



Botched (Breaking Kayfabe)

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Category: Sport

Description: Botched: to fail in attempting a scripted move or spoken line by miscalculation, mistake, or error in judgment.

Aurora Bennet wants to be a professional wrestler. She's been grinding on the independent wrestling circuit, trying to get her name out there. So far, nothing. She knows that one day she's going to get there.

Theodore Abrams has made it. He's the world champion. He's on TV weekly. He's rich. He's...well, he's not beloved. Theodore plays a bad guy on TV, but it's not just his character. He really is that awful.

After their paths cross one night, Aurora swears that she never wants to see him again. But when her dream job comes calling and the condition is she has to work with Theodore, she has hopes that maybe it won't be that bad. Maybe they just got off on the wrong foot.

Spoiler alert: he is and they didn't.

All she has to do is survive this storyline, earn her contract and put Theo in her rearview.

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Chapter One

THEODORE

“Y ou’re a fucking piece of shit!” Her voice rings out through the apartment, and I grit my teeth, making sure to sidestep the glass that gets tossed at my head.

Most men would probably be apologizing right now. I’m not like most men, and honestly? I’m not that sorry. Crossing my arms over my chest, I raise an eyebrow as I look at the petite brunette in front of me. She’s seething, anger reflected in those brown eyes that I’ve looked into most nights for the last two years. Her makeup is ruined , mascara highlighting the path that her tears took down her cheeks.

“Was throwing a glass really necessary, Veronica?” I ask, arching an eyebrow in her direction. That was not the right thing to say, because she’s reaching for something else on the coffee table behind her. “Can you stop throwing shit?! Jesus Christ.”

“No,” she answers as the TV remote comes sailing past my head. I sidestep it, too, trying not to flinch as the wind whips by my face before it crashes into the wall. It hits so hard that I can hear the drywall crack behind me. Girl has a fucking arm on her, I’ll give her that. The vibrations of the remote hitting the wall cause a framed picture to come crashing down behind me.

Glancing down, I can’t help but find it ironic that it’s one of our engagement photos. Taken in Central Park, it’s a reminder of everything that we were. Or what we pretended to be. I tear my eyes away from the splintered wood and shattered glass on top of the picture and focus on the woman in front of me.

“Veronica, you’re behaving irrationally.”

Her glare darkens. “Are you really going to fucking tell me that I’m behaving irrationally, Theodore ?” She spits my name with so much venom that I can’t help but flinch this time. “You’re the one who stuck his dick in someone else.”

There’s no point in denying it. The pictures spread all over social media before I could get ahead of it. I should’ve known better. Should’ve remembered to use discretion before taking a rat back to my hotel room. I’ve been doing this long enough to know that when people don’t like you, they’ll use anything they can to tear you down.

I bite my tongue, wanting to respond with something to cut her down even more, like telling Veronica that it’s not the first time I’ve done it...because it’s not. Everyone in Veronica’s life told her before and after I put a ring on her finger that I wasn’t any good. She’s always defended me, swearing that I’m going to get my shit together, that I just play a bad guy on TV.

Truth hurts—they were right. I’m a piece of shit, but I’ve never tried to deny it.

“She didn’t mean anything to me,” I say, because at least that’s the truth. I don’t even remember the girl’s name, or if I ever got it. She was this hot little blonde wearing hardly anything who was all giddy that the world champion bought her a drink at the club. She was practically begging to come back to my room, and who am I to deny a woman the opportunity to live her dreams?

“Do I mean anything to you? ”

The question makes me pause, and that’s all the answer Veronica needs. I should be able to answer without hesitation. I should be able to tell her how much she means to me and how I’m a huge fuck-up who loves her with every fiber of my being. It was

only six months ago that I got down on one knee in that restaurant that she loves on North Avenue and pulled an expensive ass diamond ring out of my pocket, slipped it onto her finger, and gave her all the promises that she could ever want.

Now she's throwing shit at my head and realizing everyone in her life was right about me. I can see regret flash behind those beautiful eyes, and it doesn't bother me.

Why doesn't it bother me?

Maybe because I've been feeling a pang of regret since the second I picked out the ring.

"Right," she says when I don't respond. She takes a breath and wipes at the tears. It makes her smear her mascara even more.

I can't bite my tongue this time. "You need a makeup wipe or something. You look like shit."

Rage, rightfully so, flashes across her face again. "Get the fuck out, Theodore. I don't ever want to see your face again."

"Gonna be hard when my face is everywhere , sugar tits."

"When you fall, Theodore Abrams, I'm going to fucking celebrate it," Veronica says, her tone downright poisonous.

What the fuck is she talking about? I'm never going to fall. The top is where I belong and I'll do anything to stay there. I don't give her the pleasure of a response. She wants the last word? Fine . She can have it. I'm still the one who won. The entire world knows that her fiancée got his dick wet with someone else. It's plastered everywhere. She won't be able to escape it. She's always going to be the girl that I

cheated on.

Leaving her apartment, I opt for the stairs instead of the elevator. It's only two flights until I'm in the parking garage, sliding into the driver's seat of my shark-blue Porsche 911 Turbo. Right as I put the car in reverse, my phone rings.

I feel a twinge of disappointment when it's not Veronica calling me and begging me to come back, citing how she overreacted and she understands. I'm a wrestler. I'm on the road fifty-two weeks of the year, in and out of different cities. Did she really expect me not to get bored? Not to get lonely?

I have needs too.

I press the button to answer and a deep voice fills the car. "What are you doing?"

Alex is my best friend...or, probably the closest thing I have to one. I don't do friendships. I'm not as shitty at those as I am with relationships, but I don't see the point. If they can't provide me with something, then what's the point?

Alex was someone that I met on the independent wrestling circuit. We were a tag team back when we were both trying to make a real name for ourselves. I got noticed, and well, Alex didn't. If I were in his position, I would hate my fucking guts. He doesn't. He hasn't even asked me to put a good word in for him with the boss.

Alex is not me.

"Leaving Veronica's."

There's silence on the other end for a moment before he asks, "Yeah? She see the pictures?"

“Yeah. I’m not engaged anymore.”

“You don’t sound upset about that.”

I pull onto the street, thinking it over. Am I upset? I mean, Veronica’s gorgeous. Having her on my arm was nice. We had some good times together. The companionship was good. But she wasn’t exactly the most supportive woman. She didn’t like that I was constantly gone, didn’t like that I had a lot of attention on me. I hear it in the locker room all the time, the boys complaining that their girls don’t understand. Veronica didn’t either, but I’m going to miss her, I think. Not enough to regret my decision .

“It is what it is. Girls come and go when you’re me, man. I could have three girls on my dick by tonight.”

Alex sighs, likely questioning why he even deals with me. While he didn’t make it like I did, he also settled down. Married his high school sweetheart. She’s pregnant, I think. Maybe she had the brat already. I don’t keep track.

“ Anyway ,” he says. “Are you busy tonight? It’s C1W’s big anniversary show. Thought you could maybe make an appearance. It would really motivate the locker room, seeing someone who came from here who actually made it in a big company.”

C1W, or Championship One Wrestling, is the local indie. It’s where I got my start, where I spent most of my time honing my craft after training. Alex still wrestles there, although his main focus is producing matches. I haven’t once considered going back since I got signed to the biggest wrestling promotion in the country, Global Revolution Wrestling, or GRW.

Noting my silence, Alex sighs again. “What if I make it worth your while? I’ll throw in some beers. Sara isn’t expecting me home until late anyway.”

Sara! That's his wife's name! I think about it. I don't have to fly to Seattle for our next show until Monday, and with Veronica effectively out of my life, I don't have anything else to fill my time. It's a Saturday night, so why not?

"Yeah, all right. I'll be there. And I don't want your cheap-ass beers. We're going somewhere decent, and you're buying me real fucking alcohol."

"You got it, man," Alex responds, and I think I can hear a smile in his voice.

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Chapter Two

AURORA

Every bit of my energy is focused on getting in the zone as I sit in the rundown locker room of the venue that C1W is using tonight. It's not much better than the locker room of a high school gym, which I've wrestled in those countless times. However, it's a step above the Porta Potty that we had to use to change in at the fairgrounds last fall.

The tile floor has seen better days. The white is permanently brown at this point, scratched and peeling in spots. What was once probably grass green paint on the wall is faded—and also peeling from years of humid showers. The lighting is a gross orange color, and I had to do my makeup in the car so I wouldn't look like a clown.

That's not my gimmick.

I kick my foot up on the faded white bench across from me, checking the laces on my boots and making sure they're tight. No one wants to lose a shoe during a match.

Wrestling is a performance. When I go out there, I'm not the Aurora that everybody knows. I become Aurora Dawn. Corny? Maybe. But Aurora Dawn is a badass who doesn't take shit—who'll kick ass with a smile on her face.

The locker room door opens and someone enters. I pay them no mind as I kick up my other boot, checking the laces on that one too. I can't hear anything. Wireless headphones are in my ears, blaring music from my pre-show hype playlist. My head

bobs along to the beat.

“Rory!” I barely hear someone call out to me, but I don’t acknowledge them. Not at first; not until they plop down on the bench next to me.

With an eye roll and a sigh, I pop out one of my earbuds, rolling it between my fingers. “Is there something that you need, Kai?” I ask.

Kai grins over at me. He knows better than to bother me before a match, so this has to be important. His black hair is slicked back perfectly. I can smell his ocean-scented body wash as he sits next to me, propping his feet up on the bench across from us, mimicking my posture.

“Have you seen how Jules has been killing it lately?” he asks, clearly gushing over her. He has always been a little in love with her.

My eyes drop from Kai’s face and down to the earbud in my hand. Jules got signed to GRW a couple of months ago, and she’s been killing it. Making a huge impact on screen, touted as one of the company’s best signings in years. Evidently, she got scouted at some West Coast indie show by Weston Hext. Everyone knows Weston Hext; he’s a legend. A veteran in the industry, Hext is one of the first indie guys to make it.

Jealousy washes over me. It happens. Every time another person gets that coveted contract, envy squeezes my heart and makes me want to throw up. When will it be my time? I’ve been chasing it since I turned eighteen. Working during the day and busting my ass at night, living off Ramen for weeks at a time because indie wrestling doesn’t pay shit. You put your body—and sometimes your life—on the line for a hundred bucks, and if you’re lucky, the promoter will buy you some booze and ask you to come back. C1W is one of the better indies, and that’s not by much.

Jules is good. I can't deny that. It's not like she isn't as talented as they say. It's not like she doesn't deserve it. But I deserve it too.

"Mm," is the best response that I can muster right now. I take another second, swallow down some of those feelings, and finally produce more words. "That's awesome."

"Mmhm," Kai agrees. His dark eyes are on me, and I can feel him trying to read me, trying to pick up exactly how I'm feeling. He's so annoying when he does that. "I also heard something else interesting."

I sigh. I don't want to hear another story about someone else achieving the very dream that I'm working my ass off for. I push one of my boots off the bench, bringing my knee up to my chest. "All right, hit me." I'm prepared for whatever it is this time.

"Alex told me that Theodore Abrams is going to be here tonight."

That...was not what I was expecting. Theodore is the biggest name to come from C1W. He's the person that Paul, the booker and owner, built the entire promotion around. It's not hard to see why. He's everything that a wrestler should be. He can talk like no other; he can wrestle circles around most people. He understands the business in a way that a lot of the newer generation doesn't.

He got signed by GRW when he was twenty-four, and for the last three years, he's been killing it on weekly TV. He's currently world champion, which says a lot about how he's valued.

I've never met him, but from what I hear, he's a fucking prick. He doesn't just play a heel, a bad guy, on TV. He lives the gimmick. While there's a separation between the character I play and who I am outside of the ring, that doesn't exist for Theodore.

He's the biggest piece of shit on screen, and if he's even half as bad offscreen? Christ.

"What? Why?"

He shrugs. "I don't know. I didn't ask. I assume because it's our big anniversary show."

"He hasn't shown up since he got signed."

"Maybe it has something to do with the photos that leaked? Maybe he wants some good press?"

I snort. Theodore's involved in a cheating scandal. He's been very public about his engagement to his girlfriend, name-dropping her in promos and talking about how he bagged the 'finest piece of ass,' which feels like the grossest way to talk about your fiancée. This morning, photos of him with some blonde leaked on social media and it's lighting up the internet wrestling communities. Considering scandals in the wrestling business, cheating is basically nothing. It's not a career ruiner. It's not a reason to get canceled. It happens.

"I don't think he's showing up just because he got caught with his dick in some blonde."

"Language, Rory," Kai laughs. "Probably not. I kind of assumed that since he cut promos about banging rats after the show, he was actually doing it. I don't think anyone is surprised that he cheated on his girl."

Unable to help it, I wince. I hate the term 'rats'. It's so misogynistic. Wrestlers don't have to sleep with female fans who shoot their shots; they actively choose to.

Noticing my wince, he shoots me an apologetic look. “Sorry, I know you hate that word. It’s—”

“—If you say ‘locker room culture,’ I’m going to smack you.”

Female wrestlers aren’t new. We’ve been around since the beginning. We’re finally beginning to be viewed as more than sex objects. Gone are the days of bra and panty matches. But ‘locker room culture’ still prevails from time to time. Some of the old guard are stuck in their ways. They don’t want to move into a future where women are booked equally to them.

“Anyway,” Kai says, slapping his palms down on his thighs. He’s dressed in his gear for tonight. Instead of tights or trucks, he wears fight shorts. They’re white with red detailing. His name, ‘Kaito’, is written in red down the side of one of his thighs. He’s shirtless, but I’m so used to being around shirtless men that I don’t blink twice at his washboard abs. “Maybe Theodore will give good feedback to Nathan.”

Nathan Thorpe is the owner of GRW. By all accounts, he’s a cool dude. I’ve never had the pleasure of meeting him. I’m sure if I had, I’d be signed by now. I know I have everything it takes. I just need a chance.

I scoff. “ Please . If Theodore is as much of an asshole as everyone says he is, do you really think that he’s going to give positive feedback about anyone? He’s probably one of those assholes who believes everyone who gets signed is another person taking money from him.”

“Maybe, maybe not.” He shrugs. “I mean, it worked for Jules.”

“Hext isn’t a huge douchebag.”

Kai chuckles and stands up, stretching. His tanned skin looks even darker in the gross

orange lighting. His brown eyes look down at me, and he gives me that signature sideways smile, full of boyish charm. “I need to go find Alex and talk about some spots for my match tonight. You good? You need anything?”

“Just waiting for Sammy to get here so we can walk through our spots.”

“She’s always late, isn’t she?”

“Fucking always.” I sigh. God, I need her to show up. If she no-shows, I will find her, and I will strangle her.

Kai is wrong. There’s no way that Theodore Abrams is going to walk away impressed tonight. He’s going to walk in here with some snooty attitude, like he’s better than us, like he wasn’t once one of us working our asses off to reach a goal.

But, in the slim chance that I have, I’m going to make sure that Theodore walks away with a whole lot to tell Nathan.

Particularly about me.

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Chapter Three

THEODORE

It's been a while since I've been in some ratty run-down venue that indie promotions call home. Sure, some of the bigger promotions can pull some nicer venues but this place? It doesn't even touch nice. As I pull into the parking lot, I notice how desperately it needs repaving. I choose a spot in the back. The last thing I need is one of these people hitting my car. They couldn't afford the repairs.

Getting out, I'm careful not to let my black Dior dress shoes scrape the concrete. I ensure the car is locked before heading toward the back door, which is just an emergency exit the wrestlers use to access the venue's likely rough-looking locker rooms. Once I push it open, I'm hit in the face with the stench of sweat and mildew. When was the last time that this place was cleaned?

At GRW, I usually get my own locker room.

The door slams shut behind me and I pull my phone out of my pocket. Before I can text Alex that I'm here, I round the corner and he's there, greeting me with a bright-eyed smile. "You actually came!" The shock is clear in his voice .

"Told you I would." I shrug and pocket my phone. It's not like I had much else to do. Going out to some Staten Island club, while tempting, didn't feel like the best idea. Nathan probably already has a PR lecture prepped for my 'scandal'. Fueling the fire by leaving the club with another girl won't save me any face.

The look on Alex's face says he didn't believe I'd show up tonight. Not that I blame him. I haven't even thought about visiting C1W since I got signed. Why would I come back here?

He claps his hands together. "It's going to be a killer show, man. You're gonna love it."

I'm bored out of my fucking mind. Standing in the back of the crowd with Alex, where the bored-looking college student is manning what they call their 'production'. It's a laptop hooked up to a speaker that plays the wrestler's theme music that they'd have to pay thousands in royalty fees to use if they were on TV.

There can't be more than 250 people here tonight, but they're loud . Going insane over the smallest spots, the flashy looking moves. Most of which look insanely unsafe. Honestly, indie wrestlers have little common sense. All they want to do is go viral so maybe a bigger company will notice them and give them a chance. Half the time, they don't have the skills to back it up any further and are just good for one or two signature spots. They get thrown in the deep end, drown, and then blame it on the company for not giving them any chances.

I don't hide my groan when I catch what the next match is. It's a women's match, which is my unofficial piss break. I don't even care about the women signed to my own company. Why would I care about some indie talent who probably look worse? There's a slightly chubby brunette already bouncing around the ring. Cute but not cute enough to make me care. As I turn to face Alex, preparing to make up some excuse that we'll both know is bullshit just so I don't have to watch this garbage, my attention is stolen. My eyes lock on to the girl climbing through the ropes.

Her auburn hair is in a ponytail. She's on the smaller side, shorter than the brunette she's standing across from. I can't make out too many details about her face from this distance. Not that eye color or anything matters right now. She's wearing white tights

and, Jesus fuck , that ass. It's perfect. I can't pull my eyes away from her. There's what looks like a floral tattoo running up her side. Most of it is covered by her gear obscuring my view and leaving me to wonder what the rest of that tattoo looks like.

So much for a piss break.

Trying to play it cool and disinterested, I elbow Alex in the ribs.

He jumps, glaring over at me. "What is it, Theo?" he snaps.

"Who's that?" I nod toward the redhead as she locks up with the other girl.

"Rory."

My face scrunches. I don't like that name. It sounds too harsh for a woman who looks like that. "Is that her actual name?"

"It's Aurora. She goes by Rory."

Aurora. That sounds much more fitting. Names don't matter. It's not like we're going to spend a lot of time getting personal. I can't pull my eyes away from her. I don't think I've ever been so distracted by a woman before. I see gorgeous women all the time. I'm with gorgeous women all the time.

But I've never needed to have anyone more.

Nodding along, I feign interest in the match. She has talent. She hits the ropes with the full force of her body, looking explosive in a way that not a lot of women do. She's quick, too. Her opponent is struggling to keep up with her. Not Aurora's fault. She needs someone who's on her level .

I can see the small faults, like how she has to consciously slow herself down and wait for her opponent to get into position. She tosses the brunette into the corner, runs full sprint toward and connects with a kick. She grips the back of her opponent's neck, pushing her toward the other corner but at the last second, the other woman reverses it.

"Where's she from?" I prod Alex for more information. My eyes don't leave her body. He knows me well enough to know what I'm getting at here. "I don't think I've seen her before," I add as if I'm fully aware of every indie wrestler that comes through C1W. I so haven't kept up with this shit.

Although, if the women look like her, I probably should.

"Vermont, I think," answers Alex with a shrug. "Dunno. She's not big on getting personal, you know? She's sweet, and likes to talk wrestling, but isn't exactly trying to make friends. Except for Kai."

Kai, I think I've heard of him. I'm pretty sure he's one of the kids that's on Nathan's radar. He's asked me about him. Evidently, he was working the indies back when I was. Don't remember him. Not going to tell Nathan to sign him. Why would I want to risk someone coming in and taking my spot?

"Fine by me. Less baggage." I don't care to know all about her problems. Lots of chicks like to trauma dump on you. Get a few drinks in them and you have to listen to how their 'daddy didn't love them enough' and 'their mom prefers their sister.' I want something fast and clean. A good night with a hot little thing. "She single?" I ask, getting straight to the point. This is all Alex's fault. He brought me here knowing that she was here. "I think I'm in love."

Alex rolls his eyes. "Christ," he mutters under his breath. Tearing his eyes away from the match, he looks over at me. "I told you. Rory doesn't exactly chat about her

personal life. She could have five kids and a mortgage. ”

There’s a disgusted look on my face when he says that. There’s no way. She’s too damn hot.

He narrows his eyes. “Dude, you can’t be serious. Didn’t your fiancée break up with you this morning?”

I shrug again. I don’t want to talk about Veronica. My jaw ticks and my teeth grit when Alex brings her up. I don’t want to wonder whether I threw away something good. She hasn’t even called me since I left her place. But...I made my bed and I have to lie in it. I’d prefer to lie in it with Aurora, at least for tonight. Letting those thoughts get shoved to the back of my mind, I smirk over at Alex. “What? I can’t get laid because of the break-up? That’s stupid. And I’m not actually in love. It’s just a phrase, Alex.”

From the way Alex looks at me, I can tell that he wants to say more. Either he wants to tell me that I’m a douchebag or he wants this conversation to end. I’m sure he plans to try and get in my head over drinks tonight, and get me to open up about my feelings and the breakup. Probably try to convince me to ‘fix it’.

I don’t want to.

He settles on saying, “Whatever you say, man,” before he goes back to watching the match.

My eyes follow except they go to Aurora. She goes up to the top rope so damn effortlessly. It’s like she was made to be up there. She makes sure that she has her balance before she does a textbook-perfect moonsault, a back flip. It’s gorgeous, the way her body rotates, the way she lands on her opponent.

For a moment, I'm impressed with more than her body. My mind wanders, not to what we could do in the bedroom with how flexible she seems, but the idea of how GRW could use a woman like her...

Fuck.

I haven't even spoken to this woman and I'm already acting pathetic. Thinking about putting in a good word with Nathan? What is wrong with me? Sure, a woman isn't going to take my spot, but I don't scout talent.

I circle back to what's easy.

"I think I might be able to hit. What do you think?" I ask Alex with a smirk that makes him roll his eyes.

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Chapter Four

AURORA

I slip out of the ring and as I walk back up the makeshift aisle, fans reach their hands out for high fives. It's a small crowd tonight. Indie shows don't draw thousands of rabid fans. They rarely have the reach that bigger promotions have. But I still feel like a star as I reach out and smack my palm against theirs. For these few moments, I get to feel like a real star. I'm Aurora Dawn. Not Aurora Bennet who works at 'Rise and Roll Bakery' in Bennington, Vermont most days of the week.

Later tonight, I'll pass out in my shitty hotel bed with the paper-thin duvet, but right now, I feel amazing. I head towards the curtain so I can slip back into the makeshift locker room and get out of my sweaty gear. Hopefully, with enough time I can be back to hide in the back with Alex and watch Kai's main event match.

Before I can get past the curtain, someone whisper-hisses my name. I stop, looking over to see Alex standing behind the gated-off portion of our production area. Next to him is the devil himself.

Okay, that's not fair. I don't know Theodore Abrams. He might not be evil, but everything I've heard about this man tells me otherwise. It makes sense the devil would be drop-dead gorgeous .

He's wearing a navy blue button-up with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows. The fabric of the shirt clings to his muscles. He's broad and tall with dark honey-brown hair. It's just long enough to run your fingers through and it curls at the end. Why the

fuck am I even thinking about running my hands through his hair?

I head over, slipping around the gate to where they stand. The crowd's looking toward the ring as the ring announcer gets them hyped up for the next match. I try to play it cool as I stand there. I am not impressed by this man. We work in the same business. He's just had more success. That doesn't make him better than me. He's not my boss. I try not to even look at him, focusing my gaze on Alex. But pretending tall, dark, and evil doesn't exist isn't easy when I keep looking at him from the corner of my eye.

“What's up?” I ask.

“You looked good out there,” Alex says. “And Sara wants me to extend an invite to the baby shower.”

I don't want to go to Sara's baby shower. I've said a handful of words to her. Plus, that's an almost four-hour drive on a good day. I don't get a whole lot of days off and the ones I do are usually to book indie gigs further than a couple hours from Vermont. I don't have anything in common with Sara. I don't say any of that, of course, because I don't want to come off as a bitch. I nod. “I'll think about it.”

When I go to turn away, the devil opens his mouth to lure me in.

“Aurora, right?” Theodore steps closer to me. “Theo.” He holds out his hand.

I reach forward and clasp it in mine, giving it a shake before looking up at him. Oh. Those are really pretty brown eyes. Pretty brown eyes, full lips and a face chiseled by the gods themselves. Fuck. “You can call me Rory, everyone else does.”

Theo makes a face like I suggested he should swallow gutter water. “I don't like Rory,” he says as if I'm supposed to give a single fuck that he doesn't like the

nickname I've gone by since before I can remember. Before I can tell him that, he drops my hand and tilts his head to the side. "Y'know, I can honestly say I've never seen someone move as fluidly as you in a ring. You're like poetry in motion."

I'm trying hard to convince myself that I don't care what Theo thought of my match. Why would I? He also told me that he doesn't like 'Rory'. His opinions shouldn't matter to me.

But this one does. I'm not desperate for praise. I know I'm good at what I do, but Theo...he's in the big leagues. Getting his attention could mean there's the slimmest possibility that I get signed to GRW. His attention could mean a shot at my dreams. So, I can play it cool.

Mocking his motions, I tilt my head to the side. "Yeah?" I flash him a grin. I'm not the pillar of seductive beauty right now. My makeup's a little messy from sweat. I'm fighting the urge to wipe at it and smear it across my face. I know my ponytail is a mess too. "Thanks...a lot."

Theo smiles at me anyway. It's not a surprise that his smile is wrapped in sin and temptation. "Yeah, I'm serious. You've got a bright future in the industry. And from a technical standpoint, you've got the best moonsault that I've ever seen." He sounds so damn genuine too.

That was not what I was expecting. Heat creeps into my cheeks and I hope that Theo can't see it underneath the dim lighting of the venue. The last thing I want is for him to think he has some sort of sway over me already. It was just a compliment.

But it was a damn good one.

"That is probably one of the best compliments I could've gotten. Thank you, Theo." After I piece those words together, I look away. I need to leave or else I'm going to

blush and make myself look like a fucking idiot.

Before I can take that step away to safety, he leans forward. Suddenly, he's in my personal space. My nostrils are struck by the scent of his cologne. Citrus and cedar. "Are you blushing, Aurora?"

I swallow it down. This man is not going to walk in here and wiggle his way underneath my skin. I don't need to know him to know how he works. He just got outed for cheating on his fiancée, the one he's used like a trophy for months. I'm some young, independent wrestler and he could offer me the world. But I know he wouldn't give it to me because of who he is. It's about what I can give him.

I put my hand on his chest and give him a little shove back. Theo doesn't look offended. He looks...amused. Light dances in his brown eyes, making them look honeyed.

"You are very charming, Theo."

"I try."

"But charming doesn't mean you're getting in my pants. Nice try," I tack on, patting his chest. Those muscles feel so damn solid and strong beneath my fingers and touching them is nice. I can only imagine how his body would look on top of mine, how his muscles would tense as he...

Aurora, stop. Right now.

That smirk on his face widens. "Yeah? All right. I like a woman who knows what she wants."

My eyes flash to Alex, eyebrows raised. "Did you literally call me over here because

he wants to sleep with me?" I ask, sounding offended.

"I wanted to see you reject him. He needs it every once in a while, you know?"

"I'm telling Sara," I smirk. As Alex starts to stammer over his words, I take a step back. The smirk stays on my face until my eyes meet Theo's again. He's still looking at me as if I'm his prey, as if this thing between us isn't over yet.

Why does that terrify me?

Why does that excite me?

Chapter Five

THEODORE

Well, that didn't go as planned.

Alex's eyes are on me, a satisfied look on his face. He proved his stupid fucking point. At least, he thinks that he did. This isn't over yet. This was just round one.

"I bet you're real proud of yourself, ain't ya?" I ask as I tear my eyes away from Aurora. She slips behind the curtain and I get one last glance at that amazing ass.

Alex snorts. "It was nice seeing you get rejected for once."

"She wants me."

His snort turns into a full-blown laugh. "Dude, you sound deranged. Rory doesn't want you. She told you she didn't. Don't hit me with the 'she's playing hard to get' bullshit either. That makes you sound like a creep."

No, I don't think she's playing hard to get. I think she doesn't want to admit what she wants. That's fine. I'm not going to push her. At least, not tonight. Turning back to him, I shrug. "All I'm saying is that I always get what I want...eventually."

I don't know why I'm suddenly so obsessed with the idea of her. She's gorgeous. Seeing her up close only confirmed that. She has little freckles dotting the cheeks of her heart-shaped face that she doesn't hide with makeup. Her eyes are a light shade of

green that only look more intense when framed by her auburn hair. She's stunning .

I've had pretty girls before, though. Veronica's gorgeous.

Alex slaps his palm against the back of my shoulder. "It's probably because you told her that you weren't calling her 'Rory'."

"I don't like the sound of 'Rory'."

"You don't get to rename someone, Theo."

Alex must be magic. Or the man's really good at making magic happen. Somehow , he convinced Aurora to come grab drinks with us after the show. Okay, so, we're not alone. Kai and Sammy, the mediocre-looking girl who lost to Aurora, came along too. It's a start, though. I get a chance to spend more time with her and wear her down a little bit more...except she hasn't even looked my way.

She's sitting between Kai and Sammy, devouring some cheese fries that they ordered from the bar. They look disgusting; the fries are soggy from how much of that plastic-y cheese sauce is drenching them. Yet Aurora is devouring them like they're the most delicious thing in the world.

I can't keep my eyes away from her lips. They look so damn soft. I want to feel them against mine. I want to feel them wrap around my cock. After swallowing down a cheese fry, there's a bit of cheese left on her lip. Her pink tongue swipes it away, and I can only imagine her tongue lapping at other things. Fuck, I need her.

Watching her makes me want a cheese fry.

Without asking, I reach out and attempt to grab one from the plate. Before I can clasp the edge of one of the fries so I don't get my fingers covered in the orange-ish cheese,

Aurora smacks my hand away .

“We ask before we take,” she says matter-of-factly.

I arch an eyebrow, taking it as a challenge. She wants me to play nice? Fine. I can try for a minute. “May I please have a cheese fry?”

Her head tilts. Her hair is out of her ponytail. Auburn locks frame her face, stopping right above her shoulder. “No,” she answers. She picks up the fry that I had reached for and pops it into her mouth, eating as slowly as possible.

For a moment, we’re not in a bar full of people. It’s just the two of us. She’s the most distracting person I’ve ever encountered. She changed out of gear after the show, into a pair of yoga pants and a tank top. She’s gorgeous.

I can’t take my eyes off of from her. That little tease? It’s going to haunt me for the rest of the night. When we entered this lousy bar, I decided that I was going to take home the easiest target...as long as she was pretty. Yet all I’ve done is stare at Aurora as she’s ignored me.

“Theo,” Kai addresses me and I raise an eyebrow for him to go ahead. Damn him for stealing my attention away from the vixen across from me. “Any chance you’re going to be a gimmick’d match for your next title defense? Maybe a cage match?”

I scoff, as if I get a say in that. That’s up to Nathan. Whatever he books, I do (within reason). I get a lot of say in exactly how my character is booked, but he makes the final decisions. I also have no interest in doing something like a dog collar or a strap match.

“Not likely,” I say, speaking into my shitty beer. Alex promised me better drinks. He lied. “Matches like those are how careers are cut short.”

“Hext does ‘em,” Sammy speaks up. “His career has been pretty long-going.”

Most nights, Sammy would do it for me. She has a pretty enough face, sharp features, and a dark pixie cut. She’s a little on the chubby side, but not in a bad way. She was decent in the ring. Next to Aurora? She pales . There’s no competition .

I can’t stop my eye roll when she brings up Hext. It’s not a surprise. Everybody fawns over Weston Hext, especially people in the indies. He’s the ‘one who made it.’ They look at him like some savior. It doesn’t help that he got Juliette signed, even though everyone knows she was going to end up signed anyway. He just made it happen quicker. Now, they all seem to think Hext is going to magically appear at their show, see them, and get them signed too.

“Hext...is a special case.” I’m not going to sit here and bad-mouth my co-worker in front of a group of wannabe stars. The last thing I need is for it to somehow get back to him, and then Hext wants to act like a macho asshole backstage.

After chomping down on another cheese fry, Aurora snorts. “Is that jealousy I detect, Theodore ?”

The way she says my name makes my cock stir in my pants. It makes me want to grab her from across the table and put her sassy mouth to use. Settling back in my chair, my gaze zeroes in on her again. This time, I make sure it’s obvious that I’m staring.

“And why would I be jealous?”

“Because people love Hext.”

My jaw ticks when she says that. Underneath the table, my fingers press into my thighs through my slacks. Why the fuck would I care that people love Hext? I don’t

want these people to love me. I want them to envy me. I want them to want me. I don't want love. That's never been important to me.

Leaning forward, I settle my elbows on the sticky wooden tabletop. "Do you? Do you love Hext? Would you get down on your knees for him, put that pretty mouth of yours to work so you can get a smidge of a chance at a contract? Because that's the closest you're going to get to getting signed, Aurora. I watched you tonight. You're not good enough for a real contract."

I don't know why I go for the low blow immediately; I always do. When someone wiggles under my skin, my first instinct is to hurt them as much as they bothered me. Everyone else at the table is now tense. I couldn't stop the words from leaving my lips like arrows, aiming to strike Aurora down.

For once, I wanted to shut my dumb fucking mouth.

The light slowly drains from those green eyes and is replaced by something much darker. Something a lot like hurt.

I know that I fucked up.

Before I can even try to say something that might be able to fix it, Aurora simply stands up and walks out. She doesn't retort. She doesn't even look back at me.

I go to stand, but Alex stops me and shakes his head. The look on his face tells me that that's a terrible idea. All I know is I have to fix this some way, somehow.

Chapter Six

AURORA

Never in my life have I felt more pathetic than I do now.

Warm tears sting my eyes as I push past people to get out of the bar. Someone else can cover my stupid fries; I'll pay them back later. The cool New York air hits me square in the face as I step out into the night. I don't go far, stepping onto the sidewalk and leaning back against the brick wall. The brick digs into the skin of my shoulders that my tank top doesn't cover.

Theodore fucking Abrams. What a piece of shit. The rumors are not exaggerated. If anything, they might be under exaggerated. He's awful. More than that, he's good at what he does. He hardly knows me, but he knew exactly where to cut to make me bleed. He knew what cuts would hurt the deepest and made them while looking me in the eye. Not a bit of hesitation on his face as he hurt me.

"Rory," Kai's soft voice pulls me from my thoughts. He doesn't even ask. His arms encircle me, pulling me against his chest, my cheek resting against his soft t-shirt. "Don't fucking bother with him. He's an asshole. There's a reason he's going to spend the rest of his life alone."

I nod, but I don't respond. What if he's right? What if I'm not good enough? What if I've been grinding my ass off for these last few years, living off ramen and dreams, and I'm not enough? Maybe I'm doomed to fail. Forever cursed to watch other people live my dreams while I grow old and slowly lose hope, but keep saying 'it'll

happen someday' anyway because what else am I able to do at that point?

It's as if Kai can read my mind. He pulls away from the hug, holding me at arm's length. "Aurora Bennet, you fucking listen to me. You are good enough. Everything Theo said was wrong. He saw one of your matches—an amazing match, by the way—but just one. He hasn't seen how much you've grown over the years. He hasn't seen all the work you've put in."

"But what if the work isn't enough?"

"Rory, stop. It is and you know it. You were so damn confident, and if you're going to let Theo cut you down, you're not the woman I thought you were."

I want to be angry at Kai because I'm allowed to be upset. I'm allowed to be angry and hurt, but he's right. Confidence is not something that I lack. I know who I am. I know what I can bring to the roster of any company. I could set the GRW locker room on fire. Give me an opportunity and I will knock the fucking doors down.

I take a deep breath and blink back the remaining tears in my eyes. "Holy shit, he is such a dick, though," I groan, tilting my head back and looking up at the night sky in exasperation.

"Oh, I know," Kai laughs. "He's garbage. I think he honestly did his fiancée a favor. Can you imagine spending the rest of your life with a man like that?"

My face scrunches in disgust as that thought crosses my mind. The idea of being forced to spend any extended amount of time with him is my idea of hell. I'd rather drag my vagina through broken glass.

"That's the last thing I want to imagine. "

“So, I think it’s fair to say that we are not giving him the benefit of the doubt?”

I shake my head. “Nope.” He’s as awful as everyone says. I don’t care if he’s just ‘living the gimmick’ or ‘keeping it kayfabe’, the man’s a piece of shit. There’s no reason to be that much of an asshole outwardly, especially to people that you don’t know.

“Okay, good.”

He wraps his arms around my shoulder and I lean into him for a moment, taking the comfort that he offers after my little freakout. Now that I’ve had enough time to settle, I feel so embarrassed. I let him get to me. I showed weakness in front of Theo, and I know if I ever see him again, he’s going to extort that fact.

The bar doors swing open, and I’m fully expecting to see his stupid, gorgeous, smug face storm out. Instead, Sammy walks out with a look of annoyance on her face. She joins the two of us and Kai wraps his other arm around her.

“He’s a fucking jerk-off,” she says. Before I get a chance to agree, she reaches into her pocket and hands me a hundred-dollar bill.

I take it, thoroughly confused, until I see a note scrawled on it.

Roo, sorry - Theo

I stare at it for a few seconds. Roo? I’m sorry, Roo?! White hot rage flows through me. “Who the fuck is ‘Roo’?” I ask. Did this asshole give me a nickname because ‘Rory’ wasn’t up to his standards or something? Did he give me money to apologize? I try to step away from Kai because someone needs a solid punch in the face, but he keeps his arm firmly around me.

“Rory, he’s not worth it. He also seems like the type who’ll think that punching him is a form of flirting.”

The very thought makes my nose scrunch. Flirting with Theo is one of the last things I want to do. I sigh and relax back against Kai.

“Whatever. It’s not like I’m ever going to see his stupid fucking face again.”

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Chapter Seven

THEODORE

This week's venue for Rise, GRW's weekly television show, is a simple arena. The outside is a dirt-stained ivory. Production trucks are already parked in the back lot. The production crew has likely been here for hours at this point, ensuring everything is set up for the show tonight. As I pull my rental into a parking spot, I catch a glimpse of my face on the side of one of the trucks, my shit-eating grin looking back at me.

I remember the first time I saw my face on that truck. It was the first sign to me that I made it. Indescribable pride washed over me, and when I sent a picture to my parents, neither of them seemed to care too much. Doesn't matter. I spent the night with a cute blonde. I don't remember her name, but I remember how quickly she threw back all the tequila shots I bought her.

I get out and grab my bag from the trunk. Dropping it onto the parking lot gravel, I wheel it behind me toward the back door. A handful of fans stand by the gates, desperately trying to get the attention of any wrestler who walks by. The sound of my name echoes, but I keep my head ducked low. I don't want to interact with them. Most of them probably want me to sign something that they can sell online or a chance tell all their stupid friends on social media about how much of a dick I am.

A security guard checks my badge before I'm permitted into the backstage area. It's a thin, grey-painted hallway. Production crates line the sides, making it necessary to sidestep to get through the area. The lights are that dull yellow that no one ever looks

good under. Doors line the hallway, most of them unavailable for talent to use.

I stop at one with a sheet of paper taped to it, my name printed on the white paper. Perks of being the champion, you get your own locker room. I don't have to share with my loser coworkers who smell like shit and want to talk about video games.

Right before I can push the door open and have some peace before the show tonight, one of said loser coworkers calls out my name. "Theo, Theo!"

I whip around, rolling my eyes. "Heard you the first time, Austin."

Austin Slater is a couple of inches taller than me, one of the newer signees to GRW. Not quite sure why Nathan felt the need to give the kid a contract, but it's his business, not mine. Austin hasn't quite picked up on the fact that I'm not interested in being friends. He likes to hang around me as if he's going to change my mind. He's rocking an oompa-loompa orange tan with his blond hair slicked back with too much gel.

"Nathan wants to talk to you."

I was expecting that. Tilting my head back, I groan. Just because I was expecting it doesn't mean I want to deal with it. "He couldn't just fucking text me?" I ask in a grumble. It's not as if I don't know what he wants to talk about. 'Don't let yourself get caught cheating on your fiancée, blah, blah, blah.'

After opening the door to my locker room and putting my bag inside, I walk away from Austin without another word. Maybe he'll get smart and stop trying to be my friend. It's not going to happen .

Nathan's office is a few doors down from my locker room, and a similar printed piece of paper is on the door, marking it to make it easy to find. He normally has an open-

door policy for talent, so I don't bother to knock. I push the door open. Nathan looks up from his phone call, sees me, and ends the call quickly.

His usually kind face looks far from happy right now. There's a frown plastered on it, his forehead wrinkled, his dark eyes full of disappointment. There are dark bags underneath them. I'm pretty used to seeing him like this. He's hardly all smiles with me, like he is some of the other wrestlers.

"Have a seat, Theo." He gestures to the shitty rolling chair across from him.

I drop into it, leaning back lazily. "I know I fucked up, Nathan." I don't want to listen to him tell me how badly I messed up. I'll get ahead of the curve here.

