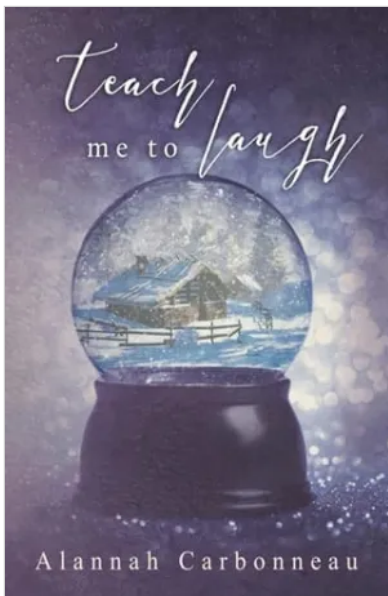




Teach Me To Laugh (Teach Me #3)

Author: *Alannah Carbonneau*

Category: Romance

Description: I'll battle for the gift of every day...if it ends with the promise of your laugh.

Amara Bloom is the girl with the wary eyes and untrusting heart.

Living in the shadows of a cracked foster system overflowing with kids just like her, she found one way to survive.

Keep your head down and your guard up. Always.

Beckett Davis is no stranger to loneliness.

Single child to power-couple Mr. and Mrs.

Davis, his brand of lonely was a little more elegant, where emotions were tweaked with expensive bribes.

He recognizes the soul inside the girl with the wary eyes, and what first is a need to conquer a challenge quickly becomes the need to conquer a heart.

Tension runs high as winter nears.

Falling in love has never been more exhilarating, more painful, or more beautiful as Amara and Beckett set the stage for a love owed entirely to laughter.

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I've always been a determined guy. I liked to think I get that from my father, but if I really considered it, I had to admit it was more a combination of Mom and Dad.

Coming from a family of well-educated control freaks—aka doctors—it's a thing to be expected.

Dad's a surgeon and Mom's a pediatrician.

They knew what they wanted young, climbed the ladder of their careers, married—and then they fucked up.

When I say my parents fucked up, I'm saying that in all of their plotted perfection, I was never supposed to happen.

An out of control New Years party had me invading their lives nine months later.

Mom didn't take maternity leave; the Davis Doctors were serious about their work, so I was raised by a nanny.

My story, though, isn't a jacked-up pity party.

I was a happy enough kid. Mom and Dad indulged me with affection whenever they were around, although that wasn't much.

They ensured I always had what I needed, and, for the most part, what I wanted.

I had a good childhood, and Mom and Dad were good parents who made the best out

of an unplanned pregnancy.

They made the best of their crap roll of the dice, but they made damn sure they never rolled that hand again.

If you don't get me, I'll spell it out. I'm an only child.

Mom and Dad were around if I ever really needed anything. Money was never short. I filled my time with sports teams, studying, and girls. It wasn't until last year when I decided to travel to Europe, against my parent's wishes, that things started to change.

Like I said, I'm an only child. I had my teams, but I never really belonged to a team. I never looked at my family like we were a pack, never to be divided. I never had that one bud that I knew I could count on. I always just had me.

But then I decided travel was a must, and I met Kaiden. He became that buddy I thought I'd never have. Something about the guy just clicked with me. And something about me clicked for him. He's the brother I never had and always wanted. He's my best man.

Still, Kaiden is a new addition to the solo path I've always walked. And being that I lived life with people who were determined to succeed in a workforce that was both stressful and intimidating, I adopted a bit of that determination for myself.

So when I say I'm a guy who tends to get what he wants, I'm not lying. I'm not boasting, either. I worked for what I wanted and I worked hard.

The thing is, I've never wanted a woman. Don't get me wrong; I've wanted to bang a few and I've done that. But I've never actually wanted all of a woman.

I wanted Amara Bloom, though. I've wanted her since I first met her and she cracked

an unexpected insult at my junk. I've wanted her since she rejected me over and over again. I've wanted her since I learned the girl didn't smile. Ever.

I was determined to have her. And I was determined not only to make her smile, but to make her laugh.

I couldn't have concocted a better plan if I'd been the one plotting. When my buddy moved out of my place and in with his girlfriend, who also happened to be Amara's roommate, Amara needed a place. Happenstance had it that I had a room available.

She moved in.

She's lived with me for a month and it's been a month of witty comments from me and the usual distance from Amara. I intended to step up my game with a few tricks I had up my sleeve. Because no matter what, I was going to make the girl mine.

That's why I was awake at the ball-busting hour of seven in the damn morning on a Saturday. I wanted to catch her before she ran off to the gym with her friend Madison, and then to work at the Library.

I'd never been a morning person, so when Amara strode into the kitchen in a little purple housecoat that had my throat feeling tight and my fingers feeling twitchy to reach out to her, I wasn't surprised to see her startle.

Her hand connected with her chest and her big blue eyes widened, "Crap, Beck," she inhaled. "You scared me."

I grinned. Her eyes narrowed and I braved a single step toward her. "Morning, peanut."

"Argh," she rubbed her temples. "It's way too early for your antics."

“I made coffee.”

“Good.” I watched her toned legs carry her to the pot. Amara had great legs .
“Because I don’t think you’d survive me this morning if you hadn’t.”

I’d survive. This woman could do pretty much anything to me and I’d survive. So long as in the end she was mine.

“Feeling a little touchy?” I teased, moving quickly to stand behind her.

Her back stiffened. Correction—her whole body froze. My hot little peanut turned to ice in an instant. Breaths raced in and out.

In and out.

In and out.

Each breath came faster than the one before. Faster and harder.

“Beck . . .”

I interrupted to tease again, hoping I could turn the ice into flame. Accustomed to being the guy women melted for, I dropped my voice low, letting it rumble the way I knew most women liked. The way I knew made women melt.

Then I teased, “No need to feel touchy, babe. You got an itch, I’ll scratch it. You want happy endorphins, no need to go to the gym.” Spreading my arms wide, I smirked. “I got you covered from the comfort of your own home.”

Shit! Did I sound like an advertisement gone bad? Something about the woman had me teetering on the edge of my game. If I weren’t careful, I’d lose it.

“Beckett,” she gasped my name, sounding off. Amara had bite. Always.

Except now.

She was a scrappy little kitten that had most men cowering. Not me, though. She excited me.

“What’s up, peanut?”

“Get away from me.” The scrap I expected to back the bite of her words wasn’t there. Instead, there was fear.

What in the fuck?

“Amara?”

“I said—get away from me.” She said again, and this time I could have sworn the rattle wasn’t typical Amara annoyance, but panic. “Now!”

“All right,” I said, moving away in surrender. But I didn’t stop watching her.

My eyes clocked her every movement. I took note of the way her shoulders fell and her hands gripped the granite lip of the counter. Her arms trembled and she looked so impossibly unlike the strong scrappy woman I’d come to know this last month.

She looked fragile.

Afraid.

Beaten.

Adrenaline spiked. My fingers curled into my palms as I realized something was wrong. Seriously wrong.

And I wanted to know what the fuck that was.

My lips parted to ask when she turned to look at me with apology in her eyes. But then the apology bowed to a new bout of barely restrained terror as she took in the fisted hands at my sides.

“Beckett,” she whispered my name and I forced my hands to uncurl, hating the relief I saw light her eyes, and hating more that I didn’t understand what was wrong with her. I didn’t understand what I’d done to tip her over the edge.

Hell, I didn’t even understand what the edge was.

“What was that, Amara?” I asked low, watching as she hooked her finger through the handle of her mug. “You’re acting like you’re afraid of me.”

“I’m not afraid of you.” She said; her bite was back.

“I don’t believe you.”

Her eyes flashed and she lifted her chin. “I don’t give a shit what you believe.”

There’s my girl and her pretty little claws.

“Are you telling me if I came close, you’d be okay with it?” I challenged, feeling a little braver now that my kitten was back.

“No.” She said firmly. “I like my space.”

“You like your space?” I reiterated.

“You know I do.” I watched, studying her as she lifted her mug. The ceramic trembled—a visible extension of her unsteady nerves. “I’m meeting Maddy at the gym before work so I’m gonna have to ditch.”

“Right.”

She blinked, looking unsure. I thought maybe she was going to explain before she shook her head and strode past me into the hall.

I heard the sound of her bedroom door latch closed and I decided right then and there that I was getting down to the truth of whatever it was Amara was hiding.

I was getting to the bottom of it, and I was going to help her through whatever it was that I found and force her to face it when that time came.

And I vowed right there in my kitchen at seven in the fucking morning on a Saturday, that I was going to be there for her through it all. When in the end she laughed, it would all be worth it.

When in the end she was mine, I’d have succeeded.

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One. Two. Three.

Take a deep breath and push through the door, I thought, as I leaned my body into the glass.

It swung open and I inhaled the scent of city.

There was a McDonalds across from the gym and I was dying for a coffee, but something about pulling my little blue bug up to the window after spending an hour hitting the weights, bike, and treadmill, seemed somehow counterproductive. Even if it was just a coffee.

I did have standards, so I ignored the gold “M” and gave Maddy a long sigh. “You heading home after this?”

“I have to pick up some groceries,” she shrugged. “Raina’s bound to come for a visit. If I don’t have ice cream I’ll never hear the end of it. Then I’m heading home. I have some work to do for my creative writing class.”

Maddy, also known as Madison, was the best workout partner a girl could ask for.

She asked questions that made you work your muscles that much harder, just so you might be too breathless to answer.

She wasn’t exactly blunt—but she was hellishly intuitive.

She saw the things you didn’t want a person to see.

She's the kind of person who knew, without being told, that something was wrong.

Somehow, somehow, the girl just feels it.

And she felt it today.

It was just my luck that she trained her studious eyes on me as soon as I walked into the gym.

She waited, however, until we were on the treadmill to get down to the nitty-gritty questions.

Maddy knew I wasn't the kind of girl to open up on my own.

I mean, seriously, do I sound like the kind of girl who spills the beans all on her own?

Hell to the no—I most definitely do not!

But, still, she always waited, giving me the chance to spill all my beans before embarking on her delicate inquisition.

Like usual, I didn't spill. And like usual, she dug in.

Like usual, she didn't get an answer, because even under duress, which I was under huge emotional duress, I didn't spill.

Hell, I was struggling enough with all the unanswered questions I had for myself concerning my new roommate.

I was also an expert at ignoring pretty much everything and anything that threatened the new life I'd crafted for myself.

My new roommate, with all his teasing grins, cocky innuendos that were never, and I mean ever going to happen, was doing enough of that without any aid from me.

If you don't get what I'm dropping, I'll give it straight. I don't deal—with anything. Seriously, I'm talking diddly-squat. Nada. Nothing.

I'm the freaking expert at self-alienation under the guise of fortification. I shove everything under the rug. And if it doesn't fit under the rug, I'm happy enough sweeping it into the cellar and locking the damn door.

I knew enough about what dealing did to a person. So I chose, a rather intelligent decision if I may say so, to never deal.

Dealing hurt. Believe me, I'd know. I'd know better than anyone, so I just kept swimming, shoving all the darkness under the pretty rug of rainbow.

I'm under no illusion that one day the shards of my past will slice through my rug to cut deep into the bottoms of my feet, but as long as I didn't have to deal with the cuts today, it was another day I'd won.

I couldn't say I lived an existence of self-pity, mumbles, and grumbles.

I didn't. I tried not to complain about everything even though sometimes, I really wanted to.

I also never outwardly exposed the restless cogs that turned my pain round and round on an endless wheel of repetition.

I kept my crap bottled tight under lock and key.

Because if no one knew, no one could force me to become what I'd one day been.

The victim.

I lived a lonely life. I'd been living that way for a hell of a long time.

I told myself for just as long, that that was how I liked it.

That was until Raina Andrews came bursting in through my every seam, pushing her smiling way into my life with hopes and dreams attached to the glittering rainbow dust that clung to the girl wherever she went. I won't lie, Raina brightened my life.

It was actually because of her that I had Maddy.

It was also because of Raina that I had Beckett.

Yep, the same Beckett that nearly pulled the string to expose my crazy when he got a little too close up in my business this morning.

I don't even know why I'd been so freaked.

The guy was cockier than I imagine even Elvis had been, but he was harmless.

I even sensed, deep down, that he was good.

I feel I have to amend; I didn't actually have Beckett. I'll never actually have Beckett. A girl can't have a man like Beckett no matter how awesome said girl is.

Regardless, Beckett was in my life.

He was so in my life, pushing in through the seams I thought I'd tightened after Raina and Maddy slipped inside, that he's bringing all the pain I thought I buried to the surface. The darker moments I told myself were locked away had come rushing at me

this morning.

They came rushing, and they hit me like a freight train.

Memories, emotions, and nightmares had come flooding to the surface. It was all I could do to keep my cool until I barred myself behind the safety of my closed door. And then I cracked. I broke. Shattered. Pain sliced through every seam, tearing me wide open.

Silent sobs tortured me until I'd run myself dry. Dry of tears. Dry of memories. Dry of hope.

The Past

There wasn't a lot of space between us, and even if there were, there was nowhere for me to go.

Nowhere for me to turn. Nowhere for me to run.

My back pressed flat against the wardrobe.

The once white walls that were now discolored a sickly yellow from years of cigarette smoke pressed in on me, making me feel as though I were drowning slowly. Air. I needed air.

My eyes fluttered to the dated lamp on my nightstand table as he took a step toward me.

I wished it weren't so dim in here. I wished that when he'd come into my room I'd been doing anything but reading.

If I'd been doing anything else, I might have had the light on.

I might have been wearing jeans—and not these loose shorts.

I might have been safe . . .

“Who are you going to tell?” His voice was low, and worse, there was a taunting edge to the lilt of his question. It made the words sound more like a threat than anything else. “Who do you think will listen?”

“I didn't say I was going to tell anyone . . .”

“But you're thinking about it.” The little space that existed between us vanished as he took another step. He towered over me, and I knew—I knew the power his body had over mine. I knew I was no match for him. “I know you, Amara. I know everything about you.”

“I'm not thinking about it.” I insisted, praying to a God who never seemed to listen that he would just leave me alone.

“I just want you to know what will happen if you do.” He said, and I knew the soothing tone wasn't to give me ease. Oh no, he wasn't about bringing anyone ease of thought.

“I won't.” I promised. I hated him more now than I had ever hated him before, and that was saying something. It was saying a lot.

“You're so pretty, Amara.” He murmured. Lifting his hand, he touched his knuckles to my cheek, trailing a path of ice down my neck and to my collarbone.

“You know you're mine. You've been mine since they gave you to us—and you'll

always be mine.

” His mean eyes flicked over my face as though searching for fight I didn’t have, before landing on my neck.

He always said I had a pretty neck. Pretty and delicate.

Every chance he had, he reminded me of just how delicate I was. Small. Weak. Incapable of fighting off the sick and twisted in the world. At first, I thought he was my savior. My protector. My friend.

And then things changed. Things got weird, and scary.

He became possessive and obsessive. There was never a moment where he didn’t take the chance to remind me that I was his; still in one piece because of him. He never denied the chance to remind me that my virtue was still mine, because he allowed it. He was saving it. He was in control.

Never me.

“I swear, I won’t tell.” I said again.

“I know.” He smiled, and there was a softness to it that wasn’t sincere.

This was the manipulation of the worst kind of predator.

“I did it for you, Amara. I did it for us.” My body turned stiff as horror sliced through my veins.

He didn’t seem to notice, or maybe he didn’t care.

“I’m doing what you asked. I’m waiting for you. But a man has needs . . .”

I blinked as the memory faded into the ice of my guarded heart. I was shaken, but the vision of Maddy’s thoughtful face encouraged me to straighten my spine and fight my weakness.

Weakness. My constant helplessness was why I lifted weights. It was why I had a membership at the gym. It was why I worked so hard, and so often, to strengthen my small, delicate, body.

In an attempt to ignore the heavy burden that was Maddy’s concern, I shifted.

The workout had been great. Killer even.

I was getting stronger. My muscles felt achy and I could feel a much-needed bubble bath with lavender Epsom salts scribbling itself into my agenda for tonight.

But first I had a long day at the Library I worked at with Raina.

I loved the Library. Books and the peaceful quiet of the space were my haven. Nobody tried to spark up frivolous conversation in a Library. I could tell people to shut their traps (politely, of course) without seeming like the anti-social nutcase I might actually be. That’s still up for debate.

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I'm not a people person. I don't even try to be.

I don't want a life filled with people, because with people comes emotions, and with emotions comes hurt.

It's inevitable and in my opinion, it's just not worth it.

So I don't make connections unless those connections come with Raina. She's the exception to the rule.

And Raina comes with more connections than Lego.

So I've suddenly found myself in a life where I have connections. And I haven't decided if I liked it yet.

"What's on your agenda?" Maddy asked as I leaned against the driver's door of my totally awesome car.

Little cars like mine said things like "don't even ask for a ride home, I barely have enough room to put my purse on my passenger seat," and "Yes, I like my space big enough for me and me alone." Anyway, that's how I liked to think of my car.

Still, though, Maddy had a wicked awesome Audi SUV.

I'd be jealous, well—I am kind of jealous.

Except I've made my peace with the fact that I'll most likely never live a day where

I'm financially capable of giving myself that kind of a car.

Because of that, I'll also never be the one voted to do the driving when it came to group situations, something I also liked.

Regardless, it's a beauty, and I'm real enough to admit that.

"I work until four," I announced, getting back to our conversation. "Then I'm going home and cracking the gallon of paint I bought." Winking at her, I opened my car door. "Then I'm relaxing in a bubble bath."

See? Lavender Epsom salts and bubbles have been officially scribbled in stone.

"You're painting?"

I paused, door still open. "Sure am."

"Does Beckett know this?"

"No."

"Do we think we should tell him?"

See? The girl was pathetically responsible. It's so overpowering it's almost gag-worthy.

"Nope."

"Amara."

"Maddy."

“Amara,” I could literally hear every note of condescending disappointment in each letter of my name. “Let’s be considerate to the fact that you’re renting from someone.”

“I can always paint it back when I leave.”

“That’s not the point.”

“Yes it is.” I shrugged, seeing the issue, but choosing to ignore it. “The only point worth fretting over, anyhow.”

She shook her head. “You tread the line of impossible.”

“Babe,” I feigned offence, only to admit. “I am impossible.”

“Amara.” She gives me that tone again—the disappointed one that had my hackles itching to rise. “If you ask him, I’m pretty sure he wouldn’t mind. Besides, isn’t it his Dad’s condo?”

“I don’t know.” That was a lie and we both knew it. We both knew Beckett had a wicked deal with his Dad that as long as he was going to school, his rent in his gorgeous condo was paid for.

I wish I had parents. The thought was so sudden; I felt a little taken aback and a lot shaken.

“Just . . .” She sighed heavily and I felt an odd tickle of discomfort. At myself. Odd, I thought, that I didn’t want to disappoint Maddy.

“Just what?”

“Just don’t ruin a good thing, okay?”

“A good thing?”

“With Beckett.”

Okay, my hackles had officially risen. “I don’t have anything with Beckett.”

“You do, Amara, and you know it.”

“All right,” I swung into my seat and started to pull the door closed. “I’ll chat with you later when you’re not being entirely ridiculous.”

Maddy didn’t reply. But she did fold her arms over her chest. And then she gave me the “Maddy” eyes.

The ones that make a girl feel all horrible and bad.

Seriously, whenever the woman decided to move forward with her life in the dating world, married, and had kids; she’d have no need to practice “mommy” eyes. She already had those down.

I started my car, and as I forced my eyes to the windshield and away from my friend, shifting the car into gear, my foot hit the pedal.

“Feeling a little tense?” Joel queried, handing the cart of books to me. “I’ll man the desk. Too much interaction with people and you’re known to blow.”

“Ha. Ha.” I snatched the cart as he tossed me an adorable “Joel” grin.

I could hear his laughter as I scooted away from the front desk, disappearing into an

aisle of books. There was something peaceful about stocking books. I'd been young when I found my first love. A love of reading.

It was my first love and as all first loves go, it was intense and lasting.

When I'd first started university, I'd taken more of a wide approach, as I'd not quite known what I wanted from life. And then I found the Library—and I knew. I wanted to be a Research Librarian. I wanted to work in a grand Library with thousands upon thousands of books.

There was nothing like a building full of books, with the scent of old and new paper, ink, and leather. There was nothing like the silence captured by the written word. There was no love quite like the love one holds in their soul when they love books.

At first, I'd thought that I wanted to help the kids who were like me: kids who were lost to a system that's too crowded for proper or true care.

But then I realized that I wasn't fit for such a career.

Seeing all those children in situations I could never properly control would break me.

Living day in and day out worrying would only make everything I'd tried to bury bubble up to the surface, and quite possibly boil over.

So I changed the path I'd been on after a few months of indecisive worrying to focus on becoming a Research Librarian. This decision happened shortly before last year ended so I was beginning this year with a fresh goal, and new classes.

I was leaving the careers focused on caring for others to those like Raina.

People who loved children, grew up in stability and knew what such things looked

like, and had strong hearts.

There was no doubt in my mind, Raina was in for a rough slap in the face with the cruel reality of some children in care, but I had something akin to faith that she would be fine.

So here I was, stocking books; a job I loved. Raina called me a machine and Joel always saved me a cart that was topped nearly to tipping. It wasn't laziness on his part, but more a gesture of kindness. He knew the act helped me to unwind, and he also knew I needed all the help I could get.

Joel wasn't exactly one of those people who'd found a way to slip through my tightly stitched seams, but I still liked him.

He was nice enough, sweet, and entirely focused on his girlfriend and their puppy.

Seriously, I liked dogs but that thing was way more trouble than it was worth.

I can't even tell you how many blankets the thing has mauled, or shoes it's chewed.

I'm more of a cat person.

"Hey," I turned to see Joel standing at the end of the aisle with a weird look on his face. "There's some really butch guy here to see you."

Really butch? Joel, and only Joel, would describe another man as such. Joel was also the opposite of butch. He was long and gangly limbed, so I'd bet he figured about eighty percent of the male population around him was butch.

I rolled my eyes and parted with my cart of books, glancing back longingly as we moved. "Did he say what he wanted?"

“Just that he wanted to see you.”

“Just my luck,” I said as I rounded the corner to see that the really butch guy was none other than Mr. Gorilla Man—aka Beckett Davis. “Just. My. Luck.” I breathed again and I could have sworn that he read my lips, because his lips quirked and then my heart fluttered.

I reinforced my frown.

“Hey, peanut.”

Seriously, why did the men in my life call me peanut? It’s not like I had an oblong shaped head, for goodness sakes!

“What are you doing here?”

“I brought you a coffee.” He handed me the cup with the big gold M on the side. My stupid heart fluttered again.

“Why?”

He smirked and leaned over the tall counter to place the coffee on my desk. “It’s polite to say thank you.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever claimed to be polite.”

“True,” he looked amused. “How late are you working tonight?”

“Why?”

“Four.” Joel answered, but when my eyes shot to glare at him, he wasn’t looking at

me. With all the obvious purpose in the world, he was focusing on a barcode he was about to scan.

I looked back to Beckett, feeling my spine tingle a little. I wasn't sure if it was from irritation or excitement. Not liking the thought, I decided irritation was more accurate.

Again, Beckett grinned. "Wanna have dinner with me?"

"Not really." I admitted, hoping I was telling the truth. Please Lord almighty let me not be crushing on this big oaf. I mean, he has a jacked-up truck! Even worse, it's a red jacked-up truck!

I'm not saying red is bad, but it's definitely flashy and I am so not the girl to crush on a flashy guy.

"I bought cake."

The traitor! I was going to pull out every pretty blonde strand of Raina's hair.

Cake, with thick gobs of icing, was totally my weakness. And Raina knew it.

"The icing is thick." He added, tempting the already tempted cake fiend inside of me.

I said nothing.

"And it's purple."

Oh, my favorite color. The guy had definitely been talking to Raina. And Raina suddenly appeared to have developed a very, very big mouth.

“What do you say?” He asked. His eyes were amused.

I decided to bargain. Well, I didn’t actually decide, since the words were out before I could thoroughly think them through. I regretted them instantly.

“I’ll join you for cake if, and only if, you not only let me paint my room,” I paused for reasons that were entirely unknown to me. “But help me paint my room.”

Brows inched up, “You want to paint your room?”

“Yes.” Did my voice actually squeak?

“What color?”

Is that supposed to be a trick question?

“Purple.” What other color would I want to surround myself with constantly?

“Figures.”

I folded my arms over my chest and tapped my toe. The corner of his perfect mouth twitched and good god, my heart responded to that too.

“Well?”

“It’s a deal.”

Shit. “Great.”

“See you at four.”

There goes my lavender Epsom salt bath. I snapped, “There better be honey in that coffee.”

“Just for you, peanut.”

I didn’t know what he meant by that, but as he turned and headed for the door, I couldn’t summon the will to call after him.

A sip of my coffee confirmed that, in fact, just for me there was honey.

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“Stop!” I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. “Stop right now! Right now! Don’t . . .” I was already making my way over to him, nearly tripping in my haste. “Just don’t move.”

“What?” His warm brown eyes were like whisky colored saucers. Big and confused. The doofus!

“You can’t just slap it on like that!” I howled, horrified. “Oh for the love of—it’s dripping! ”

I snatched his roller and ran it over the grated end of the paint plate, shedding a few gobs of paint Beckett collected in his clearly inexperienced first attempt at using a roller.

“I don’t know what I did wrong.”

“You’ve never painted anything,” I accused. “Have you?”

“Well . . .”

“Don’t even reply. I already know the answer.

” My focus moved to the wall that now looked like a sad attempt at raised art on an expensive canvas.

I rolled the now sparsely covered roller over the lines of thickly dripping paint, catching them seconds before they rolled onto the tape that covered the baseboards.

The tape was a protection we seriously needed considering Beckett had a paint roller in hand.

“What did I do?”

“Paint is like—like cologne. Too much and you’re overwhelmed.”

“Cologne?”

“You want to keep it light and evenly spread.” I continued. “You can’t just slap it on and hope it spreads nicely. You don’t want to choke out the wall.”

“Choke out the wall? You picked purple paint.”

“Raspberry Fuzz,” I corrected. “It’s light and refreshing.”

“It’s purple.”

I rolled my eyes, fixing the last of his mess. Then I turned to him. “Did you see what I did?”

“You rolled paint on a wall.”

I was going to wring his neck. “It’s a little more complicated than that.”

“Clearly.”

“Like art.”

“Evidently.”

“Beckett.”

“Peanut.”

“Gorilla!” I snapped. His brows inched up and then he tipped his head back and howled in amusement. The long cord of his throat was—well, I won’t even say. Attractive isn’t even a worthy word, and regardless, I shouldn’t be thinking such things.

But sweet lord . . . the man was attractive.

“I saw what you did. Cover in paint, roll paint off in plate and then gently glaze over the wall.”

“Sounds about right.” I said, trying to ignore the ever-present grin on his face. “Think you can manage now?”

“I guess we’ll see.” He reached for his roller and against all my better judgment; I released it to him for a second chance. It wasn’t lost on me that I was giving Beckett something I very rarely gave anyone. It was a big deal, even if it was only with paint.

It was later when the room was finished (it looked amazing, I’ll add) and Beckett popped the plastic lid off the cake to set it between us on the island counter, that I realized I’d had fun with a man.

“You need a kitchen table.”

“Why? The counter works fine.”

“It’s only big enough for two.”

He raised a brow, “You want more roommates?”

“No!” For the love of sanity, living with one person was enough. “I was thinking more about when Raina and Kaiden come over for dinner.”

“We can go to their place for dinner.”

“You can see their bathtub from the kitchen table. It’s weird.” It was true.

I’d lived with Raina in a sweet little apartment we paid way too much for, but it had separate rooms for everything.

When Raina and Kaiden got serious, they decided they wanted to save as much as they possibly could, and they moved into a studio apartment that didn’t even have a door for their shower.

It was horrible! Honestly, having everything out in the open like that, I couldn’t imagine liking someone I lived with enough to deal with a space like that.

Every time I went over there, all I could see was the clear shower curtain Kaiden had demanded—and Raina had caved into hanging. Seriously, I’d always known Kaiden was a bit of a perv, but at least he was perving on Raina and only Raina.

Still, that didn’t mean I wanted to see the evidence right there while I was eating dinner!

Beckett chuckled, “That shower is awesome.”

I harrumphed, “You’d think so.”

“What’s wrong with it?” He handed me a fork and stabbed his deep into the cake,

foregoing plates.

“There’s no privacy.” I said dumbly, staring at the big cake-barbarian. “Aren’t you going to use a plate?”

“Why? It’s just me and you living here.”

“Tell me you don’t have that view in regards to the milk container?” I could already feel my belly churning.

“No worries there. Drinking out of the milk carton makes it go bad faster and I’m not much for milk. Juice, though, is fair game.”

“Gross. I’ll buy my own juice from now on.”

“I’ll still drink it.” He stabbed his fork into the cake again, taking another large bite. “You’ll get used to it.”

“Doubt it.” I muttered, swiping my fork through the thick icing on the corner of the cake. I didn’t have a bit of cake on my fork when I poked my tongue out to lick the icing. So. Freaking. Good.

And then I noticed Beckett’s eyes on me. I paused as we locked eyes.

An uncomfortable kind of heat flooded into my belly, my enjoyment of my most favorite thing on earth taking second place to the weird sensation, and I swallowed the sweetness on my tongue. “What?”

“Raina wasn’t lying.” His voice was deep and rough, and I so didn’t like that. “You do like icing.”

“Yep.” I dropped my fork and slid off my stool. I hated it when men looked at me like Beckett was looking at me.

I hated it when men looked at me like this, but I felt oddly warm when Beckett did it.

And I didn’t understand why.

“Where are you going?”

“Pouring a juice before you get the chance to contaminate it.” I said, reaching into the fridge for my unopened carton of raspberry juice. It was another one of my weaknesses.

“Sorry,” Beckett said and I startled, confused.

“Why are you sorry?” And then I realized the seal was broken. “Beckett! You didn’t.”

“I actually used a cup for that.”

“Raspberry juice is mine. It’s the one thing I told you I don’t share. I love raspberry juice.”

“What if I promise to never let it run out? Will you share then?”

I popped my hip, dropping a hand onto it. “You’re promising a never ending supply?”

“I am.” He straightened from his crouched position over the counter, nodding. “What do you say?”

“I say that’s a pretty good deal. As long as you’re not drinking from my jug.”

“See how well we work together?”

I snorted and poured my glass. With the heat gone from his eyes and the stirring now dormant in my belly, I rejoined him at the counter and lifted my fork.

Of course, we didn’t eat the whole thing. But we definitely ate more than we would have had he simply pulled two plates from the cupboard.

“You’re a bad influence for my hips.”

“You’ve got great hips and an addiction to the gym. I have a feeling you’ll be fine.”

I had great hips. This was something I knew, but it was something that, when hearing it from Beckett, stirred all kinds of gooey, and entirely inappropriate feelings inside of me.

“Anyway,” tending to avoid awkward situations, I was looking for an escape when I announced, “I’m off to the bath I promised myself this morning.”

That heat I saw in his eyes earlier came back with a vengeance. It was all I could do to make one foot move in front of the other as I attempted to flee. But then he spoke, “You wanna catch a movie after?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Come on,” he pushed. “It’s Saturday.”

“I,” I looked at the couch and then back at Beckett. I wanted to. I wanted to so badly, and that was why I shook my head and snapped, “I already said no. Goodnight, Beckett.”

“Night, peanut.” He said, sounding just as disappointed as he looked.

And I cursed myself throughout the length of my bath, and later as I lay in bed. The man was going to ruin me.

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“How dare you tell him about my cake addiction? That’s like treason.” I accused and Raina raised her brows slowly, testily, as she opened the door of the Library.

In the summer, Raina and I didn’t cover the same shifts, but during school when the Library was busy and more people were needed on nights, those in class covered the nights while the owner and her daughter covered the days.

The owner’s daughter, Jocelyn, or Joss, is a woman I’ll always look at as my saving grace.

She took me in and gave me a job when I needed one desperately.

Not only to make my bills and keep my booty off the street, but also to keep my sanity.

I’m not one of those girls who could handle flaunting my assets in a bar or club for a nice payday.

I don’t handle men well, if you haven’t already read as much into me.

I also don’t handle bossy people, so working as a unit clerk or something equally as demanding is also another no-go.

I was at one of the computers in this very library, searching for a job with a frightening desperation, when Joss approached me. She asked me a few odd questions and wham, bam, thank-you ma’am—I had a job!

I've been here ever since. That was three and a half years ago.

I now held the responsibility of hiring and scheduling.

Joss doesn't let me fire people as I can be quite blunt—aka insensitive, but she says eventually she'll get me there.

"You just need some living under your belt, my girl." I could hear her sweetly croaked words in my mind as a prequel to Raina's high-pitched denial.

"Excuse me? Treason?" She scoffed. "You want to talk treason?"

"I do."

"All right," she planted her hands on her hips. "What do you call packing my bag for camping and packing nothing but lingerie? What's that if it's not treason?"

It's all I could do to keep from snorting in laughter. While Raina and Kaiden were dancing around the formations of what is now their relationship, I dabbled a bit in Cupid's art. I found to my shock that it was totally fun and I'd absolutely do it again.

"That's completely different. You and Kaiden were already making eyes at each other. I don't want eyes from Beckett."

"You just don't realize you want eyes from him. But believe me, you want eyes." She snorted. "You want more than the eyes."

"I really don't." I didn't have to be a person who never smiled for Raina to know that I was serious. She knew. She knew me better than pretty much anyone, and she knew I was serious.

“Mar,” she started, and I just knew I wasn’t going to like whatever nonsense she was going to give me. “You’ve gotta open up eventually. For goodness sakes, honey, you’re always so tight and—and impenetrable. Let him pop your,”

“If you say cherry I’ll hurt you.”

She smiled that bright as day Raina smile, and I scowled. I have the art of scowling down to perfection.

“Let him pop your safe little bubble. Let him get through your wall and you might actually find you’re happy.”

“I am happy.”

“You’re content. You think you’re safe, but you’re not really living.”

“You sound like Maddy. She’s always spewing on about the importance of living.”

Raina flinched. It didn’t take a rocket scientist to know why, but I feigned ignorance. Acknowledging my mistake was just too hard. Too emotional. Too much.

I shouldn’t have said what I said.

“We both know why living is important to Maddy.”

“Yeah, I know.” Sliding my bag from my shoulder, I gave it a light kick under my desk. I was hoping the night would be lax because I had a wicked amount of homework haunting the tail of every thought.

“She lost the one person she loved. The person who showed her how to live,” Raina continued.

I felt my spine straighten painfully in my back.

“Maybe you need someone brave enough to show you how to live. How to love. How to laugh, Mar. Maybe you need someone strong enough to show you that life isn’t about being safe.

It’s about taking risks and letting your heart love so that you can be loved in return. ”

When I finally turned around to reply, Raina was gone.

