



The First Kind of Love (Riverside Reapers #5)

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Description: Shiloh Nguyen is a one-woman army. Married to her job at the ripe age of twenty-four, her vision board consists of espresso machines and foam art instead of white dresses and wedding bells. With her family's business about to go under, her future's balancing on a knife's edge of guilt and responsibility. She has her whole life planned out—in a pretty little schedule planner, no less—until a rogue hockey slapshot comes careening into her tiny coffee shop, dismantling everything she thought she knew about herself.

Fulton Cazzarelli—well-known nervous wreck and bearer of the dreaded virgin title—has been crushing on the pretty barista who's been serving him dairy-free coffee for the last four years. He never thought he'd muster the courage to ask her out...until one of his teammates springs a destination wedding on the entire team. Now, with his friends goading him into bringing a plus-one, Fulton takes a quantum leap of courage to get the girl of his dreams.

A hesitant Shiloh agrees to three weeks in Cabo with the Riverside Reapers' biggest sweetheart, yet her work obligations simmer on the back burner the moment her feet hit that golden sand. But as she gets closer to Fulton—and she discovers they're more alike than she thought—Shiloh is caught in a crossfire of loyalty to her parents and loyalty to her heart. Playing pretend isn't on her itinerary, and neither is prioritizing a short-lived relationship. Fulton, however, knows what lies in his future, and it consists of one brown-eyed brunette.

Will Shiloh finally find the balance between business and pleasure, or will she let the best thing that's ever happened to her drift out to sea?

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THE WEDDING-ADJACENT PROPOSAL

FULTON

“No, Fulton, I will not show you my boobs.”

“Gage, I wouldn’t ask her to do that! And she doesn’t sound like that,” I say.

“Uh-huh. Fine then. What does she sound like?”

“Like sunshine and rainbows and butterflies.”

Me and my best friend, Gage, stake out the local coffee shop a few minutes down the road from our house, huddled behind the steering wheel in a (frankly) valiant effort to stay out of sight. Though there’s really no need, seeing as I’ll never muster up the courage to step inside. No amount of dairy-free cold brew or addictively delicious pastries will entice me—at least, not with the ulterior motive that Gage has been trying to sell to me for the past half hour.

Every time I catch a flicker of movement beyond those windows, tendrils of hope sweep through the scant spaces between my ribs, coupled with the love-drunk trumpeting of my heart. I haven’t even breached the danger zone and a swelter’s already lapping at my nape, the corrosive acid in my belly is gnawing a nauseating hole, and my legs are threatening to puddle against Gage’s leather car seat .

The girl of my dreams works as a full-time barista at Deja Brew—which I’m starting to believe is some undercover moniker for the entrance of hell itself—and I’ve only ever interacted with her on a customer-server basis. Even then, ordering is an indomitable feat that I have yet to conquer, and I’ve grown accustomed to expecting the Three P’s to take place: panic, puke, and prattle. Not necessarily in that order. I have a nervous stomach, okay?

I realize how that sounds. I’m a pro hockey player who’s decent-looking and in his mid-twenties who can’t get past the talking stage with a woman who gets paid to talk to him. I can thank my unbelievable lack of social skills for that, which I think is due to unmedicated anxiety, a bottomless basin of self-deprecating thoughts, and the fact that I have the charisma of a pet rock.

But that’s not even the worst part. The worst part is lugging around the title of being your hockey team’s only virgin. I choose to withhold this information, obviously, but the reminder that my dong hasn’t been dinged by anybody is a pretty debilitating handicap to saddle a guy with in a hookup-based culture.

I wish that I was picking up chicks after every game. I wish that I could talk to women without stuttering over my words and coming across like a weirdo. I wish that I had the charm and confidence that all my teammates possess. I’m the odd one out. I’m lucky to say that I’ve even been kissed—though it was more of a deceitful peck on my lips by Renata Pulminer.

She was the first girl I was ever “involved” with before my coffee shop crush. She showed interest in me my rookie year in the NHL, and I realized afterwards that while I was looking for a genuine connection, all she was looking for was a business one.

After a month of her hanging around my team, tagging along with us to Beer Comes Trouble, and manipulating me into believing that she actually cared about me, I was

ready to ask her to be my girlfriend. I thought we were on the same page, you know? We hadn't been intimate with each other in private, but she gushed over me in public. She'd wear my jersey to our games; she'd flirt with me at afterparties. Even the paparazzi thought the two of us were happily in love.

I should've realized the first red flag was that she never wanted to do something with me if we didn't have an audience. She barely texted me. She barely made an effort to hang out with me alone. It was like I was a complete stranger when the cameras weren't pointed at us. And I was the fool who thought things were getting better when she suspiciously wanted to play up the PDA around my friends. So, when it was time to pop the relationship question, I was in for a rude awakening.

Because not only did I get the answer I wasn't looking for, but she rubbed it in my face by making out with one of my teammates, Zaven, when we were "supposedly" a thing. I was heartbroken. I was confused. I couldn't accept the fact that this had all just been a game to her.

And when I begged her to work things out, she told me what I've known to be true my whole life—that my inexperience and my awkwardness was too embarrassing. She told me she could never be with someone who constantly overthinks the smallest things, who struggles to order food at restaurants, who has no sexual experience, and who's practically the laughingstock of his entire team. She abandoned me at my lowest point, and she left me with this crippling hole of self-loathing that never really went away.

But I'm used to women treating me as a steppingstone to get to my teammates. Most of the time, all they want is some kind of exposure. Needless to say, I've become more hesitant about who I let into my life because they can just as easily walk out of it.

Gage is completely different than I am. Before he fell in love with his current

girlfriend, Calista, he was entertaining flocks of adoring fans and women wherever he went. He had women fighting over him like cats in heat scrapping it out for the last male. I once saw him flirt his way out of a ticket, and not only did he evade the law, but he got the police officer's number . Then he proceeded to tell me about the handcuffs that he had "appropriately" used later that night.

My best friend follows my line of sight, clapping me on the back sympathetically. "Ful, you know I love you, right?"

My throat flutters with a gulp. "Y-yes...?"

"You need to get off your ass, walk into that coffee shop, and sweet-talk this chick."

And on a dime, I'm thrown into an active battlefield, cowering from zipping bullets, artillery fire, and unimpressed shouts from my superior that get me shot about fifteen times in the back.

I open my mouth to rebut—with what, I'm not sure—but am abruptly cut off by Gage's don't-give-me-bullshit hand. "Nope. No. You can do this. I've heard you hyping yourself up in the bathroom mirror about a hundred times. You've had a crush on this girl for four years, and you haven't made a move on her. Hell, you've barely gotten past casual pleasantries. I don't think you'd even know her name if it wasn't on a tag."

WOW. Rude. Of course...of course I would know her name. I would be like, "Someone as beautiful as you has to have a name." And then she'd probably throw a hot latte in my face and yell for security.

By the way, her full name is Shiloh Nguyen. It's public information, alright?

I shrink in my seat, embarrassment blooming across the tip of my tongue, and the

hard truth bludgeons me with a force so strong I'm surprised my ego doesn't suffer multiple fractures. "I was waiting for the right time..."

The excuse sounds pitiful in my own ears, trust me.

"Now is the right time, dude! Our teammate's getting married in a few weeks, and everyone wants you to bring a plus-one. We all want to see you get this girl. You never stop talking about her. It's clear you want to pursue something, but you're just a little scared."

Oh, "a little" is putting it nicely. If I humiliate myself and say the wrong thing to her, she'll never want to see me again—which will be hard because my teammates and I frequent this coffee shop.

Hayes—the scariest and most penalized player on our team—is getting married to the sweetest girl I've ever met—Aeris—who's somehow convinced him to trade in his playboy days for a lifetime of calm, peaceful domestication. They couldn't be more opposite from each other, and they couldn't be more in love. He's the biggest softie in the world when he's with her. I once saw him gluing together a five-hundred-piece puzzle for her because she mentioned that she "liked" the sunflower on it. He's all scars and trauma and temper, and she's pretty much the embodiment of a sparkly unicorn.

None of the guys are forcing me to find a date. I think they just want me to go after what I want. And they're probably tired of hearing about how this girl's hair is the color of midnight and as soft-looking as silk—how her skin's a shimmery olive color like she's been brushed in caramelized sugar. Also, she smells incredible. Granted, that fresh bread and vanilla undertone is probably the baking supplies that I'm smelling, but I can't have angel food cake without thinking about her.

She's burrowed so far beneath my skin that I can feel her in my veins—a paralytic

agent that I can't shake, a thought that I can't bury beneath power plays, an overwhelming craving that I can't satiate with your run-of-the-mill sugar fix.

And fuck, she's so out of my league, you know? Like, it's laughable. I don't have a shot with this girl, and I'd rather not have my first experience in the dating pool start off with a rejection of epic proportions. I'm content with not bringing a plus-one. I'm used to being the eleventh wheel. I'm used to seeing all my teammates in happy relationships. I'm used to the pitying looks and the soul-killing shoulder pats.

Nausea simmers on low in the back of my throat, and I discreetly wipe my clammy palms on the sides of my legs. "I can't do this, Gage."

I hate feeling overlooked, discounted. I had a childhood full of it thanks to my absent dad, and I don't want to relive that helplessness. Not to mention the walking disaster that was my ex-situationship.

While I appreciate Gage's belief in me, it's sorely misplaced. I'm not like him, and I'll probably never be like him, no matter how many Fuckboy 101 classes he gives me.

Gage's lips flatline into a supportive grimace. "What's the worst thing that could happen?"

Death.

Death is the worst thing that could happen, because right now, my pulse is a battering ram against the side of my neck, and I'll probably drop dead from a heart attack by the time I make it up to the counter.

I steal admiring glances while she's not looking, watching as she floats effortlessly through her work area, her nightshade ponytail flicking behind her. She's bobbing her

head to a track of the latest pop hits, and when a patch of golden sunlight hits her just right, her entire silhouette glows with an ethereal quality, little dust motes dancing in the coffee-shrouded air. The mechanical whir of a frothing machine and the backtrack of hushed chatter all compete fruitlessly for my attention, but I can't tear my eyes away from the beauty inside her that smolders like a newly birthed ember. She isn't just drop-dead gorgeous on the outside. Whenever I see her serving other customers, there's always this beam on her face, and her laugh...

Well, her laugh could cure a lifetime of loneliness.

There's only one person ahead of me in line, so I have all of two minutes to come up with a script, practice that script in my head, and hold down the heavy lunch doing one hell of an anxiety-induced roil in my stomach.

Be cool, Fulton. Just...make small talk. Don't be creepy. She's just a girl. There's no pressure to ask her to be your plus-one. Your teammates aren't going to look at you any differently if you show up alone. You've done it a million times. And a million times over, you would have killed to have someone by your side.

Every nervous thought rolls around like billiard balls inside my skull, and my feverish equilibrium spins, nearly making my knees buckle underneath me. But then, as the broad frame of the customer in front of me moves aside, there's a direct, sun-drenched shot between me and my future wife. Her thick, feathery lashes flick up in slow motion, making way for her big, doe eyes to pull me under with a single look.

I don't know how, but my legs move on their own accord, lured to that wood-grain countertop by her siren call. The nerves are pleading with me to retreat, but my heart is practically crawling to her, needing her attention to revitalize its now-sluggish beats.

"Hi, Fulton," Shiloh says, and the airy tone of her voice wraps me in a powder-soft

cloud, immediately liquefying my muscles and unraveling the fear that's been knotted like a cherry stem in my gut.

She's a work of art, chiseled from my very dreams and desires, stunning enough to be immortalized in marble. A small, heart-shaped face, a button nose, and big, plush lips that glisten with a thin sheen of pink gloss. She's a foot shorter than me—all compacted into this lithe, petite body—and she has to tip her head up to address me.

I lose the ability to speak. It feels like she's plucked my vocal cords from my throat with her dainty, manicured fingers (in the least violent way possible). My legs may have led me to my demise, but now that I'm here, grappling for a foothold on the side of a precarious ledge, a calamitous freefall looks like my only option.

“Uh, hi, Shiloh,” I greet with deliberate and slow syllables, wary not to butcher anything that comes out of my mouth.

Shiloh lights up brighter than an illuminated Broadway sign, her lips curling up into one cheek-plumping smile. “Just your usual today?”

Oh, shit. What do I say? I wasn't expecting her to ask me that. Why wasn't I expecting her to ask me that? It's her job. Come on, Fulton! Get it together!

Judging by the way my belly's rumbling ominously, food probably isn't the smartest idea right now. Fuck, I've never been this nervous before. Not for any games, not for any interviews (although I do despise them), not for anything. Do you think she notices how nervous I am? Oh my God, do I smell? Do I have pit stains? What if I'm freaking her out right now because I'm doing a long-ass internal monologue in my head and not responding to her?

Eventually—when I remember to function like a regular human being—I shake my head, the forelock of my sweat-slicked hair tumbling down my forehead. “No, thanks.

I, uh, well...”

Shiloh leans against the counter a bit, inadvertently bridging the distance between us, the delicate arch of her collarbone rising when she sucks in a breath. Just like the rest of her, she’s cut from perfection.

“You know, I caught the game a few days ago,” she tells me .

She’s going off script! SHE’S GOING OFF SCRIPT!

I blink a few times, confused beyond belief because there’s no way in hell that someone like her was watching someone like me . “Y-you did?”

Pearly teeth drag against a pillowy bottom lip, a coy twinkle kindling in the dark pits of her eyes—tantalizing, tempting, and a whole lot of trouble. “Yeah! You did really well. Like, you were amazing out there. But it sucks that you guys lost the first round of the playoffs.”

Is this real life? Did she just...give me a compliment ? My brain is short-circuiting, and there’s no saying if my whole body will experience a total-program shutdown as well.

I pantomime my best mask of confidence, hoping that she can’t hear the loud bellowing of my heart. “Oh. Um, thank you very much. Honestly, I’m glad the stress of the season is over, but I know my team’s disappointed with the outcome.”

Shiloh just nods, as if it’s the most relatable thing in the world.

Dude, compliment her back! She doesn’t want to hear you talking about yourself.

“I really like your...eyes?”

Good job, Fulton. That almost sounded normal.

She bristles a bit, clearly caught off guard. “Oh?—”

“Yeah, they’re not too dark. They’re the perfect shade of brown, you know? Some people’s eyes are the color of chocolate. Some people’s eyes are almost black. Some people’s eyes are poop brown, and that’s...uh...unfortunate. For them. But you don’t have poop eyes! You have pretty brown eyes that are way too light to be poop colored.”

Kill. Me. Now.

Why, Fulton, would you say the dreaded P-word to the girl that you’ve had a crush on for four years? Are you trying to ruin your chance with her? (Not that you really had one in the first place.)

I want the floor to open up underneath me and swallow me whole. I do not want to be alive to revisit this interaction when I’m lying in bed tonight. Insomnia’s already bad enough—I don’t need my mind replaying “Fulton’s Greatest Hits.”

I’m expecting Shiloh to cringe in disgust or pity or whatever the hell is going on in her head right now, but instead, she breaks into a flurry of giggles, her small shoulders shaking with each harmonious chuckle. “Thank you. I guess I wouldn’t want to have poop-colored eyes.”

That laugh...God, I’m so fucked .

I’m not sure what changes, but for a fleeting moment, confidence rallies inside me, and some deep, dark, depraved—and deprived—part of me needs to hear the sound of her laugh for as long as I can, because just remembering it won’t do it justice.

With nothing to lose—except my dignity—I place one of my hands on the counter, start to feel it slide from an accumulation of sweat, and then quickly catch myself before tripping over my feet. “Shiloh, will you...” I start rockily.

Her eyes go cartoonishly wide, and maybe it’s because I’m barely riding a whisper, but she eagerly leans in to listen to me.

There’s a din of noise all around me, like how a forest of trees screams after being enveloped by the licking flames of a raging wildfire. This borrowed confidence isn’t going to last long, and neither will the state of my pathetic, loose-limbed body.

A lot of things can happen when I drop the big question—I shower her workspace in chunks of undigested food, I hightail it out of the door and accidentally knock over some elderly lady in doing so, or I decide last-minute not to invite her and slug back to Gage with my tail between my legs—so I take it as a win when a string of unintelligible gibberish comes out of my mouth instead.

“Willyoubemyplus-onetomyfriend’swedding?”

I think Shiloh takes a moment to decode whatever it is I just said, and when she finally does, another smile is waiting for me— one that I haven’t seen before, and one that I hope she’ll grace me with during our three-week-long adventure.

“It’s, uh, a destination wedding. We would be traveling for it,” I clarify.

“Let me see if the shop can run without me for a bit.”

DISASTER STRIKES

SHILOH

No matter how much I clean my workstation, the prospect of being someone's plus-one to a wedding looms over my head like a rather intimidating venture. Fulton Cazzarelli isn't your average caffeine addict. He isn't some freakishly attractive stranger you only ever see once in a blue moon. He's Riverside's local celebrity, and the man I've secretly been crushing on ever since he fumbled over his coffee order and asked for a dairy-free macchiato instead of a dairy-free cappuccino.

I'm not a big personality. I don't command the attention of every room I walk into. I prefer to stay in the shadows where I can people watch from a safe distance and avoid socially straining situations. I'm just shy, I guess. Quiet. And I don't mind being invisible. But never in a million years would I have ever imagined that a world-renowned NHL player would ask me on a date. Or is it a date? I don't even know. Maybe it's a friendly furlough? Some kind of last-minute my-initial-date-abandoned-me-and-you're-the-backup? I mean, that alternative seems more believable than him reciprocating my unspoken feelings .

When he was standing in front of me, asking me to be his plus-one and looking like a heavenly angel, I wasn't even really considering the logistics of this whole agreement. I was too distracted by the way strands of his hair fell effortlessly into his espresso-colored eyes, how his bone structure was hewn to utter perfection by God's very own chisel (yet he still has some baby fat on his cheeks), how his ears turned the

slightest bit pink when he tripped over his words. Hell, I was all sweaty and nervous and my heart was skittering like some startled barn cat against the shelter of my ribs.

Why didn't you just say yes, Shiloh? This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for you! The Fulton Cazzarelli asked you to be his plus-one. You should've hung up your apron right then and there. Who knows if Mr. Right will come along again.

Well, there's always the possibility that Fulton's a serial killer moonlighting as a hockey player, and you would've been found limbless and stuffed in a suitcase somewhere off the coast of the Bahamas if you said yes.

But on a more realistic note, let's not forget that you have a full-time job to think about and a family business that you're trying to save because of how much your two loving, yet workaholic, parents sacrificed for you.

In my family, we follow the unspoken Vietnamese code of conduct, where a strong work ethic reflects a strong conscience. A sense of responsibility.

I'm Deja Brew's manager, and soon—fingers crossed—I'll be the sole owner of the business. My parents founded Deja Brew on nothing but a loose-pocketed down payment and an equally risky dream. They've nurtured this family-run shop for two and a half decades now, sharing generational recipes with the hoity-toity locals of soul-sucking SoCal. And when I was conceived on a not-so-platonic back seat rendezvous three nights before their wedding, I unknowingly became the inheritor of this quaint little legacy .

Work is...it's my partner, in simpler terms. I breathe, bleed, and sweat coffee. There's never a moment when I'm not thinking about my job. I haven't had a day off in...God, I don't even know how long. And it's not just because my parents are getting older and need the help.

My parents worked hard to build Deja Brew and keep us afloat when I was growing up, and I refuse to even imagine a future where money insecurity plagues my parents' retirement. Especially since my education ate up their nest egg. Not a day goes by where the guilt doesn't plague me. I never would've chosen a college degree over the well-being of my family, but that choice was made for me, and my parents are the ones (who shouldn't be) suffering the consequences. Because they went behind my back to pay for everything, I couldn't have declined their offer even if I wanted to, but I just...I wish I'd known so I could've fought harder—could've shown them the mistake they were making.

The business was rough when I was younger, until we saw an uptick in sales and lines were out the door. But now payroll is becoming a strain on the finances. Last month we had to lay off three baristas, which broke my mom's heart.

With the avaricious overflow of big chain coffee shops, our tiny, homemade, hole-in-the-wall shop is about to blink out of existence if we don't do something to increase revenue. My parents love this place. I love this place. It's an integral part of who I am as a person. Not only do I love having a purpose in life—especially if that purpose involves hospitality—but I've always wanted to help people ever since I was a little girl. I saw what poverty did to my family, and if there was a way for me to even be the smallest sliver of light in someone else's life, it was a role I'd take in a heartbeat.

My parents put their blood, sweat, and tears into this coffee shop for twenty-plus years, and now it's my legacy to uphold. Losing it isn't an option—it's just not. And maybe somewhere in my Fulton-uninfluenced subconscious, giving him an obscure answer was my way of choosing the business over some impromptu, too-good-to-be-true vacation with the man of my dreams.

I thought I had found the man of my dreams once before. Only my life turned into a nightmare when he demanded that I choose between my family's business and him. Which, as you can imagine, didn't turn out the way he wanted it to.

I've always wanted to feel special, wanted . Don't get me wrong, my parents treat me like I'm special and hold me in the highest regard, but it's not the same as being special in the sense of a romantic connection. Sometimes it feels like my parents are obligated to love me because we're bonded by blood.

I want to be loved by someone for my strengths, my flaws, my past, everything .

“Lo, this is so exciting! I can't believe you got asked out by the Fulton Cazzarelli!” my best friend, Revlon, squeals with a dreamy bat of her lashes.

I scrub meticulously at an impossible mystery stain, refusing to give her even a hint of satisfaction. “It wasn't like that.”

“It so was! Ooh, what are you going to wear? Where is he taking you? You should definitely pack that sexy one-piece bathing suit.”

Anxiety coats the back of my throat with the sour taste of nausea. “I didn't agree to go with him. I just said I'd have to see?—”

Revlon sits up like she's personally offended, and I'm glad our lack of revenue justified an early closing, otherwise she'd attract all kinds of attention with her theatrics. “What do you mean, you ‘ didn't agree to go with him ’?!”

I wince, finally surrendering to the discolored blemish staining my workspace. “I can't just abandon my job, Rev. ”

She pouts her bottom lip, disappointment suffusing her expression. “But we're talking about the guy you've liked for four years, Lo. Four. You finally have an excuse to get away from this hippie-infested dump, and you're not going to take it?”

“I wish I could take it, I do. But I can't just go off gallivanting whenever some

decently attractive man asks me to,” I insist, tossing my dish towel aside and wiping the back of my hand across my forehead. My legs are sore, my feet have sprouted some painful blisters, and this wooden death pit is hotter than Satan’s ball sack.

Revlon deadpans, “Fulton Cazzarelli is more than ‘decently attractive.’”

Touché, Revlon.

“You know what I mean.”

My best friend hops down from the counter, sighs rather exasperatedly, and points at me with both hands. “I know you’re not gonna want to hear this but…”

“Then don’t say it,” I singsong, slipping past her and working my way over to the tables, where I employ the last of my energy to haul the chairs overtop.

I’ve already had this exact talk with her a million times. She makes a comment about how I’m a prisoner of my job, I assure her I’m not, she doesn’t believe me, I change the subject, then we repeat the same conversation every few months.

I don’t have the mental bandwidth to endure one of her appreciated—yet unnecessary—motivational speeches. My bloodstream’s part caffeine, and my eyes burn from keeping them open for so long.

She hovers around me like a pesky fly, her words buzzing in one ear and out the other. “When will you start putting yourself first? I know this job means a lot to you, but surely you can take some time off. You deserve a break. If you keep going on like this, you’ll?— ”

“Work myself into an early grave,” I finish for her, situating another chair on the weathered tabletop.

Going through the motions, I make my rounds and clear the floor so I can sweep, stacking chair after chair as deep-seated regret begins to unspool in the tight clutches of my chest. I was perfectly content keeping that regret buried under employee schedules and inventory, alright? But nooo, Revlon had to go and dig it up like she always does just because I don't live the same life as her—a life full of spontaneity and adventure, unburdened by financial instability.

I'm not imprisoned here, okay? I like to work. I'd rather feel productive than waste away a perfectly good Friday night with booze, bad decisions, and men that'll tap it before inevitably ghosting you.

Revlon cuts off my trek toward the janitor's closet, standing in front of me with her arms crossed menacingly over her chest. She's huffing like an angry bull, the natural curls of her raven hair bouncing against her shoulders. But at the last moment—before I get the ass ripping I'm expecting—the anger dissipates from her body, soundless, colorless, odorless.

“Just picture it for a second. Please,” she begs.

My heart pinches. “Picture what?”

“Picture actually being happy for once.”

The statement catches me off guard—wounds me like a gun with the safety off—and I blink a couple of times to stave the pressure cropping up behind my eyes. The pressure that prefaces a waterfall of unshed, bubbling tears waiting to mangle my vision into nothing but a blurry mirage.

I am happy. I am. I love helping people, even if it's just something trivial like serving them a coffee order. Even if it's an act of kindness they'll probably never remember because they don't live their life wishing they were somewhere else.

What Revlon doesn't know is that I constantly war with the prospect of escaping—escaping from my responsibilities, escaping from Riverside, escaping from the hellscape that is my overactive imagination. My head and my heart want two different things, and I can't choose one without hurting the other.

“Think about it: you'd only be gone for what? A week at most? I'm sure your parents can handle the shop until you return. Hell, I'll pick up some shifts if it means getting your ass onto some fancy private jet with some overpriced champagne.”

Realistically, my leave shouldn't be too long. And though I hate to admit it, my parents wouldn't keep me from going on a personal vacation. In fact, they're constantly bugging me about getting out of the shop and doing something out of my comfort zone. They'd be ecstatic if I told them a handsome stranger had swept me off my feet.

“You always put everyone before yourself,” Revlon says, sympathy bleeding across the fine lines of her face. “Maybe it's finally time that you go after what you really want instead of always doing what's expected of you.”

“I—”

Before I can even try to scrounge up a rebuttal, there's a knock on the glass, and we both instantly turn our heads toward the source of the sound.

Fulton waves sheepishly at us from behind the door—backlit by a warm-toned ombre dripping across the sky—and I'm fast-walking toward him before my sensibility can stop me. I know I just saw him a few hours ago, but I can't help the excitement that flares inside me like an out-of-control firework...excitement that I haven't felt since I was a child.

Once I come face-to-face with him, the air is punched from my lungs, and I'm half-

positive I'm sporting a pretty vibrant blush that he'll have no trouble seeing in the fading light.

"Hi," I whisper breathlessly.

One disarming smile, and he's suddenly jump-starting all my hormones. "Hi. I, uh, sorry. I just forgot to get your number. And I also forgot to tell you that the trip is three weeks long...in Cabo."

Cabo? Oh my God. Cabo has been on my top five places to visit.

But three weeks is a long time. What if something bad happens to the shop while I'm gone? What if it gets taken out by a very realistic hurricane? What if my dad has a stroke out of nowhere? What if my mom gets hit by a getaway car full of dangerous fugitives while she's crossing the street?

I try to masquerade some of the internal panic. "Wow, that's..."

Fulton scratches the back of his neck, shaking free some more of that distractingly irresistible hair of his. God, it looks even softer up close. "I know it's a lot, so I totally understand if you're not on board with it, but everything will be paid for if you're worried about expenses."

That wasn't what I was worried about. Yet somehow, even with all the delusional disaster talk, a calm settles over me like the gentle suspension of waves over a shore of sun-warmed sand—sand I could feel curling between my toes a week from now. And I think it's solely because of Fulton. Like, his presence sedates me, which is ironic considering he's noticeably nervous.

He hands me his phone so I can input my contact information, and it takes everything in me not to accidentally drop it while he's watching my every move. When I give

him his phone back, I'm aware that he doesn't ask for mine.

Just say yes, Shiloh. You've had a crush on this guy for four years. Don't you think it's time you finally did something about it?

But even as those words linger on the tip of my tongue, I don't say what I'm dying to say, and instead of taking that leap out of my comfort zone, I hold my hand out for a fucking handshake. A handshake! Of all things.

I'd keel over from embarrassment if my body wasn't still trying to comprehend the unthinkable that I've just subjected us both to witness. My hand—slightly shaky and way sweatier than usual—just kind of protrudes between our bodies, waiting for some concession that'll allow me to slam the door in his face as soon as possible.

Being stuck on a beach with Fulton, in our swimwear, sticking it out for the long haul, is bound to be the most reckless decision I've ever considered. The last time I was intimate with someone was my ex, and that was nearly four years ago.

Not to mention that nobody—and I mean nobody —has had the effect that Fulton does on my psyche. Even the thought of touching him in any capacity (and yes, I do mean a handshake) makes me inexplicably lightheaded. I don't trust myself around him. Just look at him! He's so gorgeous that it shouldn't be possible for someone like him to exist—with his perfectly proportioned features and his hard hockey muscles and his boyish smile that makes everything south of the border tingle.

After minutes of contemplation—or shock, I really don't know—Fulton shakes my hand, and we both maintain an unnerving amount of eye contact with each other.

His weighted stare cuts through me, and I feel electricity sizzle between our fingers, imploring me to step closer and give him a real goodbye—a goodbye of the lip variation that definitely won't make him regret asking me to be trapped in an

aerodynamic metal can with him.

“I’ll get back to you,” I mumble, curbing those animalistic cravings with a too-wide smile. I can feel Revlon’s eyes on me, and I can practically hear her screaming at me to take life by the balls.

Fulton nods. “Yeah, of course. We leave in a few days. Friday.”

His arm falls away—leaving a distance that’s colder than the frosted air on an early-morning shift—and as I watch him walk dejectedly away from me, I can’t help but think I just gave him my unofficial answer.

I don’t know what the fuck I’m doing, which is probably very apparent by now. Both in regard to my job and my love life.

Seeing Fulton didn’t make my decision any easier, and Revlon’s pro-Fulton agenda definitely didn’t resolve any of my stress. The opportunity of a lifetime has just fallen into my lap—knocked there by a man who possesses one thing a red-blooded woman like me can never resist: genuine interest in me—and I’m not jumping for joy. Cabo is the commitment of all commitments.

The business is in hardship. Taking a self-indulgent trip during a time when my help is needed the most is selfish on so many levels. This isn’t just my parents’ business—it’s mine too. It’s a group effort. I have a responsibility to do my part just as much as they’re responsible for doing theirs.

There’ll be other Cabo trips, right? I’m sure there’ll be other opportunities for me to hang out with Fulton during my free hours, preferably close by where I can still monitor things.

I set the salad down at the table—its strips of green papaya looked far more

appetizing ten minutes ago than they do now—and I shuttle around robotically, placing the rest of the plates at everyone’s designated spots.

When I got home from work, the first thing I did was relay Fulton’s invitation to my parents, trying to keep my bias at bay so I could gauge their genuine reaction. And while a part of me was relieved when they said it would be good for me to expand my social circle, I haven’t been able to stop thinking about it ever since. They practically gave Fulton their blessing! (Yes, I’m aware that’s a term reserved for something more life-changing than this, but still!)

They didn’t even seem worried about the potential state of the business after my three-week leave of absence. They should be freaking out, right? They should be running around like chickens with their heads cut off. But no, they’d rather prioritize their own daughter’s happiness than the business that puts a roof over our heads, food in our bellies, and money in our pockets.

After spending far too long tossing the salad and garnishing it with roasted peanuts, I stubbornly take a seat and stare down at the perfectly grilled slab of beef sitting on my plate. Crispy on the outside, a little pink in the middle, glazed with a garlic herb sauce that I normally would’ve devoured by now.

But my belly binds, and I don’t even bother with picking up my fork. “Do you really think this trip is a good idea?” I ask my parents.

My mother—Mai—hums an affirmative, raking the prongs of her fork through her mix of carrots and bean sprouts. “Of course it is, sweetheart. You haven’t had a day away from work in years. Not even when you got pneumonia; you still insisted on overseeing the new hires. Plus, this could be your chance to make some new friends.”

“Your mother’s right. You worry too much about things that may never even happen, con gái . We’re gonna be fine without you here for a few weeks,” my

father—Cadeo—says around a mouthful of meat, not bothering to close his mouth as he chews.

I redirect my attention to the unripe papaya soaking in an excessive amount of sweet fish sauce. “I don’t have time to go on a trip. I was just doing payroll. Unless things turn around soon, we only have enough money for the next three months.”

“Your father and I have been talking about it, and we want to take out a small business loan,” my mom tells me.

Prickling with disapproval, I pick up my fork, pressing the handle firmly against my palm. “I’m not letting you take out another loan. You already did that for me in college.”

“You do everything for everybody else. It’s time you did something for yourself. Three weeks away isn’t going to make a difference. Maybe you need to come back with a clear head.”

My dad nods encouragingly, shifting his focus to his pile of white rice and digging in like he hasn’t had a decent meal in weeks. “We’re already speaking with the bank. I know you feel like this is solely your problem to fix, but it’s not. Just because we’re handing the business over to you doesn’t mean we won’t stop helping where we can.”

I forlornly push the beef around on my plate, and I know I have a penchant for pessimism, but the weight of my decision froths in my stomach. My pathetic attempt at a parry sticks sideways in my throat before I eventually speak.

“I don’t know if I can just uproot my life to spend three weeks with a bunch of people I’ve never even met before.”

Going to Cabo could be the greatest mistake of my life. One, there’s no guarantee my

parents will be able to get a business loan, and the odds of that happening goes down drastically without my assistance. And two, what if nothing even happens between me and Fulton? I don't know his friends, I don't know the itinerary, I get easily overstimulated, and I have so much on my mind. This is a disaster just waiting to happen.

A frown splits my mom's lips, and she reaches her hand out to rub my father's arm. "Can you give us a second, c?ng?"

With a resigned nod, my dad evacuates the premises, and the prospect of not only having to face my mother, but also the raw truth, pistons through every fiber of my being.

"I think you and I both know this is about more than just nerves," she says sympathetically.

I hate that she's right. I hate that she's not-so-forcefully forcing me to confront my stupid past and the baggage I've accumulated from it. No matter how hard I try to smoke the memories out, they're always lingering in the liminal spaces of my mind .

"Love and business don't mix," I state, brooking no room for argument.

"Not everyone is like Ace."

Ah, yes. Ace Jameson. The first boy who ever broke my heart, and the last one who will ever get the chance. He can shit in his hands and clap for all I care. He preyed on my naivety and forgiveness in the first serious relationship I was ever in, and if you ask me, life dealt me some seriously fucked-up cards. I was stupid to believe that he truly loved me, though the flowers and the tide of expensive gifts were convincing.

When the business started to falter, requiring me to work more hours, he gave me an

ultimatum—either I could choose to be his girlfriend, or I could choose to be my family’s “pack mule.”

It was never a competition. My family was always going to come first.

“He said he loved me, Mom. But clearly not enough.”

“Don’t let him ruin other people for you, Shiloh. If you don’t make time for love, you’re never going to find it.”

In the moment, I imagine what it would feel like to be wrapped up in Fulton’s arms somewhere far, far away from the mundaneness of my less-than-extraordinary life. What it would feel like to be kissed by him.

“Right now, I don’t have any extra time,” I insist.

My mother—love’s number one supporter, having been happily married to my father for thirty years—just smiles at me knowingly. In fact, her optimism is nauseating.

“Sure you do. Your dad and I just gave you three weeks off.”

3

BETTER LUCK NEXT TIME

FULTON

I knew I was bad at flirting, but I didn't think I was handshake bad. Judging by how poorly that interaction went, I can kiss the fantasy of skipping into the sunset with Shiloh goodbye. I freaked her out. Not only that, but I stood outside of her work like a stalker just to talk to her again. Normal people don't do that!

Asking her out on a date is one thing, but asking her to fly to another country to stay with me for three weeks? Hell, if I was her, I'd probably be changing my phone number and deadbolting my doors. This is the start to every Dateline case, and I'm not sure why, but Shiloh seems like the kind of girl to know her fair share of Krav Maga.

"I blew it," I groan.

Gage—who's watching my misery unfold before him—arches a brow. "How? All you did was ask her, right?"

"Yeah, and then she looked at me like I was crazy and gave me a handshake." I face-plant into the couch, effectively obstructing my words so my teammates won't hear the embarrassment lodged in my throat.

"Come on, Ful. I bet it wasn't as bad as you think," my captain—Bristol—consoles,

sitting down next to me and patting me on the back. Although the gesture is thoughtful, it only exacerbates my hopelessness.

Bristol's a great guy, one of the nicest I've ever met. He's the team's built-in therapist. He pretty much has a solution for everything, and unlike the rest of my idiotic roommates, he doesn't kick me when I'm down or laugh at my (frankly expected) female-related failures.

My lungs empty a drawn-out sigh. "I'm never stepping foot out of this house again."

Even though my vision is impaired, I don't have to clock the face to match the annoyingly arrogant voice that interrupts the conversation. It's deep, thick, and has this I-know-everything drawl to it that I've become familiarized with too many times to count. In fact, this exact voice haunts me in my nightmares—usually the ones where I'm publicly humiliated or missing pertinent clothing.

"You're a hot, twenty-something bachelor with an endless bank account. What girl in her right mind would say no to that?" Kit butts in.

Still debating the most painless way to kill myself, I roll onto my back, glance at the giant man taking up the entire doorway and reroute my gaze to the bleak ceiling above me. "Shiloh's not like other girls," I mutter under my breath, dejection coming to a screaming boil in the pit of my chest.

"Did you ever think that maybe she's just as nervous as you are?" he asks.

Hayes, the soon-to-be husband, is just the salesman I don't need promising me happily-ever-afters wrapped in a pretty little bow. "Yeah, a handshake isn't always a bad thing. Maybe she just didn't want to make you uncomfortable by going in for a hug."

Gage nods in Hayes' direction. "Blondie has a point. You've got to give yourself some credit, dude. Not every woman you meet is repulsed by you. Shit, if I was gay, I'd let you tap this."

The whole room riots with unrestrained laughter, but I can't even find it in myself to join in with a hollow chuckle or a fake smile. All I can think about is Shiloh...and the possibility that I've just ruined the chance of anything happening between us.

We had a good thing going, alright? Sure, if you asked any of the guys, they'd say that my "thing" was less of a thing and more of a—ahem—"delusional projection of my innermost desires," but there was something there. It was like this unspoken understanding between us. A symbiotic relationship of sorts, where I'm the tiny Egyptian plover bird cleaning her teeth, and she's the intimidating (yet nonthreatening) crocodile who protects me. I pay her in compliments, and she pays me in the priceless gift of getting to breathe the same air as her.

I slowly pull myself up into a sitting position, and Gage plops down next to me, jostling the couch and spurring the anxiety permanently residing in my gut. He's looking at me like he's about to deliver the news that my mother just died on the operating table and there was nothing the doctors could do to save her.

"You and what's her name have spoken before, right?" he asks.

I sigh dreamily, feeling some of my tightly wound nervousness ebb upon remembrance. I don't just remember the exact date I spoke to Shiloh—I remember everything she said to me.

On January ninth, she asked me if I wanted my nondairy raspberry tart heated up, and when I told her no, she said, "I feel like food tastes weird when it's warm, you know? It gets all mushy and gross. Cold food is so much better. You don't burn your tongue on anything, and the texture is consistent. I can't eat hot-and-ready pizza. I have to

order it a day before I actually want to eat it so I can have it cold the following day.” And my God, was that the most insightful, thought-provoking, intelligent hot take I’ve ever heard in my entire life. She’s right, of course. There’s something about cold, day-old pizza that hits differently.

I even remember the outfit she was wearing: a burgundy sweater underneath her work apron. Red suits her. It’s one of my favorite colors on her, but she looks good in anything she wears. I don’t think it’s physically possible for her to make a piece of clothing look unappealing.

“Shiloh,” I supply.

“Okay. You and Shiloh have spoken before, and it obviously must’ve gone well if she kept wanting to speak to you during her shift.”

My eyebrows draw together in confusion, and I shake a few cobwebs loose in my head. “What do you mean?”

Gage grabs the cap of my shoulder and gives it a squeeze. “Here’s how I look at it. If she really didn’t want to talk to you again, she would’ve avoided you when you came into the shop, yeah? Maybe asked one of her coworkers to take your order instead. But you told us that you two had a legitimate conversation, and she even complimented you. That’s huge! You’ve got charisma, Ful. Somewhere deep, deep inside.”

“Thank you? I think?”

The widening gorge of self-deprecation inside me seems to be retracting its monstrous fangs, but jumping to conclusions is a sport I have a gold medal in. I always expect the worst so disappointment can never creep up on me. It’s just easier that way.

Shiloh has a conventional job. She can't just up and leave whenever she wants to. She has commitments, friends, family, a completely separate life that I probably don't even fit into. I'm just a returning customer. That's all I am to her. To think that we're going to be like one of Aeris' rom-coms is preposterous. Strangers don't jet to Cabo for three weeks and instantly gain feelings for one another in that short a time.

What was I thinking? I wasn't! And that handshake sealed my fate. I didn't expect her to leap into my arms or anything, but I wasn't expecting her to look so... terrified

Kit grumbles to himself, reaches for my discarded phone on the coffee table, and begins to twiddle his thumbs away. "Since you're clearly going to lose sleep over this, let's get it sorted out right now."

There's a chalky taste on my tongue, like the remnants of an undissolved pill. "What?"

"I'm just going to text her?—"

I think my heart just dropped to my ass. He's going to...WHAT? I barely trust myself to text her, but Kit? KIT? He's going to blow everything up. And not from a safe distance either. No, he's going to charge headfirst with one of those suicide vests on, blow himself and everyone in a ten-foot radius up, and leave me with the fallout...if I even survive the initial blast.

I don't remember ever moving as fast as I do—not even on the ice—and I lunge for my phone, only to have Kit dodge me with those annoyingly honed reflexes of his. He jogs around the back of the couch while giggling maniacally, and I'm huffing for air as I chase after him. Realistically, me catching Kit would be like a mouse catching a grizzly bear, so I was pretty much doomed from the beginning.

“Kit, I swear—” I yell at him, a whip of fire wrapping around my thighs with each labored stride. I definitely regret not hitting legs the other day at the gym.

Kit’s not even breathless as he taunts me. “Dear Shiloh. I haven’t stopped thinking about you since you shook my hand today. It was the greatest moment of my life. I think I’m in love with you?—”

“You guys are just going to stand there and watch my love life go down the drain?” I exclaim as I brace myself on my knees.

Gage gives me an unhelpful shrug, and as I try to siphon more air into my burning lungs, Bristol snatches the phone from Kit’s grasp so fast that it practically teleports in a flurry of gray.

“Hey!” Kit says.

Bristol tosses me my phone, flicks Kit on the forehead, and then proceeds to give the entire room one of his disapproving captain looks. “What’s the first rule of being a Reaper?” he echoes in that stentorian voice of his.

“Don’t drink straight out of the Brita?” Hayes answers.

“Don’t be dicks to each other,” Bristol corrects in a clipped tone.

I quickly glance at the text, and a rush of relief shudders through me like balmy air through fronds of swaying palms. Kit might be a dick, but he’s not a big enough one to actually send it.

I begin to delete the absolutely idiotic paragraph taunting me—which teeters on the tightrope between the truth and the slightly more exaggerated truth—and then shit hits the fan. Because not only do I fail to delete the text message that has the potential

to ruin my love life, but I accidentally send half of Kit's stupid text to Shiloh with a slip of my thumb.

Dear Shiloh. I haven't stopped thinking about you since you shook my hand today. It was the g

Oh. My. God.

Unadulterated terror surges through my bloodstream, circling my heart and looking for the tiniest tear to wiggle its way into the rapidly thrumming muscle.

What have I just done? I look like a fucking creep. If I was worried about her declining my invitation before, she definitely has a good reason to now.

Stupid Kit! This is all his fault. I wouldn't be in this situation if it wasn't for him trying to bust my balls. Maybe...maybe she won't look at it. Yeah, she probably doesn't even know who's texting her. I could be anyone, really. It's not like I signed my name or anything. She probably shook hands with a ton of people today.

"I sent it," I whisper under my breath.

Casen, our tough-as-nails defenseman, immediately abandons his sandwich fixings.

"You did what?"

"It was an accident!"

Gage's face flushes, and it would be comical if it wasn't for the severity of the situation. "Holy shit. You need to block her. Now."

My hands shake as they fumble with the small device that now dictates my fate, fear throttling my helpless body with hands of ice. "I can't do that! How will we stay in

touch?”

“I don’t know, man, but this is a level one security threat. She’s hit the Pentagon.”

“There’s a possibility she won’t even look at it,” Bristol offers, trying to placate the frenzy that’s shot straight into the anxiety-charged atmosphere. Everyone’s looking around at one another for a solution, all while the life-ending possibility of Shiloh reading my text increases by the minute.

I need a bag to hyperventilate into.

I start pacing around the room, busying my legs even though there’s still a searing sensation beneath my muscles, and all my thoughts turn into a slurry of worst-case scenarios. The guys are all shouting out a next plan of action, but I don’t hear anything over the deafening gallop of my heart.

You’re such an idiot, Fulton! No wonder you have no game. Hell, you couldn’t even win a girl’s heart if you were given a head start. Get used to the single life, because there’s no way on God’s green earth that you’ll make it past anything but the friend zone.

“Fuck, Ful. I’m so sorry,” Kit apologizes, raking his hand through the front of his hair

.

I’m about to ameliorate his guilt when a ringing peals through the air, and every set of eyes latch onto the device vibrating in my trembling hands. The one time I actually wouldn’t mind a scammer calling, and I get Shiloh’s number splayed across my screen like a flashing billboard.

“Shit!” I scream, instinctively chucking my phone toward the nearest body—which just so happens to be Gage’s.

Gage manages to catch it before it crashes to the ground, and he juggles it like a hot potato. “I don’t want it!”

“Neither do I!”

Without so much as a heads-up, the device goes flying into the hands of another teammate, rendering Hayes stock-still as he stares down at the magnified numbers.

I cautiously approach him with my arm outstretched like he’s some feral stray. “Don’t answer it, Hayes.”

Kit stands next to him, mouth twisted into a grimace. “Don’t do it, dude.”

There’s an interval of five seconds where no one even breathes , and then, of course, Hayes disregards all our warnings and answers the call with a disturbing amount of nonchalance. “Yello?”

Fuck. Fuck. FUCK! I can’t hear anything on the other side, but judging by Hayes’ earnest nods, I can only assume she’s cussing him out or threatening to get a restraining order against me.

Hayes raises his eyebrows. “You want to talk to Fulton?”

I shake my head rapidly.

“Yeah, he’s available. He’s actually right next to me.”

I’m going to kill you, Hayes Hollings.

Before I can flee the scene like a wanted criminal, Hayes thrusts the phone into my face, and I scramble to press it to my ear, hoping that the microphone won’t pick up

how utterly breathless I am .

“Uh, hello?” I answer, wiping the back of my hand across my sweaty forehead.

“Fulton? It’s Shiloh. From Deja Brew. I got your text.”

Even through the crackling speaker, her voice is a balm to my nerves, soft in cadence and so beautifully melodic that each word from her lips cocoons my eardrums. It’s funny how she thinks she needs to explain who she is, as if I haven’t been dreaming about this moment for years.

“Hey, Shiloh!”

Less enthusiastic, dude.

I clear my throat, deepen my voice, and try not to sound like a teenage boy going through a second puberty. “Hey, Shiloh.”

“I hope I’m not interrupting anything. I saw your text and wanted to reach out. I didn’t really know how to respond to it,” she admits, her tone curling around a modicum of embarrassment.

Heat blooms in my cheeks, and I’m glad I can’t see the subsequent redness that I assume is rushing beneath the surface. “About that—I’m so sorry. That probably came off as?—”

“Oh, no! Sorry. I didn’t mean it as a bad thing. I thought it was sweet,” she clarifies.

She thought it was sweet?

Some of the tension in my shoulders deflates. “Oh.”

She giggles. “Oh.”

Thankfully, I made the smart decision not to put her on speaker so my teammates could eavesdrop on our conversation, but that hasn't stopped them from trying. I slip into one of the unoccupied rooms down the hall for a little more privacy, and once I shut the door, I slide my back down the partition.

I exhale a breath of relief, feeling the visceral discomfort in my chest snuff out within seconds. “Is everything okay?”

Her voice quiets just a smidge, belying that sturdy exterior I've come to associate with her. “Yeah, everything is fine! I just had a few questions for you, if you're open to talking right now?”

I have all the time in the world to talk to you.

A smile claims purchase over my mouth. “Yeah, of course. Ask away.”

“I know you said you were going to cover the expenses, but I really think I should pay my way.”

“I'm inviting you on a trip, Shiloh. I'm not gonna let you spend a penny, okay? It's really not that expensive.”

She snorts. “Coming from the guy who makes seven figures a year.”

My pulse trips against the thin skin of my wrist. God, this girl gets my heart beating like no close-match game ever has before. “I'm serious. This is my treat.”

There are a few beats of silence, but she eventually changes the subject. “What about the sleeping arrangement? Are we sharing a room?”

I'm not sure how well I tamp down the obvious nerves that flare up among some PG bedroom fantasies, but I practically choke on my own saliva when she springs the question. The hotel said that the suite I booked included two queen-sized beds, but sharing a room could lead to so many treacherous factors. What if...what if I keep her up with my snoring? What if I'm secretly a sleep talker?

"Yeah, if that's okay with you. There are two queen-sized beds for us to sleep in. Separately. Very separately. Far away, even."

"So you don't want to sleep in a bed next to me?"

A drop of perspiration dribbles down my temple, my heart badgers unrelentingly against my chest, and some parts of me tingle that should be on a no-tingle basis. "What? No! I didn't mean...I, uh, I just meant that I respect women. I'd never ask a woman to sleep with me unless she wants to. Which I have experienced before, in case you were wondering."

"Is that so?" she drawls, which definitely doesn't help with the aforementioned tingles. They're storming through me, wreaking havoc on my hormones and conjuring up this image of Shiloh in her sleepwear, only a few inches from me.

Wave the white flag! Fess up! Don't dig yourself a deeper hole.

Considering my brain is the consistency of wet tissue paper, I'm not surprised that I've spouted some barefaced lies during this conversation, but I am surprised at just how unconvincingly bad I've made them out to be.

"Oh, yeah. I love sleeping with women. It really gets the blood going. I do it. All the time. And...a lot."

Fulton, the only time you've touched a pair of boobs was when you accidentally fell

into a store cutout of Flo from Progressive.

“I didn’t realize you were such a hot commodity, Cazzarelli.”

She just last named me. Shit. That sounds way too good coming out of her mouth.

“Does that mean you’ll accept my invitation?” I ask, desire brimming in my belly.

Her breath hitches, and I’m not sure whether it was deliberate or not.

“I guess we’ll just have to see how far those flirtation skills of yours get you.”

4

ANXIETY AIRLINES

SHILOH

I 'm so late. I thought I had managed my time well, but apparently looking for the freakishly expensive pair of sunglasses I bought on a whim when the business was booming was very time-consuming. And I can't step foot in Cabo without the necessary eye protection.

I run through the airport as fast as my short legs can manage, my oversized backpack bouncing against my spine with every stride, and my small carry-on nearly tripping other pedestrians with my frenetic movements.

I'm going to miss my flight. Fuck. Oh, fuck. I should've abandoned the sunglasses! I could have just bought new ones in Cabo!

Not that I have time to stare at the relatively calm and relaxed bystanders who got to the airport two hours ahead of their flight time, but I can definitely feel all their sympathetic gazes flashing blurrily in my periphery. As anxiety's ever-widening maw ensnares me, the ticking time bomb of my heart enters red territory with ten seconds to go before I either break down and cry, or sneak onto that goddamn plane with nothing but the clothes on my back and my nonexistent dignity.

"Excuse me! Sorry! Coming through!" I shout as I maneuver past human-sized obstacles, finally beginning to feel my thighs protest from the exertion.

Gate B22. Almost there. I just passed B19. I can do this. I can make it. I have to...for Fulton.

Originally, I had my reservations about this whole far-fetched trip, but deep down, I think I always knew what I was going to do. My heart usually isn't this combative. My heart usually understands that my head takes the reins when it comes to work, my social life, things in general, etcetera. But it was adamant that I board that plane and grow closer to the one man I haven't been able to stop thinking about.

I really need to exercise more.

Finally, as Gate B22 comes into view, I locate a conveyor belt of people beginning to board, and I'd wave my arms and screech like a lunatic if I weren't lugging twenty-six pounds of junk behind me. Nevertheless, with my legs screaming in agonizing pain, I practically catapult myself over to the boarding area, right in front of?—

“Shiloh?”

Fulton's towering frame stands before me, his voice softened with the last dregs of exhaustion as it drags over me in a way-too-sexy rasp. He's not dressed in anything fancy, but that doesn't mean the grey sweatpants and the Reapers hoodie isn't doing anything for me. Because it is. Oh, it so is. He looks so... comfy. Like a pretty good headrest for a two-hour flight.

I wipe the sweat off my forehead in a very unladylike manner. “Hi! Hi. I'm so sorry I'm late. There was this whole fiasco back at my house, but, uh, I'm here now! Ready to go to Cabo!”

Fulton looks me up and down with heavy-lidded eyes, his lips rucking up into a tired smile. “I'm glad you came. I was beginning to think you weren't gonna show.”

Adoration swoops in my belly, fighting against an influx of butterflies all determined to turn my cheeks sanguine. “I wouldn’t miss you for the world,” I assure him.

He arches an eyebrow. “Me?”

“It! I wouldn’t miss it for the world,” I quickly correct, an infestation of nerves spidering throughout my body.

I mentally kick myself for how uncool I sound. Not to mention that I’m still trying to catch my breath after I sprinted across half of the airport. My hair’s a rat’s nest of tangles, I have purple bags under my eyes from a restless night of sleep, and my sweatshirt has so many holes in it that I hardly think it can be considered a sweatshirt anymore.

Fulton, on the other hand, looks as handsome as he always does. His hair is dangerously fluffy with the right number of loose strands falling into his eyes, and even though his attire hangs baggy on his frame, I know there’s an acreage of defined muscle underneath. If there’s anything to envy about men (which isn’t a lot), it’s their ability to get ready in less than ten minutes and look disturbingly put-together.

Since I come up to Fulton’s bicep, it’s easy for me to track the bob of his throat, and he rolls his shoulders back, the set of his jaw practically knifelike in its sharpness. He looks...nervous? He also looks like he’s about to say something, and whatever it is, it’s difficult for him to articulate.

“You look really pretty,” he blurts out, his voice splintering with a not-so-discreet crack.

I blink a few times, looking up at him with a hefty dose of confusion. “What?”

Fulton doesn’t hesitate, which is actually quite uncharacteristic of him. When his eyes

deadlock with mine, my heart starts chugging erratically in my chest, and all the saliva in my mouth suddenly evaporates.

“You look really pretty, Shiloh,” he repeats, his tone darkening a shade just above irresistible, and it makes the less sensible parts of me fantasize about some after-dark activities that have no business loitering in my sexed-up head.

I don't know what to say. One, I wasn't expecting anyone to compliment this disaster of an ensemble, let alone Fulton. Two, I'm so lovestruck by him that there's absolutely no working brain cell on-site to remedy this self-inflicted mortification.

