



The Master

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Description: Nate: I made a mistake, thinking that I could be with someone like her. One glimpse of a part of me she didn't like, and she ran. I'm not going to apologize for who I am. I had a life before I met her, and I'll just go back to that life now. That will be best for everyone. Ashlee: I had been a fool to trust him, to think that he was a better man than what everyone said. I didn't need to be at Manhattan Records anymore. Making a clean break will be the best thing for both of us. Nate Lexington and Ashlee Webb are trying their best to move on without each other, but neither one of them is able to forget how right they had felt together. If they're willing to try again, however, will their relationship be able to survive the worst that has yet to come?

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One

Nate

A bead of sweat rolled down my forehead and into my eye, the salt stinging as I lowered the weights I'd been lifting for the past twenty minutes. Before that, I'd been on the treadmill for twice as long. I wanted to keep going, pushing myself until I could barely stay upright.

It wasn't healthy, but I didn't give a shit about that. I liked keeping in shape, but no matter how much I wanted to pretend that the reason I'd been spending hours in my gym every night was because I was on a health kick, the truth was there in the back of my mind, a gnawing annoyance that I refused to give any additional attention.

What a load of bullshit.

As I'd done for the last week when these thoughts came into my head, I reminded myself that I hadn't done anything wrong. I'd never forced my desires on anyone. I'd never recorded a partner without their knowledge or consent. I'd never made a woman do anything she wasn't game for. I'd been protecting myself, and considering my position, it wasn't out of line for me to want that.

Besides, she had been the one snooping around, putting her nose where it didn't belong. We'd been in my house, and there wasn't anything wrong or strange about me expecting to maintain at least some modicum of privacy. The DVDs had been in a closed cabinet, and I hadn't exactly hidden what they were.

And we were back to the fact that I hadn't done anything wrong.

I cursed as another drop of sweat made it into the same eye. I grabbed for my towel and wiped my face before looking for the time. If I wanted to sleep tonight, I needed to exhaust myself the same way I'd done all week. Except tonight wasn't the same since it was Friday, and I didn't need to worry about how to avoid...her. Finally, I had an entire weekend where the chances of our paths crossing without deliberate choices were slim.

Except that wasn't necessarily a positive thing.

I didn't need to see her for my thoughts to head in that direction. Hell, the fact that I kept using pronouns instead of her name was proof of how much she'd fucked with my head.

Apparently determined to be a total masochist, I crossed to my rowing machine. Logically, I knew I'd regret this tomorrow when I was at my nephew's birthday party and could barely move, but the mind-numbing exertion was worth future physical pain.

I refused to think about what I'd say or do if anyone asked why I was at the party alone. Considering how fragile this new truce was with my family, I doubted any of the adults would risk rocking the boat, but I would've been concerned about my niece and nephew if I'd let myself think about it. Catherine and Jacob knew that things had been tense between me and the rest of the family, but they didn't know enough to understand how to avoid sensitive subjects.

Not that I was sensitive about her.

Dammit.

About Ashlee. There. I said her name. Ashlee Webb, the twenty-three-year-old redhead with turquoise eyes and curves to drive a man insane. My employee. Sort of.

When she'd first come to work at Manhattan Records – the record label I'd created with the man I'd only recently learned was her biological father – she'd been a normal employee. Her promotion to the A&R department had put her on my radar, and since I hadn't wanted to risk my company when we started having sex, I'd changed her position to a freelance one where she answered to Stu Hancock, one of the two people in charge of A&R. It meant that, legally, she couldn't come after me professionally for whatever shit she suddenly decided offended her.

“Dammit!” I ran both my hands through my hair in frustration. No matter how often I told myself I wasn't going to think about her, I couldn't seem to stop.

Then it hit me. Maybe the key to this internal torture wasn't to stop thinking about her. Maybe I needed to think more. More about how to get her out of my life completely. I'd been avoiding her at work, but it was my fucking company. I shouldn't have to avoid her. Sure, I'd been an idiot for getting involved with an employee, but in my defense, I'd just been looking to get laid, and I'd never done my best thinking with my dick.

Which was probably what my younger brother would say if anyone asked him.

Dammit.

At some point during my revelation, a little voice in the back of my head piped up with an accusation of self-deception. It seemed to think that I wasn't remembering things correctly, as if I was somehow determined to place all of the blame on Ashlee for the way our semi-relationship had blown up. I knew this wasn't the case since I'd admitted that my cock had done the driving when it'd come to the stunning redhead.

Then I remembered the last time I'd seen her, just before she turned and walked away. The expression of hurt on her face still cut me, and I pushed it aside.

The only good thing I could say about this whole mess was that Ashlee at least hadn't gone to her father with some sob story. Finley Kordell wasn't only my business partner, he was one of my few friends, and I'd have been pissed if she'd ruined that friendship.

I supposed there did exist the possibility that Finley would have chosen me over her, considering he'd known me longer. Hell, we still didn't know if she really was his daughter.

What a fucking mess.

My mind kept racing now that I'd let it off its leash, trying to find avenues with which Stu could dismiss her without giving her ammunition to use against me. And I had no doubt she'd find some way to screw me over since she undoubtedly hadn't gotten whatever she wanted out of me before I kicked her out of my place. No woman I'd dismissed before she thought we were done had ever simply walked away.

Which was exactly what happened when I fucked my brother's girlfriend. The one he'd had ten years ago, not the one he had now. As far as I could tell, his current significant other, Trissa Haring, was one of the rare good ones. Even if she wasn't, I'd learned from that particular mistake and wouldn't be repeating it.

I glanced at my wrist before realizing that I hadn't paid much attention to when I'd started rowing. I supposed it didn't matter since I wasn't really going for a specific timed goal, but pretending that was what I was doing would've been nice. Now all I could do was keep at it until my arms and legs couldn't do it anymore.

My entire week had been like this. Pushing myself to the limit. Dropping into bed

exhausted. Waking up to the same reality morning after morning: I didn't want to go to work.

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Feeling that way was what pissed me off the most. I loved my job. I'd sacrificed more for it than anyone, but Finley knew, and even he didn't know the graphic details. I couldn't let Ashlee rob me of everything I'd worked my ass off to build.

Decision made, I decreased my speed and went through my cool-down. Once I was done, I'd shower and crash. Tomorrow, once I got home from Jacob's birthday party, I'd figure out what I needed to do to get Stu to fire Ashlee. Her days at Manhattan Records were numbered, and I'd be able to get back to my much-missed normal life once it was done.

Maybe I'd celebrate by heading to Club Privé and finding someone who understood the way I did things. There were always plenty of willing subs for a good-looking Dom like me. Ones who didn't need me to teach them how the game was played. That was what I wanted.

And no one – not even me – was going to convince me otherwise.

Two

Ashlee

When I was a freshman in college, my general psych professor discussed the commonly used definition of insanity – doing the same thing over and over but expecting different results. Most of what I'd learned in the classes that hadn't been part of my major had disappeared not long after the final exam. That particular bit of information had apparently remained buried in my subconscious, lurking until last week when Nate and I fought about the recordings I'd found of him and former

lovers.

We hadn't been together long, and it seemed like we'd spent the majority of that time fighting, but I'd been willing to put in the work because I thought we'd reached a point where we'd actually talk when we had a problem. We'd done the whole 'keeping secrets' thing, and I'd been as guilty of it as Nate.

When he told me about having sex with Calah, even though she'd been dating his brother, I thought it'd been a breakthrough. That night, I'd even been willing to talk to him about what I'd seen instead of jumping to conclusions.

Except he'd had the exact same reaction he'd had when I'd asked if he'd slept with his brother's girlfriend. He'd lashed out verbally, accusing me of things and blaming me for what I'd seen, as if my curiosity had truly been the issue at hand. It hadn't been as if I'd gone digging through a desk or locked drawer. I'd simply been looking for something to watch because I hadn't been able to sleep. The cabinet under the television had been a logical place to look.

It had been his response as much as the rest of it that had made me leave. I'd never once doubted my trust in him sexually. He'd never degraded or humiliated me, never made me feel unsafe. But I'd wanted more than just his body.

I thought he'd felt the same, but he'd proven more than once that I couldn't trust him with anything more than the physical aspect of things. This last time had been the final straw, and I'd remembered my professor's statement as I'd taken the elevator down to the lobby.

It had to end. I couldn't keep trying to make things work while he continued to blow them up.

I had to move on with my life and chalk up the past month as life experience to learn

from. I would get past this. I'd seen my mother do it when Mona walked out on us, and they'd been together for years. I could do it with Nate, even if my working at Manhattan Records made it awkward.

At least my new contract made it possible for us to avoid ever needing to have a work conversation. I wasn't sure how much either of my bosses knew about Nate and me, but due to my freelance status, I didn't need to explain to Mr. Hancock why I didn't want to deal with Nate directly. I did my work, and it was Mr. Hancock's job to make sure the right people knew what they needed to know.

Still, whether I saw Nate or not, I always knew he was in the building, right down the hall from me. I was all too aware of the things we'd done here, of the way we'd met. I desperately wanted to believe that I could stay on at Manhattan Records and be closer to my father, but after only a month of being with Nate, I was finding it more difficult than I liked to get things back to the way they had been before Nate had overheard Flora Watts talking to me about him. Before he and I—

Someone snapped their fingers in front of my eyes, breaking the hold my thoughts had on me and bringing me back to the present, though it took me a minute to remember where I was and what I was doing.

The young man sitting next to me was tall, lean, and blond with sparkling hazel eyes. In the chair across from us was another man about the same age, but he was short and stocky, with brown hair and intelligent blue eyes. They were both watching me with concerned expressions on their faces, and I offered them a tight smile in an attempt to reassure them that I was okay. It wasn't great, but it was the best I could do at the moment.

Perry Post and Gary Whittaker lived across the hall from me, and most of the time, we were basic neighbor-friendly. Smiles and greetings any time we saw each other. Conversations when we happened to be doing our laundry at the same time. We were

the sort of neighbors who'd ask questions if we saw anything suspicious, but we'd never really gone out of our way to spend time together.

That had changed this week.

I'd left Nate's place before dawn last week and managed to keep it together all the way home, but when I'd gotten to my door, I hadn't been able to find my key. I'd broken down in tears right there in the hallway. I wasn't sure what I would've done if Perry hadn't been up with a bout of insomnia. He'd taken one look at me with my tear-streaked face and just-fucked hair, wearing men's clothes that were entirely too big, and put his arms around me.

I might've been able to get myself under control if he hadn't said, "Fuck whoever made you cry." His sincerity had made me cry harder, which led him to take me into the apartment, sit me down on the couch, and make me some hot cocoa. When I'd managed to wheeze out that he didn't need to go to the trouble, he'd told me that he'd been making himself some already. He'd recently broken up with his boyfriend after finding out that Jared was married with three kids.

The two of us had talked for nearly an hour before I'd started nodding off. He'd given me his bed and said he'd take care of the key issue. By the time I'd woken up later that morning, the lock had been changed on the door, and Perry had new keys for me. Gary had made French toast for all three of us.

It had almost been enough to make me start crying again.

I'd thanked them with dinner on Sunday, and each night, one of them had checked in with me to see how I was doing. I'd always been such a solitary person, content to have my mother as my closest friend, but this week, I'd been glad to have friends other than her to turn to. I hadn't told her yet that Nate and I had broken up, and I honestly didn't know when or how I was going to. She'd canceled our Sunday brunch

because she'd needed to meet with someone about work, and I was still ashamed at how relieved I'd been.

Yet another thing to talk to my new friends about.

"You were doing it again," Perry said, putting his arm around my shoulders.

I leaned against him and tucked my feet under me. "Thanks."

"Are you going to see your mom on Sunday?" Gary asked.

I also heard what he wasn't asking. He wanted to know if I was going to tell her what'd happened. I didn't want to lie to her, and I knew she'd ask how things were going with Nate. I'd managed to evade the question so far this week by sticking to texts and telling her I was spending a lot of time with my neighbors since one of them had just gotten out of a bad relationship. Technically, it was a lie of omission rather than a direct lie, but I wasn't going to nitpick. I felt guilty enough as it was.

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“I still haven’t figured out what to do,” I admitted. “She’s had my back about Nate from moment one, but I know part of why she supported me was because she’s always trusted my judgment. I hate the idea of her not being able to do that anymore.”

Perry gave me a squeeze. “Ash, I looked up that asshole, and trust me when I say he’d make anyone lose their sound judgment.”

“He’s right,” Gary added with a wink. “I don’t even like dick, and I think he’s hot.”

I laughed, and some of my tension eased. I felt like I’d been on edge for the entire week, constantly worrying about if I’d see Nate at work, what I’d say if we did cross paths. Fortunately for me, he seemed as determined to avoid me this time as I was to avoid him. I supposed that was a good thing since it meant I didn’t need to worry about him pushing me into forgiving him like he had the last time he’d behaved like a jackass.

No, I reprimanded myself, I wasn’t going to lay that at his feet. Each time he’d done something stupid and then apologized, I’d forgiven him of my own volition. He was right when he said I’d know exactly who he was when I’d first gotten involved with him. Yes, there had been some things I hadn’t completely understood at first, but I’d never made the mistake of thinking that he was simply misunderstood. I’d known all too well exactly how he could be.

“Enough of my self-pity party,” I said, straightening. “The pizza should be here soon, and we haven’t even picked out a movie yet.”

Gary got up to get us our usual drinks, and Perry’s arm moved to the back of the

couch, his fingers playing in my hair with the sort of casual, platonic affection I never thought I'd have. He was like that with Gary too, which had surprised me at first because I hadn't known too many male gay-straight friends who were both comfortable with physical contact.

I still remembered a man I'd met at a Pride rally when I was a kid. Jerome. He'd been there with a straight friend of his who'd been sure to mention his own orientation at least a dozen times before the rally had even begun. I'd been fascinated by Jerome's friend, unable to understand the need to declare his heterosexuality with such conviction and repetition.

Then, about ten minutes into things, Jerome had thrown his arm around his friend's shoulders. It hadn't been anything sexual. Even at ten years old, I'd been able to tell. But Jerome's friend hadn't appreciated it. He'd shoved Jerome into another group of people and sputtered out some sort of "you know I'm not queer" statement before stomping off.

The expression on Jerome's face still broke my heart.

I knew that part of the reason I'd liked Gary and Perry from the first time I'd met them was that they were completely and utterly comfortable in both who they were and in their friendship. This past week, I'd learned that they'd grown up together in Tucson, best friends from their first meeting when they'd been assigned seats next to each other on the school bus. Their friendship had gotten them through Perry coming out in seventh grade and Gary telling his homophobic father and stepmother that he was going with Perry to NYU to major in interior design. They'd been there for each other when Kenneth Goulding had graffitied both of their lockers with the same slurs and when Macy Franks had turned down Gary asking her to junior prom.

I was sure there were dozens of other similar stories in their shared history, and each one had strengthened their friendship to the point where they could be one hundred

percent themselves with each other. Perry's dry humor and Gary's flirtations. Perry's odd love of curling – the sport, not hair – and Gary's equally off-beat fascination with geology. They even alternated between straight and gay bars and clubs, neither one of them even slightly uncomfortable in either world.

“Is our romance boycott still in place?” Gary asked as he came back with three beers. “Because if it is, I'd like to make a request.”

“We're not watching Lord of the Rings,” Perry said quickly.

“I don't mind,” I put in. “I could use a little non-romantic fantasy.”

“Yes!” Gary fist-pumped as he shot Perry a triumphant grin.

Perry turned to me in horror. “You have no idea what you've done.”

I looked back and forth between the two. “Um...all right. What did I do?”

“We're watching the director's cuts, right?” Gary asked as he headed over to the rack of movies. “Silly question. Of course, that's what we're watching.”

“Did he just say ‘cuts?’” I asked, swallowing hard as realization hit. “As in plural?”

Perry pinched the bridge of his nose. “Gary has a slight obsession with all things Tolkien. He's going to quote along with the entire movie. And that's if we can get him to stop at one.”

“How can you stop with Fellowship?” Gary practically glared at us, but humor was lurking behind the expression. “Not knowing what happened to Gandalf or if the others went after Sam and Frodo.”

“I’ve seen them before,” I said. “So, I already know what happens next.”

He shook his head. “You’re missing the principle of the matter.”

“I am?”

As Gary launched into an explanation of why the films should always be viewed back-to-back, Perry leaned over and put his mouth next to my ear.

“Just wait until he starts talking in Elvish.”

While not what I had in mind, at least I’d be distracted.

Three

Nate

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I stood in front of a rack of birthday cards, racking my brain for a piece of information I should have known. Was my nephew turning eight or nine today? I hadn't been to a family birthday party since Dad had turned fifty a little over eleven years ago. Mom's fiftieth had happened after the Calah incident so I'd dropped by with a gift when I'd known she was the only one home.

I pulled my attention back to the matter at hand. Picking a birthday card for Jacob, who was either eight or nine. Fortunately, there were some basic 'kid' birthday cards that didn't have specific ages on them. Unfortunately, I still didn't know him well enough to select something that I knew he'd like. What did kids that age like anyway? Video games? Sports?

"Dammit," I muttered. I should have called Julia and asked her what to buy. I'd intended to do just that, but then...another thing my fling with Ashlee had fucked up. It wasn't irrational or petty for me to blame her for it since I'd always intended to talk to Julia or my mom about Jacob's likes and dislikes.

It was too late now to do anything about it, though. I picked up a card that had a generic cake and candles on the front. I flipped it open and confirmed that the well-wishes were just as generic as the cover. Better than nothing, I supposed. I just hoped that my less-than-original card and gift didn't reveal that Mom had generally been the one buying the gifts and cards from me over the years. I'd done some shopping on my own when Mom had sent me an idea or two, but it had been rare.

I picked up the appropriate envelope and then headed to the gift card display. A card from a large retailer in the same amount I usually spent, and my shopping was done. As I walked to a cashier, I vowed that the next gifts I bought for my family would be

ones that showed I was trying to mend things, not with money but with building and re-building relationships.

I bit back a laugh at that thought. Who the hell did I think I was kidding with that bullshit? I didn't know a damn thing about having a healthy relationship with anyone. The closest I came to anything resembling healthy was with Finley, and I was self-aware enough to admit that it was due to him far more than it was due to me. I could use that as an example of a goal, but even then, I wasn't entirely sure what to do.

Attending the party, bringing a gift, getting involved in conversations without arguing, helping with whatever anyone asked. Those were all things I knew I needed to do. Whether or not I could accomplish it was another story, and that pissed me off. I didn't like doubting myself. In fact, I'd spent a large amount of time ensuring that self-doubt wasn't a part of my vocabulary.

I was still fuming when I pulled up in front of the house, but I forced myself to put all the negativity aside. It was a practice in self-control, and that, at least, was something I could identify.

Not only was it identifiable, but it was something I'd done before in the past and had succeeded every time. Granted, most of my challenges had been sexual in nature, or at least in areas where the line between sex and the rest of my life merged, but that didn't mean I couldn't create something outside of that bubble.

Maybe that was what I needed to focus on: working outside my comfort zone. My family was definitely outside that zone...and it wasn't until I gave voice to that idea that I realized how sad it was. Family was supposed to mean comfort and safety.

I wasn't a completely self-centered asshole. I knew that the wedge between my family and me was my own fault. I knew that other people had horrific family situations that would make my absolute worst day with my family look like paradise.

I knew that there were numerous people whose families put them in danger, intentionally or otherwise.

But while my issues were tiny compared to those other people's lives, it didn't mean I felt any more comfortable or safe.

What it did mean, however, was that I could try to fix it. I couldn't do it all by myself since my family needed to accept my attempts, but I could do everything that was within my power.

Starting with getting out of my car and walking up to David and Julia's house with my impersonal present and the hope that they'd all recognize that I was trying.

It was time.

I let out my breath in a rush and opened my door. Julia answered when I knocked, leaning in for a hug when I stepped inside the house. Mom was right behind her, smiling so wide it had to have hurt.

Apparently, bringing Catherine home after she'd snuck away to see me had redeemed me in the eyes of my sister-in-law and mother. I would've done it even if it hadn't changed anything, but I was glad it had, especially with how badly the past week had gone for me. I probably wouldn't ever admit it out loud, but knowing that my family no longer thought the worst of me made things a little easier.

"I'll take that," Julia said, plucking the card from my hand. "There's sodas in the cooler and snacks on the buffet. Pizza will be here in fifteen."

She hurried away before I could apologize for the fact that I hadn't brought a bigger and better gift.

“We need to get you caught up on what the kids are interested in,” Mom said as she squeezed my arm. Her eyes darted behind me to the closed door, and my stomach sank as I realized who she was looking for. Her gaze moved to my face, and whatever she saw there must’ve told her enough because she didn’t ask. She simply took my arm and walked with me into the living room.

My brothers and father nodded at me, their expressions clearly saying that they were going to keep their guards up, but the out-right hostility was gone. I didn’t know if Joshua had explained things or if he’d just told them that we’d started working our issues out, but it was enough to keep me from feeling unwanted.

“Uncle Nate!” Catherine bowled into me, throwing her arms around my waist in an exuberant embrace that warmed my spirits.

I’d been a little worried that she’d be upset with me for her having been grounded after her solo trip to Manhattan. I hadn’t asked her to come to my office, but I also hadn’t gotten involved when I’d taken her home either. She’d scared the hell out of me, and I was just an uncle who barely knew her. I could hardly even imagine what it would’ve been like for David and Julia when they realized what she’d done.

“Hey, kiddo.” I awkwardly patted her back. “No recent unsupervised trips?”

“No, Uncle Nate.” She smiled up at me as she stepped back. “Mom and Dad told me how much I scared them, and I don’t want to do that again.” A flicker of a frown showed on her face. “Besides, I’m grounded.”

I had no idea how to respond to that, but I was saved from having to figure it out when Jacob came over to say hi too. At some point, I really needed to learn how to talk to kids. Not that I was having any kids of my own. That had never been in my plans. Never. The whole wife, kids, white picket fence thing wasn’t me. I didn’t want any of that bullshit.

“Uncle Nate?” The way Jacob said my name told me he’d said it more than once.

“Sorry,” I said with a smile. “Got a little lost in my thoughts for a second there. It’s good to see you again.”

He glanced at Catherine and then at his parents before leaning closer to me. “You got Catherine autographs from her favorite band.”

I nodded. “I did.” I had a suspicion about where he was going with this. “But I didn’t get a chance to find out who your favorite singer or band is so I could do the same for you.”

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“I don’t really like a lot of music,” Jacob confessed. “But I like baseball. Do you know any baseball players?”

“That depends. Who do you follow?” Unless things had changed in the years I’d been gone, we were a Yankees family. If Jacob said the Mets, he and I were going to have a serious uncle-to-nephew discussion before we even got to the cake.

“The Indians.” He managed to make me believe him for a few seconds before he grinned. “Yankees, who else?”

“I get tickets from time to time.” I bobbed my eyebrows up and down. “Perks for the label, for my artists. Box seats, behind the dugouts, behind home plate, all the best places. Next time I get some, I’ll ask your dad if I can take you.”

The way the kid’s face lit up, I hoped my brother would let him go with me. If I had to, I’d let David and Jacob go on their own. I didn’t want them to think I was trying to buy their affection, but if I could make them happy with the things I could give them, I’d do it without a second thought.

Catherine grabbed my hand, capturing my attention again. “Where’s Ashlee?”

My smile froze in place. Of course, Catherine would want to know where Ashlee was. My niece had latched onto Ashlee the two times they’d met. My mom had probably figured out that something was wrong, but the kids hadn’t yet gotten to the points in their lives where they’d learned to read other people’s body language to know whether or not certain questions should be asked.

“She couldn’t come today.” I offered the truest statement I could give them that wouldn’t make them sad or make me utterly miserable for the rest of the day.

I wasn’t going to ruin my nephew’s birthday party because things with Ashlee had imploded. Eventually, I’d have to tell them why she wasn’t around anymore, but not today.

Four

Ashlee

The weather was absolutely gorgeous today, and it was finally warm enough for Mom and me to have our Sunday brunch outside. Except I was sitting at our usual outside table, and she wasn’t here yet. I looked down at my phone and tried not to worry. With it being such a nice day, there was probably a lot of foot traffic and issues with parking spaces.

“Do you want a refill?” Our usual waitress, Tiffany, came over. “Your mom caught in traffic? I heard there’s some new construction out her way.”

“I’m good with what I have,” I said, my smile genuine despite my concern. “I haven’t been able to get ahold of her, but she doesn’t answer when she’s driving, so that makes sense.”

“All right,” Tiffany said. “I’ll keep an eye out for her. Flag me down if you want something before then.”

“Thanks.”

Mom and I generally talked to her a bit, checked in to see how things were going. Well, more Mom than me. She’d always been the more social of the two of us. I’d

never been good at small talk with people I didn't know well, especially not when I was by myself.

Another problem of me being by myself at the moment was that I had no one to distract me from wondering what Nate was doing today. This past week, I'd kept myself busy intentionally because no matter how pissed I was at him, there hadn't been much I'd found that could get me to stop thinking about him. Pretty much, Lord of the Rings with Gary and Perry had been the only thing that'd helped so far, and I didn't want to spend my life lost in the fantasy world of J.R.R. Tolkien.

Fortunately for me, we still had Return of the King to get through. Maybe if I picked up some food on my way home, I could talk them into watching it tonight. I'd have to deal with this myself at some point, but I wasn't there yet. I wanted to be. I wanted to move past him and start the part of my life that had nothing to do with him.

And I needed to stop thinking of him in pronouns. The man had a name.

I shot off a text to Gary and Perry and wondered if they'd have any advice for how I could do just that. I'd never had to deal with this particular issue before. The biggest problem wasn't coming up with a solution, however. It was the fact that I was pretty sure I had something that would help.

I needed to find another job.

And before I did that, I needed to talk to both of my parents.

There was a phrase I never thought I'd say again.

When Mona Wadsworth had walked out on Mom and me, I still hadn't made the decision to look for my biological father. Even after I'd decided to find him, I hadn't thought of my search actually resulting in having two parents in my life.

Once Mom got here, I'd swallow my pride and tell her about what happened with Nate. I couldn't let my fear of disappointing her keep me from telling her the truth. Besides, what was the point of having a close relationship with my mother if I didn't take advantage of her wisdom? If anyone knew how to get past an awful break-up, it was her.

After I had a plan in place, I'd talk to my father. I'd come to Manhattan Records to get to know him, but now that he knew about me, I didn't need to stay. He and I would continue to build our relationship no matter where I was employed. If I was being completely honest with myself, it might actually be easier for Finley if he could keep Nate and me in separate worlds. The last thing I wanted to do was hurt my father.

I finished my tea and considered ordering something light I could munch on while I waited for Mom. I wasn't really hungry, but maybe food could be a distraction from all the ways Nate and I were awful for each other. We should have known it from the very start. We might've both been raised in middle-class New York City, but that was where commonality ended. We came from two totally different worlds.

"Let me refill that," Tiffany said as she appeared at the table. She set a plate of French fries in front of me. "They're on the house. Someone changed their mind, but Manny'd already made the fries."

"Thanks."

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I appreciated the gesture despite my lack of appetite, and I wasn't going to hurt Tiffany's feelings by refusing them, so I poured some ketchup on the plate and dunked one of the extra crispy fries before popping it into my mouth. Manny was an amazing cook, and I could enjoy the taste at least. Besides, I needed to eat, even if I didn't want to. I'd hadn't been eating much all week, not unless I had other people around, and I wanted to pretend that everything was normal.

What was normal, anyway? I'd been raised in a home that a lot of people still wouldn't consider normal, but I wouldn't trade my mom for any other parent out there.

My phone rang, startling me enough that I almost didn't check to see who was calling. A wave of relief went through me when I saw my mom's picture.

"Mom, thank goodness. I was getting worried."

"Sorry about that, dear."

I frowned. She sounded off. Absent. As if her mind was elsewhere. "Are you almost here? I can have Tiffany get your usual drink ready."

"Oh, um, no thanks, sweetie. I won't be able to make it today."

It took me a few seconds to process what she'd said, but it still didn't make sense. I felt an invisible hand squeezing my heart, and questions came out in a rush. "What do you mean you won't be able to make it? Are you okay? Did something happen? Is it work again? Shouldn't your professor have you come in on weekdays? Like office

hours or something?”

She sighed. “Relax, dear. I’m okay.”

I didn’t believe her. “Mom—”

“I’m fine, but I can’t meet you today,” she said more firmly. “I have to go now, but I’ll talk to you soon.”

She ended the call before I could say anything else, leaving me staring at the phone in disbelief. In my entire life, Mom had never hung up on me. I was half-tempted to call her back, but I didn’t want to make a big deal about it if it really was nothing more than her being busy and distracted.

Then again, if it was something important that she just didn’t want to tell me because it wasn’t good news, I needed to know it. Scenarios began running through my head, all the things that could be bad enough for her not to want to tell me. Her cancer was back. Something else was wrong with her health. She’d lost her job. Her insurance had been canceled. She was losing our home.

I shook my head, trying to clear it before I drove myself nuts, but it didn’t help. I needed a compromise. A text. She wouldn’t have to talk to me, and she could answer in her own time. That would work.

You sounded really weird and hung up before I could say anything. I know you said you’re fine, but something feels off. What’s going on? You don’t have to call or answer right away, but I need you to tell me something more than “I’m fine.”

I wanted to remind her that we’d promised we wouldn’t keep secrets, but even though I could argue that not telling her about Nate and me was simply because I wanted to do it face-to-face, I had just recently admitted to lying for years about finding my

biological father. It would've felt more than a little hypocritical to criticize her for keeping some personal matters to herself.

Whatever her reason and whatever she was hiding, she and I would hash it out. Because that's what adults did. They talked to each other like rational human beings and came to logical conclusions. At least that's what I thought adults should do. But, as my judgment of character wasn't as good as I thought it was, I supposed my assumptions about adult behavior could also be off.

Fucking Nate Lexington.

Five

Nate

My family knew something was up with Ashlee and me. No one else had asked about her after I'd told Catherine and Jacob that she hadn't been able to come to the party, but I'd caught some of them giving me sideways glances when they thought I wasn't looking. I supposed the looks could have been the general distrust that I was still working to dispel, but Mom and Julia had been giving them to me too, and I hadn't sensed anything negative coming from them.

The worst part about it was that, if they all did figure out that Ashlee and I had broken up, they could think I deserved it after everything I'd done. They wouldn't be wrong. Even though Joshua now knew that my actions had been idiotic but mostly well-intentioned, rather than malicious, he had to be taking at least a little pleasure in the fact that I'd lost someone I clearly cared about.

As much as I wanted to keep pretending that things with Ashlee had been all about sex, I was tired of the deception. Allowing my true feelings for Ashlee to come to the surface, however, only made things worse.

My anger toward her had grown the more I'd acknowledged how I felt about her. She'd thrown away everything we'd had for nothing more than some sort of petty jealousy.

I was still trying to justify my choices and subsequent behavior when Finley walked into my office without knocking. One look at his face told me that my normally mild-mannered friend was upset about something, and it didn't take a rocket scientist to guess who it was about.

"What's going on with you and Ashlee?"

A forceful, blunt approach wasn't his normal way of handling issues and startled me enough to make me want to confirm I'd heard him correctly. "What?"

"I talked to Roberta on Saturday, and she's worried about Ashlee. Quite frankly, I am too. She's been acting strangely at work."

"What did Ashlee tell her mom?" I asked cautiously. I knew Ashlee and Roberta talked to each other about everything, so I could only imagine what Roberta thought had happened.

I felt a little stab of guilt for assuming that Ashlee hadn't been entirely honest with her mother about that last night, but I pushed it away. Everyone saw things through their own biases and experiences. It's why gossip so often didn't resemble the truth it came from.

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Finley's eyes narrowed at my question. "Nothing, and that's the problem. Ashlee talks to her mom all the time and tells her everything. Roberta said Ashlee hasn't mentioned you this entire week. That's why she called me, to ask if I knew what was going on."

I sighed and leaned back in my chair. "Look, if Roberta has an issue with what Ashlee has or hasn't said, then it's between them. I get that you have this whole 'father' thing going on with her, but quite frankly, jacking off into a cup doesn't give you the right to be in our business."

"Watch yourself, Nate." Finley's voice had gone quiet, just above a whisper.

I knew that only happened when he was furious, but I kept going anyway.

"No, Finley, let's put everything out there. How are you a father to her? Or to any of your other possible kids? How often did you think about the fact that you might have a kid – or more than one – out there? With all of the DNA testing done for family trees now, it'd be easy enough for you to connect with some of them. Find ones who might want you playing Dad. But you didn't even give it a second thought until she told you where she'd come from. Don't act like she was this long-lost daughter you'd been searching for her whole life."

Finley's hands curled into fists, and I remembered for the first time in a long time that while he might've been a little older than me, he was in excellent shape and might be able to kick my ass if it came down to it.

Still, I kept going, either unable or unwilling to stop the downward spiral. I didn't

know which reason was the truth.

“Better yet, go start a real family for yourself. Plenty of surrogates out there looking for a paycheck. At least you know your part of the procedure.” I made a crude hand gesture, and that was the tipping point.

“I know you have issues,” he said, his voice remaining even and quiet despite the anger I could feel radiating from him. “And I know you’re not my son, but I’m going to give you a piece of fatherly advice anyway. Get your head out of your ass and stop acting like a dick. If you’re not careful, you’re going to lose everyone.” He paused for a second and then added, “Even me.”

It was like someone had just punched me in the gut. All of the air rushed out of my lungs and my stomach twisted. Before I could call him back and apologize, he closed the door behind him, leaving me alone with all of the shit I’d just said to the one person who’d always had my back.

He’d found me when I’d been at my lowest point, and he’d held out a hand, no questions asked. He never judged me for the things I’d done or coddled me about the things I needed to change. When my own bullshit had separated me from my family, he’d been my older brother, looking out for me while still letting me fall on my face a time or two.

Even when he’d been angrier with me than I’d ever seen him, instead of yelling or cursing, he’d warned me about what I was going to lose if I didn’t change.

Fuck.

I put my head in my hands and closed my eyes as the enormity of what I’d done threatened to crush me. Not just to my closest friend, but to the woman I’d chosen to care for and protect.

Ashlee had come to mean more to me than any other woman I'd ever been with – even in the short time we'd been together – but I'd treated her more unfairly than any other. Those women had been given certain expectations, and I'd met every one of them. Any of them who'd say otherwise weren't telling the whole truth about our time together. I'd told Ashlee what I was like, but then I'd promised that what we had would be different.

I needed to fix things, both with Ashlee and with Finley, before it was too late.

If it wasn't already.

Six

Ashlee

Mom still hadn't answered my text, but I didn't know if she'd read it or not. The odds were that she had, but had decided not to answer me yet, but I didn't want to nag her if she hadn't read it yet.

Dammit.

I hated this indecisiveness. I wasn't normally like this. I might've been fairly shy, but I'd always considered myself a strong person. I liked to think that most people saw me that way.

Except now that Nate had proven himself to be a different man than the one I'd believed him to be, I was plagued with self-doubt. Hence the indecision about what to do.

Fortunately, I'd been busy enough today that I'd rarely had time to be bothered by whatever it was my mom had going on. I'd hardly even thought about Nate either.

There was something positive to be said for keeping busy.

I glanced at the clock and tried to decide if I was relieved that the day was almost done and I'd managed to get through it without seeing Nate, or anxious about spending the rest of my night worrying over whether or not my mom would answer me and what I would do when she did.

I let out a heavy sigh. I couldn't even make that choice.

My phone rang, and for a moment, I thought it was my cell, and my mom was calling, but then I remembered that I had my personal phone on vibrate when I was at work, and my mom's ringtone certainly wasn't that obnoxious sound my office phone was making.

"Hello?" I winced at the annoyance in my voice and hoped that the person on the other end didn't think I was normally so rude or had an issue with them.

After a brief pause, an entirely too familiar voice spoke. "Ashlee?"

Oh. It was him. He was allowed to think I had an issue with him.

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I wasn't sure how many seconds ticked by before he said, "Hello?"

"I'm here." My grip on the handset tightened. "How can I help you?"

The worst part about me having decided to call him Mr. Lexington when we were having sex was that I couldn't bring myself to do it professionally anymore, and there was no way I'd use his first name. It was awkward, but the alternatives were far less appealing.

"If you don't have any plans directly after work, I'd like for us to talk."

I gritted my teeth. I hated when he made what should have been a request into an order.

"Would you talk to me?"

Well, damn. He'd actually changed it into a question. It didn't change my answer, though.

"I'm not comfortable coming to your office or home," I said stiffly, trying not to remember all the reasons why I wanted to avoid both of those places. If he expected me to invite him back to my apartment, he was going to be disappointed.

"We can go to a neutral place. Get coffee and talk."

I was tempted to tell him that I wasn't interested, that whatever awkward work situation he wanted to address wouldn't be an issue for long because I was looking

for work elsewhere. Once I got another job, he'd never have to worry about seeing me again. Worry was probably the wrong word because he clearly hadn't cared as much as I'd thought he had, but it'd do for now.

This wasn't just about him and me, though. As long as I was still employed here, Finley would be caught between us. If Nate could say whatever it was he had on his mind and it made things easier for Finley, then it was worth whatever irritation it cost me.

"Do you have a specific place in mind?" I asked.

"There's a little coffee shop around the corner. Beulah's. Do you know it?"

"I do."

"I'll meet you there." An awkward pause. "Thank you."

He didn't say goodbye, but it didn't bother me. His thank you was enough for now. It gave me a hope I didn't want. Hope that maybe I wasn't crazy for thinking that this time would be different. That he finally understood how things needed to change.

I closed my eyes for a moment and told myself that this wasn't as stupid of an idea as I feared it was. I supposed no matter what happened, I'd have some bit of closure by the time we were done.

I went through the last half-hour of work in a daze. Fortunately, nothing I was working on required immense amounts of concentration. Most of it was organizing my schedule for what I needed to do tomorrow, the same as I did the last part of every workday. I found that it worked better for me than if I tried to do it first thing in the morning.

Once I finished, I sent off my usual email to Mr. Hancock, giving him the run-down of what I'd accomplished and what I planned to do through the week. He didn't require it of me, but it helped a lot when it came to getting things done when he needed them since he could see the timetable I'd laid out and make any adjustments based on what he needed.

When it was time for me to go, I gathered my things and walked to the elevator, forcing myself to not look back toward Nate's office. He'd said we'd meet there, and I was grateful for it. The last thing we needed to worry about was people seeing us leave together. I could only imagine what sort of rumors would fly once I found another job. For all of my issues with Nate, he didn't deserve to have this drama interfering with the company he'd built. He was good at what he did, and personal feelings about some of his...quirks didn't mean he should have to suffer.

Beulah's was a cute little place that served all sorts of beverages. Coffee, tea, juice, and not just the usual types either. She had exotic ones and odd ones that blended with the subtle and the mundane to create a unique atmosphere. Honestly, I was a little surprised that Nate knew of it. The vibe here was more laid-back than anything I associated with him. With the exception of when I saw him sleeping, I couldn't think of a time when I saw him relaxed, letting things happen at their own pace.

I ordered a chai tea I liked and found a small booth where I could see the door. When he came in a few minutes later, he scanned the room, the expression on his face unchanging when his gaze landed on me. I wondered if it was because he didn't care...or if he was trying to hide how much he did. I honestly wasn't sure which would be better.

I managed a tight smile when he carried his drink over to me and slid into the booth, his knees brushing against mine. My entire body felt that jolt when we touched, and the flicker of heat in his eyes told me he had too. He still wanted me.

Too bad want wasn't enough.

"Thank you for agreeing to talk to me," he said. "I need to apologize for the things I said. I was completely out of line."

Good start. I nodded. "Thank you. And you need to know that I wasn't snooping. I was just looking for something to watch because I couldn't sleep."

I didn't owe him an explanation, but I wouldn't be able to make things better by being petty. Besides, he'd taken the initiative to reach out and apologize. The least I could do was tell him the truth of what I'd been doing.

He took a drink, letting his eyes flick up to my face and away again. "I'm not going to lie and say that I've never watched those recordings, but I was telling the truth about why I'd made them in the first place. You've met Roma Lynn. All of the women I've been with are like her. They're with me for sex, for the things I can buy them, for the attention they get when they're with me. Women like that, when they're...dismissed, they can do some crazy things."

