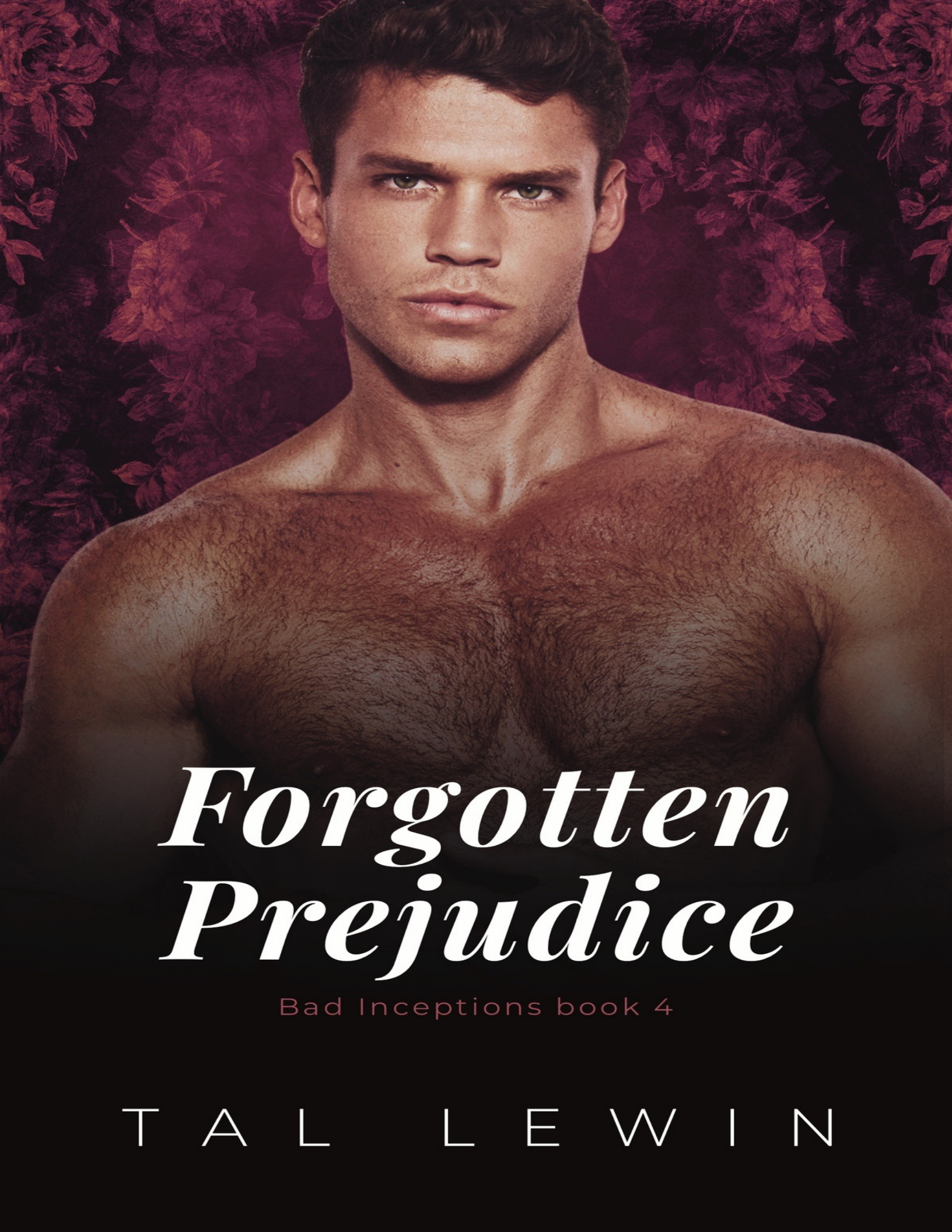

Forgotten Prejudice

Bad Inceptions book 4

TAL LEWIN

Forgotten Prejudice

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Forgotten Prejudice

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Triggers Warnings

I tried to stay as authentic and honest as I could toward my characters. Please note that due to that, this book/series may be hard to read and not suit everyone.

Please be aware that some of the characters in this book have a stigmatized approach toward addiction as part of their growth. Their reflections do not reflect the author's or the reality of the situation.

While I tried to keep things as realistic as possible when it comes to the trial, research only goes so far, and some parts might be more fictional than others.

Triggers:

* Love Triangle: This is a love triangle, not a why choose, hence one of the three guys gets his heart broken at the end and doesn't have a HEA.
* Sex with other people: Call it cheating, if you will, but basically, everyone sleeps with everyone.
* Non/Con between MCs (there's a short scene of questionable non/con.)
* Child sexual abuse (off page)
* Drug and alcohol addiction
* Homophobia
* Underage drinking and substance abuse
* Explicit violence

Author's Note

This book is a love triangle, meaning hearts will break, and not all will get their HEA. While I do believe the ending is fitting, please take that into consideration before proceeding.

DON’T CHEAT AND SKIP TO THE LAST CHAPTER TO CHECK
(Ha-ha! Do what you want! Love you!)

Love,
Tal.

Dana and Stacy, this one’s for you. Thank you for helping me figure out what this book needed.

Part One



Experimentation



Ash

"Be safe," Mom called after me as I dashed out the front door. "And don't do anything I wouldn't do."

"You bet," I shouted back, then jumped into the passenger seat of Kai's Jeep.

"Don't worry, Mel. I'll take good care of him," Kai shot at her.

"That's what worries me," Mom joked while waving us goodbye.

"Ready to go?" my best friend of twelve years asked with an easygoing smile glued to his handsome face.

The very same smile that made me realize I was in love with him freshman year of high school. Kai had no idea I was utterly obsessed with him, as I'd kept my attraction for him hidden for the past three years and planned on keeping it that way. For starters, Kai was as straight as they came, with a long history of hot girlfriends, including the one he'd been dating for a while now, Zoe. What was more, we were two months away from finishing junior year and had sweet plans for summer break. *Plans* I didn't want to ruin by pointlessly confessing to Kai about the idiotic crush I had on him. Not only would it make things awkward between us, but it would also ruin our senior year. Being the idiots that we were, we planned on making our last year of high school un-fucking-forgettable. I had no idea how yet, but I trusted Kai's crazy mind to come up with epic shit.

"Mom told me to invite you over for dinner," I said, then turned on the radio.

"As long as she's not cooking." He grinned, showing off those smile lines I adored.

"She's counting on you to cook, and you know it." Kai was always the best in the kitchen. "Are you sure Nico's cool with us tagging along?"

Moving his hand through his dirty-blond wolf cut, Kai nodded. "Yeah, for sure."

Kai's cousin Nicolas was in college, and sometimes, he invited us to parties his guys held. Those parties were much better than the ones held by our classmates, and Kai and I always jumped on the offer.

As Kai was racing the Jeep down the street, I suddenly wondered if it was smart to party tonight, considering I had the first shift at the restaurant tomorrow. Rob, the owner, was a strict yet fair man who always scolded us if we arrived at work looking like shit. Unlike Kai, who came from a wealthy family and only worked there because of me, I needed the job. My mom was a single parent, and although we weren't struggling, my small salary helped.

"When will you stop with that crap?" Kai chuckled after he noticed me biting my nails.

It was a nasty habit I'd picked up years ago.

"What's on your mind?" he then asked, already knowing I was worried about something.

"I can't stay too late because I gotta work tomorrow."

His smile once again grew, and he nodded. "Sure. Zoe will probably want to cut out early anyway. You know she hates parties."

My heart pinched with jealousy. I stupidly hoped it would be just the two of us tonight, and learning about Zoe joining us was like taking a bite from a bitter fruit.

Hiding my disappointment, I nodded. "Cool."



"I like your hoodie, Chief," Zoe said while tracing her fingers over the cotton. "Can I borrow it?"

"Why would you borrow his hoodie?" Kai asked, pulling her onto his lap and away from me. "And when will you stop calling him Chief? It's *Ashy*."

Kai knew I hated being called that, and that was exactly why he kept on doing it.

For years.

Zoe pouted her lips. "Only you call him that! We all know him as Chief."

The one who'd given me that nickname was my uncle, Aiden, unintentionally causing my friends to pick it up as well. Now, the only one to call me by my name was either Kai or Mom.

"Stop arguing," I chuckled, cutting off the argument those two were having. "And I can lend it to you if you like it so much," I added, causing Zoe to clap her hands together and give me a giddy smile.

"You're the best, Chief." Jumping from Kai's lap, Zoe picked up a bottle of vodka from the table. "Let's get fucked-up!" she yelled, raising her hands in the air. While doing so, she stretched her beautiful body, and her tight minidress rose

up to reveal parts of her ass. My good mood turned sour as I watched with jealousy at how Kai's eyes drank up her curves, probably imagining fucking her later.

Knowing I had to distract myself from those types of thoughts, I snuck away from them the first moment I could and went out to the backyard. The house we were currently in was huge, even bigger than Kai's, and I wondered what its owners did for a living.

With too much on my mind, I began walking around the property, hoping the party would end soon. I was tired and not in the mood at all after watching Kai and Zoe being the perfect couple that they were. I yearned for the same thing, which was ridiculous, considering how no one even knew I was gay. My sexuality was a secret, mostly because of Kai. As free-spirited as he was, he came from a conservative family. His father was a strict man who, more often than not, stated his opinion about gay people, and let's say his views weren't all that nice. Far from it, even. I knew Kai didn't share his father's beliefs, as he had no intention of keeping himself for marriage like his father expected him to, but maybe some stuck—such as homosexuality being a sin.

Whenever we talked about sex and stuff, I'd pretend to like girls, and I was getting sick of it. I was getting sick of going on double dates, trying to fool around with girls to make sure I was *really* gay and that it wasn't just in my head, but mostly, I was sick of watching my best friend falling in love with someone who wasn't me.

"You look lost," a smooth voice said, and I looked up from the ground in search of who it belonged to.

A guy taller than me, who at first glance looked like Prince fucking Charming, with his raven-black hair and silver eyes, was leaning back against a garden column with his hands tucked in his trousers pockets.

"Oh, sorry," I mumbled, rubbing the back of my head while gazing around. Apparently, without noticing, I'd ended up in some sort of a rose garden. "Didn't look where I was walking."

"That only proves my point." The stranger smiled and pushed away from the column. "Soren Dane," he said after offering me his hand to shake.

Even though it was a bit too formal, I didn't think twice before taking his hand. Despite his soft skin, he had a firm, strong grip. A hot flush ran through my body as thoughts about his strength reached my brain and dick. I also noticed how cold his hand was, not that it mattered.

"A-Ashton Sage. But you can call me Ash," I blurted awkwardly, not meeting his hunter eyes.

"That's a cute name. I don't think I've ever seen you around," he said after

releasing my hand.

My eyes shot to him, and I regretted it immediately because his good looks only increased my awkwardness. Not only did he look like a model, with a chiseled jaw and sharp eyes, but he also looked mature. *A man*. Not a kid like myself.

Swallowing hard, I cleared my throat. “I’m a junior.” *In high school.* “Economics.” *Yeah, right.*

“Economics? That’s nice.” He smiled, showing off his perfect white teeth. “I’m about to finish my third year of law school.”

Shit. That means he’s around twenty-four? Twenty-five?

“That’s awesome.” My voice came out too high, and I sounded like a complete moron. *He probably thinks I’m an idiot.*

Soren chuckled while pressing his knuckle to his full lips and shaking his head. “You’re cute.”

Did he just say I’m cute? *Yeah*, he did.

Not knowing how to react because a man had never told me I was cute before, I focused on the garden around us. “That’s a nice house, don’t you think?”

Soren looked around himself, an unimpressed expression on his face.

He shrugged. “I’ve seen better.”

So he’s loaded, too. Well, given the Rolex he had around his wrist, I’d already figured that out.

“So, *Ashton*, what were you thinking about so hard that you ended up in a garden of roses?”

A hint of his rich cologne reached me, reminding me of winter. I had no idea why, but I often connected people with seasons. Kai’s, for example, was summer. Whenever I closed my eyes next to him, it brought me back to sleeping in the shade after surfing on some lazy August afternoon.

Remembering I had yet to answer Soren’s question, I pulled myself back together. “Well, nothing important. Just some thoughts.”

“All thoughts are important,” he said, and I began to learn that Soren Dane always had an answer up his sleeve.

As you’d expect of a law student.

Once again, I dared to glance at him only to find his brilliant eyes locked on me. He looked… *interested*.

“Do you want to grab a drink?” I asked, surprising myself.

Unfazed by my directness, he nodded. “Sure. Let’s get back inside.” He moved to go and, without any warning, placed his hand behind my back.

I stilled at his slight touch as thoughts of him touching me more flooded my

imagination. Would he be rough? Gentle? As much as I longed for it, I'd never been held by another guy and was left with nothing but porn-based fantasies.

It took us about fifteen minutes to reach the alcohol table, and only because Soren was stopped every minute by someone else. It looked like he was popular. *Too* popular.

"So, what do you want to drink?" he asked while checking the labels on some bottles.

"A-Anything will do." I tried to sound mature but knew I'd failed the second his eyes met mine, and I saw the amusement in them.

"Something tells me that you're not twenty-one yet."

Shit. My heart rate picked up, and the lie was out of my mouth before I could stop it. "I'm eighteen. Just don't tell anyone." It wasn't a complete lie because I'd be eighteen at the end of *next* month.

"So you're a freshman, not a junior?"

Feeling like a kid who was just caught stealing a cookie, I looked down at the floor and nodded. "Sorry." I should have told him here and now that I wasn't even in college but in high school, yet being the center of his attention felt too good, so I kept with the lie.

"You're lucky, you know that?"

Confused, I looked up, a nervous smile tinged on my lips. "W-What do you mean?"

Taking two glasses, he placed them in front of him. "Most people are rather ugly when lying." He put a cube of ice in each glass. "But you?" He raised his eyes to meet mine, his lips pulling into a stunning smile. "You look adorable when you do." He then poured the drink on the ice and handed me one glass.

"Cheers?" he offered, his drink raised.

"C-Cheers."

Downing the liquor in one big gulp nearly made me choke as the alcohol burned its way down my throat. Amused by my behavior, Soren chuckled. *God*, I was making a fool out of myself.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I breathed through my nose and tried to calm myself down. Despite my brief moments of embarrassment, I was determined to impress Soren. Even though nothing would come of it, the least I could do was try. Bracing myself, I opened my eyes and was ready to face him again, only he was already gone.

What?

"Soren?" I looked around in the hope of finding him, but tracking him down in the busy room was nearly impossible. A strong sense of rejection, followed by disappointment, took over me. If only I was a bit more assertive, maybe then—

“There you are,” Zoe said, already wrapping herself around me. “You disappeared on us.” Breaking the hug, she checked my empty glass and filled it with the bottle Soren had left behind. “Who was that handsome guy you were talking to?”

“W-What?” I spat out.

Why would she mention he was handsome? Did she know I thought the same thing?

“Why are you so nervous?” she giggled, her big eyes searching mine. “Anyway, there’s something I wanted to talk to you about. But let’s go out. It’s too loud in here.”



After we found a quiet spot on the back porch, I leaned against the house wall and waited for Zoe to speak. So far, she hadn’t said a word and was busy running her fingers through her mass of hazelnut curls that reached her back.

Once done playing with her hair, she moved her eyes to meet mine. “You know I plan to go to Europe during summer break, right?”

Not understanding what she was getting at, I shrugged. “Sure.”

“I asked Kai to join me.”

“And?”

“And he refused.”

Good to know.

Ready to go back inside—*and probably home*—I pushed back from the wall and stretched my neck. “Well, Zoe, sorry to hear that—”

“He refused because of you. He said you have plans together.” Her expression turned serious. “He refused a trip to Europe because you two have stupid plans to go camping by some lake.”

Her comment pissed me off. Just because our plans didn’t match her own didn’t mean they were dumb.

“They aren’t stupid,” I said, trying to hold back a smile because a part of me was happy Kai preferred to spend his summer with me than with her.

“Come on, Chief. You realize how weird it is that he’d rather sleep in a tent than in five-star hotels.”

I scratched my jaw before shaking my head. “Actually, no, I don’t realize it. In case you forgot, I’m not rich like you two. So camping is a great option for me.”

While Zoe and Kai were rich like the rest of our classmates, I wasn’t, and

sometimes, she loved rubbing it in my face. It was utterly stupid because I didn't care for money. I went to school with them, thanks to my uncle, who was wealthy and paid my tuition to our prestigious high school, Beverly Bay High.

She sighed. "That came off wrong, I'm sorry." Once again, her fingers returned to her curls. "Anyway, can you talk to him?"

Confused, my brows pinched close. "About what?"

"Maybe you can convince him to come with me."

Her suggestion was so ridiculous that I couldn't help but huff. There was absolutely no way I'd ever do that. Even if they were a couple, Kai was still my best friend long before they'd ever met, and I wanted to spend time with him, too.

"Kai's a grown man. He doesn't need me to help him decide, and besides, it sounds to me like he has." Zoe's lips set in a hard line, and she didn't seem pleased with my answer, but she'd have to live with it. "Anyway, I'm beat. I think I'm gonna go—"

"Isn't it about time you gave up on him?" She cut into my words, and I stopped in my tracks.

"What are you talking about?" My nerves kicked in.

"He's straight, Chief." Her words turned my blood cold, and I looked at her with shock.

How did she know?

"Oh my God," she gasped. "Please don't look so scared. I'm not trying to be mean or anything." She sounded genuine as she reached for my arm.

Not letting her touch me, I stepped back, and she sighed.

"Shit. I didn't mean to push you into a corner, Chief. It's just that…" Looking around, she bit her bottom lip and then returned her eyes to me. "We both love him, but he's with me, so please don't make it harder. I'm trying to be patient, but it's getting really hard."

Getting really hard? What was she even talking about? She was the one in our way, not me. *Right*?

"You don't have a chance with him, and you know it, too, or you would have confessed to him by now. Right?"

Even though she was speaking the truth, I was too shocked to respond properly. "How did you find out?" I asked after finding my voice.

"It's the way you're looking at him," she explained, then offered me another pitiful smile. "Don't worry. He's too dense to notice."

I wasn't worried but scared. Absolutely *terrified* that Zoe, of all people, was the one to know my secret. Suddenly, breathing became hard, and I wanted to puke every bit of alcohol I'd consumed since the evening began. Already

humiliated enough, I held myself back together and got my ass out of there before Zoe could spit another word.

She'd already said enough, anyway.

If Kai were to find out, my whole life would be ruined. I wasn't even joking. I couldn't picture myself without him or, worse, hated by him. My throat hurt from swallowing back tears, and my eyes stung, so I turned my walking into running and didn't stop until I reached my uncle's house in Malibu. Once there, I took off my clothes, put on my wet suit, grabbed my board, and went on to do the one thing that kept me *sane*.

Hours later, I stepped out of the water. The sun was about to rise, and the first seagull calls filled the pink-washed sky as I sunk my board in the sand and sat down. Unfortunately, surfing didn't help as I'd hoped, and my thoughts were still raging, trapping me inside my own head.

"Do you know what I like about sunrises?" My uncle's voice was followed by the warm touch of his hand, which grabbed my shoulder. A second later, he sat beside me.

"No," I answered his question, even though I knew it was rhetorical.

"If your eyes get to witness one, it means you lived to see another day."

That was Aiden Sage for you right there. Never once did he manage to disappoint me with one of his inspirational quotes. I had no fucking idea where he got them from, and despite them always being ridiculously heavy, they were genuine and often comforting.

"You're too young to sound so old," I huffed. The dude was only in his thirties.

"Maybe," he chuckled, then moved his hand to grab the back of my shoulder. "So, what's bothering you enough to make such a beautiful sunrise look so sad?"

Taking a deep breath, I slumped my shoulders as I exhaled.

"Just… things."

"By any chance, do they involve that other idiot?"

My eyes shot to him, yet my stress was dismissed as soon as I spotted the tenderness in his gaze, and for the first time since my conversation with Zoe, I felt relief.

"Yeah." Lying to Aiden was always pointless because he saw through me so easily.

I was six when my dad had drowned while free-diving. Since then, Aiden, who was Dad's twin brother, had treated me as his own. He'd never married and had no kids other than his dog, Seb, who lived with him in his beach house right on the Malibu shore.

"What did he do now?" Aiden asked, his hand no longer on my nape.

“He didn’t do anything, but Zoe… She wants me to spend less time with him.”

Aiden’s chuckle interpreted my words. “So it’s about a girl.”

My cheeks burned with embarrassment, and I frowned. It wasn’t at all about a girl, and that was the problem. A part of me wished I’d told Aiden about me being gay before because perhaps it would have made things easier. Now, it was hard to spit it out, almost as if my secret had latched itself to my heart, refusing to let go.

“What I’m going to tell you now is the most well-kept secret in the world,” Aiden said, cutting into my thoughts. “Never let anyone stand in your way, Ash.” He pointed his finger at my heart. “And that includes yourself, champ.”

“B-But what if it’s too hard to do it?”

The corner of his lips quirked up. “It will always be too soon, too little, too much, or too *hard*, Chief, and before you know it, it will be too late.” He squeezed my neck while looking at me with such kindness as if knowing what I was keeping from him, and that hit me like a splash of cold water on a hot summer day. It cheered me up, but at the same time, not. Even if I could accept myself, how would that help me? After all, even if I was fine with being gay, Kai would still be straight, and if that were the case, what was even the point?

CHAPTER Two

Kai

Ash was acting weird, and that was saying something, considering how he was the normal one between the two of us.

While I often did stupid shit, Ash was there to balance me. Whether I was pulling pranks, drinking too much, or pissing off my dad, Ash was always there to make sure I didn't cross the line *too* far.

So, when he wasn't there for the past few days, I worried that something had happened. The last time we'd hung out was at Nico's party, but everything seemed fine then. I mean, with how much I drank, I only remembered the beginning of the night, but I was pretty sure nothing major had happened. Zoe would have told me otherwise, right?

Oh, fuck.

Maybe Ash was mad because I got shit-faced? He hated it when I did that, which wasn't too often, in my defense. Anyway, the best way to find out what was going on would be to ask him directly, and lucky for me, I'd just spotted him eating his lunch on the stone bench under the old oak tree.

"Ashy!" Running toward him, I stopped and slumped my ass beside him. I then wrapped an arm around his shoulders and stole half of his sandwich.

"Cheese and mayo?" I grunted after taking a bite. "Remind me to make you better meals than this depressing shit." I loved cooking for him.

"Sorry, I'm no chef," he said with a half smile that hardly reached his pretty green eyes.

"That's what I'm here for." Still not removing my hand from around him, I finished the sandwich with two more bites and then licked my fingers clean. "So, what's up? You've been gone for almost a week."

"Gone? I was here all along."

"That's bullshit. I've hardly heard from you."

He pulled his shoulders and kept quiet, so I went on. "Did I do something to upset you?"

“What?” He sounded nervous. “No, of course not. I was just really busy with school and work.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “Sorry if it felt like I was avoiding you.”

Aww, awkward Ashy was the cutest.

“Don’t worry about it, man.” I squeezed his arm, noticing how he’d gained some muscles since he started working out last summer. We were both on the school swimming team, but I never bothered to go to the gym as much as he did.

“You sure?” he asked, and I nodded.

“Fuck yeah, but you’re going to make it up to me. There’s another party tonight, and we’re going.”

Ash began chewing on his bottom lip, meaning he was debating with himself. As always, all he needed was another slight push, so I gave it to him.

“Come on, Ashy, you know you want it.” I fluttered my eyelashes at him like some chick until he smiled, for real this time, and agreed.

“Fuck yeah.” I fist-bumped him and was about to say I’d pick him up after work so we could drive straight from there when someone jumped on my back. Soon, Zoe’s arms wrapped around me, and she planted a kiss on my cheek.

“Hey, girl.” I smirked, moving my fingers through her wild curls while rubbing her head.

“What were you talking about?” she giggled, a big smile on her face.

After telling her about the party, she asked if it was okay for her to join.

“Yeah, of course. We’re gonna go there after Ash is done working, so—”

“Actually, I don’t think I can make it,” he suddenly said, turning my good mood sour.

“What do you mean?” I frowned at him, but he was already packing up his things.

“Yeah, I forgot I had plans with Aiden. But don’t worry about it.”

Here goes that fake smile again.

“You guys have fun.”

Not lingering another second, Ash tossed his backpack over his shoulder and walked away. In fact, he couldn’t have gotten out of here faster.

What the actual fuck?

CHAPTER Three

Ash

Rob's Restaurant was a local bistro I'd been working at for the past three years. At first, I was a busboy, but since starting junior year, I'd been working as a waiter, the same as Kai. Despite Rob being on the tough side, I loved it here. My mom used to work here when she was young, which was how she met my dad, so this place sometimes felt like a second home.

"Chief, any chance you can close up instead of me? I have an audition tomorrow morning, and I want to run lines one last time," Isabel asked as I picked up some drinks from the bar.

Since I had no intention of going to the party and being the third wheel in the Kai and Zoe show, I agreed, and she thanked me with a hug.

"You're the best," she cheered, already taking off her apron.

"No worries. But when you're a big star one day, remember me."

She laughed and then told me good night before checking out.

We had low foot traffic today, so the rest of the shift went pretty chill. The kitchen had closed up already, and by now, I was the last of the staff left. Because it was almost time for me to go, I began polishing some glasses when a beautiful Ferrari stopped in front of the restaurant. It wasn't odd to see fancy cars around, as it was Beverly Hills, but this one caught my eye. I wasn't a motors fan myself, but Kai was, and I'd have to tell him about it.

I went back to polishing until the doorbell rang, announcing a new customer. Putting down the dishes I was cleaning, I rounded the bar and made my way to the entrance to tell them we were closed when I noticed who it was.

"Well, well," Soren said with the same charming smile I remembered from the party. "If that isn't fate, I don't know what is."

"H-Hey," I blurted out awkwardly after stopping before him, my hand clenching the wet cloth I still held a bit harder.

"Ashton, was it?"

"Yeah, but you can call me Ash or Chief. Everyone calls me Chief."

“Chief?” he asked in a low drawl that was too sexy. “I think Ashton suits you more.”

Not knowing what to say, I continued to stare at him until I realized it probably made me seem like a creep, and I forced my eyes away from his flawless face.

“I think I owe you an apology for disappearing the last time we met,” he said.

Despite abandoning me at the party, I didn’t dive too deep into it and simply assumed he’d figured out I was an idiot kid.

“Don’t worry about it. If anything, I deserved it. I made myself look like a fool downing that drink in one go.”

Soren let out a soft chuckle, one that made me weak in the knees. Looking up, I found him still staring at me, and there was something empowering about the way his silver eyes checked me out slowly.

“You didn’t make a fool out of yourself, so don’t worry about it.” Crossing his arms over his chest, he stepped a bit closer. “To be honest, I was simply distracted.”

He was at least three inches taller, with wide shoulders and defined muscles. He looked so elegant in clothes that probably cost more than my monthly salary and radiated confidence with his tall stance. Yet, it wasn’t just his looks that drew me to him but his confidence. Soren seemed so sure of himself, *so well put together*, and that attracted me. Thinking about it now, Soren was the complete opposite of Kai, who was all about messy hair, laid-back clothes, and a let’s-go-with-the-flow sort of attitude.

“I tend to get distracted rather easily,” he spoke, snapping me back to reality. “It’s quite a bit of a problem, especially when I’m talking to you.”

“Me?” My brows pulled close with shock. “Did I do something wrong?”

Once again, he chuckled, his rich voice addicting. “You’re adorable.” He shook his head. “But no, you didn’t do anything wrong, although I keep getting distracted by those lips of yours.” While speaking, he moved his fingers along his jaw, and my eyes focused on his lips a second before a flush crept to my cheeks and probably painted them bright red.

“M-My lips?” Breaking our stare, I swallowed hard.

“Yeah, they’re the prettiest I have ever seen. Such a unique shape that I can’t seem to look away.”

My heart rate increased, and my throat turned dry. He was hitting on me without a hint of shame, and that left me… shocked. I was popular among the girls in our school, so I’d been hit on before, but never by a guy. And never in my wildest dreams did I think a *man* like Soren, who looked like the closest

thing to perfection, would've found interest in me. I didn't hate myself, but there was nothing special about me. Nothing unique enough to attract the interest of a man like him.

"Why do I feel like I'm scaring you? Did I get the wrong impression?" he suddenly asked, and I realized I'd kept quiet for too long.

"The wrong impression?" I blurted out, once again earning an amused smile from him. One that made me feel even more like a child.

"At the party, I assumed you liked me. Was I wrong?"

Did I like him? Was that even a question? Regardless of my unrequited love for Kai, I was still a horny dude in his prime, and it would be fucking impossible not to like a face, a body, and a personality like his.

"You weren't wrong," I said quietly. "It's just that… I've never done this before." My whole face burned up. "I mean, with a man…"

Something gleamed in his eyes a second before he ran his fingers through his raven hair, and he cleared his throat.

"Since it seems like you're in the middle of closing up this place, I think I'll go find a different restaurant to have dinner."

My stomach turned since, once again, I was being dismissed, but right as I was about to draw back into myself, Soren pulled his phone out and offered it to me.

"I would have offered for you to join me tonight, but I have very little time, and I'd rather take you on a proper date." He smiled. "If that's okay with you, of course."

Okay with me? It was more than okay with me. In fact, the only thing that made me hesitate was that I'd lied to him. Soren had no idea I was still in high school, but should I risk telling him? After all, even if we were to go on a date, nothing serious would come out of it. He looked too hot to be a guy who was looking for something serious. And if I were honest with myself, everything about him, from the amusement in his eyes to the car he was driving, screamed fuckboy. So maybe, just maybe, this was finally my opportunity to have an actual experience with a man. And if that were the case, there was no need for him to know how old I was.

"I saved myself under Ash," I said, giving him back his phone.

While taking the device from me, Soren brushed our fingers together, leaned close, and kissed my cheek. It was short, and it was over before I'd even noticed, but the touch of his lips burned my skin like the sun after a long day of surfing.

"I'll give you a call," he said and, a moment later, was already out of the restaurant.

As I brushed my fingers over my cheek, my stomach flipped with butterflies.

It was silly, but being wanted felt really fucking good.

Kai

Frozen, I stayed by the restaurant window as I watched Ashy's cheeks turning a deeper shade of red each time the man he was speaking to got closer. I'd come here thinking I'd manage to convince him to come to the party with me, not at all prepared for what I was seeing unfolding right fucking now.

But… what was I even seeing? Ash was straight. *Right*? For years, we'd talked about girls, so why did he just give that dude his number? And why the fuck was I getting so angry as the asshole got closer to Ash, and… did the son of a bitch just kiss his cheek?

What the actual fuck.

Clenching my hands into tight fists and gritting my teeth, I tried to understand the source of my anger. Was it for believing my best friend was hiding a big fucking secret from me, or was it because of something *else*? Whatever it was that made me want to break something was enough to get me back inside my car and kick the gas so fast that I nearly crashed into the lamppost I'd parked beside. Not giving a flying fuck, I reversed onto the main road, ignoring the honks and curses from other drivers, and made my way to the party.

I needed a drink.

Scratch that.

I needed to get fucking wasted. So wasted that the disgusting image of that dipshit pressing his lips to Ash's cheek would be erased from my fucking memory.

Only that not even half a bottle of vodka seemed to do the job, and my brain was still going at a hundred miles per hour trying to figure out what I'd seen earlier today.

And if that wasn't enough, Zoe had been a pain in my ass since she'd arrived, trying to convince me to go home with her since she was too tired to party. Fuck that, and with all due respect, fuck her. Right now, I had no plans to go home, where I'd have to face those repulsive thoughts alone. *And sober*.



"What the hell is wrong with you tonight," Zoe whined, slapping my arm and

then slumping her back against the couch.

Ignoring her, I took a shot that burned its way down my throat, then reached for the bottle to pour myself another.

“Seriously, Kai, you gotta cut down on the drinking.” While speaking, she reached to grab the bottle away from me, but I pushed her hand off.

“Leave me alone.” I sounded as bitter as I felt. “If you’re unhappy, go home.”

“Are you shitting me?” After I didn’t bother to answer her, she continued to push. “Are you sad because your sweet *Ashy* isn’t here to hold your hand?” Bringing her fists to her face, she pretended to cry and wiped fake tears, basically saying I was a crybaby.

She pissed me the fuck off.

“Screw you, Zoe.”

Dropping her hands to her sides, she stood up, stomping her foot. “You two are un-fucking-believable. Seriously. I don’t know why I’m wasting my time on you when you’re so clearly in love with him, too.”

She had every right to be angry with me right now because I was being a fucking prick, but that didn’t mean she could—*hold on*.

What did she just say?

“What did you say?” I asked, blinking my eyes while trying to keep focus.

“Nothing.”

Getting up, I grabbed her arms and yanked her close.

“Kai, you’re hurting me—”

“What the fuck did you just say?” I rasped.

“It was a slip of the tongue. I didn’t mean anything by it.”

Angry, I frowned at her. “You said I was in love with him, *too*. What did you mean by that?”

Rather than answering me, Zoe pressed her lips together and diverted her eyes. She clearly didn’t mean to say what she just did, but it was too late to take her words back. Letting go of her, I crashed back on the couch. Pushing the shot glass off the table, it shattered on the floor, but I didn’t give a shit as I reached for the bottle. Drinking straight from it, I only stopped once it burned, then wiped my mouth with the back of my hand.

The room spun around me while the loud music mixed with Zoe’s attempts to apologize. What was she even apologizing for? I didn’t know or care. I had so many questions running in my fucked-up brain right now, and none involved her.

No.

They all involved him—my best friend, who apparently kept shit tons of things away from me.

CHAPTER Four

Ash

Sitting by my desk, I decided to search for Soren on Facebook. It wasn't hard, and he was the first account to pop up after I typed his name into the search bar. Just as I expected, he was popular. *Very popular*. His profile picture, a photo of him leaning back against a Bentley wearing a tux, had gotten hundreds of likes and comments. Going deeper and digging up more info about him, I saw that he attended some boarding school in Switzerland instead of a regular high school and that he was currently a third-year law school student.

Well, he did mention that.

I also confirmed my earlier suspicion about his age. He turned twenty-five last May, meaning that he was seven years older than me. Well, I'd be eighteen in less than a month, so I guessed that was fine.

After drooling over his tennis photo album, I removed my eyes from my computer and bit on my nails. *Will he actually call me?* Soren did ask me for my number, but maybe he was just being polite after stumbling upon me. Thinking back on our meeting, I remembered what he said about my lips.

Getting up from my chair, I walked over to the small mirror in my room and examined my lips. I always thought they were too big for my face, and I sometimes felt insecure about them. Pressing the pads of my fingers to my bottom lip, which was slightly fuller, I wondered how it would feel to have Soren's lips pressed against mine. I bet he was a good kisser, as he seemed to look like a man with lots of experience.

The sound of something breaking came from our front porch, cutting off my line of thought. Mom was visiting her friend, so I threw my hoodie over my shirtless body and went down to check myself. I wasn't at all surprised to find a drunk Kai trying to pick up the pieces of the ceramic vase he'd just broken.

"Let me guess, you drank too much," I said while holding the door open for him to step in.

Not bothering to glance my way, Kai grunted and then dragged his drunk ass

inside the house. As always, he made his way straight to my bedroom. Considering his state, I made a quick stop in the kitchen and grabbed a bottle of water before going after him.

He left my bedroom door open, so I walked in with the bottle in hand. “You need to drink some water—”

“Are you gay?”

My heart stopped, and my blood turned to ice as my stomach flipped. Swallowing back this awful feeling, I tried to pretend his question didn’t take me by complete surprise and walked straight to my study desk.

“What on earth are you talking about?” A nervous laugh broke past my lips. With my back to him, I placed the bottle on the desk, my hand shaking.

“Don’t lie to me.” He sounded so angry.

Turning to face him, I tried to smile. “I don’t know what you’ve heard, but —”

“I didn’t hear anything. I saw it with my own eyes,” he hissed. “I saw you flirting with that guy tonight.”

Since the restaurant was empty when Soren arrived, I’d let my guard down and just went with it, not thinking even for a second that Kai might be there to witness it.

Realizing that I had no way of denying the truth, I didn’t know what to do. This, right now, was worse than my nightmares.

“Why didn’t you ever say anything?” he asked, his fists clenched close to his sides. “How long have you known? Why did you lie? We went on all those double dates. Fuck, Ash.” His voice broke. “We slept together so many nights. You hugged me…”

The more he talked, the harder it was to listen, and I bit the inside of my cheek so I wouldn’t cry in front of him. He was disgusted by me. I could see it so clearly in the way his lips curled with repulsion with each word he spat and even more vividly in his eyes, which didn’t hold the same spark I loved so much. Now, his eyes were cold and unfamiliar.

“Do you love me?” he asked, and that was it.

No longer able to hold myself together, I broke, and tears began to roll down my flaming cheeks.

If I could have chosen not to be gay, I would have. If I could have chosen to love someone else, I would have. But those things were out of my reach. For years, I’d tried to conceal my emotions in the hope they’d vanish, but they’d only grown, and now, it was all out in the most horrible way I could have ever imagined.

Shaking my head, I tried to swallow back my tears. “I-I’m sorry.” Sob. “I

didn’t mean to.”

With two large steps, Kai closed the distance between us, grabbed my hoodie, and pulled me close. Shutting my eyes, I prepared myself to get punched when, instead, I was met with his lips.

For years, I’d dreamed of this moment. Hours went by with me imagining what it would be like to be kissed by him. I thought it would be warm like his smiles and consuming like his hugs. I knew it would be a passionate kiss, just like his character, and imagined it like a warm summer breeze that hits you after a long day, making you grateful for being alive.

But it wasn’t.

This kiss wasn’t warm like sunrays, but a blizzard, leaving you cold and alone. Kai wasn’t wrapping me in his embrace as I hoped he would, but grabbing onto me until the places he touched hurt. *All of me hurt.* It was also messy. Not the sexy kind of messy, but the mess left after a storm. Mostly, it was a goodbye, and my heart broke, but I’d yearned for him for so long that even that was okay with me.

Slowly, Kai’s hands dropped from around me before he stepped back. I opened my eyes just in time to catch him wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. *Disgust.* That was what he looked at me with before he turned around and walked out of my room and probably my life.

Kai

I didn’t know what I was doing, thinking, or feeling. My head and body were like a train that had gone off the rails and was speeding down a cliff.

Ash wasn’t supposed to be gay because it changed everything between us. The way we hung, the way we looked at each other, the way we loved each other.

Fuck no.

I didn’t love him *that* way because I wasn’t gay.

So why did you kiss him?

I kissed him because of the alcohol.

Yeah, right.

Knowing that was a big fat lie scared the crap out of me. I kissed Ash because I couldn’t bear seeing him so scared.

And because you were curious.

Screaming my heart out, I punched the steering wheel until I nearly broke the fucking horn. There was nothing for me to be curious about. I wasn’t attracted to

men.

End. Of. Story.

Me, being gay and in love with my best friend? Fucking disgusting. I had a girlfriend, and dozens more before her, to prove that I wasn't a homo. I loved women, their bodies, their smell, the way they felt when they rode my cock.

You also love the way his lips felt.

How could I ever look at Ash the same way?

Ashy. My safe island in this crazy world. My parents would end me if they ever knew about that. They'd be repulsed the same way I was disgusted. Not with Ash, *never with Ash*, but with myself.

I was repulsed with myself because thinking about him in any way other than platonic made no sense. I always wanted to be with him because he was my favorite person in the world, and not for any other reason.

Right?

As my head continued to mess with me, I couldn't take it anymore. I couldn't bear another second of being alone with my thoughts, and I needed them to quiet down. I needed them to be gone. I wanted to go to sleep and wake up tomorrow morning as if nothing had ever happened. But knowing it would be impossible, I drove straight back to the party. If I were lucky, my drunk ass would crash into some tree, and we'd call it a night. And if not? I'd drink myself to death.

But as I went back to the party and began drinking, I realized that, like before, booze didn't seem to do the trick. It wasn't strong enough to make the ache go away, not this time. Wandering around like a drunk idiot, I somehow ended up in a room with Nico and some other dudes I'd never met before. Sitting on the couch beside my cousin, I focused on the white lines cut neatly on the glass table.

"You sure about that?" I think Nico asked after I grabbed the dollar bill from him.

Not bothering to answer, I bent down, rolled the bill, and brought it to my nose. What was there to be sure about? *It's just coke*. I'd never done it before, but it was just for tonight. With that thought in mind, I did the line, then popped in some pills just in case this powder didn't do the job.

A tiny bit of guilt crossed my mind as I straightened up and rubbed my nostrils. Ash would be disappointed in me, but if it weren't for him, I wouldn't have done this in the first place.

Now, my guilt was replaced with anger. It was the same anger I felt before, only stronger. How dare he love me? Why would he do that to me, to us? Why ruin the good thing we had?

“Where are you going?” Nico asked when I stood up.

“This shit doesn’t work,” I hissed back, fucking annoyed that I’d wasted my time on this crap.

The second I was out of that room, I picked up my phone and called the second person that came to mind.

“Kai?” Zoe sounded sleepy. Since it was way too late for me to call, I wasn’t too surprised.

“I’m coming over,” I said, then hung up.

I think it was about ten minutes into the drive that I began feeling… *different*, excited, even thrilled. What was I even worrying about until now? Of course I wasn’t gay. I had a fucking girlfriend. A smoking hot girl who I was going to fuck as soon as I saw her. And I sure as fuck did. At least, I think so. At some point, things became… mixed up. And the next thing I remembered was waking up the following day feeling the worst I ever had.

CHAPTER Five

Ash

Sniffing, I cleaned my snot and pulled myself back together before knocking on the door. Shoving my hands in my pockets, I waited for it to be answered. Somehow, I managed to drive here without crashing. It was a miracle because, since Kai left last night, I couldn't stop crying until my eyelids turned heavy and painful.

"Hey." I tried to smile at Jen, my mom's friend, who just opened the door. "Is my mom here?"

Before Jen could answer, Mom had already appeared behind her.

"Ash?" she said, walking down the hall and toward the door.

"H-Hey, Mom." My voice came out hoarse and weak, and it was enough to make her run toward me.

"Oh my God, Ash. What's wrong, baby?" She pulled me into a tight hug that allowed me to fall apart, and I started crying.

After Kai left, I didn't know what to do. It seemed like my world had ended, and it terrified me. Since my father's death, I always tried to "man up" so my mom would feel safe and secure. It was a silly thought because she didn't need a man to feel that way, but still. I hated worrying her, as I was doing right now, but I also didn't know what to do.

"Sweetie, what's wrong?" she asked again, her hands moving my hair away from my sweaty face.

"I-I ruined e-everything."

"I'll talk with you later, Jen," Mom said, then walked me back to the car.

Once inside, she didn't ask me why I was crying as if our dog had just died and instead turned on the car and drove off. Thirty minutes later, with a cup of hot chocolate she'd bought for each of us, she parked the truck in front of her favorite shore.

Turning off the engine, she sighed deeply and leaned back in her seat, her brown eyes on me. "So are you going to tell me who hurt you so I can go over

there and kick their ass?" She pointed over to the trunk with her thumb. "I've brought shovels and garbage bags, just in case."

I snorted a laugh, but it came out awkward because I was all snotty and raspy.

Despite her joke, it was time for us to be serious, so I held my cup a little bit stronger and took a deep breath.

"I-I'm gay, Mom," I confessed, then looked back at her, ready for the judgment in her eyes. But there was none, and Mom continued to look at me the same way she always had.

"Okay. That's totally okay, baby." She brushed her hand over my hair. "Is that why you cried? You were worried I wouldn't accept you?"

I shook my head, and she bit her bottom lip.

"Was it Kai?"

The mere mention of his name got me crying again, and unable to speak, I nodded. Mom quickly put her drink away and pulled me into a tight hug, all while making sure I didn't spill mine.

"I love him, Mom." I cried into her embrace. "I don't want to, but I can't help it."

"Oh." I think she was crying now, too. "Don't apologize for loving someone, baby. Don't you ever dare apologize for love." She hugged me a little bit closer. "Do you hear me?"

I nodded, even though I doubted her words.

Once I calmed down, I told Mom about everything that had happened, starting with Nico's party and all the way to last night. Since it was all so fresh and raw, opening up wasn't easy, far from it even. But with each word that I spoke, the better I felt.

"What if he'll never speak to me again?" I asked.

Mom let out a soft chuckle, then moved her hand through her dark hair.

"Then he's a shitty guy."

"Mom!" I yelped, and she shrugged.

"What? If Kai would choose to cut ties with you because of who you are, then he was never worth it to begin with, Ash." She held my stare. "Never cross an ocean for someone who won't cross it for you." A soft smile then pulled on her lips. "Babe, you gotta understand. It will take time, and you'll hurt. But hurting is part of life. The best way is to go right through it, hoping you'll come out of it stronger." I knew she was speaking from her own experience. After my dad's death, it wasn't easy for her, but like she just said, she came out of it stronger.

We sank into a lingering silence which she broke by nudging my arm.

“Listen to us, crying like two babies.” She winked. “How about we move our asses, use those two boards in the trunk, and go catch some waves?”

My mom was the best.

Nodding, I smiled back at her. “Sounds good.”

While surfing didn’t suddenly heal my aching heart, it did help. Each wave that I caught brought me back to Kai, and it hurt, but it also reminded me that I was still here, alive, doing what I loved the most in the world. So maybe Mom was right, and it was just a matter of time until things would be good again.

CHAPTER Six

Ash

After mentally preparing myself over the weekend to face Kai on Monday, I was almost ready. The last few days were an emotional roller coaster with coming out to Mom and, later on, to Aiden. Every Saturday, we had this small tradition where the three of us sat down to a family dinner, with Kai often joining us. Since Mom and I cooked like shit, Kai and Aiden always took cooking upon themselves. They were great chefs, and their teamwork was on point. Kai hadn't joined last Saturday for obvious reasons, but it was for the better. Being just the three of us made it easier for me to come out to Aiden, who took it the same way Mom had. Knowing I had their support made coming to school today a lot easier. Only Kai hadn't shown up to any of our classes. So after I was done with swimming practice, which he'd also skipped, I tracked down Zoe, who was on the girls' team.

"Hey, Zoe," I said, stepping close to her while she was busy drying her hair with a towel.

"Hey," she answered back half-heartedly, looking rather annoyed.

Okay, then…

"Do you know where Kai is?"

"Don't know and don't care," she snarled, throwing the towel into her gym bag and zipping it.

"Did something happen between you two?" It was the first thing I asked because, the last I knew, they were fine. More than fine. They were happily in love. *Yeah, Ash, that's a way to make yourself feel better.* And while I didn't want Zoe to get hurt, since she was still a friend, I wouldn't be sad if they broke up.

"He pushed me, Chief."

Suddenly, I wasn't all that giddy about their supposed breakup.

Kai did what now?

"What do you mean he pushed you?" My brows pulled close because what she said was out of character for him. Kai would never be violent toward a

woman, especially his girlfriend.

Looking around to see no one was standing too close, Zoe sighed, then returned her eyes to me. “We went to the movies on Saturday, and after we got to our seats and all, he pulled out a bottle of scotch. I was like, ‘What the actual fuck, Kai?’ because why would he bring booze to the cinema?” While speaking, she began pulling up her hair into this messy bun on top of her head. “Anyway, I got angry with him and went back to the car when he followed me. We got into a fight, and I tried to take the bottle away from him. He then got really pissed off.” She paused and pressed her lips together. “Chief, I’ve never seen him so angry. I swear to God, he looked like someone else. But, whatever, he got pissed off and pushed me. After that, I grabbed my things and drove off. He hasn’t called to apologize since, and I doubt I’ll take him back. I want nothing to do with a drunk.”

A drunk?

What Kai did was incredibly wrong, but he wasn’t *a* drunk, just drunk. Whenever things got rough with his parents, Kai would go out and party to release some steam. That was his way of coping. His folks were never happy with him, no matter what he did, and always tried to push him into a box that didn’t fit. Sometimes, he told me he felt like a dummy in the making. His parents pushed and pulled, forcing him to act the part and follow their lead even when it didn’t fit his character. They never saw him for who he was, and that typically was why he’d snap. Having said that, as angry as he got, Kai didn’t have violent outbursts.

So, while I did feel bad for Zoe, I’d still have to give Kai the benefit of the doubt until I heard what he had to say about this.



Parked outside Rob’s restaurant, I was ready to get out of my truck when my phone rang. Seeing the name on the screen, I nearly dropped my phone but got a hold of myself beforehand and answered the call.

“H-Hey.”

“I was beginning to think you gave me the wrong number,” Soren said, his voice as smooth and sexy as I remembered.

“No, no,” I chuckled nervously, my eyes focusing on the car’s dashboard. “Sorry I didn’t text back. I was just busy.” Soren had texted me over the weekend, but I was too caught up with Kai to even consider talking to someone else.

“They sure do keep you busy in Economics if you don’t even have a minute to text back.”

Good thing he said that because I’d completely forgotten my lie.

“Yeah… They work us hard.”

Soren chuckled, but it was more of a tired drawl than an awkward laugh like my own.

“You sure know how to keep a man hanging,” he said, causing my skin to heat up.

“Y-You think so?” I asked while pushing random buttons in the car to keep myself busy.

“Oh, for sure.” He paused for a second. “I have no doubt you can bring a man to his knees without even trying.”

Heat rushed to my cheeks, and my breath caught. On the one hand, he was so suave and composed, while on the other, he said things that set my body on fire.

“And you know what the sexiest part is?” he asked, his voice dancing on my eager nerves.

I blurted a weak no.

“The sexiest part is you not even realizing what you’re capable of, Ashton. It’s absolutely mind-blowing.”

A flutter ran through me, and I fought hard not to giggle because, *holy shit*, he was saying such bold things. Me being sexy? *Come on.* I was an awkward kid who spent most of his Friday nights binge-watching old movies with his mom. Not to mention, I was a virgin whose experience was limited to his right hand. So him thinking I knew how to bring a man to his knees was simply outrageous.

“Am I making you feel awkward?” he then asked.

“N-No. Not at all.” I swallowed my embarrassment. “It’s just… I think you got the wrong impression of me.”

Soren let out that soft chuckle again.

“And I think you’ve got the wrong perception about yourself, beautiful. So how about you let me take you out on a date so we can see who’s right?”

He was so good with words, making it even more obvious he was out of my league in every possible way. Yet, he wanted me, and it felt nice.

“Okay.” I smiled to myself. “But I’m letting you know that you’re set up for disappointment.”

“That’s never going to be the case.” His words carried a promise. “Sadly, I have to hang up now, but I’ll text you the details.”

“O-Okay.” *Seems like this is the only word I can come up with at the moment.*

“I truly can’t wait to see you, Ashton.” With that, he ended the call, leaving

me with a big-ass smile plastered on my flushed face.

Fanning myself since it was suddenly incredibly hot inside my pickup truck, I got out. His game was unreal, leaving me even more insecure about my lack of experience. It was also amazing how confident Soren was.

Was he out? Did his friends and family know he was gay? Or was it a secret? I quickly brushed off those thoughts. A man like Soren probably had no secrets to hide as he was perfect.

Walking into the restaurant, I greeted everyone and was soon asked by Rob to go and do inventory in the back storage. I loved doing this task since it took at least an hour and was much easier than working with customers.

Our storage room was a small unit in the back of the restaurant, so to get there, I had to go outside through the rear parking lot. Still giddy about the talk I'd had with Soren, I pulled out the unit's keys and was ready to start working when I spotted Kai smoking with his eyes closed while leaning against the wall.

"Aren't you supposed to be working?" I asked, pocketing the keys while checking out his uniform.

"I took a smoking break," he said, opening his eyes. They were bloodshot red, meaning he was either tired or stoned. Going by the dark circles around them, I wanted to believe it was due to the former.

"Is everything okay?" I asked, and he snorted a tired laugh. Frowning at his reaction, I moved to open the door when he blocked my way.

"What's up with that face, Ash?" He pointed at me, and I pushed his hand away.

"You're being an asshole right now."

"I thought that's what you liked, no? Assholes?" He grinned. "Or do you prefer to be the one getting it?"

"Fuck you," I snapped, hurt by his words, but he didn't seem to care and instead flashed me a toothy grin.

"I'm just joking, *Ashy*." He put his hand on my shirt and tried to pull me close.

"Don't touch me," I argued, pushing him away only for him to grab my hips and turn us around so my back hit the wall.

"Suddenly, you don't want me to touch you?" He leaned close, his lips an inch from mine.

His breath reeked of alcohol, and I wrinkled my nose.

I want nothing to do with a drunk.

Zoe's words struck me like a hard slap.

"You're drunk," I hissed.

"I went to a party last night and came back home a little too late, that's all."

He shrugged, but his lie reeked the same way the booze did.

"So Zoe was right calling you a drunk."

Anger crossed his face, and he stepped back. Taking a hit from his cigarette, he blew out the smoke. "She's exaggerating like all chicks do."

"You pushed her."

"Fuck her for saying that bullshit," he snarled. "I didn't lay a fucking finger on her. She fell by herself after acting up like a raging cunt."

Shocked, I stared at him with my mouth open. I had never seen Kai act and speak this way in my entire life. It was almost like he was a completely different guy.

"What's gotten into you? Why are you behaving this way?"

Taking another drag, he then tossed the used bud to the ground. "Sorry for not meeting your expectations," he muttered, blowing the smoke in my face. "It's a good thing we're not dating, then. Right?"

He was bringing this up again and mocking me so cruelly.

"Fuck you, Kai."

"Wouldn't you want that?"

Wanting to punch the smirk off his face, I held myself back and instead said, "You think you're my only option out there? You think I'm that desperate that I'll stay hung up on you even after being rejected? You're pathetic."

Kai's brows shot to his hairline. "Will you listen to that." He clapped his hands. "You want to tell me that your virgin ass got a waiting list?"

Kai knew I was still a virgin, and until now, he never gave me shit about it and said it was legit. So him throwing that fact back at me in such a hurtful way was more painful than I could have imagined. Swallowing back my tears, I took a deep breath. "Maybe I do."

"Please," he sneered. "Who'll ever want you?"

My palm hit his cheek before I knew it, leaving him and me shocked.

"J-Just so you know, I have a date." My voice shivered as I held my head high. Even though he was trying to mock the fact that I loved him, I remembered my mom's words and wasn't about to feel ashamed of my feelings.

Rubbing his cheek, Kai continued to look at me, stunned. We never fought, let alone hit each other. This was a first for us, but he asked for it.

"You have a date?"

"Yeah."

"With that rich asshole?"

"He's not an asshole."

Kai snorted. "Yeah, right. And do you honestly think he cares for you?"

"I've had enough of this," I said, turning away from him and pulling the keys

out of my pocket. I wasn't about to let him ruin my excitement over Soren. "I have work to do, and so do you."

My fingers trembled, but I still managed to insert the key into the keyhole and turn it.

"Do you know what I did that night after leaving your house?" he suddenly said.

When I didn't turn around to face him, he went on. "I drove back to Zoe and kissed her."

I felt my heart sink to my stomach.

"And you know what I did after?"

Tears gathered in my eyes.

"I fucked her raw. And her pussy was so fucking good."

Unable to move, I remained in place until I heard him walking away. With shaking hands, I opened the storage room. Nearly falling inside, I shut the door and locked it behind me. With my back pressed against it, I slowly slid to the floor, tears already streaming down my face, and broke down. Not only did he humiliate me, but Kai also managed to make me feel so unworthy. I thought the worst was behind us, but today, he proved me wrong.

He was vengeful, angry, and cruel. So fucking cruel, using my love for him against me.

After putting myself back together, I returned to the restaurant, prepared to tell Rob I was quitting. I loved it here, but working alongside Kai seemed impossible. But as I approached Rob, I found out that Kai had already quit before I could.

What is going on?

CHAPTER Seven

Ash

If it weren't for Soren's text yesterday asking me if I was allergic to anything, I would have thought he'd changed his mind. Thankfully, he didn't, and now that I was done with my shift at the restaurant, I was waiting for him outside to pick me up for our date.

The fight Kai and I had at the beginning of the week left me feeling like shit, and the words he'd thrown at me hit their target. I knew there was no way Soren was actually interested in me, and I didn't need Kai to say it, too, but he did anyway. The fact I'd lied about my age also didn't help my nerves about this date, and now, I was sweating into my clothes with the fear I'd mess the whole thing up.

Five minutes before the time we scheduled, Soren's car pulled up in front of me, and a moment later, Soren got out.

"You look handsome," he said as he rounded the car to greet me with a hug and a kiss on the cheek.

Rubbing the back of my neck, I bit my lip. We weren't the only ones out here on the street, and Soren sure did attract attention. Especially with the way he looked today. He screamed of old money, dressed in a white linen shirt, gray slacks that looked expensive, and a pair of stylish sunglasses.

"I look like a joke compared to you," I said, a bit embarrassed of my ripped jeans and a plain T-shirt. I'd never cared much for fashion, so my closet was pretty cheap. The truth was I had more wet suits hung in there than actual clothes.

"What on earth are you talking about?" Soren gave me a flattering once-over. "You look absolutely gorgeous, Ashton."

Ashton. My name slipping out of his sophisticated mouth ran shivers down my spine. A blush crept to my face, and I tried to brush it off by rubbing my cheeks with the back of my fist.

"Let's go, or we'll be late," Soren offered, cutting off my awkwardness while

opening the car door for me.

“Where are we going?” I asked after getting in, enjoying the scent of the leather seats mixing with Soren’s clean cologne.

“You’ll find out soon enough.”



“Are you worried I might kidnap you?” Soren asked while waiting for me to step out of his car and join him on the runway.

Taking his hand, I finally did, my eyes never leaving the private jet standing in the middle of the lane.

“You have a plane?” I blurted out, asking the question I’d had in mind ever since we entered the small private airport.

“Well.” Holding my hand, he began leading the way toward the jet. “It’s one of the family’s private jets, so technically, it isn’t mine.” As we reached the stairs, he waited for me to climb first, then continued. “But I use it quite often.”

Going to school in Bay High, I was used to teens flexing their money. Kai and Zoe both came from wealthy families, but not *this* type of wealthy.

The small crew greeted us, and once Soren and I settled on the comfy leather seats, the flight attendant announced we’d take off soon.

“Is there anything you’d like to drink?” Soren asked, and I shook my head.

I was too overwhelmed to drink, eat, or even breathe.

Still nervous, my eyes continued to look around the small jet until something occurred to me. “I have work tomorrow morning.”

“You’re so cute,” he chuckled and reached to rub my hand. “But don’t worry, we’ll be back in LA before night.”

His light touch made me a bit less nervous, and I nodded. This date, which had only just started, felt like a scene from a movie I didn’t belong in. But whenever Soren looked my way, with eyes the color of stormy clouds, I wanted to belong. And why shouldn’t I? My current life wasn’t at all that glamorous. My heart just got broken by the person I loved the most in this world, and it didn’t look like it was going to get better anytime soon.

So, if a man I hardly knew was already able to make me feel more precious than Kai ever had, why shouldn’t I enjoy it? Why should I keep thinking back on how cruel Kai was when I could enjoy Soren’s company? *I shouldn’t.* As easy as that.

And if I thought for a mere moment that a private plane would be the pick of the evening, I was wrong.

So incredibly wrong.

After an hour-and-a-half flight, we landed in Sonoma Valley, where another car awaited us. Again, not knowing my way around cars, all I could say was that it looked pretty. *And expensive.*

It was still daylight as we drove through miles and miles of vineyards until we reached a restaurant located in the middle of one. It was a beautiful building made out of stone that reminded me of houses in Italy. I'd never been there before, but my parents' honeymoon was in Italy, and Mom still had a photo album from then. I used to spend hours looking at the old images of my parents being young and in love, secretly hoping to create my own memories there one day.

"I can't say this is the same as the one in Europe, but it's as close as it gets," Soren said, referring to the winery we were led through while being walked to our tables. "I would have taken you to Tuscany if it weren't for school and work. But perhaps, next time, we can arrange a long weekend?"

My heart missed a beat, not only because he'd just described my secret fantasy but also because he mentioned a *next time*.

Does that mean he likes me?

"I don't think I can afford to go there," I said, feeling sad because it could have been a dream come true.

Shaking his head, Soren placed his hand behind my back and leaned close. "When you're saying such cute things, I find it hard to resist." He let go of me and went on to speak with the waiter, leaving me confused.

Resist? Resist what? And what part about me being broke was cute?

I couldn't dive deeper into it because soon, we sat down next to a small table with a stunning view of the valley. It was just then that the sun began to set, painting the sky with beautiful shades of peach.

Not a minute had passed, and the waiter had already placed the first dish before me. I looked down at the fancy-looking plate, beef tartare, and then up to Soren.

"I hope you don't mind that I took the initiative and ordered for us," he explained while spreading a white napkin over his lap. "This is a three-star restaurant. The waiting list is around two years in advance, but thankfully, the chef is a dear family friend, and he made sure we'd have the best table."

Did I mind it? Not at all. If anything, I found it flattering that he'd taken the time to think all this through.

"Is this why you asked me if I had any allergies?" I asked while debating with myself if I should start eating or wait for him.

"Yes." Soren smiled. "I have the most annoying allergy to mushrooms, so I

always make sure to check."

"Is it a bad one?" I used to have a friend who had a life-threatening allergy to peanuts.

"If you ever want to kill me, give me a champignon mushroom." He winked, and I chuckled.

"Don't worry, I won't."

"Here, try this." Putting a bit from the tartare on his fork, Soren then brought it to my mouth. Parting my lips for him, I took the small bite.

It tasted *weird*, and I guess my face was telling because Soren laughed.

"You don't like it?"

"No." I shook my head, an awkward smile on my face. "It's not that. It's just so… raw?"

"That's the point of tartare." His voice was adoring. "But it can be an acquired taste, same as with wine, and speaking of which, I would have offered you a drink, but as you're not twenty-one yet, it's a bit problematic."

My cheeks burned with the shame of my lie. I wondered how he'd react when he found out about my *real* age. Pushing the thought aside, since I'd rather enjoy my date, I took another bite of the beef.

"You know, on second thought, it doesn't taste too bad," I lied again since it was still too fucking raw.

As dinner progressed, so did our conversation. If at first there was awkwardness, little by little, my stress began to disappear, until I truly enjoyed myself. Soren was so charming and handsome that half the time, I didn't even realize he'd spoken because I was so immersed in his looks.

"Are you any good at it?" Soren asked after I told him I love surfing.

"I did participate in a few competitions and even won first place, but I don't think I'm better than anyone else." I also planned on making a career out of surfing, but I couldn't tell him that without selling myself out.

Shaking his head, Soren leaned back on his chair. "If you won first place, you're most definitely better than others, Ashton. It almost sounds like you're apologizing for winning."

It wasn't that I felt bad for taking first place, but more like I didn't enjoy the attention that came with it. I didn't surf to win prizes but because I loved it. I'd only started to compete after realizing it was the best way to make a career out of surfing. Which could be awesome, considering I hated school.

"I just don't like to brag," I said.

"It's not bragging when it's justified." Soren tilted his head, his stunning eyes piercing into me. "Don't be ashamed of being a winner."

I somehow found his cockiness sexy. Was that weird?

“Can you still compete while going to college? Isn’t it a bit too hard?” he asked after putting down his wine glass.

Trying to avoid the question, I took a big bite from my food. After taking my sweet time chewing, I cleaned my lips with the napkin. “Well, enough about me. Maybe tell me about yourself?” So far, he’d asked most of the questions. “Why did you choose to become a lawyer?”

“I always loved the theater, and there’s no better stage than the court.”

My brows pulled close. “Are you serious?”

“Oh, for sure.” He grinned. “In the leading role, you have your defense lawyer, while the judge and jury are your crowd, and the courtroom is your stage.”

Putting my elbows on the table, I leaned closer. “And what about the defendant?”

Soren huffed. “He’s nothing but an extra,” he said, giving me a teasing look. “A trial is a one-man show in which you need to sell your case. Whether arguing for someone’s innocence or reciting Shakespeare’s lines, it doesn’t matter. As a defense lawyer, you act the part and sell the show.”

The more Soren spoke, the more I realized how incredible he was. If he carried the same attitude in court, I had no doubt he’d never lose a case.

“But isn’t working with criminals scary? Wouldn’t you rather work for the attorney general?”

“Working for the attorney general?” He snorted a laugh. “You are honestly the cutest little thing.” He bit on his bottom lip before emptying his wineglass.

“W-What did I do now?”

“Nothing. Absolutely nothing. And, to answer your question, no. I don’t find working with criminals scary at all. My grandfather, whom I always looked up to, was a defense lawyer. He also had his own law firm that my father now runs.”

That sounds sweet, like a family business.

“So, are you going to work there once you graduate?”

“Of course not.”

Wait, what?

“Why wouldn’t you?” I asked, confused.

“Because I love winning, and as much as I love my father, I plan to learn from the best, and he’s not the best.”

The waiter then came and took away our empty dishes and quickly cleaned up the table, supplying us with new cutlery for dessert.

“Isn’t that a bit mean? Won’t his feelings get hurt?”

“I believe involving emotions where they don’t belong is pointless, Ashton.

Hence, the use of ‘mean’ is irrelevant in this case. My father knows he’ll forever have my love and respect, but it doesn’t mean I wouldn’t take away his clients one day.”

“That’s a bit harsh,” I said.

“That’s life for you.”

It was crazy to believe Soren was only a few years older than me, with how smart and mature he was. His perspective on life was clearly different from my own, but perhaps I should learn from him?

Reaching forward, Soren grabbed my hand and tangled our fingers together. His soft skin was overshadowed by how cold his hands were, and it made me think of an old, lonely man. Still, I enjoyed the touch.

“I sense you’re thinking too hard about the things I say, Ashton, so don’t. I’m well aware I can come off like a total snob.”

“No!” I cut into his words, clenching his hand harder. “Not at all.” My cheeks flushed red.

“Good. Because I truly enjoyed tonight and would love to see you again.”

Holy shit. Is this actually happening? Not only was it ridiculous that Soren wanted us to go on another date, but it was also exactly what I wanted, too.

“Well, we still have the whole flight back home for you to change your mind.” My joke failed as it only fed my insecurities.

Soren noticed my change of mood, and he caressed my hand with his thumb before bringing it to his lips and kissing the back of my palm. Despite his cold skin, his touch was nothing but warm.

“You’ll find out, soon enough, that I never change my mind once it’s set.”



Ash

For our second date, Soren took me for a sail on his yacht, and on our third, we drove race cars. Apparently, when rich enough, you can rent an entire racetrack just for yourself. It was an experience, to say the least, especially after seeing Soren dressed like a race driver. That day, I discovered that he was quite fond of cars and that his family had an impressive collection.

So far, each time we met was extraordinary, providing me with an escape from my everyday life. Soren was sweet and considerate, always prioritizing me. It was a complete one-eighty from how Kai had treated me the past few weeks. Speaking of Kai, we hadn't met all that much because he'd been skipping school lately, and when he did show up, he acted like I didn't exist. Being ignored stung, but it was much better than being told how much he loved sleeping with Zoe or how unlikely it was for anyone to ever want me.

And while I did notice an alarming change in him, he didn't allow me to get close enough to find out what it was. The other day, I called Nico, his cousin, who told me Kai was going out nearly every night. I asked Nico if he joined him, but he said no since he had school, and partying all week the way Kai was doing was impossible to keep up with. It worried me, but when I saw that Zoe and Kai were back together, I assumed it was her job to take care of him as he made it more than clear I was no longer wanted in his life.

Accepting this new reality was difficult because regardless of my feelings for him, Kai was like another part of me. He'd been there since I was a kid—my partner in crime in whatever shit we did together. He was my summer and spring, but lately, I was learning to like winter, too.

"Are you ready?" Soren asked as he walked toward me.

"I'm not sure. Is it supposed to be this tight?" I frowned while checking myself in the mirror.

Today, Soren had taken me to his family stables just outside the city, where I was about to ride a horse for the first time. He decided to take me riding after I

confessed I'd never been on a horse before, which sounded entirely absurd to him. What could I say? The only riding I knew was tube riding.

The breeches he bought me clung to my thighs and ass like a second skin. The fact they were white didn't help my insecurity about wearing them. The shirt he gave me was just as bad. It was so tight it emphasized every part of my chest and abs. I wasn't ashamed of my body as I'd been working hard on it for the past year by going to the gym almost every day. But at the moment, I felt naked with how embarrassed I was.

"Let me see," he said, standing behind me so we both faced the mirror. His hands moved to my hips while his eyes continued to study our reflection. He was also dressed for a ride, only his clothes were all black.

"It sits perfectly." He smiled, his hands still holding my hips.

Swallowing hard, I tried to resist the blush sneaking to my hot cheeks. It wasn't that I didn't like it when he flattered me, but the other way around. I liked it way too much.

"You think so?" I turned to face him.

"Yeah," he said, his voice low as he pulled me a little bit closer until I was nearly pressed to his chest.

Now, I was definitely blushing. Looking down between us, I tried to hide my reaction, only Soren didn't seem to agree with that. Hooking his thumb underneath my chin, he forced me to look up and meet his eyes.

"You look absolutely gorgeous, Ashton. I can't wait to teach you how to *ride*."

His words were enough to set my body on fire because it wasn't his horse I was suddenly interested in riding but his—*holy shit*.

His dick.

I most definitely wanted to ride his dick, and from the lust in his piercing stare, Soren had the same thought. At least, I hoped he did. It would be a shame if not. But who was I kidding? My virgin ass didn't know how to ride a horse or a cock.

All those thoughts were extremely dangerous with how close I was to Soren and how tight those pants were, but by some miracle, my dick didn't betray me.

Finally stepping back, Soren turned around and began walking away. "Let's go," he said while my eyes were busy checking out *his* ass.



"I told you I'd suck," I huffed after we put the horses back in their stables.

“I think you did great for your first time,” Soren said, winking at me over his shoulder before returning to take off his horse’s harness. “All it takes is some practice, and you’ll be a pro in no time.”

“A pro, huh?” I kicked some straw on the ground. I would have fallen off the horse twice if it hadn’t been for Soren keeping a hold of it. “Have you been riding horses for long?” I asked.

“Equestrianism was always a passion of mine, but sadly, I no longer have the time for it, so it’s become more of a hobby.”

“You have many hobbies,” I chuckled. “Expensive hobbies. Sailing, driving race cars, *equestrianism*.”

He patted his horse before closing the stall door and coming toward me. “I’m not ashamed of having money or admitting to having an expensive taste for unique things.” He smiled softly while his eyes drank me up slowly.

I let out an awkward laugh. “You always say things like that.” I placed my hand on his wide chest.

“*Things*?” He covered my hand with his.

“Yeah,” I murmured awkwardly, my eyes locked on our laced fingers. “*Things* that can be interpreted in more ways than one.”

In a quick move, Soren yanked me close and then walked us back into an empty stall, stopping once my back hit the wall. His lips pulled into a half smile as he looked at me through lowered eyelashes.

“So are you saying I’m being too obvious?” His hands moved down to my hips, his grip firm and possessive.

Shaking my head, I took a deep breath. “I-I’m saying you aren’t being obvious enough.”

Something gleamed in his eyes before he pulled me hard against him.

“Kiss me,” he said, his words an order I obeyed.

The next moment, I closed my eyes, placed my fingers against his chiseled jaw, and leaned close until meeting his lips. But I didn’t kiss him. Unsure of what to do, I stayed put with our lips pressed together, holding my breath while waiting for him to lead the way. And he did.

Moving his hand to my neck, Soren held me close while kissing me back. He wasn’t hesitant like me. Of course, he wasn’t, as he ravished my mouth with his. Heat flooded my body, and I moaned into his mouth. Taking advantage, Soren pushed his tongue in and swirled it around mine. My eyes rolled to the back of my head with how good it felt. *How consuming*. Unlike when Kai kissed me, *this* kiss was hot and warm. It was adoring and passionate, and I never wanted it to end. Soren’s body melted into mine, and it was the best I’d ever felt.

Untucking my shirt from my pants, he slipped his fingers underneath and

caressed them over my skin. His hands warmed my body with ease, turning the places he touched *hot*. My hard cock throbbed in my breeches, begging for relief as he licked into my mouth, his tongue playing with mine.

“Aren’t you the sweetest thing,” he drawled in my ear while pushing his thigh between my legs, pressing hard against my stiff length.

I moaned, then thrust my hips forward, loving the pressure and desperate for more.

Enjoying my reaction, Soren smirked before returning to my mouth and kissing me with such passion that it consumed every bit of my horny soul. It was sloppy at times, my lips feeling swollen and wet from the spit while our tongues danced around each other. Moving his hands down my body, his fingers played with the waistband of my pants while I wrapped my arms around his neck. Being at his mercy felt so good that I was more than willing for Soren to do whatever he wanted with me. My body screamed to be held by him as he continued to worship me through his touch. With his mouth not leaving mine, he thrust against me, my dick throbbing with the friction until I was ready to burst.

But then, in a split second, it all came to an end when Soren pulled back.

“Ah, shit,” he hissed, adjusting himself. “I planned to take it slow.”

“W-Why?” I blurted out, then quickly covered my mouth. *What the fuck was wrong with me?*

Biting his lip, which was slightly swollen, Soren ran his fingers through his hair, fixing it after I messed it up. *Am I looking as kissable as he does right now?*

“Because there’s no rush,” he explained, taking my hand in his. “And because I want you to feel comfortable around me without worrying about sex.”

My face was already flushed red, but it didn’t stop me from blushing harder. “But what if I want to have sex?”

Soren chuckled, but before I could worry if I had embarrassed myself again, he spoke.

“You’ve got to stop saying such cute things, or I’ll really lose control.”

Would it be such a bad thing?

“Now, come. We need to change before I take you out for dinner.”

My stomach churned at his words. I was beginning to realize how much I enjoyed being told what to do by him. But it wasn’t just that. The way he took care of me gave my body a sense of relief I was a stranger to, and I savored those moments. The way he held my hand, bought me new clothes to wear, opened the car door for me, and later, picked out what we’d eat—I loved all of it.

With Soren, I didn’t need to think. I didn’t need to be anything but *his*.

CHAPTER Nine

Ash

“Happy birthday, kiddo,” Aiden said while ruffling my hair until it looked like I had been electrocuted by lightning.

“Thanks,” I chuckled, moving my hand over my head to fix the mess he created.

“What’s it like to be a young man of eighteen? Is the weight of the adult world already weighing on your young shoulders?”

I rolled my eyes at him, and Aiden laughed. His sense of humor was almost as bad as Kai’s. Suddenly, deep sadness hit me. Today would be the first time in years I’d spend my birthday without Kai. Each year, we would go out of our way to do something crazy for the other’s birthday. When I turned seventeen, Kai had kidnapped me from school for a weekend in Palm Springs. It would have been perfect if not for the near heart attack he gave me by covering my head with a bag and pushing me into his car. The first few minutes, I actually thought I was being abducted.

“So, where are we going to eat tonight?” Mom asked after she joined us in the living room.

“How about fish tacos?” I suggested, my stomach already making sounds of agreement.

“Whatever you want, birthday boy.” She winked, then picked up her wallet. “Is it going to be just the three of us?”

Just the three of us. *Way to rub salt into the wound, Mom*. I was about to tell her yes, that Kai wouldn’t be joining us, when my phone rang, and I saw it was Rob. Since I’d taken the day off, it was weird for him to be calling.

“I’ll be right back,” I announced to the room before stepping out of the living room to take the call.

“I’ve got something that belongs to you,” Rob grunted the second I picked up, sounding pissed off. “Come and pick him up right now!” With that, he ended the call.

“Who was that?” Mom asked after I grabbed the keys to my truck off the table.

“It’s Rob, something about work. I need to go there quickly, so we’ll go once I’m back. Alright?”

Mom and Aiden exchanged odd looks. “Is everything cool?” she asked.

“Yeah.” *I have no idea.* “I’ll be back soon.”



Stepping into the packed restaurant, I tracked Rob in his usual spot behind the counter.

“In the back,” he grunted, pointing his thumb over his shoulder before I could even say hello.

Taking a deep breath, I rubbed my palms together and began walking toward the kitchen, hoping my suspicion would be wrong. Only that it wasn’t, and just like I feared, I found Kai half sprawled on the kitchen floor, either drunk or high.

“We had to pour some water on top of his head to wake him up,” said the cook with his Russian accent and an amused smile.

So that explains the wet clothes. At least it isn’t piss.

While seeing Kai this way broke my fucking heart, it also infuriated me. Why the hell was he drunk so early in the evening? The last time Kai and I had talked, combined with what Zoe had told me and his absence from school, turned on all the red lights in my head. And if before I had suspicions something was wrong, tonight confirmed them all.

With a deep sigh, I crouched beside him. “Hey,” I whispered, putting my hand on his cheek. “Kai.”

He grimaced and then squeezed his eyes before blinking them open. His pupils were blown to the size of a coin, and he was clearly out of it.

“Ashy?” He grinned, his voice wavy. “Happy birthday, Ashy.” His smile spread wider, and he placed his hand on top of mine while his blue eyes looked at me as if everything was normal. But then, his face paled, and he shifted his head aside to hurl into the pot that was already full of his vomit.

Rubbing his back, I looked aside while trying not to gag myself. The sound and smell always made me feel sick.

“Yeah, buddy, let it all out,” I sighed, patting his back.

“Ha!” the cook laughed with his rolling accent. “Good thing we put pot there, yes?”

Ten minutes later, I managed to drag Kai’s heavy ass into my truck, and after

a thirty-minute drive, I pulled the car into our favorite shore parking lot. It stood empty, as it was already too late to surf, but the ocean breeze would help sober him up.

Kai had fallen asleep the minute his ass hit the car's seat and slept through the whole ride. Since he was still dozing off, I grabbed my hoodie from the back seat and got out of the car. Putting it on, I leaned back against the hood with my hands shoved in the front pockets and watched the horizon. There was something so threatening about the spreading ocean that, funnily enough, made it look peaceful.

A couple of minutes later, I pulled out my phone and texted Mom, letting her know we'd have to rain check tonight's dinner while also promising her she had no reason to worry. I pocketed my phone when the truck's door opened, and Kai got out.

"What are we doing here?" he asked, voice heavy with sleep, while rubbing his eyes.

From his annoyed tone and deep grimace, I could already tell he'd sobered up a bit.

"I took us for a drive so you'd sober up."

"Why would you do that?" he hissed.

"Maybe because you showed up at Rob's dead-ass drunk," I pointed out, my brows pinched close as I gave him an annoyed look. "What's going on with you?"

Rounding the truck, Kai stopped right before me. Moving his eyes up and down my body, he touched the hem of my hoodie. "That's cute," he said, ignoring what I'd just asked.

"Kai—"

"Lilac was always your color."

He was acting weird, even more so as he stepped closer.

"Are you listening to me?"

"I get why Zoe wanted it, although it wouldn't look as good on her."

Why was he saying that all of a sudden while moving his hands to grab my hips?

"Everything was okay until you decided to confess," he whispered, his eyes not meeting mine. "Everything was fine until you changed it." There was anger in his voice, anger that made me feel guilty.

So guilty.

"You could have just lied. Told me it was all bullshit and that you weren't gay, but instead, you had to be honest?" His mouth twisted like speaking hurt him.

“It’s who I am.”

He let out a fake laugh. “Seriously? After years of keeping it a secret, suddenly, it’s who you are?”

His words reeked of hate the same way his breath reeked from booze and vomit.

“You could have lied and saved us from this shit, but you didn’t.” He leaned closer, his lips hovering over my skin. “And now, I can’t stop thinking about you.” While keeping one hand on my hips, he moved the other to my face. “I can’t help but think what it would be like to kiss you again.” He dragged the pads of his fingers over my lips. “To hold you.” He grabbed me tighter until our bodies were pressed together. “To fuck you.”

Despite his words and how close he held me, it wasn’t lust driving his actions but pain.

Disgust.

His bottom lip trembled as his whole face twisted with hurt. “No matter what I try to do to make those *sick* thoughts go away, they won’t.”

Sick. My love for him wasn’t natural but a perversion. Something he wished wasn’t there. Something *I* wished wasn’t there.

My eyes stung, and my throat turned dry with the tears I tried to swallow back. No matter how right kissing Soren felt or how kind Mom and Aiden were when I came out, when faced with reality, I once again felt ashamed. I believed that Kai blaming me for something I couldn’t control was justified. His fury was okay because *I* ruined what we had.

Taking a deep breath, I placed my arm between us in an attempt to make him move away. Kai didn’t budge and, in a sharp move, grabbed my body and turned me around so I faced the car.

My nerves kicked in at the same time my heart rate increased.

“K-Kai?”

“You ruined me,” he hissed, his hands going down my body while he lowered down until his lips grazed my nape. “You fucking ruined me.”

The next thing I knew, he pulled my pants and boxer briefs down to my thighs while pushing my head against the hood of the truck. Fear struck me, and I tried to look over my shoulder, only to find him fumbling with his zipper.

Standing here, with my bare ass out and my body bent, I could still fight him. I knew I had the strength to push him off me if I wanted to, but that was the thing—I didn’t.

I was the one who’d brought Kai to this place, where he was crying his heart out while rubbing his hard dick on my ass. I was the reason he consumed all this shit that was ruining him from the inside. I was the one to break him first, so it

was only fair for him to break me, too. And so, I didn't push him off and instead closed my eyes and bit my lip as he began moving his hips.

He didn't penetrate me but instead pushed his dick between my thighs and used them to get off. I never imagined being held by him would make me feel this lonely, but it did. With each thrust, more of his tears landed on my back and neck; each weighed more than the other.

He didn't ask for permission to do this, but he also didn't force himself on me. Not in the slightest. I allowed him to do this, to use me, because it felt like the least I could do after pushing him to this position.

Hugging his arms around me, he desperately held on to me as he increased his pace until his body shuddered, and he swore under his heavy breath. His cock throbbed and pulsed a second before he spilled between my thighs.

"S-Shit," he hissed, then stepped back, giving me space to digest what just happened.

Taking a deep breath, I ignored my flaccid dick and pulled my pants back up. It felt wet and uncomfortable, but mostly, the cum dripping down my legs filled me with regret. Regret for ever allowing my heart to fall for him.

After I fixed myself, I turned to find Kai walking around in circles, his fingers running through his messy hair.

"Kai." I tried to reach for his shoulder.

"Don't touch me!" he shouted, then punched me right in the face, sending me to the ground.

I landed on my arm, and it hurt like a bitch. But before I could dive deeper into the throbbing ache in my wrist or the blood coming out of my nose, Kai sat on top of me and yanked me by the collar of my hoodie.

"I was straight until you said those things to me." Tears ran down his flushed face. "But you said them and put those sick thoughts in my head. Now, everything is fucked-up." His voice turned tight with crying. "You ruined my fucking life," he wept as he bent down and buried his head in the crook of my neck.

It was beyond me how, despite what he claimed, he still held on to me. He was being so hurtful, selfishly stealing more pieces of my aching soul at the same time he was hugging me. But loving him was stronger than my reason, so I wrapped my arms around his trembling body and hugged him close. Squeezing my eyes shut, I listened to him cry while taking a deep inhale of his scent. It was unfamiliar, reeking of booze and whatnot. The direct opposite of the summer I once associated him with.

We stayed in this position on the ground until he stopped crying and moved from above me. Now, sitting with his back against the car, he rubbed his face

with his dirty palms.

After cleaning the blood from my nose with the sleeve of my hoodie, I moved to sit beside him. Usually, I enjoyed the silence because I wasn't the type of person who needed to fill the void with words, but not this type of deadly stillness that made it hard to breathe.

"I know you're probably confused right now," I began saying, trying to think of the right words. "And I know that it's hard on you because of your parents, but—"

"It's not that," he rasped, and even though he was trying to make me stop talking, I didn't allow it.

I have to tell him it will be okay. While I had Mom and Aiden by my side, Kai had no support at home. He was probably freaking out, the same way I was only a few weeks ago. *If not more*. And because I was the one making him doubt everything he thought about himself, coming to me wasn't an option.

"Kai, listen to me. Everything will be back to normal before you—"

"Zoe's pregnant."

My heart stopped, and it felt like I was just kicked in the chest by a professional soccer player. It was so shocking that, like an idiot, I asked him to repeat what he'd just said.

"She's pregnant." His voice cracked, and he buried his face in his hands as he began crying again. "My life is fucking over."

All of a sudden, I realized his fear. And while I wished to make him feel better, I had no idea how. They were both still seventeen, in high school, with big plans for the future. Having a baby was definitely the worst thing that could happen to either of them at this point in life, and Kai knew it, hence why he was breaking down.

Pressing my lips together, I placed my hand on his shoulder. "Kai, it's not the end of the world. There are things you can do—"

"There's nothing I can do!" he snapped, pushed my hand away and got up. "Absolutely nothing I can do." Rubbing his face, he shook his head. "I'm seventeen, going to have a baby with a girl I don't even like, while all I can think about is my best friend's dick." After hissing those pitiful words, he pulled out a pack of smokes from his pocket and tried to light one. A few sparks lit up the night, but the cigarette didn't catch the fire. "Fuck!" he shouted, tossing the lighter to the ground.

I stood, picked the lighter off the sand, and moved my fingers over the broken plastic. It was one of the cheap kinds, with an ugly picture of a pink cat on it. We'd bought it together when we were sixteen because the image made us laugh.

“Here.” I offered it to him.

Not taking it back from me, Kai’s eyes moved from my hand to my face before he broke our stare and began walking away.

“Hey, where are you going?” I asked nervously. It was getting late, and we were miles away from the city.

“Doesn’t fucking matter.”

“Kai!” I shouted after him, but that didn’t make him stop.

“Just piss off, Ash, and leave me the fuck alone.”

CHAPTER Ten

Ash

Back in my truck, I had no idea what to do. So many thoughts ran through my head like a storm, leaving me in an utter mess.

Zoe was pregnant.

Zoe was pregnant, meaning Kai would be a dad before we'd even graduate high school, and from the look of it, he was aiming to ruin his life long before that happened. And among all that mess, where was I? Was it really fair of him to blame me for that? Maybe it was. After all, if I had kept my secret, none of this would have ever happened.

I brushed my fingers over the place Kai had punched me, deep down believing I deserved it. On top of it all, my wrist was killing me. It didn't seem broken, but I was pretty sure I sprained it when I fell. Taking a deep breath, I checked myself in the rearview mirror. I looked like shit and felt even worse, and I wasn't at all prepared to face Mom or Aiden. They'd ask questions, and knowing me, I'd probably tell them everything, which I didn't want to do. What Kai did to me tonight was wrong, and I knew Mom and Aiden would see this as an assault, while I… it was complicated. Kai shouldn't have used me the way he did, and I shouldn't have allowed myself to be used, but I did, and the last thing I wanted was for someone to interpret what happened between us the wrong way. Because even if I felt dirty as fuck, with Kai's dried cum still coating my thighs, I'd agreed to it. While he was drunk and probably high on some crap, I was sober and still chose to be used.

I had no idea what made me pick up my phone next and dial Soren's number, but he'd already answered before I could stop to reconsider it.

"Ashton." His voice, soft as always, was like a medicine to my aching heart.

Closing my eyes, I breathed in and enjoyed this slight comfort.

"Ashton, are you there?" he asked again since I hadn't spoken yet.

"Yes, I'm here, sorry…"

"Is everything okay? You sound off."

Nothing's okay—absolutely nothing.

"Sorry I called," I muttered while fisting the sleeve of my hoodie. "I just wanted to hear your voice."

The line went quiet for a few seconds until Soren spoke again.

"Where are you?"

"In my car."

"Did you have anything to drink?"

I shook my head.

"Ashton?"

"No… No, I didn't."

"Are you capable of driving? Or do you want me to come and pick you up?"

He's so damn considerate.

"Yes."

"Yes, what? You didn't answer my question."

I'm so pathetic.

"Yes, I can drive."

"Good." He let out a breath of relief. "I'll text you my address, and you come over here, okay?"

I hoped he would say that, and now that he had, I felt guilty. Was it okay for me to go over there and seek his comfort, considering what I'd done with Kai? Was it okay for Soren to hold me while I was still wearing Kai's traces?

"Ashton." Soren's firm voice snapped me back to focus. "I'm waiting for you."

Closing my eyes, I nodded to myself.

It's about time I be selfish, too.

"I'm coming."



After driving all the way to West Hollywood, I arrived at Soren's house. It wasn't exactly a building but more of a combination of luxury condos built close to one another with a private park in between, making the whole residence look like a fancy resort.

Reaching Soren's door, I rang the bell, then stepped back and shoved my hands into my jeans pockets. I had no fucking idea what I was doing here, looking this dirty and cheap. Soren would probably have one look at me before realizing I was nothing but a lame-ass kid, then kick me out.

"What on earth happened to you?" Soren hissed as he opened the door, his

brows pulled close and his jaw tensed.

His obvious concern was the confirmation I needed that I was right to come here.

“It’s nothing.” I tried to hide my face by rubbing my cheek. While doing so, he got a glimpse at the sleeve of my hoodie, which was stained with dry blood.

“My God,” he gasped, reaching for me, and observed me closely.

“I’m okay,” I mumbled, but Soren didn’t seem happy as his stare hardened.

“Clearly, you’re not.” Grabbing my shoulder, he pulled me in and closed the door behind us.

The house was cold, like the air-conditioning worked too much. Maybe that explained Soren’s cold skin. Somehow, it made him look a bit lonely, but it was a silly thought that I quickly pushed aside as I looked around the house. It was as impressive as I’d imagined, but I had no time to admire it because Soren took my hand and tugged me to his bathroom.

“Sit here,” he said, pointing at the counter. Doing as he ordered, I jumped until my ass hit the cold marble and waited patiently for Soren to finish picking up things out of the cabinet. While waiting, I eyed the spacious bathroom. What stood out to me the most was how neat and organized it was. Everything was stocked and organized by color and size, from the towels to the soap bottles in the shower. In fact, it was almost like this room was just for show and had never been used before. I also figured he liked gray scale because everything was in those colors.

Soren came to stand between my spread thighs. Placing a small kit beside me, he pulled out some gauze, pads, and sanitizer and began cleaning my split lip and dry blood.

The sanitizer burned, and I hissed with the ache, causing Soren to chuckle.

“Hey now, don’t be a baby.”

“It stings.” I pouted and closed my eyes, allowing him to continue.

Once done, he tossed the used gauze into a small garbage bin, then pulled a soft-looking towel out of the closet.

“I’ll put ointment on your wounds after you shower,” he said, and I nodded.

Wanting to get off the counter, I placed my hands on the surface and was about to jump down when the weight I applied to my wrist pained me. *I nearly forgot about that*. Noticing my reaction, Soren quickly lifted my arm and pulled down my sleeve to expose my bruised wrist.

“What happened?”

“It looks worse than it actually feels.”

“That isn’t what I asked, Ashton. Tell me how you got hurt?”

I looked aside, and he sighed deeply.

“Was it a family member? Do we need to involve the police?”

My eyes quickly shot to his. “What? No!” I almost squealed. “It was nothing like that, I swear. My mom or uncle would never hurt me.”

While my answer did soften Soren’s expression, he still seemed far from satisfied with the tension pulled between his narrowed brows.

“Who did this to you?” His voice took on a deeper tone than before.

“It was my best friend,” I said after understanding I had to speak. “I ruined his life.”

Cupping my face, Soren caressed my skin with his thumb. “It’s hard for me to believe you’re capable of ruining one’s life, Ashton.” He angled my face so I’d meet his eyes and then brushed my hair back. “But how about we talk more after you take a nice, warm shower?”

I nodded.

“Good boy,” he said with a half smile before kissing my forehead.

I had no idea what overtook me, but just then, my heart raced faster as my chest tightened up with a warm, fuzzy feeling. Weirded out by my reaction, I brought my thumb to my lips and bit the tip of my nail, when Soren covered my hand with his.

“Don’t do that. It’s such a waste,” he tsked. “Now, get into the shower, and I’ll bring you some clothes to wear.”

Once Soren left the bathroom, I began taking off my clothes. Reaching my jeans, I stopped and took a deep breath before sliding them down my legs, trying to ignore the traces Kai had left on my skin. With a deep breath, I kicked them aside and walked into the shower. The hot water hitting my body made me physically relax, so I closed my eyes and allowed the steam to wash away this evening.

“Done already?” Soren asked once I showed up in the living room, wearing the clothes he left lying on the counter for me. They were brand-new and too big for my size but by far the most comfy cotton I’d ever worn.

Since the kitchen and living room were connected, Soren stepped from behind the large island placed in the middle of the space, then came to me. “The food I ordered still hasn’t arrived yet, but in the meanwhile, how about we do something with those bruises?”

“You ordered food?” I asked while he grabbed my hand and led me toward the couch.

“I’m not much of a cook.” He waited for me to sit down first and, after I did, crouched before me. “Besides, I think cooking at home is a waste of time when you can order in.”

Kai often cooked for me, and when he didn’t, my first pick would be some

sort of junk food.

“So, how come you’re so fit?” I asked.

“What do you mean?” He raised one questioning eyebrow my way.

My cheeks heated up, and I rubbed the back of my neck. “I mean, junk food is all greasy and unhealthy. Eating it every day probably isn’t the best thing, but you look very fit.”

Soren’s lips pulled up, deep lines forming on each side of his tempting smile.

He’s so handsome.

“You’re adorable.” He shook his head while putting a bit of ointment on his fingers, then brought them to the corner of my mouth. “I have a private chef that supplies me meals based on my diet. So no junk food whatsoever.”

“You’re on a diet?”

“Not one that’s aiming to lose weight, but to maintain my physique as it is.”

“Oh.” That sounded fancy. “I just eat whatever I want.”

“And yet, you’re still sexy as sin.”

Heat crept to my cheek, and I tried to contain my growing excitement. My whole body was already burning up from being this close to him.

After applying the medicine carefully to my wound, he caressed the pads of his fingers over my lips. The taste of the ointment was bitter, but his touch turned it sweet, and I had to stop myself from sucking on his fingers like the starved animal he turned me into.

“You have the most beautiful lips.” He caressed them carefully, his eyes locked on my mouth. “The shape and color…Whoever gave you those bruises deserves life without parole.”

Once again, my heart began racing, and my body ached underneath the heat of his words and touch. Soren was so much, perhaps *too* much, to handle. But at the same time, I only wished for more.

More of his attention.

More of his care.

More of his affection.

His proximity turned me eager and selfish because nothing else mattered. All I wanted was for him to like me so he’d allow me to stay close because, with him, my life felt like a fairy tale.

After he was done with the lotion, Soren bandaged my wrist. Holding my arm, he took his time to wrap the bandage until it was tight and secured. Once finished, he packed all the supplies back into the first aid kit, and I noticed even more how organized he was. Everything had a place in his house, absolutely everything.

What about me? What’s my place?

Nerves struck me as the fear of being rejected by him simmered into my mind. I didn't want him to suddenly return to his senses and realize he was so out of my league, or worse, to discover my lie.

"I told you not to do this," Soren said as he sat beside me on the couch, taking my hand in his and preventing me from biting the tip of my nail. "Come here." Without a hint of hesitation, he moved me to sit on his lap, my legs straddling each of his sides, while wrapping his arms around me.

Sitting on his lap felt weird because I wasn't a small guy, and he was only so much bigger than me, but at the same time, I enjoyed it.

"Now, then." He tilted his head, his silver eyes gleaming under the dim light of the living room. "Tell me, what happened between you and your friend."

