—we haven’t been introduced,” Steve says when he realizes Gio is the man holding me. “Ruin, why don’t you introduce me to this fine gentleman here. He’s the only thing people have been talking about lately,” Steve adds mockingly, and I hear Gio murmuring in Spanish. I don’t think I’ve ever heard him speak Spanish before. He must be really pissed.

“I’m Gio Bianchi, Ruin’s boyfriend.” Gio shakes Steve’s hand firmly, and I notice how he squeezes hard, while Steve struggles not to squirm. “She doesn’t owe you anything. And she’s no ‘ruination.’ She’s the best person you’ve ever had the pleasure to meet. So, next time you need to speak to her, I suggest you treat her with the respect she deserves.” Gio pauses, and right now, he looks every bit the powerful man that he is. “Otherwise, I can foresee very unpleasant times ahead of you.”

Gio gives Steve one last glare, and the moment he releases his hand, Steve winces,

shaking his hand in pain.

“Ready, sweetheart?” I’m sure I have googly eyes shooting hearts at Gio; my heart has never felt so full.

“No one has ever stood up for me like this before. Thank you.” He smiles, gently holding my chin with his thumb and forefinger, then kisses me softly.

“I’ve got you. Always.” I lean in for one more quick peck, and we make our way to my family’s booth. But Steve wasn’t kidding when he said Gio is the talk of the town—everyone wants to shake his hand and get a picture with him, thanking him for funding the renovation of our fairgrounds. Gio smiles, but I can tell he’s out of his element. My man doesn’t like being in the spotlight. I think he’d have been happier if no one knew he was behind this amazing transformation. But it’s a small town, and the grannies have a well-oiled grapevine.

“Mr. Bianchi, hi.” Dorothy, the owner of the town’s apothecary, approaches us, and Gio gives her a polite smile.

“I wanted to apologize,” she continues, and I frown.

“I assure you, there’s nothing to apologize for. Enjoy the festival, and have a good day,” Gio hurries to say, and we keep walking, but I’m really confused as to why Dorothy would have to apologize to Gio.

“What was that about?” I finally ask as we approach my family’s booth.

“I have no idea. I’m sure it’s nothing.” He’s being weird, and I want to ask what’s going on, but by the time I get my thoughts in order, we’ve reached the booth, and I see they are nearly sold out. Rain lifts her chin in greeting to Gio, then comes over and gives me a quick hug.

“You get a pass today for not helping out in the booth since you’re with Azalea Creek’s most beloved resident, but next year I expect my twin to give me a hand,” Rain says in a playful tone, and I nod at her. She spans my bum as she goes back to her job, and I jump in surprise, feeling the heat immediately rising through my neck. Gio tries to stifle his laugh, but it’s impossible, which only makes me blush harder.

“Hey, you two lovebirds. Why don’t you come for a reading?” Granny asks, and Gio smiles but looks at me to see what I want to do. I nod, and we walk to stand at Granny’s table.

“Ah, there you are. I didn’t want to read the tarot to you today; I just wanted to say how immensely happy it makes me to see two souls who have suffered so much finally find each other.” My eyes mist at Granny’s words, and when I glance at Gio, his eyes mirror mine.

“Thank you, Granny,” Gio tells her in a deep voice thick with emotion, and I launch myself to hug her.

“Okay, okay. Today is not a day to be sad. Today we’re celebrating life, family, and love. Come on, Ruin. It’s almost time to sing,” Granny says as she puts her cards and trinkets away in her little rolling cart.

Gio and I walk hand in hand toward the stage, where my siblings are already setting up their instruments.

“I can’t wait to see you perform with your family.” His eyes are shining with something like pride. “And maybe afterward, we can ride the Ferris wheel,” he adds, giving me a gentle kiss. I head to the stage, glancing back at him the entire way.

When I spot Merlin tuning his violin, I run toward him, so happy he could make it.

“You came,” I shout as I hug him, and he chuckles, hugging me back. “Wait, did you grow while you were away? Is this muscle that I feel here?” I say, checking out his biceps.

“Stop it, Ru. You’re embarrassing me.” I giggle but glance around, wondering who might be here for Merlin to feel embarrassed. Sure enough, Meadow is standing near Gio.

“I see little has changed in the crush department,” I say with a knowing smirk, and Merlin looks at me confused. Why does he think his crush on Meadow is a secret?

“Wait, how do you know I have a crush on her?” he whisper-shouts, and I think my little brother’s young love is adorable.

“What do you mean? You’ve had this crush for a while now.” His eyes widen, and I’m starting to get frustrated. Why does he think this is a big deal?

“Ruin, the crush only started a couple of years ago.” His words sink in, and my eyes grow big at the implication.

“I’m starting to get my memories back!” I shout, hugging Merlin as my other siblings surround us a second later.

“Fuck, yes!” Miles shouts as we all melt into a huge group hug.

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“You guys, this is amazing,” I say as tears run down my cheeks.

“Wait, what did you remember?” Rain asks as I try to calm myself down.

“My eternal crush,” Merlin pipes up, and we all laugh.

“Anything else you remember?” Rain asks, her voice dripping with hope.

“Let’s not overwhelm her. Remember, the doctor said her memories might come back in waves. Let’s get ready for the show,” River says evenly, but his eyes tell me he’s as excited about this little development as we all are.

We all get into position, but not before Rain gives me an extra hug.

“Let’s do this,” I say, and she counts us down.

“Good evening, Azalea Creek,” I say, and the crowd cheers. “It’s so good to be here. As you all know, I suffered a major accident at the beginning of the year, and right after it happened, I thought my life was over.” River and Miles strum their instruments as Rain keeps a slow beat going, and the crowd claps along.

“But with the love and care of my family, I was able to get back on my feet. And this summer, I met a very special someone who has been my champion since the very first day we met.” I can hear the catcalls from my siblings. Gio covers his mouth, trying to hide a grin, but his eyes crinkle, giving him away. “So, what do you say, Azaleans. Are we ready to party the night away on this amazing new fairground?”

The crowd explodes in cheers and shouts, and I nod at Rain, who changes the beat. For the past couple of weeks, I've been practicing the songs that my siblings said have been crowd favorites at previous festivals. Funny how they had no problem telling me about our band and which songs to practice but couldn't tell me anything about my life in Raleigh. Maybe I didn't share much with them? Ugh, now that one memory has come back, I want everything back. But right now, I need to focus on this moment and serenade Gio. It's the least I can do for him.

I make eye contact with him every time we play a love song. When I get lost in his light blue eyes, it feels like the grounds are empty, and it's just the two of us.

The smell of funnel cake, turkey legs, cotton candy, and apple cider hits my nostrils, and suddenly, I'm transported to another fairground—one where I was with him. A shiver runs through my body, and I close my eyes. A bright light flashes behind my eyelids, and in an instant, a flood of memories rushes through my mind.

I know we're singing "Willow," but all I can think of is Gio—Gio at the lab, him and I at the state fair, at the beach, and the pumpkin patch he had made just for us. Our getaway in New York, his graduation. Every single memory of us comes crashing back, and I collapse to my knees. My siblings keep playing, and somehow, I keep singing—it's an out-of-body experience.

"That's my man," I whisper into the mic, pointing to Gio as I catch Mama and Granny grinning wide. When the last chords of the song play, I raise the microphone to my lips, look into Gio's eyes, and say, "Blue, is that you? Cobalt?"