He rubs at his temples, where his dark hair is beginning to turn grey. I think he's aged a couple of years since I became champion nine months ago. None of this should be surprising to him; I've never once hid who I am.

"This is about more than screwing up, Theo," he says. "Do you know how bad it is for the company when our champion is constantly in the news for...everything you've been in the news for? A few weeks ago, it was for bullying that kid at that convention. Now, it's the cheating scandal. This isn't the first time that you've been seen with a girl who isn't Veronica, and—"

"—Veronica and I broke up," I cut him off. "So, we don't have to worry about the 'cheating scandal' side of things anymore. I'm free."

I decide not to add in how the kid at the convention deserved what he got. Nathan's very tired of that argument. The kid was being a snot-nosed brat and talking shit. All I did was tell him that he was a pimple-faced loser who'd never get a girlfriend. Not the worst thing I've ever said by a long shot. Of course, his mom had to bitch and whine about it on social media until they got free tickets for a year.

The news of the breakup doesn't look to relieve Nathan any. He looks even more distressed as he realizes what me being single means. I get to be even more of a menace. I don't have to be discreet about going home with girls anymore.

"I'm sorry to hear that." It takes him a bit to respond. He chooses his words carefully.

I shrug. I'm not. Although it's been a weird few days without Veronica in my life. No calling, no texting. My bed's been empty. She hasn't reached out since I left her apartment. I was fully expecting her to beg me to come back by this point. Guess she's already moved on, and the last thing I want to do is admit that bothers me a little bit.

Nothing I can do about it now.

"Is that all this meeting was about?"

Nathan nods. "Please try to stay out of headlines for a bit, Theo. I would really like to not have to address your indiscretions every single time I open a social media app. You're the champion. You're damn good at what you do."

It's my personal life that's the problem. We've had this conversation before. "I'll see what I can do." When I stand to leave, something else crosses my mind. I smack my hand against the surface of his desk. "Aurora."

"What?"

"She's this indie wrestler. I don't know the rest of her details. She wrestled at C1W this week. The show's online. She's damn good, Nathan. I'd scoop her up before another company does. She'll be a star someday given the right platform."

Nathan looks shocked and fuck; so am I. Scouting talent isn't something that I do.

That's a Hext thing. I don't know why I care. I could lie and say it's because I feel like an ass knowing that I hurt her like I did. I apologized. Whether Aurora accepts it or not isn't my problem.

I'm doing it because I want her closer to me. I want to wear her down and make her give in. Make her accept how much she wants me. I stop at nothing to get what I want. If that means getting her a job, well, she can thank me for it later, preferably on her knees. It also doesn't hurt to get on Nathan's good side for when I inevitably fuck up again.

I'm the champion, boosting the GRW locker room is what I'm supposed to do.

I lower myself back into the uncomfortable rolling chair. "I actually have an idea too. A storyline that Aurora could fit into if we decide to bring her in."

Nathan raises an eyebrow in my direction and nods. "All right. I'm listening."

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Chapter Eight

AURORA

The sound of my phone ringing wakes me up. It takes a second for me to roll over and grab it from my nightstand. Everything hurts. I had a match last night at a small, local promotion. It was a decent match. Pretty sure I hit the railing too hard at some point though. My ribs ache. Shit happens. This is wrestling; it's going to hurt.

As soon as I manage to get my fingers to wrap around my still-ringing phone, I blindly press the screen in search of the button to answer. "Yeah?" I hold it to my ear, expecting it to be Kai or maybe the bakery, asking me to come in today. No way in hell that's happening.

"Aurora Bennet? This is Nathan Thorpe."

Immediately, I sit up in bed. Pain shoots through my ribs but that's the last thing on my mind right now. Nathan Thorpe is calling me. This is better than a shot of espresso to bring me back to life. "Are you shitting me?" I ask without thinking, then I feel like the biggest idiot in the world.

Instead of hanging up on me, Nathan chuckles. "I've spent the last week watching everything of yours that I could find. I don't know how you weren't on my radar already."

I don't know how to respond because the only thing I want to do is squeal with excitement. He's probably going to offer me an opportunity to be enhancement talent,

one of those people who show up on TV once and lose immediately, but I'll take it. An opportunity is an opportunity.

"Um, did you like it?"

What is wrong with you?! That is not how you talk to your dream boss!

Once again, Nathan chuckles. He's probably regretting this phone call. When I close my eyes, I envision him sitting at some big oak desk in his office at his mansion. He probably has a list in front of him and he's currently crossing my name off. Reasoning? I sound like a fucking idiot.

"You're impressive, especially for your age. You have a lot of talent, Aurora, and I think that GRW can help refine that."

He's speaking, but I'm on a delay by a few seconds, slowly processing everything that he's saying. Refining my talent. That doesn't sound like he's calling me in to be a local talent jobber or for a dark match, one of the matches that doesn't even get televised. A warmup for the live crowd. It sounds like...I don't know how to respond. What if I'm assuming things? What if Nathan is just genuinely this nice to people all the time?

Thankfully, Nathan doesn't seem put off by my silence. "I'd like to offer you an opportunity, Aurora. It would be a pay-per-appearance contract with the opportunity to stay on if things work out. There's a storyline already in the works that I think you'd slot into perfectly and we can go from there. Does that sound doable?"

It's not my dream full-time contract. I'm not going to get my face on the side of a production truck or headline pay-per-views anytime soon, but it's still an amazing chance. They want me to show up more than once. There's already a storyline in mind for me. That's a good thing. It means they see something in me.

Or maybe I'm just delusional and hopeful at this point.

I nod even though Nathan can't see it. "Yeah, absolutely doable. Um, when do you want to meet?" I have never had a professional conversation in my life. The bakery was a simplistic 'do you want a job?' type of situation. Promoters that I'm used to working with deal in handshakes and word of mouth. There are no contracts or big meetings in the world of independent wrestling.

"Rise will be in your neck of the woods next week. How about then? If you give me your email, I'll have HR send over all the necessary paperwork to get you started and get you backstage. How does that sound?"

"Amazing."

I give Nathan my email and the call ends. Falling back into my bed, I stare up at the textured ceiling, ignoring my screaming ribs as I let it all wash over me.

I got a job. I'm going to be working for GRW, and Nathan's never even met me in person.

These bland white hallways always make me feel uncomfortable. It's not that I think the world should be covered in rainbows all the time or anything. The white just feels so... empty. It could be the place itself. These hallways are haunted. You'll never be able to convince me otherwise.

A faded sage-green plaque marks room number 153. Before I can step through the door, Janet approaches. Greying brown hair is pulled back into a low bun, and her glasses are sitting on her hawk-like nose. Her maroon scrubs are slightly wrinkled.

"Aurora," she greets me, her voice stickily sweet.

I've never been able to tell whether or not she's faking it. Is she actually that nice of a woman, or does she just want me to think she is? Dad has never seemed bothered by her.

"Hm?" I stop and lean against the doorframe, resting the side of my head against the wood. I'm still tired, still sore. "Is everything okay with Dad?"

They'd call if it wasn't, right? They have to. I'm his emergency contact. They wouldn't wait until I arrived to tell me that something— stop . I force myself to take a breath. I'm not going to spiral. If I close my eyes, I can hear the quiet hum of Dad's TV. The TV wouldn't be on if something was wrong with him.

Janet nods, soothing the remaining worry within me. "He's fine. He's been the same as he always is. Catherine thinks that he smiled at her earlier."

We both know that didn't happen. Dad can't smile. Dad can't do much of anything these days.

"We're...your father may need more care than we can provide, Aurora," she finally says.

I know what she's getting at. Dad should be somewhere better than this. Mission Health Rehabilitation is a good rehab center for patients who are recovering after a stroke. Except Dad's been having complications during his recovery. He's not progressing like the doctors expect. He needs more personalized care, something that Mission Health can't give him.

Money is a problem, though. Everything's been paid for with his barely-there savings, and the money I manage to save up between wrestling and working at the bakery. The money is dwindling to the point where I'm worried about how I'm going to continue paying for everything.

“I know. Thank you,” is all I say to Janet before I slip into his room.

More white. White walls, white tile floors that are scratched to hell and back. The hospital bed is white, the sheets are white – at least his blanket is a faded shade of blue. A few more washes and I worry that it’ll also turn white or fall apart completely.

A glance at the TV makes me scoff. “Did Catherine put the news on for you?” I ask, knowing full well that Dad can’t respond. He hasn’t responded for months now.

I pull up one of the torn, red leather chairs—a point for them not being white—and put it by his bedside. Dad’s eyes barely track my movements. They almost flick toward me before going back straight ahead.

His blond hair has been freshly combed away from his face. He has a few days’ worth of stubble on his cheeks. I need to talk to Janet about that before I leave. Dad never liked having stubble. He’s always been clean-shaven.

“I promise I’ll put your movie on in a minute. There’s something I want to tell you.” I reach out and grab one of his hands. I feel the warmth, a reminder that he’s still there, but he doesn’t squeeze my hand back. That’s okay. He’s still my dad.

“I did it. Sort of. I got noticed by GRW. They want me to be pay-per-appearance right now, but it’s a start. I’m going to be on TV, pushed into some storyline that I haven’t heard anything about yet. But I’m going to prove to them that I’m worth it. Nathan’s going to have no choice but to offer me a damn good contract. I’m going to pay for the best care possible, and you’re going to get better. Then you’re going to come watch me. Front row. Like we always planned.”

Tears threaten to sting the corners of my eyes. This isn’t how I imagined telling him this. I imagined telling him over dinner and seeing Dad’s eyes light up because he

gets to see me come closer to reaching my dreams. I don't get that.

I blink back my tears. Seeing me cry stresses him out, and I don't want to stress him out.

“You're going to be able to see me on TV, so make sure you tell Catherine or Janet to turn GRW on on Tuesdays, okay? ”

I almost laugh at myself; I'll just leave them a note.

Leaning down, I press our interlocked fingers to my forehead. “I... I did it, Daddy,” I whisper. “I did it.”

Okay, no crying. Pull it together. After sucking in a few deep breaths and squeezing my eyes shut, I manage to get my shit together. When I look back up at Dad, I smile. “Okay, we can watch your movie now.”

Grabbing the remote to the TV, I flip to the output for the DVD player. With another press of the button, The Chain by Fleetwood Mac starts. It's the one thing I know makes him happy these days. It doesn't matter how many times we watch it. Something flashes in my dad's eyes as I settle back in the uncomfortable chair, pulling my knees up to my chest and still holding his hand as we watch the concert movie together.

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Chapter Nine

THEODORE

My feet are propped on Nathan's desk. Occasionally, his eyes shoot me a look of complete annoyance, but he doesn't open his mouth. His eyes flick away from me and go back to his computer, likely reading emails or planning to jerk off to the praise people shower him with online: Nathan's such a good booker. Nathan's been amazing at making sure stories have a payoff .

What-the-fuck ever. As if any of the good ideas belong to him. They all belong to us. Nathan just approves them and takes all the damn credit.

We're in Burlington, Vermont this week. It's Aurora's first show. I'm surprised Nathan went ahead with it that quickly. I know she's good, but I didn't think she was 'put on national television without a tryout' kind of good. I also don't really care too much because this works better for me in the end. My feet tap against the hardwood of the desk, my dress shoes shining under the fluorescent lighting.

Then a knock echoes through the small, make-shift office. Both Nathan and I perk up .

"Come in," he calls.

The door swings open and Aurora walks in. She's being a suck-up, wearing a GRW t-shirt that clings to her curves and a pair of leggings that do the same. She knows exactly what she's doing.

I don't pull my feet off of Nathan's desk, but I let the shitty chair turn towards her so I can offer a little wave.

It throws her off. Those intense green eyes look briefly confused, but she tries to push past it. She focuses her gaze on Nathan instead of me.

"Hi, I'm Aurora."

"She prefers 'Rory,' which just sounds very dumb, if you ask me," I chime in.

Nobody asked me.

They both ignore me. Nathan takes her hand and smiles. "It's nice to meet you, Aurora. Please, have a seat."

She sits in the chair next to me and subtly tries to scoot it a few inches away from mine. How cute. She really doesn't like me, does she? Considering things I've said to people before, what I said to her was tame. Maybe she's a sensitive thing. She's not going to make it far in the business if she is.

People are constantly torn down in this world. Nobody hates wrestling and wrestlers more than wrestling fans. Not even in the fun 'oh, this person plays a bad guy, I'll boo them' way. They spend hours writing novels online about how untalented we are and why five other people deserve the spot we're given. The female wrestlers are picked apart even worse. They aren't allowed to make mistakes and they absolutely have to be fuckable.

At least Aurora doesn't have to worry about the latter.

"I know how we're doing things is rather unconventional," Nathan starts, gesturing vaguely. Out of the corner of her eye, Aurora keeps looking at me, trying to figure

out why I'm here. She's going to love the reveal. Nathan continues. "Normally, you'd have a few try-out matches, work some dark matches, all of that. However, I saw you wrestle and felt like you had something special. What kind of promoter would I be if I didn't capitalize on that?"

He's stroking himself off again and taking credit for ideas that aren't his. Shocking.

When neither of us adds to his ego, Nathan keeps speaking. "You play unhinged very well. I noticed that in some of your older matches. That could work to our advantage. I want to pair you with Theo. Over the next few weeks, we will introduce you to our audience: Bubbly, happy-to-be-here, white meat baby face, Aurora Dawn. People will love you."

Her lips scrunch. As soon as Nathan mentions pairing her with me, Aurora's body tenses up. She looks like she's a second away from bolting, but she stays planted. "And...how does that pair me with Theodore? If I'm a face and Theodore is..." An asshole, the person she hates the most, the furthest thing from a baby face, "not," she finishes.

"Through backstage segments and subtle interactions, we're going to hint at a pull between you two. He's magnetizing, enticing. He's going to wrap you around his finger, and the audience is going to be screaming for you to run like this is a horror movie. At our next pay-per-view, you're going to help Theo retain his belt, setting up your partnership going forward."

My eyes are obviously glued to her face. I'm trying to read her expression and figure out what she's thinking. I see the briefest flickers of disbelief and annoyance. I didn't pull these strings to get her a job out of the goodness of my heart. A challenge was presented to me, and who would I be if I didn't try to overcome that challenge? She pretends that she doesn't want me. She doesn't even like the fact that I exist.

In three weeks, she'll be underneath me, begging for more as I slide between those luscious thighs. Mark my words .

Aurora steadies herself and nods. "...All right, yeah. Sounds...fun." She says the word 'fun' like most people say the word 'moist,' with complete and utter disgust. My sweet little Roo; what a good actress she's trying to be.

Nathan reaches across his desk and clasps Aurora's hand again. They shake, sealing the deal.

"Theo, show Aurora to the locker room. Make some introductions for her. Help her get comfortable, understood?"

Nathan should know better. I'm not going to hold her hand like she's the new girl at school. Aurora can make friends all by herself. I'm getting what I want out of this, nothing else matters.

Aurora stands and leaves Nathan's office with me following after her. The door slams behind us, and we're in an unusually quiet hallway. The tiles are white with blue speckles. It almost makes them look moldy. The walls are white with a freshly painted blue line running horizontally across them.

"I don't like you," she says, finally looking up at me. I wonder if that's supposed to hurt my feelings.

"I know, but it's going to be fun working with you." I glance down, my eyes meeting hers.

She rolls her eyes. "Fun is not the word that I would use, Theo."

I take her chin in my hand, keeping our eyes locked. "You hate me, Roo. That's fine.

By the end of this little storyline, you're going to crave all of the terrible things that I can do to you. You're going to soak through your panties just thinking of me."

Her nose wrinkles and she fakes a gag, slapping my hand away from her. "You fucking wish."

"I know." God, she's impossible. Acting like she doesn't want me, doesn't want this. When I know all she wants to do is drop to her knees and suck my cock like a good girl. I can see underneath the disgust. She's lying to me, lying to herself. I don't think she even realizes how badly she wants me yet. "Anyway, your first match is with Juliette. I'm sure you know her already. All you indie darlings like to flock together, right? Good luck finding her and talking that out. I have things to do."

I don't. I'm going to sit in my locker room until the show starts, but Aurora doesn't need to know that. She's a big girl. She'll figure this all out by herself.

Chapter Ten

AURORA

There's a quote for times like these. Sometimes your dreams can become nightmares . I finally get what I've been working my ass off for, and in walks Theodore Abrams to fuck it all up. My big break is playing an obsessive fangirl. Great, love it . I get to stroke his ego and make him even more impossible to be around.

“Asshole!” I shout as he walks down the hallway, leaving me to figure everything out by myself. Was that the best thing to shout in front of my new boss's office? Probably not, but hey, at least he's getting a good sample of my personality.

My saving grace is that there are conveniently printed-off signs marking doors and stand-up floor signs pointing out where things are for talent. It takes me a little bit, but I find my way to the women's locker room.

This looks so much nicer than the locker rooms that I've used over the years. The lockers have doors that aren't falling off. It doesn't smell like piss and mildew. It's full of women that I've seen on TV. All of them eye me as I step inside, and I feel like the new, weird girl at school. I'm half expecting them to throw my bag out into the hallway and tell me to dress out there because I'm too weird to get dressed with them.

“Rory!?”

The sound of my name breaks me from the thought spiral I'm on about this becoming

a teenage drama.

Juliette Stanton is... She's my girl crush. She's the definition of perfect. Tall, toned, tan. She's covered in gorgeously intricate tattoos with raven-colored hair that looks like she should be in a shampoo commercial. Her dark blue eyes are framed by dark lashes and dark makeup and she has pouty lips. A goddess among mortals.

"Jules!" I smile as she embraces me, breathing in her fruity scent.

When she pulls away, she smiles. "When I saw your name on the run-down, I was freaking out. Did you get a try-out? You've fucking deserved one since forever. I texted Kai and he didn't know anything."

"Sort of?" I shrug. "I'm actually on a pay-per-appearance deal."

"Okay, oh my god. That's big!" she says. "Come, sit. Tell me everything."

For all the badassery that Jules exudes, she's also a total sweetheart. Most of the time. After she warms up to someone.

Jules is known as 'the cobra'. She's hardcore as fuck. She'll take bumps that most guys won't. I've always wondered if she's a little bit unstable or just that dedicated. Deathmatches, the ones with a lot of blood and things that make people think wrestling is a bunch of violent ogres, are what made her a name on the indies. They're what got Weston Hext interested in her.

It's hard for the rest of us to carve out a niche when Jules is blazing a trail.

We sit on one of the benches in the back of the locker room, and I run down everything with her. I choose to leave out most of the personal interactions with Theodore. She doesn't need to know how much I hate my new partner. Just thinking

of him as my ‘partner’ makes me want to gag.

“Oh. That sounds fun,” Jules says after I tell her about the storyline. Definitely the last word that I’d use to describe it. “Think of how in-depth you could go with it. Play up all the subtleties until you screw Hex out of the title win.” She calls him ‘Hex’ so casually, like they’re the best of friends nowadays. “Then you could close the PPV with something super fucking dramatic. It could be one of those final shots that people talk about for ages.”

Sure, it sounds great. Hell, I’d probably call it fun if it wasn’t for the fact that I have to work with Theodore. Does Jules not know what a piece of garbage he is? Have they not interacted since she’s been signed?

“Yeah, I guess it does sound... fun .” I decide to dance around the subject a bit, not cut straight to my issue. “I’m not sure how I feel about working with him. He has a bit of a reputation.”

She hums her agreement. “He’s rough around the edges, but he loves this business. It’s probably the one thing that he takes seriously. He’s going to give his all to this, that’s for sure. Everything will be fine if you give your all too. Theodore’s the type to appreciate hard work.”

He also appreciates getting under my skin. I hadn’t thought about him once—at least not outside of seeing him on TV—since that night at the bar. Now I’m going to begin my career by his side. Talk about karma. Who did I wrong to end up in this position?

I sigh. “Yeah, I mean, I’ll give it my all. But what about him? He seems like such an asshole. From everything that I’ve heard.” And everything he’s said to me.

“He’s never really been an ass to me,” Jules offers, and I’m surprised. I assumed he would’ve torn her a new one for getting noticed by Hext or something. “He doesn’t

talk a lot to people backstage, anyway.”

I’m trying to pair the fact that Theodore’s never been an ass to Jules with the Theodore that I know. It doesn’t compute. She seems like a prime target for his assholery, yet she’s never been a victim.

I don’t get the chance to press her about it a bit more because Jules turns the conversation to our match tonight. She’s going to win. It’s not going to be an upset victory by some unknown girl walking into the company, but she’s asking me for ideas.

Talking about wrestling is so much easier than talking about Theodore. Because I hate him and yet I can’t help but be just a little curious about him. Not enough to get myself tangled up in him though.

That is the last thing I need to do.

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Chapter Eleven

AURORA

Rise

Episode 567

Burlington, Vermont

Before the show started, Jules had enough time to give me a rundown of the cameras and the angles. Where to look, how to play to them, all of the stuff that isn't too important on the indies. She said it'll probably be a little rough since it's my first time, but she's sure I'll get the hang of it. She did.

Right now, we're filming my first backstage segment. It's supposed to be natural, but I'm feeling anything but. Nerves are twisting in my stomach, making me feel like I'm going to puke up the oatmeal I had for breakfast. All I have to do is interact with Theo. I've done that before. The kicker is I can't have the 'I want to puke' expression on my face the whole time—from the nerves or the man himself.

Note to self: Book acting lessons with my first paycheck.

This is just supposed to be the beginning. All I need to do is convey a spark of interest. I don't have to fawn all over him or worship the ground he walks on, so maybe that'll make things a bit easier.

My hair is half-up, half-down. The top layer is pulled back into a low ponytail. My gear is the very same as I was wearing the night I met Theo—white tights with pink detailing and a matching top. It's simple. I never had the money to get some of the pretty custom sets. Maybe soon though.

All that I need to do is cut my first promo for GRW. Easy, right ?

“Hi.” A sweet voice grabs my attention. I turn my head to see a blonde who looks like the sun wakes up when she does. She radiates warmth and happiness and...pink. When I see her, I think of the color pink. “I'm Clara,” she says, extending her hand. Her nails are perfectly manicured, with simple French tips. “I do interviews and stuff backstage.”

I take her hand, offering a smile that hopefully doesn't look like I'm a nervous mess. “Aurora,” I introduce myself. “You can call me Rory.” Despite what fucking Theodore says, that's still my name. Roo is not going to stick. I'm not a baby kangaroo.

One of the producers standing nearby claps his hands together, gathering everyone's attention. “All right, take one,” he says. “Places.”

The camera turns on. As soon as I see the blinking red light, nerves are swirling in the pit of my stomach again. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Theodore. He's leaning against the wall opposite us, waiting for his walk-on cue, in a black button-up with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows, muscular forearms on display. If I didn't know what a douchebag he is, I'd think he was fucking gorgeous. His personality outweighs his looks. I can feel his hazel eyes locked on me, making me feel like I'm an animal on display at the zoo. His gaze is lingering—unyielding.

My eyes leave him as soon as Clara begins to speak. “Hey, guys, I'm here with Aurora Dawn, the newest addition to GRW's women's division. Aurora, you have a

match tonight against Juliette, the self-professed ‘Cobra’ of the women’s division. How are you feeling? Any nerves?”

All I have to do is say what I practiced in the bathroom mirror for forty-five minutes after my makeup was done. It’s okay if I come off as cheesy; that’s the point. White meat babyfaces are supposed to come off as cheesy.

When I open my mouth to respond, the words don’t come. They feel stuck on the tip of my tongue. All that panic that’s been swirling in the pit of my stomach feels like it’s moved up to the back of my throat now. I worry that I’m going to projectile vomit all over Clara’s pink flats with sequin hearts on top of them.

The producer shouts, “Cut!” and I shake my head.

“Sorry,” I murmur.

“Don’t worry about it. Take a breath and we’ll try again.” He doesn’t sound like he hates me, but he sounds tired. His black-rimmed glasses sit on the bridge of his nose, and his black baseball cap is pulled down over his face as if he’s trying to hide the exhaustion.

So, I take a breath and we start all over again. Clara hits her line with all the precision of a professional. Each time her microphone is in front of my face, I fucking freeze.

It happens seven times.

I’m beginning to think that my best bet is to run out of here and never look back. Give up wrestling since I’m floundering my first real chance. Being stuck at Rise time to prove that you are one.”

Is Theodore giving me a fucking pep talk? What world did I get sucked into? Is this

the same man who told me to figure things out on my own earlier? Then again, Jules did say that he takes this business seriously. This is clearly an example of that.

“Thank you.”

He nods and goes back to his leaning spot, giving me only a second to think through our exchange before the producer gives the go-ahead for our eighth take.

Clara hits her line again, still sounding as peppy and excited as she had the first time. “Hey, guys, I’m here with Aurora Dawn, the newest addition to GRW’s women’s division. Aurora, you have a match tonight against Juliette, the self-professed ‘Cobra’ of the women’s division. How are you feeling? Any nerves?”

A single breath and I focus all of my attention on Clara. “Why would I be nervous? I was made for this. Juliette can call herself whatever she wants, and that’s fine. I’m not scared of an itty-bitty snake. Let her try to bite me, and I’ll pull out her fangs.”

“What is all this talk of—” Theodore slips into the frame, cutting Clara off from asking any more questions. It’s easy to see how confident he is like this because Theodore Abrams is not a character on a wrestling show. He is who he is. His eyes are on Clara and then they lazily flick toward me. The gaze is long, lingering, flitting from the top of my head down, and then a smirk pulls over his lips. “You’re new,” he purrs. “Theodore Abrams, GRW World Champion.” He taps the golden belt draped over his shoulder closest to the camera.

For a moment, I get it. I get why women fawn over him. If I knew nothing about him, and he looked at me like he was looking at me right now? I’d melt. I’d beg for his attention like a needy little kitten.

I remind myself of who I am right now. I’m the new girl who’s interested, feeling the pull. This is the moment when the audience is screaming at me to take a step away

from him.

“I’ve heard all about you, Theo,” I say.

He chuckles. “Yeah? I’m sure every single thing you’ve heard is true too.” His gaze never leaves me, drinking me in. It’s like Clara doesn’t exist—like it’s just the two of us on screen. “I’ll see ya around, babydoll,” he says before he slips out of frame with all the swagger and charisma in the world.

Clara looks at me, and right before the camera cuts, I slip off screen after him, leaving her looking bewildered into the lens.

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Chapter Twelve

THEODORE

Rise

Episode 569

Toledo, Ohio

O ver the last two weeks, I've watched Aurora get more comfortable. That first time in front of the camera? Yikes . She may be a natural in the ring, but she's not a natural in front of the camera. She's getting better, though. It takes only two or three takes for her to nail it instead of eight. The narcissist in me wants to attribute that to the sage advice that I gave her. That's what good teammates do, right? Even if Aurora isn't happy about it, we're teammates.

In the ring, she's good. She lost her first match against Juliette. She won her second, which was only a squash to get her some wins—a way to turn her into someone that people care about. People are starting to care. The bubbly way she bounces down to the ring, the way she smiles and waves...that ass. The cheers are getting louder every week. Last week, they even chanted her name.

She has another match tonight. She's scheduled to score a win over one of the veteran wrestlers in our locker room, Pearl. It's a major thing. Beating veterans gives you a good rub. It gives people another reason to care about you and what you're doing.

I'm watching her match backstage, when I suddenly feel someone next to me, standing so annoyingly close that I can feel their radiating body heat. One glimpse and, of course, it's Austin.

His eyes are locked on the TV too. "She's hot," he says, like that's not an obvious fact.

I can't agree with him. That would bring me down to his level, and I would look pathetic. Simping for a coworker is not who I am. "Mm," is all I give him as a response.

"Do you think she'd say yes if I asked her out?"

I give him an unimpressed look. "Leave her alone. She's new. You don't want to scare her away because you can't keep your dick in your pants."

The irony of me being the one to say that isn't lost on me. I don't want Austin to get any ideas. He doesn't need to think he even has a chance with Aurora. She's mine. She just doesn't realize it yet. No one's getting a piece of her before I do.

Whatever Austin responds with, I tune out. My eyes flick back to the screen, and I smile as I watch the referee count the pin. One. Two. Three. The crowd cheers as Aurora hops to her feet. Her hand is raised as she's announced the victor.

I knew she'd do fine here.

When Aurora comes back through the curtain, I go to slide up to her side. We have a backstage segment to get to, but Austin gets to her before I do. My lip curls back in disgust as he smiles at her and introduces himself. She smiles back at him in a way that she's never smiled at me.

I can't watch this go on any longer.

Stepping forward, I wrap my hand around her bicep. She fixes me with a glare, annoyance flashing in those green eyes as she yanks her arm away from me .

“Can I help you?” The snark in her question is beautiful.

“We have a live segment to film. Come on. You can flirt with Austin later.” No, she can't, but I don't need to tell her that part.

I wrap my hand around her arm again and physically drag her away from him. Austin stares after the two of us as annoyance continues to radiate off Aurora. This is the last thing we need before we go film a live segment. I feel like she's not wrapping her head around that part.

Whipping around, I fix my eyes on her face. “Pretend you don't hate me for five fucking minutes, okay? It's your job. Do it or don't. This is live . No retakes when you fuck up again and again.”

“I know what live means. Thanks, Theodore.” She rolls her eyes. “I'll act when the camera's on. Not when it's off.”

The way she says my name like that shouldn't turn me on like it does. The annoyance, the emphasis on the last syllable, I live for it. “You'll learn to act when it's off too. If we're doing this, we're doing this right. Keeping it kayfabe.” Make it look real. Make the fans buy it.

“Theodore, we are not pretending—”

I cut her off when we reach our marks. “We'll talk about that part later. Let's go to work.”

She's going to learn to pretend. I'm not half-assing this. I have never half-assed anything in my career. I'm not going to start just for her.

Like before, Clara slides into her spot to conduct the post-match interview with Aurora. I'm off-screen, observing her. Sweat dots her pale skin; her half-up ponytail is messy from the match. She's still panting a little bit as I take in the rise and fall of her chest. I want to see her like that for me . Panting and sweating and absolutely wrecked from taking my cock.

It takes everything in me to push those thoughts aside so I don't miss my mark.

"Aurora Dawn, you looked— "

Before Clara can finish her sentence, I step in. Moving in front of Clara, blocking her from the camera as she slowly sidesteps off the screen. Aurora and I are in focus. We're closer than we were before, a few inches separating the two of us. Since I'm taller, I angle my head down to look at her.

"You looked incredible out there," I say, finishing Clara's sentence. My voice is a little breathy.

Her eyes are locked on my face and I hope that she doesn't blow this. This is only believable if Aurora is believable. If she fucks it up, this comes across as a bad segment that everyone online will rag on for months.

A smile tugs at the corner of her lips and she tilts her head to the side. "You think so?"

"I know so, Aurora. You are...absolutely amazing."

Before I utter another word, Jules steps onto the screen. She glares at me with dark

eyes and puts a hand on Aurora's shoulder. "Aurora." Her voice is quiet. "Come on. Don't get caught up in him," she warns.

As she pulls Aurora off the camera, we exchange one more look. My eyes drop down, obviously checking her out as she leaves. My tongue pokes at my cheek before I turn and walk away. It's clear to the audience that this is far from over.

End scene.

I don't get a chance to talk to Aurora after because she actually does walk away with Jules. I pout, watching them go. What am I supposed to do? Beg her to come back? That sounds pathetic. She doesn't even want to talk to me. I don't think I want to talk to her either.

The only thing I want is to stare at her. She's the prettiest thing I've ever seen.

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Chapter Thirteen

AURORA

Rise

Episode 570

Roanoke, Virginia

The next chapter in the story we're building is a friendship with Jules. A friendship with Jules means ties to Hext. It makes the betrayal at the pay-per-view even more shocking. It's easy enough. We knew each other before GRW. Friendly, but not quite friends. We're quickly becoming better friends now that we're seeing each other every week. Last week on Rise, she warned me about Theo. This week, she's recruiting me for a match against two of the other girls, as if she wants to take me under her wing the way that Hext did for her.

Backstage promos are beginning to feel a lot more comfortable. I don't love them. Public speaking is probably one of the most terrifying things that I've ever done, but the backstage environment is comfortable.

A lot of that probably has to do with Clara. She's bubbly and funny, even off-camera. She talks about her daughter a lot, telling cute stories about the times she's brought the toddler backstage and how she's interacted with some of the wrestlers. It brings to light a certain feeling backstage. Like the whole place isn't out to get me. It's just the brown-eyed devil who always feels like he's lingering in my periphery.

The producer gives his cue, and Clara, Jules, and I go to our marks.

Jules falls into this whole thing so easily. It's like breathing for her. Not even a second thought as she melts into her character, looking like an enigmatic goddess.

"Juliette, it's been announced that you're scheduled to face Sage Nesbitt and GRW Women's Champion, Carolina LaVile. It seems like you need a partner," Clara says.

Jules pushes her long hair over her shoulder, shrugging. "Sage and...well, whatever her name is—they're nothing. I could take them both down without blinking." Her blue eyes settle on me and she smiles. "However, you impressed me last week, Aurora Dawn. Wanna give me a helping hand?" She extends her hand.

I eye it before my fingers lace with hers and I nod. "Yeah, why not?"

Clara smiles into the camera. "Looks like that's all settled. Tonight, Juliette Stanton and Aurora Dawn will be facing Sage Nesbitt and Carolina LaVile."

The producer yells cut and the three of us girls easily fall into conversation about whatever comes to mind. For the time being, I'm able to forget about the bane of my existence who's always lurking around a corner somewhere, waiting for the opportunity to wiggle under my skin some more.

Forgetting doesn't last long. Theo finds me as I'm finishing up my hair and makeup. Shayna, the makeup artist for GRW, is a kind woman. Although she's very strict about moving in her chair and isn't big on conversation. She turns on her playlist of techno music and gets to work on your face. If you move once, you get a glare. Twice? She'll comment on how funny it would be to do your makeup in a very clown-esque manner if you do it a third time.

He ambushes me as I stand up from the chair, before I can make it back to the safety

of the women's locker room. "I'm coming out during your match tonight," Theo announces.

I still. "Why?"

"To watch you."

I want to say that he watches me enough. Backstage, during our promos. His eyes are always on me and I hate it. It feels as if they see right through me, figuring out all my weak spots so he can target them perfectly the next time we interact.

Instead, I ask, "Is there a point to that?"

Theo rolls his eyes as if he's explaining the concept to someone who's never watched wrestling before. "Tension. People are going to want to know why I'm watching you. You're going to get your interest piqued even more. Maybe I'll hop on commentary and make a few comments."

"Great."

He's following me as we walk. If I can make it to the locker room, I can end this conversation. I can pretend to like him on camera. That's my job. I can do that. I don't have to talk to him outside of the damn ring though.

Before I can turn the corner, he stops me. He places his palm against the wall, blocking me from turning down the hallway and keeping me from safety. I wonder if it's counted as workplace violence if I stomp on his foot and mess up those stupid shiny shoes of his.

"Roo, baby doll, I know we've gotten off on the wrong foot. Let me make it up to you. Drinks? I'll buy. Dinner? Whatever. We can start all over again. "

“I don’t want to, Theodore. I know who you are.”

He rolls his eyes again, exasperation on his face. “Yeah, obviously, I’ve never hidden who I am. Doesn’t mean I’m not offering a chance for us to start over though. I’m serious.” He pauses. “Call me ‘Theo’. Only my mother calls me Theodore.”

There is no way he doesn’t see the irony in what he’s saying right now, right? Looking up at him, I huff out a sigh. “You won’t call me Rory.”

“I hate Rory. I call you Roo.”

“Maybe I hate ‘Theo.’”

The corner of his mouth turns up in a little half-smirk. It would be hot if he wasn’t so infuriating. “Yeah, kinda picked up on that one. It’s all good. You’ll love me one day.” He shakes his head. “Love is the wrong word, actually. You’ll admit how badly you want me one day.”

Wanting him is the last thing on my mind. He’s gorgeous. He knows that. I know that. The whole goddamn world knows that Theodore is attractive. But I can’t get past it when I know what he’s really like. A dream hiding a nightmare underneath.

“Whatever you wanna believe, Theo .” I make sure to put as much venom as possible into that sentence before I duck underneath his arm and start down the hallway. Don’t look back, don’t let him think you care.

Theo laughs behind me. “That’s the spirit, Roo.”

The ring shakes as Jules suplexes Carolina, holding her body up in the air for a few extra seconds before dropping to the mat. The crowd pops. They always love watching hot girls be strong too. She checks to make sure that Carolina is staying

down before she returns to me, holding her hand out so I can tag in.

As soon as the referee acknowledges the tag, I climb up to the top rope, fully prepared to do a moonsault and end the match. In the back of my mind, I think about how amazing it would be if it really was the end of the match. I wouldn't have to deal with Theo. I get to the top rope, but before I can make my descent, Carolina is up again and she slams her body against the rope.

I tumble down, hitting the outside of the ring, right on the apron, before I land on the floor. Jules hops down to check on me, while Carolina bounces around the ring. The crowd boos.

The moment that Jules's hand clasps mine and helps me to my feet, the bass of a familiar theme song shakes the arena. The crowd tears their attention away from the ring and turns to see Theo walking down the ramp. He's wearing another one of his button-ups, another shade of blue. The world championship is displayed proudly around his waist.

He walks down to the end of the ramp, just standing there. His eyes are locked on me, like usual. I know it's part of the story that we're building, but I hate it. I hate it so much.

I turn my focus back to Jules, back to the match. I have a job to do. I climb back up onto the ring apron and through the ropes. People are torn between watching the match and watching Theo, waiting to see what he's going to do next.

Back in the ring, I hit the ropes, using the momentum to propel me forward. I clothesline Carolina, push Sage off the apron, then I back over to Jules; I tag her in. Jules hits the ring like lightning, rushing to pick Carolina up off the mat, and locks her arms around her neck. She lifts her body with ease, slamming her back onto the mat. A quicker version of her finisher, the 'Snake Bite'.

Rushing back over, she slaps my hand to tag me back in. I hop to the top turnbuckle without hesitation this time. Once I'm sure I'm steady, I hit my moonsault and make the pin.

One, two, three.

My generic theme song blares through the arena. Sage helps Carolina out of the ring and Jules joins me inside of it. I play the part of the giddy newcomer. I hug her and she looks unimpressed by it, awkwardly patting my back as we celebrate our win.

When we climb out of the ring and walk back up the ramp, we have to pass Theo, who flashes that charming grin in my direction.

"You looked amazing out there, sweetheart," he says so the camera can pick it up.
"You're a star."

I let the blush that threatens to take over my cheeks do so, and I don't make eye contact. Before I can open my mouth to respond, Jules wraps her arm through mine and yanks me to follow after her.

"Come on, Rory. I told you not to pay him any mind. Let's go."

Chapter Fourteen

AURORA

Last Kingdom PPV

Charleston, South Carolina

Backstage at my first pay-per-view is unlike anything that I've experienced in my career. Things always feel hectic backstage at the weekly show, but this feels like insanity. People are bustling about, trying to make sure that every single detail is paid attention to and perfect.

While I'm not on the card for a match, tonight is the biggest night of my career. Tonight is the night that I screw over Weston Hext to help Theo retain his title.

I haven't seen Theo all day, which feels strange. Normally, I can't escape him. I'll never admit that I've been quietly looking for him all day.

There's still time before I head into hair and makeup, so I take the opportunity to swing by catering. Maybe I'll see Theo. Wait . Why am I so desperate to see him? I never want to see him. Maybe it's the nerves. Maybe the idea of him yelling at me to make sure that I don't screw this up comforts me. Still, I don't like the idea of Theo comforting me to any degree.

There's a croissant on the catering table that's calling my name. I'm not wrestling tonight, so eating light doesn't matter. I snatch it, and right as I go to shove it into my

mouth, a voice behind me has me whipping around.

“You’re Aurora, right?”

Weston Hext stands there in all of his over six-foot glory. He has shaved blond hair, heavy stubble, and these baby blues that any woman would get lost in. Women around the world go crazy for this man. They have for years. He’s a veteran in the industry, although I’m not quite sure of his age.

“I am.” I lower the croissant from my mouth. Being covered in flaky breadcrumbs feels like a bad first impression waiting to happen, and I don’t want to make a bad first impression.

He holds out his hand, his wedding band glinting in the overhead lighting. “Weston Hext,” he says, shaking my hand. His voice is a raspy bass. “You can call me Hex or Wes. Whatever you prefer.” He has a charming smile. I can see why women scream for him and desperately claw toward the front rows for a chance to touch one of his muscular biceps.

Once our hands are broken apart, Hext falls into business. “You’re supposed to interfere tonight and cost me the match against Theo. Any idea how you’re doing that?”

“I...” I had planned to talk to Theo before tonight about this. I’m sure that he has some ideas. But I also want to be my own person. I want to prove that I can swim on my own, not that I’ll flounder if I’m left to my own devices. “I could pull him out of the ring when you go for a pin. Or toss him a weapon.”

“Yeah.” Hext nods. “You could. Or you could hit me in the head with a chair.”

“You want me to hit you in the head with a chair?” I ask my question slowly, as if it’s

my first time using any of those words in a sentence. Most wrestlers would prefer not to be hit in the head with a steel chair, even if it's gimmicked.