Trying to explain to Soren, the perfect man I had only just started dating, about my long and unrequited love for my best friend seemed like an awkward conversation to have. A conversation I had no clue how to start, and yet, after taking a deep breath, I managed to find my words.

"Kai—that's my best friend's name… We've known each other for years, and he's practically my whole world." I took a deep breath, then let it out. "At least, he was until he found out I was gay and that I…"

"Loved him?" Soren offered.

Shocked, I looked at him. "H-How did you know?"

He chuckled. "Falling for the straight best friend? It's a tale as old as time."

Now embarrassed, because apparently I was a pathetic stereotype of a gay man, I tried to move off his lap, but he didn't allow it.

"I'm sorry, it came off wrong." His hand held on to my hips harder. "What I meant to say was that your love for him is completely normal. Nothing to be ashamed of."

Something occurred to me then, and I placed my hands on his wide shoulders, my eyes studying his flawless face. "Did it happen to you, too?"

He shook his head. "No."

I huffed. "Of course it didn't. You're gorgeous. Who wouldn't fall for you?"

Flashing me a grin, one that showed his perfect white teeth, he pulled me closer and then moved his hand to the small of my back. I tensed at the touch and tried to resist leaning even deeper into him.

"I can say the same thing about you, Ashton. But love doesn't work that way. We can't choose who we fall for." While speaking, his fingers slowly ran down my back.

My dick took notice, hardening in the slacks Soren had lent me. Desperate to distract myself from my growing reaction, I went on. "Anyway, he doesn't feel the same. Hence the punch to the face." I laughed awkwardly, trying to lighten

the *thick* mood. Sitting in Soren's lap, with his cologne surrounding me while having his hands softly touching my skin, made me all fuzzy, and my horny ass wished we were naked.

Those were dangerous thoughts because I didn't want him to assume that all I cared about was sex or that I was being too vulgar. Maybe those were my first intentions, but by now, I'd managed to forget all about them and began wishing for more. But I didn't want to make a complete fool out of myself. The kiss we shared in the stables was already embarrassing enough with how eager and needy I'd been.

"Your friend is an idiot," Soren said, cutting into my intrusive thoughts.

"H-He isn't an idiot," I muttered, sounding defensive.

"I beg to differ."

I pulled back a bit while sliding my hands from his shoulders to his chest. "You don't understand. Kai's parents are extremely homophobic."

"So they're idiots, too."

The doorbell rang before I could reply, and we both turned to look at the door before I rolled off Soren so he could get it.

After tipping the delivery guy, he closed the door, went to the kitchen island, and began pulling out our food. For a couple of minutes, I remained seated as I watched him set the table for us with precision and care, so much that he went through the trouble of placing two candles and lighting them to set up the mood.

"How can you say he's an idiot when you don't even know him?" I asked after joining Soren in the kitchen.

"Any person who's too close-minded to realize sexuality is anything else other than a given fact is a blunt idiot." He poured himself a glass of red wine before moving the chair for me to sit. "Come here," he said, waiting until I sat down, then did the same.

Still wanting him to change his perception about Kai, I continued to push. "It's not just that. He's struggling with a lot of things right now." As I tried defending Kai, Soren began loading my plate with food—grilled fish, green veggies, and roasted potatoes that smelled delicious.

"Come on, eat up before it gets cold." He placed a napkin over my lap.

Eager to get his answer, I took a bite and then asked, "Did you listen to me?"

Swirling the wine in his glass, he took a sip, then hummed with pleasure before nodding. "I did. You said he's struggling with a lot of stuff. But that still doesn't contradict him being an idiot."

I groaned because who knew he was so resilient?

"He got his girlfriend pregnant, and he's scared, okay? It's not all about me."

Soren huffed. "That only proves my point."

Placing down my fork, I frowned at him, and apparently, he found it amusing because he was smirking.

“Don’t give me that look,” he said, resting his hand on my thigh and squeezing it. “You’ll find out soon enough that I’m very blunt with my opinions. I see no point in hiding them. If your longtime friend punched you for your sexuality while also engaging in unprotected sex, then yeah, I think he’s a complete idiot who you are better off without.”

I’m better off without Kai in my life?

It wasn’t because Soren didn’t make sense that I found it hard to listen but because he made perfect sense. Lately, each time I met Kai, all he did was hurt me, so I *was*, in fact, better off without him. But admitting it was hard.

“How could I suddenly live without him?” I asked, my eyes focused on Soren’s hand that still squeezed my thigh.

He shrugged. “People come and go, Ashton. That’s life.”

As true as that might be, it was still hard to digest.

“W-What about you?” I found the courage to ask.

His lips curved up a second before he used his finger to angle my face up, then leaned close and kissed me. It was a short, sweet kiss, but I savored every second of it.

Stroking my cheek with the back of his finger, he smiled. “Let’s eat, and then let’s watch a movie. Okay?”

A lump of emotions formed in my throat. Sadness and hurt over Kai but also excitement and hope for Soren. By taking care of me, Soren managed to chase the bad away so that I felt safe and secure. He had all the answers to my problems, and that was exhilarating. With him, I had no reason to worry, and I wished for this thing between us to grow. But then something occurred to me. Soren and I could never be anything because this was all based on a lie.

My lie.

The second Soren learned I lied about my age, he’d be out of my life for good. Knowing that scared me to my core, so I swallowed back my guilt and nodded.

“As long as you pick the movie. I hate choosing,” I said.

CHAPTER Eleven

Ash

Used to waking up in my small bed and to the sound of my mom's dream catchers dangling in the wind, I was confused the first few seconds after opening my eyes to the view of West Hollywood.

That's right, this is Soren's house.

Yesterday, after eating and watching a movie together, Soren asked me if I'd like to spend the night. His offer immediately made me nervous because what if it were his way of suggesting we have sex? As it turned out, I jumped to a conclusion way too fast because other than cuddling me, Soren didn't do anything. Each time he snuggled closer to my body, I hoped he'd make a move, and each time he didn't, I was disappointed. I wanted Soren to fuck me, I was sure of it, but I was too scared to ask for it directly.

Good boy.

Soren had said those two words last night, and since then, they hadn't left my mind. Whenever I replayed that moment in my head, the same shiver ran down my spine, and my skin heated up. I often picked porn movies where the top was the one in charge in the bedroom. I loved scenes where the bottom, who I always pictured myself as, was there for the purpose of pleasuring his partner. Soren definitely seemed to be the controlling type. *Right*? He had these undeniable dominant and caregiver vibes that made me hot all over whenever he was close.

I flipped to my stomach, then buried my face in the pillows. They smelled like Soren, and I inhaled deeply while wrapping myself with the comforter, enjoying how warm and cozy it was underneath the sheets.

Hold on a second.

I picked my head up and looked around, only now realizing Soren was missing. We went to sleep together, but now he was gone. The warmth I felt was replaced with discomfort. Did I outstay my welcome and it was his way of showing me that?

And while I wanted to get up and look for him, it also felt awkward. Just like

the rest of his house, Soren's room looked like a museum, with each piece of furniture carefully selected and put in place. So much so that I was scared of ruining the order by mistake.

On the side of the bed was a large glass closet that displayed his folded clothes, all organized by color. Although, I could only spot black, white, and gray there. Behind it was another bathroom, not the one we used yesterday. Yet, the most noticeable part of his room was the wall facing the bed.

Dozens of photos, all framed with a white background and black frame, hung on the wall in what looked like a precise pattern. There was something almost compulsive in the way those monochrome images were hung, perfectly aligned with each other.

Rising up so only my lower body was covered with the comforter, I began examining some of those images when someone cleared their throat, and I looked aside to find Soren leaning against the doorway. He was shirtless, with one hand shoved in his joggers while the other held a glass mug. And if he wasn't sexy enough already, he also wore a pair of black-framed glasses I'd never seen him with before.

"I didn't know you needed glasses."

"I've got a low prescription, so I only put them on sometimes." Taking the glasses off, he checked them out before wearing them again. He then glanced at me. "How's your wrist?" he asked, and I then remembered I'd injured it.

Raising my arm up, I waved it with a slight smile on my face. "It's okay." My eyes went back to his wall. "How many pictures are there?" I tried to count them all but kept messing up the numbers.

"Two hundred and twenty."

My eyes snapped to him. "What?"

Pushing from the doorway, he walked further into the room and stopped beside me.

"I had to extend the wall so this exact number would fit," he said while fixing his glasses to sit better on his nose.

"To extend the wall?"

"Yeah. Nothing some renovation couldn't do."

My lips curved up, and I shook my head, unable to hold back from laughing.

"You think I'm joking?" He raised one eyebrow at me while slowly sipping from his coffee.

"Wait, you aren't?"

He snorted and sat on the edge of the bed. "I'm afraid not. In fact, I can't fall asleep until I count them all," he said casually, a small smile on his lips.

"That's…"

“Crazy?” he offered, and I almost jumped from my place while shaking my head.

“No! Not at all,” I mumbled, searching for the right words. *Oh my God*, did I just call him crazy?

And while I panicked, Soren didn’t seem offended as he laughed.

“Relax, Ashton, I was just messing with you.” He pinched my cheek, and then his expression turned serious. “Do you know what OCD is?” After shaking my head, he went on. “It stands for obsessive-compulsive disorder.”

A disorder?

“Is it something you have?”

“Yes.”

Worry filled my gut. “Is it serious? A-Are you going to survive?”

Soren’s eyebrow perked up, and a second later, he burst out laughing. And while I didn’t understand what he found so funny about him being sick, he took his sweet time to calm down. Taking off his glasses and putting them aside, he wiped the corner of his eye.

“It’s nothing like that,” he said, taking my hand in his. “It’s a mental disorder, one that involves intrusive thoughts that lead to repetitive behaviors, such as excessive cleaning, rearranging objects, or counting the two hundred and twenty photos I have on my wall to help me fall asleep.”

Still trying to understand what he was saying, I scratched my jaw. “W-Why?”

“That’s exactly the point. A person without OCD wouldn’t understand the reason behind it because, to them, there are none, but for me, it just puts things in order. Gives me control. It helps me to ease my mind.”

That sounded almost mystical. “So, it’s like some sort of a ritual?”

Soren chuckled. “I guess you could say that.”

“But wait.” I paused and perked up. “My mom also always cleans the house and likes to have things in order. So what’s the difference?”

Soren pulled his shoulders. “We all have intrusive thoughts, but it’s a question of quantity, what we do with them, and how much those compulsions interfere with functioning. If they *do*, that’s when you know you have a problem. Besides, assuming every person who has OCD is obsessed with cleaning is a stereotype.” His voice was calm and even.

“Oh… I’m sorry for assuming that, then.” I swallowed hard. “And does it? I mean, your thoughts, do they interfere with your life?”

Taking another sip from his coffee, he nodded. “They do. But that’s what medication and therapy are for.”

Therapy? Like a shrink? As a kid, after my dad died, Mom tried to make me

go and see one. Thinking about those times brought back bad memories. I remembered how different sitting in his room made me feel, how each of his questions felt off and wrong. I hated it so much and fought Mom about going there. I finally stopped seeing him after Aiden suggested he teach me how to surf. I didn't understand how it was a replacement at the time, but now I did. Surfing was my way of coping with my feelings and problems. *The ocean holds no grudge.*

"I don't like therapy," I said after keeping quiet.

"That's because you haven't met the right therapist yet." Taking my hand, he tangled our fingers together. "Finding one that fits is just like finding a partner."

My face heated up until I could feel the blush in my ears. Not wanting him to notice, I focused my eyes on his coffee. The mug was almost empty, with just a bit of liquid left at the bottom.

"There's a misconception regarding mental health and therapy, and in most cases, people tend to have prejudice about the subject. I'm not crazy, as some would like to think, and I'm not weak for meeting up with a therapist twice a week."

The last impression I'd ever have about Soren would be that he was either of those things. He wasn't crazy and most definitely not weak. He was intelligent, bright, confident, and strong. To believe anyone would ever think otherwise was absurd.

"Why didn't you tell me before?" I asked, meeting his beautiful eyes.

"Before? This is our fifth date." He laughed. "Would you rather my first words to you were 'I have OCD'?"

Shrugging, I huffed. "Well… when you put it like that, probably not."

"I'm not ashamed of who I am, Ashton. Having said that, I don't see my disorder as something that defines me as a person, and therefore, I don't feel the need to tell every single person I meet about it. I shared it with you because if we're going to take this further, it's only fair."

To take *this* further. My heart missed a beat, and I fisted the sheets in my hand.

"D-Does that mean you want to be in a relationship with me?" The mere idea that Soren would want me was insane. It became even more surreal when he tilted my head back and took my breath away in a heated kiss. He tasted like coffee, and hungry, I darted my tongue over his soft lips.

"I thought I made that part clear already," he whispered after breaking the kiss, and I frowned at his words.

"But we haven't even slept together yet."

Cupping my jaw, he softly caressed my cheek.

I loved it when he did that.

"We'll get there, too. Don't worry." He smiled. "I just like taking my time with you."

Closing my eyes, I leaned into the touch of his palm and nodded, allowing the comfort he offered to brush away my shame because while he was being honest with me, *I* wasn't. Instead of telling him, right there and then, about my age and my being in high school, I kept my mouth shut and allowed him to be fooled.

Was lying that bad? I mean, if it would get me a few more days, *or hours*, with Soren, it would be worth it. After all, how could something that felt so *good* be bad?

"What are your plans for the day?" he asked, pulling me back.

"I don't have any."

"Good."

CHAPTER Twelve

Ash

One day turned into a full weekend in which I hadn't left Soren's condo.

I skipped school on Friday and told Mom I was with friends. Because I never caused any trouble, she had no reason to suspect anything and told me to have fun. And I did, by staying with Soren until I had to leave for school this morning.

What a weekend it was.

On Friday morning, after taking me for breakfast in his favorite place, we went shopping. Soren bought me clothes I knew were too expensive, but he'd insisted on paying, saying he wanted to spoil me. Over the weekend, we did all kinds of stuff. He took me to an art show, lunch, and a tennis match. We even rode horses again. And while I enjoyed being out with him, my favorite times were when we were home. He had to take some breaks for work and studying, and when he did, I just chilled around his place.

It turned out there was a swimming pool, a Jacuzzi, and a gym where he lived, and I took advantage of them. One evening, when Soren had to study, I went to the gym. He probably finished his work early because he came down and watched me work out. The intensity of his stare as he observed me from the side pumped me with so much energy that this was the strongest I had ever hit the gym.

The only downside of this magical weekend was the hard case of blue balls it left me with. While we kissed several times, Soren always cut it off right before reaching the *good* parts, leaving me to wonder if I had done something wrong. He promised me that it wasn't the case, but it was still not enough. My dick was dying for him, and I was running out of patience. Maybe I should be more obvious? Who was I kidding. I would never know how to be bold or seductive enough to seduce a man like Soren. *Or anyone*, for that matter, as I lacked the sexy bone in my body.

Grunting, I shoved my head into my open locker and tried to chase away

those thoughts before pulling out my backpack. School was probably the last place I should be thinking about sex, especially with how horny I constantly was. I swear to God, my dick was now getting hard just with the mere thought of Soren's masculine arms, amazing abs, and how sexy his pelvis was when he walked around the house with nothing but a pair of thin sweats that showed the outline of his—*shit*.

I slammed my locker, tossed my bag over one shoulder, and began walking down the hall. Thankfully, classes were done for today, and I had a bit of time before my shift at Rob's. After stepping out of the building, the bright sun blinded me, so I shaded my face with my hand. It was a good day for surfing. Maybe Aiden would want to catch some waves after I finished work. Pulling out my phone, I was about to shoot the old man a text when someone elbowed me.

"Zoe." My voice came out high, probably because of my surprise.

"Yeah, that's my name." She smiled. "Why are you acting like you just saw a ghost?"

Running my fingers through my hair, I shrugged. "Sorry, I just didn't expect to see you here…"

"Ah." She straightened up, placing her hands on her waist. "So you spoke to Kai."

After a slight hesitation, I nodded. "I did. H-How are you?" *Is that what you're supposed to ask a pregnant girl?*

"Well, the situation sucks, but that's life. You know—" She paused when a group of our classmates passed us. After exchanging quick hugs with them, it was once again just the two of us.

"Got some time to sit down?"

Since my shift wouldn't start until an hour from now, I had enough time to talk.

"Yeah, of course."

"So, how are you dealing with the whole *thing*?" I asked after we sat on our regular bench underneath the old oak tree.

"At first, I was freaking out, but over the weekend, things changed."

"How so?" Curiosity took over me.

"I thought Kai didn't want the baby and that he'd break up with me, but on Friday morning, he came over and said we should get married," she said with a faint smile on her lips while stroking her flat stomach.

Apparently, a weekend with Soren was still not enough to make me move on because, just then, Zoe's words felt like a knife to the gut.

"On Friday?"

She hummed a yes.

A night before proposing to his pregnant girlfriend, Kai took out all his anger on me. First, he spat hateful slurs at me, then he rubbed his dick between my thighs until he came all over my ass, and to finish it off, he punched me to the ground. Now, I learned that after doing all that, he drove over to her? Not only did he not care about hurting me, but he asked her to get married right after?

How could he do this to me?

“Oh shit.” Zoe suddenly jerked up and looked at me. “Wasn’t your birthday last week?”

With a throat too sore to speak, I nodded. I already understood my relationship with Kai was over, so why was it still so hard to digest? To accept the fact that he was no longer mine.

He was never mine to begin with.

“How are your families with the whole thing?” I asked after finding my voice.

“You know how strict our parents are, so at first, mine were furious. But Kai’s proposal relieved them because God forbid their church hears I had a baby out of wedlock at seventeen.”

“And Kai’s?” Since he hadn’t told me, perhaps Zoe would.

I knew it wasn’t good when her face fell, and she slumped her shoulders.

“His dad beat him up, real bad.”

My stomach flipped, and I was struck by a strong urge to see Kai. To check how he was doing and steal him away from his awful parents. But it was cut short when Zoe continued.

“But I think that now, with the proposal and all, things will get better,” she said, her eyes full of hope.

Things will get better? Kai was walking down a lane that didn’t fit him. He was struggling, but instead of helping their son, his parents only pushed him to walk further down the gallows they considered an aisle.

“Speaking of beating, what on earth happened to you?” Zoe’s eyes studied my bruised face and bandaged wrist.

Should I tell her the one responsible for it was my ex-best friend and her soon-to-be husband?

“Surfing accident.” I flashed her a big, fake smile that she seemed to buy.

“That sucks.”

“Yeah.”

An awkward silence fell between us until she nudged my shoulder with hers. “I’m sorry things between you two aren’t the best. But I’m sure you’ll work it out eventually.”

If only she knew…

“You know how much he cares for you, Chief.”

Apparently, not as much as you’d think.

Zoe had no clue what she was talking about. I never liked her too much, simply because I always saw her as competition. And despite my dislike for her, she wasn’t some evil bitch, just a girl who loved the same guy I did. Now, I couldn’t help but feel sorry for her because she was absolutely clueless. Kai didn’t suddenly change his mind about her or that baby she was carrying inside of her. He was simply a coward. A coward who couldn’t accept his true feelings and instead chose to get shit-faced and beat me up. He was nothing like Soren, who was confident with himself and, above all, honest.

The pettiness I felt thus far was suddenly replaced with a sense of pride because why should I stay hung up on a guy who clearly wasn’t worth it? It was also the first time I was able to admit that to myself.

“I’m seeing someone,” I said, then turned to look at Zoe. “And I like him very much.”

Since Zoe already knew I held feelings for Kai, it wasn’t as if I just came out to her, but it was still not easy to say it out loud. But once Soren’s face crossed my mind, all shame that my sexuality might be wrong washed away.

“That’s amazing, Chief.” She pressed her palms together. “Who is he? Does he go to school with us?”

I shook my head. “No, he’s… he’s a bit older.”

Zoe narrowed her eyes at me while nudging my side with her elbow. “Aren’t you naughty?”

I chuckled, rubbing the back of my neck. “Yeah, sure.” My cheeks heated up, and she quickly caught up on it.

“Look at you blushing!” She giggled. “Our sweet little Chief is fucking a hot older guy?” She leaned closer, and I pushed her away.

“No one’s fucking anyone.”

“What do you mean?”

Zoe wasn’t my first pick to have this conversation with, but currently, she was my only option. Since I had no plans to ever share my sex life with Mom or Aiden, and Kai was out of the picture, talking to her wouldn’t be that bad.

“We haven’t had sex yet.”

“Because you don’t want to?” she asked, one brow raised.

“Don’t want to?” I snorted. “I’m about to explode with how much I want to, but Soren’s taking his time. He says we better wait.”

She huffed. “Well, is waiting so bad? Look at me, seventeen and preggo.”

I had no idea if Zoe was actually okay with the whole thing or if she was just faking it, but she sure knew how to make fun of herself.

“Zoe.”

“Nah, don’t give me that look.” She pointed her finger at the pity on my face. “I know it’s crazy, but I’m not seeing this as the end of the world. Sure, this isn’t an ideal situation, but I’m sure Kai and I could make it work.”

Not knowing how to respond, because I highly doubted Kai shared her positivity, I smiled. But then again, perhaps after telling me how I’d managed to ruin his life, Kai had come around and realized Zoe was the one. At this point, Kai was acting so out of character that who knew? I certainly didn’t.

Pulling out my phone, I noticed the time. “I need to go, Zo. I’ve got work.”

“Cool, let me walk with you back to your car.”

On our way to the parking lot, I told her a bit more about Soren. What he studied and where he lived; I even mentioned his photo wall and felt bad right after because maybe it was a secret?

“Oh, Chief.” Zoe came to a sudden stop.

“What is it?”

“We’re going to have a wedding. It will be very small, but still.”

A breeze blew between us and scattered her curls in the air, and I focused on them instead of the bitterness filling my gut.

A wedding, huh?

There were a few times where I pictured my own wedding. It would be held on the same cliff my parents got married on, and “Can’t Help Falling in Love” by Elvis would be playing because it was my favorite song in the world. There would be no walking down the aisle or reception, no cocktails, just me and him. Although, the idea of me getting married felt so unreal and faraway that I couldn’t even bring myself to picture the face of the man I’d want to marry. Would he be like Kai? Young and spontaneous? Or maybe like Soren, calculated and serious. Yeah, right. *Keep on dreaming, Ash.*

“Will you come?” Zoe asked, bursting my fantasy without even trying.

I looked down at the ground and bit my lip. “Of course I’ll come.” Forcing myself to smile, I met her eyes. I knew I didn’t fool her and that she quickly detected my pain, but she said nothing, and I appreciated it.

“Thank you.” She moved to wrap her arm around mine as we started walking again. “I missed you, you know?”

I was about to answer her when something caught my attention.

Someone.

“I-I’ll speak to you later,” I told Zoe before brushing her off me and walking straight toward Soren, who was waiting for me with his back leaning against his car. The closer I got to him, the faster my heart beat until my chest grew tight and my throat went dry.

Finally reaching him, I stopped with my hand gripping the straps of my backpack.

“So it’s true,” he said, pushing back from his car. “You really *are* in high school.”

Since he wore sunglasses, I couldn’t see his eyes, but I didn’t need to see them to know he was angry.

“I-I can explain.” Looking over my shoulder, I saw Zoe was still where I’d left her, watching us. “But can we do it somewhere else?”

Soren studied me carefully, the muscle in his jaw tensed before he tilted his head toward his car.

“Get inside.”

CHAPTER Thirteen

Ash

Soren drove us back to his condo in complete silence, leaving me alone to assume what was going on inside his head. Not taking off his sunglasses, he hardly even glanced my way. It was a good thing because I wasn't sure I could look him in the eyes with the amount of guilt eating me.

While driving, I considered if I should tell Rob I wouldn't come to work today. Yet, the tension in the car was so high that I was too uncomfortable to even pull out my phone, so I couldn't. I felt bad for bailing on my shift, but not nearly as bad as for lying to Soren.

After he parked his Ferrari, Soren got out first. I would have stayed in the car if it hadn't been for him waiting for me. But he did wait, so after taking a deep breath, I followed him out.

Entering his house, he locked the door behind us, then walked straight to his kitchen, where he pulled out a bottle of wine along with a glass and filled it up. Only that he didn't drink and, instead, finally took off his sunglasses.

"I can't believe that you lied about something like that." He pushed his fingers through his black hair, then placed both his hands on the marble island. "It's one thing to lie about you being a freshman, but a high school student?"

Soren had every right to be furious with me. In fact, I was shocked he'd brought me back to his place instead of breaking up with me in the parking lot, considering what I'd done.

Looking anywhere but at him, I held on to my bandaged wrist and applied just a little bit of pressure. "I planned on telling you."

"When?"

He sounded so angry, and I grabbed my wrist harder as guilt continued to bite me from the inside.

"I don't know."

Soren let out a deep sigh, and I made the mistake of looking up only to see the disappointment in his eyes. Shaking his head, he pulled something from his

pocket and tossed it my way. I caught it in time, then looked down to see my wallet.

I didn't even notice it was missing.

"You forgot it here, and I wanted to bring it back to you, so I looked inside for your address and found your ID. Imagine my shock when I learned the guy I was dating had just turned eighteen."

The most awful taste filled my mouth as my throat burned with the tears I tried to hold back. I was somewhat of a people pleaser, and being put on the spot was tough. Even more so because it was Soren I'd disappointed.

"I'm sorry." It was weak and lame, but I had nothing else to say. There were no excuses for my lie. What did I even plan on doing? To lie to him until the end of time?

"You're sorry?" he snapped, and I jumped in my place. "Do you know that the age of consent in California is eighteen?"

With my eyes pinned on the floor, I bit my lips and shook my head.

"Of course you don't know since you're a kid." He let out a deep sigh. "If I had slept with you, I could have been charged with statutory rape, for God's sake."

My eyes shot to him immediately. "Rape?" I took a step closer. "No. Never. I-I want to be with you. It's nothing like that."

"It doesn't fucking matter, Ashton." He raised his voice, and I immediately stepped back.

Tears I tried to hold in were now welling in my eyes, and I could no longer fight them. Consent age? Statutory rape? What was he even talking about? All I did was lie about my age. I didn't stop to think about the consequences.

"I didn't know I was risking you… I just didn't want you to toss me away," I muttered between tears while cleaning my nose. "I don't want anything bad to happen to you." Sniff. "I just really liked being with you, Soren. That's… That's all."

Soren glanced my way, his stare hard, before he looked down at his wineglass, which he still hadn't drunk from, and tsked. A few seconds later, he moved from the kitchen and walked toward me, stopping close enough that I could smell his cologne. His eyes studied me carefully, and I shrank further into myself.

"I'm sorry for snapping like that, Ashton." He wiped away some of my tears. "Please don't cry… I'm just really mad right now."

I sniffed, still not looking him in the eyes. "I-I'm sorry."

"My logic is telling me to break up with you, as I don't appreciate being lied to."

I probably looked as pathetic as I felt, with hot cheeks, sticky tears, and a snotty nose.

“But I won’t do that,” he suddenly said, and my eyes widened.

“W-What?”

Soren cupped my cheeks in one hand and made me face him.

“You are eighteen now, aren’t you?”

“Y-Yes.”

“And you want to be with me. Right?”

I nodded.

“Speak up.”

Swallowing hard, I cleared my throat. “I do. I do want to be with you, Soren.”

He tilted his head, his silver eyes fixed on me. I loved his eyes, but something in them made him look so… *lonely*.

“Never in your life are you to lie to me again.” His voice was firm and unwavering. “I can put up with almost anything but not lies, Ashton.”

Shocked he was willing to forgive me in the first place, I nodded eagerly.

“I won’t.” I leaned toward him. “I will never lie to you again. I promise.” In fact, I’d do anything to make him like me again.

Moving his free hand to my lower back, he pulled me until I was pressed to him. His lips curved into a small smile.

“That’s a good boy.”

I couldn’t dive deeper into what those two little words did to me because Soren’s mouth was already on me, drinking up my gasps and moans as he kissed me like he never had before. A minute ago, I was sure he’d break up with me, and now, I was in his arms while his hungry tongue explored my willing mouth. His hands held on to me, desperately trying to keep me close. With both his hands around my waist, he lifted me, and I quickly wrapped my legs around him as he walked back to the couch, where he sat down with me on top.

Slipping one hand underneath my shirt, he moved it over my skin before making me lose the top.

“O-Oh,” I gasped once his teeth grazed my nipple, then moaned when he closed his lips around it and sucked me softly. He continued to use his mouth around my nipples, switching up between them, while he slid his hand down my lower back and into my sweats, his fingers caressing the waistband of my boxer briefs.

My dick throbbed, and eager to feel more, I moved my hips and rubbed against him. The pressure felt so good, and I ached to feel more.

A low chuckle that made my cock leak erupted from Soren, and I blinked my

eyes open to look at him.

“I love how eager you are, little Sparrow,” he drawled in my ear, then lifted my body so I’d be properly seated on him with my legs on each side of his thighs. His erection pressed hard against my ass while my body burned with impatience.

Latching on to him, I hugged my arms around his shoulders and tried to kiss him, but I bit his lip by mistake. He winced, moving a hand over his mouth.

Embarrassed, I pulled back.

“Come here.” Cupping the back of my neck, he clashed our mouths together and began leading me through the kiss. The taste of blood didn’t stop me from kissing him back. It started slow as we softly exchanged angles and tasted each other before he pushed his tongue in and curled it around mine, then pulled back and allowed me to do the same. As I thrust into his mouth, Soren slid his hand to my waist and began moving my body. Understanding what he wanted of me, I started rolling my hips on my own at a pace that matched the heated kiss.

The only thing standing in my way was our clothes, but not even that seemed to matter as I continued to rut against his hot body.

“Oh my God,” I gasped when Soren reached between us and cupped my dick over my pants. Squeezing me tight, I groaned, closing my eyes and moaning even harder when he slipped his hand into my pants to grab me. It was the first time I had been touched, actually touched, and it was the best thing to have ever happened to me.

Leaning my head in the crook of his neck, I breathed him in, allowing the sensation of his hand to take over. Up and down, he moved his fist along my shaft. The touch of his cold skin over my hot dick was like no other, and I wished to make him feel just as good.

“I want to touch you, too,” I half moaned before daring to look him in the eyes. His expression was one of pure lust as hunger burned behind his silver irises, turning them into deep gray.

Letting go of my cock, he grabbed my hand and placed it over his erection. “Then do it.”

I didn’t stop to think before I unbuttoned his slacks and pulled down his boxer briefs. A gasp left my mouth once his cock sprang free and bobbed until it rested between us. Bigger than me, his cut dick was perfect. Long and thick, just like in my pornos, with mouthwatering veins and a beautiful pink head.

I licked my lips, hungrily imagining the day his cock would fill me up, then wrapped my trembling fingers around his girth. My breath caught at the touch of his warm flesh, and I bit my lips to hush a moan.

“Now, stroke me the way you stroke yourself,” he said, kissing the shell of

my ear.

Doing as I was told, I began moving my hand up and down his length, going a bit slower around the tip because that was where I liked it most. The way Soren's breath caught boosted me with confidence, and I increased my pace.

"Spit in your hand, then use it as lube," he said, and my eyes shot to his.

"What?"

"Do as I say."

Spitting into my palm, I then brought it back to his cock.

"Good boy."

Holy shit. This is hot.

Spreading my saliva over his thick length, I went back to stroking him, the friction feeling better. And when I thought this moment couldn't get any better, Soren replaced my hand with his as he took both our dicks in his big palm and started jerking us off together.

Unable to stop, I moved faster, thrusting into his hand while rubbing against his dick almost desperately in search of relief.

I wanted to come. I wanted to come so bad that my whole body was pounding. And before I knew it, I did. My balls tightened, and my hips lost their rhythm. A second later, my cock twitched, and I spilled into his fist, coating his hand and dick with my release.

Using my own cum, Soren continued to jerk himself off until he came, too. Sending his head backward, he silenced a low groan by biting his bottom lip. The veins in his thick neck popped, and his hips jerked forward while he came into his fist, his cum dripping from between his fingers, mixing with mine and dribbling all over my softening cock.

I fucking love sex.

"You're so hot," I groaned, looking up from his spent cock to his hooded eyes, still unable to believe what we had just done.

Using his other hand, Soren grabbed my neck and clashed our mouths together, taking my breath away with a kiss so passionate my toes curled.

"Not nearly as much as you, little Sparrow."

That damn nickname again. Just like the first time he called me that, my skin erupted with fucking goose bumps.

Soren let go of me, then looked between us. "Let's shower."

Somehow, after crying from guilt and fear of being dumped, I found myself exhausted in his warm embrace after he made me come like never before. It was the most peaceful moment I had ever known, one I'd cherish forever.

Part Two



Addiction

CHAPTER Fourteen

Ash

"Ash, make sure you put the clean laundry back in your closet before you go," Mom said, snapping my attention away from the chocolate pudding I had my eyes on.

Popping my head out from behind the open fridge door, I looked at her.

"Will do," I said, then kicked the door closed after deciding to give up on the pudding. "Anything else?"

"Yeah, actually, there is." Mom stood at the entrance to the kitchen, her shoulder leaning against the doorway. "How about introducing me to your boyfriend?"

Soren and I had been dating for several months now, and ever since I'd foolishly mentioned to Mom I was seeing someone, she'd been nagging me nonstop about wanting to meet him.

"It's too early for that," I said while taking the laundry basket away from her, ready to sneak back to my room and avoid the topic.

"Too early? You've been spending more time with him than with me lately. We're way past the too-early stage." She leaned her arm over her waist while giving me a raised eyebrow. She was half-joking, but I knew she was dying to meet Soren.

"I'm not spending all my time with him. It's just that senior year is keeping me busy." *That's a lie.* Ever since Soren had found out about my age and agreed to give me a second chance, we had been inseparable. It started with spending the whole summer vacation together, and now that I was halfway through my senior year, I spent every free hour with him. I did my homework at his place and canceled plans just to see him. Even when he was busy with work, as he was done with law school and had started his internship at a big law firm, I'd stay at his condo and watch him work. I was absolutely desperate to be around him, to the point it made me feel obsessed.

"You're sleeping there half the week." Mom gave me a knowing look.

“So?” My cheeks had already taken on a deeper shade of pink.

“At least tell me you’re being careful?”

Grabbing the basket handle a bit tighter, I cleared my throat. “Mom.”

“What? I just want to make sure you’re having safe sex. There’s nothing to be ashamed about getting it on, baby. If you want, I can give Soren a call and ask him myself—”

“No need.” I quickly cut into her ongoing monologue. “I’m safe. We’re safe. You’ll meet Soren when I’m ready.”

If I put aside the awkwardness of this conversation, she really had no reason to be worried about us having sex because even though we did plenty of things, Soren and I still hadn’t gone all the way. And despite wanting more, I didn’t complain because other than penetration, we did pretty much everything else. From teaching me how to give a blowjob that didn’t involve scraping him with my teeth to training me to take four of his fingers in my hole, Soren made sure I was ready. My impatience for losing my virginity was replaced with gratitude because taking it step by step lowered the pressure. A few weeks ago, we almost did it, but it hurt too much, so Soren stopped, promised me we’d get there, and cuddled me through the night.

He was perfect. Absolutely perfect.

Snapping out of my Soren-daydreaming, I offered Mom a kind smile and quickly went up to my room and began putting back my clothes. While hanging some of my T-shirts in the closet, a flash of bright lilac caught my eye, and I fumbled with the hangers until pulling out my hoodie. As I ran my fingers along the cotton, I paused when I reached the sleeve. Despite washing it several times, the blood didn’t come off, and now the sleeve had a few brownish stains, a cruel reminder of what had occurred almost nine months ago.

So much had changed since then. Since the day I turned eighteen and lost my best friend.

A few weeks after telling me about their wedding, Zoe and Kai got married. Despite promising her I’d come, I didn’t. From what I heard, it went bad, really bad, with Kai getting shit-faced at the reception and ruining the party. After that, his folks realized he had a problem, and Kai spent his summer vacation in rehab. I tried visiting him there, but he refused to meet me the three times I came. Understanding the message, I decided to wait until we were both back at school, only to find that he’d dropped out.

My heart ached for him and for the friendship we used to have, but with Soren’s help, I came to realize that whatever Kai was doing to himself wasn’t my fault. Everything he did was his decision, so I shouldn’t feel guilty or obligated to a friendship Kai himself had ended.

Now, halfway through my senior year, I had big plans for my future. Not only was I doing great with surfing, and even won a few competitions lately, but I'd also checked some college options.

My plans were to go pro after graduation, and Mom supported me, claiming I should chase my dreams. School wasn't always easy for me, and sitting in class was hard, so I was thankful for her support. Yet, Soren thought I should apply to some colleges just in case a career in surfing would not go as planned, and he had a point. Besides, becoming a professional surfer meant traveling the world, and I wasn't sure I wanted to be away from Soren. Especially after he'd said he didn't believe long-distance relationships could work.

Putting my hoodie back inside the closet, I took out the sweatshirt and slacks Soren had bought me the last time we were out. After putting them on, I checked myself in the mirror. Until Soren, I'd dressed terribly, but thanks to him, I now looked elegant. Satisfied with my clothes, I left the room and grabbed the keys to my truck. We had a date tonight, and knowing how punctual Soren was, I always made sure not to be late.



"Why don't you want to meet my mom?" I asked Soren, who came back to the room wearing his black robe. He always took a shower as soon as we finished getting off, saying he disliked feeling dirty.

Sitting on the edge of the mattress, he turned to me.

"I never said I don't want to meet her," he said while rubbing his palms together so the hand cream he'd applied a few moments ago would soak in.

Flopping to my stomach, I moved closer to him. "You said it was too soon."

"And it is." Putting his hand on my lower back, he ran his fingers over my dimples of Apollo. His palms were soft and moist from the cream, and I enjoyed the aromatic scent. "We've only been dating for several months, so what's the rush?"

I pulled my shoulders up. "She keeps asking about you."

"It's because you keep telling her about me." He gave me a raised eyebrow, then got up from the bed and walked to his closet. On his way there, he picked up the clothes I'd left on the floor from when he stripped me earlier and began folding them.

"Take a shower, Ashton. Then we can have something small to eat before I need to go to the office."

"You're going back there? I thought we'd have the whole evening." I pouted

and forced myself to get out of the warm bed.

Rather than answering me, Soren continued to scan his clothes until he picked out a pair of black trousers and a gray polo. I could never tell the difference with his clothes since they were all the same color, yet he took his sweet time picking his outfits.

“I think you should try eggshell.”

“Eggshell?” He turned to look at me with a questioning brow.

“Yeah, for your shirt. It would suit you.”

Soren turned back to pick up his glasses from the dresser before he glanced at me over his shoulder.

“Why are you still standing naked in the middle of the room? Go and shower.” He gave me a slight smile. A smile I’d learned was his way of telling me the conversation was over.

“Okay.”

After I showered, we had a quick dinner before Soren had to leave. Since he’d told me to stay for the night, I found no reason to go back home. An hour later, I made myself a bowl of yogurt with fruit because Soren hated it when I munched on junk after dinner. I was licking the yogurt lid when my phone rang. Caught off guard, I double-checked the screen when I saw who was calling.

“Zoe?” Because of the pregnancy, Zoe had switched to homeschooling, so we hadn’t really talked for a couple of months.

“It’s actually Hanna.”

Hanna was Zoe’s baby sister. Only a year younger than us, I knew Hanna by name and face.

“Hey, how are you?” I asked, a bit confused.

“Sorry for calling you from my sister’s phone… I didn’t have your number and…” She paused for a moment. “It’s just that a few hours ago, Zoe gave birth.”

My heart stopped, and not because of joy.

“Oh.” Losing my appetite, I put my yogurt aside and faced the empty room. “Congratulations.”

“Thanks, but it’s not why I called.”

“So why did you?”

“Kai’s nowhere to be found, and even though Zoe says she doesn’t care where he is, I know it isn’t the truth. Since he’s your best friend, is there any chance you can find him?”

Clearly, Hanna hadn’t been informed that Kai and I weren’t even speaking anymore, but before I could stop to correct her, she went on. “Please, Chief, please. My sister deserves it, and the baby, he’s so precious.”

I swallowed hard. “It’s a boy?”

A son.

Kai now had a son.

“Yeah. He’s beautiful, and he needs to meet his dad, so can I count on you?”

“Yeah.” I bit my lip and nodded despite not wanting to agree. “I’ll find him,” I said, and I did. It might have taken me over an hour and dozens of phone calls, but eventually, I tracked Kai down with Nico at a big party in Topanga Canyon. Going into the packed mansion, it was hard to hear my own thoughts over the loud music blasting through the halls, mixing with the hundreds of teens that squeezed together to party. Since Soren and I had started dating, I’d hardly been to any parties. The only ones I had been to were ones he invited me to himself.

I walked around for a bit before I spotted Nico standing by a staircase, drinking beer with a few other guys.

“Yo, Chief.” Nico high-fived me. “Been too fucking long, bro.”

“Yeah.” Rubbing the back of my neck, I looked around. “Where’s Kai?”

“Oh, the dude got shit-faced, so I left him to sleep in one of the rooms upstairs.”

My brows pulled into a deep frown. “He’s drunk?”

Nico laughed. “Drunk, wasted, high. You name it.” He was ready to go back into his conversation with his friends when I grabbed his shoulder.

“What do you mean? Didn’t he get sober last summer?”

Nico didn’t answer me and instead gave me the most pitiful look I had ever received. It was a look that told me how naive I was.

“Better get used to it now. It’s how addicts are.” Nico smiled, then cocked his head in the direction of the stairs. “Second room on the right.”

Better get used to it now. It’s how addicts are.

My stomach turned into a bundle of nerves with his cold words, and I refused to believe them. Parting ways with Nico, I began walking toward the room, each step I took making breathing harder. Even though we hadn’t talked in months, I still hoped Kai was doing better. I hoped that he was doing better without *me* in his life. Holding on to those shreds of hope, I opened the door to the room and walked in.

The first thing I was hit with was the stench of smoke and booze. Then, I noticed the empty cans of beer scattered around the bed Kai was passed out on. Stepping further in, I stopped near the bed and studied the person who looked like the shell of my best friend. He’d lost weight—enough for it to stand out. His pale face was covered with zits he’d never had before, and if I didn’t know better, I’d say he had a cold with how red and puffy his eyes were. The only thing that had stayed the same was his hair. His beautiful, long, dirty-blond hair

that I loved so much.

Feeling the strong urge to touch him, I moved closer when something caught my eye, and I looked at the white powder spread on the nightstand beside Kai's bed.

Coke.

So not only was Kai not sober, but he was doing coke? For God's fucking sake. It was one thing to drink, but fucking coke?

No wonder he was tossed on the bed like some zombie, probably unaware that he'd become a father. I now understood why Nico had given me such a pitiful look. Not because I was naive, but because I was stupid as fuck. Stupid enough to think Kai had any intention of recovering.

"Kai."

He didn't move.

Saying his name again, I raised my voice while slapping his cheek. It was still not enough, and he didn't move a muscle. Grunting, I walked back and searched the room for something to help me wake him when I spotted a bottle of water. *That's helpful*. Grabbing the bottle, I went back to the bed, not lingering another second before splashing Kai with the water.

His face scrunched up, and he began coughing before blinking his eyes open and looking around, confused.

"W-What the fuck?" Half rising from the soaked mattress, he rubbed his face and then looked down on his wet clothes.

"Good. You're not dead," I hissed, then put the empty bottle back on the desk.

Kai's eyes moved from his damp clothes to the plastic bottle, then to me.

"Ash?" His brows pulled close as he hardened his stare, probably trying to understand if he was hallucinating me or if I was really here.

"Coke, Kai?" I pointed over to the nightstand and the drug scattered on it.

Tearing his eyes away from me, he shrugged. "It's not mine."

"Really?" I crossed my arms over my chest, trying to hold back from punching him for throwing his life away for drugs. "You think I'm that stupid?"

Still not looking at me, the muscle in his jaw twitched. "So I got a little high, big fucking deal."

Was he serious?

"It is a big fucking deal when you're supposed to be sober. What was the point of going to rehab if not?"

"Rehab is fucking bullshit," he bit back. Bouncing his knees repeatedly, he brought his fingers to his lips and began chewing on the skin around his nails. He'd never done that before, and that explained why his fingers were covered in

small wounds.

“Why are you here?” he asked, his voice hostile.

Drops of water still dripped from his hair, so I grabbed a towel from the hanger and threw it at him.

He caught it.

“I’m here to tell you you’re a dad.” His face paled. “Congratu-fucking-lations.”

Pressing his lips in a hard line, he tossed the towel to the floor and lay back down.

“What the hell? Get up.”

Shifting to his side, he turned his back to me. “Go away.”

Staring at him with my eyes so wide they nearly popped out of my head, I took a deep breath. *This* pathetic, pitiful, and disappointing behavior was a whole new side to the guy who used to be the biggest sunshine in my world. I realized Kai wasn’t the same person because now he had new priorities in life, and those were drugs. He preferred getting high over meeting his newborn baby. Why wouldn’t he? Getting fucked-up was much easier than taking responsibility. Right?

Fuck no.

Anger burned through me like fire, and I moved toward the bed.

“Get up!” I shouted, grabbing his shoulder and trying to shake him. He’d lost enough weight for me to feel his bones. Ignoring this change, I continued to shake him while he resisted me, pushing my hands only for me to bring them back.

“S-Stop!” he grunted when I pulled him by his shirt. “You fucker.”

“Get up, and I’ll stop.”

“Fuck off!” He grabbed my arm and somehow managed to pull me down so that I was now lying on top of him.

We were both panting because of the short struggle, and for a few seconds, neither of us spoke as we caught our breath. Staring into each other’s eyes, I learned that despite everything that had changed, Kai still had the dreamiest blue eyes in the world. It wasn’t just blue. It was turquoise, like shallow waters on a sunny day. The beautiful turquoise that used to make me feel so safe in this world.

My heart hammered a bit faster in my chest, but not the way it used to. It wasn’t love beating inside me but sadness, pain for how he was ruining his life.

I quickly got up.

Turning my back to him, I took a deep breath and cleared my throat.

“If you don’t get up this second, I’ll call your parents and make sure they

know you've relapsed." My voice was strict and determined. "I'll be waiting for you in my truck. You have five minutes." With that, I left the room without looking back, hoping that was enough to make him move.

CHAPTER Fifteen

Ash

The sound of the music coming from the party danced on my nerves, so I closed the windows in my pickup truck while waiting in silence for Kai. It was almost eleven, and I wondered if Soren had returned home or if he was still caught up at the office. If he was, it wouldn't be the first time he'd worked through the night.

As the minutes passed, my worry grew that Kai wouldn't follow me. The last thing I wanted was to involve his parents, but what other choice did I have? He'd relapsed. I had no idea when it happened or if he was ever sober to begin with, but he needed help. The problem was he didn't want any help. I had no experience with addictions, and I was scared that Nico's words would turn out to be true.

Struck by a sudden cold, I turned up the heat and leaned back while tapping the steering wheel with the pads of my fingers. So lost in thought, I jumped when the passenger door burst open, and Kai climbed in.

Without speaking, he closed the door and sank into the seat with a hollow expression that worried the hell out of me. What was going on inside his head? Also, why was he bouncing his legs so much? Was sitting still so hard for him?

We began driving back, and I glanced Kai's way every now and then. His expression hadn't changed since he got into my truck, and it seriously freaked me out. So caught up with him, I took the wrong turn on one of the bends, leading us up an isolated hill. Topanga Canyon had lots of those hidden roads that led to nowhere, and I guessed we were on one.

"We're lost," Kai grunted from beside me.

Oh, now he chooses to talk?

"We're not lost."

"Do you know where we are?"

"No."

"So we're lost," he huffed.

Ignoring him, I focused on the road ahead, which only seemed to get worse.

To our left was a cliff, and to our right, a forest.

"Just turn the damn car around, or we'll get stuck."

"I can't turn around here. It's too narrow."

He straightened up in his seat and looked around. "You can. Just fucking do it."

"I can't… Hey!" I shouted when he yanked the steering wheel from me, forcing us to make a sharp move. The truck jerked and swerved in the road. I slammed on the brakes as hard as I could, trying to get the car under control. We fishtailed for a few nerve-racking seconds, and I was sure we were going to die or, at the very least, overturn. By some miracle, we didn't. After finally gaining control, the truck stilled.

With eyes wide and hands gripping the wheel so hard my knuckles turned white, I tried taking in some air into my burning lungs. My heart was beating so fast I was sure it would burst out of my chest.

"Have you lost your fucking mind?" I shouted at him once I gathered my breath, annoyed with how unfazed he looked.

"Why are you getting so worked up?" He pulled out a pack of cigarettes from his pocket and shoved a smoke between his lips.

"You almost killed us." I snatched the cig away from him and tossed it out the window.

"Hey—"

"Shut up!"

Fucking pissed off, I kicked the gas, ready to get the hell out of here and drop Kai anyplace that *wasn't* near me. But when I tried to drive, I found that the truck had got stuck in the mud, and no matter how much I pressed the gas, it didn't help, and we only sank deeper.

"You gotta be shitting me," Kai hissed while peeking out of his window at the back of the car. "You got us stuck."

"Me?" I gaped at him.

"Yes, you," he snarled, his jaw tense. "You always drove like a bitch."

Unable to share the same breathing space as him, I pushed aside his insults, turned off the engine, and stepped out of the damn truck. Kai followed me out, but I ignored him as I picked up the flashlight we kept in the bed of the truck and moved to check how badly we were stuck. One glance was enough to tell we were deep in the mud.

Huffing, I ran my fingers through my hair. There was no way I'd be able to get the car out by myself. Meanwhile, as I was trying to find a solution, Kai had found a rock to sit on, smoking his cigarette and digging into a wound he had on his elbow. It didn't seem like he'd be willing to help.

Taking out my phone, I pressed it to my lips, wondering who I should call. Mom could easily rescue us with her pickup truck, but she'd be heartbroken if she saw Kai right now. And it was the last thing I wanted to do. It was also late, and she was probably asleep. I was ready to call Aiden, who was usually still up around this hour, when my phone rang in my hand, and I saw it was Soren.

Clearing my throat, I took the call. "H-Hey."

"Where are you?" He sounded bothered.

"Oh, it's a long story." I rubbed the back of my neck, noticing Kai's eyes were on me. "But it's good that you called because I sort of need your help."

"What's wrong? Are you safe? Did you get hurt?"

His worry burdened me with guilt, but it also warmed my heart and brought a slight smile to my lips.

"I'm safe, but my car got stuck in the middle of a dirt road. Can you come and pick me up? I'm here with a friend."

Soren sighed, and the line went silent for a second. "Why are you stuck on a dirt road in the middle of the night with a *friend*?" He nearly hissed the last word.

"I'll explain everything later. I promise."

"Who are you talking to?" Kai asked from where he was sitting.

Ignoring him, I turned around and went back to the phone.

"Who's that?" Soren sounded even more annoyed than before.

"My friend."

Kai was still bothering me with questions, so I waved at him to shut it while holding the phone tighter. "I'll explain everything when we meet. Okay?"

"Fine."

After explaining where we were to Soren, I hung up and pocketed my phone. It would probably take him around thirty minutes to get here. Hopefully, I'd given him good enough directions to track us.

"Soren will be here soon. Try not to get us killed until he does, and when he arrives, please don't do anything embarrassing," I told Kai.

"Who's Soren?" Spitting Soren's name, he couldn't have sounded more dismissive even if he tried.

"My boyfriend." Ready to climb back into my truck since it was freezing, Kai stopped me by grabbing my arm and pulling me back.

"Your boyfriend? You have a boyfriend now?" He pinned me against the car, his hands on my shoulders.

"Yeah, I do."

"Since when?"

He stood so close to me that our noses nearly touched.

“Since a while ago. If you weren’t so caught up in drugs, maybe you wouldn’t have missed it.”

His brows pulled into a deep frown.

“In fact, if you weren’t wasting your life on that crap, you wouldn’t have missed many things, like the birth of your son.”

His jaw clenched, and he pushed me hard before letting go and walking away. “I never wanted that *thing* to be born in the first place.”

That was it for me. If until now, I held some sort of understanding or empathy, now it was all gone.

“That *thing*?” I took a step toward him. “That thing is a child. A child you helped to create, you fucking asshole,” I shouted, unable to bear listening to him speak that way. “You need to pull your head out of your fucking ass, Kai, because you’re fucking pathetic.”

“Shut up.”

“Why? Can’t handle the truth?” I tilted my head at him, my lips curling with spite and rage. “You’re pathetic. That’s what you are. Blaming everyone and anyone for your crappy life. Fuck.” A broken laugh escaped me. “You’re even blaming a newborn baby for your shitty choices. Do you realize how sad that is?” My words were mean and hard to bear, but they were true nonetheless. And Kai needed to get a cold, hard slap from reality.

“Like you’re the one to lecture me. You disgusting *homo*. Who the fuck you think you are?”

I stopped where I stood and smiled at him. “Yeah, I love men, and there’s nothing wrong with that. You can throw snarls at me all you want, Kai. I honestly don’t care. What I do care about is seeing you ruining your life because you can’t accept the fact that you, too, might be one. A *homo*.” Kai had started going down this fatal path because he couldn’t accept that part of him. My confession, which he forced out of me, might be the reason he’d started realizing he liked men, too, but everything that had happened ever since was his fault alone.

“Listen to you,” he hissed, stretching his neck. He looked so thin and unwell, even more so with the moonlight hitting his pale face. “Suddenly, you’re so sure of yourself. Is that what getting a dick does to you? Is it that good? *That* life-changing?”

Understanding that speaking to him was of no use, I turned around and went back to sit in the truck until Soren arrived. I had no intention of getting into more fights with him.

Now seated inside the car, I could still hear Kai speaking to himself. His mumbling went on for a while until he shut up, and I worried that he might have

left, but peeking through the mirror, I saw he was still there, sitting on the same rock as before.

Not long after, the lights of a car flashed in my mirrors, and I stepped out just in time for Soren's Range Rover to park behind my truck. The door opened, and Soren walked out dressed in the same clothes he'd worn to work.

"Dear heavens, are you okay?" he asked as he reached me, his hands moving over my arms to ensure I was unharmed.

The scent of his cologne and the comfort in his touch was already enough to make me feel better, and I breathed him in, savoring the familiar scent.

"I am. Thank you for coming."

A whistle made us both look aside at Kai, who was walking next to Soren's Range Rover while pointing at it with his thumb. "That's a nice ride. Didn't tell me your boyfriend was loaded, *Ashy*."

Soren's brows frowned, and he fixed his glasses before pulling me a bit closer.

"And you are?" he asked, his voice cold.

"I'm the best friend." Stopping before us, Kai brushed his dirty palm over his shirt before offering it to Soren to shake. Only it wasn't a friendly gesture but one full of venom. "Didn't Ashy tell you about me?" He tilted his head and dropped his hand while Soren continued to stand tall.

Removing his attention from Kai, Soren nudged me toward the car. "We should hurry up. It's already too late."

"Why the rush?" Kai slapped Soren's shoulder with the back of his palm. "We're just getting to know each other." He grinned. "I want to know everything about the man who loves shoving his dick inside my best friend."

Soren didn't answer him but instead looked at Kai with pure disdain.

"By the way, aren't you too old for him? You like fucking high school kids or somethin'?"

"Kai!" I yelled, but Soren stopped me with a hand on my arm.

He then took off his coat and put it over my shoulders. "Ashton, it's cold outside. Would you get inside the car, please?"

"But—"

"Don't worry." He smiled at me with such kindness, and I wondered where he'd gotten this insane amount of patience from.

"But what about my truck?" I then asked.

"Don't worry about it." He rubbed my arms with his hands. "Just wait inside."

Not wanting to argue, I left Soren's side and was about to get inside his car when Kai sneered.

“Who knew you were such an obedient pup?”

Angry, I held open the car’s door. “He’s wasted on drugs, Soren, so it’s better to ignore him.”

“Don’t worry, beautiful. Just wait inside.”

“Beautiful?” Kai huffed, rolling his eyes.

I didn’t hear the rest of what Kai said because I’d already closed the door, but from the look of it, their exchange of words wasn’t pleasant. Soren remained as calm as always while Kai kept moving around, his face twisting with rage and spite whenever he spoke. The situation made me uncomfortable, especially when I knew they were talking about me. Every now and then, Kai peeked at me from behind Soren, and the look in his eyes… If I didn’t know any better, I’d say he was jealous. But why would he be? He had his chance with me and made it clear nothing would ever happen.

He didn’t want *me*. Not the other way around.

A few minutes later, Soren got inside the Range Rover. “I contacted the towing company before coming here. They’ll be here in about an hour. They have all the details, so we don’t need to wait,” he said after closing the door.

“That’s great, but—” I looked outside where Kai was still standing. “—what about Kai?”

“What about him?”

My brows drew close. “Aren’t we taking him to the hospital?”

Soren sighed. “He said he’d rather spend the night on the hills than get inside my car. So can we please go now? It’s late, and I’m tired.”

I knew I was putting Soren in an awkward position. He had no reason to care for Kai, even less so after the way Kai had spoken to him. This was also not his mess to clean up. The fact he’d come here to pick me up was more than enough, so asking him to help me with Kai was ungrateful. Yet, there was no way I’d leave Kai behind.

I took Soren’s hand in mine and brought it to my chest. “Please let me try to talk to him one last time. I can’t leave him alone.”

Soren’s jaw clenched, and he poked the inner side of his cheek with his tongue while his eyes studied me from behind his glasses. He seemed angry, and it scared me, but I had to get over it.

After a few more seconds passed, he nodded.

“Fine.”

“Thank you.” I leaned over the gear stick and kissed Soren’s cheek. Cupping my jaw, he turned my face, took off his glasses, then pulled me until our lips bashed together in a passionate kiss. But he didn’t stop there, and after exploring my mouth with hunger, he moved his lips to my neck and sucked on my skin

until a soft moan escaped me. Heat spread through my body, and with Soren still sucking on my neck, I looked aside, only to find Kai was staring at us. The hurt in his eyes was enough to bring me back to the present, and I put my hand on Soren's chest. As I traced my fingers over his strong pecs, our eyes met, and I gave him a quick nod before leaving the warm car and stepping out into the cold night.

"Can you get inside the car?"

"No."

"Please, Kai."

"Why should I? So you can brag about your new relationship?" His eyes darted to my lips.

"O-Of course not." I hesitated when he stepped closer.

"So why should I? Tell me one good reason, and I'll do it."

I peeked over my shoulder to find Soren looking at us. With his glasses back on, he looked at me through sharp, cold eyes that pinned me with guilt. Feeling like I was doing something wrong made my heart ache, and I looked down at the ground, my eyes focusing on my shoes before I answered Kai. "Because I promised Zoe I'd bring you to the hospital."

He snorted. "Like I give a shit."

"Kai."

"Give me a reason to get inside the car."

Without having another choice, I raised my stare to meet him. "Because I care for you, Kai. I always have and always will, and I can't leave you alone, fearing something might happen to you."

Reaching forward, he grabbed my waist and yanked me close. Nerves struck me, and I quickly put my arm between us to keep some safe distance for my growing panic. As Kai slid one hand to my lower back, Soren honked, and it was enough for Kai to remove his hands from me.

"Fine, I'll get inside the car," he said with a devilish smirk I didn't appreciate, but at least he agreed to come with us.

The tension inside the car was so thick it suffocated me, and I did my best not to glance Soren's way as I buckled up.

"Where to?" Soren asked, his voice colder than ever.

"Malibu."

"What?" Kai jumped forward. "You said we're going to the hospital to see Zoe."

"You're going to sleep at Aiden's tonight, and first thing tomorrow morning, he'll take you to a rehab facility," I said while typing a message to Aiden. Luckily, my uncle was still awake and texted back right away.

“No fucking way.” Kai attempted to get out, but Soren had locked the doors. “Open the fucking door.”

“If you don’t agree to it, I’ll contact your parents. You know as well as I do which way is better.”

Kai’s face twisted with anger as he glared at me from the back seat.

“It’s for your own good, Kai,” I said, but he didn’t reply and instead leaned back with his arms crossed over his chest. It was enough of an agreement, and without lingering a second longer, Soren began to drive. To say the ride to my uncle’s house was awkward would be an understatement. Trapped between two men who meant the world to me, I realized having them both would never be possible and that, eventually, I’d have to choose between the two—my endless summer or my forever winter.

When we arrived at Aiden’s, he was already waiting for us outside. Seeing the concern in his sad eyes made me feel guilty, and I sighed before unbuckling myself.

“It’ll only take a few minutes,” I told Soren, then turned around to meet Kai’s stare. In silent agreement, we both stepped out while Soren stayed in his car.

“Go ahead to the guest room, Champ,” Aiden said, squeezing Kai’s shoulder.

Nodding, Kai moved to climb up the wooden stairs leading into the house, then got in with Aiden’s dog, Sebastian, following him.

“You’re just going to let him sleep?” I asked my uncle, whose eyes were pinned on the door Kai just disappeared into.

“Talking now won’t do any good.” He rubbed the back of his neck and moved to look at me. “We’ll have more than enough time for it tomorrow morning.”

“I see,” I said quietly as Aiden’s eyes darted to Soren’s Range Rover.

“Are you coming in, too?” I knew he’d ask that, and a part of me already knew that once we arrived here, I wouldn’t be able to leave Kai alone.

“He’ll need you, Chief,” Aiden added as if I didn’t already know it. “We’ll drive him to the rehab center first thing in the morning, but it won’t be easy.”

“I know.”

Putting his hand on my shoulder, Aiden squeezed it. “I’ll see you inside.” He then turned and walked into the house.

I took a deep breath and then shoved my hands into my pockets. Soren wouldn’t take this well, but I couldn’t not be there for Kai. He needed help, and despite what went on between us, I had to be there for him.

Returning to the car, I stopped in front of Soren’s window. Once he opened it, I leaned over it.

“Why do I have a feeling you’re not coming back with me?” he asked before I could even utter a word.

Knowing I’d just hurt him, I bit my lip and nodded. The way his jaw tensed while he looked straight ahead was like a punch to the gut. I hated disappointing him so much that it made me sick.

“I’m sorry.”

“But you’re not,” he tsked, then checked the time on his watch. “This was already a long night, and I need to be up soon.” He turned the engine back on. Understanding the message, I took a step back. “We’ll talk tomorrow” was the last thing he said before he drove off and left me standing.

Alone.

When he didn’t call or answer any of my calls the next day, I understood how lonely love can make you feel. And even though helping Kai was the right thing to do, it sure as hell didn’t feel like it. The cold shoulder Soren gave me the following week only made that more vivid, and I questioned my choice.

CHAPTER Sixteen

Ash

"What was so important that it couldn't wait until tomorrow?" Soren asked and walked into his house, leaving me to close the door behind us.

It had been a week since the incident with Kai, a week of getting the coldest shoulder from Soren. We didn't meet, and on the few times we spoke on the phone, Soren was indifferent, keeping the conversation short and cold.

All of that and more scared me, and with each passing day, my guilt from the first night had only grown until it was too much to bear. I couldn't sleep properly or concentrate on school or work, and even surfing didn't help. My need for him burned in my throat, and I was so desperate for his attention that nothing else seemed to matter.

So tonight, after a week of being a hopeless case, I decided I couldn't stomach it anymore and came to see him. I needed Soren like I needed my next breath, and knowing I'd made him mad nearly killed me with fear. What if he broke up with me? What would I do then?

"I missed you," I said after following him into the kitchen.

He didn't respond and instead poured himself a glass of wine.

"Didn't we agree to meet tomorrow?" His eyes were glued to the few drops of wine that dripped over the marble while he filled his glass. I expected him to clean it right away, but he didn't.

"We did, but I missed you too much to wait." I moved to get closer to him, but he grabbed his glass and walked away.

Rejected, I stopped for a moment. Was there even a point in me being here tonight? Pushing the thought away, I followed him into his bedroom. I was ready to apologize for how things went on that night when I reached the room and saw the floor was filled with his photos. The mess took me aback because in the months I'd known Soren, not once had I seen something so out of place.

"Why did you take them off?" I asked while looking at the naked wall.

Holding two frames, Soren studied the images carefully. "They were too

spaced from each other, and the order made no sense." He lowered the photos and then picked up a different pair. "Anyway, as you can see, I'm busy. So if you can let yourself out, it would be wonderful."

Being dismissed hurt, but I wasn't willing to let it stop me.

"I know you're mad, and I'm here to apologize," I said despite him not looking at me.

"I'm not mad." He was now studying a picture of a bird. "I simply have no interest in being involved in some trashy teen drama." He put the photo back on the floor and then picked up a new one. But before he could examine it in detail, I grabbed his wrist. He paused and looked at me with wide eyes. It was unlike me to be this bold, but I couldn't let him slip from between my fingers. I had to make him look at me. Now that he had, I spoke.

"I know. That's why I'm here, to apologize and to promise you it won't happen again."

He narrowed his brows at me, his expression skeptical. "Why should I believe you?"

I let go of his wrist but moved closer, careful not to step on any photo while doing so. "Because… because I love you, Soren."

I realized I loved him this week when I couldn't bear to be away from him. And while I hoped my confession would shift something inside of him, it didn't, and he remained looking at me with cold eyes.

"But you love him, too, don't you?"

Kai.

Stunned at his words, I didn't know what to say. Soren confused my lack of response for an answer and quickly brushed my hand off before taking a step back.

"I know I sound like a pitiful man, but I refuse to be someone's second choice," he said, not meeting my eyes. "Now, then, I'd appreciate it if you'd go."

My heart sank with the thought of leaving and never seeing Soren again.

"But you're not. You're my first choice, Soren, my only choice. I don't love him, not anymore."

He glanced at me. "So why did you stay with him that night? Why didn't you come back home with me?"

Home.

The way he referred to his condo as our home was a direct dart to the heart.

"He needed me, so I stayed."

Soren placed his hands on his hips and diverted his look away before returning his eyes to me. "I needed you, too, but he was more important than me. Wasn't he?"

Until now, I didn’t realize Soren needed me. I mean, why would he? He was perfect while I was just a messy kid, or so I thought. For the first time, I saw a hint of a different side to him, one that was far from perfect and composed. A pitiful man, like he said, who was scared to be left alone. Truth was, I loved this side even more because I could relate to his depression.

“Will you stop meeting him?” he then asked.

“Would it help you trust me?”

He averted his look and took a moment to think before nodding. “Yes.”

It was a big request. “You know, we’re not even friends anymore.”

“It doesn’t matter.” He cut into my words. “Will you not see him again?” Holding my stare, Soren’s silver eyes pierced into me.

He seemed so off-balance. Whether it was his clothes that weren’t as neat as always, the shreds of hair that fell over his brows, or the photos he’d taken off his wall. He was clearly hurt, and his pain was like a love confession to me. The fact he loved me so much that me not coming home with him had led him to this—it was worrying, but I was just as desperate for him, and knowing we were equals felt good.

I held my fist close to my body and exhaled slowly before looking at him with a straight face. “If that’s what you want, then yes. I won’t see him ever again.” Kai was in the beginning of his recovery anyway. “I’ll do anything you ask me to.” If letting go of Kai would bring Soren back to me, I was willing to do that. “I’d do anything, Soren.”

Finally, Soren seemed to be pleased with me as a slight smile pulled on his lips.

He crossed the room, stopping before me. “Do you mean it?”

I nodded, and his smile grew.

He hooked his finger under my chin and forced it up. “We’re going to have sex tonight.”

My breath caught.

“W-What?” I gasped at the sudden switch in his demeanor.

“I want to own you completely, little Sparrow.” He caressed his thumb along my jawline. “But first, you’ll need to clean up for me.”

A shiver ran down my spine as my heart picked up. I knew what he was referring to because he’d taught me everything I needed to know about preparation, from how to wash myself down there to lubricating and using my fingers to open up. So far, I’d practiced it alone and prepared myself at home before coming to see him. But now—

“I-I’ll do it in the guest bathroom, then.” My cheeks burned up. “You can wait. It won’t take long.”

“No.” His hand slid to my hip, and he kept me close. “You’re going to do it in front of me.”

I was struck with unbelievable heat as embarrassment took over every inch of my body. “No.” I placed my hands flat on his chest, feeling his heartbeat underneath my touch. “I can’t. There’s no way you can watch me while I—”

“Why?” He tilted his head aside, his look serious. “Is there anything you’re willing to hide from me?”

“No, but it’s embarrassing,” I blurted out awkwardly, then tried to step back, but he didn’t allow it.

“There’s nothing embarrassing about it, little Sparrow.”

I love it when he calls me that.

“So get rid of your clothes and wait for me naked in the shower.”



At first, the situation was incredibly awkward. The water sliding down my body did nothing to wash away the humiliation of being watched while I used the enema he gave me. But as Soren began telling me how well I was doing and how hot I looked, my embarrassment melted into the familiar pleasure that only came from being his good boy, and I yearned for his attention. Knowing his eyes were entirely focused on me as I did a good job filled me with the pride that I thrived on. So much so that once I was done, I almost felt sorry it had ended.

“You’re so precious, my little Sparrow.” He kissed my shoulder while drying me with a towel. “The most precious little bird.”

Feeling almost drunk, I closed my eyes and leaned my head back against him, my wet body soaking his clothes. Not minding it, Soren slid his hands down my naked skin until he reached my hard cock.

“I love how smooth you always are.” He wrapped his fingers around the base of my dick while slipping his other hand between my ass cheeks.

I let out a soft moan. “It’s because of swimming.” Since I was on the swim team, I had to wax my body. I used to feel weird about not having hair, but it no longer bothered me after learning how much Soren loved it during our first few times together.

“Always keep it this way.” He planted another kiss on my neck as he began moving his fist in slow strokes that put me on edge. “Next time, I can even help you shave.”

The idea appealed to me, and I moaned at the image of him praising me for that.

“Yeah,” I panted, trying to stay focused despite his fist that kept squeezing my throbbing length, using my precum to ease the friction. “Please, do.”

“Such a good boy,” he whispered in the shell of my ear, his words covering my skin with goose bumps, then swept me off my feet and walked us to his bed.

The sheets were cold at first touch, and my back arched, but Soren’s hands, which by now I was used to their temperature, slipped underneath my body and warmed me up quickly. On instinct, I spread my legs and made room for him as he lowered himself down, his clothes pressed to my naked skin.

We kissed for a while until he paused. “Hold on,” he whispered over my lips, then straightened up and began unbuttoning his shirt.

My mouth watered with each button undone, revealing more of his perfect body. I would never get used to Soren’s ripped muscles, sculpted abs, and pecs. He was what my wet dreams were made from.

As he reached his pants, he stopped, his eyes locked with mine.

“Undo me,” he ordered, and my skin burned under his command.

He sat on the bed with his legs spread apart, leaning back on one arm for support.

Wanting to please him, I moved to my knees and, with eager fingers, unzipped his pants. His hard dick stretched the fabric of his trousers, and I licked my lips while slowly undoing them until his black boxers came to view. I then moved my eyes away from the outline of his hard cock and met his hungry stare, waiting for his approval like it was my next breath. Once it was granted, I lowered my head to level down with his groin and pulled down the waistband of his boxers using my teeth. *I know he loves it when I do that*. His dick sprang free, almost hitting my face as it bounced before settling down. Long, thick, with a pink head and a pearl of precum, Soren’s cock was as perfect as the rest of him. With the need to feel his weight on my tongue, I parted my lips before wrapping them around his girth. Closing my eyes, I attempted to take him the deepest my throat allowed before pulling back and doing it again until tears welled in my burning eyes.

“You have such a talented mouth, Ashton,” he rasped, voice heavy, while stroking my cheek. His sweet words were comforting, as was his hand that softly moved through my hair, and my body ached to continue and be admired by him.

I flicked my tongue over the crown of his cock and savored the bitter taste of his precum before taking him in again. I groaned around his thick length when he grabbed my hair and pushed my head down until my nose grazed his trimmed pubes. For a couple of seconds, I couldn’t breathe, but soon, he let go, took his cock out, and got up from the bed.

“On your back,” he said while taking off his pants.

I quickly did as I was told.

“Good boy.” He smirked, grabbed my leg, then flipped me to my stomach and pulled me toward him. The flick of his tongue over my rim caused me to gasp, and the surprise made me jerk back against him.

“Easy there, Ashton, or you’ll break my nose,” he chuckled.

“S-Sorry,” I panted and laid my head back on the pillow. Only once I settled did he continue and push his tongue into my greedy hole. It was the first time he had ever done this to me. I’d seen many pornos with rimming, but nothing could ever come close to this moment where Soren’s tongue was spreading me open. And when I thought it couldn’t get any better than that, he added a finger, then another, and by the time he had three fingers in, I couldn’t wait any longer.

“P-Please,” I cried with a tight breath. My whole body hurt with need.

“Please, what?”

I swallowed hard so I could speak. “I need you inside of me.”

“I *am* inside of you.” He shoved his fingers deeper, grazing my prostate on the way.

“That’s not what I meant,” I cried with pleasure, my lips wet from my own spit.

“So what did you mean?” He pulled out, and then the bed shifted behind me.

“You know what I mean.” My face burned with my embarrassment.

“I want to hear you say it loud and clear.”

Gathering all the dignity I had left, I glanced at him over my shoulder. Our eyes met, and the lust I saw burning behind his silver irises gave me the confidence I lacked. “Your cock. I want your cock inside of me.”

Soren’s lips pulled into the sexiest smile I had ever seen, and the next thing I knew, he’d positioned himself behind me. With one hand hooked underneath my hip, he pulled me closer until my ass was pressed against his dick. Then, he placed his other hand between my shoulder blades and pushed me down.

He reached for the bedside table to take out a bottle of lube. He didn’t pick condoms since we never used them—Soren hated them. That was why we’d both got tested early on.

“S-Soren, wait,” I gasped when the cold lube touched my skin. My heart rate increased, and my panic rose with knowing what was about to happen. What if, like the last time, it would hurt? What would I do then?

“Don’t worry, Ashton.” He kissed my shoulder, his fingers spreading the lube over my hole. “I’ll take care of you.”

“But—”

My words were cut short once I felt the head of his cock at my entrance, and when he pushed in, I gasped. The pressure was nowhere near having his fingers,

and I was scared it wouldn’t work, but then he pushed a bit more, and his dick slid deeper into me.

“You’re so tight,” Soren hissed from behind me, the pleasure in his voice going straight to my cock. He then pushed forward, his dick going in deeper while rubbing my prostate. I moaned loudly, so he repeated the action, pulling all the way out only to plunge in again, and again, and again.

With my face shoved into the pillow, I fisted the sheets and arched my back, trying to hold back from moaning so loud. My cock throbbed between my thighs, so I grabbed it and began rubbing myself with the same rhythm Soren was drilling into me. Between having him pound me from behind and stroking my aching length, I wasn’t sure I’d last long. But then, Soren pulled out and flipped me to my back before thrusting into me again.

With my legs pressed to my chest, I was almost folded in half underneath his strong body.

“You’re so warm inside,” Soren whispered over my lips before he took my mouth in a heated kiss, slipping his tongue inside while rolling his hips, his balls slapping against my ass as he slammed into me harder.

His sweat mixed with my own, his groans tangled with my moans while his body pressed against mine, almost like we melted into each other. My heart and chest were so full, and I couldn’t tell what I was feeling. Pleasure, happiness, neediness, desperation, everything combined into a mix of emotions.

“S-Soren, I’m close,” I cried his name as my arousal grew unbearable and my balls drew tight.

“Yes, little Sparrow, come for me,” he breathed into my mouth, then took my cock in his hand and started rubbing me off. All it took were two shallow strokes, and I came. A hot pulse of cum coated his tight fists while I continued to come the hardest I ever had. My entire body trembled underneath him for a second before he came inside me, filling my ass with his hot release. Long waves of pleasure overtook me, almost like a spiritual experience, until it came to a slow stop.

It was incredible.

Soren’s body then collapsed on top of me, his arms holding me in a tight embrace while his drained cock was still inside my used hole. His weight, sweat, and scent bound me to him in ways I never knew could be possible. I felt so incredibly lucky and happy that only one thing came to my mind.

“I love you.” I whispered those three words in his ear, sliding my hands around his body. “I love you, Soren.”

He rose up so our eyes met, a small smile on his lips. “I love you, too, Ashton.” He ducked his head down, his mouth taking mine in a slow kiss. I

groaned, then wrapped my legs around him, not minding the cum that smeared between us as we proceeded to make out. I was so unbelievably happy that I was willing to do anything to keep feeling this way.



Ash

Time flew by, and before I knew it, I'd graduated. It was wild because freshman year felt like yesterday, and now I had my diploma in hand. So much had changed, and although things didn't go as planned, I couldn't complain.

I always assumed I'd graduate with Kai, but here I was, without him. Surprisingly, it didn't upset me. In fact, I couldn't even care that he wasn't here. Since promising Soren I'd cut all ties with Kai, I had. Choosing between my boyfriend and the guy who used to be my best friend wasn't even a dilemma because life without Soren was nonnegotiable.

My only sorrow today was that Soren had to skip the ceremony, but we'd meet soon for lunch with my mom and Aiden and his parents. I'd already met Soren's folks a few times when I came over to their house for dinner. They were nothing but kind and polite to the point it almost felt like meeting royalty. I wasn't even kidding. Some of the photos in Soren's parents' mansion were of them with *real* royalty. I also had the chance to meet two of his brothers, who couldn't have been more different from Soren, even if they tried.

Back to today, it would be the first time Soren met my family, and while I was excited, I was also worried because I had big news to tell Mom and Aiden.

"There he is!" Mom shouted from across the lawn, where the families sat during the ceremony. I spotted her immediately because of the white dress she almost always wore for events. She'd bought it in Italy when she traveled there with my father, and it still suited her after so many years.

"I'm so proud of you," she said a second before pulling me into a tight hug that made breathing hard. "So fucking proud."

Wrapping my hands around her, I hugged her back. "Thanks, Mom." I then pulled back and looked at Aiden, who was right behind her, looking at us with gentle eyes.

"Well done, Champ."

My chest flooded with warmth, and it was hard to swallow the lump of

emotions forming in my throat. I never knew graduating would make me this emotional, but sharing this moment with two people I loved so much moved my heart.

"We better get going," I said while checking my phone. "Or we'll be late."

Mom linked her elbow with mine as we began walking toward the parking lot. "I'm so excited we're finally going to meet *the* boyfriend." She pinched my cheek, and I grimaced.

"Please don't do that when we meet Soren."

"I'm your mom. I'll do whatever I want," she protested, pulling me closer to her.

"Of course you'd say that. But I'm serious, Mom. Please don't embarrass me today."

She gasped. "When do I ever?"

I raised my eyebrow at her, and she chuckled.

"Fine, so I won't show him the baby pictures I brought." With that, she let go of me and walked ahead, leaving me and Aiden behind.

"Was she serious—"

"Yes," Aiden said, then patted my shoulder. "Let's go."



"Soren's already waiting for us in the restaurant," I said after Mom parked the truck.

I was ready to get out when she stopped me.

"Before we go, I wanted to give you something." Reaching for the back seat, where Aiden was sitting, she picked up a paper bag and handed it to me. "It's from the both of us," she added while I looked between her and Aiden.

The bag was heavy, and I peeked into it. Inside was another box wrapped in white wrapping paper. Curious, I took it out and quickly unwrapped it.

"M-Mom, that's too much." I held the brand-new camera she and Aiden had got me, shifting it around and clicking random buttons.

"It's so you can take lots of photos in Australia and send them to us to see," she said, and I put down the camera to look at her.

My excitement was replaced with guilt because she and Aiden had no idea I'd had a change in plans and that I no longer planned to go there. For years, I'd hoped to be a professional surfer. Growing up, it sounded like the dream job, and Mom, being Mom, cheered me on to chase my dreams. I was supposed to start pursuing that dream this summer when I was offered to surf with the most

amazing team in Aussie, but I turned their offer down a few weeks ago and hadn't told Mom and Aiden about it. I also didn't mention I got accepted to college, here in California.

"That's super cool, Mom." I focused my eyes on the camera. "But—" My phone rang, cutting me off before I could tell her the news. Grateful for the interruption, I quickly picked up.

"Where are you?" Soren asked.

"We just parked the car. I'll see you in a minute."

"Okay," Soren said and then hung up.

"What were you about to say?" Mom asked after I pocketed my phone.

"It can wait for later." I smiled at her. "Now, let's go."

I put the camera back in the bag before getting out of the truck, with Mom and Aiden doing the same. My heart raced fast in my chest as I crossed the street to get to the restaurant. I was worried things wouldn't go well, but once I spotted Soren, looking as handsome as ever with a bouquet of flowers, all my nerves and fears disappeared.

"Hey," I blurted awkwardly once reaching him.

Soren's smile grew, and he leaned close, his lips grazing my ear. "Congratulations, little Sparrow," he whispered before planting a kiss on my cheek. He then straightened up and gave me the flowers.

Thankfully, I was standing with my back to my family, so they didn't see how red my face turned, and while I took a few more seconds to calm down, Soren had already introduced himself.

"Soren Dane," he said to my family before offering to shake Mom's hand. "I'm happy to finally meet you."

"My God, you are handsome!" Mom bluntly ignored Soren's outstretched hand and pulled him into one of her bear hugs. Soren seemed surprised by the act but brushed it off with a low chuckle.

"No wonder Ash is so obsessed." She beamed, squeezing Soren tighter.

"Mom," I whined, knowing it would be one long lunch after she crossed her arms with Soren's.

At least they seem to be getting along.

"Are your parents not joining us?" I asked when I noticed they weren't here.

Soren answered me with a soft smile. "Unfortunately, something came up, and they couldn't make it. But they've sent us the finest champagne as an apology."

"Oh, well, we'll have to meet them the next time, right?" Mom jumped in, sounding cheerful.

"Absolutely." Soren smiled, then stepped closer to me.

“Shouldn’t we get inside? I’m starving.” *And nervous.*

“We should, but first, I need to give you your gift.” Moving from my mom, Soren stopped before me, then pulled something out of his pocket and put it in my hand.

“That’s…” My words were cut off as I looked up from the car keys he’d just given me to the brand-new Jeep parked behind him. “You gotta be shitting me,” I gasped, my eyes going wide and my lips curving into a huge smile before I dashed toward the car.

“I knew you’d like it,” Soren chuckled while I opened the front door and got into my new Jeep. For fuck’s sake, it was absolutely insane.

I was so caught up with my gift and how good the scent of a new car was that I almost didn’t notice Mom’s reaction until she cleared her throat. One glance at her and Aiden told me they weren’t as excited about Soren’s gift as I was, and the look on their faces was like a splash of ice water.

“Is everything okay, beautiful? You don’t like the color?” Soren asked, his voice low so only I could hear.

I shook my head. “No, it’s not that.” I moved my hands over the steering wheel before meeting Soren’s silver eyes. “It’s perfect.”

His lips stretched up, and he pinched my cheek. “You’re perfect.”

His words, sweet and adoring, were the only confirmation I needed, and satisfied, I got out of the car.



Soren’s pick of a restaurant was impeccable, and I was grateful that he took my family to such a nice place. And although the conversation was flowing just like the champagne Soren had ordered for the table, I knew my mom had something weighing on her heart. The slight annoyance had shown on her face ever since Soren had gifted me the car, and while I understood the reason for her discomfort, as it was an excessive gift, I hoped she’d be able to contain it. Sure, a car was an expensive gift, but such money meant nothing to Soren. Over the year we’d been together, I’d gotten used to him being generous with his wealth. Unfortunately, while I felt comfortable with his gift, my family clearly didn’t.

“This lunch was so lovely, Soren, and I’m so happy to finally meet you,” Mom started saying after the waitress cleaned up our table from the main course. “But—”

“Mom.” Knowing where she was heading, I tried stopping her, but she went on.

“I think your gift to Ash, as thoughtful as it was, is inappropriate.”

My eyes quickly moved to Soren’s, and worried, I watched him putting down his wineglass before returning Mom a thoughtful smile.

“And why’s that?”

Mom’s brows pulled into a frown. “Well, it’s too much. Besides, Ash already has a car.”

Pulling his shoulders up, Soren leaned back in his seat and placed his arm behind me. “I disagree with you. It’s not too much. In fact, it’s not much at all, and besides, Ashton will need a proper ride to take him to school every day, won’t he? I’ll be much calmer knowing he drives a safe car rather than the wreck he’s currently driving.”

Mom’s frown only deepened before her eyes moved to me. “Driving to school? What do you mean by that?”

Oh shit.

The tension at the table rose significantly, and with how Aiden and Mom were both staring at me, I had no idea how to tell them the news.

“Well… I decided not to go to Australia.” *I guess I did know how to tell them.*

“What? Why?” Mom gasped, leaning closer over the table, already causing the drama I wished to avoid.

I rubbed the back of my neck while trying to avoid the shock on her face. It was then that Soren moved his hand to my thigh and squeezed me a bit. The touch was comforting, giving me the confidence I needed. “I had a change of plans and decided to go to college.”

One would think I’d just committed a crime with the way Mom was staring at me with wide eyes and open mouth.

“Turning down Australia? Going to college? Where is this all coming from?”

“I’m sorry, Mom. I planned on telling you sooner, just never had the time.” I understood her shock because we used to share everything with each other. But since meeting Soren, I aspired to be more independent. Wishing for him to see me as a mature partner, I couldn’t run back to mommy with every slightest discomfort happening in my life. I had to decide things on my own—*or* with Soren.

She leaned closer. “Didn’t have the time? What the fuck is going on Ash? For years, we’ve talked about your surfing. It was your dream. All of a sudden, you’re telling me you’re giving it all up for college? For God’s sake, kid, you hate school.”

“I’ve changed, okay?” My anger rose with her reaction.

“Clearly.” Her eyes snapped to Soren before coming back to me. “But not for

the better. You're obviously influenced."

"I'm not," I spat back, pissed. "If anything, you should be grateful I actually want to do something with my life."

"You don't even sound like yourself."

"Mel, we can talk about this later," Aiden suggested, trying to calm her down without success.

"No, Aiden. There's no fucking way I'm dropping this." She shut him up and then returned her attention to me. "What are you even going to study?"

"Business."

She gasped, then leaned back in her chair with her arms crossed. "Business?" She cocked her head at Soren. "It was your idea, wasn't it? Filling his head with this crap about school, telling him surfing isn't good enough?"

"Mom."

"I worried you were a bad influence on him, and it turns out I was right."

"Mom!" I shouted.

Mom looked at me, shocked, and despite the hurt in her eyes, I didn't care. She had no right to blame Soren.

"It was all my decision," I said, jaw tensed. Sure, Soren had helped me apply to colleges and advised me on courses, but at the end of the day, I was the one who'd decided it was a better choice. She might not agree with me, and that was fine, but she had no right to turn it all on Soren when I was the one who'd decided I wanted to stay here. Was it because of Soren? Of course, but who cares, it was my life to do whatever I wanted with.

"Surfing will always be my hobby. But I want to have a career. A real one." My voice was firm and composed. With Soren sitting right beside me, I had no reason to doubt myself and therefore went on. "It's all my decision. You can either accept it or not, but it won't change a thing."

Mom took a deep breath before she slumped her shoulders. "How are you going to pay for it?" she asked.

"I hoped you'd help me. But if not…"

"I'll pay for it," Soren said casually, not minding the way my mom stared back at him as if he was the devil himself. "It's not a problem, and if it's what Ashton decides he wants to do, I'd be happy to help him."

"Listen to me now—" Mom began saying when Aiden cut in.

"How about we finish this conversation later?" He looked between all three of us. "There's a lot to talk about, and maybe this isn't the right place for it."

By now, we had the attention of half the tables in the restaurant, so I nodded before we fell into an awkward silence, with Mom looking away. I had obviously hurt her, and I hated it, but I also had to stand up for myself.

“Ashton is an adult, Melany,” Soren said, breaking the silence. “It’s his right to make his own decisions.”

Mom’s jaw twitched a second before she reached for her purse. Not bothering to answer back, she got up and walked away from the table. I wanted to go after her when Aiden stopped me, saying he’d take care of it. He then got up himself, said he’d be right back, and went after Mom.

Ashamed of my family’s reaction, I focused on my hands while chewing my lip hard. Instead of being friendly and welcoming, they’d treated Soren like he was this awful man when all he ever did was care for me. Lunch went horribly, and now Mom was pissed. But what was I supposed to do? Reject Soren’s gift because it didn’t suit her? Give up on my relationship so I could catch some waves in Australia? Fuck no.

I am never, ever leaving Soren.

“Everything will be okay, Ashton.” Soren pinched my cheek before getting up. “I believe this lunch is over. I’ll go pay the check.”

I’m so lucky to have him in my life.

While Soren walked away to pay the bill, Aiden returned. He wasn’t as worked up as Mom, but then again, he was always more easygoing with these types of things. Instead of sitting back in his old chair, he took the one beside me and poured us each a glass of water.

“How’s Mom?” I asked while he took a long gulp.

He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, then coughed. “Mel will be okay. She just needs time to process everything you dropped on us, kiddo.”

“I planned on telling you sooner,” I mumbled quietly before grabbing my water glass and taking a small sip. My mouth tasted bitter, and water didn’t seem to help.

“It’s your life, Ash. As long as you’re sure of what you’re doing, your mom and I are happy.”

I side-eyed him, and he laughed.

“Well, maybe it will take Mel a bit more time, but she’ll get there. And speaking of going to places…” Aiden stopped and pulled something out of his jeans pocket, then handed it to me.

“What’s that?” I asked while checking the letter he gave me. There was no stamp or address on the envelope, which looked like it had seen better days with how wrinkled it was, only two words written on the front.

To Ashy.

That was enough to let me know who wrote this letter, and the second the realization struck me, the paper in my hand felt so much heavier.

“He’s in rehab again. This time, he’s trying. Really trying, Chief.”

After the last time we put Kai in rehab, he relapsed again. Sick and tired of this ongoing cycle, I stopped keeping track. But unlike me, Aiden didn't seem to give up and kept on insisting on helping Kai.

"He's sad he couldn't come to see you graduate and asked me to give you this letter."

I clenched the envelope tighter while looking away from my uncle.

"He also asked for you to come and visit him."

My jaw twitched, and I closed my eyes. All of a sudden, Kai wanted to see me. Not that it mattered.

"I don't want to see him." I placed the envelope back on the table.

"Ash—"

"Is everything alright?" Soren asked as he returned, his eyes moving from me to the envelope and back.

"Yeah, I'm just really tired," I said and got up.

"We can go." Soren placed his hand on my lower back, and I nodded.

But before we could leave, Aiden grabbed the letter from the table and put it back in my palm.

"Think about it," he said, a serious look pulled on his face. A look I'd seen many times before, one that told me he was counting on me.



Ash

“I’m sorry about today,” I told Soren, who’d just parked my new car in his building’s parking lot.

He took off his sunglasses and turned to me. “You did nothing wrong, Ashton. So don’t apologize,” he said, his attention split between me and the envelope I still held in my hands.

Realizing I was still holding on to it, I quickly tossed it over the dashboard.

“I don’t care about this letter.”

Soren tapped the steering wheel with his fingers, his lips set together in a hard line. “As I said, I don’t care.” After lingering a few more seconds, he sighed. “It’s a good thing my parents couldn’t make it today.”

I rubbed the back of my head. “Y-Yeah. My mom is usually cooler, but I guess she was taken by surprise with the car and all.”

“To say the least.” He huffed. “And not to mention her language.”

My brows pulled into a frown, and I looked at him, confused. “What do you mean?”

“She was so vulgar, Ashton. I must admit she made me uncomfortable. Swearing and raising her voice in public?” His gray eyes studied me before he looked away and shook his head. “Not to mention her pick of clothing. Her dress was too short and see-through. Extremely inappropriate for her age.”

It was her favorite dress. The one she always wore and loved because it reminded her of my father. But I didn’t want to argue with Soren, especially if it made him uncomfortable. I didn’t like what he’d just said, but maybe she’d hurt his feelings? Either way, I wasn’t sure how to respond.

“She’s actually not that old… She had me when she was young.”

Soren’s low chuckle filled the car before he put his hand on my thigh and squeezed me tightly. “You’re precious, Ashton. Absolutely precious. Regardless of her age, she still should have behaved differently, considering the time and place. As an adult, she must know how to compose her emotions. We can’t all

just lash out in an argument like juveniles."

A lump formed in my throat, and my stomach flipped with worry.

"So you don't like my mom?"

"My emotions for her are irrelevant. But I expected her to be more decent. At the very least, she could have been thankful you're going to college, but instead, she spat all that emotional nonsense about chasing dreams."

"But aren't dreams important?" I asked while picking the skin around my nails.

"Don't do that." Soren placed his hand on mine, then nudged my chin so I'd look up. "Besides, I thought a future with me was your dream." A soft smile pulled on his lips. "*Our* dream."

Heat rushed to my cheeks as warmth filled my heart. For the last few weeks, all we'd been doing was planning our future. Soren had even mentioned moving to a different state at some point, and I wanted it. I wanted to be with him no matter what.

"It is." I nodded, and his smile grew wider until it reached his sharp eyes.

"Move in with me."

My heart stopped, and I stared at him with my mouth open.

"D-Do you really mean it?"

"Of course I do."

I never knew this happiness existed, and unable to form actual words, I pressed my lips together and nodded eagerly. Waking up next to Soren every morning, only to go to sleep with him every night, truly was a *dream*. A dream I didn't dare to hope for. I knew how important Soren's space was for him, and even though he'd welcomed me into his home many times before, this was different. Him asking me to share his space was beyond imaginable.

Sliding his fingers to the back of my nape, Soren closed the distance between us and pressed his lips to mine—his touch, smell, and taste were like a drug. A drug I couldn't seem to get enough of. Desperate for more, I leaned closer and deepened the kiss. As I opened my mouth, Soren pushed his hot tongue between my parted lips, and I sucked on it, moaning when he swirled it around mine. This kiss quickly turned into more as he yanked me by my shirt, and I clenched to his strong body, fisting his shirt in my palms. Out of breath, I tried to get as much of him as I could with us still sitting in the car.

Knowing there was only so much we could do here, I paused. "Let's go home," I panted, my fingers digging into the fabric of his shirt. But instead of pulling away, Soren unbuckled me. Surprised, I looked down at where his fingers were tracing my thigh before he forced me to look up.

"Take your pants off and move onto the back seat," he said.

“W-What?” The shock made me mutter.

“Be a good boy, and do it.” He unbuckled himself, then glanced back at me.

I swallowed hard, bolts of excitement already tingling my stomach, then quickly undid my pants. Once I slipped my boxers off as well, I turned around and climbed into the back seat. Eager, I waited for Soren’s next orders. In satisfying silence, he got out of the car. My heart thrummed in my ears while my eyes followed him until he got back inside the car, only to sit next to me in the back seat.

“I-Isn’t it dangerous to do it here?” Despite the parking lot looking empty, people could still come and go. But the fear of being caught suddenly turned to something else when my eyes locked on Soren’s erection, which pressed hard against his slacks. I licked my lips, my dick already hardening and my balls aching.

“Touch yourself,” he then said, his eyes focusing on my cock.

Wanting to be his good boy, I grabbed my hard length and began stroking myself, feeling high both on Soren’s look and the fear of being watched by someone else. Because who knew? Perhaps while I was rubbing my dick in my palm, precum smearing along the shaft, some stranger was lurking outside. They’d be shocked and repulsed, or maybe they’d be turned on?

Oh God.

Closing my eyes, I moaned at the perverted idea.