Hearing the nickname I gave him when we were sneaking around, his lips tremble, parting slightly, as though he wants to speak but can't find the words. I glance at my siblings, and a silent understanding passes between us. With a smile, I place the microphone back on the stand and walk off the stage, each step charged with memories and meaning.

Gio snaps out of his stupor and rushes toward me. “Baby girl, you called me Blue,” he says, his voice trembling as he searches my eyes.

“I did. I remember you.” My voice breaks, and Gio captures my lips in a bruising kiss. His hands press firmly against the small of my back, pulling me flush against him as my hands cradle his neck. Everything around us fades away—there’s only Gio, filling every part of my world.

I’m not sure how long we kiss, but by the time we come up for air, the stage is empty, all the instruments have been taken away, and the crowd has dispersed.

“Damn, that was a hot, scorching kiss if I’ve ever seen one,” Miles says as he whistles, and my family explodes in laughter.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if Ruin is pregnant after that kiss,” Rain says, and I bury my face in Gio’s chest.

“That’s enough. Last thing I want to picture in my head is Gio going at it with my sister.” River fake gags, and everyone follows suit.

“So, I take it you remember him?” Mama asks, and I slowly peek out and nod.

She giggles, and Granny shouts, “Hurray! Finally! I wasn’t sure how much longer I could keep hiding this secret from you, dear.”

Everyone nods in agreement, and I remove myself from Gio’s cocoon. Straightening my shoulders, I grab his hand and give my family what I consider a mean glare—but judging by their unfazed expressions, it’s anything but.

“You’re all lucky Gio found me. I don’t think I could have ever forgiven you if that accident was the end of us. Of this,” I say, lifting our entangled hands, my voice thick

with emotion. Gio places a gentle kiss on each of my knuckles, and I can't hold back the tears that spill down my cheeks.

"I told you from the moment you met him, you two were meant to be. I never doubted you were going to find each other again," Granny says, effectively breaking the tension of my momentary threat to my family.

"Granny might have told you Dr. Bianchi was your one true love, but it was me who told him you were fine and thriving." My jaw drops at Merlin's revelation.

"And you didn't tell me?" I ask, indignation oozing through me.

"I couldn't, Ruru." He shrugs. "Besides, Dr. Bianchi didn't directly say who he was to you. But once he started asking so many questions about my family and siblings, I put two and two together." I glance up at Gio, noticing the cutest blush on his cheeks.

"Hey, you can't blame a man in love for trying to find his better half?" Gio says.

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I give him a peck on the lips, but before things can heat up again, I hear multiple people clearing their throats.

“I think it’s best if Ruin and I leave now. There’s a lot we have to catch up on.” Everyone hoots and hollers as Gio holds me bridal style, walking us toward the parking lot.

“Have fun, Ru.” Rain shouts, and I wave my hand at her as I blow a kiss.

I have no doubt that we’re about to have one of the best nights of our lives.

Chapter 37

Gio Bianchi

I drive like a bat out of hell once we’re out of downtown. I can’t wait to finally bury myself inside Ruin. I can feel the electricity bursting out of our bodies. It’s sizzling.

“I can’t believe I forgot about you,” Ruin says, her voice wobbly.

“Sweetheart, you suffered a major accident. It’s only understandable that your brain wanted to shield you from all the pain.” I grab her hand and bring it to my lips, where I place kisses all over it. The kisses are making me hard, and I don’t want Ruin to think I don’t want to hear everything she has to say, so I slowly place her hand back on her lap. But my girl has something other than talking in mind, and instead of letting my hand go, she places it over her core. I give her a side glance, and she has a mischievous smirk on her beautiful face.

“How wet will I find you if I put my hand under your dress, baby girl?” Ruin squirms in her seat, and my dick jerks, trying to free itself from my pants.

“I think you’ll have to find out for yourself,” she teases, lifting her dress. I turn into my driveway, and once I park, I get out of the car and sprint to her door. As I help her out, she jumps into my arms, locking her legs around my waist. We’re like two wild animals in heat. I start undoing the zipper of her dress as I climb the stairs to my door. I manage to unlock the door with one hand, and once we’re inside, I place her gently on the floor.

“You remembered me,” I say against her lips.

“You came to me,” she says as she starts unbuttoning my shirt, and my heart feels like it's about to burst out of my chest. I can’t believe I have the love of my life in front of me, fully aware of who I am.

“I was ready to quit life, Ruin. It is not worth living without you.” Something inside me snaps as I conjure those words. The thought of losing her is too much to bear, and I need to bury it immediately. We’re past that. We’re here now. Together.

I finish undoing the zipper and help her out of the dress. Ruin is a vision in a scarlet red lace bra and matching panties.

“You look delectable, baby girl,” I say as I feel my mouth watering at the sight—her perky tits, her nipples hard as pebbles, peaking through the lacy bra. I remove my shirt and make quick work of my pants and shoes, socks flying off, too. We kiss each other with hunger and need. I don’t think we can make it to my bedroom on the second floor, so I walk us to the living room, where a large rug sits in front of the fireplace. I help Ruin lie down on the rug and look for the remote to turn on the fireplace.

“This is so romantic, Gio,” Ruin says as she opens her legs for me. I crawl to her, enjoying the way she’s looking at me. There is no doubt in my mind—we are soulmates, in this life and all the rest.

I place myself on top of her and search her eyes.

“Yes, Gio. I’m ready. I want you.” I release a breath, knowing I have her consent, and nibble at her lower lip. She moans as her hands go to my ass. I create a trail of kisses from her lips and neck to her collarbone, where there’s a huge scar—a reminder of what she went through. I kiss the scar, making peace with the fact that the accident not only broke her but also me.

I continue my exploration of Ruin’s body, and when I reach her breasts, I rip her bra off. My dick grows harder at the sight of her rosy nipples—hard and ready to be sucked. I get to work, and the more I suck and nibble, the louder Ruin gets. If only she knew what her little sexy noises do to me. I pay the same attention to her other nipple, and she starts to move her hips, trying to find release. I get the memo and make my way from her chest to her core. Ruin moans in appreciation, and I remove her panties with my teeth.

“Blue, you’re so damn sexy when you get all feral.” She purrs, and I wink at her. Then I open her folds with my hands as I start playing with her clit. Her hips buck, and I enter her with a finger, then two. I lap and suck her clit as my fingers pump in and out of her pussy, her sweet juices covering my fingers.

“Gio, I’m so close,” she pants, and I pick up speed. As soon as I nibble at her clit, she comes undone for me. Seeing Ruin climax is the most amazing thing I’ve ever witnessed; her face glows, and her smile is wide. She’s the perfect picture of bliss.

Once she has come down from the high, I lie down next to her. “Are you ready for more?” I ask with a smile.

“Yes, please.” She grabs my cock, and I climb on top of her.

“Should I get a condom?” I ask, and she frowns. “I don’t want you to feel uncomfortable,” I tell her honestly.

“I haven’t been with anyone since you,” she says, hurt in her eyes.

“Me either. I just wanted to be sure you knew you had options. I can go get a condom, no problem, or we can go bare.”

She releases a breath as she kisses me. “I don’t want anything between us, Blue.”

I smile into our kiss as I feel her guiding me inside her heat. The moment I’m inside her, we moan in unison—I feel my soul being put back together, and I’m sure she feels the same way. I start moving slowly, enjoying the way we’re connected. I kiss her gently and unhurriedly; I want to take my time, enjoying this moment—a moment I thought I would never have again.

