



The Rancher's Pregnancy Surprise

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Category: Erotic, Romance, Billionaire Romance, Adult

Description: One reckless night changes everything.

Hartland, Wyoming is supposed to be my fresh start.

But it turns into my shameless undoing when Ronan Slater seduces me into breaking all of my rules.

Just one touch, and the walls around my heart start to crumble.

I push him away, but instead he promises to give me everything I need—including a future for the child I carry...

He makes me want to believe in love again.

But what happens when I discover he's been deceiving me from the very beginning?

Note: This is a standalone romance. No cliffhangers. Also included is the medical romance novella *One Little Lie*.

Total Pages (Source): 42

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Chapter One

ARE ALL BUS STATIONS like this?

The movies I've seen make them all look noisy, outdated, and criminally unhygienic. Or maybe I've simply been watching the wrong movies?

I press my fingers against my temples, trying to ease the forming headache. The truth is, I was looking forward to getting lost in a crowd. After what happened with Claude, anonymity sounds like paradise.

But instead, I end up with a bus station lobby—all to myself.

The plush carpet absorbs the sound of my footsteps, and the rest of the bus station is just as surprisingly...fancy. Fluted wood paneling for walls. Mid-century sofas that are the very definition of tasteful luxury. And crystal chandeliers that cast down warm lighting that's almost hypnotic.

It's enough to have me fighting back a yawn...at nine in the morning. I'm only twenty-three, but here I am, acting like I'm three hundred and twenty.

Completing the portrait is a white-and-gold jukebox that hums softly in the corner, its lilting classical music streaming through the air like a lullaby. If not for the ticket machines and departure boards sleekly nestled into the walls, I'd be seriously worried I've accidentally trespassed into someone's chic country cottage.

Something about this place feels staged somehow.

Everything about it is either too quiet or too perfect, and the entire place actually smells like lavender, which even I know is unheard of for bus stations of any size. I know the company behind this is new and all, but there's just something about this place...

I can't quite put my finger on it, and I'm tempted to turn around and leave—

You gotta be smart about this, Cay.

—until I remember Claude's last words.

My stomach twists at the memory, bile rising in my throat. Two years of believing I was special, that what we had was real. Two years of giving him everything, only to discover all that we had was a lie.

'Are you really that dumb? I was faking it, Cay! Just fucking faking until I could fucking succeed where everyone else failed...'

The memory steels my resolve, and I march determinedly to the ticket machine. It's not like I have a choice, anyway. My old life is over. And it's time to focus on the new, I remind myself forcefully.

My heart thuds as I click on English and One-Way Trip on the choices provided by the ticket machine. It's my first time booking anything on my own, but it should be easy.

Right?

Not.

I stare in mute frustration at the screen. Shouldn't buying a bus ticket be something as

simple as clicking on your departure and arrival stations from a drop-down menu? So why isn't Hartland, Wyoming one of my choices?

Story told me this was the best way to get there if I don't want to fly. And it's not that I don't want to, but—

Sheep, sheep, sheep.

Hearing an automated voice chime out "Welcome" as the lobby doors swoosh open tells me I'm no longer alone, and it only takes moments before I sense the newcomer lining up behind me.

Keep it together, Cay!

My fingers hover on the screen, but panic has zapped my brain into malfunctioning. I can't think, at all! Should I just choose any station in Wyoming in order to get out of the other person's way? I'm not used to inconveniencing other people like this—

"Anything I can help you with?"

The voice is deep but disarmingly gentle, with a faint Texan accent that immediately calls to mind cowboys of the Wild, Wild West. I'm sure he's nice and all, and that he probably means well, but—

"I'm fine, thank you."

My voice comes out frostier than Wyoming's winter. Once burned, twice shy, and I'd rather die on the lofty hills of my pride, thank you very—

"So...Hartland, isn't it?"

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I barely manage to bite back my gasp. Seriously? He could've only known that by peeking at my phone over my shoulder, and I'm torn between giving him a piece of my mind and taking the higher road...like I've been taught to do my whole life.

I'm not used to any sort of confrontation, but since that's also the reason I found myself in my current mess, maybe it's time for me to change?

Reprimand or withstand?

I'm about to embark on a new chapter in my life, and doing everything like I usually do might not be the best way to survive. Maybe it's time I learn to—

Unbelievable!

I can no longer hold back my gasp as Mr. Improper comes right up to stand next to me, and—oh my gosh!

He's obviously lost all patience waiting for me to make up my mind, but that's absolutely not a valid reason to overtake me in line. I can practically feel myself burning up in righteous anger, but it's as if I'm invisible, with Mr. Improper busily pressing buttons on the screen.

There are only two of us in this station, for sheep's sake!

Would it kill him to wait for a few more minutes?

You gotta make a stand, Cay!

I gnaw on my lip while absently studying his blurred reflection on the ticket machine's glossy surface.

He's ridiculously tall, his frame ruggedly imposing, and is that a five o'clock shadow I'm barely seeing through the reflection?

My gaze flickers downwards, and it's my first time to see someone wearing a pair of honest-to-goodness cowboy boots, which he's paired with denims and a plaid shirt that's stretched taut over an impossibly broad—

Whoa, Cay!

Color suffuses my cheeks when I realize just how much time I've spent dissecting his looks. I wrench my gaze off him even as my pulse begins to race at his proximity.

What is wrong with me?

This man needs to be taught a lesson, but all my brain suddenly cares about is how he's making me feel. If I'm truly serious about turning a new leaf, then this is my chance to—

"Here you go."

—say thank you?

I stare dumbly at the ticket Mr. Might-Not-Be-Improper has placed in my hand. His fingers brush mine, and heat radiates up my arm from that simple touch. I catch a faint whiff of something expensive and masculine—sandalwood maybe, with hints of leather. It smells a lot like the cologne Claude uses but can't really afford—

Stop it, Cay!

I try slamming a door shut on all memories of my ex, but it's too late. He's all I can see, with his tousled dark locks, thrift-store sweaters, and oversized pants.

Ugh. Ugh. Ugh.

I want to forget him so bad, but my mind isn't done torturing me, and more unwelcome memories flood my mind. Claude staring at me with eyes that I used to think were full of adoration...up until we had the Big One that ended it all.

Nothing between us was ever real!

Are you really that dumb?

I was faking it, Cay!

Just fucking faking until I could fucking succeed where everyone else—

"You didn't hear a word I said, did you?"

Oh, sheep.

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It's the amusement lacing Mr. Might-Not-Be-Improper's words that get to me, the sound freeing me from my mental prison, and I realize in secret shame that I had lost myself in the past again.

"I'm sorry," I say jerkily.

"Via doesn't offer any direct routes to Hartland from San Antonio."

Was this what I failed to hear earlier?

"But when you get to Laramie, you can transfer to a local bus to Hartland."

Words of apology and gratitude stay stuck in my throat. Everything he's said and done has been nothing but helpful, but as much as I feel bad about misjudging him—

SHEEP!

His warm breath suddenly caresses my skin as he leans in, and I realize that no, I did not misjudge him at all, and oh my gosh, are those his lips actually brushing my ear?

"You're welcome, darling."

And just like that, my body betrays me. A shiver courses down my spine, and something warm and forbidden pools low in my belly. I've never felt this kind of immediate, visceral reaction to any man before—not even Claude during our first meeting.

I should be outraged. I should step away and make it clear this kind of forward behavior is unacceptable.

But I don't.

I stand frozen, caught between indignation and an unfamiliar, unwelcome desire that makes my heart race and my palms sweat.

And what terrifies me most?

The realization that a tiny, rebellious part of me hopes he doesn't stop.

Chapter Two

THOUGHTS OF MR. ABSOLUTELY-Improper-After-All still weigh on my mind as the bus driver scans my \$150 ticket before stepping aside with a tip of his hat. "Welcome aboard, ma'am."

His gentle smile catches me off guard, and I awkwardly mutter 'thank you' under my breath. I can't remember the last time I ever had someone smile at me like that. Is it because I've changed? Is it because I'm now broke that I'm not as "cold" and "unapproachable" as people often told me I was?

I step onto the bus, clutching my small bag to my chest as if it contains all my worldly possessions—which, in a way, it does. Everything that mattered from my old life is gone now. Stolen, just like my dignity.

And...wow.

This, just like Via's bus station lobby, is unlike anything I've seen in movies. Wood paneling for the walls and overhead cabins. A toiletry kit that includes a toothbrush

set, an eye mask, and lip balm. In-seat screens with headphones and recliner seats with built-in massage functions, incredible leg space, and a note to request a blanket or extra pillows if needed.

The bus's 1-1 configuration is also a huge blessing. When watching concerts, I've always opted for aisle seats since I just don't have it in me to wriggle and squeeze past other people just to get to the toilet. Story says I could end up with kidney stones just for being antisocial, but I honestly think that's an exaggeration. It's not like I watch concerts every day, duh.

A part of me is dying to explore the rest of the amenities while I still have the bus all to myself. But there's the other part of me that's feeling really, really sleepy. And when I experience for myself just how comfy the recliner seat is, and ooooh. One push of a button has its massage function working pure magic on my back muscles, and...zzzz.

The bus is already on the move when I wake up. The sun has also started to set when I glance outside my window. I'm guessing I've been out for two hours at most?

I switch off the massage function with a yawn. Thank you, technology elves. I do a little stretch as I turn...and my heart drops to my stomach when my gaze meets a pair of painfully familiar cowboy boots.

You have got to be kidding me.

I squeeze my eyes shut in hopes that I'm hallucinating for the first time in my life. But when I open my eyes again, those shoes are still there. And they're still attached to the same pair of denim-clad legs.

Ugh.

Mr. Let's-Not-Forget-He's-Shameless-Too is seated right next to me, and I have a feeling that's no coincidence at all. He's obviously developed a taste for yanking my chain for whatever reason, but...I shall not let myself be provoked.

Because I'm a sensible adult.

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Plus the fact that I owe him \$150, literally.

Inhale.

Exhale.

Inhale.

Exhale.

I give my self-control a quick check one last time—

Yup, all good, still working.

—before finally lifting my gaze, and oh...no.

Why does he have to be the most beautiful man I've ever seen?

Why can't it be someone else?

Or just anyone really...except him?

I know I should stop staring, but seeing his annoyingly long lashes fanned against his bronzed skin presents a temptation I'm unable to resist. I just can't get over the sheer handsomeness of his features. How can someone with an attitude that leaves a lot to be desired...look so unbelievably desirable at the same time?

Every inch of him seems to have been crafted to tempt women to sin. The strong jaw. The high-boned cheeks. The very broadness of his shoulders and the mesmerizing expanse of his chest. Even his dark hair can make Claude die with envy: what this man's sable-black locks did naturally, my ex actually has to style his hair for hours, and all for the sake of his tortured-poet-persona.

This man is lethally better than Claude in every way, and...ugh, ugh, ugh.

I can't believe I did it again.

I've actually wasted precious time mooning over his looks—

"Enjoying the view, darling?"

—even if every word this horribly annoying man says makes me want to kick him in the mouth.

Manners maketh the man, sir, I'm almost tempted to growl at him. How can he not know that?A whirring sound shatters the silence then, and his recliner seat inches back into its 110-degree-angle at the push of a button. Lazy amber-colored eyes lock with mine as he finally turns to face me, and his lips slowly unleash the cockiest smirk I've ever seen.

Grrrr.

I would've given him the cold shoulder if I could, but since I do remember owing him money—

"Thank you for earlier," I manage to say instead as I open my purse. "I would've paid you back if you hadn't—"

"How about we agree to call a truce," he murmurs, "and I'll consider your debt fully paid."

I'm already putting my money back to where it still belongs even when he has yet to finish speaking. Beggars can't be choosers, 'Nuff said.

"So...why Hartland?"

I shrug, turning to stare out the window at the passing landscape. The sun is setting, casting long shadows across the plains we're crossing. Each mile that passes is another mile between me and my old life. Between me and Claude's betrayal.

"It's a nice little town," he continues, "but rather remote."

"I like remote." I like anywhere Claude isn't.

"Even if it means not being able to access the Internet unless you're in Laramie?"

That's precisely why I'm choosing it, I can't help thinking, but I also choose to keep the words to myself. Once burned, twice shy, yada, yada, yada.

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His lips twitch at my continued silence. "Am I really that hard to trust?"

I turn to face him then, really look at him. Despite his arrogance, there's something magnetic about him that draws me in. Something dangerous.

"You don't need to take it personally. I'm like this with everyone."

"Since when?"

There is no way I'm going to answer that.

"Two weeks ago?" he persists, his voice softening in a way that makes my defenses waver. "A month? A year? I'm guessing this isn't how you've always been."

His expression turns serious. "Did someone hurt you? Is that why you're keeping everyone at arm's length?"

Because he's already figured it out, blast it.

"Stop talking like you know me—"

"I know I don't," he says evenly. "But at the same time, it doesn't exactly take rocket science to guess what's turned you into a prickly little thing."

Why can't this man be more polite and less intuitive?

"It will just be the two of us for 26 hours—"

His words take me by surprise, and I find myself cutting him off as I ask, "How do you know that?"

"I think you were still sleeping when the driver made some announcements."

Huh.

That sounds perfectly reasonable, so why am I once again thinking that all of this feels like one giant setup?

"We don't have to be friends if you don't want to," Mr. More-Intuitive-Than-Polite cajoles. "We don't even have to exchange names. The only thing I ask is that we can at least be civil—"

Growl.

His words come into an abrupt halt at the sound, and a sharp frown creases his forehead. "When was the last time you ate?"

I can't remember. With everything that happened, food has been the last thing on my mind.

He's already walking to the back of the bus while speaking, and my stomach growls anew as he stands next to the vendo. "What do you want? You can check the menu on the seat monitor."

Oh, thank goodness, oh my, yum...

My mouth starts to water as I consider the array of dishes that the onboard selection has to offer.

"Can I, um, have the lobster mac & cheese?"

"What else?"

"Just that."

"What do you want to drink?"

"Just w-water, thank you."