Much to my dismay, the ache in my jaw tells me that my mouth was, in fact, hanging open this entire time, and I do my best to disperse the nervous flutters with a scratchy throat clear. “Thank you. You look very ha?—”

Considering I'm running on four hours of sleep and have since been exposed to Fulton's hot-guy fumes, my spatial awareness has taken a long hike south, which means I don't anticipate the gargantuan body that comes speeding into my side. One second my feet are firmly planted on the ground, and the next, I'm flailing in the air and being crushed by arms the size of pythons. My carry-on clatters to the ground, and my backpack whams against my spine with enough force to make me wince. I squeal like I'm being kidnapped in broad daylight, but it's drowned out beneath the ambient cooing coming from all around me.

“Fulton, you didn't tell us how beautiful she was!”

“Dude, you weren't kidding when you said she was out of your league.”

When my “captor” releases me, I vacuum up lungfuls of air, checking to make sure all my body parts are still intact. Once I'm certain that my bones haven't cracked in three different places, I make the mistake of glancing up. Because there, before me,

stands the tallest and biggest man I have ever seen, staring down at me like I'm a naive little field mouse who just scurried into the lion's den. He's...it would take at least two and a half of me to reach his height. He eclipses everyone in the airport, and it doesn't help that he's built like a bear. He's muscular in a bulky way, with a barrel chest and a softness to his midsection that flaunts a love for home-cooked meals.

"You must be Shiloh," he bellows from above me, the epitome of intimidation, with enviably straight teeth and a face that could send all the menopausal moms in this airport into cardiac arrest.

I nod silently.

"I'm Kit. Fulton and I go way back. I'm kind of his sex guru," he confesses in a whisper, waggling his eyebrows.

"You know this guy?" I ask Fulton, picking up my suitcase.

Fulton mirrors my line of sight, gives Kit an unamused once-over, then shrugs. "Never seen that man before in my entire life."

"He's lying! You know what? You just lost your place in the running to be Eda's godfather."

A blond man of ridiculous height—or maybe I just think that of everyone since I'm the size of a large FedEx box—gripes from the group that's been standing with Fulton this entire time. "I thought I was going to be her godfather."

Kit pats the blond on the shoulder sympathetically. "You're still our number one choice, but some of the guys bring good qualities to the table."

A woman with long, wavy, brunette hair joins the conversation, and the cutest baby

dangles from a Baby Bjorn strapped to her chest. I'm a sucker for babies. They're so adorable. And this one's wearing a pink onesie, further complemented by two matching bows in her wisps of hair.

"We haven't decided yet," she clarifies, glaring daggers at her partner, whom I'm assuming is the giant responsible for creating the mini giant straining against that flimsy-looking baby prison.

The two men start arguing rather animatedly in line, and the brunette relinquishes a sigh, a crescent smile embellishing her pink lips. "Sorry about them. I'm Faye. It's lovely to meet you," she greets, opting for an awkward lean and handshake while simultaneously bouncing her fussy baby.

I shake her hand, and the unease that's been poisoning my bloodstream seems to recede when an undercurrent of warmth and contentment replaces it instead. "It's nice to meet you too."

I'm about to say something else when I'm interrupted by a volcanic eruption of cries from the baby glued to her chest. Fat tears sluice down her rosy, cherubic cheeks while her chubby arms and legs swing about haphazardly.

Faye's practically on the brink of tears herself. "I'm sorry. This is Eda's first time flying. She's not used to the environment yet."

"It's okay!" I rush out. "Airports are overstimulating even if you aren't a baby. I can only imagine what's going on in that tiny head of hers."

Kit's locked in within point two seconds, and he crouches down to tickle baby Eda's feet, cooing beneath his breath and pulling all sorts of overexaggerated faces to try and calm her down. It's polarizing, to be honest. I was facing down a scary, tattooed wall of muscle a minute ago, and now I'm watching the same man at the mercy of his

little girl, fretting in a high-pitched voice.

I'm not sure if it's appropriate for me to offer them any help considering I'm a complete stranger, but I can already pinpoint the genesis of scandalized gasps rippling through the small crowd in our section, so I'd be doing a disservice if I didn't step in, right? Everyone already knows the silent, universal consensus that babies don't belong on airplanes.

Thinking quickly, I make a beeline toward one of the water fountains nearby and wet my hand underneath the spout. When I jog back to the group, Faye and I share an implicit look before I hesitantly reach my damp hand out to touch Eda's cheek. Eda squirms like a menace, nearly bursting my eardrum as she wails at a frequency you'd think only dogs could hear, but the second my hand makes contact with her cheek, it's like a switch flips. The crying and kicking stop, and even the angry canyon between her faint eyebrows smooths into a plateau.

Kit and Faye regard me with expressions of both shock and relief, and I can practically feel their combined worry taper off into a state of impotency.

Faye's voice pitches low. "How did you?—"

"It's a trick my mom used on me when I was a baby and wouldn't stop crying," I tell her nonchalantly, wiping my hand on the leg of my sweatpants.

Kit looks like he's about to fall to his knees and praise the heavens above. "Fulton, you have to keep this girl," he says, throwing figurative lighter fluid on the heat already blistering beneath my cheeks.

When I casually glance back at Fulton, the tips of his ears have gone stark red.

Before Kit can make another...suggestive...comment, Fulton cuts him off with an

inopportune squawking noise. I'm not sure if he actually means to touch me, but he does so instinctively, turning me toward his remaining friends. Aside from that stupid handshake I forced him into, we've never touched each other before this.

And fuck, does it feel... right . Invigorating. Exhilarating. A ground-shattering explosion from a long-dormant volcano, a technicolor burst of energy set to paint the sky in brushstrokes of fire. It's hard to put the sensation into words. It's beautifully dangerous—the kind of danger that showers you with adrenaline and fear in the same breath, that poses the very real risk of taking your life at any wrong move, yet still entices you to chase after the deadly thrill of it.

“Shiloh, this is, uh, the rest of the guys and their partners.”

“Hi, I'm Aeris!” one of the girls squeals, bulldozing into me to give me the second hug of the day. She's a lot smaller than Kit, but I think she has him beat for the tightest hug in the world. “We met at Deja Brew, but I doubt you remember me. You brought me and my friend some coffee cake.”

I knew she looked familiar. I remember: I brought them some of our famous post-breakup coffee cake, which I assumed was the reason behind her poor friend crying her eyes out. Men are the unknowing culprits behind most of our coffee cake sales.

“Of course I remember you,” I chuckle into her shoulder, which, by the way, smells like lavender heaven. “You and your friend were the highlight of my shift that day.”

When Aeris pedals back, she pretends to fan her face. “Oh, you're too sweet! Sorry, I'm prone to tears easily.”

Her long lashes skirt the hills of her cheekbones when she blinks, and she crinkles her nose in what I think is an attempt to halt the waterworks. “How long have you worked as a barista?”

“My whole life. Deja Brew is my family’s business. You probably couldn’t tell, but, uh, I’m actually the manager.”

Aeris doesn’t look surprised in the least. “The way you handled a distraught Lila? No, I could definitely tell. Compassion like that can’t be taught. You were practically a one-woman army that day, and Trivia Thursdays are no joke for the caffeine addicts.”

“Thanks. Yeah, I love my job, but it’ll be nice to have a break for once,” I admit, an insurmountable monsoon of flattery washing over me. I’m not used to talking about work with people outside of my immediate circle, so being praised for it is a whole different ballgame.

Unable to hide her excitement, she shows me the giant showstopper of a ring on her finger, an equally large smile adorning her lips. “Well, I’m glad I could be of service. I’m the bride-to-be!”

My eyes practically bug out of my head. “Congratulations! Holy cow, how do you keep your hand steady with that rock? ”

The ring is beautiful—an all-American diamond with the most breathtaking silver band. It makes sense that it belongs on Aeris’ hand seeing as she’s, well, drop-dead gorgeous herself. Aeris only looks to be a few inches taller than me, and I mean this in the most respectful way possible, but this girl has more curves than an hourglass (and more curves than I’ll ever have in my entire life). I’m rocking what I like to call the “Prepubescent Teen Boy Build,” except with a little bit of heft in the boob and ass areas. I used to hate looking like a poster board with two small Styrofoam cups on my chest, but I’ve grown to accept it.

“My fiancé’s a bit extreme,” she whispers, and the tail end of her sentence morphs into a giggle before the aforementioned fiancé quite literally sweeps her off her feet and into his strapping arms.

Hockey players. Right. They're all sculpted with unimaginable muscles.

Her fiancé's the blond that spoke earlier, and I don't like to toot my own horn, but I'm kind of a pro when it comes to matching faces with names. You have to be when you work in customer service.

He's got these surfer dude good looks, minus the greasy Fabio hair. Kind of like the really hot lifeguard you see on your summer vacation who's way too old for you. Blue eyes, dimples, hair that does that little swoop thing.

"That's Hayes," Fulton adds, then he shifts his attention to the rest of the Reaper (and Friends) Collective.

"The redhead is Cali, the brunet stuck to her is Gage, the other brunet with the freakishly good bone structure is Bristol, the blonde next to him is Lila, and the married lovebirds are Casen and Josie."

Hayes, Aeris, Faye, Kit, Cali, Gage, Bristol, Lila, Casen, Josie. Easy-peasy. And they're all disturbingly attractive. I recognize Lila as the friend who was with Aeris, and if my suspicions are correct—which they usually are—her significant other must be the scoundrel behind the streusel. Whatever happened between them, they must've made up.

The line shuffles forward, but the gate agent has been arguing with an elderly lady for the past ten minutes, so I doubt we'll be boarding before the estimated time. With everyone talking to their respective partner, I acknowledge the closeness of my body to Fulton's, and I pray that the courage inside me won't pull a disappearing act when I need it the most.

I break the silence between us, wholly focused on the toes of my worn-out shoes. I'd definitely never be able to afford a trip like this in my lifetime. The closest thing I'd

get to Cabo is a postcard from some sketchy gas station.

“Thanks again for inviting me.”

“Huh? Oh, yeah. Of course. Everyone wants you here,” he insists, his tone bloated with a comforting warmth that I’ve never known before—like hot cocoa on an early winter’s morning, scaring away the frostbite that’s flown in from the tenebrous night before.

That’s enough of a compliment to inflate my ego, but of course, Fulton has to go the extra mile when he clarifies: “I want you here.”

Uh-oh. That’s not good. I mean, it is good, but it’s not good for the state of my already-drained body. He’s being too sweet. He’s looking too good. It’s a widely known fact that those two facets mixed with forced proximity results in quite the chemical reaction.

Stop it, Shiloh. You can’t be so careless with your heart. What happened to practicing love celibacy after Ace the Ass?

But Fulton’s nothing like Ace. Why are you nipping this thing in the bud before it even starts?

Because emotional pain is irreversible.

And regret isn’t ?

Ugh, I don’t have time to argue with myself!

After twelve hundred years of waiting, we finally get our tickets scanned, and our whole party boards the airplane. The minute I step into my temporary living space for

the next two and a half hours, I freeze like one of those fainting goats. I'd been so distracted with Fulton and his friends that I hadn't really confronted the fact that I'd be flying—in a metal death contraption—over miles of water and pointy mountains and literally anything else that would make for a rough landing spot if we hypothetically had to jump ship (plane).

You see, I failed to mention a rather important complication because I didn't want to be a Debbie Downer, but now that I'm five minutes away from being catapulted into the goddamn sky, it looks like the truth's coming out one way or the other—in a nonsensical word vomit or actual vomit, because I'm deathly afraid of flying.

I should've told Fulton the truth, okay? I should've told him the moment we started talking about Cabo, but I didn't want to create a problem. Flying is the fastest way to get to Cabo. I wasn't going to make this man and his ten friends road trip down the entire state just to accommodate me.

I'll just suck it up. Yeah, it'll be fine. It's only a two-hour flight. On average, there are only one thousand and three hundred plane crashes annually. That's, um, not that bad! There are sixteen million flights handled every year. That's a 0.008125 percent chance of me dying in a plane crash today.

As we approach our first-class seats, Fulton and I find that there's a teenage girl sitting across the aisle with her headphones on.

“Do you want the window or the aisle?” Fulton asks me.

When I gulp, a little bit of stomach acid splashes the back of my throat. “Aisle is fine.”

I'm about to try and lift my carry-on into the compartment above, but before I can even fully outstretch my arms, Fulton's already depositing it for me. I mouth a

grateful thank you as I shimmy past him. I nudge my backpack into the alcove near my feet, trying to wipe the I'm-gonna-shit-my-pants expression off my face before Fulton suspects anything's wrong.

Small spaces are a big no go. Small spaces in the air or underwater? NEVER IN A MILLION YEARS. We're humans, okay? We were designed to walk on land . We shouldn't be forty thousand feet off the ground. It's not normal.

But my irrational fear of flying didn't stem from watching too many fatal plane crash videos on the internet when I was a teenager. My difficulty with small spaces and a lack of control began all the way back in my childhood.

I had a good childhood. Pretty cookie-cutter. Well, I mean, everything was great except for the money side of things. My parents allotted a lot of their time to growing and honing our family-run business, so I didn't get to spend nearly as much time with them as I wanted. They were always so busy, but I couldn't fault them for it. We were a family of workaholics who thought "quality" time consisted of taking inventory together. Anyways, that's not important. What is important is the wretched day of January twenty-ninth, aka, the day that changed everything.

Chinese New Year festivities were going on, as they typically did. My family and I always went over to my aunt's house since she lived on acres of land. Even though I'm an only child, I have a boatload of cousins who all come around during the holidays. And what happens when you leave a flock of rabid children unsupervised for a day? False imprisonment, that's what.

One of my knucklehead cousins—twice removed on my dad's side—thought it would be oh-so-funny to dare me to traverse my aunt's dank (and most likely haunted) cellar. None of us were brave enough to venture into that subterranean hellhole. It was creepy, it was dark, it was ninety-five percent cobwebs, and our aunt forbade us from getting into her old junk down there. I didn't want to step foot down those

rickety stairs, but a dare was a dare, and I was too young to know any better.

The dare specifically stated that I was to bring back one of Aunt Linh's porcelain garden gnomes, but little did I know that a stupid, baseless dare was going to result in a lifetime of trauma. Because the second I was scavenging wicker baskets and contracting hives from the dust, the door slammed shut behind me and the click of the lock permeated my little ears.

I screamed and banged and bargained for freedom, but nobody answered me. My cousins didn't even stick around to snicker and tease me—they just straight up left me there. I had no way out. There were no windows. It was a compact space no larger than your average wine cellar. I don't remember how long I was trapped there; all I remember is the way my eyes and throat burned after crying for thirty minutes straight. I convinced myself that I was going to die down there because nobody would ever look for me.

I was out of control.

It was the scariest moment of my entire life. After that, I vowed to myself that I'd never know what it feels like to be at the mercy of another person for as long as I lived. People aren't always reliable. Exhibit A: Ace Jameson.

I like constants. Work is a constant for me. It's predictable. I have a rigid schedule, and I stick to it no matter what. So just agreeing to go on this trip with Fulton was a shove into the goddamn deep end.

"Are you okay?" Fulton's disembodied voice asks from beside me.

I nod, though the shakiness in my tone belies my painfully obvious discomfort.
"Yeah, why?"

Everyone begins to settle into their seats around us, and the wane of commotion predicts a forecast of hyperventilating, possible tears, and definite nausea. My fingers curl absentmindedly around the armrests, knuckles bleached, arms straining like there's a fucking knife to my throat and one wrong move guarantees bloodshed.

Deep breaths, Shiloh. You got this. Everyone flies on an airplane. Babies fly, for crying out loud. You're braver than a baby, right?

"Um, you just look a little pale," he says, a frown etched onto his lips.

Trepidation curls in my belly, my heart seething more relentlessly than ocean waves during a thunderstorm. The overworked muscle knocks against my chest like water eroding an already-scarped cliff, eating away at the unsteady infrastructure as it crests under sporadic flash-bangs of lightning.

Pale? Great. Just what every girl wants to hear.

What's that thing that motivational speakers swear by? Believing you're confident so you become confident?

Picture your power pose, Shiloh. You've got this. If you can handle an almost-allergy-life-and-death situation, a toddler who knocked over a pistachio oat square display, and a rush order for two hundred cake pops when Hippie Fest was in town, you can handle anything.

Even though the plane isn't moving, the way it judders beneath me imbues me with too much adrenaline that has nowhere to go, fizzing and shaking inside me like a carbonated geyser waiting to explode.

I brush him off with a brusque chuckle. "It's probably just the lighting."

“Right.” Fulton eyes me suspiciously, but he’s thankfully polite enough not to pry.

When he takes his seat next to me, the girl adjacent to us finally pops an earbud out, and a squeal assaults my ears, augmenting the headache that’s currently chiseling a hole into my skull amateur lobotomy-style .

“Oh my God. You’re Fulton Cazzarelli. You’re my favorite hockey player!” she gushes, an ear-to-ear beam on her face.

Fulton does a double take. “Me?”

“Duh! My friends and I are obsessed with you. They’re never going to believe I met the Fulton Cazzarelli. Kalani is going to be so jealous.”

Newly-Sixteen propels herself out of her chair and halfway across my body as she encroaches on Fulton’s personal space. I shrink into my seat, but there’s really no way of derailing the awkwardness of this situation. Poor Fulton looks shell-shocked as he offers her a tight-lipped smile, cementing a fair distance between their bodies like he’ll catch an airborne disease just from the proximity.

“Oh, uh, thank you. I really appreciate it,” he responds.

Either this girl lacks self-awareness or has zero understanding of boundaries, because she inches closer to Fulton, cornering him like a fame-hungry vulture. “Can we pleeeaaaseee take a selfie? Ooh, and can you sign something for me? Actually, maybe like ten things. You’re not busy right now, are you? Are you on vacation?”

Dear God. At this point, dying in a plane crash and going up in flames seems less excruciating.

Fulton pauses, side-eyes me with a silent look that screams please help me , then

opens his mouth to say something before being—unsurprisingly—cut off. The girl shoves her phone in his face, slings her arm around his shoulder as if they're longtime friends, then proceeds to take about twenty photos all while crushing my helpless body.

I'd rather not make an enemy for this flight, so I bear the brunt of the comically unbearable tension, only comforted by the fact that Fulton and I are waist-deep in this mess together. I thought he'd be used to fan encounters, but he looks...constipated? It's definitely not a question of photogenicity because that man could be mid-sneeze and still make the cover of Men's Fitness .

I hate to admit it, but a little sprout of jealousy blossoms deep in my stomach, watered by this self-consciousness that I've never felt around a man before.

But Fulton's not just any man, is he?

A million photos later, Fulton's "Number One Fan" gets forced into her seat by a stern-looking flight attendant, and my hyperactive mind can pick out the exact moment the plane's wheels start to roll down the tarmac. The engine roars from above the temperamental winds, and the granola bar I shoved down my gullet earlier is sloshing around in my gut.

This is it. I'm going to die. I'm going to die before I confess to my crush just how much I like him. I'm going to die seated next to a girl who won't hesitate to lick the meat clean from my bones if we crash-land and wind up in some remote part of the mountains.

Fulton's saying something, but the clarity of his words is distorted beyond my comprehension, as if he just passed underneath a waterfall, his caramel-rich timbre lost to the constant downpour. I stare at the seat in front of me, eyes zeroed in on the safety pamphlet peeking out of the back pocket, and a barrage of highly improbable

fantasies buoy to the surface of my addled head.

“Shil—”

The plane seems to hurtle into turbo speed, whizzing down the runway so quickly that I’m convinced I’ll be projected out of my seat despite the strap securing me, and any iota of embarrassment surrounding my fear of flying gets thrown out the goddamn window.

Belly free-falling, migraine amplified times ten, my clammy hand crushes Fulton’s palm without a preamble. He doesn’t protest—or does he? I can’t hear him.

I slam my eyes shut, squeeze his poor hand in my deadly grip, and plead with myself to focus on him rather than the approaching altitude shift. Despite the circumstances, his hand feels nice. It’s a little rough in places where hockey must have raised some callouses, but it’s soft overall, and he radiates heat like a bubbling spring of warm, pristine water.

The trauma that rears its ugly head is promptly curb-stomped by Fulton’s soft-spoken presence, and the scent of fresh dryer sheets, along with the base notes of his citrus-tinged cologne, act like my very own safety blanket.

For the first time in my life, the anxiety is overpowered by a feeling that’s been foreign to me—a feeling that kindles a sort of self-reawakening in the blaring chorus of my heart, that submerges my world in a motley of iridescent colors. It’s the way the horizon meets the sea line, merging into a kaleidoscope of orange and pink hues to soothe the tide. It’s the way white-hot pleasure slingshots through your veins when you’re tipped over the precipice. It’s the way affection calcifies in my bones any time Fulton’s name flashes across my subconscious—a person of permanence lighting up every one of my synapses.

He doesn't pull away from me, and I don't let go of his hand. Not even when the plane's established a steady rhythm amongst the soft, snow-white clouds.

5

GOODBYE, RIVERSIDE. HELLO, CABO!

FULTON

She's touching me, and it's not an awkward I'm-just-trying-to-reach-across-you touch either. I can't believe this is really happening. Three weeks. I get to spend three beautiful, uninterrupted weeks with the girl who's plagued my every waking moment. I feel like the luckiest man alive right now.

Her touch is... unparalleled. Her dainty, slim fingers fit into the slats of my hockey-worn ones with ease. It's a comforting caress, as delicate as the silk intricacies of a spiderweb, yet somehow strung together with a muted kind of strength.

Okay, I lied. At first, there was definitely some she-Hulk strength going on when she was crushing every bone in my hand with her immobilizing death grip, but regardless, I never wanted her to let go.

When she started to doze off, I stole a few sideways glances here and there, wanting to make sure that her chair wasn't too uncomfortable. I know it's creepy to watch a girl sleep, okay? But—God, it feels stupid to say—I feel an overwhelming sense of peace when I look at her. She's a light snorer, barely audible to those who aren't listening, and she curls in on her body like a cat conserving heat. There's also a charming puddle of drool on the collar of her sweatshirt.

The girl across the aisle hasn't spoken to either of us since the plane took off, and I'm

grateful for the silence honestly. Earbuds equipped, “Curb Your Anxiety” playlist at the ready, I’m about to start the first song when a tunnel of turbulence swallows the airplane, shaking everyone’s seats and awakening who I can only imagine is a very distressed baby Eda a few rows down from us. With a jerky lurch, Shiloh jackknifes into a high-alert position, and she clings to my arm like she’s just been magnetized to my side.

“You’re okay,” I whisper, and as ironic as it is, being able to serve as someone else’s life-sized anxiety repellent assuages my own rowdy bunch of nerves.

Her tiny body trembles with each amplified clank of the airplane. “Are we crashing to the ground?” she whispers, eyes sewn shut.

I quell a laugh, and I readjust my squished arm so I can protectively wrap her in a side embrace. “Nope. Think we’re just going through a rough patch.”

“I’m, um, not the biggest fan of flying.”

“Really? I couldn’t tell.”

Although apprehension stains her words, a half-smile rewards my efforts, and it’s a welcome sight after a tiresome thirty minutes without witnessing it. Her lips are naturally plump and moisturized, and the blush-dusted apples of her cheeks puff out from the motion, bringing my attention to the blink-and-you’ll-miss-it dimple winking at me.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to invade your personal space,” she rambles, gearing up to break contact.

I don’t let her withdraw her hand. I need her touch more than I need my next breath of air. Not only is Shiloh the embodiment of a glowing beacon, but she’s a

luminescent lure dangling in the ocean's midnight zone, enticing me, leading me on a safe path home after I narrowly miss the snapping of carnivorous teeth.

Reassurance scrapes up my throat. "You're not invading anything."

Some of the tension in her shoulders melts, the clench of her hand following suit. She opens her mouth to say something, but the words seem to face some sort of delay, and I wish I could rewire every single one of her worries.

She never has to apologize for touching me. Ever.

"I don't like being out of control," she ekes out, and her palpable discomfort feathers from where she's touching me.

"You should've told me you were afraid of flying," I say quietly.

I can't believe I practically kidnapped this girl and stuck her on a plane with me for two hours. She literally has nowhere to run. Why didn't I think to ask if flying would pose a problem? Not everyone travels. Not everyone likes heights. This mini vacation is already off to a rough start, and that's overlooking this airplane's invisible, one-sided fight with gravity.

"You already paid for my ticket. I didn't want to seem ungrateful. And it's"—Shiloh drives her nails into my arm, her whole body wilting like flaxen parchment curling amidst a ring of roaring, orange-blue flames—"it's not that bad."

I'd usually be jumping for joy at the prospect of a girl entertaining any sort of physical contact with me, but not when she's under the impression that she'll die if she lets go of my arm.

Maybe it's the altitude sickness talking, but I impulsively thumb away a loose strand

of her hair, pushing it out of the frisbee-sized eyes that regard me with an unearthed innocence I've never seen before. "You know, I would've driven us."

"Don't be ridiculous. That would've taken twenty hours."

"I would drive any amount of distance, any length of time, if it meant that you were comfortable," I insist, my heart drumming an unruly tune against my rib cage, almost loud enough to be heard over the whoosh of air skittering over the plane's wings.

Shiloh's eyebrows knit in confusion. "You'd do that? For a girl you just met?"

"No, Shiloh. I'd do that for you."

Her perfect lips round into an O shape, and that concerningly green pallor of hers thaws into the usual warmth of her olive skin, so flawless that God himself must have dry brushed her with the finest of earth's clays.

Good job, Fulton. That was...flirty. But not too suggestive.

I barely register the pilot's distorted voice crackling through the speaker before the plane gives one last shudder, the crowd gives one last collective gasp of fear, and then we return to our regularly scheduled programming. Shiloh's grip has loosened exponentially, and when she realizes that she doesn't need to jerk my arm out of its socket, she crawls back into her shell and extricates herself.

She digs around in her backpack for God knows what, and then she brandishes a pink, spiral-bound notebook with a meek but proud smile. "I made this itinerary for us. You didn't really give me one, so I looked up some fun things for us to do. It'll help us stick to a schedule when Hurricane Wedding hits in full force."

I didn't know an itinerary could be so sexy.

Soundlessly, she hands me her schedule, and I flip open to a page overrun with glitter ink, doodles, sticky notes, and sectioned-off bullet points corresponding to different days of the week. It's freakishly organized, and probably the most beautiful thing my eyes have ever seen.

Her fingernails pry apart the emaciated threads on her sleeve as she peers at her work. "There's this really cool turtle release project going on at the beach near our hotel. We can watch olive ridley and black turtles hatch and journey toward the sea. I've never seen a turtle in real life before, but they're so adorable. Did you know that olive ridley turtles aren't naturally migratory like other sea turtles? They actually prefer to remain within eight hundred and fifty kilometers of wherever they decide to nest. Which can be good or bad, I guess. Good in the sense that conservation measures reap a larger benefit for the survival of their species, but bad in the sense that their varied habitats raise their exposure to accidental capture by humans."

I'll admit it—I lost her somewhere around the second "turtle," but fuck, watching her talk about something she's so passionate about makes me fall for her even harder. And I'm already one perilous, pigeon-footed trip away from face-planting.

Admiration toils inside me, nearly turning my solar plexus on its head, and I blink at her like some lovesick puppy dog. I don't know anything about turtles, so I don't have anything to contribute to the conversation. I'm honestly afraid that I'll embarrass myself if I say anything when I'm in such an incapacitated state. She's a drug I can't quit—a saccharine delicacy lodged in the molars of my teeth.

Icy realization fastens to her features, and she quickly closes her journal like she's harboring some dark, deadly secret instead of a to-do list full of Cabo's cutest wildlife. "But we don't have to look at turtles. We can do whatever you want. This was just a suggestion."

Something bitter crosses my tongue, and the dejection on her face twists a blade

through my gut. I wish she didn't feel the need to make herself small around me. I catalog the heavy weight of her brow, the strained cords of her neck, the bottom lip that's been mottled with teeth concavities and a small smear of dried blood.

"What if I want to go look at turtles with you?" I ask.

"You're not just saying that to be polite?"

"Shiloh, I'd do anything you asked if it meant I got to spend time with you. "

She chuckles, and it's like sunlight sawing through a conglomeration of storm clouds.

"Don't say stuff like that. I'll make you keep me company while I cook."

She's a cook too? What can't this girl do?

"I don't know any other way I'd want to spend my night," I tell her, my lips ticking up into a wholehearted grin, all the first-time fear evaporating like a since-hidden message hastily drawn in foggy condensation.

Something shifts in Shiloh, reining back that spark of life that had guttered with the unfamiliarity of the flight. "Fulton Cazzarelli, are you flirting with me?" she teases coyly, doing a little shimmy with her shoulders.

"Um, that depends. Is it working?"

Suddenly, the small vents overhead aren't strong enough to tame the merciless fever raging through my body, and my heart's dropping to my stomach while my stomach's propelling up my goddamn throat. Here I am, sitting with a girl who's pretty enough to be a runway model, and I'm totally blowing it by being myself. Whoever said you just need to be yourself to impress a girl was lying. They've clearly never been a twenty-four-year-old virgin with a loser complex and an extensive history of public

humiliation.

Her naturally long lashes flutter delicately against her brow bone, and a timid smile teases her pouty lips—lips that I've dreamt of kissing at least a handful of times. During an early morning when the wrens trill and there's still frost crystallizing on the window; during a late night where dusk bruises the sky in shades of violet; during any time in between where I can get my hands on her.

Blood wells to the thin skin of her cheeks, and whether it's from embarrassment or flattery, I have no idea. "Would it be totally inappropriate if I said yes?"

Wait... what ? Have I died and gone to heaven ?

"You're kidding, right?" I blubber, shock and hope dueling in the depths of my stomach.

She shakes her head. "You're an amazing person, Fulton. Even if you can't see it yourself. Not only have you been a generous host, but you've pretty much been my emotional support person for this entire plane ride."

Nobody has ever said anything like that to me before. Nobody has ever relied on me for anything—I mean, except my teammates. I feel this carnal need to protect Shiloh, to prioritize her, to do everything in my power to make her happy. This is the first girl in forever who's seen past my hockey alter ego. It's like she has a peephole into my very soul. Her consideration doesn't come with conditions, nor does it come with an expiration date. And that speaks volumes about who she is as a person.

Riding some kind of faux-confidence high, my fingers crawl to her hand, and I lightly brush my thumb over the backs of her knuckles. Holding her hand like this...I can't tell you how long this fantasy has festered in my brain.

“I’ll be whatever you want me to be, Shiloh.”

Her hand squeezes mine—a nonverbal cue that tilts my world on its axis and pumps out a complimentary flood of endorphins.

“So it’s a date then,” she decides.

“A date,” I parrot dumbly.

“Is that too strong of a word?”

Heat glues our palms together, and the potentially disastrous consequence of a date shatters my previous visage of composure.

Date? DATE? I thought we were going for a casual hangout. But a date...oh, God. A date is way more serious and way out of my wheelhouse. It’s been a while since I’ve been on a date. Years. Four, to be exact.

Shiloh just stares at me expectantly, so oblivious to my snowballing panic that it’s almost comical. She doesn’t even acknowledge that my hand is abnormally sweaty—no, she continues to hold it, endearment glimmering in her rich, chocolate eyes.

Nervousness flickers at the base of my spine, but even amidst my very reasonable concerns, my heart grabs the proverbial steering wheel and plays with the delicate balance of life by taking a quick U-turn off a sky-scraping mountain.

“No! A date sounds great. I’d love to go on a date with you.”

6

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS

FULTON

Given my history, I thought the plane ride went fairly well. No screams from the soon-to-be-departed as the plane bursts into flames and nosedives into the Pacific Ocean. No annoying child kicking the back of my seat. No appearance of bodily fluids to permeate the already-musty cabin. A charter plane would've been ideal, but Coach is a stickler against us using it outside of hockey-related emergencies. Plus, first class isn't a bad alternative at all.

Everything's going according to plan. And I miraculously managed to fish a date out of it! I seriously don't know how I did that. Everything's been a blur since we left the airport.

Carrying Shiloh's backpack on my shoulder, I trundle behind her like a lost puppy as we enter the hotel's main lobby, and the ostentatious extravagance of it all sloughs off my prior confidence. I don't know why I expected it to be far more low-key—I frequent fancy places all the time for work.

The interior is grandiose, washed in a sunset-orange film that scalds the pinkening sky and seeps in from a wall-less back—one that showcases an aqua, bioluminescent-looking inlet sandwiched between a ring of saw-toothed mountains. The floor is glossy and pristine, and hazy ceiling lights coruscate off the flickering flame of a smokeless, propane fire pit situated in the middle of the foyer. To add to the

decadence, seating areas constructed from mesquite wood and bohemian cushions line the main walkway, complete with miniature candles on each lacquered table.

Off-white, ceramic vases are scattered throughout the area, as well as tall monsteras that add a pop of color to the otherwise monochromatic background. And palm trees of varying sizes sway down near the weather-beaten dock, inviting weary travelers to sink their feet into the fine silt that composes a golden shore. It's constantly being eaten away by white-capped waves, the symphony of running water crashing beyond a tropical cabana. There are even small flocks of wild chickens running around outside.

This will be the perfect environment to get closer to Shiloh: long walks on the beach, late-night swims, the tastiest, most flavorful food money can buy. I mean, who wouldn't want to vacation in Cabo for three weeks?

Baby Eda's fast asleep on Kit's shoulder, and the rest of the crew is in good spirits. Shiloh and I watch as everyone retrieves their separate room keys, bidding farewell for the rest of the night.

Gage and Cali are giggling like a couple of troublemakers; Hayes has Aeris in some kind of hug chokehold as enviable love surrounds the two of them like a second skin; Bristol's whispering something into Lila's neck while she laughs with her full chest; and Casen's standing at the edge of the overlook with Josie.

I can't really tell if Shiloh's as nervous as I am. She blearily rubs at her eyes, stifling a yawn into her arm out of politeness. God, she looks stunning. I mean, she always does, but it's hard to believe that I'm really this lucky to have her here with me.

We're the last ones to sign in, and grogginess chokes my windpipe when I voice our presence. "Reservation under Cazzarelli."

The receptionist—a middle-aged man dressed in a flashy Hawaiian shirt with a (questionably) tasteful amount of chest on display—checks us in, handing off the room key with a smile.

“Enjoy your stay. Breakfast is from six thirty a.m. to nine thirty a.m. You’re free to indulge in our pool and sauna from ten a.m. to eight p.m. Room service is twenty-four-seven, and there are a handful of local activities in the pamphlet located in your room’s nightstand. If you’re interested in catching some decent waves, might I suggest taking advantage of the early-morning tide. You might also be able to see some of the natural wildlife if you’re lucky.”

“Thank you,” I say, my fingers curling around the plastic card with the cherry-red hibiscus printed on the front.

“It’s so beautiful here,” Shiloh whispers in awe, trailing behind me as we pass a wide hallway fringed with intricately designed doors. “I’ve never been out of the States before.”

“Never?” I ask, looking down at her and camouflaging a smile while I talk to what’s essentially the top of her head.

“Nope. Work has always been the top priority for my family. And, I mean, we’ve lived in Riverside for so long that we don’t really crave adventure anywhere else.”

Something unidentifiable sours in my stomach at the prospect of Shiloh being tethered to her job like some kind of herding dog, and it takes a few sensible brain cells for me to bite my tongue. “I feel that. Traveling can be a lot.”

We’ve been maneuvering through a labyrinth of identical hallways before she stops in her tracks, her pupils blown wide underneath the dying haze of the orange-tinted sconces. “Sometimes I feel like running away, even though I’m content with where

I'm at. It's this...inherent urge I get. I don't know what's wrong with me," she whispers shamefully .

"There's nothing wrong with you," I blurt out a little too intensely.

I'm so close to her that I can see the faint shine of tears pricking at her eyes—can see the uncertain way her chest balloons with a tightly held breath. I may suck at reading social cues, but when it comes to Shiloh, I can read her as easily as a book.

I nudge her to keep walking, offering her some privacy as I turn my attention toward the flawless, hardwood floors. My sneakers make this awful squeaking noise with every step. "I know being in control is important to you, but maybe your conscience needs a break from all of that responsibility."

Shiloh's face screws up like she hates the bitter taste of the truth. It's cloying even from here, a noxious poison coursing through her veins, but the real, long-working disease is the regret that lurks beneath.

"Doesn't everyone fantasize about running away at some point in their life?" she volleys.

My heart rabbits in my chest. "I think it's different for you, though."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because I can see the pain in your eyes."

I must've caught her off guard because her shoulders immediately curl inwards, her confidence liquefying right in front of me, and her stature crumbles into debris, a juxtaposition to the steady plinth I know it to be. She doesn't rebut my statement—doesn't try to convince me otherwise. All she does is nod toward the

giant 304 on our hotel door with half her previous enthusiasm.

What the fuck, Fulton? Way to make her feel like shit. Who says something like that? This is obviously a sensitive subject for her. She didn't agree to your weird psychoanalysis. Just shut up before you say something you really can't come back from.

I hold the key up to the card reader and watch the little green light blink to life, then I shoulder the door open for Shiloh. And if I thought making some unwarranted comment about her work life was bad, the sight that beholds us makes my idiocy look like a fucking cake walk. Because despite the room being big enough to house an entire hockey team, the interior designer decided that a single, king-sized bed would be fitting instead of two queen-sized ones.

One bed.

There's...there's only one bed .

Shiloh's jaw practically falls to the ground, and I don't know why, but I feel the need to cover the suggestive eyesore with my body. "It's not what it looks like!"

She crosses her arms over her chest, looking far more amused than I expected. "It looks like you booked us a room with a single bed."

I comb my hand through the front of my hair, my eyes frantically zipping from the comfy complication in our room to the foreboding exit, and I engage in an internal tug-of-war about whether to confront the receptionist over the clear mistake here. "Of course I didn't! Something must've gotten mixed up. I don't want to sleep with you!"

Before I realize what I just said— lied —about, there's a divot between Shiloh's rucked brows. "You don't want to sleep with me?" she repeats in a low bravado,

unaware, or hyperaware, of the fact that she's the most irresistible thing in the entire country.

Cabo's decently hotter than California, but not enough to make me sweat from every exposed orifice. Anxiety steamrolls over me and tightens my throat, my conviction coming out half-bitten and half-believing. "No! I just mean...um...I just don't want you to think..."

Oh, God. What does she think? Does she think I'm just another hotshot hockey player trying to use my fame and money to get into her pants? Shiloh's way more than some roll in the sheets. But if I tell her that, I'm implying that I'm not interested in rolling around, and I mean, it's not like I was actively thinking about it, but...

No, Fulton! Think with the other head.

Shiloh sets her backpack on the armchair, then begins to empty out her personal toiletries in neat little rows. "Relax, Fulton. I'm just messing with you, okay? I don't think you masterminded this whole thing to get your dick wet."

I'm not sure if I should be mortified that the topic of my... manhood ...is currently in discussion.

I watch as she disappears into the bathroom with her belongings, taking plenty of time to organize her things for quicker access. And after a few minutes of rummaging, she breaks out her carry-on and switches her attention to her travel-sized closet, tucking preplanned outfits into one of the drawers.

I've never known someone to be so tidy.

The room is objectively stunning if you can get past the lack of privacy. A sliding balcony overlooks the tepid waters outside, bordered by a cinch of nude-toned

curtains. The sun's fading rays billow in from the giant looking glass, rendering any artificial lighting useless as the space is promptly submerged in a projection of pink radiance. And a heavy bedspread of burnt sienna sprawls over the king-sized mattress, matching the tasseled throw pillows that rest against a mesquite headboard.

The asymmetrical coffee table looks like it's been carved from a chunk of driftwood, and it's accompanied by a sectional sofa cloaked in a thin, ivory blanket. The greenery inside is as abundant as the natural vegetation popcorned along the rocky mountainside, ranging from potted snake plants to Mexican flame vines that dangle from the ceiling. Last but not least, there's a rug compiled of geometric shapes, and a seventy-inch television hangs on one of the walls.

She starts to strip off her oversized sweatshirt, and I'm too late to avert my eyes when a chunk of it snags on her shoulder, revealing a sinful sliver of her toned stomach.

When I gulp, heat razes my (probably) reddening cheeks. Either the fumes of pina colada-scented candles are getting to my head, or I've been inhaling too much of Shiloh's perfume, because I'm no longer damning the hotel for messing up our room.

"Aren't you hot?" she asks me.

I nod, and my belly does a backflip.

"I can turn the air-conditioning on, but I'd probably suggest removing a layer just to be safe."

Removing a layer? Removing a layer. REMOVING A LAYER?

Granted, I do have a layer that can be removed, but this seems... fuck , this seems like I'm skirting a cliffside with no guard rails, no parachute, and absolutely no care for the endless drop below.

I shuck off my own hoodie, immediately feeling a chill whisper over the length of my arms. I try to ignore the heated sensation of Shiloh's gaze trailing over my now-exposed body. I'm not insanely ripped like some of my other teammates, but I have some honorable muscle definition. Nice arms, nice quads, a hint of abs. I'm not... insecure ...about my physique, per se, but I know it's not everybody's type. Girls like the six-foot-five mountains that can throw them around like rag dolls, and I, well, look like the nerdy kid you used to babysit.

She gathers her frizzy hair to one side of her shoulder, dragging her fingers through the tangles. And the whole time, while she's doing something as mundane as fixing her hair, I've been staring at her unabashedly.

"The humidity messes up my hair sometimes. Perks of being Vietnamese," she huffs frustratedly.

I think her hair looks beautiful. Hell, I could stare at her for an eternity, and it wouldn't be long enough. Of course, I've already surpassed the creep-o-meter, so maybe it's best to keep that comment to myself.

After salvaging her hairmergency, Shiloh plops onto the bed. "You don't snore, do you?"

"Uh, I don't think I do."

"You don't sleepwalk?"

"Not since I was eleven."

"You're not a serial cuddler? Do I need to form the Great Wall of China?"

A weak laugh putters out of me, more to diffuse the tension brewing in my chest than

to convey amusement. “I think I can control myself,” I lie, taking a seat next to her.

Being this close to her whets my appetite—the one dead set on tasting the salt of her sweat, the one aching to hold her soft, supple frame against my hard one. It’s not a part of me I’m proud of, okay? It’s like this darker, shunned version of me that should never see the light of day because of the disastrous things that could happen if I abandon my chivalry.

“I wouldn’t blame you if you couldn’t,” she says, those words like a false trigger against my temple.

Head thrown back, the hollow of her throat bared to the ceiling, her breasts heave with an inhale, and I have half a mind to insert a tiny shred of distance between our bodies. The mattress dips with my weight as Shiloh peels one eye open to peek at me.

“Are we meeting up with everyone else for dinner?” Her voice loses some of its teasing edge, yet I’m still wrapped around her goddamn pinky finger.

“I think everyone’s pretty beat. I don’t imagine Eda would fare well in a restaurant tonight.”

“You’re not tired, are you?” she follows up, straightening her spine and letting her hair swing back over her shoulder in a pendulum-like motion.

I apply a mask of (hopefully believable) indifference, though she’s got my pulse charging like a racehorse. “Not at all.”

A mischievous grin plays on Shiloh’s lips, and I’m ninety-nine percent certain that I’m about to get way more than I bargained for on this trip.

“How far do you think the nearest grocery store is?”

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7

COMPLIMENTS TO THE CHEF

FULTON

We're alone. Shiloh and I...are alone. On a date. With each other. In the same room.

Oh. My. God.

This isn't really happening. I must be dreaming. And not only are we sharing the same nine hundred square feet of the fanciest suite in Cabo, but she's cooking me dinner.

Me.

Fulton.

The guy who once lived off Top Ramen and Gatorade for an entire semester his sophomore year of college.

If you think simply living life is anxiety-inducing, try going on a date with the person you've been obsessed with for four years. Honestly, I never thought I would even manage to bypass the friend zone. But here I am, unscathed, sitting at the table while the most perfect girl in existence places a gargantuan bowl of noodles in front of me.

"I hope you're hungry. My mom always taught me to make multiple servings, even if

you're only entertaining one guest.”

When her russet eyes flit to me with an inextinguishable sparkle, her nose crinkles slightly from the tug of a smile .

The truth is, the last thing I want right now is food, but I'd eat fucking dirt if she asked me to. I swallow down a tangled clump of nerves, hooking my finger in my shirt's collar and yanking it from my neck. It's hot in here. Like, someone-turned-the-heater-up-to-eighty-five-degrees hot. A disgusting layer of sweat is sticking my clothes to my skin.

My first instinct is to dart for the glass of water sitting next to me, but I quickly come to regret that decision when half of it goes down the wrong pipe and results in a horrid myriad of choking sounds.

Shiloh immediately gets up to help me, but I strain to wave her off with a dismissive hand. “I'm...good,” I wheeze, praying that I've maintained at least some of my dignity.

She nods, yet I don't think she's fully convinced. She serves herself the same portion, a picture of enigmatic beauty with her naturally pink cheeks and ever-present eye crinkles. I could ramble on about how her wispy lashes resemble gossamer-spun webs clinging to dewy blades of grass, or how that invigorating perfume of hers coddles every one of my senses in a sweetened caress. She even went above and beyond to switch from her casual wear into a pastel-blue dress with a sweetheart neckline.

“In my family, food's a love language. It's a way to show gratitude,” she explains in that airy cadence of hers that washes over my anxiety, disintegrating its fearmongering form into nothing but forgettable particles of dust.

“Gratitude?” I croak.

“Yeah. I just wanted to thank you for inviting me on this trip. And for covering all the expenses...which I will pay you back for.”

“I told you that you don’t have to do that.”

“Yes, I do. I don’t take free rides. I pay my own way.”

“No, Shiloh. I meant that you don’t have to do that because I wanted to treat you,” I reassure her, the cry of my heart and the second-guessing and the worry in the back of my head all quieting to a near-silent hum.

When I force myself to tear my eyes away from her (which isn’t easy), I glance down at the Michelin-worthy meal she made for me, and appreciation warms my cheeks. “This looks incredible. Thank you. You didn’t have to cook dinner.”

She winks at me. “I wanted to.”

Fuck, this girl is everything. She makes me feel alive . She makes me feel like I’m experiencing the first simple joys of life all over again—sun rays through a car window on a sleepy afternoon, the first breath of cold air after a long, hot shower, the sound of rain playing percussion on a fogged-up window.

The presentation is stunning. I don’t recognize these types of noodles, but they’re thin and white, soaking in a semi-opaque broth that’s topped with herbs, slabs of beef, bean sprouts, and green onions. I start with a sizable spoonful, my eyes widening as I taste the spiciness of the ginger. The freshness of the cilantro and the saltiness from the broth pair into a delectable amalgamation, and the garlic sauce isn’t so overwhelming that it blots out the other flavors. Everything is perfectly balanced, and my table manners momentarily slip to the back burner.

“This is the best thing I’ve ever eaten,” I mumble around my food.

Shiloh begins to pick daintily at her own serving. “I’m glad you enjoy it. Pho is a delicacy in Vietnam. My mom always used to cook it for me when I was a kid, but she made it differently than how it’s commonly prepared. She swears by the secret ingredient.”

This time, I think before I speak, making sure to swallow my food first. “Are you and your mom close?”

“She’s my best friend. She means everything to me. I wouldn’t be here without her.”

The corners of my mouth hike into a beaming smile, and I’m not sure how observant she is (or how good the lighting is), but I wouldn’t be surprised if I was blushing like a lovesick idiot right now. “That’s really great to hear.”

Shiloh chews on a strip of beef. “What about you? Are you close with your family?”

That’s...a tough question. I’d rather not dampen the mood, but my father isn’t a good, well, father. He’s a good man and a good husband, but he was never cut out to look after a child.

“I’m, uh, not as close with my dad as I wish I was. He always prioritized his work over his family. He’s the CEO of a big tech firm in Silicon Valley. He never came to any of my hockey games because he always had some kind of work event conveniently scheduled during them. And he missed so many of my birthdays that my mother just advised me not to expect him,” I divulge, not wanting to elaborate so the night doesn’t turn into an unsolicited therapy session. I already regret bringing it up, but I know Shiloh would’ve been hurt if I didn’t tell her.

I don’t resent my father. I’ve concluded that I don’t have the energy in my heart to

hate him. He doesn't deserve to occupy my thoughts. He made his bed, and my life is better without him in it.

"I'm so sorry, Fulton. No kid should have to grow up with an absentee father. You deserved better. And he's missing out on the wonderful person you turned out to be."

As depressing—and so not first-date worthy—of a topic as this is, I love how much Shiloh cares. I never knew someone could have such a big heart, and it's evident through her interactions with complete strangers that she's just an inherently good person.

Something my dad will never be.

"It's alright. It's in the past now. All that matters is that you're here with me."

"I'll always be here for you," she promises. "Regardless of if you need me or not."

My heart believes you, so why doesn't my head?

Thanks to my father, I've learned to always assume the worst about people. But Shiloh has single-handedly rewritten everything I thought I knew, and that terrifies me. How is it possible that one girl has the power to change my entire outlook on life? I need to switch the subject. I'm not ready for this kind of wake-up call yet.

"On the bright side, I visit my mom and younger sister often. They live a few hours away, but we talk daily. My mom and I have always been close. She's my biggest supporter. But she always was, even when I was little. Even when I had to go to speech therapy because I was too shy to speak in class and my teacher was convinced I was mute. Even when I was horrible at minor league hockey but still wanted to pursue a career in it one day. I could barely hold my hockey stick because it was so big in comparison to me."

She makes an aww sound, and those brown beauties of hers practically hit me like a car speeding through a red light. “I bet you were the cutest kid,” she comments nonchalantly, swirling her fork around in her noodles.

I choke for the second time this sitting, hesitant to ameliorate the flustered state of my body with water in case it, in fact, makes things worse.

“Shit! Sorry!”

She scrambles to hand me a napkin, all while a rictus grin refuses to unlatch from my face.

I’m not sure if God is watching over me or I’m somehow outsmarting death, but I manage to get everything under control without hucking a piece of food out of my mouth and ruining the evening.

I slam down a good half of my water, gasping for air when I resurface. “Don’t apologize.”

“Oh, God. I can’t believe I made you choke! I didn’t mean—well, I did mean it—but I meant it as a compliment. Like, you’re obviously still cute. You’re handsome-cute. Is that a thing? Should I just say handsome? Is cute too cringey? It doesn’t even sound like a word anymore,” she rambles, eyes downturned.

“You think I’m cute?” I blurt out, and the possibility of her statement even harboring the tiniest seedling of truth hot-wires all my nerves.

Shiloh’s the one blushing this time, nodding her head, the light waves of her hair bouncing softly against her shoulders. “It wasn’t obvious?”

Was it? Did I miss the signs? I suspected there might’ve been attraction between us,

but to hear her reassure me that it wasn't just all in my head...it's the best feeling in the entire world. Better than scoring the first goal of the season. Better than a barn burner that puts your team on the map for playoffs. Better than winning an overrated metal cup and bragging rights for all eternity.

"I guess I'm not as observant as I thought I was," I admit with a nervous laugh, having abandoned my appetite as an uncontrollable, long-buried desire breaches my sensibility.

All I can think about is leaning across this table, cupping Shiloh's face, and kissing her on the lips. I'm a guy who's gone most of his adult life without romantic physical touch, but right now, it's the only thing I crave—a hunger that can't be satiated with good food or pleasant small talk, something so terrifyingly animalistic that I can feel it squirm deep in the marrow of my bones, searching for a life force to suck dry.

My gaze surfs languidly over the heightened rise and fall of her chest, over the way she pulls her bottom lip between her teeth unsurely, until it collides head-on with a half-lowered glare steeped in sin—one that I can feel pulling me farther out to sea.

My words are brittle as they vie for freedom. "Don't look at me like that, Shi."

Shi. It falls so easily from my tongue .

A muscle in her neck flickers. "Like what?"

"Like you want me to kiss you."

She straightens her shoulders with a darkened look that tells me she's just as hungry as I am. "And what if I do?"

I make some kind of noise between a groan and a growl. "Then I don't think I'll be

able to stop myself.”

Without warning, dinner has moved to the couch, and we’re both sitting a fair distance apart—a distance that can so easily be bridged by one swell move. When I’m this close to her, I can pinpoint the beads of sweat dotting her hairline, can faintly make out the impression of her aroused nipples against her dress’s thin material (though I try not to look there), can hear the unsteady succession of her breaths with each passing minute.

Although I didn’t finish everything in my bowl, I ate a fair amount, and I’m now regretting the heavy sludge of dinner congealing in my stomach. My anxiety is at an all-time high, and the overbearing warmth in my body nearly whites out all my senses.

There’s a sour taste in my mouth—a foreign sickness that infects every part of me with moldering rot, that calls on the self-consciousness I’ve tried so hard to suppress up until now. “I haven’t…”

She cocks her head. “You haven’t…?”

Just spit it out, dude. Rip the Band-Aid off. YOU’RE A VIRGIN! You’ve never felt the touch of a woman before! Your hand’s the only thing that’s ever made you come! You’re so sexually inexperienced that she’d gain more pleasure by making out with one of those Old Navy mannequins!

I gulp, and it’s like the deployment of an atomic bomb in my ears. “I haven’t kissed someone in a long time. Or at least not someone who mattered.”

“But I thought…”

“I lied,” I divulge, caught in the throes of shame, subservient to the overbearing guilt

that hovers above me like a soot-stained boot waiting to connect with my cheekbone. “In fact, the last time I pursued someone, I found out that she was just using me to leech off my fame. When she was done with me, she told me that I was too awkward and embarrassing to be around.”

As crazy as this sounds, maybe it’s a good thing Renata didn’t feel anything for me, otherwise she would’ve taken my first everything .

Shiloh looks so heartbroken that you’d think she witnessed everything in person. “Oh, Fulton. I can’t begin to tell you how sorry I am. And that’s not true. You know that’s not true, right?”

Sometimes it feels like the wound is still fresh—like Renata’s words are still flaying my skin from my bones. “Yeah...I know. Since then, I’ve just had a really hard time distinguishing the difference between people who want to know me for me and people who want to know me for my job.”

“I completely understand. I’ve had my fair share of bad seeds too. I was dating this guy who abandoned me the moment my family’s business began to struggle, and he basically asked me to choose between him and my parents. He told me I wasn’t enough to make him stay.”

“That’s bullshit. That guy clearly wasn’t a man because no man would ever walk away from the person he loves. I’m so sorry, Shiloh. I’m sorry you had to deal with someone so insecure in his own masculinity that he compensated for it by tearing you down.”

That dipshit is lucky I don’t know his name: otherwise, I’d probably be arrested for assault and battery. And yes, that’s saying something considering I’ve lived most of my life like a monk who’s taken a vow of nonviolence.

Shiloh doesn't respond. In fact, she just changes the subject. "So, you haven't kissed someone in how long?"

"Four years."

"Wow."

"Why do you say it like that?"

"I'm just—I'm just surprised is all."

I know I'm usually not all there in my head sometimes, but I really can't grasp what's happening right now. It's like trying to shove two incompatible puzzle pieces together to make sense of a bigger picture. "I don't follow."

"Look at you, Fulton! You're... you ! You're handsome, kind, funny, generous. You're the whole package. So it's hard to believe that you're even single right now," she confesses in a whisper, lust eclipsing the rich, earthy brown of her irises.