“You poor little thing.” He let out a low chuckle, then moved close until his lips ghosted the skin of my neck. “So hot and ready to be taken out in public.”

Biting my lips, I squeezed my eyes harder as I increased my strokes. *Who knew I was like this?*

“Tell me what you’re thinking of,” Soren said, kissing my neck and slowly moving to suck my earlobe while I continued to fap my painfully hard dick.

“That someone might see us,” I gasped, and he chuckled.

“Then they’ll have quite the show.” Grabbing me, he spread my legs wider apart as if presenting me to the world.

Both aroused and embarrassed, I buried my face in the curve of his neck.

“What else?”

I shook my head. “It’s embarrassing.”

“Tell me what else you were thinking about, Ashton.” He bit my ear. “I’m curious.”

Oh my God, he’s so fucking sexy.

“That I like the idea of being watched,” I admitted, my whole body burning up.

“That’s my naughty little Sparrow,” he growled, pulling out a packet of lube

from his pocket and tearing it with his teeth.

“Soren,” I gasped when he spread the lube over my rim with his fingers and cried after he shoved them in, grazing my inner walls in a way only he knew how to do. Jolts of pleasure shot through my body once he scissored his fingers and rubbed my prostate. He knew every inch of me, in and out, and knowing that brought me comfort.

So much comfort.

“Look how well you take my fingers, little Sparrow.” He pushed deeper. “Always so wet and hot for me.”

My dick jerked in my hand at the filthiness of his words as a hot flush rushed to my heated cheeks. My whole body was on edge, even more than usual because of doing it in the new car he bought me. I was ready to come then and there when Soren pulled his fingers out. I would have been sad over the loss of touch if it weren’t for him unzipping himself the next moment. My mouth watered at the sight of his erect cock, always so perfect, and I eagerly obeyed when he told me to move on top of him.

“God, you’re so perfect,” Soren hissed, his dick slowly sliding inside of me until he was all in. “So goddamn perfect.”

Smitten with his love, I began rolling my hips and riding him the way he’d taught me how to do. With his cold hands holding on to my hips and his fingers digging into my muscles, I rocked my body, riding his dick until we were both groaning with pleasure. I could feel my orgasm building in the pit of my stomach, but before I could reach my climax, as I so desperately ached for, Soren slipped his cock out, pushed me down on the seat, and moved between my legs.

“Good thing I got you a spacious car.” He grinned over my lips before shoving his cock back in.

I moaned loudly, my eyes rolling to the back of my head as he began slamming in and out. The pleasure was so wild, and I tossed my head back. Forgetting where we were for a second, I accidentally bumped into the car’s door. Without saying a word, Soren placed his hand behind my head, keeping me safe while he continued to pound my needy hole.

My balls drew tight with each thrust, and I was ready to come when Soren gripped my cock and squeezed the tip so hard it was painful. I whined, but he shut me up with a sloppy kiss that was all about teeth clashing and lips biting until I was left a needy mess.

“You’re mine, Ashton,” he whispered over my abused lips. “Forever mine.”

My chest warmed with my love for him, and my skin burned with heat. And even though he was so close to me, with his cock still shoved balls-deep inside

my ass, it was still not enough. I needed more of him. So much more.

“Come inside me,” I begged, wrapping my arms around him. “Please, Soren. I want your cum.”

His eyes darkened, and he swallowed hard before closing the fair distance between us and kissing me. While devouring my mouth, he moved his hips, thrusting into me harder. His hand, which squeezed me tight till now, began stroking my dick eagerly. It didn’t take more than that, and I came hard, my body trembling with my release. Soren didn’t stop and instead rocked his hips until he, too, came. A hot flush ran through my body as his release filled me to the brim, and I groaned with pleasure when he slowly slipped out.

I felt a bit of his cum dripping from my used hole, so I jerked up. “It will get the car dirty,” I muttered and tried to move to prevent it when Soren grabbed my ankle and pulled my hips up.

“If it does, I’ll just buy you a new one.” He then dove his head down.

I groaned when he pressed his lips to my hole and was left in awe at the sight of him eating his cum from my ass. The sounds were filthy, but not nearly as much as the sight of him afterward. Glossy lips, disheveled clothes, and messy hair. So strong and masculine. So perfect and mine.

Somehow, I was lucky enough that a man like him wanted me.

Loved me.

I was his precious little thing, his to do with as he pleased, and I had no intention of ever changing that.

CHAPTER Nineteen

Ash

After I cleaned up at Soren's, I decided to drive back to see Mom. I didn't want to leave things the way they were after today's lunch. I knew that if it was just the two of us, we'd be able to have a calmer conversation. But as I arrived home, I realized Aiden was also there. To his credit, the moment he saw me, he told the two of us he was going for a short walk, giving us the privacy we needed.

"I'll make us coffee," Mom said once Aiden left, and I nodded while sitting down by the table.

I watched her move around the kitchen. She was still in the same dress she wore earlier, which only now did I notice was indeed see-through. No wonder Soren was uncomfortable when you could clearly see the shape of her breasts. Mom was a beautiful woman, and she should wear whatever, but I couldn't help but see where Soren was coming from. He might have been a bit harsh, but that was Soren, blunt to the bone.

"Ash?" Mom's voice brought me back to the moment and to the mug she placed in front of me.

"Thank you," I mumbled quietly, then took a sip from the hot brew.

She sat down. "Of course."

It wasn't often that things felt awkward between Mom and me. In fact, it rarely ever happened. It was probably because we always agreed on everything, *until today*.

"I know meeting Soren didn't go as planned, but I hope next time will be better." I smiled, but she didn't return it and instead looked down at her drink.

"I don't think there should be a next time."

"What do you mean?" I put my coffee aside.

"I don't want you to see this man."

Hold on, what?

Shocked, I blinked at her. "What are you talking about?"

"He's clearly a bad influence on you."

I huffed. “You just met him today, Mom.”

“True, but it’s not *just* about today. For the past few months, I’ve been seeing how you’ve changed, and while I was concerned, I didn’t say anything.”

“And today, you finally decided to speak up?” I cut into her words, my voice laced with anger.

“Yes!” She leaned closer. “Fuck yes, I did. He’s a bad influence, Ash. And what’s worrying me is that you aren’t even aware of the effect he has on you.”

I put my hands flat on the table and stood up, not minding that my chair almost fell back. “What on earth are you talking about, Mom? Bad influence? Soren is the most generous guy I’ve ever met.”

“He’s not a guy. He’s a man.” Mom got up herself, her brows pinched close. “A grown-up man who’s taking advantage of you.”

“He’s only twenty-six.”

“And you just turned nineteen last month,” she spat back into the tense atmosphere.

I took a step back so there would be a bit of distance between us as I gaped at her. I couldn’t believe the things she was saying, let alone agree with them.

“You’re right. I’m nineteen, which means I’m an adult who can do whatever he wants and date whoever he likes.”

Her stare hardened. “Not under my roof, you can’t.”

I had no idea what bug got into her head that made her so irrational, but it didn’t matter, not to me anyway. If she was too blind to see how much Soren meant to me, I had no intention of convincing her. And yet, her rejection hurt me. Seeing the disappointment on top of anger twisting behind her eyes was a kick to the gut.

Swallowing hard, I took a deep breath. “Well, it’s a good thing Soren asked me to live with him, then.”

“What?” She gasped and tried reaching for me when I moved away. “Ash! You can’t be serious right now. Don’t you see what he’s doing? Throwing his money at you, pampering you with gifts? He blinds you from seeing things as they are.”

My blood boiled with her accusations, and I wanted to break something. Instead, I clenched my palms into tight fists and kept them close to my sides.

“What am I too *blind* to see, Mom?”

“He’s manipulating you into being someone you’re not.”

“He’s just showing me a different version of myself, and you’re too hung up on the past to see it. I’m still the same guy I’ve always been, but I’ve matured, because that’s what happens, Mom. You grow up.” When she didn’t speak back, I went on. “He loves me, Mom, and I love him.”

She huffed, shaking her head. “He doesn’t love you, Ash. He loves himself. One lunch with him was enough for me to know that much. That guy… that *man*, all he cares about is his own damn ego, and it kills me you can’t see it yourself.” She rolled her eyes. “How smug and pretentious he was when he gave you that ridiculous car. And the way he wrapped his arm around you to show ownership? *God*, what an asshole.”

What was she talking about? Did we attend the same lunch?

Soren loved me. I knew he did. And she had no right to dismiss his way of showing me that. Was he possessive? Yes, but I loved it. I loved giving him the control, even if Mom thought it was unhealthy. It felt good, and for fuck’s sake, I wanted to feel good.

“Just open your eyes and see what a jerk he truly is, Ash—”

“Shut up!” I screamed so loud my throat hurt. “Just shut the fuck up!”

Her eyes shot wide, and she looked genuinely scared. I was scared, too, because I never reacted this way, but she was doing it on purpose. She was pushing me to this point.

“Ash,” she said calmly, reaching for me again. This time, I didn’t push her away, and she placed her hand on my shoulder. “Baby, I’m not trying to hurt you. I’m just worried.”

Tears welled in my eyes as I stood in silence, allowing her to apologize.

“I love you more than anything in this world. You know that, right?”

I nodded because perhaps she was starting to see she was acting crazy, too?

Putting her palm against my cheek, she pulled me close and kissed the side of my head. “I don’t want us to ever fight like this, but you’ve got to understand, Soren is bad for you. He’s not a good guy.”

Furious, I moved away from her embrace and shook my head.

“No.” Every muscle in my body tensed. “He isn’t. And if you can’t see it for yourself, then you have no place in my life.”

Her brows shot to her hairline, and fear flicked in her eyes. “Ash!” she gasped as I began walking away.

“Weren’t you the one who told me not to apologize for love?” I hissed her own words back at her. Funny enough, neither she nor Aiden seemed so eager for me to cut Kai out of my life despite everything that he did to me. But Soren? Whose only crime was loving me?

“It’s not the same, Ash.” She raised her voice. “I understand it’s hard to listen, but just look at your reaction. And moving in with him? He’s pulling you away. First, you quit your job at Rob’s.”

“It was because of school!” I shouted.

“Bullshit. It was so you could spend more time with him.”

By now, we were almost at the door.

“Then you decide to go to college? Give up on your dreams?”

“Dreams can be changed.”

“Listen to you! You don’t even sound like yourself.” She waved her hands at me. “The Ash I know would never speak this way.”

“Well, I matured. And it’s a good thing, or else I would have ended up like you. An almost forty-year-old woman who’s still single and dresses and acts like some teenager.”

Taken aback, Mom’s face fell. And although a part of me regretted what I’d just said, I was too angry to care. Just then, the door opened, and Aiden stepped in. All it took for him was one glance to know he’d walked into a heated argument.

“What’s going on?”

“Nothing. I told Mom I’m moving in with Soren, and she didn’t approve,” I said, voice cold, then turned my back to her.

“Chief.” Aiden put his hand on my shoulder, but I pushed it away.

I then remembered I came here for another reason. Pulling Kai’s letter from my back pocket, I shoved it at Aiden’s chest.

“What are you—”

“I don’t need it,” I hissed before stepping out of the house and moving toward my new car when Aiden followed me.

“Aren’t you going to at least read it?”

“No.” I swung the driver’s door open. “You can throw it away for all I care.”

Aiden grabbed my shoulder and turned me to face him.

“Kai’s your friend, Ash. You should—”

“But he’s not,” I cut him off midsentence, noticing Mom had also stepped out of the house. “He’s not my friend, and you two keep forgetting it. Kai treated me like shit, okay?” I hissed at them both. “So why do I need to give a shit about him?” I tsked, clenching the car door harder. “He’s just an addict.”

Aiden’s eyes widened before his brows pulled into a deep frown I’d never seen on his face before.

“He’s a human being, Ash, and he’s trying his hardest to do better.”

“Yeah, right,” I huffed, recalling back to that time I found him passed out. “And you believe him?” A broken laugh escaped me. “He’s just going to relapse again and again until the day he overdoses. Save yourself the trouble, Uncle. *That’s how addicts are*.”

Aiden’s face, which had been serious until now, turned blank. Dropping his hand from me, he stepped back. “I have never been so disappointed in you as I am right now,” he said, his eyes locked with mine.

My heart clenched at his words, and I swallowed back the lump that formed in my throat.

“I know that you’re young, and part of being young is being stupid, but I expected more from you.”

Another punch to the gut.

“Well, I don’t care,” I hissed and climbed into my car. Even if what I’d said was cruel, and perhaps stupid, Kai was no longer a part of my life. So why should I care?

I ignored Aiden, turned on the car, and drove out of there. I couldn’t understand why they hated Soren so much while they were more than willing to forgive Kai? The guilt they burdened me with was unfair, and unable to hold back my tears, I cried. I cried because I hated failing them, and somehow, I’d ended up doing just that. Each tear I shed burdened me with guilt because it forced me to doubt what I knew in my heart. Their hatred toward Soren made me doubt *myself*, even if just for a little bit. Ashamed of those thoughts, I bit my lip. I loved Soren with a full heart, and he loved me back. So why did they make me feel so bad about it?

Part Three



Rehabilitation



Kai

4 Years Later

Beads of sweat covered my skin as I dropped my last box on the bed. With my hands free, I used my shirt to clean up my forehead, then grunted with the flaming heat. For fuck's sake, moving to a new place was hard enough, but doing it in the middle of August? *Real fucking smart, Kai.* But hey, at least this was my last box to unpack, and since I didn't have work tonight, once I finished this up, I got the evening to myself.

"Need a hand?" my new *landlord* asked while peeking into the room.

"Nah." I cleaned my face from sweat with my shirt one more time before turning to meet Aiden. "I'm almost done here, but thanks, old man."

Aiden smiled before knocking on the doorframe with his knuckle. "Well, if you need any help, don't hesitate to ask, kid."

"I'm twenty-two and got a child of my own. Don't you think we're past the 'kid' phase?" I asked while pulling my hair into a half bun. It had been quite some time since I'd last got a haircut, and my hair passed my shoulders now. I sort of liked it this way since I looked like an epic Viking.

"Just because you grew some hair on your balls doesn't mean you're a man." The old bastard winked, and in response, I flipped him off.

We both laughed until I cleared my throat and looked around the room.

"I know I said it already, but thank you for letting me stay here."

"Don't even mention it." He rubbed the back of his neck. "Anyway, once you're done here, we can make lunch," he said, and after I replied with a nod, he left me to continue working.

As always, Aiden acted like his generosity wasn't a big deal. Whenever I thanked him, he responded with a soft smile before quickly changing the subject —like he just did. And despite his modesty, my gratitude would never be enough for what he had done for me. If it weren't for him, I wouldn't be here right now. If he had given up on me like most people in my life had, which they had every

reason to, I would have probably overdosed years ago.

Because of my addiction, I'd been in some really bad fucking places, but it was only after I reached rock bottom that I realized how low I'd gotten. After three failed rehabs, I didn't see the point of trying again when Aiden convinced me otherwise. He'd believed in me when I couldn't believe in myself, and here I was, three years and two months later, sober.

With small, everyday victories, I took control over my life. I got a job, started working out again, and even returned to surfing. But the most important thing of all was meeting my son, Paris, who was an adorable little monkey. It took Zoe time to trust me enough to let me see our kid, but ever since she had given me a chance, I'd made the most of it. I would never be able to make up for the time I'd lost with Paris, like being there for his first steps, but I sure as hell tried to be here for him now. One of the things I'd been taught in rehab was that grieving over the past won't help with recovery, but learning from it will. Therefore, I knew that in order for me to heal, I had to be honest with my surroundings and, first of all, with *myself*.

That was why one of my first sober decisions was to divorce Zoe. Regardless of her deserving a lot more than what I had to offer, we were just not right for each other. I still cared for her, as she was the mother of my kid, but nowadays, we were no more than friends. For a while there, we'd tried living together for Paris's sake. It didn't turn out well, and long story short, this was how I'd ended up here.

Back to the box still waiting for me on the bed, I started unpacking. When I was almost done, my skin turned cold as a flush of lilac caught my eye. One night a few years back, I got high as fuck and had the strong urge to see Ash. Like an idiot, I snuck up to his room, but he wasn't there. At first, I'd gotten angry, but then my anger turned to sadness, and I began crying like a baby. After I calmed down, I opened his closet and took out what reminded me the most of him and had kept it with me ever since. With my breath caught, I grabbed the hoodie from the bottom of the box and brought it to my face. The cotton was still as soft as ever, and the scent… *Thank God*. It still smelled like him.

Unable to resist, I took a deep inhale, allowing Ashy's sweet, nostalgic scent to surround me. Clenching the cloth harder in my hands was like grasping those precious memories and trying to relive them. But those weren't just memories; they were longings and emotions—emotions that once destroyed me as I tried to deny them.

I didn't have any right to miss Ash, not after the way I treated him. The dark stains on the sleeve of his hoodie were evidence of how I, with my bare hands, had ruined the relationship I cared about most in this world.

While using drugs, full weeks had been erased from my memory. Months even. But some events were engraved in me forever, like *that* night. I regretted it wholeheartedly, and if I could reverse the clock and change what I did, I would. But that was impossible, and now, I was left with a lilac hoodie.

With a heavy sigh, I took one last sniff of his scent, carefully hung it in my closet, and went back to organizing my room.



"Are you sure about not joining me?"

"To the woods?" I slumped my ass on the couch and half turned to look at Aiden, who was standing by the door with his camping gear. "Yes. I am one hundred percent sure I don't want to go sleep in a tent for three nights."

"You used to love it."

I turned on the TV. "Still do. But I just moved in today, and I want to rest." I raised my legs onto the coffee table, resting my hands behind my head and settling back on the couch. "Ha… That's better."

"You'll have your whole life to rest, kid." I'd bet my money he was shaking his head right now. "Next time, we can take Paris with us. I bet the little punk would love the outdoors just like you and Ash did."

My heart stopped at the mention of Ash's name, and my throat turned dry. In an instant, the couch didn't feel as comfortable, and I found it hard to focus on the TV. I couldn't control the way my body reacted whenever Aiden or Mel spoke about Ash, whom they hardly saw nowadays. From what I knew, Ash lived with his boyfriend, whom neither Mel nor Aiden liked. After I had the pleasure of meeting that asshole once, I definitely shared their opinion about the smug dickface.

"Sure, next time, we'll take Paris with us," I said with a half smile, trying to distract myself from thinking about Ash.

"Can't wait, kid. See you in three days," he said before getting out of the house with Sebastian, his dog, behind him.

He always took that dog everywhere. *Fucking adorable*.

When we were kids, Aiden always took us camping with him; it was the best time I could remember. Regardless of the fact I'd hated staying at home with my terrible parents and took any chance to spend time away from them, those trips with Ashy and Aiden were fun. Hiking during the day, then fishing in the afternoon and cooking by the campfire, only to spend the night alone with Ash after Aiden went to sleep. We'd watch the stars together, tell some campfire

stories, then go to sleep. I'd always told Ash the scariest stories so he'd snuggle close to me when we slept. He was such a scaredy-cat. Funny how, even then, I tried to be close to him without even realizing why. I told myself it was our friendship that drew me to him and nothing more. I guess I was always attracted to him, even before I knew what bisexuality meant.

"Ah, shit," I grunted and moved a hand over my face. Any sexuality would do good at the moment, considering I hadn't had any activity in *days*. Straight, gay, bi, I couldn't care less what I was and who I slept with, considering how fucking horny I'd been. I knew not having sex for a few days wasn't such a big deal for most people, but I wasn't most people. I fucking loved sex. I loved the warmth of another body, the heat and the pleasure. It had nothing to do with my sexual identity, which I'd come to full terms with, and everything to do with my dick loving frequent action.

Extremely frustrated, I pulled out my phone and opened one of those apps that came in handy at times like this. Usually, I'd meet someone at the restaurant, but I had tonight off. Going to a bar was also out of the question with the whole sobriety thing. Besides, it was still day outside, so I doubted any bar would even be open.

With the TV all but forgotten, I started swiping left and right in the stupid app until I matched with a guy whose face I actually liked. Big, swoony eyes that seemed a bit innocent, brown hair, and fuckable lips. It seemed I had a type when it came to guys, one I learned about only after I admitted I liked men, *too*. My acceptance of my sexuality didn't happen overnight and had taken some time, but cutting all ties with my hideous, homophobic parents and hanging out with new people definitely helped.

Coming out as a bisexual man wasn't easy for me, but since getting sober, I didn't want anything to weigh on my conscience. Aiden and Mel were as welcoming as you could imagine and, after some time, even Zoe. Although, sometimes, I still got the feeling she wasn't comfortable with the idea that her ex-husband loved a mouthful of cock, too. I understood her, but to be honest, I did much worse things than lying about liking men in the time we'd been together.

Now, back to my phone and the cute guy who just asked for a selfie, I took off my shirt and tossed it on the couch before positioning myself in a way that made my abs look hot. I couldn't say I was ripped, but I had a pretty nice body, and the full sleeve I'd just recently got done also did the job.

With the phone in my hand I stretched my arm, flexed my muscles, and lowered the waistband of my sweats to reveal a bit more of what was underneath, then took the picture. But just as the clicking sound of the camera

pierced the air, someone cleared their throat. In an instant, I dropped my phone and perked up on the couch, ready to face Aiden, who'd probably forgotten something and came back to catch me taking an embarrassing selfie. Only instead of meeting Aiden's amused gaze, I was met with the gorgeous green eyes I'd missed so fucking much, which were even greener than what I'd remembered. Always so innocent, always so pure, Ash's eyes still pierced my heart like a shot from a motherfucking Cupid's bow.

"H-Hey," Ash muttered, making it the first time I'd heard his voice in over four years.

My heart skipped a beat, and I jumped to my feet, almost stumbling while rounding the couch to stand in front of him.

"Hey."

CHAPTER Twenty—One

Kai

I'd hoped to see Ash again and assumed it would happen eventually, now that I'd moved into Aiden's house. Yet, I didn't expect it to happen on my first day here.

There we were, me looking like an idiot wearing a pair of dirty joggers that had seen better days and Ash looking as dazzling as you could imagine, standing in front of each other without saying a word.

Fuck. Ash looked exactly as I remembered and, at the same time, not. He'd matured, but it had more to do with his clothes and hairstyle than his beautiful face. He was dressed like a member of my dad's golf club, with tailored shorts, a polo, and loafers. *When did he ever wear loafers?* His brown hair, which he'd never put any effort into and just kept it short, was now longer and styled with not a single hair out of place.

But as soon as his initial shock melted and a small, bashful smile crept onto his plump lips, I saw the guy who always wore the ripped jeans he had bought in a secondhand shop by the beach and who didn't care if he walked an entire day with sand in his hair. The guy, I realized a little too late, I was in love with.

"What were you just doing?" Ash asked, breaking the awkward silence we fell into.

Moving my hand through my long hair, I offered him an awkward smile. "Took a selfie."

"Of your…" His eyes darted to the waistband of my sweats, which still hung low enough for a bit of my pubes to peek from underneath.

"Well, you know how it is nowadays with all those dating apps." I laughed, but it died slowly as Ash kept quiet.

"I don't know, actually… Never used one." He looked at the floor.

"That's right. You've been in a relationship for… how long now?"

"Five years."

Fuck. That was a long fucking time to be with the same person.

“That’s nice.” I stretched my neck and scratched my chin. “So things between you two are good?”

Ash’s eyes looked everywhere but at me when he muttered a low yes that could hardly be heard. He was always a quiet guy, even more so when he stood next to me, so I didn’t dive too deep into why he seemed so awkward. It was probably because of me. After all, we hadn’t seen each other for years.

“So, what did you come for?” I tried to get us talking again. It was better than continuing to stand in silence like two strangers at a bus stop.

“Aiden said he bought Pacha a collar. I came to pick it up.”

“Pacha?”

“Oh.” He rubbed the back of his neck, the same way his uncle often did. “Pacha’s my dog. A pit bull.”

“That’s cool. You always wanted a dog, right?”

He nodded, and I noticed how he was still avoiding my eyes. It was a shame because I loved his eyes, but I didn’t want to push him or anything.

“Anyway, Aiden went camping for a few nights.” I turned around and grabbed my shirt from the couch. “But let’s check, maybe he left it in the kitchen? He told me all kinds of things before leaving, but I was distracted by the TV.”

“Were you watching *The Bachelor*?”

I stopped before putting on my shirt and side-eyed him.

“It’s a great show.”

“Yeah, sure.” He chuckled. “You always had lousy taste.”

I’d loved that show since we were kids because it was fucking awesome. Ash, who couldn’t see the point in that masterpiece, loved teasing me over it. But at least teasing me made him look at me again, and now that our eyes met, I kept admiring how sexy he was.

“I actually think I have great taste.”

Ash’s cheeks turned red, and he moved his eyes to my arm. “You got tattoos,” he said in an attempt to change the subject.

“Yeah.” I stretched my right arm to show him the ink. “Now, I gotta do the other arm. Already have the design and all.”

“That’s nice.”

I put on my shirt before smirking at him. “I know, right? What’s a chef without two full sleeves.”

We started walking toward the kitchen.

“I remember Aiden telling me you’re a chef now. That’s impressive.” His voice turned softer. “But you were always an amazing cook.”

“Aww, were you talking about me?” I asked, trying to hide my excitement by

joking around and pretending I found it amusing while, in fact, my stomach just flipped.

“My uncle always talks about you.”

“Well, with me, he always talks about you.” I looked at Ash over my shoulder and caught him staring at my back just before he dropped his gaze to the floor. *He’s so cute.*

I scanned the kitchen but couldn’t see anything. It was unlikely that Aiden had forgotten something, but then again, maybe he didn’t? I mean, wasn’t it a coincidence that Ash came here the day I moved in, just when I was home, alone? *Ugh*, the old bastard, playing matchmaker in his spare time.

“It doesn’t look like he left you the collar, but we can try calling him,” I said while turning to look at Ash, who was busy scanning the room.

“Nah, I’d rather not bother him. I’ll just come back another day.” He pressed his lips together while rubbing the back of his nape. “Aiden told me you moved in.” It didn’t sound like a question but a fact he casually mentioned.

“Yeah. Today, actually. I’ve got one of the spare bedrooms upstairs.”

“Oh, cool…”

We fell into silence again; the only sound filling the room was that of the oven’s clock ticking. Annoyed and impatient, I snapped my fingers.

“How about I make us something to drink?”

Ash shook his head. “I need to go—”

“Come on, *Ashy*.”

His eyes widened.

Knowing I got his attention, I went on. “We haven’t talked for over four fucking years. The least we can do is have a cup of coffee together.”

He bit on the tip of his nail before nodding, and I found it funny he was still doing that shit.

Ten minutes later, we sat on the back porch facing the ocean. The afternoon’s heat began to subside and was replaced with a warm breeze.

“So basically, Aiden was bullshitting you since I’m not a chef but a *sous chef* in a kitchen with a total of four cooks,” I told Ash after he asked me about my job. “The head chef is awesome, though. A true Italian from Milan. I learn a lot from him.”

Ash took a sip from his coffee, which he now drank with oat milk, and smiled. “That’s amazing,” he said, his eyes focusing on the mug he held close to his chest.

“It was all thanks to Aiden, who put in a good word for me. You’d be surprised how many people don’t want to hire an ex-addict,” I tried joking but immediately felt the shift in mood as Ash tensed beside me. While I was cool

with talking and even laughing about those days, maybe he wasn't.

"Anyway, forget about me. I heard you graduated recently." Last month, Aiden proudly mentioned Ash had finished his bachelor's degree. I never thought he'd go to college, with how much he hated school, but people change.

"I did."

I patted his back, and he was sent slightly forward. "Congratulations, dude, that's amazing. Business, right?"

"Business psychology, actually," Ash said, then shifted a bit on the bench we sat on so we'd have more distance between us. His reaction to my touch, as subtle as it was, hurt. It wasn't like I meant anything by touching his shoulder, but even that bothered him. We used to be all over each other, but that was years ago, and, as I said, people change.

"How's Paris?" he asked, his question surprising me.

Deciding not to linger on his discomfort from my touch, I pulled my phone out and swiped through the gallery to a recent picture I'd taken of my kid. "He's almost five, can you believe that?" I said, handing Ash the phone.

Ash's lips curved into a big smile as he studied the photo. "He looks so much like you," he said, using two fingers to zoom in on Paris's adorable face and wavy blond hair, which was as long as mine.

"He really does," I said proudly, then took my phone back and looked at the picture myself. "You should see him in the water. He catches waves better than me."

"He surfs?"

"You bet. Aiden and I taught him." I scrolled through the gallery until I found a video of him catching a wave last week. "That kid was born to surf."

Ash looked stunned while watching the screen, and once again, I saw a glimpse of the boy I grew up with. A boost of warmth filled my gut, and I couldn't help but smile like an idiot until my face fucking hurt.

"We should go surfing together sometime."

Suddenly, his face fell. "I don't really surf anymore."

That came as a shock to me, and I gasped. "What? How come—"

His phone rang, cutting me off midsentence, and I managed to see the name "Soren" on the screen right before he got up to take the call. I couldn't hear what he was saying since he walked away. As he talked, I tried to understand how the fuck it could be that Ash, of all people, had quit surfing. I planned on asking him what happened, but he didn't leave room for any questions when he returned.

"I need to go."

Short, simple, no explanation.

I forced a smile because I didn't want him to go.

“So soon?”

He nodded.

“Let’s meet up for coffee again, okay?”

“Yeah, sure,” he said, but I knew he didn’t mean it. He was always such a lousy liar.

“Let me walk you to your car.” I jumped to my feet before he could refuse and began walking beside him until we got to his Porsche Cayenne, which was one hell of a good car. I almost forgot his boyfriend was loaded as fuck. Now that I no longer had my family’s money, since they’d literally disowned me, I’d saved every penny until I could afford my first motorcycle. It wasn’t my dream bike, but it was definitely a start for a twenty-two-year-old guy.

Ash was ready to climb into the car when he stopped and turned to me, a small, soft smile on his lips.

“I’m happy you’re doing well.”

They were such simple words to say, yet they meant so much. The only problem was that the way he said them almost felt like a goodbye, and I wasn’t ready for that. Today was only the beginning of me trying to fix what I’d broken and not some stupid closure for our friendship.

Shoving my hands in my sweats pocket, I nodded. “Thanks. By the way—” I cocked my head at him. “—I didn’t say it earlier, but you look really good, *Ashy*.”

His face flushed red, and he swallowed hard before clearing his throat. “Yeah, well, bye.” He then climbed into his car and drove off, leaving me feeling giddy as fuck.

Our short meeting only confirmed one thing to me, and it was that I was still head over heels for my best friend.

CHAPTER Twenty—Two

Kai

The next day went by in a flash. It started before sunrise at the fish market, where I got supplies for the restaurant. As soon as I was done there, I went back to the kitchen for preparation and only stepped out of it once service was over. Thanks to me doing the morning preparation, Chef gave me the pass on cleaning.

Tired from today's work, I reached my bike, dying to get back home. I was so busy that I didn't have time to reflect on meeting Ash last night. It was a surprise, and honestly, I couldn't wait to see his pretty face again. And although meeting after so long was fun, I was also shocked by how much he'd changed. He no longer surfed? What the fuck was up with that? Another thing was his odd reaction whenever I brought up his relationship. He seemed so uncomfortable—

"Is that your bike?" a bubbly voice asked, snapping me out of my head.

Looking aside, a woman around my age with long brown hair and big green eyes was checking me out while her group of girlfriends waited behind her, giggling.

She was obviously hitting on me, and it took me no more than a few seconds to debate whether I was interested or not. Considering how yesterday's hookup didn't go as planned, and that she had gorgeous legs I would love to have my hands over, it was an easy decision.

"It had better be mine if I'm sitting on it," I answered with a half smirk that often did the trick.

She pursed her red lips and stepped closer before placing her hand on my arm. She had long, manicured nails that scratched my skin at the first touch, which I liked.

"You're one of the chefs here, right?" She tilted her head, then flipped her hair over her shoulder to reveal her neck. "My girlfriends and I just had dinner here, and I swear to God every bite was to die for." She licked her lips. It was a bit much, but it also worked because now I imagined her lips around my cock.

“Oh, yeah?” I peeked behind her at her girlfriends before going back to meet her stare.

Once again, she bit her lip and nodded.

Ash also did the same thing; only when he did it, he looked so innocent and cute, unlike this lady, who was determined to get what she wanted. Not that there was anything wrong with her approach. She was sexy, but I was somehow still put off. And yet, it didn’t stop me from what I asked next.

“What’s your name, sweetheart?”

“Candace.”

“So, Candace.” I flashed her a smile. “How about you get on my bike and then get to eat breakfast, too?”

Her eyes gleamed, and she wasted no time before climbing behind me. She didn’t wait for my permission before wrapping her arms around my waist, not being shy about groping my abs in the process. Without lingering too much, I kicked the gas, and twenty minutes later, we arrived home. Aiden was still camping, so we’d have the whole house to ourselves. Or so I thought.

“Oh my God, is this yours?” Camberly—or was it Ashley—gasped as she got off my bike and went to scan the black Porsche Cayenne parked in front of the house.

What the hell?

Confused, I ran up the steps and quickly reached for the door, which was unlocked. The second I opened it, a black pit bull charged at me.

“Holy shit!” I jumped back, almost falling down the stairs, when a familiar voice came through the walls.

“Pacha! Down! Down, boy!” Ash commanded the dog while trying to hold on to its collar as it continued to bark.

“Fucking shit, man, I almost had a heart attack,” I said through heavy breathing once he managed to calm the beast down.

“I’m sorry.” Ash smiled nervously, still petting his dog. “He’s very sweet and gets all excited with new people.”

“That’s sweet?” I raised a questioning brow at the forty-pound dog.

Ash looked up from the dog, and the moment our eyes met, I no longer cared about my near heart attack.

A small smile then spread on his lips. “His name’s Pacha. I’ve had him for a few years now.”

I was ready to ask Ash what he was doing here when Annabeth—okay, that wasn’t even close to her name—squealed while rushing to pet the dog.

Crap. I forgot she was here.

Ash was surprised, considering the shock on his face, but quickly brushed it

off by giving the girl and the dog his full attention.

A few minutes later, we all went inside the house. Unaware of the awkward atmosphere, Claire, I think that was her name, asked to drink something.

“You didn’t tell me you have such a hottie for a roommate.” She winked at Ash when we reached the kitchen.

“He’s not my roommate,” I clarified. “And before you get any ideas into your head, he’s taken.”

She pouted. “That’s a shame.”

Ignoring her, I turned to look at Ash, who seemed amused. “What are you doing here?” I asked and watched the smile erase from his face.

“I came for Aiden.”

Bullshit.

“Is that so?”

“Y-Yeah.”

Learn how to fucking lie, Ash.

“So, who’s that?” he asked, and I didn’t realize what he meant until the girl nudged my arm.

“Oh, shit.” I chuckled because, once again, I totally forgot about her. “That’s __”

“I’m Candace.”

So that’s her name!

“Are you two together?” Ash’s eyes focused on me after I let out a loud snort.

“Fuck no, we just met thirty minutes ago.”

“Way to make me look like a hoe, asshole,” Candace whined, then walked further into the kitchen and looked around. “Didn’t we say we’d drink something?”

“Sure, I can make you coffee? Tea?”

She laughed, moved closer, and began tracing her fingers over my chest and neck. “I had something stronger in mind.”

I noticed Ash looking aside a second before I grabbed her wrist and gently removed her hands from me. “I don’t drink, sweetheart.”

“Seriously?” Her brows curved.

“Yeah, not since my last rehab, that is.” I smiled at her surprised face.

“You’re an addict?”

“Aren’t you full of questions.” I pinched her cheek.

Her lips curved up, and she narrowed her eyes. “Ha-ha. Are you going to take me to your room or what?” She glanced over her shoulder at Ash. “You can join, too, handsome; we won’t tell your girlfriend.”

Ash laughed awkwardly and looked away. God, he was so fucking adorable with how his cheeks turned red and his inability to hold my stare. Was he the same in bed? Was he this innocent and sweet even when getting fucked? Shit. Now, I was getting hard.

But as hot as the thought about Ash joining us was, Candace's suggestion obviously made him uncomfortable.

"Don't worry, sweetheart. I'll be more than enough," I said while adjusting myself.

"Good," she purred, her eyes darting to my crotch. She probably thought it was because of her, and I didn't bother correcting her.

"You're staying the night?" I asked Ash before going upstairs with Candace.

Still not looking me in the eyes, Ash bent down to hug Pacha. "Yeah, I will."

"Okay."

I then walked upstairs, thinking how un-fucking-fair life was because instead of staying with Ash and finding out why he was here to begin with, I needed to leave him for some random girl I'd just met. But I could only blame myself and my dick for making stupid decisions. And even though I couldn't care less about whatever her name was, I had no intention of sending her away. It would be too fucking insulting for her. I guessed I'd have to wait until tomorrow to find out what brought Ash here tonight.

CHAPTER Twenty—Three

Kai

When I got up from my bed, I was ninety-nine percent sure Ash had already left. But when I heard his voice carrying through the halls as I walked downstairs, a bolt of joy shot through me. Ready to see him, I felt like a kid on Christmas morning who couldn't hold back his excitement. I still had no idea why Ash had come here and even spent the night, but one could only hope he'd finally broken up with his boyfriend.

"Good morning," I told Ash as I walked into the kitchen, forcing myself not to smile like an idiot at the mere sight of him. Tall, fit, with dreamy green eyes, pouty lips, and a face I would love to come all over, Ashy looked like a dream. He was sitting by the dining table with his dog, Pacha, in front of him. From the treats on the table, I guessed he was trying to teach him some commands.

"You mean noon?" he answered back with a slight smile.

I was never a morning person, and unless I had to wake up early for the restaurant, I slept in until noon.

"Some things never change." I scratched my stubble and went straight to the coffee maker.

"Where's Candace?" Ash asked while I focused on the drops that slowly, yet beautifully, filled my glass.

"Oh, that was her name?" I half turned to meet his curious eyes before drinking my coffee in one go. The caffeine boost was what I needed, and I groaned with pleasure at the fantastic taste. "Anyway, she's already gone. She left around six."

Ash grabbed his empty bowl from the table and came to wash it in the sink. Now, standing shoulder to shoulder, I examined him closely. He looked tired, almost like he didn't get any sleep, and the redness around his eyes made me suspect he'd been crying.

What was going on with him?

"I thought she wanted you to cook her breakfast."

“Honestly, I don’t give a shit what Cameil wanted.”

“Now you’re just inventing names,” he chuckled before turning off the tap.

“Maybe.” I grinned, then handed him the towel he was searching for. “But I honestly couldn’t care less about that woman.”

He took it from me, and I watched as he carefully dried his hands.

“It didn’t sound like it last night with how loud you two were,” he mumbled quietly, then paused, realizing what he’d just said.

So Ashy was listening… Interesting.

Candace and I definitely had great sex, but only because I was thinking about him the entire time. Yet, despite my big and occasionally tactless mouth, I held back from telling him that. I didn’t want to put him on the spot, even if I suspected Ash still found me attractive. I mean, how could he not? I was sexy as sin.

“Do you want me to cook you breakfast?” I checked my watch. “Or lunch?” I laughed because it was past 12:00 p.m.

“I already ate,” he said quietly.

“What did you eat?”

“Yogurt with fruit.”

I grimaced. “That does not count as eating.”

“It does.”

Pacha came to stand beside us while wiggling his cute little butt. I dropped to my knees, and he began licking my face.

“Hold on, boy.” I put my hand on his head and tried shifting his tongue away and out of my mouth. Ash looked at us, unable to hold back his laugh.

Smitten by the sound of his sexy voice, I had to force my attention away from the deep, smiling line that formed on each side of his face. “So, what am I cooking you before I go to work?” I asked after I decided I’d make him a proper meal. “And we’re not taking no for an answer.” By we, I meant me and the dog, who was looking at his extremely *hot* owner with the same eagerness as me. Although, I assumed Pacha and I had different treats in mind.

As if not knowing what to do with himself, Ash looked around before he flopped his hands on his waist. “I don’t know… a salad?”

I turned to face the dog. “What do you think about that?” I waited a second for an answer I’d never receive, then rubbed Pacha’s head. “Yeah, my thought exactly.” I stood and walked to the fridge. “How about pasta? You always loved Amatriciana,” I said before opening the door and looking inside. Eh, Aiden didn’t have all the ingredients.

“What? No. It’s too fattening.”

His words startled me, and I quickly shut the fridge door before coming to

stand in front of him.

“What was that?”

Ash looked away. “Soren doesn’t like when we eat empty carbs.”

Oh my fucking God. Ignoring the fact Ash just referred to Amatriciana pasta as empty carbs, what the fuck was up with what he’d just said? Anger simmered inside me with the thought of that douchebag telling Ash what to eat or not, and I clenched my jaw before taking a breath to calm myself.

“Well, I didn’t ask what Soren likes to eat. I asked what you like.” I stepped toward him until we were close enough that I could hear the soft sound of his breaths. Ash finally met my eyes, and despite the clear hesitation on his face, he nodded.

“Okay, pasta sounds good.”

“Great.”

“Hey, where are you going?” he asked after I walked out of the kitchen.

“To grab my keys. Then, we’ll hit the market.”

He followed me. “The market?”

“Yes, Ashy.” I winked at him. “We’re going to find you some fine-ass guanciale.”

I had already stepped out of the house when Ash asked, “Can’t we just use bacon instead?”

I faked a gasp before climbing on my bike. “I’ll pretend I didn’t hear that.” With all due respect for bacon, it cannot replace guanciale when making a proper dish of Amatriciana. “Now, come on, put this on,” I said while holding the helmet in my hand.

Ash glanced between me and the bike, his brows pulling into a frown.

“Can’t we go by car?”

“With LA traffic?” I snorted. “We’d get there faster by walking backwards.”

Shifting his weight from one leg to the other, he then bit his bottom lip, and fuck it. I wasn’t about to make him ride a bike if he didn’t want to.

“Fine.” I dropped my head in a deep sigh. “We’ll take the car.”

An hour and a half later, we were back in the kitchen with our sleeves rolled up, making our pasta from scratch.

“When did you learn to do this?” Ash asked as I began feeding the dough through the pasta roller.

“I had a lot of free time after rehab, and I needed something to keep me busy.”

“That’s nice,” Ash said while chopping the tomatoes for the sauce the way I showed him how. “What made you decide to… you know.”

“What made me decide to actually get clean?”

He hummed a low yes.

Taking a knife, I cut the long stretch of the pasta into the shape I needed and placed it aside. “Well, there was this party I went to, which wasn’t really a party but a house full of crackheads.” My stomach rolled just at the memory of that night. “Anyway, it was a shithole, not that I cared about it back then, and me and some guy got high together. I can’t recall anything that happened that night, but when morning came, I woke up next to him, and he was dead.”

“Oh my God, Kai,” Ash gasped, putting down the knife and looking up at me from the cutting board.

“I don’t remember a lot from back then, only that I got scared as fuck. After they took his body away and we got questioned, I was free to go, so I just ran away. I ran for hours while all I could think was what if I were that guy who OD’d at a party full of strangers? I was one snort of coke away from ending up like that dude, with blue lips and a mouth full of vomit he’d choked on.”

Ash shrank beside me, but it didn’t deter me from going on. After all, he asked me to tell him my story, and I didn’t intend to lie or save the details. Sadly, we both knew how ugly my addiction was. “You see, I was terrified by how close I was to being that guy, but I was even more scared because I was already aching to get high again.” Those days were the darkest I’d ever lived. “That was the first real time I realized I couldn’t get out of it myself. For months, I believed the lie I’d told myself, that I didn’t have a problem, and even if I did, it would all be okay. But after what happened, the thought that my kid would grow up to learn his dad ended his life like some nameless addict with powder in his nose or a needle in his arm… that thought ruined me. Realizing that, I went to Aiden, who didn’t hesitate to help, and the rest was history.”

The whole time I talked, I focused on the pasta we’d just made. Looking up from it, I was met with Ash’s gaze. He didn’t say anything for a few dragging seconds, and the anxiety of waiting for his response danced on my nerves.

“I didn’t know any of this. I mean, I knew you were doing better, but Aiden never told me what happened.”

Aiden respected my privacy, although I honestly didn’t mind telling my story. I had no shame in my past. Yes, I did many wrong things that could never be justified, but my addiction was an illness like any other; therefore, despite the stigma, I carried no shame.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t there for you,” he added, and my stomach turned with the guilt his voice carried.

“Don’t worry about it, Ashy. I understand why you didn’t want to be involved. You had every right to stay away from me, especially after the things I did—”

“Don’t you think we need to stir the sauce?” he asked, cutting in and bluntly changing the subject.

Assuming Ash wasn’t interested in bringing up the past, I respected his choice and went on cooking until I made us one hell of a lunch.

Sitting across the table from Ash while watching him devour his pasta like a starved man brought back so many fucking memories. He always had an appetite; whether it was meals we shared at Rob’s after our shift, his lame sandwich he brought to school, or all those dinners and breakfasts I cooked for him, he always ate with such enthusiasm that it inspired me to cook more for him.

“What’s funny?” he asked when I suddenly began laughing.

“Remember that time you almost choked on a fry at Rob’s?”

“Of course I do. I almost died, and instead of helping me, you laughed so hard that you started choking yourself.”

We’d both squealed and coughed for almost an hour because we couldn’t stop laughing. At some point, I’d even snorted milkshake from my nose, which eventually led to Rob kicking our asses for creating a mess.

Oh, the good old times.

Glancing back at Ash, I noticed he had sauce on the corner of his mouth. I was just about to reach over and clean it when he did it himself, not even noticing my intentions. My chest clenched with disappointment because I’d missed a Hollywood-like moment to be romantic.

Wait, should I be romantic?

“It was really good,” Ash said, cutting my line of silly thoughts and focusing me.

“Yeah? I’ll make it for you again.”

He stared at me, eyes warm, before his lips spread wide. “Yeah, why not?”

The smile he gave me was so big and cute that I knew this was the time to ask the question that had been bugging me since he showed up here last night.

“So why are you here?”

The good mood he had just a moment ago vanished as his face fell and his lips quivered. He then twisted his mouth before shrugging. “Well, the thing is…” He paused and looked around the table, doing everything he could to avoid my eyes. “Soren and I, we—”

His words were cut off by the sound of the house door opening; a second later, I heard Zoe.

“My God, Kai, why aren’t you picking up your fucking phone?”

“That’s a bad word, Mommy,” Paris mumbled after her.

“I know, sweetie. Mommy will put a dollar in the curse jar.”

I glanced back at Ash, who seemed either shocked or surprised, right before Zoe and Paris entered the kitchen.

Zoe was ready to say something else when she noticed who I was with and immediately went silent, with her eyes pinned on Ash, who was just as taken aback by this meeting.

“Daddy!” Paris yelled before charging at me, his cute voice breaking the deadly silence.

“Hey, monkey.” I picked him up into my arms.

Paris immediately started playing with my hair before he peeked over my shoulder at Ash. “Who is this?” he asked with curiosity suited to a five-year-old.

“This is Ash. He’s a good friend of Daddy’s.” I then got closer to Paris so I could whisper in his ear. “But he likes it when I call him *Ashy*.”

“Hey, Paris, I’ve heard so much about you,” Ash said in a soft voice I’d never heard coming from him before.

Paris studied Ash carefully, his eyes scanning him in detail before his lips quirked up into an ear-to-ear smile. But whatever it was that made him smile this way was no longer important as he got off my lap and went back to Zoe to grab his toy truck from her hand.

“Can I go play?” he asked, but he’d already run into the other room before receiving an answer.

That’s my kid for you.

With Paris out playing with his truck, it was just us three for the first time since we were teens.

“It’s good to see you, Zoe,” Ash said while getting up to greet her with an awkward hug.

“Yeah, it’s been too long.”

Despite the fact these two never actually fought, I’d always had the feeling they weren’t fans of each other. As a stupid teen, I didn’t get too much into it. Ash was my best friend, my ride-or-die, and Zoe was my girlfriend at the time. Now, it was clear that it was much more complicated than that because all our feelings were involved. I understood how deep this thing between them was years later, when Ash was no longer in the picture and Zoe still brought up his name in arguments. She often told me how unfair I was for putting him first, even when it wasn’t the case. Truth was, I’d been putting him last for way too long, but she had no idea. Even if she did know, she was too jealous of him to care. Even more so after I came out to her. And despite how angry her throwing out Ash’s name years later always made me feel, I couldn’t blame her. In a way, I *was* being unfair because even now, I loved him more than I’d ever loved her.

“I didn’t know you’d be here,” Zoe said, her eyes moving between me and

Ash as if she was looking for some kind of explanation. Thankfully, Ash quickly provided one.

“I’m here for a couple of days, that’s all.”

A couple of days? Did that mean he’d be here tomorrow, too?

“Oh, well, that’s good to know.” Zoe faked a smile before turning to me. “Anyway, I came because I need you to watch Paris today and tomorrow.”

I frowned at her. “You know I’d love to, but I’ve got work, Zo. I thought we agreed on the weekend?”

She sighed. “I know, alright? But the research team is going on a two-day sail, and I can’t miss it. My research depends on it.” She was currently doing her master’s degree in marine biology.

“Can’t your parents help?”

“They’re on vacation,” she explained, then tilted her head. “Please, Kai, if it weren’t important, I wouldn’t have asked.”

“It’s not that simple, and you know it.” I took my phone and checked the time. “My shift starts in less than an hour. I can’t cancel at the last minute and screw them up like that.”

“Please, it’s not rocket science. You can find a replacement at the restaurant while I can’t. This research is relying on *me*, Kai.”

Her words rubbed me the wrong way, and my frown deepened. “They rely on me at the restaurant, *too*.” I crossed my arms over my chest while trying not to get angry. I knew she was doing her best, splitting time between her studies and Paris, but so was I. Despite wanting to raise my kid, I also had responsibilities toward the restaurant.

“Listen, I don’t want to argue—”

“I can help,” Ash jumped in, and we both turned to look at him.

“Seriously?” I beamed at the same time Zoe said she didn’t think it was a good idea. My eyes quickly shot to her. “Why the fuck not? We both need help, and Ash just offered it.”

“Paris doesn’t know him.”

“We just introduced them.” I pinned her with a harsh look. “Besides, Paris seemed to like Ash,” I pointed out.

“And how did you decide on that?” Zoe questioned with a raised brow.

“Didn’t you see how Paris smiled at him?”

She rolled her eyes. I fucking hated when she did that.

“The kid smiles when he sees a garbage truck, Kai. But anyway.” She shifted her attention to Ash, who still stood in silence beside us. “You sure about doing it? He’s an energetic kid.”

I snorted. “By that, she means he’s a little devil—ouch!” I grimaced as Zoe

slapped my arm.

“Ignore Kai for a second.” Her voice turned serious. “Are you sure about staying with him?”

“Yeah, of course. I’m sure Paris and I would have a great time. And I would love to help if I can.”

With that, the matter was settled.

After telling Ash everything he needed and didn’t need to know about Paris, we both left. I was a bit nervous my kid would drive Ashy nuts, because Paris sure had the ability to do that, but I was also excited for them to hang out. About mid-shift, I texted Ash, asking how things were going. He replied with an image of him and Paris building a sandcastle on the beach, and fuck me sideways if that picture didn’t make me miss a fucking beat.

I was impatient for my shift to be over, and the second I was done cleaning my stand, I got the hell out of there. By the time I got home, all the lights were off. A bit disappointed for missing them awake, I reminded myself it was past midnight before sneaking up to my room. But as I pushed the door open to find my kid and Ash asleep on my bed with *Where the Wild Things Are* between them, I melted right there on the spot. The idea of Ash reading Paris a bedtime story before falling asleep with him struck me hard. I realized that the emotions I held for Ash weren’t the remnants of a failed youthful love but an actual love that had been rekindled. It wasn’t just love but the need to form a new connection. To build something. A desire to live with a person who’d just now come back into my life but never really left.

And although I wanted nothing more than to get under the sheets and join them, I turned around and stepped out of the room, making sure not to wake them. After all, we’d have tomorrow to find out how serious I actually was about making Ash mine again.

CHAPTER Twenty-Four

Kai

"Where do they poop?" Paris asked while sticking his nose to the glass separating us from the seals' tank.

"I don't know, kiddo. In the water, maybe?" Despite how cool it was seeing the seals swimming by up close, I put my hand on his shoulder and tried to pull him away from the glass, which looked dirty as fuck with all those handprints and smearing.

"Mommy said that if I need to go potty, I need to get out of the water first."

Ash chuckled from beside us, and I side-eyed him before crouching down and poking Paris's nose.

"Well, you're not a baby seal, are you?"

Shaking his head, Paris flashed me a toothy grin. "Nope."

"A baby lion, then?"

He laughed. "No, Daddy."

Pursing my lips, I hummed. "How about a baby monkey?"

Paris placed his small hands on my cheeks and leaned close until we were nose to nose. "I'm a baby goat," he whispered.

Ash was cracking up on the sidelines, and I had to hold back from doing the same before I picked Paris into my arms and lifted him to sit on my shoulders.

Checking my phone, I saw it was already past noon, meaning it was lunchtime. We had so much fun that I didn't even notice how late it had gotten.

"Do baby goats eat hot dogs for lunch?"

Paris roared a yes while kicking his legs and pulling my hair. *What a little bundle of joy that kid is.* And with a quick glance at Ash, who was still laughing, obviously enjoying the show, we started walking in search of food.

"Why don't you save us a table while Paris and I go buy some hot dogs?" Ash asked as we reached the lunch area. Since it was packed with other families, it sounded like a good idea.

"Sure."

Before I could say another word, Paris had already dashed toward the hot dog booth, with Ash chasing him down. My kid was a runner, and the first time he escaped us this morning, Ash nearly had a heart attack. It was funny—dangerous, but funny. Besides, he never ran too far, and I almost always caught him easily. Except that one time at the spring festival… *which is better not to mention to Zoe.*

I didn't plan for us to go to the zoo, but Ash had suggested it this morning over breakfast when Paris kept asking about elephants. Apparently, he dreamed about being one. Since it was Saturday, and I'd taken the day off work, we came here. And thank God for that because so far, it was the perfect fucking day. Especially because it felt like a *date*, and Paris, without even knowing it, was the perfect wingman. Or *wingkid*, for that matter. I won't lie and say I didn't take advantage of the opportunities he got us into, like taking the family ride on the zoo's train or hugging them both super close in each and every photo we took. We were all having a great time so far, so I could comfortably call it a win-win.

Squinting, I tried spotting them in the crowd and did. Paris was currently in Ash's arms while pointing over the image menu, showing what he wanted. It was amazing how fast they'd gotten along, but not at all surprising. After all, if Paris was my kid, which he was, loving Ash Sage ran in his blood.

"Hey," someone said, taking my attention away from my boys.

Turning my head, I saw a guy standing beside me. He looked a bit familiar, but not enough for me to remember his name. Noticing that, the guy pointed at himself.

"Andrew. We used to go to the same gym?"

Oh shit. Now I knew who he was. We'd fucked a few times after working out.

"Oh yeah. How are you doing, man?" To be fair, I was more familiar with his ass than his face, so no wonder I couldn't recognize him at first.

"I'm good. It's funny I met you here." He smiled and then pretended to look around before returning his eyes back to me, not being modest about checking me out. "You look really good. You know, I was so sad when you left the gym."

Not interested in having this conversation, I faked a smile while rubbing the back of my neck. "Yeah, well, I didn't like the vibe there. But I found a better place, so it all worked out."

He stepped a bit closer. "Oh, really? What place? Maybe I'll check it out?"

Now I also remembered why I'd stopped contacting him. The dude was clingy AF. Thankfully, before Andrew could sign up to my new gym, Paris ran toward me.

"Daddy! I got you your favorite."

The word “daddy” caught Andrew off guard, not that I cared, and he looked even more surprised when Ash joined us.

Holding our lunch in his hands, Ash looked between Andrew and me before smiling awkwardly. “Hey,” he said, then placed the food tray on the table.

Andrew probably mistook us for a family because his face paled, and a moment later, he mumbled an awkward goodbye and got the hell out of there.

“Did you wash your hands?” I asked Paris before he could touch his food and wasn’t surprised when he shook his head. “Go over there and wash them.” I pointed over to the washing station a few feet away.

Paris got off my lap and ran toward it while I kept my eyes on him.

“Who was that?” Ash asked.

“Just some guy I hooked up with,” I answered casually, still watching Paris, who was now drying his hands.

“What?” Ash’s shock came through his voice, and I turned to face him.

Looking at him, I realized that he probably had no idea I came out years ago, so what I’d just said was a total surprise to him.

“Well, yeah.” I swallowed hard. “I’m past the denial phase.” I tried brushing it off with a half smile that vanished as Ash remained silent.

He held my stare a moment longer, and I worried he was angry. After all, I’d denied my attraction to men, to *him*, for so long, and that was without mentioning all the homophobic crap I spat in his face. So, for me to suddenly be okay with it after literally punching him for loving me was a bit of an asshole thing to do, and he had every reason to get angry. But then, he smiled. A warm smile that reached his lovely eyes that I swear to God held tears in them.

“I’m so proud of you,” he whispered hoarsely as Paris returned to the table. This magical moment was cut short once Ash gave his full attention back to Paris and helped him put ketchup on his fries as if he hadn’t just melted my heart into a goo of mushy emotions.



The rest of the day flew by, and after spending a few more hours at the zoo, it was time to go home. By the time we parked the car, Paris was in deep sleep, and I had to pick him up in my arms to carry him in. Aiden’s car was also parked in front of the house, and soon, we were greeted by him and the dogs.

“I’ll put him to sleep. You two go ahead and have some fun,” Aiden said after Ash mentioned he wanted to take the dogs for a walk on the beach.

Not about to pass on Aiden’s generous offer, I quickly grabbed the dogs’

leashes and stepped outside. Maybe I was being obvious, maybe not, but who gave a shit. It was a nice summer evening, and Ash and I were finally together.

Alone.

After twenty minutes of walking, we were isolated enough for Ash to take the dogs off their leashes and let them run free for a bit. The two wasted no time before dashing forward, playing with each other.

"He's a cute dog," I said after Pacha rolled in the sand with Aiden's dog behind him.

Ash smiled like a proud parent. "He is." He paused for a second. "His old owner abused him, so after I rescued him, it wasn't so easy. He just needed love, you know?"

Oh, baby, I know.

I nodded, then smirked. "Well, he's lucky to have such a cute owner, then."

Turning to look at me, Ash gave me a raised brow. "Cute?"

I decided I wanted to mess with him, so I wrapped an arm around his body and pulled him close in a chokehold. "The cutest," I laughed, ruffling his hair.

Ash fought to get free by hitting my chest until I let him go.

"You're an idiot." He moved his hand over his messy hair to fix it before he pushed me aside. "Always were and always will be."

"You're right about that." I bumped his shoulder with mine before shoving my hands into my pants pockets.

After we calmed down, Ash rubbed the back of his neck. "I really missed this. *Us*," he said.

My heart warmed with his confession, and our stare locked. But before I could tell him that I missed him, too, Ash had already moved on to a different subject.

"My legs are killing me," he complained, taking off his shoes.

"Do you want me to carry you, princess?"

Ash's eyes shot to me, his cheeks a little bit red. "Fuck off. My legs hurt because we walked the whole day."

"I was just messing with you, *Ashy*." I poked my tongue at him, and he rolled his eyes.

"Paris is more mature than you."

"I agree."

He tried pretending to be angry, but the moment I smiled at him, he couldn't keep up the act. But since he wasn't the only one tired from walking the whole day, I pointed over to a bunch of rocks. "Let's go and sit there for a bit."

Reaching the rocks, I climbed up first and watched over my shoulder to make sure Ash didn't slip or fall. I thought of offering him a hand but knew he'd

refuse, so I sat down first, with him following me soon after. With the ocean spread before us and the sun almost setting, I was hit with a strong sense of nostalgia. God, I missed those good old days, the days before I screwed everything up.

"When did you come out?" Ash asked, breaking the comfortable silence we fell into.

"After I was out of rehab. I wanted a fresh start and didn't want to carry any secrets."

He snorted. Confused, I frowned at him. "What's funny?"

"Nothing… I just understand what you mean." He pulled his knees to his chest and hugged them close. "I know how hard a secret can be, especially this one."

"I bet." I leaned back on my arms while stretching my legs forward. I had no idea when Ash first learned he was gay and for how long he kept it a secret from me because instead of being there for him, I went out and got fucked-up.

"So, you're bi?"

I nodded.

"How'd Zoe take it?"

I wasn't expecting him to ask about her for some reason. "I think she's fine with it now, but it wasn't easy for her at first. I understand her, to be honest. But then again, we're no longer together and will never be together again, so it doesn't really matter if she's fine with it or not."

"So you're really done with each other?" Ash asked while glancing at me.

"We're raising Paris together, but other than that, yeah."

He leaned back on his arms and placed his hand next to mine, our fingers almost touching. I turned to face him, and our eyes met, and I wished I could have snapped a photo of him so I'd remember how beautiful he looked right now. The golden hour did nothing but justice with his precious complexion, painting his face with a soft hue and making his green eyes shine even brighter than usual. He was so damn gorgeous, the mere sight of him bringing back all sorts of memories. Joy, love, pain, and sorrow, all bundled together into our joint past.

"I'm sorry for everything that I did to you." The words were out of my mouth before I could even stop to think about the Pandora's box I'd just opened. "So fucking sorry, Ashy. About *everything*." From pushing him away, to telling him unspeakable things, and to using his body, only to punch him afterward. I was such a jackass, and he probably hated me for it, but being the kindest man that he was, Ash responded with a soft, little smile before placing his hand over mine.

“I don’t want you to feel guilty about those days. I knew it wasn’t easy for you, with your family and all. I understand. I really do.”

He was about to remove his hand when I grabbed it. His eyes snapped to where my fingers were wrapped around his wrist before he brought them to meet my determined stare.

“K-Kai—”

“Still, it doesn’t justify the things I did to you,” I cut him off.

“I know.” He paused, the sound of the waves filling in the void until he spoke again. “But I chose to forgive you.”

My heart beat fast as my chest flooded with warmth and love. Without thinking twice, I closed my eyes and leaned in until I was met with his perfect lips. They were like soft pillows I wanted to taste forever, but before I could dive deeper into how good kissing him felt, I was pushed back with a hard shove.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Ash snapped as he jumped to his feet.

Confused, I stared at him while trying to spit back an answer.

“What do you mean what am I doing? Kissing you, obviously,” I said while rubbing the spot on my chest he’d punched when he shoved me away.

He gawked at me. “Why the fuck would you do that?”

“Because it seemed like the right moment?”

“The right moment?” His eyes went wide, and his face turned red. “You know damn well I’m in a relationship.”

Hold on just a second.

“I don’t know what world you live in, where you fuck everything with a pulse, but I’m faithful to Soren.”

Ignoring that extremely judgmental first comment that made me sound like some sex addict, I stood up and faced him. “I thought you two had broken up.”

“What?” He nearly gasped the word, his face twisting with horror. “What on earth made you think that?”

“Jesus, Ash, I don’t know.” My voice was dripping with sarcasm. “Maybe it was you not going back home? Telling me how much fun you had today and that you missed me? Or maybe it’s because of how happy you were when I told you Zoe and I are over?”

He let out a fake laugh before shaking his head. “God, you’re unbelievable,” he sighed, then whistled for the dogs to come back from where they were playing.

“Why am I unbelievable?” I asked, angry, as he walked past me.

Ignoring me, he picked the two leashes off the ground.

“Hey, answer me!”

“I was being nice, okay?” he snapped. “I was happy to have you back in my

life as a friend, Kai. A fucking *friend*."

Why did hearing him say that word hurt so bad?

"Well, you sure didn't make it seem like it with how you were all over me today."

His jaw tensed before he once again turned his back to me and began walking away.

Swearing under my breath, I picked up his shoes, which he left behind.

"Ashy, hold on just a second," I called after him, worrying he was going down those slippery rocks too fast.

"Stop calling me that!" he rasped back as I chased him down.

"At least put your shoes back on. The rocks are slippery."

He tsked. "I can manage just fine—*Ah*!"

I nearly had a heart attack when he slipped, but luckily, I moved fast enough to catch him before he completely fell and crushed his head on the rocks. My pulse was still high as I held him close in my arms, and Ash wasted no time before trying to push me away. But the second he moved, he hissed in pain, and we both noticed the blood on his foot.

"Shit," I said while examining the cut that seemed deep.

"It's fine—"

"It's not fine." I took off my shirt. "It's a nasty wound, and you're bleeding." Ignoring his protests, I wrapped my shirt around his foot, using it as a bandage to stop the bleeding. Once done, I looked at him.

"We didn't bring any phones with us, so I'm going to carry you back home, okay?"

Grinding his jaw, he crossed his arms over his chest and diverted his gaze away from me. "Fine," he said with a deep sigh.

Ash wasn't exactly a small guy, but thanks to CrossFit and him being smaller than me, I'd manage. With him on my back, we began making our way home. The first ten minutes were dangerously quiet, and I assumed he was plotting ways to murder me, but then he spoke.

"I didn't mean to snap like that. You just… took me by surprise."

"That's alright. I'm sorry I surprised you."

"Yeah…" He wrapped his arms tighter around me. "I'm here 'cause Soren went to visit his parents without me," he said, surprising me with his words.

"Why?"

"He needed space."

I knew I hated that guy.

"Why would he need space from *you*?"

Ash shrugged, and I could feel his body tensing. "He's struggling with a lot

of things, and sometimes the pressure is hard on him, so he went there."

I snorted. "What the fuck? Isn't he a billionaire or something? Can't he just get a massage—*ouch*!" I whined when he slapped the back of my head. "What was that for?"

"It's for you being an asshole! A *massage* doesn't cure depression."

Oh, crap.

"So did you have a fight or something?" I asked.

"Yeah, and it ended with him leaving the house."

Pissed off because listening to Ash speak about that idiot was worse than waking up with a shitty hangover, I grunted.

"So what was it about?"

Ash was quiet for almost a minute before speaking.

"I told him I wanted kids, and he said no."

I had to pause from walking, then peeked at him over my shoulder.

"He said no?"

Ash nodded, and the defeat on his face pained me.

"What do you mean he said no? Isn't it something you're supposed to decide on together?"

Ash shrugged before pressing into me closer.

Never mind the fact I had no idea Ash even wanted kids, but to learn that he needed to give up on it because Soren didn't want them? What the fuck?

"Maybe he'll change his mind?" I said, trying to cheer him up as I continued walking.

"Soren isn't the type of man to ever change his mind."

His statement was so unbelievably cold that it sent shivers down my spine. Why was Ash with that guy? I then remembered the first time I'd met Soren. It was after Ash and I got stuck, and he came to our rescue. He told Ash to get in the car, and right there, I didn't like him. Sure, I was high as a kite back then, but still sober enough to hate how controlling he was over my Ashy. After Ash got in the car, Soren told me all kinds of crap, but one thing I remembered even now.

He's better off without the likes of you, and I'll be damned if I let you or anyone else get in my way.

Back then, I thought the man was full of crap. Apparently, he wasn't. Almost five years later, and he'd managed to do just that. To isolate Ash away from us, his family. I'd had a hand in it, too, but I knew it was bigger than me.

I placed my hand on top of Ash's wrist, my thumb caressing his skin.

"Have you ever thought about breaking up with him?"

"I'd never break up with him. I love him," he answered so fast and with such confidence, leaving no room for mistakes.

“But don’t you think your relationship is… unhealthy?”

“No one knows what goes on inside a relationship other than the couple themselves,” he answered coldly. “I don’t expect you or anyone else to understand why I’m with him.”

Ash was either in denial of how toxic his relationship was or refused to admit it. Either way, he reminded me of myself when I couldn’t admit to having a problem with drugs. The first step in treating addiction was admitting you had a problem, and if I had to be the one to force that admission out of him, God be my witness, I’d fucking do it because Ash deserved better.

Fuck that.

Ash Sage deserved the fucking world. And that world didn’t include a six-foot-three motherfucker who was standing near his parked car in front of our house.

“Put me down,” Ash said, panicked, as soon as he spotted Soren, too.

“What? No. You’re hurt.”

“Put me down right now!” He spanked my back, but I wasn’t about to drop him to the sand with an injured leg.

We probably caused a scene because we caught Soren’s attention, and he began walking toward us with a furious expression on his ugly face.

“Why do you have your hands on him?” he barked, his finger pointed at me.

“He’s injured, you dipshit,” I snarled back while watching the fury on Soren’s face switching to worry.

“What?” Ignoring me, he moved straight to Ash, who was already off my back, standing on one leg while using Soren for support.

“I-I’m fine, Soren. It’s just a scratch.”

Soren palmed Ash’s face, his eyes sizing him up in seconds before he turned a blaming look my way. “What on earth have you done to him?”

Pissed off, I fisted my hands. “Oh, shut it, you fucking airhead,” I grunted before rolling my eyes. How dare he blame me for something I didn’t do?

“Will you both calm down?” Ash tried to limp between us when Soren ignored him and continued staring daggers at me.

“Oh, don’t worry, *Ashy*. I’m calm, unlike this bitch.” I cocked my head at Soren, digging how his jaw twitched and his brow ticked. *What a loser.*

“Kai!” Ash scolded me.

“What?” I snorted, crossing my arms over my puffed chest. “Not my fault this insecure pussy gets all defensive the minute he’s faced with another man.”

Soren’s eyes widened so much I thought they’d pop out of his ugly head before he ground his jaw. He looked like he was a minute from exploding, and I fucking *loved* it.

“I’m going to file a report against you,” he said, thinking he was threatening anyone. What a joke.

“Soren, I just slipped over some rocks when we walked the dogs.”

Speaking of the dogs, they were going wild and probably about to wake up the whole neighborhood.

“You said you were at the house,” Soren hissed, finally taking his attention away from me. “But here I come back to find out you lied and spent your days with *him*?”

“Hey, don’t raise your voice at him,” I cut in, pointing my finger at his entitled ass.

“You stay out of it,” Soren snapped while grabbing Ash’s arm and pulling him close.

“He’s hurt.” I stepped closer, putting my hand on Ash’s shoulder.

“Guys, stop fighting—”

“Don’t touch him.” Soren pushed my hand away from Ash, and on instinct, I punched the son of a bitch right in the face.

“Soren!” Ash cried when he got on his knees, trying to help that loser back to his feet while I waved my hand, easing the ache in my knuckles. I was fucking rusty when it came to punching dickheads.

“Why the fuck did you do that?” Ash shouted at me just as Aiden came running out of the house.

The dogs’ loud barking probably got his attention.

“He pissed me off,” I mumbled, trying to look away from Soren, who spat some blood on the sand before standing back up.

“What on earth happened?” Aiden asked, out of breath after reaching us, his eyes jumping between us three.

“You’re going to regret this,” Soren hissed, voice ice-cold, which I admit scared me a little, before he turned toward Ash.

Grabbing him, he lifted him off his feet and took him away like he was some sort of a doll.

“Soren, my dog—”

“I’ll take care of it later,” he cut into Ash’s words, silencing him.

I was ready to charge at him again when Aiden placed his hand on my chest, stopping me from taking another step and forcing me to watch Soren put Ash inside his car before stealing him away.

Again.

Pissed off, I clenched my fist so hard my nails dug into my flesh, but not even that stopped me from thinking the same thought again and again.

I wanted this motherfucker dead.

CHAPTER Twenty-Five

Kai

A few days had passed since the incident with Soren. Other than some man coming a day later to pick up Pacha and Ash's stuff, including his car, I hadn't heard a word from Ash.

I was more bitter than ever before because those few days with Ash changed everything. For four long years, I thought I was fine. I believed I was in a good place in life, and I was. Only with Ash back in the picture, I realized how much better life *could* be. We were always meant to be together. Unfortunately, I was too stupid to realize it sooner, but now I had no doubt I was the one for him while Soren was in the way.

Our way.

I bet my money Ash had gotten so pissed off when I kissed him because he, too, realized how right he felt with me. How different life next to me could be. I'd give him anything he wanted, even kids, if that was really what he dreamed of. I mean, look at me—I already had one kid, and I was killing it. I bet a couple more wouldn't be hard. *Right*?

But even if, let's say, Ash dumped Soren and still didn't want to date me, I'd be fine with it, too, because Soren was bad for him. Period. That man was clearly a psycho. The other day, I even talked to Mel about the moron, and she completely agreed. She told me how much she hated Soren but also mentioned that Ash loved him deeply and refused to be so much as engaged in a conversation about Soren whenever she tried bringing it up.

For several days, I debated with myself how I should reach out to Ash, but this morning, the answer came to me in the form of a shirt he'd left behind. After parking my bike in front of work, I pulled out my phone. Looking at his contact name, I thought about whether I should call when I decided to go for a text.

Me: Hey, how's your leg?

Thinking it would take him some time to see it, I was ready to pocket my

phone and get inside the restaurant when my phone buzzed, and I quickly opened it.

Ashy: Hey, it's good. Got a few stitches.

Pleased that he wrote back, I quickly typed another text.

Me: Glad to hear.

Me: You forgot your shirt at Aiden's. The guy Soren sent probably missed it.

Once again, he replied immediately.

Ashy: Thanks for letting me know.

I hoped he'd write something else so I could deepen the conversation, but after a few more minutes passed with no new text coming, I decided to push.

Me: I wanted to apologize for everything that happened.

Ashy: For punching Soren?

Me: Yes.

Me: But also about the kiss.

He vanished for a little while again, and when he finally replied, I had to reread his text to make sure I was reading correctly.

Ashy: Why would you apologize for it?

I almost dropped my phone with how fast I typed back, my fingers hitting the screen repeatedly until I hit Send.

Me: Because I thought you didn't like it?

Ashy: I didn't?

Holy shit.

Me: You're saying you did like it?

Ashy: I'm not sure…

My heart rate increased, and without thinking twice, I hit the Call button. The line rang a few times before he hung up on me but quickly sent a text.

Ashy: Sorry, I can't talk right now.

Eager to find out what more he had to say, I tried my luck.

Me: Can we meet? To talk?

Ash: I don’t think it’s a smart idea.

Me: Come on, Ashy. Please?

Me: We can pretend I’m just giving you back your shirt.

The three dots letting me know he was typing popped up on the screen before disappearing. Nervous, I moved my hand over my face, clenching my phone harder. So caught up with this conversation, I didn’t even bother getting off my bike. When the phone finally buzzed again, I sighed with relief.

Ashy: Okay. Can you come over later tonight? Around 9 p.m.?

Fuck yeah.

Me: You bet. Send me the address.

Clearly, our little kiss didn’t only change things for me but also for him because Ash then texted me back his address. I was finally getting my chance with him, and I wasn’t about to miss it.



Before coming here, I thought about buying some flowers for Ash but ditched the idea. Assuming he wouldn’t immediately jump into my arms the moment he saw me, I scolded my eager self to chill the fuck down. There would be time for flowers and whatnot later, but tonight, I’d have to keep it cool and see what he had to say. Obviously, our reunion had affected him as much as it did me, and the kiss was just proof of that. Ash was probably debating with himself, caught between his current boyfriend and me.

I parked my bike outside the address he gave me and scanned the house with a skeptical brow. I never imagined Ash as the type to live in a Bel Air mansion, but it definitely suited his idiotic boyfriend. I snorted. That asshole definitely had a stick up his ass, which explained this overly excessive house.

Leaving my helmet on the bike seat, I walked toward the open main gate. I stepped in, unimpressed, because growing up rich, I was used to this crap, and walked straight toward the front door. Once there, I pulled out my phone and texted Ash, letting him know I’d arrived. A couple of minutes passed, and he still didn’t see the message. So, instead of waiting for a reply, I knocked on the door and buzzed the intercom, which remained unanswered.

I tried opening the door, which, apparently, wasn’t locked. *Sweet*. I walked in, not bothering to be quiet, then closed it behind me. I mean, it was better he

knew I was here, right?

“Ash?” I called his name while looking around. This place looked like a motherfucking museum. Art on the walls, weird-ass sculptures, all in black, white, and gray. Struck by the strong urge to mess up this place, I cursed under my breath. What a shame it was summer and I had no mud on my shoes to drag all over the pristine floors.

After still no sign of anyone, I allowed myself in. The kitchen was just as hideously organized as the entrance to the house, and so was the living room. How the fuck did Ashy live in such a tidy house? The guy was a walking mess. We both were.

Pacha then came to greet me, but he didn’t seem too excited before grabbing his bone from the floor and going to eat it on his bed that was right next to a big floor-to-ceiling window.

Weirded out by the situation, I took my phone out of my jeans to call Ash when a sound caught my attention—a cry, maybe a groan. I wasn’t entirely sure what I heard, but it piqued my curiosity, and I began searching for its source. The further I walked down the hall, the clearer those sounds became. Deep moans strangled with pleasure that could only ever come from sex. Filthy, animalistic, soul-consuming sex that burned you from the inside out. I knew voices like that. I knew how you needed to *feel* to cry this way. I also knew what I’d see once I took those last few steps toward the open door at the end of the hall. And despite every part of my brain telling me not to do that and to turn around, my body moved on its own.

My breath caught in my chest, and shocked, I froze on the spot with my eyes struggling to grasp what I was seeing.

Ash, my sweet, innocent Ashy, crying his heart out, with his eyes blindfolded and his hands tied with a black tie, being fucked from behind like a nameless whore. Bent over the desk, Ash sobbed while Soren kept on fucking him. Mercilessly, frantically, brutally fucking him. They were in some sort of an office, not that I cared, with my full attention on Ash’s parted lips, flushed cheeks, and the beads of sweat coating his brows as he continued begging for Soren to go harder.

My whole body dried as if I hadn’t drunk a drop of water in years, and my chest tightened. But at the same time I felt sick to my stomach, seeing Ash this way awakened all of my senses, and I was hungry to have him for myself. Ignoring the situation, my dick twitched in my jeans, and I licked my dry lips as the stench of sex, *their* filthy sex, reached my nostrils. Surrounded by the sounds of their pleasure, I couldn’t move a muscle, let alone look away. With each passing second, my cock grew harder until the ache was physically painful, and I

was tempted to grab myself. Soren's bare cock, glossed with cum and lube, slid in and out of Ash's hole, and the tempting sound drilled into my screwed-up head like a nail. When Soren suddenly stopped and pulled out, I took a step back but continued to watch them. Grabbing Ash by the hips, he turned him around and then lifted him to sit on the edge of the table.

"Do you love me, little Sparrow?" he asked.

"Y-Yes."

"How much?"

"More than anything in this world."

A cold shiver ran through me at his words because hearing Ash say this was worse than waking up drunk in my own piss and vomit.

"Tell me, my love, what lengths will you cross for me?"

Jealous, I watched Soren wrapping his fingers around Ash's neck as Ash trembled to get closer. My mind went fucking crazy at the sight of them.

"All seven seas, Soren. I'll fucking die for you."

And to think I believed coming here today would somehow make Ash mine again. I was so embarrassed for being such an idiot. Truthfully, I would have slammed my head into the wall if it hadn't been for what happened next.

Soren looked at me.

With his hands around Ash and his lips mere inches from Ash's skin, Soren's eyes were locked with mine. And what lurked behind them wasn't surprise but satisfaction. And when the corner of his lips quirked up into a self-satisfied smirk, I realized something.

I was exactly where he wanted me to be.

"W-Why did you stop?" Ash asked, his question taking me out of my shock.

"For no reason, little Sparrow," Soren said, his eyes still pinned on me. "Would you ever dare to leave me?"

Ash shook his head.

"Speak up."

"Never."

"Such a good boy," he said as he looked back at Ash before cupping his face. "Stick your tongue out."

Like an obedient pup, Ash did as he was told.

Once again, Soren's eyes flickered to me a second before he sucked on Ash's tongue. They began eating each other right in front of me, tongues meeting, teeth clashing, and lips biting, with Ash not even aware they had a guest. My brain fucking exploded, and my dick swelled with each deep moan Ash let into Soren's hungry mouth. I bit my lip, trying to hold on to this torture just a bit more because perhaps then I'd stop wishing to replace Soren. But no matter how

long I was rooted to the floor, watching Ash being consumed by another man, nothing changed—I still wanted him, *desired* him, like never before.

He wanted me long before this prick came into our lives, and the feeling of missing out was like no other. It drove me fucking nuts because never in my life had I wanted something as much as I wanted Ash Sage right now. No dose, line, or pill ever came close to this thirst that burned down my dry throat. To this insane hunger that dug a hole in my stomach until my fingers trembled and my muscles tensed.

I'd probably lost my fucking mind because, without realizing it, I began stepping closer. *What am I even planning on doing?* Probably push Soren away from Ash. *And then what?* Ash would cry, even protest for a while, but I'd shut him up by shoving my dick down his willing throat and watch him choke on my cock until he'd be too fucking weak to cry. Only then would I give him what he truly wanted by fucking him until neither of us could stand. But before any of that happened, Soren spoke, his words stopping me from taking another step.

"Do you want me to take the blindfold off for you, little Sparrow?"

While he referred his question to Ash, the message to me was clear—a warning to stay the hell away.

"Y-Yes," Ash cried, his voice putting a bit of sense in my fucked-up brain. "I-I want to see you."

Soren grinned like the jackass he was, his attention split between Ash and me. "If you want me to take it off, make sure to sing when I put my cock back inside your tight little hole, where it belongs. I want you to moan so loud for me that anyone could hear."

Ash's body trembled before he nodded eagerly, and I knew it was time for me to leave. Without lingering another second, I got the fuck out of there. But the sight of Ash's quivering body, erect cock with leaking tip, and bruised lips kept flashing before me whenever I closed my eyes. The sound of his moans overcame the roar of my bike and the noise of the road, and by the time I reached home, I was still painfully hard beyond words.

I dashed to the shower, barely stripping out of my clothes before stepping in under the cold water. I fisted my throbbing length while biting my lip and sending my head back with my eyes closed. My hand moved at a frantic pace, pumping my aching boner to images of Ash. To images of me drilling in and out of him while he was crying for me and me alone. My arousal was on the painful side because I knew my climax wouldn't put me at ease. Not this time. Not when my craving was too great to satisfy.

"Fuck!" I growled, slamming my hand over the shower wall and pressing my forehead against it as I gripped myself harder.

I was on the edge, both physically and emotionally, and I craved Ash like I craved a good high.

But Ash isn't yours to crave. Not only that, but unlike drugs, I couldn't just toss some money and buy him to satisfy my urge. He was out of my fucking reach.

Swallowing back this thought, I pumped myself faster until my balls grew tight and my dick twitched. A moment later, I sprayed my cum all over the shower floor, wishing it was Ash's face I was creaming.

Drained and hurt, I watched the water slowly washing away my hopeless desires.

CHAPTER Twenty-Six

Kai

"What the fuck are you doing here?" I growled at Soren as the prick fixed his position before swinging his racket in the air and striking a perfect serve.

"What does it look like I'm doing?" he asked, pulling another tennis ball out of his shorts. Bouncing the ball a few times, he tossed it in the air before striking it, slicing the air in half with his smooth swing. Only then did he turn to look at me, his smug face taking pleasure in the moment. "Practicing my serve, of course. And I'm so glad you could join me, Kai."

"Join you?" I hissed, my jaw twitching with rage. "They told the restaurant that some billionaire was interested in hiring us to cater his party. We were asked to meet them here to discuss the details, so the owner sent me. Now I see it was all a scam." I looked around the empty tennis court, which was part of a private club. Clearly, Soren had set it all up just to drag me here.

"Well, I am a billionaire and indeed looking for a caterer for a rather big party I'm hosting. But my assistant probably made a foolish mistake contacting your little restaurant. As if I'd ever hire someone like you." He couldn't have sounded more full of himself. "But oh well, let's look at the bright side. Shall we?" Pulling out another racket from his bag, he offered it to me.

"I don't know how to play tennis." I flashed him a fake smile while pushing the racket away from my face.

Bouncing the racket in his hand, he chuckled. "Well, that's an unfortunate lie." He held my stare. "Because my sources told me you were quite the player, and here I was, getting my hopes up to have a proper match."

I was a damn good player, and not by choice. My stupid father forced me to play. It was just one out of many other things he pushed me to do while trying to shape me into being more like him.

"Fine." I snatched the racket from his grip. "Ten-points tiebreaker," I said, not intending to stick around for a full game.

Soren smirked, his eyes checking me out slowly. "Don't you want to change

into something more comfortable? I have some of Ashton's shorts in my car. Last time we finished a game, he couldn't keep them on, if you know what I mean." He grinned. "I bet I could also find a shirt."

His words rubbed me the wrong way, but choosing to ignore him, I walked to the other side of the court. "I'd beat your ass just fine wearing whatever."

Once again, Soren let out that low chuckle that dared me not to punch him in the face.

"You can serve first," he said, hitting two balls my way.

He probably hoped to hit me with one of them, but I caught both.

"I appreciate your generosity."

"Please, it's the least I could do."

"The least you could do is shut the fuck up."

"That's unnecessarily rude," he sneered, and *fuckkkk*.

I wanted to kill him.

"Would you be quiet? I'm trying to concentrate." I bounced the ball on the hard court.

"Please, take all the time you need. I heard you're rather slow."

Biting my lip hard, I shook my head and forced myself to focus on my serve instead of going over there and pounding his head open with the racket. With my foot pointing in the direction of the net, I fixed my grip on the handle, tossed the ball in the air, jumped, and swung my racket. Like a stretched spring, I released all my strength on the ball, hitting a perfect serve that started the game.

Without noticing, I got into it and fought harder than I should have to return each ball Soren hit my way. Sweat soaked my clothes, and the afternoon sun fried my brain as we played the ball back and forth until one game turned into four.

Now, in the fourth game, it was Soren's turn to serve. Having the advantage point, all he needed was to score this one to win the game.

Already familiar with his shots, I positioned myself further back to the baseline and bent my knees, ready to take his serve. The ball went up at the same time he swung his racket back and—

"Out," I yelled after his serve missed the line by a mere inch.

"That was clearly inside the lines!" he shouted back, already walking toward the net with his racket pointed at me.

"Bullshit. It was a clear out, you *dipshit*." I also began walking until we were in each other's faces with only the net separating us.

"Of course you're going to start calling me names instead of sticking to actual facts, such as this serve being a perfect ace."

"Calling you names?" I snorted. "What are you, five?"

He frowned. “Excuse me for having proper English. And besides, it doesn’t matter. What matters is your inability to lose with dignity. Therefore, you’re lying in an attempt to steal the win.”

“Steal the win?” I challenged him, enjoying the rage forming on his face.

“Yes. Just like you stole that kiss.”

I didn’t see *that* coming, but knowing he was still bothered by Ash’s and my kiss felt pretty sweet to me, and the anger I felt thus far shifted into satisfaction.

“You’re really bothered by it, aren’t you?” I poked the tip of his cap and nudged it off his big head. “By the way, you missed a button.” I pointed at his perfectly buttoned polo, knowing it would probably annoy the shit out of him. And it did, telling by his pissed expression. Thanks to Mel, I knew about his ODD or CDD or whatever the fuck it was called. Point was, he was a fucking weirdo. Honestly, if it were anyone else, I would have had some empathy for their mental health, but it was him, so fuck it. The guy was a freak.

Soren checked his shirt, then ground his teeth together before he shook his head.

“Aren’t you a pain,” he laughed to himself. “Just like a bone stuck in your throat.” He looked back at me, a smile on his face. “It really is a shame you didn’t end up dead in some ditch with a needle in your arm.”

My eyes went wide, and I gaped at him. “Did you actually just say that?”

“Did I stutter?”

The son of a bitch just admitted to my fucking face he wished I was dead? What the fuck was up with this dude.

“You’re fucking crazy,” I hissed at his face while gripping my racket harder, feeling my knuckles going numb.

“Am I?”

“Just wait until I tell Ash about that little trick you pulled the other day. I bet he’ll dump your ass the minute he hears about it.” I was still not over seeing those two fuck, and as embarrassing as it might be to tell Ash about it, he needed to know he was dating a psycho.

Not wanting to stick around Soren for another minute, I turned to walk when his words made me pause.

“You didn’t ask what party I’m hosting.”

Confused, I turned around to face him, my brows narrowed. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

“I told you earlier that I’m hosting a rather big party. Aren’t you interested in knowing what the celebration is for?”

My heart seemed to stop as my blood turned cold. By the smile on his face, I knew I wouldn’t like the next words to come out of his poisonous mouth.

“Oh my, look how pale you’ve gotten.” He huffed and cocked his head to the side, his cruel eyes looking down on me. “Relax, Kai. It’s not a wedding. *Yet*,” he sneered, then picked his hat back from the ground. “It’s a farewell party.”

I stepped forward. “What?”

Tucking his racket under his arm, Soren cleaned the dust from his hat before putting it back on. “Ashton and I are moving to NYC. I thought you might want to know.”

Ain’t no fucking way.

“You’re joking, right?” I shook my head. “I just told you I’ll tell him everything.” There was no doubt that once Ash heard how Soren played with him, he’d get rid of him.

“Is that a threat?” he asked, sounding unfazed.

I had a bad feeling about going on with this conversation, but I couldn’t leave it as it was. This man needed to understand he had no place in our life.

“Because if it is, it’s rather weak. Don’t you think?” He scrunched up his face, amusement written all over it. “How about this… You open your mouth and spit one word in Ashton’s direction, and I’ll make sure to end you.”

I huffed. “Yeah, sure, man. Whatever—”

“You have a son, don’t you?” he cut in, his words straddling me before he went on. “You also have a failed marriage, and while you don’t care for that girl, you do for the child, don’t you?”

As I remained quiet, he spun his racket in his hand before he began tracing the strings with his fingers. “How would you feel if you lost all access to him?”

My blood boiled at his threats, and the world began closing in on me. “Y-You can’t do that,” I hissed through my rage and was horrified when I saw the glint behind his wicked eyes.

“I have a recording of you assaulting me with your fists and also evidence of you breaking into my house and peeking at me and my partner engaging in sexual activities. I have more than enough evidence to have you arrested and convicted for crimes you couldn’t even begin to imagine. Which, naturally, would get sweet little Paris out of your unqualified arms in the blink of an eye.”

Unable to respond, I kept standing there with my feet nailed to the ground. At least, that’s how it felt because I couldn’t move a single muscle. But as Soren began walking away, an idea popped into my head.

“Let’s play another game,” I shouted at him, my voice scraping my sore throat. “If you win, I’ll stay out of your life. But if I win, you’ll break up with him.”

Soren stopped from walking and held my stare, his face serious. I swallowed hard, ready for his answer, when he suddenly burst into hysterical laughter. And

as he continued rolling with laughter, my shame grew bigger, turning into a stone in the pit of my stomach.

“My God, aren’t you a funny one,” he said once he calmed down, wiping off tears from the corner of his eyes. “What do you think this is? Some cheap romantic drama?”

Each word was another stab into my already bleeding ego, making me feel as small as an ant.

“You’re a child if you truly believe I’d bet over what is already mine.” He put his racket back inside his bag and then picked it up. “Now then, I must go,” he said while checking his watch before glancing at me over his shoulder. “Let’s hope you’re wise enough to listen.” With that, he walked away and left me alone with an unbearable ultimatum.

Ash versus Paris.

A choice I didn’t ever imagine I’d ever have to make.



I spotted Mel’s car parked in front of the house once I reached home. Exhausted after today, I killed my bike’s engine and rolled off it with a heavy grunt. Soren’s words haunted me like demons, leaving me utterly lost.

After he left me on that damn tennis court, it was the first time in a long while I craved a drink or a good high, and only for the sake of silencing my problems, even just for a little bit. But instead of driving off to the nearest bar, I went to see Paris. The second he saw me and that beautiful smile of his popped on his face, I remembered why I got sober to begin with and promised myself to stay strong.

Now, a few hours later, I still felt like shit, but at least I’d accepted reality and understood my place. Running up the steps leading to the house, all I could think about was the hot shower I’d take.

But before that, I stopped at the kitchen to greet Mel and Aiden. Sure, I wasn’t in the mood, but I didn’t want to be rude.

“Hey, guys,” I said, only they didn’t answer and instead looked like they’d just seen a ghost.

Eventually, Mel glanced up from where she was sitting by the dining table and gave me a barely there smile, as if only to acknowledge me, before looking away.

My nerves kicked in.

“What’s going on?” I asked Aiden, who pushed away from the wall he

leaned against and came to stand closer.

“Ash was here earlier, letting us know he’s moving away.”

Even though Soren had already told me they were moving, my heart still clenched just now. Hearing it coming from Aiden was a harsh confirmation of what I already knew.

“Moving away? That vile man is stealing him away!” Mel hissed from where she was sitting, her voice cracking at the end as she swallowed a sob.

Aiden’s jaw tensed at the sound of her weak cry, and he sighed.

“They’re moving to New York. Ash was here earlier to invite us to a party they’re hosting next week.”

Not knowing what to say because I felt dead inside, I shrugged. “That sucks…”

Aiden placed his hand on my shoulder and squeezed me tight.

“You see, after Ash left, Mel and I sat down to talk, and we thought that maybe you could speak to him?” While talking, Aiden looked me straight in the eyes. He seemed so hopeful, and it hurt because I knew it was in vain.

“Ash cares about you, and I saw how you got close again in those few days he spent here. I mean, it was the first time since he moved in with Soren that he stuck around for so long. It must mean something, right?”

It was rather surprising hearing him speak so much as Aiden was normally a man of few words, but the longer he talked, the harder it was for me to stand and listen because although Soren had placed me in the middle of a dilemma, there wasn’t really a question.

“Ash is a big kid, Aiden,” I said with a heavy heart while avoiding both of their eyes. “He can make his own decisions.”

“Kai.” Mel said my name while getting up. “I know you still care for him, and just like Aiden, I also think Ash still cares for you. So talk to him, please. For us.”

Guilt tightened my chest, and I fought hard to resist it. Sealing my lips together, I unwillingly shook my head. “I’m really sorry, guys.” *I want to talk to him, too*. “But I can’t do it.” Not staying to watch the disappointment on their faces, I turned around and walked up to my room. Slumping back on my bed, I covered my face with my palms and squeezed my eyes shut.

One way or another, I’d have to find a way to get over Ash Sage, or I was afraid it would drag me down. *Again*.

CHAPTER Twenty—Seven

Kai

2 Years Later

I hadn’t heard a single word from him for over two years.

Not. A. Single. Word.

But then, one evening, without any warning, Ash was there, sitting in our living room with a dead expression on his face—an expression of a person who’d lost everything in his life. He looked so lost that I couldn’t even bring myself to be happy about his return. Quite shocked and mostly worried, all I did that evening was exchange confused glances with Aiden.

That was another matter—Aiden and me.

Things had gotten awkward between us a while back, and now, with Ash’s mysterious return, they had only gotten worse. I couldn’t blame the old man for feeling weird around me, but now definitely wasn’t the time to open *that* coffin. We decided never to talk about it again, and I wasn’t about to break our promise. Not when our full attention was on Ash, who was in the worst state I had ever seen him.

It took Ash about five days to finally speak to Mel, who told us that he and Soren had broken up. Why? When? How? All those questions remained unanswered, and I doubted Mel intended to push her son to tell us more, considering how Ash was in no state to speak.

We all hoped Ash would one day leave that asshole, but at what price? At the cost of him being so sad that he couldn’t get out of his room? At the expense of him crying until losing his voice? Or for him to look like a shell of his old self?