He comes back a few moments later, and the scent of my microwaved lobster mac & cheese is absolutely divine. He goes back to his seat and pulls out the seat tray. He's paired a can of apple-flavored soda with a juicy-looking Philly cheesesteak for himself, and for the first several minutes, the two of us eat in relative silence.

The warmth of the food spreads through me, and I realize just how hungry I've been. How empty. Not just physically but emotionally too.

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Huh.

I suddenly realize I can't remember Claude and I ever enjoying a meal like this. And the more I think about it, the more I realize how I can't actually recall Claude having nothing to say...ever since we started dating. He was just so self-centered, but he was also painfully right when he said I was dumb. I just can't believe it's taken me this long to see his true colors, and—

Ugh.

I can't help but bristle when I belatedly notice the way my co-passenger is studying me. "What is it?" I ask defensively.

"I was wondering if I should just say it."

"Say what?"

He slowly shakes his head. "Never mind."

Grrr.

"If you have something to say," I say stiffly, "then please, by all means—"

Sheep!

All I can do is jerk as he suddenly reaches across the aisle to oh-so-gently wipe something off the corner of my lip. His thumb lingers there, just a fraction too long,

and I feel that same electric current from before racing through my veins.

"There." He leans back against his seat. "All done."

I quickly look away as my cheeks start to burn. "Next time, just tell me—"

"Are you sure about that?"

The question has me frowning. "Yes, of course—"

"Because there's something that I can't stop thinking of, but I guess I should just ask you outright—"

The wickedness in his tone is a dead giveaway, and my stomach starts to cramp. Is he going to ask something inappropriate? Something personal?

"What's your—"

Is he going to ask for my number? Or is he just asking permission to—

"—favorite ice cream flavor?"

The question is so unexpected that I actually laugh. A real laugh—the first one I've had in weeks. It feels foreign, almost painful, like exercising a muscle that's been dormant for too long.

And when I glance back at him, the look in his eyes has changed. There's something darker there, more intense, and I feel a shiver of warning race down my spine.

"You should do that more often," he says, his voice dropping to a husky timbre that makes something inside me clench. "Laugh, I mean."

I swallow hard, suddenly aware of how small this luxurious bus feels. Twenty-six hours. Just the two of us.

And I don't even know his name.

Chapter Three

RONAN ALREADY KNEW what Acacia looked like even before walking into the bus station. A slim redhead of medium height, and although her back was turned to him now, he had a feeling the photo he had seen of her failed to capture the iciness of her blue eyes.

Her parents held high positions in one of the world's top banking chains. She had neither siblings nor cousins, being the only child of two career-minded individuals who were also raised in single-child households. As a result, Acacia had been raised by a succession of nannies and sent away as soon as she was old enough to be admitted to a ladies' boarding school.

She had no known interests or hobbies except for her keen interest in Greek mythology, and so it was no surprise she held a degree in Classical Studies. Her only job since graduating from college, which she had recently resigned from, was that of an on-call lecturer for private VIP tours in a boutique art museum. And since the Initiative was nothing but thorough when it came to conducting background checks on prospective residents, the report that landed two weeks ago in Ronan's inbox also included details of her ex-boyfriend and their breakup.

Acacia was dressed rather lightly for someone heading up to a frigid mountaintop town in Wyoming. A pastel oversized sweater that revealed the delicate slope of her shoulders, a denim skirt with a knee-high slit in the front and a pair of open-toed sandals that were as pretty as they were useless.

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Ah, well.

She was sure to freeze in no time, but it would be a good lesson she was unlikely to forget for the rest of her life.

And speaking of lessons...

"Anything I can help you with?"

It was pretty easy to tell she had no idea what she was doing—

"I'm fine, thank you."

Just as it was also easy to tell from the courteous firmness of her voice that she wasn't used to feeling helpless.

Ronan took a look at her phone over her shoulder even when he didn't have to.
"So...Hartland, isn't it?"

His lips twitched at the way she refused to look at him even as her body stiffened in visible affront. He generally preferred his women to be the malleable type, but there was something about this girl...

He moved forward to stand next to her, and her reflection on the ticket machine's glass display revealed her incredulity and frustration.

Seeing her gnaw on her lip, however, was what changed everything.

I want her.

He had a feeling that would be the case, and since Ronan had surprised the other members of the Initiative by requesting that today's task be assigned to him, the same thought had likely occurred to them as well.

He could feel her stewing next to him as he bought her a ticket. Her profile report had heavily implied a certain aloofness in her behavior, but it had mentioned nothing about Acacia possessing a fiery temper.

Did this mean he was the only one to bring out the worst in her?

Ah, sweetheart.

If he could make her blow her top this easily, then he had a feeling he could just as easily make her do and feel other things. The more forbidden, the better.

The ticket machine beeped as it dispensed her one-way fare to Laramie. Ronan had to fight back a smile as he handed it to her. The plan had been simple enough—make sure she made it to Hartland without incident. Being her knight in shining armor had been a last-minute improvisation, one that had already reaped unexpected benefits.

He could see the war within her—pride versus practicality, independence versus necessity. The way her slender fingers hesitated before taking the ticket from him. The way her lips parted, no doubt to utter some frosty expression of gratitude.

But then her eyes had glazed over, and he'd known immediately she was lost in some memory. Something painful, judging by the subtle tightening around her mouth. The ex-boyfriend, most likely. Claude Something-or-Other.

The Initiative's files had a lot to say about him actually, but Ronan didn't like wasting

his time on people he didn't give a fuck about.

Acacia, however...

A memory from the past drifted in his mind.

A girl who used to matter to him.

But as soon as he realized who he was thinking of, Ronan shoved the thought away and determinedly fixed his attention on the present.

He had a job to do, and that job had to do with Acacia, who still looked as if she were lost in the past, just as he was a while ago.

"You didn't hear a word I said, did you?"

He couldn't resist breaking into her thoughts, watching as awareness flooded back into those crystalline blue eyes. The momentary disorientation. The pink flush of embarrassment staining her cheeks.

"I'm sorry," she said jerkily.

"Via doesn't offer any direct routes to Hartland from San Antonio," he murmured.

"But when you get to Laramie, you can transfer to a local bus to Hartland."

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He watched the conflicting emotions play across her face. Gratitude warring with suspicion. Relief battling with distrust. Most women would have been melting into a puddle of appreciation by now. Not Acacia Greenway.

That was what had caught his attention in her file. She wasn't like the others. She had backbone. And strength that came from having ice running through her veins.

He couldn't resist stepping closer, drawn by some primitive instinct he hadn't felt in a very long time. The scent of her—something light and floral with notes of vanilla—filled his senses as he leaned down, his lips deliberately brushing against the shell of her ear.

"You're welcome, darling."

The small, almost imperceptible shiver that coursed through her sent satisfaction flooding through his veins. There it was. The chemistry he'd been looking for.

Ronan continued watching her as she boarded the bus ahead of him, appreciating the gentle sway of her hips and the curtain of red-gold hair that cascaded down her back. He'd given her enough time to settle in before following, taking his assigned seat across from hers.

It had been almost comical watching her fall asleep within minutes, her body finally surrendering to the exhaustion she'd been fighting. How long had it been since she'd properly rested? Days, most likely. Flight instincts tended to override basic needs like sleep and food.

He'd spent those quiet hours studying her. The delicate arch of her brows. The way her chest rose and fell with each breath. The vulnerability that softened her features in sleep—a stark contrast to the defensive mask she wore while awake.

And now, catching her staring at him as she woke, he couldn't help but feel a twinge of something dangerously close to possessiveness.

"Enjoying the view, darling?" he taunted, enjoying the way her eyes flashed with indignation.

Ronan knew he was being deliberately provocative. It went against every protocol in the Initiative's handbook. His job was to observe, to facilitate her transition, to ensure she stayed in Hartland once she arrived. Nothing more.

But those rules had been written by men who hadn't met Acacia Greenway in person.

Her attempt to pay him back for the ticket amused him. As if \$150 meant anything to him. As if money was what he wanted from her.

"How about we agree to call a truce," he offered instead, "and I'll consider your debt fully paid."

He watched as she put her money away, a small victory. Her willingness to talk about Hartland was another. But when he asked about the reason for her coldness, he saw the walls come up instantly. Thick, impenetrable barriers designed to keep everyone—especially men like him—at a safe distance.

It only made him more determined to breach them.

The sound of her stomach growling had been a welcome distraction. Physical needs were always easier to address than emotional ones. He'd taken his time selecting food

for her, using the opportunity to observe how she responded to simple kindness. The confusion on her face told him everything he needed to know about her past relationships.

"I was wondering if I should just say it."

He'd seen the sauce at the corner of her mouth for several minutes before mentioning it, waiting for the perfect moment. When he finally reached across to wipe it away, the jolt of electricity between them confirmed what he already suspected. This wasn't just chemistry. This was something more powerful. More dangerous.

Her laugh when he asked about ice cream had been unexpected. A genuine, unguarded moment that transformed her face and sent something hot and urgent racing through his blood.

That sound. He wanted to hear it again. Wanted to be the cause of it. Wanted to discover what other sounds she might make under different circumstances...

Ronan leaned back in his seat, making a show of relaxing, but his mind was racing. The Initiative's plans for Acacia had been clear. Simple. Straightforward.

But now he was considering alternatives. Complications. Possibilities.

Hartland can wait, he thought as he watched her trying not to watch him. We have twenty-six hours ahead of us.

Twenty-six hours to learn what made her tick.

Twenty-six hours to discover her weaknesses, her desires, her fears.

Twenty-six hours to make her his.

As the bus rolled through the darkening landscape, Ronan reached for his phone and composed a quick message to the Initiative's command center:

Subject en route. ETA Laramie 11:00 tomorrow. Proceeding according to plan.

It wasn't entirely a lie. They were indeed heading to Laramie. She would indeed reach Hartland.

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But the plan? That had already changed the moment he'd first seen her bite her lip.

"So," he said, setting his phone aside and focusing his full attention on the woman across from him. "You never did answer my question about ice cream."

Chapter Four

"COOKIES AND CREAM," I answer, against my better judgment. What am I doing engaging with this man?

"Really?" His eyebrows rise slightly, his lips quirking in that infuriating half-smile. "I would've pegged you for vanilla."

The way he says it—like he's implying something about my personality—makes me bristle. "And what exactly is that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing at all, darling." He stretches the word 'darling' with that drawl of his. "Just making conversation."

"Stop calling me that," I snap, my patience wearing thin. "We're not friends, and we're certainly not... anything else."

His amber eyes gleam with amusement. "What should I call you then?"

"Nothing."

His smile widens. "Acacia then."

My eyes widen. "How did you—"

"I took a look at the passenger list." He admits this so easily I'm not sure whether to feel amused or alarmed.

"Would you like to know what to call me?"

"Not really."

"Trust me, you will."

Why does this man sound so confident about it?

"And it's Ronan, by the way."

"I didn't ask," I snap.

"You don't have to," he says solemnly. "A true gentleman always knows how to anticipate a lady's needs."

His gaze dips low as he says this, and I'm mortified to feel my flesh swelling in response.

Sheep!

I burst to my feet in sudden and desperate need for distance. The farther I can get away from this infuriating man, the better.

But before I can take another step, he's suddenly blocking my way, and I glare up at him. "What the heck's your problem?"

"Are you trying to run away from me?"

"All I'm trying to do," I say between clenched teeth, "is to get to the restroom, so please don't flatter yourself."

"Are you afraid of me?"

My heart rate picks up even as I lift my chin. "Hardly."

"Then it has to be how I make you feel."

"You really love to flatter yourself, don't you?"

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"Probably just as much as you love lying to yourself."

"I am not lying——"

"Then why the red cheeks, darling?"

Oh, I've had enough of this!

I stare at him stonily. "Just get out of my way, will you?"

"Only if you say the magic word...and say it like you mean it, of course."

Seriously?

I step forward, fully intending to squeeze past him whether he moves or not.

At exactly that moment, the bus takes a sharp curve in the road. My balance, already precarious in my irritated state, completely abandons me, and the next thing I know, he's back on his seat...while I land directly in his lap.

Nooooo!

The world narrows to the points where our bodies connect—his broad chest against my side, his arms encircling my waist, and most distressingly, the unmistakable hardness pressing against my thigh.

My breath catches. I know I should move. I know I should scramble away and put as

much distance between us as possible. That would be the sensible thing to do.

But I don't.

I look up, finding his face inches from mine, those amber eyes now dark with desire. The playfulness is gone, replaced by something hungry and primal that makes my stomach tighten with an answering need.

"Acacia," he says, my name a rough whisper on his lips.

I swallow hard, my body betraying me with its response—the quickening of my pulse, the heat pooling low in my belly, the subtle arching of my back that presses me more firmly against him.

His hands tighten on my waist, and I can feel the restraint in his grip, the careful control he's exerting. He's waiting for me to pull away, to break this dangerous moment.

But still, I don't move.

My gaze drops to his lips, and time stretches between us.

The logical part of my brain is screaming at me to get up, to remember Claude, to protect myself from another mistake. But my body has other ideas, responding to Ronan's touch like a flower turning toward the sun.

I've never felt this kind of immediate, visceral attraction before. Not with Claude, not with anyone. It terrifies me—and thrills me in equal measure.

"If you don't move in the next five seconds," Ronan says quietly, "you'll come to know why I wanted you to know my name."

I let out a strangled gasp as the meaning behind his words hit me, and I can't jump off his lap fast enough.

Sheep, sheep, sheep!

Inside the small lavatory, I brace my hands on the sink and stare at my reflection in the mirror. My cheeks are flushed, my pupils dilated, my lips parted. I look like a woman on the edge of making a terrible decision.

"Get it together, Cay," I whisper to myself. "You know better than this."

But do I, really?

Claude's betrayal had blindsided me completely. I thought I was a good judge of character, but I'd been catastrophically wrong. What makes me think I have any idea what Ronan's game is?

Because that's what this is, isn't it?

Some kind of game.

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No man looks at a woman the way he looks at me without wanting something.

The question is: what does Ronan want from me?

And more disturbingly: why am I so tempted to give it to him?

