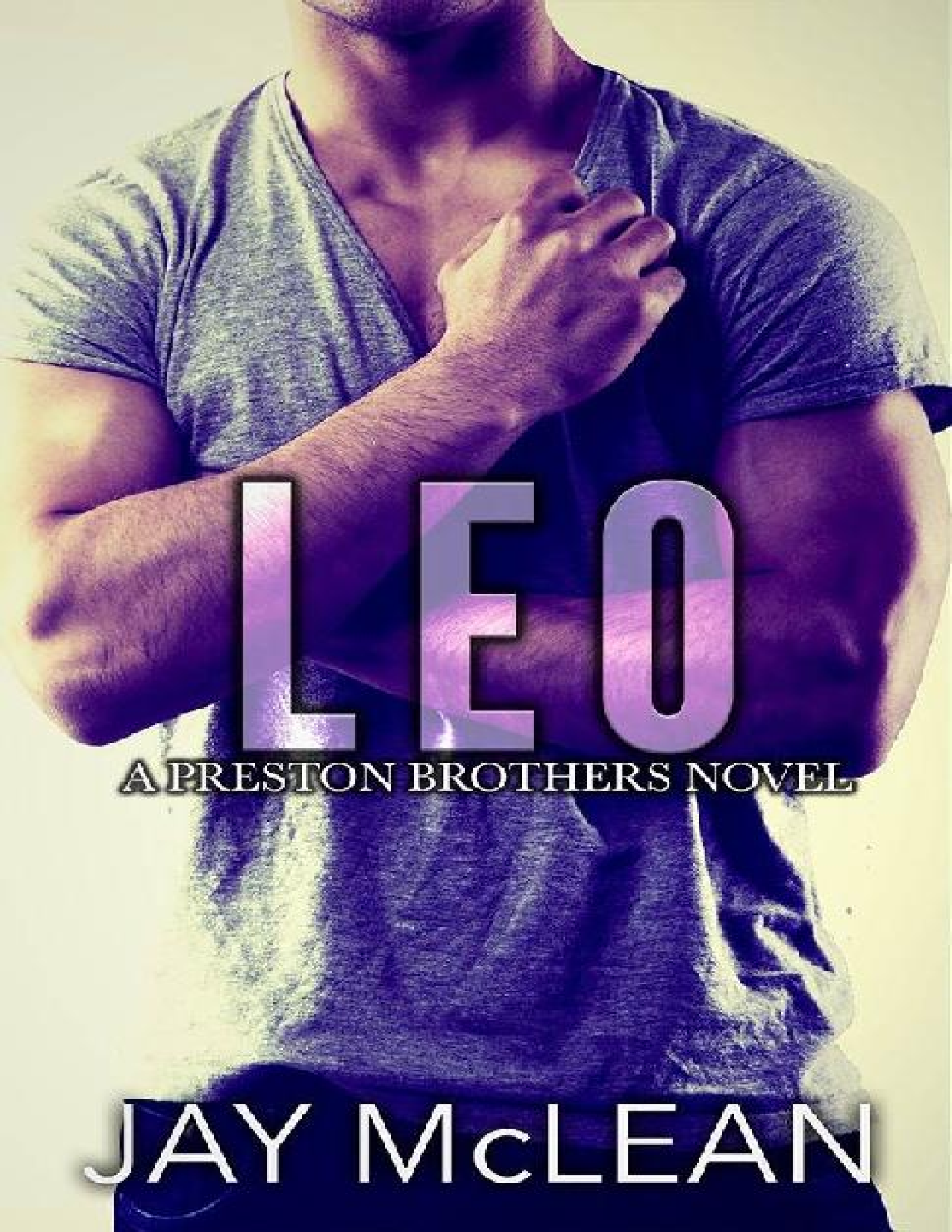




LEO

A PRESTON BROTHERS NOVEL

JAY MCLEAN

LEO

A More Than Series Spin-Off

OceanofPDF.com

JAY MCLEAN



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Editing: Tricia Harden

Proof: Rebecca Fairest Reviews

Cover Design: Jay McLean

Formatting: Jay McLean

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For Papa Istvan

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PROLOGUE

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MIA

I DON'T WANT to be here.

It's the only thing that ran through my head, causing my bloodline to fill with nervous energy.

And *dread*.

It's the same feeling I had over ten years ago. Only then, the person sitting next to me with her hands on the steering wheel—utterly clueless to my current state of mind—was assuring me that everything would be okay, that I'd be happy here. An assumption, I'm sure, because she barely knew the twelve-year-old girl beside her, and now? Now we're virtually strangers. An odd thing to say considering she's my mother.

She sits ramrod straight as she makes the final turn toward the Preston house, inconspicuously checking herself in the mirror as she does. I used to catch her doing the same the summers I spent with her, wishing for the day Mr. Preston would see her in a different light.

Yeah, that was never going to happen.

I try not to roll my eyes at her, and instead, take a moment to breathe. Just *breathe*. Wiping the anxiety-caused sweat off my palms onto the worn upholstery of the car seat, I settle my head against the headrest and try to calm my pulse by looking out the window. Trees line the road, the bright sunlight breaking through the thick leaves as we pass. A short wooden fence behind those trees lets you know it's private property, even though you can't see any houses from the road. Loose gravel kicks up from the spinning tires below us, and when I roll down the window, just slightly, I can feel the crisp, fresh air fill my nostrils.

The first time I was here, it reminded me of home.

It didn't take long for that feeling to fade.

The car slows as Mom pulls into the Preston driveway, and my breath halts in my chest, my bottom lip stinging in pain with the force of my teeth clamping down on it.

I try to keep the memories distant.

Try to keep the tears at bay.

Nothing is different.

And yet... everything has *changed*.
I don't want to be here.
Not again.

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LEO

I have these moments where I black out. Not physically, but mentally. Black out probably isn't even the right term. It's more like *check out*.

At the mention of Mia's name, I can feel it start to come on.

The different types of therapists Mom dragged me to when I was a kid tried convincing her it was a symptom of ADHD. I was, by far, the least hyperactive of all her children, and sure, I had problems with boring, mundane things keeping my attention, but who didn't? Besides, I *could* focus. Hell, I'd be hyper-focused... just on things that weren't that important. I could stare at a fly on the wall for a whole hour or be consumed by a single, stupid flower growing out of the dirt, out of place. *How did it get there?* It didn't belong, and yet, it made all the sense in the world.

The therapists' appointments waned once Mom got too sick to take me, then stopped entirely once she was gone. Her death and the weeks—no, the *months*—following had been my longest check out of them all.

Until Laney almost died.

I'm aware there are probably things wrong with me that have gone undiagnosed.

I'm also aware that my siblings are still talking about Mia; I just don't really know what they're saying. We're cramped into my parents' bedroom, all eleventy-three of us, and I don't remember how we got here.

"Mia's Virginia's daughter," Logan explains to Red, his girlfriend. "And she fucking *loved* Leo."

My jaw ticks.

"Loved?" says Lucy. "She was *infatuated*."

I attempt a scoff, but they all take it as nervous, fearful laughter.

Mia never *loved* me. And if she did, she sure as hell shouldn't have.

I turn to my only sister. "How long do I need to stay at this thing?"

Lucy laughs. She has no idea about the internal war I'm fighting.

None of them do.

I don't know how much time passes or what all is said. Not until Lucy murmurs, "We're the meanest, most judgmental bunch of whorefaces in existence."

The room grows silent, usually my favorite of all sounds. But not this time. This time, the silence gives my mind time to remember.

I recall the look on Mia's face the last time I saw her, the sadness mixed with anger and heartbreak in her eyes, the destruction in her words, all of them aimed at me. I mumble, "I mean, yeah, we are, but still... if y'all could be my buffer, I'd appreciate it."

I'm drowning in the memories now, each shove to my chest, each blow to my emotions, each truth I've spent years trying to deny, to *hide*.

Soft fingers curl around my wrist, and I look down to see Lucy's hand attempting to grasp mine. I let her take it and chance a peek up at her. She's looking into my eyes, searching between them. She's trying to find the same thing our mother spent my entire life searching for. There has to be something in me, something she can connect to. Something *more*.

To them, I'm a vessel.

Empty inside.

I release Lucy's hand, wanting to tell her just to let me go. Let me get away from this reality and back to the memories of Mia. Because I know, *somewhere* amidst all the pain and the heartache, there was *good*.

I was good.

"You okay?" Lucy mouths, her eyebrows drawn in concern.

I nod.

A lie.

I'm *not* okay.

And I don't want to be here.

But more, I don't want *her* here.

What the fuck is she doing here?

PART ONE

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CHAPTER ONE

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MIA - AGE 12

IT ALL STARTS WITH A PRANK.

A stupid, pathetic prank.

Mayhem, they call it.

The funny thing is, it isn't even directed at me.

SO FAR, the summer I've spent at the Prestons' is... lonely. It's the only way I can describe it. And that's saying a lot considering I've grown up as an only child, raised by my grandfather on an old farm in a town with a population of fewer than 200.

The only person I speak to regularly besides my grandpa is Holden, my best friend. We'd always looked forward to summer breaks, spending almost every second of daylight together, trying to discover new things we hadn't already seen or done. It becomes harder the older we get, and the more time we spent stuck in The Middle of Nowhere, North Carolina, the more we itched to get the hell out of there. Well, he did. Me? I'd be happy there if I could actually see a future for myself. The previous summer, Holden made me a promise that he'd find a way out, and when he did, he'd take me with him. "One day, Mia Mac..." he said as he crouched down in front of me, scraping the dirt mixed with blood off my grazed knee, "we're going to get the fuck out of this shithole—"

"Holden!" I squirmed uncomfortably, slapping the bead of sweat from the back of my neck. We'd been running. I don't know why. But Holden yelled out to run, and so we did. We ran through the thick brush, flicking hanging branches out of the way, and I was so afraid of whatever I was running from that I didn't see the giant tree root sticking out of the ground. I tripped, landed on all fours, and that's how I got there: me on my butt, both knees and what little pride I had stinging in pain. Holden looked at me, waiting, and I could feel the blush creep to my cheeks. "You shouldn't curse," I mumbled, knowing I was giving him exactly what he wanted. I didn't like it when anyone swore, but him especially. Besides, we

were *eleven*. It felt so wrong for such dirty words to leave the mouths of such innocent souls.

I watched him try to hold back a laugh, right before he leaned in, his mouth coming closer and closer, and for a moment—one split second—I thought to myself, “If he so much as *tries* to kiss me, I’m going to punch him right in that innocent mouth.” But he wasn’t going in for a kiss. Instead, he whispered, “Fuck. Shit. Ass. Tits.”

I punched him on the arm.

“Crap, Mia! That hurt!” he shouted, rubbing at the spot I’d just hit.

“Don’t antagonize me.”

“Ooh, big word... for a girl!”

My eyes narrowed. “You want another one?”

His features fell, eyes going wide as he shook his head. “Your grandpa been teaching you some moves, huh?”

I shrugged. “Papa wants me to be able to protect myself.”

“From what?” he almost laughed. “The giant cicadas on your front porch? Because that’s really the only thing you need protection from.” His gaze fell to the ground, and, tentatively, he added, “Well, that and your parents.”

I would’ve punched him again if he wasn’t so right.

A FROWN TUGS at my lips at the recollection as I sit on the dock of the Prestons’ private lake, my bare feet swaying in the water. I grip the cellphone—the one my grandpa gave me to keep in touch with him over the break. There are only two numbers stored in the phone, his and Holden’s mom, and most of the call logs are outgoing calls to the latter. It feels safer to vent to my friend than it does my grandpa, not because he won’t care, but because he has high hopes for my time here. I don’t want to tell him the truth—that I’m not making friends or that I’ve barely spoken two words to anyone besides Mr. Preston. Or Tom, as he wants me to call him. He goes out of his way to make me feel welcome and as comfortable as I can be. I don’t speak to my mother much, a cursory good morning and goodnight, and then she’s working and I... I’m forgotten.

Again.

I don’t really understand why she made such a big deal of having me stay with her. She is the family’s nanny and lives in a one-bedroom

apartment above the detached garage. I sleep on the couch. There's no room for me in that space...

Or in her heart.

I'll give her this, though; she's a great nanny. It's clear she loves those kids. She just doesn't love her own.

I unlock the phone and look at the last text Holden sent me from his mother's cell:

Tammy: *Three more days, Mia Mac. You can do this. Mama says as soon as you get back, she's going to take us for ice cream. Triple choc fudge with a side of strawberries. We're sorry you're having a bullshit time. We miss you. And she says she loves you. I don't. That would be weird. Call me whenever, Stink Ass.*

He sent the text yesterday, and through tears, I replied with the only thing I could think to say.

Mia: *Don't curse.*

My fingertips leave a trail of sweat as I tap on the phone to pull up my grandpa's number. The sun is scorching now, close to 3 p.m., turning my ordinarily pale skin red, especially on my thighs where the bottom of my shorts cut into my flesh. My head—covered in thick, almost black locks—seems to take the brunt of it, and I suddenly regret being out here for as long as I've been. A headache's looming. I can already feel it pulsing at the back of my skull. With a heavy sigh, I hit the call button. But a second later, voices sound from the tree line of the Preston property, and then footsteps, followed by laughter. *The Preston boys are coming.* Panic kicks from the inside, causing my pulse to thrum to an irregular beat. I quickly hang up the phone and shove it in my pocket as I stand, slipping on my flip-flops, hoping to disappear before they know I'm here. It's futile. I can see them now, running toward the dock. Toward me. There are four of them; the older three and one of their friends. They haven't seen me. Not yet. They're too busy calling out to the boy in front, Leo, while the others chase him, calling him words that would burn my tongue if I ever repeated them. My

feet plant to the aged wood beneath my soles, and I don't know where to run, where to look.

In three seconds, they'll get to me.

Three.

Two.

"Get him!" Logan shouts, and Leo curses in return.

One.

Leo must sense what's coming because he has the forethought to empty his pockets and dump the contents onto the dock. I blink hard, and when I open my eyes, Leo's horizontal, the other boys taking control of each of his limbs. And then he's in the air, arms flailing while the other boys stand at the end of the dock, laughing and pointing. He hits the water with a loud *splash*, and I look down at my feet, at the loose change that landed there only seconds ago. I start to gather them, so it'll be easier for Leo when he gets out. His wallet's on the edge of the dock. Another inch and it would've been in the water. It had splayed open when it landed, and the sunlight reflects off the plastic where one typically holds their ID. Squinting, I kick it back to safety, and that's when I notice it: in where the sun had reflected, guarded by a thin layer of see-through protection... was a picture of me.

Me.

My breath halts, and everything inside me ignites, bursts into an inferno.

I look up through my lashes, just enough to see Leo with his hands on the dock, starting to climb out of the water.

And then I run.

I run harder and faster than I've ever run in my entire life.

I run all the way back to the garage apartment in 110-degree heat.

I shut the door behind me.

Lock it.

Feel every muscle in my body tighten from exertion.

And then I take my first full breath.

And then another.

And another.

And I try to gather my thoughts.

It doesn't make sense.

When my grandpa calls that night and asks how everything is, I find myself smiling.

The next two days seem to fly by, and I'm surprised at my sudden sadness when it's time to leave, but not as surprised as I am at the answer I give my grandpa when, on the drive back home, he asks if it's something I might like to do again next summer. "Yes," I reply, not skipping a beat. I can't contain my grin. Or my blush.

Leo Preston is walking around with a picture of me in his pocket. And I want to know why.

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CHAPTER TWO

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MIA

I DON'T KNOW what made me think things would be different the following summer. My second time around at the Prestons' is a carbon copy of the previous year. The only person I have *actual* conversations with is Tom. He works a lot, so he isn't home often, but when he is, he asks me questions about my life, about home, about what I like to do with my time. Sometimes his sons are in the same room, but they never pay much attention to me. They aren't cruel or mean, but they don't go out of their way to become my friend. And my mom—she makes me feel like I'm in the way whenever I'm near her, which, again, makes me question why she asked me to come here in the first place.

I regretted agreeing to come the minute I stepped foot in the house. My eyes found Leo immediately, and I smiled at him, hoping my blush wasn't evident. I'd spent the past year in dreamland, thinking up a multitude of reasons why he would carry a picture of me in his wallet. Whatever crazy fantasies I'd come up with were just that: fantasies. He was sitting on the couch, reading a book, and then he got up, barely looking at me before exiting the room. He didn't say a word. Not even a "Hi." And I felt my little thirteen-year-old heart shatter right then and there.

I SPEND most of the first half of the summer alone, wandering the property, trying to keep out of my mother's way. The older boys always seem to find something to do. They go fishing or swimming in their lake or riding into town. They never invite me. The only Preston girl is the oldest, and she doesn't live in the main house. When she is there, which is rare, she'll talk to me. But she speaks to me like I'm a kid, and I don't feel like I am one. I doubt she even knows how old I am. I don't think she cares. I don't think anyone here cares about me at all.

I hide all of this when I call my grandpa, lying about all the fun I'm having. I feel horrible for doing it, but I'm positive it'll hurt him to know the truth. My mom stands in the kitchen of the garage apartment while I lie on the couch with the phone to my ear, trying to keep my voice even.

“It’s good you’re having fun, *baba*,” his deep voice booms, causing a smile to tug at my lips. I miss him. I miss his voice, his thick Hungarian accent, and his pet name for me that translates to *baby*. I’m his only grandchild, and I know, deep in my heart, that I’m his everything. I shut my eyes, imagining him in our living room, sitting in his recliner with the TV on mute, his withered hands shaking as he holds the phone to his ear. He’ll be missing me just as much as I am him, but he encouraged me to come here, to see more of the “world” than what he could offer me. He wants me to get to know other kids besides Holden. “It’s how you make friends,” he told me.

We were in the same state, only three hours apart, but he was right: this is another world.

“I was thinking, when I get back, we should—” I start, but Mom cuts me off.

“Mia, take this down to the main house and give it to Tom for tomorrow.” She sets a casserole dish on the counter.

“I’m on the phone,” I reply, even though she already knows this. She doesn’t respond; she only pushes the dish an inch closer to me before going to her room and shutting the door. A moment later, the shower turns on.

Sighing, I get up from my makeshift bed and say into the phone, “I have to go. I’ll call you tomorrow, okay?”

“Okay, sweetheart. *Szeretlek*.”

“I love you too, Papa.” I hang up and shove my phone in the pocket of my sweats before picking up the dish with the dishtowel. It’s still steaming hot from the oven. I struggle to slip on my shoes and open and close the door before making my way down the apartment stairs. The porch lights of the main house are on, and Tom’s sitting at a patio table with one of his sons. The boy’s back is to me, so I can’t make out which one it is. Neither of them sees me until my feet hit the porch steps, and they both look toward the sound.

Tom smiles.

Leo doesn’t.

“Sorry to disturb you,” I croak. “My mom told me to bring this over. Did you want me to put it in the fridge?”

Tom stands, taking the dish from me carefully and placing it on the table. “It can wait,” he says, that smile still in place. “Why don’t you sit with us for a bit?”

My head shake is fast, fervent. “It’s okay. I’ll just—”

He’s already pulling out a chair.

I can’t say no, so I sit, feeling the heat crawl up my neck. I’d never been this close to Leo before. He’d always leave when I entered a room or simply ignore that I was there. In this setting, with me sitting directly opposite him, it’ll be impossible to ignore me. But, he does have a book in his hand, covering his face, so maybe he can fake it. To be honest, I’m surprised he doesn’t just get up and leave.

“How’s your summer been so far?” Tom asks, taking a sip of what I assume to be coffee.

“It’s fine. *Good*, I mean. It’s been good.” I’m a nervous wreck, and I have no reason to be.

Tom clears his throat. “I take it my boys are keeping you busy? Or entertained, at least? There’s always something to do around here.”

It hurts to smile. To lie. “They sure have.”

From the corner of my eye, I see Leo’s book lower an inch. And then another. His brow knits as his penetrating gaze meets mine, his usual bright blue eyes darkening with an emotion I can’t decipher. He doesn’t speak.

“When the boys get to be too much,” Tom says, “just tell Laney, and she’ll put them in their place.”

I tear my gaze away from Leo and focus on what Tom said. From what I’ve witnessed, Laney’s mainly Lucas’s friend, but all the Preston boys treat her as one of them. Lucas and Laney are only a couple of years older than me, but they seem more mature. More...experienced in life.

“Okay, I’ll do that,” I murmur. I’m itching to leave, to go back to the comfort of my solitude.

Tom’s phone vibrates on the glass top of the table, and I’m grateful for an out. He stands, answering the call and bringing the phone to his ear. I start to get up, but his large, heavy hand lands softly on my shoulder, keeping me in place. “Stay.” His tone is gentle. “I’d like to talk with you some more.”

I nod, my neck craning to look up at him. He’s tall, well over six foot, and I wonder for a moment which of his boys will end up being the tallest of them all. My eyes track him into the house and into his office, where I can hear the slight murmur of conversation from his end. Once my buffer’s gone, I inhale sharply and keep my gaze trained on the casserole dish. A minute passes. Two. I realize my jaw’s tense. I try to relax the muscles just

as Leo clears his throat. My gaze snaps up. His book's on the table now, lying flat, pages spread. "My dad says you live on a farm?"

My pulse kicks up at the sound of his voice, at his words directed at me.

I nod again but keep my lips pressed tight, and I try not to look at him... at his eyes. They seem to give away too much, and yet, they reveal nothing at all.

He relaxes into his seat, his plain white tee stretching with the movement. "What's it like?"

Shrugging, I answer with the only thing I can think to say: "It's quiet."

His lips kick up on one side. "Must be nice."

I feel my shoulders relax. "The *quiet*?"

It's his turn to nod.

"I guess." I shrug. "Sometimes, it can be lonely, though."

"Huh."

"I bet you don't have that problem here," I say through a nervous giggle.

He sucks in a breath, lets it out in a whoosh. "You'd be surprised."

I don't know how to respond, so I don't.

"Dad says you homeschool?"

"Yep."

"Can that be lonely sometimes, too?"

I don't know if he's asking because he's curious or if he genuinely wants to know. Either way, it's nice to have someone to talk to. "Most kids in my town homeschool. We don't really have another option unless we want to travel over an hour each way," I reply, surprised at the evenness of my voice.

He sits taller, leans in closer, his eyes narrowing. "That doesn't answer my question." There's no accusation in his voice, just a steady, stoic string of words.

"It's not lonely," I murmur. "I normally do it with my best friend, Holden. His mom helps us. We do the work at his house, or they come over to mine."

Leo blinks.

I add, "I've heard that we can fit in a whole day's worth of normal school into a couple of hours..."

He chews the corner of his lip, stays quiet.

“...so, when we’re done, we just get to hang out for the rest of the day and...” I trail off, not knowing what else to say.

“And?” he pushes.

“And, I don’t know, find other stuff to do.”

He sighs, pauses a moment, then asks, “So this Holden kid—he’s your best friend?”

“Yeah.” He’s my *only* friend, but I don’t tell Leo that.

“Laney’s my best friend,” he deadpans.

My eyes widen, and I hope he doesn’t pick up on it. I always thought it was Lucas and Laney who are tight, but maybe I’m wrong.

“Is he your boyfriend?”

I choke on a breath and rear back, my nose scrunched. “*Holden?*”

Leo nods.

I shake my head. “No. We’re just friends.”

He doesn’t skip a beat. “You think guys and girls can be friends without having other feelings?”

This conversation is out of my depth. Sure, I have a *crush* on Leo Preston, and I’m fully aware of the level of that crush: nothing more than an attraction to a boy my age caused by the fact that I think he might like me in some thirteen-year-old way. But *feelings*, emotions... I can’t really *feel* anything for him, seeing as I didn’t even *know* him, and now he’s asking me questions, BIG questions... ones I don’t know how to answer. So, I counter, “Do you have feelings for Laney?”

He smirks.

And I realize now that maybe I do have *feelings*—*physical* ones.

He leans in closer again. “Do you *have* a boyfriend?”

I almost laugh out loud. “No.”

He nods at that, then moves away, relaxing in his seat. He picks up his book again, and I’m glad for a moment of silence to gather my thoughts. It doesn’t last long. This time, he practically throws the book back on the table. “What did Vagina cook?”

My eyes widen in shock.

“I mean *Virginia*,” he rushes out, his eyes closed tight. “Sorry,” he says, opening them again. “Sometimes we call your mom that because... because we’re idiots. No disrespect to you... Sorry.”

I stifle my giggle because it *is* a funny name, but it’s also crass, even if it’s coming from Leo Preston. Reaching out, I lift the foil from the corner of

the dish and peek inside. “Looks like a beef casserole.”

Leo stands quickly, his chair scraping beneath him. “Wait here,” he orders, making his way to the front door. Moments later, he returns with two forks. Leaving his previous seat discarded, he pulls up a chair next to mine and brings the dish closer, handing me a fork as he does. He peels off the foil and digs right in. “Damn, your mom sure knows how to cook,” he says while chewing his food.

I wouldn’t know, I don’t say.

“Are you going to have some?”

“Shouldn’t we... I don’t know... Isn’t it for—”

“Seven males in this house, Mia,” he says, a teasing lilt in his tone that has my stomach flipping. “When it comes to food, it’s a free-for-all. First in...”

I can’t help but grin.

He manages another three fork-loads in the time it takes me to finish one. Around a mouthful, he asks, “So you only go to school for two hours?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Sounds amazing.”

I giggle. “It is pretty cool.”

“What kind of farm is it?” he asks.

“It was a dairy farm, but my grandpa retired a few years back, and he sold the business and all the livestock and equipment. He kept the land.”

Leo seems to contemplate this for a moment before lowering his fork and swallowing. He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand and asks, his tone flat, “Is your dad dead?”

“No,” I say quietly, my gaze dropping to my hands. It’s a touchy subject, one I try hard not to think about, let alone talk about. And the casual way in which he asked makes my chest ache. Not for me, but for him. I know about his mom, and so maybe—in his eyes—only something as final as death could be the reason why parents split.

“So, where is he?” Leo asks.

“He lives in New York.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know.”

His eyes seem to be everywhere, all at once, until they finally settle on the garage apartment. I watch so many different reactions fleet across his features before he finally settles on one. Mouth pulled down at the corners,

his gaze trails from the apartment to me, right into my eyes. And I see it then, for the first time ever; a definitive emotion from Leo Preston: pity.

I *hate* it.

My fork lands on the table with a loud *clang*, breaking through the silence building between us. “My grandpa loves me,” I choke out. I regret it the moment the words are out of my mouth. It’s so pathetic and childish and *vulnerable*.

He starts to speak, but my mother’s voice cuts in. “Mia, come here! Stop bothering that boy!”

Leo gets to his feet, his jaw tense. “She’s not bothering me!” he sneers, and my breath catches.

I get up, shouldering past Leo as he stands firm on the porch steps. “I should go,” I murmur, then call out to my mother, “I’m coming!”

I’m power-walking toward the apartment when I hear footsteps behind me, and then Leo’s voice. “Wait!” He tugs on my elbow, forcing me to face him. I turn quickly, my nose level with his chest. His heavy breath hits the top of my head. “Sometimes, you wake up early and leave the apartment,” he rushes out. “I see you from my bedroom window.”

A shuddered breath leaves me as I lift my chin, look up at him.

“Will you do it tomorrow?” He glances toward the apartment, where I’m sure my mother’s watching us. “Four thirty. I’ll meet you at the bottom of your stairs.”

I stay quiet, my racing heart making it impossible to speak. Leo’s eyebrows rise, awaiting my response. “Okay,” I whisper.

“Mia!” Mom yells.

Leo lets go of my elbow and takes a step back. “Four thirty,” he whispers, and then he smirks, looks up at my mom, and gives her a two-finger salute as he yells, “Goodnight, *Vagina!*”

CHAPTER THREE

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MIA

IT'S STILL pitch-black outside when I peek through the front door the next morning. Leo's already there, standing at the bottom of the stairs, the hood of his sweatshirt pulled up. He must hear the door open because he looks up, smiles, his teeth a contrast to the darkness around us. When he pulls out a bike from under the stairs and says, "Let's go," I freeze.

I have no idea what we're doing or where we're going, and more, I have no clue what his invitation *means*.

Last night, he said that he'd seen me leave the house early some mornings. Does that mean that he's been watching me? Or is he just up early and staring out his window like some kind of teenage psychopath? And now he has a bike, which means he plans on going somewhere, *just the two of us*. I shouldn't go with him, I think; I could end up dead in a drainpipe somewhere and no one—

"Are you coming?" he whisper-yells, shuffling his feet and adjusting his backpack.

Great. He has a backpack. And I'm positive it's full of supplies to kill me... or animals. Please, God, not the animals. Still, even thinking all this, I find myself at the bottom of the stairs, almost toe to toe with my prospective killer.

Clearly, I haven't had much sleep. I spent most of the night tossing and turning, coming up with a million different scenarios of how the morning would pan out. As embarrassing as it is to admit, the most prevalent of my concerns was how to tilt my head when Leo Preston kissed me. Pathetic, I know, because why—just *why*?

"You ready?" he asks, and I try not to let my nerves show when I nod up at him.

He hands me the backpack and moves to sit on his bike. I simply stand there, unsure of what to do. "Hop on," he says through a smile, throwing his thumb over his shoulder. I notice the pegs on the back wheel and instantly feel my stomach dip. I'm not exactly the thinnest girl in the world, and I feel the weight of that insecurity drop down on my shoulders.

I take a step back, deflated, and stumble through my words. “Maybe we... maybe we can just walk?”

Leo’s eyes narrow. “Why?”

He doesn’t get it.

Clearing the knot in my throat, I return the backpack to him. “You know what? I’m not feeling the greatest, so...” I start to leave, but he grabs on to my sleeve, halting me to the ground. I wish it would swallow me whole. My eyes drift shut as I fight to keep the tears at bay.

“Did I do something wrong?” he asks, his voice cracking.

“No,” I’m quick to reply, opening my eyes before facing him. I shake my head. “You didn’t do anything.”

“So...” His gaze drops. “You just don’t want to hang out with me?”

“I do,” I rush out, stepping closer. He looks how I feel: disappointed. But he’s also confused, and I don’t want him leaving thinking he’s done anything, so I suck in a breath and tell him the truth. “I’m not exactly...” I can’t finish the sentence, so I point a finger up and down my body.

He chuckles—a sound that echoes through the air, through my heart. “I know I’m scrawny, but I’m strong. I promise. I can carry your weight. Besides, you’re so *little*.”

If you ask me to describe myself in three words, I’d tell you: short, chubby, *plain*.

I’m not *little*, not by any stretch, but as I stand here, my insecurities laid bare between us, I realize that in his eyes... that’s how he sees me, and that... that means more than anything.

More than it should.

I DON’T KNOW how long we ride before he finally stops in front of a high chain-link fence. We don’t speak on the ride, and I stay quiet as we get off the bike, and he leads us with the flashlight, which was attached to his handlebars, toward a hole in the fence. I don’t know whether he or his brothers cut it or if it was there previously. All I know is that whatever we’re doing is most likely illegal. He lifts the bottom of the wire for me to go through while I ask, “Can we get into trouble for this?”

Leo sighs, but it's playful. "Hey, remember when you thought I couldn't handle you on the back of the bike?"

Of course, I remember. It was, like, fifteen minutes ago. "Yeah...?"

"And you still got on, right?"

I nod, chew the corner of my lip.

"Why'd you get on?"

"I don't know. Because I'm crazy?"

"No." He shakes his head, then stands taller. Prouder. "It's because you trust me."

WE WALK through tall grass while Leo explains that we're going to an abandoned water tower. During the weekends, some older kids go there to party. But in the wee hours of the morning, he's never seen anyone else around. He admits that it's most likely illegal to be here, but the cops turn a blind eye as long as no *real* illegal activity happens—besides, you know, *teen drinking*. He mentions that Cameron, his sister's boyfriend, was the one to show it to him. "It's because he knows I like the quiet," he says with a shrug. "He's an only child, so sometimes being at the house can get a little too much for him."

"Yeah," I reply as if I understand any different. Sometimes Mom and I will eat dinner with the Prestons, but most of the time, we eat at the apartment and barely say two words to each other.

Once at the bottom of the water tower, he asks, "You're not afraid of heights, are you?"

"No."

"Will you be okay to climb the ladder?"

A giggle bursts out of me. "We have one of these on the farm."

His eyebrows rise, then he teases, "Ooh, look at you with your fancy farm and your fancy water tower."

"Shut up," I laugh out, shoving his shoulder. He falls back a step, laughing with me, and there's something about that moment that feels so significant. It's the first time away from home that I let my guard down, let myself be me, and let myself be *seen*.

ONCE AT THE tower's highest ledge, Leo unzips his backpack and pulls out a thermos, snacks, and a paperback novel. It's the same one he was reading the night before. "What's the book about?" I ask.

He huffs out a breath as he sits down beside me, our legs dangling off the edge. "I'm not sure yet." He doesn't elaborate further, and so I leave it at that. "I need to ask you a question," he says, hesitant, as he concentrates on dividing the snacks between us. "And you don't have to answer if you don't want to..." He peers up at me through thick lashes, a strand of dark hair falling over his brow.

My pulse picks up, anxiousness swarming through my veins. "Okay..."

After clearing his throat, he stares ahead into the breaking dawn. He cracks each of his knuckles before turning to me, the intensity in his gaze creating fear in my chest. "Last night, my dad asked you if my brothers and I were—"

"I'm sorry," I cut in, looking away. "I shouldn't have lied to him."

"I don't care that you did," he rushes out. "I just wanted to know *why* you did it."

With a shrug, I say, "I didn't want you guys to get into trouble."

He doesn't respond, and I can feel him watching me, scrutinizing.

Leo may like the quiet, but I don't like the silence, especially when it's between us. Hoping to make a sound, I kick my feet back and forth and shove my hands under my butt to hide their trembling.

Minutes pass, neither of us saying a word, and I keep my head low, my eyes shut. Finally, he says, "Is that why you're like that with your mom?"

My gaze snaps up, locks on his. "Like *what*?"

His eyes widen in the way they do when you're stating something obvious. "Like, you just let her treat you like shit."

I wince at his curse and shake my head, annoyance mixed with hurt causing heat to form behind my eyes. "I don't want to talk about this," I murmur.

"I'm sorry," he almost whispers. "I didn't mean..." His tone's so solemn that it has my chest aching. "I didn't mean to make you mad or sad or... I shouldn't have said anything."

I don't respond, too busy trying to fight back my emotions.

"Mia?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm sorry."

“It’s okay,” I say, looking up at him. “It’s just that—”

His head shake cuts me off. “You don’t need to explain anything. I won’t ever bring it up again.” He draws a cross over his heart, a sad smile marring his lips. “Swear it.”

I offer a nod, grateful for his response.

He kicks his foot against mine. “It’s time,” he says, pointing toward the horizon. The sun’s just breaking through in the distance, with silhouettes of trees splintering its appearance. The ground is a fog, a blur of existence. But it’s the sky that leaves me breathless... the darkness that enveloped us only minutes ago is replaced with all the hues of reds, pinks, and purples, stretching beyond what the eye can see.

It’s endless.

Infinite.

“It’s as if the world’s being split in two,” I breathe out.

“I know.” He pauses a beat. Then: “It reminds me of you.”

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CHAPTER FOUR

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LEO

I'VE NEVER TAKEN anyone to the water tower before. It had always been my spot, somewhere I could get away from the shouting and crying and general chaos of the house. Dad knows I go there some mornings, and as long as I'm back for breakfast, he doesn't seem to mind. He doesn't seem to mind a lot of the things I do or *didn't* do, as long as I'm "present" for the things that matter. Physically and mentally. This morning though, I lost track of time. I could've spent the entire day with her there, sitting in complete silence, as long as she was by my side. It felt like seconds, and I wish those seconds could be minutes, hours, days.

My legs are burning by the time I get us back home, cursing internally when I see Dad walking down the porch steps with his work gear. He pauses when he sees us, and I slow to stop in front of him. "Sorry," I rush out, careful to balance the bike long enough for Mia to hop off. Her cheeks are flush, either from windburn or embarrassment, I'm not sure.

"Morning, Mr. Preston," she says quietly, removing the backpack I'd given her. I already miss her touch, the way her hands gripped my shoulders as we rode.

Dad smiles down at her and then over at me. "You weren't gone all night, were you?"

"No, sir."

"Water tower?"

I nod.

He gives a curt nod and focuses on Mia again. "Does your mom know you left the property?"

Mia's staring down at her feet. "No, sir."

Dad sighs heavily but doesn't say any more. He gets in his truck and starts the engine. "The older boys are still asleep," he tells me. "So eat as much as you can before they get up." He winks at me, a silent message I don't quite understand.

Mia and I watch until his truck disappears down the driveway. I hop off the bike and take my backpack from her. "Want to do it again tomorrow?"

She bites her lip, her eyes the lightest I'd ever seen when they make contact with mine. There's something about the way she always looks at me, the way her gaze stops on me for just a second whenever we're in the same room. I both love it and fear it.

"You're not in trouble?" she asks.

"Nah." At least not from my dad. My brothers—that's a different story. And I hope that Dad won't tell them about us.

I've been with girls before—in the way most seventh graders have. I've held hands and kissed a couple, but they never lasted. Sometimes it's because they wanted me to be something I wasn't. They pushed for more than I was willing to give, and they'd end things before they even began. To be honest, I didn't care. It's not as if I truly *felt* anything for them. Most of the time, my brothers would find a way to ruin it. Either the twins would tease us, or Lucas would exist; they'd fall for him instead, or Logan would steal them just because he's Logan.

With Mia—it was different. I don't know why, and I can't explain it. Not even to myself. I'm terrified that I'll say or do something to make her not like me, even as friends, so it was easier to just not show her too much of myself. Or not enough.

But I was in it now, and I was in deep.

The last thing I want is my brothers ruining this for me.

Whatever *this* is.

"Same time?" she asks, and I nod, hiding my pathetic grin until we part ways.

I MAKE it through most of the day, thinking I'm home free. My brothers have no idea about this morning. It's not until halfway through dinner when Dad says, "I don't know how I feel about you and Mia sneaking off in the middle of the night," that I know it's all over. There's a twisting in my chest, right before my heart drops to my stomach. Logan and Lucas cut off their guffaws when Dad gives them a pointed glare. The twins giggle to each other, then laugh at me. Lachlan throws mashed potato across the table and hits Logan square in the face. "You little shit!" Logan yells.

"Logan!" Dad reprimands. "He's just a baby!"

"He's three!" he yells back, using a spoon as a slingshot to catapult a clump of potato back at our youngest brother. It misses, hits one of the

twins, World War III starts, and I do what I always do when that shit happens.

I check out.

Eat my food.

Wash my dishes.

And walk away.

I go to my room, lie flat on the bed, and stare at the ceiling, my fists balling. It doesn't take long for my door to burst open, for Lucas and Logan to enter unannounced. "Mia?" Luke says. "*Really?*"

"They're sneaking off in the middle of the night." Logan chuckles. "I thought *I* was the bad one."

I don't react.

Reacting only makes things worse.

"She's a little... weird, don't you think?" Luke adds.

Logan scoffs. "Understatement. But so is Leo."

Lucas laughs. "Did you kiss her?"

"Did you *fuck* her?" Logan cackles.

In this moment, I hate them both. Not because they're saying what they're saying, but...

All I wanted was *one* thing that's mine and mine alone. And Mia's that "thing." And they're taking away the importance of the time we've shared.

They're taking away *her*.

They're ruining it all, and I know they'll keep finding ways to make it worse, just like they do everything else.

I won't let them.

Not this time.

She means too much to me, and I don't want to erase how I felt this morning, or last night, when it was just us and no one else, and I know... I know I'll never be able to have moments like that again now that my brothers know.

I want to keep those memories alive.

And keep those feelings safe.

"Get out of my room." It's all I say, and I should say more, but I don't.

They leave, laughing to each other as they do.

I don't sleep that night. Not a single wink. And when my alarm goes off at 4:20, I get up from under the covers and look out my window. I wait for her door to open, watch as she peeks outside. I look on from the darkness of

my room as she sits at the bottom of the stairs, continuously checking the time. And as the minutes pass, I can feel time slipping away, feel the cracks in my chest start to widen.

After waiting for an entire hour, she finally gives up.

And I finally give in.

I reach under my bed, pull out the old shoebox, and lift the lid.

Hundreds upon hundreds of photographs come into view.

Hers is the first one I see.

On top of the pile, right in the middle, her light brown eyes stare back at me.

I hold it in one hand while I go through the others, flipping them over to read their backs.

Three words.

All different.

Because it's all my mother asked.

IT STARTED a year before the cancer diagnosis. She was worried about me; I could tell by the way she looked at me. She didn't look at my brothers like that. They'd always been fine, always spoke up, or spoke in general.

I was quiet.

Too quiet.

Until I wasn't.

I'd have "outbursts," Mom called them. Sometimes verbal. Sometimes physical. "Leo can't handle his emotions," I heard her telling Dad one night. "It's like he keeps them buried, and then he just... explodes."

The next day, she brought me a ton of random photographs, mostly of my family, but some of images she'd cut out of magazines and catalogs. I was sitting at my desk, staring out the window. She slid a picture toward me. It was of me holding the twins right after they were born. Lucy was beside me, making sure I was doing it right. I was grinning down at the twins the way Lucy was at me. "How do you think you felt when this happened, Leo?" Her tone was gentle, soft. "Or how do you feel looking at it?"

I stared at the photograph a moment before looking up at her. “Happy,” I said, my voice low.

She smiled then, dragging the picture toward her. She flipped it over and wrote on the back: *Happy*. “What else?”

“Grateful,” I replied.

Her smile widened. “Why grateful?”

“Because they were here, and they were healthy.”

She nodded, wrote down: *Grateful*. “One more?”

“Scared.”

She looked up; her brow dipped in concern. “Now or then?”

I shrugged, looked out the window again. “Both.”

“Why, Leo?” she asked, placing a hand on my shoulder.

I kept my gaze trained on the tree line ahead. “Because I don’t want to break them.”

For a long moment, my mother didn’t respond, but I could feel her watching me, and I’d wondered how long it would take her to realize that *I* was the broken one.

“Do you think you could do some more of these?” she finally said. “For me?” Then she added in a rush, “Or just for yourself. You don’t have to show anyone.”

Without waiting for a reply, she walked over to my door. “Just think of three,” Mom said. “Write them down.”

IN THE PHOTOGRAPH, Mia’s sitting at the bottom of the porch steps, her phone in her hand. She was sad. I could see it in her eyes, in the way her lips pulled down at the corners.

I don’t know what it was about that particular moment that had me rushing to my sister and asking to borrow her phone. I snapped the picture, emailed it to myself, then deleted it from her device, leaving no trace of what I’d done.

It was the first summer Mia had spent with us, and it was odd to have someone stay with us at the beginning. We’d all just gotten used to her mom being here and now... now there was a girl around my age who seemed to appear and disappear without anyone noticing.

I noticed, though.

There was something internally, as if I had an *off* switch whenever she was present. It was as though I would check out, but at the same time, be so aware of her.

Just her.

I didn't know what it meant.

I still don't know.

And maybe that's the reason why there are no words on the back of her picture.

Not a single one.

It's

Blank.

Void.

Empty.

Just like me.

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CHAPTER FIVE

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LEO

MIA DOESN'T LEAVE the apartment in the mornings after. I know, because I watch out for her. She isn't at breakfast or lunch like she sometimes is, and I never catch her playing in the yard. If she leaves her apartment at all, I don't see it. Part of me is grateful that she isn't around, that I don't have to protect her from my brothers' teasing and torment, but mainly, I just feel guilty.

And as pathetic as it sounds, I *miss* her.

I miss our quiet conversations and the silence we share.

IT WAS Monday when we went to the water tower, and by Saturday, I'm starting to lose my mind. I just... I want to talk to her, to apologize, but I don't know what to say. I know that whatever it is, it has to be thought out. It has to come from a part of me that I honestly don't know exists. Mostly though, I have to find a way to do it in private.

As I lie in bed, listening to the birds chirping outside, welcoming a new day, I come up with a plan. I'll fake a project to work on in the garage below the apartment. That way, if she leaves, I'll be the first to notice. I'll grab her attention, and I'll say two words: *I'm sorry*. And then I'll go from there. Even if I have to fumble through the rest of it, at least she'll know how I feel.

The plan's foolproof, and for the first time since the early hours of Monday morning, I find myself smiling.

I practically run down the stairs and then skid to a stop at the bottom. Dad's in the living room. So is Mia. They're sitting on the couch, and whatever they're saying is interrupted by my presence. "Good, you're up," Dad says, getting to his feet.

I glance at Mia, fearful she's said something to Dad about me standing her up, but she isn't looking at me. Her eyes are downcast, void of emotion, something I've felt too often.

Dad moves toward me with a five-dollar bill in his hand. "Can you watch Lachie and the twins?" He motions to my youngest brother, who's

sitting in front of the television, transfixed. “Twins are in the yard,” Dad adds. “Mia and I are heading out for a bit.”

I try to catch Mia’s attention, but it doesn’t work. “Where?”

“Nowhere important. We’ll be back in an hour.”

Mia stands, using my dad as a shield between us.

“Leo?” Dad places the bill in my hand. “You can do that, right?”

I nod, regret pressing down on my chest. “Yeah. Sure.”

I only have to watch Lachie for five minutes before Virginia enters the house. She doesn’t usually work on weekends, but when she notices it’s me in charge, she takes over. “Where’s your dad?” she asks.

My eyes narrow at her. “Somewhere with *your daughter*.” It comes out harsher than intended, but after the previous summer—when I spent too many hours secretly watching Mia and realizing how her mother treated her—I can never look at Virginia the same. It doesn’t make sense that she can be so good with us, and yet—with her own daughter... She treats Mia as if she’s a nuisance. A *burden*.

Mia’s anything but, and it pisses me off that she can’t see that.

After grabbing a book from my room, I pretend to read while I sit on the porch, waiting for Dad and Mia to return. It doesn’t take long for the familiar sound of tires spinning on the loose gravel of our driveway to fill my ears. Virginia must hear it, too, because she comes out of the house, hand in hand with Lachlan. I watch with bated breath as Dad’s truck slows to a stop. He and Mia get out at the same time and move to the rear, where Dad pulls out a bike from the bed. It’s pink and purple with a white basket on the handlebars. It’s a pretty sweet bike.

For a girl.

I’m about to say as much when, next to me, Virginia sighs. “Why in the world do you need a bike, Mia? Where did you get the money for it?” Then she gasps, marches down the steps dragging my brother behind her. She stops only inches from her daughter, her finger pointed at Mia’s face. “Mia Mackenzie Kovács! You better not have asked Tom to buy you—”

Mia’s eyes are wide, filled with fear, and I find myself moving toward her. “I didn’t ask him,” Mia utters. “He offered and—”

“And you said yes?” Virginia snaps.

Mia's hands are behind her back now, her shoulders hunched, head down.

"We'll take it back right now," Virginia tells my father, looking up at him. "I'm so sorry, Tom, she—"

"It was a *gift*, Virginia," Dad interrupts, his tone leaving no room for argument. He picks up Lachlan and holds him to his side. Then he settles a hand on Mia's shoulder. "It's yours, sweetheart. Enjoy it." To Virginia, he says, "Let's move this conversation to my office."

Mia doesn't move an inch as they make their way inside. I don't either. As soon as the front door's closed, I let out a breath. "Holy shit. Your mom can't let you enjoy anything, can she?"

Her eyes snap to mine, red and raw from her withheld tears. Then she grabs the handlebars, starts walking away. Over her shoulder, she says, her voice barely audible, "I guess you two have that in common."

IT'S 4:42 a.m. when the lights in the apartment illuminate, and my heart begins to race.

It's been four days since we last spoke, since I last saw her, and I found out the day before that she's leaving earlier than planned. In three days, she'll be gone, and who knows if she'll ever come back.

It's my last chance to make up for my mistakes, to apologize, and to plead for her forgiveness. It's been eating away at me; every second of every day I'm filled with guilt and regret. And thoughts of *Mia*.

MY SISTER once told me that our mom believed profoundly in fate. That fate was the reason she met my dad and why they were able to live the kind of blessed life that allowed them to have seven beautiful children. When she told me all this, I replied that it was bullshit. If fate gave Mom all of that, then fate also took it away, left her "seven beautiful children" motherless and gave her an incurable fucking disease that killed her slowly, painfully.

Lucy had looked at me, wide-eyed. "*I believe in fate*," she'd said.

I told her she was stupid and that she lived in a fantasyland full of fairy tales and princes who came to save the day. She wasn't a princess, and she

wasn't living in one of her romance novels. I told her that fate was a lie created to make you believe you have no control over what happens in your life.

I must have had one of my so-called "outbursts" because it seemed to shock everyone. To my entire family, Lucy was a princess, and most of the time, we treated her as such.

It's no real surprise that I made my sister cry that day. And I don't regret it. Fate is bullshit.

But as I pedal hard now, pushing my legs until they burn, fate is the only thing I can rely on.

I thought I'd be able to catch up with Mia and follow her, but once we are off the property, I can't see anything beyond the darkness.

Fate leads me to the water tower, the only place I can think to go.

Mia's bike is here, exactly where the opening in the fence is. I drop my bike next to hers and crawl through the hole. I don't want to scare her, so I use my flashlight and call out her name as I walk toward it. She's already on the top ledge when I get to the tower, her legs dangling off the edge. "Mia!" I call out, but she doesn't respond. Doesn't even look down at the sound. With a heavy sigh, I shove the flashlight in my pocket and climb the ladder. Once I'm standing on the ledge, moving toward her, she finally speaks. "Did you know?" she asks, voice breaking through the silence around us.

I sit down next to her, try to hide the fact that I'm out of breath. "Know what?"

It takes her a moment to answer. "Your dad was the one to invite me here." She turns to me, and even though there's barely any light out, I can see the sorrow in her stare, feel the dejection in her words. "When your dad took me shopping for the bike, he mentioned it. He didn't know that... that she hadn't told me, I guess."

"I'm sorry," I mumble. It's such a stupid, careless, impersonal thing to say, and the worst part? I don't even know what I'm sorry for. For her mom's actions? For mine? For her coming here believing one thing and then having it all ripped away?

"I just wish..." she chokes out, wiping a single tear from her cheek.

I wince at the sight, wishing I could do something more. *Be* something more. "Wish what?" I ask, shuffling closer to her.

Mia sighs, a sound so heavy I feel it drown my soul. "I just wish she'd *want* me."

I want you, I don't say.

Not out loud.

But I think it.

Through every fiber of my being, I *feel* it.

"I'm sorry," I say again, and then I take her hand in mine.

I don't let go.

Not that morning.

Or the morning after.

Or the one after that.

We spend every morning together of the few days we have left, never once speaking a word.

Each day, we grow closer.

But each sunrise feels different somehow.

The world isn't being split in two anymore.

It's in shards.

Shattered.

Busted.

Broken.

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CHAPTER SIX

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MIA

“MY GIRL” by The Temptations plays softly through the speakers of my grandpa’s truck as we make the final turn toward the Prestons’ house. I’m nervous. More nervous than the years prior. You don’t realize change as it’s happening, but as I sit here, reflecting on the year since I’d last seen Leo, one significant change stands out.

Puberty.

Some kids go through puberty and come out looking like movie stars.

I was the opposite.

My skin had broken out, Papa had forced me to get braces, I’d put on even more weight, and the worst? Hair had started growing *everywhere*. The one time I’d confided in Holden about it, he said that maybe it was as “bad as it is” because I was a late bloomer. I cried. He went quiet, and after a while, he made an excuse to leave. That night, his mother, Tammy, came by the house with a bag of hair removal supplies, acne cream, and feminine hygiene products. At first, I was *mortified*. My grandpa didn’t quite understand the screaming and crying coming from my attic bedroom. He was concerned for my mental health. But the more Tammy spoke, the more she opened up, the more I did, too. She was so patient with me, so gentle, the way a mother should be.

“My Girl” is replaced with “You Can’t Hurry Love” by The Supremes, and Papa turns the steering wheel, starts up the Prestons’ long driveway. As a Hungarian immigrant, one of the first things he loved about the country is what he calls “American music.” While Holden listens to modern music, mainly rap, I’ve grown up on the oldies my grandpa listens to, and I’ve come to love them as much as he does.

Papa clears his throat before saying, “You be good for the man, okay, *baba?*”

“Yes, sir.”

“And you be good to yourself.” He glances at me quickly, his lips thinned to a line. He may not know what was said between Tammy and me up in my bedroom that night, but he knows I’m changing.

Physically.

Emotionally.

Just as the house comes into view, a car approaches us. Lucas, the oldest Preston boy, is behind the wheel. Laney's sitting beside him, and in the bed is his best friend and another guy and girl I don't recognize. Lucas raises a hand in a wave, and Papa returns it, though he has no idea who he's waving to. Boys on bikes follow after the car: Logan, the twins, and then Leo. He's at the back of the group, and when he sees us, he slows. I turn to watch him, my hands gripping the headrest as we pass. He stops completely, both feet on the ground, the bike between his legs, his entire body turned toward me. My heart races as I watch him watching me, and then someone calls his name, and as if in a fog, he shakes his head, clears his thoughts, and continues on his way.

Like me, he's changed, too. His hair's longer now, showing off some waves as they fall over the tips of his ears. And he's taller, more *masculine*.

Whatever changes he'd gone through in the past year—they've been kind to him. So kind, that when he and Logan return an hour later, they aren't alone. I watch from the bottom of the apartment stairs as four girls—two on their own bikes and two on the back of either boy—join them. Even from a distance, I can tell how beautiful they are. I hate the way my stomach turns and the way jealousy pumps harshly through my veins. As soon as they hop off the bikes, I get up and turn around. I'm halfway up the stairs when I hear Leo call my name. I freeze, but I don't turn to him. I don't want him to see me up close. Not yet. Not when he can so easily compare me to the girls he'd just brought home.

"How are you?" he asks, and somehow, I find the courage to face him. Up close, it's kind of ridiculous how handsome he is. He's not built the same way the boys back home are. Guys like Holden are stocky from all the hard labor they do on their family farms. Leo's tall, athletic, just the right amount of muscles for an almost fifteen-year-old. "Mia?" Even the way he speaks, the way he stands, has changed. He's gained confidence over the past year.

And I've only grown more insecure.

"Good." It's all I can say. It's also a complete lie.

He nods, looks over his shoulder. I follow his gaze to see Logan holding their front door open for the girls. "We're about to go to the lake for a swim. You want to come with us?"

I almost laugh. *Almost*. It's the absolute last thing I want to do. "No, I'm good."

His eyes narrow, assessing. "You sure?"

"Yeah. I should probably unpack... maybe find my mom."

Leo stands taller, his shoulders square as he looks up at me. "You haven't seen her yet?"

I shake my head.

"But she knew you were coming today. She told us about it."

I shrug.

"Did she know what time you were coming?"

"Uh-huh."

His lips press tight, the muscles in his forearms contracting when he balls his fists. After a sigh, he asks, "Are you sure you don't want to come? The water's real nice."

Me? In my swimsuit. In front of *him*. And *those* girls? I'd rather shoot myself in the head. "I'm sure."

His mouth kicks up in one corner as he starts backing away. "So, tomorrow. Four thirty?" He's smiling now, the kind of smile that releases all the tension in my shoulders. "Don't keep me waiting, okay?"

IT WAS easy to ignore Leo Preston's presence when I could lock myself away in another house. But when he's sitting beside me, 130 feet above the ground with nothing but silence and darkness around us, I feel him *everywhere*, amplified by the sound of his breathing and his watchful eyes on the side of my head.

"I wasn't sure if you were going to come back," he finally says. I keep my gaze forward, trying not to give too much away.

"I didn't really have a choice," I reply. I was in two minds about returning. Holden was staying with his grandparents for the first two weeks of summer, and so there wasn't a lot *stopping* me. But it was my grandpa—when he said, having no clue what my reality was, "Your mama would like you there, I'm sure."

So for him, I'm here.

Because the truth would devastate him.

Leo's silent a beat before asking, "So, you *don't* want to be here?"

I heave out a sigh.

"Or is it me?" he questions. "You don't want to be here with *me*?"

I press my lips together.

A scoff erupts from deep in his throat. "This is *my* spot, Mia, so if you want to be alone, you should probably—"

I start to get up, but he pushes a hand down on my leg, stopping me. "What the hell?" he snaps. "Why are you pissed at me?"

It's been almost a year since we sat in this exact spot. A year since he *wasn't* there to say goodbye the last time I left. A year since I'd written him a note to thank him for being there for me. I'd included my number. But he wasn't there to accept it, and so I gave it to his dad and asked him to pass it on. I'd waited, day in, day out, for a phone call. A text. Anything to show that the time we shared meant *something*. He never made contact. And now he's here, and he wants to act as though nothing has changed, that time hasn't passed, that his lack of action hasn't hurt me.

It was in my bedroom, with shaving cream on my legs, while Tammy showed me how to use a razor, that I felt comfortable enough to share my feelings with her. She looked at me, a sadness in her eyes that I felt to my core. Tammy let out a breath, her mind lost in her own memories. "He's just a boy," she said quietly, blinking back tears. "And you're just a girl, Mia Mac. One day, you'll look back, and you'll realize that what your feeling now is heartache, and that heartache isn't worth shit." I wondered—not for the first time in my life—if she was thinking about my father.

I finally find the courage to tell Leo, "I like it better when we don't talk."

His hand stills on my leg. I should push it away. I don't. He says, "So do I."

"Good."

He smirks. *Ugh*. "Then why give me your number?"

Crap. He had me there. And I'm surprised he even brought it up. I don't have a retort, so instead, I carefully lift his hand off my leg and drop it on his lap.

His smile widens. "You should've come to the lake. It was fun."

"With you and your girlfriends?" I murmur. "Hard pass."

His chuckle lights a fire inside me. "*Ex-girlfriend*. And only one of them."

“Oh, yeah? Maybe she got sick of waiting for you to call.”

“Actually, I broke up with her.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know,” he says, throwing in a shrug. Then he leans back, rests on his outstretched arms, and looks up at the sky. “I guess I wanted to keep my options open for the summer.”

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CHAPTER SEVEN

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LEO

EVERY MORNING AT 4:30, we meet between the house and the apartment and go to our spot. Some days we talk; other times she listens to music, and I read on my phone.

"I hear it's someone's birthday tomorrow," she sings, using nail polish to cover the crude words people have scratched into the railing of the tower. She has me holding up my phone as a source of light as if I'm her servant. I'm not even mad about it.

"Oh yeah?" I joke. "Whose?"

She stops painting and slaps my arm. "Yours, *dummy*."

I feign hurt, rubbing the spot she just attacked. "Bitch."

Gasping, her eyes widen, lock on mine. "What did you just—"

"Bitch," I repeat. And then I bust out a laugh as I point to the word *bitch* scratched into the paint.

She fights to keep her smile hidden, but I catch it. "I thought you were calling me a... *that word*."

I laugh harder. "You can say the word, Mia. You're not going to burst into flames if you do."

With a growl, she takes the hand holding my phone and refocuses the light on her task. "So, what do you want for your birthday?"

I can't even remember the last year I celebrated it. "Nothing."

Mia sighs. "You must want *something*."

I really don't... besides the time I spend with her, and she's already giving me that.

After a long stretch of silence, she asks, moving onto the word *bitch*, "What's your favorite type of cake?"

I say, shrugging, "I don't really like cake."

A frustrated moan leaves her. "I'm going to make you a cake, and you're going to like it, and you're going to eat every single piece."

Deep in my chest, a chuckle brews. "You're so bossy."

She side-eyes me with a sly grin, and swear; I get *dizzy* at the sight of it. So dizzy that I say possibly the dumbest thing that's ever left my mouth. "Put your face on the cake, and I'll eat it all."

She busts out a laugh. “How could I even do that?”

I’m so glad she doesn’t call me out on my stupidity that I just go with it. “I don’t know, but you have one day to figure it out.”

MY DAD’S the only one to remember my birthday, which is no real surprise. Before he leaves for work, he gives me a new Kindle and some gift cards. I thank him, grateful, but what I really want is to see Mia. She told me the night before that we should skip the following day at the water tower in case my family wants to do something with me in the morning. I agreed, but now I’m regretting it.

The day passes, so similar to any other, and by the time night falls, I’ve already given up hope. After dinner, I go to my room to stare out the window and keep an eye out for her like the creep that I am. It isn’t until my brothers shout my name from downstairs that I crack a smile.

Maybe they finally remember.

I take each step carefully, looking everywhere at once, just in case something’s thrown at me. There’s no one in the house that I can see, but the front door’s open, and I can hear them laughing on the porch—Lucas, Logan, and the twins. Their backs are to me as they look at something on the patio table. “What’s up?” I ask, and they all turn.

Lucas walks past me, slamming my phone against my chest. “You shouldn’t leave your phone on the kitchen table.”

My eyes narrow in confusion.

Logan cackles. “Happy birthday, lover boy!” He slaps my shoulder as he passes, mumbling, “Good luck with that.”

I look from my phone back up to the twins. They’re both wearing shit-eating grins. “Why would she put her own face on it?” Lincoln guffaws.

“Because she’s crazy,” Liam laughs out.

I shove them out of the way so I can see what the hell they’re talking about. On the patio table is a lopsided chocolate cake, and, as promised, in icing, is Mia’s face. It’s so pathetic and sad-looking, and yet... it’s the greatest gift anyone has given me.

Without a word, I pick up the cake and pass all four of my idiot brothers as I make my way to the kitchen, unable to hide my grin. After grabbing a

fork, I run up to my room, slam the door, lock it, and dig right in.

It tastes like absolute shit.

But I don't care.

I pick up my phone, read the message my brothers must've gotten to before I could:

Mia: *Your gift is on the porch. Remember: Every. Single. Piece.*

I snap a picture of me eating the cake and attach it to my text.

Leo: *Best damn cake I've ever had.*

It seems to take forever to get a reply.

Mia: *I'm glad your brothers found it funny. :(*

My shoulders slump and a hint of anger pushes through my logic.

Leo: *Fuck them, Mia. They're dickheads.*

Her reply is instant.

Mia: *Yeah! FUCK them!*

I can't help but laugh.

Leo: *Did you actually just swear right now?*

Mia: *Mia is no longer here. She's currently bursting into flames.*

Leo: *Nooooo. Bring her back so I can tell her she just gave me the best birthday ever.*

Mia: *You mean birthday *present**

Leo: *No, I don't.*

Mia: *4:30?*

Leo: 4:30.

I eat every single piece of cake.
And then I throw it all up.
Worth it.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

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LEO

“I HAVE A QUESTION,” Mia asks, pausing the music coming out of her phone. Together, we’ve made a playlist of our favorite songs. Her choices are all soul/funk oldies, and mine are a mix of everything. At first, I teased her about her selections, but then she told me that she’d grown up listening to her grandfather’s music. “American music,” he called it. I could tell that it meant something more to her, and so I wanted it to mean something more to me, too. After a couple of days, I started deleting my songs off the playlist one by one. “And don’t laugh at me for asking,” she adds.

I nod, weary.

“What’s school like?”

My brow dips. “What do you mean?”

“Like, school... with people,” she almost laughs. “Holden and I decided to go to a real school for high school.”

“You did?” I ask, surprised.

Mia nods. “It’s, like, forty-five minutes by bus. Most kids in town choose to go, so...”

“So, you’ll be around more people?” More *guys*.

“It’s still a small school compared to yours, I’m sure, but I don’t know. I’m kind of nervous.”

“Don’t be,” I rush out, trying to ease her fears. “You’ll do fine.”

“I know that I’m overthinking it, but... I mean... it’s *high school*, you know. It’s, like, make or break for some people.”

“Yeah, for idiots who think high school is the be-all and end-all. Luke’s like that. He thinks he’s the king of the fucking—”

“Don’t swear, Leo,” she cuts in, her nose wrinkled. It’s kind of cute how innocent she is.

“Sorry,” I find myself saying, even though I’m not.

She’s quiet a moment before huffing out a breath, fogging the air in front of her. “I’m just glad I don’t have to do it alone,” she says. “At least Holden will be there.”

For her, I hope that he is. I hope he doesn’t get to high school and forget her existence like Lucas did Laney.

"I have another question," she says, breaking through my thoughts.

I lean back on my forearms and get comfortable. I guess today is a "talking" day, and I don't miss the quiet at all. "Go ahead."

"Those girls that were with you when I first got here—which one of them did you date?"

I hide my smile behind my hand. Is she... jealous? Or curious? Both maybe?

"We didn't really *date*. We just kind of hung out and—"

"*Made* out."

I chuckle. "I guess."

"Gross."

"You think kissing is gross?"

"You're evading the question," she says, bumping her side with mine.

I want to ask her if she's ever kissed a guy, but I don't want to embarrass her. "Take a guess which one."

She rears back. "*How?*"

I shrug. "Let's see how well you *think* you know me."

She rolls her eyes, then looks up, her lips pinched in concentration. "Well, there were three blondes and a brunette, so I think odds are it was one of the blonde ones."

"Nope," I'm quick to say, "I'm not into blondes." It takes everything in me to not tug at the ends of her hair. "I like girls with black hair."

If it wasn't so dark, swear I'd be able to see her blush.

She clears her throat, hits *play* on her phone, a distraction from both our thoughts.

An entire song plays before I pause it, work up the nerve to ask, "What about you? What kind of guys do you like?" I don't know how she sees me, or what she sees *in* me; I just know that whatever her answer is, I want her to describe *me*.

"I don't know," she says after mulling it over. "I don't know that many guys. Besides Holden, I only really see kids my age at church."

I bury my chuckle. "You go to *church*?"

"What's wrong with church?" she snarks.

"Nothing." Besides the fact that having full faith in an all-knowing, all-powerful, all-present being has about as much plausibility as Lucy's belief in *fate*.

Obviously, I don't share that opinion with Mia.

“So you don’t have a *type*,” I push.

“I guess not.”

“What about that Holden guy?”

“He’s my *best friend*.”

“So you’ve said.”

“Do you think *Laney*’s pretty?”

“I mean, if I didn’t look at her as a sister, sure,” I reply, shrugging.

Chewing the corner of her lip, she nods. “I mean, if I didn’t look at Holden as a brother, then yeah, I guess so.”

Jealousy is a bitch, and I hate the way it burns at my insides. I crack each knuckle. Slowly. “You think I could take him?”

She laughs once. “Honestly, no, and I don’t know why you’d want to.”

My eyes narrow. “So me and him, one-on-one, you think he’d kick my ass?”

She drops her head in her hands, her shoulders shaking with her laughter. “This is so pointless.”

“Why?” I poke a finger at her side, making her squeal. “Is he bigger than me?”

“Yes.”

Well, *shit*. “I mean *stronger* than me.”

“Yes.”

I start to poke her again, but she’s fast, too fast, and she slaps my hand away. “Why are we even having this conversation?”

“What if it depended on *what* we were fighting for?” I’m being such a boy, but growing up surrounded by as many brothers as I have, *everything* is a competition.

“What could you possibly, in any realistic scenario, both want that you’d come to blows over it?” she asks, her laughter waning.

I wait for her eyes to meet mine before saying, “You.”

Her smile’s gone now, replaced with shock. And then slowly, slowly, understanding dawns. “Leo,” she breathes out, and I want so badly to kiss her. It’s the perfect time. And I think she’ll let me. Maybe even kiss me back. But I don’t get a chance. I hesitate a beat too long, and her phone rings, breaking our stare.

She blinks, I blink, and *poof*, the moment’s gone.

The name *Holden* flashes on her phone, and she’s quick to answer, panic evident in her tone when she says his name, followed by, “What’s

wrong?”

It's five thirty in the morning, and there is no reason to be calling unless

—

“Wait. Slow down.”

My eyes narrow, questioning, while she holds a finger to her ear as if doing so will help her hear clearer. Useless, because there's nothing but silence around us.

“Hang on.” She moves around, her phone pressed tight to her ear. “The service is so bad here. Give me, like, ten minutes, and I'll call you back.” She hangs up a second later, her eyes frantic. “I'm sorry. I have to go.”

We rush home, and as soon as we're back through the gates, she drops her bike and pulls out her phone. I want to wait with her to make sure she's okay, but she assures me she'll be fine, that she just needs to talk to him.

Alone.

Whatever is said, it's enough to make her not show up the next morning.

Or the five mornings after that.

I never see her during that time, and she doesn't return my calls or texts.

And still, every morning at four thirty, I sit, waiting.

Forgotten,
abandoned,
discarded.

CHAPTER NINE

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LEO

ON THE SIXTH day of no Mia, I find myself on the couch, half concentrating on playing a video game with Logan, Lucas, and Garray (Luke's best friend), while Laney sits on the floor, knitting something probably meant for Lucas that I'm sure he won't appreciate.

The twins are in the yard, filming something on an old video camera they'd found, and Lachlan's in the kitchen with Virginia.

"Jesus Christ, Leo," Logan groans. "I'd rather play two v two with Laney on my team."

"Hey!" Laney shouts. "Remember that one time I got a kill?"

Lucas chuckles. "Yeah, your eyes were closed, and you were button-mashing."

"Still counts." Laney shrugs, focuses on her knitting again.

I throw the controller on the floor. "I don't want to play anymore."

"What else are you going to do?" Logan murmurs, throwing in an eye-roll. "Go to your room and rub one out?"

"You're so crass," Laney chastises.

"I'm so bored," Lucas groans, throwing his controller next to mine. "This is fucked."

"Language!" Virginia calls from the kitchen.

"Sorry," Luke replies, then flops down on the floor next to Laney.

"You have a car," Logan tells Luke. "You can leave at any time."

"And go where? There's nothing to *do* here," Luke retorts.

Garray scratches his nuts.

Laney says, "Gross."

And I heave out a sigh, wondering what Mia could possibly be doing to occupy her days. And questioning why I was no longer a part of them.

A knock on the door has us all looking toward the sound, but none of us make a move to get up.

"Who the hell knocks on the door?" Lucas mumbles.

"Your aunt Leslee," Laney answers.

All eyes go to Logan. "What did you do?" Luke asks him.

"Nothing!" Logan says, defensive.

Aunt Leslee is Dad's sister, and she's a hard-ass compared to Dad. When any of us kids get in trouble, *real* trouble, Dad sends us to stay with her. Logan's the one who gets in the most trouble, the *worst* trouble.

It isn't Aunt Leslee, though. It's Mia. She slowly opens the door when she must realize that no one was going to answer. Her gaze quickly scans the living room full of bodies before landing on me. My heart stutters, kicks into overdrive when she bites her lip, says, "Hey."

I can feel all eyes on me when I reply, "Hey."

Mia looks around the room again, her cheeks turning pink, before lowering her gaze. "Uh, sorry, I was... never mind."

Logan waits for the door to close behind her before letting out a snicker. "She's so weird," he says, low enough so that Virginia won't hear it. He has no idea that Virginia doesn't give two shits about her daughter. Only I know that, and that creates a pain in my chest that has me standing up, ignoring Logan's teasing when I open the front door and follow after her. She's at the bottom of the apartment steps when I catch up to her. I don't reach out, don't touch her like I want to. "You good?"

"Yeah, it's nothing," she says, rushing up the steps.

Obviously, it's not *nothing*. Mia's never just come to the house searching for me before. "You want to go to our spot?" I call out, stopping short of telling her that I miss her. Because that would be sad. And pathetic.

She stops halfway and slowly turns to me, shaking her head.

Disappointment fills me, and whatever physical reaction I have is apparent, because she starts back down toward me. "It's just... that spot is my happy place, and I don't want to ruin it."

"Okay," I rush out. "You want to just go for a walk or something?"

After a quick nod, she passes me and leads the way.

I want to tell her that I've been worried. That there have been so many times I had to talk myself out of simply knocking on her door to check in. I figure she needed time. Space. *Alone*. Just like that phone call that seems to have changed everything between us.

We walk.

In silence.

Through the yard.

Past the trees.

Until our flip-flops are off and we're ankle-deep in the lake.

Then she stops, turns to me. “What’s your greatest fear, Leo Preston?”

I’d checked out of the moment, so deep in my blank space, that I’d forgotten where I was and what I was doing. I blink hard and look down at her. Mia’s gaze penetrates mine, her dark hair moving with the wind, shifting around her face. A strand catches on the wetness of her lips, and I realize it now; I more than missed her. I’d felt empty without her presence; every hour of every day had become a never-ending void.

Her eyebrows rise, waiting, questioning, and I’ve forgotten what she asked.

“Huh?”

Mia shakes her head. “It’s okay. You don’t have to answer.” She starts to turn, but I grab her hand.

“No, I didn’t hear you.”

She repeats, almost hesitantly, “I asked you what your greatest fear was.”

I think about it a moment before replying, “That this is how I’m going to be for the rest of my life.”

Eyes narrowed, she asks, “What do you mean?”

With her hand still in mine, I walk us to the shore and sit down, facing the still, calm lake. Legs bent, I rest my forearms on my knees. “Sometimes, I worry that I’m not really *here*,” I admit. It’s only the second time I’ve said those exact words out loud. The first time was with Laney, but she didn’t quite understand.

I doubt Mia would either.

I add, “And I’m scared that I’m going to go through life feeling the same way. But, I guess, my biggest fear is that this *is* life. And I don’t really know if it’s enough for me.”

Mia’s quiet a moment before sucking in a breath. “Do you feel like life’s passing you by, and you’re just a side character, not the main cast?”

I swallow, hard, replaying her words over and over, and I was wrong. Mia *does* get it. Her explanation may have been oversimplified, and she may not understand *how* I feel, but she understands what I’m feeling. I face her. “I guess, yeah.” She frowns. It’s the most in-depth conversation I’ve ever had with anybody, and it feels so, so right that I’m sharing it with Mia.

She says, “I want to say something, but I don’t want it to take away from what you’re feeling, so—”

“Say it,” I push. “I want to know.”

“I think maybe you underestimate how much you put into the world.” Her gaze drops. “Every summer I’ve come here, you’ve been the main character in *my* story.”

I can’t help but smile, and that smile only widens when I catch her cheeks flame red as she looks away.

“What about you?” I ask, inconspicuously shifting closer. “What’s your greatest fear?”

She releases a breath, low and slow, her eyes doing that distant thing when she’s deep in thought. Fingers curled around the stray strands of grass beside her, she closes her fist and pulls out a clump. Roots and all. And then she rests them on her bare thighs, separating each blade one by one. “I have this recurring nightmare,” she starts, pausing to push down her emotions.

I sit taller, face her completely.

“I’m, like, five years old, and I’m in my grandpa’s truck. He takes me to this antique store in town, and he hands me some money and tells me to get whatever I want.” Her words are slow, methodical. “So I go through the aisles one by one, picking up random things every now and then. Then the store’s roof gets higher and higher, and the aisles get wider, or I’m getting smaller; I can’t be sure. But it feels endless. Every corner I turn brings me to another corner, and I can’t seem to find my way back to my grandpa, and I’m crying and calling out for him, and he never appears, and then I’m at a bay of windows looking out to the parking lot, and I can’t see my grandpa’s truck anywhere... and then I wake up.”

She sniffs once, wiping her nose with the back of her hand. Her eyes are glassy, soaked with a level of torment I’ll never understand. In my head, I run through all the different things I wish I could say, but know I can’t verbalize.

“Holden’s parents are getting a divorce,” she says, cutting through my thoughts. “His dad’s staying because of the farm, and he and his mom are leaving.” She turns to me, a single tear leaving a trail across her cheek. “That’s why he called me the other day, and I just—I’ve spent the past few days trying to understand why I’m being so selfish—”

“How are you—”

“All I can think is that they’re leaving *me*. Tammy—Holden’s mom—she’s the only mother I’ve ever known. She practically raised me along with my grandpa, and now... now I’m...” She takes a breath, and then another. “Holden’s my only friend, Leo, and we had plans. He promised that he’d

find a way to get us out of that town and that he'd take me with him, and he's breaking that promise." I push aside my jealousy and focus on her words, on her heartache. "And it's so selfish of me to think that, to throw that in his face when he's going through what he is, but I can't... I can't go to high school without him. I wouldn't even know what to do. We were supposed to go to school together, and then college, and then we were going to travel the world and actually start *living*." She wipes at her tears, now flowing freely. "He's been by my side since we were three years old, and I don't know who I am without him." A sob erupts from deep in her throat, and I finally, *finally* reach out and pull her into me. "How messed up is that?" she cries into my chest. "I don't know how to stand on my own."

"Mia..." I breathe out, trying to ignore the knot in my chest.

"And that's not even the part that I'm most afraid of," she says, shrugging out of my hold. She hugs her knees to her chest, her breaths uneven when she adds, "I'm terrified of being forgotten, Leo. Of people abandoning me."

"Like your parents?" I ask, voice gravelly from emotion.

She shakes her head. "I just feel like I latch on to people, whether they like it or not. My grandpa, then Holden and his mom, and then I come here thinking I'm going to start some amazing relationship with my mom, and she—she *hates* me."

"No, she doesn't, Mia. She's just—"

"And then *you*."

I rear back. "Me?"

"I latched on to you because she wasn't there, and you—"

"Like it," I cut in, grimacing as soon as the words leave me.

"What?"

I stumble over my thoughts. "I like being the main character in your story," I tell her. And I like *you*, I don't say aloud. "And I promise you, no matter what happens, I'll never, ever forget you, Mia."

CHAPTER TEN

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LEO

“No,” Mia snaps.

“Why not?”

“Because... no.” She’s holding firm on her response, her eyes narrowed, jaw tense.

“But why?”

“Because no is a complete answer, and I shouldn’t have to elaborate .”

“It’s not like a blowout; we’re just having a... *gathering* of sorts.”

She thumps my forehead with her palm.

“What the f— ow!” I rub at the spot.

“You’re talking to *me*, Leo. Do you think I know the difference between a blowout and a gathering? And no. Let’s talk about something else.”

“But I want you there.”

“And I don’t want to be there.”

“Why not?”

She growls. Lip snarl and all. And it takes everything in me not to laugh at her. “I’m two seconds away from throwing you off this ledge.”

I scoff. “Fine.”

We’ve been at the water tower for four hours, listening to music and talking about... I don’t even know. We’ve stopped caring about what time we get back to the house, only leaving when one of us gets tired or hungry. No one seems to question where we are or what we’re doing.

“You’re awfully cranky this morning, just FYI,” I edge, gripping onto the ledge a little tighter just in case she decides to push me off.

Mia sighs as she checks her phone. There’s a picture of her and who I assume is her grandpa as the wallpaper, but no notifications. “I didn’t sleep well,” she admits. “I argued with my grandpa, and I couldn’t stop thinking about it afterward.”

“Sucks,” I say, releasing the bar and tugging on her sweater to bring her closer to me. We’ve been a little more... *physical* since the day at the lake, but we’ve never crossed the line between friendship and *more*. I don’t think she’s quite ready for that stage, and to be honest, I’m not either. Besides, I like how we are at that moment, and I like *who* we are to each other. Still, I

find every excuse to be near her, to touch her somehow without it leading to actions we can't take back. "You want to talk about it?"

"He thinks I should still go ahead with my plans of going to a normal school, and I—I don't want to. Not without Holden."

I push aside the mountain of jealousy and ask, "Why does he want you to go?"

"He thinks if I don't, then I'll never get out."

"Get out?"

"Of that town. It's too small, and there's nothing there for me, but he thinks if I don't go to high school, I won't go to college, or I won't get a decent job. And he thinks I need to go to boost my confidence or something."

"You seem confident enough to me," I almost laugh.

She faces me. "That's because you bring out a side of me that no one else does." She says it so nonchalantly as if it holds no meaning, no weight, no depth. But I feel every word. Revel in it.

"Not even Holden?" I don't know why I ask that. I just... my brain, sometimes, I swear.

Mia sighs, grabbing my arm and pulling it around her shoulders so she can settle in beside me. It isn't the first time she's done it, and I hope it won't be the last. "He called last night."

"Yeah? How is he? What did he say?" If I'm honest, besides the fact that he's a staple in Mia's life, I give very few shits about this Holden guy. I only pretend to care for her sake.

"He said he misses me." *Gross*. "He's never said that before."

"Bet that was nice to hear, huh?" *Vomit*.

"It was. And then he belched into the phone, told me he had to take a dump, and hung up."

I chuckle. "Stellar guy."

"He really is."

Aaaand I'm done talking about him.

But not talking means silence, and silence allows my thoughts to race, playing havoc with my heart until I can feel it beating wildly in my chest.

It's not the first time the idea has come to me, but I'd kept it to myself, fearful of her response. I edge forward, trying to gain a reaction before I put it all out there. "Hey, when your grandpa comes to pick you up, can I meet him?"

Against my side, her body tenses. “Do you want to?”

“I wouldn’t ask if I didn’t.”

“You could have met him last year,” she says. “But you weren’t there.”

“Yeah...” I huff out a breath. “I’m not a fan of goodbyes. They kind of suck.”

She shuffles closer to me, and I hold her tighter. “I might have to start working summers from now on, so this year might be our final goodbye—at least in person, so yeah... that’s going to suck a heck of a lot.”

And... *Go Time*. “Unless you stay.”

She rears back, head tilted to look up at me, her brow dipped in confusion.

“Just hear me out, okay?” I pause, not really knowing what more I can add. “Stay.” It’s a single word—a *plea*.

“Leo, I can’t—”

“Stay,” I cut in. “You can go to high school here. I’ll be there. We’d be in the same grade. I could be your new Holden.” *Puke*. “And if I talk to my dad, I’m sure he’d let you stay in Lucy’s old room or something. She’ll be on campus.” I’m rambling, trying to voice all my reasons for her to stay before she can come back with one reason why she can’t. “And I’m sure there’s a bus or something that can take you back home to visit your grandpa, and it would make him somewhat happy, right? And this way... this way, we wouldn’t have to say goodbye.”

There.

I said it.

Everything that’s been on my mind is now laid out between us, and then I wait for her to counter or roll her eyes to let me know I’m stupid for even thinking it. I wait and I wait, and then finally, with tears in her eyes, she asks, her voice breaking, “You’d be my new Holden?”

I’d be more if she’d let me. I swallow my nerves and nod. “So?”

“So...” she says, releasing a pent-up breath. “Maybe.”

“Maybe?”

“Maybe,” she repeats, then looks away again. “Is that okay?”

My smile is stupid. “Well, a maybe isn’t a no, so that’s good. Because you know what they say about no. No is a complete sentence, which means that I couldn’t add to my convincing argument, and if you’d said no, then I’d be throwing myself off this ledge.”

Mia giggles, the single sound flipping my stomach. “You sure talk a lot for someone who doesn’t really say anything.”

I laugh. “That’s because you bring out a side of me that no one else does.”

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

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MIA

I PROMISED my grandpa I'd try one semester of "normal" school and, if it didn't work out, he promised *me* that I could come right home, no questions asked. But, since I wouldn't be seeing him much during that time, I wanted to spend the rest of the summer with him, which meant saying goodbye to Leo—but only for a little while.

It was strange... how so many things could change in such little time.

Puberty, friendships, family.

Mr. Preston was on board with the plan, allowing me to stay in the basement, which had its own bathroom. He even mentioned that he was *happy* to have me.

My mom—on the other hand—was another story. For some reason, she assumed that me staying there would add to her responsibility of, you know, being my *mother*. I'd gone twelve years without her. I'd do just fine. When I told her that, she threatened to call my dad about my "insolence."

I doubt she even had his number.

I doubt he'd even care.

IT WAS good to spend time with my grandpa. I didn't realize how much I'd missed the little things about our daily lives, like making him a coffee in the afternoon and sitting with him on the porch, him in his rocking chair and me on the porch swing. Music played in the background while he told me about things that happened during my time away. He only kept a handful of friends since retiring, so most of his stories involved trips to the store, or the bank, or the church, and he'd relay almost word for word entire conversations he had with people. I sometimes worried that he was lonely, but he lived such a peaceful, quiet life, and he seemed so content to just... exist.

While being there *felt* like home, I couldn't help the constant awareness of the emptiness that existed within me. Every time a car drove by, I'd get that hint of excitement to see Tammy or Holden, and it took me a moment to remember that they were no longer there. I couldn't just hop on my bike

and pedal the ten minutes to see them. The tire swing on the tree by the driveway—assembled by Tammy and put up by my grandpa—still had our names etched into the rubber, the memories of our childish laughter continuously plaguing my mind. For now, they were staying with Tammy’s parents in Tennessee. Tammy had spent her entire adult life being a mother and a wife, and now... now she didn’t know what to do. Holden would call every day and do his best not to show how much the move and the separation were affecting him, and I’d do the same. But I wasn’t as strong as him. I hadn’t been much of anything without him. Every time I’d cry, he’d hand the phone to his mom. And then I’d cry some more. Every time we got to the goodbyes, I had to stop myself from asking them to please, *please*, remember me.

And then there was Leo. He called occasionally, but mainly, he kept to text messages. Short ones. Ones that didn’t hit any cord, even though I wanted them to.

I was gone for four weeks, and really, I had no idea what he was doing during that time, and technically, I didn’t have a say. Still, it didn’t stop me from missing him. From waking up at 4:20 without an alarm, and wishing that he’d be there, waiting at the bottom of the stairs with that sly smile on his face, ready for another sometimes silent, sometimes informative adventure. The butterflies were the strongest those first couple of minutes with him, and they never really disappeared. Just faded. Slightly.

Obviously, I was crushing on him. *Hard*. But I didn’t know the first thing about what to do with those feelings, and now that we had at least a semester to work it out, I wasn’t all that worried about time.

“I’M PROUD OF YOU, *BABA*,” Papa says, both hands on the wheel as he focuses on the highway in front of us. “I know it’s tough for you with Holden gone. You were always his rational voice, and he was always your strength, so I know how hard it is to put yourself out there, to go out of your comfort zone.”

I squirm in my seat.

“This is the best thing for you, I think. It’s not good for you to limit yourself. You’re at the age where you make lifelong friends and build relationships, and you become who you *want* to be.” He glances at me,

smiling. “And you—you can be anything you want. You can be a lawyer or a doctor or the President of the United States of America.”

A giggle bursts out of me.

“I’m serious,” he says, turning up the radio. “A Change is Coming” by Sam Cooke fills the cab, fills my heart with joy when my grandpa chuckles. “This is America,” he shouts over the music, his accent thick. “Land of the free. Home of the brave.” I lean into his touch when he strokes my cheek. “You’ve always been the bravest girl I know, Mia Mac. And I know you’re going to make me proud.”

I lied to Leo when I told him that my greatest fear was being forgotten.

My greatest fear was disappointing the one man who never stopped believing in me.

WE’RE a half-hour away from the Preston house when my phone alerts me to a text.

Leo: *So I was thinking about school. I don’t think I can be your Holden.*

I stare at the message and read the words over and over repeatedly, the pain in my chest making it impossible to breathe. I glance at my grandpa, hoping he can’t see the current state of my imminent meltdown. *Why? Why* would he tell me this *now*? He had four weeks to change his mind, to tell me how he felt. I can’t ask my grandpa to turn around, that would be... *pathetic*. And he’d be so disappointed.

Leo *knows*... he knows I can’t do this without him.

Hands shaking, my thumbs fly over the screen in rage as I reply:

Mia: *Are you serious right now?*

I watch the three dots appear and reappear as he types out a response, and with each second that passes, I can feel my airways closing, the heat behind my eyes and nose unbearable.

Leo: *Well, you said Holden's just your friend, right? I don't want to be just your friend, Mia. I want to be more. I want to be your Leo.*

“Oh my god,” I murmur, dropping my phone on my lap.

“You okay, *baba*?” Papa asks.

I nod, my cheeks hurting with the force of my smile.

The rest of the drive seems to drag on, and when we finally pull into the Preston driveway, the first and *only* thing I want to do is find Leo. I don't know what I'll do when I see him. I'll probably hug him and pretend as if his text never happened until he's willing to bring it up himself.

Tom is the first to come out of the house with little Lachlan holding on to his leg. He comes down to the car to greet us, hugging me and shaking my grandpa's hand. “Thank you,” Papa tells him. “You giving my *baba* this opportunity means so much.” Then he reaches into his pocket and pulls out his wallet. “I give some money now, some later.”

Tom lifts his hands. “No, sir. There's no need.”

Papa's a proud man, and there's no way he's going to allow me to stay here for free.

They continue their back and forth while I look over Tom's shoulder, up to Leo's bedroom window, and around the yard. I can't see Leo anywhere.

“Okay, time to go,” Papa says, bringing me back to the present. He hugs me tight and says in my ear, “You be good for the man. He's a good man.”

With a smile, I hug him back. “I'll come home soon. It's only two bus rides.”

He pulls away before I'm ready. “You settle in first, okay?”

I nod.

“I put money in your backpack,” he says, opening his truck door.

“Papa, you didn't have to—”

He holds up a hand, shushing me. “For school supplies, clothes, whatever you need. Okay?”

“Yes, sir.”

He turns to me again, his eyes settling on mine. Then he reaches out, holds my face in both his hands. “I'll miss you,” he says, placing a kiss on my forehead. “*Szeretlek.*”

“I love you, too, Papa.”

I didn't expect it to hurt as much as it does—watching him drive away. I don't think it hit me until he was no longer in view. I'd been so distracted with Holden leaving and these new feelings I was experiencing with Leo, that it never occurred to me that I was going to be apart from the one person who'd been my constant.

"You'll be okay, Mia," Tom says, throwing an arm around me and bringing me to him. "I'll take good care of you. I promise." I hold back a sob, drowning in his words, because as much as I appreciate them, I wish they'd come from the woman standing in the distance, watching me fall apart.

"Thank you." I pull back, wiping at my eyes before I face him. "Is Leo here?"

Tom shakes his head. "The older boys are at some end-of-summer party." He looks at his watch. "They'll be back in a couple of hours."

"Oh." *Oh.*

"I'll bring your bags to the basement," he says. "Are you hungry?"

"No. Is it okay if I just go for a walk? I've been sitting in the car a while."

He smiles down at me. "Mia, this is your home now. You don't need to ask permission to do anything."

My *home*.

This is *my* home now, and I can't wait for it to start feeling as such.

CHAPTER TWELVE

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MIA

I WALK around the property for a while and end up at the lake. I don't come here too often, because the older boys are here a lot, and most of the time, they're not alone. The last time I was here, I caught Lucas with a girl. Their mouths were locked, their hands in places I can't even describe without flushing.

But it's quiet now, no one around, and I find myself smiling when the dock comes into view. Light on my feet, I walk over to the spot where Leo's wallet had landed the first summer I was here. I've never asked him about the photograph, and he's never mentioned it.

It's a secret I'll take to the grave.

After removing my flip-flops, I sit on the edge of the dock, let my feet dangle in the water, and I read the text from Leo, again and again. I haven't replied, not knowing what to say, so it just sits there, in limbo, making me feel as if I'm more than I am, bolder and greater than I am—and it's that feeling, that momentous, significant surge of hope that has me looking around, making sure I'm alone.

For the first time since I became truly aware of how others see me, creating an insecurity I can't fight, I allow myself a moment of freedom. Getting to my feet, I strip out of my denim shorts and tee, and I run. I run the length of the dock, the hope bubbling in my chest sparking adrenaline within me. I laugh as I jump and belly-flop into the water. I don't feel the pain. Only the glee that sweeps through me as I swim freely, the water cascading around me.

I float on my back, my eyes stinging when I make direct contact with the sun.

I am free.

I am brave.

In that moment, I'm everything my grandpa wants me to be.

If Holden were here, he'd be laughing with me, clapping and encouraging me. I can hear it—his voice—and I can picture him on the dock with his hands cupped around his mouth as he shouts, "Yeah, Mia

Mac. You bad bitch!” I laugh harder. And then I stop. Because he isn’t here, and soon enough, he won’t be anywhere.

I don’t know how long I spend in the water, lost in my own thoughts, in the memories of my best friend.

It wasn’t just that tire swing we’d carved our names into. If you walked around town long enough, you’d see the words *Holden + Mia* written on almost every surface. He once told me he did it so we could leave a trail of our past and the legacy of our existence in that town. If you looked hard enough, you’d find other names, too, faded in time. *Joseph + Tammy*.

My dad, his mom.

I wonder if my time with the Prestons would leave anything behind, or if, once gone, I’d simply fade away. It seems such a shame that this place could hold so many memories for me, mainly of the time I spend with Leo, and yet, there would be nothing to show that

Mia
Was
Here.

With that thought in mind, I dip under the water and brush my hand along the bottom, keeping my eyes open as I search for a rock. Something small and sharp. When I find one, I resurface, noting the sun beginning to set. I wade over to the dock and duck beneath it. I’ll mark my place. Right here. Where I discovered my courage and took an oath to honor my grandpa. I etch in the strokes, one by one. *M* followed by *I* followed by *A*. And then I take that courage a step further, mix it with hope, and put the rock to the worn wood. I scratch + *L* and get to the first stroke of the *E* when I hear a car heading toward me. I freeze, listen.

I’ve spent so long carving in the letters that the sun has almost set. At first, I think it’s Mr. Preston looking for me. But one door slams, and then another, and I hear voices, male ones.

“That party sucked.” It’s Lucas.

And then his best friend, Garra. “All the parties here are beginning to suck.”

The wood above my head rattles when they step onto the dock. I cover my mouth, not wanting to make a sound. I don’t want them to know I’m there.

I try not to move, and close my eyes, wishing they’d leave.

From the footsteps and shadows, I work out that there are three bodies on the dock. It takes a minute for the fourth to join them. They're *all* here. Lucas, Garray, Logan, and Leo.

My clothes are still on the dock. If they see them, they'll figure it out. They'll call for me, and I'll have to reveal myself. *In my underwear*. I would die a thousand deaths.

I pray to *God*, an actual prayer; *please, please, please leave*.

My heart races, pulsing in my eardrums.

Thump, thump.

Thump, thump.

"I can't believe the summer's almost over," Lucas says, and Logan speaks up.

"I fucking hate school. I can't wait to quit."

"As if Dad's going to let you *quit*," Lucas scoffs.

"He will. We already talked about it. When I turn sixteen, I can work for him, and all I have to do is get my GED."

"Think Dad will let me do the same?" Hearing Leo's voice for the first time, in person, in almost a month, makes the thumping in my ears dissipate. Just for a second. I open my eyes, try to peek through the gaps, but I can't see much beyond the darkness.

"Nah," Lucas says. "You actually got brains, unlike this dumbass." A slap sounds through the air, and Logan yelps.

"Fuck off." Above me, the wooden planks thunder as footsteps run across the dock, back and forth. I assume Logan's chasing Lucas.

And then it's quiet, just for a moment, and I try to settle my heavy breathing.

"Did you have fun at the party?" It's Garray talking, and there's only one person he could be speaking to.

Leo responds, "It was okay."

"I saw you walking out with that girl—Luna, right?"

If it were possible to hear a heart dropping, a stomach twisting, it would've broken through the sound of Leo's silence.

"She's what? A senior this year?" Garray laughed out. "Jesus, man. You're not even a freshman, and you're already catching the older chicks."

Logan and Lucas give up on their fight and join the conversation. "Leo's gonna have a field day in high school," Lucas says. "Girls love that whole quiet, broody thing he's got going for him."

Leo doesn't respond.

It's Logan who does. "It's sure a step up from that *fat-ass*, Mia."

Laughter erupts.

And I feel the first streak of liquid heartache leave me.

Lucas says, "I mean, she was nothing to look at when she first got here, but every year she just gets worse and worse."

"Her braces aren't doing her any favors," Logan says through a chuckle.

"And her acne..." Garraay this time.

"Oh my god! It's so bad," Logan laughs out.

Then Lucas: "And poor Leo. Dad's put it on him to watch over her at school."

Another round of laughter.

"I take it back," Lucas adds. "He's gonna have a shitty time with the girls with *fat-ass*, *brace face* around, hanging on to him everywhere he goes."

"And also—fuck her for taking the basement," Logan snaps. "*I* wanted that."

Leo says nothing.

Does nothing.

Logan continues, "It's not my fucking fault that she has no *home*. Or that her parents don't want her."

Leo's silence is deafening.

"Yeah," says Lucas. "It's bad enough Vagina's around, but at least she's not there at night. How are we supposed to be comfortable in our own house with her there?"

"It's okay, Leo." Logan busts out a laugh. "She won't be able to sneak into your room at night. We'd all hear that fat heifer coming up the stairs." The dock shakes with every one of his thumping steps, mocking me. Loose pieces of the wood crack, splinter, rain down on me. And all I can do is grip onto the post, letting the tears fall, the force of my withheld sobs making it impossible to breathe.

Just breathe.

After the hysterics settle, Lucas says, "Let's go. I'm fucking starving. Hopefully, heifer's mom made something decent."

I release a shallow breath, try to compose myself as their footsteps fade.

I want to die.

If I had the will to drown myself, I would do it.

I wait until the car doors slam shut, until the engine starts, and I can no longer hear it to chance a peek around the dock and make sure the taillights are gone. When I'm positive I'm alone again, I struggle to lift myself onto the dock, my muscles weak, cold from being in the water so long. I start toward my discarded clothes, a sob escaping when I hear the *thud thud thud* beneath my feet.

"Mia?"

Every inch of me locks up, suspended in pain.