"Oh," is all I say.

Shiloh scoots the tiniest bit closer to me—close enough for our knees to bump—and I catch a whiff of that intoxicating vanilla, cinnamon, and fresh dough combination that holds my every thought hostage.

Oh, God. Is she gonna kiss me? She looks like she's gonna kiss me. What do I do? I'm panicking. HELP!

Relax, Fulton. It's just a kiss. You just...touch lips. It's not hard.

Speaking of hard, I think, um, I think there's something happening downstairs, and in

a second or two, it's going to be a helluva lot more noticeable. I should've never agreed to a date. Oh, this is bad. This is so bad. What if she hates the kiss? What if she gets her hopes up, only to be disappointed in the end? I'd worry about not being able to perform, but I obviously don't have that problem right now.

Shiloh unexpectedly grabs my hand, and I know getting closer to her should activate my fight or flight response, but that's the last thing that happens. Everything slows down, if only for a second—time, my heart, my spiral of self-doom.

“Can I kiss you, Fulton?”

Five words. Five words I never expected to hear from any girl, let alone Shiloh.

I don't think I entirely comprehend the weight of her question before nodding instinctively. And then, as I watch her lean in, I close my eyes, and her lips brush against mine in a rush of dopamine and sensational, color-changing fireworks, flooding my body with a deluge of renewed liveliness that I can feel tingle in the soles of my feet.

My head goes woozy, butterflies swarm in my belly, and my heart's broken free of my control. There's no tongue—thank God, because that's beyond my expertise (obviously)—but the kiss is nowhere near chaste. I don't really know what to do with my hands, so I stupidly keep them by my sides as Shiloh caresses my cheek, deepening the press of her mouth on mine with an urgency that's inexplicably attractive.

When we eventually break away, I'm wide-eyed and dumbfounded, so detached from my body that I'm frozen to the sofa with a stiffness that I couldn't hide if I wanted to.

“Shi...” I breathe, unsure why I'm even saying her name in the first place.

To urge her to stop? To keep going?

But my question is answered for me when she sweeps me up in another kiss—this one more calculated, more natural, a dance that we've just conquered. It's a marrying of lips that precedes the first dart of a tongue to test the waters, and like a dog, I follow her every move with undying devotion, finally stockpiling the courage to skirt my hands up the length of her sides.

Her breasts are flattened against my chest, and instead of her hand staying innocently on my cheek, it migrates to my hair, her nimble fingers tethering around the strands .

God, this feels so fucking good. She tastes so fucking good. I never knew a kiss could be this... life-changing . I don't want it to stop. I need more. Every emotion and physical feeling in my body are fighting to come out on top—a fast heart rate melding into an equally fast pulse, the fluttering in my gut devolving into this buzzing ball of anticipation.

And as I feel her body recline to give me more room—and to give my lips a better vantage point on her throat—something strange squeezes through my stomach, too harsh to be those aforementioned butterflies flapping around.

I can feel my insides cramping, but it pales in comparison to the feel of Shiloh's tongue sliding over mine. While she readjusts her position, I follow suit and lean forward on my hands and knees, only to find that moving at all was a terrible idea that will lead to the worst consequence imaginable.

Whatever nervousness or indigestion that was going on manifests in a bout of pressure that practically sucks my stomach in on itself, and my pain would've gone unnoticed if it wasn't for the seismic growl that pierces the air between us.

Shiloh pulls away with a frown, her eyes scanning the expanse of my belly. "I'm

sorry. I'm such a bad host. I didn't know you were still hungry. Let me make you another bowl?—”

She shimmies out from underneath me to get up, but I grab her wrist before she can go anywhere, and I slouch back against the couch cushions.

“It's not. That's not—I'm fine,” I lie, bearing an instant onslaught from whatever gods above are punishing me. I have no idea why my intestines are dead set on tying themselves into a constrictor knot, but they're doing so with a disturbing amount of ease.

Concern mars Shiloh's expression. “Something's wrong.”

“Nothing's wrong.”

“Then why are you wincing in pain?”

“I'm not wincing in pain. This is...just my natural resting face.” I breathe through the waxing ache in my lower abdomen, but on the inside, I'm curling up in a fetal position and pleading with a higher power to grant me relief.

What the hell is wrong with me? Why is my body betraying me like this? I was kissing a girl! Things were good!

But no matter what I say or how I say it, convincing Shiloh to back down is about as implausible as finding some kind of reprieve in the next minute. The quiet ambience of the night was comforting at first, but now there's nothing to cover up the intermittent gurgles emanating from my stomach.

She narrows her eyes. “Fulton.”

I roll mine. “Shiloh.”

I’m trying to lighten the situation, but I can tell there’s nothing I can do to save what was, hands down, the best moment of my life. And now it’s gone, all because my stomach’s revolting the very safe, very normal dinner I just ate ten minutes ago.

“It sounds like there’s a war going on in your stomach.”

I throw my head back against the couch with a groan, refusing to brave a glance in her direction. My whole face is burning like the surface of the sun. “I’m sorry. It’s just a bit of indigestion.”

I don’t know why Shiloh hasn’t run for the hills yet, but she nods sympathetically. “Do you want some TUMS?”

Hah. Good ol’ TUMS. Always helpful when I eat...

And then it dawns on me. Cold, hard realization douses my spine like a bucket of ice water, negating the heat still flourishing through every inch of my body. The spasming is getting worse, nausea’s pooling at the base of my throat, and I’m beginning to sweat through my goddamn shirt. I know these telltale signs. I’m not indisposed because of a few pre-date jitters.

Staying as calm as possible, I feel my features pinch in discomfort, and I let out a breath that doesn’t seem to relieve any of my growing unrest. “Shi, what was in the dinner you made?”

She freezes like a deer caught in headlights. “Um, bone broth, rice noodles, beef, bean sprouts, cilantro, green onions, a little bit of cheese. The recipe doesn’t usually call for cheese, but my mother always gratinated her Pho with Gruyère.”

We both stare at each other. The puzzle piece falls into place. She mirrors my “oh shit” face.

“You order dairy-free coffee.”

“Yeah.”

“I just fed you dairy.”

“Yeah.”

“Oh my God. You’re lactose intolerant,” she whispers, immediately hiding her face in her palms. “I’m so, so sorry, Fulton. It totally slipped my mind. I—I poisoned you.”

Even though the situation is pretty dire, I can’t help the laugh that expels from me. “You didn’t poison me. I’ll live. It’s just a stomachache.”

Shiloh lifts her head, begins to fret like I’ve seen my mother do a million times when I came to her after accidentally—or purposefully—ingesting lactose as a kid, and rests the back of her hand against my clammy forehead.

“Do you need to go to the hospital? Are you about to pass out? What can I do?”

Despite my gut bubbling like a cauldron, the feel of her touch is placating, and I kind of drift off into this semiconscious state where everything’s fuzzy and the cramps are nothing but a dull throb. “Keep touching me. It feels nice.”

Panic thickens her tone. “Dear God, you’re delirious. You don’t know what you’re saying.”

“I do. You’re what I need right now, okay? Just you.”

I sidle up against her body, but no niggling worry of being disgusting or embarrassed crosses the threshold of my mind. In fact, I’ve never felt so at peace before. I feel safe being this close to her. I feel...spared of any judgment.

That is, until everything goes south (literally and figuratively), and the impenetrable traffic jam of dairy packed in my stomach begins to try and digest itself. I’m going to fart. Fuck. I’m not just going to fart, I’m going to shit my pants.

“You need to leave,” I say, repelling myself from her body and trying to push her toward the exit.

Shiloh doesn’t budge. “What?”

“Shiloh, I’m serious.”

“We’re sharing a hotel room!”

I scrub a hand down my face, mentally debating with myself what my next course of action is. A, everything goes right for once and Shiloh leaves the premises immediately. B, I barely make it to the bathroom and the nonexistent fan does nothing to cover up the noise. Or C, I actually shit my pants and drive the only woman I’ve ever wanted a thousand miles away from me.

All of it is pretty humiliating, so I don’t know why I’m trying so hard to save my dignity. “Please. Just for, like, thirty minutes,” I beg.

“I’m not going to leave you like this!” she argues.

I’d physically shove her out the door, but I don’t have that kind of energy—or that

kind of time. I get a rush that beelines for my lower, lower intestines, and I'm hightailing it to the bathroom without her evacuating the vicinity like I had hoped. I can hear Shiloh shouting at me from over my shoulder, but I lock the door before she gets the chance to barge in.

I flail for my phone, dialing Gage through blurred vision.

"Hey, man. I'm kind of in the middle of something," he says through the speaker.

"Help me," I whisper pathetically.

"The fuck?"

Since there's no way of sugarcoating the truth, I stampede across those stupid fucking eggshells. "Gage, you need to come get me. I'm going to shit my pants."

His voice drips with concern. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"It's a long story, okay? I just need you to...I need you to help me climb out the window!" I growl, already clearing a space on the tiny shelving unit used for toiletries in the corner. The window's not too far up, and it looks big enough for me to squeeze my body through.

Will I get out in time before all hell breaks loose? I have no idea. But anywhere is looking better than here because Shiloh's begun to pound her fists on the door.

"Ful, that's crazy."

"You're only two hotel rooms away!"

"No, dude. Cali and I are at a restaurant right now."

Gage is dead to me.

The twinge in my belly tells me I need to start climbing because I have negative four point five seconds before Shiloh's on the receiving end of one of the worst sounds and smells in the entire world, so I notch my foot into one of the shelves, pull myself level with the window, and slide the partition to the side with one hand.

Since I'm pretty much manning this self-save, I don't even notice when Shiloh somehow busts the door open with inhuman strength, getting a front-row seat to the most embarrassing moment of my life.

8

LIFE'S A BEACH

SHILOH

“S o you...”

“Yeah.”

“Then he...”

“Yep.”

“And you saw...”

“Mm-hm.”

Laughter erupts from Aeris' mouth as she shakes her head, a few ringlets tumbling free from her messy bun. She carves out two identical holes in the sand for her boobs—which make mine look like mosquito bites in comparison—and she wiggles into place to assume a good suntanning position.

“Sorry, I shouldn't laugh. That's just...that might be even worse than my first date with Hayes,” she says, handing off a bottle of sunscreen to Lila.

In hindsight, I can't even be mad at her for laughing. Everything was my fault. And

after I fought the fissure of guilt splitting open inside me, I tried to downplay the whole fiasco for Fulton's sake, but I think me trying to relate to his... bodily functions ...dampened his mood. He Great Wall of China-ed me! All night. He probably would've slept on the couch if I hadn't insisted that we share the bed.

We haven't really spoken much at all today. Sure, we've engaged in some small talk here and there, but it's obvious he still feels humiliated. I wish he could see that it doesn't matter to me. I wish he knew how incredible that kiss was. It was like a replenishing breath of life, a memory so profound that it's somehow written itself into the double helix of my DNA.

For the first time in years, I wasn't thinking about work or my obligations or those pesky little worries in the back of my head; I wasn't thinking about where to run to next. I wanted to stay still, to relish the moment, to soak up every smile and laugh and look that Fulton tossed in my direction. It's like he single-handedly sutured the scars of my past with hope, allowing me to finally heal.

But whatever Fulton and I have...it can only be a vacation fling. It can't exist outside of Cabo, no matter how much I want it to. Because if it takes on a living, breathing, disastrous life form of its own, it'll dismantle my entire future, and everything I've worked so hard to achieve will slip through my fingers before I even know what hit me.

Love's not in the books for a workaholic like me. Marriage and children all come second to prosperity, because without a financially stable foundation, how else will I be able to sustain a family? I have to be able to take care of myself before I can take care of another person. I have to be able to repay my parents before I can start living my own life.

And I know what you're thinking—I sound an awful lot like Fulton's absent, shit-for-brains dad. But I'm not like him.

I'm not.

I rub at the corners of my sleep-crusted eyes, braving a glance over at the attention-garnering throng of hockey players spotlighted by the sun's glaring rays. Alternating shades of honeysuckle and saffron bounce off the ocean's glittering surface, and foamy spumes lap at a shell-littered shore in their routine ebb and flow. Packs of loving families and doublets of infatuated couples mill about the beach, raucous laughter competing with the caws of faraway seagulls, the horns of nomadic boats, and the constant crash of well-behaved waves. It's...well, it's nothing short of paradise.

"Earth to Shiloh?" Lila's voice prods, dragging me back to the temperate present where she slathers sunscreen on her best friend's back.

Even though I'm toasting out here—and soon to be the unfortunate "after" picture of a painful sunburn—the lighting at least covers the embarrassment setting up camp in my cheeks. "Sorry. You were saying?"

"The night of our first date, Hayes kissed me and then basically said it was a giant mistake afterwards," Aeris continues.

I try to keep my judgment at bay. "He said that?"

"Okay, he didn't technically say it, but it was implied."

And here they are, getting married in two weeks.

Lila pauses from her sunscreen application and whispers, "He also screwed her over and broke her trust, but we don't talk about that part."

"Lila!" Aeris reprimands, her arm flailing in a half-assed attempt to whack her.

The blonde manages to evade her with minimal effort, and the two of them start bickering with one another while my attention gets carried away by the sea's incoming tide. Back and forth. Monotonous but mandatory.

My gaze involuntarily drifts to Fulton's far too delectable, breathtaking form, and I don't realize I'm ogling his oiled-up muscles until Aeris and Lila both catch my unabashed perving. I didn't realize that hockey could carve such a physique; I thought all it was good for were black eyes and broken noses. His back looks especially grabbable, a lattice of discipline, dedication, and definition that spans his mile-wide shoulders. Not to mention that the same muscle distribution twines up his arms.

"Fulton's definitely a looker," Lila comments, following my line of sight with a knowing half grin. "Way too young for me, but he has this boyish charm about him that I can appreciate."

"Yeah," I agree dreamily, watching the way he rubs a hand over his pecs.

He's laughing at something Gage is saying, and God, does it make basal want ripple through my belly. I can almost taste his searing kiss, and I touch my mouth under the guise of fixing my nonexistent lip gloss. I'd sacrifice all my working eggs for him to tongue-fuck me right here, right now.

"You should go talk to him," Aeris proposes, and although I appreciate the support, my heart's one shudder away from crumpling my body into a sad, pathetic accordion. I can't go up to him when he's looking like... that ...and I'm looking like a preteen stuffed into a Justice one-piece bathing suit.

I frantically glance around for a figurative lifeline, but Faye's in her hotel room with Eda, Casen and Josie are probably partaking in some bed-breaking activities, and Cali's waist-deep in the ocean.

“Come on, Shiloh. You guys are going to be sharing a bed for three weeks. Don’t you think you should clear the air?”

My mouth is inconveniently dry. Not only that, but I’m sweating, the overly rich lunch in my stomach is turning, and I have baby hairs popping up around my face like a lion’s mane. I’m also pretty sure that the humidity has thinned the foundation covering the gigantic pimple on my forehead.

It’s just Fulton, Shiloh. I’m sure he doesn’t care what you look like. Just go talk to him. What if he thinks you’re purposefully avoiding him because of what happened last night and not because you’re intimidated by literally every aspect of him?

I don’t have much experience navigating a crush, even less so when said crush is a world-famous hockey player who has millions of adoring fans willing to commit heinous crimes just to breathe the same air as him.

It’s like there’s this invisible string pulling me toward him, and against my better judgment, my body moves of its own accord without any self-preservation instincts whatsoever. As I slowly amble over—granting him enough time to see me coming—the world throws me a nasty curveball by sending a child sprinting in front of me at sixty miles per hour. It’s practically attempted murder as someone’s unauthorized kid is about to bowl me over, and I’ve already accepted that I’m going to eat shit in front of Fulton and all his friends. But although I brace myself for impact, I never feel my body slam against the ground.

I hesitantly peek out of one eye to assess the damage, only to find myself safely embraced in Fulton’s arms, the sun imitating a glowing halo above his mop of messy, brown hair. I’m beginning to think he’s a literal angel who’s been sent down from heaven to grant every repressed wish of mine. If this was a cheesy romantic comedy, “(I Just) Died in Your Arms” by Cutting Crew would be playing somewhere in the background.

“Hi,” he says in a gritty purr—the kind that unleashes a kaleidoscope of butterflies in my belly.

His eyes are even more enticing than I remember—melted pools of caramel that foster tiny branches of gold in the innermost rings—and they’re framed by long, thick lashes that have no business being on a man. Up close, I can see he has a constellation of freckles scattered across his cheeks, which are much more prominent now that his skin’s developed a bit of a tan.

“Hi,” I greet breathlessly.

Being this close to Fulton is not good for my sanity or the state of my stupid, ridiculously tight swimsuit. And not tight in a sexy way, but more like tight in an I-haven’t-broken-this-baby-out-since-I-was-twelve-and-still-honing-my-backstroke way .

His lips wrench into a lopsided grin, and if my retinas weren’t temporarily scorched by the sun, his Colgate-white smile would’ve blinded me instead. He also smells really good. There’s an underpinning of saltwater and sweat, but his citrusy, overly clean scent is unmistakable. That’s probably not all from his cologne, either. I bet his natural man musk smells that good all the time.

Oh, this is bad. I should’ve let the kid torpedo take me out.

I don’t think he realizes it, but his fingers tighten around my sides, and he doesn’t rush to prop me upright. The way he’s staring at me right now—like I’m somehow more beautiful than one of nature’s most wondrous creations—has something unnamable gnarling around my heart, akin to the way roses grow thorns to protect an untouched underbelly. It’s constructing this delineation between us, and I hate that I’m so aware of it.

I deserve to be happy, don't I?

At the expense of your parents' happiness? They need you. The business is failing. It will fail without you.

But I'm so tired. I'm trying my best.

It's not good enough.

Even though I don't want to, I extricate myself from our position anyways, scrambling to a stance as embarrassment rolls down the notches of my spine. "I'm sorry for falling on you," I mumble, head bowed and eyes downturned.

Fulton— stupid, beautiful, clueless Fulton —hooks his index finger under my chin, promptly lifting it until I obey the sleight of his hand and meet his gaze. "You can fall on me whenever you want."

Hubba, hubba.

Since we're both still amateurs when it comes to reading the room, we speak at the same time, and whatever pointless gibberish that was going to fly out of my mouth is swamped beneath Fulton's "Do you want to go for a walk? "

I slam my lips shut and nod.

As we branch off from his group of friends, I can hear Aeris and Lila whistling at the two of us from their spot on the beach, and Fulton's thankfully too swept up in his train of thought to witness them pulling sex faces as they pretend to dry-hump each other. My eyes flick down to my sand-flocked feet, and I watch the deep imprint they leave behind with every step.

He slices through the silence before it even has the chance to marinate. “I wanted to apologize. Again. For last night.”

“No, Ful. It was my fault. I should’ve?—”

He halts in his tracks, and considering he’s got a longer stride than me, I find myself stopping too, just a few inches from him. I think he swallowed too much saltwater today because he grabs my hand and holds it for a no-longer-platonic minute, as if the distance between us has become physically unbearable.

“You were perfect, Shi,” he whispers, his longing stare searching my expression for God knows what, his thumb coming to kiss the mountain range of my knuckles. The eye contact alone is enough to galvanize my anxiety, but his touch has my heart fully ricocheting off my ribs.

How does he always know just what to say?

“I hope you know I don’t think any less of you,” I tell him quietly.

“Because I shit my pants?”

“Yeah.”

He chuckles. “You don’t seem like the type of person to judge someone for something they can’t control.”

I’ve had my fair share of fights with control, so no, I’m not the type of person who’d do something like that.

It looks like Fulton’s lips part a centimeter, but I’m already resuming our aimless stroll and narrowly dodging a gaggle of kids that zoom past us in a colorful

blur—who are then followed by equally colorful expletives .

We walk for a few uninterrupted minutes, soothed by the inner and outer workings of the beach—the hardcore surfers paddling out on bodyboards, the lost tourists taking advantage of the numerous shops lining the dock, the surround sound of conversations intercut with murmurs from local wildlife, the heave-ho of breaking waves, the rustle of palm fronds in a salt-steeped breeze. On paper, it should all be overwhelming, but with Fulton, it's like I can observe the chaos from a safe distance.

I've never felt that way with anyone before.

I've always been the dictator of my own safety. I got used to only relying on myself because others were too unpredictable. Ace was unpredictable. My parents were unpredictable when they paid my way through college without my knowledge. I'm a control freak. I need to be in control because it's the only way I can regulate my expectations, as well as my disappointment. I don't like feeling blindsided. But now Fulton's knocked my very foolproof way of living off-kilter, and I'm not sure he'll be able to catch me this time.

“I want a redo,” Fulton says out of nowhere.

Confusion spikes inside me. “What?”

“I want a redo of our first date.”

He does? He's still interested in me...even after I poisoned him?

I trap my bottom lip between my teeth in contemplation, and I'm not sure how Fulton can understand me so well already, but he ghosts the back of his hand over the curve of my face, coaxing me to lean into his touch.

“You’re thinking too hard. I want this, okay? I want you . And before you tell me I’m being an idiot, no, you didn’t try to kill me, and no, I didn’t think the entire night was a disaster,” he reassures me, security blanketing me in a warmth unrivaled by the sun itself—a warmth that seems to cauterize my raw fears.

“I just thought...”

Fulton drops his hand and shuffles the tiniest bit closer to me, a whimper concentrated in the pit of his chest. “Please, Shi. Don’t make me beg.”

Swoon. That nickname does things to me...unladylike things.

He’s so close to me that I can practically feel the heat radiating off his body, and the implication of another closed-door date with Fulton hardens the peaks of my nipples underneath my one-piece. “I would love a redo,” I acquiesce, watching—or more like torturing myself—as his tongue sweeps the seam of his perfect, plump lips.

“That’s amazing, because I really don’t think I could handle getting rejected by you when you look like that.”

“Like what?”

He groans, then pulls me in by my waist so I’m flush against his chest. “Like you’re the most beautiful girl who’s ever graced this planet.”

Emboldened by his flattery, I can’t help but snort. “I think you may be exaggerating.”

“Not even a little bit,” he declares, tiptoeing his fingers up the curves of my sides, his woodsmoke voice burning a hole of anticipation straight through my belly.

I want to kiss him so badly right now. I need to kiss him. And judging by the cut of

his jaw, the straining of his arms, and the desperation entrenched in his darkening eyes, he needs his very own pick-me-up. He's limned in a striation of warm hues beneath a marbled sky, beads of sweat shimmering over the planes of his muscles, his impeccable bone structure contoured by sun-cast shadows.

"I know I'm not normally good at communicating my feelings, but with you, I don't have that problem at all. You bring out this side of me that I never even knew existed before. When I'm around you, it feels like I'm experiencing life for the very first time again. I'm not ready to give that up yet," he explains.

My traitorous eyes stall on his lips as hellfire blusters through my veins, and I'm no longer thinking about the logistics of my loveless future. No, I'm thinking about right here, right now, and selfishly, what I want for a change.

"I know exactly what you mean. When we kissed, I felt like I could finally catch my breath. Nothing else mattered in the moment except you. And my brain's pretty much in a constant state of anxiety, so it's rare when the world goes quiet."

"Do you need to catch your breath again?" he asks, ducking his head down so my face is only a few inches from his mouth—from finally being able to breathe clean, fresh air unsullied by a thick swath of smog.

I rise to my tiptoes, teasing him with the humble beginnings of a kiss. "Yeah, I think I do."

9

FULTON: ONE, ORAL VIRGINITY: ZERO

FULTON

We stumble into the hotel room, my arm flailing behind me as the door slams shut with a wall-shaking thud. Ever since I saw Shiloh in that ridiculously sexy one-piece jogging over to me Baywatch -style, I couldn't take my eyes off her. I didn't expect her to agree to a date redo, nor did I expect her to let me kiss her again, but now I'm in another love-lust predicament that's captured my not-so-subtle erection as a prisoner of war.

I'm way in over my head; I don't know what the hell I'm doing. All I know is that I'm a mere mortal kneeling before a deity, and I'd make a religion in her name if it meant that I got the privilege of tasting her.

She stamps kisses all over my lips, sloppily nips at the stretch of skin beneath my jaw, and pretty much makes me lose my vice-like grip on all my faculties. She's ravaging me like an ambush predator that's waited for this exact moment to strike, and the thought of sinking my canines into her and marking my territory flashes across my hindbrain. The thin skin of her neck, the meat of her inner thighs, the breasts that now jut out prominently beneath her mouthwatering valley of cleavage. All my thoughts are cobbled together in this giant mess that's been commandeered by animalistic instinct.

Even though I don't want to, I break for air, panting. "Are you sure?" I ask, my

fingers furred into her sides in an effort to keep my legs steady.

She nods, smushing her tits against my chest, her pebbled nipples poking through the flimsy, nylon fabric that's been testing my self-restraint all day. God, I'm about to lose it—my mind, my load, everything. The longer I play with the swimsuit that cling wraps to her figure, the stronger the insatiable ache in my groin becomes. Her silky skin sparkles in the midday sun, a flawless canvas that I need to chart with my hands and tongue—that I need to shower in a hailstorm of hickeys.

“I'm sure,” she says breathlessly, her tongue caressing mine in a breakneck rush, and her hands pawing helplessly at my hair before she manages to tangle her fingers in the strands. When she yanks hard enough to crick my neck, she invites me deeper into her mouth, hunger and desperation building a crescendo that vibrates through my lower belly. I accept the access greedily—a broken groan tearing through my throat—and I bear the brunt of our combined weight against the wall.

Shit. This is really happening. Okay, calm down, Fulton. Relax. You've got this. Don't overthink it. Just communicate with her. Oh my God. What if I blow in my pants before I even get her undressed?

I keep my hands on her waist out of respect, but they itch to slip to the R-rated parts of her, to grab the bottom of her butt and knead the doughy flesh with my fingers. But in my pitiful, hilariously unfortunate case, worry works as swiftly as unfettered impulse.

I pull away for the second time, unable to ignore the little voice in the back of my head that heeds me to proceed with caution. “I've never been intimate with anyone like this before. I don't know how to...”

Shiloh's face falls. “How to...?”

Hesitation takes precedence over the conversation, and I hate that I'm even considering an alternate reality where I'm not in some Shiloh-kiss coma for the rest of the night. Despite my cock straining against my swim trunks, her comfort is more important.

“How to touch you,” I eventually finish.

She lets out a small giggle—one that I shouldn't love the sound of so much, and one that wrings pleasure from every inch of my body. “I can show you, but you're doing a pretty good job of it yourself.”

Suddenly, she slides my hands down to her ass, and the gusset of her swimsuit rides up enough to expose a portion of her perky cheeks, imploring me to mold them into my own playthings.

Oh, fuck.

“But I don't want to pressure you into doing something you don't want to do,” she quickly rushes out.

I grab her butt with enough force to make her body lurch, letting her feel just how aroused I am from the simple proximity alone. My engorged cock pokes into her belly, and I elicit a moan from her loud enough to justify a noise complaint.

“Trust me, Shi, this is the only thing I want to do.”

Her eyes stray down to the... problem ...standing between us, and for the first time since she initiated this sexual escapade, concern hardens the hinge of her jaw. “You feel...”

“Good? Bad?”

“Big.”

I—oh. What am I supposed to say to that?

Heat shoots up the back of my neck, drenching me in a film of sweat that’s about to be a lot more noticeable in a few minutes. “Right. Um, we don’t have to go any further. I’m good with just kissing. I love just kissing.”

“Sorry,” she backtracks, scraping her bottom lip between her teeth. “I didn’t mean it like a bad thing. I’m just...not sure if I’m ready for that right now.”

And suddenly, the nerves and the anxiety and the doubt all get sucked out of my head by an invisible force, leaving me with the raw realization that no matter how the night ends, I want to spend my time pleasuring the girl who’s done nothing but reassure me this entire trip.

“We can stop,” I tell her. “We can order room service and stay in. You can pick a movie, or we can go for a walk, or we can really do whatever you?”

I’m so distracted with yapping her ear off that I don’t even realize the movement of her nimble fingers before it’s too late. She slowly lowers her bathing suit straps—revealing the goose bumps that pepper her now-bare chest—and I drag my gaze down her body until I reach the sliver of space just below her navel where the fabric bunches. I think my brain’s malfunctioning.

I’ve seen some pairs of tits in my time, alright? In the occasional Playboy magazine, during that one awkward episode of Bridgerton when my mom was in the room, even when I was flashed by some die-hard fans after an exhilarating game. But none of those boobs were as perfect as Shiloh’s. I can’t help the way my mouth waters like it’s some Pavlovian response, and the sight of her hardened nipples sends a goddamn signal to inflate my dick even more.

Her throat works with a swallow. “Is it okay if we?—”

“Yes. A thousand times yes.”

Before she can overthink her next response, I grab Shiloh by the underside of her thighs, hoist her onto my hips, and carry her to the opposite side of the room where the ceiling-tall window overlooks the balcony. She clings to me, drilling her fingernails into my back with a smarting sting that doesn’t come anywhere close to offsetting the pain in my balls. I’m running on primal adrenaline at this point, and some newly awakened part of me needs her up against the window while I have my fill of her.

“Are you sure you haven’t done this before?” she quips, her spine arching against the glass.

Just because I’m a virgin doesn’t mean I haven’t done extensive research on the topic at hand. In the delirious hope of experiencing sex for the first time, I felt like there were certain things I needed to know. How sensitive the clit is, how crucial foreplay is, how important it is to communicate and set boundaries in the bedroom. Let’s just say I spent an embarrassingly long time on Quora asking questions that have since been erased from my internet search history. It also helps that my teammates were more than willing to divulge their own sexual experiences.

Laughter plumes from my lips, but it’s slowly swallowed up by another mind-spinning, knee-buckling kiss, strong enough to warrant one of my hands shooting out to bracket the side of her head. She hikes her leg up and drapes it over my waist, eagerly chasing my tongue with hers, then granting me a genuine, keening moan that flies up from the depths of her gut.

“I’m sure. I’ve never wanted to be with anyone beside you.”

I leave out the part where my imagination's delusionally Velcroed the two of us together for the past four years, so I haven't even looked at another girl since her. That's...that's laying it on thick.

I experiment with tracing the outline of her breasts, and when she consents and boasts them to me, I squeeze the mound of her tit with my free hand. I'm nearly sundered by a hurricane of possessiveness by her half-open mouth, fluttering eyelids, and a tightening of her abdominal muscles that tells me she's just as sexually charged as I am. Then I swirl the pad of my thumb over her nipple, gauging her willingness before deciding to flick a nail over the tiny erogenous zone .

"Oh, fuck," she whispers, rutting her hips into my crotch as her fingernails bear down on my shoulders, hard.

I tend to her bud with twice the speed, the added obstacle of her grinding into me enough to make me black out. She's taking a hot knife to my senses, and they're separating like melted butter under a searing blade.

"Tell me what you need from me."

The sexiest whimper rumbles in her chest, and she—albeit contemplatively—leads my hand from her breast down the slender length of her stomach, then trails it below the hood of her clit where I'm greeted by the damp gusset of her swimwear.

Every muscle in my body seizes, and I can feel my cock spit a sizable helping of pre-cum against the inside of my trunks.

How is she—? We've barely even done anything.

I'm breathless, my vision is splotchy, and my head's ringing in a pleasure-pain throb that almost steals a moan from me. "Are you always this wet?" I ask, pulling a bit of

the fabric aside so I can brush my fingers against her slick.

She shakes her head, and for a split moment, her meek side peeks through that dominant veil. “Only around you.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

I’ve made it, folks. I can die an accomplished man now.

I barely breach her inner ring of muscle before withdrawing my arm, lifting my fingers to my lips and tasting her on them. She’s the sweetest thing I’ve ever fucking tasted. I’m like a man starved, licking my skin clean, so unsatisfied that I don’t think I’ll be able to picture a universe where I’m not servicing her needs twenty-four-seven. I can smell the faintness of her musk, and a deluge of desire punctures a hole through the levee of my rationale.

Her ecstasy-laden tone nearly has me falling to my knees, that sweet, innocent tenor of hers firing an uncontrollable shudder through my body. “Fulton, please. ”

I adjust the crotch of my trunks, but my dick’s so incredibly hard that it doesn’t alleviate any of the pressure. My tone’s more authoritative than I intend, and it comes out in a rolling growl with enough brass to jostle the walls. “No, Shi. You never have to beg. Ever. I’m the one who begs. Do you understand?”

When she nods stiffly, I clamber to my knees, grabbing the rest of her pooled swimsuit and yanking it down with enough force to undress her in one go. She’s completely bare—not that I wouldn’t explore the wilderness if she hadn’t shaved—and she sucks in her belly, drawing it away from the cradle of her protruding hipbones. It drives me crazy that her naked ass is pressed up against the

window right now.

Even though the sun's still out, it would be hard for anyone to see into our room given the height and positioning of the balcony, so the last thing I'm concerned about is garnering some unwanted attention.

“Can I taste you, Sunshine? Please? Please let me taste you. I'll do anything you want. I'll give you anything you want.”

I have no idea where that nickname came from, but I don't apologize for letting it slip out.

Her gaze ping-pongs between me and the window. “What if someone sees?”

I never thought I was a possessive man...until Shiloh. Something guttural builds in the pit of my chest—something that doesn't sound like me at all. “Are you worried for your sake or theirs?”

Her brows dent. “Why would I be worried for their sake?”

“Because I'll kill them if they look.”

She sobers and laughs a little. “Hah, Fulton, that's...”

I'm not a stranger to fights—thank you, hockey, for that very healing and not-at-all unhealthy outlet. When my team needs me, I'll always have their back. When my girl needs me, I'm good with slamming a perv's head through the window if he so much as breathes in her direction .

“I'm serious, Shi. It's just you and me in here. I'll never be okay with sharing you.”

“Then be selfish. God , be selfish with me.”

I can never resist Shiloh—it doesn’t matter what she asks of me. She needs help hiding a dead body? I’ll be her airtight alibi. She needs me to get her a passport and hair dye, no questions asked? I’m putting her on a private jet out of the country. But especially right now, as she pouts her lips and preens under my stare, I can’t say no to her.

All my previous anxiousness vanishes, giving leeway to the selfish appetite that coils in my abdomen like a viper. I clamp my hands into her curves to anchor myself, and I lick a thick stripe up her inner thigh, the smell of her arousal compounding the needy jerk of my cock. I prod the flesh with my teeth, tenderize it with ruthless sucks and nibbles, perfecting a hickey that I know she’ll see for days.

She quivers as a moan snags in her throat, her hand braiding itself through the front of my hair and pulling when I hit a sensitive spot. The force nearly unbalances me, but I don’t stop until there’s a sizeable bruise there.

“You tell me what you like, okay? And if you need me to stop, I’ll stop,” I assure her, coming undone at the seams the moment I delve my tongue inside her tight cunt, lapping up the excess that trickles past her swollen lips. I’m not completely sure what I’m doing, so I start with measured strokes, circling my tongue with just enough torque to make her back come off the window.

“Fuck,” she whimpers, and a consequential burn ripples along my scalp.

She tastes like heaven—like ambrosia so sweet that it could put even the strongest of gods in a coma. I familiarize myself with her inner walls, upholding a rhythmic cadence as I suck more of her cum into my mouth, and I have to smother a grin when I spur her hips to cant forward. She’s greedily clawing at me for more, fighting to stay coherent amidst a heady fog, her shallow pants and sexy moans mingling

together and stroking more than just my ego.

Shiloh's leg suddenly comes up to rest on my shoulder, providing me with the perfect angle to piston deeper, and that's exactly what I do. I speed up each lash and flick of my tongue, stoking the rapidly growing fire inside her, this time venturing to crevices I haven't even touched yet. Her ankle digs into my taut upper back, my cock weeps enough pre-cum to saturate my entire front, and the urge to release sucker punches me in my fucking gut.

Shiloh's cunt squeezes roughly. "Oh, God. Yes, Fulton. Faster!"

I do as my woman says, sweeping my tongue back and forth against that inner ring of muscle that beckons me deeper, that hollows in spastic pulses and ushers a flood of liquid desire over my taste buds. She's sensitive—like, one-touch-and-she'll-detonate sensitive.

And I'm a sick fuck for being turned on by it.

I haven't come up for a proper breath in minutes. I'm going to have a headache by the time she's done ripping my hair out. When I stimulate the perfect nerve, I can feel her standing leg give, and I pull away just enough to witness the raw pleasure contorting her features, the tremble of her lower lip, the tears waterfaling down her pinkened cheeks.

"Don't—don't stop," she pants, conjuring enough energy to glance down at me.

I lick the essence of her off my lips, deriving a drawn-out groan from her in the process. "Does my girl like it when I lick... here?"

My tongue lathes over her soaking flaps, nowhere near deep enough to carve her out like I was doing before, but her whole body tenses, nonetheless.

“Yes. ”

Barely a whisper, far from an admission.

“Say it, Sunshine. Use your words.”

“Yes, Fulton. I... love ...when you lick there.”

“How about when I bite... here ?” I ask, taking one of her southern lips between my teeth and pulling gently.

A moan loud enough to set off a goddamn avalanche permeates the hotel room. Even though I’m not nose-deep inside of her, I can still feel the way her poor pussy clenches around nothing, searching helplessly for the friction that’ll bring her to the snow-cloaked precipice.

The hunger inside me is untamable, bloodthirsty. She’s so obedient, so willing, so desperate . She’s the perfect prey—a lamb caught between the maw of a wolf, at my very mercy, with a hold so loose on her inhibitions that she wouldn’t dare be anything but malleable under my hands. There’s a creature molting inside me, shedding its innocent exterior to make way for its true nature. I’m not myself when I’m around her.

A broken plea leaps from her tongue, her words initiating a chemical reaction to the wick of lust waiting patiently inside me. “Y-yes. I need...more.”

I sit back on my heels, palming the giant bulge in my swim trunks, hooded eyes scanning in lazy perusal over the goddess before me. “I know. You’re doing so well. Now let me watch you play with your clit like a good girl.”

Whoa. Where the hell did that come from? I can’t dirty talk for shit.

With core-shaking tremors, Shiloh does as I say, snaking her arm between her bitten thighs. There are translucent streaks on her face, and her eyes are tapioca pearls ringed in the warmest of brown hues, now lacquered with a thin gloss of tears.

She flicks her finger over her lips, gathering enough momentum to continue in a swift succession, and I'm drooling like a fucking mutt as I watch moisture glaze her skin. The fullness in my balls is becoming harder to ignore, and the pain is to the point where it hurts to touch my cock, let alone rub it. Sharp, needle-fine pinpricks lance up my shaft.

Shiloh submerges her digit to the knuckle—the magnified sound of squelching echoing off the walls—and her face momentarily screws up before bliss chases the teeth-gritting discomfort away. Tiny little mewls pervade the air, gelled together with half-hearted curses, and she heightens the pain in my dick when she sinks another finger inside her greedy cunt.

“Fuck, Sunshine. That’s it. Look at how wet you are. You’re so beautiful like this.”

She rides her hand, the warmth from her body producing condensation on the glass.

“It’s too much. I can’t?—”

I can barely focus on her. I feel like I’m about to pass out. I’m not sure what happens next, but the dominant monster that prowls inside of me finally breaks free from its shackles.

A growl rumbles through my chest, and I rub my thumb over the leaking tip of my cock. “You can, and you will. Now spit on it.”

Shock shadows Shiloh’s expression, but she removes her hand to follow through with my order, spitting into her palm before slapping it over the hood of her clit, where the mix of wetness is scratching an itch I didn’t even know I had.

Jesus... fuck . I can't take this anymore. I pull my pants down inhumanly fast, letting my cock finally spring out and bow down from its heavy weight, angry, red-hued, and vein-riddled.

Shiloh gasps and stares at it. "I can help?—"

"You are helping," I insist, gently moving her hand aside so I can feast on the sweetest pussy I'll ever taste.

Once I slurp up the thickness of her spit and the proliferation of her salt-tinged cum, I drown in her. It's the kind of drowning that crushes my lungs and fuzzes my senses, but I love it. I'm determined to make her gush all over my face, and judging by the straining of her muscles, she's almost there. She just needs a little... push .

My tongue dances inside her, and with a heave of her chest, her pussy gives one last flutter before she's coming inside my mouth. I swallow everything she gives me, so inexplicably high on her that I have every intention of riding out this tidal wave of euphoria before hitting the cold, hard ground.

I'm so focused on licking her walls clean that I don't even see my own orgasm careening toward me at hyper speed, crashing headfirst into my body and causing me to spurt plentiful, pearlescent ropes onto the hardwood floor. I just narrowly miss her feet, and Shiloh has to practically pry me off her cunt.

"Is that coming out of the deposit?" she asks in between ragged breaths.

I don't even bother looking at the mess, and I lean forward to groan into her shoulder.

"It's your fault," I mutter.

"How is that my fault?"

“How is it not your fault? That whole show would’ve made any guy spray like a firehose.”

Shiloh muffles a giggle, thwapping me on the shoulder. “Ew, Fulton!”

I lift my head to look at her, the last of the post orgasmic aftershocks dimming to a barely noticeable buzz. “Hey, I’m just telling the truth! Pretty sure that was the peak of my entire life.”

Even though it’s tailed by airy laughter, she leans her forehead against mine, curls of her sweat-matted hair tickling my temples. “You’re really good at that,” she whispers.

“Don’t say that,” I grumble.

“Why?”

“Because you’re making me hard again.”

10

FAULTY LOCKS AND POST-O SHOCKS

SHILOH

Fulton Cazzarelli just tongue-fucked my brains out.

That had to have been, hands down, the best orgasm I ever had. I barely had to direct him—he just...he just understood my body and knew what I needed. There was no awkwardness or discomfort. It was like he was a completely different person, no longer ruled by his inexperience or self-doubt. And if that's the way he ravages me on the second night of our pseudo vacation, then I fear for the sake of my poor pussy. Girl hasn't seen this much action in years.

Fulton lets me use the shower before him so he can clean up his mess, and I thank the Lord that the ceramic wall is sturdy enough to hold up my weak, feverish, half-liquefied body. My cunt's sore, my thighs are embellished with rosettes of mauve hickeys, and my head throbs with a mixture of dehydration, overexertion, and salacious thoughts that would probably put me on some sort of watch list.

I lather shampoo in my tangled tresses, feeling the soap froth between my fingers. The cascade of water batters against my chest, and the plink of the pressurized stream against the tiles lulls me into a euphoric, half-awake state .

Droplets sluice down my body, washing away the evidence of arousal that had congealed over my inner thighs. With steam rapidly enveloping the bathroom, I

watch through muddied vision as a dome of bubbles disappears into the floor. I run my hands over my curves—over the areas that Fulton marked—and a sense of unflappable pride materializes in my belly, undeterred by trivial work obligations or the delusional narrative that I don't deserve to find love.

Even though I've only been in here for ten minutes, my separation anxiety is at an all-time high, and my heart is one temperamental bitch that needs to barnacle itself to Fulton's side. But the longer I'm with him, the harder it is for me to keep this a strict Cabo-only relationship.

I don't want this fairytale to end, but I have to be realistic. Where does Fulton fit into my world, and more importantly, where do I fit into his? He's the one percent, and I'm the lady at the grocery store who was holding up the line the other week because of the endless heaps of coupons I'd been hoarding.

After a thorough clean and a rather violent head shake to dispose of my depressing thoughts, I step out of the shower smelling freshly of grapefruit. When I venture outside, a pall of warm air precedes me, and Fulton's chucking crumpled tissues into the garbage can. His back is facing me, and the sinew underneath his skin ripples when he twists to pick something up. God, he's like a wet dream come to life. I also notice a hatching of nail marks on his right shoulder, but I keep my mouth shut.

Before I'm conscious enough to voice my presence, he turns around with a look that freezes my entire body—one that unfortunately starts with my nipples.

He plows a hand through his disheveled hair, groaning. "Jesus, Shi. How do you look good wearing just a towel?"

My cheeks flame. "I don't have any makeup on."

"You don't need it."

Fulton abandons his spot cleaning and begins to stalk closer to me, which isn't going to end well for my abused vagina or the state of this towel. He's brawn and bulk rolled into one delicious package—a towering giant with a gravitational pull so strong that I'm about to be sucked into his orbit for the foreseeable future. His body didn't sustain as much damage as mine did in... Windowgate ...but there are areas of his skin dappled with redness from where I either used him as a foothold or carved my proverbial name into his flesh.

And not that I was looking there or anything, but his dick is... huge . Girthy, long, impressively manicured. He's not even hard! He's just naturally packing heat down there, and the thought of letting his pocket rocket invade my garden of Eden has me cringing with phantom pain.

Before he can breach the lip zone, my chest hitches. “You're not wearing any clothes.”

A fully cocked grin tilts the corners of his lips up, and he hypnotizes me with the bottomless brown of his eyes, still managing to inch closer without realizing the total world destruction he's about to impose. “Am I distracting you?” he drawls.

My first instinct is to deny, deny, deny, but my traitorous stare drops almost immediately to his dick, and now my integrity is as flimsy as my jelly-like legs. Lust tramples me, drying the saliva in my mouth while the butterflies return with a vengeance.

The darkened glare in his eyes is loaded with desire, the twitch of his arm indicating that both of our nakedness seems to be an unresolvable problem.

Hesitancy colors my tone. “I...”

Fulton brushes his thumb over my cheek. “There're no words to describe what you do

to me, Sunshine. None. It doesn't matter if you're wearing clothes or not. You don't just distract me—you're under my fucking skin, okay? ”

Disbelief or an untimely joke perches on the tip of my tongue, but it never takes flight. There's a knock at the door, followed by a deep voice that announces room service, and it redirects the interrogation lamp that was previously boring a hole into my skull.

Fulton lights up. “Oh, the food's here. I ordered a little bit of everything while you were in the bathroom. Can you grab it? I'll be in and out of the shower, and then we can eat together.”

I'm about to nod before Fulton darts forward to plant a kiss on my cheek, then races his bare ass into the bathroom with a holler of gratitude. With my brain half-melted from whatever sexy staring contest we were having, I walk over to the partition and glance out the peephole, making sure the coast is clear.

I wrench open the door to grant a small unloading space, then I start dragging the numerous dishes and trays stacked in the hallway into our room. Jesus. Fulton must've ordered the entire dinner menu.

As I begin stockpiling the goods, a thirst-quenching bottle of champagne sits just out of my reach, and I struggle to grab it without exposing myself to any of our floormates. Hand on my tits, a nice draft fluttering beneath the towel, I'm just out of the door's radius.

“Stupid drink,” I mutter under my breath, launching myself further before making contact with the neck of the bottle, and I'm about to revel in my ah-ha moment when the unmistakable sound of a slam echoes behind me.

When I look back, the bottom of my towel's been caught in the partition, and a squeal

bursts out of me. No, no, no! Oh, no. Please. Not me. Not like this.

My cotton defense falls to the ground humiliatingly, baring my naked body for the entire world to see, and the fact that I'm on my hands and knees right now doesn't make this look any better. Hyperventilating, I yank fruitlessly on one end of the towel while simultaneously keeping my lady bits hidden .

Oh my God. Am I going to get arrested for indecent exposure? I've never gone to jail before. I'm a good person! Do you know what they do to people like me in jail? I'm going to get shanked, and I have an irrational fear of getting stabbed!

The floor is unoccupied, but who knows when someone's bound to step out of the elevator. I don't have my phone with me, so I can't call for help. I decide to try banging on the door to get Fulton's attention, but the more incessant my hits become, the greater the chance of garnering unwanted attention. After the eighth desperate knock, I realize the possibility of Fulton hearing me over the running water and coming to my rescue is slim to none.

I'm naked and afraid.

I should've left the stupid champagne bottle. I should've put clothes on before going outside like a normal person. I'm going to kill myself. I'm going to swan dive off this floor in nothing but my birthday suit.

And then...it happens. The elevator dings.

AHHH!

I desert my towel, army-crawl toward the nearest piece of furniture that can serve as a shield, and pray that whoever is coming down the hall walks straight by my hiding place none the wiser.

I can't believe this. I just had the best orgasm of my life, and now I'm squeezing myself behind an old, disgusting vending machine so I don't accidentally flash someone. This is all Fulton's fault. If I get out of this without traumatizing an innocent child, I'm going to strangle him. And not in the sexy way!

A medley of voices and the acoustics of footfalls grow louder from around the corner, and I'm covering my chest and privates like these strangers are going to use their superhuman X-ray vision to see through my grease-stained sanctuary.

Quivering from the cold and the imminent exposure, anxiety curdles in my stomach as I weather the eye of the storm that Fulton left me in. With bated breath, I wait until the conversation passes me and trails down the hall before sailing out of my hearing range completely.

Thank God .

Fulton can't take that long of a shower, right? I'm sure he'll be done soon, notice I'm missing, and come looking for me. I'll be fine. All I have to do is just...stay here. And hope that the security cameras on this floor don't work anymore.

So I overestimate Fulton's shower tolerance, wait an embarrassingly long time with my knees glued to my chest, and try to conserve as much heat as possible while freezing my literal ass off.

"I shouldn't have— hic —had that fifth martini," a girl hiccups, the stumble of her gait as loud as landmines while she lumbers down the hallway.

"You just need to sleep it off," a second female voice interjects, her inflection matching that of an exhausted parent trying to compromise with a rambunctious toddler.

“No, I need...ooh, I need that !”

A cold sweat breaks out over my nape, the thudding of her footsteps striking a chord of panic within me, and it's not long before I feel the vending machine shake in response to the too-drunk-to-function beast trying to uproot it. I cringe, shrinking further into myself, bargaining with whatever omnipotent powers are watching over me to let her pass without uncovering my feeble body.

“Chocolate. I want...a lot of it,” she slurs, banging her fists a few times on the glass for good measure.

While I suffer in silence—trying to decide if I should bequeath this good Samaritan with a quest to get me back inside—my humiliation mutates into bone-deep relief when I hear those glorious, magic words.

“I have to bring something back for Hayes. He likes the— hic —Cool Ranch Doritos.”

Hayes...as in Hayes Hollings? As in, Aeris' fiancé?

Am I saved?

Unpurgeable trepidation constricts around my trachea, but since I'm hell-bent on making it back to the hotel room to kill Fulton, the words somehow waver out of me. “Aeris?” I ask timidly.

“Who said that? Are you talking to me through a camera in the vending machine? I'm not doing anything illegal, I swear!”

I palm my forehead, glancing down at the incriminating state of my nude body. My skin purses with goose bumps, and it doesn't help that the still-wet strands of my hair

produce a constant drip of water down my spine. “No, it’s Shiloh. I’m, uh, behind the vending machine. I need your help.”

“Shiloh?”

I’m expecting to see Aeris’ alcohol-flushed face peek around the corner, but instead, I’m greeted with Josie’s head of voluminous ringlets, her lips agape and eyes wide as she takes in my pathetic appearance. “Shiloh? Oh my God. Are you okay? What happened?”

When I harness the courage to show my face, a slew of giggles threatens my dignity and the waking state of the other inhabitants. Aeris gasps for air with tears in her eyes, even going as far as bending at the midsection to catch her breath.

I deadpan, “Yes. Let’s laugh at the girl who’s currently naked and hiding behind a vending machine because her roommate takes thirty-minute-long showers.”

She wheezes, grabs at her stomach, and flicks a tear off her waterline in an exaggerated fashion. “I’m sorry, I just—you...your coochie is out. Does the breeze feel good? Should I start going commando?”

Josie clucks her tongue, gunning her inebriated partner in crime down with a glare that could freeze hell over. “You have to excuse Aeris. Her cutoff was supposed to be three drinks.”

Swaying on her feet—in arguably worse condition than I am—Aeris shushes Josie with a finger to her lips, holding back what I hope is a swallow and not a gag. “I can drink as many have as I want! I can want as many drinks as I have!”

Josie recoils from Aeris, digs in her pocket for a handful of crumpled bills, and slaps them into the drunk girl’s palm as some sort of peace offering. “Aeris, you can get

whatever you want, okay? I'm going to help Shiloh back to her room," she says.

Aeris dissolves into a fit of happy squeals as she begins her tireless journey to buy every chocolate-coated thing in the vending machine. Meanwhile, Josie catalogs the embarrassment written on my face, and she averts her eyes while I break down our next plan of action.

"It's the door with the champagne bottle in front of it," I tell her, bearing a brutal gust of air-conditioning that grazes me like a bullet against tender flesh. I'm running out of extremities to cover up the necessary areas. If I contract an airborne STD from this hotel, I'm suing.

Aeris is on her fourth attempt trying to shove a wrinkled bill into the metal slot, and she kicks or hits the vending machine whenever it rejects her money with an ear-splitting screech. If I didn't know any better, I'd say she's one hangry tantrum away from putting her hand through the glass and orphaning a bunch of helpless candy bars.

Josie, thankfully, understands the gravity of the situation because she's quick to assault the hotel door with fists and non-PG insults. "Fulton Cazzarelli, open this door right now or I'll shove my stiletto so far up your squeaky-clean ass that you'll be able to taste it!"

The pounding never halts—each rap is closer to demolishing the partition, sure to intrigue some morbidly curious bystanders to the boisterous commotion on the third floor.

With leaden nerves settling in my belly—and dragging my center of gravity down to the earth's molten core—I'm about to call for a ceasefire when Fulton finally opens the door, a towel slung low on his hips.

“Wha—”

I beeline for the room in a blurry streak, yelling an unintelligible “thanks” over my shoulder before slamming the door shut. Once I pick up my abandoned towel, I hurriedly cover myself, and then I let Fulton have it.

“You”—huff—“locked”—huff—“me”—huff—“out!” I scream, curling my knuckles into fists, the confusion infused in his features kickstarting a direct line of rage to the center of my heart. If he wasn’t so cute, his obliviousness would pluck the fraying threads of my patience.

“You were locked outside?”

“Yes, you prick! You were too busy lathering your man goods to hear me knocking and calling for help. I was”—I lower my voice to a hushed whisper, shame a bitter note on my tongue—“naked.”

“Naked?”

“Stuck to fend for myself behind a vending machine! It was humiliating.”

I’m expecting Fulton to drop to his knees and grovel for my forgiveness—maybe even kiss my feet—but he doesn’t do that. No, he chooses the idiot’s way out and chuckles at my partial meltdown, those megawatt dimples of his making it harder for me to stand my ground. It also doesn’t help that I can see the start of his V-line soar over the hem of his towel, leading up to that grid of stomach muscle that has my pussy forgetting all about his betrayal. Water droplets ribbon down his skin, coalescing into one rivulet that travels downward in a vertical line.

His lower lip is victim to a bite—whether it’s to stifle a laugh, I don’t know. “I’m sorry, Sunshine, I am. But you just...”

I cross my arms over my chest, but I probably look as intimidating as a kitten. “I just what ?”

Fulton eats the distance between us, his large, hard-ridged, hulking frame dwarfing my small one, so close to me that my sex-fueled brain is considering taking my frustration out on him in a very different way. His heady gaze lingers on the triangle of my throat, and I get the overwhelming urge to kiss him with raw abandon, shed both of our towels, and engage in round two of the Orgasm Olympics.

“You just look too good right now,” he groans exasperatedly, adjusting his hips as discreetly as he can.