Chapter Five

I SPLASH COLD WATER on my face before stepping out of the tiny bathroom. My reflection shows a woman I barely recognize—flushed, disheveled, eyes bright with something dangerous. Taking a deep breath, I smooth my hair and straighten my clothes, as if that could somehow restore my composure.

When I return to my seat, I deliberately avoid looking his way. I can feel Ronan's eyes on me like a physical touch, trailing heat across my skin. I stare resolutely out the window at the midnight landscape rushing past, but it's no use. The darkness only serves as a mirror, reflecting his image to me.

The air between us crackles with unspoken tension. Each breath feels heavy in my lungs. My breasts seem to swell beneath my sweater, and to my mortification, my nipples harden into tight peaks. I cross my arms over my chest, hoping he hasn't noticed, but the subtle shift in his breathing tells me he has.

I bite my lip hard, using the pain to ground myself. I will not give in to this... whatever this is. I've made that mistake before, letting physical attraction cloud my judgment.

Closing my eyes, I force myself to think of anything but the man sitting across from me. The gentle hum of the bus engine eventually lulls me into an uneasy sleep.

When I wake again, the world outside is still dark. I check my watch, squinting at the illuminated dial. Four in the morning? I've been asleep for hours.

My neck aches from the awkward position, and I roll my shoulders to ease the stiffness. Almost against my will, my eyes drift to Ronan.

He's asleep, his imposing frame somehow made vulnerable by unconsciousness. With his features relaxed, he looks younger, and the hard lines of his face softened. But even in sleep, there's something undeniably seductive about him—the way his dark lashes fan against his cheeks, the slight part of his lips, the strong column of his throat.

I don't realize how long I've been staring until I see his lips slowly curve into that infuriating smirk, even though his eyes remain closed.

"It's going to be really hard if you keep looking at me like that."

Aaaargh.

Does this man ever run out of innuendos to make a girl turn red as a tomato?

I stand abruptly, not sure where I'm going—the bathroom again, maybe, or just to pace the aisle—anything to put some distance between us.

But before I can take a single step, his hand catches my wrist. The contact sends a jolt of electricity up my arm. I freeze, caught between pulling away and... something else.

"Running again?" he asks softly.

"I'm not running."

"Aren't you?" His thumb traces circles on the sensitive skin of my inner wrist.

"You've been running since the moment we met."

"You don't know anything about me."

Something flickers in his eyes at my words, and for a heartbeat, it feels as if I've become invisible in his eyes, and he's seeing - remembering - someone else.

But then another moment passes, and his jaw tightens. Heat floods back in his gaze, and it's enough to make my knees knock against each other...and for me to question my sanity. Did I just imagine the whole thing?

"I know enough," he says finally. "And right now, the most important thing I'm sure of is that you want me, too."

In one fluid motion, he pulls me down onto his lap, and this time there's no pretense of accident. I land with my back against his chest, his strong arms encircling my waist.

"Tell me to stop," he breathes against my ear, "and I will."

I should.

I know I should.

But the words won't come.

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Instead, I turn in his arms until we're facing each other, my thighs straddling his. His eyes darken as I settle my weight against him, and I can feel the hard evidence of his desire pressing against me.

"This is insane," I whisper, even as my hands slide up his chest to rest on his shoulders.

"Completely," he agrees, his hands finding my hips.

When our lips finally meet, it's like striking a match in a room filled with gasoline. The chemistry that's been building between us explodes into blinding heat.

His mouth is demanding and hungry, but there's a control to his passion that makes me wild. I press closer, my fingers tangling in his hair as I open to him. His tongue slides against mine, tasting of desire and promise.

His hands move restlessly over my body, his fingers finding the hem of my sweater. They slip beneath to touch bare skin, and I gasp against his mouth.

He explores me with maddening patience, and by the time he finally cups my breasts, I'm about to lose my mind with need.

"So responsive," he growls appreciatively as his thumbs brush over my hardened nipples.

I bite back a moan, suddenly aware of our surroundings. "The driver—"

"Can't see us," he assures me, nodding toward the privacy partition. "Or hear us over the engine."

Still, when he lowers his head to press open-mouthed kisses along my throat, I have to stifle the sounds that threaten to escape. His teeth graze my pulse point, and my hips rock instinctively against him.

He groans, his hands tightening on my waist. "Keep that up, darling, and this will be over before it begins."

The raw desire in his voice emboldens me. I roll my hips again, deliberately this time, watching his eyes darken further.

In response, he lifts me as if I weigh nothing, depositing me on the seat beside him before dropping to his knees in the aisle.

"What are you—"

My question dissolves into a gasp as his hands push my skirt up my thighs. He looks up at me, a silent question in his eyes.

I should stop this. I know I should. But instead, I nod, lifting my hips slightly to help as he slides my underwear down my legs.

The first touch of his mouth against my most intimate place nearly undoes me. I have to bite my lip to keep from crying out as he parts my folds with his tongue, tasting me with deliberate, devastating strokes.

He takes his time, exploring every sensitive inch of me. His tongue circles my clit before flicking against it rhythmically, drawing soft whimpers I can barely contain. When he sucks gently on the sensitive bud, my hips buck involuntarily against his

mouth.

His strong hands grip my thighs, spreading them wider, holding me open for his relentless attention. The sight of his dark head between my legs, the feel of his hot breath against my wet flesh, the obscene sounds of his pleasure as he devours me—it's almost too much to bear.

"You taste so sweet," he murmurs against me, the vibration of his voice sending shockwaves of pleasure through my core.

When he slides one finger inside me, curling it to stroke against a spot I didn't even know existed, I nearly come undone. A second finger joins the first, stretching me deliciously as his tongue continues its wicked assault.

The dual sensations—his fingers pumping steadily inside me while his mouth works magic on my clit—quickly build the pressure to an unbearable peak. My thighs begin to tremble, my breathing grows ragged, and just when I think I can't take anymore, he increases his pace.

"Let go for me, Acacia," he commands against my flesh, and something about the authoritative tone in his voice pushes me over the edge.

My orgasm crashes over me, and what he promised came true.

I cry his name out, again and again and again, and still he doesn't stop. He's doing everything still, and my body can't stop convulsing. I'm shuddering and crying, the pleasure tearing me apart.

Ronan only relents when I'm a slumped mess in his arms, and I can't even muster the strength to scowl when I look up and see the satisfaction gleaming from his gaze.

His lips glisten with evidence of my pleasure, and the sight sends another jolt of arousal through me, even as I'm still coming down from my high.

"Your turn," I whisper, surprising myself with my boldness.

His eyebrows rise slightly, but he doesn't argue as we trade places. I sink to my knees between his legs, my hands moving to his belt with only the slightest tremor betraying my nervousness.

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He helps me, his fingers guiding mine until he springs free, and my eyes widen involuntarily. He's impressively large, thick and hard, the head already glistening with evidence of his arousal.

I wrap my hand around his shaft, marveling at how my fingers can't completely encircle his girth. His sharp intake of breath at my touch emboldens me, and I begin to stroke him, learning what pressure he likes, what rhythm makes his jaw clench with restraint.

When I lower my head to taste him, his hand comes to rest gently in my hair, not guiding or forcing, just connecting us as I explore. I swirl my tongue around the sensitive head, delighting in the way his thighs tense beneath my hands.

I take him into my mouth, but his size makes it challenging. I can only accommodate the first few inches before I feel the strain in my jaw. He groans deeply as I hollow my cheeks around him, taking him as deep as I can manage.

"That's it," he encourages, his voice strained. "Just like that."

I work him with a combination of mouth and hand, doing what I can to make him fit. His breathing grows ragged, and the sound makes my head bob faster.

When I look up at him through my lashes, I find him watching me with an intensity that makes my core clench anew. To pleasure him this way, and to see its effect on him...

It's addictive.

His body soon starts to tighten, and my head, my fingers - every part of me that's involved in pleasuring him is working double time. The movement of his hips becomes erratic, and I know he's so, so close.

When Ronan finally comes, his fingers tighten involuntarily as he grips my hair, and the thick, creamy heat of his seed rushes down my throat.

It's my first time to swallow.

I never could do it in the past.

But for Ronan, though...

Why was it suddenly so easy?

WE BUY OUR BREAKFAST from the vendo, and we eat in silence that's still charged with sexual tension. We don't look at each other, but it's no use. I can't stop thinking of what just happened, and I know it's the same for him. How can I not, when the bulge behind his pants has yet to go away?

He draws me back to him as soon as we finish eating, and the thought of resisting doesn't even enter my mind.

He cradles me on his lap, my back against his chest, and my heart thumps hard as I feel his hands slide under my sweater.

I bite back a cry as he cups my breasts through my bra, his fingers playing with its taut tips until they're aching unbearably for something...anything!

His hand moves further down, and this time I can no longer hold back making a sound. A gasp escapes me as Ronan's fingers part my folds and find that stiff,

sensitive nub of flesh.

Ronan seems to know exactly how to touch me, how much pressure to apply, when to speed up and when to slow down.

P-Please.

R-Ronan.

Please!

I don't care that I'm begging.

I just need this so badly.

"Please what?" Ronan purrs. "Say it, make it clear to me, darling."

P-Please make me come!

And as soon as I say the words, he grants my plea, one hand pinching my nipple hard, another hand pinching my clit, andaaaaaah.

I shatter with another cry, the pleasure making me black out.

Why is he so, so good at this?

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As soon as I regain consciousness, I can only think of one thing: I want him to lose control...the way he made me lose mine.

Ronan's head falls back against the seat as I reach for him. I stare at his face, paying close attention to even the slightest change in his expression. It tells me when to tighten or loosen my grip, when to move faster or slower, when to tenderly caress the weight under his length.

My own breath quickens when I feel him growing in the circle of my grip, and my still-wet folds become swollen once again when Ronan growls my name out as he spills over my fingers.

I lose track of time.

Or the number of times we make each other come.

And when I wake up, there's only one thing I'm sure of.

I've absolutely lost my freaking mind!

I can feel myself paling as our bus pulls into Laramie, and my mind plays back everything that happened between Ronan and me with explicit accuracy.

On a bus, Cay!

A bus!

And with a stranger at that!

As soon as the bus comes to a stop, I grab my bag and practically run down the aisle, desperate for fresh air and space to think. Ronan follows at a more measured pace, giving me the distance I clearly need.

The Laramie bus station is small but busy. I scan the departure board, relieved to see there's a bus to Hartland leaving in twenty minutes. Just enough time to compose myself, but not so long that I'll have to make conversation.

I find a seat in the waiting area, staring fixedly at my phone as if it holds the answers to the universe. But I can feel him watching me from a few feet away, his presence impossible to ignore.

Finally, he approaches, settling into the seat beside me with casual grace.

"So we're not really going to talk about it?" His voice is low, meant only for my ears.

I keep my eyes on my phone. "Do I look like I want to talk about it?"

"How honest do you want me to be?"

That makes me look up. "Excuse me?"

"You look like someone who would rather die than admit you felt the same thing I did."

Heat floods my cheeks. Before I can formulate a suitably cutting response, a bus pulls up outside, and the station attendant calls out, "Hartland, now boarding."

Saved by the bell.

I grab my bag and hurry toward the door, relief and disappointment warring in my chest.

"I'll see you around, darling."

I can't help glowering at him over my shoulder. "I am not your darling—"

His smile is slow and confident, like a man who knows something I don't. "Yet."

Chapter Six

I KNOW YOU BLOCKED my number. You can't keep putting me off. Doing so just hurts both of us.

Ronan didn't even think twice about deleting the message and blocking yet another number. The past was finally in the past. But such a lesson had not come without costs, since it had taken weeks of deliberately staying away from Acacia for Ronan to get his head out of his ass and realize what truly mattered.

And that was her.

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Tension turned him rigid behind the wheel of his black truck, fingers gripping the steering wheel a bit too hard as he watched Acacia struggle with the oversized trash bag.

The temperature had dropped to fifteen degrees that morning, and her breath materialized in small puffs of white mist as she hauled the garbage toward the dumpster behind Hartland Books.

It had been two weeks since she'd arrived in town. Two weeks since he'd watched her climb down from the bus at Laramie station, only to turn her back on him without a single word of goodbye. Two weeks of him keeping his distance while simultaneously ensuring he knew her every move.

This morning, she'd dressed more appropriately for the weather than when she first arrived—thick wool coat, knee-high boots, and a knitted beanie pulled over her red-gold hair—but the way she moved betrayed her discomfort with the cold. Miami-bred through and through. Acacia might as well have landed on another planet.

He smiled, remembering how she'd tried to de-ice her apartment door lock with hot water three days ago, only to create an even thicker sheet of ice when the water instantly froze. Or the time she'd stepped into a snow drift that was much deeper than it appeared, disappearing almost up to her waist with a shriek that had nearly made him blow his cover.

Yesterday, she'd worn leather-soled boots on her walk to work, and he'd watched from across the street as she performed an unintentional ice-skating routine down Main Street, arms pinwheeling wildly before she managed to grab onto a lamppost.

Every damn time, his heart had nearly stopped.

Miami to Hartland, Wyoming. The difference might as well be what divided heaven and hell, and Ronan had seen how it wasn't just the weather Acacia had originally struggled with.

He had also witnessed her bewilderment at the early closing times of local shops. Had noticed her confusion the first time she encountered Hartland's Wednesday tradition of "power conservation day," when businesses deliberately dimmed lights and limited electricity usage.

The confusion on her face when everyone in Redwood Cafe greeted each other by name. The way she'd frozen like a deer in headlights when Ethan's young wife Anah had invited her to join their book club. And the look of shock on her face when she realized that there truly were zero chances of connecting to the Internet while in town.

Acacia finished wrestling the trash into the dumpster and turned back toward the bookstore, brushing her gloved hands together. Ronan's eyes narrowed as he spotted the patch of black ice on the sidewalk directly in her path. Without thinking, he pushed open his truck door and was moving before his brain had fully formed the thought.

She didn't see it coming. Her right foot hit the ice and immediately slid forward while her left remained planted, creating a perfect split that would have been impressive if it hadn't been accidental.

