



Pomegranate Kiss

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Description: Lex loves girls just as much as she loves to leave 'em. However, when she discovers her fellow bridesmaid Camilla is none other than her last hookup, Lex is tempted for more. Except Cam's claiming she's straight, even though those moans during their night together told a different story.

Lex offers a proposal: six months of no-strings-attached exploration leading up to the wedding.

Cam hasn't been able to get Lex off her mind, which is even tougher now that they're together all the time. She should be focused on the future she's chasing, but the gorgeous tattoo artist makes good on her proposal, and every stolen kiss, late night conversation, and hint of vulnerability have Cam questioning her resolve.

All too fast, the wedding looms, but Cam doesn't want this to end. Yet when the secret she's been holding back comes to light, she may not get the choice.

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Chapter One

Lex was on lucky IPA number three, and the alcohol wasn't cutting it.

She had social skills—in the same way a screaming pygmy goat did. However, her repertoire consisted of getting women into a stall at the club, into the back of her Challenger, or if they were really lucky and the need ran too hot—into their beds.

Said repertoire didn't consist of any skills for a casual how-d'ya-do to the woman she last finger-fucked in the women's bathroom of Notes Nightclub. And Danny's best friend Camilla, or Cam as she affectionately called her, had been avoiding Lex. She was one hundred percent sure.

Lex leaned over the railing of the deck behind Adrian's house, staring out at the grassy expanse of the picket-fence perfect she'd always imagined for her big brother. Never her.

“Look, I know scowling's your default mode, but the storm clouds emanating off you right now are a massive buzzkill, sis.” Matty mouthed off from behind her.

The pain in the ass kept trying to get her to work at the Gin Mill again, despite the fact she needed to move forward. Her time in a cell had been the splash of rancid water in the face to get off her ass. Bell had been good enough to let her continue her apprenticeship tattooing for Inkspiration, and she was determined to see that the rest of the way through.

Lex lifted her middle finger. “Fuck off, nosy. Maybe all this hearts and flowers shit

makes me cranky. Doesn't mean I'm not happy as hell for Saint Adrian and the spitfire who'll keep him on his toes. They'll be perfect together."

"Yeah, how dare true love interrupt your schedule of clandestine hookups," Matty shot back, a grin on his lips and a wicked glint in his gaze.

The sun began to set, hazy peach and tangerine streaks threading across the horizon. Lex's heart thundered in her chest. She shouldn't be bothered by his comment—it was true and something she touted loud and clear. Yet, every time she watched the warm shared glances between her parents and now the loving nudges between Adrian and Danny, her stomach twisted. Lex tilted back her bottle of IPA, the sharp flavor settling on her tongue.

"Hey, Matty, you mind if I cut in?" Danny's voice rang out behind them. Lex pivoted around to lean against the railing, her elbows scuffing against the wooden beams. Danny strode toward her, her wavy copper hair glistening like flame that didn't hope to outshine the glow emanating from her all night.

Cam walked in behind Danny, and Lex's traitor heart started marching at a faster beat. The woman looked as stunning as she had that first night at the club, crimson on her lips and her thick, dark hair pulled into a careful plait. Her apple cheekbones and sharp chin set off her petite face, and her smooth, tawny skin looked delicious. Everything about her was smoothed around the edges and under control, from the lack of wrinkles on her maroon pants to the pristine state of the cream blouse clinging to her curves. And yet, Cam wouldn't look her in the eye.

Lex stared at her even harder.

Matty lifted a hand and strode off toward the door. "You'd be doing me a favor. Your turn with the Queen of the Underworld."

“If I’m Queen of the Underworld, then you’re one of my underlings, Matty-be-damned,” Lex called back. The door creaked shut, leaving the three of them out there.

Danny chewed on her lip and glanced to the ground. “I’d love it if you’d be my maid of honor. You’re one of the people I’ve known the longest, and those are few and far between for me. Besides, Adrian told me what you and Cal did—how you convinced him to not give up on me.”

A flush burned on Lex’s cheeks, and she tipped back her beer, hoping the cool liquid would counter the attack. The woman combined pure sweetness and sass into one fantastic package, and Danny was one of the few people Lex could always tolerate, even when she sank into one of her moods. Lex leaned down to place her bottle on the ground and opened her arms.

“Come on in, sis,” she said, trying to ignore the emotion that formed a lump in the back of her throat. “I even promise not to grope you, though, damn, you’re gorgeous.”

Danny snorted and closed the distance to throw her arms around her. Lex crushed her into the hug.

“I’d be honored, sweetheart,” Lex murmured into Danny’s ear. No way she’d let her brothers hear her softness hit the air.

When they separated, the grin on Danny’s face was blinding. “Thanks, Lex. You’ll have Nellie and Cam to help, since they’re my other bridesmaids.”

Lex shot Cam an appraising look. Just try to avoid her now.

Cam offered a forced grin. Whatever warmth blazed between them that night had vanished like alcohol at an intervention, and in its place remained this ice queen Lex

didn't recognize.

"Danny, Mom wants to talk to you again," Adrian called from the door. Lex's brother was tall, tanned, and athletic—a clean-cut, successful doctor. The opposite of her tattooed and pierced ass in every way. But the guy possessed a heart made of platinum when it came to his family, and she loved him more than anyone on this planet. Not like she'd ever admit it though.

"Cam, you don't have to deal with more family stuff." Danny clapped a hand on her friend's shoulder. "I'll be right back."

Danny bolted before Cam could follow, her ponytail a streak of red. The door thumped shut behind her, and Cam closed the distance to come lean against the railing with Lex, the creak echoing in the air.

"Suppose I'll be needing your number now," Lex murmured, not bothering to hide the heat in her voice. "You know. For bridesmaid shit."

Cam exhaled a sigh. "Just for bridesmaid stuff," she warned, a sharp edge to her voice. The woman's dark eyes were unreadable, but all the coldness only made Lex blaze hotter.

"Based on the way you begged that night, I'm positive I wasn't too bad," Lex kept her voice low, huskiness creeping in. "Avoid me all you like, but it's not like I'm knocking down your door begging for a relationship."

Cam hunched forward on the railing, her elbows digging deep as she speared her fingers through her hair. "Have I been that obvious?"

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“Painfully,” Lex responded with a half-grin. Her claws crept out during this conversation, her defenses rising with the woman’s odd behavior, nothing like the night they met.

“Look, I’m sorry if I’ve misled you, but I’m not gay, bi, or whatever.” Cam said, turning to face her. Her eyes flashed with pure seriousness, but Lex couldn’t wrap the cords around her laugh.

“So not-gay you let another woman eat you out in a dirty bathroom stall while you moaned loud enough the club music almost didn’t cover it up. Which I loved, mind you.” Lex pursed her lips, clarity settling over her. She’d witnessed the behavior a thousand times over with Matty, how he froze and lashed out the moment anyone made an insinuation.

Cam’s lips pressed firm together. “I was having an off night and needed an escape. Like I said, I didn’t mean to mislead you.”

Lex crossed her arms, the railing pressing into her back. Her brows lifted. “Have you given it a fair shake, or did you decide the pressure would be too much to deal with? Because let me tell you, I could do things to that gorgeous body a guy’s never going to be able to.”

Cam’s cheeks flushed, a dusky color against her bronze skin. Lex’s core pulsed at the first reaction from the woman beyond pure ice, a sign their initial encounter hadn’t been some lust-hazed, imagined thing.

“It’s not something I can pursue,” Cam said, her gaze glued to the horizon. The guilt-

covered clouds burst with the final remnants of sunset. A couple of dark strands curled against her cheek, her neck, and Lex resisted the urge to brush them away. “Besides, you don’t seem like the type for anything more than one night, so I don’t know why you give a damn.”

Lex chewed on the inside of her cheek. The woman wasn’t wrong. Yet she was a puzzle begging to be solved, and when it came to a challenge, Lex couldn’t resist. Whether stupid pride, burning curiosity, or something other she refused to acknowledge spurred her, she didn’t fucking know. “Humor me for a second,” Lex said. “It’d be a damn shame for you to shut the door tight after having a mere fraction of the experiences you could enjoy.”

Cam lifted her perfectly carved brow.

“I’m not here to interrupt your quest for the perfect man, but we’re going to be spending a ton of time up close and personal while we’re prepping for Danny and Adrian’s wedding. So, if you want to do some experimenting and get a real taste, I’ll even bend my one-night rule.” Lex licked her lips, soaking in the sight of Cam’s lean figure, her soft skin and muscular legs, ones she wouldn’t mind wrapped around her again.

Cam let out a breath and shot her a glance. “Bending your rules for the lost, potentially bi-curious? How benevolent.”

“Can’t keep these gifts to myself,” she shot back, a grin rising to her face at the woman’s sarcasm. “That’d be selfish.” Lex leaned closer to nudge her in the side with her hip. “Plus, I’m heartless, so if you decide the thrill’s not worth the problems that might follow, you won’t need to worry about hurting any feelings.”

“You’re selling this hard,” Cam responded, but she didn’t move away, their hips still touching. “Either you’re in a dry spell, or you want me real bad.”

“There’s not an overwhelming amount of hotties in Charleston, and I keep tabs on those willing to spread their legs for me,” Lex responded. She leaned down to pick her beer up and take a swig.

“Damn, you’re cocky. Are you sure there’s room for anything else besides your ego?” Cam’s eyes glittered. Her dry barbs revved Lex’s engine like they had the first time they met. Despite Cam’s lofty claims of having an off night, if Lex had to place a bet, that hadn’t been the first time she’d experimented.

“Probably not.” She leaned one elbow against the railing, facing Cam. Her whole body lit at the proximity, and the delicate scent of roses consumed her. The woman tried to avoid her gaze, but Lex devoured every slip her way. She ran the tip of her tongue over her pointed tooth. “My ego’s insatiable.”

Cam let out a belabored sigh and shot her a direct look. “Your ego’s something all right.”

The door creaked open, and Danny appeared again. She ducked her head and lifted a beer in triumph. “I’ve escaped—at least for now.”

“Give it five seconds,” Lex responded. “Someone in my family will need something and your fiancé will zoom to the rescue, dragging you into the mix.” She tried to ignore the tug of disappointment. Cam had already taken a step away from her.

“I’ll leave the rescuing to Adrian. He’s got kittens and grandmas to charm,” Danny responded, plunking beside Cam along the perfect leaning spot. She tipped back her drink. “I’ve got plenty of planning to do anyway. Hope you ladies don’t mind a shorter timeline for this wedding thing.”

“What sort of timeline are you thinking of?” Cam asked, avoiding Lex’s stare.

“Six months should do the trick. I’ve had my life on hold for so long, I don’t want to waste any more time.” Danny wrinkled her nose, her green eyes darkening. She always got quieter at the mention of her past. From when she was Sam Peterson, girl in WitSec on the run from her murderer father, not the woman she’d become, Danny Reynolds, gardener extraordinaire and now fiancée of Adrian Dukas.

Lex tugged out her phone and placed it on the railing in front of Cam. “Better get your number then, bridesmaid. We’ve got some coordinating to do.”

Cam let out an annoyed huff. The look she passed her was pure, simmering acid. Lex’s wicked grin widened in response. She’d take the irritation over ice any day of the week. Despite Cam’s reaction, she picked up her phone and punched her number in.

The door creaked open behind them again. “Leeeeex, Mom wants your help,” Nell called from the doorway. Her little sister’s blonde hair had been pulled back into a low chignon, and between the pink lipstick and her lavender swing dress, Nell was the epitome of femme. Too bad the man she had chosen to appreciate it forevermore was a supreme douche. The entire family hated her husband Greg.

Lex heaved a sigh, slipped her phone back in her pocket, and lifted her now-empty beer. Perfect timing, she’d grab another. “My turn now.”

Even though she wanted to spend more time out here flirting, now that Danny had returned, Cam would frost over again. Especially if she was as conflicted as she seemed—clinging to the closet would be her go-to.

She strode inside and the wall of sound greeted her. Out there lay a temporary peace, the quiet chirps of birds, the whistle of the wind, and the slight chill in the air. In here was a blast of heat, the rich scents of her mother’s home-cooked fisherman’s stew, and the chatter from their large family turning Adrian’s spacious home into a

barnyard hoedown.

Her mom sat on the couch in Adrian's living room with Danny's mother. The two were already becoming fast friends, but truth be told, Thaisa Dukas could befriend anyone, from the person behind her in the checkout line to the waitresses at Hanahan's main diner. Lex's chest squeezed tight at the sight of her mom leaning back in the couch, her curls pinned back and fire engine red on her lips. Joy crinkled the corners of her eyes that the oldest in the family inspired. Lex had only ever garnered disapproval. She'd stumbled from one mess to another, and despite the soft disappointment in her mother's eyes, Thaisa Dukas still supported her every step of the way.

"Alexis, would you do me a favor and pull the cake out?" Mom called, the warmth in her voice like coming home. When she'd spent her time locked up, the weekly family dinners were what she'd missed the most.

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“You’ve got it,” Lex said, offering a salute as she made her way to the kitchen. Adrian and Cal chatted with Dad in the dining room while Matty skulked around in the background, trying to avoid conversations almost as much as her. Nellie bustled into the kitchen, yanking out silverware and plates to help.

Lex’s phone buzzed, and she tugged it out. Cam had texted her.

You’ve got six months.

Lex’s lips curled into a grin. Game on.

Chapter Two

Giving in to Lex had been Cam’s dumbest idea yet.

She chopped up the chicken in front of her, the pale flesh not standing a chance against her sharpened knife. Cam channeled the force and fury of the maelstrom in her head into the smooth motion, the slabs of meat fast turning into diced cubes. The rest of the ingredients for this twist on chicken marsala lined the marble countertop of the Horntree manor, yet another meal to cook for this hellacious family.

Back when she’d dropped out of art school, she’d fallen hard on her culinary skills, and for a time, she’d been able to appreciate the creativity. However, the longer she worked in the field—the longer she worked here—the more the enjoyment ebbed until it leached away the color from tasks she once enjoyed. Danny was the sole thing keeping her afloat most days.

She'd sank into the monotony of her cycle—working during the day, swiping right on Tinder to go on dates at night, which ended up being one failure after another. Truth be told, most of the men she met were wallpaper-paste boring.

None of them electrified her like Lex. She tried denying it these past six months, yet the memories of Lex's strong arms around her refused to dissipate. Cam had savored every second of that night, the scent of campfire and wine she breathed with every heavy inhale, the live wire sensations of those lips on her neck, and those skillful fingers against her clit. She'd never had a more intense experience in her life.

Hence why giving in to Lex was a terrible idea. Cam couldn't be gay. She couldn't. She'd attended so many services at the mosque where the imam would deliver fiery sermons about the sins of homosexuality, and her parents would stand there, heads bobbing in agreement. She loved her parents despite all of that—they'd been patient teachers, kind guides, and supported her even when she dropped out of school.

Shame colored her cheeks that she blamed on the steam rising from the frying pan as she cooked the chicken in the sauce of marsala wine, chicken broth, and porcini mushrooms. Yet she'd caved to Lex when she should've stood strong. Just because she hadn't met a suitable guy said more about the quality of Tinder than her own tendencies. After all, Danny managed to find the perfect man for her. Maybe if she tried dating someone like Adrian—successful, sweet, and a family man—she'd be happy.

The chicken sizzled, and Cam turned the back boiler off on the rice she cooked to go along with the dish. Her phone buzzed, and her fingers itched on reflex. She gave the chicken another turn with her spatula, the heady aroma of roasted mushrooms, rich Marsala wine, and savory broth hitting the air. Then she checked her phone.

Lex had texted.

Her mouth dried, and she wasn't sure what to do. If she glanced to the text, she'd be tempted to sway, and she'd begin her slippery descent to Jahannam.

Desire gave out.

Meet me at nine tonight at Mount Pleasant Park. Prepare to get dirty.

Cam's cheeks flushed, and this time she couldn't ignore the response. She could imagine the raspy tone Lex would deliver it in, the sharp edge to her words, and the intensity in her eyes. Maybe if she could meet a guy who possessed half of Lex's confidence—half of the cocky swagger she rolled her eyes over yet secretly loved—maybe then she could settle down.

She turned the burners off and moved the skillet to a cooler section. It was hot enough in this kitchen, and if the text gave any indication, her night was about to get hotter.

Cam pulled her Kia into a parking spot at Waterfront Park and turned down the acoustic folk she'd been using to placate her nerves. It hadn't helped. She flipped the mirror down and began to touch up her lipstick. She'd swung home, scarfed some dinner, and changed into something nicer, but her body and mind had hummed in unison ever since she'd gotten the text from Lex.

The one reason she even considered this was Lex's reputation. She'd heard plenty from Danny about how the woman avoided commitment like it was a lit Molotov cocktail hurtling her way. So, if Cam dipped her toes in the water, she could always retract. No harm, no foul.

The sun had already set, and the Ravenel bridge stretching overhead lit up with a

gentle blue like the ocean. Bright neonlights illuminated the walking paths along the park, and at this time of night, only a few people scattered around the place.

Her phone buzzed, and she sucked in a sharp breath. Mom was calling, because of course she would, like divine intervention. She reached over to answer the phone, her keys in the ignition when her window shook under the force of someone tapping.

Lex's face appeared in the window, and she tilted her head in the direction of the park. Cam swallowed hard. She let the call go to voicemail.

She opened the door with a click, and Lex took a couple of paces back. The woman had the uncanny ability to suck the air out of a room, or in this case, an entire park. Her black pixie cut was spiked, her eyeliner charcoal dark, and she wore an olive-green tee highlighting her lithe, muscular frame. Lex kept her motorcycle jacket hooked over her shoulder and scanned Cam over like she might swallow her up.

Cam smoothed the maroon maxi-dress she'd worn with black heels that clicked along the asphalt. Not so good for hiking, but she doubted Lex's plans entailed walking any trails.

"Well, you look fucking gorgeous," Lex commented, the heat in her hazel eyes pinning Cam on the spot. When her Tinder dates dropped those sorts of lines, her stomach soured like buttermilk and she usually backed away fast. Yet when Lex said it—well, her persistence had swayed her to come here. Being around this woman felt as natural as daylight even though she sparked her body into a new plane of existence.

"You're not too shabby yourself," Cam fired back as she set off in the direction of the main paths.

Lex fanned herself. "Keep throwing compliments around like that and I might

swoon.” With a couple of quick strides, Lex walked in line with her, the swagger to her step a part of the woman’s fire and brimstone personality. The breeze swept the salt from the inlet and the crispness in the air from fall’s arrival as they wandered across the concrete path.

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Cam's senses reached an awareness she only experienced in front of a canvas with paint staining her fingers, flecks in her hair. Each step she took, she could feel Lex's proximity to her, caught the scent of cloves, and felt the heat radiating off the woman.

"So apart from cooking for asshole rich folks, being very not gay, and having an apparently dry sense of humor, what makes up Camilla...well, fuck, I don't even know your last name."

Cam snorted, smoothing her dress again, because for once she didn't know what the hell to do with her hands. "Muhuri," she filled in the blank. "My parents are from Bangladesh."

"And I'm guessing wouldn't approve of your blossoming friendship with a queer tattoo artist who has a record," Lex shot back. "Though I couldn't imagine why. I'm every parent's wet dream for their daughters." Even with her sardonic tone and flippant grin, Cam caught the bitter edge to the words and the flicker of darkness in her expression.

She bypassed the comment completely, seizing on the morsel of new information. "You're a tattoo artist?"

Lex scratched the back of her head, glancing to the side. "Well, apprenticing right now. My stint in the clanker set me back a little bit."

"I'd love to see your work sometime," Cam said, her heart skipping a couple of beats. She wasn't lying. She missed art in every form since the culinary variety had dulled so much as of late. Her paintbrushes and canvas sat in the storage closet in her

apartment, untouched for years. “I was most of the way through my arts degree back home in Georgia when I dropped out.”

Lex licked her lips, the motion mesmerizing, and her grin widened. “So what you’re saying is you actually know your shit. Consider me nervous, then.”

Cam almost gasped in relief at the response. She’d tensed without realizing, waiting for the inevitable ‘why’ that followed whenever she told anyone she dropped out. All too fast the mention brought back the slow trickle of dread as she’d entered the classroom and the vigilance that followed every time she bolted out to her car again.

They’d reached the circular path leading to the pier, the bronze statue in the center taking on a purplish hue even with the lights lining the way. The pier stretched out to greet the water ahead of them, the gentle whoosh of the swaying inlet echoing along with their voices. When Lex confronted her the other night and pitched the oddest proposal she’d ever received, Cam pretty much thought they’d be getting down and dirty in her car.

This, though, felt more like a date than anything.

“What’s your main medium?” Lex asked, reeling her attention back in. She alternated between swinging her arms in wide arcs as they walked or flexing her fingers in and out of a fist, the woman in perpetual motion.

“Watercolor or acrylic,” Cam answered on reflex. “Though I was majoring in graphic design to be able to apply that work to something practical.”

Lex’s lips curled into a wide grin, her teeth gleaming. “Fine then, you show me yours and I’ll show you mine.”

“What are we, five?” Cam shot back. The inky sky stretched above them, a couple of

slate clouds marring the sea of stars. They approached the pier, and the cream rails glowed under the lights lining the way. Even though her body still felt hyper-aware, somehow between the car and here, her nerves leached away.

“I mean, my mother’s convinced I’m in a state of arrested development. Heavy on the arrested,” Lex cracked, doing that thing again where she looked anywhere but in her direction. Cam knew avoidance—she guarded herself the same way.

“You’re out now though,” Cam offered. “No need to keep punishing yourself.”

“With a temper like mine?” Lex responded, slipping on her motorcycle jacket. “It’s only a matter of time.” Even with the confidence that poured from her and the swing to her step, talking to Lex like this was skating along the surface of a frozen lake, one crack from plunging into the depths.

“Well then, we better enjoy our time now.” Cam skipped ahead a couple of steps. She hadn’t been to this park in ages, one of the first places she’d visited when she got the gig at the Horntrees’ and moved up here from Savannah.

“Come on, this way,” Lex said, slinking past her. She grabbed her hand and began to run down the pier. Cam surged forward. She stumbled after Lex, swept in the whirlwind of movement. Their footsteps thundered through the quiet of this place, and a laugh slipped from her lips as Lex’s grip on her hand tightened. Cam caught up, running neck and neck with the capricious wind of a woman.

Just as fast as they’d set off, Lex skidded to a halt in front of the swinging benches overlooking each side of the pier. “I brought you here for these,” Lex said, sliding down to take a seat. She hadn’t let go of her hand, so Cam found herself tugged in the process. “Best view of Charleston, in my opinion.”

Cam quirked an eyebrow as she settled back in the seat. Lex spread her arms out on

either side, one of them looping around her shoulder. Not like she minded. The brush of Lex's smooth olive skin against hers caused her to squeeze her thighs a little tighter. Lex kicked off, and the swing set into motion.

"Are you sure you're not five?" Cam said, even though her heart bounced with each sweep of the swing, like the years melted away. "When you made your big sales pitch at Danny's engagement, this isn't what I had in mind."

Lex's glance in response delivered pure wickedness. "Sweetheart, I can't help it if your mind's in the gutter. You gave me six months, in case you didn't remember. Which means I'll be taking my time to show you exactly how good this can be."

Damn if that promise didn't make Cam's pussy throb. Why the hell was her defective body reacting to Lex like this? She'd been on date after date with every guy from attractive business owners to hot models and, nada. She snuffed out the traitor voice in her head reminding her of other flares of attraction in the past, none of them related to men. Yet no one, man or woman, lit her body on fire like Alexis Dukas.

And truth be told, the reason impatience struck her match right now was because ever since Lex made her elaborate declarations, she'd been able to think of little else. This was a temporary thing, a fling before she resumed her search for the perfect man with renewed vigor so she'd be able to settle down.

"Don't tell me that made you speechless," Lex murmured, kicking off again as they glided back and forth. "I've got way better stuff in my arsenal."

"Do us all the favor and hold those gems back," Cam responded, the sarcasm floating to the surface. "I only packed so many withering glances."

Lex edged in closer to her until their hips nudged together. "Don't worry, babe, I won't let you leave disappointed." Her lips pursed in amusement, but Cam couldn't

look away. With Lex's arm around her shoulder, Lex's body pressed against hers, and the scent of cloves drinkable in the air, Cam found herself fixated.

She'd already thought Lex was a stunner, but the harsh shadows carved her features into something breathtaking. Her black strands offset her olive skin, and in this dim light, her nose grew sharper, her chin more angular. Yet those lips were lush and full, and her cheekbones defined enough to sink her teeth into. Her septum piercing and the metal loops around her eyebrows glinted in the light. The thick lines of a tattoo peeked out along the side of her neck, the symbol for Pluto.

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Cam reached out, the tips of her fingers tracing along the lines before she could help herself. If she didn't have Lex's full attention before, she did now. That stare was both wild and languorous in the same breath. Cam played with a flame here, skimming her fingers over the top and attempting to not get burned.

Lex stopped kicking the ground to push the swing. Instead, she pivoted to face her, and the breath hitched in Cam's throat. Lex leaned closer and brought her palm up to cup the side of her face. Cam leaned into the touch, unable to deny that in the short time they'd spent together, the heat and promise of Lex's gaze had her panties soaked. Her tongue slipped out to wet her lips, and Lex's eyes zeroed in on the motion.

Lex pulled her hand away to trace the line of her jaw, the sensitive skin of her earlobe, and then she ran her thumb across Cam's lower lip. The motion caused her to shiver. This was far more personal and intense than even their session in the bathroom had been. Her whole body trembled with anticipation, a chord begging to be plucked. Lex's mouth was a breath away from hers, and she resisted the temptation to dive in and close the distance between them. She'd stepped into the tiger's den, and Lex was aware of every motion, every shallow breath.

Lex's fingertips glided down her neck, the slow scrape of her nails making Cam delirious. She'd been plagued with doubts from the moment she'd agreed to this, but the bliss radiating through her in the simple, sinful motions banished them away.

Lex leaned a little closer—their lips were so close the air vibrated between them. Cam let out a ragged breath, unable to help herself.

A wicked grin sparked Lex's eyes, and she pulled away.

"We're doing this my way, sweetheart, and I'm going to drag this out until you're begging."

Lex might as well have dumped a bucket of ice water over her. Cam's shoulders rose up and down with shuddering breaths in the wake of the disruption. Lex kicked off again, setting the swing into motion while Cam collected herself from the puddle of goo she'd turned into.

"You're a monster." Cam shook her head in disbelief. Lex's gaze twinkled with amusement, a smirk on her lips. "Let me guess, this is what gets you off."

"Every time, baby," Lex cackled, leaning against the seat again. She cast Cam an amused glance. "I promised you the whole experience, which I will deliver. Trust me when I say the wait will be worth it."

"Pretty sure you're just a sadist," Cam retorted, running a hand through her thick curls and trying to will away the heat from her cheeks. Not like she could do anything about the throb between her legs, at least until later.

"I've been called worse." Lex grinned wide and the tip of her tongue glided over her canine.

Lex kicked off again, continuing to swing along on the bench while her eyes glinted in amusement. Whatever had been about to happen, Lex closed the door on it for tonight. Despite the way Cam's body roared its complaints, she had to admit she didn't mind the time to get to know her, to sink into this rather than slam into a bathroom stall.

However this experiment turned out, Cam was a hundred percent sure it would either

be her best or worst decision.

Chapter Three

“Hold still, you twitchy motherfucker,” Lex growled, even as her hand remained steady.

The stylus buzzed, the static noise of it something that soothed her nerves. She’d been getting inked from the second she turned eighteen, when it rocketed from a curiosity into a full-blown addiction. The scent of rubbing alcohol pierced the air, and she wiped with the tissue she used to blot. Mitch leaned hard on the table, but the asshole kept flexing his fingers every so often. His scruff threatened to turn into a beard as of late, and despite the stupidly pretty eyelashes on him, they didn’t distract from the weariness in his gaze.

“I bet the clients come pouring in just for your award-winning attitude,” Mitch drawled, amusement in his eyes. He’d stopped piercing a couple of years ago for Inkspirations, but their friendship somehow weathered their “born from the bowels of Hell” dispositions.

“I’m not paid to pontificate, dickbag,” Lex continued. Truth be told, she owed Mitch a lot. He was one of the few friends who had stuck around after she’d gotten locked up, and even though they didn’t work together anymore, they still hung out, whether they took the bikes for a drive along the highway at midnight or caught a shitty horror movie at Terrace Theater.

“Busting out your thesaurus now?” he joked, his eyes crinkled at the edges with his smile.

“Ladies love a linguist,” Lex shot back even as she focused on the sweep of the lines. The fugue state she descended into when she inked set in—the hyper-concentration,

the way her hand swerved in a mesmerizing rhythm of lines and edges—only interrupted when she blotted the ink and dabbed more on. She was head over heels for this piece, and they'd started at the base of his arm with plans of doing a full sleeve. It featured a messload of death and destruction, the black lines of charred skulls, the delicate strokes of crows flying overhead, and a flickering candle at the base, as flame ran up through the scenes.

“Speaking of ladies,” Mitch spoke up, his low voice breaking through the haze. “Since it’s one of my few off nights, want to wingman for me tonight? My dry spell’s stretching close to six months.”

Lex made a gagging noise but kept inking away, almost done the section they worked on this session. “Bro, six months is way too long. Even Adrian’s getting laid on the regular now.”

“Don’t listen to her, Mitch,” Bellamy James bellowed from the other room. “A week’s too long for that one.”

“Thanks, boss,” Lex shouted even though Bellamy already strolled over to stand in the doorway.

The owner of Inkspirations was tall enough he needed to duck under the doorway, and due to the kickboxing he did every day, all the honed muscle combined with tons of ink made him look like one mean motherfucker. Absolute bullshit—she’d never met a sweeter wiseass. Her boss’s work and the ink he got himself was a hybrid of vintage blended with newer styles, and folks booked a full year in advance to get an appointment with him.

“Don’t be jealous, Bell.” Lex flashed a wicked grin back. “There’ll be some scraps left over on my one-woman mission to turn them all.”

Mitch snorted. “With the amount you get lucky, we’ll all end up celibate.”

Lex pulled the tattoo gun back, surveying her work. “Right babe, let’s wrap you up for now.”

She smeared the ointment on the raised skin of his arm, blood pricking from sections where she’d gone over the lines a couple of times with more intricate details. She wrapped the tattoo in plastic and then taped it around the edges. Once she finished up with Mitch, she snapped her purple latex gloves off, tossing them in the bin.

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Bell clapped a hand on her shoulder. “Not bad,” he said, which in Bell-speak was high praise.

Lex’s cheeks heated, so she didn’t look up. Fuck, she didn’t deserve to be surrounded by all these good, caring people. She was mean on a good day, sharper than a bag of needles, and kept trouble in her back pocket any time she got bored.

“Gotta pay my dues,” she forced out, keeping her tone gruff.

Mitch shifted onto his feet and slapped the cash on the table. His gaze sparked with the same mischief that circulated through her veins. “You, me, Notes Nightclub at nine.”

Lex seized the distraction. “You’ve got it, brother.”

Mitch flicked her in the arm. “The attack plan is for me, not you this time.”

“Not my fault your ladies love me,” Lex drawled. Mitch lifted his middle finger as he walked to the front of the shop, night and day different from their sterile stalls. The waiting room of Inkspirations was a splat of crimson paint covered in art books, rockabilly and retro lamps, knick-knacks, and traditional pinup work on the walls. She adored it.

Bell squatted in the stool across from her. “Your work’s been consistent, and your skills haven’t lapsed in your time apart. In six months, we’re going to have a talk about moving you up to a shop regular.”

Lex's brows drew together before she could help herself. The panic seized her chest and ran with it. She'd always raced forward a hundred miles a minute, and her mantra through all of high school was 'get the hell out of here.' The idea of being stuck in one place constricted her insides.

"I dunno, Bell," she said, avoiding his gaze. "I've got a lot of work to do before my shading's up to snuff."

She chanced a look up.

Bell raised one of his thick brows, and a grin played on his lips. "You have six months to settle into the idea. Take your time and think on it."

Her heart squeezed tight. Damn the man for knowing her far too well.

"If you were a chick, I'd marry you in a heartbeat." Lex cracked a grin.

"Our resident commitment-phobe proposing? Consider me flattered." Bell pushed up from his seat and strode through the door to the front of house. "I'm heading out. Lock up after your last appointment."

Lex didn't bother responding as she began spraying down her station. This place had become a home and she loved it, so why did her stupid mouth get in the way? She slumped into her seat and ran a hand through her hair.

She probably caught a curse or some shit. Her love life was definitely hexed. Any girl she'd developed feelings for as a kid ended up being straight, even if they didn't mind experimenting around a little. And every time without fail, her feelings slipped out and friendships didn't just crack—they shattered.

God, she was more of a mess than Uncle Noel at a wedding.

This whole thing with Cam was an exercise in futility. Another straight girl who wanted to splash around in the shallows but would skip out before she got dragged in by the tide.

“Fuck,” the word slipped from her, exploding through the empty room like shrapnel.

Head in the game. One more client tonight, and then distraction time with Mitch.

“Adrian, you’re a lime in a basket full of lemons,” Danny commented, leading the charge toward Notes. The woman dressed for the occasion in a slinky knee-length black number that made her red hair pop. Adrian on the other hand wore a polo and a kill-me-now expression. The crimson lights cast dappled patterns onto the inky asphalt, and the bass beats from inside the club reverberated out to here.

Lex didn’t bother to hide her snicker. Adrian hated clubs, but he loooved Danny. And her future sister-in-law was an inveterate club kid like herself, which had cemented their friendship.

Mitch strode to meet them outside the entrance. “Like I don’t get enough of the Dukases on the regular. Your family keeps crawling out of the woodwork, like a termite infestation.” The guy looked sharp as a switchblade in his gray button-down, the sleeves rolled up to the elbows to keep his arm from getting contaminated. His thick black hair had been tamed, and he’d even taken a tangle with his scruff from earlier.

“I like the idea of being an infestation,” Lex responded, taking the lead into the club.

“You would,” Adrian muttered, casting an irritated look the overhead sound system blasting music their way. They nabbed their wristbands in the foyer and then pushed

open the heavy double doors to enter into a world of heavy electronica, sweat, and pulsing neon lights.

“Did you just get work done?” Danny asked, glancing to Mitch’s arm. Already it grew harder to hear from the pounding music. With the flush of bodies surrounding them, Adrian tugged Danny tight to him, who bounced in her Docs as she entered.

“Lex did it,” Mitch said, jerking a thumb at her.

“Jealous,” Danny’s eyes glittered. “I’m going to have to make an appointment.”

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“Any time, babe,” Lex said, skimming the room for empty counterspace by the bar.

“Cam coming tonight?” Adrian asked, dipping down to brush his lips over Danny’s. She melted in his arms, and the two were a minute away from a sloppy makeout session.

Lex perked to attention, waiting for Danny’s response. She hadn’t seen Cam for a week, not since the night they’d walked and talked out at the Waterfront Park. Which had been a stupid plan on her part, because now all she could think of was the sultry scent of Cam’s rose perfume, her soft petal lips, and the perfect arch of her brow every time she delivered some sardonic reply.

“She had a rough day at the Horntrees’,” Danny said. “Less ‘go out and drink,’ more ‘go home, eat mac and cheese, and binge-watch a show.’”

Lex ignored the pang of disappointment. She was the idiot for dragging this out and the one who’d started this whole thing in the first place. She spied an empty stool and slid right in.