It's Leo. Using my arms, I cover as much of myself as possible, not wanting to turn to him, and search for my clothes in the semi-darkness.

"Mia?" His voice is louder now, closer, and I want to turn to him, ask him *why now?* Why find his voice now?!

"How long have you been—"

"Where are my clothes?" I seethe, my vision too clouded with tears to see straight. I'm shivering, my teeth clattering as I walk away from him.

"Whoa, hang on." His hands are on my shoulders, and I shrug them off. They feel dirty on my flesh, contaminated with the words of hate and disgust spat like venom from his own blood. "What the hell are you—"

I walk the length of the dock, my eyes frantic, my heart the same. "Where are they?"

"I don't—"

I turn, shielding my disgusting body from him. Leo's eyes—so dark, so *twisted*—land on my bare skin, at the parts of me I want to strip from my bones.

"Don't look at me!" I scream, cringing when my words echo around us. I try to calm down. I can't. "Where the *fuck* are my clothes?"

Leo's eyes widen at my curse, and he takes a step back, his hands falling to his sides. "I think Luke brought them back. He thought—"

A sob retches through my entire body.

"Here," Leo says, removing his hoodie and passing it to me.

In one swift move, I shrug it on, but it does nothing to cover my fear, my shame, my *ugliness*.

He huffs out a breath. "Mia, I—"

"Shut up," I rush out, my voice quiet. I hate that he's here, that he's witnessing my downfall. I look around, my mind too numb to think straight.

“Which way is the house?” He chews his bottom lip before reaching for my hand. I pull back, bile caught in my throat. “Please, don’t touch me.”

His fists ball. “I’ll walk you back.”

His hoodie goes down to my knees, the sleeves way past where my arms end, and I use it to wipe away the evidence of my pain. “Just point to it,” I grind out. And through the ache in my heart and destruction in my soul, I tell him, “I don’t want you near me.”

For a moment, I swear he feels what I feel. He sees, inside me, that I’m fading. As if the light within me is dimming. And he’s the one at the switch.

I should never have let him control me.

He lifts his hand, points east, and I push past him, my knees weak as I walk barefoot toward the house. He’s with me the entire time, one step behind, and I *hate* his presence.

But not nearly as much as I hate myself.

When the house comes into view, I don’t know where to go. My mom would be in the apartment, and I don’t... I don’t even live there anymore. I live in the main house, in the basement, where Logan wants to be.

I can’t go in there. I can’t stomach having to face any of them.

And Lucas—he took my clothes. My phone was in the pocket of my shorts.

Panic swirls, biting at my organs, and I wish there were a way to get rid of it all.

I stop in my tracks and turn to Leo. Surprised by my sudden movement, he knocks into me and grabs my elbows to stop me from falling. “My phone was in my pocket,” I tell him. “You need to go inside and get it.”

He wipes at his eyes, and I realize now that he might have been crying, too.

While my cries are loud, uncontrolled; his are silent.

Just like him.

“You *live* here, Mia. You can get—”

“Please,” I beg.

He nods, hands in his pockets as he slowly makes his way inside the house. I hide in the shadows, in the darkness of my thoughts.

He returns a moment later, my phone in his hand. After taking it from him, I grab my bike from under the apartment stairs. Still barefoot, in only my wet underwear and his hoodie, I ride past him, the bike wobbling

beneath me. “Don’t follow me,” I tell him, proud of the feigned strength that comes with my order.

I don’t know where I’m going or what I’m doing. I just need to go.

Once off the property, the roads open up, and I pedal, taking corner after corner, with no destination in mind. I find myself at the steps of the church, praying for a way out of my head, out of my darkness.

I can leave, I think to myself, wiping at the tears that don’t seem to quit. There’s nothing for me here. There’s nothing for me anywhere. I can leave this town

... I can leave this *life*.

My name is scrawled on surfaces where I’ve been, but my time on this earth will leave nothing behind.

I can go to the tower, my once happy place, but now it’s scarred with memories of false hope and forgotten promises.

I can jump from the top.

I won’t even feel it.

And no one will miss me.

This fat-ass, brace face heifer.

No one will care.

Holden will be sad, but he’ll get over it.

And Papa...

I release a loud sob, my hand to my chest to try to heal the pain.

Papa will be *ruined*. All his hopes. All his dreams. All the things he wished for me...

I can’t leave him behind.

But I can’t go back to him, either.

I can’t disappoint him.

I suck in a breath, let it out slowly, slowly, and then I repeat the actions, over and over, all thoughts on my grandpa, until I find the calm, the courage to pick up my phone and go through the contacts. I press dial before I can think twice and hold the phone to my ear.

A stranger answers.

I swallow my pride. “Dad?”

PART TWO

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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LEO

MY EYES ARE PLAYING tricks on me. They must be. Because I've seen nothing but green for the past half-hour. I blink hard and check the map on my phone again. I've been driving for almost three hours, and I'm still fifteen minutes away from my destination.

Dad was the one to offer me an out.

An escape from reality.

I'm not sure how spending the summer before junior year helping some old man fix up his house is going to help, but here I am.

"It'll get you away from all of this," he'd said. "*All of this*" was the aftermath of Laney, my best friend, almost dying at the hands of her ex-boyfriend, a guy who decided to unload numerous bullets into her. And Lucas, my older brother, Laney's now *boyfriend*, being too fucking thick in the head to realize it was happening.

I was angry and not the type of anger that my dad was used to. It wasn't the type that brewed and brewed, like a fucking pressure cooker with no valve. I wasn't going to just explode one day, and then it'd all be over. No, this anger was constant, never-ending.

And I was terrified of it.

I was scared of how I was feeling, of how little control I had over it. And I was scared for my family because they were scared of me.

So, I did what I always do.

I checked out.

Locked myself away.

Barely left my room.

Barely ate.

Barely spoke.

Until Dad came to me with this proposal. "I know it's tough, having to be here with Lucas and Laney." Dad and Logan thought I was in love with Laney. I wasn't. They assumed I was jealous of Luke. That was far from the fucking truth. But the truth would be too hard for them to hear, so I let them believe whatever they wanted. Sometimes, I even encouraged it.

"I don't want you to think that I'm sending you away," Dad had said.

“I don’t,” I’d replied, my voice scratchy from lack of use.

“I just think it’ll be good for you. You’ll have some space to clear your thoughts and something to keep your mind busy.”

He looked at me then, *really* looked at me. And I could see the pain in his eyes, the torment. “All of this” wasn’t easy on him, either. Three of his sons had been there that night. Logan even witnessed the crime. And Laney... Laney was like a daughter to him, and not once had anyone ever asked if *he* was okay.

So, I’d agreed to go.

For him.

AS SOON AS the old farmhouse comes into view, I realize just how neglected it had been. From the gravel road, I can see the old wooden siding rotting and the multiple layers of paint peeling. The gutters have seen better days, and the posts holding up the front porch are *barely* doing their job.

It’ll take me all summer to replace and repair them, and maybe that’s a good thing. Though, I don’t know how I’m supposed to do all this on my own. The house itself looks to be sitting on acres and acres of the same green pastures I’d been passing. Next to it is a giant barn in similar condition to the house. Everything seems to be falling apart.

When I pull into the driveway, I notice an older man sitting in a rocking chair on the porch. He stands when he sees me and raises his hand in a small wave. He’s exactly how I pictured him: gray hair, gray beard, stooped posture. He’s wearing a red flannel shirt and worn jeans held up by suspenders that stretch as he makes his way down the porch steps.

Once my truck’s stopped, I hop out and shake his hand. “You must be Leo,” he says, his tone deep, words accented.

“Yes, sir.”

His hands are rough, similar to my dad’s, most likely from years of manual labor.

“I’m John.” He releases my hand and starts up the porch steps. “Thanks for coming.”

“It’s no problem, sir.” I don’t know how many details Dad gave him about *why* I’m here, so I add, “I appreciate you letting me stay.”

He sits back in his rocking chair, pointing to the porch swing. “Sit.”

“It’s okay,” I assure. “I’ve been sitting for three hours straight.”

Music plays from inside the house, floating out of an open window. “Lean on Me” by Bill Withers fills my ears, and I’m quick to push away the memories of a girl, a water tower, and the summers I wasted falling for her.

“Yes, long drive,” he groans, getting to his feet again. “I’ll show you your room.” He leads me into the house, the hint of coffee and old newspaper permeating through the thick, dust-covered air. It’s dark inside, the curtains drawn, and it’s... bland. All the furniture matches—if different shades of *tan* counts as matching—and nothing is decorating the walls, the floors. To the right of the doorway is a basic kitchen, to the left, the living room. Directly ahead is a short, narrow set of stairs. John holds on to the railing as he slowly climbs each one, his breaths getting louder and heavier with every step. The house is a split-level, so it’s only six stairs instead of the usual twelve. The narrow walkway opens up to a landing with another tan couch and an old box television. He leads me to a room off the landing. “Your room,” he says, turning to me, his bushy beard shifting with his smile. He points to the door beside the bedroom. “Bathroom.” Then he points to a door. “That leads to the attic—the *no-go zone*.”

“Got it.” With a nod, I look around the space, my home for the summer. “Where do you sleep?”

“Below,” he says. “Stairs off the living room.”

“Right.”

“Is it okay for you?”

“Absolutely.” I nod again. “All I need is a bed.”

“Yes,” he says, pointing a finger at me. “Your *apa* said you don’t need much.”

“*Apa*?”

“Father.” I make a mental note to look up *apa* on my phone and translate it, so I know where he’s from. “Anyway,” he huffs. “You settle in, rest, look around if you want. Dinner’s at six thirty.”

“Oh, you don’t have to feed me,” I rush out. “I can go into town or—”

“Tomorrow, we start work,” he cuts in. “But tonight, we eat together.”

I force a smile. “Yes, sir.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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LEO

EVER SINCE LANEY came to the house for the first time and beat Lucas in a race, he'd put everything into running track... all so he could impress her. They were ten years old, and he's loved her from the moment he met her. Or, at least, that's the story Luke likes to tell.

Obviously, I haven't lived his life, so I can't speak his truths, but—if you ask me, he's full of shit.

Anyways... running has always been Lucas's thing. For him, running is a sport—a competition. Or at least it was.

After almost losing Laney, he seems to have given up on it.

When it was just Laney and me, she confided that she hated that he no longer ran and that he spent every waking moment of his life taking care of her. I wanted to tell her *good*. It's the least he could fucking do. But all I said was, "Sucks."

I don't run for the same reasons he did. I run to escape, to physically and mentally exhaust myself until my body and every living thing inside of it no longer functions, no longer *thinks*. Thinking creates the memories, the anger, the rage—all caused by the regret.

I WOKE up at 4:20, no alarm needed. John didn't mention what time he wanted us to start work, so I waited until around six, and when there was no sign of life, I slipped on my running gear and stepped out. As soon as I opened the front door, the morning sun blasted through my irises. It took a moment for them to focus, and when they did, the only thing I could see was an ocean of green. Tucking the house key that John had given me during last night's dinner into my sock, I hit play on my phone, attached by a strap to my arm, and adjust my earbuds. "Sucker For Pain" abuses my eardrums as I step off the porch.

I start slow, but it doesn't take long for me to find the rhythm, for my legs to work on muscle memory alone. I don't keep track of time or distance. I just run. Back home, I'd have to slow at corners or watch for cars or cracks in the sidewalk. Here, there's nothing but a level road that

goes on and on and on. I run until my body caves. And then I stop, turn around, and start again.

By the time I get back to the house, it's almost seven thirty. The front door's already open with soft music playing from an old stereo. The smell of coffee fills the air, fills my lungs, and I look around for John. He's not anywhere I can see, so I climb the stairs, two at a time, and head straight for the shower.

I open the door, and my eyes bug out, my pulse halts, and my jaw... my jaw's on the goddamn floor. The once-naked girl is now wrapping a towel around her, and her mouth is moving, but I can't make out what she's saying. Basic instinct tells me to lick the dryness off my lips, and so I do, trying hard not to focus on the girl's smooth, pale shoulders; her wet, dark hair creating an illusion of oil spilled on untouched sand.

An open hand flies toward me, and I duck it just in time.

Light brown eyes, wide and filled with fury, and then her lips... the perfect shade of pink. I zone in on the lips, a hint of familiarity flicking at my brain, like static electricity buzz, buzz, buzzing across every cell, every vein.

"Get out!" I hear over Lil Wayne shouting in my ears.

A hand shoves at my shoulder, pushing me back, and then the door slams an inch from my nose.

For the first time since I opened the door, I blink. Exhale. Try to force air back into my lungs.

I'm unaware of time passed when the door opens again. I haven't moved a muscle. The girl's dressed now and her eyes... those lips...

Mia.

I don't know if I say it out loud, but she shakes her head and reaches up, her hand brushing against my cheek.

My eyes drift shut.

All those thoughts, all those memories I've spent two fucking years trying to ignore, trying to fight—they hit. All at once. Like a punch to the gut, a match to an inferno.

Lil Wayne fades, and she says my name.

I open my eyes.

She's holding up my earbud between us, one eyebrow quirked. "Jeez. Stare much?"

It had always been my choice not to speak up, or speak in general, but right now... I can't find my voice.

I can't even find my damn equilibrium.

She picks up my hand, drops the earbud in my palm, and then rushes down the stairs. "Papa!"

I follow.

Because I can't *not*.

Mia is *here*.

John is her *papa*.

And how the *fuck* didn't I figure that out?

John appears from somewhere in the living room. "What's wrong, *baba*?"

"You said you had a boy helping with the house..." Her voice has changed, deepened a little. Matured in a way you wouldn't notice if you spoke to someone often.

"Yes," John points to me. "That's The Boy." He's looking at her like, *duh*, and I'm looking at her like...

Like I did when I was thirteen years old, through the screen of my sister's phone as I took the picture... a picture I still hold on to almost four years later.

"You didn't tell me it was—" Mia starts, and then looks over at me. I don't know what she sees, but the anger in her voice seems to fade, just a tad. "Is he staying here?" she asks her grandpa, though she's still looking at me. "At the house?"

"Yes," John answers, and it's clear he has no idea who Mia and I are to each other... or *were*... once upon a time. "You okay, *baba*?"

Mia nods, her throat bobbing with her swallow. "Yeah." She shakes her head, droplets falling from her hair onto the wooden floor. "I'm fine."

She's *fine*.

I, on the other hand, am *not*.

Strong fingers grasp at my shoulders, bringing me back to the moment. To reality. "Okay," John almost shouts. "Shower first, then we work."

It takes an incredible amount of effort to peel my eyes away from Mia and face her grandpa. "Yes, sir."

But I don't move. The room does, though. The walls—they slowly move in on me, closer and closer, and the air shifts, thicker and thicker.

“Okay... so *go*,” John urges. And so I do. It’s just one foot in front of the other. I’d been doing it all damn morning, and none of those steps had felt as heavy as the few I take to go up the stairs. In a daze, I go to my room and grab a change of clothes, and when I come back out, Mia’s hand is on the door of the no-go zone, her body half turned to me. “I didn’t know you’d be here.” There’s no inflection in her tone. No anger. No *joy*. But I see it in her eyes—in the stillness of her stare. It’s the same way she looked at me the last time I saw her.

At least this time, there are no tears.

My mouth opens, closes, and the only thing I can think to say is the same thing I said only minutes ago. “Sorry.”

And then I get in the bathroom, close the door behind me. Lock it. I grip onto the sink, my shoulders hunched, my chest rising and falling with each forced breath.

Mia is here.

And *here* is her home.

And I’ve never been more terrified in my life.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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LEO

MY MIND IS A RACETRACK, my thoughts the cars, around and around and around. I try to focus on the task at hand—at the blurred numbers stamped onto the measuring tape right in front of my eyes. A bead of sweat streaks down my temple, across my jaw, and I wipe it away with my shoulder. “So?” John calls, sitting on the rocking chair on the porch. He has a pencil in one hand, a small notepad in the other, waiting for me to call out the measurements.

Technically, I don’t have a problem reading numbers. It’s letters that fuck me over, but right now—I can’t make sense of anything.

“You hungry?” John asks, and I shake my head. “You hot?” Another head shake. “You need a break?”

“I’m okay, sir.”

I’m fully aware that he’s looking at me. I’m also aware of *how* he’s looking at me. He’s probably questioning my ability to perform basic tasks and wondering why the hell, out of all his boys, my dad decided to send me. I occasionally catch my dad looking at me the same way when I work on his crew. He never says anything. He’s used to my “issues.”

This isn’t like those times, though. I’m not “checked out.” In fact, I’m *over-sensitized*. I can still feel Mia’s touch, her eyes on mine, the smell of her shampoo, or whatever the hell it was that had her smelling so damn good. To be honest, I’m reliving her standing in front of me. *Naked*. And I can’t seem to get the image out of my head.

If John knew I was thinking about his granddaughter the way I am, he’d probably kick my ass out, and he’d have every right.

At fifteen, I sat next to Mia on that water tower, and, yeah, I had similar thoughts. But they didn’t go as far as what I’d just witnessed. I used to imagine what it would be like to kiss her, hold her hand, maybe even touch her in certain ways, certain places. But now? It’s been two years, and I’ve had *more* experience with the physical shit. Add all that to the fact that all of those “experiences” were my way of trying to emotionally connect with someone the way I did with Mia and *fuck*. I’m screwed, and I have no idea how to *unscrew* myself.

It's only been three hours since she locked herself away in what I assume is her room, and I have the entire summer left. I don't know how the hell I'm going to make it.

"Maybe some water?" John asks, pulling my thoughts away from his naked granddaughter.

He's still looking at me as if I'm incompetent, and I really need to make more of an effort. "Yeah, that might help," I mumble, retracting the measuring tape just as a beat-up truck pulls into the driveway. The sun glares off the windows, so I can't see who's inside, but the obnoxious honking pisses me off. A moment later, a guy steps out, his dirty-blond hair hidden beneath a cap pulled low on his brow. He cups his hand around his mouth and looks up at the peak of the house. "Mia Mac!"

The reaction is immediate. First a squeal, then thunderous footsteps, and then the screen door flies open, rebounding off John's rocking chair. Mia doesn't even notice her grandpa as she runs down the porch steps toward the open arms of Obnoxious Horn Honker. She practically jumps on him, and he's too late to catch her. *Weak*. They both land on the dirt, he on his back and Mia straddling his torso.

Jealousy burns a hole in my chest, and I should look away. I know I should. But I can't.

"Jesus, Mia," the guy laughs out. "Happy to see me much?"

She has both hands pressed against his cheeks. "I could kiss your entire face."

He grimaces, tries pushing her off of him. "Please don't."

Mia raises a fist. "I could punch your entire face."

The guy chuckles, his grin wide. "Please don't do that either."

John's standing next to me now, a low rumble of laughter making his shoulders bounce. "*Baba*, let the boy go."

"Yeah, *baba*," mocks the guy, his hands on Mia's shoulders as he shoves her to the side. She rolls off of him and onto her back, and she's smiling, laughing in a way I'd never seen. Never heard. The guy gets to his feet and offers her his hand. And when she looks up at him, her hair curtaining her face, I see a version of her that I'd only been privy to a few times.

She once told me that I brought out a side of her that no one else does, but she lied. *This* Mia, this confident, carefree girl currently dusting the dirt off her clothes, existed prior. And the guy picking leaves out of her hair brought it out of her way before I came along.

“It’s good to see you, Holden,” John says, his arms crossed as he watches them.

Mia looks up at him as if realizing for the first time that they have an audience, and that audience includes *me*. Her cheeks redden as Holden makes his way over to us. He shakes hands with John and says, “What’s good, Papa John?”

“Everything is good now,” John responds. “I’ve missed seeing you two together. How’s your *any*?”

Holden glances at me quickly and disregards me just as fast. “Mom’s good. She misses you, though.”

“What about me?” Mia calls from behind him. She jumps on his back, and this time, he catches her. Legs wrapped around Holden’s waist, his arms locked beneath her knees, she leans forward so she can look at him. “Does she miss me?”

“Doubt it.” Holden chuckles. “She never even mentions you.”

“Liar,” Mia retorts, and she can’t stop smiling at him.

“This is Leo,” John tells Holden, and suddenly, I’m standing taller, sizing him up.

“Hey, man,” he says, nodding in greeting. “I’d shake your hand, but…” He adjusts Mia’s legs, lifting her higher on his back. His grin falters, his eyes widening slightly. “Wait. Leo?” His gaze shifts between John and me. “As in Leo Pre—” Mia covers his mouth with one hand, the other on his forehead, pulling his head back.

“We’re gonna go, Papa,” she says, teeth gritted.

Holden curses beneath her palm, and she lets go of him the same time he releases her. They walk over to his truck, where he opens the driver’s side door, and Mia gets inside, slides over to the passenger seat. It’s a move so swift and effortless; it’s as if they’ve done it a thousand times before. Holden turns to us, says to John, “You’ll let me know when you’re making your goulash, right?”

“Anytime you want, son.” John chuckles. “You bring her back in one piece, okay?”

“Always, sir.” Holden fixes his gaze on me. “Later, *Preston*.”

I watch the truck back out, then enter the road, the laughter from a lifetime of friendship fading as they drive away. It feels as if the earth is shifting. As if the ground beneath me has separated from the rest, and I’m floating, floating, *gone*.

I wonder if Mia ever felt this way the summers she stayed with us. And I wonder what all she's told that Holden guy about me. I just hope that whatever it is, she remembers us the same way I do.

That at some point, she saw the *good* in me.
And the good outweighed the bad.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

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MIA

“Sooooo...” Holden drags out the single word as though it consists of multiple syllables.

“So?” I contain my giggle as I watch him fiddle with his truck engine, acting like he knows what the heck he’s doing. He has a bottle of water in one hand, but he’s untwisting the coolant container.

“Leo Preston’s here,” he murmurs, and I wait for him to uncap the water and tilt the bottle before shoving him out of the way.

“That’s where the coolant goes, dingbat!” I laugh out, uncapping the water container for him.

“Oohhh, *dingbat*,” he mocks, holding a hand to his heart. “That one *physically* hurt.”

“Shut up!” I watch over him as he fills the container and snaps the cap back on. “And thank you for stating the obvious.”

He looks confused. “About *dingbats*?”

“No! About Leo...”

“Oh yeah.” He pulls me back by my shirt and drops the hood before leaning against his truck. “Did you know he was coming?”

I shake my head. “No idea.” Of everyone in my life, Holden knows the most about Leo and, obviously, he only knows what I’ve told him, which isn’t much. He knows that, out of all the Preston boys, Leo was the only one to ever *talk* to me and that we’d occasionally go on bike rides together. He doesn’t know about our conversations at the water tower or the feelings we shared or the events that led to me leaving what should have been my new home.

Back then, I didn’t want to expose too much, fearful of being teased by him, but also, it didn’t feel right to share what I *thought* Leo and I had. It seemed too... *big*. Too meaningful. Putting it out there in the world felt like I was dividing our encounters with whoever else knew, and I wanted to keep it all for myself. It’s silly, now that I think about it, but as a fourteen-year-old, it made all the sense in the world.

I haven’t spoken Leo’s name since I left his house two years ago, but that doesn’t mean I don’t think about him. Luckily, I’ve been able to keep

most of my thoughts to those last few minutes we had together. I remember how it felt to be cold and embarrassed as I stood under the dock, the water to my neck, listening to my body and my life be shamed by people who didn't even know me. And then I remember the anger, the sadness that the one person who *did* know me allowed it all to happen.

It was easy to override the small, meaningful moments with that one torturous one.

"I didn't know you still kept in contact with him," Holden says.

"I don't," I reply. Too loud. Too defensive. And now, my best friend's skeptical of my reaction. *Great.* I tone it down. "I don't know how he's here or why. All Papa told me was that a boy was helping him fix the house over the summer. He didn't tell me who it was or that he'd be staying at the house."

"Wait." Holden stands taller. "He's *staying* at the house?"

I nod.

"Jesus, Mia." He drops his head between his shoulders, his hand rubbing at the back of his neck. "I don't know how I feel about that."

"Leo's not *dangerous*." I don't know why I'm protecting him. Or lying. Leo *is* dangerous, just not in the way Holden's thinking.

He glances up at me, his features pinched. "That's not what I'm worried about." I take a moment to look at him. *Really* look at him. He's changed so much in two years. When he left, he was just a boy on the verge of adulthood. And now—at sixteen—he's a full-grown man with a jawline and stubble. It's no surprise that every time I called, he'd be with a new friend, a new girl. Unlike Leo, he never hid me from anyone. He always told them who I was to him, and every time he did, there was a hint of pride in his voice. He was the first phone call I made when I got into town just after midnight last night. Sometimes, I wondered if I expected too much from Leo since the only males I had to compare him to were Holden and my grandpa, and they set the standard pretty damn high.

Over the past two years, Holden and I had watched each other grow and mature from afar thanks to social media, but it wasn't the same. I'd come back last summer, but he couldn't, too busy with all the sports and socializing he had going on. My time here wasn't the same. But now, having him back, with me, it feels like home again.

"You've changed, Mia," Holden says.

I lean against the truck beside him, my eyes on my feet and my voice cracking when I reply, "So have you." I don't know why I'm suddenly somber, but the idea of losing him to his new life, his *better* life... it's terrifying.

"Not like you, though," he says, shifting to face me.

I keep my gaze low. "What's that supposed to mean?" I ask, even though I already know. I've found a skincare regimen, discovered a workout routine, grown a few inches, and lost more than a few pounds.

It's kind of pathetic that how you physically look affects how people treat you.

It doesn't change anything on the inside. I'm still the same girl who, when insecure about how I dressed, he'd tell, "Fuck off. Fuck them. And fuck you, because you look kick-ass."

"It means," Holden starts, "and I'm going to regret saying this, but you're kind of a smoke show, Mia Mac." He makes a gagging face that has me laughing.

I flick the brim of his cap. "Shut up."

"I'm serious," he says, adjusting his cap back in place. "And this Leo guy hasn't seen you since you left there, right?"

I nod.

"Just be careful, okay?"

"It's a non-issue, Holden. Really."

He shrugs. "Maybe for you." His expression turns serious. "Just promise me."

"I'll be careful," I assure.

"I mean... with your heart."

I blow out a breath as he stares me down, and I realize maybe... when it comes to Leo, Holden's better at reading between the lines than I am. Or was. "I promise."

IT WAS a mistake telling Holden that Leo had accidentally walked in on me coming out of the shower. His face turned red, and he scoffed, "Sure..." then air quoted, "*Accidentally*." And then he drove us a half-hour away to the nearest hardware store and paid for a lock for the bathroom door.

After getting groceries for dinner, he drops me off at home, having a “prearranged meet-up” (hook-up) that he had to get to.

Papa’s in the living room when I enter the house, watching an episode of *MacGyver* I’m sure he’s seen a hundred times already. “Where’s Leo?” I ask him, dumping the bags on the kitchen counter.

Without taking his eyes off the TV, he answers, “Shower.”

I work on a quick dinner and am almost done when Leo appears. He’s in dark denim and a plain gray tee—keys in one hand, book in the other. Like Holden, he, too, has changed a lot in two years.

Not that I’m looking.

Not that I care.

He stops in his tracks when he sees me. Then he turns his head toward my grandpa, but his eyes stay on me. “I’ll be back later tonight,” he says.

I pretend to focus on the salad and ask, “You’re not staying for dinner?”

“Um...” He’s moving toward me; I can *sense* it. He stops beside me, his front brushing my side, and I can feel him everywhere, all at once. With his voice low, he says, “I figured I’d give you and your grandpa some time alone. Let you catch up.” It comes out a question—as if he’s asking for permission or acceptance.

Like I give a crap what he does. “You should’ve told me. I wouldn’t have made so much.” *Blahhh*. A simple “okay” in response would’ve sufficed.

Leo doesn’t move. Not a muscle. Not even on his broad chest to show that he’s breathing. I look up at him, my brow raised.

He simply stares back.

And he’s close. So close.

Now *I* can’t breathe.

Ugh!

Blindly, I reach into the grocery bag and take a second to find what I’m looking for. I pull it out, slam it against Leo’s rock-hard stomach. He breaks our stare so he can look down at the lock. Licking his lips, he takes it from me, flips it between his fingers. “What’s this?”

My voice a whisper so Papa doesn’t hear, I say, “A lock for the bathroom door.” He quirks a single eyebrow, and I add, “Holden got it for me.” Pshh. *Because that part’s important.*

“I’ll see ya tonight,” he says, so cool, so calm, so damn collected.

He takes a step back, and then he...

He *smirks*.

Dang it!

Holden was right. The motherfluffer *is* dangerous.

In every possible way.

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

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LEO

IT'S easy to find a diner. It's the only thing open. Mia had described her town to me in the past, and she said it was small, but I lived in a small town, so I figured: how different could it be?

It's very, *very* different. The sign upon entering reads: "Population 200." In white paint, the 200 is crossed out and replaced with 198. I imagined an old couple dying peacefully in their sleep, and the entire town mourning. Then some sucker was tasked with the job of changing the sign. Hopefully, no one has a baby soon because that sign's going to need another makeover. A strange thought, I know, but I tend to have a lot of them.

There's only one other patron in the diner, and I'm guessing he's the driver of the 18-wheeler parked out front. He sits at the end of the counter, and I take up a booth in the corner. The server, a middle-aged woman with bleached-blond hair and black roots, stops by my table. Her smile is one that can't be faked, and she aims it right at me when she asks, "You here for the summer, baby?" There's a southern twang in her words, which is similar to Mia's—though she'd deny she had an accent at all if you brought it up.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Workin'?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Which one?"

I tilt my head, focus on her name badge: *Sandra*. "Which... one... what?"

She's still smiling that same smile. "Which farm, hon?"

"Oh no, I'm just helping out a friend. Kind of," I ramble. "Well, it was a farm, but not anymore, I'm just—"

"Oh, you're at Papa John's?"

I nod.

"He's a good man, that one." She puts pen to paper. "What can I get ya, sweetheart?"

I place my order and then follow her movements to the server window, where she shouts out a bunch of words too quickly to make out.

The book that my sister had shoved in my bag before I left sits on the bench beside me, but I already know I won't be able to concentrate enough to be able to read. I'd left the house for two reasons. One: to give John and Mia time to catch up. And two: I needed to escape reality. Even if it was for an hour or so, I needed to be in a different world, a different life, and what better way than getting lost in a book.

Lucy reads. All the time. She can read a full-length novel in the time it takes for me to read a couple of chapters. She likes to read romance, and sometimes she'll pass them on to me if she thinks I'll enjoy them. Then, when I'm finally done, she likes to discuss the book in its entirety. While her topics of discussion consist of things like "Oh my god, how hot was that dude!" Or "How hot was that sex scene!"—which yeah, are incredibly awkward things to examine in-depth with your sister—my discussions are based more around the "What the fuck were they thinking?" variety.

The philosopher, Edmund Burke, once wrote that the first and simplest emotion which we discover in the human mind is curiosity. Burke was definitely onto some shit because, swear, I'll never stop being curious about *people*. About me. Sometimes I think I'm wired differently, like something is *actually* wrong inside my brain. I catastrophize basic situations, but when there's an actual catastrophe, I don't seem to grasp the severity of it.

Until it's too late.

Case in point: Mia.

Before I can get lost in *that* train wreck of a situation, Miss Sandra's back with my food. "Enjoy, baby," she says, placing my order on the table. "You tell Papa John I said hi, okay?"

"You got it." I force a smile and wait until she's gone before digging in.

I'm done in five minutes, used to having to share food with five other growing boys.

And then I just sit, stare out the window, and wait.

I don't really know what I'm waiting for, some kind of sign maybe to let me know it's okay to go back to the house. Or maybe I'm waiting for me. For *me* to be okay.

My phone vibrates on the linoleum tabletop, and I pick it up, notice it's a text from the sibling group chat.

Lucas: *You good, Leo? Get there safe and everything?*

I hate that he's checking in on me as if he's my dad. I already spoke to our *actual* dad yesterday and told him everything was fine.

Leo: *Yep.*

Logan: *Any hoes?*

Leo: *Of the gardening variety, plenty, I'm sure. Your type of hoes? No.*

Logan: *Sucks.*

Lucy: *Have you finished that book?*

Leo: *You gave it to me yesterday...*

Lucy: *Bahhhh!*

Logan: *Are there any hot chicks? They don't even have to put out.*

Lucas: *Shut up, Virgin.*

Logan: *YOUR MOM'S A VIRGIN.*

Lucy: *BOYS!!*

Logan: *Hey, Leo. You might want to wash your sheets before you get back in them. I had a little accident.*

Leo: *What the fuck?! Get out of my bed.*

Lucy: *You're so gross, Logan!*

Logan: *What? I said it was a fucking accident!*

Leo: *I gotta go.*

I set my phone to Do Not Disturb and place it face down on the table. With a heavy sigh, I look out the window. It's still light out. Summer days seem longer here.

"You want a top-up, sugar?" Miss Sandra asks. I hadn't even realized she was beside me.

"Yeah, thanks."

She looks out the window like I'd just been. "You waitin' on someone?"

"No. It's just me."

"Well, you're waiting on somethin'," she murmurs.

"Honestly, I think I'm just waiting for darkness to fall."

Her lips pull down at the corners. "Hmmm," is all she says. Then: "You want anything else?"

I release a long, drawn-out breath, and stretch my arms. "You got any cake?"

“We only got chocolate left.”
I smile. “Chocolate cake’s my favorite.”

WHEN THE SUN GOES DOWN, I get in my car, thanking Miss Sandra on the way, and take the ten-minute drive back to the house. The headlights shine on the porch, where Mia and John are both standing, hugging each other. No. They’re *dancing*.

I should back out, give them more time together. But that would be weird considering they’ve already seen me. Still, I sit in the car for a solid minute, contemplating doing exactly that before I kill the engine and step out.

The music is soft, so soft I didn’t even hear it playing from the cab of the car. It’s a song that played on repeat on that water tower, introduced to me by Mia. Etta James’s soulful voice fills the air, and I keep my head low as I walk toward the porch. But then I look up when I hear Mia sing, “At laaaaaast...”

She rests her head on her grandpa’s chest as they rock back and forth, spinning in slow circles. “Ah,” John says, “I see New York is teaching you some things.”

Wait. What? *New York*?

John glances at me, his eyes distant, and he tells me, “My *feleség*—this was her favorite song.”

Standing on the porch, hands shoved in my pockets, I lean against the railing and raise my eyebrows in question. It’s Mia who speaks. “His wife, my grandmother—it was her favorite song.” She rears back, just enough to look up at her grandpa. “It was your wedding song, right?”

John nods and lifts a hand to Mia’s cheek. “You have her eyes, *baba*.”

I look away. It’s too intimate, too personal, and yet... it’s too familiar. I’d witnessed Dad and Lucy having these exact exchanges, and I’d felt the same way then that I do now: sorrow.

The difference is, I *know* what happened to my mom. Mia knows what happened to her. But she never told me about her grandmother. Now that I think about it—she didn’t share much of her life with me at all.

Besides *Holden*.

“Goodnight,” John says, kissing Mia on the forehead.

Mia releases him. “Goodnight, Papa.”

“*Szeretlek.*”

“I love you, too.”

“Goodnight,” I tell John, and he nods in return before making his way inside.

And now it’s just Mia. And me. And the darkness around us.

I push off the railing and sit on the porch swing, wincing when it groans under my weight. Tugging at the chains attached to the roof, I ask, “Will this thing hold my weight?”

Mia’s still standing, wringing out her hands. She’s
dubious,
hesitant,
uncertain.

She says, her eyes downcast, “Holden and I sit on it together, so you’re good.”

Fuck that guy.

I kick off the floor, swing slowly. “So, you’ve been in New York?”

Mia nods and looks up at me. “Uh-huh.”

“With your dad?” It’s the only thing that links her to there.

“Yeah.”

“You know...” I say through an exhale. “About a week after you left, there were signs all through town looking for the owner of a lost bike. It was pink and purple. White basket. Looked a lot like yours.”

Mia sits down on the rocking chair and heaves out a breath as if resigned to the fact that this conversation is inevitable.

“The sign said it was found in front of the church.”

Mia chews her bottom lip, refusing to meet my eyes.

“It’s funny. I searched everywhere that night... everywhere but the church.”

Her breaths are shallow now, soft, uneven. Yet they’re amplified in my eardrums as if she’s inside my goddamn head. “I called him that night,” she tells me. “From the church steps. He sent a car to pick me up.”

My eyes widen in shock. “You went all the way to New York by car?”

“Yes.”

“You had no clothes, no *nothing*.”

“I’m extremely aware of my situation that night, Leo,” she bites out. And the way she says my name—with such hatred and disdain—it’s like a knife through my chest, a bleeding wound.

I push aside the pain and ask, *curious*, “So, you live with your dad?”

“Yes.” She looks around for an out.

But I’m not ready to give her one. “What’s that like?”

“It’s...” Her throat shifts with her swallow. “It’s *different*. I go to an all-girls boarding school, so I don’t really see him. But, he finances everything.” She shrugs. “So, there’s that.”

Disbelief washes through me, and I can’t hide it in time. I scoff and ignore her narrowed, heated eyes on mine. “Wait. So you go all the way to New York, to the state where your *father* lives, and then he dumps you at a boarding—”

“Don’t do that,” she cuts in, her voice slicing through the air.

I rear back. “Do *what*?”

“Don’t pretend to give the slightest shit about me.”

I stand, practically march over to her. “Mia, of course I care about you. What the f—”

“You say you do...” she rushes out, her hands going up between us. A barrier. A wall. Head tilted back, she makes sure I’m looking right at her when she adds, “...but your actions prove otherwise.”

“That’s bullshit,” I snap.

“Yeah?” Her shoulders square, defiant. She doesn’t break our stare. “Where’s the lie in my statement?”

I open my mouth, but nothing comes.

“Exactly,” she says.

And that knife in my heart? She’s twisting it. With every single truth she speaks, she creates another cut, a larger wound.

“Do you want me to leave?” I ask. “Because if my being here is pissing you off—”

“Why *are* you here?” she cuts in.

I shake my head, keep it low. “My dad sent me.”

Her voice is softer now, but each word is terse, concise. “Why? What’d you do?”

“I didn’t do anything,” I retort. *And that’s the problem.*

I.

Didn’t.

Do.

Anything.

I saw the red flags. I saw the way Laney's ex, Cooper, treated her. I even saw the bruises she tried to hide.

I.

Didn't.

Do.

Anything.

I watched Laney, my so-called best friend, turn into a shadow of herself. I watched her become distant. I saw the fear in her eyes when Cooper was around, and yet,

I.

Didn't.

Do.

Anything.

"Leo?" Mia's watching me, her eyes searching mine, and I don't know where I went just now, but it wasn't here.

It wasn't anywhere.

I heard everything my brothers said about Mia that night. Every name, every insult. And when I realized she was there, and she heard it all, too, still,

I.

Didn't.

Do.

Anything.

"Leo?"

I blink hard, come to, and release all the air in my lungs. Knees weak, I sit back down and admit only what I'm comfortable with. "I'm just going through some stuff right now, that's all."

"Are you okay? Your family... is everyone..." She's no longer angry or unsure... She's the fifteen-year-old version of the girl I once fell for. "Is your dad—"

"We're fine," I interrupt to stop her mind from wandering. "It's Laney." I lean forward, rest my forearms on my knees, and take a breath. "She was in an abusive relationship, and the guy—he tried to kill her. Shot her at point-blank range. It's a miracle she survived."

I look for a response, but her stare is blank, her expression, too.

"I'm just... I'm struggling a little to come to terms with it, so Dad sent me here thinking it might help to get away from it all."

“Right,” she says, then inhales as if she’d forgotten to breathe. “Well, I’m sorry that happened to her. I know how close you are.” She’s looking at me, and I’m watching her, and we’re only feet apart, but this world, the entirety of the planet we live on and everything that’s occurred on it, seems to divide us.

“I do care about you,” I murmur, and it feels like such an empty statement, one screamed into a void.

She stands up, done with the conversation. “I’ll pray for Laney and her recovery.” *Yeah, a lot of fucking good that’ll do.* “Goodnight, Leo.”

I sigh. “Goodnight, Mia.”

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

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LEO

I THINK I'm running away from my guilt.

That thought pops into my head, completely unprovoked, and I trip over my own damn feet, stumble, and land on my knees first, then my forearms, ass in the air.

Grace has always been one of my best qualities. *Obviously*. Luckily, there's no one around to see it.

With a groan, I roll onto my back, the sharp edges of loose gravel digging into me. The morning sun blares down, right into my eyeballs, and I use my arm to shield it, wincing in pain when I realize I've broken skin. *Awesome*.

The day's just started, and already I want out.

After replaying my conversation with Mia last night, over and over, I hadn't been able to sleep for hours. I'd woken up at almost seven this morning, way later than the 4:20 I'm used to, and my first thought was: how do I leave?

My second thought? I can't.

Not only would I be disappointing Dad, and maybe even John, but I didn't want to go back home. I came here for a reason, and all I have to do is wait it out. Except, just like at the diner last night, I'm not really sure what I'm waiting on. Something to click? A sign? Is this what Lucy means when she talks about *fate*? Like, one day, I'll wake up, and I'll suddenly know that everything's *better*?

Maybe I should ask Mia to pray for me, too.

Scoffing at the thought, I sit up, inspect my arms. They're scraped to shit. *Yay*.

I don't bother running back to the house. I walk, take my time, and take in the absolute lack of scenery. When I get back, Mia's standing in front of a badass ATV in the driveway, her hair hanging loosely around her shoulders. It's longer than I've ever seen it, and there are natural waves that, according to Laney, some girls would kill for. Mia's in a loose tank so long it takes me a moment to realize she's wearing denim cut-offs. Her legs are

short, thighs thick, and damn if they don't suit her to perfection. I slow in front of her and take out an earbud. "You good?"

Without looking up from the engine bay, she nods toward the keys already in the ignition. "Can you crank that for me?"

I do as she asks, but nothing happens.

"Dadgum," she whispers, and I can't stop my chuckle in time.

"Dadgum?"

She lifts her gaze, brow pinched in annoyance. Ignoring my teasing, she yells out, "Papa!"

Almost immediately, the screen door flies open, and John stands in the doorway.

Mia wipes the sweat off her brow with the back of her hand. "You told me you've been running this every week."

John looks sheepish, his hands going in his pockets.

"The terminal's corroded," she tells him.

I'm impressed. Admittedly, a little sexist, too, but I had no idea Mia knew about this stuff.

"I'm sorry," John says, but the smile on his face says otherwise. "Just take Holden's."

Mia glances toward the barn where the large doors are swung open. "Does his work?"

"Yep," John responds, and with that, he goes back into the house.

For the first time since I've been standing here, Mia looks at me for longer than a second. "You go for a run?"

"Yeah."

"What route do you take?"

"I don't have a route; I kind of just... run."

She nods, then huffs out a breath. She seems annoyed that I'm here.

"What happened to your arms?" She's moving toward me now, her expression switching to one of concern.

I clear my throat. "I fell."

"Clearly."

She motions for me to show her, so I push aside my embarrassment and lift my arms, rotating them so she can inspect them. She winces. "Does it hurt?"

"Yeah, a little." I'd forgotten it was there, to be honest. But I'll milk the moment. Besides, we're on a dairy farm. It seems fitting. I laugh at

myself, *out loud*, and her eyes snap to mine.

“What’s funny?”

I flatten my features. “Nothing.”

She sighs. “Well, you should probably get it cleaned up before it gets infected.”

I smirk. “Yes, ma’am.”

BY THE TIME I SHOWER, clean up my wounds—which aren’t that bad—and step back outside, Mia’s standing beside a different ATV, and it’s even bigger and badder than the first one. John’s on the porch steps, his arms crossed, and I stand beside him. Cross my arms as well. “When was the last time you checked the parlors?” Mia asks John. She starts the engine, smiling when it roars to life.

“A while. Is that where you’re going?”

Mia nods.

John says, “Well, take the boy with you.”

“The boy has a name, Papa,” Mia deadpans, and I can tell the absolute last thing she wants is to be around me.

“Yes,” John says, slapping my shoulder. “*The Boy*.”

Mia’s eyes meet mine. “You want to come?”

Shrugging, I make my way toward her. “Hands here,” she says in warning, tapping at the handles on either side of the rear seat. “Nowhere else.”

IT TAKES us about five minutes to get to a row of large structures made of steel. I wait for Mia to get off the ATV before doing the same. She starts walking toward one of the buildings, and, over her shoulder, she says, “Did you tell your dad I was here?”

“No,” I reply, “Why?”

She stops, turns to me, her hand on her forehead to shield the sun from her eyes. “Can you not? Tell him, I mean. I don’t know if he and my mom still talk, or whatever, but I’d prefer it if she didn’t know I was home.”

Confused, I shrug and answer, “Sure.” To be honest, I don’t know if Dad still speaks to Virginia. We no longer needed her services a year ago

when I got my license. It had always been the plan that once I could drive, Lucas and I would step up with specific responsibilities. Besides, Lachlan, our youngest brother, was at school full-time, so it didn't make sense to have her around. As far as I know, she's working in Wilmington with another family, and the only reason I know that is because Lucas called her to get a brownie recipe for Laney's birthday.

Satisfied with my response, Mia says, changing the subject, "This is the milking parlor."

We're standing in front of a building similar in size to the barn next to the house, only this one has no sides, just a roof. The floor is concrete, and every few yards there are bars, I assume to separate the animals. She steps up onto a raised concrete bench and grabs on to a bar with both hands.

"So, this is where the magic happens, huh?" I look around, but there's not all that much to see.

"Have you ever seen one of these before?"

I shake my head.

"There was a whole bunch of machinery in here, but Papa sold it all. It'd hang down from the roof, and the cows would eat at this part," she says, pointing. "And once they were calm and all the machinery had been checked, we'd attach the teat cups on the cows and *boom, milk.*"

I crack a smile. "*Boom, milk?*"

"Well," she says, jumping off the step. She starts walking down the aisle, slowly, checking each side. "It was more complicated than that, but I figured you don't need an extended tutorial on *How to Milk Cows.*" She stops when she gets to the end and walks back toward me.

I ask, "Did you do a lot of it?"

"The milking?"

My lips kick up at the corners as I nod. "I'm just picturing you when you were little, in rubber boots and overalls and a straw hat, bossing around all the adults."

Mia laughs, and it's so loud and free, it bounces off our surroundings and right into my chest. "I didn't do that."

"But the rubber boots and overalls?" I tease.

I'm onto something because her cheeks bloom pink. "Shut up." She shoves my shoulder.

"No, it's cute!"

She tries to shove me again, but I grasp her wrist, hold on to it. I laugh, ignoring the fact that we're *touching* and that she's mere inches away from me. "Wait." I squeeze her wrist. "Did you have pigtails?"

"Oh my god, stop!" She pulls her hand out of my grasp, her smile waning as she takes a step back. And then another.

Suddenly, I'm all too aware of who I am to her and how she sees me. It's clear she doesn't want to be near me, and she's pissed that she allowed herself even a second of laughter. I clear the aching knot in my throat. "So you brought me here to show me around?"

"I didn't *choose* to. Papa asked me to bring you here."

Dejected, I mumble, "Right."

It takes a moment for either of us to speak, and I don't know where she's looking because shame has me staring at my hands. Mia breaks the silence. "He didn't want me to come here alone." She starts walking up a narrow set of steel stairs, motioning for me to join her. "One time, after he retired..." she begins. The stairs aren't wide enough for two people to walk side by side, so I walk behind her, her creamy, pale legs an inch in front of me. I try to focus on her words and nothing else. "Holden and I came here on the ATVs, and a homeless man was sleeping in here."

"Holy shit."

"Uh-huh." Her thighs move with every step, the muscles shifting, and *goddamn*, what I wouldn't give to touch them.

Grip them.

Just once.

I hate myself.

She adds, "He pulled out a knife when he saw us."

I choke on a breath. "What did you do?"

She's at the top of the stairs now, and she waits for me to join her on the landing. From here, you can see everything below. I imagine a younger version of John standing here, looking down on everyone.

Mia says, "Holden told me to go wait out by my ATV. A few minutes later, they both came out. Holden told me to go home and that he'd call me later. And I... I mean, I didn't *want* to leave him with a stranger, but he assured me he'd be okay."

I'm invested in this story, like the arc of a well-written novel. "And...?"

Mia shrugs. "And he never told me what happened after. I assume he brought the man back to his house, to his mom. I wasn't worried. Tammy

always knew what to do.” She chews on her thumb, her eyes distant when she adds, “Papa says that she likes to nurture lost souls.” She’s smiling when her eyes meet mine again, but it’s the sad kind of smile that brings on pity, even if that’s not the intention.

I remember how Virginia treated her and all the things Mia had said and felt when she found out Holden and his mom were leaving.

“Anyway,” she says, her exhale heavy. “I wanted to show you this.”

She flicks a latch attached to the roof, and I realize now it’s a window of sorts. Once it’s unlocked, she pushes both sides open and the view... it’s kind of ridiculous. The world is different from up here. When you’re on the ground, you can only see what’s right in front of you. It’s dull and repetitive. From up here, though? It’s so vast, so immense.

It’s Mia’s world in one still frame.

“This is all I’d known my entire life, Leo,” she murmurs, her forearms resting on the ledge. “And for some reason, Papa thought it wasn’t enough.”

I match her position, keep my eyes trained forward.

“When my mom called about me staying with your family, it was the first time we’d heard from her in three years. He was skeptical at first, but then your dad called him. I remember the first conversation they ever had. Papa just kept saying, ‘okay, okay, okay,’ and with every one of his okay’s, his smile got wider.” She pauses a beat. “He thought he was doing the right thing by me, so I can’t blame him. Every decision he’s ever made since I was born has been for me. But he only sent me that first year. I *chose* to come back. *Twice*. And that... that’s on me.”

Heat burns behind my nose, and I sniff it back.

“I get why you’re here, Leo. I do.”

She shifts to face me, and reluctantly, I do the same.

“Maybe you haven’t worked it out yet, but your dad and my grandpa—they have a lot in common. They’re doing what they think is best for us, and they’re doing it alone. I respect that, and them, enough to live under the same roof as you, to do whatever it is my grandpa asks me to do when it involves you.” Eyes clouded, she finds her strength in the parts of her I once admired and says, “I’ll never give them a reason to doubt who you are as a person. Obviously, I don’t even know you. Not *really*.”

“Mia...” I grind out, trying to keep my frustration in check.

“I just...” She sucks in a breath. Holds it. “Leo, I can’t be around you without feeling a certain way.”

“I know,” I croak, my heart heavy, weighed down by my own fucking guilt. “But you’re wrong.” I stand to full height. “You do know me.” *You’re the one person on this entire fucking planet who knows me better than anyone.* “When it was just you and me, Mia, that’s who I am. That’s *all* I am. And I get that it’s not enough. And I get that you hate me—”

“I don’t hate anyone,” she interrupts.

I heave out a breath, crack each knuckle one by one as I stare down at her. “You don’t want to be friends,” I state, and she lowers her gaze, shakes her head.

“I can’t be friends with you, Leo.”

I ignore the twisting in my chest, the punch to my gut. “And our circumstances don’t allow us to be enemies, right?”

“I guess.” She peers up at me.

“So, it’s simple,” I tell her. “I’ll stay out of your way, and I’ll make up excuses if your grandpa asks us to do something together. And if we ever find ourselves in a situation where we’re forced to be, you can ignore me, and I’ll...”

“You’ll what?”

I swallow my nerves. “I’ll continue to act like being around you doesn’t drive me insane in the best possible ways. I’ll accept the fact that the one person in my entire fucking life who has ever truly *seen* me wants absolutely nothing to do with me. And I’ll ignore how it makes me feel. How it’s going to *ruin* me.”

Tears fill her eyes, and I’m quick to reach out, to palm her face and brush my thumb along her cheeks to wipe them away.

“I’ll ignore it all, okay?” I search her eyes, but they refuse to meet mine, and so I drop my hands, releasing her completely. I rest my forearms on the ledge again and stare out the window, noticing the water tower in the distance. I push down the pain in my chest. “For you, Mia,” I murmur. “I owe you that much.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

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MIA

I READ SOMEWHERE that the human body replaces itself every seven years. The thought stuck with me for months afterward, until I became so intrigued by the notion that I finally looked it up. Turns out, it's bullshit. Like a lot of things in life.

While it's true that cells have a finite life span, there's no real science backing up that specific time frame. And besides, if you think about it, that would kind of mean that every seven years we'd feel younger. It was so obviously incorrect that, now, I roll my eyes at the thought. But swear, for those few months, it felt like I had something to look forward to. I even looked it up on a calendar and set a reminder on my phone on the exact date, seven years from the last day I spent at the Prestons'. On that date, there'd be nothing, at least physically, to remind me of that night. Of how it felt to hate the body I was born with. I would be a new *me*. I think, in a way, that's why I waited so long to do the research. I wanted so badly for it to be true, which is dumb. You'd think that after everything that happened, I'd realize that the simple act of believing in something or *someone* wasn't enough to make it real.

I TUG my hair out of its knot and stand back up, my legs wobbly when I'm back to full height. The image of me in the mirror is blurred, distorted by dirt and grime and all the things that cover surfaces that haven't been touched in years. When I open the door, sunlight filters through the cracks in the roof, splintering the room with shards of dust-filled rays. Rows of beds take up each side, couches and an old TV on one end. On the other are a small kitchen, eating area, restrooms, and showers.

At one point, the barn was the sleeping quarters for all the workers that would come through. Most of them were drifters or hitchhikers just looking to make a quick buck so they could continue on. But some of them stayed, became full-time employees. Papa said, in the beginning, they used to pitch tents on the field, but my *nagymama*—my grandma—complained about them going in and out of the house to use the bathroom and shower and

kitchen, so Papa built the barn for them to relax in and sleep once the workday was over. He even let workers from other farms use the beds for a small fee when it was peak season, usually during the summers. I know most of this through stories alone. According to him, he didn't like strangers around me much, especially when I was little, so, as a precaution, he stopped hiring the males he didn't know. And then, females. Eventually, he stopped hiring anyone who didn't come with a trusted reference. Soon, the lack of employees made it hard for him to keep up with the work, so he retired and sold up before he started losing money. At first, I worried that he'd want us to move, somewhere smaller with less upkeep. I shouldn't have worried. This land, the house we live in, the life we have, it's his dream. His *American* dream.

I pull out my phone as I walk to the door and send a text to Holden that I'm awake and to come and get me. It's been three days since Leo and I were at the parlor, and I've spent most of that time with Holden—*not* replaying Leo's words in my head over and over like a damn broken record. Just as I begin to push the barn door open, someone does it for me. That someone is the boy I was *not* just thinking about. "Sorry," he rushes out, and he won't look at me. He's in his running clothes: navy shorts, a plain white tee, and a backward cap. There's sweat around his neck and down his chest, causing the fabric to cling to his collarbone. The flesh that's exposed glistens—his arms, his legs, all defined by muscles that weren't there two years ago. Sweet baby Jesus, if nothing else, the boy sure is something to look at. *Not that I'm looking.*

He's talking.

Shoot!

"...homeless man in the barn." He's smiling, a knowing kind of smirky smile that hints to the fact that he knows *exactly* what I was just thinking.

I force my mind to push through the *derp* moment I'm having and focus on his words, then look behind me. "What homeless man?"

He waits for me to face him before taking a step back. "I *said*, I just came back from my run and saw the door open and remembered what you said the other day, so I wanted to check that there wasn't a homeless man in the barn."

"Right." I lower my gaze. "It's just me."

"What's in there?" he asks, and I glance up to see him looking over my head.

And since he's not looking at my face, I take the chance to look at his. He'd always looked older than his years, a little more *grown*, and that hasn't changed. Either I'm too slow, or he's too fast, because he catches me looking—*staring*. He doesn't smile this time. In fact, he takes another step back. "I forgot. You're ignoring me."

I wasn't ignoring him. Because truthfully, I'd forgotten to.

"And I'm supposed to be staying out of your way."

I bite down on my lip.

"I'm going to shower," he says, almost sheepishly, as he rubs the back of his neck. "So... I won't see you later, I guess."

It's official. I'm *mute*.

Sucking in a breath, he nods once, and with that, he goes into the house.

The strength of my exhale feels like a release. "Dang it!" I whisper and then check my phone. It's been precisely *one minute* since I sent the text to Holden. It felt like a lifetime passed in the time Leo and I stood here. I'm still looking at the phone in disbelief when a text comes through.

Holden: *Can't right now. I'm preoccupied.*

Mia: *What in tarnation does that mean?*

Holden: *I'm with a girl.*

I gag.

Mia: *It's, like, 8 in the morning.*

Holden: *She's been here since last night. I've been trying to get her to leave. Any advice?*

Mia: *You're going to Hell, Holden. If your mama knew...*

Holden: *I'll call you later.*

Frustrated at my lack of escape, I stomp my feet, like the brat that I am, all the way to the house and up the porch steps. "What in the dang heck is wrong with you?" Papa's sitting on his rocking chair like he always is.

I pout. "Holden's busy," I tell him, flopping down on the porch swing. I push off the floor, move slowly back and forth.

“Well, it looks like you’re stuck with The Old Man and The Boy,” he says through a chuckle, and I can’t help but throw him a smile.

“I could think of worse things.” When it comes to spending time with him, sure. The boy, on the other hand...

“Tell me,” he says.

“Tell you what?”

“Everything. Anything. School? How is it? Your dad? How is he? New York? You like it?”

I push out a breath. “School’s good,” I say. “The girls are nice. Different, but nice.” So nice that they’ve taught me bad things that I now consider good. “Dad is... *dad*.”

“So, you don’t talk to him often?”

I shake my head. “He’s busy with work.”

“Always work,” Papa says, a hint of disdain in his tone. When my father left here, it was for college, and then every excuse since has been *work*. Dad’s dream is to become the next Mark Cuban, the billionaire owner of the Dallas Mavericks, who made his riches in the tech field. Dad hasn’t yet hit the billionaire status, though I’m pretty sure he’s close. He makes his money by buying apps that don’t have much visibility, tweaking them, and then marketing them to the right people. Last year, one of the girls in my dorm showed me an article online about him selling a dating app for 2.8 million. I pretended like I already knew. And while the girls at the school all come from money, they often tell me that it’s not the same as *my* money. Which, yeah, might be accurate, but it’s not *my* money, and it’s not my grandpa’s either. We don’t want it to be. Besides, we both know what it cost him to earn it. And those costs are sitting on this porch.

I can tell Grandpa is thinking the same thoughts I am, the slight frown hidden beneath his beard proof, and so I change the subject. “I’m getting a little more used to New York,” I say and offer a smile that I know will ease his worries. “I don’t think I’ll ever get used to the people, though. And I don’t mean the type of people. I mean the number of them.”

Papa chuckles.

“You could fit all the people in this town in one Starbucks there.”

“Yeah, I bet,” he says. “But it’s good for you, *baba*. You see more people. Make friends. Maybe even meet husband... when you’re *forty*.”

A giggle bubbles out of me, just as the screen door opens. Leo steps out, freshly showered. He’s in his work clothes now: plain navy V-neck, khaki

shorts, and sand-colored boots. *Same muscles.* “Hey,” he says, looking between my grandpa and me. “Sorry to interrupt...” he trails off.

Papa looks up at him, then points to his truck sitting in the driveway. “In the back. For you. Surprise.”

“For me?” Leo asks, eyebrows raised.

Papa nods.

Leo heads over to the truck and lifts a rocking chair from the bed. His grin is wide when he walks back with it, places it next to my grandfather’s. “You didn’t have to do this,” he says, sitting on it. He makes a show of running his hands along the armrests and rocking back and forth. “It’s perfect. Thank you.”

Papa smiles. “Of course. You’re here all summer. Need to sit.”

Leo’s phone rings, and he takes it out of his pocket. “It’s the hardware store,” he tells my grandpa. I *don’t* focus on his voice, on the deep tenor of it or the way he says, “I’ll be there soon,” right before hanging up.

“Good!” Papa rubs his hands together. “Now, we get started.”

Leo grins at him. “Finally, huh?”

I’d noticed not much work was being done at the house, but I didn’t bring it up. Honestly, I thought the whole working-on-the-house thing was just a cover-up for Leo being here.

“Mia, you go with the boy. Help him.”

Leo’s gaze snaps to mine before looking away. He says, eyes wide and ahead of him, “It’s okay; I’ll be fine on my own. I’m sure Mia has plans.”

I check my phone, no text from Holden. No genuine excuse.

Before I can speak, Leo adds, “And I might need the passenger seat for the smaller things... like screws and... stuff.”

Papa sighs. “She go.”

“Really, it’s fine.”

“She go,” Papa says and then reaches into his pocket for his wallet. He pulls out a bank card and holds it out to me. “She pays. See?”

“Oh, I can pay for it and then—”

“Bullshit,” Papa snaps, and I can tell it’s making Leo uncomfortable to have to fight him on this. Admittedly, I hate it for him. “She go.” Papa looks at me. “You go?”

I swallow my nerves. “Yes, Papa.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

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LEO

THIS IS GOING to be harder than I thought. Not even the making excuses or the ignoring part. Just the simple act of *existing* part. Mia's in the passenger seat of my truck, and she's wearing a dress, and I'd never seen her in a dress before. It's nothing flashy or revealing, but the mere fact that she's in it and she's next to me in it is driving me insane.

"You're going the wrong way," she says, and I don't know how considering we literally just pulled out of the driveway. "The hardware store's the opposite direction."

Right. I'd forgotten that just because she was constantly on my mind, it didn't mean that she *lives* in there. "I haven't had breakfast," I tell her, my voice cracking from the dryness of my throat. "I was going to grab something at the diner real quick. Is that okay?"

"Sure."

When we get to the diner, there's an awkward silence—a pause. I had planned on eating in because I like to watch the world from behind a window, but now that she's here... "I'll just get it to-go. Did you want something?"

She shakes her head. "I'm good." Then her eyes trail to a group of guys sitting on the outside tables. They don't seem to fit in with our surroundings. They look like they belong in a frat. Mia must pick up on the fact that I've followed her gaze because she says, "They're seasonals."

"Like, summer hands?"

She nods, her brow pinched as she watches them.

I look back at the guys, who are all looking at my truck and *leering* at her. "Maybe you should come in with me."

"Yeah," she breathes out.

"Wait there," I tell her, getting out of the truck. I move to her side and open her door. We don't touch. As close as she walks beside me, especially past the frat crew and into the diner, we don't make contact. There are more people here than I'd seen before, and I glance around for Miss Sandra, but can't find her.

“Mia Mac,” a woman calls from behind the counter. She’s *little*, like Mia, with fiery red hair and a face full of freckles. “I heard you lived in New York now!” She’s shouting, even though there’s no need to because we’re standing a counter distance away. “How’s that daddy of yours?”

“Good,” is all Mia says.

“I remember him as a kid...” the woman says. “Running around his daddy’s farm. I hope it was worth it, you know, leaving everything behind.” Wait.

His daddy’s farm? I always assumed Virginia was John’s daughter. Surely, I should’ve known this fact. I guess I never asked.

“Is Rita bothering you, sweets?” Miss Sandra appears from the kitchen, her natural grin doubling when she notices me. “Hey, baby.”

I return her smile. “Hi, Miss Sandra.”

Miss Sandra looks between Mia and me, again and again, before settling on me. “You still waiting on that darkness to fall?”

I glance at Mia quickly. “Undecided,” I reply.

Miss Sandra tilts her head to one side, assessing me. “Good answer,” she says. “You want the usual breakfast, hun, or are you going to change it up this time?”

“Just the usual.”

She doesn’t bother writing down my order, just shouts to the kitchen staff, “Breakfast burger!” She winks at me. “I’ll get that chocolate cake for you.”

Mia speaks up. “I thought you didn’t like cake?”

She *remembers*, and that little piece of information has my stomach flipping. “Someone made me a cake for my birthday once,” I say, pulling some napkins from the dispenser. “Had me changing my mind real quick.”

MIA DOESN’T HAVE her license, so she can’t drive while I eat, and so we have no choice but to sit in the parking lot while I practically Hoover the meal. When I’m done, I put the truck in gear, and before moving, I tell her, “I always thought Virginia was your grandpa’s daughter.”

“That’s a creepy thought,” she murmurs, looking behind us. “It’s clear. You can back out.”

I wait until I’m on the road again, going the *right* direction, to say, “It just seems weird. He wanted you to spend the summer with her, and she’s

not even *his* kid.”

Mia sighs, looks down at her lap.

Aaaand, she’s back to ignoring me. *Noted.*

THE HARDWARE STORE is a good half-hour drive away and swear; I didn’t think it was possible to drown in sounds. Or lack of, in our case, because we spent the entire ride in silence. I should’ve turned on the stereo, but I didn’t, and now it’s too late because we’re already entering the pick-up dock at the store. Mia gets out of the truck before I do and makes her way to the counter. I follow after her like a sad, pathetic puppy just looking for some attention. She’s already got the debit card in her hand, and she’s tap, tap, tapping it on the counter—a sign of impatience. I bet she can’t wait to be back at the house so she can run off with Holden or lock herself in her room like she’s done the past three days.

A guy, around my age, appears from a doorway leading to what I assume is an office. He smiles a generic smile and asks, “What can I do for y’all?”

Mia answers, “I have an order to pick up. It should be under John Smith.”

She seems annoyed with me already, so I don’t speak up.

The guy eyes her a moment, as if he recognizes her, and then types on a keyboard. “I don’t have anything under a John Smith.”

Mia’s quick to say, “He may have put it under his real name—*János Kovács.*”

Huh. It’s amazing what you can learn when you keep your mouth shut.

“You’re going to have to spell that for me,” the guy says, and he’s still looking at her like he knows her from somewhere. He probably does, and it’s difficult for him to pin-point. I’m not blind to the way she looks now compared to the way she used to. I just don’t care. This guy, though, he clearly does, because he’s eyeing her the way Logan does when he wants someone.

I want to punch him.

I want to take the two-by-four sitting on the counter and smack him over the head with it—multiple times.

“Nothing here with that name either,” he tells her.

I finally speak up. “It’s under Leo Preston.”

“Oh,” says the guy, his fingers moving swiftly across the keyboard. “*That* name, we have.”

No shit, Sherlock. I just told you that.

“So who’s John Sm—Oh!” His eyes narrow on the girl next to me, the debit card still tapping on the counter. “It’s Mia, right. Papa John’s Mia?”

“Uh-huh,” Mia says.

“You’ve, uh...” The guy’s generic smile turns sinister—at least in my eyes. “You’ve grown up.”

I face her, watch as the blush creeps to her cheeks. “It happens,” she says, shrugging.

The guy, whose name tag reads *Brent*, tells her, even though the order is in my name, “I’ve got your invoice right here.” He doesn’t look at me when he says, “Is your boyfriend paying, or...”

The dickhead’s smooth, I’ll give him that, but he’s also a shitbag, so fuck him.

“Not my boyfriend,” Mia responds, and is she... is she *flirting*?

I groan.

Now I want to take the two-by-four and slam it against my own head.

Brent calls out over his shoulder, “Hey, take over for me.” There’s no one behind him. “I’m going to help these guys load the timber.”

He doesn’t help me load the timber or anything else that we’ve ordered. He stands next to my truck while Mia leans against it, and they make small talk, which leads to laughter, which leads to me wanting to put a nail through my ears and my eyeballs, and then he asks for her number, and she gives it to him, and—“I’m done!” I shout, my words echoing off the steel walls. I jump off the bed of the truck, ignoring their shared looks of surprise as I move to stand between them. Then I reach around Mia, opening her door, while simultaneously stepping back and shoving shitbag out of the way. “Let’s go. Your grandpa’s waiting.”

Mia’s expression gives nothing away. She simply gets into the truck, sits with her hands on her lap, and looks out the windshield. As I’m closing the door, Brent calls out, “I’ll call you.”

I slam the door shut and turn to him. Now that we’re this close, I realize I have more than a few inches on him and use it to my advantage. I tower over him, give him the same look I give my brothers right before one of my many, many “outbursts.”

“No, you fucking won’t.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

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MIA

IT'S BEEN a week since our little trip to the hardware store, and every day since, from sunup to sundown, Leo has busied himself with the work he was sent here to do. Unfortunately, Holden's also been busy working at his father's nursery, which means that I have a lot more time on my hands.

From what I can tell, Leo's replaced the posts holding up the roof of the porch with temporary ones, and he's started to remove the floor, but I *think* he came across an issue because he and Papa stood on the driveway looking at it, and *talking* about it, for a good hour. Honestly, it's kind of nice to watch them together, to see the way they are with each other. Papa would say something, and Leo would agree, and then they'd discuss it, occasionally moving to show each other something, and when Papa would cross his arms, Leo would, too. When Leo would adjust his cap, Papa would run a hand through what little hair is on his head. They mirror each other a lot, which I find fascinating. So fascinating, I looked it up. Apparently, it shows that there is "comfort, trust, and rapport among them."

It's... sweet.

I mainly watch from my bedroom window in the attic, so I can't see the actual porch from there, but I can see Leo walk onto the driveway to cut wood or mess with his tools—tools he must've brought from home.

Most days he leaves for lunch, and going by the way Miss Sandra greeted him at the diner, I'm guessing that's where he goes.

We don't talk.

There's nothing for us to say to each other.

And we don't interact.

Because that would be pointless.

Every night, during dinner, Leo, again, makes himself scarce. I don't know what he does or where he goes, but I'm grateful for the time I get to spend with my grandpa. Just like his trips to the bank or the shops, Papa gives me a rundown of his days, a play-by-play, verbatim, and since most of his days are spent with Leo, I get to hear about "The Boy" even though he's not around.

Papa told me that Leo likes to ask him questions. Not about me, but about him. Leo had asked about his childhood in Budapest and what it was like growing up post-World War II in a country that defeated the Soviet Army. He'd told Leo about his family, being the youngest of four children, and about when his parents hid a family of Jews in a barn on their property. Papa was born in 1945, right at the end of the war, so his knowledge of these events is based purely on his father's storytelling.

He'd told Leo about his stint in the Navy and how he traveled the world afterward. How it didn't take long for him to fall in love with the American life, fall in love with an American girl, and then build the American dream.

Papa mentioned that Leo didn't talk much, which isn't a surprise to me. Papa did most of the talking, and Leo did most of the asking. A part of me wondered if it was like the times when Papa would go into town and people would simply amuse him by listening to his ramblings. With Leo, I doubted it. Leo was always a good listener, always interested in what you had to say, even if it held no real significance. He liked to get lost in stories, in journeys and adventures, but he didn't much like living his own.

Papa even told him about how he'd worked on this farm prior to the previous owner selling it to him. The old house was a shed, and a shed wasn't good enough for his American wife, and so he built an American House, with his own hands, worthy of the love of his life. She passed when my dad was fifteen. I think a part of Papa died with her, and my dad? According to Papa, he was never the same.

Of course, I'd heard all the stories before, but hearing how Papa retold them to Leo and seeing the smile on his lips and the gleam in his eyes when he mentioned how enthralled Leo was, made my heart soften, just a tad.

I'm reminded of the boy who held my hand when I was sad, who took me to his special place for no other reason than his want to share it... with *me*. There was so much *good* in Leo, that's undeniable, and maybe...

Maybe that good just wasn't meant for me.

DURING THE DAY, I watch Leo from afar. At night, when the world is dark and the house is quiet, I secretly get to admire the work that he's done. It's like a treat for me, a reward. I wait until I know Papa is asleep and Leo is in

the spare bedroom, and then I slip on my running shoes and head outside. Like Leo, I don't have a route. I don't need one; I have a treadmill in the barn. Last year, I ran five miles a night. This year, I'm pushing seven. Back at school, I ran on the track. I did it at night there, too, which caused some issues at first. It was against the rules, and the school called my dad. When he asked me why I was doing it, I shrugged and told him, "I just want to." He didn't ask questions, because he didn't have time, and so he "donated" an undisclosed amount to the school with the agreement that they'd let me break curfew. There were no limits to the contract. It wasn't an "only to use the track" type deal. I could've come and gone how I pleased and money—money made all my insubordinations disappear.

I *almost* make it seven miles before my body breaks down. Drenched in sweat, my lungs burn, muscles weak from the abuse I'd just handed them. I slow the treadmill to a walking pace, and it takes less than a minute for nausea to kick in. On shaky legs, I push through the next few steps of my routine, satisfied, and can't help the slight smile as I walk toward the half-finished porch. It's stripped to the foundation, and lying on top is what looks like three different railing samples. I bend down, run my finger along one of the posts, and then jolt back when a throat clears. It's pitch-black, and Leo is sitting on one of the beams, nothing in his hands, nothing to show *what* he's doing here, like a creep, like a dang *sociopath*. He deadpans, "You having fun stroking my wood?"

I gasp, jaw unhinged.

"Sorry," he says, a hand covering his face. "I couldn't help it. The innuendo was *right there*."

Ignoring him, I whisper-yell, "What the heck are you doing? You scared me."

"Sorry," he says again, then shrugs. "I couldn't sleep, so I came out here. Didn't know you were out here, too." He stands up on the beam and leaps from one to the next, jumping off the edge and landing next to me. "You been out running?" he asks, pointing a finger down my length.

Suddenly, I'm aware of how I look and what I'm *not* covering. I nod, cross my arms over my bare abdomen revealed by the short crop top. I'm grateful that it's dark, that he can't see the stretch marks on my hips and stomach.

"You shouldn't be running on your own at night."

“And you shouldn’t be worrying about me.” I don’t know why I’m so combative, and sure, I could tell him that there’s a treadmill in the barn, but that space is my solace. My secret.

Leo’s heavy breath lands on the top of my head, and I’m about to make an excuse to leave when he asks, “Which one do you like?” He’s pointing to the three different samples of railing.

“I don’t know,” I murmur, inconspicuously looking up at the attic window that’s not visible from where we stand. I want to be there. I *long* to be there.

“Well, your grandpa’s going to ask you to choose tomorrow. That’s why I have them all laid out.”

“He wants *me* to pick?”

“Yep.” His voice carries through the air, through my lungs, as if I breathe in the sound. Inhale it like oxygen.

“I’m not sure,” I say, turning and looking up at him. He’s focused on the railings; his profile lit only by the moonlight. His jaw’s square, nose narrow, eyes hidden behind the brim of his cap. After a beat, I add, “Which would you choose?”

“For me?” he says and points to the one on the left. “I’d choose that one.”

I look at the one he’s pointing at. It’s the most basic one of all. It’s nothing but square edges and symmetry. “It’s so plain,” I tell him.

“That’s why I said I’d choose it *for me*. For you, though”—he points to the one on the right, the most intricate of them all—“I’d choose that one.”

My breaths become shallow, my nerves shot, and even though I know I’ll regret asking, I do it anyway. “Why that one?”

He’s still focused on the railings when he answers, “It’s the most complicated one. But it’s by far the most beautiful. And even though it’ll take me a lot more work and a lot more time...” I’m already watching him when he faces me, his head tilted forward to meet my eyes. “It’ll be worth it, Mia. For *you*.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

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LEO

“I’LL COME HOME NEXT WEEKEND,” I say into the phone, while simultaneously filling a glass from the tap. I’d just come back from my run a little later than usual, and as soon as I entered the house, my phone rang. It was Laney.

“You said that last weekend,” she says.

It’s true, I did, but I didn’t feel much like going home, so I told her I had shit to do. To my dad, I told the truth: that I just wasn’t ready.

Laney sighs. “Lachlan will want you there.”

By *there*, she means watching his baseball game. He already has Lucas and Logan, plus our brother-in-law, Cameron, running the team and highly doubt he’ll notice I’m *not* there.

“Plus, I miss you,” she adds, and there it is. I’d say that my friendship with Laney is complicated, but it really isn’t. Growing up, she was close with both Lucas and me, though it was apparent she saw him in a different light. Their connection was unbreakable, and ours was... convenient. She’d come to me whenever she needed advice, mainly about Lucas, and I’d go to her because—truthfully—she kind of reminded me of my mom, which means that I hated disappointing her.

“I...” I trail off because Mia’s just appeared from the stairs, and she’s in another dress. This one’s white, with light blue vertical stripes, buttons down the middle. It goes past her knees, the sleeves to the elbows, and there’s nothing at all revealing about it, but on her, it’s *intoxicating*. I’d never really noticed girls’ clothes before, at least not in the way I am right now. I’d been attracted to Mia since I was thirteen, and she wore nothing but oversized tees and shorts. But now? Now I’m convinced she’d look good wearing a potato sack.

“You what?” Laney asks, and I realize I’m staring at Mia, the glass halfway to my mouth. The odd part? Mia’s staring back.

“I, uh... I’ll call you back,” I say into the phone, and don’t wait for a response before hanging up. It’s as if my voice pulls Mia from her daze, and her eyes shut tight before opening again.

I down the water in one hit, then lower the glass. “You look nice.”

Mia looks down at herself. “Thank you,” she says, but it comes out a question.

Finally forcing my eyes to look anywhere but at her, I busy myself with rinsing out the glass, the entire time wondering *why* she’s dressed like that. Before I can ask, she calls out, “Papa! You ready?”

“You can’t rush handsome,” he says, appearing in the living room. He’s wearing slacks, a tweed jacket, and a bright red bow tie.

“You look dapper, Papa,” Mia says, moving toward him.

He looks *cute*. Like little old man cute. He reminds me of the old man in *Up*. Grinning at the thought, I ask, leaning on the kitchen sink with my arms and ankles crossed, “Where are you guys headed?”

Mia turns to me, and she’s smiling, too. “Church. You want to come?”

My answer is instant. “No, thanks.”

Mia tilts her head, assessing me, and I don’t know what my reaction was or what vibe I’m giving off. “They have a potluck,” she tries to convince.

It’s the first time she’s willingly asked me to join her anywhere, and I should really make an effort. But I can’t. Not with this. “I’m good.”

“Okay,” she sing-songs and turns to fix her grandpa’s tie.

John smiles warmly at her. “You take good care of me, *baba*. Like your *nagymama*.”

“I try, Papa,” she says, then faces me again. “Papa visits with friends after church, and I hang out with Holden, so we won’t be back until after dinner.”

“Got it.”

I SPEND the rest of the day working on the porch and writing a list of other things that’ll need doing. Once this job is over, I plan on either fixing or replacing the gutters and then working on the siding. As I walk around the house, I notice the barn and question if there’s anything in there I can use to save John some money. When I go to open the door, it’s locked. I predicted it would be, but John showed me a set of keys that should open every lock. I go through each key one by one; some of them fit, but none actually turn. I’d seen Mia come out of there a few times now, mainly in the morning and

sometimes at night, so maybe she took the key. Either way, I'll be sure to check with John tomorrow.

The day goes by quickly, and before I realize, I've skipped lunch, and it's already dinner time. As if on cue, my stomach rumbles. After packing up the tools, I take a quick shower and head off, ready to see my second favorite girl here.

MISS SANDRA NOTICES me as soon as I walk in, even though the diner is busy. Most of the people gather at the outside tables, so I still have the inside somewhat to myself. "Your booth's free, baby, go ahead," she calls out, and I nod, make my way to the same table I sit at every night. Miss Sandra already knows my order, so I know she won't be back to ask.

I settle in, paperback in hand, and find where I dog-eared the page. I open it up, making sure I crack the spine. Lucy *hates* the way I treat her books. She wants them pristine, as if they've never been touched. I disagree. Books are meant to be read, spines worn from looking over the same passages over and over. Sometimes, when I'm really into a book, I highlight sentences and write in the margins. Those are the books she'll inevitably gift me and buy another copy for herself that will sit on a shelf and never truly be appreciated.

I'm only two sentences in when the bell above the diner door dings, letting in an influx of noise from outside. I look out the window and realize the people hanging around outside are kids my age. I must've missed that detail on the walk from my truck to this seat. The three dudes walking through the door are all tall and broad-shouldered, like most of the guys around here. They walk past my booth on the way to the restroom, and I've never really understood guys who piss in groups. Like, *why*? To look at each other's dicks? It doesn't make sense.

More and more cars, mainly trucks, start to fill the parking lot, and more kids appear. I'd put money that 90 percent of the fourteen- to eighteen-year-olds in this town are right here, right now. The restroom door opens, and the closet dick measurers come out, talking as obnoxiously loud as they did when they walked in. "I swear to God; it's her."

"Mia?" one of them says, and I'm all fucking ears. "Papa John's Mia?"

"Yep," the first guy responds, popping the *p*.

"It can't be. Wasn't she a fat bitch?"

Heart pumping, jaw tense, I rest the book on the table, my fingers furled as I listen in on their bullshit. I don't have to listen hard. They stop directly beside my booth, and one of them points. "See? The one in the blue and white dress."

"Holy shit, it is!"

I look to where they're pointing, and sure enough, Mia's there. She's sitting on a table outside, her feet on the bench seat. Alone. Holden's nowhere that I can see, and I'm pissed that he's left her there, vulnerable.

"Damn," the third one speaks up.

"I wonder if she puts out," one of them says, and I hold my breath, my anger building, building.

"Ten bucks says I'll have her on her knees with my dick in her mouth by the end of the night."

All the money in the world says she won't fucking let you, I don't say. Out loud. But I think it, and before I can do anything but let my rage simmer, they're already walking to the door.

MIA

Holden's with a girl—of course—a different girl than the one he had in his bed that he couldn't "get rid of." I didn't realize he'd turned into such a male hussy, and I don't know where the heck all these girls are coming from because it sure didn't seem like there were this many of them when we lived here. When I'd first brought it up, Holden blushed, which is something he *never* did. "Please don't think differently of me, Mia Mac. It's just... sex is *fun*."

I told him that I didn't care. As long as they were both consenting and he was open and honest with them, it wasn't my place to judge. It was *God's*.

That tripped him up... until I busted out a laugh.

Short of getting a girl pregnant and then abandoning the kid, Holden had way too much *good* in him, especially toward me, so there aren't a lot of things in this world he could do to disappoint me.

I glance over at his truck and see him sitting on the bed, a girl standing between his legs, their mouths locked.

My nose scrunches. "Gross," I whisper to myself. But I'm not the only one who hears it.

"What is?" Colton Lockwood's standing in front of me, his gaze shifting from Holden to me. "Holden and Kaleigh Rogers?"

"That's who it is," I murmur. "I couldn't tell from the back of her head."

Colton laughs, his head thrown back, and it's so obviously fake it makes me uncomfortable. Colton, in general, makes me uncomfortable. If the rumors are true, since the age of ten, he'd been convincing girls to leave church services and go to the playroom to make out and fondle each other's parts. Why he's talking to *me*, I have no idea.

"You're Mia, right?"

I nod. "Colton, right?"

His smile is so broad it *almost* seems genuine. "You remember me?"

"I do." I'm surprised he remembers me, though.

"How's your grandpa?" he asks, sitting down on the table next to me. His long legs could reach the ground, but he hoists them into the bench, so

he's matching my position. "I haven't seen him in the shop lately." Colton's family owns the wheat farm and the little bakery that goes with it.

"He's good," I tell him.

"That's good," he says, adding, "Honestly, when I heard you were leaving, I worried about him."

My eyebrows rise. "You did?"

"Well, it's just... I mean, he's alone now and stuff, and you two were always together when you came in to buy bread or whatever, so I thought... maybe he'd become a recluse without you or something..."

Huh. Maybe I'm a sucky person for judging Colton based on rumors I've never actually verified. "And you *worried* about him?"

Colton shrugs. "I guess."

"Well," I say, cracking a smile. "You'll be happy to know that he's doing just fine."

His lips kick up on one corner, and yeah, I'm not blind. If the rumors *are* true, I could totally understand why it's easy for him to convince girls to leave the lessons of God's teaching. He smiles wider now, and I wonder if he caught me looking at him. "So... what are your plans for the night?"

Breaking through my fog, I nod toward Holden's general direction. "I think this is it," I mumble. "Once he's done there, we'll probably just head home."

Colton nods and then something warm lands on my knee. I look down at his hand as he squeezes once and says, "You should come—" That's all he gets out before a gust of wind floats against my cheek, and the table beneath me rocks.

It takes me a moment, but the screaming and yelling from around me have me jumping to my feet and tugging on an arm. Colton's back is pressed against the table, his throat held down by a strong, firm hand attached to muscled forearms—forearms I recognize. "Leo! What are you doing?!"

I'm tugging on his arm, and some other guy is attempting to do the same while shouting at Leo to "Get the fuck off him!"

Leo doesn't budge. He's a solid wall. A statue.

"Holden! Help!" I shout, tears in my eyes, and everything happens all at once. Colton reaches up, trying to pull away Leo's fingers from around his neck, but Leo only squeezes tighter.

“What the fuck, dude!” I recognize the voice as Holden’s as he pushes me aside and stands between the two of them. “Dude, let him go!”

Leo finally releases him and stands to full height.

“Who the fuck are you?” Colton fumes, rubbing his neck as he gets to his feet.

Shoulders square, Leo stands firm. “Don’t ever fucking touch her again,” he seethes. “Don’t speak to her. Don’t even look at her.” He takes a threatening step forward, and it’s suddenly silent, all but for the beating of my heart. Mouth to Colton’s ear, Leo whispers, loud enough for everyone to hear, “If I catch you, I’ll kill you.”

I don’t know why I’m crying—whether it’s shock, or anger, or fear. Tears stream down my cheeks just as Leo turns, looks down at me with his jaw tense, nostrils flared. “Don’t cry,” he deadpans. “He’s not worth it.”

From the corner of my eye, I see Holden watching us. He says, “Can you get her home, Leo? I got this.”

“Got what?” I ask.

But no one answers me. Instead, Leo grasps my upper arm and drags me to his truck. I’m in a daze as he opens my door and helps me to sit. He makes his way to his side and gets in, starts the engine. Then he pulls out of the parking lot, but not before I hear Holden yell, “Anyone but Mia, you asshole!”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

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MIA

“ARE you going to explain what happened, or are we just not going to talk about it?” It’s the first thing spoken since we got in the truck, and my voice seems to fill every inch of the cab.

Leo sits, tense, his hand white-knuckling the steering wheel. Every time I release a sob, he flinches. I still don’t know why I’m crying. I’ve put it down to shock, but also fear. Leo has *scared* me. His actions, his words—they’re a side of him I’d never seen, never even thought possible from him—and I’m terrified. Not of him, but of what he’s capable of. “It doesn’t matter,” he grinds out, focused on the road ahead of him.

We’ve already passed the house, so I have no idea where he plans on going.

“It matters to me,” I tell him, sniffing back another sob. “What happened to make you—”

“Leave it alone, Mia,” he snaps.

And now I’m pissed, because he’s talking down to me as if I won’t understand, or maybe he doesn’t want me to understand. “I have a right to know.”

He simply shakes his head, his jaw working.

I pull my feet up onto the seat and face him completely. “Tell me!”

He turns into a side street that’s so hidden from the road; I don’t know how he knew it existed. “No!”

We’re surrounded by nothing but darkness and dense bush, and he’s driving like we’re on a dang highway. Frustrated, I tell him, “This is a dead end.”

“What?” The car swerves as we go over a large tree root, and it takes both hands for him to right the vehicle again.

I repeat, louder this time, “This is a dead end!” I reach across the console and grab the wheel while simultaneously pulling on the hand brake. “You’re going to fucking kill us!” The tires skid along the dirt, and I struggle to keep the steering wheel straight as we get jostled from side to side.

The truck stops only feet away from the Dead-End sign attached to the barrier with reflective markers. If I'd waited a second longer to lift the hand brake, we'd be through the barriers and down a twenty-foot cliff.

Chest rising and falling, I sit back, my breaths shaky. "You're an idiot!" I spit.

Leo's looking down at his lap, his head lowered, but he doesn't say a word.

"I don't know what the heck got into you, Leo, but you can't—"

"That motherfucker bet his friends ten dollars that you'd..." He trails off as if it pains him to continue.

"That I'd what?" I demand.

He lifts his head, the back of it against the headrest as he rolls it to the side, faces me. His eyes are red, raw, desolate. "He said he'd have you on your knees with his... his—"

"I get it," I whisper, my stomach turning at the thought.

Leo removes his cap, throws it on the dashboard, and rubs at his eyes. His voice is rough when he says, "I could've killed you, Mia."

I know this, but hearing him say it, the way he says it—my anger fades, replaced with a hint of pity. "It's okay."

"It's not," he murmurs, then sucks in a breath, looks out the windshield. "I don't know what happened." His mouth barely moves as he speaks. "I mean, I do, but I don't... I don't know how to explain it. How to verbalize it. I heard him say what he said and when I saw him touching you, I just..." He licks his lips, cracks each knuckle one by one.

"You just... protected me?" I offer.

He shakes his head. "That's the thing, Mia. I don't know if that was all of it. That guy—he just... he reminded me so much of Laney's ex; so cocky and arrogant and... I don't know. I *snapped*."

So, it wasn't about me.

It was about *her*.

When I was younger, I thought I was competing against Laney—the beautiful, creative girl who was always around. The one all the Preston boys adored. It took three summers for me to realize that I'd never be her. I wouldn't even come close.

"I need to get some air," Leo mumbles, pushing open his door. I watch him walk to the front of the truck, to the barrier. He starts shaking it. At first, I think it's out of anger, but when he leans against, almost sits on it,

I'm proven otherwise. Arms outstretched, the muscles in his forearms shift as he grips on to metal, his head bowed, legs kick out in front of him. I wait a minute. Two. And when he looks up at the sky, his mouth moving, I wonder who he's talking to, what he's saying. My curiosity gets the better of me, and I get out of the truck, sit beside him.

It's as if he was waiting for me, because as soon as I'm seated, he says, "The other day, when you took me to that milking place, you said something..."

I look down at the ground, at the dirt beneath my feet. "I said a lot of things."

He huffs out a breath. "You said that you don't hate anyone. And I guess I'm just wondering how that's possible. After that night, how can you not hate me? ...Or my brothers? What they said—"

I clear the giant knot in my throat, stopping him from saying more. I don't need a reminder of what they said. I live and breathe it every day. Heat prickles behind my eyes, and I blink, blink, blink, until they're gone. I swore I'd never shed a single tear over that night again, and I'm determined to see it through.

"I ask because..." Leo starts, and I look over at him. He's looking up at the stars again. "Because I think I have a lot of hate in my heart, and I don't know how to get rid of it." He pauses a beat. "And I want to. Because I know it's destroying me. I can see that it's happening, and I don't know how to stop it." His voice breaks as he speaks, and I can tell how hard this is for him and how much he's pushing himself to say the things he's saying. He said that he couldn't verbalize it, but he is. Here. Now. With me. He's doing it. And so, I do what he once did when I cried to him about my mother not wanting me. I take his hand, and I hold it, and I don't let go.

Fingers linked, he grabs on to me, as if I'm his lifeline. His anchor. Once upon a time, I felt the same about him.

I say, my voice low, tentative, "Hatred is a one-way emotion." I take a breath. "It only affects the person holding on to that hate. Take Laney's ex, for example..." I face him, but he's already watching me. "Do you think he knows how much you hate him? Do you think he *cares* that you do?"

Leo chews the corner of his lip as his eyes search mine.

"Does he even know you exist?"

His lashes lower.

“So, what’s the point, right?” I murmur. “Only *you* carry the burden of hatred, Leo. And it’s a lot easier to let go of that pain than it is to hold on to it.”

He nods as if he understands, but I can tell that there’s something more on his mind. Something heavier. When he lifts his gaze, his stare is blank, eyes clouded. “What if...” he trails off, and I find myself moving closer to him.

“What if what?” I urge.

He looks away again, mumbling, “What if the person I hate most is *myself*?”

Air jolts against my ribcage, gets caught in my throat. It takes everything inside me to open my airways, breathe his words right into me. “You don’t hate yourself, Leo Preston,” I choke out. “Because if you did, you wouldn’t be here.”

Trust me, I want to tell him. I’d know.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

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LEO

THERE'S a young couple in the diner with me, and they're talking to each other, but not *really*. They're doing that thing where one person talks and the other person *hears* them, but they don't really *listen*. They're too busy trying to come up with what to say when the other finishes speaking because silence would be too awkward, and that would be too hard.

Personally, I like the silence in between. Those few seconds or even minutes where you kind of wrap your mind around everything that's just been said. Talking for the sake of talking is pointless to me—kind of like hearing but not listening. When I *do* talk, I like to ask questions. And when people answer, I consider it a gift.

Miss Sandra appears beside my booth and practically drops my order on the table. "You going to try to kill him, too?"

I internally groan, my face scrunched in that silently apologetic way when I look up at her. I don't actually verbalize an "I'm sorry" because that would be a lie, and I don't want to lie to Miss Sandra.

She tilts her head to the side and offers an assessing "Hmm" at my non-response, and then, as surreptitiously as she arrived, she's gone again.

No longer interested in the fake couple, I pick up Lucy's book sitting on the bench beside me, and just because I kind of miss her, I crack the spine and send a picture to her.

Lucy: *I hate you.*

Leo: *You're welcome.*

Lucy: *How are you?*

How am I?

I shouldn't have started the conversation because now she's waiting for a response and I don't know what to say. I'm *average*, wouldn't suffice. But I'm not good, and I'm not bad, either. I am, however... *lighter* than I was yesterday, far less burdened with the weight of Hate.

I guess I never looked at it the way Mia described. To me, hate was always just an emotion, something I couldn't control. It was a four-letter

word that I'd scrawled on the backs of many, many photographs.
I respond to Lucy, mainly to ease her worries.

Leo: *I'm better.*

Lucy: *I'm glad, Leelee.*

I crack a smile at Lucy's pet name for me. When we were kids, she deemed that she hated the "O" part of my name and started calling me Lee, which then turned to Leelee. I was a toddler and didn't understand why she was suddenly changing my name, but I thought it was a game and so she became Lulu. Together, we were LuLee. And we were together a lot, come to think of it. She even put our joined names on a sign that hung at the entrance of a makeshift library she'd made us in her bedroom. The walls were made of sky-blue bed sheets. Sky-blue—so it wasn't too girly—so I'd *want* to be in there with her.

She set up a beanbag and little table in one corner, and we'd sit in that beanbag together, me under her arm while she read to me. She'd let me pick any book I wanted off the cardboard box shelf she'd created, and she'd point her finger along every line, saying each word carefully. And when I got confused, I'd interrupt her to ask questions, and she never got frustrated. She'd stop and answer them as best as she could for someone only five years older than me. Eventually, she'd start teaching me to read, to recognize letters, and how those letters joined to make words.

When I had to repeat third grade because I was so far behind in my reading skills, she blamed herself.

She never read to me again after that.

Eight years later, I was diagnosed with dyslexia.

It's weird—how volatile memories are. I hadn't thought about Lulee's Library in so long; it was almost painful to recall it. I pick up my phone, ready to text her. I have:

Hey, remember

before I delete it. It seems a waste to share something so significant to me via a message, so I make a promise to talk to her about it in person.

The couple has left their table now and are on the way out. After Miss Sandra clears their table, she returns to me with the chocolate cake. I haven't even taken a bite from my breakfast. Instead of leaving it with me,

she sits down opposite me, her back to the corner, legs outstretched on the seat. “You like to watch people, don’t you, baby?”

I shake my head.

I don’t like to *watch* people.

I like to listen.

Like last night with Mia. After I said what I said, and she did the same, we sat in silence, our hands linked, for a good half-hour. In my head, I replayed her words almost verbatim, because I *listened*.

I listened, and I *learned*.

“Are they together?” I ask, nodding toward where the couple was.

“Why’s that?” she asks, stretching the muscles in her neck. It’s the first time she’s sat with me, and I’m not mad about it.

I shrug. “Curious.”

“You lookin’ for a scandal, hon?” She’s smirking, and I ignore my meal, lean back on the worn leather, my arm resting on the back of the seat. She adds, “Prior to your little show last night, there hasn’t been a scandal around these parts for, what... sixteen years?”

I nod as if I know what she means, and me—scandal? *Unlikely*.

“Well, thirteen years if you count the year your darkness returned.”

My darkness? Eyes narrowed in confusion, I watch her, and I wait.

“Am I gossiping?” Miss Sandra asks, but it’s not a question. Not really. And she is. Though I won’t call her out on it. Shaking her head, she gets out of the booth. “Well, I should stop. You know what they say about gossip?”

“What’s that?” I ask.

“Who gossips to you, will gossip of you.” She disappears again, leaving me with an untouched meal, an unfinished book, and about a million questions floating through my mind.

When I leave an hour later, Miss Sandra’s outside on one of the tables having a smoke break. “See you tonight, baby,” she calls out.

I’m in no rush, so I sit beside her, keep her company. “You work too much,” I tell her. “You’re here all the time, *literally*.”

She pushes into my side. “I need the work,” she says. “Got three babies at home, and my husband’s life insurance barely covered his medical expenses.”

There’s a lot of information to process in that one sentence. Miss Sandra is a mother, *was* a wife—now a widow—and whatever caused her husband’s death was either a terminal illness or something that needed, at

the least, stays in hospitals, or at the most, operations, failed ones, maybe even multiple. “I’m sorry,” I tell her.

She’s quiet a beat as she takes a drag, exhales it to the side so it doesn’t get to me. “God has a plan for all of us,” she says.

I clamp my lips together because she’s the last person who needs to hear my opinion on *that*.