She started to fall, but he caught her in time, and he felt her freeze as soon as her stunned gaze collided with his.

She was shocked.

He was aroused.

And as soon as Acacia became aware of his hardened state, she quickly pushed him away, and he reluctantly let her go.

She stared at him, her lip visibly trembling. Everything she felt was painted in the icy clarity of her bright blue eyes.

The recognition and relief.

The desire she couldn't quite hide.

And layered beneath it all, the unmistakable flash of frustration. She missed him but hated that she did. She was glad to see him but she also hated herself for this. Her mind wanted nothing to do with him, but her body desired everything about him.

"Hello again." He smiled at her, but she didn't smile back.

No matter.

The sexual tension between them was as explosive as ever, a living, breathing thing that seemed to create its own heat in the frigid Wyoming air.

"I can report you for stalking."

Ronan raised a brow, amused despite himself. "I'm only here to pick up a book I ordered."

Her eyes widened.

He gave it a few seconds.

And finally, understanding dawned.

"The Shakespeare first edition," she said stiffly. "That's yours?"

He showed her the receipt. "Taming of the Shrew," Ronan drawled. "Don't you think it's fitting?"

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"No. I don't."

His gaze gleamed. "Just what a shrew would you say, don't you think?"

She sputtered, he chuckled.

Now this was the Acacia he knew...and missed so fucking bad.

"How have you been, darling?"

"I am not your darling."

"Did you miss me as much as I missed you?"

She glared at him. "NO."

"It's nice to know you haven't changed," Ronan said, his voice dropping an octave lower. "You still love lying to yourself even when you're bad at it."

She shot him a look that clearly said two words.

Drop dead.

He laughed, and she turned on her heel, marching back inside the bookshop without a word.

His smile faded as he watched her hips sway, and Ronan had to fight off the urge to

haul her close, bend her over, and take her sweet ass from behind.

He wanted her, dammit.

More than ever.

His jaw clenched as he sought to regain control over his body, and by the time he joined her inside, it was to see Acacia punching keys on the computer like it was her enemy. It was clear she was in a hurry to give him the book and get rid of him.

Ronan came up to the counter, but her gaze remained fixed on the screen. "Are you aware you've got everyone curious about you?"

"There's nothing for them to be curious about. I keep to myself."

"And that's exactly why they're curious. Hartland's a small town. People tend to talk about people who don't."

"I just think it's polite to mind my own business." She handed him his package. "Thank you for doing business with us. Goodbye."

He caught her wrist before she could turn away.

"Let go!"

"Have lunch with me."

"No."

"Dinner? Breakfast?"

"Never."

"Why aren't you willing to trust me even just a little? At least give me that much." A part of him expected her to brush the question off...only to have that part proved wrong when she actually answered him with the truth.

"Because the last time I trusted someone, it cost me everything."

Fuck.

"So if you don't mind—just stay away from me. And if it makes any difference, I'll say it the way you want me to." She looked at him with eyes that were suddenly opaque, and his chest clenched. "Please stay away from me. Please, Ronan. Please."

Chapter Seven

HE ACTUALLY STAYED away.

It's been two weeks since that day Ronan came to the bookshop. We bump into each other once in a while, but he's kept his word all throughout. He stays away, and I know I should be glad of that. But I'm not. And I hate that I'm not.

I've managed to establish a routine in Hartland. Every morning, I wake up at six, shower, and have a light breakfast before bundling up for the fifteen-minute walk to Hartland Books. Thornton—my expressionless, intimidating boss who looks like he stepped out of a John Wick movie—barely acknowledges my existence beyond giving me instructions, while his wife is his exact opposite. She's adorable in every way, and she's the only one capable of making her husband appear somewhat human.

Even Wyoming's winters are something I've finally become accustomed to. The only thing I'm left struggling with, however, is the one thing I can never ask for help from.

And it's all about him.

I feel his presence everywhere even when I don't see him. His name is mentioned in my hearing all the time. I catch glimpses of his black truck driving past me, and it takes everything not to cry. I know I asked for this. I know I should be happy. But I'm not.

Hormones, I tell myself desperately. These are just the hormones that are making a mess—

Oh no.

Something hurts.

Badly.

Something feels wrong.

No. No. No.

I clutch at my abdomen as a sharp pain tears through me. I'm alone in the bookstore's back room, cataloging new arrivals, when it hits me like a freight train. I sink to my knees, my hand fumbling for my phone.

With trembling fingers, I dial the number for Hartland's taxi service—a quaint operation with exactly three cars serving the entire town. Thankfully, one arrives within minutes, and he takes one look at my face, and he takes me straight to the local clinic.

Breathe, Cay. Breathe.

The clinic appears through the frosted windows, a simple two-story stone building with a discreet sign.

But as soon as I'm past its doors...

Oh, sheep.

It's the poshest medical facility I've ever seen in my life, and I don't know whether to feel thankful or terrified. The marble floors gleam under soft lighting. The reception area looks like it belongs in a five-star hotel, with plush seating and abstract art

adorning the walls.

Will I be forever in debt after being treated here?

This is the one thing I just don't get about Hartland, honestly. It's not the richest town around, but why are all the places here so, so...nice?

A nurse in crisp navy scrubs approaches immediately. "Acacia Greenway, isn't it?"

I just nod, no longer surprised that she knows my name. It's Hartland, and that's just how we roll here.

The staff moves with practiced efficiency. Within minutes, I'm changed into a hospital gown and settled in an examination room that looks more like a luxury spa than a medical facility.

"Dr. Slater will be with you shortly," the nurse—Abby, according to her name tag—informs me with a reassuring smile. "In the meantime, I need to ask you some questions for your chart."

She starts with the basics—name, date of birth, allergies, and current medications. Then come the pregnancy-specific questions.

"When was your last prenatal checkup?"

I swallow hard. "I... I haven't had one yet."

Abby's pen pauses above the clipboard, but her expression remains professionally neutral. "I see. And when did you confirm your pregnancy?"

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"About two months ago. I used a home test."

"Any prior pregnancies or miscarriages?"

"No."

"And the father of the baby? Is he involved?"

Shame fills me inside even though I know I have nothing to be ashamed about. I love my baby—

"I'll take it from here, Abby."

That voice.

My gaze jerks to the doorway, and I see a familiar figure... in an unfamiliar white lab coat.

Ronan is Dr. Slater?

His amber eyes lock with mine, and for a moment, time stands still. He looks different in his professional attire—impossibly more attractive, if that were even possible. The pristine lab coat over a light blue shirt and navy tie. The stethoscope hanging around his neck. The air of quiet authority surrounds him.

Abby steps out, and it's just the two of us.

He takes the clipboard. "You're five months along?"

All I can do is nod. Why is he being so gentle? Doesn't he hate me for lying to him?

"Tell me about the pain you're experiencing."

I tell him everything, my voice jerky. A part of me is still reeling. Ronan knows now. Ronan's a doctor. And Ronan...is so impossible to understand. Why isn't he angry?

Thirty minutes later, and I'm about to die of embarrassment.

Ronan—now my doctor at the moment—has to give me a physical examination. His touch is clinical and impersonal, but my body responds traitorously nonetheless. His fingers probe gently at my abdomen, checking for tenderness, while he listens to the baby's heartbeat with a Doppler.

"Everything sounds normal."

Uh. Yeah. Right. NOT!

"Baby's heartbeat is strong."

So's mine!

Ronan helps me lie back and prepares the ultrasound, his movements efficient. The gel is cold against my skin, but I still feel like I'm about to go up in flames any second.

"This might be a little uncomfortable..."

No kidding.

I'm about to die of embarrassment. I'm so tempted to run away. But as soon as Ronan points to my baby on the screen, everything is forgotten.

My baby.

"Is everything really okay?" I whisper.

"Okay would be an understatement," Ronan says with a smile. "He's the perfect size at twenty weeks." He says so many other scientific things, but I don't really hear or understand anything. All I can do is stare at my beautiful baby on the screen.

"Do you want to know the sex?"

The question catches me off guard. "Y-You can tell already?"

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His lips curve. "You make me sound like I've just offered you a million dollars."

More than!

"But yes, I can tell, and in fact, it's already clear——"

"Is it a girl?" I blurt out.

"Yes."

My eyes start to sting.

My baby.

My baby girl.

Oh, baby girl, hello.

After wiping the gel from my stomach and helping me sit up, Ronan explains what likely caused my pain. "Round ligament pain."

He says so many more things after that, but I'm unable to concentrate.

I'm having a baby girl!

Ronan hands over my prescription, adding, "No heavy lifting at the bookstore and make sure you're drinking plenty of fluids." He makes a final note in my chart before

looking at me. "That's it."

Silence continues, and I finally ask, "Aren't you going to ask me who the father is?"

"No." His response is immediate but gentle.

"Why?"

"Because it's your choice if you want to tell me or not."

He scribbles something else on his prescription pad.

"Another prescription?" I ask blankly.

Ronan hands it to me. "A reference."

I blink, confused. "To another doctor? Why?"

His gaze bores through me. "Why do you think?"

"But I'm not going to make trouble—"

"You were trouble the moment you stepped foot in my clinic, Acacia."

Oh.

"I can't be attracted to my own patient."

I'm about to laugh this off when Ronan rises to his full height, and...oh.

That can't be a banana in his pocket, but...

Really?

"I'm five months pregnant," I blurt out.

"So?"

"You can't possibly—"

"But I can. I do." Ronan's amber eyes darken with desire. "Do you want me to prove it?"

Say no!

But instead I hear myself whisper the magic words. "Please, Ronan."

In one fluid motion, he locks the door and returns to me. His hands cup my face with exquisite tenderness, and his lips find mine in a kiss that starts gentle but quickly burns into something fierce and hungry.

"I've been wanting to do this since the moment I saw you," he growls against my mouth.

"In the bus station?" I ask breathlessly.

He pulls back slightly, a strange smile playing on his lips. "Something like that."

Then his mouth is on mine again, and I forget to question the cryptic response. All I can focus on is the feel of him—his hands in my hair, his tongue tangling with mine, the solid warmth of his body pressing against me.

"We shouldn't do this here," I manage to gasp out between kisses.

"Clinic's closed for lunch," he responds, trailing his lips down my neck. "No appointments for the next hour."

His hands are already working on the ties of my hospital gown, exposing my skin to the cool air of the examination room. I should be mortified—pregnant and half-naked on an examination table with a man I barely know but can't seem to resist. Instead, I feel only a desperate, clawing need.

"You're beautiful," he says roughly, his gaze taking in my swollen breasts, the curve of my belly. "So fucking beautiful."

I shake my head, suddenly self-conscious. "I'm huge."

"You're perfect." He places a hand against my round flesh, his touch possessive, and a shudder rocks my body.

My heart thunders against my chest as Ronan helps me lie back on the medical bed. He pays special attention to my breasts, now sensitive and fuller than before my pregnancy. His tongue circles one nipple, then the other, making me arch and gasp.

"Tell me if anything hurts," he commands. "Tell me to stop and I will."

"Don't stop," I beg. "Please don't stop."

His smile against my skin is all male satisfaction as he continues his downward exploration. He drops to his knees beside the bed, positioning himself between my legs.

"I've dreamed of tasting you," Ronan whispers as the heat of his breath tickles the sensitive skin of my inner thighs. "Every fucking night since we met."

His mouth is on me before I can respond, and my body arches up as his tongue works its usual devastating magic, thrusting in and out of my swollen core.

But just when I'm so close, Ronan slows everything down, and it's a never-ending cycle that soon has me biting back sobs of aching need.

He finally pulls back, and all I can do is stare as he gets rid of his clothes. Is it just me or has he gotten...bigger? And harder?

My fingers itch when I see the trail of hair leading down to the waistband of his pants, and my throat turns dry as his last piece of clothing falls away.

Oh.

No other word comes to mind. The sheer beauty of his naked body. The size of him. And oh, the violent way his shaft throbs!

My eyes close as his weight settles over me, and there are just no words, absolutely no words to describe when Ronan finally enters my body, and his length swells against my inner walls.

Amber eyes capture mine as Ronan pushes forward inch by torturous inch.

It touches me how he's doing his best not to hurt me, but I want more. I want everything.

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"I'm not going to break," I whisper lifting my hips to take him deeper. "You of all people know—"

"Acacia—" He tries to slow me down, his control visibly fraying.

"Fuck me hard, please, Ro—"

I don't get to finish speaking.

His control snaps, and he's doing exactly as I asked. His thrusts become deeper, harder, hitting places inside me that make me see stars. One of his hands supports my lower back while the other finds its way between us, his thumb circling my most sensitive spot with each powerful thrust.

"You feel so good," he grates out, his rhythm becoming more urgent. "So tight, so fucking perfect..."

I'm still beyond words, beyond thought.

There's only sensation—the thick, hot fullness of him inside me, the delicious friction, the building pressure that threatens to consume me whole.

When my release comes, it's with an intensity I've never experienced before. Wave after wave of pleasure crashes over me, leaving me gasping and trembling beneath him. He follows moments later, his big, hard body tensing as he finds his own completion with a guttural growl

We come together for the first time, and it's nothing like I imagined...and everything that terrifies me.

As soon as I sense his arms loosen, I pull away and start dressing myself in a hurry.

"Acacia?"

"I'm, um, grateful," I mumble without looking his way, "for the, er, um, service rendered——"

Oh sheep, what am I saying?

"And I intend to pay you back, I promise."

Sheep, sheep, sheep.

I dash out of the clinic, dreading that he'd stop me from leaving, but hoping that he would as well.

Hormones, I desperately tell myself yet again. Hormones are always to blame!

I fight back tears as I call for another cab, and it's on the drive back to the bookshop that my phone suddenly vibrates.

Ronan: When do you intend to pay me back?

I don't know whether to laugh or cry. Why is this man so patient with me? Why?

My mind blanks out as I stare down at his message, and I find myself typing without thinking.

It's a surprise.

Chapter Eight

DEAREST CAY,

I hope this letter finds you well and adjusting to Hartland life! I know you must be freezing your adorable tush off up there in Wyoming. It's 78 degrees here in Miami today—perfect beach weather, which makes me think of our spring break trips. Remember when we built that ridiculous sand castle that kept collapsing? Meanwhile, I checked the forecast for Hartland and nearly had a heart attack when I saw it was -12 this morning.