“Dark and stormy,” she ordered the second the bartender flicked his gaze her way. Adrian leaned in to get a beer and awater for Danny, and Mitch snagged the spot next to her to nab some JD on the rocks.

The bartender slid her drink down the lit-up bar, and she wrapped her palms around the cool glass. Danny grabbed Adrian’s hand and dragged him toward the dance floor. Her older brother’s eyes crinkled, his smile so genuine it hurt. The mopey asshole determined to save the entire family deserved this. She was so damn happy

for them, yet she tipped back a jealousy chaser every time.

The spice from the ginger beer coated her throat, and she relished the sweet taste. A couple of gorgeous blondes stepped into view beside her, and Lex's senses pinged on alert. They were the sort of smooth-skinned beauties meant for basking at the beach, and they'd coordinated in an array of jewel-toned dresses.

Lex leaned closer to the amethyst one. "What are you guys here for tonight?"

Amethyst tilted her head toward the chick in the ruby dress. "Bachelorette party. Not much of a clubgoer, to be honest."

"Neither is this guy," Lex jerked a thumb in the direction of Mitch. He perfected the masculine brooding thing with his glass of whiskey lifted to his lips and a lost look in his deep brown eyes. "I had to drag him kicking and screaming from the bar he owns." Bait tossed, Lex caught Mitch's gaze and waited.

The gleam in Amethyst's eyes when her gaze rested on Mitch was telltale. Oh yeah, she picked up what he was putting down. Mitch leaned forward on cue, paying attention to them now. Amethyst's fingers slipped to a strand of hair and twirled.

"These guys are here for a bachelorette," Lex called. Mitch nodded in response.

He started to talk, but his voice got drowned out by the noise. Before Lex could gesture, Amethyst slipped past her friends and placed her hand on the bar between them. Mitch leaned in close enough that his lips brushed against her ear—Lex knew the move. She'd perfected that move. A little proximity, and the blonde leaned in to talk privately with him.

Another girl from the bachelorette party, this one in an aquamarine dress, stepped beside her. "What are they talking about?"

“The size of my friend’s dick, probably,” Lex responded.

Aquamarine leaned in closer, revealing an ample chest begging to spill from the satin curves of that dress. “Too bad I’m not interested in that.”

Lex recognized the look. Whether she was lesbian for a night, bi, or out and proud, this girl was looking for one hot night in a random club. This was when the lines, the promises, spilled from Lex as she performed a social dance that would put most clubgoers to shame.

Yet the words gummed in her mouth. The idea of cramming into a bathroom stall didn’t summon the thrill it had two weeks ago, and she only had herself to blame. Because she decided to take things slow with Cam and draw this out like an exercise in self-flagellation.

Instead, she leaned in and waggled her brows. “Want to start taking bets on how long it takes for them to ‘find somewhere private?’”

Aquamarine snorted, amusement in her eyes, amongst other things. The woman angled in until their arms brushed against each other. Lex’s body should be responding like normal with that zing-zing-zing pushing her to take the lead, but instead, all she could think of was swinging on a bench with Cam and staring out at the sea.

Ugh. She should’ve just kissed Cam back then. Maybe then this obsession wouldn’t be creeping under her skin.

By now, Emerald joined Amethyst in fawning over Mitch. He caught Lex’s glance and passed her a grateful smile.

“My bet is in the next five minutes,” Aquamarine leaned in close. She smelled like

peaches and cream, yet all Lex could think about were roses. The woman got handsier by the second, something she'd usually escalate on her own, finding excuses to reach out and touch. Those pink manicured tips glided up her forearm where she'd gotten her first tattoo, an intricate black and white wing.

"You've got gorgeous ink," Aquamarine purred.

Lex chewed on her lip, warring with the need to be smart and keep floating on the surface and the fucking temptation Cam presented. "Thanks, sweetheart," she responded. "I tattoo over at Inkspirations."

The woman's eyes lit up, and Lex bit back her weary sigh. Whatever shit revelation reared its ugly head, somehow she wasn't in the mood for her usual prowling tonight. Lex leaned forward to Mitch and snapped her fingers to get his attention.

"Hey, you good if I jet early? I'll make it up to you," Lex mouthed. Mitch nodded, though his forehead creased in concern. She'd have to spin some bullshit he'd never believe later.

Lex leaned into Aquamarine. "I'm trusting my friend here with you and yours, got that? Stick with him tonight and he'll make sure your girl has an unforgettable bachelorette. Promise."

The woman bobbed her head, but Lex already slid up by the time her mouth opened to ask where she was heading. The heavy thump of the bass beat reverberated through her bones, her mind, and her soul tonight, shaking her up like a cocktail. When the emotions ran too hot and the nerves got too high, she needed to sling a punch, fuck someone senseless, or speed along the highway until her cheeks iced.

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One thing was sure though. This fire in her veins meant something was going to burn.

Chapter Four

Cam got up at long last to put away her mother's recipe of patla khichuri she cooked tonight, needing some dose of childhood and comfort after the day she had. The scent of turmeric and garam masala infused the air in her kitchen. On top of getting a burn on the side of her hand, she'd gotten reprimanded by Natalie Horntree for serving steak when the lady wanted chicken today. Save her from idiots. Besides, she'd been losing stitches with every passing day she worked this job, until she was ready to unravel.

Not to mention, Lex had delivered radio silence ever since their weird hang-out, which was the closest she'd come in a long time to enjoying a date—even if it hadn't been one.

What drove her crazy was the curiosity, the breath of space between them, and the indefinable tension that settled into the air like a thunderstorm any time Lex entered the room.

The Tupperware clicked shut, the noise echoing in her empty apartment. As of late, the loneliness of this place threatened to devour her for Sunday dinner. More and more, she yearned for a future, a house, a family. She wanted to return home after a long day to fall into someone's arms, to cook for someone other than herself, and for her house to be filled with sounds, not silence. Instead, she had Firefly to rewatch for the five thousandth time, enough food to feed one person for a month, and her lavender couch to lose herself in.

“I need to get a pet,” she mumbled.

Cam approached her couch, ready to collapse and zone the hell out.

Her phone buzzed. Lex, at last.

You up?

Cam began to text back when her doorbell rang.

No, it couldn't be. She sucked in a breath to quash the surge of hope as she wound her way to the front door. It had to be Linda, the renter of the other side of this house, asking if she could catsit for Puffers again. At eleven at night, because that made sense. Her pulse sped as she approached the door, her body refusing to take cool-down cues from her mind. She ran her fingers through her hair, realizing she wore running shorts, an old T-shirt, and no makeup.

Still, her hand reached for the knob before she could stop herself.

Alexis Dukas stood on her doorstep looking like a fallen angel with her short black windswept hair and her thick eyeliner making her hazel eyes pop. Her shoulders heaved, her cheeks were flushed, and the formfitting black tank top and army cargoes she wore highlighted her muscular, lithe body. Cam swallowed hard and took two steps back even though her hand remained on her doorknob.

Lex was gorgeous, impulsive, and absolutely insane.

“What?” was all that came from Cam. The confusion stretched out in the silence between them.

“Sorry, just got off my bike from one hell of a fun drive,” Lex said, flashing a smile

that showed teeth.

“How did you know where I lived?” Cam asked, an actual question emerging from her lips. The realization smacked her in the face.

“Danny,” Lex responded, taking a step into her house. Just like that, Lex brought the storm with her, the ozone sparking the air, making it harder to take a full breath. “I was at the club with her, Adrian, and Mitch, but I needed to do something.”

Cam’s brows drew together. This woman descended like a whirlwind, and yet every time she caught the scent of cloves and campfire, of the leather from her jacket and the sweat that slicked her skin, she couldn’t help but surrender to the breeze.

“By something, do you mean show up on my doorstep at an unreasonable hour?” Cam pursed her lips and crossed her arms.

“Yeah, that.” Lex licked her lips and took another step so she was inside Cam’s apartment. Lex clicked the door shut behind her, the sound echoing a thousandfold in the space between them. Cam couldn’t look away from those lips, a little chapped but supple. Lex’s gaze didn’t just skim over her, it devoured. Cam tugged on the ends of her hair and glanced to the ground.

“I feel like I need to get changed or something,” she muttered, the heat rising to her cheeks. When she left her house, she donned her pressed clothes and makeup like a weapon against the world. “Fuck, I smell like a spice rack too.”

“You smell fucking delicious,” Lex growled, taking another step to close the distance between them. “And you look so gorgeous right now I’m soaked. Stop worrying.”

Cam sucked in a sharp breath. The raw, sexual words in the air, the way Lex’s gaze coursed over her like molten steel—her entire body grew taut in anticipation. Even

though a shade of vulnerability emerged that she hadn't been prepared to offer, desire melted away any lingering doubts or fears. She'd be lying if she said she wasn't turned on as hell right now. Every single thing this woman did made her burn hotter, as if they'd tuned to the same station without realizing it.

Lex's hand settled on her waist, the heat of her palm making her flush with awareness. Cam drank her in, the angular chin, the same olive skin as the rest of her family, and those arrogant Greek features that made her more gorgeous than a Degas. The dim lighting spilling in from the other room highlighted the metal of her septum ring and the piercings along her brows. However, her gaze paused on Lex's lips, desperate to taste.

"I came here to kiss you," Lex's voice grew low, husky with the same longing that coursed through her. Cam swallowed, hard. She managed a nod, because the words wouldn't leave her lips with how badly she wanted.

Lex slid her hand along the nape of Cam's neck, until her fingertips curled into her tousled strands. Before Cam could register the shock of pleasure from the gentle tug, Lex's mouth descended on hers.

The kiss was softer than she expected, a brush of the lips with a surprising tentativeness from the brimstone woman who approached everything with the command of a tempest. This was the first stroke of watercolor across paper, and all too fast the colors deepened. Lex kissed with a slow seduction that simmered, so different from the first time they'd clashed together. Lex's lips coaxed desperate breaths from her, and as she slipped her tongue into her mouth, a moan escaped.

Lex bit down on her lower lip, the sting keeping her in the present. Cam felt everything, from the scrape of her nipples against the rough fabric of her shirt to Lex's hands on her hips, drawing their bodies flush together. This was what had her nerves taut like fresh canvas all week, the need for this connection, this secret

addiction.

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Cam ran her palms along Lex's curves, slimmer than her own but toned with muscle. Everything about her was sexy as sin, and when she wasn't busy lying to herself, she'd fantasized about what tattoos hid beneath Lex's clothes. She tasted sweet and dark, and Cam twined her arms around Lex's neck, sinking into each kiss. Lex teased with playful nips followed by deeper kisses, the stroke of her tongue sending a thrill up Cam's spine.

Lex tapped the side of Cam's neck, and she pulled away. "I only came for a kiss tonight," she murmured. "I'm planning on drawing this out until you can't deny your attraction to me anymore."

Their lips were a breath apart, and Cam bit back a growl of frustration. She'd be spending a lot of time with her vibrator in the near future. She smoothed her hair, trying to regain some composure after the kiss spun her head like too many glasses of wine.

Lex didn't make a motion to storm out the way she'd stormed in, and Cam's brows drew together. Instead, the woman slung an arm around her shoulders, that damned grin sparking her eyes.

"So, what are you watching? Anything good?" Lex asked before she took several steps past her to enter the living room. In seconds, the woman plopped onto her couch in front of the TV and looked expectantly at her. Cam had never felt more like she'd been spat out by a hurricane.

"What are you, a puppy?" Cam asked, shaking her head. A grin lifted her lips—she couldn't help it. Somehow, the night didn't seem so aching any longer, and Lex's

loud, vibrant presence filled in all the cracks and spaces.

“A little, yeah,” she responded with a goofy grin that Cam had never seen on the woman’s face before, something a little softer around the edges. Cam sank into the couch beside her, their legs touching but nothing more as she reached for the remote.

“Hope you like *Firefly*, because that’s a dealbreaker for me,” Cam mentioned as she turned on the episode.

“Big damn heroes,” Lex shot back as she kicked off her boots, making herself at home like she’d been here for years and not minutes. “Let’s watch some *Browncoats*.”

Cam settled back in her couch, feeling the buzz of Lex’s nearness. Awareness sparked across her skin even as they watched the show together. One kiss should’ve stamped out the flames threatening to devour her, but instead, she blazed hotter. Whatever this weird arrangement of theirs was, she’d bask in these feelings while they lasted. Because when the morning came, the feelings of shame would descend again, the slurs her father used, the way her mother’s lips pinched tight at the sight of same sex couples in public.

No, this wasn’t any sort of dream to latch onto.

Chapter Five

Lex fucking hated shopping. But as the maid of honor, she needed to do the whole trying on dresses bullshit with the wedding party. The one thing that reeled her in right now was the promise of seeing Cam again after their kiss. Anticipation thrummed through her veins because she planned on having a little more fun with her today.

The woman had no idea what was coming for her.

She strode up to Magnolia Boutique, casting a stray glance at her slim band tee, threadbare jeans, and mud-splattered Doc Martens. The delicate hand-painted sign out front, the cream and ivory monstrosities displayed in the shop window, and all the pristine, pristine white made Lex purse her lips. This was a first. But Danny's priorities were in the same place as hers, so hopefully she wouldn't be asked to have too involved of an opinion.

She fidgeted with her septum ring before striding up the steps to go join the circus.

"Lex, we're over here," Nellie called once she stepped in. Her baby sister was a shock of blonde amidst a sea of Dukas dark hair at any family gathering. Her gentle features had deepened as she grew into one hell of a beautiful woman with blue eyes that radiated the sweetness inside. If only she hadn't married a homophobic asshole.

Mom poked around at the dresses, dipping her fingers into the creases and checking the trains. Her mother looked up, and her dark eyes brightened with warmth she shared between all her children. Lex swallowed, hard. She hated that she'd ever caused this woman distress.

"Danny already start trying on dresses?" Lex asked, taking strides across the polished pine floor. She wasn't late on principle, but Lex tended to show up like the mail—consistent, though delivery times might vary. She wrapped her arms around her mother and hugged tight, breathing in the scent of spice and home.

"She picked a few she liked and was ready to bolt, but Nellie and I are making her stay and give others a fair try." Mom gave her a knowing look. "It's no wonder you and Danny get along so well."

When they separated, Lex's nose wrinkled on instinct. This place was bright and airy

with wide windows, sunbeams spilling inside, and paste pale décor everywhere. Lex hated it. Give her a sweaty club or a murky, underground bar any day of the week.

Cam slipped out from behind a behemoth of a ballgown on a stand. The other night when all her features had been softened from the lack of makeup, there had been something beautifully raw about her, like dipping a needle into fresh ink. Today, she'd showed up with her war paint on. Her kohl eyeliner made her eyes pop, and her crimson lips tantalized. The moment their eyes locked, a flush of awareness rolled through Lex's body, making her come alive.

"We're in charge of picking out our own dresses," Cam commented, slinking over. Her long maroon skirt trailed along the floor, offsetting her cream blouse. "Danny's only rules are pastels and each of our colors has to be different."

Lex snorted. All she could think of were the parade of jewel-toned girls she'd left to devour Mitch at the bar. He'd sent her a follow-up text the next morning with a thumbs up, so the mission had been a success.

"Ugh, here's dress number three," Danny said, stepping out from the changing stalls along the other side of the room. She took small steps approaching because the dress was on a mission to devour her. The attendants flocked to Danny with the swiftness of experience and tugged her bustle back into place before helping her up to the platform. Danny glanced to the mountains of tulle beneath her and frowned. Abigail Peterson, her mom, waited in the wings to help.

"You look as uncomfortable in that thing as I am here," Lex drawled, dragging Danny's attention her way.

A grin broke onto Danny's face, her eyes crinkling with a genuine smile. "You're as bad in this place as Adrian is at Notes."

Lex let out a bark of a laugh in response. God, she loved her future sister-in-law. Her own love life might be a never-ending cycle of self-flagellation, but Danny and Adrian made her hope, even for a second.

“So, this dress is a no,” Danny said, floofing it at the edges and watching it fall with a withering glance. “Why is this torturous practice one we do willingly?”

Cam shook her head, her lips pursed. “Because women’s sizing is a nightmare and it takes a while to find something that fits.”

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“Thanks, Practical Polly,” Danny shot back with a grin as she flounced off the stage, heading to the dressing rooms.

“We should start looking for our own dresses,” Cam said, tilting her head toward the racks of multicolored satin and chiffon. Gag. Cam’s gaze rested on hers. “Pastels, not black or any variant of.”

“Does this bitch look like she wears pastels?” Lex joked as they headed toward the racks.

She cast a stray glance back to see Nellie and Mom deep in discussion, and Abigail headed over to join them. They turned the corner to lose themselves amidst a sea of fabric.

“This bitch looks like she’s going to wear whatever the bride asks her to,” Cam responded. Lex lived for the dry responses and expectant glances Cam delivered. The more she got to know her, the more she’d come to appreciate the woman’s grounded personality.

Lex cast another careful glance back—they weren’t visible from here. She leaned in and swept Cam’s strands away. The woman froze, and Lex followed the same circuit before she relaxed into her touch again. Lex trailed her fingers along the slope of Cam’s neck, enjoying the way she shivered. Cam was so responsive it made her wet.

Lex brushed her lips against hers, a mere whisper of a kiss.

The air trembled between them, and the thrill of this stolen moment rolled down her

spine. She drank in Cam's warmth, her scent, and the petal-soft feel of her skin.

"Guys, did you find anything?" Nellie called out.

Lex took a large step away, and Cam pivoted her attention to the array of pale yellow dresses in front of her.

"I'm thinking this color for me," Cam said, her voice coming across louder than normal. She had a lush look in her eyes, pooled with desire. The ache between Lex's thighs grew. The amount she'd masturbated this week bordered on ridiculous, yet she continued her stupid quest to draw things out. Lex's heart raced with a mounting thrill.

"That'll be super flattering on you," Nellie said, approaching them. She fingered through the pastel pinks. "I'll probably go with this one." She squinted at the fabrics and plucked out the lavender. "Lex, you should try this one. I know, I know, it's not black."

Lex snorted and strode over to rifle through a couple of dresses in the color her sister pointed out. The styles were all ones meant for femme girls, not rough and tumble hellions like her, but she'd squeeze herself into one of these for Danny's sake. She snatched up a few at random, but her gaze settled on the Grecian style one. Choice made. At least this way she looked like she was trying.

"How's the search going, Danny?" Lex called, her voice echoing around this spacious place. The attendants hovered around the bride, helping her onto the platform, this time in a mermaid-style gown showcasing her knock-out curves. Lex let out a wolf whistle, and Danny flashed a grin in response. The back was cut low, and flowers framed the entire thing in a gorgeous pattern. She didn't know the technicals, but Danny looked damn fine.

“Do you like this one?” Mom asked, her eyes gleaming as she grinned over the dress.

Danny nodded. “Better than the others at least. I’ve got a few more they think I should try.” She cast a look to the bundle of dresses in Lex’s arms. “Why don’t you guys start trying yours on so we can wrap up faster and get some lunch?”

“Sounds good to me,” Cam called, making a beeline for the changing rooms around the back. Lex’s tongue trailed along her lips as the idea hit her. She sped up, her long legs carrying her in the same direction. Her heart thumped harder, and she couldn’t resist the grin that broke out on her face. She reached the stalls right as the one door began to swing shut.

Lex grabbed the door and yanked it back open. “Hey beautiful,” she purred, clicking the door locked behind her.

Cam crossed her arms over her chest. “Go get your own changing room, Lex. Your family and my best friend are right out there.”

Lex closed the distance between them and leaned in. “Which is exactly what makes this exciting.”

Cam sucked in a sharp breath, but her arms dropped to her sides, a tentative twitch to her fingers as if she wanted to reach out and touch just as badly. Lex slid her hands around Cam’s waist, and after, she took one step forward, then another, Cam’s back thumped against the wall. Her chest rose and fell with the same deliberate breaths that cycled through Lex, and the smooth skin of her breasts looked fucking delicious.

Cam gasped against Lex’s mouth, but she dove to the side to press her lips against her neck, her collarbone, any of the satin skin she could find. Her fingers slipped underneath the hem of Cam’s shirt. When the woman let out a shuddering moan, Lex couldn’t help but grin. She reached for the band of Cam’s skirt and drew back enough

to look her in the eyes, her head tilted in question.

Cam bit her lip, but she nodded, a dusky flush on her cheeks. God, she was so beautiful it hurt. Lex slipped her fingers past the band of her flowing skirt, her fingertips gliding past her panties. She was fucking soaked, and damn if that didn't turn her on even more. The second Lex's fingertips swiped over her clit, another moan lit the air. She couldn't help the laugh that slipped from her.

"I love your screams, babe, but we've got to keep quiet here," she said. She stepped so their bodies were flush together and clapped a hand over Cam's mouth. Her lids grew hooded, and the tilt of her hips in offering strained Lex's composure. She wanted to shove her finger into that stunning pussy and pump until Cam screamed her name, but that wasn't the game she played.

She continued teasing Cam's clit with her fingers, the muffled moans vibrating against her palm. This body deserved to be caressed, to be memorized. Lex pressed kisses along her neck, alternating with bites. Cam was so into this she ground against Lex's fingers, and the intensity created a heady rush. Her pussy throbbed—fuck, she needed release, bad.

She tasted the sweetness of Cam's skin, the floral notes imprinting on her like a tattoo. Every time they'd come together, Cam melted in her arms. No matter the hostility, the confusion, or the freeze outs, any time things had gotten physical, those all dissolved. Cam's hips bucked as she thrust herself into Lex's hand, her panties drenched. Lex wanted her so bad she could taste it. She wanted to hear those moans fill the air, feel the pulse of her pussy as she unwound, and watch the bliss soften Cam's sharp features.

"Did you guys find anything?" Nellie called out, her footsteps echoing their way. Lex sent a silent blessing that her sister announced herself wherever she went. Lex slid her hand out and uncovered Cam's mouth. She lifted her two fingers and licked the

tips. The heat in Cam's gaze in response grew positively tropical. Lex took careful steps to snag her dresses from where she'd dropped them and slipped out of the stall, bringing the door shut behind her.

The lock clicked at her back when she turned to face Nellie who frowned over the three dresses she'd dragged with her.

"This one," Lex said, lifting the Grecian one she'd liked before she ever stepped into the room.

Nellie squinted at her. "Did you even try the other ones on?"

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“No,” Lex said, a grin playing on her lips. Her little sister knew her well.

“I’m still trying mine on,” Cam called from inside the stall, her voice raw around the edges. Lex bit back her smirk and sauntered forward to rejoin the moms and Danny in their quest for the perfect wedding dress. Her pussy throbbed with an insistent pulse after revving herself up like that. Cam’s body was such a perfect landscape she came close to ruining Lex on other women in general. The hottie at the club the other night hadn’t been enough of an allure, not like this quixotic dance they’d tangled themselves in.

At the end of the six months though—fuck, Lex couldn’t think of that. Either Cam continued to lie to herself that she was straight, or what, she realized she was some color of the rainbow and went to find herself an actual girlfriend who wasn’t a mess? Lex’s mouth dried, but she composed a game face as she approached the others.

Danny stood with both of the moms holding the mermaid style dress she’d found earlier, an excited grin on her face. “Made my choice,” she called out. “So, we’re ready when you guys are.”

Lex lifted her dress. She’d mixed the other ones in with the wrong color on the way up. “Going with this one if it passes inspection.”

Danny offered a thumbs-up. “Looks good to me.”

Footsteps pounded behind them as both Nellie and Cam approached with their choices in hand. Lex didn’t miss how Cam looked at anyone but her. She wanted to feel triumphant about that, knowing the woman was too turned on to breathe in her

direction at this point, but all the avoided glances stung like papercuts. If she could stop tormenting herself with forever unattainable girls, maybe she'd stand a chance at something open and real.

She skimmed a hand through her hair. Not like she had anyone else to blame for this mess. Every time, she plunged in on a whim only to crash on the rocks.

"All right," Danny announced. "Mission accomplished. Let's get the hell out of here and get lunch."

Lex strode to the register first, sliding her mask into place. They had a little more than five months before Danny and Adrian's wedding. Less than six months to indulge in whatever this exploration with Cam was.

Future Lex could deal with that car wreck.

Chapter Six

The letter weighed heavy in her hands.

This wasn't another piece of junk mail, or even some passing bit of news. This meant a decision needed to be made, one that would alter so, so much. Except she didn't have the time to dwell on something this immense, because Danny would be over any minute now. Cam pulled out the butter, sugar, and flour for the three different types of cupcakes she'd be baking and then frosting.

The letter sat on her kitchen island, the fine print mocking her.

Cam tugged out the powdered sugar. When she undid the top, she dodged the cloud of sugar that erupted. Every day at the Horntrees' had been getting worse, the passion leeching from her bones with each successive shift. She slogged through, the texts

from Lex one of the only things that sent a shiver coursing through her. Not like she'd seen Lex since last weekend when the woman pressed her against a dressing room wall and slipped her fingers between her folds. The heat returned to her cheeks, and she let the sigh flow through her.

Her doorbell rang, reeling her into the present.

She wiped her hands on her black yoga pants, which would get covered in flour by the end of the night, and she headed for the door. Her throat dried with the idea of Lex being on the other side. As improbable as it was, the woman had sprung an unforgettable kiss on her last week well after reasonable hours. She combed her fingers through her hair before opening the door.

Danny stood outside, her green eyes sparkling with her grin and her arms full of grocery bags. "I've got the rest of the supplies for the cupcakes, so we can get cracking."

Cam beckoned her in and grinned, ignoring the tug of disappointment in her chest. Not like she could be getting attached—Lex wasn't part of her plan, nor was the complicated mess of feelings that emerged around her.

"Okay, so we're trying a basil-strawberry, lavender, and rose, right?" Cam asked, ticking off the three flavors as she went.

"You don't have to do this," Danny said. "You're already doing so much in my wedding. Making the cupcakes for the reception is overkill."

"Or the best wedding present ever," Cam responded. "Besides, I've been jonesing for something creative to sink my teeth into."

She began sorting through the supplies Danny brought: dried lavender, rosewater,

fresh basil, and strawberries. Her fingers itched to get to work, and the colors of the frosting swirled in her mind, tiny, delicate decorations needing an artistic eye to be brought to life.

Could this be enough? She sucked in a sharp breath as she snagged her measuring cups.

Danny grabbed herself a glass of water and then sidled next to her. “Set me to work, boss.”

Cam nodded. “Here are three mixing bowls,” she said, placing them in front of Danny. “Get the butter and sugar creamed for each. The recipe’s on my phone.”

“Hey, has everything been okay at work?” Danny asked as she busied herself with pouring out the cups of sugar. “Not trying to pry, but you’re like Moody Tuesday over there, and even now you’ve got this raincloud around you that’s got me worried.”

Yeah, your future sister-in-law’s seducing me, and I’m getting less and less convinced I’m straight. Like that would go over well. Cam glanced to Danny, the earnest look in her eyes melting her defenses.

“So, there’s a letter on the countertop over there,” Cam said, not stopping the chop of strawberries as she worked. “And it’s got my head in a tangle.” The click, click, click of her knife hitting the cutting board formed a rhythm she lost herself in as she tackled the basil next. She might not be able to divulge everything in her head right now, but she could start here.

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Danny's brow furrowed as she scanned over the paper. "This says you've been accepted into Savannah College of Arts and Design starting the next semester. Wait, you're going back to school?"

Cam let out a shaky breath. Great, confession time. Her life had become minefields all around. "I was going there before I ever became a chef, but I ended up dropping out. I don't know...I've just been feeling so aimless and work has been dicing me up finer than these strawberries, so I took the stupid chance and reapplied. With the way I left, I kind of wanted to see if SCAD would take me back."

The blenders whirled as Danny creamed the sugar and butter, a frown in her eyes even as she pursed her lips. Cam's skin prickled. She was so cautious to let people in, but she always managed to mess things up.

The second the sound stopped, Danny looked up at her. "Well, what do you want to do?"

Cam shrugged, feeling a little helpless. "I honestly couldn't tell you."

"I'll be real with you, I hate the idea of you moving away and leaving me with the Horntrees by myself," Danny admitted, her lips twisting in a wry grin. "However, this isn't about me. It's about what you want, because this is your life."

What did Camilla Muhuri want? That was a question for the ages and one she'd never been asked before. Her parents had supported her dropping out and heading into a culinary career, but they really wanted to see her married more than anything. She also hadn't been leaving a prestigious degree behind. However, a thousand practical

outlets existed to pursue art beyond the normal dream of getting into a gallery, and this might be the opportunity to chase that dream.

Her mouth dried. If she were being honest, she wanted Lex more than made sense. She'd been straight her entire life, dating guys all through high school and into college, though none of the relationships lasted. Going back to school would mean leaving Lex, and she'd be lying if the thought didn't twist her up inside. However, they had an expiration date before this ever began. Cam's plan was to find a good man and settle down with a family. Lex would send those plans sailing down a creek in a Viking funeral.

"I think I need to accept it," she murmured, stirring the bowl of vanilla frosting in front of her. "I've had no luck on the dating front, and I feel like my career has dead-ended. There's nowhere I can move, nowhere to go."

Danny nodded, biting her lip. "Are you going to move away from Charleston?"

Cam knew how loaded the question was. Danny spent her entire life on the run and this friendship of hers was one of the longest she had in her adult life.

She shook her head. "I'll keep my place and come home on the weekends. I can stay at my parents' during the week." Living there would be filled with her mother's attempts to find her a suitable man, but she'd been evading them from the moment she graduated high school. She glanced up to Danny. "Do you mind keeping this between you and me? I'm not ready to go announcing this out to the world yet—I'm a little too vulnerable still."

Especially with all the questions that would resurrect about why she dropped out the first time. But he wasn't employed there anymore—she made sure before she'd even considered the application.

Danny nodded and dipped her finger into the vanilla frosting. “Of course. I’m a pro at keeping secrets. All those years in WitSec, right? Though I’ll absolutely miss you at the Horntrees’.” Danny licked the tip of her finger and let out a moan. “Oh, that’s so good. You’re hired.”

Cam snorted. “Come on now, I haven’t even gotten into the cake and garnish part. Speaking of, let’s slip the tin of lavender cupcakes into the oven.”

A knock sounded on her door.

Cam almost dropped her spatula. She hadn’t invited anyone else over. The only other person who made random visits would spell chaos and complications right now.

“That’s probably Lex or Nellie,” Danny said. “I hope you don’t mind, but I asked if they could help us and give opinions, since Adrian’s tied up at the hospital tonight.”

Cam stretched a fake smile on her face as her heart thundered. Danny had no idea what she’d invited over. “No problem. Let me tuck away my personal news—with the way gossip spreads around the Dukas household, I don’t think I’d be able to keep much secret.” She folded up the letter and slipped it inside her purse before she wrapped an arm around Danny’s shoulders and leaned in. “Thanks for the pep talk. It helped clear my mind.”

“Always,” Danny responded, aiming finger guns at her as Cam headed to get the door.

This time, she smoothed her hair down and scrubbed the flour off her cheek as she approached. Her heart already started marching in double time. She cracked the door open.

Lex stood in the entryway. Each time, the sight of this woman caused her heart to

kickstart. Lex wore a fitted olive tee without a bra and dark brown cargos that hung off her hips. She hooked her thumbs through her belt loops and rocked back and forth in front of her.

“Danny in there?” Lex asked. “She extended the invite.”

Cam nodded, unable to respond. The darkness highlighted the sharp strands of her pixie cut, the quixotic intensity in those hazel eyes, and lips she’d been fantasizing over for an embarrassing amount of time.

“Come help me with the rest of the supplies,” Lex said, tilting her head to the side.

Cam leaned inside. “Be right back, Danny,” she called inside. “Got to help Lex grab something from her car.”

Once the door clicked shut, Lex’s hand wrapped around her wrist, and she found her back thudding against the wall. Lex swept into the space between them like she belonged there. The scent of cloves overrode any sense of reason. Cam sank into Lex’s firm grip and how she pinned her hands while she closed in like a leopard on the prowl. With Lex’s body against hers, Cam found it hard to think of any reasons why she shouldn’t be falling headfirst for this woman.

A thousand different types of dangerous.

Lex’s lips whispered against her throat, gliding over her pulse, her jaw, her earlobe, each delicate touch leaving her burning up. Cam let out a low moan. Ever since their interlude in the dressing room, she’d been masturbating three times a day to try to rid herself of this ache between her legs. Nothing worked.

Nothing except this addictive, whiplash woman who dropped into her life with the speed and force of a twister.

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Lex's mouth closed over hers, and Cam's entire body sang with relief. She sank into the kiss, the burn of whiskey on Lex's lips. Her shoulders scraped against the brick wall behind her, and her warning bells clanged with how public this was. Danny stood right inside her apartment. However, her legs widened, thighs encircling around Lex as she deepened the kiss. Lex gripped her by the back of the neck, the gliding strokes of her tongue making Cam shiver with promise.

Lex pulled away to lick the line of her jaw. "Hey there, gorgeous."

Masha' Allah, that husky voice would be her undoing.

Cam pursed her lips, trying to collect her composure off the walkway. "Let's get whatever you need from your car before Danny starts poking around out here for us." Her lips were swollen from the way they'd clashed together, and her body sparked to life like she'd been plugged into a generator.

Lex snorted and gestured to the ground where two duffel bags sat. "Darlin', I already brought them up. That was what the kids these days call 'a ruse.'"

Cam lifted her eyebrow. "Okay, Grandpa Lex. You can sit out here and shout at the neighborhood kids to get off your lawn." Of course the woman thought ahead. She'd simply been trying to lure her out for a stolen kiss.

Lex pursed her lips and reached for the door. "As tempting as that might be, I was promised cupcakes."

The door flew open before they could enter, Danny standing in the frame. "Cam, do I

pull out the cupcakes now?”

“Let me come check them.” Cam’s heart thudded. A minute or two earlier, and she would’ve caught them in the middle of making out against the brick siding of her place. How the hell she would have explained away that, she didn’t have the slightest.

Lex grabbed one of the duffels, and Cam snagged the other as they followed Danny inside. At least with her best friend here with them: Lex wouldn’t dare do anything public—just bend the rules every chance she got.

The scent of lavender filled the room when Cam pulled the cupcakes out of the oven.

“Time to put the rose ones in,” she directed as she brought the lavender over to the racks she’d set out on her countertop. Danny snagged the tray they’d lined and filled, bringing it over to the oven.

“Oh damn, those smell delicious,” Lex said, leaning in close enough their arms brushed. Cam tried to ignore the way her heart leapt and how her whole body lit up every time they touched. “Can I have one now?”

Cam smacked her hand away. “No. They need to be frosted and decorated first, so Danny can evaluate them.”

“But I just want to evaluate them with my mouth,” Lex teased, heat creeping into her voice.

“We’ll be done soon, Lex,” Danny called over, whipping together the lemon frosting for the lavender cupcakes. “I’m sure Cam could put you to work in the meanwhile.”

“I’ve got plenty of tasks,” Cam said, directing her over to the strawberry and basil cupcakes. She swirled the puree through the batter and then passed it over to Lex with

a stack of cupcake liners. “Set this tray up, and we’ll have more to try in no time.”

To her surprise, Lex set to work at once, moving with a surprising expediency. Cam started pouring in the butter and powdered sugar for the final batch of frosting, but her gaze kept slipping to Lex.

“I worked at Gin Mill, remember? I’m not new to line work,” Lex said, a grin clinging to her.

“Taking orders though?” Danny responded. “From what Mitch has told me, those weren’t your top priority.”

“Mitch has a big mouth and needs to be nicer to his tattoo artist,” Lex commented.

“Especially after you landed him that hottie the other night at Notes,” Danny said with a smirk. “Did you dart off with one of the other girls? Adrian and I had a bet going.”