I remembered the look in Roma's eyes when she'd seen Nate and me together. She'd been furious. I had no trouble believing that she'd cause trouble for him just because he'd turned her away before she wanted to go. She was the sort of woman who would make false accusations against a man in an attempt to ruin his life, and in the post-MeToo movement world, a single comment could destroy Nate's reputation, his business, his life.

I whole-heartedly supported the demands to investigate all claims, to take victims seriously and not downplay incidents with that damned 'boys will be boys' excuse. That didn't mean I believed that every single woman was telling the truth, and it was because of situations like Nate described that I didn't. People who took advantage of movements like this for their own gain pissed me off, and not just because of the lives

those accusations could ruin. They made it so much harder for real claims to be believed and prosecuted.

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“I’m upfront about it,” he continued. “Recording the sessions, I mean, but I don’t tell them which ones. If I did, they could easily refer to another encounter as being non-consensual. But I ask each one, and they all agree to it. I don’t get involved without having that agreement in place.”

“You give them a contract?” I asked.

“More or less.” His eyes finally met mine. “I can count on one hand the number of women I’ve slept with who I didn’t talk to about it, and the only one in more than a decade was you.”

A little thrill went through me despite the fact that I hadn’t yet decided how I felt about the conversation. It was definitely headed in the right direction, though.

“Do you ask them, or do you ask them? Because we both know that your asking sounds an awful lot more like telling.”

One corner of his mouth tipped up, and some of the tension between us eased.

“There aren’t any cameras in my office or my home,” he added. “I don’t have sex at work, and I don’t take women home with me.”

“Except me.” I finished my cup of tea before asking, “Why me, then? Why was I different?”

“Because you are different. Nothing is the same with you.”

“What about...” I stopped and changed direction. “The other thing that bothered me about what I saw was that you weren’t the only one...” I flushed. “I mean, that woman was having sex with a lot of men. I know you said you didn’t want to share me with other people, but it’s something you’ve enjoyed before. What if you change your mind?”

He reached across the table and took my hands in his. “You’re the only one I want, and I don’t want anyone else to have you.” He squeezed, his palms warm against my skin. “And that’s another reason why you don’t ever have to worry about me recording you. I’d never risk anyone else seeing it.”

I believed him. Maybe I was crazy, but I believed him.

But there was still something else I needed to know before I let out that particular piece of information.

“Are you going to get rid of the DVDs?”

He thought for a moment, and I appreciated the fact that he didn’t just say yes because it was what I wanted him to say. I wanted his honesty more.

“For legal reasons, I don’t want to,” he said slowly, his grip on my hands tightening as if he was worried I’d pull away. “I still want to have them, just in case, but I have no desire to watch them.”

Okay, not the answer I’d hoped for, but it wasn’t as bad as it could have been.

“I suggest a compromise,” he said.

“A compromise?”

“I’ll get a safe or fireproof box just for them, and you can set the combination code so you’ll know I can’t get to them.”

That wasn’t an entirely bad idea. I didn’t need the whole offer, though. The fact that he was willing told me enough.

“I like the idea of having them out of the way,” I admitted, “but I don’t need the combination. I trust that if you say they’re locked away and you’ll only ever use them if a situation requires it, that’s the truth of it.”

He’d apologized, explained, and offered a compromise. The hope I’d been trying to hold back moved a little closer to the surface. I hadn’t really understood before how much of a learning curve he needed too. He hadn’t done anything like this before, and mistakes and missteps should be expected. It was the change and the growth that made the difference. And it seemed like he wanted both of those things.

If he asked, I’d be willing to try again. Maybe it made me an idiot, but I didn’t have it in me to push him away.

Seven

Nate

I’d fully expected her to refuse to go anywhere with me, and then when she’d said she’d meet me at Beulah’s, I’d thought she’d throw my apology back in my face and walk out. But she hadn’t. She’d let me explain and then she’d accepted my idea of a compromise.

I wasn’t used to things working like this. When a woman and I got into a fight, and one of us walked out like that, we were done. I certainly didn’t work things out so I could fix things with her. I did what I wanted when I wanted and how I

wanted...until I met Ashlee, and she became the thing I wanted more than anything else.

“Are we...” I stopped mid-sentence. I wanted her, but I couldn’t put myself in that vulnerable place by asking the question. “Come home with me.”

One of her eyebrows went up. “Really?”

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I gave her a sheepish smile. “I figured, since we were good again...”

“We are?”

The question would have bothered me if I hadn’t seen the gleam in Ashlee’s eyes. She wanted to know the answer, but she was half-teasing, which told me she thought she already knew.

“We are.” I purposefully made it into a statement and got the laugh I’d been looking for.

She turned her hand so that her fingers laced between mine. “I’m willing to give us another shot, but this can’t happen again. Not the arguing part. That, I’m sure, will happen again. And I’m not expecting us to share all our deepest darkest secrets right away.” She squeezed my hand. “But you can’t talk to me like that again.”

“I won’t.”

“I mean it.”

She was firm, but the fact that she hadn’t let go of my hand told me that she wanted this to work.

“I do too,” I said. “I’m well aware of the fact that I can be an asshole. I’m going to try to be less of one for you.”

After a second, she nodded. “All right, but I reserve the right to call you out on it if

you slip.”

“Agreed.” I finished my drink, finally feeling like my world had stopped spinning out of control. The past week had been such shit that I didn’t want our time together to end just yet. “Does that mean you’ll come home with me?”

“Asking instead of telling.” The smile playing on her lips grew a tiny bit wider. “Growth.”

Damn, she was hot when she had that teasing tone.

“Is that a yes?”

She sighed. “I want it to be, but I don’t think it’s a good idea if we jump back into bed, not after what happened. This whole thing with us moved fast from the beginning. We need to take a step back. Go slower this time.”

It wasn’t the answer I wanted, but it was better than the answer I deserved.

“We both know I’m not the most patient man.” I couldn’t help but smile at the expression on her face at that statement. “But I’ll respect your decision.”

“Thank you.” She squeezed my hand one more time before releasing it. “I’ll see you tomorrow at work.”

“Let me know when you’re home,” I said. She raised an eyebrow. “I just want to know you got there safely. That’s not unreasonable, is it?”

“It’s not.” She stood up, and I resigned myself to watching her walk away.

Except she only went a few steps toward the door before she turned back.

“I’m not sleeping with you.”

“Okay?”

“I want to trust you about everything, but it’s going to take some time.” She shifted her weight, like something was still on her mind.

“What do you need?”

“I need you to show me that there aren’t any cameras in your place.”

My surprise must’ve shown on my face, because her expression fell in anticipation of my refusal, and I hurried to correct her assumption.

“I’ll do that. We can go through the entire apartment with a fine-tooth comb.”

I tossed a couple bills onto the table and looked up to see her holding out a hand. I took it as I stood and kept a tight grip on it on the way out to my car. I was glad I’d driven today. I didn’t want anything delaying us and giving her time to change her mind.

* * *

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I'd always known on an intellectual level just how large my place was, but I'd never appreciated it until I had to go over every inch of it to prove I hadn't set up any cameras here. I was glad to do it, and I was even more glad to be doing it with her at my side. It was ninety great minutes of us making small talk about what we'd been doing at work. Discussing anything too personal would've felt weird while we were doing this.

When we returned to where we'd started, I waited for her to say something, wondering if I'd done enough.

Better than her saying something, she went up on her toes and brushed her lips across mine. It was a chaste kiss, barely a touch, but it went through me like electricity, lighting up my entire body in a way that no one else ever could. It was instinct to reach for her, but she took a step back before I could touch her, and I remembered that I wasn't supposed to.

"Want something to eat?" I asked as I rubbed the back of my neck. "I have some steak leftover from yesterday I can throw into a salad."

"That sounds lovely, thank you." Her cheeks were pink, reassuring me that I affected her as much as she did me.

The heat between us still simmered as we moved into the kitchen, but neither of us acted on it. In a way, it was almost nicer than if we'd let things continue from that kiss. There was something to be said, after all, for anticipation. I would've preferred knowing that our waiting would be over tonight rather than a time to be determined, but at least I had hope that it would eventually happen. I decided to use the time to

finally ask about a subject I'd been dreading.

"We've talked about what we did at work last week," I said, "but you never said if you'd done anything...fun."

I didn't have any reason to believe she'd gone out to a club or anything like that, but that possessive part of me needed to hear her say it.

"I spent some time with my neighbors," she said. "Mostly dinner and a movie."

"Mrs. Posner?" I couldn't quite picture Ashlee and the elderly woman eating popcorn and watching some romantic comedy.

"Her sister's in town for a few days, and I don't know what those two have been up to, but I'm pretty sure she lost her security deposit at some point." Ashlee laughed, then added, "Anyway, it wasn't her. I was with Perry and Gary."

I frowned. "The two twenty-something guys who live next to Mrs. Posner?"

"That's them."

"Mm-hm." I picked up the salad and carried it to the table. "Did you spend a lot of time with them?"

She set down two bowls and forks, her eyes narrowing. "Are you seriously jealous?" When I didn't answer, she sighed. "If I can move past all of the women you've been with, then you can get over being jealous of my two male friends, especially since one of them is gay and the other's not interested."

The volume of relief that went through me was absurd. I trusted that she was telling me the truth. She might not have noticed if the straight one of the pair was actually

interested, but it was clear that she wasn't. That was enough for me.

"I'll behave myself." I winked at her. "Mostly."

She laughed and picked a cherry tomato from her salad and popped it into her mouth. That simple action shouldn't have been so damn hot, but when it came to her, my libido had even more of a mind of its own.

"What about you?" she asked. "Anything fun?"

I shook my head. "Pretty much just work and working out." The gaze she ran over my body made everything tighten. "What are you thinking?" My voice was rougher than it had been just a few seconds ago.

"Just picturing you working out. All muscles and sweat..." She ran the tip of her tongue over her bottom lip. "We should probably change the topic before I forget why it was a good idea to go slow."

Part of me wanted to say fuck that and take her right here on the table, but I'd said I'd respect her decision, and I intended to keep that promise. So, I said one of the few things I knew would kill the mood.

"You really need to call your mom and tell her what's going on. She called Finley and told him she sensed something was wrong because you hadn't talked about me all week."

For a beat, Ashlee just stared at me, and then she nodded. "Perfect topic choice. I'm good now."

Eight

Ashlee

My lips tingled from the goodnight kiss Nate had given me at the door to my building, and I hoped that wouldn't change any time soon. I'd been the one who'd put the brakes on how physical we were, but it had been harder than I'd expected to leave him outside instead of asking him to come up. He'd been smart enough to realize that if he'd come to my apartment door, neither of us would've been strong enough to let me go in alone, and that meant almost as much to me as his apology had.

Despite me knowing that we were right to not fall into bed together, my body throbbed with unmet need. Fortunately, I had the perfect task I needed to do before anything else, and it'd take care of any lingering arousal.

I poured myself something to drink and carried it over to my couch, getting comfortable before I called Mom. We exchanged a greeting, and then I dove right in.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you about what was going on with Nate, forcing you to call Finley."

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“You’ve never been serious with anyone before, and definitely not that fast. I was worried about you.”

“I should have come to you first thing, but I was worried you’d be disappointed in me.” Even as the words left me, a huge weight lifted from my shoulders. I hadn’t realized just how much it had been stressing me out, keeping this from her.

“Why would you think that?” She didn’t sound angry, just concerned and confused.

“Because I’ve always been such a good judge of character, and I thought if I told you what had happened, you’d wonder why I hadn’t seen it coming.”

She was quiet for a few seconds, and then said, “We’re all occasionally blinded when it comes to someone we care about. Sometimes, whatever the issue is can be worked through. Sometimes, it can’t.”

“I think he and I are working through it,” I said. “We talked today. That’s how I found out you’d called Finley. Nate really listened to what I had to say...wait.” I pressed my fingers to my temples. “Let me go back a bit to what the problem was in the first place.”

Mom was silent as I explained, letting me get through everything without interruption, and when I was done, I waited while she processed.

“Do you believe him? About things being different with you and him?”

“I do.” I remembered the sincerity in his expression. “As far as I know, when he’s

done with a girlfriend, he's done. I've never heard of him working to strengthen a relationship once there's been a falling out."

I hoped I wasn't reading too much into it, but if I was, Mom would tell me, no matter if it hurt.

"I asked Finley about him," she said, surprising me with the admission. "I wanted to know what sort of man Nate is, and I wanted to know if, should it come down to it, would Finley defend him or you."

Leave it to my mother to have figured out a way to test both of the new men in my life at the same time, I thought wryly. "And?"

"Finley said that he believes Nate is a good man who's made some questionable decisions when it came to women, but that when Nate's with you, he is, and will continue to become, a better man. Then I asked Finley what would happen if he was wrong and Nate went back to that poor decision-making." Her blue-green eyes glinted with a familiar hardness, the light they took on when Mom had set her mind to something. "He asked if I wanted to come up with the alibi or if he should."

I couldn't really tell if Mom was joking or not, but it wasn't too far out of character for that to have been Finley's actual response.

"I like your father."

At least that was a statement I could agree with whole-heartedly. "Me too."

"We did luck out in that part of the family department."

Something about her tone made me frown, and my gut said whatever it was came from somewhere other than Nate. "What's going on?"

She sighed. “Your grandparents and aunt have left.”

The fact that she referred to them by their relationship to me rather than to her spoke volumes. Plus, there was that sigh, the one that came when she should have been thrilled at the news. “There’s more to that story.”

“There is,” she said, “but you called to talk to me about Nate.”

“I did, but there isn’t really much else to say. We made up, and we’re going to try to take things slow. It’s a work in progress.”

“It always should be.”

“Now, your turn.”

Mom wasn’t only my closest friend. I was hers. Growing up, she’d always had a mother-daughter line, but as I’d become an adult, that line had blurred before disappearing altogether at some point. The only thing we never talked about in detail was what had happened between her and Mona, and I’d never been sure if I even wanted to know the whole truth about that.

“The other night, they all three showed up here, pretending that they wanted to apologize. They even brought dinner with them. Two minutes into the meal, though, and they were asking questions about Nate and Finley that made it even clearer that they were only here for money.”

“Fuck,” I muttered.

“Yeah, that was pretty much my thought too,” Mom said dryly. “My parents tried to be subtle about it at first, but my sister doesn’t know how to be anything but blunt.”

“Did they just expect Nate and Finley to write out a check or something? I mean, I got the whole blackmail aspect from Flora, and while that’s appalling, it at least makes sense. I guess I’m just trying to picture someone walking up to a stranger and asking them to cut a check.”

“Well, Janette wanted to know if either one donated money to colleges because her son Trenton is ‘gifted but the teachers are out to get him’ so he’s barely passing any of his classes.”

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Based on what I'd seen, I wasn't sure if I should pity Trenton or hope that someone came around to give him the kick in the butt I was almost certain he'd need to be able to become a contributing member of society.

"My father is apparently working at a junkyard, but Mom hates it and wants him to open his own fishing shop so she can have a florist shop next to it."

"She wants a florist shop?" Somehow, the sort of upbeat people I pictured working in a place as sweet and pretty as a flower shop didn't mesh with what I'd seen of my grandmother.

"No," Mom said. "She was a nurse and retired a decade ago, I guess, but neither of them saved well for retirement. I'm sure there's some sob story that goes with that too, but I didn't bother asking. As soon as she started talking about how I needed to get Finley to pay back child support because then I could give her and Dad the money to start their shops, I had enough."

My mom had always been laid-back, rarely yelling or even raising her voice, but when she finally snapped, she was a force to be reckoned with. I'd seen her calmly face down homophobic assholes with a smile and a few quiet, cutting words, and walk away from people screaming obscenities, so for her to have crossed that line, things had to have been bad.

"I told them that I'd never let them ask either man for a dime, and if they tried to, I'd make sure everyone in their hometown knew that their lesbian daughter had a daughter out of wedlock with a gay man. See how many people like Janette's cheesy potatoes after that."

I couldn't help it, I laughed. "How did they take that?"

Mom chuckled, and the sound eased some of the ache around my heart. It'd been awful when Mona had walked out on us, but Mom and I'd still had each other, our home, our neighborhood. We might not have been extremely close to a lot of people, but we still had our community. Mom had lost her entire family, her home, everything she'd known for the first twenty years of her life. For the first few days since they'd arrived, she must've felt like she could possibly be getting some of that back.

"About as well as you imagine. It was good, though. Gave me the chance to say all the things I wish I'd said all those years ago but hadn't had the courage. I told them that I was proud of the woman I'd become and of the daughter I'd raised, all without any help from them. I said that they could go back to their narrow-minded, bigoted little world, and know that I would never think about them again."

Every time I thought I knew exactly how amazing my mother was, she went and did something badass like that.

"I'm sorry that you won't have the chance to have an extended family." Her voice had grown quieter. "I know you've always wanted that."

"Don't be. I don't want to be a part of any family that embraces that sort of hate. Besides, I have a father now who is better than anything I could have imagined."

"He is pretty great."

"Was all this going on yesterday when we were supposed to have brunch?" I asked. "I would've come over and used a few choice words of my own."

"You didn't need to get involved in all that. Family stuff can get so ugly sometimes. I

never want you around that.”

I could have reminded her that I was an adult, not a child who needed protecting anymore, but I knew my age didn’t matter to her. I was her daughter, and she’d protect me as long as she was alive.

“I promise I’ll make it this Sunday,” she said. “My treat, for standing you up.”

She sounded a little stiff, as if she wasn’t quite completely behind her attempt at humor, but if I’d been dealing with that yesterday, I’d probably feel the same way. Especially since she’d been worried about me. My guilt at that would probably prompt me to pick up the bill at brunch before she could.

We really were two peas in a pod sometimes.

Nine

Nate

That goodnight kiss had kept me awake for hours last night, most of my thoughts alternating between pride that I’d kept my promise and frustration that I hadn’t tried to change her mind. It’d been the right thing to do, letting her go up to her apartment by herself, but that didn’t mean I’d wanted her any less.

When I’d finally fallen asleep, I had one of those intense sex dreams that almost seemed real. Waking up at five, I’d spent a little extra time in the shower to take care of myself before heading into work early. Keeping busy at the office was a better idea than anything I could be doing at home.

Besides, I had someone I needed to talk to, and I wanted to do it face-to-face.

I was almost done with my emails when I heard Finley coming down the hall. I wouldn't have been surprised if he'd come in to give me another warning about Ashlee, but he didn't even call out his usual morning greeting, which solidified my decision to talk to him first thing. I didn't want to lose my closest friend because I'd been an idiot.

I gave him a couple minutes to settle into his office before I headed over. His door was open, but I rapped on it with my knuckles anyway. He glanced up, and for a beat, I thought he was going to send me away. If he did, I didn't know what I'd do, but fortunately for me, he was a much better man than I was.

"Come in."

I sat down across from him instead of standing like I usually did, and that seemed to catch his attention. I followed that with the last two words I knew he'd expect to hear from me. "Thank you."

An eyebrow went up, and he leaned back in his chair, giving me his full attention. "Go on."

"Thank you for talking to me yesterday. I needed it." I plucked a piece of imaginary lint from my pants. "And I want you to know that I've made things right with Ashlee."

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“I’m glad,” he said, “but you need to be more careful with her. She’s special.”

“She is,” I agreed. “I’m damn lucky to have her.”

“You are.” A small smile played at the corners of his mouth. “And when you’re not being an ass, she’s lucky to have you too.”

A weight I hadn’t noticed I was carrying slid from my shoulders as I realized I hadn’t done any lasting damage to my friendship with Finley. I couldn’t be reckless like that anymore, just doing what I wanted, how I wanted, and expecting him to take my side. He’d always had my back, and I hadn’t let myself see how often I’d taken him for granted. He might still want to watch out for me, but he now had Ashlee, and I couldn’t blame him for wanting to look after his daughter.

“I want this to work with her,” I admitted. “I’ve never cared about that with anyone.”

“She’s good for you,” he said.

While he didn’t add it, I heard the opposite statement as well, a warning that I needed to heed.

I wasn’t necessarily good for her.

But I planned on doing my best to, at the very least, not drag her down. First on that list was making up to her for my asinine behavior last week. After lunch, I’d reach out to her with an idea I already had forming in my mind.

* * *

I sent her a text a few minutes before she usually went to lunch, asking her to meet me in the lobby. If she was surprised by the invitation, I couldn't see it in her reply. Granted, she'd simply said okay, but one word could say a lot. I just hoped my plan would go over well, and she wouldn't think I was trying to push her.

I wasn't used to being this nervous when I wanted to take a woman somewhere, but I supposed that was a good thing. It meant I was looking at her and our relationship as different than anything else I'd been a part of.

The moment I stepped off the elevator and our eyes met, her face lit up, and I decided that I wanted to see that expression on her face more often. All the time, if possible.

One step at a time, no matter how much I wanted to rush things.

"Did you sleep well last night?" I asked Ashlee as I leaned down to kiss her cheek.

Her eyes widened a bit, but she didn't pull away. I was a little surprised at the public affection myself, but I was glad I'd done it. I didn't want her to ever feel like I was hiding her or what we were.

"I did," she said. "Did you?"

"Not really." I said it with a smile. "You were doing...things in my dreams."

"Things," she repeated as her cheeks turned pink. "Are you going to tell me what those things were?"

"Not yet, but I promise I will." I was already thinking of a plan for that. "I'd like you to have lunch with me today. I have reservations for us." I held out my hand.

“I’d enjoy that,” she said, linking our fingers together.

As we walked out to the car, I went over what I’d say once we got to the restaurant. This week ended with a three-day weekend from Friday after work until Monday evening, and I wanted her to spend it at my house in the Hamptons with me.

We needed some time away from all the chaos, time to spend just with the two of us, no worries about work or family, or any of the other distractions we had around here. I’d promise her that if she didn’t want us having sex this weekend, we wouldn’t. I’d sleep in one of my many guest rooms. Not ideal, but if it allowed us to move forward, I’d be happy to do it.

I wanted this more than I’d wanted anything in a long time, and I hoped that she would want it too.

Ten

Ashlee

Lunch with Nateon Monday had been great, and his surprise trip sounded divine, especially after a crazy week where we’d barely had time to do more than talk for a few minutes on the phone. Then a few minutes before I was ready to leave for work, someone knocked on my door.

The young man who handed me the box politely declined when I offered him a tip, saying that the person who sent the gift had already tipped generously. That alone was enough to confirm who’d sent them, even without a note. But there’d been a note. More than a note, actually, but I opened the box first.

A beautiful bouquet of red and white roses and baby’s breath lay nestled in tissue paper, filling my entire apartment with a rich scent almost immediately. I took a

minute to admire them before turning to look for a vase. Only after I had them in water did I pick up the note.

Le soleil, I hope you enjoy the flowers. Ask your friends across the hall to water them while we're gone.

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I had a feeling that comment was as much Nate's way of letting me know that he wasn't going to be weird about Perry and Gary anymore as it was about watering my flowers.

I would like us to leave straight from work, but I'll have my car if you need me to take you home first. I have included instructions for you to follow today, should you so choose.

As if I'd be able to refuse.

I wanted him even more than ever. Enough that I was nearly one hundred percent certain that we'd end up in bed at some point this weekend. I could've used that as an excuse not to go, but I wanted us to have this time together.

The second envelope in the box holds some of the details from the dream I had about you earlier this week. I want you to read one slip every hour and know that we're going to choose them, one at a time, for us to do over the next three days. Whatever we don't get to, we'll set aside for another time. Don't read them beforehand. One an hour.

My skin tingled as I reached for the second envelope. I could only imagine the sort of things that were written there. Nate wasn't just exceptional in bed. He was creative too. He'd said at one point that he was going to be the only teacher I had when it came to sex, and he'd been doing a bang-up job of it so far.

I closed my eyes and muttered a curse, not because I disliked what he wanted me to do, but because I knew how insanely horny I was going to be by the end of the day.

At least him no longer being my actual boss meant I didn't need to feel guilty about doing exactly what I wanted to do and follow his instructions to the letter.

I put the envelope into my purse, picked up the suitcase I'd be taking with me to the Hamptons, and then made a last check around to make sure I hadn't forgotten anything. Gary and Perry had already said they'd watch my place for me, but I'd text them later to tell them about my flowers. I didn't know how well they'd hold up while I was gone, but at least the guys would get to appreciate them too. Besides, I had a feeling this wasn't the last time Nate would buy me flowers.

When I arrived at work, I waited until I was settled at my desk in relative privacy before I opened the envelope and pulled out my first slip of paper.

You lean against the window, breasts pressed against the cool glass, nipples hard. I take you from behind, daring any voyeurs outside to sneak a peek at the beauty that is you in the throes of pleasure.

Fuck. Me.

I'd known he was articulate, but that description was...wow. Fucking wow.

This was going to be harder than I thought.

That particular statement was proved over and over again every time I pulled out one of those little pieces of paper. Each one of them painted a picture of sensual decadence, depravity some might have said, especially the ones that delved into the BDSM side of sexuality. I'd never imagined that I'd not only read about those things but would look forward to them. Things that were rougher than what we'd done so far.

And every single one of them made my thighs clench.

The last one was still dancing through my mind as I tidied up my desk at the end of the day.

You're so beautiful on your knees and elbows, all that bare skin. Your wrists are bound together with soft leather and similar strips tie your ankles to your thighs, making it a little more difficult to balance. Your pussy glistens with moisture, and I can't wait to taste it.

I could picture it all, almost feel it. The way his fingers would brush against my body as he put the restraints into place. The heat of his skin coming into contact with mine. The vulnerability and lack of control that gave everything an edge that nothing else in my life had.

By the time I reached the lobby, my insides were twisted up in knots, but the good kind. The knots that came from anticipation. I felt like if I had to wait too long, I was going to explode.

Fortunately for me, Nate arrived less than two minutes later, his eyes scanning the lobby until they connected with mine. Everything and everyone else faded into the background, and he walked toward me with a purpose that made a thrill go down my spine.

"Glad to see your tyrant of a boss didn't keep you over." He winked at me as he kissed my cheek.

I reveled in his warmth. "I'm glad you didn't work late, either."

"Perks of being the boss."

"Thank you for my flowers."

“You’re welcome.”

He tucked my arm around his, and we headed for the parking garage where his car was waiting. My bag was already inside thanks to Chris Starr, one of the building’s security guards. Nate had sent Chris down shortly after I’d arrived at work so I didn’t have to deal with co-workers who were already far too curious about my relationship with Nate. We weren’t hiding it, but the parts we wanted to keep private weren’t anyone else’s business, especially when there was always the chance that someone would sell any kind of juicy information to any number of paparazzi.

We kept the conversation light as Nate made his way out of the city. The traffic didn’t seem to bother him, but it was heavy enough that I didn’t want to be a distraction. We had less than thirty minutes left in the drive when something shifted between us with a single question.

“Did you follow the instructions I sent with the flowers?”

“I did.” I smoothed down my skirt.

“And?”

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I hesitated, unsure of what he was really asking me. Did he want to know what I thought about the scenes or how I felt about the ‘game’ he wanted to play with them?

He reached over and put his hand over mine. “Did they make you wet, le soleil? When you imagined us acting them out, were you tempted to touch yourself?” He glanced at me, the heat in his gaze scorching every inch of my skin. “Did you touch yourself?”

I flushed. “No. I mean, I didn’t, but I wanted to.”

His voice grew rough. “Do you still want to?”

My pulse quickened as I realized where he was likely going with that question. “Yes.”

He took my hand and inched up my skirt until it barely covered anything. Air rasped in and out of my lungs, each breath full of the sandalwood and spice scents that clung to Nate. When he slid our hands between my thighs, I parted my legs and hoped he’d take advantage of his hand’s position. He didn’t. As he pulled his hand away, I experienced a moment of disappointment, but his next words changed that.

“Touch yourself, but don’t come.”

Even though I’d suspected that’s where the conversation was going, it still caught me by surprise.

“If that’s too fast, just tell me.”

I shook my head. I wasn't quite ready to have actual sex with him again, but this I could do. "It's not too fast, Mr. Lexington."

He glanced at me, his normally mocha brown eyes almost black with desire. Then his gaze dropped to my lap, and I pulled my skirt up far enough that he could see the black satin panties I'd worn especially for today. I didn't let myself dwell on the fact that we were on a road with other cars or that, if Nate got pulled over for some reason, I'd find myself in an awkward position. I had to trust that he'd watch out for me.

I slid my hand under the waistband of my panties and let my fingers travel south, through my soft red curls, gathering moisture as they went.

"Are you wet?"

I nodded as I answered, "Yes, Mr. Lexington."

I sucked in a breath the second my fingers skimmed over my clit, but I didn't linger there. I'd had too much sexual tension building all day. It wouldn't take much at all to set me off, and I wanted to make Nate proud of me.

I was tempted to close my eyes as my fingers slipped down and then back up, never staying in a single place, but rather always on the move. I didn't give in to the temptation, however. I liked watching Nate watching me. How his grip on the steering wheel tightened until his knuckles were white and how each glance grew longer until the car drifted to the shoulder, the rumble strip's warning the only thing able to jerk him back to driving.

It took a lot for me to not push myself to release, and by the time we were turning into a driveway, I'd gone to the edge so many times that I didn't know if I could force myself back again.

I had the vague impression of a large front lawn with plenty of trees, and then of a rustic two-story house, but didn't take in many of the details because Nate was stopping the car and putting it into park. All I could think about was getting him inside the house and then inside me. I'd forgotten why I'd wanted to go slow in the first place.

The moment I unbuckled my seat belt, he hauled me onto his lap, his mouth covering mine even as his hands slid up my bare legs to grab my ass. I ground down on him, desperate for friction that didn't come from my fingers, and the erection straining against his zipper was exactly what I needed. His teeth latched onto my bottom lip, and I moaned at the bite of pain mingling with all of the other sensations, threatening to drive me crazy.

"Need..." I whimpered as I grabbed the front of his shirt. "Need."

"What do you need, le soleil? Tell me."

"Come. Need to come. Please." I sounded desperate but couldn't bring myself to care.

"Then do it," he growled, fingers digging into my muscles hard enough to bruise. "Get yourself off like this."

I nodded, my closed eyes doing nothing to block my awareness of him. The scent of him surrounded me, and everywhere his body was in contact with mine, it hummed. My leg muscles burned as I rocked myself back and forth, faster and faster until I exploded with a cry. His arms went around me as his hips jerked, pressing against the sensitive part of me until a second, smaller orgasm rolled over me. He held me as my body trembled, his hand making circles where it rested on my back.

His chuckle was the first thing to break the silence, and the vibration of his chest

under my cheek made me smile. Still, I had to ask, “What’s so funny?”

“This was not how I saw things going.” He kissed the top of my head.

“You told me to touch myself in front of you, but I wasn’t allowed to come. What did you think would happen?”

“I planned on getting you off with my fingers, if you’d let me, but I am so glad things didn’t go that way. As hot as fingering you would’ve been, seeing you riding me like that, fully clothed and desperate to get off, was one of the sexiest things I’ve ever seen.”

I raised my head, surprised. “Really?”

“The results speak for themselves.” When I gave him a questioning look, he laughed again. “You had me coming in my pants like a damned horny teenager.”

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It was only then that I realized I could feel the wet fabric between us. Apparently, that mess wasn't entirely my fault.

“We’re going to need to sleep in different bedrooms,” he said with a rueful smile. “At least for tonight. I don’t think I could handle sleeping next to you without wanting to break that ‘no sex’ rule.”

Unfortunately, I had to agree. As much as I wanted us to spend the entire weekend naked and fucking, it would be better for our relationship in the long run if we made it about more than sex.

Dammit.

Eleven

Nate

Staying in one of the guest rooms while Ashlee slept in my master bedroom required more self-control than I’d ever needed to use with a woman. When I was having sex, I could hold back because being a Dominant was part of what I needed sexually, but what Ashlee and I were doing wasn’t the same sort of denial.

Granted, I’d gotten off in the car earlier, but that hadn’t made me want her any less. Hell, pretty much everywhere I looked I could see something I wanted to bend her over, lay her down on, or fuck her against.

The thought that was keeping me sane was that I needed to focus on the long-term. I

could fuck her now and probably lose her, or I could be patient and get to keep her. I wasn't quite letting myself think of words like forever or marriage, but I also wasn't planning the future without her or wondering about who I'd be pursuing next.

She was still sleeping when I made my way to the kitchen, and I had breakfast nearly done by the time she appeared, showered and dressed, and smelling better even than the Belgian waffles I was in the process of making.

"Mmm." She came over to stand next to me. "Those look delicious."

"Almost as delicious as you." I kissed the top of her head. The atmosphere was quite domestic, but the thought didn't bother me in the least. The realization encouraged me. It was proof I could change, that what she and I had could work.

"I'll set the table," she said with a smile, her hand resting on my arm for an all too brief moment. "Plates?"

I directed her around the kitchen as I finished, and everything was ready by the time the last waffle came off the griddle. I'd had meals with women in the past, but those had been room service in hotels on the rare occasions we'd stayed overnight together. Making the food, then sitting at a table in one of my homes was completely different, and it seemed like a positive direction to take this new relationship.

"Do we have anything planned for today?" she asked. "Or are we going to wing it?"

"Have you heard of Longhouse Reserve?"

She shook her head. "What is it?"

"It's a garden." I took a bite of my waffle before continuing. "But not like what you'd picture. There are flowers and other plants and trees, but there are also sculptures.

Sixteen acres to wander through, and today is supposed to be absolutely beautiful.”

“It sounds amazing.”

“It is,” I said. “Thanks to Finley, Manhattan Records is one of their top donors. He wanted us to contribute to the arts and to the environment, and this is one of the ways we do.”

“Is it one of your...things?” She was still smiling as she asked it, but it wasn’t quite as bright as before.

I couldn’t blame her, not after how rocky things had been. “You’re the first woman I’ll take there, and the first one I’ve had here.” Even though she didn’t express any doubt, I continued, “Anytime I wanted to bring a woman to the Hamptons, I took her to a beach condo I rented specifically for those times. This place and my home in the city have always been off-limits.”

She looked around, taking in the vaulted ceilings and airy, open floorplan. Six bedrooms and bathrooms on the second floor, and more than enough space on the first. She hadn’t even seen the acreage or patio. Plus the pool. I hoped she didn’t think it was too ostentatious. I’d actually done most of the decorating myself, with only Finley’s input in a couple places.

“Your father’s the only one besides me who’s been here,” I added. She still had a question in her eyes. “You can ask me anything.”

“Why did you buy such a large vacation home if you’re the only one who uses it?”

“You know, I’ve never really thought about it,” I said honestly. “I suppose, somewhere in my mind, I knew I’d eventually want to share it with my family...and someone special.” I reached across the table and squeezed her hand. “It’s not a line, I

promise.”

“I’ll bet your niece and nephew would love it here.” She turned her hand and threaded her fingers between mine. “Maybe we can have them up here this summer.”

The faint waver in her voice tugged at that protective part of my Dominant nature. I lifted our hands and brushed a kiss across her knuckles. She needed to know that I was looking toward the future too, and she was in it. We were in it. Together. “That’s a great idea. We’ll have to plan that.”

I’d always been the type of person who liked to stay busy. Maybe a couple times a month, I’d watch a movie or a game, but even then, I was usually working on something at the same time. Dates had been specific outings with a path toward sex at the end. I took women to events, clubs, and restaurants. On the rare occasion we went to the theater or to see a movie, I had some sexual game we were playing the entire time. I didn’t like to sit still, and I didn’t like to just leisurely walk around.

But spending two hours at Longhouse Reserve, holding hands as we strolled around, looking at sculptures and flowers and landscaping, I didn’t experience a single second of boredom. Art had always been something that I could take or leave, though I’d thought I understood the value it brought to society. Seeing Ashlee’s face light up, the overwhelmed expression she wore when something particularly spoke to her...I appreciated the place on a whole other level, watching her experience it for the first time.

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We talked about it the entire way back to the house and while we waited for our steaks to grill. Dinner was simple, but that made it feel even more special to me. Ashlee wasn't insisting on five-star restaurants and elaborately prepared meals. No outrageously expensive wine or preening under the jealous glares of other restaurant patrons.

Grilled steak and vegetables, good beer, and the enjoyment of eating on the back patio and watching the sunset.

I'd never experienced the peace and contentment I felt while sitting next to Ashlee. Was this what it could be like all the time? I wasn't naïve enough to think that we'd never have another disagreement or that neither of us –most likely me – would ever do something stupid, but even the best times I'd spent with other women had been nothing compared to today.

"It's absolutely beautiful out here." Ashlee broke the silence. "I love New York, I really do, but there's something to be said for being somewhere you can actually watch the sun go down and twilight set in without all of the lights and buildings and noises of the city."

I reached over and took her hand, her fingers fitting between mine as if they'd been made to come together like that. I used to scoff at people who made those sorts of comments, as if there was anything more to it than bodies created to fit together for procreation and pleasure. Being with Ashlee had changed so much of how I saw the world, and I didn't know how to express it to her. Or if I could. The idea terrified me, but the thought of her walking away because she thought I was indifferent was far worse.

There was one thing I could say now that would give her at least an idea of what she meant to me.

“Have you ever wondered why I call youle soleil?”

“I always mean to look it up, but we’re usually in the middle of something that distracts me until the next time.”

I laughed, my thumb moving back and forth across the soft skin of her hand. “If you had, you would’ve found out that it’s French and meansthe sun.” I raised our hands and kissed hers.

Her entire face seemed to soften. “That’s sweet.”

I could have let it go with that, but I wanted her to know the whole story. “My grandfather on my mother’s side was a Scotsman named Ian Wallace. When he was in his early twenties, he went backpacking through Portugal, Spain, and France. While in France, he met a woman named Delphine, and the two of them fell in love. He called herle soleilbecause he needed her like he needed the sun. They married after only a few months, and two years later, my mom was born. Grandmom died giving birth to my mom.”

“Oh, Nate.” Ashlee’s hand tightened around mine.

“As far as I know, Granddad never even dated another woman. He raised Mom by himself and made sure she knew all about her mother. He told all of us kids too. He loved all of us, but he and I were especially close.” I swallowed hard. This next part wasn’t easy for me to say. “He had a heart attack when I was fourteen and was gone before the ambulance got to the hospital. I didn’t get the chance to tell him goodbye.”

Ashlee stood and came over to my chair, letting me pull her onto my lap without a

word. She leaned against my chest, wrapping her arms around my neck as I embraced her. Minutes passed before I spoke again, admitting something that I'd never allowed myself to acknowledge.

"I'd always been pretty independent, but after he died, I pulled away from everyone. I'd grown up seeing how much he missed Grandmom, how she'd been the center of his life, and how her death had devastated him. He was a great man and never blamed or resented Mom for Grandmom's death like some men might have, but that pain had always been there. When he died, it was like I caught a glimpse of what it meant to lose someone who meant so much to me, and I never wanted to experience that again."

I slid my hand along Ashlee's side, fingers slipping under her shirt to touch bare skin. There wasn't anything sexual about it. I just needed the comfort it brought. Talking about Granddad was harder than I'd thought it would be.

"I've never called anyonele soleilbefore. I honestly didn't even realize that I'd called you it at first. After that, it'd just seemed...right. I'd never understood it until then." I kissed the top of her head. "I wish he could've met you. He would've liked you."

"I know I would've liked him too." Her hand dropped to my chest, fingers curling in my shirt. "And I know he would be proud of you."

I wasn't so sure of that, but I believed he'd be proud of the man I was trying to be. Right then and there, I made a promise to myself that I would do everything I could to become the man he'd always wanted me to be.

Twelve

Ashlee

The sun. He called me the sun. Because it was what his grandfather had called his grandmother. He'd admired and loved them both, individually and as a couple. It was the highest compliment I could've been given, and I had absolutely no idea how to react to it.

Well, on the outside. On the inside, I was thrilled. It was proof that he was feeling things as deeply as I was. But I wasn't sure he was willing to admit it yet. Not in so many words anyway. I didn't need it spelled out for me. The fact that he'd chosen to share something so private and special was enough.

"You don't think it's weird?" he asked as we made our way back toward his car. "That it's my Grandmom's nickname?"

"Not at all." I stretched up to kiss his cheek. "I think it's sweet."

He gave me one of those rare, full-fledged smiles that made his entire face light up. My stomach fluttered, and I leaned against him. The more I got to know him, really know him, the more I saw what a great man he really was. The face he presented to the world wasn't the real Nathaniel Lexington. This was.

"If I ask you something, will you give me an honest answer? Not what you think I want to hear, but what you actually think." His voice was serious, but not somber.

