







# Love is Fake (Love is Everything #1)

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**Category:** Romance

**Description:** A fender bender, an arrogant VIP-patient, and a reunion with a man Izzy could never forget. All in all, the perfect disaster.

When Izzy is hired as the physiotherapist on a top secret job in New York, she's more than a little nervous. Who knows what's to be expected?

Old?

Rich?

Maybe the head of the Sinaloa cartel.

Possibly even the queen?

What she didn't expect, not by any stretch of the imagination, was getting into an accident on her way to the job. Even more unexpected, was getting into an accident with him.

A mortal in the body of a God.

Strong.

Ridiculously talented.

Painfully Handsome.

The brightest hockey star.

And worst of all, the guy she's been crushing on ever since well. Forever!

Lennox Gray.

Back then, he didn't notice her. Too big for their small little town. Too popular for the clumsy girl with thick rimmed glasses. Izzy is not that girl anymore, though.

Well, maybe except for the clumsiness.

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:52 am*

## Chapter

### One

Squinting into the low June sun, I reach over to the glove compartment, grabbing the sunglasses I stashed there when I picked up the rental.

I only take my eyes off the road for a split-second, before a deafening horn blasts behind me.

The sound makes me jump out of my skin and I frown at the enormous truck beside me – way too close beside me – and the driver who is currently flipping me off.

Crap.

I turn the steering wheel, realizing I started drifting into the lane next to me.

“Eyes on the road, Iz,” I mutter to myself, gripping the wheel like I might fall off if I don’t.

Living in New York for the past five years meant I hadn’t exactly needed to drive.

Judging by the current shitshow that is my driving, I’m clearly more than a little rusty.

The daughter of a mechanic who can barely maneuver a car.

My father would have a field day if he could see me.

I snort at the thought. It would have been funny if I wasn't so terrified of causing an accident on the freeway.

You owe me big for this one, Kiara.

As if thinking her name has made her appear, my cell starts buzzing with an incoming call. I risk taking one hand off the wheel for a second to press the touch screen to answer.

“Are you there yet?” Kiara has never been one for pleasantries.

When we first met, she told me ‘I don't do small talk’ and in the years I've known her she's proven that point again and again.

Not that I'm complaining. Her bluntness and take no shit attitude are some of the things I love most about her.

I sigh, heavily. “No, Ki, and calling me every half an hour isn't going to make me get there any faster.”

“You can't be late.”

“I'm never late, you know that.” If anything, I'm the person who's chronically early – to everything. Meeting up with friends, I'm always the first one there, especially as all of them are always late. I make a habit of taking a book with me now whenever I go out and inevitably have to wait.

“You do have a point, but if you keep driving like an old lady then you will be,” Kiara mutters.

“I do not drive like an old lady,” I grumble back at her, ignoring the unladylike sound of disbelief she makes at the other end of the line.

“And if I didn’t have to go all the way out to The Damn Hamptons then I wouldn’t even have to drive,” I point out.

Not even a second later, I’m cursing under my breath as I almost miss the turn the GPS is telling me to make.

“The client was very specific - ” Kiara starts, but I’ve heard the spiel already.

“Yeah, yeah, I know – extensive orthopedic experience, blah blah, but the client also very specifically asked for someone else ,” I remind her.

I’m not bitter or disappointed that I wasn’t the first choice – it makes sense, there are a bunch of physiotherapists more senior than me at our clinic.

For one reason or another, none of them were available today.

So, here I am – uninvited, but showing up anyway.

“I get that you didn’t want to pass up a big VIP client, Ki, but Michael is way more experienced than I am. Can’t this guy just wait a couple days? Did you explain that Michael’s had a family emergency when you told him why you were sending me?”

I tap the accelerator, noticing I’ve dropped well below the speed limit as I’m getting tailgated by a woman who looks old enough to be my grandmother. I’m distracted enough that it takes longer than it should for me to notice my best friend’s uncharacteristic silence.

“Ki...?” Oh hell no. “You did tell the client that Michael wasn’t coming, right?” I grit

my teeth because I know the answer before she even voices it.

“Not exactly...”

“Kiara!” I groan out her name, headbutting myself on the steering wheel in frustration.

“If I had, then we would have lost him. His manager was very particular that he only wanted the best and while Michael was his first choice, he had a long list of other physiotherapists who would jump at the chance to work with his client.” Kiara doesn’t sound even a little contrite – it’s against her religion to back down from an argument, even if it’s with me.

“His VIP client whose damn name I haven’t even been told,” I complain, pissed that I’m about to walk into a supremely awkward situation. And I’m already awkward enough all on my own without adding in external factors.

“I had to sign an NDA before his manager would even speak to me, Iz.” It’s the closest I’m going to get to an apology from Kiara, so I take it.

I know it’s killing her not to be able to tell me, we tell each other everything and my best friend is prone to more than the occasional over-share.

“And how was I supposed to know Michael’s wife was going to go into labor 4 weeks early?”

I can imagine her throwing her hands up in frustration at the inconvenience of the cute premature arrival.

“I’m sure what you meant to say was that you’re over the moon that our friend Michael has a happy and healthy baby and he understandably wants to spend time

with his family and work comes second to all that.”

Kiara lets out a long-suffering sigh and I smile to myself.

“Yeah, we both know that’s what I meant,” she relents, begrudgingly.

“That’s why we’re so good together – we balance each other out.

You keep trying to stop me from being a complete bitch and I keep trying to give you just enough bitchiness to stop you from being a complete doormat. ”

I laugh at the straightforwardness of her explanation, as if it’s a universal truth which can’t be argued.

“First of all, you’re not a bitch – well, not all the time,” I tease. “And, second of all, I’m not even close to being a doormat!” I check my rearview mirror carefully before changing lanes and exhale in relief when I do so without causing an accident.

I really do need to get comfortable in a car again and I need to do it soon if I’m supposed to be driving to and from The Hamptons three times a week.

And I’ve just found out that’s now a very big ‘if’.

Once this client sees I’m not the renowned physiotherapist he was expecting, he may very well just send me packing.

I tuck a stray chestnut curl behind my ear, a nervous habit I’ve had since kindergarten.

“You can do this, Iz.” Kiara reads my mind in that uncanny way of hers. It’s one of her strengths and it’s made her a great businesswoman and a great boss. But



sometimes I wish I wasn't quite so easy to read.

"I'm not Michael." In fact, I'm about ten years younger than him with about ten years less experience.

"Yeah, well – duh." Kiara's eye roll has actual volume. "But the client wants the best and you're the best." She says it with so much confidence, it's tempting to believe her, that is if I didn't already know the woman could sell snow to a damn snowman.

"Michael's the best," I point out.

Kiara blows out a frustrated breath. "He has the name, Iz, but you're just as good – Michael's said so himself. And he's been your mentor since college, so he should know."

I smile at the kind words, although I still can't bring myself to believe them.

Sure, I graduated top of my class and I've been shadowing one of the top sport physios in the world since college, but that doesn't mean I can do this without him.

He's always been there to bounce ideas off of, to be the 'face' of the clinic to the clients and I've been more than happy to take the backseat.

This would be my first high profile job flying solo and I'd be lying if I said I wasn't more than a little nervous.

"You can do this, Iz. I wish you had more confidence in yourself." I can practically hear Kiara shaking her head, making her signature statement earrings clatter against the phone.

I don't tell her that compared to teenager Izzy, the woman she knows is

unrecognizable. In high school I had been painfully shy, embarrassed about my very existence, not helped by the fact I was the definition of dorkiness. Talk about a painful puberty.

It had taken moving to New York, starting college and meeting like-minded people to lift my self-esteem off the floor.

I'm proud of the person I've turned into.

That doesn't mean I don't still doubt myself every now and again, especially when shit gets real, but that's why my mantra is there to fall back on.

"Fake it 'til you make it," I mutter under my breath.

"That's the spirit!" There's a percussive sound as Kiara smacks her hand down on her desk. "You'll be great. And you can thank me later – after you've met him."

"Thank you for what?" I squint at the GPS screen, my contacts irritating my eyes after having worn them since the early hours when I started work. With Michael on paternity leave, I haven't stopped the past couple of days.

"You'll see. But if his photos are anything to go by, you're welcome!"

Possibilities of who the mystery man could be whirr through my brain – maybe he's a famous actor or a model?

Kiara's insistent voice interrupts my musings. "Now, put your foot on the accelerator and get there already. Call me when you're done, 'kay?"

"Sure, but what am I supposed to say when he asks why I'm the one who showed up and not Michael?" I slam on the brakes as a shiny black Escalade darts in front of me

and I roll my eyes at the heavy bass pounding out of it. Could this guy be any more cliché?

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“You’ll think of something, you’re resourceful like that.

Talk later.” Kiara ends the call, like she does everything else, at a million miles an hour.

There’s no doubt she’s already moving on to the next problem that needs patching up.

There’s a reason she owns one of the most sought-after occupational clinics in Manhattan and she’s not even 30 yet – she works harder than anyone I know.

It’s one of the things we have in common; neither of us had a helping hand from our families.

We had to make our own way in the world.

The truth is, I wouldn’t have it any other way.

“I’ve got this,” I tell myself, trying to hold onto Kiara’s vote of confidence. It’s in that very moment that I’m distracted by a horn tooting me from behind.

I didn’t realize the light turned green. Instinctively, I tap the accelerator just a little. It’s enough to make the car lurch forward...and directly into the rear end of the shiny black truck in front of me. Apparently, I wasn’t the only one who didn’t realize the lights had changed.

“Oh, crapola,” I say aloud, gripping the steering wheel, as a very irate, very large man gets out of the car I’ve just rear-ended.

He looks at me in complete shock, although he probably can't really see me with the sun's reflection on my windscreen.

Unclipping my seatbelt, I rush out of my rental, cursing under my breath.

"Oh my God, are you alright? I'm so, so sorry." I round the hood and meet the giant by his rear bumper, which he's inspecting with a grimace.

"You're sorry? And how the fuck is that supposed to help me?" He shakes his head again, but doesn't look at me. He's still focused on the damage – or lack thereof – to his bumper.

I'll admit, I'm a little taken aback at the anger in his voice, especially as I can't see any issue with his car. Mine's the one with the bonnet that looks like someone took a sledgehammer to it. There goes my deposit.

I get it though, he's probably in shock.

"Like I said, I can only apologize, I know it was my fault, but the guy behind me was beeping and I saw the light was green and... I haven't driven in a while...

"I realize I'm babbling and that the man in front of me has zero interest in anything I've just said.

He's staring at his bumper so hard I'm tempted to ask if he wants a magnifying glass to check for a scratch.

"The most important thing is that you're fine, the collision wasn't fast enough to cause whiplash -"

The giant in the ball cap huffs a laugh at my words. "So what? You're a doctor?"

I stamp down on the anger that's rapidly rising to the surface at the unpleasantness of this guy. Seriously, what gives?

"No, but I know a few things about these kinds of injuries," I try to explain.

"Right. Like I said, you're not a doctor, so let's quit with the armchair fucking expert crap." He barely looks at me, still focused on his car.

"Look, I know this situation isn't exactly ideal," I pause to take a deep breath as Ball-Cap Man audibly scoffs, "but your car looks fine and, if it isn't, my insurance will cover the cost of any repairs," I hope.

"It was an honest mistake, so there's no need to be such a dick about it, especially when I'm trying to apologize! "

My arms are folded over my chest and I'm glad for my defensive position, when the giant unfurls himself and comes to his full height. For the first time I get a good look at him and it seems as though time stops.

No. Crapping. Way. Out of a city of 18 million people, why is he the one I had to drive into?

"Let me get this straight, you're the one who rear-ended me and I'm the dick here?" He mirrors my posture, steadying his arms across his broad chest. My mouth goes dry as I look up into a face I haven't seen in the flesh in years.

"Lennox Gray." His name is out of my mouth before I can stop myself, but he doesn't react.

It's not as if he's not used to being recognized – not only is he one of the top players in the National Hockey League, but with his All-American good looks he's got

sponsorships coming out of his ears.

His face is all over Times Square as we speak, advertising some cologne, those intense smoky eyes of his causing more than one traffic accident, I'm sure.

He frowns at me from under his Pelicans Ball Cap and in an instant I go back to being that awkward sixteen year old I was when I last saw him. His strong jaw and dark eyes are the same as I remember, but there's a hardness around his face that wasn't there when he was a high school senior.

His hair is dark and a little too long, but it works for him because... of course it does – that's how Lennox Gray's life is: charmed. If anything, he's grown more good-looking in the intervening seven years, which doesn't make it any easier not to look at him.

I still remember that time in the library when I'd been caught staring at him like some lovestruck teenager – which is exactly what I was at the time – and his then girlfriend called me out in front of the whole damn place.

“...And if you haven't driven in a while, then you should be paying more attention to the damn road, don't you think?”

I blink up at Lennox from the foot height distance that separates us.

At 5'5, I'm just around average height for a woman.

Lennox just happens to be an overachiever in the height department as well as everything else, apparently.

I realize he must have been talking to me while I zoned out into my own private hell and all I can hope is that I haven't been staring.

It's clear he doesn't remember me, and why would he?

I wouldn't even have registered as a blip on his radar back in high school, especially as he was a late transfer when his family had moved.

We didn't grow up together, don't have any shared history.

Besides, I'd like to think I look a damn sight different now.

"Look, I'm sorry." I make a calming motion with my hands and then remember the insurance details I grabbed from the glovebox. "Here."

Lennox looks from my hand to my face and back again.

"I don't need that, the truck's fine," he shrugs and I feel my previous frustration building.

"If it's fine, then why are you making such a big deal out of this?"

Or do you just enjoy shouting at women on the street?

"I plant my hands on my hips, noticing the way his eyes roam disdainfully over my work uniform of black yoga pants and a black long-sleeved shirt and then over to my crappy rental with the now damaged bonnet.

I roll my eyes at the judgement I see on his face – he doesn't know anything about me and yet he's already assumed that I'm not up to his level.

Looks like he's still the same arrogant ass, with the admittedly great ass from high school. As if I care.



His unimpressed expression flickers for an instant before it's back in full force, but he just remains staring at me in silence, which is only making me more and more uncomfortable.

That's probably his intention. I figure he's used to intimidating his opponents on the ice and he probably isn't used to being around people who will actually disagree with him.

This is why I'm so glad I never have to work with celebrities, that's Michael's jam, not mine.

Except for the one I'm on my way to now and...

I sneak a look at my watch, dammit I'm late.

Lennox clocks my movement as I check the time. "Am I keeping you from something important?"

He actually sounds offended, as if nothing could be more important than him. Delusions of grandeur much?

"I'm on my way to work and now I'm going to be late, so if you don't want my insurance details, do you at least want my number so you can contact me if there are any problems?"

I wave vaguely at the truck despite the fact that I can't imagine anything being wrong with it other than a scratch you'd need a microscope to see. But I figure it's the polite thing to do.

When he opens his mouth, I wish that I'd just kept mine shut.

“This is how you pick up guys? You rear-end them and then give them your number? How’s that work out for you usually?” He leans back casually against his trunk, like he’s actually interested in my answer as I stand there staring at him with my mouth wide fucking open.

I’m mortified. Does he seriously think I was trying to give him my number to come onto him?

I can feel my cheeks heating at his words and from the smirk on his face he clearly takes my embarrassment as an admission of guilt.

Little does he know that it really isn’t all that hard to make me blush, it’s the curse of my pale Irish skin tone.

“You know what? Forget it.” I throw my hands up in the air, pissed at being treated like something he found in the trash.

I may not have grown up with a damn silver spoon in my mouth like Lennox Freakin’ Gray did, but I don’t deserve to be treated like this.

“I was just trying to do the right thing, but you’ve been an obtuse asshole about this whole thing from start to finish.

I’m late for an important job which will probably result in me getting fired and my day just got a whole lot longer because now I’m going to have to explain to the rental company what happened to their damn tin can!

” I gesture towards my little Fiat, which is looking decidedly worse for wear.

“So, I’m done. Thank you and goodbye.” I turn on my heel and stalk back to my car, not waiting for him to respond.

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Turning the key in the ignition, the car chokes a little as it turns over, but thank God it starts.

As I indicate to pull out into traffic, my eyes meet Gray's dark ones and I expect to see a scowl on his features, the same one he's worn the whole time we were talking, but instead, there's something else.

Something I can't place. Something I don't have time to analyze right now.

Not when my focus is on what the hell I'm going to say to the VIP who I'm now running late for.

Dammit! Out of all the times for something like this to happen, why did it have to be today?

I already know the answer to that. Life has never exactly been fair to me.

In fact, I'd say it's been using me as it's laughingstock for quite some time now.

If someone's going to slip on a banana peel walking down the street, it's going to be me.

I'm the person who bumps into mannequins in stores and then apologizes to the mannequin before realizing I'm talking to a mannequin.

And, apparently, I'm also the person who gets into car accidents with high school crushes and then calls them assholes!

“Oh, man,” I groan aloud. Could this day get any worse?

And I should really know by now the answer to that question is ‘yes, it really can’.

I reach for my phone to call Kiara to give her the heads up about what happened so she can call ahead and grovel to the client but – of course – I have no cell service.

“For Chrissakes!” I grumble to myself. At least I’m only a few miles away. With any luck, the client will be running late too – these VIP types always keep their minions waiting around for them. It’s one of the reasons Kiara can charge them such exorbitant prices.

The nice British GPS lady informs me there’s only a mile to my destination and I tell myself to get my shit together. Fake it ‘til you make it, I remind myself, before pulling up to a set of gates that probably cost more than my apartment.

“Here we go,” I mumble, bracing myself, before buzzing the intercom.

“Trade entrance is round the back,” the disembodied voice grunts before I’ve even said anything. I peek at the camera which has obviously clocked my crappy car and lack of celebrity status.

Trade entrance. Of course, who doesn’t have a trade entrance?

I follow the signs, directing me along the perimeter of what looks like a massive property until I get to a decidedly less-impressive set of gates where I’m buzzed in immediately.

I try not to be freaked out over the cameras that appear to be tracking my every move.

This is definitely something I’m sure there will be no getting used to.

At a slower pace, now, I continue through the property. The house itself is imposing and super modern, but it's the garden that catches my attention, it's lush and green and looks a little magical in the dusky Spring light.

I slow down as a guy dressed head to toe in black and looking more like a Navy Seal than a bodyguard holds up a hand for me to stop. I roll down my window, smiling winningly at the huge man.

"You're the PT?" he asks in a Southern accent I'm surprised to hear. He sounds more New Orleans than Alabama, but still, it makes me a little homesick.

"That's right," I nod, striving for the confident, competent look.

The guard doesn't look impressed as he mutters something into the earpiece he's wearing. "ID?"

I nod, hurriedly handing over my ID card for the clinic. He peruses it before pausing as he listens to something that's being said to him. Something I can't hear.

"Go on through, you can park down there, and someone will show you in." He hands me back my ID and I nod to him in thanks, catching the way his eyes go to the trashed bonnet of the rental.

"That happen recently?" He quirks an eyebrow.

I huff a laugh. "Yeah, like a half hour ago."

The guard gives me a sharp look, his eyes scanning my face. "Are you alright?"

His genuine concern, so different from Lennox Asshole Gray's reaction, is so comforting it makes me feel a tad emotional. I shake my head a little to pull myself

together. Okay, so I may have a little latent shock from the accident, but now is not the time to lose it.

“I’m fine, thanks, although I’m not looking forward to the argument with the rental company,” I joke.

“I can imagine.” His features soften as he gives me a slight smile, his eyes warming, and I feel myself blushing although God knows why.

“Hey, any chance you can tell me who I’m going to find inside?” I ask on impulse. Forewarned is forearmed and all that...

He frowns in confusion. “You don’t know who lives here?”

Sure, when he says it out loud, it sounds weird.

I shake my head. “Confidentiality and all that,” I gesture vaguely.

“Right.” The guard rocks back on his heels a little, looking conflicted before he stills completely, listening to something through his earpiece and then sending me an apologetic shrug. “Sorry, ma’am, they’re waiting for you.”

Great. The one time I’m late and they’re freakin’ on time. I just about resist the urge to face-palm in view of the security guard and follow his directions to park in front of a bored-looking man in board shorts and a vintage Nirvana shirt.

Is this the welcoming committee or my client?

I scramble out of the car as fast as I can, half-tripping as my foot gets tangled in the seatbelt, because that’s how I roll.

“Woah, you alright?” The surfer comes complete with quick reflexes and he reaches out to steady me as I all but fall out of the car.

Smooth, Izzy, real smooth.

“I’m good, thanks.” I smile up at his seemingly genuine concern, downplaying my embarrassment.

“I’m Isabella, good to meet you.” We shake hands as I wait expectantly for him to introduce himself.

“Cool, come on in. I was just heading inside when they asked me to come meet you. I guess the butler’s got the night off, so I’m the next best thing.” The long-haired surfer dude gives me a conspiratorial wink and I can’t help but smile at his comment.

He turns around and motions for me to follow him into the house.

“So...you’re not my client,” I confirm as I walk a few paces behind him, trying not to gawk at the huge entryway that’s bigger than my whole apartment.

Surfer Dude laughs outright as if the idea were hilarious. I assumed as much – he’s way too unaffected to be the kind of famous the NDA warranted.

“You don’t know who you’re meeting? Didn’t your mom ever tell you not to talk to strangers?” He looks over his shoulder at me, amused, his blue eyes dancing as he teases me.

I shake my head, smiling back at him in spite of myself. His sense of fun is contagious and that catches me off guard.

“My mom didn’t stick around long enough to teach me much, so I guess I’m a little

slow on the uptake,” I banter back.

“Ouch, funny, gorgeous and emotionally damaged, watch out Shortcake, you’re totally my type.” He elbows me jokingly and I laugh out loud at his outrageous flirtation.

“Why do I get the impression this isn’t the first time you’ve used that line, today?” I raise a mock-accusing eyebrow at him, and he puts his palms up in a defensive pose.

“Just because I’ve said it more than once, doesn’t mean I don’t mean it.” He winks broadly at me as my face cracks into a smile.

“Kai, get in here!” A commanding voice booms through the hallway making me jump, but my host just rolls his eyes.

“You’re in luck, sounds like he’s in a good mood.

” My chaperone – Kai – motions me towards a closed door and I can’t tell if he’s joking or not.

Even worse, I don’t have time to ask before he’s leading me inside and I’m taking in a sleek gym that’s all polished concrete floors, top of the line equipment and wall to wall windows.

It looks like something out of an architectural magazine and before I know it, I’ve let out a noise of appreciation that hasn’t gone unnoticed.

“Nice set-up, right?” The preppy guy who’s appeared by my side follows my gaze around the gym.

“It’s incredible,” I agree, taking a look at the person I’m here to work with.



I'd thought the VIP was an athlete and although this guy's in shape, he's not someone on my radar.

I make a point of keeping up to date – the NFL, NHL, NBA, WNBA, soccer – I have to be on top of it all, it's part of my job.

Maybe this guy's sport is something a little more left-field like fencing or polo?

He's dressed super preppy in chinos and a sky-blue Ralph Lauren polo shirt, so that would fit.

"You're not who we were expecting." And from his expression, he's not all that happy about it.

Well, that makes two of us, my friend.

"Michael had a family emergency," I don't expand because I figure it's not anyone else's business. "But I'm fully qualified and have a lot of experience."

"I know, Michael emailed me with his recommendation. He was very complimentary." There's a hint of a challenge in his voice and I don't balk at his tone.

"Your boss told us to expect you twenty minutes ago." It's a statement more than an accusation and I wince inwardly at looking so unprofessional in front of a new client.

"I'm so sorry I'm late -," I'm about to explain the car accident when he holds his hand up.

"It's fine." Although the way he says it tells me that it's really not fine.

I don't make excuses, there's no point, and something tells me this man wouldn't appreciate them anyway.

I lift my head, projecting the confidence that Kiara has trained me to fake. "Really, I'm never late, I can only apologize and tell you I'm as unhappy about this as you are."

Preppy Dude tilts his head at me, a flash of respect coming into his face. Hopefully it's in appreciation of the fact that I haven't tried to bullshit him.

"Just make sure it doesn't happen again," he says and gives me a pointed look. I nod hurriedly in acknowledgement, feeling a little like I've just dodged a bullet.

"Come on, Dec, you know traffic out of Manhattan is a nightmare. Cut her some slack," Kai pipes up from behind me and I send him an appreciative smile. He winks at me and I notice 'Dec' rolling his eyes at the obvious flirtation. "Besides, Nox only just got here."

"Nox?" I frown between the two men, trying to figure out what the crap is going on and who the hell my mystery client is.

I like to be prepared and have all my ducks in a row, some people (Kiara) might say I'm even a little OCD about it, but it's part of what makes me good at my job. So, this situation, where I'm totally on the back foot is not something I'm comfortable with, which makes me spiky.

"Is someone going to tell me why I'm here or is the guessing part of the fun?" I plant my hands on my hips, looking between the two men.

Kai snorts a laugh and Dec looks like he's about to say something when his gaze goes over my left shoulder, his eyes widening slightly at whatever or who ever he sees

there.

“What the hell are you doing here?” I freeze, recognizing a voice that makes me go hot and cold inside.

No. No. No. Even my luck can't be this bad.

But even as the thought enters my head, I know it's just wishful thinking.

Slowly, I turn around to face the last person in the world I want to see right now or, you know, ever.

Lennox Fucking Gray.

## Page 4

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Chapter

Two

“Not only are you a hazard behind the damn wheel, but you’re a stalker too?”

Christ, men must be breaking down the door to get to you.

” Lennox glowers down at me with dark eyes, which would be hypnotic if he weren’t clearly irate beyond belief.

He’s changed into workout gear, shorts showcasing strong legs and a right knee that’s more than a little swollen.

I mentally flip through the sports news I’ve read recently and try to remember if there was anything about him suffering a knee injury on the ice.

There’s nothing, although I’m getting a vague recollection of a particularly nasty scrum in the final game of the season, but Gray definitely wasn’t stretchered off.

That would have made headlines. Gray isn’t just the front-man of the New York Pelicans, he’s one of the most recognizable faces in sport, period.

“You know each other?” Dec looks between the two of us, each staring at the other in confusion.

“This is the chick who rear-ended me.” Lennox motions towards me, his expression

suspicious as if he seriously thinks that I followed him here.

“It was an accident ,” I repeat the point I’d made at the roadside, working to keep the bite out of my voice and not being wholly successful.

“It wasn’t like I hit you on purpose.” I cross my arms over my chest going into the defensive posture that seems to be my default setting when it comes to this man.

“Uh-oh.” Kai lets the words out under his breath, but in the silent tension of the room you could have heard a pin drop.

“And what, you turning up here is just another ‘accident’?” Lennox uses air quotes mockingly as he continues to glower at me like a grumpy bear.

“Me turning up here as you so elegantly put it, is purely professional. I was sent here by my boss. I didn’t know you were the client.” And if I did, I would have responded to Kiara with two words. Hell. No.

“Oh yeah? And what kind of ‘profession’ brings you here?” Lennox looks me up and down lazily, pure male appreciation in his gaze and I resist the urge to take a step back.

There’s no way I’m letting this guy know he’s intimidating me.

“The strippers you hang out with are usually a helluva lot less prickly than this one, Kai.” He delivers the line to his surfer look-a-like friend who makes a face that speaks to the cringeworthiness of the situation.

I stare at Lennox in shock, my mind struggling to process what he’s just said. Did he really just call me a stripper? Not that I have any issues with the profession, whatever floats your boat, but I sure as hell didn’t go to school for four years to be dismissed

like that.

“Nox, it’s nothing like that -,” the preppy one, Declan makes a calming motion towards the other man, his eyes flicking nervously between us like he’s calculating what the chances are of a lawsuit or, worse, a negative story in the press about the New York Pelicans’ darling MVP.

“I’m your physical therapist, Mr. Gray.” I’m impressed at how confident my voice sounds. Even someone who knows me wouldn’t be able to tell how angry I am, partly because I never really get angry, although Lennox Gray is testing that theory.

He blinks at me, frowning, and I don’t miss the way his expression darkens at my formal tone. “You’re not Michael.”

I roll my eyes internally, ignoring how his stare is even more intense without the shadow of the ball cap he’d been wearing on the road to distract from the hard lines of his face.

“As I explained to your manager,” I gesture towards Declan, taking a chance on the relationship between the two men, “I’m Michael’s replacement.”

Lennox gives me an unimpressed look and just shakes his head. “No.”

I bristle at the dismissiveness in his tone.

“‘No’, you don’t believe I am who I say I am, or ‘no’ you don’t want to work with me?”

“Find someone else.” Lennox directs the order to Declan, ignoring me as if I haven’t even spoken.

“Mr. Gray, you’ll find I’m more than capable.” I take a step towards him when it looks as if he’s going to walk off. That step only gets me so far, though. In the blink of an eye, I’ve stopped in my tracks, trying to ward off the daggers shooting out of his eyes.

“Cut the Mr. Gray shit. You’re the same girl who called me an ‘asshole’ a half an hour ago.” I cringe at the memory but try to channel Kiara’s cool aloofness to get me through the car crash that is this conversation.

I continue with my sentence as if he didn’t interrupt me.

“I’m excellent at my job, but if you would rather wait until Michael’s available again or call someone else, I’ll show myself out.

No hard feelings.” That last part might be me lying through my teeth.

I’m projecting a confidence I don’t feel and hoping like hell Kiara doesn’t kill me for losing this damn contract.

My eyes meet Lennox’s dark gaze and it takes everything I have not to look away. The man is the epitome of dominance and despite how annoyed I am at being in this situation, it’s hard to deny that there’s something mesmerizing about him. His posture. His scowl. The way his eyebrow kicks up just so.

Inch by inch, he moves toward me, leaning down so that his face is no more than an inch away from mine. “That performance would be a whole lot more convincing if you didn’t look like a deer caught in headlights. Don’t poke the bear, when you look good enough to eat, darlin’.”

His expression is pure male smugness, as if he knows the effect of him being so close will inevitably have on most women. But that’s just it, I’m not most women. Sure,

he's handsome as hell, but I have enough self-respect not to lose my senses over the most boorish man I've ever met.

"Un-freakin'-believable." I mutter the word under my breath, shaking my head in disbelief at the man in front of me.

"You know what? You win." I throw my hands up and turn on my heel, more than ready to leave.

Pretty as Lennox might be, it's not enough to make me okay with being treated like an idiot.

"Wait a second, Anabella." Declan holds his hand up and the only way I know who he's talking to is because he's looking right at me.

"It's Isabella." But whatever, at this point, correcting my name seems like a pointless exercise. It's not like I'm going to be hanging around here long enough for him to remember it.

"Isabella, right." Declan waves his hand impatiently as if to say I'm telling him something he already knows and then he turns his attention to his athlete, who's still standing there glowering at me.

"Nox, you need a PT asap, you know it, I know it, your surgeon sure as shit knows it. Michael isn't available and if we go through the whole process of trying to find someone else who actually happens to be available, we're just going to be wasting time. Time we don't have, I might add."

He gives Lennox a pointed look as the other man clamps his mouth shut so tightly I'm surprised he doesn't break a tooth.



“This isn’t up for fucking discussion, Dec.

Find me someone else. I’m not working with her.

” He points towards me as if there could be any kind of misunderstanding over who he was talking about, before stalking towards the bench at the far end of the room.

I don’t miss the way he favors one leg over the other or the grimace of pain when he sits on the workout bench and starts pressing what I can only assume is the weight of a small truck.

His focus doesn’t flick back to us, making it clear as day that he’s done with this conversation.

I work not to gape at his rudeness. He’d probably misinterpret my look anyway and figure I was ogling him. Sure, he’s an impressive male specimen, but he’s also the front-runner for the prize for the most arrogant man in existence.

“Give us a minute, will you?” Declan smiles at me charmingly before narrowing his eyes at Kai and jerking his head towards the door. I’m still rooted to the spot, surprised at the visceral reaction I’ve somehow provoked in Lennox.

I feel Kai’s presence next to me. His hand grazes my elbow and I let him gently lead me out of the gym, not that I had much of a choice.

Once we’re out of the door there’s an unmistakable sound of weights being thrown against a hard surface and then the raised voices reach us.

“Hell to the fucking no, Dec!” Lennox doesn’t just sound mad, he sounds furious.

Declan’s voice is calmer but almost as loud. “I know how you feel about this, Nox -,”

“No, you fucking don’t, Dec. If you did then you’d already be looking for someone else and we wouldn’t be having this damn argument!”

My eyes are probably taking up most of my head at this point and I don’t think they could get any wider as I listen to the chaos breaking out on the other side of the door.

“Are you thirsty?” Kai speaks louder as if he can cover up the yelling his boss is doing. “How about we head to the kitchen and get a drink?”

I nod hurriedly because the last thing I want to do is stand here any longer and listen to Lennox assassinate my character.

Kai and I head past what I’m guessing is the front door and my feet slow as I cast a longing look at my escape route.

“You know what, maybe I should just go. Clearly, I’ve stepped into the middle of something.” I wave vaguely in the direction of the gym, wondering again what I could have done to make a man I haven’t seen since we were teenagers, a man who doesn’t even remember me, hate me so much.

My shoulders slump a little in defeat but after what I’ve just overheard there’s no chance I’m going to get this job and – to be honest – I’m pretty sure I don’t even want it anymore. There’s high maintenance and then there’s that , whatever that is.

Kai looks at me with a sympathetic expression, cementing my opinion that he’s the only decent guy in this entire place.

“It’s not about you, Isabella. Lennox doesn’t have any chicks on staff,” Kai explains blandly as if it totally makes sense.

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“Just Izzy is fine,” I smile at him. “The only person who calls me Isabella is my dentist,” I joke, “and I don’t like him all that much.”

Kai chuckles quietly, kindly lifting the tension that’s been present since Lennox made his whirlwind appearance.

“You look more like an Izzy anyway,” he says and gives me an unabashedly appreciative look.

“Do you flirt with everyone or just the people who turn your boss into a homicidal maniac?”

“You’re alright, Izzy, you and me are gonna get along.

” He gives me a friendly pat on the shoulder, and I don’t bother to tell him I don’t think we’re going to be spending enough time together for that to happen.

“But, just to be clear, Lennox isn’t my boss, although he’d like to think he is,” Kai snorts.

“Oh, sorry, I just assumed...” I trail off, hoping I haven’t offended him, but he just waves my concern away.

“We’ve been best friends since college and have roomed together ever since.”

I take in the laid-back guy with the surfer vibe in front of me and try to wrap my head around that information. “But you’re so...nice!” I finish lamely. “You and Lennox

are like...oil and milk...hell...oil and concrete.”

Dissing a man to his best friend probably isn't the smartest play I've ever made, but the incongruence of those two personalities meshing in any way at all has me thrown for a loop.

“You caught him on a bad day,” Kai explains. “He's usually much calmer, quiet even. There's a reason they call him The Iceman in the rink.”

“Quiet in an intense ‘silent but deadly’ kind of way, right?” I hedge, making Kai chuckle.

“Trust me – you didn't meet his best side today. He'll be more himself when you next see him.”

Sure, because there's going to be a ‘next’ time, I think to myself.

But part of me wonders if Kai's being truthful with me or if he's just being loyal to his friend.

I'd like to believe the Lennox Gray I'd seen today wasn't the real deal, although I'm not sure why it matters to me what kind of a man he is.

“Wait a minute – you went to Notre Dame?” The surfer look doesn't quite chime with my vision of the super academic school.

Kai throws his head back and laughs. “Don't look so damn surprised, Izzy.

I may not have gotten a full ride like our boy in there,” he jerks his head towards the gym, “but I'm no slouch.

Although, I may have copied some of Lennox's tests during that first year when I was more interested in chasing girls than studying. ”

His eyes twinkle in amusement and I entertain the idea of flirting right back with him, but charming as he is, there's no spark. There's no pull of attraction with him and I couldn't even tell you the last time I felt that magnetic draw.

My mind flashes to that moment by the side of the road when I recognized Lennox, but I dismiss that thought just as quickly as it's appeared. Whatever butterflies I might have felt were solely down to my sixteen year old self and her teenage fantasies.

“So he has a brain?” I ask, indulging my curiosity.

“Top of the damn class,” Kai nods, sounding proud of his friend rather than jealous.

I try not to look so surprised. I always thought of Lennox as a jock who got by on his good looks and athletic prowess.

In the only classroom we ever shared, when I skipped ahead to do Advanced Physiology, he'd barely spoken.

To be fair, so had I, but mine was out of excruciating shyness, and I'd assumed his was out of boredom.

I dial back in to the present to find Kai having filled the silence between us.

“Pretty sure Nox just keeps me around because I'm the only one who calls him out on his shit.” Kai pauses, giving me an appraising look. “You're probably the only other person I've seen stand up to him. Even Dec lets him get away with acting like the damn Almighty sometimes.”

“I guess when you depend on him for your pay-check, the dynamic changes a little,” I reason.

“It didn’t for you back there,” Kai points out and his expression makes it clear he thinks it’s a good thing. I’m not so sure, especially as I’m the one who’s going to have to face the music and the inevitable wrath of Kiara when I get fired.

My mind goes back to what Kai said about Lennox not hiring women.

“What did you mean about Mr. Gray not having ‘chicks’ on staff?”

I can’t bring myself to call him Lennox out loud, it sounds too intimate, and even though I feel like I have a passing acquaintance with the man I had a crush on during my sophomore year, I really have no idea who he is. Not that I care, anyway.

Kai looks a little cagey, as if he’s said too much and I frown at the shutter that’s come down over his expressive face. It’s the least animated I’ve seen him all evening.

“Nothing... he just prefers to work with guys. A lot of dudes are like that though. So, you about ready for that drink?” Kai changes the subject, motioning in the direction of what I assume is the kitchen.

I mull over the avoidance tactic, wondering what the big deal is.

After the way Lennox reacted to me, hearing he doesn’t like to work with women isn’t exactly a shocker of a news flash.

Alpha males like him can have a tendency to be kind of misogynistic, but I never got that impression from Lennox in high school.

He wasn’t one of the guys crowing about all the girls he deflowered and, in our AP

class he was always super polite, the perfect modern Southern gentleman.

But, then again, what do I know? It's not as if we've ever been friends.

"Oh, good, you're still here." Declan appears at the end of the hall, out of breath as if he's just run after us. "How about we head into the study so that we can get all the red tape wrapped up before tomorrow?"

I frown up at the man. "Ummm...what red tape?"

"Well there's some paperwork, some things for you to sign, some information you'll want to study -"

I hold my hand up and Declan stops talking. "I'm sorry, I don't want to be rude, but have I missed something? From Mr. Gray's reaction, I've assumed I wouldn't be working here."

Declan looks between me and Kai and I notice Kai sending him a shrug, giving him some kind of unspoken approval.

"Nox doesn't like being blindsided. He's used to being in charge of every situation so between the car accident and him not expecting you and the anniversary today...let's just say it wasn't the best combination of events."

Anniversary? What anniversary? Not your business, Izzy.

"So he's a control freak." The words are out of my mouth without missing a beat. Dammit, Iz, engage brain to mouth filter. I curse myself for not thinking before I speak. Kiara calls it just another one of my endearing qualities. I call it a sure-fire way to end up looking like an idiot.

Kai smothers a laugh, turning it into a choking sound when Declan gives him a flat stare.

“He likes things how he likes them,” Declan corrects me democratically. “But I’m sure I can talk him round to working with you. If you’re as good as Michael says, you’re our best bet to get him back to full strength.”

Do I want Declan to ‘talk him round’?

Do I want to work with someone as volatile and as difficult as Lennox Gray?

Am I willing to believe that I have him pegged all wrong?

And do I really want to have to explain to Kiara that I turned down our biggest client in history because he hurt my feelings?

The answer to the last question is a ‘hell to the no’, which pretty much trumps all my other concerns.

I can’t do that to Kiara, she deserves better from me - not just as her employee but also as her friend.

And, dammit, I deserve better. Lennox Grumpy Gray may be a tough client, but if I’m going to prove to everyone, and to myself, that I’m as good as Michael believes, then who better to be my trial by fire?

“Alright.” I nod in the affirmative, sneaking a quick glance at Kai who gives me a discreet thumbs up before Declan leads me away down the corridor to a huge study.

When I’m done gawking at the rows of books on the shelves, Declan guides me over to a sprawling desk, gesturing toward a ring binder on the table.



“You didn’t know who your client was before you got here, so I figured you’d want to read up on his injury before you get started. You’ll find everything you need in there.”