Cam’s stomach twisted. They weren’t exclusive. She didn’t have any right to feel like she tripped and was falling, falling, falling. Besides, she’d known this from the beginning. Lex didn’t commit.

And liking girls wasn’t part of Cam’s plan.

Cam swallowed hard and looked away.

“I went home with food poisoning,” Lex said, her voice careful and light. “Puked in the toilet the rest of the night, so I wasn’t going to be doing any seducing.” Cam dared to look up and met Lex’s hazel gaze. The look there burned with an intent that both soothed and terrified her. Cam stirred harder at the frosting, creaming the ingredients together until they smoothed out.

“Food poisoning, that’s lame,” Danny commented. “We’ll have to do another club night soon.”

Lex slid the tray of cupcakes into the oven, and Cam set the timer. The air buzzed between them, but she didn’t chance another glance. Lex had been with her that night, kissing her until she forgot every reason why this whole thing was a bad idea.

“What did you bring in the duffel bags?” Danny asked, pointing a teaspoon in their direction.

“Your and Adrian’s wedding gifts—at least if you want them,” Lex said, her voice taking on the gruff tone she sometimes slipped into when vulnerability peeked out. Lex’s cocky and commanding attitude was beyond hot, but what tipped Cam over the edge every time were the hints beneath the surface. She craved the looks that extended too long, and the brush of openness from a woman who always kept her doors closed shut.

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Danny crouched in front of the duffel bag and unzipped it. Inside lay sketchbooks, as well as photo books of different tattoos.

“I brought some of my personal stuff and the shop stuff, but if you both want to get inked for your wedding gift, I’d love to be the one who does it. Whatever you want,” Lex said, striding over beside her. She tugged out a few more sketchbooks from the duffel and offered one in Cam’s direction.

“You show me yours,” Cam murmured as she accepted the sketchbook, her fingers itching to flip open the pages. She couldn’t forget their first night at the Waterfront Park if she tried.

Danny threw her arms around Lex. “I wouldn’t want anyone else doing my tattoos, and you can bet I’ll be taking you up on it. As for Adrian, who the hell knows. Though, I could get behind the idea of my fiancé with a couple of gorgeous tats.”

Cam flipped open the book, and the breath hitched in her throat. Where Cam’s style leaned more toward impressionism, Lex’s fell staunchly in surrealism. The landscapes, figures, and shapes whorled together on the pages in ink, in watercolor, and in acrylic. The strong lines were a thing of beauty, bold in a way only Lex could be.

The splash of color on the pages, the twisted Dali-esque clocks, the spindly trees transforming into a staircase to the clouds, and the fantastical shadows she’d mutated into monsters on the page, all of it held a creativity and depth that made her heart ache. This woman might keep her emotions out of her words, but on paper, she bled.

“What do you think, art expert?” Lex asked, her voice low as she glanced her way. Cam didn’t miss the flicker-flash of vulnerability there or how she looked away at once.

“Beautiful doesn’t even begin to describe it,” Cam murmured. Her fingertips traced along the lines and patterns of the acrylic piece before her of a stark cemetery, the trees bending like they wept. “These are unforgettable.”

That was Lex, from beginning to end. Cam’s heart wrenched tight. This whole thing had started out light and sexy, but all too fast she waded into deeper waters, ones threatening to drag her under.

Chapter Seven

Every time Lex met with Dana, her parole officer, the aftermath left her wanting to speed on the freeway or break windows with a tire iron. All she could see was the pale walls of the penitentiary, the feel of the orange jumpsuit on her skin, and the stale lighting permeating her pores.

She couldn’t end up there again. Lex had done fine on the surface—loudmouthed with a penchant for violence, she nipped any competition in the bud fast and made some friends while she was at it. But inside, she screamed and screamed and screamed.

She leaned back in her Chevy and lifted up her phone, the bright bluish light glaring at her. All she had waiting for her back at the townhouse was half a bottle of whisky. Mitch was working tonight, so they couldn’t zoom across the highway, and she wasn’t in the mood to be a barfly. Tonight, Lex wanted someone’s entire attention, their whole focus.

You free?

The jumpstart of her heart once she sent the text had her internally cursing. This whole thing with Cam where they hung out, flirted, fooled around, and got to know each other better than she'd let just about anyone in—fuck, she had no idea what she was doing. Or what she'd do when the six months were up.

Yeah, why?

Lex chewed on her lip.

Meet me at Magnolia Cemetery in a half hour.

She didn't wait for the response, simply started the ignition and began to drive.

Magnolia Cemetery was a slice of the macabre separate from the picturesque, pastel parts of town and the hazy ocean breeze saturating the air. The creek glittered in the late afternoon sun, which threatened to turn to dusk. She strode past the metal sign, the yellow letters bright and familiar. Lex basked in the fragrance of the magnolia trees that swayed in the wind here and the stale scent of granite and limestone from all the tombstones lined around the place.

This had been one of her safe havens ever since she was a teenager and had escaped here with her friends to get high. She and the other rejects would kick back and toked up late at night. Something about this place —whether the quietness, the air of solemnity, or the sense of “other” guarding the area—every time she came here, she could breathe. The buzz in her mind muted, and her cocktail shaker of problems seemed to pour out.

Lex slipped out a cigarette to light and leaned against her car. The embers glowed at the tip when she sucked in a drag, letting the nicotine cool her nerves. She hadn't

checked Cam's response, because she didn't want to be disappointed. The location was weird, but it was also wholly her. Part of her braced for the inevitable rejection, the foreign look in Cam's eyes where she realized they didn't know her at all.

Time and time again.

The familiar mausoleums cut starker figures in the fading light, the miniature pyramid clear even from where she stood. A car rumbled across the parking lot, one she recognized at once. She tapped the ash off the end of her cigarette and sucked down a final few drags before crushing it under her heel. Lex ran a hand through her pixie cut, smoothing her gel-tamed strands.

Cam's car door slammed, and the woman stepped out. The breath snagged in Lex's throat. Camilla Muhuri was the opposite of her in every way. Where Lex rolled up in a mess of torn jeans and wrinkled shirts, everything Cam wore was pressed, neat, or clung to her curves in a style that made Lex salivate. Today, Cam wore gray leggings showcasing her toned calves and a goldenrod tunic highlighting her slender curves—clothes Lex wanted to peel off Cam's body with her teeth.

"So, we're meeting at the graveyard?" Cam asked, surveying the area with a wrinkle across her brow. "Not that the tombstones aren't picturesque, but I'm not enough of a spooky bitch to get down and dirty on top of someone's grave."

Lex couldn't help the laugh that slipped from her. Mere minutes in this woman's presence and she already felt lighter, which was more dangerous than anything.

"You sure? Sounds positively sacri-licious," Lex responded, waggling her eyebrows.

Cam delivered the droll look she'd come to love and pursed her lips. Lex hooked her thumbs through the belt loops of her jeans and rocked back and forth. She stared up at the cloudless sky, trying to ignore the prickle up her skin. "This is the place I've been

running to ever since high school when shit gets too overwhelming. I know that makes me a ‘spooky bitch’ but there’s something quiet here that speaks to me.”

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“So Matty’s Queen of the Underworld claims weren’t too far off,” Cam teased, her eyes softening. She looked at her, not a shred of repulsion in her gaze, and Lex’s heart lurched.

“Come on, let’s walk,” Lex said, reaching for Cam’s hand to pull her forward. Even after they took the first steps, Lex didn’t let go of Cam’s hand, and she didn’t pull away either. Her skin tingled where their palms touched, the simple connection making her body strike like a spark plug.

She’d made all these physical promises to Cam with their agreement, that she’d do her damndest to convert her through mind-blowing sex. Yet, they were two months in and hadn’t even fucked. And based on Cam’s confused glances and comments, she’d tuned in to the contradiction.

Still, Lex couldn’t help herself. She’d never gotten this connection from anyone she’d messed around with—the affection, the understanding, and the simple feeling of having someone else around.

Cam cast a glance to her, and their eyes snagged, the air growing thicker with the weight of all the ghosts lingering in this place.

“So, what’s getting too overwhelming?” Cam asked, swinging their hands as they strolled down the wide dirt paths cutting through Magnolia Cemetery. Limestone tombs rose all around them, a mixture of fresh and withered blooms decorating the surfaces.

“Meeting with my parole officer, for one. Every time, it reminds me of that place, and

I can't go back there," Lex said, the words slipping out unintended. She fixed her stare on the winding creek ahead, the surface turning molten gold with the setting sun.

Cam squeezed her hand. "You're not going back there. You've got a career lined up, a family who loves you, and a bright future that doesn't include more jail time."

Lex let out a bark of a laugh, half hopeless, half bitter. "Then you really don't know me. I had all that shit beforehand too, and I'll fuck it up every time. Hell, Bell even mentioned a permanent chair at Inkspiration and my commitment Klaxons started clanging."

Cam pulled her hand away, and Lex regretted the admission at once. No one wanted to pick up the fragments of the shattered window inside her head. The woman strode over to one of the graves, a fresh peony wreath in front of it. The tombstone had been carved with an intricate depiction of wings. Cam crouched and traced her fingers along the lines.

"There's a lot of gorgeous art here," Cam said, her voice echoing through the hush. "I would've never thought to look for it in a cemetery."

Lex strolled up to her, but when Cam's gaze landed on her, she froze.

"You didn't know what it'd be like back then. Now you do. You're impulsive and a little bit reckless, sure, but you're not an idiot, Lex. You've got the tools and the support to fight. Whether you do or not is in your court."

Lex swallowed hard. Few bothered to be frank with her like that, and she could feel her hackles rising, the acid begging to leap to her tongue. But Cam was right. Every time she leaned hard on what a fuck-up she was, she avoided taking responsibility.

The bravado dried on her tongue. “Enough of my maudlin bullshit. Let’s go check out the pyramid. If you’ve never been here before, you’ll appreciate the artistry.”

Cam got up from her crouch and brushed against her arm as she strode forward. The dusky look in her eyes, the way the golden sunlight brought out the rich browns in Cam’s dark hair, and how her bronze skin gleamed held her spellbound. Eventhough they weren’t holding hands anymore, tension coated the air between them as they walked mere inches apart.

“How’s your quest for the perfect man going?” Lex said, regretting the words at once. That was the last thing she wanted to hear about right now, but she couldn’t help it. With the way her skin scraped raw and sensitive, she wanted to douse it in vinegar.

Cam gave her a wry look. “Pretty poor, considering I’ve got this whole lesbian experiment going on with my friend right now who thinks I’m available at any hour of the day or night.”

Lex’s heart thundered as she lifted her hands, a genuine smile rising to her lips. “No expectations here. Can’t blame a girl for hoping to spend time with someone as scorching as you. God, I could watch the swing of your hips for hours.”

Cam ducked her head, a gorgeous flush on her cheeks. “Thanks. Good to know I’m a hot piece of ass.” Even as she delivered the dry comment, she slipped into a small grin.

Lex let out a low whistle and closed the distance between them to wrap her arm around Cam’s waist and draw her close. “You’re irresistible, babe.”

As Cam looked up at her, Lex’s hands settled on her hips, and she leaned down to brush her lips against hers. She tasted sweet, like springtime, and the rose scent that surrounded her transported Lex to another dimension. Lex pulled away, a grin

clinging to her lips and her heart pounding harder than ever. “Now get your hot piece of ass on the move so I can show you more spooky shit.”

Cam rolled her eyes. “All that big talk you delivered about swaying me to the dark side had me thinking there would be a lot more action going on. Don’t get me wrong, I’m enjoying the adventure, but if I’m still straight by the end of this, I don’t want you to get your feelings hurt.”

Lex’s throat tightened. They had an expiration date, less than four months away, but she’d been ignoring that with all her might. At the end of this, Cam would go back to trying to find the perfect husband while Lex would lapse into quick-n-dirty hookups in the bathroom at Notes Nightclub.

“If you wanted instant gratification, go on Tinder,” Lex commented. “I told you I’d show you the full breadth of how good this could be, which takes some time to unfold.”

Cam lifted a brow. “Lofty promises. We’ll see when you deliver.” Even with the arid way she responded, a grin lifted those crimson lips and challenge sparked in her eyes.

They stopped in front of the infamous pyramid, which towered above them. Lex itched to draw the precise lines, and the seafoam green doors were carved with intricate patterns and framed by large columns and an arch. Moss slipped into the seams between the weathered bricks, emerald under the late sun.

“Damn, this is gorgeous,” Cam said, shaking her head. “How have I been here for years and never seen this?”

“Probably because most people don’t go to cemeteries for fun,” Lex commented, her chest warming at the wonder in Cam’s eyes.

“You’ll never be most people, Alexis Dukas,” Cam responded, a heat in her voice that had Lex tripping over herself.

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They continued down the path until they reached another massive magnolia tree, the spindly branches reaching out to try to touch the sky. Spanish moss dangled from the branches, swaying with the breeze. From here, the thrum of the lazy creek echoed in the air, cutting through some of the quiet tension from the cemetery.

The sun had begun to set, the first magenta streaks coursing across the horizon. Lex felt the deepening colors in her core, settling with the finality of the surrounding gravestones. Not just this place but Cam's presence soothed the roar in her mind. Every time she was around her, the urge to run until her lungs threatened to burst, to dive off a cliff, to cross a shaky bridge subsided, because being by her side thrilled her as much.

The more time she spent around this woman, the harder she fell.

Lex stopped by the ancient magnolia tree that stretched wide and tall like a guardian of this old cemetery. She slipped an arm around Cam, and the woman leaned in as Lex guided them to the base. Every time Lex took the reins, Cam melted into her, and the implicit trust there formed an addiction she'd never be able to cure.

Lex took one step forward, then another until Cam's back thudded against the trunk. She placed her hands on either side to brace herself on the tree trunk, the rough bark scraping her skin. Cam sagged against the trunk, looking up at her with soft, yearning eyes that undid her every time.

Lex pressed her lips against Cam's, sinking into the slow exploration. Cam's mouth opened for her at once, her moan vibrating there. The sensations coursed through Lex like the drip of honey, and she squeezed her thighs together tight. Her pussy throbbed

as she swept her tongue in to taste Cam's sweetness, longing to slip her fingers beneath the waistband of her panties and explore.

Instead, Lex went higher.

She glided her fingers behind Cam's back and undid her bra with a snap. The straps sagged on her shoulders. Lex didn't stop kissing Cam, setting a demanding, insistent pace even as her fingers skimmed beneath the hem of her tunic. She slipped her palm up the slope of her waist, and Cam shivered against the touch. The moment her hands circled around the woman's breasts, the following moan was audible in the air.

God, she loved how responsive Cam was, how she became as pliable as stoneware clay to Lex's touch.

She squeezed the petal-soft globes tight, her clit aching from the feel of Cam's heavy breasts in her hands. Lex leaned to the side to press kisses up and down her neck and swiped her thumbs across Cam's hardened nipples. Her hips bucked forward, grinding against Cam's at the touch. Lex squeezed her breasts even harder, her breaths coming out in ragged pants. Her underwear was soaked.

Cam's hands trailed down her hips, and she squeezed them as they settled in place.

The woman wanted unforgettable? Lex would give it to her.

She continued to trail kisses down the pulse point on Cam's neck, her collarbone. Cam's nipples formed stiff peaks against the fabric of her tunic, and Lex descended to place a light bite on each one. Cam's moan was sinful, and Lex's restraint stretched like a rubber band threatening to snap. With the way this woman ground against her, holding on for dear life, she wanted to slip her fingers into the pussy she knew would be soaked for her.

Anyone else, and she would. However, every time she was about to lose control, she held back. Part of her wanted to wait until the perfect moment to cross the line, to the point she might just convince Cam this was what she wanted. As if her fantasy might stand a chance of coming true.

Lex returned to Cam's mouth, drawing out the kiss until she pulled away. The sky grew dark, and the moon peeked out to cast silver hues across the tombstones. They'd kissed right through the sunset. Cam's chest heaved with the desire charging the air between them, but as she had from the beginning, she let Lex take the reins.

"Looks like I was able to make you a spooky bitch, after all," Lex cracked, her eyes gleaming with amusement. The joke shattered the tension between them, and Cam flicked her in the arm.

"You're ridiculous. Come on, let's see the rest of this cemetery of yours," Cam said, snapping her bra on and running her fingers through her hair to comb it back. She took the footsteps forward, and Lex followed, trailing behind a couple of paces.

This was one of the few, lonely places where she could admit the truth, where her self-delusions crumbled like the tombstones surrounding her. No matter how much she tried to convince herself the opposite, she was falling for Cam.

Chapter Eight

Cam sipped at her dry martini, which was already mostly gone.

The guy in front of her—Ted? Theo? Whatever his name was droned on and on, and she had herself to blame. His gravel tone was making her nerves itch.

She should probably remember the guy's name considering it was their third date over the past few months, but he could barely keep her attention.

When things started heating up with Lex, she'd tried to keep up with one date here, another there, but no guy registered on her radar.

She slapped more duct tape over the voice in her mind screaming the reason why.

After the kiss they'd shared at the cemetery, Lex hadn't been responding as often anyway. Cam had thought whatever had sparked between them would spill into an inferno. Lex had teased and tormented her to the point she was ready to beg for the chance to slip between those thighs and taste her.

Except then her mother called, and when they discussed her plans, Cam tried to sneak in a made-up comment about one of her friends coming out as gay. She didn't know why she expected anything different.

The sharp-edged tone in her mother's voice as she told her "Allah would sort out those sinners in the afterlife," and to "stay far away" gave the confirmation of what she knew. It formed a pit in her stomach she still couldn't shake, and the shame clung to her skin like a mud bath.

"But after the meeting, I marched into his office and demanded a raise," the guy continued on. "I know my worth. That's how I ended up where I am at the firm."

He was all luscious blond hair, tan, blemish-free skin, and a Crest smile, none of which sparked the tiniest bit of attraction for her. Her mouth watered for a little more ink, a sensual, cruel mouth, and eyes that could slice. Oh, and the opposite gender.

Cam swallowed, hard, and stared up at the ceiling, all wooden panels lined with rivets. The walnut tables, porthole lights, and bronze accents gave the place an underground feel, and the ambiance oozed class. Prohibition Tap Room was one of the more fun venues around town, and live music would be starting any minute here, one of the reasons her date picked the place. When she saw the name headlining, her

stomach had dropped. She couldn't escape the Dukas family anywhere she went, because of course, Cal Dukas was playing tonight.

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“Good for you,” Cam said, nodding as she offered a polite smile. She’d stopped paying attention the moment he opened his mouth. She knew why she bothered. After the phone call with her mom, she hoped and prayed if she went on a date that she’d feel a candle’s worth of the flames that devoured her whole every time she was around Lex. However, Cam couldn’t sacrifice her family and security for a temporary thrill when Lex proclaimed far and wide her anti-commitment stance.

She should’ve texted Danny beforehand and set up some escape route, because this date had been a bad idea from the beginning. She was a walking contradiction, yet every time she considered taking the step, her mother’s words clanged around in her head.

“It’s allowed me to live in one of the nicer sections of the city. My condo’s got a gorgeous view if you’d ever like to come over and check it out.” He appraised her with heated eyes, his look edging on a leer.

Cam resisted the temptation to gag and took another sip from her dwindling martini. “Is your family from the area?” she asked, desperate to switch the focus. Part of her thought going home with him would be a good idea. Wash away the memories of Lex, quit this experiment between them, and remind herself she was straight. That part of her spoke with her mother’s voice.

“We’re originally from Louisiana,” he started. A shadow fell over their table.

Oh, shit.

“Cam, fancy running into you here.”

Lex stood in front of their table, looking gorgeous as hell in a loose maroon top and skinny black jeans highlighting her slender, but muscular figure. Cam's heart had been dead-on-arrival to this date, but the sight of Alexis Dukas got it thumping hard again. Guilt twisted in her chest like she'd been caught cheating, even though neither of them made any promises beyond six months of fooling around.

A dangerous glint lingered in Lex's eyes as she leaned forward, placing her hand on the table. She angled her body toward Cam, her lips pressed tight together even as she offered a fake as anything smile. "Here on a date? Who's your friend?"

Cam nodded. Not like she could lie her way out of this one. She tried not to notice the flicker of hurt in Lex's eyes that froze over. The look sliced her with razors and made the foolish part of her hope maybe she meant more than a goal or temporary thrill.

"This is Ted?" she said, wrinkling her nose as she glanced over to him.

His gaze darkened. "My name's Brian. Who's this?"

Lex slipped into the seat beside Cam, and in a blink, her arm looped around her shoulder. "I'm her favorite person on the planet," she drawled, baring her teeth in a feral grin. Relief shuddered through Cam at the safety of Lex's arms, and she resisted the urge to sink against her.

"We're sort of in the middle of a date," Not-Ted said, leaning in like he might put up a fight. Even though the guy was one popped collar away from a bro, he wouldn't stand a chance against Lex.

Lex nodded and picked up Cam's martini to steal the last sip. She wrinkled her nose. "Who the hell drinks martinis besides James Bond?"

Cam rolled her eyes. "Why'd you drink it if you don't like it?"

“Wishful thinking it’d be something else,” Lex said with a shrug. She fixed her gaze on Not-Ted. “How’s the date going? Did you know this girl is a talented cook AND an artist? Total catch, and she’s already smoking hot.”

Cam’s brows drew together, and she pursed her lips. Whatever Lex was doing, the guy wasn’t digging it. Maybe the way Lex’s grip tightened around her irritated him, or he didn’t like the possessive curl of her voice that made Cam shiver.

Lex leaned in, lifting her hand for a stage whisper. “She’s a screamer too.”

Of course. Cam flicked Lex in the side.

Her date blanched, his gaze darkening as he glanced between them. “Whatever, I’m out.” He pushed up from the table and pulled some crisp bills from his wallet. “This should cover my drinks.”

Brian stepped away from the table, and Cam rounded on Lex. “You’re ridiculous. You can’t just barge in on my dates and scare them off.”

“He wouldn’t have lasted,” Lex said, not budging an inch as she crowded her space. Instead, Lex spread her legs wider. “Come on, the dude seemed nervous the moment I brought up anything personal, and I’m not going to disappear from your life once our expiration date hits. You had the misfortune of becoming one of my friends.”

“Right, but as one of my friends, if I do happen to find someone who works for me and wants the whole settling down package, you’re not going to burst in and tell them I’m a screamer.” Cam fixed her with a granite look. She wouldn’t budge on this.

Lex shot her a look and leaned into her. “Fine. You meet the Mr. Cleaver of your hetero dreams and I’ll keep my lips zipped. Though, it’s a damn shame, because you make one hot-as-sin lesbian.”

Cam's features tightened at the label. She couldn't help it. The comment hit her like she'd been slapped, and her mother's ugly words resurrected from their shallow tomb.

"I'm not," she insisted, knowing how hollow her words sounded. Around Lex, she settled into her own skin at last, not the uniforms she'd been slipping into from an early age. "I can't be."

Lex's eyebrows drew together, and she reached up to brush her thumb over the crease in Cam's brow. The tender gesture made her melt like butter.

"Hey, I didn't mean anything by that. If that's not something you're ready to come to terms with, I'll back off. This has always been your choice, on your terms." She traced circles on the table with her finger. "I remember when I came out in high school, I thought my parents were going to have a heart attack. I had been agonizing for a full year over it, trying to keep it secret from my siblings and failing hard. The anxiety was crushing me, so I wrote out a whole letter to read to them. Ended up tossing it in the trash and told them they could either take me as I am, or I'd leave."

"How'd they respond?" Cam asked, unable to help herself. Her heart stuttered at this shade of vulnerability from Lex, the way she opened windows around her that remained closed for everyone else.

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Lex glanced up, running her finger along the rim of the martini glass. “My folks were surprised, sure, but they just told me they loved me however I was. They’re a real good sort.”

“Not everyone’s lucky enough to get that reaction,” Cam said, the words spilling out in a bitter cascade. Lex’s gaze darkened, and she reached out to rub her thumb over the fist Cam hadn’t even realized she’d formed.

“Yeah, I know,” Lex murmured, sinking into silence. Cam wanted to bite the loaded statement back, as if Lex had figured out too much of her reticence. As if she could keep a part of herself from this woman who descended into her space like a storm in late August. “Hey, I swear I wasn’t here to stalk you on your date,” Lex said, breaking the quiet that descended. “I showed up to support the little brother’s blossoming musical career. I’ve been promising to go to one of his shows for way too long now.”

Cam offered a grin, grateful for the change of subject. “I had the feeling when I saw Cal Dukas was headlining. Is it weird to see your brother as more of a big deal? I heard he got some radioplay.”

“Abso-fucking-lutely. The little twerp was plucking a guitar looking like a kicked puppy ever since he was a kid, but I’m glad he found his thing and he’s making some cash from it.” Lex tilted her head toward the booth seats closer to the stage. Crowds had started settling into the place in preparation for the show. “Want to grab a seat? You’re already here, and I wouldn’t mind the company.”

Cam fixed her with a look. “Sure, as long as you’re not planning on growling away

any male attention that comes my way.”

Lex pursed her lips, tapping on the side of her chin. “You strike a tough bargain, but I guess I can keep my growls to myself for the night.” The way Lex’s voice deepened when she stared her down made it clear the sort of growls she’d prefer to indulge in. The idea of those vibrating against her skin had Cam wanting to make a detour home to end the night with her vibrator.

The spotlights blinked on at the makeshift stage, and the overhead lights dimmed, signaling the show would be starting soon. Lex slipped out of the booth and offered a hand.

“Let me buy you a drink,” Lex said as they made their way up to the polished walnut bar. “My apology for ruining your date.”

Cam heaved a sigh and gave her the side eye. “You’re not sorry in the slightest, but you weren’t ruining anything. I was looking for a way to get out of it anyway.” She tried to not notice how Lex perked up and her chin lifted a little higher.

Lex flagged down the bartender to order her dry martini and a dark and stormy while the crowds filtered in. Where Prohibition Tap Room had been crowded before, now it teemed with people, most of them gathering close to the stage to see Cal Dukas strum his soul out. She had to admit she was curious. She’d only met the younger Dukas siblings a handful of times, but with everything she’d heard from Lex, Danny, and Adrian, she felt like she’d known all of them for years.

“So, what kind of music does he play?” Cam asked, leaning in as they found a spot by the wall, close to the short stage.

“Just watch.” Lex leaned in close enough her lips brushed against Cam’s ear. “They’re about to start.”

“Please welcome Cal Dukas, joined by Violet Taylor,” the announcement sounded over the speakers.

A ripple of sound ran through the crowd as two figures emerged, approaching the two mics set up. Cal was recognizable at once with tousled dark hair that belonged on a model, a firm jaw covered in scruff, and soft, soulful eyes. He flashed a grin that lit his entire face with a presence every member of the Dukas family seemed to share.

The woman who strode up to the stage beside him was petite in every way: height, stature—even her button nose and dark, sparrow eyes. When she smiled, her features bled with a raw, spellbinding vulnerability before she ever opened her mouth to sing.

Cal’s fingers strummed across the strings of his guitar, and the two of them began their song, the melody of their voices captivating. He stared at her like he found sunlight for the first time, a wonder glowing in his eyes as he continued to play his guitar. The love story that unfolded in their lyrics felt tangible on stage, and the sweet melancholy in their tone twisted Cam’s heart to pieces.

Before she realized it, she leaned against Lex, who snuck an arm around her waist. Her warning sirens should be ringing, and the guilt should be suffocating, but being here with her like this felt right, more than anything had in a long while. Not just the physical side of things or the fire that lit her veins when they touched. Lex had this rawness to her personality, like the rough shiver of whisky, but Cam had gotten to know her well enough these past couple of months to see how deep her current ran.

From the moment they met she saw right through the swagger, but she never thought she’d get to meet the woman beneath who experienced every emotion with the fury of therapids. As Cal and Violet reached the crescendo of their song, the melody pierced her with a yearning she could no longer deny.

The rusted knife pain welled in her chest, a part of her she didn’t dare share. A part

she'd been lying about for years that Lex cracked wide open. Cam hated the raw prickle of being vulnerable; how when her feelings lay out there, anyone could trample or eviscerate them.

“Those sinners” clanged around in her head, making her want to pull away from Lex. Yet the sweet, painful strain of the music spoke to her in a way nothing had for some time. In this moment, she didn't want to live with her delusions anymore. For a single moment, she wanted to pretend this was a life she could have, that Lex might want something more than a hot fling.

Cam leaned in closer to her, resting her head against Lex's shoulder. Lex's grip tightened on her waist as she squeezed. Her heart ached. This. This was what it felt like to be protected, to be cared for. To be loved.

Boyfriends in the past had made her swoon, and she'd dated guys who sparked warmth inside, but the depth of this thing with Lex made all the other instances feel trivial.

A slight smile clung to Lex's lips as she stared up at her brother strumming his heart out on stage. Cam wanted to memorize her like this, with the slight look of surprise in her glittering eyes and the flash of the stage lights along her skin, highlighting the dark lines of the tattoos. She radiated serenity here, like she had in the cemetery, so different from her thunderstorm presence everywhere else.

Cal's smooth voice glided across her skin, and Violet's dulcet tones melded with his as their melody grew as tremulous as a firefly, as seasons flashed before her eyes until the song faded away.

Cam's throat tightened, but she didn't pull away from Lex. The world could crack in two right now, but she wanted this moment to last as long as it could, before reality crashed in.

Before she remembered all the reasons why this was a bad idea and why Lex could never be long term for her.

Before she remembered that in three months, she was leaving.

Chapter Nine

“I’m pretty sure our guests aren’t going to starve, Mom,” Lex said, stepping back to survey the king’s feast of Greek food her mother had spent days cooking. Trays covered every spare surface in the kitchen and dining room table, and the scents of all those spices hung in clouds throughout the house. She and Nellie had been helping since the crack of dawn. There wasn’t enough coffee in the world after the late shift she’d pulled at Inkspirations and the failed attempt at distraction that had been her club night with Mitch.

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“I think I could’ve made some more dolmades, or at least some keftedes,” Mom fretted over the dishes laid out in front of them, probably enough to feed a wedding let alone a bridal shower.

Lex clapped a hand on her mother’s shoulder. “You did good. Danny’s going to love it.”

“I hope I’ll be getting to throw one of these for you some day, sweetheart,” Mom said in a questioning tone that always caused Lex to feel guilty.

“You’ll be waiting a long time,” Lex said. “An ex-con tattoo artist isn’t most folks’ top choice of dates they want to bring home to meet the parents.”

Mom arched her brow and pursed her lips, a look she delivered every time Lex gave her a “smart” response—which happened any day ending in Y. “Alexis, you’re so much more than a label. Someday, some girl is going to see that, and I can’t wait to meet her.”

Lex’s eyes heated up, and she forced herself to look away from her mother. This was why she avoided her family at all costs, particularly Cal and Mom who flounced around making people feel things. Spend ten minutes around the two of them and she could almost believe in herself again, which was an extreme disruption to her booked schedule of self-flagellation.

“I didn’t tell you guys, but Bell offered me a stall at Inkspirations,” she offered, trying to deflect the complicated emotions that arose at the mention of her love life. She especially tried to avoid the thoughts of Cam that surfaced. “At least, if I make it

through the next two months without royally fucking something up. Probably end up setting fire to the shop or some shit.”

Mom reached out and brushed a thumb across her chin. The affection in her gaze made Lex’s eyes sting. Holy hell, she needed to extricate herself. Every time she was around this woman, she reverted to six years old with a broken arm or thirteen with a broken heart. The warmth in those soft brown eyes was the same Cal had inherited. Like Adrian, she leaned more toward her father in looks.

“I won’t do you the disservice of lying—you were never an easy child, but that doesn’t change how proud I am of you. You’re a fighter, whether you’re protesting injustice, the world trying to force you to conform, or in standing up for the people you love. But you’re allowed to fight for yourself too.”

Fuck, the woman had emotional x-ray vision. Lex’s temptation to bolt rose with every day closer to the permanent position at Inkspirations. Yet Cam’s words clanged around in her head. The choice was in her hands.

Lex winged an arm around her mother and squeezed tight so she could hide her watery eyes. No crying on the dolmades they’d worked so hard wrapping up this morning. “Enough with the speeches, woman. What are you, campaigning for office?”

“Didn’t you know she’s the mayor of Charleston?” Nellie called as she entered the room. Lex’s chest twisted with relief—with her little sister there, she could wade out of these too-deep waters. Nellie had scrubbed the stains off her arms and face and changed into her second outfit for the day, a floral swing dress. She’d been keeping spare clothes here and sleeping over Mom and Dad’s house when her obnoxious husband Greg traveled for work.

“Live long enough in the same area and you just end up knowing people,” Mom said,

pinching the Saran wrap along the edges of the trays covering the table. “Are you sure we’ve got enough food?”

“Mom, there won’t be enough room for the people if we make any more,” Nellie said, a soft grin on her face as she tugged her wet hair into a bun. “Lex, the shower’s free if you need to take a turn.”

“Trying to imply I stink?” Lex asked, lifting her arm to sniff her pits. She made a face. “Maybe I like smelling like grape leaves and sweat.” She strode in the direction of the steps, raising a hand up as she headed for the shower. “Don’t let Mom make any more food, Nells.”

She needed to wash off these feelings before they infected her.

Danny’s bridal shower went by in a whirlwind of loud cousins and aunts, a fair amount of wine and ouzo drunk, and far too much food. Lex was already coming down from the heady buzz of the ouzo, even though the licorice taste lingered.

Thankfully, after two hours in, Danny unwrapped the gifts and sent about a thousand “help me” looks to Lex who just shrugged, and then some of the older ladies headed out. Once the numbers died down, there was more room for casual conversation and lounging. When all five of them had been growing up in this place they’d been punching at the walls for more space. Lex and Adrian had been the only ones to get their own rooms until Mom and Dad finished the basement. She tugged out the trash bag and began to pluck up rogue paper cups with unfinished drinks, tossing the liquid out before they went in the bag.

Cam approached, looking good enough to steal the air from the room. She’d dolled up today in a scarlet swing dress that clung to her curves, flaring out at thigh length.

Her lips were the same color crimson, and the curve of the matching pumps looked hot enough that all Lex could think about was slipping them off her to glide up those silken legs.

The past couple of weeks they'd both been scarce—between Cam's overtime at the Horntrees' and Lex's late nights at Inkspirations, there hadn't been much time. Truth be told, if the texts between them hadn't remained constant, Lex would've thought Cam was avoiding her again. When she'd crashed Cam's date and they'd watched Cal's show together, something between them had shifted, a softening of Cam's tone and a wry affection that Lex would go to embarrassing lengths to draw out.

"Hey there, gorgeous," Lex kept her voice low.

Cam's gaze heated, sweeping over the length of her body. That sort of attention made her glad she'd spent time on her appearance, the military green dress with pockets about the only one utilitarian enough for her to wear. She'd kept the Docs on though, but so did the bride-to-be.

"How are you still functional after all the chaos?" Cam said, leaning against the now-emptied kitchen countertop.

Lex slipped beside her until their hips touched. "Because I was born and bred in that chaos."

"Seriously," Danny said, strolling in from the other room. "Y'all are a handful, but at least you're fun." Cam shifted away from her as if she'd been burned, and damn if that didn't douse her with ice.

Mom, her sisters, and Abigail leaned back, chatting on the couch. Nellie hadn't escaped the conversation yet, even though the rest of the bridal party managed to extricate themselves.

“I need that sort of introduction at the clubs,” Lex drawled. “Think you can swing it next time? I’ve hit a bit of a dry spell.”