Resist, Shiloh, resist! You’re a strong, independent woman who doesn’t need a man to satisfy her needs, even though that man is nothing short of a hunk. Remember how he banished you to the vending machine with not even the clothes on your back? Make him pay. Make him beg. Give him the cold shoulder.

“I’m mad at you,” I growl, though with little vehemence.

I don’t think Fulton views me as a threat for a single second. All he does is snare me in his arms, pull my body flush against his front, and bend down slightly to brush the tips of our noses together.

“Can you at least be mad at me while I kiss you?”

11

LOVE IS A SILENT KILLER

FULTON

S hiloh plops down on the bed with a French fry half-lodged in her mouth, bundled in a fuzzy robe that she donned after her second shower of the day to get the germs off her unintentional exile. I feel terrible that I locked her outside the room for thirty minutes. I honest to God didn't hear any knocking. Then again, I do like to belt Celine Dion at the top of my lungs when I'm lathering myself up, so that's probably why.

I watch with pinched breath as she chomps off an impressively large bite of her hamburger. Even in the jaundiced light of the hotel room, she shines brighter than the roadmap of stars sprawling over our balcony, backdropped against a slate sky that would normally summon a baptism of rain if it wasn't for Cabo's torrid climate.

I don't have an appetite, even though I ordered nearly one of everything off the menu. It's the nerves...I think...which is weird, because surely I should feel comfortable around her by now, right?

I'm not sure why something as mundane as sharing a meal makes my heart cavort faster than being intimate with her, but it does. I get overwhelmed that she exists, you know? And just being next to her, watching her inhale food...there's a simplicity in it that I've missed amongst the whirlwind of hockey, after-parties, interviews, and sponsorships.

“Are you always this nervous?” she asks me out of nowhere, making a decent dent in her burger.

I blink, flush, then resort to rubbing my nape. “I’m not nervous.”

There’s a little smear of ketchup by the corner of her mouth, though she doesn’t realize it’s there. “Fulton, your tongue was inside my cunt forty minutes ago. And now you’re sitting far away from me like I’ve got some kind of contagious disease.”

“I’m sorry,” I mumble, anxiety trickling into my empty stomach like cave water off cambered limestone. I didn’t realize the distance was so noticeable. But she’s right—there’s practically a ravine between the two of us, and I get this urge at the tips of my fingers like I need to drag my nails against her soft, flawless skin. A predatory instinct.

“Don’t be sorry. Just come closer.”

Closer. Closer is...good? Bad? My vision practically blacks out like the sequence after an explosion in an action movie. Gleaning confidence is going to take time, but I obey her, consciously leaving at least a respectable sliver. Though knowing Shiloh’s stubbornness and her inexplicable superpower to see right through me, it’s not surprising when she demolishes my act of chivalry by sitting a centimeter away from my body...in nothing but flimsy cotton. From this angle, the neckline of her robe droops low enough to show me the tops of her breasts, and my eyes immediately slide to anywhere else in the room.

I’m suddenly ravenous, but it’s not the food that calls to me.

Shiloh’s staring at me so intently that her gaze could rive concrete. “Have you dealt with anxiety your whole life?”

Jeez. I don't usually like talking about myself, but you'd think she just asked me to kill the president.

It feels like I've swallowed a bucketful of grease. "Unfortunately. I, uh, don't remember a time in my life when anxiety wasn't at the forefront of my mind. My childhood was great, thanks to my mom, but I can't remember any of it. It's like there's this mental block standing between me and my memories. I think it's because I was constantly worrying as a kid. I could never just be in the moment, you know?"

She stops chewing, and the silence is unnerving. "Did something... bad ...happen?"

"No, but my life was always this roller coaster of fear and unease. School was a big stressor for me, and it certainly didn't help that some subjects were significantly harder for me to understand than they were for the other kids in my class. And to widen the gap, making friends was never my strong suit. I didn't—and still don't—know how to read social cues or situations. I speak before I think. I just have this bad habit of making everything awkward."

That ketchup is still there, and it takes everything in me not to reach out and wipe it away. Not because it's bothering me, but because I want an excuse to touch her.

"You don't make everything awkward," she reassures, sympathy slashing across her face.

I'm not sure if she's reading my mind right now, but she stretches her arm out toward me, and the warmth of her hand is like a conduit that sucks all the negativity out of my body.

Brow puckering, I give her a seriously? look.

She shrugs. "I'm awkward too. It's not a bad thing, Fulton. I think you care a lot

about how people perceive you, and you prioritize that over your own comfort. You shouldn't have to make that choice."

I think, deep down, I knew that was the truth, but hearing it come from someone else has a different impact. And fuck, the way she says it pulls at my goddamn heartstrings. Like there's years and years of suppressed relatability haunting every one of her words. If the roles were reversed, I'd tell her the exact same thing.

Her pupils swallow up the outer rings of her irises as her touch grows into something hungry—a bone-crushing grip, a nonvocal declaration that I'm hers and she's mine. The speed of my pulse is the equivalent of a bullet train.

Shades of sorrow affix to her face, soul-deep, thicker than the sediment at the bottom of a tannin-colored swamp. "Have you ever thought that maybe you could be neurodivergent?" she questions.

"I don't know. A part of me doesn't want to put a label on anything because it makes it that much more real. Like it's confirming what I know to be true."

"And that is?"

A plaintive answer, forthright in delivery. "That I'm broken."

For a split second, Shiloh looks... angry . At me? At the world?

"You're not broken. And just because you're not like everyone else doesn't make you broken."

I never thought of it that way. I mean, I never had anyone tell me otherwise. I always assumed that everyone else saw what I saw, and that those who did so kept quiet to spare me from embarrassment.

“I think you’re the first girl who hasn’t been put off by me,” I admit quietly.

“I could never be put off by you.”

Usually, if a girl said something as seemingly unbelievable as that, I’d question her genuineness, but I don’t have to do that with Shiloh. She’s always honest with me. She wears her heart on her sleeve, and all I want to do is cup my hands around it and protect it so that maybe, one day, I’ll be worthy of holding it myself .

I don’t know how, but I finally get the courage to reach my thumb out and clean the tomato sauce from her skin. She freezes—as if we’ve never been in a compromising position before—so tentative to move in fear that I’ll stop touching her. I don’t want to imagine a world where that’s ever a possibility.

Her gaze combs over me in a way that kicks up cinders in my belly. Despite not wanting to break contact, I eventually wipe the ketchup off on my towel-clad hips, and the low-grade fever that rakes over me is paradoxical given my shirtlessness.

“Enough about me. What about you?”

“What about me?”

“You mentioned living in a constant state of anxiety on the beach,” I explain with a shot voice, unsure if I’m trespassing on “Do Not Pass Go” territory. I don’t want to make her uncomfortable, but I want to understand her. As best I can.

Instead of the high-voltage smile I’ve grown to anticipate, a frown bows down her lips, extirpating any evidence of the carefree girl I’ve seen in lingering flashes. “Oh, right. I guess...I guess managing the shop just sets off this chain reaction of worry. One second, I’m worrying about not making payroll, and the next, I’m worrying about what would happen if Deja Brew went out of business. It’s this never-ending

spiral, you know? And there's so much pressure to be perfect. For my parents, the customers, to succeed and meet my own expectations."

"I'm not much of a perfectionist, but I can understand how draining that would be."

I'm not just looking at a girl who's given her whole life in the pursuit of living up to impossible standards, but a girl who knows nothing besides compromise. She shouldn't even be thinking about work while she's on vacation. That in itself tells me that her needs and desires usually come second to those around her. I wish I knew how much she was struggling. Maybe if I'd just grown a pair of balls and talked to her sooner, I could've helped .

Even though we're almost shoulder to shoulder, I don't rush to embrace her. Instead, I curl my fingernails into my palms. "I'm sorry you've had to carry all that pressure by yourself. If I'd known, I would've?—"

Suddenly, Shiloh's small hands are holding my large ones, and instinctively, my nails let up the pressure against calloused flesh. Whenever she touches me, I'm putty in her hands—a docile beast purring in the lap of its savior. She's the first person who's never judged me for my flaws. She's the first person to accept me despite the baggage hanging from my shoulders.

"It's okay, Fulton. It's just how my brain works. I know I'm hurting myself, but it's like...it's like I can't stop because it's all I know. I'm constantly striving for validation. I've become dependent on it at this point. I always need to do better so I can make my parents proud."

It's not okay.

I don't want to make her feel worse—because I can tell this is a touchy subject—but there are so many things I wish I could say to her. Knowing that she's trapped in this

mentally abusive cycle kills me. How am I supposed to help her without overstepping any boundaries?

“If it’s any consolation, I think they’re proud of you,” I tell her, squeezing her palm gently.

“They say it all the time, but I...”

“You can’t accept it?”

“I don’t know why I can’t.”

Please let me be the one to tell you instead.

Maybe I don’t know the inner workings of Shiloh’s occupation, but I know how hard it was for her to accept my invitation and temporarily leave the job she has dedicated her life to. Simply going on a date is a step out of my comfort zone, so I can’t even imagine flying to a whole other country and staying with a stranger for three weeks. I’m proud of her for that. In fact, I could learn a thing or two from her.

Even if she hates what I have to say, I’d rather have her hate me than live without knowing how she’s resuscitated my own love for life. “You punish yourself because deep down, you can never live up to your own expectations. You’re so used to running everything by yourself that you’ve forgotten what it feels like to be put first.”

Her eyes—two quarries of unprocessed emotion—evade me, but I don’t let her rip her hand away. “It’s easier to rely on myself than others. Things need to get done a certain way or?—”

I cut her off, not caring that my voice has risen an octave or that my fingers have locked around hers with a detested kind of desperation. “But can’t you see how it’s

hurting you? Can't you feel it?"

"I haven't felt anything in a long time."

And just like that, my whole world caves in. The only thing worse than feeling too much is feeling nothing at all. Numbness. Rigor mortis. A stillness that reminds us of how fragile our lives are.

Unlike Shiloh, I feel everything. So greatly. And I wish I didn't.

I'd kill for a brain that isn't always fighting for approval from strangers. In some sick and twisted way, Shiloh and I are mirror images of each other, aren't we? Both trying to live up to internal expectations that can never be met—both willing to die for validation.

"Let me take your pain, Shiloh. Let me drown so you can finally breathe," I beg, bringing our intertwined hands to my heart, where I'm hoping she can feel the way it flutters from her touch alone. Her poor hand feels so cold in comparison to my chest, like there's no trace of life humming through her veins.

"Maybe I'm just destined to barely keep my head above water. "

No! Take me. Use my body as a raft to keep yourself afloat. Swim. Survive. Don't do it for me. Do it for you .

Unfallen tears singe the backs of my eyes. "I refuse to believe that."

She pockets her dispute, instead settling for a simple, "Why?"

I know our "relationship" is a little more than friendly, but what I want to say has the capability of abolishing any remaining platonic parameters. So, when I should hold

my tongue, I take the idiot's way out and do the exact opposite. Letting my heart spearhead this whole thing is like threading a needle with shaky, unpracticed hands—bound to end in failure.

“Because you, Shiloh Nguyen, are destined for something greater. You'll always be too good for this world. So, this so-called 'life' you're living, it'll never fulfill you. It'll never fulfill you because you know you deserve better.”

Holy shit. What did you just do, Fulton? Please stop talking. You're going to freak her out. The next best course of action is to change the subject before the damage is irreversible.

“I wish you could see what I see. I wish you could see how incredible you are,” I confess.

That is so not changing the subject!

Shiloh's concerningly speechless. And not in a good way. Something changes in that split second of time, unknowingly rewriting our future.

To my dismay, she withdraws her hand, erecting a distance between us that might not be noticeable to the outside eye but can be felt nonetheless—a disappointment so profound that it drives the serrated edge of a hunter's knife straight through my heart. The lack of warmth and comfort hits me instantly, and the cold air from the overhead vent bracelets around my Shiloh-less arm.

“And I can say the same for you,” she murmurs, upholding a pastiche of happiness that's nothing if not unconvincing, split by hairline fractures of an indigestible truth. “You're so much more than your anxiety, Fulton. You're so much more than your past.”

How can I think about my past when all I want is for you to be my future?

12

A BARISTA, A HOCKEY PLAYER, AND A TURTLE WALK INTO A BAR...

FULTON

“ I think I’m starting to regret this!” Shiloh shouts over the whiz of the Jet Ski, her arms wrapped so tightly around my torso that they dig into my ribs.

Ever since our heart to heart, things have been...weird. Not strained, per se, but not the same as they were before. A part of me regrets letting all my emotions spill out. It wasn’t an easy conversation to have, and I don’t think I made it any easier by divulging my true feelings. Any compliments I’ve given Shiloh in the past have been watered down by humor and flippancy—at least, in her perspective. I’ve just dug myself a cozy-looking grave.

My eyes cut to the miniscule-looking shoreline in the distance, bisecting sand and water with a foamy divide. “Uh, we’re already out in the middle of the ocean.”

I don’t need to see Shiloh’s face to pinpoint her hesitancy—the tension in her body decries every little worry archived in the recesses of her brain. “What if I fall off?”

I know some part of her is joking, but the drumroll of my heart is a counterweight to my disposition’s seemingly lax nonchalance. “I’d never let that happen,” I insist, throwing a reassuring look over my shoulder.

Even though the temperature is in the comfortable eighties, her frame still shivers

against mine, as if there's an ice-laced wire crackling underneath her skin. She's crushing me with enough force to bruise, and I feel this inherent need to protect her. I mean, of course I want to, but it's more than that.

Everything is more with Shiloh.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have listened to Gage. He and Cali are adrenaline junkies. They'd rock climb without ropes."

"It's not your fault. I just need to...get out of my comfort zone more. I'm being crazy. There's no way I'd fall off this thing, get crushed by eight hundred pounds of fiber-reinforced plastic and polypropylene because you didn't notice, then have an ecosystem of fish eat my horribly disfigured, decomposing body until there's nothing left for the police to retrieve, right?"

Jesus. If that imagery wasn't so disturbing, I'd actually be a little relieved that Shiloh's prone to implausible overthinking just like I am. The sensible part of me wants to ease her concern, but the other part of me is too focused on the contact happening between us. Her arms are buttery-soft, and her product-free hair tickles the ledge of my shoulder. Even with an obnoxious life vest in the way, her breasts are squished against my back in another aneurysm-inducing one-piece.

My usual words of consolation are stripped of their comedic effect, and that possessive animal that's been hibernating inside of me has stirred awake once again. "Even if that did happen—which it wouldn't—I'd notice."

"You would?" she asks, her voice barely audible over the jet's cough of bubbles.

"I notice a lot more than you think I do."

Her death hold loosens the slightest bit. Like a wind-up toy, her breath slithers out in

one long heave, cooling the back of my nape that's been brutalized by the sun.

"It is kind of cool being this far away from civilization," she relents, resting her head against my spine. "I'd never swim all the way out here."

Despite the noisy hum of the Jet Ski and the metronomic thrash of the sea, it's quiet out here. There're no children screaming at the tops of their lungs, no stir-crazy parents berating said demon spawns, no syncopated rumble of car engines, not even the overhead caw of seagulls. It's idyllic. The motion of the waves creates this out-of-body floating sensation, and that's exactly how I feel when I'm in Shiloh's presence.

Something queasy tugs at my stomach—like butterflies, if all the butterflies had miniature knives. I turn off the Jet Ski's engine. "I like being alone together."

Now that there's no irksome vibration in the background, Shiloh's giggle is as clear as day. "Isn't that an oxymoron?"

"An oxy what?"

"An oxymoron. It's a figure of speech that contradicts itself."

I have no idea what that means—even dulled down—but Shiloh's always right. And ridiculously smart.

"Keep doing that," I beg, grabbing her hand that's resting on my stomach. Her fingers flinch, but she doesn't dare move her arm. She's magnesium to my open flame of oxygen, heating up my whole body without even lifting a finger.

"Doing what?" she asks.

"Educating me."

Righting my footing—and being sure not to nudge her—I flip my body to face her, drinking her in like she’s a tall glass of water. With my hands on her waist, she scooches closer to me, her legs bookending either side of my hips, and the gusset of her swimsuit cinches enough to show me her hot-as-hell tan lines.

A vixenish grin overtakes her lips. “Fulton, you don’t have a secret teacher kink, do you?”

I pull her into me so that her front is crushed against mine, and I drag my hands down to the curve of her butt. “Maybe I just like listening to you talk,” I counter, loving the way the lower half of her responds with a frisson.

“Did you know that a Jet Ski can reach up to seventy miles per hour?” she whispers, her fingers featherlight as they trace the bend of my collarbone. She’s got me balancing on a knife’s edge, and I’ll probably need a cold plunge in the water if her hands get any other ideas.

“Fuck, you’re incredible.”

I consume her in a breath-robbing kiss, my tongue skating the ridge of her teeth, and my fingers growing hungrier the longer her dew-smattered skin glistens like starlight in my periphery. She’s ravenously accepting every lick and every bite with an equal amount of enthusiasm, squirming her pussy until it butts up against my hardening erection. Her hands are nestled in my hair, and her legs are slung around me to the point where our combined weight is tipping the Jet Ski’s center of gravity.

I’m like the cat that’s caught the canary, and then it happens—my heel slips on a cumbersome patch of water. I’m submerged beneath the surface within a second, and the white noise in my ears is impeded by frantic shouting.

When I breach for air, I smear a hand down my dripping face, still met with a

disconcerting number of shrieks. Shiloh's a hazy silhouette in my waterlogged vision, and although I'd never admit it, I'm glad my fall managed to shrink the half-chub in my swim trunks.

“Oh my God, Fulton! Are you okay?”

She's reaching out to help me— a rookie mistake —and instead of using her outstretched hand to pull myself up, I yank her into the ocean with me. Dick move? Maybe, but that Jet Ski was getting uncomfortable.

She splashes beside me in a circlet of droplets, only buoying a few moments later with some paddles from her hands and feet. When I can intercept the flailing without sustaining a black eye, I hold her close to my chest for security, and she instinctively hooks her legs around my torso even though she's pissed.

I can't get over the way our wet bodies slide against one another, how the ocean rocks us in a sensual motion. It's a fast track to Make Out Metropolis, and if we weren't stranded in the middle of the ocean, I'd spend the rest of the afternoon claiming every inch of her as mine.

“Fulton!” she screeches, her glare sharpening as she shakes like a wet chihuahua. “I thought you were going to let me?—”

I don't let her finish that sentence. I never want her to second-guess my reliability. I never want her to doubt the extent of my feelings for her.

“I've got you, Sunshine. On land, in water, wherever the fuck we are. I've got you.”

When we head back to the beach under a curtain of nightfall, that's when the real surprise date begins. I had a feeling Shiloh doesn't like surprises, so I didn't tell her I planned something else after our Jet Ski antics. I made sure to plan our arrival at the

perfect spot, and as we disembark, my diligent decision-making is confirmed when we come across a half circle of eagle-eyed spectators.

“What’s going on?” Shiloh asks, allowing me to help her down from the Jet Ski.

Before I can answer her, I see it—a flash of movement scintillating in a glade of moonlight. Something small and dark makes its way toward us, carving a pathway in the sand and tailed by what looks like a moving horde of black spots.

My pulse is an endless sprint waiting for Shiloh to piece the puzzle together, and the confusion plastered on her face quickly evolves into awe. Olive ridley and black turtles shuffle down the slope of sand with their bumbling flippers and snail-like pace, heading out to the water just as Shiloh mentioned on the plane.

We slowly traipse over to the marine biologists, and Shiloh’s eyes double in size while we pass the tiny parade of variegated shells. God, she’s otherworldly. In beauty, in intellect, in compassion. She’s like a camellia blossoming despite the cold, thriving despite her tribulations with a grace that most people strive for but can never achieve.

Shiloh clings to my arm, squealing quietly. “Fulton, look at them! Oh my God, they’re so cute!”

This is the best decision I’ve ever made.

Adoration threads through my muscles as I memorize her smile—the exaggerated swell of her cheeks, the scrunch of her nose, the stretch of her carnation-pink cupid’s bow. Shadows play over her pronounced bone structure, the gibbous moon’s alabaster radiance practically bioluminescent as it emanates off the undulating sea.

Something tickles my bare feet, and I look down to catch a baby turtle’s fin brushing

against my sand-crusting skin while it tries to navigate toward the approaching tide. My whole body freezes up, my breath dies in my throat, and my heart quiets as if the staccato beats are loud enough for their little ear holes to discern.

That had to have been some freaky fate or miracle thing, right? That was, like, a once-in-a-lifetime experience. I read somewhere that humans can't touch baby sea turtles because we might disorient their natural path and lead them away from the water.

I know this sounds stupid, but everything is alive tonight. The electricity arcing through the air, the rustle of palm trees in the distance, the rise and fall of the water, even this inexplicable hum existing beneath the sand like a fault line waiting to make its presence known. For once, the air is cold as it collars my neck—a marine layer that's swaddled our temporary home in vaporized brine.

“You knew? You planned this?” Shiloh asks, her wide eyes twinkling, my disproportionate reflection rippling in her pupils.

I grab her hand and interlace our fingers together. “I just wanted to give you a day where you didn't have to worry about what was happening next—where you didn't feel responsible for every activity.”

“I don't know what to say. This is incredible. Nobody's ever done anything like this for me before,” she breathes.

“Being out of control isn't always so scary,” I say, bringing her knuckles to my lips before peppering kisses on her chilled flesh.

The hatching procession seems never-ending. There are hundreds of these little guys taking their first steps, embarking on the rest of their lives, and being here to witness it is so incredibly gratifying.

Shiloh isn't focused on our aquatic friends anymore—no, she's teetering on her tiptoes so she can press her forehead to mine, and I lean down to accommodate her, so infatuated with this girl that I can't remember what life was like before her.

She tips her chin up an increment, her lower lip brushing against my top one, our breaths mingling in a visible plume. "Maybe it's not," she whispers.

Neither of us makes a move. We both just linger in the moment, soaking up each other's existence, and my whole body prickles with adoration, similar to how static swarms a sky right before a storm. We're moving so fast. My brain can't conceive of this girl. She's not real. What I feel for her...it can't be real. It's so much bigger than the both of us. Uncontrollable. Unconditional. Unconquerable.

With the breeze slipping in a figure-eight around us—lashing our hair and pelting our naked skin with goose bumps—our lips crash into each other, and my heart nearly withers on the spot from the burst of adrenaline. The kiss is a contact sport in every sense of the word, but there's a softness, a chasteness, a deepness that can never be matched by fighting tongues or exploratory hands.

Shiloh Nguyen has made a home in my bones, carving a cavern out of my chest to lay right where my heart is. She drapes her arms around my neck to invite me closer, and I link my hands on her lower back, lifting her just slightly in the makeshift sling of my arms. Time stops. The world ceases to exist. We're nothing but a conglomeration of lost souls, blood vessels, and beating organs floating amongst a canopy of stars.

When she breaks away from me, she tugs me by the arm, maneuvering me past the sea turtles and over to the vast expanse of beach that stretches on for miles, unoccupied.

And we run. With no destination.

We just... run .

I chase after her as she giggles and dashes like a long-distance sprinter. Given my long legs, it only takes me a few strides to catch up with her. All my worries dissipate with each foot of land I cover, and even with the punishing burn in my thighs, it's not enough incentive to slow me down.

Closing the distance, I tackle her, wrapping my body around hers to bear the brunt of the fall. Her syrupy laughter echoes into the night, and when we unravel after a few rolls, she's underneath me while I'm kneeling on all fours. Her windswept hair is mussed around her face, small splotches of sand dot her cheeks, and her nose is red from the frigid temperature.

I've never met anyone like her before. She's sunshine in a goddamn bottle. I want to tuck this memory into the back of my mind for safekeeping so I can revisit it whenever I need a reminder that life's worth living.

But then she says the worst thing I could possibly imagine .

“Fulton, you know this is just a three-week thing, right?”

World: crushed. Heart: shattered. Dignity: hanging on by a thin strand.

“Yeah, of course,” I lie, scrambling off her so quickly that I accidentally kick up a fuckton of sand. Some of it gets in my mouth, but I feel like choking would really ruin the mood right now.

I don't want Shiloh for just three weeks, and I don't know what I'm going to do once our world of play pretend is finally up.

13

SAY YES TO THE DRESS

SHILOH

Fulton Cazzarelli has violated me. My heart, not my body.

I don't know how he managed to elbow his way into my every thought and feeling, but I'm no longer preoccupied by work-related existential crises. I still can't believe he went out of his way to research when the turtle hatchings were going to happen. And I can't believe I'm even saying this—having been voted “Most Likely to Have Their Vision Board Come True” in high school—but having someone else take the wheel for once was actually... freeing .

That night on the beach was one I'll never forget, even though I ruined everything by practically friend zoning him. I feel like the biggest asshole on the planet right now. I haven't forgotten about that night in the hotel room, either. How is it that he was willing to sacrifice everything for me?

The longer I'm here, the tighter the potential for failure sinks its claws into my shoulders—a repulsive conglomeration of blood and flesh accumulating beneath rotting fingernails—and the only way I'll ever be free is if I tear myself into pieces trying to live two separate lives. A life with Fulton, or a life dominated by work. Oh my God. I need to make up my mind. I can't just keep going back and forth like this. It isn't fair to him; it isn't fair to me. Why am I trying to sabotage the best thing that's ever happened to me?

My fingers curl around the stem of my champagne flute, and I polish off the last of my drink to disband the nausea currently staging a rebellion in my gut. The alcohol burns going down, but that doesn't stop me from asking for a refill.

I'm not sure if Aeris invited me to her dress fitting because she felt bad leaving me out, but here I am. The bridal dress shop is family owned and quaint—a nice change from the rolling hills of wealth back at the hotel. A teardrop chandelier emits a golden glow over one of the small adjoining rooms, where upholstered couches have been positioned into a circle in front of a row of dressing rooms.

The east-facing window accounts for a lot of the natural light, flanked by long, chiffon curtains that dangle down its astounding length. Pink floral arrangements dot every flat surface, and portraits of wall-pressed flowers hang in bronze-brushed frames. Racks of silk, lace, and tulle advertise the perfect dress, alongside a complementary display of heels.

While the rest of the girls are all fawning over a gown that costs more than the down payment for my house, I'm all by my lonesome on one of the freakishly comfortable couches. And I stupidly think that my self-imposed exile has kept me safe until Aeris comes over to me and sits down, probably picking up on the depression emitting from my body like signals from a phone tower.

For someone tasked with choosing the dress of a lifetime, she doesn't appear to be nearly as nervous as I thought she would be. "Are you okay?"

I startle. "What?"

Considering how direct Aeris has been this entire trip, I really shouldn't be surprised. I guess I was just hoping to hide my emotions better.

"Sorry, you just...you've been really quiet today."

This is the first time I've actually wanted to feel invisible. I should brush her off with a convincing, rehearsed smile. My problem isn't her problem, and I don't want to bring down the mood. Aeris is the last person who should be consoling the weird girl who tagged along on her trip.

But the words come tumbling out like a furious torrent of water perforating a hole in the hull of a ship.

“Do you ever feel like you're not good enough? Like no matter what you do, you're bound to end up disappointing the people closest to you?”

If you were good enough at your job, Shiloh, you wouldn't have to pick between work or love. Hell, if you were good enough at being a partner, you wouldn't be half as miserable as you are now.

Think about what Fulton said in the hotel room that night. You know how to swim, so why aren't you trying to save yourself?

She ponders my words for a moment. “I used to,” Aeris eventually says, her tone tinged with a contagious sorrow—the type that's lingering, subtle, and sometimes peeks through the cracks in her composure. I can deduce that if I'd asked her this question years ago, tears would most likely web down her cheeks. But it's like her pain has been sieved slowly, consistently.

“I felt that way all the time about my brother. His name was Roden, and he lost his life to suicide. I was supposed to be his protector, and the self-blame only got worse after he died, you know? I kept replaying this narrative that everything was my fault, and if I'd only worked harder to...to keep him here...then maybe things wouldn't have turned out the way they did.”

My belly wobbles, and it feels like there's an emotional vacancy in my chest where

my heart is supposed to be. I'm fortunate enough to be a stranger to loss and grief—at least in the conventional sense. Most of my relatives are still alive. I can't even imagine what Aeris and her family must have gone through. The funny thing is you wouldn't know it based on how she presents herself.

"I'm so sorry, Aeris. I had no idea."

Despite the heavy topic, a small smile blooms across her face. "It's okay. It took me a while to realize that punishing myself for his death wasn't going to change anything. Reliving the past wasn't going to alter the future. As devastated as I was, I had to remind myself that I was a good sister to him while he was still alive."

I nod, and my insecurity suddenly seems like a flesh wound compared to her bone-deep trauma. I didn't really intend to say anything, much less anticipate how she'd respond, but now I wish I'd never posed the question in the first place.

Can't you do anything right?

But then, out of nowhere, she grabs my hand, and my sadness buckles under a compassion strong enough to usher in the yolk-colored afterglow of an impending sunrise. Her eyes glimmer with an understanding that I once believed to be extinct.

"You're more than good enough, Shiloh. I'm sorry that the world's tricked you into believing otherwise. But if there's anything I've learned in my twenty-eight years, it's that resentment can ruin you faster than anything else in this world."

If I wasn't so embarrassed about crying in public, I'd be knee-deep in tears by now. There's a relief in knowing that I can confide in someone besides Fulton—a relief that I'm not the only person who's struggled to carry the weight of a purposeless existence.

“You’re always so nice to me, and I’m practically a stranger.”

“Maybe we can fix that.” She squeezes my palm. “I know you’re probably going to think I’m crazy for asking this—and you can totally decline—but would you be one of my bridesmaids?”

Wow. That’s...is it wrong of me to think that she may be a little off her rocker? I haven’t done anything to deserve that title.

“Are you sure? That’s a really big commitment. I don’t want to impose.”

“You wouldn’t be at all. Everyone wants to see you walk down the aisle with Fulton. And if we had met sooner, I know we would’ve already been friends.”

My fingers curl around hers with newfound hope. “I’d be honored.”

The fitting procession begins smoothly, and about an hour later, Aeris is on her third dress—this one having a long train and a curve-hugging silhouette that cinches in at the waist and emphasizes her generous cleavage. It’s beautiful. I mean, every dress has looked stunning on her, but I can tell this isn’t the one.

She twirls a few times in front of the floor-length mirror, turning back around with a frown draped over her lips. “Ideally? It’s gorgeous. But practical? Hardly. I feel like I can’t breathe.”

Lila gives a low whistle. “If you choose that one, a hundred bucks says Hayes will get a boner before the ring ceremony.”

The bridal party devolves into wheezing laughter, the overlap of slurred voices warning other soon-to-be-wed customers of the dangers of a bottomless alcohol tab. Cali’s to the point of tears, Faye’s bent over at the middle, and Josie’s entered hiccup

territory while her glass rocks in her hand like she's on a boat.

“Three hundred says he creams his pants,” Cali says.

Aeris rolls her umber eyes, scoffing. “That would not happen. Hayes is a big boy. He can control himself.”

“Right, and Gage is a God-loving Christian who could never fathom the idea of placing his hands on a woman.”

“You've all had too much to drink.”

Lila thrusts an extra flute of champagne that just magically appeared out of thin air in Aeris' direction, goading her with a conspiratorial eyebrow raise. “And you haven't had enough. You're getting married, Aer-Bear! You should be drunk off your pretty little ass!”

Aeris looks like she's about to fold for a second, but she resists with superwoman strength, an amused chuckle curtailing her departure into the dressing room. “You guys are bad influences!” she shouts, the clink of hangers and the shuffle of fabric sounding like some kind of cage match behind those dandelion-yellow walls. “I need to be sober enough to pick the right dress, and you're all about as helpful as tits on a bull. Except for you, Shiloh. You're perfect. Thanks for being here.”

I feel my cheeks ignite, and when I swallow, it's embarrassingly loud. “Of course. I'm honored that you invited me to come.”

“Don't be silly. You're a part of the Reapers family now. It was honestly a given considering how long Fulton's?—”

“Aeris!” Lila interjects, jerking so forcefully that some of her champagne sloshes in

her glass.

The whole room goes cricket quiet, and I have no idea what just happened, but I'm a host to a plethora of fears right now, the silence startling and seemingly unnatural amongst a group of intoxicated twenty-somethings.

Why is everyone looking at me like I just killed someone? Why did Lila cut Aeris off? Do they know something I don't?

Aeris' accidental, almost bean spillage is like a flame to a goddamn powder keg, and I'm the poor bastard about to experience my first trial run through hell.

"How long Fulton's... what?" I ask, worrying my bottom lip, the words harder for me to chew than a mouthful of gristle.

A number of things could come out of her mouth right now, and Aeris doesn't strike me as the type of person who's good at keeping secrets.

The dressing room door swings open to reveal one guilt-ridden bride-to-be, the upper half of her dress pooled around her waist like she didn't have time to fully slip out of it. The little line between her perfectly plucked eyebrows ratchets up my anxiety, and I don't need to look around the room to gauge the expressions of horror exchanged between girlfriends.

It's hot in here. I think I'm sweating. I can feel every hammer of my heart threaten to break my sternum in. That's not normal, right?

Faye shakes her head, going all growly mama bear on her. "Don't do it, Aeris."

But it's too late...because Aeris sings like a canary. The truth shoots out of her faster than the speed of light, a disjointed train of words mushrooming into the air and

piercing my bubble of tranquility.

“Fulton’s had a crush on you for four years! He always talks about you. If it wasn’t for the wedding, he would’ve never gotten the courage to ask you out. I’m pretty sure he hasn’t even entertained another woman since meeting you!” Aeris instantly slaps her hands over her mouth, turning red enough to compensate for the rest of the gang’s guilty silence.

Oh, okay.

I’M SORRY—WHAT?!?

Fulton’s liked me for four years? As in one thousand four hundred and sixty days? That can’t be true. They’re...they’re just joking around. Maybe this is like an initiation prank or something. Yeah, that would make more sense, right? I mean, if he’d had a crush on me for that long, surely he would’ve made a move sooner. Unless he thinks I’m unapproachable. Am I unapproachable?

The truth is Fulton caught my eye from the moment he stepped into my small, monotonous workplace. I didn’t even know he was a hockey player—there was just this quality about him that attracted me like a moth to a flame. Aside from his knee-weakening good looks, he was kind, considerate, and a breath of fresh air compared to some of the entitled customers that plagued me on a day-to-day basis. He saw me as more than just a worker to serve his needs. It’s ridiculous that the bar was even that low, but he saw me as a human being .

To think that he hasn’t been interested in anyone else since meeting me is...well, it just seems unbelievable. Fulton’s got girls lining up to simply take a picture with him. That line probably triples when it comes to his love life. Has he really turned down that many women because of me? An unextraordinary, hyper anxious barista who’s married to her work and shuns any form of social interaction? Fulton and I come

from two different worlds. His is full of luxury and fame, and mine is full of taxes and tears—which, yes, are usually synonymous with one another.

Head swimming, vision shuttering like a choppy stop-motion picture, the faint taste of iron clings to the back of my tongue. “Is that really true?” I ask quietly, unsure whether to jump for joy or shrivel into a little ball.

On one hand, I’m flattered that Fulton’s liked me for so long, but on the other, this information is a high-risk danger for someone like me. I’m usually great under pressure—thank you, rush hour during UC Riverside’s orientation week—but I’m about to be pulverized into a sad, pathetic dust pile instead of being hardened into a diamond.

“You can’t tell him I said anything!” Aeris pleads with her head halfway out of the fitting room, and Lila—still toting her liquid courage—scrambles to the rescue to help her into the next dress. The partition snicks shut, forcing me to face a sea of saucer-wide, unblinking eyes that overflow with pity.

My worry-congested mind is racing toward a migraine, my pulse is skipping erratically like a stone across water, and I’m surprised my body is still functioning given the nuclear-sized truth bomb that just fell on me. I fix my desperate gaze on Faye for support, needing to excise this unwelcome fear before I’m drop-kicked back into Fulton’s and my one-bedroom reality.

“Do I tell him that I know? Do I pretend like I just found out about it? Do I act like I’ve always known? Should I be calm? Freaked out? Oh my God, he obviously didn’t tell me for a reason. And now I know something he doesn’t want me to know! That makes me a terrible person! What if he can’t stand to look at me because he’s so embarrassed? Or worse—because I betrayed his trust and found out from someone who wasn’t him? He’ll hate me! I?—”

Cali's the one who cuts through my pessimistic waffling, shaking me by my shoulders, hard. Like, shaken-baby-syndrome hard.

“Get it together, woman! Fulton could never hate you. Hell, I'm pretty sure you could murder his entire family and he still wouldn't hate you,” she says, prohibiting any more worries from making a dent in my subconscious. “We've all seen the way he looks at you. He's obsessed with you. I mean, the truth was going to come out sooner or later.”

She's right. Either he would've had to tell me—and it would've been very stressful for him—or I'd end up finding out another way. And Aeris just so happened to choose option B. The way I see it, she made Fulton's life easier.

I'm afraid to remove Cali's claws from my arms. “So, do I confront him about it?”

“Maybe you could just bring it up casually? But definitely don't treat it like it's a big deal,” Faye suggests, chugging the rest of her bubbly as an exit ticket out of this conversation.

Josie nods. “Let him know you feel the same way. That'll probably take some of the edge off. I mean, it's sweet, isn't it? That he's had a thing for you for so long and was gentlemanly enough to wait. It's like the start of a romance novel.”

“Or a stalker romance,” Lila jokes from the tiny cubicle, to which a slapping sound ensues in the following silence, along with a high-pitched and undignified “Ow!”

“Don't listen to her, Shiloh!” Aeris yells over the ruckus, sounding slightly breathless as she squeezes herself into whatever circulation-cutting death contraption is up next on the roster. “This is great news. Now you never have to question if he likes you.”

As twisted as it is, Aeris is sort of right. If that night in the hotel room was any

indication, Fulton seems serious about pursuing a relationship. He's not just going to abandon me when things get tough—not like Ace. And who says that our relationship can't survive in the real world? Maybe Fulton and I fit into each other's lives more than I thought.

A unified consensus creeps through the group, manifesting in supportive thumbs-ups and murmurs of agreement. And just like that, confidence chases away the initial sting of fear, leaving me with a buzz of euphoria that I only thought procurable through some grade A drugs.

I've never had a huge support system before. Sure, my family and Revlon would ride at dawn for me, but this is... different . I feel like I've been friends with these girls since elementary school.

The somersaulting of my stomach ceases, the cadence of my breathing resumes a natural progression, and my heart's no longer trying to break the world record for six hundred beats per minute. I take a recreational sip of champagne for the first time in minutes, seeming to metabolize it easier when it isn't panic induced.

With the topic of conversation having shifted to baby Eda, I'm the first person to notice Aeris opening the door to the dressing room, the bottom of her gown sweeping across the floor like the leisurely migration of steel clouds over a star-studded horizon.

Aeris comes slinking out in a showstopping dress, every lace intricacy sparkling underneath filaments of sunlight. The top is strapless, with a corset-like fixture holding up her breasts and outlining her natural hourglass figure. The waistline flares out from her wide hips in a waterfall of silk, spilling onto the ground with layers upon layers of ruffles, and her long train could cover the distance from here to the entrance door. But it's the floral embellishments made of gems that pull the whole thing together. They compile a stunning configuration on her bodice, twining up the

neckline and drawing the eye to a glistening replica of blooming foliage. And the rest continues downward, interspersed throughout the skirt in single vines and florets, with little pearls sewn into the fabric to add dimension and variation.

This dress was made for Aeris.

We all gather around her, some of the bridal party in tears as they take in the elegance of the dress, and a few sniffles even provoke some of my own. I could only hope to look half as beautiful as her on my own wedding day. I mean, if I get married.

Don't get me wrong: I've always wanted to get married one day. But dating is hard. Putting yourself out there is hard. Pair that with my obligations and my baggage and, well, marriage becomes a thing of fairy tales rather than a conceivable reality.

There's a pain in my chest that wasn't there before, and it's not from acid reflux. It's something cancerous that lives beneath the surface, that thrives in the dark shadows of my heart, that constantly reminds me of a life I don't know if I can ever have. It's like the kind of parasite that wraps around one's tongue, cutting off the host's food supply without them even knowing. And then it sits there with its gluttonous mouth, feeding on every ounce of happiness, only to leave behind an emaciated husk with no autonomy, whose only avenue of calm is grouted in worry and dread.

I know I should be happy for Aeris—and I am—but God , I would be lying if I said I wasn't envious.

14

PHONING MR. RIGHT

May 4th, Sunday, 11:52 a.m.

SHILOH: Hey, do you want to grab lunch? I heard they're serving sesame tempura shrimp.

FULTON: ...

SHILOH: Ful?

FULTON: Hey! Sorry, I was partially drowning in the ocean. Yeah, I'd love to grab lunch.

SHILOH: You were what ?

FULTON: Oh, don't worry. Nothing bad happened.

SHILOH: Um, consider me extremely worried.

FULTON: I wanted it to be a surprise, but I got you something.

SHILOH: Ful, we've been over this. You can't take hermit crabs from their natural habitat. No matter how cute they are.

FULTON: What? No! I would never. I took a clam instead.

SHILOH: Excuse me?

FULTON: In my defense, it was already dead when I found it. So, I decided to crack open the shell to see if anything was inside, and...

SHILOH: ?

FULTON: I contacted a jeweler here and asked if there was any way he could fashion the pearl into a necklace.

SHILOH: A pearl? A necklace?

FULTON: For you.

SHILOH: For me?

FULTON: You ask a lot of questions.

SHILOH: This is serious, Fulton! You didn't have to go through all that trouble for me.

FULTON: Sunshine, this is barely scratching the surface of trouble I'd go through for you. Plus, I thought you might like it better than those tacky gift shop necklaces.

SHILOH: I don't know what to say. That's so sweet, but I couldn't possibly...

FULTON: If your next text consists of the words "accept it," I'm going to lose my mind.

SHILOH: Has anyone ever told you how incredible you are?

FULTON: Maybe a few times, but I wouldn't mind hearing it again. Especially when it's coming from you. *red heart emoji*

15

SPIN THE BOTTLE

SHILOH

I think I'm on the verge of having a mental breakdown.

I'm supposed to be attending a big shot Reapers party later, but my hair is being a complete twat. In addition, I'm still riding the lowest of lows after having an existential crisis in a bridal shop of all places. Fulton brings out a different part of me when I'm around him—a part that's not simply some cog in a machine. He brings out a part of me that I'll lose once my feet hit good ol' Californian dirt, and I can't believe I thought I was going to be okay with that. How can I just return to my normal life after all of this?

Not to mention that Aeris' alcohol-aided truth serum has only opened my eyes to the gravity of my relationship with him. This is real. It's all happening too fast, but it's fucking real. Fulton's feelings are involved. My feelings are involved. And if I choose to end things when we get back home, not only will it hurt me, but it'll hurt him a thousand times more.

Revlon was right when she said I never go after anything I want. I've never put my happiness above others. Why would I when the well-being of the people around me is more important? I don't know what to do. For a girl who has a solution to every problem, I'm in complete limbo.

Despite the impending anxiety wriggling beneath my skin like fire ants, I dial my focus on the catastrophe tangling around the bristles of my incompetent hairbrush. I've pulled out enough hair to warrant a small bald spot. The heat and humidity have made every strand more brittle than my grandmother's teeth, and her front one flaps in the wind like a goddamn saloon door. I don't know whether to cry, scream, break something, or drown my sorrows in the minibar. I'm supposed to be ready in five minutes.

My buzz from the dress fitting earlier has worn off, and my makeup is only half done. I keep trying to replicate the wing of my eyeliner on both eyes, but the right one is unlevel with the left, and it's noticeable. Oh, it's so noticeable. I'm starting to accumulate a little pile of sad, black-smearred makeup remover wipes.

When I yank the brush to try and free my damaged hair, an unforgiving burn claws across my scalp like the opening act of a migraine. A defeated whimper escapes from my lips, but not before getting stuck in my throat and turning into a helpless gurgling sound. I can hear Fulton shuffling around in the other room, but I'm preoccupied with contemplating surgically removing this instrument of destruction from my head.

"Shi, you almost ready to go?" he asks, and before I can scream at him not to come in, Fulton's already invaded the bathroom with his six-foot-one body.

His eyes double in size at the carnage, and whatever words he was about to wield have deserted him.

I can feel a fresh batch of tears pawing at the backs of my eyes. "I'm not going," I huff, plopping down on the closed toilet seat and hearing a would-be worrisome tearing noise from some undetected seam on my body .

Fulton cloaks my glut of frustration in his full-coverage sympathy. "Oh, Sunshine."

“I look terrible, Ful. My hair isn’t cooperating. My makeup isn’t symmetrical. My romper is too tight, but it’s the nicest thing I have to wear. I can’t go to a party with all your A-list friends looking like this .”

“You look beautiful, okay? My friends are hardly A-listers. It’s a kickback. It’s nothing fancy. We just want to spend some time together, and I would really love for you to be there,” he tells me. “But I understand if you aren’t feeling up for it. I’d never force you to do something you don’t want to do.”

“I do, it’s just...” With my throat constricting around a grievance, I opt for gesturing to the Nightmare on Hair Street.

Fulton perks up a bit. “I can help.”

As much as I appreciate his eagerness, sweet, sweet Fulton is sorely mistaken. Asian hair can be tricky to take care of, especially when it’s frizzy. It’s not that I’m worried about him making everything worse...it’s more that I’m trying to preserve his feelings from getting hurt when the outcome is, um, subpar .

“It’s kind of har?—”

He cuts me off with a dismissive flick of his hand, crouches down to assess the damage with an eye that is far too analytical, then hums to himself like he knows exactly what’s wrong and how to fix it.

For once, Fulton doesn’t reek of hesitation...which is strange, because hesitation is his personality. No, he’s sheared away all that self-doubt and stands before me a changed man—one whom exudes a very attractive hubris.

“Alright, I’m going to use some Philip Kinsley’s Preen Cream on your hair, then gently detangle the area with a wide-toothed comb, starting at the ends and working

my way up to the roots. I also read that Oribe's Imperméable Anti-Humidity Spray is great for reducing frizz."

What. Just. Happened .

My mouth gapes in shock, and once I get over the initial disbelief, admiration conducts my heartbeat to mirror the rhythmical flow of the tide.

Fulton reaches for a small, cylindrical bottle in the medicine cabinet, then clambers to his knees in front of me. "We're going to figure this out," he says, beginning to section off strands of my frizzy hair.

"How do you know how to do all of this?" I ask, watching him squirt a white paste into his hands.

"When you mentioned the humidity our first night here, I read up on Asian hair care in case you ran into another complication. Then I thought it would be good to stock up on some supplies."

With a sizable dollop of cream, his deft fingers work in the moisturizing product, letting it soak thoroughly into each tress. Finally able to catch my breath for the first time in ten minutes, I reassess the state of my half-completed face, formulating the most efficient plan to clean up my wings, reapply blush, and fill in missing chunks of foundation from when I went windshield-wiper-happy with the makeup remover wipes. Fulton's made everything seem so... salvageable .

He's moved on to the intimidating lump of tangles, and I feel myself quiver like a guitar string. "You did all of that...for me?" I whisper, looking up at him with tears pooling on my lash line.

"I'd do anything for you, Sunshine. It doesn't matter how trivial you think it is. If

spending five hours educating myself on Vietnamese hair care was guaranteed to make you smile, I'd spend the rest of the day memorizing the first fifty Google pages."

I know a declaration like that might not seem like a big deal, but Fulton's practically offering me his heart. No one's ever gone through that much trouble for me. Not my parents, not Revlon. And don't get me wrong—I don't hold it against them. I just didn't know that this is what people do when they like one another.

It makes me feel special, and that's a feeling I've been chasing my entire life.

With the sun dropping into the mountain's gullet—and spilling shades of red over the sky like blood from a cut artery—Fulton moves at a speed that could rival his skate time, wetting and conditioning the thatch of obnoxious locks clinging onto my brush for dear life. Refraining from pulling, he feeds the wide-toothed comb through my ends, subsequently raking a pathway up to my roots. Pressure pulses in places all over my skull, but I can start to feel the hair and brush lovechild give under Fulton's ministrations.

Thankfully, he's too busy to notice the teary runnel that just scaled down my still-pigmented cheek. Guilt over ruining his night still sits heavy on my chest. I'm like sun-damaged carrion melting on the sidewalk, picked apart by the vultures of self-loathing and pessimism.

"Thank you. For doing all of this. I know it's probably not how you wanted to spend your Friday night."

An expert comb cuts through weak, sodden follicles, loosening the bonds enough to detach them from the bristles without any major hair loss. He's so gentle with me. He treats me like I'm delicate, but not because I'm incapable of standing my ground—because he views me as something to be cherished and worshipped with the

utmost respect.

Fulton's voice is cold, detached, and his fingers halt. "Don't do that."

"Do what?"

"Think that I'd rather be anywhere else but here."

He doesn't allow me a chance to respond—not that I'd have anything of substance to say. He resumes his methodical detangling, and after a few minutes, he manages to dislodge the brush from my mane, relieving the pain in my forehead .

I don't know what comes over me next. I didn't want to bring up his whole "secret crush of four years" thing, but I think the lack of oxygen to my brain is hindering my decision-making skills.

"I know about the four years thing!" I blurt out before I can stop myself, slapping my hands over my mouth a second too late.

I can see the gears in Fulton's head turning—trying to make sense of my guilty admission—and then everything falls into place like Tetris blocks. His face drains of all color, there's an imperceptible tick to his jaw, and an awkward silence crackles between us in the same way banked embers pop into a crepuscular sky.

"I..." he blathers, the thick-handled comb clattering to the floor, his eyes blinking immeasurably fast. Fulton pretty much lives in a permanent state of anxiety, but I've never seen him so horrified before.

"I'm so sorry, Shi. I wanted to tell you the day I asked you to be my plus-one, but I was worried about scaring you away, and things were going so well, and I didn't want to blow my only shot at spending time with you, and?—"

Although my hair is on the road to a speedy recovery, Fulton's still on his knees on the bathroom floor, which puts me at the perfect height to cup his face in my hands and force him to look at me.

"I've liked you for a long time too," I confess, brushing my thumb over his cheekbone as our fragile worlds clash together like the convergence of tectonic plates. "Hell, I memorized your schedule just to try and catch you on my shift. You come in every Tuesday and Thursday around two eighteen p.m., at the latest two thirty-six p.m. You order the same thing each time—a dairy-free coffee with a crumbly, nondairy raspberry tart. In April, you tried the homemade zucchini bread, but it didn't last for more than a week. "

"You're kidding, right?"

"I'm not. I promise, I'm not."

At first, he looks like a shell-shocked veteran who's fought in two major wars and still has the trauma to prove it, but the dubiety is short-lived when a larger-than-life smile creases his lips. "Do you know what this means? Holy shit. Everything in my head wasn't unrequited this entire time. I'm not crazy! I didn't scare you away with my cringeworthy attempt at small talk, or the fact that I came in so regularly you could've filed a restraining order against me. And you—God, you remembered me. Me. Someone so inconsequential in the presence of someone as sensational as you."

Fulton Cazzarelli could never be inconsequential.

"You're wrong," I insist. "It's hard to forget someone like you."

His hand rests on mine as he nuzzles my palm. "I've never been able to shake you, Shiloh. You're at the forefront of every thought I have, and I'll be damned if I waste any more time not being wholly consumed by you."

Suddenly, Fulton catches me off guard and rises to a stance, picking me up by the waist and swinging me around in the spacious bathroom. Through a cacophony of squeals and giggles, I loop my arms around his neck, our bodies generating a slight wind from the momentum. His grip is as unyielding as mine is hungry. Being airborne isn't a state I'm particularly fond of, but if Fulton's arms were my only protection, then I'd gladly skydive without a parachute. Even mid-suspension, he stippled kisses all over my face.

When my feet finally hit the ground again, his platonic touch graduates to one born from sin, and he pulls me in so closely that our heartbeats overlap with one another's.

“Fuck, you really shouldn't have told me any of that.”

Fear lies in waiting deep in my stomach. “Why not?”

Fulton leans forward enough for his mouth to claim mine in one fell swoop if he so pleased, but he refrains, instead letting me beg for the golden elixir dripping from his tongue.

“Because now I'll have to do something about it.”

I fix my makeup for the fifth time tonight, and no, it's not because of user error. It's because all of it got wiped off when Fulton and I were eating each other's faces. I don't know how, but within twenty minutes, I look brand-new. My hair is no longer an entity of its own, my wings are perfect, my foundation is smooth—and I couldn't have done any of it without Fulton's help.

I know that he said this party was low-key and I shouldn't be intimidated by his friends, but they're famous hockey players for crying out loud. The closest I've ever come to fame was when a customer once mistook me for some indie actress, asked for a picture, then promptly realized I was in fact not the person they thought I was. It

also doesn't help that there's apparently going to be some huge drinking game—one that Fulton has warned me usually ends in nudity, imprisonment charges, soft-core dry humping, or all of the above.

“Am I going to end up being an accomplice tonight?” I ask, smoothing down my romper for the hundredth time and trying to rationalize the pre-party nerves putting me in a tailspin.

Fulton chuffs a laugh, leveling a look at me that somehow manages to grind my anxiety into nothing but a fine powder. “Not unless Gage breaks out the hard stuff.”

As we swerve down the maze of the sixth floor—passing the occasional couple or family headed to the rooftop lounge for the complimentary dinner—the penumbra outside makes the sunset-esque lighting stand starker against pockmarked walls, and we're serenaded by the whirs of unseen cicadas. My fingers absentmindedly squeeze Fulton's a little too hard, but there's no distinguishable gait in his step that suggests he even notices.

“I think this is the first party I've been to in years,” I admit quietly.

“Not a big party person?”

I shake my head. “I was always busy studying in college. I didn't really have time to go out on the weekends, nor did I desire to be around crowds of people who wouldn't matter to me after graduation. I honestly don't know if I would've tried my first sip of alcohol if it wasn't for my roommate implementing Sangria Saturdays.”

Even though socializing is a part of my job, the predictability of it pales in comparison to socializing in a party setting. There are so many uncontrollable factors. People are uncontrollable. In an establishment, customers are expected to act a certain way. Of course, we get the occasional nut job or temperamental complainer, but I'd

rather handle them any day than try and shepherd a crowd of inebriated young adults.

“I’m not really a huge fan of it either, but my friends love to hold kickbacks, so I go to be supportive. My college experience was pretty lackluster. Everyone around me seemed to have so much going on in their life, and then there was me, who repeated the same day over and over.”

I glance up at Fulton, and the machine-gun rattle of my heart isn’t because of the night’s festivities. I always knew that he and I were cut from the same cloth. I like that we’re so similar—it makes me feel understood in a way I’ve never felt before.

“I don’t think that’s lackluster. I think that’s perfect. People always have such a judgmental view on comfort.”

“I guess I never looked at it that way,” he says with a noncommittal shrug of his shoulders.

The groan of the door pulls me from our conversation, transporting me into the loud and colorful feng shui of Hayes and Aeris’ suite. I can already see the rest of the crew behind Aeris’ short stature, and she yanks both me and Fulton into a hug that knocks the wind right out of me.