Since Mel’s house was going through a renovation, Ash ended up staying with Aiden and me, and for the last two weeks, I’d been walking around the house feeling like a sack of stones was weighing on my shoulders. Seeing Ash in so much pain was brutal, but I also understood my place, which was to stay out of the way. I tried being around the house as little as possible, giving Mel and Aiden the space to help him. Today was the first time I stayed home, alone, with

Ash. Mel had a shift at the hospital, and Aiden had to run some errands, so I said I'd stay to keep an eye on him.

I doubted we'd run into each other because Ash spent most of his days in bed, but just in case, I decided to watch TV in the living room instead of my own room. An hour into a boring movie, Ash showed up.

Dressed in some baggy sweats that seemed too big for him, he stopped at the entrance to the kitchen. Despite it being the middle of summer and the AC not working, Ash stood with his arms wrapped around himself as if he was cold.

"Eh… Where's my mom?" he asked, voice weak.

It was actually the first time he'd acknowledged me since returning. Until today, he hadn't even looked my way, let alone spoke to me.

Shutting off the TV, I jumped to my feet. "She's at work, and Aiden is out for some errands. Do you need anything?"

Averting his gaze from mine, he shook his head. "No." He bit the tip of his nail. "I'll go back to my room—"

"Maybe I'll cook you something?" My question made him shake his head harder, and I moved from around the couch to get closer to him. "A drink, then? Coffee? Hot cocoa?"

He looked at me, and my stomach rolled at the sight of the sorrow in his eyes. Swallowing hard, I cleared my throat before smiling at him. "Paris says my hot cocoa should win awards."

The mention of Paris probably shifted something inside Ash because, to my surprise, he agreed. I told him he could sit on the couch and wait while I went to make him the drink. Suddenly, I felt nervous. It wasn't just nerves twisting my guts but also excitement that finally, I had a chance to speak to him. And maybe, just maybe, I'd be able to make him feel a little bit better, even just for a moment.

"Here you go," I said, handing him the mug.

"Thank you."

Taking it from me with two hands, he brought the mug close to his chest before cuddling into himself on the far side of the couch. Not wanting to make him uncomfortable, I sat down far enough so that a full seat was separating us.

"It's a bit hot, so be careful."

He hummed in response, his eyes fixated on the black screen of the TV.

Silence continued to linger between us, and each time I took a small gulp from my drink, I glanced at Ash. So far, he hadn't even taken a tiny sip. Disappointed, I frowned.

"Come on, Ashy, at least taste it." His nickname slipped from between my dumb mouth before I could think about it and caught Ash's attention, as he just

glanced back at me with raised brows and tired eyes.

“Ehh… sorry, I didn’t mean to call you that,” I mumbled, moving a hand through my hair.

Once again, he looked away and stared into space like he was in a completely different place. I knew it had nothing to do with me but with the inner struggle he was currently facing, but it still hurt. Could I really blame him for being so sad? Sure, I’d been through breakups in my life, but none were heartbreaking. I’d never been in love with anyone I’d dated, anyone but—

“I’m tired. I’m going back to sleep,” he said, placed his untouched cocoa on the table, and stood.

He was out of the room before I could even finish my thought, leaving me aching and worried.



The sound of a chair dragging jolted me awake, and I perked up on the bed while looking around my dark bedroom. With eyes heavy with sleep, I reached for my phone and checked the time. Seeing as how it was 2:00 a.m., I planned on going back to sleep when I heard another sound coming from downstairs. With a grunt, I dragged my ass out of bed and went down to check the source of those noises.

“Ash?” I asked, surprised and worried at the sight of him standing by the front door.

“O-Oh, sorry for waking you up. I was just taking the dogs for a walk.”

Only now, I noticed the leashes in his hands and the two dogs by his side.

“Oh… Okay,” I said, already turning on the stairs to go back to my room when something occurred to me. Half turning around, I frowned at him. “You’re taking the dogs for a walk at two in the morning?”

He shrugged. “I guess.”

I was tired as fuck and had to get up in a couple of hours to shop at the farmers market, but fuck it. Going down the rest of the stairs, I jolted the front door open. “Let’s go.” I got out first, with the two dogs right behind me. Ain’t no way I was about to let him walk around the beach alone so late at night.

Surprisingly, Ash joined me outside with no protest. He might not have said a word, but he came to walk beside me, and it was more than enough.

The moon brightened the clear sky as the sound of the ocean mixed with the night. We continued to walk while watching the dogs running ahead, enjoying playing with each other. Suddenly, I remembered the last time we’d walked like this on the shore. It ended with Ash slapping me, which, looking back, was kind

of hilarious.

“What’s funny?” Ash asked, his question invading my memories.

“I just remembered that time you slapped me,” I said, shoving my hands into my sweats pockets.

“Oh.” He stopped walking and turned to look at the pitch-black ocean. “I almost forgot about it.”

“That’s okay. It was two years ago,” I tried joking while stopping beside him.

He turned quiet, the waves filling in for his words until he spoke.

“What did you do in those last two years?” While he asked me the question, he kept his eyes pinned on the dark horizon.

His sudden interest was somehow exciting—an opportunity to have a conversation with him. To try and reach what was clearly broken.

“Nothing special, really.” I crossed my arms over my chest while kicking some sand. “I’m working at a new restaurant where I’m the head chef… I love it there. Having people do what I say is real fucking nice,” I joked, and he looked at me for a short second. His piercing gaze warmed my heart, as usual, and once he looked away, I felt cold and stupid. “Well, other than that, I’m still trying to be a dad, which turns out to be harder as the kid gets older. Especially with mine—you should see his attitude.” I snorted, remembering Paris’s cute little frown when he didn’t get what he wanted. “But that’s pretty much it. Work, family, some sport. Living life, you know?” I nudged his shoulder. “What about you? What were you up to in the last two years?”

“Nothing,” he answered flatly, and I noticed the glint in his eye of an unshed tear.

Ash took a deep breath, then wrapped his arms around himself. “I did nothing because I am nothing.”

“That’s not true,” I protested, unable to accept what he’d just said.

“But it is, Kai. I’m twenty-five, and other than being *his*, I have done nothing with my life.”

Other than being his.

Before I could dive deeper into the meaning of this startling statement, Ash went on. Only now, he could no longer hold back from crying, and each word he spat was choked with pain and sorrow.

“I loved it, *him*. I loved my life, so I went on with it. I allowed him to push me to whatever lengths, thinking—” His cry worsened, and he had to pause to take a breath. “Thinking we’d last forever… But then he ended it.” His voice completely broke, and he covered his face with his hands before crouching down.

Scared something had happened, I quickly moved beside him.

He was physically okay… I wish I could say it was the same for his heart.

“What was it all for if he… if we…”

Not knowing what to say, I put my hands around him and hugged him. He didn’t push away but continued to cry, to sob so hard that it shattered my heart.

“He promised me forever, only to throw me away one day. Why?” He clenched my shirt in his fist while burying his face in my chest, his tears and snot wetting me. “Why would he do that? What did I do wrong? Why did he stop loving me?”

“You did nothing wrong, Ash,” I said, holding him as tight as I could as his cry pierced my heart like daggers. “It’s not your fault it ended.”

“It hurt,” he sobbed. “It hurts so much, and the pain just doesn’t go away.”

I understood that feeling.

I might have never suffered from a breakup, but I knew sobriety, and I knew how painful it was when the body ached for something it couldn’t get.

Ash was an addict, and his drug was Soren Dane. The pain he was experiencing right now was just like any other addict had when trying to get sober. Sleepless nights, nausea, sickness… All that went away eventually, but then you were left with the hardest part, and that was the lifelong battle of never going back. Day after day where you keep telling yourself that you were better off without that shit.

“I know it hurts, Ashy, physically hurts.” I kissed the top of his head while holding on to his shaking body for dear life. “But it will get better. I promise.”

“I can’t live without him,” he cried.

“You can, and you will.” Just like I did. “Trust me that you will. I know what I’m saying now sounds impossible, but after enough time has passed, you’ll see that it wasn’t. And when you look back on tonight, you’ll be fucking proud you made it.”

He didn’t answer me, and I was pretty sure he didn’t believe me either, but that was okay. Eventually, he’d see I was right. I might not have been in his life for the past few years, but I knew Ash, and I knew that he was a strong man with a heart of gold.

After he’d finished crying, we went back home. Aiden was still asleep, so we snuck in quietly and went upstairs immediately. I was ready to get inside my room when Ash grabbed my wrist, stopping me.

“C-Can I sleep with you tonight?” he asked, his eyes pinned on the floor. “It’s just that sleeping alone feels weird… and I don’t like it.”

Words were unnecessary at this moment, where I took his hand in mine, opened the door, and walked us both in. I climbed on the bed first, making room beside me on the mattress. Ash hesitated for a bit before doing the same. With

his back to me, he rested his head on the pillow, and I covered him with the blanket before throwing my arm around his waist and pulling him close. His body physically relaxed at the touch, and his breath softened. He was colder than I remembered, but maybe I was just imagining it. And as I held him close, I knew this was all about comfort.

Ash's request came from his need to feel loved and nothing more. Yet, I couldn't help but be satisfied that, at last, he was where I wanted him to be. Unlike Ashy, I wasn't a man with a heart of gold, and I wasn't about to pretend otherwise. I knew I was selfish and that, deep down, I enjoyed his pain because it created an opportunity. Ash's heart might be broken for now, but my greedy ass was counting on changing it. Eventually, his love for Soren would die, and when that happened, I'd be right there, waiting.

Knowing no one could see me, I didn't hold back my smile as I hugged him a bit tighter. And for the first time, which would probably be the last, I thanked Soren because, thanks to that son of a bitch, Ash was finally *mine*.

CHAPTER Twenty-Eight

Kai

The repeated sound of my alarm pulled me out of a sweet dream, and I opened my eyes to an even sweeter one. Quickly reaching for my phone, I turned the alarm off before it woke Ash, who was snuggled at my side, his angelic face half-buried in the pillow.

Fuck, did I want to nut all over that pretty face of his, to smear my cum over those pouty lips and decorate his long eyelashes with pearls of my jizz. Unfortunately, I couldn't, and partly guilty, I let out a frustrated grunt as I shifted away from his hot body. Despite having dirty thoughts ever since Ash first asked me to sleep with him almost three weeks ago, I hadn't done anything other than hug and cuddle him. Being the furthest thing possible from a saint, I let out my sexual frustration on random hookups. After I released all that pent-up energy on strangers, I returned to Ash and hugged him in the most platonic way I could manage.

I took one last inhale of his sexy scent, which became even stronger when he was in a deep sleep, and then got up. Recently, we slept in his room because he preferred it that way. Sneaking out quietly, I stole one last glance at him and bit my lip. *He's so damn fine, even when he sleeps.*

Closing the door, I let go of the handle and moved my hand to grab my morning wood when someone cleared their throat, and I jolted back.

"Oh, shit," I gasped at Aiden, who stood behind me in the hall. "Didn't see you standing there."

"Sorry, I was just putting some things in the laundry room," he said, not meeting my eyes, which was legitimate, given the awkward situation.

Neither Ash nor I had said a word about our new sleeping arrangement, but living under the same roof, Aiden had probably picked up on it by now. Although, I was pretty sure he had the wrong impression. Not that I could blame him, with me sneaking out of Ash's room almost every morning now. And not to mention the raging tent in my sweats, which I did a poor job of hiding.

“I’m gonna hit the shower. Gotta be at the restaurant soon.” I pointed in the direction of the bathroom and watched Aiden quickly nod.

He seemed as eager as I was to escape this embarrassing encounter and moved fast to pass me on his way downstairs. Things didn’t have to get so weird between us, but I guess the old man wasn’t wired up the same way I was. *Not that it mattered*. Currently, Ash was all I could think and care about. With that thought in mind, I got into the shower, jerked off, and washed myself with cold water before heading downstairs for coffee.

Aiden was in the kitchen, sitting by the dining table while reading a newspaper. It would be impossible to guess the man was in his midforties with his head full of dark hair, thick stubble, and a killer body. I was pretty sure he checked the DILF box, minus the part about having kids other than his dog, Seb. Although, when he had his reading glasses on, as he did right now, he definitely looked older.

Noticing my arrival, Aiden put down the paper and looked at me with the same eyes as Ash, only that his eyes weren’t as pure and innocent. Not that he could be blamed; no one in this entire world could look as deliciously innocent as my Ashy.

“Want some coffee?” I asked after pulling a cup out of the cabinet.

“Already had some, but thanks.”

A few minutes later, I joined him by the table to drink my espresso. Aiden was back to reading, so I pulled out my phone and scrolled through some unread messages. I saw a text from Zoe, letting me know Paris was excited to spend the weekend together.

“Mind telling me what’s going on between you two?” Aiden asked, getting my attention.

I closed my phone and moved to look at him, my brows raised in surprise.

“Nothing, really.” My voice came out too low, and I coughed to clear my throat. “I mean, not yet, anyway.”

Aiden’s expression hardened, and he leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms over his chest. “Whatever you do, take it slow. I don’t want to see him getting hurt again.”

Oh, shit. So that was what this weird atmosphere was all about? For weeks, I thought Aiden was still angry about *that* incident while, in fact, he was just worried I’d hurt Ash. I should have realized it sooner, considering how protective Aiden was over his nephew.

“Of course. You know I’d never hurt him.” The seriousness on Aiden’s face and the tension pulled between his pinched brows made me correct myself. “*Again*. I would never hurt him again.” When we were teens, I didn’t only hurt

Ash but fucking wrecked him. It felt so long ago that sometimes I forgot those days.

"I'm very serious, Kai. Ash has been through… a lot." It sounded like he knew things I didn't. "And what he needs right now is a *friend*, not a…" With a sigh, he took off his reading glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose. "You know what I mean."

"Actually, I don't, Aiden." I didn't mean to get angry, but him suggesting I was doing something wrong pissed me off. Ash came to *me* seeking comfort, not the other way around.

Getting up from my chair, I took my empty cup to the sink and quickly washed it. I then grabbed a paper towel to dry my hands before turning to look at Aiden again.

"I'm trying to be there for Ash, just like you and Mel are." I tossed the used paper into the trash can.

"I know."

"So what's the problem?"

Saying nothing, Aiden continued to look at me, his eyes holding an emotion I couldn't quite tell. As seconds passed, the crease between his brows only deepened. But then, his expression softened, and he sighed.

"I just don't want any of you boys getting hurt. That's all." He got up. "I guess what I'm saying is think before you act, okay?"

"Sure," I answered half-heartedly before grabbing my keys and going out.



While my conversation with Aiden bothered me for a while, it was soon forgotten as work kicked in. The kitchen was always one heck of a madhouse, and with the amount of work we had, no wonder I had no time to think about anything but the dishes I plated.

"Yes, *Chef*!" my line cooks answered me in harmony after I yelled at them not to burn my fucking sauce. I might have wrecked other shit in my life, but ain't no fucking way I would serve my customers uncooked chicken and burned sauce.

Working always made me lose track of time. Putting on my black apron and getting behind the stoves did the job, and while I loved working in this restaurant as the head chef, I also yearned to open my own place eventually. I knew that day was coming and hoped it would be sooner rather than later.

A new chit came along, and I took the pencil from behind my ear to go over

the order.

“One salmon, two carbonaras, and one lobster,” I ordered my staff before pinning the chit next to the other orders and going back to plating.

“Sorry, Chef, but there’s someone in the restaurant who says he knows you?” one of our waitresses, whose name I couldn’t remember, told me.

“Who gives a fuck,” I snapped at her. I hated being bothered while cooking.

“He said to tell you his name is Ash?”

I perked my head up. “Ash?” I spat his name, my heart stopping in my chest.

“Y-Yes.” She couldn’t hold back from smiling.

Considering my reaction, I had it coming. But more importantly, Ash was here?

“Rena, take over the pass for me,” I told my sous chef before leaving my kitchen and going out to the front of the restaurant. To my surprise, Ash was really there.

“Hey,” I said, unable to hold back a goofy smile as I approached him.

Ash seemed slightly shocked to see me at first, as his eyes studied me carefully. “H-Hey,” he mumbled after he was done checking me out. “Ah, sorry. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you dressed up this way.”

I knew I looked hot, even hotter, when I wore my work clothes. From the blush on his cheeks and bottom lip tucked underneath his teeth, it seemed like Ashy thought the same.

“So, what are you doing here?”

“Well—” Ash’s words were cut off by a waiter who nearly bumped into us on his way back to the kitchen with a tray full of dishes. I gave the idiot the death glare, which made him stumble forward, before grabbing Ash’s arm and pulling him aside.

“So, you were saying?” I asked, bringing his attention away from the waiter and back to me.

Ash seemed out of place in the fuss of the busy restaurant, and I wasn’t surprised. He hadn’t left the house since returning home over a month ago, so his discomfort was understandable.

“Oh, yes, right.” He hugged his arms around himself. “I was just hanging around the house and then got hungry, so I thought—”

“You thought to drive all the way here and come see me?” I finished his sentence, my lips curving into a crooked smile.

Ash frowned, looking as cute as ever, before shoving my chest.

“Don’t be so full of yourself, asshole.” He pouted his lips, his ears turning red. “But yes. I was curious where you work.”

I’d cuddled the dude every night for weeks now, but just then, his words got

me all excited like some fucking virgin.

“You should have told me before. I would have found someone to replace me in the kitchen.” I looked around the full restaurant. “I’ve got about two hours until I’m done.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll just go home.”

He was delusional if he thought I’d allow it.

“Fuck no.” I wrapped one arm around him and pulled him close. “I’ll get you a table and cook you some good food.” I kissed his head. “Hopefully, by the time you’re done, I’ll be able to get out of here. Sound good?”

He nodded, and fuck me sideways, I wanted to eat his face. *And ass*.

Restraining myself, I led him to a corner table where he’d have more privacy before returning to the kitchen. As promised, I cooked him the best meal I’d ever made. So excited about him being here, I even served Ash each of the courses myself.

“More? I swear, Kai, I can’t get another thing into my mouth,” Ash whined after I came back with another plate in hand.

“There’s always room for dessert,” I smirked, ignoring my dirty thoughts about other things I’d want to put in his mouth.

The restaurant was almost empty now, so I dragged a chair beside Ash before sitting down and placing the plate between us.

“Raspberry and pistachio éclair with homemade crème fraîche on the side,” I said, offering him the dessert fork.

Ash darted his eyes from me to the plate and back before taking the fork from me.

“You’re going to make me gain so much weight.”

“Good. I’ll have more to cuddle at night.”

Ash grunted before he took a forkful of the dessert and brought it to his mouth. Wrapping his full lips around the fork, he closed his eyes and let out a soft moan. My dick twitched at the sound, and my throat dried up as he darted the tip of his tongue to lick the corner of his lips.

“Good, right?” I leaned a bit closer.

Ash nodded, then took another bite, cream getting everywhere. “It tastes amazing.”

Just wait until you taste my dick, baby.

This time, he used a napkin to clean himself. “I never really got to eat sweets the past few years,” he said, his eyes pinned on the plate while he smiled to himself. “Soren is one of those people who’s against sugar, so I tried avoiding it… although I couldn’t quit, and he laughed, saying it’s why I’m so sweet.”

I slowly watched how the joy washed away from his face as memories

sucked him in, and the mood at the table shifted. It frustrated me that no matter what Ash did, somehow, it always returned to Soren. I knew it had only been a few weeks, but a part of me hoped that Ash coming here tonight was a sign. A sign that he was beginning to let go.

The mere mention of Soren's name pissed me off beyond words, and if only I could have erased the fucker's name from Ash's memory. But life didn't work that way, and if I wanted him to get over the prick, I had to work for it. Good thing I already had an idea.

Standing up, I offered Ash a hand. "Come," I said, watching the confusion form in his eyes.

"Where to?"

"You'll see."

He took my hand and slowly got up. "B-But what about your work?"

"Don't worry about it."

Of course he worried about it, and when we stopped in front of my bike, he shook his head.

"It's too dangerous. You know I don't like motorcycles." He handed me the helmet I'd just given him, but I refused to take it back.

"When we were sixteen, I recall you being obsessed with a gorgeous Harley so much that you pinned its photo above your bed." I pushed the helmet back at him.

"Well, I'm no longer sixteen."

"Well aware of that." I grinned, giving him a once-over. "And thank fuck 'cause you're way sexier now."

Ash's eyes widened, and he opened his mouth to say something before closing it and swallowing hard.

With a chuckle, I climbed onto my bike.

"What about my car?" he asked.

"We'll pick it up tomorrow."

"But—"

"Come on, Ashy, live a little," I cut in. "Life's too fucking short."

Locking eyes with me, Ash then took a deep breath and put his helmet on. "Just don't drive too fast. Okay?" he asked after climbing behind me and hugging his arms around my waist.

I kicked the gas, and the bike roared to life. Ash immediately hugged me tighter, and I smirked.

"You bet, Ashy."

CHAPTER Twenty—Nine

Ash

"You can open your eyes now. We're here," Kai said, not trying to hold back the amusement in his voice.

"You said you'd ride slow," I grunted and hit his back before getting off the bike, my legs shaking with how frightened I'd been for the last forty-five minutes.

"I did ride slow," Kai protested, laughing.

Ready to hit him again, I suddenly noticed where he'd taken us. "This is—"

"Our place."

Getting off his bike, Kai moved to stand beside me. Now, we were both looking at the beach where we used to spend days and nights. Memories flooded me at once: hours of paddling in the water and catching the most epic waves, campfires, nights of looking at the stars, and days bathing in the sun. The days before the drama and pain. Days that were pure fun, where fifteen-year-old Ash followed fifteen-year-old Kai without a single worry on his mind.

"Let's go for a swim," Kai said, jolting me out of my head.

"Now? But it's dark."

"I don't recall you ever caring about shit like that, Ashy." Teasing me, he'd already begun running forward.

"We don't have swimwear." I ran after him.

"Even better." He stopped not too far from the water and began stripping. First, he got rid of his shirt, then moved to undo his pants while half turning to me. "Come on, Ashy, let's go for a swim."

Luckily, he kept his boxers on, not that it mattered with how the thin red fabric clung to his body, showing every curve and bulge. He definitely didn't have the same physique as he did back then, and my cheeks turned a bit hotter.

Kai ran to the water, his beautiful muscles lit by the moonlight and his blond hair swaying with the wind. He was always handsome and *sexy*, and I used to love looking at him. But now, it felt *different*.

Kai's skin was tanner than Soren's fair complexion and his muscles thicker, less defined. His hair wasn't the black that merged with the night but a bright blond that stood out. There were also many tattoos that I didn't quite like, and to be honest, there was nothing about Kai that reminded me of Soren, and yet, even now, I couldn't stop thinking about him.

About Soren. About the guy I still loved with a full, yet broken, heart.

But Soren was no longer here, and he would never be here. He'd made that point clear back in New York when, out of the blue, he told me we were over.

Done.

Finished.

In a matter of minutes, Soren managed to shatter my world into a million pieces. Thinking about him brought so much pain but mostly anger. I was angry at myself for being that stupid and believing the lies he'd told me. He'd promised me forever, and for him, forever ended after seven short years. This anger that began simmering in the pit of my stomach was what brought me to visit Kai today. It was also what caused me to strip out of my clothes and run to the water in nothing but my boxer briefs.

"*Shit*, it's cold!" I hissed and took a step back.

"It'll get warmer once you're in," Kai called as he began swimming toward me.

His body was wet and beautiful, and those thoughts confused me. Because how could I think this way while still mourning the loss of my relationship?

"H-Hey!" I yelped after Kai grabbed my waist and lifted me over his shoulder. His naked skin pressed against mine. It was cold and wet but not unpleasant. "Put me down!" I began laughing while hitting his back, and then it hit me.

I was laughing.

For the first time in weeks, I didn't feel like dying.

But before the realization sank any deeper, Kai tossed me into the freezing water, which was like a wake-up call.

Babe, you gotta understand. It will take time, and you'll hurt. But hurting is part of life. The best way is to go right through it, hoping you'll come out of it stronger.

My mom's words from years ago returned to me as the cold water of the ocean surrounded me. Back then, I was hurting over Kai, thinking I'd never get over him. But I did. I mean, the last time he and I were on this beach, he punched me to the ground, but here we were. Together, *again*.

"How's the water, Ashy?" Kai asked with a grin as I resurfaced.

"You made me swallow salt water, you jerk!" I pushed his chest, and he

grabbed my wrist and pulled me close. We began wrestling, and the sound of his laugh warmed my soul. Soren was probably enjoying a glass of pinot noir with some new guy, not giving a shit about me, so why should I drown in misery when I could—

"Hey! That's cheating," Kai yelped after I dunked him down when he wasn't looking, water splashing everywhere.

This was the most fun I'd had in weeks, and I wanted to enjoy it, even just for a little bit. I knew that once we were out of the water, the sadness would return, and so would the loneliness. It was a type of new loneliness I didn't even know could exist. The type that dug a hole in my chest so big I knew it would forever stay open.

"Hey." Kai cupped my face in his palms, holding me close, and his blue eyes looked at me with kindness. "Don't think about him," he whispered, and I closed my eyes, leaning into his touch.

If only it were that simple.

But then, Kai got closer until his lips were an inch away from mine, and my breath caught.

"Just focus on me," he said, or should I say begged, and closed the distance between us until our lips met.

My first instinct was to push him away because, deep down, I didn't want this foreign touch. Until now, Soren's lips were the last I tasted, and I wanted to keep it that way. But my body didn't push Kai away, and instead, I opened my mouth for him and allowed him in.

He wrapped his hands around me in a tight hug and pulled me closer as if not to let the waves wash me away. With my hands on his chest, I latched on to him, moaning at the intrusion of his tongue. Everything about this kiss was different, from the roughness of his stubble to the impulsiveness of his moves, but it was consuming nonetheless. My soul yearned to be loved and cherished—even if it was by the wrong person. Kai's kiss brought me comfort, and selfishly, I thrived on it.

"D-Don't stop," I nearly cried when he pulled back for some air.

Biting his lip, he stifled a groan and shook his head. "You're driving me nuts," he admitted, grabbing the back of my head and pulling me into a much more aggressive kiss.

My lips, chin, jaw, and neck—Kai put his lips anywhere he could reach while his fingers dug into my flesh. *Painfully*. *Possessively.* Like a thief holding on to his stolen goods, Kai kept me close, the two of us fully aware that I wasn't his to hold this way. Not yet, anyway.

"W-Wait," I panted, and he took the opportunity to push his tongue into my

open mouth and massage it against mine. It was hot and messy, and my cock took notice, growing harder and harder with each passing second until it rubbed against Kai's thigh.

Without saying a word, Kai slipped his hand between us and grabbed me over my boxer briefs. I moaned at the relief and buried my face in the crook of his neck as he began stroking me.

The waves splashed against my back, so I held tighter on to Kai, who increased his pace. The water didn't at all ease the friction, and the salt stung in a way, but with my growing need to come, I focused on the pleasure of his hand.

"K-Kai," I gasped, my eyes closed.

He didn't answer and, instead, gripped my neck and turned my head up to take over my mouth again, controlling my every move. My heart hammered fast inside my rib cage, and I could feel my whole body tensing a moment before I climaxed and came into his palm. The water quickly washed away my release, almost like it had never happened, and replaced the steaming heat with shivering cold. If only the waves could have carried with them the guilt that struck me the moment the adrenaline crashed.

"Ash?" Kai asked while trying to contain his heavy breaths.

He sounded nervous, worried, but I blocked it away.

Slightly pushing him away from me, I avoided his gaze. "Let's go home," I said, already starting to move back in the direction of the shore.

I hated that I couldn't control my emotions or that I turned my anger on him. But it was stronger than me. What if Soren knew what I'd just done? Why did I even care? He dumped me, right?

I was out of the water when Kai reached for my arm.

"Ash, wait." He turned me around to face him, but I shrugged him off.

"It's fine, seriously." I bent down to pick my shirt off the sand. "I'm just tired."

I didn't say another word, and Kai didn't push, which I was grateful for. When we reached home, I immediately went upstairs and got into my room. Alone. Tonight, I couldn't bring myself to seek comfort in Kai's warm embrace. Not after what we'd just done.

CHAPTER Thirty

Ash

"Oh, you're finally home," I told Soren as he walked through the door, relief washing over me at the sight of him. He was supposed to be back a few hours ago. It wasn't unusual for him to get home late, but he usually called to let me know. What's more, he seemed stressed, more than usual, with beads of sweat covering his forehead. Even his shirt was dampened with sweat stains, almost like he'd run his way back home.

"Is everything okay?"

"Yes," he answered, simply and shortly.

"Let me take that for you," I told him, reaching to grab his suit jacket, but he ignored my offer and went straight to our room.

His odd behavior stung, and my stomach flipped at being dismissed, but I swallowed hard and followed him to our room.

"I tried cooking tonight," I said, hoping it would break this weird atmosphere Soren had brought back home with him. Ever since we came back from Greece last month, he'd been in a bad mood. So, I tried cheering him up in all sorts of ways, and one of them was trying to cook. I knew one home-cooked meal wouldn't do the trick, but it was just one of many ideas I had in mind.

"Do you want to eat first? Or would you rather take a shower?" I asked, hoping his response would contain more than a single word. To my disappointment, he didn't even bother to answer before walking straight to the shower and locking the door behind him. My heart sank, but I forced myself to stay positive. After almost eight years together, I knew Soren sometimes faced hardships. In addition to his OCD, he had a long history of depression, which he often handled quite well. He sometimes shut me out, like he did just now, and it disappointed me. Yet, understanding it was his choice whether to share or not, I went back to the kitchen to finish dinner.

After picking his favorite plates and cutlery, I set the table so it would be exactly as he liked before opening his favorite bottle of wine. I even lit candles to

set the mood. It was the small details that mattered to Soren, from the bergamot orange scent of the candles to the gray cashmere shirt I wore; everything affected him, and when things were out of order, it burdened his life. Yes*, it might sound crazy for an outsider, but not to me. I knew him. I'd lived with him for years and saw the person underneath the rituals and strict rules. More importantly, I* loved *him. I loved him more than I could ever put into words and was willing to put up with anything he'd thrown at me. And despite what some would say, such as my mom or my uncle, Soren wasn't selfish. He was a kind man who loved me deeply.*

Thirty minutes later, we sat on opposite sides of our long dining table that we only ever used when we had guests over. Since I wanted this dinner to be special, tonight was an exception.

"How does it taste?" I asked, eager to get some feedback from him.

With his eyes pinned on the plate, Soren didn't bother to look away from his steak as he cut another piece. He slowly brought it to his mouth and then forced himself to chew before swallowing it with wine.

"Is it that bad?" I chuckled, nerves nipping my gut. "I guess I'm just not meant to be in the kitchen." I smiled awkwardly, then took a long gulp from my drink.

We sank into another dragging silence. Soren looked in a completely different place, and it worried me. He'd even missed one button on his shirt and ignored the drop of wine he spilled while pouring his second glass.

"I was thinking, maybe we can go somewhere soon?" I said. Soren always felt better when it was just the two of us on the other side of the world. Greece, Italy, Sri Lanka, Spain. We'd already been to so many places together. Maybe that was what he needed? "We can go someplace warm. I know how much you enjoy the sun—"

"I can't do this anymore," he said, his hoarse voice cutting into my ongoing monologue.

Looking up at him, I smiled. "S-Sorry?"

"I said, I can't do this anymore," he repeated himself, and I frowned.

"Well, if the steak is that bad, we can just order takeout."

He sighed, his face paler than usual. "I'm not talking about the food, Ashton."

My heart suddenly began to pound fast, each beat feeling like a punch to my chest until it was hard to breathe.

"W-What are you talking about, then?"

Finally, he looked up from his plate, and our eyes met.

I hated it.

I hated how dead his eyes were while he looked at me with such coldness that it shattered my illusion of a perfect life. But then, he continued talking, and it got even worse.

"I'm talking about this." He pointed his finger between us. "About us."

Usually, I loved it when he used that word.

Us.

Referring to him and me as one and the same.

Not right now.

"I can't do this anymore. I'm sorry."

And just like that, Soren had ended our relationship. There was no explanation, no discussion. One short sentence and it was over. Finished.

He was out of our house the same evening, leaving me alone and more broken than I ever thought was possible.

Tears rolled down my cheeks, and I squeezed my eyes shut before shifting on the bed. I'd been lying awake for the past hour, rethinking that evening again and again. Since the breakup, I'd been going over every minute of that night, desperately searching for a clue. Maybe I'd missed something that could have provided me with an explanation.

Soren leaving me that way didn't make any sense, but then again, most of the things Soren did made no sense. Perhaps, just like his obsession with counting pictures on a wall, I was an obsession, too, until I wasn't.

But whenever I came up with some sort of a reasonable answer as to why he'd ended things, I immediately discounted it. My heart and brain didn't align, not in the slightest, and accepting we were over seemed impossible.

It was also his cruelty that took me by surprise. I knew Soren was a fierce man who eliminated anything or anyone who stood in his way, but never me. I was his little Sparrow, or so I thought, until the day he cut me so completely out of his life. *Our* life. We weren't just a casual hookup. We lived together. I depended on him by every means possible. We shared a *world* until he decided he didn't want to share anymore, and I was kicked out. And while he had left me with a lot of money, I refused to take a penny because this was never about that.

Since returning to LA, I must have called him a thousand times. But none of my calls or texts were ever answered. By now, I'd stopped trying.

Despair would be the best word to describe my current state, where I didn't know what to do with my life. I was twenty-five years old, with a degree I had no intention of using, no savings, and no actual friends.

Yes, Kai was back in my life, but calling him a friend felt wrong, especially after he jerked me off until I came wrapped in his strong embrace.

Being the coward that I was, I'd avoided Kai for the last few days. He was

probably the one thing that gave me comfort lately, but of course, we had to screw it up with hot, quick, spontaneous sex that flipped my stomach whenever I remembered it.

The sensation of Kai's muscular body pressed against mine in the cold water with his hot breath on my neck and his talented hands around my throbbing dick still got me worked up. Even now, my eager dick twitched with the fresh memory I tried repressing.

With a grunt, I flipped to my stomach and kicked the mattress with my legs. I was getting real fucking tired from how my body had functioned the last few days. How could one be so miserable and yet so horny? But it wasn't just sex that I craved; it was the feeling of being wanted. The way Kai looked at me with those nostalgic eyes shifted something inside me. His affection valued me, and I found myself craving his attention. It had nothing to do with him and everything to do with my fucked-up brain that fed off other people's approval.

Voices had been coming from downstairs since the early morning, and finally giving in to my curiosity, I'd decided to get out of my room and go see what the fuss was all about. But first, I had to shower.

Brushing my teeth, I moved a hand over the mirror to clean it from the steam. I always showered in boiling water, which turned the room into a sauna. Looking at my reflection, I noticed the stubble coating my face. Without stopping to think, I reached for my electric shaver when it occurred to me. Why did I even need to bother? I'd never cared about body hair and only ever shaved or waxed because of Soren, who loved my body smooth.

But Soren isn't here anymore.

Opening the drawer under the sink, I tossed the shaver in and slammed it shut. It wasn't like I would suddenly grow a full beard, but a bit of body hair never killed anyone. Ready to leave the bathroom, I glanced back at the drawer with pursed lips. *Maybe I should shave, after all?*

Kai

"I'm not making you a frittata," I grunted at Paris after putting a plate of eggs and bacon in front of him.

"But I want a frittata!" the little bastard bit back while pushing the plate away.

Angry, I placed a flat hand on the table and pointed at him. "Listen to me, you little—"

"What's the matter?" Aiden joined us in the kitchen right as my annoyingly

spoiled seven-year-old poked his tongue at me. I loved my kid to death, but cooking him food was becoming one hell of a hustle with his weird cravings.

"Nothing," I hissed, narrowing my eyes at Paris, who gave me the same look in return. "My kid here thinks he's getting a frittata for breakfast." I rubbed a hand over my scruff. "How the fuck do you even know what a frittata is?"

Paris giggled, pointing his finger at me. "A dollar in the curse jar, *Dad*."

The little devil.

"Answer the question, brat."

"I saw it on TV."

I huffed. "And how do you know it's even tasty?"

Paris shrugged and then picked a beautiful strip of crispy bacon from his plate. "It looked tasty." He took a bite. "And Mom said you can cook me anything."

Of course it was Zoe's idea. That woman thought I had all the time in the world to cook a child fucking frittatas.

"Fine, we'll make frittatas for lunch. Happy?"

Paris answered me with a big smile before he finally began eating. With a sigh, I half turned to look at Aiden, who seemed amused by the situation.

"So what are your plans for the day?" he asked, and Paris yelled, "Surfing," before I could utter a word.

"What he said." Turning from them, I walked over to the sink and began doing the dishes.

My first idea was offering Ash to join us and maybe have another zoo date or some shit, but after screwing things up with him, it was no longer an option. Just remembering what an idiot I was boiled my blood. On the same day Aiden had warned me to take things slow and to think before acting, I did the exact opposite.

Why did I have to jerk him off? Why couldn't I bite my tongue and keep my greedy hands to myself? *Because the second you knew he was thinking about him, you couldn't take it.* True. Whenever Ash wore that sad expression on his face, one that told me he was thinking about *him*, I couldn't hold back from doing something. My body tensed and ached to shake him out of those thoughts. It physically hurt me to know he was sulking, thinking about that piece of shit. It also pissed me off, knowing he was constantly thinking of a different man while being with me.

"Fuck," I cursed as I dropped the glass I was washing, and it broke. Ignoring Paris's shout about another dollar in his "curse jar," I began picking up glass from the sink. A sharp pain pierced me, and I hissed under my breath as blood began dripping from a cut on my index finger. *Great,* fucking great.

Immediately turning off the tap, I grabbed a paper towel and wrapped it around my finger. But seeing how blood already soaked through it, I knew it was deeper than a slight cut.

“What’s wrong?” Aiden asked, trying to reach for my hand.

I didn’t even realize I had pushed away from him until our eyes met, and I felt awkward. *Shit.*

“Keep an eye on Paris for a second, ’kay? I’ll go upstairs to bandage it.”

Blood began dripping onto the floor, so I quickly went to the second-floor bathroom, remembering I had the first aid kit stored there. The first door in the hall belonged to Ash’s room. It had been locked since my fuckup on the beach. Thinking about how much I missed cuddling him each night formed a knot in my stomach, and with that, I pushed the bathroom door open.

A blast of steam hit my face the second I opened the door, and I rubbed my eyes before I got a clear, vivid image of Ash shaving while leaning over the sink with a towel knotted dangerously low around his narrowed hips. *Help me, Jesus*. It was a perfect replication of some gay porn I liked, where one guy walks in on his roommate in the middle of a shave. Things got heated up, and in the next scene, he was boning his friend over the bathroom sink.

If only that were the case now.

“S-Shit,” I spat, realizing I was staring. “Didn’t know you were in here.”

Ash locked eyes with me before they latched on to the bloodied paper towel.

“What happened to you?” He put the electric razor down and rushed to grab my wrist.

Still overwhelmed by the heat, I didn’t say a word and allowed him to pull me into the small bathroom.

He closed the toilet lid and then forced me to sit on it. “Let me see,” he said and took my hand in his.

“Don’t worry, Ashy. It’s just a small cut.” I flashed him a crooked smile while he studied the cut with pursed lips.

He let go of me and moved to fumble with the drawers, his sexy body on full display for me to enjoy as he did, until he pulled out the first aid kit.

He kneeled on the floor in front of me as he placed the kit beside him. The position gave me all sorts of dirty ideas that proved to me, once more, how weak I was. But what could a man say? Ash’s face was mere inches from my cock while he was treating my wound, half-naked, drops of water sliding from his wet hair to his chest all the way down to his—“*Ouch*!” I hissed as he squeezed my finger.

He chuckled. “I thought it was just a *small* cut,” he mocked me, using my own words to do so.

“Small yet painful,” I huffed, holding in another hiss when he sprayed the wound with alcohol and it burned. To distract myself, I focused my eyes on his body. He was lean yet toned as fuck, each muscle beautifully shaped. He was also smooth all over, with not a single hair around. In high school, we had to get our hair removed because of the swimming team. Had he kept doing that? I hoped not because I loved finding my way around a well-groomed bush. There was just something sexy about pubes peeking out, letting you know a surprise was waiting for you downstairs.

“How did you cut yourself?” Ash asked, thankfully cutting my line of thought.

Instead of telling Ash I’d got mad thinking about him, I told a white lie. “Aiden and Paris distracted me, and I dropped a glass.”

“Oh, so the noises I heard were Paris?” He looked up from the bandage he’d finished wrapping around my finger and met my eyes.

“Yeah. I have him for the weekend,” I said, desperately trying to distract myself from how tenderly Ash was holding my hand, his soft skin caressing mine. I doubted he even noticed what he was doing.

“What do you say, Doctor, am I going to make it?”

The corner of his lips quirked up. “I think you’ll survive.”

“Yeah?”

He moved to stand up.

Still sitting, I looked up at him.

“Yeah,” he said.

We held still in this position, lost in each other’s stare, until he visibly swallowed.

“Kai.” His voice came out hoarse and weak.

“I’m sorry about what happened,” I cut in before he could say anything, standing up while I did. “Seriously, Ash. I don’t know what took over me that night, and I’m sorry for screwing up.”

I was only slightly taller than him, and he held my gaze before looking down at the floor.

“And I’m sorry for avoiding you the last few days… I didn’t mean to.”

“Don’t apologize for it,” I said, still looking at him.

“It’s just that—” He bit on the tip of his nail. “—I really need a friend right now.”

Grabbing his hand, I lowered it down. “I’ll be whatever you want me to be.”

Tangling his fingers with mine, he nodded.

“Thank you.” He stepped closer, and without stopping to think about it, I pulled him into a hug.

Ash didn’t resist and quickly wrapped two arms around me. He wasn’t a small guy, yet he felt so fragile in my embrace, and I tightened my hold. I pressed my cheek against his head, his damp hair wetting me. With my eyes closed, I enjoyed the fresh scent of his shampoo while slowly tracing my fingers along his naked back. Nothing about this hug was friendly, and I’d bet my money Ash thought the same, yet he didn’t nudge away and kept hugging me back.

“What are you two doing?”

Startled, we both pulled back and stared at Paris, who was standing by the open door with a naughty look on his face.

“Ash helped me treat my wound.” I coughed, trying to clear my dry throat.

Paris narrowed his eyes.

“But he hugged you.” The little devil smirked. *God*. He definitely got that from his mother. “Did he kiss your boo-boo?”

Ash nearly choked on the spot and began coughing. I patted his back, trying to help him get some air back into his lungs while my kid laughed. *I’m glad he found the situation amusing.*

“To be clear, he’s referring to my cut,” I whispered in Ash’s ear, then frowned at Paris. “Why are you up here and not downstairs eating your breakfast?”

“I’m already done,” he answered innocently while shifting his weight and moving around. “I want to go surfing.”

“Fine,” I grunted. “Wait for me downstairs. I’ll be there in a minute.”

Paris glanced between Ash and me, a knowing smile on his face before he dashed out. He might be seven, but he was one heck of a smart kid that nothing, and I mean nothing, ever escaped him.

“Sorry about that,” I mumbled, rubbing the back of my head, already expecting Ash to use this encounter as an excuse to bolt, when he surprised me by asking if he could join.

“Seriously?” I raised one skeptical brow his way after he asked if he could surf with us.

“Y-Yeah. I think it’s about time I get back in the water.”

“Fuck yeah.” I wrapped an arm around his shoulder and gave him a proper shake. “Now you’re talkin’!”

Ash smiled, putting a hand on my chest.

“J-Just let me get dressed first, okay?”

This day is turning out to be good.

“Sure, I’ll wait for you downstairs.”

Ash answered me with a short nod before he turned around and walked into

the hall. Following him out, I eyed his firm ass and bit my lips.

Real fucking good.

CHAPTER Thirty—One

Kai

"Come on, Ashy, hurry up. The engine's running," I called loudly, one arm lazily hanging out my Jeep's window as I waited for him to come so we could get on the road. The back of the car was already packed with everything we'd need for our little camping trip, yet Ash was still in the house, looking for who knew what.

I was the one who suggested we go camping after Ash mentioned he missed nature. He didn't hesitate before agreeing and even looked eager for the trip. Ash had been much more outgoing for the past couple of weeks, and I was confident it had to do with him being back in the water. Ever since that Saturday he'd surfed with Paris and me, Ash hardly left the ocean. He spent his days in the water, catching waves and riding tubes. Morning, noon, or evening, you name it. Ash was surfing around the clock, each surf bringing a bit of his old self back to life.

Finally, the man of the hour stumbled out the front door with more bags hanging around his arms.

"Sorry," he panted, dropping everything in the back seat. "I just thought we might need a few more things."

"A *few*?" I glanced back. "You brought the whole house, Ashy. We're only going for two days."

"One can never be too prepared," he answered with a cute smile while opening the passenger door.

"Prepared for what? Seven years of drought?"

"Oh!" He stopped in his tracks. "I forgot the snacks!"

"We have enough snacks already. Just get your ass in here—*fuck*," I hissed after he tossed his duffle bag on my lap, the weight crashing my balls, then ran back to the house.

When did he become this organized?

With a grunt, I moved his bag to the seat beside me and rubbed my sore

groin. At this rate, we'd never leave. Tapping the steering wheel with my fingers, I patiently waited for his return when Ash's phone rang. The ring kept going, so I fished the phone out of his bag, ready to switch it to silent, when I saw the caller's name on the screen.

Soren.

My heart paused, and I stared at the screen with a deep frown as unsettledness took over me, forming a knot in my gut. In a split second, my shock turned into anger. Why was this fucker calling Ash all of a sudden? I gripped the phone harder, gritting my teeth as it kept ringing. Finally, it stopped, but then came a text.

> **Hey, I know it's been a while, but could we talk? There's a lot I need to explain.**

Fuck no, you can't talk was what I wanted to type him in return but didn't. This fucker really had the audacity to suddenly call Ash. But at least his text confirmed to me that Soren hadn't tried contacting Ash before. Which made what I was about to do next a whole lot easier.

I quickly glanced up to see if Ash was on his way back. The coast was clear, so I typed in Ash's code—his mom's birthday—and unlocked his phone. I then went to his contact list, my finger hovering over the names until I spotted Soren's. Without stopping to reconsider, I blocked the fucker's number and then deleted his last call and text. I wasn't about to stand by and watch this scum crawl back into Ash's life, not when our relationship was finally going in the right direction.

After I was done, I carefully placed the phone inside Ash's bag just as he came out of the house, his arms carrying snacks and whatnot. He looked so cute and beautiful that not a single bit of guilt burdened me over what I'd just done.

Quite the opposite.

I felt unbelievable satisfaction.

Ash opened the car door and moved his bag before sitting down.

"Got our snacks?" I asked with a teasing smile.

"Yeah." He grinned back, already pulling out a bag of BBQ chips. "This is your favorite, right?"

Ignoring the chips, I focused on him. Moving my hand to the back of his nape, I squeezed him tight. "You're damn right about that."

Finding a spot isolated enough to set up our camp took some time, but after a long day of hiking, I couldn't be more grateful for the effort. The two of us sitting by a lake while I was cooking dinner was what dreams were made of. I wasn't about to let Ash eat canned food, so I went as far as bringing camping stoves, an iron pan, and one juicy T-bone we'd devour soon enough.

Now, waiting for the food to cook, we had some time to chill.

"I like the scruff." My knuckle brushed against Ash's soft stubble, his skin warm from sitting in the sun.

Ash placed his hand over where I'd just touched him, his cheeks red, and not because of the afternoon heat. "You do?" He chuckled. "It makes me feel shabby."

"Not at all. It adds roughness to your face, and it's sexy."

He nudged my shoulder. "Shut up."

Laughing, I flipped the steak, the hiss of the meat roasting like music to my ears. Satisfied, I picked up a soda from the cooler and opened it with my teeth before taking a long gulp. Checking out the bottle, I twisted my lips. It tasted good, but not as much as a cold beer would have.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing." I shook my head and put the bottle on the ground beside me. "I just wish this was a beer."

"Kai." His face turned serious.

"Relax, Ashy. It's only a joke." I poked his cute nose.

Brushing me off, he frowned. "There's a sliver of truth behind every joke."

"You sound like Aiden now," I pointed out, and his brows pulled close.

"Don't change the subject."

Ah, I forgot how determined he could get when he wanted something.

"Fine," I sighed. "I do miss drinking and getting high, but it's part of staying clean. You know? Sobriety is one heck of a bitch but totally worth it."

Ash pressed his lips together and nodded.

"What do you do when you feel like using again?"

"Remember why I got sober to begin with," I said, thinking about my kid.

"And if that doesn't work?"

I looked at him with raised brows. "What's up with all the questions?"

He shrugged. "I'm just curious."

Scratching my chin, I hummed. "Well, when that doesn't work, I find ways to distract myself."

"Such as?"

I snorted. He was being *really* curious today.

"Working out, surfing, fucking." I glanced at him with that last one. Our eyes

met, and he quickly looked away. *So damn cute*. “Why? Wanna keep me distracted?”

“Fuck off.” He shoved me again. “I was just being curious. That’s all.” He stood up. “I’m going to get us plates so we can eat.”

Glancing back at our food, which seemed almost ready, I nodded. “Sounds like a good idea.”



After we were done with dinner, Ash went for a short swim in the lake while I prepared the campfire for the night. It was already completely dark outside, and every once in a while, a wolf howled from afar. I regretted not bringing Pacha, Ash’s pit bull, with us because those howls were scary as fuck. The park website clearly said it was safe, but in searching for an isolated spot, we did get off the road. *Well, let’s hope no one gets eaten by a wolf tonight.*

“It’s a shame you didn’t join me.” Ash smiled, walking toward me while drying his hair with a towel. “The water felt great.”

I pushed another stick into the fire, and it crackled, sending sparks flying into the air while I enjoyed the sight of his naked torso. “Someone needed to build a campfire.”

“I forgot how much I love the smell of burning wood.” He smiled, then sat on the chair beside me. Rubbing his palms together, he brought them closer to the fire, letting out a soft groan of pleasure.

He didn’t bother to put on clothes after his swim and instead kept the swim trunks on. Golden skin painted with warm colors, pouty lips, and flushed cheeks, with long eyelashes that brushed against them every time he blinked—Ash was fucking gorgeous, and my heart fluttered at his appearance.

“Want some s’mores?” I asked, and he moved his eyes to me.

“Yes, please.”

I grabbed the marshmallow bag and tossed it at him. “Since I cooked dinner, dessert’s on you.”

Ash frowned, hardly catching the bag in time. “But I’ll ruin them. You know I suck at cooking.”

I laughed. “Nobody can fuck up s’mores.”

Twenty minutes later, Ash proved me wrong.

“I told you I’d ruin them,” he grunted while holding what was once a pillowy marshmallow and now turned into burned goo.

“Nah, it’s not that bad.” I tried seeing if there was a part that wasn’t burned

for me to taste.

“Really?”

He sounded so cute that I braced myself and my taste buds and took a bite.

“So, how is it?” he asked, eyes full of hope.

It tasted like shit, but I forced myself to swallow before giving him a fake smile. “G-Great.” I coughed, clearing my throat.

He laughed. “Just admit that it tastes like crap.”

“It’s like bad sex. It’s okay while you’re at it, but the aftermath leaves you with an awful taste.”

Ash gaped at me, amusement dancing in his eyes before looking away. “I wouldn’t know. Never had bad sex in my life before.”

Shocked by his statement, I nudged his shoulder. “Fuck off.”

“I’m serious,” he chuckled, putting his burned s’more away.

“Not even one lousy fuck?” I studied him with a skeptical brow.

“Nope.” He licked his finger clean, then side-eyed me. The fucker was teasing me.

“Did that prick have some sort of a magic dick?”

Surprisingly, Ash didn’t shut back into himself with my comment and instead snorted. “Not going to answer that.”

“Bet my money I’m a better fuck than him,” I muttered under my breath.

“So prove it,” Ash said.

Unsure I heard right, I turned to look at him and was shocked to find him staring back at me, his face a mask of seriousness.

“What?” I breathed out the word, my heart rate increasing incredibly high.

“If you say you’re a better fuck than he is, I say, prove it.”

He sounded serious, but my brain still found it hard to believe. It was simply too good to be true, so I asked, “You’re serious right now?”

Rather than answering me, Ash got up and walked back to our tent. He unzipped the bug net, but before getting in, he glanced at me over his shoulder.

“Join me, and you’ll find out.”

CHAPTER Thirty—Two

Kai

My dick all but turned to steel with Ash's words, and like an idiot, I struggled to get up, nearly falling into the campfire before dashing toward the tent. I'd never been this eager for sex in my life before, not even the first time I had it, but at this moment, I was sure I'd lose my mind if I didn't stick my dick in him in the near future.

Bending down, I got inside the tent and zipped it closed after me.

With my cock pressing hard against my cargos and my lips dry with the thirst to taste Ash, I turned to face him. He was on his back, pushing himself up on two elbows while looking at me. The only coverage on his body was those damn small swim trunks I wanted to rip off with my teeth.

Thanks to the electric lantern he'd insisted on bringing, I could see every curve and bulge of his muscles, and I wetted my lips. Sitting on my knees, I got rid of my shirt, my hands already going down to my fly when Ash stretched his leg until his foot pressed against my heaving chest.

"Hold on, Cowboy," he said, pushing a bit harder.

My dick twitched with how sexy this move was, and I let out a low groan. Ash smirked, noticing my reaction.

The bastard.

"Couple of things before we get to it." He lifted two fingers in the air. "One, this is just sex."

"Ash—"

"Just sex, Kai." He repeated himself, face serious. "I'm not interested in anything beyond that."

It wasn't ideal, but at least the idea of just sex took the pressure off me. That way, I couldn't screw things up. Understanding I was absolutely fine with this term, I smirked, tilting my head back.

"Fine, what else."

"Two." He dropped one finger down. "I love being told what to do. It gets

me off.” He spoke with a straight face. “So be filthy with me. Use me for your own pleasure. Make a mess out of me.”

It was the first time I’d heard Ash, my sweet and innocent Ashy, say such dirty things, and it was fucking amazing.

Wrapping my fingers around his ankle, I grinned at him, then moved my hand down my torso and unzipped my pants. Going commando, my cock sprang free, and Ash’s eyes locked on it.

“So what are you waiting for?” I drawled, gripping the base of my cock. “Lie the fuck down.”

Ash’s eyes darkened before he slowly lowered himself down. I got rid of my pants and then moved to hover above him. Holding myself in a push-up position, I aligned my hard dick with his face, my dripping tip brushing over his tempting lips.

“Open up,” I rasped, my muscles tensing with anticipation.

With his eyes facing my groin, Ash parted his lips.

“Stick out that tongue.”

He did, and I grinned like a maniac because, *shit*, he was so obedient. I then thrust my hips forward, pushing my cock into his mouth in a hard shove. He didn’t gag, and so I thrust deeper until I hit the back of his throat.

“Fuck me, who knew my best friend’s mouth was made to take a cock so perfectly?” I grinned, thrusting in and out of his mouth, my balls slapping against his chin as I used his throat as my personal sex toy.

With his lips stretched around my dick and his hands on my thighs, he let out a choked groan.

“Fuck, you’re a little slut, aren’t you?”

He moaned around me, and I held myself still with my dick buried down his throat. I knew he couldn’t breathe, but that was the fun part. His fingers dug into my flesh, and he gagged around me. I withdrew at once, and Ash gasped for air, but I didn’t let him rest. I was pumped as fuck, my dick harder than ever before.

Grabbing his shoulder, I flipped him to his stomach and pulled his trunks down, revealing one hell of a gorgeous ass.

“Look at that,” I growled, ghosting my palm over his flesh. “What a fine little ass you’ve got there.”

“K-Kai.” He panted my name beautifully, so I rewarded him by slapping his perky butt, the sound mixing with his deep moan.

“Get on all fours for me,” I said, and he did.

“F-Fuck,” he cried once I grabbed his heavy dick, which hung between his firm thighs, begging to be milked.

“You work out a lot, don’t you?” With his dick in my fist, I took my time,

eyeing his perfect body. “Got such nice muscles. Bet all the ladies in the gym are drooling over you.”

He tried moving his hips to get the friction he so desperately craved, but I only squeezed him harder until he groaned with frustration.

“If only they knew you only like getting it and not giving. Right?” I snorted, my voice dripping with the self-satisfaction of having him this needy.

He glanced at me over his shoulder, face red, eyes glossy. “Kai, please.”

“Please, what, *Ashy*?” I pretended to frown, still not moving my hand.

“My cock,” he breathed out, his voice hoarse. “Touch it, make me come.”

“What’s the rush?”

His face twisted with pain, actual pain, gifting me with such a divine expression. But it was still not enough, and only after his body physically shivered did I begin stroking his rigid cock. Ash cried loudly, not being modest about letting his voice out, while I stroked him fast and hard, using his precum as lube.

“You’re creating such a mess,” I laughed and moved my free hand to his ass. “But I bet you can’t come without having this pounded.” I circled his pink hole with my finger, my mouth going dry at the sight. “I’m right, aren’t I?” I pressed my thumb to his entrance. “You can’t come unless you got a dick deep down that pretty little hole of yours.”

“F-Fuck,” he cried, dropping his head down.

Just as I imagined, he was smooth down there as well. It was definitely hot, but I wouldn’t mind a bit of hair. “Jesus, Ashy, even your balls are smooth as fuck.” I licked my lips, loving how heavy and full his sack was. *Yeah*, I had a thing for my best friend’s nuts, apparently. “You shaved just for me?” I nudged his balls, and he swore under his breath, his body quivering with need.

I was just as desperate to be inside him, so I dropped my hands from around his body and reached for my duffle bag. While packing, I’d allowed myself to dream of something like this happening and packed a bottle of lube and some condoms just in case. Praising myself for my smart decision, I pulled the supplies out and aligned myself behind him.

“What do you say, babe. Want me to fuck you?”

He nodded, eagerly pushing his ass in my direction.

“Yeah? Want your bestie’s cock?”

“P-Please,” he cried.

“Well, who am I to refuse, then?” I flicked the cap open and poured some lube into my hand, using my fingers to rub it over his perfect hole.

“I-I haven’t done it in a while,” he panted as I began playing with his ass. “S-So, take it slow.”

“Slow?” I burst out with a quick laugh. “I’ve been waiting too fucking long to own that ass, Ashy. Nothing’s going to be slow tonight.”

He lowered his head down and fisted the sheets. Loving this sight of him, I grabbed his thighs and forced him to spread his legs further apart for better access. He cried as I pushed my finger in and moaned when I added another. I was as careful as I could be with how much my body ached to fuck him and added a third finger only after he was ready.

By now, with three of my fingers knuckle-deep inside him, Ash was ready. Gasping and crying while pressing his head against the sleeping bag, I never knew my best friend could be this sexy. But then again, I did see him getting fucked once. The images from back then still lived rent-free inside my head. Thankfully, that bastard Soren was out of the picture, and now, it was my turn to take ownership of this ass. With that thought, I rubbered up, poured a bit more lube on my dick, then brought the tip to his ass. Ash gasped once I began sinking into him, his muscles tensing with each inch I pushed in.

“Shit, man, you’re tight as fuck,” I hissed through gritted teeth, my hands holding on to his narrow hips while I plunged into his body.

He was the tightest hole I’d ever stuck my dick in, and my body burned with the sensation. My only regret was wearing a condom, but at least it helped me to not bust a nut the second I put it in.

I gave myself a few moments to get used to the warm walls wrapped around me before I began thrusting. Then, at a pace I didn’t know I was capable of, I drilled in and out his abused hole until Ash was incapable of pronouncing full words. It was all whimpers and cries and moans of pleasure that mixed with the sounds of me pounding his ass.

With my bottom lip tucked under my teeth, I roamed my eyes along his strong back all the way down to where his ass sucked my cock in.

“I need to take a photo of this,” I rasped, wishing my phone was nearby. “But we’ll do it next time.”

“N-Next time?”

Gripping Ash’s hair, I turned his head back and lowered myself until I got access to his lips.

“You bet there’s gonna be a next time.” I kissed him, and he accepted me with parted lips. With my body pressed to him, I fucked his ass and devoured his mouth. It was so fucking hot, from the reek of sex to the sounds he let out, and I was losing my freaking mind.

I brought my hand to his front and gripped his dick. His ass tightened around my cock, and I cursed into the kiss. *His reactions are too sexy*.

“K-Kai,” he cried out while I moved my fist along his shaft, squeezing him

tighter around the tip.

“Yeah, babe, cry my name like you’d die for it.”

He shivered beneath me, his body tensing, and I took it as a cue to go faster. I matched the pace of my fist with my thrusts until he couldn’t hold it in anymore and burst. Hot cum coated my fists, and I collected it all until his dick had nothing more to give me. I quickly drew back, pulled my cock out of his ass, and got rid of the condom.

“On your back. Now.”

Once he lay on his back, I moved up until his head was locked between my thighs. Using his cum, I rubbed myself off in slow strokes so I’d get to enjoy the sight of him beneath me for as long as I lasted. His face was red and his eyes glassy with unshed tears. He looked like a pure mess, and when he parted those perfect lips, it was the end of me. The tension in my body was all but gone as I erupted at once, coming harder than ever before all over his face. I painted him like the fucking *Mona Lisa*, as I’d imagined doing so many times before. My jizz landed on his lips, cheek, and eyes, and pleased with my work, I groaned with satisfaction.

I’d just fucked my best friend, and it was the best thing ever.

Ash panted heavily, his chest going up and down with each breath, as I rolled off him and grabbed my T-shirt from the ground.

“There you go,” I said, trying to clean his face. But he didn’t allow me to take care of him. Instead, he took the shirt from me and did it himself.

Fine with it, I lay down with one arm tucked under my head.

“That was hot,” he said.

“Extremely hot.” I placed my hand on his naked skin and began caressing him softly. What could I say? Now, I wanted to cuddle.

I shifted closer to him and tossed my arm around his waist. “Who knew you were such a slut, Ashy,” I joked, and he laughed.

“Just go to sleep,” he grunted, patting my arm.

This mind-blowing sex only proved to me what I already knew. We were meant for each other. I mean, look at how compatible we were.

Whatever we did tonight was the beginning of a wonderful arrangement. Sexually satisfied and physically exhausted, I fell asleep, a huge smile glued to my face.

CHAPTER Thirty—Three

Kai

The mere sight of Ash splayed on my bed, his ass stretched and ready, glossed with my spit after I'd rimmed him, was enough to make me come. Yet, knowing how much better it would feel once I was buried deep inside that tight hole, I held myself back from coming.

"Can't we skip on the condom?" I asked, giving myself a lazy stroke while moving on top of him.

Ash glanced at me over his shoulder. "Did you sleep with anyone else recently?"

With my cock in my fist, I frowned at him. "Is that supposed to be a trick question?" I moved to hover above him, my hands on each side of his body. "Because you said I can sleep with whoever."

Ash flipped to his back, so now he was staring back at me. "I know I did," he said, cupping my face in his palms. "That's not why I'm asking."

"You know I always put on a condom with others."

"It doesn't matter."

Dropping my head, I sighed. "Fine, I'll wear one."

"Let me put it on for you." He reached for the condom before I could and opened it with his teeth. Moving his hands between us, he rolled it down my hard length, his fingers stroking me in the process. Once done, he looked up to meet my hungry eyes. Unable to hold back, I grabbed his throat and pinned him down before taking over his lips.

Now covered up, I used my other hand to lift his leg, then slid my cock inside his tight hole. The pressure felt so good, and we groaned into the kiss that slowly turned sloppy. Sucking on his tongue, I simultaneously rolled my hips, rubbing his prostate with each thrust. We'd been fucking for the past couple of weeks, and by now, I knew all the methods to make his body quiver with pleasure.

Pulling back slowly, I then bottomed out in one go, forcing him to cry out

loudly before repeating the action. Ash wrapped his arms around me, begging for me to go faster. No matter how many people I fucked, no one came close to him. To how sexy and brilliant he was. To how hot I felt when he clung to me like his life depended on it.

Ash's moans, tears, and sweat pulled me deeper into the sensation of his body, and hungry to have a taste, I sank my teeth into his neck, biting him hard enough to leave my mark.

"I-It will leave a bruise," he cried, holding on to me harder.

"Good," I rasped, my lips brushing the fresh wound before I straightened up, grabbed his waist, and slammed into him so hard I was scared I'd break him.

Ash was already rubbing his cock with fast, frantic strokes. With his eyes closed and lips parted, he moved his hand faster until he erupted, hot jolts of cum shooting all over his chest and abs. Flushed skin, pouty lips, and hair dampened with sweat—he looked like a mess, and the mere sight gave me that last push. Already feeling the tension of my climax building in my lower back, all I needed were a few more thrusts.

"Fuckkkk," I groaned loudly as I came, shooting my load into the condom, wishing it wasn't there to stop me from filling his ass with my cum. My body shuddered with the force of my release until I had nothing left, and exhausted, I dropped on top of Ash, crushing him with my weight, my softening cock still stuck in his ass.

"You're heavy," he laughed, trying to push me away.

"Nah," I panted. "Let's stay this way a bit longer."

"I need to wash up."

He always did.

Whenever we were done fucking, Ash always hurried to get cleaned up. Even after intense sex, where I tried to take care of him, he refused, saying it was a part of keeping this thing between us casual. In his mind, the aftercare was too emotionally dependent. Did it bother me? Maybe. But then again, we did sleep together almost every night. He might not want me to wash my cum off him, but he had no problem being my little spoon.

"At least pull out of me."

"Why?" I pouted. "Never heard of cock-warming—"

Three knocks on the door interrupted my speech, and Ash pushed me off him just in time to hear Aiden speak.

"Dinner's ready, guys. If you want to join me."

"We'll be right there," Ash called back, already getting up and looking for a towel.

Despite wanting to stay in bed, I also got up. Rolling the condom off my soft

dick, I tied it up and then tossed it in the small trash can. “Think he heard us?” I asked, glancing at Ash over my shoulder.

“Probably,” he sighed. “So embarrassing.”

“Why? It’s not like we’re keeping us a secret.”

“There’s no us.” He couldn’t have sounded colder even if he tried. “I’m going to take a shower,” he added and slipped out of the room without lingering another moment.

Okay, maybe it did bother me a little bit, but only when he gave me the cold shoulder as he did just now. It wasn’t like we weren’t together almost every day. When I wasn’t at work and he wasn’t surfing, we were pretty much glued to each other. It was fun, like the good old days, only that now we fucked. A lot. But not as much as I would have liked us to, hence why Ash gave me the pass to fuck on the side. It was a sweet deal, especially when I knew he didn’t fuck others. Was it fair? Not really, but then again, he *could* fuck others if he wanted to… but since the idea of another man even glancing his way pissed me off, I’d rather deny that possibility.

A few minutes later, Ash came back into the room, all showered and groomed.

“Don’t you want to wash up, too?” he asked after I put on a pair of sweats.

“Nah. I want to smell like you for a bit longer.”

He visibly shuddered at that. “That’s disgusting.”

Maybe, but who gave a fuck?

Downstairs, the dining table was already set. Aiden even pulled out the tablecloth he only used on special days. “What’s up with that?” I pointed over the set table.

“I wanted tonight to be nice,” Aiden said after putting a plate of roasted beef on the table.

“And why’s that?” Ash asked, pouring himself a glass of water.

Aiden sat down first, then waved for us to join him. “Have a seat, and we’ll talk.”



“When are you planning to leave?” The crease between Ash’s brows deepened the longer he waited for Aiden to respond.

Ash was on edge, same as me, after Aiden just announced he’d decided to go on a one-year trip around the world. From the look in Aiden’s eyes and the sound of his voice, I figured this trip would drag longer than a year, but I didn’t

point it out. Not with how nervous Ash seemed.

“Next week.”

“So soon?” Ash’s face fell.

“Yeah…” Aiden pulled his shoulder. “What’s the point in waiting, right?”

“Why now?” Ash asked, ignoring Aiden’s words. “I mean, is it because of me?”

Why would he even think that?

“Of course not, Chief.” Aiden smiled at him softly. “I always wanted to travel the world, and I figured that now that I’ve sold my business, it’s the right time.” He then glanced at me before moving his eyes back to Ash. “Besides, you two seem to have it all sorted out together. So I feel much calmer leaving, knowing you have each other.”

So he did know about us.

“Aiden—”

“It’s okay, Chief. You’ve got no reason to worry.”

An awkward silence took over the table. Hating the tension, I placed my arm behind Ash’s chair and leaned back. “I’m happy for you, old man. Just make sure to call us, yeah?”

It would be weird not having Aiden around. I mean, the guy had been there my whole life. Yet, he had every right to go after his dreams, and I wasn’t about to stop him from doing that. Apparently, neither was Ash, who got up from his seat and rounded the table.

“I’m already missing you,” he said, hugging his uncle.

“You’re going to be fine, Champ.” Aiden patted Ash’s shoulder.

They hugged each other for a while longer before Ash pulled back. As he did, I caught Aiden glancing at me. The second our eyes met, he looked away. It was… odd. And I didn’t know what to make of it. Could it be that Aiden wasn’t telling us the whole truth behind his decision to leave? *Probably*. And I had a feeling it had something to do with *me*. Yet, I wasn’t about to admit it, not to myself and, mostly, not to Ash.

CHAPTER Thirty-Four

Kai

After I finished texting with Zoe about when I'd get to have Paris, I checked the time. Ash and Aiden had left for the airport about thirty minutes ago, meaning it would take at least an hour before Ash came back.

Aiden wasn't joking last week when he'd told us about his plan to travel the world. It came as a shock, but despite the fact we were going to miss him, we were both excited for the old man.

I think Aiden wouldn't have done it if it hadn't been for two things. The first being Ash's breakup. Aiden wanted to make sure Ash was getting better and to wait until Ash was starting to heal before leaving. The second was the passing of his dog, Seb. Sadly, we had to tell Seb goodbye a month ago. He passed of old age, but it didn't ease the pain. Poor Aiden was heartbroken over his best friend passing. I think the grief was what pushed him to go on this adventure. Some people saw dogs as pets, but not the Sage family. For Aiden and Ash, their dogs were their life.

Pacha was also sad since Seb's death, but the vet told Ash it was a normal reaction. They'd formed a small pack, and now he was all alone. Right now, he was sitting on the couch beside me while giving me his best puppy eyes. Feeling sorry for the cute pup, I took him for a walk.

As always, the dog got me running after him on the sand until my lungs burned. I was in shape, but jogging definitely wasn't my favorite activity. We walked around the beach for a while until I decided it was time to go home and start making dinner. At some point on our way back, Pacha began losing it. Howling into the air and spinning around himself, he tried to get off the leash. That pit bull was strong AF, and he managed to get free.

"Hey, come back here!" I shouted, already chasing after him. *Ash will kill me if something happens to him.*

Thankfully, Pacha ran in the direction of the house. Maybe Ash had returned earlier than I thought? Pacha often reacted with excitement when someone he

loved came home.

I switched from running to walking, catching my breath while climbing up the wooden stairs in our backyard. Pacha's barks were coming from the front of the house, so I rounded it. Shock or, more likely, rage took over me at the sight of Soren crouched on the ground while petting Pacha, who was all too eager to see him.

What. The. Actual. Fuck?

My muscles tensed as anger slowly simmered through me, and I tossed the leash on the ground. Soren hadn't noticed me, but that changed the second I called his name, hate oozing through my voice.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" I hissed while striding toward him.

Slowly getting up, he moved a hand over his pants to clean them of fur and dirt. He looked as pretentious as I remembered, with a slim, tight suit and a stick up his ass.

"Good afternoon," he said back just as I reached him.

"Fuck off," I snarled in his face. "Better speak up before I punch your fucking face, asshole."

The idiot seemed unfazed by my threat, but he did seem off. Something in his eyes was different from before. It wasn't just the tiredness in them, as if he hadn't slept in weeks, but the lack of the repulsive confidence his eyes always carried. *Looks like someone doesn't have all his duckies in a row.*

Soren was one of those obnoxious rich, entitled assholes who always looked down on you as if you were nothing more than dust underneath their expensive shoes. Now, Soren's eyes didn't hold that attitude but something defeated instead.

Good.

"I'm here to see Ashton."

Ashton. I never got a hold of why he insisted on calling him that. What a weirdo.

"Really?" I lifted my chin. "'Cause Ash ain't here, and I doubt he invited you over."

Soren pressed his lips together in a hard line while averting his look to the ground. "I tried calling, but he doesn't answer."

"Tough shit," I snorted, a mean smile on my face. "But what do you expect? He's been over you for months." That was probably a lie, but Soren didn't need to know that. Same as he didn't need to know Ash wasn't answering his calls because *I* blocked his stupid number.

Soren's ugly face paled, and his brows pinched close. "What are you saying?"

“I’m saying that he and I are together now, and he couldn’t care less about your sorry ass.”

He visibly swallowed, and I took joy in seeing him suffer. I hated that fucker.

“When did it start?”

“When did what start?” I asked, scratching my chin.

“The two of you. When did it start?” His jaw tensed as if he’d forced the words out of his mouth.

Ohhhh.

“A few weeks after he came back. Although, we fucked long before that. Remember that one Christmas he came to visit his mom? We fucked then, too.” Well, that was a blunt lie, as I didn’t even get to see Ash that time, but Soren didn’t know that, and from the horrified look on his face, it seemed like he bought it, too.

“That’s not true. Ashton would never cheat on me.”

Aww, look at that. Who knew this fucker was capable of showing emotions.

“Is that so? ’Cause I remember how loudly he moaned that night.” I grinned and crossed my arms over my puffed chest. I definitely was the one on top now. “I would have suggested you ask him yourself, but Ashy wouldn’t bother himself with talking to you.”

Breaking our stare, Soren stepped back, almost stumbling on his feet. It seemed I’d managed to shake him off his high horse, and the taste of victory was sweet.

“You know, Ash often tells me how glad he is that you guys broke up. Usually, after we fuck, he laughs about your weird ass.” Since Soren was the first to play dirty years ago, I couldn’t help but try and stab him where it hurt the most. “Like those photos on your walls.” I faked a laugh. “Seriously, man, what’s up with that?”

When Ash had just started dating Soren, he’d told Zoe about Soren’s OCD and his weird-as-fuck photo wall. Zoe mentioned it to me, and that was how I knew about it. Yet, Soren couldn’t know that, and right now, the look in his eyes was full of dread. I wasn’t one to laugh at someone’s mental health, especially with my past, but Soren wasn’t just someone. He was a piece of shit who deserved to suffer for the rest of his fucking life.

“I-I think I’ll leave,” he said, turning to walk back to his car.

“Oh, Soren,” I called after him, and the idiot turned to look at me. “I forgot to tell you… You look like shit.” I couldn’t erase the smile on my face even if I tried. And self-satisfied, I watched the bastard going back to the car with his tail between his legs.

Opening his car door, he lingered before getting in.

What's he up to?

"I'm going to stay in LA for a while, so let Ashton know that in case he changes his mind about talking, I'll be here."

Yeah, right. As if I was about to tell Ash that. If Ash allowed Soren back into his life, he'd get hurt again, therefore, me keeping this whole thing away from Ash was for his own good. My decision had everything to do with what was best for Ash, not me. *Fine*, perhaps it was also to get back at Soren, the fucking asshole who thought he owned my best friend. Well, babe, karma's a bitch, and it was about time he learned it.



"Hey, you're back," I said once Ash entered the kitchen, half my attention on the shrimp I was currently frying. "How did it go—"

My words cut off as Ash suddenly hugged me.

Surprised, I turned off the stove and wrapped my arms around him while he buried his face in my chest.

"Ashy, what's going on?"

"I'm just so happy you're here," he admitted, his hands holding me closer.

Moved by his words, I rested my cheek on top of his head, my fingers running through his hair. "Is this some sort of an emotional breakdown because of Aiden?"

He pinched my nipple. "Don't be an ass," he pouted while I yelped and rubbed my hurt nipple. "And maybe it's about that, but mostly, it's because of this." Taking a step back, he pulled an envelope out of his back pocket.

Confused, I frowned at him. "You hugged me because of an envelope?"

"It's not the envelope but what's inside," he said, opening it and taking out a paper folded in two.

"A paper?"

He grunted, rolling his eyes. "A letter, Kai. *Your* letter."

"I'm finding it hard to follow, and I'm scared you'll pinch my other nipple —"

Ash chuckled and then handed me the letter. Reading the first line connected all the dots. It was the letter I'd written to him while I was in rehab years ago. It was nothing special, just a bunch of crap an idiotic kid wrote without giving too much thought into it, and yet, when I looked up from those meaningless words I'd written on a whim to meet Ash's face, he was tearing up like some baby.

"H-Hey, why you crying, babe?"

“I never came,” Ash choked on a sob. “You were always so sweet and kind, and I wasn’t there when you needed me.”

Watching him sob over some letter I wrote years ago and had managed to forget about was adorable, so I tossed the letter aside before quickly pulling him into another hug.

“I’m so sorry.” He rubbed his face in my chest, his snot getting all over my shirt.

It was unlike him to be this emotional, but maybe he was just having one of those days.

“How did you even get this letter?”

“Aiden gave it to me.” He sniffed. “He actually gave it to me years ago, but I tossed it away. He probably kept it until now.”

I groaned. That old bastard loved messing with other people’s lives.

“Why are you crying now, though? It’s fine that you didn’t want anything to do with me back then.” I snorted. “*I* didn’t want anything to do with me back then either.”

Pulling back, he looked at me. “I should have been there for you like you’ve been here for me for the last few months.” His lips pulled into a soft smile. “I’m so lucky to have you again, Kai. You’re truly amazing.”

My heart fluttered, and the room turned a bit hotter.

I coughed to clear my throat, then asked, “You really think that?”

His eyes softened before he pressed his cheek to my chest. “I do. And I feel so safe with you being around me, especially now that Aiden’s gone.” He took a deep breath. “I just know you’d never do anything to hurt me, and I’m grateful.”

My stomach flipped, and not only because his words struck me hard but because of guilt. For a moment, I considered telling him about Soren. Eventually, the only thing that would truly help Ash heal would be the closure he deserved and never got. But what if they met, and Soren managed to sweep Ash back into his arms? Where would that leave me? The idea freaked me out, and I hugged Ash harder.

“You’re damn right, Ashy. I’d never hurt you.” I tilted his head up before taking over his lips in a hot kiss. And as Ash kissed me back, his hands desperately grabbing my shirt, I realized that the reason I didn’t tell him about Soren wasn’t because I wanted to protect his heart but to protect *mine*. But realizing how selfish I truly was didn’t stop me from grabbing Ash’s hips and lifting him up. It also didn’t stop me from stripping him naked and then fucking him against the kitchen wall.

In fact, it didn’t bother me one bit.

CHAPTER Thirty-Five

Ash

Sunday marked one year since I returned home.

One year since the man I thought I'd spend the rest of my life with broke up with me. And although it still hurt, I *was* doing better. Or so I thought, until the name "Soren Dane" popped up in the newspaper I was reading over breakfast.

"So, have you talked with Aiden about your idea?"

"W-What?" Quickly folding the paper in two, I put it down and looked up at Mom.

"You know, about turning the old shed into a shop?"

"Oh," I mumbled quietly, my heart beating fast with the need to know what that article was about. "I did talk to him, and he was on board." A few weeks ago, I'd decided to open a surf shop. The idea had come to me after I noticed the number of surfers we had around and how there wasn't a single shop in a ten-mile radius.

"Do you know how he responded?" I grabbed my phone and opened the email Aiden's lawyer had sent me last night.

Mom took the phone from me, her eyes going wide as she read.

"He gave you the house?"

"He did." I smiled. When it came to my uncle, his generosity didn't cease to amaze me. Apparently, a living inheritance was a thing; some called it a gift, but in the end—the old beach house, *his beach house*, was now mine to do whatever I wanted with. He also gave me access to a trust fund he'd opened the day I was born and had put money into ever since. Basically, Aiden made me rich overnight.

"That's amazing. We should call him," Mom said, already looking for her phone when I got up.

"It's the middle of the night in Australia." That's where Aiden was currently traveling. "But we'll call him tonight." Even though he rarely picked up. Something told me that in the past four months since leaving, Aiden wanted to

isolate himself from his old life. Why? I didn't know, although sometimes I had my suspicions. But knowing not to go look for a man who didn't want to be found, I had no intention of bothering Aiden. After being here for us for so many years, he had every right to want time for himself.

"Want to go surfing? I don't have work until the afternoon," Mom offered.

Too impatient to know what the article said about Soren, I didn't plan on staying. "Sorry, I have plans with Kai." That was half a lie. "But we'll catch up later, okay?"

Kissing her cheek, I quickly grabbed the newspaper from the table and returned to my car. Assuming it would be better to read it closer to my home, I put the paper on the back seat and forced myself to drive home. Only once parked in front of the house did I reach for the paper and flip to the right page.

"*Young Lawyer Turns Out to be a Guardian Angel*" was what the headline said. My pulse increased, and my eyes quickly moved to read more. *Soren Dane, a name prosecutors should write down, does the unthinkable and saves an underage male, Camilo Gómez, from life behind bars.* Skimming through the part that went into details about that kid's crimes, I stopped to reread the last sentence. *For the last few months, Dane, currently working for Williams & Dufort Attorneys At Law in their LA offices, worked on this pro bono case that no one believed had a chance.*

Soren had been in LA for the last few months?

My heart sank, and unable to believe what I'd just read, I looked straight ahead. Cold sweat covered my skin, and I gripped the paper harder, feeling like I was going through a heart attack. Soren had been here the whole time, yet he didn't try to contact me once. For months, I came to accept he was gone, living his best life in NYC, only to learn through a stupid article that he was practicing law downtown. Why didn't he contact me? Rejection I thought I'd become used to pierced my chest, and I squeezed my eyes closed. If only overcoming this feeling was easy. I'd started seeing a therapist lately, so I did what he taught me whenever I felt like the world was closing in on me.

Taking a deep breath, I slowly exhaled before repeating the action until my lungs ceased to burn and my limbs stopped shivering. And by the time I was done practicing my breaths, I had come up with an idea.

Kai

"Ashy, look what I got," I announced, walking into the house with a paint can in each hand. "I wasn't sure which color you'd like better, but we can check both.

Right?” Ever since Ash told me he wanted to turn the old shed into a shop, I’d taken it upon myself to renovate the place.

I’d half expected him to get excited, like he did yesterday when I showed him the wood I’d use for the counter, only he didn’t say a word and remained fixated on whatever he was reading on his laptop.

Putting the cans aside, I walked toward him and grabbed his shoulders.

“Earth to Ash.”

“Oh, hey,” he said half-heartedly, his concentration still fully set on the computer.

Pissed off for not getting his attention, I peeked over his shoulder at the screen.

“Juvenile Detention Center Counseling Volunteering,” I read the site’s title out loud, my brows pulling into a deep frown. “The hell is that?”

Ignoring me, Ash scrolled down the form he was currently filling out with his details. Irritated for not knowing what was going on, I shut the laptop.

“What the hell, Kai?”

“Finally, a reaction,” I rasped, crossing my arms over my chest. “Mind explaining to me why you’re looking into some jail’s website?”

He pouted, reopening his laptop. “It’s not jail. It’s a juvenile detention center.”

I moved around and sat on the table, forcing his head in my direction by grabbing his chin. “Ashy, talk to me. What’s going on?”

He held my stare for a moment before letting out a deep sigh. “Fine. But you’re going to think I’m crazy.”

“Crazy ideas are good. Now, tell me what’s up,” I encouraged him. Unfortunately, ten minutes later, I realized not all crazy ideas were good. Like his, for example. His idea was extremely bad.

“Have you lost your mind?” I grimaced at him, and he frowned.

“You said crazy is good!”

“Yeah. Crazy, as in, let’s-go-to-Las-Vegas-for-the-weekend, and not let’s-volunteer-with-a-bunch-of-criminals-to-get-info-about-your-ex sort of crazy.”

Even if Ash had a degree in business psychology, he had no actual practice in it. So what the fuck was he planning on doing with at-risk youth, who—with no offense to Ash—could rip his cute ass apart. He was literally a golden retriever pup colored in rainbows and covered with sugar while those kids were… trash. They’d demolish him in seconds.

Ash placed his hand on my knee and leaned closer. “Ever since I read in that article that Soren has been here for a few months, I couldn’t stop thinking about it. I have so many questions, Kai, questions for answers that keep me up at

night.” He sounded so desperate while looking at me with those pretty eyes of his, and I couldn’t help but ache for him.

“Still, how will meeting up with some fucked-up kids help you?”

He bit his bottom lip before speaking again. “I need to meet him. The boy Soren worked with. I can’t help but feel like it’s what I’m supposed to do, Kai.”

I huffed, then stood up and walked around the kitchen, rethinking everything he’d just told me. Apparently, the reason Soren had returned to LA was to work on this kid’s case. While I knew he’d come back months ago, Ash didn’t, and finding out about it through an article flipped a screw in his head. Could I really blame him? After all, I was the one keeping that secret away from him. Sure, back then, Soren did mention he’d stick around for a while, but I didn’t bother to ask what for. When it came to Soren Dane, I believed in the saying “out of sight, out of mind.” Sadly, Ash didn’t seem to think the same.

“It just sounds like an extreme plan, Ashy, and I’m worried it will put you back in a dark place.” Especially when he was finally doing better. *With me*.

Getting up from his chair, he stopped before me and placed his hands on my hips. “I know you’re worried, but it will be okay. I mean, worst-case scenario, I’ve just wasted my time. But what if meeting this kid will give me the closure I need?”

I cupped his face and held him close. “I still don’t understand how meeting a stranger in prison could help.”

He pulled his shoulders. “It just feels right.”

God help me, I didn’t understand the way his brain worked. But when he leaned in close and hugged me, I couldn’t care less about his logic. Giving in to his touch, I hugged him back, taking in every bit of affection he was giving me.

“Fine. Do what you gotta do.”

“Thank you.” He kissed my cheek before letting go of me and going back to his chair. “Besides, it’s only going to be one meeting, and that’s it. Not like I plan on taking him home with me.” He chuckled.

If only we knew.

CHAPTER Thirty-Six

Ash

"My name is Ash Sage. I'm twenty-six, and I'll be your group consultant for the next few weeks." Three out of the twelve guys I was assigned to had left the room before I ever got a chance to introduce myself. "The purpose of these meetings is communication," I explained to the bored teens, who looked at me as if I had just landed from Mars. "I hope we'll be able to form some sort of a dialogue between us today," I told them, or at least those who weren't sleeping. Although, the snores of the kid beside me were much better than facing the judgment in the others' faces. And while the situation was uncomfortable at best, I knew I had to fake it because if I backed out now, I wouldn't get another chance to meet Camilo.

The boy I came here for.

Calling him a boy felt wrong because the kid sitting across from me didn't look like a kid but a man—a young man who'd already been through so much in his life. I wondered if Soren thought the same thing when he first met those dark eyes. Did he also feel threatened by Camilo's presence? Or maybe he thought it was nothing more than a tough act to present to the world.

Forcefully removing my eyes from Camilo, I looked at the rest of the small group, reminding myself I was here to play a role.

"I was thinking we could do a small exercise to get to know each other better. How about each one of you tell me your names along with what you're afraid of?" If there were crickets here, you would have heard them in the silence following my question. They all just kept staring at me before three more guys got up and walked away. It wasn't a mandatory activity, so no guard forced them to stick around.

My palms turned sweaty, and my stomach flopped. Perhaps Kai was right about this being a bad idea. After all, what did I expect would happen? I wasn't a real consultant, just a guy with a useless degree. I bet those kids saw right through me—

“I can go first,” someone said.

Ashamed of myself for how excited I got over some kid acknowledging me, I turned to see it was the one sitting next to Camilo. He looked way too young to be in here, with big green eyes and brownish hair that fell over his messy brows. Honestly, if I’d met him outside, I would have mistaken him to be one of the guards’ sons. He looked like such a good kid who couldn’t hurt a fly, so I wondered what he did to end up in this place.

“Please, go ahead.” I smiled at him.

“My name is Andrei. Andrei Bespalov. And my biggest fear is to waste my life.”

Even though Andrei’s answer caused an eruption of laughter from the others, I found it simply beautiful. And not just beautiful but enlightening. Without so much as even trying, a thirteen-year-old kid doing time in juvie for whatever crime he’d committed put a mirror in my face because, currently, that was precisely what I was doing with my life—letting it go in vain.

“Wow, that’s fucking deep, bro.” A tall guy with bleached hair gaped at Andrei. Unlike the others who laughed, this tall, bubbly boy sounded like he meant it. “To think all I came up with were pickles,” he said and immediately chuckled; his rolling laugh was so full of life, adding light to this gray room.

“Calm down, Jessie. You’re grabbing people’s attention,” a smaller kid muttered from beside him, a deep frown on his anxious face.

“So your name is Jessie?” I asked the taller one, who answered back with an enthusiastic nod.

“Yep.” He popped the *p*. “And this is Levi. He’s afraid of many things. Bees, bears, sun, hand cream—”

Some other kid made a dirty joke about using hand cream for… *Anyway*, the one to shut him up was Andrei, and somehow, they all got talking with one another. They were an amusing group, and as much as I enjoyed hearing them all banter, I needed to lead the session.

“Okay, okay.” I chuckled, feeling a bit more confident. “I’m happy we’re already communicating with one another, but we still need to go over all the names.” I locked eyes with Andrei. “So, you’re Andrei, and you’re—”

“Jessie!”

“Great. And from what Jessie said, your name is Levi?”

Levi nodded, his ears immediately turning red. I could definitely relate to *that*. He was a shy kid, and I liked it.

Feeling like it was going well, I moved on to the rest of the group. Surprisingly, those who weren’t asleep participated until we were down to the last guy, Camilo.

All eyes were on him, yet he remained unfazed. Leaning back in his chair, with arms crossed over his chest and legs spread, Camilo looked like he owned the place.

"You're the last one," I said, excited to finally speak to him. "So, mind telling us what scares you?"

Camilo slowly lifted his bored gaze from the floor before looking at me with murderous eyes.

I was struck with an unbearable amount of nerves.

"I ain't scared of shit," he rasped, flicking the toothpick he was chewing on from one side of his mouth to the other. "But how about I tell you what pisses me off?"

"S-Sure."

"Righteous fuckers like yourself." With that, he pushed back from his seat, the chair's legs dragging on the floor, making an awful sound that hurt my ears, and I shrank into myself a little bit.

"Where do you think you're going?" the guard barked at him, unlike he had with the others who'd left.

"Fuck off," Camilo swore at the guard before stepping out of the room.

"Damnit, Gómez! You get your ass right back here—" the guard shouted while following him into the hall. And while I was shocked to witness this unfolding of events, the others remained unfazed.

"Don't worry about it, Ash. Diesel isn't always patient with strangers," Andrei said with a soft smile, almost like he was trying to comfort me.

Could it be that he understood I was upset? What a sensitive kid.

"Strangers?" Jessie laughed. "He's not patient with anyone!"

"Jessie! Stop talking," Levi muttered, his eyes looking around. "What if Diesel hears you?"

"Then I'll get my ass kicked." Jessie once again burst into laughter that felt like a boost of warmth right into my system.

Even though I had completely failed with Diesel, which I now understood was what everyone called him, coming here today didn't feel like a mistake. In fact, this was the first time in a long while that I felt like I was doing something *right*. So I kept doing it. Week after week, I went back there and sat in the same little gray room with a group of kids who'd been overlooked by society their whole lives. Sometimes I had more kids in the sessions, sometimes less, but one thing never changed—Andrei, Jessie, and Levi were always there. Occasionally, Andrei brought Diesel with him, but by the time Diesel regularly joined our little group meetings, I no longer cared for my initial plan and simply enjoyed seeing the boys.

Those kids had been through so much in their short lives, and my heart ached to help them. Not because I felt guilty. Not at all. But because they managed to get into my broken heart and heal it in different ways from what I thought was possible. Talking to Andrei was almost like talking to myself, while listening to Jessie's stories brightened my darkest days. And Levi? He was a brilliant kid who knew so much about the world but was too shy and too scared to share his knowledge.

They helped me much more than I pretended to help them. It was a given fact I didn't even try arguing with. And even Diesel, who barely said more than a few words to me at a time, was somehow able to shift something in my heart. He was a mystery, *an enigma,* and despite how hard it was to make him trust me, it didn't stop me from trying.



"I hope you don't mind sharing a room with Andrei again," I told Diesel after showing him his new room. It had been almost a year since I'd first met all four of them in that small group council back in juvie, and today, I finally managed to bring them all back home, with Diesel being the last one.

"That's fine," he grunted, then walked into the room and looked around it before dropping his duffle bag on his new bed.

He seemed out of place, standing in the middle of a room that used to be mine, dressed in dark clothes that hung loosely over his already tall frame.

"We're all going to have dinner soon. Jessie insisted on making pizza. But don't worry, we used vegan cheese in yours." I rubbed the back of my head, hating that I still felt uncomfortable around him. "We're all excited you're finally here."

He didn't answer me this time, but that was okay. Back in juvie, I noticed that Diesel usually only spoke to Andrei. And with the way I walked on eggshells around him, it wasn't a surprise he didn't feel the urge to share his thoughts with me.

He wasn't like the others. Unlike them, Diesel didn't believe in anyone, including himself, but mostly in me. After reading his file and understanding what he'd gone through in his life, I wasn't at all surprised that trust didn't come easy for him. And yet, I hoped to earn it. *His trust*. Knowing it wouldn't be simple, I promised myself I'd work for it because, unlike my life thus far, I wasn't about to sit down and wait for things to happen. I wasn't about to let life toss me from side to side like a raging wave or allow love to deter my path.

From this day forward, I was responsible for those kids who somehow gave me a second chance.

A chance to be something more than just a friend or a lover. An opportunity to earn their trust and help them achieve what I knew they could.

A chance to finally make the right choice.

Part Four



Relapse

CHAPTER Thirty-Seven

Soren

Present Day

For some reason, Daniel decided to keep the most hideous grandfather clock in his office. Calling it antique, as he did earlier, would be a disgrace. Because this clock was nothing more than an example of poor taste. It could have been better if it hadn't been for the grotesque furniture not aligning with the wall. I assumed it was supposed to be centered in order to play well with the other art pieces in his expensive office, but instead, it was positioned too far to the right, completely ruining the balance of the room.

I pursed my lips, eyes narrowed on the damn clock as I counted the passing seconds, when Daniel cleared his throat.

"Soren, have you been listening to a word I've just said?"

"Of course I have." I turned to face my *beloved* boss. While I did have my fair share of disagreements with him, Daniel Williams Dufort was the best lawyer to work for. Much better than my father, as it was proven time after time in court. I made a mental note to call Father and Mother to ask after their well-being before continuing to talk.

"And while I do understand your concerns, I shall repeat myself and say you've got nothing to worry about." Something occurred to me, and I cocked my head in the direction of the clock. "I mean, nothing other than this hideous clock."

Daniel sighed, leaning back in his leather chair. "It was a gift from Elliot."

Oh, *Elliot*. The sweet husband whom Daniel couldn't avoid mentioning in every conversation.

"Then I assume Elliot's good taste ends in fashion." The man was a model. "Because this clock is nothing but hideous," I said, earning a lingering glare from Daniel.

"Sometimes I wonder how I haven't fired you yet."

"Because I'm your best lawyer." I smirked. "It's also why you wanted me on

this case, didn't you? You didn't just offer to help your son's friend for good measure; you wanted to win it. Not that I blame you. The publicity our company will get starting tomorrow will be unprecedented."