Cam’s face tightened at the comment. It had been low, but she took a vicious satisfaction in knowing the knife cut both ways. Lex hadn’t missed the signals from Cam every time they met up, how every encounter brought them closer and closer to implosion. At first, Lex had initiated every touch, yet now when it was just the two of them, Cam leaned in, brushed her fingers across Lex’s legs, and even clasped her hand.

However, any time Lex considered taking the next steps, she froze. Part of her couldn’t bear the idea of this thing between her and Cam devolving into the same mindless escape as all her other hookups.

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“Sure, anything to make Adrian uncomfortable.” Danny flashed her a blinder of a grin and headed over for the open bottle of wine to pour herself some more chardonnay. “Though, you? A dry spell? Is Charleston in a short supply of hot women or something?”

“Yeah, Lex,” Cam challenged, a serrated edge to her voice that hadn’t been there before. “I mean you’ve had plenty of opportunities, right? Why not indulge?”

The dark look in Cam’s eyes threatened to burn her on the spot. She deserved that. Her comment had been bitchy and spurred from the jealousy that Cam still went out there dating when Lex couldn’t keep her heart in check, which left her turning down girls left and right.

Or hell, it could be the mere fact she wanted more so badly it tore her in two. That she wanted to shout how she felt to the world, not stay trapped in this realm of whispers and stolen glances, leaping away from each other any time one of their friends or her family even glanced their way. Lex hadn’t been in the closet for a long, long time, and the guilt that came with sneaking around like what they were doing was wrong curdled in her stomach.

“Maybe I’m taking time to focus on my art,” Lex argued, casting a pointed glance in Cam’s direction. The air charged between them, the sort of tension she wanted to claw through. “Bell has me working longer hours at the shop.”

“Oh, the shop you’re planning on ditching once the six months are up?” Cam shot back, clutching her drink tight. Lex’s throat tightened. Fuck her for throwing that in her face. At once, Cam’s shoulders slumped, as if she realized how venomous that

had come out. Danny glanced to the two of them, her brow lifted and concern flashing in her green eyes.

“I’ve got to throw this trash out,” Lex said, walking away before she said anything else she might regret. She walked fast, but not fast enough to miss Danny ask if things were okay and for Cam to lie about being tired. Bull-fucking-shit. Her arms trembled from the hurt that scored through her. She’d opened up to her, she’d told her about her fears, and Cam had shoved them in her face.

Lex headed out back to drop the half-collected bag of trash into the big green containers, but she wasn’t ready to return to the scene she’d left. She tugged out a cigarette and leaned against the vinyl siding, a couple of stray dandelions bursting through the patchy asphalt in need of repair. When she took the first drag, the nicotine flooded her system, a temporary reprieve from the noxious cocktail churning inside.

The back door creaked open and shut, drawing Lex’s attention.

Cam walked out, her head down and a pensive look on her face. Lex swallowed hard and stared at the asphalt, taking another drag from her cigarette. She didn’t bother saying a word, not with the spite on her lips begging to come out and play. She didn’t look up either when Cam settled against the wall beside her.

“Hey,” she murmured. “I crossed a line. I’m sorry.”

Lex sucked another drag of the cigarette, but the nicotine wasn’t steadying her enough to have this conversation right now. Fuck, she needed to pull herself together.

Cam ran a hand through her hair, tugging on the ends. She let out a shaky sigh. “Look, I know this is a weird arrangement we have going on, but this has been driving me nuts. We’re down to two months left, and we haven’t...gone all the way.

If you're cooling off and not digging me like that anymore, please tell me." Her voice cracked, and the hesitance there, the vulnerability quenched Lex's anger like water to heated steel.

Lex glanced at her, the cigarette dangling between her fingers. Cam's eyebrows drew together, and her crimson lips pursed with worry. When she lifted her head up, the helpless look in Cam's eyes scored Lex's heart.

She couldn't manage to summon the words to address the fear in her eyes, because she didn't think Cam had any answers either. They dove into this the same way they had the night at the club—headfirst, and without a thought of the consequences.

"So, I happened to notice I showed you my art, but you have yet to hold up your end of the bargain," Lex commented, swinging her gaze to the asphalt where it was safe. She kept her voice light, but she held back the dam with a pinkie.

"Why are you bringing that up now?" Cam asked, caution ringing her tone, like a cat stalking up for a slow approach.

"Well, because of the bridal shower, I'm not working at Inkspirations tonight," Lex started, her heart beginning to step in double time. "And I have it from a good source you're not working at the Horntrees'. So, no excuses. You and your sketchpads, canvases, whatever, can show up at my place at seven tonight."

Cam licked her lips. The way they glistened made Lex want to close the distance between them and claim her mouth, but they'd have time for that later. Tonight. The air turned electric between them, and the moment their eyes met, the molten look in Cam's stroked her insides like fingers through hair, smoothing the earlier hurt as if they'd never dropped those shrapnel words.

"I'll be there with bells on," Cam said, her voice as soft as the smile she offered. Lex

leaned in to nudge her in the side, but when their hips touched, neither of them moved away. This close, she caught the mouthwatering scent of rose and felt the heat of this woman who had somehow imprinted on her skin like a tattoo.

Hell, she was so smitten she'd invited Cam to her apartment. No one came to her apartment—not family, not friends, and definitely not random hookups. Lex guarded her privacy like a rangy attack dog.

But she couldn't put this off any longer, not faced with the yearning in Cam's eyes and the flicker of hesitation, like the woman veered just as close to wrecking on the rocks as Lex. Like she was just as terrified of the ravine's edge they dangled at.

Cam reached over and squeezed her hand. Lex waited for her to snatch it away or glance at the door, but she didn't.

"I should head back in to help clean up," Cam said, tilting her head toward the door. "But I'll see you tonight. Seven sharp." The loss of the skin-to-skin connection scorched her, and her palm throbbed even as Cam strode toward the house.

"Be right there," Lex said, tapping the ash at the end of her cigarette. Cam's glance before she slipped through the door burned right through her, full of the heat, the desire, and the longing percolating between them.

In the aftermath of the sharp words they'd gored each other with, the lingering ache pulsed like a second heartbeat. She sucked down the cigarette. She'd thrown the gauntlet and invited Cam to her place, so at seven tonight, she was going to get a taste of everything she'd been longing for from the moment this arrangement began.

Lex flicked the cigarette onto the asphalt and ground it beneath the heel of her boot. She should've stepped up and admitted she was catching feelings. She should've admitted she didn't want this to end when the six months were up. Hell, she

should've never made this arrangement in the first place.

Because at the end of the six months, Lex didn't know how she was going to let Cam go.

Chapter Ten

After months of desperate kisses and touches that had Cam's entire body vibrating, tonight was the night.

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The part of her that had been avoiding the truth wanted to run screaming. For some reason, this felt far more final than a sinful club hookup, like she crossed a line she could no longer hide from. More than that, she'd be leaving all of this behind after Danny's wedding when she went back to SCAD. The weight of the decision tugged at her heels, but she wasn't ready for this fragile thing between her and Lex to shatter.

She twirled a strand of her hair as she strode down the walkway leading to the address Lex provided. Her bag of sketch books weighed heavy on her shoulder, but her entire body buzzed in anticipation for what was to come.

She stopped in front of the big black door of a red-bricked townhouse and knocked. She smoothed her peach skirt that she couldn't bend over in without flashing the neighborhood. Her white tank top might as well be glued to her skin with the way it clung, and she regretted not wearing a bra. It had seemed like a good idea at the time when she'd been tearing through her closet earlier. The rejected outfits still lay piled up on her bed. Cam lifted her hand to knock again when the door swung open.

Lex stood in the frame, her black hair slicked back and the navy muscle tee she wore revealing her toned biceps and the stark lines of her tattoos. Between that, the ripped jeans, and her bare feet, Cam was already lost. Any thoughts of escaping vanished, even though she'd be crossing the line into an experience with a woman that went way beyond a wild one-night experiment. Even her epic levels of self-deception couldn't explain away this.

Lex let out a low whistle. "Do all that dolling up for me?" Her grin widened, a predatory gleam in her eyes that caused Cam to shiver. She'd taken one step inside of this woman's house and she was so turned on she could barely breathe. The musk of

clove and campfire wrapped around her, making her want to nuzzle into Lex to get a deeper inhale.

“Had to pull out all the stops,” Cam murmured, a grin lifting her lips. “I have a hot date tonight. She’s sexy as sin, and her tattoos make me lose my mind.”

Lex’s grin deepened, and she slid her hand around her waist as she closed the door behind them. The audible click caused Cam to swallow, her throat dry.

“I’ve got it on good authority your date’s a total slut who’s three seconds from tossing your skirt on her floor.” Lex’s hand slipped beneath her tank top, and the caress of her fingertips against bare skin caused her pussy to throb.

“Thought you wanted to see some art?” Cam said, unable to help her grin as she lifted the tote bag she’d brought. Lex scanned her over with a hunger that made her want to strip down right here.

Lex skimmed her fingers along Cam’s skin, the tips skating along the waistband of her skirt. Cam sucked in a sharp breath at the touch, desperate to run her fingers through Lex’s hair, to reach out and touch and take on her own.

“Pretty sure I’m looking at a masterpiece,” Lex purred in her ear, leaning in to nip at her earlobe.

Cam squeezed her legs tight, managing to cast Lex a wry look. “That was terrible even by your standards.”

“Standards? Let’s be real sweetheart, I don’t have them.” Lex strode forward with her, leading them deeper into her house. Cam’s pace slowed as she soaked it in. The walls were steel blue, and the artwork on display was the sort she’d expect in a tattoo shop, pieces of girls tied up in rope, vintage bombshells, and gorgeous landscapes in

thick black ink over canvas.

“I’ll be honest, it’s weird being in your apartment,” Cam murmured, leaning in while they walked into her kitchen and living room combo. “I thought you pretty much just sprang from a bog at the mention of chaos or danger.”

Lex snorted and tugged her by the hand to bring her over to the corduroy couch. Cam slipped her tote to the ground with an audible thump, her art books forgotten when Lex settled into the couch and sprawled her legs out in invitation.

Cam’s calves tugged with hesitation, but she had enough of Lex calling all the shots. The woman clearly wanted her, and Cam was tired of denying she wanted Lex too. Instead of coming to sit on her lap like Lex expected, Cam summoned her nerve and sank to her knees in front of her. Lex’s tongue slipped out to wet her lower lip, and fuck if that didn’t make her hotter. The intensity of the gaze bearing down made her squirm. Her panties were beyond soaked and Lex hadn’t even touched her yet.

“You’ve been teasing me for months now,” Cam murmured. “Time to pay back the favor.” Her voice sounded husky and strange in her ears, calmer than the live wire way she felt.

Lex leaned into her couch, legs sprawled out and spread wide for her. Something dark, deep, and dangerous lurked in Lex’s gaze, a wildness she wanted to harness, if only for tonight. Even the way she lay there was cocky, like a lion surveying her pride. Cam’s throat dried, and the panic set in. When Lex took the reins, Cam found it so easy to succumb to the pleasure she offered, but tonight was different.

She reached for Lex’s pants, flicking the button open. Lex watched her the entire time, the tension between them stretching taut like elastic ready to snap. The sound of the zipper sliding down echoed in the room, but Lex shimmied out of her jeans, kicking them to the floor. Cam almost swore. Lex had gone commando, and the sight

of her bare pussy jolted Cam with enough lust her mind spun.

She wanted to taste her so badly. Cam reached forward, sliding her hands up those smooth legs. She lowered her lips to press a kiss along her calf, to trail up the inside of her thigh, which was covered in a stunning tattoo detailing the city of the dead, pale souls floating along a darkened sea. Lex reached down to weave her fingers through Cam's strands, giving a light tug.

Cam's core ached as she bit and sucked at the insides of Lex's thighs, closer and closer to that gorgeous pussy. She cherished every sharp, ragged breath from Lex, even though the woman hadn't looked away from her once. Her hazel eyes blazed with lust, but they gleamed with something a little more vulnerable too, something that made Cam want to keep her.

She trailed her tongue in teasing arcs closer and closer to Lex's glistening folds, enjoying the way the woman's grip on her hair tightened, how her breath hitched. Lex was mesmerizing, with a raw beauty that made her heart hurt. Cam sank between her legs and glanced up to meet her gaze. Lex nodded, tilting her hips.

She swallowed. No turning back now.

The moment her tongue slipped between Lex's folds, the husky moan from her lips was so hot Cam could barely think straight. She began to lap at her clit, slow, firm strokes at first as she savored the taste of this woman. Cam wrapped her hands around Lex's thighs as she sank in deeper, intoxicated by the honeyed heat. Lex hooked her legs around Cam's shoulders, and when she lapped at her faster, Lex's heels dug into her back.

She alternated between firm and light as she sucked and licked at Lex's swollen clit. The silken feel of her folds, the molten heat of her core, all of it dosed Cam with so much desire she could barely take a breath. Her knees pressed into the grain of the

hardwood as she lost herself in the rhythm, watching the way Lex unraveled.

Lex's breath quickened, her pulse a butterfly's wings. Her moans sliced through the hush of the room, the sweetest music imaginable. The flush on her cheeks and the coiled muscle of her thighs, calves, how her fingers tightened in Cam's strands—all of it drove Cam wild. Her panties were embarrassingly soaked. The throb between her legs intensified into an ache so exquisite she couldn't focus on anything beyond the thrust of Lex's hips and her taste on Cam's lips.

Cam drove her tongue inside, eliciting a razor breath from Lex as she increased the momentum, faster and faster. When Cam switched back to her clit, she sucked at it until Lex let out a ragged moan.

“God, babe, that's so good,” Lex's hoarse voice urged her on, as did the tilt of her hips. Cam's nails dug into Lex's thighs, tighter as she nipped and sucked at the tender spot. Lex's entire body tensed up, coiling like a spring. Bliss radiated through her, from the gleam in her eyes to the slight part of her lips. Cam didn't pull away, continuing to lap at her clit, gentler strokes, until Lex sank into the couch again, coming down from her orgasm.

“Holy hell, gorgeous,” Lex breathed, slipping her legs off Cam's shoulders. “You really know how to work that smart mouth.”

Cam pulled back as Lex slipped her fingers out of her hair. She wanted—so much so she couldn't form a coherent thought right now. She'd never been this turned on in her life, and if she were being honest, she could spend hours between Lex's legs.

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“It’s got a few uses,” Cam murmured.

“Believe me, I’m planning on tapping them,” Lex said, reaching forward to tug her up from kneeling. She directed her forward to sit on her lap. Cam’s throat dried, and she licked her lips. The second her ass rested against the curve of Lex’s bare pussy, she couldn’t restrain the moan from slipping out. Her skirt hiked up high around her thighs, and the skin to skin contact set her veins on fire.

Cam leaned against Lex who pulled her flush against her. She could feel Lex’s breasts pressed to her back, and she was tempted to turn around and explore more of that stunning body. Except, then Lex slipped a hand into her panties, wrapped the other one around her bare breast, and Cam forgot her own name.

Lex circled two fingers around her clit with a precision she sank into, and the muscular body bracing her, wrapped around her, was the stuff of her dirtiest daydreams. Her bare thighs pressed against Lex’s, and she squirmed at the sinful shudder that rippled through her when Lex increased the pressure.

“You keep grinding against me like that and I’m going to come again,” Lex breathed in her ear. She began to kiss along her neck, the sensations rolling throughout Cam’s entire body. When Lex’s teeth sank into her shoulder, Cam couldn’t keep back a guttural moan. Lex didn’t just caress, she possessed with every bite, every suck, every stroke.

Lex’s thumb grazed over her nipple at the same time Lex’s fingers wove lazy circles around her clit again and again and again. The sensations pushed her close to overload, and her legs draped over Lex’s as she thrust her ass back to grind harder

against this gorgeous woman. Her core ached, and the memory of the fierce thrusts of Lex's fingers the last time they'd fucked intensified the throb of her clit.

"I want to taste you when you come," Lex purred in her ear, the husky voice ringing with a confidence and command that was uniquely her. "So that means this is gone," she said, tugging Cam's skirt and panties down her legs.

Cam lifted her hips with the motion, and the fabric hit the floor. When she rested onto Lex's lap again, the woman sucked at her earlobe, causing her to shiver. Her soaked pussy rested on those bare thighs. "And we'll do away with this, because you've got stunning tits."

Cam had never been into dirty talk until she met Lex, because the moment that woman spoke, she wanted to spread her legs. Before she could blink, her shirt slipped up and over her head, joining the rest of her clothes on the floor. Lex grabbed her by the waist with a strength she couldn't help but lose herself in, her nipples grazing her back. In a quick pivot, Lex flipped her onto her back. Cam lay pressed into the couch, and Lex hovered overtop of her, arms bracing on either side.

This was nothing like the under-the-clothes fuck they'd first had. She lay here bare to this woman, not only in skin. The time they'd spent together peeled back layer after layer until they'd gotten past each other's defenses. This woman knew her like a timeworn melody, like the tick-tick-tick of a favorite music box.

When Lex leaned down to kiss her, each and every moment knit together into something stronger than she could've ever anticipated. Their lips brushed together, sinking into the familiar rhythm of their thousand and one make out sessions since this had begun. She smelled like clove, sweat, and smoke, and Cam was far gone, lost in a haze of lust, of want, of yearning.

Lex traveled down Cam's body, lips whispering over neck and collarbone, until she

reached her breasts. Her nipples formed stiff, sensitive peaks, tightening as Lex's hot breath puffed against them. The moment her tongue darted out to lick the tips, Cam's hips bucked up against Lex's. The woman prowled over her, that muscular body keeping her pinned against the couch with a coiled strength she wanted to surrender to.

Her core throbbed to the point it drowned out her own heartbeat, a need that rolled through her like thunder. Lex continued to bite, suck, and caress her way down, squeezing her breasts even as she brought her kisses lower. Once Lex neared her hips, each touch warmed her skin like cinnamon. Lex's hands, those clever fingers, glided along her curves until they settled around her thighs.

Cam's legs spread on reflex, so desperate for the sensuous caress of Lex's cruel lips, for the salvation her tongue would bring. Her throat bobbed, but her shoulders dug into the cushions as she lifted her hips in an offering.

Lex didn't just take, she claimed.

Her fingers dug into the couch on either side of her as Lex's hands slid around her ass to grip tight, and her mouth descended. Cam's moans ripped out as Lex's talented tongue slipped between her seam and flicked at her clit. Lex's tight grip, the way she held her body like she owned it, had Cam surrendering. One glimpse of those hazel eyes glazed with desire, the sensuous lips that Cam had touched herself thinking about, and the sharp line of Lex's jaw had her falling.

Lex's tongue flicked at the swollen bud of her clit until the pleasure coursed through her veins, spreading all the way to her toes. Her mouth was precise and punishing, delivering a fury of sensation that caused a system restart on her brain. In Lex'scapable hands, she became mindless with pleasure, starved for the woman's touch, for the electricity that flicker-flashed through her body.

Lex's arms wrapped around her thighs, and she dragged Cam's pussy to her mouth. Cam tilted her head back, digging into the couch. Her ragged breaths were shrapnel in the loaded air, and then Lex thrust her tongue inside her. Her thighs tightened at the force driving into her, and her heels burrowed into the cushion. She was one lit firework away from explosion, and Lex knew every last way to spark her fuse.

Lex rubbed at her clit even as she fucked her with her tongue, the stimulation bringing her closer and closer. Sweat beaded on her forehead, and her breath hitched in her throat. The bliss grew hotter, brighter, until she combusted. She tightened like a wrung towel only to spiral out so dizzyingly fast she closed her eyes and coasted out on the pulses.

Before she even came down from her orgasm, Lex's mouth left her folds, and the woman glided up her body with a serpentine grace. Lex's lips crushed over hers, stealing Cam's ragged breaths in their wake. She let out a low moan, muffled by the insistent press of Lex's lips as she devoured her.

Lex slipped two fingers between her soaked folds and glided them up with a smooth, liquidity Cam had never been able to forget. There was nothing awkward or fumbling about this woman. She had a sanguine strength to her, and the way she moved screamed precise control. Lex kissed her with a bruising strength, but Cam wanted it harder.

She wanted to feel that kiss for years after this ended, wanted it to imprint on her body, her mind, her soul. Cam wanted the connection this kiss offered more than her next breath.

Lex's fingers glided in and out of her, filling up the ache inside and making her scorch. A drop of sweat tickled as it rolled down her neck, but Lex leaned in to lap it up before biting her shoulder again. Cam lifted her hips to greet Lex's thrusts, needing to feel, feel, feel. This was more than a simple screw in a bathroom stall, this had

become a damn awakening.

Lex's thumb swirled around her sensitized clit, the needy bitch begging for another dose. Cam's eyes rolled back in her head as her moans grew louder and louder.

"You feel so fucking perfect, babe," Lex purred in her ear.

"Don't stop," she begged, unable to form a coherent sentence. "I need..."

"I know, sweetheart. I've got you," Lex murmured against her mouth before she dove in for another kiss.

Cam's lips were swollen, and her clit was ready to explode, but Lex continued driving her fingers inside her harder and harder until she felt like she floated. The tightness coiled in her core to the point of pain, and her breath snagged in her throat. She tasted copper on her lips from the fierce way they clashed together, and she felt Lex deep inside, imprinting on her in a way she'd never be able to forget.

The pressure mounted in her, building, building, building until she reached the precipice. Yet this wasn't anything as tame as fireworks. Her orgasm crested over her with the raw force of a crack of lightning, the sensations blinding her senses, her entire body trembling with the bliss that soared through her. Cam took a shaky exhale even as her eyes remained closed a moment longer. Her pussy pulsed around Lex's fingers, and the tremors radiated across her skin.

Lex's kisses gentled, lips brushing against her cheeks and then her forehead with a sweetness that made Cam's eyes prick with heat. Her eyes flickered open to see Lex looming over her like some wicked, sensual goddess. Her lips were fuller, a biteable pink from their fevered kisses, and her eyes glowed with a depth of emotion that reached right inside Cam's chest and tugged.

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“You’re breathtaking,” she murmured, her voice quieted in the wake of the furious storm of emotions and sensations raging through her. All this time she’d spent with Lex was the closest she’d come to feeling complete in a long, long while. She reached up and swiped her thumb across Lex’s cheek, enjoying how the woman nuzzled into the touch.

Lex glanced away, the air growing a little tenser. “I want you to stay,” she murmured, the deepening of her voice stroking across her heart like fingers to guitar strings. “Tonight,” she clarified, biting her lip. Cam’s chest clenched a little tighter at the addition, a reminder that this was temporary. That their candle would burn down until it extinguished. Lex’s gaze turned wicked. “Besides, I only made you come twice. I need at least three more from you before I’m satiated.”

“You’re ridiculous,” she responded. “I’m pretty sure if we try for a hat trick, I’ll die.”

Lex bumped her nose against Cam’s. “Okay, drama queen. Let’s test the theory.”

Lex’s lips caressed down her neck again, and she tilted her head back in surrender. If this sentenced her to damnation, then she’d lean back and enjoy the ride.

Chapter Eleven

Lex didn’t let women spend the night. Hell, she didn’t even bring anyone home.

Yet here Cam lay curled in her bed, the sunlight through the blinds highlighting her heart shaped face, her elegant nose, and a fringe of lashes so thick they bordered on angelic. Lex leaned against the frame of the door, watching the rise and fall of her

chest. A fierce wave of longing nearly knocked her over at the sight of Cam in her bed, tangled in her jersey knit sheets, like this was something she could have.

Like they weren't just a temporary fling.

Cam told Lex from the outset she couldn't have this—whatever fears held her back from coming out, she wasn't ready. Yet when she delivered wry retorts or let out loud, unashamed moans, when Lex caught her staring with a tender look in her dark eyes—Lex couldn't help but fall.

Lex strode in, placing the two mugs of coffee on her dresser before she slid back into bed. She'd tugged on a pair of boxers but hadn't bothered with anything else, her house a comfortable temperature. The moment she settled onto the mattress, Cam began to stir.

Lex leaned over to skim her fingers through Cam's curls. Those thick black waves were pure silk she couldn't seem to stop touching, especially since yesterday. The way they'd come together last night had been the stuff of her fantasies, better than she could've imagined.

"Hey there, gorgeous," she murmured, leaning against her pillow, her legs sprawled out in front of her.

Cam blinked and pushed herself up, a sleepy, adorable air about her as she tried to smooth her hair. She glanced over to Lex's alarm clock on the purple nightstand. "If I needed proof last night wore me out, that'd be it. I rarely sleep in this late."

"Right, so you're telling me job well done," Lex drawled, tracing circles along Cam's bare skin. The sheets slipped from Cam's shoulders revealing her heavy breasts and dark nipples that formed stiff peaks. Lex was a tits girl, and this woman had the most magnificent pair she'd seen in a long time.

“Go ahead and strut, peacock,” Cam responded, a grin curling her lips. Her gaze swept over Lex’s body, raising the room a couple of degrees. “You know, I think that’s the first time I’ve seen you topless.”

Lex shrugged. “I’m not usually in situations to take my top off.” Truth be told, she hadn’t completely stripped down with anyone. She always left something on, whether a bra, a shirt, or her underwear. In a way, it allowed her to keep her power, so she never felt truly exposed.

“Yet you’ve gotten your hands all over my breasts from day one,” Cam responded, shifting in the sheets. She reached out, gliding her thumb across the snake tattoo that wound up the right side to her breast. Lex’s breath hitched as Cam continued to trace the linework, lingering on the sensitive skin. Her cheeks flushed at the careful attention, making her feel beyond naked.

“Well you’ve got gorgeous tits, babe,” Lex said, trying to pivot out of the immense reservoir of feeling she’d dipped her toes into. “They deserve to be worshipped.”

“Smooth,” Cam murmured, a fresh and soft drowsiness to her features, like plunging fingers into the earth on the first day of spring. Her gaze transferred to the mugs on Lex’s nightstand. “You brought coffee? Be still, my heart.”

Lex grabbed her a cup and passed it over, needing the distraction. Part of her wanted to dive under the sheets and taste the honeyed warmth between Cam’s legs, but she also needed to abate this curiosity. She hopped off the bed again to grab the tote bag she’d lugged in, heavy with the art books Cam brought. They’d gone straight to fucking last night, but she’d been serious about seeing this woman’s chops.

If she were honest with herself, she wanted to know every single thing about Camilla Muhuri. It had turned into a full-blown obsession.

“I wasn’t just trying to lure you over with a pretense,” Lex said, tugging out the first sketchbook, heavy and spiral bound. She resumed her spot at Cam’s side. “You got to see my art, so it’s my turn now.”

Cam tugged at her hair forming a curtain over her face, gripping the mug of coffee with one hand. “Most of it is old or from college though. It’s embarrassing.” She pulled her knees up and hugged them to her chest. Lex’s insides melted like plastic in a campfire at the sight.

“Hey, I’m not grading you, sweetheart,” Lex said, wrapping an arm around her shoulders to pull her in. “So quit stressing.”

Cam leaned in against her chest, cheek pressed to her breast in a way that should’ve been distracting. But it felt comfortable, right. Lex skimmed her fingers through Cam’s raven wing hair and then cracked open the sketchbook.

Cam sipped at her coffee, even as she buzzed with nerves Lex could feel thrumming in the air between them.

Once Lex cracked open the sketchbook, she found herself spellbound.

Cam’s work was the polar opposite of hers, all soft, muted, and delicate in a way she could never be. As she flipped through the pages, she soaked in the small strokes, the flurry of paint on paper that was once a larger part of her life. Cam painted with watercolors mostly— idyllic fields, ballerinas akin to Degas, and scenes belonging to a world more beautiful than she’d ever fit into. She flipped through page after page of these gorgeous scenes, the firm strokes and gentle flurries something that required true talent.

Lex traced the patterns, the whimsical brush strokes, the curves and splashes of color. Cam’s work displayed the same softness that peeked out of her in moments like this.

Behind her stubborn declarations and her sarcastic responses, these paintings on the pages were every melted chocolate glance, every shy grin as she exposed a part of herself Lex would torch a building for.

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“The silence is killing me,” Cam murmured, pulling away to take another sip from her mug. “You hate it, don’t you?”

“Cam, this stuff is the real deal,” Lex responded, brushing her lips over the top of her head. “Is this what you went to school for?”

“Yeah,” she nodded. “I wanted to pursue something—anything—in the art field.”

When she stopped talking, the silence filled with the question Lex didn’t ask even though she had to admit she was curious. She continued flipping through the sketchbook of drawings and paintings that made her fingers itch to take those shapes and forms to skin.

“Then I dropped out, and all of those dreams crumbled to dust,” Cam said. She leaned past to place her mug on the nightstand, and then she nestled back in the crook of Lex’s shoulder. Lex tightened her arm around Cam, looping her hand around to rest on her stomach. Cam traced the ink of the tattoo along Lex’s thigh, her focus fixated on it.

“There was a teacher I had for graphic design in my third year. I thought it’d be a great practical avenue to pursue, and I was excited for the course,” Cam began, the weight in her voice demanding all of Lex’s attention. “Mr. Williamson was an older guy, and from day one he gave me bad vibes.”

Lex’s grip tightened on Cam as she continued, but she didn’t dare say anything to interrupt this.

“Over the course of the semester, red flags began to pop up. The times he’d ‘accidentally’ brush by me, how he’d call me up to his desk after class and his hand would find its way over mine. He’d begun cornering me to talk about my projects, and I’d have to be blind not to realize he was interested. But what could I do? He hadn’t made any overt moves, and I needed this class.”

Lex’s nails bit into Cam’s skin with how tight she gripped her, and her stomach flipped.

“And then came time for our required meetings. Once I got into the room, I knew something was wrong. I wanted out. He started talking about how I’d been looking at him, and he grabbed my wrist so tight it bruised.” Cam’s voice stuttered, and she sucked in a sharp breath, her chest rising with the movement. “The one thing that saved me was the next student scheduled coming early. The moment the door cracked open, he let go, and the next day I dropped out.”

“That must’ve been terrifying, babe,” Lex murmured, her voice coming out low. Her throat squeezed tight at the way Cam opened up to her, at the glaze in her eyes and how her whole body sagged against Lex’s like a lifeline. “If the guy is still employed, I’d be happy to go commit another felony.”

Cam looked up at her, a soft smile on her lips even as her eyes glittered with unshed tears. “Nah, not necessary.” Her expression darkened. “He ended up raping a student a year later and got fired. I knew what he was capable of, but I didn’t say anything. And then someone else suffered for it. That’s a regret I’ll carry with me for the rest of my life, because I was too much of a coward to speak up. Bet you wish you hadn’t gotten tangled up with a mess like me, right?”

Lex slipped her fingers under Cam’s chin to tilt her head up. A couple of tears trickled down her cheeks, silvery trails that Lex brushed off with her thumb.

“No one would’ve done anything,” Lex murmured. “If you had spoken up, it was your word against his, and he’d been careful to keep his actions subtle. What happened to the other girl is fucking horrible, but you didn’t do those things. He did. Our system’s unfair as shit.”

Cam blinked away a few more tears and bobbed her head. “It still feels terrible.”

God, she wanted to protect her, to wrap her arms around Cam and hold on until the pain in her eyes dissolved. A deep rage sparked inside, the dormant embers waking to life again. This injustice led her to do drastic things, an anger that careened like a plane toward a crash. This sort of anger had landed her in jail in the first place.

When she stared into Cam’s eyes though, a sorrow lurked in her gaze that spoke to Lex stronger than anything else. She would burn down the world to take away that look in her eyes.

“Yeah, babe, it does,” was all Lex said, all she could say. She leaned back in the bed and they lay there in silence, holding onto each other like refuge in a storm. Around Cam, Lex’s hard shellcracked, the years of carapace she’d built up to keep everyone at an arm’s length. Her heart hurt like she’d plucked it out of her chest to strain against the bare air, but she sat with Cam in the pain—a little dark never frightened her.

What terrified her more than anything was this warmth, this connection that had become more precious to her than riding the highway in summer or the crash of the ocean during a storm. More precious than her own freedom. Lex’s throat dried as she continued to stroke her fingers through Cam’s silken hair, savoring the press of her warm skin.

She didn’t know what she’d do if Cam decided to walk away.

Lex sucked in a deep breath, soaking in the scents of rubbing alcohol and the sterilization fluid as the buzz of the stylus filled her ears.

“Matty’s been showing up late for his shifts,” Mitch commented, shifting in the seat as he prepared for the ink. “If you happen to see him at your family dinners, cuff him in the neck for me.”

“That’s your fault for making the Gin Mill the wayward house of Dukas rejects,” Lex drawled, stabilizing his arm before she set to work. The tattoo gun hummed in her hand as she prepared to continue. She’d already finished with the linework of his hellfire piece and most of the shading, but this was her chance to add the flair of detail work she loved.

“You might have a smart mouth, but you were on time and efficient. Matty’s gotten so involved with the motorcycle club that it’s beginning to affect his work.” Mitch gave her an intent look, which she understood as ‘take care of this.’ Neither of them wanted to see Matty fired.

“Better not start with the praise, my man, because my ego does not need inflation,” Lex responded even as her focus never swayed from the canvas before her. The colors and strokes reminded her of painting. After she’d flipped through Cam’s art books the other night, she’d busted out her old acrylics for the first time in forever. God it had felt so good to get her hands on a paintbrush again, and the inspiration flowed from her fingertips.

The buzz of the tattoo gun in her hand had fast become a familiar comfort. She remembered a time before she was a tattoo artist, but ever since she’d begun her apprenticeship, she couldn’t imagine doing anything else.

“Lex, you working late on Mitch again?” Bell called out as he strolled to the doorframe, gripping it by the top. Lacey slipped in underneath his arm, the petite pistol of a woman perfect for a shop assistant.

“Before Bell gets his hooks in, your first tomorrow afternoon cancelled in case you’ve got anyone waiting,” Lacey said, adjusting the hem of her slim tank that revealed arms begging to be tattooed. Their shop girl had accumulated a few, but everyone, especially Bell vied for her to get more. Lacey twirled around on her heel and blew a kiss to Bell. “She’s all yours.”

“Thanks, doll,” Bell said, offering a wink as she strode on by. He strolled up to them. “I’m going to slide into the free spot tomorrow.” He rolled his pants up his calf and pointed to an old tattoo on his leg. “I need this guy touched up.”

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Lex nodded, even though a wash of nerves cascaded over her. She'd never tattooed Bell before, and she'd have to pull out her A-game if he was asking. "Sure thing, bossman."

He clapped a hand on her shoulder. "We can have a talk tomorrow too. Six months is almost here."

She didn't need any reminding. The ticking down clock blazed in her mind most hours now, every day bringing her closer to the end of this thing with Cam. For the first time in her life, the idea of commitment wasn't causing her throat to squeeze tight, and the tethers didn't constrain. In fact, she wanted them more than ever before.

"About that, Bell," she said, sucking in a deep breath. Mitch's gaze bore into her, but she ignored the weight. "I'm in. When six months are up, I want to be here, working in the shop."

Bell's brows rose, but a grin brightened his face. "Glad to hear it, girly. The shop wouldn't be the same without your foul mouth." He already headed for the door. "Lacey, we're changing the schedule again," he bellowed, his voice echoing to the rafters of this place.

"Fuck you too," she called back, sweet as sugar.

Lex couldn't help the grin as she shook her head. She grabbed Mitch's arm and continued adding cobweb thin lines that stretched out farther, filling in the details she'd missed in her first couple of passes.

“Stop staring at me like that, fucker. Your arm is in my hands,” Lex grumbled. Mitch’s gaze pressed into her like a hammer drill, and she’d be lying if it didn’t make the previous insecurity surge into focus.