“You guys made it!” she squeals, jumping up and down and smelling like hard liquor.

“Thank...you...for...the...invite,” I wheeze, feeling my spine crack before Aeris releases us from her boa constrictor clutch.

She’s dressed in a beautiful, baby-pink dress that cuts off right above her knees, and the top of it is a built-in bustier covered in ruched fabric. Her hair is styled in a half updo, with a giant pink bow nestled in her wavy curls.

“What are you guys drinking tonight? Vodka? Beer? Wine? Whiskey? We even have some Perrier if you want something nonalcoholic.” She’s all smiles and painted cheeks, blinding us with that soon-to-be-bride glow that everyone always talks about.

A chuckle sounds from behind Aeris, gravelly like the rev of a chainsaw. “Stacks, let them sit down first.”

Hayes’ arms encase her waist as he hugs her from behind, having to bend down to press a kiss to her neck seeing as he’s over a foot taller than her.

“Right, sorry! My brain’s all over the place right now. I’ve had”—she holds up her fingers to count, but frowns after she seemingly loses her place—“a lot of drinks!”

“The game’s going to start soon,” Hayes tells us, nodding to whatever is transpiring over in the cult-like circle on the carpet. “I need to get some food in her. You guys are welcome to anything in the fridge.”

Aeris is suddenly slammed with a burst of energy. “Ooh, should we order room service? What do you guys like? Italian? Mexican? Chinese?”

She turns around in Hayes’ embrace, then proceeds to yell directly into his ear, “DO YOU GUYS WANT SOME MOZZARELLA STICKS? ”

He flinches. “I’ll buy you the entire menu if you use your inside voice.”

Aeris giggles and clamps her hands over her mouth, nodding obediently despite the mischievous twinkle in her eye. “Okay,” she whispers through the slats of her fingers.

Hayes begins ferrying Aeris off toward the bedroom, and Fulton pales. “Wait, which game is it, Hayes? WHICH GAME?”

“Get your sexy little butts over here and sit down!” Josie shouts from the kumbaya circle.

Oh, God. What have we gotten ourselves into? I think this decision is somehow worse than when I decided to cut my own bangs before graduation in eighth grade.

Fulton and I both walk over like we’re navigating a forest floor of hidden bear traps, and the moment my gaze settles on the so-called “game,” having my leg chewed off by giant metal teeth doesn’t seem like such a bad thing. Because not only is this party game one of the worst games in existence, but it’s about to be my reality for the next four hours.

An empty beer bottle sits dauntingly in the middle of the group, uncoincidentally positioned so that the neck of it faces us. To make matters worse, underneath it is a multicolored wheel containing eight slices and eight corresponding games written in the margins.

Fulton’s rooted to the ground in paralyzing fear, and it’s contagious. “We’re playing Spin the Bottle?!”

“A more advanced version,” Gage replies.

My brain lags while I try to take everything in, denying me the breath that’s needed to disintegrate the tightness in my chest. When I get a closer look, I notice that two of the dares require kissing another person.

“Aren’t you all taken?” I throw out weakly.

Gage leans forward and winks. “We’re equal opportunists.”

Oh.

Oh, no .

“But nobody has to do anything they don’t want to,” Lila adds, looking flawless in her black leather corset and miniskirt, both of which flaunt her photoshopped-looking assets.

I’m not sure how Bristol hasn’t combusted on the spot. Then again, the two were practically made for each other. They’re like that one really hot couple that just makes sense being together because nobody else could live up to their hotness, you know?

Fulton pulls me aside and does one of those sideline huddles, thankfully looking about as nervous as I feel. Cortisol streamlines through my body, the dread in my gut growing like an impassable chasm.

“Do you want to play? We don’t have to. We don’t even have to stay. Just say the words.”

Come on, Shiloh. Let loose. Have fun. You only live once, right? What’s the worst that could happen? It’s not like any of Fulton’s friends are going to give you mouth herpes.

“Do, um, do your friends usually have orgies?” I whisper under my breath, apparently not quiet enough to go unheard.

Gage feigns offense. “Hey! Nobody’s taking their clothes off, ergo, not an orgy.”

He then swings around a confrontational pointer finger, but since he’s plastered, it veers too far to the right, so he doesn’t end up addressing anyone. “And if any of you assholes slip tongue into my future wife’s mouth, I will staple your balls to your taint.”

Silence befalls the entire room, except for the offhanded comment of a very valid “Jesus Christ.”

“Is that even physically possible?” Casen inquires, cringing in disgust.

No tongue: got it. I highly doubt this is an appropriate conversation for a baby. Speaking of...

“Where are Kit and Faye?”

“They’re parents now. They go to bed at eight thirty and don’t fondle each other’s privates anymore,” Cali answers, using Gage’s lap as a makeshift table for her plate of cheese puffs, potato chips, and a small anthill of brownies.

Gage snorts. “Not true. Faye was definitely fondling Kit’s snake in the pool the other day.”

The redhead rolls her bright blue eyes, playfully pushing him on the shoulder in a disapproving, don’t-be-so-vulgar way. “Oh my God. You’re disgusting.”

Fulton and I end up taking a seat next to each other, staring at the opening of the bottle like we’re staring down the barrel of a shotgun. This night is definitely going to end in handcuffs—whether they’re government-issued or fuzzy, I have no idea.

So far, Gage and Aeris are in the running for the drunkest, while everyone else seems to be at varying levels of tipsiness. I, however, will only remain lightly buzzed in case the police come breaking down the door and I have to launch Fulton through the bathroom window to escape.

“We’re here!” Hayes announces, dragging along his fiancée—who’s in a hardcore make out session with a...burrito...right now? He plops her down on the ground, then

jogs around the circle to sit across from her.

The surrounding lights dim, and the one overhead flares to life, creating a spotlight on the Budweiser bottle in the middle. How did they just do that? Are they on a timer? This all feels like a fever dream.

“If you don’t want to go through with a dare, or you lose one of the games, you have to drink,” Gage says before kicking things off with a twist of his wrist, the glass bottle spinning around itself like a dreidel before slowing to a lazy rotation.

The games are as follows: Flip or Strip, Two Truths and a Lie, Spill Your Guts, Kiss Someone of the Opposite Sex, Kiss Someone of the Same Sex, Drunk Charades, and Foul Play. It eventually stops on Kiss Someone of the Opposite Sex. He decides to choose Cali as his recipient—to nobody’s surprise—and a cocksure grin quirks the corners of his mouth up.

He beckons her with a crook of his finger. “That’s right. Come to Daddy.”

Cali, who’s directly next to Gage, leans in while her boyfriend puckers his lips like an ignorant fool, and at the last moment, when they’re bound to make contact, she gently turns his jaw to the side. A collective “ooh” percolates throughout the group as she sits back on one palm and lifts the rim of her drink to her mouth.

When Cali finishes her swig, she runs her tongue sensually over her lips. “Beginner’s luck.”

Gage groans, letting his head fall back. He takes a few seconds to salvage his dignity before he relents with an adjustment of his hips, and something dark lurks in the mossy-green of his eyes. “Nothing lucky about it, babe. You know I love a challenge.”

Lila takes her turn, putting into play the pie that reads: Two Truths and a Lie. I can only hope I get something as non-traumatizing as that.

“If we guess the lie incorrectly, we all have to drink,” Gage explains.

Hayes—the gracious host he is—gets up to pour me and Fulton two glasses of whatever mystery liquor they have fermenting in the cabinet, returning with a sizable amount of alcohol.

Lila contemplates what she’s going to say, toying with the plaited braid draped over her shoulder. Anticipation hangs heavy in the air as an inexplicable swell of unease dribbles down my spine like an IV drip.

Finally, Lila adheres the strictest poker face in existence, counting off her statements on each manicured finger. “One: I broke my ankle climbing over a fence after the police chased me down for urinating in public. Two: I’ve spoken to the dead. And three: a girl I invited to sleep over one time used my electric toothbrush to flick her bean.”

Everyone’s speechless. They all sound like they should be lies. And why are they all disturbingly specific?

After the initial shock wears off, the rest of us engage in a scholarly discussion about whether Lila’s a criminal, or her “friends” are criminally insane.

“There’s no way she communicated with the dead,” Gage says matter-of-factly. “The risk of possession is too high.”

We all look at him with a collective what the fuck? expression.

“What? I’ve watched every season of Ghost Adventures .”

“I don’t know Lila’s friends, but that seems like something so specific that it has to be true,” Josie muses, peeking over our group huddle to try and read the blonde’s steel-tight visage.

Bristol nods in agreement. “She told me once about a run-in with the police, but she didn’t go into a lot of detail.”

“I know Lils. She doesn’t believe in the paranormal. There’s no way she would’ve sat through a séance,” Aeris adds through a jumble of slurred words. She’s all starry-eyed, and her head is so high in the clouds that I’m not sure she even realizes she’s one too many drinks off the ground. I really hope for her sake that we get this right.

After we break from the circle, Gage authorizes himself as the speaker, saying with (maybe too much) confidence what the lie is.

“You’ve never spoken to the dead before.”

Chest puffed, a self-satisfied grin unfurling over his lips, you’d think he just saved us all from a future hangover. But Lila snort-laughes into her hand.

“I didn’t break my ankle because the police were chasing me for public urination. I broke my ankle because they were chasing me for indecent exposure. I flashed my tits at an oncoming car,” she reveals .

“Did any of them crash?” Cali asks, impressed.

“Those fuckers better have if they took a single look at my fiancée’s chest,” Bristol growls.

Lila pats him comfortingly on the shoulder like one would calm a rabid rottweiler, and all the tension in his upper body practically melts on contact. “Don’t worry. You

get them all to yourself for the rest of our lives.”

Gage shifts the subject. “Wait, you’ve talked to the dead?”

Lila shrugs. “According to the psychic I forced my parents to take me to when I was seven, yes. My childhood cat, Mrs. Whiskers, passed away from old age, and I was convinced that I could communicate with her on the other side. But now that I think about it, I don’t think Mrs. Whiskers said, ‘I’m at peace, Mother. Do not worry about me, for I have found sunlight in the passing storm and will dance in the rain as it baptizes my earthly sins.’”

I can’t help but speak up, my tone undercut with a blend of wariness and repugnance. “And someone...used your toothbrush as a...”

“Yes, my dear Shiloh, yes.”

Lila leaves it at that, and I’m grateful that she doesn’t go into more detail.

Everyone begrudgingly drinks from their glasses, and Hayes offers to drink twice the amount so that Aeris can start sobering up. With my lips to the rim, I brace myself and throw back a hefty swig, a tumbleweed of fire rolling down my gullet and making me grimace. It’s vodka. Top-shelf. And I’m about to regret arriving on an empty stomach.

Hayes spins the bottle with minimal effort, watching it fly at hyper speed in a clockwise direction. Damn those hockey wrists.

While the crowd lingers over the Wheel of Misfortune, the neck slowly seesaws between Drunk Charades and Spill Your Guts before ultimately coming to a standstill on the latter. I have no idea what that entails, but it can’t be good.

Gage sucks his teeth. “Oof, tough break, buddy. You either answer a question, or you have to eat the mystery food we have prepared in the kitchen.”

“Mystery food? Please. I have to text you pictures of groceries. The craziest thing you have cooked up back there is watered-down protein powder,” Hayes scoffs.

“Whatever you say.”

Gage pulls a card out from God knows where, brandishes it with the flair of a game show presenter, then clears his throat in an exaggerated manner. “What sound does your partner make when they orgasm? And please imitate it.”

Yikes.

There’s a domino effect of winces, and Hayes is shooting red laser beams out of his eyes, looking like he’s a second away from squashing Gage Tom and Jerry -style.

Do I think Gage may have rigged the game by choosing the most invasive and inappropriate question to ask? Possibly.

“I’m not answering that, dipshit,” he snaps.

“Then it’s settled—you’re eating the mystery food!”

Gage springs to his feet excitedly, races to the kitchen, rustles through what sounds like a miniature World War III of aluminum foil and Tupperware, then saunters back out with a phallic-looking tube of meat. The smell is nauseating from here. Putrid, sour, similar to roadkill cooking in August heat.

The minute Hayes’ punishment breaches the serenity of the circle, Hayes recoils in revulsion, a hand over his nose. “Jesus, fuck. What is that thing?”

Next to me, Fulton's got his head turned away while he swallows back a gag.

"It's a bull penis. In Jamaica, it's known as a delicacy," Gage answers proudly.

"I don't even want to know how you got that. "

Gage doesn't say anything else before shoving both a plate and a fork in Hayes' hands, vengeance writ in his features (along with a concerning dash of lunacy). "And for your information, I prefer pictures over words. I'm a visual learner."

Everybody gives Hayes adequate space, enforcing a fair circumference of distance now that he's got a military-grade weapon in his possession.

Aeris consoles him from across the room. "You should've answered it, babe. Pretty sure the majority of people here have heard it already. Just try to swallow quickly so you don't taste anything."

Gage, ever the instigator, gets out his phone to start recording. "You know what they say, Hayes. Spitters are quitters."

Hayes shakes his fork menacingly in Gage's direction. "Your mom should've swallowed you."

Dear God.

After a solid minute of just staring that thing down, Hayes angles his fork to cut a small chunk off, the pallor of his skin deteriorating into a shade of green that I didn't even know existed. His throat undulates with a thick swallow, and he slowly, slowly forklifts the food to his lips, forcing himself to shove the tines straight into his mouth without thinking.

There's an uproar of gasps.

He chews on it for at least thirty seconds, the gummy texture producing these godawful smacking sounds. Excessive chewing noises are actually the worst thing in the entire world. I can barely watch. I bury my face into Fulton's shoulder, and he clings to me like we're each other's saving grace.

When Hayes eventually gets everything down, he sprints to the kitchen, discards the detestable, devil-incarnate beef stick, and washes his mouth out under the kitchen sink's faucet. The rush of water sounds for about two minutes straight, filling the silence with a much-needed distraction. Someone has the brilliant idea of lighting a candle, Gage now has great blackmail if Hayes were to ever wrong him, and the man of the hour comes loping back, looking no better than a poor, kicked dog.

"That's never happening again," he swears, popping off the cap of a wet, unopened beer with the point of his incisor. He kills half his drink within five seconds, glaring at the troublesome brunet who—by the sounds of it—is now applying a trap beat over Hayes' mortifying video.

"You should've just answered the question," his teammate singsongs.

"I'm going to kill"—Hayes' thinly veiled threat gets drowned out beneath a sickly grumble from his stomach, and it's loud enough to compel the room's full attention—"you," he finishes with half the breath.

Even though Hayes is far from prime ass-kicking state, we as the jury make a collective decision to sit the two far, far away from each other.

Aeris volunteers herself next, bouncing on her butt with so much excitement that I'm not sure if it's from the adrenaline, alcohol, or burrito high. She doesn't calculate the spin—she practically throws the bottle halfway across the circle with enough force to

take out somebody's eye. It knocks back and forth before returning to the center of the ring, petering off into one final roundabout before landing on...Kiss Someone of the Same Sex.

Then she turns to me.

Oh, crap. Crap, crap, crap.

Don't get me wrong, Aeris is one of the hottest women I've ever seen, but I've never...kissed a girl before.

I blink.

She blinks.

My eyes jump to Fulton.

He blinks.

Is Hayes going to beat me up? He's not looking at me like he wants to beat me up, but I'm scared, nonetheless. Hayes Hollings is a household name known for sending opponents out on stretchers during games. I've watched him play alongside Fulton. I've also watched him shoulder check another player so hard that he flew about five feet into the air before his whole body folded in on itself. That's not natural.

There's a rush of lightheadedness—a compacting of my temples like the skull-bursting pressure of surfacing too quickly in the water. "Oh, um..."

"Do you want to?" Aeris whispers to me, batting her big, doe eyes in silent supplication.

I know I can say no—and that nobody would hold it against me if I passed—but a part of me is...curious. I need to stop vying for control all the time. I need to stop living life so safely. What if I wake up twenty years from now and regret never pushing myself out of my comfort zone? Like, Oh, remember that time you took a trip to Cabo, Shiloh? Remember how the scariest thing you did was try a taco out of the back of some guy's decrepit, white van?

“Is it okay with your fiancé?” I ask.

When everyone's eyes skip to Hayes, he gives a wordless nod, and when Fulton and I share an implicit look, he doesn't object.

I eventually acquiesce, feeding the neglected part inside of me that yearns for adventure, spontaneity—the one that's been coaxed into the light by Fulton's generous acts of service. Everyone is staring at us, waiting attentively, and the breath in the room is pulled taut like a drawstring. It's so quiet that you could hear a pin drop.

“Follow my lead,” Aeris says, climbing onto her knees and using both of her hands to bring my lips to hers. Her touch is soft, forgiving; her mouth moves against mine with reverence, filled with an unbidden passion that isn't exhibited in tasteless gropes or a domineering clash of teeth. She allows me to warm up to her, and when I angle my head to deepen the kiss, the slip of her tongue is so subtle that I almost don't notice it.

I really hope this doesn't awaken anything inside me.

She's the first to pull away, though not before her front teeth tug on my bottom lip, drawing out that aphrodisiacal taste of her that would drive anyone crazy with lust. A string of saliva stretches between us, and by the time my capsized world rocks upright, the kiss is over and almost every jaw in the room is open in shock. Nobody

dares to desecrate the silence. Hayes has averted his eyes out of respect, while Fulton's staring so deep into my soul that it's unnerving.

Then Aeris claps her hands together nonchalantly like she didn't just take my same-sex-kiss virginity. "Alright, who's next?"

16

FOWL PLAY

FULTON

F uck, fuck, fuck. I'm so fucked .

Why did I just let Shiloh do that? I mean, we're not together . She can do whatever she wants. But that—I—shit. This game was a terrible idea. I can barely control myself around her as is, but to watch her kiss my friend? I'm the biggest idiot on the planet. I think I'd be better off getting run over by a car, backed over, then run over again . Maybe dragged against the asphalt for a mile.

I think someone's talking judging by the distorted warbling in my ears, but I'm still trapped in whatever trance Shiloh cast on me. God, she looks so beautiful right now. Buttery light blitzes through the dark, sleek strands of her hair, framing her in an ethereal glow. Those wide eyes are staring expectantly at me, and I'm so out of it that I don't really catch on to the message she's trying to give me.

A watery half-smile flits across her now-glossed lips— thank you, Aeris —and she cocks her head at me. “Fulton?”

“Yeah?” I mutter dazedly, love hearts probably popping out of my eyes.

“Are you going to drink or do the dare? ”

Am I going to... what ?

Then that warm, fluttery feeling in the bottom of my belly metamorphosizes into a yawning pit of darkness and disquietude that can't be remedied with a drink of piss-flavored beer. A swallow chafes my dry throat, and it feels like my muscles have been bound together with goddamn barbed wire. Given my buffeting pulse, I don't know if Shiloh's going to serve as a very effective anti-anxiety ward this time around.

When did I spin? And when did it just so happen to land on Foul Play?

Judging by the devilish grin on Gage's face, this might be the dare to land us in the slammer for the night. This is a quantum leap out of my comfort zone. Not just that, but a tear-a-hole-through-the-space-time-continuum kind of leap.

Maybe I'm overthinking this. Plus, my friends are used to me chickening out of most dares.

You're so boring, Fulton. Your teammates are probably going to stop inviting you places. You're the wet blanket of the group, the buzzkill. Why is it so hard for you to do what everyone else is doing? Why can't you just fit in ?

This is all too much pressure. And I'm sitting here like an idiot thinking to myself while my friends all wait for me to finally come to a decision.

Shiloh suddenly grabs my hand, pulls me out of my depressing trip down inferiority complex lane, and clasps our fingers together despite the profuse sweat on my skin. "You don't have to do anything you're not comfortable with," she reminds me. "It's okay if you pass. Nobody's going to?—"

"I want to do it," I interrupt, breathing out the purposeless worry and breathing in what I'm hoping is a metric ton of confidence.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, I am. You make me want to venture outside of my comfort zone. Just knowing that you’re here, by my side, gives me all the safety I need to start doing that.”

Honestly, if Shiloh hadn’t kissed Aeris, then my answer would’ve been different. But seeing her so unburdened by self-doubt was a side of her that I want to see more of. She didn’t know any of this would happen tonight, yet she’s not trying to shoehorn her way into the pilot’s seat.

“Lay it on me, Gage. What do I have to do?” I ask.

“You sure about this, buddy?”

A pitchy croak loosens from my chest, and my throat feels sore, like my immune system’s preparing for the beginning of a nasty cold. “I’m sure.”

“Alright then. Your task is to... steal ...something,” Gage tells me, steepling his fingers like an evil villain.

Steal something? Like, from the hotel? Psh, that’s easy. I’ll just nab some of the soap bars and call it a day. No incarceration needed. People steal hotel toiletries all the time and get away with it. It’s not even really considered stealing, seeing as they’re complimentary.

I challenge him with an arrogant look. “Deal. This is gonna be a piece of cake?—”

But of course, it isn’t a Gage-necessitated dare without the catch of the century. And my best friend is infamously known for the worst of humiliation rituals.

“Uh, I’m not finished. You have to steal...a chicken.”

I’m sorry—a what ? As in, a live animal? That has to be illegal, right? Or at the very least, my bloodline will be cursed for meddling with the natural balance of things. Like when someone takes sacred rocks from Hawaii and then suffers life-ending repercussions because of it.

Shiloh’s jaw is ajar, and her eyes practically bulge out of her head. The rest of the group is in a similar state.

Doubt rumbles through my belly like fumes through a car engine. “And how do you expect me to do that? ”

“Leave the distraction to me,” Gage says.

Gage, Shiloh, and I peek around the corner, surveying the flock of chickens waddling around on the outskirts of the open-plan lobby. They peck at the ground, oblivious to the kidnapping that’s about to take place in the next few minutes.

“Target acquired,” Gage whispers, pointing to a larger rooster closest to us who seems to be lacking in both brain cells and self-preservation instincts.

He doesn’t look bigger than a household lamp, so technically, I should be able to wrangle him with little effort.

“Okay, genius. Now that we’re here, what’s your grand plan?” I inquire.

“I’m going to distract the receptionist with my boyish charm, and you’re gonna snag the walking drumstick.”

Shiloh freaks out. “And do what with it?!”

Gage's eyes narrow into slits, and his shit-eating smirk darkens, as if her question is completely asinine. "Smuggle it in your jacket or something."

"This is a terrible idea, even for you," I hiss under my breath, assessing the factors that could influence the success rate of our mission.

Factor one: the other chickens notice that we're abducting their leader, and they storm us like an angry winged brigade.

Factor two: the hotel employees catch us in the act and ask us to vacate the premises immediately.

The first one is objectively worse, and the second one might render us homeless for the rest of the trip, but there's something mortifying about forfeiting a dare as stupid as this.

"We're gonna put it back. Relax. I've been training my entire life for this moment." Gage licks his palm, smooths the front of his hair back, then does a roll onto the ground as if he's an international spy on his way to infiltrate the White House.

I—I don't even want to know.

He somehow manages to duck out of the receptionist's line of view, completing his over-the-top theatrics by hiding behind a large, neatly trimmed hedge. Shiloh and I—the only ones with sensibility in this ménage à trois—opt to sprint for the bushes instead.

Gage carves a little peephole through the condensed leaves. "All you have to do is get it up to the hotel room, and then we'll return the little guy like nothing happened in the first place. The team needs to witness your bravery, and they need to witness my greatness for believing in you."

Jesus. I can't believe I agreed to something like this.

"If I get my eye pecked out, I'll never forgive you."

"Oh, dude. An eye patch would look so fucking cool on you."

Before I can argue why that would not look cool and that I do in fact need depth perception to keep my job, Gage saunters over to the receptionist's desk like he's had one too many drinks—which he has. Meanwhile, Shiloh and I remain hidden, pinning our gazes on the colorful poultry that's currently trying to fit its entire beak around a rock. Chickens aren't that smart, right?

Gage is too far away for us to eavesdrop, but judging by the starstruck expression on the receptionist's face, his charisma might just be strong enough to let us get away with this crime. I don't know how long we have until our facade falls, so I need to act now before I lose my gall.

"Cover me. I'm going in," I announce, making a mental note of the distance I have to cover to get the chicken into the elevator without the staff noticing. It's far, but Gage's ability to talk a person's ear off is unparalleled—especially if alcohol is involved.

Shiloh's neck practically sustains whiplash with the way she looks at me, then the rooster, then me again. "Wait, what? What if it squawks? What if you draw attention?"

"It's too late now! I already committed to it!" I whisper-screech over my shoulder, tiptoeing toward the unsuspecting victim like the fucking Pink Panther, all while a cocktail of adrenaline and nausea funnels through my body.

The rooster is in my sight. Gangly neck, weird red flappy thing hanging from his

beak, eyes like two bubbles on the side of its head. Little dude isn't going to know what hit him.

Oh my God. Do I hear myself? I'm going crazy. I'm kidnapping this feathered monstrosity in the middle of the night! Who have I become ?

With Shiloh offering me a supportive thumbs-up from the bushes—and Gage's obnoxiously loud voice filling the hotel lobby—I dive for the long-neck dinosaur, squeezing it in my arms as my elbows scrape against the polished floor. There's a subsequent cluck of fear that shoots out of its tiny body, and it begins to flap its wings in a frenzy, an explosion of feathers hampering my vision.

A few of the loitering guests in the vicinity give me a strange look, but they don't bother to alert security. Before I know it, I'm wrestling on the ground with a demonic rooster a quarter of my size, getting a wing to the cheek and a foot to the chest. It's surprisingly strong for something so small in stature.

This was a terrible idea. Why did I let Gage talk me into this?!

Shiloh appears by my side in a flash, trying to pry its talons off my body, and we beetle toward the elevator, followed by a continuous squawking cacophony that somehow doesn't manage to attract the attention of any of the employees. I have no idea what Gage is doing, but whatever it is, it's working.

“Hold it still!” she screams quietly, struggling to get a good grip on it while its neck does a freaky gyroscopic motion thing and its head stays disturbingly still. It's like every time she swipes at it, its body contorts in an unnatural shape to evade her attack. Not to mention that its soulless stare is really starting to creep me out.

Embarrassingly out of breath, I wheeze, “I'm trying!”

With undeniable urgency, Shiloh slams the elevator buttons while Rooster Cena uses my mortal flesh as a goddamn scratch off. If the receptionist were to turn her head ninety degrees, she'd witness the crime currently taking place. This elevator needs to open now. My grip is loosening. I'm not going to be able to hold this thing for much longer.

Finally, after a couple of strenuous seconds, the elevator doors ping open, and I throw myself inside the metal prison just as Shiloh presses the close button. Since we're in an enclosed space now, I cautiously let go of the chicken, watching as it runs around in circles aimlessly.

"Oh my God. You did it," she pants, looking sexy as hell with her hair disheveled and sweat dripping down her temples.

The rooster, thankfully, has become too enraptured by its reflection to continue its onslaught. It puffs its feathers up in the stainless-steel mirror, trying to find an opening so it can rough up its apparent competition.

I press my back up against the wall. "We did it."

"I mean, of course I believed in you this entire time, but wow..."

I nod. "I think that's one of the riskiest things I've ever done, and it wouldn't have been possible if it wasn't for you. You don't only make me want to be a better person, but you make me want to live my life to the fullest, Sunshine."

The most adorable blush slopes over Shiloh's cheekbones. "Here's to new beginnings."

When the elevator spits us out on the sixth floor, I have a more secure grip on my fowl friend, this time creating a little nook with my arms for its butt.

Opening the door to Hayes and Aeris' suite, I present the guest of honor with a proud smile, and everyone bursts into rambunctious hoots and hollers. No longer squeaking like a chew toy, the rooster slow blinks at the group, head bobbing around as it takes in its new surroundings, its little chest rising in sync with mine.

Gage comes skidding into the room a moment later, Roadrunner-style, pumping both fists into the air when he notices the prized poultry snuggled safely in my arms. "Atta boy, Ful!"

"Damn, Fulton. I didn't know you had it in you," Cali inputs.

I let the little guy loose so it can roam around, and our teammates take turns capturing point-five pictures of its adorably ugly face. Passing on the responsibility of a flawless return to Gage, I feel like I can finally breathe again, and Shiloh and I celebrate our win with a look that does nothing to soft-pedal the hunger in both of our eyes.

I'd be lying if I said my friends' comments didn't massively inflate my ego. But I needed some ego inflating, alright? Speaking of inflation, the lower half of me is getting ready to Irish goodbye this bitch in the next five minutes so I can have Shiloh all to myself.

While everyone's way too focused on our new companion, I pull Shiloh close to me, my nose dovetailed in her neck as I greedily inhale the scent of her—a whirlwind of vanilla, cinnamon, and a tinge of vodka from her drink. She squeaks in surprise, and I'm a sick fuck for loving the sound of it—sicker even for wanting to hear it when she's writhing underneath me.

"Wanna get out of here?" I whisper, parting my lips and dragging them over the steep incline of her throat.

After we wash our hands, of course.

“Hell yeah.”

17

UNLEASH THE BEAST

SHILOH

My back slams so hard against the wall that a numb tingle ricochets up my spine, glitching my brain into standby mode as I struggle to breathe some sobriety into my lungs.

Fulton's fingers cage my jaw, and he bends down to whisper in my ear. "Tell me about the kiss, Shiloh." His voice is a growl, gut-deep, forged from an appetite that I know won't be satiated by my blatant half-truths.

He's talking about my kiss with Aeris.

Even though he's being rough with me, there's no threat backing his words or actions. I feel giddy about the possibility of being destroyed and recreated under his Midas touch.

"It was..."

"Did you like tongue-fucking her in front of me?"

With a harsh buck of his hips into my lower half, I can feel the buildup of arousal stressing against the zipper of his pants. I grind my pelvis over the bulge, a pathetic noise strangling in my throat.

“Are you jealous, Fulton?” I tease, feeling his distended cock stir in response, and maybe I’m as much of a masochist as he is, but I can’t help the miniature waterfall of slick that pools in my underwear.

Fulton’s such a gentle spirit. He’s so patient, so kind, so understanding. But the beast in me yearns for the beast in him, and when it comes to the raw, animalistic facets of sex, he transforms into something so unlike himself that it’s almost like he has a split personality. He’s like a rabid dog resource guarding, baring its fangs and biting at anyone who comes near his precious, precious toys.

I’ve never been wanted like that before.

“Jealous? Jealous ?” His grip on my chin tightens, the sinews of his back roiling with so much pent-up tension that each heavy inhale stretches the T-shirt across his chest. “Of course I’m fucking jealous, Shi. You put your tongue in someone else’s mouth.”

“We’re not together,” I remind him.

A stupid, childish part of me wants to suffocate him with that notion—wants him to refute it—but he doesn’t take the bait.

“We aren’t together, but that shit changes when you’re grinding that sweet little pussy over my cock.”

With the angle of his hips, he strokes upwards into my clothed cunt, and my legs part for him unresistingly as shame tickles my cheeks in a flash flood of heat. “You’re mine right now. Say it.”

Lust and anticipation draw taut behind my navel, the throbbing in my cunt suffering as an unremedied aftereffect. The pant legs of my romper are beginning to cinch and show my inner thighs, and any more exposure won’t bode well for the entirely soaked

gusset of my panties. Fulton's flush against me, the width of his hipbones pinning me in place like the prettiest Monet. Each time he breathes, I can feel his hard stomach expand .

"I'm...yours," I gasp, tipping the scales of this arrangement as I claw my hand through his hair, gathering a fistful of strands and pulling.

"Are you going to let me undress you, Sunshine? Are you going to let me pull your panties down with my teeth?"

"Y-yes."

Fulton's hands play with the strap on my shoulder, and he nudges his head into my jaw, surmounting my nervous rigidity as he gains access to the vulnerable underbelly of my neck. His lips delicately suck the thin skin there, unearthing a passage of untouched flesh where his butterfly kisses imbed their transient nature into a sweat-dotted canvas.

"Come on, baby. I'm all about consent. I need you to use your full words for me."

Shaky consonants stagger from my lips, my heart pounding like a mallet against the curvature of my ribs. My tenaciousness isn't so much a result of repeating something so crude, but rather a result of initiating the pleasure-pain storm that's about to strike a match on every one of my flammable nerves.

"You can pull my panties down. With your teeth."

Fulton rushes me with his hands and lips, and a hungry outpouring of urgency has my tits bared to him in record time, my clothing shucked and thrown to the side as if it was nothing but an offending scrap of material. He leaves my undergarment, though—the one that's been saturated with an unmissable dark spot.

Thankfully for me, the embarrassment is a gradual rumble instead of a thunderclap, and I take advantage of his tongue dragging against mine as he smears the spicy aftertaste of vodka across my taste buds. While I've still got him in my grasp, I grab blindly for the hem of his shirt, pulling it over the winding hills of his muscles. The beginning of a nearly inaudible whine develops deep in his chest—inexorable desire leaking through the blown-out aperture in his tone .

Shirt divested, his abdominals looking way too lickable for their own good, he continues his onslaught on my mouth—a melding of lips, a colliding of teeth, and a ruthless bite to any soft, plump surface in the immediate vicinity.

“I’ll be so good to you, Sunshine. I promise ,” he whispers in between kisses, hands coasting up and down the sides of my waist, the pressure against my belly growing tenfold as Fulton’s erection somehow hardens even more.

My head is all over the place. My attention shifts back and forth between the wetness painting my thighs, the broiling ache in my groin, the cooling state of our combined spit on my ravaged mouth, and the anticipatory upset that singes my stomach lining in the same way a potent shot of alcohol does.

This is it. We’re going to fuck. It’s happening. Holy shit, it’s happening. Stay calm, Shiloh. STAY CALM!

Without warning, Fulton drops into a squat so that he’s level with my pussy, and he latches his teeth on to the pink lace of my thong. Since his head obstructs my line of sight, all I can feel is the subsequent cold hitting my now-exposed skin.

I can’t help but squirm underneath his touch, though I blame anxiety’s unauthorized visit for the self-consciousness over my less-than-stellar appearance. I didn’t have time to shave today, and I definitely didn’t expect the night to end like this. I just don’t want him to be turned off by... you know .

He instructs me to kick off my underwear, and I obey immediately. Now I'm completely nude in front of the one man who could give Michelangelo's David a run for its money.

Evening the playing field, Fulton strips off his pants and boxers. His long, thick cock bobs free from its cotton prison, the ruddy, flared head sticky as it rests against my belly. I've seen Fulton's dick before, but it just...it looks scarier this time around.

The length is equivalent to my goddamn forearm, a topography of bluish veins lining his impressive shaft like a breadcrumb trail of tiny detonation points. He's manscaped everything possible, drawing my attention to the pronounced silhouette of his heavy, hanging balls. I have no idea how he expects to fit inside me. That's like trying to shove a USB charger into an iPhone charging port.

The one thing I didn't want to happen was me overthinking. And now, my mind's laughing at the sheer inadequacies of my body in comparison to his, and I absentmindedly adjust my legs so that my vagina isn't just... hanging out ...and disgusting him with its hairiness.

Fulton realizes something's wrong immediately. Not almost immediately—immediately .

“What are you doing?” he questions.

I chew on my lower lip. “I, um, I just didn't have the chance to shave before...”

He rears back in surprise, but not for the reason I expected. “You're trying to hide from me because you feel bad for not shaving?”

“Kind of?”

With his hands gripping the backs of my thighs, Fulton glances up at me through his already-tousled hair, neutralizing my anxiety with a single look—a kind, pleading look that almost turns shiny with emotion.

“I never want you to feel like you have to shave for me, okay? Never, Sunshine. I don’t care. Any real man wouldn’t care. So you didn’t shave. Do you really think that’s going to stop me from fucking the most perfect pussy in all of existence?”

Before I get the chance to respond—which is probably for the best—Fulton lengthens to a stance, hikes me onto his hips, then carries me over to the bed in two large strides. I don’t think I’ve ever been this naked against him.

He gently sets me on the mattress, and I’m too lost in my own dopamine high to realize that Fulton grabbed something from off the floor. My libido is one degree away from cataclysmic destruction, and if my pussy doesn’t get some stimulation in the next few minutes, I’ll pull the trigger myself.

Through a bleary haze, I watch Fulton dangle my panties off his index finger.

“What are y?—”

“You’ve been a bad girl tonight, Shi. A very bad girl. And do you know what happens to bad girls?” he asks with cold detachment, letting my thong drop onto his erection and catch on the ruddy head of his cock—the one oozing beads of pre-cum and polishing his frenulum in a pearlescent sheen.

I shake my head, finally lucid enough to understand the gravity of the situation. “I don’t.”

Fulton tsks, bunching up the pink lace before wiping it over the glossy cap of his dick. My eyes are glued to the rippling line of his abdominal muscles—how they

crunch and strain from the position he's in. I need to taste him. I want to push him onto his back, straddle his hips, and lick up the sweat that's accumulated since we stumbled into our hotel room.

But that's something only a good girl gets to do.

"They get punished."

Fulton keeps his salacious gaze on me the entire time, as if he's peeling back layers upon layers of my skin until he reaches the fiery core that burns only for him. A second later, my underwear is thrown onto the bed.

"I want your hands behind your back, I want you belly up, I want your knees bent, and I want your pussy spread all the way open for me," he demands.

I do as he says—my hands tucked between my spine and the surface of the mattress—and then I spread my legs so that he can get a direct look at the pathetic, weeping state of my neglected cunt. My walls clench around nothing, overeager to have any kind of stimulation .

Fulton groans, rubbing a lazy hand over his dick, wringing bits of pressure with the torque of his wrist. "Fucking hell. Look at you, Sunshine. You look decadent ."

After a solid minute of him gawking, he leans over me with his arms bracketing either side of me, and the monster between his legs drags over the comforter. "Here's what's going to happen. I'm going to stuff your mouth with your panties, and then I'm going to lick your sweet, tight little cunt. If you try to move your hands, or if you try to speak, I'll stop immediately. Do you understand?"

I nod about ten times in a row. "I understand."

“If you need me to stop at any time, you raise your leg straight in the air, okay? If anything feels uncomfortable, you let me know, Shiloh.”

God, could Fulton be more incredible? The fact that he advocates for safe sex and respecting boundaries...it makes me way hornier than if he were to slap me on the ass and call it a day.

“Please, Fulton. Please, I need?—”

“No, Sunshine. No begging. We talked about this.”

He leans over me to grab my discarded underwear, balling it up nice and tight before gently pulling my jaw down to make adequate room. And then, with minimal pressure and a meticulous hand, he feeds me my thong, making sure not to trigger my gag reflex.

Maw pried open—stuffed to the brim with a noise-preventing impediment—the smell and taste is what’s most overwhelming. A mixture of my cum, his cum, my smell, his smell, my sweat, his sweat—and I’m going to sound like a batshit crazy person, but it’s fucking orgasmic. The saltiness from both our arousals coats my tongue, and I wish I could inject his man musk straight into my veins.

Since I’m flat on my back, I can’t see what he’s doing unless I lift my head, and I deduce that after a few of those head lifts, my stomach muscles are going to be on fire. So, in a sense, I’m completely blind right now. I’m also embarrassingly wet.

Fulton doesn’t provide me with a preamble. He lays the flat of his tongue against my opening with no intention of plunging deeper. Then, languidly, he uses the dexterous muscle to employ a swirling motion while also balancing the occasional cutaway to a rapid succession of flicks. My back practically lifts off the bed, my legs start to shake, and my teeth clamp down on the nuisance in my mouth.

I squirm around, my pleasure cranking up the longer his tongue stimulates the nerves in my pebbled clit, and a muffled string of whimpers gets caught and disbanded by my panties. Fulton teases me with his mouth, listing it back and forth over my sex. Then he slowly pushes his tongue past my inner ring of muscle as an orchestra of lewd noises bounces off the walls. My thighs are the consistency of jelly while my cunt dilates around the foreign intrusion, the overproduction of my arousal lubricating his lips with little effort.

Oh, fuck. Oh, God. This is?—

Suddenly, a whoosh of cold air greets my pussy, and his magical mouth has been pulled off me.

“You were trying to speak, Sunshine. I stop when you do that, okay?”

I lift my neck to nod at him, and after a few seconds, he resumes, detouring to the swollen and sensitive rim of my hole. My cunt swallows the girth of his tongue greedily, my inner walls clinging to every flutter that he produces with the skill of a seasoned veteran.

Hyperaware of opening my fat trap, I focus all my attention on adjusting my lower half to the most prime position to feel everything . I’m contorting myself in ways I didn’t even know was possible.

“You’re doing so well. You’re being such a good girl for me. Make a mess for me, yeah? Ride my tongue. Paint my face in cum. Let me taste what I do to you.”

Fulton’s fingers are now in play, and they’re able to reach crevices that his tongue can only dream of. Between the edging, the praise, and the quiet dominance, my release-o-meter is at its breaking point. Maybe I would’ve lasted longer if the circumstances were less... restraining ...but I’m going to turn into a wild animal if I

have to wait any longer.

I don't care about the moans or the whimpers that phase through the clump in my mouth, and apparently, neither does Fulton because he's throwing his head back and grounding out a mantra of mercy. I don't think he's all the way there yet, but he's getting pretty fucking close.

With one last dive into my cunt, Fulton aims for my G-spot like he's hightailing it to a goal, his finger pressing down on that figurative little button that lights all my buzzers neon red. My sexual frustration comes bursting out of me as if a stopper has been pulled from a drain, and I drench Fulton's face in a wash of cum.

I raise my head to find him moaning through his own sexual excitement, licking up every single drop of arousal that's sullied the bottom half of his face. He doesn't even look exhausted. I guess hockey stamina is a blessing and a curse. His dick is still as hard as granite, though, and I'm determined to change that if it's the last thing I do.

He leans forward, taking the makeshift gag out of my mouth. "Let me clean you up," he offers.

I sit all the way up and lean back on my palms, flaunting my tits. "No, Fulton. I want you inside of me. All of you."

He freezes, half-paralyzed by my demand and half-paralyzed by the sight of my boobs. A paroxysm of worry ghosts over his face, and it would almost be laughable if it wasn't for the direness of the situation.

"I've never...had sex. "

Surprise blizzards through me. "Never?"

A shake of his head—one rife with embarrassment.

I grab his hand and hold it against my heart, where he can feel every overexerted thump heighten under his touch. “I’m ready if you are.”

Contemplation settles heavy on his face like the first snowfall in mid-October, and then I catch a glimpse of the predatory creature that was here moments before—the one still crouching in the tall grass in search of satisfaction. Fulton’s a giver. His only goal is to get his partner off. If he comes in the process, it’s an added bonus, but never a firm finish line.

But now, as I offer him the same effort he offered me, it takes him a lot less time to consider my proposal than I thought it would.

“Bend over. I want to see you milk every inch of my cock.”

He flips me unceremoniously onto my hands and knees—the evidence of my previous orgasm still dribbling down the insides of my thighs—and I’m about to wrestle tooth-and-nail with the beast that I’ve just unleashed.

“You have no idea how long I’ve waited for this, Sunshine. How I imagined you and your pretty little dresses every time my hand was wrapped around my dick, how I moaned your name whenever I came, how I couldn’t get you out of my fucking head for days on end. You were a sickness. A beautiful, beautiful sickness.”

My heart crowns timidly from a thick chrysalis—the mark of a new beginning.
“You...waited for me?”

“I would’ve waited forever for you to be my first.”

Besotted, the butterflies are right on time as they dance in my belly, forming a

tornado of wings that have me completely and utterly at Fulton Cazzarelli's mercy.

Since I'm facing away from him, the tear of the condom is the only noise cluing me into his next move. And then I feel it: a burn so great that it has the potential to atomize my skin, my organs, my bones, everything . With his hand on my back, he feeds his cock into my pussy in slow increments to allow me to accommodate to his size, the first stretch alerting every single one of my pain receptors.

"Is this okay?" he asks.

I make a weak noise in the back of my throat, choosing to dig my nails into the comforter for some sort of support. "More than okay."

"You're perfect, Shi. Everything about you drives me crazy," he coos into my ear, pushing his hips forward an inch so that he can fully sheathe himself inside my cunt.

Once the brunt of him hits my inner walls, it feels like I can't even breathe . Tears break over my lash lines, pinching off into crystal droplets. "Fuck, Fulton. You're so big."

Since we're both primed with an equal amount of arousal, it's easy for him to ease himself out a little. "Am I hurting you?"

"I've just never felt so full before."

I begin to rock backward into his groin, simultaneously milking his eight-inch cock that's now buried inside me, and every time he engages in the seesaw-like motion, a heaviness presses down on my bladder.

"Jesus, I'm not going to last if you keep doing that," he says through clenched teeth, fingernails printing crescents into the meat of my hips with enough force to draw

blood.

My misbehaving cunt pulses around his shaft, sucking him deeper into me, and it takes him a few minutes to set a measured pace as he ruts his hips into my ass. I glance down to catch a gleam of slick shimmering at the apex of my thighs, and I inhale deeply through the tremors that test my extremities' foundations. My previous climax nearly wiped me out. I don't know how much longer I can take getting demolished by Fulton's abnormally large cock.

"Can you go faster?" I whimper, the slapping of skin and the squelching of viscous liquids acting as a backing track in the otherwise silent room.

"Like this?"

Accelerating to an incomprehensible pace, Fulton bullies his dick against my walls, and there's so much momentum that my breasts bounce with each thrust. "That's... fuck ...that's perfect," I moan.

I can feel his hands on the sides of my waist, but they never move lower.

"You can spank me, you know. I like it," I divulge, and before Fulton needs to be told twice, he slaps my ass hard enough to make me pitch forward and bite down on my molars. My skin stings with pain, but the thought of his handprint tattooed on my butt overhauls the fresh, raw discomfort.

"Shit, sorry. Was that too rough?"

My airways clot with a breath untaken. "You don't have to hold back, Fulton. I don't want you to."

Don't get me wrong, I love that he's trying to be respectful and gentle, but I know

that he yearns for something more carnal— subhuman , even. He’s getting stuck in his own head. Fulton just needs some reassurance that it’s okay for him to let go.

“But—”

“Being out of control isn’t so scary, remember?”

After seconds of contemplation, he finally snaps. A man driven to the brink of madness; a predator driven to malevolence after being starved for so long.

My mind is like a never-ending reel of tape, and even the stutter of my heart isn’t fast enough to outperform the speed at which his cock slots itself into my stretched cunt. I want to scream into the bed. Each roll of his hips is a sledgehammer to my senses, blotting my vision with a slate of filmy white and agitating the molten desire burbling low in my abdomen .

Hazy stars begin to form behind each blink of my teary eyes. “I don’t know how much longer I can...”

“Sunshine, I’m about to come in the next three minutes whether I like it or not, but I’m not stopping until you make a mess of these sheets.”

One of Fulton’s hands snakes around to fondle my tit, and each squeeze of his fingers precedes a siege of powerful strokes that reach far enough to rearrange my insides. I wish I could see his orgasm face—the concentrated crunch of his brow, the pout of his lower lip, the whites of his eyes as they roll back into his head—but judging by the breathless, ragged pants rending the air, I think we’ve both long-jumped over our limits.

The sensation of him carving out my womb is becoming more and more unbearable. It’s like a deluge of histamine to the red swell of a mosquito bite, an urge to scratch

knowing that doing so will only make the itchiness worse. The phantom feeling of my underwear in my mouth restricts me from freeing the mewl hedged in my chest, but with each coax of his punishing cock, my lips purse and open.

“That’s it. You can be as loud as you want now. Scream for me, Shi. Let everyone in Cabo know how good I make you feel. Let everyone know who owns this pussy,” Fulton drawls, reinforcing his words by teasing my G-spot with the head of his dick.

“It feels so good, Fulton!” I cry out, arching my back like a contented cat in a sunbeam, the decibel of my half moans and half screams vibrating through the walls and inundating the hallways of the hotel.

Sapped of energy, Fulton’s grip on my hips loosens, and the cadence of his strokes begin to turn sloppy. “Choke my cock like the good girl you are. I want you to remember every moment of me being inside you—the way I made your body burn, the way your greedy pussy squirted all over me. You’d think she hasn’t had a good fuck in months with the way she’s gushing, poor thing.”

Even though my cunt’s sore and abused, a vengeful part of me refuses to let Fulton off the hook so easily, especially with all the taunting that’s stretched my patience cotton-candy thin. I know he’s close. I can feel his cock enlarging inside me.

I stop moving. “No, you’re not coming right now. Not until I say you can.”

A cross between a chuckle and a groan tumble out of him, all grit and bass and a bone-shaking rumble that instills me with a vestige of fear. “God, I love that dirty mouth of yours. You make me so hard when you’re in control.”

“If you love it so much, then be a good boy and fuck my pussy like you can’t live without it.”

He obeys me, but that doesn't stop him from mangling my ass cheeks with his large hands. When he rolls his hips, I match him in movement and tempo, the slippery suction of my cunt and his cock opening the floodgates.

With a guttural moan, I come all over Fulton's dick just in time for him to take off like a geyser and jet streams of spend inside the condom. It's so abundant that it never seems to stop, and if there wasn't a latex barrier, the force and the magnitude would probably have me leaking for days.

Exhausted, I collapse onto the mattress with his shaft slowly deflating inside me, and he in turn crumples on top of me, careful not to give me his full weight. His breath stirs the baby hairs on my neck, his sweaty skin is warm to the touch, and I can feel his heart punting against his chest so vigorously that my own ribs hurt.

"Was...was that okay?" he asks meekly. "You can be honest. It won't hurt my feelings."

His question gets me to turn onto my back and face him, post-orgasm tears clumping in the corners of my burning eyes. "That was incredible, Ful. You're incredible. "

"I didn't ruin it?"

I tuck a strand of rogue hair behind his ear. "Not at all. Did I?"

"Sunshine, the only thing you ruined for me was any other woman," he reassures, holding me by my waist with a tenderness that's been devoid this entire time. He marches his lips up my stomach with reverent kisses, cherishing me like I'm the only girl in the entire world.

Ironically, I think I'm even more fucked that I don't totally despise that idea.

18

GROWING PAINS

FULTON

Something tickles the side of my cheek—a sheet-stripping kind of heat concentrated near the curve of my body. Peeling one eye open, I glance at the small figure curled into a ball next to me, and my belly fizzles with early-morning butterflies. Shiloh’s soft, silky hair is strewn over my bare chest, and the part of her mouth that’s visible from her position leaks with the tiniest bit of drool.

I haven’t slept this well since I accidentally consumed one-third of a melatonin bottle after mistaking them for fruit gummies. And her touch... her touch is the most comforting thing I’ve felt in a long time .

I know it’s creepy to stare at people while they sleep, but I can’t help it. I never thought this day would ever come. Shiloh Nguyen is sleeping next to me, and my heart feels like it’s about to burst out of my chest. This girl means everything to me, and no matter how many times I tell her, she’ll never know the true extent of it. If I passed away tomorrow in a freak accident by slipping on shower water and cracking my head open on the side of the bathroom counter, I’d die a happy man knowing I got to hold her in my arms .

She shifts a little and rolls around in the welter of covers—which subsequently sends some of her hair flying into my mouth—but I’m not about to wake her up.

Last night was unbelievable. I'm still not entirely convinced it was real. For the first time in my entire life, I felt wanted . Wanted for who I was, not for my connections or my fame or my fortune. It's going to sound stupidly sappy, but everything was perfect. Our bodies just knew they were made for each other. All the anxiety and the awkwardness that had been leeching to my side just... disappeared . I could be myself around Shiloh. She created a space where I felt safe enough to trust her with my heart, my soul, my body . And for that, I'll forever be grateful.

With an adorable noise and a stir, Shiloh awakens from the throes of sleep, blinking sluggishly before realizing that she's left behind a pool of saliva on my chest. "Oh, God. I'm sorry," she murmurs underneath her breath, hastily wiping up the drool with the heel of her palm.

I don't say anything—and no, it's not because I'm still half-asleep. I feel a smile dance across my lips at the blush sprawling over her cheeks like a California sunrise, her weighted touch fanning the flames of adoration licking up my sternum.

"Don't apologize," I tell her.

She opens her mouth to say something, then her nose scrunches and she holds her hand up for a quick breath test. "Oh, wow. That's...rank. Let me brush my teeth."

My hockey reflexes come in clutch because I grab her arm before she can beeline for the bathroom. Without so much as a word, I nudge my nose against hers, lightly brushing our lips together to show her how insignificant a little morning breath is. She smells fantastic, like she always does.

When she doesn't pull back from me, I inch a bit closer, and she tentatively lowers her guard enough for me to go in with a full-fledged kiss. It bolsters my over-the-speed-limit pulse, and the fact that I'm raw dogging the covers right now isn't going to bode well for the state of my—thankfully still flaccid—dick.

“I don’t care what you do, Sunshine. Just please don’t get out of this bed,” I beg, wrapping her naked, lithe frame in my arms and hugging her close to my chest.

Shiloh squeals as I practically smother her with my body heat, but she melts like caramel on a hot summer’s day into my embrace, burrowing her backside against my crotch. I bite back the moan that lingers on the cusp of my lips, and my brain ferrets through the memories from last night—the way she screamed my name loud enough for the whole hotel to hear, the way her sweet, silken walls pulsed around my cock.

Humor sweetens her tone. “Are we going for round two?”

Even though I love that idea, the only thing I need right now is to hold her. “Actually, I was hoping you’d let me hold you for a while.”

A brief silence follows, and then she turns around in my arms to face me, her tenebrous eyes shimmering with something I can’t name—a happiness so profound that it’s mired in an equal amount of sadness, like she’s not used to being the sole inhabitant of someone’s heart.

“Fulton Cazzarelli, you’re such a hopeless romantic,” she whispers, and I don’t miss the shaky strum of her vocal cords.

I thumb the vibrant apple of her cheek, still coming to terms with the fact that this girl is real—that she’s made of flesh and bone, and that she’s spending her precious time with someone as undeserving as me.

“Shiloh Nguyen, you’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me. Anyone who wouldn’t be hopelessly mesmerized by you is an idiot.”

Her lips gape, her gaze rivets, and her chest rises and falls at a quickened pace. There’s moisture in her eyes when she looks at me—moisture that forewarns the first

integral crack of the dam inside her.

“Nobody’s ever understood me like you do.”

The pad of my thumb catches a wayward tear, halting its well-trodden path down her face. I never knew someone could look so beautiful crying.

“I see you, Shi. I have ever since that Tuesday in January four years ago. You’re impossible to miss.”

She snorts. “It’s very possible to miss me.”

It’s mind-boggling that she can’t see how incredible she is. “It’s not. And let me show you just how wrong you are.”

With a shuffle of the covers, I position myself above her, watching as she scoots fully onto her back and glances up at me with the most irresistible bedroom eyes in existence. When she bites her bottom lip, a stab of lust cleaves through me, gutting me from head to belly and redirecting my attention to the vulnerable pulse point of her throat.

I lower my head to the delicate arch of her neck, sucking on the thin skin with voracious lips and a possessiveness that I’m starting to think is a two-in-one with her. The muscles in my biceps tense to suspend my weight, and the ones in my back shift when I litter my new workplace with half bites and half kisses.