"I will," I agreed with equal seriousness.

"Are you enjoying yourself?" He stopped, tucking some loose hair behind my ear. "Here, this weekend, with me?"

I reached up and put my hand on his cheek. "Very much."

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Another smile. “Good.”

“Are you?” I asked. “And be honest.”

He kissed my forehead. “Very much.”

We started walking again, crossing into the Sculpture Court where other couples strolled along, having similar conversations, and laughing in similar ways. Here, he wasn’t an insanely wealthy CEO of a record label, and I wasn’t an assistant in the A&R department. We were just another couple on a date.

We talked as we walked, about nothing and everything. Little things like favorite songs and food. Medium size things about art. We left the big things for future discussions. We were progressing to something real, but that didn’t mean every conversation needed to be serious. Honestly, after all the drama that had happened since we met, we needed a day like this.

When we arrived back at the house, the ease between us remained, and we put together the makings of a light dinner. It wasn’t until we were cleaning up that something shifted. He came up behind me as I reached up to put away the basket we’d used, his arms sliding around my waist. I shivered as his front pressed against my back.

“It’s barely evening,” he said, putting his lips against my ear. “What should we do for the rest of the night?”

His palms heated my skin through my shirt where they rested on my stomach. He

wasn't doing anything overtly sexual, but a single touch or look from him never failed to turn me on, not even when I was mad at him. We hadn't set any specific schedule for us to start having sex again, but I didn't doubt he'd been thinking along the same lines as me, that we'd be in bed together before the end of this trip.

I leaned back against him, smiling as he tightened his arms around me. "I think we should do what you told me we would be doing."

"And what would that be?" He nipped the top of my ear.

"Taking from that envelope you gave me. Acting out one of the things that you dreamed."

He went completely still behind me. "Are you sure?"

I nodded. "Do you have a room here? A room where we can...play?"

He stepped back and took my hand. "This way."

His fingers threaded between mine the same way he had all day, but now, with the promise of more coming, there was a different sort of heat to it. We went up the stairs and down the hall to the last room on the left. With as many rooms as this place had, it was no surprise I hadn't found the playroom. Plus, there was the fact that this door had one of those electronic locks on it and I had no idea what the code was.

"The lock's for privacy rather than security," he said as he punched in a series of numbers slow enough that I could follow. "The code is my birthday."

I stored the information away for future use, promising myself that I'd make a point of doing something for his birthday. Right now, however, I was more interested in what we were going to be doing in the immediate future. Then the door swung open,

and all I could do was stare, trying to take it all in.

The playroom in his penthouse looked like a specialized guest room. But this one? It didn't look like any place I'd want to put a guest. Not that it was scary. It was actually like an S&M version of the scene in *Beauty & the Beast* where the Beast gives Belle the library. Not because the room actually looked like the library, but more because I felt him watching to see what my reaction would be.

Amazing natural light came through a skylight and a set of French doors. More toys were on the walls than there had been in the city. Swaths of colorful cloth masterfully hung and draped, somehow managing to complement and contrast with the wooden paneling.

"Wow." I followed him inside, still looking at all there was to see.

A large bed, easily the same size as the one in his penthouse. A pair of padded benches, one where the top was covered with soft-looking fabric, the other covered on the lower part where someone – well, me, I supposed – would end up kneeling. Soft leather restraints fastened to one wall and hard metal ones next to them. Something that looked like a hurdle I'd see on a track, except thicker with a slightly pointier top. I had absolutely no idea what that was supposed to be, but I suspected Nate would show me at some point, and I'd enjoy it as much as I'd enjoyed everything else we'd done.

"I know I'd said we'd pick out one of the scenes I wrote down, but there's one I haven't been able to get out of my head." He took my other hand and turned me to face him. He spoke slowly, his eyes darkening as each word dripped with sensuality. "You, hands and knees, wrists tied together, ankles tied to your thighs."

Oh. That one.

I remembered that one.

“Say something.” He brushed the back of his hand down my cheek. “It’s okay if that’s too much. It was just a thought.”

I put my finger on his lips, and his eyebrows shot up. “I’m sorry, Mr. Lexington, but I think you misunderstood my silence. I was just remembering how I felt when I read your description of that scene.”

He took my hand again. “And what did you feel?”

I wet my bottom lip. “So far beyond turned on that it almost hurt.”

“Good answer, le soleil.”

He bent his head and took my mouth with the same confidence and intensity that he showed every time he kissed me. Even his gentlest kiss made me weak in my knees. He gathered me in his arms, pulling me tight against him until I could feel every inch of his hardness against my softness. Even though it had been two weeks since we’d last had sex and his erection pressed against my belly, telling me just how much he wanted me, he took his time, tongue sweeping between my lips.

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We kept kissing as we shed our clothes, palms and fingers moving from cloth to bare skin. Little tingles of electricity jumped from one cell to another, racing along my nerves and heating every inch of me. When the backs of my legs came in contact with the bed, Nate took a step back.

“You are so fucking gorgeous.” His voice was rough, and I smiled, loving that I was the one who made him sound like that.

“Right back at you.” I let my gaze run down his body, devouring every inch of him. I doubted I’d ever get tired of looking at him, and it wasn’t only because of his magnificent body. He was a good man, no matter how much he might pretend that wasn’t the case.

“On the bed. Stay at the edge.”

“Yes, Mr. Lexington.”

I did as I was told, swinging my hips as I settled and earned a muttered curse from Nate. A shiver of anticipation went down my spine as he positioned me, his hands efficient as they restrained me in the exact way he’d promised. Keeping my balance was more difficult, but it kept me from thinking too much about what I must look like. I was into the sex that was coming but not into the headspace I needed to be just yet.

“You’re thinking too hard.” His tone was teasing as he ran his hands over my ass and up my back. “Close your eyes and let me get you there.”

I did, gasping as his tongue moved over my sensitive skin. I'd almost forgotten just how beyond good it felt to have that soft, strong muscle sliding between my folds and down to my clit. Unable to keep still, I started to squirm and lost my balance. For a few seconds, I thought I was going to fall, but Nate was there to hold me steady, his thumbs kneading my ass.

I swore as he slipped two fingers inside me, twisting them until the tips rubbed against my g-spot. Pleasure flooded through me, coiling tighter and tighter until the back and forth flicks of his tongue on my clit drove me over the edge.

I came with a cry, struggling against my restraints as my muscles tried to move the way they usually did when I climaxed, and only Nate kept me from tipping over, grounding me. Securely tethered to him, I floated in my subspace, dimly aware that Nate was ripping open a condom wrapper. Then the blunt head of his cock nudged against me, giving me a split second of warning before he filled me entirely, completely, perfectly.

He held himself still, whether for his benefit or mine, I didn't know, but I wasn't going to question it. I wanted to savor every second of this moment, of that rare sense of completion that only came with him. A dangerous sentiment I knew all too well, but one I was incapable of ignoring. Because it wasn't only physical. He could read my body in a way I'd never imagined, helping me unlock a part of me that I hadn't even known existed.

His hand tangled in my hair, pulling my head up until the strain on my neck was almost painful. A hand curling over my shoulder provided the leverage he needed to slowly withdraw, only to slam back into me again, pushing the air from my lungs in a gasp and grunt.

"Too long," he groaned. "It's been far too long since I was last inside you."

I would've expressed my agreement, but I wasn't sure I could form words yet, and the grip on my hair kept me from nodding. It didn't matter because my body said it for me. My muscles were a quivering mess, and it wouldn't take much for me to come again. Unable to grab the sheets as Nate started driving into me with deep, hard strokes, my fingers curled inward, nails digging into my palms.

The pain in my hands reached out to merge with the rest. The ache in my muscles and joints from being held in one position too long. The prickling of my scalp every time Nate pulled a little harder on my hair.

I yelped as Nate's hand came down on my ass, adding a whole new element to the sensations threatening to overwhelm me. He reached underneath me and grabbed one of my breasts, squeezing it for a few seconds before turning his attention to my nipple. Pinch and twist, repeat. Then the other, his hand releasing my hair to fall forward, hiding my face as my head dropped.

"I need you to come, le soleil. I need to feel you clamp down on my cock hard enough to hurt."

His fingers wrapped around my throat before I even realized his hand had moved again. The pressure he applied wasn't enough to cut off my air, but the hint of possible danger was enough to make me shudder. I teetered on the precipice, but when his thumb pushed into my ass, I came, screaming his name. At least I thought it was his name. All I knew for certain was that he followed me and that I had to acknowledge that I was in far deeper than I'd thought.

Three words remained hovering in my mind as Nate slumped over me, his arms wrapping around me as we moved to the bed together. I wasn't going to say them, but I knew I'd have to admit them to myself soon.

Thirteen

Nate

I liked seeing her here in my home, and the fact that it didn't surprise me...well, that surprised me. I enjoyed spending time with her even outside the bedroom, and that in itself was new. Having her in my space should have driven me nuts.

Even as a kid, I'd hated when anyone would come into my room or any other space I'd claimed. Having a roommate in college had driven me so crazy that I'd charmed my way into getting a single room by sophomore year. Most people just assumed that I'd wanted privacy so I could have sex without having to work around a roommate, and I'd been happy to let that rumor float around.

"You have to let me make you waffles from scratch sometime," Ashlee said as she used her last bite of waffle to wipe up syrup on her plate. "And there's this amazing maple syrup place that sells all sorts of different flavors at a farmer's market only a couple miles from where I grew up."

"You and your mom went there a lot?" I asked as I took the last piece of bacon.

"Once a week from spring to summer. We tried to get all of our produce there, but the one thing we never failed to get was maple syrup."

"My dad's idea of a well-balanced meal is adding peach cobbler to his pork chops and baked potato," I offered.

"Not steak?"

I snorted. "Too expensive to have more than twice a month."

"Especially with three growing boys."

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“If you’ve never seen a teenage boy eat, you miss out on trying to figure out where he can possibly put so much.”

We were both still laughing when my phone rang. A glance at the screen said it was Finley calling, and since he knew Ashlee and I had gone away for the weekend, I knew whatever he needed had to be important. He wouldn’t have interrupted otherwise.

I’d barely greeted him before he started talking, his urgency processing even before the words did.

“They went to a reporter, all three of them. Some of it’s true, but some of it’s just plain vindictive, but I don’t know which parts people will believe. There’s a lot of shit out there now, and it’s going viral.”

“Wait. Hold on a minute. Who’s they?” I suspected what his answer would be, but on the off chance I was wrong, I had to ask.

“Flora, Roma, and Calah.”

“Fuck.”

“Indeed.”

Ashlee reached over and touched my hand, her face showing her concern. I held up a finger, and she nodded, settling back in her chair to wait for me to finish gathering the information I needed.

“Have you talked to Jailene?”

“Not yet,” he said. “I wanted you to hear it from me before the two of you stumbled across it. And...” His voice trailed off.

Shit. Finley never hesitated to tell me anything when it came to what he thought I needed to know.

“It’s bad, Nate. They’re making accusations that could ruin you personally, let alone what it’ll do to you professionally. We’re talking legal ramifications.”

I closed my eyes and put my elbow on the table, resting my forehead on my hand. I didn’t need him to expound on that at all. I could guess the sorts of things they were spreading. A lot of the sexual things I was into could be spun into something depraved with little effort.

All they had to do was hint that I’d coerced them into a host of various kinks, and I could find myself on the losing end of three nasty civil suits. And that’d be the best-case scenario. Criminal charges wouldn’t be out of the question, not to mention the women who’d try to take advantage of the situation.

What really pissed me off was that their vendetta would take away resources from real cases of discrimination, harassment, and assault. Even when I was being the biggest asshole in the world, I’d supported the MeToo movement and spoke out against people who used their power and wealth to take advantage of others. The fact that I could end up being called out as one of those men made my stomach turn to ice. I was far from perfect, but they would make me out to be a monster.

“Call Jailene and fill her in,” I said with a sigh. “Let her know I’ll call her this afternoon to start talking strategy. Ashlee and I will come straight back tomorrow morning.”

“That’s the other reason I called,” Finley said. “I assume you were already planning on telling her.”

“I was.” I wanted to hang up before he could tell me how I’d fucked up his daughter’s life. “You aren’t saying I shouldn’t?”

“No. It’s just...she needs to call Roberta and warn her. Sooner is better than later.”

“I’ve known you long enough to know that you’re hedging. Spit it out.”

It was his turn to sigh. “Flora named Ashlee in some of her accusations.”

I let out a string of expletives that had Ashlee reaching for my hand. “How bad is it?”

“Bad. Flora said that you called them both into your office and demanded they perform all sorts of sexual acts with each other and with you, or you’d fire them. Roma put in her two cents, saying Ashlee had thrown herself at Zed Hipwood first. I guess that was how they figured they could make it so that Ashlee wouldn’t be considered a victim too. They’re not just after you.”

I wanted to punch something or someone. I’d never even been tempted to hit a woman before, but those three were seriously testing me.

“Should I call Stu and Suzie? Technically, with Ashlee being a freelancer, they’d have to be the ones going to Jailene on Ashlee’s behalf.”

Shit. I hadn’t thought of that. I should’ve just left Ashlee’s job the way it was and told everyone who didn’t like it to fuck off.

“Give them a head’s up before you talk to Jailene so everyone’s on the same page when she calls them.”

There was a moment of silence before Finley spoke again. “This isn’t your fault, Nate. You aren’t the man they’re making you out to be.”

“Maybe not,” I pressed the heel of my hand into my eye, “but I’ve never been the man you thought I was.”

“You’re starting to be.”

I didn’t have anything to say to that. The call ended without much else said, and then I turned to face Ashlee. If she ended up hating me because of this, I didn’t know what I’d do.

“Just say it straight out,” she said, her fingers tightening around mine. “Don’t try to pull punches or soften anything. I can take it.”

“I have no doubt.” I managed a weak smile before I told her everything, hating myself every second. When I got to the end, I added, “I am so sorry for this, le soleil. I didn’t see this coming.”

“It’s not your fault,” she assured me. “I learned a long time ago that cruel people will do whatever they want, regardless of circumstances.”

“Still,” I said as I leaned toward her and kissed her forehead. “I hate that they dragged you into this.”

“They dragged me because I’m with you, and I don’t mean that in a bad way. I would put up with worse if it meant I could be with you.”

I swallowed hard, a sudden lump in my throat. “I don’t deserve you.”

She stood and kissed the top of my head. “I know.” I tipped my head back, and she brushed her lips across mine. “Now, what’s the plan? Are we discrediting them, or do I need to cut a bitch?”

I stared at her for a moment and then burst into laughter. She grinned at me, but the humor didn't take away from the fury I saw in her eyes. The trio had made a serious mistake including Ashlee in their petty vendetta. Because she was so soft-spoken most of the time, most people would assume she was weak, but when it came to the important things, she was stronger than anyone I'd ever known.

"I need to spend some time online, finding out exactly what they said and who they said it to." I stood and wrapped my arms around her, the contact as much for me as it was for her. "I wanted this weekend to be all about us getting a fresh start."

She rested her cheek against my chest. "It's not your fault."

I wanted to argue but didn't. It would just make her feel worse.

"You do your research thing while I call my mom," she said. "Once we've done what we can from here, we'll turn off our phones and have a night just about the two of us before we head back to the city, ready to kick some ass."

Damn.

Who would've guessed a tough little sub like her would be the one to work her way into this Dom's heart?

Fourteen

Ashlee

We talked while we ate dinner outside, filling each other in on the phone calls made and information discovered so that, by the time we were finishing off our drinks, we were both caught up and as prepared for tomorrow as we could be. Now, we just needed to relax and get some rest, because as soon as we got back to the city, we had

to start dealing.

At least nature was cooperating with us. The sun had just started to dip below the horizon, casting all the orange and red brilliance we could've wished for. The air had a bit of a chill now, but without a breeze, Nate's arm around my shoulders and a light blanket draped over my lap kept me warm enough. His property was large enough that any man-made sounds were too distant to overpower the frogs and crickets or the last few birds still out.

"There's something I need to tell you," Nate said, breaking the comfortable silence between us. I stiffened, and he kissed my temple. "It's all right, *le soleil*."

The nickname made me relax. If it was something bad, he wouldn't have used it. "Okay."

"I don't want us to go back to the city with anything unsaid."

My heart gave a nervous flutter, and I sincerely hoped I wasn't about to pass out. Did he somehow know that I'd been thinking about how my feelings for him had grown? Was he trying to give me a "let's slow down and enjoy the journey" speech to keep me from blurting out those three words and getting my heart broken?

"Hey, none of that," he chided as he pulled me onto his lap. "I want those beautiful turquoise eyes looking at me and that beautiful brain thinking only about me."

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak. He must've understood why I didn't give my expected response because he didn't force the issue. Instead, he ran the pad of his thumb across my bottom lip and continued talking.

"Nothing in my life has ever been as unexpected as you." His large hand palmed my cheek, and I leaned into the touch. "I was completely and irrevocably changed from

the moment I first laid eyes on you. It sounds like a line, I know, but I swear to you that it's not."

I could only dumbly nod, my power of speech suddenly absent. I'd never in a million years would've guessed this was what he'd wanted to say to me.

"You mean so much to me that it scares me sometimes, but I'm not ready to say...certain things." He shifted, looking uncomfortable but powering through it. "But you need to know that I've never said that to any woman. Ever. And I want you to know that when I am ready to say it, you can believe it."

Some women might've been upset if their boyfriend had flat-out said they weren't ready to use the word love, but I understood not only what he'd just said but why he'd said it. Without me having to ask it, he'd told me where he stood, and where he saw us going. He'd said when, not if, and I knew him well enough to know that he hadn't chosen that word lightly.

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I turned my face into his palm and laid a kiss in the center. It wasn't until I felt his body relax that I realized how tense he'd been.

"I understand," I said, "and I'm there with you."

It was the truth. I wasn't ready to tell him that I loved him. Even if I knew without a doubt that I did.

He pressed his forehead to mine. "I don't think I've ever been so worried about whether or not someone would understand what I was trying to say."

I put my hands on his cheeks, loving the rough rasp of stubble against my skin. "Thank you, Nathaniel. I've never had anyone but my mom care so much about what I think."

I kissed him then, a slow, sweet kiss that turned into something hot and demanding. I squirmed on his lap, wanting to be closer, wanting more. His hands found my hips, and he pulled me across him until I was straddling his lap. I had a sudden flash of memory back to the beginning of this weekend when I'd gotten us both off without intimate skin touching, and judging by the way his fingers dug into my flesh, he remembered it too.

I moaned as he caught my bottom lip between his teeth, and my want became need. Desperate, clawing need that left no room for rational thought or anything that wasn't intensely focused on fulfilling that desire. I reached down between us, going up on my knees enough to give my hands space to work.

Nate was doing his part too, pushing the bottom of my dress up and pulling the crotch of my panties aside. I didn't wait for him to use his fingers to get me ready. I couldn't wait. Not having him inside me almost physically hurt. We both cursed as I lowered myself onto that thick, hard piece of flesh. I was wet, but not really enough, and I whimpered as I took the last two inches.

"Fuck, le soleil." He wrapped his arms around me, his head dropping to my shoulder. "Fuck, Ashlee..."

I couldn't move, couldn't think, but I had to move. At the most base, primal part of my brain came the commands I'd lost the ability to make. Nate held me so tight that I couldn't do anything more than rock back and forth, but neither of us needed much. His lips found my throat as I closed my eyes, lost in the sensation of his mouth on my skin, the press of his body against my clit, the way he filled me completely, the sounds we weren't embarrassed to make.

He came suddenly, the rush of warmth inside me making me realize I'd forgotten something, but it was a passing thought, brushed aside by the pleasure that crashed into me a moment later.

We'd worry about that tomorrow, along with everything else. Right now, this was everything.

Fifteen

Nate

When my alarm went off, I was tempted to turn it off and spend the day the way I'd originally intended: giving Ashlee as many orgasms as her body could take...and then just one more. My cock was already hard and aching from having her bare ass pressed against it all night, and for a second, I considered how easy it would be to

slide inside her from behind, wake her with the first of many climaxes.

But then she was stirring, and reality rose to the surface. We had work to do in the real world, no matter how much we both wished we could stay here. I just had to keep reminding myself that what we had was bigger than one weekend together.

“Morning.” Ashlee’s voice was thick with sleep. “Have you been awake long?”

I shook my head, running my fingers up her bare arm. She turned her face into my chest and kissed me, the press of her soft lips enough to send my pulse galloping.

“Mmm...”

Fuck. That humming sound was going to be the end of me. I needed a cold shower. Now.

Thirty minutes later, we were in my car and heading back to the city. We didn’t talk much, but we didn’t need to. Our linked hands said more than enough. We were in this together, and for someone who’d pretty much spent his entire life feeling like he was alone, it took some getting used to.

I’d driven this stretch of land several dozen times in my life, and I didn’t need to focus much to navigate, which was a good thing since I kept looking over at Ashlee. Every so often, she’d catch me looking, and we’d share a smile, but we didn’t discuss what was coming.

On my part, it was because I didn’t want this last little bit of peace to be over until absolutely necessary. I didn’t know why Ashlee hadn’t asked for details, but I hoped it wasn’t because she was thinking about walking away.

As soon as that thought came into my mind, I pushed it away. She’d said we were on

the same page, even after she knew about the shitstorm coming our way. I wasn't going to make the mistake of assuming again.

What I was going to do was make things right. Ashlee shouldn't have to deal with any of this. Hell, I shouldn't have to be dealing with this either. I hadn't exactly been a nice guy, but Flora had been rightfully fired, and the other two had known from the first what they were getting into with me. It wasn't my fault if they felt like they were due more than we'd originally agreed upon.

As we crossed into the city limits, I broke the silence. "I'm sorry about this."

"Don't you dare!"

The ferocity in her voice caught me off guard, and I shot her a quick look. She pointed at me, and my eyebrows shot up.

"I mean it, Nate. Don't you dare blame yourself for any of this. Not for what those three are saying, and not for me being involved."

"You may change your mind if it gets as bad as I think it might," I cautioned.

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She squeezed my hand. “Not a chance in hell.”

Since we were already on the subject, I figured it was as good a time as any for me to bring up the one thing I knew the two of us had to talk about before I dropped her off. “We need to talk security.”

“Security?”

“For your building and for you. You just have one of those buzzers, not a doorman. You wouldn’t believe the things reporters will sink to for a story. I had one bribe the pizza delivery guy and showed up with a camera instead of my pizza. They’ll get your neighbors to let them in—”

“Not my neighbors,” she interjected. “And I don’t just mean Perry and Gary. About six months ago, a woman on the fourth floor had her ex show up and start threatening to take their kids. I don’t know her name, but after it happened, everyone in the building got a legal agreement that stated we were only to let people in if we personally knew them. It’s actually grounds for being evicted.”

I let out a low whistle. “Harsh.”

“But effective.”

“Guess it would be. That’s good to know.” I turned onto the road in front of her building, bracing myself to see news vans already parked, vultures lurking. Only no one was there. That was good. I didn’t even want to think about how difficult it would be to try to sneak her inside.

She flashed an overly bright smile. “See, nice and safe.”

“And I intend to keep you that way.” I parked at the curb and turned to face her. “I mean it, Ashlee. I’m not taking any risks when it comes to you. I almost lost you due to my own stupidity. I won’t lose you again, not if there’s anything I can do about it.”

She leaned over and kissed my cheek. “You’re sweet.”

I raised an eyebrow. “I’m pretty sure absolutely nobody has ever called me sweet before.”

“Well, you are. When you want to be. And I appreciate your offer, but it’s not necessary.”

“Then do it for me, le soleil.” I put my hand on her cheek. “Let me take care of you.”

Her eyes met mine, and her expression softened. “All right.”

“Thank you.” I kissed the tip of her nose, making her laugh. “Please stay inside until I get it taken care of.”

“Okay. Just let me know who and when. I don’t want to accidentally call the cops on my protection.”

She had a good point there, one that I fully intended to address...after I was done kissing her.

Sixteen

Ashlee

I'd never been the sort of person who got stir crazy, but the moment I shut the door of my apartment, conscious of the fact that I needed to stay inside for the near future, I had the sudden urge to go for a walk. I wanted to hold on to the hope that Nate was just being cautious, and things would blow over quickly, but my practical side knew it was more wishful thinking than cool logic. Sensationalized stories had longer shelf-lives than matter-of-fact news. That was just the sad state of affairs in our society.

At least I'd have the time to do some things around my apartment that I'd been putting off, and some things I'd wanted to put off, specifically unpacking and letting some of my neighbors know that we might be having some problems with reporters soon.

Not exactly how I'd imagined spending today, but at least I wouldn't be forming unrealistic expectations of what life with Nate was going to be. Sometimes we'd have romantic getaways where we could spend most of the time in bed, and sometimes we'd have to prepare for whatever shit hit the fan.

A couple hours later, I was rummaging through my fridge for something to eat when my phone rang. As I reached for it, I wondered if this was the first of the paparazzi calls. My number wasn't exactly public knowledge, but I also hadn't done much in the way of trying to hide it either. Fortunately, when I saw the screen, the name was familiar.

"Mr. Hancock, hi." I sat down and hoped my voice sounded steadier than I felt.

"How are you?"

I didn't need to see his face to know that his question wasn't simple courtesy. Someone had told him about what was happening. I closed my eyes and said a quick prayer that I wasn't about to lose my job.

“Honestly, I’ve been better.”

“I expect so,” he said dryly. “I talked to Finley and then to Nate about the best course of action since none of us want you to leave the company.”

My shoulders slumped as relief flooded me. Having Finley and Nate behind me was important but expected. I hadn’t really known what to expect of anyone else at work. When Mom had asked, I’d assured her that my position at Manhattan Records was secure, but I’d been guessing at that point.

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With my new contract, neither Nate nor Finley could stop Mr. Hancock from firing me. What Nate had done to protect us could have resulted in my termination. It was one thing to decide that I wanted to leave, and another thing else entirely to get fired, particularly when I was linked to a bunch of lascivious accusations.

“Thank you,” I said quietly. “I won’t let this interfere with my work. You have my word. I’ll do whatever you guys need me to do.”

“We need you to do whatever will make you the most comfortable. You can work from home until this blows over if you want.”

“Thank you,” I said again. “I’d like to come in like normal. There’s no one at my building now, so I don’t think it’ll be a problem. If it seems like it’s going to hurt the company, I’ll stay home.”

“We’ll support whatever you decide.” He cleared his throat. “I need to know if there’s any truth to the rumors that Nate used his position to influence you into a relationship. I know the accusation that you seduced him to advance your career is a load of shit – pardon my French – but I also know how intimidating he can be.”

My face burned with embarrassment. This wasn’t the type of conversation I’d ever imagined needing to have with my boss.

“No truth at all,” I said honestly. The pressure he’d applied to get me to go to that first event with him hadn’t exactly been the most ethical thing in the world, but it hadn’t been what everyone else was saying either. Best not to muddy the waters.

“Good.”

There was one thing I needed to tell him, though, just in case some reporter worked overtime on digging into my background. I’d let Ms. Lamas know face-to-face tomorrow, but since I already had Mr. Hancock on the phone, I’d tell him first.

“There is something that you and Ms. Lamas need to know. I don’t know if someone will figure it out if they go poking around in my past, and I don’t want either of you to get caught by surprise.” I took a breath to steady myself before stating, “Finley’s my father.”

Silence met my statement, and I gave Mr. Hancock half a minute to process.

“Can you expound on that?” he asked.

“The short version is that I was conceived via IVF with an anonymous donor. My mom got sick when I was a teenager, and since I don’t have any other family, I started looking for my biological father.”

“I’m assuming since you’re telling me that both Finley and Nate know.”

“They do.”

“Did either of them know when you came to work for us?”

“No. Nate knew first, but not long before I told Finley. We hadn’t decided whether or not we were going to tell anyone else, especially since neither of them are technically my boss any longer.”

Another short silence before he responded, “All right. Thank you for telling me. It would’ve looked bad if we’d gotten ambushed with that news.”

I wanted to ask him if it changed the way he saw me, but I didn't ask. Between my relationship with Nate and my connection to Finley, I couldn't help fearing Mr. Hancock's answer.

Someone knocked on my door, saving me from continuing my internal debate. As I walked over to it, I asked, "Is there anything else I should know before tomorrow morning?"

"I think we're covered. Just let me know if you decide to stay home."

I said I would and ended the call. Even if I hadn't been anticipating a reporter, I wouldn't have opened the door without seeing who it was. I'd grown up in a good neighborhood, but I'd also been raised to be a strong, New York woman.

I used the peephole and was immediately glad that I had. I didn't recognize the woman on the other side, but the fact that she had her phone out and pointed toward the door told me exactly what she was.

The vultures had descended, just like Nate had warned they would.

Seventeen

Nate

Jailene Hutzler was in-house counsel for Manhattan Records, which meant she primarily dealt in contracts, copyright law, and that sort of thing, but she also could handle libel and slander issues, which made her perfect for a record label with a few not-so-well-behaved artists. I'd have to get a criminal law attorney, though, if the accusations that were out there ended up becoming something other than words on paper.

She'd blocked out her entire afternoon, so when I arrived at her office, the door was open, and she was waiting. In her early fifties, Jailene was a self-proclaimed workaholic and looked every bit the consummate professional. Today, however, when I walked into her office, she glared at me and pointed to a chair as if I was a child.

I couldn't find it in me to be annoyed. She was my best chance of keeping this shit from destroying me, the business I'd created, and the woman I...cared about very much.

She dove right in, not bothering with any pleasantries or small talk, for which I was grateful. I didn't want a friend right now. I wanted a badass lawyer who could make three vindictive women cry.

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“If any of this comes to criminal charges, I’m going to refer you to a friend of mine. He’s expensive as hell but worth every penny.”

The fact that she’d cursed told me how pissed off she was. She was a ball-buster both in and out of the courtroom and swore like a sailor when around friends, but I’d never heard her use any vulgarity when working.

“Do you think it will come to that?” I asked.

“It’s hard to tell. In this charged political climate, with men all over the place being charged with all sorts of harassment and the like, the police might decide to investigate even if those three don’t officially file charges.”

I nodded, letting out a breath. That’s what I’d been thinking.

“I’m going to ask you some things that you probably don’t want to talk about, but I need you to be completely honest. I’ve been outlining strategy since I first saw the news, but what path we take is going to come down to what answers you give me.”

“All right.”

“Have you talked to any of the three women involved, Calah Evenstar, Flora Watts, or Roma Lynn, since the story broke?”

“No.” I didn’t add that I’d wanted to but decided against it because I knew things would be bad enough when I told Jailene about paying blackmail money to Flora.

“Good. Have you had sex with all three women?”

She knew about Calah since there’d been some speculation after the issues with my brother and the band made a few waves.

“No. I was with Calah only that once, years ago. Roma was my girlfriend for a while, and she wasn’t happy when I ended things. Flora was an employee only. I’d never even spoken to her before she was suspended for inappropriate workplace behavior.”

“But you did fire her, correct? Not just suspend her.”

“Right. I filed all of the necessary paperwork with HR. There was a follow-up incident too, with a friend of Flora’s, a young woman named Clara Dayton. She was fired after stealing a flash drive of proprietary information from another employee’s desk.”

Jailene frowned. “Did she act alone or with Miss Watts?”

“Flora was already gone when Clara did that, but the two were known to be friends, and the woman Clara stole from was one Flora was angry at.”

“Would that be Ashlee Webb, the woman named by all three women as having slept with you in order to receive a promotion?”

Just the mention of the accusation made me clench my jaw. “Yes.”

“Have you slept with Miss Webb?”

“Yes.”

Jailene sighed and rubbed her forehead as if I was giving her a headache. “When?”

“When have I slept with Ashlee?”

“Yes, Nate. When did you sleep with your employee? Was it before or after she was promoted?”

I bristled at the implication but held myself in check. Jailene had to ask questions like this, and I needed to remember that what I’d done hadn’t been smart, but it also wasn’t what I’d been accused of.

“The first time Ashlee and I had sex was a few months after she was promoted. I hadn’t even spoken to her beyond a basic greeting.”

“The first time?” Those slate blue eyes narrowed. “How many additional times have you had sex with her?”

“She’s my girlfriend,” I said bluntly. “That word makes me feel like a teenager, but it’s the truth. We’re dating. We were actually in the Hamptons together when the story broke.”

“Lovely,” Jailene muttered. She jotted something down and then looked at me again. “We’ve got our work cut out for us. I hope you don’t have anything else to do this afternoon.”

Not anymore, I didn’t.

If I was lucky, I’d be able to head over to Ashlee’s after Jailene and I were done. Before I got the chance to find out if she wanted a visit, however, a text came through. Jailene wasn’t happy that I paused our discussion about whether or not my recordings of my time with Roma would have a positive or negative effect on my circumstances, but she appeared slightly mollified when I had information for her.

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The paparazzi had found Ashlee.

Eighteen

Ashlee

An apartment in my building opened up this morning when the landlord found out that the skeezy jerk in 4F buzzed in three reporters and got thirty bucks each time. According to Gary and Perry, the hallway reeked of pot the whole night, so that helped. They'd stopped by this morning before work to let me know that if I needed them, all I had to do was call.

I wouldn't ask them to take off work for something so trivial as a few lurking reporters, but I appreciated the offer. Except when I looked out the window ten minutes later, however, I seriously considered changing my mind. Because that wasn't just a few reporters waiting outside my building. I counted at least a dozen, and I knew I wasn't seeing them all. If I walked out there, I'd be swarmed. Making it to the subway would be difficult at best.

I was still trying to decide if I was going to take advantage of Mr. Hancock's offer to work from home when I got a text from Nate.

I'm sending a car and security to pick you up for work. His name's Owen Crocker and I've attached a picture so you'll know who to trust. He's a good man.

No question about whether or not I'd be coming into the office. I wondered if Mr. Hancock had told Nate about the offer to work from home, or if Mr. Hancock thought

it better to keep any details about my employment between him and me. Then again, I doubted there was much of anything in his company that Nate didn't know.

Out of curiosity, I sent back a question. Mr. Hancock said I could work from home if coming in was going to be an issue. What should I have Owen do if I decide to stay here?

It didn't take long for Nate to send back a response, as if he hadn't needed to even think about the answer.

You won't.

Was this a Dom thing, or something else?

And how do you know? I added a winking face icon.

Because I know you won't give those three the satisfaction of affecting your life. You've worked too hard to be where you are and you're not the kind of person who lets others push her around.

I could almost hear how matter-of-fact he would've said the words. As if there was no doubt in his mind that he knew me well enough to make such a declaration. It shouldn't have surprised me. He knew me better than anyone ever had, second only to my mother. He'd understood parts of me that I hadn't discovered before meeting him. Why wouldn't he be able to predict not only what I would do, but why I'd do it?

What did surprise me was the fact that he wasn't trying to talk me out of it. He'd already showed himself to be protective, but instead of going all alpha male on me and demanding I stay home, he was supporting what he knew my decision would be. I didn't like the fact that I couldn't just go about my regular business, but at least Nate was trying to help me keep things as normal as possible.

Thank you.

I sent off the short reply and then pulled up the picture Nate had sent. Owen Crocker looked to be in his late twenties, with platinum blond hair, and dark eyes. I couldn't tell how tall he was, but what I could see of his shoulders and chest were massive. The picture looked to be from some sort of ID, but Owen didn't have the usual bored or way-too-happy expression that usually showed up on those things. He looked like the sort of man who could make a mugger pee their pants with just a single look.

I was suddenly interested to see what the reporters would make of him.

It was easier to pretend after that. To go through my usual routine of getting a shower, dressing, finding something to eat while I waited for my ride. Okay, that last one was new, but while I was up here, not looking down at the street, I could imagine that it was just Nate being romantic.

Someone knocked on my door, and a quick peek showed me that Owen was even more muscular in person and was well over six feet tall. With Nate vouching for him, I felt completely safe opening the door.

"Ashlee Webb?"

I nodded and held out a hand. "You're Owen Crocker."

"I am. Are you ready to go?"

I picked up my purse from the hook on the wall. "I am."

"This way."

As he led me down the hall, he didn't say another word. Clearly, this wasn't going to

be a ride filled with pleasant conversation, but he didn't seem annoyed. Just focused.

Considering the mass of reporters waiting outside my building, someone this professional was exactly what I needed.

Nineteen

Nate

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I glanced at the clock for what felt like the hundredth time in the past hour. I'd wanted to talk to Ashlee last night, but Jailene had advised against it. She'd said that if I felt like I absolutely needed to talk to my girlfriend, I should do it via messaging since that'd make a paper trail. This was going to be my new life, at least until we had a better idea of where things were going.

Fuck.

Less than twenty-four hours had passed since I'd been given those instructions, and I hated them today even more than I had yesterday. Ashlee wasn't accusing me of anything, and I wasn't technically her boss anymore, so it was really no one's business what was going on between us.

I didn't need to have evidence that my relationship with Ashlee hadn't been coerced. She and I knew what we were. Who we were. Strengths and weaknesses. The good and the bad.

I wanted to see her.

No, I needed to see her.

Fuck.

I closed my eyes and leaned back in my chair. This was not how today was supposed to go. I should have been relaxed – if not rested – after spending a great weekend patching up my relationship with Ashlee. I'd given Flora the fucking money she'd demanded, and that should have been it. She was pissed, whether just because she'd

been fired or because I hadn't wanted her, I didn't know. Quite frankly, I didn't care. She was out for revenge.

Calah and Roma should've known better. I might not have been as clear with Calah back then, but Roma had no excuse. This wasn't about them being hurt because they cared about me. For the two of them, it was wanting to hurt me because I wasn't interested in either of them anymore.

Or maybe it was because they both knew that I'd never cared about them even a fraction of the amount I cared about Ashlee.

I pulled up my email and wrote one out to Jailene, asking where she was with the press release she was supposed to be putting out in response to the rumors. That was step one of her strategy to discredit and destroy.

I might've been the one who'd added 'destroy' to the plan. In my head. Not to Jailene. That would've gotten me one of those looks, and as intimidating as I could be, I didn't want to cross her.

Except I was considering doing just that by going against her order not to see Ashlee until she said it was okay. I'd never taken orders well, but if they were in line with my self-interest, I'd follow them. I could see the wisdom of this particular direction, but it chafed.

While I waited for Jailene's response, I pulled up my messages on my phone and read Owen's text for the twentieth time.

Miss Webb has been handed off to building security. No contact with media made. Returning to apartment building to speak with manager regarding new security measures. Will return at end of work day to retrieve Miss Webb unless otherwise notified.

She was safe, and that was what I needed to keep reminding myself. Owen was a good man, and he'd make sure nothing happened to her. Building security had already been notified by Finley yesterday regarding tightening specific measures. Chris had stationed guards directly inside the doors for immediate ID check. They had instructions to turn away anyone who didn't have a valid work ID, and anyone who tried to sneak in would be detained until police arrived.

Pictures of Calah, Roma, and Flora had been distributed to every employee housed in the building. If any of them stepped foot on my property, they were to be held while the police were contacted. I had every intention of filing trespassing charges against anyone who didn't have a valid reason to be on the premises. Determined to prevent as many avenues inside as possible, I'd even promised each company that I'd personally provide catered lunches for everyone until this issue was resolved so no one would have to order in.

Maybe it was overkill, but I wasn't about to let anyone hurt Ashlee, not when I could prevent it. What point was there to having money if I didn't use it to protect the people I cared about?

My computer dinged, alerting me to a new email. Jailene's response was brief.

The press release was distributed at noon today. Both your PR and HR departments have been alerted. Attached is a copy for your records. It remains in your best interest to avoid contact with Miss Webb until I learn the extent to which she has been involved. Should this prove impossible, I strongly encourage you to limit your interactions to avoid being seen together.

I hated this. I hated feeling as if there was something wrong with what Ashlee and I were doing. We were two consenting adults who wanted to be together. We had nothing to be ashamed of, had done nothing wrong, and yet we were the ones who had to skulk around as if we needed to hide.

Fuck that.

I would be smart about it, but I wouldn't let Ashlee doubt for a second that I wanted everyone to know that she was mine...and that I was hers. That last part was new, and it made the previous part different. In the past when I'd been possessive, it'd been about control. Now, it was about being proud of the woman I'd somehow lucked into having. Well, okay, some of it was being controlling and possessive, but I could feel the difference, even if I couldn't explain it.

There had to be something I could do that would keep her safe but would still let us be together. I would accomplish whatever was on my agenda for the day, but in the back of my mind, I'd be chipping away at the problem until I found a solution.