“What about you?” she asks. “You got any brothers or sisters?”

“Five brothers, one sister.”

She chokes on an inhale of smoke and thumps her chest, her eyes watering. “That’s a lot of mouths to feed,” she cracks. “Your parents must do well to support y’all, with college and all.”

“It’s just my dad,” I tell her, giving her more about me than I have anyone else since I got here. “Mom passed about seven years back... Non-smoker her entire life, and she died of lung cancer.” Which is just one of the reasons the God theory is bullshit. Either that or God gets to pick and choose, and that doesn’t seem fair.

She clucks her tongue. “Well, shit, baby,” she huffs, making a show of stubbing out her lit cigarette on the ground. “I’m sorry.”

I chuckle at her response. “It’s okay.”

Like myself, Miss Sandra doesn’t seem to mind the silence between sounds. After a minute or so, she asks, surprising me, “What’s your name?”

I laugh. All this time she’d been taking care of me, and I never once told her my name. “Leo.”

She nods. “Short for Leonard? Leopold? No. *Leonardo*?”

“Nope, just Leo.”

“Leo, the lion,” she muses. “King of the animal kingdom.”

“I’m far from a king,” I murmur, looking down at my hands.

Miss Sandra hops off the table and moves toward the door. “Someday, Leo, you’ll be a king in someone’s kingdom.”

She pushes open the door, and I ask, stopping her in her tracks, “What did you mean before? About my darkness returning?”

Dropping her hand, she props the door open with her back. “The first night you came here, you said you were waiting for your darkness to fall... Miss Mia Mac—she was what you were waiting on, right?”

Shaking my head, I get to my feet. “Mia’s not my darkness,” I tell her. “She’s my sunrise.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

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MIA

WHEN I WAKE UP, Leo's already gone. Not surprising. I wait an hour for him to return, and when he doesn't, I take the ATV to where we'd left his truck the night prior. We deemed it safer to walk back to the house than to reverse the entire way, only having the rear lights guide us. I know exactly where the truck is: the halfway point between my house and Holden's. We'd been to that exact spot so many times I could find it with my eyes closed.

When I get there, Leo's truck is gone.

And when I get back to the house, Leo's already here.

So is Holden.

Sitting on one of the beams of the porch, the first thing Holden says to me is, "Why are you on my ATV?"

"My battery's shot." I shrug as I hop off. "What are you doing here?"

He doesn't get up, as if he's found his spot for the day, and that's where he's staying. "Came to see how you guys were."

You guys. As in Leo and me. As in the two of us. Together. But apart.

Leo hasn't turned to look at me, too busy fondling his wood.

"I'm good," I say, walking toward them. This is... uncharted territory. Having the only two boys who mean anything in my life in the same space—it's... *awkward*.

And that awkwardness only worsens when Holden says, as if they'd been talking without me, "Is it, like, a travel team?"

Leo lifts a shoulder. "I don't think so."

"What's not a travel team... or whatever?" I ask, climbing the parts of the porch I know are safe. Leo doesn't move his head, but his eyes shift, watching my steps, watching *me*. He doesn't look away until I'm safely seated on another beam.

"Leo was telling me he was going home this weekend." Whatever look washes over my face has Holden quickly adding, "Just to watch his little brother play, and then he'll be back."

Could he sense it? The sudden dread I felt in that one statement, at the thought that Leo was leaving? After last night, I kind of didn't want him out

of my sight, which is going to be hard, considering we're still trying to keep our distance.

I think.

My phone rings in my pocket, and I ignore it. It's been going off all morning.

"When are you leaving?" I ask Leo. I can see Holden watching me, confused.

"Thursday," he deadpans, then rifles through a paper bag in front of him. He pulls out a handful of different colored paint swatches, and without looking at me, holds them out between us. "Your grandpa wants you to pick the paint color for the new siding."

I take them from him—all different shades of grays and blues—and ask, "When are you coming back?"

"Maybe Sunday."

"Maybe?"

His eyes flick to mine, but he doesn't respond.

"Do you play baseball?" Holden asks him.

"I used to," responds Leo. "And basketball. Football. Wrestling."

"Oh, so you're one of those assholes who's good at everything," Holden jokes. "I hate guys like you."

Leo laughs. Actually *laughs*. "I didn't say I was any good. Hence the *used to*."

"Right." Holden grins. "So, what's your thing?"

"My thing?" Leo asks, marking a dot on a piece of timber, then sliding the pencil next to his ear between his cap and temple.

"Yeah, your thing," Holden answers, before pointing to himself. "Like *my thing* is pussy."

"Holden!" I gasp, which gains a chuckle from both of them. Are they... *friends*? I don't know how I feel about this.

"She's such a prude," Holden says.

"Nah," Leo responds, running the backs of his fingers along my exposed knee. "She's fucking adorable."

Heat burns my cheeks, and I look at my best friend, eyes wide, because *what*? Before anyone can respond to *that* statement, my phone rings again. And again, I ignore it. This time, Holden doesn't let it slide. "Damn, Mia Mac. You ghosting a guy or something?"

I roll my eyes. "They're not after me."

“Wrong number?”

Shaking my head, I nod toward Leo. “They’re looking for Leo.”

“Me?” Leo’s eyes meet mine.

“Uh-huh.”

Holden throws his hand out, requesting my phone. I hand it over to him, and he uses my pin to unlock it. His thumb flicks across the screen, scrolling through pages and pages of unanswered calls. “All these girls been calling for him?” He looks at Leo with admiration. “Well, yeah, I guess after last night...”

“Girls sure love a bad boy,” I mumble.

“Don’t I know it,” Holden almost sings, raising his fist for a bump from Leo.

Leo shakes his head, amused, and gives my best friend what he wants.

“What do you know about being a bad boy?” I accuse.

“Fine.” Holden rolls his eyes. “They love a good ol’ country boy, too.”

It’s new—the sound of our mixed laughter—and it’s also *nice*. Real nice.

And while Holden’s laughing, I can tell that he’s jealous at the attention Leo’s getting, even though Leo doesn’t seem to have any form of a reaction. “Yo, check out this girl I hooked up with,” Holden says, taking his phone from his pocket. “She keeps sending me these pictures...”

Leo lifts a hand. “Nah, I’m good.”

“For real?”

Leo focuses on drilling holes in the spots he’s just marked. “I’m sure the pictures aren’t meant for anyone else’s eyes.”

I smile at him, but my words are for Holden. “See? Leo’s a good boy.”

Leo looks up, his eyes locked on mine as he chews his lip. He quirks an eyebrow, just one, and then he smirks. “I can be bad, too, Mia. You just say the word.”

What does that even mean?

Holden’s looking between us, his eyes bugging out of his head, and then he leans back, his arms wide, shouting, “The sexual tension on this porch is ASTRONOMICAL!”

I pick up a screw and throw it at his head. “Shut up! Papa will hear you!”

Leo chuckles, already focused on his work again.

“I’m cool to pull these girls’ numbers from your phone, right?” Holden asks, even though he’s already doing it.

“I don’t care,” I tell him. And since he’s busy, and Leo’s busy, I look over the paint swatches, dividing them into two piles. Heck no and Maybe.

Besides the occasional sound of the drill, we all remain quiet. Until Holden says, “Wait. Why do you have Brent Silva’s number in here?”

I practically jump off the beam and try to grab my phone from him, but another beam is blocking me, and suddenly, the drilling has stopped.

Holden won’t shut up. “There are incoming calls from him. Ones you actually answer. Hang on. *Twenty minutes?*” My cheeks flush because I know what’s about to happen. He’s about to tease me, and that teasing will turn to torment.

“Holden, give me my phone!”

He holds it farther away from me—as if I could actually reach.

Leo’s drilling again. And when I look down, he’s not drilling into a marked spot, he’s just... drilling.

“Have you been holding out on me, Mia Mac?”

I sigh, resigned, and sit back on the beam. “He’s called a few times, yes. And he’s asked...”

“What?” Holden pushes. “Asked to see your tits?”

The whirring of the drill gets louder, and when I chance a peek at Leo, his eyes are squinted, jaw tense.

“Shut up, Holden! Don’t be crass. And no. He’s asked me out on a date, okay? That’s it.”

Holden’s silent a beat. “So, are you going to go?”

The drilling stops for no other purpose that I can see besides Leo wanting to hear my answer.

I cross my arms, my head bowed, embarrassed. “I don’t know.”

“He’s not a bad guy,” Holden says. “From what I remember, anyway. Maybe you should go. Get some experience before you go back New York.”

“Experience?” Leo speaks up, but his voice is so low I barely hear him.

“With dating,” I tell him. “I’ve never...”

“She’s never been on a date,” Holden finishes for me, and then *to* me, he says, “You should go.”

Leo picks up the piece of wood he was drilling random holes into and flings it behind him. It lands on the driveway unceremoniously. Then he

picks up another piece, the same size. He doesn't mark the spots on this one. Just drills away. One hole after another.

"So?" Holden urges. "Will you go?"

"I don't know," I tell him honestly. "I'm hesitant."

"You're *scared*," Holden says, and I really wish we weren't having this conversation with Leo right here. "Talk it out with me. What are you scared of?"

I groan out loud, and it makes Holden laugh. "Where's your mom when I need her?" I mumble.

"Where's *yours*?" Holden retorts.

Leo's head snaps up; his eyes thinned to slits as he stares down Holden. I tap on his arm, tell him, "He's kidding." Leo accepts my word and goes back to his task. I'm so used to Holden's snide remarks about my mom; I just let them bounce off of me. Besides, his animosity toward her only shows how much he cares. It's like his weirdo version of love language if he could actually *love*.

Holden shakes out his hands, looks up at the ceiling. "Okay, I'm about to channel my inner Tammy. Give me a minute."

"This'll be good," I mumble.

I give him the minute he asked for, and when it's time, his eyes settle on me. "The most important thing about dating is respect." Well, I wasn't expecting that. "And respect goes both ways. But with you, Mia, it's more important that you find someone who respects you and treats you the way you deserve."

There's a sudden ache in my chest, and I don't know where to look. "What about... the physical stuff?"

Leo makes an indescribable sound while Holden blows out a breath. "You do whatever you're comfortable with," Holden says. "If you want to hold hands, that's fine. If you want to let him kiss you, that's fine, too. As far as letting him touch you—"

The drill whirs, followed closely by a "Fuck!" from Leo. When I look at him, he's got a finger in his mouth.

"You good, bro?" Holden asks him.

Leo shakes out his hand as he licks the blood off his lips. "Yep."

Holden returns his focus to me. "Don't let him touch you. Not on your first date."

I trail my gaze from Leo, who's focused on his wood again, and look up at Holden. "Is that where you stop on a first date?"

Holden laughs. "I don't date girls like you, Mia."

I rear back. "What's that supposed to mean? You jerk!" I almost shout. "What's wrong—"

"What I mean is..." He cuts in, his hands out, palms up in surrender. "I *marry* girls like you."

As pathetic as it is, I surrender to his charm. "Awww."

"I mean, I'll probably end up marrying a few of them, but still..."

I throw another screw at his head.

He laughs.

And Leo...

Leo walks away.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

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LEO

MIA'S WALKING AWAY from the barn when I return from breakfast the next morning. She offers a wave, I do the same, and I expect her to go back to the house. She doesn't. She waits for me where the porch steps used to be, and so I get out of the truck, meet her there. "Hi," she says. She's in flip-flops and red plaid pajamas: short shorts and a button-down tee, and damn if it isn't cute as hell. "You go to the diner for breakfast?"

I nod.

She has one eye squinted, trying to block out the sun as she looks up at me, so I take a step to the side, block it for her. "How was it?" she asks.

I'm never here for meals, and obviously, she's worked out where I go, but this is the first time she's acknowledged it. "It was fine."

"You don't have to leave to eat, you know. We have food here."

I don't know if this is her version of an invitation, or if she's just being courteous. "I'll keep that in mind."

"Okay," she says.

"Okay," I return.

She smiles.

I smile.

And now we're staring at each other, smiling as if some secret conversation is happening between us, though I have no idea what we're saying. She's the first to break our stare. "Why are you looking at me?"

Because you're beautiful. "You looked at me first."

Mia rolls her eyes, a move I don't see often. She starts to leave, but I stop her, asking, "Hey, do you have the key to the barn?"

I don't miss the way her eyes widen, almost imperceptibly. "Yeah, why?"

"I was just going to have a look around in there and see if there was any material I could use."

"Nah." She waves a hand in the air, dismissing the idea. "There's nothing for you there."

"You sure? Because—"

“I’m sure,” she interrupts, averting her gaze from me to the porch. “What are you working on today?”

“Laying the deck.”

She doesn’t respond, at least not immediately. It’s as if she’s contemplating what to do, what to say. Finally, she turns to me, that one eye squinted again. “You want some help?”

I don’t bother hiding my surprise. “Really?”

Nodding, she says, “Holden has to help out his dad, so...”

“Oh, so I’m like a consolation prize. Got it.”

“No!” she rushes out, laughing in that way that weakens my knees. “That’s not what I meant.”

“It’s fine,” I assure. “I’ll take it. But you better get more appropriate shoes on.” I crack a smile. “You can keep the pajamas.”

Her cheeks flush, and her mouth opens, closes, opens again. “Deal.”

LAYING the boards is easy and monotonous and would be so much quicker as a two-person job if I had one of us cutting and the other screwing them in place. Mia suggests we do it that way, but I’m not in love with the idea of her using a drop saw and power tools on her own. I don’t tell her this, obviously, and it’s not that she’s incapable of doing it—she is. It’s just that I like the proximity of our bodies when I’m watching over her the way I am. Mia’s a quick learner, a good listener, and within two hours, I’m almost positive that I could leave her on her own, and the job would get done. At some point, Mia brings out a set of Bluetooth speakers and plays music from her phone, the same songs we used to listen to up on that water tower. I highly doubt the songs playing bring back the same memories for her as they do me, considering this is the music she’s listened to her entire life. For a moment, I get lost in that thought, in the memories she might hold on to.

MIA

My grandpa once told me that memories change based on the last time you remembered them. You don't recall the solid, fact-based events, and so memories of the same occurrences change over time. When "Midnight Train to Georgia" plays through the speakers, I remember being on that water tower with Leo the final summer I spent with him. I was watching him, his profile, but he was so caught up in the lyrics he had no idea I was looking. When the song ended, he turned to me and asked, "Do you think you'd leave everything behind for love?"

I was fourteen.

He was fifteen.

I'd never experienced *love* before, but the way he looked at me then... I questioned whether I was experiencing it now.

I didn't get a chance to answer before he added, "The man in that song, he moved to LA thinking he was going to be a star or something, and when he realized that it wasn't going to work out, he wanted to go back to his roots. Back home to Georgia. And the woman... she just followed because she didn't want to be apart from him." He paused, his mind working. "He was going to leave with or without her, and she—she chose for herself."

I thought about it a moment. "I think it's love," I told him. "I mean, she loves him enough to follow him."

He nodded at that and didn't say more.

It was the day after he asked me to stay, to go to school with him. When it was happening, I remember thinking it was his way of telling me he *really* wanted me to stay. Now, when I look back, I realize it was something else entirely. He was going to be there regardless, and he was going to live his life, with or without me. It was my choice whether I followed him or not.

"You want to break for lunch?" Leo asks, pushing me back to the present.

I glance up at him and shake my head. "I'm good."

"All right," he says, taking a screw from between his lips. He lines it up with a pre-drilled hole on the decking board and says, "I was going to work

through anyway. I wanted to get past the front door so your grandpa can at least come out and sit on the porch. I know he's been missing it." He drills the screw in as if he's done it a thousand times. He probably has. When he's done, he looks up at me. "You okay?"

I fake a smile. "Yeah, why?"

He says, stretching out his back and shoulders, "You seem like you checked out for a little bit."

We've managed to lay out enough of the porch to kneel on it while we work, so I scoot over to the next set of holes and take the drill he's offering me. "I'm fine."

Holden's truck pulls into the driveway, and I'm grateful for his presence. "What's good?" he calls out, making his way toward us.

"Just working," Leo responds while I drill in a screw. When I look back up, Holden's sitting on the same beam he was on yesterday. He doesn't bother to help. He won't.

"Hi, Holden!" Papa calls from somewhere in the house.

"Hi, Papa John!" Holden yells.

I put another screw in.

Holden asks, his voice low, "Mia, how many of those screws have you done?"

I look back at the boards already in place. "Like half of them." I turn to him, notice the smirk on his lips. Hesitantly, I ask, "Why?"

He points to me, my chest specifically. "Every time you bend over to use the drill, I can see down your top."

I gasp, scrunch the collar of my top and hold it to my chest.

Holden chuckles as he shakes his head. "I'd have never picked you as a black-bra kind of girl."

I glare at Leo, and he's looking anywhere but at me. He's chewing his lip, trying to fight a smile, his face reddening from the force of his withheld laugh. I stand. "I hate you!" I stomp my foot, ignoring their joined laughter. "Both of you!"

Leo speaks up. "I thought you didn't hate anybody."

My eyes narrow. "First time for everything." I spin toward the door and push it open. "I'm going to change," I tell them.

Before I can slam the door shut behind me, I hear Holden say, "Sorry, man."

And then Leo laughing. "All good."

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

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MIA

“CAN you put it on the Preston Construction account?” Leo says into the phone as I step out onto the almost finished deck of the porch the next day. “Yeah, you can call Dad to confirm.” He rolls his eyes as he takes the glass of iced water from me. “I’ll be picking it up on Friday.” ... “Okay, see you then.” He hangs up, thanking me for the drink and then devouring it in two gulps.

“Are you ordering material?” I ask.

Leo nods as he marks something off in a notebook I’ve seen lying around. “Yeah, just the timber for the railings. It’s cheaper to get them from our supplier back home, so I figure I’ll pick it up while I’m there.” He’s sitting on the deck, legs out in front of him as he leans back on his outstretched arms. I try not to look at the way the muscles in his forearms and biceps shift with every movement.

I sit opposite him, cross-legged, while Papa sits in his rocking chair behind me. “Philip’s here,” Papa says, standing up when a truck pulls into the driveway.

Turning to him, I ask, “Where are you going again?”

“He wants my help to buy some calves.”

Leo laughs under his breath. “That’s a sentence I never thought I’d hear.”

“Long drive,” Papa says. “I’ll be back late.”

I get up and walk with him to Philip’s truck. “Be safe,” I tell him, kissing his cheek. Then, to his friend Philip, “You bring him back in one piece, okay?”

Philip winks at me. “You got it, Miss Mia.”

I wait in the driveway until the truck is long gone, then make my way back to the porch. “You and your grandpa say the same thing when either of you leaves,” Leo says.

“The ‘back in one piece’ thing?” I ask, and he nods. “I don’t even know how it started.”

Leo’s quiet a moment before saying, his voice soft, “He loves you a lot, you know?”

Sitting back down, I start lining up the screws. “Well, it goes both ways,” I tell him, shrugging.

He doesn’t respond, and when I glance up at him, he’s watching me. And when Leo looks at you, really looks at you, it feels as though every muscle, every cell, every single part of you becomes bare, exposed, *unprotected*.

I ask, subconsciously crossing my arms to shield myself, “So... you think we’ll be done with the deck today?”

He doesn’t take his eyes off me. “What’s your grandmother’s name?”

I swallow the knot in my throat, ignoring the thumping of my heart as it fills the silence between spoken words. “Mackenzie. Why?”

“Like your middle name?”

“How’d you know?”

The muscles in his jaw tick, but his words are expressionless. “Your mom said it once. I figure that’s why people call you Mia Mac.”

I nod, pretend to focus on the screws again. “Why do you want to know?”

A beat passes.

Two.

And then he exhales, so loud and so harsh, it’s as if he was just coming up for air after almost drowning. With a single headshake, he picks up the notebook beside him, puts pen to paper, and starts writing something down, saying, “I wanted to do something on the railings for your grandpa. I thought I might etch some names into it. Something sentimental...”

Now I’m the one staring at him, wondering how it is he can be so sweet, so everything I mistakenly thought he was...

“Your dad?” he asks, glancing up at me with a slight grimace. “Yes or no?”

“Yeah,” I breathe out.

“His name?”

“Joseph.”

“P H or...?”

I blink, try to clear my mind of teenage boys and the false promises they come with. “Um. Yeah. That’s the English spelling.”

Leo nods, licks his lips as he writes. “And your grandpa? Should I use his English name or...?”

“English is fine.”

Leo sets the notebook beside him and tucks the pencil between his cap and temple. "It's kind of cool that *János Kovács* translates to the most common English name." My eyes widen in shock, and he must pick up on my surprise because he says, "You mentioned it at the hardware store, and I got curious, looked it up."

He gets curious a lot, I've realized.

"What about your mom? Should I put Virginia on there?"

I snort, which is *super attractive*. Not that I'm trying to be. "Not unless you want to put *ördög nő* on there." Papa says Leo asks a lot of questions, but he doesn't ask them to me or *of* me, and I'm not quite sure how to feel about it. Leo watches me, waits for me to elaborate. "Papa calls her the Devil Woman."

His quiet laughter sends a jolt to my chest. And now it's my turn to watch. To wait. Minutes pass. Nothing. He lowers his head between his shoulders, looks down at his lap. My impatience, and maybe my own curiosity, get the better of me. "How come you've never asked about my parents?" I blurt out.

He doesn't seem phased by my question, just does that lazy shrug of his that he seems to have mastered. "I figure if you wanted me to know, you'd tell me."

Huh. I stare him down. "No one at the diner has mentioned it?"

He glances up, then right back down again. "Miss Sandra may have mentioned a scandal involving you that happened sixteen years ago, then again thirteen years ago, but she caught herself quickly and didn't say anything else." He looks up, fixes his eyes on mine. "I didn't ask for more, and she felt bad about saying anything at all, so please don't be mad at her."

The boy is an enigma, and this soft spot he's showing for Miss Sandra only amplifies that notion. "Did you know that my dad and Holden's mom dated all through their teen years?"

His eyes widen, just slightly, and he shakes his head. "No."

"Yep." I get comfortable—as comfortable as one can be sitting on a wooden deck with tools all around them. "They started dating when they were twelve and were completely inseparable. If you ask any of the older folk around here, they'd tell you that they believed the two of them to be destined, as if God put them in the same place at the same time for reasons far greater than anyone could know." Leo's all ears, and I clear my throat, adding, "Even when they went off to high school, the townsfolk were

scared that something might break them up, you know? But high school isn't what broke them, at least not *really*. My dad—he got this internship working for a tech startup in New York the summer before his senior year. He was there two weeks when he called Tammy and ended it. He's never spoken a word of this to me, so I only know what Papa and Tammy have told me. They don't know if another girl was involved or if it was the city or the lifestyle that he got caught up in. Either way, he didn't want this life, and he didn't want Tammy."

Leo snorts. "Your dad's the guy in that song, that 'Midnight Train to Georgia'..."

My brow dips. "I guess I never picked up on that."

Leo's eyes harden as he watches me, and I can hear the hesitation in his voice when he asks, "So... what happened then?"

"So then... Tammy was heartbroken, but she was—*is*—beautiful, inside and out, and she had so many guys waiting on the sidelines just for a chance at dating her, but she'd always been my dad's. By the time he came back toward the end of summer, she was already dating Big H."

"Big H?"

I nod. "Holden Senior. He's known as Big H around here, because... well, he's *big*. Anyway, she was seventeen, and he was older, twenty-five, and already running the family business. He was safe for her, and he offered her the kind of security that my dad had just stripped from her."

Leo nods, taking all this in.

"My mom," I tell him, "was just passing through. She knocked on the door one day, and Papa offered her a job as a seasonal." I point to the barn behind me. "She stayed in there."

Leo peers over at the barn. I don't know if he knows what's in there, or has seen inside, but he doesn't ask anything more about it, and I'm grateful. "So, your mom and dad met, and then..."

"Papa says that as soon as that Devil Woman set eyes on my dad, he could tell something was *off*. She was twenty-seven, ten years older than him, but she... she wanted him, or something *from* him, and my dad..." I take a breath. "Papa says he was pathetically heartbroken about Tammy, especially since she seemed so happy with Holden's dad. But Dad was also stupidly proud and never told her how he felt. Soon, Papa would hear him sneaking out of the house in the middle of the night, and he knew what was happening. He could sense it."

“Jesus,” Leo murmurs, pushing out a breath.

“It gets worse,” I say.

“I’m scared,” Leo replies, his freckled nose wrinkling.

“A month into the school year, Tammy announced her engagement.”

His face falls. He knows where this is going.

“A week later, they were married, a month after that, Tammy was already beginning to show.”

“Holden?” he asks, and I nod.

“Tammy never went back to normal school, and my mom—she didn’t leave at the end of summer. Mom and Dad stopped hiding their relationship from Papa, and it wasn’t long until...” I point to myself.

Leo looks like he’s been sucker-punched right in the gut. And I get it. I wasn’t created out of love, and he realizes this now.

“Holden and I were born three months apart. But I was nothing more than a revenge plot from my dad and a sinister one from my mom. She had her claws in him, thinking that he’d stay for her, that he’d inherit the farm and all the money that came with it once Papa died... at least that’s how Papa sees it.”

After removing his cap, Leo runs a hand through his hair, tugging at the ends. “And they were both still in high school—Tammy and your dad?”

I nod. “Scandalous, right?”

Leo’s eyes are everywhere, all at once, as if searching for missing pieces of a puzzle.

“Papa forced Dad to do the right thing and marry my mom.”

“No way,” he breathes out.

Nodding, I say, “Technically, as far as I know, they’re still married.”

Leo’s chewing his lip, still trying to process everything, and while he’s doing that, I continue. “Holden and I were born, but in the meantime, Mom moved into the main house, and Dad got a full-ride scholarship to MIT.”

“*The* MIT?”

Another nod. “The very one.”

“And?” Leo urges, his eyes wide, waiting.

“And when it was time, he left with the promise that he’d get a job, send as much money as he could and that he’d come back as often as possible. He convinced Papa that it was the best thing he could do for *my* future. Only he never planned on coming back, and my mom—she must’ve sensed

it—because a week after he left, so did she. With me. And she didn't tell anyone. Not even Papa."

Leo's eyes drift shut, his hands balled on his lap.

"Three years later, she came back. The way Papa tells it—he opened the door, and every single muscle in his body turned to jelly." A knot forms in my throat, and I do my best to push it down. "He says if he hadn't been holding on to the door frame, he would've fallen to his knees, right then and there. He thought I was an angel, this little three-year-old girl with pigtails and brown eyes so light, he swore he could walk right through them and straight into heaven."

Leo's single, quiet laugh is almost painful.

"Mom told him she had a job interview and that she had no one to watch me and that she'd come back in a couple of days. She left me right here, on this porch, with a backpack half-filled with clothes and diapers."

He sighs. "When my darkness returned," he mumbles.

"What's that?" I ask.

"Nothing." He shakes his head. "Did she come back?"

"No," I say, leaning back on my arms. "Papa waited a few days. He says—" I laugh this time, out loud. "He says those few days were the hardest of his life. He didn't know me—not really—and he had no idea how to take care of a *child*, especially a girl. My grandma did all that stuff for my dad. One day, he found himself in the baby aisle at the grocery store, trying to figure out what size diapers to buy when Tammy appeared. His *other* angel—he calls her. She had Holden's hand in hers like mine was in Papa's, and... Tammy says that she'd never seen him so lost, so scared, not even after his wife passed..." I rub at my eyes, at the sudden tears welling. "Tammy once told me that there was never a choice when it came to looking after me. There was right, and there was wrong. And I'd been wronged enough to last a lifetime..." I trail off, my voice hoarse from the number of words spoken and the weight those words carry. "See?" I say, attempting a smile as I look up at Leo. "Scandalous."

"It's not scandalous, Mia," he breathes out. "It's fucking heartbreaking."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

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LEO

I'M ALMOST FINISHED hand-sanding the last of the decking boards when John returns just after 10 p.m. I wanted to complete it before I went home tomorrow so that when I got back next week, I could focus on the railings.

The delicate, complicated, Mia-railings.

I only had one sanding block, and by the time the boards were laid, the hardware store was closed. I told Mia she didn't have to stay outside with me, but she insisted. Even though we didn't talk much, I have to admit it's nice having her here. Having her close. It's far better than the whole ignoring thing we tried and failed to do.

When John gets out of his friend's truck and steps on the porch, I put a finger to my lips and point to the porch swing where Mia is sprawled, fast asleep. She looks so at peace; I didn't have the heart to wake her.

John halts on the first step, his smile instant as he looks over at her, his head tilting in that way adoring parents look at their children. "You try waking her?" His voice is deep, loud, and not on purpose. That's just the way he speaks no matter what he's saying.

I shake my head.

"She a deep sleeper," he says, his boots stomping up the steps. "See?"

I look over at Mia, and sure enough, she hasn't stirred.

With his hand on the doorknob, he asks, "Why are you still working?"

"I wanted to finish up this part before I leave tomorrow."

He nods once, then trails his eyes toward Mia. "It's been a long time since she's done this."

"Fallen asleep on the porch?" I ask.

His gaze lowers, and he nods again. "When she was little, and I was working, Tammy—Holden's mom—would watch them. Sometimes here, sometimes at their house. Some days, *Baba* and Holden played too much, and when they got tired, Holden would sleep in your room, and she'd sleep there..."

I glance at Mia, picturing a smaller, younger version of her curled up like she is now.

“I think...” John says, turning the knob, “I think she was afraid I wouldn’t come back for her.”

Sometimes there’s a single line in a book, or a sentence, or an entire paragraph that gives you pause, makes you think, makes you open that page over and over just so you see the same few words again and again. Relive them. Rethink them. These are the pages that connect to the part of the spine that has the least amount of ink, the most damage.

I think she was afraid I wouldn’t come back for her.

It’s as heartbreaking as it is confusing because all of it is true.

There are far too many people in this world who have left her, abandoned her, and let her down.

Her mom.

Her dad.

Me.

That thought knocks all air out of my lungs, replaces the empty spaces with

shame,

regret,

disgust.

“Goodnight,” John says, not waiting for a reply before closing the door between us.

It hurts.

That’s the only way I can describe what it feels like to watch her, to see her dark lashes fan across her cheek, her lips shifting slightly with every inhale, every exhale.

It hurts.

That I have to accept the fact that I’ll never know the feeling of those lips against mine. That I’ll never deserve to.

It hurts.

That I’ll never be able to look at her like this when she’s awake because she’ll look away too fast, because for her...

For her, it hurts *more*.

I give up on my work, throwing the sanding block to the side, and scoot over to her. On my knees, I reach out, run a finger along her forehead to move a strand of hair away from her face. “Mia,” I whisper, and she doesn’t budge.

I was so, so wrong. When we stood on the top of the milking parlor and I told her I could ignore how I felt, I lied. Because I couldn't, and I can't. And maybe it's a good thing that I'm leaving tomorrow. Maybe I need the break, the distraction.

"Mia," I say again, louder this time, and grasp her shoulder, gently shake her.

Her eyes flutter open, the lightest brown eyes I've ever seen.

She smiles. It's lazy and unintentional and not at all meant for me. *I think*. But then she reaches up, inhaling deeply before sliding the tips of her fingers across my jaw. She runs a thumb across my nose, forcing my eyes to close at her touch. "The freckles are here," she mumbles.

When I open my eyes again, hers are half-hooded, tired and weary. "What freckles?"

"At the start of summers, they weren't there, but by the end..." Her eyes widen as if she's just woken from a dream. Or a *nightmare*. She sits up, her spine straight, but she doesn't take her eyes off me. "By the end..." she repeats in a daze, her voice hoarse.

It hurts.

Watching someone's eyes as they relive the agonizing moments of torment until you can't see them clearly anymore because the liquid pain prevents it. The tears come so fast, so prevalent, and then she's on her feet, wiping them away and running to the door before I can get out two words.

Two simple words I should've said two years ago.

I'm sorry.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

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LEO

WHEN I GET BACK HOME, the house is empty. Lucas and Logan work with Dad now, and the twins are old enough to do whatever they want within reason. Lachlan, for the most part, has to stay with either Laney or Lucy. It's strange... that for so much of my life, all I wanted was a moment of quiet, and now that I have it—it feels kind of *hollow*.

I drop my bag full of dirty laundry by the front door and climb the stairs two at a time, my entire body aching from fatigue. I didn't sleep last night. Not a wink. I would've left during the night, but I wanted to say goodbye to John before I took off. Shamefully, I split before Mia was up.

My bedroom is as I left it, and I don't even bother taking off my shoes. I just fall face-first onto the bed, and a minute later, I'm dreaming about a girl with red plaid pajamas and tears in her eyes.

I SHOULDN'T HAVE FALLEN asleep.

That was my first mistake.

The second was not locking my door.

The whole “issuing a buzzcut while someone's sleeping” prank is so basic and effortless, and I think that's why it pisses me off the most. It's Logan with the shaver and Lucas with the baby oil—to make the now-shaved hair stick to my skin, because *of course*. I don't know which one of them is laughing the most, and it's a weird sound—the two of them together. Typically, they're the ones fighting, and I'm the one in the middle, trying to break shit up.

I'm still half asleep, and physically fighting them would be pointless because it's not going to make my hair grow back. So, I grab the bed sheets and start wiping the baby oil/hair mix off my face and neck.

“Why aren't you pissed?” Lucas asks, and it sounds like an accusation.

I shrug. I think my lack of reaction is pissing *them* off. And that makes me happy.

“Maybe Dad sent him to, like, some hippy zen ohmmmmmm place where they meditate and turn into zombies with no emotions,” Logan offers. They’re both still in their work uniform, so messing with me was probably the first thing they did the second they got home.

I give another shrug, and they eye each other suspiciously. This isn’t going how they’d planned, and while I’m pissed on the inside, already trying to come up with ideas for payback, I won’t let it show. I’ve *mastered* the act of not revealing my true emotions. I sit on the edge of the bed and run a hand through the back of my hair. There’s a giant chunk missing. For a second, just one, I wonder how Mia would react to my upcoming buzzcut.

“He’ll be pissed in a second,” Logan says. He’s smirking. Logan smirking is never, ever good.

“Why?” Lucas asks.

Logan busts out a laugh, shouting, “Because I jizzed on those sheets he just wiped all over his face!”

“YOUR BROTHERS MISS YOU,” Dad tells me, running a hand over my now-shaven head.

I laugh once. “I highly doubt that.”

I’m sitting on a stool on the back deck while Dad finishes up with my hair. Luckily for him, he’s had a lot of experience with this form of hair care. If he’d had six girls, he’d be shit out of luck.

“They may not show it,” he says. “But they do. And Lucas especially. He worries about you.”

“Luke?” I almost scoff at the thought. “He has more important things to worry about than me.” Like his girlfriend, who’ll probably be in some form of physical therapy for the rest of her life.

Dad sighs. “He probably does, but that doesn’t stop him. He worries about all of you.”

I half turn to him. “Luke?” I ask again, incredulous. He doesn’t give a shit about anybody but himself. “As in Lucas Preston?”

Dad smiles, but it’s sad. “I know you keep your head down, Leo, and you’re quiet, and you like to *listen*, but maybe... maybe look up now and

again and *watch*.” I stare at him, unblinking. I don’t need to *see* things to know how I feel is justified, and while I may not hate Lucas anymore, I don’t have a hell of a lot of respect for him, either.

Dad sighs again, louder this time, and uses a dish towel to clear the loose hairs off my neck and head. “How’s it going at John’s?” he asks, removing the towel from around me. “Do you think being there is helping?”

I don’t think either of us really knows what I needed help with, but I nod, give him the truth. “Yeah, it is.” At Mia’s request, I haven’t told him that she’s there, but I’m *curious* like always. “You never told me that you kept in touch with Mia’s grandpa after she left.” It’s not a question. Not a statement either. I don’t really know what it is. Bait? I’m fishing for information.

He’s done with my hair, so I stand and run a hand through it as I face him. “During. After.” Dad shrugs. “Does he talk about Mia a lot?”

Now, I shrug. “Some.”

“How is she?” he asks.

“She’s...”

Beautiful,

Bold,

Broken.

“She’s in New York with her dad now.” Although he probably already knew that.

“Well,” Dad says, using that tone to suggest he’s done with this particular conversation. “I hope she’s doing better.”

Better?

Better than what?

BY THE TIME Saturday rolls around, I’m already itching to go back to a town with fewer than 200 people. I’ve become aware that the information given to my brothers about my whereabouts the past few weeks is as vague as “Dad sent him away.” They have questions, lots of them, especially the twins and Lachlan. The youngest three Preston boys come up with the craziest stories and scenarios their imaginations can conjure. Honestly, some of their suggestions would make *Ready Player One* by Ernest Cline

seem realistic. Obviously, I humor them and then leave them hanging—especially Lachlan.

“So, it’s a farm?” Laney asks, her fingers tangled in a mess of yarn. Or at least that’s how it looks. Mom tried to teach me how to knit once, and I just couldn’t grasp it.

We’re sitting in the bleachers at the baseball field, and I don’t really know why I’m here. “It *was* a farm. It hasn’t been one for years.”

“What kind of farm?”

“Dairy.”

“Like milk and butter?”

I shrug. “I guess.”

“How many acres?” she asks.

“Leo!” Lachlan’s waving at me from home plate even though there’s a ball flying right at him, from the pitcher, because they’re mid-game.

It smacks him on the shoulder, and I hiss at the same time he yells, “Shit, bitch!”

A whistle’s blown, Lachie gets sent to the bench, and Laney asks again, “How many acres?”

“I don’t know. A lot.” Has our conversation always been this stagnant? Surely not, because it wouldn’t make sense that I’d considered her my best friend for so many years. Maybe it’s me? Or maybe I’m used to deeper, more satisfying interactions with a girl I can’t seem to get off my mind.

“Are you okay, Leo?” I pull my gaze away from Lachlan and face Laney. She’s already watching me, her eyebrows drawn.

“I’m fine. Why?”

“You seem... distant.”

Like, 150-miles-south distant? Yeah, I’m definitely that. “I’m good,” I tell her, seeing my sister from the corner of my eye. She walks up behind her husband, Cameron, and grabs his ass—something I never want to see again. Cam turns to her, a smirk on his face as he bends down, kisses her quickly. I elbow Laney’s arm. “I’ll catch up with you later, okay?”

Click, click, click, go her knitting needles. “Uh-huh.”

I make my way down the bleachers and catch Lucy just before she leaves. “Luce!” I call out, and she turns swiftly, her eyes widening with her smile when she sees me.

“Leelee,” she shouts, and I’m in her arms before I can back away. She’s short, got her height from our mom, so her hugs are the type that squeeze at

your waist.

“Are you about to leave?” I ask, pulling away.

Lucy shakes her head. “I was just going to read in the car. It’s hotter than Satan’s ass crack out here.”

I chuckle. “You got a minute to talk?”

Nodding, she points to the parking lot behind her. “Can we do it in the car?”

“SO WHAT’S UP?” Lucy says from behind the steering wheel while she sets the AC to *Blow Out Your Eyeballs*.

I adjust my vents so they land on her. I’ve gotten used to the heat. “Do you remember LuLee’s library?”

Her eyes snap to mine, a slow smile spreading across her lips. “Of course I remember. I’m surprised you do, though.”

Nodding, I tell her, “The memory just came to me the other day, and it just... I don’t know...” I’m suddenly embarrassed. “It was nice... to think about.”

She’s sitting in the seat cross-legged, and she turns her entire body to face me. “That’s what you wanted to talk about?”

“I guess.” I shrug. “I just wanted you to know that I remember it and that I remember you reading to me in that bean bag, and I mean... you basically taught me how to read, so...”

“A lot of good that did,” she murmurs, glancing down at her fidgeting hands. “You had to repeat a grade.”

“Not because of you,” I tell her, and she shakes her head. “Luce, look at me.”

She glances up, her lips tugged down at the corners.

“Listen,” I start. “I have dyslexia. It’s a learning difference, and it’s something that should’ve been diagnosed way before the last fucking year—when I was *sixteen*. It wasn’t on you to pick up on that.”

“Still,” she says. “I should’ve known.”

“Is that why you stopped reading to me?”

She shrugs. “I thought I was making it worse.”

I huff out a breath and stare out the windshield. “You’re the one who introduced me to reading. You’re the one who gave me my love for books, for getting lost in fictional worlds.” I pause a beat. “Do you know how

many times picking up a book has saved me from... from my own thoughts, from myself?" I lick the dryness off my lips. "And it's not just that, Luce; it's everything. When Mom died, it was all *you*. Don't think that we don't know that—all of us boys. And I don't think any of us have ever said thank you. So... thank you." It's the most amount of words I've strung together since I got home, and I'm getting no reaction from her. At least not verbally. When I find the courage to face her, she's crying. Tears, so many of them, trailing down her cheeks and along her jaw. I sigh. "Why do I keep making girls cry?"

She laughs at this, a soft, subtle sound. "I don't know which girl you're referring to, but maybe because you wait too long to tell them how you feel."

My phone goes off with a text just as I let her words sink in.

Unknown: *Hey.*

Leo: *Who's this?*

Unknown: *Holden. I got your number from Papa John.*

My eyes narrow.

Leo: *What's up? Is everything okay?*

Unknown: *Yes. No. I don't know. Is it weird that I'm freaking out about Mia going on a date with that Brent guy tonight?*

CHAPTER THIRTY

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MIA

WELL. It's official. Dating sucks. Or maybe I suck at dating.

"I had fun tonight," Brent Silva says as we near my house. He has his hand on my lap. Not actively touching my bare thigh, more just *resting* on it. It makes me uncomfortable, which is weird, because I've held hands with him most of the night—the first step, according to Holden. The second is letting him kiss me, which he hasn't tried to do yet. "Mia?" he questions, and I'd momentarily forgotten what he's said.

He had fun tonight? Really? I can't have been too much fun to be around. I barely spoke, so he had to fill in all the silence with mundane conversation. Like what days he works, what times, and what his jobs are during those times. Brent's nineteen and lives with his parents. His mom has an in-home daycare, and his dad works all over the country, laying pipes. He doesn't know what he wants to do with his life or if he's staying in town, and I admire that about him. *Admire* is probably the wrong word. *Envy*? The fact that he even has a choice makes me jealous.

It occurred to me halfway through the date that Brent knew I'd be going back to New York, and he still wanted to take me out, so I'm not too sure what he's expecting by the end of it. If it's sex—a one-night stand—I kind of feel bad that he's wasted all that time on calls with me and all that money on dinner. I should offer to pay him back. That seems like the right, reasonable thing to do.

We're in my driveway now, and he's got his truck in park, but the engine's still running. His back's against the door, and he's watching me, smiling. "I take it you didn't have the same experience I did?" Because he had *fun*, and I... I...

I spent the entire night thinking about Leo Preston.

"Look," he says, and his smile only gets wider. "I know you were nervous. It was your first date, right?"

I purse my lips, nod.

"That's hard to believe." His eyes momentarily drop to my chest. "But I'll believe it because it's coming from you. How did I do?"

“You did... *great*.” And it’s not a lie. All things considered, he basically went on a date with himself, but he never made me feel ignored. “I’m sorry,” I add. Because I *am*. “My head’s just... it’s not in the right place, and I think maybe I forced myself to come because—”

“Because I wouldn’t stop pushing you?” he interjects.

“No,” I laugh out. “Because I figured it would be a good experience.” I take his hand in mine. “And it was. I just don’t really know where to go from here.”

“Well, normally,” he says, and then he’s lifting my hand, kissing the back of it. “I walk you to your door, we say goodnight, and then I call you tomorrow and see if you want to do it again.”

“Would you want to do it again?” I ask incredulously.

Brent doesn’t answer. Instead, he releases my hand, gets out of the truck, and I wait for him to open my door. He helps me out, his hand around mine, and he keeps it that way all the way to the front door. The porch light is on, which isn’t a surprise. Papa always leaves it on when he’s waiting for me to return. Standing in front of the door, I turn to Brent. “I’ll call you,” he says, linking our fingers together. He reaches up, shifts a strand of hair behind my ear. His hand stays there, his palm on my jaw as he moves in, his eyes drifting shut, and his mouth coming closer and closer—“Good date?” Leo says from his spot on the porch swing.

I gasp at the same time Brent groans, his head lowered in defeat as he looks over at Leo. “Hey, man.”

“I thought you weren’t coming back until tomorrow?” That was me, my voice barely audible. Why do I feel like... like I’ve *cheated* somehow?

Because I have.

Even if no one else knows it, my heart does.

Leo shrugs, but he doesn’t verbally respond, just looks at where Brent’s hand connects with mine.

With a heavy sigh, Brent leans in and kisses my forehead. “I’ll call you tomorrow,” he says, but I haven’t taken my eyes off Leo. It’s as if it physically pains him to see what he’s seeing.

“Okay,” I say to Brent and squeeze his hand once before letting go. I watch until he’s in his truck and the truck is out of the driveway before sitting down on the porch swing next to Leo. “You came back early.”

“Yep.” His feet are planted to the floor, so there’s no swing in the seat. His back is hunched, head between his shoulders, as he stares at his hands.

His hands are big, bigger than Brent's, and I mentally compared them the first time Brent took mine in his. I liked Leo's hand more. The way it fit. The way it felt. "How was it?" Leo asks, turning his head slightly. He won't meet my eyes, and it's... it's terrifying.

"It, uh..." I blow out a breath. "It wasn't what I was expecting."

Leo's eyes widen when they lock on mine. "Did that fucker do—"

"No," I cut in, wincing at his curse. "I just... I wanted..." A million thoughts run through my mind, but I'm having a Leo moment. I know what I want to say, but I can't seem to verbalize it. "Wait here, okay?"

Eyebrows arched, he nods once. When I get in the house, Papa's on the couch, half-asleep. "Papa," I say from behind the couch, my hand on his shoulder as I lean over, kiss his cheek. "I'm home. You can go to bed now."

He pats my hand. "Okay, *baba*. Goodnight."

Up in my bedroom, I unpin the photograph from the corkboard and run back down to the porch. Leo is precisely where I left him, *how* I left him. I hand him the picture before sitting down. "This," I tell him, bringing my legs underneath me as I sit sideways to face him. "I wanted to feel *this*."

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

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LEO

I'M STARING at a picture of the water tower back home. It's taken from the ground, just as it comes into view when you walk toward it from the hole in the fence—something Mia and I had done too many times to count. I haven't seen it in years. Not since the last time we were there. It didn't feel right to me—to be there without her.

"I wanted to feel *this*," Mia says.

The breath I release is like loosening a valve: slowly, slowly, slowly.

"The way I felt with you up there, the nerves and the butterflies and the constant waiting for the next moment of the same nerves and the same butterflies... that's what I wanted to feel tonight, and I didn't."

My eyes drift shut at her words, like an accusation, a poison-tipped arrow aimed right at my heart.

"And it scares me, Leo. I worry that I won't ever be able to feel that way with anyone ever again. And I hate it. I hate that the person I feel that way about is *you*. Because I won't ever be able to shake how it never even began before it all ended, and I'll never forget *how* it ended."

My eyes snap open, but I can't stand to look at her, to see the pain and devastation in her eyes—eyes that lead to a false nirvana. "Do you have a pen?"

"What?"

"Do you have a pen?" I repeat, louder, clearer.

She reaches into her purse and pulls out a pen, handing it to me. I flip the picture over, put pen to paper, but no words come to mind. Or maybe *too many* do. "When I was little..." I start, pushing through the sharp ache in my chest. "I had problems expressing my feelings. I let my emotions take control, but I'd never do anything about it until it was too late. I'd have these... *outbursts*." Mia's breathing becomes shallow, but she doesn't say a word. There's nothing to say. So she listens. "My mom, when she was alive—" My voice cracks, and I clear it, still unable to look at her. "She'd give me these photographs. Most of them were of my family, some were just random, and she... she asked me to write three words on the back of them; adjectives, *emotions*. Whatever it was to describe how I felt

looking at those pictures.” I lick the dryness off my lips. “One of the first days you were at the house, I took a picture of you sitting on our porch steps.”

Her breath catches, the seat shifting as she moves closer.

“I kept it with me, in my wallet, for *years*, and for years, it was blank. It still is. Because I don’t think I could ever describe in words what I feel when I look at you, which is why I can’t even look at you now.” Heat pricks behind my eyes, and I blink back the pain. “That picture of you was the last one I ever took for the purpose of writing on the back. I’d never even spoken to you at that point, not *really*, but I had your picture and—” I laugh because it’s so fucking pathetic, I wish I could take back every sentence I’ve just spewed. “I talked to your picture, in my head. I’d tell you everything I felt, everything I was going through. The second summer, you returned, and I was sitting on the porch with Dad reading a book, and you came over, and I finally found the courage to speak to you.”

“Leo...” she breathes out, and I feel her touch on my shoulder collide with every moment, every heartbreak, every piece of regret that’s ever stormed through my mind, bullets blazing, creating holes in my memories.

“Before that night, you were just someone I made up, like a fictional character in a make-believe world. You were a fantasy, Mia, and I was afraid you wouldn’t live up to this delusion I’d created. But you did. You fucking *surpassed* everything I thought and hoped you would be.”

She’s crying, the uncontrollable breathing type *sobbing*, and so I finally face her, because she deserves this much.

But it hurts.

To see her like this.

“That day you were coming back for good, I threw out all my fears, and I messaged you. Do you remember that?”

Mia nods while letting another tear fall.

“I asked you to be mine, and...” I reach up, swipe my thumbs across her cheeks, expose my flesh to her liquid agony. My eyes search hers, and I wish I could sink in her tears until there was nothing but her pain in my lungs. I would drown in her heartache. “I know you saw the message, and you didn’t respond. And it’s not an excuse,” I rush out. “I was just so deep in that thought, in the fear that I’d ruined everything between us, and I... I was so fucking scared of losing you, that I didn’t want to share you with anyone else—especially my *brothers*.” My hands drop to my lap, and I

focus on the picture of the water tower. Shame builds a shelter inside me, but it's no match for my thoughts, my emotions. My admission is a grenade, just waiting to explode. "Mia, I heard what they said that night at the lake. I heard the names they called you, the things they said about you. I heard it all."

"Stop it, Leo. *Please*, stop!" She's begging, tugging on my arm, but I don't stop. I can't.

"I know I should've said something, and I regret it every fucking day that I didn't. Seeing you afterward, knowing that you heard it all, too... it broke me. *Obliterated* me. I wanted to kill them, but it wouldn't change anything. It wasn't them who disappointed you; it was *me*. I let you down in the worst possible way, and I couldn't even... For so long, I tried to blame you because you wouldn't let me speak, but the truth is, I couldn't get the words out, couldn't verbalize it, not then. It was two fucking words. All I wanted was to tell you that I was sorry and that..." My eyes snap to hers. Because of everything that I've said, everything I've spilled, this is the part she needs to believe the most. And I *want* her to see me, to look into my eyes when I tell her the truth, and the only prayer I'll ever live by. "You have to believe me when I say this, Mia. I never, not for a single second, saw you the way they did." I hold her face in my hands. "You've always been beautiful to me." And then my mouth is on hers, and it's like the first breath, the first inhale after years and years of drowning. I'm kissing her. All the versions of her I'd fallen in love with for the past four years. From the girl in that first photograph, to the one sitting beside me, giving me this gift, and suddenly, I'm no longer kissing her because *she's* kissing me. Her mouth parts against mine, her tongue swiping, searching, and I give her what she wants, what she seems to need. I'd give her all the things and all of me and I'd give her the world as *she* sees it, because anything less wouldn't be worthy of her. Her tears soak into my flesh, into my heart, and then there's a whimper, just one, before her movements slow, and I know what this is. I sensed it even before she stepped foot on this porch tonight. I felt it, deep in my bones, in my soul, and even though she's still here and she's still kissing me, and I'm kissing her back...

I know what this is.

What this means.

And it's the reason I avoid them.

I fucking hate goodbyes.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

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LEO

“HAVE YOU SPOKEN TO HER?”

“Yep,” Holden replies.

“And... how is she?”

“She’s the same today as she was yesterday and all the days before when you asked me the same damn question.”

My grip on the shovel tightens. “You realize I have a deadly weapon in my hand, right?”

He laughs. “You just keep digging those holes, bro.” He’s sitting on the loose gravel of the driveway, his legs out in front of him, arms outstretched as he leans back, watching me dig holes for all the plants he’s just delivered. He says, crosses his legs at the ankles, “Dude, if there’s a question you want to ask me, just ask.”

Resigned, I heave out a sigh and remove my cap, wipe the sweat off my brow with the back of my hand. I lock eyes with his cocky ass. “Has she mentioned me?”

His smirk is stupid, and I wish I could punch it right off his face. Unfortunately, I’ve kind of grown to like the guy. “Not once.”

The day after I poured my bleeding heart out to Mia, she went back to New York. There was no dramatic farewell or overemotional goodbye. She simply came downstairs with all her bags and said, “I’m off. Have a good rest of the summer!” Holden was already in his truck waiting to give her a ride to the airport.

That was two weeks ago, and for the past two weeks, Holden’s stopped by almost daily. He never offers to help. But he sits, and we talk—or, more specifically, he talks, and I listen—and when John’s around, they talk *a lot*. My favorite is when they share stories about Mia. They don’t do it for my listening pleasure. They just do it because it’s the thing they have in common, the thing they both love in their different ways.

“Wait,” Holden says, rubbing his chin with his thumb and forefinger like a douchebag. “There was one thing.”

My eyebrows rise. “What thing?”

“She said she was glad that she had the summer with you because it gave her closure.”

“Closure?”

“Yep.” Holden nods, standing. He grabs one of the plants John had picked out for beside the now-completed porch and dumps it in the hole. “She said now neither of you have to hold on to the past.” He thumps my back. *Hard*. “And you can both move on.”

“Move on?”

“Yes. You need to move on, Preston. She will.”

“She will?” I’m repeating his words right back to him, like a jackass.

He shrugs. “She has.”

“She *has*?”

I’ve followed his movements from beside me until he’s in his truck, engine roaring. “I’ll see you tomorrow!”

“FOR YOUR HARD WORK,” John says, handing me an envelope. My dad had already told me this was coming, along with the warning to accept whatever payment John would give because he was a proud man, and not doing so would insult him. Dad also mentioned that he’d pre-arranged the money to come from Preston Constructions, rather than John himself, so I had no problems taking it from him. “Is the money actually mine?” I’d asked Dad. “Like, I can do whatever I want with it?”

It took him a moment to answer, probably assuming I’d spend it on something ridiculous like a stripper pole for the kitchen. “Within reason, Leo.”

Standing on the porch, I tell John, shaking his hand, “I appreciate it, sir. You really didn’t have to.”

“Did it help? You coming here?” John asks, eyeing the delicate, intricate Mia-railings. I used a lathe and hand-turned every single one before carving the names and words that meant anything and everything to John. He got teary when he noticed, and then walked away. Holden assured me it was his way of showing just how much it meant to him.

“Yeah, it did. A lot.” More than he’ll ever know.

“Good.” He smiles, placing a hand on my shoulder as he looks up at me. “Anytime you want to come back, Boy, you come.”

“Yes, sir.”

He drops his hand, shoves it in his pocket. “Well... *Baba* said you don’t like goodbyes, so...” He hands me another envelope. “This one is from *her*.”

I’D DRIVEN the same route to the diner every day, sometimes three times a day, but there’s something different about now, something meaningful.

Miss Sandra greets me with her usual, “Your booth’s free, baby, go ahead,” and so I make my way over and sit. The book Lucy had lent me at the start of summer sits on the table, the corners of multiple pages folded and unfolded and folded again. The spine is worn with jagged lines of faded ink, entire paragraphs are highlighted, and on the margins are notes upon notes of everything I’ve *felt* while I was reading it. I didn’t limit myself to just three words because the story, itself, deserved more.

“Your food won’t be long, hon,” Miss Sandra says, pouring my morning coffee. She leaves to serve another customer and returns only minutes later with my order. “You finally finished reading the book?” she asks, jerking her head toward it.

I lean back in my seat. “Yeah, last night.”

“What’s it about?”

“It’s, uh...” I huff out a breath. “It’s about family and loss and friendship and tragedy and love. *Young* love.”

“Sounds good,” she says, that genuine smile of hers reaching her eyes. “I’ll have to read it sometime. Who wrote it?”

Pride fills my voice, my heart. “My sister.”

I DON’T WAIT to see Miss Sandra’s reaction to the envelope I leave on the table as a tip, because that’s not why I did it. I also don’t tell her that I’m leaving. Because I really, *really* suck at goodbyes.

I drive past the “*Thank You for Visiting*” sign and look in the rearview at the Welcome sign, which now reads: Population 199. I imagine first-time parents, immigrants, having a baby, and loving that child more than anything in the world. I picture the father standing behind his wife and his new baby, looking down at them both and thinking, “This. This is the *American dream*.” And then I pull over and put the truck in park. I take a breath, and then another, feeling Mia’s letter burning a hole in my pocket.

I’d pulled it out at the diner, but it didn’t feel right to open it there, where I was open and exposed and had to control my reaction. I felt it though, the thick paper with sharp corners. I suspected what it was, and when I tear into the envelope, I smile. It’s the photograph of the water tower from back home: our special place, our solace.

I flip it over.

It’s more than three words.

Three adjectives.

Three emotions.

Leo,

God gave you a voice for a reason.

Use it.

Because if you don’t stand for something, then you’ll fall for everything.

I love you,

Mia.

PART THREE

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CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

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MIA

It's his eyes I notice first, and then everything else, all at once.

Ten minutes ago, the driver of the nationwide car service Dad uses pulled into the driveway of my home. Only it didn't look like my home, at least not from the outside. Momentarily, I wondered when, or if, I'd ever stop considering this place home. Technically, I lived at the dorms at school, so really, not a home, and I was never at Dad's apartment in the city, so that didn't classify, either.

It took a moment for my eyes to capture all the changes. When I left last summer, the only major work that had been done was on the porch. Gone is the faded, worn siding, replaced with new ones the shade of gray I'd selected myself. Two shades darker are the gutters, and both contrasted well against the bright-colored plants surrounding the house.

Papa's truck was parked in its usual spot between the house and the barn, and as I stepped onto the porch, I took note of how beautiful the new railings were. I didn't spend too much time looking at them. I knew Papa would want to show me all the hard work Leo put into them.

Leo.

It's a name, a *boy*, a memory I try not to think about because just like the notion of "home," I don't quite know where to place him in my mind.

And in my heart.

As soon as I stepped foot in the house, I was hit with nostalgia. Nothing had changed in there, and when I closed my eyes, I could smell Papa's cooking on the stove, hear the soft melodies of Otis Redding and Marvin Gaye. Suddenly, I was disappointed in myself for not coming back sooner. It had been almost a year, the longest I'd ever gone without seeing Papa, and I missed him. And really, I had no excuse for not coming back... you know, besides the fear that being here would remind me of a certain blue-eyed boy who made insane declarations on a porch swing that had forever been mine, forever been safe... until I had a momentary slip in judgment and decided to give said boy my first kiss on that very same seat.

Okay, I'm being dramatic.

I chose to kiss him.

No regrets.

Still, I couldn't be around him, and so I left.

Standing in the entryway of my kind-of-home, it occurred to me how still the house was. How quiet. It was a rarity. When Papa was home, there was always music playing, and if not music, then the TV. There was nothing. I left my bags by the front door and went to his room. His bed was made, but he wasn't there. I checked his bathroom for any sounds, and when I assumed it was safe, I opened the door. He wasn't there, either. I thought about calling him, but that would ruin the surprise. I'd made sure he didn't know I was coming. In fact, I'd made up reasons I couldn't come just so I could see the look of surprise and (hopefully) joy when he saw me.

Finally, after searching the entire house and the perimeter for a whole twenty minutes, calling out his name, I noticed the side door of the barn ajar.

And that's where I stand now, looking at the back of a shirtless boy—or *man*, I should say. His back is sculpted with nothing but muscles. His waist is narrow, shoulders broad. He has a broom in his hand, and he's sweeping the floor. Most of the furniture's been pushed to the side, some in pieces, and as I move closer, I notice the white wireless earbuds in each ear.

No wonder he didn't hear me.

He's wearing a cap backward, so I can't see his hair clearly, but it's obvious who it is, and I don't know why he's here, but I'm so happy he is. I'd been hoping to surprise him, too. It's been too long, and our phone calls have become less and less over the past year. The floorboards squeak beneath my feet as I stop behind him, lift a hand, and tap on his shoulder. "Holden!"

He turns quickly.

It's his eyes I notice first, and then everything else, all at once.

Leo's name catches in my throat as if saying it out loud will make him disappear. I'm sure he says something, or at least his lips move, but I don't hear anything over the thumping of my heart. Ducking his head, he takes out an earbud, those eyes of his taking me in from head to toe, and I feel it again: bare, exposed, *unprotected*.

But it's different now. It's *electric*.

And then his lips kick up. One corner first, and then the other, and then I'm in his arms, and he's lifting me off the floor, and I'm letting him. And I

shouldn't let him because it's the reason I left so abruptly in the first place. After that kiss, I didn't want to stop. I wanted to crawl into bed with him, under the covers, and let him hold me and touch me and never stop kissing me, and it would've been so, so perfect. Until it wasn't.

He keeps his face nuzzled in the crook of my neck as he lowers me back to the floor, back to reality. "Jesus, Mia. What are you doing here?"

I laugh, like a bubble bursting from deep in my chest. "What are *you* doing here?" His hands settle on my waist, while mine settle on his biceps. They're somehow both firm and soft. I should let go. I don't.

"You first."

"I live here," I tell him, as if it's the most obvious thing in the world.

Leo clucks his tongue, his nose scrunching. "Nope, pretty sure you live in New York, and your grandpa said you weren't coming this summer, so..."

For a second, I let myself believe that Leo came here for *me*. Obviously, I was wrong. That would've been impossible considering no one knew I was coming. I drop my hands to my sides and try not to look at the perfection that is a shirtless Leo Preston. *Jesus, take the wheel.*

I take a step back—a teeny, tiny one—asking, "So, why are you here?"

"He asked me to—well, I called—"

"You called?"

He finally lets go of my waist and takes his own step away. With a shrug, he says, "I check in on him occasionally."

Warmth fills my chest. "You do?"

He nods. "He said that you weren't coming this summer," he repeats.

"I wanted to surprise him."

A hiss sounds from between his teeth, and he's doing that adorable nose-scrunching thing again.

And then it hits me. "He's not here, is he?"

Leo shakes his head, almost apologetic.

My heart sinks, and I pout. I can't help it. "Where is he?"

"Some RV road-trip thing with his friend Philip..." He trails off, his words heightening in pitch toward the end as if I should've known this information. I didn't.

I try to hide my disappointment. "For how long?"

Leo squats to pick up the broom that he dropped when his hands became busy lifting me. "A couple of weeks," he says, still crouched down. His eyes are level with my bare legs, and they focus there for a beat before

making a slow trail up my length and back to my face. “He said you were too busy with your *boyfriend* to visit.”

I thrust my head back in frustration. “I just said that to throw him off.”

“The too-busy part or the boyfriend part?” Leo asks, standing to full height. I realize now why I assumed he was Holden. Leo’s grown at least a couple of inches, and his body... it’s no wonder I believe in God because his body is *definitely* a divine gift to women.

Aaaand I’m staring.

And blushing.

Crap.

“The too-busy part,” I manage to say.

“So the boyfriend part is real?” he asks, one eyebrow cocked.

I nod. “Yes, the boyfriend part is real.” And as soon as the words are out of my mouth, I take three full steps back, because *dang it, Mia!* You have a boyfriend, and you shouldn’t be looking at other boys the way you’re looking at Leo effing Preston.

“Huh,” Leo deadpans, pushing the broom back and forth. “So little Mia Mackenzie Kovács is all grown up.”

My eyes narrow to slits, and I don’t know what part of his statement I want to be pissed off about first. “It’s pronounced Ko-*vatch*,” I tell him. *Yeah, because that’s relevant.*

“That’s what I said.” He shrugs.

I shake my head. “No, you said Ko-vax, like *pro-vax*. It’s pronounced Ko-*vatch*.”

The boy *smirks* and covers the distance between us in the time it takes me to blink. Towering over me, his eyes study mine before dropping to my mouth. “Say it again.”

“Ko... *vatch*,” I breathe out, my voice as small as I feel.

“One more time,” he orders, his mouth an inch from mine.

I lick my lips, repeat myself.

When he pulls back, his smile is cocky. “I just *really* like the way your mouth moves when you say it.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

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MIA

CRAP.

Crud.

And, wait for it...

Fuck.

THIS SITUATION IS ABSOLUTELY worthy of a curse because *fuck*. I was not *at all* prepared for this.

My phone rings in the pocket of my shorts, and I already know who it is without having to look. When I pulled into the house, I'd been on the phone with him, and I'd told him I'd call him back in a minute. That was, what? Thirty? Forty minutes ago? Who knows how long I've been standing in the barn with Leo while he's explained everything that led to him being here? According to him, he'd call my grandpa every few weeks just to check in. It was the second day of summer break when one of those phone calls occurred. Leo had mentioned to him that he was doing some assignments for some extra credits and was spending most of his time in the library because his house didn't afford him the quiet he needed. Then, Grandpa told him that he was going on this random road trip, which was, at the very least, an odd thing for my grandpa to do, and that he'd be grateful if Leo would come and house-sit while he was gone. He got here a few days ago, and Grandpa mentioned, off-handedly, that he'd appreciate if Leo could clear out the barn while he was here, which is where we are now.

Me, standing in front of Leo Preston, while he gives me *those* eyes, and *that* smirk, and my phone is still ringing. *Balls*.

"Are you going to answer that?" Leo asks. He still has the broom in his hand, swiping back and forth. He hasn't moved spots. Just keeps cleaning the already clean floors.

I hesitate, because Leo's standing there, waiting, that one eyebrow quirked, and Drake—my *boyfriend*—knows enough about me to know that Leo Preston standing in front of me is probably not a good thing... for all

parties involved. Leo's staring at my general waist area where Al Green's "Let's Stay Together" plays from my phone—Drake's ringtone.

When it finally stops playing, Leo looks up at me, those piercing blue eyes judging me. "It's complicated," I tell him before he has a chance to ask.

Complicated is an understatement, and when Leo's face doesn't change, I cross my arms and narrow my eyes. Leo smiles to one side, drops his gaze, and focuses on sweeping again. "Does Holden know your back, or did you plan on surprising him, too?"

My arms are still crossed when I tell him, "No and yes. In that order. Unless you plan on ruining that, too."

"How did *I* ruin things?" Leo glances up, just his eyes, and that judgment is back again. His tone is even, calm, when he deadpans, "You've changed."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I snap.

He offers a lazy shrug and puts the broom against the nearest wall. "You're, like, *feisty*."

Eyes wide, mouth hanging open, I glare at him. I am not *feisty*. I'm just... protecting myself. I have to around him, otherwise... otherwise, I'll lose myself in him again, and that's the last thing I want. Or need.

He shrugs on a shirt, completely unaware of the thoughts circling my mind. When he turns to me, he says, those judgmental eyes now dark with an emotion I'm all too familiar with, "You better close that mouth, Mia Kovatch, before I pull out something to fill it."

My jaw snaps shut, heat burning every inch of my flesh. And then I punch his shoulder. Hard. The boy *laughs*, the sound bouncing off the walls. "I was just testing you," he says, taking my hand, as if I'm a child needing help to cross the road, and leading me to the door.

"Testing *what*?"

"How *much* you've changed." He doesn't let go of me as he walks me to my grandpa's truck, opens the passenger door for me. He motions for me to get inside, but I stand my ground and tug out of his hold.

"And?" I ask because I'm curious. It's been a year since we've had any contact. Things have changed. "How much?"

Leo shakes his head, his eyes holding more power than he knows what to do with. "Not a lot," he says, lifting me by my waist onto the seat. "You're still *my* Mia."

A single moment, a minute, a lifetime. That's how long it takes for my mind to catch up to what my ears have just devoured.

I don't take a breath. Not a single one. He's still watching me, his eyes shifting in minuscule movements. It's as if he's memorizing every inch of my face. Like a cattle prod burning into flesh, he's taking in every dip, every bump, every hue of every feature, and searing it into his brain.

Too late, I respond, my voice just above a whisper, "I'm not *your* anything."

Unlike me, his response is instant. "We'll see." And then he shuts my door, and I watch with bated breath as he makes his way around the car and gets behind the wheel as if all of this is completely normal.

Swallowing my nerves, my mind's still playing catch-up as I tug on my seatbelt, asking, "Where are we going?"

"Holden and I had plans to meet up for lunch at the diner. You can surprise him there."

Eyes wide in shock, I stare at his profile. "So many questions," I mutter, and Leo chuckles.

"Lucky we have all summer." He starts the truck and puts it in gear, but he doesn't make a move to leave. When he turns to me, I don't see the Leo I walked in on today, the one full of sexual innuendo. And I don't even see the version of him I gave my first kiss to. This Leo is fifteen years old, and he's just about to tell me his greatest fear in life. "You're going to stay this time, right?"

I look away, because the vulnerability in his eyes may just blind me. "Maybe," I breathe out.

"Maybe," he repeats. "That's good."

My eyes, my heart, my *everything* gravitates to him again. "It is?"

"Well, a maybe's not a no." He cracks a smile. "Because you know what they say about no. No is—"

"A complete sentence," I finish for him, and then we're moving.

I ignore the constant strumming of my pulse against my flesh, and the way my lungs expand when I breathe in his scent. I ignore the way the backs of his knuckles skim my bare knee every time he changes gears and the way my body breaks out in tiny little bumps. And I ignore that those bumps seem to float across my skin, searching, trying to create a safe space for the butterflies in my stomach to land.

When we get to the diner, my phone rings again.

And I ignore that, too.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

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LEO

I DON'T KNOW who I am when I'm with her.

That's the thought that gets trapped in my head for the entire ride to the diner. It's on loop, ricocheting off the walls of my mind, and I want it out so badly I almost say it out loud.

Almost.

"BRO, you took long enough. I gotta get go..." Holden's words die in the air when he finally looks up from his phone and sees Mia standing beside me. His grin is slow at first, and then all-consuming. He starts to get up, but for some reason, he catches himself and sits back down, his lips formed into a line. "How are you?" he asks, focused on his phone again. There's a hint of contempt in his tone, and I don't know where the hell it's coming from.

Next to me, Mia heaves out a breath. "I'm um... *good*. You?"

She doesn't make a move to enter the booth, just stands beside me. An inch closer, as if needing my protection.

"Good," Holden responds, dropping the phone. He glances up at her, and then right back down. "When did you get in?"

"This morning."

Holden looks at her now, *really* looks at her. And I question if he sees the same thing I do, that she's *changed*. The Mia he's known is the same one I do. A small-town country girl who lived in denim cut-offs, tank tops, and plaid shirts. Until about an hour ago, I hadn't seen her with even a hint of makeup. When I saw her today, I had to do a double take. Her hair's the same, except the natural waves are straightened, and I'll be the first to admit I don't know shit about clothes, but the ones she's wearing look soft, like silk or linen. The shorts are pale blue and shimmer beneath the diner lights, same with the matching oversized blazer. And her top is more a blouse, same shimmery fabric, tucked into her shorts. And then *gold*. So much gold. Around her neck and wrists and her fingers, her ears. And she's in *heels*. Which, yeah, is hot, but it just... I don't know. She doesn't look like *our* Mia. She looks too grown-up, even for a seventeen-year-old.

I say, because someone needs to say something, “Sorry I’m late. I was about to leave, but then she walked in and...”

“All good,” he tells me, but he’s looking at her. “I already ordered for you.” When his eyes meet mine, there’s a silent request, one I pick up on immediately.

“I have to use the restroom,” I tell whoever is listening and don’t wait for a response before leaving them alone.

I take my time, and when I get back, Mia’s in the booth doing all the talking. Holden’s leaning back, eyes on the ceiling, fists balled on the table. I don’t hear what she’s saying, but I clear my throat loudly and make my presence known. Mia sits back, her arms at her sides, while Holden shakes his head.

Miss Sandra appears with our orders, and Holden smiles up at her. “Sorry, Miss Sandra. Is it okay if I get my order to go?” *What is happening?*

“Sure, baby,” she tells him. “Your dad got you working extra hard, huh?”

Holden nods and waits for her to leave before telling me, “I’ll catch up with you later, man.” And then he’s up and waiting at the counter for his order.

I turn to Mia. “What’s with you two?”

She laughs once, her painted red lips twisted in annoyance. “Distance is hard.”

I study Mia’s face like I’ve done many times before. I know almost all the different versions of it. I’ve seen the sad, the desperate, the lonely, the free, the funny, and the adoring. But I’ve never, not until now, seen the dishonest.

MIA’S quiet on the ride home, just like she was at the diner. As soon as we get back to the house, she busies herself with texting on her phone and doesn’t say a word as she practically marches into the house. I know enough about girls to leave her alone, so I make myself scarce and go back to working in the barn. Last summer, after Mia left, John showed me what was inside the barn and the history behind it. When he asked me to clear it

out, he mentioned he didn't have a clue what he wanted in there, but it seemed like a waste of space having it sit the way it was.

I work with earbuds in, music blasting, until the sun goes down and I feel it safe to enter the house again. When I come out, Mia's sitting on the porch, on the floor in front of the rails, with a mug in her hand, steam floating from the top. She's still in the same clothes, but the heels are next to her, discarded, like the lying liars they are.

I approach with a cautious "Hey." "In the Midnight Hour" by Wilson Pickett, one of her grandpa's favorites, floats through the open door.

"You did a really good job on these railings," she says, looking up at me.

I sit across the porch step, my legs crossed at the ankles. "They took all summer," I tell her. "Delicate, intricate little things." *Just like you.* "It was worth it, though."

She nods as she reaches out, her gaze lost when she fingers the name etched into the wood. I know which one she's tracing without having to look. Even if I hadn't memorized the placement of each one, her eyes are pained enough to reveal the longing and sadness. *Holden.*

"Can you not tell my grandpa that I'm here?" she says, releasing a breath. "It's just... if he knows, then he'll come back, and I don't want him to. I want him to have fun with whatever he's doing."

I lick the dryness off my lips and try not to stare at her. "Sure."

"And, you know, same thing as last year... don't tell anyone I'm here."

I nod. "I won't say anything."

After a sigh, she says, her eyes meeting mine, "I don't know if I'll be staying,"

"Okay."

Wilson Pickett's voice is replaced with Ben E. King's as he croons for someone to stand by him, and we sit in silence, let the entire song play out. Mia's the first to speak, and when she does, I can hear the heartache in the breaking of her voice. "Have I changed, Leo?"

I shrug because I don't know how to respond. Any answer would be volatile to her current state of emotions.

My non-answer is answer enough, and she shakes her head, looks down at her mug. "I don't *want* to have changed."

"I mean," I start, then take a breath. "It's just you *look* different, that's all. Holden and I—we're not used to seeing you like this."

“Like what?”

I shrug again.

“No, tell me.” She puts the mug down and scoots closer. “I want to know how you see me.”

I hesitate, because I really, *really* don’t want to hurt her. “It’s just the fancy clothes and makeup, that’s all.” And the heels, which make her legs look insanely hot. I leave that part out, for obvious reasons.

She frowns as she looks down at herself.

I add, “People grow up, Mia... And where you live, it’s so different to how you grew up, so... I mean, it’s bound to happen, right?”

She inhales deeply.

And I keep going, “And if this change is what you want and you’re happy with yourself, then who the fuck are we to tell you otherwise? *Assholes*. That’s who we are. Forget Holden and me. We’re shitbags.”

A smile creeps across her face.

“We’re just not used to it, that’s all. We like the Mia we grew up with, you know? We struggle with change—guys—in general. We’re dickheads like that.”

She laughs once.

And because I like the sound of her laughter, I continue, saying, “Plus, Holden’s probably thinking about all the attention you’re getting from guys, and he *thinks* like a guy and probably hates every thought that he puts into those imaginary guys’ brains and he wants to protect you and he can’t because he’s not there.” I run out of air, replace it, and add, “He cares about you. That’s all.”

She chews the corner of her lip, and after a moment, she clears her throat. “What about you? Do you like my change?”

I tell her the truth. Every heartbreaking word of it. “I don’t see how it affects me.” Or why it matters what I think. She has a boyfriend, so she’s clearly moved on. Besides, I’ve barely spent any time with her, so I can’t judge. The things that matter to me can’t be seen. They’re not physical. They never have been.

The silence stretches between us, her eyes searching mine for answers, for truths. Finally, she looks away, and with glassy eyes, she mumbles, “I never want to grow into a person that my best friend doesn’t like.”

“I’m sure that’s not—”

“He changed, too,” she cuts in, her voice louder, clearer. “When he left, he became someone else. He was sleeping around, and I didn’t judge him on that.” Quickly, she adds, “Not that I’m sleeping around; I’m not. I’m just saying...”

I don’t respond because I have nothing to say.

“Has he said anything to you?” she asks.

I shake my head. “Nothing.” Because it’s part of the deal that came with our friendship: we don’t talk about her. Ever. “I’m not the one you should be having this conversation with, Mia.”

“I know,” she says, her exhale puffing her cheeks.

“Do you want me to take you to him?”

“I don’t think he wants to see me.”

“All right,” I say, getting to my feet. “I have homework to do, so...” I squeeze her shoulder as I pass, and stop in the kitchen, pull out my phone to send Holden a text:

Leo: *I don’t know what happened with you guys, but she’s a mess, man. And I think she’s scared to talk to you. You have to be the one to fix this. I can’t fucking see her like this.*

He replies before I can even shove the phone back in my pocket.

Holden: *I’ll be there in five.*

I wait by the kitchen window until his headlights pull into the driveway, and then I watch as he gets out and walks toward the porch, his head down.

I hear Mia say, “I’m sorry.”

And then Holden reply, “I don’t want you to be sorry, Mia Mac. I just...” I go up to the landing, where I sit on the couch with my laptop and textbooks all around me. I put my earbuds in, set the volume to high. Whatever they’re saying, it’s not for my ears.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

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LEO

IT'S a whole three hours later when Mia enters the house. She stops at the landing when she sees me sitting in the same spot I've occupied the entire time she'd been talking to Holden. She's smiling—the kind of smile that knocks all the air out of my lungs. I take one earbud out and raise my eyebrows at her. “Good talk?”

“Thank you,” is all she says, then starts for the bathroom. “I’m going to shower. Is that cool?”

“Uh-huh.” I nod.

Five minutes later, I realize how *uncool* her showering only a few feet away from me is. She didn't bring a change of clothes with her, which means that she's going to come out naked, dripping wet, wrapped in a towel.

And the worst part? I've seen what's underneath that towel. With a groan, I look down at my lap, glare at the erection tenting my shorts. “Stupid body,” I whisper to myself. “Stupid, deceiving jerk!” I grab the nearest textbook, and, clearly, all blood's rushed from my brain to my dick, because I don't even think of the repercussions when I drop the book on my lap to hide the proof of my illicit thoughts. “Motherfucker!” I shout in pain.

“You okay?” Mia calls out. And I imagine her in there, suds of soap smeared across her pale flesh, and then her hands, touching that flesh, from her breasts to her—

“Leo?!”

“Yep!” I shout. “I’m good.” I’m so fucking not. There are tears in my eyes, and I don't know if it's from the pain of the junk shot or if I'm crying at the image of a soaking wet Mia that I'll probably never get to see in real life.

I shove the book off my lap, and sure enough, my hard-on's soldiered past the point of pain and is still there, looking at me, waving at me like “Haha. Sucks to be you.”

“I hate you,” I whisper, and I've officially gone mad.

The pipes clank when the shower turns off, and, like the little bitch that I am, I run to my room, close the door, dive under the covers and hide.

And then I listen.

I listen to the bathroom door opening, and then her footsteps as she goes upstairs to her bedroom. I hear her bedroom door open and close, and I count to ten before tiptoeing back out. I grab my phone, laptop, and books and bring them all back to my room, where I take a moment to let my pulse settle.

Sitting on the bed, my back to the wall, I try to focus on the words on my laptop screen:

Community protection, criminal justice assisting, criminology, legal system.

I read all these words out loud, and yet, something happens from my eyes to my mouth to my brain because nothing is sinking in. Suddenly, it dawns on me that my whole reason for coming here was so I could focus, undistracted. But now? Now that bullshit thing Lucy calls *fate* has thrown it all out the window and given me the greatest distraction of all.

There's a light tapping on my door. "Leo?"

I close the laptop, throw it on the floor. There's no way I'm getting anything done tonight. "Yeah?" I call out.

"Can I come in?"

I rub a hand down my face. "Sure."

Mia peeks in first and then steps all the way into the room. Her hair's still wet, the makeup gone, and she's in *those* red plaid pajamas.

"Am I interrupting?" she asks, unsure, looking around the room.

She's *my* Mia again.

And goddamn she's *flawless*.

"No," I tell her, sitting higher. "You okay?"

Her bottom lip tinges red when she clamps her teeth around it, nodding. She sits on the bed, her legs crossed, and what I wouldn't give to clamp my teeth around those thick thighs of hers. I clear my throat, grab the bed sheet, and place it not-so-covertly over my lap. Her eyes trail every move, until she realizes what's happening and looks away, her cheeks blossoming that beautiful pink that stains her pale flesh. "It's so dark in here," she mumbles, and I flick on the lamp on the nightstand.

"I like to work in the dark. No distractions, you know?"

Nodding, she says, "The talk with Holden helped a lot. We *really* needed it."

"That's good."

“Yeah.”

Silence falls, and it’s... it’s almost comforting. Eventually, she moves to sit next to me, her side brushing mine. “You were right—about the whole me changing thing.”

“Yeah?”

“I mean, *kind of*, but it’s more than that, too.” She scoots down until her head’s on the pillow, looking up at the ceiling. Her fingers splay across her stomach, tap, tap, tapping away.

I stay quiet.

“When I left last year and went back home, my dad set up a job for me in his company. He said it was good for college prep and transcripts.” Her eyes squint at the word “college,” but she doesn’t elaborate, and I don’t ask. “He put me to work with a bunch of paid interns, most of them in college. They were older and far more sophisticated, and they just seemed to have their shit together, you know?”

Not really, but I nod anyway.

“In the beginning, they didn’t include me in anything, and at first, I thought it was because I was the boss’s daughter. I felt like the biggest outsider. It kind of reminded me of being at your house.” She whispers the last part, as if she didn’t realize what she was saying until it was too late.

I press my lips tight.

“No offense,” she says, and again, I nod. “So, anyway, I started dressing like them and acting like them, and before I knew it, I had *friends*. And it wasn’t like the girls in the dorms who lived with me twenty-four seven and had no choice but to talk to me... I don’t know,” she chokes out, and the wobble in her voice has me sliding down the bed and lying on my side to face her. She drops her hand from her stomach, searching, and I take it in mine. “You know me, Leo. Out of everyone in the world, *you know* how much I’ve struggled with that stuff.” She turns to me now, her face only inches from mine. “I just wanted to feel like I belonged *somewhere*.”

“I know,” I murmur. “But I hate that you feel like you have to change to do that.”

She seems to process this a moment, then says, “Holden thinks I’ve sold out.”

“Sold out?”

She nods.

“How?”

“Because I use Dad’s money to create this... *facade*. He’s so filthy rich he doesn’t even realize the dent I’ve made on his credit card. Either that or he just doesn’t care.”

“How is that selling out?” I ask.

“Holden thinks that it shows that I’ve forgiven my dad. Like him throwing money at me makes the whole walking-out-on-his-family thing okay.” She takes a breath. “Like I’ve just accepted it and forgotten about it and moved on.”

“Is that how you feel?”

“I don’t know how to feel,” she answers quickly. “But I know that carrying around that...” she trails off.

“Hate?” I offer.

Her nose wrinkles. “Not hate, just *disappointment*, I guess. I can’t live the rest of my life with that in the back of my mind and expect to be completely happy one day. It’s impossible.”

I let a beat of silence pass before asking, “Do you like your dad?”

“I love him,” she’s quick to answer.

I shake my head. “That’s not what I asked. Do you *like* him? As a person. Regardless of genetics.”

She rolls onto her back, her eyes on the ceiling again. “I don’t really *know* him. He works a lot and—”

“You shouldn’t make excuses for him, Mia.”

“I know,” she almost shouts. “But I’m scared.”

“Of what?”

She turns to me now, her bottom lip jutted out. “That he’s going to leave me again.” She says it so quietly I almost don’t hear her.

When I bring her into me, it’s habitual. And when I feel her first tear soak through my shirt, it’s instinctive for me to say, “I’m sorry, baby.” I don’t realize what I’ve said until I feel her body tense and her breath catch. “Sorry,” I tell her, because I am. I shouldn’t have said it. I shouldn’t even be this close to her. And I shouldn’t be fucking holding her, not when she’s not mine to have.

She wipes at her eyes and then pulls back to look at me. She’s so fucking close I could breathe in her exhale. I could hold my breath. Never let it out. Let a piece of her live inside me forever.

She says, voice soft, “It is so easy to forget while I’m there, who I am in here.” She taps at her chest, at the spot right above her heart. “I don’t ever

want to forget who I am or where I came from. Don't ever let me forget, okay?"

Eyes searching hers, I ask, "Who are you, Mia Mackenzie Kovács?"

She sniffs, nuzzling into me again, her arm going around me. "I'm the granddaughter of an immigrant dairy farmer, who grew up in pigtails, wearing overalls and rubber boots, and my favorite place on earth is exactly 130 feet in the air."

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CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

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MIA

I'M PRESSED AGAINST A CLOUD. No, it's too hard to be a cloud. Maybe it's a boulder? A cloudy boulder. And it's warm. So warm. And it's around me, like a blanket. There's a beeping—a fire alarm going off in my head. The hard cloud moves, and then it speaks. Clouds don't speak. "Shut up," it mumbles, and it hugs me tighter.

"You shut up," I murmur, my eyes closing again. The beeping won't stop, no matter how hard I try to get back to dreamland. I sit up, annoyed, and try to focus my eyes. "What is that?"

"Alarm," the cloudy boulder mumbles.

"Where's the fire?"

"What?"

There's a light source coming from the nightstand, and so I climb the boulder and reach for it. I hit a button on the side of a phone. A phone? Why is there a phone on a cloudy bould—

I'm suddenly awake.

Too awake.

That warm, cloudy boulder is Leo Preston. And I'm sprawled on top of him, while his arms circle my waist, holding me steady. His mouth—his heated exhale—lands on my stomach, right where my shirt has ridden up. His lips part there, just above my belly button, and he kisses me once. Just once. My breaths are jagged, fiery little things that shoot out from my mouth and don't ever come back. His hands shift, balls of heat against my bare back. I try to swallow, but the dryness of my throat prevents it. It's still dark out, so dark I can't see a thing in this room. But I feel it all. Feel his hands cling to my shoulders, tugging me down. Wetness pools at my core when my body lowers against his, his mouth finding the tip of my breast, over my shirt, and he bites down gently. I let out a groan, my body arching against his. "Jesus, Mia," he whispers, and he's shifting me, one of his bare legs moving between mine, his knee pressed against my center. He lowers me again until I'm straddling his waist, his hardness at a place I've only ever dreamed about. He kisses his way up my chest and onto my neck, one hand going to my hair. His fingers curl, pulling gently while I grind against

him, searching for my release. “Fuck,” he hisses, and he grabs a handful of my butt, squeezing tight, pressing down, putting more pressure at the parts we connect. He thrusts, again and again, and then he—

He stops.

It’s a quick movement.

So abrupt it takes a moment for me to realize what’s happening.

“Jesus fuck, Mia!” And then he’s rolling out from beneath me, cursing under his breath. “Fuck, fuck, fuck!”

The weight of my actions falls steady on my chest, slowly, gradually, until it hits me like a vice, wrapping around my heart. It’s suddenly cold, too cold, and the only warmth I feel is the guilt when it leaks out from behind my eyelids and catches on my cheeks.

What have I done?

“I should go,” I whisper into the darkness.

“Yeah,” Leo says, and I can hear the agony in his voice. “You really should.”

LEO

I run.

I run until I can't feel my legs anymore. Or any other part of my body. I run until my lungs cave in, and my mind goes numb, and I can no longer remember what it feels like to have her on top of me, in my arms, my mouth on places I've fucking fantasized over for *years*. And then I collapse, face-up on the road, basking in the way the morning sun burns me alive.

Every inhale is torture.

Every exhale the same.

I didn't have to stop it. I could've kept going until I'd stripped her bare, my fingers leaving marks on those fucking thighs of hers. And I wouldn't have stopped—not until my hands and my tongue tasted of nothing but her for days. And then I could've had her, my cock deep in her pussy while she writhed on the bed, begging for more. I could've flipped her over, gripped her waist, pressed her face into the mattress, and fucked her the way I dream about.

I could've had her.

I groan at the thought.

If I didn't care about where we'd stand a year, a day, or even a minute after it was all over, *I could have had her*.

But I *do* care.

And that's why I stopped it.

Because it would've been a mistake—a moment of weakness.

And five years on, there's only one thing I'm positive of: Mia and I—*together*—we deserve more than just one moment.

We deserve a lifetime.

WHEN I GET BACK to the house, Mia's already waiting for me. I slow my steps as I approach the porch, where she's sitting on the porch swing offering a weak smile. "Hey," she says, raising a hand.

“Hey,” I reply, out of breath.

She points to the little table between her grandpa’s rocking chair and mine, where she’s set out a jug filled with iced water. “You down, like, twenty of them after a run.”

With a nod, I flop down on my chair and fill a glass. “So what’s up?” I ask, staring ahead.

The chains of the porch swing creak as she shifts. “I just feel like we need to talk about what happened.”

I inhale as much air as my lungs can handle, down the entire glass, and fill it again. “So talk,” I say, but it comes out harsher than intended.

“Like *adults*,” she tells me, and I look down at my lap.

It’s not that I don’t think we should talk about it; it’s just that I don’t know what to say, and, if I’m being honest, I’m terrified of every single word that might possibly leave her lips. “I can do that,” I lie.

“How, Leo?” she asks. “You can’t even look at me.”

My eyes drift shut, and I take a moment, two, and when I open them again, they’re on her. She’s sitting with her knees pulled up to her chest, her chin resting on them, arms wrapped around her legs. “I’m sorry.” She almost chokes on the words.

“Don’t.” I shake my head. “Don’t say you’re sorry or that you regret it or any other thing that’ll try to convince me that you didn’t want it to happen. Because you did, Mia. Even for a second, you wanted it as much as I did. And you saying that shit will take it all away.”

“Then what do you want me to say?” she almost shouts. “I accidentally fell asleep, and you—”

“What?” I cut in, my eyebrows drawn. “I took advantage of you?”

“No! God, no, Leo. I know you’d never do that. I just...” she trails off, her chest rising with her intake of air.

“Look,” I say, trying to keep my voice even. “It happened, and personally, I *want* it to happen again. But you have a boyfriend—”

“Exactly!”

“Exactly *what*?”

“I have a boyfriend, Leo.”

“I’m aware of this, *Mia*.”

She shakes her head, mumbling, “I shouldn’t have fallen asleep in your bed.”

I heave out a sigh, try not to let my frustration show. “I have an idea.” I lean back in the chair, letting it rock my weight back and forth. “And just hear me out before you say no, okay?”

She’s quiet a beat. “Why am I scared of whatever you’re about to say?”

I face her, smirking. “You should break up with your boyfriend.”

She snorts when she laughs, which yeah, would be hot as hell if she wasn’t laughing *at me*. Her features level, and she goes silent when she realizes I’m not even close to kidding. “You’re serious?”

“Yep.”

“Leo...”

I shrug. “You should break up with him.”

“No,” she deadpans.

“No?”

“No.”

I stop rocking. “Why not?”

“Because I like him.”

“Uh-huh, you sure liked him a lot when you were grinding your pu—”

“Leo!” She’s shaking her head. But I can see it there, in those wide eyes of hers, in the way she can’t look at me for more than a second. The lust is there, hidden behind her portrayed outrage and innocence. And damn if I won’t use that to my advantage.

I shrug again, try to play it cool. On the inside, my pulse is racing, thumping against my flesh.

She stutters when she speaks, “I-I-just wanted to talk to you because I...” She looks down at her lap, her cheeks flushed. “I don’t want you to think...” She swallows, nervous.

“You don’t want me to think what?”

Her gaze meets mine again. “That I’m a *whore*.”

“Mia.” I almost laugh. *Almost*. “I don’t think that of you. I’ll *never* think that.” Then I stand, start for the door. Hand on the knob, I tell her, “Besides, if you were a whore, you wouldn’t have left my room. You would have stayed, let me strip you naked before throwing you on the bed.” When I glance at her, her eyes are huge, mouth open in shock. “And then you would’ve let me fuck your boyfriend’s existence right out of that pretty head of yours.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

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LEO

MIA'S A SILHOUETTE in the middle of the barn door, nothing but shapes and angles. "Do you ever relax?" she yells over the music coming from an old stereo I'd found under one of the beds.

It's been three days since our little "incident," and we haven't had any more mishaps since. After I made her blush fifty different shades of red, she disappeared for a couple of hours, and when she returned, she made us lunch, and then sat me down and gave it to me straight. She told me she was in a serious, committed relationship, and because of this, she took full responsibility for what happened that morning. And while she didn't deny that there was—in her sleep-haze moment—a part of her that wanted it too, she shouldn't have let it get as far as it did, and she was grateful that I had it in me to stop it before it got too far, because the last thing she wanted was to ruin her relationship. Her relationship made her *happy*.

Even though sitting there and having to listen to every word she said was my equivalent to getting a screwdriver in the ears, again and again, I could tell how hard it was for her to say those things to me, in person, and I had to respect that. And that's what I told her. Then she smiled, offered me her hand, and asked, "Friends?"

So, that's where I am currently: friend-zoned.

I haven't wanted to be *just* friends with Mia since before I first spoke to her. I was *thirteen*.

With studying and the work in the barn, I can keep my mind occupied for a good, oh, *three seconds* before I want to put my head through a brick wall.

It's *dope*.

Mia walks toward me in her classic Mia style: flip-flops, denim cut-offs, and a loose tank. She dropped the fancy wardrobe and makeup the second day she was here. I, for one, will not miss them. Maybe the heels, but that's my dick speaking.

She stops a foot in front of me, her head tilted back to look up. "I need the barn."

I glance around. "I'm kind of doing stuff, *obviously*."

Her loaded smile is sugary sweet and completely fake. "Can you do it later?"

"What do you need it for?" I say, squaring my shoulders and looking down my nose at her.

She shrugs. "I need to work out."

"Work out?" My eyes narrow. "Didn't you just get back from lunch with Holden?"

Another shrug.

"And can't you do that, I don't know, *anywhere* else?"

Pointing to the treadmill in the kitchen area, she says, "I use that."

"Okay, so go use it."

"I can't with people around." I stifle my laugh, and she pushes my shoulder. "Don't laugh. I get... *weird* about people watching me."

"Watching you *run*?"

She nods. "I'm self-conscious, okay?"

"You're a strange little thing," I say, patting her head.

She shoos my hand away. "And I'm going to do yoga, too."

I drop the trash bag I'd been holding and quirk an eyebrow, my interest piqued. "Yoga, huh?"

She nods.

"Are you flexible?"

Her lips thin to a line.

I swear, my smirk is unintentional. "How flexible?"

"You're a filthy, giant..." She pauses, her eyes roaming my bare chest. "...muscly thing."

"Your insults are lacking," I say through a chuckle. Then, seriously, I ask, "Can you put your feet behind your head?"

Mia bites her lip, her cheeks flushed. The image of Mia with her legs behind her head, naked, has my vision blurring. I don't even bother to suppress my groan as I shove a hand down my shorts to adjust myself. Who cares now? She's felt it all.

"Leo!" she shouts.

"What?" I laugh out. "I'm an eighteen-year-old guy, Mia."

"Yeah, but you're better than other eighteen-year-old guys, Leo."

"You kind of haven't given me a chance to prove that, so..."

She says, after a forced inhale to keep her frustrations at bay, "Can I *please* have the barn?"

“Fine.” I look down at her clothes. “You run in flip-flops?”

“I’m getting changed. I just wanted to tell you to get out first.”

“You mean ask my permission to use the space I’m currently occupying?”

She moves behind me, pushing on my back until I’m out the door. Holden’s truck’s still in the driveway, and he’s behind the wheel, talking on his phone. I watch Mia enter the house, and then I lean against Holden’s truck. When she returns a minute later, she’s changed into tight shorts and sneakers, same top. My eyes track her all the way into the barn, where she makes a show of removing the key from the doorknob and taking it with her. When the barn door closes, Holden’s truck door opens. “You got it so bad,” he mumbles—the body of the truck whining in protest when he stands beside me, his weight against it.

“Shut up. We don’t talk about her.”

“Fine,” he says, crossing his arms. “Should we talk about Drake then?”

“What? Like how no one wants to admit that they actually like ‘Hotline Bling’?”

Holden busts out a laugh, and I turn to him, brow dipped in confusion. “No, Drake—as in Mia’s boyfriend.”

Acid burns in my throat. “That’s his name?”

“She hasn’t told you?”

I shake my head, stare at the closed barn door. “Hasn’t come up.”

“What are you going to do about it?” he asks, as if I have options.