“Still with the sweet-talking,” Mitch responded. She glanced up to see the warm crinkle of his dark eyes. “I thought you’d be bolting once this apprenticeship was up. The whole sticking-around-to-see-it-through thing looks good on you.”

“You’re not my type, babe,” Lex drawled, trying to hide how her cheeks heated in embarrassment at the honest praise from her friend. “Though I think we tend to go for the same.”

“What can I say?” Mitch joked, even as he held still. “We’ve got amazing taste in women.”

Lex lowered the tattoo gun, the needle gliding across his skin in smooth, feathered strokes. She and Mitch had tag teamed for years, slicing their way through the club scene of Charleston, but for the first time the idea of hitting Notes to hunt for a woman to sneak in a couple of moans didn’t hold an appeal.

Lex knew what she wanted, and it was time she took the steps to claim it.

Chapter Twelve

Cam had readjusted the crimson dress at least a hundred times and they hadn’t even left Danny and Adrian’s house yet. The fabric clung to her curves, and her breasts tested the tensile strength of the fabric. If she tried to dance in this, she would definitely get dragged away for indecent exposure.

However, Lex would be at the club with them tonight, and Cam wanted to turn heads. She wanted that look from Lex, the all-encompassing, planetary collision sort of

intensity Alexis Dukas stared at her with.

In all their back-and-forth texts and the few times they'd snuck over each other's houses to get off this past month, she'd wanted to tell Lex about the imminent relocation to Savannah. Every time, the words stuck in her throat. She could admit she wanted something with Lex, more than she'd wanted anything in a long, long time.

Yet, too many variables threatened to sink her already scuppered ship. Lex might not feel the same depth she did or want the long-term Cam didn't just yearn for—she needed. Her mother and father might cut her from their lives if she started dating a woman. And while she could come home on weekends, she needed to finish her degree and make the career change before she imploded.

Danny let out a low whistle. "Damn, woman. Isn't there some rule about not upstaging the bride?"

The bride-to-be had tugged on an emerald halter dress that reached her thighs, the color matching her eyes and creating a beautiful contrast with her copper hair. The woman looked gorgeous enough to stop people mid-stride, but Danny's choice of the club for her bachelorette was more about losing herself in the music than getting down and dirty with some random guys one last time.

Cam snorted. "If you want, I can change into a paper bag. Though let's be real, you don't need to worry about anyone upstaging you. Danny, you're a stunner."

Danny stared at herself in the floor-length mirror in her and Adrian's room and wrinkled her nose. "It's just surreal, you know?" She tugged at the hem of her dress. "Getting to care about trivial shit like details for the wedding. Hell, even getting to have a wedding. If someone told me three years ago this would be happening, I'd say they had the wrong girl."

Cam's heart tugged in her chest. She couldn't imagine what Danny had gone through living in WitSec for years under constant threat of her serial killer father. Yet she understood the longing for what Danny had found in Adrian. Cam had been yearning for it all—the familiarity, the bone-aching comfort, and the scorch of a love that might last a lifetime.

The closest she'd ever come to that was waking up in Lex's bed.

“You're definitely the right girl for this,” Cam responded, squeezing Danny's shoulder. “And based on the levels of calm, cool, and collected you've been during all this trivial shit, you're acing the whole wedding thing.”

Danny finished touching up her makeup, and Cam snapped on a beaded necklace, making the last-minute tweaks before they set out for the bachelorette party.

“Well, let's tear up the dance floor one last time before you go and abandon me,” Danny said, throwing a dramatic hand to her forehead.

Cam nudged her in the side. “You know I'll be visiting on weekends. Savannah might be where I'm attending grad school, but Charleston's become my home.”

Danny looped her arm through Cam's and together they headed out of the bedroom. Adrian relaxed on the couch in the living room, but the moment they entered, he perked right up.

“I can always cancel tonight if you want to kick my sister out of the hotel room you're sharing,” Adrian said, his gaze glued on Danny. “If I'm honest, I'm terrified about what Cal, Matty, and Mitch have planned.”

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“You should be,” Danny responded, giving her dress a twirl as Adrian watched, mesmerized. “Matty’s probably going to get you into some insane shit like cliff diving or stealing a cop car.”

Adrian snorted, rolling up from his seat. “And you have Lex as your maid of honor. I think we’re about even.”

His dark hair was messy, the same color of Lex’s with the same color skin. The two of them had similar features, strong jaws, and intense stares. But unlike Adrian, Lex’s eyes were the flashing lights of a siren, the slither of a snake through the grass—pure danger.

Adrian slipped his arms around Danny and brought her in for a deep kiss. Cam averted her gaze, not wanting to intrude on their private moment. Envy coated her like wet paint at the casual intimacy, at everything she wanted with the one person she might not get to keep. She strode a few paces closer to the door.

“Have fun tonight, darlin,” Adrian said, his voice a bit rough around the edges. Danny snuck in for one more kiss before pulling away. She trailed her fingers in a wave before heading over to join Cam’s side.

“Don’t let your brother get you arrested,” Danny called. “Wedding’s two weeks away and I need my groom intact.”

“Same goes for you,” Adrian said, heading over to the couch even though he kept flashing puppy dog glances back to Danny. “Don’t listen to any of Lex’s madcap plans, no matter how enticing they sound.”

The mention of Lex had Cam's mouth drying with want. Tonight, they'd be sharing a hotel room, and she wore this far-too revealing dress for that reason alone. She wanted a repeat of the scorching night they had together a few weeks ago. The mere thought of it had her veins buzzing.

When it came to Lex's madcap plans, Cam fell for them every time.

Their party of four had already gotten dinner at Balance Seafood in town, known for drinks and quality food. The next spot on their agenda was Hi-Lo Dance Lounge, one of the newer places that had opened. Even though they all took their turns showering Danny in attention, Cam couldn't keep her eyes off of Lex.

The woman hadn't gone for femme like the rest of them, instead wearing a maroon blazer and a black muscle shirt underneath. The pair of grey skinny jeans she wore highlighted her toned legs and an ass Cam's gaze kept straying toward. She'd spiked her pixie up into a rockabilly-esque pompadour, and with her black rimmed eyes and dark lipstick, she looked like a fantasy.

Cam strode a couple of paces behind to walk in line with Lex while Nellie gabbed with Danny on the way over to the night club.

Lex leaned in, her lips brushing against Cam's ear accidentally-on-purpose. "You're a goddamn tease, you know that? I'm going to enjoy peeling this dress off you once we get into our hotel room tonight."

The heat in her voice transferred to Cam's cheeks. "Are you trying to make me combust on the spot?" She thwacked Lex in the side, hoping the darkness hid the ruddy stain of her flush.

Even though Lex wasn't touching her—they still avoided PDA in front of friends and family—Cam drowned in her intoxicating presence. She wanted everything with Lex, but they both avoided touching the topic of what would come after like it was glass one step away from shattering. Besides, she hadn't figured out how to work in the fact she'd torqued their situation by heading back to school.

All she knew was she didn't want this to end.

Lex lit a cigarette while they walked down the block toward the club, the ember at the end flaring to life before the cloud of smoke followed.

Hi-Lo's neons glowed out front, along with a trail of icicle lights decorating the awning. Cam's pulse sped up. The last time she'd gone to a club, she had met Lex. She'd been at the end of a terrible week, a string of even worse dates, and this charming, flirtatious woman had swooped in and commanded her attention.

If she were being honest, Lex wasn't the first time she'd experienced the tug in her stomach toward another woman. She had crushes as a kid and then as an adult. Yet, Lex was the first time she'd succumbed to those desires. Lex's confidence had infected her, making her feel daring enough for that first encounter.

They entered Hi-Lo, and the scent of sweat, leather, and limoncello wafted from the rafters of this place. Unlike Notes which went for the full electronica dance club vibe, this one leaned more toward upscale and classy with its cozy red couches tucked into corners, drapes framing different rooms, and cube leather booths on the opposite side of the long, backlit bar. The end of the place opened into a dance floor complete with a stage where a DJ had set up station and began to spin.

Cam tried to keep focusing ahead of her, even though her gaze drifted to Lex like she'd been magnetically hardwired. Her breasts swayed, barely held by the taut fabric of her dress that she'd been second-guessing ever since she slipped into it. She didn't

know how she'd be able to keep from dry humping Lex on the dance floor tonight. Yet the fear of Lex backing away kept her in line. Flings and family wouldn't mix for the Anti-Commitment Queen.

The complicated rush of feelings surged, and Cam's hands balled into fists. She needed to focus on the present or she'd drown. Neon red lights glided through the room with a smoothness to fit this swank club, the perfect place to unwind and let loose tonight. Already, people crowded the dance floor, bodies swaying and writhing to the deep pulse of the music. The beat thumped with the trance that Danny ate up, something she, Nellie, and Lex had researched beforehand when they chose a spot.

Danny's gaze met hers. "You're not spending the whole time at the bar tonight, Cam," she called back. "I'm dragging you out to the dance floor."

"Why don't we all dance together," Lex said, her voice dripping seduction as she wagged her brows. Danny let out a laugh while Cam's sex clenched.

"Don't be gross," Nellie shot back, the delicate pink dress she wore bringing out the tan of her skin and accenting her natural blonde waves. "I love my family, but not like that."

"It's okay, Nels," Lex responded. "Blondes are more Mitch's type than mine." Her pointed look meant something Nellie must've picked up, because she turned the color of her dress. "You sure Greg's not going to have a conniption over you coming out dancing with us?"

Nellie shot her a dirty look. "Greg's out in Minneapolis on business right now, so I'm free and clear."

"Stop fighting, guys," Danny interrupted, straying toward the dance floor. "This is an awesome song." The heavy bass beats vibrated the wooden floorboards, and the vinyl

booths beckoned her, looking like the perfect place to curl up with a drink. But Danny wanted to dance, and Cam didn't want to disappoint.

The moment they slipped into the crowd, a hand brushed against hers. Cam glanced up to spot Lex by her side, a careful gleam in her eyes. She had no idea how she would survive tonight without a slipup. All she wanted to do was melt into Lex's arms, shove her tongue down her throat, and let the wild force do whatever she wanted to her body. The strength, the fury, and the sheer passion radiating off the woman made her want to surrender every time.

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They found a clear spot on the dance floor, and Danny twisted to the music, throwing her arms up and sinking into the beat. Nellie swayed back and forth, delicate wrist turns and taps as she danced with them. Lex surveyed the scene, her lips pursed. Then she swept in behind Danny to begin dancing with her. Danny offered a coy smirk, and Cam's heart twisted. Even as Lex danced with Danny, her gaze never left Cam.

Even though Cam's limbs didn't want to work at first, she rotated her hips, feeling herself loosen up the more she sank into the music. The vibrations from the speakers pulsed up her legs, making it easier to swing around. Under Lex's hypnotizing stare, she couldn't help but unwind. Cam's body reacted, her arms moving and her legs swaying as if she wasn't in control.

Each pivot of her hips, each thrust forward and all she could think of was the other night, the way Lex had kissed up and down her body, which sparked her to life at the sensual touch. Several strands of hair glued to her skin and sweat prickled across her nape at the heat from the bodies close by. Cam continued to swirl her hips and thrust her ass back to the thumping melody as she lost herself in the rhythm.

A pair of hands settled around her hips, and the stench of cheap cologne followed. Cam froze in place, glancing back to see the massive polo-wearing guy who'd sidled up behind her to try to get in on the bump and grind.

Before Cam could step away, Lex stormed over. Her arm shot out, and she grabbed the guy by the wrist, digging into his pulse point. The guy lifted his free hand and began to back away. Lex's gaze flashed like lightning, but she let go.

"You okay?" Danny mouthed, not able to shout above the volume of the music.

Cam bobbed her head as the hands she wanted on her settled into place. Lex met Danny's gaze and mouthed "I'll keep off the creeps" back. With those palms resting on her hips, Cam was more than fine.

She'd take any excuse to dance with Lex at this point. Her body pressed in behind her, so solid, radiating a strength that caused her to melt. She thrust her ass back to grind against her, satisfied by the way Lex's fingernails dug into her hips.

"You keep doing that, and I'll drag you to the bathroom," Lex murmured into her ear, the soft brush of her lips against her skin making her wet. "I've got so much more in store for you tonight, babe. Just a little patience." The scrape of her voice made her reel, but from the beginning, Lex had delivered on every single promise.

Cam nodded, sinking into the pulsing beats of the music. Danny laughed as she twirled in the middle, and Nellie started doing finger guns at them. Lex's low laugh thrummed at her core, and a genuine grin lit Cam's face. Around Lex she felt so safe, so comfortable the worries melted away, and she dove into the chaos with the rest of them.

She'd hold onto all these moments for as long as she could.

Chapter Thirteen

The sweat had dried on Lex's skin from a night full of dancing, raunchy jokes, and drinking, but she wasn't the least bit tired. The moment they headed out from the club to the hotel next door, Lex's body hummed like she'd upped the voltage.

"Love you guys," Danny slurred, both Cam and Nellie supporting her on the way—though Nells teetered right along with her. The two of them were in for one nightmare of a hangover tomorrow. "I never had...this while I was on the run," the bride-to-be admitted, waving around at them.

“More’s the pity you got saddled with the Dukas family. You’re missing out on a whole world of sane friendships,” Lex responded, unable to help her amusement. They stepped in through the automatic doors and entered the far-too-bright foyer for this time of night. The elevator was the goal.

Danny shook her head. “Life would be boring without you guys.”

Lex swiped her bottom lip to hide the affection in her smile. She adored her future sister-in-law. Adrian had chosen well because this woman didn’t even need to try—she was one of them.

The elevator dinged at each floor as they ascended to the sixth. Cam snuck a scorching glance to her. God, that woman. The way the lace of the red dress clung to her breasts had been driving Lex crazy all night. She wanted to slide the flimsy fabric up her legs and devour her. Cam’s inkspill hair cascaded in gentle curls down her back, and kohl rimmed her expressive eyes. The crimson lipstick she wore matched her dress, and every time Lex brushed up against her, the scent of roses made her pussy throb.

This was the longest she’d ever been with one person, if this arrangement between them could even be called that. From the outset, this should’ve been nonstop sexual exploration and no feelings, but that train left the station months ago.

Normally, the anxiety would slam in, the need to distance fast and far, but the lack of labels had allowed Cam to creep closer to her than anyone else had ever managed. She wanted—no, needed—to tell her things had changed. That she didn’t want this to end in two weeks. Yet every time they got together, fear numbed her tongue.

All too fast, she was sitting on the swing after sunset with Maddy, her best friend back in high school, staring at the wood chips as those words tumbled from her lips and her cheeks burned. Maddy’s look of disgust followed, the clipped words, and

then, silence.

Or that first month in the college dorms, which reeked of lemon cleaner and dirty laundry. But when she met Lila, they'd fucked on every spare surface anyway. At least, until six months later when Lila found the boyfriend of her dreams. The denial stung the most—like their entire time together hadn't existed.

Focus on tonight. One step at a time.

The elevator doors slid open, and their entourage headed down the hallway. Nellie and Danny offered a wave before disappearing into their room. Once the door clicked shut, Lex rounded on Cam who already slipped the key card into the door. The light lit yellow, and like that, they were on.

They hadn't made it three steps inside the room before Lex's lips crashed onto Cam's. She claimed her mouth, unleashing everything she'd pent up the entire night while they pretended to be "friends." There was nothing friendly about the things she wanted to do to her. Lex's fingers raked through her silken hair before she gripped tight, enjoying how Cam sighed into her mouth.

Lex's hands didn't stay still for long. She glided her hands along those luscious curves, able to feel the heat from her body through the thin fabric of this dress that needed to be on the floor, now.

"God, gorgeous, you were driving me crazy all night," Lex growled into her ear and reached up the skirt of her dress to drag her panties down those shapely thighs. She flung them to the floor and then shrugged her blazer off. The room already swelled to a thousand degrees due to the two of them being alone. She returned her attention to her luscious mouth, savoring the vanilla taste of her. Urgency rode her in a brand new way, like she needed to squeeze every last drop of their time together.

The reason why ticked down in the background of her mind.

She slipped her hand between Cam's legs to clench her sex. She was soaked, absolutely dripping, and damn if that didn't make her even hotter. A groan slipped from Lex as she squeezed her thighs tight. Part of her wanted to take her time and savor every minute together, while the other needed to chase oblivion like the next breath. Cam's moans were a melody she could listen to forever, and the woman was pure need with the way she ground her pussy against Lex's hand.

Lex bit the side of her neck, enjoying how Cam shivered at the touch. She was half-tempted to rip the dress in two, but she loved the way it looked so much she tugged each strap down to expose those stunning breasts. She'd been watching Cam all night, how she twisted and swayed on the dance floor. When that dusky gaze had flickered to her again and again, she knew who Cam danced for, which only turned her on even more.

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Cam moaned, biting her lip. “I’ve been dying for this. You’re so fucking sexy.”

Lex’s laugh vibrated against her as she sucked Cam’s lower lip into her mouth. “That’s my line, sweetheart.”

She slipped two fingers inside the hot heat of her, enjoying the way they glided right into her slickness. Even as Cam bucked against her hand, moving along with it, her fingers drifted up to the hem of Lex’s muscle shirt, and she tugged.

“I want to see the rest of you,” she murmured, hooking her fingers into the fabric. Lex didn’t stop pumping into her even as Cam brought the muscle shirt up and over her head. She pulled her fingers out of Cam’s soaked core to toss her shirt the rest of the way. Lex’s hands gunned for the fabric bunched around Cam’s waist as she yanked off the scrap of a dress she’d been wearing. The panties went next.

The woman looked mouthwatering, all smooth, bronze skin, an inkspill of curls down her back, and round hips she needed to sink her teeth into.

Cam’s hands went for the button on Lex’s jeans, but she paused, looking up at her. She pursed her lips, the question clear in her eyes.

Lex nodded, even as her heart squeezed tight. She always kept some scrap of clothing on, but tonight, here with Cam, she wanted to be bare. Cam’s fingers trembled a little bit when she undid the button and unzipped her pants, and Lex swallowed, hard. She dragged both her jeans and underwear down her legs, completely naked for the first time in far too long with someone other than herself.

Cam licked her lips, the dark gaze soaking her in. She skimmed her fingers along the tattoos lining her ribcage, the piece along her thigh, and the symbol along the side of her neck. Lex shivered at the careful attention, a shade of vulnerable she usually ran screaming from.

“You’re so beautiful it hurts,” Cam mouthed against her skin. She rested her hands against her hips and pressed kisses from her hips up to her breasts, the trail lighting her up like stoked coals. Lex’s throat tightened. She wasn’t used to being looked at like that. The tenderness in Cam’s gaze and the soft strokes of her mouth cracked open something inside her that couldn’t be patched together again.

Lex speared her fingers through Cam’s hair and tugged, bringing her back up. She didn’t just kiss those lips, she owned them. She thrust her tongue into that eager mouth like she fucked it. Her hands wrapped around Cam’s breasts, and she squeezed hard enough the woman thrust her hips forward. Lex walked them both toward the bed even though she didn’t stop kissing Cam. Lex’s thumbs swiped against hardened nipples, and she swallowed Cam’s moans.

The moment the back of Cam’s knees thudded against the edge of the bed, Lex scooped her up and tossed her onto the bed. A laugh slipped from Cam, and her eyes shone with amusement. Lex slid over the sheets to join her there.

“I love the way you just toss me around,” Cam murmured, crawling over to press her lips to hers again. “You have no idea how much it turns me on.”

“I’ve got a little bit of one.” Lex grabbed her hip with one hand and with the other she gave a light smack to Cam’s clit. Cam’s guttural moan reverberated right through her. “You feel so ready for me, babe. And I promised you a surprise tonight, so I guess I better deliver.”

Her heart sped in her chest as she pulled back. She’d wanted to try this for a long

time, but bathroom and backseat hookups didn't lend themselves to much in by way of toys or preparation. However, this time with Cam had opened new dimensions into her sex life, ones she didn't want to think about too hard or she might teeter over the edge. The chemistry between them was the difference between monochrome and technicolor, the feelings that had deepened with every walk in the park and every midnight conversation when they couldn't sleep.

Cam perched on the bed, still on her hands and knees, her black curls cascading around her shoulders, and her perfect tits hanging down, begging to be squeezed again. Lex's mouth dried with want. She zipped open the overnight bag she'd brought with her and tugged out the strap-on. Cam's gaze fixated on her every movement, those eyes gleaming with desire. That alone spurred her on as she slipped her legs through the loops in the harness, tightening the straps. Her clit pulsed with how turned on she was right now.

Cam's tongue traced her lips as she zeroed in on the weight between Lex's legs she planned on penetrating Cam with. Lex didn't want to leave any experience unexplored with her, not when their window was fast closing.

"Look at you, sweetheart," Lex purred as she climbed onto the bed. "Already in position for me. You're a natural."

"Do anything you want." The pleading edge in Cam's voice caused her heart to jerk tight. Lex settled into place, kneeling behind her and rested her palms on the woman's stunning ass.

"First I want to taste you," Lex said, yanking Cam's ass higher as she lowered herself to the perfect vantage point for that soaked pussy. "And then I'm going to fuck you."

The moment her tongue glided along Cam's seam, she whimpered, thrusting her ass back for more. Lex drove her tongue into her core, eliciting more moans from Cam

with each flick. She reached around to graze her thumb over Cam's clit while she continued to pump in and out of her pussy with her tongue.

"You feel so good," Cam moaned, her fingers curling into the sheets. Lex was drenched enough to feel the trail down her leg. Yet she didn't stop, increasing the pressure and the strokes until the woman quaked with the first of the many orgasms she planned.

Lex pulled back and flicked the vibrator attached to the harness on. The buzz filled the room, sending sparks where it nestled in front of her sensitized clit. Cam's shoulders heaved and several stray curls pasted to her skin from the sweat glistening between her shoulder blades and along the side of her neck. Lex memorized the form before her, the hourglass curve of her waist, the rounded hips begging to be gripped, and the look of bliss softening Cam's gorgeous features.

She was in far too deep.

Lex lined herself up behind Cam and inserted the tip inside. Cam's breath hitched in her throat as Lex glided in deeper, the woman so soaked it slid in effortlessly. The vibrator hummed against her clit, making it hard to focus on anything but the task in front of her. She glided in and out, her fingertips digging into her hips as she increased the pace. Each time her clit smacked against Cam, the pleasure jolted through her, urging her on.

"God you're so damn pretty," Lex purred as she rammed into her, faster, harder. The desperation tugged at her like the tide, melding with the driving throb between her legs as she sailed closer and closer to the edge. "If you're not careful I might have to tie you up and keep you in my bed twenty-four-seven," Lex growled. The sting as they crashed together was a new sensation, one that dizzied her head.

"Do it," Cam challenged, her voice breathy. "Whatever you want, Lex."

Lex's throat tightened at the way Cam surrendered, at the scrape of vulnerability in that tone and this passionate side that she revealed in private. God, Lex wanted to hold Cam close, to preserve any shred of the ravine depth she plummeted into. Lex thrust into her again and again, the smack of their collisions echoing through the room.

Her clit ached each time she crashed into Cam, palms growing slippery on her hips. Lex's thighs flexed, the thrusts coming harder, wild as she spun out of control. Cam's cries lit the air, so loud she half-expected someone to burst into their hotel room, but Lex couldn't stop now. She was so, so close. Lex slipped her hand around to rub Cam's clit again as she drove into her hard enough to shake the bed.

Cam's shoulders tightened as she shouted Lex's name, and her entire body trembled with the orgasm that shook her. Lex slammed in again, again, again, until the pressure against her clit grew blinding, until the throb became so deafening all she could do was ride the waves. Her nails dug in hard enough to leave marks, and she blinked white as her clit quaked with one of the hardest orgasms of her life.

Cam sagged forward on the bed, and as Lex came down from the insane high, she tugged out of her. For a moment, the only sound in the room was their heaving breaths. Lex's fingers trembled as she loosened the straps of the harness, sliding it down her thighs to toss it onto the floor.

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Lex settled in the bed, but before she could even blink, Cam crawled up between her legs. She spread on instinct as the woman approached. Something about Cam caused her mile-high defenses to crumble, had her questioning her rules and pushing past her own self-made hurdles before she was aware. Hell, she lay here bare in front of Cam as she leaned into the pillow behind her.

Cam's palms settled on her inner thighs, a hunger glazing her eyes.

Lex swallowed, unable to escape the surge of helplessness in the face of the emotions Cam summoned inside her. A tempest couldn't compare.

"My turn to taste you," Cam said, offering a hesitant glance that undid a knot inside her. Cam knelt in front of her and lowered her lips to Lex's folds. Lex tilted her head back, letting it fall onto the pillow behind her. Letting Cam take control. Once Cam began to lap at her sensitive clit, Lex let out a low groan from the back of her throat, her hips rising forward.

Cam's mouth felt like heaven. She already hummed from her last orgasm, and the woman knew exactly what pace to set, none of the wild, frenetic strokes from earlier. These long, languid laps had her hips rising off the bed. Lex never let go like this. Always, always, always, she remained in control.

Yet as Cam increased the pace, the clever tongue gliding against her clit in a way that lit her nerves on fire, Lex found herself riding the waves of pleasure. Her hips bucked forward, and her fingers curled into the sheets as drops of sweat pricked on her forehead. Cam's touch felt delicate, careful, just like her, the polar opposite of Lex.

Her clit throbbed, and she ached for release. Cam's curls spilled onto her legs, the strands tickling, and the scent of roses was fucking intoxicating. Each lick to her clit had her back arching and her mind spinning. She wound tighter and tighter, the pulse so fierce all she could do was sink into the pleasure.

Cam sucked at her clit, and that tipped her right over the edge.

Lex let out a low moan, sweat beading on her skin as she flashed white-hot. Her entire body coiled tight and then released as her clit throbbed from her orgasm. Lex's breaths came out ragged, and her whole body quaked in the wake of the bliss rolling through her. She lay there on her back for a few moments, blinking as she sank into her own body to stare at the paste-white ceiling above her.

A moment later, the sheets rustled, and Cam slipped beside her. She rested her head on Lex's shoulder, and Lex wrapped an arm around her on impulse, drawing her flush to her body. Cam nuzzled against her skin, sensual sweetness wrapped in one heartbreakingly gorgeous package. She dipped her head to brush a kiss on the top of Cam's head, unable to help herself.

Fuck, she was so far gone it wasn't even funny. She'd fallen in love with this woman, somewhere between her first snarky response and the tenderness that had unfurled in their long, laden looks. And she had two weeks left to summon the nerve to tell her.

Lex stroked Cam's back with her arm, enjoying the silken feel of her skin.

"Can we just stay like this?" Cam asked, the question as tremulous as a butterfly.

God, if only.

Chapter Fourteen

The day of Danny and Adrian's wedding had finally arrived.

Cam's stomach churned as she clasped her rose-gold necklace around her neck, but she didn't brim with the normal bridesmaid nerves. She and Lex had reached their expiration date. She'd been waiting for the right time to bring up the temporary relocation to Savannah for school. And she'd been wanting to tell Lex how her feelings had changed since they started this. If Lex wanted a relationship for real, Cam would be willing to risk telling her parents, her friends, the world.

Yet Lex hadn't said anything to hint she might want anything beyond a temporary fling. And Cam had been too chickenshit to ask.

She straightened her canary yellow dress, smoothing the satin fabric that clung to her in all the right places. The stylist pinned her hair back in a waterfall of curls, and the makeup artist worked her magic to draw focus to her eyes and soften the impact of her narrow nose. Her lips had been painted a mauve instead of her normal crimson. They'd been getting dressed in the bridal suite at the Hilton, right beside the Hickory House, a beautiful old building with historic wood columns and exposed brick walls. She'd caught a glimpse of the ballroom last night at their rehearsal dinner, and the rustic, earthy place was the perfect choice for Danny and Adrian.

Nellie squatted beside her in front of the mirror, adjusting her blonde waves over the side of her shoulder. Little Dukas looked as gorgeous as ever in her rose bridesmaid dress, those innocent blue eyes belonging on someone who wasn't the youngest married in the Dukas family.

"I swear to fuck if anyone else asks me 'what the bride wants' I'll chuck my bouquet at them," Danny said, shimmying into the room. Her sheath dress only allowed for smaller, more controlled movements, but the cream fabric highlighted her peach skin, and the shape flattered her slender curves. Her shock of red hair had been tamed into elegant waves and pinned back with a flower wreath. Danny looked stunning, though

the woman usually did, even if she didn't see it herself.

"The bride wants a stiff drink and to not give an opinion on stupid shit like floral arrangements." Danny flounced onto the bed, kicking her bare feet up.

"Want me to beat them off with a bat for you?" Lex entered the doorway, clutching the top in a way that placed her defined biceps on full display. The breath snagged in Cam's throat at the sight of her. Even in the feminine dress emphasizing Lex's athletic form, she radiated strength. She'd styled her pixie cut into a pompadour and opted to do her makeup herself, retaining her charcoal-rimmed eyes like her personal brand of war paint.

"I'm tempted," Danny muttered. "But once I get a couple of drinks in me, I'll be fine."

"That I can assist with," Lex said, peeling up her skirt to reveal a flask tucked into her halter. Because of course she would. "Filled it with Hendricks, just for you." Cam couldn't tear her gaze away from the exposed skin, the linework of the tattoo on her thigh that nights before she'd spent far too long tracing with her fingertips. Lex's body was a work of art in its own right.

"Best maid of honor ever," Danny said, reaching forward to accept the flask.

"Don't pass judgement yet," Lex joked, plopping onto the bed beside her. "I've got plenty of time to make an awkward pass at one of your distant cousins and piss off the DJ."

Even as the self-deprecation passed her lips, Lex's gaze flickered to Cam. Cinnamon heat flushed through Cam at the careful examination in those eyes, the sort that dizzied her mind and made her forget every reason why she was terrified to take a leap.

“Did you manage to wrangle Greg in time?” Danny asked Nellie, her voice light with the understanding of the field of needles they paraded on.

Nellie’s husband had been a massive source of stress the past week, one Cam listened to both Lex and Danny complain about. Greg had tried to duck out of the wedding with a work excuse, which Lex had punctuated with a string of inventive new curse words. Mama Dukas had not been pleased, and even though Nellie kept trying to smooth over everyone’s upset, her big blue eyes flickered with her own worries.

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Nellie blew out an exasperated breath. “I made it clear missing my oldest brother’s wedding is a dealbreaker,” was all she left it at, though her lips pressed tight together.

“Baseball bat offer applies for you too, Nells,” Lex said, cracking her knuckles out in front of her.

“No matter what happens today, it’ll all shake out,” Cam said, taking a seat on the bed next to Danny. If she sat beside Lex, she’d have a serious problem keeping her hands to herself, especially with the way that lavender dress highlighted toned biceps and tattoos she wanted to lick. “The important thing is today you’re marrying the guy you’ve been in love with half your life, and you’ve got the rest of your life to create beautiful memories together.”

“Besides, it isn’t a Dukas wedding without a little chaos,” Lex drawled, snagging the flask from Danny and tipping back a sip.

“You’re telling me,” Nellie grumbled, crouching in front of the mirror to fidget with strands of hair. It was clear nerves rode her over Greg rather than any real need to adjust. “Aunt Miriam projectile vomited on our dance floor at mine, plus Matty and Cal got in a fight Adrian needed to break up, and let’s not even go into the Cold War between Greg’s family and ours.”

“I love your crazy, chaotic family,” Danny said, her grin lighting up her gorgeous green eyes. “I’m so happy to be a part of it.”

Cam’s chest twisted tight. In these past six months, Lex hadn’t been the only one she’d gotten close to. Nellie had become a fast friend, and after she’d seen Cal’s

show with Lex, they'd started talking a lot more. And Danny and Adrian were her favorite couple in existence. She loved her own family, but part of her longed for the warmth that came with the Dukas family—the acceptance.

Tonight. Tonight she'd tell Lex...everything. For better or for worse.

The music swelled as they took their place in the line-up for the ceremony. Danny and Adrian had opted for a short, more modern one, which of course raised some complaints from the extended family, but neither bride nor groom gave a damn.

The open atrium had a greenhouse feel to it, Edison bulbs tangling from the rafters and strong Douglas fir beams decorated with hanging plants and crawling vines. Guaranteed, Danny could name each and every green thing in this place—Cam had never met anyone more passionate about gardening. Flowers the same shades as their dresses decorated the arbor, crafted from white wood and simple beams.

She settled into place beside Lex, more aware than ever of the inches separating them. Cam should be thinking about simple things like whether she was going to drink wine or gin tonight, but too many urgent worries clanged around in her mind, amplified by Lex's presence.

What if Lex didn't want the same thing? Their constant texts continued nightly until one of them drifted to bed, and the way they'd been spending more and more time over each other's houses contradicted the thought. Yet Lex couldn't even commit to the permanent seat she'd been offered at Inkspirations—how could she offer the stability Cam needed?

Or Lex might decide the hassle of a long-distance girlfriend wasn't worth the stress, even if Cam only had a year left to complete, providing everything went well at

SCAD.

She swallowed hard and kept her focus trained on the aisle, watching Danny approach with slow, deliberate steps. Her best friend radiated confidence Cam wished she possessed. Danny strode forward, her mom beaming as she walked her down the aisle. Granted, Danny's journey to get to this point had been a waking nightmare. Not only had she spent years on the run from her homicidal father, unable to form anything lasting, but even when she reconnected with Adrian, they'd encountered their own hurdles.

At least two hundred guests sat in the seats, a gentle murmur coming from the crowd. Half of them were Adrian's ever-expanding family— aunts, uncles, and cousins included— many with similar features to the other Dukas siblings. The moment Danny passed them, line after line of people silenced.

Adrian's face lit up like he stared at the sunrise. He looked sharper than ever in his tailored suit, which brought out the glass-edge line of his jaw and the blue in his eyes, so similar to Nellie's.

Danny's gaze softened as her mother stepped away to take her seat, and she walked the rest of the way to meet the man she loved.

Cam's heart squeezed tight. She wanted that sort of love, that sort of connection so badly she could taste it in the air. Yet every time she reached, it eluded her.

Lex brushed elbows with her, and Cam glanced up to see a tenderness in those hazel eyes that made her hope, even though she approached on trembling and uncertain legs. The gentle touch coaxed her out. The way Lex saw her—the real her beneath all the sarcasm and defenses—made her unfurl like a ballerina in pirouette.

The officiant began his speech, and Cam gripped her bouquet tighter, her focus

returning to the radiant couple decked out in their finest as they clasped hands in front of each other. The stargazer lilies popped against the canvas of soft, full petaled begonias, the perfume wafting from them gentle and sweet. The words blended together as her eyes heated, emotions cracking open like someone had struck her with a hammer.

Crap, she wouldn't be the girl who cried at weddings, not here in front of everyone.

Danny and Adrian stared into each other's eyes as they exchanged their vows, something powerful between them she could feel even from where she stood. That was what she wanted—that sort of potent bond. Trouble was, she'd only ever felt it with one person, who happened to be standing right next to her.

Lex shifted again, this time her thigh brushing against Cam's. She swallowed hard. Damn, she wanted this woman like her next breath. She wanted the PDA without the crash of shame to follow, to fall into her bed every night and wake up in a mess of tangled limbs and tousled sheets, to simply just be in her presence.

“Back in high school, I knew you were the one,” Adrian said, his voice a low scrape. “And in our time together I grow surer every day. You inspire me, you center me, and you fill my life with a sense of wonder I'd forgotten I could have.” He clasped her hands tighter. Nellie sniffled on Cam's other side, a few tears slipping down her cheeks.