Shiloh groans, gouging her fingernails into my back while lifting her hips to meet mine, my cock growing harder against the soft swell of her stomach. I tried to refrain from giving her hickeys last night—to cushion the blow of the truth when my teammates find out I lost my V-card—but any false chivalry I had then is long gone.

I lick a thick warning up the length of her throat. “I want your perfect breasts in my mouth, Shi. I want to suck your nipples between my teeth and leave my mark for everyone to see. Just say the words. Please say those sweet fucking words.”

Spine arching, lungs heaving, she gives me the golden key to the goddamn kingdom. “Suck my tits, Fulton.”

Like a good boy, I do as I’m told, taking that pert bud into my mouth and hollowing my cheeks. If I thought Shiloh was loud last night, she’s already proven me wrong in the span of a second. And considering the sun’s barely up, I’m guessing that the whole floor can hear just how well I pleasure my woman.

While my lips tease her nipple, I add my hand to the mix and give her boob a few squeezes, which promotes the faint sting in my back to a near-painful laceration courtesy of her nails.

Then a ringing sound splits the air, but I’m so preoccupied that I don’t pay any mind to it.

“Oh, Fulton,” she mewls, hooking her leg over my back and baring her mouthwatering pussy to me.

There’s a second heartbeat in my skull. I can’t think straight. I’m so turned on that it’ll only take me two minutes to drench her stomach in cum—and those are rookie numbers, alright?

I pop off her breast. “You gonna give me an orgasm this morning, Sunshine? I mean, I was planning on having breakfast in bed, but this isn’t what I had in mind. Though I’m sooo fucking good with it.”

“If you’re lucky,” she taunts, bending my head back down to my favorite meal in the

entire world.

That obnoxious ringing continues, and judging by the twist of her torso, it's just stolen her attention away from me. Therefore, I hate it, whatever it is—an alarm, an amber alert, next door's room service. She screeches, sits up, then throws me off with an alarming amount of strength.

When I gather my bearings, she's holding her phone. "Shit, shit, shit. It's the bank."

The bank? Why would the bank be calling her?

I'm terrible at hiding the growl that rumbles through my chest. "Don't answer it. "

"It might be important."

She quickly jumps to her feet, yanks the sheets off the bed so she can fashion a makeshift toga to cover her body, and mouths an apology to me before disappearing into the bathroom. The door slams shut loudly, and even though most of the walls here seem to be wafer-thin, her hushed tone doesn't make it easy to eavesdrop. I know it's morally wrong, okay? But I need to know that everything is alright.

So, I lie on my back in a starfish position with nothing to cover my aching dick, and I stare up at the ceiling like a complete idiot. The conversation must be tense given how long Shiloh's on the phone, and with what little I can hear, the nature of the call is serious. Muffled shouts, frantic pacing.

"But I don't understand. I was really counting on this," she mumbles.

My gut clenches, and bile surges up my throat when I try to swallow.

What is she talking about? Does this have to do with work?

Then, like the firing of a gun in a remote forest, peeling through the silence and the pine trees and the rustle of a thousand wings, the talking stops. The pacing stops. Everything is unnervingly still, so much so that I don't even want to risk moving. I wait a few beats to see if she emerges, but she never does.

I know I'll probably have my genitals mutilated if I open that door, but I don't care. I need to see her. I need to understand what's going on.

Moving at the speed of light, I pull my boxers on and tread carefully, easing the partition open only to find Shiloh sitting on the closed toilet, her head in her hands and tiny sniffles pouring from her small frame.

“Hey, hey. Shi, hey.” I rush to her side and squat in between her legs, running my hand up and down her thigh—whether it's to console me or her, I don't know. “Talk to me. I'm right here.”

Trembles unmoor her veneer of steadiness, the permanence of a frown reshaping her mouth. The cry that spills from her isn't the same as the one I heard minutes ago. This one is guttural, dredged from deep within her soul, and it sounds like the wail of a wounded animal begging to be put out of its misery. I never knew I could feel something so viscerally. Seeing her like this makes me sick to my stomach.

When she eventually drops her arms, her eyes are overrun with burst capillaries, and tears stain her beautiful face—ones I wasn't there to brush away. They soak into her now-pale skin, and no matter how quickly I try to catch them, they reappear at double the speed and quantity.

“The bank denied my family's business for a loan.”

“What loan?”

“M-my parents. They used up all their savings and nest egg to pay for my college degree. Now the shop is having a hard t-time. We only have a couple of months left to pay rent and make payroll, or we’ll...we’ll go out of business.”

Oh my God. The signs were all there, especially after our heart to heart that night. Why wasn’t she honest with me from the beginning? I can’t imagine how much stress she’s under right now, and I fucking proposed that she go on a vacation.

“Oh, Sunshine,” I coo sympathetically.

Shiloh’s unbreakable focus remains on the bathroom tiles, and the purple bags underscoring her eyes stand out starker than before. It’s like I’m finally seeing what’s behind her fortified defenses—the other half of her that she’s hidden out of shame.

“It’s my fault. All of this is my fault. My parents gave up everything to get me through college, and now I can’t even save our business.”

Each sob has a fumbling dismount off her tongue, echoing off the walls in shrill droves. I don’t know how to comfort her. I don’t know what I could possibly say to make this situation better.

I’m surprised when I even manage to form a facsimile of some commiserative response. “It isn’t your fault. You know that, right? You’ve done everything in your power to keep your family’s business afloat.”

When she finally raises her head, her gaze is as sharp as a rifle’s scope, an imaginary red dot aimed right between my brows with every intention of taking the kill. “No, Fulton. Doing everything in my power to keep my family’s business afloat would mean that I stayed with them in Riverside instead of running away with you to fucking Cabo,” she hisses.

Ouch.

My knee-jerk response is to say something stupid along the lines of “You don’t mean that,” but I know that wouldn’t be productive in mending the situation. She’s already upset. It doesn’t matter what I feel right now.

“Let me help. Let me cover the expenses,” I blurt out, hope a timid thing that keeps evading my desperate clutches, slipping through my fingers each time I overextend myself to try and reach it.

She flinches away from me, rising to a stance so she can limit physical contact with me as much as possible, and I think it would’ve hurt more if she’d just outright slapped me. “I’m not some charity case,” she growls.

“I know. Fuck, I didn’t mean it like that. I just meant?—”

While the tears still bubble in her eyes, the drizzle is lighter now, and they snake down her features like rain droplets filling shoe-carved gulleys in sodden concrete.

“I don’t want your money. This is my problem, and I have to figure it out on my own. The last time I accepted help, my parents lost all their savings because I wanted a stupid business degree.”

I watch as Shiloh storms out of the bathroom to ditch the sheets, and I stumble upon her angrily rifling through her clothes, messing up the very organized system that she’s been so diligent about keeping.

I’m not above begging her to let me help. I’m not above falling to my goddamn knees and begging her not to shut me out. I won’t survive if she pushes me away. I’m trying my best to weed out the more incriminating responses, but I’m afraid that whatever I say, she’ll find some way to twist my words.

The current's becoming too tumultuous. She won't survive if she doesn't hang on to me. I can't let her drown. I won't.

“You don't have to carry this all by yourself. I care about you, Shiloh. If I can do something to help you and your family, I want to. Nobody's going to think any less of you for asking for help.”

“But I don't need your help! I don't want some magical fix to this, because that's not how life works, okay? Not all of us make seven figures a year.”

She's just lashing out. She doesn't mean any of this...right?

When I speak, my voice cracks under an invisible pressure, and a miasma burns in my sinuses. “Shiloh, please. Money doesn't mean anything to me. I need to know you're taken care of. I need to know that your family is taken care of. Let me help, just this once.”

“No, Fulton. I'll never be like those girls who take advantage of you for your generosity.”

“You're not like them. Not even close. Stop being prideful. Why won't you just accept that there's someone in this world who wants to genuinely help you?”

“What is it, huh? Do you think I'm not capable of earning my own money? Do you get off on pretending to play knight in shining armor with your bottomless bank vault? Do you pity me? The sad, pathetic girl who still works at a coffee shop when she's in her mid-twenties?” she snaps, wadding up one of her nighttime T-shirts and throwing it at me.

The ball unfurls against my chest, but it's her words that leave a lasting mark on my body—a gnarly, infected wound that's all putrefied tissue and blackened skin.

Moisture laves at my burning eyes as phosphenes begin to whirl in my vision like snowflakes in a snow globe.

“That’s not what I think at all, and you’re putting words in my mouth. Why are you punishing me for wanting to help you? Would you rather me just sit here and do nothing?”

I can’t believe this. Why is she making me out to be the bad guy? I didn’t force her to come on this trip with me.

Shiloh shimmies into a pair of sweatpants and aggressively yanks her head through the hole of an oversized hoodie. I can’t believe I’m even thinking about her outfit preference at a time like this, but if she goes outside, she’s going to overheat.

“We’re not together. It’s not your job to do something!”

That’s right—we’re not... together . I’m the idiot who’s been playing make believe this entire time. We barely know each other. I thought I knew her. Did I seriously think four years of small talk would lead to a flawless happily ever after? Maybe this is the reality check I needed.

Fuck. FUCK!

She has my heart in a firm grip, and she’s just crushed it like it was nothing more than rotting fruit, the juices of my labor dripping through her sharp, gnarled fingers.

“That’s not fair. You’re pushing me aside like I don’t even matter.”

I don’t have any fight left in me. It’s obvious now that she’s not going to listen to anything I say. I want to implore her to stay. I want to figure out a solution where she doesn’t feel indebted to me. I want to work something out, but she just wants to run

away.

Though I shouldn't be surprised, should I? Maybe running is always going to be Shiloh's way out—out of her obligations, out of our relationship.

“My ex asked me for more than I could give. This is all I can give right now.”

“I'll take it, Sunshine. Whatever you're willing to offer.”

Shiloh sucks in a shaky breath, blinks away the residual tears encrusted on her lashes, and stumbles over to the door. “I...I need some time alone,” she says quietly, but even at the near-inaudible volume, her words howl in my eardrums with enough force to blow them out completely.

My lips part around a counterargument, but she beats me to the chase, one hand wrapped around the doorframe in a show of finality. “Please, Fulton...please don't follow me.”

“You're walking out. Just like everyone does,” I whisper.

She doesn't respond, but she doesn't need to—her silence is loud enough.

And when she leaves, slamming the door behind her, I get this sinking suspicion that I'll always be the second choice, no matter how much I beg to be the first.

19

PREVIOUSLY, ON THE BACHELORETTE...

SHILOH

I know I should be happy given the poorly decorated party hat on my head and the fountain of endless drinks, but grief lassoes my heart—a constant reminder of the relationship that I just jeopardized. It's not bad enough that I got into a fight with the one person who matters to me most, but to get into a fight hours before my friend's bachelorette party?

I have to be the most selfish person on this entire planet.

I shouldn't be thinking about my own problems right now. I should be here for Aeris, celebrating her future instead of dwelling on mine—or lack thereof. This is her last night of freedom. Tomorrow, she'll be a married woman, starting the next chapter in her life.

Three weeks. My three weeks are up. After the wedding, I'll get my wish and go back to my lackluster life without Fulton—without him reassuring me with words of affection or surprising me with sweet acts of service.

My eyes roam over the girls screaming their lungs out to a Britney Spears song, and judging by the way Aeris is swaying on her feet, I'm betting she's more alcohol than blood right now .

I wish Fulton was here. I wish I could just live in the moment instead of always worrying about what's to come. I wish I could stow away this self-directed anger and have everything go back to the way it was.

Fulton's and my relationship has been nothing but a revolving door of will they or won't they. One minute, I'm floating on cloud nine, and the next, I can barely keep my head above water as some leviathan latches a tentacle around my ankle and pulls me down, down, down into the depths of doubt and misguided self-preservation.

Did I overreact? I know Fulton was just trying to help, but I was so thrown off when he offered to pay off everything . That's not pocket money, alright? At least, not for me. We're talking hundreds of thousands of dollars. Who in their right mind would give someone that much money after only truly knowing them for three weeks? No matter how insignificant the sum might be for him, I vowed years ago to never take money from someone I care about. And I care about Fulton—so much it aches.

Ugh, I'm such a fucking mess. Who am I going to attack next, unprovoked, because I made the idiotic decision to keep all my qualms compartmentalized on a three-week vacation with some of the most successful people in the entire world? It's not their fault that I hate my life.

I do, don't I?

Then he made that comment about abandonment, and that was really the straw that broke the camel's back. I'm prioritizing work over him. Oh my God. I'm doing the exact same thing his dad did. And I'm no better than that girl who dangled a relationship in front of him just so she could pull it away at the last minute. The most important person in my life shouldn't have to play second fiddle to my stupid job.

I sip rather aggressively on my dirty martini, hoping that I can either numb the pain or black out before the memories come barreling back. Aeris—even though she isn't

the host of the party—comes flouncing over to me with no knowledge of the untamed anger vibrating through my five-foot body, and she takes the liberty to sit down next to me, clinging to her drink like it's Liquid I.V. instead of alcohol.

“Why the long face, Shiloh?” she asks in a motherly tone, her words surprisingly understandable for someone who I doubt can walk in a straight line.

I take a balled fist and try to scrub the frown from my mouth, as if it'll suddenly disappear with a little elbow grease. “Sorry. I, uh, I'm just a little tired tonight,” I flub, the lie tasting like cigarette ash on my palate.

“Aw, love. You should get some rest. Nobody's going to hold it against you if you leave early. I'm just happy you were able to show up for a while.”

Goddammit, Aeris. Why do you have to be so nice?

I shake my head, placing my glass down on the table that's overrun with torn streamers, confetti, glow-in-the-dark penis stickers, and a disturbingly graphic, half-eaten dick cake with sprinkles for ball hairs and buttercream frosting for cum. There's a very phallic theme going on here.

“It's not that kind of tired. It's like”—I press down on my chest, right where my heart is, right where it knocks against my ribs like death's skeletal hand on my front door—“a soul kind of tired.”

Aeris nods in understanding, readjusting the pink Bride-to-Be sash over her body. “Do you want to talk about it?” There's a sweet tone to her voice, as soft as velvet as it wraps around me in an incorporeal embrace.

“It's not important. This is your big night. Don't worry about me.”

It's not my goal to put a damper on the evening—it's just hard to be in high spirits when I'm already mourning this incredible vacation that Fulton so graciously gifted me. It's like I can't enjoy it anymore because it's so close to ending.

Thank you, pessimism.

Aeris tucks on a frown, and she rests a hand on my leg, attentively searching my face for any crack in my carefully cultivated facade. "It is important. Don't invalidate your feelings for me. Plus, how could I truly have a good time tonight if I knew my friend was going through something? This is our night. I want to celebrate it with all the important people in my life, and you're one of them, Shiloh."

Before I know it, a veil of tears has misted over my eyes, but I'm quick to blink them away. I've never met someone with as big of a heart as Aeris. We were strangers three weeks ago, and now I'm important enough to be in her bridal party.

I wonder if that would change if she knew how I treated Fulton.

I glance up at the conga line that the rest of the girls have formed, completely oblivious to the internal mayhem taking me for one hell of a death-defying ride. They're all smiles and raucous laughter, drunk off good company and capitalizing on the overflowing buffet of carbs. For them, this vacation isn't the end of the road.

A cold sweat tiptoes down my spine, and the Fulton-specific butterflies in my belly flap in a frenzy similar to the way animals flee when they sense danger. "Fulton and I got into an argument," I whisper beneath my breath, picking at a hangnail on my thumb.

Instead of the sympathetic "Mm-hm, tell me more" I was expecting, Aeris turns into the fucking Terminator, her big, endearing eyes replaced with ones that verge on destructive vengeance. She tries her best to remain impartial, but the grit of her teeth

says otherwise.

“What. Did. He. Do.”

A groan and a sigh roll into one, and I throw my head back against the couch. “He didn’t do anything. It was my fault. ”

“I’m sure that’s not true.”

A flux of guilt tosses my stomach, and without so much as a warning, I collapse quicker than a house of cards, moisture sloshing over my waterlines. There’s a blistering kind of heat in my nasal cavities—one that goes against my harebrained decision to bottle up my emotions.

I didn’t want to make a scene. I didn’t want to take away from Aeris’ spotlight. I’ve convinced myself that I’m some selfless saint, but that couldn’t be further from the truth.

“My family’s business is going under. I didn’t want to burden Fulton with the truth because I didn’t want to believe it was really happening. Then I got a call from the bank telling me that they declined the loan we applied for, and Fulton offered to pay off all the expenses. I yelled at him because h-he just doesn’t understand. I’ve worked countless hours to help my parents siphon enough money for a retirement fund from a crappy little coffee shop, and to have all of that just disregarded with one flick of his black card? I’ve taken money from people I care about before, and all it did was leave them in financial ruins. Fulton?—”

“Take a breath,” Aeris says, rubbing a mollifying hand on my shoulder, the brown of her eyes like softened earth after a rainstorm.

I do as she says, feeling my body pulse from dehydration and the growing

temperature of the room. Or maybe it's because I'm crying out all my water retention. Everything's overstimulating—the lights, the voices, the decorations. Fulton's my first-rate reprieve, and all I want to do is curl up in his arms and fall asleep to the sound of his breathing.

We were happy. I was happy. Why did I have to ruin it? Why do I have to ruin everything?

"I'm s-sorry," I slur through an alcohol-soaked voice, praying that the rest of the bachelorette party doesn't take pity on me and form some kind of intervention. "I think I really messed up. And now he probably hates me, you know? I mean, I fucking hate me."

I don't know why I expect Aeris to be mad at me, but I'm grateful when she offers me a kind look, the makings of a small smile tucked into her cheeks. "You're going through a lot right now. You don't need to apologize. And you don't need to find someone to blame either. You saw his offer to help as a debt that you weren't willing to pay, and he saw your reaction to his offer as a rejection," she explains, sponging up the last residuum of guilt inside me.

"I didn't mean to hurt his feelings."

Snapshots of our fight keep coming back to me—each time worse than the last—and my heart winces when I replay the words that spewed from my mouth like magma from a volcano, hardwired to burn everything in its path.

"I don't think you did. Fulton's always been sensitive—that's one of his strengths, believe it or not. He's always second-guessing what to say or do, but when he finally got the courage to talk to you, I think some of that fear went away. I've never seen him so... himself ...with anyone before. When you told him you were in trouble, his first instinct was probably to fix your problem for you, because that's how he shows

he cares.”

He told me he wasn't going to let me drown.

“From the short interactions we've had together, Shiloh, I can tell you're a very independent person. You'd rather have others rely on you than vice versa. But when you're with Fulton, you just...”

Hoots and hollers from the other attendees simmer in the air, drowning out the sporadic sniffles that keep interspersing Aeris' bestowment of wisdom.

“I just...?”

Aeris slips her finger under a strand of my hair, liberating it from the thin paperboard digging into my scalp. “You just let your guard down,” she finishes .

I knew I felt more at ease around him, but I didn't realize other people could see it. Fulton doesn't see me for my capabilities. He sees me for my soul .

“It's that noticeable?”

“Oh, love, anyone with two working eyes could see how much you care for him. Don't get me started on Fulton—that boy is an open book whenever he's around you, and discreet isn't in his vocabulary. He is undeniably, irrevocably in love with you.”

Love? There's no way...it's too soon. That's preposterous. He likes me, sure, but love is a strong word. A word that definitely doesn't fit the bill now that I've shown him my true colors. I can't accept this. I can't accept the fact that someone may love me, and I have to check back into reality in a couple days.

I open my mouth to politely rebut her statement, but Lila comes speeding into frame

with the conspicuity of an elephant, swiping her finger through the frosting on Aeris' haunting cock cake. "No, Shi. He loves you. With a capital L. Hell, me and the girls have a running bet to see how fast he asks you to be his girlfriend."

Sensibility finally finds its way back to me after playing hooky, and cold, hard reality body-slams me into the ground. Everything is starting to click. A guy doesn't research a girl's specific hair care routine in case she has a bad hair day because he likes her. A guy doesn't surprise a girl with baby turtles that she mentioned once in passing because he likes her. A guy doesn't offer to pay off a girl's business expenses because she expresses how devastated she'd be if her family's shop went out of business because he likes her.

Oh my God.

I do my best to fix my haggard appearance without the help of a mirror, as if Fulton's magically going to burst through the door and beg for my forgiveness. "How do I fix this? How do I choose between him and my family's shop? "

Just hearing it out loud, the answer should be obvious enough. So why isn't it? Why can't I let myself be happy? Is it because I never thought I was good enough? Good enough to manage a business, good enough to be somebody's wife one day?

There's a hand on my back, and while the fat droplets of my tears scallop my lash line, I crank my neck to find Cali in my peripheral. "Have you ever thought that maybe the two can coexist with each other?" she inquires.

A hiccup racks my entire frame as snot makes a... timely ...appearance. "I can't..."

"Your family's business needs you, Shiloh," Aeris assures me. "But Fulton needs you too, and I think you need him more. I think you need him to ground you—to remind you that there's more to life than work."

I can barely see in front of me. I can't breathe out of my nostrils. It feels like my heart's breaking all over again, but I'm the one committing the act. There has to be a way I can balance my two lives. I'm not ready to say goodbye to Fulton. I haven't even given our relationship a chance outside of Cabo.

Josie and Faye both come over to console me, and Faye offers me a box of tissues as if her maternal instincts had suddenly kicked in—or she heard my obnoxious caterwauling from across the room. I take a tissue from her, pay my thanks, then blow rather harshly into it.

The organ in my chest hurts , and there's an anchor in my stomach that keeps pulling downwards. "I don't know how to live my life when?—"

"When you're living for yourself rather than others?" Faye finishes, the understanding in her tone like a salve to the open wound on my heart, staunching any further bleeding.

I don't, and I'm afraid that it'll destroy me. I'm afraid of being out of control. I'm afraid of having my routine messed up. I'm afraid of change—and Fulton's a bigger change than me potentially losing the entire shop.

"What am I even supposed to say to him? What am I supposed to do about his offer?" I panic, glancing around at the circle of girlfriends who've all put a pause on partying to comfort me , still a newcomer to the group.

Josie wipes a few confetti casualties off her skirt. "First, I think you need to be truthful about how you feel. Then, I think you need to at least try and hear him out."

Fulton deserves the truth. He deserves to know why I blew up at him out of nowhere. All those words I put into his mouth...they weren't true. And it was low of me to pin my own insecurities on him. I won't let the night end like this— I won't .

Even though my makeup is running, there's a caffeine-deficient throb in my forehead, and I'll be blindly walking into the Reapers' man cave with a half-baked plan, I still have enough motivation to pull myself from my sulking.

“What if he doesn't want to see me?” I ask timidly.

And suddenly, the 90s playlist that was playing in the background is lost beneath harmonious laughter—the kind that crinkles noses, debuts dimples, and burns cores.

Aeris throws me a really ? look. “Love, an ocean couldn't keep you and Fulton apart.”

20

EVERY CLOUD HAS A SILVER LINING

FULTON

“ A nother,” I demand, slamming my glass down on the hardwood and wiping the back of my hand across my lips.

“Dude, are you sure? You’ve had like?—”

There’s a primordial kind of anger inside me, swimming in the acid in my stomach. I don’t know what’s going on with me. I’m mad, I’m sad, I’m hopeless. None of my teammates deserve to bear the brunt of my bad mood, but I can’t help lashing out at anyone who gets within five feet of me—or anyone who isn’t Shiloh.

I’m such an idiot. She was trying to vent to me about her problems, and I just invalidated her feelings by throwing money at her. I was truly trying to help...but I was so insensitive. Not everyone’s lucky enough to be as financially stable as I am. How am I supposed to help her when she doesn’t want my help? How am I supposed to just sit by and watch her family’s business go under when I know I could’ve done something to save it?

I’m not doing it because I get my pickle tickled whenever I play hero; I’m doing it because I lo... like Shiloh. I like her a lot .

I’ll be lucky if I even see her before the wedding tomorrow. This wasn’t how I

wanted our trip to end, but it seems like she's already decided that for us. Shiloh said it herself—we're not together. She never saw us being together. She never gave us a chance. She never wanted to give us a chance.

The sensible part of my brain is still working—a miracle, really, given the amount of alcohol I've consumed—and it bellows a warning through my entire body like the faraway chime of a death knell. I'm on my way to getting shit-faced, but it's better than having to feel the aching pain in my chest.

I full-on growl at Gage, spearing him with an icy look as the last of my patience bleeds dry. He doesn't say anything to de-escalate the situation, but he does flinch a little. I'm unstable, and if I'm not cut off soon, I'm not above crashing Aeris' bachelorette party and begging Shiloh to speak to me.

This night should be all about Hayes. Hayes is a great guy—he's always been there for me when I needed him, and he's a team player at heart. Sure, he has some anger issues and was once forwarded an opposing player's hospital bill for breaking his ribs in three different places, but that's beside the point. Hayes plays every game like it could be his last. He's the perfect teammate, but he's an even better friend.

Come on, Fulton. Just put on a happy face for the evening. You're always bringing down the party, whether it's a game you don't want to play or your weird-ass aura or turning in for the night way earlier than everyone else.

When Gage hesitantly places another glass of whiskey in front of me, it barely even touches the table before I'm chugging it and deliberately scorching the lining of my throat. I'm not drunk enough. I can't stop thinking about the way she grabbed my hand and refused to let go on our flight, the way she told me that I shouldn't be ashamed of my eccentric behavior and that I don't need to change for anyone, the way we kissed on the beach after our Jet Ski date, the way she looked at me when I was detangling her hair.

Fuck, I miss her.

A frown resides on Gage's lips, and his arm twitches like he wants to reach out and give me the good ol' pat, pat on the shoulder. But he doesn't. Probably for fear of getting his arm ripped out of its socket.

"Do you want to talk about what's bothering you?" he asks, gesturing to the invisible storm cloud hanging over my head.

Apparently, the hit of adrenaline I was hoping for has been permanently delayed because now my heart's sadly ker-thumping like I've been drugged with heroin. "Not really."

She's just a girl. It wasn't even that big of a fight. You're overreacting.

She's not just a girl. She's my girl. And it was a big fight in terms of our relationship. I'm not overreacting. God, can't you shut up for once and stop making me feel worse than I already do? You're always in my head dictating how to act, what to say.

I'm just trying to help you fit in.

Shiloh says I don't need to fit in.

Shiloh doesn't care about you as much as you care about her. Why are you chasing after a girl who always planned on leaving in the first place?

"Do you want to get your fortune read by Gonzo?" Gage follows up, tentatively reaching out for my empty glass so he can confiscate it.

Confusion whittles a trench between my brows. "Who?"

Gage nods to something over my shoulder. “The capuchin monkey. He costs three hundred an hour. He can read your future. Does bachelor parties, birthdays, bar mitzvahs, weddings, even funerals.”

I must be drunker than I thought, because lo and behold, when I turn around in my seat, the rest of the guys are oohing and aahing as a furry little primate dressed in a business suit picks at Kit’s palms. Baby Eda is more than ecstatic as she gently pets our apparently well-renowned fortune teller.

“There are monkeys in Cabo?”

“Gonzo does his own thing. When we were walking downtown the other night, he and his manager were giving out free readings on the boardwalk. Hayes pretty much shit his pants—said he’d never seen a monkey in person before. It came out that we were visiting Cabo for Hayes’ wedding, and the manager told us that Gonzo is a hit at bachelor parties, so we said fuck it.”

I snort. “And you expect me to believe that a monkey can read my future?”

Gage cocks his head, actually contemplates the logistics for a second, then shrugs. “He predicted that Casen was going to ‘come to a crossroads very shortly,’ and he did. He had already made his mind up about ordering rocky road for dessert, but then the creamery ended up having triple fudge brownie, and he couldn’t decide.”

“Psh, that’s just a coincidence.”

“Oh, and Gonzo did predict that Gertrude was going to be murdered in her sleep by one of her coworkers over the last vacation slot, and it actually happened. Just got the call from my meddling grandmother.”

First off, I have no idea who Gertrude is. Second off, I’m not sure how he predicted

all of that by looking at someone's palms. He doesn't even speak human. He's a monkey! I don't need a psychic to tell me that my future's going to consist of sad, lonely nights where I eat my feelings in frozen Salisbury steaks because I drove away the only woman I've ever wanted. Though, hearing it come from a monkey may be less...humiliating, somehow?

Before I can argue with Gage over how preposterous that is, the man of the hour careens into our private conversation, reeking of liquor and looking like he just snorted a line of ketamine in the bathroom.

“Guys, Gonzo just predicted that Kit's going to get a ‘big —yet costly—surprise’ in the next few months,” he relays.

My jaw almost hits the counter. “Another baby?!”

Hayes just laughs hysterically, that one vein in his forehead bulging like crazy. “Who knows!”

Alright, noted: no baby talk. Ever. Unless I want to give Hayes a stroke. Gonzo doesn't know what the hell he's talking about, okay?

I bet Shiloh would make a good mother. She's so patient and understanding, and she's so attentive. She'd know exactly what to babyproof and which stroller would be the most ideal because she loves to research and learn and...oh, God, I miss her. I'm a mess without her. If I wasn't working so hard on holding my tears back, I'd probably be a full-blown faucet by now.

Without even meaning to take away from the conversation, I kind of just face-plant into the wood top with a sigh, ignoring the lance of pain that shoots up the bridge of my nose.

“What’s his problem?” Hayes asks from above me.

“Trouble in paradise,” Gage replies matter-of-factly, as if they’re two hardened cops discussing the cause of death over a corpse on a mortuary table.

They’re talking about me like I’m not even here! And a part of me wishes I wasn’t. I wish I was rotting somewhere six feet under so my heart could finally rest. A little melodramatic, but I don’t care.

I’m not expecting a motivational speech—or anything, really—but Hayes yanks me up by the collar of my shirt, gets right up in my face, and scares the living bejesus out of me. I don’t think we’ve ever been this close before.

“Fulton,” he slurs, shaking me slightly, and his grip is surprisingly strong for someone who has a BAC over 0.08. “I don’t know what happened, but you have to go after that girl. Don’t let something stupid drive you guys apart. I almost lost Aeris because of a mistake I made, and if I hadn’t fought for her as hard as I did, I don’t think we’d be getting married tomorrow.”

I remember. Oh, we all remember. Hayes was inconsolable after their breakup. Then he went all out to get her back—thousands of roses all over her front yard, a public apology on live television, even buying her an orchard in South Africa because her favorite fruit is nectarines.

A formidable kind of guilt shipwrecks against the outcrop of my mind. “I miss her so much. Everything was perfect, you know? We spent the night together, and?—”

Hayes interrupts me with dewy-eyed curiosity. “Wait a second. As in...?”

Shit. That’s right. I forgot to tell my teammates that I lost my V-card. I mean, now’s as good a time as ever, I guess.

“Yeah.”

Hayes’ fists fall away so he can slam a hand on the countertop, and the force is so loud and jarring that it jettisons any of my self-confidence. “Fully! Oh my God. I know right now probably isn’t the best time to celebrate, but holy shit, dude. I’m so proud of you.”

“They grow up so fast,” Gage sniffs, wiping an invisible tear away.

“Tell me everything. Actually, don’t. Actually, do. Fuck, man. We’ve been waiting eons for this to happen,” Hayes exclaims, more ecstatic than I am at the news of getting my dick wet—which is a tad bit concerning. Also, it didn’t take me eons . It took me a reasonably appropriate amount of time to lose my virginity.

Gage, surprisingly, is the last one to overwhelm me with a terribly invasive interrogation. “How was it?”

“It was incredible...but it was only incredible because of her . And then I had to go and ruin everything. I don’t think she even wants to talk to me right now.” My heart is still on a slow recovery to its full working extent, that little tumor of guilt pulsing in the abysmal pit of my stomach.

The groom-to-be puts a pin in my brooding. “But you don’t know that. You’ve given her space, right?”

I nod.

“Then what if she’s waiting for you? What if she wants to talk to you, but she thinks that you don’t want to talk to her?”

That’s ridiculous. I always want to talk to Shiloh, even about the not-so-good stuff.

Could I really live with myself if I just give up ? I'm not going to lie and say that I'm not a coward, because there've been many times when I have been, but this can't be one of those times. It can't. I have to fight for her—for us. Just because she's uncertain about the future doesn't mean that I have to reaffirm her doubts.

Be brave, Fulton, for once in your life.

I don't know how, but I practically sober on the spot, and I rise to a stance. When moisture threatens to fog my vision, I blink it away, figuratively holding on to the last-standing fixture amidst a hurricane of grief. It devastates everything around me, reduces houses to debris, floods the streets until they're unrecognizable, and yet I continue to cling to hope. I continue to wait for the storm clouds to herald the thinnest sliver of light—of redemption.

I need to go to her.

I don't even manage to get a word out before I'm sprinting to the front door. And the minute I open that partition to traverse the entire resort, my heart tap-dances against my ribs—a light patter that would've been overlooked if it wasn't for the complementary blip of love that followed in its wake.

Because Shiloh Nguyen is standing outside, waiting for me.

Something breaks in my throat, and I can't speak. She looks so small in her dark blue cocktail dress, and the sight of the semi-dried mascara tracks tainting her skin is like a fucking hockey stick to the gut. I hate that I made her cry. And I know I have no right to be thinking this, but even in spite of her tears, she's still so breathtakingly beautiful.

All my stupid, Neanderthal mouth manages is “Wha?—”

“Can we talk?”

Don't blow this, Fulton.

Shiloh shivers, and I fumble for the nonexistent jacket on my shoulders before realizing I didn't bring one with me. I don't really think she wants to talk in the middle of Hayes' bachelor party, but I don't want her to freeze to death either.

“Yeah, of course. One sec,” I say, darting back inside the madhouse to grab a throw blanket from off the couch, narrowly missing what I think is supposed to be Topsy Twister but instead looks more like a disturbing recreation of The Human Centipede .

I shut the door as quietly as I can without attracting attention, then I sling the thin, fleece blanket over her shoulders, biting back a smile when she actually accepts my warm and fuzzy olive branch.

“Thank you. I didn't realize it got so chilly.” She huddles further into the cold-resistant covering, and there's a spasm in my bicep that oh-so desperately wants to pull her into an embrace.

“Did you walk here? All the way from the event room?”

Hayes got to use their hotel room for his party, while Aeris booked one of the event rooms for hers, and there's enough distance between the two so they wouldn't accidentally cross paths before the wedding. So, in short, Shiloh walked across the resort, by herself, at night, in nothing but a tiny scrap of fabric. There're about a hundred things wrong with that picture, but Overprotective Fulton needs to take a chill pill while Guilty and Remorseful Fulton wins his girl back .

“Yeah, it wasn't a big deal though,” she dismisses. “I wasn't thinking and should've brought a jacket.”

A growl stirs in my chest. “I should’ve come to you.”

Seeing as the night has been nothing but back-to-back surprises, I shouldn’t be shocked when Shiloh breaks our unofficial no-contact rule and touches my arm, lifting the lid off all my emotions that have been pressure-cooking since our argument.

Her eyes are the color of burnished copper in the hallway’s light, and her lips part to permit a hollow sound. “Fulton...”

Not that I had a lot of composure to begin with, but the rest of it shatters, and a jumbled apology is the next thing to come out of my fat mouth—to console her more than to absolve me. I can’t waste another second without her knowing how sorry I am.

“I’m so sorry, Shiloh. I’m sorry if it seemed like I was trying to buy your affection—that wasn’t my intention at all. I should’ve listened to you instead of throwing money at your problem and expecting it to magically go away. I was an insensitive asshole, and it breaks my fucking heart that I hurt you.”

I thought that the truth would lift the crushing weight off my chest, but it doesn’t. No, if anything, it weaponizes my pain against me, and my heart thrashes like a hummingbird in a gilded cage. Her expression is inscrutable. The only piece of evidence that confirms she even heard my apology in the first place is the parched plot of lip she chooses to gnaw on.

I don’t think I could live with the possibility of never earning her forgiveness.

Time crawls by slowly while she ponders a response, and the longer she leaves me in dreary silence, the harder my stomach works to eject itself out of my goddamn mouth. The apparent cold is doing nothing for the sheet of sweat sticking my shirt to

my body. It's hard to breathe. It's hard to focus on anything other than the anxiety swarming me like white blood cells to a newly opened wound.

“You don't need to apologize, Fulton,” she says, shaking her irresistibly soft hair. “I overreacted. You were just trying to help, and I blew up at you. I put words in your mouth that I know you'd never say—or think.”

“You didn't overreact. I hurt your feelings. You needed someone to listen, and I just lectured you. If I was in your position, I would've been upset too. And my offer had absolutely nothing to do with thinking that you're not capable of solving this problem on your own, because I know you'd do a better job than me, but...”

She stares at me expectantly, the shape of her mouth hard to place—somewhere between a frown and an indifferent line. Her grip on the blanket tightens as she braces herself for the deathblow of my admission.

“But...?”

“But you shouldn't have to.”

I saw the damage prioritizing work over his family did to my dad, and I'll be damned if I let Shiloh go down the same path. What I do know is what it feels like to be a prisoner in your own body, to constantly be haunted by the belief that you're not good enough...and Shiloh is more than fucking good enough. If I can get her to see that, even for a split second, then I've finally done something worthy in my twenty-four years on this big, stupid, floating rock.

As if she's just uncorked a well of sadness, tears gloss over her eyes, threatening to race toward an invisible finish line in never-ending tributaries. “I can't just take your money. I can't stop...I have to keep working...I...”

“Breathe, Sunshine. Please ,” I beg.

Screw the distance. I need to hold her right now. I need it so badly that I think I’ll die if I don’t. So I do—I wrap her in my arms to shield her from all the hurt, and my own chest shakes with each reverberation of her sobs. She’s so small against me, so feeble, a broken girl refusing to let herself heal because all she knows is discipline and sacrifice. The thought of allowing change to happen scares her more than suffering silently for the rest of her life.

The space behind my eyes starts to burn, my diaphragm heaving with a breath not yet ready to egress from my lungs. It feels like there’s a goddamn noose tied around my neck, and each time she furls her fists in my shirt or howls in agony, the rope tightens.

“I can’t a-accept your offer,” she wails, guilt tearing through her last pillar of defense, the break in her voice rising above the whitewater in my ears. “I don’t want to take your money. I did that before with my parents, and it r-ruined them financially. If I take money from you, it could ruin more than just your finances...it could ruin our relationship .”

I rub her back with one soothing stroke after another, holding her so closely that I can feel her heart thundering against my ribs, and the way she hangs on me unbalances the apparent unsteadiness of my feet.

“You won’t ruin anything, Sunshine. I’ll help you figure this out. If you need time off, I’ll cover your shift. It doesn’t matter if it’s for a day, a week, a month—I’ll do it. I’ll do whatever it takes to carry some of this pressure,” I promise.

Shiloh reels back so she can look me in the eyes, and I have to work twice as hard to suppress my laughter when an objection flourishes over her lips. “You play hockey for a living, Ful. You can’t work two jobs.”

“I don’t care. You’re more important than hockey. You’re always going to be the most important thing in my life. You do get that, don’t you?”

I don’t think she could ever comprehend the space she takes up in my heart. She hung my moon and stars, she gave me oxygen on an uninhabitable planet, she inspired vegetative growth after years of adapting to a scorched earth.

Her tone is dipped in uncertainty. “Why would you risk your whole future for someone you’re not even with?”

“I’d never force you to be with me, Shi. Ever. But my heart belongs to you. There’s nothing you can say or do that will change that. You stole it the moment I met you—the moment you blessed me with the biggest smile even though I was a fucking mess when I was trying to order.”

“I just thought it was nerves,” she admits bashfully.

Not even close.

“It was you.”

And like a pebble plinking into a stagnant pool of brackish water, a ripple effect occurs, the rest of her emotions seeping out of her through overtaxed tear ducts. “I don’t deserve you,” she cries, keeping me at a distance while her fingers are still pretzeled in my shirt.

I grab her hand as my belly lurches with a newborn warmth that’s never existed before. “Sunshine, you deserve everything in this godforsaken world, and I won’t rest until I’m the only person who can give it to you.”

Despite my seemingly redundant efforts to pacify her, she only sobs harder,

squeezing my palm back with a desperate kind of urgency that turns my knuckles the color of snowdrifts. It reminds me of the way she relied on me during our flight here.

“Thank you for not giving up on me, even when you should have. Even with all my emotional baggage and my control issues.”

I can't believe I'm going to say this—well, I can, but I didn't expect it to be so soon—but I'm in love with Shiloh. I've been falling in love with her. It's a first kind of love, as pure as the driven snow. She's my better half; she's my best friend; she's my soulmate . And I know that sounds crazy considering I thought I'd die alone and my decomposing corpse would become an all-you-can-eat buffet for the neighborhood stray cats, but I think I knew we were meant to be together all along.

“It's okay. I should be the one thanking you. You've given my life so much purpose, and you don't even realize it. I...I fucking love you, Shiloh Nguyen. I love you with everything that I am, and it's not possible for me to ever stop loving you. I know it's only been three weeks, and you probably think I'm insane, but it's true,” I confess, and the monstrous creation of negative feelings that have been terrorizing me all these years are suddenly...exorcised from my body. Just like that.

All the anxiety and the overthinking and the tiny voice of self-loathing in my head are gone. It's taken me four years to chase peace, but I finally caught it after running for so long, and I'll never, ever accept a life again where I'm not deserving of love. My father's absence doesn't define me. The way women have used me doesn't define me.

Shiloh cups the side of my face with her other hand, and her thumb smooths over my cheekbone as if she's wiping away all the intangible pain that's stained my very soul. “No, it's been four years, Fulton. Because I was addicted to you from the moment you walked into my tiny, off-the-map coffee shop. And if you hadn't asked me out, I don't think I would've ever found my soulmate. I've been tricking myself this entire time into thinking we could never have a relationship outside of Cabo, but that's not

what I want. It's never been what I wanted. I've just been too scared to accept that my life will never be the same after you."

She wants the real thing. Oh my God. She's willing to venture out of her comfort zone for me. She's willing to face all her fears...for me. And I know how much strength that takes, especially for someone as routine driven as her.

This is the best day of my fucking life...aside from the day I first met her. And the day she let me pleasure her. And the day we had sex. Okay, so a lot of my best days have been with her. Hell, even the day she accidentally fed me dairy was nothing short of incredible.

"Trust me, I'm just as scared as you are. I don't know how to do this whole relationship thing." My chuckle falls flat, and it feels like someone's poured wet cement into my chest, the very real, very warranted fear of failure revisiting me in a cold flash.

"You're pretty perfect at it, actually. Annoyingly so," she says. "I'm so head over heels in love with you, Fulton Cazzarelli. So much so that change doesn't scare me nearly as much as living my life without you does."

I've never had the best timing, but I think I'll regret not seizing the moment while my confidence is still hot. Stomach rolling, a love song composed by the fickle beats of my heart, there's no precursor before I sign my soul over to Shiloh on that imaginary dotted line.

Nirvana is just a single question away, and for the first time in my life, I refuse to let my insecurities get the better of me. "I know this probably isn't the best time to ask, but would you be my girlfriend?"

For someone who's a straight-A student in overthinking, Shiloh doesn't even hesitate.

“I’d be honored.”

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THE REAPERS AFTER DARK

May 12th, Wednesday, 1:43 a.m.

THE SIX DICKS WITH STICKS

HAYES: Ful, where'd you go?

GAGE: I think I saw him leave a while ago.

KIT: What? He didn't even say goodbye!

GAGE: With Shiloh.

HAYES: Oh.

CASEN: Oh.

brISTOL: Oh.

KIT: HOLY SHIT. Is it happening? Is it finally happening?

GAGE: Uh, hate to break it to you, dude, but Fulton already lost his virginity.

KIT: WITHOUT ME??

HAYES: Ew.

KIT: Not like that, you perv. He didn't even think to tell me. ME! His sex guru. I showed him everything he needs to know !

HAYES: You showed him?!

KIT: Fulton, if you're reading this, I'm heartbroken. I thought we had something special. I can't believe you told Gage before you told me. I feel so betrayed. I'll remember this for the rest of my life.

brISTOL: Congrats, Ful. I think. Sounds kind of weird over text.

CASEN: Yeah, ditto. We never thought this day would come. Or you would come. LMAO.

GAGE: I can't believe he's having wall-banging sex right now and I'm not.

HAYES: I bought you assholes eight large pizzas. EIGHT. And this is how you repay me?

brISTOL: Sorry, H. Some of us don't know how to set our priorities straight.

GAGE: Oh, I know you're not talking, Mr. I-Always-Have-Golf-Ball-Sized-Hickeys-On-My-Neck.

brISTOL: Hey! At least I don't leave my cum rags everywhere.

GAGE: Gasp. You know laundry isn't my strong suit!

CASEN: Shit. I think we're blowing up Fulton's phone.

KIT: Ooh, I hope he has the volume turned up. That's what you get, you ungrateful ass munch.

22

KINK SHAME? MORE LIKE KINK SAME

FULTON

Shiloh Nguyen is going to send me to an early grave. My girlfriend is going to send me to an early grave.

Fuck, it feels so good to say that.

I can't believe I thought I could last a night without kissing her. I need to inhale the sweet-smelling perfume clinging to her; I need to hear the honeyed, soft-spoken lilt that always manages to silence the maelstrom in my head; I need to knead her soft skin beneath my calloused fingers.

When we stumble into our hotel room after racing down to the third floor, I get a strange sense of déjà vu as I lick into her mouth, re-memorizing the feel of the lips that were made for me. I'm pouncing on her like a wolf hunting for its mate through pheromones and the forthcoming of a particularly painful rut.

"I need you, Sunshine. Right now," I whimper, abandoning any last remnants of my dignity as desperation ripples off me in tangible waves. Shiloh's about to be my undoing, and she's given me a five percent chance of survival with those humble curves and that hidden paradise between her legs .

A rumble hovers at the base of her throat, and I can feel her grinning against my lips.

“A little desperate tonight, are we?”

“ You have no fucking idea. ”

I can never take my time with Shiloh. I don't have the self-control or the resolution. I want to lay her out like a five-course meal and feast on her body until she's rendered with paresthesia. Fuck, I need my pants off. I need everything off. It feels like I'm suffocating in my own skin.

With the margins of my resilience wearing thin, Shiloh inadvertently takes the lead when she pushes me up against the wall, clearly oblivious to the fact that she's just usurped control of the entire situation. Every time she strokes my tongue with hers, she nurses the little bud of pain in my lower abdomen.

My balls tighten and draw up, precipitating a ruthless throb in my cock that's almost powerful enough to bring me to my knees and turn an atheist into a devout Christian. God, this is fucking torture. This is fucking torture, and Shiloh could never understand the magnitude of her power over me.

Considering she barely needs to do anything to make me take off like a rocket, it's not surprising that my head is insulated with cotton and the lower half of me trembles uncontrollably. When she rubs her clothed cunt over my erection, I know she can feel just how turned on I am.

Without warning, Shiloh palms the bulge in my pants, squeezing with enough pressure to fish a belly-deep moan out of me—to make me soil the denim with an embarrassingly noticeable wet spot. “Let me take care of you, Fulton,” she purrs, running a manicured finger over the seam that's doing a piss-poor job of containing my swollen dick.

“Shi, no,” I start to protest—not because I wouldn't love for her to take care of me,

but because I'm the one who should be taking care of her—but my nonsensical words get scrubbed apart by an insistent sanding block .

Seeing as Shiloh's usually the one to follow the rules, I'm in deep shit when she doesn't listen to me, instead making quick work of the zipper and pulling my pants down to my ankles. My pulsing cock stands at attention, already leaking pre-cum from the preview her incredible hand gave me. My cheeks blaze with embarrassment as my dick hangs low and heavy from neglect, my belly quivering while Shiloh drags her fingers down the coarse hairs of my happy trail and over the neatly kempt dusting around my groin.

“You don't want me to make you feel good? I know you want me to. Look at the way your cock's dripping for me, baby. I'm sorry I've neglected it for so long.” She kisses the space beneath my navel, then lowers to kiss the base of my cock, and it jerks against her mouth with a brazenness that mortifies me beyond repair.

“You don't have to,” I rush out.

Where's the dominant Fulton who knew exactly how to dirty talk his girl into multiple orgasms? I think the big L-word gave me performance anxiety. Shiloh and I never just fucked for the sake of fucking, but now there's an added pressure to live up to the promises we made each other.

Shiloh carefully drops to her knees, using the length of her dress to keep from scraping her skin against the hardwood floor. With a straight shot down her chest, I don't miss the way her tits rise when she sips in a centering breath. “I want to,” she reassures me, dabbing her thumb over the slick emission beading at the tip.

Before I can try and change her mind, her pouty lips seal over the head of my cock, followed by little licks and laves that set off every one of the hypersensitive nerves in my shaft. She slowly inches her way down the length of me—all while keeping her

cheeks hollowed in a constant vacuum that milks me fucking dry —and I can feel myself passing the back of her mouth .

My head is unbearably hot, and an inconceivable sense of euphoria pops open an escape hatch in my skull, squirming into brain tissue. “Fuck, Shi. Fuuuck. That’s it. Suck my fat cock like you don’t have a gag reflex,” I moan, wrapping her hair around my knuckles and yanking a little too harshly.

I guess the anxiety finally fled.

Shiloh makes a small, sexy choking noise before obeying me, and she brings her hands up to massage the root with half-powered twists. I’m coddled in a warm, wet heat that I never want to leave, and adrenaline seethes in my belly like the sizzle of embers at the crosshatch of firewood. My hips undulate at a slow pace as I let the tip of my cock lightly tap the back of her throat, her tonsils brushing over the girth widening her jaw. She doesn’t gag, not once.

“You make me feel amazing, you know that? You’re amazing,” I praise, curling my free hand around her windpipe so I can feel where I’m distending her skin. The impression of my cock stretches her throat out, and a possessive, wanton desire crawls up from the shadowed depths of my body, rising like a phoenix from the ashes of all my discarded, shameful wants.

She mewls in appreciation, changing up her technique so she can deliciously distribute some of the pressure in my dick. Then she slips up and down, bobs her head, and drenches every inch of my cock in saliva, a string of spit dangling from her lower lip. She finally pops off after minutes, her breath rocketing out of her in shallow, short, lung-burning wisps.

“I love the way you taste,” she says, corroborating her statement with a swirl of her tongue over the lubrication that pumps steadily from my soaked slit. Wet smacks of

her mouth and equally viscous slurps ring out in the spacious suite, loud enough to combat the white noise clogging my molasses-thick head.

“Don’t say that,” I growl.

“Mmm, why not?”

“Because you’re not ready for the things I want to do to that perfect throat of yours.”

There’s no caution lacing her tone, even though there should be. “You want me to swallow your cum, big boy? You want me to choke on your cock and gag on it like I can’t take another fucking inch of you?”

“I’m not coming in your mouth, Shiloh. I’m abusing it until you can’t even swallow without remembering the way I throat-fucked you. Understand that when I come, it’ll be inside you, and I’ll plug my fingers in your goddamn cunt to make sure none of it trickles out.”

She sits back on her haunches—jaw frozen open in shock for a solid minute—but then, like the vixen she is, she cracks an arrogant grin. “Oh my God. Mr. Cazzarelli, do you have a breeding kink?”

I rub a hand up and down my cock, staring at her with a lust that won’t be slaked until I fill her up with my seed and make that pussy mine. “Why don’t you come over here and find out?”

Shiloh swipes her tongue over the leaking tip one last time before standing, then she tips her head back to look up at me, all seductive guile and a matching smile that has my dick begging for release. My shaft’s coated in a thin layer of arousal and her spit, and a deep groan rumbles out of me like the act of an old mountain settling. Now that she’s not stabilizing me by the hips anymore, the tremor in my legs is embarrassingly

noticeable.

“Didn’t your parents ever tell you not to play with your food?”

She rises to her tiptoes, prods her tongue against the opening of my lips, and lets me taste myself in a kiss that escalates the warm pressure in my lower abdomen. My thoughts come to a screeching halt, my fingers dig into her sides like I shun even an inch of distance between us, and I moan at the tangy flavor that’s now infiltrating my mouth.

“Maybe you need to spank me for being a bad girl,” she whispers, the musk of my scent thick on her lips.

“Fine by me, but I’m not going to be gentle.”

“I don’t want you to be.”

Fuck, consent is so sexy. Shiloh Nguyen is so sexy.

“I’m guessing a condom is out of the question?” she asks with all the subtlety of an earthquake, eyeing my cock like freeing it from a latex prison will have ruinous consequences.

I bristle. “I can wrap it right now?—”

“No, I want to feel all of you. Raw. ”

Fuck me.

As amazing as that sounds, I never want to participate in a kink without the necessary precautions. Especially one as life changing as mine. “Are you sure? Are you on birth

control? I just want us to be safe.”

She nods. “I’m on the pill, don’t worry. I’ve never missed a day.”

“That’s all I need to hear.”

Without warning, I turn her around so that her perky ass is facing me, and then I start to slide her pretty little dress down her body, making sure to mark each area of exposed skin with an indulgent kiss. She’s naked within a second, and the sight of her untouched ass cheeks has a line of arousal running straight through my cock.

I yank my shirt off, fighting every animalistic urge inside me not to devour her right here, right now, and drag the flat of my tongue up her crack. “On your knees. Crawl to the bed. Let me watch your ass bounce before I bruise it,” I growl low in my throat—the warning trill of a snake before it strikes.

There’s a minute of hesitation—more so because Shiloh’s the last woman you’d order around and less so because the act itself doesn’t turn her on—and she slowly clambers to her knees, her tits swaying and her pussy spread open as she waits for my go-ahead.

Jesus, fuck.

I firmly grip the root of my cock, pumping it a few times in my hand, though it’s anticlimactically subpar compared to my girl’s talented mouth.

“Crawl.”

Shiloh obeys me without a word. There’s not much distance she has to cover, but she starts slow, and I get a clear view of her ass cheeks jiggling with each movement. She’s careful not to put pressure on her kneecaps, but there’s a hitch in her crawling

that I don't miss—and that she emphasizes with a dick-wetting whimper.

Panic nearly welds my throat shut before I realize she didn't accidentally crawl on something hard, but that her vocalization is due to the rivulet of slick stuck to her inner thighs, glinting in the dull light of the room.

“Shit, Sunshine. You like this, huh? You like being my good girl? I mean, it sure looks like it with your cum gushing down your thighs. That needy pussy is practically begging me to fill her up.”

She continues crawling—unhindered by the stickiness all over her legs—the arch of her spine and the sway of her hips hypnotic to watch, and a responding twitch of my cock confirms that she has about point two seconds before I'm throwing her ass onto the bed. My pulse is doing the quickstep, there's sweat all over me, and my dick hurts so much that irrigating a fresh wound with saline would be less painful.

Shiloh, thankfully, gets to the bed, and I waste no time striding over to her and slapping her on the ass with enough force to immediately redden the skin. She lurches forward with a stilted moan, grabbing the edge of the mattress with her butt pushed out to me. The sound of flesh-on-flesh peals throughout the room, so deafeningly loud that it resounds off the paper-thin walls. The impression of my hand is already starting to come through—a red, raised, angry mark of authority materializing against her olive skin.

She turns her head to the side, and her raspy tone is diluted with eroticism. “I want you inside me, Fulton. I want you to tell me exactly what you're going to do to me while I milk your giant cock.”