“I’m going to be respectful of their relationship.” I say it slowly, enunciating every word because a guy like Holden probably has no concept of the idea of respect when it comes to unavailable girls.

“Or...” he says, standing in front of me now, one finger pointed up between us. “You could, and I’m just making a suggestion here, so please don’t rearrange my pretty face, because you have serial killer eyes right now and it’s freaking me the fuck out.”

I glare at him.

“See,” he says. “Serial killer eyes.”

I widen my stance and cross my arms. “Fuck off.”

He laughs at this. “You could fight for her, you know?”

“I could,” I concede. “But what would be the point? She doesn’t want me. She wants...” The bile in my throat prevents *his* name from coming out of *my* mouth.

“Drake,” Holden finishes for me. “And the first point of your statement—about Mia not wanting you—I offer this.” He makes a dramatic show of rolling his eyes. They go so far back his irises are no longer in view, and he shakes from the brightness of the stars he must be seeing.

I chuckle. I can’t help it. “You’re an idiot.”

He resumes a normal human stance. “Says the guy who’s been in love with a girl for how long now?”

I shake my head.

“Right,” he deadpans. “We don’t talk about her.” He rests against his truck again. “He’s kind of a jackass—that Drake guy.... That’s why Mia and I had that weird vibe when she got back. I thought he was trying to change her, and every time I brought it up, she’d defend him.”

I take in everything he’s saying. “Maybe she loves the guy.” It hurts to say, as much as it hurts to admit that this is my reality.

“Maybe,” Holden mumbles. “But loving someone doesn’t make them a good person.”

I run a hand over my face and take a breath, and then another. I turn to him. “Is she in love with him, dude? Because if she is...”

“If she is *what*?” he pushes.

“I don’t know, man,” I say, head down, *literally* kicking rocks. “I don’t know if it’s going to be worth all of this.”

“All of what?”

“Don’t make me say it.”

Holden gets in my vision, ducking down, so his eyes meet mine. I lift my head, just an inch.

“Heartache?” he teases, mock pouting.

I shove his chest. “Fuck you.”

“Despair?” he says through a chuckle, and I shake my head. He sniffs twice, his nose in the air. “You smell that?” he asks, and I don’t bother answering because it’s not a question. “I think that’s desperation...” He moves closer, sniffs my shirt. “And it’s coming from you.”

I push him down to the ground, and we both laugh as we roll around, loose gravel pricking our backs. We fake-wrestle on the driveway, and I get him in a hold that has him huffing, trying to push me off him. “I forgot you used to wrestle.”

“I also have five brothers, you lonely only child!”

He guffaws. “Better get off me before you realize how turned on I am with you as top.”

Before I can respond, Mia’s sneaker-covered feet are right beside us. My eyes make a slow drag up her body, to her face, where she’s watching us, her head angled to the side. “What are you doing?” she asks.

Holden’s laugh dies in his throat. “Playing a game.”

“What kind of game?”

I get off Holden and come to a stand. As he gets to his feet, he tells her, “It’s called Kitchen Warrior.” His face reddens with his withheld chuckle. “We were trying to make a sandwich.”

Mia nods, her eyes scanning both of us in turn.

“You want to play?” Holden asks her.

“Okay,” Mia says, shrugging.

I’m too fucking slow at connecting the dots, but when I do, I shake my head at Holden in a warning. *Don’t say it.*

“Good,” he tells her. “You be the meat in the middle.”

A pitiful groan escapes my lips, right before Mia says, nodding enthusiastically, “Okay, what do I have to do?”

Holden and I turn to each other, slowly, our eyes meeting in disbelief. It starts as a snicker, and then we lose it. Completely. We’re howling with laughter, while Mia looks between us. “What?” she asks. “What’s so funny?” And it only makes things worse. Holden’s wiping at his eyes, and I’m holding my stomach, and Mia says, “I don’t get it! What’s so funny?”

Holden settles his hand on the hood of the truck, trying to calm his breathing. When he’s righted himself, he grabs the back of Mia’s head and pulls her closer. After kissing her forehead, he tells her, “Please don’t ever change, Mia Mac.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

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LEO

“QUESTION,” Mia states, sitting on a bench in the barn, her legs swinging back and forth. This is our new normal now. When I’m studying, she leaves me alone. When I’m in the barn, she’s in here, too.

It took *a lot* of groveling on my and Holden’s end to gain her forgiveness after we explained to her what “meat in the middle of a sandwich” meant. To Holden, she said, “You’re disgusting.” And to me, she said, “You! I’m just disappointed in.” And then she marched into the house. It took a solid half-hour for Holden and me to collect ourselves enough to confront her and apologize. It was a stupid joke. A funny as hell one, but still, *stupid*.

“Where is your truck?” she asks.

“I don’t have a truck. I have a car. A shitty old Honda that was my mom’s, and I highly doubt it would have made it all the way here, and Dad didn’t have any available trucks in his fleet, so he gave me a ride here, and your grandpa’s letting me use his truck.”

“You know that truck can’t travel—”

“Faster than fifty miles per hour, yes. Your grandpa warned me.”

She nods at my response and picks up a Skittle from the bowl, raising it in the air. I stop dragging a piece of a bed frame across the room and open my mouth. “Shoot,” she says when it misses me completely.

Today, she’s in workout shorts and an oversized sky-blue tee with GOALDIGGER printed across it. Her bare shoulder’s revealed, showing her black bra strap, and I say, “Question.”

She nods.

“Why the fuck do you look so cute right now?”

“I always look cute,” she responds, and even though she’s kidding, to me—it’s the truest answer she could’ve given. “Question.”

“Yep,” I say, hauling the bed frame to a pile in the corner. Then I squat down next to another bed with a wrench in hand.

“What are your plans for college? I assume that’s why you’re doing all this work for extra credit. Because you want to go somewhere for something specific?”

“The goal, which is pretty fucking unattainable right now, is to get into a state college and study criminology for four years, get out, and join law enforcement.”

Eyes wide, she asks, “You want to be a cop?”

I nod, focus on loosening the rusted bolts of the steel bed frame. “That’s the plan.”

“When did you decide this?”

“Last year,” I tell her. “After I left here, it was kind of like a light-bulb moment. Laney’s dad’s girlfriend—she’s in law enforcement back home, so she’s helping me with it all, which is awesome because I wouldn’t have a clue where to start.”

“How’s your dad feel about it?”

I face her. “What do you mean?”

“Does he care that you don’t want to be part of the family business?”

“Nah.” I loosen the bolt completely, catch it before it hits the floor. “He’s happy as long as I’m happy.”

“Of course Tom is,” she says, and there’s no malice or jealousy in her tone, just genuine sincerity.

“Question,” I say and don’t wait for a response. “Does your boyfriend know that I’m here?”

Silence.

Followed by more silence.

When I turn to her, she’s focused on the bowl of Skittles on her lap.

“I take that as *no*?”

She glances up at me. “Can we pass on these questions?”

I sigh, then say, “Question.”

“Last one,” she says.

“Can I watch you do yoga for, like, five minutes?”

She laughs once. “Why would you want to do that?”

I mumble, not looking at her, “Because I like to torture myself.” *Obviously*.

Before she can respond, her phone rings, and she’s quick to answer. “What’s up?” It must be Holden. Whenever I’m with her and her shitbag boyfriend calls, she either ignores it or leaves the room. “I’ll ask him and text you.” ... “Okay, bye.” When she hangs up, she says, “Holden’s meeting some girl from a dating app in the next town over. They have some kind of

night market with stalls and food trucks. He's scared she's going to be a psychopath, so he asked if we want to go with him."

It's pathetic that my first thought is, "Like a double date?" It's even more pathetic that I say that thought out loud.

"Like friends looking out for a friend," she answers.

I shrug. "Sure. Why not."

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MIA

“So, this girl...?” I say, flipping through one of Leo’s textbooks on the kitchen counter while Holden stuffs his face with a sandwich.

“Is *insanely* hot,” Holden answers around a mouthful. His throat moves with his swallow, and he adds, “But she’s kind of a little... *you-ish*.”

My eyes move to his. “What does that mean?”

“Don’t get defensive; it just means... she’s a sweet, innocent little thing, like you.”

I rear back slightly. “And she wants to date *you*?”

He polishes off the rest of his food, then moves to wash his plate in the sink. “I’m a fucking catch. You just can’t see it because all your heart eyes belong to one guy, and that guy isn’t even your fucking boyfriend.”

“Shut up!” I hiss and look toward the stairs where Leo’s in his room, getting dressed. “And don’t curse.”

Holden chuckles. “I never mentioned it was Leo, but good job giving yourself away.”

“You’re mean.” I pout, and he shakes his head.

Crossing his arms, he leans back against the sink, saying, “What the hell are you doing, Mia? This isn’t you.”

“What isn’t *me*?”

He sighs, brow raised in that *I’m about to give you the obvious truth* way. “You’re stringing along *two* different guys.”

Now it’s my turn to shake my head. “I’m not stringing along *any* guy. Drake is my boyfriend, and Leo is... Leo is...”

“Leo is what?” Leo asks, standing in the doorway dressed in dark denim and a light gray Henley that shows off his broad chest, hard stomach, and toned arms. The top few buttons are undone, revealing the angles of his clavicle, and that might just be my favorite physical attribute of his.

Holden clears his throat, eyeing me in that *I told you* way. “Leo is taking forever getting ready,” he covers for me. “Let’s go!”

Leo grabs his phone and wallet from the top of the fridge and shoves them in his pockets before making his way to me. Holden’s already halfway

to his truck when I feel Leo's hand on my back, leading me through the door. Breath hot against my temple, he says, "You look nice."

It's three words spoken, but I read it as more.

You look nice. I like you in dresses. Did you dress like this for me?

Yes, Leo Preston, I did. I put on a pale-yellow summer dress that I know shows off my legs and my ass—the two things I catch you staring at the most because, even though we can't be together, I still want you to want me. And I hate myself for it.

"Shotgun!" Leo shouts, bringing me back to reality. He's running to Holden's truck, and I run after him.

"Wait, no! I'm the best friend." I stomp my foot when his fingers reach the door handle.

"My legs are longer," he protests, his heated gaze trailing up my length, from my ankles to the top of my head.

"Now, now, children," Holden chides as he gets behind the wheel. "Why don't you rock-paper-scissors?"

I put my hand out, fist balled, between Leo and me. "Ready?" I ask, and his large hand covers my entire fist, the ends of his fingers circling my wrists. I've spent three days doing everything I can not to be close enough to him that he could touch me. Leo's touch is so much more than skin-on-skin contact. It's so charged with pent-up emotion, that even something so innocent as holding my hand makes my breath catch, my knees weak.

I'm in deep, and I don't know how to fix it.

He opens the door and motions for me to get in. I take his offered seat, and he waits until I have my seatbelt on before closing the door. Once he's crammed in the backseat, like one of those clowns at the circus driving around the miniature car, Holden says, starting the engine, "When we pick up Brianna, you're both in the back."

IT TAKES twenty minutes to get to Holden's date's house, and while he goes to the door to get her, I get out and hop in the back with Leo. His legs are so long that he has to sit semi-sideways with his feet on the opposite side to be able to fit. I sit with my legs crossed so he doesn't have to move. He watches me, unabashed. "Want me to move?"

"No, it's fine." I wave a hand in the air and turn to him. "Have you ever met someone through a dating app?"

Leo shakes his head.

Yeah, boy who looks the way he does—he'd have no problems meeting girls. Even for hookups. *Especially* for hookups. With that thought staining my brain, I suppress a gag.

Leo's lips pull up at the corners. "What about you?"

"No," I say. "Besides, you have to be eighteen to use those things."

He busts out a laugh. "No one actually adheres to those laws. It's so fucking cute how innocent you are." And then he tugs my hair. And I swear on everything, I don't know why or what it is about him pulling my hair that has my eyes drifting shut in pleasure and... moaning. Out loud.

Oh, no.

Luckily, Leo doesn't realize, or at least he doesn't react. Verbally. But my eyes are still closed, and so I tilt my head his direction, open one eye, my nose scrunched, face flaming with embarrassment. He's watching me, that full bottom lip trapped between his teeth. "You can't do shit like that, Mia. *Jesus.*" And then he sits up taller, his hips shifting as he runs a hand over his—I look away. "You know..." he says, in that low, deep hum of his, and I know where this is going, and I know I should stop it. I don't. "If I were a lesser man, I'd flip you on all fours, lift up that dress and fuck you from behind right now." He pauses a beat. "Want me to?" It's so *lazy*, the way his words spill from his lips. So effortless. "I could get you off before they get here."

"Leo." I don't have anything to add. Just his name. That's all.

"Unless you're into people watching you, because I'm down. Whatever you want, babe."

It's undeniable, the way my body reacts, the evidence of it pooling between my legs. I hate that I'm like this. With him. And no one else. "You need to stop." It's *barely* a whisper.

"Okay." He shrugs, a movement as effortless as his words. "So no dating apps for you?"

What roller coaster am I on, and can I get off now? "No," I reply, trying to steady my breathing and clear my mind. I look over at him, and there's no longer heat in his eyes. He's back to Leo. My *friend*. I clear my throat, saying, "I think I would die if I had to meet a stranger." I drop my gaze, focus on the frayed edges of my dress. "So, you meet most of your girlfriends through school, or...?"

Leo adjusts, and when I turn to him, his back is against the door. “I guess. It’s been a while, though. I haven’t even dated for...” His eyes squint as he thinks about this. “Over a year now.”

“Really?” I ask, surprised.

He shrugs. “I kind of had this epiphany.”

“Do tell,” I sing-song.

“I don’t see the point of dating unless I can see a future with the girl. Like, a settle-down-and-get-married, have-kids kind of future. And there aren’t any girls around who fit that description, so... no dating.”

“But how do you know if you don’t date them and get to know them?”

He sucks in a long, drawn-out breath and releases it in a huff. “Because the girl I want... she’s not even in the same state.”

I stare at him, unblinking, and he stares back like it’s a dare. A game. Our eyes break apart only when a door opens. “Hi!” Brianna says, waving to the both of us. She’s a tall thing, with butter-blond hair and big brown eyes. I give her what little a smile I can muster. “Hi, Brianna. I’m Mia.” I motion to Leo. “This is Leo. It’s nice to—”

“Oh my god,” she cuts in, settling in her seat. Holden makes his way around to his side just as Brianna says, “Holden’s told me so much about y’all, and I’m so happy y’all are coming with us. I was nervous, you know? This is the first time I’ve ever done anything like this, but then he told me he could bring his friends, and we could make it a double date, and it eased my fears so much.” Leo stifles a chuckle as I watch him and Holden share a look through the rearview mirror. “Holden said y’all have been dating since you were thirteen!” Brianna turns to look at us in the backseat, her hands clasped together beneath her chin. “That’s so dang sweet.”

I shake my head in disbelief. “Oh, we’re—” I start, but Leo interrupts, throwing an arm around my shoulders and pulling me to him.

“We’re happy to be here,” he tells her, shifting my body until I’m sitting sideways, my legs stretched out on the seat, my back to his chest. His arms are around my torso, holding me in place. He lays a soft kiss on my bare shoulder and whispers, his words just for me, “Relax, Mia.”

Relax, he says, as if it’s possible to do such a thing. Leo adjusts, so he has one foot on the seat, and I’m tucked in between his legs. He has one hand splayed across my stomach while he runs his nose along my shoulder and up my neck until his mouth’s at my ear. “Your body’s such a perfect fucking fit against mine.”

I stutter a breath.

He kisses me again, this time at the soft spot behind my ear. “I wonder how many other positions we can find that’ll prove how perfect we fit.”

“Leo,” I breathe out, and it’s both a plea and a warning. I crane my neck, look up at him. “You’re being bad.”

He smirks, fists a handful of my hair, and then tugs lightly, forcing my neck back even more. “I told you I could be bad, Mia.” And then he shifts, and I feel the evidence of his arousal press up behind me. My eyes drift shut, my breaths nonexistent. They don’t open again. Not until a few minutes later, when I feel the warmth of his hand sliding up my inner thigh. I grasp his wrist as I sit up, turn to him. “We can’t do this, Leo.”

He laughs, but it’s sad, and then he shakes his head, his eyes focused on my lips. “Just play with me tonight, Mia? One night. Let’s pretend.”

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CHAPTER FORTY

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MIA

I'VE THOUGHT about moments like this—daydreamed about them. Never more so than on that last drive back to the Prestons'. Leo had just told me that he wanted to be more than friends, and I was too shocked to reply. Instead, I stared out the window, and I fantasized about what our future would look like. We'd watch our favorite movies together and listen to our favorite songs. And we'd create new favorites. Together. We'd go on dates; movies, dinners, and little things their town would put on—like night markets. We'd walk hand in hand around town and at school, because he'd be *proud of me*, and he'd introduce me to everyone as Mia, *his girlfriend*.

"It matches your dress," the little girl behind the handmade jewelry stall says, pointing to the woven bungee-cord bracelet I'm holding. It's two different shades of pale yellow with a metal clasp.

"It's very pretty. Did you make it?" I ask, smiling at the woman behind her, whom I assume is her mother.

The girl, no older than ten, nods vigorously, her crooked teeth showing behind her smile. Poor girl's going to need braces, and that's no fun for anyone. Her chin lifts a few inches as she grins up at the boy beside me. "I have bigger ones," she tells Leo. "You can have matching ones! I can give you a discount for two!"

Leo's laugh is quiet as he settles a hand on the small of my back. From the corner of my eye, I spot Holden and Brianna looking at plants. I wonder if she knows he has an entire nursery.

The girl's searching through her stock laid out on the table, and I almost feel bad when I say, "I'll just take this one. I don't—"

"I want one," Leo interrupts, running his hand up my back to my neck, beneath my hair. His fingers tighten, squeezing my shoulder in a touch so gentle and intimate I can feel the heat instantly form in my cheeks.

"Here it is!" She holds it out for him, the band spread, and he offers her his wrist. She wraps it around and clicks it into place, her smile getting broader.

"It's perfect," he tells her, tone as gentle as his touch. Dropping his hand from my shoulder, he turns to me and takes the bracelet out of my hold. He

repeats what the little girl just did for him on me, and then he takes my hand, linking our fingers, and holds them both out in front of us. “Look at that,” he says. “Perfect fit.” His forearm is so tanned compared to mine, his hands so much stronger and larger.

“So you’ll take them?” the girl asks, looking between us.

“Absolutely,” says Leo, and he releases my hand to take out his wallet. “How much?”

“They’re normally eight dollars each, so sixteen, but I can do, like...” She looks back at her mom, who offers a shrug with her encouraging smile, and turns back around to us. “Like, um, twelve?”

Leo stands taller beside me, his arms stiff at his sides. “How long does it take you to make one?”

She shrugs. “Like, thirty minutes each, but my mama helps me.” She looks scared, as if she’s about to lose out on a sale.

I elbow Leo’s side, and he says, “So taking into account the time you spend on making them, plus the material, you’re probably what? Making a couple of bucks a bracelet?” The girl nods, her smile wiped. Leo shakes his head, heaves out a sigh, and reveals some cash. “I’ll make you a deal,” he tells her. “I’ll give you forty for the two, but you have to raise your prices, okay?”

The smile returns, and she looks from her mom to Leo, again and again. “Yes, sir.”

He hands her the cash, and then retakes my hand. “I’m going to tell you something, and it’s really important you hear me...”

She nods. “Yes, sir.”

“It is never, *ever*, okay to undervalue your worth.”

I choke on the sudden knot in my throat while the girl’s mom hugs her daughter, and then Leo walks us away as if nothing happened. “Leo,” I say, squeezing his hand. “That was a really nice thing you did. That little girl’s going to remember you forever.”

He doesn’t reply to that, but when he spots a hot drink stand, he asks, “You want a hot chocolate?”

Our hands are still linked, now with matching bracelets. “Sure.”

Once we have the drinks—hot chocolate for me and a coffee for him—he leads us to a little picnic table to the side of the stalls and sits on the table, his legs up on the bench. I do the same, my hands cupping the warmth of the paper cup. It was so hot out today, but now that the sun’s

gone, a chill floats through the air. I sit quietly, occasionally sipping, while casually glancing at the boy beside me. His blue eyes twinkle under the fairy lights as he stares ahead, and I wish I knew what he was thinking. Eventually, after minutes of silence have passed, he says, not looking at me, "I should have brought a coat."

"Are you cold?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "For you."

"I'm okay."

And back to the quiet he goes.

My drink is almost gone, and he hasn't even touched his. "She reminded me of Laney," he says out of nowhere. "That girl with the bracelets. Laney used to do the same thing, and I don't know..."

With a pout, I lean into him.

"And these bracelets..." he says, lifting his hand and examining it. "They remind me of home... at the field by the water tower... these flowers would sprout. They were the same yellow as these, as your dress." I press my lips together. He doesn't need to know that I remember the flowers. That those flowers are the reason I bought this dress. Or the many other pale-yellow dresses in my wardrobe. "They were surrounded by weeds and dirt, and they had no business being there, those *fucking* flowers." His jaw is as tense as his tone. "Yellow was my mom's favorite color."

"I'm sorry," I say, but it isn't enough.

He shakes his head and laughs once. "Sometimes all I want is to get away from there, and now...that girl and these bracelets and those flowers and my mom... I think I miss my family." He pauses a beat. "I think I'm homesick," he almost laughs.

I hold on to his arm, shake it lightly. "Maybe Holden can lend you his truck, and you can go home for a couple of days."

He faces me now, his eyes tracking mine. "Would you want to come with me?"

"No," I answer quickly and look away.

Leo pulls me into him and kisses the top of my head. Running a hand up and down my arm, he asks, "You have church tomorrow, right?"

"Yes." And, just to see his reaction, I ask, "Would you want to come with me?"

He chuckles. "No."

I pull away and look at his profile. “Why is you going to church so funny?”

“Don’t you have to *believe* to go to church?”

“You don’t believe in God or faith?”

He vehemently shakes his head. “Not even a little bit.”

“Well.” I sit taller. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but that kind of makes me sad for you.”

“Why?” This time, his laughter is more of a scoff. “Because I don’t believe in the power of an All Mighty being? Because I don’t think walking into a building once a week to listen to a person talk and tell stories will take away all of my sins?” He takes a breath. “Or is it because I don’t believe that I can do *horrible* things in this life, then say a few prearranged words, and suddenly, I’m forgiven?”

I don’t respond. I just look down at my lap and press down on my skirt, trying not to let his words hurt me the way they do.

“Don’t feel sad for me, Mia. I’m *fine*. I own up to my actions, and I know that there are consequences if I do wrong.”

“I don’t want to talk about this. It’s making me uncomfortable,” I reply meekly.

He’s quiet a beat, and just when I think he’s about to let it go, he says, “So what you’re saying is that the guy who shot Laney, he can walk into a church and ask for forgiveness and *boom*, done.”

“No, that’s not what I’m saying at all. And don’t do that, Leo. Don’t mock people for having faith.”

“Faith?!” He’s shouting now, and I’m glad we’re away from everyone so that no one can hear him. “Faith carries as much bullshit as *fate*.”

I don’t know how we got into this conversation, but I want out of it. I start to stand, but he grabs my wrist, forces me to stay.

“I’m sorry,” he says, his voice lowered. “I didn’t mean to yell; I just... I don’t get it. I don’t get how people can believe so blindly in something that doesn’t physically exist.”

“You don’t need to see something to know it’s there.”

He rolls his eyes.

“Like *love*,” I rush out. “You can love someone, and there’s no measure of that love, no way to determine if it truly exists or not, but you can *feel* it, and know that it’s there.”

“That’s a cop-out answer, Mia, and you know it.”

I bite back my annoyance. “Why does it matter to you?” I ask. “How does someone’s faith affect *you*?”

“It doesn’t,” he says, shrugging. “It’s just bullshit, is all.”

He sits there, quiet, relaxed, almost bored. Meanwhile, I’m agitated and frustrated because who the heck is he to judge what *I* believe. I hop down and stand in front of him, because I want to see him properly, and I want him to see me, to hear me. “What if faith isn’t about believing in one God,” I say quietly. “What if it’s about believing that there’s good in this world, and it may not be right in front of you, and it may not be happening right now, but you know it’s coming... because you *believe*. You believe that there *has* to be something better because you’re *here*, and you’re alive, and there has to be a reason for it.” I watch his Adam’s apple shift with his swallow. “Take this as an example. Earlier this year, in Sydney, Australia, five kids were walking on the sidewalk to go to a corner store or something. A drunk driver lost control of his vehicle and hit all five of them. Four of them died. Three of them were siblings. In one devastating accident, a mother and father lost *all their children*. You know why they can wake up every day and continue to live? Because they have *faith*, and because of that faith, they don’t have it in them to hate that driver. They chose to forgive him, and that level of forgiveness isn’t human, Leo. It *has* to come from something divine.”

“Mia,” he sighs, and he’s still shaking his head, a forever non-believer.

“Okay, how about this: Take a girl”—I choke on the words—“whose parents abandoned her the first chance they got, and she spent her entire childhood thinking there was something wrong with her. That she wasn’t smart enough, or pretty enough, or *thin* enough, and no matter what she did, they never fucking came back for her.”

Leo’s breaths are ragged as he turns to me, his eyes filled with pity.

“What if faith is all that someone has, Leo?”

“Mia...” he says through a heavy exhale, his hand reaching up to cup my face.

I lean into his touch. “You don’t think there’s a reason someone found my bike on the church steps when I left that night?” I ask him. “How about Laney? You said it was a *miracle* she survived, right? Or how about the night you nearly drove us over the cliff edge? I *saw* you, Leo. I saw you looking up at the stars, and your lips were moving, and you were talking

to *someone*.” I press my lips to his palm and then grasp it in both my hands. “Who were you talking to, Leo?”

He shakes his head because he doesn’t want to admit it.

“Who?” I push.

“My mom,” he murmurs.

“Right.” I nod. “So your mom’s body, her soul, it’s not rotting six feet underground. At least that’s not what you want to *believe*.”

“Of course I don’t want to believe that, Mia. Shit.”

“And those flowers in the field...”

His eyes narrow. “What about them?”

“You said it yourself, they were surrounded by weeds and dirt, and they had no business being there. But they were, Leo. In a place you went to almost daily. You—just *you*. They were there, and they got your attention enough to remember what shade of yellow they are. Yellow... your mom’s favorite color.”

He stares at me, his breaths short, shallow, and then he leans in, kissing my forehead just once before clearing his throat. “So what? You think it’s a sign or something?” His voice cracks. “A sign for *what*?”

I pull back. “That’s not for me to decide, Leo. It could be nothing. It could be *everything*. Whatever you want to *believe*.”

He laughs once and then pulls me into him, his hands stroking my bare arms. “You’re freezing,” he says, and it’s his way of telling me he’s done talking about it. But I know him. I know he’ll be thinking about it, stewing it over in that complicated mind of his. He runs the pads of his fingers down my arms until his hands meet mine, and then he lifts them both, cups them in his and brings them up to his mouth. I watch as his lips part, his breath slow as it leaves him, warming my hands. It’s a move so romantic and so intimate that it catches my breath.

And I catch myself.

Because I *can’t* do this.

Not again.

“Mia,” he whispers, and I lift my glassy eyes to his.

He stares back.

One second.

Two.

Then he dips his head, his breath heavy against the crook of my neck.

I cannot, will not, break.

Not again.

He whispers, “You have no idea how much it hurts to want you as much as I do.”

I close my eyes and breathe, allow myself this moment. Even if it’s all a lie. I let him hold me under twinkling lights, on the first and only date we’ll ever have.

Because as much as it may hurt him to want me, it hurts me more that I *can’t* want him back. That I can’t love him the way my heart does.

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CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

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LEO

I THOUGHT it would be fun to pretend, just for one night, that Mia was mine and I was hers, and this date we were going on was just one of many we'd been on in the years we'd been together. I was wrong. It wasn't fun at all. In fact, it was kind of depressing. And Mia must feel the same way, because she hasn't spoken a word since we got in Holden's truck.

I smile at her, but I can't say much more. Or do much more. Because the truth is, I'm devastated. I'm in love with a girl who might possibly be in love with someone else, and there's fuck all I can do about it. I told her how I felt, and she didn't say it back. She didn't say anything.

When Holden drops us off, Mia and I hold hands on the porch and wave him and his date goodbye. As soon as they're no longer in view, I drop her hand.

I need distance.

No more touching.

No more feeling.

No more *pretending*.

Her phone rings, that same stupid ringtone I've heard too many times, and I can't fucking be around her anymore. "Answer it," I tell her. "I'm going for a walk."

"Now? It's, like, almost eleven."

"I just need to clear my head." Hands shoved in pockets, I go down the driveway and onto the road, and then I walk. I walk and I walk, but it's nowhere near as satisfying as the beating I take from running.

I could leave.

That would be the sane thing to do. It would take a couple of days to finish up the barn so it was ready for when John got home, and it's not as if he *needs* me to house-sit. Mia's here. Holden's here.

I could leave.

It suddenly dawns on me that I haven't been paying the slightest attention, and now I have no idea where the fuck I am. With a heavy sigh, I pull out my phone to use the GPS. There are a bunch of messages from the family group chat from two hours ago that I must've missed.

Lucas: Leo, are you there?

Logan: Leo.

Lucy: LEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!

Liam: LEEOOOO

Lincoln: LEO!!

Logan: Doesn't look like it. Call him?

Lucas: Nah, he might be studying.

Lincoln: Swear, he has more self-discipline than anyone I know.

Logan: No shit.

Lucy: I really hope he gets into the college he wants.

Lucas: He will. I've never seen him so focused on something.

Logan: He doesn't go out anymore. Doesn't party. He's in those books all the damn time. I'm fucking jealous my lazy ass doesn't have that built in.

Lucas: At least you're working and not just sitting on your lazy ass.

Lucy: I miss him. :(

Liam: Hey, Luce. Who's your favorite brother? Be honest.

Lucy: I don't have a favorite. It changes every minute with you guys.

Lucas: Lol. That's what Mom used to say.

Lucy: Exactly. :)

Logan: Why do I never get any other notifications besides this chat. And girls. Obvs.

Liam: Because you don't have any friends?

Lincoln: None of us have friends.

Lucas: We've never needed friends. We've always had each other.

I read the passage of texts, over and over, and that homesick feeling I have only doubles. Without a second thought, I hit call on Lucas's contact. When he answers, he's almost whispering. "Hey, bro."

"Sorry, man. Are you and Laney sleeping?"

"Give me a second," he says, and I can hear the covers shifting and then a door opening and closing. "You there?"

“Yeah. I just, uh...” *Miss you?* I can’t say that. That would be... weird. “I saw in the chat you were looking for me.”

“Yeah,” he says, voice louder than before. “I know you haven’t decided on colleges yet, but I saw NC State has an open house in October.”

“NC State?” I ask, eyebrows raised.

“Unless you don’t want to stay local,” he rushes out. “I mean, obviously it’s somewhat up to you, but... I don’t know, it would kind of suck if we only got to see you during summers and holidays.”

I push down the knot growing in my throat. “NC State would be... I mean, that’d be awesome.”

“Well, you can look around campus and stuff. I did it for UNC and got a lot out of it, so...”

“Yeah, but your route to college is a hell of a lot different than mine.” UNC practically begged Lucas to go there, offering him a full athletic scholarship.

“I went the athletic route because I’m a dumbass. I would’ve failed out within a year if I didn’t run track. You’re different, so, yeah, I guess you’re right.”

We’re quiet a beat, neither of us having anything to add. Finally, he says, “So, I was thinking... if you want... I could go with you—to the open house thing. We can get a hotel room nearby and make a weekend of it. Might even bring Logan for some comic relief.”

There’s a heaviness in my chest, and I can’t quite pinpoint where it’s coming from. “Yeah, that sounds good.” It really fucking does.

“All right, well, you register asap, and I’ll find us a killer hotel.”

“All right.”

“Anyway, you good there? You need me to send you anything, or...?” I’d always seen Luke as a martyr, someone who took on the responsibility of taking care of us even though we didn’t need it, didn’t ask for it. But no one forced him to be the way he is. He does it because he genuinely fucking cares. Eight years since Mom died, and I’m only seeing this now, and now—now I see him as my big brother, my confidant.

“Hey, Luke?” I say, ignoring his question. “How did you do it—when Laney was with Cooper? How did you just... *wait?*”

He heaves out a sigh so loud it fills the speakers with static.

“I shouldn’t have waited,” he says. It’s so quiet I barely hear it. “Obviously.”

BY THE TIME I RETURN, an hour and a half has passed, and I've come up with one simple conclusion to my problems: I can't keep doing this.

But I *can* fight for her like Holden said.

When I enter the house, I climb a set of stairs I've never climbed before and knock on the door. "Yeah?" Mia calls out, and I open the door, peek inside. She's sitting up in her bed, covers over her lap, with the phone still to her ear. She taps the screen, probably mute, and says, "What's up?"

"Can I talk to you?"

She nods. "One sec."

She taps her phone again, then says, "I have to go. I'll call you tomorrow."

A bedside lamp casts a dim light across her room, and even though I spent many hours wondering what her room looks like, I never wanted to invade her privacy. It's so different from the rest of the house filled with nothing but tan furniture. Mia's room is full of light pastel colors and pictures, mainly of her and Holden, pinned to the walls. There's a desk, a chest of drawers, a full-length mirror, and a white wrought-iron bed with pale-yellow covers. I sit on the edge of the bed and run a hand over the soft fabric. It matches my new bracelet, and I can't help but smile.

"Okay, bye," she says into the phone, and then taps a button, drops it on her lap. "What's going on?" she asks me. Her walls are gray, so light they almost look white. There are a few items of clothing scattered on the floor, and on the pillow next to her is a laptop. The image of her falling asleep while video chatting with her boyfriend flicks in my mind, and I push it away just as fast.

"So this is your room," I murmur, looking around.

"You've never seen it before?" she asks, and I shake my head. "You didn't even get curious enough to peek in while I was gone last year?" Another head shake. "Huh."

"Have you ever seen my room?" I ask.

"No."

I smile over at her. "You never got curious?"

"Only in my mind," she says, and then lowers her head in embarrassment. "I mean, I never actually snuck a look or anything, just um... imagined." She rolls her eyes as the last word leaves her.

“What did you imagine it to be like?”

“I don’t know.” Her lips purse as she looks around. “Probably nothing like this.”

“I have plain white walls, all wooden furniture. Desk, bed, and three bookshelves.”

“That’s it?”

I nod.

“Clothes on the floor?”

I almost grimace at the thought.

“So, you’re neat?”

“I’m... *organized*. Plus, I spend a lot of time in there, so...”

“So...” she responds, and the elephant in the room hangs in the air between us.

What exactly am I doing here?

I take a second, looking around the room again, while I scratch at my jaw with the backs of my knuckles. That’s when I notice the blank space between a myriad of pictures—*the water tower*.

I heave out a breath, my head falling between my shoulders. “What happened last year? When we were out on your porch... you kissed me.”

“No,” she says. “*You* kissed me.

I bite back my scoff and face her. “You kissed me back, Mia. You can’t deny that.”

She looks down at her lap.

“And then you left, and you didn’t just leave me, but you left that picture, and you told me—”

“I know what I told you,” she interrupts.

I sigh, so fucking close to giving up. “Then let me say it out loud.”

Her throat moves with her swallow.

“You told me you loved me.” Silence stretches between us, and I’ve never hated the sound more than I do now. I ask, because I need to know, “How long have you and your boyfriend been together?”

Her breath catches, and every single one of her muscles seems to lock up. Her gaze lifts, locks on mine. “Almost a year.”

“So, like, right after you left?”

“Yes.”

My entire body slumps, as if any life inside me has left, and I’m nothing but flesh and bone. I wish I were anywhere else, but I’m here, and I need to

know if this fight is futile. I need information, and I only have one source. “How did you meet?”

“He was one of the interns I told you about.” There’s no lilt in her tone. No excitement at speaking about him. There’s *nothing*.

“So, he’s in college?”

“Yes. NYU.”

I nod, my jaw working as my eyes drift shut. I keep them closed. Seconds, minutes, hours. There’s a war brewing in my head, in my heart, and when I open my eyes again, I focus on hers. I suck in a breath. “Is he good to you?”

She looks anywhere but at me, and I know she can hear it—the pain in my voice.

“Like, does he treat you well? Is he kind? Respectful?”

Eyes coated in sadness and covered with heartache, she nods once.

And even though I really, *really* don’t want to know, I have to ask, “Does he love you?”

Her reply is instant. “Yes.”

“Do you love him?”

Her silence gives me all the answers I need.

She loves him.

And she *loved* me.

I fiddle with the clasp of my bracelet, unable to look at her. “I just spoke to Lucas. He’s pretty busy right now with work and taking care of Laney, so he can’t get off until next weekend. It should give me enough time to finish off the barn and then—”

“You’re leaving?”

My pent-up exhale is ragged, and against all better judgment, my eyes gravitate to hers again. The remnants of her tears leave a trail down her cheek, and I don’t know why *she*’s crying. “It’s too fucking hard being here with you, Mia. I just... I can’t take this shit anymore.” Mia and I—we’re teetering on the edge, tiptoeing a tightrope, and there’s only one harness. One of us is going to fall, crash-land, and shatter to pieces. And the other’s going to walk away unharmed.

I’d take the hit.

Again and again.

As long as she walks away happy.

But something has to give.

I get up, done with the conversation, and head for the door.

“Leo, wait.”

I turn to her.

“I told him about you just now... about you staying here.”

“And?”

“And...” She hesitates. “He’s flying in to see me.”

My fists ball. “When?”

“Tomorrow.”

I slam the door between us, my pulse racing, that anger and rage building and building, just like the old me—the one who carried too much hate in my heart. But it’s worse now because I don’t have anywhere to direct that hate.

It’s impossible to hate *her*.

Because she was wrong.

So fucking wrong.

I *can* see love.

And I see it every time I look at her.

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CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

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MIA

LEO'S AWAKE, and he's moving around, and I don't want to get out of bed. I don't want to see him, because I don't know what version of him will greet me.

Last night, when I told Drake that Leo was here and that he'd been here the whole time, he went silent. All I heard at his end was the clicking of keys on a keyboard, and then he told me he'd booked the next flight and to organize the car service to pick him up. So I did. And then as quickly as our conversation spiraled down, it went back to normal. He didn't speak Leo's name. Not once.

I expected him to accuse me of cheating, of lying by omission, and to be fair, he had every right to. But he didn't.

The thing is, if he had questioned those things, I don't know that I would've denied it. Sure, Leo and I hadn't done anything. Not *technically*. Not physically. But emotionally... I was torn. And that—that, I couldn't deny.

Groaning into the pillow, I reach over to the nightstand and check my phone.

Drake: *About to take off. GPS says it's an hour-and-a-half drive from the airport. I'll be there soon.*

I don't bother replying. He's already in the air.

The water pipes clank, and the shower switches on, and I close my eyes, smash my face in the pillow. Again and again.

Minutes pass, and the shower ends.

I wait a half-hour, and then, like the super-creep I am, I tiptoe down the stairs to make sure Leo isn't there. Both the bathroom and his bedroom door are open, and he's not in either one. He's not on the landing. I practically run to the bathroom and take the quickest shower known to man. I should've brought my clothes, but I was in too much of a rush (hysterics) that I didn't think of it. Wrapping a towel around myself, I open the door a crack, and when I feel the coast is clear, I step out. I make it one full step

when Leo appears in the stairway to the kitchen. He's in neatly pressed slacks and a button-down shirt, the sleeves rolled up to his elbows. His tanned forearm is a stark contrast to the bright silver of the laptop he's holding. I freeze, gripping the towel to my collarbone. He stares, unabashed, absolutely no trace of emotion on his face. And because it's quiet, too quiet, and neither of us is moving, I say, "You look nice." I hate myself for saying it, and I wish the world would swallow me whole.

He stares at me, right into my eyes, his brow knitted. He doesn't speak.

I clear my throat, take one more step toward my room. "Are you going out?"

He blinks. "I'm going to church with Holden."

My eyes widen. "You are?"

He steps onto the landing and starts packing some books into a backpack. With his back to me, he asks, "I take it you're not coming?"

I shake my head, even though he can't see me. "Drake... he's um..." I don't like saying Drake's name around Leo. It feels wrong, like lightning cracking behind a rainbow.

Leo turns, slinging the backpack over his shoulder, and, without looking my direction, he says, "I'll see you after then." He's halfway down the stairs before he mumbles, oozing with sarcasm, "Can't wait to meet the guy."

LEO

After last night's conversation with Mia about *faith*, I had every intention of going to church, just to see what it was like. But as Holden pulls into a spot in the parking lot, I start to regret everything. There are people milling around the outskirts of the old building, kids playing, adults talking, and there's just too many of them. And they're all laughing and smiling, and this is the absolute last place I want to be. "That's the pastor," Holden says, pointing to an older man with graying hair. "See the woman next to him?"

"Yeah?"

"Looks like his daughter, right?"

I shrug, saying, "I guess."

"That's his wife," Holden says through a chuckle, and I face him. When his eyes meet mine, he sighs. "You really don't want to be here, do you?"

"I thought I did, dude, but..."

"That's cool," he says, putting the car in reverse. His tires squeal as we peel out of the parking lot, and I almost crack a smile. "So, I'm guessing your mood has something to do with Mia, and therefore, we're not going to talk about it."

"You guessed right."

He doesn't say another word as he drives, and just when I think he's bringing me back to hell, we pass Mia's house and end up at his. I'd only been to his house once before, and it was so he could get his phone. I never got out of the truck.

"Okay," he says, taking the keys out of the ignition and turning to me. "I'm going to be honest; I've never really been in your position before. Like, in love or whatever." He actually looks pained at the word *love*. "But whenever I'm in a shitty-ass mood, I give myself four options."

"Okay..."

"You ready?"

I laugh once. "Hit me."

"Option one: PlayStation. Shoot some virtual people?"

"Eh."

He nods. "Option two: shoot some real guns?"

“Getting closer.”

“Option three,” he says and points to his glove box. I drop the lid, pull out the only thing in there, which is a bag full of gummy bears.

I look over at him. “Sugar high?”

He smiles. “Edibles, my friend.”

“It’s like, nine thirty in the morning...”

“I haven’t slept.” He shrugs. “Ready for option four?”

“I don’t think I am,” I mumble, inspecting the weed gummies.

“Option four is all of the above.”

I crack a smile.

“Option four it is.” He looks toward the house. “My old man’s home, so if he asks, those are just some generic-ass gummy bears. Yo, put them in your pocket, okay?”

I shove them in my pocket and then follow him into the house. Holden’s dad is *huge*. And it’s obvious where Holden gets his build from. That’s about as much as they have in common, at least that I can see in the two minutes I spend with him. He’s quiet, soft-spoken, and polite. All things Holden is not. He leads me toward his room, and then closes the door after us. It smells like teen boy, sex, and dirty socks. It smells like Logan. Not Logan’s room. Just Logan in general. He must pick up on my reaction because he chuckles, then slides open a window, saying, “Brianna stayed here last night. She was gone when I woke up. Thank God.”

Nodding, I look around the room. There’s a queen bed in one corner and a twin in the other. “That was Mia’s bed,” he tells me. “Don’t bother sniffing the pillows. She hasn’t slept in it in years. “

“Shut up.” And also: how did he know?

We down an edible each, kill some losers on the PlayStation, down another edible, and somehow still have the smarts to decide that maybe touching a real-life gun isn’t the best idea.

“Can I ask you something?” Holden says. He’s lying on the floor, on his back, with his legs up against the wall. I’m in Mia’s old bed hugging her pillow. We are *not* high. Probably. “Why are you putting yourself through this hell with Mia? Why not just hook up with some random girl and get over it?”

“Uhh, because that’s not how shit works.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I’ve tried.” Minutes of comfortable silence pass, and I say, “How come you only do the hook-up thing?”

Holden sighs, so long it’s almost as if he’s sucked in all the air in this house just for the one sound. Both legs slide against the wall, counterclockwise, until his entire body is turned to me. “My mom, mainly.” In my blazed mental state, the first thing I think is incest, and that’s so fucking wrong on so many levels. “Mia told you about my mom and her dad, right?”

“Yeah, she did.”

“She got burned pretty fucking bad, and my mom—she’s, like, The Best. Literally. But she fell in love too young, and all those emotions that come with love shouldn’t be in the hands of teenagers. That’s why they took away life sentences for minors who are murderers. Our brains, at this age, can’t handle that shit. But here I am, and so is Mia, and now we’re our parents’ life sentence. Don’t get me wrong; my mom loves me. She loves me way more than I deserve, but she’s thirty-four years old, and she’s never really lived. Mia and I—we’ve been her entire life since she was seventeen, and so... the last thing I want is to repeat history.” I wonder if he realizes just how much of himself he’s revealing to me. “It’d be nice though,” he continues, “to have a girl love me... like, look at me the way Mia looks at you.”

I scoff. “Like she wants to poison me in my sleep? Mia hates me, bro.”

“She doesn’t hate you. I don’t know what’s wrong with her. Maybe it’s the same thing, you know? She’s scared of love because her parents fucked with her head so bad. Or maybe it’s the age thing too. I mean, name anyone who meets that young and falls in love and stays together. I bet you can’t.”

“My sister and her husband.”

His eyes widen, just slightly. “Yeah?”

“Yep. They were fifteen. They’d gone to school together pretty much their entire lives, but my sister’s that shy, quiet bookworm type, and Cam’s always been the popular jock, so they didn’t really run in the same circles.”

Holden sits up now, yawns, and asks, “So how’d they get together?”

“I have little twin brothers and Cameron coached them in baseball. I guess he saw her there. And then...” I lick the dryness off my lips. “And then my mom died, and I don’t really know how or why, but Cameron just started showing up and kind of helping out. He played with us and kept us occupied while she took care of my baby brother. He was only eight months

when Mom died, so... anyway, they're together and married, and yeah, it's not been easy, but it's possible."

He stares off at nothingness, and I think maybe he checked out, didn't hear a word I said. But then he mumbles, "Maybe that's the difference between you and Mia."

"What do you mean?"

"Like, you see how *good* things can turn out, and she only has proof of the bad." His phone goes off with a text, and he's quick to check it. "Shit. It's Mia. She's asking when I'm coming by." He faces me. "Giddy the fuck up, bro. Shit's about to get real."

HOLDEN ASKS, as he pulls out of his house to take the two-minute drive to Mia's, "You ready for this?" By *this*, he means Drake.

"No," I tell him honestly. "Do you even know what he looks like?" In my mind, he looks like *the* Drake, musician and actor.

Holden nods as he loosens his tie, then removes it completely and throws it in the backseat. It joins a bunch of other clothes, a mix of girls' and guys'. I'd forgotten we were still in our church clothes. "He looks like Lord Farquaad."

I stifle my chuckle. "Shut up."

"Miniature-lookin' dude, square head, shoulder-length black hair and fucked-up bangs," he jokes.

I picture a real-life version of the Shrek character and bust out a laugh.

Holden laughs with me and then squares his shoulders, takes in a huge breath. "Nah, to be honest, he kind of looks like you. Like a preppy, Walmart version of you." He ruffles my hair. "Handsome motherfucker."

I try to resetttle my hair. "You're an idiot."

Silence passes, and then he says, "Look, I know we're friends—you and me—and I hope you don't take it personally if I'm nice to the guy."

Turning to him, I shake my head.

"It's just..." He shrugs. "Mia's my girl, you know?"

"I get it, man."

"And this guy means something to her, so..."

"Don't even worry about it."

"Yeah?" He glances at me quickly before focusing on the road again. "Because I really like this little bromance thing we have going." He sits

taller, clearing his throat. “Anyway, did you see the rack on the pastor’s wife? Got ‘em last year. What I wouldn’t give...”

“There’s something wrong with you, dude.”

He blows me a kiss. “Love me anyway.”

We pull into the driveway, and he cuts the engine, then turns to me. “In all seriousness, do I need to be ready for a fight or something? Because you *could* take him... if you wanted to.”

I shake my head. “I’m not going to fight him.”

“Good,” he says, opening the door. “My face is too fucking pretty to be taking blows for your pathetic, love-sick ass.”

DRAKE... is... wearing a sweater vest.

That’s the first thing I notice.

The second is that he’s sitting on the kitchen island with Mia standing between his legs. They both turn to us as we stop just inside the door, and Drake hops off the counter, approaching us with a blindingly fake smile and a hand out in front of him. “Holden, man, it’s good to finally meet you.”

I step to the side so Holden can shake his hand. “Yeah, bro, you too.”

I cross my arms, stare at Mia—the *fake* Mia with the fancy clothes and the makeup and roll my eyes. She notices, but she doesn’t react.

“And you’re Leo.” Drake’s in front of me, his hand out, and I look down at it... at hands that have touched Mia in ways I’ve only ever dreamed of.

I suck in air through my nose.

Inside me, something cracks, *detonates*.

Holden whispers, “Jesus Christ.”

“I can’t.” I look at Mia and shrug. “Sorry.” *I’m not*. I shove past Drake and make my way upstairs.

“Nice guy,” Drake cracks.

“Fuck off,” I murmur.

“Leo!” Mia yells, and I can hear the click-clack of her lying liar heels following after me. I try to shut my door, but she’s right there, pushing it back open.

I shrug out of my shirt just as she shouts, “What is wrong with you?” Then slams the door behind her.

I spin to her. “Me?” I say, a hell of a lot quieter than her. “What’s wrong with you, Mia? Who the fuck are you right now?”

“Shut up!” she whispers, patting down her perfectly straightened hair.

I give myself a moment to breathe, calm the fuck down, and then take her in from head to toe. She’s pressed against the door, arms stiff at her sides, painted red lips twisted in a snarl. She’s in a low-cut, thin-strapped top tucked into a flowy skirt, and everything is positioned just right. And then it hits me. “You haven’t let him touch you, have you?” I close in on her, so close I can feel her every exhale warm my flesh.

Eyes narrowed, she mumbles, “What are you talking about?”

I reach up, finger the ends of her hair. “Your hair’s perfect. Your clothes too.” I shrug. “I’m just saying, if you were my girl and I hadn’t seen you in weeks, I’d have fucking *ravaged* you the minute I saw you.”

Her eyes dip to my bare stomach, then right back up. She tries to hide her reaction, her lust, but I see it there, hidden beneath her façade.

“I don’t see why you have to change your clothes,” I tell her. “I think you look hot—”

“You don’t have to like my clothes,” she cuts in, and there’s a tiny little hint of a smirk on her lips. She runs a finger across my collarbone, her eyes never leaving mine. Then she pushes a finger into my chest. “I’m not wearing them for you. You—you...”

I quirk an eyebrow. “I’m a... what?”

Her cheeks flame red, and she whispers, as if it hurts to say, “Little bitch.”

I don’t stifle my laugh in time. “Such a dirty word from such a pure, innocent mouth.”

“Shut up,” she laughs, shoving my shoulder. I grasp her wrist, keep her hand on my bare chest. *She’s* the one who chooses to lower it, all the way until her palm’s flat against my stomach. My cock stirs when her eyes meet mine, and she doesn’t look away.

Hmm. She wants to play. “I like some of your clothes,” I tell her, and I’m removing my belt, shifting closer until our fronts are practically touching. Then I dip my head, my mouth to her ear. “I like those heels.” Her breath hitches, and I move closer again, my hand going to her waist. “The first night you were here, when you slept in my bed, I was dreaming about them.” My words are low, my mouth so close to her skin I’m sure she can

feel the vibration of my voice. “You. In your heels. Nothing else. While I fucked you so hard against this very door that the entire house shook.”

A whimper. *Perfect.*

I press my lips to her neck before letting my smile spread. One hand on her hip, the other in her hair, I murmur, “Should we?”

“Leo.”

“Think they’d hear us?”

She moans, her head tilting to the side, giving me access. Giving me permission. I part my lips, kiss a trail from her collarbone to her neck, up to her jaw, where I bite gently, and she rewards me with another sound of pleasure. Fuck, I love her like this. At my mercy. I have her trapped against the door now, my erection pressed into her, and she hasn’t pushed me away, hasn’t asked me to stop. I rear back, fist a handful of hair, and pull.

She bites down on her bottom lip to stop the groan, but I hear it. I fucking *feel* it. My dick twitches between us, and with her neck craned, her lust-filled eyes are on mine again. “Ever since I saw you in those heels and had that dream, that’s what I use to get off every night.” She exhales through her nose, her lips pressed tight, her pulse beating wildly in the dip of her collarbone. “But I think I have a new fantasy now,” I tell her, running my thumb over her bright red lips. “Your lipstick. This exact shade. Smeared all over my cock.”

Her eyes close, and they stay that way, and just when I think she’s about to end this little game, her lips part, taking my thumb into her mouth, sucking, tongue swirling. It’s such an unexpected move, that my knees buckle beneath me and I almost blow my load.

Almost.

“Jesus, *fuck*, Mia,” I groan into her shoulder. I have to steady myself with my forearm on the door, right above her head, while she pulls back slowly, her teeth gliding against my thumb, and I imagine her mouth lower, right where I want it to be. I unzip my slacks, shove a hand down there, and start easing the pressure she caused. Her eyes trail from my pumping hand, up my torso, so fucking slow, it’s torturous. And when her eyes lock on mine, I realize that ever since she kissed me last year, I’ve compared every girl I’ve been with to her. And whenever I sleep with them, I close my eyes, and I pretend it’s Mia, because it’s the only way I can get off. I tell her all of this—it’s part of the game. And when her eyes widen, fill with something other than lust, I’m quick to realize I’m about to be annihilated.

“You said you haven’t dated in a year,’ she says, pushing me away.

I run both hands through my hair, frustrated. I was so close. To what? I don’t fucking know. “I haven’t *dated*.”

“So, you just sleep around?” There’s accusation in her tone, and she has no right.

I keep my narrowed eyes on hers. “You’re not allowed to be pissed about that.”

“I’m allowed to feel however I want to feel.”

“Mia, your *boyfriend* is right outside this fucking door!” I whisper-yell, pointing to the kitchen, and I don’t know why I’m keeping my voice down. Why the fuck am I protecting her?

She’s shaking her head, looking down at the floor. “Lucky I didn’t break up with him when you told me to,” she says, her voice cracking as she looks up at me, eyes filled with unshed tears. “Maybe I’d be just another one of those girls you sleep with who means nothing.”

“You know that’s not what you are to me, Mia. You’re being pathetic right now.”

She scoffs. “I’m *pathetic*? No, Leo. What *would’ve* been pathetic is if I did break up with him, and you and I—” she air quotes “—dated.” She pushes off the door and past me, trying to get distance. “I’d be in New York, and you’d be here, and who knows what you’d get up to while I wasn’t around.”

I roll my eyes. “You’re so full of shit. You know I wouldn’t do that to you.”

“I can’t trust what you would or wouldn’t do for me!” she snaps. “Hasn’t that been proven?”

“That’s not fair, Mia,” I mumble, change the subject because it hurts too much to go back *there*. “You don’t worry about *him* messing around on you while you’re away for the summer?”

“No,” she’s quick to answer. “I don’t.”

I scoff. “Maybe because he’s a giant fucking nerd who wears sweater vests.”

Everything stops in that moment.

Mia stops moving.

My heart stops beating.

Her tears stop falling.

My breaths stop coming.

Then her lips part, her exhale the only sound in the room. She starts to speak, and then stops, and then lets it all out—though I wish she didn't. “You sound just like your brothers, Leo.” She smiles, but it's sad. “And I don't like it.”

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CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

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MIA

DRAKE and I have dated for almost a year.

Dated.

As in, we go on dates, and that's basically as far as it goes. We don't spend entire days together, or *nights*, for that matter, and so the fact that he's here and we have zero plans of what to do is... weird. And intimidating. And he keeps looking at me sideways as if he's waiting for something, and I don't know what it is. An admission of my guilt?

Drake lives in student housing with three roommates, so we don't spend a lot of time alone. And he's into tech. We don't even have a flat-screen TV. Or Wi-Fi.

I can't even drive us into town because Leo took the keys to my grandpa's truck when he left with Holden right after our little... whatever that was. For the entire day, Drake and I have done nothing but sit. Side by side. On the couch. Holding hands. For *hours*.

We went through Papa's DVD collection and finally settled on *Rocky*. Then we watched *Rocky II*. Now we're on to *Shawshank Redemption*, one of Papa's favorites. I'm not really watching, though, and I doubt Drake is either.

He runs his thumb along the inside of my wrist, his thumb catching on the clasp of the pale-yellow bracelet. He lifts my hand to get a closer look. "What's this?"

"It's... nothing," I say, covering it with my other hand.

"It's, like, not what you normally wear. Where's your real jewelry?"

"Up in my room," I tell him. I hadn't bothered to wear any of it, but I did make an effort with the "fancy" clothes and makeup. It's the only version of me he knows.

Drake puts his arm around my shoulders and pulls me closer until my head's on his chest. I close my eyes, wish for butterflies. They never come. Even when I saw him for the first time in weeks, they didn't make an appearance—treacherous little things.

It's because he's safe, I try to convince myself. And that safety is exactly what I need.

When the credits begin to roll, Drake releases a long breath, and I wait for the bomb to drop. “What does your room look like?”

It burns my throat when I swallow. “Well, you’ll see it tonight,” I tell him, pulling my legs beneath me and turning my body toward him. “I’ll sleep in Papa’s bed. You can stay there.”

He eyes me sideways, the way he’s been doing all dang day. “What did you and Leo talk about earlier? In his room?”

I stand quickly. “Are you hungry? I can make dinner.” I start walking to the kitchen. “I don’t know what we have, but I’m sure I can put something together.”

“Did you not hear my question?” he asks, watching me from the couch.

After opening the fridge, I scan the items in there and give him a weak, “Huh?”

“Leo,” Drake deadpans, getting up to stand beside me. “What’s with him?”

“I don’t know.” I shrug.

“He’s kind of a dick, Mia.”

I go back to scanning the contents of the fridge. “I should be able to make a basic pasta—”

“Why are you protecting him?” Drake spits. “Do you still have feelings for him?”

“No!” It’s a lie. A big, fat, giant lie. “But he’s my friend, so I don’t want to speak badly of him, especially behind his back.” Besides, I know how that feels, and it sucks.

Drake’s shoulders slump, and he closes the fridge, takes both my hands in his. After a sigh, he tells me, “You’re too good a person, Mia.” He moves forward, runs the tip of his nose along my jaw and up to my ear. “That’s why I love you; you know that?”

It’s not the first time he’s said it, and I really, *really* wish I could say it back. He lets go of my hands, only to grab my waist, and then he’s pushing me gently up against the fridge. His mouth parts on my neck, kissing me there, and I reach up, grasp handfuls of his hair.

When my eyes close, I see Leo.

I force them open.

And... I see Leo.

Standing by the front door with my best friend next to him, Leo’s looking down at the floor with his hands shoved in his pockets. He won’t

look up. He's already seen enough.

I push against Drake's chest. "Hey..."

Drake turns to them before adjusting the front of his shorts. "Sorry. Didn't hear you come in."

Holden looks pissed, and Leo... I don't even know what his reaction is. I swallow, nerves swimming through me like a swarm of bees stinging the inside of my flesh. Finally, Leo looks up, his eyes half-hooded, and he starts for the stairs. "We're just grabbing my mattress," he says. "I'll take it out to the barn. Give you guys some privacy." Holden follows behind him, his glare enough to darken the room.

"You don't have to do that," I say, at the same time Drake mumbles, "Appreciate it."

Holden scoffs but doesn't say anything more. They're up the stairs and out of view when I hear voices coming from outside. I make my way to the door and see two cars, two girls.

The ache in my chest forces my eyes to shut tight. Not just because I don't want to see what I'm seeing, but because I need to hide the sudden tears. Quick. Because Drake is right behind me, his front pressed to my back. His hands are on my waist again, his mouth pressing on my bare shoulder. Instinctively, I reach up, never once taking my eyes off the girls, and run a hand through his hair. It's Brianna, Holden's date from last night, and another girl... and this girl is everything I'm not. She oozes sex appeal in a way I'll never be able to, and she's here.

For Leo.

She's tall, and she's tanned, and her hair's the perfect shade of auburn I've always wanted. Her jeans are tight, her thin-strapped tank even tighter. She has curves upon curves and the kind of laugh that comes with confidence.

I bet she was never called a fat, brace-face heifer.

"Can you move?" Holden snaps. And then adds a, "Please."

Drake pulls me back and right into his chest, and I stand there, with my boyfriend's arms wrapped around me, feeling like an outsider in my own home.

I lower my lashes, let a single tear escape, and when I look up, there's nothing but dull blue eyes behind an ocean of anguish.

"Show me your room, babe," Drake says, loud enough for everyone to hear.

I keep my eyes on Leo and give him the same treatment he once offered me.

I give him silence.

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CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

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MIA

DRAKE and I don't go up to my room. I make us dinner, we watch another movie, and then he tells me he's tired. I tell *him* that it would be disrespectful to my grandpa if we slept in the same bed under his roof without his knowing. And Drake, being Drake, accepts this for what it is: another giant lie to go with all the others.

I LIE in Papa's bed, my eyes wide, staring up at the ceiling. Behind the bed is a window, and through the window are their voices. Their laughter. All four of them. Music plays, the bass just loud enough to rattle my brain and drive me insane.

Slowly.

Surely.

I fist a handful of blankets when I hear Leo's voice so loud and unrestrained. I toss. I turn. Over and over until my body and the sheets resemble a sushi roll. I get out of bed, fix the covers, and then dive back in.

Thump, thump.

Thump, thump.

A girl squeals and Holden hollers, and I look at the clock on the nightstand. It's close to midnight. If we had neighbors, they'd be pissed this was happening on a Sunday night. If I were petty, I'd call the cops. If I didn't feel pathetic dressed in nothing but an oversized shirt and underwear, I'd go out there and tell them to shut the heck up.

I'm not confident enough to do any of those things, so instead, I lie there, and I try to take my mind away to another time.

When we were little, like seven or eight, Holden and I found an injured baby squirrel on the side of the road. We were on our bikes, and it was getting dark out, so I told him to just let it be. But he couldn't. He picked it up and cradled it like a football all the way back to his house. He showed his parents, and at first, they were annoyed. Squirrels were everywhere, and most of the farmers considered them a nuisance, and then there was their son, bringing one into their home. It only took one look at Holden's face,

the sadness in his eyes, for his parents to cave. They put it in a cardboard box lined with towels and told us they'd take care of it in the morning. I slept in his room that night, on the spare bed opposite his. He was already snoring when I heard his parents talking. Tammy, his mom, said that she was proud to be raising a boy with so much compassion, and his father agreed. I didn't know what compassion meant. When I woke up the next morning, I asked Tammy for the definition.

Compassion: sympathetic pity and concern for the sufferings or misfortunes of others.

"Holden likes to take things that are broken, or injured, or even sad, and he likes to fix them," Tammy told me.

I remember looking at up at her, my head tilted. "Is that why he likes me?"

It's an hour later when the music kicks up in volume, along with murmured voices. A light shines through the window, indicating the barn door's open. I sit up a little, my ears straining to hear. A moment later, a car door opens and closes, and then another. The engine starts, and then tires spin on loose gravel. The light from the barn dims, and I listen closer, pray harder. There were two cars in the driveway, and only one has left.

I wait.

And I wait.

And I wait.

And then I have enough of waiting, and I get up, light on my feet, and move to the living room where I peek through the curtains. Holden's car is gone. A stranger's car is still here.

The reality of what's happening slams into my chest, and my stomach turns at the thought. I've never tasted bitterness as sour as the bile in my throat, and I can't breathe through the pain, through the heartache. I shuffle back to bed, my heart by my feet, and crawl under the covers. The thumping of the bass continues, but now it's doubled in volume. It rattles the walls, shakes the windows, and suddenly, all those emotions I'd felt only a minute ago are replaced with a single one: *rage*.

I open my grandpa's closet and unlock the safe where he keeps a set of spare keys. I don't bother being quiet as I slip outside, my hands shaking, angry tears falling fast and free. I unlock the barn door, my eyes instantly closing as I wince at the loudness of the music blaring.

And then I open my eyes.

And I wish I hadn't.

Leo's sitting on a couch with the girl straddling his lap, her knees on either side. They've both stripped down to their bottoms, their tops discarded on the floor beside them. His large hands—hands I've fantasized about—are on her butt, his grip so tight his fingers are white. She grinds on him, her head thrown back, the ends of her perfect auburn hair gliding against his knees every time she moves. One of her hands is in his hair, tugging, the other using his broad shoulder for balance. Leo glides a hand up to the small of her back, spreading his fingers, his thumb stroking along the clasp of her bra. His entire hand spans her tiny waist, and I know I should look away.

But I can't.

Because I know, deep down, a part of me needs to see this.

Needs to *own* this.

So I can finally start to pick up the shattered pieces of the heart he broke all those years ago.

I make it to the stereo and switch it off. "Get out!" I seethe.

"Shit! Get off!" Leo huffs, pushing the girl off his lap. He picks up her tank and hands it to her, and—as self-destructive as it is—I watch her put on her top, and then scramble for her purse, her keys, her shoes. When she's done, Leo leads her out the door with his hand on her elbow. I wait just inside, my arms crossed, a tornado of emotions twisting inside me, building higher and higher, coming out in the form of tears too heated to ignore. The car starts, headlights shine and then disappear, and a moment later, Leo enters the barn, slamming the door behind him. He opens his mouth to speak, but I beat him to it. "How fucking dare you!"

"How dare I *what*, Mia?" he spits.

"Disrespect me like this!"

"Like what?!" he shouts, closing in on me. I back away until I'm pressed against a set of lockers. He's so close I can feel every one of his heated breaths along the top of my head. "Your boyfriend's sleeping in your bed right now, so don't—"

“I know that!” I cut in, my heart pumping so fast, I can barely breathe.

“Then why the fuck are you here!” he roars, his closed fist slamming against the metal right beside my head.

I jerk at the sudden sound, the sudden movement, and shriek in fear, my hands covering my face.

“Fuck, I’m sorry, baby,” he whispers in a rush, and his words are filled with so much pain and regret that when he cradles my head to his chest, I let him. “I’m so sorry.” I’m shaking in his arms, unable to catch my breath, and I don’t know if it’s his pulse I can hear or mine, but it’s so loud, so deafening. His entire body envelopes mine, filling all the empty spaces with warmth. “I’m sorry,” he says again, his face nuzzled in my neck. “I never wanted to be like this, Mia... not with you.” He holds me tighter, and I let out a whimper—the first sound I’ve made since he put his hands on me.

And then it’s suddenly cold, and he’s moving away, the heels of his palms digging into his eyes. He laughs once, but it’s sad, and it’s empty. “Do you think this is easy on me, Mia?” He can barely get the words out.

I try to stand taller on already weak legs and drop my hands to my sides.

His voice rises when he says, “It’s fucking killing me to have to see you with another guy! To see the way he touches you! The way he puts his hands all over you! The way he fucking *kisses* you!” Every word spat is filled with venom, and his face twists with torment. “It’s destroying me, Mia! And I don’t know how the fuck you can’t see that!” His breaths are ragged, harsh against the stillness around us. “You were always mine!” he yells, then takes a moment to compose himself. “In my head”—he points to his temple, his eyes never leaving mine—“and in my heart”—his palm flattens on his chest—“you were always *mine*.” He inhales a sharp breath. “Since I was thirteen years old. Five fucking years. Every summer I spent with you, and every single day in between, I’ve been *in love with you*, Mia!” His voice breaks. “It’s always been you!”

My chest rises and falls with every breath, my pulse beating to the rhythm of every word he’s just said. Every truth he’s just declared. And every lie left unspoken.

“And now I’m standing here, pouring my fucking heart out to you, and you can’t say shit!”

“Shut up!” I hiss.

He laughs, his eyes wide in disbelief. “I can’t fucking take this—” That’s as far as he gets before I cover his mouth with mine. He’s quick to find my waist, to curl those large hands around my frame, while I stand on my toes, trying to reach every single part of him. I touch him everywhere, gliding my hands over his bare shoulders, chest, stomach, and back up again. I pull on his hair to separate our mouths, needing to fill my lungs with their life source. I gasp for air while his lips find my neck, sucking, biting, teasing. His hands move up my sides, and when his thumbs stroke the tips of my breasts through my top, I release a guttural moan that has my head throwing back in pleasure. His lips curve against my skin. “So fucking perfect,” he whispers.

I find his mouth again, my tongue sliding against his lips, begging for entrance, and when he gifts me with the taste of him, I almost fall apart in his arms. He crouches down so he can lift the bottom of my shirt. He doesn’t remove it. His hands, rough and warm, explore every inch of skin between my hip and my breast, and I subconsciously arch my back, needing his touch, offering myself to him. He pulls away, just an inch. “Where the fuck is your boyfriend now?” he murmurs, his dark, dark eyes searching mine.

“Stop talking.” I kiss him again, hands splayed against his stomach, and this time—it’s his turn to moan. It comes from deep in his throat, and it’s so fucking sexy, I feel the effects of that sound thrum against my core. And then his hands are on my ass, squeezing hard, and I’m being lifted in the air, my legs folded around him, my arms around his neck, and I don’t stop kissing him. Not for a second. I could die in his kiss. And live happily in my death. “Off,” he orders, tugging on my shirt, right before he drops me down on the mattress. I drop like a rag doll and steady myself. He’s standing in front of me, every perfect inch of him. My eyes are level with the bulge trapped in his jeans, and I reach out, undo the button, then lower his zipper. I start to tug down, but he grasps my wrist, tight, stopping me from going any further. When I look up, his eyes are half-hooded as he stares down at me, his nostrils flaring, his jaw set. He motions to my chest. “Off.”

I hesitate a moment and look around the room. The only light comes from a lamp next to the couch, and so it’s dark enough that he won’t see the stretch marks marring my hips.

“Mia,” he deadpans, and he’s losing his patience. He has a hand inside his boxer shorts, stroking his length. “Off.” It’s not an order this time. It’s a plea.

Slowly, self-consciously, I lift my shirt over my head and expose myself to him. His reaction is instant. His eyes widen, just a tad, and he bites down on his lip. I close my eyes for only one second, trying to regain some strength, and when I open them again, he’s shrugging out of his jeans, his erection tenting his boxers. It’s so fucking close, I could move my mouth one inch forward and taste him through the fabric. “Don’t,” he warns, and he must sense what I’m thinking. He cups the side of my face, holding my head up so my eyes focus on his. “You’re too fucking pure for that,” he murmurs, and then his lips tick up at the corners. “For *now*.”

I don’t want to be pure, I don’t say. I want him to grab the back of my head and use me for his pleasure. I want to be dirty, filthy, vile.

His.

He climbs on top of me, his weight held up by his forearm. His mouth finds my neck while his hand glides up my side. His kisses leave a trail of wetness down my chest, and he’s so fucking close. His hand covers my breast, gently touching, exploring, and I lift my knees, squeeze my legs together, try to create friction to ease out my release.

He’s so slow.

So methodical.

I close my eyes, waiting, waiting.

And then his mouth is on my nipple, tasting, teasing, and I jerk in response, my entire body in flames. My legs shake, toes curl, as I reach up, my fingers curling in his hair. “Oh, god,” I whisper, and his mouth moves from one breast to the other. I’m so hot, so turned on, I fear that I could combust. Right here. Right now. But then I feel the backs of his fingers slide down my stomach and tease at the waistband of my underwear. I lift my head, look down at him, but he’s already watching me, his tongue swirling around my pointed flesh. Then he parts his lips, taking my breast in his mouth, and then slowly, slowly, drags his teeth back, biting gently. My core pulses, releasing evidence of my pleasure, and then his hand lowers, past the smattering of hair, and he says, almost undoing me completely, “Spread those perfect fucking legs for me, baby.”

“Oh, god,” I breathe out, and my knees fall apart, and I’m open. To him. *For him.*

He moans against my breast when he feels how wet he's made me. And then he uses that wetness and presses the tip of his finger to separate my folds, the length of two fingers sliding against my clit. "Leo," I beg, holding him to me. "I can't take much more."

"You'll take it all," he says, so lazy and free.

I plead with him, "Kiss me!"

And so he does. He kisses me like a man dying of thirst, and I'm his oasis. I try to reach down, to touch him, skin on skin, to circle my fingers around his cock and return the pleasure he's giving me. He's too tall, and I can't reach, and he says against my mouth, pulling his hips away, "You first, Mia."

I'm nothing but shallow breaths and sweat and fire. And he won't stop teasing, and I can't stop thrusting because I need more, more, more, and I'm so close to the edge, I beg, "Please, Leo."

He smiles against my mouth, right before his fingers slide inside me. I gasp, the sudden pain so extreme it catches my breath and locks up every muscle. I don't know if it's a loud cry or a whimper that comes out of me. Tears prick my eyes from the sharpness of the ache between my legs, and before I can stop them, they're out, and they're free, and Leo is watching me, his fingers stilled, but deep inside. "Mia," he breathes out, and there's no color in his face. Eyes wide, he slowly, carefully, pulls out of me, and I choke on a sob, on my fear and shame. He looks down at his fingers, the tips smeared with my pleasure mixed with innocence. It's not a lot of blood, but it's enough for him to know, and he looks up at me, his lips parted. Not a single breath leaves him in the seconds I stare at him. And then he's up, moving so fast, my pathetic eyes can't track him. He's at the kitchen sink, washing my filth off his fingers. "You should've fucking told me, Mia!" he yells over his shoulder.

I pull my knees up to my chest, suddenly too exposed, and murmur, "You never asked."

"You've been with your boyfriend for a year!" he accuses, standing in front of me again, his hands on his hips. "I just assumed..."

I don't hear anything else he says because my mind catches on the word *boyfriend*, and it stays there, mocking me, ridiculing me, reminding me of my sins. I pick up my shirt and shrug it back on. My legs wobble when I first stand on them, and my feet are lead. Every step feels like a thud against the floorboards. "*We'd all hear that fat heifer coming up the*

stairs!” It’s Logan’s voice I hear—his description of me climbing the stairs. My tears feel like loose pieces of wood from the dock as I stood beneath it, cracking, splintering, raining down on me.

“Mia, hey.” Leo’s mouth is at my ear when he holds me from behind, his arms wrapped tightly around me. “I’m sorry I yelled at you. *Again*. I’m just...” He forcibly turns me to him and cradles my face, tilting my head back. His thumbs swipe at the tears, one after the other. “I’m just scared,” he says. “Because I don’t know what this means—you being here and us... doing *this*.”

I push down the lump in my throat. “I don’t know, either,” I mumble.

His hold on me loosens. “So what? You’re going to go back to *him*, crawl into bed beside him and pretend like you and me—”

“No, Leo. We’re not even sleeping in the same bed.”

His gaze searches mine, and then he blinks, his eyes widening as if his vision’s suddenly clear. I wonder if he sees the same things *I feel*: dirty, filthy, vile. He holds me closer. “I’ll fight him for you, if that’s what it takes.

“You don’t have to do that, Leo.”

“Why not?”

I rear back and sigh—the sound of finally resigning to years and years of torment and heartache. “Because you’ve already won.” It kills me to push him away. “I have to go.”

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

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MIA

THE SUN'S just beginning to rise when I force my eyes open and climb out of Papa's bed. I send Drake a text telling him that I'm going out to grab something for breakfast, then change quickly and step outside. The morning air is crisp against my nostrils, and it agitates my lungs, heightening my already upset mood. It only takes twenty minutes to walk to Holden's house. Even though his dad might already be up and working, I don't knock on the front door. Instead, I walk around the side and practically slam a closed fist on his bedroom window. The curtains part and a half-asleep, shirtless Holden appears. Behind him is Brianna, holding the covers to her chest. I roll my eyes and mouth, "I need to talk to you."

He nods, holds up a finger, and I march back to the front of the house. It doesn't take long for Holden to come out, dressed in gray sweats and an athletic tee. I move us away from the door and into his front yard. "Does your dad know you have a girl in the house?"

His eyes squint against the bright sunlight. "Is that why you're here?" he asks, his voice cracking from lack of use.

I realize I'm crossing my arms, my stance ready for combat. I try to relax, but agitation crawls beneath my flesh, biting at my insides. "Why'd you bring her to the house?"

"Who?"

I shake my head, my lips pursing. "You know who, Holden. Don't play dumb."

"Why do you care?" he asks, shoving his hands in his pockets. "Was your boyfriend not paying you enough attention?"

"Fuck you."

"No, fuck you, Mia," he spits, and it's the first time he's ever spoken to me like this.

I lean forward, my eyes wide. "I'm sorry, what did you just say?"

He rears back. "So you can dish it out, but you can't take it?" He scoffs. "Classic Mia."

"Shut up."

"No."

“Yes!”

“No!”

“Yes!”

He shakes his head at me. “We’re not kids anymore, Mia Mac,” he says, and there’s a sadness in his voice that has me dropping my guard. “The choices we make—they’re irreversible, and they don’t just affect us, they —”

The front door opens behind him, and Brianna appears. Holden doesn’t take his eyes off me.

“Is everything okay?” she asks.

“Yeah,” Holden calls out. “Go back to bed. I’ll be there... whenever.”

Brianna looks between us, then closes the door, does as she’s told. “Good, obedient little girl you have there,” I quip.

Holden blows out a breath. And then his head tilts to one side, his eyes taking me in. “I like you better when you dress like this.”

“Haggard?” I ask, one eyebrow quirked.

He laughs once. “Come on.” He takes my elbow, leads me to the backyard and toward the playhouse his dad had built us when we were kids. It used to seem so big, and now? Now, I’ve outgrown it. Like so many things when it comes to Holden and me.

Holden has to hunch down all the way to get through the door, and I duck, following after him. We sit against one of the walls, me with my legs crossed and his outstretched. “How long do you think it’s been since we’ve been in here?”

“Years,” he deadpans. “It feels like a lifetime ago.”

I run my finger along the window sill, where we carved in our names like we used to do everywhere. *Holden + Mia*.

“You know, last year, when you left...” Holden says, and I look over at him. “I’d go by the house, just to check in on your grandpa. It was every couple of days in the beginning, and then it became daily, and I got to know him.”

“My grandpa?” I ask incredulously.

“No, you dumbass. Leo!”

“Oh.”

“He didn’t talk a lot at first. I’d be doing all the talking, but I realized that he didn’t really have a lot to say. He listened. A lot. And when he did

talk, he opened up, and when he opened up, you had no choice but to hear him.”

A heaviness forms in my chest, and I go back to tracing the letters of our names.

“He told me everything, Mia. About all the summers you spent together, about waking up and sneaking off on your bikes to go to the water tower. The music you’d play, the conversations you’d have...”

I fill my lungs with their life source.

“But he also told me about...”

Tears fill my eyes instantly, and I wish, pray... God, *please no*.

“He told me about that last night you were there... on their lake, about how—”

“Stop,” I whisper.

“He cried, Mia... when he was telling me. And guys like us, we don’t fucking cry. Especially to each other. It devastated him, and I—”

I turn to him, not hiding my emotions. “Then how do you think I feel?” I whisper-yell. “That was the most humiliating, most mortifying experience of my life!”

“Is that why you won’t give him a chance, because—”

“No,” I huff out. “That’s not why!”

Holden stares at me, his eyes shifting from side to side, trying to read me, trying to do the impossible. I’ve built so many walls, layers upon layers of bricks so high no one can get to me. No one can *see* me.

“Then why do you—” he shouts, then groans in frustration, the heel of his palm rubbing at his temple. “It’s not fair to him, you inviting your boyfriend—”

“I didn’t invite him.”

“—and rubbing it in his face like that!”

“Whose side are you on?” I demand.

Holden drops his head between his shoulders. “I didn’t know there were sides, Mia. But Leo cares about you. I’m pretty sure he’s insanely in love with you, and I care about you, too, and I want what’s best for you.”

“And you think Leo’s it?” I almost sneer.

He looks up at me now. “Yeah, Mia. I do.”

Silence passes between us, and I can see it now, a lifetime of friendship thrown away over something he’ll never understand. “You don’t know anything,” I whisper, my throat too tight to speak any louder. He stays quiet

while a million thoughts fly through my mind, and I search and search for a way out of this conversation, out of this emotional hell. And the only thing I can come up with is: “I love him, too, you know... it’s not one-sided.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

A sob erupts from my chest, and Holden moves closer, his arm going around my shoulders. Perfect, sympathetic Holden and his broken little toy. I wipe away the tears with the back of my hand, staring down at my lap, because looking at him—knowing that someone else is there to hear my deepest, darkest thoughts, my secrets, my turmoil—it’s too much. “Every time Leo kisses me, or he touches me, or even looks at me...” I pause, try to gather my thoughts. “I think about how easy it would be to give in to him. To *us*. And I close my eyes, and for a second, I picture my life with him—this perfect life that would last forever. Marriage. Kids. All of it.” I take a breath, and then another. “But it only lasts a second. Because the next thing I see is me as the pathetic, insecure, fourteen-year-old girl, shivering in the cold water of that lake hearing all the horrible things his brothers are saying about me, realizing how they feel—”

“Mia...” he sighs out, and he holds the back of my head to his chest, taking in my pain and my heartbreak like he’s always done.

“And I can forgive him for that. I *have* forgiven him.” I rear back and look up at him. “But I can never step foot on that property again. I can never look his brothers in the eyes and not feel how they made me feel back then. I get sick, Holden. *Physically sick*.”

Holden’s eyes are clouded, red and raw from having to hear his best friend’s downfall.

“I know that I’ll never feel with anyone else what I feel for him. For the rest of my life. And if I ever find someone, I know, deep down, that I’ll be settling. But... Leo and I—we can’t be together, because being together means him having to choose between his family and me, and I could never, *ever*, make him choose.”

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

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LEO

AWKWARD.

It's the only word that comes to mind as Drake stands in front of me. I try not to make eye contact and fill my second glass of water while he makes small talk as if this is all completely fucking normal.

I'd just come back from my run and walked into the house, thinking everyone would still be asleep.

He was sitting at the kitchen island, on his phone, wearing silk boxers, *nothing else*.

He still hasn't put on any more clothes.

"There's this really cool app for Gen Zs that let you track stocks and crypto-currency," he tells me.

Cool story. Oh! By the way, I had my fingers deep in your girl's pussy last night.

Obviously, I don't say that, but it would be fucking rad if I did. Instead, I nod, lick the water off my lips, and refill the glass.

"You know..." he says, and I wish I could punch him in the throat just to shut him up. "They say you shouldn't drink too much water too fast after exercise. Especially in the heat."

"Have you tried calling Mia?" I ask. "There aren't a lot of places around here to get food, so..."

He shrugs. "I tried. Cell service is so bad here. Fucking hick town."

My eyebrows rise.

"No offense." His eyes widen. "Don't tell Mia I said that."

I lift my chin. "Uh-huh."

My phone alerts me to a text, and I read it quickly.

Lucas: *Laney has a last-minute appointment on Saturday so I can't come to you, but Dad said he's free. Is that cool?*

I reply:

Leo: *Yep. All good.*

“So...” Drake says, and I lift my eyes to his. “Mia mentioned that you were here to study or something...”

“Something.”

“What are your career plans?”

“Law enforcement.”

He hisses a breath in through his teeth and clucks his tongue. “You know the pay for law enforcement’s very subpar,” he says, a cocky lilt in his tone while he adjusts the Rolex on his wrist.

I honestly can’t believe Mia chose *this guy*. I put the glass to my lips, stare him down. I could take him. Now that I see him shirtless, I’m positive of it. I’m also positive, thanks to his silky drawers, that I have a bigger dick, but that’s irrelevant. *Maybe*.

He eyes me for longer than I’m comfortable with, and then he looks down, mumbles, “Nice bracelet.” I adjust the pale-yellow band, knowing *exactly* why he said it. Last night, when Mia came into the barn, she was still wearing hers. He must’ve noticed. And now he’s seen mine. I don’t bother hiding my smirk. This piece of jewelry made by a little girl sure holds more value than his fucking Rolex.

Before I get a chance to retort, Mia’s opening the screen door. She looks between us, her eyes wide, fearful. I try to send a silent message that *no*, I didn’t say anything, even though I really, *really* wanted to.

“Hey, babe,” Drake says, jumping down from the stool. He approaches her and goes in for the kiss. I watch her, like a hawk, waiting for her reaction.

She smiles.

And then she kisses him.

And I die.

A thousand deaths.

Over and over.

“Where’s all the food?” he asks her.

“What food?”

“I thought you said you were going out for breakfast.”

“Oh yeah....” Mia says, and I turn to the window above the sink and white-knuckle the edge of the counter.

“Why are you dressed like this?” he asks her.

I suck in a breath, try to rein in every single emotion.

“All my clothes were in my room, and I didn’t want to wake you by going in there.”

“Of course,” he answers. “So, where have you been?”

Mia’s tone doesn’t change. “I got caught up on the phone with my grandpa. You know how it is.” There isn’t even a hint of a lie. And now I’m wondering how many fucking times she’s lied to me and I’ve never picked up on it. Like the time she told me she loved me. That’s the biggest lie of them all.

“Let me get dressed, and we can go to the diner,” she tells him.

Drake says, turning to me with a smirk I want to punch clear off his face. “Do you want to come? I really don’t mind if you join us.”

I laugh once, but it’s bitter and harsh and everything in between. “Yeah, I really don’t give a shit how you feel.” I leave through the kitchen door so I don’t have to walk past them, and then I go to the barn, blare music from the speakers, and flop down on the couch, try to focus on what I came here for. I read the same paragraph eighteen times and give up.

It’s Monday.

My dad’s not coming until Saturday.

I have five more days of this hell before I can get the fuck out.

Five days.

“Fuck this,” I whisper to the ceiling, then grab my phone from the coffee table. I send Holden a text.

Leo: *How much can I pay you to drive me back home right now?*

Minutes pass with no response, and just as I’m about to check the cost of an Uber, there’s a knock on the door. “Fuck off!”

“It’s Holden!”

With a heavy, painful sigh, I unlock the door and sit back on the couch. He steps in, closes the door behind him, and then drops a six-pack of beers on the makeshift coffee table. “If my piece-of-shit truck could make it all the way to your house, I’d do it for nothing. Honestly, man.”

He knows. He knows about last night, which means Mia told him, and I have no clue what version she’s given him. I reach over, pull out a beer.

“It’s like, 8 a.m., dude.”

I glance up at him. "Then why bring them?"

He shrugs. "Peace offering."

"For what?"

"For what I'm about to say."

I put the beer back on the table and suck in a breath, ready myself for whatever blow he's about to deliver.

"Don't fight for her, man. I'm sorry, but she can't choose you."

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MIA

Before leaving Holden's house, I got on my phone and booked the next flight back to New York and a car service that would get there in time. And then I went home to face the music.

It was Holden's idea to go somewhere public. So I took Drake to the diner, and I sat him down and told him the truth: I wasn't in love with him.

I'd never be in love with him.

My heart belonged to someone else, and even though he knew I was speaking of Leo, he never spoke his name.

Drake suspected as much, and surprisingly, he accepted it. He told me that he flew here with two different expectations of how things would go. We'd either become closer and finally take that next, final step in our relationship... or we'd end it. He'd hoped for the first, but he expected the second.

Drake and I tried it once—the whole sex thing. My body must've known that I wasn't physically or emotionally ready, and it froze up on me. He kissed my tears away—every single one of them. And then I told him about Leo, a boy who didn't intentionally break my heart, and I didn't intentionally break his. Still, hearts were broken, and I was, at the time, in the process of mending said broken heart.

It was, no doubt, the worst timing.

But Drake said he understood. So, we dated. And dated. And dated. And never anything more.

Because everything about Drake was *safe*.

Even when the car pulls into the driveway almost seven hours later, and we walk out together, hand in hand, and he kisses me, one last time—there's no excitement, no butterflies. It's just... *safe*.

The barn door opens, and Leo stands in the doorway, his hands in his pockets as he watches us with zero expression. Drake opens the backseat and throws his bag inside, then turns to me. "Any chance you can get your dad to give me a good reference?"

I scoff, disbelieving. "You weren't just with me because of my dad, were you?"

“No.” He smiles, and it’s genuine. “But I may as well walk away with something, right?” He kisses my forehead and squeezes my hand. “Take care, Mia.”

I watch the car leave with a heaviness in my heart I didn’t expect. When I turn to the barn door, it’s already closed, and Leo’s nowhere to be seen.

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CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

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MIA

FOR THE NEXT TWO DAYS, Leo and I barely see each other. He's always working in the barn—where he sleeps now—or disappearing for hours at a time. I don't know where he goes, what he does, or who he sees, and really, it's none of my business.

Holden's been working like crazy with his dad during the day, so by the time he's done, he's usually with that Brianna girl.

And me? Besides making an appointment for my annual checkup at the dentist, all I've done is constantly look up flights back to New York, and then talk myself out of actually booking them. Which is what I'm doing right now when Leo walks through the door. He halts when he sees me, and I drop my phone on the kitchen island, turn back to the oven and look at the lasagna I've made from scratch just so I have something to do. "Sorry," I say, and I don't even know what I'm apologizing for.

My eyes drift shut when I hear his heavy sigh and then the screen door closing after him. "Your grandpa just called," he says, and I stand immediately, spin to him, my eyes wide as I wait for whatever it is he has to say. "He's coming home tomorrow."

When my face stretches with a smile, it feels so unfamiliar, like aged leather forming to a new shape. "That's good," I say, my voice breaking. I don't think I'd realized until right this second how desperately I needed my grandpa.

Leo nods, his gaze dropping. "Probably not a good idea to book a flight back to New York then..." I realize he's looking at my phone, at the screen that shows the checkout page of American Airlines.

I shake my head. "I wasn't. I can't really go there anyway." I regret it the moment the words are out of my mouth.

Especially now that Leo's looking at me with his eyes narrowed and jaw set, head tilted to the side. "Why not?" He takes one step closer and rests his hand on the island, right next to my phone.

I swallow my nerves and stare at his hand so I don't have to look in his eyes. The very first time I sat opposite him on his porch all those years ago, I remember thinking that his eyes gave away too much, but revealed

nothing at all. He still has those same eyes, and it takes everything in me not to get lost in them. “It’s nothing.”

His hand forms a fist, and then he’s cracking his knuckles, one by one. “Why can’t you go home, Mia?” The way he says it... it’s not a question. It’s a demand. And it’s so powerful that I lose my breath.

“It’s really nothing.” My speech is rushed, because the sooner I get it out, the sooner this will be over. “My dad has a girlfriend who lives with him, and she doesn’t really like me. Or, not me specifically, because she doesn’t *know* me, but just... she doesn’t like that I *exist*, I suppose, so it’s um... it’s better that I’m not there... for everyone.”

Leo’s quiet a moment, but he doesn’t make a move to leave. Instead, he exhales loudly and says, “Would you have left already—if you had somewhere to go?”

I shrug, still not looking at him. “Probably.” I wait a beat before asking, “Would you have left? If you had a way to?”

“Probably,” he responds. “My dad’s coming on Saturday, so...”

It’s Wednesday night. Which means we have two full days to somewhat live in this semi-awkwardness. “Hopefully, with Papa here tomorrow, it won’t be so bad.”

He doesn’t respond, and he doesn’t move a muscle, so I look up at him. Into his eyes. *Mistake*. I can see the hurt, and I don’t know what caused it. “My dad will probably be here around eleven. I wasn’t sure if you wanted to make plans to do something so you’re not around or whatever. I know you didn’t want him to know you were here.”

Right. I hadn’t thought about that. “Okay, thanks.”

“Why is it so bad if your mom knows you’re here?” he asks, and he has both hands on the island now, his index finger tapping on the countertop.

I lean on the sink behind me, my arms loose at my sides. “It’s not about me being here; it’s more where I’ve been. If she knows I’m in contact with my dad then she’ll find a way back into my life, which will be easier since I’m here, and then she can use me to get to his money.”

“Wait.” His eyes thin to slits. “*Back into your life?*”

I nod. “We haven’t had contact since I left your house that night.” I thought I told him all this, but maybe I didn’t, because he’s looking at me like he has so many questions, and he won’t leave it alone until he gets all the answers. “A few days after I left, she called, and before I could explain anything, she said that she was disappointed in me and that I’d embarrassed

her in front of all of you, and just... she said some pretty nasty stuff, so... I cut her out of my life.”

“Good for you,” he says, and there’s the first hint of a smile I’ve seen in days. I miss his smile. And standing opposite him now, I can finally admit to myself that I miss *him*.

Subconsciously, I look down at my bracelet, the one that matches his, and I fiddle with the clasp, my mind working to think of something to say to keep him here. Even if he doesn’t talk to me, I just want him near.

The oven timer goes off, and I catch myself smiling. “I made lasagna,” I say. “Do you want to take some with you... into the barn?”

Please say no. Please say that you’d rather stay. That you’d rather eat with me.

I slip on the oven mitts, take out the dish, and set it on the counter between us. “See? I made plenty,” I murmur, and then look up at him, because he hasn’t answered. But then I see his eyes, and I’m suddenly scared because they’re clouded with an emotion I can’t decipher.

“What are you so scared of, Mia?” he asks, and it comes out a whisper.

I drop my gaze. “What do you mean?”

“I mean...” he says, then clears his throat. “You have all these people in your life who, you say, want nothing to do with you... but then you have me. And I *want* you. I *love* you. And you’re pushing me away.” He starts walking around the island, and I panic, retreat. He stops dead in his tracks, shaking his head, his glare raging with fury. “I don’t know what the fuck is wrong with you,” he spits, and then he storms off, doors slam, and a moment later, music blares.

I stand in the kitchen with my heart in my stomach and tears in my eyes, and *Everything!* I want to shout, throwing the lasagna in the trash.

Everything is fucking wrong with me.

Holden: *Are you on your way? Please say yes!*

Holden: *Do you not understand what an SOS EMERGENCY means? She’s talking about breeding rabbits on our land and growing marijuana plants.*

FIVE MINUTES AGO, Holden had messaged me. Brianna was still at his house, and she wouldn't leave. I was supposed to take Papa's truck and come up with an excuse so that when I got there, he had a reason to take her home. But I haven't moved. Ever since Leo left, I haven't wanted to get out of bed. I've lain on my back, covers over my head, and I've cried. I've cried until the tears dried up, and my body shut down long enough for more tears to form, and then I cried some more. The absolute last thing that I want is to leave the house and save him from a stage-five clinger.

I text back:

Mia: *I thought she was a good, innocent little thing?*

Holden: *Mia, I swear to God.*

I make up an excuse.

Mia: *I can't find the keys.*

Technically true, considering I'm pretty sure Leo had them last.

Holden: *Leo has them. And, yes, that means putting your big-girl panties on and having to speak to him.*

A pathetic, pitiful sob escapes me.

Mia: *Why not ask him to save you?*

Holden: *He's not answering my calls or texts.*

Mia: *What did you do?*

Holden: *Patience. Thin. If you don't get here soon, I'll tell everyone about that time I walked in on you making out with your mirror!*

Mia: *You would not!*

Holden: *It was last year, Mia. It wasn't even cute.*

Mia: *I'll be there soon.*

Big-girl panties on, I leave the house, go down the porch steps. Leo's already out, walking toward the truck. "No!" I shout, and I sound crazy. *Great.*

He turns, brow knit.

"Sorry," I say, "I just... I need the truck."

One eye twitches. "So do I."

"It's for Holden. I need to—"

"I just called him," Leo says. "I was deep in study mode and had my phone on silent."

"Oh, okay, so... you're good?"

He shrugs. "You can go instead."

I shake my head, wrinkle my nose. "Don't really want to have to deal with the girl... not really a fan of confrontation, so..." I start to back away. "Have fun and all."

He rolls his eyes and then gets in the truck, not another word spoken. And then I run up the porch and wait for him to leave. Once he's gone, I lie across the porch swing, and once again, I feel the emptiness of my loneliness laying heavy on my chest. And then I let the weight of it suffocate me.

I wish, more than ever, that I had someone to talk to. I have no real friends; none close enough that they would sit through hours and hours of me talking about some guy they'd never even heard of. I've never spoken about any of this stuff with Papa before, and Holden—he'd be as frustrated as I am. I wish I had parents—ones who actually cared about me. I wish I had a mom who was *not* my mom. I wish I had Holden's mom, Tammy. She practically raised me, and she always knows what to do. But it's been a while since we've spoken. Once she left and I moved to New York and she no longer had to watch over me for homeschooling, I felt like... like, I didn't need to burden her anymore. She used to call. At the beginning, she called a lot, and then slowly, gradually, it stopped. Maybe I should've made more of an effort. Pouting, I grab my phone and pull up her number. And then I feel guilty for even thinking about bothering her with any of this. I don't call her for three years, and then suddenly, I call, and it's because I'm having boy trouble? It's pathetic, really.

I call her anyway.

"Hey, sweetheart," she says, and she has the same kind, gentle tone I've always known. When I close my eyes and think of Tammy, I see her in a

flowery dress with a straw hat coming out of my house with a plate of sandwiches and a jug of juice. She puts them down on the porch and watches Holden and me doing schoolwork as we lie on our stomachs. She squats down and ruffles Holden's hair, and then pats mine. *Love*. It's all I see when I think about Tammy. And now, I question what she saw when she used to look at us like that.