"It's a good way to draw some heat to the whole thing. No one's going to find you redeemable if you hit me in the head with a chair. It shows how far gone you are, how wrapped up in Theo you are, that you'd resort to something so violent almost immediately. I also know how to take a chair shot."

I don't love the idea of hitting a legend in the head with a chair. It feels so damn risky. What if something goes wrong? Accidents happen in wrestling all the time. I'd also much rather hit Theo with the chair. Like in the moments when his gaze obviously lingers on me for a little too long.

I nod anyway because Hext is a veteran and I trust him. He also has a good point. What comes off as more far gone than whacking someone in the head with a chair without remorse?

"Yeah, okay. I can do that...if you're sure."

He chuckles and nods his head. "Mm-hmm. Sure. I trust that you won't go psycho on me." His gaze leaves me then. Jules walks by and Hext's blue eyes follow her movements as if she's the only other person to exist. Seems like Theo isn't the only person with a staring issue. "I'll see you out there tonight," he adds before he walks off, leaving me alone.

"Mm-hmm." The phone is pressed to my ear as Janet rambles on the other end. All I want her to do is buy the PPV so my dad can watch. I know I'm not Stevie Nicks, but I think he'd appreciate seeing the biggest moment of his daughter's career.

He's been watching Rise every week since I've been on. Janet has sent me pictures of his eyes glued to the screen. Is he processing everything that is going on? Does he

even know it's me? I like to think so .

Janet sighs. "I don't know why they made this whole thing far too complicated. Asking all these questions. All I want to do is purchase—what is it again?"

"GRW Last Kingdom. It's on at eight. Costs \$59.99," I say, feeling like a salesperson. Nathan should give me a bonus for it.

Hidden in the back corridors of the arena, I thought it would be me and a shit ton of black production crates. I was wrong. I feel him before I see him. That sounds stupid. He's not some supernatural entity.

Although if he were, that would make so much more sense. A demon crawled from the depths of hell, sent to punish me for masturbating too much or something.

Looking up from where I've been studying my nice, thrift store purchased sneakers, Theo is looking at me with a raised eyebrow. I hold up a finger, telling him to hold on. All I need is to finish this phone call before he drives me insane.

Amusement flashes on his face. He's not used to being told to wait. His arms are crossed over his broad chest. He's wearing a pair of sweats and a T-shirt with the sleeves cut off. It's the most normal I've ever seen him. I've seen him in wrestling trunks. I've seen him dressed like he wants to be the cover model for GQ. Seeing him so normal makes me feel...uncomfortable. As if I'm seeing a part of him that I shouldn't.

"Aurora," he says.

I pull the phone away from my ear and fix him with a look. "Busy." When I put the phone back to my ear, I still hear Janet humming as she tries to find the PPV.

“Well, Aurora, I just can’t find it,” she huffs. “Are you sure that’s what it’s called?”

It takes everything in me not to respond with, ‘Of course I’m fucking sure. That’s what all the signs around here say. ’ But I don’t. Janet is in charge of Dad’s care. She’s never been anything but kind and gentle, but I don’t want to piss her off .

I sigh. “Janet, this is super important. Can you ask someone else to help? All I need you to do is find it and charge it to my card.”

I must sound more exasperated than I think because Theo raises an eyebrow and holds his hand out expectantly. I shake my head. Absolutely not. He’s not getting involved.

He snatches my phone from my hand.

Before I can protest, he’s taking charge. “Janet? Hi. This is Aurora’s friend, Theodore.” He smirks over at me. “What’s the problem? Oh. Easy. Your easiest option is to...”

Theo proceeds to give Janet an entire walkthrough of how to buy the PPV. He does it so effortlessly with all the charm that he can muster. Finally, he smiles and nods. “Have a nice night, Janet. All right. I’ll tell Roo.” I cringe as he uses that nickname in front of other people. I don’t want it to stick. It can’t stick.

He hangs up the phone, steals a glance down at it, then hands it back to me. “Janet got it up and running. She says she’ll charge it to your card. She’s about to make your dad his snack while he watches.”

I take my phone back and slip it into the pocket of my sweats. I’ve already spent forty minutes in hair and makeup. My hair is pulled back into a high ponytail that’s sleeker than I could ever get it. My makeup is a smokey grey eye with dramatic lashes, a

thick wing, and nude lips. All I need to do is head back to the locker room and change into the dress that Jules is letting me borrow.

“...Thanks,” I murmur.

“Stepmom?”

“Excuse me?”

“Janet, is she your stepmom? She sounds nice. Gives stepmom vibes.”

I shake my head. “No. She’s not. She’s...helpful.” I cut that conversation off right there. I don’t want to get into the details of my life with him. I don’t trust him. It would be stupid to trust him. Taking the opportunity, I pivot the conversation. “Is there something you need?”

“I wanted to make sure that you were ready. Hex said that he talked to you earlier. Something about a chair shot to the head?”

I nod.

“Right. That works. Here’s my thoughts...”

Chapter Fifteen

THEODORE

Last Kingdom PPV

Charleston, South Carolina

Sweat is dripping down my brow as my back crashes into the mat again. Hext stands above me as the crowd cheers, thinking that this is the moment the hero of this story finally dethrones me. Maybe anti-hero would be more apropos. Hext isn't the type to play the knight in shining armor.

Hext is on top of me, raining down punches. None of the punches actually hit me. Wrestling would be an entirely different sport if he were actually punching me in the face repeatedly. Together, we sell it to the world. We tell them the story of a villain getting the beatdown that he's deserved for so long.

When it's my story though? The villain always wins.

The punches come to a stop. Hext takes a step back from me, taking the time to gloat to the audience. He plays up the cheers as he signals that he's going in for his finisher. That's the opportunity that I need. While he's distracted, I roll out of the ring to a chorus of boos .

Now comes what none of them are expecting.

Aurora's been ringside for most of the match, playing up that budding mentorship she has going on with Jules. She's supporting her friend, who's supporting her mentor. During the right moments, the girls are huddled together in panic, looking shocked. Whenever I knocked Hext down, Aurora banged her hand on the apron to rile up the crowd to cheer for him to get back up.

You'd believe that the pretty redhead isn't on my side.

My feet hit the ground outside of the ring, and I begin to walk up the ramp. My right hand grips my left shoulder, selling the idea that I'm hurting. To some extent, I am. My body is sore. It's been a fifteen-minute high-intensity workout. Just because the fighting may not be real doesn't mean that it hurts any less.

Hext comes storming up the ramp to grab me and throw me back into the ring. His hand rests on the back of my neck, guiding me back to the ring. For a moment, my eyes meet Aurora's and I wink.

Jules's face contorts in disgust at the gesture, but Aurora looks back at me wide-eyed before I roll back into the ring. I know I should be on my back, but I want to see how this all plays out. I'm hopeful that it looks even better than I've imagined, so I roll onto my stomach, keeping my head low but eyes open.

Hext goes to get back into the ring and finish it up, but Aurora grabs his arm. Jules is shouting, asking what she's doing. Hext pushes her away from him, making her stumble backward.

"What is your problem?" he shouts loud enough for the microphone to pick up what's going on, for the people in the front rows to hear it.

He turns to get back into the ring. As he climbs up onto the apron, Jules cries out his name, "Hex!"

A crack rings out as Aurora brings a steel chair down on his head.

Hext's body slumps as he sells the hell out of that chair shot. Taking the opportunity, I scramble up to my feet. My eyes meet Aurora's and I try to sell the moment—the eye contact, the realization. I want everyone to see how I look when I realize what she's done for me. She looks up at me and drops the chair, taking a step back and holding her hands up in front of her.

Not wanting to waste the opportunity given to me, I grab Hext and pull him into the ring. It takes me seconds to hit my finisher with a snap. My arms slip underneath his, lifting him into the air, rotating slightly, and then slamming him back onto the mat. The referee counts the pin as the boos rain down.

One, two, three.

Jules scrambles into the ring, worrying over Hext as the referee raises my hand in the air. I don't care how goddamn scripted it is. Nothing feels better than winning.

Aurora climbs into the ring. She looks down at Jules and Hext, the former too worried over her mentor to acknowledge the betrayal by her friend.

I take the opportunity to observe how gorgeous Aurora looks today. Her makeup is all dramatic. Her hair is pulled back, showing off that angelic face. She's wearing a dress that makes her look like a goddamn goddess. It's black, off the shoulders, and flowy...except there's a very high, very suggestive slit up her thigh.

All I want to do right now is follow that slit up with my tongue.

She looks at me before she drops to her knees in front of me. It takes a solid five seconds to remember that we're live on TV right now and in front of a crowd of thousands. My cock twitches and I'm so damn thankful for my cup. Even I don't

want to get a hard-on on TV. I don't need the internet fussing over my dick.

I get exactly what she's going for, though once the blood stops rushing south. She's under my spell, here to worship me. Reaching down, I run my fingers through her ponytail in an almost affectionate way before they slide down to cup her cheek. My calloused fingers splay along soft skin, stroking it gently as the camera gets the shot.

That's the last shot before the PPV goes off the air. The world sees Aurora on her knees for me as I treat her like she's my pretty little pet.

Gotta admit, it's a lovely sight.

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Chapter Sixteen

AURORA

Don't ask because I don't know where the kneeling thing came from. The last thing I want is to hear his opinion on it. I know he's going to get it all twisted and jump to the conclusion that I want to blow him. That's definitely not the case. It was just something that felt like it would sell the angle we're going for.

After the PPV, there's a press conference. Things are even more hectic backstage. Producers are collecting the talent who's going to be featured. I'm not important enough to deal with all of that yet, but Theo is. So, thankfully, I don't have to hear him lament about me on my knees.

I seek out Jules. Unsurprisingly, she's with Hext. The two of them are off in a corner together and I make a mental note to ask later about what's going on between the two of them. Hext is her mentor, I get that, but it's pretty obvious that something else is bubbling under the surface.

I never took Jules as the homewrecker type. I'm not one to judge but...okay, so I'll judge a little bit if she's hopping on a married man's dick.

"Are you okay?" I ask Hext as I approach.

He shoots me this lopsided grin, and yeah, I get what Jules would see in him. He's the type of man who only got hotter as he aged. Young Hext was nothing compared to this older version. "Five by five, Red."

The confusion must be obvious on my face, because Jules laughs. “It means he’s good. Hex is a very big Buffy fan.”

‘Understanding him on that level is doing nothing for the homewrecker rumors,’ is what I want to tell her. Instead, I look back at Hext. “Didn’t expect that from you.”

He’s still grinning as he responds. “No one ever does.”

Jules clicks her tongue. “So that kneel. Rory, what the fuck was that? I mean it was hot as hell.”

Heat rushes to my cheeks. It’s the last thing I want to talk about, but I know that’s what everyone’s going to be focused on. “It...it felt like a good way to hammer home the point,” I mutter.

“The way that Theo touched you definitely made it better. I think you two really struck gold with that.”

Is that what I want to be known for? Kneeling in front of Theo? But I remind myself that this is just my gimmick for now. It’s my breakthrough into a main spot. I can prove what I can do—that I can stand out and put in the work. Lemons into lemonade. Nathan’s not going to make me stick with it for long.

“Are you hungry?” Hext asks, pushing off the wall. “Jules and I were going to hit up a diner or something—get a quick meal before we crash. Wanna join?”

I genuinely consider it. Food sounds amazing right now, but bed sounds better. I want to call Janet and see if Dad managed to stay awake through the whole thing and if he got to see me, but it’s late. She’s not going to answer. I’ll have to wait until tomorrow morning and call before my flight home.

“I’m tired. I’ll pass. We can get food after the next show, yeah?”

“It’s a date.” Jules grins .

We hug and I promise to get the dress back to her after I wash it. She waves me off, telling me that I don’t need to worry about that. Hext waves at me, and then I leave for the night.

The hotel that the talent is put up in is very swanky. Since it’s late, the lobby is pretty vacant. White tiles surround a blue and beige carpeted seating area. The chairs are all either dusty blue or beige with end tables near them. There’s a gorgeous chandelier above the sitting area that reminds me of a dandelion puff with different lights coming off of it. I walk past the poor night receptionist who looks bored out of her mind and press the up button on the elevator.

It dings open and I wheel my bag in behind me. Before the doors can swing close and I can get closer to being embraced by the not-quite-soft enough hotel sheets, Austin slides into the elevator with me.

I don’t really know Austin Slater. He hangs around backstage, but he’s not booked often unless it’s to lose. He has blond hair that he slicks back with a boatload of gel, and his skin is a little too tan. He’s tall and built. He’s like your quintessential California surfer-dude-turned-wrestler. Austin smiles at me, his teeth blindingly white against his tanned skin.

“Good night, yeah?” he asks with a grin.

I nod, not quite in the mood for a conversation. The siren call of my bed is getting stronger. “Yeah, pretty good night.”

“You looked amazing out there. That dress was gorgeous.”

It feels like he's trying to flirt, and I don't want him to. I always say that I don't have a type, and while I don't have a very deep romantic past, the few guys I've dated haven't all fallen under one category. It's all about vibes, right? With that said, Austin is not my type.

There's something about him that I don't feel like I'm vibing with. Or maybe I'm not giving him enough of a chance. I should be gentler with him.

"Thank you," I say, looking down at my shoes.

Before either of us can utter another word, another body enters the elevator. I'm overwhelmed by the scent of a familiar cologne and a presence that I can sense like some phantom is watching me.

"This is cozy," Theo says as he wheels his bag into the elevator. He forces his body between mine and Austin's, standing between us like he's chaperoning the eighth-grade dance. "Austin, give Roo a break. It's been a long night." I cringe at the nickname. Theo isn't fazed. "So, what floor is everyone on?"

"Four," I say, not making eye contact. We just work together. I don't have to like him. We're not buddies. This elevator ride doesn't need awkward small talk.

"Same," Austin answers.

"Mm, I don't think that's right, Slater. If I recall, you're on the fifth floor with me."

"No, I'm pretty sure I'm on the fourth floor. My room number is four hundred twenty—"

"—Fifth floor it is," Theo says as he presses the numbered buttons. Floors four and five light up with a faint yellow light.

It's the most uncomfortable elevator ride of my life. The door chimes open on the fourth floor, and I breathe a sigh of relief at my chance for escape. "Goodnight," I say politely to the two men before I wheel my bag out and head toward my room.

And then I realize that I'm not walking alone. The cologne signals the presence of my own personal demon that's hellbent on terrorizing me. Closing my eyes, I stop walking and take the deepest breath that I can.

"This is the fourth floor. Did you forget how to count—or read, Theo?" I ask.

I don't even have to see his face to know that he has that annoying shit-eating grin on his lips .

"I'm escorting you to your room, Roo," he says matter-of-factly. "It's late. There's no telling what sort of creeps are roaming the hallways of this hotel. Can't have anything happening to my partner."

I suck in a breath. "The only creep roaming the hallways is you, Theo."

"Better the creep you know than the one you don't, huh?"

It's late. I'm tired. I don't want to stand in the hallway and argue with Theo. I want to crawl into my bed and not think about him for a few hours. I groan, hoping he sees the displeasure painted on my face.

"Fine ," I say through gritted teeth. "Walk me to my room, Theo."

It's a three-minute walk max. I can handle him for three minutes.

Suddenly, I feel a warm, calloused hand sliding over mine. My eyebrows raise in shock, confused; I do not want to hold his hand. I'm not going to hold his hand. But

all he does is gently pry my bag from my hand. “Let me get that for you.”

“I don’t know if I like you when you’re trying to be nice.”

“You don’t like me at all, Roo.”

Most people would probably sound a little bitter when saying that. Not him. He sounds accepting of the fact. It’s like he’s stating something everyone knows. The sky is blue, the grass is green, and Aurora Bennet does not like Theodore Abrams.

I tilt my head to the side, agreeing. “Fair.”

I would be perfectly content walking in silence. My room is right ahead of us. Theo has other plans.

He clears his throat. “You were amazing tonight,” he says. Something sounds different in his voice. Normally, Theo’s loud. He could be heard down a hallway; he also speaks quickly. Now, it’s softer, the accent that I can’t quite place comes out a little more obvious. He lives in New York, but it sounds more west coast, like Jules.

I wait for the backhanded compliment.

And nothing comes. So, I momentarily concede my dislike for him and let a smile appear on my lips. “Thank you.” I hate how much his stupid compliment means to me. I like knowing he thinks I did well. I tell myself it’s because I want to feel like I did a good job on my first big moment, and obviously my partner who’s been doing this for a while and is at the top of his game, complimenting that is a good thing.

“Also, I gotta say it—that kneeling bit? Instant boner.”

And there it is. The expected comment from Theo. “Not my intention,” I say as I roll

my eyes.

“Doesn’t matter if it was your intention or not, baby doll. It was hot. Face it, you’re hot.”

That’s never been anything that I’ve doubted. I’ve never thought I wasn’t pretty. I’m not insecure. I don’t think I’m the hottest woman in the world, but I also don’t shy away from my sexuality. Unless that sexuality involves Theo. I don’t respond, choosing to click my tongue instead. My room is right there. I come to a stop by the door, fishing in the pocket of my sweats for the key.

Theo wheels my bag to a stop by the door, waiting for me to wrangle the key out of my pocket.

“You’re not coming in.”

“Wasn’t planning to.”

The look I give him portrays my disbelief. Theo always comes off as entitled. I’m sure he was expecting me to drop to my knees for him the second he started to wheel my bag behind him. I get the key and press it to the little lockbox. It lights up green, the door unlocking with a soft click.

“No, seriously. I’m a lot of things, Roo. I’m the biggest asshole that I know, but I’m not going to force myself into your room.” He stops me as I open the door. “Give me your number. ”

“Theo—”

“For work, promise. We’re working together. I want us to be able to communicate in case we have ideas. I promise that I won’t send you any dick pics.”

“If you send me a dick pic, I’m sending it to your mother.”

Something different flashes across Theo’s face. Before I have time to take in the emotion, it’s gone, replaced by his expected reaction. He cringes. “Ouch. Mama Abrams would not love that. Threat received.”

I don’t question what that emotion on his face was. Decide that maybe it’s better if I don’t think too much into things with him.

With a slightly amused snort—I don’t want Theo to think I’m enjoying being around him—I give him my number.

I stand by my dick pic threat. There’s nothing sexy about an image of a dick. What am I supposed to do with that? Fantasize about likely unsatisfying sex?

No, thank you.

Chapter Seventeen

THEODORE

O kay, so the dick pic idea is out. Believe it or not, that's worked for me once or twice. Send a picture, freak out that it was totally an 'accident', and be all cute and shy and apologetic. Some women eat that shit up. Clearly, that's not going to do it for Roo. Whatever. The fact that she actually smiled at me today makes up for that.

There's something about her smile. I haven't gotten one of the real ones yet. Not one of the ones I see when she's talking with Jules or Clara backstage; the one where her nose crinkles a little bit and her green eyes turn into slits. Those are my absolute favorite...

What the fuck is wrong with me? Why am I thinking so poetically about a smile? I should be thinking about her tits. Aurora has great tits. Not too big, definitely not fake. Don't get me wrong, I love fake tits. They wouldn't look right on her. I prefer hers the way that they are. A nice handful. I bet she has the cutest nipples too.

There. That's better.

Halfway back to the elevator, I see Austin walking toward me. That's a problem I'm going to have to deal with. He doesn't need to get close to her. She's mine. No one knows that yet, not even her. Once I have a piece of her...no. Actually, no. Once I have a piece of her, I don't want anyone else to have her. The thought of someone else touching her? It makes me want to break their hand.

“Austin, buddy,” I start as I close the gap between us. “I was thinking...” I reach into my back pocket and grab my keycard, holding it out to him. “Take this and take my room for the night. It’s a suite, you know, only the best for the champ. But tonight? All yours, man.”

When he stops in front of me, Austin’s eyes jump from me to the key and back again. “Appreciate it, Theo, but I’m good. My room’s just down the hall, and I have an early flight home in the morning. No need for the extra comfort.”

My jaw clenches. “That’s not going to work for me, bud.” I sling my arm around his shoulders, physically redirecting him to turn around and walk back toward the elevator. He may have a height advantage, but I have a few more pounds of muscle. “You’re gonna take my room upstairs; I’ll take yours.”

Austin doesn’t put up a fight as he walks with me, but I can feel his muscles tensing, trying to keep me from leading him further down the hallway. “Is this about Aurora?”

“Of course not.” Everything is about Aurora. “Although, speaking of Roo, why don’t you stay away from her? She’s new. She’s getting her feet underneath her. You don’t need to jeopardize her career, which would fuck me over in the process. She doesn’t need to be distracted by sex, romance, and all that jazz. You know how women are. They meet a guy and suddenly all they can think about is him.”

“I don’t think Aurora is like that.”

Neither do I. I’ve been engaging in some not-so-healthy social media stalking, and I can’t find anything about a current—or ex—boyfriend. No old pictures, nothing tagged. I’ve looked hard, trust me. All I’ve learned is that she’s thoroughly dedicated to wrestling and follows an insane amount of interior designers. I’ve decided that she watches home renovation shows when she wants to relax.

“Well, we don’t want to risk it, do we?” We come to a stop back at the elevator. My arm drops from around his shoulders and my eyes lock on his. “Give me your key. We’re switching rooms. I’m not asking anymore.” My voice drops an octave as I hold my hand out expectantly.

Nathan would never forgive me if I punched a coworker and started a fight in the hallway of the hotel that the company was paying for. That would be a bad look, and I don’t need any more bad publicity right now.

The way Austin is looking at me reminds me of a kicked puppy. He doesn’t want to turn this into an altercation. He doesn’t know how close I am to turning it into one if he doesn’t fucking listen. There appears to be an argument on the tip of his tongue that never leaves.

He reaches into the pocket of his jeans and slides out a keycard. “Here,” he grumbles in defeat. “Take it. I’ll be back in the morning to get my stuff.”

Who knew that it would be that easy? I’m not going to complain. I prefer things the easy way.

“Knew you’d make the right choice, bud.” I smack him on the back again. We exchange keycards and I immediately turn to walk away, not allowing him to change his mind.

There are two more days before I see Aurora again. Forty-eight hours. That sounds a hell of a lot more doable than it is. My thoughts keep drifting to her. What’s she doing? Who’s she with? No one...hopefully. Even if all my social media stalking came up empty-handed, she may have a boyfriend out there. Now I want to find that hypothetical man and tear him limb from limb .

Unable to escape my thoughts of her, I decide to text her. I’ve been back home for a

good five hours. I've hit the gym, done a load of laundry, and ignored phone calls from my mom. She doesn't want to talk to me anyway. She likely wants to yell about my ruined engagement and tell me how much of a fuck-up I am, then ask for me to pay her country club fees.

Roo

It's Theo. How was your flight?

Do I need to consider a restraining order? How did you know that my flight had already landed?

Lucky guess. You didn't answer my question.

It was fine. Did you need something or are you just being annoying?

I roll my eyes. She likes playing hard to get, huh? She thinks she's discouraging me from continuing to wiggle under her skin—she's not. She's going to break. She's going to realize how much she really does like me.

Men often pretend to be something they're not. They act like they're knights in shining armor until they get the girl, then they turn into raging douchebags. The girl ends up blindsided and heartbroken. 'How could I have ever fallen for a man like that?' All my red flags are right up front. No pretending is necessary.

I am not a knight in shining armor.

I'm not going to sweep anyone off their feet.

I'm a bastard and I fucking know it. Maybe that makes me a horrible person, but at least I'm honest with myself.

Actually, yeah. What are your measurements?

Did you seriously text me just to ask my boob size? That's pathetic.

Where did I mention boobs? I'm not the one with a dirty mind. It's a simple question.

What are your measurements?

Why?

Because I want to know. Can you humor me and send them? I promise they're not for anything creepy. At least not anything a normal person thinks is creepy.

You're not normal.

Maybe you're extra creepy and no one's called you on it before.

Yet she sends me her measurements.

I'm beginning to think I'm wearing her down already.

Maybe she likes me more than she'll ever admit—even to herself.

Chapter Eighteen

AURORA

Rise

Episode 573

Savannah, Georgia

My nerves are genuinely getting to me today. I feel more nervous than I did my first time on TV. All eyes are going to be on me after the PPV. People will want to hear what I have to say and see what I do next. There's no room for mistakes and that's what makes me nervous. If this goes over poorly, I'm definitely not getting that official contract. My stomach is flipping and flopping. I've felt like puking since before I even got to the arena.

The sun is high in the sky. The air is thick and humid. I can taste the salt in the air from the nearby ocean as I walk through the parking lot, rolling my bag behind me. A quick flash of my badge to security and I'm backstage, looking around for Jules. I need her. Hopefully, she's not too busy with Hext; I have no idea what's going on there and it feels like something I should know but simultaneously something that's none of my business .

Rounding the corner, I don't bump into Jules. Theo grins down at me, wearing a crisp cerulean, blue button-up. The sleeves are rolled up to his elbows, showing off his impressive forearms that I'm one hundred percent not admiring. "I've been waiting

for you, Roo.”

“Have I ever mentioned you give me serial killer vibes? You might want to get those in check.”

He chuckles, and I catch a flash of amusement in his brown eyes. “Funny. Come on. I want to show you something.”

“Circling back to ‘ serial killer ’ there,” I say, but despite that, I follow him. I can’t help that a part of me is curious. It’s not like he’s going to try anything backstage with our coworkers around.

Theo leads me to his locker room, which does give off a few red flags. Like an absolute dipshit, I follow him inside. The heavy door slams behind us. It’s a simple room like all backstage rooms generally are. The champ just gets his own. There’s a couch and a table along the wall with a few snacks. Theo’s bags are tossed against the wall, right next to the couch. Around the partition, I’m sure there’s a little bathroom set up, complete with a shower.

“I know tonight we’re only cutting a promo,” he starts as I stand there, crossing my arms over my chest. I nod for him to go on. “And I’m sure you either brought something to wear or you’re going to borrow something from Juliette again.”

How did he know I borrowed something from Jules in the first place? The outfit I brought from home is now in the back of my mind as I worry it won’t hold up to Jules’s sexy ass dress that the internet loved.

Maybe I stayed up way too late after the PPV, scanning social media sites for reactions. Sue me.

“Uh-huh?”

Theo walks over to one of his bags and unzips it, pulling out a bundle of fabric and holding it out to me. “I had my gear maker put this together for you. Hopefully, your measurements were right. I figured your other gear was...lacking. It was very amateur and babyface, and that’s not the image that we want to give off.”

Biting my tongue at the backhandedness of his comment, I snatch the clothing from him with a huff. The first thing I unravel is a top. It’s a very simple black cropped tank with some harness pieces that would fall over the tops of my breasts. There’s a built-in bra for extra support. Okay, not bad.

What surprises me is the second piece—a pair of parachute cargo pants. They’re black too with a neon pink trim. The total opposite of the shorts that I usually wear. When Theo said that he had gear made for me, I expected him to go heavy on the ‘sexy’ aspect. This comes off as functional and comfortable.

I’m speechless.

Theo leans against the wall, arms crossed over his broad chest. That annoying, almost charming shit-eating grin is on his face. “Just so you know, I’d accept a kiss as a thank you.”

A smile tugs at my lips. “It’s going to take a lot more than this to get me to kiss you, Theodore.”

“So...you’re saying there’s a chance?”

I wince. I did just imply that, huh? I have no intention of kissing him. I don’t hate myself that much. My self-esteem isn’t so low that I need his attention to make myself feel better. My reply comes off as a soft hum.

More surprisingly, Theo doesn’t push. Usually, when he sees an opening, he doesn’t

stop trying. “What are you wearing tonight?” he asks, gesturing toward my bag as an unspoken instruction to show him.

“Oh.” Carefully, I lay my new gear on the couch, treating them as if they’re so fragile they’ll shatter the moment they touch. After unzipping my bag, I pull out a pair of black skinny jeans and an off-the-shoulder white top.

Theo’s nose wrinkles. “I don’t love it.”

“I’m sorry? ”

“I mean, it’s cute, sure. But we need to look more...cohesive. We can’t do that when the shirt I’m wearing clearly costs more than your entire outfit.”

Ah. There’s the Theo I know and despise. “Well, some of us aren’t fucking rich, Theo.”

He rakes his fingers back through his brown curls and sighs. “No, I know. That came off way too douche-y, even I can admit that. Here.” He reaches into his back pocket, grabs his wallet, and pulls out a sleek black credit card. He hands it to me, making a wave of confusion wash over me. My brows knit together and Theo shrugs. “Take this. There are boutiques downtown. Buy something that matches me. I don’t give a shit about the price. Take Juliette if you want. She can buy something too.”

I blink once. Twice. Fully letting myself process what I’m being told to do. Go buy clothes. He wants me to buy myself something to wear with his card. It was the last thing I expected, and I’m left with a dilemma. Do I do it and feel like I owe him something for the rest of forever? Or do I wear what I packed in the first place and feel inadequate the entire time?

A sigh escapes me as I reach out and gently pluck the piece of plastic from between

his fingers.

Theo's been on TV longer than me. He knows better.

At least that's what I'm telling myself.

I like the city, I don't love the boutiques. So far, most of what I've found in Savannah has skewed toward the aesthetic of a southern housewife who wakes up every morning and makes lemonade and biscuits from scratch. Not a bad thing, just not what I'm going for.

Jules is driving her rental; I'm navigating. Every shop I've navigated the two of us to has been a total bust.

"All right. Last stop. If we're late for hair and makeup, Shayna's gonna get all bitchy. She has a tight schedule," Jules says as she pulls into a parking spot along the cobblestone street.

Willow trees swoop down, shading the road and the surrounding shops. The store we've stopped in front of is red brick, in the middle of a strip between a coffeeshop and a naturalist shop. The dresses on the mannequins in the window don't look promising. I have to find something. I don't want to go back and deal with Theo bitching because he doesn't like my outfit. I don't want to see the look of displeasure in his eyes.

Wait.

Why the fuck do I care if Theo is displeased?

I shake the thought away as Jules pushes the door open. A golden bell chimes above us as we're greeted by the scent of lavender. The girl behind the counter holds up a

hand in greeting but continues to sip on her latte, not offering much assistance. It's not a big store. There are scattered tables in the center filled with accessories, and racks of clothes line the walls.

"Let's get digging."

Jules and I start on opposite ends, working our way through the hangers to meet in the middle. She holds up a skater dress. It's pink with hypnotic rainbow swirls all over it.

"Cute, but I don't think that's what Theo was thinking."

She scoffs. "He just wants to see your tits again," Jules mutters as she keeps flipping through the hangers, wrinkling her nose at a distasteful turquoise paisley abomination. "I don't think he cares about you matching him."

"It's Theo. All he cares about are tits."

She pops her lips in a way that she does before she says something that's either enlightening or that she knows I'm not going to like. "You know, he actually doesn't usually fuck around with coworkers. Sage is basically his textbook type. Big tits, blonde, sexy. He's never even asked her out for a drink."

I don't know if that's supposed to make me feel special or not. I hate that a part of me does feel a little something. I'm not delusional. I'm a conquest for Theo. He wants to 'conquer' me and then he'll move on. He also recently ended things with his fiancée because he was cheating. Not exactly the signs of someone who wants something serious.

"He got out of a six-month engagement like two months ago," I mutter as I push past a button-up pink dress with leopards all over it. Not leopard print. It has cartoon

leopards with ridiculous looking faces all over it.

“Veronica was...” Jules trails off as she thinks over what she’s going to say. “I’ll preface this by saying I’m not justifying cheating. Cheating is wrong. Theo’s garbage for doing it. Veronica didn’t deserve that. But anyone who could see beyond her constant social media posting about how ‘happy’ they were could see that it was some fabricated trash.”

Immediately, I want to press for more. I want to know what Jules knows that I don’t, what she saw. Why am I so interested in Theo’s past?

Maybe there’s a tiny part of me that wants to see him as something other than a villain. I want to rewrite the narrative so he’s not some jackass who I’m forced to work with. I’m also a nosy coworker.

My chance to get more information is stolen when she gasps and grabs something off the rack. “This .” She holds up a sleeveless black mini dress with rose gold fringe and pearls detailing it. There’s a sequined flower design off-center. “It’s perfect.”

I tilt my head as I look at it. While I’m not a fan of the rose gold, I do genuinely like the dress. “Do you think it’ll match Theo?”

“If it’s not up to his standards, he can fucking change.”

We buy the dress and stop at the bakery next door for coffee, on Theo’s card, and begin the short drive back to the arena.

On the touch screen in the car, Jules’s phone notifies her of a text from Hext. Discomfort crosses her face as she pops her lips and tells the car to read the message.

The automated voice announces, “From Hex: Since you’re MIA, I’m checking to see

if you're still flying out this weekend. Let me know. Be safe, whatever you're up to."

A pause from the automated voice. "Would you like to respond?"

With a sigh, Jules says, "No."

I was going to press for more about Veronica, trying to figure out what Jules knows about that situation. This, however, is much more interesting. I'm quiet as I try to think of how to ask. "You're flying out to see Hext this weekend?" I try to word it as casually as possible.

From the way her hands tighten on the wheel, knuckles turning white, I can tell that Jules is already on edge. "I fly out to see him every week," she mumbles. "It's not like that. He has a ring and everything set up in his basement. We train together. I sleep in his guest room. His wife knows."

Nothing about that sets me at ease about her situation. If anything, it sends up more red flags. "Jules..."

"Rory, I need you to trust me, alright? It's not like that. I'm not like that. Nothing is happening between Hex and me. We just spend a lot of time together because he's taken me under his wing. He wants to see me succeed."

There's something more there. I'm not blind to how they look at each other, how they follow each other around, but I can tell by the look on her face that even asking is distressing Jules, so I stop.

"I got you," I say, deciding not to push further, even if I want to. "Take care of yourself, Jules."

The last thing I want is for her to get a reputation because she's sleeping with a married man. It could ruin her, and she deserves so much more than that.

Chapter Nineteen

AURORA

Rise

Episode 573.

Savannah, Georgia

“ O kay, okay. This is what I was talking about. I’m loving this look on you,” Theo says. He makes a slow circle around me, taking me in from every angle. I have never felt more uncomfortable in my life. It feels like every part of me is being scrutinized and observed. I feel myself trying to suck in my stomach, stand a little straighter.

But I also feel a heat building in the pit of my stomach underneath his gaze.

He stops before me, taking a loose red curl and holding it between his index finger and thumb.

I swallow, turning my eyes to look up at him. “You’re making me feel like a doll. Not a wrestler.”

“You are a doll,” he says, a wicked smirk on his lips. Before I can lash out about how diminishing that feels, how misogynistic it is, he tacks on, “You’re also a wrestler. A badass one that has a match next week.”

I tilt my head. Instead of asking how he knows that, I find it's better to assume that Theo knows way too much about everything. "Wow, you're getting better at talking to women. You been studying?"

"Stayed up all night watching YouTube videos, baby doll. Just for you. 'Course, then I started thinking about you, and my mind wandered. I ended up on another type of video site. Gotta admit, no redhead does it for me like you do."

Well, nice things don't stay nice forever, do they? The fact that I wrangled a little bit of kindness out of Theo today feels like a win. "Charming."

"Thought so." He winks at me, and I hate the way that my stomach flutters.

Theo's music hits. The bass begins to shake the floor beneath our feet, causing the stairs to wobble. I shake on my heels a bit, gripping the handrailing a little tighter. His arm reaches out and circles around my waist.

"I wasn't scared," I mumble.

"Sure you weren't. But I'm gonna take care of you," he whispers back to me, speaking into my hair. "Now, pretend you like me for a bit. Scratch that, pretend you worship me."

There's no chance for me to fire off a response. Theo leads us through the curtains, onto the stage. The boos are automatic. I've never been booed this hard before. There are thousands of people, and there's something weirdly empowering about this. I evoked a feeling so strong in them. They hate me this much.

Theo's arm stays around my waist as we walk down the ramp together. I stay tucked against his side, and I hate how much a little piece of me likes this. Maybe I've been putting my love life on the back burner for far too long. I'm touch starved if Theo is

getting to me like this today. He climbs into the ring and doesn't bother to hold the ropes open for me, impatiently gesturing for someone to hand him a microphone while I slide in alone.

That's how we planned it. I'm more obsessed with him than he is with me. I walk over to him and drop to my knees, like I did at the PPV. And like before, his hand reaches out and cups my jaw, making me look up at him.

My stomach twists. More heat pools in my belly. I need to get laid. I need to go home and spend an hour with my vibrator because holy fuck , why is my mind suddenly hyper focused on Theo's rough fingers touching me in other places?

Our eye contact lingers before Theo brings the microphone to his lips. His free hand remains on my jaw, gently caressing it as he addresses the crowd. "Everyone's asking why , asking how . 'Oh Gosh, how did the big, bad Theo Abrams manipulate the sweet, wittle Aurora Dawn? He must've hypnotized her! I'm sure he's blackmailing her!'" Theo mocks, pausing to laugh at himself as his fingers continue to trail over my skin. He stops and shakes his head. "It's none of that, folks. It's simple. Aurora's on her knees in front of me because she wants to be. She's doing exactly what every woman in the audience wishes they could."

Boos rain down on him as he makes that misogynistic, egotistical jab. I even feel the emotions pull at me. That's not Theo acting. That's how he thinks. He strokes my jaw one last time before his hand drops.

I miss his touch.

Yeah, absolutely. An hour with my vibrator when I get home.

"Tell 'em, darlin'."

He gestures for me to stand and I do. He hands me the microphone, and I push back all of my nerves. Public speaking still isn't my favorite thing. If I could get by on wrestling and never talk, I'd be the happiest girl in the world. That's not how things work in this industry.

You can be the best wrestler in the world, but if your microphone skills suck, no one's going to care. Wrestling is about making people feel something . Hope, rage, hatred, love, lust. It's your job to entertain.

"I've heard it all week," I say as I look out at the crowd, trying to paint a defiant look on my face and hoping that it works. "Everyone wants to know why. That's what you're all asking, right? Why ?" Shaking my head, I laugh. "Because it was the right thing to do! I worked my ass off for years to get where I am. None of you noticed me. None of you gave a damn about who I was until a few weeks ago! Theo? He noticed me months before any of you ever did. Theo sees me. Why wouldn't I be loyal to him?"

More boos. Boos are better than silence. I don't realize I'm breathing heavy until I lower the microphone. Adrenaline rushes through me; my heart feels like it's fighting to break out of my chest.

Theo's hand slips underneath my chin, tilting my head to look up at him. He gazes down at me, his brown eyes looking golden underneath the lights that shine down on us. For a moment, I think that he's going to kiss me. For a moment, I hate how much of me wants that. Instinctively, I take a small step toward him. I don't know what's happening. Our eyes are locked as we breathe each other in.

Then, Theo's theme hits. The familiar bass rings out and pulls us from the trance.

His hand drops from my chin and he turns to exit the ring. Quickly, I scramble to follow him like a precious little puppy.

Chapter Twenty

THEODORE

All I can think about is pushing Aurora against the locker room wall and making her scream my name loudly enough for everyone to hear. I've been silent since we left the ring and it's making her tense. She's flitting around the room, full of nervous energy. Seeing her on edge is a cute.

She's not a natural promo, but she's been working on it. What she said tonight is probably the most comfortable she's sounded on the mic. I wonder how much of it was real. Is that how she truly feels? Like I see her? Because I do. Fuck, she's all I see these days.

I almost kissed her in the center of the ring. My cock aches when I think back on it. I almost had everything I've been wanting for weeks now. Her lips on mine, her gorgeous body under my control.

She rummages through her luggage, grabbing some clothes. I raise an amused eyebrow in her direction. "Are you showering?" I finally break the silence that's been lingering between the two of us. "You didn't even wrestle."

"I like showering. It relaxes me."

A smirk tugs over my lips. "Something stressing you out, baby doll?" I cross one leg over the other, hiding the slight bulge in my slacks. "I know a great way to relieve stress, actually. Want me to join your shower and show you?"

Her green eyes narrow as she adjusts the clothes she's grasping in her arms. "No, Theodore, I don't want you to join me."

"You know, I can always tell when I'm really tempting you, Roo. You call me Theodore in that sexy voice of yours. I could make you—"

"Nope. Not doing this. I'm gonna go shower," she says as she turns toward the bathroom. She stops in the doorway, and I feel a glimmer of hope. She turns to look at me, leaning her shoulder against the doorframe. Aurora looks like sin in that dress that I paid for. "Alone," she adds.

"No fun." I pout as the bathroom door closes.

As I relax back on the couch, I fuck around on my phone. A quick search confirms that Savannah has a surprisingly decent club scene. That gives me a way to blow off some steam. As much as I want her to, I know Aurora isn't going to come back to my hotel room. We haven't gotten that far yet, but we're going to.

I'm not stupid. I see her resolve breaking the more we spend time together. She's beginning to understand that maybe I am a monster, but I'm the sort of monster that she wants to eat her.

When I hear something coming from the bathroom, I stop everything I'm doing on my phone, lowering it into my lap. I have to hold back a laugh.

She's so goddamn...cute.

Fifteen minutes later, Aurora comes out of the shower. Her dress is neatly folded in her arms. She's wearing a pair of leggings and a ratty old T-shirt. Seeing the look on my face, she rolls her eyes. "What's funny?"

“Your outfit is very cute, Roo. I’m surprised there’s not a salsa stain on your shirt somewhere. ”

“That’s my other comfy shirt. I’ll make sure to pack that one next week.”