Daniel crossed his arms and studied me carefully before his poker face broke, and he smiled. "That's your problem, Soren. You think every good deed comes with a hidden motive."

"'Cause it does." I shrugged, my eyes back on the clock.

"It doesn't. We took this case to help an innocent guy."

Innocent? Please. The only thing the prosecutor lacked was a picture of Camilo with the gun in his hand.

"But let's get back to the point. Tomorrow, the trial starts, and I want to make sure we're ready," Daniel said, his eyes focused on me.

"We're as ready as we can be. Although, it would have helped if you pulled *your* connection in the DA's office." Well, I did pull mine, but I was less likable than Daniel. "That snake Christian already buttered up the state's prosecutor. Not to mention he had his hand in picking the freaking judge." Christian, as in Christian W. Rogers, the victim's father, who just happened to be one of the richest men in the world. *Ha*. That man's wealth made *me* look poor.

"You'll manage just fine, as you have many times before," Daniel said, ignoring my whining.

"Of course, but it would be much better with a bit of *help*." I side-eyed him, and he sighed.

"I already told you we need to keep this trial clean. We don't want any shade added to our name."

That made me snort. "Then how about not taking on the most publicized trial in the last decade? We're going head-to-head with Christian W. Rogers. Not even you can pretend his name doesn't make you lose sleep."

Daniel's face didn't give away his thoughts, but I already knew what he was thinking. It was what we all thought—this trial was going to be a bloodbath, and my job was to make sure it wasn't my client's blood that ended up on the courtroom floor.

"Soren—"

"There's no reason to worry, Daniel," I said, standing up and buttoning my suit jacket. "Because I'm not going to lose."

He shook his head, his eyes giving away his tiredness. "At least you're confident."

"I wouldn't be a defense attorney if not."

He rolled his eyes at me, which he often did. "But why are you standing? I still wanted to go over some details with you."

“No can do. I’ve got another meeting I’m already late for,” I quickly said and got out of his office before he could complain about my attitude. We already knew I never listened to a word he said. Besides, I had an important guest waiting for me in my office. A guest I’d kept waiting for far too long.

My temporary office was on a different floor, so I waited for the elevator to arrive. Once it did, I got in. Thankfully, it was empty, and I took a moment to examine myself in the mirror. Everything was in place—from my suit to my hair, I looked as perfect as I could be. It helped ease my mind after being forced to sit in an office with that hideous clock for the last half hour.

Fourteen.

Thirteen.

Twelve.

Eleven.

I counted the floors until the elevator stopped, and I stepped out and walked straight to my new office. It was a complete change from my fifty-seventh-floor office in NYC, the one I had used for the past eight and a half years. But the same as always, Ashton Sage somehow managed to interrupt my life without even meaning to do so. With the lift of a finger or, in his case, a phone, he shifted my routine. One moment, I was working on a major case in New York, *et voilà*, there I was, back in LA, ready to save one of the juveniles Ashton had decided to adopt years ago. Only God knew what went on inside that head of his, and if it weren’t for him making the call himself, I’d probably have refused it.

“I thought you got rid of that horrid habit,” I tsked after entering my office to find Ashton biting on the tip of his nail.

The door hadn’t even closed behind me, and he’d already jumped to his feet. “I’ve been waiting here for over forty minutes.”

“Have you?” I asked, my lips curling as I moved to sit behind my desk and grabbed my glasses I’d left on it earlier.

His jaw tensed as a vivid line formed between his pinched brows. “You did it on purpose.”

Cleaning the lenses, I then put my glasses on and looked at him. “Those are some serious accusations, Ashton.”

Without any warning, he slammed his hands on my desk and leaned in close, his face an inch from mine. “Stop playing games, and don’t call me that anymore.” He pulled back at once, which was a shame because he still smelled like an afternoon breeze in Santorini. Who knew what that even meant, but it was what his scent had reminded me of ever since he’d first entered my proximity years ago.

Ashton Sage might have had the same addicting scent from when he was

seventeen, but he'd definitely developed a feisty side he'd never had before. I'd encountered this new aspect of him when I first arrived here almost seven months ago. Desperate to save this kid, Camilo, Ashton went as far as to allow me back in his life. It might not be as sweet as I hoped it would be, considering the fact we were a few months in, and the only places he ever agreed to meet me were either in my office or at the courthouse, but it was something nonetheless. I left behind a boy and came back to find a man. A magnificent one, at that. A man who clearly wanted nothing to do with me, telling by the annoyance on his face.

"Fine." I lifted my hands in mock surrender. "I'll stop playing games."

Ashton studied me with a raised brow before he huffed and sat back in the chair he'd evacuated earlier.

"You said you had something important to tell me."

"How about we do it over dinner? I'm starving." I nudged my glasses to sit higher on my nose. I didn't really need to wear them, but I still did *sometimes*.

"No." His voice was sharp and cold, showing no evidence of the little Sparrow who was once mine. "I have plans with Kai. So hurry up and tell me what you have to say so I can get out of here."

My original plan was to tease him a bit, but now that he'd brought up the moron's name, I had a change of plans.

Taking out a pile of files from my briefcase, I slammed them on the table between us. "We need to go over these tonight, so if I were you, I wouldn't count on getting home anytime soon. So better call the boyfriend—"

"Fine," he cut in, already taking a handful of papers in hand. "What do I need to do?"

"Help me go over them to find something I might have missed," I lied because there was no way I'd missed a thing. Over the past few months, I'd gone through every paper, letter, text, or file that could have been useful for us. I went so far as to read letters that Camilo's teacher had written about him in kindergarten, all in an attempt to build a case that had almost no chance of winning. But that was the thrill. To do what others couldn't. To win despite all odds. So no, I didn't need his help, but having Ashton here for company was just a treat I spoiled myself with after months of hard work.



It was already 10:00 p.m., the trash can filled with boxes of the takeout I had ordered, and black circles had formed around Ashton's eyes—probably from reading endless testimonies for the past few hours.

“I think it’s about time we wrap it up for today,” I said after I decided I’d kept him there for long enough.

“But we still have about half to go.” He reached for the folder I tried picking from the table. “What if we find something new? Tomorrow’s the start of the trial and—”

“And we are more than prepared.” I attempted to calm down the anxiety that burned in his eyes to no avail.

Ashton bit on his bottom lip and looked down at his shoes as silence erupted between us. I wanted to reach forward and brush the pad of my thumb over those plump lips. To press them hard before leaning close and licking into his mouth to enjoy the taste of him—but I didn’t and instead took off my glasses and put them aside.

With a sigh, I got up from my chair and walked over to the bar cart in my office to pour myself a glass. Resisting the urge to touch him became infuriatingly difficult, to the point I was in need of scotch to ease my burning desires. Ashton not letting me waltz back into his life didn’t make it any easier, and I found myself caught between the hammer and the anvil. Or, in this case, between my ex and my job. The worst part was seeing him still hanging around that monkey-man he referred to as his best friend. It would be a lie to admit I didn’t hope, more than once, for the guy to get hit by a truck.

“Do you believe we can win?” Ashton asked, breaking into my sweet fantasies.

“I wouldn’t be here if not.”

“I mean it.”

The chair moved, and I heard footsteps. When I turned around, he was already standing behind me. The fearful expression on his face reminded me of the Ashton from the past, the one I’d left behind.

“It’s not going to be easy, and you’ll have to gather all the strength you can find, but I’m sure we’ll make it.” We’d already been through this conversation before, but because I knew how gentle Ashton’s heart was, I needed to make sure he understood what was about to happen in a few hours.

This wasn’t just a trial. It was *the* trial.

“You need to understand, darling, that it’s going to be ugly. Camilo is being charged with the double murder of two allegedly innocent people and the attempted murder of a kid in his class. With his record and appearance, he’s already guilty in the eyes of most people.” I placed my glass on the desk and walked closer to him so we stood face-to-face. “That’s why I worked my ass off for weeks to have the right jurors for this trial, but the prosecution did the same.” Those fuckers knew who to pick and who to dismiss.

So close to him, I wanted to place my hands on his hips. Instead, I shoved them in my pockets and continued. “Perception is everything in this trial. If Camilo looks guilty, then he is, and my job is to put the blame on someone else.”

“What’s the game plan?” my co-counsel asked. This was our first group meeting after being assigned to the case. I’d already gone through most of the details and gathered enough information to come up with a strategy. The only one that could work in order for us to win this son of a bitch. Pulling a picture from my folder, I pinned it to the wall in the conference room.

“That’s the victim,” said our private investigator, Eiv.

“Correct. Starting now, this angel-face is the star of this horror show.” I tapped on the image. “In case I wasn’t clear—we make this case all about Shay-Lee Christian Rogers.” I looked at the rest of the confused room. “I don’t care that this kid is in a freaking coma as we speak; you guys are going to dig every bit of dirt you can manage on him and bring it back to me. Am I clear?”

Of course, when I repeated my overall plan to Ashton, I reserved some of the details, but he needed to understand that this was going to be one ugly fight. Nothing about my job was pretty—nothing but the man standing in front of me.

“I see,” he said under his breath before looking at me. “Promise me you’re going to get him out because if you don’t—” His voice shuddered, and he had to take a deep breath. “If you don’t, then I will never forgive you.”

My God, was he adorable.

Unable to hold back, I moved closer. His breath caught as he froze on the spot, but unlike what he probably thought I was about to do, I skipped over his lips and pressed my cheek to the side of his head, my mouth nearly brushing the shell of his ear. “*Good*. Because I never change my mind once it’s set. And right now, it’s set on winning.”

CHAPTER Thirty-Eight

Kai

With my knife sharpened and sleeves folded, I went back to the cutting board and the onions waiting there for me. The kitchen was in full blast, my chefs working hard behind me in preparation for tonight. Taking a deep breath, I started chopping the onion. I focused on the repetitive task and the sound that followed until noises from the TV in the employees' room reminded me why I tried distracting myself to begin with.

Brushing my eyes with the back of the hand holding the knife, I then put it down and dried my hands on the towel tucked into my apron before walking over to the sound source, not surprised to see a bunch of cooks staring at the TV.

"Just a few hours ago, the trial the whole country was waiting for began in Los Angeles Superior Court," said the blonde female broadcaster. "In the center of this horrible case that shocked the state almost seven months ago stands Camilo Gómez, nineteen years old at the time, who allegedly shot to death Mrs. Rosa Rivera, sixty-two, and Mr. Orson Sandres, thirty-four, both of whom worked for the Rogers family. After fatally shooting them, the defendant then allegedly attacked Shay-Lee Christian Rogers, the only son of the multibillionaire philanthrope Christian W. Rogers. As of now, the victim's condition has remained unknown, and the family asks for privacy. Rumors say that the eighteen-year-old victim had been in a coma for several weeks and hasn't been the same since waking up." As she continued to give more details of the case, a photo of Diesel appeared on the screen. They'd deliberately chosen an image that presented him in a bad light, one of him smoking in a nightclub. After that, they showed a series of photos of him from his earlier arrests while also repeating, again and again, about his criminal past. Not one word about how he'd been on the right path for the last few years and that he *might* be innocent.

"The defendant's last chance is in the talented hands of his attorney, Soren Dane, who, worked with Mr. Gómez previously in one of his earliest trials. Back then, Mr. Gómez was sentenced to thirteen months in prison after shooting a

man.”

Shooting a man? He shot his sister’s rapist, for God’s sake; how about mentioning that?

“Mr. Dane is known to be a fierce yet charming attorney who’s already broken the internet with his opening arguments in court earlier this morning. His speech reached social media, where he is now trending.”

The broadcast cut to the courtroom, where we saw a video replay. First, they zoomed in on Diesel, and it sucked seeing him sitting there with his hands cuffed, wearing an orange jumpsuit. His head was shaved, and he kept staring at his hands like a dead man. Instead of being let out on bail while waiting for his trial, Diesel was required to remain in jail. It was unjust, and for the past few months, only God knew what he suffered there. From the black eye he was sporting, along with a split lip, I didn’t dare imagine.

We knew nothing because he refused to speak to any of us, including his attorneys. Since he was taken into custody, his lips had stayed sealed, and his eyes remained dead. He was in a dark place, and knowing there was no way for me to help sucked. We were all desperate, begging for a bit of light in this ongoing hell, yet so far, we got none.

My sadness was replaced with pure wrath the second the camera shifted from Diesel to Soren.

“You called him?” I gaped at Ash’s straight face. “You actually picked up your phone and called that fucker?” I yelled, rage boiling my blood.

“He’s our last chance, Kai, and you know it.”

“Fuck that!” I screamed, slamming my fist into the wall. Ash flinched and stepped back, but it didn’t stop me. “You didn’t do it for Diesel but for yourself.” Spit flew from my mouth. “You wanted him to be here so you could rely on him. Like you always did.”

His eyes went wide with shock before a look of anger took over him. “Screw you for saying that! I called him because he’s the best, and we need the best.”

“We could have found someone else. There are many good lawyers out there.”

“No one is as good as him,” he said back, brows pulled close.

Freaked out with the idea that this man was going to be a part of our life once again, I gritted my teeth.

“How could you do that without asking me first?” I pointed at myself, fucking hurt because Ash telling me he called Soren only a few hours before this fucker was to arrive was a really shady move on his behalf.

“Why should I?” He shrugged. “It has nothing to do with you.”

“It has everything to do with me.”

“No. It doesn’t.” He looked so angry. “It only has to do with one person, and that’s Diesel.”

Hurt, I bit my lips. “But what about me, Ashy? Don’t you care how Soren’s being back might affect me?”

Ash’s jaw clenched before he shook his head and stepped back. “If you think, even for one second, that I’d prioritize your feelings over Diesel’s freedom, then you’re extremely wrong.”

We hadn’t fought that way in years, and since that day, things between us hadn’t been the same. Yeah, we still hung out and fucked once in a while, but Ash’s full attention was on Diesel. He apologized after that fight, but it didn’t matter because I knew he meant his words. They hurt. Knowing I wasn’t a priority fucking sucked, and this whole situation we’d found ourselves in was a nightmare.

“This isn’t a story of hate, but one of love.” Soren’s voice took me back to the TV, and I watched the reply the news showed. “A tragic story of love between two kids who shouldn’t have ever fallen for each other, and yet they did.” He walked around the courtroom as if he owned the damn place. With my fists clenched and pressed close to my sides, I continued watching. “And I know what you might think: this is the classic story of love that goes wrong, leading to a horrible crime of passion. Don’t get me wrong, this is a tragic love story, and crimes were committed, but not by Camilo.” Soren now stood close to the jury, with all eyes on him. “You might think that Camilo is the big bad wolf and that Shay-Lee is Little Red Riding Hood, but let me argue differently.” It was nearly impossible to take your eyes off him with his smooth speech and confident stance.

I hated it. I hated how good he was.

“Therefore, I ask you today to put aside your prejudices and examine this tragedy from a different perspective. Ask yourself, who else could be the wolf, and why would he want to take the hunter down, too?”

The cameras zoomed in on Soren’s face, and that was the moment I’d had enough of it. “Turn this shit off and get the fuck back to work,” I yelled at my staff, who jumped in surprise. They probably had no idea I’d been standing here for the past ten minutes, watching the news with them.

“Yes, Chef,” they called back in unison, moving their asses back to the kitchen.

Now left alone in the room, I slammed the door behind me before leaning back against it. Squeezing my eyes shut, I rubbed the bridge of my nose. I

wanted to go to the courthouse and be with Ash today, but he vetoed me on that. The first time I saw Soren after he came back, I tried to punch him. In my defense, he was standing way too fucking close to Ash. Needless to say, Ash didn't care for any explanation, saying that there was no place for such childish acts when our full focus needed to be on Diesel. He thought I was being immature about Soren and, therefore, forbade me from getting close to him or going to court. How was me not wanting Ash to hang around his ex being immature? It wasn't like Ash actually had any way of helping in the case, yet he kept sticking to him like glue. We would all give our testimonies when we were called to, and that was it. Yet, Ash still hung around Soren and jumped to his feet whenever the prick told him he needed his help.

What a piece of scum.

My phone rang, cutting off my line of thought. Seeing it was Ash calling, I immediately answered.

"Hey, Ashy. Just saw a report about the trial. How's it going down there?"

"It's awful, Kai. Just awful. Have you seen Diesel?" He sounded distressed. "His whole face is a mess. He'll die in there before the trial is even over."

"Do we know what happened to him?"

"Of course not!" he snapped. "He's still not speaking to anyone other than Soren, and even that, he hardly does. And today… he was just sitting there, his hands cuffed, staring at the floor. He's hardly said a word to anybody in months. What are we going to do?"

I exhaled slowly while running my fingers through my hair. "What we've done so far, which is our best."

"And have you seen the media coverage?" he went on, completely ignoring what I'd just said. "They talk about him as if he's guilty, Kai. They drag his name through the mud like he isn't a human being." His voice carried nothing but pain, forming a lump in my throat.

"Maybe try to avoid it, then. Just don't watch the news."

"I don't watch it, but they are everywhere. Outside the courthouse, around our street—some reporters even came and questioned me after I parked my car outside the supermarket."

It wasn't a surprise the media was seeking any crumb of information. One reporter even came to the restaurant today, but I kicked him out.

"You know what she asked me?" Ash hissed, getting my attention back. "She asked me if there were any early signs before Diesel's violent rampage. How dare she say that?"

Diesel definitely had some anger issues, but I highly doubted he did what he was accused of. He loved Shay-Lee, and I was sure of that, but I couldn't blame

anyone for thinking he was guilty. So far, the story running through the news said that Shay-Lee had broken up with Diesel so he could be with Diesel's boss, which led Diesel to lose his mind and get revenge. And while we knew this was complete bullshit, the media coverage did expose some new details we didn't know about Diesel, such as him working as a stripper for months. It killed Ash because he felt like he'd failed. Personally, I thought Ash had nothing to do with Diesel's poor choices. I mean, the kid chose to be an idiot, so how was it Ash's fault?

"Are you coming back to the house? We can meet there," I said after we both kept quiet for too long.

"I can't. I'm going to meet Soren at the office."

Anger spiked through my blood.

"Why do you need to meet him again?"

"You know why, Kai."

My chest thrust out, and my heart rate increased.

"Don't you see that he's doing it on purpose? Using the situation to get back into your life? *Our* life?"

Ash sighed and then went silent for a minute before speaking. "I'm not doing this again. Anyway, Andrei's here, and I need to go. We'll talk later."

He hung up.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," I hissed, leaning my head back against the door while rubbing my face.

I trusted Ash. The one I didn't trust was Soren, who still looked at my Ashy like he was a piece of meat. On top of all that, I was fucking pissed over how *naive* Ash was when it came to Soren. And to think, there was a time I actually believed he was going to be mine.

CHAPTER Thirty-Nine

Soren

"I'm pretty sure we lost juror number five," said Eiv, our private investigator, while he, one of my co-counsels, Charlie, and I looked over the jurors' photos we pinned on the wall.

"Agreed," I said, moving number five from the center to the left, making sure the picture aligned with the others.

"But we did win juror number ten. He has a soft touch for animals," I said, recalling the man's face after we brought up the vegan arguments and how unlikely it was for Camilo, a firm animal lover, to kill the cat. Sadly, they'd also found a poor, lifeless kitten at the crime scene. As tragic as it was, it came in useful because proving Camilo's deep affection toward animals was easy. All it took was showing the scar on his back, one he got after he refused to hurt some stray dog years ago, along with speaking about his choice to go vegan. It was amazing how the small details in life could suddenly turn significant.

"But after Jones brought up the DNA evidence, jurors three and one also seemed doubtful." Jones was the leading prosecutor. An idiot son of a bitch.

Camilo's DNA was all over the apartment, and while I did manage to explain it was normal, given the fact he and the victim were dating, not all jurors believed it. The crime scene being a penthouse owned by the man the victim *allegedly* had an affair with and left Camilo for wasn't helpful.

"Agreed." I moved numbers three and one to the left side, then took a step back to examine the wall.

"Well, shit," my co-counsel hissed as we studied our stance. "We've got five against us, two with us, and five pending."

"Don't worry, Charlie." I patted his back. "It will change soon enough. You also can't forget that Christian took the stand today. That piece of shit sure knows how to sway a crowd." I rolled my eyes, thinking back on today's events.

"The cross-examination didn't help much," he pointed out.

I smiled.

“Well, I didn’t expect to get much out of it,” I admitted.

“How come? We know he’s an abusive father.”

Once again, I laughed.

“Allegedly, Charlie. He is an abusive father, *allegedly*.”

Eiv sighed. “Seven months in, and I couldn’t find one piece of evidence to prove that Christian W. Rogers is a piece of shit who hits his own son.”

It was definitely a shame because without solid evidence of the abuse, bringing it up was a high risk. All we had was hearsay testimony from Andrei, Camilo’s friend, which could be easily dismissed. Christian wasn’t some nobody but a beloved public figure. Putting him on the stand while accusing him of something so outrageous would be like shooting ourselves in the foot.

“We don’t need Christian when we have him,” I said, picking a photo from the table and pinning it to the wall.

“The mobster?” Eiv chuckled. “Why am I not surprised?”

Dion Bianchi, the rightful heir of the famous crime lord Francesco Bianchi, was one of my key witnesses. I’d bet my family’s wealth Dion knew who committed the murder but would never tell us. Not that it mattered. All I needed out of him was a reaction—one that proved he and Shay-Lee were never a couple. If I could manage to show Shay-Lee didn’t leave Camilo for Dion, then that would put a crack in the prosecutor’s argument.

“You got something up your sleeve, don’t you?” Eiv teased while placing his hand on my shoulder and leaning closer.

“Of course I do.” I winked at him, and he grinned. We’d been working together for quite some time, and I always found his cheeky attitude to be *amusing*. He’d been nothing but a punk when I first offered him a bit of cash in exchange for gathering information. Street cats always made the best PIs simply because they went unnoticed. Although, it was hard not to notice Eiv, with his beautiful looks. And yet, I couldn’t say he was my taste, as I wasn’t a fan of blonds.

“Soren,” Charlie said while cocking his head in the direction of the door.

Turning around, I was surprised to see Ashton standing there, a paper bag in his hands.

“What a nice surprise.” My lips quirked up at the beautiful sight. Unlike Eiv, Ash was a perfect example of my taste. From head to toe, there was nothing about him I’d change.

“Am I interrupting something?” He glanced at the wall behind me. “I can come back later—”

“Nonsense. Eiv and Charlie were just leaving.”

“Were we?” Charlie cluelessly asked before Eiv elbowed him.

“Yes, C, we are,” Eiv chuckled, already pushing Charlie to get moving.

When he passed Ash, Eiv stopped to give me a knowing look over his shoulder before walking out of the room.

“Who’s that?” Ashton asked as soon as we were alone.

“Eiv is our PI.”

“Oh.”

“Oh?” I raised an eyebrow at his annoyed face. Yet, not wanting to tease him too much, I pointed over at the bag he was holding. “What’s that?”

“Dinner.” He walked into the room and placed the bag on the table. “I thought you might be hungry.”

I reached for the bag and checked inside. “Don’t lie, you wanted to ask about the case.” *Oh*, he brought steaks and veggies. “Are there any mushrooms in it?” I was deadly allergic.

“Of course not, and you’re right. This food is a bribe for information,” he said and glanced at the wall. “Are those the jurors?”

“Yes, but ignore that. Let’s eat—”

“The ones on the left side are against us?” The panic in his voice was unmistakable.

The situation might have looked bad, but I knew it would be like this at the beginning.

“Relax, Ashton, it’s completely normal for the first week of a trial.”

I doubt he heard a word I’d just said with his eyes still pinned on the wall. “We’re losing.”

Putting the food away, I placed my hands on his shoulders and turned him around so that he’d face me. “We’re not losing. We haven’t even started yet.”

“H-How can you say that? Just look at the jurors!” He attempted to turn around again when I forced him to stay put. I then wrapped an arm around his shoulder and led him toward the table. “Trials take time. And it’s only been a few days since this one started.” Ashton leaned a little bit closer to me. “I’ve won much harder cases.” That was a lie but for a good cause. “So promise me you won’t worry too much?”

Ashton paused for a moment before looking at me with a scowl. He was so anxious, and the nerves affected him. His beautiful face was tense, with a deep frown pulled between his pinched brows and a worried lip. I hated seeing him this way. Not because it aged him but because his sadness always affected me. I never bothered to tell him that when we were still together, but whatever he felt always reflected on me. I was somehow a mirror of his emotions. When he was joyful, so was I, and when he was sad, so was I.

Those days were far behind us, yet my urge to put a smile on his face never

changed.

"How about we sit down to eat the food you brought and talk about the case? I'm sure you'll feel better after I answer some of your questions."

Biting his bottom lip, he nodded, and I smiled because seeing a glimpse of my little Sparrow always eased my heart.



"Has he told you anything new?" Ashton asked, referring to Camilo.

"No," I said, wishing it wasn't the case and that I had something to tell him to satisfy his thirst for information. Seeing how much he cared for this boy, all of those boys, was truly moving.

Swallowing hard, he looked down to stare at his empty plate. "I'm worried about him," he whispered in a choked voice.

"I understand that."

Camilo refused to talk to anyone. For three whole months, he hadn't said a word to me or anyone else on the defense team. Okay, so that wasn't entirely true. The first time we met, he asked me one simple question.

Is he going to live?

At the time, Shay-Lee was still in critical condition, with his life hanging by a thread, and nobody knew the answer to that question. After I failed to give Camilo an answer, he hadn't spoken to me. Not for three whole months, until I did have an answer.

"Still not talking?" I snorted once entering the room to find Camilo sitting as he always did, head down, eyes on his cuffed hands.

Not caring for his protest, I sat down on the opposite chair and began taking out files from my briefcase. "Your little boyfriend is awake," I said, and for the first time, I got a reaction from him.

With deadly silence, Camilo's eyes shot to mine. Narrowing them, he examined me closely, checking to see if I was bluffing.

"If you don't believe me, you can read it for yourself." I slid Shay-Lee's medical folder on the table, and he quickly snapped it up. Pleased, I watched him as he carefully opened the folder to read the files.

"He was transferred from intensive care to a rehabilitation unit, and although it will take time, it seems like he'll get better," I summarized it for him.

Camilo put the folder down and looked at me. Those dark eyes hadn't changed from when he was thirteen, when I took his prior case pro bono.

“But you know the same as me that him being alive means nothing. Not as long as his father’s around,” I said, making that point crystal clear.

His jaw twitched before he tossed the folder back at me and looked away.

Unfazed, I collected all the papers into a neat pile and then leaned back in my chair, crossing one leg over the other.

“You know you can help him, right?” I examined his side profile. I knew he was listening, so I went on. “The only way to save him is to win this case, because if we lose, you stay stuck here while he stays out there with him.”

He glanced at me, lips set in a hard line.

“Let me help you help him, Camilo. I know that’s what you want. I know he’s the only thing that matters to you.”

He stood up in a flash, so fast his chair fell to the floor. The cuffs on his hands and legs were the only things stopping him from punching my face.

“You better not bullshit me,” Camilo hissed, ignoring the guard’s warning.

“We’re fine,” I told the guard, who was ready to move while my eyes locked with Camilo’s. “I’m your best chance to save him, so stop wasting our time and start talking.”

Since then, Camilo had begun cooperating, with me being the only person he spoke to. While I’d had my fair share of rough clients, Camilo took the cake. Never before had I encountered a man who so vividly didn’t care about his freedom. I wasn’t a therapist, but I knew a man with a broken heart when I saw one, and I guessed Camilo thought living life in prison was better than living out there, in the big world, without the man he loved.

It was a feeling I knew all too well.

Life without love is a prison in itself.

Focusing my attention back on Ashton, I noticed his hair was shorter now. It suited him quite well. What a shame that I wasn’t the one who got to run his fingers through those soft locks. I also admired the soft dusting of stubble that coated his strong jaw and wondered if kissing him would feel different now.

“It’s all my fault, you know?”

I frowned at him. “What are you talking about?”

“Last year, Diesel came home with Shay-Lee after Christian beat him up. He asked if they could stay, and I refused.”

“Ashton—”

“It was the first time Diesel ever asked for my help, but I told him no,” he cut in. “Back then, it made sense. After what Shay-Lee did to Andrei, it felt wrong to help him, but how could I be so stupid?” He swallowed hard, tears gathering in his eyes. “He hates me now, as he should, because if it weren’t for

me, none of this would have happened. Even Kai told me I shouldn't have refused them." He brushed his tears away. "I'm always such a coward."

Suddenly, I was angry. I was angry he was holding on to guilt over things that weren't his fault. Reaching forward, I placed my hand on top of his, surprised that he didn't push me away.

"Where we are today has nothing to do with what happened that day, and you shouldn't hate yourself over it."

He shook his head. "But I do. I needed to be there for him."

"You're here for him now, and that's what counts." I smiled at him, but he still looked half-hearted. "And you're not a coward, Ashton. You didn't reject Camilo out of hatred but because you were thinking about Andrei, and that's admirable." Holding his stare, I watched how his cheeks turned red.

As if only now noticing my hand was still covering his, Ashton quickly withdrew and cleared his throat.

"I-I think I better go now." He got up, collecting the trash on the way.

He was ready to leave when I decided I wasn't quite done with him yet.

"Let me escort you to your car," I said, already getting up before he could refuse.

The ride down in the elevator felt a bit awkward on his behalf when he made sure to stand as far away from me as possible. It could have been cute if not for my need to touch him. The doors opened to the parking lot, and we both got out. Quietly, we walked to his car.

"Back with the pickup trucks?" I smirked when he pulled out his keys.

"Yeah… I need space for my dogs and boards," he answered while rubbing the back of his tan neck.

It was the first time he'd brought up something about his personal life that had nothing to do with the case.

"Is Pacha still alive?"

Ash turned to look at me, his brows raised. "Y-Yeah, he is." He seemed shocked that I remembered his beloved dog. "He's old but kicking."

"That's good to know."

"Do you have any pets?"

I snorted in response.

"Of course you don't," he chuckled.

His soft laugh was like a breath of fresh air that brought back so many moments that were now out of reach, and disappointed, I stayed quiet. I could have said something about how wonderful this evening was, but it felt pointless. Since returning here to work on the case, Ashton had made it clear he didn't want our past to resurface. So, even though the air between us was always

loaded, neither of us dared to mention the elephant in the room.

So instead of commenting on his beautiful laugh and stunning smile, I told him good night before returning to my office.

One, two, three, four, five, six… I started counting the tiles on the floor. At one hundred and four, I finally reached my office and walked in, my mind still busy with Ashton. We never talked about how things ended, almost as if we'd both accepted the breakup in the years that followed. He'd clearly moved on with his life, and going back to mess him up again felt wrong. I was a selfish man. That much was true, but not when it came to him.

Never with him.

Ashton Sage was and always would be my first priority. It was why loving him nearly cost me my already fragile sanity. All of which he never knew and never would.

CHAPTER Forty

Kai

“What if we lose the case?”

“Jessie,” Levi grunted.

“What?” Jessie turned to look at him, holding a slice of pizza he had yet to take a bite from.

“We can’t think like that.”

“But it is a possibility—”

“Jess.” It was Andrei who joined in, face serious. “Don’t even think about that, okay? Diesel is innocent, and the truth always comes out in the end.”

Jessie stared back at Andrei and then at his pizza. Hopefully, they were done.

“The truth didn’t come out in your case,” he murmured before taking a bite, causing Andrei and Levi to groan his name in union.

“Guys, why don’t we all calm down?” I said, placing another box of pepperoni pizza between them, then sat next to Andrei on the floor. I might not know the right thing to say, but I did know pizza made everything *slightly* better.

“So, Jessie, how’s your illustration business going?” I tried changing the subject. Recently, Jessie had started doing art commissions online.

“I got my first job done last week, and now I’m starting a new one.” He didn’t sound as excited as usual, so I tried my luck with Levi.

“What about you? Getting ready for college?”

“I had to postpone it a year because of… you know, Diesel being on trial for murder?” he answered flatly before reaching for a new slice.

Well, shit, I truly sucked at small talk.

“What’s going on between Chief and Diesel’s lawyer?” Jessie asked out of the fucking blue, his question catching me off guard.

The room turned slightly hotter, and if it weren’t for how all three suddenly looked at me with curiosity, I would have tried avoiding the question.

“What do you mean?” I played dumb.

“They know each other from before, right?” Andrei said, his full attention on

me.

Now they're in chatting mode?

"I think they dated," Levi added.

How the fuck did he know that?

"How do you know?" Andrei asked what I was thinking.

"I heard Chief saying something about it to his mom over the phone—"

"Okay, okay." I raised two hands in the air. "How about we stop this gossiping session?" I faked a smile. "What happened between Ash and that asshole is between them. Most importantly, it's in the past. The far, far past." I paused before narrowing my eyes at Jessie. "Wait, why did you ask?"

"I dunno," he mumbled, mouth full of pizza. "But he's handsome."

My nose scrunched up. "No, he isn't."

Andrei snorted.

"Why are you laughing?" I grunted.

"'Cause he's gorgeous. Miles and I talked about it the other day," he said, licking the sauce from his fingers. "We both said, hypothetically, of course, that we'd totally fuck him."

What the fuck?

Knowing he was my last hope, I turned to Levi. The second our eyes met, he quickly took a big bite, and I gaped at him.

"Un-fucking-believable. You too?"

Levi shook his head, his ears already turning red. Apparently, I was surrounded by traitors. More importantly, how could anyone find Soren attractive?

"That man is probably filled with Botox—"

"What's up, guys?" Ash's voice surprised me, and midsentence, I turned to look at him. He was standing at the entrance to the living room, looking as tired as ever.

"H-Hey, Ashy." I smiled at him, hoping he hadn't heard our conversation while also ignoring the kids' chuckles. At least they were laughing for a change.

"I see you had pizza for dinner?"

"Bought some on my way here." I jumped to my feet. "I also got one with green peppers just for you." It'd been his favorite for years.

"I already ate," he said quietly while running his fingers through his hair. He then looked at the guys. "If you don't mind, I think I'll head to bed. I'm beat."

"Sure," Andrei hummed, while Jessie squealed good night.

Once Ash left us alone, I turned to face them again. "You bunch of freeloaders are going to clean up in here," I ordered while looking around the mess of empty soda cans, used paper plates, and pizza boxes. I glanced back at

where Ash had stood only a moment ago and sighed. He was doing really badly lately, and I was seriously beginning to worry. The only time I remembered him being this down was after he and Soren broke up, and the fear of Ash going through that again scared the shit out of me.

Speaking of which… Why had he returned home so late? I checked my watch. It was definitely way past the time he usually got back. My jaw tensed, and my brows pulled into a frown because I bet that son of a bitch *Soren* had a hand in it.

Ash

With my eyes closed, I tilted my head back and allowed the hot water to wash down my body. The pressure of the stream gave me a sliver of relief that was soon forgotten the second my brain forced me to reflect back on the day. Hours of testimonies trying to prove that Diesel was a monster when he wasn't. Him sitting in the middle of the courtroom with his hands cuffed like some animal, more bruises added to his handsome face each passing day. The jurors' expressions while the prosecutor tried to convince them with false narratives and, later on, their images in Soren's office.

Soren.

My stomach turned as goose bumps covered my body at the mere thought of him. Now cold, I turned up the heat until the water nearly burned my skin, but not even that was enough to take my mind off him. He had been so kind ever since he returned, reminding me of the past. It was brutal how easy it was to remember the good days and forget the bad. And while my breath still caught whenever the smell of his cologne hit me, and my eyes still attempted to steal quick glances at him, my heart didn't forget. Our history was like a lump in my throat. One ugly, messy lump made of all the tears I shed over him that still choked me whenever he smiled my way.

The hardest part about his return was stopping myself from asking all the questions I'd held on to for years. Soren always had an answer up his sleeve, as he proved in court daily. And yet, to the biggest question of all, he never provided me with an answer. And although the suspicion had been gnawing at my flesh for years, I had to restrain myself from opening that Pandora's box. Soren was here to do his job, and that was it. There was no place for the past when the present sucked every bit of energy I had.

Yet, in this chaos, small moments like coming home to find Kai with the kids gave me a bit of comfort. Knowing he was here to help me, despite what I was

forcing him to go through, gave me the comfort I so miserably needed.

Strong arms wrapped themselves around me, and I leaned my head back against Kai's hot body as he softly caressed my skin.

"I didn't notice when you came in," I whispered while he brushed my wet hair back and kissed my neck.

I moaned at the soft touch, relieved to feel him behind me.

"That's okay," he chuckled, then bit the shell of my ear. "I missed you," he added, his hands already sliding down my body until he reached the base of my cock.

"But I didn't go anywhere." I choked on a breath as he traced his fingers along my pubes.

"It doesn't matter," he rasped. Cupping my jaw, he turned my face to take my lips in a heated kiss while moving his hand along my growing erection.

Kai thrust his tongue into my mouth, and I sucked on it, moaning around him. It had been a while since we'd last had sex, and my body was already begging to be touched. To be owned. Knowing what I needed after years of sleeping together, Kai broke the kiss only to plant smaller ones along my neck and collarbone. With one hand still stroking my cock, he used the other to play with my nipples.

With the water still running, he brushed his fingers over my light chest hair, letting me know how much he loved it. He flicked his thumb over my hard nipple, massaging it until I shivered underneath his touch. Only after I asked for more in a weak voice did he move to the other. And as he continued to edge me, using his talented hands, I felt his erection rubbing in the crease of my ass.

"K-Kai," I gasped his name, water getting into my mouth while I pushed back, rubbing my ass with his big cock.

"I love it when you're needy." He grabbed my hair and jerked my head back in a sharp move before kissing me again. This time, he devoured my mouth until the lack of air burned in my lungs. Once he let go, we were both heaving, but that didn't stop him from moving his hand to my ass and spreading my cheeks apart.

"You're so hot, babe," he rasped in my ear as I heard the squeeze of a bottle. The next moment, his slicked fingers grazed my hole, and I hissed at the familiar pressure when he pushed them in. I always made sure to keep a bottle of lube in the shower for times like this. Kai poured more of the liquid over my crease before pushing in another one of his thick fingers. Now, with three fingers in, Kai shoved me forward until my head was pressed against the shower wall.

Using my hands for support, I arched my back and rocked harder against him, wishing for more.

“Wear a condom and fuck me already,” I panted.

“Why?” He twisted his fingers inside my stretched hole, hitting the spot that made my eyes roll to the back of my head. “Look how much you enjoy my fingers.”

My face heated up, and I savored the feeling of humiliation. *I adored it*. “P-Please,” I begged, my body burning with need until my muscles shivered. “I-I need more.”

A low cry erupted from me after Kai removed his fingers and stepped out of the shower. I immediately regretted asking him to put on a rubber because that meant he had to let go of me. But we had to use one. We weren’t exclusive with each other, and Kai fucked other people sometimes. I didn’t care as long as he was careful. Or at least, that’s what I loved telling myself—

“Hands on the wall.” His order brought my attention back, and I immediately complied, placing my palms flat on the slippery surface. He then kicked my legs further apart before aligning the crown of his cock with my ready hole. With his hands holding on to my waist, he thrust forward, my body moving with his, and pushed in with one go.

It hurt, and I *loved* it.

“Fuck, babe, I’ll never get used to how tight you are,” he hissed, his dick sinking all the way in, filling me to the brim. “No matter how many times I use this little hole of yours, it’s still tight like a virgin’s ass.” He spanked me, and I cried with the blistering ache. He then began moving, drilling in and out of me until I couldn’t keep my moans down. My room was separated from the other rooms in the house and blocked noises pretty well, so knowing no one could hear us, I wasn’t shy about using my voice.

Kai rocked his hips, his heavy balls smacking against my flesh with each pound. Biting my lip, I arched my back deeper, feeling satisfaction when he complimented me on how sexy I looked. Now ready to come, I took my pulsing dick in hand and began stroking it. With my fist tight around my length, I rubbed it to the rhythm of his thrusts until I felt my climax building in the pit of my stomach.

“I-I’m close,” I cried, my balls tight and my muscles tensed.

“Shit, me too,” Kai hissed from behind me right before he pulled almost all the way out, only to slam back in with full force. That was the last push, sending me over the edge, and my climax hit me at once. Waves of pleasure ran through me as I shot jolts of cum over the shower wall, every bit of me shuddering with the intensity of my release. The moment I was done, Kai pulled out, turned me around, and forced me to my knees.

“Open up, buttercup,” he rasped, a half smirk pulled on his full lips.

Obsessed with his face, I parted my lips and stuck out my tongue while watching him get the condom off.

He grabbed the root of his dick and then brought the tip to my lips before he began stroking himself. He moved his hand slowly from the base to the tip, almost like he was holding back from coming. Drops of precum already salted the tip of my tongue, making my mouth water. It was in these moments when he stood above me that the world stopped existing, and my only purpose was to pleasure him. Long minutes of complete pleasure that helped me forget who I was.

Too eager to wait, I took him into my mouth and moaned around his shaft. A few more thrusts and his cock began spilling its load inside my mouth, hot cum landing over my tongue.

“That’s it, Ashy.” He cupped my cheeks after pulling out, my mouth still filled with his cum. “Drink up.”

I did as I was told, not letting a drop go to waste.

Once done, he let go of me, and I licked my lips clean while rubbing my neck. My throat felt sore, but I’d make myself something warm to soothe it later.

“You’re cool?” Kai asked after I rose back to my feet.

“Yeah,” I said in a hoarse voice.

“Good.” He kissed my forehead. “You’re so hot, Ashy,” he said and was ready to get out of the shower when I grabbed his wrist.

“You’re staying over, right?”

Kai seemed surprised at first; his brows raised all the way up before his shock melted into a warm smile.

“Of course.”

I usually made a clear separation between our sex life and friendship. After fucking for years, the lines sometimes blurred, and I tried avoiding it as much as possible. It wasn’t that I was a cold man. Quite the opposite—I yearned for love, yet in the same breath, I’d learned to fear it. In the two times I’d loved, my heart got broken. The pain nearly killed me, and I had no plans to ever experience it again. Especially when Kai was the first man to break me. And yet, despite our past, we couldn’t help but get closer over the years. Since it was unavoidable, I came up with ways to ensure I wouldn’t get hurt again. If it were avoiding defining our relationship, allowing him to sleep with others, or not letting him take care of me after sex, somehow, we made it work. And despite all of that, the last thing I wanted tonight was to be left alone.



Soren

I'd just finished talking to the few reporters waiting for me at the entrance to the courthouse when the roar of a motorcycle whizzed in my ear, making me turn around. On the side of the road, not too far from us, a red bike stopped with two passengers.

One of them got off, and I knew who it was even before he took his helmet off. After years of being obsessed with every bit of him, I recognized Ashton by body language alone. Bitterness overtook me when the one giving him the ride lifted his helmet shield. Not that it took a genius to guess it was Kai driving my precious Ashton on this death machine.

"No more questions," I bitterly told the reporters before walking past their crew and into the building. Stopping before the security line, I looked at my watch. There was still a bit of time before I needed to meet my team, so I could afford to wait for—

"Good morning, darling," I oozed at Ashton, who just walked in, his eyes pinned on the floor.

Jerking his head up at my greeting, he seemed shocked for a mere moment before the frown I was familiar with appeared on his face.

"What do you want, *Soren*?"

"Keep saying my name that way and I might just think you're unhappy to see me."

He responded with a deep glare that earned a chuckle from me.

"It was a joke, Ashton."

"Since when do you joke?" he hissed as we took our spot in the line for security.

The line moved slowly, which was perfectly fine because I enjoyed looking at Ashton's back.

"I can feel you staring," he rasped.

"Can you?"

He grunted, half turning to look at me while also moving along as the line proceeded. “I hate it when you play games. So stop it.”

I would have stopped if it weren’t for how cute he looked with that frown.

“How did you come here today?” I asked, and he rolled his eyes.

“So that’s what this is all about. You saw Kai giving me a ride?”

We finally reached our turn, so I took out my phone and briefcase and put them on the table for a security check, my eyes not leaving Ashton as I did.

“Maybe.”

“I can’t believe you two,” he muttered before walking through the metal detector.

“What do you mean?” I followed him but was stopped by one of the guards, who decided to place his hand on my chest.

“Wait for your turn,” he warned me as if I were some child.

“Will do.” I glanced down at his hand, which, for some reason, still hung on my chest. “Do you mind?” I was running out of patience because while this moron was holding me back, Ashton had already moved on.

The officer finally removed his hand and then asked me to walk through the metal detector once more before I was free to go.

“What did you mean earlier?” I asked Ashton after catching up to him.

“You and Kai are acting like children, thinking I have the time or energy to play games with either of you.” He paused his walking and turned to look at me. “You keep dancing around me like this whole thing is some sort of a game. It isn’t, Soren. I’m not here to play. I’m here to get my kid out of the trouble he’s in, and it would help if you stopped with the act.”

Now, I was truly curious. What did Kai do to piss him off? Being familiar with Kai’s type, I assumed he acted like some jealous airhead. Which probably explained Ashton’s short temper.

“I have no idea what games you’re referring to.” I flashed him a toothy smile. “All I wanted was to wish you good morning and to say I would rather you not ride that death-on-wheels machine.”

His expression dulled. “Wait, so this is because of the motorcycle and not because of Kai?”

Twisting my lips, I looked around the busy hall. “Well, I would much rather you not waste your life with him, but yeah.” I moved a hand over my suit. “I don’t want you to get on those things.”

Ashton snorted, taking a step back. “You’re un-fucking-real.”

“Language.”

“Seriously?” His face scrunched up. “You’re not in the position to tell me what I should or shouldn’t do.”

This rebellious side of him rubbed me the wrong way because whenever he gave me this attitude and refused to do as I said, I wanted to spank him. My dick also shared my urge, as it just twitched in my slacks. *Wonderful*. The last thing I needed prior to getting inside the courtroom was an erection. Yet, instead of stopping myself as a sensible man would, I proceeded to push.

With a step, I closed the distance between us and leaned close enough to hear the sound of his soft breath. “When you answer me like a little brat, I can’t help but wish to place you over my lap and treat you accordingly,” I whispered so only he could hear me.

His lips parted, and his cheeks took on a beautiful shade of red.

Satisfied with his reaction, I straightened up. “Now, then, should we get going? We have a busy day.”



I had undoubtedly overstepped the line with Ashton earlier, but his newfound rebelliousness reminded me of my forgotten desires. Who was I fooling? My feelings for him were far from a thing of the past and were still a burning flame in my frozen heart. Even now, as I found myself interrogating a crucial witness in this case, I couldn’t help but yearn to turn around and catch a glimpse of Ashton in the audience.

I knew exactly where he was seated—second row, third seat on the right—but I tried to convince myself that I wasn’t that consumed. The urge to delve into this new, unexplored side of him was like a ticking time bomb, threatening to push me over the edge with each passing day. What would happen when the time ran out? Seven years ago, I had barely escaped with my life.

“Objection, Your Honor,” Jones, the leading prosecutor, called in that annoying voice of his.

“On what grounds?” the judge asked, tired of Jones’s nonstop objections ever since I put Dion on the stand.

“Hearsay, Your Honor.”

Rolling her eyes, she waved her hand. “Fine. Sustained. The jury may ignore this last statement.” She moved her eyes to me, “Now, then, Mr. Dane, please continue.”

“With pleasure.” I smiled at her before turning back to my witness.

With a mischievous smirk and good looks, one could never suspect the man currently sitting on the witness stand to be a crime lord. And yet, that was precisely what Dion Bianchi was—one heck of a mobster, with half the

institutions in this country dying to get him behind bars. Being good at his *job*, no one had so much as a parking ticket on him. Of course, they'd tried to get him for years, and he'd been on trial on several prior occasions. But, thanks to his wonderful lawyer, who happened to be me, Dion was still a free man.

Representing Dion in the past might have seemed like a conflict of interest, but my prior representation of him was unrelated, and I followed all the necessary procedures, such as informing the judge ahead of time. I also didn't plan on revealing anything that fell under our attorney-client privilege. Of course, Dion had tried to get away from being a witness by claiming just that, but sadly for him, his request was denied.

"So, let me see if I got it right," I said, my body half facing Dion, who still smiled from ear to ear. He was either amused by the situation or trying to hide his true emotions. Knowing him for quite some time, I'd bet on both. "You say you were involved with the victim for, give or take, five months?"

"Yes," he answered with a smooth voice.

"And you admit to having a sexual relationship with the victim?"

"You know how weak I am against temptation." He winked.

"Answer my question, Mr. Bianchi."

"*Yes*. We slept together." He then looked behind me. "In fact, I can't even recall the amount of times we had sex."

Glancing over my shoulder, I saw Dion looking directly at Camilo.

Since I had no time for his games, I cleared my throat.

"And yet, you weren't exclusive. Is that correct?"

"Yes."

I smiled at him. "But you did want to be in an exclusive relationship with the victim. Isn't that right, Mr. Bianchi?"

"Objection! Leading, Your Honor," Jones, the moron, called, but the judge overruled his objection, leaving Dion to answer the question.

"Mr. Bianchi?"

"I wouldn't say that." He shrugged.

Going back to my desk, I took a paper from it and stood in the middle of the court. "We got clear orders that whenever Mr. Rogers attended the club, we had to inform the boss. He'd ask to clear his schedule, and he'd get mad if he missed him." I read the words written in black and white before handing it to the judge as evidence. "So, as you see, some of your employees beg to differ. So how about I ask you again, and this time, you'll answer me?"

Dion crossed his arms over his chest and leaned back. "Fine. So I might have wanted more."

"And did you act on it?"

He pulled his shoulders. “Maybe.”

“Would inviting the victim for a vacation in Italy count as doing more?” I handed the judge another piece of evidence, proving me to be right.

“Yes,” Dion hissed.

“So would it be safe to assume that you found it irritating, to say the least, that the victim was romantically involved with the defendant? Who also happened to be your employee at the time.”

Dion bit the inside of his cheek, his jaw twitching. I knew the only way to get to him was to hurt his ego, which was almost as big as mine.

“That’s ridiculous,” he huffed. “Why would I ever be jealous of an employee?”

“Maybe because it reminded you of the time you worked for your father?”

Dion’s eyes widened, and I saw danger crossing them right as Jones yelled another objection. I didn’t care that it was sustained because I’d already gotten what I needed.

An angry Dion.

“So, could it be that you and the victim weren’t, in fact, a couple by the time the crime was committed?” I navigated my question carefully, already knowing Dion’s facial expressions were giving me what I needed.

“I will tell you what I said before.” He sounded irritated. “A week before that shit happened, Shay-Lee came to *me*.” He hissed that last word, his eyes glancing at Camilo before going back to me. “First, he mentioned that he was done with Diesel, and then he went on and on about how much he regretted wasting his time on him.”

“Isn’t that convenient?” I swirled my finger in the air. “For months, Camilo and the victim were inseparable, which you were aware of. In fact, we have records of texts between you and the victim, in which he is clearly writing that you have no chance with him whatsoever.” I air quoted because those were Shay-Lee’s exact words. “Then, all of a sudden, after the victim was cut off financially, as it was already proven earlier in this trial, he came to you and asked for a place to live?” We’d managed to show that Shay-Lee was cut off by his dad, but Christian explained it as he was worried about his son’s growing use of forbidden substances.

“Yes, that’s pretty much how it was,” Dion answered flatly.

“And it didn’t feel off?”

Dion forced a smile. “No.”

Now, it was my turn to flash him a toothy grin. “Sounds to me like Camilo and Shay-Lee set you up, and you fell for it. Because not only did you give Shay-Lee a place to live, but you also spoiled him with gifts to buy his love.

From a twenty-thousand-dollar cat to a brand-new car, you attempted to buy what you knew you'd never have—his attention."

The vein on the side of Dion's neck popped, and he looked at me with murderous eyes. Knowing I had to push, I went on.

"Would you agree that you aren't too surprised by what I'm saying?"

"Yes."

"So would it be reasonable to assume you figured it out yourself?"

"What are you implying?" he hissed.

"That after you found out Shay-Lee was using you, you decided to get even with him. But things went wrong when he wasn't alone at the house."

He leaned closer to me so we were face-to-face. "I have an alibi."

"No one said you did it yourself. After all, you've got people working for you."

"Objection, Your Honor! Counsel is harassing the witness," Jones called just as I pushed back from the stands.

"Sustained."

I turned to face the court, a comfortable smile on my face.

"All I'm saying is that there's a reason to doubt the prosecution's version of events, which finds Mr. Bianchi to be nothing more than a witness. While, in fact, we should question why Mr. Bianchi is *not* a possible suspect."

"Objection!"

God, he sounds like a parrot.

After I got permission to go on, I moved closer to Dion.

"So, what do you have to say in your defense?"

"That I did no such thing. I wouldn't waste a bullet on a *whore*." He tilted his head, eyes moving to Camilo's. "That's what he was, and you know it, too."

I was ready to respond to Dion's words when Camilo beat me to the punch.

"You son of a bitch!" he shouted, eyes pinned on Dion as he tried to stand up. With his hands and legs cuffed, he fought off the guards who tried to restrain him. The judge called for order and for Camilo to sit down, only for him to ignore her. Chaos erupted in the room, reporters already taking pictures and recording the event. This utter disaster ended with the judge dismissing Camilo from the court and calling it a day.

While seeing my client being forcefully removed from the court wasn't ideal, seeing Eiv's and Charlie's faces was. From the knowing look in my team's eyes, we all shared the same thought: the jurors were starting to see the cracks in the prosecutor's case. But my satisfaction from getting what I wanted was soon erased as I crossed paths with Ashton, and the anger burning behind his green irises told me I was in deep trouble.

CHAPTER Forty—Two

Soren

"You son of a bitch. You actually put me on the stand."

Huffing, I turned to face Dion, who walked toward me until we stood face-to-face in the hall.

"You know it's not personal," I teased him back.

"Screw you, you cold bastard." He slapped my chest, then pulled out the toothpick he was chewing on. "You're lucky I still need you, Dane, or you'd be dead right now." He spoke while my attention carried to his thick eyebrows and hooded eyes.

Dion always had a tired expression accompanying his face, although by now, I knew he wasn't tired or bored as it might have seemed to a stranger. Hours of studying his appearance, out of mere curiosity, brought me to the conclusion that it was the combination of his deep blue eyes and thick eyelashes, along with the shape of his brows, that gave off this unique impression.

"Did you honestly just threaten me in court?" I asked, eyeing the guards behind him. To Dion's credit, he and his men always looked neat. It made focusing on the conversation a lot easier.

"Did I?" He looked around the empty hall, amusement in his eyes. "Because I don't recall doing so." He brought his toothpick back to his lips. Now, playing with it with his tongue, he tilted his head. "What were you trying to do back there?"

I knew Dion would come to find me after today's testimony, but I expected it to be a lot *less* civil. Thankfully, I was too useful for him to toss me out over some slight inconvenience.

"Don't worry." I looked around us to ensure no one was listening. The only people around us were his guards, who stood a few steps back. "It's not you I'm after."

"You're after the dad." It wasn't a question, but my lack of answer *was* an answer, and he laughed. "That son of a bitch…" He ran his fingers through his

tousled dark hair. “He called the feds on my club. You knew about it, right?” Dion had his hand in many *legitimate* businesses, but his favorite was the Venetian, the allegedly illegal club where Shay-Lee and Camilo’s love story bloomed.

“Well, since it is a *legitimate* business, I assume they found nothing?” I stated the obvious while locking eyes with him.

“Of course they came up with nothing. But it doesn’t matter. What Christian did was a clear declaration of war.” Shaking his head, he chuckled. “What a piece of shit that man is.”

“So why not give me the evidence I need and help me get even with him? I bet you have it.” I tried my luck, but all I got in response was a throaty laugh from Dion.

“That was a good try, Dane.” He patted my chest, his evil eyes letting me know that he did, in fact, have the key evidence to end this case. But like everything in his life, Dion kept his secrets close to the heart and even closer to the trigger.

“Now, between an attorney and his client, what do you have against Camilo? He’s just a kid.” Clearly, Dion held some sort of animosity toward Camilo, which made no sense to me. Camilo was nothing but a small fish in a tank full of sharks.

“He’s an arrogant brat who needs to learn a lesson or two before he comes to work for me again.”

Now it was my turn to laugh.

“He’s facing life in prison.”

Dion shrugged, seeming unfazed by the situation. “But you’re gonna get him out of it.”

“Let’s hope.”

“Hope is for the religious and the fools, my friend,” he snorted before his eyes locked on something behind me. Turning around, I saw Ashton waiting for me.

Shit.

“Let’s just say Camilo and I have a bond we have yet to fulfill…” He dragged out his words while still eyeing Ashton. “Who’s that pretty baby?”

“No one important,” I answered calmly, hiding the strong sense of protectiveness that just took over me with the slightest interest shown on Dion’s face. For a split second, I wished him death but quickly came back to my senses with the teasing smile he gave me.

“Well, it looks like ‘no one’ has some unfinished business with you, so I’ll leave you to it.” He patted my shoulder and was ready to go when he paused, his

lips nearly brushing my ear as he leaned in close. “And just so we’re clear: ever mention my father again, and I’ll be forced to find a new lawyer since mine will miraculously disappear.”

Our eyes met as unspoken understanding crossed between them. He studied me closely for a few more seconds before his lips quirked up, and he left with his guards right behind him. Even though I knew Dion wasn’t spewing out empty threats, I couldn’t say I was particularly scared. Being a criminal defense lawyer came with its own list of risks, which I knew all too well. So, while being threatened by a mob boss didn’t affect me, the sight of Ashton’s stern face as he walked toward me did.

Ash

My first mistake was deciding to have a talk with Soren. My second mistake was agreeing to have it in his car.

Once we were both settled in with the doors closed behind us, I turned to face him.

“What were you thinking today?” I snapped, unable to hold back anymore. Since the second he began questioning Dion on the stand, all I could see was the tension building up in Diesel. Long minutes passed, one question following the other, in which Soren didn’t even look back at Diesel *once*.

“If you had just glanced at him, you would have seen how he reacted to your questioning and could have stopped before he snapped.”

Diesel’s suffering from listening to this awful man was clearly evident through his posture and stern face. Yet Soren had completely ignored him, and eventually, Diesel couldn’t hold it in. Months of him being locked up and away from the boy he loved, and now he had to endure this crap?

“Please calm down, Ashton.” Soren placed his hand on my shoulder, but I pushed it away.

“Don’t tell me to calm down,” I hissed at him, the anger in my voice not coming close to the fury burning inside me.

“You’re missing the point here—”

“No. You’re missing the point.” My eyes shot to his. “I know what you think—that the court is your stage, and you’re the main actor. But that’s not the case here,” I said, recalling the conversation we’d had years ago in a vineyard in Sonoma Valley. Back then, I’d trusted him blindly, believing every word he said without a single doubt. Not anymore. I wasn’t a clueless guy who needed the validation of others. “You’re not the main actor, Soren. Diesel is. And it’s about

time you start seeing him like that, too." My expression hardened. "It might not look like it, but he has a kind heart. People are just too scared or simply don't care to look long enough to see it." I was one of those people. If only I had given him a bit more of my time and, instead of walking on eggshells around him, actually been there for what he needed. "He's also a proud young man who cares about respect. So you can't do what you did today, Soren," I urged him. "Don't allow others to disrespect him. Find a different tactic. In fact—" I pulled a paper from my pants, my fingers trembling as I offered it to Soren. "—I wrote a few ideas that might help." I tried reading the lines I scribbled during the trial, but the lines turned blurry and hardly made any sense now.

"Ashton."

"Look at this idea—"

"Ashton," he said again.

My breath caught as he slowly slipped the paper from between my shaking fingers.

"Look at me," he said, and even though his voice was nothing but soft, the order was loud and clear. Once I did, he placed his hand on my cheek. But unlike when he touched my shoulder, now I didn't feel like pushing him.

Soren's eyes softened as his gaze focused solely on me. "I will read your ideas later. I promise."

Swallowing hard, I slowly nodded, my eyes still locked with his. It was almost like the entire world stopped moving as we continued to look at each other in complete silence, the sound of the car's engine humming around us like a tweeting bird.

Little Sparrow.

My heart skipped a beat, and my whole body turned hotter. Immediately, I closed my eyes and leaned against his palm for one more second, allowing Soren to comfort me a bit more. For years, this man was the sole star in my sky. The only star I needed. But it wasn't like that anymore, so I forced my eyes open only to be met with Soren's silver irises that were still oxygen to my soul.

I hate it. I hated that after all this time, he still had that impact on my body. And while his touch felt good against my skin, I knew it was wrong. Not only because of our past, but because of our present. My focus must be on Diesel and the trial, and I couldn't afford any distractions.

So, when it felt like he was about to lean in, I pulled back. Breaking our stare, I took a deep breath to calm myself from what just went on.

"I often tell the kids that they should live life to the fullest," I began saying, thinking about all four of them. "I warn them of regrets, saying that it's a man's worst enemy. And yet, I'm filled with them." A soft smile pulled on my lips.

“Diesel is not going to be another regret,” I declared, turning to face Soren. “So start looking at him, too. Understand what he’s like. You already managed to help him once, so do it again. But this time, actually *see* who he is because he’s truly an exceptional young man.”

Soren didn’t say anything and instead kept looking at me like he never had before. What was up with that?

“What’s wrong?” I asked when he finally snapped out of that weird vibe.

“Nothing.” He grabbed the steering wheel. “I was just impressed with how mature you’ve become.”

A sense of pride overtook me as dangerous warmth filled my stomach. Knowing better than to embrace this feeling like I did in the past, I huffed. “Well, that’s what seven years does to you.” Moving my body, I reached to open the door when he spoke.

“Let me give you a ride home.”

“No need.” I glanced back at him, a half smile on my lips. “Kai’s coming to pick me up on his bike.”

Soren’s jaw clenched like he’d taken a bite from something sour, and chuckling, I got out of his car. But only after he drove off did I acknowledge how fast my heart was racing. One might think I’d just run a fucking marathon, but no. All I did was spend a few minutes in his proximity. Realizing spending time with him was becoming dangerous, I forced myself to walk faster to where Kai told me to meet him. My anxiety over the situation grew with each passing minute until breathing became difficult. But then, like a miracle, Kai called out my name, and I turned around to find him behind me. One glance at his easygoing smile was enough to put me at ease.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” he asked after I tossed myself into his arms and buried my face in the curve of his neck.

“I’m just really tired,” I muttered.

Wrapping his arms around me, he held me closer. His body was so warm, and his cologne was nice, smelling nothing like Soren’s.

Shit. Why did I just think of him again?

“Wanna grab something to eat?” Kai asked, grabbing my attention from the unpleasant feeling that gnawed in my stomach.

“Only if you’re cooking.”

“You bet, babe.” I liked it when he said that word. It was so dumb yet cute at the same time.

With his carefree personality, Kai managed to make me feel somehow better, and the night went off smoothly until later on, when we had sex and he came over my face. After he was done, he cupped my face in his palms, and I

remembered when Soren did it earlier that evening. The same awful feeling once again swirled my insides, only now I realized what it was.

Guilt.

CHAPTER Forty—Three

Kai

“Hey, Ashy,” I said after waving to the group of people I’d been with to keep it low. “What’s up?”

“Hey. Are you busy?”

Still unable to hear a word he was saying because of how loud these restaurants were, I got up and walked away from our table. “Sorry, I had to move somewhere quieter.” I leaned my back against the wall. I think this was the hall leading to the bathroom. “So what were you saying?”

“Oh, nothing special. I just asked if you’re busy, but it sounds like you are.” He went quiet for a second. “Are you still in the restaurant?”

“Nah. I came with a bunch of people to a new place that had just opened. It’s actually awesome. How about you join me?”

A group of girls passed me on their way to the bathroom, and a hot brunette with a killer body caught my eye. I was pretty sure she checked me out, so I smiled at her before going back to the call. “So what do you say? Feel like joining me?”

Ash snorted. “I’m beat, Kai. We had a long day in court, and I think we’re making progress with the jurors—”

“Come on, Ashy,” I groaned. “You need to live a little, too. You know?” Ash putting all of his focus on the trial was unhealthy. He was driving himself nuts, and sometimes, me as well. I understood that he cared, but he couldn’t stop living; I mean, what if Diesel did end up going to jail? What would Ash do then? Of course, God forbid I ever told him that. I’d implied it the other day, and in return, Ash nearly ripped my head off. I wasn’t trying to be mean, but he had to face reality.

“I’m really tired, Kai,” he said with a heavy breath.

“Want me to come home, then?” I asked while hoping he’d say no. It wasn’t that I didn’t want to be there for him. I did. But doing it every day was fucking hard, and sometimes, I needed a break to let loose. It had been a week since we

last had sex, and my dick was about to burst with how horny I'd gotten.

"No, no," he quickly said. "It sounds like you're having fun, and I'll probably just ruin your mood."

The same group of chicks moved past me again, and this time, the brunette definitely checked me out. "Are you sure?" I asked, my eyes zooming in on her ass as she passed me.

I love women in tight minidresses. "Because if you want me to come over, I will."

"No, it's fine. You do you."

One might claim he sounded half-hearted just now. And if I'd dived deeper into the long pause he took before answering me, I might have felt too guilty to stay here. But then again, I was horny, and knowing Ash, he'd give me none tonight. Therefore, I decided to stick around for a bit more, get laid, then go and be with him. It would be a win-win, right?

"I'll come over once I'm done, okay?"

"O-Okay," he said quietly, sounding as adorable as ever.

"You're so cute, Ashy." I smiled, already eager to move. "Anyway, see you soon, babe." I then hung up the call and shoved my phone into my back pocket before going back to find that sexy brunette who'd look fine on my cock.

Soren

After getting the cold shoulder from Ashton for the past six days, my team managed to drag me for a drink to some new restaurant that opened up not too far from the court.

To think, I used to be the one giving Ashton the silent treatment in the past. Now, after getting a taste of my own medicine, I realized how immature it was of me, although I knew it was childish back then, too. Only sometimes my ego got the better of me, as it often did whenever Ashton Sage was involved.

"What's the matter, Charlie?" Eiv asked, snapping me out of my thoughts.

Looking across the table, I found Charlie messing with his phone, a deep crease between his brows.

"My wife called me five times already, and I've only just seen it," Charlie sighed, scratching his head.

Snorting, Eiv reached for the bottle of wine we'd ordered for the table. "That's why I'll never get married."

"Don't be a brat, Eiv. Melody is a lovely woman," I said, sliding my glass closer to him. Understanding the message, he didn't skip my glass and made sure

to fill it until I had to stop him with my hand.

“Are you interested in Melody, Soren?” Eiv wiggled his eyebrows at me, and I had to roll my eyes.

“I think that’s enough wine for you.”

“Not even close.”

Charlie pocketed his phone, then brought his gaze to meet us. “Sorry, guys, I have to go now.”

He was about to pull out his wallet to pay for his meal when I stopped him. It would be a cold day in hell before I’d allowed my subordinates to pay.

“Go ahead, Charlie. We’ll meet tomorrow,” I told him before he thanked me, grabbed his things, and ran away.

“Where did Charlie go?” Hanna, my second co-counsel, asked as she returned from the ladies’ room.

“The wife called.”

“Aww, that’s a shame. We were having such a good time.” She pouted.

“Whatever!” Eiv said, wasting no time before ordering our table another bottle.

An hour later, Hanna also left, leaving me alone with Eiv and a half bottle of wine.

“You’re not going to bail on me, too, are you, Soren?” Eiv smirked, tossing one hand behind his chair while taking a long sip from his glass.

“Well, it’s late, and we both have work tomorrow,” I said, already looking around for our waiter to ask for the check when Eiv reached for my arm.

“You know, we can go home together.” He grinned, meeting my eyes.

Placing my hand on his, I softly removed it. “What we did was a mistake, and you know it, Eiv.”

“You know, calling it a mistake after so many times is kinda pathetic.” He snorted, then ran his fingers through his bleached hair. While doing so, the white T-shirt he wore rose just enough to reveal a strip of his toned lower stomach. Remembering how fun dragging my tongue along those fine abs was almost made me agree to his offer. *Almost*.

“We can’t get distracted, Eiv. Not until this case is over.”

He pouted his lips, his finger circling the rim of his glass. “Is it because of him?”

His question annoyed me, and I looked down at my wrist, my eyes focusing on my wristwatch, slowly counting the numbers.

One, two, three, four, five—

“You know I don’t mind when you think of him while we do it,” he purred, leaning closer so his breath was in my ear.

I found it to be extremely annoying, so much so that it was hard to focus on his lewd words, and not even counting helped.

“You can even call his name when you come—”

“Enough,” I cut him off, my voice coming out rougher than I planned.

Disappointment flashed for a split second in his bright doe eyes before he went back to being normal. “Your loss,” he tsked while pretending to look around the busy restaurant.

“It *is* my loss.” I tried to offer him slight comfort.

Eiv was a wonderful, sexy, smart guy. Yet, he wasn’t for me. And while getting down and dirty with him used to be fun, lately, I noticed he was getting too attached, meaning it was time to stop. Resisting him wasn’t easy, not because I wanted him but because he so easily offered me the comfort I lacked. He didn’t judge me the first time Ashton’s name slipped through my lips, nor the tenth time. He even encouraged it, which was just another sign that this thing between us wasn’t healthy. Not that I was one to speak about healthy relationships. For years, I’d treated Ashton like a bird in a cage. *My little Sparrow*. And while he willingly stayed inside the cage, even when I kept it unlocked, it wasn’t healthy and clearly affected us both.

The atmosphere at the table got awkward, with Eiv still refusing to make eye contact. Ready to call it a night, Eiv stopped me by cocking his head in the direction of another table.

“He’s hot.” He darted his tongue out to wet his lips. “A complete one-eighty from you, but that would do me good. Don’t you think?” he said while I turned to see who he was referring to.

Eiv’s voice turned into white noise the moment my eyes locked on Kai, who was sitting with his arm wrapped around an almost naked girl, his lips on her neck. What the hell?

I was out of my seat before Eiv could even attempt to stop me, already making my way to that cheater’s table. I had no idea what I’d say once I reached them, but that was a thought for later because right then, I saw red.

“Excuse me.” Apparently, that was the only thing I came up with. I loved that *now*, of all times, was the time for me to be awkward with my words.

Kai removed his lips from the woman’s collarbone, or breast, to be more accurate, then slowly moved his eyes to me, a deep frown glued on his idiotic face.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” he snarled, his hands still wrapped around that whore’s waist.

“Me? What on earth are you doing?” I hissed, my rage splitting between him and that lady, who I was sure made some poor choices in her life. “How dare you

toss yourself all over this cheap whore—”

“Hey!” she barged in, but I completely ignored her and went on.

“What about Ashton?”

His brows pulled close as he finally moved from beside her and stood up. “What about him, you dumb fuck?”

Shocked, I jerked back. “I beg your pardon?” My jaw twitched. “Who are you to call me dumb?” I crossed my arms over my chest, rage boiling in the pit of my stomach. “Is one bastard child not enough? You want another—”

The collar of my shirt was in his fist before I completed the sentence, and if it weren’t for Eiv, who came to stand between us, I would have already gotten punched. Not that I cared if it was Ashton’s honor at stake.

“How about we all calm down, okay?” Eiv smiled, forcing Kai to drop his hand from around me.

“I’m going to tell Ashton he’s wasting his time on a cheater,” I spat out, wishing this jerk would fucking vanish.

He laughed, but it lacked humor. “Ash knows I’m here, you OCD freak.” He spat out that word, *freak*, and as much as I would like to pretend it didn’t hurt, it did. But since what he said right before was more important than my pride, I pushed away my feelings and focused.

“What was that?” I hissed, unsure I heard correctly.

“I said, we’re in an open relationship, asshole. So you and your twink better get the fuck out before I break your face. *His*, too.” He glanced down at Eiv, who still seemed offended by the twink comment.

“You think you can beat me, huh?” Eiv snarled. “Wanna go outside and see for yourself, big guy?”

I was still processing this new information Kai had just hit me with when I noticed too many eyes were on us. Understanding that staying here was a bad idea, I placed my hand on Eiv’s shoulder. “Let’s go,” I told him, ignoring the fuss gathering around us and, mostly, ignoring Kai.

CHAPTER Forty-Four

Soren

"Is there something you want to say?" Ashton asked, keeping his eyes on the transcripts I'd handed him half an hour ago.

"Not that I can think of," I hummed, carefully studying him.

"So why do you keep glaring at me?" He glanced up to meet my stare, the look in his eyes letting me know he was angry.

We were currently sitting across from each other at the long table in our conference room. Since it was Sunday, the office stood empty apart from the two of us. Ashton would finally take the stand tomorrow, and I wanted to ensure he was ready. At first, I even tried to get him off the idea, but he insisted on testifying, claiming he wanted to help Camilo in any way he could.

"I'm not staring at you," I lied because I definitely was.

"Well, you clearly have something to say, so just spit it out, Soren."

I huffed. "Perhaps I'm just surprised you're finally talking to me." Did I sound petty?

"I've been talking to you the whole week." He flipped the page he was reading to a new one.

"Asking generic questions about the trial doesn't count as talking to me." My tone was almost as bitter as I felt.

"You're my lawyer," he muttered under his breath, putting the transcripts down. "What else am I supposed to say to you?"

I snorted at his hypocrisy then took off my glasses to buff them. "Technically speaking, I'm Camilo's lawyer, not yours. Therefore, your argument doesn't count."

From the anger on his face, I guessed he didn't find me funny.

"What the hell do you want from me?"

"Nothing." I put my now clean glasses back on.

He held my stare for a moment longer before going back to reading. I was about to do the same when he tsked.

“Besides, you haven’t talked to me in seven years. One more week won’t kill you.”

I frowned at his words because what did he mean by that?

Taking off my glasses, *again*, I placed them beside me. “What do you—”

“I see I’m not the only one working on Sunday,” Daniel announced as he popped his head into the conference room, completely unaware of the moment he’d just interrupted.

Ugh, what a fool.

I was still rolling my eyes at Daniel’s unwanted visit while Ashton quickly got to his feet and moved closer to my boss.

“Daniel, hey.”

“How are you holding up?” Daniel asked, showing off the softer side he usually kept hidden.

“A lot better, thanks to your help.” Ashton smiled nervously.

And as he went on, letting Daniel know how he planned to pay for everything despite Daniel insisting it was unnecessary, I took my time to examine Ashton. He clearly dressed differently from when we dated and went back to loose jeans and simple shirts. However, I did notice that in court, he made an effort to dress more formally. He was still bad at picking colors that suited him, but it was a part of his charm. My attention shifted back to the desk and the mess of files left on it. Bothered, I reached to fix them into a neat pile when Daniel cleared his throat. Turning to look at him, I frowned.

“What?”

“See what I mean?” Daniel patted Ashton’s shoulder. “If this one gives you any trouble, please don’t hesitate to come straight to me.”

“Don’t worry, Soren is the best.”

Oh, am I now?

I narrowed my eyes at Ashton, who gave me a pissed look in return before facing Daniel and telling him goodbye. Before leaving, Daniel mentioned something about me stopping in his office later, but who cared? It was Sunday, and I’d only come in here because of Ashton.

“Suddenly, I’m the best?” I asked once we were alone while aligning the markers and pens we used with the now organized files.

Ash glanced at my work, probably impressed, then sat back down with his arms crossed over his chest. “Come on, Soren. I know you have something to say, so just say it.”

Clearly, he was still in a sour mood.

“Fine,” I sighed and pushed back from the table so I’d have a place to cross my legs. “The other night, I went to a restaurant, and I ran into Kai.”

Ash looked almost bored as he raised one brow my way. “And?”

“And he wasn’t alone.”

Bracing myself for his reaction, I swallowed hard. But Ashton didn’t react to the news and instead kept the same unfazed expression.

“I know he wasn’t alone,” he said, ready to go back to reading when I stopped him.

“So he wasn’t lying? You truly are in an open relationship?” A muscle in my jaw twitched with this ridiculous idea.

Dropping his head, he snorted. “You’re so full of shit. You know that?” he snapped, looking up to meet my confused eyes.

“Excuse you?”

Anger took over his features. “Just admit that you came here today, dying to tell me the big news to get my reaction.” He leaned back in his chair while shaking his head. “What did you hope would happen? That I’d cry? That I’d thank you for telling me the truth?” He looked furious. “Maybe you hoped I’d jump right back into your arms. Was that it?”

Suddenly, I felt like an idiot for almost taking a punch for him.

“Do you honestly think so little of me that you’d believe I had some sort of a hidden agenda?” I hissed, anger flowing through my blood over his accusations. “I wanted to make sure you knew about it because it was the right thing to do.”

Ashton ground his jaw. “Fine. Whatever.” He looked away. “Let’s just forget it.”

“Actually, no.” I crossed my arms. “I would much rather like to know more about this *arrangement* you two have.”

“It’s none of your business,” he said.

“What on earth were you thinking, Ashton? An open relationship? Really?” Disgust oozed through my words. “You’re fine with him screwing whatever he wants before coming back home to you?”

His jaw dropped, and his cheeks flushed red. “I-It’s none of your business!”

“Of course it is. He’s putting you at risk for STDs.” I raised my voice, but so did he.

“That’s an insulting stereotype, and besides—” He leaned closer. “—we’re being safe. Not that it’s any of your damn business,” he hissed through gritted teeth, his face red with rage and embarrassment.

I highly doubted they were *actually* being safe, but that was beyond my point.

“Why are you living this way? Don’t you have any self-respect?”

“Shut up!” he shouted, jumping to his feet.

Shocked by his reaction, I looked around to make sure we didn’t catch

Daniel’s attention.

“Y-You have no right to judge me.” His voice shivered as he swallowed back a sob. “You have absolutely no right to judge me, Soren, when you’re the reason I’m like this.” He took a deep breath, his whole body shaking. “It’s because you broke my fucking heart that I can’t allow myself to fully be with *him*.”

My anger vanished, leaving me with nothing but sorrow. My heart broke with his confession, and my body ached to get up and hold him. But as I tried to do that, he raised his hand and stopped me. “I’ve asked you, over and over, to keep what happened between us in the past. But you keep ignoring me, so please, please let it go.” He calmed his breath, his hands clenched into tight fists. “Kai and I might have an odd arrangement, but it’s working for the two of us.”

My brows pulled into a frown. “Judging by your tears, it sure doesn’t look like it.”

His lips trembled before he took another deep breath. “I love being with him,” he admitted. “It’s easy.”

Easy.

Ashton tossing that word felt like a punch to the gut, but I deserved it. After all, being with me was everything *but* easy. My wealth, job, and charm were nothing but coverage to hide what I truly was. *A freak*. A man who counted photos to fall asleep or got annoyed when a bunch of papers didn’t sit in a neat pile. A man who was so scared that he’d be left alone that he did everything in his power to isolate the one person he truly loved. And now, that same person couldn’t have a normal relationship because of the way *I* had hurt him, and instead, Ashton had settled for this open relationship nonsense. I knew this was an arrangement that worked for some people, and I respected that, but not for Ashton. He was a monogamist in the purest sense of the word. He wanted to be owned, to be cherished, and loved by one person to the point of dying without the other. It was what I wanted, too, and it was exactly what I gave him—until I didn’t.

No wonder he looked at me with such hurt in his eyes after I took *our* life away.

My throat dried as an awful taste filled my mouth. I felt like crying, too, but I held back from embarrassing myself even more. And if it weren’t for how he’d just begged me to stop bringing up the past, I might have been just tempted enough to tell him why I’d left. But what was the point of digging into closed wounds?

“I understand,” I admitted, my stare locked with his because I refused to look away from his pain. “Life is a lot easier when you don’t need to deal with someone like me.” I was a confident man, but I still had my insecurities the same

as any other human. Although, it only ever mattered when Ashton was involved. Any other person's opinion never mattered. Only his. *Always* his.

Ashton's eyes widened. "Soren, that's not what I meant—"

"I know." I smiled at him because even when he was mad, he was simply precious. "I know you didn't mean it, but it is what it is. And I'm sorry for hurting you and for continuing to do so." I looked aside at the big window that splashed the room with sunlight, thinking how Ashton was my eternal sun. Even in my darkest hour, he was still there, waiting behind rain clouds to shine on my day. He could be miles away, but his warmth would forever reach me, even to the bottom of the ocean my heart was currently sunk in. "You can hate me all you want, and rightfully so. But you can't expect me to stop caring about you, Ashton, because that is simply impossible."

He didn't say a word in response, and that was okay. I didn't tell him that in order to squeeze out an emotional reaction but to make sure he knew it—that no matter what, I'd forever care for him.

CHAPTER Forty-Five

Ash

"You sure you don't want me there today?" Kai asked after handing me a cup of coffee. Our fingers touched as I took it from him, and I wished to crawl back into bed with him. Not only because I loved spending mornings with Kai but because whenever I thought about taking the stand today, my stomach turned, and I felt like vomiting.

"Yeah, I think it's for the best." I kissed his cheek and was ready to go and see if the boys were ready when Kai cupped the back of my neck, turned me around, and pulled me into a kiss.

Taken by surprise, I dove into it with an open mouth, groaning at the invasion of his tongue. With his arms wrapped around me, he pressed me closer to his body while eating my mouth until my whole body turned hot. Realizing the kiss was turning too passionate, I placed my hand on his strong chest.

"Kai, s-stop," I chuckled, trying to push him away. "If one of the kids come down—"

"I don't care," he whispered, his naughty fingers slipping underneath my shirt.

Since we had a couple more minutes, I allowed him to stroke my skin while I slowly sipped my coffee.

"I'm sorry about the other day," he said, surprising me.

"Why are you apologizing again?"

Kai told me what had happened with Soren at the restaurant that same night. I wasn't angry with him because from the start, I'd been the one to push him in the direction of sleeping with other people.

Kai shrugged, his hands still around me. "I guess it felt awkward? I dunno. I still feel like crap over it." He dropped his arms. "Do you think maybe I should stop?"

"What do you mean?" I asked, watching as he pulled his hair into a half bun. He was always sexy with that hairstyle.

“I’m talking about fucking around… I can stop doing it if it’s bothering you.”

I nearly spat out my coffee.

Putting my mug aside, I cleared my throat. “Why would you suddenly bring it up?” This was a big thing to discuss right before I was about to leave.

Kai shrugged. “I’m not sure, but I guess I don’t want to do something that’s making you feel bad. That night, I was a total asshole for not coming over right after you called.”

I was upset that evening because I did want Kai to be with me, but I also understood he had the right to do whatever he wanted.

What he was saying only made the thoughts I’d had ever since my argument with Soren yesterday resurface. Was I actually okay with Kai fucking around? Of course not, but it felt only fair to share him with others, knowing I could never give him my whole heart. Though, since he was the one to bring it up—

“Yeah,” I said, my lips curling.

“Yeah?” He seemed so happy, his smile stretching from side to side.

“I would love that, actually. But we need to sit down and talk about it further, okay?”

“Fuck, yeah, Ashy.” He bit his lips before cupping my face and planting a big-ass kiss on my forehead. “You know I love you, right?”

Whenever he told me that, I felt incredibly awkward. While I did, in some ways, feel the same, I never said it back. Now was no different, and instead of saying those three little words, which I doubted Kai even cared about, I nodded.

“I do.”

“Good.” He wrapped a thick arm around me just as Andrei walked into the kitchen.

“Hey, we’re ready to go,” Andrei said, pointing his thumb in the direction of the front door.

“Good.” I turned to face Kai. “We’ll talk more tonight, okay?”

“Sure.” He gave me that smile again that reminded me of the time we were seventeen and high on life. “Good luck today,” he added with a slap to my ass.

I groaned in frustration. He knew PDA was not allowed near the kids. But Kai was never one to follow the rules, and it was probably why I first fell for him.

Soren

“Objection,” I called, my jaw tense as my eyes set on the back of Jones’s balding

head. “We have already established that Mr. Sage took the four kids into his home out of the kindness of his heart and nothing more. At this point, the prosecution’s desperate attempts to argue otherwise are plain harassment.” My whole body tightened with anger over this despicable *Jones* and his pathetic attempt to present Ashton in a bad light.

He was trying to show that Camilo’s alleged crime had something to do with living under Ashton’s roof, which was utter bullshit.

Ever since he’d gotten Ashton on the stand, around thirty minutes ago, it had been a series of low blows and attacks on Ashton’s character. Watching my sweet boy sitting there in a suit that was too big for him, looking as anxious as ever while attempting to do his best, physically pained me. My guts swirled, and my skin crawled with every passing second of him being treated like a common criminal. And if that wasn’t bad enough, Christian Rogers had decided to show his face in court today. That smug asshole sat a few rows behind me, and every now and then, I caught him smirking as if he ran the show. *I’ll prove him wrong*. The only positive thing coming out of Christian’s presence today was Camilo’s reaction. For once, the guy seemed alert to what was happening around him, and he wasn’t just sitting beside me with his eyes pinned to the floor.

“Sustained,” the judge rightfully called, forcing Jones to move on with his crap.

“What a jerk,” Jessie hissed from where he was sitting behind me, referring to Jones. At least the kid said out loud what I couldn’t. The corner of Camilo’s lips seemed to twitch a little at Jessie’s comment, but then again, it might have just been my imagination. All three kids also testified today, and they did a great job, but the prosecution knew what they were doing by questioning Ashton last.

An idea occurred to me, and I grabbed a pen to write it down, when Jones’s new question caught my attention.

“Tell me, Mr. Sage, is it true that you grew up fatherless?” the idiot asked.

“Objection, Your Honor, relevancy,” I nearly snarled, waving in his direction.

“I promise it will all make sense in a bit,” Jones explained. Sadly, the judge accepted his argument and told Ashton to answer the question.

He shifted in the chair with his hands in his lap before leaning closer toward the small mic. “My father passed away when I was seven. My mother raised me.”

“So you *did* grow up without a father figure?”

Ashton swallowed hard. “You could say that. But my uncle was present during my childhood,” he added, and I swore under my breath.

I told Ashton not to mention his uncle, who, apparently, was involved in a

few businesses that went bankrupt and had a bad name with the IRS. Aiden, the uncle, was only a small partner in those places, but it still added shade to his name. Of course, Jones knew it as well, and he used it for his benefit.

"And where is your uncle now? Escaped overseas, maybe?"

"He didn't escape anywhere." Ashton's brows pulled into a frown. "He's traveling the world."

Jones snorted. "Charming. Just charming. Now, then, is it true that you haven't worked anywhere for the past ten years?"

Ashton seemed confused. "I-I run a small surfing shop."

"A shop that's only active for a few hours a day and hardly makes any profit," Jones said while flipping through a few financial documents before submitting them as evidence. "Surely, you can't expect us to believe you're able to financially support four teenage kids, as well as yourself, and take care of your house, with what that business makes in a year?"

Shit. This was going even worse than I'd imagined.

"N-No," Ashton said quietly.

"So, mind telling us where you got the money from?"

"My uncle left it for me, as well as the house." He sounded so embarrassed, even though he had nothing to be ashamed of. Getting money from a relative was absolutely legitimate. Not to mention, he used that money for a good cause.

"In fact, before living off your uncle's money, you lived on the account of your boyfriend of eight years. Is that correct?"

"Objection!" I jumped to my feet just as Ashton's gaze locked with mine. Seeing the fear behind his gentle eyes shocked me, so much so that I momentarily blacked out. Still stunned by my reaction, I forgot to answer the judge.

"Counselor," she said for the second time, and I was finally able to look away from Ashton. "On what grounds?" She sounded impatient.

"Character evidence."

"Denied."

I sat back down, feeling like a total failure while being forced to hear the rest of Jones's ridiculous arguments.

"Let's get this straight. Before living off of your uncle's money, you lived on your ex's. Who just so happens to be one of the attorneys representing the defendant. Is that correct?"

"Yes."

"And if I am not mistaken, Mr. Dane is seven years older?"

Ashton glanced at me, desperation in his eyes.

"I'm afraid Mr. Dane can't help you right now," Jones cut in, scaring Ashton

even more. “So please answer the question.”

“Yes.”

“So would you agree that you’re fond of older men?”

Ashton’s cheeks flushed red, and he looked down at his shoes.

“No.”

“Could you comfortably agree that Mr. Dane was much wealthier than you?”

“Y-Yes.”

“So a rich boyfriend, a rich uncle. This pattern makes me believe you’ve never worked hard to achieve any of the things you have.”

Ashton shook his head. “That’s not true.”

“How so? You’ve been given gifts your whole life.” Ashton had no reply and kept quiet as Jones went on. “Clearly, you are not a good example for four young teens who just got out of juvie. I mean—” Jones turned to face the jury. “—Mr. Sage here has never held a job in his life, graduated with average grades, and has had everything he owns given to him. No wonder Mr. Gómez didn’t do better when that was the example set for him. This connects to Mr. Gómez’s work as a stripper and his numerous affairs with older customers from his previous job at the beach club.”

With each word Jones spoke, Ashton shrank further into himself until he looked impossibly small and fragile on the stand. My entire body screamed to do something, and I wished for this hell to be over with.

“But the kids did do better!” Ashton tried to say, only causing Jones to list all the fights and trouble those four had gotten into just this year alone.

“They got into a fight on their first day of school, and that’s without mentioning the several fights Mr. Gómez had with the victim. Such as an incident in which he reportedly stepped on the victim’s chest while saying, and I quote, ‘*Yes, bitch, choke for daddy*.’”

Ashton’s face fell before he fumbled with his answer. “All of those incidents were settled in school.”

“And yet, they clearly reflect on Mr. Gómez’s quick temper and your inability to control him.”

“He’s not some beast that needs to be controlled!” Ashton argued, and I swore Camilo tensed beside me. “He’s a good kid who was framed for a crime he didn’t commit.”

Another snort from Jones. “We’ll see about that.” He then turned around and pulled another file from his table. “Lastly, I have a question regarding their school.” He cleared his throat. “They all attended Beverly Bay High after their old school burned down. Is that correct?”

“Yes.”

“Beverly Bay High, or BH, as the kids call it, is a rather prestigious school. Therefore, I can’t help but wonder how those kids managed to get in.”

Ashton took a deep breath and then straightened in his chair. “They each got a scholarship,” he said proudly. Only his pride disappeared once Jones went on.

“I have a record here showing that your first application to sign the four kids to the school, made when there was no scholarship yet, was rejected. The same applies for the other three requests you submitted the following year. The only request accepted was the fifth one, and this happened only after the school received an anonymous donation. That seems quite convenient, don’t you think?”

Ashton’s eyes widened, and he looked dead lost. “I-I don’t know anything about this.”

“Are you sure? Because it sure seems like a lucky coincidence.”

“Objection, Your Honor.” I got to my feet. “Counsel has no grounds for these claims. It’s outrageous to even suggest such a thing was done without a single shred of evidence to base it on, not to mention it’s not relevant to the case.” My hands shook with my rage, and I clenched the pen in my hand until it nearly broke. He was making a mockery out of Ashton in the most cruel way imaginable.

“Calm down, Counsel,” Jones said in a patronizing voice. “I’m done with this witness.”

I gritted my teeth so hard I feared I’d break them while glaring back at that asshole. He might be done with Ashton, but I wasn’t done with him. And he was about to pay for this shitshow he ran today.



After the hearing was done, Jones and I went to the judge’s chambers, where I argued that Ashton’s cross-examination was a poor attempt to personally attack me. Since it so obviously was. The whole matter about ruining Ashton’s character to show that he was a lousy guardian had no actual relevance to the case, yet the judge still allowed Jones to go on with it. It was only further proof of what I already knew—Christian owned Jones and wanted to try to get into my head since we were doing well. That man loved playing dirty. And it was about time we started doing it, too. Even if Daniel warned me to play fair, it was hard to win when the other team wasn’t following the fucking rules.

The conversation with the judge turned out to be a waste of time, and now I was back in the halls of the courthouse, looking for Ashton. Unfortunately,

before I could track him down, I came across Christian, who was busy talking to a few reporters and saying he couldn't wait for justice to be served and that his son's attacker deserves to spend the rest of his life behind bars. I fully agreed with Christian, although I doubted he'd fancy wearing an orange jumpsuit over his tailored clothes.

Not far from the press conference, I spotted Ashton's boys. They, too, were busy watching Christian giving his heart-wrenching speech, their faces nothing but a display of disdain.

"You did well today." I opened with that while placing a hand on Andrei's shoulder. Just like Ashton said, Andrei was indeed a remarkable young man.

"Yeah?" He looked at me, voice rough.

"Yes. Thanks to you three, now the jury knows about Camilo's and Shay-Lee's relationship and their deep connection."

A small smile took over all their faces before Andrei cocked his head in Christian's direction. "What's he doing here?"

"Playing a role. Nothing more."

"Do we know what's going on with Shay-Lee?" It was Jessie who asked.

"Last I heard, he's still in the hospital."

"Will he testify?" Levi asked, his eyes narrowed.

"Sadly, no."

"How's that even possible?" Jessie squealed, jumping off the stair rail he was sitting on.

"The victim is allowed not to testify, Jess," Andrei explained, impressing me.

"That's almost the case, but not exactly," I corrected him.

So far, Shay-Lee's refusal to testify wasn't that simple. Because of the details of this case, even though he acted with contempt of court by refusing to testify, he was only fined for that. After all, no one would send that poor kid to jail for refusing to speak of what was done to him. And since money wasn't a problem for Shay-Lee's dad, the court could fine them until the end of time, and it wouldn't nudge them from their tactic. The prosecution used Shay-Lee's rights and twisted them in order to get what they wanted, which was keeping him away from court. *Have I mentioned they played dirty?*

"In any case, we don't want to compel Shay-Lee to testify but have him do it out of his own will." *No one wants a scared victim on the stand.*

"So ask him. I'm sure he'll want to do it," Jessie said, always the optimistic.

"If only it was that simple," I snorted. "The hospital is refusing to let us even speak to Shay-Lee, so we can't even try and convince him otherwise." I twisted my lips, remembering our numerous attempts to get access to the Shay-Lee. Among other things, Christian had hired a private security team that made it

nearly impossible to get close to his son. “Besides, Shay-Lee doesn’t even remember the entire week before the attack occurred. So in any case, he can’t tell us who did it.”

“But he can say that he and D were in love and about to run away together!” Andrei jumped in, his jaw tensed and eyes focused.

Seeing the connection between these kids was enough to tell what a remarkable job Ashton had done with them. I read their files and saw where they all came from, and without a doubt, if it hadn’t been for Ashton’s good heart, they wouldn’t have been here today. He always had the ability to see into people’s hearts, regardless of the stereotypes following them.

“Have you seen Ashton?” I asked, remembering why I first came to speak with them.

“Oh.” Andrei pursed his lips while looking around. “I think he went to the restroom? I’m not sure. It’s been a while.”

“Thank you.” I squeezed his shoulder before letting go and walking in search of the lavatory.

He wasn’t in the first one I checked, but remembering there was another restroom on the second floor, I went there. Sure enough, Ashton came into view as soon as I pushed the door open. He stood by the sink, and when I came in, he quickly turned around and pretended to clean his nose.

“There you are,” I said, not mentioning a word about his attempt to hide the fact he was crying.

“Y-Yeah.” He sniffed. “Wanted to wash my face.” He tossed the used tissue into the garbage bin before turning to face me. He didn’t meet my stare and instead looked down. I still managed to get a glimpse of his bloodshot eyes, and my heart ached. I wasn’t sure if telling him something would make him feel worse or better, so I kept quiet until he spoke.

“I screwed up, right?” he asked, looking up to meet my stare. Seeing the unshed tears welling in his eyes felt unfair, and if I hated Jones before, now I loathed him.