I didn’t see Raina for the rest of the night, but I didn’t actually look for her either. After powering through the cart of books Joss left for me, I cracked my books and got down to my homework. I finished just before we closed.

Now I was walking through the door of the condo I shared with Beckett, which was within walking distance to work and the university—something I never could have afforded before him. My heart was feeling heavy and I had to fight myself to keep from texting Raina with an apology.

I’d eventually have to face the words I’d thoughtlessly said, but doing so through text would be low and I’ve let my low fall as far as I can.

I knew Maddy’s story. It was the kind of story you want to read about because it would remind your heart to live.

It’d revive your stagnant soul and remind you to take that moment to stop and smell the flowers.

It was the kind of story that inspires and breaks your heart in the same sentence.

The kind you want to read about—but not the kind of story where you want to know

the main character in any personal sense of the word.

It's not the kind of story you wish upon anyone, not even someone you dislike.

And as much as I hated to admit it, I loved Maddy.

I dropped my bag onto the couch as I shuffled into the kitchen, watching Beckett the entire time. He never even lifted his head. He was hunched over a mess of books and papers that stretched across the island.

"Hey," I greeted and his gold eyes flicked to me.

He looked exhausted and I thought back to every other night this week.

I've come home from work to find him just like this.

He's always hunched over his books at this counter.

I'd have a bubble bath with candles and a good book before bed, and he's still hunched over this counter when I crawl between my sheets.

I didn't have the faintest idea when the man actually called it quits.

"How was work?" He tipped his head from side to side, cracking his neck.

I cringed. "Should you be cracking bones? Aren't you in med school now? Isn't that like a call for arthritis?"

"Myth," he replied. "And med school blows."

"I have to agree there." I said in response to his med school comment. "You've been

pretty busy with homework.”

“And studying. How my parents did this is beyond me.”

“You’re doing it.” I shrugged, trying to sound encouraging as I opened the fridge. And that’s when I saw it. The raspberry juice. I finished off the last glass this morning and had meant to pick some up at the store on my way home from work.

I couldn’t believe he thought of it with everything else on his mind.

“It’s hard as balls, though.” He mumbled, watching me pull the juice from the fridge.

I didn’t acknowledge his gesture as I poured a glass. That’s just not the girl I was. “You want some?”

“Sure.” He was looking back down at his papers when I slid the glass toward him. “So happy tomorrow’s Friday. I don’t know how you’re working and going to school.”

“I get most of my studying done on shift. That’s what happens when you’ve got kickass bosses.” I replied, sipping my juice. “Besides, I highly doubt my courses are anything like yours.”

He grunted and I took that as my hint that our conversation was officially finished.

I turned with my juice in hand and made my way to the bathroom where I would prepare a hot bath with bubbles and candles.

Some people sought others as a source of therapy for past pains.

Me? Not so much. I found long ago that there weren’t many pains that couldn’t be

healed when submerged by hot, softly scented waters.

I inhaled the deep scent of lavender as I stripped off my clothes, letting the fabric fall to the center of the floor.

When I sunk deep into the bubbles, I let my eyes close as I rested my head on the lip of the tub.

And where I usually discharged with the happenings of my day, I instead thought of Beckett.

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Unlike the masochistic psycho I lived with, I didn't work out in the morning when I was still half-dead with sleep.

I preferred to kick my own ass with punching bags and running track after I'd been awake for, well, around nine hours or so.

That was why I was running, my feet pounding hard against the green track as sweat coated every inch of my flesh with Kaiden by my side, at four-thirty. In the afternoon.

I'd been trying to get my ass up at the crack of dawn with Amara, (it was worse on days we had class than on the weekends) but I just couldn't do it today.

Today, when my alarm sounded only four hours after I'd fallen into bed, I thought I'd die.

No joke, I seriously thought that was it for me. Kapoosh. I was done. Toast.

Thankfully, two and a half more hours of sleep and mismatched socks later, I was in class on time and feeling—well, I didn't feel quite so dead to the world.

I even made it to my evening workout, which was something I hadn't been feeling I could do with the workload I was taking home every night. Being that it was Friday, I had the whole weekend to kill myself with studying. I could take the evening to work the tension from my muscles.

The beginning of September had been rough, but now, with the middle of October coming to a close, I was beginning to learn the definition of agony.

Agony: Med school.

The two went hand in hand. Don't let anyone tell you different.

Honestly, if I hadn't taken a year between my four-year undergraduate program and the torture I'd enrolled myself in for med school, I'd probably have already flunked.

But against my parent's wishes I had taken that year.

And I didn't regret it. Not even a little bit.

Yeah, so I was one year farther from graduation and the working world, but at least I'd gotten a little living in before true adult life kicked into full swing.

I'd always wanted to backpack through Europe. Now I had those memories.

By the time I hit twenty-seven, I'd be everything I've ever wanted to be. Lucky for Mom and Dad, I'll be everything they ever wanted their son to be.

But as much as I might want to be a Doctor one day, I definitely couldn't say I liked anything about the long hours that came with studying. It was tough. Worth it, I'm sure, but still tough.

The timer on my watch sounded and my lungs released a long breath as my legs slowed their determined strides for a steady fast-paced walk. I could feel Kaiden beside me, but even if I couldn't, I could hear his ragged breaths.

I didn't know why the guy strove to keep up to me. I had years of working out on him. But he said I was butch and Raina liked butch, so he'd work out with me.

I think he was spewing shit. Raina's been obsessed with Kai for years. She couldn't

care less if he had a few more pounds of muscle or not.

“How’s living with the nutcracker been?”

“Man,” I gave him a look that made him chuckle, and shook my head. “Where do you come up with this shit?”

“Her.” He said, sounding defensive. “Called her peanut when we first met. She told me she wasn’t the peanut, but the nutcracker. Told me if I hurt Raina in any way, it’d be my nuts she cracked.” He shivered. “Woman scared me.”

“Gimme a break, she’s tiny. She can’t be more than five foot four.”

“She’s got a bit of demon in her,” he assured, clearly convinced. “Demons can come in tiny little packages with great legs and big blue eyes.”

I shook my head at my buddy, feeling my wet skin start to cool as my heart rate dropped steadily. “She the star of your nightmares?”

“Naw,” he chuckled. “I’m not dreaming of much while I have Raina in my arms. But I do know whose dreams Mar does star in.”

“You said it man.” I decided to go with his teasing jibe. “Great legs and big blue eyes. What’s there not to dream about?”

“If you’re still dreaming then it’s not going all that well, is it?”

“Not as well as I’d like.”

“What would you like?”

“A date for starters.” I rubbed my brow regretting it instantly when I felt my fingers slide over my wet skin. “Maybe some trust.”

“Trust?”

“The girl doesn’t trust me. She even sleeps with her door locked.” My steps quickened, but Kaiden kept pace. “I didn’t even know that door had a lock.”

“It didn’t.” Kaiden admitted, and he’d know as the room used to be his. “Wait, how would you know her door has a lock?”

“I wasn’t trying to sneak in. She left her phone on the counter. Maddy kept texting her so I knocked. She didn’t answer so I tried her door and it was locked.”

Kai was quiet for a beat while he processed.

When you travel with another person in a foreign country for any length of time, you begin to know the ins and outs of their quirks.

This was one of many that Kaiden had. He didn’t just reply with one of his countless quips when the conversation was serious.

If a conversation was serious, you could always count on Kaiden to give it real thought before he replied.

It was for this reason that I was getting really nervous. My heart raced and my lungs felt—well, they felt damned uncomfortable.

“It’s not my place to tell you this and Raina would kill me if she knew, so I won’t say much and please don’t ask for more .

. .” he pinned me with his ice eyes. I’d known two people in my life with eyes that blue.

Kaiden and his father. Apparently his kid brother, Austin, the one who sent him to Europe where he met me, had the same ice eyes.

“Won’t ask for more.”

“Amara had a tough life. Raina won’t tell me the details and I honestly don’t think even she has the details of how tough it was.

But she knows enough to know it wasn’t something any kid should live through.

Sure, Mar has quirks and she can scare the balls up inside a man, but all that hard she hides behind is just that. A wall she hides behind.”

“She’s not hard.”

“Not even a little. For Raina and even Maddy, Mar’s all soft.”

That much I knew. It was that soft I knew she had that I wanted. Every inch and more.

“She’s afraid of me.” I admitted under my breath. I heard Kaiden’s low hiss of breath and I wondered why I even said the words. I hadn’t thought of them. I hadn’t meant to say them. They’d just sounded.

“What?”

“I was teasing her in the kitchen one morning and I got a little close. Not real close. Well, I wasn’t touching her. Anyway, she got freaked. Locked up tight and trembling.

Her eyes were wild and . . .” I shook my head. “Man, I wouldn’t hurt her. I’d never hurt her.”

“I know.” Kaiden did know. Yeah, I went through my fair share of ladies and never turned down the offer of a good night, but I wasn’t an ass.

The girls I played with knew the game. They knew what one night meant.

Honestly, I think they wanted attachment even less than I did.

I didn’t consider myself a true player, but I’d never deny that I liked the game.

“Guess after that morning I haven’t known how to proceed.”

“Gently?” Kaiden made it sound like a question. “She’s been hurt. Don’t know how or from whom, but she’s been hurt. That much isn’t in question. Take it easy and maybe, if you’re serious about her, she’ll let you in.”

“Yeah.”

There was another long pause. “Are you serious about her, Beck?”

If there was a question I hated more, I hadn’t found it yet. “I don’t know. I don’t know enough to know whether I can be serious about her. She barely talks to me and when she does it’s never about anything serious. Kinda hard to know if you want serious when you never get anything real to go on.”

“Give it time.”

“Yeah.”

“It’s only been a month and a half.”

“Yeah.” I said again. As far as I was concerned, the conversation was over.

But I’d ended up with more concerns and questions than I’d begun with.

Who had hurt Amara? And if she were so wounded that she didn’t allow herself to trust, would she ever trust a man like me? Teasing was second nature to a guy like me. I liked to laugh and date; I’d never even seen the girl smile. Never.

Who went through life without smiling?

It killed, but no matter how hard I knew it would be, and how I couldn’t yet admit it to my best friend, I was serious about Amara. I wanted her, past hurts and future smiles included.

I just had to figure out how to build a bridge between the hurt of her past and the laughter of the future I intended to give her, because I knew if she walked across that bridge to the other side, she’d be mine. She’d be safe.

Amara was home when I opened the front door. She was sitting cross-legged on the couch with a book in her lap and a bowl of cake on the coffee table. When I say cake, I mean cake. She’d already scooped off all the icing.

“Hey,” she said, lifting those big blue eyes to me. I swear those eyes could weaken the toughest of men to falling to their knees. And her lips, I won’t even get started on her lips.

“Hey,”

“Tough day?”

“Tough workout.” I smirked, dropping onto the couch beside her. Consciously, I didn’t sit too close. “You gonna eat the rest of that cake?”

Her nose wrinkled. “I don’t think so. I already ate the good stuff.”

“Blasphemy!” I accused, snatching her bowl and shoveling a big chunk into my mouth. She watched as I let my lips drag over her fork and to my surprise and enjoyment, she blushed. “This is the best part right here. Fluffy and moist.”

“I beg to differ.”

I chuckled, continuing to down the icing-less cake. “Each to their own, eh, beautiful?”

“I suppose so.”

“How was class?”

She shrugged, but her cheeks were still pretty and pink. “It was class.”

“Really? For some reason class seemed kinda great today.”

“Could it have anything to do with it being Friday?”

Sweet heaven have mercy, the girl knows me so well already. “I’d wager that’s it.”

“I was thinking of ordering Chinese tonight.”

I raised a brow. “A woman after my own heart.”

“Quit it.” She huffed, lifting her phone. “What do you want?”

“Dinner for six.”

“Gross! We’re two people.”

“Who desperately want leftovers so they don’t have to cook for the rest of the weekend.”

“Who raised you?” Her big blue eyes were wide as saucers and her pretty pink lips were puckered in a frown I’d pay with my right arm to kiss away. “You can’t eat Chinese for three days.”

“Oh peanut, how I must teach you the ways of the world.”

“You’re a funny man, Beckett.” She shrugged and I noted she didn’t laugh as she lifted her phone to her ear. “But if the good Doctor in training wants to poison his organs three days in a row with MSG’s, who am I to stop him?”

Who was she to stop him? Well, she was probably the only one who could. The good Doctor would do pretty much anything for his pretty little patient, but she didn’t know that.

And if she did know, would she care?

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“They don’t deliver.”

“Blasphemy.” He seemed to like that word, so I didn’t quip at it. “It’s no longer the stone ages. Who doesn’t deliver?”

“Are you driving or am I?”

“We’re going together?”

“Figured we would.” I shrugged, but I could already feel my silly cheeks turning red.

I truly had no explanation for why I always turned apple red around this gorilla of a man.

Honestly, it was humiliating enough that I caught myself staring at him when I really shouldn’t be staring.

So to have my cheeks do this funny heat thing kind of killed me a little. Just a little.

“Right, then I’m driving. No way in hell I’ll be able to fit in that thing you call a car.”

“It’s a bug and she’s beautiful.”

“It’s tiny.”

“Are you saying tiny isn’t beautiful?” I demanded, sliding my feet into my cute gray Uggs with the statement button on the side.

“Not at all.” He smirked that grin that made my belly flip and flop all uncomfortably.
“Tiny looks beautiful on you.”

I rolled my eyes, playing at being unaffected. In truth, I was affected. Oh, was I ever affected. “Do those lines ever actually work?”

“Usually.”

Well, at least he was honest.

“You’re ridiculous.”

“Come, little one,” he tossed his arm around my shoulder as he guided me from the condo and into the hall. “Let’s get a move on so we can grab our grub.”

The words sounded like a ringing buzz in my ear. Every time he touched me, this happened. My blood heated and my body froze. I wanted to snuggle in close and I wanted to run. My mind and body practically tore me in two as they dueled over desire and cowardice.

Still, apart from the one morning in the kitchen, my desire always seemed to triumph when it came to Beckett.

And now, even though I knew he sensed my stiffness and could probably hear the wild beating of my heart, he didn’t tighten or loosen his arm around my shoulder.

He held me gently, letting me know silently that if I chose, I could escape him.

And maybe that was why I didn’t want to. Maybe it was because I knew that I could be free, that I actually liked his gentle captivity.

So that was how I stayed as he walked us to the elevator, and then through the lobby to the parking lot.

Beckett, in all his gallant manliness gave me the underground parking stall.

He said it would snow soon and I shouldn't have to brush it off my car if I didn't have to.

He didn't seem to consider that it was much easier for me to brush the snow off my little bug rather than the work he had to do to brush it off his massive truck.

Still, I didn't fight his kindness. And that too, surprised me.

"Whoa," Beckett tore me from my thoughts and I looked up at him.

"What?"

"Got foggy."

"Yeah," I nodded. "They were calling for it. Apparently visibility tomorrow is supposed to be awful."

"Weird."

"I know." This year had been weird weather-wise.

Normally we had loads of snow in the forecast, but this year we'd had sunshine and fog.

If I had to choose, though, I would take the bitter chill that came with a heavy snowfall over the wet nip of a misty winter.

The wet cold came with a chill that sunk deep into your bones.

It was that kind of cold that one never seemed to escape no matter how hard they tried.

“The city looks different with all the fog, don’t you think?”

“It does.” I admitted. “I kind of like it. It’s pretty.”

“A little eerie.”

He opened the door of the passenger side and I hiked myself up before he could help me. Then I turned to him and teased, “Is someone afraid of fog?”

“If I was, would you cuddle me all night long?” Shocker alert; I was speechless. He chuckled, his hand on the door. “Just playing with you, peanut.”

I didn’t have time to reply before he closed the door.

I watched as he rounded the truck with the smile still dressing his cut jaw.

In so many ways, Beckett would be most girls’ dream guy.

If I had to pick a dream guy, I’d name Beckett.

He had the kind of eyes that made a woman feel all melty.

I totally know that’s not a word, but I’m making it one here and now.

Beckett made me feel melty when he looked at me, up and down, before those full lips of his curled into his signature grin.

He had the kind of gold blond hair that was so thick; it was impossible not to think about running your fingers through it.

And his latte skin—that was something else altogether.

I'd wondered if it was a summer tan thing, but with the cooler days we'd had I knew it wasn't.

The man was creamy cappuccino delicious, as Raina would say.

The only thing I didn't find particularly perfect about the man was his size.

Beckett was literally massive. The man dwarfed me in every way.

Standing an entire foot (maybe more) taller than me, he made me feel not only delicate, but also fragile, and in a way, helpless.

He made me feel both safe with him while the possibility that he could be a threat hung over my head.

He was thick. Everywhere. His wrist had to be two, maybe two and a half times the size of mine.

His shoulders were so broad and his arms were so thick, bulging with heavy muscles, that if he wanted, he could knock me straight into oblivion.

He stood on legs that were even thicker than his arms, and that frightened me too.

The thought that, if he wanted he could kick me and probably steal my very last breath with the impact obliterated any sense of safety I thought I had grasped.

All in all, I believed he wouldn't hurt me. I trusted that I was safe with him, but I was still terrified of his size. When he got too close, I sometimes wondered how quickly protection could morph into danger as laughter fell away to lust.

I'd lived to see how quickly danger could form in the wake of promised protection when lust played a part in the game. I'd watched the comfort of laughter flutter like ashes in the wind as unrestrained desire abolished any sense of honor.

I'd survived the pain of a blow.

I knew the power behind a kick.

And worst of all, I knew the guilt-coated shame that followed with tender displays and the vowed "never again."

I hadn't shared my fears with anyone, but I knew that eventually I'd have to.

I would have to because I couldn't stop thinking about it.

I'd even bought a lock for my bedroom door.

Both a door lock and a chain lock, as a precaution, of course.

I'd learned that if you took precautions, you were less likely to live through the horrors that lived in the night or behind closed doors.

I'd learned and it had been a hard lesson.

But the hard lessons are the lessons less forgotten.

The truck bounced beneath Beckett's weight as he hoisted his big body into the seat

beside mine. The truck, already started, was quickly engaged as Beckett shifted the gear into reverse, and then we were on the road.

I gave Beckett instructions to the Chinese place I'd ordered from.

It was one Raina and I had frequented when I was feeling lazy toward the stove.

I didn't love cooking, but I didn't hate it either.

It's a necessary thing one does to survive, and in order to survive living in a house with Raina; one takes the title of cook seriously or else they eat yogurt, marshmallows, and chips endlessly.

I didn't like to eat anything endlessly, even icing.

But on the nights Raina did make dinner, I had to admit she threw together the best ever peanut butter and mini marshmallow sandwich. It sounds disgusting, but it's shockingly delicious.

"You're suddenly quiet." Beckett announced. "Did I say something wrong?"

"What? No, of course not."

"Good." He smiled, but this one didn't reach those warm eyes. "I thought maybe the idea of cuddling a frightened boy made you uncomfortable."

I snorted. "I wouldn't call you a boy."

"What would you call me?"

"A man." My eyes roamed the length of his long body in the drivers seat. "A very

large man who shouldn't be afraid of fog."

"You think I'm a large man who fears nothing?"

"I don't know." When he said it like that it sounded a little silly. "Do you fear?"

"Course I do. Anyone ever tells you they fear nothing, don't trust em and run fast and far."

"Why do you say that?"

"Anyone who loves anything fears. Even if all they love is themselves they'll still fear."

"That makes enough sense." I admitted, even more curious about the big man Kaiden met while backpacking in Europe. "Why did you decide to take a year off to travel?"

He raises a brow, "Do I get to ask you a question if I answer?"

"You can ask."

"Will you answer?"

"Maybe."

"Suppose I'll take my chances," he sighed. "I've always wanted to see the world, but I also want to be a Doctor. I've always admired my parents and I like helping people. Doctors are what I know."

"I spent so much time in the hospital with my Mom or Dad when they were called in on an emergency that they just started feeling like home. When I was a kid, I'd spend

a lot of my time in the hospital daycare so Mom or Dad could visit easily enough while on shift, then my nanny would usually take me home from there.

I liked it. It was like a second home and as I grew older I knew it was where I was supposed to be.

But being a Doctor is demanding, and I'd like to be a surgeon like my Dad.

I'm thinking cardiology, but I won't know until I get in there, you know what I mean? "

"Sure," the man amazed me more and more every day.

"Anyway, getting back to your question," he signaled into the parking lot and twisted to face me.

"I want a demanding career, but I also wanted to make some memories in my younger years. I didn't want all of my twenties to be filled with school and work, so I took the year to do what I wanted. One year. And I'll never regret it."

"Why Europe though?"

"I think it's my turn to question." He laughed when I blinked. Then he answered. "It's old. I wanted to be somewhere with a history and Budapest seemed a little too dangerous to go at alone."

"Budapest?" I straightened. "I've always wanted to go. Always. I've never known anyone else who actually wanted that!"

His eyes softened. "Maybe this summer we'll take a week or two?"

“I don’t know about that,” I fell against my seat again. “It’s expensive and as you pointed out, dangerous.”

“We’ll keep it in mind.”

The way he was looking at me made me feel that melty feeling again, so I unbuckled and opened my door. “I should go in. It’s probably ready.”

I didn’t give him a chance to say anything, but before I made it to the door, Beckett was beside me. “Tell me something about you. Anything you want to share.”

“What?”

“I have a feeling I won’t get far if I ask a question, so I’m asking you to choose something you want to share.”

“My favorite color is purple.”

“I guessed as much by the purple walls I helped you paint.”

“Raspberry Fuzz.” I corrected. I knew my walls were purple, but fighting about this one thing with Beckett was too fun to pass up. “They aren’t purple.”

“They’re purple, peanut.”

I huffed a sigh as I tugged on the door. Beckett caught it, opening it the rest of the way as I slipped inside the warm, deliciously scented restaurant. That was when I felt it, his hand on my back. The thrill ran down the length of my spine as I moved to the front desk.

“Pickup for Bloom.” Beckett said, giving the hostess my last name. She smiled big up

at him and for the first time in my life, I truly resented another girl and her ability to smile so freely, or even at all, at a man.

“Right here,” she lifted the enormous bag with a dinner for six inside and placed it on the counter. When Beckett pulled out his wallet, I shook my head.

“I got it.”

“You’re not paying for my weekends worth of meals.” He handed his card to the girl and she giggled. I glared, but Beckett continued. “This one is on me.”

I had a feeling that Beckett was the kind of man who insisted every meal was a meal on him. I thought about arguing before I snapped my mouth shut.

When the transaction had been approved and Beckett lifted the bag of food, I wondered why I’d even gotten out of the truck.

I’d been useful for absolutely nothing. Hell, I wasn’t even arm candy.

Women like the hostess with their long blonde hair and bubble gum smiles were arm candy material. Not me.

Beckett seemed to sense my mood as he opened my door. “Something wrong?”

“Nope.”

“Right.” He handed me the food and I placed it on my lap. “You’ve got thirty seconds to figure out what you’re going to tell me. I’m going to close the door, walk around to my side and I want you to be ready. A deal’s a deal.”

“I didn’t agree to any deal.”

“It’s the principle of it, beautiful.” He said, and then he closed the door.

I wasn’t thinking when he opened the door to sit beside me again. I wasn’t thinking at all, because if I were thinking I never would have said what I said.

“You call me beautiful, but I was never adopted. Nobody ever thought I was beautiful enough to make me a part of their family. Not really.” I’d started and now I couldn’t stop.

“Sure, people wanted me. Men wanted to screw me and girls wanted to be my friend, because I was beautiful enough for that. But nobody ever wanted to love me. I wasn’t beautiful enough for that.

I wasn’t funny enough. Smart enough. Lovable enough.

” I didn’t cry even though I wanted to. I kept my tone hard and unaffected.

“I was four when I lost my parents and it wasn’t until I was eleven that I felt even a little loved again, but I lost them too.

After that, it wasn’t until I met Joss, my boss at the Library, and then Raina and Maddy, that I actually felt someone cared for me.

For the me beneath the beauty of my skin. ”

“Amara,”

“Is that enough, Beckett?” I asked coldly. “Is that what you wanted to know? Have I completed my end of the deal?”

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Tragic. She was so tragically wounded. So tragically guarded.

So tragically fragile . . .

So tragically beautiful.

“No.” I finally said as we walked through the front door and into the warmth of the condo I shared with this tragic woman.

“What?”

“No.” I repeated. “That wasn’t enough, Amara.”

“Tough shit, Beckett,” she kicked off her boots. “You’re not getting anything more from me.”

I caught her arm already knowing that I was most likely crossing some unseen line she’d drawn, and tugged. When she turned to face me, her face was a mask of fear beneath an armor of ice.

I wanted to release her, but I didn’t. I forced my hand to remain where it was locked gently around her arm, and released the words I needed to say.

“I won’t hurt you, Amara. I would never hurt you.

And you might think that you’re unwanted, but I want you.

Even if all you ever give me is friendship, I want it.

You might think you're not funny because you don't laugh or smile even though I fucking wish, more than anything in this world, you would, but you are.

You make me laugh more often and harder than anyone else I've ever met.

You've got a sourpuss scowl that cracks me up every time, like it or not. ”

She's not even breathing. And her eyes, so beautifully blue, are wide and round.

“You might think that you're not smart enough, but I don't know another woman who is smart enough to keep up with me.

You reply to my every quip with a quick lash of your lovely tongue.

” I think that in any moment, she might crumble.

“You might think you're not beautiful enough, but there is no other woman I've ever looked at that is as beautiful as you.

Your eyes, they are so big and blue I could get lost in them.

Your lips are the perfect shade of pink and your hair,” I shook my head, nearly at a loss for words.

“You're beautiful, Amara. Outside and in.

And you might think you're not loveable, but you are.

” My voice is deep and low when I repeat, “You have no idea how loveable you are.”

She has no control of the renegade tear that dives from her long lashes to sweep down her cheek. Cocking my head, I released her arm to catch the salty orb with my thumb.

When she didn't reply, I proposed, "How about you go get into your pajamas, I'll get into mine, and we meet back here? We'll gorge on Chinese food and watch movies until we can't keep our eyes open. Sound good?"

"Sounds . . ." she caught her breath. "So good."

I couldn't have torn my eyes from the woman as she walked to the hall if my life had depended on it.

I didn't know I had it in me to be the man I was these past few minutes.

I didn't know I had it in me to be the man she clearly needed.

But now that I did, I couldn't imagine I'd be a man who was worth anything if I didn't give it my all from here on out.

I wasn't lying when I said I'd take friendship from her if that were all she had to give. I'd take her friendship for as long as it took for her to want to give me more.

But I understood a little more about Amara Bloom than I had before. She'd been alone for so long, hurt, and abandoned, and afraid, that she'd grown a thick skin. Still, I wasn't going to hurt her. I'd never abandon her. And I'd conquer every fear she'd show me.

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The Past

His fingers locked around my arm, squeezing. He squeezed me so tightly, my fingertips went numb and the muscle beneath my skin pulsed in agony. I'd be bruised tomorrow for sure.

"You like him?"

"No." I shook my head. "I don't even know him. He's—he's your friend."

"He likes you."

"I don't care."

"He says you're off limits. You're my sister." He smirked bitterly. "But we both know you're mine."

His fingers pulsed as a rush of anger swooped through his eyes, and I whimpered. "You're hurting me."

"I don't care." He said through his teeth, but his grip loosened. "Tell me what he said to you."

"He didn't say anything. He asked for a glass of water, that's it."

"I wished his friends hadn't come over tonight."

I wished I could have decided to study in my room, rather than in the kitchen.

But it'd been quieter down here than in my room.

My room was next to his—and he and his friends had been listening to really loud music.

“It didn’t look like nothing.”

“I swear—it was nothing.”

I flinched at the sound of the front door slamming closed, rattling the house. His eyes flared at the knowledge that his parents were home, and through gritted teeth, he announced. “I’ll be back in a couple hours.”

And then he was gone, and I was left staring at the closed door of my bedroom with tears burning the whites of my eyes.

I could still feel the harsh throb of his hand around my arm—a memory brought on by the tender, but frighteningly familiar way Beckett had held me moments before.

I knew Beckett wasn’t him. I knew he wouldn’t hurt me like he had.

He’d proved as much by the gentle way he’d handled me even through his frustration, but still, he’d frightened me.

And he’d torn loose a memory I wished to keep locked away.

My back was against my door and tears were spilling from my eyes as I gasped, pulling quick breaths into my lungs.

I was thinking this was becoming a kind of habit. I was also thinking it was a habit I needed to break. ASAP.

But right now, like it or not, I was a sobbing mess.

His words had stolen my breath, and quite possibly a little piece of my heart.

Every word that fell from his lips chiseled away a little more of the wall I'd built around my heart.

It was amazing how quickly something I spent years crafting could crumble.

But the wall was crumbling, and Beckett Davis was the one demolishing it.

Sucking in a deep breath, I pushed myself from the door to my dresser. As Beckett proposed, I pulled out my favorite pair of fluffy purple jammies. They weren't sexy at all, but they were warm and cozy and everything I needed tonight.

I never would have guessed that my well-crafted strength would be obliterated by the man in the next room.

He was a funny guy. He was never serious and always cocky.

I thought my heart was safe with him. If I had thought for even a moment that he could pull me into his web of feelings, I never would have moved in.

I would have run from him. I would have saved myself before it came to this.

But it's too late now. The year has begun and I couldn't find a room to rent at the awesome deal I have here with Beckett if I sold my left kidney.

I'm stuck and I'm hell bent to make the best of it.

So I'll put on my ugly, ridiculously comfy jammies and I'll gorge on Chinese, making it clear to the man that I don't want anything more than friendship, so he'll have to take it or leave it, because I don't have it in me for anything more.

I'll never have it in me for anything more. Never.

One. Two. Three.

Deep breath in with a deep breath out. Clear the mind. Harden the heart and things will be all right.

I've told myself these words almost every day since as far back as I could remember. Somewhere along the way they became my prayer. My saving grace. My protection and my courage.

The words became the foundation to the thick wall I'd built to withstand all the hurt anyone I could ever meet might intend to throw at me.

But no matter how strong those words were, they weren't strong enough to craft a foundation capable of keeping out Joss, Raina, Maddy, and now the most dangerous of them all—Beckett.

But I still had my face. The mask I'd worn every day for so long that it was nearly automatic. As soon as I woke, it slipped into place. I wore my bitterness like a shield and I wielded my lashing tongue like the sharpest sword.

Maybe my wall was crumbling, but I hadn't lost my entire arsenal quite yet. For now, I was safe enough.

At least, that's what I decided to tell myself as I opened my bedroom door to step into the hall.

One fleece covered leg moved and the other followed not far behind as I walked myself to the living room.

It was there that I noticed Beckett in the kitchen, standing behind the island counter.

He wore a pair of blue plaid pajama pants that hung impossibly low on his gloriously carved hips and a gray housecoat that he left hanging open to expose the lickable tan skin with all the ripped glory that was his chest.

I'd seen plenty of men with their shirts off, Kaiden included. The man had a penchant for going shirtless in the mornings. If Kaiden had a cup of coffee, there was no shirt. Raina excused the nonsense with "he's building a good tradition, my girl" or "we appreciate good traditions."

But this wasn't tradition. This was like seeing the Holy Grail for the first freaking time. Awing. Pure righteousness.

And clearly this whole plan I had to keep myself hard and unaffected was doomed.

I was feeling melty again.

"Figured I'd get everything open so we can pile it onto plates."

"Sounds great." I said, praying my mask was holding even though all the glue that seemed to hold me together was melting away, bit by bit, every time I was in this man's presence.

"You wanna watch something sappy? Women seem to like that stuff and I figured

I'm man enough to give you what you want," his warm teasing eyes lifted to mine. "At least for tonight."

"Actually," I shook my head, knowing I was totally going to surprise him. "I'm not feeling that tonight."

"What are you feeling?"

"I have the boxed set of Game of Thrones. I've been dying to see it, but I've never been much for TV and I hate waiting for things I love.

Figured now that six seasons are out I'm good.

They've been sitting in my room, but I haven't had much time to watch.

"I could feel something like excitement bubbling up in my belly as I moved closer to the island. "What do you think?"

"I think we can make it through at least one season tonight."

"You haven't seen it?"

"Oh, I've seen it."

"And you want to watch it again?"

"It's that good." He winked and my silly heart fluttered. "But I'm warning you, don't get attached to any of the characters. They'll either die or get so brutally hurt that death would have been preferred."

"That bad?"

“That bad.” He confirmed.

“Good.” I decided. “I don’t want hearts and flowers tonight.”

“Then you’ve ordered the right series.” He chuckled. “No hearts in the Game Of Thrones —unless you count the ones being ripped out and tossed away like trash.”

“Just what I need tonight.” I informed, swiping my plate and filling it with deliciousness. “And this, this looks so good right now.”

“You look good, by the way.” He said and I felt suddenly fluttery in my belly. “I like the ugly pajamas. They work.”

“They aren’t that ugly.”

“They’re pink.”

My eyes snapped to his, because this was real business. “They are not pink. They are purple! Are you colorblind?”

Beckett wasn’t colorblind. He was laughing. Actually, he was a hysterical mess of laughter as he crouched over, holding his gut, sobbing with man-giggles. “I was kidding. They’re purple. I just like messing with you.”

“You’re . . .”

“I’ve never known anyone to get so defensive over purple before.”

I bit my lip and stayed quiet, just glaring at him over the counter. Then I added another two lemon chicken balls to my plate. “Whatever.”

He laughed harder.

I glared harder.

“There are DRAGONS!” I twisted to look at Beckett with wide, excited eyes. “Dragons! We have to start season two.”

“Woman,” he groaned. “I’m going to pass out.”

“But—dragons.”

He chuckled. “You’ll have tons of time to see the dragons later.”

“But . . .” I huffed, seeing the dark coloring under his eyes and remembering the intense week he had studying late into each night. “We have to watch at least one episode a day. I need to know about those dragons.”

“Think I can manage that, peanut.” Beckett was standing, moving to the kitchen with our plates.

I turned off the system and joined him in the kitchen. I poured myself a raspberry juice, downed it and declared, “I’m going to have a bath. See you in the morning.”

“Night, beautiful.” I tried not to flinch at his words. “Sweet dreams.”

“You too, Beckett.”

Saturday morning was a morning I spent with Maddy, but this Saturday, after staying up so late into the night with Beckett, all I wanted to do was sleep in.

Still, when my alarm went off at six-thirty, I pulled my booty out of bed.

If I didn't, Maddy would ask questions. I didn't want to answer questions about Beckett.

It was when I was padding into the kitchen for a cup of mud that I noticed the light was on. And then I noticed the man with the books spread out at the counter. His hair was a mess and he looked like he'd already had about ten cups of coffee.

"Morning," He startled at my voice, twisting to look at me.

"Hey, is it that time already?"

"Already? How long have you been awake?"

"A while," he shrugged. "Made coffee."

"I see that." I was already on route to the pot. "Did you get any sleep?"

"A few hours."