“Aw, already dressing to impress me?” I place a hand over my heart. “I am flattered.” She’s scowling at me, and I keep going. “Was that Fleetwood Mac? That you were singing in the shower.”

Her lips form a cute little ‘O’ shape before she brushes it off, shrugging. “It’s very weird that you were listening to me shower.”

“Well, I had to hear if you were moaning my name,” I pause when I notice her freckled cheeks tint pink. Circle back to her being cute. “Instead, I got serenaded. I didn’t know you were a Fleetwood Mac type of girl.”

“What type of girl do you think I am?” she asks as she walks over and begins to repack her bags. I notice her take the utmost care with the dress, and that makes me smile.

Standing up, I stretch my arms over my head. “Haven’t figured that one out yet. Maybe you could show me. Go out with me tonight. There’s a club downtown that looks like it’d be fun. I could buy you a drink. You could enjoy it. You could enjoy me.”

It’s a risk. I don’t expect Aurora to agree to go out with me tonight, but there’s a part of me that’s a hell of a lot more hopeful than I care to admit. I want to spend some time alone with her outside of work. Maybe I won’t be able to prove that I’m not a total dickhead or anything, but maybe she won’t entirely hate me by the time it’s over.

“I’m okay.” She brushes me off, dropping her rolling bag to the floor and pulling up the handle. “Plus, we have that convention tomorrow, yeah?”

I make a face when she reminds me of that. I hate conventions. Hours dealing with the general public who basically despises me. It’s extra money. It’s good marketing; usually not good press, though. Not when I’m involved.

Convincing Nathan to book Aurora for the convention too was easy. Whether she likes it or not, we’re a packaged deal now .

I don’t push her to come out with me. Aurora doesn’t respond well to pressure, and I don’t want to pressure her. I want her to pick me. For some unknown reason, that matters to me.

“That means you can’t have some fun or something?” I ask, raising an eyebrow. But I let it go. “Your loss. See ya bright and early in the morning, baby doll. Text me if you need anything, all right?”

My hand grips blonde hair, trying to get my brain to focus on the beautiful woman on her knees in front of me. I didn’t take a lot of time to study her face. One look at her body and what she was offering me, and we ended up in the club’s bathroom. The graffiti-covered door is locked, but I’m sure it could be flung open with a single push.

Her neon yellow dress is pushed down, her tits hanging over the top of it. They’re nice—really nice. Normally, this would be doing it for me. Her head bobs up and down on my cock, her tongue swirling around my shaft. Blondie is pulling out all of the tricks. I squeeze my eyes shut, thrusting into her mouth as I try to concentrate.

My grip on her hair tightens as I fuck into her mouth. If I close my eyes tight enough, I can imagine glossy plump lips and red hair, pretty green eyes looking up at me. I think of Aurora and I swallow back a groan.

What is she fucking doing to me? I can't even get my dick sucked in a club bathroom anymore without her flooding my thoughts and ruining it for me. Blondie sucks harder, taking my entire thick length down her throat without gagging. I thrust harder. I just need to come. I need to come and clear my mind. Think of anything but Aurora for a single goddamned second.

She's fucking ruining me .

Her fake nails dig into my thighs, pulling me closer. Blondie slows down. She's getting lazy, and I don't blame her. It's not like I'm giving her much. I squeeze my eyes shut tighter, thrusting harder into her relaxed throat. "Suck," I hiss.

What would Aurora look like with her mouth full of my cock? Would she still glare at me? Or would she look at me with fondness? Would she enjoy it or would she do it because I want her to? Of course not; that's not who my Roo is. She would never put her enjoyment second. Especially not for me.

My balls tighten. I'm so goddamn close. I'll blow my load, give her some attention and then I'll bend Blondie over the sink, fuck into her cunt, and I won't think about red hair and green eyes. I won't wonder about all the details of that tattoo along her side.

My phone buzzes, and normally I wouldn't give a damn, but something in my gut is telling me to check it. Without pulling my cock out of her mouth, I grab my phone from the pocket of my slacks. She doesn't seem fazed, probably thinks I'm taking a picture or a video or something.

Like I'm some weirdo who keeps trophies of all the girls he fucks in club bathrooms.

There's a text from Aurora on my screen. Opening it immediately, I read it twice to make sure I'm not imagining it.

Are you busy? Can you come to my room? It's okay if you can't. I need someone right now.

Chapter Twenty-One

AURORA

A nother crash of thunder causes the hotel to shake and sends my heart lurching in my chest. I hate it. I hate it so damn much. There's nothing cute about a grown woman who has panic attacks over storms. It's not fun. It's not quirky. It makes me feel like a kid who never grew up. It's not the storms that I'm scared of. It's the memories of what happened on a night just like this. Rain batters the window of my hotel room, and I pull the paper-thin blanket tighter around me as if that's going to protect me from my thoughts.

When there's a knock on the door, I get up and go to it. After peeking through the peephole to check that it's not some monster prowling in the night, I open the door.

Maybe it's worse.

Theo stands there, one hand in his pocket. His brown eyes are trained on me, like usual, except they look more intense. "What do you need?"

If I look too deeply into it, I'd probably think about how frazzled he looks right now, as if he was concerned over my text. Theo wasn't my first choice. I texted Jules but she was busy. Probably with Hext. Not touching that right now. I don't think I'm close enough to Clara to ask her to come sit with me through a storm, and I don't talk to anyone else. Theo was the only other option.

I swallow. "I don't like storms." Understatement of the year. I hate them.

He doesn't laugh. I was thoroughly convinced that Theo would laugh his ass off once I told him. He gestures for me to step aside as he enters my hotel room. The door closes behind him and he's quiet as he slips off his shoes. "What do you need me to do?"

"Can you sit with me?"

"Yeah, I can do that."

It's tempting to make a joke about how this is the first time we've spent more than a few seconds together without Theo making it sexual, but I don't want to ruin what we have going on. I climb onto one side of the queen bed, sitting with my back against the pillows. He sits on the other, almost in the same position.

Silence washes over us. I worry with a loose thread on the sheet before breaking it off. "I'm sorry if I interrupted your night."

"I wasn't doing anything—or anyone—important," Theo scoffs. He's quiet before adding, "I was worried you were hurt or something."

"Nope. I'm okay."

Sort of a lie. I'm not okay right now. I'm keeping my shit together because that's what I have to do. A crack of lightning strikes something in the distance, making another loud boom ring out as if something's exploding. I jump, curling into myself.

And then Theo's arm comes around me. One muscular arm wraps around my shoulder and pulls me across the bed and to his chest. I don't flinch and pull away. Presented with this situation before tonight, I definitely would've pulled away.

Comfort settles over me, and I'm not sure how I feel about that, finding comfort in

Theo. I tell myself it's because he's a warm body in the middle of a storm. My eyes close and I lean against his broad chest, feeling the hardness of his muscles underneath his shirt. His callused fingertips lightly run over my arm.

We're co-workers who are working closely together. Being comfortable around him is a good thing. That's all this is.

"What would you do if you weren't a wrestler?" he asks, breaking me from my thoughts. Thankfully.

"Huh?"

"I'm trying to distract you from the storm. Get you talking. What would you do if you weren't wrestling?"

I want to say that I don't have a backup plan. Wrestling is the end all, be all for me. I never wanted anything else. But I also knew I had to have something in the back of my mind, just in case. Wasn't like I could do nothing for the rest of my life if I didn't make my dreams come true.

"Baking," I answer. "I'd want to bake. I worked at a local bakery to make ends meet when I was on the indies. I actually like it."

"I can't imagine you baking," Theo snorts. "Were you any good?"

"I like to think so. No one's ever complained when I've baked them something."

His fingers still idly run down my arm, leaving goosebumps in their wake. "Bake me something sometime," Theo commands.

"Maybe." I leave it at that before turning the question on him. "What about you?"

What would you be doing?"

His fingers leave my arm. They go up to my hair, letting the strands slip through his fingers. Why am I letting him? Why aren't I stopping him?

He sighs. "Probably...I don't know, work with animals? Maybe run an animal rescue or something? Is that a viable option?" Theo pauses before answering his own question. "Probably not, but that's what I'd want to do."

His answer takes me by surprise. I was expecting 'strip club DJ' or 'porn star' not rescuing animals. "Really?" I can't help but sound a little skeptical.

"I like cats. My parents wanted me to be a vet, but I dropped out of college after two years to pursue wrestling full-time." His brown eyes are so much softer when he says that, the genuineness coming through. For a moment, I think I catch a glimpse of the man underneath all the bravado.

Or is the bravado all Theo is?

"I bet they're really happy about that one."

Theo chuckles. "Eh. Give or take it. They like the fact that I'm successful." There's a bitterness in his voice. "Mom wouldn't talk to me for a few years. Only really started to come around when I won the title. It makes me look successful, and my merch sells better, which means more money."

Oh.

I want to press a little bit more about that.

Theo doesn't give me the chance. He's very good at avoiding things he doesn't want

to linger on. “What about you? Your folks supportive?”

“My dad’s always been,” I tell him. “My mom died when I was six, but I like to imagine that she would’ve been supportive too. That could just be me being hopeful. My stepmom was supportive.”

It’s hard for me to imagine what it would be like to have parents who aren’t supportive of your dreams. When I told my dad I wanted to wrestle, he immediately gave me the money for wrestling school and told me to chase my dreams. Showed up to every shitty indie show that he could.

“Janet?” Theo pushes. “See, I knew you had a stepmom.”

“Janet is not my stepmom. Ruby was my stepmom. She’s also dead.”

He pauses and then laughs. The humor on his gorgeous face as the storm rages outside the hotel is surprisingly beautiful. “Fuck, your dad has the shittiest luck with women. ”

So unabashedly. So pointed. It makes me laugh too, even if it’s morbid. Dark humor is how I’ve survived my life up until this point. “I’m pretty sure my dad made the same joke a time or two.”

“Good man. At least he can laugh about it.”

Could . I want to correct him, but I don’t. Trauma dumping on Theo doesn’t feel like the right call. We’re getting along for the first time. Knowing him, that could change at any moment.

Sometimes, though, I can’t help myself and I ruin moments. Curiosity gets the best of me. What Jules said about Veronica not being the greatest partner has me curious.

Maybe I've gotten Theo wrong the entire time.

After swallowing, I force the words past my lips as another flash of lightning makes me tense. It feels like an omen for what's going to be the ultimate mood shift. "Why did you cheat on your ex? So publicly. You had to know that you were going to get caught."

I feel it—Theo shutting down on me. The laughter is over. The joy vanishes and his brown eyes go dark. "Dunno what to tell you, baby doll. I'm just a selfish piece of shit."

"Or is that what you want people to think?"

"No. I'm genuinely a piece of shit, Aurora. I get it. You want me to have some tragic backstory and some reason behind being the way I am. Oh, he was bullied in school. Oh, his ex was evil and manipulative and he couldn't escape. No, I'm not a good guy. Never have been. Never will be. It's not in my nature. At least I can be honest about it, unlike everyone else in the fucking world."

I chew on my bottom lip. Looking into his eyes, I can see that Theo is telling the truth, or at least his version of it. It's in the way he's looking back at me. What's better? The monster you know or the pretty lies that most people present?

"You still didn't answer my question."

He rolls his eyes. "You are impossible." His arm is still wrapped around me, and he pulls me against his side a little closer. "Because I wanted to. Because I was drunk and the other girl was sexy and I wanted to fuck her. Because I was forcing myself to be with Veronica because that's what everyone expected. I wasn't happy. I was fucking tired of her bitching all the time. I wasn't home enough. She needed more from me. More time, more money. More. I got tired of fuckin' giving."

It sounds like Veronica was using him. It sounds like his mom uses him. Does anyone give him anything? But pushing for more information feels like a slippery slope with Theo. I worry if I push further, the wall will go up completely.

“At least you’re honest,” I murmur.

He tilts his head as he looks down at me. His fingers lazily run through my hair again, twirling a strand around his index finger as we recline on the bed. Rain is pouring outside, slapping against the window, sounding like machine gun fire.

He’s a wonderful distraction.

“Let me guess, you want a way to justify the monster,” he says, his voice soft. “You want to be able to say, ‘Theo isn’t so bad,’ but that’s the thing—I am. What you see is what you get with me.”

The softness of his voice screams honesty. This is Theo being completely honest with me. It should push me away more, I know that. So, why is this breaking down the walls between the two of us?

Maybe in the end, the truth is all that matters.

A crash of lightning strikes somewhere closer, lighting up the night sky. The loud noise that follows sends me practically on top of Theo. His arms tighten around me even more. I don’t fight it. I close my eyes and bury myself against him, breathing in all the safety and comfort that I can.

He doesn’t make a comment about my body on top of his. Surprisingly. His fingers continue to run through my hair. “Why are you so scared of storms?” Theo asks.

It’s my turn to face the truth. I can either lie to him or be as honest as he was with me.

“A year ago, we had this really bad storm back home. I’ve always disliked them, but it was never a fear, you know? Anyway, I was going over to my dad’s. I tried to visit as much as possible after my stepmom died. I didn’t like him being alone. I get there and knock. No answer. I knock again. No answer. There was no reason for him not to answer. Dad always called if something came up. Since the door was unlocked, I let myself in. That’s when I found my dad in the living room. He had a stroke.”

“Is he—”

“He survived,” I answer. My eyes focus on a spot on the hotel wall as I lay my head against his chest. There’s a little chip in the eggshell-colored paint. Not looking at Theo makes this conversation so much easier. “He’s still in rehab. He hasn’t regained his speech.”

“Janet’s his nurse,” Theo murmurs as he puts the pieces together.

“Yeah. Even if he can’t talk, he’s still in there somewhere. I wanted him to see my big moment. I think he liked it,” I laugh softly, clinging to that instead of the sadness that the memory fills me with. “I don’t know, but Janet said that he watched the whole thing. Didn’t even go to bed early.”

It’s not the same, though. I wish he could’ve been able to be there in person. I know Dad. He would’ve been front row, screaming his head off for me, even as the rest of the crowd booed. He’d be my number one fan.

I swallow back emotions so I don’t cry in front of Theo, letting my gaze zone in on that chip in the paint on the wall. I won’t cry. I can’t.

Chapter Twenty-Two

THEODORE

I don't often find myself speechless. Talking is something that I'm very good at, whether it's running my mouth, cutting a promo, or saying the wrong thing. In this situation, saying the wrong thing isn't an option. Believe it or not, I have tact. I'm not going to say something out of pocket in response to Aurora opening up to me about her father.

"I'm sorry, baby doll," I murmur, stroking her hair still. It feels like silk. She's so damn soft.

I don't mind this.

Ask Veronica—I've never been much of a cuddler. I'd do it because that's what's expected of me, but I've never really gotten it. It's always felt like a way to overheat and have your arms fall asleep. Aurora on my chest makes me understand the appeal a little bit more.

"It's, well...it's not okay," she says with a bitter laugh. "But it has to be because there's nothing else I can do. I'm paying for the best rehab that I can afford. My plan is—"

I interrupt her. "You're paying for it?"

She nods .

Aurora is funding her father's care all by herself. That bothers me. I can't exactly explain why, but it does. I don't like the idea of her dealing with all the stress alone. It can't be good for her. I want to help, but if I know anything about my favorite redhead, she won't outright accept my help.

I'll figure it out.

"I'm sorry you're dealing with this," I say and genuinely mean it.

We lay there together for a little bit longer. Every loud crash of thunder or crack of lightning has her body pressing closer to me. Her body's half on top of mine, and I'm hoping my dick doesn't poke her in the thigh. It's a natural reaction to having the girl of all my fantasies lying on top of me, wiggling against me.

I left that damn bathroom earlier without blowing my load in Blondie's mouth. She was very confused, and I didn't have the time to assure her that there was nothing wrong with her oral skills; they were great. She wasn't doing it for me because she wasn't my Roo.

As much as I want to crack a joke about Aurora wiggling on top of me, I don't. Now isn't the time to tease her and get her rolling those pretty green eyes at me.

I clear my throat. "Do you want me to stay?"

"What?"

"Do you want me to stay here tonight? I don't mind. We both have to get up early tomorrow anyway. I'm not going to feel you up in your sleep or anything." A pause.

"Unless you're into that."

"Theo—"

“It’s called a joke, Roo. Scouts honor. I won’t touch you. You won’t even know my dick exists. You’re still trembling. We’ve been lying here for what? An hour or two now? The storm’s probably going to rage all damn night. You need to sleep. I don’t want you calling me in two hours, crying about how you can’t. Or dealing with your grumpy ass first thing in the morning.”

Aurora chews on her bottom lip, and I so badly want to take that plump lip between my teeth and make her whine. Does she not understand what she does to me? She’s like catnip. Addictive. And I haven’t even had the chance to touch her yet.

Her head tilts to the side. “Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

She nods, unsure, but giving in to it. “Okay,” Aurora whispers.

Reaching down, I lift the covers and drape them over the two of us. My focus is on her. I want to make sure she’s as comfortable as possible. Her head settles against my chest, her body slipping off of mine to curl as closely into my side as possible. Slowly, she wraps an arm around my middle, and I kick the blanket over her feet.

That’s when her feet brush my ankles. I jump back, eyes wide. “Holy fuck. Why are you so cold?”

She laughs. Fuck. It’s a beautiful sound, too. It’s the first I’ve heard it all evening. I could listen to it again and again. “They’re not that cold,” she says, not removing the ice blocks she calls feet from my ankles.

“Not that cold, my ass. They’re fucking freezing,” I shoot back, trying to keep up the guise that I’m actually offended. I don’t try to push her away.

She's still laughing, pressing her feet higher up my leg, pushing up the leg of my pants as she does so. It's taking a lot to keep my dick under control right now. This is the most contact she's chosen to have with me.

She's light and playful and all of these things I couldn't ever imagine her being.

As her cold feet brush the back of my knee, I growl. Before she can keep moving the offending appendages higher, I reach down and wrap my hand around her ankle, stopping her. She squeals, her face turning to meet mine.

A flash of lightning highlights her gorgeous face. She's not wearing makeup. We're close enough that I can see every freckle on her face. I can see her intense green eyes, her full lips, and the way her nose is just a little bit upturned.

I'm not sure how long I'm staring. Aurora's giggles stop and she's staring back. Everything between us feels thick. And then I have to open my mouth.

"You're beautiful," I whisper after the silence lingers on for what feels like forever.

Color rises to her cheeks. I want to touch her more than I already am. I want to kiss her. Fuck her through the thunderstorm and replace that fear with only thoughts of me. Make it so every time she thinks of storms, she thinks of the way I slammed into her tight cunt.

For a second, it feels like she's going to kiss me. Yet she doesn't. Aurora slowly pulls her feet away from me. "We should sleep," she whispers.

I let her pull away, only to turn her body back into mine. I didn't fuck things up completely. Her head is back on my chest, feet to herself.

The moment is lost, but the night isn't.

I stroke her hair, my fingers running down her spine each time it completes a stroke through her silky locks. I feel her relax, except for the way her body shivers with every loud sound from the storm. I shush her gently.

Eventually, I feel her breathing slow.

She falls asleep in my arms, and I've never felt more whole.

Chapter Twenty-Three

AURORA

“Can you stop fake gagging every time you look at my coffee?”

Last night was wonderful. This morning, Theo is back to being Theo. I’m not sure if that’s a blessing or a curse.

“That is not coffee, Roo,” he shoots back, looking over at me. He has one hand on the steering wheel of his rental, the other resting on his thigh. “That’s sugar. You’re not drinking caffeine; you’re getting a goddamn sugar high.”

I roll my eyes. He’s been bitching about my coffee order since we picked it up this morning. “You are a delight in the morning, Theo.”

I should be thankful that he’s hyper-focusing on my coffee instead of not shutting up about my outfit. That was the running commentary until we got coffee. I suppose it’s my fault, though.

Since this was sprung on me last minute, and Theo seems picky about my appearance, I didn’t want to repeat the dress I wore last night or ask him to buy something else. Instead, I grabbed one of his merch shirts, cut it into a crop top, and paired it with denim shorts .

‘My face looks good on your tits.’ Those were the first words out of his mouth after I got ready this morning. So, Theo is obviously in prime Theo mode.

“It’s early. I slept like shit. You take up the whole goddamn bed, by the way,” he defends himself. He reaches for his coffee, a hazelnut Americano—black. “I have to go deal with fans who likely smell and are going to pay money to meet me just to try and talk shit.” Another sip of his coffee. “At least you wearing my merch is a highlight of my day.”

I roll my eyes—again. “Why do you agree to do the conventions if you hate them so much?”

“Money,” he answers.

I don’t believe him. I saw something on his face. It was there for a brief moment. Not long enough for me to truly figure it out, but it was there.

I think Theo loves this—the attention, but more than that, the fans. Jules said he takes wrestling very seriously, and underneath his jagged edges, I think he enjoys what he does. Even when that includes fan interactions.

Pointing that out will result in one of those annoying rants about how he’s definitely just an asshole who doesn’t like people.

“Whatever you say.”

We fall silent again. Spending this time with Theo isn’t nearly as grating as I thought it would be. I was dreading today before last night. He was...nice. He actually cuddled me without trying to feel me up. There was that one moment last night.

He called me beautiful, and the look on his face was so goddamn genuine. A part of me wanted to kiss him. More than I had when our eyes locked in the ring. I’m still chalking all of these uncomfortable Theodore-related feelings up to needing a night with a vibrator and investing more time in my love life. Thinking about what these

feelings mean beyond that is terrifying.

We pull into the parking garage of the convention center and Theo kills the engine before we get out and fall into step together. He eyes my coffee and once again fakes a gag. I groan, rolling my eyes. “Fucking Christ. You are impossible .”

He grins over at me, a boyish light to his brown eyes and he elbows me in the ribs. “Admit it, you’re starting to love me.

There is no way in hell I’m admitting to that—because I don’t love him. Definitely not. I side-eye him as we walk. “Love is a very strong word, Abrams,” I say as he opens the door for me. I step through and wait for him to rejoin my side. “I would be sad if you died, though, so I think that’s a good start.” I smile over at him.

He raises an eyebrow before lazily wrapping his arm around my waist as we walk. I don’t fight him on it. “Wanna know a secret?” he asks, leaning down to speak against the side of my head as if we’re not the only ones currently in the back hallway of the convention center. “I’d be sad if you died too, baby doll.”

I think that’s progress for the two of us. I offer him my cup of coffee. “At least try some.”

Theo eyes it as if I’m offering him piss in a cup, but then his hand wraps around it. He takes it, makes sure his lips can hover over the spot that mine had just touched, and sips from it. His eyes lock onto mine and I never knew that drinking coffee could look so seductive. His nose wrinkles as he hands it back to me. “It tastes like a burnt marshmallow.”

“I know; that’s the appeal.” I grin. Looking up at him, I raise an eyebrow. “You have some of my lip gloss on your lips.”

When I reach up to wipe it from his lips, Theo grabs my wrist and stops me. “Leave it.” He smirks as he swipes his tongue over his bottom lip.

My pussy clenches. Fucking stop, Aurora. Fucking stop thinking of Theo like that. It’s exactly what he wants. I swallow and try to ignore it, needing to focus on something else right now. Anything but my unrelenting desire to fuck him. Reaching into my pocket, I grab my phone so I can make a quick call to check on my dad .

Theo stops me. “Hold on. Let’s get set up at the table first, baby doll,” he says, guiding me into the open floor ballroom where there’s a line of tables along the back wall for the guests to sign at. “You can make your phone call later.”

I didn’t get a chance to make that phone call like I planned. The convention starts and then we’re thrown into signing. I’ll call and check on Dad at lunch. It’ll be fine.

People have more of an interest in Theo than they do me, and I get it. He’s the champion, the big star. His title belt is lazily draped over his shoulder as he signs autographs, looking as disinterested as possible. People expect that from him.

I won’t say I love being an afterthought. I don’t let it show on my face. Instead, I look at Theo like he puts the stars in the sky. All starry-eyed and schoolgirl because that’s my character. I worship the ground he walks on. While most wrestling fans understand how much of it is just character work, they don’t care about Aurora Bennet, the girl who likes to bake and watch home renovation shows and whose favorite color is sunshine yellow. They care about Aurora Dawn, the character.

That’s what I give them. Keepin’ it kayfabe.

I have my chin resting in my palm, when a mother ushers a little boy—I swear this kid is no older than four or five—up to the table toward Theo. My body tenses as I prepare for the shitstorm that’s about to unfurl.

Nathan gave me a rundown of Theo's last convention, where he caught shit for being rude to a kid and defended himself by saying that the kid deserved it. My real job is to run interference and play the role of Theo's handler. No more bad PR this year.

"Hi," the kid says shyly. He won't look up at Theo, his sandy blond hair falling across his forehead, obscuring his eyes slightly .

"Hi," Theo responds and then waits.

The mom puts a hand on the kid's back, giving him another little shove forward. "Jacob, tell him what you wanted to say," she urges.

Theo raises an expectant eyebrow, waiting, although I can't say patiently. He taps his fingers against the table, keeping that bored, aloof expression on his face.

Jacob clears his throat. He still can't look Theo in the eyes, keeping them on the plastic grey tablecloth. "I—I'm gonna be a wrestler one day, and then...then I'm gonna fight you for the championship."

I suck in a breath as a faint flicker of amusement dances along Theo's face. "Yeah? You gonna kick my ass someday, kid?"

Jacob's mother doesn't even seem bothered by the language as Jacob tentatively looks up at Theo. He nods in a slow, almost frightened motion.

There is nothing gentle about Theodore Abrams. He's not a soft man who hides underneath the guise of a professional wrestler. He is hard edges and broken glass. You touch him and you will get hurt. He doesn't sugarcoat his words. He doesn't lessen himself to make people more comfortable.

In a way, I feel like we could all benefit from having a bit more of a toned-down

version of him inside of us.

Not like I'd say that to his face.

When Jacob's eyes meet his, Theo flashes him the barest hint of a smile. There one second, gone the next. "Get tough then," he says. "I ain't going down without a fight." He stands up and puts the GRW championship belt on the table and taps his finger against it. "Touch it, kid. Closest you're ever gonna get to touching real gold."

Jacob reaches out and touches it gently, eyes going wide as his mom snaps a few pictures. Theo scribbles his signature on an action figure before his gaze lands on Jacob's mom. "If you ever lose the kid, gimme a call," he says with the most obnoxious wink.

I've done really well at minding my facial expressions this entire time, but that ? That causes me to roll my eyes, and Theo notices. Of course, he does. It feels like he's always watching me.

As Jacob and his mom walk away, Theo leans back in the metal chair and kicks his feet up on the table. "Jealous, baby doll?"

"Absolutely not."

"Mm. That felt a lot like jealousy. Don't worry, Roo. You're always my first choice, but hey, until you finally give in, a man's gotta get his needs met." He smirks, lazily dropping his hand down onto my bare thigh.

His hands are rough and calloused and send a shot of desire straight to my core. Heat creeps to my cheeks, and I want to run, but Theo's grip tightens on my thigh. He doesn't move it higher but a part of me wants him to. Even in a room full of people, I want his fingers to slip underneath my shorts and sink into— fuck .

I'm totally fucked, aren't I?

Chapter Twenty-Four

AURORA

Theo manages to keep me distracted throughout our small lunch break, asking me random questions to the point where I don't get to call and check on Dad. It's not until we're leaving to head back to the hotel, preferably in our own rooms tonight, that I remember to call. I'm not sure how much longer I can be around Theo without giving in to what he wants. What I want.

I can't admit that I want it. I can't give in. Once I do, what happens? Theo gets what he wants. I'm a notch in his belt. I'm left as another girl who's been used and discarded by the great Theodore Abrams. I deserve more than that. I know that.

But fuck, he's tempting.

Before we get in his car, I pull my phone from my pocket again. "I'm gonna check on my dad," I say.

"Roo," Theo starts, shoving his hands into the pockets of his slacks. "Why don't—"

"I promise it won't take long, all right?" I say. I step away from him, sitting on the opening of the parking garage, looking out at the city below us as the phone rings. Every ring makes my head pound quicker. I never take this long to call and check on Dad. What if something happened because I was too busy to make a phone call?

"Hello? Mission Health Rehabilitation. This is Jade. How can I help you?"

Weird. Janet always answers the phone in his room. Or Catherine. I don't know a Jade. Whatever. It's probably just a new girl. Not everything is weird and suspicious, Aurora. "Hi. This is Aurora Bennet. I was calling to check on my father, Tobias Bennet."

"Hi! We've actually been waiting for you to call, Miss Bennet. We want to confirm your father's transfer to Mountain View in the morning. They have a room all ready to go."

A wave of confusion washes over me. Transfer? Mountain View is the top stroke rehabilitation center in Vermont. They're expensive—like yearly salary for any basic job, expensive. I swallow. "I...I didn't request a transfer to Mountain View. I can't afford that."

"Oh." Jade sounds confused. "Your husband called this morning and said he set everything up, and we've confirmed with Mountain View. Are you sure this isn't a communication error?"

If she thought that would clear up any confusion, it didn't. I'm only more confused. "I'm not—" I have a hunch, and maybe I'm assuming things, but there's only one person I know who would make up such an asinine lie and meddle in my life. "Thank you for your help, Jade."

"Do you want to go ahead with the transfer, Miss Bennet?"

"Give me a few minutes and I'll get back to you." I hang up on Jade and try to calm myself down before I confront the devil who's wiggled his way into my life.

I should've known that things were going too well. Theo was up before me this morning, but I thought he was some weird early riser. I'm far from calm as I stomp back over to the smug asshole.

He's leaning against the side of the car, hands still in his pockets. "Aurora," he says before I can even speak.

"Did you call to get my dad transferred to Mountain View? "

"Baby doll—"

"Yes or no, Theodore."

He sighs. "Yeah, I did. Couldn't sleep last night, so I did some research. They're the best in Vermont. New York has better options, but I didn't think you'd want him out of state. If you do, we can have him moved, and you can stay with me."

He sounds so aloof , he's talking about this as if it's nothing, as if it's completely fucking normal for him to do something like this. It's not. It's definitely fucking not. "How—did you go through my phone?"

"Your passcode is really easy to guess. It's the date you got your first GRW gig."

I rub at my temple, trying to take a deep breath. I would get fired if I pushed him off of a parking garage. I don't want to get fired. "That's such a violation of privacy. It's fucking creepy. You don't do shit like this without asking, Theodore."

Frustration is painted on his face, and a hand leaves his pocket, running through his dark curls. "I thought this would be a good thing! Your father needs the best treatment available. I was making sure that happened. I don't understand why your panties are all in a bunch," he scoffs.

I can't help but wonder if he's this fucking dense or if he can just never admit to a mistake. I'm so angry that I'm shaking, glaring up at him. He won't even look at me, looking down at the concrete beneath us as I snap.

“First, this was a huge breach of privacy, Theo. I told you something last night in confidence. I wasn’t asking you to step up and save me from my problems. Second, I can’t fucking afford Mountain View! Don’t you think if I could, my dad would already be—”

He cuts me off. “I’m paying for it. I already paid Mountain View for the next two months. If your father needs longer, I’ll handle that too. You don’t have to pay for it, Roo. Maybe I overstepped here, but I...I wanted to help you.” His tone softens at the end, a glimpse of vulnerability shining through.

“I didn’t fucking ask for your help.” The words come out a lot harsher than I meant for them to. I don’t know how to deal with these feelings. There’s a part of me that’s grateful. It’s the sort of kind act that I didn’t think Theo had in him. Another part of me is beyond pissed that he’d overstep and take it upon himself to fix my problems when I didn’t ask.

“You didn’t.” His voice is clipped. I can tell that my snipping at him has crossed a line. I can see it on his face, too. It’s stone. All his walls are up. A line has been drawn between us again. “I chose to. I didn’t think you’d be so fucking ungrateful that someone tried to help you for once. I guess you’re happy playing the sad little girl who gets sympathy points for her sick daddy.”

“Theodore,” I don’t even know what to say. “It’s not...I...” The words aren’t coming to me. Did I take it too far? Did he? I know Theo was trying to be nice in his own weird way and now I’ve offended him by rejecting that kindness.

“Whatever.” His tone sends a shiver down my spine as if I jumped into a pool of ice water. He’s shutting down. The Theo that held me last night who laughed and opened up a bit is gone. The one who showed up the minute I said I needed someone has vanished. In his place is the version that everyone hates. The one that I hated until he started to show that maybe he wasn’t the devil in disguise. “If you want me to

apologize for overstepping, I'm not going to. I did what I thought was right. I wanted to help you out. Won't do it again. They already have my money, so let them take care of your damn father, Aurora."

He turns and unlocks the car, walking over to the driver's side. "Get in the car. Let's go."

The last thing I want is to spend twenty minutes in a car with him. I feel like a victim. I also feel like the world's biggest asshole. I never thought I'd have an interaction with Theo where I ended up feeling like the bad guy.

"No."

"Excuse me?" He rests his forearms on the top of the car, looking across it at me. "Get in the damn car, Aurora. Let's go ." His tone is more aggressive than I've ever heard it, except for when he's spitting venom at his opponents in the ring.

"No," I say again. I pull my phone out, holding it up. "Gotta make a phone call to confirm the transfer. I'll get an Uber."

Theo's rubbing at his temples now. "You are fucking impossible . Get in the goddamn car. Let's go. You're not taking an Uber."

"You're not the boss of me, Theo. You're not going to control every fucking detail of my life." All right, so maybe I'm being a little difficult on purpose now, but I don't want to get in the car with him. I don't think I can handle the idea of being so close to him right now. We're five feet apart, and the tension is thick enough that I can't breathe.

His eyes narrow and he glares at me before he throws his hands in the air. "Whatever," he hisses. He gets into the car, slams the door, and speeds out of the

parking garage, tires squealing.

I suck in a breath, push everything I'm feeling away, and call Mission Health back. Jade answers the phone again with the same bubblyness as before.

"This is Aurora Bennet. Go ahead and transfer my father to Mountain View. Thank you."

Once she confirms, I hang up.

How the fuck am I going to fix what just broke?

Chapter Twenty-Five

AURORA

“ I can’t tell if he was an overstepping asshole or really sweet,” Jules says as she jams her fork into her hashbrowns, bringing them up to her lips and taking a bite.

It’s a little past one in the morning. Today is a show day, but I haven’t been able to sleep. Knowing that I have to see Theo later today makes me nervous. Unsure. I don’t want to cause a scene and fight with him backstage.

So when Jules shot me a text and asked if I wanted to grab breakfast in the middle of the night, I jumped on it immediately. It’s a welcome distraction.

Except I didn’t realize that Hext was going to be here too. My interactions with him have been slim, so basically the chair spot and after. He’s intimidating. There’s something about his face that just...scares me. Not in a mean way. He’s an incredibly handsome man. He also looks like if you say the wrong thing, he’ll rip you limb from limb.

He crunches a piece of bacon before shrugging. “It’s Theo. Probably went for overstepping asshole and stumbled into sweet. The fact that you even think he could be sweet worries me, Goblin. ”

I haven’t asked about their relationship or even thought too much into it since Jules told me it wasn’t like it seemed. It just wasn’t my business; plus, I have my own shit to worry about. But sitting with them right now? It feels like there’s so much more

there, despite the wedding band on his hand.

The nickname just adds to that theory.

Jules snorts. “I grew up with Theo. I—”

I cut her off. “Wait. You grew up with Theo?”

“More like...adjacent to Theo. His dad was always sniffing around mine, trying to get on his good side. I saw the Abrams like twice a year.”

There’s a quick debate on whether or not I should push for more information about Theo’s childhood. As much as I want to scream to the heavens that I don’t care...I do. I care a lot more than I want to admit. “What was...what was he like?”

“He definitely wasn’t a sweet kid,” Jules snorts. “Like his personality didn’t change as he grew up or anything. He’s always been a bit of a dick. But his whole family is that way. His parents are very Hamptons trips and stock market conversations. His sisters are bitches. They once spent an entire dinner giggling because my dress was ‘last season.’”

“His whole family sounds like a nightmare,” Hext chimes in.

“For sure. And they were always the toughest on Theo because he’s the only boy.”

“He was going to be a veterinarian before he got into wrestling,” I say, taking a sip from my orange juice. “He told me he did a few years in college for that before he decided to wrestle.”

Jules snorts. “Being a vet definitely wouldn’t have been good enough for Theo’s parents.”

I'm officially at the crossroads of whether or not I should press for more. I could easily leave it like it is, just take what Jules has told me already. But I'm curious, and I know that Theo won't answer my questions—if we ever talk to each other again after our fight in the parking garage.

“What about Veronica?” I ask. My curiosity had been piqued by the idea of his former fiancée since the moment Theo entered my life. Jules has painted it out like there was more to meet the eye since the beginning. Theo makes it seem like he's the huge fuck up. There's a truth lying between those two options, and I want to find it.

As soon as I mention Veronica, Hext groans. His blue eyes look over at Jules before they settle back on me. “Please don't get her started on Veronica.”

She gives his bicep a little shove. “I'm not going to ‘get started.’” She uses air quotes. “Veronica's a bitch. We had a huge fight backstage a few months ago. The dirt sheets sorta picked up on it but it got glossed over when Theo had his whole argument with a kid at a convention or whatever.”

If I said I didn't check the dirt sheets, I'd be lying. Before I got signed, they were the closest I could get to having insider information about the big leagues. Newsletters and websites were ‘journalists’ report on wrestling rumors, from who's getting signed or fired, to who's planned to win the title next. Half the shit is made up for clicks or overexaggerated, but I don't remember reading anything about Jules getting in fight with Veronica.

“I had to pick her ass up and carry her away before she got fired,” grumbles Hext.

Jules seems to ignore him as she settles back in the booth, pushing her plate away from her so she can really dive into the gossip. “So, we were in Vegas a few months ago. Theo came up with the idea of having Vegas showgirls escort him out for his entrance, and Nathan thought it was pretty damn genius. Anyway, long story short,

they did it. It looked great. Really fit him.

“On the same day, Veronica was backstage with him because she’d wanted to come to Vegas. She threw a whole ass fit when he came back from his promo. Like demeaning him, screaming at him. He’d touched one of the showgirls on the hip, which seems pretty fucking tame for Theo, right?

“I’m not under some belief the guy is a saint, but you don’t need to bring your shit to work. She doesn’t need to tell him what a piece of shit he is, what a shitty lay he is, etcetera, just because of something he did for work . And you know, not in front of his co-workers either. Theo actually apologized to her and gave her his card to go shopping. Although that was after I told her what a bitch she was being.”

Sawing off a piece of my syrup-covered waffle, I chew on that as I let what she said soak in. Does anything Veronica did justify cheating? No. No one deserves to be betrayed. That’s what the moral side of me says. But if I was in the same position as Theo, feeling stuck and demeaned, would I still be so morally high? I don’t know. It’s a slippery slope.

“He gave me his card to go shopping.” I slowly set my cup down as the realization dawns on me. “When we went shopping in Savannah on Theo’s dime.”

“That was probably Theo trying to win you over, make him like you more. Money rules everything in his eyes.”

I groan. This man is so goddamn complicated. He’s a dickbag, but he’s trying. He keeps trying, and I keep giving him nothing. I don’t owe Theo a damn thing, but...maybe he deserves for me to meet him halfway. Maybe I need to try more.

“I don’t like him being layered. He’s convinced he’s just an asshole.”

“Both can be true,” Hext adds. “He’s definitely an asshole, but maybe that’s not all he is. There’s more to him than his assholery. I guess. Jules is convinced of it. Personally? Undecided.”

“Have you talked to him since you blew up on him?” Jules asks.

“Nope,” I say, popping the ‘p’. “He hasn’t tried to talk to me either. ”

“Well, tomorrow’s his birthday. So...maybe try to talk to him at work tomorrow?”

I planned on giving him the silent treatment unless we were in front of a camera, but now I feel like a dick if I do that. It’s his birthday. Well, shit. “I don’t wanna talk to him,” I mumble. Thinking back to the conversation that we had the night of the thunderstorm, I get an idea. “Do either of you have a kitchenette in your hotel room?”

“Hex does,” Jules volunteers. I don’t push to ask how or why she knows that. One thing at a time. Deciphering what relationship my work bestie has with her older, married mentor is not at the top of my to do list right now. It feels a lot like the less I know about it, the better.

“Can I come to your room tomorrow morning?” I ask.

Hext shrugs. “Don’t care.”

This plan is either a great idea, or it’s going to come back to bite me in the ass. So far, I’m not convinced it won’t be the latter.

Chapter Twenty-Six

THEODORE

Rise

Episode 574

New Orleans, Louisiana

I don't want to be here.

It's my birthday. The company put out a stereotypical social media post to wish me a happy birthday, but my coworkers don't give a single shit. I haven't worked hard to make friends here.

I tried with Aurora. I was nice, and she spat in my face and threw a hissy fit because I wanted to help her. We haven't spoken since the parking garage. I texted her—multiple times—but she left me on read. Fuck it. Fine. Whatever. This is why I don't bother being nice; it always comes back to bite me in the ass.

I spent most of my weekend drunk, spending time in nightclubs, but I couldn't go home with anyone. I had offers, but none of them were a spunky redhead whose laugh became the highlight of my week until I crossed a line.

Pushing open the door to the shitty locker room of this venue, I'm moderately surprised when I see Aurora already inside. She's leaning against the white brick

back wall.