Twenty

Ashlee

Some people might've been upset, or at the very least frustrated, if their boss had given them a list of detail-oriented tasks to complete when something crazy was going on in her personal life. In this aspect, I was definitely not most people.

I'd been pleasantly surprised by how well Mr. Hancock knew me because he'd given me things that could still be done from home, but none of them were busywork. With all of the rumors and accusations, I needed to feel as if my contribution to Manhattan Records was legitimate. Even if no one outside of A&R saw what I was working on, I'd know that the people whose opinions mattered to me saw me as valuable to the label.

A few people had looked surprised to see me, but the memos everyone had gotten when they'd first arrived had made it clear that any discussion of what was going on would be dealt with swiftly and firmly. The majority of people had already heard the

women's side of things, so even though the memo had mentioned only Calah, Roma, and Flora by name, most of Manhattan Records – if not the entire building – knew that I was involved too, if only due to my relationship with Nate.

All of that had fallen away when I'd started to work. No one bothered me, so as I got into the rhythm of my projects, noise faded to the background and all of the chaos in my head calmed. I didn't think about the reporters waiting for me at home or the fact that I was probably going to have security with me for the near future. I pushed aside thoughts of all the gossip going around, even if it was mostly outside the building, and reminded myself that Mom was strong enough to handle anything that came her way.

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I worked, and it was exactly what I needed to get through the day with my sanity intact. It did it so well that I didn't realize the time until Mr. Hancock stopped at my desk.

"I made it through three-fourths of the list," I said. Even though I knew he was on my side, I still wanted him to see that I wouldn't let what was happening affect my work.

He let out a low whistle. "I thought that would at least give you two full days of work. Did you stop for lunch?"

I shrugged, my eyes sliding away from his. "I wasn't really hungry."

"Well, keep in mind that Mr. Lexington is providing lunch for everyone until this whole thing is resolved." He tapped on my desk for a moment before adding, "Any time you feel like you'd work better from home, just let me know. I'll send you whatever I have for you that day."

I nodded. "I'm going to try to keep things as normal as possible."

He nodded back, then took a couple steps before turning to back me again. "You should know that Ms. Lamas and I are on your side. I know Mr. Lexington has some...well, I know he's not exactly a 'dinner and a show' kind of guy, but he's not what those women are saying he is either. He's better with you."

"Thank you." I smiled at him, a truly genuine one.

He hadn't needed to offer his opinion of what was going on. His willingness to take

the circumstances into consideration when it came to work had been more than enough, but knowing I not only had his support professionally but personally as well, meant a great deal to me. I didn't have to worry about him having a negative personal opinion of me behind a professional face.

“Leave when Owen gets here for you. You don't need to work overtime. You have nothing to prove.”

He walked away without waiting for a response, probably because he knew I'd try to find a way to say that I did have something to prove without flat-out contradicting him. My head knew that what he said was right, but the rest of me wasn't so sure. His departure meant I didn't need to try to reconcile the conflicting sides into an answer.

I turned back to my computer. I wouldn't work overtime, but I would finish this particular section before closing things down for the day. It's what I would've done even if I hadn't been waiting for Owen, which meant it was the right thing to do now too.

When the phone on my desk rang, I picked it up without thinking, only realizing that I probably should've let it go as I opened my mouth to say 'hello.'

Fortunately, it wasn't a reporter – probably because the line was one only used within the company – but rather a familiar and welcomed voice.

“Hello, le soleil. How has your day been?”

“Not terribly bad,” I said honestly. “I had plenty of work to do, and no one bothered me.”

“Good,” he said. “Owen just messaged me that he's on his way back. He's got your place squared away.”

“Oh, good.” I wasn’t entirely sure what that meant.

“So, I was wondering if you wanted Owen to take you home...or if you’d rather stay with me tonight, maybe longer? It’s okay if you don’t. I won’t be offended.”

I frowned. Since when did Nate ask?

“Is something wrong?”

“I was wondering when you started asking me things like that.” I let a hint of humor trickle into my voice to let him know I wasn’t upset.

“Would you prefer if I said that Owen was bringing you to my place?”

He honestly sounded curious, and that made me smile. “And if I say yes?”

“Then I’d say that I’ll see you at my place later.”

Familiar warmth coiled in my belly. “Won’t it make things worse for you, if anyone sees me at your place?”

“I don’t care about me. I want to protect you, take care of you.” The intensity in his voice made me catch my breath. “If you think it’s too fast for us to be staying together after this past weekend, you can stay in one of my guest rooms. I’ll keep my hands to myself. I promise.”

“And if I don’t want you to keep your hands to yourself?”

“I’ll do that too.”

I swallowed hard, my heart thudding against my ribs. “I’ll need to go home to get a

few things.”

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“That’s a good idea. Who knows how long you may be stuck with me.”

I liked the sound of that.

“I have to stop in to talk to Jailene in a few minutes, so we’ll probably get to my place about the same time. If you’re there first, he can take you up. Make yourself at home. I’ll have a copy of the penthouse key for you tomorrow.”

He was going to give me a key to his penthouse. I reminded myself not to make too much of it. He wanted to keep me safe, and it made sense that it’d be easier to do that if I could come and go as needed.

“I’ll see you when we get home.”

The way he said it sent a warmth flooding through me, something that was beyond simple desire. And I couldn’t deny how right it felt. How much I wanted this to be the new normal.

Well, minus Nate’s two exes and one former employee.

Twenty-One

Nate

My pulse was racing like I was a teenage boy on his first date, not a thirty-five-year-old man who’d been with more women than I wanted to count and had slept with this particular woman more than once. She’d been here before. There was no reason for

me to be this keyed up.

Well, maybe. I was planning a new experience for us, if Ashlee was up for it. I wouldn't assume that she'd want to cope the same way I did, and as much as I wanted this with her, I refused to push her into it.

I'd rushed through my meeting with Jailene, and I had a feeling she knew exactly why that was. She didn't warn me off, though. Maybe she thought I was smart enough to stay inside with Ashlee. Maybe she was hoping she was wrong, though what I knew of her suggested that most likely wasn't the case. Maybe she assumed that nothing she could say would change my mind.

That one seemed to be the most likely scenario.

I unbuttoned the top two buttons of my dress shirt and then rolled up my sleeves. I'd already abandoned my tie, belt, and shoes. I wanted to be comfortable while we ate and if we stayed in. If she took me up on my offer for after-dinner entertainment, I'd be changing out of the rest of my work clothes then.

I'd gotten a text from Owen a minute ago, letting me know that he was pulling into the parking garage, which meant that he'd be bringing Ashlee up to my floor shortly. I checked the food warming, its smell already saturating the apartment, and as I closed the oven, the elevator dinged to announce the doors opening.

"Mr. Lexington?"

I turned as Owen said my name. His eyes met mine, and he nodded. Without saying anything else, he stepped back to let Ashlee inside. The elevator doors closed behind her, and we were alone. I took a step toward her and then frowned. She had a strange look on her face, almost dazed.

“Ashlee, le soleil, what’s wrong?” Two long strides took me to her side, and I put my arm around her, leading her to the couch. Sitting next to her, I fought my impatience and waited for her to be ready to speak.

After several long seconds, she opened her purse, pulled out a folded sheet of paper, and handed it to me.

“This was in my apartment when I got home.”

“What the hell? Owen said he—”

“Someone slipped it under the door,” she interrupted. “No one got into my apartment.”

“Still, he and I are going to have a word.”

“He doesn’t know,” she said. “I didn’t tell him.”

“Why not?” I tried not to sound annoyed. This wasn’t her fault. None of this was.

“Because it didn’t change anything, and it’s entirely possible that it happened while Owen was driving me to work. He can’t be in two places at once.”

I closed my eyes and took two slow breaths in and out before opening my eyes. “You’re right. I’m sorry. It just pisses me off that someone was able to do that when I’m supposed to be keeping you safe.”

A troubled expression settled on her face. “Read it.”

I opened the paper, suddenly aware that Ashlee wouldn’t have been upset if it was just a reporter wanting a story. This had to be something else. Had some reporter

gotten a compromising picture of her and was trying to blackmail her? I thought we'd been careful, but we'd had a couple semi-public trysts. Whoever this asshole was, I'd have criminal charges brought and sue their asses off.

Then I saw the inside of the letter and all the air went out of me.

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Do you think you're special? You're just another one of his whores, bought and paid for. I know the things he does to you. Do they turn you on? Do you like it when he spansks you? When he fucks your ass? I'll bet you get wet just thinking about him. He's creative and good at what he does, but he gets bored easily. If he isn't already. He'll pass you around, get off on degrading you, humiliating you. And then he'll get rid of you. Just like the rest of them. And you'll be one more ruined cunt.

I could barely breathe as I folded the paper and set it on the end table. I couldn't let Ashlee see how shaken I was. Being disturbed by the words I'd read was one thing. The fact that I wanted to throw up was something else. If it'd just been the content of the letter, I would've been furious, already on the phone to the police, but it was more than that.

I recognized the handwriting.

Isti Mollen.

She'd written all of that bile and had someone slip it under Ashlee's door, all because she knew that Ashlee and I were together. She'd tried similar shit over the past few years, but it'd been sent to me, never to the women. All of those women had been well-known, though, and a letter like this would've gone straight to the cops. As far as I knew, she'd only harassed me. Shit. I hoped that was the case.

"I want you to stay here until things quiet down," I said. "I'm going to have my people look into that. They'll take care of it."

I didn't tell her that they'd find whoever sent it because that might lead her to

eventually ask who it was, and I didn't want to lie to her. Omission wasn't exactly the same, especially since telling her the whole truth would only make this entire thing worse.

"Now, how about you and I get an early dinner. I had one of my favorite restaurants bring us their signature dish, and I think you'll love it. After dessert, I have an idea to keep your mind off this whole business." I took her hand and kissed her knuckles.

She smiled. "You always think sex is the best distraction."

I chuckled. "That's true, but I have something a little different in mind. But first, food."

Twenty-Two

Ashlee

This was definitely not what I'd imagined when Nate had said he knew of a way to get our minds off of what was happening, but it was definitely working. I really couldn't think about anything else but what I was seeing.

A short, stocky man in an insanely expensive three-piece suit walked past, arm-in-arm with a tall, lean man wearing tight leather pants and a sheer shirt that showed off a silver hoop through each nipple.

Another couple leaned against the bar. The woman was young, probably in her early to mid-twenties, though her diminutive height made her look younger. Bronze curls spilled over her shoulders as she peered up at a tattooed, dark-haired man who looked at her the way I thought Nate sometimes looked at me. Their clothes were more casual, but still nice.

My mind moved away from trying to process the whole picture and began registering individual images as snapshots in my brain.

A brunette in a red latex bodysuit on her hands and knees, a leash attached to what looked like a cat collar, led by a tall redhead in an elegant, sleeveless black dress.

A bald, burly man in dark slacks and a short-sleeved dress shirt walked hand-in-hand with a petite bald woman in a white halter top and skirt, matching tattoos covering both sets of arms.

“Le soleil?” Nate’s voice was low and warm in my ear. “We can go if you want. If it’s too much...”

I shook my head, and the movement snapped me back to reality. A strange reality like nothing I’d experienced before, but reality, nonetheless.

“You said Club Privé.” I snapped my eyes away from the scantily dressed woman on a leash. “I assumed we were going to get something to drink, maybe dance. This wasn’t what I was expecting.”

Nate rested his hand on the small of my back and guided me to a dark corner where an empty loveseat sat against the wall. With everything that had been happening, I was surprised when he suggested we go out at all. But his driver had made certain we weren’t being tailed, then had taken us into a private garage and we’d used a private entrance.

“Good to know people,” Nate had said with a wink.

Although I was still mildly terrified that some reporter would jump from the shadows, camera in tow, I forced myself to relax, knowing that Nate wouldn’t have brought me here if he was worried about any exposure.

Similar seats were scattered throughout the rest of the club, some occupied, some not. Being a weekday night, the place wasn't full, but enough people were here that I could only imagine how packed it would be on a weekend. The VIP area where we were was practically empty, easing my mind even more.

The hand on my back slid up to my neck, strong fingers massaging the tight muscles there. Nate didn't ask again if I wanted to leave, but I could feel new tension in him and knew it was my fault. Well, not my fault exactly, but it was a response to my reaction. And I didn't know how to fix it.

I didn't know how to explain what I was thinking and feeling because I didn't know myself. That not knowing was familiar, in a way. It reminded me of the odd and conflicting feelings I'd had when he'd spanked me.

"You're thinking too much," he said, his breath hot against my cheek, lips brushing my ear. "Do you want me to take over? To clear that busy little head of yours?"

I nodded, relief flooding me. I wanted to be my own person, but I couldn't deny how nice it was to sometimes not have to be the one in charge, to let someone else take care of me.

"Let's get you more comfortable then, before the show begins." He pulled me onto his lap, wrapping one arm around my shoulders and the other across my thighs, one large hand resting on my hip.

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“Show?” I asked, already more comfortable. With his arms around me, no one could touch me. I was safe. And since I was safe, I could be curious.

“Club Privé is the city’s most elite and exclusive BDSM club.” His voice was conversational, as if he was simply discussing the weather with me. “The couple who own it, Carrie and Gavin, are good people. They’ve made sure this place is safe, discreet.”

“For the wealthy select, right?”

He smiled, his eyes sparkling. “Most people who have a VIP membership are wealthy, yes. But they have options for those unable to afford the full VIP treatment.”

“I’m guessing one of those options is for a non-member to come as a guest.”

“Correct.”

I didn’t ask the question that popped into my head because I didn’t want to know the answer. It was okay if he’d brought other women here. There wasn’t any reason why he shouldn’t have. This place was important to him – I could see that on his face – but it wasn’t like his home. He was free to explore his desires here, among like-minded people, and I had no doubt that intimacy could be part of this, but it didn’t have to be.

“There are rooms here,” he continued, “playrooms of all kinds. Members can rent them.”

The lights dimmed briefly, then again a beat later, reminding me of the way theaters would flicker the lights to let people know intermission was coming to an end. The pulsing music dropped, and a murmur ran through the patrons. Something was coming, and the regulars knew the signs.

“Watch the stage,” Nate said, motioning toward a raised dais in the center of the room. “Relax and enjoy the show.”

Show. He’d mentioned a show, but I’d forgotten about it.

Two people walked up onto the stage, both wearing scarlet filigree masks. One was a woman, petite, with short white-blond hair. The man following her was tall with dark hair that gleamed red under the lights. His muscular torso was bare, and the boxer briefs he wore left little to the imagination. Her dress fit her like a second skin, stopping just under her ass cheeks. They were quite striking together.

The masks kept anyone from seeing their faces, but something about them seemed familiar. As if I’d seen them somewhere around the city before. Without context, it was difficult to tell. I didn’t think too hard about it, though. If they were going to do what I thought they were going to do, I didn’t actually want to know their names. Maybe, one day, I’d be comfortable enough with how I felt about this sort of thing that I could talk to people in this setting and then see them in the real world without skipping a beat.

That wasn’t today, though. Today, I’d watch.

When they reached the middle of the stage, the house lights dimmed, and a spotlight focused on the couple. A light round of applause seemed to start the show. The woman removed a cloth belt from around her waist, and to my surprise, bound the man’s wrists behind his back.

“He’s usually the Dominant,” Nate whispered in my ear. “But sometimes, she likes to be the one in charge. They’ve been married for a few years now. They’re friends with the owners.”

The man sank to his knees in front of his wife, his head tipped back so that they could see each other’s faces, and I suddenly realized that what they were doing wasn’t for us. It was all for them. The fact that an audience would enjoy the performance was merely a side-benefit of what they needed from each other tonight.

This place was more than somewhere to discuss mutual interests. It was a place where people could have their needs met without judgment. Where they could express themselves however they wished, and as long as it was safe and consensual, it was not only permitted but encouraged.

She pulled the hem of her dress up, revealing a tiny thong that covered very little. When she ran her hand through her husband’s hair, I had a pretty good idea what she was going to do next.

I wasn’t wrong.

She pulled him to her, the hand in his hair acting as a guide and a balance. The angle he was at kept anyone from actually seeing skin, but the moan we could all hear over the music left no doubt about what he was doing. Her head fell back, her fingers tightening and relaxing in his hair as he skillfully brought her to orgasm.

I joined in the applause automatically, not giving my brain time to overthink whether or not I felt awkward about clapping for a sex show. As I did it, though, something in me flipped. This wasn’t some sordid thing where desperate people had to perform intimate acts for enough cash to pay rent. The two on stage were a married couple, members volunteering to do something that gave them personal satisfaction.

And they weren't done.

The woman helped her husband lay down on his back, his hands underneath him in what must've been an uncomfortable position. As she went to her knees, one on either side of his head, Nate's hand slid down my thigh to the hem of my dress, fingers brushing against bare skin before moving between my legs. The blonde's hips began to rock back and forth, her dress covering most of the man's face as she rode it. I caught my breath, equal parts fascinated and turned-on, then shivered as Nate's fingers brushed against the damp crotch of my panties.

"Like what you see?" he asked.

When I nodded, he scraped his teeth against the shell of my ear and pressed his fingers against me. I grabbed his arm, unsure if I wanted to ask him to stop or beg him to put his fingers inside me, but I said neither.

The blonde came with another cry and then slid down the man's body until she was straddling his waist. Their eyes met, and I knew that, for them, no one else existed. She reached beneath her, and the catch of his breath was enough to tell us that she held his cock. When she sank down on him, her entire body shuddered while his tensed.

I could imagine his frustration, unable to touch, to control. His pleasure entirely in his lover's hands. I might not have been able to know what it was like to be a man in that position, but I knew what it was to be a woman, and I doubted there was much difference besides the obvious.

Nate's fingers moved in slow circles, the soft cotton of my panties creating a different level of friction than when I touched myself. I was aware of my pulse racing, the rush of air in and out of my lungs, but I couldn't tear my eyes away from the couple on the stage.

The man's hips were jerking now despite the clear effort he was making to hold back. Low, guttural sounds mixed with his wife's breathy moans, fascinating me. I'd never been one to watch porn, but I knew, statistically, that most of the noises made were fake. I'd once read that most women in porn never orgasmed during filming. There was no doubt in my mind that these two weren't faking anything.

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“I want you to come for me,” Nate said, pushing his fingers against my clit through my underwear. “Right here, like this. Can you do that?”

I swallowed hard. He could get me there, I knew. The real question was, could I get out of my head enough to let him?

I nodded.

While I watched the couple on stage climax – first him and then her –Nate kept his fingers outside my panties, working over my clit until I came too, my cries lost in the roar of applause for the pair’s performance. The arm around my waist tightened even as my thighs clamped down on his hand. He held me through it, not rushing, not talking, just letting me enjoy.

I slumped back against him, muscles lax, body tingling.

“Now,le soleil, what do you say we check out one of the member rooms and pretend that nothing else in the world exists?”

I liked the sound of that.

He helped me smooth out my clothes as he set me onto the couch next to him, then got us both to our feet. He linked our hands and headed toward the bar. My face was burning as we made our way through the crowd, but any self-consciousness was in my own head. The people who even paid us any attention at all simply smiled, and I was surprised at how genuine each pleasant expression seemed to be.

At the end of the bar was a small case with five glass compartments. Inside each one was a key card with a name on it. Or, rather, inside four of them were key cards with names. The fifth one was empty.

Nate took a card out of his pocket – the same one he’d used at the door – and inserted it into a slot in the cabinet. Something clicked, and he opened the second door, retrieving the card. He pocketed the first card and led me over to one of the doors on the far wall. The second card went into a slot next to a keypad, and he pressed a few buttons before the door clicked, and a green light lit up.

“It’ll lock behind us,” Nate explained as we walked into the room. “Some people don’t mind if observers wander in, but I want to keep what we do here private.”

“Thank you.” I squeezed his hand and closed the door behind us. The music faded to a barely audible bass line.

He turned and gave me a quick kiss. “I’m not an exhibitionist. I don’t necessarily care if someone’s watching, but that isn’t one of my kinks.”

He stepped out of the way, and I forgot to respond with anything more than a low whistle. This wasn’t like the playroom at either of Nate’s places. High ceilings with exposed piping like a warehouse. Brick walls. Steampunk was the word that came to mind.

“Every year or so, they redo the rooms, give them different feels, different toys. They’re not satisfied with just the status quo. They want to be the best.”

I understood now what had drawn him here. He liked the best.

“Any particular reason you chose this room?” I asked as my gaze moved along the walls.

The restraints were all metal rather than a variety of materials, but there were several different sizes of handcuffs, with various lengths of chains between them. Some looked like those heavy manacles from historical movies, the ones that usually went around ankles. A few spreader bars hung underneath them.

Another wall had...well, masks and harnesses were the only words I could think of to describe them. I really hoped he didn't think I was going to wear any of that stuff. That was a hard no. Fancy masquerade masks like the couple on stage had been wearing would be okay, but these things looked like they belonged in...well, in an S&M music video.

"It's my first time in this one since it's been redone," he said. "Not my favorite one, to be honest, but it'll do."

"Did you have something specific in mind?" I asked.

He tugged on my hand, pulling me against his chest. "I did. Unless you're too weirded out by the room."

I hooked my fingers in his belt loops. "Not at all. Just tell me what to do."

He grinned, his eyes dancing. "I was hoping you'd say that. Now, let's get you out of those clothes and into something less comfortable."

Twenty-Three

Nate

I walked around the bench, finding it harder than usual to keep my attention on checking the knots and restraints that had Ashlee bent over and waiting for me. I'd been tempted to just take her, but she deserved more than just a quickie. She deserved

to have her horizons expanded.

I'd left her hair in the thick braids she'd coiled around her head like a crown, allowing me to see her face. That was also the reason I'd positioned her in front of a mirror. I wanted to see my handiwork while I enjoyed it.

"This is going to pinch, and then it's going to hurt." I held up a pair of nipple clamps. They looked like rusty black metal, but that was just cosmetic. They were as well-designed and safe as everything the club provided.

She swallowed hard but nodded. "Okay."

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That complete trust in her eyes made my stomach tighten. I bent over and cupped one of her breasts. I loved the way they moved when I fucked her from behind. My fingers teased her nipple into a hard nub, and judging by the soft moans she was making, she enjoyed it. Which made it the perfect time to put on the first clamp.

It took her a second to register, and then she yelped. I chuckled, and she glared at me. The glare stayed as I teased her other nipple into a point and eased the second clamp on.

“Fuck...”

“Just wait,” I promised.

I moved around behind her, running my hand down her spine before nipping her shoulder. Another yelp, but there was something breathless about the sound this time, and it made me smile. She was starting to move past the initial pain to find that place where everything would turn into pleasure.

My fingers moved between her spread legs, two dipping inside her for two quick strokes, and then sliding up between her cheeks to her ass. The tight muscle there twitched as I rubbed my finger over it.

“Nate...”

“Tsk, tsk, le soleil.” I smacked her ass. “Who am I?”

“Mr. Lexington.”

“Maybe you need a reminder.” I pushed against the muscle, driving my finger in to the first joint. “What do you think? Can you come like this, with my finger in your ass?”

“I-I don’t know.”

I twisted my finger, and she whimpered.

“I don’t know, Mr. Lexington.” Her voice trembled, but she didn’t use her safe word.

“Let’s find out.”

I raised my eyes to the mirror, watching her face as I worked my finger in and out of her ass. She squirmed, the restraints giving her just enough wiggle room to make her breasts sway, the weight of the clamps making her wince. She shook her head, fingers flexing.

“Do you want me to stop?”

“N-no.” She began to pant. “I-I-I...”

I dropped my free hand, easily finding her swollen clit. A few rough brushes across that sensitive nub and she keened, then screamed as I released the clamps from her nipples, practically wailing as she came. I pushed her, rubbing back and forth on her clit until her entire body shook. She let out a half-sob, and I knew that was enough.

For now.

I washed my hands while she came down enough for the next thing I wanted to do. My clothes joined hers, and I took a moment to stroke my cock as I enjoyed the sight she made. When I moved in front of her, the bench put her at the perfect height for

the tip to brush across her lips. I made a sound in the back of my throat and caught her chin. I pressed my thumb into her mouth, and she sucked on it, swirling her tongue in the same way I knew she'd do once my dick was in there.

“You remember your safe word?” I asked, pulling my thumb back. She nodded. “And you know what to do if you can't speak, right?”

She nodded again and snapped her fingers.

“Open your mouth.”

She did, and I slid my cock inside. Her tongue was hot and wet as it rubbed against the underside of my shaft. Without me having to tell her, she wrapped her lips around it and began to suck. I groaned, unable to stop myself from rocking back and forth with short, barely restrained thrusts.

I gripped her hair as I pushed myself deeper, half-listening for the snap that would stop me. I slid across her tongue, the head reaching the back of her throat without her gagging. Pressure built quickly, fueled by the sight and sound of making Ashlee come twice.

“I'm going to come in your mouth.” I didn't make it a question, but she could protest if she wanted.

She didn't, her eyes looking up at me through thick lashes, the rich color dark and shining. With a groan, I drove forward once, twice, and then exploded with her name on my lips.

Fuck.

From the outside, this might've looked like any other scene, but I felt the difference.

I'd lost control. Completely and totally, like I never had before. And it was only because of her.

The things this woman did to me...

Twenty-Four

Ashlee

I woke in the dark, disoriented and unsettled. The first made sense since I was in a strange bed and I wasn't alone. As soon as I thought it, though, I remembered where I was and who was with me. Neither of those things, however, contributed to my being unsettled. Maybe I'd been dreaming and simply didn't remember. That wasn't too far-fetched.

When I was stressed, I often had vivid and intense dreams that eventually drove me to wakefulness but then dissipated so quickly that I couldn't recall anything more than a general feeling. Compared to Mona leaving and Mom's cancer, my recent circumstances weren't much of anything, but they had their own stressors, not the least of which was the fact that everything about this experience was new to me. When it came to Nate, I felt more out of my depth than I ever had with anything in the past.

Thinking about him made me look over. I could barely make him out next to me, but the arm he'd flung over my waist told me he was laying on his stomach. In the silence, I could hear his deep, even breathing, and I smiled. I loved that he felt safe enough to be so unguarded with me.

Now that I was completely awake, my entire body ached in a way that I didn't entirely mind. He'd been rough with me, but I hadn't doubted for a second that I could trust him. And the orgasms he'd given me...damn. I'd actually passed out at the end, barely aware that he'd come again before everything went dark. I'd woken

up in the club's bed then, Nate cleaning me off with a warm washcloth.

I finally looked at the clock, its glowing red numbers telling me that it was still early. The sun was probably up outside, but it was the middle of May, which meant dawn didn't necessarily equal a reasonable time to be awake. Still, I knew I wouldn't be getting back to sleep any time soon. Nate had gotten me out of my head long enough yesterday for me to relax and be able to fall asleep, but now I didn't have anything to keep my busy little brain from buzzing.

Instead of spending the next couple hours, or however long it took Nate to wake up, staring at the ceiling while thoughts swirled in my head, faster and faster until I went crazy, I decided to get up. Thanks to the stop at my apartment after work yesterday, I wore my own comfy pajamas, but I was chilly enough that I picked up Nate's robe from where I'd left it after my shower last night. It was huge on me, but the fabric was soft, plus it smelled like him.

A few security lights placed throughout the house kept the place from being pitch black and allowed me to move without having to turn anything on. I wouldn't have minded Nate being up with me, but I didn't want to wake him. He could use the sleep, whether he'd admit it or not. The amount of stress he had to be under...just thinking about it made me angry. He'd done a lot of things in his past that I didn't agree with, but the one thing I never doubted was that he'd been up-front with Calah and Roma from the first. And Flora's behavior was simply reprehensible. I'd never been inclined to violence, but those three women brought it out in me.

I ended up in the living room but didn't feel like sitting. At least, this time, I knew I wouldn't stumble onto anything that would blow up in my face. I didn't even check the cabinet under the television to see if he'd moved the DVDs as he'd promised. I believed him, and even if he never knew I peeked, I would know.

Hints of a sunrise gleamed through a small gap in the blinds that covered the massive

windows, and for the first time, I realized how quiet it was here. My apartment didn't exactly have thin walls, and I'd grown up in a fairly calm neighborhood, but the sounds of the city had always been there. A hum, an undercurrent. Like a movie score not consciously acknowledged but whose absence was noticed.

I wasn't surprised that Nate's penthouse was essentially sound-proofed. Even without his sexual proclivities, someone with his position would want a place that was already set up to keep the outside world from intruding. Given what was happening in our lives at the moment, I was grateful for it, even if the silence meant it was harder to drown out the thoughts.

Nate's robe snagged on the corner of the end table, and as I reached down to pull it loose, the folded paper on top caught my eye. I reached for it, my stomach flipping as I picked it up. The light was dim enough that the words were difficult to make out, but I'd read it enough times on the ride from my apartment to here that I had it memorized.

I regretted that now. Almost as much as I regretted bringing it to Nate in the first place. The contents made me sick to my stomach, but it wasn't like the writer had threatened me. I wasn't stupid. There was no demand, no warning. It wasn't blackmail or intimidation. Those would've made the letter criminal, and I would've gotten the police involved. Calling me names and trying to degrade me based on the things Nate and I did wasn't pleasant, but I doubted there was any legal recourse.

The things this person said made me wonder, though. Had they simply been guessing at sexual acts based on Nate's reputation or what they themselves thought was shameful? Or had they, like Calah and Roma, known from experience the sorts of things Nate liked to do?

Not for the first time, I wondered if they could be behind it, the three women who were causing us so much trouble. Except I would think that Nate would know their

handwriting. Maybe not Flora's, but I'd seen enough of her inter-office memos to know that she hadn't written the letter either. I supposed whoever it was could have altered their style, but my gut said it was too neat to not be natural.

The impulse to throw the letter away was strong, but Nate said he would have people look into it, which meant it was on his radar now. If I got rid of it, he'd want to know why. Besides, it wasn't only my life that was being fucked with. Whoever had left it had made it about both of us, which meant he had as much of a right to decide what to do with it as I did. Then there was the fact that this wasn't simply about someone saying nasty things. They hadn't even just stopped at mailing me a letter. They'd taken the time to come to my apartment and slip the note under the door. I had no way of knowing if they'd knocked first. For all I knew right now, if I'd have been home and answered the door, they could have hurt me. I wondered if the personal delivery would change the legality of it.

I dropped it back on the end table and moved toward the hall. The library seemed like the best place for me to lose myself until Nate woke up. I'd yet to explore it completely.

The glass case was one place in particular that I kept meaning to explore. The leather-bound volumes had caught my eye before, but I hadn't taken a closer look until now. A few were ones I expected like *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, *Macbeth*, and *Great Expectations*, but others were a bit more surprising. A collection of *Grimm's Fairy Tales*. *Pride and Prejudice*. *The Canterbury Tales*. *Paradise Lost*. Non-fiction books about Abraham Lincoln, Alexander Hamilton, and Clara Bow. A collection of Robert Frost's poetry.

Then I dropped my gaze lower and found hardcovers that weren't leather-bound but that I felt certain were first editions. These ones made me smile, especially since the first set was the entire *Harry Potter* series, including what appeared to be a first edition of the British version. All of Stephen King's *Dark Tower* series. *The Lord of the*

Ringstrilogy, plusThe Hobbit. Philip K. Dick'sDo Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?

I hadn't realized Nate liked fantastical literature enough to collect these specific first editions, but as I moved to his regular bookcases, I saw what I'd missed before. Isaac Asimov. Dean Koontz. HG Wells. Jules Verne. Jack Finney. HP Lovecraft.

I'd always considered myself a reader, even though I didn't get to read as much as I would've liked, but I'd never had the opportunity to own even a quarter of what Nate had here. And this definitely wasn't the kind of library where the books were only for show.

Even if someone took care of the books they read, opening a book and settling in to enjoy it left its mark, and I could see it all over these volumes. Most of the paperbacks had cracked spines and dog-eared pages, and I even saw a couple that looked like they were being held together with tape.

A book at the end of one shelf caught my eye, and I picked it up.Gulliver's Travels. Although I had a vague idea about the story – something about a guy landing on an island where everyone's tiny – I'd never actually read it. Now seemed as good a time as any to try it out.

Everything around me faded as I immersed myself in this new world. The room lightened as the sun rose, a bright sliver of light sneaking in from the small gap between the curtains. I didn't hear Nate approach until he was at my side, leaning down to kiss the top of my head.

“Good morning,” he said.

“Morning.” I smiled up at him.

He gestured to the book. “You’ve been up a while?”

“My head was too busy,” I said as I set aside the book. “Reading helped.”

He held out his hand, and I took it, a pleasant shiver moving across my skin as he helped me up. “You could’ve woken me.”

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“Both of us didn’t need to lose sleep.” The two of us headed for the kitchen. “What time is it? I’ll find something quick for breakfast if it’s late.”

“We’re going to be working from here,” he said as he released my hand and headed to the coffee machine.

I almost scowled but reminded myself that jumping to conclusions had gotten us into trouble in the past. Before I reacted as if he’d made a unilateral decision, I needed to make sure that was what had happened. “We are?”

He glanced over his shoulder at me before turning his attention back to his coffee. “That’s what I went to see Jailene about yesterday.”

It took me a moment to place the name. “The label’s lawyer?”

“Yes. I wanted to know recommendations regarding whether you and I came into work or worked from home. Since I told her that I wasn’t going to stay away from you until this was all figured out, she thought it was a better idea for us to stay away from the office.”

I raised an eyebrow. “And what did she have to say when you told her we’d be staying away from the office in the same place?”

He looked at me again, a grin curving his lips. “I didn’t offer that particular piece of information, and she didn’t ask.”

“So, it’s one of those ‘better to ask forgiveness than permission’ sort of things?”

“Exactly.”

He started pulling food out of the fridge, and I took a few seconds to decide how I felt about this turn of events. I still didn't like it, but with it coming from the legal department, at least I knew it wasn't Nate trying to be protective. I could get behind doing what was best for the company, no matter how much it annoyed me.

Twenty-Five

Nate

I'd liked the idea of working at home with Ashlee at my side, so I hadn't given Jailene a chance to second-guess her recommendation. That meant I hadn't really thought about what it would mean to have Ashlee with me all day while we both tried to work. Then again, I wasn't sure I would've done things any differently if, at the time, I'd realized how much of a distraction she would be.

Case in point, she was working from the chair in my office, her feet on the footstool so her legs were on display. All I could think about was how much I wanted those legs wrapped around my waist. At least she was wearing dress slacks instead of a skirt or dress. If I'd had to stare at her bare legs, the tenuous grasp I had on my control would've snapped hours ago.

As it was, I kept glancing at her every few minutes, which meant I then had to try to find my place again in the policy pdf HR had sent to me for first approval. I couldn't send it to Jailene until I finished my pass, and it couldn't be distributed to Manhattan Records employees until she verified everything from a legal standpoint.

Basically, if I didn't get my ass in gear, something that should've been finished already might not get done until tomorrow...or later if we stayed in tomorrow too. I wondered how much of Ashlee's work I'd distracted her from. I'd caught her looking

at me a couple times, but I didn't know if that was because she'd felt me watching her or because she couldn't stop thinking about me either. It wasn't a lack of confidence in what she felt for me, but rather not knowing if she was simply better at focusing on a mundane task no matter her surroundings.

Or at least that was what I'd been telling myself.

I could've asked her to move, to work in the library or at the table. Or I could've offered her my desk and gone elsewhere to work, even though it was my house. None of those options would've made a difference, though. It wasn't just the sight of her that had me off my game. The simple knowledge of her presence was enough.

"Do you want a refill?" she asked suddenly.

I tried to pretend I hadn't been thinking about fucking her against the wall, her ankles crossed as she held on for dear life. "What was that?"

She smiled, a glint in her eyes that made me wonder if she'd either guessed what I'd been thinking or had been thinking something similar herself. "Do you want a coffee refill?"

"You're not my secretary," I said. "I don't expect you to fetch coffee for me."

She stood up and stretched, a sensual movement that drew attention to the sliver of pale skin at her waist and the way her breasts moved when she arched her back.

Fuck me.

"I wasn't offering to fetch coffee." She smirked. "I'm going to get some for myself and figured I'd be nice and ask if you wanted some while I was up."

Right. That made sense. “Sure. Thanks.”

I watched her walk from the office, positive that she was putting an extra swing into her hips just so I would watch her ass as she left. I shook my head, unable to stop myself from smiling. Sex distracting me was expected. I wasn't accustomed to humor and a smile doing the same thing. Well, it was that and her ass.

It'd felt so good, easing into that tight passage. Pleasure with an edge of pain even for me. Her body an instrument that only I was allowed to play. My cock thickened as the memories ran through my head.

I closed my eyes. Dammit. I needed to stop thinking about Ashlee's ass. Or any other part of her that made me hard. Which was pretty much every part of her, now that I thought about it.

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Lips that wrapped around my shaft to give me the best blowjob I'd ever had. Eyes that darkened with heat and desire. That spot on her neck that made her whimper when I bit it. Those breasts...

Fuck.

I enjoyed sex, but I'd never let it rule my mind. Not until now, anyway. Ashlee was the only one who managed to get under my skin like that. I couldn't quit thinking about her, wanting to touch her, to be with her.

I sighed and turned back to my computer. I had work to do. Important work.

"Just a hint of sugar," Ashlee said as she set the mug in front of me.

I reached for her, my arm going around her waist and pulling her onto my lap before she could walk away. She let out a startled yelp that made me laugh.

"You wouldn't be laughing if I'd dumped my coffee on you." She glared at me even though she was still laughing.

I plucked the mug from her hand and set it next to mine on the desk. With my other hand, I caught her chin, holding her in place as I covered her mouth with mine. Her lips parted, and my tongue swept inside, tangling with hers, my teeth worrying at her lips. She fisted my shirt, leaning into me to deepen the kiss, and I was tempted to take her back to my bedroom and spend the rest of the day making her scream.

Before I could put the plan into action, my computer dinged, signaling that I had a

new email, probably one that needed to be answered right away, considering my luck.

I reluctantly broke the kiss and sighed. “I should probably get that.”

Ashlee wore a dazed expression as she nodded, and it took her a moment to get to her feet. I opened the email and hoped that whatever it was about would be enough to kill the erection currently pressing against my zipper. Considering it was from Jailene, the odds were high.

Mr. Lexington, I have a meeting tomorrow morning with a judge regarding a restraining order against all three women. The order includes you, Miss Webb, and Manhattan Records to make it clear that she and the company stand with you. There will likely be a counter request from the trio to make it seem as if you and Miss Webb are the ones harassing them. No matter what happens, don't react. Any press questions should be answered with, ‘I refer all questions to the Manhattan Records in-house counsel, on advice from same counsel.’ If you retain personal counsel, my recommendation remains the same.

I scowled at the screen. I didn't like the idea that Calah, Roma, and Flora could smear my name, Ashlee's name, and I had to stay quiet about it. Letting other people fight my battles wasn't something I liked. In fact, I hated it. Even if it was the smart thing to do.

“What's wrong?” Ashlee was sitting on the chair again, but her posture had gone stiff, as if she was ready to move at a single word.

“Jailene is filing for restraining orders on all three women for you, me, and the company, but she says they might turn around and try to file ones against us too, but we're not supposed to have anything to say about it if it happens.”

She frowned. “Why?”

I shrugged. “I’m guessing because we’ll both come across as defensive, which won’t make us more believable but less so.”

“The standard ‘the lady doth protest too much’ sort of thing.”

I made a noncommittal noise as I tapped out a response that more or less said I’d follow her advice. I intended to, but things rarely went as planned, especially when it came to Ashlee and me.

“I don’t like it.”

Leave it to Ashlee to say it flat-out like that. I chuckled. “I don’t either, but I trust Jailene to know what she’s doing.”

Ashlee sighed. “It’d be a bad idea for us to lock ourselves in the house and pretend no one else exists, right?”

The idea appealed to me far more than it should have. I had a business to run, and it had been my main focus my entire life. Just because I had someone in my life now who mattered to me, I couldn’t just stop working. I still enjoyed my job, and not just because of the money either. Even with all the headaches, I loved making music, all the bits and pieces of it. The parts everyone thought about, and the ones no one realized were important. I delegated to the appropriate departments, but I still saw it all.

Pretending, however, was something I could really get behind at the moment. Particularly because it didn’t look like I was going to be getting anything done in the near future. Maybe blowing off a little steam was what I needed.