I grab the binder and just about resist the urge to not dive into it head-first to find out about Lennox’s mystery injury. But Declan keeps hold of it. I frown up at him, asking myself if any part of this job is going to be straightforward.

“There’s also the matter of the confidentiality agreement we require.” Declan hands me over a contract as thick as a novel. I don’t hide my surprised expression at the size of the thing.

“You want me to sign this now?” It’ll take me a week just to read it.

Declan nods. “If you don’t sign it, I can’t let you take the binder with you. Lennox’s medical history is private, and he wants it to remain that way.”

I feel myself bristle at the inference that I can’t be trusted to standard client privacy without signing my damn life away. “All my clients have complete confidentiality when it comes to their treatment and anything else that we talk about. I can’t do my job if we don’t have that level of trust.”

A flicker of something like respect passes across Declan’s waspish features. “I’m not questioning your trustworthiness, Isabella, anyone we employ has to abide by the same rules.”

“Fine.” I hold my hand out. “Got a pen?”

Declan blinks at me, his turn to be surprised. “You’re not even going to read it?”

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“You said everyone has to sign one of these things, right?” I slap the War & Peace sized NDA on the table.

“So my boss would have had to sign it too,” I look at him for verification, and he nods.

“If she was happy to sign it and I’m sure her lawyers looked it over far more thoroughly than I’ll be able to, then I’m okay to sign it.

” I scrawl my name at the bottom of the last page and date it, pushing the pile of papers back to him.

“What if I’d slipped something else in there without telling you, like a requirement for your first-born child if Lennox doesn’t make a full recovery?

” Declan looks at me, his expression serious.

For a split-second I’m not sure if he’s joking or not and then his dark-blond eyebrow quirks up in amusement.

“Ha – preppy and funny, the girls at the country club must love you,” I tease back, glad to feel the ice thawing a little.

I get the impression Declan is the serious one in the house, balancing out the moodiness of Lennox and the easy-going nature of Kai. The three of them must be an interesting dynamic to observe.

Declan barks a laugh and he seems as surprised as I am by the unguarded sound. He recovers his uptightness quickly though.

“It’s getting late, I’m sure you’ll want to be heading back.” Declan gives me the politest ‘get the hell out of here’ I’ve ever received, and I wonder if ‘PR-mode’ is second nature to him. “I’ll walk you out.”

I nod my thanks because there’s no way in hell I’d be able to find my own way out of this mansion. I’d probably wander the halls for days until my skeleton was found by one of the (many) maids who I’m sure work here.

We’re silent as Declan leads me to the front door and – for once – I don’t try to fill the awkwardness. He seems to be lost in his own thoughts, anyway. Probably wondering how he’s going to manage to persuade his client to take on a woman he ostensibly can’t stand the sight of.

“Good to meet you, Isa bella,” Declan jokes with emphasis, motioning me through the door. “I’ll give your boss a call when we have this all straightened out.”

I wave my goodbye as I try not to trip down the stairs towards my car, the thick ring binder weighing me down.

“You’re driving that back to the city?” Lennox appears out of nowhere next to me, making me jump out of my skin. And his voice... he’s injected just enough derision in it to make me grind my teeth. Entitled asshole.

Breathe, Izzy, breathe. You’re not allowed to punch clients in the face no matter how tempting it might be.

I hold one hand to my chest, closing my eyes for a moment and recovering from him scaring the crap out of me.

“It’s the only car I have, so...yeah.” I don’t bother to look at him as I march up to my half-dead tin can, but he’s in between me and the car in a matter of seconds.

It makes me wonder how a big guy can move so fast. He barely has a limp, but when I look up into his face I see a sheen of perspiration on his forehead, as if it’s an effort to move the way he has been.

“Where are your crutches?” I frown up at him.

He makes a dismissive gesture with one hand and I struggle not to roll my eyes.

Damn alpha males. Pro athletes are the worst – they think they’re indestructible and that the rules of normal human physiology don’t apply to them.

By the way Lennox operates, I know that he’s not going to be the one to break the mold.

“The more weight you put on your knee, the longer it’s going to take to fully heal.” I haven’t even looked at his file yet and I know that much. “I’m guessing I’m not the first person to mention that to you?”

“You’re not driving that.” Lennox nods towards my sad little rental as if I haven’t even spoken.

He’s really good at ignoring me and it’s irritating as all get-out.

“It’s as likely to break down on the side of the road before you make it half-way as it is to burst into flames before you’ve even driven it off the property. ”

“You know cars don’t really do that outside of the movies, right?”

” I lift an eyebrow at him. Years of working in my father’s auto shop have robbed me of the illusion that cars just spontaneously combust as a matter of course.

It was one of my dad’s bug-bears about action movies.

He would harp on about it to anyone willing to listen – ‘anyone’ would usually be me.

Lennox levels me with a look that speaks volumes, all but asking if I think he’s an idiot. “Thanks for the completely unnecessary physics lesson. My point is, it’s not safe for you to drive,” he insists.

And whose fault is that? I think ungraciously. If he didn’t drive such a monstrosity of a truck, it wouldn’t have turned my bonnet into a damn accordion.

“Well I sure as hell am not getting an Uber from here to Manhattan, and last time I checked, you weren’t the boss of me, so...

” I hold my keys up and shake them perilously close to his face, motioning for him to move so I can open the door.

He’s already too close to me and the idea of coming into closer quarters to reach around him for the door makes me warm in all the wrong places, which just makes me even more frustrated with myself.

How the hell am I going to have this man laid out on a couch and do my damn job if my inner sixteen year old is melting at the thought of actually touching Lennox Gray even after the supreme levels of ass-hat-ness he’s shown?

Woman up, Izzy. You’re a professional.

“Pretty sure you signing that NDA makes me your boss, so...” Lennox holds his hands out palm up, watching me expectantly.

“You’re my client not my boss,” I clarify although we’re into semantics now. As long as I’m working with him, I’m essentially working for him, but that doesn’t mean I have to do whatever he says.

How the hell does he already know I signed the NDA anyway?

“Whatever helps you sleep at night.” Lennox shrugs, making his huge shoulders roll and I catch myself thinking how much he’s filled out since high school. “Now, are you going to give me your keys or am I going to have to take them from you?”

He raises a perfectly arched eyebrow and there’s a flash of something dark in his eyes. It makes me think he’d very much enjoy prying the keys from my grasp and I tell myself that I’m not at all affected by the intensity of his look.

A noise of frustration escapes me. It’s already been a long as hell day and I still have a two hour drive back to the city.

“Why do you even care if I break down on the way home?” I don’t add the fact that he hasn’t shown the least bit of interest in me as an actual person in either of our encounters today. I figure he’s a smart guy, he can figure that part out for himself.

“I’d be concerned if any of my staff are left stranded, especially when I know how spotty cell reception is on that road.” He stares me down as if it’s some kind of contest I hadn’t realized I’d entered, and I tell myself I’m not at all intimidated.

I shift a little on my feet. He’s right about the cell reception.

I’ve discovered that much on my way here.

If I break down, calling a tow truck would be a matter of luck and I could find myself waiting for hours.

Still, him calling me staff irks more than a little, which no doubt had been his intention.

I flick a stray curl out of my eyes in annoyance. “You don’t want me to use the car I came here in, so what are you suggesting Mr. Gray?”

“Like I said, it’s just Lennox.” I’m fairly certain I’m not imagining the way his teeth grind. It makes me feel inordinately pleased with myself for pissing him off just as much as he does me.

“And, I have a spare truck for you to use.” He throws me a set of keys and I catch them instinctively.

“You want me to drive one of your cars?” I look dumbly at the Chevy logo on the keyring in my hand. “I can’t take this.”

“Don’t get excited, it’s a loaner.” His mouth kicks up in a half-smile at my expression and I make a point not to notice how it makes him even more attractive. “And I’m not taking no for an answer. If we’re going to be working together, I’d prefer it if you remain in one piece.”

This guy changes moods so fast he’s making my head spin. I try to remember if I’ve read anything in the tabloids about him being bipolar because that’s the only way to explain how he’s gone from treating me like dog poop he’s just stepped in to seeming to give a crap about my personal safety.

I shake my head to dispel my confusion, weighing the keys in my hand. “So, are we going to be working together?”

“You’ve got a forty-eight-hour trial period, starting tomorrow at 8am. Let’s see if you can change my mind in that time. If not...” He shrugs for me to fill in the blanks. If not, he’ll be looking elsewhere, and I’ll have lost our clinic’s biggest contract ever. No pressure then.

“Forty-eight hours isn’t exactly long enough for you to see any results from the therapy,” I point out.

He shrugs broadly again, his signature move. “That’s your problem, Isabella, not mine.”

He watches my reaction and it strikes me that he’s looking at me how a predator would look at its prey. He’s thrown the gauntlet down and he’s wondering if I’m going to take it. If he knew me, he wouldn’t be looking so expectantly. I don’t shy away from a challenge.

“Alright, but that means you have to follow all my advice and that includes using your crutches.” I give his injured knee a pointed look.

Lennox smirks at me, with that infuriatingly appealing smile of his. “You’re negotiating with me now?” He sounds shocked, but more amused than irritated.

“It may not be what you’re used to, but when I take on a client, I’m all in and I don’t mess around.

Either you do what I say, or you can forget about being ready to play next season.

” It doesn’t take a genius to figure out that’s what he’s going to be working towards and I see from the expression on his face that I’m not wrong.



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“I can get on board with a woman who likes to take charge.” There’s an arrogant gleam in Lennox’s eyes as he says the words.

“Great, well. I better be going.” I only stutter a tiny bit as I turn away from him, only to realize I don’t know where my new ride is.

I look over my shoulder to find Lennox with that damn smirk on his face. He locks eyes with me, and I feel a tingle in my stomach.

It’s probably hunger, I reason, though I know better.

“This way,” he motions with his head and I fall into step beside him. We walk towards an outbuilding I didn’t notice on the way in, probably because I was so worried about being late and wondering who my mystery client was. If I’d known who it was I’d be meeting I would have been even more anxious.

“This is the quietest you’ve been since we met,” Lennox comments and I feel, rather than see, his eyes on me.

I shrug, stealing his move. “If you’re just judging me on tonight then you’re forgiven for thinking I’m more argumentative than I really am.”

He lets out what sounds a bit like a hum of surprise.

“Same goes here, I guess,” he says eventually, and I manage to stop my mouth falling open in shock.

I'm pretty sure what I just heard was the closest thing to an apology I'm ever likely to get from Lennox Gray.

Instead of working up a comeback, I just nod, curtly.

I'll let him decide whether or not he wants to interpret it as acceptance.

We come to a stop and Lennox nods towards the garage doors. "If you flick the red button on the remote -"

I quickly look down at the keys in my hands, realizing I was staring at him again. This is why it's easier to not look at him at all because once you start it's like being pulled into a very attractive black hole.

Embarrassed and flustered, I flick through the keys until a large, tanned hand enters my field of vision, taking the remote and clicking the – now screamingly obvious – red button.

Breaking my own rule, I lift my eyes to meet Lennox's, his fingers still brushing my palm and I swear I hear my pulse pick up just at the sight of the man.

Thank God the sound of the garage door lifting snaps me out of my psycho-levels of ogling. Lennox snatches his hand back and takes a step away from me, trying to create some distance and I promise myself I won't blush at being silently called-out for being a complete creeper.

That's the moment I decide that no matter what my reaction to Lennox is, I can't let him see how he affects me.

First of all, it's unprofessional and secondly, it's just flat-out embarrassing.

He's just an attractive guy, and inconvenient as that may be, it isn't something I haven't dealt with before. No big deal. None at all.

With that, I turn my attention to the open garage and it's the best distraction I could have asked for.

"Wow, nice collection." I don't have to hide the appreciation in my voice as my eyes roam the mix of new and vintage cars and trucks. My dad would love this place. As soon as the thought hits, I feel the familiar pang of missing him.

Lennox doesn't seem the least bit interested in my reaction. In fact, he looks a little uncomfortable and I get the feeling again that I've done something wrong without meaning to.

"This is your ride." He puts his hands in his pockets, motioning with his head towards the monster Chevy off to one side.

It's so shiny I can see my reflection in it and I'm almost nervous to touch it.

It's definitely worth more than I make in a year.

Hell, make that 5 years. The fact that I'm expected to drive this thing, given how my last ride ended up...

"It's just a car, Isabella," Lennox says softly, and I realize I've spoken my thoughts out loud.

I wince inwardly, but I don't comment. This time, I make sure my lips are firmly sealed so none of my deepest thoughts come spilling out of my mouth without my say-so.

Clearly, I can't be trusted not to make a complete fool of myself in front of this man.

I go to get in the waiting truck, except it's much easier said than done when you happen to be vertically challenged.

"No nerf bars," I mutter to myself. Without a step I'm going to have to jump up into the seat like a little kid.

Lennox is right by my side, looking at me curiously as I look warily at the distance between the floor and the driver's seat. "You know about cars?"

I shrug. "My dad's kind of a gear-head." I don't elaborate, not wanting to get into it and risk Lennox making the connection between my dad's auto shop and me.

"Hold on."

I can't stop myself from letting out a noise that sounds suspiciously like a squeak of surprise as strong hands grab my waist and I'm forcibly lifted into the truck as if I don't weigh anything at all.

Lennox waits a beat before letting go of me and stepping away from the truck, closing the door.

"Thanks," I mutter under my breath, busying myself looking at the interior of the truck so I don't have to meet his eyes.

Get a grip, Izzy, all he did was give you a leg-up. But it doesn't stop me from shivering at the tingle I felt as my top rode up just enough for his hand to graze the bare skin at my waist.

"I'll see you in the morning," I mumble unnecessarily and then realize that I've

already frickin' told him that.

I risk a glance at Lennox to find his dark eyes lit up with amusement.

He's enjoying my discomfort way too much.

So, I go back to inspecting the interior of the car, not trusting myself to look directly at him.

Besides, this car is way nicer than any others I've been in and I'm both excited to get to drive it and nervous as all hell.

"Isabella?" I lift my head, ignoring how good my name sounds when he says it. Lennox's arms are leaning on the open window, drawing attention to his not unimpressive biceps.

"Try not to crash my truck."

This time I don't resist the urge to roll my eyes. "Funny."

"I look forward to seeing what you have in store for me tomorrow."

Dammit, how does he make even that straightforward phrase sound sensual?

He taps the hood of the car, pushing away as I start the engine.

I send him a saccharine smile. "You won't be disappointed, Mr. Gray."

I wave innocently as I drive away, hazarding a look in my rear-view mirror to see he's still standing in the driveway, watching. I figure he's probably half-expecting me to crash before I've even left the property. I'm not going to satisfy his assumption by

doing just that.

My cell rings as I head out of Lennox's compound and my shoulders relax a touch as I answer the call, hearing the voice of my favorite person in the whole world.

"Izzy Bizzy." I smile at the endearment he's been using since I was in diapers.

"Hi daddy," I sigh, settling back into the driver's seat.

"How's my girl?" His voice might sound gruff to someone who doesn't know him, years of cigarettes have given him a permanent smoker's throatiness. It had taken me emotionally blackmailing him for him to finally give up a couple of years ago and I didn't even feel a little bit bad about it.

"I'm good." The lie slips out easily. I never burden my dad with my problems – he's had a lifetime of them to deal with all on his own.

"You sure? You sound a little... off. "

Aside from making the worst possible impression on the highest of high profile clients, long-buried mortifying memories of my teenager years coming back to haunt me and wondering how the hell I'm going to do my job when the athlete I'm working with thinks I'm a basket-case, aside from all that, everything's totally fine.

Of course, I don't tell him all that. "I'm just tired, it's been a busy few days," I deflect.

He makes a disbelieving sound, telling me I'm not fooling anyone. But he doesn't push. It's one of the things I love about him; he lets you come to things in your own time. "How's work?"

I weigh up the pros and cons of telling my father who my new client is; the NDA I've just signed says I can't, but I know my dad wouldn't ever tell anyone.

When it comes to secrets, the man is a vault.

Although there are some secrets, I wish he wouldn't keep all to himself, like what happened the day my mother left us and why he never tried to find her.

Even without bringing the confidentiality contract into my decision, my dad had never been a big fan of Lennox Gray.

Not since I came back from school saying I was never going back because of the library incident with Carly.

It didn't even help when I told him Lennox found me crying on the bleachers of the deserted football pitch and apologized on behalf of his awful girlfriend.

If I hadn't already been a little bit in love with Lennox Gray, that moment would have cemented it.

I was barely able to speak, so overwhelmed I was he was even talking to me.

He must have thought I was a complete loser.

Anyway, in my father's book, a private apology was nowhere near good enough.

Lennox should have stopped his horrid girlfriend from making my life miserable at the time, not just assuaged his guilty conscience after the fact.

I was quicker to forgive the object of my affection - instantaneous, if I'm being honest.

So, I keep my new client's identity to myself, keeping things general and light. The last thing I want is my dad worrying about me. Lord knows he did enough of that when I was in high school.

"Work's work," I shrug, not wanting to get into it when I'm feeling so jaded about a job I usually love. "Michael had his baby," I tell him, smiling at the thought of how excited my mentor must be. He and his wife had been trying for a kid for so long, his little one was nothing short of a miracle.

"Hey, that's great news. Girl or boy?" My dad lets me steer the conversation to safer territory.



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“Girl. And before you ask, they haven’t named her yet. I think Michael’s still trying to get his head around the fact that he’s a father.” And there’s no doubt in my mind, he’ll be a great one, like mine.

“He’ll figure it out,” my father asserts with confidence even though he’s never met my mentor. All he knows is all the good stuff I’ve told him. “Girls are easier than boys, anyway.”

A laugh escapes me. “How would you know? All you had was me!”

“And you were all I needed.” My dad says the words like he’s trying to convince me, and I skip over the elephant in the room, that my mother had left him because of me. “Besides, it wasn’t like I had to do much, by the time you could talk you were pretty much the one looking after me!”

I roll my eyes at the exaggeration. Sure, I’d been an independent kid because it had just been me and my dad and he’d had enough trouble making ends meet with his repair shop.

That’s what happens when you have a bleeding heart and a habit of fixing people’s cars for free when they can’t afford their bill...

“Is that Izzy? Hey sweetie-pie! We miss you!” Marianne’s voice rings out like a bell in the background and I smile at the warmth in her tone.

Marianne had moved into the house next door when I was in junior high.

It didn't take long for her to become the aunt I never had.

Well... if that aunt had a penchant for leopard print, pink lipstick and made the best damn brownies in the universe.

"Hey Marianne," I call back, loudly and then lower my voice so only my dad can hear me. "So, Marianne sure is over at your place late..."

I can only hope they've finally taken the next logical step in their friendship and started dating.

They're perfect for each other and Marianne hasn't made any secret of her feelings for my dad.

He's the one who's always held back. Sometimes, I can't help but wonder if – even after all this time - it's because a part of him is still waiting for my mother to come home.

"I was working late at the shop and Marianne was kind enough to come over with some of that chicken pie she knows I like so much." I can almost hear my father blushing.

"Uh-huh." I don't comment further, letting my tone speak for itself. Quick as a whip, my dad changes the topic to the weather and local politics in our small town.

I listen to him, letting his voice and the familiar names and places lull me into relaxation. As it always happens when I speak to my father, I think of how much easier my life would be right now if I hadn't left Alabama. If I'd just stayed put and hadn't fallen in love with the bustle of New York.

If I'd stayed, by now I'd probably be married with a kid on the way. I'd probably be

managing my dad's auto shop. I'd be living in a big ranch-style house like the people I grew up with instead of in a postage-sized apartment. And I'd be bored out of my mind.

My hometown is great for a visit and no judgement on the people who stayed there, but it has never been for me.

I've always wanted to see the world, longed for a big city where no-one cares who you are or who you were before you showed up.

I've reinvented myself in this city and in a way, I feel like I've become the person I was always supposed to be.

If I'd stayed behind, that would never have happened.

"So when're you and Marianne coming to visit me?" I ask eventually, although I know the answer before I've even finished the question.

"You know what it's like Biz; I can't just leave the shop," he hedges.

"The shop will survive for a few days without you," I remind him, but I don't push.

I know my father misses me. I also know my father hates the city - the crowds, the noise, the speed of it, pretty much everything I love about it.

He hasn't been to visit me once in the six years I've lived here, so we only see each other when I manage to get home.

Unfortunately, it's becoming less and less frequent as work gets busier and busier.

We settle on more neutral topics and I'm grateful for the company of his voice on the

long drive home. I try not to calculate how many hours until I'll be back on this road, heading in the opposite direction and back to Lennox.

It's just a job, Izzy , I remind myself. You're a pro, you can do this. It's not like he's an ex-boyfriend. Lennox Gray is just a guy, someone that I never even really knew to begin with. It'll be like working with any other athlete.

For a moment, I toy with the idea of telling him about our past connection, but I table that thought almost immediately.

Maybe if he hadn't been so unpleasant the whole time, I'd have a different reaction.

But nothing about the way Lennox reacted to me makes me think he'd welcome any conversation from me that isn't about his treatment.

And that's fine, totally fine. He's my client, not my friend.

And the more I have that in the forefront of my mind, the better I'll be able to do my job.

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### Chapter

### Three

I'm on auto-pilot as I slide my legs out of bed, cursing as something heavy lands on my big toe.

“Mother-Freakin – !” I grumble, rubbing my toe as I pick the offending binder off the floor. I'd fallen asleep reading through Lennox's medical history, which was really a tragedy centered around his injured knee.

He's already been through surgery to fix a ruptured ACL and he's managed to come back from that only missing half the season.

That's impressive, bearing in mind that a lot of athletes are never able to play professionally again after such an injury.

But Lennox's knee has never been the same and he's suffered minor injury after minor injury.

A whole bunch of small harms that culminated into this latest monstrosity.

My eye focuses on the post-it I stuck to the front of the binder, reminding me to watch the video of the match.

Seeing the accident in real time gives me more information on the trauma of the injury.

Also, I'm more than a little curious to see how he managed to finish the damn game without being stretchered off.

Either he was so high on adrenaline he didn't feel the pain or he's the most stubborn person I've ever met. After our conversations last night, I'm willing to bet it's a combination of the two, with a healthy dose of the latter.

I zone out watching the coffee machine do its thing, falling half-asleep again on my feet. I'm so out of it that I don't even hear my front door open.

"So you are alive then. Good to know I don't have to kill anyone." Kiara sets her keys to my place down on the kitchen counter along with a bag from my favorite bakery and leans against the refrigerator, arms crossed.

I blink at my best friend, a vision of bright orange in my tiny kitchen.

As usual, she's perfectly-put together, in a killer outfit complete with stiletto heels, golden eye make-up accentuating her dark skin and her jet-black hair in braids.

She looks like she's ready to take over the whole damn world.

It makes me acutely aware of the ratty tee I sleep in, which declares me a 'Structural Mobility Superhero'.

If I were any cooler, my apartment wouldn't need air conditioning.

"You're an angel." I open the bag, inhaling the smell of fresh-baked croissants and devour one in about two bites.

I didn't realize how hungry I was, but between the events of last night and the sadness of my refrigerator, I didn't eat much yesterday. I didn't even have time to

make a dent in the PhD work I was already lagging behind on.

Tonight – I promise to myself, tonight I'll get it done, even if it means getting even less sleep than I have been. I grimace a little at the thought of that, but truth be told, it wouldn't be the first time I've pulled all-nighters to do what needed to be done.

“I appreciate that even though you thought I was dead, you still brought baked goods.” I wave my second croissant at Kiara, but she doesn't crack a smile. Instead, she just keeps on giving me that pissed off look, which has sent lesser men running for their mommas.

“It's 6 in the morning, Ki. Don't you ever sleep?” I grumble the question at her, automatically getting another mug out of the cupboard and filling both with coffee - hers with cream and sugar, mine black like my soul.

“Of course I sleep.” Kiara inhales the smell of the fancy Colombian coffee I've been buying since I deposited my first paycheck.

It's my one splurge. “I just don't need as much of it as some people.

” She gives me a pointed look, which I ignore.

I'm too busy rubbing the fatigue out of my eyes anyway as I inhale my first cup of coffee and quickly pour myself a second one.

“That stuff's going to give you a heart attack one day, you know?” Kiara watches as my second cup goes the way of the first. I start to feel vaguely like myself again by the time I start my third.

I don't respond immediately, knowing she'll follow me the few steps to my bedroom as I get my day started.

“Statistically, that’s not accurate,” I remind her. “But I’m guessing you’re not here at this ungodly time of the morning because you’re worried about my blood pressure?”

Kiara gives me a nonplussed look. “I was worried about you . You never called me back after your meeting with Lennox Gray and whenever I tried to get hold of you, I got bounced to voicemail. I thought something happened. And then this morning I get an email from the rental place saying your car hadn’t been returned... ”

Kiara doesn’t look at me. Instead, she’s inspecting the limited clothes in my wardrobe, but her tone tells me just how concerned she was.

It might seem like overkill from anyone who hasn’t lost someone, but I know Ki’s back-story.

I know what happened to her sister and how it made her prone to think the worst was always about to happen.

“I’m sorry, Ki.” I lay my hand gently on her shoulder, giving it a little squeeze. “My dad called as I was leaving the Gray mansion and then by the time we finished talking I figured it was too late to call you back.”

Kiara makes an unimpressed sound and I’m not sure if it’s about my excuse or my wardrobe.

“And how did things go with Gray? And is he as gorgeous in real life as he is in his photos?” She throws me a sly sidelong look and I immediately know I’m forgiven.

I sigh, thinking about the man I’m only a short time away from seeing again. “More, if anything he’s better looking in person, which just proves my theory that the universe is a she and she’s kind of a bitch.”



Kiara laughs and her shoulders finally relax some of the tension they've been carrying since she arrived.

“Look, I've got to be on the road in a half hour and there's no way I can be late meeting him again, so can we talk while I'm getting ready?”

I slip into the bathroom, turning the shower as cold as I can stand it before taking a deep breath and jumping in.

It's the final step in the wake-up routine I perfected in college.

Back then, there was hardly enough hours between classes, work, studying and trying to have some kind of a social life.

I squeak as the cold water hits my chest and scrub my body as hard and fast as I can before hopping out.

Kiara gives a dramatic shiver as she hands me a towel. “I still don't get how you stand doing that every day.”

“That's funny coming from someone who runs almost every morning. I don't get that.” I copy her shiver and she throws a hand-towel at my face.

“One day I'll get you in some running shoes.” It's a promise, wrapped in the tone of a threat.

“Thanks, but I'm good with the pool,” I remind her.

And it's true. Vertically, I might be challenged.

Horizontally and with the water carrying my weight, there's not much that can go

wrong.

Plus, my swims are pretty much the only time in my day when all the outside noise is – quite literally – drowned out.

It's the only kind of meditation I've ever had the patience for; focusing on my strokes and my breathing.

"If you're going back to The Hamptons today, then I'm guessing the meet went well?" Kiara searches my reflection in the mirror as I hurriedly moisturize my face and swipe some mascara onto my lashes.

"Aside from getting into a car accident with the client before officially meeting him, it all went fine." I smile at the horror in Kiara's dark eyes as they almost bug out of her head.

"Please tell me this story doesn't end with you killing Lennox Freakin' Gray." She closes her eyes, her hands in the prayer position and I shove her with my shoulder.

"If that had happened, you definitely would've heard about it by now. You'd be my first call to dispose of the body."

Kiara finally opens her eyes, shaking her head at me in mock-despair. "So after that stellar first impression, then what happened?"

I flit around the bedroom, putting on the clothes Kiara hands me as I tell her an edited version of the story of my day.

I negate the part about just how pissed Lennox was about me being Michael's replacement, knowing it'd only cause her to worry.

She listens silently, indicating with a shake of her head that I should wear the yoga pants she's selected and not the comfy scrubs I picked out for myself.

"If everything's fine. What's got you so nervous? You're not crushing on your client, are you?"

I laugh as if that were the craziest idea in the world. "Sure, because what right-minded, self-respecting woman wouldn't fall for a guy who hasn't been anything but a smug asshole towards her?"

Kiara doesn't even blink at my evasion, waiting for me to convince her.

"He's a big deal," I tell her, shoving the binder I only got half-way through before I fell asleep into my bag. "I don't want to screw this up."

The explanation is close enough to the whole truth to satisfy her.

Kiara's expression softens as she takes me by the hand and steers me toward the wardrobe mirror, putting her hands on my shoulders and standing behind me as I look at our reflections.

We couldn't look any more different from each other and yet she's most definitely the sister I never had.

"You've got this, Iz." She says the words slowly and I nod at her in confusion.

"I know. I know. It'll be fine." I try to add enough conviction to my words, but Kiara senses my doubt like a bloodhound.

"Don't tell me," she says, shaking her head. "Tell her." She points at my reflection in the mirror and I roll my eyes.

“Come on, Ki. I’m going to be late.” I move to turn, but she holds me firmly and I know I’m not going to be able to get out of this no matter how uncomfortable it makes me.

“Why are you so weird about looking at yourself in the mirror? You’re gorgeous with that whole ‘pale and interesting’ Irish rose thing going on, so it can’t be the way you look. So, what gives?”

It’s not the first time Kiara’s asked me that question and it’s not the first time I’ve dodged it like a damn bullet.

I sigh heavily. “If I do this, will you stop digging your talons into me?”

Her expression softens and with it, I feel pieces of my heart chipping away. She motions for me to go ahead.

I can’t fight the sadness that stirs in my gut when I stare at my reflection.

It’s weird to see the mother who left you staring back.

My dad once told me that she and I could be twins, except my eyes are green where hers were blue.

It’s been a while since he’s said those words to me, and yet they still linger, clawing at the most tender parts of my heart.

I don’t exactly remember what she looks like.

In fact, I don’t remember anything about her at all.

The one photograph I have of her, she’s looking over her shoulder as she walks away,

like she was already half-way out of the door, even then.

But even though her face is barely visible there, I see myself.

The rose-colored blush on snow white cheeks, the softness of her jaw and of mine.

Whenever I look into the mirror, I see the her in me and...

“Any time now, Iz. It’s not like you’ve got somewhere to be or anything.” Kiara manages to inject a healthy eye roll into her voice and the threat of being late again is enough to spur me into action.

This time, I pull my shoulders back and do as my friend has instructed.

I look into my own green eyes, ignoring all the negative self-talk that tries to derail me.

Instead, I remember the girl I was when I first met Lennox - the shy, awkward, clumsy, sad, fearful teenager who wanted to disappear and I think about how far I’ve come in the intervening years.

I may still be clumsy, and sadness might shadow me more often than I’d like to admit, but I’ve grown up and I’ve grown stronger.

And although my confidence may fail me now and again, I don’t feel so lost, so fragile, anymore.

I’ve learned that I can cope with more or less whatever life throws at me and Lennox Gray is no exception.

“You’ve got this,” I tell the woman in the mirror and – this time – I sound like I

might actually be starting to believe it.

“Feel better?” Kiara relaxes her death-grip on my shoulders as I turn around to face her.

“Much,” I reply, only a little sarcastic.

“See, I’m always right!” Kiara smirks and I roll my eyes at her. “Now, get on the road before you blow it – being late once is cute, twice just looks unprofessional.”

“Thanks for the pep talk, Ki.” I shake my head at her and laugh, hurrying towards the door.

“And, Izzy,” I turn at the serious note in my friend’s voice, “be careful around him. Keep your distance.”

The warning surprises me, although I’d be lying if I said it was unwarranted. There’s something about Lennox that hints at danger, at an adrenaline rush waiting to happen. An adrenaline rush waiting to end in disaster.

“I’m careful with all my clients, Ki, you know that.

And keeping distance is a little hard when my job is pretty hands-on!

” I purposely misunderstand her – we both know she’s not talking about physical distance, she’s talking about how I invest in people, how I lead with my emotions right out of the gate.

And something about what I’ve told her about Lennox has her spidey senses tingling about me putting myself out there.

Kiara gives me one last searching look before smiling. It's a genuine smile that causes the tension between my shoulders to ease...just a little.

"I know you know what you're doing. Drive safe, Iz. I'll lock up when I leave."

I wave to her from the door before speeding out of the house and down to the garage where Lennox's truck is waiting for me.

As I lever myself into the raised seat, I get a flashback of Lennox's hands around my waist, his palm slightly grazing the bare skin of my belly.

I tramp down on the memory, focusing on Kiara's parting words of advice.

Be careful around him.

And that's just what I intend to be, because Lennox Gray isn't someone I can or should ever let my guard down around.

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Chapter

Four

I'm not sure what I expect when I arrive at what I've decided to call the Gray Mansion.

What I know I definitely don't expect is to see a shirtless Lennox Gray.

His skin glistens golden as the sun kisses him in all the right places, accentuating his broad, muscled arms and the ridges in his abdomen.

He looks like nothing less than a walking, talking anatomy book cover.

But there's more to it than that. There's a smile as broad as the Atlantic on his face as he waves his arms around, gesturing something to the silver haired man in front of him.

If the truck had been a stick shift, there's no doubt in my mind I would have stalled it. A grumpy Lennox has the potential to suck all the charm out of a room. A happy, smiling Lennox is a heck of a lot more attractive. Irresistibly so, perhaps.

The easygoing guy I'm watching is about a bajillion light years away from the surly, arrogant man I met yesterday.

I remember Kai's assertion that I didn't see Lennox at his best. Perhaps he was right.



I hope so for both Lennox and my sakes, because I'm not sure either of us will get out of this intact if he turns out to be that same arrogant asshole.

But then again, is this version of Lennox better?

You can kill someone with harshness just as easily as you can kill them with charm.

I sit in the truck staring like a creep until the man in front of Lennox - the gardener, I suppose - motions towards me.

Lennox turns his head, following the tip of the man's finger all the way until his eyes land on me.

Despite the stutter in my heart, I keep my eyes trained on Lennox's, watching as every ounce of glee slides right off his face, replacing his smile with something that looks more like a scowl.

I blink in confusion at the sudden change in his demeanor, once again realizing that I didn't come prepared.

Not for a shirtless Lennox. And not for the version of him that's staring back at me.

I break eye contact with him, grabbing my bag and phone so as not to let him see my discomfort at his abrupt flip. It's as if he's gone from Dr. Jekyll to Mr. Hyde in the millisecond he spotted me.

Out of the corner of my eye I notice him saying something to the older man before pulling on his shirt and stalking toward me. He moves like a predator, fangs already wet, appetite ripe as he prepares to tear his prey to shreds.

Maybe I should have backed down. Maybe I should have sat pretty and waited until I

absolutely had to get out of the vehicle.

Unfortunately, that's not the way things work out.

Before I know it, I'm opening the door, hopping out of the car, and just about managing not to trip over my own feet as I land.

Lennox takes another stride, landing him in front of me, making it even more apparent just how small I am and how larger than life he is.

"You're early," he says. It sounds like an accusation more than a statement.

"Yeah, it's kind of a sickness of mine," I joke, attempting to break some of the tension radiating off of him.

"I'm always early, chronically, except yesterday – but that was a whole other thing, there was a reason behind me not being on time, but then, you know that, you were there.

"I'm rambling. Dammit, I'm rambling so bad and so hard that every word I speak is annoying to my own damn ears.

On the long drive over here I thought about all the ways I was going to wow Lennox with my professionalism.

Blathering on at him was not one of them.

I'm usually able to project a front of credibility, even if I'm quaking in my sneakers on the inside.

But with Lennox, all that seems to go out the window and I feel as if I'm stripped

bare under his dark gaze.

It's especially unsettling as he just stands there in silence looking down at me with an impenetrable look on his handsome face.

"Shall we...get started?" I ask, if only to break this staring competition. If this is what Lennox is like off the rink, no wonder he has a reputation for being such an intimidating force when he's on the ice.

Lennox makes a noise of assent, but his unimpressed expression doesn't change one bit.

Well, this is sure going to be fun.

"Okay, great!" I overcompensate for his lack of enthusiasm, trying to turn myself into Little Miss Sunshine. "I just need to grab something out of my rental and I'm good to go." I look around the driveway, not seeing the sad-looking car I arrived in yesterday.

"Kai drove it back to the rental company this morning," Lennox says as if him taking it upon himself to make that decision makes total sense.

"You're kidding."

"Do I sound like I'm kidding?" he asks in that gravelly voice of his.

"I thought you wouldn't let any of your staff drive my sad little car," I remind him, knowing I'm needling him, but somehow unable to stop myself.

"Kai hasn't ever done what I've told him," he says with affection rather than the irritation I'm accustomed to.

“He had some business in the city, so it made sense for him to take it.” He shrugs, drawing attention to his broad shoulders defined beneath the thin grey Henley he thankfully pulled on before stalking over to me.

“You’ll be keeping the truck anyway while you’re working here so what’s the problem? ”

He frowns at me as if he really has no idea why I’m so bent out of shape about him making decisions about me that are totally out of his remit.

“Don’t you think this is something you should have discussed with me? Instead of just assuming I’d agree to whatever you think makes sense?” I’m proud of myself for sounding reasonable as opposed to pissed at being treated like a little kid who needs to have their decisions made for them.

Lennox looks at me as if I’m some kind of foreign species, probably because he’s not used to being challenged by anyone other than the opposing team on game day.

“No.” It’s the monosyllabic answer I’m expecting, but the gall of the man is still astonishing.

Arrogance, thy name is Lennox Gray.

I change tack. “My treatment table was in that car!”

“You won’t need it,” he says as if that were the point I was making. “We have an in-house massage suite next to the gym. Dec didn’t show you around?”

I shake my head. “I guess he was a little busy arguing with you .”

Lennox’s eyes flare at my back-chat and I wonder if I’ve just talked myself out of a

job barely 5 minutes into the first day when a deep chuckle catches my attention.

Peering around Lennox's huge frame, I see the older man he was talking to laughing at our exchange.

"I like this one, Lennox." The Hispanic man winks at Lennox before setting his sights back on me.

"Miguel, encantado ," he says and reaches his hand out to shake mine, smiling kindly at me.

I return the gesture without hesitation, even though it means having to negotiate the heavyweight binder with one hand.

Although they look nothing alike, something in Miguel's gentle demeanor reminds me of my dad. The feeling is odd, but comforting nonetheless.

"Izzy," I respond, "pleased to meet you."

"And what have you done, Lennox, to make this lovely woman so angry?" Miguel arches a brow as he rounds on his boss.

I half-expect Lennox to snap at Miguel, like he seems to do with everyone else. Instead he just rolls his eyes at the older man, huffing. "Why do you assume I'm to blame? Maybe Isabella here has just woken up on the wrong side of bed."

I can practically feel the steam start to pour out of my ears when Miguel speaks, saving me from whatever verbal beat-down I was about to lay onto my new boss.

"And what is it you do, Izzy?" There's genuine interest in his eyes as he asks the question, making it a pleasure to answer, except I don't quite get the chance, though.

“She’s my physical therapist-” Lennox starts. I put up a hand, wanting the ball back in my field. God knows, left up to him, Lennox will find a way to drain the life out of the occupation I’ve worked my ass off to perfect.

“I’m a physical therapist,” I tell him, giving him all of my attention and Lennox none. “I’m here to help Mr. Gray get back to full health, if he’ll let me.”

Miguel snorts at my thinly concealed dig at Lennox.

“Beautiful and bright.” He looks between me and the immovable mountain of a man next to us and drops his voice as if he’s telling me a secret. “I think you’ll be very good for him.” He winks broadly, suggesting he’s not just talking about repairing Lennox’s knee and I feel my cheeks heat.

Lennox clearly hasn’t missed Miguel’s tone, looking distinctly uncomfortable, which makes my own embarrassment totally worthwhile. Anything that’ll knock Lennox down a peg or two to the level of us mere mortals is a boon in my opinion.

“Stop flirting with her, Miguel, unless you want Maria to hear about it.” Lennox gives the older man a pointed look and Miguel lifts his hands in a gesture of innocence.

“My wife,” Miguel confides in me, patting me on the hand like an old friend. “And she would love to meet you. You come for lunch one day, yes?”

He’s so sincere, it’s as if I can feel the warmth radiating off of him. “I’d love to -,” I start before Lennox interrupts.

“We don’t know how long Isabella is going to be with us for.”

Ouch. Talk about raining on a parade. As if I needed any reminding that I’m here on

a trial basis.

“Ah, that is a shame.” Miguel shakes his head, looking curiously between the two of us glowering at each other, clearly picking up on the tension. “But if you find yourself staying, it’s an open invitation.”