“What do you want?” I sigh. Just because we’re working together doesn’t mean we have to hang out. We tried. It went to shit. She doesn’t have to spend her time around me if she’s going to glare at me and tear me a new one anytime I open my mouth.

She rolls her eyes. “Whatever happened to ‘hi, how are you?’”

I push my rolling suitcase against the wall, keeping my back to her so she can’t see my face. “Why would I waste my time asking? I don’t care how you are. I wish you were far away from me right now.” Lies .

All I want is for her to be close to me, but she wouldn’t even get in my fucking car. My reasons didn’t matter. She didn’t want to hear me out.

Finally, I turn to look at her. Why does she have to be so goddamn stunning? She’s wearing leggings that highlight the curve of her hips and a white tank top that hugs her breasts. There’s a little sliver of skin visible between the tank top and the leggings, and I see a bit of the flower tattoo that’s haunted me from the moment I first laid eyes on her. I want to trace it with my tongue.

Her green eyes are on me as she pushes off the wall. “All right.” She goes to walk out the door but pauses, holding up a small Tupperware container. “I made you a cupcake...for your birthday.”

It’s hard to maintain this pissed-off energy when she says that she baked me a cupcake. I didn’t even know she knew it was my birthday. I didn’t expect her to give a shit, but she does. At least a little bit. I don’t want to show her how weak I am. I don’t want her to know that she’s dug her way underneath my skin and built a home there.

We're supposed to be pissed off at each other.

"I don't want your cupcake, Roo."

I watch her stiffen. She really hates that damn nickname, so I use it anytime I can. I like calling her something that no one else does.

She shakes off whatever annoyance she feels but doesn't continue out the door. She pops the lid off of the container, and I get a good look at the cupcake. It's chocolate with dark blue icing and little glittery gold sprinkles on top. Her eyes lock onto mine before she runs her finger through the icing and brings it up to her lips, sucking the sweetness from her finger.

"It's good," she says once she pops her finger out of her mouth.

My cock stirs in my sweats. I have never wanted a cupcake more in my life.

"Give it here." I reach for it.

"Mm, no." She repeats the action, running her finger through the icing again and again sucking it off. Slower this time. Aurora knows what she's doing.

My cock is awake and it needs her. I don't even bother trying to tuck it up in my waistband. I reach out, trying to grab the cupcake from her hand, but Aurora holds it up. As if she can hold it out of my reach. I have a good six inches on her. I reach for it again and she steps backward.

We play this game for a few moments. Me trying to get the cupcake from her, and Aurora avoiding me until she's back against the white brick wall. My body is pressed against hers, my erection obvious pressed against her thigh. She's looking up at me, wide-eyed.

Her eyes darken, and for the third time, she runs her finger through the icing. The cupcake is practically bare of icing now. “Are you sure you don’t want a taste, Theo?”

She brings her finger to her mouth but doesn’t suck the icing from it this time. Instead, she licks it, letting the icing sit on her tongue. When her eyes lock onto mine again, I see the dare in them.

How do I deny this?

I give in to what I’ve wanted for months .

Leaning in, I slowly run my tongue over hers, licking the icing from her tongue. Sugar floods my tastebuds, but also the distinct taste of her. Her eyes widen like she wasn’t expecting me to take her little dare. If there’s one thing she should know about me, it’s that I don’t back down.

“Delicious,” I murmur before I lean in and fully press my lips to hers.

I’m giving into everything I want. It’s her. A deep longing that’s settled in the pit of my stomach, desperate for her. My hand slides into her red hair, cupping the back of her head as I pull her in. My heart is thudding in my chest, hammering away. When Aurora starts to kiss me back, there’s no stopping.

I have her pinned to the wall with my body, grinding my hips into hers. Trying to find some relief, but it’s not enough. I need more. I need her. I’ve needed her.

Her tongue flicks against mine, tasting me as I taste her. Her hand comes to my chest, and I think she’s going to push me again. I’d let her. I wouldn’t force this on her, but I want her. Need her. She doesn’t push me away. Her slender fingers twist into the material of my t-shirt, pulling me in deeper as her tongue teases mine, and I swipe my

tongue in her mouth, collecting any remnants of icing.

She whines into the kiss, and I've never felt weaker. I want to hear that whine over and over again. I want to record it and play it on repeat. That single sound is going to bring me to my knees.

There's a thud, and I realize that Aurora's dropped the cupcake. Doesn't matter. I don't give a single fuck about that cupcake right now.

My teeth gently scrape over her bottom lip as the kiss breaks. My forehead is pressed against hers, my hand still cupping the back of her head. We're breathless, panting. She's looking up at me with blown pupils and eyes that are begging for more.

"Tell me to stop," I whisper, looking down at her. "Fucking tell me no right now, Roo." I clench my hand at my side, so damn hard that my short nails are able to dig into my palm. It's taking every ounce of my self-control to not rip her clothes from her right now.

If she doesn't, I'm not stopping. I'm going to take what I want. I don't care how awkward this makes working together. I don't care if she hates me and if she's the biggest pain in the ass that I've ever met.

Slowly, she shakes her head. "Why would I?"

"Because I'm going to ruin you," I whisper back to her. My fingers run down her side, stopping at her hip. "I'm going to make it so you can never think of anyone else. You'll always come crawling back to me."

Her teeth worry her bottom lip as she thinks it over. Then she whispers the words that will be my demise: "Ruin me, Theo."

My lips are on hers again. There's nothing gentle. My tongue needs to be inside her mouth. I need to taste more of her. Swallow down every bit of her. I tug her closer, rutting against her thigh so she can feel what she does to me.

When I pull away from her lips, there's still a string of saliva connecting the two of us. I lick it and watch as her eyes flutter.

Moving my lips down to her neck, I pause to inhale her scent. She's so goddamn sweet. Sweeter than any cupcake. I work a trail downward, over her collarbone and shoulder, playfully nipping. I want to leave bruises. I want to leave marks, but I can't risk anyone knowing.

Nathan wouldn't be happy if he knew my debauchery had extended into my work life.

One thing is on my mind. I drop to my knees, my hands keeping her pinned against the wall. My fingers hook into the waistband of her leggings and with a glance up at Aurora, seeing the glazed look in her eyes, I rip them down, helping her out of them.

She doesn't put up a fight. Her eyes are glazed over with white hot need, chest heaving as she steps out of them. She wants this as badly as I do.

I've never done this before. At least not without the girl pouting and begging and telling me I owe her. I don't even know why I feel like I have to do this right now, but I do.

Her pretty little pussy is right in front of my face, the landing strip of soft red hair makes it look even prettier. I put one of her legs over my shoulder and without any warning, I bury my face in her sweet cunt. Her fingers shoot to my hair, tangling in the curls and holding me in place. Not like she has to; there's nowhere else I'd rather be.

My tongue runs up her slit, teasing her and tasting how wet she is. I chuckle, stealing a glance up at her. “Aw, sweet thing, is someone needy for me? Someone desperate for my tongue inside of her cunt?”

“Shut up,” she hisses, gripping my hair a little tighter, trying to pull me closer.

“Uh-uh.” I run my tongue along her slit again, biting back a groan. “Say it, baby. Tell me you want my tongue in your pussy and I’ll give it to you. I need to hear you say it, Roo.”

Aurora groans in frustration, trying to buck her hips against my face. “Theo.”

“Say it, baby doll. Come on. Beg for my tongue in that tight cunt of yours.” I bury my face between her thighs and take a deep breath, my eyes rolling back. My cock is screaming that it wants to plunge into her. I lightly blow over her clit, savoring the way her thighs quake. “Fuck, Roo, please.” It comes out as a pathetic fucking whimper. Why am I the one begging? “Do it for me, baby. Beg. I want it so badly.”

It feels like I’m teasing myself more than her at this point. Thank God my mouth is hidden because I’m drooling. I want to eat her pussy more than I’ve ever wanted anything in my entire life.

She whines and keeps trying to pull me closer, but I won’t give in. I’m a stubborn bastard and I want to see her break for me. Aurora’s fighting it—hard, but I see her green eyes soften as they relent, as she gives in.

Her grip on my hair tightens, hips rocking toward my face. “Theo,” she whines my name and I feel like I’m floating. “Please, eat my pussy. Please? I need your tongue.”

“Damn right, you do.”

As fun as it would be to keep her begging, I'm only torturing myself in the long run. I need this, too. Spreading her with my index and middle finger, I bury my face between the apex of her thighs. My tongue slides up and down her slit, collecting all of those sweet juices before I focus my attention on her clit. Sucking it into my mouth, my tongue flicks at the swollen nub.

Above me, Aurora is gasping. Her fingers stay in my hair. The sounds coming from her are going to be ingrained in my head. Those soft little gasps and cries are music to my ears. I slip two fingers into her pussy, feeling her juices drip onto my hand as I begin to fuck her with them.

All I can think about is making her come. I need to. I've needed to since the moment I first saw her. There's not a better birthday present that I can think of than having her come all over my face, crying out my name. I'm determined.

My fingers curl against the spongy spot inside of her, pressing up against it as my tongue swirls around her clit. I bounce between sucking it and gently teasing it, figuring out which makes my Roo cry out louder for me. Her hips rock against my face, her fingers tighten in my hair.

"Theo!" She gasps out my name and I don't care if the rest of the goddamn roster hears us. Nathan could walk in right now and I wouldn't stop.

I look up at her, my tongue still stroking her clit as my fingers fuck into her. My eyes are begging. I'm weak for her. I don't care. I need this as badly as she does at this point .

Her pussy squeezes around my fingers as the first wave of her orgasm crests. The cry she makes is more beautiful than any other I've heard. I don't stop. I guide her through her orgasm with my fingers still inside of her.

“Good girl,” I murmur as I pull my lips away from her.

My chin is soaked. I lick my lips, tasting her salty sweetness. There’s a wet spot on my sweats from my cock leaking, desperate to replace my fingers. She doesn’t know what she does to me. When I finally pull my fingers from her, they’re dripping. Bringing them up to my lips, I savor the last taste of Aurora.

Looking at her now, she’s vision. A Renaissance painting. Flushed and panting. Her pretty eyes are wide as she looks down at me and I flash a smile that makes the devil look innocent.

Rising to my feet, my arm wraps around her waist. “Happy fucking birthday to me.”

I press against her, grind my cock against her sensitive core. I need to be inside of her.

I ask without words and my answer comes as Aurora’s fingers slip into the waistband of my sweats. She yanks them down to my knees in one swift motion. My cock springs forward, precum leaking from the thick, pink tip. When her soft hand wraps around my shaft, I feel like my knees are going to buckle.

“I made you a cupcake,” she murmurs as she strokes my cock.

“Didn’t want it,” I respond. “Found something tastier.”

Leaning up, she presses her lips to mine. I feel her tongue swiping over my lips, collecting the remnants of her release. She pulls away with a smile. “You’re right. Tastier.”

I fucking can’t. Can’t hold back. Can’t wait any longer. I lift her and her hand releases my cock. Once her legs are secured around my waist as I keep her pressed

against the wall, I press inside of her. There's no hesitation. There's no more preparation. I don't care if it hurts. I know she's wet. I know she wants this as much as I do. Her head falls back against the wall, a cry spilling from her lips .

“Fuck,” I hiss. Her cunt is wrapped around me so goddamn tightly. Wet and warm and home.

I pound into her. Fast, hard strokes of my cock as her hips begin to move to meet mine as we set a pace. Rough and desperate. This is need.

“You're stuck in my fucking head, Roo,” I hiss as she moans, burying my face in the crook of her shoulder. “Can't stop fucking thinking about you. When I wrap my hand around my cock, I think of you. When I get a shot at another girl, I imagine you. You're... fuck . What are you doing to me?”

My fingers hook underneath my arms, gripping my back, pulling me against her. She whines and moans, right in my ear. The sound is driving me fucking crazy.

My hips switch to a punishing speed. I don't think she knows what she's doing to me. She just exists and for that reason, she's my weakness. The locker room fills with the sounds of moans and grunts. Our bodies slapping together as I take what I've wanted since the minute I walked into that shitty venue, since she became the only thing I can ever think about.

I drive her to another orgasm. Her nails dig into my back and I don't care if she leaves marks in her wake. I don't care if the internet starts to obsess over the claw marks. I don't care if Nathan yells at me. As long as she keeps making those pretty cries for me, I'm so fucking good.

“Theo!” She cries through her orgasm, sensitive body trembling in my arms as I keep her against the wall.

Fucking her through her orgasm, I crumble soon after. I groan through my release, filling her. My head stays against her shoulder as I keep her supported against the wall.

As the beautiful post-orgasmic high begins to fade, we're left with the truth of what happened. We fucked. I fucked Aurora. I can live with that. The question is, can she ?

When I lift my head and see the look on her face, I have my answers.

Green eyes are wide as she processes. I don't say a word as I pull out and let her down slowly. Her legs wobble as she finds her footing. I don't reach out to help her, opting to pull up my sweats instead.

"We..." she trails off like she's in shock. Like she didn't just come on my tongue, on my cock.

"Fucked," I finish the sentence for her. Turning my back, I can't look at her face. The last thing I want to see is her regretting what happened.

The idea of Aurora regretting me bothers me more than I care to admit. Other girls have regretted me. I'm not the best guy in the world. But Aurora...the idea chews at my heart. It takes what has been the best birthday of my life and sours it. When she doesn't say anything, the familiar warmth of anger bubbles in me.

Anger is my comfort zone. It's safe, like a blanket I can wrap around my shoulders and know nothing can touch me.

"We fucked, Aurora," I say. "And you fucking loved it. You can hate me all you want, but you can't take back the fact you begged me to eat your sweet cunt. Can you live with that?"

She doesn't respond. I hear the shuffle of clothing. Everything that was good vanishes and all I can feel is the anger, the rage. All I need is for her to show me that I'm not a fucking mistake. Slowly, I turn to look at her. For the first time, I let hope take a hold of my heart. Hope that maybe something will go right.

Yet those beautiful green eyes meet mine, freckled cheeks still flushed in the ruined afterglow and she says, "That can never happen again."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

AURORA

Rise

Episode 575

New Orleans, Louisiana

F uck. Fuck. Fuck!

Saying I shouldn't have done that feels like the understatement of the year. It was a huge, huge mistake. I acted on instinct, on desire. I acted on the things that I should keep stuffed down because they're bad. Wrong. Things that I should not feel when Theodore Abrams is involved because that's how I become just another girl. One of the sparkly-eyed ones who ends up dull and lifeless because I believed his lies.

I'm spiraling. Theo didn't even try to promise me anything. He's just been trying to get in my panties since the day that we met and I finally gave in. I offered him my body like it was a present for his birthday.

And I loved every minute of it. I loved the sounds of him begging. I loved how his tongue felt, how his cock felt .

Dark brown eyes are locked on me, that shield up between the two of us. Every wall that I feel like I knocked down has been perfectly reconstructed. I'm on one side,

Theo's on the other.

I swallow. "What I mean is...we work together. We can't get all twisted up in..." Pausing, I gesture vaguely around her. "...Whatever this is."

This time, he turns his back to me. "Right. Whatever this is," Theo mutters. He drags his fingers back through his dark hair, not a hint of emotion on his face right now. "Did you happen to check the schedule for tonight? Do we have anything going on?"

To be honest, I completely forgot that we were at work. I definitely didn't check when I walked in this afternoon. I went straight to the locker room with my now forgotten cupcake, fully planned to apologize to Theo for what happened and...what? Where did I expect things to go from there?

Maybe I planned this the entire time.

"I didn't."

"Make yourself useful, baby doll. Go check for me."

My teeth sink into my bottom lip, biting back all of the venom I want to spew at him for that comment. This is just how he usually treats women, isn't it? He uses them, then he pushes them away. Treats them like absolute fucking garbage. This is why I should've kept him at arm's length.

Proud of myself for choosing not to lash out at him, I leave the locker room with still wobbly legs and the feeling of slickness between my thighs. A reminder of what I just gave in to.

I keep my head down to avoid anyone seeing the shame in my eyes and the flush in my cheeks. I head over to check the run down for the night. As I'm scanning over it,

looking for my or Theo's name, someone is standing a little too close to me.

When I turn and see Austin, I plaster a smile on my face and try to take a subtle enough sidestep away from him. "Hey."

"Hey, Rory." He smiles, his teeth blindingly white against his orange tan. He smells like a high school locker room, the overdone aerosol cologne that teenage boys bathe in. It burns my nostrils and I try to take another subtle step away from him. "I've actually been looking for you or Theo."

I hope he doesn't see how hard I swallow. If he was looking for us, maybe he checked the one place that he knew Theo would be. Maybe he... No, I'm not going down that trail of thought. No one knows what happened in that locker room between the two of us.

"Oh?"

"Yeah." He points to his name on the rundown. "I talked to Nathan earlier. He's giving me a shot to work a program with Theo." There's pride on his face, in his voice.

Everyone knows there's no way in hell that Austin's going to get the title. He's nowhere near ready, probably will never be. He's a good hand, someone who can lose very convincingly.

I don't say any of that. That would be a Theo or Jules comment. I keep my bitchiness to myself. "That's great," I respond, trying to signal that I'm done with the conversation as I go back to looking for what we're doing tonight.

But Austin doesn't seem to get the hint. "Yeah. So, anyway, are you doing anything tonight? After the show? We're in NOLA and there's plenty of bars and stuff. We

could hit one up and—”

“I’m good,” I cut him off right there, keeping a polite smile on my face.

I don’t have a type, not that I know of. There’s never been one specific kind of guy that I could comfortably say did it for me. However, I have no interest in Austin. He’s very...frat boy. Also, the cologne mixed with the awful fake tan do not help in the least.

His face falls. Blue eyes look a shade darker for a moment before he shakes it off and smiles. “Maybe next time then.”

“Yeah, maybe next time. ”

That shuts the conversation down, which I’m incredibly grateful for. I turn my full attention to the run down, find that Theo and I have a promo segment to set up Austin’s match next week and immediately head back toward the locker room.

Not that I want to face Theo, but I don’t really have any other option. This is still my job.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

AURORA

Rise

Episode 575

New Orleans, Louisiana

I t's really hard to pretend like everything is normal as we get ready to head to the ring. Every time I look at Theo, I feel my stomach clench in such a delightful way. He keeps looking at me with a knowing smirk, as if he knows what's on my mind.

His theme hits, and his hand immediately goes to rest on my lower back, fingers splayed against my skin as he helps me up the few stairs that lead to the stage.

The chorus of boos that welcome us sends a shot of adrenaline through me, and for a moment, I forgot all about the sex. Boos actually feel good, because invoking the crowd to feel something is the best thing you can do as a professional wrestler. If they hate me, if they think I'm traitor and a bitch, I'm doing my job.

For these few moments, I get to melt into being Aurora Dawn. She doesn't have of the problems that I do. She's sure. She knows her feelings, and those feelings are an obsession and a devotion toward a man who wouldn't care if she died tonight.

Maybe I'm a lot more similar to her than I originally thought.

Theo climbs into the ring and gestures for a microphone, while I slip into the ropes, coming to stand beside him. Instead of taking in the arena full of people, I turn my gaze to him. I watch him instead of the crowd.

And I'm not sure how much of it is me pretending to be a character anymore.

The confidence that radiates off of him once he's in the ring is somehow stronger than the cocky prick I deal with on the daily basis. This is who Theo really is. He rolls his shoulders before tapping the microphone with his index finger.

"Now," he says as the boos grow louder. A muscle in his jaw ticks with annoyance before he rolls his eyes. "I'm trying to talk. You all are being rude. Which I suppose I should expect from people this far south. The lack of education is astonishing."

Heel Work 101. Insult the crowd. The boos get louder.

Theo shakes it off, but before he can continue, the generic club beat of Austin's theme song hits. The crowd goes...mild.

Staying on the stage, Austin paces like an animal stuck in a too-small cage. He holds the microphone to his lips, doesn't bother to look out at the crowd. His nerves are palpable from here. This...isn't good.

"I don't think you should be insulting the great people of New Orleans, Theo." The crowd's reaction is still mild, but Austin continues. "See, these people are clearly smarter than you and your brainwashed pet slut." The cheap insult gets a reaction from the crowd, but it's so...boring.

It's like a high schooler hurling insults. Sure, that's a lot of what wrestling is. At least, back in the 90's. Crowds don't react to the basics that strongly anymore.

Yet in the ring, Theo clenches his fist, his knuckles turning white as the veins pop in his hands. Somehow that makes me want his hands on me even more.

Suddenly, I get my wish.

Placing the mic in the back pocket of his slacks so it's out of the way, Theo's hands wrap around my waist. He picks me up, sitting me on the top turnbuckle like he's placing a porcelain doll on a shelf.

"Stay lookin' pretty for me, baby doll," he says when he grabs the microphone again. "I got some business to handle." He turns away from me, giving me the opportunity to observe how the fabric of his red button-up stretches across his muscular back.

"Austin, Austin, Austin," Theo says, shaking his head. "I've tried, man, I really have. Tried not to put you down like the pathetic dog that you are, but you leave me no choice. You don't deserve to be out here with me. Hell, you don't deserve to be in this company. Your skills in the ring are lackluster. I'd rather listen to some grandma straight from the bayou on the microphone than you, and you immediately result back to playground insults. You're nothing on my radar, on any of these people's radars. They'd rather listen to me than you, and I think that says a lot. They hate me."

Have you ever watched a person be stuffed in a coffin and buried while still alive? That's exactly what this feels like. This isn't far from a typical promo segment from Theo. He has a formula that he follows. Most of his opponents can volley with him. Come back with something just as snarky.

But two things are different here.

One: Austin is not strong on the microphone. I've heard indie guys cut better promos.

Two: Theo is immediately going in for the kill. He's burying Austin, making him

look pathetic in front of the fans.

That's not Theo's usual MO. He knows how to play his role, make himself look like the prick and the other guy someone the crowd wants to root for .

Austin opens his mouth and yet again, Theo starts speaking before he can. "Don't bother. Even I think that the New Orleans crowd deserves better than listening to you. Production, hit my music."

He drops the microphone in the ring before walking over to where I sit. His hands wrap around my waist again, picking me up and sitting me on my feet. "Are you okay?" Theo leans in and whispers in my ear.

His breath tickling my ear sends shivers down my spine. I can't figure out why I wouldn't be okay, but I don't ask. Not now. I nod in confirmation.

Theo exits the ring and I trail after him, following like the lost puppy everyone needs to think I am.

At the top of the ramp, there's a stare-down between him and Austin. I can almost feel the heat of Theo's anger radiating off of him before he guides me back through the curtains.

His gaze settles on Nathan, who's sitting in Gorilla, and Theo pats my lower back. "I need to have a word with him. I'll see you later, baby doll."

What now?

Chapter Twenty-Nine

AURORA

Considering what I do for work, it's not abnormal to have a weird day. Today topped the weirdness, though. Between fucking Theo, the awkward run-in with Austin, the bomb of a segment with Austin, and then Theo disappearing to talk to Nathan, all I want to do is melt into my hotel bed and think about nothing. Sounds a lot better than getting lost in my head, full of regrets, desires.

I shouldn't have slept with Theo. I shouldn't have liked it. I shouldn't crave all the things that he did to me, all the things he could do to me.

I roll onto my stomach, burying my face in my pillow. I need to stop thinking about it. But I can't. Every time I close my eyes, I replay things. The way his mouth felt on my pussy, the little whimpers he made, how he made me feel fuller than anyone ever has before.

My ex, the only guy I've really dated, used to roll his eyes whenever I asked him to go down on me. Theo dropped to his knees and begged to eat my pussy, fucking drooled over me. My ex was always a quick fuck. Sex with him felt like just another thing on my to-do list. I can imagine having sex with Theo for hours and—fuck!

This is the opposite of forgetting about it.

A knock on my hotel door gets my attention. I slowly sit up and walk over, peeking out the peephole. A sigh escaped the lips. Why won't the devil get off my back? Is a

break from him too much to ask?

I debate on whether I'm going to answer it before I finally give into the niggling desire in the back of my skull that wants to see him.

"Yes?" I ask as I open the door.

Theo grins at me, a sparkle in his brown eyes, almost like I didn't run away from him after sex. He's still so goddamn handsome too. "Got ya something, baby doll." He hands me two sloppily put together bouquets of red roses. It looks like one bouquet was removed from its plastic wrapping and shoved into the wrapping of the other one so they could form a bigger bundle.

Taking the flowers, I raise an eyebrow. "Why?"

He doesn't answer me, instead he holds up a finger. "But wait, there's more." With a grin still plastered on his face, Theo hands me a small purple cardboard box.

My eyes widen when I look down, reading the text on the box. He bought me the morning after pill. "Really?"

"I don't want any little fuckers running around. I don't know your birth control status. I didn't use a condom earlier. Wanted to be on the safe side, ya know?"

"I don't know whether I'm charmed or offended."

"You can be both." He shrugs. "I will have you know that I spent a solid minute searching the internet to figure out what the best 'I'm sorry' flower is. Red roses seemed popular." Theo puts his hand on the doorframe, leaning in a little bit. "I shouldn't have snapped at you after."

“Probably not,” I agree. To be fair, I don’t think I handled everything after the best either. I shut him down, immediately got defensive because accepting it felt like a step too far. Denial is a comfortable place to stay in.

“But you should know that you can’t run from it, Roo. This,” he gestures between us with his finger, “is inevitable.”

My gut clenches at his words. Dread and desire swirling together like it always seems to do when Theo’s involved. I don’t want him, but I do. I take a deep breath, needing to hold myself together. I bring my hand up to his chest and give him a gentle shove out of my doorway.

“We’re not,” I say. “Nothing between us is ‘inevitable.’”

He tilts his head, looking down at me. “Why are you so desperate to deny it, Roo? I don’t get it. If I can feel it, you can feel it too.”

That’s the problem. I can feel it. But I have enough sense to be able to look at it logically too. I can give in, and what happens? Maybe we’re good for a few months until Theo gets bored of me, then he’ll discard me. Just like every girl before me. Just like Veronica.

Even if the strongest part of me is eager to fall into it, I also know better.

Using your head really fucking sucks sometimes.

I sigh, clutching the roses in my hand. “Theodore, what happened earlier was a mistake. It can’t happen again.”

He raises his brows at me, not bothering to shield how unhappy he is with my words. “A mistake? You’re really aiming to hurt my feelings, baby doll. Ouch.” There’s still

a playfulness lacing his words as he leans against the doorway again. He's blocking it with his hand so I can't slam it in his face.

Theo knows me a lot better than I want to give him credit for.

"I'm serious." I sigh. I don't want to be a bitch. For some reason, hurting Theo makes me feel bad. He's an asshole, but there's more to him underneath that facade, even if he wants to deny it. "We work together. You're...you. This can't happen. "

"Are you really playing the 'we work together' card?" he asks with an exaggerated huff, rolling his eyes. Then his expression changes, becoming a little darker, more serious. "What do you mean 'I'm me?'"

Might as well give it to him straight. "You will break my heart. You'll snatch the light from my eyes because that's what you do. It's what you always do to girls. I don't want to be tossed out like trash when you get bored of me."

I'm expecting that wall to go back up. I hurt him; I can see it on his face. He's not trying to hide it yet. But I know that he will, because that's who Theo is. He doesn't like people seeing that he's actually human underneath the bravado.

"You're assuming that I'd get bored of you. What if I don't?" No wall goes up. It's down again, a certain vulnerability in his voice, in his brown eyes. He looks much...softer, even in the dim lighting of the hotel hallway.

He's saying the right things. What if he didn't? What if I'm the girl who changes him? But I'm not delusional enough to let myself believe that would be the case.

I don't think that Theo's intentionally a monster. Maybe he's one because of his family, even if he denies it. Maybe it's just who he is and he doesn't know anything different.

Sighing, I roll my bottom lip between my teeth. “You just ruined your own engagement, Theo. You put a ring on Veronica’s finger and then you destroyed her. Publicly. What makes me so different from a woman you proposed to?”

Bringing that up is probably a low blow. I can acknowledge that, but it’s a point that needs to be said. Humans are creatures of habit. Theo’s habit is using women until he’s burned through them or something new comes along.

From what Jules has told me, his relationship with Veronica wasn’t a happy one. In the shades of grey that I exist in, I can see why he made the choice that he did. Relating to Theo is the last thing that I ever expected to do.

Frustration is evident on his face. Eyes dark, eyebrows furrowed, full lips in a bit of a pout that’s surprisingly cute. “That whole thing was for publicity, for my parents,” he confesses, keeping his voice low. Resting his forearm on the doorframe, he leans in toward me and my heart pounds in my chest. “Look, I don’t know what the hell you want me to say, Roo. I like you. I want you. Why does that have to be a damn problem?”

He doesn’t know how badly I want him. How hard it is not to give in. I want to reach out and pull him close instead of pushing him away. I want to press my lips to his and spend the night with him inside of me. He makes my stomach clench and my thighs ache.

And underneath that desire, he’s wiggling his way into my heart.

I don’t know how. I don’t even know why.

“Because I can’t do that to myself.” My words come out in a whisper, almost reluctant to let them spill from my lips because I don’t want to deny him. The problem is, if I don’t, where does that leave me? What does that make me if I so

willingly put myself into the position to get hurt?

As hard as standing my ground is, I have to do it.

Theo opens his mouth to speak, but before he can, I step toward him. Standing on my tip toes, I press a kiss to his cheek. “I wish things were different,” I murmur.

The darkness vanishes from his features for the smallest moment. The corners of his lips almost curl up in a hint of a smile before it fades. Theo takes a step away from me and that wall comes back up again, closing himself off because he’s hurting.

“You’re really gonna hold my past against me, huh?” he scoffs, looking up at the popcorn ceiling in the hotel hallway. “I can change, y’know. I could be a better man. For you.”

It’s like he’s using a step-by-step guide on how to break me down. Theo’s saying all the right things, making all the right moves. Despite knowing that, it’s taking all of my self-control not to fall for it and give in. I want to so fucking badly.

I meant it when I told him that I wish things were different.

Tilting my head to the side, I look up at him. “Prove it then, Abrams,” I challenge. “Show me that you can be ‘different’ and then we’ll talk.”

Theo pauses and looks at me, his head tilting slightly to match me. Then his eyes drift away from me, looking off toward the side as if he’s thinking. His tongue pokes at his cheek as he slowly nods. “Yeah? That a deal? I show you that I can be different, and you’ll give me a chance.”

“It’s a deal.”

That far too familiar smirk spreads over his lips. “You just made a deal with the devil, baby doll.”

I know I did, and that terrifies me, but sitting right beside that fear is excitement. The pure excitement at knowing what could come next.

Chapter Thirty

THEODORE

I 'm only here because there's a chance that I could see Aurora.

I didn't get a chance to ask if she'd be at Alex and Sara's baby shower. I remember Alex mentioning it to her the night that we met. When it comes to Aurora, I remember a lot of things—things that I normally wouldn't care about. So, when Alex asked if I was home for the weekend and if I could come because their guest list was looking a little small, so Sara decided to change it to a co-ed situation, I actually agreed.

Alex knows me well enough to know that I'm not doing this to be a good friend. He just doesn't know how in over my head I am with Aurora Bennet.

She wants me to prove that I can be better. I don't know how to be anything but me. I'll make her like me, though. I'll make her see that there's no better option for her.

The weather's nice as I park at the curb, really hoping none of these beat-up Camry's touch my Porsche. I try to avoid stepping through the grass, but there's no other option to get to the backyard. My Dior dress shoes have to sink into the dirt of Alex's poorly kept yard .

Letting myself through the gate, I'm greeted by balloons in shades of pink and orange. There's two pink flamingos sitting by the entrance with leis around their neck. There's a wooden table with a plastic pink and orange flower-patterned

tablecloth covering it stacked with snacks and cupcakes that resemble pink flamingos.

What the fuck did I walk into?

Alex sees me and heads my way, dressed in a pair of jeans and a pink polo shirt that's tight across his muscular build. "Theo!" He grins. Stopping by one of the flamingos, he grabs a yellow lei from its neck and offers it to me.

"Absolutely not." I don't reach out to take it. I am not involved in whatever insanity this is.

"It's for Sara," he says, keeping his voice low. He thrusts the lei toward me again. "Put it on, make her happy. Please . She's already upset that the turn-out is as low as it is."

I am not happy about this, but I take the lei and throw it around my neck. I don't want to make the pregnant woman cry or anything.

At the mention of the low turnout, I scan the backyard. There's only a handful of people here. A few women that are hovering around Sara, a guy or two I vaguely recognize from C1W...and off to the corner, the apple of my eye.

Aurora has her back to me, a cup of punch in her hand. She's wearing a pair of army green shorts and a white top that shows off a delicious sliver of skin. It takes me back to a few days ago in the locker room.

I haven't been able to stop thinking about her.

Annoyance floods over me when I realize she's talking to that Kai kid. I call him a kid as if he's not in the same age range as me, but he hasn't made it yet. He's still slumming on the indies, trying to get a chance.

To me, he's a kid.

Alex follows my line of sight and sighs, shaking his head. "Are you still hung up on Rory? I've seen that you two are working together. She had to cancel her C1W bookings because of whatever she's doing with GRW. Let me guess, you got her the job?"

I flash him a smirk. "Can't confirm or deny anything, Alex."

I want nothing more than to march over to her and steal her attention away from Kai. But I'm trying to show her that I'm not the biggest piece of shit around. She wants me to prove that I can be better.

Instead, I head over to where Sara and her friends are gathered. Sara turns her head up to look at me, and I instantly see the annoyance spread over her face.

She doesn't like me. Shocking, right?

She hates that Alex is my friend. She hates that he gives me continuous second chances with my shitty behavior. No woman wants their husband to be friends with a guy like me. Which makes me like Alex even more because he continues to put up with me, even with his wife's protests.

I'd never do anything to influence him to follow my path. Would I cover for his ass if he did? Absolutely. Would I be surprised if he did? No, but that's because I think that deep down, most people are like me. They just hide it really well. Would I tell him to cheat on his pregnant wife? Never.

"You look ready to pop." I grin at her.

Sara rolls her eyes. "It's nice to see you, too, Theodore." She doesn't mean it. I can

tell.

Leaning down, I press a tender kiss to her cheek, and she makes a noise of disgust as I pull away. “Anyway, I’ve never been to a baby shower before. People never invite me to these things. Didn’t know what to bring, so I bought what was left on your registry.”

Her brown eyes go wide, and I can hear Alex huff in disbelief beside me. “Theo,” he says, slapping my shoulder.

“I don’t know shit about kids. I didn’t know what to prioritize getting you, so I got you everything. Hope it helps. I...” I trail off when I feel it. She’s noticed me. She’s watching me. Turning my head, I see the green eyes of my dreams settled on me from across the yard. Clearing my throat, I nod toward Sara. “Congratulations on the brat, I guess. If this is what you two wanted. Excuse me.”

I slap Alex on the shoulder as I push past him, making my way over to the outskirts of the gathering where Kai and Aurora are standing, still slightly annoyed that my shoes are getting dirty.

“Surprised to see me here, Roo?” I ask, sliding up to her side. She smells like warm vanilla, like freshly baked sugar cookies. It’s become my favorite scent in the whole world.

“A lot, actually.” She brings her punch up to her full lips, coated in clear lip-gloss that makes them shine. “You remember Kai, right?”

Forcing myself to play the role that she expects me to, I bring my gaze to Kai. His dark hair is swept to the side; he’s wearing a pair of dark rimmed glasses. He looks a lot more like a nerd who gets pushed into lockers than a professional wrestler.

“Theodore,” he greets me, extending his hand.

And like a good boy, I take it, shaking it. “Kai.”

“Kai’s got a dark match for GRW when Rise is in New York,” she says.

I hide my annoyance. The last thing I need is Kai to get a job at GRW. Aurora likes him. What if she likes him more than me? What if he comes along and takes my spot? I’m sure he’s a better face for the company than I am. I can’t lose this.

But I can’t verbalize any of that. If people find out you’re insecure, they’ll exploit any opportunity they get. Insecurity is weakness. I can’t be weak.

Choosing not to comment on that fact, I nod along. When I scan the very lacking party again, my gaze lands on the table full of snacks and refreshments. Zoning in on the flamingo cupcakes, I tilt my head. “Did you make the cupcakes, Roo?”

I live for the way her cheeks heat up, and she slowly nods. “Yeah. Alex asked if I could whip something up since the bakery they were using had to cancel their order for some reason or another.”

“I forgot that you baked,” Kai tacks on, like he’s supposed to be in this conversation. Like anyone wants him here.

But Aurora smiles at him, and I envision pummeling my fist into his stupid face, breaking his glasses. “How could you forget? I made you a birthday cake.” She laughs.

I can imagine how his nose would crack under my knuckles already, blood streaming down his baby face, tears spilling from his brown eyes.

She made him a cake for his birthday. She made me a single fucking cupcake.

I have to remind myself that it would be harder to make a cake in a hotel room, right? And she's known him longer. Maybe he paid her for a cake.

Kai smiles at her. "Still the best damn cake I ever had. I don't know how I forgot that."

Not one to stand around and be left out, I jut in. "I only faintly remember the cupcake you made me last week, baby doll. I got distracted by other things that tasted a lot better."

Her cheeks turn red again as she glares up at me. I can't help myself; I love how she looks when she's angry.

Looking between the two of us, Kai shakes his head. "I...think I'm gonna go talk to Alex." Smart kid. At least he knows when he's not wanted. "I'll see ya later, Rory."

They hug. I see red. Like every time before, I force it down for the sake of not ruining the baby shower and not making Aurora go back on her agreement to give me a chance if I can prove myself.

As Kai makes his exit, she turns to me and hisses, "What the fuck. You just can't help yourself, can you?"

"When you're involved? Absolutely not."

"You're impossible, Theo."

"Yet you love every second of it. "

Aurora scoffs and storms off to go chat with the rest of the women. Okay, so...not exactly the home run I was hoping for, and maybe I wasn't on my most sparkling behavior, but I can see it in her eyes—the way she looks over her shoulder at me as she walks away. She's falling.

I need to hope to god I catch her, and I don't fuck it all up.

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Chapter Thirty-One

AURORA

Rise

Episode 579

Phoenix, Arizona

I t's been a month since I fucked Theo on his birthday. He wants to prove that he's going to change, and I feel like there's progress being made, but I haven't given into him, despite how badly I want to, because I'm still waiting for him to fall back into his usual habits. There have been no reports of Theo hitting the clubs after shows. He hasn't been seen with any gorgeous women.

It all feels far too good to be true. It feels like at any moment, it's going to come tumbling down.

His feud with Austin was quickly squashed. The match was pretty damn embarrassing, at least for Austin. Theo wiped the floor with him in record time, and he hasn't gotten a TV opportunity yet.

I can't say for sure that it had anything to do with the conversation that Theo had with Nathan after that promo in New Orleans, but my gut tells me it does. It's not unheard of for guys at the top to get the opportunity to call shots.

I haven't asked because it feels like one of those things I'm better off not knowing.

Austin has continued to hover around backstage. He's asking me out for a drink every damn week, and every week I tell him no. I thought Theo was persistent. I'm beginning to wonder if Austin has a humiliation kink.

Professionally, I'm building a feud with Jules for the next pay-per-view. The story writes itself. I'm the best friend that turned on her, betrayed her and her mentor. I have no doubt that she'll be the one to come out on top in the feud, especially since I don't have a contract yet.

But a pay-per-view match is huge, especially for a girl like me. It means that Nathan trusts me on a big stage, to have a match against the fastest rising star in the women's division.

Shayna takes a step back, running her fingers through my hair to make sure the curls look TV ready. I have a pre-tape promo with Theo today. Something that has a little bit more production behind it than going out into the ring and cutting a promo.

Theo's move on to a feud with Micah Duvall. Micah is someone that the fans are behind. He's the guy that people want to see as the GRW World Champion and it's easy to understand why. He can wrestle, he can talk, and the man is gorgeous.

"There, good?" Shayna asks, popping her strongly scented mint gum when she goes back to her table, placing her tools back in order.

Looking at myself in the mirror, I smile. My hair is in these beautiful soft curls. My makeup is perfect because Shayna is a fucking artist. "Amazing. You're the best."

I give her a little wave as I stand up, my heels clicking down the peeling linoleum hallway, scanning over the signs posted to the doors to try and find the room we're

doing our pretape in .

Once I find it, I push the door open. The production crew's inside and so is Theo. I drink him in for a moment. He doesn't look much different than usual, but he's still delicious. A crimson-colored button-up, slacks that hug his muscular thighs and nice ass. Hair styled to perfection, those thick brown curls that I just want to run my fingers through again looking messy, but not unkempt.

He is my temptation and every day he makes standing my ground even more difficult.

He doesn't hide the way his eyes rake over me. "You look like a goddess, as per usual, Roo," he says.

The dim lighting in the room thankfully hides the heat that creeps into my cheeks. Theo sits in a velvet-backed chair, looking like royalty. The Dark Prince of GRW. The devil that I can't stop making deals with.

He pats the arm of the chair and as if he has me trained, I walk over and perch myself on the arm, tugging down the bottom of my dress when it creeps too high on my thighs.