Danny offered a slanted smile, her green eyes glistening as she tilted her head to the side. “What can I say to compete with that, folks?” A couple of laughs came from the crowd, and Cam couldn't help her own. Leave it to Danny to be frank and snarky during such an emotional moment. Her best friend sucked in a shaky breath and looked into Adrian's eyes.

“I traveled from city to city for years, and in all my travels, only one man sparked this

fire in me, some hot track star I used to tutor in high school. Big crazy family, I think you know him?" Adrian's eyes crinkled with his grin, and Danny continued. "You fought for me, and you fought for this. You are the reason I got to stay. And each day I've spent by your side, you continue to be the reason I dream of what will come in our future, which I'll forever be grateful for."

Cam's eyes burned with tears as she looked out to the audience. Mama Dukas sobbed into her handkerchief, and her husband, Nikos, wrapped an arm around her shoulder, drawing her close. Glittering eyes and sniffles came from so many sources out in the crowd, everyone here thrilled to witness Danny and Adrian's marriage. Before she realized it, the officiant swept through the rest of the vows with a smooth liquidity, and Adrian placed his hands around Danny's waist as he leaned in to kiss the bride.

The swell of music followed, and Cam snapped into focus for the cues of when she needed to head down the aisle. She clutched the bouquet tight, the wrap crinkling, and tried to blink away the water in her eyes. Lex's plum lips quirked into a grin, but she remained as cool and calm as ever. Nellie, on the other hand, wiped away the tears streaming down her cheeks in the wake of the beautiful ceremony.

Danny and Adrian set down the aisle first in a flood of cheers that traveled to the wooden rafters, and then Lex and Cal followed right after. Cam took her cue and looped arms with Matty to trail down the aisle in the recessional, Mitch and Nellie walking behind them.

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Her heart thundered in her ears after listening to those vows between Danny and Adrian, filling her mind with all sorts of crazy notions she shouldn't indulge in. The moment Cam stepped out of view, she and Matty separated. They headed to join the rest of the bridal party in the private side room for the cocktail hour so they could tip back some drinks and scarf food in peace before the rest of the chaos ensued.

Lex leaned against the wall beside the door. She tipped her fingers to Matty as he entered, but before Cam could step through, Lex reached out to touch her arm. Cam stopped still and tilted her head in question.

"After the reception winds down tonight, we need to talk," Lex said, the serious look in her hazel eyes stopping her heart, only to restart it again.

"Yeah, we do," Cam said, squeezing Lex's arm before heading inside. She needed a drink, stat. "We need to talk" clanged around her head, but for the life of her, she didn't know if it would spell salvation or devastation.

Chapter Fifteen

Lex had done it. She had set the stage by asking Cam to talk, and now she would have to deliver, once they got through the reception.

Not like that helped fuck-all for her nerves. The idea of "the talk" and pouring out those feelings had her heart slamming forward in her chest like she was the final girl at the end of a horror movie. She'd jotted down a couple of notes for her maid of honor speech on the crumpled papers in front of her, but she wouldn't even try to compete for the heartfelt one Cal would regale everyone with. The man oozed

emotion from his pores.

Still, one glance at Cam in that canary yellow dress with the winsome look in her eyes, and Lex was a half-step away from spouting Shakespeare.

The Hickory House was one of those venues that fit Danny and Adrian perfectly, with wide windows streaming sunlight onto the dance floor and a massive chandelier made of flowers gracing the center of the room. The sun had already begun to set, and the jar fixtures buzzed on with tremulous lights that cast a gentle glow through the room. The podium lay at the front of the room, and Cal poured his heart out with warm diatribes of things Adrian had done for the family over the years. Mom sniffled into a handkerchief for the thousandth time today.

Her turn would be next, but she'd far rather stand up in front of friends and family and talk about love than deal with the very serious conversation she planned on having with Cam later tonight. The buzz in the back of her mind reached a roar as she tried to shove away the bitter memories of all her past failed confessions.

Lex sipped more of her drink, avoiding the pointed looks Matty tried to send her. The rum wasn't cutting it. Cam sat on the other side of the table, her dark eyes glowing with emotion as she listened Cal's speech. She was different than the others. This was the longest time Lex had spent with anyone, and by the end of the six months, Cam had begun to initiate as often as she did. Like a future together might be something she wanted too.

Cal cracked a joke, his voice smooth as coffee with cream, and everyone began to applaud. Danny and Adrian lifted their champagne flutes to toast, and then Cal stepped away from the podium.

Game time.

Cam mouthed “good luck” to her as she rose from the seat, clutching to the scraps of notes she’d written down over the past couple of days, trying to think of what to say. Her heart thudded.

Lex stepped up in front of the podium, the light beaming over her. Hundreds of people circling the tables focused on what she would say next, most of the faces familiar, because she had about a thousand aunts, uncles, and cousins. Lex flashed Adrian a wicked smile, which earned her a warning look from him and a laugh from Danny. Fuck, her sister-in-law was amazing.

“Adrian and I were always closest in age, so I think he’d kill me if I dove into the stories from when we were kids because I know everything. However, part of knowing everything about your big brother includes the crushes, and his crush on Sam Peterson—or Danny Reynolds as the lovely bride goes by now—well, that one was legendary.”

Adrian’s shoulders relaxed, and he flashed her the “you asshole” look she was so used to getting from him. He was far too fun to string along.

“My brother’s always been the serious sort, and I’ve done my best to shake his life up and cause a little trouble along the way. I always worried he’d marry some twit that would allow him to work his life away without injecting a little joy in the mix, but he couldn’t be in safer hands with Danny.”

She winked at Danny, who gave her a radiant smile. “And this woman here. I may not have known her in high school, but I wish I had because we would’ve been fast friends. Danny, when you asked me to be your maid of honor, I was wondering if you hit your head—no one asks for the chaos I bring. But the more time I’ve spent with you, the more I’ve come to realize you’re fearless. You plunged right into the Dukas family without even blinking, and by the time you left that first dinner, I knew you’d be one of ours.”

Danny's eyes glistened now, and Lex's heart pounded louder as she scanned through the audience. Her gaze fixated on Cam, and her chest squeezed tight.

"You're only going to hear this once from me, so listen up," Lex said, her voice scraping a bit. Even as she glanced to Danny and Adrian, all she could see was Cam in her peripheral. "I've been the Anti-Love poster girl for as long as I can remember, but when I see the way the two of you care for each other, how you help each other grow and support each other through the difficult times? A love like that makes even a cynic like me hope to find the same."

Lex stepped back from the podium and tried to ignore the prickle of heat behind her eyes as she offered a flourish. Mom blew her nose again, loud enough to hear, and a smile rose on her face. Applause rippled through the crowd of family members and friends, before the DJ cut them off to make his next announcements.

Lex headed to the table of bridesmaids and groomsmen, trying to ignore the incredulous stares from Matty and Cal.

"You make one comment and I'll slit your throat," Lex grumbled in warning.

"Now that's the sweet garbage I'm used to you spewing," Matty crooned, an amused glint in his dark eyes.

"Don't worry Lex, Cal's was way more emotional," Nellie added, entertaining a small teasing smile. Her siblings were assholes, the lot of them. Cal lifted his drink to toast, but not before giving her one of his patented mom glances. Lex slammed into her chair and tipped back her dark and stormy. She couldn't look Cam in the eye right now, not after exposing herself in public. Ugh.

"I thought it was beautiful," Cam said, her voice holding a tenderness that made her hope.

This time, Lex flushed. “Well, speeches are done now, so let’s get on with this whole eating and dancing thing.”

Lex’s entire family had flooded to the dance floor with Danny dragging Adrian out to the center, despite his protestations. As much as he whined, his eyes were laughing and that smile on his face told her everything she needed to know. Lex loved how Danny pushed him out of his comfort zone.

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The hours had flown by in a haze of loud music, laughter, and sweat. Her feet ached, even in the flats she wore, but she'd needed to be out there distracting herself on the dance floor. Otherwise the talk looming between her and Cam would've driven her insane.

However, as the music slowed in tempo, leaving the couples with their slow dances and the older family members began to clear out, time ticked closer and closer to their conversation.

She probably shouldn't have had so many dark and stormies, because they were corroding her stomach. Lex scanned over the dance floor, but she didn't see the striking canary yellow dress or the curves she'd memorized with her mouth and with her hands. Lex sucked in a deep breath. Time to do this.

Lex strode off the dance floor, running a hand through her pompadour, which held up by will of extensive product alone. She headed for the corners of the room, but she didn't spot Cam or Danny either for that matter. The outside didn't offer up the duo, just Matty leaning against the siding to catch a smoke with their cousin Jeremy. Lex raised her middle finger in greeting, and Matty saluted back with the same.

Where could they have gone? She hadn't checked the corridor leading to the bathrooms yet. Lex's feet carried her forward by some miracle, even as the nerves threatened to stage a coup. Few people waited around here at this point, where before there had been lines all the way to the corridor from the ladies' room. She'd almost reached the turn into the posh mirrors-and-throw-pillows entryway in front of the bathroom when she heard familiar voices.

“I can’t believe this is your last week,” Danny complained louder than normal, because the woman had drunk enough to drain the Atlantic at this point.

“Just because I’m relocating to Savannah doesn’t mean you won’t see me. I’ll only be two hours away.”

Lex stopped in her tracks. That was Cam’s voice.

“Why can’t your school be online, or near me?” Danny whined. “If I have to face the Horntrees alone, I’ll die.”

“Okay, drama queen,” Cam responded in the wry tone that normally caused warmth to pool in Lex’s chest. Except right now she was falling, falling, falling.

Going back to school? Moving to Savannah?

She’d faced some epic rejections in the past but never someone relocating to a different state. Her hope shattered like glass plates in an alcoholic’s house, and the shakes began trembling through her body.

Cam hadn’t said a word. She planned on going back to school, quitting her job, and leaving. Yet she hadn’t bothered to tell her.

The news didn’t just hurt—it cracked something inside of her, like the snap of a femur.

Lex had been sure, so sure Cam felt the same way. That she wasn’t alone in falling deeper in love than she ever had before. Yet the woman kept this a secret from her. The memories approached, hungry things determined to swallow her whole. The disgust on Maddy’s face after she’d confessed her feelings, the pitying wince from Lila as she told Lex about her now-serious boyfriend. The taste of shame on her

tongue. Time and time again, she remained the casual fling, never anyone's reality.

Her feet carried her forward even though her mind reeled. Her fingertips numbed. The hurt she'd experienced before, too many times in the past, but this grief that arose was new, this loss that had her barely able to breathe. It clawed at her chest without mercy, even as she steeled her features.

Lex turned the corner to walk in on Danny and Cam sitting on the couch along the side wall.

When their eyes met, Cam's widened, and she leaned in to whisper to Danny. Lex's lips thinned, the anger brushing across her skin like third-degree burns. Danny's brows pulled together, and her head tilted when she glanced over to Lex, but her sister-in-law didn't ask any questions. She stood and waved at Lex as she strode away. Cam rose from the seat, and Lex could see the way her legs trembled even from here.

"You're leaving." Her words fired like a bullet from a gun.

Cam swallowed hard, and she wrung her hands as Lex crossed the distance between them. "Look," she said, "I was planning on telling you. I wanted to, so many times."

"You had six months," Lex responded, her voice as dead as her hopes. "And you're leaving next week? Convenient that it's right after we're wrapped up."

Her heart thumped hard in her chest, enough that it boomed in her ears. From the moment she heard the news, she'd plummeted into a void she might never emerge from. Stupid, she'd been so stupid to hope. Cam was no better than the others. Lex was good for a fling, but no one could fall for someone as damaged as she was. No one would ever take the risk to brave her shit moods, her acerbic words, or whatever-the-fuck seemed to repel anyone she fell for.

“I’m sorry,” Cam said, “I wanted to talk about it with you tonight. There’s so much we need to discuss.”

Lex shook her head. The time for talk was well past. All the speeches she’d rehearsed in her head throughout the day in preparation made her feel stupider than ever. God, she’d fallen for this shit again, like the sucker she was. Her skin crawled like she wanted to climb out of it.

In the faint light, Cam’s features were as sharp and stunning as ever, the sight slicing her heart to shreds. Her tumble of curls Lex had threaded her fingers through, the full lips that had twisted into an affectionate smile at the goofy things Lex said, and the eyes that had once looked at her with enough tenderness to make her forget why she didn’t do commitments. Why no one could be trusted. Now Cam’s eyes throbbed with a seriousness she didn’t want to face.

Her actions proved enough, but she couldn’t take hearing those words fall from her lips: that this had been a bit of fun, nothing more.

Lex slipped her hand around Cam’s nape and leaned in to brush her lips against hers. God, she still tasted so good, and her body sparked to life even as her heart splintered. The scent of roses surrounded her, one she’d have to avoid now.

She pulled back, knowing this was goodbye. She wouldn’t see her off to Savannah, and they’d reached the end of Danny and Adrian’s wedding.

“The six months are up,” she murmured, trying to keep her voice from breaking. “You’re free.”

With that, she turned on her heel and strode for the bathroom. Her entire body trembled, and the heat stung her eyes, but she’d be damned if Cam got a shred of emotion from her. The woman had already stolen enough. Crashed cars couldn’t

always be salvaged.

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The bright lights of the bathroom glared down on her, but no one else was in here. She locked herself into one of the stalls and sagged against the cool surface. Her shoulders shook and she clutched herself tight as the sobs erupted from her in shuddering, violent waves, with enough force her ribs ached. Her eyes blurred, but she didn't need to see to know what an idiot she'd been. Falling in love with another straight girl who didn't return her feelings. Giving a part of herself away she'd never get back.

This plunge into a frozen lake was unforgiving, even as hot tears streamed down her cheeks, ones she hated almost as much as the traitorous throb of her heart. God-fucking-damnit, she thought she was past this. Her shoulders shook, and her wholebody tremored in the wake of the hurricane that descended upon her, like one of those flimsy trees battered by the winds.

Yet no matter how she tried, no matter what steps forward she'd taken, the inevitable always slammed in.

She ended up curled in a bathroom stall, her college dorm, the secret park by her parent's house sobbing her loss out. Alone.

Chapter Sixteen

Weeks had passed, and still the lingering press of Lex's lips and the taste of pomegranate haunted Cam even now.

She finished setting the dinner table, the silverware cool in her hands, and sank into her seat after another grueling day back in school. After being out in the real world

for so long, the return was a far different experience from the first time around. The scent of her mother's paanch poron spices vaulted her back in time. For almost being thirty, living in her parent's house was an adjustment, since she still held a lease at her apartment in Charleston.

As much as she was determined to finish out her degree and head in a new direction career-wise, the regrets continued to leech color from her landscape. She should've told Lex earlier. Cam would've had to be blind to miss the devastation in those hazel eyes, how Lex seemed to shatter even as she worked hard to keep her mask in place. But Cam had tried calling, tried texting, tried emailing, and the only response she got was silence.

Message received, loud and clear.

Not like that filled the void left in her heart or extinguished the doubts about her own sexuality her six months with Lex raised. The rare moments she was willing to be honest with herself, she began to realize how little interest she'd always had in men. How her time with Lex had been the deepening strokes of a paint brush she'd been missing from every relationship.

"You have been so quiet since you returned home, amara kan'ya," her mother said, stirring the pot of haleem she prepared. "Is going back harder than you thought?"

Cam's voice stuck in her throat. She wanted to talk to her mother and father about everything going on in her head, but she knew the responses she would receive. Cam couldn't bear a fight with her parents, not when her entire life was in transition. Her mom glanced up to look toward the front door, waiting for her father to return home from work.

"It's different this time around," Cam admitted, veering toward safer territory. "I feel a lot more focused in my direction, having the work experience of knowing what I'm

not a fan of now and getting a better idea of where my passions lay.”

Except those weren't the only passions she'd pursued.

Their bedrooms, the hotel room, hell even Magnolia Cemetery held memories of Lex. She hadn't been back to Charleston yet like she'd promised Danny, because the idea of running into Alexis Dukas was almost too much to bear.

She had been prepared to risk her career and her family for Lex, but in the end, Cam stalled, and Lex never offered anything more.

“Graphic design will be a sensible career, and you gained valuable experience in the meanwhile,” her mother said with a soft smile, turning the burner off. She proceeded to ladle the thick spiced lentil soup into the bowls she'd set out. Four bowls.

“Is someone joining us for dinner?” Cam asked, her eyebrows furrowing. She hated surprises. They made it impossible to prepare a game plan for a situation.

Her mother's eyes twinkled in a way she didn't trust. “Well, your father and I have been talking...” Her gaze drifted to the door as the key clicked into the lock and the knob rattled. “It looks like they're here now.”

Cam's heart thumped harder in her chest as she gripped onto her utensils like she prepared for war. Would it be one of their relatives? She didn't think she could sit through another family dinner with Auntie Ranya, who held nasty opinions on almost everyone she knew. Most of her family was still in Bangladesh, but a few lived in the area.

Her father entered the kitchen, his dark black hair parted to the side and streaked with silver, and his thick glasses perched on his nose. Behind him trailed a younger man who looked about her age. This guy was tall, broad-shouldered with a full head of

thick, dark hair. Based on his rounded, prominent jawline and the similar arch of his nose, he had to have Bangladeshi heritage as well.

Her stomach sank. Between the mischief in her mother's eyes and the arrival of a man her father couldn't possibly work with, she had the feeling where this train headed. The idea made her very cells revolt.

"Camilla, Munira, I'd like to introduce you to my friend Safwan Mustafi's son, Nazir. He'll be joining us for dinner tonight." Her dad announced his presence with an intent Cam didn't like.

Nazir flashed a smile that Cam didn't hate, but the glimpse of those pearly whites didn't set her at ease. He'd obviously been filled in on whatever plan her parents concocted, and she hated being left in the dark.

"My, you're far more handsome than your father let on," her mother demurred, wiping her hands off on her apron. She began to carry the full bowls of haleem over, still steaming. The rich scent of spices permeated the air, infusing her parent's kitchen. Yet even in this familiar place, she couldn't help but feel like she was being ambushed.

"It's a pleasure to join you tonight," Nazir said, taking the seat her mother offered. "I've been looking forward to meeting you, Camila. Your father has told me such wonderful things, but he never mentioned how gorgeous the Muhuri women were."

Mom fanned herself. "What a gentleman, right, Camilla?"

Cam pursed her lips, not thrilled with any of this. But she'd maintain civility. "Sure. Pleased to meet you, Nazir." She forced a smile she knew looked fake, but with the way her parent's stares bored into her, she was apparently on display night.

She busied herself with digging into her lentil soup. Normally she loved this meal, but with the interloper at their table, each bite tasted like ash on her tongue. His gaze gleamed every time he stared at her, clearly interested.

“Where do you work, Nazir?” Her mother asked, dominating the conversation.

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“I’m at a law firm in the city. Prosecution,” he said, offering a polite smile as he took his first taste of the soup. He let out a low noise in his throat. “Mrs. Muhuri, this is delicious.”

“My wife’s cooking never fails to remind us of home. Our daughter spent years as a chef as well.” Her father stepped in, trying to sell her as best as possible.

“Though I quit that job and I’m back to school now.” Cam couldn’t help herself, wanting to be out of this situation ten minutes ago.

“Your father said you were finishing up a graphic design degree?” Nazir asked. “I didn’t realize you were so multi-talented.”

Ugh, her parents had given him every single detail about her. She hated this surprise attack from the moment it began. Truth be told, Nazir was handsome, held down a great job, and had already earned her parent’s approval. He should be the whole package.

Yet Lex pretty much ruined her for men. Really, for anyone else.

Every time she caught Nazir’s gaze drift her way, all she could think of was the scorching way Lex scanned over her and the glow of her hazel eyes. When Lex looked at her, she saw every insecurity, every secret she hid away, and accepted them anyway. Nazir’s stare remained superficial, not permeating past skin.

“Truly, it’s not talent,” she said, “just an indecisive nature, I suppose.”

“Modest as well,” Nazir continued, his grin widening. “I can appreciate that.”

Strike her down now, this man would not stop. His persistence didn't seem so dissimilar from Lex's aggression, truth be told, but the difference was her interest. When Lex had pursued, Cam wanted the attention, even if she hadn't been willing to admit it yet. This felt manufactured, hollow in comparison.

Cam forced down another couple of spoonfuls, eager to excuse herself from the table. She lapsed into silence while her parents continued to grill Nazir. They heaped praises upon him with each question he successfully answered, each box he ticked off their perfect son-in-law checklist. Cam wasn't naïve, she knew what her parents had planned from the moment her father walked through the door with him.

Yet, there was a significant part of her they didn't know about. One that would make any heterosexual arranged marriage a nightmare. One she'd only just started to acknowledge herself.

“If you don't mind, I'm going to excuse myself for a moment,” Cam said, pushing up from the table and bringing her bowl with her over to the sink. Somehow, she'd stomached the food, but it churned right now. The squeak of a chair across the hardwood followed as she stepped into her parent's living room and placed a hand over her forehead.

She blazed right now, anger flaring inside her and mingling with the ripped canvas of her pain at the loss of the closest to true happiness she'd come. Not like she could tell her parents anything about her relationship with Lex either, without opening a door that might get slammed back in her face.

Footsteps padded behind her.

Cam turned around as her mother approached.

“Camilla, you’re being rude to our guest,” her mother said in a low, quiet voice, the kindness leached away.

“Care to tell me why he’s here then?” Cam challenged. “Maybe he would’ve gotten a politer reception if I’d been prepared rather than ambushed.”

Her mother glanced to the ground before looking into her eyes. “You’ve been single for far too long, my love. I know you wanted your time to find the right man for you, but you’re getting older. Your father and I felt it best we intercede. Nazir is from a good, Bangladeshi family, and he’s perfect for you in every way—a successful lawyer, handsome, and kind. You couldn’t ask for a better husband.”

Bile rose in Cam’s throat. An arranged marriage. That was what she feared.

Too bad for you, I’m gaystuck in her throat. She wanted to rebel against this with all her heart, but she heard the careful edge to her mother’s tone. They wouldn’t budge on this one, and she’d just started back in school. She couldn’t swing commuting from her apartment in Charleston right now, and she couldn’t afford two rents.

“Let me get to know him first, mama,” Cam asked, a cajoling tone in her voice as she pushed for a compromise. “I know you and father were arranged by your parents, but you raised me here, where we do things differently. He seems nice. I was just overwhelmed.”

Her mother pursed her lips, but then she smiled and nodded. “Good girl. You’ll come to care for him in no time. It was like that for me when I first met your father. I was so scared and nervous. I wanted to be a good bride, and I didn’t know what sort of husband he would be. I’m thankful to this day for what a perfect man I married. We just want the same for you.”

Cam wanted to scream.

Their intent wasn't malicious, but they didn't understand a thing about her. They'd supported her decisions, but only the ones that aligned with their own preferences and choices.

She swallowed back the rage bubbling inside her, the way her entire body and soul revolted at the idea of entertaining this for even a moment longer. Lex didn't want her, and she had no other prospects. Cam had only promised to get to know him better.

Yet every step as she followed her mother back into the dining room felt like a betrayal.

Chapter Seventeen

Shitfaced didn't begin to describe the state Lex was in.

Truth be told, she'd been wrecked most of her nights off ever since Danny and Adrian's wedding. On her workdays, she'd been pulling longer shifts than ever, taking on any clients she could get, even the "Oh Em Gee, I just want a butterfly on my ankle" ones. Bell, bless his soul, worked with her and didn't ask any questions. He seemed to understand she was dealing with something and let her distract herself as much as she needed.

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No matter how much she drank though, she couldn't erase the memories of Cam that haunted her in a carousel of all the places they'd spent time together. Waterfront Park? Ruined. Magnolia Cemetery? Off limits now. Even her own house had been tainted by the woman's presence. No matter how much she wanted to hate Camilla Muhuri and no matter how many calls and texts Lex ignored, grief rocked through her with an intensity she didn't think she'd survive.

Lex took another sip of her dark and stormy, the spice from the ginger beer numbing out her tongue with how many she'd drank at this point.

"As much as I'd love to see the drunken shenanigans you'll get up to this weekend, I'm going to have to cut you off, sis," Matty said, lifting one of those carved eyebrows.

Lex thrust her middle finger at him. "Since when are you the responsible one, Matty-be-damned? You're barely showing up for your shifts on time."

"Trust me, I don't want to be the responsible one either," Matty said, holding the rag in his hand to clean the bar. "But I don't want to have to kick you out of Gin Mill, and watching you wreck yourself for weeks isn't my idea of a good time. Lucky for you, I called in the cavalry."

Lex lifted her head, wincing as the room spun for a moment. Maybe she'd drunk a bit more than planned. She should call an Uber to drag her ass home. But home was the last place she wanted to be, where she'd be alone with her memories.

"When Matty said you looked like shit, he wasn't kidding." Adrian's voice came

from behind her. “I mean, he tends to exaggerate, so we had to come see for ourselves.”

Lex let out a groan. “You’re an asshole, Matty. And Adrian, don’t you have a wife to be fucking into the bed right now?”

“We put a pause on it to see you,” Danny said, sliding into the empty seat beside her and looking far too chipper. Adrian took the adjacent one. “And we were right in the middle of some seriously steamy shit too.” Adrian let out a groan at the comment, placing his head into his hands.

Lex rolled her eyes and drank another sip from her dark and stormy. Her normal modus operandi for shaming the pain away was finding as many willing participants as possible to spread their legs for her. Yet ever since Cam, when she went to the club she stalled out. Her mouth and heart betrayed her, and she ended up excusing herself out of at least a dozen hookups. Mitch had noticed something was up, and he’d been casting her longer than average looks.

“Well, here I am. There’s nothing wrong with getting a little plastered once in a while,” Lex muttered. “Not like I’ve been irresponsible at work or anything.” Adrian and Danny exchanged one of those stupid couple looks, and Lex resisted the urge to deck both of them. She wouldn’t sit around as some museum exhibit to be gawked at. Come all and see the woman dumb enough to fall headfirst in love get rejected for the thousandth time. When will she learn? Oh, never.

“Well then you won’t mind if we keep you company,” Danny insisted. Lex loved and hated her sister-in-law right now, but the woman was nothing if not persistent. She and Adrian really were meant for each other.

“Be my guest,” she said, sweeping an arm out to gesture at the seats. “Not my bar.”

She tipped back a little more of the drink, the numbness not doing shit to stem how her chest throbbed, scooped like a grapefruit until she became a hollow husk.

“So, I heard from Cam,” Danny said, looking toward Adrian, even though she spoke loud enough for the bar to hear. Lex froze at the sound of the name. Part of her wanted to know so, so badly what was going on with the woman while the other part of her dreaded even the slightest mention.

“How’s she doing in school?” Adrian asked, also fake and loud. Lex hadn’t said a word to her siblings or Danny about what happened with her and Cam—that secret she planned on taking to her grave with her. However, her nosy as fuck sibs had been casting her a messload of long, meaningful looks as of late, and she suspected some had pieced things together. Lex thanked everything holy Mom and Dad hadn’t sat her down for a heart to heart yet.

“School’s going great. She’s hoping to finish up her degree by next year,” Danny said, reaching forward to accept the Aviation Matty poured for her. “Though her parents are being royal pains in the asses. They’re from Bangladesh, and since Cam is an unmarried woman in their household, they’ve taken it upon themselves to arrange a marriage for her.”

Lex gripped the drink tight enough the glass threatened to crack. The room swirled around her again but this time not from the alcohol. She was going to be sick. The idea of Cam married away to some guy she didn’t even know was enough to make her get up out of her seat. The rum churned in her stomach, begging to upheave.

“Be right back,” Lex muttered as she headed for the ladies’ room. She squinted at the bright glare of the lights as she made her way to one of the stalls and closed the door behind her. Lex sank to the floor, hugging her knees tight to her chest, and she tried to force the room to stop spinning. The bile lodged in her throat, but she rarely puked from drinking.

The door creaked open, and she caught a pair of familiar Doc Martens approaching from the gap beneath the stalls.

A knock sounded on her stall door. "I'm sorry," Danny said from the other side of the door. "I shouldn't have sprung the news on you like that."

"Why should I care what your friend does?" Lex responded, her voice coated in acid. "Let her get married to some random guy her parents picked out."

Danny knocked again. "I see you on the floor there. Let me in?"

Lex clutched her legs tighter to her chest, tempted to ignore Danny until she went away. However, she found herself reaching for the latch and nudging the door open. Danny slipped inside the tight space and locked it shut again with a click, slumping on the opposite side of her.

"We all had the feeling something was going on between you and Cam. I spent enough time with you both to piece things together, and Nellie had her suspicions. Adrian had you both pegged from the first day you guys met."

Lex pressed her forehead to her knees. "Thanks. I already knew you were a bunch of nosy assholes who gossip too much."

Danny nudged her in the leg. "None of that shit. You love us nosy assholes, even if you'll never admit it. But Lex, you haven't been talking about this shit with anyone for weeks now, and we've been worried. I know dropping the bomb back there was underhanded, but for once you didn't school your features at the mention of her, and I needed something to go on."

"You fit in with the rest of my family just fine. You're determined to climb all over each other's business like a bunch of dumb puppies. We had a six-month fling, then

she decided to up and move away at the end of it.” Lex forced her tone from shaking even though her fingers didn’t take the cue.

“How do you know she wouldn’t have made it work?” Danny asked. “Savannah’s a few hours away, and she planned on visiting on weekends.”

Lex shot her a poisoned glance. “We’ve sure been seeing a lot of her this past month. Besides, Savannah is in a different state. In case you didn’t forget, I’m still on parole. She made her intention loud and clear.”

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“Fuck,” Danny swore. “I am an ass. I forgot you couldn’t leave the state. Look, I’m not here to tell you what to do or how to handle this shit, because when I thought I’d lost Adrian, I was a fucking wreck. What I’m here to say is no matter how much you try to isolate yourself or shoulder things on your own, we’re here, we’re stubborn, and we’ll continue being obnoxious until you accept you’re not alone in this.”

Lex’s throat tightened. Adrian’s wife was becoming just as good as her husband at rallying speeches. She didn’t lift her head from her knees because the alcohol had set in big time, but she reached her hand out. Danny slipped a hand in hers and squeezed tight. Heat welled in Lex’s eyes.

What was supposed to be a no-feelings fling with a “straight” girl had ended up savaging her beyond belief. No matter the time that stretched between them, Camilla Muhuri remained on her mind twenty-four seven. Lex had blocked her on social media, but she hadn’t been able to stop herself from looking through the art book Cam left at her house, at all of the stunning paintings that captured every bit of depth she tried to hide from the world. Lex stared at the pictures until the lines blurred from the stupid water stinging her eyes.

“Look,” Lex murmured into her knees. “This is going to take time, and I’m not up for care and shares or kumbayas by the fireside with you fuckers. But if you want to sit back with a drink and talk about anything else, I guess I could deal with that.”

“You’ve got it, sis,” Danny said, the words coming as naturally as if they’d always known one another. Danny kept her hand gripped tight even as they both lapsed into silence.

Cam would be getting married.

She had always worried about what her parents would think over everything, and Lex was about a hundred percent sure they were the main reason why Cam remained so staunchly in the closet. However, she'd made her choices, and if she wanted to lie to herself for the rest of her life in some loveless marriage, well, that was none of Lex's business.

"I'm just going to ask you one thing," Lex said, lifting her head up at last to look at Danny. She'd tried to keep the hoarse rasp out of her voice, but she failed. "When it happens? When she marries that fucker her parents picked for her? Don't tell me."

Chapter Eighteen

Cam had been good on her word. She'd wasted a month trying to get to know Nazir, and all that time only reinforced what she knew from the start. He wasn't for her. In fact, nobody sparked her attraction or even her attention in the wake of the fallout between her and Lex. She wanted to ask Danny how Lex was doing, for some scrap of information, but that would mean cracking the whole secret between them wide open.

She couldn't go there yet.

However, she was beyond ready to get some time away from her parents. Their endless comments about Nazir and how beautiful she'd look in a sari for her wedding scraped away at her a little more every day. Every time they made mention, her anger and irritation didn't fade but compounded. After spending time around someone she'd been able to be a hundred percent herself with, she couldn't shove herself into the box of "good daughter" again, even if it led to what she feared. She'd always been able to go home, to visit her parents, and the idea of losing them, losing that space—fuck.

Cam stepped hard on the pedal, flooring it down route seventeen back to Charleston. She was finished entertaining her parents' attempt at arranging her marriage, she was finished with lying to herself, and she was finished being two hours away from Alexis Dukas. She didn't care if she needed to show up on her doorstep or pry her out of the club—she'd make sure they had the conversation she meant to have with her at Danny's wedding, rather than the shock and run that followed.

She'd completed her first semester back in college with one more to go, and since winter break stretched ahead of her, Charleston had been her top destination. Now that she'd committed, she couldn't turn away, but a thump-thump-thump pounded in the back of her brain with how badly she needed to be done. How badly she wanted to return to her apartment and the home she'd made in Charleston.

How she hoped and prayed Lex would talk to her this time.

The houses cropped into view along Savannah highway, a beautiful residential sprawl of red-bricked two stories and charming white ranchers. She'd cracked the window open, even with the bite in the air, because she wanted to catch the first gasp of the salt breeze mingled with magnolias. Staying at her parent's house confirmed her sneaking suspicion that she'd been drifting for a while now, and her time apart drew her in a different direction. She'd been cruising on a highway her parents had designed, but now, she was getting off at the exit.

Instead of continuing to fight herself, the more she thought about it, the more she wanted to embrace those differences.

Cam gripped the steering wheel a little tighter as she neared the turn. Her calves clenched with her nerves. She could head home to her apartment deeper in the city instead of heading to what would probably be a rejection.

However, she regretted holding back the first time, and even though her nerves

buzzed like she might take off, a single email bolstered her right now. She peeled into the development parking lot, weaving through the side streets toward Lex's townhouse.

A few days ago, Matty Dukas had shot her a short email.

My sister's a stubborn shit, but she hasn't been the same since you left. I'm not going to tell you to come out of the closet if you're not ready—not my place and frankly, not my concern. But if I were in your position and had someone like her? Someone who's always been unashamedly herself, who was willing to fight for the people she loves? Taking those first steps out wouldn't be half as terrifying.

His words jangled around in her brain until they felt a lot like resolve.

She pulled into a parking lot that had become so familiar. After she went to Lex's place for the first time, she'd slept over there far too many nights to forget which house was hers. Once she tugged the keys out of the ignition, the situation slammed into her. What would she even say to Lex? She'd rehearsed about a hundred speeches, but none of them sat quite right, and the sheer proximity of the woman tended to make her lose her sense.

Beneath the humming of her nerves, her heart lurched at the idea of seeing Lex again. She'd wanted her these past few months so badly she could taste the hint of pomegranate from her lipstick that night and the spice of ginger when they'd kissed.

Cam tapped her steering wheel three times before she pushed herself up out of the seat. She needed to face this.

Cam strode down the walkway, even more nervous than she'd been her first visit to Lex's place. The red-bricked townhouse stood out amidst the others with the black door she could guarantee Lex had painted herself. When she reached the "Gothic Hell

Away” welcome mat, her fingers numbed. She lifted her fist up to knock anyway and then took a step back to wait.

If Lex was in there with another woman, she might die. Cam swallowed back bile. She’d been technically dating another guy, so she didn’t have much room to talk. Not like she’d sought out Nazir. She only got to know him as an effort to pacify her parents.

The pound of footsteps echoed from inside the house until the door creaked open.