We could've been brother and sister—Holden and me. In a different world, a *perfect* one. We could've been hers—both of us. And I would've never felt the pain of growing up without parents.

"You there, Mia?" she asks, and I speak through the knot in my throat.

"Yeah, I'm here."

"Uh-oh. You have your sad voice. What's wrong? Did my son do something to you?"

"No. Holden didn't do anything. I just, um..." What the hell do I say? The truth, idiot. "I just needed to talk to *you*. I thought I needed to speak to someone who would just listen, but... I just needed to talk to you. To hear your voice. I miss you, Tammy."

"Oh, sweetie," she croons, and I can hear the scratch in her speech. "What's going on? Talk to me."

I suck in a breath, and then I ask her something I've always wanted the answer to. "Do you regret meeting my dad? Falling in love with him? You guys were so young. I mean, if you knew how it would end..." I realize I'm rambling. "I don't really know what I'm asking. Sorry."

If I couldn't hear Tammy's breathing on the other end, I'd assume she'd hung up on me. But she's still there, and she's thinking, trying to find a way to tell me how she feels without falling apart. "Has Holden ever told you why his father and I separated?"

"No," I say, fiddling with the end of my pajama shirt. It's red, and it's plaid, and it's my favorite thing to sleep in. "Holden doesn't really talk about that stuff with me."

I imagine her nodding when she says, "Yeah, that's the boy in him." I smile. "The reason we divorced is because I settled, Mia." She pauses a beat. "I've always been in love with your dad, and Holden's dad knew, but he... he wanted me anyway. Even if I didn't fall pregnant with Holden, he would've stayed knowing that fact."

Poor Big H, I think, but I also think about my dad. About how badly he broke Tammy, and he has no clue he'd even done it.

“You know,” Tammy says, “we were your age when everything went to shit.”

I smile at her choice of words. Holden definitely gets his cussing from her.

“I always knew he wanted out of that town. He had big dreams and aspirations, and I never quite understood them. I didn’t want the same life as him, and I knew... I knew that he’d leave one day and accepted the fact that he’d leave without me. So... you asked if I regret it?”

“Yeah.”

She exhales, long and forced and filled with a weight of a thousand answers. “I don’t regret it, Mia. Not for a second.” I can hear her smile through her words. “I found love. Even if that love was for a moment, not a lifetime... I found love, and I chose to live in that love for however long time would allow me.”

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CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

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MIA

IT'S two hours later when I hear the truck return. I'm still on the porch swing, and so I keep my eyes closed, and I listen for how many car doors close. The girl who was with him the other night is Brianna's friend, which means she and Leo have *that* in common, and I don't know what state of mind Leo's in or if it even matters or why I'm even thinking about it, but I am. And two hours is a long time to disappear.

One door slams.

I wait.

And wait.

Another door slams.

And then voices.

Two.

"Thanks for doing that, man," Holden says, and then it's quiet. "I'm just going to go up and check on her real quick. I'll walk home."

Leo replies, "All right. I'll catch you later."

The gravel shifts, the barn door closes, and then footsteps on the porch. They stop. Then start again, approaching. "Move," Holden says, and it's not rough or demanding. I keep my eyes closed as I lift my head, feel Holden sit down beside me. When he places his hand gently on the side of my head, I lie back down, rest my head on his lap. He strokes my hair and asks, "What are you doing out here?"

"I don't know," I breathe out. "I came out here to get the keys, and then Leo was already going to get you, and I thought about my bed and how far away it was, and it just didn't make sense to go all that way."

He chuckles, a rumble of a sound from deep in his chest.

"I just spoke to your mom."

"You did?" he asks, tone kicking up a notch. Holden would never admit it, but he's a bona fide mama's boy. "What did you talk about?"

"Just... *stuff*," I murmur. "Girl stuff."

"Well, I'm glad you have her to talk to because I'm way out of my depth here, Mia Mac." It's supposed to be a joke, but I can hear the relief in his voice that he no longer has to carry the burden of my problems. "You

know... sometimes I wonder what it's going to be like, growing up and growing old, having a wife and family of my own, and not having you around as much to piss me off."

I bust out a giggle. Only Holden could change my mood as quickly and effortlessly as he does. "I'll always be around," I assure.

His hand in my hair stills. "Will you, though?" There's a sadness in his voice that has me shifting to my back so I can look up at him. "Sometimes, I worry, is all," he murmurs, looking ahead.

"What do you worry about?"

His eyes lower, lock on mine. "Nothing. Everything," he says, shaking his head, his hands moving again. "You."

"You don't need to worry about me," I say through an exhale. "I'll be fine."

Gaze searching mine, he chews the corner of his lip, and then he looks away, his chest rising with his heavy inhale. "Are you happy, Mia?" he asks. "I mean, take away all this Leo stuff that's going on. Are you actually *happy*? Because I don't think you are. And I don't think you'll ever be because... because I feel like there's a part of you that believes that you don't deserve it." He pauses a beat, his mind working. "And as selfish as it is to admit, to say out loud, it's *killing me*. You're not my best friend because we were forced together as kids. You're my best friend because I *wanted* you to be. Do you think it was easy on my dad knowing that his son was spending all that time with his wife's ex-boyfriend's daughter? Do you know how many arguments they got into over it? Do you think I cared? No. I *demand*ed you be my best friend. I *fought* for you, Mia. And it's fucking killing me because you—you're not even fighting for yourself."

I ONCE READ SOMEWHERE that a different version of you exists in the mind of every person you meet, have a relationship with, or even make eye contact with. The person you see as yourself only exists to you, and everyone else has a unique mental image of you based on what *they* see.

My entire life I saw myself as a fighter simply because I was here, and I was smiling, and I was a believer of *faith*.

But I wasn't fighting for anything.

I wasn't even *living* for anything.

I was merely surviving.

I had no visions of my future, and just the thought of college made me anxious. I thought that New York had changed me; that having friends and a boyfriend meant that I was growing up and that I was finally creating an image of myself that I was happy with. But it was all a facade, and everyone saw it but me.

I pull the corner of Papa's blanket across his bed and straighten the pillows. I'd already cleaned his bathroom, changed the bed sheets, and made sure everything was ready for his arrival tomorrow.

Tomorrow's going to be a big day. Papa's coming home, and I'm finally going to fight for what I want: *Leo*.

One hand on the doorknob, I give Papa's room a quick once-over, and when I'm satisfied, I switch off the light, layering the room in darkness, and click the door shut. Then I prepare myself for another sleepless night. I quickly brush my teeth and then go up to my room, open the door. A gasp catches in my chest when I see Leo sitting on the edge of the bed, his elbows resting on his knees. I didn't even know he was in the house, let alone my room.

"Sorry," he says, looking up at me, those blue eyes the same way I've seen them since that night in the barn: *pained*. "I didn't mean to scare you."

"It's okay," I reply, and it comes out a whisper. "What um... what are you doing here?"

He's in jeans and a blue long-sleeve tee with the sleeves pushed up to his elbows, his cap backward. He looks like he's about to go out, not go to sleep. I feel like today's been the longest day in history. I don't know how he has the energy to keep going. "I need a favor," he says.

The room is only illuminated by the lamp, and he's nothing but shapes and shadows when I close the bedroom door, saying, "Anything." And then I lean against it, my hands behind my back, because the way he's looking at me makes me nervous and I don't want to get close.

"I found a bus route home that leaves tomorrow morning. But I need to get to the depot. It's, like, twenty miles. I asked Holden, but he's doing some important delivery with his dad so he can't do it. I have to be there before eight, and your grandpa's not coming until lunchtime, so you should be back by then." He's speaking as if this is the last conversation we'll ever have, and I *hate* it.

Tears form in my eyes, and I blink them back. He wants to leave. Tomorrow. Because waiting a couple of extra days would be too hard.

“Do you think you could give me a ride?”

I push off the door. “No.”

“No?”

I stop in front of him. “No.”

His eyes search mine, and I pray he finds the answers there. His gaze drops as he fishes his phone from his pocket. “I’ll book a ride then.”

“No!” I move forward until I’m standing between his legs, my hands on his shoulders as he looks up at me. I know I’m about to lose him, and I know I should say something, do something, that I should *fight* for him, but I don’t know what to do. I’ve never fought for anything in my life. And so I cry, because it’s the only way my body and my mind know how to process emotional turmoil. “I don’t want you to leave,” I whisper.

“Mia...” His shoulders drop, and then his arms are around my waist, and he’s pulling me to him, his forehead resting on my stomach. “I can’t stay here like this. It’s too fucking hard.”

“Stay,” I plead, my hand going to the back of his head, holding him there. I look up at the ceiling, searching for words, searching for courage. “Spend the summer with me, and more if you still want me, and then we can—” I break off when he pulls back, his head tilted to look up at me.

“What are you saying, Mia?”

“Stay,” is all I can think to say. And I’m reminded of being fourteen, sitting on that water tower when he asked the very same of me. Stay. With him. For him. I force myself to stop the memories there. To not think about what happened next.

He’s still watching me, unsure, and so I lean down. “Stay,” I whisper against his lips. My mouth parts on his, my tongue begging for access. He doesn’t move. Not an inch. Seconds pass. I refuse to give up. To let him go. Not like this. I press my knee to the mattress, and then the other, until I’m straddling his lap, my chest to his, my arms around him as I settle my face to the crook of his neck. He stutters a breath, his hands shifting from my waist to my back, holding me there, pulling me closer. I rear back, my eyes clear, and my mind clearer. “I’m not letting you go, Leo. Not anymore, and never again.” He blinks. “The other night, you said that I was yours, in your mind and in your heart, so I’m here, asking you, *begging* you... make me yours.”

His eyes flash, and he runs his tongue along his bottom lip. “For how long?”

“For however long you choose me.” I don’t wait for a response. I kiss him again, and this time, he kisses me back. We’re nothing but lips and tongues and teeth and hands and breaths all meshed together, as if we can’t get enough, as if we need this to survive. Suddenly, we’re pulling apart, staring at each other. And when we come together again, everything slows, everything clicks, like we both just realized that we have something now that we’ve never had before. We have *time*.

He swirls his tongue against mine in that Lazy Leo way, and I let my moan drown in his kiss, in the way one hand grips my ass while the other travels up my spine, until his fingers comb through my hair, and then he tugs. I moan again, my head pulled back with his force. Our lips part, but he keeps his on my heated flesh, moving down my neck, my collarbone. I push down, grind, circle my hips, needing more of him. All of him. “Slow down, baby,” he murmurs, but I can’t. I keep going, my mind lost to my body as I feel the pleasure build at my core.

He smacks my ass and tugs my head back again. “Oh, fuck,” I whimper, my movements slowing. I bite my lip while his face hovers over mine, breaths harsh against my cheeks.

He looks down at me, his eyes heated. “I said slow the fuck down. You’re going to make me come.”

“Isn’t that the point?” I breathe out.

He shakes his head. “Not with you.” And then he smirks, and I want to lick that smirk off his face. I want to lick every single inch of him. And I want him to order me to do so.

Oh, god.

He keeps one hand in my hair as he rears back, his eyes scanning my face. He runs the back of his fingers over the tip of my breast, causing my eyes to shut in pleasure. “I love it when you wear these pajamas,” he tells me. “They remind me of Christmas.”

My eyes snap open. “What?” I look down at my red plaid pajamas and almost cringe with embarrassment. It’s the absolute *least* sexy thing I could’ve worn on the night I decide to lose my virginity.

He smiles to one side. “Like wrapping paper.” He undoes the top button. “I was always slow to unwrap my gifts,” he says, his eyes focused on loosening the buttons so methodically, I might just combust in his arms. “I

liked the anticipation of peeling back the layers and finding a gift inside. A gift just for me.” He has all the buttons undone, but he doesn’t spread the fabric apart. He simply slides his hand from my stomach, up to my breast, his eyes locked on mine. He doesn’t squeeze; he just cups, so gentle, so safe. I suppress another moan when his thumb flicks across my pointed flesh. I want him to pinch them, to bite them, to devour them. All these images flash in my mind, and I start grinding against him. His fist tightens in my hair. “What did I tell you?”

I bite back a smile. When he’s like this, this... demanding... I want to give myself to him, to comply to every one of his orders. I’m aware there might be something wrong with me—thinking that, *wanting* that—but I don’t care. He’s the only guy to ever turn me on, and I never, ever thought it would be like this. Gaining courage from his stare, I pull back just enough to lift his T-shirt over his head. His cap comes with it, and I run my hands through his hair. It’s longer than I’ve ever seen it, and I love the way the waves flip around his cap, the way they stay like that even after it’s gone. His mouth finds mine while his hands move along my chest, spreading my top open for him, exposing me to his hungry eyes when he rears back. “Fuck, I love your tits,” he says, and then he’s doing everything I wanted him to. Pinching them. Biting them. Devouring them. I hold on to his head, my back arching in pleasure. I ride his erection through his jeans, but it’s not enough. I need more. I need *everything*. I undo the button first, and then lower the zipper. “Mia.” It comes out a warning. I *don’t* comply. I push down his boxer shorts and free him. My eyes widen. It’s the first one I’ve seen, in the flesh, and I’m momentarily stunned. Leo must notice, because he asks, “You okay there?”

I nod, try to do that natural thing called *breathing*. “I’ve never um... seen one before.”

He’s silent for so long, and when I look at him, he’s grinning so wide almost all his teeth show.

“Don’t laugh; you know I’m... inexperienced.”

“I wasn’t sure how inexperienced.” He shrugs, lazy. “But I’m going to be honest. I’m scared that if you touch it, I’ll be done for. And I want to get you off at least twice before I fuck you, so...” He starts to pull his shorts back up, but I grasp his wrist, stop him.

He laughs once, his eyes hazy with lust as he peels each of my fingers off his wrist. “That’s not how this works, Mia.”

“Not how what—” Before I can finish, he’s standing us both up and shrugging out of his jeans. Even hidden beneath his boxers, I can tell how big he is, and I worry—just for a moment—that he could possibly hurt me. I stand, my hands at my sides, as he moves behind me, shifting my hair so he can kiss the back of my neck. A shiver runs up my spine, and he catches it with his tongue as he lowers my shirt over my shoulders, down my arms. My arms move behind me with the movement of the sleeves, my hands almost meeting behind my back. His mouth is on my lower back, and he makes a noise from deep in his throat. I look behind me, see him squatting, my hands caught in the sleeves of the shirt. “What’s wrong?”

He laughs, but it comes out a scoff. “I’m just trying to talk myself out of tying your hands like this and pushing you onto your knees so I can’t do really, really bad things to you.”

At his words, heat pools between my legs and my mouth goes dry. “Do it,” I find myself saying.

“Mia, no.” He bites my butt through my shorts.

“Why not?”

He sighs, the sound of temptation.

And I groan, the sound of frustration. “You say these things, Leo, and then I picture them in my head, and I get so fucking turned on and then you deprive me of—”

“*Deprive you?*”

“Touch me!” I demand. “Between my legs. Touch me there and see what you do to me.”

He’s still squatting behind me, and I’m still standing, craning my neck to see him. He looks up at me, even though his hands are lowering my sleep shorts. For a second, I feel embarrassed about how exposed I am to him. Cool air hits my wetness, and then he does what I asked of him. He slides a finger through my liquid pleasure, and my knees buckle beneath me when his tongue replaces his finger. “Oh, fuck!” I cry out. His hand’s firm against my back, pushing me so I’m angled, giving him better access, and I’ve never, ever felt so much pleasure in such short time, with such small movements. I can’t catch my breath, and he keeps going and going, his hands steady on my thighs, spreading me for him.

“Fuck, baby,” he groans, and then he’s gone. No more fingers. No more tongue.

I whimper at the loss. Only for a second, until I realize he's standing again, his hands making quick work of tying my top around my wrists. A smile tugs at my lips, but I hide it when he turns me to him, my hands bound behind my back. His shorts are off, and he already has his dick in his hand, stroking slowly, when he says, "I'll be gentle."

I don't want him to be gentle.

He pushes me down by my shoulders, just like he said he would. On my knees in front of him, I wet my lips when my eyes level with his length. I regret asking him to tie up my hands now because I want to touch him, feel him. But then I realize I have my mouth to do that. I lick the tip, just once, and he lets out a sound so guttural I feel it pulse between my legs. I chance a peek up at him. He's watching me, his face strained, jaw tense. He grasps the back of my head with one hand while the other cups my jaw. Then he runs the pad of his thumb across my lips. "Open."

I give him what he wants and keep my eyes on his.

His entire body bucks the second he fills my mouth. His head throws back, but he keeps his eyes down, watching.

Here's the thing: I went to an all-girls' boarding school, which meant that most nightly conversations consisted of sex, and explicit details of sex, and information and encouragement on how to do exactly what I'm doing. And even though I may not have done this before, I've imagined it. And every time I did, it was with Leo. I recall every little detail about blow jobs that I listened in on and put them to use. Whatever I do, it works, because it only takes a few minutes before Leo's tugging on my hair, pulling me off of him. He reaches for his discarded boxer shorts, the muscles and veins in his neck straining with his release. The sound he makes, *holy balls*, I feel it everywhere. He keeps his eyes on mine as he recovers, his breaths so heavy they flow through every inch of him. "You're so fucking bad," he says, and then he's pulling me to my feet, turning me around, untying my hands and then throwing me on the mattress. I land on my back and watch as he kneels on the edge of the bed, spreads my legs open, my thighs pressed to the mattress, and then he dips his head. It's like an out-of-body experience. I'm acutely aware of his mouth, his tongue, his fingers working me to the edge, over and over, but he never lets me fall. He just keeps forcing me to climb higher and higher while I grip at the sheets, at his hair, at his arms, at anything I can get my fucking hands on. My ears fill with the sounds of his movements against my most intimate parts, our heavy breaths, my moans of

pleasure, and his dirty, filthy, vile words in between—all promises of the things he plans to do to me: him on top, cock deep inside me. Him beneath me, while I ride out my release. Me, on all fours with him pushing my face into the mattress as he pounds into me from behind. That last one is what pushes me over the edge. I'd been teetering in the state of semi-orgasm for so long that I don't even realize I'm coming until I'm right. fucking. there.

I curse. So many filthy fucking words. And I scream at God, as if he can somehow save me. I don't even get a chance to recover before Leo's standing up, taking his wallet from the pocket of his jeans and throwing it on the bed. He removes my pillows, then sits up, his back against the headrest. He pats his lap, but I can't move. Even if I tried to stand, I don't think my legs have the strength to hold me up.

He smirks when I whimper, and then he reaches across for me, dragging me over his body, my sweat coating his flesh. I'm a mess. A hot, naked, burning mess of erotic pleasure. He holds me against his chest as he kisses me, and I taste myself on his tongue. But there's something so different about this kiss. It's not driven by lust or desire. It's slow, and it's passionate, and it's all the versions of Leo I've been in love with since he introduced me to the emotion.

He shifts lower on the bed, lying on his back with me on top. He never breaks the kiss as his hands wander my body, slowly, carefully, as if memorizing every dip, every bump. I force my body not to lock up, not to think about all its imperfections. Tears well in my eyes and I hate that they're there, but I hate even more that he notices. He pulls away from the kiss, his eyes searching. "What's wrong, baby?"

I swallow the ache in my chest. "It's just a lot, all of this." It's only a half-lie, I assure myself.

"Do you want to stop?"

"No." I shake my head. "I want you. This. All of it." I kiss him quickly. "Make me yours?"

He nods, eyes clear, as he rolls us onto my back. He kneels between my legs and reaches for his wallet, and pulls out condom, before dropping it beside my head. I glance at the open wallet, memories flooding me. This one is leather; the first one I saw was canvas. And because I'm curious, I lift my head, just to peek, and my breath catches. Holding his wallet up in front of me, I stroke my thumb over the plastic covering the picture. *Why does he still have this picture of me?* I look up at him, my eyes glassy with

emotion. He smiles, but it's sad. Then he reaches out, his hand cupping my face. "I hope you see how beautiful you are, Mia." His throat moves with his swallow. "How beautiful you've always been."

I release a sob and focus on the picture again. And then I slide my finger beneath the plastic, hesitate, and look up for permission. Leo nods once, his eyes closing, as he lies on top of me, weight on his forearms, condom on, our most intimate parts barely touching. I put the wallet beside me and hold the picture to the side, so he can press his lips to my neck, again and again.

I flip the picture over, and all air leaves my lungs.

"I didn't need three words to express how I feel about you, Mia." He rears back, tilts his head to see what I'm seeing. "I just needed one."

I read the single word out loud. "*Everything.*"

He takes the picture carefully from me and places it on my nightstand so he can take both my hands in his. He holds them above my head with one hand, the other sliding down my side. Eyes on mine, he says, voice so soft I barely hear him, "To me, Mia Mackenzie Kovács, you are *everything.*"

I don't hide my tears this time. I wear them proudly. "I have three words for you," I tell him, kissing him once. "I love you."

The laugh that drags out of him isn't from humor. It's the sound of relief. Of releasing all the anxiety and dread and uncertainty we've been carrying around for five years. It's his turn to kiss me. And in between those kisses, he murmurs, "So much."

And I whisper, "For so long."

And then he positions our bodies *just right*, the perfect fit, and he makes me his.

Forever.

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

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MIA

“YOU’RE SO ADORABLE,” Leo says, watching me from his rocking chair as I pace back and forth on the porch. This morning, we woke up naked and in each other’s arms, and it was perfect. So insanely perfect that I never wanted to leave. Never wanted to not be naked and wrapped around him. Which yeah, would be weird, but whatever.

“I’m so excited!” So much so, I’m literally bouncing on my toes. “I haven’t seen him in a year. I can’t wait to hug him and fuss over him and love on him.”

Leo stands and grasps my shoulders, forcing me to stop and face him. “Hi,” he says.

“Hi,” I reply, and his smile matches mine.

“What are we going to do about your grandpa?” He says each word slowly, hesitantly, and I narrow my eyes in confusion.

“What do you mean?”

He leads me to the porch swing and gently encourages me to sit. “Are we going to tell him about us?”

“Are you kidding?” I almost shout. “I can’t wait to tell him!”

Leo grimaces, and suddenly, I’m not smiling anymore. “You don’t want to tell him?”

“It’s just... it’ll be a lot for him, you know, with the whole coming back, you surprising him, and then kind of the whole history of your parents sneaking around and... you’re here, so we know how that turned out.”

“Ooohhhh.” My eyes widen as understanding dawns. “I hadn’t thought about that.” I push forward on the swing, just enough to reach him and kiss him quickly. He smiles against my lips, and so I do it again.

“I was thinking... I leave on Saturday—” I pout. “Just for a couple of days,” he rushes to add. “A week, max.” I fake cry, and he chuckles. “But let’s tell him when I get back. And...” His gaze drops, always thinking. “We’ll be respectful of his rules if he sets any. No sneaking around—”

“But—” I start.

“I know,” he sighs.

“Sex,” I finish in a whisper, and he busts out a laugh just as an RV pulls into the driveway. I squeal and shove Leo out of the way so I can run toward it. I’m a giddy little girl, and I’m well aware that I might possibly be embarrassing myself in front of my booooooyfriend, but I don’t care because Papa’s home!

As soon as the RV hits the brakes, I’m opening the passenger’s side door, only to be greeted with a sleeping Papa. My shoulders drop. “He’s tired,” Philip, Papa’s friend, says from behind the wheel.

“I can see that,” I mumble.

At the sounds of my voice, Papa’s head rolls to the side, and he whispers, “*Baba?*”

“Papa?” I whisper back, and his eyes flutter open. His smile is slow, weak, and I realize now how much he’s aged in the year since I’ve seen him.

“You’re here?” he croaks.

“Are you surprised?”

His nod is as weak as his smile.

Leo stands beside me, and I watch his face for a reaction. Concern fills his eyes, and his brow dips. “You okay, sir?”

“He’s just tired,” Philip repeats, placing Papa’s luggage beside Leo. “Bring that into his room for me, will ya, son?”

“Sure,” Leo says, and Philip has to physically help Papa out of the RV. On unsteady legs, Papa holds on to his friend as they walk up the porch and into the house. It takes a moment for my mind to catch up to what I’m witnessing, and by the time everything clicks into place, everyone else is already in the house, and they’re walking into Papa’s bedroom. I stand in the doorway, my heart beating wildly against my ribs. A knot forms in my throat, blocking my airways, and when Philip helps Papa lie down, bringing the covers over his chest, I finally find my voice. “Is he sick?”

Leo’s looking at me, his gaze as unsure as mine. When Philip approaches, he says, “Let him rest for now, sweetheart.” He rubs my arm. “He’ll be fine once he wakes.”

Leo walks Philip to the door while I drop down to my knees next to the bed, taking Papa’s hand in mine. His hand is cold, fingers spotted with age. They’re rough from all the years of manual labor, and no matter how long it’s been since he retired, I don’t think that will ever change. I run my thumb over his knuckles and kiss his cheek. His eyelids flutter, but they

don't open. The curtains are drawn, and the lamp on the nightstand is the only source of light, casting shadows over his face. Every single strand of hair is white, from his bushy eyebrows to his thick beard. Even the wisps of hair on his head glimmer like snow under sunshine. A hand lands on my shoulder, and Leo's squatting next to me, kissing my temple.

I turn to him as his palm finds my nape, rubbing gently. "Was he like this when you saw him last?"

"No," he replies with a quick headshake.

"Did he mention anything—"

"No. I mean, he'd aged as much as can be expected in the year since I'd seen him, but it wasn't like this. I'm just as surprised as you are, baby."

"What the hell happened?" I whisper, and Papa squeezes my hand.

"I'm okay, *baba*," he breathes out, his eyes remaining shut. "Just tired. I'll be better after sleep."

"Are you sure?"

"When I wake properly, I'll see you. Everything will be better." He seems to struggle to reach over with his free hand to cover mine. "I promise. Please, don't worry."

"Maybe we should let him sleep?" Leo offers.

I shake my head. "I don't want to leave him."

"Go!" Papa says, and he opens his eyes this time. Brown, like mine, but darker. "You go..." And then he winks. "*Baby*."

Leo chuckles, his forehead falling to my shoulder, and I exhale, relieved. "You'll be okay?" I ask, but Leo's already pulling me to my feet.

"I'll be fine!" Papa grumbles, rolling to his side. "My bed never felt so good."

MY GRANDPA'S bedroom door opens just as Leo and I are setting the table for dinner. I smile when I see him, and he returns it. About a half-hour ago, I heard his toilet flush, and then the shower switch on, so I knew he was up and about. Seeing him now, color has returned to his face, and he's dressed in faded denim overalls and a plaid shirt, just like the Papa I know. I start to approach him, my arms wide, and he puts a hand up between us. "Careful, *baba*," he warns. "I'm not as young as I used to be."

With a giggle, I hug him carefully. “You scared me.”

He returns my embrace with shaky arms. “Ah! I’m an old man. Soon, I’ll be in those adult diapers.” When he releases me, he looks over my shoulder. “Now you, Mister *Baby*...” Leo laughs as he pulls out a chair for Papa. “You treat her good, yes?”

“Yes, sir,” Leo says, picking up the salad bowl from the island and putting it on the table.

“And you’re *safe*?”

Leo almost chokes on his tongue.

“With her heart...” Papa says, and I crack a smile as I sit down in the chair between them.

Leo exhales slowly. “Yes, sir.”

Papa nods, forking fried chicken onto his plate. “And her body, too?”

This time, Leo actually does choke. The water he’d just sipped comes dribbling out of his mouth, down his chin, and he wipes it away with a paper napkin. Eyes wide and red, he looks to me for answers. I pretend to focus on the salad. “Um...” *Poor Leo*.

Papa grunts. “I’m asking if you’re using protection. I’m not stupid. I know what kids your age do, and the *baby, baby*—” he makes kissy noises, two to be exact “—stuff.”

I stifle my laugh and look up at Leo, nodding once.

He answers, “Yes, sir. We’re safe.” I mean, we’ve only done it once, so it’s not a lie.

“Good!” Papa booms, then he takes Leo’s hand on the table, turns it palm up, and then slams a closed fist against it. And then he laughs, a sound that reminds me of why this place is *home* to me. “I give you now, my stamp of approval!”

Leo chuckles, and as soon as Papa lets go of his hand, he shoves a piece of chicken in his mouth. I widen my eyes, shake my head to get his attention, and he notices. With another forkful halfway to his mouth, he looks between Papa and me. Then slowly, he lowers the fork, grimacing.

I press my lips tight, doing everything I can to contain my laugh.

“First we pray, boy,” Papa says, his voice low, even.

“Sorry,” Leo mumbles.

And then Papa retakes his hand. “Give me back my stamp,” he cracks, and just like that, we’re all laughing and smiling. And that’s how we spend the entire night, even after dinner’s long over. Papa and Leo talk about the

work in the barn and Leo's hopes to get into law enforcement. I sit, and I listen, and I ignore the nagging in my gut that tells me I shouldn't be enjoying this, that there's no possible way this could be my future, that it'll all be over before I know it, and when it does end, it will all be my fault.

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CHAPTER FIFTY

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MIA

LEO AND PAPA stand side by side, their arms crossed, legs parted as they watch a dumpster being lowered onto the driveway. “Yep!” Leo calls out. “That’s good.”

“Yep! That’s good!” Papa repeats, and I stifle my laugh as I walk up behind them, my arm going around Leo’s waist.

We slept in my bed last night, and even though we both wanted to do... *things*... it felt weird with Papa in the house, and so we cuddled. Or as Leo calls it: *cuggles*. We fell asleep in each other’s arms, and that’s how we stayed for the entire night.

Leo was right; we are a perfect fit.

“You taking off?” he asks, his arm around my shoulders as he drops a kiss on top of my head.

“Yeah, the appointment’s in a half-hour, and it takes twenty to get there.”

“Where are you going?” Papa asks me, leaning forward to look past Leo.

“Dentist. It’s just a standard checkup.”

His eyes light up. “I go with you.”

I shake my head. “No, *Papa*,” I plead, but he’s already halfway to the front door.

“I get changed and go with you. Don’t leave without me.”

I sigh, resigned. “Fine. But hurry up.”

Once he’s back in the house, Leo turns to me, both forearms resting on my shoulders. “Why don’t you want him to go with you?”

My eye-roll makes him chuckle. “He goes to flirt with the nurse there. She’s, like, half his age.”

Leo busts out a laugh.

“Pervy old man,” I mumble.

“Nah. He’s just havin’ fun,” he says, then drops his arms to sign for the dumpster.

“We’ll be back on Monday to collect it,” Brent Silva says, and Leo grunts in response. Brent fixes his eyes on me. “What’s good, Mia Mac?”

I shrug. “Same old.” And then I shift closer to Leo because this situation is awkward, and it’s not one I ever thought I’d find myself in. Brent works at the hardware store where Leo rented the dumpster, and Brent and I also went on *one* date, last year. It was the date that made me realize I’ll never be able to feel anything for anyone else the way I feel for Leo. When I went on the date, Leo had been back home visiting his family, and when Brent brought me home, Leo was on the porch waiting for me. It was the first time he told me he loved me. And I was so afraid of everything it meant that I left the next day.

“Okay, let’s go,” Papa says, coming out of the house.

“You’re in your church clothes!” I laugh out. In khaki slacks, suspenders, button-up shirt, and a pale-yellow bow tie I sent him a few months ago, Papa looks dapper and way too overdressed for a visit to the dentist.

Beside me, Leo chuckles. “Looking good, sir.”

Papa slips on a flat cap and looks up at Leo with a mischievous grin. “Hat or no hat?”

“Papa!” I whine.

His eyes snap to mine. “I’m asking The Boy, *baba!*” Then he goes back to Leo. “Hat or no hat?”

“I say hat,” Leo says, nodding. “It’s a classic look. The ladies will love it.”

“Just one lady,” Papa jokes before going down the steps, bow tie, flat cap and all. “Okay, *baba*, we go! The boy has work to do!”

I kiss Leo quickly. “We’ll be back soon.”

“Take your time,” he says. “I’ll be in the barn all dang day.”

PAPA STANDS at the dentist’s reception office, one arm resting on the counter while he strikes up a flirtatious conversation with the woman sitting at the desk. She plays along, amusing him. I roll my eyes when our gazes lock, and then I smile, because really? What can I do?

We only have to wait a few minutes before the dental hygienist, Miss Annika, comes out of a long hallway and calls my name. Papa perks up at the sight of her, and I get it. I do. Miss Annika is beautiful. The kind of

beauty that's so timeless, even boys Holden's age like coming to this dentist. Holden included. Papa turns to me. "Let's go, *baba*."

I quirk an eyebrow. "Oh, you're coming in with me?"

He nods. "Of course. You're my baby. I take care of you."

Bulldust. I want to call him out, but I won't. He likes to be in there because Miss Annika's in there. Containing my giggle, I get up and follow after Papa, who's right behind Miss Annika, down the hallway and into the last room on the left.

I've been coming to the same dentist my entire life, so when Mr. Anderson sees me, his eyes widen a tad. "Mia Kovács! Look at you all grown up!"

Smiling, I climb into the dentist's chair. "Hi, Mr. Anderson." Kirk Anderson has been the town dentist since even before my dad was born. He doesn't like being called sir and calling him doctor is even worse. I'm not sure why, and I don't think anyone's ever asked.

Mr. Anderson and Miss Annika ask me the same questions most people in town do. Things like what I'm doing now, how my dad is, how I like New York, and then we're done with the small talk and ready for business. The dentist lowers the back of the chair, orders me to open my mouth, and digs right the heck in. Miss Annika is beside him, handing over whatever tools or instruments he asks for, and about five minutes into my mouth violation, I hear Mr. Anderson mumble, "Are you seeing this?"

I don't see or hear Miss Annika's response, but a moment later, Mr. Anderson pulls away and quietly tells me that I can close my mouth. He removes his mask, and he smiles down at me, but there's something *off* about his smile. It's the same way people smile at me when they hear about my parents—full of sadness and pity.

I hate it.

I *fear* it.

"Miss Annika and I just need to have a quick discussion," he tells me. "We'll be right back. Just stay where you are." Another fake smile to go with his fake words, and I look over at Papa, who's slumped in his chair, half asleep.

When they leave, I hiss, "Papa!"

He jerks awake, his eyes finding mine immediately. "What's wrong, *baba*? Where are the doctor and nurse?"

“They stepped out, said they had to discuss something.” I shrug. “Maybe I have a cavity?”

Papa scoffs. “Maybe all that junk they feed you at that school. Not like Papa’s cooking, huh?”

I smile at him just as the door opens again. Miss Annika steps inside, clicking the door shut behind her. She says, sitting on the stool usually occupied by Mr. Anderson, “Mia.” My name mixes with a sigh. “I need to talk to you about something that’s a little... sensitive.” She takes my hand in hers and motions to Papa, her dark gray eyes filled with worry. “Maybe without your papa in the room.”

I glance over at Papa as he jerks up, his back ramrod straight. “Why? What’s wrong?”

“What’s wrong?” I say, repeating his fear. “Do I have a cavity or something?” I laugh, but it’s not from humor. It’s from nerves.

Tension sucks all oxygen out of the room, making it hard to breathe, and Miss Annika never takes her eyes off mine. “I really do think it’s best to have this conversation in private.”

I look over at Papa, his brows knit in confusion. And then I shake my head, my eyes meeting hers again. Pulse thrumming against my eardrums, I tell her, “Papa can stay.”

Besides...

How bad could it be?

LEO

I've barely made a dent with all the junk in the barn when Mia and John return. After removing my gloves, I make my way over to the driver's side of John's truck to greet Mia. When I open the door, she doesn't turn to me. She doesn't move at all. She stares out the windshield, her hands still on the wheel. "Hey... you good?" I edge, and she blinks once, sucking in a breath as if it's the first time she's done it in days. Without a word, John hops out of the truck and goes right into the house. "What's with him? Did the hot nurse knock him back?" I try to joke, and when I turn to Mia again, she's already watching me.

Her eyes seem to scan my face, every feature, one by one.

"Babe, are you okay?"

She nods once and finally speaks. "Yeah, just... tired, I guess."

"Did they give you drugs or something? You seem a little out of it."

"No," she says, placing her hands on my shoulders to help her down.

I settle a hand on her waist and close the car door. After a quick check to make sure John isn't watching, I drop a kiss on her shoulder, right next to the strap of her tank, and then I just hold her. Because I missed her. And because I've spent five fucking years wanting to wrap my arms around her. "I get anxious with doctors and dentists," I tell her. "I think I let it all get to my head, and once it's all over, it's like an anxiety dump. Like a carb or sugar dump, you know? It's exhausting."

"Yeah," she says, pulling away so she can kiss me once. "Maybe that's it." She peers over at the barn, and then the dumpster. "You still have a lot to do?"

"Yeah." I loosen my hold on her. "I'd ask you to help, but I know you'd rather be spending time with your grandpa."

She frowns at that and then heaves out a sigh. Hands soft against my biceps, she murmurs, "I should probably do that."

“I DON’T KNOW what to do, *baba!*” John pleads, and I press my ear against his closed bedroom door.

“Papa, it’s not a big deal. Don’t worry about it,” Mia murmurs, and it’s obviously a private conversation I should not be listening in on.

I tap my knuckles against the door and wait for a few seconds of silence to pass before saying, “I think I’m going to go to the diner for dinner...” Because I’m hungry as shit and I wasn’t sure if they had plans or... I don’t know what’s going on. I’d been so busy in the barn that I didn’t even realize how late it had gotten. And neither of them had come out once to check in on me. I don’t think they even left the house—which is odd. Last year, they were always outside, sitting on the porch, watching me work.

“Okay!” Mia calls out.

“Did you... want to come with?”

“No. We’re okay.”

“Did you want me to pick up something for you?”

“No.”

“Okay, then... I’m going now.”

“Okay.”

I wait a few seconds, and when nothing else comes, I quickly shower and leave.

When I get back, they’re both still in his room, their hushed voices filtering out from under the door. I don’t hear what they say, and I force myself not to listen. All I know is something’s changed, and I have no idea what it is.

I’VE ALMOST FALLEN asleep in her bed when I hear the creaking of the door. A crack of light filters through, and then leaves again. Clothes shift, the mattress dips, and then warmth heats my side. “Hi,” I whisper, and Mia jolts, just an inch.

“Sorry,” she whispers. “I didn’t mean to wake you.”

I flick on the lamp and then roll to my side to face her. She’s lying on her back, her gaze to the ceiling, eyes lost. “What’s going on, Mia?”

Her stare doesn’t shift. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, you’ve been weird ever since you came back from the dentist, and then you locked yourself in your grandpa’s room the whole day talking under your breath.”

Her eyes snap to mine. “Did you hear what we were saying?”

I shake my head. “No. No clue. Otherwise, I wouldn’t be asking you.”

Her nostrils flair with her exhale, and she goes back to staring at the ceiling. “It’s just family stuff.”

“Like, with your dad?” I ask, trying to get *something* out of her.

“No. It’s...” Sighing, she turns to her side. “It’s nothing you need to worry about. I promise.” She runs her nose across mine, and then she kisses me, and the kiss erases all worries, all fears, and when her hand slides through my hair, I moan into her mouth, kiss her harder, deeper, until there’s nothing between us—no space, no air.

No questions.

Her knees part, and I crawl into the space between them, gliding my hand up her side to remove her top. “We have to be quiet,” she whispers, and I nod. “And quick,” she adds, and I nod again.

When it’s over, she lays naked in my arms, her head to my chest, mindlessly tracing the outlines of my stomach muscles. “I wanted to run something by you.” I stroke my fingers through her hair. “I want to tell my dad about you—about us—when he comes tomorrow.”

She sits up a little, resting her forearms on my chest so she can look down at me.

“I know you said that you didn’t want him knowing because he might tell Virginia, but he won’t,” I rush out. “If I tell him not to, he won’t. And I don’t want you disappearing. I want him to see you.”

Her gaze drops, lingering on my throat, before moving up again. “Why?”

I shrug. “Because I don’t want to hide you,” I tell her, shifting loose strands of hair behind her ear to see her face clearer. “And because I like to share all the good things that happen in my life with him.”

Her lips kick up at the corners. “And I’m *good*?” she asks.

“Mia, you’re the fucking best.”

Her head drops, her giggle catching against my chest. When she’s settled, she sucks in a breath, then says, “Okay.”

“Good...” And suddenly I’m nervous about bringing up what I want to say next because we haven’t discussed it, and I don’t know how she’s going to feel about it. “So... I was looking at flights for Thanksgiving break...” Her entire body stiffens in my arms, and so I continue before she can tell me no. “If I book them super early, then I can get a reasonable price. And I

don't know about Christmas, but I was thinking... I wouldn't mind being there for New Year's, see the ball drop or whatever." And because I'm nervous and can't seem to shut up, I add, "It'll be *fun*...."

"Fun?" she asks, smiling up at me, her eyebrows raised.

I nod, bite down on my lip.

"I can come back for Christmas," she says, rolling to her side again. "You can spend Christmas with your family, and when you're ready, come back here. We can hang out for a few days before heading to New York together."

I don't even bother containing the size of my pathetic grin. "It sounds perfect."

"I'll book it all," she tells me, tone flat. "Daddy's Amex won't even feel the dent."

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CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

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MIA

I GET WOKEN by Leo's phone ringing, but he's quick to answer it, and I attempt to go back to sleep. A second later, his lips are on my forehead, and he's saying something about Holden and the heavy stuff in the barn. I make a noise, smear my face in the pillow again. "You're still naked," he tells me, and I wrinkle my nose. "I don't know if you want to put on clothes in case your grandpa comes in here."

Right.

Smart.

"Clothes," I mumble and sit up, try to open my eyes. The sun's out and burns my eyeballs. "What time is it?"

"Seven." Leo kneels at the side of my bed with my sleep shorts in his possession. He carefully lifts my ankle, slips it through the leg hole, and repeats the process with the other one. The boy is literally dressing me, and even in my daze, I realize how intimate this is, and I wish... I wish it would last, these moments we have. So little and so significant.

"Up," he orders, and I use his shoulders to push myself up just enough for him to slide my shorts over my butt.

"What time is it?"

Leo laughs under his breath. "You just asked me that. It's seven." *Seven?* Last time I checked the time was right before I fell asleep, and it was 5:48. No wonder I'm tired. He slips my tee over my head, and I struggle to push both arms through the holes. "Go back to sleep and quit being so fucking cute," he says, pushing on my shoulders until I'm lying on the bed again. He pulls the covers up to my chin, tucks them in around me, and I start to fall, fade away, with visions of dentist chairs and the sounds of Papa's silence floating through my mind.

A second later, the door opens and closes, and just like that, Leo's gone.

Like a ghost.

A dream.

A memory.

I DON'T KNOW what time it is when I wake up to Holden opening my bedroom door so hard and fast it slams into the wall behind it. I jerk up, eyes wide, breath caught in my throat. The first thing I do is look for my phone because all emergencies come with at least one phone call. "Mia!" Holden says, and he's white as a ghost. "You need to come downstairs."

"What? Why?" I get to my feet, ignore the velocity of the blood rushing through my veins. Pushing past him, I call over my shoulder, "Is it Papa? Leo?" I don't hear his response over my pulse pounding in my ears. I basically fall down both sets of stairs, and when I get to the kitchen, I skid to a halt. All air leaves my lungs, and I have to catch my hand on the wall to keep myself upright.

Joseph Kovács is standing just inside the door, his large frame taking up more space than he's worthy of. He's in a suit that probably costs more than my tuition, and he has the phone to his ear, his eyes locked on mine. "And you need to understand that *she* is my daughter," he says into the phone, tone biting.

I swallow, push down my nerves. And then I take a moment to look around. Holden is beside me, his arm brushing mine. Leo is standing in the kitchen, leaning against the island, his look of confusion deepening the more his focus switches from me to my dad, over and over. And then there's Papa, sitting on the couch with his head down, fingers linked, hands beneath his chin. If he's praying, it's too fucking late. "You called him!" I shout, the tears of rage so quick to come I didn't even realize they were pending. "Why?!" I accuse.

"Mia, stop," Holden says, voice quiet and meant only for me.

Papa stands, his arms falling to his side. "Because I don't know what to do with you!" he yells. Papa never yells. Never at me.

I release a sob, and then rein it in. I wish I could leave. I wish I could run through the door and out into the field and keep running and running until there's nothing left to run away from. But I can't. Because my dad is here, and he's standing in my way, and he won't

Stop

Looking

At me!

"Stop looking at me!" I shout, fingers curling around my hair. I tug and I tug and I wait for the pop, for the roots to pull free.

"Mia..." Leo's voice is distant, so far away.

“How long, Mia?” Dad asks, using the same authoritative tone he uses with his employees. But I’m not one of his workers, and he has no authority here.

“Shut up,” I snap, my teeth clenched.

His shoulders drop, his gaze shifting to Papa before returning. Gentler, he says, “I just got off the phone with your dentist, and they confirmed everything.”

“Stop it,” I cry, my shoulders shaking with the force. From the corner of my eye, I see Leo step forward, but I shoot him a glare.

Don’t touch me.

Don’t look at me.

No one is speaking, but the room is loud. *So loud*. And filled with so many voices. So many *insults*.

Dad steps forward, and I step back.

Don’t touch me.

Don’t look at me.

“It’s not a big deal,” I grind out.

“Not a big deal?” Dad scoffs. And then he drops the bomb: “It’s *bulimia*, Mia. It’s a very big deal.”

I ignore the gasps that fill the house, like plane engines roaring to life right beside my ears.

Holden turns me to him, but I refuse to move.

Don’t touch me.

Don’t look at me.

“How long, *baba*?” Papa says, his voice breaking. “How long have you been forcing yourself to throw up?” I look at him, see the tears in his eyes—this man of strength and pride. This man who made me his everything before a boy came along and did the same. I die inside at the sight of him now, and I wish he didn’t have to know. I wish he could’ve lived his life never realizing how tarnished and broken and ugly I am.

“Papa,” I cry, and I start to go to him, but Leo’s voice cuts through the air, through my heart.

“Since that night?” he asks. My gaze snaps to his, and I regret it the second our eyes meet. Eyes clouded with tears, his jaw is set, lips forced into a shape that hides his true heartache. “Was it, Mia?”

“What night?” Dad asks.

“Answer me,” Leo says, but he doesn’t need the answer, and mine would only come with a lie. He already knows the truth.

It was that night.

On the steps of the church.

I told myself that it was an accident. That my cries were just too strong, and I couldn’t control it.

And then I went to a boarding school with a bunch of perfect girls with perfect skin and perfect teeth and perfect bodies, and I was the absolute opposite of everything they encompassed. I told my dad I wanted out, and he didn’t offer me any other options. So I stayed. And soon, I realized that the perfect girls were just good girls doing bad things to become perfect. And they taught me all the bad things they did to get there. So I became a bad girl, doing bad things, just to feel good. And soon, the bad thing became a good thing.

The best thing.

The greatest thing I could’ve ever done for myself.

And I never want to stop.

Ever.

And I won’t.

“Jesus Christ, Mia,” Leo says through an exhale, his arms at his sides, bleary eyes on the ceiling because he won’t look at me now.

He’s the only one I want to look at me, and he won’t.

Because he sees it—all the things I’d spent years purging.

“So, what are you going to do about it?” Papa says, and he’s talking to my dad because he’s the only one Papa thinks *can* do anything.

Leo drops his gaze an inch, catches me watching him. We stare at each other. A heartbeat passes. Two. Tears slip from his eyes, and he quickly disregards them with a swipe of his forearm. He doesn’t speak. Won’t say a word.

Every summer I spent with you, and every single day in between, I’ve been in love with you, Mia!

He won’t say it now because he realizes it’s a lie.

Dad says, “There’s a treatment center in upstate New York that caters to —”

“No!” Papa yells. “All you do is put her places! Here! There! She has no home since she left! She needs a parent, *József*! She needs...” I don’t hear anything else because Leo breaks our stare to look out the window at

the truck coming up the driveway. Before the truck's come to a stop, Leo's picking up his bag on the kitchen counter and walking to the door, pushing past my dad to get to it.

I follow after him, my feet thudding against the floor.

We'd all hear that fat heifer coming up the stairs.

Mr. Preston's halfway out of his truck and Leo's halfway to him when I call out from the porch, "So you're just going to leave?"

Leo turns to me, his words an eruption from deep in his chest. "What the *fuck* do you want me to do, Mia? Stay here knowing that I'm the one who fucking caused all of this?"

"Whoa," Tom says, coming up to his son. "What's going on?"

"I did this to you!" Leo shouts, pressing a finger to his chest. He wipes at his jaw, at the tears of anger floating across his flesh.

"So what?!" I yell, running down the steps. I stand in front of him, my fists balled. "So now that you know, you don't want me anymore?"

"How—" He laughs, head thrown back in frustration. The single sound lessens me, makes me feel tiny. "How the fuck can you *want me*?"

"Because I love you!"

"It's not enough!"

"I fought for you, Leo." I shove his chest. "I fought for myself so that I could have you!"

"You might be able to ignore what happened and move on, Mia, but I *can't*," he booms. "I can't do that!"

I shove him again because it's too damn loud in my head, and it's too hard to speak through the noise. "Just go then!" I push him. Again and again. Because this shit keeps happening. Again and again. I roar, "You told me you loved me, but you're just like everyone else who leaves me!"

Leo stares down at me, those tears of ours never-ending. "I do love you," he chokes out. "And that's *why* I have to leave."

"You're so full of shit," I spit. And then I say something just to hurt him because I know how much he's about to hurt me. "You want to protect me now, but where the fuck were you then when I actually needed protection!"

I can see the exact moment my words hit him, and they hit hard, so hard they break him. There are no more tears in his eyes, no more anguish or despair. "Let's go," he says to his dad, and his dad—being *an actual* parent—does what he knows is best for his son.

They get in the car, and Mr. Preston starts the engine, looking at his son before asking, “Are you sure this is what you want?”

“Go, Dad!”

“Son, I don’t feel good about leaving—”

“Dad!”

“Maybe there’s something—”

“Dad! Dad! Dad!” It takes me a beat to realize it isn’t Leo shouting the words. It’s coming from the house.

Holden rushes out the front door, yelling, “Mia, come quick!”

“Dad! Dad! Dad!”

Tires spin on the gravel behind me as I run up the porch and step inside.

“Dad!”

Dad’s kneeling on the floor of the living room.

Lying on the floor, eyes wide, shirt open to reveal the fresh, ugly scar down the middle of his chest—“PAPA!”

CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

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MIA

OF ALL THE things that were removed and shifted around in the barn, the treadmill stayed. The stereo in the corner has the volume set as high as it can go, and Bill Withers “Lean on Me” plays, on repeat, the bass ricocheting off the walls, the ceilings.

It’s Papa’s song.

The monitor on the treadmill shows I’m already seven miles in, even though I feel like I could run seven more. Sweat pours from every inch of my body, my bare feet barely gripping the belt as it slides beneath me, again and again. My chest burns, along with my muscles. Soon, it will stop. The burning, the aching—all of it will stop.

And when it does, I will too.

A groan pumps out of me with every step, and I wait for nausea to kick in. But my mind is a blur, and my body is worn. Tired. Just like me.

Suddenly, the music is *too* loud.

And so the voices in my head speak louder, harsher.

It’s never-ending—this cycle.

“It’s sure a step up from that fat-ass, Mia.”

“We’d all hear that fat heifer coming up the stairs.”

“He’s gonna have a shitty time with the girls with fat-ass, brace face around.”

“It’s not my fucking fault that she has no home. Or that her parents don’t want her.”

“Shut up,” I whisper. “Just shut up.”

The world tilts when I get off the treadmill, and then the darkness around me closes in. In my head, I’m living my nightmare. I’m five years old, and standing in the middle of an antique store. There are corners, so many corners and I turn and I turn and I turn and then there are windows. Big, huge windows. And I stand in front of them and look out to the parking lot, but my grandpa’s truck is gone.

I forgo my usual routine of using the bathroom to empty my stomach. Instead, I leave the barn, let the cool night air sting my flesh, my throat. I make it to the porch and hold on to the rail of the steps to keep upright.

Then I force air into my lungs.

And then two fingers down my throat.

I purge all the ugly and the filthy and the vile out of my system until there's nothing left. And then I do it again.

I do it until there's nothing left of me but my body.

A shell.

A hint of my existence.

Legs weak, I climb the steps and collapse into the porch swing, where I lie across it, let my exhaustion creep through every cell. My eyes drift close, and I stay that way even when I hear the screen door open.

"Mia?"

I struggle to open my eyes, to see Dad squatting down in front of me, dressed in all black with a glass of whiskey in his hand. His eyes are so red, so raw, and when he reaches out, the backs of his fingers stroking my forehead, I close my eyes again.

His voice breaks when he asks, "What are you doing out here, Mia?"

I sniff back a sob. "Waiting for Papa to come home."

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PART FOUR

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CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

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MIA

I DON'T WANT to be here.

It's the only thing that ran through my head, causing my bloodline to fill with nervous energy.

And *dread*.

It's the same feeling I had almost ten years ago. Only then, the person sitting next to me with her hands on the steering wheel—utterly clueless to my current state of mind—was assuring me that everything would be okay, that I'd be happy here. An assumption, I'm sure, because she barely knew the twelve-year-old girl beside her, and now? Now we're virtually strangers. An odd thing to say considering she's my mother.

She sits ramrod straight as she makes the final turn toward the Preston house, inconspicuously checking herself in the mirror as she does. I used to catch her doing the same the summers she had me spend with her, wishing for the day Mr. Preston would see her in a different light.

Yeah, that was never going to happen.

I try not to roll my eyes at her, and instead, take a moment to breathe. Just *breathe*. Wiping the anxiety-caused sweat off my palms onto the worn upholstery of the car seat, I settle my head against the headrest and try to calm my pulse by looking out the window. Trees line the road, the bright sunlight breaking through the thick leaves as we pass. A short wooden fence behind those trees lets you know it's private property, even though you can't see any houses from the road. Loose gravel kicks up from the spinning tires below us, and when I roll down the window, just slightly, I can feel the crisp, fresh air fill my nostrils.

The first time I was here, it reminded me of home.

It didn't take long for that feeling to fade.

The car slows as Mom pulls into the Preston driveway, and my breath halts in my chest, my bottom lip stinging in pain with the force of my teeth clamping down around it.

I try to keep the memories distant.

Try to keep the tears at bay.

Nothing is different.

And yet... everything has *changed*.
I don't want to be here.
Not again.

I CAN PINPOINT PRECISELY two moments in my life when I've wanted out of a situation so bad, I'd have given anything to be able to crawl out of my skin and disappear. One of those occasions happened to be within the Prestons' property line.

Standing in the house's entryway, I keep my head down, grateful that my hands are too busy holding the numerous containers filled with food. "We're going for Lucy's daughter's first birthday," Mom had explained in the car as soon as she scooped me up from the airport. She didn't tell me her plans prior to my landing, and as I sat there, letting that information sink in, I stared at her, my eyes wide in disbelief.

She knew I wouldn't want to be here.

She just didn't care.

Mr. Preston shares some pleasantries with his sister, who rode with us here, and then my mother, and I shrink further into my shell when I feel his eyes on me. The last time we'd seen each other, it wasn't exactly *pleasant*. Shame washes through every cell of my being as he says my name, a softness in his tone that lets me know he, too, remembers. It'd be hard to forget. "Wow, Mia," he breathes out, "look at you. It's been a long time."

Next to me, Mom nudges my side and clears her throat, and I gather my courage, look up at him. It seems he hasn't aged a day. I force a smile, a nod. "Hi, Mr. Preston, it's uh... it's good to see you again."

He returns my smile with one of his own, and it's as genuine as he's always been. "You look..." He stops there, unsure of what to say.

I would be, too.

I look what? Older? Wiser? *Sane*?

"You look *great*," he says, snapping his head forward, acknowledging the end of *that* conversation. He takes a step back, his large frame somehow making me feel smaller than I did the first time I met him.

“Kids!” he calls out over his shoulder. “You have visitors!” He doesn’t take his eyes off me, his gaze scrutinizing, no doubt wondering *why* I’m here. I wish I could click my fingers and a giant neon sign would light up above my mother’s head with the word “HER” flashing in bright red.

She is the reason.

She is my demise.

Mr. Preston sighs, finally tearing his penetrating stare away from me and toward the staircase behind him. “I’ll go get them.”

I almost reach out to stop him.

Almost.

“You’re being rude,” Mom hisses as soon as Mr. Preston is out of earshot.

My eyes drift shut. I can feel the frustration building inside of me. “I’ve *barely* said two words.”

“It’s not what you’re saying, Mia. It’s how you’re behaving.”

“How do you want me to—”

“Act like you want to be here!” she cuts in.

My jaw snaps shut, my nostrils flaring with my heavy exhale. A house this big, you’d think it would be impossible for the walls to close in and suffocate you, yet here I stand, breathless.

Laughter fills the air, trailing from somewhere upstairs—a complete contrast to everything I’m feeling—and I’m suddenly reminded of how many of them there are. And then thudding, like what I imagine a herd of elephants stomping on dry desert land sounds like. But the Prestons aren’t animals, I remind myself—they’re just kids...

Or at least, they were.

It’s been almost eight years since I’d seen them, and as they file down the stairs one by one, all dressed in suits, I recognize each of them by name. While it’s obvious they’re all siblings, they all have distinct features. Even the twins. They’re taller now, the boys more masculine and *grown-up*. Lucy and Cameron are the first to appear with the birthday girl. And then Lucas, the oldest boy, clutching hands with Laney. It’s good to know they’re still together. I guess some loves are made to withstand the harshness of reality. Next is Logan, a couple of years younger than Leo. He’s carrying a red-haired girl on his back, and then the twins. The only one I don’t recognize offhand is Lachlan. He was a toddler when I last saw him, and now... now he’d be a teenager. *Jesus.*

The last to appear is Leo.

I lower my gaze quickly, not wanting to look long enough for the pain to arise. Or hard enough for that same pain to annihilate me.

“You guys remember Mia,” Mr. Preston says.

The thudding has stopped now, and a chorus of “*Hey, what’s up,*” fills my ears. Mom elbows my side, and so, grinding my teeth, I look up. There are too many sets of eyes all focused on me. But I’m only drawn to one.

And those eyes—they make me want to shed my flesh, leave my beating heart where we once stood under a sheath of empty promises. Because while eight years have passed since I’ve seen the others, it’s only been five since I’ve seen Leo.

Five years can change a person.

It’s sure changed me.

But, going by the way Leo’s looking at me, confusion mixed with disdain, five years isn’t enough.

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CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

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MIA

MY MOTHER IGNORES ME, which is nothing new. Her friend, Leo's aunt Leslee, let slip that Mom is currently on vacation, and she's spending the entire *week* with Leslee, which means that if I don't get what I came here for today, I might possibly be stuck here for days. And knowing my mom, that's precisely what she'll make happen.

It should be impossible to feel this pissed off and anxious and agitated at a one-year-old's birthday party with a rainbow of balloons, Kidz Bop playing through the speakers, and a pet pig roaming around, but here I am. The event itself is extravagant beyond words, and Katie, the birthday girl, is clearly spoiled, but not in a way that has you believing she's going to grow up obnoxious. She's spoiled with love, and maybe I should add *jealousy* to the list of emotions I'm currently drowning in.

Mom shoots me a glare and slowly runs an open hand in front of her face, as if silently telling me to *fix my face*.

I should fix *her* face. Rearrange it.

I run my fingers through my hair and squeeze. And then I release it quickly. *No*. I don't do that anymore. I never did. It was the triggers that made me do it.

With a deep breath, I try to resettle my thoughts. I just need to remind myself of the triggers, make sure I overcome them, and I'll be fine. I give my mother my most disingenuous smile before turning on my heels and walking away. I may be twenty-two, but I'm not above petty. Leaving the party behind me, I make my way toward the apartment. If I sit on the steps, I'll be out of view, and then she won't be able to keep telling me that I'm not behaving in accordance to the standards of the great Virginia Kovács. I wish I could strip her of that name. She doesn't deserve it, which is why I'm here.

I make it safely to the garage and notice the door open. It's a mistake to peek inside because the first things I notice are the bikes. Leo's and *mine*. And even though my mind is yelling *trigger, trigger, trigger*, I can't help but gravitate toward them. "Why are you still here?" I mentally ask the bike, running a finger over the pink handlebars. It still looks new. Besides the

dust covering it and the slight fraying of the white basket's wood, it's exactly as I remember it.

"That basket was the reason you chose it, remember?" I turn swiftly at the sound of Mr. Preston's deep rumble and blink back the wetness in my eyes. I was *not* expecting tears. I'm better than that now. Stronger. My constant tears were a sign of weakness, and they don't belong here, in my body, in my *peace*.

I nod once, the air in my throat too shallow to speak.

"When Leo saw the FOUND posters around town, he made sure that we got it back as soon as possible. I think there was a part of him that was hoping you'd return." *Trigger*. "Every year I do a massive clear-out, and I try to get rid of them, but he won't let me," he says. *Trigger. Trigger.*

I stare at Mr. Preston, wondering how much he knows. Did Leo tell him why I left, or why he chose never to come back that last summer? Regardless of the answer, it didn't matter. Mr. Preston's the reason all of this started. If he hadn't invited me here that first summer, I would've never met his boys, and I could've— "Why did you invite me here?" I find myself asking, and I hate the way my words wobble with my speech. It's a question I've found myself asking too many times over the past five years, and I could never come up with an answer definitive enough to stick with. I never thought I'd get the chance to find out, but I'm here, he's here, and I need to know.

Mr. Preston's hands are shoved in his pockets as he leans against the garage door frame. It's a move so similar to his son's, or vice versa. "When I found out that Virginia had a kid that she couldn't be with—take care of—because she was working to take care of mine, I didn't think it fair to her."

I scoff. "Is that what she told you? That she had to leave me so she could work here?"

His eyes narrow, his lips pulling down in a frown as he nods once. "Is that not what happened?"

I almost laugh. *Almost*. "Mr. Preston—"

"Tom," he cuts in.

"Tom," I say, and the single syllable seems foreign in my mouth. "My mom abandoned me when I was three. When she contacted me to come here when I was younger, it was the first we'd heard from her in three years." I smile, proud of myself. Years ago, I vowed to stop protecting the people who didn't give me the same in return. I add, "Whatever story she

told you was a lie, probably to gain your pity. And I'm sorry she did that to you."

Tom's quiet a beat, his eyes on mine, and I look away. It's too much. "No, Mia," he says eventually. "I'm sorry she did that to *you*."

I shrug, try to play it down. There's only so much childhood trauma I can handle right now.

"You're welcome to it," he says, his voice picking up, and when I look at him, he's pointing to the bike. "It's yours."

Shaking my head, I answer, "I'm good, thanks." Besides, the bike was never mine. Nothing *here* was ever mine.

Before he has a chance to reply, his phone rings, and he answers, mumbling something to the tune of "I'll be right there." He glances at me one more time, and I can tell he wants to say something, but neither of us knows what, and so he nods, and I do the same, then I stick to my original plan of why I came to the garage in the first place: to hide. I sit on the apartment steps, and, as a much-needed distraction, I go through my emails on my phone, archiving, marking, forwarding, replying, over and over. I don't know how long I sit there, getting lost in my work when I hear male voices approaching. I look up and see the three youngest Preston boys round the corner. They smile when they see me, and then continue into the garage. A moment later, when they come back out, one of the twins is holding a box of sky lanterns, and Lachlan, the "baby," who's now a teenager, is carrying a box of fireworks. It's only now I realize I've been working from my phone for *hours*, and the sun is beginning to set. I blink the fatigue from my eyes and stand. The boys start to leave. Well, two of them do. One stays. The empty-handed twin. "It's Mia, right?" he asks, and his voice... he sounds so much like Leo, like the eighteen-year-old version of him that's trapped in my mind when I allow myself to think about him. The boy standing in front of me would be about the same age now.

I nod. "Liam?"

His smile reaches his eyes. "You had a fifty-fifty shot of getting it right." A small chuckle filters from his lips. "And you got it."

I force a smile. I could always tell the difference between the identical twins. It's their hairlines. The widow's peaks are off-center. Liam's is slightly on the left, and Lincoln's is the right. It was the only way I could tell them apart when I was younger.

“We’re about to set off the lanterns,” Liam tells me, his grin crooked as he motions his head toward the party. “You should come and watch.”

It’s strange, this jolt of emotion that nags at me. For so many days during the summers, all I wanted was to be included and be part of their world. And this... this is all it took. Such a tiny gesture. Too bad it came almost a decade late. I open my mouth to decline, to make up some stupid excuse, but before I can, he shrugs, says, “It’s for my mom. It’s just a thing we do. She’s up there, you know? In heaven. So we set the skies ablaze, let her know we’re thinking of her.”

Well, shoot. My shoulders deflate, along with my facade. How the heck can I say no to that?

Liam and I walk side by side toward the party. We don’t talk, but I can tell that he’s shortening his steps to match mine so he doesn’t leave me behind. Another small gesture years too late. When we get closer and I’m surrounded by the rest of the non-Preston guests, he throws me a quick, “I’ll catch ya later,” and then starts jogging to catch up with the rest of his siblings. He must yell out something because a few of them turn to him. Lucas is the first, but his eyes don’t find Liam immediately. They find mine. The blue of his eyes becomes black as I take them in, let them seep into my veins, replacing my blood with thick, ugly tar.

Trigger.

I blink.

“Where are they going?” a woman behind me asks.

And someone replies, “To the dock.”

Trigger. Trigger.

I can’t be here anymore, and that’s a *fact*. It’s not an emotional choice or an opinion or a want. It’s a *need*. I spin quickly and don’t bother looking for my mom as I make my way to the makeshift parking lot by the property gate. My mom’s car is unlocked, and so I sit in the passenger seat and allow myself two things:

Time.

And grace.

My knees bounce, rocking the car back and forth, and I don’t try to hide it. I cry, soft and silent. Thick tears stream down my face, and I let them sit for one minute. Two. Three. When I wipe them away, I see the darkened sky lit with bubbles of fire—the lanterns. It’s pathetic that I smile, that I

think of Mrs. Preston up there in the sky, in heaven, knowing that her kids are thinking of her.

The partygoers are quiet as they watch the lanterns float to a new existence, and I *breathe*. Slowly. Quietly. And then I reach across the car and pull the lever to release the trunk. My luggage is still there, where it's been since Mom picked me up from the airport. I don't know where I'm going. I just know that I can't stay here and I can't stay with her. I take the luggage out of the trunk, and then, as quietly as I existed in this place all those years ago, I disappear the same way.

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CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

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LEO

BEFORE THE CRYING and the yelling and the truth, there was everything.

There was you, a girl I'd been in love with since love was a choice, and you were naked and sitting on the edge of the bed. The morning sun filtered through the cracks of the blinds, and they made what parts of your irises I could see from your half-closed lids look like honey. Sweet.

Like you.

You were half asleep, and you asked me twice for the time. Your voice was rough from lack of use, but it was still soft, pure, perfect.

Like you.

I took my time dressing you, taking your ankles in my hands and slipping on your shorts, and when your hands landed on my shoulders to rise just a little so I could bring them over your hips, there was a moment.

One single, insignificant moment.

It surged through me like a blast of lightning right through my chest.

I envisioned a life with you, and it wasn't because you were naked and you were mine. It was your hands on me. Depending on me to keep you grounded. Keep you safe. But help you rise. You didn't notice that I stared at you then, and the visions I had weren't blurred or hazy. They were clear and concise, and this, I thought to myself. This is what I want forever and a day.

A lifetime of single, insignificant moments.

I used to think of you as my sunrise, but in that moment, I realized you were the sun, the stars, the moon, the sky, the ground, and everything in between.

Before the crying and the yelling and the truth, there was you.

And you were everything.

These are the words I'd wanted to say to Mia if I saw her again. I'd written and rewritten it so many times that I had it memorized. It's not that I wanted her back or wanted her forgiveness... I just—for some reason, I needed her to know that she was loved.

Before the crying and the yelling and the truth, there was love.

If I'm being honest, I never thought the opportunity would come. I still wasn't a firm believer of fate, but maybe... she's here, and I'm here, and I

don't know what I expected to feel when I saw her again. When she came into view, standing just inside the door of *my house*, it was like a dream, a fantasy. And the only words that came to mind were the ones written in notebook after notebook in preparation for this one moment. If this happened in one of Lucy's books, I'd have pushed all my siblings aside, marched down those stairs, stood before her, and declared all those feelings, out loud, fuck who was listening. But this wasn't a fictional story, and I was no one's hero. So I watched her, from afar, as the day went on and on and on. She disappeared for a couple of hours, but I knew she was still around. If she stayed long enough, I'd be able to catch her, and then... I don't know if I would've told her word for word what I'd planned. I probably would've started with *Hi, how are you?*

It seemed the right thing to do.

If I actually got the nerve to approach her.

God, she's beautiful. But she'd always been, so that was nothing new. There was a reverence to her now, though, something *bold*. And I feared that forcing her to even look at me might take all that away. And that was a terrifying thought.

So I waited, and waited, and waited. And then *poof*, she was gone.

Like a dream.

Like a fantasy.

THE PARTY'S OVER NOW, and all the guests have left besides Lucy's group of friends who are at the fire pit by the lake. Katie, my niece, is sleeping in the crib in Dad's room, and he's passed out, snoring like the tired old man he always tells us he is. I'm in the garage apartment with Logan and Red, his girlfriend. I spend more time here than I do in my own room. Ever since the shit that happened with Logan, I don't like to be too far from him. At first, I thought I might be smothering him with all my big brother bullshit, but then he pulled me aside and told me that he appreciated it, that he *needed* me to be that person for him, which is good, because I didn't really plan on going anywhere any time soon.

"Are you ready?" Red, whose real name is Aubrey, asks as she sits on the couch opposite me.

“For what?”

Logan uncaps a beer and hands it to me. “Academy.”

Right. I was leaving for the police academy in less than a week, and I’d be gone for near six months, which made the whole creeping-around-my-little-brother thing hard, but still doable. I take a sip of the beer and nod once. “Yeah, I think so.”

I’d already passed all the previous tests, and Misty, Laney’s kind of stepmom, lined up a job for me as soon as I graduate. If I graduate. Misty and I had become close over the past few years, ever since I told her that I was interested in joining law enforcement. So close that when she had a son with Laney’s dad, they asked me to be his godfather. They named him Preston. To be honest, it was a little overwhelming at first—all that responsibility—but man, it helps that he’s cute as hell, and for some unknown reason, he *really* looks up to me.

“Dude,” Logan says, flopping down on the couch next to Red. His hands are free. He doesn’t drink alcohol. Weed was his vice. In normal circumstances, it isn’t too bad, unless you’re using that drug to help murder the memories of your past. Which he was. “How much has Mia changed?” I can hear the underlying meaning in his words, and so can his girlfriend, because she narrows her eyes at him and smirks at the same time. “I’m just saying!” Logan laughs out, kissing the side of her head. Red simply rolls her eyes and allows him to bring her closer. And before I can even process the fact that he’s even said Mia’s name, he’s telling me, “I gave her a ride to the hotel.”

“What? When?” Now Logan narrows his eyes *at me*, and I try to play it cool. “I mean, I didn’t see her leave or anything, so...”

Aubrey stifles a giggle. “You should just sex her,” she tells me, using Lachlan’s toddler talk. “I saw you watching her the whole day.”

It’s true. I was. And also: been there, done that. Greatest sex of my life. And then the crying and the yelling and the truth happened.

“After we set off the lanterns,” Logan says, clueless to the silent message his girlfriend’s trying to send me through her eyes alone. “Lucy asked me to get more ice, so I left, and Mia was walking on the side of the road with her luggage. I felt bad, so I offered her a ride.”

“Huh.” It’s all I can get out.

“What did you talk about?” Red asks. “How much she’s *changed*?” She’s still teasing him in that way they do—to each other—all the time.

Logan shakes his head. “Nah, she didn’t really talk much. I tried, but it was clear she didn’t have a lot to say.”

I chew my lip.

“But she did mention that she was here trying to get Virginia to sign divorce papers for her dad or something. I didn’t even know Virginia was married.”

You don’t know the half of it, I want to tell him, but my chest is too tight, and my throat is too dry, and so I down the entire bottle of beer in my hand.

Red notices.

Logan doesn’t.

Mia’s doing something for her *dad*? There are so many things to process in that one sentence, and I don’t know where to start. Five years is a long time for so *many* things to happen, to change, and really—I don’t know a single thing about Mia’s life now. Not that I knew much about it *then*.

“Anyway,” Logan keeps talking. “When I dropped her off, I, uh...” He rubs the back of his head in discomfort. “I kind of tried to apologize if I was ever a dick to her and—”

“Wait.” I set the beer bottle on the coffee table and lean forward. “What exactly did you say?” Red’s eyeing me curiously, but I don’t care. Whatever he said, it could be a trigger. It happens. I read about it, and it’s *bad*.

“I think my exact words were...” Logan starts, eyeing me sideways. “I’m sorry if I was a dick to you.”

“That’s it?”

He nods.

“What did she say?”

“She kind of scoffed, thanked me for the ride, and then left.”

“That’s a little rude,” Red says, but she doesn’t know. None of them do. And there’s no way I’m ever going to tell Logan. Especially now that he has his own triggers to deal with.

IT WAS about a week after I left her that I found the courage to actually *think* about everything that had happened... once the anger and self-pity and guilt became too strong to ignore.

It didn't make sense to me at the time—why her dad was there and exactly what happened that led to him showing up the way he did.

My dad had questions, too, obviously, and I never knew what to say. “I’m a fuck-up” didn’t seem like enough. So, eventually, he left me alone.

But I had questions, and all of them kept me up at night, stopped me from being able to function like a somewhat decent human being.

What?

When?

How?

Why?

So I researched, and I remembered.

Everything.

Dentists are actually trained to recognize the side effects of bulimia. Vomit contains acid that eats away at the enamel that protects your teeth. If you do it enough, your teeth can erode. Mia had been doing it for three years.

I suspect her “workouts” in the barn, where she felt “self-conscious” and didn’t want anyone watching, was where she did most of her purging. The barn had its own toilet, and a lock, and enough space that no one would hear her.

The *how* is pretty self-explanatory.

And the *why*... the why was the only question I already had the answers to. And I hold on to those answers tight. Every second. Every day. To remind myself that I never want to be anyone’s reason for anything ever again.

CHAPTER FIFTY-SIX

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MIA

IF A SILENT SCREAM could actually be heard, everyone in this sports bar would be diving under their tables or fleeing from the psychopath whose throat that scream came from.

Me.

I would be that psychopath.

I slam my phone on the bar and drop my head on it. Again and again. Because this is officially my third day here, and my mother is doing absolutely everything she can to evade me. The day after the party, I knocked on her friend Leslee's door and demanded she sign the divorce papers. When that didn't work, I begged. I pleaded. She told me to leave the papers with her and she'd go through it and sign. She still hasn't. I was so done with being here, and I needed to get back home. Dad even told me to book the flight. He said it wasn't worth this toll it was taking on me and assured he'd find another way. But I was determined, and it wasn't even just for him and his hopefully soon-to-be wife. It was for me, too. Deep down, I knew that. This was going to be my little *eff-you* and one last, final goodbye to the woman who birthed me. I don't hate anyone. I've never hated anyone, but she—she came damn close a few times.

"I'll take four more of what she's having," a quiet female voice says from what seems like *inside* my skull.

I'm... tipsy. Okay, maybe a little more, but I'm not used to this whole drinking thing, and I overestimated my ability to consume alcohol. Bleary-eyed, I lift my head. "Bad day?" Lucy Preston, or whatever her married name is, is standing beside me, removing her coat, and arranging it on the back of the barstool next to mine.

I don't know what part of my *anything* right now is screaming for company, but I don't tell her to leave. She's too little and beautiful and porcelain-doll like that I fear I might break her if I so much as speak loud.

So I smile. "Don't mind me; I'm just having an existential crisis."

"Ah," she says, jumping onto the stool. The man behind the bar brings the drinks over, and she pushes two toward me, and then practically inhales

one of hers. It's impressive, really, and I'm kind of in awe. "What is that?" she asks, licking her lips.

"Manhattan."

"Fancy," she giggles, then faces me. "You're paying, right? Because I'm a broke bitch."

The laugh that busts out of me is so foreign to my ears. "I got you."

"So," she says, and she's turning her entire body to me. "What are you doing here at 6 p.m. on a Tuesday evening drinking fancy drinks and slamming your head against the bar top?"

This woman is *funny*. Had she always been like this? She wasn't really around when I was, so I don't really know her, and maybe that's why I'm not getting those same dark vibes from her that I do her brothers. "You first."

She shrugs. "Just finished work, meeting someone for dinner, but they're running late. Now you. Existential crisis of the *penis* type?"

"No!" I gasp and look around. I may be buzzed, but I'm not one to have conversations about private parts in public places. I feel my face redden, and she giggles.

"So, not a boy problem?"

"No." I almost laugh at the thought. "The b-word motherly type."

"B-word?" She says the word slowly. "How old are you?"

My smile falls. "Twenty-two."

Her grin spreads. "Say it. It'll make you feel better."

"No." I'm shaking my head, looking around again.

"Do it!" she encourages, and she's smiling so wide, I can't help but grin along with her.

"Bitch," I whisper.

"Oh, Mia," she says through a giggle. "Girl, you gotta shout that shit."

"Bitch," I say, a little louder, and she shakes her head, disapproving. I inhale a huge breath, and then let it out. "Biiiiiitch!" My eyes widen as soon as I say it, and I look around, expecting a scene from those movies where the music stops and everyone freezes and looks at you. No one is looking at me. Nothing has changed.

Lucy laughs, clinks her cocktail glass against mine. "'Attagirl."

I sip my drink.

"So, what's up with Vagina?"

She has said both penis and vagina in the span of a minute. In most cases, I'd be put off by the crassness and maybe a little disgusted, but as I said: porcelain doll. "You call her the V-word, too?"

She giggles again but lets me slide this time. "Girl, I made up that name. Pretty sure I said it the moment I saw her, to her face, and then accused her of trying to be with my dad for his money."

I mean... she's not wrong.

"My dad wants to get remarried, so he needs to get a divorce. Technically they haven't been together *together* since I was born, so..."

"So what's the bitch's problem?" she asks, and she's already finished her second drink. I raise my hand to the bartender and ask for another two for her.

"She doesn't want to sign them because she thinks she's somehow entitled to his wealth."

"Wealth?" she asks, one eyebrow cocked.

I nod. I don't really like talking about Dad's money, but in this case, I don't see the harm. "He made some smart investments right out of college and has kept making them since, so he has a *lot* of money."

She nods, slowly, and then gestures for the bartender. "I'll take another two on top of the two she just ordered, please and thank you."

A giggle erupts from deep in my chest.

"You can afford it, right?" she asks, and I nod. "So, she wasn't around when he earned the money?"

"No."

"Where were you?"

"I stayed with my grandpa. I didn't really have much contact with either of them growing up, but my dad's really stepped up the past five or so years, and I *love* his fiancée, so I'm doing it for her mainly." Why I'm divulging all this to a virtual stranger is a mystery, but... I figure I'll never see her again, and truth be told, it's nice to get it off my chest.

"Got it," she says, then sucks in a sharp breath. "Well, good luck with that. To be honest, I was hoping for some juicy penis problems, so..." She shrugs, smiling. "You got any of those for me?"

"No," I laugh. "I'm sorry."

"It gets a little boring, you know? The whole mom thing. Don't get me wrong; I love my daughter, but sometimes I just want something else to fill

my days. And all my friends are in steady relationships, and I don't get to read as much as I used to... so yeah, penis gossip."

"I'm sorry I can't help you with that."

The bartender brings her four more drinks, then mentions he's going to charge as we order, just to be safe.

"So you're not dating anyone?" Lucy asks me.

I shake my head, leave it at that. If she starts to dig, I might have to leave, and I don't want to. She's been the highlight of my stay.

"Eh," she says. "That's what toys are for."

"Oh my god," I whisper, covering my face.

She nudges my side with hers. "You're such an innocent little thing. I like you. Sucks you have a bitch of a mom. You deserve better."

I deserve better. She has no idea how long it took me to understand the value of those words alone.

"There's my dinner date," she says. "You should *totally* join us."

I lower my hands and follow her gaze, and there, walking toward us is Leo Preston.

It takes a tenth of a second for my smile to be wiped, for my spine to straighten, for my body to shift and stare at the neon sign behind the bar as if it's the most fascinating thing in the world.

"I found a friend," Lucy announces.

I don't look at him when he says, "I see that." But I hear him. And I feel him *everywhere*. Right down to the darkest parts of my soul. "Hey, Mia." And there it is, the spark that lights the darkness.

Then I do something I *could* avoid when we were surrounded by a hundred other people, but can't do here without looking like an idiot. I face him. Head-on. My eyes on his. Eyes that hold mine and make me breathless. "Hi."

"How are you?"

Better. "I'm good." And *calm*, surprisingly. Huh. "What about you?"

He shrugs.

Lucy hugs his waist. "Leo's about to leave for six months, so—"

Leo sighs, cutting her off. "It's only in Charlotte, and I'll be back on weekends." He rolls his eyes playfully.

"I'm trying to get in as much time with him as possible," she says, then reaches up and pinches his cheeks. "My little Leelee," she coos, and I can't help but smile.

He swats her hands away. “Who are you calling little?” It’s true. He’s not *little*. Not by any stretch. Even at eighteen, he was built, but now... he’s a *tank*.

She resumes the hugging of his waist and pats his stomach. “He’s going into the police academy.”

“You are?” My eyes are wide as I watch him, and he nods, darts his gaze away for barely a second before meeting mine again.

“Yeah.”

“That’s... great.” I smile, and it’s genuine. “I’m pr—” I break off, shaking my head. *I’m proud of you?* Who says that?

Lucy gasps so loud, even the bartender gets her attention. “I have the best idea!”

“Uh-oh,” Leo murmurs, looking at the empty cocktail glasses on the bar. “How much have you had to drink?”

Lucy’s eyes are enormous when she practically squeals, clapping her hands, “You guys should fuck!”

“Okay, time to cut you off,” Leo’s quick to say while I go back to the neon sign. It’s green and pink and says cocktails, and all I see is *cock*, and oh no. I’ve been with Lucy for five minutes, and she’s already rubbing off on me.

“No, you should!” Lucy yells as if this is literally a *great* idea. It is not. “You’re leaving, and she’s leaving, and she’s not seeing anyone, and you haven’t had a girlfriend in years.”

“We might have to skip dinner. Let’s get you home,” Leo says, and from the corner of my eye, I see Lucy being lifted out of her seat. Maybe I shouldn’t have bought her all those drinks. Also, where has all the oxygen gone? Because it’s not in me or around me.

“You should, Leelee!” Lucy is adamant. “Look at her! She’s fucking hot!”

My face flames red.

“Luce.” Leo sighs. “I’m well aware of Mia’s beauty.”

There are no goodbyes when they leave, and I don’t watch them go.

I’m too busy replaying Leo’s last words in my head, over and over.

I’m well aware of Mia’s beauty.

I blink back the reckless tears from my eyes. Because the truth is, I believe him. And the truth is something that took years for me to understand. He wasn’t the only one who walked away, who did everything

he could to avoid the situation. He had guilt, and I had secrets. And we avoided each other because we loved each other. And that love for each other was greater than the love we had for ourselves.

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LEO

“Did you know Mia’s mom is a bitch?” Lucy is *shitfaced*. She’s sprawled across the backseat of my truck, and she hasn’t stopped talking about Mia. Thankfully, she’s gotten off the subject of me *fucking* Mia.

“Yep,” I murmur, checking the rearview to make sure she isn’t about to hurl. She’s so fucking small, and it’s not that she drinks too much; it’s just that she drinks too many when she does.

“Did you know that her dad is, like, loaded?”

“Yep.”

“Did you know that she’s here to get divorce papers signed?”

“Yep.”

“How scandalous.”

“Yep.”

She grunts, and when I check for her between the seats, her face is right there—an inch from mine. “Does *she* know?” She’s looking at me with accusatory eyes like she used to when we were kids and she was asking if any of us had been in her room.

“Know what?” I huff. I’m not annoyed that she’s drunk or that she’s talking about Mia. It’s *those* eyes. They scare me.

“That you took a picture of her on my phone when you were kids?”

My eyes widen, and I do that lame headshake thing as if it needs that little jolt to make sure your mind is working, because there’s no possible way I heard what I just heard.

My reaction must be answer enough because Lucy smiles her Drunk Lucy smile and sits back down. “When you delete pictures on the phone, it just goes to a deleted folder.” Her eyes lock on mine though the rearview, suddenly sober, and *knowing*. “Things don’t just stop existing, Leo. Not unless you want them to.”

CHAPTER FIFTY-SEVEN

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MIA

IT'S DAY FIVE, and I'm at my wit's end. I need to go home. I have things to do and people to see and work waiting for me. I can't just sit here anymore, in a hotel room, in limbo, waiting for my mother to concede. She wants money—lots of it. Dad's willing to give her some. It's me who's not ready to give her *shit*. She may have birthed me, but beyond that, she has done *nothing*. Not for me, not for Dad, and definitely not for Papa.

The hotel phone rings, which is odd, because besides the occasional—okay, like twice a day—room service, they tend to leave me alone. Perks of being in their version of a “presidential suite.”

I answer with a quick, wary, “Hello?”

“Miss Kovács?”

“Yes...?”

“Sorry to disturb you, ma'am.” Ugh, I hate being called *ma'am*. “You have a guest down at the reception. Should I send him up to your room?”

Guest? *Him*? What the... “No, I'll come down.”

“Okay, ma'am.”

I don't bother changing out of my yoga pants and sweatshirt or even looking in the mirror before slipping on my sneakers and grabbing my phone and key card. The private elevator is connected directly off the living room, so I don't have to wait for the doors to open. It takes no time to get to the ground level, and when the doors part, I see him. His back is to me, but I can tell who it is, and suddenly, stupidly, I regret not making more of an effort with my appearance. I stand in the elevator and give myself a moment to simply rearrange my thoughts until they're all lined up, and I can think clearly. Leo's dressed in the familiar way I've often seen him, dark denim and long sleeve tee with the sleeves pushed up. The receptionist, who I assume was the one to make the call, is talking to him, smiling, most likely flirting. If I was any other girl, I'd probably do the same. And then she stops talking because she's pointing toward me, and I'm still standing in the elevator looking at his back. When he turns, it takes everything in me not to press a button, any button, so that I can disappear.

The other day, when Lucy was a buffer, things were fine. Now? It's just him and me, and what the hell is he doing here?

He's only a few yards away, but I feel like the effort it will take my legs to get to him might just kill me.

Slowly, effortlessly, his lips kick up at one corner, and he raises his hand in a small wave. I take a breath, cross my arms, and then I move, keep my head lowered. I stop a safe distance away from him. "Hey." One word. A *million* questions.

"Hey," he says, and then silence screams at me. I look up, see his eyes on mine. It *physically* hurts to look at him. And it's not *painful*, because pain isn't what I think about when I think of him. It's... longing. And it's pathetic. "I'm sorry to drop in on you like this," he says, and he tries to look away, but he keeps coming back to me. "I, um, I hope you don't mind, but I got you this."

It's only now I realize he's been holding on to a stack of papers, and he's holding them out between us waiting for me to take them. Which I do. Eventually. "What is this?" I ask, and it's only a second later that I work it out. A gasp catches in my throat as I flip through the divorce papers, seeing my mom's signature on all the appropriate lines.

"It's all signed. I made sure before I left."

My eyes trail to his, awestruck. "How... I mean... why? *How?*"

Leo's shrug is lazy, as if it's no big deal. He massages the back of his neck, his head down, but his eyes up. On me. "So... you can leave now, right?"

My mouth opens to respond, but nothing comes, and everything hits at once. He didn't do this for me. He just doesn't want me around. His town, his home. I bet seeing me with his sister must've done a number on him. I don't even have it in me to respond verbally, and so I take a step back, hoping my hurt doesn't show. "I'll be gone in the morning." It's barely a whisper, and I hate my vocal cords for deceiving me.

"No." His eyes widen, and he reaches for me, his hand on my elbow. I look down at the touch, but by the time my eyes are there, his hand is gone. "That's not what I meant, Mia. *Shit*. I just meant that it can't be easy for you—being here, so..." My gaze meets his again. "I read about it," he says, and he can't hide his pain either. "About the—your—*disease*." He cringes at the last word as if he doesn't know if it's appropriate. "I read that certain things

can trigger—” He breaks off, rolling his eyes. “I just don’t want you to have to deal with anything... *bad*.”

I stare at him. It’s all I can do. But the longer I stare, the less vivid he becomes.

“God dammit,” he spits, taking a step closer. “Please don’t cry.”

I didn’t realize I was, but of course, I am, because I am Me, and he is Him, and there will always be something between us. I wipe at my tears before they fall and find enough grace to keep my eyes on his when I croak, “Thank you.” I lift the papers. “For this. It means more than you know.”

He nods at this, shuffling his feet. Hands shoved in his pockets, he looks around, no doubt for a way out. “So... your dad’s getting remarried?”

“Yeah, he is.”

“And he’s good to you, like... you know what I mean...”

I smile, for real, and nod once. And come to terms with the fact that Leo Preston is always going to care about me, even if it’s based on history alone, and it goes both ways. “So... you’re going into the academy?” I ask.

His grin is slight, but it’s there, and I can see the moment his shoulders relax. “Yeah, I leave tomorrow, actually.”

“Well, I know it doesn’t mean much, but I’m happy for you, and I’m...” This time, I say it loud and clear. “I’m proud of you, Leo. I know how hard you worked to get there, so...”

He laughs once, but it’s not from humor. It’s something else. “You’re wrong, about it not meaning much. It means *everything*, Mia.” His voice cracks on the last few words, and he sniffs once, biting back an emotion I can’t decipher. “Hey, I wanted to ask you when I saw you, but I was kind of...” I get it. When I first saw him, I was kind of... too. “How’s your grandpa these days?”

Whatever physical reaction I have gives him pause, makes his eyes widen, and then he curses under his breath.

He starts to reach out, but stops himself, shoves his hands in his pockets again. “I’m so sor—”

“It’s okay,” I cut in, surprisingly calm. I take my first breath since “grandpa” left his mouth, then offer him a weak smile. I try to joke, “Hundreds of hours of therapy have prepared me for this.”

Leo doesn’t find it funny. He frowns, his eyes filled with sadness. “What happened?”

I've thought about this moment, this exact situation, like the many other situations I might face when it comes to Leo, and I know that I have a choice to make. I can either give him the vague *just-enough-to-satisfy* answer, or I can give him the truth. Every heartbreaking ounce of it. "We should talk."

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LEO

Mia walks me toward a little courtyard right near the spot where Laney was shot because we're at the same hotel that held the senior prom all those years ago. I don't tell her this, though, and I don't tell her that this place brings back some of my darkest memories. I let her sit on a bench, and I sit down beside her. And I don't say anything, because I know what it's like to have a million thoughts running through your head, and picking out the one you want to start with takes enough effort.

For minutes, we just sit there, silent, looking at the fountain ahead of us. I can tell she's crying; the tears are there, but the sounds are not. I want to hold her. I'd give anything to be able to. Or just take her hand in mine. I won't do either. I'm not deserving of her touch. "It was a heart attack," she says, her voice so quiet I barely hear her. I don't turn to her, because the devastation in her voice is hard enough to accept; seeing it would destroy me. Somehow, she manages to keep talking. She tells me that the RV road trip with her grandpa's friend Philip was actually a trip to Tennessee where Tammy, Holden's mom, lived. He chose to go there so she could care for him after his quadruple bypass heart surgery that was recommended to him after his first heart attack only months prior. Mia had no idea about any of it. According to Tammy, that was John's wish, and as much as Tammy didn't agree with him, she respected that. It made sense now, Mia says, how he was acting when he got back. It had only been four weeks since the surgery.

"I was outside with you when he collapsed," she says, and my mind is still playing catch-up to all the other information she's given me that it takes a moment for her last words to sink in. It happened *the day* I left. While I was telling her that I couldn't be around her anymore because it was *too hard*, her grandpa was *dying*, and she was too busy letting me destroy her.

"The last thing I remember was him yelling at my dad about *me*, and how to take care of *me*, and the whole time he was the one who needed taking care of, and I..."

I know I should console her. Say something to let her know that it isn't her fault, but I just stare at the fucking fountain, and I don't look away.

It's the silence that kills me, the moments between her words.

"For a long time, I was convinced that I *literally* broke his heart."

My throat closes in, catching a gasp, and I realize my knees are bouncing, my legs shaking. My hands, too. I look down at them, will them to stop, because now is *not* the time to lose it. When my mind finally kicks in, reminds my body that it needs air to *live*, I choke on the oxygen filling my lungs as if they reject it, yell that it doesn't belong there, inside *me*. Guilt is the most painful emotion because it carries with it a life sentence of *what-ifs*. And what ifs are the most critical questions imaginable. Like a ripple effect of torture. What if I'd said something on the lake back when we were kids? She wouldn't have an eating disorder, and then she wouldn't

"I thought that him finding out that I was bulimic..." she says, cutting through my thoughts. "I thought it made him feel like he'd failed me somehow, and that was so far from the truth." Because it wasn't him who failed her. It was *me*.

I need to say something. All the words are there, but they're trapped, and fuck my brain, fuck my inability to speak when I need to. I *hate* it. I *hate* it. I *hate* it.

"The church choir sang 'Lean on Me' at his funeral," she cries. "The whole town was there. Every single person. It was beautiful, Leo. How many people he touched in his life."

I'm still shaking, every part of me, and then a pained sound erupts from somewhere, and I don't realize until her hand takes mine that it came from me.

"He left you some land," she says.

Jesus Christ. I grasp her hand tighter.

"It's not a lot. Just a few acres. I think it was his way of telling you that you were important to him." She pauses a beat. "I'd like to buy it off you."

I shake my head, manage to mutter, "I don't want your money, Mia. You can have it." Then I press the heels of my palms to my eyes, ease the heat building there, and I don't feel like guilt caused the tears. It's something else. Something harder.

It's *mourning*.

"I tried calling you," she whispers, and my eyes drift shut because I know where this is going. "That night, after they, um, they said there was nothing more they could do..."

I find the courage to face her now, and I wonder if I look as much of a mess as she does. Her entire face is wet with tears, eyes red.

“I’m pretty sure you blocked my number and Holden’s... and *Papa’s*, and I just figured...”

“I thought I was doing the right thing.” It’s such a pathetic fucking thing to say, to admit, and *what if...*

She sniffs once, nodding, and says, her voice filled with clarity, “You were.”

“Mia, I—” She cuts me off with a kiss. On the lips. And it steals my breath and holds it hostage. When she pulls away, she smiles, and it’s such a contrast to everything I’m feeling, but I want it. I want that smile and that kiss because I’ve never *stopped* wanting it, but just like that night on her swing seat, I know what this means. And when she stands, I look down at my feet and be the first to actually say it. “Goodbye, Mia.”

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CHAPTER FIFTY-EIGHT

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MIA

WHEN I LEAVE for the airport the next day, the receptionist behind the desk catches me just before I hit the exit. “Sorry, Miss Kovács. Someone dropped this off for you early this morning.” She’s holding out an envelope, and so I take it and thank her. I wait until I’m in the car before tearing it open. Inside is a sheet of paper ripped from a notebook, folded in thirds. Held on by sticky tape is a single pale-yellow flower.

*My mom’s up there with him. She spends her days hugging him and fussing over him and loving on him just like you would. I know...
because I have faith.*

CHAPTER FIFTY-NINE

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LEO

I'D SPENT MANY, many hours discussing what to expect at the academy with Misty, so when it actually came time to being there, I was prepared. The first week flew by, and before I knew it, it was Friday afternoon. Even though the academy offered housing, I knew from my time living in the dorms at NC State that I'd rather put my head through a brick wall than go through that again. So, it was an easy decision to rent a one-bedroom apartment at one of those long-term places nearby. Luckily, I'd been working with Dad the past year and a half and had enough money saved that I didn't have to rely on him to make it happen.

The plan is for me to go home every weekend. Leave Friday night and come back Sunday. I wanted to be there as much as possible. For Logan, mainly, but everyone else, too. It's true what they say—tragedy really does bring people closer.

I'd done *okay* with the first week's work. I'd love to say *well*, but the truth is, I was distracted. And how could I not be? The day before I left to settle in at the apartment, I went to see Mia, and it went about as well as slicing off my own balls. Painful and irreversible. I assume. I haven't done it. Yet. So yeah, she's been on my mind—a lot. And so has John and even Holden. The strange thing is that even though things ended so fucking horribly with my time there, when I think of them, I can only see the good times and hear the laughter we shared. And there was a lot of it. The first summer, after Mia left, John took Holden and me to one of his poker nights with a bunch of his friends. They were all old, like John. It was at Philip's house, his friend who took him to Tennessee, and man, Philip was something else. He told Holden and me about his days in the military and all the women he'd "nailed" from his uniform alone. Swear, Holden considered enlisting just on that fact alone. The best, or maybe worst, part was John had bought homemade *grappa*. Fifty percent alcohol. He made me promise I wouldn't tell my dad and made Holden do the same. It didn't end well. Poor Philip probably still has remnants of my puke, as well as Holden's, in his bathroom. I don't think I ever saw a deck of cards once.