MINUS TWELVE, CAY! How are you even surviving?

I'm sorry it's taken me so long to write back. Ellana caught a cold that turned our household upside down for a week (toddler snot is EVERYWHERE), and then Raj had a diplomatic thing I had to attend. Which brings me to the part of this letter I've been dreading to write...

I saw your parents at an Afxisi event. Raj and I were seated with Helios and the others, but we bumped into them on the red carpet. We said hi, of course. I was hoping they'd ask about you. I even mentioned something about Dr. Yay. But they were just their usual poker-faced selves. I'm sorry, Cay. Let's just keep praying.

I wish I had better news about Claude to balance things, but it's all just the same, sadly. Well, except for the part about these rumors of Claude being disinherited. No idea if any of it is true.

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Oh, wait, there is some good news. Or sort of. Joan, Claude's grandmother, was also at the same party. She asked about you! It was easy to tell that she missed you a lot.

We all do, really.

But...I can't say I'm sorry that you're there. And I don't think you are either even if being away from everyone makes you sad. Raj, Ellana, and I hope to visit you and the baby soon. We might not be by your side right now, but God is with you, and He loves you so much. He sees your pain, Cay. He knows what you had to sacrifice to do what's right, and He's so proud of you for finding the courage to see it through. We're all proud of you. We love and miss you lots!

XOXO

Story

P.S. Have you found out what your baby's gender is?

Tears blur my vision, but unlike the sobs that used to rack my body for hours, they run down slowly and softly on my cheeks. Being reminded of my old life still hurts, but not as much as before. I used to think time could heal all wounds, but ever since leaving Miami and learning how to live on my own and for someone else...

Everything I used to know and believe in, everything's changed now.

My whole life, God was simply this invisible force that I knew was good. But that was it. He never figured in the equation, and I realize now He never would have if I

hadn't lost everything...in order to realize I had nothing without Him in the first place.

How are you so good to me, God?

Because I love you.

How can You forgive me when my parents can't even bear the sight of me?

Because I love you. And so do your parents, even if it may not seem so right now.

I just feel like a failure at times.

You are My beloved child, Acacia, and so is the baby you have in your womb. Both of you are My creation, and all that I create are good. Have faith in Me. I will be with you to the end of times.

ANOTHER WEEK PASSES, and it's a week that has me constantly fighting the urge not to text Ronan. But it's getting harder each day.

I'm not sure if it's a coincidence, but I seem to hear his name wherever I go. I'm at the flower shop one time, and its owner Ethan asks very casually if I wanted to be set up on a blind date with one of his friends. Guess who?!

I'm having lunch at Redwood Cafe when two female tourists walked in, both of them gushing about how "lucky" they were to have this little accident. Why, you ask? Because they got to visit the clinic and meet the local doctor, whose name I really do not want to think about.

I don't want to keep hurting and disobeying You, God.

But I also know I can't do this on my own.

What do You want me to do about Ronan?

My quiet life in Hartland has made me closer to God. And while that's never a bad thing, it's also made me see that there's still so much of my life I need His help with. Sex with Ronan was insanely addictive. He made me feel things I never thought were possible to feel. Made me do things I never thought I could. But at the end of the day, sex was just sex. Sex didn't last...the same way the love I once thought was for eternity didn't last.

Claude and I had started dating in high school. I thought I'd spend the rest of my life with him. And even though I had noticed how he seemed to have changed over the years, I still thought we were endgame. Until we weren't.

Claude had started pressuring me to have sex with him since we entered college, and after so many years of saying no, I had finally said yes.

I'm hurting so bad.

No one loves me.

You're the only one who loves me.

But if you keep saying no, it's like I have no one.

He needed me. I loved him. And so I gave in.

Because that was how I used to define love.

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You do what the other person wanted, always.

Shame engulfs me when I recall how foolish and gullible I was. The only boy I ever loved...guilt-tripped me into giving him my virginity. And that same boy didn't hesitate to dump me when he found out I was carrying his baby.

Seeing Claude's true colors had cured me of my heartbreak, and I honestly thought I was over men for good...until him.

Ronan.

Memories flood my mind, and I can feel my cheeks turning hot even when I'm alone in my room. I've met other good-looking guys before, and Claude himself wasn't terrible to look at. So why then? Why was Ronan able to affect me in a way no other man could?

And why do I have to meet him now when it feels like it's too late?

Why now...when God's already made clear that this time...

He already has a plan, and the next man I'll kiss is the man I'll be married to for the rest of my life.

Chapter Nine

"I THINK YOU'RE IN LOVE with her," Eve Manolis declared sincerely. She turned to her boss, who was also her husband, asking earnestly, "Don't you think so, too?"

Ronan shot his friend a sardonic look. "Yes, do tell. Or better yet, remind me again of how you and Eve became a couple? Did you also believe you were in love with her from the start?"

Konstantin only smiled. "You make a good point. And the answer is no. Because I was a fool back then, and I ended up paying the price." Konstantin then turned back the table on the other man, drawling, "If you wish the same thing to happen in your life, far be it from me to stop you."

Ronan grimaced. He had walked straight into that one, and he only had himself to blame.

The three of them were seated in Konstantin's office at Stanhope Medical Center's newest branch in Laramie—a state-of-the-art facility that seemed more like a luxury hotel than a hospital, with floor-to-ceiling windows offering views of snow-capped mountains in the distance.

When Eve excused herself to take a call, Konstantin glanced at his friend thoughtfully. "You were never the type to waste time in denial."

"Who says I am?"

"You never mix business with pleasure. But for this girl, you broke every important rule there is..."

"Just like you did with Eve."

"Exactly, Ronan. Exactly. So again, I have to ask. Why waste time in denial?"

Ronan's lips tightened. Konstantin made it sound so damn simple. But there were things the other man didn't know about the past.

Eva came back, an apologetic smile on her face as she looked at her husband's friend. "Sorry about this, but Konstantin's one o'clock is here."

The two men rose to their feet, and Konstantin gave his friend a warning look. "Think about what I said. Don't wait until it's too late, and you've already lost everything."

Eve looked at Ronan in concern. "What's too late?"

Konstantin frowned down at his wife as he led her out of his office. "I'm a very jealous man, sweetheart. You don't need to waste a precious second worrying over an idiot like him."

Ronan could hardly believe it was his friend speaking. Jealousy and Konstantin in one sentence would never have made sense in the past. But falling in love with Eve had obviously changed that...just like things could also change for him.

And yet that was easier said than done.

Ronan saw himself out and the first thing he saw as soon as the elevator doors opened in the lobby was her.

Acacia stood near the reception desk, one hand absently rubbing her rounded belly as she spoke with the receptionist. She wore a simple blue maternity dress that accentuated her eyes and a gingham-patterned cardigan that hugged her shoulders. Her red-gold hair was pulled back in a loose braid, exposing the elegant curve of her neck.

She hadn't spotted him yet, giving him a moment to drink at the sight of her. She was still the most desirable little thing in his eyes, but...

Don't wait until it's too late, and you've already lost everything.

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She suddenly turned, their gazes colliding, and the icy clarity of her bright blue eyes showed everything.

I want you.

I miss you.

I love you.

Every damn thing she felt, including the words that she obviously had no desire to tell him.

Don't wait until it's too late, and you've already lost everything.

His fists clenched against his sides. He tried to think of something to say, but instead he saw her eyes darken with pain, and the next words he read in them had his face whitening.

I can't be with you anymore.

Ronan felt as if he had been punched in the guts. Why? Why the hell was she thinking that?

She approached the elevator hesitantly, as if unsure whether to wait for the next one.

"You're, um, not coming out?"

Instead of answering, Ronan simply stepped to the side, and her eyes widened. "Oh, um..."

"You should get in," he said silkily. "Unless you don't mind causing a build-up?"

A look over her shoulder at the growing line of people behind her had her cheeks flushed, and Acacia quickly joined him inside the elevator.

"Are you here for your checkup?" he asked, his voice carefully neutral.

She nodded, and he pressed the corresponding floor for the obstetrics department.

Before either could say another word, a flood of people squeezed into the elevator behind them. As bodies pressed forward, Ronan instinctively moved to shield Acacia, guiding her into the corner with a protective hand at the small of her back.

The sudden crush of people pushed them closer together, forcing her against the wall of the elevator. Her breasts flattened against his chest, and he felt her sharp intake of breath. She swallowed hard, her gaze fixed determinedly on his collarbone rather than his face.

The scent of Acacia's perfume wrapped around him, stirring memories that had his body growing rigid.

He remembered the taste of her on his tongue.

The moist, tight heat of her passage.

And the sound of her voice as she cried his name out.

Don't wait until it's too late, and you've already lost everything.

The elevator stopped at each floor, disgorging passengers in twos and threes. With each departure, Ronan could have stepped back, giving her space to breathe. But he didn't. He kept her walled in, one hand braced against the panel beside her head, his body forming a barrier between her and the rest of the world.

The last passengers filed out, and he saw her sigh in relief.

Not so fast, darling.

He slammed his hand against the emergency stop button, and a strangled gasp spilled past her lips as the elevator jerked to a halt.

"W-What do you think you're doing?"

Acacia tried reaching around him for the control panel, but he caught her wrist, tightening his grip when she tried to yank free.

"Look at me," he said quietly.

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She shook her head, her hair falling forward to shield her face.

"Please."

"I can't," she said jerkily.

"Why?"

"I can't say that either." Acacia tried freeing herself again, and her shock was palpable when he actually let her go. Her confused gaze flew up to his—

Don't wait until it's too late, and you've already lost everything.

And it was then he heard himself say, "Marry me."

Acacia's cheeks lost all color. "That's not funny."

"I know. It wasn't meant to be a joke."

She shook her head. "I d-don't know what game——"

"Not a game either." He cupped her face, this time leaving her no choice but to look into his eyes so she could see the truth for herself. And then he said it again.

"Marry me, Acacia."

And the words felt more right than ever.

"If you're asking me out of pity—"

"Do I look like an idiot to you?"

A choked laugh escaped her even as her eyes filled with tears.

"Marry me."

"This is insane," she whispered. "People will think—"

"Who cares what other people think?"

"But—"

"Did you ever stop thinking about me since the last time we saw each other?"

She shook her head, a single tear tracking down her cheek.

"Neither did I, darling." He cupped her face, catching the tear with his thumb.

"Neither did I."

"D-Do you really want to marry me?"

"More than I've ever wanted anything else."

"Why?"

It pained him to see the fear in her eyes as she whispered this.

"Why me when you could have anyone else?"

It was as if she was terrified to hear what he had to say——

"There can be no one else, Acacia."

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—when, in truth, he was the one who had everything to lose if she were gone.

"I thought what I had and lost in the past was love. But you showed me I was wrong."

Ronan saw her lips part in shock at what he was saying without words, and he had to fight off the urge not to chain her to him, for good.

"I didn't know the past was holding me back until you," he said rawly. "And that's why it has to be you, no one else. You made me start living again."

Chapter Ten

"BILLIONAIRES?" I GASP out. "Everyone here is a billionaire?"

It's my bridal and baby shower combined, with Redwood Cafe transformed for one special night into a place of magic and fairytales, and what was once a masculine interior has turned into a whimsical landscape, with the ceiling completely covered with blue and pink flowers and concealed projectors turning the walls into evening skies filled with dragonflies flying all over the place.

Everyone has been so warm and welcoming, but the best thing of all is having Story and my goddaughter Ellana with me. Ellana, with her cherub cheeks and infectious giggles, has been the star of the show, with the royal toddler wowing everyone with the sheer magnitude of her impossible-for-a-toddler vocabulary.

Instead of 'big', she says 'gargantuan.'

Instead of 'hard', she says 'complex'.

And when we asked her how she had learned all of these "gargantuan" words, Ellana suddenly had an angelic look on her face as she answered our question.

'Classified.'

It's an almost perfect night, really, except for this part where my close friend tells me the truth about our remote but not-so-ordinary little town.

Kady squeezes my hand in sympathy as I struggle to wrap my head around the truth. "You'll get used to it eventually." A rueful smile touches the other woman's lips. "It's not like you have a choice. Ronan's a billionaire, too, you know."

Oh.

Kady's eyes widen.

Right.

I'm vaguely aware of Kady looking at Story, and then all the girls are looking at each other.

"Ronan's a billionaire."

It's only when everyone bursts into laughter that I realize I've blurted the words out.

Hmph.

I make a face at them, but this only has everyone laughing harder. Oh, please. Can't they cut me some slack? Having billionaires as next-door neighbors is already a

stretch, but for my fiancé to be one as well?

"So let me get this straight," I say, once the laughter dies down. "Hartland isn't just some random small town. It's a... what? A billionaire sanctuary?"

"The Hartland Initiative," Story explains, bouncing Ellana on her knee. "A place where the wealthy and famous can live normal lives away from the public eye."

"That's why there's no internet," Blake adds. "And why the town looks poor on paper."

"But the hospital..." I murmur, thinking of the state-of-the-art facility where Ronan works. "The bookstore... everything is so..."

"Nice?" Frankie supplies with a grin. "That's because we have the money to make it nice, but we keep it subtle. Well, subtle-ish."

I think back to my first impressions of the bus station when I arrived—how everything seemed too perfect, too polished. How the entire setup felt staged somehow.

Because it was.

My mind reels as pieces fall into place. The way Ronan appeared at precisely the right moment to help me buy my ticket. The luxurious but empty bus. The "coincidence" of him being seated next to me for that long journey.

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None of it was a coincidence.

"Oh my gosh," I breathe. "Did Ronan know who I was before I even got on that bus?"

A BILLIONAIRE, I find myself thinking once again as a cab takes me back to Ronan's place. I'm actually dating a billionaire, and I still don't know how to feel about it.

I rest my hand on my swollen belly, but all I can sense is calmness and peace from my baby girl. She takes after our God, I guess?

As do you, child.