Since we're in an optimal position right now with her bent over the bed, I line myself up with her wet entrance, butterfly her legs open, then drag the head of my cock through her abundance of liquid desire. She mewls in ecstasy, the backs of her thighs

quivering as she waits for me to sink inside her.

I smack her butt harshly again, this time grabbing its curve and squeezing. “You’re lucky I’m an impatient bastard, otherwise we’d be here for the rest of the night while I spank you over my lap. But I need you, Shi. So badly. I’m not going to survive if I’m not buried between your thighs in the next minute.”

All she does is whine petulantly at my apparent bluff, shifting the weight on her legs while her cunt searches for the traction I’ve been withholding this entire time.

I cease the onslaught on her backside, then move her hair aside so I can whisper in her ear. “I’m sorry. This might hurt, baby.”

I plow into her heat with as much tenderness as I can, sliding myself deeper when I feel that tight ring of muscle stretch around my girth, and it only takes a few pushes until I’m completely seated to the hilt.

“Fuck,” she whispers, her words bending under a helpless weight while she grips the mattress like it’s a matter of life or death.

I know she said she didn’t want me to be gentle, but worry excavates an unfathomably deep hole in my chest. “Are you okay? Do you want me to stop?”

“No, I just...I forgot how incredible you felt inside me.”

Her pussy clenches around me in a silent approval to begin moving, and I do so at a brutal pace, snapping my hips against her ass, feeling the tip of my dick bulge against her cervix. I want to gorge on every moan and scream of my name. I want to pray at the altar between her thighs until my vision’s warped from exhaustion and synesthesia bursts onto the scene in a mosaic of polychromatic colors.

With each thrust, Shiloh's body jolts forward, her tits recoiling and her ass rippling from the force, profanity rolling off her tongue in some kind of fucked-up compliment. She's squeezing the life out of me, meeting me each time I go to sheathe myself, and we operate in a positive feedback loop that has one of my arms shooting out to stabilize myself on her shoulder. The springs in the bed are squeaking like crazy, and the headboard slams against the back wall each time we shake the mattress. If I was in my right mind, it would probably be a cause for concern, but I can confidently say, without a doubt, that Shiloh Nguyen's got me pussy whipped.

"That's it, Sunshine. Look at how well you take me," I coo, and even with my stamina, I know I'm not going to last long if she keeps swallowing me deeper.

I grunt through each laborious strain of my lungs, through the harsh constriction of my balls, through the way my stomach double-knots in anticipation. "I can't wait to breed this greedy pussy until she's leaking my seed for days."

"It makes you crazy, doesn't it? Knowing that I could be yours for eternity? Knowing that you've marked your territory?" she taunts.

My free hand comes around her side and splays over the swell of her belly, giving me some added reinforcement while I ravage the aching cunt that's wrapped around me. "Right here, Shiloh. I'm going to put a baby in you, and I'm going to make sure it sticks. You're going to look so fucking sexy pregnant. Jesus, you don't know what you're doing to me right now."

Our position muzzles one of her chuckles. "I'm going to get huge."

I pound into her with a series of strokes that communicate just how much I love that imagery, and I swirl my pointer finger around her belly button, feeling her abdominal muscles tense. "And it'll be the hottest thing in the entire world watching your belly get swollen with our child. How beautiful your stretch marks are going to look while

you grow. Tell me you want this.”

“Please, Fulton. I want this. I want your cum inside me.”

I snake my hand up to Shiloh’s chest, kneading one of her breasts while she pants from the persistent tug and pull between our bodies. “Don’t even get me started on your tits. You’re gonna pop out of all your bras. I won’t even be able to cup them completely with how big they’re going to get. And every time we fuck, I’m gonna be reminded how full your breasts are of milk,” I tell her, using my finger to rub circles over the hardened peak of her nipple. “Are you going to be a good girl and let me suck on your nipples? Let me drink your milk?”

A broken “yes” whooshes out of her, and each rut of mine begins to taper into a sloppy mess, my deluge waiting to spill into her womb and stuff her full. She’s just as close as I am, and I’m about to make good on my promise to her.

“Louder,” I demand.

“Yes, Fulton. Fuck, yes!” she cries, clenching around my cock so hard that stars begin to freckle my vision. “I want to be full of you. I want everyone to know how you bred my pussy. I want everyone to know that I belong to you.”

“You’re wrong. I belong to you . I always will.”

Shiloh’s my shining light. She led me through a bleak, desolate landscape of loneliness, and I did the first smart thing by letting the purity of her spirit guide me out of the encroaching darkness. Whether we end up having a family or not, she’s stuck with me for the rest of her life.

I bump that sensitive spot inside her, and the way she surrenders herself completely brings me to a fever pitch that I never thought was humanly possible. The mere

notion that she's reshaping around my length drives me up the goddamn wall.

"Come for me, Sunshine. You're almost there. You've been so good for me, so obedient. Let me feel you fall apart, and I'll show you just how thankful I am."

And then, straddling the line of no return, Shiloh blooms instead of shatters, a rush of her cum enveloping my cock and exiting the sliver where I've notched myself inside her. The warm, wet feeling is enough to make me orgasm, and it sends me flying over the edge instead of falling.

I empty myself in her pussy—one abundant stream of cum after another—squirting against her walls with so much force that it depletes my body of all energy. And to my utter horror, my last thrust must've been hard enough to shift the bed because there's a sudden, earth-shuddering crack.

The temporary sanctuary we've sought gives out beneath us, pillows and sheets flying in every direction. It happens too quickly for me to move Shiloh, so we both end up slipping down the mattress that's now wedged between the wooden frame of the bed—one that I can see has splintered down the middle.

I quickly pull out of her, so shocked that I don't know whether to panic or laugh.

Oh my God. We just broke the bed. That has to be grounds for a lifetime ban from the hotel, right?

Shiloh glances between me and the mess we've made, unable to hide her snickering. "Did we seriously just break the bed?"

I'm about to respond to her—even though my thoughts are scattered like windblown leaves—but the feeling of something wet drips down to where my knees are tucked into the mattress. With Shiloh's body farther up on the bed than mine, I look to her as

the unspoken culprit, seeing a steady trickle of my cum dribbling out of her pussy.

Those tiny snickers transform into full-blown pig snorts, and she covers her mouth with her hands, as if that could muffle their volume.

Noise complaint? Check. Broken property? Check. We're two for two. Three strikes and we're out. It's a good thing that the wedding is tomorrow.

All I do is roll my eyes good-naturedly, showing her my eyeteeth. "I guess we're just gonna have to keep trying for a baby."

23

HERE COMES THE brIDE

SHILOH

Today's the big day. Three incredible, eventful weeks have led up to this moment—Hayes and Aeris' wedding.

Weddings always make me emotional—the act of promising your heart to another person for the rest of your life, the tear-evoking vows that immortalize your thoughts into words, the union of friends and family coming together to participate in the melding of two souls. Hayes and Aeris love each other so much that they want to start a family and grow old together. That means something, okay?

It's not just a little slip of paper or some fancy diamond ring. This whole wedding is a physical embodiment of every smile they've shared, every kiss, every look, every handhold. This is the beginning of the rest of their lives. And now that I know where I stand with Fulton, I don't feel that pang of jealousy stewing inside my stomach anymore. I feel... happy. A small feat for some, but what I'd deemed impossible.

A woven tapestry of sun casts through the window, flecks of gold whispering over the sky as the redolence of flora fragrances incoming, honeycomb shafts of light. Aeris picked the perfect dress for her bridesmaids—an elegant, chocolate-brown, full-length ensemble with off-the-shoulder sleeves, a classy leg slit, a cowl neckline, and satin material that's to die for.

I didn't go too heavy on the makeup because I know it's going to get ruined the minute Aeris walks down the aisle. My hair is curled in loose ringlets that drape over my bare shoulders, and I decided to use my brain and opt for platform sandals rather than six-inch heels.

Fulton is in the other room getting ready, and I have no doubt that he's going to blow the rest of the groomsmen away. I've never seen Fulton in a tuxedo. I can barely handle him in his day-to-day clothes, so I'm pretty sure I'm going to be a mess when I see him fitted in a perfectly tailored suit.

This is the best trip I've ever been on. I finally solidified things with the man of my dreams, made lifelong friends, got to immerse myself in Cabo's beautiful wildlife, and even did my fair share of partying.

Wow, that's something I really never thought I would ever say.

I'm not scared to go back home or go back to work because I have a whole support system behind me. And I have an amazing boyfriend who wants to help me in any way he can while still letting me exercise my independence.

In other words, things are perfect . There's nothing that could ruin this day. Perfection doesn't come along often for someone like me, so when it does, it's my sacred duty to sit back, relax, and do absolutely nothing while it runs its course. Pre-Cabo Shiloh would be shitting her pants right now, sprinting around with an itinerary in threatening tow, running on two hours of sleep and five cups of caffeine—but that's not me anymore. I'm Post-Cabo Shiloh now. And Post-Cabo Shiloh is cool, calm, and collected.

I glance down at my phone to check the time; we have about ten more minutes before we need to be at the venue. I always knew Aeris had good taste, but a beach wedding? The pictures are going to look beautiful.

I'm about to grab my clutch when my phone on the entryway table begins to vibrate, and my eyes pivot down to catch my mother's name flashing across the screen. Why would she be calling me right now? I told her I'd be occupied for the day.

Wrangling some loose nerves, I inhale deeply before answering the call, adopting a tone of nonchalance despite the concern churning in my stomach. "Hey, Mom. I'm just about to head to the wedding. Can I call?—"

Panic crackles through the speaker, distorting my mother's voice. "I'm so sorry to bother you, honey, but there's an investor here who needs to speak with you in person to sign off on a loan for the business."

"A loan...but I thought we were denied?"

"We were. So your dad reached out to a friend of your aunt's, and he wants to invest. But he's also asking for a percentage of the business. I know it's a lot to ask of you—and you'd have to get a flight out as soon as possible—but this could save the business. He can't come down another time to work this out."

I...I don't know what to say. Fuck, I don't know what to think. My parents were the ones who wanted me to go on this vacation, and now they want me to drop everything and come back home? How am I supposed to choose between my blood family and my chosen family? This isn't fair. I can't help but feel like I've been completely blindsided.

With my heart shivering like fragile wings against a raging tempest, I begin to pace back and forth, not caring for the loud clack of my platforms against the hardwood floor. "Can't you just talk to him yourself?"

"I wish I could, Shiloh, but since you own part of the shop, we need your signature too. We need this money and fast, or we won't be able to make payroll."

No, no, no. This isn't happening. Ticket prices are going to be ridiculously high for a flight on such short notice. The investor doesn't have all day to wait around for me. I need to leave now. Shit. SHIT!

Moisture stings the backs of my eyes, and there's not enough saliva in my mouth to quench my palate and afford me a swallow. A lightheadedness—brought forth by a gross accumulation of guilt—swipes my balance, forcing me to rely on the edge of the table in front of me.

“Mom, I...”

I can't. I'm sorry?

I'm on my way?

Whatever I choose to do, I'm going to hurt Fulton or my parents in the process.

Please don't make me choose. I can't. I don't want to let anyone down. This wasn't supposed to happen.

Maybe it's all my fault for agreeing to go on this trip. If I hadn't left, this wouldn't even be a dilemma. I would already be there to sign the paperwork, and disappointing my parents wouldn't even be an option.

The Reapers family have been nothing but kind to me—they've shown me that there's more to life than spreadsheets and soufflés. But my family is...my family. My parents have spent their whole lives raising a hard worker, and I'd be spitting in their faces if I abandoned them in their time of need. It's not just my parents' future that I have to think about...it's mine too.

I take another second to really think about my decision, and then, with a burr in my

throat and a cry on the verge of being ripped from my chest, I seal my fate with four simple syllables. “I’m on my way.”

My mother begins to shower me in gratitude, but I hang up abruptly, partly because I can’t stand marinating in what I’ve just done, and partly because I’m halfway to throwing up my breakfast. I need to get my stuff and get out. My things are mostly packed since we leave tomorrow, so that’s one less thing to do.

I move toward the bedroom on autopilot, and I begin gathering my belongings as the tears fester. I want to sob and break down in Fulton’s arms; I want to cling to him for strength; I want to beg him for help, but there’s no time, and I’ve expended the grace that’s been shown to me.

“Hey, Sunshine, does this look okay? Rolled cuffs or?—”

One look at me and Fulton’s words die a swift death.

I don’t look at him—I can’t, or I’ll flood the room with tears. All I do is zip up my backpack and grab my carry-on in complete silence, the periodic clack of my sandals entirely discomfoting.

“Shiloh, what’s going on?” Fulton asks quietly.

This isn’t you, Shiloh. You don’t abandon your friends. Fulton’s done so much for you, and this is how you repay him? He took you on a surprise date, he held you when you cried, he’s been there every time you’ve needed him. And now, when he needs you, you just vanish?

And what about Aeris? Aeris didn’t have to make you a bridesmaid, but she did, because she truly, from the bottom of her heart, loves you. She took you under her wing, invited you to hang out with her friends, included you in the most important

day of her life, and you don't even have the guts to say goodbye. You should be ashamed of yourself. You took advantage of these kind people.

You can never just let work go, can you? It's going to control your life. You're letting it control your life. And the worst part is, you're still choosing to betray your friends even after knowing the consequences. You're going to lose them all. Fulton's never going to forgive you for this. You know that, right?

"I'm sorry, Fulton. I have to go," I say, evading the pain-soaked stare I know is waiting for me, my hand clamped around the suitcase handle despite the burn of doubt swirling through my veins.

Vertigo nips at my brainstem, spinning the ground that feels as flimsy as paper maché underneath my feet, one wrong move foreshadowing a plummet through thousands of deposited layers.

I don't need to look at Fulton's face to pick up on the betrayal tempering his tone. "Shiloh, what's going on?" he repeats.

His voice has yet to fracture from the ten-ton weight of grief, and for that, I envy him. When he reaches out to brush my arm, I rip it away like he just seared my flesh with a fireplace poker.

"My parents are expecting me. I have to go," I repeat, the half-spoken truth abrading my sandpaper throat. Eyes wrenched shut, I pitch forward toward the door, but it's not my lack of eyesight that forbids me from making any progress.

Fulton's hands clench my arms entreatingly, forcing me to bear witness to the destruction I'm leaving behind in my wake—a failed relationship and broken trust, strong in theory but as delicate as spun glass.

When I meet his gaze, a current of hurt drifts through the brown of his eyes, and his bottom lip quivers. “What are you talking about? We have to get to the wedding. It’s going to start soon.”

Agony barrels onto the scene, flattening the reinforced defenses that have been constructed to keep my poor, impressionable heart from suffering another crack. Not by Fulton’s hands, but by my own. Instead of talking this through like a mature, grown adult, I made a decision that will affect us both, with little consideration for Fulton’s feelings.

“You have to go without me.”

There’s a fountain of tears waiting to spring eternal, and once I stop fighting them, I’ll feel their wrath well into my two-hour flight back home.

“Sunshine, please...just...tell me what’s going on. We can figure this out. We can figure anything out,” he begs in an octave that I’ve never heard, his grip deteriorating into one of desperation—much like that of a mad man who’s gambled away his heart and refuses to let it go.

“Not this time,” I sob, shrinking in on myself, my nostrils hissing with a buildup of congestion. My eyes feel like they’re on fire. Even when I blink and clear the smoke, they ache, pleading for the moisture that I withhold.

Fulton sinks to his knees before me, his own eyes rheumy. His expression of confusion is arguably worse than one of vitriol, and it makes something evil tug at my belly. There’s a special place in hell for someone who strings people along like I have.

“Shiloh...” My name is dressed in his dulcet voice, but instead of soothing me, it welts my already-hemorrhaging heart, lashing against a bloody membrane.

“There’s an investor waiting for me in Riverside. I have to be there for legal reasons. I can save my family’s business if I fly home right away.”

“It’s Hayes and Aeris’ wedding day. We...we promised to be there for them. We’re in the wedding.”

“I know, but this is the miracle I’ve been waiting for, Fulton. Don’t you see how important this is?”

A flip in him switches. Instead of skirting the realm of disbelief, anger overthrows the initial shock, now splashing his face in shades of crimson. When he stands up, he crowds my space with his mountainous body.

“And we aren’t?”

“That’s not what I meant,” I argue, shelving the sorrow long enough to wipe the teardrops clinging to my lashes.

“I should’ve known this would happen. I should’ve known that when it came down to me or work, you would always choose work. Even after I offered to help. Even after I held you during all those times you cried to me about wanting to escape—how you felt like a prisoner in your own life. Did any of that mean anything to you?” he snaps.

“Of course it did. I didn’t want to have to choose! You’re acting like I planned for this to happen. My mom sprung this on me five minutes ago, and there’s nothing they can do without me there. I’m a voting partner. I have to be there. I’m just trying to do what’s best for my family!” I scream, finally letting salt and water carve a circuit through my makeup, mascara running through separating foundation.

Fulton turns away to collect his anguish, one arm knocking against his temple like he doesn’t know what to do with it, and then he just... explodes .

“What happened to always being there for me?”

The sound from his throat is guttural, visceral, akin to the howling one might hear from a grieving mother who just lost her baby.

I did promise to always be there for him during our first date, and I’m not a person who goes back on their promises. At least, I thought I wasn’t.

I can’t describe the pain in his eyes, nor could I ever understand it. It’s years of being chosen second, of being overlooked, of being let down by the people who were always supposed to be there for him. Years of regret for being the man his father never was, only to realize that those with bigger hearts sustain the worst injuries.

Years of wishing he was enough to make someone stay .

I thought we had that in common.

“I need to be there for my parents too.”

“Well, that’s the problem with promising things to too many people: there’s always going to be someone who winds up unhappy. You’re never going to put yourself first, are you? ”

A frown maims my cracked lips. “Ful?—”

“This can’t be what you want. Please don’t leave me, Sunshine. Please. ”

Leave me . Not just leave. That is what I’m doing, isn’t it? Indirectly. I’m leaving him, after I promised that I wouldn’t. This isn’t about Hayes and Aeris’ wedding. This is about us. This is about the future of our relationship.

What if there're other investors? Are you willing to risk your relationship for an opportunity that could come around again? Either way, you're the villain. You either leave your parents high and dry, or you leave the love of your life stranded, and something tells me that you're going to disappoint one of them no matter what.

I don't even try to suppress my wails anymore. My whole body undergoes a wide-reaching heat that chars me from the inside out, and my now-pale hands shake uncontrollably like my blood sugar's taken an unforeseen drop.

Fulton doesn't console me like he usually does, which only exacerbates the hopelessness prying apart my rib cage as if it's nothing but a wishbone to be licked clean by insatiable, forked tongues.

I nearly fall to the ground, but the berth of my suitcase keeps me upright. "I'm so sorry, Fulton. I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry," I blubber.

You're a bad person, Shiloh. You don't deserve Fulton. You refuse to balance work and life, and it's not even because of extenuating circumstances. Multiple people have offered to help you, and you refuse. Every. Single. Time. You can't seriously be hurt by this outcome. You did this to yourself. And you'll keep doing it until you die.

Hackles lowered, it's like all the emotion has been drained from Fulton's spirit, the light from his eyes fading in a matter of seconds. Light that I've grown to love, to look for, to hang on to.

"So that's it then? You're just...leaving? After everything we've been through?"

"You know I can't stay," I whisper, the looming threat of distance tearing moth-eaten holes in the memories I've made with him.

He can't even look me in the eyes. All he does is oblige me and move aside. "I don't

know you anymore, Shiloh. The girl I fell in love with is gone, and I don't think there was anything I could've done to keep her here."

"I told you I didn't have a lot to give, and you promised me that was okay. But it's clearly not enough."

And as my heart flickers with the last, dwindling bit of life in the hearth of my ribs, I haul myself out the door, tailed by my suitcase instead of the man I wish was chasing after me.

24

LOSING GAME

FULTON

I'm not familiar with loss. I never have been.

Even with my dad out of the picture, I never grieved him like he's dead—which, don't get me wrong, he very much is to me. Loss was always something that happened to those around me, and I experienced small doses of it through an objective lens. But now, with my heart on a one-way track to failure, I'm afflicted with the realization that I've just lost everything I've ever wanted, all because I was too cowardly to chase after the first girl who saw the real me.

I can't think straight right now. I've barely been afforded any time to think at all. I'm running on complete impulse, legs chugging in a record-breaking sprint down to the venue.

Why didn't I stop her from leaving? Why didn't I try harder? I just let her walk away from everything we've built over the last three weeks. We're supposed to be in this together, and at the first speed bump of trouble, I showed her just how incapable I am of upholding that promise.

How could I ask her to choose between her family and me? I'm no better than that dickwad who broke her heart all those years ago. Hell, if my mom needed me, there's nothing in this world that would keep me from going to her.

Shiloh's work will always be a part of her. If I want to be in her life, I have to accept that she has obligations just like I do. I'm mad at the situation. I'm mad at myself. But the last person I could ever be mad at is Shiloh.

Throughout the awkward elevator ride with four other people, the frantic sprint across the hotel lobby, and the treacle-slow trek through small dunes of sand, my mind's masticated every single one of my worries beyond comprehension. I just keep spiraling. The anxiety won't stop, and it's the first time I've felt true, cold-blooded fear since meeting Shiloh. It devours what's left of me like an ouroboros, governing the infinite cycle of destruction that continues to chip away at my unguarded defenses.

How am I supposed to break the news to Hayes and Aeris? I feel like I'm responsible for all of this. I was the one who brought Shiloh into the friend group. I'm the one who was supposed to keep her here. Everyone's going to be so disappointed.

Fuck! This isn't how the day was supposed to go. Shiloh and I were supposed to have a great time, shed a few tears, eat some overly expensive cake, then skip off into the sunset while all our problems just magically disappeared.

The aloofness of her words hangs like a guillotine in the air, and no matter how far I run, I can't escape the snarling pit of unease in my stomach. I feel sick. I feel like I didn't just lose my soulmate, but I lost a part of me.

I come careering into the wedding party waiting underneath a vine-twined arch, and I feel two hands shake some sense into me before I realize that I was one step away from tackling my teammates in front of a sizable crowd.

"Hey, whoa. Ful, what's going on?" Hayes asks, concern dripping from his brow, the rest of my team mirroring his look of confusion.

Safety measures off, my head housing a thousand and one worries about the uncertain dice roll of my future, I blink myself from my stupor. “She’s gone,” I say, my eyes flicking to Hayes’ with a note of desperation to...put me out of my misery? Help me?

“Who’s gone?” Gage follows up.

My heart can’t take this pain. I was never built to endure something like this, much less come out of it stronger. I want to break down. I want to stop feeling. I want to dispel the growing crescendo of voices in my head that trap me in a white, padded room.

The truth fluctuates from my lips with a croak. “Shiloh. She’s gone.”

Murmurs of disbelief break out through my team, and Bristol steps forward like he would during an intermission. “What happened?”

I can see the bridesmaids out of my peripheral, talking amongst themselves in hushed whispers and unified worry. I pray that the guests haven’t caught on to my hyperventilating, because the last thing this wedding needs is a lunatic ruining the mood and sobbing over his girlfriend of three minutes.

“She just...she left. She got a call from her parents about some investor waiting for her in Riverside. He can give them a business loan, and she couldn’t pass up the opportunity.”

I feel like shit for disclosing her financial situation.

“I didn’t know her business was in trouble,” Kit comments. He’s bouncing baby Eda on his hip, who’s outfitted in an adorable, pastel-pink dress with puffy sleeves.

The girls—with some kind of sixth sense for broken hearts and equally pathetic

men—cross the makeshift stage, holding up the hems of their bridesmaid dresses so their heels don't catch on the ankle-length material .

“You just let her leave?” Cali exclaims, looking like she's seconds away from taking her bouquet and whacking me over the head with it.

“Why didn't you go after her?” Lila inquires at the same time.

Ouch. I mean, I deserve the judgement. What idiot lets the love of his life catch an Uber to the airport after she tells him she's on a one-woman mission to save her family's business?

The last thing I want to do is try and save my own ass, but everything kind of just expels out of me like a projectile word vomit. The temperature's already doing nothing for the sweat seeping through my dress shirt, and my pulse is so unhealthily fast that if the heatstroke doesn't take me out, tachycardia will. And I only know that term because I'm a hypochondriac.

“I didn't know what to do. I was in shock. And then we got into this fight, and I made things personal, and I didn't even consider how hard the decision must've been for her, and I let her leave thinking that I hate her, and?—”

Hayes baits my attention, practically grabbing me by the scruff. “Dude, I'm saying this to you as one of your best friends: you need to ditch my fucking wedding and chase after the mother of your future children.”

“That's a little presumptuous...”

He rolls his eyes. “Jesus Christ, Fulton. You know what I mean.”

“But what about the wedding?”

Even with the support from my friends, my anxiety has taken on a form of its own, mutating into a gigantic hive mind that can't be destroyed without burning the host. Not only am I going to miss my best friend's wedding, but I'm racing against a countdown clock to catch Shiloh before she boards that fucking plane.

"We'll halt the wedding. Just go! Before she leaves!"

"You'd halt the entire wedding so that I can chase after the girl I love?" Subsumed in an immeasurable amount of love, it feels like a jar of butterflies has been uncapped in my belly, and if I wasn't being pulled in all different directions right now, I'd probably allocate enough energy to cry.

I thought that baring my soul was the scariest, most painful thing I could ever do, but the truth is, vulnerability is the gateway to creating something stronger, something lasting, something that transcends time and every obstacle the world could possibly throw at you.

"We're family, dumbass. We'd wait forever for you."

Come back to me, Sunshine. I need you.

About thirteen minutes later, after running two red lights and driving Hayes' rental car like I was in Grand Theft Auto , I pull up to the airport with zero direction and even less confidence. According to the airline's website, the next flight to Riverside takes off in T-minus four minutes, and Shiloh's presumably at Gate B15. I bought an insanely expensive ticket just so I could enter the airport and bypass TSA.

I've left her about thirty texts and twenty-five voicemails, but she hasn't answered me—whether it's due to an external circumstance or a broken heart, I have no idea. The bottom line is getting ahold of her is going to be impossible.

I realize how idiotic this plan is—hell, it isn't even a plan at all. And that's not just the pessimism talking. This is one of those grand gestures I see in romance movies all the time, except this isn't a movie, and the possibility of finding Shiloh and smoothing things over in the next four minutes is peak insanity. I haven't even rehearsed what I'm going to say to her.

Hayes and Aeris stopped their fucking wedding for me. Me!

As much as it pains me to consider this alternative, I might just have to live with the fact that I'll be watching my best friend's wedding through a shoddy recording on some rando's phone. In some deep, dark, unplumbed part of my conscience, I know that I can't ask her to come back with me. I just can't. If that means following her to Riverside to be the support system she's always been for me, then so be it.

She's drifting out to sea. Don't let her get away.

Pushing past people and mumbling short-of-breath apologies like I'm a mother of five reaching for the last pressure cooker on Black Friday, I rush to the elevator, bursting out of those metal doors with a speed I've never even reached during hockey games. Shiloh's name leaps from my tongue and harpoons into the air, roaring above the mindless chatter that weasels through the teeming crowd.

I'm going to run out of time. I'm going to lose her. Fuck! I need to move faster. Come on, Fulton!

Thighs straining, worry runs a similar gauntlet through the self-imposed obstacles in my mind. "Shiloh!" I scream, ignoring the judgmental (and frankly concerned) looks from idling bystanders.

If it wasn't for the tight security and the fact that public nudity is frowned upon, I would've ditched my tux jacket and shirt ten minutes ago with how much I'm

sweating. I haven't stopped for a full breath since I stepped in the airport.

With an unsettled stomach and my exhaustion gauge tipping into the lowest of reds, I maneuver through a particularly congested pack of flight-goers, and I nearly take out a kid in the middle of the walkway. I'm pretty sure his mother cusses me out, but all I can hear is the pounding war drum of blood in my ears.

“Shiloh!”

One ungainly step after another, disappointment falls over me like a dying star hurtling through the cosmos and crashing to earth... and then I see her .

She's in line to board her plane, lugging her carry-on and shrugging the strap of her backpack higher on her shoulder. Even in my questionable state of mind, she still looks as beautiful as the first day I saw her. Even after I completely wrecked her, she still shines like an event horizon in the pitch-darkness of space.

“Shiloh!” I call out to her, forgoing my manners and shoulder-checking people to get to her.

Her head whips around as her dainty features draw up in confusion, and then I'm colliding into her with enough force to knock over the three other flyers behind her. Her backpack clatters to the ground, and the fact that she doesn't embrace me immediately makes guilt eat away at my insides like it has a sweet tooth for viscera.

“Fulton? What are you doing here?” she asks, part of her question muffled by my chest.

I don't stop hugging her, not even when the line begins to filter into the enclosed passageway of the boarding bridge. It's minimal, but I can feel her body soften against mine as if all the indignation has rolled off her like rain off the waterproof

grooves of an awning.

God, I could fucking cry right now. I found her. I found my sunshine.

I pull away to let both of us breathe, my fingers digging into her arms in fear that she'll become another blurry face in the nebulous landscape of my memory. "I'm so sorry, Shiloh. I'm so sorry that I didn't support you as soon as you told me the news. I'm so sorry that I didn't fucking follow you, because I should have. I'd follow you to the ends of the earth if you'd let me. I was a complete dick to dismiss you like I did back at the hotel. I can't believe I even assumed that this decision wasn't hard for you to make."

"It's okay, Ful?—"

"It's not. You've always been there to support me. You've always been there when I needed you. You needed me back there, and I failed you. I'll never forgive myself for the way I let you down."

Shiloh hangs her head, and I need a goddamn cheat sheet to read her emotions. Is she mad? Sad? Maybe I'm too late. Maybe she doesn't want me to come with her. Maybe I've ruined the best thing that's ever happened to me before it even really began.

But then, after a few agonizing seconds, her eyes lift to mine, populated with so many tears that each droplet begins to fall at a steady pace, almost too quickly for me to wipe away.

Almost.

Her throat clicks like a faulty pipe when my thumb brushes over her cheekbone. "You came."

Long-sought laughter undermines the dread that had nearly hollowed me out. “If you think you can get rid of me that easily, you’re wrong.”

“As soon as I got in the Uber, I knew I made the wrong decision,” she sobs, her mouth slanted in a frown. “I didn’t want to leave. I didn’t want to leave you . I always choose work first. And when you needed me to choose you, I didn’t. I hate myself. I hate that I wasn’t there to reassure you. I’m sorry, Fulton. I’m so, so sorry.”

“Shh, Sunshine. You don’t need to apologize. Your family and their legacy are important to you. I shouldn’t have taken your decision so personally. You’ve spent your whole life putting others before yourself, but I’m here to tell you that you don’t have to anymore, because there’s nothing in this world I wouldn’t do to put you first. And that includes taking on some of your responsibilities.”

This time, Shiloh’s the one who initiates the hug, and there’s no rush to catch her flight as the rest of the passengers part into two separate streams around us. She’s got her fists buried in the back of my dress shirt, the occasional wail racking her small frame. I encompass her in my arms, telling myself I’ll never let go. Ever.

“I-I can’t...a-ask you...to do that,” she cries.

I squeeze her tighter, determined to ward off the sadness for as long as I can, and even though she can’t see my face, there’s a smile lifting my cheeks. “You’re not. I want to help you. And there’s nothing you can say that’ll change my mind.”

An unconvincing rebuttal takes flight. “But?—”

“Look, we’re gonna figure this loan thing out as soon as possible. Hell, I’ll invest.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“I want to. I believe in you. I want to be your partner in life, and a big part of your life is your family’s shop. So let me be a part of that too. Think of it as a loan. Or think of it as me investing in our future—our family’s future.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’ve never been more sure of anything in my entire life.”

Shiloh withdraws, giving me the opportunity to clean the smattering of slow-drying moisture on her skin. “I was wrong about you, Fulton. You are my knight in shining armor. You saved me, even when I pushed you away,” she whispers, her tears nothing but remnants of the past now.

“ You’re the one who saved me . And I’ll forever be indebted to you for the rest of my life. For your kindness, your understanding, your patience. You showed me that there’s more to life than just heartbreak.”

“And you showed me that there’s more to life than just work.”

I lean forward to press a kiss to her forehead, and I inhale her scent as if it’s my lifeblood. It still hasn’t dawned on me that my future is packed into five feet of kick-ass and inspiring determination.

“Sounds like we saved each other, Sunshine.”

“I love you,” she says in a small voice, gulping around an incurable lump in her throat. “You’re my family too, just as much as my parents are.”

“I love you more than you’ll ever know, Shiloh Nguyen. My heart was in stasis before I met you. You’re the reason I can breathe easily now. The world doesn’t deserve you, and it never will. You were made to change lives, and I’m honored that I

got to be the first. I pity the people who'll never get the privilege of crossing paths with you, because you've given me so many reasons to keep living. I feel like the world left this dwindling fire inside me, but destiny knew that you'd be the oxygen to keep me alight. And I'll burn for you every day, for the rest of my life."

Rising to her tiptoes—and taking her platforms with her—she upgrades our forehead kiss to one on the lips, sealing her mouth over mine in a starburst of love. It's a completely new species of affection, one that's been bred through every mind-numbing touch and life-altering kiss that we've shared in the past. I never want it to end. I could stay here for hours, subsisting on the taste of her, exploring every addictive inch of her body until I can't even navigate the back of my own hand.

But, to my dismay, Shiloh breaks our kiss. "Wait a second, if you're here, then...what about the wedding?!"

Now that Gate B15 is nearly vacant, I have no trouble embarrassing myself for the hundredth time today as I take a bow, one arm tucked against my torso and the other outstretched to the side. "Shiloh, would you do me the honor of being my plus-one to Hayes and Aeris' wedding?"

She brandishes one of the biggest smiles I've ever seen before clamping her hand over my upturned palm. "I thought you'd never ask."

25

A MEANS FOR CELEbrATION

SHILOH

I've never feared for my life in a car before, but there's a first time for everything. And if you ask Fulton, that curb came out of nowhere.

Somehow, though, we made it back to the venue in record time without being pulled over for speeding. I was tasked with the nearly impossible job of fixing my makeup post-crying session, and Fulton was tasked with drying his armpits out using the air-conditioning.

I spoke to my parents about not being able to make it, but when I told them about Fulton investing in the business just this once so we can make payroll, it hacked their anxiety in half like an axe felling timber. Luckily, they understood that my priorities lay elsewhere, and they were proud of me for listening to my heart for the first time.

I can't believe Fulton bought a ticket and raced through the entire airport to find me, knowing very well that I could've already been forty thousand feet up in the air. The small, hopeless romantic in me was praying that he'd stop me from making the biggest mistake of my life, and I should've known that Fulton Cazzarelli would never abandon me in my time of need .

Feeling his arms around me and seeing him in person—it felt like fate had finally taken a chance on the awkward, work-obsessed girl with the less-than-subpar love

life to match. Nothing can keep me from him, and to think that work was even a contender is laughable.

Fulton Cazzarelli is my Achilles' heel. But as vulnerable as he makes me, he instills in me an equal measure of strength. When I'm with him, I don't live with both feet in the future or in a permanent state of worry. When I'm with him, he lends me the courage to shut out the voices of unreason so I can swim to shore.

Now, here I am, sniffing back ugly tears while I watch my dear friend walk down the aisle in the most beautiful gown in existence. Fulton's in a similar state as I am, discreetly rubbing his watering eyes on the sleeve of his suit—one that has just become the irreplaceable core of all my fantasies.

God, how did I get so lucky?

We steal glances here and there, and every time I lock eyes with him, I squeeze the rough stems of my bouquet a little harder. As the sun rests on its pedestal in the sky—flirting with the architecture of the flower-girdled arbor—something hot and heavy sits at the base of my throat.

Hayes sweeps Aeris' veil back with reverent hands, and the minute he takes in the timeless beauty of his soon-to-be-wife, tears well in his eyes with a vengeance that can't be stamped out.

I always believed in love, but I never believed it would find me. Fulton was a blessing in disguise that appeared when I least expected it, and now I stand across from him, envisioning a future where I'm the one in the floor-length dress, cupping my heart in my hands and offering it to the man who'd move mountains just for a chance to hold it.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we are gathered here today to witness the union of Hayes and

Aeris—two unlikely souls who have been blessed with the gift of finding each other out of eight billion people in the world. Whether you’re just joining them or you’ve been here for the long haul, we welcome you as members of their family,” the officiant states with an incandescent smile.

I glance out at the crowd, my belly warming when I discern an older woman in the front row dabbing her eyes with an embroidered handkerchief. Judging by the uncanny resemblance, she must be Aeris’ mother, her gorgeous head of hair the same silver as a frosted-over lake in the middle of winter. Beside her is presumably Aeris’ father, who’s faring far worse with wet cheeks and a red nose.

As much as I want to focus on the officiant’s speech, I blame Fulton’s dazzling good looks for accosting my attention, and it feels like the giddy high of a morphine rush is zinging through my body. Envious of his composure, my shoulders shake with a silent chuckle, and he mouths I love you from across the aisle, as if the words themselves are his salvation.

The same sentiment gets wedged in my throat before reaching my lips.

Halfway through the wedding—with a quarter of the Reapers already teary-eyed and down for the count—we get to the vows, and neither bride nor groom have to rely on a cue card to communicate their love for one another.

Aeris goes first, unbridled love oozing from her pores as she stares at her future husband with the same bandwidth of admiration that spills in my stomach like sticky oil over coastal waters.

“Hayes Hollings, the moment I met you, I thought you were the biggest dillweed on the planet,” she jokes, rousing laughter from the audience. “If it wasn’t for you taking care of me on the anniversary of my brother’s death, I don’t think I would’ve had the strength to carry on. I was at rock bottom when I met you, and you didn’t even care.

You weren't looking to fix someone—you were looking for a reason to keep living, just like I was. I know I've said it a thousand times before, but I wouldn't be here today without your love, your support, your constant reassurance...even your ill-timed innuendos.

“I came to you a broken person, but my past never dissuaded you. You remind me every day that I made the best decision in trusting you with my heart. Spending forever with you is the first future that doesn't scare me, and I'm beyond grateful that you're the person I'm going to love for the rest of my life.”

Moisture smears the edges of my vision, and a full-throated sob nearly impedes their exchange.

Hayes swallows before beginning, desperately trying to keep himself together. “Aeris Relera, the night you turned me down and made fun of my penis size was the best night of my entire life.”

Good thing there aren't children here—at least, not children who can understand words yet.

“I was a complete loser when I landed on that barstool next to yours, and I'd given up hope on my career, my love life, everything . I was so used to living in the darkness that I didn't realize how badly I missed the light...until I saw you .

“And there you were, looking more beautiful than anything I'd ever seen before, drinking away your sorrows. In that moment, I felt like I'd been put on this earth just to love you, to hold you up on the days when you couldn't. I had no conception of what love was—and even less understanding of how to be a good boyfriend—but you gave me a chance when I was the least deserving of it. I'll keep saying it until I'm on my death bed, but you fixed me . You showed kindness and compassion to a heart wrought with scars, and slowly, over time, you healed the gaping holes inside me. I'd

be nothing without you. I'd be lost without you.

“You’re the reason I get up in the morning. You’re the goddamn reason why my heart’s still beating and I’m still breathing. Getting to spend the rest of my life with you is a future that I won’t take lightly. I never pictured myself growing old—much less with the most incredible person in the world—but I’m going to spend every waking second loving you in hopes that you can feel a fraction of the love you’ve shown me.”

I wouldn’t be surprised if Hayes has Aeris’ name tattooed somewhere on his body. He’s so madly in love with her that even the blind could see it. And that kind of love never dies.

“Do you, Aeris Relera, take Hayes Hollings to be your lawfully wedded husband? In sickness and in health, in good times and in bad, to laugh with and to cry with and to love no matter the tribulation, for as long as the two of you shall live?” the officiant asks.

There’s no hesitation.

“I do,” Aeris says.

“And do you, Hayes Hollings, take Aeris Relera to be your lawfully wedded wife? In sickness and in health, in good times and in bad, to laugh with and to cry with and to love no matter the tribulation, for as long as the two of you shall live?”

Hayes is even quicker to the punch. “I do.”

“Can we please have the couple exchange rings at this time?”

I’m not sure why I was expecting a wild chicken or some elusive, fluffy ring bearer to

trot down the aisle, but it's baby Eda who presents the stunning rings to the couple, all smiles and laughter while she's koala-ed to her father's side.

Hayes places Aeris' ring on her finger, and Aeris reciprocates the gesture.

This is it. The vows were a spoken commitment, and the rings are a physical one. Their souls are tethered to one another forever. Just the thought of that makes me love love. I didn't always, but there's no other feeling like it in the world. And when you finally find your person, you begin to realize the true extent of your purpose. Time is ephemeral, but the way we spend it is eternal.

The waterworks are still flowing out of me with no end in sight. It feels like my whole chest is aflame with emotion, and the only person in the world who can douse the fire is the one waiting for me, so consumed by my eyes that he doesn't dare to look away, not even for a second.

With one last hurrah, the officiant closes out the ceremony. "Then, with the power vested in me, I pronounce you husband and wife. You may now kiss the bride!"

Wasting no time to fulfill his promise, Hayes grabs his wife and dips her, enveloping her in a kiss that's hungry and searing and all-consuming. Then, with perfect timing, there's a loud bang and a sizzle of light as fireworks burst into the sky, taking advantage of the fading sunlight to print their golden flares onto a backdrop of blue. Brilliance splices through the overhead palm fronds as a chiaroscuro dances across my vision. Cheers sound like cannons all around me, but the world stops when I fall into Fulton's eyes all over again, just as I did when he first walked into my coffee shop.

"You're killing me in that dress, Sunshine."

"A little impatient, are we, Mr. Cazzarelli?"

“Oh, impatient doesn’t even begin to describe it.”

Fulton is behind me with his arms wrapped around my torso, his lips brushing over the carotid artery that’s one pulse away from entering overdrive. I squirm from the fluttery sensation of his mouth on my neck, and each expertly placed kiss has me internally begging for a moment alone with him.

“There are children present. ”

A low noise grates up his throat and rings through my belly. “Eda’s a baby. She doesn’t count.”

Before I try—and fail—to list all the reasons why grinding at a wedding reception is not appropriate, there’s a huge commotion over by the giant speakers, and I catch Aeris with her back turned toward a flock of adoring women.

“I’m throwing it!” Aeris screams, tossing her bouquet high up into the air as a handful of guests dive out of its path like it’s a live grenade. It’s a frenzy of dresses, flailing arms, and a litany of creative swears, but the die-hard, superstitious partygoers are in for a sore surprise when the flowers sail right into a little baby’s grabby hands.

Kit’s entire face drains of color when he notices the vegetative warfare dangling from his daughter’s fists. “Oh, hell no. No. You’re not getting married until I’m at least in a retirement home,” he declares.

Fulton and I just laugh, and over the course of the next few hours, we teleport around the venue, engaging in small talk and consuming a delicious spread of food. It’s night by the time I get the itch to dance, and Fulton’s on his second slice of chocolate-coconut pavlova cake.

“Will you dance with me?” I ask him, apparently having ripped him from his sugar-coated reverie.

He fails to school his bewildered expression, half of the cake falling out of his mouth and onto his plate. “What?”

“Dancing—you know, when two people move their bodies to the rhythm of music. Sometimes alone, sometimes together. I’m surprised you haven’t heard of it.”

Fulton gulps thickly, cringing as he forces the rest of his dessert down. “I might be decent on the ice, but put me on land and I can barely walk without tripping over my feet. Do you really expect me to know how to dance?”

“Does this mean you don’t want to? ”

“For you, Shiloh, I’d dance until my feet fell off,” he pledges, jumping to said feet and offering me his hand.

I don’t even realize that I’m being swept into his arms and onto the spacious dance floor until we’re in the middle of the mosh pit, the catchy beats of a pop song blaring into the echo chamber around us. I start to sway to the tempo, finding my footing while butterflies play a restless game of tag in my gut.

Fulton’s slower to feel the music, glancing around awkwardly like someone’s waiting to catch him in the act, so I ease him out of his head by placing his hand on my waist and pulling him closer. It’s not long before we’re dancing with each other, our bodies lightly grazing in a tango of temptation that’s making it harder for me not to drag him down to the beach for some privacy.

When he brings my backside flush against his front, I’m about to commit a morally unsound decision before Lila shimmies over to us and interrupts the moment.

“The last time I saw Aeris throwing it back like that was during a toga party our freshman year of college. And that was after a bottle of Pink Whitney,” she shouts over the music, nodding her head to the newlywed who’s, indeed, pulling some moves on her husband that I’ve never seen before.

“I have no idea how she moves like that and makes it look good,” I yell back.

Lila bumps shoulders with me. “That would be Cali’s doing. Pretty sure the girl has shown her more action than a strip club in Las Vegas.”

Reminder: contact Cali if I ever need private dance lessons to spice things up in the bedroom. Though, knowing Fulton, that won’t be a problem.

I laugh as the blonde grabs my hand and twirls me underneath her arm, and I can’t remember a time when I was this happy. Aside from every interaction I’ve ever had with Fulton. He makes me unsteady, but this is a kind of unsteadiness that I don’t mind.

“Speaking of action, did you guys hear that crazy crash last night? It sounded like a miniature earthquake,” she says.

I immediately stop moving and choke on air, all while Fulton’s gone as white as a ghost—and that’s saying something, considering my man is exceptionally unseasoned.

Cross acting off my list of potential careers. “Noise? I didn’t hear a noise.”

Fulton backs me with a resounding alibi. “Me neither. We must’ve...slept through it.”

Lila’s eyebrows jump to her hairline. “Must’ve been one hell of a night’s sleep.”

Fulton and I both look at each other, donning matching grins that definitely don't vindicate ourselves. "Oh, you have no idea."

As the festivities stretch on into the late evening, most of the guests have trickled out, leaving behind the Reapers family and a very exhausted baby Eda. Everyone sits around one of the impractically large tables, picking at demolished leftovers or talking in hushed whispers to accommodate the sleeping child nestled against her mother's chest.

"We're so glad you could be here," Aeris tells me, giving me one of her famous hugs.

I thought I was done crying for the night, but I guess I was wrong. Hayes and Aeris' love doesn't just extend to each other but to everyone around them. I feel it now, surrounded by the people who have become closest to me, all celebrating the roots of their homegrown bond.

"It wouldn't have been the same without you," Hayes adds.

"I'm so sorry. I should've said goodbye in person. Actually, I shouldn't have considered leaving at all," I apologize, guilt coagulating in the cavity of my chest.

Aeris waves me off. "Don't be. We understand how important family is. And just know that you'll always have a place here with us, even if you and Fulton are no longer together."

Knowing the word-for-word protest that's about to come out of my boyfriend's mouth, I grab his hand and reassure him with a loving squeeze, losing myself in the solace of his eyes.

"Trust me, I'm not going anywhere."

26

I THINK WE SKIPPED A FEW STEPS

SHILOH

T HREE YEARS LATER

I hate Fulton Cazzarelli. I hate him and this gigantic baby that he put inside me.

Okay, that's a lie, but still. I'm feeling extra homicidal today because I have two more months of peeing when I sneeze and vomiting at the sight of ranch dressing. Two months! I couldn't even reach for the remote on the coffee table earlier without pulling something in my hip and groaning like I was twenty-seven going on seventy.

I love this baby, I do, but my God, I've never been this sleep-deprived in my entire life. Everything sets me off—Fulton's obnoxiously loud snoring, the texture of the bedsheets, the weird whirring sound of the ceiling fan. Not to mention that this—albeit lovely—demon spawn jumps on my bladder like it's a trampoline every five minutes.

Getting pregnant before marriage wasn't really at the top of our to-do list, but it just sort of happened. Aeris was having a missed period emergency, and since there's a convenience store on the same block as the shop, I offered to grab her a pregnancy test just to be safe. The box came with two tests—one of which she obviously wouldn't need—so I took it because I knew how important the feeling of solidarity was to her in a time like this. Aeris' came up with that single, pink line, and I was

blindsided by two very stark ones instead.

I mean, it's no secret that Fulton and I weren't Trojan's biggest advocates, but I was on birth control. The statistics for getting pregnant on the pill are low, alright? Less than five percent. I thought we were safe.

But even as mentally unprepared as I felt, I knew that deep down, my heart was ready to make room for another person. Fulton, of course, was ecstatic when he found out. Maybe this was fate, you know? Maybe we were destined to expand our family on some uneventful Saturday in March. Maybe I was destined for a greater purpose beyond espresso machines and overpriced scones.

Speaking of, the business has been booming. I'm now the sole owner of Deja Brew, and my parents are living out their retirement in a spacious, three-story house on endless acres of land. And not to toot my own horn, but aside from Fulton's initial investment, it was all achieved without asking him for another loan or having him buy the business as a selfless act of love like he's some black-tie billionaire in a romance novel.

My family and I earned every penny. The majority of it was through hard work, long hours, and the cost of a healthy sleep schedule, but a small portion of it was due to the fact that the Riverside Reapers started to hold free meet-and-greets here to boost business. The turnout was absolutely insane. Everyone benefited—the diehard fans, the team, Deja Brew. And once people gave our impeccable drinks and desserts a chance, they became customers for life.

Since the announcement of our little plus-one, my parents have come out of retirement to take over the shop while I'm on maternity leave. Which, no, wasn't my first option. However, everyone was pretty adamant that I deserved a break .

Three seasons. Three seasons I've grown this little peanut, and now that autumn's

well on its way, I'm getting ready to nest.

Hunger grips my gut, and the grease-demanding creature that's single-handedly responsible for me gaining thirty extra pounds is kicking its tiny feet in outrage. I wince, practice the breathing techniques that my doctor suggested, and palm the side of my rounded belly.

"Chill out, would you? Your father's coming," I coax, stroking the swell of my stomach.

Then, as if the internal abuse wasn't enough, Fulton shreds the much-needed silence, bursting through the door with a leaning tower of takeout boxes. "I'm here! I'm sorry. I got everything on the menu. And then I got stuck in traffic. Oh my God, and they took forever to make everything. I was waiting in that overpacked sardine can for thirty minutes. Thirty! Can you believe that? Do people not understand the urgency of a pregnant woman craving French fries?!"

"You got everything on the menu?" I ask in shock.

Fulton carefully navigates his way over to me—making sure not to drop his hard-earned food—and then he begins to deposit everything onto the coffee table. "Of course I did; my girls were starving."

"Starving is a bit melodramatic."

"You're eating for two now, Sunshine. I need to make sure you're getting the proper nutrients," he insists, his tone ripening with concern.

My lips twitch into a frown, a malaise of guilt sinking into my bones. "You didn't need to order fifteen pounds of food."

“I wanted you to have options. Plus, I even got you those miniature churros you like with the caramel drizzle. The restaurant swore they didn’t make the drizzle anymore, but I was quite the persuasive negotiator.”

“Ful, that’s so sweet, but…”

“At least eat a bite right now. Please. ”

He rummages around for the aforementioned churro, flourishing it like it’s the magic cinnamon stick that’s going to solve all my problems, and the orgasmic bit of caramel drizzle that drips down the doughy groove nearly turns me feral. Unresistingly, I open my lips so he can feed it to me, and once the sustenance hits my taste buds, I practically melt into the couch with a quiet moan.

“Good girl,” Fulton praises, taking his thumb and wiping up the tiny patch of crumbs by the corner of my mouth.

“You’re ridiculous,” I sigh, though I couldn’t be more grateful for Fulton’s affinity for grand gestures and his rather alarming lack of obedience.

“Ridiculously in love with you.”

Maybe it’s the hormones, but the tears are fast acting this time, and I’m sobbing like a complete mess in a matter of seconds, using my well-loved sweater as a tissue.

He immediately sets the churro down, then squats by my side so he can be eye-level with me. “Whoa, whoa. Hey, Sunshine. It’s okay. You’re okay,” he coos, grabbing my hand and rubbing my knuckles. “What’s wrong? Did I forget something? Did you want me to get you something else? I can run back outside and?—”

“Why”—sniff—“are”—sniff—“you”—sniff—“such”—sniff—“a”—sniff—“good”—sniff—“bo

Fulton's stygian eyes assess me, his tone ambered with rich, sweet love. "That's what you're upset about? That I'm too good of a boyfriend?"

"Exactly! Thank you for understanding," I murmur nasally, doing my absolute best to wipe the tears as they come—which is exceedingly difficult when my heart feels like it's too big for my body.

"You make it easy for me to be good to you, Shi. And you deserve nothing less. I don't think you understand how incredible you are. You're growing our child. You're sitting on this couch and putting our little girl first, even though you'd rather be on your feet working. You're suffering through heightened emotions, hormonal imbalances, cramps, and constant muscle pain. You're sacrificing everything for her, and that's more commendable than you can possibly imagine."

I throw my arm out in exasperation. "See! That's what I'm talking about! You recite all this lovey-dovey crap, and then you swear you aren't even that good! But you are!"

When Fulton chases away a wandering drop of moisture with his thumb, it only dignifies my previous claim and resurrects the guilt wrenching my chest—which is already two cup sizes larger and prone to heartburn.

"Can I show you something?" he inquires out of nowhere, his lips softening into a warm smile.

Since my legs are about as unsteady as a newborn deer's, I have the stamina of an out-of-shape old person, and now that my vision's been compromised by tears, I rely on Fulton to lead me to this mysterious "something."

"You've stayed out of the baby's room like I asked you to, right?"

“Yes, Daddy ,” I quip in mock-annoyance, feeling Fulton’s body go as stiff as an obelisk beside me. He’s got one hand braced protectively against my bump, and the other is resting on the small of my back while he pilots me with sickeningly sweet wariness.

A groan localizes in his throat. “Jesus, Shi. You can’t joke like that when you look like...”

“Like a humongous, inflated beach ball?”

“Like the sexiest woman on the fucking planet.”

Whew. One thing I’ve discovered about Fulton is that his sweet-talking is both a blessing and a curse. The first time we had sex after the pregnancy reveal, he refused to fuck me until he completed in-depth research about the potential of hurting the baby with his penis—which is as preposterous as it is sweet .

I think I know why he exiled me from the baby’s room. He’s been spending a lot of time in there after hockey, and it always sounds like a goddamn construction site. I’m glad at least someone’s been showing the nursery some love. I never even had an idea of what I wanted it to look like. I think I’m still coming to terms with the fact that I’m going to be pushing a who-knows-how-heavy baby out of my vagina in two months.

“Be honest with me, Sunshine. If you hate it, we can change it first thing tomorrow. I promise,” he says as a prelude.

“I could never hate it, Fulton. Because whatever you did was done with love.”

Without further ado, he opens the door to reveal a sea-themed room, complete with a lamp that emits pale-blue light to imitate a feeling of being underwater. On the wall, there’s a mural of hand-painted beach motifs, oscillating between crashing waves, a

sandy shore, palm trees, marine life, and a gorgeous sunset. There's also a quilted blanket draped over the side of the crib—a thoughtful gift from Fulton's mother—and he's filled the space with a rocking chair, a cubby for the baby's toys, a dresser embellished with ocean decals, and a giant monstera in the corner.