With the money I'm making from my GRW deal and the money I'm saving with Theo taking care of Dad's medical bills at the moment, I was able to buy a dress and not have to borrow one from Jules or scrounge around at the thrift store. It's a simple red velvet mini dress with thin straps. It hugs onto my body like it was made for me, highlighting my curves. I look good; I know I look good.

When I perch next to him, Theo slips an arm around my hips. His hand comes to stop on my ass and he squeezes it. "This good, baby doll? Feels natural, y'know."

I don't snap at him like I would've before. It makes sense for him to be handsy with

me, considering our on-screen relationship, and it's a natural place for his hand to rest with the height of the arm of the chair and out positioning.

And I like how it makes me feel. It soothes that part of me that's desperately craving more of his touch.

He moves his hand only to drape his title over his opposite shoulder, then his hand is back on my ass. Once the producer gives the signal that the cameras are rolling, we melt into our roles.

Which are just becoming an extension of ourselves. Where does our on-screen relationship start and end?

"Micah," Theo starts, drawing out the 'a' sound. "Hey. What's up? You want me, right? Not a surprise. A lot of people do. No, no. We're not going to do that. We're cutting to the chase. You want what I have." He nods his chin toward his championship.

"You think you deserve this, yeah? Think because you work really hard and people like you that you should represent this company. That's not how it works. This isn't a prize for being a good boy, which between you and me, we both know you're not. This is for being the best, and frankly, Micah, you're not up to my speed. This is how things are going to go. At Uprising , you're going to get your title match. You're going to lose. You're going to be sad and whine and complain and probably leave the company like the dirt sheets have said you're going to do for months now. I'm still going to be the GRW World Champion. I got the gold, I got the girl." His hand pats my ass, pulling me into him a little bit tighter.

"See ya then, bud."

"Cut!" The producer calls out and the blinking red light of the camera stops. He looks

at Theo with a small nod of his head. “I think we’ve got it. Good job.”

“Great. We’ll head out in just a second.” Theo dismisses the crew, but doesn’t let go of me. His hand tightens on my ass a little bit, fingers pressing into the flesh.

Raising an eyebrow, I look down at him. It would be a damn lie if I said this wasn’t making me feel something. The same things that I’ve been in denial of feeling for Theo for weeks now. The want. The desire. I’m just not ready to break for him yet.

I’m scared. Terrified. I don’t want to put myself out there and get hurt. Especially not when that seems like the most likely outcome .

Clearing my throat, I shift on the arm of the chair. The wood is becoming uncomfortable, digging into my thighs. “You can let go now,” I say, keeping my voice low so the crew that’s still packing up their things won’t overhear.

“No, I don’t think I will,” Theo responds. There’s a hint of frustration in his voice as his hand drags slowly over my skin, always coming back to my ass.

His touch feels good, I can feel his hand pushing up the edge of my dress, calloused fingers dragging over my ass cheek. Swallowing that down, I set my gaze on him, hoping he sees how damn annoyed I am with him. “Wasn’t a request, Theodore,” I hiss, resorting to his full name.

“I didn’t take it as one, Aurora.”

He’s being the real Theo today, which essentially means he’s back to being a world-class asshole. Not that he’s ever really stopped.

He pulls me closer, and I’m not even sure the rest of the room has cleared out yet. He’s the only person I see.

Does he not understand how badly I want to give in to him? He brings his other hand up, running the back of his knuckles along my jaw, our gaze locked.

But I can't.

He's going to break me if I let him in, and a part of me wants to be broken by him.

Love is not something that I've ever allowed myself to take a chance on. It's come second to my career—the career that I'm not even sure that I have because this isn't an official contract. I'm just here until they no longer have a use for me. That use depends on Theo.

I believe in love. I'm not that cynical. I'm not sure if love is a fairytale or a happy-ever-after. My ex was an asshole who didn't understand how important wrestling was to me. Why I picked doing indie shows in breweries and fairgrounds over date nights with him. I wasn't the best partner either.

Since I haven't pushed him away yet, Theo runs his thumb over my bottom lip before gently pushing it inside of my mouth.

For a moment, I let myself melt into the moment. I suck on the tip of his thumb and watch as his eyes get that hazy look to them.

When he pulls his thumb out of my mouth, he brings it to his own mouth and licks the tip, maintaining eye contact.

My core tightens.

Sense comes washing over me again. Stubbornness or resolve, although I'm not sure there's too much of a difference now.

“Stop,” I hiss, breaking eye contact. The blankness of the tile wall across from me is so much easier to look at than looking into his eyes. “Stop with all of this, Theo.”

His gaze narrows, the formerly dazed look fading away. “Why, Aurora? Because you’re scared? Because now you can’t stop thinking about me and that scares you?”

He brings up the fear again—the fear that I feel deep in the heart of me that is holding me back from everything. The fear is holding me back. It’s not the same nervousness I feel before I leap from the top turnbuckle and pray gravity doesn’t hate me for a few seconds. It’s not the anxiety that hits before I step out in front of a crowd that thinks I’m a backstabbing traitor. It’s not even the same fear that a thunderstorm evokes in me.

It’s this deep fear that I can’t move past. It freezes me in place. It only washes to the surface when Theo is involved.

I jerk myself from his grip, getting to my feet. He’s right and it’s so goddamn frustrating. He sees through me like glass. That’s exactly how I feel around him—like I’m made of glass. See-through. Breakable. “Because we both know how this ends. I’m not doing that to myself.”

Theo stands too, but he doesn’t approach me. He stays standing in front of the chair, gaze fixed on me. “This song and dance again, Roo? Are you going to enlighten me about how much of a bastard I am? How I’m going to break your little heart and steal the sparkle from your eyes?” His tone is almost mocking, and that sets a white-hot anger in me. “I don’t know what else you expect from me. I’m not going to become some fucking prince charming overnight. That’s not who I am.”

“I don’t...” I don’t even know how to finish that sentence. I don’t know who Theo is. Every time I think I have him figured out, another layer is pulled back or a wall is reconstructed. Is he a monster? Is he some tortured hero who puts up a wall to protect

himself?

He points a finger at me. “Don’t. Don’t act like you don’t know who I am, Aurora. I have showed you time and time again.”

“You’ve been acting for the past month!” I finally shout back.

He takes a step toward me, causing me to back up into the wall. My heart hammers in my chest, and it’s not fear that I feel anymore. It’s arousal, memories of the last time Theo had me up against a wall play in repeat in my mind.

“Have I? Right, because I can’t be nice. I’ve only been nice because I want to get in your pants, yeah? I could have been banging other girls every goddamn night. And we’ve already fucked, in case you forgot. If this was just sex for me, I could’ve just moved on. But I can’t.” His hand slams into the wall above my head, making me jump slightly.

I’m enclosed, his body so close to me that I can feel his body heat.

“I can’t get you out of my fucking head. This has never been ‘just sex’ for me, even when I thought it was. I want to take you places. I want to be close to you. I got you a fucking job. I mean, who does that?”

I can’t wrap my mind around anything that Theo just said, because my brain grabs onto one point and holds on to it. “You got me a job?” I whisper the words back to him .

It feels like my entire world is spiraling in that moment. I thought Nathan called me because he thought I was talented. But this makes more sense, doesn’t it? Nathan calling me up after my run-in with Theo wasn’t just fate being weird.

Theo's hands are all over my life, sculpting it into what he sees fit. Being helpful when I never asked for his help. Twisting the pieces so he can easily slot himself in.

I feel angry and betrayed. And now I'm doubting myself. Do I even deserve to be here? There must be hundreds of girls who are working their asses off for this opportunity and I only have it because of Theo. Not because of all the work I've put in over the years or all the sacrifices I've made.

He takes a step back, his face softening. "Aurora."

But there's nothing I can say to him. I don't want to fight with him. I don't want to look at him.

Luck was on my side for once because this stupid pre-tape is the only thing we have to do for Rise tonight. I don't need to be around him.

I turn and leave the room, leaving Theo to do whatever he does when he's alone. Stroke his own ego. Scroll through dating apps. Whatever.

I storm toward the locker room, wanting to get out of this stupid dress and into something comfortable. Maybe I'll be able to dip out early. Maybe Jules won't be busy and we can hang out.

As I turn the corner, I almost run into Austin's chest. I stop on a dime, but he reaches out to grab my arm, steadying me when I don't need steadying.

"Whoa there, Rory. You good?"

"Yeah," I say, definitely not in the mood for conversation right now.

He doesn't get the hint. "I know I ask every week, but do you want to grab a drink

tonight?” he asks. My usual denial is on the tip of my tongue when he adds, “It’s not just us. Micah’s coming out too. So is Jammy.”

I blink slowly. I know Micah. “Who the fuck is Jammy?”

“Jameson.”

Oh. Micah’s right-hand man. Jammy is such a weird nickname. Another denial is right on the tip of my tongue, but a drink sounds good tonight. With everything that’s swirling around in my head, I like the idea of getting a little trashed and not thinking for a few hours.

Especially not about Theo.

So, I shrug my shoulder and give in. “Yeah, sure. I’m in.”

“Great.” Austin grins back at me.

Chapter Thirty-Two

AURORA

I feel out of place.

This doesn't feel like going out for a drink or two with people after an indie show. Those people are friends, almost family. You go through the same struggles; you know them because you are them.

This is going out with three strangers that I don't know. Jules had something else to do, surprisingly not Hext related. She offered to cancel if I needed her to, but I didn't want to come off as clingy. I'm a big girl. I can handle myself.

But I feel so...weird. I'm sitting in the corner of the booth of some bar. The guys are laughing and joking, occasionally shooting glances toward me to see if I find their not-so-funny jokes as hilarious as they do. Austin keeps his gaze on me, making me sink into the corner a little bit more.

It's doing nothing to make me stop thinking about Theo. I'm so angry at him. He got me a job and then threw it in my face. I didn't ask him to do that. I didn't ask for anything he's done.

Fighting with him today is actually bothering me. Wiggling underneath my skin and making me feel...wrong. I keep pulling my ph one from my pocket, checking to see if he's texted me—he hasn't. Maybe I finally succeeded. Maybe I really did push him away this time.

The thought makes me miserable.

“Waitin’ on a call?” A smooth voice graces my ears, the delicious Australian accent making me perk up to look at Micah Duvall.

Gorgeous is the simplest way to describe Micah. Shoulder-length blond hair that’s usually pulled back at the nape of his neck, stubble, deep blue eyes, and that damn accent. Tattoos line his forearms. There’s a reason people obsess over this man, and it’s not just because of his wrestling skills.

“Sorta. Just...checking,” I mumble, bringing my drink to my lips and taking a small sip. I’m not even sure what it is. Austin keeps buying them for me. Something with peach juice and tequila, maybe?

Micah takes a sip of his beer, nodding. “Checkin’, ah.” He looks around us for a moment. Austin and Jameson are up, heading over to the pool table. He doesn’t follow, he stays right by me. “Somethin’s wrong, sweetling,” he says. “Austin’s been tryin’ to get ya to come out every night for the last month. Why now?”

Theo isn’t the only person who can see right through me. Maybe I’m just much more translucent than I thought I was. “Just wanting to not think for a little bit.” This time, when I go to take a sip from my drink, I keep the straw between my lips and sip from it continuously, needing the alcohol to hit.

Micah looks amused but doesn’t say anything about it. “Somethin’ on your mind? I don’t mind listenin’.”

I must be a lot drunker than I originally thought because I hear myself saying, “Theo.”

“Right. That bastard.” Micah chuckles. There actually sounds like there’s a bit of

fondness in his voice. Is he close to Theo? No, right? The only people I know Theo talks to are me and sometimes Alex. “I know workin’ with him can’t be easy. Did he say somethin’ especially asshole-y today?”

Yes. No. He told the truth. I think that’s what I’m more pissed about. All Theo’s done is told me the truth. Over and over again. I keep sipping through the plastic straw. The drink is basically gone on this point. It’s making an obnoxious sound as I slurp at the still melting pieces of ice.

Reaching out, Micah pulls the drink away from me, a smile on his face. His eyes wrinkle in the corners when he smiles. That’s cute.

I pout when my drink is gone.

“You’re a cute one, sweetling. If things were different...”

“What things?” Okay, officially drunk. Why do I care? Because you can’t just say riddle-like shit to people and expect them to not to ask for more.

Micah boops his pointer finger against my nose. “Your heart is taken, eh? So is mine. You deserve to be more than a body to keep someone warm.”

I pop my lips, fully prepared to argue. My heart isn’t taken, but that would be a lie. It is taken. Maybe that’s what I sacrificed when I made a deal with the devil, my heart and my damn sanity. “I can’t love him,” I admit quietly.

“And why not?”

“Because he’ll get bored and toss me aside. He’ll break my heart.”

“Don’t let the fear get in your way, Aurora.” The way Micah says my name makes it

sound like poetry. If I wasn't drunk off the liquor, I could get drunk on that. "Trust me on that one, all right? Fear will ruin everything if ya let it."

He has to know that I'm too intoxicated to press on about whatever he's getting at because he drops it there. I want to push. I want to know more, but I also don't know if I'm going to remember this conversation in the morning .

"I need another drink," I murmur. I try to stand from the booth, and my body teeters, the alcohol definitely hitting me. Fuck.

I'm not a big drinker. Usually when I go out, I sip a drink or maybe have a glass of wine. I've only been allowed to legally drink for a year so it hasn't exactly been high on my list of things to do.

"Aye, I think ya might be done, Aurora." He reaches up to steady me, and I plop back down in my chair.

Instead of arguing, I pout again. "Probably. But I don't wanna think about Theo."

He snorts. "So you admit it, yeah? Once your head hits your pillow, I don't think you'll be thinkin' about much. I'll get Austin to take you back to your hotel."

Instead of arguing about how I don't want Austin anywhere near me or taking me to the hotel, I just nod and grab my empty cup, sipping at the faintly peach flavored melted ice as Micah gets up to grab Austin.

He says something to him, his face stern and serious. Austin doesn't look like he's as serious about it and waves Micah off. It's too loud in here to hear what they're bickering about, but it looks serious.

When Austin goes to walk past him, Micah roughly grabs his arm and says something

again, to which he nods.

Curious.

Chapter Thirty-Three

AURORA

The ride back to the hotel with Austin is quiet. Uncomfortably so. I have no idea how to talk to Austin, and I'm not even sure that I want to. The alcohol is heavy in my system. I let my head lean against the window as he drives, starting to fade a little bit. The gentle hum of the car is slowly putting me to sleep.

"So, did Theo tell you what he did?" Austin asks, pulling me from my near slumber.

I blink a few times, feeling a little dazed. My mouth feels dry before I manage to speak. "What did he do?" I don't even know what Austin's talking about. But it's Theo. He's always doing something that makes people talk. Meddling. Conniving.

His silhouette is dark in the car next to me, hands gripping the steering wheel as he turns into the hotel parking lot. "He went and threw a fit to Nathan about that promo I cut. The one where I called you a slut. I got fined and pulled from the match. That's why things are pivoting straight to Micah."

Maybe it's because I'm drunk, but it takes longer than normal to process all of that. Theo complained to Nathan because Austin called me a slut? It was a promo. This is wrestling. People call each other shitty names all the time—in and out of the ring. I wasn't offended.

But clearly Theo had been.

“I...didn’t know that.” It’s all I can say. What does he want me to do, apologize for Theo’s actions? That’s not my job. He’s not my responsibility.

Austin scoffs and shakes his head, pulling the car into a parking spot. “Dunno why you’re fucking him, Rory. You could do so much better.”

“I’m—I’m not.” I fucked him once. One time. So what if that one moment lives on repeat in my head and haunts my fantasies when I close my eyes at night? So what if I’ve gotten myself off a few times remembering the way his tongue felt on my pussy, how he looked at me?

Austin doesn’t respond. Either he doesn’t believe me or he doesn’t care. Discomfort floods over me, and I’ve never been more thankful that we’ve made it to the hotel.

I get out of his car and Austin follows me. When I stumble slightly, his hand goes to my arm to steady me. His grip is tight, bruising almost. I jerk away from him.

My brain is firing off warning signals. Something is off. I fumble to get my phone out my pocket, but my fingers keep pressing the wrong button when I try to unlock it. Giving up, I shove it back into my back pocket.

We’re back to silence as we enter the lobby, the one that looks like every hotel that I stay at on the road. Austin leads me to the elevator, and I mutter that I’m on the fourth floor.

One quiet elevator ride later and I’m so close to my room. No more bad vibes. Tonight was not the night that I needed. There was no forgetting about Theo. There was just the realization that I want him more than anything .

It’s taking every ounce of self-control not to go find his room and spill my drunken guts to him.

When we come to a stop outside of my door, I reach for my key. Suddenly, I'm being shoved back against the door. Austin's larger body has me pinned to the door, the scent of alcohol on his breath invading my personal space.

Panic floods through me. My breathing picks up. My arms are going numb and tingly. Austin's hand goes to my hip before slipping back to my ass, grabbing a handful of it.

"Austin." I put my hands against his chest, giving him a pointless shove. He's stronger. I'm drunk.

I could scream. I could stomp on his foot and scream until someone comes out to see what's going on.

Before I can, he huffs and steps away, shaking his head. "That's what I thought. He's already ruined you, Aurora. Remember that I gave you an opportunity to save yourself."

As much as I want to know what the fuck he's talking about, I want to get away from him. Putting a door between the two of us seems like the smartest thing I could do. I scramble to get my key, having to press it to the keypad a few times to unlock my door because my hands are shaking.

I slam the door behind me, leaning against it as my heart pounds in my chest.

Jules.

I know she's busy, but I don't want to be alone. I'm drunk and scared and I need someone. I need the kind of comfort that only a best friend can give you.

When I reach for my phone, it's not there. I check my other pocket and come up

empty as well.

“Fuck,” I mutter to myself. I must have dropped it when I went to put it in my back pocket earlier.

Going out into the hallway means I risk running into Austin again. That terrifies me. I’m also drunk, and I don’t want to be stumbling around the hotel hallway and make GRW look bad.

I’ll have to eat the loss and hope that some kind soul will drop it off at the front desk tomorrow.

Chapter Thirty-Four

THEODORE

“Can you move? Like just an inch?” I groan, shifting on my bed and making more room. How can such a small thing take up so much damn room? It’s insane, honestly.

I haven’t spoken to Aurora since she stormed out on me. She’s like a scared deer, and I pushed too hard too soon, but I’m so tired of waiting around. She’s the only person I want to call and tell the news, but I’m trying to give her space.

When we had that conversation during the storm, talking about our other passions, I mentioned animals. Specifically cats.

I adopted a kitten.

Her name is Rumour. She’s this small, black furball that is currently somehow taking up my entire bed as I lounge on it. Sun comes in through the curtains of my bedroom, but I don’t want to get up. I already did my workout of the day. For now, I just want to relax.

And think about my Roo. About how to fix things and make her see once and for all that we could be good together. I scare her, but all the best things in life are frightening, aren’t they? I don’t know how to make her understand that.

When my phone rings, I almost jump to answer it, hopeful that it’s Aurora.

My face falls when it's not, and I debate on not answering it at all, but I'm terribly curious as to what it's about.

I pick up, and before I can even say hello, Juliette is demanding, "What did you do?!"

I blink a few times, really fucking confused, because for once, I have no idea what I'm being accused of. "Um...clarify?"

She makes a noise of frustration then pulls the phone away from her ear, says something to someone—probably Hext—and then I hear a door slam. "You can't be serious, Theo. This has you written all over it."

Sitting up, I rake my fingers through my disheveled curls. Freshly showered after my workout, they're a little messy. "Juliette, I have no idea what the fuck you're talking about. You know when I do shit, I own up to it. Can't own up to something I don't know."

I don't know whether she believes me or not, but she sighs. "Have you not been on social media?"

"I hate social media." I really do. I use it to promote things that I have to, like big matches or shows that need tickets sold, but I don't spend a lot of time scrolling through it. Most of it is people telling me how awful I am or whatever. I don't want to deal with it.

"Aurora's nudes were leaked."

My brain goes blank for a second. Aurora's...nudes? I didn't even know she took them. Who was she sending nudes to?

Once I get over that, the reality of the situation begins to set in. "Oh fuck." My hand

goes through my hair again. As if she senses my stress, Rumour comes over and curls up by my thigh. “Is she...fuck, is she good? What happened?”

“I can’t get ahold of her. I sent Kai over because he lives the closest to her, but I don’t know. All I know is that they’re spreading like wildfire online. Dirt sheets are posting them, social is going crazy. I—fuck. I’m in West Virginia right now. I’ll get a flight—”

“Send me her address,” I cut her off. Aurora is mine to handle. All I can think about is making sure that she’s okay. Getting off the bed, I pull a t-shirt on while keeping the phone to my ear. “Seriously Juliette, send me Aurora’s address. It’s like four hours from here. I’ll drive up and check on her.”

She lets out another heavy sigh. “Okay, yeah. I’ll text it to you. Theo?”

“Hm?”

“You really weren’t the one who did it, right? I know that you two have something going on, and I know you—”

“I would never, ever hurt Roo like that, Juliette. You’ve known me for how long? I’m a bastard. I would get her fired before I tried to ruin her damn life. I don’t want to do either.”

I’m met with silence, which I know is just Juliette trying to figure out whether she can believe me or not. Finally, she responds. “I know, Theo. I know.”

With more pressing matters at hand, like getting to Aurora and making sure she’s okay, I hang up the call. Stealing a glance back at the bed, Rumour is still curled up on the duvet, right in the center of the bed as if she already owns the place. Cats . She’s looking at me and I roll my eyes. “Don’t give me that look; you’re coming

too.”

The four-hour drive turns into a three hour one. Can’t guarantee that Rumour isn’t a little car sick, but she’ll be fine. I pull into the parking lot of a red brick apartment building. Looks as normal as possible.

I get out, grab Rumour’s carrier, and start up the stairs, stopping at the unit that Juliette had texted me. I gently tap my knuckles against the door a few times. When no answer comes quickly enough, my knocking turns into pounding.

Right before my fist slams into the door again, it’s flung open. I stop just in time so I don’t connect with Kai’s stupid face—even though that’s all I want to do.

Why is here for her? It’s my job. Aurora is mine.

He looks almost annoyed that I’m here. His dark hair is shelved, he has his stupid glasses on. “Theodore?”

“Juliette gave me the address,” I say. “Is Aurora okay?” Without waiting for a reply, I push past him and into her apartment.

It’s simple, but just the living room feels very Aurora. The couch is olive green and looks as if it was thrifted. The rug is brightly colored flowers on a white background and is admittedly an eyesore. At least compared to my simpler tastes. There’s a small TV, a few wrestling DVDs scattered by it. A coffee table, a lamp. Her kitchen is off to the right, but there’s more pressing matters than investigating what she keeps in her fridge.

Pictures line the walls, mostly ones of what I assume is her family and of Aurora from various indie shows. The fact that she has framed photos of herself makes me smile, and I’d tease her about it if the situation was different.

Kai closes the door behind me, eying Rumour's carrier. "You brought a cat?"

"It's my cat and yes." I don't need the fifth degree from someone who doesn't matter. "You didn't answer my question."

"She's...not okay. She hasn't gotten out of bed since I've been here." He crosses his arms over his chest as I put the cat carrier on the couch, opening it so Rumour can come out and explore her surroundings. Kai continues. "She's going through a lot right now, Theo."

"As if I don't know that," I scoff, turning to face him. He's an inch or two shorter than me, which makes me feel like I have a little more ground than I do. "Did you see them? The pictures?"

I don't know why I need to know, but I do. Aurora's nudes are evidently everywhere online, yet all I care about right now is if the man who's annoyingly close to her has seen them.

I don't want to think about anyone else I know seeing her like that. I'm supposed to be the only one.

He shakes his head. "No. And before you ask, because I feel like you will, I'm not going to look for them. It's not like that with Aurora."

I don't believe him, but it also simultaneously relieves me of an insane amount of paranoia that I don't want to acknowledge. "Oh, it's not?"

"It's really not. Rory's a friend. That's it."

As much as I want to press him on that, I don't. Not now. There's something much more important to tend to. "Good," is all I say before I gesture toward a closed door.

“Roo’s room?” Without waiting for an answer, I start toward it, then pause. “Rumour, come.” I snap my fingers at the cat who stops sniffing curiously as a fake plant in the corner of the living room and just looks at me.

Listening is not her strong suit. I opt to walk over and pick her up instead of bickering with the kitten in front of Kai. She looks incredibly displeased as she struggles to get out of my arm. I wrap both of my hands around her tiny body, lifting her up in the air so her face meets mine.

“Listen, this is important, okay? Roo is sad. I’m shit at cheering people up. This is going to be on you, okay? Because I’m sure I’ll say some shit that makes it worse.” Behind me, Kai snorts and I shoot him a look. “Didn’t ask you, asshole.”

Then I head back toward the closed door and turn the doorknob. Darkness greets me, only a sliver of sunlight coming through closed curtains. “Roo?”

Chapter Thirty-Five

AURORA

I've had shitty days before. Everyone has. I've had days that I could easily chalk up to being the worst day of my life. This takes the fucking cake though.

When I woke up this morning, I planned to go to the gym, go visit Dad, get my head straight. When I opened my phone, that was surprisingly turned into the hotel's lost and found the morning after I drunkenly lost it, I was greeted by a screen full of notifications.

Jules's texts were the ones that I homed in on. Screaming at me to call her, asking if everything was okay. I had no idea what she was talking about until I checked my other notifications.

They were flooded with people talking about my nudes. Private photos that weren't meant to be seen by anyone. I took them when I was feeling myself a few weeks ago. They weren't anything super scandalous, but all my parts were now still seen by the world. The pictures were floating around the internet, probably for the rest of forever.

Everything came crashing down.

I'm going to lose my chance at working for GRW or any major wrestling company. No one is going to want me because of my 'behavior'. They'll claim it's nothing personal, but I'll see the looks in their eyes when they realize that I'm a nightmare.

I'll be stuck working for pennies on the indies for the rest of my days because I know that Rise and Roll won't take me back either. Too much baggage.

Dating will be impossible. My friends won't be able to look me in the eyes because all they'll ever be able to see are my tits.

Kai came over and I let him in, expecting him to lecture me. To make me feel worse because that's what I want right now. I want to sink into this pathetic feeling. I'm at rock bottom, can't get any lower. Of course, he didn't. Kai is too much of a fucking angel. He tried to comfort me and I kicked him out of my room.

I know he hasn't left yet.

When the door cracks open, I roll over to glare at him. Instead, I realize how much worse shit has gotten.

Theo is standing in my doorway in sweats and a t-shirt. His brown curls are messier than I've ever seen them. In his arms, I see what looks like a shadow with the brightest green eyes I've ever seen.

"What the fuck are you doing here?"

"Checking on you, baby doll," he says.

"Leave."

"Nope. Not gonna. You want me to leave, you gotta get your ass out of bed and kick me out yourself. We both know you ain't gonna do that, so..." He kicks the door closed behind him and steps further into my room, into my space.

He sits on the edge of my bed, placing the shadow down on it.

It's the smallest black kitten I've ever seen. It stumbles over its own paws as it tries to get used to walking on my bed, over the wrinkled yellow duvet.

"You have a cat." I hold my hand out, trying to beckon the kitten closer to me.

"Got her last week. Her name's Rumour. "

Something clicks and I tilt my head. "Rumour? Like..."

"The Fleetwood Mac album? Yeah." Even in the darkness, I can see Theo smile. He leans back on one hand, the other drawing shapes on my blanket as Rumour watches him with the slightest hint of interest.

"Why did you name your cat after a Fleetwood Mac album?"

"Cause it reminded me of you."

Any other time, I would've smiled. I would've melted, but it's not happening. I think I'm more than a little broken right now.

Theo keeps trying to get Rumour to play and she only keeps watching. I hear him pop his lips before speaking. "Roo...do you want to talk about it? Juliette is worried. Kai's worried. I'm fucking worried."

I exhale through my nose, hard. "What's there to talk about? I'm ruined because I'm stupid."

His hand leaves the blanket, coming to grab my chin and force my gaze to meet his. "Uh-uh. Not stupid. We're not doing that. You fucked up. It happens. Not the end of the world. Could've been worse. You just trusted the wrong bastard—"

That's where I cut him off. "I didn't send them to anyone, Theo."

That's what's been driving me insane. I didn't send the nudes to anyone. I took them and I wanted to send them to Theo, but I bitched out. So, I deleted them.

"You...took nudes and didn't send them to anyone?" He sounds like he doesn't believe me and what can I say? I wouldn't believe that either.

I explain the entire situation to him. I tell him about taking them for him but never sending them, about losing my phone when I was slightly drunk, about getting it back the next morning. The only things I leave out are my conversation with Micah and what happened with Austin. It doesn't seem necessary to the story.

Theo exhales heavily. "Lots to unpack there. You took nudes for me? In any other situation, I'd be fucking honored, Roo. You have no idea how... appreciated they would have been."

The way his voice drops at the end, the suggestiveness in his tone, makes my pussy clench in the most annoying of ways. I'm fucking distraught, but she's evidently still very interested in Theo.

Needy bitch.

"You got drunk with Austin? Don't fucking like that, though. Dude's a creep. He called you a slut, which is so far from cool. Especially since he didn't run it by us first. That's just wrestling 101. You don't go for low blows without making sure it's okay. I'm an asshole, and even I check in before I go for things like that."

"I wasn't that offended by the whole slut comment..." I chime in, but Theo ignores it. He's on another train of thought.

“Where did you lose your phone? The hotel?” He makes a face. “Someone probably took it. You were drunk, not paying attention. Maybe they went through it and found the nudes. Decided to leak them...”

I groan, turning to hide my face in the pillow. “I don’t care why they leaked them, Theo. I care about how this is going to ruin my fucking life.”

Rumour comes over and sniffs my hair before curling up on the pillow next to my head. I wouldn’t exactly call it a cuddle, but it’s damn close enough.

I lean my head against her soft body as Theo leans back on both elbows next to me.

“Your life isn’t ruined, Roo. You’re being dramatic. So what if the world has seen you naked? You’re hot naked. They should be honored.”

“Yeah, I’m real sure Nathan’s going to feel honored about my nudes leaking and causing a PR circus.”

When it comes down to it, my job is my biggest concern. I don’t want to lose my dream over something so goddamn stupid. Wrestling is everything to me. It’s all that I’ve ever wanted, and now I might have to give it up. I don’t know who I am without it. I don’t want to know.

I’m broken from my spiral by the sound of Theo laughing. Obnoxiously laughing next to me as I’m going through a huge personal crisis.

“Something funny, Abrams?”

“Have you seen the shit that I’ve done, Aurora? Nathan’s not going to fucking fire you. He’s probably going to be relieved that I’m not the one fucking up for once.”

“I don’t even have a contract, Theo. Remember? You didn’t finagle one of those for me when you got me this job.” Yeah, I can’t help myself. I throw that back in his face again. “It’s just a pay-per-appearance situation. Those are easily discarded.”

Theo sighs. He shifts on the bed next to me, inching closer and trying not to disturb Rumour in the process. When she doesn’t seem bothered, he finally moves up so he’s leaning back on the pillows next to me.

I can’t say why I do it, but I reach up for his hand and Theo gives it to me. I trace my index finger over the callouses on his palm while he’s uncharacteristically quiet, just letting me touch him and try to ground myself.

“I’m not letting you lose your job over something that wasn’t your fault, Aurora,” he finally mumbles.

“I want to believe you,” I whisper back.

I want to believe in everything Theo promises me. That he won’t hurt me, that I can trust him, that I won’t lose my job. And maybe I still can’t convince myself that the first two are possible, but I need something to believe in right now.

A little string of hope to keep me from plummeting down in the depths of a depression that I’m not sure I’ll be able to pull myself out of.

Hope is what has kept me going for so long. When my mom died, when my stepmom died, when Dad had his stroke. I had hope that I was going to achieve my dreams. Something to hold onto in the darkness.

“Believe in me then, baby doll.” His hand captures mine, giving it a small tug so he can lace our fingers together.

And now, my little string of hope, is the person who I used to think I hated with everything in me.

Chapter Thirty-Six

THEODORE

A urora goes quiet after that, her hand grasping mine. I'll be damned if I let her go until she's ready. I don't know if she actually believes me or not, but I know that I'll do anything in my power to make things better for her. That's all I've been doing, even if she doesn't see it that way.

Eventually, I hear her breathing turn softer. When I glance over at her, I realize that she's fallen asleep and Rumour is asleep in her hair. She needs to eat something and get out of bed at some point today. We'll work on that when she wakes up.

I lean down and brush my lips over her temple. She stirs, pressing her face into my lips before she goes back to a still sleep. A smile spreads over my lips. My baby doll is the sweetest creature.

Careful not to wake her, I shift out of bed. Rumour lifts her head, looks at me, and then goes back to sleep. I think the cat already likes Aurora more than she likes me.

Staying quiet, I leave the bedroom, only to find the TV on in the living room. Kai is on the couch, looking up at me when I step out. "Is she okay?"

"Why are you still here? "

He awkwardly rubs the back of his neck. "Because I didn't know what else to do. Jules asked me to come over and I just...I was worried about Aurora. She told me to

leave but I didn't want to leave her alone and—”

Jesus fuck. With the way he's stressed out, you'd think that it was his private photos that got leaked. “Amazing how many men turn into puppies when Juliette Stanton is involved,” I muse out loud, and Kai blushes. Darkly .

Curious.

I plop down on the couch next to him, throwing my arms over the back of it, making myself comfortable as if I own the place. “She went to sleep,” I add. “I think I got her to stop spiraling.”

Kai nods, looking down at his hands. “She's worked so hard. I just don't want her to lose anything.”

“She won't. I won't let that happen.”

He goes quiet before he asks, “Do you love Rory?”

No one's asked me that before. Love is...complicated. I don't know if I've ever experienced love before. Maybe my parents love me in their own way.

Veronica was a possession. It was mutually beneficial. She was a gorgeous woman to have on my arm. I could finance a lifestyle that made her happy. But it wasn't love. I never loved her.

Staring ahead at the TV, I pop my lips and nod slowly. “I think I do.”

“She deserves to be loved.”

“Do you...?”

“I love Aurora as a friend,” he reiterates. “I love her as a person. She’s amazing and talented, but I’m not in love with her,” Kai says, and I have no reason to, but I believe him. Quietly he adds, “I don’t think I’ve ever been in love.”

This would be a perfect bonding moment for me to say that I haven’t either, but that’s not me. We’re not about to get deep in our feelings on Aurora’s couch while she sleeps. I got the information I needed. He doesn’t want my girl, which means he’s fine to keep around. He’s not a threat.

“We’re done here,” I say, smacking my hands against my thigh as I stand up. “I’ll have Roo text you when she’s feeling better. But I got her, alright? You can tell Juliette that I relieved you of your duties, puppy.”

That blush is back over his cheeks as he stands, shuffling away from the couch. “Right, okay. Thanks and...be good to Aurora, please?”

“I will as soon as she lets me.” I wave as he slips out the front door.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

AURORA

When I wake up from my nap, Theo's ordered food. I'm starving, and he makes me come out to the couch to eat it. From there, we watch home renovation shows and eat take-out, sitting in silence because there's not a whole lot to talk about. At least not a lot on my mind right now.

It's late when he takes my hand and leads me to bed, tucking me back underneath my yellow duvet. Theo takes the spot next to me with Rumour at our feet. I drift off with him stroking my hair again, the last thought on my mind being a concern with how used to this I'm getting.

"Alright, time to get up."

Sunlight floods my bedroom suddenly and I groan, turning to bury my face in the pillow. Waking up is the last thing I want to do. Sleeping is a pleasure. It's an escape from the feelings that I don't want to face when I'm awake. I turn and roll into the blankets in an attempt to burrito myself in them. "When the fuck did you become a morning person, Abrams?"

My precious duvet is being tugged away from me. I open my eyes to see Theo standing at the foot of the bed, pulling on the blanket. "We have plans today, baby doll."

There's entirely too much cheer in his voice for me to be comfortable with. He's

already dressed, wearing a pair of jeans and a grey t-shirt. Did he go out and buy clothes? How fucking late did I sleep? How hard did I sleep? I doubt I'll ever get used to seeing him dressed down. I'm used to wrestling trunks, slacks, and button-ups. Everything else feels like someone that I don't know.

"What do we possibly have to do, Theo?" I'm raking through my thoughts, trying to remember if we were booked for media or something today. Maybe I forgot, with everything else going on. It wouldn't surprise me. But I can't remember anything. No interviews, no conventions. That would explain why he came yesterday. Not because Jules asked him to, but because we have an obligation that we need to fulfill together.

He huffs as he finishes pulling the blanket off the bed, and I curl into myself, missing the warmth. At least Rumour looks as offended as I do. The kitten was sleeping by my feet, and Theo so rudely ripped the blanket away. She starts to fuss at him, angry meows filling the bedroom.

"Women are so damn bitchy in the morning," he grumbles. Ah, that's closer to the Theo I know. I was beginning to worry he'd changed completely. "You'll see, all right? It's a surprise. You have to get your ass out of bed, though."

Sitting all the way up on the side of the bed, my feet meet tan carpet. "Okay, I'm up." Forcing myself to stand, I stretch with my arms over my head. I pause, looking back at Theo. "How long have you been awake? Did you go shopping?"

"Long enough to get a workout in, run to the store to get clothes and food for Rumour." Theo turns toward the door. "Get ready. I'm going to feed the other cranky one. I got you something too." He holds out a finger. "Don't argue with me. I already have to deal with one sassing me." He starts out the door and Rumour follows him, knowing breakfast awaits her.

As she trails after him, she's still telling him off for waking her up and taking away

the warm blanket. Before I step into the bathroom, I can hear Theo talking to Rumour. “You can go back to sleep after breakfast, all right? Will you stop bitching at me?”

Rumour meows in response.

It doesn’t take long for me to get ready. I put my hair in two sloppily done braided pigtails, wash my face, and change into a t-shirt and some leggings. I head into the kitchen, joining Theo and Rumour just as the latter is finishing up her breakfast. Her green eyes look up at me as Theo leans back against my kitchen counter, sliding a plastic cup and a brown paper bag over to me.

My usual coffee, with all the unnecessary extras that Theo has always deemed as ‘gag-worthy.’ Opening the paper bag, I pull out a muffin.

“Cinnamon crunch. Wasn’t sure what kind of muffin you liked, but you like cinnamon, so...” he trails off with a grin.

“Thank you.” I break off a piece of the muffin and pop it into my mouth. It’s like a delicious cinnamon explosion. Sweet, but not overly so. Buttery and soft. “This is the best damn muffin I’ve ever had,” I say with my mouth still full. Did I eat anything at all yesterday? I don’t think so.

Theo chuckles. “I can tell.”

“Was there actually a reason I needed to jump out of bed?” I ask, bringing the coffee cup to my lips. Going back to bed still feels like an amazing idea. Hiding under my covers, safe from the rest of the world.

“Yes.” He makes a sweeping gesture toward the front door. “If you come on.”

“I hate being rushed. ”

“Then start moving, baby doll.”

I make sure Theo sees me roll my eyes before I walk toward the front door. Theo follows, his hand coming to rest on my lower back as we walk, guiding me down the stairs. I’m comfortable with him touching me. It’s second nature at work. It’s becoming comfortable out of work too.

Once we’re settled into Theo’s Porsche, he pulls out of the parking space and starts driving. Resting my elbow on the car door and supporting my chin in my palm, I watch my small-town turn into the highway which turns into the nearest cityscape. “Once again, I’m going to ask, where are we going?”

Theo sighs. “You are the worst person to surprise, aren’t you?” When I don’t answer, he continues. “We’re going to the zoo.”

I turn to look at Theo as he taps his fingers against the steering wheel. “The zoo?”

“That’s what I said.”

“Yeah, I heard you. It’s—” Theo taking me to the zoo is very weird. It’s not expected. Sure, I should probably expect the unexpected when he’s involved, but the zoo came out of the blue. “Why the zoo?”

“Do you not want to go?”

“Not what I said, Theodore.”

A smirk tugs at his lips. “God, I’ve missed you saying my name like that.” He shakes his head and gets back on track. “Anyway. The zoo. Because you’re sad and having a

shit time right now. The zoo's a good distraction."

"I—okay, that's good reasoning."

"Yeah, I know."

I'm beginning to feel normal again. If I can keep riding this wave of normal, it'll all be okay. Unfortunately, that's not how moods work. It'll ebb and flow, especially when something cuts as deeply as what happened to me. I'm not sure how I'll face work next week or the week after that, if I even have a job when it's all said and done.

When we arrive at the zoo, Theo pulls into a parking spot. As we walk to the ticketing gate, his hand goes back to my back. I try to pay for my ticket, but he doesn't let me. He glares at me, snatches my wallet, and holds it away from me until he can tap his card and pay.

Once we're inside, there's a fork. Left to the flamingos or right toward the elephants.

Obviously, I go for the elephants.

Theo follows along behind me as I lead the way toward the elephant exhibit. The zoo isn't insanely crowded today. There are still families with small children and groups of tourists, but I guide us around them to an open spot along the fence.

I hop up on the curb, lifting my chin over the black metal so I can peer inside with ease. "Oh my god," I gush. "Look at the baby!"

There's a baby elephant following right by its mother. It hides by her legs, occasionally peering around, but mostly focusing on its mother.