“Not at all. He played dirty in an attempt to get back at *me*. It wasn’t about you, darling.”

He snorted, but it was sad and pitiful. “It was only about me. About what a screw-up I am.” He placed his hands on the sink, his head bowed down. “Am I really that worthless?” he asked, voice choked.

“No. You’re priceless.”

He jerked his head up right away, looking at me with wide eyes. I assumed I’d caught him off guard, but it was the truth. I knew that only yesterday, he’d asked me to keep our relationship strictly professional, but at this moment, I

couldn’t care less.

I couldn’t care less that his suit didn’t fit him perfectly or that his hair was messy. I couldn’t care less about the tap that kept dripping since I’d entered the room. I couldn’t care less about the inconsistency of the tiles on the wall, nor the dirt on the floor. I didn’t care about anything but him, and before I knew it, I’d closed the distance between us with three large steps.

Cupping his face in my hands, I forced him to look at me while using my thumbs to wipe away his tears.

“You are absolutely priceless, Ashton, and don’t you dare let anyone else say otherwise.”

His breath caught, one tear sliding down his cheek. Still staring into each other’s souls in a moment that dragged on forever, he slowly brought his hand up to cover mine, moving his fingers along my skin. My heart rate increased until it felt like a hammer pounding in my chest. Following my instincts without stopping to think, I leaned down and pulled him closer.

My finger traced along the line of his jaw, which was now covered with soft stubble, and as my lips finally met his, I held in a breath, waiting for him to push me away. And while tears still slid down his cheeks, Ashton didn’t do that but instead moved his hands to my waist. Unable to hold back any longer, I cupped his head and tilted it back, pushing my eager tongue between his parted lips, exploring his mouth with all the passion burning in my chest. Ashton shared my fervent hunger, his tongue aggressive in searching for mine in a battle for who missed the other more. I licked into his mouth, my fingers holding his jaw still. Famished, I sucked on his tongue at the same time I moved him with me until his back hit the wall. He gasped, and I held him closer to breathe him in. Ashton wrapped his arms around me, back arched and body pressed against mine. Ignoring where we were, I pushed my thigh between his legs, feeling the tension building in his slacks, and pressed harder until he cried into my mouth, the sound so sweet and lovely, making me weak in the knees. His desperation matched my own, and while I moved my hands along his body, slipping them underneath his jacket and caressing every spot I could reach, he ran his delicate fingers through my hair, undoubtedly creating a mess.

Not that I cared.

With my racing heart and burning soul, I only yearned to have more of him. No other thought seemed to cross my mind, and if it weren’t for the hand on my chest that suddenly pushed me back, I would have had him naked by now.

“S-Soren, wait,” he panted, pushing me until I had no choice but to stop. “We can’t.” Two words were enough to extinguish the fire he’d just ignited in my heart.

Disappointment washed over me, along with an unbearable chill at his putting an end to this. I pressed my lips together and nodded, my head brushing against his while I did. “Okay,” I whispered hoarsely, then stepped back, giving him room to move.

Ashton wasted no time and was out of the bathroom before I had a chance to say another word. With a groan, I turned to face the mirror. Placing my hands over the cold counter, I dropped my head with a deep sigh as I attempted to release the bundle of nerves in my chest. A moment later, I looked up to meet my reflection. My hair was disheveled, the same as my clothes. I looked like a mess, and that was without mentioning the arousal tenting my slacks, making it incredibly inappropriate to step out like this. And despite my head raging to fix my appearance, I had yet to do so. Desperate to feel Ashton’s touch over my body, I allowed myself to be locked in this moment for a while longer. Brushing my fingers along my lips, I softly pressed the pad of my thumb to where he’d bitten me, the ache nothing but medicine to my broken soul.

Once I was finally ready to go, I left the restroom and went straight to my car. I’d already turned on the engine when I noticed Jones in the parking lot. The low-life creature seemed giddy as he stepped into his car while speaking on the phone. The same rage from earlier struck me at once, combined with the freshly engraved image of Ashton crying over how this bastard humiliated him.

Pulling out my phone, I dialed a number, not surprised when he answered right away.

“There’s something I need you to do for me,” I said, fixing the rearview mirror so I’d stare back into my own vengeful eyes. “But I’ll have to tell you in person.”

CHAPTER Forty—Six

Kai

It was the weekend again, and despite Ash promising we'd discuss my suggestion about becoming exclusive, we still hadn't sat down and talked. Each time I'd tried to bring it up, Ash found a way to avoid it. If it was offering to suck me off or saying he was too tired, both ways worked. Something was bothering him, and I mean something other than the usual trial concerns. Having had enough of it, I finally came up with a plan that would leave Ash with nowhere to escape.

With the guys out of the house for the entire weekend, we had the place all to ourselves. It was a rare occasion that happened once in a blue moon, and I'd planned to take full advantage of it. Ashy thought we were having Mel over for dinner; little did he know that I'd canceled on his mom and, instead, got us a sexy picnic basket filled with his favorites for an even sexier dinner we'd have on the beach.

"Why isn't the table set?" he naively asked after he joined me in the kitchen. "My mom will probably be here soon—"

"Oh, she had to cancel," I said, grabbing Ashy's hand to pull him close before he could say something else. "Which is a good thing because my dinner plans are meant for two." I lifted the picnic basket with my free hand, enjoying the annoyance growing on his face.

"You blew my mom off?" He frowned.

"That sounds wrong," I snorted.

"Eww." He grimaced.

Letting go of his body, I spanked his ass. "Enough complaining. Now, let's move. I want to settle down before the sunset begins." And settle down we did. Thirty minutes and one checkered tablecloth later, we were sitting on a cliff overlooking the ocean. I drove us to an isolated spot and also took the initiative to turn the bed of Ash's pickup truck into a cozy lover's nest with blankets, pillows, and, well… condoms and lube.

“I gotta give it to you, Kai; I didn’t know you had it in you to be this romantic,” Ash said, pouring us both a glass of the nonalcoholic champagne I’d brought.

“Well, I’m a man of many surprises.” I raised my glass. “Cheers.”

“Cheers.” He smiled while we clinked our glasses.

Smitten with his beauty, I took a big gulp, unprepared for how bad that shit tasted. “Fuck,” I coughed, spitting out the rest of the drink I didn’t spill while choking, as Ash rolled in laughter beside me. He laughed until tears welled in the corner of his eyes, and he complained his stomach hurt.

“Stop laughing, you asshole,” I swore, upset that I’d got my shirt all wet with that crap. Since I planned on getting naked anyway, I got rid of the shirt, and that was enough to quiet Ash down.

“Maybe lose yours as well?” I wiggled my brows, and he responded with an eye roll.

“Nah. It’s too chilly.” He grinned.

“I’ll make it hot—” I reached for his side, but he slapped my hand away.

“We just finished eating. Let me digest first.”

Fair point. Besides, we had the whole night ahead of us.

With the food out of the way, we both made ourselves comfortable on the tablecloth while watching the moonlight shining over the ocean. It was a beautiful sight, but it had nothing on the one right beside me. Ash didn’t even notice I was staring at him the whole time, admiring his hot muscles, sexy lips, and hazelnut hair I wanted to run my fingers through. Licking my lips, I moved down his body, enjoying how juicy his biceps were with the way he leaned back on his arms. He was eye candy, and even though I said we had the whole night, my dick was already becoming impatient. The only thing stopping me right now from getting on top of him was knowing we still had to talk.

“Paris is going to be with me this summer.” I decided to start with a different subject and slowly move to the main one.

“Really?” Ash turned to face me. “That’s nice. I miss that kid.”

“He misses you, too.” I grabbed a cherry from the fruit plate beside me and popped it in my mouth. “I thought, maybe we can take him somewhere? Spend the summer together. Just the three of us,” I said while trying to make a knot of the cherry stem with my tongue. I succeeded. And once done, I spat it out. Ash seemed to be more focused on the cherry stem than on what I’d just said, so I went on. “What do you say?”

“There’s still a lot of time before summer.” He took the used stem and moved his finger over the small knot. “I never understood how you do this,” he murmured.

Annoyed that he was trying to change the subject, I grabbed his hand. “I know there’s time, which is good. It means we can plan where we’ll go. How about Bali? Maybe Hawaii?”

Ash took a deep breath and exhaled it slowly. “I don’t know, Kai. What about the boys? Diesel?”

He’d either be in jail or out, and neither of those options should affect us. Despite how much I cared for Diesel, his future couldn’t determine our life. But I couldn’t tell this to Ash. At least, not in those exact words.

“What about *us*?” I asked instead, my eyes focused on him. His mouth was set in a hard line, and he scratched his neck.

“What about us?”

With my hand still on his, I moved a bit closer. “At the beginning of the week, we said we’d talk about us being exclusive. You’ve been avoiding it.” It wasn’t a question but a fact. “Why?”

Ash seemed to be taken aback, and he tried to move away from me, but I didn’t allow it.

“Talk to me, Ash. What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong,” he answered quickly, avoiding my stare.

It was almost like he was hiding something.

“Come on, Ashy, I know you better than this. You seemed excited when I first brought it up. Now, it almost feels like you regret what you said.”

He shook his head, still looking at the ground. “It’s not that. It’s just that… maybe we’re rushing things?”

That made me laugh. “Rushing things?” I tilted my head down, trying to catch his eyes. “We’ve been fucking for almost seven years, babe. There’s no rushing here.”

His cheeks turned red, and as always, he was fucking adorable. Cupping his nape, I brought him close and kissed his forehead. “I think it’s about time we stop playing games,” I said, moving my lips to his neck and softly kissing him there. “I mean, we’re meant for each other, Ashy. Since we were fucking kids.”

“Kai.” He placed his hand on my chest, but that didn’t stop me from laying him on his back.

“What?” I chuckled, my fingers caressing his soft skin.

“I’m not in the mood,” he muttered, a small smile on his face.

“That’s okay.” I slid my hand down his body until reaching the waistband of his pants. “I’ll get you there.” My lips moved to the shell of his ear, and I tugged on it.

“I mean it.” He chuckled, pushed me off him, and sat back up.

With a grunt, I rolled to my back and squeezed the bridge of my nose.

“Fine.”

“I’m going to go get something warm from the car,” he said before getting up.

Opening my eyes, I looked at the starry sky and decided to try again. Ash loved playing hard to get, but eventually, he always ended up beneath me, begging me to go harder.

“Jesus, Kai, you’ve only got this stupid hoodie here,” he complained with his back to me while holding the lilac hoodie I’d stolen from his closet years ago.

“It’s my favorite,” I said, approaching him from behind.

Ash always complained that I’d kept that thing.

“I don’t know why you still have it—Kai,” he groaned when I wrapped my arms around his waist and hugged him tight.

Moving my lips to his neck, I sucked him there, ignoring his whining before going up to his ear.

“Kai, stop it,” he rasped as I sucked on the shell of his ear and slid my hands underneath his shirt. “Kai—”

My hard cock ached in my jeans, and I pushed my hips forward, rutting against his ass while cupping him over his pants. He was getting hard himself, so I squeezed him firmly, enjoying how his erection fitted perfectly into my palm.

“Just relax, babe.” My breath grew heavier with my arousal. “You’re already hard.”

“I said, stop it!” he yelled a second before he turned around and—

Smack.

“What the fuck, Ash?” I snarled after he punched me to the ground. Shocked, I moved a hand over the spot he’d just hit.

“I-I told you I’m not in the mood.” He breathed heavily and took a step back until he was met with the truck while shaking his hand.

“So you punched me?” I snapped, getting up to my feet. “What the actual fuck?” I shouted in his face, not giving a shit that he’d flinched like a scared pup.

Fury ran through my veins at his rejection, and I spat some blood on the ground before bending down to pick up my shirt. “You actually punched me!” I rubbed my jaw, still not believing he did that.

“L-Let me see—” He tried touching me, but I pushed his hand away.

“Fuck off, Ash.” I began collecting our stuff back into the car while trying hard to calm down and block him out because the longer he kept saying he was sorry, the angrier I got.

Ash

After Kai packed our things, we got inside the truck and drove back home in complete silence. Whenever I glanced at him and saw the bruise on the right side of his face, my stomach twisted with guilt. I'd already been feeling guilty this whole week over that kiss I shared with Soren, and tonight, I'd just added another match to the fire.

I knew Kai would bring up the being exclusive thing tonight, and after avoiding the subject for the past few days, I thought I'd finally be ready to discuss it. But when the time came, I got cold feet. He was already planning our summer together while I was still thinking about how good Soren's lips felt on mine and how hard he'd gotten me in a matter of a few seconds. I didn't want to feel this way. I didn't want to think of Soren when it was Kai's lips kissing me, and it was why I originally shoved him off me. Only that he kept pushing, and I snapped.

Literally.

But if tonight had taught me something, it was that I had to come clean and tell Kai about the kiss. It was only fair to confess and admit that even though I kissed Soren back, it was in the heat of the moment, and I had no intention of ever doing it again. I'd already made up my mind about wanting to be with Kai, and I just had to tell him that.

Kai pulled the car in front of the house, and I unbuckled myself, ready to get out, when I noticed he hadn't killed the engine.

"Are you not coming in?" I asked, anxiety already gnawing at me.

"I'm going home," he said, voice cold, not even bothering to look at me.

"Kai—"

"Good night, Ash." He sounded so angry.

Deciding not to make things worse, I exited the car and closed the door behind me. Kai didn't waste time before driving away, and as he did, a sharp pain pierced my guts, forcing me to my knees. It was guilt—pure guilt mixed with fear that I'd just made a huge mistake.

Tears fell down my face, and I let out a choked sob, one I tried to hush. I felt so lonely and hated myself for making one mistake after another. I was nothing but a fuckup. First, it was Diesel, and now Kai. Who knew who'd be next?

A wet nose rubbed the side of my face, and I turned to see Pacha staring at me with sad eyes.

"Hey, boy." I moved a hand along his dark coat, and he thanked me with a big lick. I chuckled, half choking on my snort, when Puma and Pooh also joined us. With the three dogs, I got back to my feet and walked into the house. It was dark and empty, and I hated it. I missed the sound of Jessie's music carrying through the walls. Levi's complaining that he wasn't catching up with his

homework or Andrei’s voice as he talked with Miles for hours over the phone. I mostly missed the sound of Diesel lighting up another cigarette on our back porch and even the arguments he’d pick with the others.

I have to fix it.

That was the same thought I’d had for months.

I’d have to fix it all because, without Diesel, this place would never feel like a home. And not just for me, but for all of us.

“Come,” I told the dogs. “Let’s go to bed.”

CHAPTER Forty-Seven

Ash

With my hands shoved in my pockets, I looked around the empty restaurant. It was early afternoon, meaning it would stay closed for at least a couple more hours. Yet, the staff was already in the kitchen, busy with preparation for rush hour. On most weekends, I joined Kai at the market to shop for his restaurant. Today wasn't one of those times, and when I woke up to an empty bed this morning, sadness pierced my heart. That was why I decided to come here as soon as I could.

A few minutes had passed since I'd arrived, and finally, Kai stepped out of the kitchen, wearing his chef clothes. He was always so sexy dressed this way, and I was ashamed to admit that, more than once, we'd fucked in this kitchen.

"Hey," I said, pushing back from the table I leaned against.

He stopped before me.

"Hey."

I twisted my lips, feeling guilty over the black eye he was sporting, thanks to me. "Sorry about that." I reached my hand and softly caressed the bruise.

He hissed at the touch, making me chuckle.

"Does it still hurt?"

"Like a motherfucker."

I tried to pull my hand away, but he grabbed my wrist, keeping it close.

"But I totally deserved it," he said with a crooked smile that was sinfully sexy.

"No, you didn't." I looked between us, biting my lips. "I shouldn't have hit you so hard."

"Well, I didn't listen to you when you asked me to stop, and that's an asshole thing to do." He poked my chin, causing me to look up and meet his blue eyes.

His smile was contagious, and my lips immediately pulled up to match his.

"You mean it?"

"Yeah, I do." He then moved a hand over his thick stubble that was begging

to form a mustache. “I felt rejected, and it sucked, Ashy.”

“I know.” My throat dried up. “I’m sorry about that.”

“I’m not talking just about yesterday.” He tilted his head to the side, his eyes studying me. “This whole week, you’ve been avoiding me, and I hated it.”

Kai had a point. I *was* avoiding him because of my kiss with Soren. Last night, I wanted to tell him about it, but now, when things seemed to be okay, maybe it was unnecessary.

“I’ll stop pushing you away. I promise.”

Kai was about to say something in response when a woman stopped beside us. She looked young, and because of her clothes, I assumed she was one of the staff here.

“Something wrong?” Kai asked her, sounding unfazed.

“No, I just wanted to give you this.” She handed him a paper bag, which he took without even checking what it was. “Thanks,” he added, not bothering with another word before going back to me.

Getting the message, the girl left.

“Who’s that?”

“One of our new waitresses. She’s nice, just started college.”

“Oh.” Peeking over Kai’s shoulder, I watched her as she walked away when Kai suddenly hooked his finger in the loop of my jeans and pulled me close.

“How about we spend the night at my place?” he asked, his hands keeping me pressed to him, his spicy cologne surrounding me. “We can eat dinner, then watch a movie?”

Loving the sound of that, I nodded and leaned my head against him.

“It’s a date.”



“Right there, yes, fuck, yes,” I cried, half my face shoved into the pillow while Kai’s cock hit my prostate after he repositioned himself behind me.

“Yeah? You like that?” he rasped, voice oozing with lust while his hands grabbed my waist, moving me with the rhythm of his fervent thrusts.

“Y-Yeah, I do,” I moaned, eyes rolling to the back of my head with how good his dick felt inside of me.

After getting to Kai’s condo, we skipped the movie and dinner altogether and went straight to the fucking. What started in the kitchen led to the shower, which eventually brought us to Kai’s bed. Right now, I was on all fours, body covered with sweat, while Kai was hitting me from behind in the good, old doggy style.

It was messy, dirty, and hot—all the things I loved about him.

"You're so tight, babe," he groaned, pounding my ass, his balls smacking against me with each move. Rolling his hips, he increased his pace, and I began pushing back against his thrusts. My cock, heavy and full, hung between my burning thighs and ached for relief. Unable to hold back, I sent a hand down and grabbed myself. My strokes matched Kai's rhythm, my fingers squeezing my dick tighter, milking pearls of precum while Kai kept telling me how sexy I looked. Soon, I burst in my fist at the same time Kai came into the condom, his body shaking until he was done and drained.

He pulled out and slumped on his back, his chest rising and falling with his heavy breaths. Doing the same, I watched him as he rolled off the condom and tied it up.

"Maybe next week we can get tested?" I offered.

After tossing the used rubber, Kai got back to lying beside me, one arm tucked under his head.

"Yeah?"

I nodded. "If we're going to start sleeping just with each other, why not? Condoms suck."

"What you're saying is like music to my ears, babe." He grabbed my jaw and planted a kiss on my lips. Not surprised when he deepened it, I opened my mouth for him, and he pushed his tongue inside. If it weren't for my stomach suddenly growling, we'd probably have gotten into another round.

"Someone's hungry," he chuckled into the kiss.

"Well, we skipped dinner and went straight to sex." I tossed my arms around his shoulders and flopped my head. "Now, I'm starving and could definitely use some food."

Smacking my ass, Kai kissed my head. "Go and take a shower while I start cooking us dinner."

"Well, that's music to *my* ears."

He winked at me before getting up and walking out of the room.

Smitten, I moved my ass and walked over to the bathroom, taking my sweet time under the hot water. We had great sex, but cleaning up afterward was never fun. I didn't find sex to be something dirty unless I wanted it dirty, but properly cleaning before and after was a habit I'd learned from Soren. He was always strict when it came to hygiene. Or when it came to washing his cum out of my used ass—*Shit*. Now he was in my head again, even though he shouldn't be.

Frustrated, I turned off the tap and grabbed a towel from the hanger. Soren had texted me this morning, but I hadn't opened it. Not yet. Positive that his text wasn't about the case, because if it were, he would have called, I ignored it. He

probably wrote me something about the kiss again. I should have deleted it right away, as I did with the other texts he'd sent me over the week. Out of sight, out of mind, right? Anyway, I'd delete it as soon as I was done drying up.

Back inside the bedroom, I put on a pair of Kai's sweats and looked around for my phone—it was charging on the dresser. Walking over there, I noticed the white paper bag Kai had gotten from his waitress sitting beside it. *Didn't he plan on putting it away?*

I grabbed my phone when curiosity got the better of me, and I decided to peek inside the bag. Bright lilac immediately caught my eye, and I dropped my phone to check the bag's contents with two hands. My mouth split open as I pulled the hoodie, *my hoodie*, out of it. With shaking fingers, I held it in front of me to make sure it truly was my hoodie and not some mistake.

Yes.

There was no mistake about that.

This was the same hoodie Kai had stolen from my closet years ago, with the sleeves still stained with my blood. The same hoodie he'd had with him in the car only yesterday.

Wanting to be exclusive, my ass.

Rage I didn't know I was capable of feeling took over me at once, making me understand that saying about your vision turning red, because right now, I was seeing fucking crimson. Clenching the damn hoodie in my fist, I stormed out of the room and walked straight to the kitchen.

"You fucking liar!" I shouted at him, tossing the damn cloth in his shocked face. Glancing at the hoodie and back at me, it took Kai a moment to realize what was going on before he raised one hand before him.

"Ash—"

"You fucked her, didn't you?" My own words hurt me as I tossed them into the air. Swallowing hard, I shook my head. "You dropped me off like I was this piece of shit and then drove away to fuck some eighteen-year-old waitress!"

"I can explain."

"I don't give a shit about your explanation." My face heated up, and my throat dried out, but I didn't feel like crying. No. I felt like breaking something, smacking it to pieces, and if it could be Kai's face, that was even better.

"I felt rejected, okay?" he yelled, trying to defend himself. "You were cold, and I just—"

"You just what, Kai?" I shook my head, taking a step closer until we were face-to-face. "You just what?" I urged him to speak as he began to stammer his lame excuses. When he shut up, I went on. "I didn't want to sleep with you, so you went out and got laid? Is that seriously all *this* is to you?" I waved between

us, spit flying from my mouth.

“I fucked up, okay?” He swallowed hard, brows pulling close. “But she meant nothing.”

“None of them do, Kai.” My voice turned high. “All those strangers always mean nothing to you while, in fact, I’m the one who means nothing to you.” I pointed at myself with two hands, my whole body vibrating.

“That’s bullshit!” Grabbing my shoulders, he squeezed me hard. “You mean everything to me, Ashy. You know that.”

I shrugged him off me, my eyes rolling. “I mean everything to you when it suits you, Kai. Only then. When things don’t go your way…” I raised my hands in a mock surrender and stepped back. “When things don’t go your way, you don’t give a flying fuck about me or anyone else. You know—” I pointed over to the floor, where he dropped my hoodie. “—the fact that you kept this shit at all is just more proof of that.” I tsked, remembering that damn birthday where he punched me to the ground after using my thighs to jerk off. “Are you even aware of what you did to me that night?” My lips pulled back in a silent snarl. “You made me want to die, Kai. But of course, you wouldn’t know that because all you ever care about is your own ass.” With that, I turned around and began walking back to his room to grab my things. Sickness crawled down my spine with the thought that we’d just had sex. I felt filthy. Rotten to my core with regret.

“You’re overreacting, Ashy. It was just sex, and it wasn’t like I hadn’t fucked other people until five days ago,” he tried groveling while following me around the house.

“Un-fucking-believable,” I hissed, unable to even face him. “You’re un-fucking-believable.”

Going into his room, I grabbed my phone and quickly tossed a shirt over my body. When I was ready to leave, Kai stood at the doorway, not letting me pass.

“Can you just calm down and talk to me?”

“No, asshole.” I pushed him aside and walked into the hall. “I’m getting out of here.”

“Come on, babe. I’m sorry, okay?” He walked before me, placing his hands on my shoulders and forcing me to stop. “I’m fucking sorry.”

His blue eyes begged me to stay, but the same as his words, I didn’t fall for it.

“Move aside, or I’ll punch you again. And this time, I’ll break your nose.”

He seemed uncertain if I was telling the truth, but when I didn’t budge a single muscle, he cleared the way.

“You know, you’re one to talk.” The ridges of his neck stood out, his lips

pulling out on one side. “Like you’ve not been obsessed with *him* since he returned.”

Of course he’d try and throw a low blow. Kai was never one to know how to lose, and he always had to have the last word. To stab you with a knife and twist it for *good* measure.

Unable to bear one more minute of looking at him, I turned around, grabbed my keys from the counter, and got out of his apartment, not being subtle about slamming the door behind me.

I needed a break from him and his bullshit. A break until I calmed the fuck down because I was still vibrating with rage. Thick, bubbling anger that steamed inside my body like hot lava.

I felt betrayed and fooled. Mostly, I felt worthless. Kai couldn’t even wait for us to talk and set things right before he went out to stick his dick in the first living creature he found. He didn’t stop to think about my feelings for one moment after he left me at the house and, most certainly, before he shoved his cock into that girl’s vagina.

He was a pig. An asshole. A complete jerk who had always done whatever he wanted ever since we were fucking teens.

Now, the tears in my eyes weren’t ones of anger but of pain. Sadness over how stupid I’d been to think, even for a second, that he meant it when he said he wanted to change. What did I expect? For years, I’d gotten used to him getting whatever the fuck he wanted. Fucking other people? Check. Screwing me when he wanted? Check. Sucking his cock? Check. Giving him money to open up his restaurant? Double check.

I pulled my truck out of the parking spot in a quick move and got on the road so fast I nearly hit another car. The bastard honked at me before rolling his window down to curse my mother.

“Fuck you,” I shouted back, then rolled up my window and hit the gas. Being this angry wasn’t like me. It was Kai’s fault. He was the one to bring this ugly monster out of me. It made me feel sick, literally sick, because I didn’t know what to do with all this rage. Breathing became harder, and focusing on the road almost seemed impossible. I switched between lanes, ignored stop signs, and dashed down the road when an idea finally came into my mind.

Kai never stopped to think about me before screwing someone else, so why should I?

CHAPTER Forty—Eight

Soren

"I'm coming," I called to the person impatiently knocking on my door. Checking my watch, I saw it was late at night. Whoever thought bothering me at this hour would be a legitimate thing to do was about to get a piece of my mind.

"Why on earth would you—*Ashton*?" I gasped, my anger turning into a pleasant surprise at the sight of him.

"You weren't sleeping, were you?" he asked, allowing himself into the house and leaving me to close the door behind us. I quickly followed him in, checking myself in the mirror I had at the entrance before he turned to face me.

"No, I was working." I answered his question while moving a hand over my clothes. I was in cashmere pants and a simple shirt meant for sleeping. I'd have changed into something more proper if I'd known he was coming.

"Working? At this hour?" He frowned.

"Well…" Nudging my glasses back into place, I smiled at him. "Someone said they'd never forgive me if I lost this case." He kept a straight face, so I went on to ask the question standing on the tip of my tongue. "What are you doing here?"

With his bottom lip tucked underneath his teeth, Ashton looked around the house that was once his as well. I'd never bothered selling this place after moving to NYC, secretly hoping to return here one day.

"Isn't this house too big for one person? Don't you get lonely?"

"I often do."

His eyes met mine in a heartbeat, and although his beauty took my breath away, right then, I focused on the redness in his eyes and the tiredness in them. Something was clearly wrong, or he wouldn't have shown up here this late.

"Is everything alright—"

My words were cut off as he tossed himself at me. With no warning, Ashton closed the distance between us, his hands cupping my face as he smashed our mouths together in a kiss. It took me a moment to realize what was happening

before sending my arms around his body and wrapping them tight. I pulled him with me, almost like I was trying to breathe him in.

My damn glasses got in the way, and I wanted to take them off, only for him to snatch them off my face for me. His eagerness left me shocked, yet before I could react to his surprising aggression, he kissed me again. Licking into my mouth, his tongue clashed with mine and fought for control before he removed his lips and began kissing me everywhere. My chin, jaw, and neck, he placed his lips wherever he could reach until I had to stop him.

It wasn't that I wanted to stop—after all, my cock was already swelling in my slacks—but I had to pause and check on him.

"Hold on," I whispered, trying to put some distance between our heaving bodies.

A deep frown escorted his pout once I parted my mouth from his.

"As much as I'm thrilled by this surprise, something is obviously wrong with you," I said, my fingers stroking his short hair.

Leaning into me, he closed his eyes, lashes brushing his cheeks, and shook his head. "Please, I don't want to talk." His words sounded like a prayer, and forever his loyal servant, I complied.

"Okay." Slipping my glasses from between his fingers, I placed them on the counter before I grabbed his hips and lifted him at once. With his arms already on my shoulders, he crossed his legs around my waist, allowing me to carry him in. His lips were back on mine, fingers in my hair. He kissed me nonstop, only taking small breaks to get some air until we reached the main bedroom.

"Have you showered?" I asked.

"No. I'm dirty. Wash me."

His words sent bolts of arousal to my already hard cock, making me weak in the knees. Like a monster just awoken from its slumber, my hunger for him burned in my stomach, and I cupped his face, devouring his mouth on our way to the bathroom.

He stripped off his clothes immediately, not waiting for my orders before he stepped into the shower. His naked skin was a work of art. One that was engraved into my memory, although he'd changed, and now, the changes were more visible than ever. He was stronger, bigger, and not at all fragile. His muscles took the shape of adulthood, his waist thicker, abs more toned, and his chest covered with a dusting of light hair. He was built like a Greek god, and my mouth watered just from looking at him. But my eyes then darted to the pile of his clothes on the floor, and my skin itched.

"Take off your clothes, too," he said, or should I say, ordered, successfully getting my attention back.

Oh, how the tables have turned.

With a smirk, I stripped naked, my eyes locked with his the entire time. He licked his lips, *the little tease*, and I knew it was time to set the record straight over who was in charge here.

“Turn around. Hands on the wall,” I said while slowly moving my fist along my length.

Ashton proved to be as obedient as always and did what he was told without saying a word.

“Spread those legs for me, little Sparrow.”

A shuddered breath escaped him at the sound of his old nickname, and he glanced at me over his shoulder. His brilliant lips were slightly parted, waiting to be sucked again, while his eyes searched mine for approval. That was what he came here for, after all, to get the confirmation he so desperately sought.

“Good boy,” I praised him once he widened his stance and arched his back, giving me a full view of his glorious ass. My dick was already dripping with the need to be buried inside his pink hole, but I restrained myself. Removing my hand from my cock, I strode into the shower and joined him under the hot stream.

Not wasting time, I moved my hands to his firm chest, squeezing his juicy pecs until he groaned with pleasure. Once satisfied with his reaction, I brushed my thumbs over his perked nipples while pressing myself into his behind, my cock settling in between his thick thighs. Ashton pushed his ass back against me while I continued to play with his nipples, squeezing sweet moans from him until he turned frantic.

“T-Touch me,” he panted.

“Ask again. Properly, this time.” I leaned my cheek against the side of his head, enjoying the sound of his heavy breaths.

“Touch me, Soren. Please.”

I moved my mouth to the shell of his ear, planting a small kiss before tugging on it. “You mean here?” I pinched his nipple, and he squirmed.

“My cock. Please, Soren. I feel like I’ll burst.”

“When you’re saying such cute things, who am I to refuse?” In a sharp move, I turned him to face me and then dropped to my knees before him.

He gasped, placing a hand on my shoulder while using the other one to cover his cock.

“W-Wait.” His cheeks turned red. “I’m not shaved…” he muttered, not meeting my eyes. “I know it repulses you.”

My brows pulled into a deep frown, and for a second, I felt horrified. Did I actually make him think he could repulse me? Yes, I loved his smooth body, but

only for the control it gave me over him. A sort of ownership. Back then, I was a foolish kid who couldn't control the crap he spat out. Now, I knew better and had no intention of letting Ashton fear he could ever disgust me. Seeing how deep the scars I'd left on him were made me determined to do better and become the man he once saw me as.

Pushing his hand out of the way, I leaned in until my nose was buried in his pubes and took a deep inhale. He smelled good and clean, and I savored his masculine musk before moving my lips to kiss along his girth, slowly going up until reaching the crown of his cock. Water from the shower got in my face, but that didn't stop me from parting my lips and swallowing him whole.

Dear Lord. I'd missed the taste of him. I missed the weight of him on my tongue and the feeling of having my mouth filled with his heavy cock.

"O-Oh, God," he moaned, his voice soaked with pleasure.

I began moving my head, sucking his dick in slow, long movements until his body trembled.

"Y-Yes, it feels so good," he cried, his hands finding their way to my hair.

Pleased, I slid my fingers to his ass and spread his cheeks, my mouth still around him as I circled his entrance. His rim was already soft, and knowing a thing or two about anal, I realized he'd been with another man before coming here. Possessiveness took over me, and I let go of his cock.

"Why did you stop?" he asked, brows curved.

Not bothering to answer, I spun him around and pushed him against the wall.

Spitting into my hand, I brought it to his ass, then shoved two fingers in. He gasped, all the air leaving his lungs as I added another.

"I understand now why you wanted me to wash you," I whispered in his ear. "It's because you've been a naughty boy. Haven't you?"

Glancing at me over his shoulder, he nodded, then closed his eyes. "O-Oh, fuck."

"Answer me."

"Y-Yes."

"Yes. what?"

He opened his eyes, tears welling in the corners. "I've been a bad boy."

My lips pulled into a wicked grin. "But you've come home," I said, voice promising, even though I knew tonight was only temporary. It didn't matter because, for that moment, my little Sparrow was back at my mercy. It had taken me years to learn that unless its wings were cut, a sparrow could never be tamed; therefore, if I wanted to be with Ashton, I had no choice but to let go and hope that he'd return.

Fucking him now with four fingers, I cupped the back of his neck and pulled

him into a kiss. I pushed my tongue between his parted lips, tasting everything he had to offer while moving my fingers inside him, reaching the spot that I knew made him see stars. The whole time my dick was throbbing, asking for me to give it a bit of attention. Knowing I was losing my patience and seeing how Ashton was all but a quivering mess, I pulled my fingers out and turned off the water.

I took his hand in mine and guided him out of the shower. My precious boy allowed me to dry him up before I led him to our bed. Yes, even though he was no longer living here, it was still his bed. His home. His space. The same rule also applied to my heart, which, whether it liked it or not, still belonged to him and him alone.

All these thoughts were irrelevant, though, as Ashton hadn't come here for that. He came to get fucked. And that was exactly what he was about to get.

Tossing him on his back, I reached for the nightstand to pull out some lube and a box of condoms I kept there but had never used before. Whenever I hooked up with someone, not that it happened frequently, it was in a hotel, and I used condoms from my wallet. I never brought my hookups home; that also included Eiv. No one was worthy of that privilege. No one but the man lying beneath me.

"H-Hurry up," Ashton cried, his eyes following me as I rolled down the condom over my aching length. "I need you inside me." And if he wasn't erotic enough thus far, the brat spread his legs wider and moved his hand over his hole, pushing his fingers inside. My body shuddered with my arousal, and I quickly moved above him.

"You keep teasing me like this and I might never let you leave this bed."

Once he took his fingers out, I squeezed a decent amount of lube from the bottle and spread it over his ass and my dick.

He wrapped his arms around my shoulders and pulled himself up until his mouth met mine. "Fine with me," he rasped over my lips before darting his tongue out to lick along my jaw until it reached my ear. "Now, fuck me like only you know how."

I had no idea when he'd become this bold, but I was obsessed with this new side of him. He was absolutely mind-blowing.

Grabbing his hands, I moved them over his head before aligning my dick with his entrance. With his wrists in my fist, I shoved inside of him until I was settled all the way in, letting out a long breath as all the tension left my body, only to return twice as hard when he pushed back against my cock, nearly making me come on the spot.

Grinding my jaw and biting my lip, I held still.

“W-Why aren’t you moving?” he whined, his face an inch away from mine.

I leaned in to cover his lips with mine, our tongues swirling around each other as I finally began moving. Rolling my hips, I pushed in and out of him, savoring each thrust as if it would be the last. Ashton’s body quivered beneath me, his skin hot and covered with sweat, his moans deep and on the verge of crying. I needed more of him, so much more that I decided to lose control.

I dropped my hold from around his wrists, straightened up, and grabbed his waist.

“W-Wait,” he tried to stop me, but I didn’t listen before I thrust forward with pure force, bottoming out inside him. Ashton’s lips parted as he gasped for air, but that didn’t stop him from crying for more.

So I gave him more.

Fucking into him like a man on a mission, I dug my fingers into his hips, probably leaving a mark. *Good*. I wanted him to carry my touch long after I’d removed my hands from his skin.

“You feel so good,” I panted. His ass was so tight, making it hard not to burst at any given moment, but I wouldn’t come until he did. And simply because he always came first, literally and figuratively. He was the only one that mattered, in and out of bed.

“R-Right there,” he cried, back arching off the bed while his hands clenched the sheets. “Right there.” He turned his face to the side until it was half shoved into the mattress.

“Come here.” I grabbed his body and lifted it with me, changing position so now he sat on my lap, facing me, while I leaned back on one hand. “You’re so beautiful,” I whispered, my fingers tracing along his jaw.

Ashton’s eyes were unfocused, his cheeks flushed red, and his hair damp with sweat. I doubted he heard my words, but even if not, that was okay.

I bucked my hips up at the same time he plunged down on my cock before he started rocking on top of me. With my dick still inside his tight ass, he leaned back and placed his hands on my legs for balance, so his entire weight was helping each of my thrusts to hit him harder. His cock throbbed and bobbed up and down with his moves while precum decorated his flushed tip. It made my mouth water, and finally, I took his dick in my hand and started stroking him while he rolled his hips on top of me. Our pace matched perfectly, and it didn’t take long before his lips parted in a voiceless cry, and he shot his load between us. The hot liquid spilled into my fist and dripped between my fingers just as I felt my balls tightening and my muscles tensing. My heart raced at an erratic pace, and I bucked into his body one last time before I came, hard, deep, and recklessly, until I had not a single drop left in me to give. Still inside his warm

walls, I felt like I had finally returned home. Pressing my head to his chest, I closed my eyes and allowed the sound of his heartbeat to surround me. It was a bittersweet moment that I knew would be gone soon.

Yet, before I could dive deeper into the storm of emotions swirling inside me, Ashton dropped his body on me, his breaths shallow. He was exhausted in more ways than one, and I could understand why. I bet it had taken a lot out of him to come here tonight, to open a grave and pull out the skeletons he hoped never to see again.

His body turned limp in my arms, but I didn't bother to move him. Instead, I hugged him closer, my fingers pushing his hair away from his precious face.

"Please come back to me, little Sparrow," I whispered in his ear, doubting he was still awake to hear me. "I miss you so much."

Ash

I opened my eyes to a dark room, confused about where I was, until I noticed the arm tossed over my waist. Turning my head, I saw Soren was right beside me, eyes closed, lips slightly parted. His sleeping face made him look much younger—no creases or frowns, just calmness. He only ever looked this peaceful when he slept or when we were far away on the other side of the world, just the two of us.

Warmth filled my chest, bringing an easy smile to my lips just from remembering those trips we took together. How young and carefree I was, not a single worry on my mind. If only it were still the same and my problems could be cured with a trip to Italy.

Knowing better than to fall down that rabbit hole, I forced myself to remember why I was in Soren's bed to begin with. It wasn't to reunite with him. *No*. I was still mad at how he'd left me alone and broken years ago, and a one-night stand, as amazing as it was, wouldn't suddenly change that. I was here because of Kai, because of our fight yesterday, and because of how angry I was left by his betrayal. And yet, until right that second, Kai's name hadn't crossed my mind even once. The moment my lips touched Soren's, it felt like everything around me ceased to exist and that he was the sole thing in the world that made my heart go on. The passion of his kiss, the touch of his hands, and the weight of his body on top of mine—all brought me back to the past. To what we used to be. To what *I* used to be with him.

But what scared me the most was that having sex with Soren didn't only remind me of the past. It forced me to acknowledge the changes in him I'd

already seen and chose to ignore. Like when he dropped to his knees and buried his face in my pubes or when he constantly brushed his fingers over my chest hair. Those were small things for most people, but not to him. Everything mattered to Soren, from the color of my shirt to the aftershave brand I used. Yet, last night, he put it all aside. But why? What happened in the years we were apart?

I cut that line of dangerous thinking right away. *This* was just sex, and even though it was fantastic, it changed nothing. I still had no interest in knowing what had made him leave.

Keep lying to yourself, Ash.

And while my logic made perfect sense, when it was time to sneak out of his warm bed, every bit of my body urged me not to do so. I still did it, and naked, I walked back to the bathroom, where I found my clothes tossed on the floor—*another change because in the past, he'd fold them immediately*—and quickly picked them up. While getting dressed, I noticed he'd cleaned my body. He was always so attentive, and I almost forgot how nice it was to be taken care of.

My phone was in my sweats pocket, so I pulled it out and checked the time. It was almost 4:00 a.m., and because sleeping would probably not happen tonight, I decided to go surfing. It would clear my head and, hopefully, help me forget the mistake I'd made tonight. And so I did. Only throughout the whole time I surfed, one thought kept my mind busy: How could something that feels so right be a mistake?

CHAPTER Forty—Nine

Ash

I met my mom on the beach after she also came to catch some waves. We spent the whole morning surfing, which was a nice distraction from the shitshow I called my life. Once done, we decided to eat lunch at her place. The boys wouldn't be back until the evening, so I was in no hurry to return home. After I left Soren's house, I visited home first to check on the dogs and only then went to the beach. Now, I took them with me over to Mom's.

"Where's David?" David was her boyfriend of three years.

"He's with his kids today."

"That's nice," I hummed, tapping the table with my fingers while Mom checked out the fridge. "How about burgers?" She pulled out a package of ground beef.

"I slept with Soren," I blurted out, watching for Mom's reaction.

Putting the beef back inside the fridge, she kicked the door closed, then turned back to face me. "Yeah, burgers sound great," she said, walking toward me. "How's that for an answer?"

"Sorry," I muttered, already feeling like it was a mistake to bring up the subject. I was never good at keeping things bottled up—not with her, anyway. Not having many friends, my mom was basically the only place I went to unload. She was my official complaining address, whether it was problems with the boys or just life struggles.

"So you slept with Soren?" she asked after sitting beside me.

"Yes."

"When?"

"Last night." She said nothing, and I knew it was her sign for me to give more details. "Kai and I got into a huge fight after he'd been a total jerk, so I just drove there and…"

"Fucked your anger out?" she offered, and I frowned.

"Mom." I'd forever be caught off guard by her directness.

She chuckled. “It is what it is, babe.”

“I told you not to call me babe,” I grunted while scratching my head. “Kai calls me that, and it’s just weird when you do it, too.”

“Fair enough.” She dropped her smile. “What are you going to do with Kai? I mean, you’re going to tell him, right?”

That was the thing killing me. I was still pissed at him, to say the least, but also guilty as fuck over sleeping with Soren. Sure, Kai fucked people all the time. *That’s how I’d gotten into this situation*. But the people he slept with were strangers, while Soren… definitely *wasn’t* a stranger. With my heart rate increasing each time I thought back on last night, I also couldn’t pretend it was a one-night stand that I could simply put behind me and go on with my day like nothing happened.

“Maybe I don’t have to tell him—*Hey*,” I whined after Mom smacked the back of my head.

“You can’t keep it from him, Ash. It’s not fair.”

My brows scrunched up. “He sleeps with other people all the time. Including the other night, after we agreed he’d stop doing that.”

Mom gave me a pitiful look before crossing her arms. “Just because he did something wrong doesn’t excuse you from doing the same.”

She had a point.

“You already know what I think about Soren,” she went on, not being subtle about the displeasure on her face. “He’s a piece of—”

“Mom.”

“Fine.” She moved her hand through her hair. “I won’t tell you what I think about him.”

“You mean you won’t tell me *again*?” I cut in. Over the years, Mom had never tried hiding her dislike for Soren. *And that’s putting it gently*. They’d had a long beef going on ever since I first introduced them, and while I understood both sides, I had sort of hoped it would vanish eventually. Not that it mattered, with Soren and I no longer being a couple.

Rolling her eyes, yet again, she continued. “*Anyway*, I don’t think you should be involved with both men at the same time.”

Thanks, Mom, as if I didn’t already know it.

Just then, my phone buzzed, and I saw it was a text from Soren.

“Speak of the devil,” I said, picking up my phone to read the text while ignoring the dozens of missed calls and messages from Kai. I wasn’t in the mood to speak to him, not yet, anyway.

“Hey, can we meet and talk?” Mom read out loud the text, her voice taking a deeper note.

“Is that supposed to be Soren?” I asked, narrowing my eyes at her.

“I can’t sound as pretentious as him, but yeah, basically.”

I couldn’t help but smile as she started laughing. Putting down my phone, I sighed and buried my face in my palm. “Why did I have to shit where I eat? Soren is handling Diesel’s case. The last thing I needed to do was add sex into the mix.”

Mom grabbed my neck and squeezed me gently. “Sometimes sex just happens, babe—I mean, *Ash*.” She got up and walked back to the fridge to pull out ingredients for our lunch. “And if I’m honest, I think you should ignore Soren and give Kai a call.”

“Of course you’d say that.”

She turned to face me. “What’s up with that tone?”

“Nothing,” I hissed bitterly. “But since forever, you and Aiden have always given Kai the benefit of the doubt. Never holding him accountable for anything he did. And let’s be honest, he fucks up a lot, Mom.”

“But he’s a sweetheart.”

I snorted. “He most definitely isn’t. He’s selfish, and it’s because you keep smiling at him like that”—I pointed at her annoying smile—“that he keeps being selfish. I’m your son, Mom, not him.”

Now, it was her turn to pout. “You know I love you the most, Ash.”

“It doesn’t change the fact you ignore Kai’s defects and always encourage me to give him another chance.” It had been the same story throughout the years. Like when we were young. Despite how Kai treated me when I first came out, Mom forgave him rather easily. *Too* easily. Same with Aiden.

“And what’s bothering me the most is that you hated Soren from the get-go. You never even gave him a chance.”

She tsked before resting her hand on her waist. “That’s because he’s an arrogant bastard who manipulated you when you were far too young to know it.”

I never thought Soren was too old for me and, quite frankly, hated when she mentioned it. Yes, I was young when we met, but old enough to know better and make my own decisions. So when she, or anyone else for that matter, judged Soren for a choice *I* made, it pissed me off. It pissed me off because by doing so, they completely dismissed me as an individual and immediately put me in a box that didn’t fit. Was Soren always in the right? Of course not. But just like he loved taking control, I loved giving it, and slowly, we fell into a complicated relationship that, at times, was toxic. I wasn’t so naive that I couldn’t look back on those days and understand we were in the wrong, but if there was one thing I knew, it was that I loved Soren. I loved him from the bottom of my heart just as he loved me. The fact Mom couldn’t understand it wasn’t my problem but hers.

And yet, I didn’t want to start a fight, so I got up from my chair and walked toward her.

“I’m not saying we were always the healthiest couple, but one thing was for sure: Soren always thought of me first.” I wasn’t angry with her but tried to have a decent conversation, which was new, considering it was about Soren. “And if I’m being honest with you, he’s changed, Mom.”

Her brows pulled close. “How so?”

I shrugged. “I’m not sure, but… it’s like he’s turned it down a notch, you know? Don’t get me wrong, he’s still a lot to handle.” A soft smile pulled on my lips, thinking about how ridiculous he could get. “But he’s doing better,” I said, mostly to myself.

Mom’s deep sigh pulled me out of my thoughts, and I focused on her frown.

“I just don’t want you to get hurt again.”

Leaning in, I kissed her forehead. “I know, and I’m thankful you care. But I’m fine, so don’t worry,” I said, even though it was the furthest thing from the truth.



“Why are you sulking?” I asked, half smiling, as I watched Soren stir his tea with a sour face.

“You snuck out in the middle of the night like a common thief,” he hissed before taking a sip, his mouth twisting with displeasure. “They call this tea?” He looked at the cup, his expression even more annoyed than before.

Sometimes, I wondered if he was British in his previous life.

“I didn’t want to wake you,” I said, trying not to chuckle at my passing thought.

“How convenient.”

“Hey, I felt guilty enough to come all the way here to make up for it.” I waved around the coffee shop that he insisted we go to. “So cut me some slack, okay? I already apologized for sneaking out.”

Soren placed his cup back on the table before looking me in the eyes. “I’m not some random guy you picked up at a bar for a quick fuck, and I refuse to be treated like one.”

If I had known my leaving would hurt him this much, I would have stayed till morning. “Again, I’m sorry for sneaking out without a word, but in my defense, you knew what last night was about.”

He crossed his legs and then removed his eyes from me. “Still. I’ve got

pride, Ashton. And I do not appreciate being treated wrongfully."

"And I didn't appreciate you breaking up with me after eight years and then going radio silent, but you don't see me complaining," I muttered as I took the menu to check it out. Suddenly, I was sort of hungry.

"What are you talking about?"

Glancing up, I noticed his sulk had turned into a full-on frown, and not even his glasses were enough to make him look cute at that moment. I adored it when he wore those thin-framed silver glasses that made his eyes stand out even more.

"You know what? You're right." I looked back at the menu. "There's no point in talking about the past." Pursing my lips, I tried figuring out what I wanted. "I can't choose between the chocolate cake and the cheesecake. What do you say?"

Soren's jaw was still clenched like he had taken a bite of a lemon. Back when we were still a couple, I recognized his expressions immediately. This one was the "I have something on my mind I'd rather keep to myself" expression. *I hated this one in particular.*

Still, we'd come all the way down here, and I'd rather have a nice time than an awkward one. "How about we order both and share?"

"I don't like to share," he said bitterly just when the waiter arrived. "He'll have the cheesecake and chocolate cake while I'll have the fruit salad. Make sure there's no mushroom in anything."

"Mushrooms, sir? Those are desserts."

"Just make sure there are no mushrooms," Soren repeated himself, then took the menu from my hands before handing it back to the waiter, who left us alone after writing down the order with a confused face.

I guess Soren's officially pissed.

"You didn't have to order both. I can't handle two pieces of cake," I complained while he looked at me with a straight face.

"I think you'll manage just fine."

"Is that your way of telling me I've got an appetite?"

He studied me carefully. "You clearly do."

"Why do I feel like you just insulted me?"

Finally, a small smile crept to his lips. "I didn't, so don't worry."

We both fell silent for a few moments, and I took the opportunity to look around the shop, which was beautiful, while Soren looked at—

"Why are you staring at me?" I asked.

"For no reason."

I couldn't help but laugh. "You're such an odd person, Soren. Truly."

He seemed surprised by my comment but also amused as he leaned closer.

“How so? Isn’t it legitimate to want to stare at beautiful things?”

I pointed my finger at him. “Hold on with the compliments, Romeo. *This* isn’t a date. Just a pity meeting for sneaking out on you, that’s all.”

Soren’s sulk returned just in time for our dessert to arrive. Both cakes looked absolutely delicious, and licking my lips, I had no idea which one to try first. I decided to go for the classic cheesecake when my phone buzzed. Checking the screen, I saw Kai was calling me, *again*. I rolled my eyes and turned the phone to face the table.

“So you two had a fight?” Soren asked, studying me with curious eyes.

Snorting, I took a forkful of cake. “I am not going to talk with you about Kai,” I said between chewing.

“But you will sleep with me after you had a fight with him?”

I nearly choked on the chocolate cake I’d just taken a bite from. Coughing into a napkin, I then cleaned my lips. “What did I tell you just now?”

“That you won’t talk about Kai, but I asked about me and you. So technically, you can answer my question. You just don’t want to.”

And now I regretted my choice to come here today. At what point did I move from not meeting him outside the office to having cake with him in a trendy cafe? *Maybe last night, when you came on his cock.*

My cock seemed to enjoy the fresh memory as it suddenly grew harder in my pants. Feeling my cheeks turning red at the same time my arousal kicked in, I looked down at my plate and shoved more cake into my mouth.

“Easy there, Ashton, or you might choke,” Soren said nonchalantly, his words only making me feel hotter.

I reached for my water glass and finished it up in two long gulps, then wiped my mouth with the napkin he’d offered me.

“T-Thanks,” I muttered, voice hoarse. My body and mind couldn’t seem to cope today, and clearly, I was in no state to casually meet with Soren over tea. I needed to find an excuse to go home. *Fast*. Before I got another embarrassing boner in the middle of a busy restaurant with Soren sitting across the table. God, I felt like a teenager. Just then, my phone rang, snapping my attention. I half expected it to be Kai. I didn’t want to answer, but maybe if I did, it would give me a reason to jolt. To my pleasant surprise, it wasn’t Kai calling but Andrei.

“Hey, Andrei—”

“Chief!” he cut me off, out of breath. “You gotta come back home. *Now*. It’s an emergency.”

My heart stopped at the same time my blood ran cold.

“Hold on, Andrei, I can’t understand what you’re saying.” I covered my other ear to hear him better.

“The police are here.” There was so much noise in the background that I could hardly hear anything. “They’re searching the house.”

“What’s wrong?” Soren asked.

Panicked, I looked to meet his concerned eyes. “Andrei’s saying the police are in our house.” I told him the little I knew, but that was enough.

Without wasting a second, Soren paid the bill and got us to his car, then drove us so fast I feared we’d be pulled over. Thankfully, we weren’t.

“Don’t,” he said, placing his hand on mine and lowering it from my mouth. I hadn’t even noticed I was chewing on my nails. Soren was about to remove his hand from mine when I grabbed it. Somehow, having him touch me helped to calm down my raging nerves.

After what felt like forever, we finally reached my home. Soren hadn’t even parked the car, and I was already out of it, running toward the kids, who were standing outside by the front porch.

“Chief!” Jessie was the first to notice me, a smile of relief washing over his anxious face.

“Are you guys okay?” I panted once reaching them, my hands moving over their bodies to make sure no one was hurt.

“What’s going on here?” I heard Soren’s voice in the background and turned to see him talking to one of the policemen.

“We got an anonymous tip to search around the place,” the policeman said while pulling out the warrant, which Soren carefully checked over. My heart was beating fast, and I wanted to tell them the house had already been searched —*twice*—when a group of officers stepped out of the front door.

“We found it,” one of them said.

Found it? Found what?

And then I saw it.

A gun.

The officer beside the man who said “found it” carried a gun in a vacuum-sealed plastic bag. The whole world felt like it was spinning. Between the kids asking me questions, the blue and red lights blinding my sight, the sirens ringing in my ears, and Soren’s voice, I had no idea what was happening.

“Ashton Sage?” someone asked, and I turned to face them.

“Yes?” I answered the serious-looking officer.

“You are under arrest for aiding and abetting the concealment of evidence.”

“What?” I gasped, trying to understand what the fuck he’d just said as he went on to recite my Miranda rights.

“Hey! Take your hands off of him!” Andrei shouted when the officer turned me around, but I managed to tell Andrei to calm down just before they cuffed

my hands behind my back.

Panicked, I looked around at the commotion until my eyes locked on Soren's wide back.

"S-oren!" I called desperately, my voice cracking.

Soren turned around, his eyes widening the second he saw me, and he ran toward us. I think he tried arguing with the officer, but they'd already taken me to the car. The whole time, I was so fucking scared. *Terrified* would be a better word, when suddenly, Diesel's arrest flooded my memory. Did he feel the same way when he was arrested? And if so, was he still this scared?

CHAPTER Fifty

Soren

"Are you okay?" I asked as soon as I met Ashton in the hall of the police station.

Rubbing his wrists, he nodded. "Yeah, thanks for bailing me out," he said, a small smile on his lips.

We started walking to exit the station while I filled him in on the missing information. "You've got nothing to worry about with those charges. They're so ridiculous that they'll be dropped in no time. It was a low blow made by the prosecution and Christian in an attempt to mess with us." I knew the other team was playing dirty, but to go this low? To have Ashton arrested and spend the night in jail? That was outrageous.

"That's good to know." He pursed his lips before turning to me. "What about the gun?"

"I think it's better if you get some rest first."

Ashton grabbed my arm, forcing me to a stop.

"Answer my question."

Looking around the stretching hall, I sighed with frustration. The last thing Ashton needed to know after he spent the night in jail was how the prosecution had managed to fuck us with this evidence a week before closing arguments. But with how he was looking at me, danger in his eyes, there was no way I could avoid answering him.

"It's not good. They found the weapon used to kill Orson and Rosa in Camilo's room. There might not be any fingerprints on it, but the jury is not going to like it."

Ashton's face paled, and he took a step back. He was quiet for a moment before turning to face me. "They must have planted it in Diesel's room. The house was empty all day yesterday; they could have done it then. Right? I mean, they *must* have planted it. It wasn't there the first two times they searched."

Those were my thoughts exactly, but proving it wouldn't be easy.

“That’s what I’m about to argue in court. But I won’t lie, this looks really bad.” To say the least. Unless I came up with something new, we were screwed, and Diesel’s chances of being a free man would be as good as gone.

The fear on Ashton’s face made me pull myself back together, and I placed my hands on his shoulders. “I promised you I wouldn’t lose this case, didn’t I?”

A bit of hope shone in his eyes, and he nodded.

“You did.”

“So count on me.”

After understanding crossed between us, I let go of him and began walking.

“What about the boys?” he asked.

I was in the middle of telling him that I’d spoken to Andrei about an hour ago, when someone called Ashton’s name. Looking ahead, we saw Kai running toward us, his bike helmet in his hand.

Great.

Kai’s stupid blond hair swayed in the air with each step he took, and with the leather jacket and a pair of old jeans he wore, he looked like the stereotypical bad boy in some teen drama. I sure hoped Ashton wasn’t one to fall for that crap, but considering the fact they’d been together for quite a few years, I guess he did enjoy it on some level.

“Fuck, babe, are you okay?”

Babe. Ugh. What a douche.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” Ashton said, tiredness carrying through his hoarse voice.

“I swear, I came as soon as I heard.”

Which was, what, eight hours too late? I rolled my eyes at his attempt to show he cared. *Moron.*

Kai’s eyes then darted to me, and he frowned. “What’s he doing here?”

“He bailed me out, Kai,” Ashton said with a deep sigh while rubbing his face.

The muscle in Kai’s jaw twitched. “Of course.” His lips drew back in a snarl. “Soren’s here to save the day, yet again.”

“Well, unlike you, I wasn’t preoccupied with picking up random women at the bar.”

Kai’s eyes went wide as he gritted his teeth. “You son of a bitch—”

“Why? ’Cause I was here to take care of Ashton when you weren’t?” I challenged him, also stepping closer. I had had enough of this man-child acting like a third-rate bully.

“Enough!” Ashton called loud enough to get both of our attention. “I have had enough of you two acting like children,” he hissed, eyes moving between us. “I haven’t slept for nearly forty-eight hours, and the last thing I care about is

your ridiculous banter." Ashton paused for a second, took a deep breath, then went on. "We have one week until the closing arguments. Till then, I don't want to hear a word from either of you unless it's related to Diesel or the case."

"Ashy—" Kai tried saying something when Ashton pinned him with a deadly look.

"Don't even start. I'm still pissed at you." He then turned to me, making me flinch underneath his wrath. "And you, too. I'm not yours to save, so give me a break, Soren. You bailed me out, and I'm thankful, but don't think it changes anything between us."

Kai's eyes darted to mine, and he seemed suspicious. But then, Ashton spoke again, and he went back to looking at him.

"You two need to stop acting this way. I don't have the time or energy to deal with this alpha-male crap going on between you two. Just grow the fuck up already."

Feeling like a kid who'd just got scolded for stealing a cookie, I bit the inside of my cheek, my eyes focusing on the tiles on the floor. I had no problem playing fair as long as the other person did the same. But Kai?

"Of course, Ashy. I'll do whatever you say." He beamed, wrapping an arm around Ashton's shoulder and pulling him close.

Definitely didn't play fair.

"I'm going to grab my phone from the front desk, and then you're going to take me home," he told Kai before turning to face me. "And you better start working on dealing with this gun bullshit." His eyes were fierce but still held the vulnerability he only ever shared with me. It was enough to set me at ease. That was until he left to grab his phone, leaving me alone with the *problem*.

Kai might have seemed to be an average buffoon with the brain of a snail, but sadly, he wasn't as dumb as he looked. Since I'd come back, Ashton had mentioned numerous times something about how I'd disappeared without ever saying a word. While I did, in fact, break up with him rather suddenly, a few months later, I tried reaching out again when he was the one to ignore *me*. I'd always assumed it had to do with the way I ended things, but now, I knew it wasn't the case.

"You never told him that I came looking for him, did you?" I said, catching Kai's attention, who slowly turned to look at me, one brow raised.

"The fuck you on about, psycho?"

I snorted, ignoring his childish insult, and stepped closer until we were in each other's faces. "That time I came to your house looking for him. You never told him about it, and I'd bet my money you're the reason he never picked up any of my calls. What did you do, block my number?" His silence was the only

confirmation I needed.

“You’re unbelievable,” I hissed, holding back my rage. I guess Ashton never found out about it because he’d changed his number over the years, and Kai wasn’t smart enough to block my number on the new one, too.

“Who gives a shit?” he snorted and took a step back. “It happened years ago.”

My jaw tensed, and I shoved my finger at his chest. “I bet he never cheated on me either. I’m right, aren’t I? You made that whole thing up because you were always a little person who only cared for his own stoned ass.”

Back then, when Kai told me that he and Ashton had slept together while we were still a couple, I’d found it hard to believe. Yet, my mental state was so bad at the time that his lie still managed to get to me, and there were days when I truly believed Ashton had been unfaithful. It hurt, and my hurt eventually turned into an ugly self-pity. I promised myself never to hit that rock bottom again and feared that reuniting with Ashton would lead to that. It didn’t. In fact, spending time with him since coming back only proved to me how unlikely it was for him to ever betray me that way. Now, I knew there was no chance he’d ever cheated. Not on me, anyway.

Kai’s brows pulled into a deep frown before he pushed my finger away from his chest. “The fuck are you implying, bitch?” he spat out.

Tilting my head, I looked down at him. “That you’re a snake.”

He huffed and then flashed me a toothy grin. “What if I am? Are you going to tell Ash about that? You think he’d give a shit?”

He was such a horrible human being.

“No,” I said, voice cold. “I’m giving you the chance to tell him yourself.”

His brows rose up until they reached his hairline, and he looked confused before anger took over his features. “The fuck are you playing at?”

“Nothing.” I shrugged and walked back to have some distance between us. “If I tell Ashton myself, he’ll only get hurt. So what’s the point of that? Instead, I’m giving you a chance to do something right, for once.”

Kai’s face turned red, and he seemed even angrier than before. I was certain that if we weren’t at the police station, he would have punched me by now.

“Are you messing with me?” he hissed after finding his words again.

“Not at all.” I held his stare. “I’m being dead serious. You have until the trial ends to tell him. If not, I will do it myself.”

His eyes gleamed with something vicious before he shoved his helmet in my chest. “If I go down, I’m taking you with me, asshole. I wasn’t the only one playing dirty back then.”

That was true, only that the keyword in his sentence was *then*. The me back

then was a hideous man, but I was no longer that pitiful guy. I had grown, and with my growth, I promised myself to be better—to be a man Ashton deserved, starting with being honest. Even if it meant losing him.

Our pleasant conversation ended with Ashton's return.

"What are you talking about?" he asked, eyes narrowed.

"Just agreeing to keep it cool," Kai said before I could, already throwing himself over Ashton. "Let's go home, Ashy."

Watching them walk away together definitely hurt. Not because I was jealous but because I knew this guy wasn't the right choice. Even if I were to be out of the picture, Ashton deserved a million times better.

CHAPTER Fifty—One

Soren

"You are far too good of a lawyer to have been blindsided as you were today in court," Daniel said, slamming the briefs I'd handed him a while ago on his desk.

I was currently in his office, giving him the summary of today's events. Or should I say I was getting scolded for it?

I didn't need him to scold me. I already knew I'd fucked up in court when they pulled out the gun evidence. None of my arguments seemed to have done the job, and from the look of it, we were heading toward the finish line as the losing team.

My failure burned in my chest, not only because I wasn't used to losing but because of Ashton. I would give my career to win this one case for him.

"If they planted the gun, as you are so sure of, why didn't we know about it before? Why did we find out about it now, one week before the closing arguments?" Daniel's brows pinched close, his strong jaw set tight. He was angry, and so was I.

And the worst part? That hideous clock was still in his office, driving me insane.

"Soren." He barked my name. "Stop looking at the damn clock and give me answers."

Annoyed, I turned to face him with a snarl on my lips. "I told you, they play dirty."

A vein popped on his thick neck as he clenched his fists together. Taking a deep breath, he turned around to face the window.

"Do you think he did it?" he asked.

"Are you asking me as a lawyer or as a person?"

He glanced at me over his shoulder before turning back around. "Both."

"As a lawyer, I think the evidence leaves little room for doubt," I said, my eyes locked on the clock. The ticking sound also annoyed me. "But as a person, I have no doubt he's innocent. He loved that boy—and still does." While

speaking, I thought about the hours I'd spent with Camilo. He might never have said much, but if you paid close attention as I did, you could see the picture loud and clear. "It's not just love, though. They found sanctuary in each other. You don't need me to tell you how rare it is to find a person like that, a person who completes you in every sense of the word." By now, Daniel was fully facing me. "And when you find that, that life-changing love, you don't just toss it away."

Daniel's expression, angry thus far, softened. "Who knew you were such a romantic?"

"Aw," I tsked, pretending to be hurt. "Now you're just being mean."

The corner of Daniel's mouth quirked up just as the intercom in his office beeped.

"Yes, Cole?" Daniel asked while pressing the button to take the call.

"Sir, Christian Rogers is here for you," his secretary said.

Daniel's eyes snapped to mine as we held each other's suspicious gazes.

"Very well, let him in," Daniel said, ending the call.

I stepped aside just in time for the door to open, and Christian, with all of his might and *glory*, walked in. One quick look my way was the only acknowledgment I received from him before he turned toward Daniel.

"Christian, to what do I owe the pleasure?"

Acting like he owned the place, Christian strolled toward the bar cart in Daniel's office and began making himself a drink.

"Remember that vacation we all took together in Monaco?" he asked, filling his glass.

"Yes, I do."

"I've been thinking about those days recently. About how happy my son was, how lovely he was." He turned to face Daniel while sipping from the scotch he invited himself to. "Now he can't even get up from his hospital bed," he hissed, eyes cold. "And you're trying to help the guy responsible to get away with it."

Daniel sat back in his chair, one leg crossed over the other. "While I'm heartbroken over what happened to Shay-Lee, I'm also a firm believer of the saying 'innocent until proven guilty.'"

Christian snorted, taking the chair across from Daniel and mimicking his stance. "Don't mock me, Daniel. That criminal is guilty, and he will pay for what he did to my son."

How about you pay for what you did, asshole?

"I won't lie about how disappointed I am with you," Christian went on, his face cold. "To think I saw value in our longtime friendship. But I guess it all means nothing to you in the name of fame?"

Daniel leaned back in his chair. "I didn't take this case as a publicity stunt

but because I believe in Mr. Gómez's innocence."

Aww, Daniel. Who knew you were such a kind man?

Christian snorted, placed his half-full glass on the table, and stood up. "I couldn't be more disappointed," he leered. "But I didn't come here for that. I came to warn you that if your guys keep snooping around my son, who is currently not even able to form actual words, then there will be consequences." With that, Christian turned to leave, but not before giving me a look full of disdain.

"What do you think?" Daniel asked as soon as Christian closed the door behind him.

Smirking, I stepped closer to his desk. "That an innocent man would not bother coming here to spew empty threats."

"My thoughts exactly," Daniel said, crossing his arms over his broad chest and moving his fingers along his thick stubble.

"Besides, he's lying. From what Eiv managed to gather about Shay-Lee's condition, the kid might be in a bad state, but he's able to talk. Christian just doesn't want him to."

The disgust on Daniel's face couldn't have been more evident, and he shook his head. "To think this man had been near my son for years." He then turned to me. "We've wasted enough time. Get back to work. I want to see this case end the *right* way," he said before going back to read the briefs on his desk.

Knowing better than to argue, I walked toward the door but stopped when Daniel called my name.

"Yes?" I asked, turning to face him.

"Last week, Jones Brown was attacked in a car hijacking. As you know, he came out of it with nothing but a few bruises."

Jones Brown. The prosecutor who'd brought my sweet Ashton to tears.

"So that's why he looked like a raccoon in court today," I snorted, yet Daniel didn't seem amused.

"If I find out you had anything to do with it, you will be fired, Soren." This was the first time since I'd started working for Daniel that he'd said something of the sort. Over the years, I'd had my fair share of incidents that got us into high tones, but not once did it get to the point of him threatening to fire me.

"Well, good thing I had nothing to do with it, then. Right?"

Daniel studied me carefully before nodding. "You can go now," he said.

I quickly stepped out, not risking another second in there. After all, I had a lot on my mind and didn't plan to waste it on Jones, the moron.

"Yo, Dane!" Eiv called, catching me right as I was about to go into my office.

“What is it, Eiv? I’m busy,” I said impatiently, already walking to my desk.

“Well, you better make time for this.” He waved a folder in his hand. Usually, when he handed me new evidence, he seemed rather pleased. Not this time. The worry on his face only made me more eager to discover what that folder held.

“It had better be good.” I snapped it out of his hands.

“Remember that lead you asked me to follow a while ago? About Camilo and Shay-Lee’s visit to the hospital?”

A few weeks ago, Ashton had mentioned something about those two visiting the hospital after Shay-Lee was allegedly beaten by his father. I asked Eiv to look into it, just in case.

“Yeah, I do.”

“Well, good thing you did because this shit is nasty,” he hissed while I’d already begun reading.

The more I read, the harder it was to believe until I had to sit down. My heart rate increased, and nausea took over me, but I forced myself to finish reading. By the time I reached the last word printed on those damn papers, I was sure of two things. The first being that we’d just found the key evidence we lacked. The second was that Christian W. Rogers was a far worse monster than I had ever thought him to be.



“You’re such a pretty boy,” the man whispered through chapped lips. “Such a good, pretty boy.” His sickening voice danced around the dark room that smelled of rotten wood. “And you know what good boys do?” he asked, the reek of his hot breath fanning over my cheek. “Good boys keep their mouths shut.”

The door to the room opened, and I turned in time to see Camilo being brought in. The rustle of the handcuffs danced on my nerves, and I bit my lip until he sat down, and the noise stopped. Realizing I was sweating, I pulled a handkerchief from my pocket and dabbed my forehead.

I waited for us to be left alone before sitting down on the chair across from him.

“How are you holding up?” I asked, not at all surprised when Camilo didn’t respond. Instead, he continued to stare at me with his intense, dark eyes. When I’d first met him years ago, he was just a troubled youth who’d shot a man in a fit of rage. I didn’t know what to make of those eyes then. But now, on our second time around, I did. They were the eyes of a man constantly on the brink

of war. A fighter who'd fought far too many battles but was far from defeated. He was a tiger, a panther. A brutal beast locked in a man's body, and it was scary. Yet, I also saw his humanity, the piece of his soul Shay-Lee had managed to touch. Only that part was now lying under rubble, making it far harder to reach.

Opening my briefcase, I pulled out the reason I'd come here for. Placing the folder between us, I waited for him to take it.

"What's that?" he rasped, voice low, as he finally reached out a hand and grabbed the folder.

"It's what's going to get you out of here," I said while he opened it.

Camilo glanced at me before he focused on the documents. Sitting quietly, I watched the tension slowly growing between his pinched brows, his jaw tensing and his head moving.

"What the fuck is this?"

"The report of the rape kit Shay-Lee took when you visited the hospital together last year," I explained calmly despite the waves of repulsion clashing through me.

The lines around Camilo's mouth tightened as he held his lips together, fury burning in his eyes. "*Rape kit*?" He hissed the words like a curse.

"My guy managed to get a handle on the nurse working that day. She said Shay-Lee agreed to take it while you went out to buy some things."

He looked away from me, eyes back on the files. "That can't be true." He shook his head. "He was beaten that day… not—" He swallowed back whatever he was about to say, pain coating his words.

"He took it anonymously, but cross-checking the data confirmed that this kit belonged to him. Since he never pressed charges, the hospital just kept the results on file."

"S-Shut up," he snapped into my words, but I went on.

There are much bigger demons lurking between those pages.

"The DNA results show a perfect match between the victim and the—"

"I said shut up!" he shouted, clenching the folder in his fist. He then looked down, covering his face with his hands before moving them up to his scalp. "Just shut the fuck up."

My stomach flipped, and my throat dried. I'd never held any attachment toward any of my previous clients, but this? Camilo? He was different. I knew he hated me, as he hated everyone around him, but his pain reached me.

"I know that with what happened to your sister, it's hard for you to accept that this happened to Shay-Lee, too, but—"

"Don't you dare say his name," he hissed, voice hoarse. "Don't you dare say his name like you know anything about him." He finally looked at me again, his

murderous eyes filled with so much rage and hate.

“I know that he was raped by his own father.”

“Shut up!” he roared, then tossed the folder away and charged at me. Despite his cuffs, he managed to get his hands around the collar of my shirt and pulled me closer. Everything happened so fast, and he was in my face before I could even recall my words.

“If you spit that shit to even one person, I swear to God I’ll murder you.” By now, the guards had already come into the room and tried separating us, only Camilo didn’t budge and held my shirt so tight it was hard to breathe. “You hear me?”

I nodded.

“So don’t you dare bring it up in court, or I’ll confess. I’ll confess to everything they are accusing me of.” He finally dropped his hands, and I gasped for air just as the guard pulled him away from me.

“You got that?” he hissed while fighting the man pulling him out of the room.

“Y-Yeah,” I gasped, my throat burning with the need for air.

Camilo was already out of the room, but I still heard his shouts. He was screaming, and so were the guards, but his voice was stronger, carrying through the halls like thunder. Eventually, the voices stopped, and shocked, I stared around the empty room.

I knew Camilo would take it hard, but I didn’t expect him to react this way. This new revelation was supposed to be my way of getting him out of here. Yet, he refused. More than that. Camilo said that he’d confess if I were to take this thing public. I thought we finally had the upper hand, only to discover that we didn’t, and instead, we’d only added more pain to this horror show.

CHAPTER Fifty—Two

Kai

I'd been fucking up a lot lately.

Like, *a lot*.

The fact Ash had agreed to come to my place for dinner was a miracle in itself, considering what happened last Saturday. Fucking that waitress was a huge mistake, and I swore something like that would never happen again.

I was done with hookups.

But what if you fuck up again?

The voice in the back of my head nagged me as I stirred the sauce for our dinner. Grinding my jaw, I tried blocking those thoughts away. What I needed to do right now was to focus on the food, to make sure everything turned out tasty and that nothing would get burned.

Burned.

Shit. I'd completely forgotten about the lasagna cooking in the oven. I was supposed to take it out five minutes ago, but caught up in my screwed head, I forgot. Opening the oven, I grabbed the metal pan to pull it out.

"Fuck," I hissed, quickly withdrawing my hand. I'd forgotten to use a towel —*what a rookie mistake*—and now I'd fucking burned myself. "Shit, shit, shit." I held my hand close to my lips, trying to blow air on it to cool it down.

"What's wrong?" Ash popped into the kitchen, worry written on his face.

"Got a small burn," I yelped as he quickly reached to grab my hand.

"Shit, that looks bad. Do you have any Vaseline or burn ointment?"

"Yeah," I wheezed. "In the bathroom cabinet."

Ash nodded. "Hold on, okay? I'll be right back."

He left my side, and I turned around, still trying to ease the pain by doing this silly dance that never actually helped. My head was a total mess, and between trying not to screw up and worrying over Soren, I was losing my mind. The other day in the police station, when he'd urged me to tell Ash the truth, what the fuck was up with that? We were both jerks. Why not keep the past

where it belonged?

Ash came back, ointment and some gauze in his hand. “Here, let me see it again.”

Carefully, he held my hand while looking at the burn. It wasn’t serious enough to go to the hospital, but I knew it would limit me for a few days.

“We need to run it under cold water,” he said and brought my hand to the sink. About ten minutes later, he turned off the tap and began treating me.

“Thank you,” I told Ash as he took care of me, his touch nothing but gentle.

“Of course.”

I was such a jerk to him and didn’t deserve his kindness or forgiveness. I knew it. I knew he was a thousand times too good for me, but in the same breath, I couldn’t let him go. I was too fucking selfish for that. I was too greedy to ever give up on him.

“I’m going to ask you something,” Ash suddenly said, cutting into my thoughts.

“Of course.”

He looked up from my bandaged hand to meet my eyes. “But before I do, promise me you’ll be honest.”

My chest tightened with nerves as my heart pounded faster. *What’s he talking about?* I swallowed hard, then tried to get some air into my lungs. Could Soren have told him about—

“Why is there a bottle of scotch in your bathroom cabinet?”

Oh shit.

My eyes snapped open with shock because I’d completely forgotten about that thing. Ash’s face turned worried by the minute until I had no choice but to explain.

“It’s not what you think.”

“Are you drinking again?”

“No.”

“Using?”

“Fuck, no,” I squealed.

“So why do you have that bottle?”

I shrugged. “Just because?”

“So you didn’t buy that bottle?”

“I-I did.”

He held my hand tighter, and I winced. “O-Ouch.”

“Answer me, Kai. Why the hell did you buy a bottle of scotch?” He dropped my hand but didn’t move away.

Well, shit. Now I had to speak.

“I almost drank it… but I didn’t.”

Ash’s brows frowned, and he placed his hand on my jaw. “But why?”

I snorted, caressing the back of his palm. “What do you mean why? On Saturday, I thought you were through with me… and it killed me.”

After Ash left that evening, I went into a spiral. He didn’t pick up the phone, and I started having all these thoughts that he might be with someone else just to spite me; it hurt, and the pain wouldn’t go away no matter what I did, so I drove to the nearest liquor store and got my hands on the first bottle I saw. Back home, I placed it on the table and stared at the sealed bottle for about two hours until my phone rang. At first, I thought it was Ashy finally calling back, but instead, it was my kid calling to tell me he saw a shark while surfing. That little monkey… It was the wake-up call I needed. I’d planned to empty the scotch into the toilet and almost did, but at the last second, I changed my mind and instead just tossed it into the cabinet.

“Oh, Kai,” Ash gasped after I told him pretty much the whole story. “If I knew, I wouldn’t have ghosted your calls.” He then wrapped his arms around me and hugged me tight. “I’m sorry for not picking up the phone. I was just so angry with you,” he confessed.

Hugging him back, I leaned my head against him. “I know. It’s just that… I kept thinking you were with *him*, and that drove me nuts. But I swear I didn’t drink. You can even check the bottle and see it still has the seal on.” Closing my eyes, I took a deep inhale of his scent, forever my nicotine.

“I’m sorry for putting you in this state,” he whispered after a short hesitation.

Pulling back, I cupped his face in the hand that didn’t get burned. “You don’t need to apologize, Ashy. You had every right to be angry with me. But I can’t help it… *Him* being back in our life makes me insecure about us.”

He looked away, but that didn’t make me stop. Right now, I had the chance to get him back, or at least try. Ash could deny it all he wanted, but when we were in the police station, I saw the way he looked at Soren and the way Soren looked at him. Something had happened between them, and over my dead body would I let that asshole take away what was mine.

Not again.

Soren said it was my job to tell Ash the truth, and he had a point. Confessing first would give me an advantage in this race.

“There’s something I need to tell you,” I said.

Ash

On my way back home, I couldn’t stop thinking about what Kai had told me. To say I was angry would be an understatement. It might have happened years ago, but the wound felt fresh, and time didn’t lessen my anger. How dare he do something like this? What was he even thinking?

My anger bubbled in my stomach, giving me no rest. There was no way I’d be able to go home after learning what I just had. Not until I’d given him a piece of my mind. Without stopping to think, I did a U-turn the first place I could and drove straight to his place. What I said about not wanting to discuss anything other than the trial didn’t seem to matter in the moment, when all I cared about was getting answers. Getting the answers I deserved.

I didn’t bother parking my car straight before getting out of it and strolling to his front door. Vibrating with rage, I clenched my hands into a tight fist and slammed on his door as hard as I could while also buzzing the intercom repeatedly. Soon enough, the door opened, and Soren stepped out.

“Did you trick Kai into seeing us having sex?” The words were out of my mouth before I could even stop them. They just oozed their way into the world after I’d been thinking them for the past hour.

Soren didn’t seem shocked; in fact, he looked completely indifferent.

“So?” I gaped at him, waiting for some kind of reaction. “Don’t just stand there. Answer me!”

Shoving his hands into the pockets of his slacks, he nodded. “Yes, I did.”

I assumed he’d at least deny Kai’s words and that I would be forced to fight with him, but instead, he just confirmed it all? What the hell?

“Are you serious?”

“I am,” he said with a straight face, not a single emotion showing.

It made me even angrier.

“And did you use it to threaten him later?” I frowned, hoping that at least this part would be false, only for Soren to confirm it as well.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” I snapped, more annoyed with his lack of reaction than anything. “How could you do this? To threaten to take away his child?”

He shrugged. “I guess I’m just a shitty person, Ashton.”

Why was he behaving this coldly?

“Why are you saying that?” I frowned, utterly confused by the situation.

“You came to hear the truth, and I’m giving it to you. Wasn’t that what you wanted?” He took a step closer. “You know what? While we’re at it, how about I tell you more? Let’s see.” He tapped his mouth. “Oh, I have a good one. I moved us to New York just to get you away from Kai.”

Taken aback by his words, I withered. “W-What are you saying?”

“What I said before. That I’m a shitty person, so how about you leave me alone and go back home to *him*?”

I clenched my hands into fists and was ready to answer him when I heard a voice coming from inside the house. I tried to peek over Soren’s shoulder, but he blocked my way.

“I-Is there someone in there?” I wasn’t even sure why the idea he was with someone bothered me as much as it did.

“Yeah,” he answered flatly, causing my stomach to flop. “So, as you can tell, I’m rather busy, so it would be helpful if you’d go home.”

My mouth fell open, and I had to swallow before I was able to form a sentence. “W-Why are you acting this way?” I asked, confused. It was a complete one-eighty from when I last came here. He was so warm that day, accepting me with open arms, while now? Now, he was the ice-cold man who’d ended our relationship over steak.

“What did you expect to happen when you came here?” he questioned, his voice like a blizzard. “You thought I’d deny what Kai told you? Or did you hope I’d fall on my knees and grovel for your forgiveness? And quite frankly, I don’t even understand why you’re here to begin with after you so clearly announced you don’t want to deal with anything that’s personal.”

I shook my head. “I-I came to get answers.”

“And you got them, just not the way you wanted.” He then checked his watch before looking back at me through eyes that seemed to be thousands of miles away. “I said it before, and I’ll say it again: I’m not interested in your drama, Ashton. And I’m afraid that’s what you’re searching for. I don’t know why, and honestly, I do not care. Now, if you don’t mind, and since I gave you the answers you needed so badly, I’m going to go.”

Soren didn’t even wait for me to respond before he went back inside his house, closing the door behind him.

What the actual fuck just happened? And why was I more hurt than angry? I’d just learned everything Kai told me was the truth, among other things, such as Soren moving us away out of jealousy. And yet, my mind was more bothered by the cold shoulder he gave me and the fact that he was inside that house with someone who wasn’t me.

Soren

My hands trembled after I closed the door, and feeling like I was about to be sick, I had to take a deep breath.

One, two, three, four, five—I counted the seconds passing on my wristwatch

until a minute passed, and once composed, I brushed my hand along my shirt to straighten it and fixed the few stray hairs that fell over my brows.

“Was that Ash?” Eiv asked, popping his head into the hall with a spoon in his mouth and a bucket of ice cream in hand.

“Yes, it was.”

“And you kicked him out?” He frowned.

“Were you eavesdropping?”

“You bet.” He grinned, pulling the spoon out of his mouth and licking its back.

“Be sure to take this shit with you when you leave.” I pointed at the industrial-sized sugar he’d brought with him.

Ignoring me, he took another bite. “Anyway, why did you do that?”

I really didn’t have the energy to handle him right now. He came here unannounced this afternoon and had refused to evacuate ever since.

“When are you planning on leaving?”

“Not before you answer my question. Why were you such a jerk to him? I thought you were head over heels for your dear Ashton.”

Oh, for heaven’s sake, I needed a glass of wine in order to handle this nonsense.

“Well, once I lose this case, which seems to be inevitable at this stage, he’ll hate me either way. So it’s better to make it happen sooner rather than later.”

I was in my kitchen, already filling a glass with my favorite wine, when Eiv huffed so loud it could awaken the dead.

“What was that about?” I snarled, annoyed with his permanent eye-rolling.

Stealing the glass from my finger, he brought it to his lips and took a sip. “Nothing. I just never knew you were such a lousy loser.”

I grimaced. “Excuse me?”

“You’re excused.” He took another gulp, then cleared his throat. “But seriously, self-pity doesn’t look good on you. I’d even say it ages you.”

“Could you please go home and leave me be?”

“See?” He waved his hand at me. “Right now, you look about forty-five.”

Now, I was the one rolling my eyes. “I’m almost there.”

He laughed. “You’re only thirty-nine. Besides, that’s not my point.”

“So, how about you get to your point and then leave?” I offered through gritted teeth, holding myself back from slamming the wine bottle into his head.

“Fine. Why did you decide to give up?” he asked while placing his hand on his waist.

“I didn’t. But let’s face it, without using the evidence about Christian’s abuse, we’ve got nothing.”

“*Eh*, wrong.” Eiv twisted his lips, and I looked at him, annoyed.

“What on earth are you talking about?”

“You might not use the evidence, which I still don’t understand why.”

“Was being nearly choked to death not enough of a reason?” I rubbed my neck, still feeling Camilo’s hold. “Besides, like I said, I wouldn’t do that to Camilo.”

“And suddenly, you’ve developed a conscience.” He clapped his hands. “Anyway, before you give me that speech about how Camilo needs to be the leading actor in this case or whatever other bullshit you mumbled earlier, remember you have another leading player. Shay-Lee.”

“What about Shay-Lee?”

“Get him on the stand.”

I snorted. “Oh, sure. Let me just pick up my phone and make a call—”

“Ha-ha.” Eiv came to stand closer, leaning into my personal space. “You sarcastic bitch.” He then pulled out a note from his pocket and held it between us.

“What’s that?” I asked, looking down at the folded paper.

“That, my sexy lawyer, is your ticket to see Shay-Lee.”

I raised a skeptical brow his way. “Do I want to know how you got it?”

He huffed. “Not unless you want to be involved with extortion and threatening a poor bodyguard.”

“You little weasel.” I shook my head at him. Eiv always had his way of doing things.

“Anyway, all I can do is get you into that hospital room. The rest is up to you.”

We’d been trying to reach Shay-Lee for months, but because his room was constantly guarded by private security, it was impossible. That was until Eiv took the initiative.

Suddenly, I didn’t feel like drinking myself to sleep tonight.

Snapping the paper from his fingers, I flashed him a toothy smile.

“I like you so much right now that I could kiss you,” I said.

“Well, what’s stopping you?” He wiggled his eyebrows like the little brat he was.

Laughing, I stepped back. “Common sense?”

Eiv reached for the bottle of wine, already filling a new glass for himself. “You know, I liked you more when you were a lonely bitch.”

How charming of him.

“Drop the glass, Eiv. We got a lot of work to do,” I said, already determined to get back in the race because I might just still have a chance.

CHAPTER Fifty-Three

Soren

"Listen up, buttercup—"

"Ugh, don't call me that," I hissed at Eiv while we both stood in the hospital parking lot, trying to look discreet.

"Why not? It's cute," he pouted, brows curved and eyes hiding behind dark sunglasses.

"Please focus."

"Fine." He looked over his shoulder, quickly scanning the ground before turning back to me. "I was only able to get you twenty minutes with him. So don't waste them. I doubt we'll get another chance."

I nodded, well aware of how precious this limited access we had to Shay-Lee was. I had twenty minutes to convince him to give his testimony, which could win us the case.

"Let's go."

We parted paths as we agreed, and I began making my way to Shay-Lee's floor. I was never one to care about breaking the rules or lying, but this time, my heart raced incredibly fast with the fear of getting caught. Thankfully, the elevator was empty when it arrived, and once the door closed, I leaned against the mirror and took deep breaths while I counted the floor's buttons.

"And you know what good boys do? Good boys keep their mouths shut."

My breath caught, and my blood ran cold. This was not the time or place to think about that, but ever since learning what Shay-Lee had been through, I couldn't block away those memories from resurfacing.

The elevator stopped, and as the doors opened, I knew I had no choice but to step out, even if my guts were swirling. "Do your best, Soren," I whispered to myself, then got out. I walked through the long hall until I reached the right room number, and just like Eiv had promised, the guard wasn't there. Looking to my left and right, I pushed the door open, quickly closing it behind me.

The white room was bathed in sunlight, and it took my eyes a few seconds to

adjust to the bright light. As soon as I was able to focus, I immediately looked at the bed placed in the center of the space and at the guy lying there, who looked nothing at all like the pictures I'd seen. Ignoring that his legs were in casts, the first change that stood out was his hair; while in all of his photos, he had long, golden hair that resembled the mane of a lion, now his head was shaved. It was probably because of the stitches that ran down the side of his skull, but it was certainly an unfortunate sight. Since he was staring out the window, I didn't see his face, only the side of it. He seemed thin and pale, almost like the faintest gust of wind could break him.

I cleared my throat to get his attention, even though I was sure he'd noticed me already, then spoke. "Hello, Mr. Rogers, I'm Soren Dane. And I'm—"

"I know who you are," he said, eyes still gazing out the window. "I've seen you on TV."

A nervous smile crept to my lips. "Well, that will make it easier, I guess." I looked around the room and spotted a chair by the window. "Mind if I sit there?" I asked. When he didn't answer, I decided to go for it.

Sitting down, I was now able to see his face. And what I saw wasn't the beautiful angel some described or the bully others feared, but a boy. A frightened boy who was living in an ongoing hell. It broke my heart, and I yearned to help him and Camilo in the same breath. Before the trial had started, my plan was to ruin Shay-Lee's name in the process of getting Camilo vindicated, only to realize that one could never be free without the other. Those two were connected through their tragic fate and had no point in living in a world where the other didn't exist.

"So if you know who I am, you also know why I'm here."

"I'm not going to testify," he said, his attention still focused on the window.

Curious to see what was so fascinating out there, I glanced over my shoulder. The view was of a small garden with some trees. It was pretty but nothing out of the ordinary.

Looking back at Shay-Lee, I leaned a bit closer. "You're his last hope to get free, Shay-Lee."

He said nothing, so I went on.

"Is that what you want? For him to spend the rest of his life in prison over a crime he didn't commit? I'm sure it's not the case because I know you love him."

Finally, he turned to face me, his brilliant blue eyes locking with mine. The tears welling in the corners dried my throat, and I observed him with awe. So much pain was written on his young face, leaving me without words.

"He'll kill him if I open my mouth," he whispered, voice shivering.

“He’ll kill him either way, and you know it.”

Shay-Lee’s eyes widened, and he bit his lip before turning to face the window again. The sun’s rays made the tears flowing down his face look like glittering diamonds.

It’s heartbreaking how beautiful pain can be.

“I can help you.” I clenched my fists, which were resting on my knees. “I can help you get rid of him.”

He snorted, the sound so broken and twisted it made me pull back.

“Help me, *huh*? This foolish thought is why I’m here and he’s there.”

He was referring to Camilo.

“Shay-Lee, I know you’re scared, but I promise that if you trust me, I can help you both.”

His eyes darted to mine, letting me see the disbelief in them. “You know nothing of me, yet you think you can save me. Well, you can’t. No one can.” He looked down at his hands. “Camilo tried to do that… to help me…and now he’s going to die because of me.”

“Listen—”

“I think you should go,” he announced, clenching the bedsheets in his fist and biting his lip.

“Shay-Lee, please. If I go now, you know Camilo’s fate is sealed.”

“He doesn’t like it when people use his name,” he suddenly said, eyes softer as he gazed outside. “Only me.” His voice broke, and his lips quivered before he closed his eyes.

I swallowed hard, trying to ignore the soft sob that came from him. I didn’t want to make him feel worse, but what other way did I have to convince him? I was running out of time, and guilt was usually the best method to convince people to do things they didn’t want to.

“How would you live with yourself, knowing you could have done something different?” It was a thought I often had about myself. Maybe if I had acted differently during the time I was with Ashton, we wouldn’t have gotten to this point. Of course, that was a whole other situation.

“I don’t plan to live much longer, anyway.”

His words startled me and left me without an answer because how could you convince one who had already given up? This kid had been through so much suffering, so who was I, a complete stranger, to ask him for the little power he had left?

Positive that I’d screwed this up, I knew we would lose the case. What was I even thinking of coming here? I wasn’t one to know how to reach someone’s soul. I wasn’t like Ashton, who knew how to speak from the heart and make you

feel welcome. I was a cold man with a cold heart that sometimes felt like a shadow of himself. But then, a thought occurred to me. I wasn't Ashton, but I might as well try to do what he would have done. After all, for months, he'd been telling me to see the other person. To see who Camilo was and to speak at eye level with him.

Assuming this rule also applied to Shay-Lee, I sat back down, rubbed my sweaty palms together, and took a deep breath.

"I know what it's like to be afraid to open your mouth," I said, my voice already shivering with those horrid memories. "Because I…" Suddenly, I couldn't form my next words. It was as if they got stuck in my throat like a lump of mud. But then, I noticed Shay-Lee was looking at me with those broken eyes, and it gave me the courage to go on. "When I was a child, I was molested by a friend of my father for many years." It was the first time I had ever said this to another living soul. "And for years, I kept my lips sealed out of shame and fear because that person is still alive." *And friends with my family*. "But my silence only cost me my own sanity." I shook my head, remembering all the things that could have been if I were brave enough to speak. Above all, my relationship with the most amazing man I'd ever known. "I know what years of being told to keep quiet will do to you. I'm living proof of that. In fact—" I paused for a second, giving Shay-Lee a kind smile. "—I stayed silent for so long that I almost believed it never happened. But it did. And those things come back whether you want them to or not." Like that one day, seven years ago, when the monster from my past came to the office I'd been working at. He smiled and shook my hand as if he had never stripped me naked and bent me over his lap. The same lips that once told me what a pretty boy I was were now smiling at me, letting me know he was trusting me with his lawsuit. "But Shay-Lee, when good people stay silent, it's the bad ones who get away." My throat burned with the tears I tried to hold over things I never thought I'd cry over. This secret had been with me for so many years, scaring me to death. I thought that living life the way I did and controlling everything would help me forget, but the only thing it did was to help me repress.

Repress. Repress. Repress.

Until it was too much to hold, and my mind couldn't take it anymore, and no number of photos on a wall was enough to help me ease my soul.

"I may not know you personally, but from what Diesel has told me, you are a brave young man, Shay-Lee, who's been suffering way too much. You deserve to be happy, and your father deserves to be punished for the crimes he has committed."

Shay-Lee's face twisted with pain before he choked on a low sob. "I want to

help," he confessed, holding his breath. "B-But I'm scared." His voice was nearly a whisper, but his call for help was loud and clear.

I leaned forward, face serious.

"I know, but I promise you that you're not alone."