My eyes skate over the hyper-realistic waves, and if I wasn't so stunned by the dedication and care that he put into this, I would be resuming my meltdown from earlier. My thoughts are scrambled like eggs. I can't believe Fulton did all of this. It's breathtaking . I didn't even know he was this artistic. This looks like something that was done by a professional.

I don't know what to say. My speechlessness must be glaringly obvious because Fulton ushers me over to the crib, sparing me from a response. “This is my favorite part! Look! Little black ridley turtles!”

He points to the baby mobile hanging overhead, which does, in fact, include miniature-sized sea turtles just like the ones we saw hatch in Cabo. Each turtle is a perfect replica of its real counterpart, and little ribbons of cerulean and ivory dangle between each one to break up the symmetry.

As determined as I've been to tread this uncharted territory, having a slice of Cabo here provides me with a boundless comfort that could never be explained through words. “Fulton, I...this is amazing .”

Forcing myself to suck in tears, I reach out to gently touch one of the turtles, feeling the raised texture of its scales and the detailed carapace of its shell. Something as intricate as this wasn't bought off Amazon. No, every single piece was sculpted and painted individually.

Fulton forfeits a sigh of relief. “Oh, thank God. I was worried you wouldn't like it.”

“Are you kidding?”

“I wanted it to be perfect for our little girl. And I know you gave me a lot of examples of the nursery themes you liked, but when this came to my mind, I just...I couldn't help myself. Now she'll be a part of the most special time in my life.”

With emotion ensconced in the chamber of my heart, my sense of calm is disassembled through another round of bawling. Droplets of water branch from my stinging eyes and into individual rivers, which leave behind their evanescence like grave markers buried beneath a heavy snowfall. If I wasn't so preoccupied with crying, I'd probably be embarrassed that it takes me a full ten seconds to sit on my butt.

“Shit, no, I didn't mean—was it something I said? I'm so sorry, Sunshine. I'm fucking this up,” Fulton whispers under his breath, kneeling beside me so I don't have to suffer on the floor alone.

“N-no. This is...oh, Fulton. This is everything I-I could've ever wanted. The fact that you love this baby so much and she isn't even born yet just makes me...emotional.”

“You know why I love her so much?”

I shake my head, trembling as violently as the withered leaves clinging to the bare trees outside.

“It's because she's a part of you,” he says, shifting his attention to my engorged belly so he can cradle it with his large hands. He then carefully raises the hem of my sweater, pressing a kiss to the area of skin that he's bared.

“She's made up of all my favorite qualities about you—your ambition, your kindness, your selflessness, your understanding. Being by your side throughout this entire

pregnancy is the best thing I'll ever accomplish, and I'll spend forever making sure that our child knows how loved she is."

Always the perpetuator of self-doubt, I ask, "What if she gets my bad qualities too?"

Fulton's lips skim to another part of my stomach, a little to the left of my protruding navel. "Not possible. You don't have any bad qualities."

"Fulton..."

He abandons his affectionate doting to brush his mouth against mine, parting it just slightly so he can silence my overactive worries—this time for good.

"Then I'll love her all the more."

LILA

“I can’t believe this is really happening,” I exclaim, pacing back and forth in front of Kitty’s Catwalk, the modeling studio that currently holds the success of my career in the palm of its manicured hand.

The clop of my heels ricochets against the sidewalk, and my barely there dress fails to stave off the afternoon chill. Though my constant pacing seems to keep me from freezing into a well-dressed popsicle.

Aeris, my best friend, squeals through the staticky receiver of my phone, and I can practically picture her jumping up and down. “Li, I’m so happy for you. You’ve been working so hard for this moment. I don’t know anyone more deserving of this big break than you.”

And suddenly, the spine-crushing weight of this meeting sends my nerves into overdrive and churns my stomach like a rather violent rinse cycle. “Oh, God. What if I blow it? What if they realize there’s another model better suited for this campaign?”

Kitty’s Catwalk is known for turning girl-next-door types into world-famous models on the front covers of *Vogue* and *Sports Illustrated*. They’re known for creating overnight sensations and signing girls who go on to rake in an astounding eight-figure salary each year. Every model they’ve signed has climbed the social ladder and gone on to star in projects beyond their modeling contract—whether it’s a lead role in a blockbuster hit or becoming a self-made millionaire with an empire of clothing and makeup products. These are the kinds of A-list celebrities who get invited to red carpet events, who get swarmed by paparazzi if they simply make a grocery run, and

who cause mass hysteria on every social media site because of their tumultuous dating history.

I've worked my ass off to get here today. For the past five years, I've been modeling for swimsuit ads, and I've made the occasional appearance on little-known catwalks. This could be the start of the rest of my life. And I wouldn't have gotten this opportunity if it wasn't for the massive spike in engagement I've gotten on Instagram.

Since modeling was barely paying the bills, I decided to take a stab at influencing, pretty much expecting next to nothing. It's hard to grow a following, and even harder to maintain social relevance. But after one of my swimsuit photos went viral, people started discovering my account, and the likes skyrocketed before I could comprehend what was happening. Being financially comfortable isn't just a future I'm seeking out for myself; it's a future I've wanted to pave for my mother since the minute she loaned me money to pursue my modeling career.

She's supported me throughout the devastating ups and downs, through the nasty, unsolicited feedback from the public, through the projected insecurities of guys and girls alike on the state of my body—how I look too skinny in one picture but have a belly in the next. She never once told me to stop chasing my dream, and for that, I owe her everything.

“There's no one better suited for this job. You're the perfect fit. And if they can't see that, then they're stupid idiots who wouldn't know talent and beauty if it bit them in the ass,” Aeris says, and if it wasn't for the expensive foundation on my face, I would probably blink a few tears from my eyes.

While my feet haven't stopped trying to dig a trench in the concrete, my heart's no longer trying to slam itself against the bracket of my ribs. I suck in a breath long enough to stilt the frenetic hammering of my pulse, and for the first time in the past five minutes, my heels come to a clacking halt.

“It’s just...everything has to go perfect, Aer-Bear. This is my one chance. If I don’t land this gig, I’m back to cursing the Instagram algorithm for shadowbanning my posts.”

Sure, I’ve gone through endless casting calls before, but the twin glass doors beckoning me to the equivalent of hell have never looked quite as foreboding as they do now. Either I’ll get burned alive in there, or I’ll claw my way out of that death pit with my champagne-pink acrylics.

This is the last step in the audition process. One meeting stands between me and never having to go back to a normal life ever again. Kitty’s Catwalk reached out to me months ago for an initial audition, and they liked me so much that I’m one of the few finalists out of thousands of girls who auditioned. It’s surreal. I never thought I’d get this far.

Aeris’ tone melts into a softer inflection, one that overflows with admiration and coats my insides with liquid honey. “It’ll go perfect. You’ve got this, Li. I believe in you. I’m proud of you. You just have to push the nerves aside for an hour and let fate do the rest for you.”

There’s that cursed F -word. I think I start to see red every time someone mentions it, which is surprisingly a lot.

A lot of people talk about fate, but they dress it up in unbelievable soul ties and Christmas miracles that simply don’t exist. I get the appeal, I do. Fate gives people hope, but is it really worth it when that hope is about as fake as a knockoff Louis Vuitton bag?

I’ve come to learn that fate doesn’t exist. Just like soulmates don’t exist. Nothing happens because the world deems you lucky enough or the stars align or whatever the hell psychics are saying nowadays. If you want something to happen, you have to

make it happen.

“Right. You’re right,” I ramble, holding my phone against my ear with my shoulder so I can iron out the creases in my skintight dress. “I’ve just got to play it cool. I’ve got this. I’ve done this a hundred times before.”

“See! Atta girl. And you have to call me the minute you hear back from them. I’m thinking we do a girls’ night with some champagne to celebrate.”

A swallow glugs down my throat, and nausea surges right up to my tongue before receding back into my belly. “I promise. My call time is now. Oh, God. Okay. I’m going in.”

Either the connection’s starting to break up, or Aeris is sniffing quietly. “I love you.”

“I love you too,” I tell her, ending the call and shoving my phone into my purse. I don’t have time to do some meditative breathing or psych myself up. My six-inch red bottoms carry me past the threshold and into the hallway that precedes the large, empty, whitewashed room that I know is waiting for me.

The studio is silent. I can’t hear anything aside from the staccato rhythm of my heels against the cement floor. I can’t feel anything aside from the increasingly urgent need to puke up the Caesar salad I had for lunch. When I get to boardroom 102, my clammy palm nudges the freezing-cold handle, and I open the reinforced door to find a plain backdrop and a ring of high-powered fluorescent lights all huddled toward the back.

A row of casting directors has been set up at the front of the room, their expressions ranging from friendly looking to stony and unimpressed. Half-empty water bottles scatter the cloth tabletop, a daunting, inch-thick stack of notes inhabits the lead director’s space, and laminated headshots lay strewn about like windblown leaves.

I slowly make my way to the center of the room, hyperaware of trying to walk straight without twisting an ankle and embarrassing myself in front of my possible future employers.

“Ms. Perkins, so lovely of you to meet with us,” the lead director, Rebecca, greets, lowering her diamond-encrusted glasses before poring over my file.

“Thank you for making the time to meet with me,” I reply, half-surprised that I didn’t stumble over my words.

Luxury emanates from Rebecca’s slender frame, and her fine taste is obvious from the black, sculpted blazer hugging her shoulders. Her bob of hair is slicked back to utter perfection, and even though the gauntness of her cheekbones alludes to her being older, her makeup doesn’t make her look a day over thirty. A cherry tint fades over defined lips, thick brushstrokes of mascara line feathery lashes, and full-coverage foundation conceals any possible blemish on her otherwise flawless skin.

“As you know, we’ve been looking at you to be the face of the newest Menoulé fragrance. You’re exactly the kind of model needed to sell this. You’re sophisticatedly elegant with an understated sensuality, you’ve got a fresh look, and you’ve got an astronomical social media following. Honestly, this job is yours to lose,” Rebecca says, flicking her eyes up to me in a nearly knee-buckling look. She sears a hole right into my eyes, and the air-conditioning does nothing to combat the flush of my skin or the film of sweat over it.

It’s mine to lose . So all I have to do is convince them that I’m the right choice without seeming desperate. I have to come off confident, but not arrogant. If I say the wrong thing, I can kiss this opportunity goodbye .

I straighten my spine as a smile gradually crawls across my lips. “I assure you, I’m the right person for this job.”

Rebecca mirrors my smile with one of her own, clasping her long fingers together on the table in front of her. “That’s what we like to hear. However, before we make our final decision, we need one more thing from you.”

Anything! I scream internally, trying to quell the desperation slowly overtaking me. I can taste this victory. It’s just within reach. I’m so close, and there truly isn’t anything I wouldn’t do. Do they want me to fight the other contending models to the death in a Hunger Games -style arena? I’ll do it. Oh, I’ll so do it.

Thankfully, my sensibility catches up to me before I blurt out the insistence that’s, well, insistent about airing out the fame-hungry demon inside me.

“Of course. I’m up for anything,” I assert confidently.

One of the more unamused casting directors scoffs under his breath, but Rebecca remains poised and professional, maintaining a disturbing amount of eye contact with me. “As you know, you’ll be starring with another model for the perfume ad and the subsequent magazine covers, yes?”

“I am aware.”

“We want to do a chemistry shoot with you and the male model. As soon as possible so we can go ahead with shooting,” she explains.

I’ve done plenty of chemistry shoots in the past with other models, and I’ve aced them every time. Playing up romance for the public is all show. It rarely ever turns into something substantial. I’ve tried to date in this industry a few times, and I’m definitely not doing it again. Men make me... ugh . They make me want to strangle them most of the time.

Luckily for me, though, sex appeal is something I’ve never struggled with. This will

be a piece of cake. All I have to do is bat my eyelashes, touch his arm a little bit, inflate his ego so he thinks he's the shit, and then wham, bam, thank you, ma'am, the job is mine.

“Of course. When would you need me to come back down for the chemistry shoot?” I ask, scrambling for my phone to set a calendar reminder.

The casting director who's done nothing but stare at me with blistering disdain curls his lips. “We were hoping you'd be up for doing the shoot right now,” he discloses, turning his aquiline nose up and still eyeing me like I'm a piece of half-melted gum stuck to the bottom of his hideous Ferragamo loafers.

I'm calling him Gangrene Dick in my head. I said that in my head, right? Yeah, I think I did.

Right now? Uh. Right. Okay. Minor setback. I wasn't mentally prepared for a chemistry shoot today, but I can do this. I think. I just need to focus on what's at stake here—which is only the future of my career as a successful model.

I'm not sure how long I wait to answer them, but all five pairs of eyes blink expectantly at me. I have to clear my throat because my saliva's dried up in the time it took for the inner panic to set in.

“Of course. I'd be happy to do a shoot right now.” My voice cracks toward the end, and I try to keep a mask of professionalism plastered to my face.

“Excellent,” Rebecca says, pleased. “For the male model, we've decided to go with a rising athlete in the sports world. With the traction he's getting from games, he's the perfect candidate to bridge the gap between high luxury consumers and sports fans. His rugged edges juxtaposed with your feminine curves will be a winning pairing. And we think you two would look great together.”

An athlete? I've never done a shoot with an athlete before, but hey, there's a first time for everything. As long as he's not a hockey player. That would be, hah , that would be a fucking disaster.

I've been down that slippery road before. And the worst part of it all? I was really starting to fall for him...until he ended things with me out of the blue, insisting that he was "just not ready for a relationship," even though he'd been stringing me along for months.

I set my purse by my feet. "Sounds perfect."

"Great, we're gonna have him come in, and you two can introduce yourselves."

With bated breath and a concerningly fast heartrate, I lock my gaze on the door, starting to feel more than antsy as I drum my fingers against the sides of my legs. I don't know what to do with my arms. Do I fold them? Do I just let them hang? If I don't move, I'm going to explode.

I'm being ridiculous, right? I have nothing to worry about, so I should just chill. Yeah, Lila. Chill. Casting directors can smell fear from a mile away.

A few seconds of silence hang thick in the air before the snick of the door echoes throughout the room, and I can hear my potential future costar laughing about something that someone must've said outside. His body is turned away from me, but from the back, it looks like he has a muscular physique. He's clearly been gifted with some God-given height, and his luscious hair curls down his nape in a way that tells me this man's hair probably won't recede until he's seventy.

But as he turns around—which is some kind of weird slow-motion sequence in my brain—realization hits me with the force of a speeding Mack truck. My first reaction is to freeze. My second reaction turbocharges me with a rush of rejection and

lovelorn heartache. Because the model they've hired—the one they could've picked from hundreds of teams from any sport in the world—just so happens to be the very person I never wanted to see again .

Bristol Brenner. Captain of the Riverside Reapers hockey team. And the ex-fling that ripped my heart in half, shoved it into a shredder, then used those sad pieces of me as a cushion for his shoes as he walked out of my life.

Aka the man who's incited so much anger in me that he's become a main talking point between me and my therapist.

So much for fate.

As soon as Bristol sees me, that annoyingly handsome face of his lights up, and his lips crook into a lopsided grin. "Hi, Lils," he drawls with that stupid, honeyed lilt of his—the one sprinkled with just the right amount of gravel to make the lower half of me want to wham into his fucking dick like he's some kind of sex magnet.

And then, the third reaction hits—I bubble with molten-hot rage.

He's acting like things are good between us. Lils? Seriously? I can't believe this. I feel like I can't breathe. And it's not because I'm stunned into shock; it's because this douche nozzle is hogging all the oxygen in the room with that big head of his.

Rebecca raises an eyebrow. "Oh, do you two know each other?"

We speak at the same time. Granted, my tone has more of an I'll-never-forgive-you-for-as-long-as-I-live-and-I-hope-your-future-wife-cuts-your-dick-off kick to it.

I shut her down immediately. "No."

“Yes,” Bristol says with an ungodly amount of charm.

The casting director next to Rebecca—who’s less ostentatious with her angora cardigan and curly, product-free hair—is oblivious to the tension lingering between the two of us. “This is great news. The chemistry shoot should go smoothly since you two already know each other, and then we can start shooting right away.”

Great news. Greater news would be if I found out I had a UTI and chlamydia at the same fucking time .

Bristol closes the distance between us, slings his arm over my shoulder, then pulls me into the side of his hard body. “Lila’s exactly the girl you want for this campaign.”

The casting directors all turn to one another with murmurs of intrigue, allowing me a split second of time to gun Bristol down with a death stare that could put him six feet under...and then some.

“Ass kisser,” I hiss under my breath, physically revolting at how close our bodies are touching. It makes my skin tingle, and not in the good way.

He maintains a perfect, toothy smile, squeezing the cap of my shoulder with his hand. “Didn’t bother you when it was your ass I was kissing.”

If I wasn’t— ahem —the professional I am, I would slap him right in the face. I can’t believe my luck. For the dream job I’ve been wanting for years, I have to work with the only man who’s ever broken my heart. What kind of karma bullshit is this? I’m a good person! I recycle. I help old people cross the street. I donate to those kids in need advertised in the grocery checkout line. I don’t deserve this.

The best day of my life has quickly turned into the worst. Remember when I said I’d do anything for this job?

I meant anything but this .

CALISTA

I 'm late. This week's goal was to work on punctuality, but the universe is conspiring against me.

My dance class went over time, so I had to cram a twenty-minute drive into a measly eight minutes. I'm surprised my car even covered that much distance within such a small time span since it's on its last wheels.

I promised my little brother, Teague, that I'd be on time today. Another broken promise to a little kid who deserves so much more. With my father out of the picture and my mother bedridden, Teague is my responsibility. An eight-year-old, adorable, bad-mouthed ball of responsibility. But I wouldn't trade that responsibility for anything in the world.

When I pull into the massive parking lot, somehow every spot in the vicinity is occupied. Sure, Riverside is a big hockey city, and if you arrive at the arena after three o'clock, you're guaranteed to endure some traffic, but this is preposterous. And my brother is inside that teeming sardine can, where a simple "I'm here" text won't be enough to compel him out of the door.

If I'm going to get my brother home, cook him dinner, and get back to the studio for my final dance class of the night, I'll need to run in and get him. Right now, that's looking like the equivalent of voluntarily running into crossfire. But I have no choice.

Whipping my head around, I try to search for the nearest "parking space" that won't get me a ticket or my car towed. I can't park against the sidewalk because there is no

fucking sidewalk, and I can't park in front of the rink with my hazards on because I'd be blocking the mouth of the parking lot entrance. I'm panicking. It's a mild panic, but panic, nonetheless.

And then, breaking through my figurative haze—and a literal foggy one—is a single spot calling to me from the hockey team's reserved parking spaces. Home to the Riverside Reapers. One of the best professional hockey teams in the league. And Riverside's pride and joy. We got close to the playoffs last season, and now everyone and their mother thinks we're going to win this season.

Look, I'm not blind, I know what the signage says—RESERVED PARKING. But I'll be out in less than five minutes. I highly doubt a team member is going to arrive in the next five minutes, find that I'm in his designated parking spot, and get me towed. Plus, this is the closest spot to the arena.

Kiss my ass, time management class I should probably be attending! I'm in control, and I've got this.

I pull haphazardly between the white-painted lines, kill the engine, and jump out of the car quicker than I think I've ever moved in my twenty-two years of life.

My threadbare shoes squelch in puddles of murky rainwater, and crushed autumn leaves disintegrate into muted hues of fiery crimson against the soaked pavement. The sky is the color of dragon's breath, with nebulous clouds shrouding the parking lot in a disquieting darkness—one that makes the rink look a lot more foreboding than usual. Cold licks up my spine, raising goose bumps on the exposed flesh of my arms as I try to circulate some warmth with my palms .

I push through the double, weatherproofed doors and into the arena. My eyes start to tear up, and my nose stings from the acreage of subzero ice in front of me. To say that the rink is packed would be an understatement. Hundreds of skates and little legs. A

cacophony of shouts that ricochet off the tall, hollowed walls. Pucks zinging around like miniature missiles.

I bear the chill of the atmosphere, wishing I'd had a chance to slip on a jacket before entering the goddamn arctic. Dance attire wasn't made for a hockey rink. All I have on is a black bralette and booty shorts, and despite them covering all the necessary areas, I still feel like I'm going to contract hypothermia.

"Teague!" I shout from behind the plexiglass, waving my arms overhead like a lunatic.

My brother glances in my direction and says goodbye to his friends before skating over to me. The messily illustrated fire symbol on his helmet sticks out in a snowscape of white, and he steps off the ice with his hockey stick gripped tightly in his gloved hand.

"You're late," he says, jutting his lower lip out.

"I know. I'm sorry, Squirt." I sit him down on a nearby bench and start to untie the laces of his skates, all while he glowers at me with sharp eyes. "I ran over time. It won't happen again."

Teague sheds his gloves, then removes his helmet, unveiling a mess of sweat-slicked spikes on the top of his head. "You always say that. And it always happens."

My fingers falter in the polyester strings. I feel terrible. I do always say that, and nothing ever changes. I'm trying to juggle so much at one time. Teague is my main priority, but so is keeping a roof over his head and food on the table.

With some expert detangling and tugging, I manage to yank his skates off, mentally chastising myself for being the worst sister on the planet. With a feathery exhale, I

rise to a stance, gripping a fistful of laces. “I know you’re mad, T, but we really have to go,” I tell him, unable to ignore the disappointment seeping into his expression.

He doesn’t argue with me. He doesn’t say much of anything, actually—which is unlike him. My brother’s usually a bundle of untold stories waiting for an ear to listen. But I don’t push him to talk to me, and the silence that follows is deafening.

I burst out of the rink, fumbling for my keys as he slogs behind me, when I’m accosted by the blinding sight of a bright red Jaguar sitting horizontally behind my car, boxing my little Honda in.

No, no, no.

A scream thunders from my throat, loud enough to garner shocked looks from families milling about the parking lot. “Fuck!”

Okay, think, Cali. Just...just go inside and ask the owner to move his car. And also pretend like you didn’t drop the F-bomb in front of your eight-year-old brother.

I set Teague’s skates down before grabbing him by the shoulders and forcing him to look at me. “I’m going to be right back, okay? Please, please stay here. This will only take a minute.”

“Why can’t I come with you?” he whines.

“It’ll be less stressful for everyone if you stay here. And I mean it, Teague.”

My brother opens his mouth, but no protest comes out.

My eyes flit over the obnoxious license plate as I scoff at the sheer idiocy of the personalized words emblazoned on the aluminum. Of course this person would be the

biggest asshole out of Riverside's three hundred thousand population.

I turn on my heel, march back into that godforsaken rink, and politely ask the attendant at the front desk if he could be so kind as to call out the license plate to the red Jaguar parked illegally out front .

With a sigh, his monotonous voice bellows over the loudspeaker, "Will the owner of the red Jaguar please come to the front? I repeat, will the owner of the red Jaguar please come to the front? Uh, license plate: HUGE STICK."

Impatience cracks through me and sizzles along my ribs. I'm going to show this dipshit that he messed with the wrong woman. He couldn't wait a few seconds before boxing me in? Seriously? The world doesn't revolve around him.

A few minutes pass before there's any movement in the sea of hockey helmets, and then, sauntering over is a man nearly half a foot taller than me. He's dressed from head to toe in hockey gear, exuding a nonchalant air about him that triggers that fight response boiling inside me.

He has the decency to take off his helmet, and what I'm greeted with is a handsome face, much to my misfortune. Shaggy, brown hair parts down the middle, a few strands falling into green eyes. His long, dark lashes tickle his brow bone, his seemingly flawless face complete with a chiseled jawline, angular cheekbones, a set of pouty lips, and a nose too straight to belong to a hockey player. He has a face made to be seen, a face that could cure cancer, a face that could do some serious damage to me if I don't treat this situation with the utmost caution.

"This better be important. I'm in the middle of practice," he snaps, pinning his arms over his chest. A muscular-looking chest. Or maybe that's just his hockey padding.

Who does this guy think he is? He's acting like he's a goddamn gift from the gods

and I should be blessed for simply existing in his presence.

The attendant immediately livens. “Oh, I didn’t realize it was your car, Gage. You want me to deal with this lady?”

Excuse me?

Gage shakes his head, glaring down at me from his stupid, towering height. “I’ve got it, Ernie. ”

From the parking lot to the rink, I’ve had plenty of time to gather an arsenal of insults for the douche in front of me, and I’m ready to send those suckers flying like bullets from a machine gun. “You boxed me in, you fucking prick!” I shout, torrents of anger pouring through my veins as opposed to the usual trickle.

“Whoa, there. You’re the one who parked in my parking space.”

“I was only going to be a minute!”

“You can read, can’t you? Those spots are reserved for team players. And last I checked, you’re not on the team, sweetheart.” Gage gives me a condescending head tilt that makes me want to pop said head off his spinal cord.

I’m fully aware of the audience we’ve amassed from the volume of our altercation, but I couldn’t care less if someone gets my meltdown on camera. This dick needs to be knocked down a peg.

“I’m just asking you to move your car. I have somewhere to be, and none of this would be happening if you just waited for me to move.”

His tone drips with sickly sweet sarcasm. “Oh, I’d love to stop what I’m doing right

now for your benefit and move my car. In fact, I'll ask Coach to stop practice until we get this whole thing resolved. Do you want monetary compensation for your time too?"

A growl rumbles in my throat. "You think the world revolves around you just because you're a hotshot hockey player?" I hiss.

"You think the world revolves around you just because you're a stuck-up brat?"

That's it. I'm going to kill him and make everyone in the rink a witness to murder.

"Move. Your. Car. Before I shove it up your ass and gun it."

Gage steps closer to me, magnetizing grin and all—perfect, blindingly toothy, with just the right amount of confidence to churn a storm of butterflies in my stomach.

He's so close to me that I can feel his breath plume over my face, can smell the intoxicating hint of pine in his cologne, can practically anticipate his touch on my skin if he moved slightly north.

"She has a bark," he drawls, impressed.

Our eyes clash for a moment—a world of arctic blues and forest greens meeting each other for the first time—but I smother the attraction cresting inside me. Any nonviolent feelings will be immediately terminated upon discovery.

Don't get too close, Cali. Long-term Gage exposure could result in radioactive poisoning.

My glare has enough venom in it to paralyze a single person, and it's reserved for Gage only.

“You couldn’t handle my bite.”

Something in him changes. It’s fleeting. And thanks to being up close and personal with him, I can see how blown his pupils are, how the brown from his inner irises have somehow widened in diameter underneath the harsh, recessed lighting, drowning out the previous green.

“Wanna put that theory to the test? I love a girl who bites.”

Something about the way he just said that makes the lower half of me tingle. That shouldn’t be a normal bodily response, especially not with him . I tamp down whatever the hell is budding between my thighs and try to ignore that warm, oozing, honeyed lilt in his tone.

Ugh! He’s so infuriating. Gage is the rudest, most arrogant, and most conceited person on this fucking planet. I’d rather have a Pap smear performed by Wolverine than be within a ten-foot radius of him.

My heart punches against my ribs, indignation streamlining to every part of my quivering body. “Fuck you!” I spit .

“That’s all you got? Come on, I know a spitfire like you really wants to give it to me. Go ahead. Do your worst.”

“If you don’t move your car, I’ll...”

You’ll what, Cali?! What can you do that isn’t illegal?

Everyone’s staring at me. The whole rink has quieted. No scuffle of blades or clink of pucks on ice. There aren’t even any whispered comments about how utterly embarrassing this whole interaction is for me.

The words die on my tongue, and my confidence goes with them.

Gage pastes on a too-wide smile that has pearly enamel twinkling underneath the fluorescents. “That’s a shame. Looks like you’ll be waiting to get your car back until after my practice is done. It should only be a few hours,” he drawls. “It’s not like you have anywhere else to be, right?”

Shock drives my precursory fury all the way to the state line. “I?—”

But he’s gone. He’s turned around, gotten back on the ice, and resumed practice like he didn’t just single-handedly ruin my entire day. And everyone stood by to watch while it happened.

So, pushed to the brink of madness, I do what any reasonable person would do in this situation. I force myself to retain some semblance of calm, and I walk out the door with my head held high.

Teague perks up as soon as he sees me, anxiously shifting his weight from one foot to the other. “Is he going to move his car?”

I navigate my way around the crimson complication, opening my Honda’s passenger door for my brother. “Nope.”

“Then why are we getting in the car?”

“Because we’re going to get out of here another way.”

Gage doesn’t think I have the balls to do anything, does he? I’m going to prove him wrong. I’m going to prove him so wrong that he’ll regret ever speaking to me like that. In fact, if I ever see his smug face again, I’ll make sure to rearrange it with my fist.

As I get myself situated—with that wicked plan of mine forming in my head—I stick my key in the ignition, make sure Teague’s seatbelt is tightly secured, and then brace my hand over his chest before propelling backwards into Gage’s expensive car.

FAYE

I look up at the ominous storm clouds as they inch across the desolate sky, draping the night in everlasting darkness. The promise of rain is poised on the horizon, waiting to fall in tandem with my tears. The streetlamp beside me flickers precariously, a large beacon that shines down on me like I'm a moth caught in a filth-covered flame. Cold air spills over my naked arms and legs, raising goose bumps on flesh, and the cement patch I've claimed as home for the time being has made my core temperature drop.

My dress—once a thing of happy memories—has been forever tainted. I can't feel my body. It's like it doesn't belong to me.

See, that already broken part of me has lost another crucial piece tonight, and I don't know if I'll ever get it back.

I look at my phone and check the time. Ten minutes have passed since I called the only person I could trust—the one I knew wouldn't ask questions and who just so happened to be in Pennsylvania visiting a friend.

I called Kit Langley.

Star left defenseman for the NHL's Riverside Reapers. One of my brother's best friends. The guy I'm secretly in love with—the guy who looks at me like I'm his kid sister.

I'm sitting on the cold, hard gas station curb, wondering why I can't feel the rain

penetrate my clothes when a Jeep Wrangler pulls haphazardly into one of the parking spaces, parking diagonally across two white-painted lines. The door swings open with enough force to jar me from my thoughts, and Kit's behemoth frame lumbers out of the vehicle. The minute I meet his dark eyes, I feel mine surge with water, and despite my efforts to keep my emotions at bay, all of my tears flood out of me like a fast-rising tsunami.

Kit races over to me and yanks me up by the arms, pulling me into his large chest. His grip suffocates me, but I don't try to pull away. He's mumbling something into my hair, his hand cradling the back of my head, the rapid thundering of his heart a steady medium in my ears.

When his embrace loosens and he backpedals to look at me, his eyes are alight with worry, a muscle in his jaw flickering. "What happened?" he asks.

I'm not alert enough to form a coherent sentence, but my voice box is vibrating before I have the chance to clamp my lips shut.

"I..." My chest feels tight, like there's a thorn twisting in my sternum. Pair that with the tears wanting to make a quick getaway, and I'm pretty much as useful as a push sign on a pull door.

"Faye, breathe. You're okay. I've got you," Kit says, the softness in his tone wrapping around me like a gentle caress. His hands are still on my arms, and he's craning his neck down to look at me.

A few sobs slip unbidden from my mouth as I inhale shakily, forcing my bloodshot gaze to focus. My vision is peppered with all sorts of ink blots, and my tongue feels like it's swollen to twice its size .

Anger tears across his expression. "Faye, who hurt you?"

“He’s...I...”

Come on, Faye. You’re safe. You’re with Kit. You’re not in danger anymore.

But was I ever in danger, or was it my past playing tricks on me?

The minute I stop trembling from nerves, I break down into a gigantic, blubbing mess, clinging to the back of Kit’s shirt. He hugs me with the same bone-crushing desperation, absorbing the weight of my pain, wringing every tear from me until I’m nothing but a hollow shell.

He uses his thumb to brush away the moisture glistening on my cheek.

My stomach rolls with nausea. “My date. H-he—I said no...” I choke, the sweat on my brow now covering every bare inch of skin.

Kit’s eyes heat with understanding, and every muscle in his upper body ripples with iron-hot rage. The cords in his neck are taut, the veins in his forearms like individual rivers of power snaking up to bulging biceps.

“Did he?—”

“No,” I whisper. “It wasn’t his fault. I sent mixed signals.”

I’d gone back to his place, we’d started kissing, and then he’d rolled on top of me, and that long ago night came rushing back with such ferocity that I froze. I couldn’t speak, I couldn’t move, and he took that as a sign to start undoing my dress. It felt like he was peeling off the tattered walls that protected my soul.

“There’s no such thing as mixed signals. Either you’re into it or you’re not. And it’s pretty fucking clear when a chick isn’t.”

“But I was,” I whisper. “Until I wasn’t.”

Kit reaches out to, I don’t know, maybe cup my cheek, and I flinch. He stops and lets out a litany of swears so harsh they feel like sandpaper grating against my skin.

“Where. Is. He. ”

It’s not a question.

I trap the plumpness of my bottom lip between my teeth. “Kit, stop.”

A guttural rumble stirs deep within his chest. “I’m going to kill that son of a bitch.”

“Kit...” I reach out to lightly touch his arm, and he seems to melt a little, but not much.

With a bracing breath, he rakes his hand through the front of his hair, looking about a second away from hitting whatever poor, helpless object is in the vicinity.

“I’m taking you to file a report.”

“No,” I say, panicked. The last thing I want to do is explain this whole horrid, confusing story to another person.

“I’m not doing this with you right now, do you understand?” he snaps, gritting his teeth. “You’re going to get in the car and go to the police station.”

I flinch at the bite in his tone, wrapping my arms around my midsection. “Nothing happened.”

“Well, clearly something happened.”

Unable to maintain eye contact, I drop my watery gaze to stare at the middle of his chest. “Not tonight.”

“Then when?”

“A long time ago.”

“Does Hayes know?”

At the idea of telling my brother the truth, panic whirls through me like a Category 5 hurricane, determined to bring me to my knees. “No. And he can’t know.”

In hindsight, I probably shouldn’t have said that, because the lid that Kit’s already struggling to keep on his anger has completely blown off into the stratosphere.

“You’re calling him.” He firmly grabs my wrist, urging me toward his car.

I plant my heels into the ground and pull back, managing to break free from his steel vise. Granted, it takes all my strength and a good amount of my breath.

“If I go with you, we can’t tell Hayes.”

“Faye...”

I’m thrown by his gentle protectiveness, the uncharacteristic softness I didn’t think Kit was capable of, much less willing to show me. Kit’s callous. He isn’t compassionate or particularly thoughtful, but it’s not because he actively chooses to be an asshole. He just isn’t perceptive when it comes to others’ emotions. But I’ve never seen him so distraught before.

“Please, Kit. I can’t bring Hayes into this. You know how reckless he can be. If he

finds out, he'll lose it.”

Humorless laughter dances out of him. “Oh, and you think I’m super calm, cool, and collected right now?”

Even with my skittering pulse, there’s enough fire inside of me to light a match. It scalds my insides, wanting to burn every weak part of me, wanting to turn that meek little girl still crying out for her mother into flakes of ash. “I don’t need you to play hero! I just need you to be here for me. I called you because...”

His eyebrows jerk together expectantly. “Because?”

“Because I trust you,” I finish.

Ever since Hayes joined the Riverside Reapers—a National Hockey League team born and bred in Riverside, California—I’ve had a crush on Kit. He and my brother have been friends for four years, and even though they don’t always see eye to eye, they’re always there for each other.

As much as I trust Kit , I don’t think I could trust him with my heart .

Kit doesn’t believe in strings, whether they’re attached or not.

I know liking an unreformable womanizer is a disaster waiting to happen. Kit doesn’t date. He never has. He’s almost always pictured with a new girl, and each relationship lasts as long as a hockey game. If I wanted to get my heart broken, I’d let Kit manhandle it all he wants. As much as I wish things could work out between us, I’m smart enough to know that Kit can’t give me what I need—he can’t give me stability or reassurance or unconditional love.

Like any well-adjusted young woman with a burning hatred for romance, my endless

search for love is in part thanks to my absent father. When my mother died of cancer, my father abandoned his parental duties, leaving me and my brother to fend for ourselves. The only thing he was good for was the money he sent us.

I knew Kit was going to be in town this week. And a part of me wanted to reach out, to grab lunch with him, to just see him. But I knew better. So I was going to let him coast through Pennsylvania without so much as a text.

Not only would keeping my distance benefit me, but it would probably save Hayes from going into cardiac arrest. Hayes is a...protective...older brother. He's never approved of my previous boyfriends. He never thought they were good enough for me. If he found out I liked one of his best friends, his whole world would implode. He'd probably ship me off to a nunnery overseas. After he castrates Kit.

Kit's lips wrench into a frown, and I wish we were meeting under different circumstances. I wish he was disarming me with that million-dollar grin of his, the one that makes paper-thin wings flutter in the pit of my belly.

"I'm sorry for losing my cool." He sighs, letting the knots of his muscles slacken, his voice returning to a lukewarm drawl. "You're scared. Flying off the handle isn't going to help either of us."

Upon seeing me shiver, he glides his hands gingerly over my arms, generating a spark of heat within me.

"Come on. Let's at least sit in the car while we talk things over. "

I nod through the debilitating lump in my throat, letting him guide me to the passenger door.

The minute I get into the safety of his Jeep, the roar of the outside world comes to an

anticlimactic stop. All I can hear is the mingling of our breaths and the jittery whirring of the heater coming to life.

“What happened?” he asks, his hands white-knuckling the steering wheel.

I shift uncomfortably against the leather seat, a yawning hole of dread opening inside of me, threatening to drag me under and fill my lungs until they forget what crisp air feels like.

“I was on a date with a guy. Everything was going well. We went out to eat, then he invited me back to his place. It-it all happened so fast. We were in the living room, laughing about something stupid, indulging in glass after glass of wine...and then he was on top of me. He was on top of me, and I couldn't scream, no matter how hard I tried. I tried saying no. I was frozen.” A string of words, almost all obstructed by the thickening saliva and errant tears in my mouth.

My head sloshes with the insuppressible memories, and my gut does a nosedive all the way to my toes.

“When I finally got the courage to move, I pushed him off me. He had no idea what was happening. I just freaked out. I was so embarrassed. I grabbed my things and ran like hell,” I supply, my hands shaking despite being planted safely in my lap.

This night has brought up a past trauma I've tried so hard to bury. Trauma that's haunted me for five years now. It's teleported me back to the night of my senior prom—when I was raped by a man who claimed to be my friend. Ever since then, I've been wary to go on dates, to trust men. And yet, I went on this date voluntarily, thinking I could gain control over my trauma .

I was wrong.

Kit doesn't say anything for at least two minutes.

And then he loses it.

He curses so loudly that it echoes in my ears, and he punches the steering wheel, rocking the entire car in the process. I'm surprised he doesn't break anything. His ivory-colored fists are strained, and his arms twitch with an ungodly amount of tension. I think he's going to lash out again, but all he does is inhale deeply.

Kit rests his hands on the steering wheel, the surface of his knuckles throbbing with a crimson hue. "What do you want to do?"

The last thing I want to do is go home. Or be by myself. But I don't really have another option.

I want to stay with you.

"Take me home," I finally decide, the weight of my solitude bearing down on my shoulders.

Kit's leg bounces against the underside of the steering wheel. He's so large that he takes up the whole space, even with his seat pushed all the way back. His head is flush with the ceiling, his elbow eating up the entirety of the console between us.

He ponders me for a moment, swishing my weak words around in his mouth, then grimacing like he hates the taste of them.

He sticks the key in the ignition. "I'm not taking you home."

I buckle my seat belt even as uncertainty courses through my veins. "Then where are you taking me?"

“To my hotel room,” he says, looking over his shoulder as he backs out of his makeshift parking space.

With his arm right by my head, I get an intoxicating whiff of the bergamot cologne he always wears, which only lightly masks the heady musk of him. I covertly breathe him in, losing myself in his scent, the proximity, the safety of it all .

When I open my eyes, we’re barreling down an empty ribbon of road, vegetation flashing past my peripheral.

“I don’t know if that’s a good idea,” I tell him, worrying at the hem of my dress.

Kit slams down hard on the brakes, nearly making me face-plant into the glove compartment. My seat belt strains against my chest, squishing my boobs, and I recoil from the momentum.

He fully twists toward me, glaring. “What are you talking about?”

“Us. Being alone. In a hotel room together.”

The truth is the only place I’d feel comfortable right now is in that goddamn hotel room.

“Are you afraid of me?” Kit asks, pained.

“No. I know you’d never do anything to hurt me. It’s just?—”

I’ve never been in a room alone with you.

Seeing that this is apparently argument-worthy, Kit pulls to the side of the road, puts the car in park, and flips his hazards on. “You’re out of school, right?”

“My finals ended a month ago,” I admit, turtling in on myself.

“I just want to get you somewhere safe, okay? If you’re worried about missing work, tell them something came up—which it did—and that you need time off to be with family.”

I’m not worried about my job as a teaching assistant. I’m worried about having to confront my very real, very terrifying feelings for Kit. The good thing about Kit living all the way on the other side of the country is that I don’t feel inclined to give in to my temptations. But right here, right now, I want to give in so badly, even after the night I’ve had. All I can think about is lying in bed with him and having him hold me until I fall asleep.

The look on Kit’s distractingly chiseled face would be butterfly inducing if it weren’t for the hard lines marring his features. “I promised your brother I’d look after you.”

I cross my arms over my chest, doing my best to look sure of myself. “I can look after myself.”

“Clearly, you can’t.”

I wince like he’d just physically burned me. Honestly, that would probably be less painful than whatever heart-squeezing sensation is erupting behind the cage of my ribs.

Kit registers what he said a second too late, regret immediately shadowing his eyes. “Fuck, Faye. I didn’t mean that.”

Tears sear the backs of my eyes, and I swallow down the vomit threatening to spray the floor of Kit’s car. “No, you did. You’re right. I need to handle this. I’m not your problem.” I unbuckle my seat belt and reach for the door handle, but the little lock

above it clicks down.

Kit knocks his head back against the headrest. “I didn’t...there’s...this is all a lot to process,” he confesses. “I can’t imagine how hard this is for you.”

All I do is nod, because now my mind is channel-surfing back to three hours ago when I thought I’d end the night with a kiss goodbye. The buzz from both the alcohol and adrenaline are starting to wear off, meaning I’ll have to consciously try to weather this torrential storm.

I don’t know what to say. I’m paralyzed again.

I suddenly feel Kit’s hand squeeze my palm, and it jolts me back to the present. The warmth of the gesture brings a comfort I haven’t known until now, not even when I’ve searched for it in other people.

“Look, Faye, when you called me...I’ve never been so afraid in my entire life. I was worried something bad had happened to you, and I was right. I need to know I’m keeping you safe, otherwise I’m going to lose my mind.” There’s a brokenness to his words that impales that failing organ in my chest.

Lose his mind? Does he really feel that way ?

His fingers tighten around mine, almost painful enough for me to acknowledge it.

“If I go with you, you have to promise not to tell Hayes,” I murmur ashamedly, and I know I’m in no position to negotiate, but I refuse to burden my brother with all this drama.

“You’re seriously asking me to keep this big of a secret from your brother, who’s one of my best friends, and who I also happen to live with?” His barb, sharp and stinging,

clings to my side and burrows into flesh and muscle.

He's right: keeping a secret this catastrophic from my hotheaded brother isn't going to end well. But the alternative is possibly seeing my brother in handcuffs as he's being taken away for aggravated battery.

I'll get on my knees and beg this man if I have to. "Please, Kit. He never has to find out about this. He'll kill that guy on some crazy vengeance trip."

"You're lucky I'm not going to kill that guy," Kit growls.

Oh, I am. Hayes might have enough rage to fuel a small village, but Kit beats his already impressive strength with a six-foot-five body of pure muscle.

"I appreciate it, I do. And now I'm just asking you to keep a teensy, tiny secret."

Kit sucks his teeth. "I'll contemplate it if you at least let me get you under a roof. You're half-soaked. The hotel is only ten minutes away."

I have a feeling that's the closest to an agreement I'm going to get from Kit, and considering he has the resolve and patience of a grizzly bear, I'm not looking to argue with him for the rest of the night.

"Okay," I acquiesce. "But you have to promise to think about it."

Kit holds his pinky out to me. "I promise."

I hesitantly hook my pinky with his, letting myself get lost in the wilderness of his umber eyes. There's warmth nestled in the inner rings, but with it comes a dash of concern.

Fuck, Faye! This could've all been avoided if you just focused on yourself, your career. If you stopped chasing after guys to fill that hole in your heart.

I pull back, severing our arrangement. "I should've done something."

"Stop," Kit snarls, the intensity behind the command alone shaking me to the core. "This is not your fault. You need to understand that."

Kit leans over the center console and hooks his forefinger under my chin, his thumb tracing the edge of my jawline. "This is his fault, okay? This is all on him. He took advantage of you. This small-dicked asshole took your freedom, your choice, and he'll be paying for every second of it for the rest of his miserable life."

"Why do you care so much?" I blurt out before I can stop myself.

The first smile of the night surfaces over his extremely kissable lips. Extremely kissable, and extremely dangerous.

"Because we're friends."

Friends? I've never hated one word so much in my entire life.

HAYES

Tits or ass: that's the eternal question. That's the question I've been asked my entire life, by friends, flings, teammates, my ex-girlfriend. I'm not going to lie. For a long time, I was a tits man. But tonight, I think my answer is gonna change.

And that's thanks to the girl's thighs currently straddling me. They're lean with muscle, and it's clear she sticks to a rigorous workout regimen. I'm a thigh guy. Definitely. Is it wrong that I want her to crush my head with them? I really shouldn't be thinking about this when I should be wining and dining sponsors, but she's wearing such a short dress, so short that from this angle I can see practically everything.

Her lips ghost the shell of my ear, and her tongue tickles the column of my throat, doing wonders for my hard-on. I understand that I'm fully making out with a girl at a sponsor party. I understand that there's media around every corner covering the new merger between the Reapers team and Voltage Sports Drinks. I should be mingling instead of acquainting myself with the inside of some girl's mouth.

I don't care, though. I need the distraction. After seeing my ex with one of my hockey rivals—after she cheated on me during the biggest game of my career—I lost my mind.

It's my fourth season playing for the Riverside Reapers. I entered the NHL draft when I was nineteen, and I was fourth overall-pick in 2019. My quick puck handling is what put me on the map, but at the time, I was racking up eighty penalty points in my collegiate midseason, which made me the most penalized player in NCAA

hockey at one point. Not something scouts are necessarily looking for. I'm a hothead when I get on the ice. If somebody bodychecks me or gets between me and the puck, I'm not afraid to hit them back—whether those hits are illegal or not. I think the thing that saved me the most was my fifty-goal average, with a total of seventy-two assists in a sixty-game season.

It's been my dream to go pro since I was little. My parents signed me up for minor ice hockey when I was eight, and I've been playing ever since.

Despite me getting lucky enough to enter the NHL, my life hasn't been a walk in the park. My father's a shitty excuse for a parent, and my mom is dead. I'm honestly not sure which is worse.

Sherry passed away of cancer when I was eight, and it broke my dad. He became distant, closed off, a shell of the man I remember from my childhood. I didn't realize I'd lost two parents that day.

I don't think my mom was even planning on telling us she had breast cancer. The only reason I found out was because my dad got a call from the hospital after she was admitted for fainting. Thankfully, she was outside when it happened, and our neighbors managed to get to her in time. Then the doctors told him everything. We all knew she had been acting a little off more than usual—curt answers, lapses in memory and judgment, distancing herself from us. I chalked it up to her being stressed with work .

I was wrong.

After she died, my father abandoned me and my sister. I had to take care of my younger sister, Faye, while I juggled school and hockey. We still had a roof to live under because of the monthly paychecks our dad sent us, but besides that, he wasn't in our lives. He disappeared to some faraway, forest-grown part of the Michigan mountains where he made sure his tracks weren't traceable. He wasn't there for any

of Faye's milestones. He wasn't there to see me off to college. He wasn't even there to cheer me on at my first NHL game. The only contact he's maintained is the occasional text whenever he needs something.

I want to forget this whole week. I want to stop feeling. The alcohol's already helped a bit with both, but if I can rely on one thing in this damned world, it's good sex.

In my defense, I haven't slept with anyone in sixty days. And that's a deliberate abstinence, okay? I haven't really been able to trust anyone after my ex-girlfriend, Macy, broke up with me.

While I was ruminating over what went wrong, incriminating pictures of her tongue down Quentin Cadieux's throat surfaced in the media. Quentin Cadieux, center for the Atlanta Avocets, and the bane of my fucking existence. Both me and Cadieux were top prospects for the Riverside Reapers, with me being chosen out of the two of us. And ever since then, he's made it his life's goal to make mine a living hell.

When I confronted Macy about the photos, she admitted to only using me for my money, my name, and my fame. She dumped me before I could break up with her. She threw all my shit out her window—at least the shit she hadn't burned yet—and topped everything off with a few glitter bombs and a passionately worded Notes app paragraph on her Insta story.

The girl in front of me is shaking the bed with how much she's bouncing on top of me. We went from a fifteen-minute make out sesh to her riding me like rent was fucking due .

I'm not sure I even asked what her name was. She knew my name, though. Sponsor parties are always crawling with puck bunnies.

I can't stop staring in awe at the way her perfectly proportioned tits recoil as she fully clenches around me, her head lolling back, dark hair spilling down her shoulders like

ink.

My hands are gripping her thighs so tightly that red marks are rising in their wake. I love when girls are loud, but fuck, is she loud. I bet the whole party downstairs can hear us, despite the outdated EDM music playing. Her moans are heaven-sent, and they unravel the knot of desire in my stomach. She's rolling her hips and playing with the curve of her breast, two images that rev the static inside of my brain. The warmth in my groin intensifies, erupting into a fire that sears every inch of me. Her perky ass slaps against the tops of my thighs.

I'm close to coming. My dick is practically begging me to release inside of her, and it's a good thing I snagged a few condoms before leaving the house because no matter what dude you talk to, pulling out rarely works.

The minute I saw her across the room, I think a part of me knew how the night was going to end. Before I even got the chance to talk with my teammates, her hand was stroking me. Yeah, self-control has never been my strong suit.

"Fuck..." I groan, though I think it comes out more like a frustrated growl.

We move together in a synchronized pattern of movements, and I watch her pick up the pace. Her pussy squeezes up and down my length as she nears her climax, and when she comes down hard on the hilt of my pubic bone, an avalanche of arousal suffocates me. The tip of my dick tingles, and it feels like a supernova is exploding in my veins, coloring my vision with constellations. Before I know it, I'm spilling myself into the latex in hot, wet bursts.

When I get up to dispose of the condom, she has the bedsheets pulled up to her chest.

"Are you coming back to bed?" she asks, hope playing in her amber eyes.

"I should probably head back to the party. You know, rub shoulders with some

sponsors, maybe a few geriatric sugar daddies,” I joke, but her lack of laughter hits me in the face like a wicked slapshot.

“Oh, right. Will I see you again?”

My cock loves the idea of seeing her again, but I really shouldn’t be entertaining a relationship when I have my career to focus on. This was a one-time thing.

A wrecking ball of anxiety swings to the center of my chest, making the air in my lungs diminish. “Sure, I can get you tickets to an upcoming game.”

I take my time getting dressed, because I’m definitely not in a rush to get back to the party.

My response must’ve been convincing enough because she perks up, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “That would be great. Uh, can I see your phone?”

I hand my phone over to her, slowly slipping one pant leg on at a time so I don’t look like I’m in a hurry to get out of here.

Look, I don’t want to hurt her feelings, alright? I know she’s gonna put her number in there, and I’m not going to stop her. I’ll just let her down nice and easy over text. That way I don’t have to deal with the tears and the yelling.

She hands me back the device, exposing her tits as she reaches down to pick up her shirt. “I put my number in there. I hope you use it.”

I’m only able to nod because I’m currently contemplating how moral it would be if I proposed we go for a second round.

Verdict: not moral.

I shake the thought from my addled brain, say a quick goodbye, and give her a half-hearted hug. Then I slip out of the bedroom, ready to sprint for the exit to evade any prying eyes. And I foolishly think I'm in the clear before I come face to face with the last person I wanted to run into.

The top buttons of my shirt are undone, my hair's a mess from the girl gouging her fingers through it, and I'm pretty sure I saw at least three hickeys decorating my neck in the mirror.

"Coach?" I sputter, the air around me seeming strangely distilled.

"Hollings, I?—"

Coach takes in my disheveled state, and then his eyes turn as round as frisbees.

"Please tell me that's not Sienna Talavera's bedroom," he bellows, that one vein on his forehead pulsing with a mind of its own.

Who?

My back goes as stiff as a board when I hear that drill sergeant voice of his, like it's a conditioned response. "I...I don't know, sir."

I've never heard that name in my entire life.

"Sienna. Talavera," he reiterates slowly. Those behemoth arms of his are barred over his chest, reminding me how easy it'd be for him to squash me like a cartoon mouse.

I wait for him to elaborate, and judging by the death glare he's giving me, I know I just fucked up. My hands are so clammy that I keep wiping them on my pant legs, my heart is galloping like a racehorse in my chest, and my stomach is seconds away from revolting the hors d'oeuvres I polished off an hour ago.

Coach expels what I think is supposed to be a cleansing breath, but his nostrils are still flared. “Son, Raymond Talavera owns the sports drink company sponsoring our team,” he explains.

Fuck me.

“Coach, I swear, I had no idea,” I blurt, desperate to temper the anxiety racing through me at warp speed.

“Hollings, this cannot get out, do you understand? If Raymond hears that you slept with his daughter, he’ll pull, and we need his sponsorship.”

“I promise I won’t say anything, Coach.”

“If it comes down to it, the team owner will have no problem picking Talavera over you. Every player is tradeable, expendable.”

“Understood.”

Shit. I can’t get traded. I can’t imagine the rest of my NHL career—if I even have one—without my teammates. Not only would I have to move, but I’d have to somehow seamlessly weave my way into already-lasting relationships.

“And Sienna? Do you think she’ll talk?” he asks.

“I took care of it.” Right? Sure, I’d offered to get her tickets to the next game, which she clearly doesn’t need, but we parted with a hug. We both knew the deal going into the night.

“I—it won’t happen again,” I swear.

How have I fucked up...fucking? I’m great at fucking. If I wasn’t a professional

hockey player, I could probably make it as a porn star.

“It better not. And I better see you working your ass off at practice tomorrow.”

I nod, trying to keep my nerves from catapulting themselves up my throat.

“Look, Hollings. I want to give you a piece of advice. And I’m only saying this because I truly want you to succeed, okay?”

That doesn’t sound good.

The redness in his face has started to fade. “Mistakes like this can make or break a career. I know how much hockey means to you. But with the way you’ve been playing recently, you’re treating this privilege like it means jackshit. And now you go and complicate things with our biggest sponsor. You’re lucky I’m the one who caught you and not some news-hungry paparazzi. You need to start thinking before you act, otherwise a warning will be the least of your worries.”

“Yes, sir,” I say, my voice hiking a pitch louder than intended. Anxiety batters at my chest like exploding shrapnel, and I fear that my knees are going to give out despite my back being against the wall.

Coach knits his furry eyebrows together, deepening that wrinkle on his forehead. “I expect you to fix this,” he demands, and just like that, my world full of carefree living has just been turned on its axis.

“And do not , under any circumstances, repeat what happened here tonight.”