“Pretty much everywhere delivers now,” I said. “We could hire someone to ride up and down in the elevator with packages, and they could just shove them inside so we

don't even have to see another human face.”

“We could install a bell that they could ring so we could go hide.” Ashlee laughed, her face brightening. “We’d turn into urban legends, the music mogul and his girlfriend who no one has seen in decades.”

“The world descends into chaos, but we’re safe up here,” I added.

“The zombie apocalypse. Of course we’d be safe. They don’t know how to use elevators.”

It was my turn to laugh, and she joined in, the mingling sounds something I’d never associated with work before. I liked it. A lot.

“That sounds much better than my original survival plan for the zombie apocalypse,” she said.

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“You had a previous survival plan?”

She gave me a ‘duh’ look. “Of course. My mom and I routinely reassess our plans to see what improvements can be made.” She grinned at me. “Are you telling me you didn’t already have a plan in place for zombies?”

“I think I want to hear some of your plans,” I said. “How were you and your mom going to survive the zombies?”

“Well, one year, we thought the way to go was a motor home with chainsaws as our defensive weapons.”

“Chainsaws?” I tried to picture Ashlee and Roberta wielding chainsaws, and it just made me laugh even harder.

“We were actually going to try to take some chainsaw art class because we figured that was the best way to figure out how to use them, but the instructor told us we wouldn’t be able to use full-size ones and we realized that smaller ones really wouldn’t work for our plan.”

“So, no underground bunker stocked with non-perishables and machetes?”

“That was the plan five years ago, until we realized that an underground bunker in New York was pretty much impossible, unless we converted a subway station, but then we’d have to worry about subway zombies.”

Her laptop dinged, indicating new mail and she turned her attention to the screen. I

kept looking at her, soaking in every line of her body, as if I didn't already have it memorized. I would know her with my eyes closed.

Whatever the email was about, it must've needed a response because she spent the next couple minutes intently focused on replying, but I didn't mind. I didn't have the pleasure of watching her work during a normal day. When she was finished, she glanced up at me, cheeks flushing. The humor that had permeated the atmosphere not long ago was replaced with something heavier, and I knew it was because of what she saw on my face.

"I like your idea of locking us in here and never having to deal with people again," I said, my voice low. "We'll let your mom and Finley visit, of course, and maybe my family, but most of the time, it'll be just us."

"That sounds great." The smile that curved her lips was more sensual than amused. "Do you have ideas of how we'll keep from getting bored?"

"Indeed, I do." I crooked my finger at her, and she came over to stand in front of my desk. "There would be a mandatory dress code when we're alone."

"And what would that be, Mr. Lexington?"

Fuck.

"Nothing but the finest lingerie. Sheer lace so I can see those pale pink nipples of yours as well as your pretty pussy. The barest scraps of silk and ribbon that I can take off you with my teeth."

She swallowed hard, confirming for me that she was just as turned on as I was. "And when we're not alone?"

“Whatever you want to wear...underthings optional.” I shifted in my chair. “And, of course, we’ll have casual Fridays.”

“Wh-what does that mean?”

I waited to answer, letting my gaze drift over her, caress her, so that by the time my eyes returned to her face, she was panting slightly. “Clothing prohibited.”

Her fingers curled into fists, then relaxed, making me want to know what was going through her mind at that moment. The heat in her eyes told me that whatever it was, she didn’t dislike what I was saying.

“You’ve been distracting today,” I said, “and that’s not very nice, is it?”

She shook her head.

“I’ve had a hard-on almost all day,” I continued. “All from watching you. Listening to you. Thinking about what you’re wearing under those clothes. What do you think I should do about this?”

She clasped her hands in front of her and dipped her head. “Anything you want, Mr. Lexington.”

I reached down to adjust my cock. “What would you suggest, le soleil?”

“I could show you.” Her eyes darted up to mine, then down again. “I could show you what I’m wearing under my clothes.”

“All right. Do it.”

She unbuttoned her blouse with trembling fingers, but I knew her well enough now to

understand that she was excited and eager, not scared or embarrassed. When she slipped the shirt off and let it drop to the floor, my heart gave an unsteady thump. She was so damn beautiful. Her dress pants joined her shirt, leaving her in only matching bra and panties, a deep, rich green that complemented her fair skin and bright hair, and made her eyes shine.

“Dammit, le soleil.” I practically growled the words. “If I’d known you were wearing this, I would’ve bent you over my desk hours ago. You’re gorgeous.”

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“Thank you, Mr. Lexington.” Her voice was breathless.

“You haven’t been on the best behavior today.”

She shivered. “No, Mr. Lexington.”

“You need to be punished for being bad.”

She nodded, lips pressed together as if she didn’t trust herself to speak.

“Come here.”

It didn’t take me long to have her in position, stomach down across my lap, her ass in the air, that gorgeous hair of hers hanging around her face. I smoothed my hand over one ass cheek, then the other, before dipping my hand between her legs to find the cotton already damp. Her breath caught as I pressed my fingers against her through her panties, but she didn’t protest.

“Ten swats seems appropriate,” I said as I removed my hand. “Don’t forget to thank me for each one, or we’ll have to start all over again.”

“Yes, Mr. Lexington.”

I alternated cheeks, each blow harder than the last, but she made it to six before she forgot what she was supposed to say. I made a disappointed sound. “You really should have been more careful. Now I have to begin again.” I pressed a kiss to one pink cheek and then began atone.

“Thank you, Mr. Lexington.”

Her skin turned a brilliant shade of red, heating my palm with each contact, but she didn't use her safe word. She yelped and whimpered as we got closer to ten, but she didn't forget this time, thanking me for each stinging slap. By the time my hand landed the final time, she was shaking and gasping, her body trying to process so many feelings at once.

I ran my hand up her spine to the base of her neck. I massaged the muscles there, quietly letting her recover enough for what I wanted next. With my free hand, I opened one of my desk drawers and found the condoms I'd tossed there after I'd brought Ashlee here the first time. We'd forgotten them the other day, but I wasn't going to make that mistake again. She needed to be able to trust me to be responsible, even in the middle of something like this.

“Up, le soleil,” I said, helping her stand.

She leaned back on the desk as I unzipped my pants and pulled out my cock. When I rolled on the condom, she licked her lips, and I about lost my load right then and there. I held out a hand and guided her until she was kneeling on my chair, straddling my lap, her breasts in my face. I pulled down one side of her bra until I could get my mouth around one of her nipples.

“Ohh...” she moaned, her head falling back.

I worked the sensitive skin between my teeth and lips, alternating licks and sucks while I maneuvered her into place and pulled aside her panties. Hands on her hips, I held her still for a moment, then pushed her down on my cock, my hips driving up to meet her partway. She keened as we joined together, a long, loud sound that tugged at a primal part of me. I didn't want anyone else to ever see her like this, but another part of me wanted everyone to hear her, to know how well I pleased my woman.

She grabbed my shoulders, balancing herself as she rode me. I kept my eyes on her face, my physical pleasure enhanced by the sight of her pushing herself toward orgasm, using my body to get herself off. As a Dom, I should have taken control of it, of her. Her pleasure was my responsibility. I told her when she could come.

But there was something to be said for how fucking hot it was to watch her lose control like this.

I slid my hands up her ribcage, down her spine, moved my mouth back and forth between her nipples, never lingering long enough on one for her to get used to the sensation. I enjoyed the surprised little gasps she made every time I changed things up, the way she tightened around me.

“I want you to come for me, le soleil. I want you to make me come too. You can do that, can’t you?” I spoke the words against her skin.

“I can,” she whispered, her fingers tightening on my shoulders. “I can.”

“Do it.” I grabbed her ass, ground our bodies together. “Do it, le soleil.”

She nodded, and her mouth crashed into mine. I tasted the desperation on her tongue, her need for me that mirrored my need for her. We moved against each other, no finesse, no rhythm, just that pure, instinctive drive to be a part of something more. Sex didn’t have to be slow and vanilla for it to be about us finding that place where, for a few seconds, we became so intertwined that it was impossible to see where one of us began and the other ended.

Her body jerked, tightened, as she cried out. I wrapped my arms around her and drove up into her twice more, groaning as her muscles spasmed around me. I clutched her tight enough to make her gasp and come, holding her as another, smaller, orgasm rippled through her.

In a few minutes, after we cleaned up, I'd give her something else. I'd give her the key I'd had Owen pick up yesterday. If I wanted her to stay with me until this matter was resolved, she needed to be able to come and go whenever she liked. I wasn't trying to move too fast, but this was necessary to take care of her, and I intended to do my best.

Twenty-Six

Ashlee

I wondered how long it would take for me to stop being sore after having sex with Nate, or if it was always going to be this way. Not that I'd stop having sex with him just because I'd feel it for hours afterward. If anything, the ache was a pleasant reminder of what it was like to be with him. Pleasure with him always had an edge to it.

"It was too much, wasn't it?" Nate frowned as he set a plate down in front of me. "Last night at the club and then in the office earlier."

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I shook my head. “Not too much.”

He turned, the expression on his face saying he didn’t quite believe me. I reached out and grabbed his wrist, waiting until he turned back to me to speak again.

“I would have told you if I didn’t want to. Besides, I like the way I feel when we’ve been together.” I let go of his wrist as I tried to find the words to explain the complexity of what I felt. “Like every twinge reminds me that I...belong...”

He leaned down and kissed my forehead. “You do belong.”

I didn’t need him to tell me, not when he’d given me a key, showing me that he trusted me to come in and out of his penthouse whenever I pleased. Still, it was nice to hear it.

I turned my attention to the meal in front of me. We didn’t need heavy dinner conversation. “What did you call this again?”

“Brown butter scallops.” He took his seat at the end of the table, close enough that we could touch, but far enough that we weren’t crowding each other.

I took a bite and closed my eyes, letting the flavors burst across my taste buds. I made a sound that was almost sexual because the food was almost that good. Sex wasn’t the only thing Nate excelled at.

“Damn, le soleil.” His voice was gruff. “If you keep that up, I’m going to come in my pants.”

I opened my eyes, blushing at the look he was giving me. He wanted me again, and I wanted him. My stomach, however, wanted more of this amazing food, and I listened to it for the time being. Everything couldn't be all sex all the time between Nate and me.

No matter how good the sex was.

I needed to find a different subject, something as far from sex as possible.

“Have you heard anything about the letter?”

He blinked, the change in conversation clearly taking him off-guard. “The letter?”

“The one I found under my door. You said you were going to have your people look into it.”

He nodded, but my gut said he wasn't answering my question, but rather acknowledging that he knew what I was talking about now. Something was off, but I figured I'd wait for his answer.

“Did they find anything?” I asked again.

He looked away, his hand coming up to rub the back of his neck. “I haven't heard anything back yet.”

I took a couple bites before offering a new question, one that was a little more specific. “What aren't you telling me?”

A flash of guilt crossed his face. “I have a hunch about who wrote it.”

I waited, but when he didn't add anything to it, I pointed my fork at him. “And?”

“I don’t want to smear anyone’s name if I’m wrong,” he said. “We both know how gossip can get out of hand.”

He had a point, but I refused to let things go that easily. “It’s not like I’m going to tell anyone.”

He really looked uncomfortable now. Whatever he knew, whoever he suspected, wasn’t a random thought. He had more than a hunch. My phone rang before he could respond to my statement, and since it was my mom’s ringtone, I answered it. He could think about what to say while I talked to her.

“Hey, Mom.”

“Hi, Ash.”

Even with only those two words, I knew something was wrong.

“I need to see you tomorrow.”

My stomach twisted, the food I’d been enjoying now a lump. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m not going to lie and say everything’s great, but I need to wait. I need time to think, and it’s nothing I want to talk about over the phone. I just knew with everything else going on, you’d need at least some notice before you came out.”

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An icy hand gripped my heart. “Is it...is it the cancer?”

Nate grabbed my free hand but didn’t say a word. He didn’t need to. He was here, and that was what I needed.

“No, that’s not it.” She paused, then repeated the assurance, “It’s not cancer, Ash. I promise.”

I wasn’t sure I believed her, but I wanted to so badly. If I didn’t push the issue now, I could pretend, at least for another day, that she was okay. Maybe it was foolish, thinking about it that way, but it was the only way I could think of to let myself agree to wait until tomorrow to find out what was going on. One thing supporting her statement that it wasn’t the cancer was that she was willing to wait to tell me. She’d never hidden or sugarcoated anything when it’d come to medical issues.

I worked at keeping my voice even and worry-free. She didn’t need to add me being worried about this to the things on her plate. “All right, Mom. When do you want me to come over?”

“After lunch would be best. I’ll need a couple hours in the morning to finish a project for work.”

Okay, if she was planning to work in the morning, it couldn’t be too tragic, right?

“Nate’s welcome to come with you.”

Relief took some of the weight off me. I’d wanted to ask but wasn’t sure how I could

ask her, or ask Nate, for that matter. Now that I had her permission to bring him, it would be easier to ask him to come along.

“Okay. I’ll ask.”

A moment of silence hung between us before she spoke again. “I’ll see you then.”

I didn’t put down my phone even when it beeped in my ear to signal that the call had ended. I felt like my brain was stuttering, skipping like old records used to, unable to process and unable to move forward.

Only one thing was for sure. I didn’t give a damn about that stupid letter anymore.

Twenty-Seven

Nate

“Ashlee...” I didn’t know how to ask what I needed to know without the question sounding stupid. She clearly wasn’t okay.

“Mom wants to see me tomorrow.” Her smile was forced. “She didn’t want to talk about it on the phone.”

“Is she sick again?” I hadn’t been able to hear Roberta’s response to Ashlee’s question about the cancer being back. If it was, I’d make sure Roberta had the best care, the best doctors, whatever it took.

“She said no.”

I could hear the doubt in Ashlee’s words. I squeezed her hand. “If she is, we’ll make sure she gets the best of everything.”

“Thank you.” She sighed. “I don’t think that’s it. I mean, I’m petrified that she just didn’t want me to worry tonight, but when I come at it logically, I know she wouldn’t make me wait for something like that. If she’d had a bad test result or something equally negative, she would’ve come straight to me. Or if she didn’t feel like she could come here, she’d have asked me to come over right away.”

I didn’t like this. I was supposed to take care of her, but how could I do that when there wasn’t anything I could do about the situation? It was frustrating enough, not being able to go to the media to defend myself and Ashlee against the accusations made against us, but this was worse. At least with the things going on with Calah, Roma, and Flora, I had legal recourse. I still preferred to fight my own battles, but I hadn’t been completely sidelined.

With this, I had no power, no plan. Nothing. I didn’t even know who or what we would be fighting against.

“What can I do?” I asked, putting my hand on her cheek. “Tell me how I can take care of you, *le soleil*.”

The hurt and anxiety in her eyes cut me deep. “I need to forget. To not think about all the things that could be wrong. I need to get out of my head.”

That, I could do.

I stood up and pulled her to her feet. One arm went around her waist, the other on the back of her neck, my thumb brushing back and forth across the bottom of her jaw. I held her tight, letting my body tell her without words that I’d never let her fall. Gently, my lips pressed against hers, the kiss soft and sweet.

Yesterday and earlier today, we’d both needed the distraction that came with rough intensity, with mind-clearing pain and the headspace that came with it. Right now,

she needed to be comforted, cared for. As a Dom, it was my job. As her boyfriend, it was my privilege.

Neither of us spoke as I led her to my bedroom, though I felt her pause when she realized we weren't going to the playroom. I took my time undressing her, letting touches linger on her soft skin. The tops of her breasts. The slight curve of her stomach. The backs of her knees.

When I knelt in front of her to help her remove her pants, she put a hand on my shoulder, her touch burning me through my shirt. Her skin was hot, body flushed with anticipation. I wouldn't let her down. I would please her, worship her, say with my body all the things that I wasn't quite ready to say out loud.

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I kissed her calf, then her thigh, and hooked my fingers under the sides of her panties. I lowered them, kissing down her other leg as I went. I pressed my mouth just below her belly button, my teasing tongue earning a gasp, and then I stood. Her bra joined the rest of her clothes, and I allowed myself a few seconds to appreciate the beauty in front of me.

“Your turn,” she said, reaching for my shirt.

I let her undress me at the same excruciating pace, suffered her feather-light touches and tender kisses. When, after removing my underwear, she kissed the tip of my cock, I thought I would explode right then and there. I clenched my fists and refused to let my control slip. If she wanted to explore my body, if that made her forget, then I would bear the exquisite pleasure-pain torture for as long as she wanted to inflict it.

“I-I want—” she stopped as she stood, eyes downcast. “Never mind.”

“No.” I tipped her chin up. “Look at me, le soleil. Tell me what you want. Always tell me what you want.”

“I want you like this.” She wrapped her hand around my cock, stroked it. “Skin to skin. Nothing between us.”

My heart did a strange skip. It was one thing to get lost in pleasure and forget. We’d had a brief talk about it after it’d happened and agreed that we still wanted to be careful. The fact that she trusted me enough to ask for it meant more than I’d realized it would.

I cupped her face between my hands. “It would be my honor.”

When I kissed her, I savored her. The taste of our abandoned dinner. The softness of her lips leisurely moving with mine. A tentative touch of tongue and then an exploration. I let her take what she wanted, what she needed, and gave her back everything I had.

One moment we were standing, and the next we were on the bed, limbs entangled, hands caressing. Without my usual sense of urgency, I found satisfaction in the simple joy of being near her, being with her in my bed. I’d always made my subs’ pleasure important, but it had still always been, for me, a testament to my skills as a lover. The longer I was with Ashlee, however, the more I realized that I’d completely misunderstood what it meant to have true intimacy with another person.

I moved over her, propping myself up on my hands as she wrapped her legs around me, heels on the backs of my thighs. I kept my eyes locked with hers as I slid inside her, one continuous motion until we were completely joined, the closest two people could be. We stayed like that, motionless, existing together. I drowned in her eyes, lost myself. Found myself. With her. In her.

Only when she rocked her hips did I move, but even then, I took it slow. Each stroke went deep, every inch of her against every inch of me. She gasped and moaned, my name mingled with other sounds of pleasure, no coherent thought expressed. I breathed it in, let it fill me. Every cell in my body felt alive in ways they hadn’t before.

She was responsible for all this. For all the ways I’d woken up and changed, all the ways I’d stayed the same but with a new acceptance of who I was. The enormity of what she meant to me, what my life would be without her, brought darkness that threatened to overwhelm me.

“Shh.” She put her hand on my cheek, the tender touch chasing the shadows away.
“Be with me. Here. Now. Just be with me.”

I nodded, leaning down to cover her mouth with mine as I took her higher, faster, spiraling us both to the peak before we fell over the edge together.

Twenty-Eight

Ashlee

I wasn't surprised that I woke up several times during the night, but the fact that I'd gotten back to sleep was unusual. Each time, Nate was there, holding me, even when he was still sleeping. The reminder that I wasn't alone, that I didn't need to go through this alone, was new.

We didn't set an alarm but still woke around the time we usually did for work. Our plan to go to Mom's after lunch helped us focus on work better than we had yesterday, so when it came time for us to leave, we'd actually accomplished quite a bit.

Nate was quieter than usual, but I understood the silence. He wanted to be there for me, take care of me, but he didn't know what to say or do, especially since neither of us knew the reason for my mom's invitation. He didn't ask what I wanted him to do or say, understanding without me needing to say that I had no idea what I wanted from him either. As we drove to Staten Island, my hand in his was enough.

Mom opened the door before we could knock, and the knot of anxiety and dread in my stomach grew. Nate squeezed my hand as he greeted my mom, and he didn't let go when I moved inside.

“Have you eaten lunch?” Mom shut the door behind Nate.

“We have, thank you,” Nate said politely.

He didn’t add that I’d barely picked at my food.

“Can I get either of you anything to drink?”

She wouldn’t look at me, her gaze landing somewhere over my shoulder, on Nate’s and my hands, anywhere but on my face. Annoyance joined the other negative emotions twisting up my insides. I’d been patiently waiting since her mysterious call yesterday even though a part of me had wanted to drive straight over here. Now that we were here exactly when she’d told us to come, she was still putting off talking to me.

“No, we don’t want anything to drink,” I said sharply. Finally, her eyes cut to me, her blue-green eyes guarded. “I’ve been worried sick about you since yesterday. I want to know what’s going on.”

If Nate thought my tone was out of line, he didn’t say it, which I appreciated. I’d given him my thoughts on his relationship with his family. It would’ve been only fair for him to do the same with me.

Mom sighed. “All right. Let’s sit down.”

Nate and I took the couch, my grip on his hand tightening. I leaned against him, our legs pressed together, the heat from his body a welcomed reminder that he was here with me and for me. Whatever Mom had to say, it wouldn’t be like before, when I’d been the only person to hear.

“Mona’s back.”

The world stopped. My heart, my breathing, everything in me and around me, came to a screeching halt as I processed those two words.

Mona Wadsworth. The woman who I’d considered my mother the first thirteen years of my life. The woman who’d broken Mom’s heart as well as mine. Who’d walked away and never looked back. Never reached out.

Never wanted me in the first place.

“What...” I had to stop and clear my throat. “What do you mean she’s back?”

I hoped the question hadn’t come out as harsh as it’d sounded in my head, but I wouldn’t have been surprised if it had. Mona’s betrayal and abandonment was still an open wound, no matter how much I tried to hide it.

“She came here yesterday afternoon to talk. She’s been back in the city for a few days, trying to work up the courage to talk to us.”

I couldn’t tell what Mom was thinking or feeling, and I didn’t like it any more than I liked the fact that Mona wanted to talk to us.

“She didn’t know if we were still here, but figured she had to start somewhere.” Mom looked down at her hands. “She wants to make amends.”

“Amends?” I scoffed. “She’s been gone for ten years without a card or word, and

then she shows up here like she can just say she's sorry and fix everything? That's if she's even sorry in the first place."

"She's dying, Ashlee."

The words were without inflection, but the pain I saw in Mom's eyes was more than enough for me to know how she still felt about Mona. The anger and hurt I'd tried so hard to set aside came rushing back, overpowering the shock of Mom's statement.

"And you believe her?"

The pressure of Nate's fingers increased, but I didn't look at him. I needed the truth, and I wasn't sure Mom was ready to face it. I couldn't let Mona destroy us after we'd worked so hard to survive.

"If you saw her, you'd understand," Mom said. "She's practically skin and bones. She looks twenty years older than she should, and even the smallest movement causes her pain. Maybe, if I hadn't been so close to death myself, if I hadn't experienced all of the pain from the cancer and my treatments, maybe I would think she was faking it. It's real. She's dying."

"From what?"

"Easy, le soleil," Nate murmured in my ear as he wrapped his arm around my shoulders.

I shook my head. He was trying to help, but I didn't need help with this. I already knew how I felt and what I wanted to do.

"That's her story to tell, but I can say there's nothing anyone can do for her."

“I won’t say good, because I’m not a horrible person, but I can’t say that I feel any pity or sympathy for her.”

Maybe that did make me a horrible person, but I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t have compassion for the person who’d left Mom and me to deal with years of chemotherapy and radiation.

“She wants to make peace with us before the end, and she doesn’t have long.”

Mom wanted to do it. I could see it on her face. Mom wanted to tell Mona that it was okay, that a decade of pain could be brushed under the rug just because she was sick.

“I can’t believe you’re considering it!” I let go of Nate’s hand and stood up, too full of everything I was feeling to stay seated. “I can’t believe you actually want to forgive her!”

Mom got to her feet, her hands on her hips in a stance I knew all too well from my childhood. When Mom stood like that, it meant she wasn’t going to budge.

“She’s truly sorry for how everything happened.”

My laugh was brittle, bitter. “Wake up, Mom. The only reason she came crawling back now is because she wants something. She says she wants forgiveness, but let’s be real for a moment. If she was truly sorry, it wouldn’t have taken a fatal diagnosis for her to come here.”

“I was angry too at first, but she means it. She sees how wrong she was to leave the way she did. You can’t understand what it’s like, being so close to death. All of the regrets and things left unsaid. Sometimes that’s what it takes for us to be honest with ourselves.”

I shook my head again, tears burning my eyes. “You’re right, Mom. I haven’t been close to death. But what I have been close to is being an orphan. And it was because that bitch left me as much as she left you. I’m sure having someone fall out of love with you is awful, but you, of all people, know what it’s like to have parents disown you. How could you forgive someone who did that to her daughter? To your daughter? She was supposed to be my mother!”

Nate stood behind me now, but he didn’t touch me, and I was grateful for it. I wasn’t sure I could take anyone touching me right now.

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“She lost her way.” Mom’s voice shook. “Can’t you understand that? You’ve forgiven other people for a lot. Why can’t you do the same for Mona?”

She didn’t say his name, but I knew she was talking about Nate. She was right about that. I had forgiven him a lot, but it wasn’t the same. The fact that she’d use what had happened between Nate and me was the final straw.

“That’s not a fair comparison, and you know it.” All the emotion had left my voice flat. “She hurt you, and I hated her for that, but what she did to me...” Tears rushed to the surface, but I refused to let them take hold. Forcing them back, I went on. “For thirteen years, I thought she loved me, that I was her daughter, and then she left without a word. No calls or cards. Nothing. As if I meant less to her than the possessions she’d taken with her. I can’t ever forgive that.”

“Ash–”

I ignored her and turned to Nate. “Take me home. I’m done here.”

Twenty-Nine

Nate

My head was still spinning as I followed Ashlee to the car. I’d thought I was prepared for whatever Roberta had in store for us, but I could honestly say that I hadn’t seen any of that coming. Not the return of Ashlee’s mother – other mother? Ex-mother?

Roberta’s ex.

Mona coming back to the city was crazy enough, but her having some sort of fatal illness and wanting to make peace with the family she'd abandoned...I was definitely not that imaginative.

I didn't say anything as I pulled away from the house. I wasn't sure if Ashlee wanted to talk right now or if she was still processing everything, so I focused on driving, trusting that she'd speak up if and when she was ready. I hated being helpless to do anything. All the money I had and the only thing I could offer was the ability to buy Mona off if that was what she was really after.

I knew it wasn't only the thought of Mona that had Ashlee so upset, though. Ashlee and Roberta weren't used to arguing. I doubted they'd disagreed about much over the years, and certainly never to this extent. I'd been alone a lot, but it was my own fault – most of it at least. Ashlee and Roberta hadn't been left alone by their own choice. Not with Roberta's family or with Mona. The people they'd loved had left them, and now one of them had come back, and it was tearing them apart.

"I don't want to go home yet," Ashlee said finally. "I can't be cooped up inside your place or mine. I need to be somewhere new. Look at something new."

One place automatically came to mind, a person we could both trust. "I know where we can go."

I moved into the other lane. Ashlee had come to Manhattan Records because she'd been afraid that losing her mother would make her an orphan. Now she needed that familial connection, even if it was still new.

"Where is that?"

"Finley's," I said. "He only does half-days of work on Tuesdays and Thursdays, unless he has something specific to do."

“We shouldn’t impose,” she protested. “He doesn’t need to deal with this shit.”

I reached over and took her hand. “Trust me, this is exactly the sort of shit he wants to know about.”

“Nate.”

“Okay, so maybe you don’t want to discuss everything with him, but he’ll be a good listener, no matter what you want to say, and he’s a safe place. No paparazzi will get into his house, and he’ll let us stay as long as we want.”

She nodded, but I wondered if she was really even listening to me. She was staring out the window, but her eyes were glazed over, and I wished I could see what was going on in her head. What she was thinking, what she wanted me to do.

Finley lived in the house where he’d grown up, a nice one in a good neighborhood, though not as good as what he could afford with what he had now. Since he was single and didn’t have kids – well, aside from Ashlee – he didn’t need even a home that spacious but having a big place in the city was generally more about status than it was use.

Fortunately, his place was also on Staten Island, so it was actually a shorter drive to get to his house than it was to get back to mine. I pulled into his driveway only a few minutes after deciding that was where we were going.

“Is this where Finley grew up?” she asked. “He was this close to me all this time?”

I wondered if she was thinking about how much better it would’ve been for her to have known her father when her mother had been fighting cancer years earlier. He would’ve taken care of both of them, I knew. Not just financially, but in every way they would have needed. I also couldn’t help but think that Mona’s leaving wouldn’t

have hit Ashlee so hard if she'd had Finley in her life back then.

I rang the doorbell and looked up at the security camera over the front door. I'd always thought he was crazy, not living in a gated community or anywhere with a large measure of security, for that matter. Now, I was starting to think he knew what he was doing after all. The street was quiet, and not a single reporter was anywhere to be seen. Then again, Finley wasn't in the public eye as often as I was. Maybe I needed to think less about moving and more about staying out of the limelight.

"Nate?" Finley said my name as he opened the door and then saw Ashlee next to me. "Ashlee? Are you okay?" He gestured for us to come inside.

"We needed to get out of the house for a while," I said, giving Finley the bit of information I felt comfortable sharing. If Ashlee wanted him to know more, she'd tell him herself. That part wasn't my story to share.

"Take a seat. Can I get either of you anything?"

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That sounded a lot like what Roberta had said when we'd first gotten to her place, but since we hadn't come here for any specific news, Ashlee's answer now was more polite than the one she'd given her mom.

"Something to drink would be great." She managed a small smile, but it didn't quite reach her eyes. "Iced tea if you have it. Water if you don't."

"I'll give you a hand," I said, following Finley into the kitchen after a nod from Ashlee told me she would be all right alone for a couple minutes.

"Anything new on the legal front?" he asked.

"Just some basic stuff." I took down three glasses from the cabinet next to the fridge. "Jailene is trying to get restraining orders on all three women, and she wants me to keep staying away from the media."

"She knows what she's talking about." Finley filled two glasses with iced tea and put lemon in one of them. "I hope you and Ashlee aren't spending all your time worrying over this stuff."

When I didn't immediately come back with a joke about the two of us being too busy doing other things, Finley frowned.

"What's going on, Nate?"

I picked up my glass and Ashlee's before responding. "Ashlee's just got some stuff going on. It's not my place to say anything else."

Finley nodded his understanding, just like I'd known he would, and we headed back into the living room. Ashlee hadn't sat down yet. Instead, she was standing in front of Finley's fireplace, looking at the pictures on his mantle.

"Is this you and your mom?" she asked, pointing to one of the pictures.

"It is," Finley said, moving to stand next to her. "I'm probably about twelve, thirteen there."

He'd been a gawky teenager back then, still awkward and lanky, not yet the good-looking guy who'd gotten me off the street. His mom had been a beautiful woman, and as I looked at the picture, I again saw the resemblance between her and Ashlee.

"She passed a few years ago," Finley continued.

"Was she sick?" Ashlee asked, concern in the question.

I understood her worry. With her mother having had cancer, an illness from her father's side too would cause anyone anxiety.

"Not with anything you need to worry about," he answered. "She'd been born with a heart defect. A fluke. Her doctors always told her that she shouldn't have kids. That her heart couldn't handle the strain." He lightly touched the picture. "She'd told me more than once that the moment she found out she was pregnant with me, she was happier than she'd ever been."

I'd heard this before, from Penelope herself. In the years between meeting Finley and Penelope's death, the three of us had spent a decent amount of time together.

"It was just the two of you?" Ashlee asked, finally taking a seat on the couch. "No dad or siblings?"

“I knew my father.” He seemed to be choosing his words carefully. “He and my mom never married, but he provided for us both. Even included me in his will. Pissed my sister off to no end. Half-sister, I mean.”

This was only the second time I’d heard him mention a sister, and it made me think how little I knew about his father and that side of his family. With a start, I realized that I didn’t even know his father’s last name. In fact, the only thing I knew was that his money came from his father’s side.

“You aren’t close to her then?” Ashlee asked.

“No, not at all.” He sat down across from Ashlee, his posture stiffer than it had been a few seconds ago. “We’ve always known about each other, but...” he shook his head, “she’s not the kind of person I like being around.”

It didn’t sound strange, not exactly, but something about the way he held himself, the way he seemed to be speaking so much more carefully than usual, made me wonder if I was imagining things, or if Finley was purposefully hiding something from Ashlee...or from me.

Thirty

Ashlee

Talking with my father— I still wasn’t used to saying those words — had helped calm the chaos inside me. Nate’s decision to bring me here had been a good one. Finley was the type of person who exuded tranquility. I’d never heard him raise his voice or speak harshly to anyone, but it was even more than that. He had an ease about him that soothed me, and learning about that side of my family was the perfect distraction.

“Was your mom from here too?” I asked.

“Born and raised in the Bronx,” he said with a smile. “One of four girls. Pap died a couple years before Mom, and Grammy moved to Florida with Aunt Matilda after that.”

I had a great-grandmother who was still alive. And at least one great-aunt. The subject of Finley’s half-sister might have been a sensitive one, but there didn’t seem to be the same animosity toward his mom’s side of the family.

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“Aunt Matilda was an army nurse who became an RN after she retired from the military. She was the logical choice to care for Grammy after Pap passed.”

“And your other two aunts?”

“Aunt Thelma and her husband live in Montana. They have four kids, all grown, and with families of their own. Aunt Denise and her son moved to France after she caught her now-ex-husband cheating on her with the babysitter.”

It was hard for me to wrap my head around having a family that large, even if it was made up of great-aunts and second cousins or first cousins once removed or whatever the relation was.

“Have you told any of them about me?” The question popped out before I could think better of it.

“I have.” Finley smiled warmly at me. “In fact, I was planning to talk to you both about having a Fourth of July picnic with all of us together. Nate, your family would be welcome, and of course, Roberta is too.”

And just like that, the mention of my mother’s name brought everything crashing down again.

It must’ve shown on my face because Finley frowned. “Did I say something?”

Nate gave me a sideways glance, and I sighed. “Mom and I are...well, we’re having a disagreement. I don’t really want to talk about it.”

“That’s all right,” Finley said, the tension on his face melting away. “Whatever you need from me.”

I needed to change the subject, and I brought up the first thing that came to mind. “Did Flora drag you into this mess with Nate and me?”

“She didn’t.” Finley didn’t appear to be the least bit thrown by the question. “Probably because she’s never met me.”

I thought it more likely that Roma was smart enough to tell Flora that going after Finley too would damage their credibility. While Nate’s reputation made the women’s accusations more believable, Finley’s would do the opposite. He was known to be a fair and trustworthy person who would be believed on his word alone. There was also the fact that he was gay, and any talk of inappropriate sexual behavior toward women would immediately be discredited.

“Do you think one of them hired someone to write that letter?”

“What letter?”

I looked over at Nate, but he wouldn’t meet my eyes. “The obscene letter someone slipped under my door. I would’ve thought Nate showed it to you when he had people looking into it.”

Finley turned to Nate now too.

“The person I have trying to figure out who sent it isn’t connected to the label, so I didn’t think to share it.”

Something about Nate’s explanation didn’t sit right with me, and I suddenly remembered how uncomfortable he’d been when I asked him to tell me who he

suspected. We'd been interrupted by Mom's call, and after that, the letter had slipped my mind.

"Should we get the police involved?"

I was grateful Finley had directed the question to me instead of Nate. "I'd prefer not to unless absolutely necessary. The things that woman said—"

"A woman wrote it?"

Nate's eyes dropped. "The handwriting looks that way."

I stared at him. "You said you recognized it. The handwriting."

He shifted in his seat, and Finley shot him a suspicious look. Nate was definitely hiding something.

Thirty-One

Nate

Shit.

I'd hoped that, with all of the stuff going on with Roberta, Ashlee would've forgotten about what I'd said about the letter. This wasn't the time or place I wanted to have this conversation. Honestly, I didn't want to have this conversation at all. She was already dealing with the consequences of my bad decisions. Isti Mollen could end up being the last straw.

One look at Ashlee's face was enough to confirm that she wasn't going to accept any excuses or delays. I had to tell her something. Since Finley already knew all of my

secrets, he'd know if I skirted the whole truth, but considering what I wanted to leave out, I was guessing he wouldn't call me out on it.

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“Isti.” I glanced at Finley and watched color drain from his face. That seemed a bit overdramatic, but I wasn’t going to call him on it. “I think it was written by a woman named Isti Mollen. I had a relationship with her years ago, and our break-up was...less than cordial.”

After a few seconds of silence, Ashlee lifted both eyebrows. “And...?”

“And what?” I fought to keep my expression blank.

“I figured thesheyou were talking about was an ex-girlfriend.” She crossed her arms, an annoyed look on her face. “I’m not stupid, Nate. The way the letter was written, the things she said...”

“I don’t understand.” I was pretty sure I did understand, but I was going to play dumb as long as possible.

Unfortunately, Ashlee knew me well enough to guess what I was doing. Her eyes narrowed. “Bullshit. We both know there’s no way some random ex went through all the trouble of finding my address, writing a letter, then slipping it under my door. This woman is more than some cast-off. Who is Isti Mollen?”

She wasn’t going to let it go. I could refuse to tell her, say Isti was in the past, and it didn’t matter. I wouldn’t be lying. Somehow, however, I doubted Ashlee would accept any of that as a legitimate reason not to actually answer her question.

I would’ve asked Finley what he thought, but I had a feeling he wouldn’t be any help. He would’ve wanted me to tell Ashlee the entire truth and trust her not to be pissed

off. I wasn't really worried about her being angry – well, except for being mad because I'd kept this from her. What I was afraid of was her being disgusted by what I'd done. How could she not be? I was.

But I couldn't keep hiding this. I needed to tell her.

“A couple months after I graduated from college, the label I'd tried to start tanked. I'd invested every penny, and almost all of it was gone. I couldn't go to my parents and admit that I'd failed. I convinced myself that I could find financial backers, people who would invest in the label while I got it back on its feet.”

I'd told her a version of this before, but I'd left something out. Someone, actually.

I blew out a breath and went on. “I ended up at an arts fundraiser and was introduced to a wealthy woman named Isti Mollen. She was in her mid-forties at the time and had a...reputation.”

I stood up and walked to the fireplace, then to the couch again, rubbing the back of my neck as I paced. Years had passed, but I still felt like I did the night when I'd chosen to go home with Isti.

“To put it bluntly, she told me that she'd fund the label if I fucked her.”

Ashlee's eyes widened slightly, but nothing else about her expression changed.

“She liked fucking younger men and knew that they'd be attracted to her money, so she thought she'd cut the bullshit and go right to an exchange of what everyone wanted. She never called us escorts, but it was money for sex, no matter how she worded it.” I picked up Finley's picture and looked at it without really seeing it and then set it down again. “I was with her for a little over a year. Servicing her. She was...” I shook my head. “Anyway, she caught me having sex with one of her maids

and kicked me out. That's how I ended up on the street where Finley found me."

That was it.

The whole story.

Now, I just had to wait and see if this changed things. Or, more accurately, how it changed things. Because there was no way what I'd just said could be forgotten.

Thirty-Two

Ashlee

I didn't know what to say. How was I supposed to respond to what he was telling me? Obviously, I knew he'd been with other women. Him having been with an older woman wasn't anything I cared about.

Him sleeping with a rich woman for money...that one was going to take some processing.

My poor brain, however, was on a bit of an overload. Between the legal stuff, this whole Monafuckery, and now finding out about Nate's version of Pretty Women and the ex who apparently thought she needed to try to intimidate me...

My head hurt.

"Ash—" Nate's phone rang, interrupting whatever he was going to say to me, and I felt relief at the reprieve, even if it would only be until the call was done.

When he stepped out of the room, I let my shoulders slump. I didn't remember that Finley was in the room until he cleared his throat. He took a couple steps toward me

but stopped before he reached me, his expression saying he wasn't sure what to do.

Fortunately, I had a question that would keep him from needing to figure things out.

“Did you know? About Isti?”

“I did,” he admitted. “But it wasn't my place to tell you about her. I hope you can understand that.”

I nodded, suddenly exhausted. “I do. And I'm sorry I put you in such an awkward spot. Again. I never meant for things to get so weird between all of us. Maybe it would've been better for everyone if I'd just left things alone when the sperm bank wouldn't give me your information.”

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“No.” He crouched in front of me and took my hands. “No, that would not have been better. Not for me, and not for Nate. No matter how awkward or frustrating things get, we are better for having you in our lives.”

“I have some...” Nate stepped back in the room and immediately came to my side. “Are you okay?”

“She seems to think that we would be better off if she hadn’t come into our lives.” Finley sounded half-annoyed and half-amused. I wasn’t sure which one I liked less.

Nate patted my shoulder, almost like he was afraid I would bite him if he did anything more. “I would say not to be stupid, but I have a feeling I’m about to use up what little goodwill I have left to tell you what that call was about.”