Miguel gives me a friendly smile before heading back to his plants and I find myself wishing he’d stay if only to provide a distraction from the impossible man in front of me.

“He seems nice,” I offer in a bid to break the silence.

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“Miguel’s the best,” Lennox agrees quietly. “He and Maria like to tell me they’re my New York family.” He smiles fondly as he looks in the direction the older man has gone.

The softness in his expression is something I haven’t seen before and it looks good on him, just like everything else.

“She sounds great,” I admit, genuinely. “I hope I’m around long enough to meet her.”

Lennox nods thoughtfully, still not looking at me. After what feels like the longest minute ever, he sighs in resignation.

“Your treatment table is inside, and I confirmed the rental return with your boss this morning,” Lennox says, a little begrudgingly, but at least he finally meets my eyes.

So perhaps he wasn’t as high-handed and as much of a railroader as I thought.

I narrow my eyes at him. “Why didn’t you just say that instead of letting me think -?” I bite my lip so I don’t say anything that might incriminate me or plunge his mood back into the gutter.

“Think what? That I’m a...what was it you said?” He taps his lip, looking up at the sky like he’s trying to remember. “Oh yeah, an ‘obtuse asshole’.”

I cringe at the reminder. He’s definitely not going to let me forget that exchange. Time to be the bigger person, as my dad would say.



“Look, Mr. Gray, if we’re going to work together then can we just start with a clean slate?

Neither of us were our best selves yesterday, so how about we draw a line under it and start fresh today?

” I try to maneuver the binder I’m holding into a more comfortable position, but it’s so damn heavy and I’ve been standing with it for so damn long, I’m starting to lose the feeling in my arms.

“You need a hand with that?” Lennox nods at the weight in my hands and doesn’t wait for my assent before reaching for it. When he reaches over, his fingertips brush my skin and I shiver involuntarily at the contact and – inevitably – drop the binder.

Fuck.

“Sorry, I’m such a klutz!” I reach down to pick it up from the ground at the same time he does, but he gets there first.

In my panicked rush to avoid our hands touching again after the visceral reaction I seem to have to him, I jump up to standing and manage to headbutt him in the nose.

“Jesus!” Lennox’s head snaps back, his hand going to cover his face automatically. To say I’m mortified would be the understatement of the year.

“Oh my God, I’m so sorry, are you okay?” I speak a mile a minute and without thinking, reach up to move his hand away from his nose. “Let me see.”

Please don’t let there be blood, please don’t let there be blood.

I breathe an internal sigh of relief when I see his nose isn’t broken. Thank goodness

because aside from the guilt of hurting him, it's a news article that would dog my professional life forever. I can already see it now. Junior Physio Breaks NHL Star's Nose

"It's just bruised I think," I murmur, inspecting his nose, touching and probing his cheekbones just to make sure everything's in place.

I'm not sure when it penetrates that I'm up on my tiptoes, running my fingers over Lennox's stubbly cheeks, our faces only a few inches apart from each other.

The moment it does, I know I should let my hands drop by my side and step away, but I'm frozen.

I'm close enough to see the flecks of gold in his dark eyes.

Close enough to taste the mint on his tongue without kissing him.

Close enough to hear every heartbeat pounding against his chest.

Lennox's gaze tracks down to my mouth, making me hold my breath.

I should move. I know that I should. It's just that time seems as still as my feet do right now.

Like I've been trapped in a vessel, frozen between reality and the damning thoughts in my head.

But I'm not blaming myself for this. It's like Lennox is a magnet drawing me towards him.

His head dips down and my lips part, my eyes start to flutter close of their own

volition, until a whoosh of air snaps them back open as Lennox takes a big step back.

“Yeah, I think you’re right, it isn’t broken.” His voice is husky as he looks away from me. “Thanks for checking.”

My face flames, not just because I’m thinking about what an idiot I must have looked like, standing there as if I was waiting for him to kiss me, but also because Lennox himself is so obviously uncomfortable.

“No problem,” I croak out, smoothing the non-existent creases out of my shirt just so I have an excuse not to look him in the eyes. “You should – uh – put some ice on that though, to stop it, you know, from swelling.”

Please let this be the moment an asteroid hits Earth. Please. That would at least kill me faster than this awkwardness.

“Good idea, I’ll get some ice and I’ll meet you in the gym.” Lennox latches onto my suggestion like a drowning man would a life preserver, probably because it involves being in a different room from me.

“Great!” I nod, injecting as much enthusiasm as possible into my voice.

“Great,” he echoes, rubbing the back of his neck with his hand like a nervous teenager, before spinning on his heel and heading towards the house.

I take it I’m supposed to follow, and I hurry to catch up, his longer legs eating up the distance faster than I can without breaking into a trot.

Crossing the threshold, I don’t stop to ogle the house-porn like I did the night before, there’s no time if I don’t want to be left behind. I very quickly realize I have no idea where I’m going.

I call out to Lennox but he's already out of sight, racewalking towards his kitchen like a damn pro, although it must be hurting him to move that fast without crutches.

"Umm, Mr. Gray, where's the gym again?" I ask, wondering if I'm going to feel this gawky around him the entire time.

"Hallway to your left, third door on the right." Lennox throws the comment over his shoulder without breaking his stride. "And stop calling me Mr. Gray if you expect me to fucking answer!"

The double-heightened entry-way echoes with the sound of his annoyance and this time, I don't take any pleasure in knowing I've gotten under his skin, because I can already feel him deep underneath mine.

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Chapter

Five

By the time Lennox gets to the gym I've had time to find the massage room and get myself set up.

Part of me wonders if he was giving me extra time to get myself together because he noticed what a basket-case I've been.

If that's the case, I don't know whether to be grateful or even more embarrassed than I already am.

Fake it 'til you make it , I remind myself.

I'm determined to claw back some level of professionalism even it kills me and the best way to go about that is to pretend like what took place outside never even happened.

Denial and distraction are my two new best friends right now.

"If you want to hop up on the bed, I'd like to do a quick consultation if you don't mind?" I ask the question in my best 'this is how it's going to work' voice. I'm surprised not to encounter any resistance from Lennox who does exactly as I ask.

He leans back on his elbows, stretching his long legs out in front of him and I definitely only look at the corded muscles of his legs from a purely specialist point of

view.

“This is a great set-up.” I gesture around to the fully fitted out-treatment rooms that would put most five-star spas to shame. “Was it like this when you bought the place?”

Smalltalk, I hate it, but it’s a trick of the trade I’ve learned to employ over the years. Especially when either I or the client are nervous.

“No.” Lennox’s monosyllabic response is punctuated by an intake of breath as I touch a sensitive spot around his knee.

I raise an eyebrow at him. “Did that hurt?”

He shrugs like it’s no big deal, but from the way his jaw is clenching he’s in a not inconsiderate amount of pain.

“If you’d been using your crutches instead of putting all your weight on your knee this morning, it wouldn’t be as sore as it is now,” I point out, but Lennox just stares daggers at me.

So someone doesn’t like to be told they’re not invincible , I think to myself. Damn alpha male athletes.

“I had some stuff to do,” Lennox shrugs. “The crutches just get in the way. They slow me down.”

“Because they’re supposed to slow you down,” I rebuke gently.

“Your knee has gone through a massive trauma, not just once with your surgery, but again during that last game.” The game I haven’t yet watched.

I've been so busy pouring over Lennox's medical charts I didn't have time, but he doesn't need to know that.

"You need to give it some time to heal."

"You can save the lecture, Isabella. I've had it already from the damn surgeon," Lennox grumbles.

"And apparently it didn't work when he gave it to you, so that's why I'm reminding you."

If Lennox wants to turn this into a battle of wills, I'm happy to show him just how stubborn I can be when it comes to my patients.

"There's a set of crutches over there-" I nod towards the corner of the room. "You're going to use them for the rest of our little trial period."

I cross my arms, looking at him expectantly.

Lennox's expression goes from mulish to amused in a matter of seconds. "I don't think I heard a question there, Isabella."

Rolling my eyes, I shake my head at him. "You didn't. Out on the ice, you're the boss. In here," I make a circle with my index finger including the treatment room and the gym, "in here, I'm the boss."

Lennox looks a little surprised and rightly so because right now I'm light years away from the timid woman I was outside. But this is different, this here is my world.

The surprise in his eyes gives way to something looking like grudging respect and I tell myself I don't need his approval.

“I’ll give the crutches a try,” he accepts begrudgingly. “But I’m not makin’ any promises.”

I duck my head to hide my victorious smile, knowing Lennox is the type of person who would renege on his acceptance purely to prove a point.

His Alabama drawl which is normally barely noticeable is coming through strong.

It makes me wonder if it’s because he’s subconsciously picking up my accent or because he’s in pain. Neither of the two options is ideal.

“When does pre-season training start?” I ask, focusing on the task at hand.

“It’s already started,” Lennox sighs, looking pained. “We don’t usually do the whole break things. We train year-round.”

“I meant on-ice,” I tell him gently, knowing it’s hard for any athlete who’s been sidelined with an injury, but especially so when that athlete is as dedicated as Lennox is.

“I need to be skating by August.” There’s no question, no hint of doubt that what he wants may not be possible.

Not in his mind, at least. After looking at his scans, however, I’m not convinced Lennox will get back to the level he was playing at before and in two months’ time even less so.

But if I know one thing about rehabilitation, it’s that if you don’t believe you can get better, it won’t happen.

So I’m not going to be the one to tell him not to get his hopes up.



“And I’ll do everything I can to help you do that,” I promise and let him see my sincerity when he looks into my eyes.

He nods in acknowledgement and it feels as if some of the tension has left the room - like Lennox has allowed himself to trust me, even just a little. Silently, I vow not to prove his faith in me wrong.

“We’re going to be doing a lot of work in the pool,” I tell him. “You have one on site, right?” I look up for him to confirm and he nods.

“Indoor or outdoor?” I ask, making notes as I go.

Lennox shifts slightly on the bed, looking a little pained as if he doesn’t like to talk about the luxury he lives in. It’s endearing, actually; it’s a change from the number of show-offs I usually meet in this job. “Umm, both.”

“How about a tennis court?” I ask, not because it matters for his treatment but because now I am curious.

“Four,” he nods, the word twisting in his mouth like a bad taste. I hide my smile behind my hand at how clearly he wants to get off this topic.

“Cinema room?” I continue.

“Yes,” he sighs before narrowing his eyes at me in suspicion. “Seriously, is this even important?”

“Olympic-sized ice rink?” I ask innocently, ignoring his question. His mouth twitches as he realizes I’m teasing.

He shakes his head, letting me see the smile that’s graced a million magazine covers.

“Sorry to disappoint.”

“So no rink at Wayne Manor, huh?” The words are already out of my mouth by the time I’ve realized I’ve done that thing of speaking out loud without really thinking first.

“Wayne Manor?” Lennox’s expression turns from confusion to amusement at the speed of light as he makes the connection. “Are you calling me Batman?”

I shrug. I’m a nerd, so what? “Well, between the out-of-the-way mansion, the batmobiles in your garage and the whole air of mystery you seem to like to cultivate...you tell me.”

I’m rewarded with a deep rumble of laughter. It’s an addictive sound. A sound, I realize, I wouldn’t mind hearing again. Maybe I wouldn’t even mind if I was the only person to make him laugh like that.

Lennox eyes me curiously. “So you’re a comic book fan?”

“Don’t sound so surprised! I know my Marvel from my DC.” God, could I sound like more of a dork right now?

He frowns as if he can’t get his head around me. “You just...you don’t seem like the type.”

I know I shouldn’t ask him what type I seem like, that if he says something belittling, I’ll be crushed no matter how much I want to pretend his opinion doesn’t matter to me.

It’s just because I’m a people-pleaser, I reason. It’s not his opinion I care about. I just have this thing about people liking me. It’s not something I’m proud of, but it’s not

something I've ever been able to get away from. It's been that way since I was a kid.

Kiara – ever the psychoanalyst – says it has to do with my absent mom and me thinking if I can make people like me then they won't leave me.

I'm not saying she's wrong. I'm just saying I prefer to think about my mother as little as possible and I'd prefer to believe any impact she had on my life ended the moment she decided to walk out on her husband and infant baby.

“What kind of ‘type’ is that? Someone who can read?” I challenge him, mostly joking.

Lennox gives me that inscrutable look of his again. “Are you always this feisty with your clients or do I just have a special talent for pissing you off?”

I wince inwardly, hoping like hell I haven't offended him and reminding myself I'm supposed to be on my best damned behavior, especially after what almost happened outside.

The memory of the not-quite-almost kiss has left me feeling frustrated and confused, but now really isn't the time to analyze those emotions or dig any deeper.

“Sorry, lack of sleep,” I mumble under my breath in a pretty half-hearted apology.

Lennox doesn't say anything as I keep gently manipulating his leg and knee, making notes as I go over the areas we need to work on together.

“It wasn't supposed to be an insult. All I meant was that girls with your looks aren't normally into comics,” Lennox states quietly, making my heart beat faster in my chest.

“Graphic novels,” I correct automatically, earning another twelve nerd points before turning away from Lennox to scribble some nonsensical notes down just so he doesn’t see the flaming tomato my face has become.

Is he making fun of me? I wonder. But there’s no way I’m going to look at him to figure it out – much better to distract both of us from the awkwardness in the room. Or perhaps it’s just me feeling like that? Lennox is so full of confidence I doubt he’d be familiar with any hint of uncertainty.

Change the subject, Iz. Anything that’ll break the silence, which is becoming oppressive.

“So, how come you live all the way out here? I’m guessing most of the other guys on the team live closer to the city.”

I don’t risk looking at him until I feel some of the heat leave my face.

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“It’s quiet here,” Lennox shrugs. “I’m not really into the whole bright lights, big city thing and fans can get a little crazy when they recognize me,” he says, seeming almost a little embarrassed at the admission, as if being a super hockey star and pin-up aren’t things he likes to admit to.

“I grew up in a small town, so I guess I’m not all that comfortable in crowds. ”

“Yeah, I know.” I freeze as soon as the words are out of my mouth. Lennox has a similar reaction, one I possibly wouldn’t pick up on if my hands weren’t on his body right now.

“ You know ?” he says and there’s no getting around the question. A conversation shift isn’t going to fly this time.

Taking a step back from the table, I take a deep breath and look into his face, his brow now furrowed in suspicion.

“Yeah, I know,” I sigh. “Not because I’m a crazy ‘I watch you while you sleep’ stalker, but because we grew up in the same town.”

And there goes the promise I’d made to myself less than 24 hours ago, not to mention our connection. But it was either that or let him think I’m about to go full single white female on him.

“Okay...” When I look up at Lennox, he’s staring at me as if I’m some kind of code he’s trying to break, a safe he’s trying to crack. If he ever found his way inside, I think he’d be sorely disappointed.

I shake my head, partly because it gives me a reprieve from his enquiring eyes.

I've never been comfortable with people looking at me, especially when 'people' in this instance is Lennox Gray.

"You wouldn't remember me," I tell him, thinking that'll bring the conversation to somewhat of a pause.

Of course, I'm wrong. Instead, it leads to more questions that I have to weave my way around avoiding.

"We've met?" Lennox frowns at me, tilting his head like he's trying to place me. "Because I would definitely remember that." He doesn't bother to hide the frank appreciation in his eyes and I don't need a mirror to know my cheeks have turned pink.

I nod, averting my eyes as I look back down at the hands I'm wringing together nervously, forcing myself to stop and calm down.

"St Patrick's," I explain.

Lennox blinks his dark brown eyes at me. He couldn't look more surprised if I'd told him I was raised by wolves. "High school?"

"I looked different back then." And isn't that the understatement of the century.

So much so that I almost wince at the memory of those days.

They were definitely not my finest. There is a reason I never talk about my high school days and why I have no intention of ever going to a reunion.

I've tried to put those times firmly in my rear-view mirror.

And I was doing just fine with that until Lennox came along.

I wave a hand in front of my face. "Glasses, braces...more or less permanently dressed in dungarees stained with motor oil..." I paint a picture for him, not sure if it's worse if he remembers me or if he's none the wiser.

Lennox squints hard like he's trying to place me, perhaps see me with the red school lockers behind me. But no matter how many times he furrows his brows, it's blatantly obvious he has absolutely no idea who I am.

I swallow down my ridiculous sense of somehow being let down. It doesn't even make sense. Not being remembered is a win in my book, after all.

Still, Lennox looks a little stressed, so I decide to throw him a bone and save him from the discomfort of having to admit just how forgettable I was, or am, I guess.

"Don't worry about it." I wave away his concern at seeming rude.

"You were a Senior when I was just a Sophomore. We didn't exactly move in the same circles.

" In fact, we might as well have been on different planets for all the interaction we had.

Save for that one time when he apologized for his awful girlfriend.

It's a little galling when I consider that a moment that meant everything to me was so insignificant for him.

Lennox is silent for a while before he nods, as if it makes sense he wouldn't remember me, despite the fact we didn't go to a big high school.

I don't add that we shared a biology class because I skipped ahead on the sciences.

We may have been at the same school, but between his star-athlete status and my special power of social invisibility we may as well have been in separate countries for all the cross-over we had.

I saw him every day for an entire year, he never saw me at all.

I shake my head to get a damn grip and remind myself I'm here to do a job and that's it.

"Dizzy?"

I freeze at Lennox's outburst, coupled with the snap of his fingers like he's just solved a complex math equation. It's the nickname his bitchy girlfriend Carly gave me way back when because I was so goddamned clumsy and somehow – much to my chagrin – it stuck.

Dizzy Izzy.

It might have been cute if a friend called me that, but it was ever only used by bullies like Carly.

I wrinkle my nose like the moniker is a bad smell.

"I haven't heard that name since high school.

" And yet it has the power to send me back to the place that was my own personal



version of hell for way too many years.

“I hated it then and turns out I still hate it now! Your ex had a real way with words,” I joke feebly.

“Sorry,” Lennox winces in acknowledgement and I wonder if – in retrospect – he can see what a supreme piece of work Carly really was.

I shrug as if it’s no big deal. “You don’t have to apologize, you weren’t the one who started it.”

“No, but I didn’t stop it either. I should have.” He shakes his head and I’m so surprised at the genuine frustration I hear in his voice that I allow myself the luxury of looking at him a little more closely.

“It was a long time ago.” I wave away his annoyance. “It’s all water under the bridge,” I assure him, although I’m not sure it is.

It still hurts to think about those days, but I never put Lennox into that group of kids who made my life hell. He was never mean to me. In fact, his only cruelty was indifference and I can’t really say I blame him for that. High school boys sort of just flow with the stream.

“Still...” Lennox looks at me for a long time and I wonder if he’s seeing the girl I used to be or if he’s lost in his own high school memories.

Either way, it’s not important. We’re not here to talk about old times.

“We’re going to do some flexibility tests now, alright?” I ask him, parking our previous conversation way in the back.

“You’re the boss,” Lennox teases, but without any of the harshness I’ve become used to from him.

“Damn straight,” I joke back as I start lifting his good leg to test his hamstring length.

I don’t think about the heat of his skin under my hands or the zing of awareness I feel every time I touch him.

I’ve never had a crush on a patient, so whatever this is, I need to kick it to the curb and I need to do it fast.

In my head, I start reciting all the bones in the body from the toes upwards until I manage to push those flustering feelings into the background.

Denial, denial, denial. Works like a charm every time.

“Did you know in high school you wanted to be a PT?” Lennox asks, making it hard for me to pretend he’s someone else.

Still, I’m grateful for the conversation and for him making an effort even though I can’t imagine he’s actually interested in my answer.

“I thought I wanted to be a doctor,” I respond truthfully.

“But I shadowed a surgeon for a while over the summer before my senior year and I realized it wasn’t for me.

There are a lot of good doctors, don’t get me wrong, but they didn’t have the time to really get to know their patients.

They dealt with whatever the issue was and moved on to the next thing.

It was like they weren't treating people, just the problem.

I wanted to spend more time with my patients, get to know them, help them in their day to day lives, not just for the hours I was operating on them. ”

I click my jaw shut, abruptly, realizing I've said more than I meant to.

“Sorry, you were probably hoping for more of a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer,” I smile sardonically. “I have a tendency to ramble when I'm nervous.”

“Don't apologize,” Lennox says, “I asked the question because I wanted to hear the answer.”

Thankfully he doesn't mention me being nervous around him, although I have a feeling he's stored that tidbit away for another day.

In the short time I've spent with him, Lennox has given me the impression that he pays attention and that not a lot gets past him.

He's not the dumb jock I labelled him as, which is unfortunate because that would make him a whole lot less attractive.

“What about you? Sports were always the plan I guess?” He was a star athlete back in school. Enough to have the football and hockey team fighting over him.

“They were a plan, but they weren't mine,” Lennox says a little testily.

I keep my mouth shut, hoping he'll say more, but not exactly asking him to.

“It was all down to Gray Senior – my...father,” his mouth twists a little and I wonder what kind of a relationship they have that he calls his dad by his last name. Once

again, I keep my mouth shut, hoping he'll say more and I can't say that I'm not a little surprised when he does.

Lennox shrugs, as much as he can given the position I have him in.

"He wanted me to play college football," he says.

"There were college scouts in and out of my house since I was in junior high. But I wanted to travel." He shakes his head, looking a little regretful as he dances with the memory of a time far away.

"I dunno, I guess, more than anything, I just wanted to get the hell out of town. See the world outside, you know. I figured there'd be time after that to decide what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. "

"So what happened?"

"What happened?" Lennox looks up to the ceiling, like he doesn't really know the answer to that question. "A lot happened, I guess. Things change and you roll with it or you get left behind."

I try not to be disappointed at his evasion, he doesn't owe me anything and I have no right to expect him to pour his heart out to me.

"You go home much?" I ask. It's a question that doesn't take us out of the conversation completely, but it's the best I can do to keep him talking without prying too much.

Dare I say, I might be enjoying the amicable chat we've settled into.

It's worlds better than us sniping at each other, which was our default until not too

long ago.

“Not if I can help it,” Lennox snorts quietly before looking a little dismayed he was so honest in his response. Like he’s shown more of himself than he planned.

I smooth out my frown before he sees it.

Even back in high school, I always thought Lennox lived some kind of a charmed life.

A wealthy family, one of the most recognizable in the state, the big house, the fancy car, high-end clothes.

From the outside it looked like he was living the dream, but his words are giving me a peek behind the curtain and I’m starting to wonder if I wasn’t mistaken.

“Me neither.” I skip over his reaction as if I didn’t notice it. “My dad keeps on trying to get me to head down, but with work it’s hard. And after New York, small town ‘Bama feels a little...”

“Claustrophobic.” Lennox finishes my sentence with a sigh and I look over at him, surprised he found the word I was thinking.

“Yeah,” I nod, in agreement, our eyes meeting and holding.

This time, as our gazes stay fixed on each other, I see understanding.

I see that he knows exactly what I’m talking about.

I’m not exactly sure what Lennox sees as he looks back at me.

What I do know, however, is that we lock eyes for a few seconds too long.

Looking down, I bring the focus right back where it should have been this entire time.

“Let’s start off in the pool,” I suggest, although if I’m hoping for a distraction, seeing Lennox half-naked is probably the worst idea I’ve ever had.

“Sounds like a good idea. You bring your bikini?” Lennox’s eyes drift over my body as if he has x-ray vision, like he’s undressing me with his eyes.

“I’m not going to be swimming,” I tell him, sounding prissy as a Catholic school-teacher.

“Shame,” Lennox says cryptically, before hopping off the bed.

“Crutches!” I shriek at him sounding like a damn first wife.

I’m knocked for six when he actually listens to me and grabs them from the corner of the room before making his way out.

“See,” he smiles over his shoulder, “sometimes I do what I’m told.”

I watch him leave, thinking that apparently, I don’t. Kiara told me to keep my distance from Lennox and, after barely spending a morning together, I already know it’s going to be a hell of a lot easier said than done.

### Chapter

### Six

I count it as a victory that I haven't been fired by the end of my first day. If anything, Lennox and I – gasp – actually seem to be getting along. He's even graduated me to the use of his nickname.

"It feels weird calling you 'Nox'," I tell him. Nicknames are too intimate, too personal. Another barrier between us I'm not sure I can afford to have fall.

"The only people who call me Lennox are my mother, Miguel when he's trying to rile me and..." He casts around, scratching the five o'clock shadow on his jaw, which makes him look even more like an off-duty model. "And actually, that's pretty much it."

I smile, taking in his relaxed lean against the state-of-the art cable machine in his gym.

"And you definitely don't remind me of my mother," he adds, making it sound like a compliment, although I'm not altogether sure why.

A part of me wants to dig down more into that, but I resist. I'm trying to avoid too many personal questions, because the more I find out about Lennox, the more I like, and the more I like, the more I want to know. It's a sequence of events which won't end well – not for me at least.

“Alright then, Nox it is, I guess,” I agree a little shyly, my breath catching as our eyes meet.

A small smile quirks up his lips as he continues to watch me with an unreadable expression. “Good.”

“So does that mean you’ll call me Izzy from now on like everyone else?”

Lennox shakes his head slowly, his eyes never leaving mine.

“I’m not ‘everyone else’.” It would sound arrogant coming from anyone else, but the reality is he sure as hell isn’t.

He’s Lennox Gray and the man I’ve had a crush on since I was fifteen, not that he’s aware of that particular dirty little secret of mine.

“Besides, Isabella is a beautiful name, it fits you.”

I don’t have time to reflect on Lennox’s comment before his phone buzzes with an incoming call.

I’m happy for the disruption until I check my own phone and realize just how late it’s gotten.

At this point, I’m into overtime territory.

Not that that’s a problem. The problems will come when I’m on the road, falling asleep in traffic as thick as a mudslide.

God knows what time I’ll get home. And then studying...



there'll be no way to cram a single ounce of information into my brain at that point.

I'm in such a panic thinking about everything I still have to do before I can even think about sleep that I don't register Lennox coming close enough to touch me on the wrist.

It's a gentle, innocent touch on my arm for Christ's sake, so why does it make my heart race as if it's something more affectionate?

"You okay?" He looks down at me with genuine concern.

I've never been good at hiding my emotions and when I'm tired I'm even more of an open book.

I smile grimly. "Just thinking about my to-do list," I admit. "It's not a pretty picture."

Lennox frowns, looking like he wants to ask what I mean, but then his phone buzzes insistently in his hand again.

"You should get that." I nod towards the cell he isn't even looking at because all his attention is on me.

"You'll be back tomorrow." It's half statement and half question, an edge of unease in his tone, as if he thinks I might never come back.

"Of course, bright and early and pumped full of caffeine," I joke. It has the desired effect, snapping him out of whatever thoughts he was having.

Nodding briskly, Lennox answers the call and turns away, breaking off our eye contact and, I suppose, effectively dismissing me. I wave to his back and turn on my heel, still halfway panicking about the traffic I'll hit. Before I'm even able to make it

to the door, however, Lennox's voice stops me.

"Isabella. Good work today," he says and there is no grudgingness in his approval.

He looks as if he's about to say something else, but then his back is turned to me again as he throws a goodbye wave over his shoulder.

"You too," I tell him quietly, smiling to myself as I walk to Lennox's truck.

On my drive home, I bask in the high of his praise while at the same time telling myself it shouldn't be all that important to me.

On the up-side beating myself up over my reaction to him is better than obsessing over all the work I have to do when I get back to my apartment or wondering how I'm going to survive on a few short hours of sleep night after night.

That's if this long-ass commute doesn't kill me first.

### Chapter

### Seven

It's on the second day of us working together, with me trying to cover up my yawns as we work through Lennox's warm-up, that he throws me for a loop, again.

He stops and gazes down at me, hands on hips, looking like something out of an inspirational fitness poster. It shouldn't be possible to see every muscle in his upper body through his training shirt, but apparently Lennox Gray defies the laws of physics.

"This isn't working."

"Huh?" I frown up at him, noting his serious expression.

"We can't go on like this, it's not working," he repeats, gesturing between us.

I mirror his stance, because if he's about to kick me out before we've even really gotten started he has another thing coming.

"I thought I had 48 hours before you decided whether or not we should work together, by my reckoning, that still gives me until the end of the day."

Part of me wonders why I'm fighting for a job I wasn't even sure I wanted in the first place.

It's not because of Lennox, definitely not because of him. It's a pride thing , I tell myself; because no-one likes to be told they're not good enough .

Lennox waves his hand as if it doesn't matter. "This isn't about the trial period."

"So why does it sound like you're breaking up with me? 'It's not working'," I parrot, doing a truly terrible impression of him. "It's not you, it's me," I joke, to ease the tension which has ratcheted up between us like nothing else.

Lennox raises an eyebrow. "I wasn't aware we were dating, Isabella. Did I miss the part where you asked me out?" His voice drips with sarcasm, making me feel flustered beyond belief. He tilts his head at me, analyzing my reaction which just unsettles me even more. "You know, you blush a lot."

"Yeah, well, you would too if your skin was almost translucent," I grumble back, lamely.

We stand there in silence, sizing each other up long enough for me to feel rattled, which isn't all that hard. Apparently, all Lennox has to do is look at me to throw me off my game.

"So are you going to tell me what you mean by 'this isn't working' or do I have to guess?"

"I ask eventually. "Because if you're firing me, I'd rather you just tell it to me straight instead of dancing around it.

Not that I think you should fire me, because you've barely given me a chance, but it's your knee so it's your look-out," I ramble on until I manage to pull on the emergency brake.

Lennox breaks into a smirk. “You’re cute when you’re all angry and have the whole righteous indignation thing going on.”

“Sure, because that’s not at all patronizing,” I interrupt, rolling my eyes.

“-but I have no intention of firing you,” he finishes as if I hadn’t broken his flow.

“You don’t?” I can hear the surprise in my own voice.

“No. I’ve worked with a lot of PTs. I know the difference between someone who’s up to the task and someone who isn’t. You know what you’re doing.”

I tell myself I shouldn’t be so pleased when all he’s done is tell me something I already know. But I can’t deny it feels good to have his approval, even though I shouldn’t need it. My job is important to me and to know he respects my work is a heady feeling.

“I thought you didn’t hire women,” I blurt out. Apparently, that’s what I do when I’m nervous. Whenever I’m around Lennox I feel as if I go back to being that gawky 15 year old girl again instead of the woman I’ve grown into and it’s more than a little unnerving.

I expect an angry response, telling me who he hires isn’t my business – and he’d be right. But instead, Lennox sighs deeply, rubbing the bridge of his nose as if I’ve given him a headache – which I probably have.

“Remind me to kill Kai once we’re done here,” he mutters, accurately guessing who let that particular cat out of the bag. Finally, he takes a deep breath and looks me square in the face again with that intense look of his.

“It’s true, I don’t usually bring women into my closest circle of employees, you’re the

first in a while,” he admits a little begrudgingly.

I’m about to point out again how I don’t work for him, but I figure there’s only so much sass he’ll take before he changes his mind about not firing me. So, I keep my mouth shut.

“Wow, no questions? That must be a first,” he jokes, making me smile in spite of myself.

There’s something contagious about Lennox when he’s in a good mood; he has the kind of grin you can’t help but return.

“When I said this isn’t working, I meant you commuting here from the city every day.

You drive 2 hours to get here, work a full day, hit rush hour traffic on the way home, do your PhD work, most likely falling asleep at your laptop and then repeat the process. You’re exhausted and it’s only day 2.”

I bristle a little at that. “Sure, it’s a long day, but I’m not exhausted. I may be a little tired -,”

“You’ve yawned your way through the past hour, and you look like you’d like to stick your head in a bucket of caffeine,” Lennox challenges.

I indulge the thought of just mainlining coffee for a second, before snapping out of my waking dream. It pisses me off that he’s right. Between the travel, the work and my studies, I’m burning the candle at both ends and then just setting fire to it right in the middle.

“I’ll figure it out,” I promise him. “My sleep shouldn’t be your concern.”

“It is when I need you at the top of your game and you’re too tired to function properly.” He pauses for a second. “Which is why I think the best solution is for you to move in here,” he finishes, making my mouth hang open in that gaping fish look that everyone knows is so attractive.

“Sorry, I must have misheard you, because it sounds like you just asked me to move in with you.” And while the idea of living at the Gray Mansion may hold some appeal – I’ve seen the size of the tub in one of the guest baths – it’s wholly ridiculous.

“What’s the matter, Izzy? A guy’s never asked you to move in with him before?” Lennox gives me an assessing look and I’m starting to have a really hard time telling whether he’s joking or not.

To my horror I find myself answering him truthfully. “I’ve never been with anyone long enough for things to get to that point, I guess.” And up to now, I’ve been okay with that. I have close friends and a job I love, my life is pretty full.

“That...surprises me,” he says slowly, his dark eyes never leaving mine.

Yet again, I wish I had some idea what’s going on in that head of his, because his expression is completely inscrutable.

“It shouldn’t,” I joke, “you’ve had first-hand experience of my sparkling personality.

Most guys I’ve dated aren’t all that interested in a woman who speaks her mind, and I have a brain to mouth filter malfunction so...

” I gesture helplessly, smiling in spite of myself as Lennox lets out a husky laugh.

“Well, you’ll be relieved to know I wasn’t suggesting we make this official.

I was thinking you could move into the pool-house.

It has an apartment above it. It's totally private so you'd be independent from the main house.

It makes sense if we're going to be working together 6 days a week that you're here on site instead of spending half your day on the road.

” He spreads his hands out in a kind of ‘take it or leave it’ move.

There's a lot of information there to digest, and it's hard to argue that what he's saying doesn't make sense.

If I was based here it would give me so much more free time to catch up with all the PhD work I've been falling behind on without having to choose between that and a decent night's sleep.

And yet, being here, on the property with Lennox 24/7 seems like a step too far.

It's a little too extreme. A little too intimate.

“I've never lived on site with a client before. I'm not sure it would be appropriate.” And oh my God how prissy do I sound right now? He's offered me a completely separate living space, not a cot in his bedroom...

Lennox stands up a little straighter at my words, the ease gone from his expression. “I wasn't hitting on you, Isabella.” There he goes again saying my name like I'm the most frustrating person he's ever met. “It's not like we'd be living together. ”

“I didn't mean...I wasn't saying -,” I fluster, knowing I've offended him when he was offering me help.



He holds his hand up, stopping whatever I was about to say and thank goodness because I have no idea what it was going to be.

“You don’t have to decide right now, just think about it.”

It’s less of a question and more of a command and although being ordered around doesn’t sit well with me, I nod in acquiescence because I’m starting to get used to Lennox’s high-handedness. And I know it’s coming from a good place.

“We should get back to work.” I motion towards the weight bench, without directly looking at Lennox because I need a minute to switch gears in my brain.

“Sure.” Lennox’s response is tight-lipped and I know I’ve disappointed him in some way, I’m just not sure exactly how.

Working with Lennox isn’t anything like being with any other client. Every interaction we have feels more intense, more charged. It leaves me hopped up on adrenaline before the inevitable crash. Then the process repeats.

Being around him is similar to how I’ve always imagined skydiving would feel, and Kiara’s warning comes back to me. Careful around him.

I shake my head, clearing that heavy thought away. A lot has happened and it’s not even noon. I look longingly at the coffee thermos poking out of my bag, even though I know it’s empty. I could really go for that bucket of caffeine Lennox mentioned earlier.

“And, Isabella?” Lennox interrupts my java dreams. My head lifts to meet his eyes and I’m struck all over again by how unfair it is for someone to be that damn attractive.

It's not natural. "For what it's worth, some men are very interested in a woman who speaks her mind.

" His tone is heavy with meaning, but I'm so caught off-guard it barely registers.

I'm grateful when he turns around to hit the weights without waiting for me to reply because it gives me a moment to remind myself to take a breath. A blush reddens my cheeks as I pick up my notes if only to have something to do with my hands.

Like always, I wonder if Lennox is making fun of me a little.

His expression is so damn inscrutable sometimes it's hard to tell the difference between teasing and truth.

It's easier to decide it's just friendly banter, that there's nothing hidden beneath his words, because that's what makes the most sense anyway.

After all, men like Lennox have their pick of women, there's no way he'd be interested in someone like me.

I file away the disappointment my logical thought has caused along with my pathetic teenage angst and get back to what I'm here for: to work.

### Chapter

### Eight

“Do you know how many trips this is going to take?” Kiara turns in a circle in my apartment, surveying the boxes I’ve packed up full of books and a few trinkets to make the pool-house a little more homely.

She eyes my suitcases, smirking before turning her gaze back to me.

“And how long exactly are you leaving for?”

So, I may have overpacked a little. “Just a couple months, or maybe less if it doesn’t work out,” I shrug. “I just like to have my things around me.”

Kiara raises an eyebrow at me. I shake my head, telling her with my expression that I can do without the psychological assessment of what that means. I don’t need her to tell me how many issues I have.

“I’m gonna miss you,” she admits, poking at a box with her sandaled foot. “I can’t just drop by when you’re all the way out in the Hamptons.”

“I know, I’m really gonna miss those baked goods deliveries,” I joke.

“But you’re the one who stuck this job on me.

” There’s a small pause as we kinda just let the silence linger between us.

“You don’t think I’m doing the wrong thing, do you?”

” I chew my bottom lip, voicing the anxiety which has kept me up most of the night before.

After another day of Lennox lobbying me over moving into his compound, it became harder and harder to come up with valid arguments. At face-value, it made complete sense, it was a win-win for all involved. So why do I still feel so damn nervous about it?

“I think you’re smart and I trust your decisions,” Kiara answers evasively. “As long as you’re doing it because it’s the best thing for you instead of for him .”

There’s no question who the him is she’s talking about. Kiara’s concern over me working with Lennox hasn’t eased since her croissant delivery a few days ago.

“ He is a big client. I thought you’d be happy I’m keeping him sweet.”

“You know he has a girlfriend,” Kiara drops breezily as if this were just a casual conversation.

“They broke up, didn’t they?” I frown over at her as she re-packs one of my boxes like the control freak she is.

Kiara shrugs. “Who knows? Celebrities are a breed all by themselves.”

“It doesn’t matter whether he’s single, married or has a harem full of women hidden in his mansion somewhere. I’m moving into the pool house, Ki, not the master suite.”

“Uh-huh.” It’s amazing how she manages to say so much in only two syllables.

“I know what I’m doing, Ki,” I tell her, projecting confidence, even though there’s a nagging voice in the back of my head asking if I really do.

Kiara gives me one last, searching look and then picks up one of the lighter – but still not light - boxes.

“Alright then, let’s start moving this stuff downstairs.”

I breathe a sigh of relief at her words, hoping to chart this conversation off as a win in my direction. We maneuver ourselves and as many boxes as we can into the tiny elevator, laughing as we’re plastered to the walls by so much cardboard.

Kiara looks up at the mountain we’ve created in this small space. “I never imagined I’d die from a box of anatomy books falling on top of me.”

” I roll my eyes. “The worst you’d get is a black eye.”

She narrows her eyes at me. “Remind me never to help you move again.”

We give each other shit for the rest of the ride and we’re both cackling by the time we all but fall out of the elevator and then out onto the street, dumping the boxes hard enough I’m grateful there’s nothing breakable inside.

Kiara looks down distastefully at the dust on her hands. Her dress is somehow still immaculate and yet I’m covered in it, but of course, she’s too busy brushing herself off to notice just how much I look like an actual pigsty.

“Looks like I got here just in time.” Something inside me stirs at the voice behind me. I can tell from Kiara’s expression she’s as shocked as I am as she tracks my gaze to the man standing on the curb outside my apartment.

“What are you doing here?” The confusion in my tone hangs on till the very last word.

Lennox Gray shrugs, his broad shoulders rolling and in that way that makes it hard not to stare.

“It’s moving day,” he says. Something happens between that time and now, but I only realize that I’m staring, probably with my mouth hanging open when Lennox’s voice cuts through the air again. “Cat got your tongue, buttercup?”

Buttercup? Seriously.

“My moving day, not yours,” I manage.

“That’s all semantics, but whatever. Whether you’re expecting me or not, it definitely looks like you two could use some help.

” My gaze is on him again. And again, it takes me a good minute to process his words.

It’s impossible to search his eyes to get a better read on him, but something tells me they’d be full of amusement.

I’m about to tell him thanks, but no, when Kiara interrupts.

“That’d be great!” She sounds so enthusiastic that it almost makes my skin crawl. Kiara is a lot of things. Kiara can be many things. Feisty. Independent. But never...whatever this is.