There was a time I wasn't alone either, but being who I was back then, I was too stupid to acknowledge that. Too scared of what Ashton might think once he found out what had turned me into the man that I was, I kept quiet and allowed fear to control me. The fear of him being repulsed by what I was. The fear of realizing our whole relationship was built on something dirty. The fear of being rejected for never standing up and allowing this thing to go on for years until I grew older and that predator no longer had an interest in a man's body.

Now, I knew Ashton would have never done that, and the fact I doubted him proved what a coward I truly was. *But* there would be time for that later because, currently, my job was to help these boys, who were still just boys, locked in a hell made by men.

CHAPTER Fifty-Four

Ash

"Just take it easy today, Ashy. I'm sure it will all be fine," Kai said while squeezing my neck.

"How?" I turned to look at him.

We'd just parked outside the courthouse but were still inside the car, where Kai had been trying to calm me down for the past ten minutes. Today was the last day before the closing arguments, and I was freaking out with nerves. Too damn anxious to go through today alone, I asked Kai to join me. He agreed without hesitation, quickly finding someone to fill in for him at the restaurant.

"If finding the gun wasn't bad enough, Jordan's testimony pretty much sealed the deal," I went on, my hair standing on end just by thinking of yesterday's hearing. It went awful.

Kai's brows pulled close. "Who's Jordan?" He then snapped his fingers. "Oh, that kid who couldn't stop crying on the stand?"

Unlike him, I took the matter very seriously. "Don't joke about it, Kai. It's a serious matter. Jordan spoke for over an hour about how violent and abusive Diesel was toward Shay-Lee, and the jury listened."

"What did you expect to happen?" Kai asked, turning off the engine and unbuckling himself. "That kid dated Shay-Lee before Diesel and is clearly still in love with him."

"So?" I frowned, following Kai, who'd just got out of the car.

"So, I wouldn't be surprised if he lied."

I shut the door behind me and circled the truck until we faced one another. "What on earth are you talking about? Why would he lie?"

Kai snorted. "Why wouldn't he? I mean, he finally had a chance to get back at Diesel. After all, D literally stole his boyfriend."

Kai began walking in the direction of the courthouse as I stood in place, processing his words.

"But that's wrong," I said, finally running to catch up.

“You’re telling me you wouldn’t lie to get back the person you love?”

I didn’t even have to think about it.

“Of course I wouldn’t,” I said, walking a bit faster so we wouldn’t be late.

“Well, I wish everyone were as good as you.” He smirked.

Could it be that Jordan lied in his testimony out of envy and spite just to get back at Diesel? Thinking about it, Soren also did bad things when he felt threatened by Kai… but it wasn’t the same. *Right*?

“Hey.” Kai reached to grab my hand. “I’m here for you today, so don’t look so worried.” He clenched my hand tighter.

Somehow, over the past week, I’d found it in me to forgive him. I guess that in the end, I was no different from Mom or Aiden when it came to Kai.

Even though we were held up in the security check because of the long line, we still arrived on time and were now looking for a place to sit in the busy courtroom. Someone called my name, and I tracked Andrei waving at us. He was there with Jess and Levi, two empty seats beside them. *Damnit, we didn’t get first row this time.* I always tried to sit as close to Diesel as possible.

“The kids saved us seats,” I told Kai, who took my hand again before he started making his way toward them. I didn’t understand why he decided to hold my hand in this crowded room, but before I could dive deeper into it, my eyes landed on Soren. He was with his back to me while talking to his team. I admired how elegant he looked in his black suit but then remembered what an asshole he was the other night. I still had no idea what made him shift back into his cold self. Maybe he was still pissed at me for sneaking out in the middle of the night? I continued to stare at his back when he suddenly turned and caught me looking, his eyes darting to Kai’s and my joint hands. On instinct, I pulled away and broke the connection. Guilt quickly flooded my body, and when Kai turned to look at me, I retook his hand just so I wouldn’t feel so shitty.

“You cool?” he asked, and I nodded.

Once Kai turned back around, I dared to take one more glance at Soren. His eyes were still on me, but soon, his PI, an incredibly sexy young man, whispered something in his ear. My heart clenched with how close they looked, and I bit my lip with envy. I often saw them together, and Kai mentioned that Soren was with him the night they bumped into each other at the restaurant. Could he be the guy who was at Soren’s house? Maybe. Who knew? Besides, it didn’t matter. And yet, I just checked him out again. He had bleached hair, which I knew Soren didn’t like since he loved natural beauty. But perhaps his taste had changed? That PI was slimmer than me, with long muscles and a cute ass. Well, *that* Soren definitely loved.

Asshole.

“Did you say something?” Kai asked, half turning to me in his seat.

Shit, did I say it out loud?

“No.” I nervously smiled at him. The second Kai went back to chatting with Andrei, I swore under my breath. For fuck’s sake, I was losing my mind. Thankfully, the judge then entered the room, and everyone, including my idiotic brain, went silent.

The final day of testimony began, and at first, there was a feeling that today wouldn’t be any different when, an hour in, the prosecutor yelled at Soren.

“You’ve got to be kidding!” he snarled, eyes nearly popping out of his head. “A new witness at this stage?”

What was going on?

Soren stood up, but unlike Jones, he seemed calm and composed. “Your Honor, it’s not just *some* witness we’re talking about,” he explained, his voice smooth like butter. “But the only victim who survived to tell us what had actually happened that day.”

Whispers erupted around the courtroom at his words, and my mouth fell open in shock. Was he talking about—

“Is this for real?” Andrei whispered, eyes locked with mine. “Shay-Lee’s going to testify?”

“I don’t know,” I said, my heart hammering fast with the news.

As far as I knew, Soren’s team hadn’t managed to get Shay-Lee to speak. What had changed?

“Did you know anything about it?” Levi questioned, brows furrowed, and I shook my head because it took me by complete surprise. And not just me but Diesel, too. For the first time since this trial started, he straightened up in his chair, body tense as he listened to the argument going on between Soren and Jones.

“Mr. Rogers is in no state to testify,” Jones mumbled when Soren stepped closer to the judge.

“With all due respect, Your Honor, Jones is lying. Mr. Rogers is more than capable of testifying, and more than that, he wants to do it. As a matter of fact, I have a signed statement from him in which he states that he wants to testify at this very trial.” He then narrowed his eyes at Jones. “Perhaps you missed that day in law school, but isn’t it illegal to forbid the victim from giving their testimony?”

They exchanged a few more heated arguments before the judge slammed the gavel on the desk, asking for order in her court.

“Very well,” she coughed, fixing her glasses to sit better on her nose. “Since this is indeed an unusual circumstance, I will allow it. But since this case has

already gone on long enough, I ask that you make every effort to have Mr. Rogers come to court this afternoon to give his testimony. I will not tolerate any delays." With that, she dismissed the court for a recess and stated that we would reconvene at noon. Shocked, we all stayed seated in our chairs while chaos erupted around us. This might have changed everything.



While waiting for the hearing to reconvene, the guys decided to find somewhere to eat and pass the time. Too nervous to go anywhere, I told them I'd stay here but urged them to go and eat. As much as I was glad to see Andrei, Levi, and Jess giving their full support to Diesel, I didn't love how the trial affected their lives. They were all young men at the most exciting times of their lives. The last thing they needed to do was waste their days in court halls, not to mention the memories it might bring back. But, thankfully, they were all doing fine. Andrei loved keeping his head in the game, and knowing what was going on gave him the confidence he needed. Jess was brilliantly sweet, and his therapist told me he was doing fine. Levi? Well, he was communicating, which was something.

The main reason I skipped the restaurant and stayed here wasn't just my anxiety but my eagerness to speak to Soren and learn more about what was happening. Sitting outside the room I believed he was currently in, I waited patiently, my knees bouncing each time the door opened and someone stepped out.

"Want some?"

Turning my head, I saw the bleached-haired guy standing beside my bench while offering me candy.

"No, thank you."

"Suit yourself." He shrugged, popped a few into his mouth, and sat beside me.

Something about his odd personality made him feel familiar, even though I couldn't pinpoint what it was exactly.

"So, how you doing?" he asked after I hoped he'd stay quiet.

"I don't think I know your name," I said instead of answering his question. It wasn't like he actually cared.

"Eiv," he said between chewing. "I'm working with Soren—"

"I know that."

He swallowed, then turned to look at me with narrowed eyes. "Why do I feel like you don't like me?"

I shifted a bit further on the bench. “I don’t know you enough to not like you.”

He snorted and placed the packet of candies beside him before cleaning his palms over his pants.

“You know we used to hook up, yeah?”

My eyes snapped to him, and he immediately smiled.

And he wondered why he wasn’t likable.

“Relax, hon. I said *used to*.” He nudged my arm with his elbow.

So they’d fucked. I knew it.

“He sure is fun to be with,” he went on while pouting his lips. “But sadly, he’s no longer interested in me.”

“I don’t care.”

“Is that so?” He eyed me. “Sure doesn’t look like it with that pout of yours.”

“How did you two meet?” I asked, mostly to divert the subject away from my obvious jealousy.

“Awww, you really are as cute as he says you are,” he suddenly said, eyes locked with mine. “And as handsome. Although, you’re not my type. Not really.”

He’s so scattered.

“You haven’t answered my question yet.”

He grinned. “That’s right.”

What was this guy on?

“Anyway, we met at the hospital. I used to work there as a cleaner, and among other things, I had a tendency to look into people’s stuff.” He scratched his chin. “I guess that was why I got fired… But hey, I mostly only looked and only sometimes took.”

Oh my God, now I knew why he felt familiar. He was an older, less cute version of Jessie.

“Anyway, while I still worked there, I met Soren, and we hung out for a few weeks. It was a nice way to pass the time during my shifts. That guy’s smart as fuck, you know? Half the time, I had no idea what he was talking about.”

My forehead creased while I tried to process what he was saying and focus on the important parts. “What was Soren doing in the hospital?”

“What all the other patients in a psychiatric ward do. Stare at the wall while trying to get better,” he snorted. “The wall thing was a joke, of course—don’t get offended.” He went on mumbling crap, completely unaware of what his words had just done to me.

For a second, I wasn’t sure what to think because my heart stopped and my breath caught. Did he just say psychiatric ward?

“Psychiatric ward?” I asked, voice weak.

Eiv’s smile immediately dropped as he looked at me with wide eyes. “Oh shit,” he gasped, perking up on the bench. “Did I ramble too much? I mean, I was sure you knew about it.”

“Knew about what?” I urged while rubbing my palms over my pants.

“About his nervous breakdown.” He swallowed hard. “I mean, he was in there for almost three months, and from what I understood, it was right after the time you two broke up, so I assumed you’d have at least known.”

I hadn’t known. Not until right this second when a complete stranger told me that the man I’d dated and lived with for almost eight years, the man I used to love and probably still did, had gone through a mental breakdown, followed by a stay in a psychiatric hospital. My entire body trembled with this new information, and not knowing what to do with myself, I began chewing on the tip of my nail.

Eiv mentioned it happened soon after Soren and I split up, so could it be the reason—no. I shouldn’t jump to conclusions before speaking to Soren and hearing what he had to say. This wasn’t the time for me to even be thinking back on those days, but the need to know burned inside me like the need to take my next breath. The idea that I’d walked around the world for seven long years without understanding the true reason behind our breakup made me feel both angry and hopeful. *Hopeful?* Why? Why was it hope that flared in my heart? There were still so many questions to ask, so many things to discuss—

The door to the office slammed open, and out walked a furious Christian Rogers.

“You’ll regret this,” he hissed while pointing his finger at—

Soren.

“I think I can handle a few more regrets,” Soren said with an easy smile.

I jumped to my feet at the sight of him. So overwhelmed, I almost bumped into Christian, who stormed down the hall like a beast set on its prey. Not that I cared about him when my eyes were locked on Soren, who had lost his smile the moment he noticed me. His brows pulled into an immediate sulk, and he was ready to walk back inside the room when I called for him.

“Not now, Ashton,” he said, his voice giving me the same closed-off vibe as the other night.

“Wait,” I tried again, walking faster to catch up to him when I stumbled on my feet and crashed forward. I would have fallen flat on my face if not for him stopping me with two steady hands. There was a second there in which neither of us moved, a second of me being in his arms, in his proximity. What I felt wasn’t cold but warmth, like the summer I’d been missing for years. The

nostalgic feeling was quick to disappear after Soren removed his arms from around me.

“I need to talk to you,” I said, eyes begging.

“Now is not a good time.” He tried moving away when I grabbed his arm.

“Please, Soren, it’s important.”

He stopped to pin me with a harsh look that made me shrink into myself. But then he grabbed my arm and pulled me into a room, closing the door behind us. It looked like a library, and I quickly scanned the empty space when he sighed, the sound catching my attention.

“What’s so important that it couldn’t wait until later?”

Us.

The same word I’d feared from years ago returned to me at once, only now, it didn’t fill me with dread. But before I asked the question I wanted the answer to most in the world, I reminded myself that it was no longer just the two of us and that right now, there were bigger things to care about.

“Is Shay-Lee really going to testify?”

“Yes.”

“How?”

Soren looked around, biting the inside of his cheek. “I went to talk to him,” he answered, something about his voice deeper than usual.

Maybe there was more to it than he was willing to share?

“I need to go meet with him, so—”

“Go,” I said before he could find another excuse to get away from me.

He moved to walk out when I stopped him again by saying his name.

“What is it?” he asked.

“When all of this is over, I want you to tell me.”

“Tell you what?” His brows drew close in confusion.

“Everything.”

Holding my stare, his winter gaze bored into my soul before he nodded, a barely there smile on his lips. Without a word, he slipped out of the room, leaving me alone with so many damn questions.

CHAPTER Fifty—Five

Soren

One.

Two.

Three.

Four.

Five.

Six.

Seven.

Eight.

Nine—

I stopped at nine, removing my eyes from my wristwatch and back to the court just in time for the judge to tell me the stage was mine. I took a deep breath, placed both hands on the desk, and pushed back my chair to stand. I had the court's full attention, and for good reason, as the words I said next were the ones they had all been waiting for.

"I would like to call Shay-Lee Christian Rogers to take the stand, Your Honor."

Once the permission had been granted, the doors to the courtroom opened, and in what felt like a choreographed scene, Shay-Lee entered the room. He didn't walk; he couldn't walk, so instead, one of the officers had to push his wheelchair down the aisle. The silence in the room was so stark you could have heard a pin drop, and with all eyes on Shay-Lee, I allowed myself to steal a quick glance at Camilo.

It was the first time I'd seen a different expression on his face. His lips were set in a hard line, jaw tensed, and brows furrowed over soft eyes. Eyes that didn't belong to a fighter but a lover. A lover with a broken heart. I could understand his pain, as watching Shay-Lee being brought to the stand was brutal —gut-wrenching. The boy seemed broken, too broken. From the casts on his legs to the faint bruises on his face, he was a living tragedy. A terrible result of

man’s cruelty. But despite all that, he was here, and he was strong. And above all, he was ready to fight for his life.

Once he was settled and sworn in, I stepped forward.

It’s showtime.

“Can you please state your name for the record?”

Clearing his throat, Shay-Lee leaned closer. “Shay-Lee Christian Rogers.”

“Can you please tell me the names of your parents?”

“Eva Rogers and Christian Wynter Rogers.”

“Are they here today?”

“Only my father is.” He looked down. “My mother’s dead.”

“Could you point to your father for me?”

Like a branch shaking in the wind, Shay-Lee lifted one thin arm.

“Please write in the record that the witness just pointed at Christian W. Rogers,” I asked the court reporter before turning my attention back to Shay-Lee. The room was still dead silent, making each word spoken sound a thousand times louder.

“Mr. Rogers, are you aware of the narrative the prosecution has been telling the court about the day you were attacked?”

He nodded, eyes locked on his hands. “I am.”

“And what do you have to say about it?”

He visibly swallowed before pulling his shoulder. “That it’s not true.”

“What is not true?”

He lifted his head only to look behind me at where Camilo was sitting. “Camilo would never hurt me.”

I wished I could have given Shay-Lee more time to focus on Camilo, but sadly, we didn’t have the luxury at the moment, and I had to move on.

“Do you love him?” I asked.

“Yes.”

Such a simple yet powerful answer—as it should be when it comes to love.

“So you didn’t cheat on him as the prosecution claimed?”

Shay-Lee shook his head, eyes still locked with Camilo. “Never.”

“So why did you end up living at Mr. Bianchi’s house?”

He focused his stare on me. “That was a part of our plan.”

“And that plan would be?”

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “To run away.”

“And why would you want to run away, Mr. Rogers?”

“To get free.”

“Free of what?”

Shay-Lee didn’t respond immediately. Instead, he froze with his eyes glossy

with tears. He was clearly scared, but I knew he could do it. He just needed more time, so I decided to help.

“Mr. Rogers, we’ll come back to that question later. Meanwhile, could you tell me if you remember anything from the day of the attack?”

He shook his head before brushing the back of his hand over his cheek, wiping away some of his tears. “No. I don’t recall the last seven days before the attack happened.”

At this point, Jones tried to step in but was silenced by the judge, who allowed me to proceed.

“Could you tell me the last thing you remember before the attack?”

“Camilo and I agreed to wait until graduation before running away.” As he spoke, he moved his hand over a golden necklace that hung around his thin neck.

“You were excited about it, weren’t you? About a new beginning?” A soft smile pulled on my lips, just imagining sharing those intimate moments with the person you loved. In my case, it was always the same man with the dreamiest set of green eyes one had ever seen.

“I was,” he answered, voice choked. “Still am,” he added, and a noise from behind me caught my attention. Turning around, I found Diesel staring back at Shay-Lee. He looked like a man under a spell; hypnotized couldn’t even begin to describe the possessed look in his desperate eyes. I drifted away until I found Ashton. He, the same as everyone else, was invested in what was happening, only that his eyes were locked with mine.

My chest filled with warmth, and my body was boosted with confidence. This was it. This was my time to do something right.

“But just like that—” I snapped my fingers. “—all those dreams went away when someone decided you shouldn’t be happy.”

I turned to face the jury. “Since the beginning of this trial, you have been repeatedly told that my client, Mr. Gómez, was a cruel man who acted out of maliciousness and hate and that he had taken it upon himself to get back at Shay-Lee for leaving him. Clearly, this wasn’t the case, as my client had no intention of hurting the victim. But someone else did wish to hurt them both and succeeded.” I turned back to Shay-Lee. “Tell me, Mr. Rogers, is the person you believe responsible for what happened to you in this court today?”

Shay-Lee stayed still for a dragging moment before he slowly nodded his head.

“Y-Yes,” he whispered in a hoarse voice.

“Is this person my client, Mr. Gómez?”

He shook his head, eyes looking down. “No.”

“Would you please point to the person who you believe did this to you?”

Shay-Lee's whole body tensed, his shoulders trembling as he slowly lifted his arm and pointed it in the direction of the monster behind this hell. Chaos erupted in the court as Shay-Lee finally held his head straight up, looking directly into his father's eyes while pointing at him.

"Order!" the judge called out, using her gavel to calm everyone down, to no effect. After all, they all got what they came here for—a horrifying scandal.

Unable to resist the urge, I glanced over my shoulder at where Christian was sitting with a poker face on; not a single emotion was displayed on it. Yet, I saw the rage burning behind his ugly eyes. I saw the evilness of the true monster lurking inside the body of a man. And while I knew how far the horrors he inflicted on his son went, I had no intention of revealing them. Not today. Not ever. That secret belonged to Shay-Lee, and when we prepared for his testimony, I promised him it would not be brought up. Despite that, Shay-Lee still agreed to talk to some extent, and that was precisely what he did next.

"Mr. Rogers, if you'll allow it, I would like to go back to my previous question. When I asked the purpose of your plan with Mr. Gómez, you answered that it was for you to get free. Free of what?"

With a bravery I had never seen before, Shay-Lee held his head straight up. The tears rolling down his cheeks didn't stop him from speaking the painful truth.

"Of him." He nodded his head in the direction of his father. "Of the devil who'd been torturing me my entire life."

And just like that, the truth was out.

"Would you mind elaborating?" I asked once the voices in court calmed down again.

"How much time do we have?" he asked coldly, his eyes still locked on his father. From then on, for a long, dragging hour, Shay-Lee began telling things one could not even imagine. He didn't only speak about his father but also mentioned Orson, the sadist who worked for Christian and who, more often than not, abused Shay-Lee himself.

On the day he was attacked, among other things, Shay-Lee was raped. The prosecution tried to play it off as a consensual act between Shay-Lee and Orson, but I knew better. Of course, I wasn't about to mention it. Thankfully, Shay-Lee was lucky enough to forget what had happened to him. Unfortunately for me, the images I saw from the crime scene would forever be engraved in my memory. It was a horrible scene, one that I knew wasn't the act of a single man. Christian wasn't working alone, but *that* was a different matter.

Shay-Lee went on to tell more about living life in the shadow of a monster. It was hard to listen to, but not as hard as it was for him to speak about it. I knew it

took everything he had, and it wasn't even half of the unspeakable things he'd experienced on a daily basis for the past nineteen years of his life. When he was finally done talking, Christian had gotten up from his chair and began making his way out of the courtroom. To my surprise, Shay-Lee had none of it.

"You're running away?" he asked, voice unwavering. "Why? You can't handle the truth, Dad?"

Christian didn't bother with answering his son and instead left. I knew they wouldn't arrest him on the spot as they should have, but this motherfucker's time would come.

Our work didn't end with Shay-Lee's words. As if the universe had decided to play fair for once, my team had gotten their hands on two videos that were filmed in Dion's club. The first video showed Camilo being beaten up by Christian and Orson. The audio left no doubt about their intentions. The second video might have had no sound, but it showed Orson holding Shay-Lee at gunpoint inside Shay-Lee's car. Both videos, along with Shay-Lee's brave testimony, were enough to prove that this trial was one big scam, perfectly composed and orchestrated by the devil himself.

Christian W. Rogers.

"You did amazing," I told Shay-Lee as soon as he got off the stand. We had a short recess before the judge would address the court. I had a good feeling about today, a really fucking good feeling.

"Did I?" Shay-Lee asked, voice weak.

Smiling at him, I nodded. "You did. You were so brave."

I wouldn't say he smiled, but the corner of his lip twitched before he tried looking behind me at where Diesel sat the whole time. Since we had a break, the guards had taken him out of the courtroom. It was a shame because I'd hoped they'd have a chance to talk.

"Can you tell him something for me?" Shay-Lee asked, and I immediately agreed.

"Of course."

"Tell him that I'm sorry it took me so long."

I wanted to tell Shay-Lee that he had absolutely no reason to apologize, but I also knew it wasn't my place.

"I'll make sure to deliver your message," I promised.



The hearing ended with Shay-Lee's powerful testimony and evidence. I left

immediately after, not wanting to give Ashton the chance to catch me. Before the second half of the day started, he'd said he wanted to know everything. And while it had gotten me excited and nervous at the same time, I knew that it had to wait. We were a mile away from the finish line, so close you could practically hear the crowd's cheering and roaring. Therefore, distracting us from the case would be a critical mistake at this stage. One more day, that was all we needed to get through.

Quickly enough, the hours passed, and before I knew it, it was a new morning. The prosecution didn't seem excited to be in court today, not that I could blame them. After Shay-Lee's shocking testimony yesterday, they had clearly lost. The prosecution delivered their closing arguments, and so did I, and now it was time to wait. The ball was officially in the jury's hands after the judge gave them their instructions. Now, they needed to deliberate as to whether Camilo was guilty or not, and that could take anywhere from a couple of minutes to several days.

When we were called back less than an hour later to hear their decision, I knew it was either a good sign or an utter disaster.

My heart rate increased as the jurors filed back into the courtroom, clearly having made their decision. Straightening up in my chair, I took a deep breath. Nerves kicked in my gut, and my leg bounced under the table.

The foreperson of the jury stood up, the decision in her hand. She cleared her throat before she began reading from the paper, word after word until she reached the reason we had all been waiting for with bated breath.

"Considering the evidence presented yesterday by the victim and the defense team, which shed new light on the case and made us doubt the prosecution's claims, we, the jury, find the defendant not guilty on all counts."

Not guilty.

For many years, I had heard that verdict being said, and it always felt like an achievement. Nothing more than a validation of my good work. But right now, it felt so personal and raw that I could cry with joy. Unable to control myself, I placed my hands on Diesel's back and shook him. At the same time, calls of joy erupted from his friends. I swear to God, I couldn't remember the last time I'd felt this kind of joy. But as I turned around and saw Ashton, tears of happiness in his eyes while he was looking at us, I actually did remember the last time I'd been this content.

I used to think I was a solo player. For years, I'd told myself the lie that a trial was a one-man show. It was a story I told myself to excuse how lonely I often felt. Even more so after Ashton was out of my life. But after long months of hard teamwork, I knew I wasn't alone, and neither was Diesel, who was

sitting right beside me, soon to be a free man.

After getting the attention of everyone in the court, the judge turned her focus to Diesel. “Young man, after the rather dramatic few days we’ve had, I’m inclined to believe that a great injustice has been done to you, and I would ask the police to reopen their investigation of the case. Now, then, without further ado, I hereby accept the jury’s decision and dismiss this case against Mr. Gómez and order the immediate release of the defendant.”

I couldn’t describe what happened next. There was simply too much joy to form it into words. But I would say that it felt like I could finally breathe again.

CHAPTER Fifty-Six

Ash

"It's not like you to give others the spotlight," I joked after finally finding Soren in the empty courtroom. I was so busy celebrating Diesel's exculpation that at some point, I'd lost sight of Soren. And I wasn't the only one. While his team spoke to the press outside the court, giving them the details of the successful case, Soren was nowhere to be found. That was, until I found him sitting on the same chair Diesel had occupied for the past few weeks.

Soren half turned to look at me, a small smile tinged on his lips. "Is that so?"

Walking down to the front of the court, I invited myself to sit beside him.

"Yes."

He snorted. "I guess I've changed."

I didn't immediately speak and instead enjoyed the simple comfort of being next to him. Thousands of thoughts ran through my head, and finding the right question to start this conversation was almost impossible.

"We did it," Soren said, saving me from finding a way to break the silence we'd fallen into.

"*You* did it," I corrected him, my shoulder touching his. "Soren, I will never be able to thank you enough for what you've done."

He huffed, eyes focused on his hands that were placed flat on the desk. "Nothing to thank me for. I simply did my job."

To gather his attention, I covered his hand with mine. "You did so much more."

Biting back a smile, he nodded, and I withdrew my hand. After all, I still needed to keep those lines between us clear, even though they were getting blurrier by the minute.

"You know, it felt personal." He turned to me. "When Diesel got acquitted, it felt like the judge talked directly to me. Your joy, the kids'." He observed me, his silver eyes reminding me of the ocean after a rainstorm. "I don't know, I've just never felt this attached to a case before."

If I talked about seeing slight changes in him, now was one of those times. Excluding me, Soren was never one to show empathy with others, so this shift warmed my heart. “Well, those kids have the ability to do that. They’re capable of touching your soul.”

“Oh, Ashton,” he sighed, amusement written on his tired face. “You’re still as naive as always.”

“What do you mean?” I frowned.

“Nothing,” he chuckled. “You’re just sinfully cute.”

Despite being confused, I decided to let it slide and move on.

“You promised to tell me everything,” I said, eyes locked on him.

“I did…” He rubbed his jaw and then placed his hands back on the desk. “Where do I start?”

“How about at the beginning?”

“That’s going to be a pain,” he joked, but I nudged his shoulder. “Okay, okay,” he laughed.

I loved the sound of his low laugh. It was so rough and raspy, reminding me of the hours we spent in bed together, just talking about life, joking with one another.

“So, let’s see.” Soren averted his eyes from me, his focus now up front. “To make a long story short, between the ages of eight and twelve, I was molested by my father’s friend.”

I did not expect that, and my stomach turned with his words. Shocked, I stared at him with my eyes open and lips slightly parted.

“Oh, Soren.” I placed my hand on him, my thumb softly caressing his skin. “I-I don’t know what to say.”

He stayed silent, a sad smile coating his lips.

“Did that man get what he deserved?” The need to find out more nipped at me.

“No, because until recently, I’d never told anyone. In fact, the only people I’ve told are you and Shay-Lee.”

My brows pulled close before realization sank in. “You told Shay-Lee because… because he went through the same—”

“Yes.”

“Oh my God,” I gasped and leaned back in my chair. Shock and horror didn’t even begin to describe the storm of emotions that just took over every inch of my body. “Was it his father?”

“Yes.”

I felt sick to my stomach and had to shake my head to get out of it. *That poor boy*. And if I hadn’t already regretted the day I turned my back on them, now I

felt even worse. But before I allowed guilt to divert my attention, I focused back on Soren.

“So you never told anyone?”

“I was too ashamed, Ashton. Still am.”

“You have nothing to be ashamed of, Soren. You did nothing wrong,” I urged, leaning closer to him.

He kept quiet, so I went on. “You were so open about your OCD when we’d just met and about your sexuality. You’ve never shied away from any tough matter, and you shouldn’t with this either. *Especially* this.”

“It’s not that simple,” he cut in, voice tight. “Being gay or having OCD are things that are out of my control.” He slumped his shoulders while shaking his head. “That… that *thing* wasn’t. I mean, I could have done something instead of just letting it happen over and over for four years.”

What he was telling me crushed my heart, and my throat tightened with the emotion I was trying to hold back. I didn’t want to burst into tears and take the attention away from him, but it was difficult to keep them inside.

“What that man did to you was not your fault. Even if you never told anyone. Even if you were too afraid to cry, it still doesn’t make it your fault.”

“But it is.” His brows pulled into a frown, and his jaw tensed. “My silence was my sin.” He took another deep breath and closed his eyes, a crease forming between his pinched brows. “I kept telling myself that it happened because I was out of control, and to make it stop, I just had to control everything else. So I started with the small stuff. What clothes to wear, what books to read, and what color to paint the walls in my rooms. Before I knew it, my obsession with details grew even bigger. I tried to control everything, every passing second in my day. When it didn’t work, it drove me insane, and I began repeating the same action until things felt *right*. After some time, my parents noticed the change. They sent me to a psychiatrist, then a few more, and all of them diagnosed me with OCD.” He then took a small break and brushed his hand over his jaw. “I easily accepted my diagnosis and even liked it. I liked knowing that what made me tick wasn’t that man who bent me over his lap and told me I was a good boy but some sort of a mental illness.”

Good boy.

No wonder he was scared to tell me this until now.

Soren welcomed me into his life pretty much from the moment we met. And although he allowed me into his house, it always felt like he kept some of the doors locked. Soren always had something blocking him from giving himself wholly to me, and at last, he was telling me. We might not be together anymore, but it didn’t change the fact I was here for him. Reaching forward, I grabbed his

hand and squeezed it tight.

“Why didn’t you tell me sooner?” I was ashamed of myself for asking. It was Soren’s decision whether to share this or not, but still.

Once again, his eyes met mine as he laced our fingers together. “I was scared you’d be repulsed or, worse, that you’d think our relationship was a result of what he’d done to me.”

“Oh, God.” I released my hand only to cup his face with both palms. “I would have never.”

He shrugged. “I mean, why not? Psychologically, it makes perfect sense that I’d seek control in a sexual relationship after I was introduced to sex in a situation where I was completely out of control. Not to mention you weren’t even legal when we met and the power dynamic we had.”

Something then occurred to me. “Was that why you got so angry when I lied about my age?” Thinking back on that night, he was so damn mad, repeating the word *rape* again and again. Even though I was old enough to make my own decisions then, maybe my age triggered him.

“Yes,” he said, then shook his head. “Maybe, I mean. I’m not sure.” He shrugged. “There were times I doubted our relationship and questioned my motives. I loved you, don’t get me wrong, but I was constantly afraid I was doing to you what he did to me, and that made me—” His words cut off as he took a sharp breath and squeezed his eyes shut.

“It made you depressed?” I offered, feeling tortured over the pain he’d gone through for years. If he had just spoken to me sooner, we could have worked through it. It also made me wonder if what that man did to him was the reason Soren never wanted children of his own. Whenever I brought up that subject in the past, Soren would always reject it. We had many fights over it, in which I got frustrated because he never provided me with real explanations as to why we couldn’t have children. Now, it all made so much sense. He didn’t want to speak about it because he couldn’t open up. He couldn’t bring himself to admit what happened to him when *he* was a child.

When he opened his eyes and I saw the softness through which he was looking at me, my heart fluttered. Realizing how close we were didn’t help, and my pulse only increased. Swallowing hard, I placed my hand against his jaw. But Soren didn’t budge and instead turned to kiss my palm. My skin burned where his lips touched me, and my cheeks turned red. He chuckled, the warm sound like medicine to my soul.

“You’re the most precious thing, Ashton,” he whispered, kissing me again.

“So why did you break up with me?” I asked, holding my guard because there was still a lot I needed to know.

Soren gently removed my hands and straightened up. “Ashton—”

“No,” I declared. “I need to know.”

Soren

Ever since we returned from Greece, I hadn’t felt like myself. Getting up each morning and needing to leave Ashton’s side became harder and harder until my everyday tasks became nothing but distractions until I could hold him in my arms again. He was the only thing that helped me to feel like a person and not some walking machine with no soul. He gave my life purpose and light.

Most of the time, all I wished for was to go back and lie on some sandy white beach with him by my side, without a worry on my mind. Perhaps I should do that? After all, I had the money to live such a life, but what would become of me without any structure? I couldn’t just… be. *I needed a schedule, a routine, something to keep me in control, like work. What I was feeling now was only a phase, another one of those times where my mood shifted. Perhaps I should talk with my therapist about changing my dose or trying a new medication. That could help. I wasn’t an idiot; I knew what this was.* Depression. *After all, depression had many forms, and in my case, it wasn’t about lying in a dark room and not leaving my bed. I functioned, as I always did, but my thoughts didn’t give me a break. Not for a moment. What usually helped me calm down wasn’t working, and I found myself repeating the same actions again and again. Pointless rituals that were supposed to keep me sane but instead—did the opposite.*

I needed to see Ashton. He’s the only one that could help.

“Dane!” my boss called, and I turned in time to see him walk into my office with another man. “Come and meet your new client.”

Getting up from my seat, I rounded my table and automatically sent my hand forward in a handshake to introduce myself. But then, I was met with a pair of vicious eyes I’d never forgotten.

“I’ll be damned. Young Soren Dane?” He smiled, chapped lips stretching into a repulsive smile that showed off yellow teeth.

A shudder ran through me as I remembered how those disgusting lips felt brushing against my skin. Swallowing hard, I forced myself to return a smile.

“Robert, right?” I hated myself for remembering his name.

“Indeed, son.” Still shaking my hand, he pulled me close to pat my back, treating me like I truly was his son.

God. I’m about to be sick.

“Knowing my case is in good hands would help me sleep at night,” he added, his hand still squeezing me tight.

Soon, my boss escorted him to a different room, and once they were out, I went straight to the bathroom. At first, I thought washing my face would help, but somehow, I ended up on the stall floor, pouring my guts into the dirty toilet. My whole body was shaking uncontrollably, and I was heaving like a dog in heat. I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand, then leaned back against the stall door. With shaking fingers, I pulled out my phone and typed Ashton a text.

Could you please come and meet me at work?

My thumb hovered over the Send button, but at the last second, I deleted the text and put my phone away. Squeezing my eyes shut, I began crying, tears streaming down my face while I tried to swallow back my sobs and keep my voice down. I couldn’t call Ashton because if I did, he’d find out, and everything would end.

And you know what good boys do? Good boys keep their mouths shut.

My eyes snapped open, and I jumped forward, holding the side of the toilet before hurling again until I was sure I’d die choking on my vomit.

Once I was able to stand, I got out of the stall, freshened up, and quickly left the building. Walking fast, I was trying to think what I’d tell Ashton once I saw him. How would I be able to keep this away from him when I could hardly breathe? But what choice did I have? He would run away the second he learned why I called him my good boy—

A loud honk pierced into my thoughts right before someone shouted, “Watch out,” and I was yanked back. My ass slammed onto the hard pavement, and I groaned in pain before realizing what had happened. People were already gathering around me, asking me if I was okay. Blinking my eyes several times, I saw a man getting out of his car, his hands in his hair.

“He came out from nowhere—” the driver yelled while I’d already started gathering back my things.

My briefcase was right beside me; papers were scattered all around.

“S-Sir,” someone tried to say when I pushed their hand away.

I needed space. I needed to be out of here. Deciding to leave my things on the ground, I got up and just ran away. It was suffocatingly hot, and sweat soaked through my clothes, but I couldn’t stop, and I kept running until my legs carried me home. I hoped that once I saw his face, I would be able to calm down, but the opposite happened, and my panic doubled. Throughout the evening, I bottled up everything inside, telling myself again and again that I must hold it together, when suddenly Ashton asked something.

“Is it that bad?”

What would he think of me once he finds out I’m nothing more than a perverted freak?

“*I guess I’m just not meant to be in the kitchen,” he chuckled.*

He won’t laugh anymore.

“*I was thinking, maybe we can go somewhere soon?”*

He won’t look at me with such kindness and affection.

“*We can go someplace warm. I know how much you enjoy the sun—”*

He won’t love me anymore, and I’ll lose the one thing that keeps me sane.

“*I can’t do this anymore,” I cut into his words.*

Everything was crumbling around me, and just like that, one bad decision after another, I finally put the last nail in my coffin.

“*I said, I can’t do this anymore,” I repeated myself, well aware I was sentencing myself to my own death.*

“Please don’t cry, my love,” I told Ashton while offering him my handkerchief.

“W-Why?” He took the handkerchief and cleared his nose. “Why only now?” *Sniff.* “Why are you only telling me about this now?”

My sweet little Sparrow was too kind for his own good. Too naive and gentle. The truth was, I’d wanted to tell him this years ago. In fact, I was ready to share my story with him as soon as I was out of the hospital, but then I came to his house and saw that he’d moved on. I couldn’t say I believed Kai, more like I chose to believe him. He was a snake then and still was now, but for many years, I had convinced myself that he was a better fit for Ashton. And on paper, he was. They merged into each other’s lives so easily that it was painful for me to watch, but it was also reality. Of course, now I held different beliefs, and I had no doubt that Ashton belonged with me. But despite knowing that, I wasn’t willing to tell him his best friend had betrayed him. It wasn’t right for me to break his heart, yet again.

“Why didn’t you say anything before?” he asked again, eyes red from crying.

Rubbing his cheek with my palm, I tried to smile at him. “Because it changes nothing.”

He pushed my hand away. “It changes everything.”

“Only if you don’t love him,” I said, watching the shock forming on his face.

“W-What?”

“This only changes things if you don’t love him, Ashton. Because if you do, and he’s the one, then nothing else should matter.”

If Ashton were to decide he wanted me back, he needed to come to that

decision on his own. Manipulating him in order to keep him away from Kai wouldn't help. Not anymore. Like I said, I'd changed in the time we'd been apart, and I had no intention of repeating the same mistakes I once did.

"Soren," he whispered, his eyes jumping from mine to my lips. He then placed his hand on my thigh and leaned in. My heart rate lowered the closer he got until his breath brushed against my lips. But then, the door to the courtroom opened, and Ashton quickly jumped back.

"K-Kai," he gasped, his voice choked.

"There you are. I was looking for you everywhere." Kai smiled while walking down the aisle toward us.

Good, so he didn't see us.

"Sorry. We just got sucked into a conversation," Ashton explained while rubbing the back of his head, already up on his feet.

"About what?"

"Nothing important." Ashton moved to stand by Kai, whose eyes darted to check me out.

"Whatever." He shrugged, wrapping an arm around Ashton's wide shoulders. "Shouldn't we go pick Diesel up from prison? The boys are already dying to see him."

"Yeah, we should," Ashton said, out of breath, as I got up myself.

"Well, I guess I'll go home now—"

"How about we treat you for dinner?" Kai suggested, surprising the two of us. Ignoring Ashton's shocked expression, he went on. "I mean, we owe you for getting our kid out of prison. It's the least we can do, right?"

We, we, we. Didn't this asshole just love using that word?

I would have refused if Ashton hadn't jumped on the idea. "That's right, Soren. Please come." His face gleamed with hope, and since I was never good at telling him no, I wasn't about to start doing it.

"Okay."

CHAPTER Fifty-Seven

Ash

With my back leaning against my truck, I checked the time again. Diesel was supposed to be out by now, but I guessed he'd been delayed. While Andrei and I drove here to pick him up, Jessie and Levi stayed home with Kai to prepare one heck of a welcome home meal. We were all so damn excited because fuck, after a long eight months, the kid was finally coming back home. Putting my joy aside, I was well prepared for Diesel to be different from before because who knew what he'd gone through in there? From the little I did know, it hadn't been easy. Diesel appeared beaten up more than once, and after months of hardly speaking to anyone, he had clearly suffered significant trauma. Not that he could be blamed. He had been torn away from his life in the blink of an eye, was forced to separate from Shay-Lee, and then faced the worst allegations one could ever think of. On top of it all, I highly doubted that Diesel was aware of the amount of publicity his case received. By now, most Americans knew his face and name, as well as Shay-Lee's. This whole case had blown up all the media outlets, even more so after Shay-Lee's testimony. In fact, since the afternoon, my phone had been buzzing with news channels asking to interview him, and if not for the police switching Diesel's facility to avoid attention, this place would also be filled with reporters and paparazzi wishing to get Diesel's first pictures out of prison. I knew this was a passing stage and that, eventually, they would all move on to the next story, but for the time being, Diesel would have to stomach it.

So, with the new reality he'd return to, I was sure Diesel was going to have a hard time adjusting, but I was also certain that I'd be here for him. For real, this time. The day before the trial ended, I did something I hardly ever did: I prayed. I prayed to God and promised that if Diesel would walk out of that court as a free man, I would forever do my best to help him. No matter what choice he made, I'd respect it and be of full support because, for the love of God, I would not repeat the same mistakes I'd once made.

"There he is," Andrei said while nudging my arm and snapping me back to

the present.

Looking ahead, I saw Diesel stepping out of the prison gates, his duffle bag tossed over his shoulder. Seeing him in jeans and a T-shirt was such a nice change from the awful jumpsuit, and I smiled, already pushing back from the car and joining Andrei, who was calling for him. Diesel looked up from the ground, his stare landing on us. There were about ten feet between us, but I easily detected how the expression on his face hardened before he looked away and kept on walking.

Oh, no.

"Didn't he see us?" Andrei asked with a deep frown on his confused face. "Yo, Diesel," he called out again, louder this time, while waving his hand in the air. When Diesel didn't turn around and kept walking in the direction of the bus stop, Andrei darted toward him with me right behind.

Andrei reached him first and placed his hand on Diesel's shoulder. "Hey, man, where are you goin—" His question was cut off when Diesel shrugged him off.

I couldn't see Andrei's face, but his body tensed as he took a step back. "What the hell, man? What's the matter with you?" he asked, but Diesel didn't answer and just kept walking. At that point, Andrei's anger erupted out of him like fire. "Hey, I'm talking to you," he shouted. "Where are you going?"

"Anywhere that isn't here," Diesel finally answered with his back to us.

I wanted to jump in and say something, but Andrei left no room for that.

"What do you mean? The guys are waiting for you at home. We're all waiting for you."

"It's not my home." Diesel's answer was short and precise, like a dart to my heart. Clearly, I wasn't the only one taken aback by his words.

"What the fuck are you talking about, saying crap like that," Andrei spat out before he rounded Diesel and forced him to stop. "We're your family."

"My family is buried six feet under," Diesel hissed, his fists clenched tight.

Andrei's face twisted with shock before he visibly swallowed, his neck working.

"Guys, let's calm down," I offered and tried to step in. Looking between them, Diesel stayed true to his words and still didn't so much as glance my way. It hurt, but I half saw it coming.

"I'm done here, with this place, this city. With *you*. I've got nothing more to do here," Diesel said, jaw tensed. He didn't wait for an answer, rounded Andrei, and kept on walking.

"What do you mean you're done?" Andrei turned around, his eyes pinned on Diesel's back, which was only getting further away. "We've fought for you for

months, you asshole!”

“I didn’t ask you to do that.”

Wow.

“But we did anyway.” Andrei’s voice broke at the same time my heart did. “We fought for you to come back to us, and now you want to leave?”

Diesel didn’t answer, and when I saw Andrei was about to charge after him again, I reached forward and wrapped my arm around him.

“W-What are you doing?” Andrei asked me, unshed tears in his furious eyes. “He’s getting away!”

I understood his pain. Fuck that, I felt it in my bones, but at the same time, I chose to stay true to my words. I promised to respect Diesel’s choices no matter how hard they would be, and that was exactly what I was doing right now.

“It’s his right to do whatever he wants, Andrei.”

“Fuck that,” Andrei snapped and released himself from my hold, then took a few steps forward. “What about Shay-Lee?” It seemed as if his scream finally reached Diesel because he stopped walking.

For a moment, I thought that Andrei had managed to reach him, but then Diesel half turned to look at us over his shoulder.

“I’m done with him, too.”

Diesel’s words were so cold, said without an inch of remorse while he stared at us through dark eyes that left no place for his soul. He then turned around and moved on. I flinched, my throat turning dry with fear. Yes, he was free, but I couldn’t help but think that a part of him had stayed in prison.

His heart.

“W-What?” Andrei gasped, mostly to himself, while waving his hand in Diesel’s direction. “Are you just going to let him leave?” he urged me, eyes begging. I hated to disappoint him, but what other choice did we have?

“He’s free to do whatever he wants,” I told Andrei.

“Bullshit!” he spat out. “That’s bullshit!”

“I know,” I said, my hand resting on his shoulder and squeezing him tight. “I know it’s bullshit, but it’s what he’s choosing to do. If Diesel is done with us, then it’s his choice, Andrei, whether we like it or not.”

Biting his lip and grinding his jaw, Andrei squeezed his eyes shut. A single tear fell down his cheek, and my heart ached for his loss. Our loss. But we had no right to decide what Diesel should do with his life. We’d fought for his freedom and won; now, it was up to him.

Andrei cleaned his nose and turned back around just in time to see Diesel climbing on a bus that had stopped at the nearby bus stop. He didn’t glance back at us, and we didn’t get the chance to say goodbye before he rode off and left his

old life behind.

Did I see this coming? Of course not, and I felt like I'd just lost a son, but for an entirely different reason. Diesel had every right to leave and move forward with his life. But the look in his eyes after Andrei mentioned Shay-Lee's name broke me. For years, I avoided getting too close to Diesel because of fear. I never realized what it was that made me so fearful of him until he looked at us with those sad eyes, and for the first time, I saw what it was that made me so easily rebuff him in the past.

Regret.

His eyes were a pitch-black vortex full of regret, and whenever I was met with those dark pits, it forced me to face my own regrets. Never being one to face his problems headfirst, I did the same thing I always did—turned the other way. Only with Diesel, it was impossible to look away, and perhaps that was why he finally left.

CHAPTER Fifty-Eight

Ash

"You didn't go after him?" Kai asked as soon as I closed the door to my bedroom behind us.

After Andrei and I returned home without Diesel, we had to explain what had happened. Jess, Levi, and Kai were all confused, and while they had many questions, I didn't have any answers. Kai had seemed bothered from the second we told him the news, and so he dragged me into my room the first chance he had. I half expected him to try and cheer me up, but now, he sounded… angry?

"No, Kai, I didn't go after him." I frowned. "Why do you sound angry?"

Kai walked further into the room, his fingers running through his loose hair. "I'm not angry. Fuck." He sighed, then turned to face me. "I'm just worried that you'll end up regretting this decision, too."

Why? Because I might have made a huge-ass mistake and allowed Diesel to vanish to who knew where and get himself into a new mess? I mean, what if he got into some fight and got stabbed again? What then? Who would help him—

"Oh, fuck, Ashy," Kai sighed and crossed the room until he had me in his tight embrace. "I didn't mean to scare you." He kissed the top of my head, not that it gave me much comfort.

"What if something happens to him?"

Still hugging me close, he spoke. "Then it will no longer be our responsibility, Ashy. I mean, if D decided to be on his own…" He slumped his shoulders. "Then I guess there's nothing we can do about it." Pulling back a bit so we'd face each other, Kai smiled at me. And despite the comfort he tried providing me with, I still felt as if I stood in the middle of a storm.

"I guess it's just hard." I moved my hand to rest against Kai's chest, softly caressing my fingers along the fabric of his shirt. Touching him was supposed to be a distraction, nothing more. "When he left, it felt like I'd lost one of my kids. I know they aren't mine." A small smile spread on my lips just with the thought of them. "But it sure feels like it sometimes."

“Aww, that’s sweet,” he said, bursting my bubble with his words. He then covered my hand with his. “But kids always leave at some point, and let’s face it, Diesel is all grown up.”

“I guess you’re right,” I mumbled, even though it didn’t feel like it.

“Speaking of kids, Zoe talked with me. She wants to come for a visit next month with Paris, what do you think?”

Oh God, for a while, I almost forgot she existed. “You should spend time with them; they’re your family, but I don’t think I have the mental capacity to handle her or anyone else right now, Kai. The trial just ended.”

“You’re my family, Ashy.” He brought my hand to his lips and kissed it. “And you’re right. The trial ended, meaning it’s time for us to move forward.” He flashed me a toothy smile that I wanted to punch off his face.

But I didn’t and instead allowed him to keep holding on to my hand.

“The other guys are also grown up. You realize they’re not the same troubled kids you picked up four or five years ago?”

“I didn’t pick them up, Kai. They aren’t stray dogs.” I withdrew my hand from him, but he quickly grabbed me again and pulled my body close.

“I know, I know.” He chuckled while kissing my cheek. “I was just joking. You know that, right?”

I usually admired Kai’s ability to joke in tough situations. Now wasn’t one of those times. He didn’t make me feel better and, instead, dismissed my emotions. The worst part? He was too dense to get it. Or maybe he wasn’t oblivious and simply didn’t care?

“You need to shower,” I said, placing my arm between us and pushing him away. “You’re all sweaty.”

“So why not join me?” He tried pulling me with him, but I stepped back.

“Nah, I’m not in the mood.”

“Oh, come on,” he tried again, as he often did, and I rolled my eyes.

“I’ll take Pacha for a walk. You go ahead.”

He grunted, took off his sweaty shirt, and tossed it at me. Too tired, I didn’t even bother to dodge it.

“Fine, I’ll go jerk off by myself. You’re welcome to join if you change your mind.” He grinned, already getting rid of his pants.

Usually, I’d find his offer tempting, as I loved watching him get off, but now, sex was the last thing on my mind. Once Kai closed the bathroom door behind him, I looked at the corner of my room, where Pacha’s bed was placed. My baby was getting old, and he spent most of his time sleeping.

“Come here, boy. Let’s go for a walk.”



“You’re tired, aren’t you?” I asked Pacha as I strolled slowly by his side. He used to make me run after him on the beach, but that was a long time ago. Now, he moved like an old man. I knew that one day, I’d have to say goodbye, but thankfully, that day wasn’t today, and for now, I just walked at his pace and took a break whenever he needed it. It was also why I took him on walks alone from time to time. Pooh and Puma were much younger, and I’d hate for Pacha to hurt himself while trying to keep up.

I wasn’t ready to say goodbye to him, just as I wasn’t ready to part ways with Diesel or any of the other kids. If it were up to me, they would all stay with me forever. But that was a selfish thought, wasn’t it? After all, at some point, they needed their freedom. I’d left Mom’s home pretty early on and moved in with Soren. Now, I could understand why she got so mad. It wasn’t just because she didn’t like him—although her hate for him didn’t help—but because it was hard for her.

Being alone is hard.

Pacha suddenly lifted his head up and wiggled his butt in a way he hadn’t done for weeks. So overwhelmed with happiness over seeing him so lively, it escaped me to check what caused his excitement. By the time I lifted my head up to check, Soren was already right before us.

“My God, did he grow old.” He smiled, bending down to pet Pacha, who clearly remembered him. It was like watching Pacha turn into a puppy again, all too eager to lick and kiss Soren.

“He missed you,” I said with a huge smile glued to my face, unable to hide the sudden joy that overtook me. Getting down on one knee beside them, I also began petting Pacha. I moved my fingers along his fur until they met Soren’s, and we both stopped to look at each other. He was smiling; some creases that weren’t there before only added to his handsome face, making him sexier. And while everything about him was familiar, the softness in his eyes didn’t remind me of the old days because it was brand-new. I didn’t know if it was due to him finally opening up to me or because, suddenly, my anger from back then had almost vanished, but I, too, saw him through a whole new perspective. I felt like we were finally equal and in the right place to fully endure the other. The only problem was… we weren’t together.

“What are you doing here?” I asked as we both rose to our feet.

“Oh, that’s right.” He cleaned his slacks from the sand. “I came to ask Diesel to sign some papers. I hope that’s alright.”

And just like that, reality flew back in.

“Actually, Diesel isn’t here.”

Soren’s brows curved in wonder. “How come?”

“He said he was done with his old life and wanted nothing to do with us,” I said and began telling Soren what happened. There wasn’t much to tell, but somehow, it took me a lot more time than when I told the same thing to Kai. Maybe it was because I felt more comfortable with Soren to share more. He was always a great listener, even though he had sharp opinions that sometimes were hard to digest.

“Well, I think you made the right choice by letting him go,” Soren said after I was done telling him what had happened.

By now, we were already back in my yard, and I led him to the small hose so we could wash the sand from our hands.

“You do?”

“Yeah.” Soren rubbed his hands under the running water.

My eyes focused on his long fingers, and I remembered how he used to rub hand cream into them every night before we went to bed. I still recalled the clean pine scent.

“Our job was to give Diesel back control over his life. We achieved this goal, so who are we to stop him now?”

He made so much sense, which gave me the confidence I lacked.

“Don’t you think something bad could happen to him?”

Soren snorted. “If there’s one thing I’m sure of, it’s that Diesel is more than capable of protecting himself,” he said, taking the hose from my hands to allow me to wash off the sand.

“You call him Diesel.”

“Oh?” Soren lifted his head up, eyes meeting mine. “What do you mean?”

“It’s just that until recently, you called him Camilo, but now you’ve stopped.” I noticed it earlier today, too.

Soren averted his eyes from me to focus on my hands as I rubbed them under the running water. “Well, when I spoke with Shay-Lee at the hospital, he told me that Diesel doesn’t like to be called by his given name. I wanted to respect that.”

My heart stopped at the same time my chest tightened, and I had no idea what made me do what I did next. Whether it was the beautiful smile I’d yet to see on Soren’s face, the kindness he so easily showed, or the comfort he provided me with without even trying, but before I knew it, I closed the tap, grabbed his shirt, and pulled him close.

“Ashton, your hands are all wet—”

“Who cares,” I whispered a second before I sealed my lips with his in a kiss I

needed more than my next breath. It took Soren a second to overcome his shock, but once he did, he quickly grabbed the back of my head, holding me close as if to make sure I wouldn't pull back. *Oh*, I had no intention of doing that. Being fully aware that the house was full of people, including Kai, didn't stop me from kissing Soren harder, my lips ravishing him with a hunger I had almost forgotten. And even as he licked into my mouth and clenched my hair in his fist, I knew that this wouldn't be enough.

"Come," I said, voice hoarse, as I grabbed his hand and pulled him after me toward my small surf shop. I opened the door and was ready to pull him in when Soren practically shoved me inside. Stunned, I watched him locking the door behind him before he reached for me. My hands wrapped around him desperately as he lifted my body and walked us back inside until we reached the counter.

"God, you're so precious," he whispered, placing me down on the hardwood, his hands already working on stripping me naked.

Eager to see him, too, I did the same. "Fuck, I missed this dick," I gasped, then licked my lips at the sight of his magnificent cock standing tall just for me.

Soren ducked down, covering my mouth with his, as he grabbed my dick in his fist and began stroking me. So eager for his touch, I leaked with precum, and he collected every drop before moving his fingers to my ass. It wasn't enough, and since we lacked lube, he added a bit of spit.

"Would you look at that," he rasped, grazing the pad of his thumb over my entrance. "As beautiful as I last left it."

"H-Hurry up," I cried, frightened that we'd get caught before he could fuck me. I ached for it. Literally hurt to be held and burned with the fire of his touch, only for him to put it out later.

"I don't have any condoms," he whispered over my lips, and I shook my head.

"I don't care. I'm negative—"

"Ashton."

I cupped his cheeks and held his head close, our foreheads touching. "For the love of God, Soren, I'm telling you to fuck me raw. So just do it already—*Oh God*," I moaned, all the air leaving my lungs as he pushed inside me, his hot length filling me up just the way I needed. Closing my eyes, I bit my lip and sent my head back, already feeling ready to come. That was the thing; with him, I was ready to finish as soon as he put it in.

I was well aware that being pinned on my back in my surf shop, with Soren's dick balls-deep inside my ass while the house was full of everyone, was the wrong decision on my part. It was irresponsible, selfish, and careless, and yet I

didn’t care. For years, I’d missed this man so much it hurt, and finally, he was here.

“Hold me,” I begged, reaching my arms forward.

Soren leaned down, hugging me as I requested while burying his face in my neck. His lips grazed my skin while he thrust his hips, moving in and out of me, his cock grazing my inner walls. My body was on fire, and my skin was covered with sweat, soaking through my shirt.

“O-Oh, yes, right there,” I cried in his ear after he’d adjusted himself and managed to hit my prostate perfectly.

Thrust after thrust, Soren rolled his hips, moving fast as if we were running out of time. We did, in fact, lack it, not that it mattered. Nothing did at this moment, where he consumed me whole.

His big hands moved my shirt up to reveal my chest before he closed his lips around my nipples, one at a time, and sucked on them. I hushed my moans, making sure not to grab anyone’s attention because I wasn’t sure I’d be able to stop even if we got caught. *God*, I forgot how dirty my mind could be.

“What’s funny?” Soren asked, lips glossy with spit.

“Nothing.” I shook my head, already pulling him closer. “Kiss me.” And he did. He kissed me until we were both out of breath and had to pause to get some air into our burning lungs.

Soren then took my cock in his fist and began stroking me while drilling into my ass. The hard table hurt my lower back with how fast he thrust into me, but I’d put up with it. I’d put up with anything in order to feel this way.

Moving my hands along his body, I slipped them underneath his shirt and caressed his chest. He tensed when I grazed his nipple, and I smiled, wishing to lick it.

“I’m close,” he groaned, his breath caught.

“Then come inside me,” I begged, moving my hand up until it rested against his strong jaw. “Fill me up with everything you’ve got.”

His forehead creased before he took a short intake of air. “When did you become this lewd?”

“I was always like this,” I murmured, eyes closed as I felt my climax building up in the pit of my stomach.

Soon, Soren’s body tensed, and he thrust forward one last time before his dick pulsed and grew inside me. Unable to hold back another second, I burst, hot cum shooting from my dick and making a mess out of my already dampened T-shirt. At the same time, Soren came deep inside me, filling my ass to the brim with his sweet release. As good as it felt, I half regretted that he didn’t finish in my mouth because, so help me God, I missed the taste of him.

Soren pulled out, and I licked my lips at the sight of his dick covered with cum, while also enjoying the sensation of his release dripping out of me. But then, after we'd cooled down, the understanding of what I'd just done struck me. Yes, I'd thought of it before, but in the heat of the moment, everything made sense, and not giving a fuck was easy. Now? Not so much.

"Fuck." I cringed as I moved to a sitting position, and my back nearly broke.

"Are you okay?"

Rubbing the aching spot, I grunted. "That killed my back." Realizing how old I sounded, I chuckled and shook my head. "God, I'm not a kid anymore, am I?"

He frowned. "You were never a kid, Ashton."

Suddenly, I realized what I'd just said and felt like a complete idiot. Only this morning, he'd shared his secret with me, and here I was, already making mistakes.

"Soren—"

"It's fine," he whispered quietly, leaning forward, and kissed me again. It felt odd. The casualness in which he did it, that was. We might have fucked twice by now, but both times were rather hot sessions with nothing in between. This kiss just now, the way he took his time while moving his lips along mine, wasn't. It was nothing if not intimate as he explored my mouth in an attempt to reach my soul. My heart beat so fast it thrummed in my ears, and even though I ached when he parted his lips from mine, I had to speak up.

"I-I know I was the one who asked for this, but—"

"If you're going to say this was *another* mistake, at least get dressed first." His eyes darted to my flaccid dick and exposed stomach, which was covered with my cum. "I mean, it's hard to concentrate when I see my load dripping out of you."

My cheeks heated up, and I coughed to clear my throat. "S-Soren."

"Here." He grabbed a towel that rested on one of the boards and began cleaning me, once again causing my chest to tighten up with feelings I thought were long gone.

"I don't think this was a mistake," I clarified.

Soren stopped wiping me and looked up to meet my eyes.

"You don't?"

I shook my head and slid my hand to rest on the back of his neck.

"I don't, but as long as I'm with Kai, I can't keep doing this."

"So break up with him."

As always, Soren's line of thinking was short and precise, only that it wasn't that simple.

“It’s more complicated than that.”

If I ended things with Kai, who knew what would happen? One big fight was enough to make him buy a bottle of liquor, so I didn’t dare think what his reaction might be if I were to break up with him. But it wasn’t just guilt that made me reject the idea of splitting with him. Despite everything, I cared for him. *Deeply*. One might say I even loved him, although I wasn’t entirely sure about that. Maybe it was just comfort? Or familiarity? Or maybe it wasn’t, and this whole thing with Soren was the result of those hard months of the case coming to an end. Maybe *this* was nothing but my need for comfort after a rough day.

But you rejected Kai when he offered it.

“You do what feels right to you,” Soren said, breaking into my thoughts.

Looking at him, I chewed on my lip, utterly confused because I had no idea what felt right. Erase that. I knew what felt right; I just didn’t know what *was* right. When he fucked me just now, it felt incredible, but the aftermath left me wondering, as always… When it came to Soren, it was always the same question: How can something that feels so right be wrong?

Just then, I heard the guys’ voices coming from outside, and I quickly jumped to my feet. I doubted I had ever gotten dressed this fast, but in less than a minute, I was decent.

“Your T-shirt is a mess.” A low chuckle erupted from Soren as he stopped me before I could get out.

“Oh, thanks,” I muttered awkwardly, then took my T-shirt off and grabbed the spare one I had in the shop. *Thank God for that*. Once I was ready to leave, I met his eyes again and nodded like an idiot. Why was I acting this awkward? Ten minutes ago, I’d practically attacked him with my lips.

Fuck, I missed this dick.

My eyes widened as I recalled my words, and I rubbed my face with a deep grunt. Did I actually say that?

“What’s the matter?” Soren asked from behind me.

Too embarrassed to tell him I was just reflecting back on what a hoe I apparently still was, I shook my head. “N-Nothing. Let’s just get out of here before the boys notice something.”

As we quietly left the shop, I scanned the area to make sure we weren’t seen. Since the ground was clear, I signaled Soren to follow me out. After rounding the shack, I quickly spotted the guys gathered around Soren’s car.

“I told you, I didn’t lose it,” Jessie whispered. “It was in my closet, and now it’s not.”

Andrei grunted before Levi spoke. “You always lose things, Jessie.”

“Not wee—oh, hey Chief!” Jessie called in a high-pitched voice once he noticed us. “Is this yours?” he asked Soren while pointing at his Bugatti.

“It is,” Soren said casually, stepping closer at the same time Andrei moved toward me.

“Where were you?” he asked, eyes darting between me and Soren.

“I was just showing Soren around,” I muttered, hoping I didn’t look as thoroughly fucked as I felt. *My God*, this was so inappropriate.

“Can I take it for a ride?” Jessie asked, referring to Soren’s brand-new car.

“Jessie, you can’t just ask for—”

“Sure,” Soren said and tossed the keys to Jessie, who caught them.

“Wait, seriously?” I frowned at Soren, who seemed unfazed.

“Why not? If it will cheer him up.”

Once again, the change in him shocked me, and I looked at him, unable to hold back my smile. In fact, I was so distracted by how amazing he was that if it weren’t for Kai suddenly wrapping his arm around me, I would have probably done something stupid.

Again.

“When did you show up?” Kai asked Soren while Jessie reversed out of the parking lot.

“A while ago,” Soren answered, his eyes quickly darting to Kai’s arm before he looked up. “I came to drop off a few files when I learned Diesel wasn’t here.”

“Yeah. Sucks, doesn’t it?”

“Kai.”

“What?” He shrugged. “It truly does suck. All that hard work for him to just run away.”

He then glanced at me, his brows narrowed while he studied me. My nerves kicked in, and my throat dried with fear that he might know—

“You’re all sweaty, Ashy. How about taking that shower now?” he offered, his lips stretching into a big smile.

Letting out a breath of relief, I chuckled awkwardly. “Y-Yeah.”

Kai moved to pull me back toward the house when he stopped and turned to face Soren. “I sure hope that car is insured since Jess is not the best driver.”

“Don’t worry,” Soren answered coldly, not looking our way.

Shit. I felt like crap, as I should have. Soren’s cum was literally still inside me while Kai was all over me. What the fuck was I doing? I’d held back all this time just to fuck it up in one day? Soren had a point about me *loving* drama.

“And how about next Friday for that dinner I promised you?” Kai asked, snapping my attention back.

“You were serious about that?” I frowned at Kai’s words, who nodded.

“Of course I was. After all, it’s the least I could do for Soren after all the kindness he showered us with.” He turned his eyes to me. “Don’t you agree, *Ashy*?”

I hesitated before nodding. “Y-Yeah, of course.”

Once again, Kai’s lips stretched into a big smile, only his smile was cold as ice, and I was filled with sudden worry.

CHAPTER Fifty—Nine

Ash

"It's unfair to kiss me the way you did and then not answer my calls for days," Soren said over the phone, his voice rough, almost like he'd just woken up from a deep sleep.

My stomach flipped with his sexy drawl, and I turned around to face the ocean. I was busy washing my board after I'd been surfing when my phone rang. At first, I wanted to ignore Soren's call like I had for the past week but then decided not to.

"I know… I'm sorry." I moved my hand through my wet hair and bit my lip. "I didn't plan to ignore you. I'm just—"

"Confused?"

I snorted. "To say the least."

"Then I'm assuming my calling to let you know how much I miss you won't help."

My heart skipped a beat, and I placed my hand on my chest, right where it felt warm and fuzzy. This feeling brought me back to when we had just started dating, to how each call or text he sent me filled my stomach with butterflies. I was thirty-two, and yet, hearing his voice through the phone still brought those same damn butterflies.

"Definitely not," I chuckled, eyes pinned on the spreading ocean and pink-washed sky. The sun would go down soon.

"At least I'll see you on Friday."

He was talking about Kai's dinner.

"Yeah… about that. You can still cancel."

"Why would I turn down such an invitation? I've heard he's quite the cook."

I rolled my eyes. "There are moments I think you've changed, but then you say something like that, and I remember what a sarcastic jerk you are."

Soren laughed, his voice so damn sexy. "Eiv used to tell me the same thing, only he used the term *sarcastic bitch*. His words, not mine."

The mention of Eiv brought an unpleasant feeling to my gut, and I clenched my phone a bit harder. “Do… Do you still sleep with him?”

“Ah,” he sighed. “So he told you about that?”

I nodded, even though he couldn’t see me.

“Yeah.”

Holding my breath, I waited for him to speak again.

“We don’t have that kind of relationship anymore, so don’t worry about it.”

His answer settled some of my nerves, but I was still far from satisfied.

“But you did sleep together.”

“A few times.”

I frowned. “Define a few.”

Soren laughed. “My, my, I never thought of you as the jealous kind, Ashton.”

Heat spread through my face before I dropped my head with a deep grunt. “Just answer my question.”

“We slept together for quite some time.”

I hate this.

“But like I said, it’s a thing of the past, and besides, it was never more than quick hookups in hotel rooms.”

Hotel rooms?

“So what was he doing at your house when I came to yell at you?”

“We were working.”

“If that were the case, why did you push me away that evening?” I hadn’t thought about it until now. Frankly, I assumed I’d interrupted them in the middle of something *other* than work and preferred not to ask, knowing I wouldn’t like the answer.

“Let’s just say there were moments I doubted myself, but it’s no longer relevant. And besides, who are you to be jealous over me sleeping with someone else?”

Annoyed with the truth, I kicked some sand before I sat on the steps leading to our back porch. “You’re right.”

Now feeling like a complete asshole, I considered going for another surf, just to keep my mind busy from this mess I’d created.

“Ashton,” Soren said, breaking the silence that drew between us.

“What?”

“I quite like it when you’re jealous.”

Despite the chilly air, my temperature rose with his words.

“Oh, shut it,” I muttered, thankful that he couldn’t see how red my cheeks and ears had turned.

“You know what I can’t get my head around?” he suddenly asked.

“What?”

“Why would Diesel leave Shay-Lee behind if he’s clearly still in love with him? It makes no sense.”

“Why did you?”

He chuckled. “Fair enough.”

“I mean it, Soren. You might have had your reasons, but ultimately, you just got up and left me.” I paused for a moment and took in some air. “It hurt so much for so long, and I can’t help but think how everything could have been different if you’d just said something.”

I could hear him breathing through the phone before he cleared his throat.

“I know, and I’m sorry.”

“No, you don’t get to say that.” My eyes stung, so I squeezed them tight and then looked up at the sky. “You had seven years to speak up. Seven fucking years Soren.”

If he’d just told me sooner about the things he went through, I wouldn’t have suffered for so long—erase that. I would have been there for him. But because he didn’t say a word and instead chose to go through this hell alone, I was forced to do the same.

“Why don’t you come here right now?”

“Seriously?” I tsked. “That’s what you have to say in your defense?”

“No. I have a lot to say, but it’s better speaking in person than over the phone.”

I shrugged. “It’s easier this way.”

“Why?”

“I dunno. Maybe ’cause it rules out the possibility of having hot sex?”

Like the superhot, dirty sex we had in the surf shack last week. My back still hurt from that damn counter, but it was the best type of pain.

“We can have phone sex.” He let out a low chuckle that went straight to my cock. “I’ve been told before that I have a sexy voice.”

I could definitely vouch for that, but luckily, I had enough willpower this time to stop it before we got swept away with lust.

“Stop avoiding my questions.”

“Fine,” he sighed. “I left, and I agree it was stupid of me, but look how much we’ve grown through the pain.”

I wanted to get angry with him, but he made perfect sense. If I didn’t reach rock bottom, who knew where I’d be today?

Overly emotional, I looked around me, then cleared my throat. “I’m going to hang up now.” *Because talking with you is becoming too addictive.*

“That’s a shame.”

“Bye, Soren,” I said and quickly hung up before he could say another word that would lure me in. Smiling, I stared at the black screen and shook my head. He was always so smooth with his words—*the jerk*.

After that, I took a long shower before deciding to make myself something to eat. The kids were out, and Kai was still at work, so it was just me and my three Musketeers; although the dogs were sleeping, so I was pretty much on my own. Since I was a terrible cook, I settled for a sandwich with cheese and lots of mayo. I loved that crap. Adding a bit of chips on the side, I then poured myself a glass of soda and was ready to sit down and eat when Kai walked in.

“Tell me this isn’t your dinner,” he said, already grabbing half a sandwich from my plate and taking a bite. “Disgusting as always.”

“Hey,” I grunted and stole it back from him. “That’s my hard work you’re talking about.”

He laughed, smile lines appearing on each side of his handsome face. “I can cook you dinner, you know?”

Taking a bite from my sandwich, I shook my head. “Nah, it’s good enough. Besides, you just came back after a long day—” My words were cut short as he moved his thumb over the corner of my mouth, cleaning me from the mayo, then brought it back to his lips and sucked on his thumb.

“Mhmm.” He licked his lips, then bent down to kiss me. Not minding the fact I’d just eaten, Kai pushed his tongue in and groaned into the kiss. His tongue fought mine for dominance before I gave up and allowed him to do as he pleased.

“You know I love feeding you,” he chuckled over my lips.

It seemed as if my confusion didn’t stop my body from responding to Kai’s flirting, as my cock just grew harder in my pants. I felt guilty, but in the same breath, I wanted him to touch me more. Was I a bad person for wanting both men at the same time? Probably yes, but it wasn’t like Kai hadn’t slept with hundreds of people over the years. The same went for Soren, who just got up and left me after I gave him my heart. So, while I didn’t know what I wanted, I did know Kai’s hands on my body felt good, so when he asked if I wanted to shower with him, I agreed, and when he got on his knees and sucked my cock, I allowed the pleasure to take over me without stopping to think about it. And later on, I did the same to him.

After we were done, Kai cooked dinner for me, and we sat down to eat.

“You know, I had a thought,” he said after passing me the salad I asked for.

“Yeah?”

“Why don’t we have kids?”

I nearly choked on the tomato I was chewing on and had to cough for a long

minute until I calmed down. Kai handed me a glass of water, which I drank up in one go before I cleaned my lips and looked at him. “What?” I gasped, still shocked.

“The boys are all grown up and will probably leave soon, so it feels like the right time. Besides, isn’t that what you’ve always wanted?”

Yes.

Since forever, my dream was to have kids and build a family, but I gave up on the idea once Soren told me he would never have children. After we broke up and I started this thing with Kai, having kids never came up. Ignoring the fact that we weren’t an actual couple, I also struggled to picture us as parents… it just didn’t feel right. Why? I had no idea—maybe because I didn’t see him as the fatherly type. The sad thing was that Kai *was* a dad. That fact sometimes slipped away, and I wondered what it said about him.

“Where is this coming from?” I asked after putting my fork down.

“It’s about time, don’t you think?”

I frowned. “Kai, we’re not even a real… you know what I mean.”

“What? We’re not actually dating?” He placed his hand behind my armchair and leaned in a bit closer. “Because if I recall correctly, last time we talked, we decided to be fully committed to this.” He pointed between us.

We did, and since then, I’d slept with my ex. *Twice*. Not that Kai had a clue.

“We can be awesome dads, Ashy. Just think about it.” He smiled at me, his blue eyes flashing with excitement. Although, I knew better than to just fall for it. Whenever Kai came up with an idea, it started with him being hyperfixated until he lost interest. Only it didn’t work the same way with kids. A baby wasn’t a project you took upon yourself only to put aside when your interests moved on to something new. A baby was, well, a *baby*.

“It’s not all fun and games, Kai. Kids take a lot of energy and are a big responsibility. Not to mention, this is all so sudden. We still have so much to focus on with the boys growing up and Diesel being away—”

He cut me off with a deep sigh, then leaned back in his chair. “You always see the negative in things. I thought you’d be happy with the idea.”

“Kai, we’re talking about a kid, not a dog.”

He rolled his eyes. “You know, I keep trying to be what you want, but it feels like it’s never enough.”

That was a very cute thought, but it was incredibly off-putting. Besides, I was in no place to even start considering having a kid with him. Not until I figured out what to do about Soren and my undeniable feelings toward him.

“You are enough, Kai. It’s just not the right time to talk about it. In a few months, when everything calms down, we can bring it up again.”

Kai studied me with a raised brow before he rubbed his jaw. “I just thought you’d be happy with the idea.” He got up and took his plate with him to the sink.

I hated that he was hurt.

“You know, I brought this thing up now because when I spoke with Zoe the other day, she mentioned she was thinking about having another kid.”

My body tensed with where this was going, and I straightened up in my chair, my full attention on Kai’s back as he washed his plate.

“And?” I asked, eager to know the rest.

Turning off the tap, Kai dried his hands and then turned to face me with his arms crossed over his chest. “She asked me if I was willing to be the father again. She said it only made sense with us already having Paris.”

For a second there, I felt like I was having a minor heart attack. Zoe’s audacity to even suggest such a thing while knowing Kai and I were together brought back all the crap from when they were teens, when I was forced to watch them from the sidelines and smile like an idiot.

“She actually asked you that?” I hissed, anger flowing through my body like lightning.

“Don’t worry, Ashy. I told her no.” Kai quickly came to calm me down, his hands rubbing my arms. “You know I’d never do that to you.”

Biting my lip, I shook my head. “It doesn’t matter.” I was so pissed. “She has no right to ask that of you. No fucking right, Kai—”

He pulled me into a tight hug that forced me to swallow back my fury. His warm skin, strong body, and familiar scent helped to calm me down, but not quite enough. I still couldn’t believe Zoe would cross such a line. We might have had our differences in the past, but I assumed that by now, she’d accepted the fact that Kai had chosen me.

“I think I’m going to call her,” I said, my face half-buried in Kai’s chest.

“No, don’t do that. I already told her off for suggesting it.”

I pulled back just enough to face him. “Are you sure? I feel like I need to do it, too.”

Kai brought his hand to my face and softly caressed my cheeks. “I’ve already settled it with her. She even cried. You know how she is.”

Zoe was always more emotional, and so was I.

“Why would she do that?” My brows pulled close as I studied Kai’s face, hoping he’d have some kind of an answer.

“She was always jealous of you. You know that, right? Maybe it’s what led her to that… I mean, she broke up with her boyfriend recently, and maybe seeing us being stronger than ever bothered her.”

“Oh.” Now I felt a bit sad for her.

“I also told her that she shouldn’t come to visit next month.”

I gasped. “You shouldn’t have done that. What about Paris?”

“I’ll fly to meet him. I think it would be for the best.”

My throat constricted, and I swallowed hard before speaking. “Are you sure about that? I don’t want to stand in your way.”

His eyes gleamed before he pulled me back into a tight hug. “Your way is the only one I care about, babe.”

If Kai was willing to risk his family for my sake, how could I not give him a real chance? And if the mere thought of him having another child with Zoe bothered me so much, didn’t it mean he was the one I wanted? If not, why else would I react the way I just did? Even now, so worried that he might leave, I couldn’t bring myself to let go of his body and instead hugged him tighter.

“Guys, did you hear the news?” Andrei said as he burst into the kitchen, not minding us at all before he made his way to the living room. *When did he even come back home?* Confused, we quickly let go of each other and followed him into the living room in time for him to switch on the TV. The split screen showed photos of a fire in the middle of the ocean, and it took me a few seconds to realize that it was the remains of an airplane. Confused, I immediately read the headline displayed at the bottom of the screen: *A private plane crashed in the middle of the sea; among the passengers, the multi-billionaire Christian W. Rogers. All four passengers, including the two crew members, are suspected to be dead.*

My eyes widened with shock as I reread the headline, not believing what I was seeing. Beside me, Kai and Andrei were just as stunned with disbelief because this accident felt like a divine intervention.



Soren

"You look dashing." I smiled at Ashton.

Dressed in a brown sweatshirt and bright blue jeans, he looked lovely, and I missed his beautiful face after I'd last seen him over a week ago.

Ashton's lips quirked up, and he moved a hand over his clothes, ready to speak, when someone else cut in.

"Thanks. He's wearing my clothes," Kai said before joining the table and taking the seat closest to Ashton.

Wonderful.

"Kai," Ashton sighed, already looking tired.

"What? It is *my* sweatshirt. Although it always looked better on you, babe." Kai grinned and wrapped one arm around Ashton's shoulder, then waved his hand toward the free chair. "Why are you still standing? Sit down, make yourself at home, man."

Resisting the urge to roll my eyes, I sat down and placed the white napkin on my lap. I wore one of my favorite suits and had no intention of getting it dirty with whatever food Kai would serve us. "Your restaurant is lovely," I said despite not meaning it. The place looked as if a flea market and a warehouse had a baby, and that baby was color-blind. Everything was so flashy and vibrant, plants popping out of nowhere and random pictures hanging on the walls without any order. My mind went crazy, and I'd been counting the seconds since I'd gotten here. I assumed this place was what kids would refer to as "cool," but I found it tacky—the same as its owner and his stupid ponytail.

"Thanks, man." Kai smiled at me like the moron he was, his fingers tapping against the table.

The sound was so annoying that I was tempted to snap his fingers like chopsticks.

"Want something to drink until the food's ready?" he asked, getting my attention back.

“Soren loves pinot noir,” Ashton said, mostly to himself, before he realized he spoke out loud. An awkward little smile quickly took over his lips, and he chuckled. “I mean, you used to love it.”

“I still do.” Knowing he remembered my love for red wine was somehow adorable, and it could have been a wonderful moment if not for Kai clearing his throat like some caveman.

“Sorry about that,” he said once he was done rumbling. “I felt like something got stuck in my throat.”

If only.

“You don’t mind if Soren and I drink, right?” Ashton asked Kai after we ordered the drinks, the softest expression on his face.

The bitter taste of jealousy filled my mouth at the sight of them together, but thankfully, the wine arrived soon enough to help me wash it away.

I had to stop the waiter from pouring too much; after all, I needed to taste it first. Swirling the wine in the glass, I allowed it to breathe before I brought it to my nose and took a gentle sniff. It smelled sweet, *too* sweet, and the flavor was even worse.

“So, how is it?” Ashton asked.

Unlike me, he seemed to enjoy the wine. Since I didn’t want to insult him, I nodded. “It’s okay. Although, it’s not as good as the bottle we shared in Varenna. Remember that little restaurant on the lake?”

“With the angry waiter?”

“Yes,” I answered back, smiling at him. “Our waiter was so angry he nearly poured the wine over my head. We laughed for hours after that dinner was over, trying to figure out what had put the man in such a sour mood.”

“Sure you weren’t just your usual self, and the waiter had no patience for jerks?” Kai jumped in, ruining the moment—yet again.

“How’s your apple juice?” I bit back, earning myself a harsh glare from Ashton, who didn’t seem to enjoy my joke. *Oh well*, Kai had it coming.

“So, Soren, what will you do now that the case is over?” Kai asked, his eyes narrowed on me.

“Go back to work, obviously.”

He smirked. “And that would be in New York, right?”

I knew the bastard had an agenda.

“Yes.” I put down my glass and turned to face Ashton. “I planned on telling you. I’m going back on Sunday night.”

Ashton’s eyes widened before his forehead creased. “That’s in two days.”

The disappointment in his voice burdened me with guilt, and I hated that I was forced to leave him, but what other choice did I have?

“Unfortunately, I don’t have much of a choice. I’ve already been assigned a new case.”

“I bet Ashy is going to miss you.” Kai elbowed him. “Isn’t that right? After all, you’ve gotten so close lately.”

Kai’s words stirred in me the suspicion that he might know about us, and I did my best to avoid meeting Ashton’s panicked look when Kai clarified himself.

“You know, working on the case together?” He glanced between us, a big smile on his face. “Jesus, Ashy, you’re all red. Want me to turn down the heat?”

Ashton reached for his drink and took a long gulp before he shook his head. “N-No, it’s fine. I guess it’s the wine.”

“So maybe stop drinking it?” Kai joked, and his laugh seemed to make Ashton a bit less nervous.

Well, my little Sparrow was never much of a liar, and I could tell he was eaten up by guilt. Cheating might be wrong, and I might have felt bad about it if I wasn’t sure that Ashton belonged with me.

The first courses arrived on time, and the plates were placed in the middle of the table.

“I hope you don’t mind sharing,” Kai said, tearing a piece of bread with his hands before placing it on Ashton’s plate. “You know, it’s more fun eating this way. Don’t you agree?”

Oh, the bastard knew.

“Actually, I do mind sharing very much,” I said back, taking a bun from the breadbasket and placing it on my plate. “I find it to be annoying, not to mention unhygienic.” I lifted my look to meet Kai’s narrowed eyes. “After all, who knows where you’ve stuck those hands before?”

He slammed his palm on the table, strong enough for it to shake. “You son of a—”

“Guys.” Ashton’s voice was loud as he looked between us. “Can we please just focus on the food instead of biting each other’s heads off?”

Kai leaned closer to Ashton, and with his lips scraping Ashton’s ear, he grinned. “Sure, babe. I’ll behave as long as I get to bite you later.”

I clenched my fork a bit tighter, gritting my teeth with disdain. That low-life creature was doing his best to get on my nerves, and to my shame, he was succeeding.

Ashton’s face reddened, and he pushed Kai away, who had already gotten what he wanted anyway. I despised that bastard, who did whatever he wanted just to spite others. I used to be the same, too, only that I’d matured with the years.

Thankfully, we managed to dive into a civilized conversation that mostly revolved around the trial. At some point, Kai said he was going to check on the main courses, leaving me and Ashton alone.

“When were you going to tell me you’re leaving?”

I knew he’d ask that.

“I planned on doing it today.”

He frowned. “So what was the point of seducing me if you planned to go back all along?”

Surprised by his accusations, I chuckled. “I’m sorry, but did you say I *seduced* you?” I took a sip from my drink, then put it down. “If I recall correctly, you were the one who threw himself all over me. *Twice*.”

Clenching his jaw, Ashton turned the other way. “That could be debated.”

No. It most definitely couldn’t. But I wasn’t about to put him on the spot.

“Let’s agree that this was a mutual seduction.” I reached my hand forward and grazed his pinkie with mine. His eyes flew to my hand, a cute little blush decorating his cheeks.

When he didn’t push me away, I kept my hand on his, enjoying the warmth of his soft skin.

“If you want me to stay, all you need to do is say so, Ashton,” I said, my eyes locked with his. If Ashton chose me, there would be no hesitation on my side. I’d be waiting on his doorstep with a ring this evening. Oh, for God’s sake. I would have had a ring ready an hour ago if he just gave me the cue.

He darted his tongue out to wet his bottom lip before he bit on it. “Do you really mean it?”

Slipping my fingers underneath his sleeve, I caressed his skin before I grabbed his wrist and turned his arm around. I then slid my palm down and placed mine on top. “Of course I do,” I answered him, adoring every bit of his divine expression. I would have held his hand forever if not for Kai’s voice coming from afar, forcing us both to pull back.

It was a shame, but at least these small moments and stolen glances confirmed what I had suspected—Ashton wanted me, too, and this thing with Kai was only temporary.

“I hope you like your meat red and bloody,” Kai said, slamming his hands on my back in a push that was supposed to be friendly, only it wasn’t. Letting go, he moved back to his chair, planting a big kiss on Ashton’s cheek before sitting down.

“So, what were you talking about?”

“I asked him something about the trial,” Ashton lied.

“I see.” Pressing his lips together, Kai hummed to himself before turning his

eyes to me. “You know, I’ve always wondered what it’s like to be a lawyer. If it’s as cool as it seems or if it’s just all bullshit.”

Not sure where he was going with that, I shook my head. “It’s the same as any job, I guess.”

“Oh, come on.” He rolled his eyes and leaned back in his chair. “You’re telling me working with criminals is the same as cooking steaks on a grill?” He faked a laugh. “Just thinking about all the connections you must have. Fucking mind-blowing.” He gestured an explosion with his hand, mouthing the word *boom*.

“Kai, I think you’re exaggerating,” Ashton muttered while shifting uncomfortably in his chair.

“No way.” He wrapped his hand around Ashton and pulled him close as if he was sharing a secret with him. “I’m telling you, this guy is one hell of a badass. I wouldn’t dare mess with him.”

“Soren’s nothing like that.”

“Really?” Kai’s lips twitched into a crooked smile as he let go of Ashton and rubbed his jaw. “I think getting some mobster to beat the shit out of your competition is a pretty badass thing to do.” He leaned a bit closer. “But then again, who am I to say? I’m just a simple cook.”

If I were the type to get nervous over getting caught, I wouldn’t have broken the law to begin with. And yet, seeing the shock slowly transforming into disbelief on my sweet Sparrow’s face made me regret my decision. Jones crossed a line when he made my little bird cry in an attempt to go after me, and he got what he deserved. Was it right of me? No. Was it shady for a lawyer to break the law? Well, obviously, but who gave a fuck. When it came to my Sparrow, there were no lines I wouldn’t cross. Did it make me morally gray? Probably yes, but I never pretended not to be. Unlike the snake who was sitting across the table, grinning from ear to ear as if he’d just won the lottery.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” I said and took a sip from my drink. And while being accused of committing a crime didn’t bother me, the fact he knew about it did.

“I assumed you’d deny it. Thankfully, I’ve got evidence.”

“What are you talking about?” Ashton barged in, his face pale.

“About your ex acting like a thug, thinking he’d get away with it.” He then turned his eyes to me. “What’s the matter, Soren? Did you think you were the only one who could hire a private investigator?”

The scum.

Just then, the waiters arrived at our table with several plates of food. The whole time they placed the dishes between us, Kai’s eyes never left mine. He

followed me like a hawk, but little did he know that I wasn't scared of him.

"Soren, is Kai telling the truth?" Ashton asked once the waiters left us alone.

"It doesn't matter, darling."

"Oh, but it does." Kai smiled. "Because it proves to Ash what a lunatic you are."

I gritted my teeth together, my blood boiling with rage. Somehow, this jackass had managed to make a fool out of me.

"I don't understand what's going on," Ashton said while moving his gaze between us.

"So let me explain it to you." Kai smiled again, and I knew this was about to be one nasty conversation.

Ash

Kai's arm felt too heavy around my shoulder, and I wanted to push him off, but I didn't, as I was too focused on what he was telling me.

"This guy had us stalked, did you know that? Because I didn't." He then moved on to say things about private investigators and whatnot while my eyes were focused on Soren. He… he had eyes on me for years? Even before this whole trial had started? But why? Why would he ignore me at the same time he was paying someone to watch me?

My skin turned ice-cold as shivers ran down my spine. I felt sick to my stomach, with this awful lump stuck in my throat. I wanted to have a nice dinner, and instead, all I'd gotten was more lies that brought up more questions in my already exhausted brain. I'd had enough of this crap, and so, clenching my hands into fists, I shook my head.

"Enough!" I snapped, slamming my hand on the table until both men stopped arguing and turned to me.

"Ashy—"

"No." I removed Kai's arm from around my shoulder. "I don't want to hear anything about this. I don't care."

"But—"

"I. Don't. Care," I repeated. Unable to bear looking at either of them, I focused on the food. Picking up the first dish that caught my eye, I began loading my plate with ravioli. I just wanted this to stop, but as I took the first bite and the food tasted bitter and cold, I realized how naive my wish was. How could I expect them to stop while I kept on pushing them? As long as I continued misleading both men, I'd never have peace. We had been so involved with one

another for years, and all the garbage we'd hidden was finally coming out in a blast.

The tension around the table rose and became so thick you could nearly smell it, and it stank. It reeked of resentment, lies, and jealousy. And while they both had tons of shit they had hidden away from me for years, I was the one lying, and my lie smelled like a rotten fish.

"I know you guys hate each other because of me, but maybe if we could just communicate, we'd be able to…" To do what? I had no idea where I was going with this. Disappointed with myself, I huffed. "I don't know."

"No, you're right," Kai suddenly said, surprising me. "We should stop acting like children. Don't you agree, Soren?" He turned to face him, and so did I. Soren slowly looked up from his plate, his bright eyes too tired to keep up.

"Of course."

"See, Ashy? I can be mature when I want to. Just wait and see what an awesome dad I'll be."

My jaw dropped, and I quickly turned to meet Soren's stunned face. I swear to God, his face just paled in front of me as he looked at me with pure hurt in his eyes.

"What?" Soren asked after snapping out of his shock.

"Ashy didn't tell you?"

"Shut up, Kai."

"Why? We're going to be parents. Isn't it great news to share?"

Knowing he was doing it on purpose only made me more furious. I wanted to yell at him, but first, I had to clarify it to Soren.

"We're not going to be parents. He's talking nonsense," I told Soren, who was so shocked that he began filling his plate with food. It was so not like him to shove calories down his throat without giving it a second thought, and pissed off, I looked at Kai.

"What's your problem?"

"What do you mean?"

"We're not having any kids!" I hissed, the vein on my neck popping.

"You practically agreed to it." Kai turned his head toward Soren. "He practically agreed to it."

Grabbing Kai's jaw, I snapped his head to face me. "Don't you dare say another word," I warned, my blood boiling. Soren must have thought I was making a joke out of him, and the mere thought killed me. Agreeing to this dinner was clearly a mistake. It was all just one big plan of Kai's to get back at Soren. Sure, we deserved to be scolded for going behind his back, but not like this. There were better methods.

“Soren, listen—”

Soren raised his hand in front of him, his eyes bulging, signaling me not to speak before he reached for his wineglass, his face red as he downed the contents of the glass like a man who hadn’t drunk in a year.

“And *I’m* the alcoholic,” Kai muttered under his breath, his tone mean.

I glared at him right before Soren coughed and spluttered, reaching for the water. His face was glowing, and his chest was heaving. He appeared to be struggling to swallow as he attempted to pour himself a glass of water with shaking hands.

“Soren?” I asked worriedly due to the changing color of his face. *Shit*. Had we shocked him so much that he was choking on something—*hold on*. He truly was choking, his lips swelling, too.

“I-I c-can’t swallow,” he wheezed, his voice rough as he plonked the glass down and grabbed for his tie, clumsily attempting to release it.

“What did you eat?” I demanded, panic taking hold of me. I jumped to my feet and moved around the table to get to him. “Did any of this have mushrooms in it?” I asked Kai, doing my best to hold it together. He, on the other hand, was rooted to his seat, wide-eyed.

“W-What?” he stuttered, looking at me.

“Did any of this food have any mushrooms in it?” I asked through gritted teeth, pushing Soren’s useless hands away to undo his tie and top button.

Coming out of his shock, Kai got up and quickly checked the table, his eyes moving over everything. “The pasta! He ate the pasta—it was cooked in mushroom stock, and the sauce, too.” His face paled as he glanced at Soren, who was making grunting noises.

“I told you he’s allergic!” I yelled at Kai, my body tensing with fear and adrenaline while Soren kept on gasping and wheezing. My hands shook while I tried to rub his back, realizing it wouldn’t help at all. I had to get him to a hospital, but first—

I checked his jacket for an EpiPen, as I knew he always carried one with him, just in case. Luckily, he had one now. In all the time we’d been together, not once did he have to use it, but him being him, he’d taught me how to work it just in case.

“The blue side up and the orange down,” I reminded myself aloud before jabbing him with the injection that would help with his symptoms.

In the background, I heard someone say they’d called an ambulance, but we weren’t far from the hospital, and I wasn’t about to wait.

“Get me my car,” I ordered Kai, already tossing him my keys, which he caught.

By the time I'd gotten Soren to my truck, his skin was covered in a red rash, while his lips and the lower half of his face were swollen. My anger at Kai made my temples throb, and the thought of killing him with my own bare hands crossed my mind. Only right then, my worry for Soren overshadowed my anger. He was my sole priority; the rest could fucking wait.

"Let me drive you," Kai offered after Soren was sitting in the passenger seat.

The second he reached his hand forward, I slapped it away. "You've done enough," I warned through gritted teeth, the fury on my face enough to let him know he'd better not push me any further. I wasn't the type of guy to get angry, but as of late, Kai dragged it out of me with force.

Closing Soren's door, I ran around the hood, quickly climbed into the driver's seat, and turned on the engine.

"I t-think I'm b-better now," Soren grunted while trying to straighten himself out on the seat.

Taking a breath and a moment to look at him, I placed my hand on his chest and forced him to stay put. "Don't push yourself."

He sagged against the seat, and only then did I reverse out of the parking spot, not bothering to look at Kai, who was standing on the curbside.

"Ah…" Soren hissed, grabbing my attention. "I hate this."

With my eyes focused on the busy road, I reached over and softly caressed his cheek, needing to know he was okay. "I know, baby, but I've got you."

CHAPTER Sixty-One

Ash

Thankfully, everything in the hospital went smoothly, and a few hours later, we were discharged. Soren was rather sleepy, and taking him back to his home wasn't easy, but we'd managed.

"The keys are in my—"

"Your pocket, I know," I chuckled, already pulling them out and unlocking the door. The house alarm beeped, and I turned to turn it off. He hadn't changed the code, *my birthday*, and the alarm went off once I typed the numbers in.

"Haven't you thought about changing it?" I asked Soren, who was holding on to me for support. All the medicine he was given had made him drowsy.