Lex stood in the doorway and stared at her like she’d seen a ghost. Cam drank in the details, her black muscle shirt that looked so damn good against her olive skin covered in tattoos. She was barefoot, and strands of her pixie cut twisted every which way, but that tousled look made her even hotter. Lex’s pale flash of disbelief fast purpled to anger.

Lex clutched the door for dear life. “What do you want?”

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Cam had been preparing for the question the entire car ride over, but the moment the words hit the air her answers vanished.

“To see you,” Cam said, the truth slipping from her lips. Maybe she should launch with apologies or explanations, but Lex might not even be willing to listen. Whatever fear had whispered in her ear during their final weeks together seemed to be the furthest from the truth. Because the ticking bomb of a woman standing before her didn’t let any of the softness she’d come to witness past her rebuilt walls.

Lex gave a flourish of a bow. “Here I am. You’ve seen me.”

She made the motion to close the door, but Cam slipped her foot in the way, stepping through the frame. Lex’s eyebrows drew together, her expression darkening. Cam remained steady. Storms never frightened her anyway.

“Look, I know I held things back,” Cam said, keeping her grip on the door. “But you did too. We owe it to ourselves to have the conversation we meant to have before you found out about my plans.”

“Don’t think that’s appropriate when you’ve got a betrothed all lined up,” Lex responded, her hazel eyes flashing and her voice corrosive. “Seriously, what are you doing here, Cam? You used me for six months, fucked off to another state, and then got yourself into an arranged marriage from what I’ve heard. Believe me, words aren’t necessary—your actions speak loud enough.”

Damnit. Danny must’ve told Lex the situation with her parents she’d been venting about.

“Sure, throw the judgement my way,” Cam shot back, stepping further into the house. Lex was infuriating, angry, and more hurt than the stubborn woman would ever admit. “From the outset you said you didn’t want commitment, and that’s all I’m looking for. I wasn’t clear about my own bullshit, true, but never once did you say you wanted anything more than those six months.”

Lex’s mouth opened, but whatever she might say she swallowed back. Instead, Lex shut the door behind her. The tension in the room thickened like the onset of a thunderstorm, the intensity of this woman something she craved and missed more than she could’ve known.

Cam took a step away and then another, until her back bumped against the wall. Lex prowled forward, those hazel eyes darkening with emotions she couldn’t identify.

“Thought you were straight, babe,” Lex growled, her words vibrating in the air between them. “Getting yourself a husband seems to be exactly what you’d been aiming for.”

“That’s what my parents want,” she shot back, her hands balling into fists. Mere inches separated them, and Lex loomed close enough she could smell the campfire and clove of her, a scent that wrapped around her like a lullaby.

“Yeah, and what is it you want?” Lex asked, her husky voice driving her nuts. Mere minutes in her presence and her body reacted like she’d been doused in kerosene and lit on fire.

“You know what I want,” Cam whispered. Lex made her feel in a way she forgot she could, made her hope and dream for something deep as the Atlantic, as broad as the horizon.

“That’s not good enough right now,” Lex said, inches between them as she reached

forward to slide her finger under Cam's chin, tilting her head up until their eyes locked. Her gaze flickered with a vulnerability that lured Cam in from the start, a softness behind the poisonous sting of her words she hid behind.

"You," Cam mouthed, her heart squeezing tight in her chest. "I want you."

At the words, the heated air in the room combusted. Lex lunged in for her, crushing her mouth to Cam's with a kiss that was the furthest thing from sweet. Cam reached out to grip her by the waist as Lex closed the distance between them to press Cam harder into the wall. Yes, yes, yes. She missed this so much. No one else got her soaked like this with a single kiss, and no one else made her feel the way Lex did, like she'd stepped out into a neon green field after a rainstorm.

She sagged against the wall, holding onto Lex for dear life. Cam slipped her hands beneath Lex's shirt, feeling the strong muscle of her chest beneath, the smooth skin that made her ignite. Lex snarled at her like a furious force of nature as she kissed her with a desperation summoned from their time apart. Lex's teeth sank against her neck, and Cam let out a moan.

Nothing about this was gentle, or sweet. That had been bled from them in the wake of their implosion. However, Cam would take her any way she could get her. She missed Lex more than she could ever explain, like she'd lost the arm she painted with. The phantom sensations had haunted her for months now to the point it grew unbearable.

Cam ran fingers through Lex's pixie cut and with her other hand glided up her chest further to cup her breast. She slipped beneath her sports bra and thumbed over her hardened nipple, loving the way Lex ground her hips against her each time. Lex snapped the button of Cam's corduroys and in seconds had them halfway down her thighs. She dragged her panties down with equal force in a way that left Cam gasping.

She was so drenched for her, so ready for this to the point reason flew out the window. Lex bit and sucked at her earlobe, her neck, her shoulder, the sensations growing so intense Cam became wet clay in her hands, the moans exploding from her. Lex reached down to cup her pussy, and she didn't care how shameless she appeared as she ground against her hand.

"God, you fucking taste so good," Lex growled, the words sharp as a paring knife.

"I missed you so damn much," Cam breathed between moans. Lex smothered Cam's mouth with hers as she devoured Cam again and again. The long, rough kisses made her lips swollen. Then Lex slipped two fingers between her folds, rubbing her juices along the seam before she plunged inside.

Cam let out a cry, thrusting her hips forward to urge Lex deeper in. Lex pumped her fingers into Cam's pussy with a building force that had her writhing. After months of a dry spell longing for this touch, each stroke Lex delivered was explosive. Lex's mouth barely left hers, only to bite her neck, her shoulders, and then she'd return to sucking on her lower lip, devouring every moan to come from her.

The moment Lex began to swipe her thumb against Cam's clit, the motion caused Cam to blink back stars, bringing her closer and closer to the edge.

Cam ran her hands up and down Lex's waist, trying to memorize these curves, the feel of them against her palms. Her eyes heated with how much she'd missed this. How she'd regretted the way things left off every day since the wedding. Lex pumped into her until all thoughts obliterated from her mind, and each graze to her clit had her pussy throbbing from the overload of sensations.

She let out a gasp as her orgasm crashed through her. Her vision blanked out, and the shuddering waves wracked through her entire body. She gripped onto Lex's hips for stability as the bliss she'd been craving coursed through her. Lex's lips separated

from hers, but the normal tenderness didn't follow, the caresses against her neck and the warmth she'd once coaxed out from the Arctic woman.

Lex pulled her fingers out of Cam and wiped them on her pants. She stepped away as if they were strangers, as if this was no different than their first collision in the bathroom of Notes Nightclub.

Cam didn't realize how much that would hurt. How much she missed what had unfurled between them that died as easily as a crocus in a cold snap.

"Please, can we talk," Cam pleaded, hating the vulnerability in her voice. She pulled her pants back up, fastening the button as her shoulders heaved in the wake of the orgasm that ripped out of her.

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Lex leaned against the wall beside her. She stared at the wall on the opposite side of the foyer where a piece of art hung along the wall, a woman bound in black rope.

“I still don’t know why you’re here, Cam,” Lex murmured, something lost and devastating in her voice. “You say you want me, and you’re good when we’re physical, sure. But the moment our arrangement ended, you moved away for months to a place I couldn’t follow. You know I’m on parole. And no matter how you claim this arranged marriage isn’t what you want, I don’t see you coming out to your parents or fighting it hard.”

Cam opened her mouth, her tongue dry. She wanted to tell her parents, she did. But the free-fall wasn’t something she could survive. If she were being honest with herself, part of her kept the charade with Nazir going because pretending to go on dates with him felt safe. Because it didn’t make her blaze with anything real.

He offered stability and had the acceptance of her family.

Yet the one person she wanted was Alexis Dukas.

Lex’s nails dug into the wall behind her, and she wouldn’t look her way. “You want truth, Cam? I’ve always been everyone’s good time, experiment, or freak show because I’ve always fallen for girls who swerve straight at the last second or never were interested in the first place. And I’m done. I’m done chasing people in the closet. You talk big about how you want commitment, but if you wanted that with me you wouldn’t be wasting time in Savannah with an arranged marriage in the works.”

She looked to her at last, a finality in her eyes that socked Cam in the stomach.

“Go home, Cam. Go to your betrothed, have your family and dozens of fat children. I’m gay and proud of it. I might’ve dealt with all the sneaking around for the six months you were mine, but I came out when I was in high school, and I won’t let anyone make me feel like I’m in the closet again.”

Cam swallowed hard. The hurt in Lex’s voice rang clear, and her words hit like a slap. She wasn’t wrong. She’d known what she wanted for a bit, and yet once she returned home, she’d lapsed into the same cycle of letting her parents take the rein over her life. She’d compromised, compromised, compromised, until she struggled to know what belonged to her or who she was.

“I’m not giving up, Lex,” she said, even as she took the first steps toward the door. The heat between them hadn’t disintegrated, even after the way they’d both sliced each other open. But she’d been the one to make the first cut, and after seeing the gasp of vulnerability that remained behind Lex’s impassive mask, she couldn’t turn back.

She’d hurt her. Not on purpose, but she’d dragged her along for six months unwilling to even admit she had no interest in men. That she’d always been interested in women, but the avenue had never been one she’d been allowed to consider.

She waited for the tug at her wrist, hoping Lex would change her mind and ask her to stay. But when she reached the door, Lex remained where she leaned against the wall, staring at the ceiling like she might burn holes through it. Cam dipped her head in goodbye before she walked out the door.

Three weeks home from winter break. Which meant she had three weeks to try to convince Lex she was serious this time.

Chapter Nineteen

Cam's reappearance in town had been hydrogen peroxide on the open wounds across Lex's heart. She'd barely been able to push thoughts of her from her mind in the first place, and with the way she kept stepping into her line of sight at Third Eye Coffee, at the Food Lion, hell even at the Gin Mill, there was no escaping the woman.

She'd already gotten the scoop from Danny that Cam returned home for winter break, staying the three weeks until she went back to SCAD. With Christmas approaching at the end of the week, only one and a half remained until Cam would disappear to Savannah again.

Pushing her away the afternoon she'd showed up at her door had been the hardest thing she'd done, but Lex couldn't sustain how each encounter left her battered and broken inside.

Maybe Cam's persistence should've flattered her. Hell, she'd been just as relentless.

However, despite the clear interest, Cam still refused to admit she was gay. Lex had been serious when she told her she wouldn't touch her with a ten-foot pole while she stayed staunchly in the closet. Danny hadn't even known about them until Lex had confessed on that shitty bathroom floor, and she could guarantee Cam hadn't come out to her yet.

Still, the club didn't hold the distraction she'd been hoping for tonight. Mitch sat next to her with his glass of scotch, leaning against the bar and staring out to the crowd. He looked every bit the bartender even away from his job, because the man had almost the same commitment to black that she did.

"Are we going to talk about what's been up your ass sideways?" Mitch asked, even as he didn't look at her.

"What?" Lex called back, pretending she couldn't hear over the noise.

Mitch shot her a dead-eye look. She hadn't seen him as much since she'd finished up on his sleeve, but when he'd called her out to Notes tonight, she seized on the chance. Anything to keep her from another night alone in her house, waiting for a knock to sound on her door and then hating herself when it didn't.

"Had a fling that went sour, that's all," she said, lifting the pomegranate and rum concoction she'd been addicted to as of late. "Nothing drinks and distraction won't cure." The thump of the bass beat reverberated through her bones, and Lex tapped her boot against the chair, even though the music didn't slam into her like it normally did.

Mitch lifted a brow, but out of anyone, he knew better than to push. The two of them were too alike in the way they kept everyone at a distance. Yet the fact he called her up for tipping back drinks at the club meant as much as a long and overly poetic emotions talk from Cal. This was one of the few places Cam wouldn't follow since she didn't do the whole dancing and pulsing electronica thing.

All that made her think of was Danny's bachelorette and the night they'd spent together in the hotel afterward. Her core pulsed, and her heart hurt. This fucking sucked, but she'd meant what she told Cam. She couldn't risk splintering on jagged rocks again. She'd be obliterated.

It had taken hitting this low again to make her realize she'd grown tired of the chase and tired of distracting herself. But if she was going to sort her life out and begin settling down in Charleston, that meant avoiding her old holding patterns of chasing after the unattainable.

Mitch lifted his cup, and Lex clinked hers with it.

"To distractions," he said, staring at the surface of the bar like he was lost in his own damage. Lex didn't pry. She knew better.

Unfortunately, the very woman she'd been trying to distract herself from walked through the entrance of Notes Nightclub, looking so fine the breath caught in Lex's throat. Not like Cam had a day where she wasn't gorgeous enough to hurt. Lex had seen her in every state from all dolled up to casual and makeup free, and she'd found each side of her stunning.

Tonight, Cam had shown up as pure temptation.

She wore the red number that made Lex lose her mind at Danny's bachelorette. The fabric stretched so tight every curve was visible, and those full breasts begged to be touched. Fuck, fuck, fuck. Already, her traitorous body reacted to the sight of those crimson lips, the waterfall of silken curls, and the bronze skin that tasted so damn perfect.

"Bro, pull yourself out of your brooding," Lex called to him. "I need a wingman tonight."

"You? Need a wingman?" he raised both brows. "I don't think you've ever asked before."

Having the woman she'd fallen head over heels for in the same room made any attempts of flirting on her own impossible. If Lex were honest, she hadn't hit on anyone after Cam. Everytime she saw a pretty face, the normal lines collected at her lips unsaid. Flirtation had been a reflex as long as she could remember, and Cam crashed into her life and ruined it.

She tried to look away from Cam, but she couldn't help the glimpses she stole. Of course, the woman headed toward them. Because she was being just as persistent as Lex had been when she'd started her whole quest to swing Cam to the other side. A bitter, jagged edge part of her was almost satisfied when things shattered because she'd been protecting herself for so long from the former hurt that she expected it.

The times she and Cam had been together belonged to a dream or a fantasy,

something that faded out of reach like an ending song the moment she tried to grasp for it. That sort of bliss, that sort of happiness where you knew someone inside and out and loved them anyway—it didn't exist for fuckups like her.

Mitch had lured a pair of gorgeous blondes over—the man was predictable—and he cast a couple of wayward glances in Lex's direction before murmuring in one of the girl's ears. Her gaze flashed with interest, and she bit her lip. Lex forced a smile she didn't feel.

“Anyone sitting here?” Cam asked from her other side.

Lex heaved out the breath she'd been holding as she shrugged her shoulders. “Spot's open if you want it.”

She wanted her to sit there just as much as she was willing to beg she didn't. Because her restraint stretched like a tenuous thread close to snapping, and she would never heal if she kept hooking up with Cam and hating herself for her weakness every chance she got.

After all, Cam never gave a clear answer about the fucker her parents arranged her with. Every time they'd run into each other since the night Cam showed up at her door, it had been quick back and forths with a dry quip thrown in, and Lex found an excuse to bolt every time.

No more. She wasn't going to give any more of her heart to this woman when in a few weeks she'd head to Savannah and then Lex would get the devastating news that a wedding date had been chosen.

“I'm surprised you're not out there dancing,” Cam mentioned, gesturing to the sea of people in front of them.

“I think you’re confusing me with Danny. She’s the one with the electronica fetish,” Lex drawled, trying not to sneak glances over at the expanse of bronze skin gleaming in the lights by the bar. God it hurt that Cam looked this sexy in the dress even now. She wanted to rip it right off her and thrust her fingers inside the pussy she knew would be drenched. But thinking like that got her into this mess in the first place.

Lex tipped back more of her drink, hoping it would wash away the anxiousness that swept over her like she’d never flirted with a woman before.

“Have you been coming here a lot recently?” Cam asked, an edge to her voice. Lex couldn’t gauge if it was jealousy or regret, but she’d made her choices, neither of which encouraged a future between the two of them.

Lex bit back the ‘none of your business’ threatening to leap from her throat. “Mitch asked me to come out with him tonight,” was all she managed without venom.

This awkwardness between them hurt. Mere months ago, Cam had been resting in her arms, splayed out in her bed, sleeping next to her like some raven-haired angel. How could she not understand that in a few weeks she’d be heading over a boundary line Lex couldn’t follow? The more Cam tried, the more it felt like she pushed for another hookup, and Lex was so sick of feeling used. She’d never let the emotion sink its teeth with any of her one-nighters, but over the years they’d accumulated into a pool of quicksand, and she sank deeper every day.

The blonde that had been eyeing her stepped up to her other side. “Your friend said you’re looking for a little company tonight?”

Saved by the blonde. And Mitch, she supposed. This girl was a looker for sure, wide hips and legs for days. She wore a skintight black dress cut high enough on her thighs that bending over would be a risky proposition. In her pre-Cam days, she would’ve been on her like ants on sugar. However, now? The chick didn’t even elicit the

slightest thrill.

Lex swallowed. She could feel the press of Cam's gaze on her, sending her careening over the edge. If she indulged in spending tonight with Cam, things would turn carnal fast. The way she looked in the red dress did funny things to her nether regions, and the moment she caught the scent of her rose perfume, she'd been clenching her thighs tighter. And then the night would end with Cam leaving while Lex sat alone in her apartment feeling like a discarded toy. Fuck that.

"Yeah, I guess I've been pretty lonely as of late," Lex drawled, even as her mind and heart revolted. She tasted bile in her throat at flirting with this girl in front of Cam. It betrayed every emotion inside her, but she'd taken the chance before, and Cam refused to either come out or leave her alone.

She was done with this limbo.

"Why, are you looking for some company, tonight?" Lex asked, loading the question with insinuation. Blondie's blue eyes gleamed, and she leaned in on the bar to reveal a slice of cleavage that once upon a time she would've found delicious. Instead, all she could see was Cam's curves, the ones she'd spent hours memorizing. The woman had ruined her, for sure.

Truth be told, she didn't need Mitch's help attracting the girls. They still flocked to her when she made her way to the club, but she'd become tongue-tied where the words used to drip from her lips with no effort.

Blondie's hand slipped over hers, even though the touch didn't inspire a tingle let alone a spark. "I was planning on swinging to the bathroom to touch up my makeup."

The intent broadcasted bright and clear.

The chair beside her screeched, but Lex didn't dare look over to meet Cam's gaze. Right now, she hated everything about this situation. She heard the clip of the footsteps and only chanced a glance when Cam closed in on the door. The pendulum swing of those hips had her ensnared, even when Cam cut a hasty retreat. Watching that woman walk away sent her plummeting to indescribable new depths of misery, knowing she'd been the cause.

Even if she wanted the distraction, her heart wasn't in a bathroom fling. If anything, she felt worse than when she'd arrived here.

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“Sorry, sweetheart,” she said, removing her hand from the woman’s. “I’m shit company tonight. You’d be better off finding someone else.”

The blonde frowned, following her gaze to the door. Her dark eyes clarified as she put the pieces together. “Your loss.” She strode toward the dance floor this time, losing herself amidst the crowd. Meanwhile, Mitch’s attention remained front and forward on her friend who did the usual curl and twirl with her hair.

No, Lex had chased her loss right out the door. She slumped forward against the bar and drained the rest of her drink dry. Her restraint had been tested in the past, but it paled in comparison to this onslaught from Cam. After tonight though, she’d scared her away for good.

That was what she’d been trying to do to protect herself, to heal.

However, all it felt like was devastation.

Chapter Twenty

Christmas had already arrived, which brought Cam back to Savannah for a spell. She’d been dreading the return the moment she got into her car to drive back on Christmas Eve for the normal family festivities. Christmas Day they celebrated with their friends in the area and occasionally an auntie or uncle, since most of their extended family still lived in Bangladesh. But Christmas Eve was just her and her parents, a more intimate dinner.

Cam’s stomach churned like she came down with food poisoning the second she

stepped out of her car.

Truly, she'd been feeling ill ever since she'd made her exit from Notes Nightclub. Lex hadn't said yes to the blonde's proposition, but Cam didn't want to be there if she did. Cam was determined to take this step, and watching Lex walk off to fuck another girl in the bathroom would be the sort of pain that would scare her away.

And she'd been living scared long enough.

Cam tugged at the sleeves of the button-down sweater she wore, her palms breaking into a sweat. The cooler breezes of winter caressed her cheeks as she headed up the driveway toward her parents' house. Her chest sank when she caught sight of another car in the drive, the gunmetal Porsche that belonged to Mom and Dad's favorite new friend.

Of course, they hadn't given up. They were determined to marry her off to Nazir, and no matter her wincing or dismissals, her parents came on even stronger with countless arguments to sway her opinion of him. Pointing out her fast-vanishing years of marriageability, emphasizing how much money Nazir made—all the comments made her want to scrub her skin. What should've been a quiet Christmas Eve, the perfect opportunity to have the conversation with her parents, was now ruined by the betrothed she'd never agreed upon.

Cam steeled her expression to hide the irritation coursing through her veins. She cracked open the door, the scents of turkey and stuffing wafting her way. While her mother cooked Bangladeshi recipes most days of the week, on Christmas Eve she always treated the family to a Western meal. Cam had been in charge of bringing the pie, a cherry one she carried in her arm.

Not like she'd be able to stomach a bite. She was nervous to begin with, and the fact Nazir already arrived spiked her anxiety to eleven. However, Lex's words had

imprinted on her. Cam had talked to Danny a ton over the break. While her friend never asked her anything directly, she mentioned a lot about how Lex had settled down and taken the job at Inkspirations, working there full time now.

She and Lex might've each lied to themselves, but one thing they'd never done was lie to each other. She withheld news Lex needed to know out of fear, but she was done letting that hold her back.

Still, easier thought than done.

"Mom? Dad?" Cam called from the doorway. "I'm home."

Her mother bustled to the door, a huge smile on her face and her eyes alight with pure joy. Cam's stomach twisted, unable to help feeling like she'd been ambushed again.

"You're finally here," she gushed. "We've been waiting for you."

Yeah, that couldn't mean anything good. Before she could say anything, her father appeared, smile lines crinkling his warm eyes as he strode forward with his hand on Nazir's shoulder.

Even after she'd given Nazir minimal responses, refused to sleep with him, or even kiss him, she hadn't missed the hungry way he scanned over her. It didn't help that he took all her avoidance and disinterest as a sign she was some demure, meek thing. Little did he know a week ago she'd come harder than she had in months when Lex fucked her to completion. Even if she'd lost the chance with Lex Dukas, the past few weeks turned on a light in a lost room inside her that had been dark for years.

"Noyoner moni," her father started, and she knew she was in trouble. If he busted out endearments, something in this arrangement must have changed, something to make both of her parents light up like that. Something she would undoubtedly despise.

“Nazir has come to us with wonderful news today, and we can’t wait to share it with you.”

Nazir stepped forward, out of her father’s grasp, and approached her. He reached to clasp her hands in his, and Cam wanted to tug hers away. He smelled like expensive cologne that made her gag, and the way he talked was too oil slick, how he stared at her too possessive.

“I thought it would be appropriate for the holiday celebrations,” Nazir started. Her palms sweated harder, but with the way he gripped them tight she couldn’t pull away to wipe them down. “Today I asked your parents for your hand in marriage, and they accepted. You’re beautiful, Camilla, talented, and you’ll make the perfect wife.”

Oh fuck no.

She was going to vomit.

The panic descended a moment later. Her parents stared at her, genuine joy plastered on their faces, and Nazir beamed. All of them expected her to acquiesce, that they could rewrite her life without her permission. Repulsed was the only way to describe this combination of rage and illness warring inside her. Repulsed and betrayed.

She’d always been the obedient daughter. She didn’t get into trouble in high school and had ignored her own wants and needs for years, catering to the whims of her parents. It hadn’t been until her time with Lex that she’d awakened to needs of her own, to desires that made her feel at home in her own skin.

In the wake of the discovery, these people staring back at her were strangers.

“Camilla,” her mother said, casting a careful look to her. “I know this is a surprise. Aren’t you going to say anything?”

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“Yeah,” she said, pulling her hands out of Nazir’s grip. She stared past him to meet the gazes of her parents. Heat flushed through her, flames scourging every last doubt and making things clearer than they had been in years. “I was hoping to talk about this in private, but I guess I don’t have the option.”

She sucked in a deep breath and balled her hands into fists. “I can’t marry you, Nazir, because I’m in love with a woman, and I’m tired of pretending to be someone I’m not.”

Her nails bit her palms as she squeezed her fists tighter. Cam’s words dropped into the air like active missiles, leaving silence in their wake. Nazir’s brows drew together, and he cast a questioning glance to her parents, who both looked like they’d been spat out by a monsoon. The joy abandoned her mother’s eyes, and her father’s smile vanished.

Her gut clenched at the shift in their features, and the world spun, but she remained planted on the ground. The truth spilled out, and there wasn’t anything she could do now. A helpless laugh bubbled in her throat at the hysteria churning inside her, and it slipped out.

“What exactly is funny about this, Camilla?” Her father asked, his voice colder than she’d ever heard. Even when she’d done normal kid things to test their patience, he’d never spoken to her like that. “You’re embarrassing your fiancé with this ludicrous lie. Don’t you think we’d know if we’d housed a sinner all these years?”

His comment smacked her in the face, yet the tide of adrenaline kept her moving forward.

“Apparently you had no idea because I’m a lesbian, and I always have been. No amount of disappointment is going to change this,” Cam challenged. Nazir already stepped away from her as if she was poisoned, as if being gay was a disease he could catch. The disappointment reflected in his eyes, and disgust shone in her parents’ gazes. These people had raised her, loved her, and taken care of her throughout the years.

And now they looked at her like she’d committed first-degree murder.

Bile rose in her throat, and the room swayed again. She’d always known, deep down, her parents would react this way if she came out. They would never accept her like this. And the Arctic wasteland in their eyes proved every fear right.

“Get. Out,” her mother intoned, a dark fury in her voice that didn’t just hurt, it destroyed her.

Cam backed away to the door, clutching tight to the pie she’d brought. Out of all the ways she’d thought tonight would end, this was the scenario she’d feared. By some miracle, she managed to shut the door and make it to her car even though her arms and legs had already numbed. When she crashed into the driver’s seat, she lifted her phone with trembling hands.

The phone rang a few times.

“Hello?” Danny sounded on the other end.

The first sob slipped from her throat at the familiar voice. “Danny, are you around tonight?” Her voice was raspy, shaking, but she forced the words out. She didn’t know what she’d do if her friend said no.

“Tell me the time and I’m there.”

Cam's drive home had been through blurred eyes, and she'd pulled over a few times when the sobs wracked through her too hard. Once she reached her apartment, the tears had subsided, drying like a plastic film across her cheeks. Good. Maybe she wouldn't be an absolute wreck when Danny came over. The guilt throbbed in her gut at taking Danny away from her first Christmas Eve with the Dukas family, but her best friend had sworn sideways Christmas Day was when the real celebrations took place.

She moved around her apartment like a zombie, her bones aching and her eyes pulsing with phantom tears. Her mother had ordered her out like a stranger from the home she'd grown up in. Where she'd been living the past few months. From the place she'd always believed she'd be able to return to. Fuck, she didn't even know what she would do about school. Maybe she could take out a loan to swing rent for her last couple of months to complete her degree.

A knock sounded at the door, and Cam's heart sped on instinct. She didn't think she'd ever forget how Lex dropped by her door late at night to spring that kiss on her when things had begun unfolding between them. However, she'd fucked up that relationship too, just like she'd screwed up the one with her parents. Cam wiped at her eyes as she headed for the door.

Danny stood on her porch, concern glowing in those green eyes. "Hey, Cam, what's going on?"

Cam opened her mouth, but fear gripped her tight by the throat. Danny didn't blink an eye at having a gay sister-in-law, and she suspected Danny already knew or at least figured something was going on between her and Lex. Yet all she could see was the aching, brittle coldness that had blasted from her parents after she delivered the news. Fuck it. She was Novocain-numbed from the pain.

“I came out to my parents tonight,” she murmured, the words she couldn’t steal back. A cool calm descended over her in the wake of all the tears, courtesy of the numbness that followed the adrenaline crash. “They called me a sinner and then told me to get out.”

Danny closed the space between them and threw her arms around her. “Oh, honey,” she said, a hoarse scrape to her words. “I am so, so sorry.” When Danny squeezed her tight, some of the warmth managed to penetrate through the chill devouring insides.

Heat welled in Cam’s eyes again, and she sank against her best friend. She buried her face in Danny’s shoulder, gripping her back so tight she might leave marks. “They accepted a marriage proposal from that rich douchebag without even asking me,” Cam mumbled, her shoulders beginning to shake as the tears streamed down her cheeks anew. “I know they were worried about me, that they wanted to be happy, but I couldn’t marry him. I couldn’t marry aguy. I wanted to tell them for a while now, but it slipped out.”

Danny stroked her hair, and Cam cried even harder, unable to hold back this pain tonight.

“That’s fucked up,” Danny said, keeping an arm around her shoulder as she began to walk them both toward her kitchen. “Let’s get some tea made, and we’ll talk. But for what it’s worth? I think you were really brave today, Cam. And you’re my best friend no matter what way you swing.”

Cam’s throat squeezed tight. That acceptance was what she’d craved from her parents, what she’d hoped for in a secret part of her even though the cynic knew they never would. She leaned against her kitchen counter, the tears slithering down her cheeks. Danny bustled about to set her electric kettle on, grab them mugs, and place the bags of earl grey lavender they both loved in them.

“You already know, don’t you,” Cam said, “about me and Lex?”

Danny nodded before she let out a reluctant sigh. “And I love you both, whether you end up together or not. Lex was a tough nut to crack, but ever since you left, she looked so damn miserable that me and her brothers pretty much corralled her into talking. Like, drinking herself into oblivion and turning down hookups in a very un-Lex-like fashion.”

“We both avoided talking about our situation while we were together, and when our six month arrangement ended, I was so scared to tell the Anti-Commitment Queen I wanted something more that I never told her about going back to school,” Cam muttered, scrubbing her face with her hands.

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Danny plucked the steaming kettle up and poured the water into the mugs before passing one over to Cam. She picked it up, the scorching heat of the porcelain about all she could feel right now.

Danny blew across the surface of hers, leaving it on the counter. “She’s not faultless here. Adrian’s told me she had a history of falling for the wrong girls, ones who used her for some kicks until they all left. Until she pretty much walled everyone off, even most of her family. At least the Dukases know her well enough to claw their way back in.”

No wonder Lex pushed her away. Cam never told her what had changed. Hell, if she hadn’t gone through this situation with her parents tonight, she didn’t know how long she might’ve clung to the masquerade. And leading her on wasn’t fair to either of them.

“Do you think it’s too late for us?” Cam asked, her voice skating a whisper.

Danny’s eyes softened with sympathy. She clutched the mug as she took the first sip from the steaming liquid. “I think only you and Lex can figure that one out. But I’m rooting for you.”

Cam leaned in against her best friend, and Danny snuck an arm around her shoulder. The Chernobyl levels of fallout from tonight would radiate through the next few weeks, months, years, but right now, these were the people she would rely on. From the day she’d ended up in Charleston, she was meant to make this place her home. The support from Danny in her worst hour made the promise resonate deeper.

Chapter Twenty-One

Dukas Christmas dinners were something of legend, where not only the entire family gathered, but many of their extended relatives as well. Aunts, uncles, and cousins all crowded in Lex's folks' place who welcomed these mass takeovers with a zeal that made her wonder if her parents were insane. With the way each of them had turned out, the crazy thing was probably genetic.

Still, after the tumult of the past few weeks—hell, the past few months—she didn't feel like dealing with her forty-some family members crammed inside the house. Cam had been silent ever since the club—no texts, no calls, and no random run-ins. Lex should've been relieved. And yet, she hated the way they'd left things between them. Lex couldn't bear to think how much she must've hurt Cam that night.

There didn't seem to be any way this would pan out without one of them ending up with permanent scars.

Danny had been giving her lingering glances all evening, and since her sister-in-law wasn't interested in switching siblings, it had to be about their mutual acquaintance. Maybe Cam had come clean with Danny about the situation. More of a step than Lex could hope for, if she were being honest. All she'd needed was some action, anything, to disprove all the decisions Cam had made, some sign Cam wouldn't string her along for the scorching sex until she hopped lanes to the easier route.

Either way, she'd stuffed herself to oblivion with Mom's moussaka and baked fish and had drunk enough wine to float herself for the night. The hazy numbness had become far too familiar a friend at this point.

Lex leaned against the exterior of the house. The scents of roasted meat, spiced apple wine, and fresh baked bread lingered outside the house, filtering from inside. Multi-colored Christmas lights twinkled along the roof of her folks' place, and the windows

glowed with electric candles in each one.

Even with the chill nipping at her arms, she was glad she'd left her jacket inside. She needed some of these bracing winds to knock some sense into her. She lit her cigarette and slumped to the ground, placing her dwindling wine glass beside her. It would need at least a few more fill-ups from the family wine cabinet for her to make it through tonight intact.

"Oh look, she's drowning herself in alcohol again," Adrian said in a loud voice as he stepped out the front door. He'd dressed up classy like usual in his slate button-down shirt and charcoal slacks, every inch the successful doctor. Meanwhile, even on Christmas, Lex wore her Doc Martens, a pair of fleece-lined leggings, and a slouchy long shirt that came to mid-thigh. She'd thrown on a little extra eyeliner for effect.

"Fuck off, we're all drinking. It's Christmas, asshole," Lex shot back, lifting her middle finger.

Matty slipped out after him and lit a cigarette, the embers glowing against the night sky. Her little brother had also ignored the "dress nicely" memo in his white shirt, biker vest, and ripped up jeans. "You've made it a champion sport lately, sis. Mitch and I have both agreed to put you at a three-drink maximum at the Gin Mill."

"There are plenty of other bars in Charleston," Lex responded, more than a little irritated these fuckers talked about her behind her back. "At least I'm not getting into fights and ending up in jail again. Take the progress and shove your judgements."

"What phenomenal options you leave us with," Adrian drawled, plopping beside her. He had a knowing look in his eyes that made her want to punch him in the face. Matty continued to lean against the wall on the other side of her, taking a drag from the cigarette to puff the smoke in the air.

Lex gasped and clutched her chest. “Adrian, what ever will you do, dirtying those posh pants to muck down here with the peasants.”

“Ha, funny. Stop playing the distraction game, Lex. You’re not as good at it as you think you are. You know Danny tells me everything, right?” Adrian continued, as if he didn’t notice the daggers she shot at him. “So, I know about her.” He didn’t say Cam’s name, and for that she was grateful. She didn’t think she could bear hearing it aloud right now.

“Hey, it’s just your fuck-up sister failing to turn a straight girl, yet again,” Lex rasped, her throat raw. She sucked in a deep inhale and blew the smoke out with enough force to take down a building.

Adrian nudged her in the leg. “The others weren’t your fault, Alexis. No matter how much you want to blame yourself. Back in high school, you had a bad run of shitty people who used and abused your trust, which you’ve always been a stingy bastard with.” He delivered it in the big brother tone that brooked no room for arguments, even though she’d spent her entire life arguing him. “And before you protest, remember you’re talking to the guy who wasted way too long with a manipulative bitch who was in our relationship for the prestige.”

Ugh, this was why she hated her older brother. Half of the time he made far too much sense. And he didn’t arrive with doe eyes and dulcet words like Cal either. If Cal had come out here for this care and share, she would’ve punched him in the face. The stars twinkled like crystals in the velvet sky above them, and Lex stared up, letting out a low stream of smoke as if it might stand a chance at reaching them.

And Matty stood there in silence smoking his cig and pretending like he wasn’t listening to the conversation. Her little brother acted so much like her it wasn’t fair to him because he’d have a lion’s share of heartbreak in his future. Volatile powder kegs like them pushed away every good chance that wandered their way or found some

avenue to fuck things up.