"I think med school is going to kill you," leaning into the counter, I watched him exhale. "You've gotta have balance."

"There's no balance. Talk to either one of my parent's and they'll tell you as much."

"Right," I breathed. "But you can't not sleep."

"I slept."

"A few hours isn't sleep. Is that even enough time for someone to hit REM sleep?"

"Most people hit REM sleep within ninety to a hundred and twenty minutes of being

asleep.”

“Sometimes you’re too smart.”

“It’s just a fact.”

“Okay, Dr. Davis, but you still need more than a few hours of sleep a night.”

“I think med school stretches you so thin so it can prepare you for the hours you might keep on shift.”

“What?” I frowned. “Are you telling me doctors don’t sleep?”

“Pretty much.”

“Right,” I snorted, sipping the hot liquid. “Well, I better get ready for the gym and you should get your butt back to bed.”

“Do you work today?”

“Yeah.”

He dipped his chin, eyes back on his paper. “I’ll be ready for our show tonight.”

I stiffened. “Is that why you’re up so early? So you can watch Game of Thrones with me?”

“No.”

He was lying. I could practically smell the stench of it. “Don’t push yourself, Beckett. I have plans tonight anyway.”

“You do?” He was the one frowning now.

“Yes.”

“With who?”

“What does it matter?”

“You’re ditching our show for someone else. I want to know who trumps dragons.”

“Maddy and or Raina.” I said. “But definitely Maddy.”

I didn’t actually have plans quite yet, but by the time I was done with the gym, Maddy and I would have plans for tonight like it or not.

“Right,” he rubbed his temples. “Well, I think I’ll take your advice and catch a few hours of shut-eye so I can get back to it.”

I nodded, started walking from the room and paused. “Take care of yourself, Beckett.”

His warm eyes softened in a way I didn’t, but so did, like.

I didn’t give him time to respond as I turned and moved down the hall.

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“The guy is going to burn out,” I said around a scoop of mint chocolate chip ice cream.

Raina gave me big eyes and Maddy looked contemplative.

“I mean, he has so much going on. Yet every second or third day, whenever I’m nearing the end of my raspberry juice, he comes home with a new one.

And he always watches at least one episode of Game of Thrones with me.

It’s like . . .” I huffed, letting my back fall against the couch as I pushed my quart of ice cream away. “I don’t know what it’s like.”

“I think he’s trying to impress you.” Raina waggled her brows and Maddy scoffed.

“Or he’s trying to be a man of his word, as good men should be.”

“Well,” Raina stabbed her spoon into her caramel swirl tub. “That’s a possibility too.”

“How do you feel about him trying so hard?”

“I feel like a burden.” I replied to Maddy’s question, hating that I felt that way. “I’ve told him he doesn’t have to do these things, but he always does.”

“Well maybe you should do something for him.”

It was when Raina said things like this that I felt untrusting. Yes, she was my friend. Yes, I loved her to the moon and back. But the woman was a little crazy. She was all about skinny-dipping and gypsy living, while I was a little more restrained.

“What do you have in mind?” Both Maddy and I were giving her wary looks. Both of us had experienced the wilder side of Raina’s advice.

“I don’t know,” she lifted her spoon to wave it in the air. “Give him a night off being the student. Take him out. Get him wasted and just have fun. Remind him that he’s twenty-three years old.”

“Get him wasted? That’s your grand advice?”

“Yep,” she popped her lips. “That’s it.”

I considered. Then to my surprise, I agreed. “Okay.”

“Okay?” Her eyes got huge and then she reached over to slap a hand on Maddy’s thigh. “Baby cakes, will you come?”

Maddy rolled her eyes at the nickname. Honestly, I’d roll my eyes too. “I don’t know.”

“Oh, come on!” Raina bounced excitedly. “It’ll be fun. We’ll all go out together.”

I watched Maddy a little hopefully. It was when her eyes came to me that she sighed and relented. “Fine. I’ll come.”

“Yay!” Raina clapped. “I’ll text Kai. He’s with Beck now.”

“He is?” I was surprised to find Beckett wasn’t planted at the island counter with his

books.

“Yeah, they’re at the gym. It’s like the only time Kai sees Beck anymore.”

“I’m glad he’s out. He’s been at the counter so much it’s starting to look like an extension of him.”

This wasn’t a lie. Beckett studied all the time.

I understood and tried to make things easier on him by doing the simple things I could.

I tried to make dinner diligently, because if I didn’t, he ate a banana or a bag of Cheetos, and I couldn’t imagine that was enough food for a man as large as Beckett.

So I cooked. I didn’t hate cooking, so it wasn’t a big deal.

I’d cooked for Raina when I lived with her, but cooking for Beckett felt way different than cooking for Raina. It felt almost intimate in an odd way.

Besides, I had to eat too. I might be sassy, but I wasn’t cruel.

Cooking for myself and ignoring Beckett would be rude.

So I cooked for him as much and as often as I could.

I’d even started making eggs and toast before class each day.

He appreciated the effort and let me know it. So I continued doing it.

This had been going on for nearly a month.

I'd been living with Beckett now for nearly three months.

It was going well. Really well. But I was beginning to feel almost couple-ish even though Beckett had basically stopped hitting on me as he had when I'd first met him the weekend of Raina's birthday.

We'd moved past the entirely inappropriate comments to an easy friendship where teasing banter and feel-good words were exchanged in place of sardonic quips.

I liked it. I never expected to, but damn, I did.

If someone would have told me a few months ago that I would feel this way about a man I lived with, I would have laughed. I would have laughed at the thought of living with a man, and I would have laughed at the thought of feeling any kind of trust towards any man at all.

It was shortly after I lost my parents in a car accident with the city transit that I'd learned just how untrustworthy men were.

A little girl learns quickly that her daddy is her white knight and her mommy is her queen.

A little girl who loses both at four years old learns that the world isn't a fairytale and life isn't easy.

It wasn't easy for me.

I never got adopted. After the accident, I'd stopped talking. People might want a pretty child, and I was a very pretty child as I'd so often been told, but no one wants a child so touched by grief that they stop talking.

So I'd moved from foster home to foster home until I turned eleven.

I lived with more kids than I could count—and a lot of kids who weren't kids at all, but demons in the night.

The boys in particular were bad with their mean comments, threats, and tricks.

It only became worse the older I got. Kids in care are defensive.

Their bark is really all the protection they've got and I know, being in care myself, that sometimes a vicious bark can invoke a whole lot of terror.

But not all the homes I was sent to were bad.

I had one really good one. Emmie Roberts was a beautiful woman both inside and out.

She was single and had a daughter, Gracelyn, who was kind.

I was eleven years old when I moved in with the Roberts family.

They quickly made me one of them, and for the first time since I'd lost my white knight and queen, I felt like I had a mother and sister.

And then my sister was diagnosed with cancer.

It came out of nowhere and it obliterated not only my life, but also Gracelyn's.

Emmie lost it after that. I still remember the day she sat me down and told me she couldn't do it anymore.

I remember the terror that spilled free inside of me as I assured her I'd be fine.

I'd loved Emmie and Gracelyn, but it was when I packed my bags and moved into a new home with a new family that wasn't quite so nice, that I decided I'd never love again.

I was fourteen and with only four more years in the system it seemed like my best course of action.

I'd been right; especially considering the next three and a half years of my life I lived with Jayden.

"What do you think, Mar?" Raina waved her hand in my face. "Earth to Mar . . ."

"What?" I blinked. Then I blushed.

Okay, so it's rare, but it happens. Sometimes when I think about my past, I space out. That's why I didn't think about it. I didn't deal with it. I'd shoved it under the rug a long time ago, and no matter how long I lived, I didn't ever intend to lift that rug. Not for anything.

But lately the thoughts had been slipping free from their prison regardless of my effort to keep them locked away.

She lifted her brows and repeated, "Saturday night work for you?"

"For what?"

"For going out, silly." Raina giggled, eyes narrowing slightly. "Are you feeling okay?"

“Yeah,” I shifted toward my ice cream desperately needing something to do with my hands. “I’m fine. Just thinking about what I’m going to make for dinner.”

She eyed me carefully before glancing at Maddy. I pretended to ignore the very obvious silent exchange between my two friends as I shoveled a huge scoop of green ice cream into my mouth.

“Okay,” she continued. “Well, Beckett says if you’re in he’s in.”

“I think he likes you,” Maddy said dreamily.

There was a soft smile playing at the corners of her lips, and I wondered if she was thinking about Austin.

Austin had been the one to teach Maddy to live.

I don’t really know how one person can teach another how to live, considering we’re all alive and breathing, but from what I hear, their story was epic and tragic.

From the bits and pieces Maddy had shared over the last few months we’ve been going to the gym, I had to agree.

Their love was something rare, and beautiful, and tragic.

But the gifts he gave to her before he passed away were gifts she would forever cherish until the very end of her days.

If Maddy could still smile after losing everything she had, I didn’t understand why I couldn’t find it in me to do the same.

In a way, it made me feel pathetically weak.

But I just didn't smile. I hadn't smiled in years.

It wasn't until I met Beckett that I'd even wanted to.

"Great," I said to Raina, making a conscious effort to ignore Maddy's comment.
"Saturday. Let me know when and where."

"This is great, peanut." Beckett moaned the words around a mouth full of food.

I had made a lemon chicken stir-fry for dinner. And Beckett was right. It was great.

"Thanks."

"Where'd you learn to cook?"

"Google," I said matter of fact. "And then Pinterest."

He chuckled. "Well, you learn fast on your own."

"I do everything better on my own."

It was from the corner of my eye that I saw his jaw lock tight. He chewed. He swallowed. And then his eyes met mine. "It doesn't have to be that way."

"What way?"

"You don't have to be lonely."

"Lonely works for me."

"Bullshit."

“Excuse me?” I cocked my head to the side, lifting one brow.

“I know what lonely is like and it’s not all you’re cracking it up to be.”

“ You know what lonely is like?”

“I do.”

“I doubt that.”

His eyes narrowed and I thought maybe, just maybe I’d pissed him off. Worry flared, but his voice was low when he spoke. “You think you know everything about my life, but you don’t.”

I felt my heart jump a little. “Okay, what was your life like?”

“You think I had it all—everything I wanted, right?”

I swallowed a sip of my juice. “I think you had more than I did.”

“You’d be right. I did have pretty much everything I wanted. I also had affection whenever my parents were around, but they weren’t around much, Amara. My parents are successful people, and it’s no secret that they never wanted kids. Never. I was an accident and that’s never been a secret either.”

Stunned, I had no words for him. I didn’t need them. He continued.

“I had a good life and I know that. I was well provided for, and even though I knew they didn’t want me, they still loved me.

I was lucky for that. They told me often that they were proud of me, but I never really

had a family—not the way I wanted.

I never had the mom who cooked and family game nights didn't exist in my house.

Fuck, you're the first woman outside of my nanny to cook for me.

"He dropped his fork and it clanged against his plate.

"I didn't have the kind of childhood Raina and Kaiden had.

I was luckier than you, but I wasn't that lucky.

And you can't hide lonely from someone who knows what it looks like. "

"I . . ." I pushed my rice around my plate. "I'm sorry, Beckett. I didn't know."

"I don't know much about it, but I know you had a shit life, Amara. Don't be sorry. Just don't keep living your life like you've still got a shit life. You don't. You've got people who care about you now."

"I . . ."

"You're not lonely. You're just choosing to act like it." He lifted his plate and dropped it in the sink. And then he disappeared into his room, closing his door loudly behind him.

And there I was, left alone with the ghost of his words.

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I should have been studying, but I wasn't. Instead, I was at the gym with Kaiden. I'd made it to the gym two days in a row. This deserved comment as working out was coming to be a rare thing for me. And that comment was something Kaiden gave in excess.

"I know," I said in reply to the fourth exclamation. "I've been slacking lately."

"I wouldn't say you've been slacking. More like eating, breathing, shitting school." He laughed at his joke. "But not slacking."

"Ain't that the truth?" I muttered.

"So do you wanna talk about it?" Kai asked and I set the weight I'd been lifting down.

"Talk about what?"

"The fight you had with Mar,"

I gave my friend a look and then I decided I didn't like the idea of having friends who were couples. Couples seemed to talk about everything.

"I didn't have a fight with Amara."

"That's not what Raina said."

"And how would Raina know?"

Kaiden shook his head. “Mar talks to Raina.”

For some reason, I found myself feeling a little irritated and a little excited that Amara had been talking to Raina about me. I liked it because she was talking about me. I wanted her talking about me, and thinking about me, and daydreaming about me. For fuck sakes, I just wanted the girl.

But I didn’t want her talking to her friend about our arguments—especially when I didn’t know we were arguing.

“Didn’t know it was a fight.”

“What happened?”

“I told her to quit acting lonely.” I shrugged. “I kind of just—well, I guess I lost it a little.”

“You lost it and you don’t think you had a fight?” He chuckled. “I know you’ve never dated, but dude . . .”

“I walked away before I actually lost it.”

This time, Kaiden laughed. Hard. “Buddy, you walked away from the girl after giving her a piece of your mind. How can you think she wouldn’t view that as a fight?”

“I don’t know.”

“On top of that, you’ve met me here the last two nights. You’ve chosen to come to the gym over being home with her,” he said, stating the obvious. “Why wouldn’t you think she’d think you’re pissed?”

“Fuck,” I rubbed my brow. “Everything I try with her backfires.”

“Again, that’s not what Raina says.”

My eyes snapped to his. “What does Raina tell you, exactly?”

“She says she thinks Mar’s falling for you.” His eyes never left mine. He didn’t grin and his eyes weren’t laughing. He was trying to see through my mask. But I wasn’t trying to hide anything from him.

“She’s hard to get to know.”

“That’s a given.”

“Man, I didn’t expect to feel this way for her.” I couldn’t believe I was talking about this. “I didn’t expect to be so affected by her unhappiness.”

“I don’t think she’s unhappy.”

“The girl doesn’t smile.”

“Yeah, I know. But that doesn’t mean she isn’t happy.”

I cocked my head. “What does it mean?”

“Could mean she’s afraid to show the world she’s happy. Could be that every time she’s shown the world she’s happy, her happiness gets taken away. Could be she feels she’s safer hiding it.”

The thought killed me. I hated the idea that the sweet woman with all her crazy kitten sass had been hurt so many times, she’d given up on showing her happy. I hated

thinking that maybe I'd never get to see the evidence of the happiness I hoped to give her.

I'd tried to be funny. I'd tried to push her every button, make her wild, and make her crazy. Nothing worked. It'd been months and I hadn't seen her smile, not even a slight quirk to her lips.

"Maybe."

"I bought a ring." Kaiden said, changing the topic to one I didn't expect. But as soon as he said the words, I felt my mood shift. Instantly, I was ecstatic for my friend.

My happiness, unlike the woman I was falling for, showed itself on my face. My happiness wasn't a secret or a burden.

My happiness was free.

"When?"

"Last weekend."

"Kaiden," I gave him a heavy pat on the shoulder. "Congratulations."

"I'm going to ask her this Christmas."

"Wow," I nodded. "That's just over a month away. Think you can hold onto the ring that long without giving it away?"

He laughed, "I got no choice. I have a plan and I'm sticking to it. But I need your help."

“Let’s hear it.” I said eagerly. “Anything.”

“I want to plan a ski trip.”

“A ski trip?”

“Yeah, with everyone. She’d want Mar and Maddy there, and you know I want you there too. I already talked to her parents and mine. They’re in but they never plan trips out this way for Christmas so I don’t want them planning anything. Raina can get suspicious. It’s gotta be her idea.”

I chuckled, “I think we can manage this. We’ll plant the idea on Saturday.”

“You’ll plant the idea. I don’t want her to get any ideas about me pressing for anything.”

“All right,” I agreed. “I’ll plant the idea.”

“Thanks,”

“Any time.”

“You know you’ll be my best man, right?” His voice cracked and I knew he was thinking about his younger brother who was no longer here with him.

It was while Kaiden was mourning Austin in Europe that I’d met him.

He’d become the brother I never had and I hoped that, to him, I was a brother, even if he’d already had one and lost.

“I’d be honored.”

Me: Don't worry about dinner. Picking up pizza.

I stared down at my phone, waiting for Amara to reply as I stood in line waiting to pick up my order. It wasn't until I was in the truck, about to drive, that my phone chimed.

Amara: Sounds great!

Me: You home?

Amara: About 2 leave Library.

Me: Stay. I'm close. Pick u up.

Amara: K.

I wasted no time in driving from the pizza place to the Library.

It was only just past six so I didn't know what she was doing at work.

Amara typically had Wednesday's off, but things changed; she could have gotten called in.

She loved being at the Library so I suspected that if she were called in, she'd take it.

It was when I pulled up to the big brick building and saw her standing on the stairs waiting for me, that I realized Kaiden was right.

She thought we'd had a fight and even though it hadn't been intentional, I had been avoiding her.

I was an ass. Being an ass unintentionally didn't change the facts. I was still an ass.

She wore a gray beanie with a knit flower on the side and her dark gray winter jacket.

Purple mittens hid her hands; I knew they were purple because everything the girl picked for herself was some shade or another of purple.

And her cheeks were rosy from the cold. Big white flakes had started falling from the sky to coat the ground, and I thought that she'd never been more beautiful as my headlights grazed over her body before I pulled up next to the big set of concrete stairs.

I watched as she climbed down the stairs, jolting into gentleman mode just in time to jump down and run for the passenger door. I opened it and she gave me a curious look, her head tipped back and her lips positioned in a pouty frown.

I counted my lucky stars that she wasn't glaring at me. The woman had the glare to scare a man mastered.

"You know I can open my own door."

"I happen to remember a sassy little thing asking me where on the gentleman scale I capped out."

"I wouldn't say that's how it was worded."

"It was something like that," I leaned down and caught sight of the small parting of her pretty lips. Every male hormone in my body flared to life with the evidence of just how my nearness affected her. "And I made it my mission that day to show you, that when it comes to you, I'll never cap out."

“Every guy caps out.”

“Not me. Not with you.”

Her eyes broke the connection with mine. Her flushed cheeks turned even pinker as she breathed out a low breath. Then she looked back up at me. “What do you want from me, Beckett?”

Well, shit. Of all the words that could have come from those lips, I wasn’t prepared for these. Not even a little bit.

“I want what you want.”

“I don’t want anything.”

A lie. We both knew it. She wanted so much more, but she wasn’t ready to admit it to me or to herself.

I could wait. I would wait. For this woman I would wait as long as it took.

“I want your friendship. I want your honesty. I want you to be happy and I wouldn’t mind being your reason one day.”

“My reason?”

“For being happy. One day I’d like to be your reason.”

She didn’t say anything as she pulled her little body into my big truck. I’d give anything to have the trust I needed to put my hands on her hips and lift her up, but we weren’t there yet. One day we would be. But that wasn’t today.

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Things with Beckett after our little argument had been fine.

Like all things, I swept it under the rug.

We had pizza, teased, and watched our show until it was way later than either of us should have gone to bed.

The next morning I realized Beckett pulled an all-nighter.

It was then that I realized he didn't sweep things under the rug like me.

Beckett dealt with things. And the way he dealt with me was to spoil me rotten without me even realizing he was doing it.

He bought pizza, sacrificed his study time to spend time with me, and in turn had to sacrifice his sleep time to study.

I felt horrible when I realized, so I made an awesome breakfast with bacon—something I hate cooking—before school.

Beckett had made his love for bacon clear, but who likes to cook something that spits burning pieces of pain at you?

And worse, bacon is a morning thing, so you're not exactly starting your day off right by making the stuff.

Unless you've got a thing for pain, then a pan of bacon spitting its fire on the stove is

the perfect way to start the day.

Regardless, I cooked the bacon, and I cooked it for the man who sacrificed sleep for me. I cooked it, and to my sheer surprise, I loved it.

I loved it because Beckett walked into the kitchen after his shower looking like a model, with a gaze of sheer delight. He tilted his head up slightly, sniffing the air, before letting out a low, appreciative moan.

“Peanut,” he groaned deep and low. “You’re the best.”

I’m the best. I’m the best. The. Best! The man had no idea how that felt to hear. He had no idea how my insides melted in that way I tried so hard to stop.

He had no idea . . .

“Grab a plate,” I returned, gesturing to the pan of scrambled eggs and bacon now in a bowl on the counter. “Hash browns are in the microwave.”

“Heaven,” long fingers plucked a piece of bacon from the bowl. “Have I told you you’re an angel?”

“You don’t need to tell me I’m awesome.” I tried, and probably failed to play down the way his words made me feel. “I already know.”

Beckett only laughed. “Thanks for this, really.”

“It was a long night for you, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

“You didn’t sleep,” I said, adding, “did you?”

Whiskey colored eyes met mine and then he shook his head. “No.”

“Why did you spend so much time with me if you had other things to do?”

Drawing in a deep breath, Beckett looked contemplative. I wondered if I was going to get the truth out of him. And then I wondered if he weren’t telling the truth, would I even know?

“I figured you needed me.”

“I didn’t.” The denial came automatically.

He lifted his chin. “Yeah, you did. We argued. I hadn’t realized we argued, but we did. When I realized what you thought, I made an effort to make it better between us. Your happiness is important to me, Amara.”

I raised a brow “My happiness?”

His eyes warmed and my heart flipped. “You were happy last night. There was no smile or laughter, but you were happy.”

“I was?”

“Yeah.”

“How do you know?” It was my turn to lift my chin, but when I did it, it was in defiance.

“Your eyes gave you away, they always give you away.” My breath snagged, but he

continued. “Last night they told me I made you happy.”

The man was determined to break me. “If you don’t eat soon you’ll be late.”

He grinned in that cocky delicious way he did. “We wouldn’t want that, would we?”

I said nothing as I poured my coffee and filled my plate with the breakfast that spit fire at me first thing. I said nothing, but my heart was saying all kinds of things as it fluttered and danced like a wild thing in my chest.

I ate in silence and Beckett ate with a grin that never slipped.

But silent or not, I was mentally cognizant enough to know that like it or not, I was slipping into like for Beckett Davis. I was slipping into like, and trust, and happiness.

I was slipping into sweet.

The rest of the week raced by in a whirl of class, work, and studying.

I’d seen Beckett, of course, but we hadn’t watched an episode of our show since the night he picked me up from the Library where I’d been visiting Raina.

By visiting Raina, I mean I was moaning and groaning about the man I lived with.

And then the man picked me up in his huge Alberta Man truck, giving me a night that obliterated every moan and groan I’d given to Raina.

By the time Friday night came and Beckett proposed we watch an episode before bed, I’d thought for sure he was nearing the point of dropping like a fly.

The skin under his eyes had turned a dark shade of purple in evidence of his late

nights studying.

He looked exhausted and even his teasing grins came less.

I didn't like it; seeing Beckett so tired, but I had to admit that I loved spending time with him.

When I was with him, I wasn't so alone.

When I was with Beckett, I felt safe.

So I didn't tell him I was tired. I didn't send him to bed because it was the best thing for him to do after the week of insanity he'd had. I didn't close my door and slide into my sheets alone.

Instead, I proposed we get into our jammies and bring our blankets out to the couch. I proposed we watched not one episode, but instead challenged we get through a season.

Not even I had the juice for an entire season of Game of Thrones, no matter how deeply I loved the series. But I challenged it. I did something I never imagined I would do just to spend more time feeling not so alone—and safe.

I manipulated.

When Beckett dropped his pillow down on the leather, I thanked the couch lords that Beckett chose to buy a giant sectional. I was already stretched out on the long arm with my blanket cocooning me.

“See you stole the best spot,” he accused, a slow grin forming.

“I gave you the whole couch. Now you can lie down and relax.”

“Now I can lie down and sleep.”

“You’re that tired?” I knew he was, but still I asked.

“I’ll make it.”

I felt guilty, but I couldn’t bring myself to stand and walk to my room. I missed spending time with him and I just wanted to feel not so alone tonight. I didn’t know why. I honestly didn’t have a reason, but I just couldn’t turn away from him. Not now. Not tonight.

So I snuggled deeper into my cocoon of blankets as Beckett settled on the couch beside me, his head close to my lap where he’d dropped his pillow.

By the second episode, my eyes were burning and Beckett was asleep.

I decided as I hit the power on the remote and blackness flooded the room that I wasn’t going to sneak into my room like I should.

I was going to cuddle down on the couch and share Beckett’s pillow with him.

I was going to stay where I felt happy, and safe, and not so alone.

I was going to stay with Beckett.

I didn’t think on it any more than that. And as soon as my head sunk into the soft cushion of his pillow with the steady pulls of his breaths in my ear, I fell asleep.

For the first time in years, I didn’t wake afraid. I didn’t see the cold blue eyes I’d

once thought were beautiful. I didn't dream of Jayden. Not once.

I slept sound, and safe, and in the company of a man I trusted. For the first night in years, the ghost from my past didn't haunt me in the dark of the night. For the first time in a long time, I wasn't alone.

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My hand fell off the side of the couch and I startled awake.

It took me a moment to gather myself, but when I did, I heard her.

Her breathing. It was soft and quiet and delicate.

I lay unmoving as I waited for my eyes to adjust to the darkness.

When they did, the room glowed beneath the warm orb of orange light cast from the streetlamp outside the patio door.

I twisted on the couch and saw her. Amara.

She was curled on her side, snuggled awkwardly into the curve of the cushions with her head on my pillow. Her head was on my pillow.

There was an initial moment of “holy shit” that faded into “she’s beautiful in sleep.

” Amara was beautiful all the time, but there was an alluring softness to the pout of her lips that wasn’t there when she was awake.

Long lashes fanned the pale flesh of her cheeks and her hair was spilled out around her. Again, on my pillow.

So. Fucking. Beautiful.

Slowly, I repositioned myself on the couch so I was facing her. I felt like Spiderman

as I stared at her face upside-down. I felt like a super hero, and I wanted to kiss her.

The urge burned through me like wildfire. My gut ached with the denied desire, as I remained still, my face inches from hers. I wouldn't kiss her, even though I was sure I could. I didn't want to be another man who took or demanded anything from her that she wasn't willing or happy to give.

But hell, I wanted her. I wanted her more than I'd ever wanted any other woman, and there had been a few.

Slowly, without conscious thought of what I was doing, I lifted my hand to her small one that rested close to her face on my pillow.

I covered her hand with mine and felt my heart jolt in my chest when her fingers curled around one of mine.

Her eyes didn't open and I was certain she was still asleep.

I watched her for a long time as I held her hand.

Then I fell asleep, still holding her soft hand in mine.

When I opened my eyes a few hours later, it was to a well-lit room and big blue eyes. It wasn't me who was being the creeper now. It was Amara. And it was bloody adorable.

I'd caught her staring at me in sleep as I'd studied her in the still dark hours of the morning. I'd caught her and I knew she didn't know how to respond to her current predicament.

That's when she blushed—and fuck me, I'd bet my life savings a man never woke to

a sight more beautiful.

“Oh—I,” she pushed up on her elbow, tugging on her hand, but I held tight. “Beckett, I just fell asleep.”

And the television turned itself off? My sweet little liar. “It’s fine.”

“Can I have my hand?”

“Don’t think so, beautiful.” I grinned when her big blue eyes widened even more. I never would have thought they could turn any bluer or get any bigger, but right now I was proven wrong. So wrong. “How’d you sleep?”

Her eyes flitted from our hands to my face. She looked undecided for a moment, and then she replied. Her voice was quiet and soft. So unlike my scrappy little kitten that all I wanted to do was pull her across the couch and into my arms.

“Really good. Probably my best sleep since I was thirteen.”

“Sleeping crooked on a couch was your best sleep since you were thirteen?” That churning in my gut was back.

She shook her head, looking unsure. When she’d made the decision to be honest with me, I saw it happen. I saw it happen, and I braced. “Sleeping safe was my best sleep since I was thirteen.”

“You weren’t safe with Raina?” I wasn’t trying to argue her statement. I just wanted to know what was working in her mind. I had to know . . .

Again, she shook her head. “No, I was safe with Raina. We had a few locks on our front door and I had another on my bedroom door,” she paused and I thought about

the lock she'd put on the door just down the hall. "I was safe. But I didn't feel safe."

"Amara,"

She drew in a deep breath. "Believe me, being safe and feeling safe have a huge impact on how well a person sleeps."

I had questions. Hundreds, maybe thousands, of questions.

I wanted to know why she had an obsession with locks.

I wanted to know what happened to make her feel she needed a lock on every door she slept behind.

I wanted to know what happened after she turned thirteen that fucked so badly with her head.

I wanted to know it all, but instead I said, "I'd imagine. Happy I could be of service."

She didn't smile, but her lips did soften. To my surprise, she let her head drop back onto my pillow with her hand still in mine.

I dropped my head to the pillow beside hers and fought every instinct I had to stare at her the way I wanted. She shifted and I heard her blankets rustle, but she never released my hand.

"Will you talk to me?" Her voice was soft and quiet, almost sleepy. There was a sweetness to it that wasn't there when the girl was standing, ever armed and defensive. I liked it.

"What about?"

“Anything.”

“Won’t lie; my mind kind of goes blank when I’m asked to talk about anything.”

“What do you like to do with your time when you’re not studying?”

Would you look at that? She’s trying to get to know me.

“I like being outside.”

“You’ve gotta give me more than that,” she protested my reply. “What do you like to do outside?”

I’d give this woman anything she asked for. The thought was a little frightening and the Beckett from a few months ago might even be a little nauseated by it.

“I like to hike, ski, and camp. I’ve always preferred the country to the city. I don’t know where I get that from as my parents are as city as city folk get.”

“Do you ski or snowboard?”

“Ski.” I tipped my head to ask, “You?”

“Ski.”

“Any good?”

“I’m not horrible, but I’m probably not as good as you.” She admitted, and again the pink was back.

I chuckled, “We’ll go. I can teach you whatever you don’t know.”

“Oh, can you now?”

“Definitely.” I confirmed. “I’ve been told I’m a good teacher.”

“Well,” she breathed. “Someone thinks highly of himself.”

“Only a little.”

Another length of silence fell between us. I let my eyes close again, my thumb rubbing absent circles into the soft skin of her palm.

“Your parents don’t enjoy the country?”

“Not unless they’re entertaining in it.”

“How did you develop a passion for hiking, skiing, and camping, if your parents didn’t introduce you to it?”

“I spent almost every year in summer camps just outside the city. Camps with Boy Scouts and other programs. All summer, every summer.”

“And skiing?”

“A love I developed in junior high when I went with the school. I went every chance I got after. When I got my license I went all the time.”

“But you’re still close with your parents? Even though they spent most of your childhood working?”

“We’re close enough. I understand them and what they do. I understand the importance . . .” she shifted her hand, locking her fingers with mine when my words

cut short. I repeated, “I understand the importance of what they do.”

“But you were lonely.”

“Sometimes. It could have been worse.”

We both knew the truth of those words were a heavy weight settling on her hardened heart.

“You’re right. It could have been worse. So much worse, but that doesn’t lessen the fact that you were lonely. Being lonely sucks, and I’d know the difference, because you were right. I’m not lonely anymore.”

My eyes opened to the stretch of sun pouring in through the patio doors. It spilled over the stucco of the ceiling, painting it in gold. Still, it wasn’t better than hearing her words. She wasn’t lonely anymore. Because of me. And she was letting me know it.

“You’re not lonely anymore.” I whispered, confirming her words.

She squeezed my hand. “Tell me something else.”

“I can’t wait to be out of school.” She made a noise in her throat, and I crooked my neck to look at her. “I’m serious. I can’t wait.”

“When school is over you’ll just be consumed by work.”

“I’ll be consumed by my chosen career.”

“Work.”

“My choice.”

Twisting onto her belly, she demanded, “Is school not your choice?”

“It’s a requirement for my chosen career.”

“It’s your choice.”

“Fifty percent my choice. I had to agree to school in order to take what I want from life, but I never actually wanted to go to school.”

“Only you could talk your way around school being your choice.”

“I’m talented.”

“At some things.”

I rolled onto my stomach, facing her. She gasped, “At all things I put my mind to.”

Her lips parted and a pink tongue poked out to wet her lips. Her pale cheeks turned a hot rose color and I felt my cock stiffen, thankful I was on my stomach where I could hide my sudden arousal.

“Beckett . . .”

“I want to kiss you, Amara.” I said, watching as her pretty eyes blinked slowly, dazedly. Beautifully.

“I don’t . . .” she licked her lips again. “I want that too, but I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

Holy fuck. She wanted me to kiss her. She wanted it, but what wasn't a good idea? What about me putting my lips on hers was a bad idea? What, about something so sweet, could possibly be bad? Nothing. That's damn right. Nothing.

"Amara," I tipped my head, and she pushed herself back so fast, I thought she was going to fall over the side of the couch. "Shit, babe, slow down."

She was standing on the other side of the couch, breathing hard. Her eyes were wide and her face was pale, her hands trembling. "I'm s—sorry."

"Hey, don't be." I got slowly up on my knees, never taking my eyes from my skittish little kitten. "Too much too fast. I get it."

"Right," she pivoted and dashed for the hall.

I heard the slam of her door before I became aware of my heart pounding with an unfamiliar violence in my chest. A deep breath rushed from my lungs and I let my body fall face first into the couch. Her blanket remained, and as I inhaled, I swore the taste of the woman fused with my next breath.

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The club was wild. Bodies crowded the space and loud sounds thrummed through the airwaves, pulsing through my body with every beat of the bass.

I was impossibly hot from dancing with Raina and Maddy.

Maddy wasn't big on dancing in clubs, or even clubs at all, but she was trying.

Raina, however, was a natural. Her body moved with the grace of someone with an untouched gypsy soul.

There was no darkness in Raina, and although I wished I could be like her, I knew I couldn't. For me, that wasn't possible. I wasn't carefree. I'd never been carefree and I sincerely doubted I ever would be.

Hell, I wasn't even sure if I wanted that.

Something about being carefree seemed—well, it seemed dangerous.

I didn't like taking risks that could lead to danger with my body or my life.

I'd had enough risks taken for me that resulted in danger.

I'd learned my lesson many times. I didn't need to learn it again.

That's why when my body felt like it might overheat at any moment and I needed refreshment, I walked to the bar and called, "Water, please."

A warm body caged me against the bar, two thick arms coming around my frame. My heart leaped as my mind fizzed with panic.

Then the voice sounded, “Water, peanut? Let go for just one night.”

Turning in the circle of Beckett’s arms, I lifted my chin. “I don’t drink at clubs.”

“Why not?”

“Because there are people at these places who aren’t good people.”

“There are bad people everywhere.”

I rolled my eyes, “My point exactly.”

“You can’t live your life in fear of bad people. Hell, you can’t live your life in fear. You do and it’ll ruin you.” He tipped his chin. “Besides, you got people with you tonight who care about you.”

“Anything can happen, Beckett.”

His eyes flared, and I saw something I’d never seen in the mocha depths. I didn’t know what it was. I didn’t know what it meant. What I knew was that I liked it. A lot.