That got my attention. “What are you talking about?”

Nate sat down next to me and took my hand from Finley’s. My father went back to his seat, and we both waited for Nate to explain.

“That was a call from Owen. Someone broke into your apartment.”

“Say that again.” I’d heard him, but I still felt the need to ask the question, as if that would change his answer.

“Owen did a sweep of the building and then met with the super. They were in the super’s office for about fifteen minutes, and then the two of them walked through the building so Owen could point out places where he wanted to make improvements.

When they got to your floor, they saw that your door had been forced open.”

“Shit.” I closed my eyes. I didn’t want to hear anything else.

Nate’s voice softened even more. “Owen sent the super to call the cops and stayed by the door to make sure no one interfered with the crime scene, and then he called me.”

Crime scene. My apartment, my home, was a crime scene.

I’d always felt safe there, even without gates and doormen. Isti’s letter had angered me more than frightened me, but the thought of someone in my place, trashing it, stealing things...I didn’t know if I could ever feel safe there again.

“What do you want to do?” Nate asked, a helpless expression on his face. “The police are on their way to your apartment. They’re going to interview the super and Owen, take pictures, dust for prints. They’ll eventually want to talk to you and have you see what’s missing, but I can have a detective meet us at my place if you’d prefer that.”

I shook my head. “I spent last night and this morning worrying about what I wasn’t being told. I’m tired of waiting for bad news. I want to get this done and over with.”

Finley came over and put a hand on my shoulder. “If you ever want it, this is your home too. You’re always welcome here. Whatever you need, you can come to me.”

His words cut through all the questions and concerns rattling through my brain.

“Thank you.” I put my hand on his and smiled. It wasn’t a great smile, but it was a genuine one. I was grateful that I had an option if staying with Nate got too claustrophobic. Especially now that I had yet another reason to not want to stay in my apartment anytime soon.

“Do you want me to take you?” Nate asked. “I didn’t know if, after what I just told—”

I held up a hand. “That’s in the past. I might want to talk about why you didn’t tell me earlier, but not right now. Not with all the rest of this going on. It’s not...” I met his gaze. “Honestly, the nature of your relationship with Isti isn’t exactly the foremost thing on my mind at the moment.”

“Whatever you need, le soleil.”

Finley gave Nate a surprised look, and I wondered if he knew the story of that particular nickname. I supposed I’d ask him at some point, but not right now. Now, I had to go see if I had any of my life worth salvaging.

Thirty-Three

Nate

One good thing had come out of the break-in. The police officers standing in front of the building kept the vultures back. Reporters still crowded the sidewalks, but with a couple uniformed cops standing there, they behaved themselves better as Ashlee and I walked to the building. I still shielded her as best I could from the cameras, glaring at the few who still dared to venture too close.

“Do you live here?” The younger of the two officers looked up at me but didn’t move from his place in front of the door.

“My apartment was the one that was broken into. Ashlee Webb.”

“ID?”

She dug into her purse and handed it over. By the time the cop was done with hers, I

had mine out. After studying mine more closely than he'd looked at Ashlee's, he gave me back my license and motioned for us to come inside.

I took her hand as we rode the elevator up, trying to pretend that I didn't feel like shit. Like I hadn't fucked up her life by getting involved with her. She'd told Finley that she thought we would've been better off if she hadn't found us, and I'd meant what I'd said about how that wasn't the case. How much better she would've been if I'd kept my dick in my pants, however, was a different matter entirely.

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Owen was waiting by the door when we arrived, his arms crossed and a stern expression on his face. Based on the way the cops were looking at him, I got the feeling they'd asked him to leave, and he'd told them he wasn't going anywhere. If the situation had been different, I would've laughed and asked for the full story. As it was, I just put out a hand and thanked him for calling me.

"I'm sorry I wasn't here to catch them before they did any damage." Owen spoke to Ashlee directly. "Or to catch them in the act."

She shook her head. "It's not your fault. You've gone above and beyond to keep me safe. You can't be everywhere at once."

The tight smile he gave said he appreciated her sentiment, but that he still blamed himself. I understood how he felt. Every second since I'd gotten his call, I'd been thinking that this wouldn't have happened if I'd stayed out of her life. She'd be happy and safe in her apartment, not dealing with yet another pile of shit that my baggage had thrown her way. I had no doubts whatsoever that whoever had done this was connected to me. Ashlee'd never had any enemies until I'd come along.

"Miss Webb?" A detective stepped into the doorway before we could go inside.

"Yes. I'm Ashlee Webb." She looked at the door and then the doorjamb, lips flattening into a line when she saw the broken wood.

"It looks like someone kicked it in after their attempts to pick the lock failed," the detective shared. "I'm Detective Lotte."

“I already let the super know that the locks need to be changed when he replaces the door,” Owen said. “He’ll also be adding a few new security locks onto it too.”

Detective Lotte looked from Owen to me and then to Ashlee. “Maybe I can speak to you alone?”

She glanced at me, and I tried to tell her with my eyes that it was okay. I would do whatever she wanted me to do.

“You can speak freely in front of them,” she said. “Nate is my boyfriend, and he’s the one who hired Owen as personal security for me.”

“Nate...” I saw it on his face when the name clicked. “You’re Nate Lexington.”

“I am.”

He jotted something down on the piece of paper he held, but I suspected he’d done it more to give himself a few seconds to process this new information rather than to remember anything specific.

“Miss Webb, can you think of anyone who’d want to do this? Something expensive that someone coveted? Maybe a gift?”

He was good enough that his gaze didn’t waver from Ashlee, but we all knew what he wasn’t saying.

“I’ve been staying with Nate the last couple days,” Ashlee answered, “and I took my laptop with me. It’s the most expensive thing I own. I don’t have much in the way of jewelry, and what I do have is more sentimental than costly.”

“Mm-hm.” He wrote down something else.

Ashlee sighed. “Look, I’m having a bad week. Can I please just go see what’s missing? You can ask me questions while I’m doing that, right?”

“Of course.”

He stepped out of the way and watched Ashlee and me as we walked inside. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him glance at Owen, who didn’t move. One of the downsides of hiring security or private investigators was the dislike of the police if the two factions ever had to meet. Owen was a pro, though, and understood the difference between a pissing contest and using the knowledge he had to ensure the right things were done.

I made a mental note to give him a bonus for how he’d handled this situation. While I wished he’d been able to stop it from happening, I agreed with Ashlee that it wasn’t his fault.

Ashlee squeezed my hand, drawing my attention, but she wasn’t looking at me. She was staring, eyes brimming with tears, at the mess some asshole had made of her home.

Pictures had been knocked off the walls, glass broken, shards everywhere, frames crooked or cracked. Pillows and cushions were ripped apart, the knife that had done the damage stuck in the wall above the couch. Her TV was smashed beyond repair.

Her bookshelf was empty, and all of the books had been thrown everywhere. At least half had pages ripped out, maybe more. All of her kitchen drawers had been pulled out and emptied. Food from the cabinets and refrigerator covered the floor, leaving a disgusting, ruined mess. Glasses and mugs lay in pieces everywhere.

I couldn’t see how it was safe to walk, but that wasn’t the main reason I didn’t want her to go to her bedroom. If this part of the apartment looked this bad, I imagined her

room had to be worse. The sheer destruction made me suspect that robbery hadn't been a motive.

"I don't think anything's missing." Her voice was strong, but she couldn't stop the tears from spilling over. She wiped at her cheeks. "Can I see the rest?"

I squeezed her hand, biting my tongue to keep from telling her not to go. It wasn't my place to try to make that decision for her. It wasn't even my place to offer a suggestion.

I was her boyfriend but hadn't been for long. I also had been an asshole a lot of the time we'd been together so far, which meant I had a lot to make up for. I had to trust that if she needed me, she'd let me know.

The bathroom had been trashed like the rest of the apartment. The mirror broken. Soaps and shampoos emptied all over the floor. Medicine, toothpaste, and toothbrushes in the toilet. About the only thing we could be grateful for here was that the intruder hadn't left any...biological waste behind. Probably because he or she knew that doing so could be used to gather DNA evidence rather than any sort of decency.

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The bedroom was the worst. Another knife had been used on the bed, cutting through the blankets and linens and into the mattress itself. Pillows and pillowcases had received the same treatment. Her clothes were everywhere, closet and dresser emptied. Some of them looked to have dodged the knife, but others were ripped apart. Everything that had been on her walls was down, broken and torn. Jewelry was scattered but didn't appear to be damaged.

"I-I don't think anything's missing here." The strength in her voice had been replaced by a shakiness that made me wince. "It's...the mess is too bad for me to say for certain."

"Honestly, Miss Webb, the first thing I thought when I walked through was that this wasn't a robbery." The detective's face was placid, without even a hint of what he was thinking. "Unless a thief has reason to believe that you're hiding something valuable inside a couch or pillow or mattress, they won't take the time and energy needed to do all this damage. Do you have some cash set aside? An emergency fund or other valuables?"

She shook her head. "No, I don't keep much cash on hand, and never hidden."

"I didn't think that was the case, but I needed to ask. There's also how they smashed the television instead of taking it. It might not have been worth a lot, but they could have pawned it for something at least. There is a possibility that whoever broke in thought you'd have money and expensive things because of your boyfriend and then lost their temper when they didn't find anything."

Great. Another way this could be my fault.

“But, taking into consideration the media buzz about the two of you this week, my gut tells me we’re looking for someone with a grudge against one or both of you. Have either of you received any threats, mysterious phone calls, that sort of thing?”

Ashlee looked up at me, and I nodded. The main reason I hadn’t wanted to go to the cops about the letter had been the danger of people finding out about how things really had been between Isti and me. Now, Ashlee knew, and I didn’t care what anyone else thought.

“I stopped by here with Owen on Tuesday afternoon to get some of my things, and I found a letter someone had pushed under my door.”

“You didn’t call the police about it?”

She looked at me again, and this time, she was the one who nodded for me to speak.

“I wanted to have a private investigator look into it because I think I know who wrote the letter.”

“Why didn’t you tell Miss Webb to turn over the letter and tell us who you thought it could be?”

I sighed. “Because I think it was my ex. I thought if I confirmed it was her, I could go to her and get her to stay away from Ashlee by threatening to get the cops involved. She’s got connections, and it’d be a whole big thing. And before you ask, it’s Isti Mollen.”

Detective Lotte paused for the briefest of moments before asking, “As in daughter of Isaac and Harriet Mollen? That Isti Mollen?”

I’d forgotten that Isti donated a decent amount of money to various first responder

charities. Most of the cops, paramedics, and firefighters in the city knew who she was.

“I was with her for about a year, and things didn’t end well.” I hoped he’d be satisfied with that.

“Is there anything you want to tell me before I get her side of the story?”

I should’ve realized, especially with the things Calah and Roma were saying about me, any mention of my sex life would only raise more questions.

“I cheated on her. She ended our relationship and kicked me out of her house. It was more than a decade ago, and since then, I’ve tried to avoid her at any events we both attended. She’s sent letters to me every so often, but she’s never tried to come to my place or anything like that.”

“Why do you think, after ten years, she’d write your new girlfriend a threatening letter and then break into her apartment?”

“I don’t know if she had anything to do with this.” I gestured around me. “But the handwriting on the letter looked like hers. I have the ones she sent me in a safety deposit box in case I ever needed them.”

“We’ll want all of the letters so our experts can compare them.” He was quiet for a few seconds, busy writing on his notepad. “Is there anyone else either of you could think of who’d want to cause this amount of damage?”

“The three women making accusations about us,” Ashlee said. Her face was pale, but she’d stopped crying and had wiped her cheeks. “We’ve filed restraining orders against them, and it’s possible this was in retaliation for that. Or it could’ve been just because they don’t like me.”

“Ashlee?”

A man’s voice had all of us turning toward it. The cop at the door blocked our view, but I suspected it was either Gary or Perry from across the hall.

“Let him in, please,” Ashlee asked. “You’ll want to talk to him anyway. He and his friend live across the hall.”

The officer stepped aside, and two men came into the apartment, one blond, one brunet. They both looked shocked at the state of the place, but they didn’t stop until they were hugging Ashlee.

After they released her, she did introductions. “Detective Lotte, this is Gary Whittaker and Perry Post.”

“You live over there?” The detective pointed.

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“Yes, but neither of us have been home since around six o’clock this morning,” Perry said, his face a tight mask of anger. “I wish we would have been here. Please tell me you were still with Nate when it happened.”

“I was,” she said, reaching for me.

I put my arm around her and pulled her close to my side. I knew there wasn’t anything romantic between her and the guys, but I still wanted to be the one comforting her and taking care of her.

“This is awful,” Gary said, shaking his head. “How did anyone even get into the building?”

“That’s on the list of things we’re looking into,” Detective Lotte said. “Have any of you noticed anyone suspicious hanging around the building? Maybe asking to be let in or just watching it?”

“No one,” Perry said. “Everyone here is really good about not letting strangers in and taking note of anyone who doesn’t belong.”

“We had a tenant whose abusive ex kept trying to sneak in,” Gary explained. “People have actually been evicted for buzzing someone up they don’t know.”

“Just for the record, where were both of you today?”

“Work,” Perry answered for both of them. “I’m an accountant at Grossman & Paulsen. Gary does interior design with Home Comforts.”

“And after work? Or do you both work late?”

“I worked late,” Perry said, tapping his chest. “One of the partners went on maternity leave, and I’m picking up some of her clients.”

“I had a date,” Gary said.

“Oh, so you’re not—”

“Just friends.” Gary answered the question before it was finished, not like he was annoyed, but more like he’d answered it hundreds of times before. “Anyway, the woman I was with was on call with the hospital where she works and got called in before our dinner even arrived.” He held up a plastic bag. “Would you like steamed rice, quinoa, and kale? She told me to take her dinner.”

“No, thank you.” Detective Lotte closed his notebook. “I think I have enough here to get started.” He dug a couple cards out of his jacket pocket and handed one to each of us. “If any of you remember anything, let me know.”

“Will I be able to get any of my things?” Ashlee asked before the detective could walk away.

“I’m sorry, Miss Webb, but no. Due to the possible connection to other legal matters, we want to be thorough in searching for DNA, fingerprints, or any other evidence. In fact, we’ll want fingerprints and DNA samples from you, Mr. Lexington, your friends here, and anyone else who’s been in your apartment recently.”

“Oh, um, okay.” Ashlee looked thrown, and I didn’t blame her. Not only had her possessions been destroyed, but the only personal belonging she’d have until she was allowed back here were what she’d packed on Tuesday to stay with me. Even after she was allowed back inside, not much would be salvageable.

“I’ll get you anything you need.” I kept my voice low, so only she could hear. “And anything that needs replaced, I’ll take care of it. I know some cleaning crews too. You won’t have to do this alone.”

She opened her mouth like she was going to argue, and I put my finger on her lips. A brief touch, but full of electricity that I knew she felt too.

“This is my fault. Let me fix as much of it as I can.”

“It could’ve been a random vandal.” She pushed a strand of hair back from her face. “A drug addict who came in looking for money or pills and got pissed when they didn’t find what they wanted.”

“I suppose those are possibilities, but with everything else going on, it seems highly unlikely that this isn’t connected to the other mess I got you into.”

She leaned against me and wrapped her arms around my waist. “It’s not your fault. None of this is your fault.”

Detective Lotte met my eyes, and I saw the truth I already knew written in his. None of this would’ve been happening if it wasn’t for me.

Thirty-Four

Ashlee

I couldn’t sleep.

Again.

Actually, it was worse this time because I hadn’t even been able to fall asleep in the

first place. True to his word, Nate had taken me shopping for anything I'd need for the near future, and then we'd gotten dinner before heading back to his place.

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I was comfortable here now, able to wander the halls and explore without feeling like I was intruding or being nosy...but it wasn't home. I loved being with Nate, falling asleep and waking up next to him...but I missed having my own bed. My own space.

This was far too early in a relationship to be spending every minute together, especially since we weren't even leaving to go to work. I didn't know how long we would last if we didn't get breathing room and take things down a notch for a while.

That wasn't what was keeping me up, though. Not entirely. The biggest reason I couldn't sleep was that every time I closed my eyes, all I could see was my trashed apartment. Mental snapshots of my things broken and torn. Things that I couldn't afford to replace. Things that couldn't be replaced even if I did take Nate up on his offer to pay for anything that was ruined.

The dress I'd worn to the event Nate had taken me to had been ripped from neckline to hem.

A picture of Mom and me at Coney Island the day she'd officially been declared in remission had been stomped into a puddle of melted ice cream.

The mug Mom had given me when I'd gotten accepted to NYU had been dashed into at least a dozen pieces.

So many memories destroyed. I didn't understand how someone could do this. What sort of person could break into someone's home and tear it apart like that?

My eyes burned as I climbed out of bed. If I was going to cry, I wanted to do it

somewhere I didn't have to worry about waking him up. I didn't want him awake right now either.

I appreciated everything he'd done, but the guilt written across his face just made everything harder. A small, petty part of me wanted to blame him because, even though he didn't deserve this, he hadn't exactly been a paragon of virtue who had amicable break-ups, no matter what he tried to tell himself. The majority of me was furious with the women responsible for this whole mess, and not just because of my apartment or even the things they'd said. I was angry because, when their lies were finally revealed, it'd make it that much harder for true victims to be believed. I was angry because they'd played right into the stereotype of the catty women who go after their ex's new girlfriend even if that woman hadn't done anything wrong.

If we kept doing this to each other instead of banding together and supporting each other, things for women would never change.

Not for the first time since beginning at Manhattan Records, I wondered if there were ways the label could make a difference that wasn't just helping shape what the most popular music was. Could we choose to focus on artists who celebrated and encouraged rather than tore down others and mocked? Would people even get the message, or would they just think that we were playing politics for publicity's sake?

I must've been more exhausted than I realized if this was where my thoughts were going. The more fatigued I was, the more introspective I tended to get.

I wandered into the kitchen and made myself some tea – decaf – but I doubted it'd do anything either way. Maybe if I kept myself awake, pushed myself to the limit, I'd be able to fall asleep tomorrow. Or maybe I'd end up completely loopy and do something stupid that'd get me fired.

The thought popped into my head that I should call Mom and ask her if she had any

suggestions about how I could cure my insomnia. I scowled and tried to push the thought away, but it stuck there, nagging me with the logic that if anyone would know, it'd be Mom. She'd suffered from insomnia since she was a kid and still had bouts of it even now.

But I didn't want to talk to her yet. I didn't understand how she could even consider forgiving Mona for breaking her heart, let alone for leaving us both. I knew that was the real heart of the matter. I hated Mona for abandoning me.

I was only a kid, and I'd believed her when she told me that she loved me. She'd never been overly affectionate with me, but she hadn't been that way with Mom either, so I'd always chalked it up to personality. I'd never imagined that she would walk away and not look back.

What sort of woman could leave her child like that?

Obviously, there were plenty of women out there who'd do just that. After all, Mom's family had done it to her too. That made it worse, though. Mom knew what it was like to have the people who were supposed to love and protect you completely betray your trust. How could she even think about forgiving someone who'd hurt their child like that?

I rubbed the tops of my arms, the chill more from my thoughts than from the actual temperature. Maybe I needed to tell Mom how I felt. I'd never really had to do that before because she'd always seemed to just know, but maybe about this, she needed me to tell her my thoughts because she was too close to see clearly.

Maybe I was too close to see clearly.

If what Mom felt for Mona was even close to what I felt for Nate, it changed things. I still thought Mom should stay away, and it hurt to think she was willing to forgive

someone who'd hurt me, but I did understand it a bit better now that I would've been able to before I'd met Nate.

I stopped in front of the couch, looking at the large canvas that hung above it. I sipped my tea and admired what appeared to be a charcoal drawing of a rocky cliff overlooking a sea. At least that was what I could make out in the dim light. Night in New York City was rarely pitch-black, but blinds like the ones Nate had on the floor-to-ceiling windows kept out most of the artificial light, leaving the wide space in shadows.

I could've turned on one of the lamps so I could see the picture better. The light wouldn't even reach his bedroom. I preferred it like this, though. Having lights on would be too harsh for what I was feeling. I wanted things soft right now, even if it made it harder for me to see the picture.

Nate must've felt the same way since no light preceded him into the room. I hadn't even heard his footsteps on the carpet. He just appeared at the corner of my vision, speaking as he came toward me.

"I had a business trip to England about five or six years ago and ended up at a local art show for some strange reason. Pretty much everything in the gallery was abstract or political, and that's all fine, but then I saw this picture hanging in the back, like someone thought it wasn't as good as everything else, and I immediately bought it."

"Is that a place in England then?" I asked as he stopped behind me and wrapped me in his warmth.

"Near Cornwall, I believe." He kissed the top of my head. "I've never really been into art, even though I appreciate it in general, but something about this piece just caught my attention, and I couldn't let it go."

“I think I know what you mean,” I said. After a beat, I asked, “I didn’t wake you up, did I?”

“No. I had to use the bathroom, and I noticed the bed was empty.” His fingers slipped under the hem of my shirt and lazily stroked across my bare skin. I shivered as my head fell back against his chest. “Are you cold?”

I shook my head and closed my eyes, making a noise that brought a chuckle from him. His hands slid higher, brushing against the undersides of my breasts. I reached up, my fingers finding the back of his neck and the soft hair that grew there. He needed a haircut.

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When his hands cupped my breasts, I pushed my ass back against his groin, and he groaned. We were both dressed, but two layers of thin cotton wasn't even close to enough to keep me from feeling the hard length of him pressing against me.

"I want to touch you, le soleil," he murmured in my ear. "I want to make you feel good. May I do that?"

"Yes, please."

The last syllable rose as he pinched both of my nipples, and he laughed again, that same smoky sound that slipped over my skin like warm water. Damn, I loved it when he laughed. I loved it that I could make him laugh when so few others could. One of his hands moved away from my breast, and I made a sound of protest, reaching for his wrist.

"No, le soleil. I'm in charge." He kissed the side of my neck. "Rough play and controlled play don't always have to go hand-in-hand."

I hadn't considered that before. It was good to know, but any analysis or questions would have to wait because his fingers were now making their way under the waist of my pajama bottoms.

"Tsk, ts. You're not wearing anything underneath." His teeth grazed my throat. "I bought you all sorts of pretty underwear. Why aren't you wearing them?"

His fingers hovered just above my curls, teasing me, but not giving me what I wanted. The frustration made me petulant. "Because I didn't want to."

He went still, and I immediately realized what I'd done. Shit.

"That's not a very nice thing to say."

The hand still under my shirt moved quickly. I'd barely registered the release of my breast when his fingers were on my throat. He wasn't squeezing, but those long, strong fingers left no doubt that he could truly hurt me if he wanted to. A thrill of excitement raced along my nerves, and my heart began to pound. I'd never known danger could be such a turn-on.

"I'm going to repeat my question, le soleil, and I want you to think very carefully about how you answer." Danger edged each word. "Do you understand?"

"Yes, Mr. Lexington."

His fingers flexed, restricting the slightest bit of airflow. Nothing more than I would've noticed if I'd sneezed a couple times in a row, but because I knew my breathing was under his control, it was nothing at all like sneezing.

"Why aren't you wearing any of the panties I bought you?"

"Because I don't usually wear any at night, and I wasn't thinking when I changed for bed."

"You don't wear underwear when you sleep at home?"

"No, Mr. Lexington. Just pajamas." For some insane reason, I added to that statement. "Unless it's really hot, and then I don't wear anything."

His grip on my throat tightened, cutting off air for two beats of my heart, and then he relaxed his hand. "You sleep naked when it's too hot."

“Yes, Mr. Lexington.”

He made a sound I could only describe as a growl. “After I make you come, you’re going to strip these clothes off so I can feel every inch of your skin when we go back to bed.”

I nodded, feeling the tension radiating up his arm. He wanted to squeeze my throat again...and I wanted to let him.

The hand still in my pants dropped lower, his fingers rough as they searched for my clit. I gasped when they rubbed against the sensitive nub, then cried out as he rapidly rubbed back and forth, the pressure almost too much, the friction burning even as pleasure coursed through me. This was no gentle coaxing. He was showing his mastery over my body, his control, and his will. He would decide how and when I came, and unless I stopped it, he would decide how I got there.

I was panting now, my nails digging into the back of his neck, my body writhing. I didn’t know if I wanted to get away from his probing fingers or beg him to never stop. Then his hand tightened around my neck until spots danced at the edge of my vision. Just when I thought I’d pass out, his fingers smacked my clit with one sharp blow, and I came. With no air, I couldn’t scream, but I still tried, my body shuddering as it struggled to process an overload of sensations.

I didn’t know when Nate had moved again, only that when I became aware of myself once more, his arms were around me, holding me up, my back to his front. My entire body felt limp, as if my bones had all been replaced by noodles...or something less gross but equally bendy.

“You broke my brain.”

Nate laughed, turning me until I could look up at him. “What was that?”

I glared at him. “It’s not funny. My brain is broken. I can’t think the right words.”

“That’s my cue to get you into the shower and then back into bed.”

I managed to get my feet under me again. “Not yet.”

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He raised an eyebrow. “And why is that?”

I grabbed the waistband of his pants. “Because it’s your turn...unless you want me to get you off in the shower.”

Without a word, he swung me into his arms and headed for the bathroom. I supposed that was one way to express his preference.

Thirty-Five

Nate

I was in the middle of a surprisingly accurate dream about what Ashlee had done to me in the shower when my phone rang and interrupted the best part. Well, anything with Ashlee naked was the best, but not getting to finish in a dream was almost as bad as it was in real life, especially when it meant waking up with an aching hard-on.

“What?” I answered the phone without bothering to see who it was. Anyone responsible for my current state deserved to be snapped at.

Ashlee’s phone rang with what I knew was her mother’s ringtone. I sincerely hoped she was calling to apologize or do something to patch things up with her daughter.

“I’m going to guess you just woke up and haven’t seen any news yet.” Finley sounded pissed, and even as groggy as I was, I could tell it wasn’t directed at me.

“I haven’t.” I sat up, glancing over at Ashlee as she answered her phone. “What’s

up?”

“There’s an article in theTimes, online and print, and it’s bad. It’s really bad.”

“What are they saying now? I have mass orgies in the conference room?” This had gone on long enough. As soon as I was done talking to Finley, I was calling Jailene to see what legal recourse I had.

“I wish they were.”

My sleep-deprived brain finally registered the strain and anxiety in Finley’s voice. The jolt of adrenaline that flooded my veins finished waking me up.

“Tell me.”

“There’s stuff in there about Roberta and her ex.”

Shit.

“And it says that Ashlee had been a virgin the first time you two were together.”

Shit.

“There are other...accountsabout the things you two have done. Like what happened at that first party after Zed Hipwood practically assaulted her.”

This wasn’t the sort of thing a father should know about his daughter, even if he hadn’t been the one who’d raised her.

“TheTimescould only report so much,” he continued, “but all the graphic details are online on dozens of gossip sites.”

This couldn't be happening.

"Everything about Isti is in there too. The nature of your relationship." He paused for a few beats before adding, "Ashlee is listed as the source."

My heart dropped.

"I don't believe it," Finley continued, "but you needed to be aware of what they're saying because people who don't know her might not dismiss the claim as easily. It will make her a target."

"Thank you for letting me know." My voice sounded strange to my own ears, wooden, dull. "I'll talk to her now."

I hung up before he had to tell me more things I didn't want to hear. I stood up, turning toward Ashlee as she ended her call. Her face was white, and I knew that Roberta had given her the same talk Finley had just given me.

This just kept getting better and better.

"Did she tell you that they're saying you're the source of all this new information?" I asked. "I think we could have a case for defamation of character as well as libel. Once we figure out where they really got the information, we can go after them too—"

“It came from me.”

Her words were quiet, but they might as well have been a shout. “What?”

“The quotes, the things about my mom and Mona, the things about me and you...” She rubbed her upper arms as if she was cold, but my gut said her movements had nothing to do with temperature. “I wrote about all of that in my journal.”

I stared at her. “You did what?”

“I have a journal. Diary. Whatever you want to call it. Them. I’ve been keeping them since Mona left. They helped me work through my thoughts and problems.”

“You wrote it down? All of it?” I was still trying to wrap my head around how monumentally stupid that had been.

“Whoever broke into my apartment must’ve found my box of journals.”

“You said nothing was missing,” I said, more sharply than I’d intended.

“The box was in the back of my closet. I didn’t think to look for it.”

I shoved my hands through my hair. “What the hell made you think that it was a good idea to write down details about our sex life?”

Her eyebrows shot up. “It’s not like I planned for anyone to ever read them! They were private!”

I made an annoyed sound as she stood up. She was completely missing the point. “Not so private anymore, are they?”

She came around the bed, eyes flashing. “I don’t think someone who kept recordings of sexual encounters has any right to be upset with me for keeping a journal.”

“I explained why I did that.”

“You’re saying that your reasons for recording sex tapes are more valid than my reasons for keeping a journal?” She crossed her arms.

I shook my head and walked out. She didn’t get it. She might be embarrassed by all this stuff, but it could ruin my life. Ruin my business and everything I’d worked for. All because she had to write it all down.

Even as I stalked into the kitchen, I knew I was acting like a jerk. If she’d told me at any other time that she kept diaries, I wouldn’t have thought anything of it. Keeping journals wasn’t even close to the same as what I’d done, no matter how logical my thinking had been about the recordings when I’d made them.

I’d fucked up Ashlee’s life, and now I was blaming her for something that wasn’t even close to her fault. Once an asshole, always an asshole, right?

Thirty-Six

Ashlee

I hadn’t needed to hear both sides of Nate’s conversation to know that someone had been telling him the same thing my mom had told me. My guess had been Finley, but I supposed it could have been Jailene. Or one of his family. The information was out there for anyone to see, after all.

The thought that Nate's parents now knew intimate details of our sex lives made me sick to my stomach. The fact that it was my fault made it so much worse. Logically, I knew it wasn't actually my fault since it wasn't like I'd handed my journals over to reporters, but I still couldn't help feeling like I could've done something different.

Then Nate had gotten short with me, and my natural instinct had been to defend myself. Hearing the words come out of my mouth made me accept the truth of them more than just thinking them had. When he stubbornly kept insisting that I shouldn't have written things down, my frustration turned from myself to him.

He should have been the one reassuring me that it wasn't my fault, that I didn't need to feel guilty about the things I'd said that I thought would always be private. I'd done it for him. Instead, he'd lashed out, and then he'd walked away.

Hell, no.

I followed him from the bedroom to the living room. We were going to have this out now.

"You know, if you'd been paying more attention, you'd realize that you should be more concerned with the source who told about you and Isti Mollen."

He turned toward me, the question on his face telling me that I'd guessed correctly. He'd completely blown by that little fact because blaming me was easier than acknowledging that yet another person had betrayed him.

"I didn't know about Isti until yesterday. How would I have anything about her and you in my journals?" I didn't bother to hide my annoyance with him. "Someone else had to have fed the reporter or one of those three that information and then said it was from my journals too."

All the air seemed to go out of him. Seeing this strong, dominating man suddenly looking vulnerable bled away my anger.

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“I’m sorry.” He came over to me before I could say anything else. “I shouldn’t have snapped at you. You’re right about all of it. None of this is your fault. It’s mine.”

“No.” I wrapped my arms around his waist and leaned against him. “No, it’s not your fault either.”

He embraced me, kissing my head. “Still, I shouldn’t have taken it out on you.”

“I’m sorry that the things I wrote are being used to make you look bad.”

He hooked his finger under my chin and tipped my head up. “You have nothing to apologize for. I’m so sorry that your personal, private thoughts are out there for anyone to read because some people are pissed at me.”

“I’m not going to lie,” I said, “it’s not exactly the best thing that’s ever happened to me. But it’s not the worst either.”

“I’ll do whatever it takes to make things right,” he promised. He bent his head and brushed his lips across mine. “Starting with giving you a proper apology.”

The heat flaring in his eyes left no doubt about the sort of ‘apology’ he had in mind. And I wasn’t about to turn down what he was offering. Not with what we would have to face at some point today. I’d do it, face this whole shitstorm with him, but it would be nice to spend a few minutes not thinking about anything except how great he could make me feel.

Without taking his eyes off me, he walked us over to the table and boosted me up

onto it. I'd fallen asleep in one of his old shirts, and nothing more, which meant sliding back from the edge of the table left pretty much everything he wanted bare.

He went down to his knees, spreading my legs and hooking them over his shoulders. He kept me waiting a little longer, letting anticipation build until I was almost ready to beg him to touch me. He knew me well, though, and lowered his head just before the words could leave my mouth.

My head fell back, and I barely had the presence of mind to grab the edge of the table, my fingers instinctively curling around the wood to keep me upright. The noises that I kept making might've been embarrassing if I was thinking of anything other than the things Nate's tongue was doing between my legs.

I came fast, the sudden burst of pleasure nearly painful in its intensity. All of the tension that had been winding me tighter and tighter disappeared in a rush, leaving me boneless and limp. I dropped onto the table, my brain unable to produce anything but the most basic of commands.

Nate's hands slid over my knees and up my thighs to take hold of my hips. I couldn't quite manage words yet, but I knew I wouldn't be completely satisfied until he was inside me again. I gave him a thumbs up for consent, and he laughed, the sound making me smile.

When he slid inside me with one smooth motion, for several blissful seconds, the world stopped. We didn't breathe or speak, just existed in that strange place where physics failed, and two separate beings became as close to a single entity as they ever would.

A shudder went through him, and his grip on my hips tightened. I reached for his wrists, wrapping my hands around them as he drew back, then surged forward without a pause between. I hadn't quite recuperated enough to be able to sit up and

use his body as an anchor so I could move mine, or to put my legs around his waist. Honestly, I doubted he would've wanted me to have any control, not when he felt like this was part of his apology. I could see it in his eyes. Everything was focused on me, even more than usual.

I knew sex wouldn't always be the solution, that there would be arguments that we'd need to talk through, or we wouldn't last, but sex was a place where we didn't misunderstand each other. No matter how different our views had been at the beginning or how vast the distance between our experience levels, the physical was the place where we'd always connected without the mess of misunderstandings and baggage.

He raised my hips slightly, changing the angle of how he glided in and out of me. One hand moved to hold me at the small of my back, and the other went to where his thumb could stroke my clit in time with his thrusts. My second climax came as violently as the first, my entire body stiffening.

I tightened around him, and he followed me over the edge, slumping over me even as he emptied inside me. His cheek rested on my chest, and I could feel the heat of his skin through the soft cotton. I could feel all of him, the places we touched, and the places we didn't.

We were going to get through this. What we had was too important to do anything else.

Thirty-Seven

Nate

As much as I loved my place, I had to admit, it felt more like a home when Ashlee was here. I knew we each needed our own space, especially this early in our

relationship, but I couldn't deny how much I was enjoying sharing my shower with her.

"Mmm..." She moaned as she tipped her head back farther.

My fingers massaged her scalp as I worked shampoo into her hair. I'd known Doms who included bathing their subs as part of their aftercare. While I'd occasionally cleaned up after a session, I'd never been this invested. I doubted I would've enjoyed it with anyone else. With Ashlee, however, I found it not just enjoyable but desired. I wanted to do this for her.

"When you make sounds like that, le soleil, it makes it...difficult to stick to my noble intentions." My voice was low, rumbling underneath the white noise of the shower's spray.

She turned toward me, our bodies close enough that her nipples rubbed against the hair on my chest. Judging by the heat in her eyes, she enjoyed the light, scratching friction as much as she did the more sensual sensations of the water on our bodies. She joined her hands behind my neck and smiled as she leaned into me. My cock was half-hard and rubbing against her slick skin made it harder, but I ignored it and waited for her to say whatever had been on her mind for the past half hour or so.

"I can't deny that the idea of spending the morning seeing what other surfaces we can find creative uses for is extremely appealing, but I think I should go see my mom."

That hadn't been what I'd thought she'd say. Not even close.

"Are you sure that's what you want to do?" I wasn't second-guessing her. I just wanted her to be sure.

"Even after how I left things with her yesterday, as soon as she saw what the papers

were saying, she called me. Our argument simply wasn't important anymore." She ran her fingers through the hair at the base of my skull. "I don't want this thing with Mona hanging over Mom and me, and it will if I don't face it head-on."

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I smiled and kissed her forehead. “You’re an amazingly strong woman, you know that?”

She was gorgeous, and I’d told her as much more than once, but it was her strength that left me in awe of her, even more than her beauty. How had I gotten so lucky that a woman like her put up with an asshole like me?

“When Mona left, she just vanished. No notes explaining why she’d left or where she’d gone. Mom and I just came home from a shopping trip, and everything of Mona’s had simply vanished.” Her smile faltered, and I knew she was remembering, but she didn’t let it stop her from continuing., “We never really got any closure. We just had to move on.”

“You think that’s why your mom wants you to talk to Mona?”

“I think that’s why she agreed to talk to Mona in the first place, to ask all the questions we didn’t have answers to. Now, I think she wants me to have the same opportunity.”

“Do you still have questions?” I released her and reached for conditioner. I needed to do something with my hands, and this seemed like the best way to distract myself from the urge to take her right up against the shower wall. I turned her around and began to work the conditioner into her long, fiery hair.

“Some,” she admitted, “but honestly, I want to talk to Mona so I can tell her all of the things I’ve wanted to say since we realized she was gone. I want to tell her how devastated Mom and I were, how many times I wondered if it was my fault. I want to

let her know that she missed out on being a part of a great family and that we had a loving home without her.”

She fell silent for a minute, and I kept at what I was doing, not saying anything. She didn’t need me to talk right now. Her mind had to be racing with all of the things that she’d thought had been long buried. My own past had come back to bite me in the ass, and that had been bad enough. What she was going through wasn’t her fault at all. She needed time to work through it.

“Do you think that’s the right choice?” she asked. “I mean, I know I want to mend things between Mom and me, but do you think my reasons for me wanting to talk to Mona are valid, or am I just being petty, wanting to unload on her?”

“You aren’t petty at all,” I said immediately. “Just because she’s the one initiating the contact, doesn’t mean she gets to determine all of the content of those conversations. Why should only you have to listen to what she wants to say without the chance to say whatever you need to?”

I wanted to say more, but it wasn’t my place. I hated what Mona had done to Roberta and Ashlee, and if I was asked, I’d have been hard-pressed not to say anything. Fortunately, Ashlee didn’t ask what I thought about the woman in question.

“I’d like to go around lunchtime,” she said. “That way, we have some time to get to anything for work that needs to be done right away. Does that sound okay?”

“That’s a good idea.” I couldn’t believe how perfectly that worked with what I wanted to do today. I hadn’t wanted to try to come up with an excuse that wasn’t a lie. Now, I could be vague, but not hiding anything. “I had something I wanted to do this afternoon too. Owen can take you to your mom’s while Angus takes me where I need to go, if that works for you.”

I tensed as I waited for her to either accept or reject the bit of information I'd given her. I didn't want to lie to her, but I knew telling her my plan wouldn't go over well.

"Owen doesn't have to take me," she said. "I've made my way through New York on my own for years."

"You're not going by yourself." I fought to keep my voice even. "Not with these new developments. The press will probably go into a feeding frenzy right now."

"Good point," she agreed, much to my relief. "The last thing Mom and I need today is for her to have to rescue me from vultures."

I wrapped my arms around her from behind, and she leaned into me. "I'm going to fix all of this, le soleil. I promise."

Thirty-Eight

Ashlee

While Owen drove me to my mom's, I was still thinking about the last thing Nate had told me before we'd finished showering

I hadn't told him that I thought he probably wouldn't be able to keep that promise, not if he thought 'fixing' meant things would go back to normal, the way they'd been before everything had blown up in our faces. I believed in the relationships we had with each other and with the people important to us, but the things that were now public knowledge could never be put back into the box.

Still, I loved that he wanted to do it, not just for himself, but for me too.

"Dammit."

Owen's curse snapped me back to the present. One look out the window told me without asking why he'd sworn. Vans and cars lined both sides of the street in front of Mom's house, half of them right in front of parking restriction signs. Every inch of the sidewalk was taken up with people, some with microphones in front of large cameras, others using their phones.

"Is there a back way I can get you inside?" Owen asked.

I thought for a moment before nodding. I directed him around the block and had him pull into the driveway of the house behind and to the right of Mom's. The Russells always spent April and May in South Carolina with their grandkids, which meant I could use their hedges as a shield without having to explain to them the things that were being said about me. Since they'd known me as a child, it would've been beyond awkward to have that particular discussion.