Ruin presses her nails into my ass, and I pick up the pace. I don’t want this to be over just yet; it feels too good to be inside her. When her walls start to clench, I move us around, putting Ruin on top. She rides me like she was born to do this. Her hair is a wild mess, cascading down her shoulders, giving me a peek of her tits. I rise and grab a nipple with my lips as Ruin rides me faster—she’s panting and moaning, and I can’t hold on much longer. I’m about to explode. My thumb finds her clit, and I start making circles. I know the moment she comes because my cock is squeezed by her walls, and I jump off the proverbial cliff with her. She lies down on top of me, and by the fire, we let our souls find their way to each other.

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“Thank you,” Ruin says as she traces circles with her finger on my chest. We’re lying by the fire after making love and enjoying the quietness of the house.

“What for?” I ask, placing a kiss on the top of her head.

“For everything. Ever since I met you, you have made it your mission to take care of me, to make me your priority. Thank you.”

“Thank you for choosing me, twice.” She giggles, and I hug her closer to me.

“I know we can laugh now, but when you were hurt in the hospital, I was back in Raleigh with my heart broken and no way of knowing if you were going to be okay.” I close my eyes and remember those days full of anguish and desperation.

“And you came to Azalea Creek?”

“I did,” I tell her as the memories of that day play in my head. “I went into Rosebay Apothecary, and Miss Dorothy, who I didn’t know at the time, told me she didn’t know you. But then she called River, and he told me about the accident and asked me to stay away.”

“Oh, so that’s why she wanted to apologize earlier at the festival?” Ruin asks, and I nod. “Huh, I wonder why she didn’t tell you,” she continues as she drapes her leg across mine. Her knee lands on top of my dick, which immediately perks up.

“I think everyone was trying to protect you. Plus, she didn’t know who I was to you. I didn’t say I was your boyfriend. I just said I was looking for you.” Ruin nods as if it

makes sense.

“Then, after talking to River and Rain, they agreed to let me see you in the hospital. You were in a coma, and it broke my heart to see you enduring so much pain. But when I touched your hand, you woke up and freaked out at the mere sight of me. The doctors had to come in and sedate you again, and pretty much warned me to not come back and disturb you.” I retell the story of one of the hardest days of my life.

“Oh, Gio. I’m so sorry. I don’t remember that, at all! I wish it would have been different. You know how much I love you, and I’m sorry for having caused you all that pain,” Ruin says, her hand covering my cheek.

“You don’t need to apologize, sweetheart. Your brain was in protective mode, trying to give your body time to heal.” I turn my face and place a kiss on her palm.

“Anyway, I’m glad we were able to find each other. There were many sleepless nights when I wondered if I had left someone in Raleigh, and if I did, why hadn’t he come to see me. My brain was a mess, and I thought my life was over. As much as I love spending time with my family and living near them, I don’t want to be a waiter for the rest of my life, you know?” She sighs, and I start playing with her hair, running my fingers through it.

“I know, sweetheart. It was a dark time for all of us, but as you said, we’re past it. And it goes without saying, you have my full support for whatever you want to do next. If it’s going back to school in Raleigh, we’ll make it happen. If you want to stay here and find something else that gives you joy, we’ll make it happen. Whatever it is you want to do next, we’ll make it happen. Together.” She lifts her head, and when I look at her eyes, I see they’re misting over.

“No more tears, unless they are happy tears, baby girl.” She chuckles, and I turn us over, getting on top of her and burying myself inside my favorite place. All night

long.

Chapter 38

Ruin MacAllister

Last night was epic. Being with Gio is out of this world: his kisses, his touch, the weight of his body on top of mine. Our breathing entangled into one. After the third round, my back was starting to hurt, so we moved to his bed and continued talking and making love. It was something we both needed to satiate our bodies and souls.

I woke up half an hour ago and found Gio's side of the bed cold. For a moment, I panicked and thought everything had been just a dream, but then the smell of bacon and eggs drew me out of the bedroom.

After getting dressed, I find a very sexy man making breakfast, his bare back on full display, with a pair of gray sweatpants hung low on his waist.

"Good morning," I say as I hug him from behind.

"Good morning, sweetheart," he replies, turning to give me a toe-curling morning kiss. "Ready to eat?"

"I'm starving," I say with a grateful smile when I see all the ingredients for my special pumpkin-spiced cocoa on the counter. I get to work on the cocoa while Gio plates our food. It feels like no time has passed since those days I spent at his place before the holidays.

"Don't think I haven't noticed how good you look in my shirt. I'm just making a herculean effort to let you eat before I can have you for dessert." My core immediately throbs, and I have to press my legs together to find some relief.

We sit down to eat, and I try to act demure, resisting the urge to gobble up the food so Gio can make good on his promise. Just then, his phone pings with a notification. He frowns at first, but once he sees who the message is from, he smiles and passes the phone to me.

Rain: Morning, lovebirds. Mama is making stew for dinner tonight. You two better show up on time and without any visible hickeys.

I crack up and look at Gio to see what he wants to do.

“If Mama MacAllister is making a special Sunday dinner, we better go.” He shrugs like it’s the most natural thing in the world to have dinner with my family, and I love him a little bit more for it. I send a quick text back to Rain, letting her know we’ll be there. After taking a sip of my cocoa, I look Gio in the eyes.

“I’m trying really hard here to not be jealous about the fact that you text my sister, but I don’t even own a phone anymore.” Gio stops mid-chew and swallows the bite of food in his mouth.

“Ruin, I never had any non-sisterly thoughts toward Rain. The only reason I have her phone number, and River’s and Miles’ too, is because I’ve been in contact with them ever since your accident. She told me about the accident and about the doctor’s instructions not to tell you about your past. Trust me, sweetheart. I wanted to tell you who I was from the very first moment I saw you at the diner, but knowing what the doctor had recommended, I decided to follow the rules and pray like hell that you would fall in love with me again.”

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I know he's being sincere. I see it in his crystal blue eyes. I stand up from my chair and sit on his lap.

"I know, Gio. I know you love me as much as I love you. And you're right about following the doctor's orders. I think I'd have done the same if the roles were reversed."

He releases a deep breath, and I kiss him on the cheek. I grab a piece of bacon from his plate and take a bite.

"Hey, I gave you your own bacon," he says, fake indignation in his tone.

"Oh, yeah? And what are you going to do about it?" I say with a smirk as Gio gets up from the chair with me in tow and walks back to his room. He tries to take the bacon from my hand, and I giggle. We make good use of our time before dinner with the family.

"Mama, they're here!" Miles shouts when Gio and I step inside the house.

I smile at Miles and whisper to Gio, "I'm going to go change real quick. I'll be right back."

He kisses me and goes to say hi to Miles and the rest of my family.

When I walk inside my room, Rain is waiting for me with a shit-eating grin on her face and petting Cobalt, who's wiggling his tail at me. I go and pet him a bit before I speak to my sister.

“What?” I ask, trying to play innocent, but my sister is not having it.

“What do you mean, what? How was it?” she asks, bursting with excitement. I chuckle at her eagerness.

“It was a perfect night.” I say simply before grabbing a clean dress and underwear.

“That’s it? I need details.” She pouts, and I throw my head back in laughter.