And then his already low voice lowered. I liked that too. “Do you think I’d ever let anything happen to you?”

His voice and his words sent shivers pulsing down the length of my spine. My breath snagged and I whispered, “No.”

“Then order a drink. Let go just this once—and let me take care of you. We’ll have a

good night out together. We'll take a taxi home, and I promise in the morning you'll be safe and in one piece."

I turned again in the circle of Beckett's safe arms, and waved at the bartender. "I'll take something strong."

A few hours later the strong drink I asked the bartender to give me, proved its strength. I was hammered. Very hammered.

For the first time in as far back as I could remember, I was in public and I was blissfully unaware of all but one thing; the fact that Beckett was taking care of me.

Raina leaned in and yelled over the music, "I don't think he's taken his eyes off you once."

"He hasn't," my hips kept rocking to the music and heat flamed over my flesh at the feel of Beckett's eyes on me. "He promised he'd keep me safe if I wanted to let go. He's keeping his promise."

"I think he really likes you."

"A lot," Maddy put in, moving her hips in small motions to the music. The girl was even worse than me at clubbing, and I was pretty bad, so that was saying something.

"I think from now on Maddy and I are going to stick to wine and ice cream nights at her place."

Maddy bobbed her head. "Yes. I agree. One hundred percent."

"Good."

“I love dancing,” Raina objected, pouting.

“We can dance at Maddy’s.” I assured and Raina giggled.

“Done!”

“Well, that was easy enough.” Maddy smiled easily, drunkenly. “My place next time.”

“I think we should join the boys at the table,” Raina said, smiling at Kaiden. “They’re looking lonely, and so delicious over there.”

One minute she was in her little dress dancing up a storm, and the next she was half way to the table. Maddy and I watched her go before we decided that without Raina, we weren’t much for dancing.

We followed, and I felt my blood heat a little more below my skin with every step I took closer to Beckett.

He’d been drinking, but unlike me, he wasn’t obliterated.

This was the first time in my life that I’d let loose with friends.

Granted, this was the first time in my life that I’d had true friends to let loose with, so that could have something to do with my letting go.

Regardless, the importance of this night wasn’t lost on me.

It also wasn’t lost on me that I was feeling this kind of happy and carefree, while still feeling safe, because of Beckett.

So when he stood up to gesture me into the booth, I didn't hesitate. I also didn't get tense and uncomfortable when he lowered his big body back to the seat, his arm lazily swinging to rest behind me on the booth.

I saw Raina's green eyes pop wide, her smile huge, as she watched Beckett move. When I didn't react, but rather pretended not to notice, her smile got even wider.

If I made a big deal out of something as simple as Beckett's arm kind of/sort of resting around me like I was his, then he'd move. I didn't want him to move, so I didn't make a big deal. I also ignored Raina, hoping she wouldn't make a big deal of it either.

That's why I trained my eyes to Maddy, who sat on Kai's other side. Maddy was surprisingly comfortable with Kaiden, even though I was told he looked remarkably like his little brother, whom Maddy had loved and lost. "You having another?"

"I don't think I can,"

"Nachos!" Raina's hands thumped on the table. "We'll order food so we can drink more."

"Need to take her out more often, Kai." Beckett teased. "She's never gonna wanna leave if you're always keeping her cooped up in that tiny apartment."

"It's an awesome apartment, man."

"I know," Beckett nudged me. "Amara likes the shower in the middle of the room."

"Oh," Raina leaned into the table and whisper-yelled over the music. "The shower is becoming my favorite part of it too."

Tipping my head back, I let my eyes fall to a grinning Beckett. “You think you’re funny, don’t you?”

He shrugged. “If the shoe fits.”

“So funny.”

He laughed and I felt the low rumble in my belly. I really liked the sound of his laugh, even though I knew I shouldn’t.

It was later, after we’d ordered and devoured two platters of nachos and a few more drinks each, that Beckett leaned back with the neck of his beer between large fingers. “Christmas is coming around soon. Are you lot planning on heading back home?”

His question was directed at our three friends across the table. They were all from the Spruce Grove area, a city just west of Edmonton, Alberta. I knew he was directing his question at them and not me, because I didn’t have a home to go to for the holidays. I’d never had that.

Raina glanced at me. “Actually,” she smiled at Kaiden. “We don’t really have plans yet. But we’d like it if you spent the holiday with us, no matter what we do.”

“Me?” I was surprised, and even though I felt the warmth of her offer, I also felt the burden.

Beckett didn’t let me feel it for long, as his big hand came down on my shoulder and he squeezed.

“I was actually thinking we could make plans for this Christmas. My parents are always busy and I usually spend the day alone so,” he glanced down at me.

“I was hoping I could convince Amara to save me from loneliness this year.”

“Oh,” Maddy lifted her hands. “Don’t let us interfere.”

I could still hear his words echoing in my mind, “Hoping I could convince Amara to save me from loneliness this year.”

Wow.

“That’s just it,” Beckett continued and I blinked myself back to awareness. “I was thinking we could pool our resources and spend a week in Banff. We could ski, or whatever,”

“I think that’d be awesome.” Kai put in, grinning.

“Yeah, then we’d all be together and no one would be lonely.” Beckett chuckled, and I felt his thumb start to move gently over the bare skin of my shoulder. The sensation was—too much. “It’d save my lonely ass, anyway.”

“I don’t know,” Raina winced. “What about our parents?”

“They love skiing. We’ll invite them.” Kai proposed. “And Maddy, you can invite yours.”

“I’m not sure if they’ll go for it, but I’m in either way.”

My eyes sliced to Maddy, who was being a lot more accommodating to the proposition of being without her parents for Christmas than I would have thought. Even Raina looked surprised as she leaned into the table to look around Kaiden.

“Really?” She asked, “You’d be good with ditching your parents during Christmas?”

She shrugged. “If they don’t want to come, it’s not like I can’t head home after the holiday for a visit.”

There was something fishy about this. I was thinking that if I hadn’t drank half the bar, I might have been able to put my finger on whatever that fishy was—but unfortunately, I had drank half the damn bar and at the moment I was good for putting my finger on absolutely nothing.

Therefore, I did nothing but squint across the table at my friend.

“Will you come, Mar?” Raina asked a little hesitantly, and I startled.

“What?”

“If we rent a cabin, will you come?”

Always the downer, I pointed out the only saving grace I could think of to get myself out of this new predicament. “I sincerely doubt you’ll be able to book anything this late. Most everything is reserved for Christmas already.”

“Actually, that’s not entirely true.” I caught a weird look between Beckett and Kai, but didn’t have time to analyze it before he embarked on an explanation.

“My parents bought a cabin a few years back. It’s more like a house, but they call it their summer cabin.

Anyway, I talked to them and they said we could take it for as long as we wanted. ”

“Your parents have a cabin?” I asked stupidly. “I thought they didn’t like skiing?”

“They don’t. They do like to relax on a big deck, entertain, and be complimented on

the luxury their lifetime accomplishments have bought them, though.”

“Oh,”

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“Anyway, we can use their cabin, but it only has four bedrooms.”

“Well, that’s enough, isn’t it?” Kai asked.

Beckett shrugged. “Maybe.”

“How wouldn’t it be enough?” Maddy asked, but I was already there.

Raina and Kaiden would share a room. Maddy needed one. I needed one and Beckett needed one. Where would the parents go?

“If the parent’s come, there might not be enough space.”

“I’ll take the couch.” Maddy proposed.

Raina’s lips stretched into the slowest, most worrisome grin I’d ever seen to date. Then she wagged her brows at me and it was all I could do to keep from scoffing, “And if you two bunk together, there would be enough rooms.”

By you two, I knew she meant me and Beckett. That was so not happening.

“You’re joking, right?”

“Think about it.” Raina beamed, naming herself as Cupid’s minion once again. “It would be perfect.”

I wasn’t sure who or what I hated more in this moment. Beckett, my friends, or

Christmas.

“I’ll think about it.” I mumbled, when in reality what I really meant was—not a chance in hell.

“Great!” Raina clapped. “I’m so excited! This will be awesome!”

That right there decided it. I hated my friends.

But I must love them more, because even though my heart felt like it was tearing through my chest it was racing so fast, I knew I’d do it.

And I prayed I didn’t regret it.

After the whole Christmas cabin proposition, I started drinking a little heavier.

I wasn’t sure if I felt the urge to quench my thirst because I was so bloody hot from feeling Beckett’s warm hand on my shoulder, with the way his thumb caressed my skin back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, or if it was more to do with the fact that my nerves were strung so tight they needed liquid to keep them from snapping in two like a dry rubber band.

Either way, I did as Beckett propositioned earlier in that deep rumbling voice of his. I let go. I let go and trusted that the man who claimed to care for me, would do just that. I trusted that he’d care for me.

I tossed in my cards and for the first time in a very long time, I trusted in a man.

So now as Beckett guided my fumbling body into the back seat of the taxi behind Maddy, I moaned. “How could you let me do this?”

Maddy giggled. “It was fun.”

“I’m going to be sick tomorrow. I jussssst—I know it.” I slurred. I knew it, but I just didn’t have it in me to care at the moment. Go figure.

“You’ll be fine.” Maddy said. “Beck will take good care of you.”

She sounded so sure of her declaration, and I couldn’t help but wonder how that could be? How could one girl have been gifted with so much trust in men, while I had next to none?

Because the men she’s known were good men, that’s why.

Beckett climbed in and closed the door loudly, shutting out the bite of cold winter air. Rubbing his hands together, he rattled off Maddy’s address to the cabbie.

Then he shifted his torso toward me, giving me more room. I took the room he gave me eagerly, entirely aware of his body so close to mine on a physical level. I mention a physical level, because mentally—well, mentally I had no level.

I existed on purely physical everything. The way Beckett’s warm thigh felt pressed against mine. The long arm that stretched out on the seat behind me. The way he smelled . . .

“I’m so tired.” Maddy said, cutting into my thoughts. “So tired.”

“Not me.” I fought a wave of dizziness as I let my head fall into the crook of Beckett’s arm, my face turned toward Maddy. “I could go all night.”

“Mmmm,”

Time sort of froze then until I felt the car lurch. Beckett shifted, and then I heard his voice rumble in my ear. “Gonna make sure she gets inside all right. Be right back.”

Then I felt Beckett’s body move and cold air replaced his warmth. Instantly, I felt disappointment, but I watched a little dazedly, as Beckett helped Maddy from the car. She giggled, trying to assure him she was fine, but he wouldn’t hear it.

I heard him rumble, “If anything happened to you, Kaiden would kill me.”

“That’s true. He would.” She agreed, sounding sad.

“Hey Maddy,” I called, and she glanced back at me. That’s when I saw it—the tears and heartache in her eyes. She was thinking about why Kaiden would kill Beckett if he let anything happen to her. She was thinking about her lost love, Austin. It was on that thought that I said, “Love you, babe.”

I hadn’t meant to say the words. All I knew is that as soon as they were out, they were true. I’d meant them with everything inside of me.

The shimmering in her eyes got more intense as she croaked, “Love you too, Mar.”

And then Beckett closed the door. I let my head fall back on the seat as I waited for him to return, and as I closed my eyes, I couldn’t help the bite of fear that tore through my heart at the thought of being alone with the cabbie.

If he wanted, he could drive away. He could take me to a bad place where he could do bad things to me.

Don’t think about it, Amara. Don’t think about it. Not every man is evil. Not every man takes what isn’t his to take.

Anger swelled inside toward Beckett. He'd promised to care for me, and here I was alone in a car with a man I didn't know, or trust.

It seemed like an age, yet a mere blink of an eye before he was back, and I was again safe.

The door opened and cold air came rushing in.

Then he was there beside me with his big body and all his warmth.

I forgot about my anger as his arm came up to rest on the back of the seat, and this time, I didn't fight the urge to seek more warmth as I let my body fall into the side of his.

I was safe. Safe.

Beckett didn't say anything as I snuggled in, and I was glad for that. Because right now it appeared I had a bit of a loose tongue, and if he sparked even the faintest of emotion from me in this state, I'd let him know all about it.

I preferred to live behind a sheet of ice where I was safe from the heartache that came when one knew just how vulnerable you were to all that they could give you—so I didn't want to shatter the ice castle I'd built with the truth that showed in the wake of raw emotion.

I didn't want to ruin this. Whatever this was.

It was on that thought that I felt Beckett's hand on my shoulder, shaking me gently. "We're home, baby."

"Oh," I groaned. "Can he drive around the block just one more time?"

Beckett laughed. “Don’t think so.”

“But it’s so comfortable.”

“You’ll get comfortable when we’re inside.”

“Not like this.” I shook my head. “You are so warm.”

I thought I heard his breath catch. “You want me to carry you?”

I stiffened to alertness. “No! I do not!”

The words sounded on a surprisingly audible snap and Beckett laughed a full-throated laugh.

“That’s what I thought. Come on, I’ve already paid the driver.”

He opened the door and my teeth instantly started chattering.

I cursed Raina for her wicked manipulations as I thought about the little tank top I was wearing under the little thin jacket.

It didn’t matter to Raina that there were thick flakes of snow falling from the sky, or that the temperature was way past freezing, “This is the cutest jacket ever!” was way more important than the possibility of me saying “Hello” to hypothermia.

Beckett opened the door to the foyer of our condo and I stepped inside. Warm air blasted over me, but I was still chilled. “Raina’s a horrible friend.”

“Why is that?”

“She convinced me to wear this . . .” I huffed. “I feel like a frozen pixy stick.”

“Pink looks good on you.”

I snorted; the man really was colorblind! “This is not pink. It’s army green.”

“I’m talking about the little tank top you’ve got on under the jacket.”

“You’re defending Raina?” I raised a brow, hoping I’d donned a haughty expression.

“How dare you?”

“Women,” he thumbed the elevator button. “Can’t win.”

“Besides, I’m not really a pink girl.”

“Your wall is pink.”

“Oh my god,” I drawled. “It is not pink. Beck, we need to get your behind to the eye-doctor.”

“I like that,” he grinned, his eyes warming in a way I didn’t entirely know what to do with.

“What?” The elevator rolled open and I moved inside. I could feel him following close behind me, probably watching in amusement as I stumbled.

“The way you say my name.”

Warmth flooded my belly, but somehow I shivered. I couldn’t find the words I needed for a reply. I knew they should be cutting and just mean enough to send him the warning he needed to obviously cut ties with whatever hope he was entertaining,

but I just couldn't find those words.

I couldn't find them because my silly heart was turning to goo in my chest. Seriously, any more melting and I'd be little more than a puddle on the floor.

"Well that's good—because that's your name." Seriously? That's the mean and cutting comment I come up with?

For the love of all that's holy, I was turning soft.

"Yep," Beckett moved another step closer, but I was saved from whatever cockier than thou bull that had been about to fall from his mouth as the doors rolled open.

I darted into the hall and toward our condo, and then I waited for Beckett because I didn't bring anything but my ID and two twenty-dollar bills to the club.

With the door swinging open, I was free to flounce inside.

And yes, I flounced inside, totally rocking my baby pink tank top that totally didn't suit my hard-girl personality.

Purple was as soft as I got, and that was because purple was, well— purple!

"Do we got anything here to drink?"

"You want more?"

"I'm feeling my buzz go down and I'm not ready for that yet.

" I twirled to give him hopeful eyes, and this time when I wobbled, I really wobbled.

My booty connected with the arm of the couch, but I continued babbling without missing a beat, “You can’t tell me that you and Kai lived here and didn’t have a stash.”

“You’re right.” He was watching me with an amusement that had my ovaries fluttering. Yes, my ovaries. “I can’t tell you that.”

God, the man was something else.

“Well,” I encouraged. “Where is it?”

Beckett pointed to the cupboard above the stove, and I frowned.

“Seriously?” Hands on my hips, I gave my attention to the cupboard that could have been on Mount Olympus for as high and out of my reach as it was. “Why would you put the booze all the way up there?”

“Because I can reach it all the way up there.” Beckett announced, moving to the fridge where the cupboard of impossibility sat. “What do you want?”

“Anything but rum.”

He pulled the vodka down and I skipped to the fridge where I knew I’d find a new jug of raspberry juice waiting, haloed in the light of the fridge. And I was right; there was a brand new jug, “Just like Heaven.”

“What?”

“Never ending supply of my favorite juice. It’s a little how I imagine Heaven might be.”

“Right,” he nodded, chuckling. “Well, someone in Heaven is going to be working hard every day to get you your juice.”

“Heaven doesn’t work like that,” I announced, pouring my drink. “In Heaven, the good things just happen.”

“I think I like your Heaven.”

“Me too.”

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Her Heaven is the raspberry juice I bust my balls to make sure she has, but my Heaven is her. I wondered if she knew she couldn't have her Heaven without me.

“What kind of grown woman has playdough in her room?”

“And kindergarten flash cards.” She waved the bundle of cards tied in an elastic band and I wondered about this game she'd propositioned we play after her drink was poured.

“What are we doing with playdough and flash cards?” I let the cool rum and coke slide down my throat, watching the little bundle of energy curiously. This was the first time I'd seen Amara let loose, and really let loose.

I liked it. She was beautiful always, but she was extraordinary when she let herself move without thinking ten steps ahead.

“All right, Raina and I used to play this all the time,” She shuffled the flash cards before slapping them on the table, covering the stack with a little box that had two ends cut out of it. “So you can't see the card you're going to draw before you draw.” She explained the odd box.

“What do we do with the playdough?”

“Sheesh, a little impatient?” She eyed me teasingly through thick lashes, and fuck me, if she wasn't drunk I think I would have made a move. “What color do you want?”

“Blue.” I was already looking into her brighter than bright blue eyes, so it was the

first color on my tongue.

Sliding the blue playdough across the coffee table, she nabbed the purple for herself. Something we both could have guessed she'd do.

"We take turns drawing a card and we both have to sculpt whatever the card says. Whoever has the best when the sixty seconds is up gets the card. Whoever has the most cards at the end wins the game."

"Sounds easy,"

"Oh, I'm good at this game. Very, very good at this game."

By the time we'd gone seven rounds, I had the majority of the cards on my side of the table. It wasn't because I was good at this whacked game she'd created, but because the rules were easy as fuck to bend and every time I bent a rule, I could see her heat flare. I wanted all that heat to explode.

"Mine's the best." I said.

"No, it's not! Look at it, Beckett."

"It's the best mess."

Bobbing her head, she huffed in agreement. "Exactly, a mess. "

"But it's the best. You said whoever had the best wins."

"I meant the best as in the most perfect." She gestured to her prim and proper purple elephant. "Clearly, mine."

Hers was the best. She was a good little sculptor—so good, I really thought that if she took an art class she might actually be able to take her talent somewhere.

“Perfect is boring. Nobody wants perfect.”

She raised a brow, “You want a mess?”

“I want real.”

She blinked, staring at me with those beautifully parted lips I’d fucking kill to kiss. “Well, your real elephant looks like it has a shriveled up—um—carrot for a trunk.”

“Hey now,” dropping my hand over my heart, I feigned a wounded expression. “No need to get mean.”

“I’m being honest.”

“Your honesty is mean, my lady.”

“Yuck,” she scoffed. “I’m no one’s lady. You’ve been watching too much Game of Thrones. ”

Laughing, I slid the card from the middle of the table to my side. “I win this round. My shriveled—carrot trunk needs the ego boost.”

“You cheat!”

“I don’t know how you can play this game and not cheat. There are so many openings to cheat.”

“So you’re admitting to cheating?”

“I’m admitting to cleaning the table with your pretty little ass.”

She straightened, her expression one of indecisiveness as she contemplated leaning toward pissed or flattered. I grinned bigger.

“You’re something else, Beckett.” Flattered. Thank fuck.

“Glad I’ve made my impression on you, babe.”

“Oh, your ego definitely has made its impression.” She tapped her forehead, “stamped itself practically on my forehead.”

“You wanna go another round?” Tipping my chin to the playdough, I watched her shake her head.

“No. You’ll just cheat for another round.” She downed her glass and made to stand, teetering a little to the side. “Whoa,”

“Yeah,” Hurrying to round the coffee table I caught her arm in my hand to steady her wobbling frame. “Let’s get you to bed.”

“Bed?” She shook her head. “I don’t want to sleep, Beckett.”

It was looking into those big blue eyes that I saw that castle of ice crumble. There was so much vulnerability; I felt it in my gut.

“Why not, beautiful?”

“I don’t want to be alone.” She admitted, and then she turned and walked toward her room.

It didn't take longer than three seconds to make the decision to follow her.

Pausing in the doorway, I watched as she moved slowly to her bed, flopping down on top of her covers.

I chuckled, moving into the "raspberry fuzz" colored room.

Drowsy blue eyes watched as I snagged the blanket at the end of her bed, tugging it slowly up around her body.

It was when she rolled onto her side, tugging the foot of the panda I won her for Raina's birthday at the summer fair, that my heart pulsed hard in my chest. Her arms circled the black and white bear as she pulled it tight to her chest, blowing a steady breath of air from her lungs.

"You like him?"

"I do."

"Glad, beautiful."

"Why do you call me that?"

"Cause it's the truth. You're beautiful."

"Mmm," she didn't smile and I watched as her eyes flickered open and then closed.

"I'm so dizzy."

"You're so drunk." I leaned forward to flick on her bedside lamp. "Just in case you need it in the night."

“You’re leaving?” There was a frantic quality to her question that had me pausing by the door.

“Yeah, baby.”

“Please don’t,” she was watching me, waiting. “Just stay until I fall asleep, kay?”

I felt her words in my dick, and in my soul. The heavy pulse in my cock and soft stirring in my chest warred for dominance. A war I ignored as I slid my finger over the light, letting the lamp do all the work of illuminating her pink, or in her mind, purple, room.

“Right.” I moved to the bed, sitting beside her. “Until you fall asleep.”

She scooted over, patting the pillows. “You can lay down.”

Holy shit, the woman was going to test every hold I had on my restraint, I was sure of it. Still, I let my back connect with the bed, “Better?”

“Yes.”

Silence. Uncomfortable and yet contented silence. It stretched for long minutes until I heard her soft sigh.

“What’s up?” My voice was deep, husky.

“Will you talk to me?”

“What about?”

“Anything.”

Again, making it easy on me. Yeah, I know, I'm a sarcastic bugger. "You feeling happy right now?"

"I think maybe I am." She whispered. "Sometimes it's hard to tell. I was unhappy for so long."

"Why?"

"I had a bad life. I knew bad people who did bad things. Sometimes those bad things were done to me and sometimes I watched." Her next admission was quiet. "Sometimes I did bad things."

Fucking hell. What was she talking about? "You want to explain?"

"Not really." She admitted, and then she surprised me by doing just that. "I grew up in the system. Sometimes bad things happen to kids who have no one looking out for them."

"What about your social worker?"

"There are too many kids in the system to get the proper kind of care. A lot of social workers are stretched too thin." Her chin dipped into the fluff at the panda's head. "Most are stretched too thin and sometimes kids slip through the cracks."

"Did you slip through the cracks?"

"Sometimes."

"How?"

"There was a boy I lived with who was really mean. He did things . . ."

My body turned tight. “Amara,”

“He had a really twisted sense of fun. Honestly, if I think about it now being a little older and a little wiser, he was a sociopath.”

A sociopath? What did she mean by that? “When I first met him he seemed fun and nice. He took risks and as a stupid girl I thought he was cool. He was so troubled, Beck.”

Her voice cracked and I felt the tense cord inside me snap. “Amara, you’re safe with me. You know that, right?”

“Yes.”

“You believe it completely—that I’d never hurt you. I’d never let anyone else hurt you.”

“I do.”

I wanted to touch her, but honest to Christ, I was terrified. What if I touched her, hoping to comfort her, and broke the fragile trust she’d given to me? What if I scared her? What if she thought I was playing a game?

“Don’t wanna talk about the past tonight, peanut,” I tried to sound at ease. “I want to know what you want in your future.”

“My future?” Big vibrant eyes met with mine. “I don’t know what you mean?”

“When you close your eyes and fantasize, what do you see?”

“You’re girly,” she teased, brushing the question off.

“I’m serious, Amara. What do you see? Everyone has a picture.”

“Well, if everyone has a picture, what’s yours?”

“I asked you first.”

She huffed smartly, “And I’ll tell you mine after you tell me yours.”

“Don’t go to Vegas, you’re horrible at playing by the rules.”

“Says the man who cheats!” Her elbow knocked into my arm. “Besides, I thought Vegas was the place to break all the rules.”

“It probably is,” I admitted. “I haven’t been.”

“Do you want to go?”

“Someday, maybe.”

“Yeah, someday,” she reiterated, and that’s when I decided to give it to her. My dream. The picture I had for my life when I closed my eyes. My hope. My fantasy.

My someday.

“I want a wife who will give me babies I’ll love more than my career.

I want to build a family. Something real and true and right.

” I said low, shifting on her bed. “Don’t get me wrong, I know I’ll love my career.

But I want to want to come home at the end of the day.

I want the kind of love with a woman who will give me everything she has to give, because I'll give it to her. ”

“You’re a really good man, Beckett. A good, good man.” Her voice was soft, and if I wasn’t mistaking, a little hurt. “Those are rare.”

“Not as rare as you seem to think.”

“Maybe, maybe not.”

I turned to my side so I could look into her face—and not look away. “Your turn.”

“When I close my eyes I see safety. I see a small home surrounded by trees in the mountains where there’s peace. Inside, there’s warmth from a real fire and love from a good man. There’s days where I’ll be snowed in, but I’ll be so warm and so safe—and loved”

Fucking hell, I wanted to give that to her. So simple. So perfect. “And kids?”

“I don’t know if I’d be good at the mom thing.”

“You’d be good at it.”

“You think?” Her eyes were gentle as they searched my face. “Why?”

“Because you’d be safe.”

She gasped, and I saw wet hit her eyes. More than anything, I wanted to pull her into my arms and hold her tight.

I wanted to promise her I’d make her safe now and always.

But Amara wasn't a girl you rushed, and if I pulled her into my arms now after getting her drunk when I promised I'd keep her safe, she'd think I manipulated her.

I knew it with the kind of certainty that had me glued to my spot on her bed, where I wasn't touching her.

So I didn't reach out to touch her, not even to hold her hand. I didn't pull her small body against mine, where I hoped she'd snuggle in deep and breathe easy. I didn't do anything. I didn't even move. Hell, I wasn't even breathing.

Not until she whispered, "Goodnight, Beckett."

"Night, peanut."

I did as she asked—I stayed with her until she fell asleep. Only then did I lean in, press my lips to her hair, and use the last bit of strength I had to turn and leave her room.

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Morning came much faster than I liked. Also, I woke with a heck of a lot more than I wanted.

That being, I woke with a pounding head, dry mouth, and queasy tummy.

In short, I was hung over as hung over could be.

Well, in truth, it could be worse. I could be hugging the porcelain bowl, or hiding from the light under my covers as a migraine pounded through my brain.

I wasn't doing either of those things, so I had some lucky stars to count. However, I also had some not so lucky stars . . .

I may have been drunk out of my mind, but I wasn't so intoxicated that I didn't remember my little conversation with Beckett. I remembered, and I was cursing myself. Big time. Huge. Massive.

I was screwed. I'd nearly told him about Jayden—about the things Jayden did to me, and the things he made me watch.

I almost told him about the past I tried, harder than anything, to keep buried.

And I had told him about the one thing I wanted from life.

I told him about my fantasy—I told him about the place I saw when I closed my eyes at night.

I stripped myself down to the most vulnerable part of me, and I let Beckett see my hope.

Now he knew there was more to me than ice. Now he knew there was something inside me that was still breakable. Now he knew I could be hurt.

Now he knew I had something to hurt for . . .

Now he could hurt me.

“Crap,” dizziness flooded my brain and blurred my vision as I swung my legs over the side of the bed. “Okay, too fast.”

Slower, I stood from the bed still in the pink tank top and jeans from the night before. “Yuck,”

I didn’t have to think on it as I set to stripping.

Then I slid into my purple satin housecoat and tiptoed from my room into the bathroom.

I was in the shower as fast as I could move, which wasn’t all that fast because I got dizzy with hasty movements, but it was still fast enough.

Warm water flowed, washing all the dirty that came with clubbing, away.

After I’d scrubbed my skin clean, I decided to relax as I let my booty meet with the floor of the tub. Warm water continued to pour from the head, moving to slide relaxingly over my skin. I pulled my knees into my chest, letting my head rest on the tops, as my mind moved to Beckett.

It was true; I'd woken up this morning in a bit of a panic over all that I'd revealed to him.

But it was also true; I knew Beckett would never intentionally cause me hurt.

Yes, I'd given him the ammunition to cause me the same kind of pain I'd tried to ensure I'd never again feel, but I also trusted that Beckett wasn't a man who would take advantage of my fears.

He was a man who I could ask to stay with me until I fell asleep, and he would do just that. He would stay until I fell asleep, and then he would leave. He was a man who kept his word—something that was truly so very rare.

And then I remembered agreeing to spend a week over Christmas at his parents' cabin, in the same bedroom!

I was mortified.

And then I was standing, gripping the wall for balance as I steadied my suddenly double vision, because I was intent on rectifying this immediately.

Because I was certain that I was not, under any circumstances, going to spend any amount of time in a cabin where I would be sharing a bedroom with Beckett. Absolutely not. No. Freaking. Way.

Little did I know, I'd be eating my words when I walked into the kitchen five minutes later.

My hair was still wet and I was in my housecoat, but Beckett was standing at the stove in a navy, black, and white plaid pair of pajama pants and no shirt.

I'll repeat, no shirt. And the kitchen smelled of bacon and sausage and, good lord almighty, there were hash browns.

Maybe I could love a man . . .

I shook my head, stepping forward. "What are you doing?"

"Cooking you breakfast. After last night I figured you'd need the grease."

Grease sounded freaking perfect. So . . . freaking . . . perfect.

Again, I shook my head. "Um,"

He interrupted, "Thought I was going to have to put everything in the microwave when you took forever in the shower, but now that you're out, pop a squat."

Pop a squat? What in the world?

"Beckett," he turned to look at me—and wow. Seriously, this man with no shirt on was a delicious sight to behold. I understood the whole hype of licking, when I caught sight of the muscles in Beckett's chest.

Okay, that was dirty. Mind back on track, Amara. Back. On. Track.

"You want coffee? It's made."

"Yeah," I started for the pot, poured the black liquid into the cup Beckett obviously set out for me, dunked my spoon in the honey, and stirred. Now I had crap to say. "Tell me, did I seriously agree to spend Christmas Holiday in your parents' cabin?"

He quirked a grin, getting even sexier than he was five seconds ago. I scowled and he

nodded. “Yep.”

“Urgh,” with my fingers pressed to my temples, I moaned.

“How’re you feeling?” Concern filled his tone, and I found my eyes connecting with warm brown.

“Like I sold my soul to the Devil’s dog as a chew-toy.” I squinted, and rubbed my temples. “Remind me, did I really agree to share a room with you for an entire week? Bed and all?” I lifted a finger, “Because that really doesn’t sound like me.”

“Not sure how I feel about the chew-toy thing,” he shrugged, “But yeah, babe, you did.”

“Well,” I straightened my back. “I’m taking it back now.”

“You can’t.”

“Really? Wanna tell me why not?”

“Nope.”

“Then I’m taking it back.” I said decisively, nodding resolutely. That hurt my head and I winced. Crap! Never will I drink again. Never, never, never!

“Already said you can’t,” he slid a plate filled with greasy food, toast that was properly buttered (meaning there was butter all the way to the crust) and scrambled eggs, to my seat at the island.

Again, I could love a man . . . if said man wasn’t being an ogre!

“See,” holding up a finger to take a slow sip of my coffee, before embarking on trademark Amara Bloom bluntness, I explained.

“I’m beginning to think the hellhound traded my soul in for my brain as its chew-toy, because I seriously feel as though my brain has been not only scrambled, but shredded.

So I’m not playing around when I tell you I’m really not in the mood for the back and forth two-step you’re determined to dance.

If you feel like giving me a reason to stand behind, I might be willing to consider . . .”

Again, he cut me off. “Kai’s proposing.”

My mouth snapped shut. And then it fell open. “What?”

“Kai is proposing to Raina.” Beckett gave me blunt right back, and I had to admit that his blunt came with a heck of a lot less mess than mine. Still, that didn’t make it any easier to swallow.

“He’s proposing?”

“Yeah,” he settled into the chair beside me, popping a piece of crispy bacon—just the way I loved it—into his mouth.

“He’s my best man, peanut, so you gotta know I’d do pretty much anything he asked me, and he asked me to make sure the whole gang is there when it happens.

He says that’s how Raina would like it, and being that she’s your girl, I’m thinking you know this. Am I right?”

“But,”

“She’s gonna say yes. And we both know that when she does, she’s going to want those she loves there when it happens. That’s you, Maddy, her parents, and his.”

“Maddy knows!” I whispered my exclamation.

“Maddy knows.” He confirmed. “Kai told her.”

“That’s why she said she’d take the couch,” I stated. “And why she’s totally fine with her parents not being a part of it all.”

“Yeah,” again he nodded. “She already talked to them about it.”

“Kaiden is proposing.” I said again, a little breathless. “Marriage.”

“That’s usually what it means, peanut.” Beckett’s lips were slowly stretching into a grin. “So now you know why you can’t back out.”

I squinted my face into a scowl. “Beckett . . .”

“It’s for Raina.”

Screw me sideways. For Raina there wasn’t much I wouldn’t do . . .

“That girl is starting to be a serious pain in my ass.”

“Looking forward to our week together, peanut.”

I smacked him in the shoulder, grunting, “You’ll be on the floor.”

He just grinned in that way that made me think I'd bought myself a whole lot more trouble than I thought. So I ignored him, sipped my coffee, and ate the delicious breakfast that I totally needed—that Beckett Davis cooked for me.

Then I told myself I couldn't love a man.

Not any man, but especially not a man like Beckett.

Not a perfect man, with perfect smiles, and perfect warm eyes, and perfectly buttered toast. I couldn't love any man.

Because I knew what it was like to love and lose and I wasn't setting myself up for hurt like that again.

Not ever.

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“You couldn’t have developed an obsession for something like apple juice?” Beckett’s voice sounded through the sappy romance movie I was watching, and I lifted my gaze from the tear-streaked confession of love, to the man I’ve lived with for months.

Fresh snow fell from his hood to the entrance carpet as he flipped back the hood on his jacket. And as he let the bag of raspberry juice meet with the floor to remove his jacket, I couldn’t look away.

“I like raspberries.”

“They have apple juice at gas stations. Quick and easy. This stuff is like trying to track down good crack, and because crack isn’t good in any form, that’s not easy.”

“Loving something isn’t worth it if it’s forced—even if it’s convenient.”

“Very true, beautiful.” He said, his voice deep and raw sounding. And then he tipped his head and continued to undress from his winter wear.

Beckett had gone to the gym, and it showed.

It showed because he wasn’t wearing a big hoodie under his jacket like I knew he should, to make sure he didn’t get sick from the cold, but instead he was wearing one of those tanks with the inch of material over his shoulders.