"It'll be easier for me to sneak in alone," I said. "And I don't know how long I'll be, so there's no need to stick around."

"Mr. Lexington would want me to stay here."

"I'll text him and let him know that I told you to leave and that I'll call when I'm ready to go. I promise I won't leave the house on my own."

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Owen still didn't look happy, but I could tell he was weighing his options. With the media out front, staying in the car would most likely result in reporters knocking on windows and maybe even swarming the car. If he came inside, Mom and I would both feel awkward talking about private things with him there.

"All right," he said reluctantly. "Give me your phone so I can put my number in it. I want you to call me directly if you want to leave."

I did as he asked, and then headed for my mom's house. I felt Owen's eyes on me as I went and knew that he wasn't going to leave until I was inside. Sneaking into the house made me feel like an idiot, but the alternative was far less appealing. I startled Mom when I knocked on the back door, but she didn't ask why I hadn't come to the front.

"I'm so sorry you're caught up in all this," I said, hugging her.

The disagreement we'd had yesterday seemed like a lifetime ago, and being in her embrace took me back to my childhood, when her arms could protect me from anything, real or imagined.

"This isn't your fault," she said. "Sit. Let me get you something to drink, and then we can talk."

I sat but didn't wait to talk. Her life was as much on display as mine was. "I never thought anyone would read my journals, and not just because I had them in a box in my closet. Who would want to read about my life?"

“It’s not your fault,” she repeated as she came back to the table with two glasses of lemonade. “Let’s get that out of the way first. You are not to blame for any of this.”

I nodded. It was one thing to know it logically and another to actually feel it. I understood now why Nate had kept blaming himself even after I’d told him that he wasn’t responsible for what was happening. I supposed the two of us would be spending a lot of time reassuring each other that we hadn’t caused damage to the people we cared about the most.

Right now, however, I did have something I needed to apologize for. “I’m sorry for how I reacted yesterday. I should have handled things better.”

“I’m sorry too,” Mom said. “I was so caught up in my own issues with Mona that I didn’t even consider that you wouldn’t feel the same way.”

“She left us both,” I reminded Mom gently. I didn’t want to hurt her, but I worried that she was wearing blinders. Even if Mona was actually dying, she shouldn’t get a free pass, not if she truly wanted to make amends.

“She did,” Mom agreed. “But what I should have realized yesterday is that there’s a difference between an adult losing a lover and a child losing a parent.” She reached across the table and put her hand over mine. “I’m not saying that to belittle what you’re feeling. Just saying that I shouldn’t have expected you to feel the same way I did, partly because our experiences were different. And even if they had been the same, we’re not the same person, and it was wrong of me to project that on to you.”

Dammit. My eyes welled up. “Me too. I mean, I shouldn’t have put my own thoughts and emotions on you.”

She squeezed my hand. “I’m not saying any of this to make you feel bad. And it’s on me more than you. What you said yesterday was right. I should have looked at things

from the perspective of a mother whose child was hurt, and I didn't. When Mona first left, I was furious with her because of how she'd treated you. I should still be angry with her on your behalf."

"No, Mom." I offered her a watery smile. "I'm an adult now. I shouldn't have expected you to put what I was feeling above what you needed."

"You're always my daughter, no matter how old you get."

We both stood and moved toward each other, arms outstretched. The embrace was a long one, and exactly what we both needed for so many reasons. I knew Nate and Finley were standing with me, but if anything had alienated me from my mom, I'd have been lost. I loved Nate, but I needed my mom.

"Let's not do that again," I said as I returned to my seat, feeling a hundred times lighter.

"I agree," Mom said with a smile. "I like it better when we're on the same side."

I took a long drink before I brought up the whole reason we'd been fighting in the first place. "Do you still think I should meet with Mona?"

"I do. I think it'd be good for you to get out all the things you never had a chance to say before." She paused, then continued, "but I won't push the issue. I'll accept and respect whatever decision you make."

Even though I was about to agree to do what she wanted me to do, I appreciated that she was going to let it be my choice.

"You're right."

Her eyebrows went up. “I am?”

I rolled my eyes. “Don’t look so surprised. I reacted emotionally before, but when I calmed down and thought about it, I realized that it’d do me a lot of good to get everything out in the open. I don’t know if I’ll be able to forgive her, but I’ll see her.”

The relief on Mom’s face told me just how much she’d been worried about me. “She’s planning to come here for dinner in a few hours. I’d intended to tell her that you didn’t want to see her, but I can tell her otherwise if you want...or you can stay for dinner.”

Mom and I had always had a ‘rip the band-aid off’ sort of mentality when it came to unpleasant things. While my head knew that seeing Mona was the best thing for me, the rest of me wasn’t looking forward to it. Which meant if I didn’t rip off that particular band-aid fast enough, I’d get cold feet and back out.

“What are we having?”

She smiled. “Roast chicken and vegetables. I was hoping you’d join us.”

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Nate was a good cook, but there was something special about Mom's home cooking. Especially when it came to that meal. When Mom was sick, we ate a lot of prepared meals, but the times she felt up to it, we would make roast chicken and vegetables together.

"Let me text Nate and let him know I'm going to stay for a while. I don't want him worrying." I had a feeling he'd worry until all of this was behind us, but at least he'd know I was safe and staying put for a while.

Mona's coming over for dinner, so I'm going to stay here and get this over with. You're welcome to come too if you want.

His response came back rather quickly.

That sounds like a good idea. I don't know when I'll be done with what I'm doing. Call Owen when you're done. DON'T leave alone.

I frowned. It wasn't rude, exactly, but something still felt...off.

"Everything okay?" Mom asked. Then she shook her head. "That's a stupid question. Of course you're not okay."

"Nate's got some things he's doing right now. I'm guessing whatever it is, it has to do with putting this mess to bed."

Mom came around the table and put her hand on my shoulder. "I'm glad you have him and Finley. They have the resources that can make those women pay for what

they've done to you."

I stared at her. Mom had never been a vindictive person. Then again, with the exception of Mona, there'd never been anyone who'd hurt me like this.

"I mean it, Ash." Her expression was hard. "They can't get away with this."

"They won't." I didn't think I could actually promise that, but this wasn't the time or place to discuss the fact that the world was unjust.

Mom and I had a dinner to prepare, and I still wasn't ready to face Mona. Then again, I doubted I'd ever actually be ready for what was coming in just a few hours.

Thirty-Nine

Nate

I'd promised myself I'd never come back here, and I hadn't broken that promise...until today. I'd do more than that to protect Ashlee. I'd do whatever it took.

Even if it meant coming face-to-face with the last person in the world I wanted to see.

I walked up the slate walkway and onto the porch, knowing she was probably already watching me. She'd always known who was coming and going. She liked the idea of appearing all-knowing. Everything was a power trip for her.

Even though I knew she was most likely right next to the door, she made me wait after I rang the doorbell. Twice. I didn't bother to smile when she finally opened the door. We both knew that we weren't here for anything remotely cordial.

She was pushing sixty now, but still looked years younger. No gray in her light brown hair and only the faintest lines at the corners of her eyes. She was petite and didn't look like she'd gained an ounce since she'd kicked me out. If I hadn't been paying attention, I might not have noticed the little things that told me it wasn't good genes but rather a skilled surgeon that was responsible.

"Nate. I'm surprised to see you." She crossed her arms and leaned against the door jam, managing to look wealthy and elegant all at once.

"No, you're not." I wasn't going to play this game with her. Especially not after what she'd done. "Are you going to invite me in or are we going to have this talk out here?"

"I don't have anything to hide," she said, examining nails that had never seen a day of work, honest or otherwise.

"There's no one out here to see this little act, Isti. We can talk out here if you really want to, though." Choosing which battle to fight was always the best way with Isti, especially when I was no longer willing to distract her with sex.

She scowled and stepped back from the doorway. She didn't invite me in, but she didn't close the door either. I followed her inside, memories flooding in from every side, some from places I could see as I followed her down the hall, some that were unseen.

Isti had me take her from behind while she knelt on those stairs.

We'd fucked on the couch in the front room more than once.

I'd bent her over every marble counter in her kitchen.

The screened-in porch out back had been useful when Isti wanted to have sex outside but didn't want to risk anyone getting a picture of the two of us. She'd wanted everyone to know that she'd been fucking a man twenty-four years younger than her. Having indiscreet pictures, however, would have been embarrassing.

Through the dining room doorway, I could see the antique chair that she'd once tied me to, naked. She'd ridden me over and over, stroking me back to an erection until it'd hurt too much for me to get hard again. I'd consented to all of it, but I hadn't really liked it. Even back then, being submissive wasn't in my nature.

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And, if I was being honest, I wasn't sure how much 'consent' could really be involved in a situation where money and sex were being exchanged. I wouldn't go as far to say that she'd forced me, but I couldn't say I'd actually wanted it either.

She took me into the library. It was one of those old-school libraries, not like mine. Massive wooden bookshelves built right into the walls. Books meant to be admired and not read, every one of them. Leather chairs and fancy tables. Expensive lamps. Everything in here was to be admired.

Especially her.

She sat in her favorite chair, crossing her legs and settling her hands on her lap. I didn't wait for her to ask me – or tell me – to sit. Instead, I sat down in the chair opposite her rather than on the couch where she'd usually had me sit when we'd been in here. The couch where she'd have me jack off while she watched. I would burn that couch before I'd sit there again.

"You look like you haven't slept well recently. I hope you're not sick."

"I would say I can't believe that you would stoop that low, but that's not the truth." I wasn't going to let her pretend this was some nice visit where we were going to catch up.

She smoothed down her skirt and gave me the polite, empty smile I'd seen her use hundreds of times. Ignoring my statements, she spoke as if we were having a polite conversation. "I sold the villa in Versailles. I prefer to use the money from the estate to support charities."

I knew that was a lie, but I didn't particularly care to call her on it. If she wanted to pretend that she was a good-hearted philanthropist, that was her business. I was here to discuss our once-private business.

I wasn't going to waste any more of my time. "You need to leave Ashlee alone. You've done enough damage already."

She tilted her head, an innocent expression on her face. Her eyes, however, had a familiar predatory gleam. "I'm afraid I don't follow the gossip columns."

I gritted my teeth and reminded myself that she was trying to get a reaction out of me. She'd always loved seeing how far she could push me. "I'm not stupid, Isti. The details about you and me could've only come from you."

"I'm sure you remember all the details too, Nathaniel. I'm not easily forgotten."

She was right about that, but not for the reasons she thought. "We didn't part on the best of terms, I know, but we've pretty much stayed out of each other's ways for years. Why now?"

Her smile disappeared. "I wish you'd stop bringing up irrelevant things. We haven't seen each other for so long, and all you want to do is complain."

"Dammit, Isti, stop acting like this is a fucking reunion!" I didn't shout, but I didn't soften my voice either. "Why are you coming after Ashlee? You know damn well that I've been with plenty of women since we broke up and you've only ever sent letters to me before."

Her mouth twisted into something sour as she sneered at me. "You want to talk about this? Fine. My letters to you were to remind you that I could have you back with a snap of my fingers. And, yes, I know you fucked around, but that's all it was. One

conversation with those three women, and I knew that it was different with this little redhead.”

That answered at least one of my questions. I hadn’t known whether or not the reporter had put the pieces together independently or if Isti had talked to one of the others.

“You’re spending time with her like you’re actually a couple and it’s not just sex. I’ve seen the pictures in the news. You look at her, and you’re smiling, laughing.”

At least Isti wasn’t trying to hide anything anymore. She let all of that bitterness and jealousy show.

“You made a fool of me and lost the best thing that ever happened to you. There’s no way in hell I’m ever going to let you be truly happy.”

I glowered at her. “I was happy the moment I walked out of this house knowing I’d never have to touch you again.”

“That’s not true!” Her voice rose with the words. “You were on the street, and if it hadn’t been for my bleeding-heart brother, you’d still be there, turning tricks to earn enough money for food.”

I shook my head, confused. “What?”

“Oh, he hasn’t told you?” A strange smirk curled her lips, and there was so much evil behind the expression that the hair on the back of my neck stood on end. “Well, let me break the news then. Finley, your ‘savior’ didn’t take you on out of the goodness of his heart. He did it to spite me because he’s my father’s bastard.”

What. The. Fuck.

Forty

Ashlee

Mom went to get the door, and I pressed my sweaty palms against my jeans. What had I been thinking, agreeing to go along with this? I needed time to prepare. Except this was exactly why I hadn't allowed myself more time to prepare. I would've called it off.

Then Mona came inside, and I forgot to be anxious. Mom had said that Mona was dying, but I hadn't truly believed it until now.

Patches of steel gray hair showed the skin of her scalp, and the whites of her eyes were tinged yellow. Her naturally dark skin had a sallow, jaundiced look to it, and her normally pristine nails were cracked. She'd always been average height and weight, but now I could see her bones jutting up into sharp points, and she seemed smaller than I remembered. Two years older than Mom, they'd never really looked any different age-wise, but the woman shuffling into the house wouldn't have been guessed at anything less than her mid-sixties.

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Mom cleared her throat, and I realized I'd been staring. I moved forward to take Mona's other arm, a lump forming in my throat when I felt just how frail she was. We took her straight to the table so she wouldn't have to move again, and then Mom excused herself to go check on dinner, leaving me alone with the woman who'd broken my heart so long ago.

"It's all right, kiddo."

Her voice was raspier than I remembered. She'd been a heavy smoker before I was born, but she'd cut it down and only smoked outside after I'd come along. I wondered if she'd started up again when she'd left and if that was why she was sick.

"All right?" I echoed.

Her laugh was brittle and ended in a fit of coughing. Mom came in with a glass of water but didn't stay. Once Mona was recovered enough to talk, she answered the question I hadn't really asked.

"Let's not pretend that you don't think I deserve this." Her words didn't hold any animosity. Or any emotion, really. She could have been talking about the weather.

"Mona, I..." I shook my head and sat down. "Honestly, I have no idea how I feel right now."

She shrugged. "That's better than I'd thought you'd feel toward me."

This conversation wasn't going the way I'd thought it would. My head was spinning.

“I’ve already told Roberta my story, and now I want to tell you. Not because I want you to feel sorry for me, but because I know leaving like I did was a shitty thing to do, and you deserve to know the whole truth.”

“Okay.” I took in a deep, steadying breath. “I’m listening.”

She nodded once and seemed to brace herself. “I didn’t want kids, and I know that’s an awful thing to say to someone who was supposed to be my daughter, but I don’t want to lie to you.”

It did hurt, but it wasn’t really much of a surprise to hear her say what I’d suspected.

“I tried,” she continued. “I loved Roberta, and she wanted a baby, so I went along with it. And sometimes, it was great, being with the two of you, but I always felt like a fake, being someone I wasn’t.”

Mom came back in and took a seat on the other side of me. She didn’t interrupt Mona’s story, though, and the words kept coming.

“Over the years, I felt more and more stifled, trapped. None of it was your fault. Either of you. I should have been honest from the beginning. I had no right to put the two of you through that deceit.” She paused to take a sip of water. “I thought about leaving for months before I actually did it. Then one day, the two of you weren’t there, and I realized that if I didn’t leave right then, I never would. I’m not going to lie and say that I did it for your benefit. My decision was completely selfish.”

My mom took my hand and squeezed it, reminding me that she and I were still in this together.

“I’ve always been selfish. Besides lying, I cheated. Never long-term affairs, but that doesn’t excuse the fact that I was with other women.”

Now, it was my turn to squeeze my mom's hand. The expression on her face told me that she'd already known about the cheating. It didn't make me any less angry with Mona, but it did keep me quiet. For now, at least.

"I'd thought that leaving would mean I would have the life I'd always thought I wanted. Casual relationships, no commitments. No family tying me down. No responsibilities, other than work. I could do what I wanted, when I wanted, with who I wanted."

If it wasn't for the self-loathing I could hear in her voice, I would've told her to shove her amends up her ass and kicked her out, dying or not.

"For six years, I hooked up with whoever I found attractive at the time. I acted like some immature asshole, going from bed to bed. Then I met Yvonne, and she took me to rock bottom." Another sip of water. "She was an addict. It started with coke, just a little for a pick-me-up. A social thing that we'd do at parties. Then we'd do it when...in the bedroom."

Mom's hand tightened around mine, and I wished we were alone so I could ask her if she was still in love with Mona. Then I was glad that we weren't alone, because I wasn't sure I wanted to know the answer.

"Cocaine became heroin, and time went by in a blur. At some point, Yvonne left, and I heard later that she overdosed a few months after that. I didn't really care at the time. I was using heavily, doing whatever I needed to do to get my fix."

This wasn't the story I thought she'd tell. I'd been prepared for her to say she was lonely because she'd abandoned us and now, she didn't want to be alone because she was sick. Nothing about this had been anywhere close to my radar.

"Three years ago, I woke up in the hospital with no idea of how I'd gotten there or

what day it was. I was under arrest for solicitation and assault, but I didn't remember any of it. I was sentenced to three months of rehab and got clean." She swallowed hard and glanced up at me before looking back down at her glass. "It was too late, though. At some point in those years, I'd contracted hepatitis and HIV. A year ago, I was told that I'd run out of treatment options. I've lived longer than anyone expected me to, but my time's almost up."

I finally understood why Mom wanted me to talk to Mona. Not so I'd pity her, but so I'd see that she had suffered for her actions.

"I had a long list of people I needed to make amends with as part of my recovery, and I always knew the two of you were the ones who deserved it the most, but I was a coward. I put you last because I knew you'd be the hardest. I'm not asking for forgiveness, because I know I don't deserve it, but I wanted you to know that I regret every day how I handled things. You both deserved so much better than that." She met my eyes for the first time, and I saw the shadows in them. "I am so sorry."

I'd agreed to meet with Mona because I had things to say to her. Listening to her wasn't something I'd wanted to do, but Mom had thought it was important, and now I understood why. All the pain and anger I had toward her was still there, and I knew I'd need to say it to get even a hint of closure, but right now, there was something more important I needed to say.

I'd seen how unspoken things and unforgiveness had torn Nate's family for years. Mona wasn't a part of my family anymore, but if I refused to give her at least some measure of peace, I would carry that guilt with me for the rest of my life.

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“There are some things I need to say to you,” I began. “Things I need you to hear. And I don’t want to be a part of your life, no matter how little is left.”

“Ash—” Mom started to interrupt, but Mona held up a hand, letting me finish.

“But I forgive you. It’s more for me and for Mom than it is for you, but I forgive you.”

Something twisted and tight in my chest released, and I found I could breathe easier than I had in a long time. We were far from done here, but at least we were on the right path.

Forty-One

Nate

Isti was lying. She had to be lying because there was no possible way that the person I’d been closest to and relied on for more than a decade had been hiding something this big from me all this time. He’d been there for me through all of the shit with my family, and he’d never once talked about the fact that he had a half-sister, much less that she was my ex.

I frowned as Angus pulled up to Finley’s place. A memory came forward, something from not too long ago. Finley had said something about having a sister. It’d been the first time I heard him mention a sibling and he hadn’t given details or brought it back up. I’d been mildly curious, but nothing more than that. It still didn’t excuse anything.

“Do you want me to circle around, Mr. Lexington? Or should I find somewhere to park?” Angus asked as I reached for the door handle.

“Park, but not too far. When I’m ready to go, I don’t want to have to wait.”

“Yes, sir.”

When Finley opened the door, he automatically stepped out of the way to let me inside. As I passed, he asked if something was wrong. I couldn’t help thinking that in a minute, he’d regret that question. I just had to figure out how I wanted to start.

“Is Ashlee okay?”

“She’s fine,” I said curtly. “This has to do with you and me.”

When I turned to face him, he looked confused, but I didn’t see any guilt or betrayal there, which just pissed me off even more. He’d lied to me for years and didn’t even have the decency to acknowledge it.

“You’re a fucking liar.”

Okay, maybe not the calmest way to start the conversation, but at least it got to the point quickly.

“What are you talking about?”

I shook my head. “I can’t believe you. Lying to my face all this time and you’re acting like you have no clue.”

“Assume I’m clueless.”

He crossed his arms, and even though his tone was mild, I knew him well enough to know he was annoyed. Then again, I clearly didn't know him as well as I'd thought, so maybe that wasn't his annoyed stance. Maybe that was his 'boy are you stupid for not having figured it out before' stance.

"I went to see Isti to find out why she was going after Ashlee."

If I hadn't been watching for it, I probably would've missed the slight tension that appeared the moment I said his sister's name.

"What did she say?"

"It's funny. Her excuses were exactly what I'd assumed they'd be, and I thought I'd basically wasted a trip. But then she told me something about herself that I found interesting."

I paused to see if he'd confess, but he didn't say a word. More than ten years and he'd been acting like it was sheer coincidence that he'd found me and helped me. All out of the goodness of his heart.

"She's your sister."

He nodded. "Half-sister, yes. We have the same father."

When he didn't add anything else, the control I had on my temper disappeared. "What the hell, Finley? When I told you about her, why didn't you say you knew her, and that's why you were helping me? Some misguided attempt at atoning for her sins or whatever bullshit you told yourself?"

"Would you have come with me if I'd told you that she and I were related?"

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“It doesn’t matter! Even if you didn’t tell me that first night, you’ve had years to come clean!”

“Isti and I weren’t raised together, and we don’t even like each other,” he said, his voice still calm despite the fact that I was practically yelling at him. “Our father cheated on her mother with mine. Isti blames me for ruining her happy family.”

If I’d been hearing any of this under different circumstances, I would’ve been indignant for him, asking how Isti could blame a child for a parent’s infidelity. But it was too late for that.

“Why didn’t you just tell me that? When I brought up the details of how I’d ended up on the streets, why didn’t you just tell me that you already knew?” I hated that I sounded more hurt than angry. Before today, I wouldn’t have really cared much about Finley hearing how vulnerable I was feeling, but I needed my guard up right now.

He sighed. “You’re not always the easiest person to talk to, Nate. I thought you’d blame me, and it’d ruin our friendship. Maybe even want us to quit working together. I didn’t want to see that happen to either of us.”

I wanted to tell him that none of that would’ve happened, that if he’d told me, I would’ve accepted it and it wouldn’t have been a big deal. I wanted to believe that I wasn’t as immature and petty as he made me sound. Except I knew better, and that just pissed me off even more.

Before I could figure out the best way to respond, my phone rang. Ashlee’s ringtone should’ve broken through my anger, making me realize that talking to her would give

me time to calm down and really think about what I wanted to say. Instead, a new flash of betrayal went through me. Ashlee was Nate's daughter. That meant she was Isti's niece.

"Yes?" The word was curt, but she didn't seem to notice.

"I'm still at Mom's, but the cops called and said I could go back to my apartment if I wanted to. I didn't want to make any plans without talking to you since I'd have to call Owen."

I barely heard any of what she said. As soon as she paused, I asked, "Did you know that Isti is your aunt?"

Finley said my name, but I ignored him.

After a couple long seconds, "What?"

"Did you know that Isti Mollen is your father's half-sister?"

Finley moved to stand in front of me, glaring. In my most mature response yet, I flipped him off.

"No. I had no idea. He never mentioned her to me. Are you sure?"

"Positive," I said. I didn't bother explaining that I'd heard it from Isti first, then confirmed it with Finley. She didn't need to know the process.

A little voice in the back of my head wondered if hiding that from Ashlee wasn't pretty much the same thing Finley had done to me. It wasn't. I fully planned on telling Ashlee the full story once I'd gotten it all straight in my head. As fucked up as all this was, I didn't want Ashlee to feel like she had to choose between her father and

me.

Unless that was already how she felt. Was she lying about what she didn't know? It made sense that she wouldn't admit if he'd gotten her tangled up in this. She would want to protect herself as well as us. Maybe she thought the best way to do that was to say that she hadn't known anything.

I didn't want to believe that, but the one person I'd always thought I could count on had broken my trust. Shattered it, really. It made me question everything I'd thought I'd known.

"Are you with Finley right now?" she asked. "Do you want me to have Owen bring me there?"

"No. You should probably go back to your place. I need some time and space to work through this."

"Oh. Well, okay." A few more empty moments. "I'll call Owen then. Talk to you later?"

"Sure." I ended the call before she could say anything else. Before I could be guilted into apologizing for being abrupt. Before I could guilt myself into asking about how dinner with Mona went.

Not having her on the phone anymore didn't stop me from feeling guilty about both of those things, especially since I knew how anxious she'd been about seeing Mona again. I should have put aside my own issues long enough to make sure she was okay, or at the very least tell her that I'd call her tonight so she could tell me how things went then. Instead, I'd let my own shit become more important than her.

"That was a real dick move, Nate." Finley was still glaring at me. "If you want to be

an asshole to me, fine. But that's between the two of us. Leave Ashlee out of it."

"She wouldn't be in it at all if it wasn't for you."

"You're right," he agreed. "You wouldn't have even met her if she hadn't come to Manhattan Records looking for me. The two of you coming together was sheer coincidence. She could've ended up with anyone if the cards had played differently. Where would your life be then?"

I didn't even want to think about that.

Forty-Two

Ashlee

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I was torn between staying until Mona left and going back to my apartment like I'd told Nate I was going to.

It wasn't like I had to physically worry about Mom. Even at her worst with us, Mona had never been violent, but now she looked like a strong wind would blow her over. I did, however, worry that Mom would feel obligated to take care of the woman she once loved. Maybe not obligated, I admitted to myself, but maybe overly compassionate, which would then translate into the need to nurse Mona through her final months.

On the other hand, staying wasn't entirely appealing. I'd said everything I'd come to say, and it'd wrung me out emotionally. I didn't have the strength or the patience to make small talk or reminisce. Especially now that I knew I could be spending my time cleaning my home. The cops had gotten everything they'd needed, but it wasn't their job to put everything back together again. That was on me.

Besides, I needed to know if I'd even be able to feel safe enough to stay there. If I didn't, I needed to figure out what that meant. Finley had said I could stay with him any time I needed to, but with what Nate had just told me, I wasn't sure that was a good idea. I didn't want to be in the middle of what was going on with them.

"Thank you for helping me clean up," Mom said as she came back into the kitchen. "You didn't have to do that. You could've just excused yourself to talk to Nate."

I was glad she didn't ask why I'd wanted privacy to talk to Nate. I'd assumed he'd want to know how the dinner went, which wasn't something I'd wanted to discuss with my mom and Mona sitting right there. He hadn't asked, though. Considering the

shock he'd gotten, I completely understood why he hadn't.

He and Finley had been so close for so many years, it had to have completely thrown him for a loop to find out that the woman who'd used him and then kicked him out was Finley's sister. If my head was spinning, I could only imagine what his was doing.

"I figured I could be useful at the same time." I kissed Mom on the cheek. "How are you doing?"

She thought before answering. "Still processing, but I'm glad she's here. For you as much as for me. I think no matter how much we'd moved on, there would always be a part of us that would always be hurting, but now we can have real closure." She patted my cheek. "What about you?"

"I'm glad I stayed. I think I needed to hear what she had to say as much as she needed to say it." I put away the last glass. "Where do we go from here?"

"I don't know," Mom said. "I think that's something that will have to be dealt with one day at a time for right now."

I nodded. "Well, I know where this day is supposed to end."

"I don't know if I like the idea of you being at your apartment alone."

Since I hadn't realized my journal had been stolen until Mom called to tell me about the latest gossip, I'd filled her in on the robbery then. With everything else going on, my apartment wasn't exactly top priority while the scene was still being processed. Now, however, was perfect timing. Something that needed done but didn't require a lot of brainpower.

“I don’t think anyone’s coming back. Whoever they were, they already got my journals and trashed the place. Besides, I already texted Perry and Gary to ask if they’d mind keeping me company for a bit while I clean up.”

“It just worries me,” Mom said.

“I know, but if they chase me away from my home, then they’ve won, and I refuse to let that happen.”

The smile she gave me had the fire in it that I’d inherited. I wasn’t the most outgoing person, but I could be stubborn as hell when I wanted to be.

“I’m going to call Owen.”

Thirty-five minutes later, Owen followed me up the stairs to the apartment. He’d told me that the super had replaced the door once the police were done and then he’d given me new keys. I didn’t ask, but I suspected that the super had been given extra incentive to get me a new door. Yet another way Nate was taking care of me.

I just wished he’d let me do the same for him.

I wasn’t upset that he hadn’t asked about the dinner, or at least not for my own sake. I knew how upset he must’ve been to forget to ask, and I just wanted to help him through it the same way he’d been with me through this entire mess. I knew he thought this was all his fault, but I didn’t blame him. He wasn’t responsible for what some petty, vindictive women did.

“Thank you for bringing me home,” I said as I let myself into my apartment. “Gary and Perry will be over in a few minutes.”

“If it’s all the same to you, Miss Webb, I’d like to help you clean up.”

Yet another person feeling guilty about something that wasn't his fault. At least this one had a fairly easy solution.

"That's very kind of you, Owen. I would appreciate anything you can do before you need to go home."

"I'm not going home, ma'am," he said as he followed me inside. "Not any time soon, anyway. Mr. Lexington wants me to be here until the people involved with the break-in are caught."

I gaped at him. "He can't have you working twenty-four seven for that long."

One corner of Owen's mouth twitched like he wanted to smile. "It's part of my job."

"Knock knock!" Perry called as he rapped his knuckles on the door Owen had just closed.

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“Thank you for coming over,” I said as I let my neighbors inside.

I gave them a grim smile as they handed me two plastic containers full of food and a six-pack of beer. This wasn’t going to be a fun night, but the four of us would accomplish much more than I’d have been able to do alone. And having them here would keep me focused on cleaning rather than mourning what I’d lost.

“The super said we can use the building’s dumpsters at no extra cost,” Gary said. “So, you don’t have to worry about needing someone to haul away anything big that can’t be salvaged.”

“Remind me to get him a thank you card,” I said as I reached into my shopping bag and pulled out a box of garbage bags and then several pairs of work gloves. “I don’t want anyone getting hurt. Please wear gloves at all times and make sure your shoes have thick soles. The last thing we need is a trip to the ER.”

“Gary and I have an air mattress you can borrow once we get space cleared on the floor,” Perry said. “And you can use it as long as you want.”

I hugged them both, letting the embrace say what I didn’t have the words for. My mattress was beyond help and getting another one would put a dent in my finances. Nate and Finley would both offer to buy me one, I knew, but I wasn’t going to count on them or Mom for anything. I wasn’t too proud to accept gifts, but I refused to ask for help unless absolutely needed. The air mattress took the weight of at least one of those decisions off my shoulders.

“One thing,” Perry said with a smile. “We can’t do this without music.”

He tapped a few times on his phone and music started to play. As we began to go through things, I was glad that he'd thought of it. A lot of my now-destroyed possessions were items I would've eventually had to replace anyway since I'd gotten them second-hand here and there over the years. It made me angry that I had to get new ones now because someone decided to throw a temper tantrum, but they weren't what made cleaning up difficult. No, it was the irreplaceable knick-knacks and silly toys I'd collected. The picture frame I'd specifically bought for a picture that was torn in two. The music covered the sound of occasional tears and gave me the privacy I needed without the awkwardness that came from people seeing that grief.

The things that could be fixed or repurposed went in a pile next to my couch. Unlike my mattress, I could stitch the couch cushions well enough to make them usable again. As that pile grew, some of the ache in my chest eased. That was another small victory, being able to fix the things that had been broken.

A good analogy, I realized as the night wore on. Whoever had done this had intended to break me, but I would never let that happen. Not to me, and not to the relationships with the people I loved. When Nate was ready to talk about the issue with Finley and Isti, I'd be there for him and help him do what was necessary to fix his relationship with my father.

By the time the floors were cleared and the air mattress set up, it was well past midnight, but my helpers weren't complaining. In fact, they waited until I was entirely sure I felt safe enough to be alone, and even then, they all reassured me that they would be within shouting distance all night.

When I locked the door behind Owen, I clicked into place the extra locks that had been added to the new door, but it was the knowledge that I had friends looking out for me that made me feel safe enough to shower and then go to bed.

I was still trying to get comfortable on the new-to-me bed when my phone buzzed.

Nate had sent me a text.

Hey, babe, I hope I'm not waking you up, but I'd really like to see you tonight. It's lonely in my bed without you.

I read the message a second time, then turned on my light. As I dressed, I sent back a reply saying I was on my way, then sent messages to Gary and Perry, letting them know I was going to Nate's. Owen was my last text because he was my ride. It didn't matter that it was nearly two in the morning. Nate needed me, which meant I was going.

Forty-Three

Nate

Today sucked.

I scowled at the empty glass in my hand. I'd drained the last of my Blanton's Whiskey a few minutes ago and was now trying to decide if it was worth the effort to get up for another one. Finley had given me the bottle for Christmas a couple years ago. At the time, I hadn't wondered how he'd known that this particular brand was my go-to for lousy days. Now I knew. He'd been spying on me.

I closed my eyes and rested my head on the back of my chair. No, that couldn't be the case. Even my buzzed brain knew that was false logic. For one thing, I hadn't been 'allowed' to drink Blanton's when I lived with Isti. I'd gotten a taste for it at a party she'd taken me to, and afterward, she'd given me a twenty-minute lecture on the importance of choosing the right scotch to speak to the sort of person I was. Why she had an issue with that particular brand, I still didn't know.

I hadn't been with her long when we had that conversation, but it had been enough

time for me to know that what she really meant when she talked about me was how I reflected on her. She wanted people to know she was powerful and attractive enough to snag and keep a guy like me, but as much as she liked to remind me of where I'd be without her, she didn't want anyone else to know that I wasn't as refined and wealthy as her.

I honestly wondered who she thought she'd been fooling. It wasn't like I was someone she'd plucked from obscurity. Sure, I hadn't moved in the same circles socially, but I had spent time talking to people with money, asking for investors. And gossip in high school had nothing on the way news traveled in high society. Everyone knew that I'd been looking for financial backing and that Isti liked her boytoys. It hadn't taken a genius to put it together, but she'd always refused to acknowledge it in public when someone brought it up.

Two pieces of previously unrelated information came together with a loud click, and I cursed. I now remembered telling Finley about liking Blanton's, and he'd said the same. It was the only whiskey his mother had liked. Finley hadn't gotten me Blanton's because he knew from Isti that I liked it, but rather Isti hadn't wanted me to drink it because Finley and his mother did.

"This is so fucked up." I was alone in the house, but some things just needed to be said out loud.

I wanted to say that I couldn't believe Isti would be so vindictive as to have kept the secret of her connection to Finley for years, just so she could wait for the opportune moment to drop that particular bombshell, but that was exactly the sort of person she was.

I pushed myself up from my chair and went back to the bottle I'd left on the kitchen counter. I'd had a reason for leaving it there instead of taking it with me, but I couldn't remember what it was now. Probably something to do with believing I'd be

less likely to get drunk if I had to keep getting back up to refill my glass.

Fuck that.

I left my glass and took the bottle to my seat. I made a pathetic picture, sitting here in the dark drinking straight from a bottle but couldn't find it in me to care. Besides, it wasn't like anyone was here to see me anyway. I'd told Ashlee to stay away. For her own good. She needed to take care of herself, not me, and I wasn't in the right mindset to be the caretaker today.

Not that I'd done a particularly good job of taking care of her when she was around. If I'd been as good of a Dom as I thought I was, we wouldn't be in this whole mess. I would've been able to control the situation, bend it until it went the way I wanted. What good was I if I couldn't even take care of the woman I loved?

Loved.

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I was drunker than I thought. The word had been dancing around in my head, true, but to have it just come out like that told me I was slipping. Definitely a good reason to not have Ashlee here with me at the moment. If I kept drinking, I could end up doing or saying something monumentally stupid and fuck everything up even more than it already was.

I took a long draught from the bottle, barely even tasting it anymore. I briefly considered swapping it out for something that would get me just as drunk but didn't have memories associated with it. Except that would mean I'd need to get up again. Besides, Blanton's was my self-pity go-to drink, and even if I didn't like thinking of myself as being self-pitying, that was what I was doing. If I couldn't be honest with myself, then who could I be honest with?

I made a derisive sound and frowned at the bottle. Honesty. What was the point? If people said they were being honest, it didn't really mean they actually were, so why even bother pretending? We should all just accept the fact that people lied and stop trying to act like honesty was required for intimacy.

Intimacy.

There was a word as loaded as honesty. What was wrong with just fucking? Pure physical pleasure that didn't need to include emotions. I'd been good at that. Hell, I'd been great at it.

Okay, Calah and Roma proved that doing things that way wasn't always smooth sailing, but maybe they had seen what Isti had seen, which set them off. It wasn't a stretch to think that the reason they'd come after me the way they had was because

they knew Ashlee wasn't just another warm body to play with.

She'd been more than that from the first moment I laid eyes on her, even if I hadn't admitted it at the time. There was no turning back. Now that I'd had something real, I could never go back to a meaningless fuck, and in my maudlin state, I didn't know if the change was good...or bad.

If I was an asshole sober, what did that make me when I was drunk?

Not that I was drunk. Just on my way there.

Someone buzzed the intercom.

"Fuck off!" I shouted even though I knew whoever it was couldn't hear me. I'd have to push the button for that to happen.

It buzzed again, and I ignored it.

Then again.

Shit.

I stumbled a little as I got to my feet, but my path to the door was straight. Halfway there, I realized that it could be Ashlee. Maybe she was planning to surprise me by showing up with a coat, heels, and nothing else. I liked that idea.

I hit the button, still hoping it was her, then realized I probably should have doublechecked first. If whoever had broken into Ashlee's place wanted to do the same here, I'd just given them grounds to say that they'd been invited in.

Reality hit when I remembered it couldn't be Ashlee in that elevator. She was busy

cleaning up the mess at her apartment. A mess that was my fault, and I hadn't even offered to help. Even if I'd still wanted to be alone, I could've called a cleaning service so she could stay at her mom's while someone else did the dirty work. I'd even told her that's what I'd do.

I was a shit boyfriend.

The elevator dinged, and the door slid open.

Two women. Heels. Fairly conservative black dresses. I blinked a couple times, but there were still two women. Women who weren't my girlfriend. Women who most definitely shouldn't have been able to get into the building.

"You've had a rough day." Calah put out a hand to stop the elevator door from closing.

"We'd like to make things better," Roma said, her expression soft. "Can we come inside?"

Forty-Four

Ashlee

Owen offered to come up with me, but I told him I had a key. As good as he was at keeping his face blank, he couldn't completely disguise his surprise. Even if I only had it because of extenuating circumstances, it still meant something that Nate cared more about my comfort and care than about his privacy.

I just hoped he wasn't going to regret giving it to me before the night was over.

The ride up to the penthouse felt like an eternity, and I kept catching myself tapping

my toes or fingers, making all sorts of anxious little ticks that revealed just how tightly wound I was. I hadn't texted or talked with Nate on my way here, but now I was wondering if that had been a mistake.

The elevator door slid open, and I stepped into the quiet penthouse. I waited for a moment, then heard faint voices. I set my purse and jacket on the closest table, then headed for the bedroom, not walking with any extra care. I wasn't trying to hide my approach, but I also wasn't going out of my way to make noise either.

When I reached the door to his bedroom, I didn't bother to knock since the door was open partway. I pushed it open and took in the scene in front of me.

Nate was on his stomach in the center of the bed, completely naked, if the fact that only half of his ass was covered by the sheet was any indication. He was sound asleep. The women on either side of him, however, were very much awake.

And also naked.

“Oops,” Calah said as she rolled toward Nate like she actually cared that I could see everything.

“I guess you caught us this time.” Roma smirked at me.

I rolled my eyes and walked to the bed, ignoring both of the women watching me. I knew what they were expecting, but they were going to be sorely disappointed.

And they’d be lucky if they didn’t get bitch-slapped before the night was over.

“Nate. Wake up.” I grabbed his leg and shook it. I really didn’t want to have to get any closer to the women, but if he didn’t wake up from me touching his leg, I wouldn’t have much of a choice in the matter. And if that happened, I was going to be royally pissed.

“I guess we wore him out,” Calah said, putting her hand on his back.

“Remove your hand, or I’ll do it for you.” I kept my voice even as I shook Nate’s leg again. “Come on, Nate, you need to wake up.”

He groaned and rolled over. I’d seen the bottle of whiskey on the counter when I first came in, which meant I was already prepared for the bleary blink and confused expression when he saw me. As he moved to sit up, he realized two things in quick succession. The first was that he was naked, and he grabbed at the sheet, which led him to the second realization that he wasn’t alone in his bed.