I close my eyes as I fight back tears. I wish I could think my hormones are to blame, but I know it's not.

I still can't believe you chose Ronan for me.

Ye of little faith.

God's tone in my mind is teasing, and this supernatural sound still has me smiling when the cab finally drops me off in front of Ronan's place.

I use the key he's given me to get in, and I jump back in surprise when I find him waiting for me in the living room. "Y-You're still awake."

"I was waiting for you."

"Why?"

He shoves his hands deep into his pockets. "You know why."

The tightness of his tone is just too cute...that I can't help teasing him a little.

"I don't know what to say."

Ronan jerks at my shaken tone. "What do you mean?"

"You lied to me."

He stiffens at this, but it's not enough for me.

"You didn't trust me—"

"No." He starts toward me, his face pale. "Acacia, let me explain—"

"S-Stop."

He becomes absolutely still, his body coiled like a spring. "Acacia—"

"I need to tell you something, too."

"Don't make any rash decisions when—"

"I've changed my mind about the wedding."

"Fuck, Acacia—"

"Now that I know the truth, I'm determined to save even more money by canceling

our catering plans. We'll do a pot bless instead—"

"Damn you."

He looks at me as if he doesn't know whether to strangle or kiss me first, and I can totally relate because for so many times, that's how he's made me feel.

"I thought I lost you," he grates out.

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A smile wobbles to my lips.

Silly man.

"I couldn't make myself tell you I was pregnant, and you forgave me. That was when I knew. However impossible it may be...your heart is as beautiful as——"

Oh my.

Is my beautiful fiancé blushing?

I only realize I've whispered these words out loud when he glares at me.

Stupid, stupid hormones.

I try to make my escape even though I know it's futile. Ronan has insane reflexes while pregnancy has me waddling like a duck, and——aaaah!

He bends me over the back of his couch as soon as he catches me, and then he's pushing my dress up, ripping my panties off——

"You're already wet," he growls, his fingers sliding between my folds.

"R-Ronan——"

His fingers thrust inside of me, and my protests melt into a moan.

Aaaah.

When he asked me to move in with him, I had said yes with one condition. I wanted us to wait until our wedding night, and I didn't know it at that time, but the reason he had said yes so easily was because of this.

Ronan starts squeezing my breasts, his thumbs circling my nipples through the thin fabric of my dress, and I cry his name out.

Silly, silly, adorable man!

He honestly thought our period of celibacy is a test of his willpower, but what he was adamant about not giving up was the right to make me come—

My eyes squeeze shut as his fingers thrust deeper and deeper into me, curling to hit that spot that makes stars explode behind my eyelids.

—wherever and whenever he desires, and as many times as he wants.

"You're so tight." Desire makes his voice rough, and I love it. "So wet and perfect for me."

His thumb finds my clit, circling it with devastating precision while his fingers continue their relentless assault on my inner walls. My hips buck against his hand, chasing the pleasure that builds with each stroke.

"Tell me you'll never leave me." His fingers slow, making me whimper. "Tell me."

"N-Never." It's all I can manage, with how every thrust of his fingers is driving me crazy.

"Good girl." He rewards me by speeding up again, adding a third finger that stretches me deliciously. "Because everything I've done—everything I am—belongs to you now. Do you understand?"

I can barely nod, my body trembling on the edge of release.

"Say it," Ronan growls. "Say you understand that I'm yours."

"Mine," I pant, grinding back against his hand. "You're mine."

His free hand tangles in my hair, pulling my head back so he can capture my mouth in a searing kiss that steals what little breath I have left. His tongue mimics the thrusting of his fingers, claiming me completely.

Pleasure finally consumes me, my body shuddering at the strength of my orgasm. My knees fold as soon as he pulls his fingers out, and Ronan chuckles as he sweeps me into his arms.

My eyes drift shut as he lays me on the bed. His touch is gentle as he cleans me with a warm cloth, removing all traces of my pleasure before pressing a tender kiss to my forehead. My lips tremble at all the things I want to say.

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I can't believe you're mine.

I can't believe you really want to marry me.

I can't believe this is really true.

He pulls me into his arms, his lips brushing the top of my head, and the tenderness of it nearly kills me.

I love you, Ronan.

It's the truth.

But the words remain stuck in my throat.

LIFE IS ALMOST PERFECT these days.

Almost.

In the weeks that follow the shower, I settle into a routine that feels like a dream I never dared to have. Each morning, I wake to Ronan's arms around me, his hands gentle as they trace the curve of my belly. He whispers to our daughter before he leaves for work, tells her to be good to her mama. Some days I help at the bookstore, carefully cataloging new arrivals while Thornton watches me with his hawk-like eyes to ensure I don't overexert myself. Other days I nest, preparing our home for the baby's arrival, arranging and rearranging the nursery until it feels just right.

And almost perfect.

Except for those three words I can't seem to say.

I love you, Ronan. I love you. So, so much.

The words have turned into a burden, but I still can't make myself say it.

All I can do is think of them endlessly...

And tonight is no exception, even when Ronan has brought me as a date to some doctors'-only event in his friend's hospital in Laramie.

"I still think you're showing too much skin," my fiancé grumbles as I hand over my coat and receive a number in return.

"All you can see are my shoulders," I protest.

"Exactly."

Can this man be any more adorable and sillier?

Heads turn as we enter, and the way Ronan commands attention wherever we go is still a thing I'm getting used to. He's always been gorgeous to look at, but Ronan in a tux? In one word: devastating...and it has me turned on so, so bad that I'm already wet under my gown, and I'm just really hoping Ronan won't find out.

Throughout the evening, Ronan is never far from my side. He fetches me drinks (non-alcoholic, of course), makes sure I'm sitting when my feet ache, and glares at anyone who comes too close with a champagne flute that might accidentally spill on my dress.

"You're hovering," I whisper during a lull in the conversation.

"I'm protecting," he whispers back, pressing a kiss to my temple.

When Ronan excuses himself to speak with a former professor, I find myself momentarily alone by the dessert table, my mouth watering at the array of delicate confections. The mini macarons are particularly tempting, their rounded tops adorned with edible pearls in pastel colors that match the decor of our nursery back home.

I'm just reaching for one when I sense someone beside me.

"The raspberry one's better."

I look up to find a young man—boy, really—beside me, his tuxedo slightly too large for his lanky frame. He can't be more than eighteen, with a mop of dark curls and a smile that's all boyish charm.

"Thank you. I shall take your word for it then." I pop the raspberry-flavored macaron into my mouth, and oh my gosh.

My eyes close.

Heaven.

When I open them, the boy is standing closer, his smile widening as he reaches for a macaron himself.

But I can't smile back...because Ronan is standing right behind him.

Hell.

And my fiancé does not look happy.

At all.

"Excuse me," Ronan bites out as he cups my elbow, and he steers me away before the boy can get a word in edgewise.

"Um—" I begin.

"Not one damn word."

"But—"

He glares at me, and I stop speaking and simply follow behind him as he takes us to a side door that leads to a balcony. Once outside, he locks the doors behind us, the soft click somehow more ominous than a slam would have been.

The night air is crisp against my bare shoulders, the distant mountains visible as dark

shapes against the starlit sky.

Ronan turns to look at me, and I gulp at the glint in his eyes.

"Do you think I didn't know?" His voice is low, controlled, but with an edge that makes my pulse quicken.

"K-Know what?"

He moves toward me then, each step deliberate, forcing me to retreat until my back meets the cold stone of the balustrade. He places his hands on either side of me, caging me in with his body.

"I could smell your need for me the moment you got wet." His eyes burn into mine.
"And so did the boy."

No way.

He must be kidding.

Right?

I look at him in horror, but Ronan's gaze only bores through me, and I think...I think I'm going to die of embarrass—

"R-Ronan?"

I can only stammer his name out when he suddenly drops to his knees before me, the fine fabric of his tuxedo meeting the stone floor. The sight of him kneeling there, still so elegant, so powerful even in this position, sends a fresh wave of heat between my thighs.

"There's only one thing we can do to make sure that doesn't happen again."

By the time I recover from my shock, it's too late. His head has disappeared under my gown, and at the first stroke of his tongue, I fall back against the stone balustrade, my fingers gripping his head through the thick velvet fabric of my gown.

Ronan laps at me lazily at first, as if we have all the time in the world, as if we're not at a formal event with hundreds of people just beyond the door. His hands grip my thighs, spreading me wider as his tongue delves deeper.

His tongue circles my clit before flicking rapidly against it, sending jolts of electricity up my spine. When he slides two fingers inside me, curling them to hit that perfect spot, I have to stuff my fist against my mouth to muffle my moans.

Orgasm comes in a flash, washing over me with blinding intensity. My body convulses, inner walls clenching around his fingers as waves of pleasure crash through me.

Ronan emerges from beneath my skirt, and he carefully takes his time as he fixes my hair and adjusts my gown. He straightens when he's done, his mouth gently covering mine, and a shudder rocks my body as I taste myself in his kiss.

I love you. I love you. I love you.

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I want to say it so, so bad.

But I can't.

Because I'm terrified when I do...

Ronan won't say them back.

IT'S MY CHECKUP THENext day, this time with my fiancé and "unofficial" doctor, who has also texted me about being late.

Meeting with the founding members running over. Oliver insists on discussing security protocols for the wedding. Will try to wrap up ASAP. Wait for me.

I can only shake my head. It's just so surreal, knowing that everyone in Hartland is a billionaire.

The desk of Ronan's secretary is empty when I get to his office. Thinking that she's likely out for lunch, I decide to let myself in at his consultation room, only for my steps to come to an awkward halt when I realize someone is already inside.

Oh.

It's like finding myself staring at my doppelgänger, albeit a slightly older and more cynical version. But most surprisingly of all, she's made herself comfortable in Ronan's chair, and the more I look at her, the more I find it harder to breathe.

The other woman finally looks up, and I see the same surprise in her gaze when she realizes how identical we look.

Her gaze narrows, and her voice is sharp as she asks, "Who are you?"

A memory flutters into my mind, and I remember that one time when Ronan and I were on the bus, and it was as if I had become invisible...because he was seeing someone else.

Pain squeezes my heart, and I hear myself say, "I'm Doctor Slater's patient." It's not a lie, but it's all I suddenly feel I have the right to say...and I don't understand it. Why is my heart suddenly hurting so, so bad?

"Please take a seat," she tells me, and I find myself doing as she says because it's just easier...than to let myself think.

She studies me with a look that's equal parts curiosity and calculation. "His secretary still hasn't come back, has she?"

I shake my head, fighting the rising sense of dread.

"She's been with Ronan since eternity," she says with a curl of her lip. "She should've retired a long time ago, honestly. She can't possibly be a huge help to Ronan at her age."

I feel bad about the way she's talking about Terry, but I feel even worse when I think about how this woman's relationship with Ronan goes far beyond anything I have with him.

Thoughts I should have no business of entertaining start poisoning my mind, and I desperately shove them away. "Are you a relative of Dr. Slater's?" The words come

out stilted, and it shames me to hear myself ask this. Ronan doesn't deserve this. I shouldn't be acting like—

"We were high school sweethearts."

—he's cheating on me.

"I...s-see."

"Are you alright?" the other woman asks. "You look rather pale all of a sudden."

I want to say 'I'm fine' but I can't.

I feel dizzy and nauseous.

I rise to my feet, but the world only starts to spin faster and faster.

No. No. No.

"I think I need to—"

The words die on my lips as darkness closes in.

Chapter Eleven

DON'T WAIT UNTIL IT'S too late, and you've already lost everything.

Konstantin's warning echoed in Ronan's mind like a death knell as he paced the sterile hospital corridor. He paused at the window of Acacia's room, watching her chest rise and fall in sleep, tubes and wires connecting her to machines that beeped a steady rhythm. His hands clenched into fists at his sides, the urge to go to her, to touch her, to explain everything nearly overwhelming him.

But he couldn't. Not yet. Not until he sorted through the chaos in his own mind.

An ominous foreboding had taken possession of Ronan's soul since the night he had taken Acacia to the fundraiser at Konstantin's hospital. He had bumped into his former professor, and the older man had casually asked him how long he had been dating Lena again.

"I'm not," Ronan had replied, confusion furrowing his brow.

"Then I must be seeing double."

He had followed Professor Jin's gaze across the crowded ballroom, and that was when the truth he had fought so hard not to see could no longer be denied. Acacia, in her midnight blue gown, laughing at something a young doctor's son had said, her hand resting protectively over her swollen belly. And beside her—not physically, but in the professor's memory—the ghost of another woman, with the same delicate features, the same red-gold hair.

Ronan remembered making his excuses afterward, remembered feeling like he was about to fucking puke because he finally realized that this was what he had been terrified of all along.

Don't wait until it's too late, and you've already lost everything.

The first time he saw her photo in the Initiative's file, he had wanted her...because she had reminded him of Lena, the girl he had fallen in love with as a boy, only for her to toss him aside for some college jock who would later knock her up and cause her to quit high school without graduating.

History repeating itself in the cruelest way.

That initial attraction, that immediate spark of recognition—those had been based in a past he couldn't escape.

But what had grown between him and Acacia since?

What they had was real.

And precious.

So damn precious that it had him wanting and fearing to say the truth at the same time.

Don't wait until it's too late, and you've already lost everything.

Since then, Ronan kept telling himself all he needed was time.

Just enough time to make her love him so much she wouldn't be capable of leaving him.

Just enough time to find the right words.

Time.

He had thought he wouldn't run out of it.

But he was wrong.

Ronan was at a meeting with the other members of the Hartland Initiative when he was informed that Terry was waiting to speak to him. Since his secretary knew better than to interrupt him on days like this, he knew right away something had happened—

"What's wrong?" he demanded, striding out of the conference room where Oliver and the others continued their discussion of the upcoming wedding's security protocols.

Terry was pacing outside, her face creased with worry. Before becoming his secretary, she had worked at his family home as his nanny. Many an eyebrow was raised when Ronan had hired her as his secretary, but then, as now, what other people thought mattered little to him.

"She's here, Ronan." Terry's voice was strained.

She?