I send her a look, telling her in no uncertain terms she’s a complete traitor. She doesn’t care, her eyes are on Lennox and I can’t blame her. It’s one thing to see the

man on the screen or on billboards, but in the flesh he's a whole different ballgame.

"You must be Kiara," Lennox reaches past me to shake her hand, extending a courtesy he never offered me on the first day. "Declan told me you drive a hard bargain," he adds, smiling.

I wonder if he sees the moment my best friend melts under that smile.

"If you want the best, like Izzy here, you've gotta be prepared for the price tag," she fires back, making him chuckle.

"Okay, I get it now," Kiara mutters to me under her breath and I hope like hell Lennox hasn't heard her. Suddenly she seems much more amenable to the whole idea of me moving into Gray's place. Who knew that all it would take was a few minutes in Lennox's orbit?

"Here, let me take that," Lennox reaches forward for my suitcase.

"It's fine, you really don't have to." I try to pull it away from him and only succeed in hitting myself in the shin with it. "Mother-freakin'...Ouch!"

"See...I'm offering a hand, you really should take it. No way you're gonna carry all those boxes when we're here to help?" Lennox leans back against his Escalade, arms crossed in that faux casual way of his, which doesn't make him look any less dangerous.

"We?" I ask, dumbly.

Lennox nods his head toward a truck parked a little ways down.

A truck which looks suspiciously like the one he loaned me and which I thought was

safe in the parking garage of my building.

Kai hops out, dressed in his usual uniform of a t-shirt and board shorts, looking completely incongruous in the middle of New York City.

“Is there some hot guy convention in town today that I didn’t know about?” Kiara whispers in my ear. I would laugh if I weren’t still annoyed at being ambushed by Lennox.

“Iz-meister!” Kai envelops me in a hug like we’re old friends.

It didn’t take me long to figure out that he’s the touchy feely type.

I’m not complaining. After all, my friends know that I’m quite the hugger, too.

“So, cool you’re moving in, I’m getting hella bored just hanging out with this dude.

” Kai jerks his thumb at Lennox who just looks on with that impassive expression of his, but it feels like his eyes are zeroed in on me behind his designer aviators.

“Kai, you want to make yourself useful and grab a box instead of groping Isabella?” Lennox’s tone is light but there’s a sharpness to it that I don’t miss.

Kai on the other hand seems oblivious.

“Sure, Nox. You just stand there looking pretty while I do all the heavy lifting.”

Kai grabs the box closest to Kiara and stands up slowly, not making any secret of the appreciation in his gaze.

“You gonna introduce me to your friend, Iz?” he asks, as if Kiara weren’t right there



in front of him and I can tell how much that pisses her off.

Kiara cocks her head and gives him one of her signature withering stares. “Her friend can introduce herself.”

Kai steps towards Kiara like a planet being drawn to the sun and the two of them start to get acquainted. From the sound of it, it mostly involves exchanging playful insults, which leaves me with Mr. Tall Dark and Intense.

“How’d you even know where I live?” I frown up at him.

“You’re listed,” he states simply, and I instantly feel stupid for asking such an obvious question.

He takes the suitcase from my limp hold and starts piling boxes into the trunk of his car, while I watch.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were planning on coming all the way out here yesterday?” It’s not as if we hadn’t spent more or less the whole day together and he hadn’t had a chance to mention it.

“Because you would have told me not to. Seemed easier to save the argument until it was too late for you to do anything about it.” Lennox lifts another box with ease and stacks it.

This maddeningly calm and practical version of Lennox is really hard to fight with.

“You didn’t need to drive all the way out here,” I insist. “I’m sure you had better things to do with your Sunday. And I could’ve done this on my own.”

Lennox stops what he’s doing and looks at me appraisingly. It makes me aware of

how much of a mess I must seem with my clothes covered in dust, my hair pulled up in a makeshift bun high up on my head. It's not my best look. But I'm not exactly heading out to a ball.

He frowns down at me and I really wish he'd take those damn sunglasses off, so I'd have more of an idea of what he's thinking. "You don't like to let people help you, do you?"

"I was never a fan of the whole Cinderella, damsel-in-distress thing. I've never wanted anyone to save me," I shrug.

"Besides, I think my dad always wanted a boy, so he pretty much treated me like one. I learned how to take an engine apart and put it back together around the same time as I learned my times tables."

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And... I'm rambling again, just like I always do around Lennox. I try to remind myself that I'm not being paid for my conversation. We're not friends, despite him turning up to help me move suggesting differently. We work together, that's all. I shake my head.

"What?" He furrows his brow at me.

I frown right back at him. "What, what?"

"Normally I'm pretty good at reading people, but you're just...different," he says eventually.

"I guess," I shrug, marveling at how a description that would have upset me as a teenager is like water off a duck's back to me now.

"We're all squared away here, Nox." Kai, calling over from his truck, interrupts us. I see Kiara shaking her head in a mixture of confusion and amusement at the other man and I wonder what's gone on between them; it's a combination of emotions I'm all too familiar with now.

"Great, is that everything?" Lennox looks at me for confirmation and I nod. "Get in, you're riding with me."

I step towards his Escalade because his commanding tone makes you automatically do what he says like it's some kind of freaky superpower. And then I stop.

"No, it's fine. I can just go with Kai." I motion towards the much safer option behind

me.

“There’s no room in his truck,” Lennox responds without missing a beat.

His truck, which used to be my truck before it was re-appropriated, I think to myself, grouchily.

Lennox watches me, waiting for the next excuse. “I have to go and close up the apartment,” I come up with finally.

Lennox folds his arms, his words a challenge. “I’ll wait.”

Infuriating freaking man.

“I’ll lock up, Iz. Just go ahead and head on out. You don’t want to hit traffic.” Kiara ushers me on, sweetly and completely unhelpfully.

“That’s settled then.” Lennox, nods at my best friend. “Good to meet you, Kiara. You should come out to the house, sometime – it’s an open invitation.”

Damn charming so-and-so.

Kiara’s smile splits her face. “Thanks, I might just do that.”

Kai looks like all his Christmases may have just come at once and everyone seems super happy with the current situation apart from me who now has to spend almost two hours in a confined space with a man I’ve been trying to keep at a purely professional distance.

This is not how I planned for my day to go.

I wave at Kiara before rounding the hood to climb into the passenger seat. Before I even get to the door, Lennox is in front of me, pulling the damn thing open for me like a gentleman.

You can take the boy out of the South...

I take in the distance between the floor and the seat. Apparently, I'm going to have to jump again, like a child. "You have something against steps?"

Lennox chuckles deep in his throat and the sound makes me think things I really shouldn't be thinking about.

"Maybe I just like helping you up." Before I can formulate a response, his hands are on me and he's hoisting me up.

I hold my breath, and then I hold it some more as Lennox's hands stay on my waist for a few seconds too long, warming every part of me.

Finally, he catches up to himself, steps away and closes the door.

I sit there dumbly, watching him round the hood of the truck, trying to get my body temperature to drop from boiling.

But the sound of his voice and the flirtation in his words keep pounding in my ears.

Maybe he tells all the girls he lifts into his truck the same damn thing.

Maybe that's why he only drives such mountainous vehicles – so that he can use that line over and over and over again.

I shouldn't take it as him flirting, but for some reason it's hard to convince myself

that it was anything but.

I don't say anything as he slides into his seat and pulls out onto the road, his strong, capable hands on the wheel as he guides the car through traffic.

Instead, I stare straight ahead, stealing a few sidelong glances at him.

I shouldn't. I know that. But it's hard not to look at him when he's this close.

"You said your dad wanted a boy. Y'all tight?" he asks seemingly out of nowhere and I twist to face him.

So, he's been listening to my verbal diarrhea back there.

"You don't miss much, do you?"

"I pay attention. I'm not a complete meathead," he jokes but there's a hint of vulnerability behind his words, telling me it's a label he's heard more than once.

"I never thought you were," I assure him, because it's true.

Lennox may be famous for his athleticism, but there's no doubt he's smart and sharp as a damn tack.

"And – to answer your question – yeah, my dad and I are close. It was just the two of us for a long time, so we sort of depended on each other."

Lennox nods. "Must be nice." His expression grows a little wistful and I watch as his mouth parts to formulate his next question. "You talk about your dad, but you never mention your mom," he says eventually.

I look out of my window and away from him so he won't read anything in my expression.

"Nothing to tell. She never wanted to have a kid, bailed when I was still a baby. It's always just been me and my dad." My voice is cold, emotionless as if I don't care.

Lennox reaches over and takes hold of my hands that I've clenched together in my lap without realizing. "I'm sorry," he says. The words are really nothing more than a whisper and yet I hear them loud and clear, vibrating against my eardrums, reaching deep down inside of me.

I shake my head. "Don't be. If she didn't want to be around, her leaving was the best option for everyone."

I should pull my hands away from his grip, but his touch is comforting.

Instead of moving away, I find myself leaning into his embrace.

This might come back to bite me in the ass, but...

I don't really think far or hard enough to decide how hard that bite might be.

The truth of the matter is, this really isn't a conversation I should be having with someone I barely know and – worse – a client.

I never talk about this stuff. Never. Kiara is the only friend I've ever shared this stuff with.

And, even with her, I don't go too deep.

"What about you?" I deflect like a pro. "Your parents are still in Homewood, right?"

Lennox releases my hands in an instant, his fingers gripping the steering wheel like he's mad and I wonder what's got him so riled up all of a sudden.

"I forget sometimes that we must know a lot of the same people." He relaxes slightly, remembering who he's talking to, that I'm not some prying reporter.

That was a bit of a stretch, but the Grays were pretty much royalty in small town Alabama.

They were the picture of old Southern money; the big plantation house in the burbs, the good-looking family gracing the society pages of the newspapers, their son a star athlete, their daughter a beautiful debutante.

"More like, everyone knew you back home," I snort. But Lennox doesn't laugh, if anything he looks uncomfortable. "What?" I frown over at him.

"Nothing, it's just weird, you know more about me than I do about you. I'm not used to it."

"It's not that weird," I huff a laugh. "You're 'Lennox Gray'." I say his name in the style of a fight announcer, making him chuckle – a sound I definitely want to hear more often. "You were a big deal in high school. Everyone wanted to know all there was to know about you."

Lennox shakes his head. "High school was a long time ago."

"And thank the good Lord for that!" I proclaim.

Smiling over at me, Lennox still has that 'I don't really get you' look on his face. I guess I'm not much like the women he usually hangs around with. I have about as much in common with models and actresses as chalk does with cheese.



“I’m guessing it wasn’t a high point for you?” Lennox asks, as if he doesn’t already know the answer.

“Just about rock bottom,” I admit, looking out of the window again. And it was made worse by some people – like his bitch of an ex-girlfriend – but there’s no point in going back down that road. “But it made me stronger, I guess, gave me thicker skin.”

It was another one of the aphorisms my dad liked to impart over the dinner table. Either you win or you learn. And in high school I did a whole lot of learning.

“I know the feeling,” Lennox murmurs.

My eyes quickly swivel to him in surprise. “What are you talking about? You were the King of that town!” And with the way his athletic career is going, it’s only a matter of time before they erect a sign on the town boundaries stating ‘birthplace of Lennox Gray’.

“Not everything is as perfect as it looks from the outside,” he says slowly, as if he’s measuring his words.

I’m about to ask him what he means when a jogger jumps out of nowhere, forcing Lennox to slam his foot down on the break. At the same time, his arm shoots out in front of my chest to protect me from jerking forward.

The runner crosses the road, oblivious of her near-death experience as I take a deep breath to calm my racing heart.

“Are you okay?” He gives my shoulder a gentle shake to get my attention and I meet his eyes, nodding slowly. “I need you to say it, Isabella.” His teeth are gritted and the hand on my shoulder gets a little tighter. It’s only then that I notice the worry on his handsome features.

“I’m okay,” I assure him, taking the hand he’s put on my shoulder and squeezing it, reassuringly. “I’m fine.”

The concern on his face eases a little and he takes a deep breath, taking his sunglasses off and rubbing the bridge of his nose in a gesture I’m learning means he’s giving himself a moment to think.

Seconds tick by before he puts his hands back on the wheel and drives, but there’s clearly something on his mind. His reaction was more than just the shock of the moment or concern for me, there was something more going on there.

“How’s the knee?” I ask quietly. The sudden braking movement he was forced to make most certainly aggravated it.

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“No more than usual,” he answers, his tone broadcasting the fact he really doesn’t want to talk about it.

Okay then...

The temperature in the car moves down a few notches and it has nothing to do with the air conditioning.

Lennox’s death grip on the wheel tells me whatever’s going through his mind is far from good.

Even though it’s not my place, I feel bad that I can’t do anything to take that haunted look out of his eyes.

“You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to,” I tell him, looking straight ahead to avoid putting him on the spot. “But if you do, I’m here.”

Lennox is quiet for so long I’m fairly sure he’s ignoring my offer, but then – like he always seems to do – he surprises me.

“I lost someone in a car wreck. The idiot wrapped his damn car around a lamppost,” he admits. His words are so quiet that I almost have to strain to hear them. What’s hard to miss, however, is the emotion in his voice that damn near splits my heart in two.

I lay my hand on his, resting on the console between us as I turn to face him.

Unsurprisingly, Lennox doesn't look at me, but he does flip his hand over so we're palm to palm... holding hands.

"We hadn't known each other for long," he continues. "But he was important to me. When I lost him it hit me pretty hard."

"I'm so sorry, Nox. That must have been awful, I can't even imagine." My words don't feel like nearly enough.

No-one close to me has ever died. My mother walking out on us was as close to a loved-one's death as I've ever experienced and, still, it's a world away from what Lennox must have gone through, must still be going through because he's talking about actual death.

Not someone turning their back on him. Not someone choosing to walk away.

But death. Unplanned. Unprepared. Unexpected.

"I don't know what the right thing is to say," I tell him.

"You don't have to say anything, Isabella. This," he squeezes my hand, "this is more than enough."

He draws circles with his thumb along the soft skin of my wrist, making me shiver. There's such a feeling of rightness in being like this with him that it almost bowls me over.

"Was it," I clear my throat, trying to rid it of the huskiness that has suddenly taken over. "Was it recent?"

Lennox shakes his head. "Last week is five years since it happened. Right when I first

moved to New York. The person that died, he was one of the reasons I first came here.” His sentences are short, as if he’s struggling to get the words out.

“He was an alcoholic. Had been for most of his life. But he’d gotten sober, or at least that’s what he told me.

I guess he lied,” he sighs heavily. “The cops found a quart of whisky in the front seat. I guess it was lucky he didn’t hurt anyone else. ”

His response to the almost-accident we just had makes so much more sense now.

So does his exaggerated reaction to when I rear-ended him.

He’s got a whole heap of trauma wrapped up in car accidents.

The pieces all fall into place including Declan’s comment about ‘the anniversary’ having Lennox out of sorts that night.

He was talking about the car wreck, about Lennox’s friend’s death.

I wince, remembering how rude I was to him. “I’m sorry for calling you an asshole that night.”

Lennox looks at me out of the corner of his eye and smiles, giving my hand that he’s moved to his lap a squeeze.

“Don’t apologize, you were right. I was an asshole to you! I’m embarrassed at what a tool you must have thought I was.”

Now why did he have to go and remind me what a decent human being he is? It’s much easier to pretend I’m not drawn to a man when I can reason he’s a complete

douche. Unluckily for me, that doesn't seem to be the case with Lennox.

"You weren't that bad," I hazard. Lennox gives me a skeptical sidelong glance. "Okay, you totally were!"

He chuckles low in his throat, throwing his head back just a little. God, it's a sexy sound. And I really shouldn't be thinking about that, or how much I like the feel of his absent strokes on the back of my hand.

"Isabella?"

My name really shouldn't sound so good coming out of his mouth.

I snap out of the loaded direction my thoughts have taken. "Mmmm?"

"Thank you," he says softly, his eyes on the road.

"For what?"

"For listening. It's not something I get into with many people, but you're just damn easy to talk to." He shakes his head a little as if he doesn't understand why that would be.

"That's what friends are for," I shrug, uncomfortable with the praise. It's not as if I've done anything out of the ordinary.

"Is that what we are?" Lennox looks at me intently as we stop at a red light. "Friends?"

It's only been a few days, but...I think so.

Regardless of our rocky start, I guess I can honestly say that a friendship with Lennox feels like it could happen.

Plus, being friends is safe. Friends don't have to worry about the complications which come with attraction, with wondering what could be.

Being friends is simple. Being friends is enough.

"I'd like that," I nod. "And I'm guessing so would you."

You don't make a four hour drive to help your employee move, unless you want that employee to consider you a friend.

Just saying." Lennox doesn't laugh. Instead he keeps looking at me with that intense stare of his, something he shouldn't be able to pull off while still driving but there you go.

"No, you definitely don't do that just for an employee," Lennox agrees, and I can hear there's a silent 'but' at the end of that sentence. I wonder what it is he's not saying. Because I know there's a helluva lot I'm holding back.

"Friends then," Lennox says eventually.

"Friends," I agree and we lapse into silence again, but there's nothing uncomfortable about it this time. It's the kind of silence you have with someone you've known for a long time, one without any expectations, one that says their company is all you need.

Neither of us says anything for the rest of the drive, not until we pull up to the Gray Mansion and hop out of the truck. Neither of us mentions the fact that we've held hands all the way to the house.

Just like friends do.



### Chapter

### Nine

It's a back-and-forth we seem to have most days. He always wants to do more, and I always try to pull him back. Sometimes I wonder if he does it just to drive me crazy.

After our heart to heart in his truck, things have been so much better between us; the layer of formality, of standoffishness which was there before has disappeared.

"Let's start a little lighter, alright?"

I nod towards the smaller kettlebells - but Lennox's face takes on that mulish expression I've seen so often - in the gym, in the pool, on the table.

There's no doubt he's the most stubborn man I've ever met.

What I'm not sure about yet is if it's going to speed up or slow down his recovery.

He doesn't accept any sign of weakness from himself, doesn't give himself any let-up.

It makes me wonder what it must be like to be so hard on yourself all the time.

"Uh-oh," Kai mutters under his breath to me. "You know Nox doesn't really like being told what to do, right?"

I give him a withering look, doing my best impression of Kiara. I've seen her turn men into shadows of themselves with it, but my form must be off because Kai just gives me a noncommittal shrug, slinging his arm around me jovially.

"Helpful input, Kai, as always." Lennox narrows his eyes at his friend, looking pointedly at my shoulder where Kai's hand now rests.

I guess Lennox doesn't like his friends fraternizing with the help. I roll my eyes, shrugging his arm off.

Kai's taken to hanging out in the gym during some of our sessions when he needs a time-out from software programming, which I've learned is his day-job.

Turns out the dude I'd labelled as a surfer-wannabe has a pretty big brain to go with his infectious sense of humor.

He's fun to hang out with and has helped to temper Lennox's volcanic energy more times than I even care to count.

"Why don't you worry less about what Kai's doing and more about what you need to do? We've got a lot to get through and we don't have all day." I plant my hands on my hips, my expression telling him I'm not playing around.

I've learned Lennox responds to the stick better than the carrot, which is just as well as he's so damn infuriating sometimes that I wish I had a stick to beat him with.

"Yes ma'am." Lennox lets his Alabama drawl out in all its glory, picking up the heavy weights while he watches me for a reaction.

I don't say anything because if I did, he'd just take it as a challenge and do what he wants anyway.

He starts the exercise, the thick muscles of his thighs bulging and I whip my eyes up to his face before that thought goes any further.

It's only a few seconds before the inevitable happens. "Argh, shit!" Lennox curses in frustration, letting the weights in his hand drop before dropping himself down on the bench.

I'm by his side in seconds, noting the pain in his face. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah, it just fucking gave out on me again." He frowns down at his injured knee and I can feel the irritation rolling off of him. "And if you say 'I told you so'..." he warns me.

I shake my head. "I wouldn't ever say that, not when you're in pain."

"I'm fine." He tries to wave me away as if I'm fussing over nothing, twisting away from me like a kid trying to avoid eating his broccoli.

"You're not fine, if you were, you wouldn't have almost dropped a weight on your damn foot!" I huff at him. Frustrating man. "So just sit still and let me do what I do."

We glower at each other, neither of us backing down. To make the point, I poke him gently in a tender spot in his knee and he actually growls at me.

"Grumpy damn bear," I grumble at him as I move him back into a position I can work with, kneeling in front of him.

He mutters something under his breath. Something I don't catch. It's just as well because I don't assume it was all that complimentary.

I start massaging the area around his knee to get the blood flowing and to release

some of the tension in the muscle.

“How’s that feel?” I ask after a couple of minutes.

Lennox makes a groan of contentment, the sound sending warmth straight to the apex of my thighs.

Instinctively, I look up at him to find his face is only inches away from mine.

He’s staring at me, his dark eyes almost black as awareness pulses between us.

We’re close, close enough that if I were to lean down, if I were to lift my head just a tiny little bit more, our mouths would be in the perfect position.

The thought of kissing him makes me lick my lips and Lennox’s eyes heat as if he can read what I’m thinking.

“You know, I’ve been feeling a little sore in my shoulder.” Kai’s interruption is beyond welcome and I use the opportunity to jump to my feet, breaking the magnetic moment between Lennox and me.

Friends, Izzy. Friends, remember?

Kai grimaces melodramatically as he rotates his arm. “Maybe you could give it a look once you’re done with Nox?” He grins amorously at me, making me laugh and dispelling some of the sexual tension in the room.

I know Kai isn’t interested in me like that.

His flirtatious banter is nothing but harmless fun.

The person he keeps asking about is Kiara.

Last night he complained that he gave her his number, but she didn't call.

Apparently, Kai isn't a man used to doing the chasing and Kiara has never been a woman to fall at any man's feet, so what happens next should be entertaining.

"Are you here for any reason other than to flirt with Isabella, Kai?" Lennox raises an eyebrow at his friend, his voice doing that growly thing I feel all the way down to my core.

"Courting Isabella is obviously my primary motivation, but I'm also here to annoy the shit outta you, Nox." His completely reasonable tone makes me chuckle before I swallow it when I see Lennox's glower.

"Well, I'd say that's mission accomplished." Lennox huffs good-naturedly before taking the hand Kai's offered to help him up.

"I've always been an overachiever." Kai shrugs and winks at me.

I roll my eyes at him before focusing on Lennox again. He takes a few tentative steps, breathing an internal sigh of relief when he doesn't seem to be in any pain.

"Alright, walk it off and let's go back to just using your bodyweight. We're not going to put any additional stress on your knee today." For once, he doesn't argue with me. "Wow, Nox, it's almost like you're starting to trust the fact that I know what I'm doing!" I needle him.

"Ha fucking ha. You and Kai are definitely spending way too much damn time together," he responds dryly. But there's a bit of an edge to his words, as if he really doesn't like Kai and me hanging out, as if it bothers him for some reason.

Before I can call him out on it, Declan marches into the gym in yet another pair of expensive loafers, with an announcement I don't need. "Remember, you need to wrap up here earlier today."

"It's Saturday," I remind him. "Nox has the afternoon off." As do I, I add silently, and while I would love nothing better than to crash for a couple of hours, there's a pile of PhD work I need to wade through. I'm behind as fuck.

"Great, that gives us time to prep for tonight, Nox." Declan turns to the man in question who just frowns.

"Tonight?"

"Please don't tell me you've forgotten the banquet for your biggest damn sponsor!" Declan's eyes pop out of his head cartoonishly. He looks like he might blow a blood vessel.

Lennox unscrews the top of his water bottle and chugs half of its contents down. "Breathe, Dec, before you pass out."

My mouth goes dry watching him because he looks like something out of a Diet Coke commercial. No-one should make drinking water look that damn good.

Lennox's eyes flick to mine as if he knows exactly what I'm thinking and I feel myself flush. God, how many times is he going to catch me staring at him without thinking I'm a total bunny boiler?

"So, who're you going with?" Dec taps his expensively-loafered foot on the gym floor, looking like a pissed-off Ken doll.

Lennox sends his agent an unimpressed look, gesturing towards his injured knee. "It

may come as a surprise, Dec, but I've had bigger things to think about than a date for a damn dinner."

Declan is unmoved by Lennox's icy tone. By now it's probably water off of a duck's back.

"You need a date, Nox." The foot tapping becomes more insistent.

Lennox shrugs his massive shoulders, crossing his arms over his broad chest. "It's not a big deal. I'll just go stag."

Declan and Kai exchange a look, both their expressions signaling what a terrible idea that is.

I probably shouldn't be eavesdropping, but Dec's the one who interrupted my session, not the other way around, so I let my inquiring mind get the best of me. Besides, it's not like anyone's said this is a private conversation.

"You hate these things, Nox. I know that, I get it. But it's good PR and it's good for your relationship with the sponsor.

If you go stag, we both know what'll happen.

" Declan gives Lennox a look and the bigger man shifts uncomfortably on his feet like a kid who's been reminded of that time he promised to be good and then drew on the living room walls in permanent marker.

"What'll happen?" I ask, blurting my curiosity out.

All eyes swivel to me and Declan gives me an assessing once-over as if he'd forgotten I was even there. After a few seconds, his put-out expression clears, and he

smiles at me like I've solved a problem for him.

“Nox has a tendency to go AWOL at things like this,” Kai supplies when it's evident no-one else will. “He slips out the back door as soon as he possibly can. A date helps keep him in one place long enough for him to talk to all the bigwigs who want a piece of him.”

“Sounds like fun,” I snort, giving Lennox a sympathetic glance. For someone who hates crowds, being at one of those events must be a nightmare.



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“Just one of the perks of the job,” Lennox confirms sardonically, smiling as we share a glance and I feel my pulse kick up a notch in response.

“I could check if Honey’s back from her shoot,” Declan suggests breezily.

I note Kai’s expression of distaste, his mouth twisting like he’s just sucked on a lemon.

“Please God, no,” he groans.

It takes me a hot minute, but I hit on the ‘Honey’ in question - Lennox’s ex-girlfriend and model du jour.

I remember seeing them grace the front pages of tabloids, two impossibly perfect-looking people together.

I’ve never been a jealous person, but the thought of the two of them together feels suspiciously like that emotion.

“We’re not bringing Honey in,” Lennox states in an ‘end of conversation’ kind of way and I feel myself relax slightly.

Silence descends and I wonder who’s going to break the stalemate first. Turns out Declan likes dead air about as much as I do.

“What about Izzy?”

My head snaps up at his question.

“What about her?” Lennox asks warily at the same time as I ask, “What about me?”

“You need a date, she’s a woman.” Declan makes the two points as if they amount to some kind of inevitable mathematical equation.

Lennox looks at me and I wonder if he’s just as uncomfortable with this suggestion as I am, especially after the heavy, silent but meaningful interaction we had before Kai’s interruption earlier. I’m definitely fully ready for him to shoot Declan’s idea down.

“How would you feel about it?” His eyes scan my face.

“Obviously I’d pay you for your time.” Aaaaand...

he must be shitting me. Pay for my time?

The words pound in my head, flitting through all the education I’ve gone through just to stand here and listen to Lennox throw words at me that only hookers are keen on catching.

I hear a noise behind me that sounds like Kai slapping his hand against his head in despair and I’m tempted to mirror the action. How is it possible to be so kind and intelligent one minute and so damn tone-deaf the next?

“I’m a physical therapist, not an escort,” I reply icily, fighting the flame I feel rising to my cheeks.

Lennox’s eyes widen at my words. “That wasn’t what I meant.” He takes a step towards me and I take one back. Not because I’m afraid of him, but because I’m so damn irritated that I don’t want to be anywhere near him.

“Oh yeah? So you didn’t just offer to pay me to be your arm candy for the night? Because that’s sure as hell what it sounded like.” I grit my teeth, as though that will help to bite back the emotions that war for a spot on my face.

“We’ll leave you two alone...” Dec motions towards Kai and starts edging towards the door.

“No, stay.” Lennox barks the words out like an order.

“We’re nearly done here, and I wouldn’t want Isabella to feel uncomfortable being in a room alone with me if she thinks I’m the kind of man who would proposition her like that.

” Lennox’s jaw is so damn rigid it’s a wonder he doesn’t break any teeth.

He turns toward me with lethal grace. “I meant it as a business arrangement, Isabella.” God, I hate it when he says my name like that, like we’re complete strangers.

“You would be doing me a favor and I wouldn’t expect you - or anyone – to put yourself out like that for me without compensation.

It seemed like a good plan as we’re working together anyway.

You’ve already signed the non-disclosure agreement and there’s no romantic interest between us so there’s no danger of either of us getting the wrong idea.

And I have enough respect for you to know that your time isn’t worth nothing.

We’d be going as friends.” That last word is steeped with meaning.

I struggle to meet his intense gaze as he lets that final pearl drop and I ignore the flash of disappointment I feel.

Don't be stupid, Izzy .

"Oh, right, that makes sense," I say, somehow managing to leave all the venom out of my tone.

Maybe it does make sense to someone like Lennox.

Because maybe Lennox lives in a world where his dates have to sign confidentiality agreements, and his friends need to be paid to have dinner with him, that is.

"There we have it," Declan claps his hands together. "Sounds like an excellent arrangement."

"Shut-up, Dec." Lennox and Kai chorus as one.

Lennox stands in front of me, his gaze heavy on me. "Isabella hasn't said yes yet."

The 'yet' irks me a little, as if he's confident of my answer.

"I don't have anything to wear to something like this," I answer lamely, as if my wardrobe were the only thing holding me back.

"I'll have something couriered over for you.

" Dec doesn't glance up from the phone he's frantically typing into.

"What size -?" He stops himself as I raise an eyebrow telling him he really doesn't want to finish that sentence.

“Don’t worry, I’ll figure it out.” He looks at me uneasily, as if he thinks I might bite him, before going back to his furious typing.

“You still haven’t said yes.” Lennox looks down at me.

He’s moved even closer and this time I haven’t moved away.

His body is blocking mine, so the men behind him can’t see me or what he’s doing, and I wonder if he’s created this wall of privacy intentionally.

It doesn’t take long for him to approach me, albeit silently.

He hooks his index finger underneath my chin and gently lifts it up, so I’m forced to look at him, not that it’s usually a hardship. In that moment, it’s hard to remember all the reasons why agreeing to this fake date is such a terrible idea.

Looking down at me, his eyes intent on mine as if we’re the only two people in the room, it feels as if he has a direct line to the most deep-seeded parts of me, parts that are warming under his touch.

“Yes,” I say huskily, the word pulled out of me by the same power drawing my body closer towards his.

Absently, I notice the satisfaction on his face.

Lennox lets his finger drop from my chin, whispering along my neck, a barely-there touch, but one that leaves a searing line of fire behind it.

He steps away, breaking the spell he’s put on me and I’m suddenly able to take a breath.

I watch him walk back to his friends, discussing plans for the evening while I'm trying to persuade my legs to hold me upright.

I wonder what the hell it is that I've just agreed to.

And where the anger was that I felt when he offered to pay me money to hang off his arm just a couple minutes before...

### Chapter

### Ten

“Holy shit, Iz you look fucking amazing!”

When Kiara uses that many curse words in one sentence, it’s usually either a very good or a very bad sign. This time, I know for sure it’s the former.

I turn in front of the mirror, my hands skimming over the silky material which fits me as if it were made for me.

“How the hell did he find a shade that matches your eyes in less than a day?” Kiara turns her head to one side and then the other on my phone screen. “Whoever his personal shopper is, they’re my guru.”

Mine too , I think to myself as I stare at my reflection in the mirror.

The floor-length dress is held up by two thin spaghetti straps that plunge down to a seriously low neckline, making it impossible to hide my substantial boobs, something I’ve been used to doing since high school when I developed early.

“Don’t you think it’s a little...revealing?” I gesture towards my cleavage. It’s not indecent, but it’s definitely more than I’m used to showing.

“I’m not even gonna answer that, Iz. We both know you look elegant as fuck and sexy as all shit! Own it!” The swearing is definitely a good sign, I decide.

I let out a deep breath, imagining I'm pushing out all my nerves with that sigh. It works for at least 30 seconds and then I take a step in the gold high-heeled sandals. Saying I'm unsteady on my feet is an understatement.

"Are you sure about this, Iz?" The nervousness in Kiara's voice is so foreign it almost doesn't sound like her.

"The heels?" I frown down at my feet. "I'll be fine once I get used to them."

Kiara waves her hand in front of the camera, dismissively.

"I'm not talking about the shoes, Iz. I'm talking about the guy."

And there's only one guy she could be talking about. There's only one guy who's been on my mind all day.

"It's just business, Ki." I shrug, repeating the words Lennox had said to me. "I thought you'd be pleased, there'll be a lot of agents and managers there to talk to and get the word out about the clinic. It's a good marketing opportunity for us, right?"

It makes a lot of sense, I reason as I talk. It's a shame it's only half the reason I'm going, or maybe not even half, I admit to myself.

"You been practicing that long?" Kiara asks with a smile and an arched eyebrow.

"A little while," I shrug in her direction.

"Well, you're not wrong, it's PR we couldn't buy, so I'm not going to tell you not to go. I'm just going to repeat what I said before. Be careful, okay?" Kiara has her big sister voice on and – growing up an only child – it sorta makes me love her even more.



“I will,” I promise her, although a voice in the back of my head tells me it might already be a little late for that.

“Then, knock ‘em dead, babe.” Kiara blows me a kiss, which I return and then I’m just staring at a black screen.

I give myself one final once-over in the mirror, making sure I don’t have lipstick on my teeth, before grabbing the gold purse that arrived with the rest of my outfit.

I’m grateful for the short walk to the main house.

Not only does it give me a chance to practice walking in my vertiginous heels, but it gives me time to at least try to settle some of the butterflies in my stomach.

I’d like to pretend it’s just the idea of being at a big-deal event like tonight’s which is causing the nerves, and that I’m good enough at lying to myself to buy it.

But the truth is that the person I’m going with is just as responsible for the queasiness I’m experiencing.

“Fake it ‘til you make it,” I repeat my mantra to myself, pulling my shoulders back and shaking my hair out before walking into the house.

I follow the sounds of conversation through to the main entrance which itself is bigger than my whole apartment.

“Have you pulled the plug on that crap yet?” Kai asks, in an unfamiliarly serious tone.

“Trying to, but Dec’s asked me to think it over.” Lennox rubs the back of his neck in frustration. “He thinks they’ll come back at us with some breach of contract bullshit,

if we pull out now.”

“And what do you think?” Kai asks.

“I think I’d rather stick a fucking fork in my eye than go through with it, but it’s not just about me, Kai.

If she decides to sue, and knowing her, she damn well could, that’s gonna affect everyone who works for me.

People will lose their jobs because of me and I don’t want that shit on my conscience.”

Kai shakes his head in annoyance. “You’re not responsible for everyone, Nox. I know you think a lot of yourself but you’re not the freakin’ Almighty! You don’t have to protect everyone all the damn time.”

I feel a little awkward walking in on what seems like a private conversation and I’m about to try to retreat when Kai looks around Lennox’s broad form. His eyes widen at me for a moment before he breaks out into a toothy smile as if I haven’t caught them in the middle of an argument.

“There she is!”

Lennox turns around smoothly and my throat goes dry at the sight of him all dressed up. If I thought he was irresistible in gym-wear, in the charcoal-grey suit he’s wearing, he’s positively devastating.

“Hi.” I swallow, forcing myself to say something as they both look at me. “If you guys are in the middle of something, I can come back.” I take a step back, not wanting to intrude on whatever’s got them both so tense.

“You look...” Lennox stares at me, more than just a little slack-jawed.

“You look like you’re gonna have to be beating every dude in that place off with a stick, Iz-meister!

” Kai interrupts, looking me up and down with frank admiration.

“But we all know you only have space in your heart for one man.” He waggles his eyebrows at me, making me giggle and I wish he was coming too.

Having Kai there would make this thing a whole lot less daunting.

One on one time with Lennox while we’re working is one thing, but this is a whole new ballgame.

“We should make a move,” Lennox rumbles, setting off butterflies in my stomach.

“Sure.” I try to smile the nerves away, but one look at Lennox in all his suited glory makes that impossible.

As we step out of the front door, I’m half-expecting to see a limo, but instead I’m faced with a classic sportscar. My eyebrows lift all the way up to my hairline and I realize how much my dad would love to see this thing of beauty.

I circle the car, taking in its mint condition, right down to the black paintjob that’s been waxed to a high shine.

“69 Mustang?” I ask, thinking out loud. I don’t miss Lennox’s surprised glance as he nods, confirming my guess.

I shrug. “Daughter of a mechanic, remember? Just because I can’t drive for crap,

doesn't mean I can't appreciate a classic. This our ride?" I ask, not above feeling excited at the prospect of driving around in one of these rare babies.

"Figured it was a good occasion to break out the batmobile." Lennox winks at me, making me laugh. "Besides, it's easier for you to get in and out of than the truck."

I'm touched by his thoughtfulness, but I'd be lying if I said I wasn't also a little disappointed not to need Lennox to help me into this car.

"After you." Lennox opens the passenger side door for me, and I manage to slide in without making a fool of myself, which I count as an early win.

As Lennox hops into the driver seat I'm immediately aware of how much smaller the Mustang is than the truck. He seems to fill up the space with his body, with his presence, with the cedar smokiness of his scent. God, I could get drunk off that smell.

Our seats are close together, making it impossible for me to ignore him and even more impossible to avoid thinking about how good he looks in his suit.

I'm grateful Lennox receives a call almost as soon as we start the short drive to the resort where the party's being held. I look out of the window, watching the world go by while I try to calm my heart. It's beating so loudly it's impossible for Lennox not to hear it.

"Sorry about that," he clicks off his earpiece, ending the call as we stop in front of the valet of the resort.

"It's fine." I wave his concern away, my nerves already re-focusing on the task at hand; walking into a room full of powerful people, none of whom I know.

Lennox puts his hand on my lower back, guiding me gently through the lobby,

smiling and nodding at people as we go. “You’ll be fine,” he says. “I’ll be right next to you the whole time.”

His words and his hand on me both comfort and stir something deep inside of me. I smile up at him gratefully and my heart catches in my throat as our eyes meet and, for a moment, I forget everything apart from the man in front of me and the way he’s looking at me.

“Breathe, Isabella,” he says quietly, and I snap out of staring at him like a psycho.

Please let me get through this without making an idiot out of myself .

I take a deep breath as instructed and feel less like I might be about to pass out. That is until we walk into the function room and it feels like every eye in the place swivels towards us.

“Is this what it’s like?” I ask under my breath.

“What what’s like?” I hear the frown in his voice, but I’m too busy looking at the floor so I don’t trip down the damn stairs to see it.

“Being you, having everyone stare at you as soon as you walk into a room,” I explain.

Lennox chuckles, a low, warm sound that makes the deepest parts of me vibrate with awareness.

“You think they’re looking at me ?” His hand on my waist tightens automatically as I misstep, stopping me from toppling over. I send him a grateful glance, my heart stopping in my chest at the way he’s watching me. “They’re looking at you, Isabella. You’re stunning.”

My face warms at his compliment, but I'm saved from having to respond by a group of people welcoming us to the event.

"Lennox, great to see you."

"We can't wait for the season to start."

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There's lots of handshaking, manly backslapping and a mass of introductions.

I make a mental note of who I need to speak to as Lennox expertly circulates us through the room, introducing me as his 'friend'.

He makes sure to include me in conversations and tees me up with a few big-hitters to talk about the clinic, without me even needing to ask.

For all his talk of not liking crowds or stuffy events like this, he's a natural; charming, polite, engaging.

He's been by my side the whole time. Enough for me to get comfortable and a tad disappointed when he's finally pulled away by his sponsor for a private discussion, but he still looks at me to make sure I'm alright.

He's been attentive to me all evening, checking on me and basically being the perfect date.

"I'm fine, you go ahead," I nod my assurance as he comes over to check on me. "I'm good here, just gonna take a little breather."

It's been a whirlwind and I could use a few minutes alone, off to the side of the room.

"You're sure?" He frowns down at me as if he doesn't quite believe me.

I give him my best confident smile. "Go. You've got work to do."

His eyes lock on mine for the longest time, like he's trying to read me. Whatever he sees there must satisfy him because slowly, reluctantly, he lets the other men lead him away.

I push away the bereft feeling that rears its head as soon as he leaves.

I've spent my entire life being independent, certain I don't need a man, unwilling to let myself fall for anyone after I saw the mess love left my father in when my mother walked out.

But one night with Lennox is starting to make me question all of those things I thought I knew.