“Yes, Rain. That’s it. I’m not going to share any private details.” She huffs in frustration, and I roll my eyes at her.

“Okay, fine. But at least tell me—was it better in the van or at his place?” I shake my head. I can’t believe Rain, but then again, it’s Rain—there have never been secrets between us.

“If you must know, nothing happened in the van. But last night sure made up for the lost time.” Rain kicks her feet in the air, and I laugh all the way to the bathroom.

“Hi, Mama.” I hug her as soon as I enter the kitchen. “This smells delicious, thank you for inviting Gio over.”

She hugs me back and says, “Oh dear, I’m so happy you remembered him. I’ve been praying for that to happen. He truly loves you.” I smile at her. I know he does.

I help Mama set the table and bring the food in. Once everything is ready, I go to the living room to let everyone know dinner is served. From what Gio has shared, I know he talks to my siblings, but what I see when I walk into the room is four friends chatting as if they’ve known each other forever. Warm, fuzzy feelings wash over me as I watch Gio so at ease with my family. It feels like he belongs here with me.

“River, why don’t you bless the food?” Mama says, and he nods.

“Thank you, good Lord, for this food that Mama has cooked for us. We thank you for giving Ruin her memories back and for letting her find love in Gio. Amen.” I squeeze Gio’s leg under the table, and he winks at me. I can tell this means the world to him, going from having only his siblings in his life and both living far away to having my entire family loving him and supporting him.

“Thank you,” I mouth to River, who gives me a curt nod.

Dinner starts quietly, with everyone enjoying the delicious stew and warm, buttery cornbread, until Miles breaks the silence.

“Hey, Granny, I was wondering which one of us is next to find love.” We all chuckle, but I can tell he is asking genuinely.

“You don’t need to worry about that. You’re not next in line.” Miles whines, faking annoyance, but I see how Granny looks at Rain. Maybe she’s next?

“Okay, okay. I want to hear from Ruin,” Mama says, and everyone settles down. “What do you remember, dear?” I give her a warm smile as I straighten my shoulders and wipe my mouth with my napkin.

“I think everything is back. I mean, I remember everything about Gio.” Miles and Merlin snicker, and River smacks their heads with the napkin. Mama gives them her no-nonsense look, and River murmurs an apology. I look at Gio, and he’s smiling at the situation.

“It’s funny we’ve been dating for a couple of months, but everything came rushing back to me last night as I was singing a song I sang to him while we were at his beach house.” River opens his eyes wide, half shocked, half terrified to know my

dirtysecrets. I laugh but cover my mouth. “Anyway, I remember being in Raleigh and coming home to see you all.” I place my hand on Gio’s leg, and his hand immediately covers mine. “I remember Daddy’s accident now,” I say as I swallow the lump in my throat.

Gio gives me a gentle squeeze, and I breathe in his scent, immediately calming down.

“And now that you have your memories back, what do you want to do?” River asks, and I take a deep breath.

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“I honestly don’t know yet. I know studying and living in Raleigh was a big dream of mine, but now...” I trail off as I look into Gio’s eyes and get lost in the vastness of his love.

“There’s no rush for you, sweetheart. You don’t need to figure out your life after less than twenty-four hours of getting your memories back,” Gio says, giving a pointed look to River. I cover my mouth with my napkin to keep River from seeing the grin on my face. I don’t think anyone has ever spoken to River like that.

“What I would suggest—if you’re okay with it, of course—is to start easing you back into your life.”

I frown at Gio’s words, and he smiles.

“Well, for starters, I think we need to get you a phone ASAP. That way you won’t be jealous of your sister texting me.” The table explodes in laughter, and I smack Gio’s arm with the back of my hand. I can feel the heat rising through my neck.

“Aww, Ruru. Were you jealous this morning? I’m sorry, but your boyfriend is right. If you had a phone, I’d have texted you instead. As nice as Gio is, he’s not my type.” Rain shrugs, and I smile, joining in the lightness of the moment.

“I’m sorry, Ruin. I was the one who said it was best not to let you have a phone. I guess I took it to heart to shield you from your memories,” River says, not meeting my gaze. An uncomfortable silence falls on the table, and I know I need to help my brother stop blaming himself for everything once and for all.

“River, I know you did it because you thought it was what was best for me. But I’m an adult, remember? If I had really wanted a phone or to go back to Raleigh, I’d have done it. But I decided to follow the doctor’s suggestion, as well, so please don’t blame yourself for this. As much as I understand you shielding me from Gio and everything that he means to me, I’m thankful he came back for me. Honestly, I don’t think I could have forgiven you if I had lost him.” I wait for him to lift his gaze, and when he does, I smile. His smile is crooked, but it’s there.

“Gio, perhaps you have a sibling you can introduce to our Rain?” Granny blurts out of the blue, and everyone cracks up, effectively breaking the heavy moment. Rain groans, and Gio laughs so hard I think his eyes are watering.

“Sadly Granny, my only brother is happily married. But maybe there’s a friend of his who’s still single. I’ll make sure to ask.”

Granny nods as she continues eating, and Gio wipes his eyes with the back of his hand. It looks like Rain wants to protest, but she thinks better of it and goes back to eating as well.

“Wait, what about a sister? Maybe you have a sister you can introduce me to?” Miles asks in a hopeful tone, and Gio turns serious. I know how much he loves Isa.

“Well, it just so happens my sister met the love of her life this summer. So she, too, is off of the market.” Miles shakes his head in defeat, and I go rigid. I hate that I’ve missed so much.

“She did? Who is he?” I ask, anxious to know everything I’ve missed. Gio smiles brightly before saying, “She went to spend the summer in Italy with Gabo, Karina’s brother, and well, I guess they clicked.”

“Aww, I’m so happy for them. Hopefully, we’ll get to visit them soon.”

Gio nods as he places a kiss on my head. “Yes, he treats her like a princess. They went through a lot this summer, but I think things are looking up for them now. I need to fill you in on everything that went down. We need to talk to them—my entire family, really. I haven’t had a chance to share the good news yet. I can’t wait for them to meet you as my girlfriend.” I grin from ear to ear at his words.

After coffee and apple pie, we all sit in the living room to chat, and laughter carries us into the night. When Granny gets up and hugs us goodnight, Gio stands up, too, and I immediately miss him. I don’t want to go to bed without him.

“Ready to go, sweetheart?” Gio extends his hand to me, and I grab it happily.

“You’re leaving, dear?” Mama asks in a surprised tone, but when she sees the happiness pouring out of me, her gaze softens, and she comes over to hug us.

“I’m happy you found your way back to each other. But please don’t be strangers. This is your home, too.” I love that my mom included Gio in this hug and her blessing. I’m sure he feels a little lighter about asking me—without asking me—to move in with him.

“I’m going to go pack a few things and get Cobalt. I won’t take long,” I tell Gio as I head to my room to pack as much as I can.

Chapter 39

Gio Bianchi

It’s been two weeks since Ruin moved in with me, and waking up next to her every morning has been pure bliss. When I asked her to come home with me after dinner at her family’s place, I wasn’t sure if she would understand my intentions. I thought maybe she’d think I was inviting her just for the night, but the understanding Ruin

and I share should have told me that she would grasp the meaning.

She packed her clothes, we moved things around in the master bedroom to make it ours, and the farmhouse became our home. The next day, she got a phone, and we drove to Raleigh, where she met with her school friends and former housemates. Everyone was shocked to hear her story, but no one batted an eye when they saw us holding hands. I guess we had been less than subtle all along.