Ronan stiffened. "What happened to Aca—"

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"No," Terry cut him off. "I'm talking about that girl!"

Only one woman came to mind, the only one whose name Terry was unable to say because she was still struggling with unforgiveness.

Lena.

He left Terry to make his excuses to the other men. He drove as fast as he could, taking corners too sharply, narrowly avoiding an elderly pedestrian who gave him a one-fingered salute as he sped past. But he was still too late. When he arrived at the clinic, Lena was inside his office... while Acacia was being wheeled out on a hospital bed, unconscious.

"No. God. No."

The words tore from him as he rushed to her side, taking in her pale face, the slight swell of her belly beneath the thin hospital blanket.

"Dr. Slater," one of the nurses acknowledged him with a nod. "We're taking her to room three. Her vitals are stable, but she fainted. Blood pressure's a bit low."

"What happened?" he demanded, his fingers automatically finding Acacia's wrist, measuring her pulse for himself.

"Still to be determined. When we got to your office, she was already unconscious. The other woman called for help."

The other woman.

Lena.

He would deal with her later.

But right now and forever more——

Acacia.

Whether she would choose to believe him or not——

She was what mattered.

Always.

ACACIA'S DOCTOR CAME out to meet with him, and what she told him, a part of Ronan had already expected.

Vitals normal. Baby's heartbeat is strong. So it's nothing serious...for now. But you need to help her avoid anything emotionally stressful.

Since Acacia was still not asleep, he used the time to come face to face with Lena and get rid of her, once and for all.

She got to her feet upon seeing him, and he got to the point as soon as she did.

"I'm about to marry someone else, and I don't want you near us. In any way."

"So I was right," she sneered. "I had a feeling she was more than a patient to you."

"You probably don't know this, but you've been keeping my legal team busy for so many years now. We've been keeping track of all the enemies you've made. They all had dirt on you, but not the money to sue you. Do you think I can help them?"

"Ronan, don't be like this. We were in love once——"

Her sudden switch to being pitiful disgusted him. How could he have been in love with her? She had always been like this, he realized that now. Terry had seen it from the start, but he hadn't. And because he had been so damn blind, it had led him to wanting Acacia for all the wrong reasons when he first met her.

"It's over, Lena," he said curtly. "Get out of here. Forget I ever existed. This is the only warning I'll give you. Cross me at your risk."

He turned away, but this proved to be a mistake, with Lena suddenly rushing forward to hug him from behind.

Fuck.

His teeth clenched as he forcibly extricated himself from her hold. "Enough——"

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"I don't have anyone else," she cries out.

"Then it's time for you to work like the rest of us."

"Just...just give me a loan one last time. Please."

"No."

He stepped back.

She slapped him...and then stared at Ronan in shock as if she couldn't believe what he had just done. "R-Ronan——"

That was it for him.

A single nod was all it took, and Lena started screaming as soon as she saw the building security head toward her.

"Ronan——"

The pair of security carried her bodily out of the premises, and Ronan turned away. This part of his life was over. Because this time, he finally saw Lena for the girl she had always been.

Acacia was still unconscious when he visited her. He took her hand in his, and he swallowed hard as he found himself praying for the first time.

Please. God. Please.

Ronan studied her face, searching for traces of Lena in her features.

All those similarities used to be so damn easy to spot.

But now, all he could see were the things that made them polar opposites.

Like the hardened expression on Lena's face...and the softened look on Acacia's.

Don't wait until it's too late, and you've already lost everything.

Konstantin's warning echoed in Ronan's mind like a death knell as he paced the sterile hospital corridor. He paused at the window of Acacia's room, watching her chest rise and fall in sleep, tubes and wires connecting her to machines that beeped a steady rhythm. His hands clenched into fists at his sides, the urge to go to her, to touch her, to explain everything nearly overwhelming him.

But he couldn't. Not yet. Not until he sorted through the chaos in his own mind.

When he was finally permitted to enter her room, he took her hand in his, and he swallowed hard as he found himself praying for the first time.

Please. God. Please.

Time slipped by, but he remained by her side until her eyes finally fluttered open.

For a moment, confusion clouded her eyes, then recognition dawned, and she started to smile at him—a smile that faded as memory returned, and pain gripped his chest because it was like the fucking sun dying on him.

"I need you to tell me the truth." Her voice was hardly more than a whisper, but the tremor in it cut him to the quick.

"Acacia—"

The machines monitoring her vitals registered a spike in her heart rate.

"Swear it, please."

"I swear."

She swallowed hard, her eyes never leaving his face. "Did you want me the first time because I look like your ex?"

The question hung between them, sharp as a scalpel. He could lie to her. Tell her no, absolve himself of the sin of his initial deception. Anything to keep her from leaving him. But because he loved her too much, even if it meant losing her by speaking the truth—

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"I'm sorry," Ronan said rawly. He meant to tell her that it was only his subconscious that had recognized the resemblance between her and Lena. And that the more time he had spent with her, such similarities had mattered less and less. He had meant to assure her that she was still the only woman who ever mattered.

But as soon as he heard her cry out, and the machine monitoring her vitals started beeping more rapidly, Ronan realized that it was too late, and that Acacia had completely misunderstood everything.

"Every time we were together," she choked out. "You...y-you were t-thinking of her, w-weren't you?"

Ronan's face went ashen. "No. Acacia, no—"

"You used me," she choked out, her hands moving protectively over her belly. "You made love to me while seeing someone else."

"That's not true." Ronan reached for her, his expression desperate. "Please, let me explain. It wasn't like that—"

"You already admitted it!" The words tore from her throat. "You wanted me because I look like her. What else is there to explain?"

Ronan could see the horror and disgust in her eyes, could see exactly what she was thinking, and self-loathing crashed over him in waves. He had done this to her. His cowardice, his inability to face his own past, had led them here.

"Listen to me," he said urgently, gripping her hand tightly. "What happened on that bus—what's been happening between us—it's never been about her. Yes, your resemblance to Lena may have triggered something initially, but I didn't even realize it then. I swear to you, every moment since has been about you. Only you."

But Acacia was shaking her head, tears streaming down her face. The monitors shrilled as her heart rate spiked dangerously.

"Please get out."

"Let me—"

"Get out!" Her voice broke on the words, and the monitors shrilled as her heart rate spiked dangerously.

The nurses entered her room just as she cried out, and Ronan knew that would be it for him. He saw her curl into a ball as he rose to his feet, his heart shattering at the sight.

"Acacia—"

One of the nurses shook her head at him. "I'm sorry, Dr. Slater. But we need you to vacate the room."

Ronan stepped out, each movement feeling like he was dragging himself through quicksand. And as soon as the door closed behind him, he heard her start to cry, the sound muffled but unmistakable.

And this sound...

This was also how it sounded if the sun was to stop shining for good.

Chapter Twelve

THE DESERT AIR OF NAMJA wraps around me like a warm embrace as I stand on the private balcony of one of the guest suites in the royal palace. It's been two weeks since I had left Hartland. Two weeks since I last cried. Two weeks since Ronan broke my heart and shattered my dreams.

Did you want me the first time because I look like your ex?

I still remember how he had stared at me, and how the raw look on his handsome face had given me all the answers I didn't want to hear even when he had yet to say a word.

"Your tea is here, milady."

The attendant's soft accented English draws me out of my thoughts, and I turn around to muster up a smile of thanks even when I still feel numb. The only time my heart starts beating again is when I feel my daughter kick inside of me...or when it starts to ache so, so badly every time I'm alone in my room at night, and I'm crying out to God.

Help me.

Please.

I can't do this alone.

I tuck my knees under my chin as I watch the sun set, and all I can think of is how God is still so good to me. I don't even know why this surprises me after everything, but it does.

It's because of God that I have friends like Story and Raj. They had taken one look at me in that hospital room, and they had immediately flown me out of Hartland, their tone gentle but brooking no argument as they told me I needed time to rest and heal.

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Heartache can't possibly be good for the baby, but the royal physician had run some tests yesterday, and he had assured me that there was nothing to worry about.

Blake and Thornton had given me a ring a couple of days ago, and my boss had gruffly assured me that I could come back to work for them anytime. I wish I could, really. But every time I think about having to run into him...

My fingers tremble as I reach for my tea. It slowly runs down my throat as I take a sip, but its heat and strong taste are no longer capable of distracting me from my pain.

"I want to forget him, God."

The words escape my lips like a prayer, but only silence answers me. I've been waiting—night after night—for that gentle voice of guidance I've come to rely on. But there's nothing. Just the endless desert wind and the hollow ache in my chest.

"I don't think we'll ever work. There's too much baggage."

I wait, hoping for some sign, some whisper of direction, but God remains quiet.

"Please talk to me."

My voice breaks on the last word.

Please.

Night falls across Namja, the evening skies made bright by stars that seem so

exquisitely close, that it almost feels like I can reach and pluck them out from the heavens. An attendant brings me dinner, and it's a veritable feast. I'm sure it all tastes good, but I find myself eating only for my daughter's sake.

And after that, I lie back on my very comfortable bed, thinking that it's going to be another sleepless night.

But it's not.

When I turn to lie on my side and face the outside world through the sliding doors of the balcony, I feel something inside of me slowly peeling away. It takes me a while to realize that it's the shock of Ronan's deception finally wearing off, and the pain of our breakup is no longer enough to keep my heart from beating the way it used to.

My mind starts working more clearly, and a choked sob slips past my lips when I start seeing and hearing things I couldn't see and hear before.

I'm sorry, God.

I was so lost in my pain that all I cared about was what I wanted.

What I thought was right.

It was all about me.

I was acting like You didn't know these things would happen.

Or that You wouldn't know how to comfort me.

A part of me is terrified all I'll still hear is silence. But I realize a moment later that's just the devil wanting to deceive me, and as soon as I start to believe that I will hear

from my Father in Heaven—

I have always been by your side, child.

That's exactly what happens, faith tearing past the web of deception the enemy has done its best to weave around my mind and heart.

And I never stopped talking.

But you were too busy talking yourself to hear Me.

A choked laugh escapes me at His tone, lovingly familiar, wonderfully reassuring, and - at times like this - hilariously chiding.

I miss You, God.

I was always with you, Acacia.

Please don't ever leave me.

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I have promised you that even before you were born, and I always keep My promises.

I don't know what to do, God.

You only think you don't.

But you do.

Just like how you knew from the start what to do...when your parents asked you to abort your own daughter.

EVERYONE LOOKS SO HAPPY and relieved to see me come out of my cave the next day, and Story even starts fighting back tears when I say yes to joining them in tonight's festivities. The royal family will be camping in the desert, and over a hundred of the palace's most loyal officials have been invited to join them.

"Never make me worry like that again," my friend grumbles later on as she helps me put on a contemporary spin on the abaya, with a deep V neckline, flowing sleeves of semi-sheer fabric, and an empire cut to conceal the roundness of my belly.

"I can't make any promises," I say solemnly, "but I promise to pray for that for all of our sakes."

Story only grunts, and the sound so un-princess-like that it has both Ellana and me bursting into laughter.

"All done," Story announces as she takes a step back, and her daughter lets out a gasp

as her wide-eyed gaze swings back and forth between me and my reflection.

"Ethereal!"

This time, it's Story and me who are laughing. Ellana and her unbelievable vocabulary strike again, and the memory is enough to put me in a good mood for the rest of the evening. I'm constantly lost in my thoughts, and I just feel like I've been away from God for so, so long that I just can't stop talking to Him in my mind.

Ellana is so cute, God!

Is it okay for me to pray that my daughter be just as cute?

Wait. Does that make me vain?

I've changed my mind. Is it okay for me to pray that my baby girl be just as smart?

No, wait. I just remembered what Solomon prayed for.

I want her to be wise instead. But not too wise that she's never going to listen to me.

Or is that too selfish to ask?

The thoughts run endlessly at the back of my mind as I find myself once again facing an impossible challenge.

Which of these deliciously baked nougats should I eat first?

"Anything I can help you with?"

The voice comes out of nowhere.

Quiet with a hint of unsteadiness.

A lot rougher than it should be.

And so, so heartbreakingly familiar.

A shadow falls over the table as I feel the heat of his virile presence envelop me. He's standing right behind me, but I can't make myself face him just yet.

"I miss you."

My eyes squeeze shut—

"I tried my damndest to stay away because I thought it's what you deserved."

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—just as cracks start to appear all over my heart.

"But every fucking day, I just can't concentrate."

His strong hands grip my shoulders as he speaks, spinning me around so that our gazes collide as his words come to an end.

Oh, Ronan.

There's so much pain in the amber depths of his eyes that I can only bite my lip hard to keep myself from crying out.

"I'm sorry," he says unevenly. "The last thing I would ever want to do is to hurt you, but that's exactly what I ended up doing. When I..." Ronan swallows hard as if needing to find the strength to say his next words. "When I first saw you, you were right. You did remind me of Lena. And I did want you because you looked like her...but I didn't realize it at that time."

The cracks in my heart have finally reached their limit, his painful words now tearing my heart into pieces.

"All I knew was that I wanted you. And it made me feel extremely good when you wanted me back, the way she never did."

My throat tightens, and I struggle for control.

"It was only the night when we attended our first party together that I realized..."

Agony flashes in his gaze.

"I wanted you for the wrong reasons at the start."

My fight for composure shatters, and my shoulders start to shake.

"Acacia—"

He hauls me into his arms, and I sob on his chest. How crazy is it that I'm drawing comfort from the same man who's causing me pain?

"I'm sorry," he grits out. "I'm sorry for hurting you, but I want you to know everything's changed since then. That night was when I realized I wanted to marry you. I wanted to marry my Acacia. Be with you and our daughter for the rest of my life."

He pulls back so he can cup my face and make me look at him. His hands tremble as he wipes away my never-ending tears.

"When I see you now, I just see you and no one else. I see the girl who never spoke a single word against the people who hurt and abandoned her. The girl I will never deserve...but I'm hoping will still be foolish enough to take another chance on me."

I shake my head, knowing it's not foolish at all, but Ronan seems to misunderstand this as rejection, with the way his features turn ashen.