As I GET into my truck in the underground garage and press my keycard to the gate access panel, memories of John invade my mind, causing my heart to fill with the heaviness of grief. I get out onto the road, and the afternoon sun blazes through my irises. I drop the visor, and that's when I see it, the picture of the water tower Mia had given me. It's my reminder, my reason. If I turn right, I'll be home.

I flick on the blinker.

And I turn left.

It takes an hour and a half to see the Welcome sign, the population now 208. This time, I don't make up stories of births or immigrants finding a new home. I feel like a stranger here, and I don't think I have the right. I pass green pasture after pasture until I pass Holden's dad's driveway and keep going. When the familiar, aged wooden fence comes into view, I smile. I can't help it. I slow when I see the house, my grin getting wider when I realize nothing has changed. Mia didn't mention who lives here now, and I know she flew in from New York, so I know she doesn't. The house and the surroundings are kept, so I assume someone is either occupying it, or Mia's dad is paying for someone to keep it this way. I don't know what I'd prefer. Not that it matters. There are no trucks in the driveway, and all the curtains are drawn, so I risk pulling in, just to... I don't know... *look around*? The first thing I notice is the porch, of course, and it's exactly how I left it, how I *made* it.

I climb out of the truck and stretch my back, noticing the tire swing that has Mia and Holden's names etched into the rubber. Then I make my way to the porch and climb the steps, light on my feet. I check out the carved letters on the railings. Everything is the same, even the air that fills my lungs, expanding them for what feels like the first time since Mia showed up at my house. The porch swing is still here, but the rocking chairs aren't. On the railing, there are a bunch of rocks, all different shapes and sizes, and I wonder why and how they got there. I don't have a lot of time to consider this before a flash of blue floats through my vision—a woman's walking around the side of the house in a long, light blue dress. A straw hat covers her head, gardening gloves on her hands. I grimace because I didn't think anyone would be here, and now I have to explain why I'm standing on the porch, practically looking through the windows. "Can I help you?" she asks, and she has gardening shears in her hand. She doesn't look scared, though. Not even worried. She's smiling. *Weird*. She stops at the bottom of

the porch, looking up at me. At my silence, she stands a little taller and looks around. “Are you lost?”

I shake my head, find my voice. “I’m sorry, ma’am. I, uh...” What the hell do I say? “I used to know the man who lived here, and I—”

“You knew John?” Her eyes twinkle at the mention of his name.

“Yes, ma’am.”

Her gaze drops then, and then moves back up as she sets the shears on the bottom step of the porch. She removes her gloves and sighs heavily. “I’m sorry, but John’s no longer with us.”

“Oh.” She thinks I’m here to see him. “No, I know. I just...” I shrug, then shove my hands in my pockets. “Sorry to disturb you. I’ll go.”

I start down the steps, but she places her hand on my forearm lightly, and when I look at her, she’s smiling again. But it’s sad. *So sad.* “Sometimes, when we remember people, we just like to be around them. Is this... is this your way of doing that?” She’s scanning my face, as if she sees something there she recognizes but can’t pinpoint. I do the same with her; only I know what I see. She dresses like my mom, talks like her, too. Or at least the parts of her I remember. She’s probably close to the same age as my mom when she passed.

I offer another shrug because it seems like the only thing I can do. “I guess so, yeah.”

She nods at that. “Why don’t you come in?”

“It’s okay. I don’t want to put you out.”

She lets out a small giggle as she makes her way up the steps. “Any friend of John’s is a friend of mine.” I don’t even realize that I’ve followed her up the steps until she turns to me with her hand on the doorknob. “I’m Tammy, by the way.”

The name jolts a memory, and it takes me a moment to figure it out. “Your Holden’s mom?”

Her eyes widen, just a tad. Then she checks herself, starts opening the door. “I am. So you’re a friend of my son’s, too?”

I shrug. *Again.* “I’m more a friend of Mia’s.”

She freezes one step inside the house and turns to me. She looks at me, *really* looks at me, and does that face-scanning thing again. After a few seconds, she steps to the side, letting me into the house.

I step one foot in, and there’s no blast of nostalgia because, unlike the outside, the inside has changed dramatically. All the furniture is new, just

like the kitchen. It's what Laney would call "farmhouse chic." But we're in a farmhouse, and all this stuff is manufactured to *look* rustic, and I don't know how I feel about it. Not that I have a say.

"I'm sorry, what did you say your name was?" Tammy asks, and I trail my eyes to hers.

"I didn't."

Her smile is flat.

"It's Leo." I offer her my hand, and she shakes it.

I'm well aware that she won't stop looking at me, waiting for some form of recognition to hit. Mia's told me they were close, and maybe she knows more about me than she's letting on. So I add, "Preston," and gauge her reaction to see if that hits home.

Nothing.

"How do you know Mia?" she asks, making her way toward the fridge. She motions for me to sit at the island, and so I do.

I say, watching as she pulls out a jug of what I assume is lemonade, "She spent a couple of summers with my family. Her mom was our nanny."

She slams the jug down on the counter harder than necessary and cocks one eyebrow. "Virginia?"

I nod.

"Hmm," is all she says. "So, how do you know John?"

"I spent a couple of summers here, just helping fix up the house."

She nods, her eyes distant, slowly piecing the puzzle together. "And that's how you met Holden?"

"Yes, ma'am." I sit taller as she pours two glasses to the brim. "How is he, by the way?"

"He's good," she says, and I can hear the pride in her voice. "He's in Boston. He'll be graduating this year, and then God knows what he'll do after."

I crack a smile.

"What about you, Leo?" she asks, carefully pushing the glass toward me. "What do you do?"

I take a sip, and before I get a chance to answer, the front door opens. I spin around, just in time to see Mia drop a bag full of groceries by her feet. "Dang it!" she whispers, crouching down to collect her shopping. There are cracked eggs splattered out of the bag, oranges rolling everywhere, and flour scattered all over the place.

I hop off the stool to help, bending down in front of her. My heart thumps harshly against my ribcage because I was *not* expecting to see her.

Or maybe I was.

Maybe she's the reason I'm here.

"What are you doing here?" she whispers in a hiss, her teeth clamped, jaw tense.

When I chance a peek over at her, her face is red, eyes wet. "Sorry," I say, getting to my feet. "I didn't know..." Didn't know what? That she'd be here? That she'd be pissed that I'm here?

Mia stands to full height now, while Tammy takes over cleaning the mess on the floor. She moves to the other side of the island with whatever products she managed to salvage and dumps them in the sink. She runs the tap before turning to me, her arms crossed, eyes everywhere, all at once.

"Mama, mama, look!" I hear from behind me and spin around to see a little boy, around four or five, running up the porch steps. Behind him is a man I recognize as Mia's dad. He looks different from the last time I saw him. Maybe it's the lack of a suit, or perhaps it's his smile. It all clicks then. Mia's dad, Holden's mom... the need for the divorce papers. He's getting remarried.

The little boy swings the screen door open, and I notice the bucket in his hand. He lifts it with both hands and yells, "Mama, look!"

I stare down at Tammy, waiting for her response.

But the response doesn't come from her. It comes from behind me. "What have you got there, buddy?" Mia asks, voice soft, sweet.

Like her.

I *feel* her move, stepping around me, but I can't stop looking at the boy.

"I got rocks," he tells her, his light brown eyes bright when she stoops down to his level. "Papa and me went to the creek."

"I can see that," she laughs quietly, shifting his dark hair out of his eyes. "Papa let you get all dirty, huh?"

"Sorry," says Mia's dad, stepping into the house. He quickly glances at me but doesn't seem to care that there's a stranger in the room. And that stranger is in the middle of a panic attack and it's taking everything in me to just... *be*.

"I got this one for Uncle Holden," the boy says, taking a rock from the pocket of his denim overalls. "Can we send it to him tomorrow?"

“We sure can. I bet he’ll love this one,” Mia says, inspecting it closer. Then she seems to look at everyone, all at once, before going back to her son. She rubs her hands up and down his forearms, then looks over at me. “Benny, this is Mama’s friend, Leo. Say hi.”

Benny.

Benny lifts a hand and smiles wide, revealing all his baby teeth. “Hello, sir.”

I raise my hand in return, but I don’t do anything else. I can’t. And it doesn’t matter that everyone’s looking at me, waiting for a verbal response. I literally can’t breathe. How the fuck can I speak?

Mia turns back to her son. “Why don’t you go with Papa and Tammy, so they can give you a bath?”

“Bubbles?” he squeals, dropping the bucket.

He starts to run toward the bathroom, but Mia’s dad picks him up. “Better not have you traipsing mud through the house, kiddo.”

In reality, all of this happens in less than a minute. In my mind, it was all in slow motion, from the second Mia walked in until right now, when it’s just me and her standing in the kitchen. Me, looking at her. Her, looking anywhere but at me. I finally speak. “How old is he, Mia?”

She looks up, meets my eyes for the first time since she walked in. “We both know that’s not the question you really want to ask, Leo.”

I swallow every single emotion that ever existed. “Is he mine?”

“Yes.”

CHAPTER SIXTY

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MIA

“MAMA, why is that man walking up and down and up and down?” Benny’s standing at the living room window, looking out between the curtains, and he turns to me, his dark eyebrows pinched in the center.

“What man?” I ask, mindlessly cleaning the kitchen. I didn’t get much sleep last night, for obvious reasons, and I’m really not in the mood for a visit. Whenever we’re in town, people seem to flock to the house just wanting to check in and talk about Papa. Most days I don’t mind it. Today—it’s the last thing I want.

We’ve had a lazy morning, Benny and me, and we’re both still in pajamas even though it’s close to midday. “The man from yesterday.”

Before I can even begin to panic, the buzzer of the intercom goes off. Why we need an intercom when I’m in the barn and Dad and Tammy are in the main house, mere yards away and we have cell phones, I have no idea. Dad said it would be easier for Benny to communicate with them. He can’t even reach the dang thing. Reluctantly, I hit the answer button, already knowing what’s coming. “Honey?” It’s Tammy. “Leo’s here to see you.”

Crap.

Crud.

Fuck.

I wasn’t expecting to see him, at least not this soon. Yesterday, after he asked me if Benny was his and I answered in truth, his initial reaction was anger. I saw it flare in his eyes. Actually, it was his only reaction. Right before he stormed out the door, got into his truck and peeled out of the driveway.

“Should I bring him over?” Tammy asks, and I can barely hear her over the thumping of my heart.

“No. I’ll, um... I’ll go there.” Whatever conversation Leo wants to have, I don’t want to have it here, and definitely not in front of my son.

Our son.

BEFORE LEAVING THE BARN, I get dressed quickly and help Benny do the same. And then we make our way to the main house. I don't know if he's holding my hand or I'm holding his, but I'm grateful for it. I need strength right now, and he's always been the one to give me that. Leo turns when he hears the barn door open, then looks away. Even when we climb up the stairs, still holding hands, Leo won't look at us. Or, more specifically, he won't look at Benny. I open the door and tell Benny I'll be right back. He's already climbing all over Dad, laughing, completely unaware that his fate might be in question.

I'm scared. I'm not ashamed to admit it. I'm terrified of what Leo's presence means. Even though I've thought about this moment so often, and I thought I was prepared; it's clear that I'm not.

When I close the door, Leo says, his tone flat, "We need to go somewhere and talk."

HE STILL HAS that rage in his eyes, the one from yesterday, only now it's all over him. His muscles are stiff, guarded, and we're only in his car for a total of five minutes. He drives us down the dead-end road that leads to the cliff edge that he nearly drove us over all those years ago. When we get to the end, he stops, kills the engine, and then gets out. He didn't say a single word on the drive. I try to hide my fear before stepping out, following him to the rear of the truck. He's sitting on the tailgate, the heels of his palms rubbing at his eyes.

I say, because I feel I like I need to say *something*, "Have you slept?"

He looks up now, the rage gone from those blue-blue eyes, and he just looks... *worn*. As if he's been to hell and back and then hell again and this... this is his version of hell. "Could you, if you were me?" There's no bite in his tone, no malice.

It takes way more effort than it should to climb the bed, and Leo has to help me up by tugging on my arm. In any other situation, I would've laughed or thought it was one of those adorable moments between couples. Now, and with Leo and me, it just seems pathetic. I don't sit beside him. I go all the way in, my back to the side of the bed, facing him. I want to see his face, every reaction, every emotion.

"I'm trying really fucking hard not to lose my shit right now, Mia," he grinds, his eyes shifting to mine. "How could you not fucking tell me?"

“What? Like, *call* you?” I snap back.

“That’s weak, and you know it.”

Weak? That single word sets me off. “I couldn’t even call you because you fucking blocked me and everyone around me out of your life! And you expect me to come crawling to you with a baby knowing you wanted nothing to do with me?”

“That’s not fair, Mia!”

“None of this is *fair!*” I almost shout, and I hate the tears burning behind my eyes.

“It’s not like you don’t know where I live! You could’ve come to my house!”

“No, I couldn’t!” I shake my head, fast, furious. “I couldn’t bring myself there, Leo. I just... I *couldn’t*.” My voice cracks on the last word, and maybe he was right. Maybe I am *weak*.

“You were there last week! We *talked* and—”

“And what was I supposed to say? I’m happy your life is going great, and you’re getting everything you ever wanted! Good luck at the academy! I know how hard you worked to get there! Oh, by the way, you have a four-year-old son!”

“Yes! *Exactly* that!”

I stare at him, and he stares back, and I don’t know where the heck to go from here. Breaths shallow, I break our eye contact and look down at my lap, fiddling with the threads of my torn jeans. I could tell him a thousand lies, and it wouldn’t be right. Or I could tell him the truth and surrender to all our wrongs. “You don’t understand, Leo. It got worse. After Papa died, my disease... the bulimia, it took hold of me, and I couldn’t...” I wipe at my tears, refusing to look at him. The knot in my chest makes it hard to speak, but I find my strength in the heart of a little boy we created and push on. “I was so consumed with grief and anger and pain and I... I was already four months along by the time I found out I was pregnant. I can’t even think about the damage I’d done to my own body in *four months*, and somehow, he was still there, and he was still fighting and I...”

“Mia,” Leo sighs, and I look up at him, his eyes glassy from his withheld tears.

“He forced me to get my shit together and turn my life around. For him. For me.” I take a breath, try to settle my breathing. “It was the first time I didn’t question or hesitate or wonder if I was deserving. For my entire life, I

never really knew who I was or what I wanted, but I *wanted* him. I *needed* him. And that might be the most selfish thing to admit out loud, but it's the truth." I pause a beat, then add in a whisper, "I didn't want you to resent him," I whisper.

"Mia, you know me better than that," he says quietly.

"I wasn't in the right headspace," I admit, my eyes struggling to hold his. "To me, back then, you walked away when things got hard and never once looked back. I didn't want to force him on you when you wanted nothing to do with me. It would be me with my parents all over again, and Benny—he doesn't deserve that."

Leo sucks in a sharp breath, his eyes darting to the side before coming back to me. "It's been over four years. I just... I don't understand how you could've gone that long and not once thought about how this would impact me."

"I did. I *do*," I rush out, trying to keep the tears at bay. "Of course I think about you. Every day I look at him, and I see you, Leo. He has—"

"Don't," he cuts, his tone final. "I'm not ready to talk about him, Mia. You and me, I can deal with but—" He huffs out a breath, his cheeks puffing with its force. Then he throws his head back, his eyes on the sky, darting everywhere, all at once.

I open my mouth to speak, but my phone rings, cutting me off. Dad's name flashes on the screen, and I'm quick to answer. "Hello?"

"Mama, are you coming back soon?" Benny practically shouts into the phone.

Leo lowers his gaze, listening. Always listening.

"Um. I'm not sure, bud."

"I'm making Benny's world-famous burgers!" he yells, but it comes out *boigas*.

I watch Leo frown as he looks at the phone in my hand.

"Mama?"

"Yeah." I push down the lump in my throat. "I'll come home now. Can't miss your world-famous burgers!"

"Kay! Bye, Mama!" He hangs up before I can respond, and Leo's eyes catch mine.

"I'll take you back," he says, hopping off the truck. He starts to walk to the driver's side before pausing, then turning back to offer me his hand to get down. I take it, ignoring how his touch has *always* made me feel, and let

him lead me to the passenger side. He waits until I'm seated and my belt is on before closing the door.

The drive back to the house is just as quick as the drive to the cliff edge. He pulls in the driveway and cuts the engine, then turns to me. "I don't know what to do here, Mia."

I face him. "I don't know, either."

He heaves out a breath, looks out the windshield. "Do you think," he starts, before grasping his hair, making it stick up in all directions. "Will you send me a picture of him?"

I contemplate this for all of one second. "Will you unblock my number?"

He grabs his phone from the center console, and, shaking his head, he taps at a few buttons, then nods to go ahead.

I send him one I'd taken only a few days ago. Benny's sitting on a rug in the field with a bucket full of rocks, his eyes wide, smiling as he shows me his latest finds. Leo stares at the picture—seconds, minutes. I don't know how long. His thumb strokes over the glass of the screen, and when he finally looks away, he looks right at me, his eyes glazed. "Did you ever collect rocks?" he asks, and it's such an odd question, it takes me a moment to comprehend.

"No." I shake my head. "He just started doing it one day, and now he's obsessed. He has this book of—"

"Rocks and minerals?"

I nod.

He looks back at the picture. "He has your eyes," he says, and then quickly shuts off his phone and throws it back in the console. He sucks in a breath, his hands tight on the steering wheel.

I tell him, "I don't expect anything from you, Leo. You don't have to be a part of his life."

"Mia..."

"Nobody knows you're his father," I say. "I mean, after yesterday, Tammy suspects *something*, but my dad doesn't know. Holden is the only one, and he's never said a word. It's not like we're struggling financially, so you can walk away without any guilt or shame..."

"I *can't* walk away."

I shake my head. "I don't want you to feel like you *need* to be here, Leo."

“That’s not what I meant,” he mutters, almost agitated.

I sigh, looking through the kitchen window at Benny standing on a stool at the island watching Dad use a knife. I ask, throwing caution to the wind, “Did you want to come in and meet him?”

Leo’s eyes meet mine again with emotion so heavy I wish I could decipher it. “I want to, Mia. *So bad*. But I don’t think I’m ready.”

“Okay, that’s fine,” I’m quick to say, to *soothe*. I start to get out, but the warmth of his palm on my forearm stops me.

“Can I call you?” Before I can respond, he adds, “I just... I’m going to need someone to talk to, and I don’t think I can bring this to my family yet, and I know I’m not making this easy, and *I’m sorry*.”

“Don’t be sorry.” I frown, leave the door open, and settle back in the seat to face him. “This is a lot for you, Leo. You need time to process everything before you make any decisions.” And then I add, because I *need* to, “I’m sorry, too.”

He exhales, so long and slow, it’s as if he’s held his breath since the moment he found out. “Come here,” he says, tugging me to him. He holds me, his hand on the back of my head, and it’s a million fleeting emotions all wrapped in one embrace. “We’re going to be okay,” he says, kissing the top of my head. “I just need time.” He pulls away. “Will you give me that?”

I nod, and it takes everything in me not to kiss him like I did on our last goodbye, because: “I’ll give you forever, Leo.”

CHAPTER SIXTY-ONE

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LEO

I DIDN'T LOOK at the time when I left Mia's, so I don't know how long it takes me to get here. I do know that I had to turn around at least four times because I couldn't focus for shit. By the time I park the truck, the sun's already set. I stand on the front porch, my hand raised to knock, but I hesitate. Because I don't know what the fuck I'm doing here. I don't know what to say or *how* to say it. On the drive here, I'd run through the conversation in my head over and over. So many words flicked through my mind. Some were complete sentences. Some were explanations. Some were even apologies.

I suck in a breath, hold it. Then knock on the door. "It's open!" my sister shouts, and so I open the door of her cabin. Some acres away, on the same property, is the main house, where *Dad* is, and I'm way too scared to face him just yet. He's going to look at me beaming, proud that I made it through the first week of the academy unscathed, and he won't even realize that of all his kids—I'll be his biggest disappointment.

Cameron, Lucy's husband, is on the floor of their living room, holding their daughter in the air and making airplane noises as he swings her from side to side. He's still in his suit from work, his tie loose around his neck. Lucy is beside him, reaching up to tickle Katie's belly. Katie giggles the way babies do, the kind that makes you smile even though you feel dead inside. Which is exactly how I feel as I watch them. I could've had this—I think, just for a second—but I wouldn't have been coming home from work. I'd be coming home from *high school*, and then college...

"Leo, what's wrong?" Lucy asks, sitting up, her eyes narrowed, worried.

I haven't said a word, but she knows me. Besides Mia, she knows me better than anyone. After giving Katie a quick kiss, she's on her feet and moving toward me. Her hand grasps mine, her neck craned to look up at me, and I stare down at her, my big little sister. She's so much like my mother; it hurts. "I..." I can't even get the words out.

Her chest rises with her inhale, and she lets it out through her nose, nodding once. And then she takes my hand, and I'm back outside, and she's

rubbing my back, saying, “Breathe, Leelee. Just *breathe*.”

I hadn’t realized I wasn’t, so I inhale as much air as my lungs can handle while she leads me to the bench seat underneath the oak tree in her front yard. It’s dark out, the only light coming from the house and the moon. I hear the sounds of Cameron cooing and Katie laughing, and my jaw tightens. I crack my knuckles, one by one, and look down at the ground. Lucy never stops rubbing my back. She doesn’t speak. She just waits. And I know that she’d wait all night and all day if that’s what it takes. I realize now that all the practice I did in the car was pointless, because all the words were jumbled, and at no point did I decide how to start. I try to crack my knuckles again, but nothing comes. A ragged breath falls out of me, filling the silence between us, and her hand just keeps moving, up and down, up and down. I wish I could check out of this moment—for just a minute, so I can focus on what I need to say, to reveal, but I can’t. “Mia has a son,” I blurt out.

Lucy’s hand stills on my back momentarily before moving again. “Oh?” It’s a question. Like, *why am I even telling her this?* I look over at her, and whatever she sees in my eyes—the pain, hurt, longing, agony, confusion—has her repeating, “Oh.” Except this time, it’s a statement, an understanding.

“He’s four.”

She removes her hand from my back and reaches for my hand, her face shifting forward, looking at the blank space in front of us. “So... you would’ve been...?”

“Eighteen,” I say, watching her. “She was seventeen. It was right before senior year. I stayed on her grandpa’s farm, and she was there...”

“So, it was, like, a summer fling?”

“No,” I’m quick to respond. “God, no, Lucy.” For some reason, it hurts that she thinks that. Like, it takes away everything that Mia and I were, and I *hate* it. “I’ve loved her since I was thirteen.”

“Oh, Leo,” she sighs, the romantic in her looking at me with those pitiful eyes, and I don’t know what I hate more.

“We only did it twice.” It’s a stupid thing to say, but it’s been on my mind ever since the bomb was dropped on my lap. “We used protection both times.”

“It only takes one time, and no protection is a hundred—”

"I know, Luce," I cut in, and it comes out harsher than I intended. Obviously, *I know*, and I don't mean to be frustrated with her. I'm just... I don't know how the fuck to feel right now.

"Why didn't she tell you? I mean, she *didn't* tell you, right?"

I shake my head. "I found out last night."

"Jeez, Leo. It just..."

"Just what?" I ask, facing her.

"It just doesn't make sense, I guess," she says, her voice low. "If you loved her and I assume she felt the same, why couldn't you..."

I try to pick my next words carefully. Try to find a way to arrange them so I can defend my actions, but the truth is... I *can't*. "I found out she was sick, and I got scared and ran away. I blocked her number and everyone associated with her, and I... I broke all contact." I pause a beat, knowing how bad this makes me sound. "I thought I was doing the right thing."

Lucy takes a moment to process all this, and when she looks at me, I can see the mountain of questions in her eyes alone. She wants all the answers, and I don't have many, but I'll give her what I know. "What are you going to do, Leelee?"

"I don't know, Luce." My voice cracks, and I try to fight back my emotions. My fear. "I don't fucking know."

She's quiet a minute, then, speaking through the knot in her throat, she asks, "What's his name?"

"Benny." I choke on the word.

"Benjamin?"

I shrug. "I guess."

"Katie and Benny," she muses. "They're cousins, you know?"

I stare at her, unblinking. And then I break. In the arms of my sister, I fall apart. And I don't care that I'm twenty-three, that I'm almost twice the size of the woman holding me, keeping me together. It's as if the weight of the past two days has finally caught up with me, and I process every emotion, one by one. Beyond the hurt and the anger and the chaos, there's something else. Something more. "It's going to be okay," she assures. "I promise." She strokes my hair as I rest my head on her shoulder, her tears *for me*. "And I'm right here. Whatever you need, Leelee."

LUCY and I sit on the bench for another hour, neither of us saying a word. Eventually, she asks about the academy, about my apartment, and how I'm doing with *everything else*, and I know it's her way of placating my insecurities. There are two things Lucy can do that none of my brothers can: read an entire book in one sitting, and read *me*. She knows I needed to get my mind off Mia and Benny.

Benny.

I've never known a Benny, a Ben, or a Benjamin, and saying his name in my head is strange. Saying it out loud and knowing he's a part of me is even stranger.

After I give Lucy some words resembling answers, she's quiet again. Minutes pass, and we stare ahead, and then she asks, hesitantly, "Are you sure he's yours?"

I take out my phone and show her the picture Mia had sent me.

I hear the exact moment my sister's breath hitches, and I already know what's coming before she even opens her mouth. "Jesus, Leo. Take away the color of his eyes, and he's *you*."

I shove the phone back in my pocket and don't bother hiding my despair. "I'm so fucking scared," I admit.

"It's a lot to—"

"I love him, Lucy," I cut in. "I already love him so much, and I'm terrified of hurting him."

CHAPTER SIXTY-TWO

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MIA

“I CAN SEND you the mock-ups, but I don’t know if they’re what you’re after. I’m happy to keep working on it,” I say into the phone. On the other side of my office desk, Dad narrows his eyes, shakes his head at me.

With my facial expression alone, I tell him to *stop it*.

“Okay, I’ll send the link to the shared file now,” I say. “Have a good day. Bye.” I hang up and raise a finger at my dad, telling him to wait while I put together the email. Once I hear the *whooshing* sound of the email sending, I glance up at him. “I know.”

“You have to be tougher, Mia Mac.”

I sigh, my shoulders dropping. “I’m trying,” I mutter, deflated. “It’s not like it’s numbers and analytics.” I shrug. “I feel like I’m putting a part of me out there to be judged.”

“It’s exactly what you’re doing,” he says, his large frame shifting forward. “And you shouldn’t be worried because your work is *good*, Mia. It’s better than good.”

My lips thin to a line as I look behind him. Through the glass walls of my office, I catch Dad’s employees walking by, glancing in, only to realize that *the* Joseph Kovács is in here, and they look away quickly, their steps rushed as they flee the scene. If only they knew that his favorite pair of pajamas are sky blue with printed clouds, and he cries every time he watches *A Walk to Remember*...

“You need to be tough, like your dad,” he says, smirking.

I eye him sideways. “Or I could be a b-word like my mom.”

He cringes, sucks in air through his teeth.

I sigh. “I’m not like either of you, you know. I’m like Papa.”

“Oh, Mia. Papa was tough. You think he ran that farm all those years all”—his voice heightens in pitch, mocking me—“you can milk the cows now, but only if you want to, and I guess it’s okay to take a break whenever for however long because, like, you know, it’s all about what you want.”

I shake my head. “Why are you here?”

He chuckles. “See? That’s the kind of toughness I want to see you use. You’ll be running this place one day...” He hesitates. “If you want to.”

It's my turn to mock him. "*If you want to,*" I repeat. "Who's the sucker now?"

He all out laughs at this, getting to his feet. "You want to have lunch together today?"

I quirk an eyebrow, and he already knows my answer. It's hard enough for the people I work with to consider me their colleague, let alone friend, and me—having lunch with their boss's boss's boss? That would only make things worse.

"All right," he says, arms up, palms out in surrender. "No lunch. But make sure you eat, okay? I don't want you skipping meals again." He raises a single eyebrow, and maybe I am more like him than I want to admit.

All humor gone, I answer, "Yes, sir." Because I don't want him to worry about me the way he used to.

Before he gets to the door, my phone rings—my cell, not the office one—and he looks down at it vibrating on the desk. The only people who call me on that are him and Tammy, and Tammy has Benny today. I look down at the phone, my eyes widening, heart skipping a beat when I see Leo's name appear on the screen. "It's okay. It's not them; it's..." I trail off, not knowing what to say.

Dad cracks a smile. "Your gentleman courter?"

A giggle erupts. "Get out!"

"Ooh, you're blushing, Mia!" As far as he knows, Leo is just some guy from home who wants to reconnect with me. He hasn't put two and two together yet, which is weird considering he sees Benny daily, and Benny is *all* Leo. My dad is *clueless*.

The phone stops ringing.

"Shoot," I mutter, then glare at him. "Get out!"

He chuckles. "Want me to lock the door?"

I chew my lip before nodding, and he cracks a knowing smile as he leaves.

Standing, I dial Leo's number and start pacing my office. For some reason, I feel exposed with the stupid glass walls, and so I lower the blinds as the phone rings and rings. "Hello?" Leo answers.

"Hey!" I almost shout, then mentally kick myself. In an attempt to calm my nerves, I close my eyes, focus on breathing. "You called?"

"Yeah..." His voice is a lot quieter than mine. "Um... I'm sorry it's taken me a while to get in touch." It's been ten days. Ten whole days, and

every single time my phone rang, I jumped, thinking it was him.

"It's okay," I say, settling in my chair again. "Like I said, no expectations."

"I hate that you say that," he murmurs, and I feel my chest tighten. "There should be expectations, Mia. I'm his dad."

I release a breath slowly, hoping he doesn't hear it.

"I want to meet him, I do. I just..." He trails off.

"You're not ready?" I ask, just above a whisper. "I understand." I don't know why I'm disappointed. I spent so many years telling myself—*convincing* myself—that I was doing the right thing by not telling Leo. And it's not like I know without a doubt which direction would be best for Benny. I guess it's selfish—to want Leo to be part of his life, because maybe then he'd be a part of mine, even if we were nothing more than parents to our son.

Parents.

Our son.

The words are so foreign, even in my thoughts.

"It's not even that, Mia..." He exhales into the phone. "I just... I feel like I can't give him what I want when I still have so many questions, and I need you to answer them for me." He pauses a beat while my mind spins in circles, and I work my bottom lip until it stings. "I don't want to go into this blindly. I don't want to fuck it up. I feel like I only have one chance to make it right, and I just... I need *you*, Mia. Before you can trust me with him, I feel like I need you to trust me with *you*."

Well. That's a lot to process, and it's not at all what I expected him to feel. And the fact that he's even verbalizing this... "Okay..." I still don't completely comprehend what he means, but *okay* is the best response I can give him.

"I was thinking... maybe we can meet for dinner or something? If you have someone to watch him..."

"Um..." Dinner. Me and him. *Alone*. I can do that. *Right?*

"Or is that not a good idea?"

"No," I'm quick to say. "But... I'm in New York."

"Oh." The single sound seems to go on forever. "You live in New York?"

I'm sure he knew this. "Yeah. I mean, I go back. And forth. But. Here. Mainly. A week a month at Papa's. So, yeah. New York." *Are you there,*

God? It's me, the girl who cannot form a sentence to save my life. What is wrong with me?!

"Well, shit." He's quiet a breath. "See what I mean? I didn't even know that. I knew you flew in from New York before Katie's party, but then I saw you at your grandpa's, so I assumed... I don't know what I assumed. There's so much I don't know..."

I'm not sure how to respond, so I tell him, anxiety crawling through my chest, "I can fly down—"

"You don't have to—"

"No. I will." It's the least I can do. I'm already tapping at my keyboard, looking at flights. "When are you free?"

"During the week, I'm in Charlotte."

"Well, I usually fly into Charlotte, so that works."

He clears his throat, and I imagine him standing, leaning against something, looking down at the ground, his legs crossed at the ankles. "So... when's the earliest you can get here?"

"I mean, technically, I could get there tonight."

"That works."

"Really?"

"I'll text you my address."

CHAPTER SIXTY-THREE

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LEO

I AM... *screwed*.

I woke up this morning, and the first thing on my mind was Benny. The second was Mia. It was the same way it's been ever since I found out. While in the shower, I somehow convinced myself that today would be the day I'd call, and I'd tell her how I felt. Kind of. Yes, I wanted Mia to trust me with something so important to her, especially since my go-to reaction to extreme life-changing news is to run like a little bitch. But, I was also fighting my own internal demons. Guilt was one of them—that shitty motherfucker. And the other was the question of my self-worth. Because the truth is—I'm not ready. I'm literally in my third week of the police academy, and sure, I have a job lined up for me once I graduate—if I graduate—but that asshole sweater-vest was right. Law enforcement pays shit. And I know it's not about the money because Mia's dad is loaded, but he's not Benny's father.

I am.

There's also that little problem of me still living in my childhood home. Because that screams *parenthood*. Not.

I'm twenty-three years old, and I thought I was on track, and now I'm at a crossroads, and I don't know what the fuck to do.

And all of this doesn't even include the questions of what happens *after*.

I have so many questions, and they've all been trapped in my head for eleven days with just me, myself, and I to come up with answers. Only I don't have them. Mia does. And so I asked her to meet me. And now she's on her way, and

I.

Am.

Screwed.

I ponder exactly how screwed I am as I close the fridge door, realizing I have absolutely nothing to actually *serve* her for the dinner she *flew in* to attend. I eat grilled chicken and steamed vegetables every night, and it's not exactly... exactly what? Romantic? That's not what I'm going for, I think.

What do you serve someone when you don't care if they like what they eat because you just want them to talk, tell you every detail of the past five years, and how they envisage the next five years?

I'm overthinking it. I know I am. But before I can over-overthink it, my phone buzzes with a text. It's Mia. And she's right outside.

CLUTCHING an overnight bag in both hands, Mia stands in the foyer of the apartment complex in a dark gray sweater, a pair of black jeans with rips on the thighs, and black *heels*. Air gets trapped in my chest when she first turns to me, those light brown eyes a contrast to what she's wearing. Her hair is down today, waves upon waves, and there are a lot of things I wasn't prepared for tonight. Seeing her in person is *definitely* one of them.

She smiles, and it's like a valve in my throat, releasing the air slowly. "Hi," she says, raising a hand.

"Hey." I'm in gray sweatpants and a navy-blue shirt I've had for eleventy-three years, and I feel inadequate as I walk toward her, taking her bag from her. "I'm up on the fifth floor," I tell her, at the same time she says, "You don't have to carry..."

I'm already leading us to the elevator, my back to her, and I'm nervous. *Fuck, I'm so nervous*. I haven't felt like this since I texted her to tell her that I wanted her to be mine in my fifteen-year-old way.

Since I'd only just left the elevator to get her, we don't have to wait for the cart, and so we step in, stand on opposite sides, and stare at each other. "This is nice," she says, looking around. But we're literally in a seven-by-seven-foot box, and there's nothing to see. But there's everything to *feel*. My pulse beats against my ribs, as if it's trying to escape, while Mia chews her thumb, looks down at my chest, and then back up to my eyes. And it hits me then; she's as nervous as I am. At the thought, a chuckle bubbles out of me, and I roll my eyes. "I've known you for ten years, Mia, and you still do crazy things to my heart."

Her eyes widen, and I realize what I've said.

I don't take it back.

Besides, if I want the truth from her tonight, it's only right that I give her the same.

I USE the keycard to unlock the door of my apartment and hold it open for her to step inside. She looks around, but there's not much to see: couch, television, a small kitchen and eating area, and two doors. One leads to the bedroom, the other to the bathroom. I set her bag by the front door and say, "I haven't cooked anything. I'm... not a great cook."

She turns to me, her lips kicked up at the corners. "Well, lucky for you, I am," she says, rolling up her sleeves. Before I can stop her, she's in my kitchen, opening the fridge.

I cringe.

"What do you have?" she calls over her shoulder.

"Chicken, potatoes, and broccoli."

For a moment, she doesn't move, doesn't speak. Then her shoulders begin to shake, and she's laughing. It's silent, but it's there, and when she closes the fridge and turns to me, she's wiping the wetness from her eyes.

"Are you making fun of me?"

"No." She shakes her head, her laughter gone, but her smile still there. "I just imagine you eating grilled chicken and steamed potatoes and broccoli every night."

My eyes narrow, but my lips are twitching to smile.

"It's like the diner all over again. Same meals, all day, every day."

"I'll have you know..." I start, moving around the small counter to get to her. "I've moved on from burgers and—" It's all I can get out before she has her arms wrapped around my waist, squeezing tight. I don't know if it's a hug or a death grip, but I don't get a chance to do anything in response before she's pulling away, looking up at me.

"It's been five years, and you haven't changed, Leo Preston."

"Is that good, or..."

She shrugs, taking a step back and leaning against the fridge. "Question," she says, and this time I smile. Nod. "How are you?"

"I'm..." My heavy exhale fills the space between us. "I'm a wreck, to be honest."

Her head bobs, before tilting to the side. "I'm sorry. I know your life is so full-on right now, and this is the last thing you need."

I chew the corner of my lip, completely aware that her eyes track the motion. "Question."

She smiles. "Go ahead."

Pressing my hip to the counter, I cross my arms, keep my eyes on hers. “Why the fuck do you look so cute right now?”

Her jaw drops, her eyes so wide I’m afraid they’ll fall out. I didn’t mean to say it. The last thing I’d planned was to attempt to flirt with her. What kind of dickhead would I be if I did that? Me. I’m that dickhead. “You can’t say things like that, Leo.”

“Why? You got a boyfriend?” *Shut the fuck up, dickhead!*

“I do,” she says, and something stupid happens in my chest. In my heart. It hurts. “He’s four years old, and his name is Bennett.”

“Bennett?” I repeat.

Mia nods. “Did you think it was Benjamin?”

“I guess, yeah.”

Her nose wrinkles. “The name Benjamin means *Son of my right hand.*”

I bust out a laugh.

“Right?” she says. “It sounds so wrong, like...” She does the universal sign for jerking off, then flushes red, her eyes scanning the room.

I want to reach over and run the backs of my fingers across her cheeks just to feel the heat they emit. I don’t, of course, because that would be ludicrous. “So if Benjamin means that, what does Bennett mean?”

Her eyes meet mine again, gleaming with an emotion I can’t decipher. “Blessed.”

I SUGGEST we order food to be delivered. Mia insists she orders ingredients to cook. I don’t stop her. While we wait for the delivery, we sit on the couch, and we continue the question game, back and forth, back and forth. The questions start light, reminiscent of old friends merely catching up on the years they’ve been apart... until she asks about college. “I got into NC State,” I tell her, and her smile is so broad and so unrestrained that, for a moment, I wish I could capture it and keep it forever.

“That’s what you wanted, right?”

I nod, drop my gaze.

“So did you graduate early, or...?”

“I dropped out midway through junior year.” I meet her eyes again. “There was some stuff that went on at home, and so I had to go back.” I shake my head. “I mean, I didn’t *have to*. I chose to.”

Her gaze searches mine. “Is everything okay?” she asks, and it’s the same look she gave me when I told her about Laney.

“Uh-huh.” I force a smile. “It will be.” I won’t tell her about Logan. It’s not my story to tell.

The food arrives, and Mia busies herself in the kitchen, refusing any of my help. We keep playing the game, only now, I’m asking all the questions. And she answers every one.

She tells me that she learned to cook by taking classes when cabin fever became too much after Benny was born. Tammy was the one who recommended she do it, and even though it was hard for her to be away from Benny after four months of being with him twenty-four-seven, it was a much-needed break. She enjoys cooking, especially since she has a mouth to feed other than hers. She hesitates to disclose that it also helps her mentally—being able to control what goes in her body, not just what comes out.

At the time, Tammy was somewhat living with them. When Mia was eight months pregnant, she started to panic about the actual labor and delivery, and she reached out to Tammy for help. Mia and her dad were already in New York at the time, living in his condo above a hotel. His girlfriend that she mentioned—the one who hated her—bailed on her dad when he finally put his daughter first.

For the few months after her grandpa died, her dad stayed with her at the farm and worked from there. “It wasn’t until...” Mia says, plating up a chicken and mushroom with a red sauce dish. “Until...” She looks up at me, sitting on the other side of the counter, my ears and eyes trained on her. I’ve consumed every word she’s said so far, and I don’t want her to stop. *This*—filling this gap in time is what I need from her, and now she’s locked up.

“Until what?” I urge. “You realized you were pregnant?”

Her eyes glaze with tears, and she blinks them away, setting my plate in front of me. I ignore the food and get off the stool to make my way over to her. Settling a hand on her shoulder, I bend down a little, so I can meet her eyes. “Until what, Mia? What happened?”

She looks up now, her eyes distant, empty. “My dad kicked down the bathroom door and found me passed out on the floor, lying in a pool of my own vomit,” she murmurs, voice straining with agony. “He called an ambulance, and they rushed me to the hospital. That’s how I found out.” Her entire body is tense, her breaths sharp like the edges of a knife piercing

into my heart, making me weak. I try not to picture her in that state, physically and emotionally. Bile rises up my throat, and I swallow it down.

“Mia...” It’s all I can get out.

She steps back, away from my touch, and blinks hard. Just once. “There’s nothing wrong with him,” she states, finding strength from within.

“I’m not—”

“I know I made mistakes, Leo, and my biggest one was not taking care of myself when he was inside me, but I swear, there’s nothing *wrong* with him.” A single tear escapes, and she’s quick to wipe it away. “His delivery was quick and relatively painless, and he was the perfect baby. He rarely cried, and he slept through the night within weeks. He was crawling by eight months, walking at thirteen. His first word was *ball*, even though I really hoped it would be *mama*. He eats like a champ—whatever I put in front of him. And he’s polite. He smiles at everyone and everything, and when he laughs—like, *really* laughs—his entire body laughs with him.” She takes a breath, and before I get a chance to speak, she’s saying, “Please don’t be mad at me. I have proof. Pictures and videos. So many videos. And he loves watching himself. His favorite one to watch is from his first haircut. He didn’t move once. Barely even blinked. He thinks it’s hilarious, like he was a robot or something. And he’s smart, Leo. Like, *really* smart, and he likes science experiments. We do them all the time. And he’s—”

“Perfect,” I cut in, my heart heavy. “He’s perfect, Mia,” I whisper, pulling her into me. With her face pressed to my chest, she releases sob after sob, and I mindlessly stroke her hair, my gaze lost, full of images of the past, the present, the *future*. I kiss the top of her head. “And so are you.” Her breaths stall, and then she’s pulling away, looking up at me, her eyes filled with liquid hope. I press another kiss to her forehead. “When can I meet him?”

CHAPTER SIXTY-FOUR

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MIA

I CAN FEEL his eyes on me as my fingers tremble, trying to fight the nerves swarming through me. So far, I've managed to hide it well enough, keeping my hands busy and the conversation light, and then *trigger*.

Dang it!

It came out of nowhere, and I wasn't prepared. I guess the one good thing about being in that emotional state is that I don't have time to overthink my responses. I lay it all out there, bare and exposed, and if there's anyone and any subject I *should* be like that with, it's Leo and Benny.

We sit side by side at the kitchen counter now—Leo forcing me to eat before the food gets cold—while I go through the calendar in my phone searching for the next chance to bring Benny down. Being on my phone while stuffing my face has given my mind something else to focus on other than my meltdown. “Crud,” I mutter, and Leo chuckles.

“Still with the no-swearing thing, huh?” I narrow my eyes at him, and he's smirking, motioning his head toward my phone. “When?”

“I have a project that's due late next week, so I'll be slammed with work until then. I can bring him that weekend, though.”

Leo nods, thinking, and then a slow smile spreads across his lips. “That works well for me. I have to go to—” He breaks off. “Just... *a thing*... with Logan, so...” He focuses on his meal. “Not that Logan's a priority over—”

“I get it,” I cut in. “You don't have to explain.”

We fall silent, my mind circling. Leo's the first to speak. “What do you do? For work, I mean.”

“I work for my dad,” I tell him, holding back an eye-roll, because *of course* I do. I don't think Dad would be happy for me to do anything else. “I work in the graphics and digital marketing departments. Most of it I can do remotely, so I'm not in the office a lot. I spend my days with Benny, and when he's asleep, I work.” I shrug. “It works well, because I can submit my work as part of my course load—”

Leo's head swivels, eyes scrutinizing. “You study, too?”

I nod, suddenly anxious. “It’s distance learning, so it’s 100 percent online. Double degree so I’ll probably graduate the same time Benny does.” I release a nervous giggle, then add lamely, “I don’t miss out on time with Benny. I promise.”

Leo’s sigh is short, sharp. He uses a paper napkin to wipe his mouth, and then dumps it in his now-empty bowl. Pushing it aside, he turns his entire body to me. “So you graduated high school.” It’s not a question.

With a smile and a nod, I say, “Yep. After I found out I was pregnant, Dad moved us back to New York so I could get the best treatment—for my pregnancy and my disease and my grief.” Whoa. That was a lot to reveal in literally once sentence, but I don’t backtrack. And I can see his mind working, processing. “I didn’t board at the school, though, and I think they may have had a few pregnant students before because my being there in that state didn’t seem all that scandalous.”

“Huh,” is all he says.

I smile, recalling the memory. “I walked the stage to get my diploma with an eight-week-old Benny in my arms.”

“Shut up,” he says. “Pic or it didn’t happen.”

A giggle forms in my chest. “I don’t have one in my phone, but I’ll send it to you when I get home.”

He grins, motioning his head toward my food. “Eat,” he orders. And so I do, and he sits and he watches me, and he doesn’t ask anything more.

AFTER DINNER, he grabs a beer from the fridge and offers me one. I accept, and we move from the kitchen counter to the couch. I catch him watching my every move as I slip off my shoes and bring my legs up under me. His mouth parts, ready to say something, but my phone alerts me to an incoming video call. “It’s Benny,” I say. “I have to take it.”

“Of course.”

“Um...” I look around for somewhere private, and Leo must sense what I need, so he points to a large window off the small living room, which I now realize is a sliding door leading out to a narrow balcony. I make my way there, closing the door behind me.

The video call has Benny and me saying goodnight, followed by dozens of blown kisses. Dad's the one to end the call because he knows I'd be there for hours just looking at my son. Before he hangs up, he cracks, winking, "Be safe."

When I get back in the apartment, Leo's just finishing up the dishes. He grabs a dish towel and starts to dry, and so I make my way around the counter and take the cloth from him. "You washed, I dry," I tell him.

"You cooked, I clean," he retorts, his voice low, a somewhat sadness in his tone that has me looking up at him, my gaze questioning.

"You don't want him to know you're here... with *me*?" he asks, but he's not looking at me. He's digging through the drawers for another dish towel. He picks up the pan I'd used to make dinner and starts wiping it down, staring at the now-empty sink.

I focus on the bowl in my hand. It's dry, but I keep drying it anyway. "He doesn't know that you're his... I haven't told him," I admit. "It's just... I want to be sure, you know?" He remains silent. I add, quietly, "And I want *you* to be sure, Leo."

"Yeah," he says through a heavy breath. "I guess."

I hesitate before asking, knowing that his answer could cause me to stumble on my so-called growth, "Have you told your family?"

A single puff of air falls from his lips. "What answer would be best for you?"

The truth, I want to say. Which is this: "This has all been really confusing and... *hard*," I confess. "And I know it will be just as hard on you, if not more so, but knowing that your brothers know and that they're judging me for not telling you, it's just—"

"I haven't told them," he cuts in, and when I look up at him, his eyes are right on mine. After sucking in a breath, he adds, "I told Lucy because I needed to tell *someone*, but she knows not to breathe a word of it to anyone until..."

"Until?"

He shrugs. "Until we're both sure, I guess."

I nod, relieved. "Good."

"But, Mia..." he says, and he's suddenly towering over me. I clasp the bowl tighter. He takes it from my hands and sets it on the counter. "My brothers..." he starts, eyes squinting just a tad, "they're not the same people they were back then." He says this with a determination in his eyes, as if

trying to convince me with that look alone to *trust him*. I do trust him; I just... don't trust my strength when it comes to his brothers. Before I can explain this, Leo says, "And when I say that I'm waiting until we're both sure, it's not about *me* and my wanting to stick around. I'm here, Mia. For you and for Benny—" His lips curve as he says Benny's name. "I'm not going anywhere. I know I've not had the best track record when it comes to dealing with crisis, but this is... this is different, and I need you to know that. I need you to trust that *I'm* not the same person I was back then."

Ever since the moment Leo stood in the kitchen of the farmhouse and Benny walked in, my chest has been tight. I don't think I realized just how much pressure I'd been putting on myself until this very moment. At Leo's words, his *declaration* almost, I feel my lungs physically expand, feel the weight on my shoulders lessen with every second he looks at me.

I'm here, Mia. For you and for Benny. My therapist would tell me that this is one of those moments that I just need to stop, think, and assess. Which is what I do. And what I get out of it is this: all the nerves and the anxiety and hesitation and questions of the unknown... I'm not alone.

I smile at Leo, and as much as I want to hug him, I don't. I ask, leaning back against the counter. "So... did you have questions about Benny?"

Leo nods, his shoulders deflating a couple of inches. "His birthday?"
"April first."

He blesses me with a crooked grin. "That's two days before Katie's."
"I know."

"Full name?"

"Bennett János Kovács."

Leo's grin is gone, replaced with a frown.

I let out a sigh. "When he was born, I considered giving him your last name, but..." I don't elaborate. I *can't*. Saying "it hurt too much" seems so fickle now that we're *here*—at a place I never thought we would be.

Leo licks his lips. "So, your mom—"

"Oh, god," I mutter through a short laugh and an eye-roll.

Leo's smile returns. "It's just, my aunt Leslee? She's a gossip, and she would've mentioned if your mom had said something about Benny."

My shoulders lift, and I make my way back to the living room, saying over my shoulder, "She doesn't know." I sit on the couch, beer back in my hand, and wait for Leo to do the same. He sits down beside me, his arm outstretched on the back of the couch. I press my back to the armrest, facing

him. Once we're settled, I tell him, "When Papa died, I reached out to her with the funeral plans. She said that—" I scoff, bring the beer bottle to my lips and gulp down half the liquid. "She said that she wouldn't be there, that Papa played no significant role in her life."

Leo's eyes flare with anger. "Besides raising her daughter?"

I nod. "She did say to call her if she was in his will."

"I hate her, Mia. I mean... you taught me long ago that hatred is useless, but with her..."

"Oh, she's a toxic b-word," I agree. "Hence why I don't want Benny anywhere near her."

"Smart choice," he says, clinking my beer with his.

I can't help smiling at him, or looking at him. *Appreciating* him. It should be a crime to look as good as he does. I watched him go from a boy, to a teen, to a man, and Leo Preston is *all* man. Chewing my lip, I force my eyes away from his and lower my beer to the coffee table. That's enough for tonight, I think, even though the alcohol has nothing to do with my thoughts. It's been a while since I've had the type of pleasure only he—

I shake those thoughts out of my mind—physically shake my head like an idiot—and feel the blush creep to my neck as he *smirks* over at me.

I realize neither of us has said anything the entire time I've been lost in those thoughts, and I wonder how much time has actually passed. *Crap*. "Anything else?" I rush out. "Questions, I mean. About Benny?" Lord, help me.

"No." He shakes his head, nose scrunched. "Is it weird that I kind of want to get to know him on my own?"

My heart just melted. For real. "No, it's sweet."

"I do have a question though," he says, placing his beer down next to mine. "And I don't know if it's inappropriate."

"You're going to ask it anyway, aren't you?"

"I know you're not seeing anyone now, but in the past?"

"Um..." I pull my hair to one side and work my bottom lip. "I've dated a little," I confess. "It's hard, you know, with a kid and all. Not everyone wants to date a single mother."

"So nothing serious?" he asks.

"There was one."

His lashes lower. "What happened?"

"He got a job offer in Seattle."

“And he took it?”

I nod. “He asked me and Benny to join him, but I said no.”

“Why?” His eyes are hard as they watch my every reaction, soak in my every word.

“Because I didn’t love him enough to change my world for him. After that, there was no point in continuing, especially long distance.”

Leo doesn’t respond to that, but I can sense that he’s deep in thought, and I know exactly what he’s thinking. “We dated for a year. It took five months for me to feel comfortable enough to bring Benny around him, and he and Benny got along really well.”

His throat bobs with his swallow. “Did Benny love him?”

Benny adored Jase, and after the split, he would often ask about him. Luckily, he was too young to truly comprehend what was happening. I don’t respond, which is answer enough. “Are you okay?” I ask, noticing the frown marring his lips.

“I’m not going to lie,” he says through a heavy exhale. “It’s a little painful knowing that some other guy was a father figure—”

“No,” I cut in. “He was never that. The only father figures Benny has are my dad and Holden.”

Leo’s head throws back, landing on the back of the couch. “How much does Holden hate me?”

“He doesn’t,” I assure. “Not even a little bit.”

“Bullshit,” Leo mumbles.

“Holden was your biggest supporter, Leo. From the beginning. He’s who pushed me to trust myself enough to be with you in the first place. And when I told him I was pregnant, he *urged* me to tell you. But, he understood why I couldn’t...”

Leo blows out a breath.

I look down at my lap. “You have every right to be mad at me,” I murmur.

He cracks his knuckles, one by one, and I can feel his eyes on me, so I gather my courage, look up at him. His eyes are clear, *resolute*. “Earlier, when you were talking about school, you were quick to say that you’re not missing out on time with Benny. And before that when you were talking about how you found out you were pregnant, you kept saying that there’s nothing wrong with him, like you’re scared I’m judging you or something.”

My knees bounce, anxious, and heat burns behind my eyes. “Of course I am,” I say, barely a whisper.

“Why?”

“Every decision I’ve ever made since I found out I was pregnant with him has been *for him*, for his best interest, but I’ve never had to justify those choices. It was always just Benny and me, and now there’s you. And it’s important you trust me with him if we... *do this*.”

“Mia...” My name is a sigh... and a curse. He stands, taking my hand. “I want to show you something.” I think he’s leading me to the bedroom, which is wrong on so many levels, but he doesn’t. He takes me to the bathroom and has me facing the mirror. It takes a moment for me to realize what he’s showing me. Above my eye level, stuck on the mirror with tape, is the back of a familiar picture that was once on my wall.

I read the words I’d written so many years ago:

Leo,

God gave you a voice for a reason.

Use it.

Because if you don’t stand for something, then you’ll fall for everything.

I love you,

Mia.

“It’s because of you, Mia,” Leo says, his voice gruff as he stands behind me, his touch gentle on my shoulders. “That’s why I wanted to get into law enforcement... so I could use my voice to stand for something *right*.” His eyes meet mine in the mirror. “You changed my life. Before everything else happened, you changed *me*. You saw something in me no one else did.” His throat moves with his swallow as his hands move from my shoulders down to my arms, and he turns me to him, linking our fingers together. Bending slightly so he can look in my eyes, he says, “I trusted you then, and I trust you now.”

It’s hard to see the emotion in his stare with the tears glazing mine. I ask, because I might be a little insane, “Are you seeing someone?”

Leo blinks, wiping all previous warmth from his eyes. He stands to full height, right before he gives me that cocky smirk I hate to love. “Why? You want to make another Benny?”

I choke on a scoff and roll my eyes, pushing him away from me. “I swear, the things that come out of your mouth.”

Chuckling, he pulls me into him. Not all the way, just enough so I can feel the heat radiating off him. Eyes narrowed slightly, he says, his voice a tremor that makes its way up my spine, “If I recall correctly, you *like* the things that come out of my mouth.” He lowers his lips to my ear, his hands going to my waist, squeezing gently. “And you *really*, really like the things I do with my mouth.”

Oxygen. I need it. Stat. And he has some. So I kiss him. It’s a soft, quick, *chaste* kiss that has my heart hammering against my chest. It doesn’t alleviate even when I pull away. I’m well aware of how dangerous it is to be kissing a boy—no, a man—when we have so much history, and so much of that history determines our future. I panic. Because *of course* I do. “I should go.”

He doesn’t skip a beat. “No.”

I almost laugh. “Excuse me?”

He smirks. “You can’t just keep kissing me and walking away, Mia. Three strikes and you’re out.”

Fair. He has a point. But also: I’m stubborn, and still panicking. My eyes narrow, playfully. “Oh yeah? What are you going to do? Punish me?” I regret my response the second I see his eyes flash with heat. *Oh, no.*

“I would *love* to punish the fuck out of you.” His smirk gets smirkier. “But you like that, don’t you?”

“Shut up!” I shove his shoulder and turn away, trying to hide the crimson I’m positive is staining my cheeks.

“Stay,” he says. “I’ll even let you keep kissing me, since it’s so obvious you can’t control yourself around me.”

“Oh my god,” I murmur.

“Just stay,” he repeats, turning me to him. The smirk is gone. The heat in his eyes, too. “I promise I won’t touch you.”

I chew my lip, hesitant. There’s no possible way this will end well.

“Stay,” he says again, his eyes pleading.

And so I do.

WHEN I GET out of the shower, dressed in the most unflattering pajamas in the history of the world, Leo is sitting up in bed with the bedside light on.

Shirtless.

Reading.

Glasses.

That's the order I notice things.

His eyes flick to mine quickly when I scoot toward the bed, and then he goes back to his book, not looking twice. Which is fine, because it gives me the opportunity to stare at him. The frames of his glasses are thick and black and holy hell... "When did you get glasses?"

He chuckles, closing his book and setting it on the nightstand. "Senior year," he says. "Which, by the way, is an awesome time for people to start calling you four-eyes." He snorts. "I don't *need* them. They just help with reading."

He watches me pull out lotion from my overnight bag and start smearing it all over my arms and legs, one eyebrow cocked the entire time. When I'm done, I crawl into bed, as far away from him as possible. He switches off the light, and it doesn't take long for fatigue to set in. Just as I'm about to fall asleep, I hear him whisper, unsure if he realizes I'm still awake, "You've always been mine, Mia Kovács. In my head and in my heart."

A moment later, he's snoring, and I'm wide awake, my eyes on the ceiling, letting tear after tear soak into my skin.

CHAPTER SIXTY-FIVE

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MIA

THE COLD AIR hits my back when Leo's alarm goes off the next morning. It takes me a second to comprehend that it's because his chest had been pressed against me, and now he's rolling over, turning the alarm off on his phone. He gets up a moment later, pulling his arm from under my pillow, mumbling something about stupid training and stupid laws and stupid criminals. I barely open my eyes just in time for him to close the bathroom door. The shower turns on, and I fall back asleep.

The next time I wake, it's to Leo's wet, warm mouth pressing against my forehead. "What time's your flight?" he asks, his voice low.

I pull the covers up to my mouth to hide my morning breath and keep my eyes closed as I murmur, "Midday."

"Do you have an alarm set?"

"Uh-huh." I peel my eyes open and am rewarded with the blue-blue of his irises right on mine.

He's squatting down by the side of the bed, and he smiles, gently shifting my hair away from my eyes. "So you'll stay here until it's time to go?"

"Is that okay?"

He nods. "Can you do me a favor?"

"Sure." My eyelids are too heavy, and his bed is so warm.

"Can you send me another picture?"

"Sure."

"Maybe one of the both of you?"

I smile against the pillow and force my eyes open again. "I can do that."

Another alarm goes off on his phone. "Shit," he says. "I have to go." But he doesn't make a move to stand up.

After a few seconds of him studying me, and me doing the same, I say, only slightly embarrassed by his penetrating stare, "You're going to be late."

He sighs, dropping his head between his shoulders. When he looks up, there's a reverence in the way he says, "I was never ready to walk away from you, Mia Kovács." He stands and walks to the door, and I watch, my

heart in my throat. It's not until I hear the front door open that I sit up, my pulse pounding in my eardrums, and call out his name.

A second later, he's standing in the doorway of the bedroom. "What's up?"

My shoulders drop as I try to settle my breathing. And for no other reason than because I want him to know, I tell him one last secret I've held on to: "You've always been the main character in my story, Leo Preston."

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CHAPTER SIXTY-SIX

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LEO

EVERY TIME MIA SENDS A PICTURE, I ask for another one.

The camera roll in my phone is filled with nothing but pictures of Benny and Mia.

“Who’s the girl?” Logan asks, and I shove my phone so deep in my front pocket, I whack my nuts. Behind the wheel of his truck, my brother laughs.

“No girl,” I say, after wincing in pain.

“Or guy,” he says. “No judgment.” He glances at me quickly before focusing on the road again. “Every time your phone goes off, you’re so quick to check it, and you’ve been on that thing since you got home, which is weird. For *you*.”

It’s true, it is weird. And he’s right; I have been on it a lot. But this time, I wasn’t on my phone because Mia had sent a picture. I needed a distraction. Brain bleach, really. I must have misheard Logan when he initially asked me to go to this meeting with him. I thought he told me it was one of his “sobriety” meetings. It wasn’t. It was just him and his therapist, Amanda. The thing is, and this is going to sound so horribly selfish, but there are certain things about Logan’s past that I’d rather not know the details. What they discussed today was one of many. Now his secrets are mine, and I don’t know what to do with them. I wish I could give them back, so I never have to know them because I *hate* them. I hate the visions they bring up, and I hate the bile in my throat and the hate in my heart—hate that’s so rooted in my veins and my chest and my mind, and I don’t know how to deal with it. So, as soon as we got in the car and on the road, I looked at the pictures Mia had been sending over the past few days, and slowly, the hatred ebbed. And then flowed. It flowed so quickly and so dense that it became too much. All I can think about is Benny and the fact that I’m not there to protect him from the things that cause Logan’s torment.

As I sat in on his session, all three of us in that small room, Logan’s knees bounced, his jaw tensed, and he tapped, tapped, tapped at his pockets. Every time he did it, Amanda would motion with her head to the action, and

he'd force himself to stop. "You don't need it," she said, and I knew she was talking about drugs.

Logan got like that a lot—the shaking and the craving for a way out of his head, his memories. Every time he got triggered, I'd watch him go through the motions until he worked through it in his mind, and then he'd stop, act as if nothing happened. I wondered if the process was healthy—if it was part of his healing. I should've asked Amanda, but I didn't.

"Earth to Leo?" Logan says, snapping his fingers in front of my face.

"I'm here," I tell him, but I'm not.

Not really.

My phone buzzes in my pocket. Probably another picture. And I'm gone again, my mind consumed with thoughts of my son.

My son.

I look over at Logan and wonder what it would be like if I shared my secrets with him—if he'd want to give them back like I do his.

He wouldn't.

Because our secrets are nothing alike.

I SPEND the rest of the day floating around town. I visit my godson, Preston, who I realize is only a few months older than Benny. Then I head over to Lucy's bookstore, where she's working alone. With her voice low, she asks about Benny, but I don't have a lot to say. I tell her that I'm meeting him properly next weekend, and she asks if I have any more pictures to share. She gives me those eyes—not the accusatory ones—the romance-loving ones, and I wish I'd paid more attention to the books she forces me to read because maybe then I'd know how the hero is supposed to act or feel. I show her the pictures, and she beams, her smile wide. But then her eyes get watery, and I know she wants to say *all the things*, but she doesn't. I'm grateful for that.

When I get home, I sit with Dad on the porch. I read, and he works while sipping his coffee, and it reminds me of the farm. "We should get you a rocking chair," I say mindlessly, and he eyes me with a look that screams *what the fuck, kid?*

When night falls and the house is quiet, I sit in my room and look out the window just like I did for most of my childhood. It's weird. I'm *home*, surrounded by friends and family... only I'm not.

My family is in New York.

My family.

Holy shit.

I don't even allow my brain to process the thought before my hands are gripping my phone and I'm dialing Mia's number. She answers on the first ring and asks, "How are you?"

And the only thought I have is said aloud before I can stop it. "Incomplete."

I'm met with silence. And that silence stretches for so long that I wonder if she even heard me. But then she says, "I've felt the same way for a really long time, Leo."

A knot forms in my throat, and I picture her standing against a wall, her black hair a contrast to the white backdrop. I can't see anything besides her, and maybe it's because I have no idea what her life is like, what her apartment looks like, or if it's because... because I only ever saw *her*. Ignoring the ache in my chest, I ask a question I didn't have the nerve to a few days earlier, "Has Benny ever asked about me?"

"Once," she says, before sucking in a breath.

"What did you tell him?"

It takes a moment for her to answer. "I told him that his mommy and daddy loved each other very much, but we were young, and we made some bad choices. And I told him that I got sick right before I had him... and I said that you were a wonderful man who loved with his whole heart and that everything good inside him comes from you." She breaks off on a single sob, and I hate that I'm not there to hold her, to wipe at her tears.

I sniff back my emotions, my breaths ragged as they leave me. "What did he say?"

"He asked what color elephant poop was," she says through a giggle, and I find myself laughing with her.

We talk for a little while more before she tells me she has to go. "I'll see you next week?" she says, and I want to tell her that I miss her.

"Yeah, I'll be there."

"Okay," she says, then pauses. "I miss you, Leo."

My smile is ridiculous. “I miss you, too, Mia.” A relieved sigh falls from my lips. “So much.”

“For so long,” she says, and then she’s gone.

I throw my phone on the bed and go straight to my closet, where I pull out an old backpack. Then I move to one of the three bookshelves in my room. Unlike Lucy, I don’t have an order in which I sort my books, besides fiction, non-fiction, and educational. I go to the educational ones and drop down to my knees to access the books on the bottom shelf. There are seven of them in total, all thick hardbacks with bright-colored covers and large font titles. I wipe the dust off them with the bottom of my shirt, and then open the first one to the title page: *My Book of Rocks and Minerals: Things to Find, Collect, and Treasure*.

The “My” in the title is crossed out, and written in my seven-year-old scribble is Leo Preston. I grab a pen off my desk and cross out *Leo*, then write: *Benny* beside it.

I hesitate when it comes to his last name, and so I leave it as it is.

Benny ~~Leo~~ Preston.

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CHAPTER SIXTY-SEVEN

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LEO

JUST AS I pass the Welcome sign, I pull over on the side of the road. It's the third time I've done it on the drive to the farm, so I don't know why I'm doing it again. Still, I open the backpack filled with books and check over them. All seven are still there, along with the present I'd spent hours wrapping and unwrapping and re-wrapping. I'd bought five different wrapping papers and opted for a blue one with Bs in different fonts stamped all over.

I'm stalling. I know I am. And I'm well aware that most guys in my situation would've jumped at the chance to meet their son, but clearly, I'm not *most guys*. Which sucks. Because right now, all I am is a giant ball of fucking nerves.

I zip up the backpack and grasp at my hair, trying to talk myself up. I roll the tenseness out of my neck, and then attempt to shake out the stiffness in my hands.

In under five minutes, I'll be face to face with my son.

My son.

Jesus.

Mia had told me that her dad and Tammy would be coming with them, not because they worried I was visiting—because they still didn't know about me for sure, even though Tammy *suspects*—but just to give her a break if she wanted to spend time with *me*.

She said it apologetically, like I'd somehow feel different if they were there. To be honest, when I think about Benny and hope for a future with him, I don't just see him and Mia. I see her dad and Tammy and Holden, too.

Like I do whenever I'm too deep in my head, I run through every possible scenario and catastrophize every situation. The worst would be if Benny takes one look at me and hates me off the bat. I think that's why I bought the present.

I'm *bribing* him.

I wonder if bribery is in any parenting manuals. Are there parenting manuals? I should probably get some.

I roll my eyes as I pull out on the road again and run through conversation topics in my head. He's four, the same age as Preston, so I know I can *talk* to him, and I'm pretty clued in on what four-year-olds like. Preston's going through a *Paw Patrol* phase. His favorite characters are Chase, the cop, and Rubble, the construction worker, because of his parents. His favorite food is hot dogs, sliced and eaten with a toothpick, because why not?

I realize that I'm saying all of this, out loud, to myself. And before I know it, I'm pulling into the farm. And before I can second-guess myself, Tammy is walking between the house and the barn, pushing an overflowing wheelbarrow full of dirt. At the sight of it almost tipping over when she loses control, I get out of the truck and jog toward her. "I got it," I tell her, and she laughs quietly, moving out of the way so I can grasp the handles. "Where do you want it?"

"By the porch would be great," she says, wiping the sweat off her face with her forearm.

I take the wheelbarrow to where she points and release it slowly before turning to her. "Hi," I breathe out, and the warmth of her smile challenges the heat of the sun beating down on us.

"It's good to see you again," she says. "Mia and the boys just went to the store quickly to grab some stuff for lunch."

"The boys?"

"Benny and Joseph. I still call him a boy because sometimes he acts like a child."

Chewing my lip, I nod once.

She settles her hands on her hips. "How are you feeling?"

I raise my eyebrows in question, and her smile turns sly. "I'm not here to make assumptions, Leo," she says, holding both hands up in surrender, "but I questioned it the moment I got a good look at you." She shakes her head, looks down at the space between us. "Joseph can be a little daft, but I won't say anything." Her eyes meet mine again. "So? How are you?"

I inhale as much air as I can handle, then let it out in a *whoosh*. "I'm kind of shitting my pants," I tell her honestly. She laughs, so loud and carefree, I *almost* laugh with her. Instead, I show her my hands, reveal their trembling. "See?"

"Oh no," she says, looking up at me, both her hands covering one of mine. "You have nothing to be worried about." I stare down at our hands,

and I let my mind wander to my mother and what she would do if she faced this same situation. Before I can dwell on it for too long, a truck pulls into the driveway. “You got this,” Tammy says, winking at me.

I’m rooted in my spot as I watch the two front doors of the truck push open. Mia steps out, and it’s her legs I notice first. Short denim cut-offs at one end and yellow Chucks on the other. Beside me, Tammy giggles. I turn to her, right before she makes a zipping motion with her fingers to her lips. “Not a word,” she whispers in a song, before making her way toward the truck.

I move toward Mia, my footsteps heavy. She greets me with a smile that I could get lost in for hours. And then she’s up on her toes, hugging me and planting a kiss on my cheek. She doesn’t say a word as she releases me to open the back door and unbuckle Benny from his car seat. I hold my breath, shove my hands in my pockets to hide their tremor.

“Benny, you remember Mama’s friend, Leo?” she asks him, taking his hand in hers.

I have dozens of photographs of the little boy in front of me, and none of them—not one—have even come close to bringing out the emotion that consumes me when I look right into his light brown eyes. “Hi, Benny,” I manage to say, my voice just above a whisper.

Benny looks up at me, then right back down as he takes a step back, hiding behind his mom. I glance at Mia, unable to hide my fear.

“We’ll get started on lunch,” Tammy calls, dragging Mia’s dad away.

Mia’s smiling at me, but it’s sad, and then she squats down so she and Benny are eye to eye. “What’s wrong, bud?” she asks, and his eyes convey something I don’t understand. She shifts closer, moving her ear to his mouth so he can whisper something to her, and I feel *lost*. Like an outsider—which is precisely what I am.

Mia smiles as she pulls away from Benny and looks up at me. “He says you’re sooooo tall,” she says through a giggle.

I force a smile and squat down, hoping it helps. “Better?”

Benny looks between Mia and me, his lips pressed in a line, and I realize that my worst fear is coming true. He *hates* me. “I, uh...” I rub the back of my neck. “I got you a present,” I say. “If it’s okay with your mom, I’d like to give it to you.”

“You didn’t have to do that,” Mia says, standing to full height.

“I know. I wanted to,” I say, standing, too.

“Would you like to see what Leo got you?” Mia asks him, and he nods.

Mia said he smiles at everyone and everything, but he’s not smiling at me, and I’m not even going to sugar coat it—it hurts.

I grab the present from my truck, leaving the books where they are, and head over to the porch steps, where they sit, side by side, waiting. I sit down beside Benny with Mia on the other side of him. “Here you go, buddy,” I say, handing it to him.

“Thank you, sir,” he says quietly, and my frown deepens.

“You can call me Leo,” I say, pushing aside the hopes that he’ll call me Dad one day. If this interaction is anything to go by, that might take years. But, just like the railing on the porch, it’ll be worth the time and effort.

I glance up at Mia, who nods, reassuring, and then watches as Benny tears into the present, completely opposite to the way I would do it.

Not that it matters.

He holds the box in his hands, flipping it over, his eyebrows drawn before looking up at Mia. “What is it?” he asks her.

“It’s a rock tumbler,” I answer, carefully taking it from him and showing him the picture on the box. “You put rocks in there with some water and grit, and after a while it...” I trail off because Benny’s not even paying attention to a word I’m saying. He’s looking up at Mia, tugging on her arm, trying to get her attention.

Mia gives me a pitiful look before focusing on Benny. “Benny, you’re being very rude. Leo’s trying to—” He pulls on her arm again while stretching up to put his mouth to her ear. He whispers something I can’t quite hear, and Mia laughs and sighs at the same time. With an eye-roll, she says, “He wants to know if you’re the strongest man in the world.”

My lips twitch, my gaze moving from Mia to Benny. Pink stains his pale cheeks, so much like his mother, while he uses her arm to shield half his face. “Am I the strongest man you’ve ever seen?” I ask him, keeping my voice low.

Benny’s nod is slow as he comes out from his mother’s shadow.

“Well, that makes me the strongest man in *your* world, and that’s all that matters, right?”

Benny *smiles*, and it’s so much of everything all at once, I struggle to see straight. And then slowly, shyly, he reaches up, one finger pointed in the air, coming closer and closer, and I watch, breathless. He presses the tip of his finger to my bicep, poking at the muscle, and then he *laughs*. Full on, all

out, *laughs*, his entire body shaking with him. I laugh, too, while Mia giggles. “You’re such a goofball, Benny!”

Mr. Kovács calls us in for lunch, and so we get up, my gift left discarded on the porch. We sit at the kitchen table—Mia’s dad on one end and Benny on the other. I sit beside Mia, opposite Tammy, and I let Mr. Kovács interrogate me. I knew it was coming, so I’m prepared when the questions begin. He asks about where I’m from, how I know Mia, and my career plans. When I tell him I’m currently at the police academy, he does that thing with his lips people do when they’re impressed—something that surprises me. “Law enforcement is a tough job, man. I sure as hell couldn’t do it.” He shakes his head, spearing a piece of lettuce with his fork. “You have my respect.” And then he does something weird. He offers me his fist for a bump. Mia mutters something resembling “Oh my god” under her breath when I tap his fist.

“Joseph likes to think he’s still in college,” Tammy offers with an eye-roll.

Mr. Kovács narrows his eyes at her. “We haven’t even hit forty yet, Tams.”

“Eat, Benny,” Mia says, and I trail my eyes to the little boy sitting at the end of the table, a fork in his hand. He doesn’t move. He’s looking in Mr. Kovács direction, but his stare is distant, something I’m *more* than familiar with.

“Benny? Where are you, Benny?” Tammy sings.

He doesn’t seem to hear her.

“We call this him *rebooting*,” Mr. Kovács chuckles. “He’ll snap out of it soon.”

Benny hasn’t blinked once.

“He does it all the time,” Mia tells me, voice so close I feel it spread through my entire body. “It’s like he—”

Benny blinks and then looks around with those big eyes of his. Everyone else at the table mock-cheers.

“There he is!” Mr. Kovács almost shouts, and I can’t help but smile as I look down at my plate. I’d spent many, many meal times doing the exact same thing. My parents called it checking out. I like *rebooting* better.

We continue to eat while Tammy tells us about her work in the garden and then, out of nowhere: “Leo?”

My eyes snap up to Benny’s, my heart pounding in my chest. “Yeah?”

“Did you know that sedimentary rocks are the most common rocks on earth?”

Sedimentary, he means, and yes. Yes, I did. “I did *not* know that.”

He doesn’t react to my answer. He simply continues to pick at the salad on his plate.

I go back to my meal.

“Leo?”

My smile is ridiculous. “Yeah, bud?”

His head tilts, assessing me. “Do you have a favorite rock?”

Nodding, I wipe my mouth with the paper napkin before saying, “Topaz.”

“Why?”

I clear my throat. “Because it’s yellow.”

“Is yellow your favorite color?”

I nod. “What’s your favorite color?”

“Blue,” he replies.

“So... would your favorite rock be...” I squint, trying to recall. “*Turquoise?*”

His perfect little face lights up. “How did you know?”

“I guessed,” I say, smiling over at him.

Mia’s hand lands on my knee, and I glance at her quickly, noting the glassiness in her eyes.

“My bedrooms are all painted blue,” Benny tells me, and I focus all of me on all of him.

“They are? How many bedrooms do you have?”

“Four,” he says, holding up three fingers. “I have one in here and one in the barn and one at Papa’s condo and one at the apartment.” Wow. And the barn... I’d seen Mia coming out of there before, but I had no idea it was a proper livable space.

“Must be cool having all those rooms,” I say.

Benny shrugs, shoves a spoonful of food in his mouth. “Leo?” he says, and corn flies across the table.

Mia sighs. “No talking with your mouth full.”

Benny chews and chews and makes a show of swallowing. “Leo?” he says again, and the chuckle that comes out of me forms so deep in my chest, it’s a relief to get it out.

“Yes, bud?”

“Can I show you my room?” He’s already starting to get out of his chair.

“Maybe after lunch?” Mia tells him, pulling him back down.

Benny’s shoulders deflate. “Okay...” He pouts, and that look alone has me wanting to *plead* to see his room *right now* so that I don’t have to look at him like that. I pick up my fork for something else to focus on.

“Leo?”

I drop the fork. Who needs food, anyway? “Benny?”

“Will you help me set up the rock tumbler?”

Mia squeezes my knee.

“I would *love* to.”

“Leo?”

Swear, you couldn’t wipe the smile off my face if you tried. “Benny?”

“Why is yellow your favorite color?”

I suck in a breath. “Because it was my mom’s.”

He nods, his eyes wide. “Yellow’s my mom’s favorite color, too!”

I peek over at Mia. “Really?”

“Mama has a yellow bracelet. She says it’s septeminal.”

“Uh...”

Warmth fills my heart when Mia clarifies, “Sentimental.”

“That’s what I said!” Benny laughs. “You’re such a goofball, Mama!”

I SPEND the afternoon with Benny, setting up the rock tumbler and then walking around the farm, searching for rocks to put in there. Even though Mia assures him he already has tons of rocks in multiple buckets, bowls, and pockets of his clothes, Benny tells her they’re not the right ones. So Benny and I—with Mia following quietly behind—go on what he calls “an adventure.” We traipse through the grass with a bucket and shovel, and occasionally, he’ll look up at me with a grin that literally melts me and points down to the ground. “Right here!” he’ll say, so we dig. We dig and dig, and sometimes we’ll find nothing, so we’ll move on and keep walking.

He doesn’t talk a lot while we walk, which is fine. I wasn’t really much of a talker myself. But when he does talk, I listen. I listen more intently to the random things he’ll spout than I do anything and anyone else in my

entire life. At one point, we come across a little creek, and he tells me that this is where they wash the rocks. So we wash the rocks. He could tell me this is where they peel off their skin and sacrifice themselves to the rock gods, and I'd do it. We wash as much dirt off the rocks as we can, and when I stand up, a bucket full of wet rocks in my grasp, he takes my free hand in his. His small hand grips the tips of my fingers, and I freeze. Every single muscle locks up. And then I just stare at him, this little boy who stares back at me. I don't breathe. Don't blink. And then he smiles, pushing his hand firmer in mine until we're palm to palm. I wrap my fingers around his. Behind me, I hear Mia make a noise, but I don't look at her. I look at our son, at his wide smile and his honey eyes, black hair, and the smattering of freckles on his nose. "Leo?" he says, pulling me from my daze as he continues to walk, dragging me with him. "Are you staying for dinner?"

"Would you like me to?" I ask, the words harsh against the emotion in my throat.

"Yes," he says, and it's such a simple, one-word response, but it means *everything*.

"Then I'll stay," I tell him.

Mia walks up beside him, taking his other hand in hers, and we head back to the house, the three of us together, and slowly, surely, the fear in my heart is replaced with the hope in my hands.

CHAPTER SIXTY-EIGHT

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MIA

“SHOULD WE WAKE HER?” Leo whispers, his breath fanning across my cheeks.

Benny giggles. “Scare her,” he replies, his voice low.

“No, we shouldn’t do that,” Leo murmurs. “Look at her. She’s so *cute*. And little.”

I try not to smile, but my lip twitches in response. After searching for rocks the entire afternoon, Leo stayed for dinner, and then dinner turned into a movie, all at the request of Benny. We settled in for the night in the barn’s living room and watched a documentary about rocks and minerals I’d seen close to three million times. The last thing I remember was all three of us sitting on the couch watching, and now I’m *lying* across the couch with a blanket over me, and I don’t know how this happened.

“Cute, little Mama,” Benny whispers, his small hand cupping my cheek. “WAKE UP, MAMA!”

My eyes snap open. “You little—” I try to reach for him, but he steps back, laughing. My eyes narrow as I get up. “Brush teeth and bed.”

Benny moans in protest but heads to the bathroom anyway.

A few minutes later, he’s in his bed, and I’m tucking him in while Leo busies himself in the kitchen. “Can we have breakfast at the diner tomorrow?” Benny asks through a yawn.

“Sure.”

“Leo too?” he asks.

I sigh, bringing the blankets up to his chin. “Leo drives a long way to be here, so—”

“I’ll be there!” Leo calls out, and I can’t help but laugh.

One eyebrow raised, I look down at Benny. “I guess we’ll see him tomorrow. You really like him, huh?”

Benny nods.

I whisper, “Can Mama tell you a secret?” Benny nods again, eyes wide, and I lean down, place my mouth to his ear, my words just for us. “I really like him, too.”

When I pull back, he's smiling, his eyes closed, and so I kiss his cheek and leave the room, closing the door behind me. Leo's standing just outside the door now, his hands shoved deep in his pockets. He opens his mouth to speak, but I lift my hand to cover his lips. "Shh," I say, ignoring the heat of his hands on my waist. I turn, practically in his arms, and stare at the door handle, waiting. Leo's front is pressed to my back, warm and hard, and I try to ignore my body's reaction to him. Tiny footsteps creep across the floor, and then the handle shifts. "Boo!" I shout, and Benny squeals, runs back to his bed, laughing as he puts the blankets over his head. "Goodnight, Benny," I tell him.

"Night, Mama," he calls.

"I love you, bud."

"Love you!" he says, but it comes out *luhyoo*—all one word.

I lean against the wall just outside the door with Leo in front of me, his hands on my hips, his eyes right on mine. We stay silent for a solid minute to make sure Benny isn't getting up again. When I assume it's safe, I lead him to the kitchen, rest against the counter, and ask, my arms crossed as I look down at the tiles, "How do you think it went?" Going by the smile that's graced his lips for most of the day, I'm assuming it went well.

"A little rough at the beginning," he says, then releases a heavy exhale. "But, God, Mia, he's..." He trails off.

"Everything?" I ask, looking up at him.

He nods. "And then some."

I bite down on my bottom lip, trying to comprehend all the emotions swarming through me. As far as first meetings go, I couldn't have asked for a better outcome. But I'm scared, concerned about what it means and confused about where to go from here. "So... maybe we should make a schedule?" I offer, shifting my stare away from his, because he's looking at me with heat in his eyes again. I've caught him doing it a few times throughout the day, stolen glances mixed with desire, and it's hard not to want the same things he wants. But it would also be selfish. And it was fine when Benny was around and he was our buffer, but now it's just us, and it's almost too much. I clear my throat, reach for my phone on top of the microwave and pretend to go through my calendar just for something else to focus on that isn't him and his eyes and the smirk, and I'm blushing.

Crap.

"Whatever works for you, we'll make it happen," I breathe out.

He takes a step forward, our feet almost touching. “Yeah?”

I nod, mindlessly scrolling through the dates on my calendar. “You’ve missed out on enough, and I want this for you and Benny. I want him to have you in his...” I trail off when Leo’s palm slides against my hip, his thumb stroking the bare skin between my shorts and top. A ragged breath falls out of me, and I try to refocus my thoughts. “What are you thinking? Like every other weekend?”

He pushes forward, his nose running along my jaw until his mouth’s to my ear. “That works,” he murmurs, and then his entire hand is under my top, at the small of my back, and my knees buckle, but he catches me in time, his strong arm holding me to him.

“Crud,” I hiss, pushing on his chest. He doesn’t budge. I don’t know if I want him to. “It’s getting late.”

When seconds pass with no response, I look up at him, just in time to see his tongue dart out, wet his full bottom lip. I think I moan, which is *stupid*.

“You have a long drive back.” It’s barely a whisper.

“Uh-huh,” he says, and then his mouth is on my neck, his lips parting. Heat radiates up my spine to the tips of my fingers as they slide through his hair. He groans, saying, “Like, so far away, I might fall asleep...” My back arches, pressing my breasts closer to him as if they’re yelling *here, I want that mouth here!* He smiles against my flesh because he knows *exactly* what he’s doing. Soon enough, that smile turns into a wicked, cocky guffaw. The motherfluffer is *teasing* me.

This time, I do push him away and attempt to glare at him.

He laughs. *Jerk*.

“My couch is *really* uncomfortable.” I move to grab the blanket and thrust it against his solid chest. “I hope you have the worst sleep ever!” And then I cross my arms and stomp off to my room, closing the door behind me. I strip out of my clothes and into an oversized T-shirt before climbing into bed. For minutes, I toss and turn, and I don’t know why I’m so annoyed that he has this stupid power over me. I should take the power back. Claim it. I retrieve my phone from the pocket of my shorts and write out a text:

Next time you tease me like that, I’m going to sit on your face and ride your filthy mouth, Leo Preston!

With a wicked grin on my face and newfound confidence, I hit send.

A second later, I hear the alert go off on his phone, and a moment after that: “Dammit, Mia!”

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CHAPTER SIXTY-NINE

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MIA

I WAKE up the next morning on my own, no Benny climbing on the bed—which hasn’t happened since he moved out of his crib. I check the time on my phone, and it’s close to ten. I don’t sleep in this long, not even when Benny stays at my dad’s. I worry too much; I know this. Still, it doesn’t stop the panic from pumping through my veins. I throw the covers off of me and practically run out of my room, halting when I see them in the living room. Under a shared blanket covering their backs, Benny and Leo sit between the couch and the coffee table, looking at the pages of an open book. Leo glances my way, then says, focusing on whatever Benny’s pointing at in the book, “Morning, sleepy head.”

Benny giggles. “Yeah. Morning, sleepy head.” He’s on his knees, flipping through the pages.

Leo’s eyes meet mine again, his smile lazy, hair sticking up in all directions. “There’s still some coffee left if you want it. Benny and I had toast already. We weren’t sure when you’d wake, but we can still go to the diner for breakfast.”

“Leo, look at this one!” Benny almost shouts, finger slamming down on the book.

“That’s a really cool one,” Leo replies.

“You think any of the rocks in the tumbler will be like that?”

“Maybe.”

For a moment, I just stand there, my heart in my throat, watching them talk, seeing them *connect*. And I try to push down all the emotions swarming through me. Regret bites at my chest, clawing to escape, and it’s so damn painful it causes heat to burn behind my eyes. My airways close in while I sniff back the heartache. And Leo—he must sense my destruction because he looks over at me, his eyes stained with pity, and then he lifts the blanket and motions for me to join them. I sit, ignoring the heat emitting from his bare chest as he pulls me into him, his hand stroking my arm, up and down, up and down. He presses his lips to my temple, whispering so low I barely hear him, “It’s okay.”

I wipe my tears against his shoulder, because it's not. None of this is okay. The pain we caused each other—the guilt and regret and turmoil and suffering—it doesn't just go away because we have a son together. And all of that exists in just our little bubble alone. What happens when his family finds out and gets involved? Which they will, inevitably—and how do I tell him that of all the things in this world that terrify me, his brothers' judgement could be my one undoing? I sniff back another sob as Benny asks, "What's this one?"

Leo leans forward to look at the page. "That one looks like amethyst."

"Oooh, I like hammafist."

Leo chuckles.

"Where did these books come from?" I finally speak, my voice hoarse with emotion.

"Leo brought them," Benny answers. "They were his from when he was little like me!"

LEO

We don't go to the diner. Instead, Mia, Benny and I stay at the farm and we spend as much time together before they have to leave. Since the airport's close to my apartment, I offer to give Benny and Mia a ride, just so I can get some extra time with them. When Tammy and Mr. Kovács bring up moving Benny's car seat, I show them the one already in my car. There are two there—one for Preston and one for Katie. I stutter when Mr. Kovács—who insists I call him Joseph—asks if they're for my kids. After I explain who they're for, Tammy and Joseph leave just after lunch so they can get some shopping done in Charlotte.

Benny and I go on another adventure with Mia trailing behind us. We find more rocks than we know what to do with, and I'm slowly learning which of the rocks Benny prefers to collect. He doesn't opt for the smooth, gray stones. He likes the ones with sharp edges and imperfections—probably why he seems to like me.

"Look, Mama!" he says, ankle deep in the creek as he pulls his latest find from the stream and lifts it in the air.

Mia smiles, but it doesn't reach her eyes. "That's nice, buddy." She's leaning against a tree trunk a short distance away, her arms loose at her sides. It hasn't gone unnoticed that ever since this morning, she's been quiet, a little distant. "We should head back, Benny. Mama didn't put sunscreen on you and you're starting to burn."

Benny nods, shoving the rock in his pocket.

When we get back to the house, Benny dumps the bucket onto the porch, spilling his treasure all over the floor. Then he lies on his stomach and reaches for my hand, indicating for me to do the same. So that's how we stay while he goes through every one, setting them in piles I don't truly understand. He's mainly quiet as he does this, his little mind working, brow knitting every few stones as he assesses them. I simply watch him, ignoring the ache in my chest at knowing that our time is almost over. Mia sits on the porch swing watching us, her lips pulled down at the corners.

After an hour or so, Mia goes into the house and returns a few minutes later with a cut-up sandwich, an iPad and a pair of small headphones.

“Snack time, Benny,” she says, setting all the items in front of him. She taps the iPad a few times, then helps him put the headphones over his ears as he sits up. Her eyes catch mine, and she inclines her head toward the swing seat. I get up and immediately stretch my back, easing all the knots from being in that same position for so long. She sits back on the swing seat, and I sit next to her, taking in the way she sits with her shoulders bowed, arms outstretched, hands gripping the edge of the seat. She’s guarded, and I don’t know why. “Did I do something?”

Her eyes snap to mine. “No, Leo,” she sighs. “You did nothing wrong.”

I don’t know what to say, so I stay quiet.

After a long stretch of silence, she says, her voice low as she watches Benny, “Seeing you both this morning, it kind of... I don’t know. It made me regret not telling you, I guess. You’ve missed out on so much, and... it was selfish of me.” Her voice cracks, and she clears it before adding, “I think I did such a good job of lying to myself, convincing myself I was doing the right thing that eventually... I believed it.”

I lean forward so our faces are closer, and I can keep my voice just above a whisper so Benny doesn’t hear. “It’s not like I made it easy,” I admit. “Obviously I’m pissed that I missed out on the first four years of his life, but I’m not pissed at *you*. I’m shitty at the situation we put ourselves in.” I pause a beat, cracking my knuckles. “We both made mistakes, but Benny—he isn’t one of them.”

She nods, understanding. “I should’ve known,” she says, still watching our son.

“Known what?” I urge.

It takes her a moment to answer. “How good you’d be with him. *For* him. I mean, I knew *you*, Leo. I knew your heart, and I loved you for it.” Her eyes trail to mine, filled with tears of sadness and regret. “Your brothers are going to hate me more than they already do.”

My breath catches in my throat, because of all the things I was expecting her to say—this isn’t it. “My brothers don’t hate you, Mia.” I sigh. “Why are you even thinking about this?”

“I don’t know,” she’s quick to say. “I just... I worry.”

“About *what*?” I don’t mean to be harsh, but that’s how it comes out. “This isn’t about my brothers or anyone else, and I know... I know we have a lot to overcome—you and me—and maybe some of that stems from the shit that happened with Lucas and Logan that led to your—” I stop, the

pressure in my chest preventing my mind from going back there. I peek over at Benny, make sure he's still consumed by the documentary on quarries playing on the iPad. "I just feel like, right now, we need to focus on *our son*."

"That's *all* I focus on, Leo," she snaps, shaking her head. Her knees are bouncing, rocking the swing, and she reaches up, her fingers curling in her hair, tugging at the roots.

I reach up, pry her fingers away and make her face me.

Eyes scattered, she looks everywhere but at me. She says, her words rushed, as if every thought she's ever had spills out of her in a single breath, "It's all good now, when it's just us three, but when they find out, they're going to judge me for not telling you, and they're going to hate me but love him, and they're going to talk you into doing the same, and they'll ask you to fight for custody of him, and it'll go to court and some judge will decide about weekends and holidays and—"

"Mia!"

Her mouth snaps shut just as a single tear escapes. She swipes it away, as if it never existed. "It's true, Leo," she whispers.

And here's the fucked-up thing that never even crossed my mind. It *is* true. At least part of it. The memories she has of my brothers don't define who they are now. They're far from the shitty humans they were then. Ever since the shit with Laney and then Logan, something switched within all of us. The Preston name became more than a name; it became an *honor*. And with that honor came a bond, a loyalty so fucking strong there was no way we'd ever let anyone come in and break it. And Mia—she had the power to do that. They'd be pissed *for* me, because they don't know our history, and that's... that's on me.

Fuck.

Mia had always been my secret, because I was stupid and immature and I didn't want to share her, but more... I didn't want them *teasing* me about her. How fucking pathetic.

"It's not something you have to worry about," I lie, my jaw tense.

Her eyes lock on mine. "I'll do anything you want, Leo. If you want us to fly down every weekend, we will," she cries, letting her tears fall. "I'll do whatever you need, just please, promise you won't take him away from me."

“Mia...” I hold her face in my hands, thumb the tears staining her cheeks as my gaze searches hers, and I wish I had something to say to ease her fears, something powerful. I don’t. I only have truths, and so that’s what I give her: “You and Benny are mine now, and I won’t let anything happen to us.”

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CHAPTER SEVENTY

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LEO

“THIS IS GOING to be the longest two weeks of my life,” I murmur, my mouth pressed to the top of Mia’s head.

“I know,” she replies. “You can call any time. We can video chat.” She’s in my arms, and I don’t want to let her go.

All this time, I’d been so worried about Benny and hoping he’d like me that I didn’t even consider what it would be like to say goodbye.

“This sucks,” I mutter, finally releasing her.

“Keep moving!” a man dressed as airport security yells, eyeing me as he points to the drop-off sign.

I roll my eyes and squat down in front of Benny. “Thanks for hanging out with me this weekend,” I say, but he’s in the middle of a “reboot”, so his reaction is minimal.

Mia runs a hand through his hair. “You have to say bye, bud. We’re leaving Leo now.”

Benny blinks, then looks up at his mom. “Where’s Papa?”

Disappointment pierces my heart, even though I know it shouldn’t. Damn, I wonder how many times my parents felt this way with me. It must’ve been enough for them to try to “fix” me, that’s for sure.

“Benny,” Mia urges, squeezing his hand.

I get to my feet. “It’s fine.” I kiss her forehead, attempt not to break down like a little bitch in public. “I’ll call you.”

“Keep moving!” the security guy yells. Fuck him.

“There’s Papa!” Benny shouts, and then he’s off, running through the open sliding doors toward Tammy and Joseph, who are waiting just inside.

Mia watches until he’s safe in her dad’s arms before turning to me. She pouts. “Thank you for... being *you*.” She almost laughs, rolling her eyes.

I take both her hands in mine and lean against my truck, the overwhelming emotions making it difficult to stand. “Thank *you* for making it happen.”

“Two weeks,” she says.

“Two weeks,” I repeat.

She kisses me so quick, I barely have time for it to register before she's walking away, dragging her luggage behind her.

I watch her leave until the security guard stands in front of me. "Keep moving!"

"Jesus Christ, *okay!*"

"You're holding up the line!" I look behind me. There are cars, sure, but no line. I turn back to him, my eyes narrowed. He's at least half a foot shorter than me, scrawny as hell, and I don't know why he seems to have an issue with me. I'm not the only one here. He points to a badge attached to a lanyard around his neck. "Just doing my job."

I contain my eye-roll. If I ever become a shitbag because of a badge, I want someone to rip off my nuts. I glance one more time at Benny and Mia, now walking away, and take my keys from my pocket to show the guard. "I'm leaving," I tell him, hands up in surrender.

"Leo!" Benny's voice has me turning to him so fast, I almost lose my footing. He's running toward me, Joseph walking only a step behind. His arms are outstretched, and so I squat down, ready to catch him. He collides with my chest, his arms folding around my head, squeezing as hard as his four-year-old muscles can handle.

"I'll see you soon, bud," I choke out, and I don't want to let go of him either. Ever.

He pulls back, loosening his grip, but still holding on to me. "I forgot to give you something."

"You did?"

He releases me and fishes a rock from his pocket, holding it between us.

"You're going to get a fine," the guard warns.

"Fine me," I say, never taking my focus off Benny. From the corner of my eye, I see him pull out a handheld device. I don't care.