I thought it would be hard for her to return to campus, but she was relaxed and happy the entire time we were there. We spent the night at my house in Raleigh, and when I asked her if she wanted to return to Wolfe, she surprised me when she said no.

“I think my priorities and dreams have changed,” she said, causing my heart to sink for a moment.

“After everything I’ve been through, I have developed a deep admiration for people who help others get back on their feet—physically and mentally. I think that’s what I want to do next. I want to help people the way I was helped. I know you were a big part in healing my heart and my soul, but the mountains helped, too,” she said, her eyes shining bright with the light of a new dream.

“Maybe we need to look into opening a safe haven for people who need to find themselves,” I said, knowing in my heart that I’d support her dreams and whatever brought her happiness.

“Would you do that for me?” she asked as she sat on my lap.

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“The world is your oyster, baby girl. I’ll make sure of that.”

“Oh, Gio. You’re too good to me,” she says, hugging me. I hug her back, feeling all the love I have for her seeping through my pores.

“You’ve gone through so much, baby girl. I just want to make sure your life, ours, is as smooth as possible from now on.” Ruin melts in my embrace, and I hug her tighter, if that’s even possible. “I know this is all new and there’s a lot to think about and plan to make this a reality, but have you considered going back to school for something completely different than what you’ve studied so far?”

“Yeah,” she says as she releases a deep breath. “I know there’s going to be lots of changes, and I’ll have to start from zero if I want to become a counselor, but I think it’s worth it, you know?” She removes her arms from around my shoulders, and I immediately miss her warmth. She’s looking at me with those soulful eyes of hers, and I just know she’s going to do amazing things, no matter how long it takes.

“Yeah, baby girl. I know.” I give her a quick peck on the lips as I get up from the couch, carrying her bridal style.

“Gio, what are you doing?” Ruin asks with a nervous laugh, wrapping her arms around my neck again.

“We need to eat before the food gets cold. Then, I have some ideas on how to spend the night.” She giggles all the way to the kitchen, and my heart has never been happier. I get to make my dream girl’s dreams her reality.

On our way back to Azalea Creek, I make a detour, and it takes everything in me not to tell Ruin what we are doing. She had been practicing driving my car from our home to the diner and the grocery store. I want her to have a reliable car so she can feel safe while driving.

“Gio, what are we doing here?” She hesitates when she sees the BMW sign. They have an assembly factory in North Carolina, and I knew this would be the perfect place for Ruin to choose her next ride.

“You’ll see,” I reply as we drive into the factory. After I park, we are greeted by the Vice President of Public Relations.

“Dr. Bianchi, what a pleasure.” He shakes my hand, then Ruin’s, and guides us to a showroom featuring every single BMW model you could ever imagine.

“What are you all looking for?” he asks, and I look at Ruin.

“Her dream car.”

Her eyes grow as big as saucers, not a word coming out of her mouth.

“Excellent. I’ll give you both some time to walk around and see what tickles your fancy.” I nod as I murmur my thanks. Holding Ruin’s hand in mine, I start walking around the showroom.

“What kind of car do you want?” I ask her, and she still doesn’t say anything.

“You don’t like BMWs? We can leave. We don’t need to buy a car here if you’d prefer another brand.”

She stops walking and turns me to face her.

“No, it’s not that. I don’t know, Gio...this is just too much.”

“We’re together, right?”

She nods.

“Then it’s not too much, it’s what every person in a relationship would do. You need a car, we’re getting you a car.”

“But these cars are way too expensive,” she whispers, and I chuckle.

“They’re not that expensive. I’ve seen cars that go for millions.”

Her eyes widen again, and I bite my lip to avoid laughing. She’s so cute when she’s startled.

Slowly, we make our way around the showroom. Ruin sits in most of the cars, letting out plenty of “ohhs” and “ahhs” and repeating, “This is too expensive,” until she finally chooses the BMX XM—a slick, safe SUV model, perfect for her.

“Are you all ready?” The vice president asks as he returns to find us inside the vehicle.

“Ready for what?” Ruin asks, panic rising in her voice.

“For a test drive, or course,” he says simply, and she looks at me expectantly. I give her a reassuring nod, and she takes the fob key from him. This surprises me, considering I practically had to beg her the other day to get behind the wheel to drive us to her family’s place. But maybe all she needed was a little push. I can’t begin to imagine how traumatic that car crash must have been for her—especially after losing her dad the same way years ago.

“Simply follow the blue arrows, Miss. They’ll take you to the test drive zone.”

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I murmur my thanks, and Ruin buckles her seatbelt. I do the same. She squares her shoulders, and after a few deep breaths, she presses the ignition button, and the car purrs to life.

“I got this,” she murmurs to herself, and I give her hand a gentle squeeze. When she looks up at me, I say, “I’m so proud of you.” Right on cue, my girl blushes a pretty shade of pink.

“Oh wow. This is nice,” she says when the console lights up. I have to admit, it’s a cool car. I might have to get one for myself.

“Whenever you’re ready,” I tell her gently, and she shifts the gear to drive. She drives us out of the showroom, and once we are on the test drive road, she takes one more deep breath and starts driving faster. The more laps she does, the more comfortable she gets.

After twenty minutes, she parks the car, turns to face me, and says, “I’m ready.” A huge grin spread across my face as I lean closer and kiss her.

“I knew you could do it. I’m so damn proud of you Ruin,” I tell her, my voice thick with emotion.

“I’m not going to pretend it was easy, or that I almost didn’t back out in the showroom. But whenever I’m with you I feel invincible, and all of my sad memories don’t scare me as much when I know I have the best man in the world cheering me on.”

I kiss her again because I can't believe this is my life. I'm in love with the most amazing woman on Earth, and she loves me back.

"Now there's only one more thing you need," I say, removing my lips from hers, and she frowns.

I take a small velvet box out of my pants pocket. Ruin gasps, and I move my chair back as far as it can go to kneel.

"Ruin, you are the reason I wake up in the mornings and the reason why I go to bed with a smile on my face. You have changed my life for the better, showing me the importance of following my dreams without compromising my happiness. I want to build a safe haven for others with you; I want to help students reach their full potential. But most importantly, I want to build a home and a family with you."

Tears begin to run down her cheeks, and I smile at her while gently wiping them away.

"Would you do me the honor of becoming my wife and be by my side for the rest of our lives?" I ask as I take out a four-carat diamond in an oval cut, mounted on a simple white gold band from the box.

We're still inside the car, and if Ruin says no, it'll be the most uncomfortable moment of my life—not to mention the saddest. I watch her expression shift from surprise to understanding, then awe. And when her gorgeous lips part and she begins to speak, I hold my breath.

"Yes, Gio Bianchi. I'll marry you and be the happiest woman in the world with the most amazing man by my side," she says, tears streaming down her beautiful face. Her hands come up to frame my face, and we share a silent moment, letting our tears flow freely—happy tears, this time.

After a few beats, I place the ring on her finger and hold her neck with my hand, bringing her lips close to mine. I kiss her gently, unhurriedly, showing her all the love and adoration I feel for her.

“But how? When did you get this?” she asks, admiring the big rock that fits perfectly on her finger.