When it came to Cam, she knew she should've spoken up sooner. Lex should've told her how she felt, that with her, the commitment didn't seem so terrifying. Yet she'd let her own fears speed down the freeway, and after the way things shattered between them, she didn't have enough faith to believe again.

"Whatever. She's determined to stay in the closet. Even nabbed herself an arranged marriage, courtesy of her folks," she spat out, ashing her cigarette on the grass. "So sticking around is a recipe for heartbreak."

"Maybe she needs to know if she comes out, she won't lose everything," Matty said, his voice distant in a way they didn't dare probe. As nosy as her family was, they all knew how volatile Matty got when people questioned his sexuality, even though they'd known he was gay for years. "Sounds a lot to me if her folks are so locked in certain ways and beliefs they're trying to arrange a marriage for her, they wouldn't have the best reaction to any announcements that she's a lesbian now."

Lex swallowed, her throat tightening. Fuck Matty for making sense too. She'd seen the hesitation in Cam's eyes, the darkened tone when she'd referred to not everyone having the same reception to coming out. Lex had been lucky, she knew that. Yet she had been letting her own fears and damage numb her tongue, too afraid of being wrecked again and not being able to glue her pieces together any longer.

She at least owed Cam one final talk. Ever since the woman had been home for winter break, she had shown a persistence in pursuing her that she never did during their six-month agreement when everything had been in secret. If Cam could try to push past her own shit, Lex could do the same.

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She tapped the end of her cigarette, watching the ash drift to the ground like snowflakes. “The lot of you are nosy motherfuckers, you know that? I was just sitting out here getting drunk on Mom’s cheap syrah and there you had to go talking sense into me.”

“We all know how feelings repulse you, dear sister,” Adrian responded, amusement in his tone. “But we’re all in this together. We might be way too overinvolved in each other’s lives, but the Dukas family sticks together, through whatever life throws at us.”

“Yeah, yeah, save it for a speech at the next family wedding, bro. You’re already working overtime saving lives—you don’t need to save all of us too.” Lex lobbed a punch in his arm.

“You’re going to hate me, but I’m turning your own words around on you,” Adrian warned. “I remember a wise woman telling me not so long ago, ‘I’d fight a whole army, even fight my own demons, to hold tight to someone who inspired that sort of passion.’”

“She sounds like an idiot,” Lex responded. Adrian’s words settled in her gut a lot like resolve. “Next time tell her to shut the hell up and mind her own business.”

“Like that’s something this family’s capable of doing,” Matty said with a snort. “I’m shocked no one’s set up an intervention for Nellie. Greg missing out on Adrian and Danny’s wedding was the last straw.”

Nellie had been having problems ever since she and Greg got married. After a three-

month honeymoon phase post-wedding, he'd spent the ensuing two years either working longer hours or being such an intolerable shit most of the family couldn't stand being around him. Lex already had had many a shouting match with the homophobic asshole, and he never failed to set Matty off.

"Trust me, a Nellie intervention is in the works. She's been getting more miserable with every passing month they're still together," Adrian reassured them. "Mom, Cal, and I have been talking."

Lex placed a finger in her mouth and made a gagging noise. "Ew, the Feelings Trio. Remind me to stay home on that family dinner." She glanced over to her brothers, Matty still staring into the distance while smoking his cig. Adrian's eyes crinkled around the edges as he dared a smile. Warmth pulsed in her chest despite the empty threats to herself that it would stay hollow forever.

She lifted the glass of wine and tipped the remaining contents into the grass. "There, assholes, that was my last drink of the night. Happy now?"

"Yeah," Matty shot back. "That means there might be some left for the rest of us now."

Lex snorted. "Let's be real, Uncle Noel's the problem child in there. Hide your beer, hide your whisky, because he'll be guzzling all of it down."

"I think he's already induced himself into an eggnog coma," Adrian muttered, pinching the bridge of his nose. "That's up to Carrie and Brian to deal with, thank fuck. I'm just here to make sure he doesn't need to be rushed off to the ER."

"Good thing you could make it tonight," Lex said, elbowing him in the side. When her brother began working at the hospital, holidays were a dice roll based on his schedule, yet as the ever dutiful eldest, he always found a way to make it up to

everyone. “What would we do without Saint Adrian to lecture all of his wayward siblings? Watch out Matty, he’s going to reprimand you for spending so much time with your gang of motorcycle heathens.”

Matty rolled his eyes even though a wicked smirk lit his lips. “Like you’re one to talk, ex-con who full-times at a tattoo shop. We were pretty much born the problem children.”

“Shoo, Problem Child Number Two. You too, Saint Adrian. Let a girl have a little alone time out here,” she said, waving at them. “I wanted to savor a cigarette in peace and quiet before you lot took it upon yourselves to stomp out here and interrupt me.”

Adrian pushed up from his squat with a grunt and then brushed off his knees. “Come back in soon, though. You know I’m going to need help breaking up at least one fight.”

“Joy,” Lex drawled.

“Yeah, save me from throwing the first punch at Greg.” Matty flicked his cigarette into the grass, earning a dirty look from his older brother. Adrian headed inside first, and Matty swung down to pick up his discarded cigarette before he followed.

Lex lit another one. She hadn’t been lying. After the talk they had, somehow the bowlines in her mind untangled. As much as she hated her too-involved family sometimes, she loved those stubborn fuckers with all her heart. She stared out over the rolling lawn of her parent’s front yard and all the cars cluttered along the road and parked on the grass. From inside, she could hear the bark of laughter, the steady buzz of conversation.

For years, she’d felt adrift, like she needed to hop on her motorcycle and drive out of town. The tethers of her family had wrapped around her arms like constraints, at least

until she'd landed in jail after the one rally. She still didn't regret going to the protest—no way could she stay silent while queer rights were under threat, but Adrian had commented that maybe she hadn't needed to throw punches. When she'd come out, even from the short stint, her perspective flipped. This place had made her want to run for years, but now she found herself wanting to stay.

She wanted the stupid family dinners. She wanted the stable job at Inkspirations doing work she loved with the family the folks at the shop had become. And her time with Cam made her realize more than ever that she was done with the mindless flings, done with all the nameless faces she fucked. She wanted something real, something lasting.

Lex lifted up her phone and scrolled to Cam's number. Before she could get too much in her own head about it, she began to type away.

I owe you a real talk at least. So, name the time and place, and I'm there.

Merry Christmas,

Lex

She sat there for a couple of minutes looking at the stars and letting smoke drift from her lips up to the aethers, as if she cast wishes to the wide expanse above her. Her phone buzzed with a return text. She scrambled to pick it up.

Meet me at the Waterfront Park, same spot as before on the 28th. Three PM. I miss you.

Merry Christmas,

Cam

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Lex tried to stifle the flutter in her chest at the words. A few fights hadn't been enough to extinguish the way she felt about Cam, but if they couldn't come to a resolution, she'd have to find a way forward without her.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Cam pulled up to the parking spot at the Waterfront Park, saturated with memories of her first meet-up with Lex. She'd been so confused as to why the woman who seemed only interested in strings-free sex wanted to go on a simple date where they didn't even touch each other. However, the more she'd gotten to know her, the more her actions made sense. Feelings made Lex prickly at best, yet the connection between them had always been deeper than surface.

Lex hadn't just spent six months fucking her into oblivion. Lex had spent six months making her feel cherished and protected. Making her feel comfortable in her own body. No wonder Cam had tumbled headfirst for the stubborn, overly sensitive, irritating-as-sin woman.

She glanced to her phone again. Next week she'd be going back to school, and she was in the process of scheduling a place to stay. One of her classmates ended up being a sweetheart and offered to lease her a room for the duration of the semester. Which was good, because her parents still weren't speaking to her. The ache in her chest over that still hadn't abated. She wasn't sure if it ever would.

Spending Christmas by herself had been one of her lowest nights. Danny offered her a spot at the Dukas celebrations, but she wasn't prepared to handle dropping the news to Lex yet. They had too much to figure out for themselves without getting Lex's

massive and nosy family involved. So instead, she'd popped on Firefly, twisted open a bottle of lemon vodka, and dragged out her acrylics.

Painting had been the therapy she needed, pouring out the rage and the pain onto a stretched canvas. The strokes released everything she'd pent up for so long. Magnolia trees bloomed across the page, a celebration of life and death in one gasp—so reminiscent of that kiss with Lex in the cemetery, the one that had awakened her body and soul.

By the time she'd gotten the text from Lex that night, an idea sparked in her brain.

So, here she waited, tapping on her steering wheel like she had first date jitters. So much so she'd shown up a half an hour early. She'd reapplied her crimson lipstick at least six times at this point. Cam tugged at the gauzy wrap she'd placed around a black and yellow striped dress that clung to her curves up top and flared out into a wide skirt. Cam couldn't help herself. She hadn't seen Lex in almost a week, and if this didn't crash and burn like the talk with her parents, she wanted to look her best.

A pounding came from her window, snapping her to attention.

Lex stood on the other side, like she had the first day they met up, raring and ready to go. She gave her a tentative smile, her eyes crinkling with the motion as she stepped back, and it looked a little bit like hope.

Cam stepped out of the car, all too aware of the way Lex scanned her down, soaking in her details like always. Lex had run product through her dark strands, and the motorcycle jacket she wore highlighted her slim figure. With the black tank top and ripped up jeans, she looked every part the tattooed rebel Cam had first fallen for.

"Hey there, gorgeous," Lex said, her voice coming out in a low purr she'd missed so much.

Her chest twisted sharp at the greeting Lex had given so often when they'd been together. Their six months might've been in secret, but they'd felt more like a relationship than any she'd been in before.

After the way her foundation crumbled last week, Cam thanked everything holy Lex wasn't delivering the same reticence she had when she'd returned to town. Even though hesitation lingered in Lex's glances and the light edge to her words showed she tried to fight through the emotion too, Lex did her damndest to treat her like she had before.

If Cam had arrived to another freeze-out, she didn't think she could bear it. Not after the way her parents' rejection had destroyed her. Nazir, on the other hand, had sent her an email apologizing for his reaction that night—he'd been upset because he thought the interest was mutual. He hadn't known this was entirely her parents' making.

"Why don't we walk and talk," Lex said, offering her hand.

Cam's heart ached as her palm pressed against Lex's, the touch something she'd needed more than ever after Christmas Eve. Lex took the lead like always, striding toward the path that wound beneath the Ravenel Bridge. The sky was the sort of blue it belonged in an oil painting, and the sun shone bright even with the cooler temps of winter. The trees swayed in the breezes, and the pale strip of pavement almost glowed with the intensity of midday.

Tension smeared between them as they both stole glances, but neither of them spoke. In essence, their silence summed up every issue they had up until now, where they'd both been too terrified to risk their hearts. Lex swung their arms while they walked, the playful motion spurring Cam to talk.

"So, you were right," Cam said, "At least, about me needing to take action. I've spent

my whole life trying to make my parents proud, never getting in trouble and always, always compromising my own wants and needs to keep them happy. It wasn't until we began to spend time together that I realized how much they'd stifled."

Lex scratched the back of her head, looking at the ground as they continued to amble forward. "I was a bit of an ass on that front. My brother may have smacked some sense into me. I never stated my intentions, and you don't have the big network of friends and family to fall back on like I do."

Cam squeezed Lex's hand tight at the admission. It had taken them this long to spill out their truths, but they all unraveled so fast it was mystifying how tangled up they'd been for so long.

"Just to clarify, I didn't run off to Savannah to ditch you, and I didn't start dating a guy. I wanted to go back to school for a while now, but you were always so dodgy about commitment that I didn't want to scare you off with talk of long-distance." Cam glanced to her, and their eyes met, the intensity in her hazel gaze making her breath snag. She could paint portraits of Alexis Dukas for the next century and still never capture the enigmatic, wild force on paper.

"Well I'm a fucking idiot for assuming. What...about the arranged marriage thing?" Lex asked, her voice hesitant, as if she was a glass vase ready to hit the concrete.

Cam sucked in a breath, drawing in the salt breeze and the dark spice of cloves that always lingered around Lex. "Well my parents set that up without my consent, which exploded magnificently on Christmas Eve. They accepted his proposal for me, and I came out."

"What the everloving fuck is wrong with them?" Lex spat, her gaze flashing.

"It's part of how they grew up," she admitted, still trying to process, even amid all the

hurt. “Currently, I’ve got to figure out a new living situation for the next semester because they kicked me out and haven’t talked to me since,” Cam said, trying to remain dry and sardonic even as her voice quavered.

Lex stopped in the middle of their walk to face her. She threw her arms around her in a crushing embrace Cam couldn’t help but sag into. The strength emanating from Lex—it was everything she’d been searching for. The fresh pavement she needed to land on. She clutched the front of Lex’s shirt, and her shoulders shook even though the tears didn’t come. She’d cried for too many days over the loss.

“I don’t care if I break my parole,” Lex growled into her shoulder. “If you need me to go over there and slice their tires, or break into their house to get your stuff, I’ll do whatever you need.”

Matty Dukas had been so right. Cam nuzzled into Lex’s chest, clinging like her life depended on it. She’d missed this sturdiness, this warmth, this ferocity with her every breath. Even with the family and stability she’d lost over the past week, she couldn’t deny her path felt clearer than ever. In a semester, she’d graduate with the degree she had never been able to finish, and she knew who she was now. She had Lex to thank for the latter.

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“Nah, not necessary,” she murmured. “I set up a time next week to pick up my stuff. They broke radio silence for that. I think they’re still in shock to be honest.” She wished she could keep the twist of bitters out of her voice, but hell, the situation still hurt. Cam was far from over the fallout from this.

“This is my fault,” Lex said, pulling away to look her in the eyes. She cupped her face, the contact keeping Cam grounded. “If I had known the situation you were dealing with...that’s not an easy leap to make.”

“Hey, in the end I made the choice,” Cam said, wrapping her hands around Lex’s. “I just needed the push to get there. I don’t regret it.” Not like the way she regretted how she and Lex had splintered apart.

Lex led them over to the bright white pergola where dark hickory benches stretched out beneath the hatched overhangs. She hadn’t let go of Cam once, gripping her hand tight as they walked over. Cam’s heart lurched. She had told Lex everything she’d held back, by some miracle. The rest lay in her court.

Cam prayed Lex didn’t break her heart a second time.

Lex sat and patted the bench beside her. Cam couldn’t help but slide into the spot. As much as she wanted to lean in against Lex, the woman turned to face her, reaching out to offer her hand again. Cam grabbed the lifeline offered. She sailed on sheer adrenaline at this point, tiptoeing over glass shards and hoping she didn’t get shredded to pieces.

“Hell, Cam, I can’t imagine what you’ve been going through. I wish I had been there

for you instead of drinking myself to a stupor,” she murmured, staring at the ground. “I’ve spent enough time being a fucking coward about this though. Camilla Muhuri, from the day I first met you here and didn’t try to get in your pants right away, I knew something was different. Romantic, right?” She flashed a smile that was pure Lex, all cocky disarray.

“I wanted to know every last thing about you—I still do. You’re the sort of fascinating someone could spend a lifetime trying to discover, and that’s what I realized I wanted to do. Way before we ever hit six months, I had fallen deep for you. I talked big on hating commitment, but I’d been hurt to the point I’d pretty much given up. Easier to fuck around than risk my heart. Except no matter what thick walls I hid behind, mere moments with you brought them crashing down.”

Cam swallowed hard, heat pricking her eyes. She’d barely dared to hope, even though she wanted Lex more than she could ever say. She gripped Lex’s hands even tighter, feeling the sweat from their palms mingle. Today had been an evisceration of a different sort, the kind that left her free-floating like she belonged amidst the puffy clouds in the achingly blue sky.

“I love you, Cam,” Lex said, meeting her gaze with a steadiness that didn’t have her just falling—she plummeted. She’d dreamed of hearing those words in a secret part of her soul she’d locked away, trying to keep some part of herself safe. “When you left, I had no interest in other women, because I’d already found the perfect one. I also had way too much interest in drinking myself into a stupor, which I’d be happy to never repeat. I meant to tell you on the night of Danny and Adrian’s wedding, but maybe we weren’t there yet. Maybe we both still had some growing to do.”

“I love you too, Lex,” Cam murmured, her eyes heating up with tears. The joy that welled up inside her was the extreme opposite of the depths she’d sank to the week before. Today, she soared. Lex’s thumbs grazed at her cheeks, wiping away the few tears that slipped past. The slant of her smile held all the cockiness she loved about

the woman, the way she took the lead without blinking. Cam tried on a wry smile and sucked in a breath to steady her voice. “That mean you’re asking me to be your girlfriend?”

“Oh fuck yeah, babe,” Lex purred, almost climbing on top of her as she prowled forward. “That means PDA all over the place. We’re going to be the obnoxious couple that makes out in front of everyone. Even more annoying than Adrian and Danny.”

“No one will be able to tolerate us,” Cam said, slipping out her phone to fire off a text.

Lex’s brows furrowed. “I’m here trying to climb all over you and you’re whipping out your phone to text?”

“All part of the plan,” Cam reassured her, reaching up to place her palm on Lex’s cheek. “Trust me on this one.”

Before Lex could argue, Cam leaned in and pressed her lips to hers. She’d been dying to taste her ever since they’d crashed together when she came home. She savored the sweetness of her mouth, the way Lex wrapped her hand around her nape in a possessive grip that she loved. Around this woman, she felt safe and she felt free.

Cam hadn’t realized what she’d been missing until a stubborn as hell firebrand approached her on the back deck with a proposition she couldn’t resist. With Lex it had always been deeper than mind-melting sex. Lex was the loud she’d never be, the chaos opposite to her calm, and the fight to her peace. All the opposites rubbed off a little, teaching her how to stand up for herself and take risks.

When she was around Alexis Dukas, Cam wanted to freefall off the Church Flats Bluff, dive into the deepest part of the Atlantic, and speed along Savannah Highway

at a hundred miles an hour.

This woman made her want to paint again.

Lex growled as she deepened the kiss, straddling her thighs. Cam knew she needed to put a stop to the very public makeout session, but after everything they'd been through, she couldn't pull away if she wanted to.

With Lex now fisting her hair to pull her head back, Cam surrendered to the way she devoured her, with the desperation from before but also the tenderness she missed. Lex bit her lower lip, pulling it between her teeth and then sucked at Cam's neck. She peppered her cheeks, her forehead, her collarbone with so many light kisses she might ignite. Already, her core throbbed in anticipation of what was to come.

If they were lucky, a whole lifetime of this passion.

"Ew, guys, get a room," Danny's familiar voice came from closer to the parking lot.

Lex pulled back at once, popping her head up to see who had arrived. Danny and Adrian approached down the walkway carrying a few coolers with them. Her brows drew together as she stared at Cam.

A smile widened on Cam's face. "They're not the only ones who'll be arriving. Surprise."

Chapter Twenty-Three

Lex couldn't stop grinning like an idiot.

She couldn't have hoped for any of this—Cam as her girlfriend, the fact she'd gotten her feelings out and hadn't been struck by lightning, or this brilliant surprise Cam

concocted. Placing her family on standby for a picnic was a stroke of brilliance. After months of hiding the way she felt about her, she wanted to shout it from the rooftops, tell strangers on the street, and even bring her crazy family into the mix.

Adrian and Danny walked closer, their supplies in tow. Danny offered a wave to them while Adrian did the head bob.

“I now know who you were texting, but what if this hadn’t gone well?” Lex asked, unable to hide her incredulousness. She ran her fingers through Cam’s hair and wrapped her other arm around her waist. Cam leaned into her like she belonged there. She couldn’t stop touching her—hell, she hadn’t been able to from the moment they arrived in this park.

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Cam tugged at the wrap around her shoulders as she stared hard at the ground. “Then your family would’ve been here anyway to make sure you were okay, and I would’ve made a timely exit.”

Lex squeezed her tighter. “None of that loner shit. We’re in this together now. Anything that crops up? You don’t just have me, you’ve got the whole Dukas family behind you.” Her chest burned with the feelings for this beautiful woman she’d spent far too long dodging around.

Cam’s eyes glistened, and she swiped at the corners before reaching to grab Lex’s hand. Together, they walked in the direction of the spot on the grass where Danny and Adrian had begun rolling out a plaid blanket for their mid-winter picnic. The bright sun and a high in the sixties made this the perfect day to spend outside with a few extra layers thrown on. Lex didn’t let go of Cam’s hand, even when they reached the blanket. For once, she didn’t care if everyone saw what a giant sap she was.

“Word on the street is that the infamous ladykiller is retired,” Adrian called, not bothering to hide his amused smirk.

“I’m not Jack the Ripper, fuckwad,” Lex shouted as they approached.

Danny hopped up and raced over to throw her arms around them both. “I’m so glad you guys got your heads out of your asses long enough to have a real conversation.” Danny’s voice muffled with the way she buried her head against Lex’s shoulder.

“See this abuse?” Lex said to Cam, even as she hugged her sister-in-law tight. “This is what you have to look forward to.”

Danny pulled back to wave her middle finger in her direction.

“This pales in comparison to half of the shit that spills from your mouth on a daily basis,” Cam muttered even as her eyes twinkled.

“Thank God you found someone who’s not afraid to dish your own snark back,” Adrian said, pulling out the Tupperware offruit salad and then the wrapped sandwiches they’d brought in cooler packs.

The slam of car doors sounded from the parking lot as Cal and Nellie got out of his beat-up Dodge Neon and headed up the pathway toward them. Her brother’s hair was slicked back, and he wore a faded band tee and a clean pair of jeans. Nellie had either rolled out of the house prepared or touched up in the car. Her hair cascaded down her back in perfect waves, and the gray leggings and burgundy tunic she wore highlighted her lighter features.

A second later, Mom and Dad’s Buick flashed into view. Her parents climbed out of the car and began to amble down the walkway. Cam’s gaze followed hers, landing on Lex’s parents. She let go of her hand, stepping a pace away, like they’d vaulted back in time and this still had to be kept secret. Like their relationship was something shameful.

Rage scorched her chest. She wished she’d understood the full extent earlier.

Lex grabbed her hand again. “Come on,” she said, offering a blinder of a smile. Cam’s lips hesitated, but she managed a small grin of her own. Lex began leading them down the pathway to meet Mom and Dad midway.

“Danny texted to tell me we’d get to meet your girlfriend,” Cal said, stopping in front of them. His warm brown eyes danced with the same amusement the rest of her siblings had been entertaining. “There was no way I’d miss this.”

Nellie stomped the ground, her arms crossed in front of her. “I was with you guys for months.” Her eyebrows lifted in bemusement as she glanced between them both. “How did I miss all the signs?”

“We were keeping things quiet,” Cam responded, a gentleness in her tone Lex adored. God, she wanted to ditch the picnic and go make out with her girlfriend some more.

“Though, keeping you quiet was tough when we were trying on bridesmaid dresses.” Lex bared her teeth in a feral grin.

“Oh, gross,” Nellie groaned. “I so didn’t need to know that.”

A furious blush spread on Cam’s cheeks, and she thwacked Lex in the side.

Lex continued moving past her siblings, dragging Cam in tow. “Scram, kiddos. I’ve got to introduce her to our parents before Mom explodes.” Lex didn’t miss the flicker of uncertainty in Cam’s eyes or the tighter press of her lips. All the more reason to hurry up and show her the warm welcome she deserved.

Mom’s grin widened when she caught sight of Cam. Her green dress with the pink flowers fluttered in the breeze, and she carried two laden bags that Lex could guarantee were filled with too much food. Dad’s eyes crinkled with warmth when Lex met his gaze, and she ducked her head. A slight wave of the jitters rocked through her now. She hadn’t realized how important it was to her that Mom and Dad liked Cam.

Lex sucked in a sharp breath, trying to summon her nerve. “Mom, Dad, I want you to meet my girlfriend, Cam,” Lex said. Cam’s eyes had grown wide with the deer-about-to-bolt look.

Mom beamed and reached her hands out to Cam who pulled hers from Lex and offered her own. “Camilla, I couldn’t be more thrilled that you’re the woman who stole our Alexis’s heart. You offered so much of your time and assistance during Adrian and Danny’s wedding and truly helped make it something special.” Mom squeezed Cam’s hands in her own, and Cam’s eyes began to water. Lex placed a hand on her shoulder, feeling the need to protect her somehow.

“You must be serious if you’re bringing her around the family.” Dad looked her in the eyes, and Lex simply nodded. Her own eyes stung at this point. Dad switched his attention to Cam. “You do know you’re the first girl Alexis has ever showed up with, right?”

Cam’s brows drew together as her head tilted in her direction. “That can’t be right. You’ve had other girlfriends before, right?”

“Have you?” Lex shot back before realizing she pulled her usual move again. Cam stomped on her boot for that one. She stared up at the sky, scratching the back of her neck. “Didn’t have anyone I was serious enough about to bring around the family. You see what an inquisition it is around here.”

Cam’s eyes gleamed with the tenderness Lex had fallen for from the first glimpse she’d gotten. She could feel Cam’s shoulders tremble under her palm in the wake of Thaisa and Nikos Dukas’s warm welcome. Pride thrummed in her chest. Pride at how her family rallied together to make her girlfriend feel like she had somewhere to belong after the devastating way Cam’s family had cut her out. Pride for Cam at how brave she’d been to stand up to her parents when they’d set up an arranged marriage.

She’d almost let her slip away. She’d almost let her fears run the show, like always. No more. Cam was hers, and if she had it her way, she’d never be alone again.

“Welcome to the family, Camilla,” Mom said, a dulcet tone in her voice, like the first

sip of sweet tea on a summer day.

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Matty strolled down the walkway, hands in the pockets of his leather jacket. His thick, dark hair was windswept as if he'd just gotten off his bike. Her brother's fresh labret piercing glinted under the sun, and his eyes glowed with interest the moment he caught sight of Lex and Cam.

"We're going to help your brother and sister-in-law set out the food," Mom said, lifting the bag of something that smelled like spiced deliciousness as she and Dad continued on over to the picnic blankets that had been spread onto the grassy section.

"Lesbians all over are going to cry, sis. Don't tell me you're off the market." Matty called over.

Lord, her family. "Let them cry," Lex said, wrapping her arm around Cam again. Fuck, she couldn't get enough of this woman. "I'm not interested in anyone else."

Matty let out a groan as he reached them. "Don't tell me you've turned into a sap too."

"Not with you lot," Lex shot back, lifting her middle finger in greeting. Matty grinned, the fierce sort that made his razor-blade cheekbones somehow sharper.

"Thanks," Cam said, giving Matty a knowing glance. He tipped his fingers in a salute before walking a little faster to join the rest of them.

"What was that about?" Lex asked, unable to help her curiosity.

Cam looked up at her, affection in those dark eyes. "Matty was the reason I came

home for winter break in the first place,” she admitted. “He sent me an email that gave me the push I needed to try a little bravery on for size.”

“Hunh. Better buy the little fucker a fruit basket then. He and Adrian were the ones who smacked some sense into me at Christmas.” Lex rifled her fingers through her hair, shaking her head at the realization Matty had been playing matchmaker the entire time. Not like he’d admit it, but she owed him more than she could ever repay.

Lex couldn’t help but soak in the sight of the gorgeous woman in front of her, barely daring to believe her luck. Cam’s raven strands trailed behind her with the breeze, and her crimson lips looked so kissable. She was all soft curves and gentle eyes betraying a tenderness she’d guarded before.

She leaned down and brushed her lips against Cam’s.

“What was that for?” Cam asked, her brow wrinkling.

Lex shook her head. “Nothing, I just love you.”

She slipped her hand in Cam’s again and soaked in the sight of her family by the stretch of green, the Ravenel bridge looming in the background, and the bright sunlight painting the whole park in technicolor hues. Matty had already picked a fight with Adrian, and when Cal stepped in, he added fuel to Matty’s fire. Mom and Dad bustled about getting plates ready, while Nellie and Danny helped them, everyone else happy to not get involved.

Lex tightened her grip on Cam’s, and they took their first steps forward, together.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Five months later...

“What kind of weirdoes take their dogs on a walk through the cemetery?” Cam asked, holding tight to the leashes as Cerberus, Tartarus, and Charon tugged with all their small, puppy might. The three rottweilers were dopey, fumbling little guys they’d gotten suckered into. Or, more accurately, Lex found out Cerberus didn’t want to be separated from his brothers and couldn’t resist taking the others too.

Magnolia Cemetery sprawled around them, birds chirping and the first magnolias blooming for the spring on the sloping trees covered in their Spanish moss.

Lex reached over and grabbed the leashes from her, a duty she was happy to pass over. “Spooky bitches like us, that’s who.”

Not like either of them knew how they would fit three full-sized dogs into Lex’s townhouse. Cam had gotten out of her lease once they’d officially started dating, and the final semester of school had breezed by. As fast as she dove back in, she would get her degree in mere weeks, the classes already concluded. Her throat tightened. She wouldn’t attend the ceremonies. Standing up there and knowing her parents wouldn’t be in the audience was too painful to bear. After she’d gotten her belongings back from them, communications had been minimal and perfunctory at best.

She’d be lying if she said she didn’t miss her mother and father. No matter what had shattered between them, they had read her bedtime stories and showered her with hugs, Mom taught her how to cook Shukto and Aloo Posto, and in college when she had the run-in with her professor, they’d supported her, given her a place to retreat to. However, when she started down this new path with Lex, a part of her had always feared they wouldn’t be able to follow, even though she hoped someday that might change.

Cam glanced to the surrounding gravestones, tall, limestone structures, some with pointed spires, others graced by angel statues. The sadness when she thought about her parents was something she tried her best to put to rest, but it might always be a

brush of bittersweet. At least they hadn't ended contact entirely—that, she could cling to.

“We've only been here for a couple of minutes,” Lex said. “Don't tell me you've already gotten possessed and I've got to find a priest to exorcise.”

Cam rolled her eyes even though the comment brought a smile to her lips. Based on the look Lex passed her, she caught the drift of Cam's brooding and tried to pull her out of it. Tartarus bounded over to try to loop around her ankles, yipping in excitement. “Though really, this is your ‘I want to escape’ place, so is there something we need to talk about?”

“Yeah,” Lex said, ducking her head as she avoided her eyes. “Nothing bad, I promise. Just the stupid feelings shit I hate. Let's get to the water first so these little guys can get themselves a drink.”

Cam snorted. For as much swagger as Lex broadcasted, underneath the defenses lay one of the most sensitive people she'd ever met. Something that had been as apparent as ever when Lex had gotten suckered into three dogs. Three.

Not like she was much better. When it came to Lex, she couldn't help herself—she'd do anything to see the sweetness in her eyes and the hesitant smile reserved for her alone. And besides, Lex fucked like a beast. Cam thought their first six months together had been wild, but given the time and freedom they had now, Lex only seemed to get more creative. And her possessive streak in bed made her one hell of a lover.

“Let me help.” She reached out and grabbed Cerberus's leash, sharing the load with Lex who passed her a grateful glance. The side shave she now rocked made her even hotter, and in a black wifebeater, threadbare jeans, and those Docs she never ditched, Lex was still the only one she fantasized about. Cerberus pranced around, slobbering

all over the Duquesne family gravestones and then trampling over the Mills.

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“Normal couples take their dogs to the dog park,” Cam mentioned, a grin on her lips.

“Normal couples are boring as shit,” Lex shot back, heading toward the path that led to the water where weeping willows bowed, their long branches and leaves almost brushing the surface. “Thank fuck we’re nothing like that.”

Cam shook her head, knowing the response had been coming. They neared the lake, and each step closer had Lex brimming like she did any time a serious talk was coming. As much as Lex reassured her it wasn’t anything bad, she couldn’t help but teeter into a vat of worries that Lex had changed her mind, that she had gotten bored with their life together, that she’d somehow fallen out of love.

Lex’s fingers threaded through hers as if she could sense the panic. The woman had an uncanny way of reading her that she’d never expected when they first met. Lex had appeared all cocksure arrogance and bluster, but beneath all that lay a heart as sensitive as her own.

They reached the weeping willows, and the pups scrambled forward, kicking up mud as they thrust their little faces into the water and began slurping.

“Ugh, guys, really?” Lex said, scratching the nape of her neck the way she always did when she was nervous. “So, ignoring these thirsty assholes,” she started, casting a glare at them before returning her gaze to Cam. “I realized the other day if you count our first six-month experiment, we’ve been together for almost a year.”

“I’m willing to count it,” Cam said with a wan smile. Their time together beat most of the longer, half-assed relationships she’d been in that didn’t have a fraction of the

depth.

“Right.” Lex licked her lips, staring at the ground. “Well, it’s the longest relationship I’ve ever been in. And the thing is? The longer we’re together, the more time I want with you. A year isn’t enough. Ten years isn’t enough. I want to be eighty and still the one fucking you and falling asleep at your side.”

She reached into the pocket of her jeans and pulled out a box. Cam’s throat dried as realization crashed over her.

“So yeah, I brought you to a cemetery, because I want to be with you until death do us part,” Lex said, the rough scrape of her voice sending shivers through her. She flipped open the box to reveal an engagement ring—a delicate circlet of diamonds in rose gold that surrounded an oval yellow diamond. Cam’s eyes heated at the sight of Lex standing before her, heart exposed. This alone proved the sheer amount of trust Lex had come to place in her.

“Camilla Muhuri, from the moment I met you and caught your rose perfume, I knew you were my spring. You’re every unfurled bud, every blossoming dream, and every hope I’ve kept in secret begging to be set free. Will you marry me?”

The tears slipped down her cheeks, and her shoulders trembled. She opened her mouth to respond, but a sob slipped past her lips. All she could do was nod as she reached forward to wrap her hands around Lex’s shaking ones.

“I called your parents, you know,” Lex commented, her voice watery. “But I didn’t ask for your hand. I just told them I was going to propose to their daughter whether they liked it or not.”

“You’re an asshole sometimes,” Cam said, shaking her head, even though she couldn’t help the way her smile strained so hard her cheeks hurt. The tears trailed down her cheeks, but she let them fall, droplets of unadulterated joy.

“You love this asshole,” Lex said, slipping the ring onto her finger. “Though I’m beginning to question how much, since you never gave me an answer.”

Cam shoved Lex in the side before she leaned against her. “It’s yes,” Cam said. Lex wrapped her arm around her shoulders, the possessive grip and the strength she emanated something Cam would never get tired of. “I didn’t realize I was living in a cage until some cocky woman swaggered on in promising to unlock it. You freed me back then, Lex, and for that, I’ll always be grateful. But this future with you? This is pure selfishness on my part because the moment you gave your heart to me, I knew I’d never be able to give it back.”

Lex leaned in to press her lips against hers in a kiss that descended light as gossamer, teasing at first. All too fast it deepened. Lex growled into her mouth with a hunger that reverberated through her bones, one that sparked her senses to life. Cam shifted her hips until they were flush with Lex’s, and those hands slid up and down her waist.

At least, until the dog leash slipped. “Oh fuck.” Lex pulled away to reach for the leash trailing across the grass in front of them as Cerberus scampered in the opposite direction. Cam laughed and then bit her lip as she stared at the yellow diamond sparkling on her finger. When she looked up, Lex’s knees hit the mud, and she tugged at the leash with the pup in a fight that had already turned messy.

Her heart squeezed so tight it hurt. Joy radiated from her like the first sip of coffee at sunrise, like late-night walks by the water in the middle of the summer. Like standing in the middle of a cemetery and watching the love of her life wrestle in the mud with their three hyper puppies. Back when she’d agreed to Lex’s proposition, she had been sure it was a terrible decision. She’d been wrong. Taking the risk with Lex had been her best one.