"It's got yellow in it." Benny shows me the specks of yellow marring the stone, then looks up, his smile just for me. "It's your favorite color."

"It is," I breathe out. "Thank you. I'm going to keep it with me always." I take it from him, and his grin widens.

"I can't wait to open the rock tumbler when we go back."

"I know," I say, my lungs filling with the warmth of his presence. "I'm excited to see what you have."

"Can we go on another adventure?"

My smile is stupid. “We can go on as many adventures as you want.”

He nods, just as Joseph puts a hand on his shoulder. “I’m sorry,” he says to me. “We have to go, or we’ll miss the flight.”

“All right.” I focus on my son. “I’ll call your mama, and maybe you and I can talk about where to go next?”

“Okay.” He hugs me one more time before I finally release him. “Bye, Leo!” He waves, and I wave back as I get to my feet. I watch him take Joseph’s hand as they walk through the sliding doors together. And then I see Mia, watching us, her sad smile aimed at me, and then Benny. She forces her lips to broaden as she takes his other hand, saying something to him I can’t make out.

After sucking in a breath and exhaling loudly, I look over at the guard, who’s still standing right fucking there. I sigh, checking my truck’s windshield. “Where’s my fine?” I ask him.

He motions to the sliding doors. “That man took it.”

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CHAPTER SEVENTY-ONE

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LEO

BENNY'S FEATURES, besides his eyes, are all mine. But his mannerisms are very much Mia's. Especially his little scowl, which, thankfully, he doesn't do anywhere near as much as Mia. When I told her this, she scowled, proving my point. Her dad thought it was hilarious.

That was two months ago. It's been four months now of me splitting my time between the academy during the week, and then alternating weekends back home and at the farm. Most of the time, Tammy travels with Mia and Benny. Once a month, her dad joins us.

I've gotten to know Joseph Kovács on a level I never thought I would or—more specifically—never thought I'd *want* to. It was on my third weekend at the farm when I woke up at six to go on my morning run, and he was there, on the porch steps, stretching, preparing to do the same. We had this awkward little standoff for a good few seconds before he laughed, and I found myself nervously laughing with him. We run together most mornings when he's at the farm, and we talk. Well, he talks, and I listen. He tells me about his work mainly, but every now and then, he'll talk about Mia and Benny. Sometimes he'll get real quiet afterward as if his mind is consumed with other thoughts. One time, when we got back from a run, he said, "Listen, about Mia... I'm—" I swear he was about to apologize, though I don't know what for, and besides, I'm not the one he needs to apologize to.

One time he asked me what I had to do to get Virginia to sign the divorce papers, and I told him the truth—that I called her a bitch for the way she'd treated Mia, and since that didn't work, I threatened to call her current employer and reveal all the times she made sexual passes at my dad... and *us*. The last part was lie. But whatever it took, I was making sure I wasn't leaving until those papers were signed. I'm pretty sure that was the moment I won him over.

Mia says that he's really working hard to make up for the mistakes he made in the past. He often tells her that walking out on her was his biggest regret, and then coming back for her only to watch his father die—it kind of messed with his head. She's too grown now for him to be a father to her, but

he tries. And he's a really good grandfather to Benny, which is all that matters. She says he has a hard time expressing his emotions, so he shows his love and devotion to them in other ways—mainly by spoiling them with material things they don't necessarily want or need. But, she understands that it's his way of trying to heal the pain of their past, so she lets him.

Tammy spends most of her time at the farm working on the memorial garden for John at the back of the house. She doesn't *love* New York or the lavish lifestyle that her fiancé leads, but she does love Joseph, always has and always will, and so she makes compromises. Because, as she once said while I was helping her dig a hole for a lemon tree, "That's what love is, Leo. A compromise." I'd looked over at Benny and Mia then, the two of them lying together on a picnic blanket in the grass, their hands raised, fingers aimed to the sky as they pointed out images formed by the clouds.

I know that at some point, Mia and I will have to have *The Talk*. We'd discussed having The Talk in the future so often that we could've had The Actual Talk by now. The problem is, I'm still at the academy, and until that's done, I won't be able to make any decisions regarding my future. Or maybe that's just our way of justifying it, because the truth is, I don't think either of us knows how to go forward once it's over. We'll have no more excuses, and we'll have to deal with reality, and that reality sucks.

I've come to hate the word "visit" because I don't feel like my son should "visit" me, or I should "visit" him. And sure, that works for other people, but it doesn't work for me.

I spend almost every waking second with Benny doing whatever the hell he wants. He wants to go on an adventure? *We're going on an adventure*. He wants me to stand like a statue and have him climb me? *Sure, bud. Hop on*. He wants to have a pretend dinner party with rocks as our guests? *I'm cooking whatever he wants to serve them*. He wants me to tickle his mama until she cries out that she's about to wet her pants? *Absolutely, I can do that*.

I swear this kid is beyond anything and everything I could've dreamed my son to be. I just... I wish I had someone to share that joy with besides Mia.

I've told her that whenever she's ready for Benny to know, I am, too. I *want* to be his dad more than anything in this entire world, but I also know that it's something she has to work through. Once he knows, I'm going to

have to tell my family, and that's a step she's not quite ready for. Which, unfortunately, I understand.

But, it's getting harder and harder to come up with lies every other weekend for why I'm not going home. I had to miss another one of Logan's therapy sessions—though, I don't know that my heart could handle another one.

For him, I'd overcome it.

For him, I'd do anything.

Laney is suspicious, of course, and she thinks that there's a girl involved. I don't discredit her assumption, because there is a girl.

Once Benny is tucked into bed at night and it's just Mia and me, it takes everything in me not to rip off her clothes and throw her down on the couch and do dirty, filthy things to her. We kiss. Or, more specifically, she kisses me. It's always quick and chaste, and there's never any tongue, which sucks, because I miss the way she tastes, both her mouth and *other parts*. She doesn't do it to tease me. It's like she can't control herself, and then she'll back away as if it never happened, and I roll my eyes, but I also agree with her.

Early on, we decided that getting to know Benny was the priority, and whatever we felt for each other would have to wait. I think there's still a part of her that fears that she's forcing me to be in his life, and having us "involved" will only add to that pressure. I've tried numerous times to convince her otherwise, but I have to accept that this is her battle she has to conquer on her own.

When we're apart, I video call them every night, which is what I'm doing now. Mia answers after a few rings, and I can tell right away that she's exhausted. Benny's been sick the past few days with a summer cold. Tammy's in Tennessee visiting her parents, and her dad can't risk getting sick because he has a conference coming up that he can't miss. Mia still has to work and study, so she's been doing a lot on her own, and I *hate it* for her. Still, I can't help smiling when she comes into view, her wavy hair up in a messy, lopsided knot on top of her head. Dark circles surround those light brown eyes, there's no color in her cheeks, and I'm pretty sure there's some type of red sauce smeared on her chin. She looks... a mess. But god, is she beautiful. "Benny's playing in the shower," she says in greeting, then narrows her eyes. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

My smile widens, and I sigh heavily, shaking my head. “I’ve spent a hell of a lot of years in love with you, Mia.” I shrug. “Hard habit to break.”

“Stop it,” she scolds, leaning against the doorframe of what I assume, going by the shower’s noise, is the bathroom. She opens her mouth to say something more, but her eyes dart to the side. “Benny, no! You’re going to break the glass!”

Benny giggles.

After a groan, she turns back to me. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay.” I can’t stop smiling. “How is he?”

“He’s feeling much better the last couple of days, so—” Her focus shifts. “All right! Time to get out. You’re not listening.” To me, she says, “I’m going to get him ready for bed. We’ll call you back in ten.” She hangs up before I can respond, and, ten minutes later, her number shows up on my phone. When I answer, all I see is a black hole.

“Benny, I’m sure Leo doesn’t want to see up your nose,” Mia says.

I chuckle.

And then I’m blessed with the beauty of Bennett. I understand now why Mia named him that. “Hey, buddy!”

“Hi, Leo!” He smiles wide, laying his head on the pillows on his bed. “I peed in the shower.”

I stifle my laugh. “I thought your mama said you shouldn’t do that anymore.”

“I got it all over the glass!”

“You did, huh?”

He nods, his small head moving erratically. “And then I tried to clean it with my feet.” He sneezes so loud, I can’t help but chuckle.

“Your mama says you’re feeling better. That’s good, right?”

He nods again. “I had a nose full of boogers. Still some there. Wanna see?”

I bust out a laugh. “I’m good, Benny. Thank you, though.”

“Did you know wombat poop is square?”

What is it with boys and poop? “I did not know that.”

“Do you know the colors of the rainbow?”

“I do.”

He raises his eyebrows expectantly.

“Red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet—in that order.”

His bright eyes widen. “How do you know?”

“My sister taught me,” I say. “She said if you remember the name ROY G BIV, then you can remember the colors.”

“You have a sister?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t have a sister.”

I smile. “I know.”

“What’s her name?”

“Lucy.”

“Do you have brothers?” he asks, but it comes out *bruvvas*.

Nodding, I tell him, “I have five.”

“What are their names?”

“Lucas, Logan, Lincoln, Liam and Lachlan.”

“Leooooo,” he sings.

“Beeeeeeny,” I mimic.

He puts a finger to his lips. “Cute, little Mama’s sleeping.” Then he points the phone to a sleeping Mia on a cushion made to look like a rock. Before I can stop him, Benny’s yelling, “Wake up, Mama!”

I wince as Mia’s eyes snap open. “Oh my god.” She takes the phone from Benny. “How long was I out?”

“Less than a minute,” I tell her.

She sighs, then the phone shifts, and I can hear her kissing Benny, most likely on the forehead like she does every night. “Goodnight, Benny. Mama loves you.”

“Luhyoo, too,” he replies.

“No sneaking out tonight, okay, buddy? Mama’s got a lot of work to do.”

“Okay, Mama.”

Benny shows up on the screen again, and my lips pull up at the corners. “Goodnight, buddy.”

Benny lets out a giant yawn before saying, “G’night, Leo.”

Mia’s back on the screen, and I see her closing Benny’s bedroom door. She moves from there to her office. I’ve been on video calls with them so many times, I can make out the floor plan of their apartment. She sits down on the chair behind her desk before focusing on me. Tired eyes blink slowly, slowly. “Hey,” she says through a sigh.

“Hey.” I try to force a smile, but it’s hard when I see the deep frown marring her beauty. “Are you okay?”

She glances down, her shoulders rising with her deep inhale, and when she looks back up, her eyes are glazed with tears. “I’m so exhausted,” she says, trying to hold back a sob. I sit a little taller on the couch while she lets out a long, heavy breath. Shaking her head, she says, “I have so much work to do, and I can’t even keep my eyes open.”

“I’m sorry, Mia, I wish—”

“When Benny was sick, he was up, like, every hour, and I couldn’t get anything done. And Tammy’s been gone, and I had all this course work to submit, so I had to focus on that, and now I’m behind with my *actual* work. At least a week behind, and I’m so...” She trails off sighing and sets the phone down on the desk to where I can still see her, but her hands are free, and she uses those hands to extend the sleeve of her top and wipe at the tears flowing too fast, too free. “I’m so tired, and I have to get so much done, and I have tomorrow and the weekend to do it all because it’s due Monday.” She covers her eyes, her shoulders shaking with every sob. “I’m just overwhelmed,” she says, sucking in a breath before lowering her hands. “I’m sorry, that was so much to dump on you.”

My eyes track her every move, my heart heavy with sympathy and guilt and everything in between. “I’m sorry you’re going through this,” I say, my voice low. “I wish I could do something.”

She shakes her head. “It’s okay. It’s just... a slump, I guess.” She rubs her eyes before saying, “I think I just need to nap for like an hour, and then I’ll be fine. I just need to recharge.” She attempts a smile. “Call us tomorrow?”

“Of course,” I say through an exhale.

“Okay.” She hangs up, and I stare at the now-blank screen of my phone. For minutes, I just sit there, thinking about her and everything she has to do. Then I move to the kitchen counter and open one of the manuals the academy supplies us. I try to concentrate on the words written on the pages, but my focus is elsewhere. In New York. Approximately... *how many miles apart are we?*

I open my laptop and click on the web browser. I type in *North Carolina to New York City*. The first search result is for flights. There are forty-four nonstop flights *per day*, and it takes less than two hours to get there. I don’t even think. I just click, click, pull out my credit card, click some more, then set the alarm for early the next morning.

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CHAPTER SEVENTY-TWO

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LEO

IT WASN'T hard to find the address for *Kovács Industries*—it's right there on their website. JFK Airport had more people in one place than I've probably ever seen in my entire existence. Finding the cab bay was easy, and according to the information online, there's a flat fee to take you into the city, where their office is. The ride feels never-ending. We're stopping and starting and stopping and starting. Everything is so different from home, and I don't know where to look. It's weird to think that I can be on a plane for two hours and experience a full-blown culture shock, but that's exactly what's happening.

My return flight leaves on Sunday afternoon, so I didn't have a lot to pack. All I had with me was a backpack full of clothes, my phone, and my wallet. It's the same as I have when I go to the farm. It was supposed to be my weekend home, so I had to lie—again—and tell Dad that I was being dragged to a bachelor party for one of the guys in the academy. I hated lying, but I didn't know what else to do. I *should* be there, but I *need* to be here.

"Here you are," my driver says, pulling up to the tallest building I've ever seen, all glass, too many people walking briskly in and out.

I pay him a ridiculous amount of money and step out, trying not to look too much like a tourist. The first thing I notice is that *the air* is different. The second is that everyone is fast, too fast, and standing on the sidewalk looking up at a building is frowned upon. *Noted*. I grip the straps of my backpack and enter through one of the eleventy-three doors. I'm underdressed. I'm in a T-shirt, basketball shorts, and sneakers, and everyone is in suits and *sweater-vests*. I have to laugh at the thought, and now I'm standing in the middle of a vast foyer laughing to myself, looking like a whack job. *Awesome*. I check my phone for the floor for *Kovács Industries*. Floors 17-21. *Shit*. Where the fuck do I even begin to look for Mia? I walk to the elevator, ignoring the looks of suspicion from everyone around me. When the elevator doors open, there's a man in there whose job is to press the buttons... I guess. I've never been anywhere this fancy. He looks at me, and I look at him, and I almost want to tell him I can press my own button.

Instead, I mumble, “Seventeen.” He eyes me the same way everyone in the foyer did and taps the button.

The low hum of annoying music fills the elevator as I watch the numbers above the door glow higher and higher. People get on and off, and when I finally get to seventeen, I turn to the elevator man and say, “Thank you.”

He just stares at me, his eyes wide.

I step out of the cart before wondering if maybe I should have tipped him? Is that how it works here? Dammit. Before I can overthink it, the woman behind the large desk right in front of me asks, “Can I help you?” She’s in her late twenties, I guess, and wearing a blindingly bright green blouse, her blond hair pulled up in a perfect little bun.

The *Kovács Industries* logo is printed on the wall behind her, and so I step forward, moving out of the way of the people walking back and forth. I ask, “Is... um... Is Mia around?”

“Mia...?”

“Kovács.”

Her eyes widen before she plasters on a smile that wasn’t there only seconds ago. “Her office is on the twentieth floor,” she tells me.

“So, do I just...?” I point behind me.

“No.” She shakes her head, standing to point to my left. “You can take the internal elevator to her floor. There’s another information desk there. Trent will be able to help you.”

“Okay,” I breathe out.

She smiles. “You’re from out of town, aren’t you?”

“Am I that obvious?”

She laughs quietly. “Are you a friend of Mia’s?”

I nod. “I guess, yeah.”

“That little boy of hers is just gorgeous.”

“You know Benny?”

“Are you kidding?” she almost scoffs. “He’s the apple of his papa’s eye.” And then she winks, and I don’t know if she’s flirting or if she’s insinuating she knows who I am because Benny and me—we really do look alike. In any case, I hightail it out of there and make my way to the elevator. Another minute passes, and I’m at another desk, and there’s a younger guy behind this one. He isn’t dressed as professionally as the others I’ve seen in the building. I look around before I make my way over. This floor is open,

desks scattered in groups. Glass walls surround the offices lining the exterior, and... there's a basketball hoop in the corner. "Yo," the guy calls out. I assume he's Trent. "You good, bro?"

I take the few steps to get to him. "Yeah, is Mia Kovács around?"

His eyes squint, assessing me, and then he nods, slowly. "Do you have an appointment?"

I shake my head. "Is that a problem?"

His shoulders lift with his shrug. "Give me a sec. I'll try calling her office." He picks up the phone, taps it a few times, and then I wait, look around some more. The people on this floor seem young, like—just out of college. Some of them are dressed in slacks and button-up shirts, but a lot of them are in jeans and casual shirts. "She's not answering," he says, and then his attention moves to a guy coming up to the desk.

"What's good?" the guy asks Trent.

"Not much, man. You seen Mia around?" he asks, motioning to me.

The new guy looks me up and down and then shoves his hands in his jeans pockets. "You're here for Mia?"

I nod, already hating this guy without knowing a thing about him.

He smiles to one side. "Good luck, man. We've all tried."

I stand to full height, noting I'm a few inches taller. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Ooh..." he says, his hands going up in surrender. "You, like, know *know* her."

"Caleb, shut up," Trent tells him. *Smart guy*. "If Joseph knows you're talking about her like that, you may as well pack your shit now."

Caleb doesn't shut up as suggested. "All I'm saying is she's hot as hell, and she doesn't act like a rich girl, you know? So yeah, we've all tried to hit it, but she's so wrapped up in her son, she doesn't even realize when guys are hitting on her."

I cock an eyebrow. "You've tried to *hit it*?"

He nods. "So has every other guy on this floor."

Trent sighs. "Shut up, dude."

Again, Caleb doesn't listen. "I mean, good luck, man," he says, tapping my shoulder like we're old friends. "You're going to need it."

I look where he's touched and then back at him, my jaw tense. I'm two seconds away from smashing his head against the desk. Luckily, in those two seconds, Trent says, "There she is." I follow the direction of where he's

pointing, and sure enough... *there she is*. In a simple gray dress and black heels, Mia walks toward me with her head down, waves upon waves of black hair shielding her face. She's carrying a box filled with rolled-up posters, and when she's about ten feet away, Trent calls her name. She glances up. I lose my breath. Mia stops walking, freezes completely, besides her lips. They move, but I don't know what she says. Then her shoulders fall, her chest deflating with her exhale. She drops the box, letting all its content scatter everywhere. And then she's walking toward me, those heels clicking against the tiled floor, and as soon as we can reach each other, she's in my arms, and her mouth's on mine, and this time, it's not quick, and it's not chaste. Her tongue slides against my lips, and I part them, giving her what we both need. She's so soft in my arms, her tongue warm against mine. Her arms tighten around my neck, pulling me closer, and of all the reactions I'd hoped for, this wasn't even in the *dream* category. When she pulls away, her eyes are glassy. "You're here."

"I am."

"For me?"

I nod.

She kisses me again. Just once. "Thank you."

I smile. "Don't thank me. I want to be here."

After a sigh, she says, "Let's go." She walks over to the box and starts putting everything back in. I turn back to Caleb, wearing a smirk that's completely intentional. And then I give him the finger. Because I'm *twelve*.

Mia takes me to her office, which is floor-to-ceiling glass. The first thing she does is lower the blinds so no one can see in. I lean against her desk and drop my backpack to the floor. "I can't believe you're here," she says, and she's so much of everything all at once.

I take her hand and pull her between my legs, my palm going to her jaw. "I hate that you're having a rough time. So whatever I can do, I'm here, okay?"

"When do you leave?" she asks, big brown eyes blinking up at me.

"Sunday."

Her smile is slow as she leans into me, her arms trapped between us. She rests her head against my chest, saying, "I just need you to hold me for, like, five hours."

I chuckle, tightening my arms around her and kissing the top of her head. "Anything you need, Mia." I only get to hold her for a few seconds

before her door bursts open, and her dad appears. He's looking down at his phone as he mumbles, "Do you want to tell me why people are talking about you almost cry..." He trails off when he looks up and sees me.

"Hey..." he says, eyeing me sideways while Mia pulls away, stands taller. "What are you doing here?"

He offers me his fist for a bump, so I return it, saying, "Mia was having a—"

"He just came to surprise us," Mia says, cutting me off.

"Wait." I look between Mia and Joseph and settle on Mia. "You were crying?"

Joseph closes the door behind him and heaves out a sigh. "What's going on, Mia?"

"Nothing," Mia replies, crossing her arms. "I'm fine."

Joseph looks above Mia's head at me, and I shake my head. Mia must notice because she turns to glare at me, then goes back to her dad. "I'm *fine*," she repeats.

He watches her a moment as if trying to read between her words. "Mia..." It's almost threatening, the way he says her name.

Mia's arms fall to her sides. "I'm just overwhelmed, okay? I haven't had as much time to work on the Ludlow account, and I had other work I had to submit for class, so I'm a little behind because Benny's been sick and—"

Joseph's nostrils flare before saying, "And you didn't think you could come to me and tell me?"

"I don't want special treatment because I'm your daughter!"

Joseph scoffs. "If any of my employees came to me and said their kid was sick and needed an extension, I'd give them a break. Sure, maybe not before, but now? Come on, Mia, you know better!" He runs a hand over his face, trying to settle his irritation.

"I didn't want to disappoint you." Mia's voice is so quiet, I barely hear her. "I'm sorry."

Joseph's eyes snap to hers, and then an emotion washes over him that has his entire body relaxing. "Jesus," he mutters. "Come here." Mia steps forward and into her father's arms, and he holds her, stroking the back of her head. "You will *never* disappoint me," he says, just above a whisper. "I'm sorry I've done things in the past to make you question that." His voice cracks with emotion on the last few words, and I feel like I should leave. Like this moment between them isn't for my eyes and ears.

I shift, uncomfortable, and Joseph releases his daughter. “Go home,” he tells her.

“Dad, no! I can—”

“Go home,” he repeats, and it’s an order this time. “Go directly home. Do not pass the condo; do not collect a Benny.”

I crack a smile at his Monopoly pun, and Joseph notices, his eyes conveying a message I can’t decipher. “How long are you here for?” he asks me.

“Just until Sunday.”

He nods, then, settling a hand on Mia’s shoulder, he tells her, “We’ll figure out the Ludlow account on Monday. It’s not a priority. You are. Relax, take some time for yourself. I’m going to call Bernado’s and have them deliver lunch, so you better be there.”

“Dad, I—” Mia starts to protest, but Joseph’s already on his phone, tapping it a few times, and then bringing it to his ear.

“Go home, Mia,” he says, halfway to the door. “Let Benny’s dad take care of you.”

My breath catches, and Mia gasps so loud it rings in my ears.

Joseph looks between us, his eyes narrowed. “How dumb do you think I am?” He throws in an eye-roll for good measure. “The kid’s a spitting image.”

Before either of us can say anything, he’s on the phone, muttering out his name and a bunch of fancy terms for *pasta*. He covers the phone with his hand and says, “The limo’s downstairs waiting.” And then he closes the door behind him.

I have so much information to process from the last few minutes, but my brain—the moron—latches on to the most insignificant detail. “You have a *limo*?”

CHAPTER SEVENTY-THREE

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MIA

AS MORE PEOPLE step on the elevator, I hold the phone tighter to my ear and press my back to Leo's chest. There's more than enough room for everyone to fit, but I *want* to be this close to him. And going by the way his arm curves around my middle, he wants it, too. Just as I think the call's about to ring out, Tammy answers. "Your dad just called," she says in lieu of a greeting. "No coming by the condo. I've blocked access to the elevator. Benny's staying with us tonight, so—"

"But Leo's here," I cut in, turning in his arms and glancing up to meet his eyes. "I'm sure he'd want to see him."

Leo responds by narrowing his eyes and holding me closer.

"You can come for dinner tonight. Six thirty," Tammy says. "And then you're gone, okay?" Tammy rarely speaks to me like this, so when she does, I know there's no point in arguing with her. She hangs up before I can respond.

"Sorry," I tell Leo, pouting and dropping my phone in my bag. "No Benny until dinner."

Leo just stares at me, his eyes holding mine. He doesn't say a word, doesn't move a single muscle until we're at ground level. He holds on to my hand, our fingers linked as I lead him to the limo. When I get into the car after him, I notice him scanning the space, his eyes darting around. His lips curve when he must find what he's looking for, and he reaches across to the button console. A second later, the privacy screen lifts, shielding us from the view of the driver. He turns to me, his smile sheepish, and rests across the long bench seat, his back against the corner, one foot on the seat, the other on the floor. "Come here," he says, motioning for me to slide between his legs. As glad as I am to have him here, as hard it is to control myself around him, fooling around in the back of the limo isn't really *appropriate*. Especially since I have to see Henry, our driver, daily. Leo rolls his eyes when I scrunch my nose at him. "You wanted me to hold you, right?"

A girly little giggle erupts from deep in my chest, and I don't bother hiding my giddiness when I lean into him, my back to his chest as he wraps

his arms around me, pressing his lips to my temple. Craning my neck, I look up at him, saying, “I can’t believe you’re here.” I’d been so overwhelmed, feeling like there was no way out of it, and then he showed up, unannounced, looking lost and a little wary, and I had no idea how much I needed him. Just *him*. I heave out a sigh, cover his hand resting on my stomach, and push up to kiss the stubble on his jaw. He catches my lips as I pull away, kissing me once.

“I need a favor,” he says. “Just for this weekend.”

Concerned, I try to turn to him, but his tight hold stops me. “What do you need?”

He lifts a hand, cradles my face as his eyes bore into mine. “I need you to let me take care of you, Mia.”

“Leo, you don’t—”

“You’ve been doing so much, and you’ve been doing it on your own for too damn long—Benny and work and school—and I’m not saying you *need* help, I’m just saying...” His heavy exhale fans across my cheeks. “Just let me show you how much I appreciate you.”

It takes the wicked smirk to form on his lips for me to process what he’s saying, and before I can retort, he’s kissing me, his fingers grasping my hair, tugging my head back to give him better access to my mouth. And there’s something so filthy about the way his tongue brushes against mine, something so *perfect*. He inhales my moans as my fingernails dig into the strong muscles of his arms. Our bodies jolt forward when the limo takes off, and he never pulls his mouth off mine. “Fuck, Mia,” he groans, and I’m reminded of the last time we were in this position. We were in the back of Holden’s truck before our *fake date*, and I can still recall the way he looked at me, the way he spoke to me. “*If I were a lesser man, I’d flip you on all fours, lift up that dress and fuck you from behind right now.*” The memory, the visual, creates a throb between my legs, and I try to press them together to ease the pressure, but his hand is there—right *there*—and I don’t even know when it happened. He pulls his mouth away, allowing me to fill my lungs with their life source.

But then his hand covers my breast, his thumb stroking the tip, while he sucks at the spot right beneath my ear. My eyes drift shut while his hand between my legs glides higher, higher—“Spread those perfect fucking legs for me, baby.”

My head falls against his chest while my legs part, my breaths harsh against my throat as I try to breathe through the pleasure swarming through me.

“I’m going to appreciate every single inch of you,” he murmurs against my ear. “With my hands first...” He strokes me through my underwear, and I’m sure he can feel it—how wet he’s made me. “And then my tongue... and then my cock.” He accentuates that last one by lifting his hips, pressing his hardness against my butt.

My moan would make a whore jealous.

His mouth crashes against mine as his fingers push my underwear aside. Cold air hits my center, and I don’t know where I am or what I’m doing or where the heck to put my hands. The tip of his finger strokes through my slit, so fucking slow, I almost yell at him to just shove them in and finger-fuck me until I come all over his hand.

Oh, no.

Only Leo brings this out of me.

Never anyone else. Ever.

He stops just short of pressing down on my clit, and then makes his way back down, and I *cannot breathe*. “Why are you teasing me?” I moan.

He pulls away completely. No more hands. No more mouth. Only a smirk beneath his heated eyes as he pushes me away. “You said you’d sit on my face if I ever teased you again.” He shrugs, so lazy and carefree as he looks out the window of the moving car. “You better come through on your threats, Mia Kovács.” I scowl, which only makes him laugh. “I’m just kidding,” he says, tugging on my arm to bring me back to him. He drops a kiss on my shoulder. “If I didn’t stop then, I would’ve taken you here, in the back of a limo, and that’s not really how I want things to go.”

Well, he has a point, and I’m glad he could think straight because I sure couldn’t.

At my non-response, he drags me over his lap until I’m sitting across him. After a quick adjustment of his private parts, he raises his hand, strokes the blush on my cheeks with the pad of his thumb. Eyes on mine, he says, “How are you feeling?”

“I’m...” I consider lying for all of one second. “Exhausted... and horny now”—he chuckles at this—“and much better now that you’re here.”

His eyebrows kick up. “Yeah?”

I nod. “I needed *you*, Leo,” I say, spreading my fingers over his broad chest, feeling his heart beating beneath my palm. “I didn’t even realize you were the cure until I saw you. It was like I could *breathe* again.”

His kiss is gentle, soft, and intimate. “I *want* you to need me,” he murmurs against my lips before pulling away. “I hate that I can’t be here for you.”

“You’re here now.” I rest my head on his shoulder. “That’s all that matters.”

He’s quiet a long moment, his fingers mindlessly twirling a strand of my hair. “I’ve missed you, Mia,” he murmurs, voice so soft I barely hear him. My chest aches at his admission. Two fingers beneath my chin, he lifts my eyes to his and runs his nose along mine. His eyes drift shut, right before he says, “It’s been ten years, and you’re still the only girl I’ve ever wanted.”

I kiss him.

With everything I have and everything I am, I kiss him, hoping to show him with the action alone how much he means to me. He’s the first to deepen the kiss, his hand gripping my hair and pulling hard. When the limo stops just outside the lobby, I pull away in a daze and then giggle as I watch him trying to pull himself together. He’s in workout shorts, so he has no real way of hiding his erection. I lick my lips as my eyes lock on the outline of his—

“How horny are you?” he says through a chuckle.

I shrug, feeling the heat roll up my neck to the tips of my ears.

When the driver opens the door, I slide out first, Leo right behind me. He walks through the lobby and to the elevator, with his front against my back, his hardness pressed between us. He doesn’t speak a word as we walk to my apartment. The second I open the door he’s *on me*. Hands and mouth and everything all at once, and I push away the questions, the insecurities, the *what ifs*... until his fingers tug on the zipper of my dress. I freeze, lock up. And even through his lust-filled haze, Leo notices. He reads my body better than anyone. “What’s wrong?” he asks, his eyes unfocused.

I step away, my back against the door, because we’ve barely made it a foot into the apartment. Shame forces my gaze to lower, my voice to crack. “My body’s not the same, Leo.” I hate that my insecurities show up *right now* and that those insecurities are strong enough to make my eyes water, my breaths halt.

Leo doesn't reply right away, doesn't move, and when I look up at him, he's watching me, a frown so deep it hurts to look at him. "Mia," he whispers, stepping closer. He cups my jaw in his hand and kisses the tears clinging to my lashes. "I'm going to spend my entire existence proving that you have, are, and will always be perfect to me."

And so that's what he does. For the next hour, he shows me—in his own Leo way—how he sees me. He mutters filthy words between declarations of my beauty, of how the scars from carrying *our* child only make me sexier.

And then we talk, buoyant in our conversations—light and meaningless.

We don't talk about what *this* means or how it can affect our son. We don't talk about the unpredictability of our futures or the necessary choices we'll soon have to make.

We act as if we're seventeen again and we have the entire summer together, or our entire lives if we want it.

We don't even remember the lunch that Dad ordered until we leave the apartment for dinner and see it just outside the door. We ignore the food... just like we ignore all of our unspoken uncertainties.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-FOUR

OceanofPDF.com

LEO

“WHAT?” Mia laughs. “You are!”

I glare at her, my brow pinched. Of all the things people could say to offend me, I never thought the words *helicopter parent* would be included. “I am not!”

“You are so,” she says, pushing me to walk backward toward the park bench. “Benny’s fine.”

As she says this, I’m aware that my eyes are back on Benny, watching him climb one of the playground structures. Kids are running around him and above him, and it would only take one of those little shits to knock into him and cause him to fall, break a bone, maybe even get brain damage. My eyes narrow. “Careful, Benny!” I shout, and Mia presses down on my shoulders, forcing me to sit.

“He’s fine,” she says, and I’m sure she’s rolling her eyes, but I’m too busy watching Benny to look at her. I feel her sit down next to me, her body pressed to my side. I throw an arm around her shoulders. “Leo!” She’s laughing. “We come here all the time. He can get around this playground with his eyes closed.”

There isn’t even any grass or rubber below the equipment. It’s just concrete. Everywhere. There’s barely any grass anywhere that I’ve seen. In order for Benny to play outside, we need to walk or catch a cab to a park. We can’t just open the door and be like, “Have at it, kid.”

Now I know what Jay-Z and Alicia Keys were going on about in “Empire State of Mind.” New York really is a concrete jungle. But these streets don’t make me feel brand new, and the lights sure don’t inspire me. They make me anxious and itch to get home. Don’t get me wrong; I can definitely see the attraction and why some people love it. Maybe a few years ago, I would’ve been one of those people. But I’ve changed and so have my priorities, and this place—it just isn’t for me. “It’s not him I’m worried about,” I mumble, rubbing at the back of my neck in irritation as someone stands in front of me, blocking my view. “There are too many people here,” I say, looking around us. All it takes is one second for someone to snatch him up and—

“Do you want to go?” she asks, breaking into my thoughts.

“No.”

Mia sighs and doesn’t say anything for a long moment. “Look, I know it’s not your house or the farm, but this is our *home*,” she says quietly.

I don’t know how she’s able to read my mind the way she does. I tear my gaze away from Benny and focus on the girl beside me. “I know.”

“You hate it here.” It’s not a question.

“It’s not that I *hate* it. It’s just... it’s so different from what I’m used to. It’s not the way I was raised, and I guess—”

“You want to raise your kid the same way you were?”

I shrug. “Is that so bad?”

Mia frowns. “It is when it’s impossible.”

And this, right here, is what we’ve spent the entire weekend avoiding. I look back at Benny, trying to find a way out of this conversation because I’m not ready. Mia is, apparently. “This is our life. I have a job here, an apartment, a support system that goes beyond my dad and Tammy,” she says. After a breath, she adds, “My therapists are here...” Her voice cracks, and I can’t avoid looking at her now, my heart aching at her admission.

“I know,” I say. And I do, which only makes things worse.

Mia and I have taken that next step in *our* relationship, and I don’t want to take that back. Physically, we’ve gone as far as we can without going all the way. And emotionally, we’ve grown closer than we ever have. But none of that means shit if we can’t make it work. Benny is the priority. He always will be. And for us to give him the life he deserves, he needs his mom, and he needs her to be *healthy*, and thanks to Logan, I understand the importance of a solid support system, so I know I can’t be the only one to give her what she needs.

Even knowing all this, still, I say, “My family could help us.” It’s stupid to say, and I don’t know why I say it. My family doesn’t even fucking know about him, besides Lucy, and maybe that’s my problem. Maybe *I* need support with this whole thing, and I don’t have anyone.

Mia doesn’t respond. She has nothing to say, at least not anything positive.

“It’s not yours!” I hear coming from the playground. Some teenage punk is standing over Benny, yelling at him, and I’m on my feet before I know what’s happening. Mia runs ahead of me, taking Benny in her arms. “What’s going on?” Mia asks.

The punk doesn't look at her. He looks at me—all the way up and into my eyes. Whatever look I give him has him stepping back. He lifts a yellow dump truck between us. "Look, your kid tried to take my brother's toy. That's all."

It's only now I notice a kid around Benny's age standing behind his brother with tears in his eyes. "You can't just take people's toys," Mia says, the same time Benny shouts, "I'm not his kid!"

Well, *fuck*. Before I can say anything, Mia says, "You need to say sorry, Benny."

Benny groans, then takes a step forward, standing between us. The little kid's brother moves out of the way so Benny can talk to him. "I'm sorry," Benny mumbles, but there's nothing genuine in his tone.

"Say it and mean it," Mia warns, squatting down beside him.

Benny's shoulders drop. "I'm sorry I took your truck," he says. "I didn't know it was yours." And then, like the champ he is, he offers the kid his fist for a bump, just like his papa.

The kid looks up at his older brother, who motions for him to go ahead.

"I'm sorry," Mia says to the teenager. "He doesn't really hang around kids his age..." She trails off, as if this is explanation enough. A moment later, Mia grasps onto Benny's shoulders, leading him away. "Why would you take something that's not yours?" she asks him, frustrated.

Benny shrugs. "I didn't know it wasn't mine."

"Not everything in this world is yours, Benny. You're too spoiled," she says through a sigh. "Maybe you shouldn't get that ice cream now."

"What?" He spins to face her. "You said I could have ice cream!"

"But then you did something you shouldn't have, and that's the consequence."

"I didn't know I couldn't!" he screams, and it's the first time I've ever seen him like this.

I say, because I feel like I need to say something, "Benny, you shouldn't talk to your mother like that."

His little eyes narrow on mine, and then he bursts out in tears. "You said we could have ice cream!" He pushes Mia, hard, and I have to catch her when she falls back a step.

"Benny!" I scold, and his eyes widen, right before he bolts.

I run after him, picking him up quickly. He's kicking and screaming, and I'm trying to calm him down, but he won't stop crying, and his little

fists keep thumping at my chest, trying to hurt me, trying to push me away.

“Let’s go,” Mia hisses, leading us to a cab. He doesn’t stop on the ride back to their apartment, and he’s still going as we step inside. For the first time since he started, I release him. He runs straight to his room and slams the door. Mia winces at the sound, her hands gripping the back of the couch, chest rising and falling with her harsh, sharp breaths.

“I’ve never seen—” I start.

“It happens,” she murmurs, and when she looks at me, her eyes clouded, I die a little on the inside. “It’s not about the stupid ice cream,” she says, almost like a confession. “He has no friends his age, so he gets anxious being around other kids, and he doesn’t know how to act or behave, and I can tell it gets to him, you know? But he won’t talk to me about it. He just shuts down, and then he’ll have these—”

“Outbursts?” I cut in, and she nods, gives me a knowing look.

My son has outbursts.

Like me.

“I’ve tried the picture thing, you know? The three words thing your mom did for you, but he doesn’t—” I trap her against my chest, holding her tight. The warmth of her pent-up breath floods my beating flesh. “I don’t know what to do when he’s like this,” she cries. “I can’t hold him the way you did, and he just keeps going and going with me. I end up with bruises —”

“Mia...”

“It doesn’t happen often,” she says, as if trying to justify it. “Maybe once every few months.” She pulls away, her eyes pleading when they meet mine. “Do you think I should do something—take him to see someone?”

“I don’t know,” I tell her honestly, my mind racing. In my eyes, in my mind, Benny’s *perfect*.

She steps out of my arms and wipes at her eyes. “I’m scared they’re going to slap a label on him, and he’s going to have that stigma his entire life, and it’s not the *worst* thing that could happen. I know that. But what if they put him on meds and he’s no longer my Bennett?” She shakes her head. “Sorry, I don’t know why I’m dumping all this on you.”

“Because I’m his dad?” I say quietly. “And you shouldn’t have to make these choices alone.”

She swallows loudly before glancing at Benny’s door. The crying has stopped. “Benny?” she calls out.

When he doesn't respond, we make our way over to his door. I knock. "Benny?"

Still nothing.

Slowly, quietly, I open the door, and there's our son, asleep on the floor of his blue bedroom. "He must've worn himself out," Mia says, the giggle escaping her such a contrast to what we were feeling only minutes ago.

I step inside and carry him to his bed while Mia pulls the covers down. I put him in the middle of his bed, and without saying a word to each other, Mia and I get in on either side of him. Mia strokes his hair, causing his breath to hitch. His eyes open, just slightly, and he says, his little voice barely audible, "I'm sorry, Mama." And then he lets out a sigh, falls back asleep. His muscles relax enough that his fisted hands open, revealing a rock he'd been gripping on to. "What's this?" Mia asks, taking it from him.

My eyes squint at what she's holding, and then my heart soars right out of my chest. "It's amethyst. I gave it to him the second time I met him."

Mia pouts.

I run a hand over my face, try to make sense of the last hour. I want him to know I'm his dad. That I, too, had *outbursts* and that it's not his fault. I don't want him to carry that guilt, that burden. "When can we tell him?" I ask, at the same time she says, "You can't see yourself living here, can you?"

For a long moment, neither of us respond to either question. We just stare at each other, hundreds of unanswered questions floating between us like a kaleidoscope—the same mirrored images reflecting our hopes... hopes that are forever changing.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-FIVE

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MIA

“THIS IS SO COOL!” Benny gasps, walking into Leo’s temporary apartment. It’s Saturday morning, and we’d just flown in. Instead of going to the farm this weekend, we’re staying with Leo.

Leo had been the one to mention it since the rock and mineral museum he wanted to take Benny to was near his apartment. So for tonight, we’re staying here, and we’re “camping.” When Leo found out that Benny had never been camping—never even seen a tent in real life—he *had* to make it happen. Now Benny’s walking around the tent set up in Leo’s living room, his eyes almost as wide as his smile. “Can I go inside?” Benny asks in excitement, kicking off his shoes.

Leo drops down on his knees to unzip the tent. “Go for it!”

Benny squeals with excitement when he steps inside. “Which one is my bed?”

“The blue sleeping bag,” Leo says through a chuckle.

I lower myself to sit beside Leo and look inside. There are two sleeping bags, one smaller compared to the one beside it. There’s a small foldable table between the heads of them with books stacked up, and on the edges of the tent are all different rocks. There are flashlights on each of the pillows, a box of glow sticks, a sketchpad, and crayons. “You went all out, huh?”

Leo nods, smiling as he watches our son flick the flashlight on and off. He closes the zipped opening of the tent just long enough to kiss me quickly. “Hi,” he says, his grin widening. “How are you?”

“Good.”

He nuzzles my neck. “I missed you bad these last couple weeks.” I giggle, feeling the butterflies swarm through my stomach. Only Leo’s ever made me feel like this—these water tower feelings—and even though we still haven’t done *it*, I can’t get enough of him.

“Me, too.” I laugh when he gnaws gently on my exposed collarbone. “Stop it!”

“Stop what?” Benny calls out. “What are you guys doing?”

I push Leo away. After New York, we decided it would be safer not to show too much intimacy around Benny. We didn’t want to confuse him, and

since Leo and I are confused enough as it is when it comes to us and our future, adding Benny's emotions to it might just destroy us.

"Nothing," Leo says, parting the opening again. "So this is just a trial, okay, bud? And if you can stay the entire night in the tent, then once I finish at the academy we can go on a real camping trip in the woods." He glances at me, grimacing. "If it's okay with your mama."

Benny crawls headfirst into his sleeping bag. "How long?" he asks.

"How long what?"

"Until you finish."

"I finish in one month," Leo tells him.

"How many years is that?"

Leo chuckles. "It's four weeks."

"How many *years*?"

"It's less than a year."

Under the blanket, Benny shifts until his head pops out. "How many days?"

"28 or so..."

"So how many *years*?"

Laughing under my breath, I poke my head inside, take a better look, and pout dramatically. "Where am I going to sleep?"

"In my bed," Leo answers. "This is a boys' camping trip." When I scowl at him, he shrugs. "Sorry." He's not. Not even a little bit.

"Yeah, Mama!" Benny laughs. "Boys only!" He sits up, his legs still buried in the sleeping bag. Then he looks around, his eyebrows slowly dipping. "Where are all the snacks?"

"The snacks," Leo repeats in a whisper. "Dang it."

"You don't have to—" I start, but Leo's already on his feet, grabbing his phone, keys, and wallet from the coffee table. "Leo, you don't have to go now," I try to convince. "We still have to go to the museum."

"But *snacks*," he says. He shakes his head, his brow furrowed. "How the heck did I forget the snacks? They're pivotal to a boys' camping trip."

"We can get them later!"

He already has the front door open. "Any requests?" It's like he doesn't hear me at all.

"S'mores!" Benny yells.

"Right." Leo nods. "So fire of some kind." His eyes do that distant thing they do when he's deep in thought. "I'll be back." He closes the door, and I

sigh, look into the tent again.

Benny's grin is so big I can't help but do the same. He pats the spot next to him. "Come in, Mama."

"Are you sure? I thought it was boys only?"

"You can come until Leo gets back. I won't tell him."

I laugh and crawl into the small space. I go straight for the table—more books about rocks and minerals. I didn't even know they made this many.

Leo told me that his sister owns a bookstore, so he gets her to order them for him at a discounted rate. He'd always grown up around books, and while his parents didn't spoil them with material *things*, there was never a limit when it came to books. As kids, they would use the allowance they earned from doing chores around the house to buy the things they wanted—toys or outings—but his mom would always pay for books because you can't put a value on education, imagination, and time and space travel—which is what books are to Leo.

He told me about day trips to the city with his mom and sister, just the three of them, and they'd do nothing but go to new and used bookstores. They'd come home with so many bags of books, his dad would have to carry them in. And then he and his sister would sit at the kitchen table while his mom made hot chocolate, and they'd go through all their purchases. Lucy would pile them neatly, alphabetize them and sniff the pages, while Leo—to his sister's dismay—would dramatically crack their spines, write his name on the title pages, and—just to really annoy her—dog-ear the pages.

As he got older, he realized he didn't get through them as quickly as his sister did, so he didn't go on as many outings with them, opting to stay home and actually read the ones he had. He said that of all the things he'd like to teach Benny, his love for getting lost in another world is high up on the list, along with woodworking, and you know... being a decent human being.

He's been talking about Benny a lot lately, and not just the cute things he does or the adventures they go on together. He talks about his hopes and dreams for Benny, and sometimes, I wonder what he sees. Specifically, *where* he envisions this future of ours.

Last week, he asked what my plans were for Benny going to school next year. I sent him the link to two schools in New York that I'd been looking at. One is a public school. The other is a school with a wait list so long we

put Benny's name down a few days after he was born. After perusing both websites, Leo responded with: *Where's all the space for him to play?*

And that's when we both realized that we couldn't hold off on The Talk much longer. He's just under a month from graduating the academy, so it was time to—as he put it—*adult the fuck up*. This weekend, we planned to make it all about Benny. In two weeks, when I return, we'll sit and we'll talk. We'll talk until decisions are made.

My phone buzzes in my pocket, and it's a text from Leo:

Leo: *Your ass. Those jeans. Holy shit, Mia.*

He follows this up with emojis of a tongue and a peach.

I scoff.

"What's wrong, Mama?" Benny asks, taking a book from the stack and opening it to the title page. He grabs a crayon from the box and starts writing his name.

"Nothing," I say. "Leo's just being silly."

He giggles, halfway through the E when he says, "Leo's not silly. He's the bestest and strongest man in my world."

My lips part to reply, but the sudden knot in my throat prevents it.

He's finished with the first N when he stops, looks up at me. "Mama?" His lips are pursed, his dark eyebrows almost meeting in the middle. "Is it okay if I tell Leo that I love him?"

A ragged breath falls from my lips, and I release the air in my lungs slowly. "Yeah, bud," I choke out. "If that's how you feel."

"I do," he says, going back to his task, completely unaware of my current emotional state.

"Then you should tell him." I look away, hoping he doesn't notice the tears in my eyes.

"Done!" Benny says, showing me his wonky name written in blue.

"That's great—" I break off when there's a knock on the door. I look at Benny. He looks at me, shrugging. "Maybe Silly Leo forgot something," I mutter, crawling out of the tent.

I start to open the door, saying, "Silly Leo, did you..." My words die in the air when Mr. Preston stands just on the other side, his large build almost filling the frame.

His eyes are wide when he sees me, almost as surprised as I am. “Mia.” It’s a name. A question. “What are you—”

“Who is it, Mama?” Benny calls out, and before I can stop him, he’s lifting my arm, standing between my leg and doorframe.

I don’t look away from Mr. Preston, because—as self-destructive as it is—I don’t want to miss his face when he sees Benny for the first time. His mouth parts and he takes a step back, as if he’s seeing a ghost, and I *know* that look.

I’ve seen it.

In my dreams...

In my conscience.

I don’t remember it, not physically.

But I know...

I know I’ve seen it before.

I’ve lived it.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-SIX

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LEO

MIA NEVER GAVE ME A WARNING. Not even a text message to say that I was about to walk into the danger zone. Dad's sitting on the floor of my living with Benny beside him, one of the books I'd gotten Benny last week in Dad's hands. All eyes are on mine when I stand at the doorway, my hand still gripping the handle as if it's a sign that I shouldn't go any farther, that I should turn around. Run.

"I got snacks," I mumble because I don't know what else to say.

Dad won't take his eyes off me. *He knows*. I can already see it, the disappointment mixed with concern and a whole lot of *what the fuck* plastered on his face.

"Your dad's here!" Benny announces, like I don't already know. I force a smile as I watch him walk toward me, his arms out, reaching for the paper bag I'm strangling. Handing it to him, I look over at Mia standing on the other side of the kitchen counter, her eyes void of emotion.

After clearing my throat, I look at Dad. "What are you doing here?" I step inside, letting the door close behind me. There's no accusation in my tone, no malice. I try to keep my cool, but I don't know what all has been said in the time I've been gone, and going by Mia's lack of reaction, *something* is wrong.

"You haven't been home as much as we expected, so I thought I'd just pop in and see how you were doing."

"Right." I nod. "Because a phone call wouldn't have been enough?"

"Leo." Mia's single word is barely a whisper, and when I look up at her, she shakes her head, just once, her eyelids heavy.

Dad sighs. "I was in town at a supplier conference," he explains, his jaw tight. "I thought I'd take my son out for lunch."

"But we're going to the rock museum," Benny says, standing beside me. He half-hides behind my leg, like he did with Mia the first time I met him.

I settle a hand on his shoulder, try to ease his fears. "We're still going to the museum," I assure. "Don't worry."

He tugs on my arm, and I drop down so he can whisper in my ear. “Can your dad come with us?” He says it loud enough for everyone to hear, because Dad reacts by tilting his head, and Mia—she sucks in a breath, her eyes meeting mine before nodding, her smile almost painful.

I look over at Dad. “Do you want to come with us?”

Dad smiles at Benny. “I would love to, Benny. Thank you for the invite.”

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MIA

Mr. Preston takes his truck, saying he'll meet us at the museum. I catch Leo alone just long enough to inform him that his dad didn't mention anything to Benny. Leo merely shrugged, but I could tell it was nagging at him. How could it not? I'm sure this isn't the way he pictured his dad finding out. Benny has no clue what's happening, and me—I can't get Mr. Preston's initial reaction out of my head.

THE MUSEUM IS TINY. It's basically an old house that's been transformed, and the only way we knew that we were at the right place was the giant boulders out front. In any other circumstance, it would take less than fifteen minutes to peruse all the displays, but Benny—being Benny—can't get enough. He grasps onto Leo's hand, stopping at every rock, asking Leo to read, aloud, what the signs say about each one.

About a half-hour into it, Mr. Preston excuses himself to make a call, and we keep going. I wait a few minutes before telling Leo that I need to find the restroom. Truthfully, I want to find his dad, because I feel like I need to talk to him, and I don't want to do it with Benny or Leo around. I search the interior of the building, but he isn't anywhere I can see. And so I go outside, find him on a bench just outside the entrance. He isn't on his phone. His back is turned, his shoulders slumped, elbows resting on his knees. Slowly, cautiously, I make my way over. "Mr. Preston?"

I hear his loud intake of breath as his spine straightens. "Mia," he says, but he doesn't turn to me.

Rounding the bench, I sit down beside him, try to find the right words to start. I don't know what to say. I never thought I'd be the one in this situation. Luckily, or maybe not, he speaks first. "How long has he known?"

"Leo?"

He faces me, eyes penetrating, but he doesn't reply.

I lower my gaze. "A couple of weeks after your granddaughter's birthday party."

He nods, his mind working to piece the puzzle together. “So, you didn’t tell him before then?”

I shake my head, try to look at him, but the pain in his eyes has me dropping mine again.

“Why not?” he asks, tone flat.

Heat burns behind my eyes. “For a lot of reasons.”

He sniffs once.

“I just...” I face forward, grip the edge of the seat, and try to push through my nerves. “I wanted to say I’m sorry.”

“For not telling him?”

“And you,” I admit. I clear the knot in my throat, adding, “When you saw Benny today, it was, like, this... this...” This what? Jolt of a memory? That wouldn’t make sense to anyone but me. “I was just a year younger than Benny when my mom left me with my grandpa. I don’t remember it, but he’d described it often—that feeling of seeing me for the first time since I was a newborn, and I could always picture it in my head, and you—you had that same look. And I’m sorry.” I wipe at my tears and try to catch my breath. “I’m sorry that I kept him from you because if you felt even an ounce of what I know Papa felt...” I trail off, not knowing what more to say, what more I can add to show how seeing his reaction pains me.

Mr. Preston doesn’t respond for a long time. When he does, his words surprise me. “Of all my boys, I never really had to worry about Leo. Sure, when he was younger, we had some issues, but he’s grown into a fine man.” He’s talking like he has to worry *now*. Like I’ve *ruined* his son for eternity. “I don’t recall a time when he’s ever lied to me,” he says. “But for the past five months, he’s *been* lying. Did you ask him to lie? To not tell us about your son?”

I nod because it’s true. I did.

After clearing his throat, he says, voice even, “My family’s been through a lot the past few years, Mia, and maybe you’re unaware of that. My boys—they’ve gotten closer than ever—and they’ve needed Leo. Especially Logan. Logan’s needed him to come home, and he hasn’t, and he’s been lying about why. So now they’re questioning his loyalty to the family... and that’s why I’m here. Because I needed to talk to Leo about it, but... I never expected to walk in on what I did today.”

I don’t reply, my mind too busy alerting me with visions of barn doors and toilet bowls and two fingers down my throat because *I am not enough*.

Me. My son. We're not reason enough for Leo to betray his family the way he has.

"Are you ashamed of your son, Mia?"

I gasp. "God, no. *Never*. That's not—"

"I asked your mother the same thing when I found out she had a daughter."

Every single negative emotion crawls through my veins, clawing at my insides for a way out of my body.

My dirty, filthy, vile body.

"That's not fair," I grind out. "You don't know me or my son."

"That's the way you wanted it, right?"

Fat, ugly tears fall from my lashes, and my lungs shrink, closing off my airways. I keep it together. *Just*.

"That little boy is my grandson, and I didn't even know about him." For the first time since he started speaking, I can hear genuine hurt replace his accusatory tone. "He has an aunt and uncles and a little cousin *he* doesn't know about, right? I heard you call him Leo rather than his dad, so I assume he doesn't know."

I nod. "We're waiting to tell him until..." Every word I speak seems useless, pathetic when it comes from me.

"Until *what*?"

I look at the man beside me. Really, truly look at him. And I no longer see my grandpa. I see *Benny's*. "Until I'm ready." I choke on the response.

"Well, when is that going to be? Another four years?"

I shake my head. "I don't know," I tell him truthfully.

Mr. Preston's chest rises with his inhale, and he looks from me to the parking lot. The silence stretches between us, neither saying a word. He breaks the quiet, shifting just enough to make the bench beneath us creak under his weight. "It's going to be Halloween in two weeks." I watch as he stands to full height, my heart thumping in my ribs, in my eardrums, making it hard to hear what he says next. "I expect to see you and my grandson there." He sniffs, rubbing at his red, raw eyes—eyes filled with emotions too confusing to decipher. "Tell Leo he needs to come home next week and tell his siblings. Benny doesn't need to know Leo's his father, but Leo's siblings have a right to know they have a nephew." He pauses a beat. "I'll see you in two weeks," he says, and then he's turning on his heels and walking toward his truck.

I don't know how long I sit there, waiting for the tears to stop, for the ugliness to fade. Just as I'm about to get up, I hear, "Mama!"

Turning, I see Leo and Benny walking toward me. Benny's smiling from ear-to-ear, and Leo's watching me, his eyes thinned. "You okay?" he mouths, and I nod.

I'm not okay.

But I will be.

Because the little boy stopping in front of me, his eyes as bright as the constant smile he carries, is

My reason.

My purpose.

My *Everything*.

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CHAPTER SEVENTY-SEVEN

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LEO

“OKAY, ARE YOU ALL TUCKED IN?” Mia asks.

Benny rolls his eyes—a move he *definitely* gets from his mother. “Yes, Mama.”

“You got everything you need?” Mia looks around the tent. “Your water bottle’s on the table, and your flashlight is right beside your head.”

“Mama! No girls allowed,” Benny says through a giggle.

“Yeah, little mama,” I say, squeezing her thigh from my spot in my sleeping bag. “No girls!” I poke out my tongue when she glares at me. “I’m right here,” I laugh out. “He’ll be fine. You’re *literally* in the next room.”

She quickly turns to Benny, knocking his full water bottle off the table and dropping it right in my goddamn eye socket. “Motherf—” I spit, cutting off when Mia gasps. I press the heel of my palm to my eye, attempting to ease the pain.

“Mother what?” Benny asks, sitting up to look between Mia and me.

“Nothing,” Mia’s quick to respond, her eyes thinned, shooting daggers at me.

“Mother *what?*” Benny asks again.

“Nothing,” I say, opening my eye to nothing but black spots. “Dang, that hurt.”

Mia picks up the water bottle and places it back on the table. “I’m sure it didn’t hurt *that* much,” Mia teases.

I grab her waist and pull her on top of me, her back to my chest, my fingers quick to pinch at her sides, making her squeal. “Get off!” She manages to get out between fits of laughter.

“Tickle her until she wees!” Benny giggles, his little fist raised in the air, egging me on.

“Whatever you say, bud,” I mumble, trying to hold down Mia’s arms so she doesn’t junk-shot me like she did the last time.

“Ohhh! I know what you were going to say!” Benny shouts. “Motheerrr....” He pauses, giving us the infamous Cheeky Benny side-eye. I stop tickling Mia instantly, and we both turn to Benny, waiting, ready to stop him. He smiles to one side, right before he says, “Mother *lover*.”

Mia and I let out simultaneous exhales of relief.

“Because you love Mama, right?”

Mia opens her mouth to speak, but I sit up, taking her with me, basically forcing her to sit on my lap. I wrap my arms around her waist and kiss her cheek. Then I lock my eyes on Benny. “I do,” I tell him. “Very much.” Mia turns her head toward me, but I keep my gaze on our son. “Is that okay with you—that I love your mama?”

Benny nods, flopping back down to a lying position. “Yep,” he says, grabbing the flashlight. He flicks it on, then points it to the roof of the tent. “You love Mama. I love you.”

Everything inside me stops at his words, and I’m floating, soaring, so high, high, high. And then I come down from my high and push Mia off my lap. I crawl over to Benny and hug him harder than I’ve ever hugged him before. Behind me, Mia laughs, says something about getting in the shower. “Too tight,” Benny chokes out, and I release him, just enough to rear back and kiss his little cheeks, again and again. “I love you so much, Benny.” Dammit, why am I on the verge of tears? For someone who claims to be the strongest man in this boy’s world, I’m sure acting like a little bitch.

“I know you do,” Benny says.

“How do you know?”

He shrugs. “Because you show me you do,” he responds, and I realize now that there’s nothing at all complicated about love in the eyes of a four-year-old.

You know someone loves you because they show you they do.

It’s that simple.

I don’t go back to my sleeping bag. I sit beside my son and watch as his eyes slowly fight the fatigue until his dark lashes settle across his cheeks. I wait until his little hand gripping any number of rocks loosens its grip, and when his breaths even and his lips move with the motion of his inhales and exhales, I get out of the tent and search for Mia.

She’s standing in front of the bathroom mirror in nothing but a towel. At any other time, I’d have ripped the towel off her, lifted her onto the counter and spread her legs so I could devour her. Now though, I just watch her through the mirror, a reminder to myself of how lucky I am. She’s so fucking beautiful it almost hurts to look at her, and she gave me Benny—our son—the greatest gift in the world. “Have you stopped smiling?” she asks, her eyes on mine through the mirror.

Reaching up, I massage the muscles in my cheeks, aching from the force of my grin. “Not even for a second.” I step forward, settle my hands on her hips from behind, and watch her apply some kind of face cream. “I meant what I said, you know? That I love you?”

She turns in my arms, splotches of white dotted all over her face. I run the pad of my thumbs across each one, spreading the cream across her flesh. She stays quiet as I do this, her hands gripping my forearms. When I’m done, she leans up, presses her lips to mine. “You know that I love you, too?” Her voice wavers as she says it, and when I search her eyes—it’s like a slow torture.

I don’t know how long I spend watching them fill with tears, but with every second that passes, my insecurities grow stronger and stronger. “Is that a bad thing? That we love each other?”

My palms are still cupping her face, so they move with her head shake. “No, it’s not that.”

I drop my hands. “Did my dad say something to you today?”

Her lips thin to a line, and I take a step back, allowing myself room to breathe. I don’t want to go from Benny telling me he loves me to whatever is about to happen. “Can we not do this tonight, Mia?” I grasp at my hair, frustrated. “I just... as pathetic and childish as it is, I just don’t want to.”

“Leo,” Mia sighs, tugging on my T-shirt to bring me closer. She attempts to sit on the counter, but she’s too little and weak, so I grasp her waist and hoist her up. She offers me a shy smile—the one I’m pretty sure I fell in love with before I even knew what love was. After a quick kiss, she settles her arms on my shoulders and spreads her legs for me to step between them. It’s not a sensual move; it’s... intimate... and *right*. It feels so fucking right—this entire day and night. Spending time with Benny outside of the farm, having them here with me, just us. Having my son tell me he loves me and then saying the same thing to my... my *Mia*. For the first time, I feel like a family, and I want this. Mia once told me that when she discovered she was pregnant, she was at a point in her life where she never knew who she was or what she wanted, but she *wanted* him. She *needed* him. And I want this. Them. I *need* them.

Mia’s eyes are downcast as she plays with the hem of my shirt. Her single heartbreaking sniff—one she uses to fight back her emotions—has me cupping her jaw, forcing her to look up at me. I suck in a breath and hold it, waiting for her to speak. “You missed out on four years of Benny’s

life because I kept things from you, believing it was for the best, but it wasn't."

I nod. It's all I can do.

"So I'm not going to do that anymore, Leo."

My throat closes in, blocking my lungs from their life source.

"I spoke to your dad today..." Then she proceeds to tell me *everything*—every word Dad said, every accusation she felt, every bit of heartbreaking anguish that tore through her.

I stand, and I listen, and I hold her through her cries.

I don't say a word. But I do make a promise—one brought on from the mind of a four-year-old. I promise to do something I failed to do too many times before when it came to Mia. I'm going to *show* her that I love her. And it really will be that simple.

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CHAPTER SEVENTY-EIGHT

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LEO

AFTER MIA FINISHED TELLING me about her conversation with my dad, I told her I'd take care of it—that there was nothing she needed to worry about. And she didn't. This was on me. And then I smiled, and I kissed away her tears, and I carried on with the rest of the night trying to make her laugh, make her forget.

But, deep in my chest, in my gut... there was a rage simmering, something I haven't felt since Logan's past was revealed. But it's in there, like a bomb waiting to detonate. I felt it the moment she started to speak. I won't let it happen. It's not who I am anymore. It's not the man Benny and Mia know and *love*, and so for them, I put on a mask.

We spend the rest of their time here as one, as a *family*. The anger faded slowly, replaced with moments of joy and laughter, and everything I didn't know I'd been missing.

I DON'T BOTHER WAITING until the following weekend. After dropping Mia and Benny off at the airport the next day, I send a text to the family group chat and tell them I'll be home in two hours and for everyone to be there. Unless my dad couldn't keep his mouth shut, they have no idea what's coming.

AS SOON AS I get in my truck, I blast "Here Comes the Sun" by The Beatles, on repeat, full volume—a reminder of why I'm about to do what I'm doing.

Mia and I have never had a lot of things in common. We still don't. We've never needed it. The one thing we do have is one of the most important to our story: our favorite place in the world is exactly a hundred and thirty feet in the air.

I was fourteen, and she was thirteen. It was the second summer she spent with us. The first summer I actually got the courage to talk to her. One

morning, right after the sun came up, “Here Comes the Sun” played through the speakers of her phone. I’d heard the song before, but I’d never really paid attention to the lyrics. Mia knew the song by heart, and she sang... She sang each word quietly, her head bobbing up and down. She was in her usual clothes: denim cut-offs and an oversized tee. Her flip-flops were kicked off, and she sat across the ledge, not over it like we usually did. Her knees were raised, and she leaned back on her outstretched arms, her face pointed up to the sky, eyes closed. I couldn’t stop looking at her. As the song played on, her singing got louder and more off-tune. Her singing voice was atrocious if I’m being honest, but I didn’t stop her.

I just sat, and I watched, and I couldn’t help but smile as I did. And I thought to myself, “Man, you must really love someone to put up with singing this bad.” And that’s when it hit me. That was the moment she turned from a crush to all-out love.

When I got home, I looked up the lyrics to the song. There aren’t many words, but it’s basically how winters are long without the sun, how it feels like years whenever it’s not around, and the one I felt the most: how smiles return when the sun appears. That day, Mia stopped being a girl I longed to be around. She became the reason for my happiness. She became my sunrise.

I’M NOT surprised when I enter the house and see my dad and all my siblings sitting in the living room waiting for me. I head to the coffee table and pick up the remote, quickly switching off the TV.

Dad’s standing at the doorway to the kitchen, his hands shoved in the pockets of his worn-out jeans. “Son,” he says in greeting, and my jaw ticks. I don’t respond.

Lucas and Logan are sitting on one couch, while the twins sit on the other. From the corner of my eye, I see them share a look. They communicate something only the other knows, something none of us has an insight to no matter how hard we’ve tried.

Lachlan’s sitting on the recliner that was once Mom’s. Next to him, on the arm, is my sister.

I stand in front of the TV and try to gather my thoughts.

“So...” Lucas starts, his eyes darting around the room as if I’m here to surprise them with some form of fucking mayhem. No. This isn’t a prank, and it’s sure as shit isn’t a joke. “What’s going on?”

I glance at Logan, but he looks away. Him, I’ll deal with later. He’s the only one I owe an apology.

Lucas adds, “You send us all a text saying it’s important and to meet you, like we all have to drop everything just to—”

“Yeah, what’s going on?” Lincoln cuts in, his eyebrows drawn. “You’re here, what? Every other weekend? And when you are here, you lock yourself in your room—”

“Or you’re on your phone,” Liam adds.

Lachlan speaks up. “You said you’d come home every weekend.”

Lucy says, “You guys, he’s in the police academy. We don’t know—”

Liam cuts in before she can finish. “What the hell are you doing on the weekends when you’re not here?”

“Yeah, what’s so important?” his twin adds.

“There was one time when you didn’t come home for three weeks in a row!” Lachlan almost yells.

“And you’re so secretive,” says my older brother.

I’m aware of the fact that Logan hasn’t said a word.

“Are you seeing someone? Is that what it is?” Lincoln asks.

“Yeah.” Liam, always mirroring his older twin. “Is it a girl?”

“Or is it a boy?” Lincoln teases.

I clear my throat.

“Holy shit!” he yells. “It is a boy! Did you meet someone at the academy, and now you’re *gay*?”

“We don’t care if—” Lucas says, but Lincoln cuts him off.

“I knew it! I told you!” He’s on his feet, pointing at everyone in the room, before stopping on his twin. Hand out in front of Liam, he sings, “You owe me fifty bucks.”

I finally speak. “It is a boy.”

All my brothers—besides Logan—gasp in unison. Logan just looks at me, his eyes void of emotion. My sister smiles, knowing exactly where this is going. I’m too pissed to even look at Dad. Before anyone else can say anything, I say, my voice firm. “I have a son.”

A chorus of *what the fucks* fills the room. The questions come, but I ignore them all. In twenty-three years, I’ve never once been the center of

attention, never held court, never been the focus. Now, I have to. Raising my voice so I can be heard over everyone else, I tell them, “His name is Bennett János Kovács, but everyone calls him Benny.”

More questions fly at me, until Dad speaks up, pushing off the doorframe. “Shut up and let him talk.”

Everyone goes silent. Everyone but Lachlan. “How is he your son when he’s not a Preston?”

I stand taller. “I don’t mind that he doesn’t carry my last name because the truth is, I’m not sure if I’ve earned it yet.” All eyes are on me now, even Logan’s. “He was conceived the summer before my senior year.”

“What?” Lucas hisses. “Did you know?”

I look over at Dad, try to keep my expression in check. “His mother didn’t tell me about him for a lot of reasons. One: I didn’t make it easy to contact me afterward, and no, it wasn’t a summer fling or a one-night stand.” I take a breath. “Mia and I—we were—*are*—very much in love.”

“Mia?” The twins shout at the same time. “Holy shit!”

“How?” Lucas asks, but I ignore him.

Instead, I focus on Dad when I say, “We, as *his parents*, decided not to tell you guys. Mia didn’t pressure me into anything. She brought it up, and I agreed because the truth is I was fucking scared.” I look back at my siblings, one by one. “I didn’t know if I was ready to be a dad, and I wanted to make sure that he wanted me to be part of his life before bringing anyone else into it.”

“This is...” Lincoln starts, sucking in a breath.

“Yeah,” Liam agrees, doing the same.

After swallowing my nerves, I say, “Benny’s four years old... and he’s smart and funny and cute as hell. He likes rocks and minerals and collects as many as he can wherever he can. He walks around with pockets full of them, and right now, he’s trying to memorize birthstones. His is a diamond, by the way. His birthday’s April first, two days before Katie’s.” Lucy smiles, but it’s sad. “When he’s not collecting rocks, he likes to draw, mainly with crayons, and always with blue, nothing else; it’s his favorite color. When he laughs—like, out-of-control laughs—he makes this *yakyakyak* sound, and it’s the greatest sound in the world. I could live in that sound. Die in it.” I glance at Dad. “He has moments where he checks out. We call it him rebooting. One time, I had a draining week at the academy, and when I went to see him, he could tell how tired I was, so he

offered to hug me to make me feel better. And it did. I told him he recharged me.” I catch Lucy smiling and continue. “He thinks it’s hilarious—that he reboots and I recharge. And now every time I say it, he does that *yakyakyak* laugh, so I ask for hugs a lot just so I can hear that one sound.” I realize now that my muscles are no longer tense. That just talking about Benny eases my soul. “They live in New York City, so Mia’s been bringing him down every other weekend so I can spend time with him—something she absolutely did not have to do. She does it for me.” My chest tightens, my voice hoarse as I say, “Last night, he told me he loved me for the first time. He was the first to say it, but I loved him even before I met him. And I’ve loved Mia for ten years now. Ever since she started coming here during the summers. I kept her a secret, and I shouldn’t have. She was—is—everything to me. I didn’t want to share her, and I didn’t want you guys ruining it. I didn’t want... I don’t know.” I heave out a breath and choke on my next words. “I’d grown up always believing there was something wrong with me. The therapists, the outbursts, the learning disorder...” I pause, take a breath. “When I was fifteen, I confided in Mia that my greatest fear in life was that I wasn’t truly living and that this *life... it wasn’t enough for me...* I’d always felt like an outsider, even in my own home, but Mia and Benny—they make me feel like I’m part of something... something bigger and *greater*. Something *divine*. They make me feel like I’m a part of *them*, and that’s the greatest gift they could’ve ever given me.” I wipe away the sudden tears clinging to my lashes and look around the room.

All eyes are on me, but no one says a word.

I sniff back my emotions. “Benny doesn’t know I’m his father—not yet. We’re waiting for the right time, and that’s a decision we’ll make together. As far as Mia and I go, there’s nothing more to say. We love each other, and right now, we’re trying to be the best people and parents we can to our little boy. We don’t know what the future is going to bring. And when it comes to those decisions—they’re ours and ours alone.” I give my dad a pointed stare. “And I hope you all can leave it the fuck alone.”

“Leo,” he deadpans.

“No, Dad.” I shake my head. “You had no right to push her into this, and I swear, if you’re the reason I lose them, I will never forgive you.” I trail my eyes around the room again. “There’s so much you don’t know about her and her life and her... *struggles*.” I pause, try to rein it in.

"I understand why she didn't tell me about him, and that's all that matters. No one else gets a say in what's right and wrong when it comes to her or Benny, and no one gets to play God here. No one gets to *judge*."

"We wouldn't," Lucas states, voice quiet.

"Yeah, you would, Luke. You *have*. You and everyone else. In this case, I get that it might come from a position of love, of wanting to protect me or be angry *for* me, but that's not your place."

"Will we..." Lachlan says, then shuts his mouth when I look at him. He leans closer to Lucy.

"Will you what?" I ask, trying to keep my tone soft. Lachlan and Lucy are the most innocent ones here.

"Will we get to meet him?"

My inhale is sharp. "Halloween. They're coming here."

"Really?" Dad asks, his eyes wide.

"You really didn't give her much of a choice, Dad. We weren't ready for everyone to meet him, and I wasn't ready for all of you to know, but you said what you said, and now we're here."

"What do you mean?" Lucy asks.

"Dad knows what I mean," I spit. "And I have to go."

I make it to my truck without another word from anyone. I've just taken my foot off the brake when the passenger door opens, and Logan slides in. "I'm sorry," I rush out, at the same time he says, "Dude."

"I know."

He closes the door, then turns to me, leaning against it. "You're a *dad*."

"I know."

"Holy shit."

"I know." I pause, hesitating. "Listen, I'm sorry about—"

His head shake cuts me off. "I was pissed, not going to lie, but I thought you were just screwing around with some girl, but *this*... holy shit, dude."

"I know." I almost laugh at my repetitiveness. "But I should've been there for you. I wanted to tell you. Honestly, it's just..."

His gaze drops. "I thought—I mean, after that therapy session you went to, I just assumed it was too hard for you to... I don't know."

"It was hard. It fucking killed me, bro. But I would sit through a thousand of those with you if that's what it takes to heal you."

He puffs out a breath. "I know you would, man. That's why I asked *you*."

We sit in comfortable silence for a few seconds before he looks up, a slight smile playing on his lips. “Have you got any pictures?” I grab my phone from the console, open the photo album titled *Benny and Mia*, and then pass it over to him. His smile widens before he glances up. He stares at me a moment, the smile fading as his eyebrows lower. “So... does this mean you’re moving to New York?”

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CHAPTER SEVENTY-NINE

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MIA

“SHUT THE FRONT DOOR,” Holden says, his phone raised snapping picture after picture of Benny. When he graduated from college, he didn’t really know what to do with his time. He looked for jobs, but nothing came through. Only a few days ago, he accepted a job at Dad’s company and Dad set him up in an apartment a few blocks away from us. Holden didn’t want to live in the same building as his mom—for reasons I assume have to do with the revolving door of girls he might bring home nightly. It was hard for him to accept the job and the apartment, but I talked him into it. I love having him close, and it makes Tammy happy to have us all together, and Dad *loves* making Tammy happy.

Finally.

My best friend’s grin is stupid, his green eyes flashing bright as he looks at my son. “What’s up, lady killer?” He raises his fist for a bump, but Benny just stares at him, his head tilted in confusion.

“I don’t want to kill any ladies, Uncle Holden.” Benny looks down at his costume. “I’m a policeman.”

Holden’s short laugh fills my ears, and he looks over at me. “He has a point.”

My legs swing back and forth as I sit on the edge of the hotel bed. “I keep telling you he’s smart.”

Flopping down beside me, he keeps his voice low, words only for me. “How are you feeling?”

I’m nervous and anxious and scared, but he already knows all this. It’s why he’s here. Holden’s the one who convinced me to go along with Mr. Preston’s insistence of bringing Benny to meet Leo’s family. Not directly. But because... I don’t have any brothers or sisters. Holden’s the closest thing I have, and once our parents get married, it’ll be official. I couldn’t even imagine having to hide Benny from him or not being able to share all the joys of raising The Greatest Kid in the World.

Holden’s been by my side since I can remember, and he’s played such a pivotal role in my life and my son’s. He’s been there for me through everything. He was even in the delivery room, though he refused to stand

anywhere but right next to my head, holding my hand. All the doctors and nurses assumed he was the father. He didn't correct them. When he went off to college in Boston, he started living the typical college life, and I was busy being a mom, but still—he's forever there, on the outskirts, whenever I need him.

And I need him now.

I release all the air in my lungs as I look at him, right into his eyes, knowing he'll understand without me having to say a word. He settles a hand over mine. "It'll be fine," he says. "I'm right here, and Benny—he's going to have a blast. We'll make sure of it, okay?"

I nod, even though I don't believe him. "Okay."

When I told Leo that Holden would be joining us, he didn't seem the slightest bit fazed. He was excited to see Holden again, and to be honest, I'm pretty sure Leo's half the reason Holden jumped at the chance. It's been five years since they've seen each other, and I doubt much has changed. These two had some weird—what Holden calls—*bromance*, and even though he'll brush it off if you ask him, Holden was hurt when Leo blocked him out of his life. When Leo re-entered our lives like a clichéd wrecking ball, there wasn't a single negative thing Holden had to say about it. He'd always wanted Leo to know, but he never pushed to make it happen.

A knock on the door has Holden smirking at me. "There's mommy and daddy," he says through a chuckle. Yep. Our parents are here, too. They didn't want to miss out on a chance to see Benny in costume, but more, they wanted to meet Leo's family. Thanks to the help of intensive therapy, they all know what I went through that last summer at the Preston house, and they want to be there for me just... *in case*.

Holden swings open the door, and our parents gush over Benny in his costume. Phones come out, pictures are taken, and Benny basks in the attention. A minute later, we're walking out of the room and down to the same lobby Leo had handed me Dad's divorce papers. We pile into the car, and then we're on our way to the place where my dreams went to die.

I don't want to be here.

But then Benny turns to me in his car seat, his smile from ear-to-ear. "You think Leo will like my costume, Mama?"

And I smile, *for him*. "I bet he's going to love it."

CHAPTER EIGHTY

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MIA

MY PULSE *POUNDS* in my eardrums, my hands shaking so feverishly I can't even unbuckle Benny from his car seat.

They're all here, every single one of the Preston boys.

When we pulled up to the house, they were waiting on the porch. Leo had said that he'd handled it—whatever it was—and that everything was *fine* and I had nothing to worry about. Still, I worry, not for him or Benny but for me.

I don't want to be here.

"Hey, you good?" Leo says, standing beside me, his mouth so close to my ear, I can feel his warm breath flood across my neck. Another time, it would have set off the butterflies, or at the least comforted me. Now, it just agitates me. "Here, I got it," he says, carefully moving me out of the way to undo the seat belt.

"Benny! My little man. I missed you, buddy!" His voice is calm, a complete opposite of everything inside me. He helps Benny out of the truck, taking his hand, and I see him and Holden greet each other. But it's like I'm watching a movie... from below the surface of a lake.

A lake.

I don't want to be here.

Everything is a blur, voices muffled, and I can't even focus enough to listen to the introductions. It's not until Holden stands beside me, his hand gentle on my shoulder, that I blink, come to. I look up at him, and he offers an assuring smile. "You got this," he mouths. "For Benny."

I nod. I do *got* this.

"Deep breaths, Mia Mac," Holden whispers, and so I inhale as much air as I can handle, let it out slowly, and refocus.

"I love your costume, buddy," Leo says, squatting down in front of Benny.

"I dressed like you!" Benny shouts.

On the porch, the girl I assume is Logan's girlfriend sighs. "I can't with this cuteness," she says, looking over at Logan. He smiles at her, and I wonder how perfect she must be to be good enough in *his* eyes.

Leo stands and turns to face his family. “Remember how I told you I had five brothers?” he asks Benny, and Benny nods. “Well, this is all of them.”

They file down the porch steps—one by one—to greet my son in different ways. Mr. Preston’s the last, and Benny looks up at him, gives him a megawatt smile. “Hi, Mr. Preston, sir!” he says, waving his little hand.

“Hi, Benny. It’s good to see you again.” His smile is forced.

I don’t want to be here.

“You’re all so big and strong,” Benny tells them, his head moving from side to side.

Lincoln, one of the twins, laughs at this and says, “You’ll probably be big and strong like us, too.”

“Why?” Benny asks, head tilted.

My heart leaps out of my chest, and I try to come up with a response. I can see everyone else doing the same. Leo *assured* me his brothers wouldn’t say a damn thing. We didn’t want it coming out, not from them. We wanted— “Leo said you eat all your vegetables, right?” It’s Logan who speaks.

Benny nods.

“Well, vegetables make you big and strong.” Logan smirks, then flexes his bicep. “I eat them all the time and look at me.”

Benny laughs, then shakes his head at Logan. “You’re not as big and strong as Leo!” he says, tugging on Leo’s arm in excitement. “He’s bigger than all of you!” He looks at Mr. Preston, his smile lopsided. “Even you!” That gains a round of laughter, even from me.

“We’re just waiting on Katie, my granddaughter, and Preston, Leo’s godson. They should be here soon,” he says, looking at my dad. “Did you want to come in for a drink?”

“Sure,” Dad says, taking Tammy’s hand as they follow behind Mr. Preston.

“This is a lovely home you have here,” Dad murmurs.

I don’t hear Mr. Preston’s response, because they’re already in the house.

Benny looks between Lincoln and Liam, his eyes narrowed. “Why are there two of you?”

Leo laughs, saying, “They’re twins. Do you know what twins are?”

Shaking his head, Benny answers, “No.”

“It means they were in my mama’s belly at the same time.”

Benny’s eyes widen. “How did they get in there?”

“Um...” Leo turns to me, his cheeks reddening.

“Hey, Benny!” Logan calls, distracting Benny. He reaches behind the porch to collect a blue bucket. “I hear you like rocks?”

Benny’s eyes light up. He’s so excited, he’s practically jumping in his spot. “I do!” he squeals, taking the bucket from Logan.

“See there?” Logan says, pointing to Benny’s name on the bucket in a darker shade of blue. He points to Laney, saying, “She put that there just for you, bud.”

“Thank you!” Benny grips the bucket to his chest, then looks up at Leo. “Adventure time?”

Leo nods. “You go ahead. My brothers will go with you. I’ll catch up in a minute.”

I start to say no, but Holden stops me. “He’s fine, Mia.”

I watch as Logan and Lucas walk on either side of Benny, leading him away. “Hi,” Leo says, stopping in front of me.

“Hi,” I repeat.

“It’s going to be okay, Mia.” He presses his lips to my forehead. “Just relax.” And then he’s kissing me, full open mouth, his arms wrapped around my waist, and I melt into the comfort of his embrace, living for the moment, for the now.

“Gross,” Holden mutters, and Leo and I pull away just in time to see him going into the house.

“I missed you,” Leo says.

“I can tell,” I laugh out, wiping the evidence of our kiss from his lips.

Leo sighs, loosening his hold on me. “So, at some point, my dad wants to talk to you.”

I grimace.

He shakes his head. “Don’t worry, okay?”

I grimace harder.

Leo chuckles. “Quit being so fucking cute all the time, or I’ll take you up to my room right now and fulfill all my childhood fantasies.”

“Shut up,” I whisper, shoving his shoulder.

“You think I’m playing?” He cocks an eyebrow.

“I know you’re not,” I murmur. “That’s why *shut up*.” I look over his shoulder at his brothers walking with Benny, stopping every few seconds to

look at something. “It was really nice of them, the whole bucket and rock thing, and swear—when Lincoln said—”

“Lincoln’s an idiot.” He rolls his eyes. “But I swear to you, Mia. They’re not the same people they were back then. They’ve been super supportive and asking questions about him, and they’re excited for me.”

“They are?” I ask, trailing my eyes back to him.

“They are. So *relax*,” he says, shaking out my arms. “Benny’s going to have a great time.”

A GOOD HALF-HOUR of rock hunting with Leo’s brothers later, Lucy arrives with her husband, Cameron, and their daughter, Katie. Katie is dressed as a princess, tiara and all, and after formally introducing me to her husband, Lucy gets me in a surprisingly tight hug considering her size. She whispers, “Penis gossip,” in my ear, and I laugh, wondering if she even registers that the penis I’d be gossiping about belongs to her brother.

Holden is intrigued by Lucy. Not in the way that he *wants* her, but he finds her lack of effs given when she speaks fascinating. It was the same reaction I had when we had drinks at the sports bar all those months ago. Leo, Holden, and I sit with Cam and Lucy on the porch while our parents sit out back and the rest of the Prestons get changed into their costumes. Some will be staying here to hand out treats, and others will come with us to go trick-or-treating. “She’s so cute,” I tell Lucy, watching Katie toddle around the yard. Benny is *smitten* with her, following her around, trying to show her his rocks she has absolutely no interest in.

“She’s a handful,” Lucy says, sitting on her husband’s lap. “But you would know what that’s like,” she adds with a smile. Cameron doesn’t even stop the conversation he’s having with Holden—something about baseball. He merely curls his hand around his wife’s waist, pulling her closer.

Katie trips on the grass and falls to her stomach. Leo stands, ready to save her, but Benny beats him to it, dropping his bucket and rushing to her. “Oopsies,” he says, helping Katie sit first, and then get back onto her wobbly feet. “I got you, princess,” he tells her, and the coo that comes from Lucy and me may as well be one sound.

Then Lucy scoffs. “Sit down, Leelee! You’re such a helicopter parent!”

“I said the same thing!” I laugh out, catching the look Holden gives me. It takes a moment for me to register what it means. It’s only now I realize

the nerves and anxiety and fear I'd been drowning in have faded, and I'm... I'm *fine*.

For the past two weeks, I've been worrying about this one night, going through every possible scenario, all of them ending horribly. There was no way I thought I would come out of this alive. But I'm here, smiling and laughing with Leo's *family*, and everything is fine.

Good, even.

Another truck pulls up with the same *Preston, Gordon & Sons* logo on the side as most of the other vehicles here. From what I recall, Brian is Laney's dad, and Misty is his girlfriend or fiancée—wife, maybe? Misty is in law enforcement here and helped Leo with the process. They have a son named Preston, who is Leo's godson. I'm pretty sure Preston and Benny are similar in age. We all stand to greet them while Leo shouts over his shoulder, "Dad! They're here!"

Misty opens the back door, and a moment later, a dark-haired little boy jumps down from the truck. He's dressed as a police dog, I guess, and holding on to a bright yellow dump truck. "Chaaaase!" Leo sings, moving toward him.

"I thought his name was Preston," I mumble, more to myself than anyone else.

"You don't know Chase?" Lucy asks. "From *Paw Patrol*."

"Oh."

"You have a dump truck?" Benny asks, going up to Preston. Leo introduces them, and then Preston nods, hugging Katie when her tiny little arms reach for him. "Do you want to play?" Preston asks Benny.

"Can I put my rocks in your truck?"

"Yes!"

"How easy would life be if we, as adults, could make friends like kids do?" Holden says, standing beside me. "Just go up to someone and be like, 'Yo, wanna play?' And boom, friends for life."

"Benny's never had a friend his age," I murmur.

"Benny has never had friends, *period*. He's surrounded by adults. That's the problem with where you live." He shrugs. "Maybe it'll be different once he gets to school."

"Maybe." I watch the three kids play together in the front yard as the sun begins to lower.

"You okay?" Leo asks.

“Look at him,” I say, voice low. “He’s never made friends this easy before. He’s always anxious or scared, and here—it’s like he’s... *comfortable*.” I look up at Leo for a response, but he’s too busy watching them, his brow knitted. We stay quiet a moment, both of us watching our son. Then he throws his arm over my shoulders, bringing me close. “What are you thinking?” I ask him.

Leo shrugs. “Just wondering...” he says, turning to me. “Has he ever had an outburst at the farm?”

I try to remember if he has, but I can’t think of a single time. “Not that I recall.”

Leo nods at this. “Noises get to me,” he states.

My eyebrows raise. “*Noises*?”

“Yep. People. Crowds. *Noises*. I get, like, anxious. I feel like I’m always on the edge of a panic attack that never comes.”

“Did you feel like that in New York?” I ask, my brow dipped in concern.

“A little. It would’ve been worse when I was a kid. It’s gotten better, though. I think college helped.”

I nod as if I understand, but my mind is spinning, running in circles. I look back at our little boy while he, Preston, and Katie play together, their laughter unconfined. And slowly, *surely*, I feel the tightness I’ve carried in my chest for over eight years begin to fade, to dissipate.

CHAPTER EIGHTY-ONE

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MIA

LUCY AND I WALK, elbows linked, behind the kids while Cameron and Leo walk them to each door, letting them knock. I smile every time they squeal when they get treats. “Benny’s having fun,” Lucy hums.

“He is. This is his first real Halloween. We don’t get to celebrate it at home.”

“No?”

I shake my head. “We live in an apartment above a hotel, so the whole door-knocking thing would probably be frowned upon.”

“Right. Yeah, Leo mentioned that,” she says, and then she turns, looking at someone behind us. I follow her gaze to Mr. Preston, his smile strained as he looks down on us.

“Lucy, any chance I could steal Mia for a moment?”

“Sure.” Lucy untangles her arm from mine before joining the kids.

“Mia,” Mr. Preston deadpans. I look behind me for my dad and Tammy, making sure they know exactly what’s happening. They’re only a few steps behind, and Dad jerks his head, just once, a silent message. Behind them is Holden, chatting up a young mom holding a baby dressed as a pumpkin.

“Mr. Preston,” I reply, voice wavering.

I wonder what he has to say that he couldn’t say in front of everyone else. Does he want to thank me for bringing Benny here? Because I didn’t do it for him. Does he want—“You know why I invited you to stay with us those summers?” Or he could say that.

Looking up at him, I shake my head. It’s all I can do. “Because Kathy—my late wife—she would’ve done the same thing.” He shrugs. “Sometimes, I try to do things because I know she’ll be proud of me. My kids are all so proud of her. She was... an amazing mother. And I want my kids to think of me the same. I think that’s every parent’s goal, right?”

Another nod.

“But I think there was something more. My wife believed undoubtedly in fate, and you... you spending time with Leo those summers here and even the ones at your grandpa’s farm... you *changed* him, Mia. He went from this quiet kid who just followed the crowd and did what was expected of him, to

this man who... who stood proud, who gained a purpose. And I..." He clears his throat before adding, "I didn't see the changes in him until it was too late. I guess what I'm trying to say is that I overstepped, Mia. And I owe you a giant apology. The fact that you're even here shows a level of maturity and grace, that, to be frank, I don't carry myself. I've proven that. So..." He stops in the middle of the sidewalk and drops his eyes to mine—eyes filled with desperation and longing—not for me, but for the little boy currently running toward me yelling, "Mama, Mama, look!"

"I hope you don't hate me for speaking out of turn, Mia. And I hope you can forgive me one day," Mr. Preston says, stepping to the side so my son can get to me.

Benny's holding up a yellow flower, probably picked from someone's garden. "I got it for you."

"It's beautiful, Benny." I take it from him. "But you shouldn't—"

"He asked permission from the owners," Leo cuts in, standing beside his dad. "I didn't even tell him he had to. He just did it."

"That's very polite of you, Benny," Mr. Preston coos. "I don't think my sons would've done that."

Benny giggles. "Silly Leo," he sings, and then he's off, joining his new friends. Leo runs after him, forever the helicopter parent.

I trail my gaze back to Mr. Preston. "I don't carry hate in my heart, Mr. Preston, or hold on to grudges." I hold on to *fear*. "We're good."

He smiles to one side, so much like his son. "Yeah?"

"Uh-huh."

WHEN WE GET BACK to the house, the other Preston boys inform us that they're all going to a drive-in the next town over that's showing back-to-back horror films. They ask if Holden, Leo and I want to join them, but we decline. Lucy and Cameron went straight home after the trick-or-treating, with Lucy and me making plans to catch up when I'm in town next. Holden's been on the phone texting pumpkin baby lady since we got back in the car, and now, the rest of us are just sitting on the porch, watching Benny and Preston go through their collected treats on the floor, swapping candies. "All right, I have to go," Holden says, standing so fast all heads turn to him.

"Go where?" Tammy asks.

“Just...” He shrugs, looking sheepish. “I have to go, so do I take the car? Should I drop you off at the hotel?”

“Go *where*?” Tammy pushes, and my dad stifles a laugh. He knows exactly what’s happening. “Hot date?” Dad asks.

“How?” Tammy scoffs. “Here?” She shakes her head. “How?” she repeats.

“He picked up a mom during trick-or-treating,” I inform.

Holden narrows his eyes at me. “Snitch,” he spits.

“Man-hussy,” I retort.

Leo chuckles.

Tammy shakes her head. “Holden, you’re going straight to hell in a handbasket. You know that, right?” But she’s already gathering her stuff.

“We should go too,” Misty says, and Preston whines.

“No, Mama! I want to play with Benny!”

“Yeah,” Benny jumps in. “I want to play with Preston!”

My cheeks hurt with my smile.

“Mia, honey,” Misty says, getting my attention. “Why don’t I get your number, and we can set up a play date next time you’re in town.”

“That sounds good,” I reply.

“What’s a play date?” asks Benny.

“My window is closing,” Holden huffs, already walking down to our car.

Tammy rolls her eyes. “Are you coming back, or are you and Benny staying here?”

“Stay!” Leo almost shouts, and I laugh, looking over at him. “We can watch a movie, and then you can stay in Lucy’s old room with Benny.”

“You should stay,” Tom adds.

“Mama, can we?” Benny’s eyes are pleading. “Puhleaaaaase?”

Like I have a choice. “Okay.”

AFTER SAYING GOODBYE TO EVERYONE, Tom excuses himself to bed, and Leo, Benny, and I sit in the living room and share a bowl of popcorn while watching a documentary about mining minerals. It doesn’t take long until the day catches up with Benny, and he falls asleep, sprawled across Leo and me. “You’re going to have to carry him up to the room,” I whisper, shifting Benny’s hair away from his forehead. “He’s *pooped*.”

Leo laughs under his breath before carefully sliding out from under Benny and lifting him as if he weighs nothing. I follow him up the stairs—stairs I’ve never climbed before—and into Lucy’s old room. There are twin beds in here, against opposite walls. It’s decorated in the way a teenage girl would, and I wonder if it’s been touched since she left. The soft glow of the lamp on the bedside table showcases photographs of her and Cameron and a bunch of their friends, as well as the Preston clan. After tucking a sleeping Benny into the bed, Leo grabs my hand and leads me just outside the room, where he pushes me quietly against the wall of the hallway and presses his lips to mine. His hands are rough as they tug on my hair, craning my neck so he can kiss me there. As much as I want him, it feels *wrong* to be doing this with his dad sleeping just down the hall. I push him away, giggling when he rolls his eyes. “Come sleep in my room,” he offers.

“I can’t. Benny won’t know where he is when he wakes.”

Leo’s grin turns wicked as he drops his mouth to my ear, whispers, “My headboard has wooden slats. I could tie you up—”

I shove him away, heat burning my cheeks.

Leo smirks. “I know that’s what you like.”

“Shut up!” I hiss, shoving his shoulder. I look around the empty house, then lower my voice when I add, “Next time.”

Leo groans. “Promise?” I roll my eyes. He takes a step back, leaning against the opposite wall. “So, how do you think it went?”

“It was... good.” I heave out a breath. “Much better than I expected.”

“Yeah?”

“It’s a relief,” I admit. “I’d been so worried, and—”

“I told you, you had nothing to worry about, Mia. I took care of it.”

“I know.”

“You should trust me more.”

“I know,” I concede. “I’m still learning.”

He cracks a smile. “Never stop learning,” he says. “That was one of Mom’s favorite phrases.”

“Yeah?”

He nods, closing in to drop a kiss on my forehead. “Sunday Family Breakfast tomorrow. Everyone will be here. You should call Holden and your parents and get them to come, too.”

“Okay.”

His eyes trail from my head to my toes, his bottom lip caught between his teeth. “You sure you don’t want to come to my room for a little bit?”
Of course I *want* to. “I’m sure.”

I DON’T KNOW how long I’ve been asleep when I’m woken to a hand cupping my cheek and the whispers of, “Mama, Mama, Mama.”

My eyes snap open to see Benny standing beside the bed, his face an inch from mine. “What’s wrong, baby?”

“I’m thirsty, and I can’t find my water bottle.”

“Oh.” I sit up, rubbing my eyes. “We didn’t bring your bottle, bud. I’ll go down and get you a glass of water, okay?”

“Okay, Mama.”

“You get back in bed, and I’ll be right back.” I grab my phone off the nightstand to use as a flashlight, not knowing if there are going to be any lights on downstairs. Then I wait until Benny’s back in bed before exiting the room, closing the door behind me. It’s only now I realize that I’m just wearing a T-shirt Leo had lent me. I check the time on my phone. It’s just past two. The likelihood of anyone seeing me is low. A soft glow from a lamp left on downstairs gives me enough light to find my way. I make it all the way down the stairs and toward the closed kitchen door when I first hear the voices. “He should take a paternity test.” I don’t know the Preston boys well enough to decipher their voices, but I stop in my tracks, my heart falling to my feet. And even though I know I shouldn’t, that what I’m about to hear could possibly ruin me, I creep closer, my ear to the door.

“Are you kidding? The kid looks *just like him*.”

“No. The kid looks like a generic dark-haired kid. He looks like Mia.”

“I just don’t understand why she wouldn’t tell him.”

“And why now?”

A girl—I think Laney—says something like, “I don’t think we should be talking about this.”

But everyone ignores her. “Maybe she’s after his money.”

“Leo doesn’t *have* any money.”