“I got it last year, after our trip to New York.” Her mouth drops open and she wraps her arms around my neck. I wasn’t sure the ring would fit, and I was ready to have it resized, but my guess was correct. The ring fits her perfectly.

“Thank goodness you found me, Gio. Thank you for never giving up on me. On us.”

I breathe her in, thanking my lucky stars and my guardian angel, because the only ruin in this life would have been to have to walk this Earth without her.

“Are you ready to head home?” I ask, trailing kisses down her neck. I know this is a big step for her—not only did we get her a brand-new car, but we also got engaged. I’m such an ass for overwhelming her with so many things at once, but I couldn’t help myself. I want her to have everything her heart desires, and I want her to know she’s mine. The least I can do is distract her with kisses and caresses.

“Keep going, Professor Bianchi. Your ministrations are calming my nerves.” I smile against her skin—she knows me well.

“I’m glad it’s working.” I say as my hands travel down her back and grab her delectable ass.

“Okay, okay. I think we’re done here.” She tries to get away from me, but I don’t care if anyone sees us. We just got engaged, after all. I don’t think anyone would blame me for wanting to be all around this woman.

“Are you sure?” the smirk she gives me makes my dick twitch.

“I mean, I’m ready to drive back home.” She rolls her eyes at me and motions for me to head to my car.

“Yes, ma’am.” I give her one more kiss before getting out of her car.

We drive back to Azalea Creek, and I follow her the entire time. I think she was going forty-miles an hour for the first mile or two, and then she started feeling more comfortable. We cruised down the highway and made it home right before dinner.

She called me from the car and asked if we could share the good news with the family. I chuckled but, of course, agreed—I was just as excited to marry her and tell the entire world that she had said yes.

“Hello, dear Gio. What a pleasant surprise,” Jossie says as she opens the door. Ruin raises her left hand instead of hugging her mama, and Jossie immediately shrieks. Everyone comes quickly to the foyer.

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“What happened? Is Ruin okay?” Miles asks, confused by the commotion. “Oh damn, she’s more than okay. Look at that rock,” he answers himself as Ruin wiggles her fingers at him. Then he shouts, “Rain, come on over. Ruin has something to show you.”

I chuckle at his antics, but I’m happy no one seems to be surprised. I know this has been a crazy year for all of us, and Ruin and I have spent more time apart than together since we met, but it just felt right to ask her to marry me today.

“Oh my. We have a wedding to plan,” Rain says as she and Ruin melt in a hug.

“Where’s Granny and River?” I ask.

“Granny is napping. She’s going to be so pissed she missed this,” Miles says with a grin. “And River is out in the orchard.”

I nod. He’s always working.

“Congratulations, Gio. Welcome to the family. Thank you for loving my girl so much.” Jossie comes to hug me, and I can’t help but feel a lump in my throat. I feel so loved by Ruin’s family, and I can only hope the love of my siblings and their partners is enough to show her we also have a family from my side, too.

“Okay, so details?”

Ruin and I frown at Rain as everyone makes their way to the living room.

“I mean, when are you planning to get married? Where? Details,” Rain explains, and Ruin and I chuckle.

“We got engaged a couple of hours ago. Relax, Raindrop,” Ruin says, and Rain huffs in frustration.

“How can you be so calm? You’re marrying the love of your life,” Rain says as she gets up from the couch.

“I’m calm because I know he’s the love of my life. This is the biggest news of the day but maybe not the only news.”

Everyone looks at us expectantly.

“I drove my own car here,” Ruin announces, clapping her hands. A deafening silence fills the room, and I just hope they don't screw up this moment for her. She’s so proud of herself, and so I am. After a beat, Jossie and Rain are the first to smile and rush over to hug her, while Miles heads to the window.

“Hot damn, that’s your car?”

My girl gets the pretty blush on her face she gets when she’s the center of attention, and she simply nods. I hug her close to me, and she giggles against my chest.

Rain cranes her neck to take a peek at the car and nods. “Yup, it’s the perfect car to go along with that rock, Ru. Good job, Gio.”

She smiles at me, and I return it in kind. There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for Ruin.

“And also—” Ruin starts talking, but Jossie interrupts her.

“What? There’s more?” Jossie holds her chest, and Ruin laughs.

“It’s nothing like that, Mama. I promise. It’s just that I’ve been thinking a lot about what I want to do now that my life is in order. I was talking to Gio about wanting to open a place for people who have been under a lot of stress or have gone through difficult situations like I did. I want to go to school and become a therapist. I envision that place here in the mountains; maybe it’d help others like it helped me.”

My heart bursts with pride for this woman who decided to dedicate her life to helping others overcome hardships. Every time I think there’s no possible way to love her more, she surprises me, and my love for her grows.

When no one else says anything, Ruin starts fidgeting with her hands under the table—a telltale sign she’s nervous. My thoughts go from pride and love to downright murderous. If they make Ruin feel bad about her decision, I’m not sure I can keep it civil. I know my face betrays me, because when I look at River, he clears his throat and says, “Right. Well, even though it’s a surprising change, I have to admit I’m so proud of you, Ruin. Your heart has so much love to give, and I’m sure you’ll help lots of people. I think this is great.”

I nod at him as the others murmur their agreement. My Ruin takes a deep breath and releases it with a big smile on her face.

“I’ve been thinking we can open such a space on part of the land I bought. We can bring in some medical staff to help Ruin and, of course, we can open it once she’s done with school. So there’s no rush, but you are going to have plenty of work for the foreseeable future,” I say as I point to Miles, who gives me a salute.

Not only do I want to build a rehab center for Ruin to run, but I also want to build our dream house, the one she sketched in our bucket list notebook. There’s plenty more to come in Azalea Creek.

Chapter 40

Ruin MacAllister

Eight Months Later

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“I can’t believe I’m marrying my best friend today,” I murmur to myself, still in awe of what’s happening. It feels surreal. In a few minutes, I’ll be walking down the aisle to Gio in front of all our friends and family. I hear Rain’s voice through the bathroom door, a comforting reminder that I’m not alone.

“Hey, are you almost done in there?” she calls out. “You’ve got a big crowd out here waiting for you!”

“Yes, just a second,” I reply, studying my reflection. My thoughts are swirling, but I’m smiling. “Can you believe we’re getting married at the Biltmore? It’s the biggest private house in North America. What is this life!”

“Gio really pulled out all the stops,” she says, a smile in her voice. “Now, get out here, Ruru. I’m sure you look perfect.”

I laugh softly. “Thanks, Raindrop. It feels like a dream.” And she’s right—Gio has spared no expense for our wedding. All of our guests are staying at the Biltmore Hotel, and we’re spending our wedding night in this magnificent place. I never thought any of this would be possible—a small-town girl who’s been welcomed into a whole new world.

These past few months have been busy—returning to school for something completely different from what I’ve studied before has been harder than I anticipated, but Gio has been a great support through it all.

We commute together to school now that he started teaching a couple of classes and try to spend as much time together as possible.

“When do you want to get married?” he had asked me one night.

“Summer,” I’d replied immediately, already imagining it. “We’ll both be on break, and we can take a nice, long honeymoon.”

And now, in just a couple of weeks, we’ll be heading out on a one-month road trip to Italy—one of the items on our bucket list. “I’m so excited to cross it off,” I’d told him while we were planning our little adventure. It took us months, but we have everything mapped out, from stunning places to stay to beautiful ruins and historic sites to visit.