"Give me a chance to explain," he urges. "Please. I'm sorry I didn't tell you about Lena the moment I realized how it started between us. I thought I had all the time in the world to find the right words to explain...but I was wrong."

He takes my hands in his, and it hurts to feel how badly his own hands are shaking.

"Forgive me, Acacia," Ronan says raggedly. Take me back. In whatever way you're willing to. I just want to be with you. Please—"

My lips start to tremble, and agitation flashes in his eyes.

"Please don't—"

I can't bear it any longer, and I feel him stiffen in shock as I throw my arms around him.

"I love you, too."

A powerful shudder rocks his body.

"So, so much."

Ronan's arms close around me like chains, and his body is still shaking, as if he's unable to believe what's happening.

I love you.

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I love you.

I love you.

Ronan doesn't say the words out loud, but I hear it in the way his arms tighten around me. I hear it just as clearly as I hear that other voice. The one that has always been with Me, and the one that always says the perfect things at His perfect timing.

Your parents also caused you pain.

But not once did it cross your mind to give up on them.

Because you knew the truth.

The people you love are not perfect.

No one is.

And that's why forgiveness must follow every mistake, for despair to transform into hope, and the love you have for each other will never die.

Epilogue

ACACIA STOOD AT THE railing of the yacht, the warm summer breeze caressing her face as she watched her six-month-old daughter being passed from one adoring arm to another. Azalea's peals of laughter carried across the deck, making Acacia's heart swell with a joy so profound it left her breathless.

"She's a beautiful girl," Joan Nelson said, coming to stand beside her. "I'm honored to be her godmother."

The upper deck of the grand yacht had been transformed for the occasion, decorated with soft pink and white azaleas—a tribute to her daughter's name. Today was Azalea's dedication day, and Acacia couldn't have imagined a more perfect celebration.

Guilt pricked at Acacia's heart as she observed the love in the older woman's eyes. Joan had been nothing but kind to her, even after the messy breakup with Claude. She opened her mouth, thinking that she should tell Joan that Azalea was actually her great-granddaughter, but before she could say a word, Joan suddenly asked in a casual tone, "Have you heard? I've updated my will."

"Oh?" Acacia's hands tightened on the railing.

"Azalea shall be a part of it, but let that be our little secret."

Acacia's eyes widened. Did this mean—

"Old age does not make one an imbecile," Joan said with a sniff. "I admit that it took a while for me to realize there was more to your breakup with Claude, but by the time I found out, you were gone, and I was not able to protect you."

Acacia quickly gave Joan's hand a squeeze at the regret in the older woman's voice. "You have nothing to regret, Joan. Everything happened the way God meant it to happen. God wanted me in Hartland. And now..." Her eyes brightened with tears. "God also answered one of my prayers." Her voice broke. "I'm sorry I couldn't tell you the truth the first time. I didn't want you to force Claude to marry me—"

"And you were right to think that, too," the older woman acknowledged with a heavy

sigh. "It was exactly what I would have done. I'm trying, Acacia. But I am still blind to some of his faults. Even so, the moment I saw you and Ronan together, it was clear to me that the two of you were meant to be together." She patted Acacia's hand. "And one day, your parents will see it, too."

"I'm praying for that, too," Acacia said softly as she remembered the looks on her parents' faces when she visited them with Azalea and Ronan. They hadn't even looked at her baby girl, and they had barely been civil to Ronan, whom they thought was a step down from Claude since they only saw him as an "ordinary" doctor while Claude stood to inherit millions.

Since then, she had not seen her parents again, with her mother stiffly making it clear that they would not welcome any other unscheduled visit. Acacia loved them still, forgave them for hurting her, and because she knew she had also hurt them with her pregnancy, she had asked for their forgiveness.

Beyond that, she was at peace.

Some things, one could only pray for and wait.

ON THE TOPMOST DECK, Ronan stood with their hosts, taking in the magnificent view of the ocean stretching endlessly before them. The luxury yacht was a floating paradise, with polished teakwood decks and gleaming chrome railings catching the golden rays of the setting sun.

"Thank you for this," Ronan said, gesturing to the elaborate setup surrounding them. "Azalea's dedication day wouldn't have been nearly as perfect without your help."

"Do not make the mistake of thinking that just by saying 'thank you' I am letting you use my yacht for free," Damen Leventis mocked. "I am still charging you for it. We both know you can afford the fee—"

Mairi couldn't believe what she was hearing from her Greek billionaire husband.
"Don't be so——"

"—which, would then be directly donated to my wife's favorite charity," Damen finished smoothly.

"—marvelous," Mairi ended instead without missing a beat, but she knew it was still too late when she saw the two men exchanging smirks.

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"Was that really what you intended to say?" her husband asked silkily, his dark eyes glittering with amusement.

Not wanting to lie but not wanting to admit the truth either, Mairi looked around for a distraction and found it. "Oh, look, Claude's finally here—" She broke off upon seeing the glint in Ronan's amber eyes.

Oh no.

"Excuse me for a moment," Ronan said calmly.

Mairi looked at Damen worriedly as the other man disappeared from view. "I thought everything was okay with them."

"It depends on how you define okay," her husband murmured, his arm sliding possessively around her waist.

"Um..." The last she heard, Claude had been reinstated in his grandmother's will, but his monthly allowance had been greatly reduced, and it was probably why he had signed away his rights to fatherhood for a hefty sum.

"Legally speaking, it's all good, right?"

"It is."

"There's a but, isn't there?"

"But the boy has more ego than sense, unfortunately. He has been texting Ronan's wife nonstop, convinced that she's still in love with him and doing this out of spite. And so what you see unfolding right now is Ronan about to prove him wrong..."

Their vantage point from the uppermost deck allowed Mairi to see Claude's face darkening when he glimpsed Ronan pulling his wife into one of the staterooms.

"Please don't tell me there's going to be a fight," she said worriedly.

Damen's eyes glinted. "It will not be necessary. Claude only has to hear the truth to know he will never win this war."

"Listen?" Mairi frowned in confusion. "Listen to what?"

She turned towards the room again, wondering what Ronan and his wife could possibly...oh.

Damen's lips curved at the way his wife blushed. All these years, and she remained incurably naïve.

Mairi turned to Damen, and that was when she saw the smoldering look of heat in his gaze. Uh...oh. She only managed to take one step, but then he was whirling her into his arms—

"Don't you think we should also prove to everyone we are still passionately in love?"

"Um, not—"

He cut her off with a kiss, his tongue driving inside her mouth, andum, what was she saying no to again?

ACACIA GASPED AS RONAN suddenly took her hand, his amber eyes dark with intent as he pulled her through the corridor and into one of the staterooms. The door closed behind them with a soft click, and he immediately pressed her against it, his powerful frame caging her in.

"W-What's wrong?" she whispered, searching his face. His jaw was tense, his eyes feverishly bright.

"You asked what I wanted as my wedding gift," he murmured, his breath hot against her ear.

"I...I did." She had a hard time concentrating, with him already working on the buttons of her dress, his fingers deftly exposing her skin to the cool air. Heat pooled low in her belly at the hungry look in his eyes.

The yacht rocked gently beneath them, the distant sounds of celebration a stark contrast to the building tension in the luxurious stateroom. Sunlight streamed through the porthole, turning his skin to burnished gold as he shed his own jacket and tie.

He leaned in, his lips brushing her ear as he whispered his desire, the words making her face flame even as a thrill of excitement raced through her veins.

At the very same moment, he claimed her body, joining them as one, and all she could do was moan at the combined heat of his demand and his possession.

Her face burned at what he was asking of her, but since she had promised to give him whatever he wanted...

Her husband's movements grew more urgent, more demanding, and she surrendered to the tide of sensations washing over her. Lost in the moment, not knowing that her ex-boyfriend stood outside, able to hear everything, Acacia began to cry out.

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"Please," she gasped, her fingers digging into his shoulders, "take me harder. I love how big you are. I love how you fill me. Please. More."

Her voice rose as the pleasure intensified, words tumbling unbidden from Acacia's lips.

"I've never felt anything like this before. You're so much bigger... so much thicker... I never knew it could feel this good."

Each proclamation seemed to spur Ronan on, his powerful body moving in perfect rhythm with hers.

"Only you," she cried out, no longer caring who might hear. "It's only ever been good with you..."

Outside the stateroom, Claude stood frozen, his face draining of color as Acacia's passionate declarations echoed through the thin door. He hadn't meant to eavesdrop, but her words were impossible to miss—especially the part about size comparisons that was not exactly a glowing recommendation on his part.

Claude became acutely aware of the sudden silence around him. Turning slowly, he found several guests had paused their conversations, champagne glasses suspended midair as they stared in his direction.

Heat crawled up his neck as he realized everyone knew exactly who was in that room—and more importantly, who had been found lacking.

Fuck!

He stalked off, intending to leave this stupid party as fast as he could. But because news had wings - and especially one as juicy as this - everyone he walked past had the same look on their faces.

Claude couldn't help trying to defend himself. "She's a liar——"

But the other guests only looked at him in pity, and he realized soon enough that no one on this stupid boat was on his side.

With each step toward the yacht's exit, Claude's humiliation compounded. A group of women stopped their conversation to stare as he passed, their eyes dropping pointedly to his crotch before they dissolved into giggles. A waiter offered him a tray of hors d'oeuvres – tiny, bite-sized canapés – with a smile that was just a touch too knowing.

By the time he reached the lower deck, where departing guests queued to board the speedboats back to shore, Claude's designer shirt was plastered to his back with sweat despite the cool ocean breeze.

"I need to leave. Now," he snapped at the uniformed attendant managing the departures.

The young man looked up from his clipboard, recognition flickering in his eyes. Claude could practically see the exact moment when the rumors reached him – the slight widening of his eyes, the twitch at the corner of his mouth.

"Of course, sir," the attendant replied, his voice professionally smooth but unable to hide the amusement dancing in his eyes. "However, I'm afraid all the speedboats are currently occupied."

Claude's jaw clenched. "Then call another one."

"That would take at least thirty minutes, sir."

"Fine," Claude bit out. "Whatever. Just get me off this damn boat."

The attendant consulted his clipboard again, then looked up with a polite smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. "All sailboats have been taken, sir. But Mr. Leventis says we could loan you use of one of the jetskis." His gaze swept down Claude's frame before adding, "It should be something you're used to because it's something... smaller?"

The queue behind Claude erupted in poorly disguised snorts and chuckles. Someone at the back called out, "Perfect fit, I'd say!"

ACACIA LAY ON TOP OF her husband, her body still trembling with aftershocks of pleasure. Somehow, they had made it to the bed, though she couldn't quite remember how. The silk sheets felt cool against her heated skin, a stark contrast to the burning heat of Ronan's body beneath hers.

Her heart raced as she tried to catch her breath, still overwhelmed by the intensity of their lovemaking.

For so many years she had imagined herself in love with Claude, only to have him destroy her innocence. The moment he had turned his back on her and their then-unborn child, it was as if she had her childhood blinders removed. She had finally seen Claude for who he truly was, a boy who refused to grow up because he only loved himself and no one else.

He was, in other words, the opposite of her husband.

The mere thought of Ronan had her toes curling hard and Acacia biting back a sigh. Every day with him just made her love him more and more. The way he pampered her with spontaneous weekend getaways to private islands, the custom-built nursery that rivaled royal quarters, and how he'd casually ordered an entire boutique closed for her private shopping spree when nothing fit her post-pregnancy body.

And then there was his "day job" as a doctor, which had led to more than one breathless examination on his office desk after hours, those capable hands knowing exactly how to make her body respond.

She loved him so much, truly. She couldn't thank God enough for being so good to her, and for choosing Ronan to be her husband. Life was beyond anything she imagined, but...

Ronan could sense something troubling his wife as he felt her body gradually becoming tense, and it was not difficult at all to guess what was bothering her.

"Acacia..."

He rolled his wife to her back so he could gaze into her eyes. "Ask me what you want," he said simply.

Acacia's chest tightened. She was so tempted to pretend, but since she also knew it was foolish to hide from the truth forever...

"Tell me about her," his wife finally whispered.

And so he did.

Acacia bit her lip hard as she listened to Ronan explain how his relationship with Lena was nothing but a product of teenage hormones, and how later on, the pain of their breakup had largely stemmed from his injured pride.

"For years, I built her up in my mind into something she never was. The perfect first love. The one who got away."

Acacia found herself digging her fingers into her palms.

"But now," her husband continued, his fingers tilting her chin up until she had no choice but to meet his gaze, "when I look at you, it almost feels like I've lost my mind. Because I see nothing of Lena in you at all."

Her head jerked up at this, eyes widening in disbelief. She was about to tell him not to lie, because even she herself could see the similarities. But the raw honesty in his

amber eyes stopped the words in her throat. There was no deception there, no careful calculation—only pure, unbridled truth.

"It's not that she came first, and you're her replacement. If anything, Lena was nothing but a foreshadowing of what was real. What would last. What's from God. And that's you."

His hands framed her face, thumbs brushing away tears she hadn't realized she'd shed. "When I watch you with Azalea, when I see your kindness to Joan, when I feel your forgiveness for your parents—that's when I know you're nothing like her. You love deeply. You forgive completely. You're real in ways she never could be."

Acacia's heart felt as if it was about to explode. There were so many things she wished she could say, but since she would never be as charming or eloquent as her husband when it came to matters of the heart...

Ronan raised a brow when his wife wriggled out from under him. He rolled to his back, thinking she would climb back up on him, but instead, she positioned herself between his legs, and...

"Acacia."

He could only bite her name out as she suddenly took him with her mouth.

His fingers gripped her hair as he fought to make it last and retain his sanity. But the harder she sucked, the harder it was to hold on, and the harsh sound of his breathing soon filled the room.

The taste and feel of him inside of her mouth were intoxicating, and when she remembered what he said, remembered how he had pursued her tirelessly from the very start—

Acacia's eyes lifted up to his, and in that moment of perfect connection, she let her soul speak what her lips couldn't.

I love you, Ronan.

Her husband's powerful body jerked, his amber eyes finding hers just before pleasure took over.

I love you, Acacia.

The End