Theo's larger body is right behind me. His chest is pressed against my back, locking me in. It's comfortable and I try not to think about that. If I let those thoughts linger, then I'm right back to looking eye to eye with the truth of my feelings for him. I can't do that right now. Not when everything that happened with Austin is so fresh.

"Adorable," Theo drawls, resting his chin on my shoulder. I get the feeling that the baby elephant isn't melting his heart the same way it is mine, but he doesn't complain. We stay there, watching as long as I want.

I could look at the sweet baby all day, but I don't want to bore Theo to death. So, with one last look at the baby, I slip away. He stays by my side, hand on my back as we walk to the next exhibit.

Until I get sidetracked .

I notice the directional sign pointing to important exhibits. The big cats, the monkeys, the bears, and the petting zoo.

"Theo, do they have pigs?"

"What?"

"The petting zoo. Do they have pigs?"

Caramel eyes look down at me, an eyebrow raised as he shrugs a shoulder. "I think so, yeah. Why?"

Not giving him an answer, my hand reaches for his. With ease, I intertwine our fingers and tug him in the direction of the petting zoo.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

THEODORE

“I am not sitting down there with you.”

While I’m not much of a planner, this wasn’t how I envisioned our zoo trip. I thought we’d walk around, see some animals, maybe have lunch. Aurora could soak in the sunshine and feel a bit lighter.

Then she found out there were pigs at the petting zoo. She bolted to it, dragged me through the fence, and found a piglet who loves her as much as she loves it. Now she’s sitting in the dirt with the piglet in her arms, stroking the top of his head.

“Theodore,” she whines, drawing out the last syllable of my name. Those big green eyes are looking up at me, and I know I’m going to break and do whatever the fuck she wants. “Look at him.” She holds the pig up, making me look at his dorky face. He has beady dark eyes and a clueless expression.

“It’s a pig, Roo.”

She rolls her eyes like I don’t understand anything. “Pigs are my favorite animal.”

I raise an eyebrow. I didn’t know what about her. “Yeah?”

She nods. “When I retire, I want to buy a farm in Vermont. ”

“I don’t think I can picture you on a farm.” I try to imagine her sitting in the grass somewhere, wearing overalls and surrounded by pigs and goats, maybe some ducks and a cow. “Why are you already thinking about retirement anyway? You’re young.”

“Wrestling isn’t forever.”

That hits hard. It’s something I hate to think about. Bodies break down after doing this for so long. I’ve done my best to wrestle a style that’ll make sure I can keep doing this for the next twenty years, but freak accidents happen in the ring all the time.

A life without wrestling isn’t one I want to think about. Wrestling is the first thing I’ve ever been sure of. The second thing is sitting in the dirt in front of me, holding a piglet as if it’s her blood child. Kind of cute. Slipping my phone from my pocket, I snap a photo of her while she’s baby-talking to the pig.

Then I give in and sit down next to her, wrinkling my nose when I think about how much dirt is going to be on my pants when I stand up. Looking over at me, Aurora smiles and lays her head on my shoulder. Okay, so sitting in the dirt was worth it.

Reaching over, I stroke the top of the piglet’s head. His hair is rough and wiry, but he seems to be so happy in Aurora’s arms. “What’s his name?”

“I can’t keep the pig, Theo.”

She sounds heartbroken over that fact. If it was logical, I’d buy her the damn pig. Strike whatever deal needed to be made. Life doesn’t work like that. Maybe I’ll buy her a stuffed one in the gift shop. Just to see those eyes light up the way they do when she looks at the pig.

“Obviously,” I roll my eyes. “But if you had to pick a name for him, what would you

name him?”

She tilts her head as she thinks about it, looking down at the animal in her arms. Aurora’s brow creases as she thinks. She’s taking this seriously. “Piggie Smalls.”

Laughter erupts from my chest before I can contain it. I can’t remember the last time that I laughed as much as I am right now, throwing my head back with amusement. That’s good . When I look back at her, Aurora’s eyes are locked on me, a smile reflected on those soft pink lips.

The way my heart jumps in my chest feels like a betrayal of who I am. “Are you fucking serious?”

“One hundred percent. His name would be Piggie Smalls.” Aurora leans down and presses a kiss to the top of his head.

The softness in her eyes is beautiful. I don’t tell her that. Instead, I scoff. “You know, I’m offended that you’d rather kiss a pig than me.”

Aurora lowers Piggie Smalls, leans over, and allows her lips to brush against my stubble jaw. There’s my jumping heart again as such a simple kiss feels like a shock of electricity. I want to capture her lips with my own. Taste her again because I miss the taste of her. I only kissed her once, and I’ve been needing that high ever since.

“There,” she says softly as she pulls away. “You know, you’re making it really hard for me to keep saying that I hate you.”

“Oh, I’m not making it hard for you at all, baby doll. I’m making it just about impossible for you to ever say you hate me again.”

Everything has changed.

I spend the rest of the weekend with her. Our phones are on silent, only picking them up to reply to Juliette because she's just as worried as Aurora is.

When Tuesday rolls around her, I drive her to the arena myself after dropping Rumour off at my apartment. The damn cat is attached to Aurora, completely forgetting about me unless I bribe her with food .

Aurora has an oversized hoodie on, keeping the hood pulled up over her head so nobody can see her. She quickly flashes her ID to security as we slip backstage.

“Just stay in the locker room, alright? I'll go talk to Nathan. We'll get a handle on it.” I roll her bag behind me as I open the heavy door of the locker room for her. She slips inside and immediately goes to the couch.

I want to take her in my arms and comfort her more. I spent the entire weekend holding her, being her safe haven in the middle of the storm. Seeing her still look defeated...it's breaking parts of me I didn't know could break.

“I'll find Juliette and send her in too, okay?” I add.

She turns her head up to look at me and nods slowly. Walking over, I brush my lips over her forehead. Just like she did in her sleep, she leans into the touch.

“Be back,” I promise before I slip out of the room.

As I'm searching for wherever Nathan's office is this week, I pass Micah, who's talking to Clara. Probably about the brat that they have together. He sees me, says something to her, and follows.

“Theodore?” The thick accent makes me turn to look up at him. His blond hair is down, and he's wearing a hoodie that's rolled up to his forearms.

“I’m busy right now, Duvall. We can talk about our program together later.”

“This isn’t about our program. It’s about Aurora.”

My eyes narrow as I look up at him, arms crossing over my chest. He has my attention. I don’t like it. I don’t like where this is going. “Yes?” I bristle, waiting for him to say something so I can ruin his handsome face.

He looks off for a moment and says, “Austin had something to do with it. He’s been talking about it nonstop. Last week, he was saying he wants to find a way to get back at you for getting his match taken away. ”

As Micah speaks, I feel numb. I went from hurting for Aurora to feeling a white-hot numbness as I think about Austin having something to do about the situation.

“Why would he target Aurora if he wants to get back at me?”

“Maybe he has eyes and can see how gone ya are for her like everyone else. Or maybe he thinks you’ll lose some of your steam if ya lose your valet. Either way, I’d check that out if I were ya. Assuming you’re aiming to get some revenge.”

Revenge hadn’t been on my radar. I assumed it was a random hack. Some internet lowlife targeting female wrestlers, and Aurora was the easiest victim, something like that. I’ve been angry, but I haven’t had anyone to unleash that anger on.

Micah’s just given me a target.

“You’re sure he had something to do with it? Aurora said that she lost her phone at the hotel and—”

“Austin took her back to the hotel,” Micah says. He stops and curses under his breath.

“She was drunk. I didn’t want her at the bar much longer, and Austin offered to take her back. I told him that she had nothing to do with his problems with ya and he said he wasn’t gonna do anything about it. Lying asshole.”

“He could’ve taken her phone,” I say. It clicks in my head and that’s all I need. Without saying a word to Micah, I start to storm away from trying to find Nathan’s office and toward the men’s locker room.

I slam the door open, greeted by the scent of cologne and sweat. Eyes turn toward me because I haven’t set foot in the regular locker room since I won the title. I prefer my own for a reason.

My eyes seek out only one person and I find him in the corner with Jameson.

“Slater,” I say, getting his attention.

Austin looks up at me and he has the biggest shit-eating grin on his face. His too white teeth stand out against his orange skin and fuck, at least I have a target .

“Theo, what’s up, man?” he asks.

Walking over to where he stands, I shrug. “Ah, you know, not a lot.” With no more precedent, I reel back and slam my fist into his face, connecting with those too white teeth.

His head snaps back and then it snaps forward. I punch him again. I hear a snap sound. Blood covers my knuckles as it drips from the spot where he’s now missing a front tooth. I look at him, considering what just happened and decided that that isn’t enough.

As I pull back to hit him again, someone grips my arm from behind. Whipping

around, I'm face to face with Hext. He's looking at me with those blue eyes and a scowl on his scarred face.

"Enough," he growls.

Fucking veteran trying to control the locker room. "He's the one who hurt Aurora," I hiss back to him. "He leaked her pictures."

Anger flashes in his eyes as he looks past me, over at Austin who Jameson is helping to his feet. "Did you do that shit, Slater?" he asks.

"It's just some pictures," Austin says, speaking with a lisp because of his missing tooth. His hand is covering his mouth, trying to stop the bleeding. "I was just going to fuck her, but she kept shutting me down."

Hext lets go of my arm and steps back. "One more wouldn't hurt."

Chapter Thirty-Nine

THEODORE

“ I can’t believe this, Theodore,” Nathan runs a hand over his tired looking face as I sit across from him, icing my knuckles because knocking someone’s tooth out sort of hurts. “Assaulting one of your co-workers backstage? This is a new low, even for you.”

“That co-worker violated one of my other co-workers,” I remind him, my gaze narrowed.

“Two wrongs don’t make a right!” Nathan says. “So, what do I do? Do I suspend you? Do I try to stop Austin from filing charges?”

I’m not sure how I expected this conversation to go, but for some reason, I didn’t expect so much anger from Nathan. “If he files charges, Aurora’s going to sue him for revenge porn. Actually, I’m going to make sure she does that anyway. Seems like a real big mess to me.” I’m making it worse, I know I am.

Nathan puts his elbow on his desk, holding his forehead in the palm of his hand. “You do not run this company, Theodore. You might be the champion, but you don’t control as much as you think you do.”

I bite my cheek to try and hide my annoyance, although I’m not sure it works. I don’t think that I run the damn company, but I won’t admit that I did anything wrong. Austin was in the wrong. The fact that I only knocked out a tooth seems like the bare

minimum when it comes to what he's owed.

Deciding to change the subject, I shift in my seat, putting one ankle up on my knee. "What are we doing for Aurora, by the way? It's going to be a shitstorm tonight."

The exhaustion looks even clearer in his eyes as he looks back at me. "We keep her off TV for a few weeks, see if it blows over. People are going to be insane tonight. Letting her go out there is throwing her to the wolves. And then we...I don't know, go from there. See how things shift."

I don't like that. I don't try to hide my irritation this time though. Aurora probably shouldn't be on TV tonight. She hasn't been a performer on this level long enough to know how to push all that bullshit aside and slide into character, but keeping her off TV for weeks for something that isn't her fault? "It sounds like you're punishing her."

"I'm not..." Nathan rakes another hand through his dark hair, the greying at his temples looking even more obvious today. "Aurora is not being punished. As you know, she's not actually a contracted performer for GRW. We have to weigh our pros and cons. She's talented, but this isn't the best way for her to start her career. If people can't move past these photos, then..."

"Don't you dare fucking finish that sentence," I hiss.

"Theodore, I don't care if you're personally involved in all of this, but I have a company to run. I have to look at it from that perspective. I can't just do things based off your feelings. You think I want to be the bad guy here? I have plans written out for Aurora for the next two pay-per-views, but if we have to cut ties to do what's best for us and the performers, then it's on me to make that decision."

I don't give a fuck about all that pro-company bullshit. I care about my girl. I care

about her living her dreams and not getting shit for something that was out of her control.

Technically, it was my fault.

I'm the one who got pissy because of Austin; she didn't. I got him pulled from his match; she didn't. The start of her problems begins and end with me. It's my job to fix it.

Gritting my teeth, I reach into my pocket and pull out my phone. God, I fucking hate social media, but if this is something that I have to do to save her...I'll do it ten times over.

Nathan's eyes are fixed on me, probably because I look like a jackass who's typing away on his phone after he gave me some heartfelt speech about the greater good.

Once I slide my phone back into my pocket, I turn my gaze up to meet his. "Weird. Looks like you have a real problem on your hands, man. Someone's leaking private photos of your talent. Might want to get a handle on that before it makes the company look bad."

I stand up and leave his office, ignoring it as Nathan calls after me, "What did you do, Theo?!" in the most exasperated tone.

Either I fixed the problem, or Aurora and I will be unemployed together.

Chapter Forty

AURORA

“So, on the bright side, you look really hot in those pictures,” Jules says, sitting on the couch next to me. I have my head on her shoulder, and she’s running her fingers through my hair in the most comforting way, her long acrylics occasionally scratching my scalp.

“I don’t know if that helps,” I mutter to her.

“At least it’s not a sex tape,” Clara pipes in. She’s sitting on the wooden table across from us after pushing aside Theo’s favorite energy drinks and his pre-show snacks. “Like you could always go with the ‘nudes are fake’ excuse. Sex tapes are harder to fake.”

“Actually, it’s getting a lot easier with current technology,” Jules corrects her with a roll of her eyes. “My PR training did a whole course about behavior because people can make others believe anything these days. The power of suggestion is amazing, and then you add in the downfalls of modern technology.” The door to the locker room opens, and instead of pausing, she continues. “Someone could probably fake a sex tape of me fucking Santa Claus.”

“Why are you fucking Santa Claus, Stanton?” Theo asks, leaning back against the doorway.

“Daddy issues. Next question.”

He snorts, crossing the room and sitting on the other side of me. “Ladies, you can leave now.”

“We don’t leave until Rory says we can,” Jules challenges him while Clara looks like she’s slowly sliding toward the door.

“Roo, I’d like to talk to you without your little girl gang,” he says, reaching over and slipping his arm around my shoulders. He pulls me away from Jules, into his side instead and she makes an offended sound. “You can invite them in later. Promise.”

I blink up at him. Any other time, I’d be annoyed. Right now, melting into him is a comfort that I crave. He was there for me all weekend. Theo saw the snot and the tears and listened to my mental breakdowns in the shower.

No complaints or mockery. He ordered food to make sure I ate and watched reruns of old sitcoms until some random joke made me smile. He took me to the zoo, just to try and make things a little better.

I hate storms and Theodore Abrams is becoming my shelter in them. Literal and figurative ones.

“Let me talk to Theo,” I say finally. “We can talk more about Jules’s sex tape with Santa later.”

That makes Jules snort as she stands up, leaning down to press a kiss to the top of my head. “It’ll be a hot one. You know that.” She ruffles Theo’s hair as she slips by him, making him roll his eyes.

On the way out the door, she wraps an arm around Clara’s and pulls her along with her. “Come on, let’s go, Bubbles.”

As they slip out the door, I shift in Theo's arms, sitting so I can look at him better. "How did the conversation with Nathan go?" He was gone a hot minute, so I assume it was a long one and long ones aren't always good .

I can feel a fresh wave of panic rising in my chest. He probably kicked Jules and Clara out so he could tell me that I'm fired alone. Probably wants to try and break the news easily.

"Well, first, I went and punched Austin because evidently he's the one who did it."

I blink, processing that. Austin...leaked my pictures? "H-how do you know?"

"He was being a shit stain about it. Micah told me, I confronted him, he confessed, so I punched him in the face a few times. Would've done more, but Hext stopped me after three."

I'm annoyed, only because I want to punch Austin. I wanted to hit him once I sobered up and remembered how he tried to force himself on me while I was drunk. Now, I want to hit him even more.

Almost like he can read my mind, Theo says, "He was escorted out of the building, so you can't get a lick or two in. Sorry, baby doll. I knocked out a tooth for ya, though, so maybe that gives you a peace of mind."

"Sorta," I mumble. It doesn't feel as good as hitting him myself, but knowing that Austin had something taken from him that he can't get back, just like I did, feels good.

I lost my privacy, my security. He lost a tooth.

Both of those things can be replaced with fakes, but you can't get the original back.

“So, anyway...Nathan’s going to keep you off TV this week. Give it time to wash over, but, uh, I think I fixed your problem.”

I pause. This is a constant between the two of us. Theo fixes problems in his own way. Lacing his fingers in my life, twisting it to his will. “What did you do?” I whisper.

Almost sheepishly, he rubs the back of his neck. “Let’s just say that you’re not the only one with private photos out there. Seems like GRW has a hack. Pretty concerning.”

“Theo...” My eyes go wide as I realize what he’s saying. “What did you do?”

“Everyone keeps asking me that today.” He shrugs. “I posted dick pics on social media.” The way he says it is as if he’s discussing going to the grocery store. So mundane, so simple as if he didn’t just expose himself to the world.

“Why?” is the only question that comes to mind. It’s the only thing I can think of asking.

“Because I’m the bad guy,” he says, leaning forward and pressing his lips against my forehead. “People are focused on me. They won’t focus on you.”

For me. He did it for me. So I don’t have to weather this alone. So I don’t have to be afraid or worried or any of those things. “You’re the champion,” I whisper.

“Nathan won’t fire his champion, baby doll. That’s bad for business. It just looks like there’s been a violation of privacy for his talent. That’s a whole different PR crisis. Paints us as the victim instead.”

As annoyed as I get with Theo for meddling in my life, this is the sweetest thing that

he could've done. Instead of lashing out at him, I lean up and press my lips to his.

Theo's shocked. He doesn't kiss me back at first, and I worry that I made a mistake.

He doesn't feel like that about me anymore.

I've ruined it.

I've pushed him away too much.

But then he melts into it. His hands grip my shoulders and pulls me to him, his full lips moving softly against mine.

It's not a hungry kiss like we shared on his birthday. It's sweeter. Something I can fall into and not want to resurface. My arm slips up to wrap around his neck, pulling him in closer as his tongue seeks entrance to my mouth and I grant it .

When it breaks, he presses his forehead to mine. "Is that a thank you?" he whispers, a teasing lilt to his voice.

"Yeah, that's a thank you."

Theo smiles and presses another gentle kiss to my forehead. "I'd do anything to make things easier for you, baby doll."

Chapter Forty-One

AURORA

Rise

Episode 582

Washington D.C

I was kept off TV for two long weeks. There was an HR meeting about the entire situation, one where everyone was extremely apologetic about the ‘outside hack’ that violated a few GRW talents. That’s the story they went with to the public. There was an outside hack violating the privacy of wrestlers and it was handled. By ‘handled’ they meant that Austin was fired and blacklisted from the industry.

Theo’s been on my ass about going after him for revenge porn, but that ruins GRW’s cover-up story and risks outing Theo for assault, which Nathan has been an angel about and is protecting him. Money talks. I’m convinced that Theo could get away with murder and Nathan would cover it up for his champion. If I didn’t want a future at GRW, I probably would go after Austin, but this is where I want to be. I can’t risk it.

Sometimes sacrifices have been made .

The public harassment has died off a bit. News of my pictures getting leaked dropped quickly after Theo’s own became public. That was much more interesting. Now, the

internet fans and the dirt sheets have moved on to the next story, Zayden Trilow, also known as Trilogy, one of the fastest growing young stars in GRW, suffered a gruesome arm injury on live TV. It just... snapped .

So, everyone's worried more about Zayden's future than how he's currently doing. Which isn't well. I don't really know Zayden, but I've texted him a few times to check in. Because that's what people should do. Common sense, right?

Today's my first day back on camera and I'm sort of terrified. My stomach has been twisting and flipping the entire time. I wanted to puke during the plane ride here and in the Uber to and from the hotel. Anxiety is setting in hard. I thought about calling out. Theo told me he would drag me by my ankles to work if I did that.

I hate that the thought of that turned me on a little bit.

We haven't talked much about what happened between us. The kiss. Theo hasn't pushed which feels like the most un-Theo thing he could do. I want him to push. I want him to ask me about it because I am over being scared.

Fear can't control me. I can't let it ruin things like it so badly wants to do.

That's why I showed up at work today. Even if I'm keeping my head down, trying to avoid the gaze of my coworkers. Not like any of them care as much as I think they do. I just focus on heading toward Theo's locker room.

"Roo!" The shout of the nickname that only one person uses makes me finally look up. Theo stands, leaning with one shoulder against the wall. His gestures with his head for me to come over and join his conversation.

Standing across from him is the familiar mountain of a man. Micah's wearing a cut-up t-shirt. The sleeves are cut to show off his tattooed sleeves, and the bottom of the

shirt is cut into a crop top, showing off insanely defined abs. Blond hair is pulled back into a low bun at the nape of his neck, stubble lines his chiseled jaw.

His blue eyes settle on me and a smile pulls over his lips, showing off blindingly white teeth. “Aurora,” he greets me.

Annoyance is painted on Theo’s face as clear as day. He’s not bothering to hide it. Reaching out, his hand settles around my waist and he yanks me to him. I bite back a smirk, amused at how he’s acting.

I don’t know a lot about where things are between us. He took care of me at my lowest. He gives me butterflies. He named his cat after my favorite Fleetwood Mac album. But neither of us have talked about what this does or doesn’t mean. It’s unspoken between the two of us. Maybe it’s better if it stays that way.

“Micah and I were talking about our match later,” he informs me, keeping me pinned to his side.

“Okay.” I nod, giving him the chance to continue.

“The plan is for Theo to get DQed,” Micah chimes in. “He had the idea to play up the relationship between the two of you.”

My cheeks flush when he refers to our relationship . Relationship can mean a lot of things. We’re partners. We’re co-workers. We’re...whatever we are. He makes butterflies flutter in the pit of my stomach.

There’s a smirk on Theo’s face when he catches my blush. “The thought is, you hop on the apron, try to distract Micah. He ends up throwing me into the ropes, you take a bump, and I get pissed off. Hit him with brass knuckles. You good with that?”

It's one of the most common and repeatedly done valet spots. I get knocked off the ring apron because my distraction attempt gets thrown in my face. Easy enough. I shrug. "Doable, yeah."

"Perfect," Micah says, but his voice comes out as a purr. Theo's grip on my waist tightens.

Silly boy—does he not know that, while Micah is gorgeous, he's the one that's stolen my attention? Of course not. I haven't told him, and everyone knows that he can't take a damn hint about anything.

Feeling the need to make sure that Theo feels secure, I lean my head against the side of his chest. "Anything else?" I ask the two of them. "I gotta get into hair and makeup. Shayna may murder me if I'm late again."

"I like keeping you alive, baby doll. Go to Shayna. I'll see you in a bit."

So, if I knew I'd be taking a bump tonight, I probably would've packed different shoes. These strappy heels aren't the most secure, but I'm making it work. At least I feel like a goddamn goddess in my dress tonight. It's a white halter dress with crisscross cutouts and split thighs. Shayna killed it on the hair and makeup, like usual.

Standing on the outside of the ring, I pay close attention to everything going on within it. Micah has Theo in a headlock before flinging him into the ropes. Theo uses the momentum to bounce off of the ropes, rushing back toward him, but Micah drops down, avoiding the incoming hit.

He kips back up, landing perfectly on his feet as the crowd cheers him on. Basking in the attention, he turns to gloat, and Theo hits him from behind as the cheers shift into boos. I take the opportunity to play it up, clapping my hands as I pace ringside.

I don't feel panicked being out here. Eyes are on me, but not because they've seen my naked body, but because I get their attention. I haven't heard a single asshole in the crowd yell something negative.

Maybe Theo's distraction method, although slightly insane, did work.

His brown eyes flick to mine and he winks at me, making heat swirl in the pit of my stomach. You can't fake that .

The match continues, neither man getting the upper hand in this situation. Waiting for my cue. Once I notice Theo tossing Micah into the ropes, I climb up onto the apron. I give Micah my best bedroom eyes, trailing a finger from my collarbone down, trying to get his gaze to follow. An obvious attempt at seduction that'll be easy to pick up on TV.

It looks like Micah's falling for it. Theo goes to grab him from behind, but Micah uses his momentum to push Theo into the ropes. When his body hits, I go to fall off, but I land wrong. There's a soft snap, and pain radiates from my right ankle up my shin.

Theo's eyes drift down to look at me, and he can see that something's wrong.

The show must go on.

Suddenly, he looks enraged, and I can't tell if he's acting or if it's legit. Either way, he doesn't care that the ref sees him reach into his trunks and grab the knuckles. Without hesitation, they crack across Micah's jaw.

And he sells it like death, dropping back to the mat, his head lulling to the side. Boos rain out. "Bullshit!" The crowd chants in unison. The referee looks shocked, eyes wide as he gestures for the bell to be rung.

“Winner of his match due to disqualification, Micah Duvall!”

Not waiting around for the referee to ream him out, Theo climbs out of the ring. He drops down to where I’m still on the ground. “Your ankle?” he asks, as if he automatically knew.

“Yeah,” I whisper back to him. The camera isn’t focused on us. It’s focused on Micah, who still lays in the center of the ring, the ringside doctor checking him over.

Panic swells in my stomach. I don’t want to be hurt. I’ve never gotten legitimately injured from wrestling so far. It was only a matter of time, I knew that. Injuries are common when what you do is dangerous. But fuck .

What if this costs me? Nathan’s going to be pissed. I know it’s all on a thin rope lately. I’m becoming too much of a problem. My contract, my hopes and dreams. All of it is sliding out of my hands. I’ve had a really shitty streak of luck lately.

“Let me help you up. We’ll get to the back and look at it.” Theo wraps my left arm around his neck, helping me stand up on my left leg. I try to put weight on my right leg and immediately wince in pain. Okay, not happening.

With him supporting most of my weight, I hobble backstage and through the curtain. We get to Theo’s locker room and he drops me down on the couch.

His skin is flushed from his match. Sweaty. I’m sure he’s sore and tired, yet he kneels down in front of me. His fingers delicately undo the straps of my heel, pulling them from my foot. A callused finger runs over the swelling. “I’m going to go get you ice, Aurora. It doesn’t look broken. Can you move it? Is it just sore or...” He trails off, leaving the sentence open to me.

I move my ankle from side to side, wincing the entire time. It’s killing me, but it’s

possible. My ankle is swollen, so ice is probably a good idea. “I think it’s just sprained.”

“Probably,” he agrees. “We’ll ice it and get you in to see the trainer. You’re probably going to have to go to the hospital though.”

Fuck. I groan. This is it. This is the end of my time at GRW.

I’m not going out with a bang. I’m going out with a goddamn whimper.

Chapter Forty-Two

THEODORE

After grabbing a bag of ice, I immediately come back to Aurora. I can see on her face how damn worried she is. She looks like she's going to worry herself into a panic attack.

My Roo is an overthinker, especially when her career is involved. She's so zoned in on wrestling that everything else fades to the side for her. Kneeling in front of her again, I place the bag of ice to her ankle. She doesn't speak, teeth worrying her lip.

I want her bottom lip between my teeth, but given everything going on, that's probably the most inappropriate things I could say. She doesn't need to me to think with my dick right now. She needs to relax a little bit.

"You know," I say, breaking her out of her own head and getting her attention. "You really gotta stop falling for me, baby doll. It's becoming a bit of a problem." My lips pull into a smirk.

Those green eyes land on me for a second, and she doesn't react. A beat later, and laughter spills from her lips. That beautiful sounding laugh that makes my heart jump in my chest. "That was cheesy as fuck," she finally says as she stops laughing .

Hey, I'll be cheesy all damn night if it keeps her laughing. That laughter is the soundtrack of my life.

“Well, did it hurt?” I keep the ice pressed to her ankle. “When you fell from heaven, did it hurt?”

Her laughter continues. It’s like the pain isn’t there anymore. She’s too distracted by my cheesy jokes. “Cheddar!” she says through her laughs. “Pure fucking cheddar. Do you have anything that isn’t so cheesy?”

Tilting my head to the side, I think. Oh, she’s getting something that’s absolutely cheesy because I want to keep her laughing. “Knock knock.”

She blinks slowly. “Who’s there?”

“Lettuce.”

Aurora presses her lips together, face already scrunching up, prepared to laugh. It’s kind of adorable. She forces out, “Lettuce who?”

“Lettuce make out already.”

This time, when she throws her head back and laughs, I laugh too. She laughs until tears form in the corners of her eyes and she has to wipe them away. When her laughter subsides, her eyes look back down at me. “Theo?”

“Yeah, baby doll?”

“Do ya think I’m going to get in trouble?”

The joy is gone from her voice. She sounds scared, and my heart twists. Absolutely not, she’s not allowed to be scared. Not when I’m right here. Keeping her ankle supported on my thigh, I lean forward and cup her jaw gently.

“Absolutely not.” I can promise her that with absolute certainty. “Nathan’s not going to punish you for a freak accident, alright? Your feud with Jules will just be put off until your ankle is better.” Hopefully sooner rather than later.

She groans, her head falling back against the plush cushion of the couch. “Jules is going to kill me. ”

“That? Yeah. That’s probably likely.”

I swear, Juliette must have super hearing because it’s about that time when her knuckles wrap on my locker room door. Only once, before she pushes the door open and lets herself in. “Great, no dicks are out,” she says.

As fully expected at this point, Hext hovers behind her. Wordlessly looking on. I don’t know what’s going on there. I desperately want to because I’m a nosey bastard. No one’s going to tell me though. I can say that one thing’s for certain: Weston Hext is fucking whipped.

“Shocking, right?” I snark back.

Juliette disregards me, her gaze focusing on Aurora’s swollen ankle that’s propped on my knee. Clocking the ice and the swelling, she sighs. “Rory, you good? You head to medical yet?”

Aurora shakes her head. “Not yet. Theo’s icing it for me.” I shoot Juliette a shit-eating grin that makes her roll her eyes.

“What the fuck happened?” she asks. “How damn hard did you hit the ropes, Theodore?”

A heavy groan leaves me. How am I getting blamed for this?! I didn’t do anything.

Before I can tell her that, Aurora comes to my defense. “It was a combination of the heels and me falling wrong. Theo didn’t do anything.”

My look turns smug.

“Falling is like half your job,” mutters Juliette. She comes over, kneeling by me and looking over Aurora’s ankle. “It doesn’t look too bad. Hex, what do you think?”

He runs a hand over his buzzed head. “I ain’t a damn doctor, Goblin. Probably a sprain. Should definitely get her to medical though.”

“Should we go get someone else to weigh in?” I snark. “Maybe Clara’s free. Think she knows anything about injuries?”

“You’re the dumbass who hasn’t taken her to medical yet,” she shoots back .

Sometimes, I think of Juliette as a sister. I like her better than the sisters that I have. She’d kill me if I said that she was softer than them, and maybe softer isn’t the right word, but she’s more...caring. Less obsessed with money and status, which considering who Juliette Stanton is comes off as the funniest shit.

Aurora looks over at Hext, who still stands in the doorway, guarding the group of us like a rottweiler. “Are they always like this?” she asks, gesturing between me and Juliette with her index finger.

“From what I’ve seen, they absolutely are.”

“Jules,” she says with a sigh. “I’m sorry. For getting hurt. I know we’ll probably have to put off our match for another PPV cycle.”

She shakes her head, standing up. Leaning down, she brushes her lips over the top of

Aurora's head. "No worries, Rory. Seriously. I'll be fine. We'll just figure out a way to build this up even better, yeah?"

"Yeah," she agrees.

She smacks my shoulder before walking away. "Get her medical," she orders. Pointing to Aurora she adds, "Text me what you find out. I want every damn detail from the doctor."

After Aurora gives her a mock salute, she heads off. Hext trails after her. The rottweiler turning into a pathetic puppy.

Chapter Forty-Three

AURORA

It's later than usual when Theo helps me back to my hotel room. He presses the key into the reader, pushing the door open before stepping aside so I can hobble into the room. It's going to take a while to get used to using crutches. I've never had to do it before, and I keep feeling like I'm going to fall flat on my face.

That's where Theo comes in.

He closes the door behind us, eying me carefully as I hobble over to the bed and sit down on the edge of it. I wince slightly as I rest my ankle up on the bed. It's wrapped. A simple sprain. The doctor said it'd be healed in about a month. So, it's not the end of the world. It's a setback. It's an annoyance.

"This has been the shittiest month of my career."

"The shittiest month of your career yet," Theo corrects. He kicks off his shoes and comes over to sit on the other side of the bed, carefully avoiding jostling my ankle. "Look at it this way, baby doll, you have a long career ahead of you. Plenty of time for it to get worse."

"Was that supposed to be motivating?"

"Eh." He shrugs. "Back on the indies, I got kicked so hard I pissed myself during a match. I thought that would be the worst moment of my career. Then I got caught

cheating on my fiancée.”

“Sort of your own fault. You didn’t have to cheat,” I point out. Feels like it needs to be said. I sit back against the headboard as Theo grabs the pillows from his side of the bed, stuffing them underneath my ankle to try and prop it up some.

He tilts his head toward me in agreement. “I didn’t.” Silence washes over the two of us before he continues. “On paper, Veronica is perfect for me. Gorgeous, professional cheerleader. Comes from a good family—which is important to my parents,” Theo adds. “But Veronica cared about money. Everyone in my life cares about the damn money.”

He’s doing that thing where he opens up again. It always leaves me with an uneasy feeling. Unsure of exactly how to react. Scared that if I say too much, he’ll shut down or if I say too little, he’ll think that I don’t care.

“Everyone?”

He snorts decisively. “Everyone. My parents. Veronica.” Theo shakes his head. “That’s about all the people in my life. Don’t really have friends or anything. I’m kind of a bastard.”

“I’m your friend. I don’t care about your money.” I slip my hand over the multi-colored duvet on the hotel bed, letting my fingers brush over his.

“Aren’t you a sweet thing?” Theo purrs. He flips his hand over, letting my hand rest in his calloused palm. His thumb glides over my knuckles before a smirk overtakes his full lips. “But we’re not friends, Roo. You know that.”

My stomach flips. I can’t tell if that’s a good or a bad thing. A few months ago, I never thought that I’d want to be anything to Theo. And now...I don’t want to be his

friend. I want to be his everything .

I want to curl into his warm body every night. I want to kiss him. I want to fight with him over the dumbest shit only for the fights to end with him pushing me against the wall and fucking me senseless. Making it so the only thing I can think of is Theo and his cock.

More than anything, I want to take the risk and fall into the spiral of Theo. Get lost in the labyrinth with no chance of finding an exit.

Swallowing, I force the words from my lips. “What are we then?”

His free hand comes up, thumb stroking my jaw. “To be determined.”

My heart drops. That’s not the answer I craved. Fear sinks in, a fear that I’ve been scared to acknowledge for a while now.

What if I was right?

What if Theo doesn’t want me anymore because I’m no longer a conquest? He had me. He fucked me in the locker room after I spent weeks telling him that I wouldn’t. What use does he have for me now? I’m just a notch on his belt. Nothing more.

I press my lips together, so hard that it hurts. “Right,” I say softly, letting the conversation drop before I can say something that makes things worse. Like confessing my feelings and making it so Theo really thinks that I’m an idiot. “I should try and sleep.”

His jaw sets. Theo’s upset about something now, too, but it vanishes just as quickly as it was there. “You should,” he agrees. “I’m going to stay with you until you fall asleep. In case you need something.”

He doesn't get a verbal response for me. I sink down into the too-soft hotel mattress, burying my head in the over-stuffed pillow. I try to keep my foot resting comfortably as I get settled, turned away from Theo.

I'm overthinking. I'm in my head .

His fingers stroke the hair by my temple as I start to drift off. The simple act makes my heart clench. Makes me crave more.

There has to be more. This can't be all in my head.

Chapter Forty-Four

AURORA

The bed shifting next to me wakes me up. Blinking through the sleep, my hand reaches out and wraps around Theo's wrist, stopping him from leaving. He pauses and looks back at me in the darkness. "Get some rest," he murmurs.

Anxiety fills my chest as I force myself to speak. "I don't want you to leave."

His face softens, and Theo shifts back into bed next to me. He settles back against the pillows, not trying to pry his wrist from my grip. "Okay," he says. "I won't leave. Get some rest, Aurora."

"Theo..." I lick my dry lips. "Why are you still here?"

His brows knit together in confusion as he shifts a bit, looking over at me. "Because you just told me not to leave?"

"No, not right now." I groan in frustration. This isn't an easy conversation for me to have. I'm not sure why I'm picking tonight to have it. Our conversation earlier, and my subsequent spiraling thoughts, are weighing on my mind. "We fucked. Why are you still...around?"

"Did you want me to not be?"

"No!" I reply maybe a little too quickly. This is hard. Painfully hard. Feelings are not

something I have a whole lot of experience talking about, especially these. The vulnerability makes me uncomfortable. “I just... Why do you still want me even after we fucked?”

He clicks his tongue and sighs. “You’re still on that, aren’t ya?” Reaching out, he twirls a loose strand of my hair around his finger. “I really don’t know how many times I have to tell you that I want you for you to understand that. Originally, yeah, I wanted to fuck you. You’re gorgeous. Then you were impossible and I still wanted you. Now? I want all the pieces in between. I want to be with you. You’re just being a bit of a brick wall about the whole thing.”

“I am, aren’t I?” I give his hand another tug, pulling him so he lays down beside me. He’s mindful of shifting the bed around my still aching ankle, although that’s the least of my worries right now. “I just...I’m scared,” I admit. It’s not the first time. He knows how much the idea of this terrifies me. “You wouldn’t just hurt me, Theodore, you’d destroy me.”

That’s the truth of the matter. Loving Theo is easier than I want it to be. It boils down to the fact that if he were to hurt me, it wouldn’t just hurt me, it would shatter me. He has the ability to destroy me because he’s the first person who’s ever made me feel seen.

I’ve allowed myself to be open and real with him in ways I’ve never been with other people. I’ve showed him the pieces. He’s seen the good, the bad, and the really, really bad. He’s still insistent that he wants me.

It doesn’t take a genius to know that either this man is extremely persistent or he wants me for more than sex. He wants me for me. And the idea of ever having something like that taken away would destroy me.

His finger untwists from the strand of hair, his hand coming down to cup my jaw. I

lean into the touch, his warmth. “I’m sure you want to hear promises that I’d never hurt you, but I can’t promise that, Aurora. I can promise that I would never intentionally hurt you, and if I break you, I’ll be the one to put you back together.”

Not the most reassuring thing, but it’s real. It’s Theo. He doesn’t lace things with sugar to make them more digestible for anyone. He’s honest, probably to a fault, but I can appreciate it. “I’m just...I’m terrified, Theo.”

“Love’s a little terrifying, baby doll,” he says, flashing me a sideways smile in the darkness. “Not that I know from experience, but it’s what I hear. You’re giving someone the ability to really, really hurt you and you’re having to give up control. You won’t be able to stop the hurt unless you close your heart off and I don’t think that’s any way to live.”

I latch on to the first part instead of the most philosophical thing he’s ever said about anything: “Are you saying you love me, Abrams?”

Theo laughs. It’s one of those real, gorgeous laughs that makes him seem like a little less of a monster. “Of course that’s what you focus on.” Still avoiding my ankle, he shifts a little closer to me. Searching his brown eyes, I can see it, but he’s not going to say it. Not yet, and I don’t want to push. Instead, I melt when his lips lean in to meet mine. A quick, soft kiss before he whispers, his lips brushing mine as he speaks. “To be determined.”

I let out an annoyed growl as my hand comes up, tangling in his curls. “Getting real tired of your TBD’s,” I say before crashing my lips to his. My kiss is less gentle, hungrier. The truth can stay unspoken between us for now, that’s fine.

We both know it.

He chuckles as I try to kiss the sound from his mouth. My tongue eagerly slides

against his and Theo reacts. His body comes over mine, caging me underneath him. A calloused hand slides down to my thigh and pushes it to the side, making it so I gently spread my legs for him and keep my injured ankle out of the way of danger. He's being so much more tender than I ever thought he'd be with me.

It makes me slip back to that thought again. Does he actually love me?

Theo brings his knee up between my thighs and I grind myself against it. Every time the friction brushes over my clit, he swallows down my gasps and whines. His hand comes up to cup my breast through my t-shirt and I arch into it.

On the nightstand, his phone buzzes. We don't part, too caught up in what we're doing. His hand teases my nipple through the fabric, making it harden into a stiff peak that's needy for his attention. The buzzing of his phone stops.

Then it starts again. Our lips part and Theo groans. His dark eyes meet mine, and I can feel my heart falling to the pit of my stomach. "Really?" I mutter.

He sighs and sits back, running a hand through his curls. "Let me at least see who it is, baby doll."

I don't think he knows how insulting that feels. We had a moment; we were going to fuck, and now he's picking up his damn phone because that's somehow more important. He's a wrestler, not a damn doctor. It's not like he's on call in the middle of the night.

When I don't respond, he rolls his eyes and reaches over to grab his phone from the nightstand. A deep wrinkle forms in the center of his forehead, like it always does when he's annoyed about something. "It's Nathan," he says before answering. "What?"

Leave it to our billionaire boss to cock block us in the middle of the night.

I shift closer, trying to hear what Nathan might be saying on the other end, but I can't make out anything. All I hear from the other end of the line is the mumbled sound of Nathan's deep voice. At least I know Theo didn't hit pause on everything for another girl .