The building for the environmental department got approved in record time, and they’ve been hard at work. I hope it’ll be up and running next year. In the meantime, Gio is doing amazing as a professor, and he even created an environmental club at our local high school. He takes the students on hikes and trips around the mountains and teaches them about our ecosystem and how to enjoy it while protecting it.

Gabo, Gio’s brother-in-law, is an architect and was very excited to help us design the place for my rehab center. I’ve even come up with a name for it: Serene Lookout. I want to make sure we not only offer physical therapy but also mental support. The wounds that can’t be seen are sometimes the hardest to heal. I’m living proof of that.

Gio’s siblings are here, with Luca as his best man and Isabella as one of my bridesmaids. Besides Rain, who is my maid of honor, I really didn’t have many female friends to stand up with me at the altar, so having Isabella and Karina, Luca’s wife, is a big deal for me. I hope we can create a strong bond, even though we live so far apart.

Luca and Karina came with their newborn, and he’s the most precious baby I’ve ever seen. Enzo Bianchi has everyone wrapped around his little finger. My mama and Granny have been hinting not so subtly at Gio and me that they want a baby to take

care of, but I want to finish school before I become a mom. I want to dedicate all the time in the world to our baby. Or babies. I would have a dozen children with Gio, that's for sure.

Gio's friends Vicente and Penny are also here. Vicente will be a groomsman along with Gabo and my brothers, and Penny will be my other bridesmaid. It's funny how, at one point, I thought Gio and Penny had something going on, but once I got to know her, I realized their friendship was genuine.

Penny has visited us a few times at our place in Azalea Creek, and I cackle each time Gio tries to convince her to move closer. "Come on, Penny," he teased last month. "It would be so much easier if you moved here. We could just meet in person instead of over the phone all the time."

Penny scrunched her nose. "Small towns are cute in theory, Gio, but I think I'm just too much and not enough for this place," she replied, pretending to gag at the idea. Her aversion to rural life makes me laugh every time.

Vicente is here by himself, even though originally he had RSVPd for another adult and a child. From what Gio shared, he's seeing a single mom and wanted to introduce her and her daughter to everyone at our wedding. I was excited to meet the woman who finally got the biggest playboy I've ever known to fall on his knees, but I guess we'll have to make a point to visit them in London sometime soon.

"What's the hold up, Ru? Do you need me to get in there and help?" Rain asks from the door, pulling me back to the present. I've been hiding in the bathroom, wanting to have some time to myself. I love having everyone here celebrating our love, but it can be overwhelming to be the center of attention when all you want to do is to marry your best friend.

"No, I'll be out in a second. I promise," I tell Rain as I take one last look in the

mirror. My dress is breathtaking—a chapel-length train flows behind the ivory, handmade boho, A-line design. The illusion top is covered in delicate floral lace that trails down the sides, and the back of the dress is adorned with hundreds of tiny buttons, each fastened with care. An ivory leaf-vine headband rests like a halo on my free-flowing hair. At the center, a small clip shaped like a puzzle piece with the Sol de Mayo at its heart honors both Daddy and Gio—each in their own way. The puzzle piece is for my father, while the sun represents Gio’s heritage and his dedication to environmental causes.

“I miss you, Daddy. Wish me luck,” I whisper.

The moment I walk out of the bathroom, there’s a collective gasp. Right on cue, I feel the heat rising up my chest.

“Oh, my sweet darling, you look stunning.” Mama comes to hug me as her eyes mist over. “Here, I wanted you to have the ‘something old’ from me.” She opens her hand, and I see a beautiful, pearl necklace with a flower pendant. “Here, let me help you put it on.”

I turn and bend my knees so Mama can clasp the pearls around my neck. Once she’s done, I turn and give her another hug, my throat suddenly feeling too tight.

“And I made you a handkerchief as your ‘something blue.’” Isabella, who’s an artist, approaches me and hands me a beautiful silk handkerchief—the blue is the same shade as Gio’s eyes. When I open it, I see she has embroidered our initials and today’s date on it. My eyes immediately water, and I start fanning my face.

“I’m so sorry, I didn’t want to make you cry,” she says, and everyone in the room laughs. I dab my eyes with the handkerchief and give Isabella a big hug.

“Thank you,” I whisper.

“Thank you for loving my brother the way he deserves,” she says as she lets go.

I nod at her, damn tears and emotions clogging my throat.

“He’s the most special man I know,” she says, then hurries to add, “Besides Gabo, of course.” We all chuckle, and then she covers her mouth. “Don’t tell Luca I said that.”

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Karina laughs harder than everyone else, and we all join her.

“Don’t worry, Isa, I know my husband’s worth. Your secret is safe with me.”

We all laugh some more, and once we’ve all calmed down, Penny approaches me.

“I decided to give you ‘something new.’” She takes a black velvet box from her purse and opens it, and when I see what’s inside, I gasp.

“Penny, this is beautiful but I could never accept it.”

It’s a very fancy-looking tennis bracelet.

“Of course, you can,” she says in her no-nonsense tone and makes quick work of putting it on my wrist. “I make a lot of money thanks to your soon-to-be husband. This is just a little something to show my appreciation. I’m so happy he met you.” She holds my wrist as she fights back tears. “Ugh, this is why I don’t like weddings—everyone crying because their happy,” she says, pretending to gag, and another round of laughter fills the room.

Rain hands me a tissue to wipe my tears, and I murmur my thanks.

“I have your ‘something borrowed,’ dear. Your grandfather gave me these earrings on our wedding day.” I hold Granny’s hands in mine and kiss her forehead. She pats my cheeks, and I put the earrings on—simple solitaire diamonds, the perfect touch to complete my look together. The tears start to flow again. At this point, I think I’m going to have to get my makeup redone.

There's a knock on the door, and River peeks inside.

"What are you doing? What if we were naked?" Rain asks, pulling River into the room and quickly locking the door. River rolls his eyes, but when he sees me, he freezes.

"Ruin, you look..." His voice breaks, and I immediately go to hug my brother.

"Are you ready? Everyone is waiting," he says, and I nod without hesitation. Rain fixes my makeup and then opens the door. One by one, my bridesmaids, Mama, and Granny leave the room, each of them blowing me kisses or waving goodbye. I smile, and once River and I are alone, I hook my arm through his.

"Thank you for walking me down the aisle," I tell him as I grab my bouquet and leave the room.

"Wouldn't miss it. It's an honor, Ru," he replies, his voice thick with emotion.

We walk in a comfortable silence, making sure I don't trip down the stairs with the train of my dress. Once we make it to the main doors, River looks at me, and when I nod at him, he signals the wedding planner, and she opens the doors for us.

It's a beautiful summer day, a soft breeze swaying the green leaves on the trees. Our guests are seated on the lawn in front of the Biltmore house. When River and I step outside, the music begins, and everyone stands and turns around. We have over two hundred guests, but the only person I see is Gio. He's standing tall, a beautiful smile on his lips. He's wearing a dark blue suit, which compliments his eyes perfectly.

River and I start walking slowly toward the fountain, where Gio and the priest are standing on a small stage. River shakes Gio's hand and kisses me on my cheek. When it's just Gio and me standing in front of the priest, we smile at each other and say

with our eyes what only our hearts know.