Muscles bulged in his freshly worked arms and every vein was bright and blue.

He looked strong. And surprisingly delicious.

Again, I kind of understood the whole “I could lick him top to bottom” fad.

“We have a full jug in the fridge,” I shifted, tucking my legs up under my bum. “You didn’t have to stop for more.”

“I did. My next two days are going to be crazy with studying.” He kicked off his boots. “You go through this shit like crazy and I wanted to be stocked up.”

“You know I am capable of getting myself to the store for my own juice, right?”

“Know you got legs,” he grinned, eyeing what he could see of my legs. “Great legs.”

“Beck,”

“But a promise is a promise. I gave you my word that I’d keep you stocked.”

“I’m revoking you of your vow.”

His lips curled, “Now who’s been watching too much Game of Thrones? ”

“Oh,” I debated on tossing the throw pillow I’d brought from my apartment with Raina. It was teal and it so didn’t match Beckett’s dark bachelor living room. “Shut up.”

He chuckled and walked into the room, giving the television his attention. Then, with a crook to his neck he looked back at me, “What’re you watching?”

“Nothing as brilliant as our show.”

“This is romantic, peanut. You have to have a bit of a heart to watch something like this.”

“Oh,” This time when the urge to toss the pillow struck, I didn’t deny it.

“Oomph,” he laughed, and of course, because he was practically perfect—he caught the pillow. “Don’t get defensive, babe. I won’t tell anyone, I promise.”

“I like to make fun of all the clichéd sap they put in these things. Raina and I used to do this a lot.”

“That’s damaged.”

“What?” Seriously, a girl couldn’t keep up with this man even if she was paid. And I most definitely was not.

“Damaged. That’s something those sad women on those Valentine’s Day movies would do. The ones who never have anyone to share it with, but really want someone to share it with, even though they pretend to rock being single.” He explained, his eyes never leaving mine. “It’s damaged.”

“Well, nobody said I wasn’t rocking the damage.”

“You’re not damaged.”

“Oh?”

“You play it like you are, and might even think you are, but it’s bullshit.”

“You’re making me miss the best part.”

“I am?” He waved to the TV. “Let’s hear it. Make fun.”

“No.”

“Why?”

“It’s not as fun without Raina.”

“Not nearly as damaged as you play to be.”

“Go study, Beckett.”

“Right on it, babe.” He turned and moved into the kitchen. I had to force myself to watch the remaining thirty minutes of the movie when all I wanted to do was crawl into my bed and pull my panda to my chest. And possibly cry a little.

But I didn’t do that. I watched the whole thing until the credits rolled, doing exactly what Beckett accused—playing at my damaged.

Then I stood, flicked off the system and padded into the kitchen.

It’s the Wednesday before Christmas and with two busier than busy days of school left, I utilized my day off from the Library to do a little grocery shopping for the ingredients I needed for my famous lasagna. Seriously, my lasagna kicked ass.

It was cheesy, meaty, and saucy. I’d told Beckett about it a few times, but had yet to make it.

I decided today that I’d get right on that, so that Beckett would have supper for the next two days while I worked and he studied.

Beckett loved left-overs and he never wasted food, so I didn't mind making a little extra when I cooked.

And I had to admit, although I'd never do such a thing out loud, that I really liked to cook for Beckett. I liked knowing that I was able to give him something he didn't already have.

"You made lasagna?"

"I did."

"When?"

I glanced back at him after I'd preheated the oven. "When I got home from shopping after school."

"I think I wanna marry you." He teased and my heart did this totally unacceptable flutter. Unacceptable!

I scowled; packing all the punch I had behind it. "I'm not that easy."

"I know." He said matter of fact, and again, my silly heart flipped. It freaking flipped!

"You said you wanted to try it, so I figured why not make it now."

"Well, thanks."

"I'm going to have a bubble bath," I said abruptly. "Oven's preheating so it just needs to be put in when it's ready. It'll cook for forty minutes, if you don't mind popping it in?"

“Got it, peanut,” he assured warmly. “Enjoy your bath.”

I didn’t say anything as I escaped into the hall.

I’d been doing this a lot since our night out when I gave him much more than I intended to give him.

I knew he sensed it, but he didn’t press for a reason I couldn’t give.

He just let me work through my crap the way I needed to work through my crap. I appreciated that about him.

Actually, I pretty much appreciated everything about Beckett. That’s what sucked.

What sucked even more was the fact that we only had two more days of school before we would be preparing to spend our week in Beckett’s parents’ cabin. I knew Raina had an exam on Monday, but Beckett and I were free to head out early with groceries and goodies for the weekend.

I was freaking out big time. Big. Time.

But I was trying to play it cool so not everyone would know the extent of just how messed up I was inside.

By everyone, I meant Mr. Golden Boy in the kitchen.

That’s why I was hiding in a bubble bath at seven o’clock in the afternoon while the lasagna I’d prepped for the man in said kitchen, cooked in the oven.

“Amara,” a knuckle tapped against the door and I stiffened, my heart going haywire in my chest. “You gonna be out soon? Pretty sure it’s almost done.”

“Yep.” God, go away! I’m naked, and it’s bad enough that I was already thinking about the man.

“Great.”

Yeah, someone up above was cursing me for sure, I thought, as I pulled the plug and stood from my bubbly water.

I decided there was no point in dressing up again because I wouldn’t do much after eating, so I donned my cute purple and white snowflake jammies, tossed my hair into a messy bun and joined Beckett in the kitchen.

He was at the stove, slicing the lasagna into large squares. “Did you find the garlic bread?”

“Sure did,” he nodded, still focused on cutting dinner. “Can’t have lasagna without garlic bread.”

“True,” I conceded, because I absolutely had to agree.

Beckett turned and his warm golden eyes dropped to my jammies. “Cute, peanut. Tell me you’ll bring those to the cabin.”

Where was that throw pillow when a girl needed it? “Ha. Ha.”

He laughed, always finding such enjoyment when he teased me. “Seriously, though, you look cute.”

“I’m not trying to look cute.”

“That’s probably why you look cute.”

“Argh,” my booty connected with the island stool. “Are you going to serve dinner, or what?”

Beckett bent to pull the garlic bread from the oven. My eyes landed where they had no business landing—you named it, on his freaking amazing ass. My cheeks felt like little ruby apple crisps.

“Yeah, yeah, hold onto your panties, will you?”

He just had to mention panties . . .

I rolled my eyes to the sound of tick-tick, click-click, as my fingernails tapped against the granite.

I was playing at nonchalance—and sucking at it.

I have no idea when I lost any and all control over my hormones, but it had happened, and I’d need to figure out a way to deal.

And soon. Staring at his behind and thinking lickable thoughts about his chest were not going to aid me in doing so.

Deep breath in, Amara, I thought as I asked, “So, we’re on grocery duty for the cabin, right?”

“Yep. You got a meal plan?”

“Why would I have a meal plan?”

“Because you and Kai are the only ones who really cook and Kai is probably thinking of nothing but his proposal.”

“So I’m left on cooking duty?”

“You really are good at it.” He tossed me a wink over his shoulder and my teeth started to grind. I was thinking; if my teeth were grinding maybe my heart wouldn’t be fluttering. I was wrong.

“I don’t know why you think flattery will get you anywhere. It has never worked before.”

“Are you flattered, beautiful?” He came to sit beside me, and the smell of Italy (as I imagined it) and cheese seduced my olfactory senses. “Because I happen to think you are.”

“No.” I dug in, preferring to scald my tongue on the lasagna than continue this conversation.

“You lie.”

“Whatever you say, Beck.”

“Yeah,” the lazy happy sound was back in his tone—the one that made me get all shivery and melty. “I like it when you say my name.”

“I have no idea what your game is, but you can quit playing. It won’t work.” Honestly, if I failed to get a handle on myself, the man was going to succeed in melting all my ice, like it or not. I, for one, definitely did not like it.

“It’s already working, peanut.” He said, stunning me speechless. And then he gave all the attention I didn’t, but kind of did want him to give me, to his lasagna.

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“Amara,” I hollered, knowing it would piss her off before I did it. “Let’s get a move on or we’re going to be late.”

“How can we be late if we’re going out a day early?” She called back from her bedroom and I smirked. We wouldn’t be late, but I had a thing for razzing her.

“I’m a responsible adult. Responsible adults have schedules to keep,” I was cracking myself up with this shit, so I added, “Don’t want to be driving in the dark.”

“It’s nine o’clock in the morning, Beckett.

” She huffed, tugging an obnoxious black and yellow suitcase behind her.

She wore a pretty off-white sweater that looked like it would be soft to the touch and a pair of dark snug jeans.

But it was her fluffy purple socks that looked more like slippers that had me grinning hugely.

The woman was fucking adorable.

“Nice socks. You’re really bringing back the Two Headed Monster, babe.”

Her chin tipped down before angling to the side. Her cute little nose was scrunched when she asked disbelievingly, “Are you talking about the monster from Sesame Street? ”

I shrugged, “If it’s purple, got two heads and scraggly fur like your socks—yeah.”

“Wow,” she moved forward to the sound of wheels on hardwood, dragging her bumblebee suitcase. “I guess you really do learn something new every day.”

“Well, Amara Bloom, you wouldn’t be teasing me now, would you?”

“Beckett,” her little kitten hiss was starting to sound. “Will you get a move on? We don’t want to be late. ”

I barked laughter, holding the door open for her as she strutted through with her bumblebee suitcase on her heels.

She didn’t smile, laugh, or tease. But I knew the girl well enough to know that somewhere inside, even though she wasn’t feeling safe enough yet to let it show on the outside, that she was happy.

It was my intention to make this week the week Amara failed at her vow never to let herself show her happiness. I had all the arsenal I needed to do just that in my suitcase in the pretty purple box with the pretty purple ribbon.

It was in the elevator when I pressed the ground floor, that Amara huffed a sigh. I didn’t understand her sigh until the doors rolled open and she shook her head when I gestured her forward, “I’m driving myself.”

“Don’t think so, babe.” I pushed her gently forward with a hand to the small of her back. She dug her little heels in.

“I can drive myself, Beck.”

I really liked it when she called me Beck. “You can, but you shouldn’t.”

“Why not?”

Pinning her with a “you know why” expression she didn’t seem to read, I was forced to explain. “You drive a bug.”

“So?”

“It’s small.”

“Perfect for city driving.” She shrugged. “I don’t see a problem.”

“The problem is we’re not city driving.”

She narrowed her eyes and I readied myself for battle. “Raina drives a car that’s just as small as mine. Proof that people who aren’t plagued with little penis syndrome get around just fine.”

Again, insulting my junk. “We can reminisce in the lobby.”

“What?” Confused, she didn’t fight me when I pulled her gently from the now protesting elevator. Another minute of forcing the doors open and we probably would have shut the thing down. Sensitive metal box.

“First time we met you insulted my dick. If you’re really that curious, I’ll show it to you.” I didn’t grin even though I was dying to when her big blue eyes got even bigger. “Just say the word.”

“I can’t believe I agreed to share a room with you.”

“Believe it, babe.”

“Ugh,” she huffed. “Anyway, back on track—I’m driving my own car, so text me the address and I’ll see you there.”

I started walking for the front doors, leaving her standing alone by the now closed elevator. So I knew by the irritated groan she made in the back of her throat, and the click-click sound of her boots stomping against the tile, that she’d given up and begun to follow me.

“Beckett, you’re being seriously ridiculous.” I ignored her. “And overbearing.” Again, I ignored her. “Like a freaking ogre!”

That’s when I turned, plucked her suitcase from her hand, and lifted it.

If I forced her to get snow on her suitcase, I’d never hear the end of it.

As it was, I probably wouldn’t hear the end of her displeasure at having to ride shotgun in my truck.

But I didn’t give a damn how pissed she was, I wasn’t about to let her take the back roads to the cabin in her little blue punch buggy. Not a fucking chance.

It wasn’t only about her safety, although that was the number one contributing factor. Most importantly, it was the visions I had of taking the time to pull her out of the ditch she’d no doubt drive into, with my little penis syndrome, big truck.

She just kept on talking. If anything, the girl really was determined. “You know you’re being silly, right? At least tell me you know this.”

“Kai’s not letting Raina drive her little car out either.” I felt like my father. I could practically hear his voice, “If your friends jump off the bridge, will you?” I’d always hated that question.

“How do you know that?”

“Because Kai’s a man. Any man worth being called a man isn’t going to let his woman drive on icy back roads, while it’s snowing, in a car the size of yours.

” I opened the passenger door, gesturing her inside.

“Fucking hell, they should be outlawed in the winter. They can barely clear a puddle much less a snowdrift. Riding around in cars like that in a climate like this is dangerous, so I’ll say again, we’re taking my truck. ”

Something in her face changed as she pulled her tight little body into the passenger seat of my truck. It was when she turned to me and announced, “I’m not your woman, Beckett,” that I understood.

Closing the door, the words escaped my throat on a low growl. “Not yet.”

The snow started falling real fast and heavy by the time I pulled my truck up to the front of the cabin.

The picture of my parents’ summer home looked more like a log mansion draped in white, than a cabin.

The drive had been an icy one and I knew, although Amara would never admit it, she was happy I forced her to ride with me.

“Well,” she sighed as she looked into the back seat at the piles of grocery bags. “Happy I wore boots.”

By boots, she meant the cream colored Uggs with the big brown button on the side. The girl had a few pairs of these boots and I wondered if the things were actually

warm and comfortable, because style-wise, they weren't the hottest things around.

Still, they were cute enough on Amara, because if she could pull off fuzzy purple socks, then she could pull off Uggs.

Killing the engine, I twisted to look at her. That's when I saw her cheeks were pink and her eyes were wide as she stared through the windshield. I knew what she was seeing. She saw a huge overdone vacation house that people with money indulged themselves with. She saw excess. She saw pathetic.

My throat tightened as I said, "I'll grab the suitcases."

I didn't see her blink in startled awe as she pulled her eyes from the big cabin. I was already in the deep snow, slamming my door closed behind me. I was lifting the latch of my cover to pull our suitcases from the back when she called, "These groceries are going to take a few trips to bring in."

That was saying something as the girl turned into The Hulk on grocery days.

If there was something Amara hated more than making multiple trips from the vehicle to the condo on grocery days, I had yet to find it.

The girl loaded herself until I thought she'd collapse like a little paper doll every time.

I followed her to the door and mentally noted I'd have to shovel the stone path before anyone else arrived.

My parents' had a family who lived close by employed to maintain the cabin while they were at the main house, which was most of the year.

Still, although I could tell the path had been shoveled a few times, the snow was falling hard enough to demand another.

My eyes fell on the little woman with the cute gray beanie as she waddled up the carved log steps to the front door. Turning, she barked an order that had me fighting my grin. “Will you get a move on? My arms are gonna fall off soon.”

“Heavy groceries?”

“You bought half the store, what did you expect?”

I did as she demanded and got a move on, shoving my key into the front door and pushing it open. The sky was cloudy and gray, so the inside of the cabin was dark without the light from the sun. Amara dropped the groceries to the floor and I set the suitcases next to the wide oak bench.

I caught her by the waist as she made a move for the door, shaking my head. “Why don’t you start putting the groceries away? I’ll bring the rest in before starting a fire, yeah?”

“Oh,” her mitten covered hands rested against my arm across her belly. “Sure.”

I stood for a moment, watching as she tipped her head back to take in the enormity of the cabin.

If it were a house used for regular use, it wouldn’t have been so bad.

So excessive. But it wasn’t used for regular use.

At thirty-seven hundred square feet of living space, not including the loft over the garage which made the total living space forty-two hundred square feet, it was a bit

outrageous for a couple who used it no more than three times a year.

Granted when they used it, nearly every room was filled with people, but still.

It was excessive when they could throw the same parties at their estate in the city.

Still, this house was pretty much my dream.

I couldn't imagine living in a place more peaceful than this, with the tall trees and quiet of nature surrounding the ambiance of wood, space, and flame.

When I finished medical school and got a decent paying job, I intended to buy this house from my parents. That's how much I loved it.

I assumed that was why I wanted Amara to love this house. Because there was no question, I was falling for her. I was falling fast, and deep, and hard. I also didn't want to stop.

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This place was huge. When Beckett said his parent's had a four-bedroom cabin on the outskirts of Banff, I'd been excited to see the quaint details of the place.

There was nothing quaint about this cabin—except maybe the décor.

I had to admit the décor made the tall vaulted ceiling over the living room feel a bit less “O.M.G.” and a bit more “Sweet.”

The walls were all exposed logs and the floors stretched throughout in warm toned planks of oak.

The entrance, although surprisingly large and separate from the living space, moved directly into the informal living room where a tall wood-burning fireplace crafted by excellent masonry work stretched up through the vaulted ceiling.

The cherry brown leather furniture shone clean in the warm light cast by the tasteful hazed glass domes strategically positioned on the walls.

A large dining room filled with the largest cedar table I'd ever seen surrounded by numerous black leather high-backed chairs.

Below large windows, lining the L of the wall surrounding the table sat cedar-crafted benches with cream-colored cushion tops.

Between the windows and benches, pillows that had no apparent uniform in color, size, or design, had been positioned with a hand that aimed for a careless, yet classy-comfortable, design-scheme.

It was between the dining room and the rustically designed kitchen that a clean pair of sliding patio doors stood.

From here, I could see the large deck and blanket of white in the wide-open back yard.

I was certain it would be paradise in the summer.

On a sigh, I turned my attention to the kitchen where I lifted the groceries onto the enormous island counter.

The cabinets were an off-white that was brushed artistically with bronze around the edges, giving an antique feel to the sprawl.

The countertops were a beautiful granite I never would have chosen from the tiny little squares they give you in the stores to pick from.

But in this kitchen, with the white creamy base, veins of chocolate and rivers of gold, it was perfect.

I was staring beneath the open stairs that faced the front entrance to a hall where I suspected was one or two of the four bedrooms the home housed, when Beckett came barreling into the front door with grocery bags in hand.

His cheeks puffed out as he shook the snow from his hood.

“Whoa,” kicking off his boots, he took the short way to the kitchen, bypassing the long route I’d taken through the living room and dining room, and instead moving straight toward the stairs, past them, and into the kitchen.

Honestly, in my minds overwhelmed state, I hadn’t even registered the shortcut.

“Cold out?” I asked, already knowing it was. Not ten minutes ago I’d been standing on the front porch waiting for Beckett to get his keys out.

“And snowing harder. We’re lucky we left when we did.”

I glanced out the bay window over the corner sink to see the large fluffy white flakes spiraling quickly to the ground. “Yeah.”

“You look around at all?”

“Yeah.”

“What do you think?”

Was that nervousness I detected in the nonchalance of his tone?

It couldn’t be. He wouldn’t care if I hated it.

He probably wouldn’t care if I loved it, either.

And I most definitely loved it. Yes, it was admittedly a bit big, but it wasn’t my house.

I didn’t have to dish out the dough to fill it, so what did I care if it was a little too large?

“It’s nice.”

“That’s it?”

Okay. Yep. I was pretty sure I was detecting apprehension. But why? “Um—it’s

unique, and huge, and really nice.”

“Yeah.”

Had I disappointed him? “I can’t wait to take a tour to see the rest.”

His eyes lit and I had my answer. I had disappointed him. “Let’s get the food put away and I’ll take you around. Then I’ll make a fire.”

I couldn’t wait for a fire. I so couldn’t wait for a fire that I sort of wanted to tell him to hold off on the tour and build a fire instead, but I didn’t want to disappoint him.

He seemed excited and uncharacteristically nervous to be here, so I didn’t want to make whatever he was going through worse.

I might be the nutcracker when it came to protecting my friends, and the ice queen when it came to protecting myself—but I wasn’t heartless. At least not when it came to Beckett.

“That sounds great.”

With the groceries put away, I was closing the fridge when I felt Beckett standing close behind me.

I tensed, aware of every inch of his nearness.

About to tell him to back off, I didn’t register the heat that shot through my body when his hand moved over mine, his fingers locking around my hand.

And then I was being pulled through the kitchen, below the open stairs, to the hall I’d noted before.

I'd been right in my suspicion. A half bath was on one side of the hall, and a massive master bedroom with a large master bath and a closet Raina would die for were behind the two doors on the other.

Next, we moved upstairs where a large open living area overlooked the main floor.

The furniture up here looked even comfier, and it faced a massive television that stood surrounded by a wall of books. I'm not kidding; I nearly drooled.

That's when I realized Beckett still had a hold of my hand, because I wanted to move toward the wall of books, but instead I was moving deeper into the room.

"Bedroom one and bedroom two share a bathroom." He turned and pointed to another set of stairs that was more a half set. "And we're staying up there. It's the guest suite over the garage. It can be entered from outside as well."

As soon as he pointed out our bedroom, my heart forgot to pace itself.

It was going on a full rampage as I climbed the stairs behind Beckett, still holding his hand.

There was another small seating area with a comfortable little chair and lamp next to two huge glass double doors.

The glass wasn't fogged, but instead a crocodile green curtain had been hung.

Beckett opened the door and my breath snagged in my throat as my eyes widened. I'd stepped from the land of "wow" to the land of "paradise" in seconds.

The room had a feeling of warmth I never imagined was possible.

A ginormous king size bed centered the wall to my left, surrounded by a plush shag area rug in deep moss green.

Draped across the bed was a thick winter duvet with thin gold twigs threaded intricately into the fabric.

Pillows—so many pillows of brown and green and cream were positioned against the padded russet headboard.

I wanted to do nothing more than fall into the chocolate cloud that was that bed.

But then I saw the fireplace. Again, the masonry was stunning.

Large natural stones climbed the wall opposite the entrance and the hearth was begging—I mean begging, for flames.

I could already see myself lounging on a blanket on the thick brown rug that was sprawled before that fireplace.

“Suddenly sharing a room with you isn’t seeming like the end of the world.”

Did I say that aloud?

Beckett barked a laugh that had my cheeks burning. I was back to glaring, so I decided now was the time to pull my hand from his grip. He only laughed harder, tossing his head back.

“What changed your mind? The bed or the fireplace?”

“None of your business.” Yep—I was vexed.

“Come on, babe. I gotta know.”

“And why is that?”

“So I know what I need to make you want to spend every night in the same room as me.”

Was he being serious? Surely he wasn't.

I snorted. It was entirely un-lady-like, but what did I care? “What you'd need is this exact room.”

“Really?” He raised a brow. “Well, maybe one day that could be arranged.”

“Call me when that happens.” I mumbled sarcastically, ignoring the race in my heart, padding across the oak floor to the double patio door. The snow was falling even harder now, and I shivered just at the sight of the winter storm blowing in.

“You hungry?”

Turning back to face him, I was startled still by his expression. For a moment, I stared at him and he at me. I didn't know how to respond, or what he was thinking, so I decided to nod. “Starving.”

I should have known when Beckett asked if I was hungry, that what he was really saying was, “You should cook us dinner, Amara.”

So, I'd struck a deal. I'd cook dinner if he built a fire in the brilliantly huge fireplace in the living room.

I made a simple dinner of spaghetti with a side of garlic bread.

I'd debated on a salad too, but decided I'd save my big dinner energy for when everyone else was here.

I knew Kaiden had a lot on his mind with proposing to Raina, but I was hoping he'd at least cover the kitchen for a couple nights.

Still, if it came down to it and Raina volunteered, I knew it'd be safer if I kept my apron on.

No one needed food poisoning all the way out here.

And that's what had me asking, "How far are we from Banff?"

"About ten minutes."

"Really?" Well, if we weren't that far from the hospital, surely we could take the risk of Raina killing all our guts. "That's nice and close."

"It is." Beckett agreed around a large mouthful of spaghetti. "Why?"

"Just wondering." Wind howled and Beckett looked up from his plate to glance out the large window where snow blew in white swirls outside.

The sky was beginning to turn dark, but the fire inside was crackling and warm.

I hoped tomorrow wasn't so gray and snowy.

The gloom of the sky had cloaked the massive mountains throughout the ride, and there was no hope of seeing any more than their base through the windows of the cabin.

Still, on a clear day, there was nothing more peaceful than staring at the unmovable stone masses that stretched from the earth into the sky.

“I should probably text Kai and see what time they’re thinking of leaving.”

“You don’t think they’ll back out, do you?”

Gold eyes narrowed at the obvious distress in my tone.

But seriously, I didn’t want to spend a whole week alone in this cabin with Beckett.

Yes, I might live with the man, but there was something about being all the way out here, with the burning fire and log walls that had a certain kind of atmosphere—an almost romantic feel.

I just didn’t want him getting any ideas.

I didn’t want to let myself get any ideas, dammit.

“Not a chance. Kaiden has plans.”

“Yes,” I agreed thankfully. “Plans.”

Beckett leaned back in his chair, his eyes again narrowing on me. “Are you worried you’ll get stuck alone here with me?”

“What? Of course not.”

“Good, because I’d have to point out that we live together. Alone.”

“I know.” Could the man read minds? Seriously!

“You are nervous, aren’t you?”

“No.”

“Why are you nervous?” He leaned forward and I pushed my plate away, sighing.

“I just told you I’m not nervous.”

“But I know you’re lying.” He countered. “What I want to know is why you’d lie?”

I blinked slowly, staring at him. I was hoping that there would be a little intimidation working behind my unwavering gaze, but unfortunately, there wasn’t.

“It’s not nervousness. It might even be for the better because then we wouldn’t have to share a bedroom.”

“Ah, so you’re afraid of sleeping beside me?”

“No.” I totally was.

“Really? So tonight you’ll be fine with crawling between the sheets with me?”

“Tonight?” Heart. Racing. Fear. “Why would we share a bed tonight? There are four beds in this house.”

“Because all the bedding is fresh. If we sleep in one, someone won’t be getting fresh sheets.”

“Raina wouldn’t mind if I slept in her bed.”

“But Kaiden might.”

I blinked. “I’ll do laundry tomorrow. Surely there’s a washer in this house somewhere.”

Beckett shook his head, grinning. “You’ll sleep in our bed, babe. Don’t worry, I promise I won’t touch you.”

“You do?” I raised my brows.

“I’d never touch you, Amara.” He vowed a little harshly and I visibly flinched. “I would never touch you unless you wanted me to touch you. I’d never take advantage of you, or harm you in any way. I think I’ve proven many times now that I not only respect you, but care for you.”

I didn’t know what to say. Beckett took my emotions and twisted them around until they were a mess I could barely untangle. So I reached for his empty plate and stood, “I trust you.”

I didn’t turn around as I said the words. I didn’t want to see the righteousness I suspected lit his eyes.

It was after I’d put our dishes in the dishwasher and Beckett stoked the fire, when I turned to see him lowering his big body onto the cheery brown leather of the couch that I realized I’d lost control over my ice castle.

He’d seized my palace and I was helpless against the war he raged to claim my heart.

He might not know it, but I was a hell of a romantic and sometimes, the words he said played out in my mind for days after.

It was when I stepped into the sunken living room and Beckett twisted to pull the knit blanket off the back of the couch, holding it open for me, that I realized I wasn’t only

falling for him. I'd already fallen.

The weight of the knowledge settled on my soul like a ton of bricks as fear of heartbreak slithered through my veins.

And that's when I decided I needed to talk to someone. I needed my girlfriends. Desperately.

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Yep, I'd fallen. Somehow, when I landed, the crash didn't kill me as I'd suspected it would if I ever allowed my heart to commit such a foolish act. Some said loving another took bravery. I thought loving another took having a few loose screws.

I wasn't sure which was correct.

But I was sure that I'd fallen. I knew this, because as I lowered myself into the blanket Beckett held open for me on the couch beside him, his arm settling around my shoulders as I wrapped the blanket tightly around my body, I realized I didn't want to be anywhere but here.

Snuggled into this big man's side; before the crackling fire like I was his to cherish and protect against the winter storm outside.

It was the only place I could imagine being in this moment.

I'd never felt so safe.

"You're not fighting my nearness." He said sounding surprised. I realized, as I took in our position, that he had every right. I'd been more than a little cold, but I was confused.

Even now, I was terrified and lost and I wanted my girlfriends. Raina would excitedly offer advice that would have a harlot blushing, while Maddy would be honest and responsible in offering her opinion. And I desperately felt the need for both their words.

Desperately.

But they weren't here.

"You're right." I concurred, saying nothing more.

"Why?"

"Because you were right when you said you've given me no reason not to trust you. I do trust you, Beckett. I just—I've never been the kind of girl who finds affection between friends easy."

"Is that what we are?" I felt his face dip toward mine, but I kept my eyes trained to the dancing flames. Still, that didn't stop my heart from beating so hard it practically tore through my chest.

"What?" The word sounded like a gasp.

"Friends? Is that all we are, Amara?"

"I—I don't," Oh my god, my head was beginning to spin.

"If it makes any difference to you, it's not all I want to be."

Holy crap! The dynamics of Amara and Beckett just went from a playful bantering love/hate friendship to—what? I mean, what were the dynamics now?

"Beckett . . ."

"It's okay, you don't have to respond now. I just want you to know how I feel. I just want to be honest with you."

Could he be any more perfect? He had to have a flaw. He had to have a freaking flaw!

“Okay,” Really, Mar, that’s all you’ve got?

“Okay.” He agreed simply, settling back into the couch with my body tucked snugly into his side.

For long minutes, I sat as tense as a freaking iron pole before finally, I eased into the comfort of Beckett’s hard and, it had to be said, flawless body.

And that’s how we sat relaxing on the couch together like we’d always been a couple—or a couple of friends who always cuddled. It was so easy to be like this with him, anyone looking in would have figured we’d never been anything less.

When nothing more than coals simmered in the hearth, Beckett announced, “You know, in our room there’s a real nice bathtub.

” I tensed, waiting for him to proposition something that would obliterate all the trust I had in him.

“Why don’t you take one of your bubble baths and I’ll put out the fire.

I brought Game of Thrones, so when you’re done relaxing we can watch a few episodes before bed.

” The smile was loud in his next words. “I promise I’ll build a small fire in our room before bed too. ”

Yeah—I was right, the man really was flawless.

“Okay,” everything he proposed sounded like a dream. I stood. “I’ll leave you to it then.”

He nodded, watching me toss the throw blanket over the back of the couch. Then I headed for the stairs.

I was in the bedroom, inspecting the perfection of the rustically chic décor when there was a knock on the door. My heart did a little jive as I called, “Come in.”

Beckett appeared with my suitcase. “Thought you might need this.”

Blushing, I explained, “Totally didn’t even think about what I’d wear after my bath.”

He winked, “I’d say nothing, but as you’ve told me before, you’re not that kind of girl.”

I didn’t know why, but his teasing didn’t make me feel uncomfortable. Instead, I felt a rush of heat shooting straight for that place between my legs. My blush turned something fierce and I tucked my hair behind my ear, “Ha. Ha.”

He laughed. I freaking loved the sound of his laugh. “I’ll leave you to it.”

He did leave me to it, and as I undressed in the huge warm bathroom, stepping into the beautiful free-standing bathtub, I couldn’t stop myself from thinking of the last boy I’d given my trust to—and how in the end he’d burned me so badly I thought I’d never heal.

It was the first time I thought of Jayden and didn’t feel the rush of fear pulsing with every beat of my heart.

It was the first time I thought of Jayden, and believed that maybe there was someone

good and pure enough to chase away the pain so that maybe I could believe in laughter again.

It was the first time since the demolition of all that I was, with a boy who didn't deserve everything I gave, that I felt hope.

"Yes!" I clapped, jumping up from the couch in victory. "Why don't I feel like the brutality of his death was enough?"

"Because it wasn't. I get the public humiliation of it, but the guy was horrible. I don't feel vindicated." Beckett agreed, grinning up at me.

"I know," Seriously, Joffrey from Game of Thrones was probably one of the all-time worst characters I'd ever encountered. "I hated him."

"He doesn't get any better watching it a second time around. The shit he does is still shocking even knowing what's coming."

"I'll bet." In a way, he kind of reminded me of Jayden. Only, Jayden wasn't quite so messed up, thank heaven for that.

The thought of Jayden had my mood spiraling into crash and burn territory. Beckett saw it, because before I knew it, I felt his hands on my hips and I was flat on my back on the couch. Then he was tickling me. Tickling me!

Shouting, "Stop it!" I fought, struggling and failing to escape. "What are you—argh, doing?"

"Tickling you. Saw your face fall, peanut."

"I hate," I gasped. "Being," I kicked out at him, pushing my foot into his gut to push

his body away from mine. “Tickled!”

He laughed and I rolled from the couch, making a run for our room.

I heard him shut off the TV and then I heard footsteps pounding on the floor, coming nearer to me.

Slipping through the door, I tried to slam it closed aiming to lock him out, but his hand stopped the door from latching.

On another shriek, I bolted into the bedroom, cutting my losses on locking the door.

Beckett charged into the space, his warm whiskey eyes dancing as they landed on me. “I like chasing you.”

“I don’t like being chased.”

“Liar.”

“Oh no, buddy,” I shook my head. “Not this time.”

He shook his head in disbelief, prowling closer. Again, I shrieked my command, “Stop hunting me!”

“I like hunting you,” he winked. “Gets the blood flowing.”

“Go run around a tree. That will get your blood flowing too.”

“This is so much more fun.”

The only thing between us now was the bed. When Beckett made a move to come

around the foot, I dove onto the mattress, coming to my knees to crawl in a desperate attempt to clear myself from his tickling fingers when they clamped around my ankle, pulling me back down the mattress.

I howled, “Nooo!”

“Yes,” the bed dipped beneath his weight as he threw his body down beside me, flipping me onto my back, and tossing a leg over my belly to hold me in place. “Definitely yes,” his fingers found my sides and that’s when it happened—I laughed.

Beckett’s fingers quit moving and our bodies stilled as the echo of the sound lingered between us. I couldn’t remember the last time I laughed like this, without any inhibition at all. It felt—well, it felt wonderful.

When the shock of the sound wore off both of us, Beckett tipped his head down, and whispered, “Do it again,”

“I—can’t.” You couldn’t command a person to laugh. It didn’t work like that.

Beckett had other ideas, though. I knew this when I felt his fingers begin moving at my sides again. And again, the sound of my laughter spilled from between my lips.

It was beautiful and revealing and raw. I felt naked and vulnerable and safe beneath this brilliant man who unveiled the beauty I’d been hiding for years deep beneath my surface.

I felt clean . . .

And then I felt the tears. I was so overloaded with happiness I couldn’t take it, and it spilled from my eyes in salty liquid that streamed over my temples and into my hair. My heart danced and my soul sang.

And then Beckett dipped his head, and he kissed me.

His lips on mine were soft and warm and hesitant.

There was a moment when instinct demanded I pull away, but only a moment.

My heart took over from there as I pressed my mouth against his, opening to him, tasting, and being tasted.

His hands on my sides stopped tickling, and instead held me close.

His kiss deepened as I opened my mouth to him, a low groan rumbling from the deep of his throat as he pushed his body closer to mine, pressing my back deeper into the bed.