"Why should I?"

"It's been years."

"Well, it's still your house," he said before clearing his throat. "Mind helping me to the shower? All I can think about is how dirty I am."

Nodding, I held his waist tightly as we began walking.

"Do you need me to bring you anything?" I asked once he got into the shower. At first, he said no, but then he asked for his robe, which was hanging in his bedroom. Nodding, I closed the bathroom door behind me and went straight there, searching for the robe. Easily enough, I found it hanging in Soren's closet, right where he always kept it. That man… He loved it when things had their own place. Living with four teenagers and Kai, *order* had become a foreign word. My house was a twenty-four-seven mess with all their things scattered around everywhere. Last night, I went to bed only to find Jess's tablet poking my back. How did it get into my room? I had no idea, but that was Jess for you.

With the robe in my hands, I turned to go back when something caught my attention, forcing me to a full stop. Blinking my eyes to ensure I was seeing correctly, I moved closer to his famous photo wall, which was now empty. Maybe I was confusing things, and this wasn't the same wall? *No way*. I knew every inch of this house, and without a doubt, two hundred and twenty photos

were once hung on this exact wall. But why would Soren take them down? After all, he couldn't fall asleep without counting them. I hadn't noticed this change when I'd come here for sex; too caught up with getting fucked, I didn't care for anything but my need to be consumed by Soren.

An uneasy feeling settled in the pit of my stomach with this dramatic change, which left me with some questions. Soren calling me from the bathroom snapped me out of my thoughts, and I went back to him. Done with his shower, he looked so exhausted that I decided to ask about the wall later. Because of the late hour and his state, I took him straight to his bed.

His body relaxed once his back hit the mattress, and he let out a sigh of relief.

"God, what a day." He moved a hand over his forehead, his eyes already closed.

"I know… How are you feeling?" I asked, sitting down on the edge of the mattress right beside him.

Because of all the medicine, he was a bit dopey, which was adorable, especially when he fell asleep midsentence, as he did earlier in the car.

"Embarrassed." He chuckled, then coughed, trying to keep his eyes open. "I nearly died from a mushroom."

"Don't speak if it's too hard," I said, brushing his dark hair away from his brows. Soren relaxed at the touch and settled more comfortably on the bed. His robe was slightly open, exposing his chest, which was still slightly red from the rash. However, the swelling on his face and lips was beginning to subside, thanks to the treatment.

"Thank you for helping me home," he said as he wrapped his fingers around my wrist. "But you should go home and rest yourself."

Despite telling me to go, he only held on to me stronger.

"I don't want to leave you alone."

He smiled. "I'll be fine, Ashton. I can take care of myself."

Why do I find it hard to believe you? He'd been alone for seven long years and claimed to do just fine by himself, and yet, his hands held on to me so desperately. *They always did.*

"I'm also afraid that if I go home, I might murder Kai," I sighed, then shut my eyes and took a deep breath to calm myself down. Thinking about his stupidity pissed me off beyond words. "I'm sorry about dinner," I added.

"Don't worry. Mistakes happen. And I won't sue if that's what you're scared of." He winked, and I smacked his arm.

"I wasn't talking just about that… but everything. Kai—" I rubbed my face. "I can't even defend him. I have no idea why he'd act so pitifully."

“Because he loves you.”

Listening to him was a pinch to the heart, and I stared back at him, not knowing what to say. For months, I’d tried to avoid getting involved with Soren, telling myself we had to focus on the trial. Now that Diesel was free and gone, I no longer had excuses and had to face reality as it was: I was involved with two men at the same time.

Two men I cared deeply about. I knew it was naive of me, but still, all I wanted was for this tangle to be resolved without anyone getting hurt.

“I’m going to come clean and tell him that we slept together,” I said, my body already tightening with anxiety and fear over Kai’s anticipated reaction.

Soren grabbed my hand, softly stroking my skin with his thumb, and I wondered when his touch turned this warm. After all, he used to be my winter.

“If it helps, I think he already knows.”

Soren was probably right. Kai wasn’t an idiot, and I was a lousy liar. He’d probably realized something was going on, and this awful dinner was his attempt to get back at Soren. It was petty and childish but suited Kai’s character.

“We’re not having kids, by the way. He brought up this crazy idea, and I—”

“You don’t need to explain yourself to me, Ashton. You have every right to want a family.”

But I want it with you, not him. That was the first thought that came into my head, and it scared me. It scared me because I wasn’t ready to break Kai’s heart, nor was I prepared to fall back in love with Soren. Although, I was afraid it was already too late for the latter.

“Maybe you should delay your flight by a few days? You’re not in any condition to travel.” I blatantly changed the subject, hoping it would ease the amount of guilt twisting my gut.

“I’ll be fine by Sunday.”

Disappointment took over me, and my heart sank because I’d hoped to have a few more days with him.

“Who will take care of you there if something happens?”

Soren laid his head back on the pillow and closed his eyes. “If I need help, I’ll just give you a call.” He smiled, but it was all goofy and lazy, as if he was on the verge of dozing off again. I wanted to cover him up and let him sleep when he kept mumbling. “Just make sure my number isn’t blocked.”

“What do you mean?” I asked after I got up to tuck him under the blanket.

Soren yawned, burying his head in the pillow. “You know…” Another yawn. “Like it was back then.”

“When have I ever blocked your number?” I asked, my eyes narrowed down on him.

Soren half opened his eyes.

“What?” He sounded so confused, and I assumed he was so tired that he had no clue what he’d just mumbled.

“It’s nothing. Go to sleep.” I leaned close and kissed his forehead. “I’ll see you in the morning.” Ready to move, Soren grabbed my hand, holding me close.

“Don’t fly away, little Sparrow. Stay with me,” he whispered ever so gently, his words falling to my ears like a prayer, coating my soul with the love I’d forgotten. Finally happy that he was telling me what he *truly* wanted, I didn’t leave; instead, I stripped down to my boxer briefs and climbed onto the bed with him.

I snuggled close to him, my arms wrapped around his already sleeping body. He was so warm and soft, the man I had loved for years, but only slightly different. As I closed my eyes and pressed my lips to his neck, gently kissing him, I knew that tomorrow, I’d have hard decisions to face.



I wasn’t even out of my truck when the front door to the house slammed open, and Kai came out running toward me.

“Where have you been?” he asked, both of his hands clenching the truck’s door as he leaned through the open window, not giving me any space.

With eyes heavy with sleep, I turned off the engine, still not looking at him. Since my head was flooded with thoughts, I’d barely had any sleep last night.

Kai opened the car door at the same time I unbuckled myself. “Give me some space to breathe,” I asked of him because he was practically in my face.

I climbed out of the truck, and of course, he was already onto me.

“Not until you tell me where the fuck you were, Ashy.”

I lifted my gaze from the ground to meet his furious face. His eyes were bloodshot red, with dark circles underneath them. *Shit.* He looked even worse than I did.

“I stayed with Soren after you nearly killed him,” I hissed with venom as I started to walk toward the house. On top of all the other crap I had to deal with, the weather was especially shitty today. It rained through the whole night, and judging by the dark clouds covering the sky, it was probably about to start pouring again.

“I didn’t poison him!” Kai shouted from behind me.

Jeez. He’d wake the whole house.

“Will you keep your voice down? It’s early, and the boys are probably still

asleep," I snapped, turning to look at him.

Kai's jaw clenched as he swallowed hard. He came out of it quickly enough as he grabbed my arm to pull me back. "I didn't poison him," he repeated himself, only quieter this time.

"But you were irresponsible, and that's just as bad."

On my drive back home, I'd promised myself not to get angry with Kai, but it was hard because the moment I saw his face, the anger I felt last night returned to me, and I wanted him out of my sight.

"Come on, Ashy," he tsked. "It was a fucking mistake."

"One that could have cost him his life, Kai. Do you even realize what could have happened?" Stepping into the house, I tossed my car keys into the small bowl near the door and then walked to the kitchen.

I need coffee.

"If you think about it, it was really his fault. He should have mentioned his allergies *before* he started stuffing his mouth like a pig."

My temples throbbed with anger, and I slowly turned to face him. "Seriously?"

Standing behind me with a straight face, he seemed oblivious to the situation. Instead of feeling some sort of remorse or, at the very least, empathy for what happened to Soren, Kai's sole focus was on saving his own fucking ass. He didn't stay up all night because he was worried for Soren but for *himself*. It wasn't guilt eating his insides but jealousy. Ugly jealousy he'd held on to ever since he first saw Soren kissing me at Rob's restaurant years ago.

"I told you about his allergies more than enough times during the last week," I said, focusing back on the point. "And if not for you talking nonsense about us having a kid, maybe Soren wouldn't have been too distracted not to notice what he was eating."

He rolled his eyes. "Oh, please, the man is kissing forty, and you treat him like some fucking baby."

I took a step toward him until I was in his face, my finger pressed against his chest. "Among the three of us, you're the only one acting like a petty child," I hissed, unable to hold back my anger.

Kai's brows narrowed, and he seemed hurt, not that I was surprised. When it came to his own ego, he sure as fuck knew how to show empathy.

"Hey, where are you going?" he asked, voice high with nerves, as I let him go and walked away.

"To make myself a cup of coffee."

He followed me into the kitchen. "I'm sorry, okay? I'm sorry for fucking up lately."

“You know, at some point, after tossing it around so easily, the word ‘sorry’ loses its meaning.”

I pulled out my favorite mug from the cabinet and began making my drink. Putting my attention on the coffee helped me to calm down. Fighting wouldn’t get us anywhere, and at the end of the day, Kai was acting out because I’d hurt him. *Yes*, he was selfish and careless as always, but it didn’t take away from the things I’d done.

The coffee machine let out a noise as it began filling my mug with the warm brew, the aroma spreading around us, adding more to the already thick air.

“I don’t want to fight,” I said, my hands on the counter. “So I’ll just say it—”

“Wait.” Kai hugged me from the back and rested his forehead on my shoulder. “Just wait with what you were about to say.”

“Kai—”

“I love you, Ashy. I love you so fucking much.”

My heart sank, and my throat dried with the words I held in.

“*This is over*” was what I needed to say but couldn’t, so instead, I swallowed back my words. Kai only held me tighter, his body wrapping around me like a blanket. Only it didn’t make me feel warm and loved but cold and desperate. But it wasn’t always like this. In the past, Kai was as warm as the sun, and knowing that I was the one who turned his touch into ice broke me. Before everything began, he was summer. *My summer*. But somehow, we’d managed to fuck it up. Did we ever stand a chance? I had no idea. What I did know was that we couldn’t keep going the way we were, tiptoeing around each other, acting like everything was okay while it wasn’t. Kai was never the kind of person to be in a relationship, and even if he was, I never gave him a chance. Not a real one, anyway. And despite knowing all that, breaking this hug was nearly impossible because imagining my life without him was unthinkable.

With my coffee all but forgotten, I took a deep breath and turned to face him, ready to at least try and tell him a fraction of what I was feeling, when I noticed the blood on his face.

“Jeez, you have a nosebleed,” I said, already reaching to grab a paper towel to clean him up.

Taking it from my hands, Kai held it to his nose, trying to stop the bleeding. “Shit,” he hissed, the blood dripping down to his shirt. “It’s probably ’cause I didn’t drink enough water.”

“Doesn’t matter. Just go wash it up,” I ordered him, thankful for this little extra time I’d just received. Maybe this was God telling me not to make rash decisions. Who knew? I wasn’t much of a believer, but looking for a divine sign was easier than making my own choices.

“Wait here, okay?” he said while holding his head up so he wouldn’t drip all over.

“Just go before you bleed all over the floor.”

Once he was out of the kitchen, I took a deep breath and then reached for a towel to clean up the bit of blood that got on the floor. I was almost done cleaning when a phone rang. At first, I thought it was Soren calling to check where I was, but instead, it was Kai’s phone buzzing. He’d left it on the kitchen table, so I glanced to check who it was. Usually, the only one to call him this early was his restaurant, if something went wrong with delivery and such, except that the one calling was Zoe.

She always had the worst timing.

I debated with myself for a half second before I picked up the phone.

“Thank fuck you’re finally answering,” she said, sounding angry.

“Actually, it’s me, not Kai.” I ran my fingers through my hair, already regretting answering.

Because Kai asked me not to, I hadn’t talked to Zoe about her bizarre request for Kai to father another one of her kids. And now, it stood on the tip of my tongue to tell her off, and I had to hold myself back from yelling something.

“Oh,” Zoe spoke, sounding annoyed. “Well, shit. I need to talk to him. Is he around?”

“He can’t talk right now, but I’ll tell him to call you later.”

She snorted. “As if he’ll do that.” It sounded like there was some beef going on between them.

Maybe she was angry because he turned her down?

“Can you tell him that I need to know if Paris can come next month? I’ve been waiting for his answer for almost two weeks now, and he keeps ignoring me. That man… Jesus.” She sighed. “Summer is almost over, and this is literally the only time I have to go with Dave on a short vacation, just the two of us. I love Paris, but I deserve some time with my boyfriend, no?”

I kept forgetting that in Australia, summer lasts between December and February, but hold on, did she say *Dave*? As in her so-called boyfriend Dave?

“Didn’t you guys break up?” I asked, confused because that was what Kai told me.

“What? Of course not.” She sounded impatient. “Why would I break up with the first man to treat me right? Seriously. Being with him only proves to me how lucky I am to have dodged the bullet with *your* idiot.”

What the hell?

So, what Kai told me about her wanting another kid from him was a blunt lie? But why? Why would he make up such a story? My blood froze as

realization sank in, and I nearly dropped the phone. Kai lied to *manipulate* me. *Again*. He wanted to push me into a corner he knew would make me feel guilty and make it harder for me to leave him. He didn't want more kids; it was just another way for him to keep me by his side where it suited him.

"Listen, I didn't mean to sound so mean," Zoe said, probably thinking my lack of response was because I was hurt. Well, I was, only not because of her.

"It's all cool, Zoe. I need to go now." I didn't wait for her to speak back before I ended the call. A feeling of betrayal pierced me like a knife, quickly turning into rage—thick, bubbly fury that throbbed through my veins. But my anger didn't stop there because who knew what else he'd lied about. Breathing through my nose, I attempted to calm down but failed and only clenched the phone so hard it hurt.

I walked to my room, where Kai had just finished washing his face. "How's the nosebleed?" I asked, attempting to keep it down.

He tossed the used towel on the sink, the mess dancing on my nerves, and then gave me one of those goofy smiles of his. "It stopped, which is good 'cause I doubt we have tampons around here." He reached out to hold me when I shoved his phone in his chest.

"Zoe called you," I said and stepped back to my door, closing it so we'd be locked in this room until the truth came out.

"Did you speak to her?" he asked, voice casual.

I squeezed my eyes shut and released a breath before turning to face him. "Yeah, I did."

"Did you bring up the—"

"The what?" I cut in. "The imaginary baby? No, I didn't. She was too busy talking about her boyfriend."

Kai bit his lip and looked aside, probably calculating how he could get out of this. But his silence annoyed me beyond words, and I snapped.

"What the fuck were you thinking?"

"I wasn't, okay?" he hissed back, tossing his phone on the bed. "I saw you slipping away from me, so I wanted to show you that you still cared about me."

My eyes bulged. "Still cared?" I took a step toward him. "Are you out of your fucking mind? Who does that?" It wasn't just anger twisting my insides but pain over his betrayal. The fact that he used the one thing he knew would work on me. *The one thing Soren never agreed to give me.*

"I'm sorry, okay?" That empty word came out of his poisonous mouth again. "I panicked and lied. It was stupid, and I regret doing it." Reaching for me, he grabbed my arms and held me tight. His face was so close, all red and sweaty, as he continued to apologize, spitting the word "sorry" over and over again.

I then understood something. Kai wasn't carefree; he was careless. He wasn't easygoing but a selfish man who did whatever suited him at the moment. Mostly, he wasn't the good guy but a fucking liar.

"What else have you lied about?" I hissed.

"W-What?"

"I said, what else have you lied to me about?"

He shook his head. "Nothing. That was the only thing."

"Bullshit." I shoved him away from me, and he wobbled back.

Breaking our stare, I looked down at the floor and took a deep breath, my whole body vibrating. "If you believe that there's the slightest chance for us to be together, you better start talking."

"Ashy—"

"I mean it, Kai!" I raised my voice, not about to fall for his charm this time. And oh, was he charming. With that smile and his hair, rolling laughter, and sense of humor, it was impossible not to forgive him. *Impossible* not to look the other way and ignore his mistakes. But not anymore. I'd had enough of this bullshit.

"I don't know what to tell you," he said, keeping his arms close to his sides. Understanding it was my turn to speak, I nodded.

"Very well. So I'll ask." I crossed my arms over my chest and held my head high. "All the things you told me about Soren, him sending someone to beat up Jones. The stalking our house thing. Was any of it true?"

He nodded. "All of it. I can even show you the proof my guy sent me, like bank transactions Soren sent to the kids' school. He's a fucking lunatic, babe."

Bank transactions? What was that about? I would have to find out later because at that moment, it wasn't relevant.

"He's not a lunatic," I spat out, annoyance oozing through my words. "He's a good man who loves me."

"He's crazy." Kai's forehead creased as anger took over his features, turning his calm face tense and ugly. "Have you forgotten how he dumped you like yesterday's trash?" He attempted to step closer. "Did you forget who was there for you after he did?" Another step. "Who was the one to hug you on all those nights you couldn't sleep?" Another step. "Tell me, Ashy. Who the fuck was there for you?"

By now, he had me backed against the wall, his taller frame looming over me. "I protected you from him, don't you get it? If not for me, he would have dumped you a hundred times over."

His words struck me hard. "W-What do you mean?" My bottom lip quivered as fear took over every inch of me. "What did you do?"

Kai's jaw twitched as he looked at me through dreadful eyes. He looked dead crazy, and for a second, I was scared, but then I remembered I was also a strong man, just like him, if not stronger.

"What did you do?" I pushed him away from me, and he stumbled back until he fell on his ass. He grunted, and as he got back to his feet, Soren's mumbling from last night about blocking his number returned to me.

"Tell me you didn't block his number." In my heart, I prayed it was false and that it was all in my head, only it wasn't.

Looking the other way, Kai kept quiet, and that was all I needed to know.

"How could you do this?" I asked, unable to believe this shit. No wonder Soren never called me if Kai blocked his fucking number. "How could you do this to me?" I demanded, my voice louder.

"Because I loved you, for fuck's sake!" he shouted. "And still do, Ashy. I love you so much it hurts." In a second, he was on me again, his arms hugging me tight.

I was so stunned that pushing him away wasn't even an option, and instead, I just stayed frozen as he went on telling me things I wished I never knew.

"He came to see me?" I asked once he was done talking, my voice choked with tears. "He came to see me, and you pushed him away?"

Kai pulled back so he could meet my eyes. "You said to tell you the truth if I believe in us. And I do. So yes, Ash. I got rid of him back then, but I did it for you, for *us*, babe. And I would have done it all over again because he's wrong for you." He moved his thumb over my cheek to wipe away my tears.

"No." I raised my hands between us while shaking my head. "You're the one who's wrong for me." This time, when I pushed back, he didn't budge and instead grabbed my wrists in a lock hold.

"How can you say that?" he hissed, his mouth crimping. "After everything I've done for you. After all the years I wasted chasing you?"

"You lied to me, Kai—*ouch*!" I cried when he twisted my wrist in his hand until it hurt so bad.

"Who are you to lecture me?" Ignoring my pain, he leaned in closer, his spit hitting my face each time he spoke. "Who are you to talk about lies when you're the one going around letting him fuck you like a common whore?"

Shocked by his violence, I tried releasing myself, only for him to shove me so hard my back slammed against the wall, the force of the impact making me lose all the air in my lungs.

"You think I don't know you've been fucking him behind my back?" he rasped, and I had no fucking idea who this man standing above me was because this wasn't my Kai but a complete stranger—*That's not true*. I did know this

version of Kai, only that I hadn't seen him in years. Not since he was—

"What are you high on?" I hissed, my whole body in pain.

"Oh, come on, babe. Give me some credit." He snorted, voice mean. "I'm not fucked-up, just pissed off my boyfriend is a fucking slut." He bent down to eye level with me. "We can always share you if that's what you want. I know your slutty ass is always hungry for a cock."

I raised my hand to slap him, but he grabbed my arm before I could.

"How many times did you fuck him?"

"K-Kai, you have to stop."

He tightened his hold.

"Answer me."

"It doesn't matter—" He shut me up by slamming his lips to mine, pushing his tongue inside my mouth while twisting my wrist harder in his fist. As he continued to violate my mouth, tears rolled down my face. My heart was breaking in ways I never imagined would happen again. It was as if I were sent back fourteen years ago, where he punched me to the ground after he'd used me for his own pleasure.

"W-Why are you crying?" He breathed the words into my open mouth. "It's me, Ashy." Finally, he let go of my wrists only to press our foreheads together. "You loved me once. Why can't you do it again?"

Under different circumstances, I might have felt sad for him, but not right now, not when he made my whole body hurt.

"Because I love him."

And there it was.

The truth.

Finally, it was out, in the most ugly, brutal, and unpleasant way it could be.

Kai slowly pulled back until we were eye to eye, and I saw the crystal blue I used to adore as a young, foolish guy. But just like the ocean, the deep blue would fool you before swallowing you whole.

"And you know what?" I held his stare, not flinching at his threat. "I never stopped loving him."

Kai's face twisted with rage, almost like he snapped, and he raised his hand in the air. "You fucking whore," he shouted, nostrils flaring.

I prepared myself to get hit when the door to the room slammed open and Kai was yanked away from me. For a moment, I thought that Diesel had come back home, but then I looked up and saw who was standing before me with a fucking knife pulled out, pointed at Kai.

"Put the knife down, Jessie," I said, my voice cracking just as Levi and Andrei got inside the room.

“What the fuck, Jess?” Andrei yelped, voice nervous.

“He hit him,” Jessie hissed, knife still pulled out. “He fucking hit him.”

“*Kotik*—”

“It’s okay.” I raised my hand in Levi’s direction, letting him know I could handle it. “I’m okay, Jessie, you see?” I said, slowly moving to step before him. Jessie’s scared eyes jumped to mine, and the fear in them crushed me. Growing up in foster homes, Jessie had been subjected to domestic violence from a young age, and hearing the fight between Kai and me probably triggered him. Seeing how scared he was only gave me more reasons to resent Kai in that moment.

Slowly slipping the knife from between Jessie’s trembling fingers, I then pulled him into a hug, pressing his head to my chest. “I’m okay, Champ,” I promised him. Once Jessie submitted himself into my arms, I realized how nothing else mattered. Kai, Soren, all of them meant so little when one of my boys was at risk.

“Ashy—”

“Get the hell out of my house,” I warned Kai through gritted teeth, not caring for what else he had to say. “Just get out.”

I didn’t look back, so I had no idea if he’d listened, but then I heard footsteps, and I assumed he left.

Thank God.

Now, I could give Jessie more of my attention.

CHAPTER Sixty-Two

Soren

I walked down the white hall as I watched the passersby, nurses, and doctors rushing to different rooms, among them families and relatives of those getting treated in this hospital. My skin still itched from the rash, although it was feeling much better than when I'd woken up this morning. Wearing a shirt didn't help as the fabric kept sticking to my body, increasing my discomfort. I would have skipped leaving my house and stayed home to rest if it weren't for how important this meeting was to me.

The traffic of people significantly declined once I reached the right floor, as now, the corridor almost stood empty. Being here again was nerve-racking, but since visiting him the last time, Shay-Lee had hardly left my mind, and I had to see him again before I went back to NYC.

Since I still didn't know what would become of Ashton and me, returning to my home in New York was inevitable. However, calling that horrible penthouse a home was a blunt lie as it hadn't felt like one for the past seven years. Spending the last few months in California had reminded me of my love for the sun and the warmth it carried with it, and my thoughts of returning here for good became much stronger after the meeting I had with Daniel last week, where he'd offered me a partnership in his NYC office. I planned to refuse Daniel's offer, but until it was final, I wasn't going to tell Ashton. If things went wrong, he'd get hurt. On top of that, I didn't want to pressure him by telling him I was planning to move back here. I knew he was struggling with making a decision, and although him staying with me last night gave me the confidence that he might have made his choice, he was already gone when I woke up this morning. Only unlike before, this time, he'd left a note, telling me he'd call me later with a cute smiley face. Being the desperate bastard that I was, I kept the little sticky note in my wallet, eagerly waiting for that call.

Putting those thoughts aside, I cleared my throat and fixed the collar of my shirt, ready to get inside Shay-Lee's room. The poor boy still had a long

recovery ahead of him, and somehow, I hoped to help him. I also felt bad for not visiting him in the two weeks since he'd helped us win the case, but I planned on making up for it now. Only as I walked inside the room, I found it to be empty. Confused, I walked back to the hall and stopped the first nurse I saw.

"Excuse me, but could you please tell me where the patient of room 401 was moved to?"

The nurse checked me out through her glasses. "Are you talking about Mr. Rogers?"

So she knew who he was. Then again, I assumed most people did.

"Yes."

"He isn't here anymore," she simply said, ready to go back to her work when I stopped her.

"What do you mean? Where is he?"

The older lady looked around us before she leaned a bit closer, a glint of satisfaction on her face, probably due to the gossip she was about to share. "I'm not allowed to say it, but have you heard what happened to his father?"

In a shocking turn of events, Christian's plane had crashed into the ocean, killing him and all the crew members that were on board.

I nodded, and her smile grew bigger.

"So, after hearing the news, the young boy lost his mind. We needed to inject him with sedatives. Afterward, he was transferred to a psychiatric ward. Can you imagine? That poor kid."

She didn't sound worried at all as she kept on speaking. Clearly, she was having the time of her life, telling everyone other people's business.

"From what I heard, he went through a mental breakdown, but can you blame him?" She moved a bit closer. "From what they said at that trial, he was abused by the dad. One would think he'd be happy the bastard was gone." She paused for a second to rethink her words. "But, if you ask me, I bet he made this whole thing up to get his boyfriend out of jail and get his hands on his father's fortune."

Sickened by her ignorance, I didn't say anything before walking away. And while this vile nurse's mindset disturbed me, I knew many would think the same. This whole case was a scandal that would follow Diesel and Shay-Lee for many years to come. Yet, I had greater concerns than public opinion based on what she had told me. So Shay-Lee had a mental breakdown upon hearing of his father's death? That wasn't surprising, given their unpalatable relationship. Knowing a thing or two about abuse, I knew that, more often than not, victims might develop an unhealthy dependency on their abuser. Especially in a complicated case like Shay-Lee's, in which the abuse went on for years and reached levels of

torture no one should ever experience. In a way, until Diesel arrived, Shay-Lee's dad was his whole world, and while being ripped apart from him was good, it wasn't so simple. And on top of all, Diesel just left? Shay-Lee was probably in utter darkness, all alone and scared. I knew this feeling all too well, and I ached to help him in some way.

I could hear the rain pouring even from the parking lot, and I hurried into my car when my phone rang. Once inside, I pulled it out of my pocket to see it was Ashton. At last. A giddy smile spread on my lips with just the thought of hearing his sweet voice, and I quickly took the call that connected to my car's speaker.

"I've been waiting for your call—"

"Soren," Ashton gasped, out of breath.

Upon hearing the panic in his voice, I straightened up in my seat, one hand gripping the steering wheel as I tensed with worry.

"Ashton, what's wrong?" I immediately asked, my heart racing up.

"I need your help."



"What do you mean he hit you?" I rasped, my body throbbing with rage over what he'd just told me.

The rain was coming down hard on my windshield, but that didn't stop me from driving my car as if the road was my personal racetrack.

"That's beyond my point!" Ashton eagerly claimed.

Annoyed by the way he dismissed the severity of Kai's violence, I dodged between cars, trying to get to him faster.

"How on earth is this bastard raising his fists to you, *again*, not the point?" I nearly hissed out my words, my blood pounding in my head, making it hard to concentrate.

"I should have never told you about that part, so just let it go, alright?"

Let it go? Oh, Ashton! How the hell am I supposed to let this shit go when you've just told me Kai had raised his fists to you?

It was one thing for him to hit Ashton when they were teens, but they were both adult men in their thirties. Over my dead body would I let it go—

"Soren." Him saying my name so firmly forced my mind to quiet down and listen. "I think Kai relapsed. Not that it justifies his behavior, but it means he might endanger himself. Yes, he was wrong to act the way he did, but what would it help to get mad at him now if he gets himself killed?"

From what Ashton told me earlier, Kai had been missing since their fight this

morning. If you asked me, he was probably drinking his ass off at some bar, but Ashton didn't care and was determined to track him down.

"It's not your fault," I said, pretty sure he was taking the blame for how things went south.

"It doesn't matter right now. Just get over here quickly, okay?"

"Okay."

Twenty minutes later, I pulled my car to a stop in front of Kai's building, where Ashton had told me to meet him. The rain had stopped for a minute, so I quickly got out, slamming the door behind me. Ashton emerged from where he was shielding himself from the rain, his face pale.

"Thank God you're here," he said after tossing himself at me. "I'm so fucking worried, Soren."

Moving my hand to the back of his head, I held him close. His body was freezing—probably from waiting outside. "We'll find him," I promised him before letting go.

"Let's check his apartment," I said, leading him into the building. When he called me earlier, he said he was too scared to go in there alone because of what he might find. That was why I came so we could do it together.

"When was the last time you were here?"

Taking the keys out of his pocket, he shook his head. "I don't know, two, three weeks, maybe? We usually hung out at my place." Realizing I might not like hearing what he just said, he turned to me. "Soren, I'm—"

"Don't worry about it. Just open the door."

He nodded, pushed the key in, and turned it before opening the door. The place reeked like Kai hadn't bothered to open a window in weeks, which wasn't a good sign. Ashton's shoulders tensed, so I rubbed his neck before encouraging him to step in. The empty bottles of liquor, along with cans of beer scattered around the place, confirmed Ashton's suspicion about Kai relapsing, and even though not one bit of me cared for Kai, seeing this still hurt my heart. Yes, I wasn't a fan of him, and even though in the past I might have said some controversial things regarding his sobriety, seeing that the guy actually had relapsed was sad. He had a job, family, and people who cared about him; he was in a good place, or so we thought.

"Kai," Ashton called as he began searching around the house.

While he did, I scanned the place myself. I picked up one of the bottles and sniffed it. The strong scent of booze burned my nostrils, and I quickly put it down on the coffee table. I paused when I noticed traces of white powder left on the dark wood next to rolling papers, which were often used for weed.

That's just… sad.

“What is it? Did you find anything?” Ashton asked from behind me. I quickly turned around, hoping to hide the drugs from him, but he rounded me.

“Oh, shit.” He crouched down next to the table, his face pale. “How could this happen without me noticing?”

That was a big question most people asked themselves after some tragedy occurred. The thing is… we often missed the signs, not realizing they were there until it was too late. But just because you didn’t see something didn’t make you responsible.

Crouching beside Ashton, I placed my hand on his back. “What’s important now is to find Kai, darling, so don’t allow guilt to stop you from it.”

Ashton turned his head until our eyes met. So much sadness coated those pure emeralds he had for eyes, and all I could do was offer him a small smile.

“Okay.”

Holding my breath, I cupped his nape and pulled him close. Kissing his forehead, I held still for a second before pulling away and giving him a small nudge. “Come on, let’s go find him.”

We drove around the city, checking places Kai used to hang around. Yet, no matter how many restaurants and clubs we stopped by, we had no clue where to find him. The rain was only getting worse, and the closer we got to twilight, Ashton’s nerves grew stronger.

We were back in the truck after checking Kai’s gym in case someone there had seen him when the phone rang.

“Andrei? What is it? Did you find him?” Ashton spoke fast.

While we searched, so did the others, including the boys and Mel.

“No, not yet, but Miles just said something about how high the waves are because of the storm, and it had me thinking, what if he’s out surfing?”

I peeked out the window, my brows pulling close. “In this weather—”

“Andrei, remember that shore I showed you last summer, the one by the cliff?” Ashton spoke over me, already starting the car.

“Yeah, Chief, I do.”

“Go there, right fucking now.”

“Why? You don’t think he’s there, do you?” I asked Ashton, whose eyes were focused on the road. “I mean, you need to be crazy to go out surfing in this weather.”

Ashton’s brows pulled into a deep frown full of worry.

“I know.”

CHAPTER Sixty-Three

Ash

Pulling into the parking lot of what used to be *our* shore, I saw Andrei's truck parked right next to Kai's. My heart dropped because my fears turned out to be true, and Kai was stupid enough to go surfing in the middle of a fucking storm.

"Shit," I hissed under my breath, stopping my car and getting out. The blasting wind hit my face, the sand and salt it carried stinging my skin and getting into my eyes.

"I went down to the shore, but the visibility is terrible 'cause of the wind, and the waves are too high to see anything from there," Andrei yelled over the whistle of the wind as I checked the inside of Kai's Jeep.

"And he's not on the beach?" I asked.

"No," Miles said while trying to keep his hair out of his eyes. "Before you got here, Andrei and I walked around. He's definitely not on the beach."

Shit.

I glanced over my shoulder at the ocean. It was crazy out there, and I feared the worst, yet I wasn't about to give up so quickly.

"We need to call the coast guard," I heard Soren saying from beside me as he himself looked at the dark water.

"We don't have time for that," I said, already walking back to my truck.

"What on earth are you saying?" he rasped while following me.

I opened the bed of my truck and quickly pulled my wet suit. I was about to start getting undressed when Soren grabbed my arm.

"You're not getting in there, Ashton."

Not saying a word, I held his stare. Seeing the fear in his eyes growing by the second didn't make it any easier, but I couldn't just stand here and do nothing.

His brows pulled close before they relaxed with disbelief, and he gasped my name. At first, he held me tighter but then slowly relaxed his grip. I guess he knew there was nothing he could do to stop me from going in there. *Absolutely*

nothing. Kai might have done unforgivable things to me, but he'd forever be someone I cared about deeply. My best friend. My first love. My first heartbreak.

Once Soren dropped his hand from my arm, I turned back to my car and began stripping down. I always carried my surf stuff in my trunk because who knew when you'd want to catch some waves? Andrei was the same, going with his board everywhere, but when I saw him also putting on his wet suit, I stopped.

"You're not going in there with me, kid."

"I'm not taking no for an answer," he said, zipping himself up.

Okay, then.

"Ashton, please think about this a bit more," Soren begged me as we went down to the shore.

I hated doing this to him, but he had to trust me.

"You know, there was something I always wanted to tell you," I said, stopping to face him.

Confused, Soren focused his scared eyes on me, and I doubted I'd ever seen him this worried. Maybe only that cursed night seven years ago, when he decided to break both our hearts without explanation.

"You worry way too much, *Verano*." I pressed my fist to his chest, right where his heart was beating fast. Automatically, he moved to grab my wrist, his thumb caressing the skin the wet suit didn't cover.

"It's because you never give me a break."

Smiling, I moved my hand up and rested it against his strong jaw. Turning his head, Soren kissed my palm, his soft lips lingering on my skin. I loved this vulnerable side of him but had no time to admire it because each minute was valuable. Breaking the connection was hard, but I forced myself to move.

Since the moment I'd found out Kai was missing, my heart had been racing like crazy. I was scared as fuck, anxious about what would happen. Yet the second my feet met the cold water, all the noises in my head quieted down, and I was focused on the mission. The ocean was always my home, where I came when I needed guidance. Now was no different, and despite the tall waves and strong wind, I'd trust it and myself.

I turned to glance at Andrei, whose eyes were already on me, waiting for my signal. One nod was all it took before we ran in, boards under our arms. Jumping headfirst was quite a shock since the water was freezing, but working on my breathing helped. "Stay away from those rocks." I pointed at them. "And there's a strong rip current to the right, so keep to your left and avoid areas where waves aren't breaking."

"Okay," Andrei called back. It was harder to hear him over the crashing waves.

“And if you get caught in one, don’t fight against it,” I reminded him of the first rule of the ocean: never, and I mean never, try to beat a rip because the water would always win. Rips would flow faster than a person could swim, and eventually, you’d get tired and start panicking.

A glint of hope came in the form of a sunray, hitting the ocean a few miles away. I told myself we’d find Kai once we got there, so that was where we swam. We had a bit of paddling to get there, but we’d manage. Thankfully, the water was a bit calmer now without the rain, and if we worked fast enough, we might get Kai out of here alive.

Once we got to that small ring of light, we sat up on our boards, trying to look around. It almost felt impossible until—

“There,” Andrei yelled, pointing his finger at a white spot that stood out against the dark water.

Squinting my eyes, I managed to focus on the figure long enough to recognize it was Kai, paddling through the waves, fighting to stay above water.

Thank God. He’s alive. But from his heavy stroking and slumped body, he looked exhausted.

The strong wind and the rolling waves made it hard to move forward. Swaying from side to side, each stroke we made felt like it was taking us backward, but we didn’t give up. My lungs burned, and my muscles hurt with the effort until I was close enough to call his name.

Kai turned around, looking for the source of the voice until his eyes landed on me. For a moment, it seemed like he didn’t believe what he was seeing, but once I reached him and was able to put my hand on his arm, his expression changed.

“W-What are you doing here?” he gasped, breathless.

Just like I suspected, he was holding on to his board with his last ounce of strength, his knuckles going white with how hard he clenched it. Who knew how long he’d been here?

“I’m here to take you back home.” My eyes studied him carefully.

“A-Ashy, I’m so sorry,” he choked, but we didn’t have time to get emotional.

“Are you injured anywhere?”

He shook his head, and I noticed his stare was unfocused. He was either too tired or still high, but thankfully, he was unharmed.

He swallowed hard and spat some water. “No, but I can’t reach the shore. Whenever I try to, the current pulls me deeper in,” he said while panting, then rested his head down on his board. “I’m tired, Ashy. I don’t think I can make it.”

“Don’t,” I warned. “You need to stay focused a little more so we can get out of here.”

I looked at Andrei. “You good?”

“You bet.”

God, I loved that kid.

“And you.” I pointed at Kai. “You’re not giving up, or I’ll fucking kill you.”

Kai seemed to pull himself together before he nodded.

I stretched my neck and looked around for whitecaps or breaking waves that would help us get to the shore. Luckily, I spotted a zone that seemed good enough. The only problem was that it was a bit too close to the rocks, which we needed to avoid.

“We’ll paddle that way.” I pointed in the direction while giving the two a short brief. “Andrei, you make sure Kai’s beside you at all costs.”

My kid nodded.

Feeling water coming from above, I looked up at the sky. It had started raining again, and I knew it was time to move. “Let’s go,” I said, my hands already breaking the surface as I started paddling.

“I’m so fucking sorry,” Kai began crying midway.

“Now’s not the time,” I yelled, trying to push him to keep moving. We couldn’t afford to waste time with the weather starting to get worse again.

“We’ll all die because of me.”

“No, we won’t.” Andrei smiled while rubbing Kai’s shoulder. “We’re almost there, you see?” He pointed over to the spot we were trying to reach. “Just save your breath and take long strokes. It will help.”

“Hear him, Kai?” I tried joking to loosen him up. “The kid thinks he can teach us.” I winked at Andrei. “We’ve been surfing since long before you were even conceived, kiddo.” Now I sounded like my uncle.

A half laugh broke past Kai’s trembling lips before he nodded, and it almost felt like we were doing okay when suddenly, we were pulled back in a flash, the water hitting my body so hard, dragging it underneath the surface in a vacuum.

It was a flash rip. One of the worst things you could come across while surfing.

The violent riptide moved me with it, and I barely managed to hold my head above water to get a few breaths in and see Kai and Andrei struggling the same way I was.

“Stay with him—” Water got into my mouth, and I quickly closed it as the waves carried me away. The strong flow pulled me down, then up. “Stay with each other!” I managed to shout. I heard Andrei calling my name back, right before everything went silent as I was pulled underwater again, the rip dragging me deeper and deeper, swaying my body from side to side. I lost my board the first time the waves crashed down on me, and without the leash keeping me

attached to it, there was nothing to help me float back. It felt like I was being torn away from my life as the water kept swallowing me whole, moving my body like a leaf in the wind. Brief seconds turned into dragging minutes in which I couldn't breathe, and when everything around me turned black, I thought about my father.

He'd died while free diving, and I wondered if, in his final moments, he, too, felt betrayed by the thing he loved the most.

The ocean.

But then I thought about my mom and the kids. I thought of how I'd never get to see them again, and I wondered where Diesel was right now. But in those last seconds in which everything turned cold, Soren was the only thing in my mind. Soren and the future I so desperately wanted to share with him and might never get the chance to have.

Soren

Waiting on the shore and looking at the ocean while knowing my biggest treasure was inside the belly of this raging beast was torture like no other. Each wave that crashed made my heart stop until my chest grew so tight that breathing was nearly impossible.

I walked back and forth on the sand while running my fingers through my hair, nearly pulling it from the roots as I waited for them to come out.

"You worry way too much, Verano," he'd told me right before he ran into that danger without looking back.

How could I not worry?

How could I not reach for your arm after you called me your summer?

That was what he said. *Verano*—the Spanish word for summer. *But when did I become your summer? I thought I was winter.* Cold and lonely like an old man, grasping through life with shivering hands.

The question was picking at my skull, turning me even more anxious. *Please, Ashton, just come back so I can ask you that.*

Time stood still, with me staring into the eye of the storm, more scared than I had ever been in my life before. Meanwhile, Miles spoke to me, and although I didn't want to ignore my boss's son, his attempt to comfort me by saying Andrei and Ashton would be fine was nothing if not annoying. How young and naive was he to think he could promise me what he could not control? I couldn't blame him, as this was part of youth. The most beautiful part of it. The confidence to think you'd live to overcome all obstacles in life. Only this kind of thinking was

what led me to lose Ashton in the first place. Back then, I thought we'd be able to overcome the toxicity and lies that coated our relationship and live happily ever after, only to get a cold slap from reality.

I wouldn't repeat the same mistakes, and until I held him in my arms again, I wouldn't fall into empty promises.

When a figure emerged from the water, I could finally breathe; that was, until I saw who it was. Falling to his knees the moment he reached shallow waters, Kai began coughing out salt water. He needed help, but I couldn't bring myself to move and instead remained rooted to the sand while watching Miles running to assist him.

My heart thrummed in my ears, my panic growing wild as Kai's mumbling turned into actual words.

"I killed him," he cried between coughing. "He's dead because of me."

Finally able to move, I darted toward him, jerking Miles away as I gripped Kai's shoulder and shook him hard.

"Who's *him*?" I yelled, my throat ripping apart. "What happened?"

Kai struggled to focus his eyes on me and continued spurting unhelpful crap. For God's sake! I needed him to answer me—

"Soren!" Miles gasped after I slapped Kai with the back of my hand, so hard the guy probably saw stars. Yet, before he could go into shock again, I held him close.

"What happened? Where are they?"

The idiot sniffed before he pointed at the waves. "We tried reaching a safe spot when a flash rip took us by surprise." He sobbed. "It dragged Ashy away in seconds before either of us could do anything." His sobbing turned into crying at the same time my whole body turned to ice. "A-Andrei tried going after him, but he disappeared, too."

The urge to slip my hands from his shoulders down to his throat and tighten my grip until he ceased to exist was unbearable.

I tried counting the seconds in my head to get those obsessive thoughts out of my mind, but it didn't help. My mouth dried, and my temples throbbed as I swallowed hard, my fingers already twitching to move—

"Andrei!" Miles called, snapping my attention at once.

Looking straight ahead, I saw Andrei stumbling out of the water with Ashton in his arms. I dropped Kai at once and jumped to my feet, only to fall back to the sand before getting up again.

Andrei carried Ashton until they reached the safe zone, and he put Ashton's unconscious body down before he slumped down and began coughing out water. Without wasting time, I dropped to my knees beside Ashton, tilted his head back,

and lifted his chin. His skin was ice-cold, but it didn't stop me, and I bent down until my lips were on his. I had kissed this man a million times, but never before was a kiss as important as this one. And in this dreadful moment, my sole wish was to kiss him a million times more.

After giving him two breaths, I positioned the heel of my strong hand at the center of his chest and began doing compressions. Counting came easy, and I moved in a trance, counting to thirty, then two and thirty again. But seconds turned into long minutes in which hope began to thin, and fat tears welled in my eyes. Each time I breathed into his mouth, I prayed for God to hear my calls and help me save this man because the world would be a colder place without its sun.

The wind whistled around us, and the rain only got stronger. My hands hurt, and I became tired, my body aching with agonizing pain from the inside out. Tears blurred my vision, yet I forced myself to stay calm and do my best.

"Goddamnit, Ashton!" I shouted while giving him another thirty compressions. "Don't you dare die on me!" My voice was so hoarse and raw that I couldn't even recognize it. "If you live, I promise you we'll have as many kids as you want," I cried, still trying to pump air into his lungs, not stopping even for one second. Why now, of all times, could I see it so clearly? *Our future*. Him and me, traveling the world, building fucking sandcastles with our children and dogs. Why was life this cruel?

Then, in a miracle that lasted only a second, Ashton's chest rose, and he coughed, choking on the water he'd drowned on. I quickly turned him to his side as he continued to wheeze and puke out everything that he'd swallowed, his body shaking while he did. And although the sound was repelling, it gave me comfort because it meant he was alive.

"Take it easy, my love, a breath at a time," I whispered to him, and to myself, while brushing his wet hair away from his face. "Take it easy. I'm here."

At some point, his gasping turned into a choked sob, and so I turned him to his back when he grunted with pain.

"I-It hurts," he mumbled, eyes closed.

"What does?" I asked, already looking for injuries, but it was hard to see with his wet suit on.

"Everything."

Biting my lip, I attempted to hold back a cry because, currently, there was nothing left for me to do other than wait for the EMTs to arrive. If he'd broken something, moving him might make it worse, so instead, I slid my hand into his and held it tight.

"Don't worry, little Sparrow. It will all be okay soon." I kissed his forehead, thanking God for hearing my prayers.

Part Five



Sobriety

CHAPTER Sixty-Four

Ash

I pried my eyes open; at first, the room was a blur until I managed to focus on the white ceiling and reminded myself I was still in the hospital. My body was hurting, like I'd been lying still for too long, and I tried to get up and relax my muscles when a sharp pain in my ribs forced me to stay put.

"Easy there, kiddo," a deep voice said, and I turned my head on the pillow to see who it was.

A face nearly identical to mine, only older, looked at me, a warm smile on his lips.

"Dad?" I whispered, unable to believe my eyes.

The man laughed and then leaned back in his chair. "Well, I'll take it as a compliment, Champ."

My confusion turned into shock. After years of not seeing him, Aiden was here, sitting beside my bed like he'd never left.

"You look good," I said, my eyes studying him the best they could, considering my fuzzy state. He seemed different, smaller in a way. More fragile?

"Nah, I look like an old man."

"You were always an old man," I tried to joke, but laughing hurt, and instead, I grunted with the pain.

"I can call the nurse so they'll bring you more painkillers," Aiden offered, but I shook my head. I had gotten enough painkillers in the last three days to put an elephant to sleep. But with three broken ribs and a fractured arm, that was pretty much the only thing that helped.

"You really crashed into those rocks, didn't you?"

"I guess." I rubbed my jaw with my healthy hand, my body hurting with the slightest move. "Can't say I remember it. Thankfully, Andrei pulled me out of the water before I was done for. That kid saved my life." After the flash rip dragged me with it, my body crashed against the rocks, which caused my injuries. *Life is going to be a pain for a little while.* Not that I was complaining,

with me staying alive.

“That kid reminds me of you,” he said, crossing his arms over his chest. “In fact, all three of them reminded me of you in a way. But then again, I only spoke with them for a little while, so I might be wrong.”

“You met them?”

He nodded. “I arrived last night and stayed at the house. They were all great. You did a wonderful job.”

I took pride in his words.

And while Aiden being here was a pleasant surprise, it didn’t make any sense. The guy had been gone for years, only to return because of a few broken bones. But then again, that wasn’t the only thing that had gotten broken, and an unsettling feeling from years before returned to me at once and, with it, the few questions I’d never dared to ask.

“Why are you here?”

Aiden tilted his head. “What do you mean why? Your mom called me; she was worried sick over you nearly dying.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t die.” I bit my lip, thinking about all the other crises Aiden had missed while he was gone. “I mean, you haven’t even called the past few months with the trial, but suddenly, you show up without a second’s notice.” I shrugged. “It makes me wonder.”

Aiden cleared his throat before he shifted in his chair. “What are you trying to say, Chief?”

I raised my eyes to meet him. “You came back because of *him*, didn’t you?”

Aiden didn’t respond and instead broke our gaze. It was enough of an answer for me, and I shifted back around so I was staring at the ceiling.

“You always cared for him, a lot more than you should have,” I said, eyes focusing on a small crack that traveled along the ceiling.

“Kai’s your best friend.”

“But he was more than that to you,” I said, thinking back on all those stolen glances Aiden had tried to hide for years. When I first moved in to live with those two after my breakup with Soren, there were times I felt like an intruder—a stranger who’d broken into a functioning household. He and Kai had always worked well together, way better than Kai and I ever had. I wasn’t saying they’d been in a secret relationship. That would be absurd, but I had a feeling something had at least happened between them. I’d never brought it up, as it wasn’t my place, and I wasn’t one to stick my nose where it didn’t belong, but more often than not, the atmosphere between my uncle and best friend felt heavy. Even more so after Kai and I began sleeping together. Secretly, I sometimes thought it was what had led Aiden to leave and not return until…

today.

My uncle could pretend all he wanted, but it wasn't my broken bones that had brought him back but Kai's broken heart.

"Don't worry, Aiden, I'm not mad," I said, breaking the silence. "If anything, I'm glad you'll be here for him now."

"I'm here for you, too." He leaned closer, and I thought of all those times I'd run back to him as a teen. He was my rock on days I felt utterly lost. With a kind smile and good advice, Aiden always helped me find the right way, only I no longer needed that help.

"I don't mean to sound rude, but I don't need your help." I turned to face him. "It might have taken a few years, but I'm finally in a place where I don't need anyone's advice." Maybe it was my too-close encounter with death or those last three days I'd spent in a hospital bed, unable to move due to the pain. Perhaps it was the trial, or maybe it was the whole time since I'd taken the kids in, but finally, I knew what I wanted and didn't need anyone to validate it. More than that, I didn't feel the urge to please anyone other than myself.

"Are you sure?"

I nodded, thinking of a conversation we'd had years ago. "Yeah. I'm sure. I know who I want, and I'm not going to let anyone stand in my way. And that includes myself."

I doubted Aiden even realized these were his own words I'd just said, but that was okay. Maybe it was time for him to take his own advice, too.

"Well." He took in some air before letting it all out. "I'm glad to hear that."

"I'm glad to say it," I admitted because the feeling was liberating.

He got up from his chair, and I studied him once more. On second thought, he didn't look different at all and had remained exactly the same, as if time had never passed. The one who'd changed was me. I used to look up to him, believing he had all the answers, but not anymore. I'd grown and matured and no longer felt like a lost kid who was ashamed of his heart's desires.

"Once I'm healed, you're going to tell me where the hell you've been traveling for seven fucking years," I tried joking, immediately regretting it as pain spread through my body.

Aiden gently placed his palm on my shoulder. "Will do, but please, rest for now."

"I will, but before that, there's something I need you to do."



The door to the room opened, and I glanced at the entrance to find Kai standing beside it, his eyes pinned to the floor.

"I didn't think you'd want to see me, but then Aiden said you asked to meet," he said before he rubbed his nose with the back of his palm.

"What are you on about? Of course I do."

Shocked, he looked up, and our eyes met.

I smiled. "What are you doing standing there? Come here."

He immediately moved until he was right by my bed.

"Give me a hug, will you?"

Once more, Kai didn't hesitate before doing exactly as I asked of him, and he eagerly wrapped his arms around me. His hug hurt, but I bore the pain because it was necessary.

"I'm so sorry, Ashy," he cried into my shoulder, his tears landing on my skin.

"I know."

"I'm so fucking sorry."

"I'm sorry, too," I admitted while running my fingers through his long hair. *Ah, shit, I'm going to miss it.* "I'm sorry for bringing us to this place."

Kai pulled back yet stayed close enough that I could see every spot and dimple on his sun-kissed face. "You're not responsible for this, Ashy—"

"I am. I mean, at least, for a part of it." It wasn't guilt that made me say those words but responsibility. For the first time in years, I took full responsibility for my behavior.

Kai sat down on the edge of the bed, worry on his face. I took his hand and brought it to my lap. "You see, if it weren't for me being too weak to be alone, I could have saved us so much pain. But I was never good at it, being alone, that is, and I took the comfort you offered me without thinking about the outcome."

He shook his head, pulling his hand away. "You make it sound like we never loved each other."

"Of course we did, just never enough for this to actually work."

"No." He looked offended. "That's not true. I loved you more than anything. Still do."

I offered him a sad smile. "So I guess I was the problem." Again, I wasn't feeling guilty but sad about how things came to an end.

"No. You're just confused because he's here again, but deep down, I know you can love me, too. Just the way you used to."

Ah… he really was breaking my heart.

And while Kai was, without a doubt, my first love, it didn't make him my last.

"If you just gave me a real chance, I'd be able to show you that we can make

it work.” He spoke fast, muttering words I’d already heard, so to make him stop, I cupped his face with one hand.

“Hey, calm down,” I whispered with an easy smile, waiting for him to relax. Once he did, I went on. “We did try, Kai. We had seven years of trying, but it never really worked. We were happy for moments, but that’s all this was. Momentary highs.” I took a deep breath. “I admit that I’ve never given you a real chance, but you were thankful for it. You were thankful for it because it made everything so much easier. You came and went as you pleased and kept your life the way you loved it. Don’t get me wrong; I’m not mad at you for being this way because I basically pushed you to keep going, knowing it was easier for you to find warmth in other people’s embrace than in my own.”

“Why?”

“Because I couldn’t bring myself to give you my heart.”

He squeezed his eyes shut, his whole face twisting with pain. “B-But why?”

Tears gathered in my eyes, and I shimmied away from him, my throat drying up. But then, I forced myself to look him in the eyes, not because of cruelty but for the sake of his sanity. He and I had to put a clear end to this tango that had been going on between us for years.

“Because my heart belongs to him, Kai. And if we’re being honest, you knew it long before I ever realized it, and it was what led you to act the way you did.”

His breath shivered before he held back a grunt and bit his lip. He was crying, but so was I. Things would never be the same again, and it hurt. It hurt because long before we were lovers, we were friends, and I couldn’t fool myself into believing he’d stay in my life after this was over.

“W-What will I do without you?” he hissed, voice breaking.

“Amazing things because you’re an amazing man. But first—” I grabbed his hand and clenched it tight. “—you need to get sober.”

He shook his head. “I don’t think I can, Ashy. All I want is to drink and get fucked-up.” He sobbed. “And I can’t get through it again.”

I knew rehab wasn’t easy, but he had the power, even if he didn’t believe so himself.

“But you must.” I pulled him closer. “And you can. Think about Paris. He’s no longer a child but a young teen who’s aware of what’s happening around him. It’s your job to be there for him, Kai.”

His face twisted with pain. “You said it yourself that I’m not good at being a father.”

“Who am I to decide that?” I snorted, yet my voice lacked amusement. “I don’t have kids.”

“But you will now. Right?” He cleared his nose. “With *him*. I heard him promise that to you on the beach. He said he’ll do anything for you.”

I had no clue what he was talking about because Soren had yet to visit me. And even though it was a surprise, now wasn’t the time to dive into whether Soren meant it or not.

“It’s not important, Kai. What’s important is you getting sober.”

“I don’t want to,” he cried and leaned down, burying his face in my lap.

It was hard watching a grown man’s shoulders tremble with his cry, even more so when it was him. I did love him. That was why I was willing to forgive the things he’d done. Only it was a different type of love. One that never matched the love I held for Soren.

I brought my hand to his head and softly caressed his hair, trying to provide him with the comfort I wasn’t entitled to give. Not anymore.

“Mom always said that the best way to go through pain is headfirst,” I started saying, my fingers still moving along his golden mane. “We both know it to be true, and you’ve faced a lot worse, Kai.”

“But I always had you.”

“That’s not true,” I chuckled because it really wasn’t. “I wasn’t there in times you needed me. I was too much of an idiot back then to help. Did you forget?” Or maybe, somehow, he’d managed to replace me with Aiden in his memories.

“It doesn’t matter.”

“But it does.”

Kai’s shoulders stopped trembling, and his body tensed before he got up and brushed the tears off his face. He then looked at me, his eyes red and his jaw tensed.

“Kai?” I asked after he kept on standing without saying a word. I tried reaching for his hand again when he stepped back.

“I want to be the bigger person and tell you I’m happy for you, but I can’t.” He swallowed hard while grinding his jaw. “You’re making a mistake.”

“Maybe.”

“No.” He shook his head. “There’s no maybe. And I hate you for not realizing it yourself.”

“Then hate me,” I said to him with a straight face. “If that’s what’s going to help you heal, hate me. Blame me for everything.”

“You don’t mean it,” he hissed.

“But I do. If hating me would help you get better, then do it. Hate me until the end of your life. I’ll put up with it as long as this hate will keep you sober.”

Kai’s eyes widened with shock, and he looked stunned for a second before his expression changed and turned vengeful. Seeing him looking at me through

such eyes was painful, but true to my words, I'd suck it up.

"Fine, then. I'll make sure to do just that."

And just like that, Kai left my room without another word, not sparing my emotions. This man had both loved and hated me throughout my life. And if there was anything the years had taught me, it was that in the end, when it came to Kai—love and hate both hurt just the same. I'd believed he was my summer, only to come to understand that I was his winter. And as long as we kept trying to fool ourselves into thinking we were right for one another, we'd be left cold and alone.

So yes, hate me, Kai, because in our case, it's better than love.

CHAPTER Sixty-Five

Soren

Today was the third time I'd come to the hospital with the intention of seeing Ashton. However, on the two other occasions, I didn't manage to get to his room and instead went straight back to my car.

On my first visit, my clothes made me doubt my decision. *I know, pathetic, isn't it?* Somehow, I decided to wear a bright blue shirt, hoping it would make Ashton see I'd changed and was a man he was capable of relying on. But once I reached the hospital's parking lot, I was struck by self-awareness and realized blue made me look like an idiot. Needless to say, I drove straight back home. The second day, I made sure to wear black, so my clothes weren't an issue. But as I reached his floor, I was shocked by the number of people waiting outside Ashton's room. It somehow scared me, and I snuck out of there, hoping no one had noticed me.

Now, the halls were clear, and while my shirt was eggshell and not white, it was still good enough to keep my mind at ease. Prepared for my final judgment, I knocked on his room door.

"Come in," he said, those two words enough to make my heart race.

Not falling into the temptation of counting the seconds passing on my watch, I forced my hand down and pushed the door open. I wasn't even sure what made me this nervous, but the second Ashton's brilliant eyes met mine, I felt alive again.

"I was wondering when you'd show up." He smiled warmly. "Are those for me?"

It took me a second to remember that I'd brought flowers. "Y-Yes," I stammered, moving to place them on the table, where dozens of other bouquets were placed. "Although, maybe I should have gone for something else."

"Why? The flowers you picked are beautiful, and besides, I'm just glad you're here."

"You are?" I frowned, and he chuckled.

“Why are you this nervous?”

After putting the flowers down, I sat on the chair beside his bed. “I actually don’t know.” I rubbed my knees, annoyed that my pants rose and now my socks were showing.

“Hey,” Ashton whispered, and I gazed up at him. “I like the shirt.” He pinched the fabric.

“It’s eggshell.”

His smile grew. “I know.”

“Weren’t you supposed to go back to NYC?” he questioned, one brow raised with a bratty suspicion.

“As if I could be anywhere else on this planet while you’re here,” I muttered, well aware of how cheesy I sounded.

“You’re cute.”

“Please, Ashton. I’m nearly forty; I doubt calling me cute is appropriate at this age.”

He snorted. “That’s even cuter.”

I side-eyed him and was immediately struck by his glowing beauty. A beauty I was mere seconds away from losing. And the cast on his arm was just another reminder of that.

“You nearly gave me a heart attack,” I whispered, my voice choking and my body turning cold while remembering those dreadful seconds.

“I know, and I’m sorry.”

“Never do it again.” Adjusting my glasses higher on my nose, I realized I was asking the impossible from him. “Or, at the very least, take me with you the next time.”

He laughed. “You don’t surf.”

“Then teach me,” I urged, leaning closer. “Teach me so I’ll be able to save you in times of need.”

His jaw nearly dropped, and he stared at me for a long moment before he snapped out of it. “O-Okay. I will teach you how to surf. But you know, there’s no waves in NYC.”

“Luckily, there’s plenty in California.”

Now it was his turn to side-eye me. “Does that mean that you’re staying?”

“Yes.”

“What about your job?”

“Well.” I cleared my sore throat. “Due to recent developments, I’ve decided that I’ve learned enough from Daniel and that it’s time to take over my grandfather’s company, which happens to be located in LA.” I also knew that *when* Daniel found out about me asking Dion to send his men to beat up that

despicable piece of shit Jones, he'd fire me regardless. However, it was all one big excuse, as the sole reason for my staying was looking back at me with eyes I'd grown addicted to.

"But don't worry. I don't expect you to take me back just because of that. I told this to you simply because I didn't want you to hear about it from someone else…"

Ashton tilted his head while studying me with pursed lips. "So you don't want me to take you back?"

"That's not what I'm saying." I rubbed my hands together, my palms growing sweaty. "Of course I want you back, Ashton. That's basically what I've wanted since the day I made you leave, but—"

"But?" he asked, waiting for me to go on.

"He'll need you."

Just like in the past, Kai had relapsed, meaning it was Ashton's duty to care for him.

"You're right," he answered almost immediately, and my heart sank to my stomach. But then, he reached forward and took off my glasses only to put them away before grabbing my hand. "But you need me, too. And quite frankly, I need you, Soren."

His confession left me out of words, and I struggled to make so much as a sound. My whole body warmed in seconds, making me realize how incomplete I was without him.

"But why?" I frowned at his beautiful, young face. "Why would you need someone like me?" Tangling our fingers together, I allowed my cold skin to get warmed by his touch. "I first came here thinking you'd need me, but seeing all the people waiting for you outside, I realized I wasn't needed anymore. It made me reflect on the time we'd been together, and that filled me with shame." It was hard to speak, yet I went on. "You were always so bright and warm while I was nothing but a cold, lonely man who found solace in your insecurities. I lived on it, isolated you from everyone for my own selfish needs. So when you finally left, it made sense, as birds never stay where it's cold, and so, they search for their summer someplace else."

I hoped he'd make it easy for us both and ask me to leave, but instead, he only held my hand tighter. "Summer comes in many forms, Soren. It can be hot and dry but also composed and beautiful, with blooming flowers and tweeting birds. The summer in Alaska is not the same as the one in Greece, and that's okay." He held my gaze, his lips curving up. "I'm not looking for sunshine and rainbows but for the man whose cold touch I became addicted to. I love it, always have, and nothing you say will change that."

Overwhelmed with emotions I'd never thought I'd feel, I slipped my hand from his touch and brought it to my face, hopelessly trying to hide the tears in my eyes. I wasn't sure if this was happiness because it felt more like relief. Relief from being free of the shadows that were forever chasing me.

"Hey, come here," Ashton said, his voice so soft and loving, unfolding the bundle of nerves that knotted in my stomach.

Somehow, I managed to make my body move, and I sat on his bed.

He put his good hand on my waist. "We're going to have a lot to work on." He rubbed my thigh, and I nodded.

"I know."

"And there are things you'll need to learn to adjust to because, like you said, I've matured and grown, and my life has changed."

I frowned at him. "A-Are you talking about the boys? Because if so, I don't care. They're all great, and Andrei and I are already getting along."

He chuckled, then pressed his head to my body. "I'm talking about a whole lot of things, but we can do one at a time."

That sounds fair enough.

"Okay," I whispered, then put my hand on the back of his head. His hair was so soft and fuzzy, and touching it gave me such simple pleasure.

"I love you, Soren." He looked up to meet my tearing eyes. "Truth is, I never really stopped."

My lips quivered, and I knew I looked like a pitiful mess, yet I couldn't care less; I was too damn happy. "I love you, too, little Sparrow, more than I could ever put into words."

He smirked. "That's new, a lawyer without words?"

"Little brat."

He joked, and I seized the moment to lean down until my lips were an inch from his. "Back on the beach, when I was afraid you'd leave me, I made many promises. One of them was that if you lived, I'd kiss you a million times more." I whispered the words over his lips, already hungry to taste them.

Ashton's eyes darted to my mouth and up to my eyes, and he licked those perfect lips of his.

"So you better start counting."

Closing my eyes, I leaned in until my lips met his. The warmth of them, I'd never get used to, and I opened my mouth, allowing his tongue in. He was as sweet and eager as always, and with my hands cupping his head, I held him close, nearly eating him alive. He chuckled at my eagerness and groaned when I went a bit too forceful, but he didn't stop kissing me back. Every bit of me melted into this moment, which was probably the happiest I'd ever been before.

“I love you,” I breathed into his mouth, and he drank up my words before swirling his tongue around mine, pulling me closer to him until I nearly covered his body with my own. If only he hadn’t been injured, I would have made sweet love to him. But thankfully, there would be plenty of time for that.

“You’re getting me too excited,” I rasped as I adjusted myself.

Ashton’s hungry eyes darted to my crotch, and he licked his lips. “What a shame I can’t do anything about it right now,” he pouted, and I laughed.

“There will be time for that later.”

He moved a bit on the bed, giving me space to lie beside him, so I did.

“Speaking of, how are your injuries?” I asked, worried I’d taken it too far with this kiss.

“They’re okay. Right now, my cock’s bothering me more.”

“My, my, you sure learned to be vulgar with your words.”

He laughed. “You asked!”

“About your injuries, Ashton, not the current state of your—”

“Dick?”

I rolled my eyes, secretly wishing to suck it. But I knew my limits. And doing it on a hospital bed was definitely one of those.

“There was something I planned on asking you, though,” he suddenly said, his voice taking on a serious tone.

“What was it?” I tilted my head aside to face him as he did the same.

“Your photos. You took them all down. What happened?”

I wondered if he’d noticed it the last time he’d been to the house.

“When I was in the hospital after my breakdown, I had to teach myself how to fall asleep without them, and I guess I kept that habit with me.”

His forehead creased.

“So what did you do?”

“I thought of you.” I smiled and leaned in close until I kissed his forehead. “Now, whenever I close my eyes, I have two hundred and twenty-two pictures of you, Ashton. And when I count, no matter what it is, whether it’s the seconds passing on my watch or the tiles on the floor, I imagine it’s your photos I’m counting.”

I dared to look him in the eyes only to find him staring back at me with love. Real, true, pure love that cured my broken soul in more ways than I’d ever be able to thank him for.

Unable to resist the urge, I leaned against him and closed my eyes. This time, I didn’t need to imagine him in my head because my little Sparrow had finally returned to me. Only now, he was more of a falcon than a sparrow. And while beautiful and majestic, I had no plans to try and tame him again because birds

were meant to fly. And if loving him meant spending my days looking up at the bright sky, that was precisely what I'd do. Because loving Ashton Sage wasn't even a question but a given fact that had engraved itself onto my heart years ago, when he found me lost in a garden of roses.

Epilogue

Ash

One Year Later

“What are you doing over there?” Soren called from where he was waiting for me under a tall palm tree.

“Hold on just a second,” I told him while typing Levi back. “Levi just texted me. He doesn’t know how to turn on the heat.”

With how hot it was here, in Thailand, Koh Samui, it was hard to believe it was winter back home.

“Are they struggling with the new house? I can ask my assistant to go and help them,” Soren said, stopping before me.

“Don’t worry, I explained to him how to turn it on, and he just texted back, saying it worked,” I said and pocketed my phone.

“Maybe it wasn’t a smart idea to travel here right after we got into the new house,” Soren hummed, mostly to himself, and I chuckled.

He was still thinking way too much over everything, but it was one of the things I loved about him.

“Nah, if anything, they’re excited to have the place all for themselves.”

We’d just moved into our new gorgeous house in Carpinteria. It might be an hour away from LA, but we loved it there—our little piece of heaven within arm’s reach.

Soren and I had been inseparable since that day in the hospital, and things had been going well, enough for us to live together for the past few months. Just like he’d promised, Soren took over his grandfather’s firm, and other than making Daniel angry for stealing some of his clients, he was doing great. Andrei had started college in hopes of becoming a lawyer and was already excelling, while also moving in with Miles. Thankfully, they were only an hour’s drive away, so I saw his face almost every day, especially with him coming on the weekends to study with Soren, who helped him with his school. To be honest, it was beyond me how Soren still remembered what he’d learned in college with it

being years ago. Levi had also started college, but unlike Andrei, he and Jessie chose to move in with Soren and me after we left the old house. Jessie loved Carpinteria's nature, and he spent the hours he wasn't drawing searching around, although he was mostly working on his business. That kid was creating amazing art for clients all over the world while also working on his very first webtoon.

Watching them pursuing their dreams not only brought me pride but also pushed me to do the same, and after closing my small surf shop, I signed up for a few photography courses. My new passion was the reason I dragged Soren out of bed at the ass crack of dawn so I could take some beautiful pictures of the ocean at sunrise. I used to think nothing could beat Malibu's sunrise, only to find that it was nothing compared to the ones in Koh Samui.

"Let's go." I took Soren's hand and began leading the way to the shore. Our cabin was not too far from here, but yesterday when we were swimming, I saw a spot that I knew would make the best place for a shoot.

"Do you know where to go?" he asked, and I nodded, holding on to his hand harder.

"I do," I said, thinking of how happy this simple moment made me feel. There was something utterly amazing about being alone, with the person you love, on the other side of the world—so far away from everything you know. As crazy as it sounded, it gave me comfort.

I had never been this happy in my life before, and while the old Ash might have felt guilty over this unbelievable amount of happiness, the new me didn't. All simply because I'd stopped living life in the shadow of regret. My life was mine to decide on, even if my choices didn't suit others. But the last year had taught me that when you're confident in your decisions, things had their way of working out. Mom finally came to terms with my choice to be with Soren, and the two of them had actually learned how to get along. When she wasn't so stubborn and Soren wasn't too bitchy, they made a great team. Aiden was also settling down well in my old house, which was originally his and which I gave back to him. With him returning to California, it only felt right.

And Kai? He'd started his recovery journey back from scratch and was making great progress. And while I could happily say he was doing a great job staying sober, I couldn't say the same about us, as he took the hating on me part very seriously. Everything we used to have was as good as gone, and Kai hardly ever spoke to me. But from what Aiden had told me, he was doing much better, and I was happy. I was happy to know he was finally able to move on the same way I had. And oh, did I move on.

I turned my head to look at Soren, my gorgeous man who was all mine to admire. With his shirt open and his hair falling loose over his brows, he looked

so relaxed and peaceful that it warmed my heart. Not that it was new because literally everything he did made me all warm and fuzzy.

“Do I have something on my face?” he asked when he noticed me staring.

“No, I was just thinking about how handsome you are.”

His lips stretched up in a smile. “And yet, you are a thousand times prettier.”

I snorted. “It isn’t a competition.”

“Of course not, because you’d win so easily.” He brought my hand to his lips and kissed it.

Now smitten, I giggled like a little kid, my cheeks turning red despite how accustomed I was to his flattery. What could I say? He was always smooth with his words.

“Oh, isn’t this the place?” Soren then said, snapping my attention away from my cheesiness.

Looking up, I saw he was right. “Yes, it is.” I’d already pulled out my camera from its case, grateful that we got here just in time to catch those first rays of sun. Walking over to the beautiful spot that was basically the end of the shore, I stopped a few inches from the water and positioned myself to face the horizon. The sun started to rise, and I took the first picture, the snapping sound mixing with the waves each time I took another photo, wishing it would be as precious as this moment. The sun slowly stretched its rays over the sky, painting them and the water in bright colors. The ocean was so calm you couldn’t even tell where it ended, and instead, those turquoise waters spread on and on until the far, far horizon. The only sounds you could hear were those of nature slowly waking up, and it brought me so much peace.

“Soren, come here. I want to take pictures of you.”

Soren moved in front of the camera, turning the view, which was beautiful until now, into perfection. Excited over this beauty, I began capturing this moment through the lens, admiring how after all these years, he still looked like a young prince. But then, he fumbled with his pocket until he pulled something out of it, and at first, I had no idea what it was until I did, and my heart stopped. Slowly lowering my camera, I gazed at the small black box in his hand with my mouth open.

“S-Soren?” I swallowed hard, my camera nearly slipping from between my fingers.

He smiled at me with such warmth before he cleared his throat. “At first, I thought of doing this at sunset, but then I realized that sunrise would be a much proper hour because—” He got down on one knee, not even minding the wet sand. “—I want this to mark new beginnings.” He opened the box, and I gasped at the sight of the silver ring presented on white velvet. It was simple, classy, and

so Soren. “I know our love story was complicated, to say the least.” He chuckled, and I snorted, half crying already. “But it was beautiful nonetheless, and you, Ashton, are without a doubt the love of my life. And while I know and hope our story is far from being over, it would be my honor to go through the rest of this journey as your husband.” He held my stare, his silver eyes shining so vividly, even more than the ring itself. “Ashton Sage, would you give me the greatest honor of marrying you?”

My throat was too sore to speak with the number of tears I tried swallowing, and instead, I nodded. “Of course,” I cried, covering my mouth. “Of course I’ll marry you.” Thankfully, my camera was attached to a string around my neck because the next moment, I tossed myself on him, not caring if it would break. My weight crashed us both down to the sand as my lips were already on his. “Fuck yes,” I said over his mouth. “I’ll marry you a thousand times.” I kissed him again, my chest tight with love and joy.

Soren pulled back only to take my finger.

Shit, I almost forgot about the ring.

My hand trembled, but he calmed me down by stroking my skin with his thumb before slowly sliding the ring down my finger. My face was all red from excitement and sticky with tears, but that didn’t stop Soren from kissing my cheek.

“I’ll love you forever, my little Sparrow,” he promised in my ear while I kept looking at my beautiful ring, which was the same color as my summer’s eyes.



Getting back to our cabin, which was more of a suite, was nearly impossible. I could hardly keep my hands to myself, and that was without mentioning Soren, who was all too eager to get me naked before we even walked in.

The shower we took together to clean the sand from our bodies was nothing if not foreplay, and now, all washed up and groomed, I was ready to show my *fiancé* how excited I truly was over his surprising proposal.

“Ashton.” Soren gasped my name so beautifully after I’d pushed him back on the bed.

Tossing my towel to the floor, I slowly climbed on top of him, already knowing I was about to blow his mind away. I started kissing up his body and stopped once I reached his chest. Taking one of his nipples into my mouth, I nibbled on it until Soren couldn’t hold back his voice and let out a throaty groan that went straight to my already hard cock. On very rare occasions did I wish to

be the one to squeeze such a precious reaction out of him. Almost every other day, I was eager for him to bring this side out of me, but today… today was different.

"My goodness, Ashton," Soren gasped, lacing his fingers through my hair as I dragged my lips along his toned stomach until I reached the root of his cock. I inhaled him deeply, taking in every bit of his masculine scent before I grazed my teeth over his shaft, my fingers moving over his trimmed pubes. He hissed, and I dared to glance up only to find him looking at me, his face already a display of pleasure.

Happy beyond words that this man was all mine, I parted my lips and took him in. What started with shallow sucks quickly turned into long, deep swallows until his magnificent cock slid down my throat.

The sensation of having my mouth filled was like no other, and intuitively, I moved to cup his balls and massaged them in my palm. He hushed a moan, and I wished he hadn't because his deep voice was music to my ears. Feeling like he'd be up for it, I slid my hand from his heavy sack down to his ass and caressed his tight hole. He didn't say a word, so I went on massaging his entrance, pressing my thumb to his rim until he warned me to stop, or he'd come.

Withdrawing at once, because the last thing I wanted was for this moment to be finished too soon, I grabbed his hips and sank my teeth into his right cheek. "Can I do you today?" I asked, my lips ghosting over the fresh mark I'd left on his perfect skin.

Stretching his hand, Soren stroked my jaw, his eyes looking at me with nothing but love. "You don't even need to ask."

His words swayed my heart, which only seemed to go faster by the minute. It wouldn't be the first time I'd topped him, as I'd done it before, only those times were few and could be counted on two hands. Usually, I preferred to be on the receiving end, but now, I couldn't help but want to be buried inside him.

Licking my lips, I took the bottle of lube Soren handed me and applied a decent amount to my hand. Soren watched me as I did before he turned around to lie on his side. I moved up on the bed so I was aligned with him, kissing him while my fingers slipped between his firm ass cheeks. With his leg tossed over my hips, I had easy access, and I pushed my fingers into his unbelievably tight ass at the same time I licked into his mouth, savoring the taste of him. Soren wasn't like me, as he didn't turn into a bundle of whines and whimpers as I fucked his ass with my fingers, and instead stayed composed. His pleasure came in the form of soft blushes and stifled groans.

Watching his arousal grow on his face turned me on beyond words, and my dick leaked with precum, all eager to go inside Soren's body.

“That’s enough, Ashton,” Soren whispered over my lips, his fingers moving through my hair. “You can put it in.”

And even though I was supposed to be the one in charge, it sure as fuck didn’t feel like it. I watched with awe as he moved to lie on his stomach and arched his back for me while I positioned myself behind him. His strong back was on full display, and he looked so gorgeous while he waited for me to take his ass.

“My heart is beating like crazy,” I confessed, and he turned to look at me over his shoulder, a tiny little smile tinged on his lips.

“Mine’s the same.”

Heat flushed to my already flaming cheeks, and I bit my lip before taking my cock in hand and bringing it to his entrance. Pressing the tip to his puckered hole, I first rubbed the head of my cock against it, and we both groaned with the sensation. It felt so good, and I hadn’t even pushed inside. There was enough lube, but I added more just in case before I grabbed Soren’s hips and thrust forward. His body moved with me, and he let out a deep moan at the same time I did as I began sinking inside him, inch by inch, until I was settled all the way in.

“You’re so warm and tight,” I gasped, my eyes locked on where his ass sucked me in. “It’s perfect.”

“No, you are,” he half laughed, voice rough. “Now, fuck me, little Sparrow. Own me like I own you.”

His words became my command, and I began thrusting my hips, sliding in and out of him, my fingers digging into his flesh while I held him tighter. Soren’s body was as strong as mine, if not stronger, and he moved against my thrusts, increasing the sensation. It felt so good, and overwhelmed both physically and emotionally, I slumped down on top of him, one arm hooked around his strong chest. His ass swallowed my cock to perfection, and I nearly saw stars with how good his hole felt.

“I-I’m close,” I moaned, then kissed his neck, trying to hold back at the same time I ached to fill him. “God, Soren, I’m so close.”

Soren sent his hand backward to grab me, his fingers sliding along my sweaty skin. “Then come, my love. Come deep inside me. I want everything you have to offer.”

His words sent me over the edge, and I hugged him tighter before I pushed inside him, only to pull all the way back and do it again. My balls tightened, my muscles tensed, and I sank my teeth into his neck a second before my climax forcefully hit me, my body shuddering while I came inside his perfect ass. I continued to thrust through my release, not stopping until my dick turned too sensitive and it was actually painful to move.

Breathing heavily, I pulled out, licking my lips at the sight of my cum dripping out of his used hole. I wanted to say something, but before I could, Soren already had me on my back with my legs thrown over his broad shoulders.

"Now's my turn," he smirked, moving his dick to my already stretched hole.

When we took a shower together, Soren had worked on my ass, and I couldn't be more grateful because just now, when he pushed inside me in one sharp move, I saw fucking heaven. I didn't need to be hard to enjoy the pleasure of his thrusts, although the longer he fucked me, the stiffer my cock turned, as if I hadn't just come.

"Yes, fuck, yes!" I hugged my thighs closer to my body before allowing him to bend me like a fucking pretzel.

"I love how flexible you are," he groaned before putting his full body weight on top of me, his cock drilling in and out of my hole.

My ass hurt in the best way possible, and I closed my eyes as I tried my best to stretch my legs further so he'd be almost completely on top of me. At this point, I almost felt like a sex toy, *his sex toy*, and I moved my hand over my face to clean some of the sweat. As I did that, the cold silver caught me off guard, and I looked at my ring. I was flooded with emotions because even though he was fucking me brutally, like I was nothing more than a piece of meat, I knew it wasn't true and that each part of him was adoring me in this moment. Because this wasn't just hot sex but another aspect of our complicated relationship that spread over many years. A relationship that might have started from a heartbreak but rolled into the most beautiful love one could ever dream of.

Swallowing hard, I moved my hand to his neck and brought my lips to his ear. "I love you, Soren. I love you so much."

He stopped thrusting only to meet my adoring stare, and as I looked into his eyes, I saw love.

So much love.

Soren reclaimed my lips and somehow moved us into a new position where I was on top. Now having the power again, I rolled my hips while he slid his hands over my body, admiring me in the way only he knew how to do. His touch was warm, burning my skin with his love, and I wondered how I'd ever mistaken his hands to be cold.

Soren thrust inside me at the same time I rocked my hips, and it didn't take much before we both came together, while being so in love with one another it was almost illegal.

“What are you doing?” Soren asked as he returned to bed after he’d taken a shower.

Glancing at him, I smiled, then handed him my phone. “Just texted the guys a photo of the ring.” I smiled to myself. “They are so excited for us, and Jessie already asked to be the best man.”

Soren gave me back my phone before leaning closer to kiss the top of my head.

“They can all be your best men,” he chuckled.

“I want a small wedding, though,” I said, my eyes going over the boys’ texts again. “Like my parents had.”

“We’ll have whatever wedding you wish, Sparrow. Big, small, I don’t care as long as I get to marry you.”

I snorted. “You’re such a romantic.”

And while all the boys responded in the group chat immediately, one didn’t. And even though his lack of response wasn’t surprising, it was noticeable. It was noticeable because despite not hearing from him in over a year, Diesel’s presence in our life was still vivid. Whether it was the empty chair around our dinner table, his clothes and plants we took from the old house, or his name that still appeared on our group chat in spite of him never responding to any of our messages.

I missed him, we all did, but knowing that he didn’t want to be found, I had no choice but to accept it as a fact. And yet, despite my acceptance, there were times I couldn’t help but wonder where he was or what he was doing. All I knew was that he had disappeared off the face of the planet like he’d never lived, leaving us all behind, including Shay-Lee.

But who knew better than me that sometimes, you had no choice but to leave your heart behind.

My heart broke for Shay-Lee, and I took small comfort in knowing that Soren was constantly there for him. For the past year, they’d grown closer, probably over their shared trauma, or maybe not? Their conversations were private, and I respected that.

Unable to stop myself, I clicked on Diesel’s contact info and hovered over his number. Sadness washed over me, but it quickly vanished once Soren hugged me.

“You’re thinking of calling him again?”

“He won’t answer.” I closed my phone and tossed it over the bed, then turned to look at him. “Where do you think he is right now?”

Soren simply smiled before grabbing my hand and bringing it to his lap. “Someplace warm, hopefully.”

The thought of Diesel bathing in the sun somewhere in the world, a thousand miles away from all the crap that had haunted him for years, brought me a bit of comfort, and I wished that that was the case and that he'd left simply because he wanted a fresh start. After all, wasn't that what we all wanted?

Looking at our interlaced fingers, I admired my ring, then turned to face Soren. "I hope you're right." I closed my eyes and leaned against him, thanking God for giving *us* our own fresh start.

Camilo

The city of Seattle seemed to be in the same state as my heart, buried under a deep layer of snow that kept it still and frozen. It was almost impossible to see ten feet ahead, with thick fog covering it all like a blanket of frost, as barely there noises reached from the street. The tip of my fingers stung with the cold, and my face grew numb after I stood on the rooftop of this twenty-story building for the past thirty minutes. I hated Seattle almost as much as I hated winter, but then again, what I liked or disliked had no say in what my life had come to.

Feeling dead inside, I took out my phone, the one I almost always kept shut down. Moving my finger over the broken screen, I felt the shift of the damaged surface underneath the pad of my thumb as I waited for the screen to light up. Once it did, I opened the group chat of the people I used to consider my family and focused my attention on Chief's text. He was getting married to the lawyer who'd represented me during my trial last year. I had no idea how it happened because the last I knew, he was with Kai, but then again, I didn't care.

While I was stuck in the hell I was born into for the past twelve months, they all kept living their lives. In the beginning, they used to write to me, especially Andrei, but after a few months, even he'd stopped. I never answered any of their calls or texts, so they eventually gave up, which was good… I guess. And yet, even though I knew being away from me kept them all safe, I couldn't help the rage twisting my gut. Not at them but at myself and the decisions I'd made that forced me to be away from *him*. Away from the missing part of my heart.

Doing what I promised myself not to, and only because it hurt so fucking much, I closed the group chat and opened my photo gallery. I tapped on that one photo where soft sunrays reflected in Shay-Lee's eyes while his gorgeous lips stretched into the most beautiful smile a sucker like me had ever seen as I kissed his cheek. Only the cracks on my screen went right between us and nearly erased my whole face. By some miracle, his side remained untouched, and I could continue to gaze into his stunning eyes for the rest of my life.

My heart ached with the distance separating us, and my stomach flopped with the memory of leaving him behind. Whenever I thought of him, the pain nearly sliced me in two, and in the beginning, I wasn't sure I'd be able to get through this year without going crazy. I was worried sick for his well-being and recovery, but somehow, I was able to block away those thoughts long enough to survive one day at a time. My only comfort was that in a few weeks, I'd finally be free to go back to him.

"What the hell are you doing here?" someone asked, and I turned to look at one of the men I worked with. "My balls are fucking freezing, and I've been here for less than a minute," he tsked, still standing by the emergency exit leading into the building.

"What do you want?" I snapped, irritated at this idiot for infringing on my time alone.

He seemed even more pissed off than I was. "The boss is here, and he's pissed." That was his way of saying I better get my ass in there before he turned on his heels and left me alone.

With my jaw clenched, I ripped my stare away from where he stood only a second ago and looked back at my phone, my heart breaking with how much I missed Shay-Lee.

"Just a little longer, *Llorón*," I whispered to myself, somehow praying to God he could hear me. Although, by now, I knew there was no God in this world, only devils. *Fucking demons.*

Shutting down the phone, I waited until the screen turned black, then walked back inside, my body still cold from standing outside for so long. The resentment and anger I felt thus far only doubled the second I stepped inside the guarded room and saw Dion's smug face looking at me with the same smile from when he came to visit me in jail.

"I knew it was only a matter of time before you'd ask to meet." He grinned, then cocked his head forward. "That must hurt like a bitch," he added, referring to the black eye I was sporting after the guards beat me the fuck up.

They got violent because of how my meeting with my lawyer ended the other day, with me nearly choking him to death after he came up with those sickening files.

"Cut the bullshit," I snarled at him, holding myself together because my urge to kill and destroy was like a living thing, beating and breathing inside me.

"Fine." Dion glanced at the guard standing in the corner of this room, which was enough to make the man step outside. This French fucker owned people everywhere. Once we were alone, he leaned closer to me. "Let's hear you out."

“Get me out of here.”

He snorted. “And how would I do that?”

“I know you have your ways.”

“Okay, let’s say I can get you out of here.” He tilted his head aside, still holding my deadly stare. “Why would I do that?”

“So I can kill that motherfucker.”

I still refused to believe what that lawyer had shown me was the truth, but even if it wasn’t, I had every intention of ending Christian W. Rogers’s life in the most brutal way one could ever think of. The thing was, if I ended up locked in here for the rest of my life, I’d never be able to do that, hence why I asked to see this demon to make a deal with him. It took all of my pride to call in a favor from the man behind my brother’s death, but Shay-Lee’s life meant more to me than anything.

Dion’s smile grew bigger. “I have a deal for you.”

Hearing those words coming out of his mouth frightened me because I knew a deal with him was no better than a deal with the devil.

“I’ll get you out of here and will help you kill Christian without getting caught, but in exchange for a life, you give me a year of yours.” He held up his hands and shook his head with a light grin. “As simple as that, can you believe it?”

No, *I couldn’t, but at this point, I had no other option than to take it. So without stopping to dive deeper into his words, I nodded.*

“We have a deal.”

Back to the present, I focused my eyes on Dion, who was sitting on a leather couch in this fancy room that one could mistake for a proper office. Only just a couple of hours ago, pounds of drugs were sorted on the same table Dion was now resting his legs on.

“What is that?” Dion asked, kicking a box that was on the table closer to me.

I had to stop it before it fell off the table and then straightened back up.

“A box.”

He tsked. “Don’t play with me, jackass. What’s inside of it?”

I hissed under my breath. “A hand.”

He snorted. “That’s right. A hand.” He dropped his legs from the table and leaned with his legs spread apart, finally sitting like the mob boss he was. “And what did I ask for?”

I kept quiet.

“Answer me before I shove that hand down your throat.”

“A head.”

“That’s right.” Dion got up and walked around the table, picking up the box

before coming to a stop in front of me. “I asked for this motherfucker’s head, and you give me a hand?” He opened the lid, yet the chopped limb did little to shift me.

After all, I was the one to chop it off and then put it in this box.

Removing my eyes from the amputated hand, I met Dion’s stare. “I don’t kill.”

Dion studied me before he held the box in one hand, and one of his men quickly came to take it from him without Dion even saying a word.

“You’re my hound, just like they are.” He referred to all the men standing around us that would shoot me in a heartbeat. “And just like any other hound I own, you do as you’re told.”

Gone were the days I’d been one of his *Gatti*. And more than once, the things he’d forced me to do made me miss that damn *Gatto* mask. But no matter how many times he threatened me and how determined he was to break me into being his dog, there were things I’d never do.

“I don’t kill,” I hissed through gritted teeth, not afraid of his vicious eyes.

But my words didn’t seem to scare him off, as he just smirked like the crazy fucker he was. “Didn’t you kill *him*?” He licked his lips. “Oh, that’s right, you didn’t just kill him. You butchered him.”

My chest tightened, and I held my breath, trying to keep it cool, even though his mockery was enough to stir awake the beast within me. My palms felt hot and wet, like they were still covered with his blood, and I knew that if I looked down, all I’d see was red. My nose scrunched up with the sudden stench of blood and burning flesh that flooded me as my head pounded with the sounds of his screams. Screams that went on for days until what had been left of him could no longer resemble a human. My skin turned cold, and my knees grew weak as my heart beat like crazy, and I felt like I was about to pass out when Dion laughed.

“My God, wasn’t that an exciting sight,” he chuckled, pleasure oozing with his sadistic joy. “You, my sweet dog, are an artist. I swear to God, not even I had the stomach to do what you did to that scum.” He moved closer and then grabbed my jaw.

The pain from his fingers digging into my skin snapped me out of my sick head, and I stared back at him.

“It’s why I want you to work for me. Because I see your talent, Camilo, your true talent.”

To be a cold-blooded monster who could rip a man’s body apart with its bare hands? A beast who enjoyed watching another human being writhing in pain until it was too great to move? But Christian wasn’t a human being. He was a

rapist. A devil who hurt the one thing I loved most in this world. And same as any other rapist, he deserved death. So whatever Dion was trying to prove was utter bullshit. The only man I'd killed was Christian, and only because he deserved it.

"It doesn't matter what you want," I rasped, not afraid of him. "I have two more weeks with you, then I'm done."

Silence drew between us before Dion's brows pulled close. "What are you talking about?"

Not minding the other men in the room, my sole focus was on him. "Our deal. Next month, it will be one year, meaning it's over."

My heart raced as his expression slowly shifted from confused to amused.

"Next month will only mark the end of the first out of five years you owe me."

Pissed off at his nonsense, my jaw twitched, and I stepped closer, nearly headbutting him. "What?"

He only smirked, holding my gaze as if I wasn't a spit away from killing him. "That was our deal, Camilo. A year for each life taken." He lifted his hand, holding four fingers in the air. "On that little plane crash we organized to give you Christian on a silver platter, with no questions asked, four people had died." He added another finger. "Then you murdered Christian." With five fingers up, he waved his hand before patting my cheek. "So give me a little smile, will you? We're going to have so much more fun together."

My whole body was burning with my rage, and without thinking about my actions, I pulled out my gun and pointed it at his head. Ignoring the guns his men quickly aimed at me, I spoke. "You son of a bitch, you tricked me."

Unfazed by the barrel pressed against his temple, Dion smiled like the sick monster he was. "It's not my fault you were too dumb to listen." He snorted. "But that can be expected of a dog."

"I'd rather just kill you now and die than serve you one more day," I rasped, my voice deep and low.

"You can, but just know that if you pull that trigger, not only would you pull it on me and yourself, but on your sweet baby, as well."

The mention of Shay-Lee was all it took to force the raging monster inside me to stop, and I swallowed hard before taking down the gun.

"That's right, Camilo. I have a man ready to kill your whore at any moment, so remember that the next time you're about to do something stupid like this."

Feeling like a fool, I stayed rooted to the floor as Dion turned around and walked back to the couch. "Someone get me something to drink," he ordered before looking back at me. "And you, you're lucky I enjoy you so much, or you

would have been dead long ago."

He might as well have done it because living for four more years in this hell would be worse than death. In order to get rid of one devil, I made a deal with another, and now, I was paying the price. One year was too much, so *four* more?

My breath shuddered as the room began closing around me. There was no way I'd make it, no fucking way I could go through this torture for another second.

"Now, go get some rest, Camilo, because first thing tomorrow morning, you're flying to Switzerland for some unfinished business I have there."

Unable to hear a word he was saying, I got out of that room and out of that building. Walking straight into the freezing night, I turned into the first alley I spotted. "Fuck," I screamed and punched the wall, only the ache spreading through my tensed fist wasn't enough to overcome the one in my chest, and I threw another punch, and another one, and another one. "Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck." I pressed my head to the cold wall and cried, cursing the day I'd exchanged one prison with another. Breaking my own hand wasn't even enough to distract me from this nightmare, and for a second, I thought of pulling out my gun and ending it there and then. But as my finger grazed the trigger, I thought about my mom and how she'd left me. And then I thought about him, about the love of my life, and that time I snuck in to visit him in the hospital. He was asleep, unaware of my stolen visit that lasted for no more than a few minutes, but it gave me enough power to get through those lonely months.

"I'll be back to you before you know it." I kissed the top of his head, lingering for as long as I could before pulling away. "It will be so fast it will almost feel like a dream." That was what I'd promised him, so how could I betray him even more than I already had?

Taking a deep breath, I let go of the gun. I might have sold my soul to the devil, yet Shay-Lee was the one holding my heart. And for as long as he'd have it, I had no choice but to grit my teeth and accept my fate because I'd return to him come hell or high water.

Come.

Hell.

Or.

High.

Water.

Acknowledgment

If you're reading this, thank you for sticking with me! I had so much fun writing this book that it ended up taking me in a completely different direction from my original idea. My God! We're already in book 4, fucking insane! There is only one more book left, and I know it's the one we've all been waiting for.

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What's to Come

In a whisper full of tenderness and love, he promised me a dream only to sentence me to a nightmare. A never-ending nightmare that only sometimes resembled life.

The next book is the conclusion to Shay-Lee and Diesel's story, and it will also be the last in the series.

About the Author

Hello there!

My name is Tal.

I’m an illustrator who likes to write stories and create plots. Check out my Patreon for spicy art and extra content.

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