“He has the money Mom left him.”

“Didn’t Vagina always try to hit on Dad?”

“For his money, right?”

“Apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.”

I wipe the liquid agony from my cheeks, my throat aching with my withheld sob. I'm fourteen again, hiding beneath the dock. It feels so real, like the waves are crashing into my flesh, making it hard to stand. But there are no waves here. My legs are just weak. *I am weak.*

"You really think it's true—what Leo said—about being in love with her since the first summer she was here?"

A scoff, and then: "Why would she leave if that were true? Remember, she was going to stay with us and go to high school."

"Oh yeah."

"So why would she leave him?"

"Didn't Vagina send her to fat camp?"

Chuckles erupt.

A silent sob tears through me, breaking every part of me. Bricks upon bricks of strength annihilated.

"Imagine spending all that time with a guy and not even knowing that he's your dad."

With shaky hands, I send Holden a text:

Mia: SOS

His reply is instant.

Holden: *I'll be there in ten.*

"I feel sorry for the kid," one of them says, and before I know what I'm doing, I've pushed open the door. All eyes go to me, so many deer in headlights. They're all here, scraps of candy wrappers on the kitchen table between them. I release a sob—just one. I refuse to give them any more. "Mia..." Logan's on his feet so fast, his chair scrapes behind him. He looks everywhere but at me.

I stand in the doorway, my heart in my throat, my pain laid bare between us. But I will not hide. I will not shrink under their judgment. They can say what they want about me, but *feel sorry for Benny?* Fuck them.

"I don't need Leo's money," I tell them, which is such a stupid thing to start with. "My dad is Joseph Kovács. He owns Kovács Industries. You can look him up. His net worth is close to nine hundred million." My eyes shift

around the room. Everyone single one of them is here, even Lachlan. Laney and Aubrey, too.

I don't want to be here.

But I am.

"My mom didn't send me to *fat camp* that summer. I ran away." Lucas stands, his arm reaching out, but I take a step back. "I ran away because... because..." My throat closes in, making it impossible to breathe, let alone speak. But then I think about Benny, of why I'm here, and the person he forced me to become.

Strong.

Defiant.

I wipe at my pathetic, endless tears and raise my chin. Then I allow myself a calming breath, and then another. "I ran away because I heard you, Lucas and Logan, on the dock after coming back from a party. I'd been swimming in the lake, and I was just in my underwear, and I was too scared to reveal myself because I knew how you saw me. Fat. Ugly." I spit the last two words like acid on my tongue. "So I stood under the dock, and I listened to you say *horrible* things about me." I look at Lucas first. "Brace-face heifer?" His eyes drift shut, his jaw tense, but he doesn't speak. "Wait, no. It was *fat-ass*, brace face heifer. That's right." I nod, remembering all the things I've worked so hard to forget. "And Logan." I almost break when I look at him. *Almost*. "You... you mocked me for not having parents who *loved* me," I cry.

"Jesus, Logan," his girlfriend mumbles. Logan looks down, his entire body shaking as he taps at his pocket.

"The worst part is that Leo was there, and he didn't say anything. He didn't add to the conversation, but he didn't speak up, either. Not once. And it took a really long time for me to forgive him. For me to understand that he didn't *have* to. He wasn't put on this earth to protect me. That was my parents' job, but like you said, I didn't *have* any. At least not ones who gave a shit about me." I sniff back my emotions and continue, telling them everything I wish I'd said so many years ago. "So I ran away and made one horrible mistake that ruined me for life. I *believed* you. I saw myself through your eyes, and I hated everything about myself. I hated the way I looked on the outside, but worse... I hated the way I felt on the inside. So I purged it all. All the ugly, filthy, and vile that was inside me. Every day for

three years, I forced myself to throw it all up. I *gave* myself an eating disorder.”

“Oh my god,” Laney groans with tears in her eyes. I don’t want her sympathy. I just want her to understand. I want them all to realize that the things they say and do *affect* people.

“The thing is... you guys may have brought it on, but there was no one there to stop it until it was too late. My parents weren’t there to protect me, but I’m here to protect my son. And trust me when I tell you this: there is not one fucking reason for you to feel *sorry* for Benny. But there are many reasons I didn’t tell Leo about him, and one of those reasons is *you*,” I spit, looking between Lucas and Logan, who are staring back at me, their expressions passive. “I didn’t want my son around such toxic fucking assholes because God forbid he isn’t *perfect* in your eyes.”

I turn to leave but slam into a solid chest. Mr. Preston stands in the doorway, his jaw tight, eyes glassy with unshed tears. His voice cracks when he says, “Why didn’t you say something?”

I laugh, a sound so pathetic it hurts when it resonates in my ears. I could lie, come up with a million different excuses, but I don’t. I tell him the truth. Every pitiful word of it. “Because I didn’t know what behavior would classify as being *bad enough* to abandon your children.” I lock my eyes on his. “I didn’t say anything to protect *them*.”

“Mia!” I think it’s Logan who says it, but I don’t turn to him, my focus switched to the little boy standing beside Mr. Preston, his tiny hand gripping the man’s large one.

“Mama?” His head tilts. “Why you sad, Mama?”

I curse under my breath and make quick work of ridding the tears. “I’m not.” It hurts to smile. “I’m not, baby. I’m sorry. I got caught up. Let’s get you that water, okay?”

I take his hand and lead him to the sink surrounded by silence so deafening I can feel it penetrate my flesh. My fingers tremble as I hold the glass under the tap, let it fill. “Try not to spill it, okay?” I manage to say.

He nods as he puts the glass to his lips, drinking slowly. When light shines into the house, alerting me of Holden’s arrival, I tell Benny, “Uncle Holden’s here. We need to go back to the hotel. Mama’s going to go up and get our stuff.”

He finishes drinking and wipes his forearm along his mouth before handing me the glass. He nods and then tugs on my hand until I’m low

enough to hug around the neck. “Don’t be sad, Mama. I can recharge you.” When he lets go, he looks around the room, his eyes scanning. “Does anyone else need a recharge?”

My eyes drift shut.

I don’t want to be here.

It’s Logan who speaks. “I sure could use one, Benny.”

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CHAPTER EIGHTY-TWO

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LEO

WHEN I WAKE up the next morning, much later than anticipated, the house is quiet, which is odd, considering it's a Sunday and we all wake up at a decent hour for breakfast. Honestly, I was hoping to be woken by an adorable four-year-old jumping on my bed. One day, it'll happen, and on that day, Mia will be right beside me. I trudge out of bed with a yawn, throwing on some sweats and then fumbling, bleary-eyed, down the stairs. The kitchen door is open, and my family is all there, some sitting at the table, some standing, but no one is moving. I can't even smell anything cooking. *Weird*. "What's going on?" I ask, leaning on the doorframe. I look around. Everyone is here, besides—I stand taller, suddenly alert. *Too alert*. "Where are they?"

All their eyes move, shifting from one person to the next, while my pulse begins to pound. "Leo..." Lucas says, but then he shakes his head, doesn't say any more.

I look at all my brothers, one by one. No one is looking at me. No one but Logan—and the guilt and regret on his face ignites the rage in my chest. "What the fuck did you do?" I mumble, walking backward.

I can't think.

Can't breathe.

"Leo, wait!" Dad calls, but I'm already grabbing my keys and heading out the door. I get in my truck, speeding through the streets to get to the hotel. It seems to take forever. My tires squeal as I pull into the valet section, ignoring the attendant who tells me I can't park there. I rush through the doors, the lobby tiles cold against my bare feet. Relief washes through me when I see Benny running around the sofas, giggling as Holden chases after him. I look around for Mia, but she's not here. Her dad is though, standing by the reception, talking to the woman behind it. Rushing up to him, I ask, "Where's Mia?"

His eyes are downcast when he turns to me. "She's in her room."

"What's the room number?"

"Leo, just..." He sighs. "Give me a second, okay?" He turns back to the woman to finish their transaction. The few seconds I wait feel like an

eternity. When he's done, he says, "Come with me."

I don't want to go anywhere with him. I want to find Mia, and I want to talk to her and find out what the fuck happened. Still, I follow him out the side doors and to the same bench near the fountain that Mia took me to. Nothing good has ever happened at this spot, at this entire *hotel*, and I wish I could punch something. Hard. Over and over until there's nothing left in me.

"Sit," Joseph orders, and so I sit. So does he. Side by side, we stare at the fountain as if it's going to give us all the answers.

It's just water. Fluid. Like the anguish filling my veins.

Joseph leans forward, rests his forearms on his knees. "Holden got a text from her just after two this morning. All it said was SOS." My eyes drift shut. "He was there within minutes, said she was a mess. She was crying, but they were silent—for Benny's sake."

"What the hell happened?" I whisper, keeping my eyes closed and my world in darkness to match everything I feel on the inside.

"I had to coax it out of her this morning. She didn't want to say, but... she said she overheard your brothers talking and... that's all she said."

My eyes snap open. "Jesus Christ, not again."

"That's not all," he mutters, and I look at him, my eyes pleading for... *something*. Because I don't know if I want to hear what he says next, but I know that I *have* to. "After he took them up to their room, Holden came to get me, because I... I had my phone on silent. I shouldn't have. When we got back there... she was... was—" He stops there, trying to settle his breathing. "She was on the bathroom floor, next to the toilet, with her fingers down her throat."

"No..." It's all I can think. *No. No. NO!*

"Benny was there, Leo. He was in that room, virtually alone, and he was crying and..." Joseph sniffs back his tears, the same way I do. "I don't know where to go from here, but I've booked a private plane back to New York, and her therapist is going to meet us at the condo."

"I didn't know," I say pathetically, but I don't want this man to think that I would ever, *ever*, knowingly let this happen. Not again.

"She needs to take care of herself. For Benny. And I don't know how long it's going to take or what she needs to do, but..."

Turning to face him, I choke on my words. "I can't lose her again."

A ragged breath falls from his lips. “Neither can I, man.” He clears his throat before facing me. “Look, Leo. As far as my hopes for who Benny’s dad was—I couldn’t have asked for a better man. You stepped up, and that’s something far greater than I ever did. And I see how much Benny means to you, and more, I see how happy you make Mia. She may be twenty-two, but I’ve never had a little girl, not really, and so that’s how I see her.”

The door to the courtyard opens, and Holden appears with Benny sitting on his shoulders. “Valet’s just brought the car up,” Holden says, ignoring my presence.

“I’ll be there in a minute,” Joseph tells him.

Holden leaves without another word, and I stare at the fountain, knowing I’m teetering on the edge of forever or never. “What’s going to happen to Benny? Can I still see him?”

“Of course,” Joseph’s quick to respond, and my tear-soaked eyes widen. “Mia’s made it absolutely clear that she will not take that away from either of you. I want to stay close to her, so I’ll be in New York. I think Tammy might bring him down in a couple of weeks if he’s up for it.”

He stands, shoving his hands deep in his pockets. “I have to go.”

“Can I talk to her, just to... I don’t know.”

“Yeah.” He motions for me to follow, and so I get up, leave my battered heart on the ground by my feet and let him lead me toward his car waiting in the valet. Mia’s standing by the back door, getting Benny settled in his seat. “Mia,” Joseph calls, and Mia turns, her eyes instantly meeting mine.

I am breathless.

Motionless.

I’m everything I shouldn’t be in this moment. She stares at me, hoping for something, anything. And the only thing I can give her is: “I’m sorry.”

Her eyes widen, just a tad, before she steps forward and takes my hand. Her touch is like oxygen, like fire to alcohol, igniting me, bringing me back to life. And then she’s in my arms, or I’m in hers, and it’s

everything,

everything,

everything.

CHAPTER EIGHTY-THREE

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LEO

“SHUT THE FUCK UP!” It’s the first thing I say the moment I enter the house. Only I don’t say it, I shout it. As soon as the door opened, they all pounced, trying to talk or apologize or take away from the destruction they caused with whatever the fuck it is they said last night. “I don’t want to hear a fucking word!”

“Are you going to let us explain?” Lucas yells.

My fists ball. What I wouldn’t give to punch him. Just once. “What the fuck is there to explain?”

His mouth opens, and a strangled sound erupts, but no words. Nothing.

“There’s not a goddamn thing you could say to make any of this okay!”

Laney winces at the loudness of my voice, the harshness of my words. I don’t care.

“What the hell is wrong with you?!” I yell, looking around at my brothers. “This isn’t a fucking joke! This is *my life*. Benny’s my son, and Mia—” I pause, take a breath. “Mia is the person I want to spend the rest of my life with, and you’re *ripping* it apart. You’re tearing me away from anything and everything that’s ever meant something to me!” I scream, pointing at my chest. “Why the fuck can’t you just... just... shut the fuck up!”

I start up the stairs to pack, stopping when I hear Logan call my name. He’s my Achilles heel, and he fucking knows it. I turn to him slowly, try to keep my anger in check. “What?” I spit.

He’s gripping on to Aubrey’s hand, his knees bouncing, his free hand tapping at his pocket. Trigger. “I’m sorry, man,” he chokes out. “I’m so fucking sorry.”

“We all are,” Lucas adds.

“Yeah,” the twins say at the same time.

I stand on the stairs, my chest rising and falling while I close my eyes, try not to lose my fucking mind. “I’m not the one who needs your apologies,” I grind out. When I open my eyes again, I look for Laney. “I need you to find me a rental. Three bedrooms. Big yard.”

Dad speaks up. “You’re moving out?”

“No,” I deadpan. “I’m moving the fuck on.” I continue up the stairs, mumbling, “And away from all of you.”

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CHAPTER EIGHTY-FOUR

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LEO

FORGOTTEN,
abandoned,
discarded.

It's how I felt when I was fifteen, and Mia didn't speak to me for six days. I'm on day sixteen now, and I'm trying really fucking hard not to feel the same way. It's difficult, but I remind myself of what she's doing and *why* she's doing it. I go through the pictures of her and Benny, and I force myself to understand.

When I was thirteen, I spoke to Mia—the photograph, before I spoke to Mia—the person. And now, at twenty-three, I do the same. I tell her about my days at the academy, about how I went out of my comfort zone and cooked a red sauce she'd be proud of. I cooked so much of it, I ate it for every meal for four days straight. One day, I'll get the portions right. Or, hopefully, one day, I won't have to adjust it, and it'll be enough for the three us.

I tell her how much I appreciate Tammy and her dad video calling me every night so I can talk to my son. So he can tell me all about his day, and I can tell him about the rocks I've found around the apartment and at the academy. I told him that I went to the farm on schedule to pour out the water and grit from the rock tumbler, and I showed him what they were.

I tell fake Mia that when our son asked when he could see them in person, I didn't know how to respond.

I tell her about my plans. I can't *not* work. I would have to pay back my wage from the six months of training, and that's just not viable right now. I could wait it out and see if there's a position for me in New York City, which I'm sure there will be, but I don't want to do my field training there. I don't think I'd survive it. I'll get the right training here, and with my four days on, four days off schedule, I'll have more time to fly up and see them. After a year, I'll move. I don't *want* to live in New York, but I will. For them.

I tell her my secrets: that as much as I want to *hate* my family for what they did, I can't. Because she taught me that hate is a one-sided emotion,

and it's a heavy burden I shouldn't carry. I tell her that there's only one thing in this world that I'm positive of, and that is that love exists, and it exists in many forms. My love for her and Benny hold more weight, more power. More passion. But the love I have for my siblings is visceral. It's ingrained. And maybe that's what I hate. But I don't hate them.

And then I tell her my fears: that one day I'm going to have to make a choice, and while I'm positive that I'll choose her and Benny without a second thought, I'm afraid of the things I'll leave behind when I do.

All my siblings were at my graduation ceremony, along with my dad. I appreciated them being there, and I could tell how happy and proud they were of me, but I could barely look them in the eye. And while I don't hate them, I'm so fucking disappointed.

I'VE BEEN HOME for four days now, and tomorrow, I start my first shift. Misty says that I'll be riding along with an old-timer who's set to retire within a year. He'll show me the ropes and then *all* the paperwork that comes with it. I sit on the edge of the bed and look up at my uniform, a million different emotions swarming through me—and the most prevalent one is the one I try the hardest to ignore. My eyes drift shut as I grab my phone and pull up a picture of Mia and Benny. And then I swipe through the images, spending a few seconds on each one. When one pops up of Benny, Preston, and Katie on Halloween, I feel my chest tighten, feel the dull ache float through my veins. I open my mouth to speak, to tell Mia everything I'm feeling, like I've done so many times before, but it just—it doesn't seem like enough anymore.

This life is not enough anymore.

Not since I've had a taste of what my life *could* be.

MIA

“I should just buy a private plane,” Dad mumbles.

I glare at him from across the aisle of the commercial aircraft. “It’s literally a two-hour flight. You’re such a snob.”

Dad scoffs, while Tammy shakes her head. “To be honest, I’m surprised you haven’t gotten one yet. You and your toys.”

“Toys, huh?” Dad muses, looking up at the seatbelt sign. “I always considered it a business expense, but a new toy...” He rubs his hands together. “Come to Papa.”

“I can’t!” Benny shouts, sitting forward to look past me and toward Dad. “I’m still buckled in, Papa!”

Dad busts out a laugh, and I do the same, and I feel... *lighter*—the same way I’ve always felt whenever I come home. Home—as in North Carolina.

I’ve spent two weeks holed up in the apartment in New York. The first week was what Krista, my psychologist, called intensive rehabilitation. I had to relearn and convince myself that everything inside me wasn’t ugly, filthy, and vile, and even though, deep down, I *knew* that, sometimes I needed a reminder, and that reminder was Benny. Besides, I grew him inside me, so there’s definitely beauty there. Beauty, bold, brave. That’s the way Benny sees me, and that’s the way I have to be. It’s not that I *can’t* have moments of weakness. It just means getting help for those weaknesses as soon as possible, which is exactly what I did. But *I* am the one who has to fight those demons—me and me alone. I’m the only one who lives inside my head. Inside my body.

The following week was less intense, but I didn’t feel like getting out much. Tammy and Dad were around often, and they helped put Benny to bed at night, and I’d stand just outside his bedroom door, listening to him talk with his dad. They have their own inside jokes and stories, almost like their own language. For me, it’s not that I don’t *want* Leo or that leaving him there meant The End for us. I just... in my head—I needed to find a way to separate Leo from the rest of his family, which is hard. It would be for anyone. The last thing I want to do is make him choose between them and us. It’s a fear that’s been there even before Benny. It’s the reason why I

hesitated to start anything with him in the first place. When we were at the hotel, we didn't make any promises to each other. We didn't discuss us and where we were going to go from there. All I knew was that I *wanted* him. I wanted him for Benny, and selfishly, I wanted him for me. I wanted our family. However I could have it. He held me in his arms for minutes that felt like seconds, and when I had to leave, he said three simple words that let me know he wanted the same. "This isn't goodbye."

Once I felt somewhat like myself again, the only thing I wanted was to go home. I wanted to be close to Papa. It was the only thing I knew would truly heal me. So, Dad cleared his schedule and booked us all on the next available flight. As soon as we get to the farm, I'll call Leo for the first time since I left, and I'll allow myself to get lost in his voice. In his presence. Even if it's three hours away.

Baby steps.

As soon as the seatbelt light switches off, Benny's fiddling with the straps and the buckles trying to get out. The kid does *not* like being contained. He's a free spirit, Tammy says, like Holden and me when we were kids. Some days when she watched us, she was afraid to blink because we'd be there once second, gone the next, on our own little adventures wherever our little legs could take us. Luckily we had all the open land our hearts desired.

I release Benny from his seat, and he's running toward his papa immediately. "I'm coming now!" While I wait for the cabin doors to open, I switch on my phone. Notification after notification goes off, filling the quiet with *ding ding ding!*

"Jesus, is your apartment on fire or something?" Dad mumbles, looking over my shoulder.

I wait for the alerts to stop pinging before I go through them. They're all text messages. And they're all from Leo.

Leo: *You don't know this because we haven't spoken, but it's officially my first day tomorrow.*

Leo: *This entire journey into law enforcement started my junior year. Remember? It was that note you left me that made me want to do this. I guess, in a way, I did it because I thought it'd make you proud of me.*

Leo: Stand for something or fall for everything, right?

Leo: You've been there every step of the way, Mia. Maybe not physically, but... you know what I mean.

Leo: And now it's all over, and the real shit begins, and you're not around. And I get it. I understand why you can't be, but it doesn't mean it doesn't suck. Because I wish you were here.

Leo: I'm not going to lie, I'm kind of freaking out right now.

Leo: I don't know why I am, but I am.

Leo: I keep thinking about Benny.

Leo: And how this job is so much more than a job to me.

Leo: Like, I have a SON, and this world, this society we're raising him in—it isn't good enough for him. And I'm scared because I'm supposed to protect him from all the evil and injustice and abuse and the stuff with Logan.

Leo: Jesus Christ.

Leo: I don't even know how I'm supposed to do all that when I couldn't even protect you. And now I have to protect the world.

Leo: And I think about Benny and how sweet and innocent he is, and I don't want anything or anyone to take that innocence away from him.

Leo: Now, I have to put on a uniform, and when I do, I become someone people rely on.

Leo: Why did I want to do this? No one should rely on me. No one.

Leo: I'm so fucking scared.

Leo: I'm sorry to dump all this on you. I know you have so much going on.

Leo: I'm so sorry.

Leo: I wish you were here, Mia. That's all.

Leo: I wish you were here.

CHAPTER EIGHTY-FIVE

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MIA

WHEN WE LEFT THE AIRPORT, the sun was just beginning to set. I grabbed a quick dinner for Benny and me on the road, and close to two hours later, I'm parking on the front lawn of the Preston house.

After looking behind me to a sleeping Benny in the backseat of my rental, I inhale a calming breath, hoping it will give me the courage I need. Raising my chin, I knock on the door. For a long moment, no one answers. I knock again. On the other side, I hear thumping, like rushed footsteps coming down the stairs. It's Liam who answers, his twin right behind. They both share identical looks of shock when they see me, then glance at each other before coming back to me. "Mia."

"Liam." I nod once, then look behind him to his brother. "Lincoln."

"How do you always get it right?" Liam asks.

I point to my forehead. "Hairlines." *Why the hell are we talking about this?* "Is Leo home?" I ask, trying to look beyond them and into the house.

Lincoln's shoulders lift with his shrug. "Probably."

"Well... can you get him?"

"Wait," Liam says, opening the door wider. "Leo doesn't live here anymore."

Now I'm the shocked one. "He moved out?"

Lincoln nods. "You didn't know?"

"Obviously," I mumble, fishing my phone from my pocket and opening the navigation. "Can I have his new address?"

For a long moment, no one speaks. I look up at them. Liam says, "We don't know the address."

"But we can take you," Lincoln adds in a rush.

"I'd appreciate it." I start back to my car, with them only a step behind.

"You tell her."

"No, you."

"I don't want to."

"Neither do I!"

"Tell her."

I spin on my heels, almost knock into two separate brick walls. “Tell me *what?*”

Liam blows out a breath and squares his shoulders as if he’s preparing for a battle. He might be, depending on what he says next. “Listen, about what happened...”

I open my mouth to stop him, because right now, my focus is on Leo and nothing and no one else. But they’re both looking at me, waiting, probably expecting me to attack them. It’s the reminder of Dad’s words that halt me.

A few days after we got back to New York, Dad sat me down, and he coaxed the details of that night out of me. I told him every painful truth and shared the burden of hatred with him. He just stared at me a moment, eyes scanning my features like Leo does. “You’re too good to carry hate in your heart, Mia, and that’s one of your best qualities and one that I’m the most grateful for. If you didn’t forgive me... if you didn’t give me a chance, then I wouldn’t know how big a heart lives inside you. I wouldn’t know my daughter. I wouldn’t know the amazing woman your *papa* raised you to be.” He looked down then, his lips pulled into to a frown. “People can change. And I hope that you see me as proof of that.”

I let my shoulders relax, lower my defenses, and say to the twins, “Yeah...?”

“Um...” Liam drops his gaze and rubs the back of his neck. “We just want you to know that it was us. Lucas and Logan didn’t have a lot to say.”

“And this next part—it’s not an excuse,” Lincoln says, as if they’ve rehearsed this speech.

“Linc and I—we’ve always had each other, but Lucas and Leo and Logan—it was always the three of them, and this is the first family thing we’d been included in, you know?”

“It sounds so stupid, but it’s like...” Lincoln trails off, shrugging, hands deep in his pockets. “I don’t know.”

“We felt like we had a say—”

“No,” Lincoln cuts in. “We were showing off to Luke and Logan, thinking if we said something they agreed with, then they’d think we were cool and include us in more shit.” He scoffs.

“It wasn’t right.” They say in unison.

I tilt my head, fascinated. *How do they do that?*

Liam adds, after eyeing me curiously, “Even after the stuff with Logan, it was like we were kept in the shadows.” They both watch me expectantly.

“I, uh...” I shake my head, fully aware that it’s not the first time Logan’s name has been mentioned in this way. And while I’m curious, I’m not going to push the issue. “I don’t know what happened with Logan.”

“Oh.” They share *another* look. “We thought Leo might have told you.”

Shrugging, I say, “It might not be his story to tell.”

“Like your story isn’t ours to judge?” Lincoln murmurs, almost sheepishly.

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“Look,” Liam says, taking keys from his pocket. “We understand that we ruined... everything, but Leo doesn’t deserve any of this. He’s...” He huffs out a breath.

Lincoln finishes the thought. “Don’t tell Lucas and Logan, but Leo’s always been our favorite. He’s always had time and patience with us, and we hate that he’s not talking to us.”

My eyebrows rise. “He’s not?”

“No.” They say at the same time.

Lincoln adds, “We’ve tried to reach out. Even at his graduation, but it’s like... he’s checked out.”

He’s rebooting, I want to say, but they won’t understand. “Can you take me to him?”

THE TWINS DRIVE no more than ten minutes and turn onto a residential, tree-lined street, then slow in front of a cozy two-story house that reminds me of the one from *Gilmore Girls*. The siding is painted light blue with a wrap-around porch out front, and on that porch, on his knees, is Leo Preston. He stands when he sees both cars slowing. It’s dark out now, so I’m not sure if he’s able to make out who is in the vehicles. He starts down the porch steps, nodding toward the twins’ truck. They wave, and then speed away. I pull into the driveway and park next to his truck. He’s still standing just at the bottom of the steps, his eyes narrowed in confusion. When I get out, the first thing I notice is the smell of fresh paint. The second is Leo’s expression. First shock, then... curiosity. Before he can speak, I point to the backseat. “Benny’s asleep,” I tell him. “Can you carry him in?”

Without a word, he makes quick work of taking our son out of his seat and carrying him toward the house. I follow him up the porch steps, stopping when I see what he'd been doing out here in the first place. On the floor, in pieces, is a porch swing. The chains from the roof are already in place. "You coming?" Leo whispers, holding the door open for me.

I blink back the tears clinging to my lashes because I know what this is.

It isn't just a porch swing.

He didn't just paint the house a random color.

This isn't just a house.

This is a *home*.

"Yeah," I breathe out. "I'm coming."

He leads the way up a set of stairs just past the entryway and into the second bedroom on the left. The only light comes from the hallway, so I can't make out too much besides the bed and the covers as Leo slides them down to lay Benny on the mattress. He pulls the blankets up to his chin, kissing his forehead before joining me just outside the room. Carefully, quietly, he closes the door, wincing when it squeaks. "I have to work on the hinges," he murmurs, and before I know what's happening, his mouth crashes down on mine, his strong arm wrapped around my waist, holding me to him. And maybe this is what I needed to heal me, because his touch, the hardness of his body mixed with the tenderness of his kiss—it's all I can think about. I get lost in it. So lost, I don't even realize he's moving us to another room. Another bed. He lays me down slowly, patiently, and then he's on top of me and everywhere around me. And I know we should talk. We have so much to say. But then his hands drift up my sides, taking my top with them, and maybe this is his way of speaking. And my way of responding.

He wants me.

I want him.

And nothing else matters.

Within moments, our clothes are off, discarded, and it's almost like a race to see who can get the other off first. He overpowers me when I reach for him, holding my hands in a firm grip above my head as he sidles up beside me. "Spread 'em," he orders against my neck, his palm between my legs. I open for him like I always do, and when he slides his fingers deep, deep inside, I almost lose it. *Almost*. But I concentrate on kissing him, on sliding my tongue painfully slow against his, nibbling on his bottom lip

when he pulls away. He takes my breast in his mouth, teeth clamping gently on the tip. My toes curl, and I want to run my hands through his hair, hold him there, but he won't let go of my wrists. I try to fight him, but it's futile. Slowly, he brings me back to the edge of release, only to stop, let go of my hands. He kneels over me, his hardness close to my mouth. I lean up on my elbows and part my lips, but he pulls back, smirking that way he does when he knows he's about to win this little foreplay game we play. And I know it, too. Because he kisses his way down my stomach while grasping a handful of my breast, hard. Last time he did it, his fingertips left bruises. And *fuck*, was it perfect. I moan when I feel his warm exhale replace the coolness of the air against liquid pleasure. "You have to be quiet, baby," he murmurs, and then he slides his tongue up the entire length of my slit, and I jolt in response, fingers curling against the sheets. His fingers join a moment later, and I can't—"Leo, I can't—"

"Then let go," he says, right before he sucks hard on my clit, and I try. Honestly, I try to be quiet, but the moan that leaves me is guttural and never-ending.

When I finally come down, I rasp, "Come here."

He slides over me, his weight held up by his forearms. And then he leans to one side, smiling down at me as he runs the head of his cock between my folds, but he never once enters me. Not even the tip. He stops after a few seconds, and I whine in response. Dropping his forehead to my shoulder, he says, "Fuck, Mia, I don't have anything."

"Are you clean?"

"I've never *not* used—"

"I'm on birth—" Before I can even finish, he's inside me. For the first time in five years, Leo's *in* me and—"Crud, I forgot how big you were inside me."

He smiles against my neck, slowly pumping into me. "You have such a filthy little mouth, Mia Kovács," he jokes, reaching into the drawer of his nightstand. He pulls out a set of handcuffs. "And now I'm going to make all your filthy little dreams come true."

My eyes widen while my girly parts throb.

Leo smirks, pulling out of me. "Flip over, hands by the headboard, ass in the air."

"Am I under arrest, Officer Preston?"

His jaw drops. “Holy fuck, you do have a filthy mouth. And you’re going to make me blow my load already. Flip. The Fuck. Over.”

I do as he asks, smiling against the mattress as I hear the handcuffs click into place. He smacks my ass, just once, before he’s inside me again. Hand pressed down on my neck, he doesn’t make love to me, doesn’t sweeten what we’re doing. He fucks me. He fucks me so *hard* and so fast, I can barely catch my breath between releases.

It’s not why I came here, and it’s not how I expected this to go, but it’s what we both want, what we need.

And when it’s done, when it’s all over, and we’re both satisfied and trying to settle our breathing, he holds me in his arms. “I love you,” he says.

“I know,” I retort.

He chuckles at this. “Do you still love me?” He’s trying to come off light, but I can hear the genuine concern in the way his voice wavers.

“I’ve loved you for ten years, Leo. I’m pretty sure I’ll love you forever.”

“Pretty sure?”

I giggle into his chest. “I’m sure.”

“Good,” he says, flicking on the lamp on the nightstand.

I look around the room. White walls, nothing on them. It doesn’t smell like paint in here, so he must’ve only painted the outside. Hanging on the door that leads to the bathroom is his uniform. The smile that overtakes me is overwhelming. “I’m proud of you,” I say, then add, “I’m sorry I wasn’t there to see you graduate.”

He runs his hands through my hair. “I understand. I know you needed to heal. Are you okay now?”

“No,” I tell him honestly. “But I will be.”

He kisses the top of my head. “I’m probably going to get as much field training done here, and then I’ll see about getting a transfer to New York.”

I lean up, look down at him, my eyes narrowed. “I thought you wouldn’t want to live there.”

He kisses me once. “It’s not about me anymore, Mia. It’s about him. And you. And you need your support system, and I need you, so…” He shrugs. “I’ll move to New York.”

I watch him, scrutinizing every shift of his eyes and every emotion that passes them. But there’s only one: certainty. I lie back down, my hand flat against his stomach.

And then we spend the next hour talking about anything and everything. I tell him about what the twins said before I got here, and he tells me about the house. It was the only house on the market that suited his needs. The only problem was that it was for sale. He *bought* the house, with his Dad co-signing the loan, and when he moves to New York, he plans on simply handing over the deed to his dad, and they'll probably flip it for a profit. I tell him about the therapy I've gone through over the past two weeks and how we had just landed when I got all his text messages. I mentioned that we were planning on staying at the farm for a week and that I'd planned to call him once we were there so he could visit if he had time off. And then I tell him the *real* reason I wanted to come here and why I wanted him to visit the farm. "I want to tell Benny."

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CHAPTER EIGHTY-SIX

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MIA

“MAMA! AHHHH! MAMA!”

“Crap!” I sit up. “Where are my clothes?!”

“Mamaaaa!”

“Here.” Leo’s already out of bed, throwing my clothes at me while still managing to shrug on his boxers.

“Mama!”

“I’m coming, buddy! Just stay there!” I shout, slipping on my underwear. I hiss at Leo, “Give me your T-shirt!”

“What?!”

“Your T-shirt! You don’t need it. It’ll take me too long to—”

He throws me the T-shirt, whacking me straight in the face. He laughs. I do not. I slip on the top and run out of the room and into the one next to it. I open the door and flick on the light, and then I freeze. Benny gasps. “Whoa! Where are we, Mama?”

The room is painted blue, but not just one blue. There are flecks of different shades like we’re in outer space, and this is another planet, and... I run my finger along the irregular glittery swirls on the wall. It feels like... like—“It’s crushed rock,” Leo says, leaning against the doorframe.

“Leo!” Benny squeals, getting out of bed to hug him, but only for a second because this room—*his* room—is too... too... I don’t even know how to describe it. All the furniture is wooden. There’s a bed, desk, and three bookshelves. I glance at Leo. “Is this...” I trail off.

He nods. This is the furniture from his childhood bedroom.

Benny’s covers have a smooth pebble print, the same as his pillowcases. One of the bookshelves has books, the other is empty, and the third one displays all types of rocks and minerals with an overhead light on each shelf. Even the lamps are made of everything Benny loves. Benny’s walking from one spot to the next, his eyes wide, just like his smile as he gasps at every new thing he discovers.

“Leo,” I breathe out. “This is—”

“Is this my room?” Benny practically squeals, jumping on the bed.

“It is if you ever stay here,” Leo says, pushing off the frame. “I’m glad you like it, buddy.”

“I love it!” Benny says, wrapping his arms around Leo’s neck. “And I love youuuu!”

Leo chuckles. “I love you, too. And I missed you.”

“Me too!” He releases Leo to jump off the bed and inspect the mineral collection on his bookshelf. “I never want to leave!”

I move to Leo and nudge his side with my elbow. “That was your plan, wasn’t it?” I whisper.

Leo looks down at me, smiling sheepishly.

I roll my eyes. “Hey, Benny,” I call out, sitting on the edge of the bed. “Come here, buddy. Leo and I have something we want to tell you.”

Leo’s eyes widen. “Right now?” he mouths.

I shrug. “Why not?” I mouth back.

His grin is ridiculous. Benny stands in front of us, his eyes shifting between Leo and me. “So,” I start, and then stop because I never planned out exactly what I’d say.

“Sooo?” Benny sings, swinging his hips from side to side.

I lower my gaze, try to gather my thoughts. “So, do you remember when you asked me about your dad? And how I told you that he and Mama were very much in love and that your dad was a good man and that everything good... in you,” I say, tickling his belly. He squirms, and I add, “...came from your dad?”

Benny shakes his head. “I don’t remember.”

Well. There goes that. I sigh. And then I just tell him. “Benny, Leo’s your dad.”

Benny looks at Leo, who’s smiling so big his cheeks must ache with the force. Then Benny’s focus switches to me, his eyebrows pushed to the middle. “Like how Tammy’s going to be your mom?”

“No.” I shake my head.

Leo sighs, his shoulders deflating.

“I mean, like, he’s *your dad*.”

“No, he’s not,” Benny says. “He’s my Leo.”

My lips part, but I don’t know what to say. A beeping sounds from somewhere in the house, and Leo stands. “That’s my alarm. I have to get in the shower and go.” He drops a kiss on my forehead, then Benny’s, before leaving the room.

“Go play, buddy,” I tell Benny, before going after Leo.

He’s already in the master bathroom, switching on the shower. He turns to me, and I think I’m about to have to talk him down off a ledge, but then he barks out a guffaw, his head throwing back. “Why did we think that a four-year-old would even understand?!” he laughs out.

“I...” I shake my head.

“Like, what are we supposed to tell him?” he says, unable to quit chuckling. “That I blew a load so deep and powerful inside you that it broke through the condom, and nine months later *boom*, welcome to the world, Bennett!”

It starts as a giggle and then turns to all-out, silent, uncontrollable laughter that has me losing my breath. My eyes water as I hold on to my stomach, trying to relieve the ache.

Leo’s still laughing as he drops his boxer shorts and stands in front of me in all his naked glory. He gets under the stream, pours liquid soap on a loofa, and starts scrubbing himself clean. It’s such a strange, intimate, *ordinary* moment that I almost forget everything that happened in the past few weeks. I push away the memories because I don’t want to remember them. This house, this *home*—it can be our bubble.

“You keep looking at me like that, Mia, and I’ll be late for my first day.”

AFTER A QUICK GROPE of Leo’s parts—him, in his uniform? *Jesus, take the wheel*—Leo gives us a tour of the house. There are two bedrooms and two bathrooms upstairs. The downstairs consists of the living room, laundry room and kitchen, and another smaller room off that kitchen. “Spare bedroom and your office—for if, or when, you might need to work from here,” he says, kissing my temple. He opens up the sliding door off the living room to an expansive yard and lets Benny free.

“Hey,” he says, taking both my hands in his. I try to grope him again, but he slaps my hand away. I scowl. “Can you guys be here when I get back, or do you have to go?”

“We’ll be here,” I assure.

“Yeah?”

I nod. “I’ll work on the whole *Dad* thing, too.”

He chuckles. “Walk me out?”

I call out, “Benny! Leo—I mean, your *dad* is leaving. Come say goodbye.”

“Oh, that’s good. Let’s just keep doing that,” Leo mumbles.

BENNY and I walk with Leo out to his truck. “Good luck, *daddy*,” I say, kissing him quickly. When he pulls away, his eyes flash with heat... and I don’t quite understand why.

“Bye, Leo! Good luck!” Benny says, jumping in his spot until Leo picks him up and holds him tight.

“I’ll keep this recharge all day,” Leo tells him. He keeps his hold on our son as he kisses me once more.

“You’re going to do great, okay? Don’t worry.”

Leo shakes his head, putting Benny back on his feet. “I stopped worrying the moment you showed up.”

Benny and I stand side by side as Leo reverses onto the road, honking twice before taking off. Once he’s gone, Benny turns, looks up at me. “What do you want to do today, Mama?”

“What do you want to do?”

“Can we visit Preston?”

“You remember Preston?” It’s not like Benny to remember people’s names, especially from over two weeks ago.

Benny nods. “He’s my best friend,” he says, pulling me toward the house. “Can I keep playing in my room?”

“It’s a pretty cool room, huh?”

“It’s my favorite place in the world.”

“It is?”

“Where’s your favorite place in the world, Mama?”

I inhale a sharp breath, let it out slowly. “Maybe one day soon, I’ll show you.”

BENNY SPENDS the morning running between his bedroom and the yard, traipsing dirt throughout the house. Leo doesn’t have a lot of furniture, not even a couch or kitchen table, but he has enough cleaning products to service a small hotel. I make sure to clean up as much as I can. Surprisingly,

his kitchen is pretty stocked up, and honestly, I'm impressed. He went from grilled chicken and steamed vegetables to—going by the ingredients he has—making pasta sauce from scratch. It must be all the impromptu cooking lessons I gave him in the barn.

I call Dad and let him know that we're safe, and then, because I'm bored, I steal a piece of paper and a crayon—not blue—from Benny's room, sit on the floor of the living room and draw out a quick floor plan of the house and where I recommend the furniture go for when he decides to buy it. Here, there's only an old fold-out chair in front of a TV that's sitting on a makeshift table and a bookshelf. Last night, when we went into the bedroom, it was too dark to see anything in there... and I was a little preoccupied with other things. This morning, I noticed that his bedroom is lined with open stacks of books piled taller than Benny. I assume that's where all the books from the shelves in Benny's room went. On this shelf, there are only a few books. I get up to inspect them. One has a black cover, no title, no author. Not even an image. It's just a plain black book. But, the pages look worn, and the spine's cracked in multiple places. When I flip through it, I notice Leo's handwriting in the margins, as well as highlighted passages. I put it back on the shelf and move to the others. They're all composition notebooks, and I pull one out and flip through it. It's Leo's handwriting, which is what I expected. What I don't expect is my name. I should put it back. I know I should, but I don't. The words jump from the page, and when I look at the date scrawled at the top—the date I gave birth to our son—Leo's written declaration of love fills all the holes in my heart, all the gaps in my memories.

Mia,

Before the crying and the yelling and the truth, there was everything.

There was you, a girl I'd been in love with since love was a choice, and you were naked and sitting on the edge of the bed. The morning sun filtered through the cracks of the blinds, and they made what parts of your irises I could see from your half-closed lids look like honey. Sweet.

Like you.

You were half asleep, and you asked me twice for the time. Your voice was rough from lack of use, but it was still soft, pure, perfect.

Like you.

I took my time dressing you, taking your ankles in my hands and slipping on your shorts, and when your hands landed on my shoulders to rise just a little so I could bring them over your hips, there was a moment.

One single, insignificant moment.

It surged through me like a blast of lightning right through my chest.

I envisioned a life with you, and it wasn't because you were naked and you were mine. It was your hands on me. Depending on me to keep you grounded. Keep you safe. But help you rise. You didn't notice that I stared at you then, and the visions I had weren't blurred or hazy. They were clear and concise, and this, I thought to myself. This is what I want forever and a day.

A lifetime of single, insignificant moments.

I used to think of you as my sunrise, but in that moment, I realized you were the sun, the stars, the moon, the sky, the ground, and everything in between.

Before the crying and the yelling and the truth, there was you.

And you were everything.

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CHAPTER EIGHTY-SEVEN

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MIA

THERE ARE four composition notebooks in total, and I go through each one, my heart racing as I read the same words in various orders, various proeses, but it's all the same declaration. He'd written it so many times, as if it was that important to him, he had to make it perfect.

The last one he wrote was the one I read first.

He'd perfected it the day perfection was born.

A knock on the door startles me, pulling me from my reverie. Leo didn't mention anyone stopping by, and so I hesitate a beat before the knocking begins again. "Mama? Is that you?" Benny calls from the top of the stairs.

"Someone's at the door, buddy," I say, opening it.

My heart drops to my feet when I see Lucas and Logan standing shoulder to shoulder. "Leo's not here," I manage to say before my throat closes in. I hate the sudden fear in my voice, the agony in my soul.

"Yeah, we know," Lucas says. "Um... we were hoping to speak to you."

I glance at Logan, whose looking down at his feet, his hand tapping at his pocket. I saw him doing it a couple of weeks ago, and I wonder what it means. What does *any* of this mean?

Lucas clears his throat. "Can we come in?"

I slam the door in their faces, my lungs filling with too much oxygen so fast that my body folds in half, and I have to hold on to the doorknob to keep upright.

"Who is it, Mama?" Benny asks, coming down the stairs.

"It's, um..." I blow out a breath. "It's..." *Your uncles*. I can't even get the words out, but that's who they are, and soon Benny will be old enough to work it out. With that in mind, I rush to open the door again, only to be greeted with their retreating backs. "Wait!" I call out and wait for them to turn to me. "I need a minute! Please."

Logan's eyes are wide as he nods, stating, "Take your time."

I close the door just as Benny stops in front of me, head tilted as he watches me attempt to inhale. Exhale. Just *breathe*. "What's wrong, Mama?"

“Nothing, baby.” I hold him to me, blinking back tears when his little arms wrap around me. “Mama just needed a recharge, that’s all.”

When he pulls back, his neck craned to look up at me, he smiles. “Are Leo’s brothers here to go on an adventure with me?” His eyes are wide, the joy and excitement filling them almost bringing me to my knees.

I know that I have to face them again. I can’t hide out here—in our own little bubble—forever. According to the twins, Leo’s already pushing them away. My initial fear is becoming real. Leo’s being forced to choose. Something I *never* wanted to happen. Even back then, over five years ago, I knew what it would mean to him to have to do that—what it would *do* to him. Like my disease, only I can fight this because it’s inside *me*.

I have to *try*.

For Leo.

For Benny.

“Maybe,” I tell Benny, and his smile widens.

“We might have to have a grown-up talk first, okay?”

Benny nods, and I turn around, open the door for the third time. “Hi.”

“Hey,” they say in unison.

I swallow my nerves. “Do you want to come in?”

“Actually,” Logan says, shifting on his feet. His hands in his pockets, but they look to be fisted. “I was hoping maybe you and I could talk out here, and Lucas can watch Benny?”

I open my mouth to come up with an excuse because the idea of Benny being alone—“Can I show him my room?” Benny asks, tugging on my arm. “Please, Mama! Please!”

My gaze drops. “Yeah, okay.”

Lucas steps forward, and I move to the side, giving him room to enter the house. “Thanks, Mia,” he says, and I know it means more than that single word.

I can feel it in the way he says it—the underlying meaning. He’s thankful for the chance, whether it’s for him or Logan—I’m not sure.

“It’s my most favoritest place in the world,” Benny tells Lucas as they climb up the stairs.

“Oh yeah?” Lucas responds. “I can’t wait to see it!”

When I turn back to Logan, he motions to the porch steps. “Want to sit?”

“Sure.” On shaky legs, I sit on the porch, noticing that he closes the front door. He probably doesn’t want Benny to hear whatever he has to say, which makes sense. A moment later, he’s sitting beside me, far enough that we don’t have to touch. It’s the closest I’ve ever been to him, I realize, and I ignore the fear clogging my airways.

“You probably know why we’re here,” he says.

I clear my throat, but I don’t respond. I look ahead at the large oak tree in the front yard. Beneath the branches, on the ground, is an old tire... for a *tire swing*, I bet.

“We wanted to apologize about that night on the dock.” He pauses a beat. “There are no excuses for the things we said, or how we made you feel, or everything that happened afterward. We feel like... like absolute shit, to be honest, Mia. After you gave us a beatdown on Halloween, I haven’t been able to think straight. And Laney’s pretty much stopped talking to Luke, so that’s fun for him... Lucy’s stopped talking to all of us.” He shakes his head. “But that’s not your concern.”

I don’t know if he’s watching me, but I’m too scared to look at him.

His heavy exhale fills the silence between us. “I don’t expect you to forgive us or understand, but I hope one day you’ll see that we’re not the same people anymore.” He sighs. “I feel like everything I say is going to sound like an excuse, but I feel like if I don’t say anything, then you’re forever going to think that we’re those same fucking assholes we were back then. So I’m just going to say it, and you don’t have to listen.”

I stay quiet, anxiousness clawing at my insides.

“Besides Lucy, Lucas took Mom’s death the hardest, and it wasn’t because we’d lost her or we’d miss her. It’s because he felt like he had to step up and become more than his twelve years could handle. Lucy was gone with Cameron a lot, and when she moved out of the main house, it was basically him in charge, along with your mom—but she was mainly focused on the younger kids. I think he thought that in order to keep us in line, he had to be this *obnoxious fucking dick* all the time.”

My eyes snap to his, shocked at his words, and he cracks a half-smile.

“But it worked,” he adds. “For the most part. To be honest, Lucas put on an act around most people, even his best friend—who, if I recall—was there that night. Garra?”

I nod, look away again.

“I never thought I’d say this, but Luke—he’s not a bad guy. He was just a guy trying to do his best, make Dad proud, and not leave any of us behind. There was a lot of pressure on him—being the oldest boy and all—and sure, he was cocky and rude, but he loves hard, Mia. And after that shit with Laney—it *really* changed him, you know? He became... selfless.” His voice cracks on the last word, and when I glance at him, his eyes are clouded, filled with tears. He sniffs once, fighting back his emotions. “As far as me being an absolute shit bag—” He breaks off to clear his throat. “Look, I was going through a lot. I hated the whole fucking world, and to be honest, I was so high at the time, I’m surprise I even remember that night.” *High?* He would’ve been what? Twelve? Thirteen? Logan taps at his pocket again, and my eyes shift to the movement. He stops immediately. But his knees begin to bounce. It starts slow, then gets more and more frantic. “I was addicted to weed,” he says, and I try to look up and into his eyes, but he’s looking ahead, his gaze distant. “And weed—it’s not so bad unless you’re using it to to *forget*. And there was a hell of a lot that I wanted to forget.” His entire body is shaking now, both his hands slapping against his pockets and...

My eyes drift shut. I can’t believe I didn’t realize what this was before. *This*—the searching in his pockets—it’s his trigger reaction. I used to pull out my hair, only satisfied when the roots came out. It was always my left hand, my right too busy aching to be down my throat. I’d done it so often that I had a patch missing from my scalp. “You don’t have to tell me,” I rush out. “It’s okay.”

“I do, Mia,” he says. “Because I need you to trust me.”

And before I can stop him, tell him that I can work on trusting him without knowing or caring what it is that’s making him this way, Logan *tells me*. And he tells me *everything*—the abuse and the addiction and the bender that led to rehab, all while his voice strains against every word. And then he tells me about his niece, Katie—how he turned it all around for her. I listen, my stomach twisting, my eyes flooding with so many tears I don’t even bother hiding them. It’s impossible to breathe, to speak. But I *try*. “I’m so sorry, Logan.”

“That’s not even the worst part,” he croaks, his eyes finally meeting mine. “Aubrey’s his daughter.”

My eyes snap shut.

“Finding that out is what led to the bender.” He clears his throat. “She’s been wanting to reach out to you because she knows what it’s like to be... an *outsider*, I guess. My whole family knows who she is, and sometimes she sees herself as her father’s spawn, but we don’t. *I* don’t. But if any of them ever treated her the way we treated you... holy shit, I’d burn the entire world down, Mia. And Leo—he’s at that point. I can see it. He’s lit the fucking match, and he’s just waiting... And I don’t want that, because...” He pauses a breath. “He dropped out of college to be there for me, and he *has* been. There are some things I tell him that I can’t anyone else, not even Aubrey. He’s been my strength through my physical and emotional recovery, and I don’t want to lose him. I can’t. And maybe that makes me the most selfish asshole in the world, but I’m seriously considering moving to New York when he does. I *need* him, and in order for him to exist in my life, I need you to—” He stops there, his eyes narrowing. “I don’t know what I’m asking of you and it wasn’t at all my intention to ask *anything* from you, but...” He looks at me now, his eyes lost, and for the first time in my entire life, I want to *hug* Logan Preston. “Mia, I relapsed.”

My stomach drops.

“That Halloween night....”

So did I, I don’t say.

“It was just one toké.”

It was just one purge.

“I need to be better than this.”

So do I.

“For Katie.”

For Benny.

I hug Logan Preston.

And he hugs me back.

And then I find my inner strength, my inner *Mama*, and I say something I never thought I’d ever say to him. “We’re going to get through this, Logan. And we’ll do it *together*.”

He doesn’t let go of me. Not until the front door opens and Benny pokes his head out. “Look what I drew, Mama,” he says, holding out a sheet of paper.

I wipe the remnants of my tears off my cheeks and take Benny’s drawing while he looks over at Logan, frowning. “Do you need another

recharge?”

Logan chuckles. “Absolutely, I do.”

Lucas steps out, his brow furrowed as he looks at his brother. He doesn’t speak. I gaze down at Benny’s picture of a lopsided playhouse with a bright blue sign above the door that reads *Benny!* “This is awesome,” I tell him.

“Did you know Leo’s brothers build houses?” he asks.

With a smile, I reply, “I did know *your dad’s* brothers build houses. And do you know what you call *your dad’s* brothers?” I don’t miss the widening of eyes on both the Preston boys.

“No.”

“They’re your *uncles*.”

“Nuh-uh,” Benny says. “I already have an uncle. Holden.”

“You can have more than one uncle.”

“Nuh-uh,” he sings, and I sigh, roll my eyes as I look at the drawing again.

“It’s a great playhouse, Benny.” Then my eyes thin as I peer up at the brothers now standing on the porch. “Speaking of which, shouldn’t you both be at work?”

Lucas shakes his head while Logan scoffs and laughs at the same time. “We were fired,” Lucas tells me.

“Your dad *fired* you?”

“Yep,” Logan responds. “Papa Preston does *not* play.”

I get to my feet. “When did this happen?”

“Halloween night.”

CHAPTER EIGHTY-EIGHT

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LEO

WHEN I OPEN the front door of my house, the first thing I notice is the smell of Mia's cooking. The second thing I notice is the music. Soft and smooth, "Easy" by the Commodores plays just loud enough for me to assume it's coming from a phone. I slip off my shoes at the entryway and make my way to the kitchen. Benny's sitting on the kitchen counter with a sketchbook and crayons, and Mia is setting the table. I'd comment on how amazing it feels to come home to this scene, how it warms my heart, yet raises my insecurities, but... the table that Mia is currently placing silverware on? It wasn't there this morning.

"Hi," I say, and Mia spins, her hand to her chest.

"I didn't hear you come in!"

"Leo!" Benny shouts, sliding off the stool to recharge my soul.

Mia asks, beaming up at me, "How was your first day?"

"Yeah, how was your first day?" Benny echoes, his arms raised. I'm not sure at what age he'll stop wanting to be picked up and held, but right now, I'm all about it.

I answer, "It was... anticlimactic, to be honest. A lot of sitting in the car listening to my training officer tell old, boring stories." I drop a kiss on Mia's forehead and tickle Benny's side before releasing him back to the floor. He climbs on the stool, the only seat that *was* here. Now there's a bench on either side of the kitchen table. My eyes narrow as I look down at Mia. "When did you get a table?"

"Oh, this," she says, her smile confusing as hell. "I commissioned your brothers to build it. They did it in, like, two hours. Pretty cool, huh?"

I'm not sure what part of that sentence I'm *not* supposed to read into. "Wait." I follow her to the stovetop, stand beside her as she stirs. "When did you see my brothers?"

"They came here. Lucas and I played in my room," Benny answers from behind me.

Mia turns, her hands warm against my chest. She lowers her voice when she says, "Did you know your dad *fired them*?"

I rear back. "Who?"

“Lucas and Logan.”

Shaking my head, I mutter, “I haven’t really spoken...” I trail off, my mind racing. “Wait, they were *here*?”

Mia nods, her lips pressed tight.

Shoving my hand in my pocket, I pull out my phone, my jaw tightening as I mumble, “I’ll tell them they won’t be doing that again.”

“No!” She covers my phone with both her hands. “It’s fine.”

“It’s not.”

She motions toward Benny as if this conversation isn’t one we should be having in front of him. “It’s fine,” she repeats. “It was... *helpful*.”

“Helpful?” I scoff.

Fingertips to my jaw, she smooths out the muscles before kissing me quickly. “Yes. Don’t worry, okay?”

It’s impossible not to worry, especially when it comes to those idiots and anything important to me, but I let it slide. For now.

“I’m going to go up and change real quick.”

Mia frowns. “You can’t stay in uniform?”

“Horny girl,” I mouth, and her laughter fills my ears, my heart.

“Leo! Come look at my drawing!” Benny calls out.

I stifle my chuckle. “No luck on the whole *Dad* thing, huh?”

“Nope,” Mia sighs. “I’ll keep working on it.”

MIA

“When Mama cooks, we clean,” Leo says, his hands on his knees as he squats down to Benny’s eye level. “Deal?”

Our son’s gaze shifts to the open dishwasher, then to the sink, and then back to Leo. “Deal.” They bump fists. “What happens if I cook?” Benny asks him.

Leo thinks about this a beat. “Then we—your mom and *dad*—clean up after.”

Benny nods at this, comprehending. “Did you know that the earth’s crust is made of rock?”

I contain my giggle while Leo hides his frustrated sigh behind an overly dramatic grin. “I did *not* know that,” he says, standing to full height. He starts to clear the table while I sit at the kitchen counter, watching father and son.

“Do you like bread crusts?”

“I don’t *not* like them,” Leo says, handing Benny a stack of empty bowls.

“I’m confused.” Benny walks over to the dishwasher.

“What are you confused about?”

“Mama always says that I’m not allowed to eat rocks, but if the earth’s crust is made of rocks, and I eat the bread crusts, then...” His head slants. “What is an *earth*?”

Leo busts out a laugh. “We’ll have to get you some more books, huh?”

Benny responds by nodding, his eyes as wide as his smile. “I like the books you get me.”

“I like that you like books... *son*.”

Benny looks out the window. “The sun’s gone home for the day. It’s dark now.”

AFTER DINNER, Leo showers and changes out of his uniform—*boo*—and then he and Benny head out to the porch to work on the porch swing. I sit across the steps, playing music from my phone. The playlist is old. Nine

years old, to be exact, and I wonder if Leo realizes that it has all the songs we used to listen to when we were kids. I watch as Leo goes through the tools with our son, revealing his patience as he shows him how to use each one. On his knees, he stands behind Benny with a drill in his hand, letting him pull the trigger. Benny squeals when it whirs to life, and he tells him, “See? It’s like a smaller version of an auger driller they use at the quarries.”

“But it goes into wood instead of rock,” Benny confirms.

His lips curve. “How did you get this smart?”

Benny grins. “Let’s do another one!”

In my head, I picture Leo at this age, a version of Benny with blue eyes, looking up at Mr. Preston the way our son looks at him—as if he carried the world on his shoulders, and that world is *safe* and filled with nothing but *good*. It’s the way I used to look at Papa.

I wonder if Logan Preston ever looked at his dad that way. It must have destroyed him when he was forced to realize that the world has shadowed corners filled with darkness and evil. And evil doesn’t care how old you are or how much you’ll hurt.

The world is far from perfect, and maybe that was my problem.

Mahatma Gandhi once said that no human being is so bad as to be beyond redemption.

I disagree.

The man who took Logan’s innocence is far beyond it.

Two teenage boys who were hurting and struggling to deal with their pain? They’re not so bad. Sure, they said some pretty nasty stuff, but they’re not perfect. I guess, in my head, I always saw them that way—this perfect family filled with love, loyalty, and *brotherhood*. I never once stopped to consider them as *kids*—which is what they were. They were kids, and they were troubled and wounded and damaged, and up until that time, Papa made it a point to hide the things in this world that would allow me to feel the same. Lucas and Logan had no choice.

Through the speakers, “I Can See Clearly Now” by Johnny Nash is replaced with “At Last” by Etta James, and it instantly brings on more thoughts of Papa. A knot lodges in my throat as I watch Benny holding two pieces of wood together while Leo screws them into place. Gosh, what would Papa think about Benny? He would dote on him just like he did me. He would love him, treasure him, go on so many rock-hunting adventures no matter how tired he was.

Leo's eyes snap to mine, and it's only now I realize I'm crying. I try to smile, to assure him that I'm okay, but it's hard. So hard. "Hang on, buddy," Leo tells Benny, standing to full height. He walks over to me, ordering, "Up."

Sniffing back another cry, I just stare at him.

"Up," he says again, and so I stand up. He takes one of my hands in his, the other on my hip as he pulls me closer. And before I know it, we're moving slowly, side to side, as he strokes my head resting on his chest. I can feel his heartbeat against my cheek as he leads us on this slow dance. He asks, voice low, "This was your grandparents' wedding song, right?"

I rear back, surprised. "How did you know?" I shake my head because I don't need the answer. "I'm just thinking about Papa..."

"I know," is all he says.

I press my cheek to his chest again. "It's such a shame that he was taken from this world before he got a chance to meet Benny."

Leo pulls back, shaking his head. And then he laughs. Just once. "You don't think your grandpa or my mom haven't met Benny?"

My brow dips.

"Who do you think created him, Mia? They—together—gifted us the joy of Bennett."

I blink up at him. Again and again. Because it's all I can do, and then he smiles... and it's ten years' worth of every emotion wrapped up in a single gesture. "That's why he's *blessed*."

I don't know what to say, so I give him the one truth that has never changed. "I love you, Leo Preston."

"I know."

My scowl has him chuckling, and I can't hide my smile in time.

He presses his lips to mine, murmuring, "I wish I could wrap myself around your smile. Around your strength to be here. For me. *For us*. That's how I know you love me, Mia. Because you show me." And then he kisses me again, deeper and softer, and I could get lost in his kiss. Forever.

But we don't have forever.

We have Benny. "Oooh! Mother lover!"

We break apart, stifling our laughter. "Bath and bed. Off you go."

"Mama!" he whines, stomping his foot.

Leo raises his eyebrows at our son. "Listen to your mama, Benny."

"Fine," he mumbles, walking past us.

Leo asks, head lowered. "You're going to stay again?"

"Is that okay?"

"Is that even a question?"

WHEN I GET out of the shower, Leo's sitting up in bed, shirtless, reading glasses on, and a book in his hands. "Question," I say, grabbing my laptop from my bag. "What are the chances of you, in your uniform, wearing your glasses, me on top?"

Over his book, he peers at me standing at the end of the bed. "How can you ride my cock when I'm still in uniform?"

I blush at his dirty words. "Your pants have a zipper, right? I just need that one thing."

He chuckles, goes back to his book. "You're filthy, Mia."

Dropping my computer beside him, I crawl between his legs, maneuvering his arms and legs with a grunt. Finally satisfied with our positions, I lean back, rest my back to his solid chest and pull his arm over my shoulder. Then I grab my laptop and open the screen, pulling up my email. "Are you comfortable there?" He chuckles.

"Yep."

"So my brothers came by today?"

"Yep."

"Are you going to tell me what happened, or...?"

I shrug. "Honestly, I think it was a conversation that needed to happen, and I'm at a much better place because of it. As far as the *actual* conversation, I'm still kind of processing it, and I think that's something I need to do on my own."

"Well, that's good, right?"

"Yeah, it is."

For the next few minutes, he continues to read while I go through my work messages. Then he says, "Hey, I saw that little sketch up of the floor plan you did."

"Yeah?"

"What are you thinking? As far as furniture goes. Grays and pastels like the barn?"

I tense, grimacing, and stay silent.

"Mia...?"

"I kind of maybe ordered some furniture online. It'll be here tomorrow."

"What—how—who is paying for that?"

"My dad." It's barely audible.

"Mia!" he scolds.

"What?" I say, turning to him. "He won't even notice, and besides, it's for Benny. So..." I pout. "Don't be mad."

Leo rolls his eyes as he reaches across to get his wallet from the nightstand. He pulls out a credit card and hands it to me. "No more buying things on your dad's dime. Use this. And, I know you're not used to this, but there is a limit on the card, so don't go nuts," he breaks off on a chuckle, ruffling my hair as if I'm a child.

I look between the card and him, again and again. "You already bought us a *house*, Leo. I can buy the things to go inside it."

He merely smirks, goes back to his book. "Use my card, Mia."

"But the interest—"

His heavy sigh cuts me off. "I'm trying to read here."

"Sorry," I exaggerate, rolling my eyes.

I go back to my laptop, switching from my work email to my personal one. Most of the emails are confirmations from the purchases I made today, but there's one from an office in New York. I lean in closer to study the information they sent. "Leo."

He groans, making a dramatic show of closing his book and putting it on the nightstand. Then he wraps his arms around my waist when I pout at him. "I'm just playing. What's up?"

"I forgot to mention it earlier, but while we were in New York, I set up an appointment with this child psychologist."

His brow lifts. "You did?"

Nodding, I say, "I was thinking about what you said about his outbursts and the noise and people and all that stuff, so I wanted to see if there's something we could do to help him through it—if that's even the problem."

"Okay..."

"She sent a questionnaire that we have to fill out, just about how he reacts to certain things. She said it might be a sensory issue."

His eyes are everywhere, all at once. "Right."

"So I'll prepare the document, and maybe you and I can sit down tomorrow night and go through it."

"Yeah..." he says, but his mind seems to be elsewhere.

“It’s not a bad thing,” I assure.

“I know,” he rushes out. “It’s just... if he does have more appointments, I’d like to be there. If I give you my schedule for the next couple of months, can you make them so it’s during my time off?”

“You’ll fly up to New York?”

He nods. “Yeah, if that’s what it takes. Of course.” His lashes lower as his hold on me tightens. “You know, it was really nice coming home to you guys today.”

“Yeah?”

Another nod. “You said you were planning on being here for a week, right?”

“Yeah.”

“So it’s Wednesday today, and my last shift is Saturday. Maybe you guys can stay until then, and on Sunday, we can drive up to the farm together? We can drop your rental back at one of the depots, and you go back to New York from there?”

My lips curve, my chest expanding at the thought of spending almost an entire week with him. “That sounds like an amazing plan.”

“Good,” he says. “Now strip.”

CHAPTER EIGHTY-NINE

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MIA

THE LITTLE STRIP mall on Main Street reminds me of home. There are far more shops here than back there, but they're all small and quaint, and when I step inside each one, the greetings are personal and the smiles genuine. "Look, Mama!" Benny shouts, pointing toward a store. Behind the window is a display of books, all covered in brown paper, and the sign above is handwritten in comic book style writing with the words "Blind Date with a Book! You tell us your taste, and we'll set you up!" Below it, in much smaller font and bracketed, it reads, "It's like Tinder for nerds."

"You think that's where Leo gets all my books?" Benny asks.

"I'm positive it is," I say, grinning wide when I see "Lucy's Bookstore" on the glass door. "Let's go." I take Benny's hand, and without a second thought, I push open the door. Lucy glances up from behind the desk, her eyes wide when she sees me. "Mia!" she gasps, right before Benny yells, "Princess!" He runs toward Katie, who's sitting in a cardboard box playing with the packaging. "What you got there?" he asks. "A box?"

Katie repeats, "Bock!"

And before I can even process how stinking cute they are, I'm being wrapped in porcelain. "I heard you were in town," Lucy tells me. "I was going to come by tonight after work."

"So, Leo's still speaking to you?"

Lucy releases me, nodding and saying, "Oh yeah, Leelee's fine with me. It's the rest of those assholes we're pissed at."

I sigh, a discomfort aching at my chest. I know I'm not *all* to blame, but I also know that I'm causing it. I'm tearing this family apart, and I don't like this for them. For me, either.

Katie squeals, "Mama!"

Lucy groans. "She's been so needy today, which sucks because I have a delivery I have to get out, and Red's at Logan's therapy."

"Red... as in Aubrey? She works here?"

"Uh-huh."

"Is—" Hmm. I don't know how to broach the subject without raising questions. "Is Logan's therapy local?"

“Oh yeah,” she says, moving behind the counter again. “Amanda’s right up the road. She’s one of my best friends. She’s great.” She pauses a beat. “Her specialty is child psychology, but she sees Logan as a favor to me.”

“Right,” I muse, my mind working.

“Mama!” Katie cries, and Lucy inhales a sharp breath, her eyes drifting shut.

“I love you, baby girl, but Mama just needs ten minutes.” Her voice is sweet, but her teeth gnawed together as she says it reveals something else.

“Do you want me to take her for a bit?” I offer.

“Are you serious?” She almost cries. “Mia, I would love you forever.”

“I don’t mind,” I say, picking up the little girl from the box. She stops crying instantly. “Benny and I were about to get ice cream. Can she—”

“Anything she wants,” Lucy cuts in.

I giggle. “We’ll be back in half an hour?”

“You are saving my life and my business and my sanity.”

THE ICE CREAM store is only a few doors down. Benny gets something blue, and I get plain vanilla for Katie. While carrying her, I hold the cone to her mouth and let her go crazy. With no free hands, Benny holds on to the strap of my bag. As soon as we step back out, I realize where we are. It was dark the last time I was here, and I never noticed what was around. Across the road is a white building with a tall steeple and the steps I sat on when everything changed. I expect the panic to begin, the trigger to set off, but nothing happens. I look at the church again, the stairs. I’m positive it’s the same one. Yet, there’s no visceral reaction to seeing it. “Come on,” I mutter. “Make sure you walk with Mama, okay?”

We cross the road, and it’s nothing like New York, where we have to look twice before crossing, even at the lights. Benny skips the entire way to the church steps, and we sit side by side with Katie on my lap.

“Princess has ice cream all on her chin!” Benny giggles, and I look at Katie, her blue eyes wide as she parts her lips to devour the treat.

I pull out wipes from my bag and wipe her clean.

A second later, she’s back at it.

Benny laughs harder. “She’s so cute.”

“You know Katie’s your *family*, right?”

Benny freezes mid-lick and eyes me, confused.

“Lucy—Katie’s mom—is your dad’s sister.”

“You mean Leo’s sister?”

“Yes.” I smile. “That makes Katie your *cousin*.”

“Cousin,” he repeats. “Do I have other cousins?”

“No, just Katie.” Although, with Holden being as promiscuous as he is, I do have to wonder.

We sit in silence, Katie breaking through every couple of minutes to demand more ice cream, and I wait. I wait for my lungs to shrink, for my throat to close in and my heart to race so hard and fast that I expect it to burst right out of my chest. I wait for my skin to crawl, my veins to fill with nothing but panic and restlessness. I wait, and I wait.

It never comes.

I feel... *free*. Like I can breathe. From the moment Leo showed up at the barn six months ago, I’d been living my life in limbo, not knowing how to feel or what to do next. Everything was in question, and it still is, but... at least I can *breathe* through all the uncertainty. I look up at the steeple, the sun blasting right behind the cross, and my lips tick. I haven’t stepped foot in a church since Papa died because... because I stopped believing in faith. How could faith exist when it rips away the most important parts of my soul, fills the empty spaces left behind with dirty, filthy ugliness?

But it didn’t.

Faith filled my emptiness with Bennett.

Blessed Bennett.

The church doors open, and a beautiful, black middle-aged woman appears, dressed in dark gray with a white priest collar. Her smile is soft as she makes her way down the steps. “Good morning, babies,” she says to the kids, then looks pointedly at me. “Are you new in town, sweetheart?”

“We’re visiting my Leo,” Benny tells her.

“Your Leo?” she asks.

I *wish* for Benny to say “my dad,” but he just nods in response.

“I thought you might be here about the school program,” she says, walking past us.

“School program?” I call out.

She turns back to us. “For your little boy.” She grins at Benny. “He’d be about ready to start, right?”

“Next year.” I nod.

“Well, if you do decide to stay for whatever reason, we have a completely optional program with the elementary school for those little ones who want to...” She winks. “Fill their hearts with a little *faith*.”

“That sounds...” I trail off, lost for words.

Her smile widens as she turns her back, starts walking away. Over her shoulder, she says, “It was really nice meeting you, Mia.”

How did she—“Wait!” I call out. “How do you know my name?”

She spins on her heels, starts walking backward. “*Your* Leo’s told me so much about you.”

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CHAPTER NINETY

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LEO

“WAKE UP! WAKE UP! WAKE UP!” Benny shouts, jumping on the bed beside me.

I crack one eye open first, then the other. Then I growl, pulling on Benny’s legs until he falls back on the mattress. I tickle his sides until he squirms, laughing and shouting, “Stop! I’m going to wee!”

“Stop. He *will* wee... all over your new mattress,” Mia warns, coming out of the bathroom adjusting her clothes. She’s already showered and dressed, and I’m still half asleep and *confused*.

“I didn’t know we were going to the farm this early,” I mutter, reaching for my phone on the nightstand. It’s just hit nine, which is a *huge* sleep-in for me, but still...

I lie back down when Benny pushes on my bare shoulder and gets his pajama-clad body under the covers with me. He lifts my hand and tucks himself under the crook of my arm. “So cozy cozy,” he mumbles. “I’m going to sleep right here, with you, every single night, Leo!”

I tense, my eyes pleading with Mia to say *something*.

Look, I love my son; that’s not a question. But I also love his mom. And I *love* the things I get to do to his mom in this very bed.

“Who’s going to watch over your rocks if you’re in here every night?” Mia asks, hands on her hips, one eyebrow cocked. *She’s so smart*. How does she do that?

“Oh yeah!” Benny says, running his hand over the stubble on my jaw.

“And we’re not going to the farm yet,” she says, walking to the end of the bed. She tugs hard on the covers until there’s nothing left over us.

Benny and I whine, holding each other closer to keep warm. “Mama!” we both yell, and she rolls her eyes.

“It’s Sunday,” she says, as if that’s supposed to mean something. When I give her a blank stare, she scowls. “It’s Sunday Family Breakfast!”

I sit up, taking Benny with me. “But—”

“Hurry up!” she orders. “I don’t want to be late for my first one!” She starts walking away, and I attempt to go to her, but Benny’s climbing my torso, and so I take him with me.

I catch her just before she leaves the room. “Baby, wait.” I pull on her arm, and when she turns to me, she’s smiling. I search her eyes for any doubt or worry, but all I see are clear, light brown eyes I want to get lost in. “Are you sure?”

“I’m sure,” she says, keeping her eyes on mine a breath longer so she can *show* me how sure she is. “Let’s get you dressed, Benny.” She takes the climbing monkey off my back and leads him toward his room, saying, “We’re going to see all your *dad’s* family...”

Benny *still* doesn’t react to this, which, yeah, I’m starting to get a little bummed about.

Mia adds, “Your uncles will be there, maybe even your aunt and your cousin.”

“Princess!”

BENNY HOLDS my hand while gripping one of his rocks and minerals books in the other. According to Mia, he refuses to leave the house without a book, which isn’t fun on her back and shoulders, considering she’s the one who has to carry it in her bag. I promised to start buying him lighter, more compact ones.

Looking over at Mia, I ask one more time, “Are you sure?”

She inclines her head toward the door of my childhood home. “Open the door, baby.” Then she squares her shoulders. “I got this.”

“I love you,” I tell her, because I do, and she should know.

She smirks. “I know.”

“Oooh,” Benny squeals. “Mother lo—”

Mia covers his mouth, and I brace myself and open the door.

The twins are half asleep on a couch each, and Lachlan’s curled in a ball on Mom’s old chair. Dad’s sitting in his recliner—in his boxer shorts, a white tee with coffee stains on the front, and a piece of toast halfway to his mouth. “What are you...” He trails off, swiping crumbs off his T-shirt.

“Sunday Family Breakfast,” I mutter, looking around the house. It’s dead quiet. The TV isn’t even on.

The twins look up, shocked when they see us. “We stopped doing it when you...” Lincoln starts, sitting up. He kicks Liam’s arm and shakes Lachlan’s shoulder.

A second later, the scene is a complete contrast to the one we walked in to. Dad's hugging Mia and Benny, and then Mia goes over to hug the twins, greeting them with what I'm positive is a whispered, "What's up, you little shits?" Lachlan high-fives her and Benny, and then takes Benny out to the porch to collect his blue bucket. They're off on an adventure together, while Dad gets dressed, and I ask the twins, "Where is everyone?"

"We stopped Sunday Family Breakfast when you stopped talking to us," Linc answers.

Liam adds, shrugging, "Yeah. It didn't seem right."

Then both of them, at the same time: "If you tell them to come, they will!"

Mia side-eyes me, her hand loose in mine. "How do they do that?" she whispers.

I shake my head, take my phone from my pocket, and answer, "I've spent many years trying to figure it out, and it's futile. We'll never understand."

Tapping at my phone, I open the family group chat, ignoring all the unread messages.

Leo: Sunday Family Breakfast, you fuckers. If my girl can be here, you all can too!

Less than a minute later, Dad's back downstairs, and Logan's bursting through the door. "Shut. Up!" he shouts, lifting Mia off her feet and spinning her in a circle. She giggles, grasping on to his shoulders.

"Okay," I say, pulling Logan off of her. "That's enough of that." I push Mia behind me, my eyes narrowed, arms crossed as I face my younger brother. "Dibs."

"How many times do I have to tell you this?" Red says, walking through the door. "You can't call dibs on *people*."

"Babe!" Logan shouts. "Look." He's pointing between Mia and me. "The band is back together, bitches!"

"You have a band?" Mia squeals, her eyes so wide it almost kills me to disappoint her.

"No." I chuckle. "It's just an expression."

"Oh." Her shoulders drop, her gaze lowering. "Wait!" And then she laughs. Like, all out, uncontrollable, eyes watering laughter. And no one has

a single clue why. When she's calmed down enough to actually speak, she notices that we're all staring at her. "You already have a cop," she struggles to say. "And a construction worker..."

I have no idea where this is going, and judging by the looks of confusion on my brothers' faces, they don't know either.

Mia's shaking her head as if she *cannot* understand why we don't get it.

She adds, "So you just need—"

Dad's sudden bark of laughter scares us all.

Now they're both laughing, and *what the fuck?*

Mia starts moving her arms all over the place. "Why Em See..." she starts to sing. "The Village People?" Her eyes shift from one person to the next, her smile fading. "No. You don't..."

We're all shaking our heads.

I say, patting her head, "You're such an odd, little thing."

Sighing, she mumbles, "No. I was just born in the wrong generation."

AN HOUR LATER, the kitchen table is filled with enough food to feed an army, which is basically what we are. There was no food to cook here, so Lucas and Laney went to the diner and basically ordered five of everything on the breakfast menu. Going by the way Mia's giggling, I don't think she's ever seen the level of food intake she's witnessing right now. There weren't enough chairs for everyone to sit, so Lucas, Logan, and the twins opt to stand. Lucy's here, too, along with Cameron. Benny's spent most of the time ducking all the food Katie throws at him. Every time Lucy goes to scold her, his little eyebrows furrow at her, then he wipes it clean as he smiles at Katie. "It's okay, Princess," he soothes.

"We're going to need a bigger table," Dad muses.

"And more room," Logan says, elbowing Lincoln's side.

Around a mouthful of eggs, I mumble, "You should just knock down the wall to the formal dining room. No one uses it. When was the last time anyone even went in there?"

Dad nods. "Good plan."

I continue to stuff my face while Mia talks to Aubrey about girly shit. And then there's a hammer right beside my head. I almost choke on my food, but I follow the arm holding on to the hammer to see Dad looking down at Benny. "Feel like putting a hole in a wall, Benny?"

Benny's eyes are huge. "Really?" he asks, jumping out of his chair.

"Sure," Dad says, and we all go quiet, turn in our seats, and watch them move toward the wall between the kitchen and formal dining room. Under the table, Mia settles her hand on my leg. Or at least I think it's Mia because it would be really fucking creepy if it were anyone else. I hold her hand in mine, run the pad of my thumb along the inside of her wrist. I keep my eyes on my dad and my son as Mia presses her lips to my jaw. "Right here," Dad says, and Benny looks up at him.

"Are you my other papa?"

A breath catches in Dad's throat.

In mine too.

His eyes glaze.

So do mine.

"Yeah, Benny. I am. I'm your papa."

Benny's smile warms my *everything*. "Did you teach Leo to build things?"

Dad glances at me. "I did," he says to his grandson.

"So you can teach me, too?"

"I would *love* nothing more in the world, Benny."

Benny nods, then slams the hammer through the wall. Cheers erupt, and the twins start chanting his name. He basks in the attention, slamming the hammer again and again. It barely makes a dent, but it's not about the progress.

It's about knocking down walls, and once it's gone, we'll all remember—Benny, my son, was the reason it's no longer there.

LACHLAN and the twins offer to clean up afterward, only because there are far less dishes than usual, and Lucas and Logan approach Benny, who's showing his cousin a picture from his book. It's a diamond—their birthstone. "Hey, Benny?" Lucas asks, and Benny looks up at him. "Logan and I would like to show you something. Do you want to see it?"

Benny looks between his cousin and his uncles. "Can Princess come, too?"

"Sure!" Logan says, taking Katie from her high chair. They walk out the back door, and I follow because, *dang it*, I am a helicopter parent. Mia stops me on the back deck, holding on to my elbow as Lucas and Logan lead

Benny toward a playhouse they must've built. It's all different shades of blue and somewhat lopsided, and above the door is a sign that reads *Benny!* It's written in Benny's handwriting, backward E and all. "How did they...?" I trail off, watching Benny jump and squeal in excitement.

"Oh my god," Mia whispers, her eyes wide in awe. "Benny *drew* this. He gave it to Lucas as a gift... and they... they..." When she turns to me, her mouth is open, eyes filled with unshed tears.

I kiss her forehead and bring her close. "Luke's not great with saying the words, but he sure knows how to show it in other ways."

"Because he loves hard?" she asks, and I pull back, nodding.

"Yeah." I swallow my emotions. "He really does, Mia."

Benny's running in and out and around the structure, laughing and squealing and gasping at every new thing he discovers. "Mama!" he shouts. "There are shelves for my rocks."

"They're curved," Lucas adds. "So they're not dangerous!"

I start to go down to inspect it, but Mia stops me. "Let his uncles have this joy," she says. "They missed out on the first four years of it."

I don't know what conversations she had with Luke and Logan, but I know that I'm grateful. I'm grateful to my brothers for manning the fuck up, and I'm so, so thankful to Mia for being open-minded and kind and... *everything*.

Mia Kovács is *everything*.

She didn't have to listen to them, and she sure as hell didn't have to *forgive* them. And it's not just them or anyone else who's done her wrong her entire life. It's *me*, too.

My dad steps beside Mia, looking at the playhouse, at his kids, and his kids' kids. "They can pull it apart and bring it to your house," he mutters. "Or you're welcome to leave it here for when you visit or if Benny ever stays the night or weekends or... you know? I'm here. I can look after him. His uncles, too. There sure are a lot of us who can—"

"Dad," I cut in, laughing. "We get it."

"He's a good boy, Mia." Dad's voice cracks. "You did a phenomenal job raising your son."

Mia stares up at him while he looks out into the yard, her eyes filling with tears again. She spends a few long moments there, her eyes tracking his features, and I wonder what she's looking for... what she *sees*. Finally, she says, "You did, too, Mr. Preston. With all your sons." His gaze drops to

her, and he smiles. She returns it. “They really are good at their jobs,” Mia muses. “It seems a waste that—”

“I’ll give them their jobs back,” Dad cuts in with a chuckle.

“You’re a good man, Papa Preston,” she tells him, getting up on her toes and kissing his cheek.

“Where’s Katie?” Lucy asks, coming up beside me like a tiny, stealth ninja.

I motion toward the playhouse. “Playing with Benny.”

“I should probably check on her. She’s going through a phase of licking every surface.” Lucy takes my hand and leads me down the steps. I take Mia’s, and she takes my dad’s. All four of us walk, like a Red Rover line, toward the playhouse.

When we near, Lucas puts a finger to his mouth, telling us to be quiet. And so we do. We creep to the opening and all look inside. Benny’s sitting on the floor with the book on his lap, his arm swung around Katie’s shoulders. She’s slowly nodding off against Benny’s side, as he tells her all about granite.

I turn to Lucy, questioning if she’s thinking what I’m thinking. “Lulee’s Library,” she whispers, holding her hands to her chest. “This is too much.” And then I look at my son, sitting in a playhouse in the yard where I spent so many days and nights creating memories with my family. My hope for his future is that he’ll get a chance to do the same. Right here. Where I got to live out adventures I’d discovered in between pages of numerous books. Where branches were used as swords and bedsheets as capes, and we’d come home when the sun set, cut up and bruised, and when our parents asked what the heck happened, my brothers and I wouldn’t have a clue, because we were too busy having fun. This place is my *home*. It’s where brotherhoods were formed, and bonds were created. Bonds so strong I thought no one could break them.

Mia *could* have.

But she didn’t.

Because she knew what this was to me.

This was love.

This was loyalty.

I choke back my fears—fears of concrete jungles and too many people and too many sounds, but then Benny looks up, his eyes holding mine, and all those fears disappear. “Hi, buddy,” I say over the knot in my throat.

Benny smiles. Then: “Hi, *Daddy*.”

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CHAPTER NINETY-ONE

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MIA

“YOU READY TO GO?” Leo asks, slipping his hands around my waist from behind. I’m standing in the backyard of the farmhouse, surrounded by so much beauty, it pains me to have to leave. Tammy had worked so hard on the memorial garden for Papa, and I’d never envisioned it to look like this when it was done. And I sure didn’t expect to have such a visceral response to it, either.

“It’s so...” I whisper, unable to hide my emotions. Not that I would have to.

“It’s everything he was.” He spins me to him but keeps his hold tight. Bright blue eyes level on mine. “He was a great man, Mia, and as cliché as it sounds, he’d be so damn proud of the woman you’ve become. The mother you are, without ever having a mother yourself.”

He’s wrong, though. I had Tammy. And in a few months, she’ll be my mother on paper. No *step*. Just mom.

“You’re going to miss your flight if we don’t leave soon.” He hesitates to add, “The traffic is horrible at this time.”

Missing my flight wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world, but he’s right. I take one more look around me, breathing in Papa’s presence, and then I let Leo lead me to the car, where Benny’s already strapped in the backseat. I force a smile as I get in. “Are you ready to go home?” I ask him.

Benny doesn’t respond, too busy rebooting.

“Here,” Leo says, handing me his phone. “You choose the music.”

I go through his playlists as he begins the drive to Charlotte, where Dad and Tammy will be meeting us at the airport. I select one titled *Mia*, my lips ticking and my eyes closing when “Brown Eyed Girl” by Van Morrison plays through the speakers.

“When do you think you guys can come back? Or I can go up there,” Leo says, and I look over at his profile—the boy, now a man, I’ve been in love with for ten years. He’s changed so much, and yet, he’s still the same boy who held my hand as I cried. Who sat with me, a hundred and thirty feet in the air, and shined a flashlight on curse words I didn’t want to see.

Who hummed to music that he'd never heard of, but listened to because he knew it was sentimental to me—because it reminded me of Papa.

The first morning we sat up there, I told him that the sunrise made me feel like the world was being split in two. He said that it reminded him of me. I didn't know what he meant, not back then and not even now. But right now, I *feel* it—my world being split in two.

“Mia?”

“I'm not sure,” I finally answer. “I'll check my schedule. Soon, I hope.”

“You'll tell me about his appointments, right? I don't want to miss any.”

“Of course.”

We don't speak much for the rest of the ride. Van Morrison turns to Otis Redding, then Aretha Franklin, Sam Cooke, and so on. The entire drive, my mind races, my heart dreading getting to the airport. I don't want to say goodbye to *anyone*. Unfortunately, I don't have a pause button or a time machine, and before I know it, Leo's pulling into a short-term parking spot.

He gets out to unload our luggage from the bed of his truck, and I help Benny out of his seat. It's a routine all too familiar, and for the first time, I realize how much I *hate* it.

Benny says he's too tired to walk, so Leo carries him on his shoulders while still dragging our suitcase behind him. I wasn't the only one who didn't have a lot to say on the drive, and I wonder what's going on in Leo's head. Benny's, too. Unlike Leo and me, Benny doesn't hold back. “When am I going to see you again, Daddy?”

It's not the first time he's asked Leo this same question on this same walk, but it's the first time he's used the word *daddy*, and it kills me. *Ruins* me.

We find Dad and Tammy just outside the security gates, the same place they always are when we meet here. But something is different. Something is *off*, and I don't know if it's just me—but Tammy must feel it too. I can sense it the moment she looks at me. “What's wrong, sweetheart?” she asks, approaching us.

Leo's attention snaps to me. “Is something wrong?”

“I don't know.” It takes everything in me not to burst into a sob. *I don't know* what's wrong with me.

Tammy eyes all three of us—all at once—and I don't know how she does that. Then she settles a hand on my forearm and tells Leo, “We'll be back.”

She leads me to a set of chairs hidden from view of the Kovács/Preston men, and Benny... Benny's still a Kovács, and he shouldn't be. He should be a *Preston*.

"Sit down, honey," Tammy says. "You look like you're about to pass out."

I stare at her, at the face of a woman who has always known too much, seen too much. Papa called her his angel, and she is. She's always been there, guarding over me. Always. Her eyes search mine, switching from concern to... something else entirely. Her lips kick up at the corners, and she sighs, long and loud. "Oh, Mia," she says, voice raspy with emotion. "You know... you've always been *my* little girl." She pats her chest. "Since you were three years old. In here, you've always been *mine*. And I have both loved and hated watching you grow up. Which is what you are now, sweetheart. You're all grown, and you can make your own choices—choices you think are best for you and Benny. Choices that will make *you* happy."

She *knows*. Without me having to say a word, she knows.

"And as sure as the sun will rise, Mia, that man out there, Benny's father—there's only one man I've ever seen love as much and as hard as he does. And that's your papa."

I PHYSICALLY CAN'T STOP CRYING as we make our way back. Three generations of a family stand before me, their expressions concerned as they take in my state. I can see that Leo wants to approach me, but he does what he's always done. He waits for me. I stop in front of them, my focus on my father. "I'm sorry," I cry out.

"Mia, what's—" He breaks off when Tammy shakes her head, guiding him into letting me speak.

Through strained breaths, I add, "I don't want you to feel like I don't appreciate everything you've done for me. You've been everything I needed and more, and you've given me a life where I didn't have to worry about a single thing besides raising my son. Your support for me has been limitless. These past five years..." I break off on a sob.

Dad's eyes widen as he looks between Tammy and me, and I can see the exact moment it clicks for him.

“Mia,” he whispers, cupping my face in his hands. His red, raw eyes hold mine. “It’s my fault I only got five real years with you. But even with everything we went through, they’ve been the best five years of my life.” He kisses my forehead before pulling away. “We’ll be back in two weeks to visit you and make sure you have everything you need.”

I nod, my heart in my throat as he and Tammy say goodbye to Benny with the promise of video calls. Dad shakes Leo’s hand, saying, “Take care of them, okay?”

Leo nods but doesn’t say a word. Not during the conversation, and not even as we watch them walk through security and toward the gate. When I can no longer see them, I turn to Leo and our son, still sitting on his dad’s shoulders. And then I wipe at my eyes, at the tears caused by the pain of my world being split in two. Only now, I *know* I’m standing on the right side of it.

I can feel it.

Because I have *faith*.

“Let’s go home.”

EPILOGUE

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MIA

“I CAN’T BELIEVE your dad’s sending his private jet!” Lincoln says.

Liam adds, “Yeah. This is insane.”

“He’s just showing off,” I mutter, watching through the window as the plane taxis into our hanger. We’re at a local airfield, where Dad flies in and out of whenever he comes to visit us.

The first time he came, it was to look at office space for us.

He bought the whole building.

The second time he visited, we took him to Sunday Family Breakfast, where he and Mr. Preston, who insists I call him either Tom or *Dad*, got to talking about a development Preston, Gordon and Sons was building in the next town over.

Dad invested in it.

On the third visit, he tried to convince me to let him buy our house for us. I groaned, believing Leo would *hate* the idea. When I told Leo about it, he shrugged and said, “It’s not a bad offer. As you say, he’ll barely feel it, and we could get a head start financially. You know, for all the other kids we’re going to have.”

“How many are you planning to have?” I almost scoffed.

“Lucas wants eight to beat our parents, so I’m going for nine to beat him,” he jokes.

“You want me to physically birth another nine babies?”

He shook his head and widened his eyes as if what he was about to say was obvious. “Just *eight*. We already have one, or did you forget about Benny?”

“Who forgot about me?” Benny shouted from the tire swing in the front yard.

“Besides,” Leo said, “I kind of dumped all my savings into this.” And then he held out a ring for me. *The* ring. It was a Tuesday morning, and he was off work. We were sitting on the porch steps watching Benny play, and there was nothing at all remarkable about the day or the way he *told* me we were getting married. We just were, and that was that, and that

was... *perfect*. That was a couple of weeks ago, and we haven't told anyone. We're not big on celebrating love. We're big on living in it.

"I love weddings!" Aubrey sings.

"Me, too!" says Laney.

"Settle down," Lucas and Logan say simultaneously, and I crack a smile, glancing at the twins, who are snapping picture after picture of the plane. Probably to post on social media. I don't know how it never came up before, but the twins are *famous*. Like, YouTube, social media, influencer famous. For two little shits, they sure are business smart. They're also big believers in clean living. They don't drink, don't smoke, don't do drugs, are both *virgins*, and feel strongly that all teenagers should be able to live the same life without being peer-pressured or teased. They're currently working with Dad on an app that connects parents with teens. Basically, it's an app that looks different every time you load it, so the people around you don't know what it is, and there are quick message options to communicate back and forth so that if, say, you're at a party and you're uncomfortable and want to leave, you can send something super quick without your friends knowing. See? Smart.

Everyone is here, all the Prestons, their girlfriends. Dad said to invite anyone we wanted, so we did. The plane is at max capacity. Even Benny's best friend, Preston, and his parents are here.

Bennett Preston—yes, we changed his last name—and Preston Sanders are going to start school together come fall. Leo and I did a tour of the elementary school, and even though it's the same one he attended, he wanted me to be sure. I was sure the moment I walked in and could still smell the fresh grass from outside through all the open windows. Benny needs to run, to play, and not be restricted to small rooms and concrete playgrounds. He needs to touch things, to lift, and push and pull things. We learned all this through Benny's therapist, who he calls his girlfriend, Amanda. Amanda is the same therapist who Logan sees, and she's been amazing. She understands my fears, and she works with Leo and me through all of them.

As for my therapy, once a month Dad sends his plane during Leo's days off and we all go to New York for a few days. I see my therapists there, and then come back *home*. If I need them, they're just a phone call or text message away. Eventually, I might look into some counseling closer to me, but for now, it works. Besides, it gives us a reason to visit Dad and Tammy.

“Daddy!” Benny laughs out. “Look at Princess!”

I watch Leo squat down to the kids’ level. “What am I looking at?”

Benny reaches behind Katie’s ear and pulls out a penny. “Magic,” he says.

Logan high-fives him. “You’re a champ, Benny. You got that so quick.” Logan and I are... *better*. There’s still a small level of discomfort when I’m around him and Lucas, but it’s getting easier to manage it. Logan is *great* with Benny, and Lucas is always around the house, helping Leo with odd jobs—his way of showing he loves us and that he’s sorry without ever saying the words.

Benny gives Logan a megawatt smile. “Mama says I’m smart.”

“Yeah?” he says. “You must get that from her, because your dad—”

“Hey!” Benny growls. “My daddy’s the bestest, biggest, and strongest man in my world!”

Leo crosses his arms, jerks his head at his little brother. “See? I’ve been telling you since we were kids, man. *I’m* the best.”

DAD AND TAMMY’S wedding at the farm is both beautiful and completely over the top. The guest list is in the mid-hundreds, thanks to Dad, but the ceremony itself is played down. There are flowers *everywhere*, thanks to Big H, Holden’s dad. The money *my* dad dropped on the flowers alone was enough to keep Big H’s nursery going for the next few years, which is a relief to Holden because, according to him, they were one season away from shutting down.

Holden quit his job at Dad’s company to come home and run the family business. He says that the only thing he misses from Boston and New York is the endless p—synonym: cat—word.

The wedding was held in the field to accommodate all the guests. There are decorated tables upon tables beneath white tents. The economy in this town and the surroundings will be *booming*. There are more people in this field alone than the people who reside here.

As soon as the meals start arriving at the tables, Leo catches my gaze, blue eyes on brown, and he smirks that smirk that I love, love, love.

“Let’s go,” he mouths, and I nod, making an excuse to use the restroom. He grabs Benny, dressed in his little ring-bearer suit, and catches up with me just before we hit the driveway. I’m already laughing, giddy with excitement as he takes my hand and leads me, in a rush, around the house and to Papa’s garden where Gloria—the priest from back home—is waiting for us as requested. Beside her is Miss Sandra, who still works at the diner where she and Leo met. For years now, they’ve kept in touch, mainly through email. He says that during that first summer he was here—the summer when he was filled with so much hate and darkness, Miss Sandra was often the one to shine a little light into his soul. She was the first to see how much I meant to him. So for him, it made sense that she be our witness.

“Are you ready?” Gloria asks.

“I’m ready,” Benny shouts, standing between us.

Leo sucks in a breath, his eyes never leaving mine. “I’ve been ready for ten years.”

Within minutes, we’re saying *I do*.

And just like that:

I am Mia Mackenzie *Preston*.

I am the granddaughter of an immigrant dairy farmer, who grew up in pigtails, wearing overalls and rubber boots. My favorite place on earth is exactly 130 feet in the air.

I am mother.

And now, I am a *wife*.

“Congratulations!” Miss Sandra squeals.

And then Leo kisses me, and it’s a kiss that holds so many promises, so many hopes and dreams for a future. Together. And sure, this may not be the wedding most girls dream of, but this is the one I wanted.

Besides, we fell in love in secret.

And held on to that love in private.

It only seems fitting to seal that love in the same way.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jay McLean is an international best-selling author and full-time reader, writer of New Adult Romance, and skilled procrastinator. When she's not doing any of those things, she can be found running after her two little boys, playing house and binge watching Netflix.

She writes what she loves to read, which are books that can make her laugh, make her hurt and make her feel.

Jay lives in the suburbs of Melbourne, Australia, in a forever half-done home where music is loud and laughter is louder.

For publishing rights (Foreign & Domestic) Film, or television, please contact her agent Erica Spellman-Silverman, at Trident Media Group.

Connect With Jay

www.jaymcleanauthor.com

jay@jaymcleanauthor.com



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