“Ashlee...this isn’t...I mean...le soleil, I didn’t—”

I cut him off before he could get out a full sentence. “I know.”

He frowned, not even glancing at either of the naked women with him. “You know what?”

I smiled, keeping my gaze focused on him. “I know you didn’t sleep with either of them.”

Calah gave an inelegant snort. “You can’t be that stupid.”

“I think it’s more greed than stupidity,” Roma said. “If she gets pissed that he cheated on her, she loses her meal ticket.”

I ignored them. “I’m guessing you were pretty buzzed when they got here, right? They gave you some excuse to get in the door, then things get blurry after that?”

He nodded, a tentative hope written on his face. His brain wasn’t quite as sharp as usual, but he was starting to realize that I wasn’t angry with him.

“I don’t know what you think happened, but we came here to make amends, and Nate invited us in, for old times’ sake. One thing led to another...” Roma climbed out of bed and stood with her hands on her hips.

I wondered if she thought being naked was going to get Nate’s attention or make me uncomfortable. I supposed it was possible she just didn’t care about nudity, but Roma struck me as a person who used her body like a weapon, and not in a fun assassin sort of way.

“Aside from the fact that I know Nate would never cheat on me, especially with the

two of you, I have tangible proof that you're both lying." I folded my arms and squared off with Roma. She'd gone too far with this stunt. "I came here because I got a text from Nate's phone that said he wanted me to be here."

"Ashlee, I don't remember sending a text." Nate slid down to the end of the bed near where I stood, taking the sheet with him as he went.

"That's because you didn't," I said.

"Yes, he did!" Calah was next to Roma now, not looking nearly as comfortable with her clothes-less status. "He said he wanted to know if you would join us or be a prude about it."

Apparently, Calah hadn't been the one who'd sent the message. I pulled my phone from my pocket and read the screen. "Hey, babe, I hope I'm not waking you up, but I'd really like to see you tonight. It's lonely in my bed without you."

"Okay, so he didn't actually tell you that he wanted you to join us," Calah backpedaled. "But he wanted you here, and we were here, so obviously there was something he wanted you to see."

"You should probably stop talking," I said. "I'm going to make this simple. Nate doesn't call me babe. In fact, he doesn't call me anything that he's called anyone else. You assumed that he talks to me the same way he talked to you. But he doesn't. Because what he and I have isn't anything like he had with either of you."

Calah and Roma both glared at me, their cheeks flushed.

"Now, here's what's going to happen. Because I'm a decent human being, I'm going to let the two of you get dressed before you leave, but if you try anything, I'll take you downstairs myself and deliver you to security to hold until the cops get here."

“He invited us inside.” Calah’s voice shook with anger. “The cops can’t arrest us for trespassing.”

“No,” I agreed. “But I can call them and say that you two are violating your restraining order. And if that isn’t enough, I’ll explain that two individuals took advantage of someone under the influence of alcohol, resulting in all three people being in bed together, naked, and one of them hadn’t consented.”

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“That-that’s not...that’s bullshit!” Roma practically shouted the last word. “Everyone knows that Nate’s a pervert. No one will believe you!”

“Oh, they’ll believe it.” I took a step toward her. “They’ll believe it because I’ll be on every news channel, talking to every reporter, every blogger, anyone who’ll listen. I’ll talk about how, if the genders had been reversed and a drunk naked woman woke up in bed with two naked men and no memory of what had happened, every feminist in the country would be up in arms. I’ll make sure everyone knows that you’re trying to slut-shame Nate and me about our sex life because you’re petty and jealous. You won’t have to be worried about the lawsuits that are going to bankrupt you or the criminal charges that will be filed against you because your reputations will be beyond repair when I’m done with you.”

Both women stared at me, and I could feel Nate watching me too. I wondered what he was thinking but didn’t even glance at him. I wasn’t quite done yet.

“Now, get your clothes and get on the elevator. I’m going to call down to security to make sure they see you leave. If you so much as dawdle, they’ll escort you from the building. After that, I recommend you start looking for a lawyer because I’m done playing nice. You’ve got a whole world of legal shit headed your way. Civil and criminal, so choose your lawyer wisely.”

A second of silence passed. Two. Three.

I pointed at them. “Get. Out. Now.”

They practically ran, and I went to the hall to watch them go. Once the elevator door

shut behind them, I sent a text to Owen to make sure security got both women out of the building as quickly as possible. After I got a thumb's up reply, I turned back around. It was time for Nate and me to have a conversation.

Forty-Five

Nate

I was awake. Or, at least, I was ninety-five percent sure this wasn't a dream, but that five percent of doubt had some pretty good points as to why this couldn't possibly be happening.

Like the fact that I'd woken up in my bed a few minutes ago, naked, with Roma and Calah – also naked – and Ashlee just standing there like she wasn't surprised at all. If I'd ever imagined this scenario, my death would have come at some point shortly after she'd walked into the room. A smile wouldn't have come into play at all. And I hadn't even touched the ludicrousness of Roma and Calah being here in the first place. I'd consumed enough alcohol to be a little fuzzy, but I could never get drunk enough to have sex with them again.

Except Ashlee hadn't even needed an explanation to know Roma and Calah were lying. Hearing that she knew I'd never cheat on her sent a rush of relief through me, but she wasn't done yet.

Now, as I watched, she handled Roma and Calah with a strength and confidence that turned me on more than was probably appropriate in this situation. Her mild temperament and soft-spoken nature wasn't an act, but few people saw the steel and intensity under the surface. She was no malleable submissive, meekly bowing her head, but she wasn't just playing a part either. Her complexity appealed to me in ways that was surprising, and seeing her like this, fire blazing in her eyes as she faced off with the other two, solidified my belief that the two of us belonged together.

To my surprise, I didn't even care that she said Roma and Calah had taken advantage of me while I'd been drunk. Technically, she was right, and while I never would've reported it on my own, I'd do it if Ashlee asked me to.

When she followed them out, I didn't move from where I was sitting on the end of the bed, unsure of what I should do next. I'd been caught off-guard by all of this. My head was still spinning, foggy with lingering alcohol and sleep. So I did the only thing I could think to do. I waited.

"I'm serious." She came back into the bedroom. "I'll eviscerate them in the press if they don't deal with their shit."

I stood up, letting the sheet drop so I could take her face in my hands. I bent my head, but before I could kiss her, she put a hand on my chest and gave me a gentle push.

Right. She was probably pissed about me blowing her off earlier, and she had every right to be. I should've apologized first.

"I'm sorry."

She gave me a puzzled look. "I meant it when I said I know you'd never cheat on me."

"No, I mean for being short with you and telling you to go home when I knew that meant you'd have to clean up that mess all by yourself and—"

"I didn't do it alone." She smiled, and it went all the way to her eyes. "Owen, Gary, and Perry all helped. I completely understood that you needed time alone to process. We've been together non-stop for days. Wanting some space isn't a bad thing."

"Okay," I conceded, "but I still should've asked you how dinner went."

“We can talk later,” she said. “Right now, you need a shower.”

I frowned. “What?”

“You reek of alcohol and perfume.” Something must’ve clicked then because she added, “That’s why I didn’t want you to kiss me. I’m not mad at you, but I’m not letting you any closer without a shower and some time with a toothbrush.”

I laughed, the last of the weight falling from me. “Give me five minutes.”

“How about you brush your teeth, and then get started in the shower while I put clean sheets on your bed...and then I’ll come join you.”

“What did I ever do to deserve you?” I had to clench my fists to keep my hands to myself.

“Not a thing I can think of,” she teased as she stepped around me. “Now, go get clean.”

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“Yes, ma’am.” I winked at her and left her laughing as I headed for the bathroom.

Several minutes later, I was stepping under the spray to rinse off when the door slid aside, and Ashlee joined me. Without a word, she came to me, wrapping her arms around my neck and pulling my head down for a kiss. I tasted her hunger as she leaned into me, and it was a heady thing to know this strong, sexy woman wanted me. Not my money, not just my body, but...me. Me, with all my flaws and weaknesses.

My hands slid down her slick skin until I palmed her ass. I squeezed the firm muscles there, then lifted her. Without breaking our kiss, she wrapped her legs around my waist, ankles crossing to give her balance. Her breasts pressed against my chest, and she made a soft noise as her tongue teased mine. I put her back against the wall and felt her shiver as she came in contact with the cool marble. My teeth scraped and nipped at her throat, leaving her mouth free to make all of those sounds that made everything even hotter.

She rocked against me, whimpering, and I reached between us. She nodded in answer to a question I hadn’t asked, and I pushed inside her. Hot and wet, she took every inch of me and begged for more. I buried my face in her neck, sucking on her skin until I’d marked her. Her nails dug into my shoulders and then scratched down my back, urging me to go harder and faster.

When she came, her cry echoed off the walls, and she clutched at me, body shuddering and trembling. Before she could completely come down, I moved a hand underneath her, pushing the tip of my finger into her ass. She climaxed again, and this time, no sound came out as her head fell back against the wall. Her muscles all clenched, and the increased pressure around my cock brought me to orgasm.

I held us there, together, bodies still joined. No matter how often either of us needed some alone time, we would always come back to this. Here, like this, we were complete in ways that I couldn't explain. I could lose every cent I had, lose my company and my reputation, but as long as I had her, I would count myself lucky. I'd do whatever I needed to do to keep her in my life. Even if it meant bringing my not-so-positive past to light.

Forty-Six

Ashlee

Would there ever be a Saturday morning where I could wake up next to Nate and not have some unpleasant task ahead? A day when we could just relax and spend time getting to know each other in that way that only came from conversations that flowed from place to place without any official direction?

Sure, we'd gone on a vacation where we'd had a couple days of peace, but that wasn't the same. How would we know if we could handle real life together if we hadn't had a real day yet? The insanity we'd so far experienced couldn't be what we'd always have.

Could it?

I sighed. After the past few days, it would've been really nice to be able to linger in bed. Maybe wake Nate up with my hands or mouth, reassure him again that I wasn't angry with him for Roma and Calah's trick. Or for not asking about the dinner before that. When we'd talked about it last night as we'd fallen asleep, he'd apologized again, even though I'd promised him that I understood.

If I initiated sex, however, who knew how many hours we'd lose, and we had a task today. One that, if it worked, would ensure that we might know what it was like to

have a normal life sooner rather than later.

I propped myself up and kissed Nate's cheek before whispering, "I'm going to make us breakfast."

I didn't know if he'd woken up yet or not, but the smell of food would most likely do it. This time, I'd make waffles.

Less than twenty minutes later, a bleary-eyed Nate stumbled into the kitchen. He looked rough, but not hungover enough to reject the plate of food I handed him.

"Thanks."

We didn't speak again until we were settled and had both eaten a few bites of breakfast. Half a cup of coffee helped too.

"How's your head?" I asked, breaking the silence.

"Better now that the drugs have kicked in," he said ruefully. "It's far from the worst hangover I've ever had."

"That's good," I said, "because we've got work to do."

He raised an eyebrow. "We do?"

I nodded. "We're going to end all of this. No more dragging it out. No more waiting for everyone else to do something."

He opened his mouth, then closed it again. He put another bite of waffle in his mouth and gestured for me to continue.

“I don’t think Calah and Roma broke into my apartment. It just doesn’t seem like the sort of thing those two would do. Too...average. But I don’t know if–”

“I think it was Isti,” he said as he reached for his coffee. “None of the women would break in themselves, and while I wouldn’t put it past the others to try to hire someone to do it, I doubt they have the means to get anyone good.”

I frowned. I agreed that it had probably been someone Isti had hired, but I wasn’t following this particular train of thought. “All they did was trash my apartment and steal my journals. How much skill does that really take?”

“To do it without leaving evidence does. All that glass and no blood? Not even a scrape?”

He had a point.

“And no one else in the building saw or heard a thing,” he continued. “That means whoever broke in managed to get into the building, up to your floor, kick the door open, spend the time needed to do all that damage, and then still have time to find your journals.”

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Something occurred to me. “They couldn’t have known about my journals, so that would’ve taken them even more time because they didn’t know what or where to look.”

“That makes sense,” he agreed. “Getting someone like that, who could figure out what would be useful, who could get in and out without being seen, that would cost more than I imagine any of those other women would be willing to pay.”

“But Isti would.”

He nodded, his expression troubled. “When you were with your mom, I went to see her, to see if there was a way I could get her to back off. She’s angrier than I thought she could ever be. I mean, it’s been more than a decade. Who holds a grudge like that for that long? It wasn’t like she and I were married or anything.”

I reached over and put my hand on his. “It’s not your fault.”

“I was stupid,” he said with a sigh. “I never should have gotten involved with her in the first place.”

“Probably not,” I agreed, “but it’s done, and there’s no use thinking about the what ifs. Besides, none of what happened justifies what she’s done.”

He stood and took our plates to the dishwasher. “Does your plan for today include going to see Isti?”

“It does.” I drained the last of my coffee. “We’re going to get her to confess to

threatening me and being involved in the break-in.”

* * *

Even though it was my idea, I still couldn't quite believe that I'd gotten Nate to go along with it. I'd half-expected him to tell me that he was calling Owen to babysit while he went to see Isti alone again, but he didn't.

Something between us had shifted, and my guess was that it'd happened when I'd taken care of things with Roma and Calah. I felt like, somehow, it'd put us on even footing. Before, he hadn't treated me like I was inferior or anything like that, but his whole protective Dom thing made it difficult for him to let anyone take care of him.

“You seem like you're deep in thought,” Nate said as he took my hand. “If you've changed your mind, it's okay. I can talk to her by myself.”

“I was actually just thinking about how much I like you letting me take care of you a bit too.”

He raised our hands and kissed the back of mine. “I think I'm starting to understand this whole real relationship thing. Working together. Trust.”

We didn't have the time now to discuss any of that further, but I made a mental note to add it to the list of things we'd talk about once all this was over. Then, I rang the doorbell and wondered if she'd let us inside.

She was clearly in contact with the other women, but I didn't know if that had been a one-time thing for the article or if Calah and Roma would've called when they left the penthouse last night. All of which meant we had equal chances of her knowing why we were here or having no clue whatsoever.

The door opened, and a well-dressed woman looked down her nose at me. Figuratively, anyway. With the heels she was wearing, she was barely my height. Her gaze moved to Nate and held there for a few seconds before she turned around and walked away, leaving the door open behind her. Nate and I followed her while I tried not to feel insulted that she'd basically dismissed me with a single look.

We moved into what looked like a living room, but I was willing to bet that she had some fancy name for it like sitting room or parlor. The entire place screamed ostentatiousness, and she fit right in, lowering herself into one of those chairs that was more for decoration than use.

Her tone was cool, polished. "Sit or stand. Makes no difference to me."

Nate chose to sit, and I took the place next to him, hoping we looked more casual than I felt.

"Two visits in as many days," Isti said with a smile. "Have you missed me that much?"

"Did they call you?" Nate asked. "Your partners, Calah and Roma. Or did you just use them to pass off what you had someone steal from Ashlee's place?"

I hadn't thought it possible for Isti to look more offended, but that did it.

"Please. Those two are little better than streetwalkers." She made a dismissive gesture.

"Did they tell you about what they pulled last night?" I asked, drawing her attention. "Streetwalker seems like an appropriate description, though I doubt they'd appreciate you calling them that."

“You’re not a part of this discussion.” She pointed at me and then turned back to Nate. “You didn’t succumb to them again. You wouldn’t. Once you tire of someone, you walk away and don’t look back.”

“Like he did with you, right?” I goaded her. “Got tired of you and moved on to someone else.”

She ignored me, or at least pretended to. “I’m curious. What was it like, deflowering the virgin? I imagine it didn’t take you long to realize that innocence has limited appeal. You want someone who knows what she’s doing.”

“I’m a fast learner,” I interjected.

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Those expensively manicured nails tapped on the wooden arm of the chair. “You should have known better, Nathaniel. I won’t let you be happy. I can destroy you with minimal effort.”

“Hate to tell you, but threatening letters slipped under my door aren’t going to keep Nate and me apart.” I smiled at her, certain she could see me out of the corner of her eye.

“We’ll see about that,” she snapped.

I kept pushing. “What are you going to do next? Send someone else to break into my apartment again?”

She finally looked at me, eyes flashing. “Next time, I’ll make sure you’re inside. I can find someone who would offer a discount if he got a go at you.”

“Isti—”

I squeezed Nate’s hand. This was what we wanted. Get her off-balance so she’d be careless with what she said.

“You have no idea what I can do to you.” Two spots of color showed high on her cheeks. “I’ll ruin you. I’ll pay a dozen men to say that you had sex with them, then blackmailed them. Drugs, prostitution, extortion...it won’t take much. People may like to think they want Cinderella stories, but all they really want is someone to look down on.”

“I know exactly who you are and what you think you can do,” I said mildly. “Nate told me what you did to him.”

“And if my father’s bastard hadn’t rescued him, Nathaniel would still be on the streets.” She gave me a disgusted look. “Finley won’t rescue you, though. You aren’t his type. Not like Nathaniel.”

I glanced at Nate, and he nodded, and for the hundredth time, I was glad I hadn’t written my father’s name in my journal, instead referring to him as F.

“You’re right,” I said, putting as much steel in the words as I could. “I’m not Finley’s type. I’m his daughter.”

Isti’s face flushed as she stared at me. She lifted her chin. “No. That’s impossible. He’s...gay.”

If I hadn’t already loathed her, the way she said gay would’ve done it. “So’s my mom. There’s this thing called IVF that...”

“No.” Isti stood, her hands shaking with what I assumed was anger. “You can’t be. He doesn’t have any children.”

“He didn’t know about me until recently.” I got to my feet, uncomfortable sitting while she stood. “But you don’t need to worry. I don’t plan on claiming relation to you.”

“Out.” She took a step toward me. “Get out of my house!”

I thought that response was more than a little overly dramatic, but we had what we came for, which meant there was no point in sticking around.

“Gladly.”

She slammed the door behind us, but Nate and I didn’t even glance back. When we got to the car, he drove down the street until we were out of sight of her house and then pulled over. We both took out our phones and double-checked the audio files we’d just recorded. I handed mine to Nate, and he sent both files to Jailene. If she needed the originals, we’d get those to her, but for the moment, she had what she needed to prove that Isti had been behind the letter and the break-in.

Isti’d had it backward. She was the one who should’ve been worried about what Nate and I could do to her.

Forty-Seven

Nate

Isti’s confession was only part of the plan for today. Ashlee hadn’t been thrilled when I’d told her what I wanted to add on to her list, but she’d agreed that it was something that needed to be done. I could’ve done it alone, but I wanted her support. We were in this together, and I wanted her to see that I needed her as much as she needed me, if not more.

Probably more.

Definitely more.

As I parked the car, my phone went off with Jailene’s tone. I read the text out loud so Ashlee could hear it too. “You have good timing. I’m talking to a friend of mine at the police department, and apparently, you two aren’t the only ones Isti has been threatening, though there’s never been enough evidence to prove that it’s her. It seems anytime one of her exes gets serious about anyone, ‘accidents’ happen.

Burglaries. Muggings. Calls to ICE and the IRS. That sort of thing. Her confession is exactly what they needed to start connecting the dots legally. The ADA is going to file for an arrest warrant. Isti should be in custody as soon as the warrant's signed. Good work."

Ashlee let out a breath. "I thought for sure she would be mad that we didn't go to the cops."

"Me too," I admitted. "Jailene can be more than a little intimidating."

"I haven't had much interaction with her," Ashlee said, "but I'll take your word for it."

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I smiled, but it felt forced. Not because of Jailene, but because of what I had to do now. If Finley didn't accept my apology, I didn't know what I'd do. Besides the fact that he was my closest friend, he was a part of Ashlee's life, and I didn't want her to be caught between us.

As soon as Finley opened the door, I started apologizing. "I'm sorry for what I said and how I behaved. There's no excuse. You've always been a good friend to me, and I should have given you the benefit of the doubt."

"Come in."

The moment we were inside, Finley had his arms around me in a hug. I wasn't much of a hugger, but after everything that'd happened recently, even I needed one. When he let me go, he turned to Ashlee and gave her a longer hug. Before things could get awkward, he took us into the kitchen and offered us something to drink. Only after pouring us each a glass of lemonade, did he join us at the small breakfast nook.

"I'm glad you came," he said. "I was literally trying to decide between calling you and coming to your place when you got here."

"I was out of line."

"No, you weren't," he said. "Not really, anyway. I should have told you about Isti years ago. I'm sorry that I didn't. You're one of my closest friends, and it was something that I knew would be important to you. I shouldn't have hidden my relationship with her from you."

I put out my hand. “How about we both agree that there’s a lot of things we should’ve done differently and that, from here on out, we stay honest with each other?”

He shook my hand and gave me that grin that always made him look ten years younger. “As long as that honesty doesn’t include things with my daughter that no father wants to hear.”

Ashlee made a choking sound, and Finley burst out laughing. I couldn’t help it. She looked so indignant that I had to laugh too. She glared at us, but there was no heat behind it. She actually looked relieved that we were laughing together.

“Now that fences are mended, there is something else I needed to talk to you two about. Well, more you, Ashlee, than Nate.”

“Me?”

“Isti and I had the same father but different mothers. Isti’s legitimate, and I’m not. Our dad never gave me his last name and never did anything that would make it seem like my mom and I were the priority over Isti and her mom. But, he did acknowledge that I was his and took care of my mom and me. After he died, he left me a portion of his estate. Not as much as Isti, but I’ve never minded. I grew what I’d been given and never begrudged Isti what she has.”

Ashlee glanced at me, but I just shrugged. I had no idea where Finley was going with this. Telling her about her grandparents didn’t really seem like the kind of thing that required any sense of urgency.

“What I didn’t know was that my father had a trust for any grandchildren who came along, no matter which of his children they came from. Or how they came to be.”

Ashlee caught her breath, and Finley nodded.

“I called my lawyer this morning to make an appointment to go over my will. When I told him that I wanted to make changes because I’d just learned that I had a daughter, he told me about the trust.”

I wasn’t sure which was shocking Ashlee more, that her late grandfather had left her money or that her newly-found father wanted to write her into his will.

“Somehow, Isti managed to get her hands on some of the trust a couple years ago. I don’t know how she did it, but because the trust was supposed to be held until Isti and I were both fifty before it would be split between us, she had no right to even half of it.”

“I don’t understand.” Ashlee’s hands were folded in front of her, knuckles white.

“Basically, the half of the trust that remains will be released to you once a paternity test is done, which is a stipulation of the trust, not because I don’t believe you. The other half will be taken from Isti.”

I let out a low whistle. “She’s not going to like that.”

“She’ll like it even less when she realizes that anything she can’t pay back will come out of a sale of her property. From what my lawyer said, she’ll be lucky to be able to hire an attorney to defend her from the grand larceny charge she’ll have brought against her.”

Ashlee and I exchanged glances.

“That’s not the only criminal charge she’s going up against,” I said. “You’re not going to believe what’s happened since I left here yesterday.”

Forty-Eight

Ashlee

May was already coming to an end, and I could barely believe it. The last two weeks felt like a blur, and today marked the end of all the drama that had plagued Nate and me almost since the beginning. Our life together wasn't ever going to be boring or even drama-free, but I sincerely hoped we never had any excitement like this again.

The Monday immediately following Isti's confession to Nate and me, an arrest warrant was issued, and she was taken into custody. A lucky reporter happened to be nearby for a fluff piece and got the only footage of Isti slapping one of the arresting officers. After having an assault charge added, Isti ended up mouthing off to the judge and landed herself in jail without bail.

I had no sympathy for her.

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Maybe that made me a bad person, but I wasn't going to waste my time even thinking about her. If I needed to testify at her trial, I would, but she wasn't going to take one minute more from me than absolutely necessary. Personally, I hoped she'd make a deal, so I never had to see her again, but I wasn't the only person she'd come after, and I wouldn't deny them their justice.

I pushed those thoughts aside as Nate pulled up to Mom's house. We'd just been here last night, but everything looked different to me. My world had completely shifted the day I'd learned who my father was, and only now was I getting to see just how different the rest of my life was going to be.

Finley had paid for our DNA to go to a private lab for the necessary paternity test, and it had come back Thursday afternoon with the expected result: Finley was my father. He'd taken me to see the estate lawyer Friday morning, and I'd been given access to my trust. I'd actually needed to ask Finley if I was reading the balance correctly because I hadn't been able to believe it wasn't an account number.

Nate went with me to the bank that afternoon, and then we'd come here. I could've waited until today to give Mom her gift, but I hadn't wanted this to be some public thing. Mom had cried when she read the letter from the bank that said the mortgage had been paid off. That had been when she'd told me that 'an anonymous donor' had paid the last of her medical bills. We'd both turned to Nate, but he'd denied it. I believed him. Even though I hadn't asked Finley, I was inclined to think that he was the 'anonymous donor.'

"Are you okay?" Nate asked, putting his hand on my arm.

I smiled at him. "I'm great. Still adjusting, but great."

He leaned over and brushed his lips across mine, the chaste contact causing body-wide tingles that were definitely not chaste. We planned to go back to his place after today's picnic, and the promise in his eyes made me shiver in anticipation.

"We should probably go in now," he said with a sigh. "Curious eyes and all that."

I followed his gesture and saw both Catherine and Jacob standing at the window, clearly waiting for us. As soon as I opened the car door and stood, their faces lit up, and they waved. Nate and I both waved back, and the kids disappeared. They reappeared a few seconds later at the door and ran out to meet us, hugging us both before Catherine started talking a mile a minute about all the food waiting inside.

When I'd told Mom that Nate and I wanted both families to get together, she'd immediately volunteered to host a picnic. Once Nate had told his parents about the picnic, Julia had gone into full-fledged planning mode, meeting up with my mom more than once to help. At this point, Mom knew Julia better than I did, and she said that Julia was eager for the family to be whole again.

Nate and I both hoped that today would be only the beginning of building these relationships. A nearly-start-of-summer picnic seemed like a great way to do it.

Everyone else was already here, so when we walked in, we did a round of greetings before Catherine grabbed Nate's hand and pulled him out back to see something she'd brought with her. I followed Mom and Finley into the kitchen.

"Have you made any decisions yet?" Finley asked as he went into the fridge to grab a bottle of water.

"Decisions?" Mom shot me a look. "What about?"

“Oops.” Finley had the grace to look embarrassed. “I didn’t realize you hadn’t told her yet.”

“Told me what?”

Shit. That was her ‘you’re in trouble’ voice. I was an adult, but that voice still intimidated the shit out of me.

“I’m going to go see how the grill’s coming along,” Finley said as he headed for the back deck.

“I didn’t want to say anything until I had a better idea of what I want to do.” I leaned against the counter. “I’m thinking about quitting my job.”

“I thought Nate worked things out so that there wasn’t any conflict with the two of you dating.”

“He did, but I’m honestly not sure if this is what I want to do.” I took the beer she held out.

“Is that the only reason?” she asked, opening her bottle of water. “Finley said there are still some reporters hassling people as they come out of work.”

“Yeah, they’ve been jerks, but security’s been great, helping people get past them, but no, that’s not really a factor. It’s mostly me just not feeling like this is where I’m supposed to be or what I’m supposed to be doing.” I shrugged. “It might just be me trying to get back into a routine, but I’m not sure.”

“What does Nate think?”

“He said he’ll support whatever I want to do.” I hugged myself, the beer cold against

my arm. “He’s been great about it.”

He was supporting other decisions too. Like whether or not I was going to go to Mona’s funeral with Mom or not. Earlier this week, Mona had been put in hospice care near her older sister, and the last update Mom had gotten hadn’t been good. She was expecting a call any time to say that Mona had passed, but I wasn’t going to make a final decision on that until it’d happened.

“And Finley?”

“If I say he’s actually hoping I leave, will that ruin this friendship the two of you have going on?”

She laughed and shook her head. “Not at all. I love that you have him in your life. And in my life.” Her smile softened. “I’d forgotten what it was like to have a friend.”

“So, I don’t count?” I teased.

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She rolled her eyes. “Let me rephrase. I’d forgotten what it was like to have a friend closer to my age. Someone who gets my references as more than just ‘old Mom’ pop culture.”

Now it was my turn to laugh. “Is it weird that my boyfriend and my dad were best friends before my dad knew I existed?”

“Ash, sweetie, there isn’t one normal part to our family, and that’s what makes it great.”

“Excellent point.”

“All right!” Finley announced as he came back inside. “The meat is ready. Let’s eat!”

And that ended the serious conversation for the rest of the day. Which was perfect, because I’d had enough serious to last me a while.

Forty-Nine

Nate

The other shoe hadn’t dropped yet, and I was starting to think that it wouldn’t. It wasn’t that I thought things were going to be perfect, but they were moving in a positive direction. We’d spent hours at Roberta’s house, and there hadn’t been a single snide remark sent in my direction or even a hint at an argument. In fact, I’d spent the majority of my time getting to know my niece and nephew better, and no one had even suggested that perhaps I wasn’t the best role model for impressionable

young minds.

“Today was a good day.” Ashlee’s words echoed my thoughts.

“It was,” I agreed. “Thank you.”

“What for?”

If I hadn’t known her well enough to know that her confusion was genuine, I might’ve thought she was fishing for a compliment.

“None of this would’ve happened without you.” I parked the car and turned in my seat so I could face her. “I never would have tried to patch things up with my family if you hadn’t encouraged me. Isti would still be going after other people, and I would be in one more dead-end relationship. I use that word loosely.”

“Then I need to thank you too,” she said. “Because I doubt I would’ve ever had the guts to tell Finley that he was my dad, and I definitely wouldn’t have talked to Mona.”

“That’s why we’re a perfect fit. We take care of each other.”

“Mom always said that the way a couple knows that they’re meant to be is if they’re better people together than they are apart.”

“Your mom is smart.”

“That she is.”

As we made our way to the penthouse, we shared the bits of news we’d each gotten and made what I was quickly learning was the general small talk that couples had

when they weren't focused on the latest disaster in their lives. Nothing about it was obligatory or strained, not like the conversations I'd had to force with other women.

I watched Ashlee putting leftovers in the fridge, moving things around to make room, and it struck me that this was what people meant when they referred to domestic situations. She was comfortable here, and I liked it. I liked having her here, seeing her things next to mine. I liked having someone to cook for and eat meals with.

"Nate, why are you staring at me?"

I took the few steps I needed to bring me close enough to put my arms around her. "I enjoy watching you."

She went up on her tiptoes and lightly kissed my lips. "Why don't we go to bed and I give you something else to watch?"

I slid my hands down to her ass and squeezed. "What do you have in mind?"

"I haven't decided yet. I'm torn between having you watch me touch myself or having you watch me go down on you."

I closed my eyes. "Fuck, le soleil," I ground out. "Impossible choices."

"Unless I go down on you first, and then you watch me until you're hard again."

She was going to kill me.

"I choose option C."

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I bent my head and covered her mouth with mine, the tip of my tongue sliding across her bottom lip until she opened for me. She whimpered as my tongue swept inside her mouth, the sound making my cock ache with the need for release. I wouldn't have any trouble at all getting it up a second time tonight.

We made our way to the bedroom, shedding our clothes and pausing to kiss along the way. Our hands got in the way, and kisses meant for lips landed on cheeks and jaws, but the laughter we shared enhanced the experience instead of detracting from it.

Making love didn't have to be somber to be serious, I realized. And that's what she and I did. We made love.

"Sit down," she said, pointing to the bed.

I complied, and she went to her knees on the soft carpet, parting my thighs so she could get into the position she wanted. Her eyes stayed on mine as she wrapped her hand around the base of my cock, moving from bottom to top with tight, almost rough tugs that made me groan with pleasure. And her mouth wasn't even on me yet.

"What do you want me to do, Mr. Lexington?" She darted out her tongue and flicked it against the tip of my cock, never losing her rhythm.

"Suck me." I reached out, curving my fingers around the back of her head. "I want to come in your mouth."

She licked her lips, and I cursed. Her eyes glowed as she let me pull her head down, and then came the first soft breath, the touch of her lips as they wrapped around me.

Light pressure encouraged her to take more, and inch by inch, I slid over her tongue and deeper into the wet heat of her mouth. When I neared the back of her throat, I relaxed my hand, wanting this part to be her choice.

Her free hand cupped my balls, rolling them between her fingers as she slowly took more of me until I was as deep as I could go. She didn't linger long, but she didn't have to. The suction as she moved her head up and down was enough to build the pressure inside me at a nearly painful rate, and it didn't take long for me to dig my fingers into her hair to get her attention.

"I'm close."

The hand around my balls tightened, and she sucked on me harder. My eyes rolled back, and the second I felt teeth, I exploded, holding her head in place as my hips jerked, and my cock emptied into her mouth. She swallowed, then licked every inch of my sensitive skin until my cock began to soften. Only then did she sit back on her heels, her hands now resting on my knees.

I let my gaze run over her, taking in the flushed skin and pebbled nipples. I didn't need to ask if she was turned on. The visual said it all.

"Bed. Now." My voice was harsh.

She climbed onto the bed, giving me an enticing view as she went. Without me needing to tell her, she settled back on the pillows and spread her legs.

I didn't hesitate to give her the command. "Touch yourself."

One hand went to one of her breasts, fingers pinching and tugging on her nipple. The other hand went down between her legs, fingers moving through fiery curls before parting those lower lips and revealing that soft, pink part of her.

Her middle finger made short, small brushes across her clit, and then slipped down to slide inside her. Her breathing quickened as she repeated the sequence once, twice, three times...

My cock began to swell, and I wrapped my fingers around it, skin still slick from Ashlee's mouth and my cum. I moved my hand in the familiar rhythm, my eyes never leaving the erotic image Ashlee offered. Her eyelids drooped, and she fought to keep her eyes open, appearing to be as turned on as I was.

It didn't matter that we weren't touching each other or that we were at opposite ends of the bed. This was more intimate than what I'd had with any other woman, and Ashlee was the only one I ever wanted to have it with.

I moved first, but she came to meet me, her arms wrapping around my neck even as I picked her up, holding onto her hips. We came together with a sigh, bodies rocking against each other in rare, perfect synchronization. I was as aware of her body as I was of my own. Our pulses racing together. Nerves screaming as pleasure blazed across them. Cells merging, bodies becoming, joining, being...

Ashlee cried out my name, every muscle in her body tightening around me to the point of pain, and that was exactly what I needed to come again. Her nails bit into my skin and I sunk my teeth into her shoulder, neither of us drawing blood, but both hard enough to leave marks. Physical marks that didn't even come close to reflecting the unseen mark she'd left on me from that first conversation.

"I love you, le soleil." I kissed her jaw as I ran my hand up and down her spine.

"I love you too."

She didn't sound surprised, or like she was only saying it because I'd said it first. She wouldn't ever say something that she didn't mean, but I suspected she'd waited until

I was ready to admit that I felt the same thing for her that she felt for me.

I'd always thought that those three words would terrify me, send me running, but now I was wishing I hadn't waited so long to say it to her because loving her and her loving me was the greatest thing I'd ever felt.

Vowing that I'd never wait to let her know how I felt again, I pulled back enough so we could look at each other.

"This might be fast," I said, "but I want you to move in here. If it's too much right now, that's okay. I just want you to know that whenever you're ready, I am too."

She was quiet for a few seconds, her expression telling me that she was searching for something in my face before answering.

Then she smiled, and I smiled back.

"I'd love to live with you."

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As she kissed me, I felt everything falling into place, promising that what was to come would be different and so much better than anything that had come before.

Fifty

Ashlee

Mom tucked a curl back up into the complex hairdo that my soon-to-be brother-in-law's fiancée had done for me today. Trissa had set the bar high for being a great bridesmaid. When she and Joshua married next year, I'd have to try to figure out a way to be equally as great.

She said doing my hair was a thank you for allowing my bridesmaids to choose their own dresses. She was four months pregnant with her and Joshua's first child, and while she wasn't showing that much, I'd wanted to make sure she felt comfortable. I didn't want anyone to look back on today with any negative feelings at all.

I smoothed my dress down again, even though it wasn't wrinkled, and Mom caught my hands, squeezing them. She didn't ask if I was nervous because she knew that wasn't the case. I was eager, impatient to marry Nate and keep taking steps toward our joint future. Our lives had changed so much since we'd met, and I couldn't wait to see what would come next. We were all moving on.

Mona had passed away not long after being put into hospice care. I'd gone to the funeral with Mom, more to be her support than to mourn Mona. I'd forgiven her, but I couldn't forget what she'd done. Still, I was thankful that Mom had gotten the closure she needed to be able to move on.

Then, Finley had introduced her to the widowed cousin of the man he was dating, and to my surprise, Mom had accepted. The foursome was always going on double dates and seeing my parents happy was even better than being happy myself.

Nate's family was happy too. Things were going well with him mending fences with David and their dad. They'd never be close – their personalities were just too conflicting – but the animosity and tension was gone.

Despite the fact that Joshua was the brother he'd directly hurt the most, the two of them had a better relationship. I suspected a lot of that was due to the changes at Manhattan Records.

Not long after I'd moved in with Nate, Zed Hipwood had shown up at a concert high and drunk. He'd then shouted obscenities, both sexual and racial, for nearly five solid minutes before the rest of Unraveling had managed to drag him off-stage, but the damage had already been done. The label ended up breaking Unraveling's contract, and the band members had scattered. The last anyone had heard of Zed, he'd been kicked out of rehab for providing drugs to other patients.

The demise of Unraveling wasn't really what had done it, though. It had been Nate offering Joshua a job. He'd brought Joshua into Manhattan Records as a producer who would also take care of some of Nate's duties. Delegating some of the responsibility to Joshua allowed Nate to keep more normal work hours, and Joshua could make whatever music he wanted to without the need to answer to Nate for it.

Isti had taken a plea bargain, so we'd been able to put all of that behind us not long after the arrest. Calah, Roma, and Flora had all but disappeared from the media. I'd heard rumors that Flora had moved out of state, and Roma had last been seen hanging on the arm of some business tycoon. Calah had moved to LA and tried to sell her story, but surprisingly, no one had bought it.

I hadn't needed to do anything to get the press to turn on her. She'd done that herself

when she'd made a public diatribe regarding how it was all a conspiracy against her, naming specific groups specifically.

Between that and a few other national news stories that had come up, Nate and I had disappeared from the news before the summer had officially begun. I'd been especially happy about that since, by mid-July, I'd quit my job at Manhattan Records and started online classes to become a paralegal. I wasn't sure yet if I wanted to go on to law school like a lot of paralegals did, but law seemed to be a better fit for me than business.

I'd taken a bit of a break right now, though, wanting time before the wedding to help Mom and Tabitha with the last-minute details, and then needing a couple weeks after for our honeymoon. Carrie and Gavin Manning, the owners of Club Privé, had given us an early wedding gift: VIP memberships to a Club Privé affiliate in the French Rivera. Every time I thought about it, a thrill went through me.

A knock on the door preceded Finley opening the door and stepping inside. "Is everyone ready?"

"We are," Trissa said. She motioned for Julia and Catherine to follow her, leaving my parents and me alone.

"You look beautiful," Finley said as he came over to me. He kissed my cheek, then did the same to Mom. "You look lovely too, Roberta."

"You look great." I squeezed his arm. "And I'm ready to go."

The three of us left the bridal room, and Finley headed up to the front of the church where Nate and the other groomsmen would be standing shortly. Mom and I went to the back of the short line of my bridesmaids, and she took my arm. I could've had Finley walk me down the aisle and Mom wouldn't have thought anything of it, but even though I loved my dad, Mom was the one who'd raised me. She was the only

one I'd ever imagined giving me away. Besides, Finley was Nate's best man.

Once the wedding party had found their places up front, the music changed, and it was my turn. Mom and I took two steps down the aisle, and then my eyes locked with Nate's, and I didn't see anyone or anything else. I gave the right responses at the right times, but my surroundings barely registered. Then Nate was kissing me, and the world flooded back in a rush of applause.

We turned to face our family and friends, our fingers threaded together, both of us smiling wide enough to hurt. As the minister introduced us as Nathaniel and Ashlee Lexington, it hit me that this was real. This was my life. My family.

It wasn't what I'd thought it would be. It was so much more, and I had no doubt that life would continue to surprise me, but I looked forward to it now because I knew I wouldn't be experiencing it alone.

Nate was my partner, my Dom, my lover, and now he was my husband. We belonged to each other, and today was the beginning of yet another chapter in our life together.