It was on pure instinct that I lifted one leg, shifting into his body in a wordless plea for more of him.

And that's when he tore his mouth from mine, lifting his head to look into my eyes. His eyes were hooded and his lips were red. We were both breathing hard and fast. And the longer he looked down at me, the more I began to feel uncertain. Afraid. Helpless.

"Don't pull away," he whispered pleadingly. "We'll take this slow, beautiful. We'll take us slow."

"Us?"

"Oh yeah, baby. Us."

"What does that mean?"

“It means you’re mine and I’m yours. It means we’re lighting this spark that’s been between us since day one, on fire, yeah?”

Goodness, I didn’t know about that. “Beckett,”

“Say yeah, baby.” He dropped his forehead gently to mine, inhaling hope and—me. “Please, say yeah.”

The word was small and hesitant, but I couldn’t deny the fact that it sounded. “Yeah.”

I lay awake in the bed beside Beckett staring into the flames dancing over the logs Beckett had set before climbing into bed beside me.

I knew he wasn’t asleep. I was also pretty sure he knew I wasn’t asleep.

Neither of us had spoken since we pulled the sheet up over our bodies.

I was in my totally unsexy jammies. I’d packed them knowing I’d be sharing a room with Beckett, not wanting to get any blood flowing.

Now, I was regretting that decision. The purple fleece was killer hot.

Lounging around the house in these jammies and wearing them beneath a thick winter duvet were two entirely different things.

I huffed, rolling onto my back, pushing the duvet down another inch or two.

“Hot?”

“Yeah,” See? I knew he wasn’t asleep.

“Did you pack any other pajamas?”

“No,” I huffed again, amending. “None that aren’t fleece.”

He chuckled. “For some reason that doesn’t surprise me.”

“Beckett,” I groaned. “I’ll get through one night then I’ll ask Maddy or Raina to bring me something else tomorrow.”

Then I blushed, because after my stunt of packing only lingerie for Raina’s camping trip with Kaiden, I knew her retribution would be aptly horrific.

“You wanna borrow a t-shirt?”

“From you?”

“Yeah,” he sat up, smirking. “Who else?”

“Um . . .” I wanted to borrow a t-shirt. I wanted to borrow a t-shirt so, so badly.

He raised a brow, prompting. “Not gonna jump you if you’re wearing something other than fleece.”

I scowled. “I didn’t say you would.”

Promptly two seconds after I’d settled into my familiar scowling expression, Beckett reached back to pull the material of his t-shirt over his head. The scowling turned to what I suspected was the face of pure mortification.

He was giving me the shirt off his back. Holy crap.

“Here,” he handed the shirt to me and I ignored the fist-gripping sensation that overtook my lower belly as my fingers closed around the material. It was still warm from his body, and that was a turn on like I never would have expected.

“Thanks.”

“You want me to turn around?” he winked, “promise I won’t peak.”

Rolling my eyes, I slid out from beneath the covers, calling over my shoulder as I clutched his t-shirt to my chest. “I’ll change in the bathroom, thanks.”

His laughter followed me into the room and I sighed at the feel of the warm tile under my feet as I quickly slid from my fleece jammies and into Beckett’s t-shirt. The smell of him was entirely man, and I noted that too was a turn on.

Padding barefoot toward the large mirror, I stared at myself in Beckett’s t-shirt.

It was big and navy blue. The hem tickled my thighs; covering my booty shorts, thank heaven.

It wasn’t the most flattering thing I’d ever worn, but for some reason I couldn’t quite explain, I felt sexy and sensual. I felt like a woman.

I was a woman.

I was a woman in a man’s shirt, sharing a bed with said man. I was a woman who was influenced in ways I couldn’t control by that very man’s scent, voice, and body. I was a woman who was finally coming into herself.

The thought had my lips stretching into a small, slow smile.

The sight staring back at me stilled something inside of me.

My heart turned quiet and my fingertips lifted to connect hesitantly with my lips.

I didn't know how he did it, but he'd battled every demon I had, and freed the beauty I thought I'd buried forever.

If I lost him tomorrow and lived to be one hundred and one, I'd forever be thankful for the beauty he gave me tonight.

Because for the first time since I was a girl, I felt no holds barred happiness.

"You all right in there, Amara?"

Startled, I dropped my hand and turned to the closed door. Hurrying to gather my jammies from the floor, I folded them and set them on the vanity before moving, a little hesitantly and a whole lot nervously, to the door.

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The sight of Amara in my t-shirt was all I needed to turn as hard as a rock.

She wasn't a tall woman, but from under my t-shirt, her legs looked like they stretched for miles.

The amber glow from the fire cast golden shadows over her normally pale skin, and if I wasn't afraid of her running from me, I would have hooked an arm around her waist, dropped her to the bed and slowly kissed up every mile of her toned legs, from ankle to . . .

"Thought maybe you got lost in my shirt." My voice croaked on my tease. Croaked. Fuck me, I sounded like a hormonal teenager about to take a woman for his first time. I wasn't even close to virginal—but I also wasn't close to claiming her.

"No," she breathed a shaky breath, lowering her little body into the bed beside me. For the first time tonight, I was thankful for the thick duvet. It was hiding my thick, barely restrained desire for her. "Um—earlier you said I was—um,"

"Mine?" I questioned, relieving her. She was cute when she stuttered, but the last thing I wanted her feeling tonight was uncomfortable.

As much as I liked to tease her, making her cute little ass squirm as she thought up a sharp quip, that wasn't how I wanted tonight to play out.

Tonight it was about honesty, our future, and us.

"Yes,"

“And?”

“Well, I was wondering what that meant. Exactly.”

“It means you’re mine and I’m yours,” The explanation was simple. “Like I said earlier, we’re lighting our spark.”

“Yes, but—what does that mean? ”

What wasn’t I getting here? “Peanut, gonna have to clarify for me.”

“Beckett,” my name was a frustrated curse on her pretty lips. “I figure you know this, but I’ll tell you anyway—I don’t date.”

“You do now.” Okay, maybe that was a little too firm and caveman-like. Oh well, not like I could take the words back. Hell, I didn’t want to take the words back.

“So we are dating?”

Eyes narrowed, I took her in. Her face was the picture of innocent confusion, so I took pity, “Yeah, baby, we are.”

“Okay,” a slow breath in and another out. Her chest rose and fell under my shirt—and holy fuck, her nipples were hard. “So, what does that mean?”

“What?” My eyes lifted to her face. This time, hers were narrowed.

“What does dating mean for us?”

I frowned. “It means we’re in a relationship.”

She fisted the blanket into her little hands, clearly frustrated. “What I mean is—never mind.”

“No, talk to me.”

“You’re too hard to talk to!”

“I’m trying to listen. I’m trying to communicate the way you need me to communicate, Amara. Don’t give up on me yet. Don’t just shut down because we’re not communicating quite right. We’ll get there eventually.”

Silence pulsed and her fisted hands loosened their grip on the blanket.

“Okay. I guess I’m trying to ask what dating entails.

I don’t know what I’m ready for—or even if I’m ready to date.

I just don’t know about all this. It’s all happening really fast. I hadn’t even considered dating you and then all the sudden you’re tickling me and then you’re kissing me and I’m liking it and . . .”

“Amara,” I cut her off, pulling her fidgeting hand into mine. “Hey, don’t freak, okay?” She bobbed her head so I figured it was safe enough to proceed. “You sure know how to talk a mile a minute. Ever think about becoming a lawyer? Or an auctioneer?”

“Beckett,” I was pretty sure that was the first time I’d ever heard Amara Bloom whine. This, too, was fucking adorable.

“All right, sorry,” sending her a rueful grin, I forged ahead. “How about we don’t make boundaries for our relationship? If I do something you don’t like, you tell me

and vice versa. We'll take it day by day, slow and steady, yeah?"

"Slow and steady?" She sounded disbelieving. "I can do that."

Was she trying to convince me, or herself?

"You sure?" I asked, needing clarification.

She lifted her free hand, "One thing,"

"What's this one thing?"

"You say no boundaries—does this mean we're not exclusive?"

I wasn't expecting those words to fall from the lips I'd been kissing only a couple hours before. I didn't want anyone else kissing those pretty pink lips. As far as I was concerned, they were mine. All of her was mine.

"We're definitely exclusive, Amara. I've never been the sharing kind." Did she prefer it the other way? For some reason, I doubted that.

Tipping her head forward, a sigh of relief sounded. "Good."

"Good." I echoed, feeling my inner gorilla roar. "How about we get some shut eye, yeah?"

"Yeah."

I watched as she snuggled down into the bed, pulling the duvet up to her chin before I lowered myself next to her. Listening to her short soft inhalations, I could practically taste the sweet aroma of her nervousness.

“Is this the first time you’ve slept with a man?”

She rolled onto her side, facing me. Then she tipped her head up to press her lips to mine. The boldness of her move stunned me and it wasn’t until she’d twisted to her other side, facing the nearly dead fire that I realized she hadn’t replied.

Amara didn’t sleep deadweight. She was a shifter. From side to side, front to back, she moved. I wasn’t getting much sleep as it was with her lack of reply to my question spinning around in my mind, but with her thrashing movements, sleep was a no-go.

Wondering if this was normal for her, or if she was just so wound up with everything that had happened tonight, I remained unmoving on my back. I really hoped it wasn’t normal, because I couldn’t imagine passing out from exhaustion only to get the shit kicked out of me by a comatose woman.

My hand was lifted to touch her shoulder when I heard it—her whimper. It was soft, barely there. A cry that had the hairs rising on my flesh as I froze, my ears perked.

“No, please . . .” The words were so mumbled and so weak, I was just able to decipher them. But even though they were mumbled and frail, they were also tortured.

“Amara?” I whispered gently, my hand falling on her shoulder.

“God,” she moaned. “It’s bad.”

“Amara?” My own fear was beginning to climb. What was going on in her mind? What was she dreaming about that had her so afraid?

I moved in closer to her, my hand shifting to the small of her back as she snuggled

into my chest. I froze, waiting for the flailing to continue. Minutes passed and nothing happened. The tension in my body fled as I let my arms relax around her, finally falling into the peace of sleep.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:59 am

The last time I was this happy at Christmas, I was a little girl. Today, there was laughter and friends and—dare I say a boyfriend! I know, who would have thought I'd have a boyfriend? But apparently, if last night was anything to go on, I did.

With the anxiety I'd cultured while spending the whole day trying to gather the lady-balls to pull Beckett to the side and talk about last night, it was safe to say I was feeling a little uncertain.

It was also safe to say that we'd had absolutely no time to talk about everything that went down only last night.

Eggnog and rum flowed as popcorn over the gas burner on the stove popped, "You have to use real butter."

"Margarine works just as good." Raina huffed, rolling playful green eyes at Maddy.

"No, I'm serious. It's no good if you don't use real butter." Maddy was insistent upon her "real" butter. I'd already seen Raina melting the "real" butter Maddy apparently had a thing for, but for some reason Raina was toying with her.

"Right,"

"Raina," Maddy uncurled from the couch to inspect the bubbling butter in the pot. Then she spotted the "butter" wrapper and accused, "You're such a pest."

"Did you really think I'd force you to eat popcorn with margarine? What kind of horrible friend do you think I am?"

“Your sarcasm is like drinking vodka straight. Unbearable.”

“First world problems, baby cakes.” Raina laughed and Maddy rolled her eyes, sipping her sweet eggnog and rum.

I’d had one of the best days, and it was being capped off with a great evening.

Shortly after I’d woken in a tangle of sheets while wrapped in Beckett’s arms, the front door had swung open and I’d heard Kaiden call, “Beck?” After which Beckett and I had scrambled from the bed, into our clothing, and down the stairs.

I hadn’t even had time to inspect my hair before I’d been faced with my girls.

And they’d known instantly that something had happened between me and my new boyfriend. How strangely awesome is that?—I have a boyfriend.

Raina had strutted her booty past me with a low, “We’ll chat about this later,” as she announced, “I claim the master.”

Beckett had pointed her to the master on the main level. She’d squealed her unexpected delight as she ran back into the living room. “It’s really a master suite! I totally thought you’d claim it.”

“There’s another upstairs.” Beckett explained and Raina had dashed back into the bedroom with a grinning Kaiden close on her heels.

Now, I was thinking that the later Raina had promised was upon me.

She was holding a bowl of warm popcorn with real butter and a glass of creamy liquor—giving me the eyes.

They were telling me to climb my arse up the stairs and to my bedroom, so she could quiz me about all the happenings between me and Beckett.

I was thinking that I should take my unlikely chances ignoring her, when she announced. “We’ll be upstairs. Mar still has to show me this master suite she’s been sleeping in. I’m thinking it’s pretty amazing if you chose it over the one I’ve got.”

“It’s pretty amazing.” Beckett said, grinning at me.

My heart was a mess. He knew what Raina was saying within the words she wasn’t saying. He knew, and he was feeding me to the wolves.

Regardless of the two she-wolves behind me, I climbed the stairs and moved right into my bedroom. Maddy was mumbling something about, “This couch looks way comfier. I’ll sleep here,” when I opened the door to the room I was sharing with Beckett.

Due to our rather abrupt wake-up call, the bed was still a disaster. Seeing it instantly had my cheeks turning fire-engine red.

Raina, however, was giving me the eyebrow waggle, “Did you and Beck do the hanky-panky last night?”

“Oh, jeez, Raina . . .” I gasped. “No!”

“Looks like it. The only time my bed gets that messy is when either Kai or me sparks the mood.” Giggling, Raina winked. “I’m just paying you back for all the times you made me blush like that with Kaiden.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You know what I’m talking about. There were some pretty intense situations you could have helped me out in, but you,”

“I did help you out. You wanted to move forward with Kaiden and I helped push you where you wanted to be.” Thumbing my chest, I announced, “See, I’m a good friend.”

“Good friends don’t pack lingerie for a camping trip for their girlfriends.” She reminded me.

With a quip ready to go, I returned, “Good friends are the only friends with access to your undie drawer.”

Raina smirked. She had a way with getting me all riled up and ready to go, just to bring me back down again. And then she shot me right back up, because her next words had the adrenaline in my veins sizzling. “Are you saying you don’t want things to progress with Beckett?”

Blinking once, twice, three times, I could do nothing more than gawk at my friend. My mind was trying to form the sentence I’d need to explain when Maddy dropped gently to the bed.

“You don’t have to hurry into anything, Mar.” She said in that wise, gentle way of hers. “You just have to stop ignoring your heart. You’re not living and it’s tearing me up inside to know that you have all this potential for a life that could be so beautiful—and you’re not living it.”

Knowing what living meant to Maddy, I instantly felt guilty. The guilt powered the courage I needed to admit every fear I thought I’d locked up tight.

“The first and last time I ever let myself trust a man enough to fall for him was the

biggest mistake of my life. His name was Jayden.” Sucking in breath, I started pacing as I continued.

Raina knew some of the things I’d encountered while living with Jayden and his family, but she didn’t know everything.

I’d never planned to tell her everything, but things change.

“He seemed nice at first. Well, looking back there were signs that pointed to just how screwed up he was, but I was too young to really see them. It started just before I turned fifteen. He was a couple years older, cute, and—well, he pursued me and I was too naive to see him for what he was.”

“Jayden was your foster brother?” Raina clarified. “I didn’t know you were—I didn’t know you were in a relationship.”

“We shouldn’t have been.” I said, and it was the only way I could admit to my mistake.

“He was a bad kid, no doubt about it. At first, being silly and young, I was intrigued. He broke all the rules and I thought that was exciting. It started with the long gazes over the kitchen table. Then he came into my bedroom at night. He’d kiss me and touch me—but I never let him take it all the way and surprisingly, looking back, he let me stop him every time.

Then we started sneaking out, stealing silly things from stores or peoples lawns, playing baseball with car mirrors and crap like that.

It escalated quickly to other things. Bad things.

He’d bully kids at school into doing really twisted things.

It took no time at all before he was manipulating me into doing these things—or forcing me to stay quiet as I watched. ”

They were both looking at me like they were seeing me for the first time.

“I did things with Jayden that I’ll always regret.

I started rumors I wish I could take back.

I broke couples up. But I never hurt anybody physically—at least never on purpose.

You see, Jayden had really messed up parents.

They were bad people—as evil as evil gets in the parent department, so it’s really no wonder he turned out the way he did.

They looked great on paper, made decent money and built a life that made them look like decent people, but they weren’t.

I know the way evil hides behind the guise of good, so I don’t always trust what seems like a good thing.

I was hardwired that way, and you would be too if you lived with them. ”

“Honey, what happened?” Raina moved cautiously closer to me and I realized then that I was crying. Body shaking, hands trembling, teeth chattering kind of crying. She caught me around the waist, tugging me in close. “Take your time, but let it out. We’re here to listen.”

“His dad used to beat him. God, and his mom was probably the weakest, most meek woman . . .” Air slid down my throat, burning my lungs.

“His dad was later arrested for,” I couldn’t say it.

It was too wrong—too sick. It didn’t deserve words or memory, so I wasn’t going there.

“Anyway, I realized I had to get out when I went to a party with Jayden. I was sixteen, almost seventeen, so I’d been with him for a while.

I don’t know how I managed to hold onto my innocence for so long with Jayden in my life, when everything that happened that night happened.

He drugged a girl—he drugged her and he took advantage of her.

I don’t think she ever remembered what happened to her and I couldn’t hold it in any longer, so I said something.

I told my school counselor and that’s how I got out.

I could have saved her if I’d have said something earlier—but I didn’t know.

I didn’t know . . .” I was a mess. “He did what he did to her because I wouldn’t,”

Again, I couldn’t say the words. Raina’s hand rubbed up and down the length of my back as she whispered soothing words into my ear. I could feel Maddy close too, and then she was there, hugging us both.

Reliving some, but not all that I’d buried was a terrible thing to experience, but at the same time, when the tears began to run dry, I felt relieved. Liberated.

In an odd way, I felt healed.

“I’m so sorry that you went through all that.

I’m so sorry that you’ve been suffering by yourself all this time.

I’m so sorry that he killed your happy and stole your smiles for years Mar, but you can’t keep letting him take from you.

” She pulled back to look into my eyes. “You can’t give him any more. ”

“I know.” The words were whispered on a strangled, pained breath. “I don’t want to give any more. Not to him. Not to that family.”

“We love you, Amara.” Maddy said, her hand stroking my hair gently. “You know that right? We’ll be sisters forever—family, because it feels right, not because it’s forced, okay?”

“Yes,” have I said I loved these girls? Well, I loved these girls. “Thank you.”

“You know you’ll have to tell Beckett about your past. Not now, but eventually, you’ll have to let it out, okay?”

Nodding even though it was the last thing I wanted to do, I admitted, “I know.”

“How are you feeling?” Maddy asked, searching my face.

“Okay. Better.” I wasn’t shaking anymore. “But I really want a glass of that eggnog.”

Raina handed me her glass with a wink. “Finish this one. I’ll go make two more and bring them back. We’ll Hoover our popcorn and gossip about what it’s like to fall in love with hot as hell men. How does that sound?”

“Like a plan.” I took her drink and drank deep when she turned to leave, feeling lighter in my heart than I’d felt in years.

I felt lighter because I set on the path of releasing the pain I’d been carrying inside. I felt lighter because I had someone I could give my pain to—someone who loved me enough to take my pain, understand it, and not judge me for it.

I finally had family I could trust.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:59 am

Skiing in the mountains with Beckett was most definitely sketched into my book of “life highlights.” He was good.

I wasn’t nearly as skilled, but he was patient and gentle in his teachings.

Like everything Beckett did with me, there was a ton of teasing that had my heart fluttering wildly in my chest.

Both Raina and Kaiden were insanely good at skiing, and had long since ditched Beckett and me on the hill.

Maddy was in the chalet, working on writing another book.

Her first had been picked up by a publisher—total eek moment—and although this second one she was writing had been top-secret, it made her happy, so it made the rest of us happy.

The last time we’d been in the chalet had been for lunch and Maddy had been on her tenth, maybe I’m exaggerating a bit here, cup of coffee.

She was jittery and excited and rosy-cheeked with happiness while the rest of us were rosy-cheeked from the December chill.

It was the last run of the day and we were expecting to return home to Raina and Kaiden’s parents at the cabin.

Beckett had hidden a key for them and told them where they could find their rooms,

so we weren't in a hurry to return, but I had to admit my legs were sore and I was getting cold.

A warm bath was definitely being scribbled into the plans for tonight.

I was thinking about this when I stopped, like a girl who knew a thing or two about her skis, beside Beckett outside the chalet. I twisted out of my skis, feeling a little wobbly as I stepped onto the packed snow.

"You'll be an expert by the end of our trip." He said, grinning hugely. "We'll have to get you your own pair so we can come out more often."

Maybe I could afford skis—my rent was cheaper now and I had a tiny bit of savings stored in my account. Maybe . . .

I shrugged, "We'll see."

He chuckled.

I followed Beckett to the ski return cabin, thinking that I was actually excited for tomorrow.

Tomorrow was Christmas Eve. We had plans to lounge around the cabin, spending time with the family and, although Raina didn't know it, Kaiden was going to propose.

I was so freaking excited to see her face—and the ring.

Honestly, I couldn't believe the guy hadn't shown me already.

Admittedly, I was a little peeved about this, but my excitement for my friend was

greater.

We grabbed Maddy from the chalet on our way to meet Raina and Kaiden beside Beckett's truck. Raina had pulled the box open and was sitting, swinging her booted feet from side to side as she drank from a can of pop.

"Finally," she hopped down, grinning. "How much did Beckett teach you?"

"Not enough for me to keep up with you."

"She's pretty good." Beckett said, and then he started laughing. "She sings."

My head swung to the side and my wide horrified eyes landed on him. "You heard me?"

"Fucking hell," he smirked. "Adorable."

"Okay," I shook my head in defense. "I sing when I feel a little afraid. It calms me down."

"Beckett's right, Mar," Maddy said her eyes were laughing. "That's adorable."

"Whatever," I made my way to the passenger side of the truck, ready to be done with this conversation and not bothering to hide that fact in the slightest.

It was nearly a half hour later, when we were rolling into the driveway of the cabin, that I saw another really big truck parked in the drive.

The lights were on in the cabin and judging from the chimney, the parents were here and they'd made a fire.

My toes wiggled happily in my Uggs as I thought of stretching out beside the fire.

“The parents are here!” Raina screeched excitedly bouncing in the middle seat.

Beckett parked and Raina was practically pushing Kaiden from the truck, clearly eager to see her mom and dad. Again, I felt my heart squeeze in want, and when my eyes moved to Beckett, I saw he was watching me.

Then he leaned in, whispering low in my ear. “And that look on your face is why you’d make a good mom one day.”

My heart. It didn’t flutter; it melted.

Then Beckett was opening his door and climbing down from the truck.

Bringing all the skis inside so they didn’t rust, the front entrance was a disaster as we piled into the cabin.

I instantly caught the scent of something warm and nicely spiced, and my belly rumbled.

Thank goodness parents were here—that meant no cooking for me tonight because someone had taken it upon themselves to make what smelled like chili. Freaking yum.

“Mom!” Raina shrieked, bolting for her mother’s open arms. Isabelle Andrews was a stunning woman who looked like a gracefully aged version of her vibrant daughter.

And smiling the way she was right now, holding her baby girl in her arms the day before she’d be an engaged woman, I knew she loved her more than life.

“How was skiing?” Isabelle asked. “And how have you been?”

“Good and great!” Raina answered, beaming a grin up at her father.

Daniel Andrews was what I’d call a solid man.

He had morals that were his, and he’d pressed them on his daughter, but he wasn’t the type to hold a grudge when she made her own decisions for her life.

Decisions like moving in with her boyfriend before marriage.

He took her in his arms, pressing his lips to the top of her head.

“There’s my girl.” His eyes found Kaiden. “Kai,”

“Daniel.” Kaiden grinned, “Good to see you.”

“It is.”

Kaiden had already been squeezed half to death by his mother, Gracie.

She was sweeter than sweet and Madison absolutely adored her.

It was obvious by the way she closed her eyes and trembled just slightly when Gracie closed her arms around her for what Madison called a heart hug.

I’d heard of these heart hugs, and it was another reason I adored Kaiden’s parents, even though I didn’t really know them.

“I made chili,” Keith, Kaiden’s father, announced proudly, his eyes trained on me. “Heard you were the designated cook,” he winked. “Figured I’d give you a break

today.”

I felt the urge to smile, but it still felt a little weird, so I just nodded, “Thank you.”

His grin never faltered. “Dinner will be ready in about an hour.”

“I’m going to grab a quick shower.” Raina said, thumbing over her shoulder as she walked backward to her room. “I’m feeling icky and sweaty.”

At the chance to escape and gather my bearings, I thumbed the stairs over my shoulder. “The same for me,” and then I was fleeing.

I was sitting on the bed in my housecoat after my shower when a tap on the door sounded. “Come in,” I called, knowing it was Beckett and my heart kicking up at notch at the thought.

When I saw him, my heart didn’t just race.

It melted. It melted and it hummed with pleasure at seeing his warm whiskey eyes land on me.

His lips quirked up at the corner in a lopsided grin as he closed the door behind him quietly.

It was when he was stepping into the room, coming closer to me, that the racing set forth full-force.

“You okay?”

“Why wouldn’t I be okay?” God, I even sounded breathless. Pathetic. I’m entirely pathetic.

“You looked a little shocked to see the parents here.”

“No.” I said. “I knew they were coming.”

“I know, but seeing someone have something you want can sometimes be a little much to handle.”

My belly dropped—after it tightened into a mess of knots.

I wanted to tell him I didn’t know what he was talking about, but I did.

It was always hard to see someone who was lucky enough to have two, or even one loving parent in their lives.

It was hard, because I knew I would never have that.

I’d lost what I had—and then I’d obliterated any chance that I might have had to find that when I’d refused to talk.

Later, I was just too old for someone to want to take a chance on.

Now—now there was no chance. The only family I’d ever have for myself was the family I’d eventually make. I knew my friends were, in a way my family, but that’s not the same thing as a real honest family. The one that would love you no matter what.

Strong jean clad thighs stopped before me, but I didn’t bother lifting my eyes to his. I didn’t want him to see all the sadness that lived inside of me, shining bright and on display in a way that made me feel deeply vulnerable.

So much had happened in the last week, and even the last few months.

My life had changed. The whole view I had on the way I lived my life had changed.

I'd realized that maybe I didn't have to hide my happy from the world, to stay safe.

Maybe I could have it all—all the beauty the other girls who weren't so wounded, their wings clipped young, had. Maybe I could have Beckett too . . .

His thumb slipped beneath my chin and I felt my face tipping up, my eyes meeting his. Mine were heavy and rimmed in wet that, when he saw it, made his go dark. His lips parted and he pulled my body from the bed, swiftly maneuvering me into his lap.

This position wasn't one I was in any way accustomed to.

I felt small, like a doll. I felt out of control, but in no way did my sudden lack of control make me the victim or the preyed upon.

I didn't feel weak and I didn't feel helpless.

I felt, and loved that I felt, as though I were something to cherish.

I felt as though I were his to cherish—not to own—but to care for.

So I didn't think as I let instinct take over, and my arms moved around his waist, holding tightly to his strength.

I didn't think about it when I let my face drop into his warm throat, and I didn't think when I inhaled the pure scent of Beckett.

I didn't think when I closed my eyes and breathed easy against a man I'd come to trust implicitly.

And when his hand began to slide, open palmed and warm along the length of my spine, I didn't think about that either.

"Tell me you're okay, Amara?" His voice was low and querying. I was thinking there was a bit of hesitation in his words too, but I couldn't have been certain.

"I am." My voice was soft and filled with emotion I was having difficulty comprehending fully.

"You know you have me, right?"

"What?" Now I was really confused.

"Me?" He kept tracing his warm palm along the length of my spine.

"You have me. I'll be here for you when you need me for anything.

I was there for you before you let me in at all.

"I felt his lips twitch against my hairline as his hand moved to cup the back of my neck.

"I was there for you the moment I first saw you this past summer. You had me hooked, Amara, and I fell for you more and more with every lash of your tongue as we drove to Spruce Grove for Raina's birthday. "

The man was going to strip me down until I was filleted raw. "Beckett,"

"You'll have me for as long as you want me."

"You've got a really weird penchant for pain, you know that?"

He laughed, and then he was serious. “When it comes to you, I’ve got a penchant for anything.”

Goodness, this man was sweet in a way I wasn’t all that certain I deserved. I was a girl on guard, but I did try to be open for him. I tried to be good and kind. I tried to be helpful. I just—tried.

So when I wiggled in his lap to lift my face to his, my lips to his, it took serious guts. Guts I didn’t know I had.

But then I heard the small groan of appreciation in the back of his throat a moment before his lips started to move against mine, his hand on my neck sifting into my hair, my body turning to flames. In that moment I realized having guts was totally worth it.

It was with the ringing of his groan in my mind that I decided to screw fear. Screw holding back and screw delay. I felt things for this man that felt like ages in the making.

So when I felt the ache in my belly to be closer to him, I didn’t fight it.

I didn’t even hesitate. I twisted in his arms until I had one leg on either side of his thick body, my arms looped around his neck.

And I was still kissing him. He had one hand tossed around my waist, saving me from falling to the floor in the event I lost balance, and the other in my hair.

His mouth on mine had gone from soft and uncertain to hungry and fierce.

The ember he’d ignited in my belly burst into hot, high flames.

Suddenly, the fact that I was in my satin housecoat and only my housecoat had my

body burning even hotter.

I was twenty-two years old and I'd never let myself get this hot for a man.

I was twenty-two years old and I was hungry, starving, ravaged for this intense affection.

"Beckett," I moaned his name against his lips, and his arm tightened around me, pulling my body into his.

And that's when I felt it—his erection. It was hard and so very there between us, pressing into my thigh.

A hot ache swept through me from the top of my head to the tip of my toes at the feel of his desire raging wild for me.

But then he pulled his mouth from mine, his warm eyes hooded and gentle. My cheeks flamed.

"Hey," he smiled slowly. "Don't hide now. That was—it was beautiful."

"Beck . . ."

"I didn't stop because I wanted to stop. I stopped because I want to take this slow with you. I want you to trust that I won't let it go farther or faster than you're ready to let it go."

"I," I didn't know what to say.

"We only just started," kissing my jaw, he murmured. "I have so many things I want to do to you before we get to that. So many things I want to give you."

“Oh,” the sound was shaky. “Okay.”

“We’ll start tonight.” He declared and the butterflies in my belly were suddenly set free.

“We will?”

“Yeah baby,”

“I don’t—I don’t know.”

He was still grinning. I knew this, because I could feel it against my throat. “I do.”

Well, since I was tossing care to the wind, I decided to give him my trust. All of my trust, as I whispered, “Okay.”

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:59 am

Chili had tasted great, but it was nothing compared to the taste of Amara.

Her eyes were a warm blue; all the ice that had lived for years inside had melted.

I'd been giving it all I had to melt the little bit that had remained after our kiss earlier today—and I'd succeeded.

Amara was in my t-shirt in the bed we were sharing, and I was hovering above her, kissing her, grinding into her, and tasting her.

I felt like a teenager again, in the thralls of exploring a girl.

My hands didn't fumble and my kisses weren't hesitant, but the layers of clothing that remained between our bodies had me reminiscing.

So I couldn't say if it was her purity or the gentle innocence in our exploration, but there was something undeniably sweet about our make-out session.

I had enough experience to know how to touch her to make her moan, but I didn't want to pull out all the stops tonight.

I didn't want to flood her first time with me, with everything all at once.

Amara hadn't admitted to being a virgin, and sometimes when she said things, I found myself questioning my suspicion, but it was when she was beneath me, or in my arms that I found that suspicion obliterated.

I wanted to give her everything, and everything included a build-up to the act.

Everything included the hot and heavy that every girl deserved to experience before the act of sex ensued.

I was all for wild, unplanned sex. I'd had my fair share of one-nighters, but with Amara, I felt it was important to give her this. So hot and heavy was what I was giving.

It was also what she was loving.

Her pink lips were swollen and red, and her blue eyes were warm and hazy.

Her little body writhed beneath me, and I could feel my length, hard and hot, pulsing against her core.

My body was between her legs and I'd moved from kissing her mouth, to her jaw, to her throat—and now I was giving attention to that sensitive place behind her ear.

I couldn't believe that this was where we were when before she'd been mortified to find she'd agreed to spend a week sharing my bed. Now she was sharing her body and trust with me.

"Beckett," my name sounded deep in her throat, and I thought that was the most beautiful sound in the world. No wonder I'd fallen for the girl so fast and hard. I'd known, subconsciously, that there was something amazing living beneath all her ice. I must have.

"Beautiful." I murmured, kissing up the length of her throat. "So beautiful."

I ached to touch her. I wanted to slide my hand beneath the t-shirt to cup her breast.

Hell, I wanted to pull the t-shirt over her head and take her into my mouth. I wanted to hear her moan as I dipped my fingers into her panties . . .

Not tonight, man. Not. Tonight.

“I need, Beck . . .” she moaned. “I need.”

Oh, I knew she needed. But I wanted her to need. I wanted her to ache and desire and know. I wanted her to know that when she took all that she needed from me—it was because she not only needed, but also wanted, and craved, and ached. I wanted her to know.

So I didn’t ask her to elaborate. I didn’t ask her to tell me what she needed so that I could give it to her, no questions or hesitations. I didn’t say a thing. I just put my lips on hers and kissed her harder.

That was when she lifted her hips, rocking herself against me. If I thought there was a moment I might be in risk of losing my mind, this right here, was it.

I wanted her like I’d wanted no other in my life. The need was an ache so desperate it was nearly painful.

Still, I didn’t lose control. And I reveled in all that we had together in this moment. The beauty. The rawness. Everything.

My hand found her hip and I stilled her movement, smiling against her soft lips. Her breaths were panted. Her chest rose and fell against mine. Her beauty was messy and perfect in this moment.

“Wow,” she said, and then perfection really did happen.

Because her eyes softened on mine, and her lips started to curl.

She smiled. She wasn't laughing or giggling.

She was just smiling up at me, like I was the knight she'd always been waiting for.

And it might be corny as fuck, but I vowed right then and there that I would always be that to her.

Until the end of my days, I'd work to be this woman's knight.

I'd be her protector and her friend. I'd be her lover and her confidant.

I'd be everything that I could be to her, because this girl was it for me.

I knew it in my bones. My soul. My heart.

She was my one. She was my laughter and my dream come true.

She made life worth it all—good times and bad included.

“Yeah baby,” I whispered. “Wow.”

I couldn't take my eyes off the little woman who was laughing with the others at the kitchen table.

My woman. They each had glasses of wine, and they were fawning, no joke, fawning over Raina's engagement ring.

It was a nice ring. Kai definitely chose well.

But it was the look on Amara's face—the wet joy in her eyes as she watched the moment between Kai and Raina, a moment I'd missed because I hadn't been able to take my eyes from Amara, which I couldn't get out of my head.