Epilogue

Gio Bianchi

I'm a married man. It's crazy to think this time last year, I thought my life was over and that I had found love just to lose her a couple of months after. Life has been an avalanche of emotions since I met Ruin, but I wouldn't change a thing. Everything we've gone through has led us to this moment, and seeing her now laughing and enjoying herself as she chats with our friends and family is everything I have ever wanted.

"The man of the hour." River comes to greet me, and we shake hands as we do a half-man hug.

"Thank you so much again for walking Ruin down the aisle. I know it meant the world to her." River smiles instead of replying. He's a stoic man, but today, everyone has had their feelings on their sleeves, including the oldest of the MacAllisters. His eyes were shining as he gave me Ruin's hand on the altar.

"You know there's very little I wouldn't do for my siblings. I have never seen my sister this happy; I should be the one thanking you." I know the feeling; there's nothing I wouldn't do for my siblings, but now that they have found their partners, I would be lying if I didn't say I feel my duty is over. Of course, I'll always love them and be there for them when they need me, but my number one priority is the family I'm creating with the redhead who has a matching wedding band.

"No need to thank me. I just hope you can maybe start breathing a little easier now? Look, I understand the urge to help your siblings, but they are adults. You have to trust them."

River stays quiet, impassive for a couple of beats, and I wonder if I overstepped my boundaries, but then he stuns me with a humorless laugh. “I know, Gio. I know I need to start living my life, but the truth is, I don’t know how. I don’t know where to look. All I know is in Azalea Creek and the orchard.” He shrugs as he drifts off and gets lost in thought. A heavy silence falls upon us, and before I can break it, River changes topics.

“Ruin told me your naturalization ceremony is coming up. Congratulations are in order. Do we need to throw you a party?”

An easy laugh breaks free from my chest, and River joins in.

“Thank you. And no need to throw a party. Being an American citizen is an honor, and I’m glad I don’t need to worry about renewing my green card ever again.”

“What are you two doing over here?” Ruin comes behind me and wraps her arms around my waist.

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“Just chatting,” River says, giving his sister a genuine smile. “I’ll leave you to it.” He nods his head in a salute and goes to mingle with our guests.

“It’s everything okay?” Ruin asks as she turns to face me, and my hands go to her waist. I start swaying us to the rhythm of the string quartet playing during cocktail hour.

“Of course, we were just chatting.” She gives me that bright smile that I love, and I continue speaking, “I was just thanking him for walking you down the aisle. You were a vision, baby girl.” I lean down and graze my lips with hers. That familiar sensation of wholeness that I feel whenever I’m with her invades my body, and I’m not sure I’ll ever be more in love than I am right now.

“Do you know what I was thinking?” I shake my head, and Ruin continues talking while I rub her arms. “Maybe what River needs is to find love, you know?” I nod at her and wonder if there’s anyone I know who I could introduce him to.

“Maybe Penny?” I say, and Ruin chuckles at me.

“No way. I mean, I love her but she’s a little too much for River.”

I smile as I see said friend chatting animatedly with Miles.

“You’re right, we need to find someone more River’s speed. But I’m not sure who.”

“Maybe we can ask Luca and Karina? Maybe they know someone,” Ruin says as her hands start traveling down my back, and I inhale deeply.

We continue to dance around the gardens, which are in full bloom. The cocktail hour is in full swing and I can't wait to dance the night away with my bride and then take her to our room and make love to her all night long.

"Do you think people would notice if we head back to the house for a moment?" Ruin asks, a smirk spreading her plump lips. It's like our brains are connected or something. What are the odds that both of us are thinking about sex at the same time?

"Are you suggesting what I think you are, Mrs. Bianchi?" I tell her, and she immediately squirms. Yup, we both have our heads in the gutter.

"Wait, do you have a thing for me calling you Mrs. Bianchi?" I ask, half surprised, half aroused.

"You have no idea," Ruin says as she places her hand on the back of my neck, bringing me closer to her. The moment I taste her lips, all bets are off, and even though we're in public, I want to devour my wife. But before we get lost in each other, I break the kiss. After clearing my throat and adjusting my raging erection in my pants, which elicits a giggle in Ruin, I kiss the back of her hand as I walk over to the string quartet.

"Attention everyone." All eyes are on me, and I immediately regret this idea. "It has been brought to our attention that there are a few more pictures Mrs. Bianchi and I need to take, the cocktail hour will be extended a while longer."

Luca explodes in laughter, immediately recognizing my lame excuse to go have sex with my wife. Karina smacks him on the chest and murmurs something in his ear, and whatever it is calms him fast. I'm sure it has some sex connotation because I don't think there are many things my brother loves more than giving me shit.

"Okay. That would be all, thanks." I head back back to where Ruin is waiting for me, avoiding eye contact with any of the guests. I don't know why I'm so weird about

this—I just want to have sex with my wife. It’s not a bad thing or anything. As we start making our way from the garden to the Biltmore House, one of the photographers approaches us.

“Mr. Bianchi, where do you want the pictures taken?” She gives us a pleasant smile while Ruin’s eyes are sparkling with mischief.

“Yes, Mr. Bianchi. Where do you want more pictures taken?” Ruin asks, and my dick throbs in my pants. I love it when she plays along.

“Actually, I’ll give you ten thousand dollars if you go take a one-hour break in one of the rooms and sign an NDA.” The photographer's expression transforms, and she gives us a knowing smile.

“Of course. Believe it or not, this is not uncommon.”

Ruin pulls my arm to stop me. “Are you insane? Ten thousand dollars?”

It’s my time to smirk. “Baby girl, I’d give my fortune away if that means I get to keep you forever.”

Ruin rolls her eyes at me as we start walking again. “You silly man. You have me already.”

“Trust me, I know.” I lick her earlobe, and goose bumps rise on her arms. “But you didn’t let me finish.”

She places her pointer finger on my lips, and I chuckle. Once inside the house, I help her up the stairs with her gown’s train. It’s a beautiful, handmade dress, but I’m glad she got another dress for the reception. This one looks heavy, and I don’t want her shoulder to flare up with pain on our wedding day.

“Actually, there’re a couple of extra pictures I’d like to have taken,” Ruin says to the photographer as we reach our room. The photographer takes her camera in hand. I look at her with a curious smile, and she winks at me.

“Hold me, husband. I want a picture of us entering our room before our wedding night.” I wonder where she’s going with this, but I immediately carry her bridal style. The photographer is quick to take a couple of shots from different angles. As I enter the room with Ruin in my arms, the photographer continues taking pictures—me placing Ruin on the floor, twirling her around, and losing myself in this moment.

“What are we doing?” I whisper to Ruin after she asked me to help her undo the hundreds of buttons on the back of her dress.

“I want to have something physical to look at if, for whatever reason, I lose my memories again. I want to see that face of adoration you have whenever your eyes meet mine. I want to remember the love you have for me, even if it’s through pictures.” Ruin’s voice breaks, and I gently turn her around so she can face me.

“Okay,” the photographer drawls. “I think I’m done here. Let me know when you both are ready to go back downstairs.” I’m too lost in Ruin’s eyes to acknowledge anything else.

“Baby girl, if for some reason you ever lose your memories again, I’ll be right by your side to remind you. I’m not going anywhere,” I tell her as I help her get out of her dress. Gently, I run my fingers through her waist until they reach her back, and I cup her ass.

“Promise?” Ruin asks in a breathy tone, letting me know she’s ready for me to take her.

“I swear, Ruin Bianchi. You are lodged in my heart and my soul.”