He groans in obvious annoyance. "Now? Really? It's almost three in the goddamn morning." He sighs. "Fuck, fine. Give me ten and I'll come up." He hangs up, looking down at me. "Nathan wants to talk to me."

"At 3 AM?"

"I know, I know. It sounds like the most bullshit reason, but you have to know that stopping this is the last thing I want to do. I would do anything to be inside of you again, Roo."

"Except stay."

Now his annoyance shifts toward me. "Aurora, I wouldn't leave you for anything but Nathan said it was important. There's a change he wants to make for the upcoming shows and I'm at his mercy. You know that."

But I still want to argue. From everything I've seen, Nathan has been at Theo's mercy. Theo makes decisions, bullies Nathan into agreeing. He convinced Nathan to give me a spot and follow a whole ass storyline, he made Austin lose his title match, he gets away with every damn thing. He leaked his own dick pics and put Nathan into a corner.

Why is he now a good employee?

With everything going so well between us right now, I decide not to fight. Putting my hand on his chest, I shove him. “Fine, go. You owe me.”

“You’ll get the fucking that you so desperately want, baby doll.” He grins, tucking his erection into his waistband before he slides off the bed.

“Saying it that way makes it sound so much more unappealing.”

That grin stays on his face. Something I once saw as pretty damn annoying has turned into something that I think is...endearing. Something uniquely Theo that I love. “Well, guess you won’t sit around missing me too much then.” After sliding on his shoes, Theo comes over and presses his lips to my forehead. “Get some rest. Text me if you need anything. I’ll be in touch. ”

And he leaves. Leaves me laying in my bed with a sore ankle, an annoying ache between my thighs that he didn’t soothe and the realization that I really hopes he loves me.

Because I know that I love him.

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Chapter Forty-Five

AURORA

Rise

Episode 583

Lexington, Kentucky

I haven't seen Theo since he rushed off to go see Nathan. My flight out was early, and I wanted to get home, take care of my ankle. We've been texting, and he's been promising me a conclusion to what we started last week, but I haven't gotten it yet.

When I get to the arena, I do my usual routine of checking the production rundown for the night and I notice something off. An unexpected pivot. Instead of the rematch against Micah being at the PPV, it's tonight. After, Hext and Jules are scheduled to interrupt the celebration. I know that I'm meant to feud with Jules. Why are Hext and Theo going at it again ? We just ran that feud last PPV. Why is Micah getting bumped?

"What happened with Micah?" I ask as I enter Theo's locker room, still limping but not on crutches. I'm not cleared to wrestle, but I can still valet, as long as I don't get in the ring or take any bumps. The metal door swings shut behind me. "Why are you feuding with Hext again?"

"Good afternoon to you too, baby doll. Your makeup looks fantastic , by the way.

Shayna really knocked it out of the park.”

Rolling my eyes, I throw the crumbled-up print off with tonight’s rundown at his head. He smirks when it bounces off the wall beside him. “What happened to Micah’s title shot?” I repeat the question.

“Getting all soft and sweet on Micah, Roo?” he asks. Something dark flashes in his eyes. Something a lot like jealousy.

Not touching that. “It’s a good feud. People want to see it. People want to see Micah get his main event shot. We saw you and Hext at the last PPV.”

“I don’t book. I only do what the bossman tells me.” His tone is so damn dismissive that I want to hit him.

Even all the time we’ve been spending together doesn’t make him any less... Theo . He’s still an asshole a lot of time, like right now.

“Don’t give me that bullshit, Theodore. You have more of a say in your booking than most people do. You know exactly what’s going on.”

He shrugs. “Can’t say I do.”

My eyes narrow. Fuck it. Fine . He doesn’t want to talk to me. I’ll go ask the man in charge. Turning, I leave the locker room and let the door slam behind me. The metal echoes in the corridor. I don’t give a fuck if it causes a disturbance right now.

Limping down the hallway, I stop at the door with Nathan’s name and knock. I’m not insane enough to stomp into my boss’s office.

“Come in!”

I open the door and Nathan's brown eyes light up. He takes off his reading glasses, running a hand through his dark hair. "Aurora! I actually wanted to speak to you," he greets me .

Any other time, that would make me panic, but he doesn't look upset. This is the first time I've talked to Nathan outside of the HR meeting after my pictures got leaked. I was assured that it was going to be taken care of and no punishment would be given to me due to an 'outside hack.'

So, I don't think this is where my pay-per-appearance deal ends. They probably want Jules to go over in our feud first, make their next star look good, and then rid themselves of the train wreck that I've been.

Lowering myself into the chair across from him, I put my hands in my lap. "I have a question."

"Question in a minute." Nathan sorts through the stacks of papers on his desk. How he manages to travel with all this disorganization is beyond me. Sure, he's like a billionaire, but I'd go insane if I were that messy. Finally, he pulls out a packet and slides it across to me. "You've knocked it out of the park, hiccups aside. Your work with Theo has been phenomenal . You've won the crowd over; you've made them hate you. There's a spot for you here at GRW if you want it, Aurora."

Listening to him, my eyes barely scan over the text on the paper in front of me as I soak it all in. An actual contract, not just a pay-per-appearance deal. Something real . Something solid.

"I'm...I'm signed?" I know how stupid that sounds. It's obvious what he's saying, but I need the verbal reassurance to pull me from this state of disbelief.

Nathan nods. "You're signed as soon as you sign the contract. Feel free to look it

over, take your time and—”

I don’t need to hear anything else. A stray pen is among the mess on his desk, and I snatch it. Not bothering to read anything else on the paper, I scribble my signature at the bottom of the last page. If my dad knew I signed a contract without reading anything, I’d get one hell of a lecture. I should read it .

But when your dream is right in front of you, you snatch it. No matter how shitty some of the pieces may be.

Nathan raises an eyebrow at my eagerness, but he doesn’t comment on it. “It’s a three-year deal. There’s a two-year option attached if both parties choose.”

A smile that’s so wide it hurts spreads over my lips. “Is it unprofessional to hug your boss after signing a contract?”

“Completely,” Nathan answers. But he doesn’t stop me when I stand and hobble to the other side of the desk, wrapping my arms around him. This man made my dreams come true. He deserves nothing less than a hug. “You had a question?”

The hug breaks and I look down at him. I’d forgotten all about that when the contract was in my face. Good to know I’m easy to appease. “Right. Why is the feud with Micah being dropped?”

“As Theo and I discussed the other night, actions have consequences. It’s about time he learns that, and all things considered, he’s getting off lightly.”

It’s not hard to put two and two together. Hext is the ‘break in case of emergency’ option for Nathan. Reliable, beloved, a respected veteran. “Theo’s dropping the belt?”

“That’s on a need-to-know basis right now, Aurora.”

I thank him, grab the contract from his desk, and leave. Nathan’s a busy man. He has a company to run and a show to put on. He doesn’t need me in his office, asking a thousand questions that I doubt he’d answer. Actions have consequences . So what the fuck did Theo do?

There’s no need to storm into the locker room again; I catch Theo in the hallway. He smirks when he sees me, before he can open his mouth, I blurt out, “What did you do?”

The smirk stays on his face. “Gotta be more specific than that, Roo. I do a lot of things.”

Why does he insist on giving me a headache? “Why are you dropping the title? Nathan told me.” More or less .

“I can’t be champion forever.”

“Get more specific, Abrams. What. Did. You. Do?”

Theo takes a step closer, backing me up against the beige-painted brick wall. His eyes darken as he looks down at me, our gaze meeting. “You already know what I did, Aurora. I leaked my pictures on purpose, and I guess Nathan grew some balls and decided to take charge of his company for once. About damn time, honestly.”

“I didn’t ask you to—” That was weeks ago. Why is Theo just now being punished? Did it really take Nathan that damn long to come up with a plan?

“Didn’t say you did. I gotta go talk to Micah. See ya in a bit.”

Theo leaves me there, letting that information soak over me.

He's dropping his title because of me. Because of my shit. He didn't have to get involved and he did. Now it's cost him.

Way to take the wind out of a girl's sails.

Chapter Forty-Six

THEODORE

A urora's mad at me.

I know, I know. What else is new? She's always mad at me.

I can't stand it now. Now that we're...whatever we are. After our conversation in the hallway, she was different. Quieter. She didn't make snarky comments or light up much. When I texted her after I got back to my room, fully planning on making up for leaving her wanting last week, I got no response.

Like any logical person who hates being ignored, I stormed to her hotel room. My fist slams against the pale-yellow door a few times. "Roo? We need to talk!" I call through the wood.

It takes a second but the door swings open, revealing Aurora. She's in a T-shirt and shorts; Juliette is standing behind her. Shocking . I'm surprised Hext isn't hiding in there too.

"You don't have to yell. That seems like a little much ," Aurora says.

"It's dramatic as fuck," Juliette chimes in, unhelpful as usual.

I choose to ignore her obvious attempt to provoke me. "You weren't answering my texts. We need to talk." My eyes dart to Juliette who has her tattooed arms crossed

over her chest. “ Alone .” I’m sure everyone’s favorite homewrecker has a home to wreck somewhere.

She rolls her eyes and gives Aurora a side hug. “Way to make a girl feel unwanted, Abrams. No wonder Rory’s scared of you.” As she pushes past me in the doorway, she punches me in the shoulder.

Once she leaves, I step inside and close the door behind me. My gaze lands on Aurora, who’s refusing to make eye contact. “You’re mad at me.”

“I’m not. I mean, I’m now annoyed because you’re making a scene.”

“You were ignoring me. I don’t like to be ignored.”

She rolls her eyes, turning away from me. “I wasn’t ignoring you. I—” She stops herself from speaking and sighs. Her shoulders deflate as she gives in to whatever she’s feeling. “You’re dropping your title because of me .”

I sigh. This isn’t what I wanted to talk about. Dropping the damn title sucks. It would be a lie to say it doesn’t. This was the only way to please Nathan. The more he thought about it, the more pissed he got that I made an even bigger mess of things right in front of him with zero fear. I’ve never had to face consequences before; he decided now was the best time. When it comes to keeping my job or dropping the title, I’d rather drop the title.

“Yeah, I’m dropping the title. I’d lose a million titles for you. You have no idea the things I’d give up because you’ve somehow become the most important thing in my life.” The words feel uncharacteristic coming from me but I need Aurora to understand.

I’m tired of the pretenses. I’m tired of dancing around it because she might or might

not be scared of what it means. And I sure as hell can't let her walk around blaming herself for my decisions. She has to bear enough weight. She can't carry mine too.

She turns to look at me, light green eyes looking conflicted . "Being the champion was all you ever wanted." Her bottom lip quivers.

"It was," I agree. Taking a few steps forward to close the distance between us, I put my hand under her chin, forcing her to meet my gaze. "Until I found something better."

Things have steadily changed between us. I can't pinpoint the exact moment I knew. All I know is that it's all different now. I'm different now.

Tears form in her eyes as I continue. "You're what matters to me now, Roo. Not a title. You ."

"Theodore." She breathes my name as her eyes lock on mine.

The sound of my name spilling from her lips sends shockwaves of need and desire rippling through me. I wrap my hands around her waist, picking her up. She doesn't fight it. Her body molds to mine as her legs wrap around me, letting me easily carry her to the bed.

Aurora shivers in my arms. I'm so careful as I drop her back onto the bed, avoiding any unnecessary damage to her ankle. I watch as her body bounces, her hair splaying out beneath her.

She's the most beautiful thing in the world. She took her makeup off after the show, so I can see the light scattering of freckles along her pale cheeks, her full pink lips slightly parted. I sure as fuck don't deserve her, but I'm going to take advantage of every moment given to me by this perfect creature.

Leaning down, I nip at the sensitive skin of her neck again. Aurora tilts her head to the side, silently permitting me to plant kisses along her smooth, pale skin. “I can’t stop staring at you,” I confess between the kisses. “Whenever you’re around, you’re all my eyes go to. I like watching the way your hips sway when you walk and how the light hits your hair and makes it glow like a halo. Even your nose is damn cute. I like the way it wrinkles when you laugh. I could watch you for hours, Roo.”

I’m ripping myself open at the seams, putting parts of myself on display for her that no one has ever seen before. The weakness that I shut down and pretend doesn’t exist is hers for the taking. Discomfort ripples through me, and I focus on her neck because then I won’t have to see her face if she cringes away in discomfort.

My teeth sink into her soft flesh, making her gasp and arch into it. That reaction only makes my cock harden and I busy myself by worrying a maroon-colored mark on her neck with my teeth and then soothing it over with my tongue. Mine .

“You’re so goddamn brave and tenacious. You’re strong and smart and you put up with my shit more than any woman ever has before,” I whisper against her skin.

Her fingers lightly trace over my arms, sliding up and down and making me wonder how one touch can make me feel more than anything else ever has. Aurora speaks quietly, “I think your smile—your real smile, not your shit-eating grin—is the most beautiful thing in the world.”

My heart slams against my ribcage as my vulnerability is met by her own. Tilting her chin back, I run my tongue down the slope of her throat, feeling her body squirm beneath me. “You’re the only one who gets a real smile from me. You’re the only one I can be real with. When everyone else expects a villain, you make me want to be a hero.”

Her body arches into my touch, but she lets out a quiet laugh that’s broken up by a

moan. “Don’t be something you’re not. Sometimes the villain gets the girl, Abrams.”

She called me on my bullshit. Okay, fine. I jumped the gun when I spoke about wanting to be a hero. That’s not who I am. Never have been, never will be. I do things for her because I want her to be mine and I want to make her life easier.

But I’m not her knight in shining armor.

“Keep looking at me like that and calling me by my last name and I’m going to pin you down and devour you,” I warn, heat dripping from my voice as my tongue dips into the hollow of her throat before I move down to her collarbones. “You’re the worst thing that ever happened to me,” I whisper against her warm skin.

Stupid damn t-shirt is in my way. Gripping the bottom of it, I roughly tug it and Aurora sits up, letting me pull it over her head and toss it off the bed, finding her wonderfully bra-less. “You turned my entire goddamn world upside down,” I tack on as my lips kiss down her sternum.

Goosebumps erupt over her skin. Her body twists and arches, trying to get more from me. We’re not rushing tonight. I need to take my time. I need her to know that she’s mine.

“Wouldn’t that make me the best thing that’s ever happened to you?” she challenges.

Wouldn’t that be the case for anyone else? Contrary to popular belief, I liked my life. I liked who I was. I didn’t ask for this redheaded spitfire to change everything for me.

My lips move to one of her full breasts, sucking a dusty pink nipple into my mouth. She cries out, fingers threading into my curls as I suck on it until it’s a stiff, painful peak. Pulling away with a pop, a string of saliva connects me to her still. “Absolutely not,” I answer gruffly. “You are the bane of my existence. A goddamn thorn in my

side, making me want to do things that I shouldn't want to do. I would commit felonies for you."

Technically, I already have. A couple of times. Fraud to get her father moved to a different hospital, assaulting a co-worker, sort of blackmailing our boss. It was all worth it.

Her pale skin has a pink hue to it as I kiss my way over to her other nipple.

"No felonies," Aurora gasps as I suck that nipple into my mouth, treating it the same way as I did the other one. Except I let my teeth scrape over this one and she whines, fingers tightening in my hair. "They're not necessary."

Fuck. I love the sound of her voice when it's desperate and breathy, when she's losing her mind for me .

"No promises," I growl back. My lips leave her breasts and I set my sights on what I've wanted to see for so long. The start of the floral tattoo along her side. I can take in all the details I don't usually see because of her clothing concealing it.

Detailed flowers start right underneath her armpit, down her ribcage, wrapping slightly onto her back. Darkly shaded leaves and stems connect the flowers, complete with a black and white ladybug settled on one of the leaves. It's photorealistic, continuing down her side, over her hip, and stopping at the top of her thigh.

I trace my fingers over the details before my tongue follows that path. I've dreamed of this tattoo. Naively, I thought seeing the black and white ink would mean I finally reached my goal. I would be able to let go of the woman who's wrapped around my heart like barbed wire, sinking into the organ and refusing to be pulled away without ripping it apart.

“You have consumed my every thought. I can’t go twenty minutes without wanting you in my life. Wanting to hear your voice, see your smile, watch you roll your eyes when you’re done with my shit. You know how long it’s been since I’ve been able to think about something other than myself or wrestling?”

I spill myself to her as I kiss down the tattoo, listening to the little hitches of her breath and the way she sighs.

Then she inhales sharply, her voice shakes as Aurora utters three words that stop me in my tracks. “You love me.”

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Chapter Forty-Seven

AURORA

S aying that was a mistake.

I can see it in Theo's brown eyes, he's panicking. I terrified him by making that observation. I said what felt right, what we've been dancing around. Putting the pieces together, that was the conclusion that was made crystal clear. I don't think Theo was ready to come to that conclusion. His lips are frozen against my ribcage. His fingers had just hooked underneath my shorts and now they've stopped.

When he pulls his hand away, I reach for him without a second thought. I don't know how, but I need to fix this. Walk back my words and hope they are erased from his brain and allow me to continue having this moment.

Theo swallows hard enough that I see his Adam's apple bob. "It scares me," he whispers.

Our eyes lock, my fingers brush over his shoulder. My mouth suddenly feels dry and I lick my lips in an attempt to remedy that. That was an admission, wasn't it? Was Theo owning up to his feelings? I need to respond but it feels like making that observation took all of my courage .

Now I know that I'm not the only one who's been terrified.

He brings his hand up my body, cupping my cheek. "More than anything," he admits.

“It scares me how much you mean to me. How badly I want you to be happy and safe.” He hovers over me again, pressing his forehead against mine as his thumb lightly strokes my cheek.

Hot tears sting the corners of my eyes. One slips down my cheek. “It scares me too,” I whisper back to him. Leaning down, he kisses the tear from my cheek. The gesture gives me a bit more courage to continue. “You scare me. I know who you are. I know all the bad and all of the good.” Theo is fire. He could keep me warm or he could burn me to ashes. “All your red flags have always been on display.”

“You can see them from space,” Theo chuckles. He leans down, brushing his lips against my cheek. “I’m not going to change, baby doll. I’m not going to suddenly become a good guy. I’m still a villain—I’m just yours.”

There’s something about that that’s comforting and frightening at the same time. I know what I’m getting into, but I don’t have a choice anymore. I’ve fallen into this maze and I have to follow it through until the end. Either I burn or I don’t.

I move my hand to the back of his neck, fingers lightly playing with the soft hairs there as I pull him down for a kiss. My eyes flutter shut when our lips meet. It’s soft and sweet until Theo’s tongue slides along my bottom lip and I open for him. Our lips and tongues crash together as his hips settle between my thighs. My tongue chases after his as his hips grind down against my core. I can feel the hardness of his cock through his pants and I press myself up into it, making him groan into the kiss.

“You’re going to drive me insane,” he breathes when the kiss breaks. His lips brush against mine as he speaks. “You have no idea how badly I’ve needed you. Once was not enough, Roo. It’s never going to be enough. ”

I smirk up at him. “I am right here, Theo.”

“Right here is where you’re going to stay,” he growls. Sitting up, he reaches down to undo his belt. It’s the same black leather Ferragamo belt that he always wears, the signature belt buckle glinting in the light. He pulls it through the belt loops of his slacks until it’s free. “Hands,” he demands.

I offer my wrists. He loops the belt around them, ensuring it’s not too tight before he attaches it to the headboard. It’s loose enough that I could break free if I wanted to—I don’t want to.

His eyes are dark. Caramel has turned into pools of black as they rake down my body. Bringing his hands to my shorts, he rips them down my thighs without a second thought, my panties following them. I’m naked beneath him as Theo drinks me in.

“Fuck,” he groans. “Look at you.” He trails a finger from my collarbone to the top of my mound, grinning. “Such a beautiful sight.”

I sigh, arching into his touch, trying to angle his hand down just an inch or two. I want to feel his fingers or his tongue or his cock. Something. Anything .

I think he’s going to give in. His index finger trails down, running along my slit. Theo chuckles, the sound dark and velvety. Sin from the devil himself. “You’re soaked and I’ve barely done anything to you, baby doll. Is this how badly you want me? How much you need me?”

Words are stuck in my throat again. Not out of fear, but desire. Talking is the last thing I want to do. I want to feel . I want him to fuck me until the mattress breaks and we get noise complaints. I need everything that’s been building up between us to be said with our bodies. No more fighting or denying it.

I nod when my words don’t work.

Theo doesn't press his finger into me like I so desperately need him to. He glides it up and down my slit, smearing my slickness over me. Occasionally, the pad of his finger brushes over my clit and makes me jump at the teasing.

His finger finally stops and sinks into me until the first knuckle. It's the most uncomfortable tease of my life. The feeling of having more right there, but not getting any of it.

Theo leans down, chest pressed to mine. With his mouth by ear, he nips at my earlobe before whispering, "I would do anything for you, baby doll. Burn this whole fucking world down to see you smile." Without warning, he pushes his finger into me and another joins it.

I gasp, relief flooding over me as my pussy clenches around his digits.

"I can only imagine how pretty you'd be with the flames reflecting on your face." He adds before he sits back.

He hooks his fingers inside of me, pressing them against the spot that makes my eyes roll back. "Fuck—fuck, Theo," I moan.

"Say my name, Roo. Fucking say my name when you cum around my fingers. Then you can have my cock."

With my eyes watching his face, I rock my hips in time with the movement of his fingers, grinding down against them each time they press upward. The feeling of ecstasy starts to build at the base of my spine and I rock to chase the electric tingles. A little bit more and I'll tumble over the edge for him.

Theo slows down.

I whimper, glaring up at him as he smirks down at me. His fingers stay buried in my cunt, but they stop moving. My inner walls desperately clench around them, trying to get that feeling back, but Theo holds still.

“Do you deserve it?” he asks. “Do you deserve to come on my fingers? On my cock? You’re at my mercy. I could leave you here all night. Get myself off, make you watch.” His voice is practically a coo, teasing, mocking . His free hand goes to the hefty bulge in his slacks, stroking over it and biting his bottom lip, dropping his head back.

My mouth is so fucking dry. I’m pissed that he took my orgasm from me, leaving me on the precipice. I’m pissed that he looks so goddamn hot as his hand teases himself, never letting his cock spring free, but letting me watch the way his hips roll.

His head snaps back up, eyes meeting mine and he flashes me that devilish smirk. “Maybe I’ll let you come if you ask me nicely enough.”

I swallow, trying to wet my mouth. “P-please Theo?”

“Please what, baby doll?”

Asshole . “Let—let me come. Fuck! Let me come.” I’m so frustrated. I was right there! It’s not fair that he took it away. It’s not fair that he’s in control. He’s always in control.

“Mm, maybe.” He starts to move his fingers again at the most frustratingly slow pace. I should be irritated, but I can feel my release start to build up again. Painstakingly slow, but the coil in my abdomen is tightening again.

“Fucking let me come!”

“Temper. Being demanding won’t get you anywhere.” His fingers start to slow down again and I can’t take it. I need this.

“Theodore, please,” I whimper as tears sting behind my eyes again. It’s so pathetic that I’m going to cry over being denied an orgasm, but I don’t think he knows how badly I need this. The pressure building inside of me needs to be released or I think I might die. “Please let me come. Let me come on your fingers. Please.” I keep begging, the words running together until I’m a wreck of senseless pleas and whimpers.

Theo tilts his head, looking down at me. “Okay.” He speeds the pace of his fingers again, slamming them against my g-spot at a tempo that has me losing my mind.

Waves crash over me suddenly. I feel sparks. I see sparks. I cry out for him but my head is spinning and I can hardly hear myself as I come on his fingers.

I’m hardly aware of Theo pulling his fingers away as I ride out the aftershocks. As I’m blinking my eyes to clear up my vision from the blurriness it took on after my orgasm, the thick head of his cock presses into me. My vision is cleared in time to see him smirk before he pushes inside.

“Fuck!” I gasp. My body is still sensitive. I haven’t come down from my orgasm yet. Each thrust is angled to hit that spot inside of me again and again, simulating it like he had with his fingers. My hands fight at the belt restraining me because I want to touch him. I want him to be close.

Theo reads me. He doesn’t release my hands but he leans down and presses kisses along my jaw as his hips piston into me. A delightfully deep in and out, letting me feel every inch of him stretching me in sinfully delicious ways. His hand grips my thigh, holding it up so he can angle himself better.

“Fuck, baby doll. Fuck . This cunt was made for me. Can’t you feel it? How good you fit around me? I was meant to be inside of you.” He leans down, burying his face in the crook of my neck. He nips at the skin again, pulling even more moans from me. “You’re so goddamn pretty like this, taking my cock. Pretty all the time, but fuck, when my cock is in you...I lose my mind.”

His hand grips my hip tightly as he pounds into me. Harder. I can feel another orgasm cusp and I let myself fall into it. I let it take me as I come around him, my pussy milking his cock desperately as I come. Wave after wave washes over me, and Theo doesn’t relent. The devil is taking me to heaven.

Or maybe this is hell. Whatever it is, I never want to leave.

“Roo,” he whispers against my skin, followed by a few curses as he comes. His hot release fills me, making me whimper and press against him one more time.

A few more slow, deep thrusts and he pulls out. Wordlessly, he undoes the belt around my wrists, rubbing the barely there marks. Theo gets off the bed, goes to the bathroom, and comes back with a damp towel.

He cleans the mess between my thigh, then himself, and lazily tosses the used towel on the floor before sinking into bed with me.

My body curls against his, relaxation washing over me. He presses a soft kiss to my hairline. “Feeling okay?”

“Better than okay.” I’m sated, tired...happy. Everything’s fallen into place. I have my dream job. I—my dream job! I never told Theo that I got signed. I sit up so suddenly that Theo jumps too.

“What’s wrong?” he asks immediately.

“I got signed.”

“What?!”

“I signed the contract earlier when I went to talk to Nathan. I forgot to tell you. I got signed!”

“Holy fuck. Can you not scare me like that, Roo?!” he snaps, holding a hand over his chest. Then a smile pulls over his gorgeous face. “You got signed!” His arms wrap around me, pulling me back against him. “Knew you would. You’re amazing. I told you that.”

It’s a shock that Theo didn’t know considering how... hands-on ...he’s been with my career. “You didn’t know?”

“Nope.” He shakes his head. “This wasn’t me. This one was you.” He kisses the side of my head again. “We’ll go out to dinner soon to celebrate.”

My nose crinkles. “Dinner? You’re buying me breakfast, Abrams.”

“What did I tell you about calling me by my last name?” he growls. Suddenly, he’s on top of me again, pinning my body to the mattress. His lips are making a path from my collarbone down to my pussy, making me squirm. Right before he buries his face between my thighs, he murmurs, “I’ll buy you breakfast, lunch, dinner. Whatever the fuck you want, baby doll. I’m yours .”

Chapter Forty-Eight

THEODORE

Uprising PPV

Detroit, Michigan

“Does it make you feel better to know that Hext has been bitching about this all week?” Juliette asks as she leans in the doorway. “He doesn’t want to win the title, feels like it should be Micah.”

“Everyone feels like it should be Micah. I won’t be surprised if the bastard walks when his contract is up,” I say, sitting on the couch and wrapping my wrists with tape. Doing a couple of layers to hide the razor blade and make sure it stays hidden. “It is what it is. Nathan thinks it should go to Hex.”

It’s not like I get a say in who I drop my title to. The gold-plated belt sits next to me on the couch. This is bittersweet. I haven’t experienced a lot of heartbreak in my life. There’s not much I let my heart get involved in. This stings though.

Championships come and go. I did what I had to do. Actions have consequences. Sometimes the consequences hurt, but I can still confidently say that it was worth it .

She pushes off the door. “I’m gonna go check up on him. I’ll see you two later.” She nods to me and Aurora before she disappears down the hallway.

Reaching over, I wrap my arm around Aurora's waist and pull her into my lap. She looks stunning in a black lace jumpsuit. It hugs those curves that I love so much. "Think we could get it on real quick?" I ask, kissing the sensitive spot behind her ear and making her giggle. "It's our last time in our own locker room. Might as well use it to our advantage."

She leans back against me, her body melting underneath my touch. She so wants to give in. "You'll rip my outfit."

I run my fingers over the jumpsuit, callused fingers snagging on the lace. "Probably," I agree. "But we could run out and buy you something else after."

"Mm, don't think we have time. How about I make it up to you tonight?"

I grumble, not liking being told no. Sex would be a great distraction from how I'm feeling. Maybe I don't need a distraction. I should probably feel my feelings or whatever. That's what Aurora would say if I told her about the tightness in my chest. "Fine," I relent, burying my face into her neck. Inhaling her sweet vanilla scent calms me a bit.

Reaching back, her fingers thread through my curls and I relax some more. "You okay?" she asks.

Lying to Aurora isn't something I want to do. I've tried hard to avoid doing that since she became mine. No one understands how hard being honest is for someone like me who isn't used to it. So far though, I haven't fucked up. No rats, no PR scandals. I think Nathan is happy with me for the first time ever.

"Not really," I admit. "Feels like shit. But...I guess there's more stories for me when I don't have the championship."

“You’re young. You’re a damn good wrestler. You’ll win it again. ”

“I know.”

But knowing that doesn’t make the bitterness sting any less.

As I lay on the mat, staring up at the lights, blood dripping from the hidden cut on my forehead blurs my vision.

“And new GRW World Champion... Weston Hext!” The ring announcer’s voice booms through the arena and cheers ring out through the crowd.

It feels like a shotgun blast to my ego, to my heart.

When I roll out of the ring, giving Hext the spotlight to celebrate, Aurora is right there. She wraps an arm around my waist as I drape one around her shoulders, using her for support. She helps me hobble backstage. With one last glance over my shoulder, I see Hext holding my title above his head as the crowd goes wild.

The villain has been defeated.

Their chosen one wins.

When we’re through the curtain, Nathan slaps his palm against my sweaty shoulder. “You looked good out there, Theo. I’m proud of you.”

Words I thought that I’d never hear don’t sink in like they would’ve in a different situation. All I feel now is my loss. It washes over me. Walking a few more feet with Aurora, I stop against the far wall, sliding down it.

I think I’m crying. Tears mix with my sweat and the blood that’s dripping from the

gash on my forehead.

As the adrenaline settles, I'm crashing down. Aurora quickly kneels in front of me, forehead wrinkled in concern. "Theo, hey. Are you okay?" she asks. "Baby, look at me."

"I'm okay, I'm okay," I assure her, wiping at my eyes. I don't want her to worry. I don't want her to blame herself.

She presses her forehead to mine, my blood coating her pretty skin and getting in her hair. "It's going to be okay," Aurora whispers.

"I know." It is okay. I know it is. This is not the end of my career or the end of the world. But the sting hurts. "Feels weird coming back here without my title." I held it for almost a year. Every day, I protected it with my life. Airport security, hotel rooms, hiding it in the trunk of my car whenever I went to a club after a show. The title was the most important thing in my life.

Until her.

Aurora Bennet means more to me than that gold ever did.

Chapter Forty-Nine

THEODORE

Six Weeks Later

“Are you sure about this?” Not one to usually doubt myself, but in this situation, doubting myself seems natural. My arm is looped around Aurora’s waist, keeping her tucked into my side as we walk the green and white tiled hallways together.

She leans her head against my shoulder. “Wouldn’t be doing this if I wasn’t sure,” is her response. She does not allow me to continue with that thought process, but she speaks again. “I like this place a lot better, by the way. There’s more color. It feels like it’s meant for the living.”

“I’m taking that as a thank you.”

Aurora huffs in response as she stops at Room 57. Her knuckles tap against the cracked door before she pushes it open. A smile etches over her lips. “Dad?”

Tobias Bennet is a tall man, even sitting down. His blond hair is freshly washed and combed out of his clean-shaven face. He’s wearing a blue t-shirt with a white stripe across the chest. When he sees Aurora walk through the door, there’s a light in those familiar green eyes and a smile tugging at the edges of his lips. A small hint of one.

Aurora’s hand slips into mine, pulling me into the room with her. “Hi, Dad. This is Theodore. He’s the one who paid for you to get transferred here. He’s also...” She

hesitates over the word for a moment, teeth worrying her bottom lip.

I want to jump in and fill that gap for her, but this is something she has to do on her own.

“My boyfriend,” she finishes.

Stepping forward, I offer a smile that I hope screams ‘charming’ and not ‘deceptive psychopath who you don’t want anywhere near your daughter’. Tobias tries to lift his hand and after a glance at Aurora, double checking that it’s okay, I reach out and take his hand in mine.

I don’t shake it; I give it a gentle squeeze instead. “It’s really nice to meet you, Mr. Bennet.”

From the way he looks at me, I’m ninety-nine percent certain that his man hates me. Not a surprise. Most people do. I get it.

Aurora has her arms crossed over her chest as she stands beside me, a little smirk on her face. “He doesn’t like to be called Mr. Bennet. Makes him feel old. He prefers to be called Tobias.”

Ah. Okay. No sudden hatred? That’s better. Although she definitely could have told me that in the car.

“Got it. Sorry, Tobias.” Dropping his hand, I shove mine in the front pockets of my slacks.

Walking over, I plop down into one of the tan leather chairs in the corner of Tobias’s room, watching as Aurora comes to life talking to her father. She’s a little ray of sunshine, catching him up on every detail of her life.

In the middle of her rambling, she walks over to the minifridge by his TV. She opens it and frowns. “You’re out of Root Beer, Dad. I’m going to go see if I can get some more from the kitchens.” Then she scampers off, leaving me alone with Tobias.

Being left alone with your girlfriend’s father who doesn’t speak is one hell of an awkward position. Do I talk to him even if he can’t respond? What do I even say? Something to make him like me? I don’t know how to make people like me. It’s not something I generally care about.

But this is for Roo.

I look over at Tobias. “She’s something special, huh? You’ve been watching her on Tuesday nights, right? Your nurse says you have. I think after her blow-off match with Juliette she’s going to get pushed into the title scene. She should. She’s amazing.” I’m rambling. I’m sure I sound like a pathetic puppy trying to make a good impression.

He’s looking at me, and I’m not convinced he doesn’t hate me, no matter what Aurora says. “She’s different,” I add. “For me. I fell in love with Roo before I even knew what love was, I think. My life would suck without her. I’m definitely not the best guy for her. Roo could do so much better, but she chose me so that has to mean something, right?”

I shrug. “Or maybe your daughter has shitty taste in men.”

That’s not the best thing to say to your girlfriend’s dad, but it’s true. Tobias should know the truth. Before I can make myself look even worse, Aurora’s back with a few cans of Root Beer tucked in her arms. As she puts them away in the fridge, she recounts how nice the nurse was about the situation and how she’ll make sure he’s kept stocked up on his Root Beer.

As she finishes her story, Tobias opens his mouth. She stops and tilts her head, worry filling the eyes that I know so well. “Dad? Is everything okay? Do you need something?”

His hand moves forward, resting on her forearm. His mouth opens and closes a few more times as if he’s trying to remember how to form words. “Roo,” he finally says. His voice is rough, shaky from not being used for God knows how long. “Proud.”

Tears fill Aurora’s eyes, threatening to spill down her cheeks. Every part of me wants to comfort my girl, but that’s not my job right now. This is a moment for the two of them that I’m honored to bear witness to.

She puts a hand over her mouth, holding back a choked sob. “Dad?” Her arms wrap around his shoulder, hugging him tightly.

After that, it’s not like Tobias becomes a chatterbox. It was progress though. We stay with him for a few more hours, watching the Fleetwood Mac concert and helping him with dinner. Aurora is the dutiful daughter, feeding him bites of mashed potatoes as she tells him all about Rumour, New York, and me .

She’s blessed by a few shaky, real smiles throughout her stories. Like when she tells him about how Rumour was adopted by me, but the kitten loves her more.

As we’re leaving, she hugs him again and kisses his forehead. I give his hand another squeeze. “I’m taking care of her. Don’t worry,” I tell him. “Focus on yourself, because she needs you, all right?”

Walking out of the facility, my arm wraps around Aurora’s shoulders, and I pull her against me. Leaning over, I press a soft kiss to the side of her head. “I told you Roo was a good nickname. So much better than Rory .” I say the name with mock disgust.

“You still can’t just rename people whenever you want, Theo.”

“I think we can let it slide this time, baby doll.”

THEODORE

Seven Months Later

Four months ago, I signed a contract extension with GRW. It's not shocking that Nathan wanted to lock me down for longer. I'm damn good at everything I do, even if I've been a bit of a headache in the past. And as much as I struggle to see eye-to-eye with the bastard sometimes, GRW has given me everything. My career, money, and the girl of my damn dreams.

During negotiations, I asked for two things. First, I wanted my own locker room. I didn't give a damn if I was champion anymore or not, although we all know the belt is coming home sooner rather than later, I didn't want to share with anyone. I wanted a place that Aurora and I could hang out before the show, which meant I also ended up with a place that became full of the people that Aurora attracts.

My girl is lovable.

When I push open the door to our locker room, I find Aurora on the floor, kneeling next to her suitcase. She's putting all her damn weight onto the thing, trying to get it zipped. I raise an eyebrow, leaning against the wall as the door closes. "Wanna do something tonight?"

She blows a piece of her hair out of her face, turning to look at me with a raised eyebrow. "Like what?"

"Probably something fun and inappropriate, if you'll say yes."

Aurora snorts. “Maybe. Dinner first and then we’ll talk about fun and inappropriate.”

“You got it, baby doll.”

“Are you gonna offer to help me with my suitcase?”

“Is my fault you pack half the damn closet with you?”

Her green eyes narrow. God, I love when she gets irritated with me. It makes the green in her eyes look even brighter. “If you recall, I once only packed one outfit, and you made me go buy a new one because it wasn’t sexy enough.”

I cross the room over to where she’s kneeling by her suitcase, getting down next to her. “I saved you from going on national TV and making it look like you got your clothes by dumpster diving.”

She rolls her eyes at me as I push down on her suitcase, trying to pull the zipper up the track. It feels like wrestling with a wild animal, but I finally manage. Sitting back, I reach over and brush that stray piece of hair behind her ear. “Next time, you’re not packing your entire life up.”

“Whatever.” She rolls her eyes and stands up, wiping off the knees of her leggings from where she was kneeling on the not-so clean laminate flooring. “So, dinner? What are you thinking?”

“Actually, Roo...” I trail off, digging into my pocket. My fingers wrap around the object in question and I latch onto it. “I have a question.”

“Theo...” Her eyes go wide, looking down at me. “Just so you know, if you propose right now, I’m saying no.”

“Ouch. Good to know.” No, I’m not insane enough to propose to the girl that I’ve been with for less than a year. I’ve already done that once. I’m not even sure if marriage is something I’m ever going to want, and I know from small comments here and there that Aurora’s on the same track. “But I’m not proposing. Give me your hand.”

Suspicion etches across her features, but Aurora listens. She holds her hand out, palm up. I place the object from my pocket in her palm and she looks down at it skeptically. “You got me a toy piglet?” She tilts her head. There’s a tiny plastic pink piglet sitting in her palm. Ask me how many stores I searched to find that. “That’s actually very cute. Very random but very cute.” The smile on her face is gorgeous.

But that’s not the surprise.

“I bought a farm. I bought us a farm. In Vermont.” That was part of my negotiation. I wanted a signing bonus big enough to afford a farm in Vermont, just like Aurora dreamed of.

She blinks. “You...what? You bought a farm ?”

“I want to drive up there tonight. Show it to you. It’s ours. It’s yours.” It’s the grandest, most insane romantic gesture I’ve ever done. Proposing is nothing compared to buying property to share with someone.

That’s how serious I am about Aurora Bennet. I want to make all her dreams come true. I helped her get her foot in the door with GRW; I made sure her father got the best care he could to recover from his stroke. I bought her a goddamn farm.

“Why?” She’s in shock. I can almost see the gears turning in her head as she tries to piece it all together.

“Because what happened to Hext has me thinking how quickly this can all end. You’re right. Wrestling isn’t forever.” I lick my lips. “We can buy piglets.”

That last part breaks her out of the emotions that washed over her when I mentioned the Hext situation. We don’t know a lot about what’s going on there. It’s being kept very tight-lipped, and I know that Juliette is struggling, but when I bring up buying piglets, Aurora’s eyes sparkle .

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” I stand up, my arms slipping around her hips and pulling her flush against me. I lean down and press my forehead to hers. “Come on. We’ll find somewhere that has cheese fries this late. Make a pit stop by my place to pick up Rumour and we’ll drive out to our farm.”

I told her once I’d do anything to make her life better and I meant every damn word of it. Maybe I didn’t know a lot about this love thing when we started, but I think I might be getting the hang of it.

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Babyface/Face: The good guy in a wrestling feud.

Breaking Kayfabe: Similar to an actor breaking role on camera.

Gimmick: The wrestler's character.

Gimmick'd Match: A match with a stipulation (Ladder Match, No Disqualification Match, etc.)

Gorilla Position: The command center behind the curtains.

Heel: The bad guy in a wrestling feud.

Jobber/Enhancement Talent: A wrestler whose role is to lose matches and make their opponent look good in the process.

Kayfabe: The portrayal as staged events in wrestling as real, including but not limited to: rivalries, relationships, and competition.

Ring Apron: The bit of the ring that extends outside of the ropes.

Squash Match: An extremely one-sided match where one performer dominates the other.

Turnbuckle: A rigging device that holds up the ropes in a ring. Located in the corner of the wrestling ring, normally covered by a leather-covered pad.