One fake night, I remind myself. This isn't a date, it's a business arrangement and I need to keep that in the forefront of my mind at all times, because it's too damn easy to mistake Lennox's attentiveness and care as more than courtesy.

If anything, it's a stark reminder that he's a decent guy despite my first impressions of him.

Everything I've seen from that point on has driven that certainty home.

Grabbing a glass of champagne from a passing waiter, I take a deep gulp as if I can swallow down the completely inappropriate thoughts I'm having about Lennox as easily as the bubbles.

"And who is this lovely creature?" A man old enough to be my father looks over me lasciviously and I instantly feel like I need a shower.

His suit jacket is straining over a sizable gut and his face bears the unmistakable markers of someone who really likes his drink.



If I were anywhere else, I'd make a beeline for the nearest exit. But this is a formal gathering and not only do I not want to piss any big hitters off, I also can't just leave without Lennox. That leaves me with no choice but to woman up. I figure I'll be able to slip away at some point.

"I'm Izzy." I hold my hand out for him to shake out of politeness rather than any desire to actually touch this man.

Instead of shaking my hand, he lifts it to his mouth and delivers a damp kiss to the back of it like a poor imitation of some European count.

"Well, Izzy, you are a sight to behold, and all on your own." He smiles, showing too many teeth as he talks directly to my cleavage.

I snatch my hand back from his grasp, resisting the urge to wipe off the remnants of his kiss.

"I'm just waiting for my friend." I send him a tight smile, trying to ignore the way he's edging towards me like a predator sizing up its prey.

I look around for Lennox, hoping he's nearly done with his meeting, but I don't see him anywhere and this guy is starting to get a little too handsy for my liking.

"I have a suite upstairs," the man cuts into my thoughts.

"That's nice for you," I mutter, distractedly, still searching the crowd.

"It could be very nice for you ." Mr. I Can't Stop Looking At Your Boobs makes his meaning very clear and I'm about one second away from throwing the remnants of my champagne in his face.

“Izzy, there you are!” A man I don’t recognize appears by my side, smiling broadly in a way that reminds me of Kai. He sends me a deliberate wink and I breathe an internal sigh of relief.

“Here I am!” I reply brightly, playing along.

I smile at the newcomer gratefully, glad it’s not just me and Mr. I Can’t Stop Looking At Your Boobs on our own anymore.

“Sorry, Roger, I just need to steal Izzy for one moment.” The newcomer takes my elbow gently and leads me away before the older man has a chance to object.

“Thank you for that,” I tell him. My hand is shaking and I’m not sure if it’s out of anger or shock at what just happened. Did ‘Roger’ really just proposition me, touch me, like he could buy me?

He shrugs. “You looked like you needed a hand.”

“I did,” I admit, glad I didn’t have to resort to causing a scene.

I look over at the man who formulated my escape. I don’t recognize him as someone I’ve been introduced to yet. He looks to be about ten years older than me, so in his early thirties. He has the clean cut good looks that make him look like he belongs on a yacht or at the tennis club.

I stop when we’re far enough away from Mr. Boob. “You have me at a bit of a disadvantage. You know my name but I don’t know yours.”

“Jack,” he shakes my hand. “Jack Harris, and I only know you by reputation.”

Oh God, not another man who thinks I’m up for sale tonight.

He must see something in my expression because he hurries on.

“I’m Lennox’s surgeon, Doctor Jack Harris” he explains quickly. “Declan told me you were working with Lennox and I have to admit, I looked you up.” His cheeks redden his skin which is almost as pale as mine and his embarrassment is endearing.

“Oh, you did?” I cock my head at him, smiling at his openness.

“Purely from a professional standpoint, of course,” he adds.

“Of course,” I echo. “I would’ve done the same and, to be honest, I should have already been in touch with you to talk about Nox’s treatment plan, but things have been pretty busy since I started working for him.”

“Well, I’d be more than happy to discuss whatever you need, perhaps over dinner?”

” He asks the question so smoothly it takes me a moment to realize he’s asking me out.

“If you don’t think Lennox would mind?” he adds, his meaning clear.

This time, he’s asking if I’m here as Lennox’s therapist and friend, or as something more.

“That would be nice,” I smile. ”And I’m sure Nox wouldn’t mind,” I say firmly, confirming without saying it, that we’re ‘just friends’ as Lennox and I have both agreed.

I’m not sure why I feel a little guilty when I hand Jack my business card with my cell number on it. I haven’t done anything wrong, so why the hell does it feel like I have?

“Great!” Jack smiles broadly. We chat about our jobs and I discover he’s easy to talk to. After a few minutes I’ve all but forgotten how desperate I was to leave after Roger the Pervert’s innuendos.

I can feel the moment when the relaxed atmosphere between us changes and I know without turning around that Lennox is at my back. It’s as if my body is completely attuned to his presence and I’m not sure when that happened.

“Sorry I left you alone for so long, Isabella.” His deep voice vibrates through me and the way his tongue dances over my name causes goosebumps to raise over my skin.

This isn’t the moment I’m going to allow my body to betray me, so I keep my crap together, even as Lennox inches close enough that his arm brushes against my bare skin.

“I wasn’t alone, Jack’s been keeping me company,” I say and nod towards the man in question.

I don’t miss the tick of annoyance in his jaw at my words. It makes me wonder what the hell has gotten into him.

Jack frowns a little as he takes in Lennox’s closeness to me and the tension amongst our little threesome thickens up.

“Isabella and I have some work to discuss, Doc.” Lennox doesn’t finish his sentence with ‘so would you kindly fuck off,’ but he may as well have from the dismissiveness in his tone.

“It was great to meet you, Jack.” I smile so hard my cheeks hurt, trying to make up for Lennox’s rudeness.

Jack's eyes flick between the two of us as if he's trying to figure out what the hell just happened. Needless to say, he's not the only one.

"You too, Izzy. We'll talk soon." He taps his chest pocket where I saw him place my card, smiling brightly. His face sobers as he nods goodbye to the giant by my side. "Lennox, always good to see you."

"Doc." Lennox's voice is more of a growl as he watches the other man weave through the crowd.

I wait until Jack's out of sight and out of earshot before turning to Lennox, wrapping all the faux courage I can muster around my voice. "What bug's crawled up your ass?"

"Is that the charm you used on the doc to make him look at you like he's hearing a damn choir singing in the background?"

"Jack was just being friendly."

"Oh, so it's 'Jack', is it?" There's a definite edge in his voice. I stare at Lennox, mouth practically agape. But Lennox wouldn't know that because his eyes are still stuck on Jack, staring daggers into the man. If looks could kill, the good doctor would be DOA.

"Would you quit it? You sound like a jealous boyfriend!" I regret the word 'boyfriend' almost as soon as it's out of my mouth, but isn't that the story of my life?

No filter on the words that leave my lips.

To cover up my faux pas, I take another glass of champagne from a passing waiter.

I'm a complete lightweight, but whatever. I need something to do with my hands.

When I hazard to look back at Lennox, I find he's staring at me. Really staring at me. Like I'm a bug under a broken microscope.

"Dance with me." It's an order, not a request. It's also completely out of left field, which I'm learning is very typical of him.

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“I don’t really dance,” I say. It’s not a lie.

Plus, even if I did, ballroom dancing in front of a whole heap of strangers, in shoes I’m only slowly learning to walk in, sounds like a very terrible idea.

“Have you talked to everyone you need to?” I ask, hoping to have parked the dancing conversation for now.

Lennox takes a sip of his water. “Pretty much. Why? You ready to leave?”

“Not if you’re not,” I assure him, although after being in these heels for the last few hours the idea of getting home and taking them off is so damn tempting. “This is your gig, so you just let me know when you’re done.”

Lennox nods in agreement. I feel his eyes on me, but I don’t return his gaze. Instead, I try my best to look at anything other than the man in front of me.

“I’ll tell you what, you dance with me and we can go.”

I blink up at him in surprise. “I thought we covered this with the whole ‘I don’t dance’ thing.”

He shrugs, casually. “You want to go and I’m pretty sure those shoes, although they look damn sexy, are probably murdering your feet. The sooner you dance with me, the sooner we can get gone.”

“You’re bribing me?”

“You can call it what you want, but that’s the deal.

One dance, Isabella. What are you scared of?

” He smiles wickedly as if he knows exactly what I’m frightened of.

Him. And then he holds his hand out for me to take.

I only hesitate for a second before knocking back the last glug of champagne from my glass.

I figure I’m going to need all the Dutch courage I can get if we’re really doing this.

I lay my hand in his, my skin instantly tingling at his touch. “Alright, Nox, you win.”

“I always do,” he grins and it would sound arrogant if it weren’t also true.

Still, I roll my eyes, hard. “Asshat,” I mutter under my breath, smiling in satisfaction as he missteps because he’s laughing at my curse.

“There’s that charm again,” he drips sarcasm as he leads me to the center of the busy dancefloor and I try to ignore the eyes following us. Being with Lennox is a lot like being a bug under a microscope and I wonder how he lives with the scrutiny of strangers day after day.

He puts his hand on my waist and leans in close to my ear. “I know it goes against your nature, but let me lead.”

I laugh breathily as his lips quirk into a smile. I like this playful, lighthearted version of Lennox. And I definitely like it a lot more than the version of him that was silently boiling over the sight of me and Jack.



I relax into his hold, for once in my life doing as instructed without putting up a fight.

I let Lennox move us around the room. It's a slow dance, but even so, it's clear Lennox knows what he's doing.

Of course he would, he's as good at this as he is at everything else.

It would be easy to feel intimidated around someone so damned competent, but I find it inspiring.

It's not hard to see why so many people, athletes or not, look up to him.

"See, it's not as bad as you thought it would be, right?" Lennox whispers the words against my hair, his breath on my skin making me shiver.

Bad really isn't the word I'd use to describe what it feels like to dance with Lennox. To be this close to him, to be held by him, to taste his scent on my tongue every time we speak.

"There's plenty of time for me to step on your toes," I joke, trying to cover up the way he affects me. Truth be told, I'm not sure I'm fooling anyone, least of all him.

We dance, his hand on my waist, mine resting on his shoulder, and it feels so nerve-wrackingly natural.

There's a sense of rightness about the moment as I raise my eyes up to his to find he's watching me and only me.

Normally I'd squirm, duck my head under the heaviness of his gaze, but this time I don't.

I let him look and I look right back at him with an openness I haven't dared to before.

"You look beautiful tonight, Isabella." The appreciation in his eyes tells me he's not just humoring me, although it would be easier to deal with if he were.

"Declan did a good job with the dress," I shrug off the compliment. "And you clean up pretty well yourself."

"Thanks, but I can't wait to take off this damn straightjacket." As he rolls his impressive shoulders, my brain goes to thinking about him taking off his suit and the body I already know he's hiding underneath it.

"I know what you mean, this dress is beautiful, but beauty doesn't always feel the way it looks." It's a throwaway comment, but Lennox stills against me, stopping us in the middle of the song.

I look up at him in confusion to find him staring down at me with an impenetrable expression. The only suggestion of what he's thinking comes from the storminess in his dark eyes, gluing me to the spot.

"Let's get out of here," he says, his breathing a little heavy and I find myself nodding because apparently I've lost the ability to speak.

We make our escape out of the back exit that leads to the resort's gardens. Out here, it's just the two of us and the quiet of the night.

Lennox gives me a sidelong glance. "What're you thinking?"

Something I wouldn't tell you in a hundred years, I think to myself.

"Ask me no questions, I'll tell you no lies," I say instead. It earns me a chuckle from

Lennox.

Lennox shakes his head at me, suddenly going preternaturally still as if he's let something slip. "You always did keep everyone on their toes, even the teachers."

I frown up at him. "Always?" I scoff. "For the whole week you've known me?"

"It hasn't been just a week. We had a class together at school."

I stop walking, blinking up at him. "You remember that?" He has made it seem as if the only thing he remembers about me is the nickname his bully of a girlfriend gave me.

Lennox gently tucks a stray strand of hair behind my ear. "Those green eyes are kinda hard to forget," he shrugs. "I used to wonder what you'd look like without the glasses. Now I know."

"The joy of contacts," I mumble, caught off-guard by what Lennox has just admitted.

We're almost at the valet counter now, but my mind is overflowing with questions I need answered. To complete the snafu, my new least-favorite person on the planet makes an unwelcome comeback.

"There you are," Roger The Pervert appears out of nowhere as if he's been lying in wait for me this whole time.

It would have been funny if the situation weren't so damn creepy.

"You aren't leaving without me, are you?"

"He plants a hand possessively on my arm and before I have time to react, it's

wrenched away.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” Lennox is in front of me in an instant, shoving the other man in the chest hard enough to have him stumbling backwards. He’s only saved from falling over by a large plant pot, pushing him upright.

“No need to get upset, Lennox. Izzy and I are old friends.” He winks grossly at me, slurring his words so much it’s hard to understand him.

He’s way more than drunk , he barreled right past that exit and opting for completely tanked instead.

Roger sways unsteadily in front of Lennox who looks like he’s about to go postal.

“Once you’re done with her,” Roger The Pervert points to me, in case we weren’t sure who he was talking about, “send her over to me. I’ll pay a pretty penny for an ass like that. ”

Seriously, this man really needs to stop talking.

“What the fuck did you just say?” Lennox takes a murderous step towards the older man, his fingers flexing like he wants to pull his head from his rotund body.

“He’s drunk, Nox, just let it go.” I put my hand on his arm, trying to calm him down, but he doesn’t even seem to register my words.

“She’s not for sale, and you’re going to fucking apologize right now.”

“I’m – I’m sorry, Lennox,” Roger holds his hands up, his red, booze-tinted face suddenly turning pale.

“Not to me, asshole. To her.”

Roger looks at me in confusion, apparently still not getting the message I’m not someone you pay by the hour. But his belated sense of self-preservation has him saying the words. “I’m sorry?”

Lennox takes another threatening step forward. “Say it like you fucking mean it, or I swear to God!”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, okay?” Roger holds his hands up in a surrender, looking appropriately terrified, as if the penny has finally dropped.

“If you keep making a scene, Nox, I swear I will not forgive you,” I warn him, noticing the way some curious heads are already starting to turn towards us. I’m mindful of the fact that anything Lennox does is front page tabloid fodder.

He doesn’t even look at me, he’s still staring the other man down. If this were a cartoon there’d be actual steam coming out of his ears.

I grab hold of Lennox’s hand, trying to pull him along, but it’s like trying to move a damn mountain. “Can we just get out of here, Nox? Please?”

Desperately, I tug on his hand again and something in my voice has him following me. I’m not naïve enough to think I’d be able to move him if he wasn’t willing.

Lennox stops by the valet guy. “Get security to escort that asshole back to his damn room. Alone.” His tone doesn’t leave any room for negotiation and the kid nods at him, hurriedly, picking up the internal resort phone presumably to do exactly that.

Lennox doesn’t speak until we’re in the car and then I wish he hadn’t. The anger in his voice is barely contained.

“You wanna tell me what the fuck that was all about?”

I think about telling him it isn't any of his business, but I don't want to get into an argument with him when he's all but vibrating with rage.

“When you were having your meeting, he cornered me and seemed to think I was the kind of company you pay for,” and doesn't that sound smart?

“It was nothing – Jack saw I was in need of a wingman and helped out. I totally forgot about it until he ambushed us,” I lie, trying to play it down, anything that'll calm him.

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“Jack, fucking Jack!” Lennox growls. There’s so much tension in his body, I don’t call him out on his outburst. He looks as if any little thing might just send him over the edge and I have no intention of being on the receiving end of a Lennox-style explosion.

We’re silent on the ride home, Lennox doing his white-knuckled grip thing on the steering wheel, his anger a living thing, taking up space in the close quarters of the car.

When we finally roll to a stop, my hand is already on the door, ready to get the hell out of dodge when Lennox stops me with a sigh.

“I’ve always had a skeezy feeling about Roger but...” He shakes his head. “You should’ve told me about him,” he says eventually, his tone a little more controlled than it had been back at the resort.

“Why? What would you have done if I had? Punched him?” I quirk an eyebrow at him.

“Probably.” Lennox shrugs as if it’s a completely reasonable answer.

“And someone would have filmed it. And then you’d have a whole lot of explaining to do and probably a lawsuit to deal with. For what?”

“For you,” he rumbles at me. “For treating you like that.”

“It’s not the first time some guy has thought his money gives him a free pass at me. I

could have handled him myself,” I tell him, grateful, but also a little frustrated that he thinks I’m some damsel in distress.

“It shouldn’t have been fucking Jack who came to your rescue.

It should have been me,” he shouts angrily, guiltily.

And that’s when it hits me. He’s not mad at me, he’s mad at himself for not being there when I needed him.

He’s mad that Jack was the one who showed up for me.

But it’s not really about Jack. It could have been anyone else and Lennox would still be as pissed because he didn’t get there first.

His reaction is both dangerously endearing and frustrating beyond belief.

“First of all, don’t put what that pervert did on yourself, what he said isn’t your fault. And secondly, I didn’t need freakin’ rescuing, I’m not some fragile damn flower!” I yell back at him, staring him down.

“You don’t think I know that? You’re the woman who doesn’t want help from anyone!” He leans in closer as he barks at me. “You’re the most infuriating woman I’ve ever fucking met!”

Ouch.

“Well, I’m sorry I’m such a damn pain to be around! Next time you need a date, you can find someone more pleasing to your palate!” I move to open the door, but Lennox is faster, reaching across me and laying his warm hand over mine on the handle.



In the blink of an eye, our chests are flush against each other and our faces only inches away.

“I don’t want someone else. I want you .” His lips trace my ear, the action combined with his words, making me melt all the way away.

His dark eyes are filled with naked fire. There’s no hiding what he’s going to do and – even though I know I should – I don’t stop him. Wrong as it might be, I want this just as much as he does.

Lennox trails his mouth from my ear down, moving along my jawline.

Every move he makes causes my heart to beat like a jackhammer against my chest and when he reaches my lips that jackhammer just goes out of control.

Lennox pauses for what feels like an eternity, his breath the only thing touching me right now.

But even that is enough to light me on fire.

“Nox,” his name comes out as a needy moan, a voice I don’t even recognize as my own.

Lennox slides right past the nervousness and focuses on the need in me, brushing his lips against mine as though testing the feeling.

As light of a brush as it was, it doesn’t stop the heat between us from going straight to the ‘V’ between my thighs.

Only a second later, as though deciding that I feel just right against his lips, Lennox devours me.

His mouth opens, prying my own open with it.

His tongue searches and finds just what it's looking for as I respond hungrily, biting his full bottom lip, smiling against his mouth as he groans.

A moment later, he's pulling me across the console so I'm steady in his lap, unable to avoid the hard ridge in his pants.

I wriggle against him, grinding against his erection, wanting to feel him, wanting the clothes between us, off.

His hands are running through my hair as I fist his shirt in my fingers, bringing his head down to mine.

I'm plastered against his front, straining to get even closer while his hands begin to trail my neck, making me shiver.

And then lower, moving further down my back to my ass, rocking me against him, showing me how turned on he is.

Knowing it's because of me is the headiest of feelings in the whole damn world.

I can't think of anything other than his mouth on mine, of how good he feels against me, of how much I want him. The tightness of my dress makes it hard for me to straddle him, to have him where I want him, where my body so desperately needs him.

God, I'm so ready for him and all we've done is kiss. I'm so lost in him it's as if nothing exists outside of this moment, outside of how much I crave him.

With a fistful of my hair, he pulls back, earning access to my neck.

Without a breath or a pause, Lennox kisses his way down to the sensitive spot at the base of my throat, scraping his teeth there and making me squirm against him.

When he groans, all the hairs on my arm stand tall and then even taller when he pulls me flush against him, his hands ripping my dress apart in the process.

The sound causes a window to open back into reality.

And oh my God...what the hell am I doing?

What the hell are we doing?

I blink down at him through the haze of lust that's surrounded me. His hair is disheveled, his tie loose and there are scratch marks around his neck which I realize with horror must be mine. He looks so damn sexy and just as surprised by what's just happened as I am.

I register the hardness underneath me and my blush could most likely be seen from space. I push away from his chest, but Lennox's hands on my hips tighten for a second, before releasing me. I sheepishly wriggle my way back over the console, trying to shimmy my dress down as I go.

God, could this be any more awkward?

"That was...fuck!" Lennox rakes his fingers through his hair, leaning his head back against the seat.

I touch my swollen lips, knowing if I lick them, I'll taste him and the thought doesn't do anything for the brain-bending arousal still coursing through me.

Lennox turns to me and I meet his eyes even though I'd rather be looking anywhere

but at him right now.

“Isabella, I’m sorry. I know you’ve had a couple of drinks and I shouldn’t have-”

His words are like an ice bucket tipped on my overheated body. The only thing more embarrassing than throwing yourself at your boss, is having him think it’s because you’re drunk.

My face flames. “Let’s just pretend it didn’t happen,” I say.

Great plan, although I’m not sure how I’m ever going to forget the kiss to end all kisses, not to mention everything else. I’d suspected Lennox was well-endowed but after tonight there’s no doubt in my mind.

“Izzy, I don’t want you to feel weird about this,” Lennox starts, and it’s not lost on me that he’s used my nickname, as if we’ve crossed some invisible line and we’re now firmly on the other side of it.

“It doesn’t have to be a big deal, it was just, you know – heat of the moment and all that.

We work together and I don’t want to jeopardize that...

I don’t want you to get caught up in something that...

” He sighs as though struggling to put his best word forward.

“I don’t want you to think this is something that it’s not.

You’re nice to play with and this was...mmm...

But honestly, Izzy - ” His voice is ice cold, a world away from the passionate man who was kissing me as if his life depended on it.

And the insults, I didn't know it was possible to pack so many into one stuttering monologue.

It's as though every negative thought he has about me is fighting for a position on his tongue.

“It's fine,” I wave away whatever else he's about to say because I don't want to hear any more about how he knows it should never have happened; how he knows it was a mistake. How I'm a good plaything or just not worth it or whatever the hell else he was going to say. “I'll see you on Monday.”

Thank Christ tomorrow's Sunday and my day off.

Sure, because a whole day away from him is going to magically solve this impossible situation.

I wrench the door open without another word, in a hurry to get out. He calls my name as I almost face-plant onto the driveway, but I don't look back, moving as fast as I can away from him like my fuzzy brain is telling me to, while my body is trying to get me to stay.

It was hard enough not thinking about Lennox when I had to rely on my imagination, but now that I actually know what it's like to kiss him, to feel him against me, now every touch is branded in my brain almost as deeply as his rejection.

### Chapter

### Eleven

I take one last look in the mirror, again questioning if the shirt Kiara's picked out shows a little too much cleavage for a first date, if you could even call this a date. It's just dinner, I tell myself, two colleagues getting to know each other.

Women pay for tits like yours, babe. Own them.

Kiara's assertion makes me chuckle and – as she's no doubt intended – makes me feel a little more confident.

My eyes skate towards the evening dress hanging on the back of the door, knowing I'm going to have to explain to Declan how the designer dress I was only borrowing got ripped and I'm so not looking forward to that conversation.

The events of the night before start replaying in my mind; the feeling of Lennox's hand on my lower back, the shiver of anticipation just before he kissed me and then the kiss.

That kiss. My fingertips go to my lips as if I can still feel the ghost of his mouth against mine.

It was a kiss I felt throughout my whole body.

It's just as well I remember it as well as I do, because it's never going to happen

again. It can't.

I give myself a little shake – I shouldn't be thinking about him when I'm going out with someone else. In fact, I shouldn't be daydreaming about him at all.

If only it were that easy...

"Izzy, you are hopeless," I sigh out loud, wondering for the hundredth time why the only guy I've ever felt this way about also happens to be the guy I very much can't have.

Grabbing my purse, I search around for my phone, but it's not in its usual place on the nightstand. After minutes of searching it's clear it's not anywhere in the apartment.

Dammit, where the hell is it?

I run through where I've been today and my stomach drops as I realize where I've left it.

Kai and I spent most of the day watching old episodes of Buffy the Vampire Slayer back to back while I nursed my hangover.

Of course, I only agreed to hang out once Kai confirmed that Lennox was going to be out all day.

In the late afternoon, when I heard his car pull up outside I rushed back to the pool-house, thankful to Kai for not commenting on my shady escape.

My eyes go to the main house, trying not to think about the person inside I'm trying desperately to avoid. I entertain the idea of just leaving my phone behind, but my

responsible brain reminds me I'm about to go on a date with a guy I don't really know. Safety first, Izzy .

But what about the danger Lennox presents? Surely that should factor into the equation.

Sighing deeply, I check the time and know it's now or never if I don't want to be late.

Letting myself in through the empty kitchen, I virtually tiptoe down the hall to where I last saw my phone, breathing out a sigh of relief when I see Kai is still alone in the TV room. I don't think I could handle a run-in with Lennox right now. Scratch that, I know it for a fact.

Kai lets out a low whistle, giving me a nod of approval. "Looking good, Iz-meister. But you didn't need to get all dressed up for me. I like you just the way you are." He taps me on my nose like I'm a puppy and I swat his hand away, laughing.

"Good to know, Kai."

"But seriously, where are you going all dressed up and if it's with that hot boss of yours can I come too?" Kai waggles his eyebrows and I can't help but laugh.

"I'm going out and, no, not with Kiara, but if you want to ask her out, it's not like you don't know where she works," I point out.

Kai's eyebrows move up so high on his forehead they almost fall off. "She's single?"

"At the moment," I confirm, smiling as his eyes light up like a kid at Christmas.

Kai sidles up beside me, looking the picture of innocence. "You know, you could just give me her number?"



“Nuh-uh, no way.” I shake my head. “I don’t just hand out my best friend’s number to random guys.”

He winces as though my words really and truly pack a punch. “Random? You wound me, Izzy.”

I watch him, nonplussed by his Oscar-worthy performance. “If you want her number, Kai, you’re gonna have to grow a pair and ask her for it.”

“Fair point, well made.” He nods and slaps me on the back like I’m one of the guys. The gesture, regardless of how simple and how natural it is, makes me smile. His easy friendship is a welcome relief from the intensity of whatever the hell has been going on between Lennox and me.

“So where are you going looking all fine and shit?” Kai repeats his question, watching me as I retrieve my phone from the shelf where I left it.

“I, my inquisitive friend, have an actual date.” Something I wish I was a little more excited about.

“With a real-life man?” Kai raises his eyebrows in shock. “I thought you ‘didn’t date’,” he adds, using air quotes for emphasis.

“I don’t date people I work with,” I correct him. “There’s a difference.”

Kai follows me out of the room, keeping pace with me as I head towards the front door at speed. “Does Nox know?”

“Does Nox know what?” The deep voice makes me stop in my tracks.

Ah, hell no. I curse under my breath. I was so close to a clean getaway.

Lifting my eyes, slowly, I see Lennox standing between me and outside, between me and safety away from this conversation.

He looks achingly good in his low-ride jeans and black shirt.

Seeing him standing there is giving me flashbacks of last night, how he pulled me against his body, how I ran my fingers up and down his strong chest.

Stop, Izzy. Stop right there. No daydreaming about the man who apologized for the best kiss of your entire life, as if it were something he was ashamed of.

“Does Nox know he doesn’t get to butt in on everyone’s life?” I look right at him, seeing the way his jaw ticks in annoyance.

Kai looks between the two of us, sensing the tension ratcheting up a few notches. He starts to ease his way backwards, slowly like you would if faced with a charging elephant.

“I – um, forgot I left...the couch...on fire.” He turns on his heel and heads in the opposite direction, like he can’t get away fast enough.

I have an idea to do the same, seeing the thunderous expression on Lennox’s face, but I also know the worst thing you can do is turn your back on an angry elephant, or bear, or Lennox. Better to face the danger head on.

“You’ve been avoiding me.” It’s not a question, it’s an accusation.

“Don’t flatter yourself,” I mutter under my breath, but the look on his face tells me he’s heard me.

“I came to find you earlier – but you’d run back to the pool house.”

My chin lifts even as my face burns at little. Busted . “I didn’t run. I needed to get ready.” I shrug.

“You have a date?” Lennox’s lip curls in distaste as he looks me up and down with his self-important stare.

“Yes, I have a date!” I throw my hands up in frustration. “Why is that so hard for everyone to believe?”

I may not look like a Victoria Secret model, but I don’t think I look like I live under a bridge either!

“If you’re fishing for compliments, Isabella, it doesn’t suit you.

I already told you last night that you’re a beautiful woman.

” Lennox manages to make even that sound like an insult and I flush, hating that he’s made me feel like a little kid again.

There’s also the fact that we’re back to the formality of ‘Isabella’.

His eyes dip to my exposed cleavage and I blush even harder, resisting the urge to pull my top all the way over my damn head.

“Who’s the lucky guy?” he asks, and his sarcasm is like a punch to the gut.

The tidbits of anger it fills me with is what propels me to answer, even though I know I shouldn’t, I shouldn’t even be entertaining this ridiculous back and forth.

“Dr- Harris.” I say the name like a challenge and watch with no small amount of satisfaction as Lennox’s expression turns furious right before he explodes.

“ My fucking surgeon, that’s who you’re going out with?” He looks at me in shock.  
“When?”

“When what?” I shout right back at him, because loud appears to be the only volume level he understands.

Lennox advances on me like a lion stalking his prey but I stand my ground. “When did he fucking ask you out?”

“Last night,” I admit, managing to keep the trembling out of my voice as he gets dangerously close.

“Last night,” he repeats, his voice dropping. “Last night when you were with me. Last night when I was kissing the fucking color out of your lips. Last night when you were grinding on me like....”

“Last night when I was your fake plus one,” I cut in. “Last night when you made it very clear that I was a business arrangement and definitely not a date. So what the hell has you all bent out of shape now?”

I stare at him. Really, stare at him. The anger I see boiling in his eyes is...

God, it’s infuriating. And I know. I know that it may be a little bad form to go out with someone the day after kissing someone else, but when Jack messaged me, it seemed a good antidote to the Lennox problem.

A friendly face, someone easy to talk to, no expectations and no complications.

I didn’t do it to piss Lennox off. I did it because...

because I needed to get Lennox out of my damn head.

“You haven’t asked why I was coming to find you,” Lennox notes, leaning casually against the door I need to get through.

His tone now, is different. It’s as if someone reached into him and flicked a switch, disconnecting all the wires that were firing within him.

To be honest, it makes me a little dizzy – the way he can go from high to low in a frickin millisecond.

“That’s because you were too busy being an ass,” I smile at him, saccharine sweet.

“Cute,” he snarks right back. “I wanted to let you know you don’t have to worry about Roger anymore. He’s done.”

“What do you mean...done?” I ask, fearful of what Lennox might have done giving the murderous look in his eyes last night.

“I mean he’s out of a job,” Lennox clarifies. “I told my sponsor I wouldn’t work with them if they didn’t step up and get rid of a guy they must have known was a complete fucking pervert. So, they let him go. And I’m going to make damn sure everyone in the industry knows exactly why.”

“That’s...that’s...” I’m overwhelmed that Lennox would have gone to bat for me like that and I feel a swell of pride in him for being the kind of man who would do that.

It’s a whole different ballgame he played than the one in high school where he wasn’t loud enough or active enough in dispelling his ex-girlfriend’s insults.

“Thank you,” I finish and it’s not lost on me just how inadequate my gratitude feels.

“Did you think I would just let it slide?” Lennox’s eyes flash with remembered anger.

“I wouldn’t let a guy treat any woman like that, least of all you.”

When the last word falls he stands up straight and takes a step towards me, locking me in his gaze.

I feel pulled towards him even as my rational brain knows I shouldn’t.

But before we can get closer than comfort allows, I hear a car pull up outside and I thank the good Lord my date’s a punctual man because this is getting worse by the second.

“That’s Jack,” I tell Lennox, stepping around him to get to the door.

“You shouldn’t go out with him,” he growls, wrapping a hand around my arm, stopping me.

“Oh yeah, and why’s that?” I ask, whirling on. “Since when do you get to decide what I should and shouldn’t do? You’re my client, Lennox, not my damn keeper!”

“Is that all I am, your client?” His dark eyes flash and then he’s coming closer and closer until his lips are pressed against mine and oxygen becomes of short supply.

I’d call it a kiss, but it’s more of an owning, a possessing than it is anything else.

It’s a claiming and it’s so damn hot it makes everything inside of me clench with need.

Without even realizing it, I’ve curled my fingers into the front of his shirt, bringing him closer to me, but it’s still not enough.

Lennox makes a growly sound deep in his throat, his hands squeezing my hips and I

want more, so much more.

But you can't have it with him, Izzy.

A thread of logic manages to make its way through the haze of lust I'm feeling, reminding me that this isn't right. I shouldn't be in a lip-lock with this man, no matter how damn good it feels.

It takes all the willpower I can summon to break the kiss, pushing myself away from him. He keeps hold of my waist for a split-second before letting his arms drop to his sides. I ignore the warm imprint I still feel as if his hands were still on me.

"You don't get to just do that." I glower at him, my lips still vibrating from the power of his kiss.

I'm cheered to see the way his chest heaves as if he's just run a marathon, like he's just as affected by the kiss as I am.

"You should stay. You know you want to."

What I want right now is to wipe that self-satisfied smirk off his face but that would require getting closer to him than is safe at the moment because as much as I'm pissed beyond belief, all my body seems to want to do is jump him.

"What the hell is wrong with you?"

"You might be out with him, but you'll be thinking about me. I've made sure of it."

I shake my head at the ego of the man. I'm grateful for what Lennox did; getting rid of Roger the Pervert and making sure he doesn't treat other women the way he did me, but that doesn't cancel out how he's acting right now.

“You’re an arrogant asshole, you know that?”

“Tell me I’m wrong,” he challenges, his dark eyes virtually black.

“I don’t have to tell you a damn thing.” I step around him, opening the door and hot-footing it out of there before one of us says or does something that can’t be smoothed over in the morning. We still have to work together somehow for Christ’s sake.

I’m proud I don’t trip on my heels as I stalk away from the house and away from Lennox. I would never be able to live it down if I fell flat on my face.

I should feel a sense of elation at having – for once – said exactly what I meant to, exactly when I wanted to.

I should feel excited about going on a real date – the first in a long time.

But I don’t feel any of those things, all I feel is disappointment; I’m disappointed and angry and confused as all hell.



### Chapter

### Twelve

I'm on a perfectly nice date, with a perfectly nice man. So, what in tarnation is wrong with me?

Lennox's voice has been ringing in my ears all evening.

You might be out with him, but you'll be thinking about me.

Damn him, why did he have to be right?

I've been distracted all night and I'm sure the good doctor must have noticed.

I'm thankful he's keeping up the conversation more or less single-handedly as he drives me back to the Gray mansion and I direct him round the back rather than to the main door.

Coming face to face with Lennox again tonight is the very last thing on my list of crappy ways for this day to end.

"You really didn't have to walk me to my door," I tell Jack, secretly wishing he'd just said goodnight back at the car.

"I wanted to," he smiles as I dig around in my purse for the keys to the pool-house. "I like spending time with you, Izzy. I'd very much like to see you again."

His voice drops and I know with a sixth sense I've developed over years of dating he's going to lean in for a kiss and I really don't want him to.

What the hell is the matter with me? If we'd met two weeks ago, this guy would have landed right in the 'keeper' column. He ticks literally all the boxes: smart, good-looking, funny, kind and he's a freakin' surgeon. He's literally the jackpot of dating.

So why don't I feel anything at all?

He makes his move and at the last moment I tilt my head so he kisses the corner of my mouth rather than landing a direct hit.

"Look, Jack -," I start, ready to tell him I think we should just be friends, when I take a step back and right into a solid wall. Except this one isn't made of brick, it's all muscle.

I don't have to turn around to see who it is, I already know, even though I can't really believe it.

"Lennox." My date nods his head in acknowledgement, his frown showing he's as confused as I am as to why Lennox is outside my living quarters when supposedly we just work together.

"Doc," Lennox drawls, putting his hand proprietarily on my shoulder, pulling me a little closer against his warm body.

I try to step away from him, to shake him off, but he holds me tight against him, ignoring the elbow I'm digging into his side.

"You kids have fun?" Lennox asks, patronizingly and I glare up at him with all the fury I'm feeling. He doesn't even bat an eye.

“Yes, thanks,” I say through gritted teeth, smiling an apology at Jack who looks at me questioningly as he watches the interaction between the two of us.

“What’re you doing here, Nox? It’s my day off, remember?”

” I inject a false brightness into my voice because I have no intention of having the argument I feel brewing inside of me in front of Jack.

“This isn’t a business visit.” He looks down at me with that arrogant expression and I want to punch him right in his handsome, smug face.

I don’t believe this. He’s just made my date think there’s something going on between us.

“Well, I guess that explains why you were so distracted tonight,” Jack frowns, clearly put-out and I can’t blame him for it either.

“I’m sorry, Jack, but this really isn’t what it looks like.” I cringe at how cliché that sounds, but I don’t want him to think I’m trying to date two men at the same time.

“It’s fine, I should get going anyway,” he shakes his head, already backing away. “I’ve got an early surgery in the morning.”

Sure, you do, I think to myself. But I know a brush-off when I hear one. Not that I can blame him.

“Thanks, Jack. I really did have fun tonight,” I tell him, hoping he doesn’t think the worst of me, even though I know by this point it’s probably a lost cause.

“See ya round, Doc.” Lennox sends the man a mock-salute, his smug smile unwavering as Jack walks away.

I wait until he's out of earshot before I stamp on Lennox's foot, hard, making him grunt in pain. I use his surprise to shove his arm off my shoulder and then I turn around to him, poking my finger in his hard chest. "What the hell is your problem?"

He looks down at me, his eyes going to my finger as if I'm entertaining him. "What're you talking about?"

"You just made Jack, my date, think that we're sleeping together!" I mimic his deep tones. "Why would you sabotage my night like that? Friends don't pull that kind of crap on each other."

"We're not friends, Isabella."

"Yeah, no shit!"

"Did he kiss you?"

I look up at him, not believing he'd have the gall to ask me that question.

I shake my head at him. "As if it's any of your damn business!"

"I'd say after what happened last night, it is my business." His eyes flare with anger and I'm sure mine have the same fire. He may be pissed, but I'm already on my way to livid.

"Last night wasn't a big deal, just like you said," I remind him, my voice bitter. I turn away from him to unlock the door. I'm done with this conversation. "Go home, Nox. I don't want to talk to you right now."

I can almost hear his eyebrow quirk up at that.

“I am home. I live here, remember?”

Smart ass.

“Yeah but you don’t live here .” I motion towards ‘my’ pool house, coming to a decision I should have seen coming from a mile away. “And I won’t be living here past tonight either,” I add.

Lennox puts his foot against the doorframe, stopping me from closing it on his surprised face. “What?”

“What ‘what’?” I glare at him. “You think after everything that’s happened, I’m going to stay here?”

Thanks, but no, I don’t need you thinking you can run my life because I work for you and because of one, stupid,” mind-blowing, “kiss.” And, thinking about it, I’m not sure I can even work with him anymore, not when things are this tense between us.

Not when touching him will feel less professional and more... personal.

Lennox’s expression is more than surprised, he’s downright shocked. “You can’t leave. Not because of me.”

“Just watch me,” I tell him, sighing when I can’t slam the door to make my point. “Now, can you get your foot out of the way, Nox, before I break it?” I ask the question sweetly.

Nox plants his hand on the doorframe all but forcing his way inside. “We’re not done, talking.”

“Oh, we really are,” I disagree.

“I’m not leaving until I say what I came here to say, Isabella.” He fills my doorway, telling me with his body he has no intention of going anywhere.

“Fine, then we’ll talk outside.” The pool house is too small for Lennox; he has a habit of filling up every space he’s in, making it impossible to get the distance from him I need.

Lennox only takes a small step back, forcing me to squeeze past him. “Fine.”

Ass.

I cross my arms, defensively. “So what did you ruin my date to tell me?”

Lennox rubs his forehead, his expression pained. “I didn’t mean to ruin your date.”

Not even he believes that.

“Sure, you didn’t,” I snark, “you just wanted him to think you and I were together so he’d step off! You did everything but pee on me in a bid to mark your damn territory!”

He mirrors my crossed arms, not looking even a little bit sorry.

“Why?” I demand. “You didn’t want anyone else playing with your toy?” My voice wobbles, but I refuse to let it break.

“My toy?” Lennox looks convincingly aghast. “Is that how you think I see you?”

“I don’t know anymore, Nox.” I fist my hands, digging my nails into my palms to distract me from the emotion rising up inside of me.