I'd always known that one day I'd want to put a ring on a woman's finger, get married, buy a house, and have babies. I just hadn't expected the feeling to hit me so hard and so quickly.

Watching Amara watch the happy couple had me itching to make us the next happy couple.

Still, we'd only officially been together for a couple days and moving that fast would have her running for the hills just to escape me.

It didn't seem to matter, though. I still wanted what I wanted.

I could hide it from her, but I couldn't deny the truth of it to myself.

In the last few months I'd been living with Amara, getting to know the extraordinary ins and outs of her beautiful mind and lashing tongue, I'd fallen in love with her.

Raina said something under her breath and Amara's eyes slid to me.

Her cheeks flushed and she shook her head at Raina, looking down into the red of her wine.

But I didn't miss what she clearly tried to hide.

The slow soft smile that formed on her lips took my breath away, and if my heart hadn't already been lost to her, that smile would have stolen it.

Kaiden clapped a hand on my back. “Looks like I’m not the only one who deserves a congratulations.”

I raised a brow, “What?”

“You got through to her.” He lifted his chin in the direction of the table where Amara sat.

“Pretty sure I just saw her smile. I was watching Raina, and when her eyes got so wide I thought the moon fell into her lap, I looked to where she was looking. Mar might have been trying to hide it, but we all saw it.”

“I think I’m getting through to her.” That wasn’t necessarily true. I didn’t think—I knew I was getting through.

“Yeah, I think so too.” Kaiden said, calling my bluff with his matter of fact reply. “Glad for you guys. You deserve it.”

“So do you, man.”

He nodded, his eyes finding his new fiancée. “I can’t wait to marry her. I already know she wants a summer wedding, but I’d marry her tomorrow if I could.”

“Tomorrow’s Christmas,” I said, laughing.

“I just want her to be mine.”

“She’s already yours.” I announced, but as soon as I said the words, I knew what Kai was talking about. He wanted her to be his in the way that she shared his last name. Shared a concrete future together. Shared dreams and hopes and everything. I got it.

“Think Mar’s yours now, Beck.” He replied after a beat. “You sure you’re up to it?”

I didn’t even have to think. “Yeah, I’m sure.”

Later in the room when everyone had said their goodnights, an early evening after the celebrations of Kaiden’s and Raina’s engagement, I was waiting on the loveseat for Amara to return from the bathroom where she was readying herself for bed.

I had the gift I’d bought for her on the cushion next to me.

My hands were twisting as I tried to calm the nerves inside.

I’d built her a small fire, knowing she loved falling asleep to the warmth. I didn’t mind staying awake to watch the embers burn low. I didn’t mind, because I liked giving her something that made her eyes happy. And I loved giving her something that made her lips curl.

The door opened and I heard the light flick off. A creak of the floor alerted me to her nearness and I twisted to glance back at her. She was in my t-shirt again, looking uncertain as she stopped by the couch.

“You’re not in bed?”

“Come sit?”

“Um,” she shifted, her fingers tugging on the hem of the shirt.

I pulled the blanket from the back of the couch, “You can cover your legs with this.” She didn’t have to tell me that was the problem. In my time with Amara, I’d come to know her well. Reading the woman wasn’t hard. After melting her wall of ice, she was like an open book.

“You’re not tired?” She asked, rounding the couch to drop to the cushion. It was when she was snuggled into the blanket, her legs tucked up on the couch, that she noticed the purple wrapped box with the purple satin ribbon. Her breath caught, an audible thing between us. “What’s this?”

“For you.” The words sounded on a breathless whisper. The woman did these things to me—stealing my air.

“For me?” Her eyes moved from the gift up to my face. They were filled with disbelieving question that had me vowing to be the man who, for the rest of her years, gave her gifts that were just for her. Just because.

“For you, Amara.”

“Oh, Beckett . . .” she shook her head. “I—um I . . .”

“Open it,” I lifted the box, placing it into her lap.

I didn’t take my eyes off her face as her hands moved to the bow.

Delicate fingers tugged on the satin, unraveling the ornate ribbon and dropping it to the blanket.

Then she tore at the wrap around the box to uncover another purple box.

This one had white swirly designs that emanated a delicate lace.

Even the box had reminded me of Amara—but it was the gift inside that made me stop and walk into the shop.

My breath stilled in my lungs as I watched her slender fingers pull the lid from the

box to reveal a shimmering snow globe. It was when she sucked in a deep breath, lifted watery eyes to mine, and whispered, “Beckett,” that I knew I’d fallen in love with Amara Bloom.

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The snow globe was beautiful. Shining glass with a solid russet base and gold engraved letters that had my heart stopping in my chest, only to start again on a race that was so fast and so intense, it was nearly painful, stared up at me.

Inside, white imitation snow swam through the liquid as I lifted the globe from the box.

The snow swirled down around a ramshackle cabin that was surrounded by trees and mountains, but what I couldn't stop seeing were the words that had been engraved. I promise you, one day.

My mind flashed back to when I'd told him about my dream of being in the mountains, secluded, and safe. And then my heart clenched on a beat in my chest.

"Beckett,"

"It says everything I wanted to say to you before you let me in, Amara. Before you let me see your smile, kiss you, hold you—this says everything I wanted to tell you, but didn't feel like I could."

"I don't understand."

"I want to be the man who gives you safe. You said you'd feel safe surrounded by mountains in a little cabin in the woods." His eyes were so soft and so true; it took away my breath and seized my heart. "I want to be the man to give all that to you—and I promise, if you let me, I will. One day."

How had I gone from the hurt woman who was so wounded and lost only months ago, to this woman who sat before a warm fire with a beautiful man she trusted, in such a short time? How could I be so lucky? And when the floor fell out from beneath me, how was I ever going to survive?

Beckett continued when I said nothing in reply, “The cabin looks broken, but it’s not.

It represents you—and everything you think you are.

You see yourself as broken, Amara, but you’re not.

You’re perfect. You’ve been wounded and it shows, but even if you take yourself back down to the studs, you can always be rebuilt. You’ll always be strong.”

Right now, I wasn’t feeling very strong. Right now, my insides were quaking and my heart was—my heart was falling. Yes, you heard it. My heart was falling head over heels for Beckett Davis, and there was no stopping it. Honestly, I wasn’t sure if I even wanted to stop it.

Falling, when done right, and with the right person, was a beautiful thing.

So it was looking down into my globe of dreams and wishes for one day, that I whispered, “I really hope you always feel that way about me, Beckett.”

His warm hand slid beneath my thick hair to cup the back of my neck.

When he tugged, forcing my eyes to meet his, I’d thought he was going to kiss me.

He didn’t. Instead, he looked deep into my eyes and vowed.

“I’ll always feel for you, Amara. But it won’t be the same way I feel now.

” My heart squeezed. “Every day, I feel more for you. So I know that as the days pass, my feelings for you will only keep growing. They’ll keep getting stronger. ”

I didn’t know if it was because of the snow globe, or his declaration, but he’d just obliterated any and all sense of reservation I’d been clutching, white knuckled, onto.

It was as I threw caution to the wind, letting my heart soar for the first time since I’d caged it tight all those years ago, that I finally felt his lips on mine.

Christmas morning was filled with merry celebration, love, and a dash of crazy.

We’d decided to do a Christmas exchange rather than giving gifts to everyone.

So it was around a crackling fire, laughter, and coffee that we opened our presents.

Maddy had drawn my name, and she bought me the most unattractive and yet adorably cozy lavender onsie.

It had a big fluffy hood and fluffy booties at the feet. I loved it.

So it was on that, I lifted it high and declared, “It’s perfect.”

That was when Beckett demanded. “What is that thing supposed to be?”

“You’ll love it when it’s on.” Raina said, winking.

“Already know I like it when it’s off.” Beckett countered and Isabelle Andrews, Raina’s mother, gasped.

“Beckett!”

“What?” Beckett asked, feigning innocence. “It’s true. I don’t know what Maddy was thinking buying that thing.”

“I was thinking it looked like something Amara would love. I also bought one for myself. It’s pink.”

“Where’s mine?” Raina asked, suddenly affronted.

“It’s a Christmas exchange,” Kaiden explained. “You don’t get one.”

“But my two besties have matching jammies.” She pouted, but her lips twitched just enough to let us all know she wasn’t serious.

“Yours is in my suitcase.” Maddy said, shrugging. “I couldn’t resist. By the way, it’s yellow.”

Raina clapped. “Squee!”

“You had to indulge her, didn’t you?” Kaiden asked.

“Now you feel my pain.” Beckett mumbled. “Try getting her out of that once she’s bundled in.”

This time, when Isabelle gasped, the room erupted in laughter.

Incidentally, I drew Raina’s name. Knowing Raina, I bought her a massive bag of colorful marshmallows, wine, and white chocolate.

Kaiden gave me a look and Raina giggled hysterically, because apparently he’d bought and given to her the same thing before they’d left home to join us at the cabin for Christmas.

But honestly, it was no secret the girl loved her marshmallows and white chocolate.

The wine was just insurance for the next time Raina was feeling a little crazy, we would dance it up in Maddy's apartment instead of at a club.

Raina shopped for Beckett. He warily unwrapped a soft charcoal gray housecoat I knew, instinctively, that I would be stealing.

The thought made me warm inside. The housecoat came with a pair of slippers, that if my feet weren't unbearably tiny and his ungodly huge, I would have considered stealing as well.

I knew Beckett drew Maddy's name, because he'd whined for days until I'd joined him at the mall where he bought the books I selected, knowing she'd love them. She was ecstatic as any true book lover would be as she declared, "It's going to be an early night for me."

The only person left was Kaiden, which Raina decided she and Maddy would shop for together. I was a little stunned to watch him unwrap a shiny blue fishing rod and tackle box filled with fishing paraphernalia.

Kaiden raised a brow, "Fishing?"

Clearly, Kaiden didn't fish. "I thought we needed something more than," Raina's cheeks turned pink as she avoided her parents' eyes. "More than skinny dipping to get us to the lake in the summer."

Isabelle muffled a chuckle and Daniel shifted, but they both knew they'd raised a wild child, who even though she was wild, had a good head on her shoulders.

"Maddy?" Kaiden asked, "You agree?"

“While I know Raina can get pretty much anyone to agree that skinny dipping can fix pretty much anything, I personally believe that fishing is good for the soul.”

“Well, in that case,” Kaiden shrugged on a grin. “Thanks.”

The next were the parents. Kaiden and Raina had given both their moms family birthstone rings that blended their family colors together.

Seeing that had my heart feeling silly in my chest, because I ached for it in a way that sucked, because I’d never have it.

Never. Still, I was happy my friend did.

She deserved to have all the beauty this world could offer.

The men, as Raina had been involved in the shopping of their gifts, received fishing rods.

Again, the room erupted in laughter and Keith, when his laughter had died, looked to Beckett and announced. “We’ll need to get you a rod so you can join, son.”

Maddy’s breath caught and Beckett stiffened, but only slightly. “I’d like that, Keith.”

Keith smiled, surely thinking of the son he’d lost as well as the beauty he was gaining in his continued life, “Me too.”

After, we all opened our gifts from the parents. Everyone got pajamas with slippers and the girls all got scarves and baileys while the boys were given flashlights and whiskey.

I had to admit, while reflecting later that night after board games and Gracie’s famous

Christmas popcorn with red and green M I didn't like it for him. "I like Christmas."

Whiskey eyes were soft as he looked over his shoulder. "I can tell."

"I didn't always like it." I admitted, feeling as though he should know this. "But I do now." And then I added, "I'm sorry I didn't get you anything. I wasn't prepared . . ."

"Don't be sorry." He grinned. "You've given me more than you know."

"I have?"

"I've seen you smile."

"That's not me giving you anything. That's me giving me something." Or more accurately, it was me taking happiness from him. So again, something more he'd given to me.

"That's not true. I've wanted to make you smile since I met you." He grinned and it made me feel all kinds of melty. "Finally, I did it."

"Taking credit, are you?"

"Definitely," his hand snagged me by the waist, tugging me in close as the new fire crackled low behind him. "I'm taking all the credit. I also intend to continue taking the credit."

"For how long?" I whispered, unable to stop the revealing words in their tracks.

For a moment, I felt naked. Entirely stripped bare and vulnerable as he looked down into my face. And then he revealed himself in a way I didn't know I wanted with the desperation I wanted it.

“Forever,” he vowed. His voice was deep and gravelly. “If you’ll let me.”

I never would have guessed that when I met this man in July the past summer, that I would be standing in his arms on Christmas Day, in love.

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Three nights passed since I realized I was in love with a man I never would have thought I was capable of falling so deeply for. In the three days since, I only fell deeper. This was because Beckett was undoubtedly the most gallant man I'd ever encountered.

I wasn't quite certain he still wasn't trying to prove he would never cap out at being a gentleman.

However, I had to admit I was blossoming under his carefully displayed affections.

I also had to admit that it felt really good, and in no way, did I want this to end.

Boxing Day had been topped with snow filled fun on the mountain, jovial quips, and heart fluttering teasing.

The morning after had me finding myself alone with Beckett in a huge cabin that, although silent after everyone had left, felt undeniably comfortable.

I was at peace with both my surroundings and myself for the first time in such a long time, I didn't know if I could recall the last time I'd felt so wonderful. So free. So safe.

Beckett had made a delicious breakfast that we shared together over a pot of coffee and conversation about nothing. We laughed, we teased, and we flirted shamelessly.

It was on the third morning after I'd realized the true depth of my feelings for Beckett Davis, that I took a moment to appreciate my new feelings of safety and

contentedness.

The hour was early and the sky was still black with remnants of the night.

It was so early, in fact, that the moon was still bright, although not nearly as high in the sky.

This was why the moon, in its slow bow to the sun, was shining brilliantly in the center of one of the massive windows.

It was because of the moon that I'd been able to see every beautiful line of Beckett's peaceful face as he slept.

He really was a beautiful man. There was a kind power surrounding him that in the beginning, I'd feared.

He was a large man. His arms were twice, if not triple the size of mine.

He was tall, so tall he dwarfed me. And he had the legs of a rugby player, strong, and again, powerful.

I'd once feared all the power that Beckett housed, but never once had he used his power against me.

He'd never hurt me and I trusted that he never would.

At least not intentionally. I thought it was possibly because of this that I'd begun to value his power rather than fear it.

All the power that was Beckett now made me feel little, delicate, and protected.

He held me in his big arms when he slept, cocooning me in his massive strength—and I loved it. Every minute.

I'd once thought I'd succeeded in hardening my heart against men. All men. Bad men and good men the like. I'd been wrong, because like Raina, and Maddy, and Joss, Beckett had somehow slipped through the gaps in my seams.

He'd found his way inside and now I didn't ever want to let him loose.

Every night, and even yesterday on the couch after we'd found ourselves alone, and Beckett distracted me from our newly resumed Game of Thrones marathon, I'd experienced the pleasure of his touch.

It was something else. Gentle and yet sweetly raw, I'd found myself aching for him in ways I never expected I'd ever ache.

It was remembering the fierce passion in his kisses, the experienced wonder in his every touch, and the way he hesitated in taking too much from me, even though I had been willing on more than one occasion to give, that had me squeezing my thighs together tightly to relieve the discomfort my remembered pleasures caused.

I could no longer deny that I wanted to experience all that it meant to be with Beckett.

I wanted to know what surrendering myself physically would feel like.

I wanted to watch the emotion I knew would pour from his expressive eyes as he took all I had to give.

I was twenty-two years old and I was finally in a state of mind where I felt I was not only physically ready, but also mentally, and emotionally ready for sex.

I'd thought about it and even though it was soon, and we were moving fast—although I could tell Beckett was trying to keep things progressing at a safe, slow pace—I was ready. I was finally, completely, ready.

That was then. This was now.

Now it was late and the moon was again shining into the large windows.

I wore my housecoat tied tightly around my waist as I padded, barefoot, from the bathroom door, across the room to the couch.

There, I lowered myself to the cushion and watched as the muscles in Beckett's bare back rippled with his movements as he fed the small flames another log.

My hair was still damp from my shower, even though I'd spent time in the bathroom blow-drying it.

My hair was incredibly thick and had always been hellish to dry, but I couldn't, and wouldn't ever cut it.

My hair was my shield. When I didn't feel as though my eyes shot the daggers I intended to use to keep me safe, I let my hair fall over my face, offering a last-ditch sheet of protection.

I loved my hair, and although I was growing much more comfortable with Beckett being in my life, I didn't think I'd ever come to the point where cutting my hair became emotionally feasible. Not ever.

My thoughts disintegrated as Beckett rose to his full, massive height. He turned to me and I watched, a little breathless, as his lips lifted in that quirky grin he sometimes gave me when we were alone. It was the grin that made me feel gooey and, in an odd

way like I was—his.

“Gonna grab a shower,” he lifted his chin to the bathroom. “You done in there?”

“Yes,” Oh, for the love of all womanly integrity—why was the man so good at stealing my breath?

“Fire should keep you warm.” He started for the bathroom, but to my surprise, he stopped by the couch.

Dipping low, his big hand caught me at the side of my neck and his thumb slid beneath my chin, and with gentle pressure he lifted my face to his.

He pressed his lips to mine. Warmth and want filled me within seconds.

I was entirely helpless against his physical onslaught as he parted his lips, tasting me.

Distantly, I heard a noise I wasn’t altogether familiar with. That was why it was seconds later, when I realized with heavy humiliation, that the sound was coming from me.

I was moaning.

Still, I wasn’t the one to break the kiss. Beckett was. And when his eyes swept over my face, lingering on my mouth, I flushed with heat.

“Beautiful.” He whispered. And then he released me to walk to the bathroom, closing the door behind him.

And I knew, with the intensity brewing in my belly, that tonight was definitely the night.

That was why when I heard the shower turn on, I raced around the room to gather all I needed to gather for the night I had planned.

My heart was going to rip out of my chest, I was certain of it. I was acutely aware of everything. Every sound, scent, and wild thrum of my heart. I was aware of it all.

I was also aware of the fact that when Beckett stepped from the bathroom wearing nothing more than his checkered draw-string pants, I wasn't breathing.

I could see him from where I was laying on my make-shift bed before the fire.

While he was in the shower, I'd run in pursuit for blankets to bring back to the bedroom we shared.

Now, the bed of duvets I was currently sprawled on was intensely comfortable and plush.

I could easily spend the entire night right here, and not be achy in the morning.

Well, at least not achy from sleeping on a floor.

I entirely intended to be achy come first light.

I intended for this night to be the night that I gave all of me to Beckett.

It was either from intense nervousness, or the confused look on Beckett's face, that made me giggle when he stepped from the bathroom only to pause in confusion when he saw the naked bed. I'd also pulled our blankets onto the floor, and was currently lying beneath them, beside the fire.

I realized that sex by a fire on the floor was probably on par with the cliché of rose

petals and candles, but I didn't care. I wanted cliché and I wanted romance I'd remember forever. So I was taking it.

Beckett's eyes swung to mine at the sound of my giggle. And then I watched as he stiffened. "What are you doing down there?"

"Getting ready for bed." I said, my voice sounding husky and thick with emotion, desire, and maybe even a dash of insecurity.

"You want to sleep on the floor?" His long legs were covering the distance between us, and his lips were curling up at the corners.

"Yes."

"All right," There was a deep gravelly sound to his acquiescence when he lowered his body, his big arms taking the brunt of his weight as he positioned himself above me, kissing the tip of my nose. "Whatever you want, beautiful."

"Whatever I want?" God, the words were barely even audible.

"Whatever you want," his eyes had darkened a shade or two. They were an intense chocolate now, warm and filled with want.

My belly fluttered and I felt that familiar ache of desire pulsing between my legs. I knew he wanted me. I knew he'd wanted me countless times since we'd been here at the cabin, but not once had he made an attempt to take things all the way. This both frustrated me and made me feel cared for.

Lifting my arms, I looped them around his broad shoulders, pressing my lips to his.

My heart hammered fiercely in my chest as he kissed me, dropping some of his

weight over my body, and I wasn't certain if he'd consciously left the thick blanket between our bodies.

I wanted to tell him to come beneath the blankets with me, but I couldn't seem to find the courage, so I just kissed him.

I kissed him long and hard, and all the while, the need I felt inside for him continued to grow.

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I was ready to burst at the seams when Beckett lifted his head to gaze down at me with eyes so dark and so wonderfully warm.

“Wow,” breathily, he shook his head and repeated. “Wow.”

“I know.” I whispered, not knowing what else to say.

“I should,” he shifted, pushing up onto the palms of his hands. “I should turn out the lights.”

Goodness, I hadn’t even noticed they were on. The moment was a face-palming moment I should have anticipated, and acted accordingly. That meant I should have already turned off the lights to avoid this about to be very awkward situation. Live and learn, right?

“Sure.”

Beckett hoisted his big body up, and embarrassed, I rolled onto my side to look into the small flames dancing in the hearth.

Beneath the thick blanket, I was wearing an adorable lavender satin nighty that was bordered in thin white lace.

It was sexy and something I never would have worn if Raina hadn’t brought it out, stating, “I figured you’d need something a little friskier than fleece if you were to seduce that man. ”

I hadn't been planning to seduce anyone. I most definitely hadn't been planning to wear a little purple nighty in the hopes that maybe I might influence Beckett to take our bedroom play a little further—as in all the way.

Now, the satin felt like acid on my flesh as I waited with a wildly racing pulse for the man to return. What had I been thinking? If I'd screamed my want for him from the tallest building on earth, I couldn't have made it more obvious.

I was suddenly regretting my attempt at brazenness when I felt the blanket lift.

And then I felt Beckett's body slide close to mine.

The only light igniting the large room was from the glow of the low flames, so when Beckett reached out to place a hand on my waist, his breath hitched at the feel of the satin covering my skin.

That was when I felt the blanket rise and I slammed my eyes closed in horror.

This was so not how I'd wanted things to play out. It wasn't even remotely like I'd imagined when I'd fantasized this wonderful evening. This was a freaking mess with a capital M.

His hand returned to my waist to pull me onto my back. I still didn't open my eyes. I couldn't. If I did, I was certain he'd see every ounce of horror I harbored inside. God, I didn't want him to see.

“Amara,” his voice was husky and that surprised me. “Open your eyes, beautiful.”

I shook my head—like a silly little loser. God, I was going to kill Raina for convincing me that I needed satin and lace.

“I feel silly.” I whispered, refusing to open my eyes.

“You look amazing.” He replied. “Beautiful. Breathtaking. Not silly.”

I opened my eyes. “Beckett,” my breath caught at the heat in his. “I . . .”

“You?” He pressed, his hand moving slowly over my belly, petting the satin in a way that had me feeling achy with need.

“I just wanted to,” yep, I was going to kill my friend. “I wanted to be beautiful for you.”

“You’ve always been beautiful, Amara.”

“And I wanted you to want me.”

He laughed. The sound was deep, and low, and husky. It made me shiver. “I don’t think there’s been one day since I met you that I haven’t wanted you.”

I blushed. “I don’t mean like that,” he cocked his head and I continued to explain. “I mean, want me, want me. Like physically.”

“Amara,”

Oh, when he said my name like that.

“Yes?”

“I don’t think there’s been a day since I first met you where I haven’t wanted you, in every way.”

Oh wow. Well, I wasn't expecting that. Nor did I know quite how to reply. "Beckett,"

He dipped his head to kiss me. This time his lips on mine were slow and soft.

I opened beneath him and tasted the taste that was uniquely Beckett when he slid his tongue inside my mouth, gently claiming me.

His hand was still on my belly, but his body wasn't where I needed it to be.

He was on his side in the bed of blankets, beside me.

I wanted him on top of me. I wanted to feel him everywhere.

I wanted him to conquer me in every way.

I ached for it so acutely, so intensely, I couldn't fathom spending another minute without it.

"Please," the word was a soft moan against his mouth. I felt his lips quirk in response and my belly dipped.

"Please?" He rumbled, the sound moving—and I mean moving through me.

"I want you." I said, finally admitting the words aloud.

Beckett stiffened as he lifted his head to look down into my face. His hand was still on my belly, now motionless. His body was frozen beside mine.

"We don't have to do that, Amara. Not yet. I don't want,"

I cut him off. "I know you're trying to take it slow for me, but I'm ready. I want it to

be with you. I want this. Tonight.”

I couldn’t believe I had the courage to speak those words to this man. But they were the honest truth. They were raw and real. They were without regret.

This man had taken a woman who was terrified of everything—good and bad.

He’d cared for me and proved to me that life could be beautiful.

Happiness wasn’t something to be guarded under lock and key, but rather, happiness was meant to be shared.

Since Beckett, my happiness had begun to shimmer and shine.

There was no doubt it was still shy and a little hesitant, but the ease with which it showed itself was beginning to grow more and more frequent.

Again, I owed this to Beckett. To his laughter, his teasing, and all the safety he’d given to me these last months.

I owed him happiness, and I wanted to gift the one thing I had that I cherished like nothing else. I wanted to gift him my innocence. I wanted to gift him my unspoken, but not any less valuable, love.

Slowly, Beckett lowered his head, pressing his lips to mine.

His kiss was warm and gentle. My insides were filled with fluttering as his big hand moved over my belly, to my side—up and down.

He explored me, everywhere, over the warm satin that clung to my body.

And when his hand roamed north, to the heavy swell of my breast, my breath caught. He palmed me there, kissing me deeper.

Liquid heat pooled between my legs as need pulsed alive and determined within me.

I craved. I craved for something I couldn't quite explain.

There was a deep hollowness pulsing almost painfully inside of me as I kissed him, my hands roaming over the smooth skin of his back.

Muscles rippled beneath my fingertips as he shifted, moving his body slightly above mine.

A knee slipped between my legs and I let him in, eagerly pleading without words for his nearness.

I could feel his want, hard, and thick, and long, against my thigh as he continued to kiss me.

I wanted him to move. I wanted him between my legs where I knew, instinctively, I would find relief for the new build-up of sweet agony that had settled itself in the pit of my belly.

I just wanted him. This. Us.

“Beckett,” I moaned, pleading. God, if he wanted me to beg, right now, I’d beg. I needed him in a way I’d needed nothing else. Not even water after a long walk in the desert could compare.

“Are you sure, Amara?”

“Yes.”

“You won’t regret me?” His eyes were gentle, but there was a fierceness I couldn’t ignore burning in the depths. “Promise me, when it’s over you won’t shut down? You won’t shut me out?”

Pushing up onto my elbows, I pressed my lips to the corner of his. I kissed his lips, his chin, and his throat. It was at the hollow, when I kissed him one last time, that I whispered, “I promise.”

A growl of broken will sounded as he lifted his body from mine.

For a moment, I was confused when he stood and moved quickly to his suitcase across the room.

Then I was red in the face as I realized just what he’d crossed the room for.

A small silver packet between his fingers twinkled in the light as he strode back to my makeshift bed.

His desire for me was on display, not in the least affected by his walk to his suitcase.

His eyes were dark on me as his hands moved to the waist of his pajamas.

And then I watched as he pushed the material from his hips, for the first time revealing himself to me.

I never thought I’d ever think the male body was beautiful—but Beckett was.

He was all hard coated in satiny softness.

I watched, my mouth going dry as he lowered his body to the blankets. “You can change your mind, Amara.”

Turning into him, I whispered, “I don’t want to change my mind. I want this.”

And oh, did I ever want this. Just seeing all that he was had the ache I’d felt moments earlier intensifying tenfold.

So when his hands moved to the lace hem of my nighty, and he tugged upward whispering, “Sexy as this is, it’s got to go,” I let him.

We explored one another inch by inch until there wasn’t an inch unexplored.

Beckett spent what felt like hours exploring my body until the flames in the hearth were nothing more than simmering coals.

Then he reached for the condom, rolled it on, and covered me with his body.

My heart raced in my chest as my legs spread open for him, wrapping around his waist. He settled himself against my body, his lips against mine as he pushed slowly inside.

It was when he’d rooted himself there that he whispered, “I’m in love with you,” and I knew that no matter how long I’d have lived, I’d never have found a moment as perfect as this to give the gift of me to this man.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:59 am

I felt victorious. Not only had I made love to the woman I'd been aching to possess since the day I'd met her, but only minutes ago, I'd heard her soft whispered words as she lay curled against my chest, her fingertip drawing small circles into the flesh.

She'd told me she loved me. If I was being honest, I hadn't expected to hear those words from her mouth for a good long while.

I'd said them because I meant them. I'd meant them with everything I had inside of me, and although I'd feared I'd freak her out, I couldn't hold them inside.

So to hear her whispered confession hours later was a thing I took a moment to cherish. I took a long moment. And after that moment had been good and spent, I had to admit to myself, and the world, that I was happier than I'd ever been.

"Thank you," my voice was gruff and heavy with emotion as I covered her hand on my chest with one of my own. "For giving me everything you gave me tonight."

"Thank you for giving everything to me."

"What did I give you?"

"Happiness. Laughter." She stopped talking, breathing deep against my chest. "You gave me safety."

"Safety?"

"Yes. Safety."

“I don’t understand.” The thought that I’d made her feel safe had me both wanting to pound my chest in male pride, as well as demand to know what or who had made her feel unsafe to begin with—and then pound them.

“I think I have to tell you something, Beckett. Maybe I should have told you before, but I didn’t, and I think now I have to.”

“Okay?” My chest felt tight with worry and unease, but I didn’t want her to feel uncomfortable or unsafe. So I let my hand roam along the length of her back, my fingers tickling her flesh softly the way I’d figured out these past few days that she liked.

“You know I was in the system.”

“Yes.” I confirmed, hating that she’d known any kind of pain.

“Well, I was with this one family. They weren’t good people and they raised an even worse son.

At first he was exciting and fun and—well, I was stupid.

I thought he was my friend. He wasn’t. Like I said, I thought he was exciting and I went with him when he did a few bad things.

We vandalized and he bullied kids at school.

By this time in my life, I really resented the kids that had good families who loved them.

So, picking on them wasn’t something I was really all that against. It was early-ish into our relationship that he started sneaking into my room.

Again, at first, I didn't mind." A sob caught in her throat and I felt a new kind of protectiveness I wasn't fully prepared to comprehend.

"He was nice to me. At least, he was in the beginning. Then it got weird. He started to do odd things to me, say things that made me feel worthless. He'd convince me I needed to do bad too, and by the time I realized he wasn't doing harmless bad—it was too late. "

My mind was reeling against the uncharacteristic admission. I couldn't see this woman who was so firm with her opinions doing anything out of force. She was always so—strong. She was always so firm when it came to protecting her own.

"Anyway," shame and pain flooded her words.

"I tried to distance myself, but when I couldn't, I tried to tame him.

He'd suggest something horrific . . ." her body was beginning to shake.

"Toward an animal he'd see in someone's yard or something .

. ." a shudder passed from her and into me.

"And I'd convince him to instead take his rage out on a building or a car or something that wasn't alive to feel it.

I knew the vandalism was wrong, but I couldn't be a part of something as vile as physical abuse against anything.

I couldn't, Beckett. I'd once tried to tell his mom—she never listened.

She didn't want to hear it, but her husband was the worst of them all, so she would

have been adept at ignoring it all. ”

“Amara,” her name was a whispered prayer. “You don’t have to go on. You don’t have to relive it.”

“I do. I do because after I give this to you, I won’t ever have to give it away again. It’ll be gone.”

She said the words with a concrete belief I couldn’t have argued even though I desperately wanted to. So I acquiesced, “Okay, baby.”

“He thought we were an item. He’d sneak into my room and he’d kiss me, touch me—make me touch him.

He’d get really mad when I didn’t and he’d say things that hurt.

It was easier to . . .” she shook her head against my chest, inhaling my scent on a deep breath.

“I never gave him me. I was always able to stop things from progressing so far, but now, looking back, I think he was excited about one day taking that away from me—taking away my innocence. I think he had a twisted fantasy about it. And then one night at a party he took things too far. He drugged a girl. I hadn’t known quite what was happening, until it was well into happening.

He’d always been attractive and girls easily fluttered around him, so when he took her into the room, I didn’t think.

I didn’t think about the way she stumbled or the evil intent in his eyes.

I didn’t think about it until I walked in on him.

She was like a doll, barely able to move her limbs, Beck . . .”

“Amara,” Her name was tortured on my lips. I was filled with a rage I’d never before known. It was so intense, so strong, and so without control, that if I knew who this prick was, I don’t think I would have kept a level head.

I didn’t know his name, but he’d made the woman I loved a victim she didn’t deserve to be. She’d lived for years in her head, terrified of everything. She’d lived for years as a victim and all I wanted to do was free her forever from it all.

“I told someone after.” There was more pain in those words than there’d been in everything else she’d told me thus far.

“I told someone because it was the right thing to do—even though I knew it was too late. That girl will live every day knowing something horrible happened to her. That night changed her irrevocably, altering the path of her future. I knew she’d never be the same.

She’d never trust like she once did. She’d never look at herself and see strength, but instead a suffocating helplessness she can’t obliterate.

I know that—but I had to do something. And that was all I could do. ”

“What happened?”

“There was an investigation. That’s how his father got caught doing what he’d been doing.

” Her voice lowered, and although I wondered, I didn’t ask about the pricks dad.

“I was old enough then to move out on my own. At first, I had government help to

pay for my apartment. But I worked. I hated working around people who thought flirting was the thing, and somehow I built a wall around myself. I thought I was protecting myself from men, because I worried they were all like him. And then Joss hired me at the Library and I realized there were safe places out there. But I still didn't look at men and think of safety.

Until you. You showed me that there are good men out there, Beckett.

You showed me happiness and laughter and safety. ”

My arm convulsed around her as emotion, deep and raw, flowed through me.

“I'll do everything I can to make sure you always know happiness. I promise I'll give you laughter for as long as you let me be a part of your life, because when you laugh, I get happy.” My voice pitched low and I murmured in her hair. “And I'll always give you safety. Always. I promise.”

“That's why, Beck,” she said softly and I felt my brows furrow in confusion.

“Don't understand, baby.”

“That's why I love you. This is why I fell.” Her voice was soft and small. “We all have demons. I just met my monster before I was old enough to understand. It scarred me and until recently, until you, I never healed.”

“Definitely the best Christmas I've ever had.” I murmured in reply—and because everything always got better with Amara, I wasn't surprised when my heart lifted and she made perfect even better as she pressed her lips to my chest where my heart was beating fast.

I lost myself in Amara Bloom for the second time in one night, obliterating all the

past pains with the promise of a good and happy future where I was the man who kept this woman safe.

New Year's came and went. So far, it'd been a real good year and I fully believed this was because I'd welcomed it with my lips pressed tightly, lovingly, and a little possessively against Amara's.

We'd spent New Year's with our little family of good friends in the condo I shared with Amara.

The girls had cracked the bottles of wine Raina had gotten for Christmas, and danced up a storm in the living room.

It had been a good night, and the beginning of this New Year had been even better.

It was early February and my relationship with Amara had been going strong.

I'd even convinced her to move her stuff into my room.