I'm angry and frustrated and...so many other things I can't quite put a name to.

"I don't understand you, Lennox. One minute you seem to like me, respect me even and then last night..."

"I trail off not really knowing what I want to say.

Perhaps because there's too much to say.

"Last night I kissed you," he finishes, flatly, that emotionless voice of his coming into play again.

Angry Lennox is hard to deal with but, not as hard as this cold version of him I've seen in glimpses.

"Last night you kissed me like you wanted me and earlier tonight...you kissed me like you hated me." I swallow the hurt down. "So, yeah, you made me feel like a toy, like this is all some damn game to you."

"Izzy," his voice is tender and, in an instant, he's right in front of me, close enough to reach out and tuck my hair behind my ear.

"I never meant to make you think that. I fucking hate that I made you feel like that." He cups my face and – because I can't resist him even when I know I should – I lean into his touch. "I'm so fucking sorry."

He pulls me towards him and, when my arms snake around his waist, he crushes me against him, holding me as if he's never going to let me go and I don't think I want him to.

"If you didn't mean to, then why did you?"

I feel him relax against me as he strokes my hair soothingly, his chin propped on the top of my head, holding me close.

“Because when I’m around you, I don’t know what the fuck I’m doing half the time,” he sighs. “You make it impossible for me to think straight, so I say and do stupid shit.”

I blink, taken aback by his honesty and by what he’s saying. Slowly, I look up at him, needing to see his face when he answers my next question, because my heart is hanging in the balance and when he meets my eyes, it all but stops.

“You said last night wasn’t a big deal, heat of the moment.” I bite my lip, stalling but knowing I won’t get away from asking the question I really want to ask. “Did you mean it?” I add.

Lennox shakes his head, looking me dead in the eye. The heaviness I’ve been carrying around in my chest eases, bit by bit.

“I want you,” he growls.



## Page 27

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:52 am*

Tingles of awareness dance all the way through me when Lennox traces my lips with the pad of his thumb.

“I really want you,” he amends, his stare heating me from head to toe.

He pulls me closer, though there’s not much closer I need to get to feel the hardness against my abdomen.

“But it’s more than that, what I feel for you...

” He shakes his head as if he can’t find the words.

“I’m no good at relationships. I never have been, but you, something about you makes it easy to imagine something more and that is a big fucking deal for me. ”

I lick my lips and he watches the movement like a hawk.

“You need to stop looking at me like that, Isabella.” He draws out my name, making it sound so good. Too good.

My throat is raw with desire, but I still find the strength to answer. “Like what?”

“Like you’re thinking about everything you want me to do to you.” His voice is pure sex. Pure unfiltered sex.

“I, I don’t know what to say,” I tell him truthfully. I’m so keyed up, I don’t even know what to think. All I know is that being with Lennox like this feels too damn

right to be wrong.

He quirks an eyebrow at me, looking heartbreakingly handsome. “Are you done being pissed at me?”

“For now,” I joke.

“Good, because I’m going to kiss you now.”

“Please,” I breathe, full of anticipation, and I don’t know who moves first and I don’t care, because this...feels...too...good.

Lennox kisses the hell out of me, his hands dropping to my jeans-covered ass, my legs snaking around him until they’re wrapped tightly around his waist. With a slight flex of his muscles, he holds me up as if I don’t weigh anything at all.

Stepping forward, he traps me between his body and the wall.

I grind myself against him as he captures my mouth, nipping at my lips and possessing me with his tongue.

My hands go around his neck and into his hair as his kisses burn their way through me.

I’ve never been so hungry for anyone before, never understood that feeling of wanting to jump a guy’s bones as soon as I look at him.

That was before Lennox. Now I understand it all too well, and from the way he’s kissing me like I’m water and he’s dying of thirst, I think he might feel this same overwhelming need.

The force of it is frightening and in the back of my mind I wonder if something this intense can last and what I'll be left with when it inevitably burns out.

That's while I can still string thoughts together, which doesn't last for long.

Lennox's hands cover mine, and he spread-eagles my arms against the wall, pinning me there with the weight of his hips grinding against my most sensitive part.

"Nox," I plead, begging for more. Needing to feel him against me without the barriers of clothes between us.

"Inside." He growls his answer against my lips and I'm grateful he has the presence of mind to know we should move this indoors.

I have no intention of giving the neighbors or any snooping photographers a show.

"Hold on," Lennox instructs, his hands dropping to my ass, as I hook mine behind his neck and he carries me through the door, kicking it closed behind us.

His mouth doesn't leave mine. Not until he sets me down on the ground.

I can't say that I'm not grateful for his strong arms around me as my legs have apparently turned to jelly.

Our lips separate just long enough for Lennox to skim his hands up behind my back and pull my top off slowly.

I let it fall where it drops and then I'm on him, pushing his shirt up and over his head, exposing his beautiful, hard body.

And then I stop, for a moment, taking him in, committing his lines and his ridges to

memory.

“If you don’t stop looking at me like that, Izzy, this isn’t going to last anywhere near as long as I want it to.”

Lennox’s words have me snapping my head up to meet his eyes, which are burning as they look me over with the same intensity I’m staring at him. with

He reaches out to drag his finger down the column of my neck, one hand palming my breast as the other pulls me towards him so he can keep kissing me as if he never wants to stop.

“You’re so damn beautiful,” he says, rolling my nipple between his thumb and forefinger, sending another flood of wetness between my thighs.

Every touch of his sends shockwaves through my body, making me dizzy with desire.

I make an impatient noise as his mouth moves away from mine, his head dipping to my chest. He bites my nipple through my bra, making me moan as my hands go into his hair, urging him on. My breasts ache for his mouth, for him, for all of him.

“Too many clothes.” I manage to get the words out in breathless pants. He looks up at me from under his dark lowered lashes, his gaze predatory and so damn hot.

Slowly, he walks me backwards, until the back of my legs hit the end of the bed. Watching me the whole time, Lennox reaches behind me and unhooks my bra with practiced ease and – after only a moment’s hesitation – I let it fall to the ground.

Standing in front of Lennox like this, half-naked, I should feel nervous, vulnerable, but the way he looks at me drives all those fears out of my head. He makes me feel sexy, confident in a way I never have before outside of my work.

“Beautiful,” he breathes, devouring me with his eyes and then with his hands, his mouth. I let my head fall back as he sucks on one nipple, biting gently and making it hard for me to stay upright.

Smoothly, he encourages me to ease back on the bed, his strong arms cushioning my fall. He follows me down, his hands on the button of my pants. Snapping them open and hooking his thumbs inside, he pulls them down and off along with my panties, leaving me completely bare to him.

The look in his eyes is pure male approval. The way he looks at me is so proprietorial it would normally set my ingrained sense of independence on edge, but I don’t mind him examining me like this in bed. In fact, I like it. I like the idea of belonging to him. I like it a little too much.

My hands go to his belt of their own volition, copying his actions.

He raises an eyebrow at me as I impatiently shove his jeans and boxer briefs down, letting his impressive erection spring free.

After straddling his lap last night I’d known he was big, but it’s one thing to know and another to see the length of his hard cock.

He must read nervousness in my expression, because he kisses me sweetly, tenderly enough to make me fall half in love with him.

“We’ll go slow,” he promises. But I don’t want to go slow, I don’t want to wait, I want to feel him, all of him inside of me, filling me up.

As if he’s read my thoughts, his hands roam down to the space between my thighs, the place where I’ve been wanting him for far too fucking long.

He strokes me slowly at first, feather-light, skimming my nether-lips with his fingertips.

I grind against his hand, wanting more, needing every damn thing this man has to offer.

My body is out of control. My desire through the roof.

The hardness of Lennox's cock tells me that he's right there with me, but his actions remain calm.

Slowly, he draws lazy circles around my clit, making me writhe on the bed, nowhere near satisfied, the burning craving between my legs only getting more intense.

"Stop teasing," I whisper breathlessly, greedy for more than the soft caresses he's showering me with.

"You think I'm the one doing the teasing?" His voice is strained, raw with desire.

I nod because I don't think I can get any words out around the ball of need in my throat.

That's all it takes for Lennox to really take charge.

In an instant, he's slipped between my thighs, his fingers opening me, exploring me, stroking me more insistently now and driving me towards one inevitable conclusion.

My hands run over his shoulders, massaging the strong muscles I've admired but have never been able to touch how I wanted, until now.

My grip on his arms tightens as he thrusts into me harder, stimulating nerve endings

most men don't even know exist.

"You're so tight, baby." Lennox groans as he inserts another finger inside of me, his movements getting faster, leading me to a crescendo of pleasure.

My gasps get louder as he fucks me with his fingers. I try to swallow my cries down, but Lennox shakes his head. "I want to hear you," he mouths against my neck, kissing, biting, licking. "I want to hear you scream as you come."

His words and fingers send me over the cliff I was teetering on the edge of and I'm calling his name as my orgasm rocks through me, leaving me feeling like I'm floating.

My whole body turns to mush as he kisses me softly, sweetly almost, stroking my breasts, whispering how beautiful I am, how sexy, how much he wants to fuck me until my pussy is just as raw as my throat.

Lennox's face is pure male satisfaction as he dips his head, kissing his way down my neck, between my breasts, making me arch into him. He moves further, over my navel, kissing a path all the way down to my pussy.

"You're so wet, Isabella." His tone is reverent as he strokes my slick folds with his clever fingers.

"Open for me, baby." He encourages my legs to spread further and then he settles himself between so that all I can see is his full head of hair.

Anticipation threatens to bite a hole in me as I wait and wait for the tickling of his breath to stop and something else to take over.

And then...there it is. Just the tip of Lennox's tongue as he circles my clit. For a

second. Two. Three. My eyes close, my breath halts and then I'm gasping for air as Lennox closes his mouth around my pussy, tongue-kissing it the way he did my lips.

Not long after, his fingers join, working me deep as his tongue licks me, finding my g-spot, sending me into ecstasy with his mouth and his hands.

"Come for me, Isabella." He captures my clit, sucking hard and I let go, screaming as I orgasm for the second time.

In the background, I hear the rustle of foil and the snap of rubber as Lennox puts on a condom. Pinning my hands to my sides, he moves his way back up my body, covering my mouth with his luscious lips, my body with his.

The tip of his hard cock hesitates at my entrance, only just parting my wet lips. His whole body is filled with tension as he pauses there, holding me when I try to wriggle against him to bring him inside.

"I don't want to hurt you." His jaw is rigid with how hard he's holding on.

"You won't," I assure him, breathlessly. "I'm ready for you." So damn ready. I wrap my hand around his shaft, squeezing him lightly as I guide him inside of me.

His arms strain with the effort of how slowly he's trying to go, to hold himself back. But I don't want him to, I want him to be as out of control as I am.

My legs wrap around his waist, inviting him deeper and he loses the internal battle he's been fighting. He pushes inside, agonizingly slowly, giving my body time to adapt to the size of him.

"Breathe, baby," Lennox whispers against my lips and I do, telling my body to relax as he inches his way deeper until he's completely buried inside of me.



I've never felt this full and as he starts to move, our eyes lock and it's the most intense joining I've ever experienced. I use my heels on his ass to urge him to thrust into me again and again, harder as my body stretches to accommodate him.

"So good." Lennox pumps his hips against mine, fighting for breath like he's just as turned on as I am.

He pulls out until only his tip remains and I writhe underneath him, begging him with my body for more.

This time he rewards me without hesitation.

A powerful thrust fills me up, pushing me towards ecstasy.

Our bodies are slick with sweat as they slide against each other, as his hard length slides along my hypersensitive skin.

"Say my name, Izzy," he growls at me. "I want my name on your lips when you come."

It's an order, another way of staking his claim and here and now I'm more than happy to be possessed by him.

He thumbs my clit while he keeps thrusting into me.

The way he's looking at me is pure sin and it's not long before he's stoked the fire inside of me into an inferno again.

My back arches off the bed as he pumps, his hips slamming against mine, our bodies slapping together as I scream his name, exploding around him, orgasming with the force of an earthquake.

Lennox follows me, pumping into me, once, twice before his whole body stiffens and he throws his head back, tension filling him as he comes hard, emptying himself inside of me.

He collapses against me, holding his weight just above me so he doesn't crush me. We lie like that, his head buried in the crook of my neck, my fingers drawing lazy circles on his shoulders.

Too soon, Lennox lifts his head, kissing me softly, before he pulls out of me. My body protests, because it wants him to stay right where he was.

After disposing of the condom, he's by my side, pulling me over until I'm laying sprawled more or less on top of him, his hand holding mine over his heart.

I absorb the steady beat, my mind starting to tick into gear. I don't think I've ever felt so completely content, so completely satisfied or so completely owned by someone and it's both exhilarating and terrifying.

"Stop thinking so much, Izzy." Lennox's drowsy voice cuts through the fog in my brain. "Sleep," he urges me, stroking my hair, lulling me with his touch until I do exactly that.

Whatever comes next, it can wait until the morning, for now I just want to hold onto Lennox and pretend I'll never have to let go.

### Chapter

### Thirteen

When I wake up the next morning, my eyes squint against the sunshine streaming through the curtains I forgot to close because I got distracted by...

My head turns enough to see the dark head on the pillow next to mine and I jerk upright, taking a moment to realize I've slept next to, or more like on top of, Lennox Gray all night.

"Morning." His eyes blink open slowly, making him look all sleep tousled and sexy as hell.

A muscular arm, belonging to the man in question, pulls me back down beside him and I pull the bedsheet up to cover my bare chest. The move earns me an amused look as if to say it's a little late for modesty.

I blush at the reminder of everything we did together last night and try to shift my legs out from where they're tangled in his.

"Morning," I answer awkwardly, doing my damndest not to look him in the eyes.

"Are you always this quiet before your first cup of coffee?"

"Only on mornings when I wake up in bed with my boss," I mumble, my brain to mouth filter apparently still asleep.

He chuckles low in his throat, the sexy sound sending heat between my legs.

“That happen often?”

I turn my head towards his to give him a ‘what do you think?’ look and it’s impossible to look away.

He threads his fingers in my hair and pulls me gently towards him, stopping just shy of his lips and forcing me to make the decision to close the distance between us. It’s a no-brainer; any intention I had of escaping him gets shot all the way down.

He kisses me until I forget to remember to care about anything except the way his lips feel against mine.

“You know, if this were a romantic comedy, me rear-ending you would be called a ‘meet-cute,” I point out, when I regain the power of speech.

“Yeah? Well if this were a romantic comedy I probably wouldn’t have been such an asshole to you.”

“You weren’t an asshole,” I hedge and Lennox gives me a ‘come on’ look, making me break out into a grin. “Well maybe a little,” I concede.

As we’re opening up to each other, there’s something else I want to know and I decide that now is as good a time as any to find out. “Why did you pretend you didn’t recognize me?”

A laugh rumbles in his chest. “You didn’t forget about that, huh? I was sort of hoping the champagne might have blurred that part of the night out.”

I roll my eyes, poking him in the side. “I had two glasses, not the whole damn bottle.

So...?”

Lennox shrugs, looking uncomfortable, but his discomfort makes him even more endearing. “I guess it was easier to pretend I didn’t remember you because then I wouldn’t have to admit how cruel I was to you in high school,” he admits, quietly.

I shake my head, stroking his stubbled jaw as he suddenly looks so damn vulnerable. “You weren’t cruel to me,” I say. “The people you hung out with were a different story. I’ll grant you that – but you were never mean to me.”

“I didn’t stand up for you, either. I just let it happen in front of me and apologized to you in private, because I was so damn worried about what other people would think of me.” Lennox shakes his head in despair of his younger self. “I’m not proud of the person I was.”

“You were eighteen,” I reason with him. “None of us were our best selves as teenagers. I know I sure as hell wasn’t.”

You’re way too nice for me, you know that?”

I wrinkle my nose at that word ‘nice’. It’s not the descriptor you want from the guy you’ve just had the best sex of your life with. And then the fact that I’ve just voiced the thoughts rumbling in my head makes me cringe.

“The best sex of your life, huh?” Lennox smiles like the cat who got the cream and my eyes widen at what I’ve just done.

I cover my face with the pillow because it’s the closest I can get to disappearing, but Lennox’s chuckle penetrates it with ease. Gently, he pries the pillow from my grasp, looking down at me with a mixture of amusement and warmth.

“You don’t have to look so pleased with yourself,” I grumble, still trying to avoid eye contact.

“Will you look at me, Izzy?” he asks. To be truthful, I would really rather just study the threads of the bedsheets because I’ve proven I am literally the least cool person in the entire world.

“Will you look at me if I tell you last night was amazing?” he asks, his voice husky in a way that makes me wet in an instant. “That it was the best night of my whole damn life?”

Those words shock me so much that I do in fact meet his gaze.

“There she is,” he breathes reverently as he traces the lines of my face. “You really are incredible, you know?”

I bite my lip to keep the surge of emotions his words have provoked at bay. “You’re not so bad yourself,” I tell him quietly and in an instant we’re on each other again.

My lips say all the words I’m not ready to tell him out loud just yet. And he kisses me with an intensity that makes me feel like the most desirable woman in the world.

His hand strays down underneath the sheet, cupping my breast and I moan against his mouth, my inner thighs already slick with wanting. I’m so ready for him. I reach out to stroke his shaft to find him hard as a rock and he groans as I touch him.

“Want you...so fucking much.” Lennox breathes against my mouth and the feeling is more than mutual.

It takes a few seconds for the insistent knocking on the door to penetrate the bubble of desire I’m floating in as we kiss and stroke each other.

“Izzy, you home?”

I let out a small chuckle as Lennox curses loudly at the sound of his friend’s voice.

“Remind me to kill Kai,” he mutters.

“He’s not going to leave,” I point out quietly, before raising my voice. “Hey Kai.”

Lennox gives me a murderous glance, making me roll my eyes.

“You sleep through your alarm, chica ?” Kai laughs. “Are we training today or what? You know how freakin’ anal Nox is about being on time.”

Lennox looks mildly offended, making me giggle. “To be fair, he’s not wrong,” I point out. “I’ll go talk to him.” I move to get out of the bed, but Lennox pulls me back down.

“Fuck that,” he shakes his head. “You’re not going anywhere and Kai’s not seeing you wrapped in nothing but a damn sheet.”

Stalking out of bed, naked as the day he was born, Lennox moves toward the door.

I shamelessly ogle the blatant gorgeousness of the man and make a little sound of disappointment as he pulls on the boxer briefs he discarded on the floor.

He flashes me a look, his eyes glittering with lust, telling me he heard me, and I’m too turned on to even blush.

“Hold that thought, beautiful,” he tells me, before opening the door to his friend.

He angles himself so Kai can’t see inside, his big frame filling the doorway.

“You need something, Kai?” Lennox stands there, arms crossed, looking like he’s just got out of bed, my bed.

I slap my hand against my head. So much for keeping this between us.

“Hey man,” I can hear Kai’s frown. “I – um, was looking for Iz, but I’m guessing she’s – uh, busy.”

The amusement in his voice makes even my ears turn red.

“She is.” Lennox grunts. “Busy with me.”

As if there were any doubt over what was going on, I roll my eyes at his territorial tone, although I’d be lying if I said I didn’t kinda like it.

“I can see that,” Kai’s smile frames his words. “About damn time, man.” Kai mutters the words to his friend, making me wonder if what was happening between us had been obvious to everyone apart from us.

“Goodbye Kai.” Lennox grinds out the words, his annoyance earning him a snort from Kai.

“See ya later, man, or maybe not,” Kai jokes. “Bye Iz!” This time, he raises his voice, peering through the open door. I wave at him weakly before Lennox manhandles him out, all but shutting the door in his face.

Lennox turns around to face me, his eyes smoldering and my inner thighs clench in anticipation.

“Now, where were we?”



Later, much later, Lennox and I have made our way into the pool.

I pointed out he didn't have any trunks with him, but that didn't bother him and I was more than happy to see him in all his naked glory.

The man really is something to behold. I can't help but watch him, standing in the shallows, the water up to his hips, the marked vee below his abs pointing down to what I now know is a more than impressive cock.

He flicks water at me, when I remain on the edge, my feet dangling over the side.

"You know, the bikini isn't necessary when I've seen everything underneath," his voice drops suggestively. "But I'm not complaining when you look so damn sexy in it."

You would have thought that by this point I'd be physically incapable of blushing, but apparently not.

Slowly, like a predator stalking its prey, he makes his way through the pool and closer to me.

Automatically, I open my legs as Lennox comes to stand in-between them, his hands grabbing hold of my ass.

I only get a moment's warning in the form of Lennox's mischievous grin before he's pulled me all the way into the water and I squeak at the sudden movement.

Lennox's hands are still on my ass and, instinctively, I wrap my legs around his waist as he walks us backwards to the lip built into the side of the pool, sitting down and settling me against him.

There's no hiding how turned on he is and my whole body warms at the feeling of his erection against my upper thighs.

He looks at me how I imagine the big bad wolf looks at red riding hood. "This bikini is nice, but your tits are much nicer."

His hand covers one and then the other. My nipples are already rock hard.

Impatiently, he pushes the bikini-bra over my head so I'm bare to him and I watch in fascination as his pupils dilate.

His head dips down to lick, suckle and bite the soft flesh of my breasts, his hand attending to one and then the other as if he doesn't want to play favorites.

"So damn beautiful," he exhales against my skin.

My hands are on his shoulders, gripping the muscles there, struggling to remain upright because he's turning my whole body to jelly. My pussy actually aches for him, for his touch, his hardness.

"Nox, touch me." The pleading voice sounds so unlike me it takes a moment for me to register I've spoken my need out loud.

I feel, rather than hear, Lennox chuckle darkly against my neck. "I think I like Impatient Isabella."

Shoving my bikini bottoms to one side, he thrusts his fingers inside of me, already finding me wet and wanting.

I moan as he strokes me as if he's known my body forever and not just for one night.

His touch is patient and insistent at the same time, making me dizzy with pleasure.

It doesn't take long before I cry out, seeing stars as he drives me over the edge with his fingers inside of me and his mouth sucking hard on my nipple.

"I love watching you come, darlin'." I've noticed Lennox's accent comes back in force when he's angry or turned on as hell.

I meet his eyes, loving the hunger swirling in his irises as I reach down to grip his shaft under the water.

His eyes flutter closed as soon as I start to stroke him and he growls low in his throat when I squeeze his cock, sweeping my thumb over the tip.

My lower body tightens at the fascination of watching and feeling his whole body tensing against mine.

Lennox's hands are still busy on my breasts, moving from one to the other.

A savage sound comes out of him as I pump him from base to tip.

Grabbing hold of my shoulders, he stops me. "I fucking need to be inside you." He hooks his arm around my hips, forcing my legs to wrap around his waist as he sits on the submerged step in the pool.

I move just an inch, settling myself over his shaft, my entrance hovering just above his tip and I meet his eyes.

"Izzy, shit, I don't have a -" he curses under his breath, his expression conflicted.

"It's okay," I assure him, squirming over his cock. "I'm clean, I'm on the pill."

“Me too,” he grits out and then shakes his head, “the clean part, not the pill. I always use protection. Always. ” His stare is intense, making sure I’ve understood. This is the first time he’s been completely skin to skin with someone and my heart sings at the fact he wants it to be with me.

“Me too,” I admit.

“ Are you sure?” he asks, still stopping me from sinking down over him. “I want to have you bare so fucking much, but I need you to be sure.”

“I am, Nox,” I kiss him because I can’t be this close to him and not. “I want this.” I let my weight carry me lower, so that I’m sinking down onto his naked tip.

With my body, I’m telling him that I trust him. There’s no way he has any idea how much of a big deal that is for me; for me to trust someone so completely.

He watches me as he guides me down over his shaft, taking him deeper and deeper inside me until he completely fills me up.

Sex with Lennox was one thing, but staring into his eyes as we’re closer than I’ve ever been with anyone else is a whole different ballgame.

It’s intense and it’s freakin’ sublime. And then I start to rock, his fingers on my hips, squeezing tighter as he urges me on, moving up and down his hardness, reveling in the friction between us.

“I’m so close, Nox.” I’m wound so tightly I can barely get the words out. My nails dig into his arms as I turn into nothing more than a ball of need.

“Izzy.” My name on his lips shatters me and I scream as I climax.

Three more thrusts and then four. Lennox pumps into me hard. My inner walls clench around him, milking him as he explodes inside of me.

Breathless, I wrap my legs tighter around him, holding him even closer as we crest this wave together.

His arms hold me firmly against him as my body shakes with the aftershocks. And I realize in that moment that I don't want him to let me go. Ever.

### Chapter

### Fourteen

Lennox and I have spent most of the week going between the bed, the pool, the shower and back to the bed. Somewhere between hunger and exhaustion, we decided we were decamping to the big house. But even there, every moment spent was a moment spent together...until now.

Lennox excused himself to make a few phone calls. For the past few days, he's had his phone off, having gotten frustrated with its incessant ringing.

Before Lennox and I started working together, I didn't have any idea how much he had going on.

He may not be playing NHL right now, but he's constantly getting interview requests, photo-shoot invitations, calls from the charitable foundations he works with, updates from businesses he's invested in.

Anyone calling him a one-trick pony would only be making themselves look stupid.

My eyes go to the main house, feeling his magnetic pull, but there's something I have to do first. Kiara has already called me multiple times and there's no doubt she's figured out there's something going on from my resounding silence.

Plus, it's not as if I've ever been able to hide anything from her anyway.

Admitting to sleeping with a client isn't exactly the high point of my professional career, but I'm not going to pretend it hasn't happened, especially when I'm planning on doing it again, very soon.

Time to bite the bullet and fess up.

"Finally!" Kiara blows out a sigh as she answers. "I was about to send out a damn search party!"

"I need to tell you something," I blurt out.

I don't have – nor have I ever had – any chill. Not even a little bit.

"Okay..." Kiara sounds wary and she has reason to be. Hell, I'm wary about saying the words out loud.

"I slept with Nox!" I figure the quicker I can get the words out, the easier it'll be. It's not.

Kiara's silence on the other end of the phone speaks volumes.

"What? Clearly you have something to say and I've never known you to skirt around what you mean. So just say it, Ki."

My friend sighs. "I just don't want to see you get hurt, Iz."

Immediately, any irritation I was feeling towards my bestie drains out of me and I sit down heavily on the bed.

"I won't," I assure her, although I'm not as sure of that as I sound.

“Is it...is it serious?” she asks uncharacteristically hesitant.

Good question.

“For him or for me?” I respond only half-joking. “It’s serious enough for me to be telling you about it,” I admit, biting my lip. “And as my boss, I figured you should know and if you want to take me off this job I totally understand.” But I really, really hope you don’t, I add silently.

“I’m not pulling you, Izzy. Unless you want me to?”

“No!”

“Alright then.” Kiara sighs, telling me there’s a lot more she’d like to say, but neither of us are sure if I’m ready to hear any of it. “Just...be careful, Iz, take it slow.”

I nod into the phone even though she can’t see me. I know she’s right, but I don’t want to take it slow, I want to throw myself into whatever it is that’s going on between Lennox and me. No matter the fucking consequences...



### Chapter

### Fifteen

Another week goes by before anyone else finds out about Lennox and me. I asked him and Kai not to mention it to Declan as I have a feeling he'd disapprove. They both agreed, for now. But I can tell it's bothered Lennox.

"Are you ashamed of me or something?" he asks half-joking while we're having breakfast out on the terrace overlooking the outdoor swimming pool.

"Right, I'm ashamed of the fact that I'm dating arguably the most eligible bachelor in the tri-state area," I snort.

Lennox goes preternaturally still.

"Dating?"

I almost choke on the gulp of coffee I've just taken. We agreed not to label what was going on between us and I just broke my own damn rule.

"Or...you know, whatever," I cough the words out, waving my hand as if to say it's just a word I used to describe a thing.

"Ahh, Izzy, is that your way of asking if we're going steady?" Lennox's dark eyes twinkle with amusement.

I ball up my napkin and throw it at his head. “Ass.” He deftly avoids the missile, leaning close enough to thoroughly kiss me and I relax against his lips, feeling the depth of his tenderness all the way down to my toes.

“I knew it!” The exclamation from behind me makes me jump, twisting in my seat to see who’s caught us in a lip-lock.

Miguel, the groundskeeper, stands there smiling from ear to ear as I resist the urge to bury my face in my hands. I’m not a big fan of PDA, but even less so when we’re supposed to be keeping our thing on the low.

“Hey, Miguel,” Lennox doesn’t seem to share my embarrassment. In fact, he stretches his arm behind my chair, sliding me closer towards him.

“Maria will be so happy,” he beams and it’s impossible not to smile back at him. “You both come for dinner tonight, yes?” He looks so eager I find myself nodding, ignoring Lennox’s amused expression.

“ Bien ! Now, I do not mean to interrupt, carry on,” he gestures towards us again as if he expects us to start up kissing again.

“Well, he seems...”

“He’s happy, I’m happy,” Lennox says softly, his eyes on me and I do a little internal dance at the thought I’m the one who’s made him feel like that.

“When did you guys get so close?” I ask, but Lennox’s face shutters abruptly. It’s so sudden it’s as if someone’s turned all the lights out in New York.

After a few beats, he carries on as if I haven’t spoken, the warm expression back in his eyes so quickly I wonder if I’ve imagined the coldness that was there only

moments before.

“Trust me, they’re the best people. You’ll love Maria and I know she’s gonna love you.”

“How can you be so sure about that?”

Lennox just shrugs. “Because everyone does,” he says simply, having no idea how his words have made my heart swell and making me promptly forget there was anything amiss between us a minute ago.

That night, as promised, we have a double date with Miguel and Maria and it turns out to be the most fun I’ve had in a long while.

Lennox isn’t wrong about me loving Maria – she’s warm, funny and friendly and so maternal I’m surprised when I learn they haven’t had kids of their own.

Her eyes go watery as she thinks about it and I curse myself for asking such an insensitive question.

“We weren’t blessed with children of our own.” Maria’s eyes meet Miguel’s and they grasp hands on top of the table. I feel tearful just watching the affection flowing between them.

I look down to see Lennox has grabbed my hand on my thigh, squeezing it gently in comfort as he’s seen my reaction to the older couple’s exchange.

“Lennox is like our son.” Maria looks at him affectionately and I feel a lump in my throat. For someone who hardly cries, sitting at the table with Maria and Miguel is surprisingly emotional. “We looked after his father and then, after the accident, we started working for Lennox.”

“Maria,” Lennox’s voice is filled with warning and the conversation abruptly shuts down. Maria looks at him in confusion and then looks to me, realization – of what I don’t know – dawning.

“I say too much!” She shakes her head. “Miguel always says I talk too much. Who’s ready for dessert?”

There’s a sudden tension in the room that wasn’t there before, one I can’t hope to understand.

Lennox’s body is stiff as a board and his hand releases mine as he turns to Miguel and starts questioning him about his vegetable garden.

The rest of the evening passes without incident, but the echo of whatever Lennox didn’t want discussed sits like a fifth person at the table and he more or less ignores me for the remainder.

It’s only once we leave their cottage and start the walk back to the main house that I call him out.

“You wanna tell me what that was all about?” I ask, keeping pace with him as he strides purposefully towards the main house.

“It was nothing.” He doesn’t meet my eyes, but if he thinks I’m going to be fobbed off so easily, then he’s got another thing coming.

“Well things got pretty damn awkward pretty damn quickly over ‘nothing’,” I tell him, coming to a stop.

Lennox takes a few more steps before he realizes I have no intention of catching up to him.

“If you don’t want to tell me, that’s fine.” I hold my hands up. “But don’t gaslight me and say what I just saw in there didn’t happen. You turned into a completely different person all of a sudden and Maria looked like she’s just eaten a whole tray of humble pie.”

Lennox looks up at the sky as if he might find an answer there, or like he’s hoping an alien spacecraft might appear and save him from having this conversation.

“You really don’t miss anything, do you?” he grumbles under his breath. “And you’re not afraid to call me out on my shit.” He says it as if it pisses him off but he’s not unhappy about it. I wonder if that’s why he likes having me around – because no one else dares to call him out when necessary.

I shrug, not really knowing how to answer him. “I don’t want to fight with you, Nox,” I say eventually, hands on my hips. “But I don’t appreciate being frozen out either.”

He scoffs as if to say I’m being dramatic. “I didn’t freeze you out.”

Yeah, right.

“From the minute Maria mentioned your father, you all but ignored me. You could’ve cut the tension in that room with a damn knife! I’m not asking you to tell me what Lennox Gray Senior has to do with any of this, but...don’t lie to me!”

I bite my lip, because I didn’t mean to start an argument with him, not when things have been so good between us.

“It isn’t Gray Senior Maria was talking about.

It’s my father, my real father,” Lennox says eventually, sighing as he leans against a tree.

It's hard to make out his expression in the darkness, but from the droop of his shoulders I would hazard a guess that whatever the story is he's about to tell, it's not one that has a happy ending.

"When I was seventeen, during one of the damn shouting matches between my mom and Gray Senior, he let it slip how he raised 'that little bastard' even though the kid wasn't his."

I cover my mouth with my hand. What a way to find out your life has been a lie.

"Nox, I'm so sorry." I cross the distance between us, any residual anger I felt dissipating immediately, wrapping my arms around his waist and leaning my head against his chest. He doesn't hesitate before holding me and we stand like that for a few moments before he starts talking again.

"We never got along," he admits. "Senior has always been tight with Laurie, my little sister, but nothing I did was ever good enough for him. As I got older I just stopped trying." I feel Lennox shake his head at the memory and I hold him a little tighter, hearing the pain in his voice.

"You asked if it was always ice hockey for me – the truth was I made up my mind to do whatever Gray Senior didn't want me to do.

He wanted me to play college football, so I knew I sure as shit wasn't gonna do that.

He thought ice hockey was just a pointless hobby.

So, naturally, that's where I focused all my energy. "

"Naturally," I murmur, smiling at the stubbornness of this man who has become so important to me.

“Once I heard Gray wasn’t my real father, it was like I’ve been given permission to step away from a family I never really felt was mine.”

My heart actually hurts at Lennox’s admission. I always thought he had the perfect life growing up, a life I was jealous of. It turns out I couldn’t have been more wrong.

“I went looking for my biological father. My mom wouldn’t help – she didn’t want anything to do with me finding him.

She’s always been under Gray Senior’s thumb, probably because he was the one who paid for everything.

She was so worried about making him angry, everything else came second, even her own kids.

” Lennox doesn’t sound sad about it, more like he’s just stating a fact and I’m not sure what’s more heartbreaking.

“You asked why I don’t go back home, that’s why. ”

I lift my head from his chest looking up to see him looking down at me, his expression unreadable.

“You don’t have to tell me the rest if you’re not ready.” I squeeze my arms around him a little tighter, bringing our bodies even closer together, telling him with my touch that I support him with everything I am.

“That’s just it, Izzy. It’s the damnedest thing; you make me want to tell you every goddam secret I’ve ever had.

” He shakes his head as if he doesn’t understand it himself.

But I do, it's the same feeling I get around him.

I stay silent, not trusting my voice and giving Lennox the space to say whatever he needs to.

"It took me a helluva long time to find my real father – when you don't even have a name to start off with, it turns out tracking someone down is a full-time job!

" Lennox huffs a laugh without humor and I think about how little the Grays deserve a son like him.

"I found him during my last year of college; I had offers from a few different NHL teams, but when the Pelicans wanted to recruit me and it turned out my biological father was in New York, it felt kind of like it was meant to be, you know?" I feel him shake his head.

"I know it sounds fucking stupid, but that's how it felt at the time. "

"It doesn't sound stupid," I lift my head to look at him. "It doesn't sound stupid at all." It sounds like a man who was desperate to find a family he's never felt he had. That's not idiotic, it's heartbreaking. "What was his name?" I ask, quietly.

"Jonas. His name was Jonas. He was a landscaper, worked on the Gray property and fell for my mom. I think a part of him was in love with her until the day he died...Anyway, he was a kid from the wrong side of the tracks and although he tried to persuade mom to run away with him, she liked the finer things in life too much to give it all up for a man earning minimum wage." The disappointment in his voice is palpable.

"Gray Senior paid him off, told him never to come back. Jonas didn't even know he had a kid until I contacted him.



He said if he'd known..." Lennox's voice is thick with emotion.

"If he'd known he would have come looking for me. "

I decide I really freakin' hate the parents Lennox grew up with for denying him the chance to know his father, for taking something so fundamental away from him.

"When he left Alabama, he used the pay-off money to set up his landscaping business, he hired Miguel and they became like brothers. Miguel was the one who helped him to get sober, the one who kept him on the straight and narrow, at least as much as he could. But he couldn't protect him from my asshole of a stepfather. "

"What do you mean?" I ask, but I'm afraid I already know.

"When Gray Senior heard I found my dad, my real dad, I guess he was worried about how it would look to the world once word got out. I was already doing interviews, getting news coverage and he must've thought there was a risk I'd blurt out on national television the family secret the untouchable Gray family has kept for 25 years!

" His beautiful mouth twists with bitterness.

"He called Jonas and threatened him, and I guess it tipped him over the edge, according to Miguel, he hit the bottle pretty hard and – well... you know the rest. He was dead before the ambulance even got there. I haven't spoken to Gray Senior or my mom since then and I have no fucking intention to. "

"I'm so, so sorry, Nox." I hold onto him tighter because my words feel so insufficient. I want to take away all his pain, but I can't. My heart actually hurts for him and tears I never cry are threatening to make their way down my cheeks.

“I know, baby. I know.” Lennox rubs my back, kissing my hair, soothing me as if I’m the one who needs comforting.

“I’m so sorry you had to go through all of that.” I can’t imagine what that must be like. Mine is the most important person in my life, although Lennox is climbing the ranks disconcertingly quickly.

“Me too,” he says quietly, and we just stand there, holding each other in silence, gathering strength from each other.

Lennox breaks the quiet first, lifting my chin up so that my eyes meet his. The emotions I see swirling in their depths make me catch my breath. “There are only three people in the world who know the whole of that story. Kai, Maria and Miguel. And now there’s you.”

“I would never say anything -,” I start, hoping he doesn’t really think I’d share anything we spoke about, NDA or not.

“That’s not what I meant,” he interrupts, shaking his head, frustrated with me or himself, I’m not certain. “I guess, I’m just trying to say you’re important to me, Isabella.”

“You’re important to me, too,” I tell him and, again, my words are nowhere near enough to let him know how I really feel. There are words for it, I’m just not ready to say them to him, or even to myself. Not yet.

Still, as he kisses me, it feels as if we’re both saying all the things we can’t yet speak out loud.

### Chapter

### Sixteen

“No-one would ever believe this if I told them.” My chin rests in my palms, elbows on the breakfast bar as I watch Lennox.

“Believe what? That I’m a damn magician in the kitchen?” He throws me a suggestive look. “And in other rooms in the house - if you’re screaming this morning is anything to go by.”

I manage to control my blush, but only just and only because he looks so incongruous in his ‘kiss the cook’ apron. Incongruous and gorgeous as all get out.

“Who gave you that thing anyway?” I ask, watching as he flips a pancake with an expert flick of his wrist. Breakfast for dinner is the absolute best and it’s a sign of Lennox’s good taste that he shares that opinion.

“I’ll give you three guesses,” he gives me a pointed look.

I only need one. “Does his name begin with K and end in -ai?”

“Ding, ding, ding, got it in one!” Lennox points to me with his spatula. “And the crowd goes wild!” A few seconds later, he’s sidling up next to me, holding the spatula like a microphone and using his best ‘sport’s commentator’ voice. “Tell me, Isabella, how does it feel to be a winner?”

I laugh, loving this relaxed side of Lennox.

It feels like we've been floating in our little bubble, being able to hide from the outside world.

The last few weeks have been a dream and the truth is, I don't want them to end.

But reality is starting to muscle its way back and with Lennox almost back to full strength, it won't be long now.

I try to ignore the twinge I feel in my chest at the knowledge we haven't got much longer together before my contract's up and life goes back to normal.

I'll go back to my work in the city, back to my apartment.

Lennox will start training with the Pelicans again and he'll no doubt be wall-to-wall with interviews and photo-shoots on his return to the sport.

I just don't see how there'll be a chance for us, for me, in his life.

As far as my experience has taught me, you can't depend on anyone else to make you happy.

I saw what it did to my dad for so long after my mother walked out on us.

I won't fall into that same trap, I can't.

So, I ignore the whisper in the back of my head telling me I've already fallen hook, line and sinker.

The smile on Lennox's face drops as he frowns at me. "What's up?"

“Nothing.” I wave away his concern. “I was just thinking about my dad,” I lie and hate myself a little for it.

Lennox looks at me sympathetically which only makes me feel worse for lying.

“Ya’ll talked yesterday, right?” He kneads the knots out of my shoulders which are suddenly tense.

“Mmmhmmh,” I reply noncommittally because I’m pretty sure I know what’s coming next.

“I’m looking forward to meeting him. What did he say about coming up for the first pre-season game? You said he’s a fan, right?” Lennox goes back to flipping pancakes and sliding them onto two plates for us, only looking up at me when I don’t reply.

“It didn’t come up,” I evade, biting my lip at the lie of omission.

Lennox’s eyes narrow on my mouth, reading my tell as easily as if I’d blurted out my truth. “It didn’t come up?” he repeats, giving me his no-bullshit look.

I shrug, still avoiding his gaze. “You know, I’m not all that hungry.” I slide off the stool and I’m half-way out of the kitchen before Lennox blocks the exit.

This time, his comedy apron doesn’t take away any of the seriousness in his expression.

“Izzy, what’s going on? Is your dad pissed about us dating or something? Does he not approve? I know how close you guys are and I don’t want y’all to fall out over this.” Lennox looks so genuinely distressed at the thought of coming between my father and I that I have to tell him.

“It’s not that he doesn’t approve, Nox.” Big breath in. “I just haven’t exactly told him about you, yet.”

I wince inwardly at the range of emotions which play out over Lennox’s face; from confusion to anger to disappointment to hurt. It’s the last one that gets me, because the last thing I’ve ever wanted to do is hurt him.

“You haven’t told your dad about me, about us?” he asks slowly, watching me with that hawk-like focus of his as I nod. “Are you afraid of what he’ll say?” I know I’m not imagining the pain in his voice – I can feel it as if it were my own.

“No, of course not, it’s not that,” I assure him, although that’s part of it.

My dad’s a realist and there’s no way I could spin our story to him that would make him think it makes any sense.

Me being with someone as famous and celebrated as Lennox is hard enough for me to square at times, let alone for anyone else to get their head around.

“It’s just all so new,” I flounder, reaching for his hand, but he doesn’t respond.

“It’s not that fucking new, Izzy. We’ve been together for over a month,” he growls, the anger in his voice starting to break through the hurt.

“So why wouldn’t you tell him? I thought you guys talked about everything.

And don’t say it’s fucking nothing, because when I fed you that line, you said I should respect you enough to tell you the truth.

” He throws my words back at me, knowing I can’t argue with them.

“I’m just asking you to do the same.” He folds his arms over his chest, forcing me to drop my hand and I feel his rejection of my touch as if it were a living thing.

“Because...because I don’t want to tell him about this, about us, only to have to tell him in a month that it’s over,” I burst out before snapping my mouth shut, too late.

There, I’ve said it, and it turns out honesty isn’t always the best policy because I don’t feel better, not even a little bit.

“Is that how long you’re giving this?” Lennox asks, gesturing between the two of us.

“One more month? I’m just asking so I know we’re both on the same damn page here, Isabella.

” I ignore the formality he injects my name with.

It’s a world apart from the seductive way he whispers it to me in the dark while he rocks me to my core.

“How long do you really think this can last, Nox? I know you’re not naïve enough to think this can work out in the long run!

” Us being together is such an impossibility.

Our lives are way too different. It’s only a matter of time before we’re pulled so far in different directions there’s no chance of ever finding our way back to each other.

Lennox runs his fingers through his thick hair, frustration projected all over his face.

“Who the fuck knows how long anything’ll last for?

I don't have a crystal ball, Isabella. I can't see into the future, but I know how I feel about you.

"His eyes meet mine and I will him to say more, to say the words that feel as if they're on the tip of his tongue.

But he doesn't and I'm left feeling more than a little disappointed.

If you know, then say it, I ask him silently.

"What about you? Have you told your sister about me, your friends?" I ask and, sure I'm deflecting, but it's all part of the same argument.

Lennox's eyes flash in warning at the mention of his family, even though I haven't mentioned his parents, it's a fine line I'm in danger of crossing. But I'm not backing down, he's the one who started this damn argument in the first place.

"You know I don't talk about shit like this with my sister," he grinds out between gritted teeth.

"Sure, that might be part of it," I concede, "but what about your friends? Tell me that you're not worried about what they're going to think about you hanging out with white trash?"

"The fuck, Iz?" Lennox blinks at me in shock. "Why the fuck would you ever talk about yourself like that or think I would? Besides, you're the one who wanted to keep us a secret from everyone, hell the only reason Dec knows is because apparently Kai can't keep his damn mouth shut!"

And Kai has been left in no uncertainty over how I feel about his slip-up. It wasn't intentional, but the damage has been done. And I was right to think Declan wouldn't



approve. It was clear that he didn't. Lennox pretends not to notice. I pretend not to care.

"I'm just calling a spade a spade, Nox," I tell him. "You know that's what your big-league friends'll think. Daughter of a mechanic, dirt freakin' poor, mother's whereabouts unknown." I could go on, but my throat has started to close up with tears I didn't even realize were creeping in.

We agreed to just see where things would go between us, to not put a label on whatever we were, but somewhere along the line, it has become so much more than a 'wait and see' casual thing – to me at least.

We said no strings, but if I'm being honest to myself all I want to do is tie us together.

Lennox tilts his head, looking at me as if he's seeing all the way down into my soul. "No-one would ever think that shit about you, and even if they did, they wouldn't be anyone whose opinion I give a shit about."

"You don't know that, Nox," I shake my head, pushing down the tears trying to make an appearance.

"I know there's no way anyone would ever think you're not good enough for me, because none of that crap is true. I'm the one who's won the fucking lottery with you!" He says it as if it were an undeniable fact and I feel myself glow on the inside.

"I don't know how long you're gonna think that for, Nox." I smile up at him through the feeling of inevitability that I can't shake. "But I'll take it for as long as it lasts."

I expect Lennox to return my smile, but he doesn't. Instead his expression remains pensive.

“I’m not going anywhere, Izzy,” he vows quietly, lifting my chin for our eyes to connect. “Why are you trying so hard to push me out the door?”

I blink up at him, his words hitting home. Is that what I’ve been doing; trying to push him away, keep him at arm’s length emotionally, so I’m not caught unaware when he eventually – inevitably – decides to call it quits?

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I don't need Kiara's amateur psychology to read into why I might be doing that.

It's not as if it isn't something that hasn't happened before.

I've had exes complain about me doing exactly that; shutting them out of my life when things look as if they're about to get serious.

It's not something I'm proud of, I just don't know how to stop.

How do you re-program yourself when you were let down by the one person who was supposed to love you forever when you were just a baby?

Lennox has opened himself up to me in a way he hasn't with anyone else, I feel as if I owe it to him to give him the same. And not only that, I actually want to tell him. I want Lennox to know me in a way no-one outside of my father and my best friend do.

Talking about my mother always leaves me feeling vulnerable, like an exposed nerve, so I keep my eyes down as I give him the explanation I know he deserves.

“When my mom left, I was just a baby. I don't remember her – the way she smelled, her smile, if she ever held me or sang to me.

It's all just...blank.” I hug my arms around myself, suddenly cold.

“My dad kept photos of her around the house. He thought it was important I knew who my mother was. It took me until I was a teenager to tell him I hated seeing the person who treated me like I was nothing every day. It's bad enough I see her in the

mirror.

” I draw a circle in the air around my face.

“I always thought how much that must’ve hurt my dad – to see the woman he loved in the face of the daughter who drove her away. ”

“Izzy -,” Lennox takes a step towards me, his arms out to hold me but I stop him.

“Don’t be nice to me right now, Nox.” I bite my lower lip so hard I taste blood. “If you are I don’t think I’ll be able to stand it.”

Slowly, he takes a small step back, giving me space and I couldn’t be more grateful to him.

“I never went looking for her. I never saw the point. If she wanted to see me, if she wanted to know me, we were easy to find. My dad still lives in the same damn house as when she left. I think – for the longest time – part of him expected her to come back. He never really dated anyone after mom, not until I moved to New York. It was like she’d ruined him for other women.

She made him love her so much, he couldn’t imagine loving anyone else.

” Lennox reaches out and gently brushes the errant tear making its way over my cheek.

“He had no idea she would ever leave him. He didn’t see it coming and he had no way of coping with it.

He told me I was the only thing that kept him going those first few years – he knew he couldn’t crack because he had to look after me.

” And it’s something I’m both grateful for and something which leaves me feeling inexplicably guilty.

“The number of times I’ve asked myself if my dad would have been able to have a more normal life, a better life, if I wasn’t around, if I’d never been born... ”

I trail off as Lennox pulls me towards him, fiercely.

“Don’t ever fucking say that,” he growls against my hair. “You’re the best damn thing that’s ever happened to me and there’s no doubt in my fucking mind your pops feels the same. And so does Kiara and everyone else who fucking loves you.”

My breath hitches at the ‘L’ word. It’s not quite a declaration, but it’s close, close enough to make my heart beat as loud as a drum.

“Just because your mom couldn’t handle being a mother, that’s not on you.

That’s on her. And when she chose to walk out, she missed out on knowing the most incredible person in the whole damn world.

She missed out on you. And you are fucking everything , Isabella.

” Lennox leans down, bringing his face closer to mine and making my lips sing in anticipation before his mouth covers mine.

It’s more than just a kiss; it’s possessive, it’s passionate, it’s reverent and it’s tender.

It’s a well of emotions I’m getting dizzy trying to unpick.

So I stop trying to think and instead just focus on how good it feels and how good I want to make him feel.

My hands reach around his waist to untie the apron.

“Not a fan?” He smiles against my mouth.

“Not for what I’m about to do.” I bite his lip, loving the way it makes him groan.

I pull back just long enough to push it up and over his head and immediately my hands are on the snap of his jeans.

I kiss him hard and long one last time, before I kneel down in front of him, easing his pants over his hips at the same time, making his already-hard cock spring free.

I stroke him from base to tip, squeezing him gently and pumping his shaft. A bead of pre-cum drips from his tip and I catch it with my tongue, licking the saltiness. Lennox’s eyes go heavy-lidded as he watches me and the look of desire on his face makes me bold.

I meet his gaze, and then take him deep into my mouth until his head hits the back of my throat.

His hands go to my hair, sifting the strands through his fingers as I pump his base with my hand, and work his length with my mouth, my tongue, my teeth scraping lightly against his sensitive skin.

His eyes widen as he watches me take him deeper and deeper, sucking him off, hard.

“Fuck, Iz,” he pants. “So damn good.”

I smile to myself, reveling in the sounds of him losing control.

I want to send him as out of his mind with pleasure as he does to me.

I draw circles around his head with my tongue, and tug on his balls gently, hearing him groan.

The wetness between my own thighs makes me ache.

I've never been this turned on giving head before, but with Lennox everything is different, more intense, more real .

"I'm going to come, Izzy." Lennox's warning is a rumble from deep inside his chest. He's giving me an out but I have no intention of pulling away.

I want to take everything he has to give me.

I suck harder, gripping his ass as he thrusts deeper into my mouth, his shout of release combining with the burst of cum in my mouth.

I swallow it all down, taking every last drop of him.

The muscles in his legs spasm with the force of his orgasm and his hands behind my head urge me up to standing.

I get to my feet, our eyes never leaving each other and – without a word – Lennox takes hold of my hips and lifts me onto the kitchen counter, pulling down the sleep shorts I'm wearing.

Instinctively, I open my legs and, immediately, his still-hard cock shining with a combination of my saliva and his cum is positioned at my entrance.

"You're fucking amazing," he breathes, his mouth on my neck, biting and finding that sensitive spot which drives me insane. "I can't get enough of you."

I know the feeling.

And then all I am is feeling. Lennox pushes hard inside me, making me arch against him.

He kisses me, possessively, ravaging my mouth and tasting himself on my lips.

It's so damn erotic, so hot I'm burning up from the inside out.

He thrusts into me, pumping as he speeds up the tempo.

I wrap my legs around him, my heels on his ass urging him even deeper inside of me.

"Harder," I plead and his hips power forward. Our bodies surge against each other, fiercely, frantically, racing towards the inevitable finish.

I cry out as the earth moves around me and I spin out, dizzy with the force of my climax.

With one last thrust, Lennox follows me, growling my name as he thrusts into me one final time and empties himself inside of me.

We collapse against each other; my head against his chest, listening to the hammering of his heart as he strokes my hair.

That's the moment my stomach chooses to growl. Lennox chuckles against my cheek. "Hungry?" he asks.

"Starving." And not just for food. As soon as I've had Lennox, I want to do it again and again and again. I don't think I'll ever have my fill of him, that a time will come when I won't want him so desperately, so constantly as I do now.



Later that night, once the pancakes have finally been eaten and we've made love again, I lay my hand on his chest and feel his heart beat underneath my palm and bask in the rightness of lying next to him like this.

"The next time I go home, you could come with me," I tell him. "My dad's gonna love you." In fact, I'm pretty sure once he meets Lennox in the flesh, he may never let us leave Alabama again.

"I'd like that," he smiles peacefully, kissing my nose. "And I want you to think of here as your home too," he adds quietly, and I wonder if he hears my sudden intake of breath.

Home. It has a nice ring to it. And not only that, it's how I feel when I'm with Lennox. I feel like I'm home.

"Sleep, beautiful," Lennox whispers against my hair, as if he can hear my mind whirling. He gathers me closer against him.

If I knew things were about to change, I might have held onto him a little tighter that night, resisted sleep for a little longer so I could remember every moment of being next to him. But I didn't. Naively I started to believe that this could be the real deal, that Lennox could be my forever...

When my eyes finally drift shut, I have a smile on my face because I have no idea what's coming.

### Chapter

### Seventeen

I close my laptop, feeling like my eyes are going square from staring at slide after slide about tendon repair. I've been sitting here for hours and my brain has decided it's had enough, which is fine because I'm – finally – all caught up.

As Lennox's knee is needing less and less rehab time, I've been able to spend more of my hours on my PhD work. Now, after what seems like an eternity, I feel like I've got things in hand.

Between, work and study and Lennox, it feels as if things have finally come together.

Like life is working out in a way it never has.

Before, there was always something missing.

If I was doing well at work then my love life was AWOL.

If my social life was busy then I felt bad for not spending enough time on my studies.

My existence up to this point has been a finely tuned balancing act where the set of scales I was given were all out of whack.

But since being with Lennox, it's as if those scales have finally come good.

For the first time since I can remember I feel like I can step back and breathe.

Like I don't have to hold onto everything so tightly to stop my world from falling apart.

Part of me – the cynical part – is waiting for the other shoe to drop, because things can't really be this good, can they? People don't get to be this happy without some kind of blow-back, right?

My cell buzzes, interrupting the bleak turn my thoughts have taken.

“Hey, Dad.” I smile into the phone at my father's familiar voice.

“I was starting to wonder if you've forgotten my number,” my dad jokes.

“Sorry, things have been busy.” And I knew the next time we spoke, I'd have to deliver on the promise I made to Lennox. I'd be lying if I said my nervousness over that hasn't stopped me from picking up the phone.

“You work too hard, Bizz,” my dad says reproachfully. As always, his protective instincts are on point when it comes to me even though I'm not 5 years old anymore.

“Says the man who doesn't know the meaning of the word ‘vacation’.” I roll my eyes, glad he can't see me as it's one of his pet peeves. I smile a little to myself as I think about how it also drives Lennox mad – sometimes in the best possible way.

“You sound...happy, Bizzy.” And it's not just my dad's words that give me pause, it's the incredulous tone in his voice, as if my happiness was something he couldn't easily identify because it presented itself so rarely.

It hits me that I am. I'm happier than I've ever been, and I know how much of it has

to do with Lennox.

“I – um, I’ve met someone,” I admit, taking the plunge. I’ve never told my father about anyone I’ve been dating, but Lennox is so much more than that, so much more than just another guy.

He blows out a deep breath. “About damn time!”

“What happened?” I hear Marianne’s voice in the background.

“Izzy’s in love!” My dad doesn’t move the phone away from his mouth as he hollers back to Marianne, making me wince as he nearly blows out my eardrum.

“I didn’t say that,” I clarify, blushing, once Marianne has stopped sending up her messages of thanks to the Great Almighty who she has apparently been praying to for exactly this reason.

You would think the big man upstairs would have more pressing matters to deal with than my love life, but there you have it.

“You didn’t need to,” Pops points out. “You haven’t told me about any men in your life since...well...ever. So, if you’re mentioning him, I’m guessing there’s a good reason.”

I don’t say anything, struck by how closely my dad has been paying attention without me having any idea.

“Have you told him?” he asks, once my silence has stretched out.

“Told him what, daddy?”

He grunts as if to say he knows I'm purposely being difficult. "Have you told him how you feel?"

"Not yet," I mutter, questioning why I ever thought talking to my father about my love life was a good idea.

"Well, what are you waiting on?" he asks impatiently. He's like a dog with a damn bone that it isn't willing to let go. Not until he gets to the marrow of it.

"It...it just has to be the right time," I answer, completely copping out.

My father sighs heavily in that way that tells me he's about to lay down some solid truths.

I brace myself to hear them, already cringing just a tad.

"Bizzy, you'll wait your whole damn life if you keep waiting for the right time, because it doesn't exist. If I'd waited for the 'right time' to open my business, I'd still be working for someone else.

If I'd waited for the 'right time' to ask Marianne out to dinner, I'd still be spending all my evenings alone.

If I'd waited for the 'right time' to be a father, then I wouldn't have you and that would have been a damn tragedy, Bizz. "

The emotion in his voice makes my throat threaten to close – my dad doesn't do mushy.

"Did you ever regret it, Dad?" I ask, the question spilling out of me as if it couldn't be held back any longer.

“You? Never! Not even for one damn second!” He sounds so horrified I might ever have doubted his love for me. It has been the one constant my entire life. He deserves more than that from me and I feel a little ashamed of myself for ever questioning how much he wanted me.

But I wasn’t the ‘it’ I was referring to in my question, so I rush to set him straight.

“I meant falling in love with my mother, Dad,” I tell him. “Do you ever regret it? Because she left...”

It’s something I’ve never asked him, partly because I was afraid of what he’d say, but also because I couldn’t imagine that he didn’t regret it. Her leaving brought him to his knees, he told me that more than once.

“If you could go back in time, would you have avoided that diner where you met? Would you have done it differently?”

I chew my nail nervously, his silence heavy at the other end of the line. I wonder if he’s going to answer or if he’s just going to say it’s none of my business and move on.

“No, baby girl,” he whispers eventually, his voice a little hoarse. “I wouldn’t have changed a damn thing. I had two wonderful years with your mama and I wouldn’t trade one moment of them for any of the pain I felt in the twenty-five years since she left, because loving her was worth it.”

“Thanks daddy,” I whisper. “I guess I better go. Thanks to you, I’ve got something to do.” My resolve has strengthened after my father’s emotional assertion. I want to believe he’s right; loving someone is worth the pain of losing them.

“That’s my girl,” he chuckles. “And next time we talk I want to hear more about your

young man.”

I hang up the phone after promising to answer all his questions during our next call.

I sit there for a moment, letting the butterflies in my stomach circulate at the thought of what I’m about to do. I know if I mull over it for any longer, I’ll lose my nerve, which means it’s now or never and never is a long time to wait.

I race to Lennox’s study, knowing that’s where he’ll be.

The simplicity of that intimacy makes me smile again as I think about how I’m going to say what I need to.

I go back and forth before deciding it’s best not to plan it, to just wing it and speak from the heart, as that’s what I’m talking about after all.

The study door is open so I slip in, ready to blurt out what I’ve come here to say, before I notice Lennox is on the phone.

He stands, staring out of the floor to ceiling window, his back facing me, cell to his ear.

I take a moment to admire how damn good he looks.

He must have had meetings today because he’s changed out of his gym wear and is in what I like to call his ‘off duty top-model’ outfit of jeans and a Henley shirt he fills out as if it were made for him.

After a few seconds of me ogling him, I take in the fact he’s having an argument with the person at the other end of the line, which is totally out of character.

Sure, he was an asshole to me when we first met but there were extenuating circumstances and all is now forgiven.

As a rule, Lennox is polite to a fault; a total Southern gentleman.

So why does he sound like he wants to murder the unfortunate person he's talking to?

"What do you mean it's coming out now?" Lennox snarls down the phone and I'm grateful as hell not to be on the receiving end of it. "I told you to stop it!"

I stand uncertainly in the doorway, watching Lennox pace up and down. He's so wired he hasn't even noticed me.

"For fuck's sake, Declan. This is the shit I pay you for!"

I frown, wondering what's got Lennox so strung-out. Did something happen with his return to the Pelicans? That wouldn't make sense, he's their best player and they've been falling over themselves trying to get him back on the ice this whole time.

So, what is going on?

"No, I haven't told her yet." Lennox rubs the bridge of his nose like he does when he's getting a headache.

Normally, I'd walk over and try to soothe the pain away, but something in his tone makes me hang back.

"I fucking know, Dec! I don't need you to tell me how pissed off Isabella's gonna be when she finds out. "

At the sound of my name, my stomach bottoms out, reminding me of being at the top



of a rollercoaster, peering down at the drop that's about to come. My planned declaration is suddenly forgotten in the face of the shit-show I feel heading straight for me.

“Shit, Dec. What do you mean she's coming here? We agreed that wasn't fucking happening!”

My eyes track the tension growing in his body and the rising panic in his voice. Lennox doesn't do panic. Something is very wrong.

“Fuck!” He slams his phone down onto the table, angrier than I've ever seen him.

“When I find out what?” I ask, softly, watching him as his head snaps up to realize I've overheard everything.

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*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:52 am*

Lennox's dark eyes meet mine and the alarm bells which started ringing in my mind get a little louder because instead of the warmth I'm used to seeing, there's a hardness in his gaze.

Not good.

"There's something I need to show you."

Picking up his phone, he taps a few keys and hands it over to me to look at. As I stare at the screen, it feels like my entire world is turned upside down in a matter of seconds.

"I wanted to tell you before, but I didn't know how and then it didn't matter because I called the whole thing off.

But now it looks like Honey's people didn't get the fucking memo.

"He runs his fingers through his hair in agitation and tries to take my elbow to pull me closer to him, but I'm stiff as a board.

My eyes are glued to the headline of the article and the photo above it, everything else has just turned into white noise.

'Gray Scores a Fiancé!'

The picture is of two of the best looking faces you could hope to see. Two faces who belong in magazines. Who belong together.

“That’s your ex,” I state dully, unable to take my eyes off of the photo of the model draped all over Lennox as they’re coming out of some fancy party. I check the date of the article, hoping like hell it’s from months ago, from before I even showed up here. It’s not. It was published today.

“Izzy, I’m so sorry,” Lennox’s words come out in a rush, but it’s as if I’m hearing them from far away. That’s all he has. An apology. An apology and a face full of regret.

There’s something horribly ironic about me coming to tell Lennox I’ve totally fallen for him and instead finding out he’s already fallen for someone else. But, right now, I don’t care about irony, not when the world suddenly seems to be spinning underneath my feet.

“I feel sick.”

“It’s not what it looks like,” he says.

I drop the phone and look at him. He’s shaking his head. Sighing. But he’s not saying much.

I turn away from him, rushing out of the room, leaving him cursing behind me. I need some fresh air. I need to think.

I run down the stairs, hearing him pounding down them after me. He should be careful of his knee, I think to myself, absently. But just as quickly, I remind myself that I shouldn’t give a crap about his knee, I shouldn’t give a crap about him at all.

I never understood when people were talking about a love/hate relationship, but I think I get it now, because I’ve moved from one to the other so quickly, I might have broken the sound barrier.

“Izzy, stop!”

Nope, not stopping, definitely not.

In the end, he doesn't give me the choice, catching up to me and grabbing hold of my arm at the bottom of the steps.

His grip is gentle, but firm and I hate him for the way I so desperately want to lean into his touch, as if my body didn't get the message that he's the biggest bastard I've ever met.

“We don't have much time, and I want to explain it all to you before she gets here.” Lennox's eyes bore into mine as if he's trying to read my thoughts.

“ Until she does what ?”

This feels like a nightmare, like my sub-conscious has come up with the worst possible ending for us and manifested it. If I could wake up now, that would be really great.

Before I start to pinch myself, there's an insistent knock at the front door and I see Lennox's face fall.

“Fuck, not now,” he growls, his grip on my arm tightening involuntarily.

“Nox, you're hurting me,” I tell him, even though he's not. I just need him to stop touching me. He delivers, dropping my arm like I've burned him.

He looks horrified. “Izzy, I'm sorry, I didn't mean -,”

I never get to find out whether he's apologizing for lying to me, for keeping secrets

from me or for grabbing me.

The front door creaks open and there's a squeal of excitement and a flurry of blonde hair and clattering of high heels.

"Noxy, I missed you!" The Amazonian stick-thin blonde throws her arms around Lennox and peppers his lips with kisses. He holds onto her upper arms and tries to create a little space between them, his eyes on me.

I guess I should be grateful he's trying to spare my feelings, but pity is the last damn thing I feel for Lennox Gray right now. Besides, it's way too late to spare my feelings, that ship has well and truly sailed.

Now, I'm definitely going to be sick. I step away from them, hoping I can slip out and just disappear without being noticed. But – as always – my luck is nowhere near that good.

"Did you see the socials? Isn't it great?" She's bouncing up and down in excitement and hasn't seemed to notice Lennox is still standing there like a damn statue as she shows him her phone like a kid showing off a report card full of As.

Lennox doesn't even look at her phone, his eyes are locked on mine.

"Who's this?" Honey eventually notices the lack of attention Lennox or 'Noxy' is paying her and looks down her perfect nose at me, a feat which isn't all that difficult as she's almost a foot taller.

"This is Isabella," he says simply, warmly even, and I can almost see her hackles rise at his tone. "And Honey...we need to –"

I have no intention of getting in the middle of this and I don't know what game

Lennox is playing, but I'm ready to cash in my chips and head the hell home.

"I'm Mr. Gray's physical therapist," I add quickly, avoiding the look Lennox throws me. I try to smile at her, but it probably looks more like a grimace.

"Oh, sure, the masseuse for your elbow, right?" Honey looks to Lennox for verification.

"Knee," I correct automatically, and she looks at me as if I've offended her for answering a question not directed at me. I guess she figures the help should be silent and subservient.

"Whatever," she shrugs, dismissing me with a wave of her manicured hand. "I'll just go upstairs and start getting settled in. The driver will bring in the rest of my things." Honey gestures upstairs, blissfully unaware her words are rubbing salt into my open wound.

"Honey, we need to talk," Lennox calls after her, but she's already half-way up the stairs. She can move surprisingly fast in those vertiginous heels. Another way she's completely different to me, I notice.

"I know, we need to set a date and start thinking about a guest list, I'm so excited!" Honey claps her hands together like a little kid and my eyes zero in on the huge rock on her ring finger.

It's not the size of the diamond that makes my knees go to Jell-o, it's the thought of Lennox going down on one knee and giving it to her .

I've been fooling myself this whole time. I let myself believe in the damn fairy tale even though I knew better.

I've always known happily ever after doesn't exist outside of Disney movies, but somewhere along the way of falling in love with Lennox, I must have forgotten that.

And holy crap, she's talking about their wedding . This is actually happening, it's not a nightmare and no amount of pinching myself is going to get me out of this seventh circle of hell.

"Nox?" I look up at him in confusion, willing him to tell me something to make all this make some kind of sense. Like, I don't know, he had temporary amnesia or this is some kind of prank or... I don't know, the wrong dimension spun itself on its ass and landed at our feet.

He looks between me and – fuck - his fiancée, conflicted about what to do before he steps in the direction she's gone.

He's chosen her.

"Just, wait here, don't go anywhere, okay? I need to straighten this shit out." He doesn't wait for me to reply before rushing off, probably to placate the woman he's apparently engaged to.

What. The. Actual. Fuck.

For a full minute I stand there, frozen to the spot, unable to compute what I've just seen.

When my brain starts functioning again, the only thing I can think is how much I need to get out of here.

On auto-pilot, I tap my phone a few times, ordering an Uber because there's no way I'm driving Lennox's truck anymore. I don't want anything of his.

I get flashes of conversations I've overheard, scraps between Lennox and Declan, between him and Kai and I realize this is what they were talking about.

Everyone knew about it, everyone apart from me.

Part of me wonders if they've all been laughing at my naivete behind my back.

I'd like to think Kai wouldn't, that at least one of the relationships I've had in this house has been real.

Vaguely I'm aware of a uniformed man, laden with matching designer suitcases walking through the front door and grumbling to himself as he starts to struggle up the stairs with them.

It looks like she's moving in. Permanently. And, of course, why wouldn't she be? This is going to be her home when she marries Lennox.

The thought causes a bubble of hysterical laughter I swallow down before it turns into the real emotion I'm feeling, the bone-deep misery I don't think I've ever experienced before, not even when my dad sat me down when I was old enough and explained the woman who gave birth to me had left us because 'she didn't want to be a mom'.

It almost feels like history is repeating itself. Lennox said he didn't want to get married, he wasn't into the institution. But perhaps what he was really trying to say is that he just didn't want to marry me .

I'm not sure how long I stand there for before I decide to get the hell out of dodge. I can meet the Uber at the front gates. I don't need to wait around in the entrance hall and watch what I thought was happiness crumble around me.



I'm almost at the door when Lennox's unmistakable step hits the stairs.

"Isabella, wait!"

Like the fool that I am, I do and it's not just because it's damn hard to walk away from him; it's because I feel like I deserve to have some freakin' answers!

"Where are you going?" That alarmed look I'm so unused to seeing on him makes a reappearance. Lennox is always in control and full of confidence, but right now he seems anything but.

"Anywhere!" I burst out. "Anywhere that's far away from here!"

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:52 am*

“Don’t leave, for Chrissakes, not before we’ve talked about this!”

As I look at him, the scraps of our conversations start to come together. Puzzle pieces make their way into recognizable pictures.

“Of course you wouldn’t have told your family about me.” I shake my head at myself, wondering how I could have been so naïve. “You couldn’t tell them you were with me when you were engaged to someone else.”

The word ‘engaged’ is like a dagger twisting in my stomach.

Whatever I thought we were, clearly I was wrong beyond belief. There was never an ‘us’, there was only him and me and now there is just me again.

“What was I? Just someone to pass the time with, while you waited for her to come back?” The thought makes me sick to my stomach. “I may not be what you want, but I deserve to be treated with more respect than that.”

“Iz, would you just calm down and let me explain?” Lennox growls, which just makes me angrier because everyone knows the worst thing you can possibly tell someone who is pissed beyond belief is to ‘calm down’.

“First of all, don’t ‘Iz’ me, we’re not friends, we’re not anything anymore.

” I ignore the hurt on his face because it’s nothing compared to how I’m feeling.

“And ‘explain’?” I virtually spit the word out.

“What’s there to explain, Nox? Can you tell me your damn engagement announcement isn’t all over social freakin’ media?

Can you tell me your fiancé isn’t upstairs right now moving back into your bedroom like she never left? ”

The bedroom I started thinking of as ours. The bedroom we’ve been sharing.

“Well if it’s on social media, then I guess it must be fucking true!” Lennox snarls.

“So it isn’t? Do you want to tell Honey or should I?” I challenge him, hoping he’ll take me up on it.

Please, just say this is all some big mistake. Say I’m the one you want.

“Dammit, it isn’t as simple as that, Isabella! God knows, I wish it were.” Lennox rakes his fingers through his too-long hair, reminding me that’s one more thing I’ll never do again.

“It should be,” I tell him, simply, feeling myself deflate like a popped balloon.

“It should be that easy, that simple, Lennox. Because if you don’t have a fiancé and the woman who barged into your house is nothing but an intruder then all it would take is one call to your security team and they’d throw her the hell out.

But back there, you couldn’t even tell her what we were to each other and you know why? ”

“Because –“

I put a hand up, stopping him in his tracks. “Because you can’t admit to having a

fucking girlfriend when you've got a fucking fiancée, Lennox. Because you and I, we're nothing but a dirty little secret that I wasn't even fucking aware of."

I can feel that I'm about to break down and I refuse to let that happen. I won't do that in front of him. I have to hold onto any scrap of dignity I can at this point. I've already given too much of it away. Time for damage control.

"I'll send someone to pick up my things." There's no way I'm coming back here to do it myself. I need to put as much distance between us as possible.

"You don't have to – you can stay here as long as you like."

"Ha!" My laugh sounds more like a dry wheeze. "Thanks, but I'll pass." The last thing I want is to sit around watching him and Bitchface Barbie playing happy damn families. My heart can only take so much of a bashing.

"Don't do this, Iz."

I flinch at his use of my nickname, the name he started using when things started to change between us.

"Me?" I shout at him. After what's just happened, he's blaming me? Hell no.

"I didn't do anything, Nox. This is all on you. You broke us, there's nothing left. That's if there was anything real here to begin with."

And that's what cuts so deep, the realization that he never felt about me the way I did him, because if he had he would never have been able to do this to me. He would have never lied. Honey wouldn't have been able to kiss him the way she did. And Honey would be the one leaving. Not me.

“Isabella, please, just give me a chance to-,”

I hold my hand up, stopping him right there because I’m fresh out of chances.

“I don’t want to hear your excuses, Nox. You can keep them.”

He’s standing so close, if I reach out my hand I’ll be able to touch him, but, even then, it feels like he’s a world away.

“What about the work we still have to do? The rehab.” Lennox is grasping at straws now and we both know it.

It’s a last ditch attempt to save something that’s already gone, something that apparently only existed in my mind to begin with anyway. I should have known, I should have stuck with what I always believed; love only screws up your life.

Love is fucking fake!

I learned that lesson when I was just a kid but somewhere along the line with Nox, I must have forgotten it. He made me forget it. But now it has come rushing back in glorious technicolor.

I look straight at him, ignoring how much it hurts, ignoring how much I want to go to him, to let him explain it all away, to let him tell me all the lies I need to hear.

“You’re all good now, Nox. You don’t need me anymore.” The heaviness in my tone tells him I’m not just talking about the therapy, I’m talking about whatever it was between us. I feel another crack in my heart at the knowledge this is it, I’m saying goodbye. I’m done here. “I have to go.”

“Shit, Isabella, at least let me drive you.” He takes a step towards me, reaching out

and, although it takes everything I have, I step away from him.

“Noxy!” The blonde bombshell who’s blown apart my world with one sweep of her dyed mane totters over to us, laying her hand proprietarily on Lennox’s shoulder.

I want to rip her arm off, jealousy surging up inside of me like a tsunami. But I have no right. Lennox isn’t mine. He never was. He’s always been hers.

“Oh, you’re still here.” She looks me up and down, her expression saying exactly how little she thinks of me.

“Not for long,” I manage to grit the words out, ignoring Lennox’s pained expression.

“Noxy!” She whines and the nickname grates on me like nails on a chalkboard. “I’ve been traveling for hours, a massage would be div-iiiine.” She all but drapes herself over Lennox. Why doesn’t he stop her? He just stands there like waxwork, unmoving.

My automatic reaction is to shrink back, make myself small.

It’s what I would have done in high school and Honey, after all, is just another Carly, a beautiful bully.

So, I do the opposite. I stand a little taller, even though that still puts me at a serious height disadvantage to the model with her endless legs.

“I’m actually on my way out.” I motion towards the door, wishing- among other things – I was on the other side of it. “So, no.” No – it feels damn good to say that word. It sounds final, like all of this.

Honey huffs dramatically. “I’m sure you don’t have any clients more important than Nox.” Her voice is saccharine sweet as her painted talons stroke his shoulder. “You

wouldn't want him to tell your boss he doesn't need your services anymore."

My eyes widen. Seriously? She's threatening my job now?

"That's enough, Honey." Lennox's voice is sharp as he takes hold of the hand that's rubbing him like a damn magic lamp, stopping her ministrations.

I don't know if he's telling her to stop touching him or to stop treating me like a damn servant. But I don't care, I'm not waiting around to find out. I'm done with both of them.

"Noxy, why are you being like this?" Honey pouts at Lennox like a spoiled child.

"You should have told me you were fucking coming," he growls. "This wasn't what we agreed to."

Whatever, I'm not hanging around to watch them have a domestic. Miss me with that bullshit.

Looking directly at Lennox, I hold my head high, my pride carrying me through, papering up the cracks over my heart, at least for now.

"Congratulations, you two deserve each other."

I watch as Lennox's face falls – as if he cares what I think – and as he takes a step towards me, I turn around and all but run out the door. I don't stop until I've slid into the waiting Uber and told the driver to get out of here as fast as he can.

Familiar feelings of worthlessness threaten to overtake me. I hunker down in the back seat, willing him to drive faster, to put as much distance between me and Lennox as possible, as if that'll stop the hurt.

So, this is what it feels like for a heart to break, I think to myself dully as I stop trying to hold the tears back. I don't think I could anyway, even if I wanted to. I don't know if I'm crying for whatever I thought we had ending, or because apparently it never really begun.

I've only ever been a stop-gap for Lennox, if that. I was never his endgame. I was stupid to believe I could be and that stupidity has landed me here; no man, no job and no damn idea what to do next.



### Chapter

### Eighteen

I've wasted way too many tears on Lennox Damn Gray. They've stained my pillow, my sweatshirt, the designer-looking silk shirt Kiara's wearing. For someone who 'doesn't do tears', I've really outdone myself.

I'd slunk out of the Uber and directly into Kiara's arms, the angry expression on her face telling me she was ready to go on over to the Gray Mansion and go medieval on Lennox's ass on my behalf. And, to be honest, I half-wanted her to. I wanted him to hurt like he hurt me.

I didn't tell her what had happened. I didn't need to.

Even if Lennox hadn't come clean to me only moments before Honey made her big entrance, it would have been impossible to hide from the news of their engagement.

It was all over social media and every tabloid website in the northern hemisphere.

Not that I'd poured over every one of those articles until Kiara forcibly took my laptop away from me or anything.

I wish I had amnesia, that way I wouldn't be able to remember exactly how it felt to be held by him. I didn't realize I'd been preparing the whole time for what it would feel like to lose him, but the truth is he was never mine to lose.

I hate him for what he did to me. But I also I hate myself a little too, for what I let him do to me.

For letting him in even though I knew I shouldn't have.

For breaking all of my rules because I thought he was special, because I thought he was worth it.

My thoughts go back to the encouragement my gave me, telling me the pain of losing someone was worth the happiness of being with them, that it's the price you pay for loving someone. It sure as hell doesn't feel that way.

"He's not worth any more tears, babe." Kiara says the words I'm thinking out loud as she strokes my hair soothingly. Absently, I wonder if her hands are tired. She's been stroking my hair for the better part of a week.

She's not wrong, I reason, but turns out it's easier said than done.

I was never much of a crier but since leaving the Gray Mansion I don't think I've really stopped. The worst part is, all I have to show for my sobbing is a wet pillow and a banging headache.

"You think Michael can take over?" I ask, part of me feeling as if I shouldn't be letting my private life affect my professional one.

"He's already said he will," Kiara confirms and the lack of judgement in her voice makes me relax a fraction. "You said it's just a few follow-ups anyway, right?"

I nod.

"Did you tell Michael why?" I ask, sniffing loudly like a total lady. The man is my

mentor and the last thing I want is for him to think I'm a complete flake.

"I told him you were taking some long-overdue vacation time." Kiara gives me a meaningful look as I scoff.

"I haven't taken a vacation since..." My mind blanks.

"Exactly. So you're definitely in need of one. Take a couple of weeks – do something fun, you work so damn hard - you more than deserve it," she nudges me.

"So, let me get this straight; I screw things up by falling for the biggest client we've ever had– even though you warned me not to – and when the whole thing implodes you punish me by giving me vacation time?

"I frown over at her, before I suddenly go cold inside.

"Oh crap, Ki – you're not firing me, are you?

I love this job and I know I messed up but -,"

"Will you stop?" Kiara puts both of her hands on my upper arms as if she's about to shake some sense into me.

"Of course, I'm not firing you! Only you would consider a holiday a punishment!

" She shakes her curly head at me in despair.

"And you didn't screw anything up with Len...

him," she interrupts herself, looking at me quickly to see if I've heard her almost name he-who-shall-not-be-named.

“He’s the one who screwed things up with you and there’s no doubt in my mind the day is gonna come when he’s going to realize what he missed out on.