This had been a bit of a fight as she liked the color of her walls and had no interest in moving into my plain white room, as she'd put it.

Still, she did because my room had a huge bathroom with an impressive soaker tub.

I'd also had to promise we'd paint a feature wall.

She'd tried for the whole bedroom, but I'd calmly explained that in a relationship, there was compromise.

I might have explained this, but I'd been willing to paint the whole damn condo purple if that meant I made her happy.

My dad, when he eventually saw it, would blow a gasket.

School was just as intense, but with Amara giving me all the sweetness she'd been hiding for years, it wasn't anything I couldn't handle. I felt like I was walking on top of the world.

Damn, I was a man who now had date night. I loved date night.

If I were to have been told the day I met this little woman who breathed spitfire and glared ice, that within half a year I'd be a man who looked forward to date night, I would have laughed in disbelief.

Now, I couldn't imagine my life any other way.

I was happy. I was in love. And I was building a fucking good life with an even better woman who had finally come into her smiles.

That was another thing. Amara was smiling on a regular now. It had been a good month that I'd had her smiles, but they still took my breath away. I had a feeling that I could have her and her smiles for a hundred years, and they would still steal my breath.

Mom had called last week to check in and ask about my Christmas.

Although I normally didn't have a crazy holiday with all the fixings I'd had with Amara and my family of friends, I usually saw my parents at least once.

I hadn't this year and I knew my mom was feeling my absence.

I could hear it in her voice. So when I finally told her about Amara and the reason for my absence, she exclaimed firmly that we were coming for dinner so she could meet

her.

I'd never had a woman I was serious enough with to tell Mom or Dad about, so this was a big thing.

That was why Amara was fretting beside me as I pulled my truck up the large concrete pad of my parents' massive house. Her blue eyes were as big as saucers and her usually pink cheeks were ghostly pale.

Reaching across the cab, I squeezed her thigh gently. "Stop worrying."

"What if they hate me?"

"It doesn't matter what they think because I love you."

"But,"

"They will love you."

She shook her head. "You can't know that."

"I do." I stated firmly, entirely believing my words. "Stop worrying."

She glared at me like I was telling her to swallow a ghost pepper without burning from the inside out, so I barked laughter as I pushed open my door to climb down from the truck. I met her on her side, taking her trembling hand in mine as I walked her to the front door.

Mom was already there, waiting for us. She was smiling elegantly, wearing a comfortable outfit of brown pinstriped pants and a cream sweater.

Her hair was tied back at the nape of her neck in her signature bun.

Mom was a pediatric surgeon and although she hadn't wanted her own children, she loved them.

So when she smiled, she had a smile that was welcoming and easy to trust—a smile perfected for nervous children.

It was with this smile that I felt Amara's tension disintegrate.

"You must be Amara? How lovely to meet you." I watched in muted fascination as my mother pulled the woman I one day intended to make my wife into her arms, and then into her home.

I already knew, as I watched Amara move into the home I'd grown up in, that she would complement my existing family perfectly. Maybe she'd even make it more of a family when one day she gave my mother grandbabies.

Amara's insecurity was gone before I'd even made it through the door.

The two women disappeared into the long hall, and I smiled, because Amara didn't look back over her shoulder with big uncertain eyes.

She didn't plead, silently, for me to save her.

Instead, she fit. And what I'd already known was solidified in concrete as I saw my life unfolding with the very woman who'd undone me the summer before.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:59 am

Amara wasn't much of a morning person this sunny Saturday morning. She wasn't feeling her usual energetic self, because last night had been Friday night date night, and I'd taken my time showing her how spirited I was on date night.

Still, as many times as I'd had her the night before, when I opened the bathroom door to see my navy blue sheet curled around her toned leg, stretching up over the pale pink of her naked body, I felt suddenly animated.

"Don't look at me like that." She said with a sleepy firmness that had my grin stretching.

I didn't respond and she opened her eyes, squinting at the bright light of the bathroom that spilled into the room around me.

"I'm serious, Beckett. I'm exhausted. Dead to the world and you're looking at me like,"

Fucking hell, the woman was adorable. She was propped up on her elbows now, her dark long hair an absolute mess around her tiny face. Her cute nose was scrunched and her full lips were pouting.

"How am I looking at you?"

"Like you want to work me out and over." She flopped back to the bed. "I can't."

"You can."

“Nooo,” she droned, nuzzling into my pillow. Her little arms came up and she hugged it, her body relaxing back into the mattress.

I decided she could most definitely be worked out and over.

I didn’t care that I’d just had a shower as I walked back to the bed, dropping my towel at the foot.

I crawled up the length of her body. “I’ll do all the work.

” I murmured, kissing a sliver of exposed skin over her hip.

“You don’t have to do anything.” I added, kissing another piece of skin.

And another, and another, until I’d made it to her shoulder.

I nipped her gently there and she moaned a throaty sound that had me feeling desire in every fiber of my being. “All you have to do is say yes.”

“No,” she moaned, but I could already hear it—her need for me.

I grinned and I knew she could feel it against her shoulder. I hovered above the sensitive flesh of her throat just behind her ear, blowing gently. She shivered. “Say yes, beautiful.”

“Beckett,” she sighed—and then she rolled onto her back. “Yes.”

I liked this woman sleepy, but I knew I’d love her sleepy and sated.

I set about achieving this new goal as I claimed her mouth.

She was on her back now, but still in a tangle with my sheets.

It was no matter; I'd had her so many times the night before, exhausting her to the point where she hadn't even had the energy to put clothes on.

She might be wrapped up in my sheets, but she was still naked.

I took my time kissing her. Need for her swam through my veins, but I resisted.

I wanted to work her into a mess of need so strong and so intense; she'd be consumed with it.

So I kissed her long, and I kissed her gently.

I touched her with the exploration of a first time even though I'd had her countless times since the cabin.

But I knew it would never change. I could explore her beautiful body a thousand times in as many days, and each time it would excite me this same way.

I could never grow tired of hearing her breathy sighs, of feeling the flush of warm heat against her skin, of feeling the softness of her body beneath my own.

"Beckett," she breathed and my need soared.

Still, I wasn't finished exploring. When her hand came up in a sleepy motion to touch the side of my neck, I caught her wrist and brought her fingers to my lips.

I kissed each one, before pressing my mouth to her palm and then to her wrist where I felt her pulse racing.

This woman was a weakness like no other, and yet she was my strength.

I couldn't fathom there was a thing on this earth that I couldn't give her, if only she asked.

So when her blue eyes fluttered open and she whispered, "Make love to me," I was helpless to refuse.

I took her. Soft and slow. Doing exactly as I promised—all the work. And then I joined her in the shower, because we both had to be up early this morning. She had breakfast with the girls before work and I had to meet Kaiden at the gym.

It was later in the afternoon while I was sitting at the island with my books open, unable to stop thinking about the way she'd leaned into me as we parted ways this morning.

Her breasts pressed to my chest and the sound of her throaty accusation, "you're insatiable," sent heat pulsing through my veins.

I'd never missed a woman the way I was missing Amara right this moment. I thought about texting her, but I sensed even that wouldn't be enough. I needed to see her. Smell her. Touch her.

Slapping my books closed, I packed them up, grabbed my keys and drove determinedly to the Library.

That's when I felt the ache I'd been culturing abate.

Joel, her co-worker, was pushing a cart of books toward her, and she was smiling.

It wasn't the full smile she gave me, but it was something.

I liked seeing it. I liked knowing she felt safely content in her life now, and that smiling free was something she was able to let herself do.

It felt good knowing that in a way, I'd played a part in her finding her happiness.

When her eyes lifted and she caught sight of me standing with my book bag over my shoulder, leaning against a pillar, her smile got even wider. "Hey," she mouthed, waving for me to come closer. I didn't make her wait as I strode with purpose toward my woman.

Then, with a hand on her waist, I pulled her in close. Touch. I kissed her temple. Smell. And she pulled back to shine another full smile up at me. Sight. I had everything I'd felt so desperately that I needed.

"What are you doing here?"

I shrugged, playing off the feeling of intensity that had driven me to come to the Library. "I figured I'd study here. If I look at our kitchen any longer, I'm not sure what will happen."

"That table," she pointed to a free table beside the desk she worked at. "I'll sit with you while you study."

I raised a brow at the cart of books. "That so?"

"After I put these away." She amended. "You know I'm a machine at stocking books, though."

"True." I did know that. "Meet you there in a bit."

I watched as she moved away, lugging her big stack of books behind her. And then I

thought, not for the first or the last time, that I was a lucky man.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:59 am

I'd been serious with Beckett for just over a month.

I'd never really been huge on winter, as I'd never really loved the cold or had anyone to enjoy winter sports or the Christmas holiday with, but now I had Beckett.

And I knew that if I didn't let my psycho crazy Amara restrictions come out to play, I'd more than likely always have Beckett.

So it was as we were walking hand in hand on a Saturday morning that I decided I now loved winter.

I loved the cold, because with every little shiver Beckett pulled me into his arms for a quick "warming hug" as he called it.

I loved winter sports, because I knew he'd teach me everything I wanted to know, and what he didn't already know, if I wanted to learn, he'd assured me we would learn together.

And I loved the Christmas holiday, because it was through the blessed bliss of that holiday that I finally let my heart fall for a man.

I finally experienced the beauty of love in its truest, kindest, and unbridled form. I finally felt like I had family.

So it was this morning as we walked hand in hand beneath the unusually bright February sun, to the coffee shop I'd declared Beckett had to visit if only just once, that I realized I was finally happy.

Although I'd always be touched by my past, the repressing hand of my memories no longer dictated my life.

I didn't feel the crushing fear weighing down on my soul as I smiled, free and easy.

I was finally living. Living and loving and—laughing.

Beckett glanced down, his lashes sweeping his cheeks as his warm whiskey eyes connected with mine. And then his lips twitched at the corners and his hand came to catch me by the nape of my neck, twirling me into him for a quick hot kiss.

When he released me, I felt swept away in the tide of all that this wonderful man was.

And for the first time in my life, I glanced around to see that there were people looking at me with something akin to appreciative envy.

That was when I realized that I had it. I had what everyone wanted—what we as souls strove to find.

I had it, and I had it with Beckett Davis.

So I smiled. I smiled big and I smiled proud as we walked hand in hand into the coffee shop.

“And she'll get one of your long john donuts. The one with the rainbow sprinkles.” Beckett added to our order.

“I don't need a donut,” I scoffed, bumping him with my elbow. “Especially not a long john.”

“You do.” He said firmly, giving the cashier no nonsense eyes. “She does.”

“Sure thing.” She grinned, adding it to our bill.

I huffed, rolled my eyes, and let Beckett pay. It was as he was sliding the plate with the long john across the table, that I mumbled, “You’re a horrible man.”

“Me? I saw the way you were looking at it. You have a sweet tooth to rival the Cookie Monster.”

Cocking my head to the side, I asked on a memory of purple socks and the Two-Headed Monster. “What is your thing with Sesame Street? ”

“Me?” He feigned innocence. “I have no thing with Sesame Street. ”

“I beg to differ,” I took a big bite of my breakfast donut. “You like comparing me to all the monsters from that show.”

“It was a favorite of mine.” He admitted sheepishly, his eyes getting suddenly shifty.

I giggled, because honestly, when a man tells a woman his favorite show was Sesame Street, what else can she do? “You’re adorable.”

“Your laugh is adorable.”

“Is it, now?”

“Like music.”

“Now you’re laying on the sauce a bit thick, don’t you think?”

A bark of laughter spilled from his throat, “With you? Never. I could lay layers and layers of sauce and it wouldn’t be enough to make you swoon.”

“Not true!” I declared, aghast. And then I asked, “You’re trying to make me swoon?”

“I’m always trying to make you swoon.”

I smiled, because how could I not? “I think I like that.”

“Good.” His eyes were hot on mine. “Because I don’t ever plan to stop.”

“Good.” I reiterated, breathless.

There was a beat of silence, and then Beckett announced, “I’ve been thinking,”

“Of?” I hedged, suddenly nervous.

“Kai and Raina set the date for July eighth.” I already knew this, and was terribly excited for the day they made their promise of forever final. Beckett continued, however, when I said nothing. “I was thinking we could fly out after the wedding.”

“Fly out—where?”

“Budapest.”

My eyes got wide. “Budapest?” Had I mentioned I loved this man? “Are you serious?”

“Yeah.”

“I—yes!”

“Good.” He grinned. “Because it’s already booked.”

“It is?”

“My mom liked you a lot.”

“Your mom?” Now my eyes were even bigger. “What?”

“Yeah,” he shook his head again. “I think this was her way of making sure we stick it out until at least July. And she knows I’ve always wanted to go . . .”

“Stick it out?”

“Don’t break up.” He explained and I stiffened at the thought of losing Beckett. He hurried to add, “I’ve never brought a woman home before, Amara. You know that. She’s a mom and moms often want their sons to settle down. My mom’s no different, as work obsessed as she is, she cares for me still.”

“So she bought us a trip?”

“Yes.”

“That’s—crazy.” And a little awesome, I couldn’t deny that very huge fact.

“Say you’ll come with me.”

“Of course I’ll come,” I said. “But they don’t need to buy us things to keep us together.”

“That’s true.” His grin turned devilish. “You’re stuck with me forever and ever.”

“Forever and ever.” I whispered, loving the sound of that.

Beckett settled back in the chair across the table from me, grinning as he sipped his coffee. “So, back to July eighth,”

“Back to the eighth,” I prompted, unable to lose my grin.

There was something about the thought of attending a wedding with Beckett that made me feel irrefutably excited.

It was like a promise for sugary sweet romance, and in the past month I’d had with Beckett, I’d come to realize that I adored romance.

“Has Raina talked to you about the dress you’ll be wearing?”

I narrowed my eyes. “Yes.”

“And?” Leaning his elbows on the table, he asked, “What color are you going to wear?”

“Any color I want.” I shrugged and he frowned.

“What?”

“We get to pick our own dress in whatever color we want.”

“You do?”

“Yeah,” I nodded down to my sprinkled donut. “Raina wants a rainbow wedding.”

“Of course she does.” Beckett shook his head. “It’s going to look like a circus.”

“Not even close. She’s got plans.” I defended my friend to my boyfriend. “You wait

and see.”

“So you’re going to wear purple?”

“No.” I shook my head. “I don’t think so.”

He raised a brow. “What color?”

“You’ll see,” I teased. “Maybe it’ll be a surprise.”

“It can’t be a surprise. Kai says my tie has to match your dress.”

I didn’t respond. I just smiled as conspiratorially as I could.

The day had been great. Beckett made love to me in the morning before we’d decided we were too hungry not to venture out of bed.

Once out, we decided the day was too beautiful to pass up staying inside.

That’s how we’d decided to have breakfast at the coffee shop, so that was also why I was standing alone on the winding path that weaved through the large city park as Beckett jogged to the nearest trash can to toss our coffee cups.

That was why I was alone when my eyes locked on a familiar face that had ice filling my veins and my past crashing back into me with the vicious force of a train. Air raced from my lungs and my heart seized. My fingers turned numb and my belly felt suddenly weighted with rocks.

No, not rocks. Boulders.

For a long moment, I couldn’t move. I couldn’t breathe, or blink, or scream.

I was frozen—paralyzed in fear.

I hadn't seen him since I was seventeen years old. The warden of my nightmares and the killer of my dreams—Jayden.

Adrenaline shot through my body and I was suddenly moving. I was running, fast and hard, for Beckett. He caught me before I even realized I was there, his arms coming around my waist.

His voice was frantic, “Mar, baby, what’s wrong?”

“He—he—it’s him, Beck. It’s him.”

“Who?” His hands were on my cheeks now. His eyes bored into mine. “Who, Amara?”

“Jayden.” I whispered the name I loathed on a breath that was weak and nearly inaudible. “He’s here.”

“Where?” He demanded, but when I looked back to where I saw the face from my past, he was gone. There was nothing but people walking on the busy sidewalk and cars driving by.

I shook my head, trying to dispel the piercing ringing in my ears for the sound of car engines, people talking, and snow crunching. I failed.

Beckett’s hands on my shoulders shook me gently, “Baby, where did you see him?”

“He’s gone.” I whispered. The sound was an aching desperate sound that, as it made its way into my consciousness, I hated.

The fear I'd finally freed myself from had returned after only a month of sweet reprieve.

"Amara?"

"Take me home, Beckett."

"Baby,"

"I said take me home." The words were a harsh lash that had guilt flooding my heart. I pleaded, "Please."

There were no thoughts of lovemaking, laughter, and weddings when I fell into bed that night.

I didn't fight the safe circle of Beckett's arms when he pulled me in close, but I couldn't say that I found sleep easy.

I didn't. I was awake late and long into the night as I watched the bedroom door, wide-eyed and afraid.

I knew better than most how monsters operated. They roamed free and unobstructed in the day, no one suspecting a thing. But they came out to play at night where the darkness obscured the horrors they craved. I knew—and I hated the night. I hated the darkness that toyed with my fear.

I hated my weakness.

But no matter how acutely I loathed it—I couldn't fight it. I just couldn't.

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“Take one more step and I’ll scream.” My voice rattled with fear-filled desperation that I knew he heard, but still, something in it made him pause.

I’d gotten through Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and most of Thursday before Jayden’s return in my life was confirmed.

I’d been beginning to think that maybe I’d been seeing things on Saturday when I thought I’d seen him.

Jayden wasn’t one to slip into the shadows and disappear, so by Thursday morning, I’d been certain I’d been seeing things.

I hadn’t.

He’d been real that Saturday morning, even though I so desperately wanted him to be an apparition. I could accept that—I really could. I’d even told myself my seeing him in the park had been me slipping into my ways of self-sabotage. I’d begun to convince myself all was well and that I was safe.

But now I knew I wasn’t. Because my monster had returned and he wasn’t an apparition. He was real as real could be. And he’d come for me.

That’s why I was standing in the science fiction section of the Library between eighty-three and ninety, with a cart of books between my little body, and the man who had haunted my nightmares for years.

I’d always suspected this day would come—eventually. He’d want his revenge for all

I'd taken from him when I confessed to the horror of his crime. Unlike me, Jayden was of the age to pay, as an adult, for his sins. And he had paid. He'd paid in prison.

"I'm not here to hurt you, Amara." He said gently, his hands lifting in surrender. "I just—I shouldn't be here."

"You're right." I said, shaking. "You shouldn't."

The book I clutched to my chest was the only shield I had to wield—and I wielded it like it might just save me from whatever bullets Jayden aimed my way. His eyes fell to the book and lifted back to my face.

He looked—well; there was sorrow and apology I couldn't understand in his gaze. I couldn't connect it to the monster I'd once known. "I had to come. It's—I promise you this will be the last time you'll ever see me."

"Good."

"Amara, listen, I . . ."

"What do you want?" God, I hated the weakness I knew he could hear in my words. I hated it so much, because it didn't seem to matter how strong I became, when it came to Jayden, I'd always be the weak little girl he manipulated and used.

"I'm sorry. For everything."

"You're sorry?" I couldn't believe this. "You're sorry you're a horrible person?"

"I've gotten help. I don't—do what I once did. I'm not that person anymore."

"I don't care." I shook my head. I didn't want to hear about this.

“I know.” He said quietly, looking to his shoes.

“I just, it’s selfish, I guess.” He paused, but I didn’t speak.

“I have my whole life ahead of me and I know I made mistakes. I made them and I’ll regret them forever, but I want to be better now.

I can be better and for me, that starts with closing the door to my past.”

“Am I a door?”

“Yes.”

I wanted to ask about the girl he’d ruined. Was she a door too?

As though reading my mind, he admitted, “I have a lot of doors to close.”

Again, I said nothing.

“I’ve gotten help, Amara. I’ve had years of counseling and when I’m finished here tonight, I have a flight to catch.

I’m going away and starting new. But I wanted you to know I’m sorry for hurting you the way I did.

I’m sorry I tainted you. I just needed you to know that.

I needed to know that you were happy.” He didn’t smile, but there was something surprisingly gentle in his eyes.

It had something inside of me stilling. It wasn’t forgiveness; I didn’t think I had it in

me to give that to him.

I didn't think I was strong enough yet, or secure in myself enough, to give forgiveness to either of us. Not now. Maybe not ever.

He continued. "I know you saw me Saturday. I saw you first though. I saw you with him and I knew it then—you are happy. I wasn't going to seek you out, but then you saw me.

And I knew I freaked you out. I knew I took your happiness again, manipulated you again.

I couldn't leave without making that right. So I'm here."

"You think this makes it all better?" I asked, not quite knowing what possessed me.

"I don't know. I don't know if you'll ever forgive me, but I hope one day you do.

As for me, I have to find a way to forgive myself.

I know I'm your monster, but I have monsters of my own I know I'll fight every day," he looked, for a moment, like a young boy.

And for the first time, I thought that maybe Jayden wasn't solely the monster, but the victim to a crime I didn't entirely understand.

A victim who'd become something abhorrent in response to the pain he suffered. "I hope you have a nice life, Amara."

I watched as he turned, but it wasn't until he was at the end of the aisle, that I called, "Jay," he turned, hope in his eyes. That's when I said the words I never thought I'd

say, “I hope you find what you’re looking for. I hope you find—good.”

“Me too.” His chin dipped into his chest, and I thought maybe he was going to cry. “I’m so sorry.”

I didn’t know what possessed me to say the words I said next.

I didn’t know where the strength came from.

I didn’t even know that I was ready to take this next step in healing—until the words sounded—echoing in the distance between us.

“I forgive you for the pain you caused me. I forgive you—not for you, but for me. But Jayden, I never want to see you again.”

He didn’t smile, but his eyes were filled with a tortured relief that was both achingly devastating and sweetly liberating.

Then Jayden was gone from my life.

It was as a long breath blew out from between my lips as my body sagged against the shelf of books, that I felt the pressure in my soul abate. I was finally, truly, wholly free.

In forgiveness, I had found liberation.

It was then that I realized the hard truth. Sometimes it takes facing your past, with all the monsters and all the pains that lurk within it, before you can really and truly find the peace you need to move on, move forward, and find happiness.

And I couldn’t find that true happiness until I released my heart from its prison of

hate.

I burst through the door of the condo I shared with Beckett exactly an hour and a half later.

As expected, he was sitting at the island counter, nose buried in his books.

I desperately hoped he was up for a study break, because I was feeling free in a way that demanded action. Not only action, but immediate action.

I kicked off my boots, shucked my jacket and was halfway across the living room when he spun around on his stool to greet me.

My fingers worked the buttons of my thin sweater and I dropped that to the floor moments before the thin camisole followed.

I was in my bra at the end of the couch, Beckett's stunned eyes on me, when my hands began to work the button of my jeans.

Then Beckett was there and he was taking my wrists in his hands, guiding them up and over his shoulders.

He hauled my body up against his, and in response, my legs wrapped around his waist. I hadn't been in the mood since seeing Jayden on Saturday. But even before, I hadn't felt as though I had the freedom to take him this way—but now, well; I was free.

"I see you're up for a study break." The words were spoken between hot kisses against his neck. I knew he was taking me to our bedroom, and I couldn't wait until he dropped me onto the bed, stripped and took me.

God, I couldn't wait.

"I'm up for this break lasting all night, baby." He replied, moving through the doorway and into the dark room. A gap in the curtains showed a thin sliver of amber light from the streetlamp, but the rest was ensconced in shadows.

Beckett dropped me to the bed and I bounced, gasping in anticipation as I watched his hands move to remove his shirt, and then he unbuttoned his jeans.

But he didn't remove them. Instead, he bent and pressed his mouth to my hip.

He kissed me hot and wet, sucking and nipping gently at my skin.

And then I felt his fingers dipping into the band of my jeans.

Slowly, he pulled the material down my legs until I was in nothing but my lacy sky blue underwear.

Starting at my ankle, Beckett kissed up the length of my leg as I writhed in need on the bed. I let the sounds my body begged to make break free—and they did. Moans and pants of need spilled into the dark silence as Beckett took his time kissing me.

"Feeling a little frisky?" The deep sound of his voice rumbled through my whole body. "I like it."

"God," I pleaded. "Please."

"I know what you need," he promised. "I'll make sure you have everything. Always."

"I need it," I whispered, "hard."

“Fast.”

“Yes.” See how perfect he is? He always knows—everything I need, he just knows.

His hands moved to my panties and I lifted my hips quickly, helping him to remove the material.

As he stood back to remove the remainder of his clothing, I pushed up off the bed to unclasp my bra.

I wanted him now without barriers. I wanted him hot and full.

I wanted him raw and real. I wanted him now.

“Now.” I said, dropping back to the bed as he moved over me. And then he dropped his weight to my body, caging me beneath him as I took his length between my legs. And on one long hard thrust, I had him. All of him. Hard and fast. Exactly how I needed.

“Amara,” he grunted.

“Beck,” tossing my head back, I moaned. “Yes, that’s it. God, yes.”

“Hold on.” He commanded. I obeyed with just seconds to spare as he flipped us so I was on top. And then he sat up, still moving his hips beneath me, pushing deeper inside.

It was a whole new angle—and a whole new sexual experience. Wild. Hot. Passionate.

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He took my mouth and I gave him everything, tearing free from every hold the past had had on me as I fell into a new future and a new promise for more with a good man I trusted and loved. And when we came undone, we came crashing into bliss together.

“I love you.” I cried into the wet skin of his neck, tasting the salt of his flesh on my tongue and feeling the race of his heart against my chest.

“You know I love you, Amara.” He murmured, his lips against my shoulder as our bodies shuddered in the aftershocks of our passion.

It was a moment of unbridled beauty. A moment to remember. A moment one might engrave in their memory for forever.

It was later as we cuddled side by side on the bed, tangled in blankets that Beckett twisted to face me. He was gazing down at me like I was the key to Pandora’s Box, filled with mystery, wonder, and even some wickedness.

“Do you want to talk about it, Mar?”

“About what?” My chest fluttered in wonder at how well this man had come to know me.

“About whatever happened tonight.”

I thought about lying, but I sensed that he would somehow know if I did, so instead, I shook my head. “Not yet, if that’s okay?”

He frowned, but his eyes didn't tear away from their intent study of my face. "All right,"

"I just," I paused. "I want you to know that my monster is finally gone."

He stiffened and I thought for a moment that he was going to demand answers, but he didn't. Instead, he nodded. "You know I'm here for you, for anything, right?"

"I do." God, the man was the sweetest man ever.

I knew it made me sound all girly and weepy, but I just couldn't imagine that there was a sweeter man in the whole entirety of the world.

I'd once thought Raina was lucky for having found her one—but I felt confident now that even she wasn't as lucky as me.

"Okay," leaning forward, he pressed his lips to my forehead, the tip of my nose, and finally my lips. "I'm sure you need nourishment. I intend to have you again before we call it a night."

"Twice on a school night!" I played awestruck. "Beckett Davis, you're insatiable."

"I am." He pushed his big body up off the bed. "Nourishment."

"Peanut butter and marshmallow sandwiches!" I proposed excitedly, and was met with the slapping sound of his briefs against his hips.

"What?"

"They were mine and Raina's go-to dinner."

“You and Raina need serious help.” He held up his finger, pointing to me. “Stay.”

“Hey!” I pouted, crossing my arms over my chest. “Rude.”

“Stay, Amara.”

“Fine.” I huffed placating—and then I mumbled, “If I must.” But he was already gone from the room and I knew he hadn’t heard.

It was no matter, when Beckett returned, he returned with a platter of grapes, cubes of cheese, slices of apples with a large dollop of peanut butter and a small pile of mini rainbow marshmallows. See, totally why I love the man!

We ate, shared a huge glass of raspberry juice, and made love again before we fell into the oblivion of the dream world.

I slept like a baby in the arms of a man I was entirely safe with. And I dreamed of a future where love and laughter and living were all I ever thought about.

It was bliss.

Amara

The flowing chiffon of the pale pink dress I wore danced in the evening breeze as Beckett twirled me around and around in his arms. His smile was huge, as it had been all day long, as we watched our good friends enter the world of eternal marital bliss.

I’d chosen a pink dress because Maddy had chosen a soft yellow.

There was a delicate beauty about the two colors that somehow suited Raina.

Yes, her wedding was a blast of pastel colors—think mini eggs as favors—that made one consider an Easter rainbow, but damn, did Beckett ever look fabulously handsome in the pale pink silk tie he wore to match my dress.

He'd grinned at me when he'd found he'd be wearing pink—to which he'd then announced, "I'm all man, baby. Pink's not going to intimidate me." Clearly, pink didn't intimidate him, because he rocked it.

"You're beautiful." He murmured, dropping his head to nuzzle my nose with his. I felt my heart do a little dance and leap at the gesture.

"I love you."

"I know." He twirled me around again. "I'm a lucky man."

I smiled, because I was beginning to think that he was, indeed, lucky. He was lucky to have a woman who loved him as wholeheartedly, and faithfully, as I loved him. Just the same as I was lucky to have him.

We were lucky.

"It's the toss!" Maddy exclaimed, suddenly appearing beside us. She gripped my arm and did a little bounce, clearly tipsy. "Come on!"

I laughed, moving away from my man to the center of the dance floor that stood beneath the stars.

The Weir's had an intimate wedding on the hotel ground before a crystal clear lake.

It was stunningly beautiful, and all the guests had cabins booked to stay the night.

It was perfectly Raina and Kaiden Weir. Perfectly wonderful.

That's when I saw Raina dance onto the floor barefoot, with her lovely arrangement of pink and yellow peonies.

She wore an ivory gypsy gown that had delicate bands of lace hanging limply around her upper arms. The bodice was snug and a tiny braided gold belt hugged the small of her waist. Her hair was loose and wild, and she wore a thin crown of tiny pink flowers.

She looked lovely, and fresh, and Raina. Entirely Raina.

"Ready ladies?" She called, winking to the small crowd before she turned away and tossed her bouquet.

I didn't even move. It was like the arrangement knew where it wanted to go—and it wanted to slide right into my hands, because that's what it did.

Loud cheers erupted and a scarlet blush heated my cheeks as strong arms swept around my waist. Beckett's rumble was in my ear, "Looks like we're next."

It was later, after the party had ended, that the moon was high in the sky and I had the bouquet I'd caught dangling from my fingertips.

I was skipping a few paces ahead of Beckett; all too aware of the delicious grin he wore, as we neared our cabin.

That's when I felt his arm circle my waist once again.

He pulled me into his hard body, caging me against him as he proposed, "How about we honor our friends the way we know they'd want us to honor them?"

“And how would they want us to honor them?” My breaths were starting to come quickly. My heart was beginning to pound faster and harder.

Beckett took a step away from our cabin that was nestled privately into the woods, and closer to the lake.

And then he swept me up in his arms, walking me to the water’s edge.

When my feet met with the cool rocks and I felt his fingers tug on the zipper, my breath caught in anticipation of his intention.

“Beckett, someone might see.”

“Who cares?” He rumbled. “We’re young, in love, and living.”

The dress fell away, leaving me bare apart from my panties. I’d decided to go sans bra as it was a strapless and I was comfortable enough without one. Now, I most definitely wasn’t regretting that as his hand lifted to palm the soft skin.

I moaned, “You want to skinny-dip?”

“Is there really a better way to honor Raina?”

“No,” I was breathless. “There isn’t.”

“That’s what I thought.”

So that night we made love in the cool night water of the clear lake after Raina and Kaiden Weir vowed to stay together forever, as we all knew they would.

It was two weeks later, as I walked hand in hand with the love of my life while we

toured the castle district in Budapest, that the promise of the bouquet toss took life.

The city lights danced over the water and stretched up into the dark sky in beams of ancient, and magical amber.

It was unexpectedly quiet and pleurably private as the soles of our shoes connected with the old stone walk.

We'd been in Budapest for a week and had another week to go.

Even though I knew that we had time, we wouldn't see everything this magical place had to offer. Still, I was blissfully happy.

It appeared, as Beckett paused to slide into the position that would make any woman's heart begin to race, that he was blissfully happy too.

And then he pulled a ring from the pocket of his jeans. No box. No ribbon. No fuss. Just a ring he knew he'd slide onto my finger—because he knew I'd say yes.

“Marry me, Amara. You've made me the happiest man in the world, and I know if I have your promise of love for life, I'll have laughter for life.

And I know if you give me that, I'll give you everything.

” He took my hand in his before I'd even had time to form words, and slid the thin white gold band of diamonds onto my finger. “It's engraved. Forever and ever.”

The declaration took me back to that moment when we vowed forever and ever, and I smiled. My eyes were shimmering with happy tears as my lips trembled with the power inside my emotion.

I let my eyes move from the beautiful face of the man I loved, to the ring. It wasn't flashy. It was simple and little and intimate. It was perfect and entirely—us.

“Yes.”

Beckett rose to lift me into his arms, pulling my front into his for a tight embrace.

And then, as my toes touched solid ground once again, he caught my face in his hands and kissed me with a passion that lifted my soul.

I knew then that I'd fly through the rest of my existence with this man, in this life and in the life after it was all finished.

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For eternity.

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Five years later

My wife was still the most beautiful woman I'd ever encountered.

We'd been together for just over five years, married for four.

The darkness I'd first seen hovering over her when we met had been gone since that night she came bursting into the condo we'd shared throughout the remainder of our schooling.

It had taken her nearly a year to explain to me the events of that night.

Although I'd been filled with something like rage that her past had come back to touch her without her telling me, I had to admit I was happy that the monster in her past took a moment to give her the closure I now understood she needed.

For that, I would forever be thankful.

It was summer and she'd been awake since the ungodly hour of five o'clock in the morning. She'd been doing this a lot these past three months, but sleep was coming a little roughly for her. Still, whenever I noticed her slipping from the bed in the mornings, I wasn't far behind.

My work schedule was hectic and I'd come to appreciate an early morning with my wife. But these past few months were the best, because I'd find her on the deck off the kitchen, watching the sun rising over the mountains with a tea steaming on the table and her hands caressing her swollen belly.

Every time I saw her hands on her belly where our baby was growing, I felt a sense of life that I'd never before experienced. Not for the first time, or the last, this woman made me want to fall to my knees and thank Heaven for all the beauty I'd been given in this life.

"Good morning, beautiful." I said, coming to stand behind her. She tipped her head back and smiled up at me. Again, I wanted to fall to my knees.

"Good morning, handsome."

"How are you feeling this morning?" I asked, my hands moving to rub her shoulders.

She groaned and the sweet sound had my lips curling up at the corners. Beautiful. Sweet. Simple. Blissful. Life.

"A little sick to my tummy, but we'll be okay."

I have to be at work at eight," she sighed, but we both knew she loved working at the Library in Banff.

It was a close enough drive to the house we now owned.

I'd taken over the mortgage my parents had for the house where I first made this woman mine. Now, it was ours.

"You'll let me know if it gets worse?"

"You know I will, Dr. Davis." She teased, and I liked that too. I also liked that I'd gotten a killer residency in the Banff Hospital. We were close to each other and close to home.

Life, if I'd written it into a book, couldn't have been more perfect.