And you don’t need to worry about the work side of things.

We’re paid up in full, I got an alert this morning from the bank confirming the final installment has been received, two weeks before your contract was due to be up. ”

I go quiet, processing what she’s just said.

Lennox has held up his end of the deal, even though – contractually – he didn’t have to.

The ungracious side of me, says it’s the only way he knows to make things right, to apologize by throwing money at the problem.

The hopeful side says he’s done it because he’s a good person.

I tell that part of me to shut the hell up, because I have no business thinking anything positive about Lennox. Not right now. Maybe not ever.

I see Kiara’s phone light up with a text from a familiar name and I blink in surprise at it.

“Kai finally called you?” I ask, wiping my tear-stained cheeks, because I need to talk about something other than he who shall no longer – ever - be named.

Kiara gives me a sidelong look, as if she’s checking that I really want to hear this rather than just spewing the beans if I’m not up for the information.

I respond earnestly. “Tell me, I need to think about something other than my crappy

life!”

“Ain’t that the truth,” she mutters, nudging me gently, forcing a watery smile out of me. “We were supposed to go out tonight but -,”

“Nuh-uh,” I shake my pounding head. “No buts, you’re going!”

“There’s no way – I’m not leaving you like this, Iz.” She gestures to my sad, unwashed, pajama-in-the-middle-of-the-day state.

I glance down at myself, knowing she has a point. If Kiara looked this pathetic I wouldn’t want to go out and live it up either. But if Kiara ever looked like this it would be nothing short of a national emergency.

“I promise to shower while you’re gone,” I assure her.

“And eat something.” She looks pointedly at the cheese sandwich still sitting on my nightstand. Turns out having your heart ripped out is murder on your appetite.

“And I’ll eat something.” I hold up my little finger for the standard pinky swear.

“And you won’t stay up all night binge-watching repeats of ‘Gilmore Girls’,” Kiara adds because, damn, the woman knows me too well.

“No promises on that one.” I snatch my pinky finger away from hers. ‘Gilmore Girls’ is my happy place. I’ve seen it so many times it’s like a comforting blanket. I figured all moms and daughters – apart from in my house, obviously – were like Lorelei and Rory for so long I’m ashamed to admit it.

Kiara looks conflicted so I resort to violence, physically pushing her towards the door.

“We both know how long you take to get ready, so go home and make yourself even more beautiful and get out there and knock Kai’s damn socks off!” I tell her.

“Iz...” she starts, her voice far from convinced.

“Kai’s one of the good ones,” I assure her, hoping I haven’t got that completely wrong – my man radar is apparently faulty. “And he really likes you. And if it works out with you guys, we could give you a cute couples name like KaKi! So, everyone’s a winner!” I joke.

“Khaki’s not really my color,” Kiara deadpans.

“Noted, it wasn’t my best work,” I admit, hands up. “I’ll think on it while you’re out.” I make a shooing motion with my hands.

Kiara gives me one last once-over. “If you’re sure...”

“I’m sure, one hundred percent,” I assure her. “And I expect a full de-brief in the morning.”

My friend sends me a mock-salute and is half-way out the door when she pauses.

“He’s just a guy, Iz, you don’t need him. You’re gonna be okay,” she vows.

“I know.” I conjure the best smile I can, hoping it’s convincing, and close the door behind her.

“And turn you damn cell back on!” she shouts from the hallway.

Just a guy. It’s the phrase I would have used with any man other than Lennox, because to me he was so much more than that. It didn’t take long for him to become

everything to me.

I shake my head as if it were possible to physically force that thought from my mind. Delving into those feelings is a complete dead end. They can't go anywhere, which means it's time to park them.

I give my cellphone a wide berth. It's been off since I called Kiara from the Uber, asking her to come over.

Lennox tried to call me more than once before then and rather than ignoring his calls, turning my phone off seemed like an easier option.

Part of me wants to check if he's left any messages, wants to hear his voice.

But that's the weak side of me talking; the side that still wants to hear what he has to say, as if any explanation could make any of this okay.

Mostly, I'm too pissed off and, more importantly, too hurt to deal with anything Lennox has to say right now.

I've allowed myself a week of wallowing, it's time to get my shit together.

I sniff my sweatshirt, wrinkling my nose at the ripeness I smell.

Time for a shower. And after that I'll call a company to get my stuff back from the Gray Mansion and then maybe I'll order a pizza and drink a whole damn bottle of wine.

And that's how I'm going to get through this, I reason.

One task at a time. If I can focus on the next thing and then the one after that and then

the one after that and on and on, then I don't have to ask myself how you go from thinking you can't live without someone to having to.

I won't have to think about what it feels like to know you thought you were in love with someone who apparently didn't come anywhere close to reciprocating your feelings, no matter what you thought.

I won't have to think about how you stop loving someone, even when it's clear they don't love you back.



Chapter

Nineteen

Things between Kiara and Kai are proceeding at pace and I'm truly happy for her.

We haven't talked about the elephant in the room.

I know for a fact Kai has tried to tell her what happened between me and Lennox, but Kiara has stopped him every time.

She knows I don't want to hear it and she has no desire to play piggy in the damn middle.

In moments of weakness, I've been tempted to ask the fateful words.

"Did he say anything about me?"

But I've managed to stop myself.

They're the same moments when I think about going onto social media or searching the news for his name. So far, I've managed not to crack, and it'll only get easier from here on out, right?

Days go by and then a week – apart from the initial flurry of voicemails and texts, all of which I ignored, the name Lennox stopped appearing on my phone several times a day.

I guess he got the message, finally. Even for someone as thick-headed as him, me not answering for days at a time is a pretty clear indicator that I don't want anything to do with him.

At least that's what I thought. It turns out Lennox is more thick-headed than most.

It's late at night, ungodly late. Even though I'm not asleep, the buzzing of my doorbell annoys me. I frown at the video screen not instantly recognizing the big man loitering there with a ball-cap pulled low against the rain.

I press on the intercom. "Wrong apartment."

"Isabella?"

Everything inside me goes still at the voice, at his voice and the sound of my name wrapped in its huskiness. Even after everything, just hearing him makes my heart beat louder, faster and somehow slower, all at the same time.

"Go away, Nox."

I'm proud at how strong I sound against the crumbling of my defenses.

"Please, Izzy, if you'd just let me explain -,"

I put my hands over my ears because I can't deal with this, not now.

I've managed to get to a place where I felt like I was doing better, where I wasn't walking around in a fog of heartbreak the whole time.

Where I wasn't crying myself to sleep every night and waking up each morning knowing the pain the day would bring.

Or maybe I was and I was just getting better at hiding it.

Either way, I was less of a basket-case than I had been.

“Sometimes you don’t get to have it all, Nox. You don’t get to have a damn fiancée and have me. You don’t get to keep me on the backburner just in case your first choice falls through,” I explain to him tightly.

“That’s what I’m trying to tell you, about me and Honey -,”

“Nox!” The sound of her name is like a knife going through me. “We’re not talking about this. There’s nothing to talk about. It’s over.” I hit my forehead against the wall, telling myself I’m doing the right thing.

Lennox’s broad shoulders roll as he sighs and as he looks directly into the camera; I wonder how the hell I’m ever going to get over him.

It’s bad enough he’s impossible to avoid with his face on billboards, on every sports channel and magazine, but he made me feel more than anyone I’ve ever met.

And that’s what I can’t forgive him for – he made me want him, only him and now I don’t know how to want anyone else.

“When you’re ready, call me, Iz. Please.” There’s a desperate quality in his tone, which gets to me even though I don’t want it to. “There’s a lot you need to hear.”

“Don’t hold your breath,” I snipe, biting my lip to keep my voice from wobbling. “Go home, Nox. Please. If you care about me at all, just leave me alone.”

Something in my tone must tell him I’m on the verge of losing it and I watch the video feed as he hesitates for a moment before stepping back.

He takes one last look at the screen and holds his hand up in a goodbye.

As he steps away, my hand goes to the intercom, ready to tell him to wait, to come up, to make everything alright.

But then my sanity returns and I snatch my hand away, forcing myself to take a step back.

Whatever Lennox has to tell me, it won't undo the hurt he's caused, the damage. I can't even think about being with someone I don't trust and I'd be stupid if I trusted Lennox after everything that's happened between us.

I still have the vacation time Kiara has given me and there's only one place I want to be, only one place I can start to feel better. Somewhere far away from Lennox and his midnight visits to my mind, and now even my front door.

I book my flight to Alabama for the following day, planning on making it a surprise for my dad. I ignore the voice in my head telling me I'm running away. I push that voice right down into the bottom of my suitcase and struggle to get the oversized case out of the door.

"You ever heard of travelling light?" The familiar voice makes me snap my head up in surprise before I've even managed to lock the door behind me.

"Kai!" I jump, holding my hand over my chest. "You scared the crap out of me!"

"Good to see you too, Iz-meister." Kai smiles broadly at me, opening his arms and – despite his connection to Lennox, despite the fact I'm sure he must have known exactly what was going on the whole time – I want to go in for a hug. But I don't and Kai's lips turn down at the edges.

“Don’t make that face, you look like a sad clown,” I tell him, blandly.

“You’re pissed at me too? I thought you’d be happy to see me because I’m so adorable.” He shrugs as if that were a self-fulfilling prophecy.

“I’m not pissed at you, Kai.” I cross my arms because I do really want to hug him - Kai gives good hugs, it’s one of the things I like most about him. “I’m just disappointed.”

“Ouch!” Kai’s hands go to his heart as if I’ve scored a direct hit. “When your parents used the ‘d’ word, that was the worst.”

“Well, lucky for both of us, I’m not your mom.” I check the time on my watch, even though I know I’ve got plenty of time before my plane as I’m Chronically Early Girl . It’s a crappy superhero name but at least it’s accurate.

I frown at him. “What are you doing here, Kai? And how did you even get in anyway?”

My building security is pretty tight and my neighbors aren’t the type to just let anybody in.

Kai has the decency to look sheepish as he holds out a keyring I recognize.

She wouldn’t!

He sees the anger in my expression and starts using calming motions with his hands. “Don’t get pissed with Kiki!”

Kiki? Seriously? I file that gem away to give her crap about later.

“Why would Kiara give you the keys to my apartment?” I love my best friend and I know she wouldn’t have done it without a good reason, or if she had then I may have to kill her.

“Because I told her the truth about what happened with Nox and you and that walking coat-hanger.” I’m guessing that’s Bitch Barbie or she-who-shall-not-be-named. “And once I told her what I’m about to tell you, she gave me the keys in case you wouldn’t let me in and listen to me.”

Kai explains at speed, as if he knows he only has a few seconds to convince me.

He’s gauged it well, having my best friend’s blessing is pretty much a touch-down.

But I’m still suspicious, especially as Kiara and I have agreed she wouldn’t get involved even though she was dating Kai.

Either way, this is a rabbit hole I don’t want to go down.

Getting over Lennox was already proving nigh-on impossible; I don’t need to give the fire of feelings I still have for him any additional fuel.

“Kai, I’ve got a plane to catch, so either we need to speed this up or you can tell me when I get back.”

“You’re leaving?” Kai asks, and I gesture towards my suitcase, raising an eyebrow. “Where’re you going?”

“I’m going home, Kai.” I don’t dwell on how ‘home’ used to be the place I shared with Lennox. “I need to get away from here for a while, away from Nox and his damn face plastered on the billboard I walk past every day to get my damn morning coffee!”

I snap my mouth shut as Kai gives me a sympathetic look.

“We miss you, you know, Iz? He misses you.”

I shake my head because I don’t want to hear it, although I also do, I really do. Confusing doesn’t even begin to cover all my feelings around Lennox.

“I bet, now you don’t have anyone to watch trashy box-sets with,” I joke, purposely ignoring his mention of Lennox.

Kai sighs, signaling he hasn’t missed my evasion.

“This is for you.” He holds out a crisp white envelope.

“What is it?” I frown at it, arms still crossed.

“Only one way to find out.” He waggles it in the air in front of me, before rolling his eyes melodramatically. “It’s an envelope, Iz, not an atomic bomb.”

Slowly, I reach out and take it, popping open the seal and looking inside. Part of me expects a note from Lennox or maybe a copy of my NDA to remind not to say anything about what has gone down at the Gray Mansion.

It takes me a moment to realize what I have in my hands.

I really must have lost track of things because the ticket has today’s date and it’s the first pre-season game for the Pelicans, for Lennox.

People pay top dollar for these ‘glass’ tickets, right behind the player’s bench.

It’s as close as you can possibly get to the players and the action.

“He wants you there, Izzy.” Kai’s voice interrupts my thoughts.

“If that’s true, why didn’t he bring it himself?” I ask.

“Would you have let him in the door?” Kai gives me a knowing look and I don’t disagree with him. The last interaction I had with Lennox, I wasn’t in the most receptive of moods.

“What about Honey?” I almost choke on her name. Evil Bitch-Face sounds more accurate anyway.

“Honey’s history, Iz, she has been for a long time. If you picked your phone up every now and again you’d know that.”

“He couldn’t even choose me in front of her, Kai. And I’m not a homewrecker. I’m not the kind of girl who fights for things that don’t rightfully belong to her.”



*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:52 am*

“He chose you. Every single time, he chose you. It’s just that...There were things...Ugh God... Honey, she’s complicated. Irrational. And there were loose ends that needed to be tied up in order to not have her spiral out of control. No one expected her to show up the way she did –“

“But she still had the right to show up. She could still do that. And you know what Lennox didn’t do? He didn’t send her packing.”

“He’s hurting, Iz,” Kai says, completely avoiding everything I’ve said. “But he won’t let anyone see it. God forbid the almighty Lennox Gray prove he’s human,” he chuckles. “You’re the only one he really ever let in, you know? That has to count for something.”

I bite my lip, feeling the emotions I’ve been trying to keep at bay hammering at my resolve.

I do know, because Lennox told me as much.

He told me things he hasn’t told anyone else and I’ve done the same because I thought what was between us was real.

I trusted him with my deepest thoughts and feelings knowing it would be hard when things inevitably came to an end, which the cynic in me always thought it would.

Joke’s on me, I guess. I thought it would be hard when we broke up, but it was more than that, it’s been heartbreaking.

“Hey, Iz.” Kai waves his hand in front of my face, taking me out of my daydream.  
“Turn your TV on to ESPN.”

I frown at him.

“For what?” I shake my head. “It doesn’t matter, Kai. I’ve gotta go!”

“It sure as shit does matter, Iz. I saw how you and Nox were together, I saw how he looked at you like you hung the damn moon and don’t try to pretend you didn’t look at him the same way.

It was sickening, but it was also the happiest I’ve ever seen Nox.

And from what I’ve heard from Kiara, it’s the happiest you’ve ever been.

So, if that isn’t worth 5 minutes of your damn time, then maybe I don’t know you at all!

” Kai throws his hands up in the air in frustration, looking at me with a seriousness all the more powerful because it’s completely out of character for him.

“You been practicing that?” I raise an eyebrow at him, covering the effect his words have had on me.

He shrugs. “Nah – I figured I’d just wing it.

I’ve been told I have a flair for the dramatic.

” He looks inordinately pleased with himself and I can’t help but laugh as some of the tension eases out of the air.

“So, are you gonna turn ESPN on or am I going to have to carry you inside and do it myself?”

“I’d like to see you try,” I mutter at him, making a decision. “Tell me what it is you want me to watch first.”

“Nox has a pre-game interview starting in about,” Kai checks his non-existent watch. “2 minutes ago.”

“And I care about this why?” I ask, although I can’t help but steal glances at the TV set as if Lennox might just appear behind it.

“Jesus, you and Nox are as damn stubborn as each other, no wonder you get along so well,” Kai gripes to himself, before changing tack. “Have I ever steered you wrong?” I give Kai a look and he holds his hands up. “Alright, don’t answer that. But, seriously, Iz. Just do it.”

I give up pretending I’m not all-consumingly curious about what’s going on and – for once – I do as I’m told, going back into my apartment, leaving my case for Kai to deal with.

Turning the set to ESPN, the sight of Lennox suddenly filling up the screen takes my breath away. It really is unfair how good he looks. I’m here pining and he looks like a damn male model.

The attractive reporter is in the middle of asking a question about the new Pelicans uniform when Lennox interrupts her. For the first time I notice he seems a little antsy, his hand goes to the back of his neck in a telltale sign I wonder how many people apart from me know.

“There’s something else, I wanted to come on here and talk about,” Lennox says,

looking straight into the camera. “Actually, it’s more like a message I’ve been trying to send someone, but she didn’t want to listen to me.”

I sink down onto my couch, not trusting my legs to sustain me anymore, eyes gripped by what’s unfolding on the screen.

“Alright, I’m guessing this is for your beautiful fiancée…”

“No. There’s no fiancée,” Lennox states coldly.

“What the -?” I whisper and my surprise is mirrored in the face of the perfectly coiffed interviewer on screen.

She looks like she’s been caught off-guard, but she also knows you don’t interrupt Lennox Gray. The man is a God in the world of sports and whatever’s about to come out of his mouth is going to be big news.

“Told ya.” Kai shrugs nonplussed before I shush him.

“So…you’re not engaged,” the reporter confirms and the expression on her face says this is good news to single women everywhere. She looks like she might jump him there and then. Jealousy flares up inside me until I remind myself I don’t have any claim on Lennox, not really, not anymore.

“I never was,” Lennox clarifies, looking straight at the camera instead of at the reporter and it feels like he’s speaking directly to me.

“It was a PR exercise for Honey.” There’s no disguising the way his lip curls at her name and – I’m not going to lie – it gives me the warm fuzzies.

“We’d dated for a while, a long time ago,” he emphasizes, “but we’d stayed friends

and she came to me and told me she needed some help.

She was launching her own swimwear brand and needed some extra buzz around it and what creates more buzz than a story the tabloids can run with?

That's what my manager said and – like an idiot – I agreed.

” Lennox shakes his head as if he still can't believe it.

Join the club. “I was happy to go along with it as a favor to a friend, but once I started to become involved with someone else, I tried to call the whole thing off, but it was too late. Honey was willing to push the news through with or without my cooperation.”

The anger in his voice is palpable and I'm transported back to that fateful day in his study when he was yelling down the phone at Declan that the whole thing should have already been shelved.

“I told you to stop it!”

“We agreed that wasn't fucking happening!”

Lennox continues. “It was only supposed to be a picture of us taken a long time ago and we'd just let the tabloids run with it.

A few column inches, some publicity for her, no harm done.

Unfortunately, Honey took it too far and planted the engagement story.

A diamond ring was photoshopped into the picture of us without my knowledge and then it was too late.

The damage's been done. I've hurt the only person I never wanted to hurt. "

The reporter is sitting on the edge of her seat, looking as rapt as I am. "And, why did you go along with it? You could have come out and told the truth as soon as the story landed."

My question exactly, lady.

"The reason I'm speaking out about it now is because I signed a contract, a confidentiality agreement with Honey.

It took some time to iron out the legalities but once she started threatening to sue not only me, but everyone who works for me, I decided it was time to make a stand.

I won't allow anyone to go after the people I care about, no matter how much it'll fucking cost me in the long run. "

The reporter's eyes widen a little at Lennox's curse which most definitely isn't ESPN-friendly. I half-expect them to cut to a commercial break.

"All I want to do now is apologize. Isabella, if you're watching I never meant to hurt you and – I know I don't deserve it – but I'm asking for a second chance, because I know I can make you happy.

And I know you sure as shit make me happier than I've ever been, than I ever could be without you. I miss you like hell, baby. Come home."

Home. I stare at Lennox's face, seeing the anguish, the sincerity in his eyes and I know exactly where my home is. It's where my heart decided to stay.

"You might want to inhale at some point, before you pass out, Iz," Kai's suggestion

reaches me just in time and I take a deep breath in. I didn't even realize I was literally holding my breath and waiting to hear everything Lennox had to say.

The reporter dabs at her eyes discreetly as if she's been moved by his words before she thanks Lennox and throws to commercial.

"When was this recorded?" I'm still staring at the screen even though it's switched to a commercial about hair transplants. I can still see the expression of sincerity in Lennox's eyes and there's no doubt in my mind everything he said was true.

"This morning," Kai replies quietly. "He wanted to tell you, but you wouldn't listen. This was the only way he could get the message out to you and hope you'd hear it."

My resolve hardens and I grab my cell to call him. After what I've just seen I have to talk to him.

"If you're trying to call Nox, don't bother. He and the other guys are in pre-game mode, no cells in the locker room."

"Dammit!" I look between the two tickets in my hand, one to Alabama and the man who taught me how to love, the other to the game and the man who I've loved so hard I thought it was going to kill me.

Dad would tell me to follow my heart and to chase happiness all the way to the end of the world if that's what it takes.

"Kai, I need to get to the game. Can you take me?" I look up and meet my friend's eyes.

"I thought you'd never ask," Kai smiles and I all but run out the door, because now I've made up my mind. And I don't want to waste one more minute.

### Chapter

### Twenty

The kind of luck only I have makes a reappearance on our way to Madison Square Garden. We don't just hit traffic, we hit the kind of epic tail-back only possible in New York.

My knee bounces up and down nervously in the passenger seat, looking at the endless stream of taillights ahead of us.

"Can't you just, drive over them or something?" I ask Kai, motioning towards the smaller cars in front of the giant truck of his we're sitting in, stationary.

"Not unless you want me to get arrested before we get to the game," Kai responds, blandly. "Don't worry about it, Iz. Nox isn't going anywhere," he says with a confidence I don't share.

By the time we make it there, the game is almost over; the Pelicans are winning 5 – 2 and my eyes scan the ice until I find Lennox. He's not hard to spot, he's in the middle of the action, looking the absolute pro that he is.

My professional therapist's eye goes to his knee and I smile as I notice how he skates on it as if he's never had an injury.

He gets around three defenders, dropping them like stones and then goes in for the kill, ramming the puck home into the goal, lifting his arms and celebrating with the



other players.

He looks beautiful and brutal at the same time and I feel so damn proud of him I could burst.

There are only a few more seconds on the clock and I whoop with the rest of the Pelicans crowd, shouting Lennox's number and in that moment it's as if he's heard me.

He lifts his head and looks straight at me and I smile, a little shyly, waving at him.

I see the surprise on his face give way to a wide grin, which sets the butterflies off in my stomach.

It's in that moment – when he's distracted by me – that he's cross-checked by a member of the opposition. He knocks Lennox at full speed, his stick pushed up against Lennox's face, forcing him to the ground, head first.

It's such a blatant foul, there's no way it wasn't deliberate. Lennox is the best player on the team and the opposition must have planned to take him out of the game as some kind of revenge for being beat so resoundingly. It's a dick move, but that doesn't mean it's not effective.

All these thoughts go through my head in the seconds it takes Lennox to fall to the ground, his helmet bouncing off the ice so hard it echoes through the rink.

The crowd erupts in boos and the other player gets shoved away by Lennox's teammates, but the damage is already done.

“Oh my God!” I stare at Lennox's prone body on the ice, willing him to get up and just shake it off. But I know that fall isn't something you just shake off. My entire

body goes as cold as the ice Lennox is laying on when the medics rush in and, still, he doesn't respond.

Get up, get up, I will silently.

"Nox!" I shout his name, already out of my seat and running to the opening I've spied in the glass.

My sneakers slip on the ice, but I don't care, all I care about is getting to Nox who is now surrounded by medics. One of them turns around to me and motions for security to get me the hell out of there.

"Miss, you can't be here."

He must think I'm some kind of crazed fan. He's half-right as I'm out of my mind with worry.

"Let me see him, please." My eyes are focused on Lennox's chest, relieved when I see it rising and falling. Whatever's happened, he's alive. That manages to calm me at least a notch down.

"Give her some room, she's his personal physician." Kai lies very well from behind me and one of the medics makes space for me next to Lennox's head as they continue to assess him.

"Nox? Nox, can you hear me?" Pulling his glove off, I take hold of his hand and squeeze it gently, carefully flipping the visor up on his helmet so I can see his face better. "It's Izzy," I tell him. "I'm here."

"Have you checked his pupils?" I ask anyone who'll listen, my voice panicked.

“He’s not responsive. We need to get him off the ice.” They’re talking to each other, but not to me. I don’t care. All I care about is making sure Lennox is alright.

I lean in to talk to him as the medics rush around us.

“I saw the interview, Nox,” I tell him quietly.

“I wish you’d told me everything from the start.

I wish I hadn’t been so quick to think the worst and I’m sorry for that.

” I know it’s stupid talking to someone when they’re out cold, but I’m praying some part of him can hear me.

“I wish I hadn’t been waiting for something bad to happen the entire time we were together because I didn’t think I deserved to be with someone like you.

I didn’t think I was allowed to be that happy and get the happy ending.

I spent so much time thinking about what would happen when things inevitably ran their course, I didn’t stop to think what would happen if things went right. ”

Tears squeeze out of my eyes and spill over my cheeks. Seeing him like this and having no idea how badly he’s injured is tearing me apart.

“Damn you, Nox, damn you, for breaking my heart.” I whisper hoarsely at him. “And damn you for not being awake for me to tell you that I love you.”

I’m vaguely aware of a stretcher being brought over. I step back so Lennox can be moved onto it, his head braced, but I pause when I feel his hand tighten around mine.

I look down, telling myself not to get too excited, that it's just a reflex action.

"Nox?" I whisper, squeezing his hand back and stepping forward again to speak into his ear. "Can you hear me?"

All I see is Lennox and as his eyelids flutter, I think my heart actually stops. He blinks, his eyes open slowly, painfully slowly and there's a chorus of exclamations around me. I'm shoved out of the way as the medics shine lights into his eyes and pepper him with questions.

I want nothing more than to hold my ground, but I know they need to check him over, they need to make sure he's okay. And he has to be okay. I don't think I could cope with anything else.

"Isabella?" I hear Nox's voice from the middle of the crowd and I see him start to get up from the ice.

"Gray, sit your ass down and let us look you over!" One of the medics is shouting, but clearly he doesn't know Lennox very well if he thinks he's any good at following orders.

"Isabella?" He ignores the tumult around him, coming up to his full height, a head above the other men, and pulling off his helmet to meet me eye to eye.

"Nox," I breathe his name, tears of relief in my eyes as I all but launch myself at him.

He catches me in the air, grunting a little and I pull back, horrified. "Oh my God, did I hurt you?"

Lennox shakes his head, keeping me from moving away and I wrap my legs around him as he holds me against him. "Only when you left," he tells me quietly and my

heart squeezes in my chest.

“I’m not going anywhere now,” I promise him as his eyes search my face for the truth. “You’re stuck with me.” I laugh through the tears I’ve stopped trying to pretend I’m not crying.

“Is that so?” He looks at me, reverently, as if he’s carrying something precious in his arms.

I nod, slowly. “If that’s okay with you?”

“You watched the interview.” He still hasn’t taken his eyes off of me and the medics have learned to back off after he’s had to growl at a few of them to give us some space.

I nod again. “I’m sorry.” I dip my chin, but Lennox lifts it right up to meet my gaze.

He looks at me as if I’m crazy, special but still crazy. “What do you have to be sorry for?”

“For not letting you explain. We could’ve avoided all this,” I gesture vaguely around me. We could’ve avoided the last few weeks of heartbreak.

“I wanted to tell you, Iz, I really did,” he shakes his head, sighing in frustration. “But there was never a right time and then I just fucking chickened out because I was shit scared of losing you. But I lost you anyway.”

God, I would do anything to take the haunted look off his face.

“I’m not lost, Nox,” I tell him. “I’m right here, loving you.” I take a deep breath. “I love you.”

Slowly, Lennox's expression shifts from awe to the happiest I think I've ever seen him, and it only makes him even more devastating.

He dips his forehead to meet mine, breathing a sigh of relief.

"I was hoping like hell I didn't dream you saying that while I was out.

I love you too, Isabella, more than I can say with words.

You're it for me. You, me, us. It's everything. "

"And that's not just the concussion talking?" I joke through the ball of emotions in my throat, making Lennox chuckle in that low register that sets all my senses off.

He shakes his head. "I think I've loved you since the day you rear-ended me and then called me an asshole, baby."

"You keep talking like that and you're liable to sweep me off my feet," I tease.

Lennox looks pointedly at the floor where my feet most definitely are not. "I thought I already had."

"Nox?" I ask quietly, biting my lip. "Is this the part where you kiss me?" I smile up at him, the heat infusing his eyes is reflected in mine.

"I think it just might be," he breathes.

I lift my head as he lowers his and we meet in the middle for the kind of kiss that makes me glad I don't have to stand on my own two feet.

I don't know how long we kiss and taste each other, making up for what we've

missed in the past weeks.

What I do know is that I lose myself in him.

And from the way Lennox groans when I pause to take a breath, I think he feels the same.

That's when the outside world comes rushing back in, loudly. The whole arena is on its feet cheering and I blush as I realize everyone has just seen me making out with Lennox. There are wolf whistles and applause, making Lennox chuckle and I look up to see we're on the big screen and live on ESPN.

"Oh my God." I hide my face against Lennox's neck, feeling him laugh.

"What's the matter, darlin'?" His voice goes full Southern drawl. "You embarrassed to be seen with me?"

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:52 am*

I lift my head to see him grinning and he looks so damn pleased with himself and more than just a little bit like the cat who got the cream. And I'm totally fine with being the cream.

"What do we do now?" I ask, losing myself in Lennox's dark eyes.

"We smile," he grins, "and wave." He lifts his hand and waves at the crowd, making them cheer even louder. I copy him, feeling as if I'm living in an alternate universe. "And then we kiss." Lennox pulls me towards him, literally lifting me off of my feet again to cover his mouth with mine.

He kisses me as if I'm the only woman in the world, as if he never wants to stop. I kiss him right back, my love for him vibrating through my whole body.

"Fair warning, Isabella, I'm not going to let you go again."

"I don't want to be anywhere but here, Nox, with you," I assure him, nipping at his bottom lip. "You're my home."

"Forever." He drops a kiss on my lips.

"Forever," I confirm, sealing the promise with a kiss and – this time – I don't care how many people are watching.

THE END

We're so excited that you've decided to take this journey through 'Love is Fake' with



us.

Like all good things, this too shall come to an end.

But not so fast, maybe? If you're interested in finding out where Lennox and Izzy's love affair ends up, you'll be happy to check out the exclusive **BONUS CHAPTER** **HERE**.

Once you're through getting your fix of Lennox and Izzy, we'd love to take you on another adventure with Madison and Rhue in our next hot releases, 'Love is Angry'.

I am not supposed to be in Ithaca.

Harvard was my ticket. Their lacrosse team fell in love with my stats, my charm, my ego. I was bound to be their darling – a no bullshitter on the ice, heated, hungry, and scorching hot on the outside.

But things changed. I changed. With all of that, so did my goals and my vision for life as well as the path I've chosen to take.

The anger, though, remained. I'm not stupid enough to think it will ever go away.

The Echeveria bloodline is filled with angry men paying for the past, current and future sins of their fathers.

Speaking of fathers—mine thinks I'm shitting my dreams away.

Truth is, it's his dreams that I'm taking a big fat dump on.

Daddy dearest wanted Harvard, I chose Cornell.

And hockey might as well be the new fucking lacrosse.

At least it is for me. It has to be. Anything to put my old life behind me.

Anything to show the old fart that his needs and his wants don't make the whole damn world go round.

To prove to him that he can't have everything .

Nineteen years of my life, sure, he had those.

My girl, he got her too. My future, though, my future is mine. He can't have that.

I take a deep breath, scanning the world around me.

Collegetown is always moderately crowded, from what I've seen so far.

It's only been a few days since I've set foot in Ithaca, but that conclusion is one that is yet to be proven wrong.

There are never too many people, yet it's never quite empty, either.

Life moves forward here with students happily buzzing about their day. The storefronts are clean and mostly shabby chic. Flower shops open out onto the streets with bursts of roses and white lilies, their intoxicating fragrances reaching all the way into my car.

I flick the window button and seal myself in. For most people, the smell of flowers is a pleasant smell. All it does is remind me of death.

Of my mother's funeral.

Of all the people with tight fists gripping bouquets of flowers.

The wreaths on my mother's grave.

The fucking garden that was made out of our dinner table.

I shake my head. Memory lane is like a trip into hell and it's not nearly cold enough out for me to want to take that ride.

It's been a year since I buried my mother. The pain should have subsided by now. Except— it hasn't. It just lingers somewhere in the background, dull and cold and ghostly.

I'm not sure if that makes me a good person – the fact that in some way, shape or form, I'm still mourning her loss. What I do know is that I'd do any damn thing to banish that feeling forever.

I gaze out the window again, shifting my thoughts to something else as I watch the cars go by. It's not exactly rush-hour, but the traffic's still thicker than pudding.

I wonder how many of these cars will end up in Cornell's student parking lot.

For the ones that do, I wonder what they came here for.

What they're hoping to get out of their degrees.

What awaits them back home. If they're better than me and happier than me.

Or if, like me, they're burdened with emptiness, a shit father, and a broken sister who they've tried and failed to fix.

Red light. I stop. There's music playing in the background, but I don't pay much attention to it. My mind keeps wandering.

Time might be perceived in a linear fashion, yet I tend to be all over the fucking place, suffering the past and the present, the memories and the experiences with an equally shattering intensity.

Green light. I'm driving again. It's better when I'm focused on something. I'm always keeping busy these days. Whenever I stop, I unwittingly delve into the chain of events that brought me to where I am. I end up missing high school and the world as I knew it before Mom died. Before I saw Dad with...

I shake my head. I need to get a proper fucking grip.

There's still some Redbull left in my can, currently abandoned in the cup holder.

It's a shitty drink, but it's the only thing that gets me going in the morning—besides the pills, of course, but they're doing regular urine tests at Cornell, so I've had to kick them to the curb.

Plus, coming down from uppers is a fucking nightmare.

I promised myself a clean slate, a fresh start, and this should be it.

Ithaca. Aspen trees. Pretty shop fronts.

Clean pavements that get hosed every morning.

Florists and small craft-beer bars that don't stay open past midnight.

It's much quieter than what I'm used to in Rochester, but nobody knows my face here, so that's an immediate bonus.

Being a stranger has never felt so fucking good.

By the time I see the university clock tower rising ahead with its grey cap and sand-colored masonry, I'm already feeling a little better. More focused. Crisp, even. Something akin to a freshly squeezed lime over a glass of ice.

Once I park my Lexus in the parking lot, I know that this move was the right one. Here feels more like home than my father's house ever could.

I briefly check myself in the side mirror, just to make sure I'm all there. My reflection speaks volumes. My eyes are slightly bloodshot, but that just brings out the dark blue in them.

My black hair is cut half-an-inch too short, my beard a little more stubbly than usual.

The look is different from the one I've been sporting for as long as I can remember.

I'm not sure I like it, but I wouldn't exactly say I hate it either.

Different is good. Different is refreshing.

Different is just what the fuck I need. That and a long, long break from home.

I feel my jaw clench just at the thought of going back to that place.

My father will expect me back in the summer, but I'm planning on milking this whole living on campus deal for as long as I can.

Screw what the therapist said about showing up and being present in order to help our family heal.

Anyone who signs a contract with my father is a person I can't trust.

My phone rings. I check the time first. I've got ten more minutes, tops, before I'm

officially late to class. The caller ID demands my full attention, however. I made a promise to myself to never reject my sister's calls.

"Laura..."

There's a second-long silence before she responds. "Shit. You're busy."

"I'm about to head to class," I tell her. "And don't be such a potty mouth. It's unbecoming."

"Well, fuck off, then," Laura giggles. "Sorry. I was just hoping to get you to confirm for brunch next weekend. I completely forgot it's Monday morning. We can talk about it later."

I can almost see her by her window, looking out, her gaze lost over the rolling hills that surround our mansion just outside of Rochester.

She's probably still in her pale blue satin robe, flanked by three different maids while wishing they could just leave her the hell alone so she can finish her coffee in peace.

I miss her, but I need to be away from that place for a long time.

"I'm not coming back home this weekend," I say. "I thought I told you..."

"Oh, no, that's fine. I'm coming to Ithaca!"

Why doesn't that sit right with me?

Don't get me wrong, I love my little sister. She's the only blood relative I have left who's worth a damn. So why do I loathe the idea of welcoming her here?

"I'm not even fully unpacked yet," I reply, feeling like shit for shutting her down, but

doing it regardless. Then again, Laura never was an easily scared kind of girl.

“You’re shit at organizing, Rhue. You and I both know you’ll need the help if you don’t want to be living out of a suitcase for the next twelve months.”

She’s in a good mood, and I’d be a dick to ruin that. Besides, this is her way of telling me not to push her away.

I promised Mom a long time ago that I would look out for Laura. I failed once and almost lost her. When that memory resurfaces it becomes a heck of a lot harder to push an agenda that doesn’t have much to do with her.

“Fine, I guess.”

With my concession loudly spoken, she smacks a kiss at me and hangs up. If I know my sister the way I think I do, there will be a text follow-up wishing me well and reminding me to plug her into my calendar.

I grab my bag and head for the main building first. I’ve already gone through orientation, but I still need a few minutes to move around and understand which hallways lead to where. The closer I get to the building, the bigger it grows.

Cornell University is a giant made of stone and steel. A place that has nurtured many great minds.

Politicians, athletes, anthropologists, historians, archeologists and world-class scientists walked out of here with their degrees and blindingly bright futures. When it comes to this place, I am nothing more than a smudge on the fabric of humanity.

The purpose of my presence here is to become something bigger.

Something better.

Something worth a damn.

It takes a few turns, but sooner rather than later I find my first class. It's packed, but that shouldn't come as a surprise. Anthropology is one of Cornell's fortes. It has been for decades.

Despite how well lit the auditorium is, I'm unable to make out any of the faces. Everyone's sitting and waiting for the professor to come in. His desk is at the bottom, an old walnut framed by a huge blackboard that covers two thirds of the entire wall.

As for the rest of the room, it pretty much smells of smart people in here. For a moment, I find myself riddled with anxiety, briefly poked by some kind of imposter syndrome.

Fuck it. I belong here. I earned my spot here. Fair and square.

I find an empty seat in a row close to the door. It's safer to stay out of the professor's sight, for the time being.

Exhaling deeply, I take out a notebook, a pen, and the infamous brochure, to which a bibliography has been stapled. There's a ton of books I need to buy, apparently. I'm in the middle of mentally mapping my schedule around getting these books when the soft scent of lilac tickles my nose.

It's a familiar scent. Far too familiar. And it— rattles me.

At first, that's all there is; the scent and the memories associated with it fighting to pummel my mind. I manage to keep them at bay for a few seconds before my head starts to spin, putting one and two together, trying to figure it out.

Suddenly, an ice-cold claw pierces the back of my neck and goes all the way down and through my spine. I know that fucking perfume better than I've ever wanted to



know a damn thing in my life.

My head turns slowly.

So slowly, in fact, that time seems to have stopped.

Her profile is an etching of the kind of sins that should never be committed. The small nose. The full lips. The bright eyes where ancient Irish forests grow.

The auditorium's overhead LED lights cast a warm glow upon her face, not illuminating it completely, but giving enough to allow imagination to carve its own path. I breathe in. Somehow, it's as though I can almost see the lilacs coming off of her in delicate wisps.

For a moment, I imagine her naked in the morning, spraying the fragrance onto her soft skin. But the beauty is short-lived when she looks at me, and the sparkle of instant recognition blows everything to hell.

It really is her.

Not someone drenched in the same odors.

Not a lookalike or a copycat, but... her .

“Oh, for fuck's sake,” I hear myself mutter.

I sound defeated. For good reasons, too.

“Rhue?” I don't even register the moment the tranquil beauty of her oval face shifts into this colorless mask of true horror. But I can't say that I mind it.

I make her feel like this. Good! She should be fucking mortified.

Of all the places in the world, this is where our paths cross. It's un-fucking-believable.

The universe must be fucking with me. I pause on that thought, knowing better than to think these kinds of coincidences are normal.

This could very well be my father's doing.

This is the kind of bullshit he would do to punish me for choosing Cornell over Harvard.

For carving my own path instead of walking the one he picked out for me.

I steady my gaze on Madison Willis, my former tutor. The woman that made my balls blue and my soul sing before she broke the shit out of my heart.

The woman I found in my parents' bedroom with my father on top of her, pounding her like the ten-dollar whore that she is. The Madison who ruined my family.

Yet here the bitch sits.

Like she thinks I'll give her a hand at destroying me, too.

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