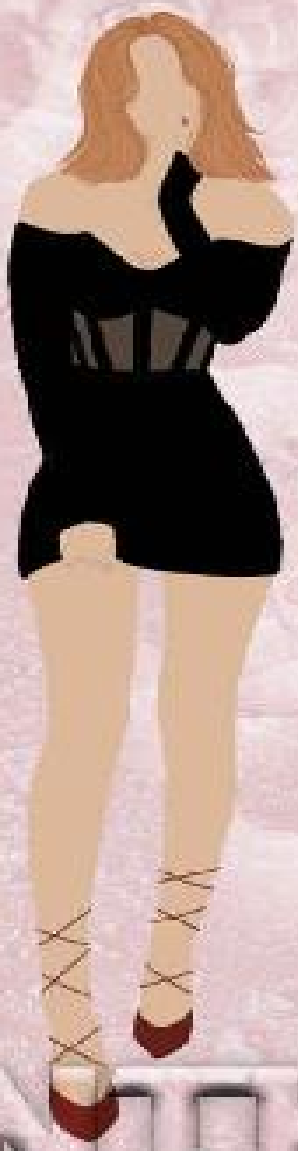
He would do anything to keep his daughter...

SEVEN



A Novel

MONTHS

... even marry his ex-girlfriend.

Joelina Falk

Unfrozen Four Series

Seven Months
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To those who stay awake all night, crying, and blasting
Taylor Swift to stop the world from rotating.
You are loved, even if it doesn't seem like it right now.

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Playlist

or click *here*

Favorite Ex — Maisie Peters

Man Who Stays — Jake Scott

The Great War — Taylor Swift

Boyfriend — Ariana Grande, Social House

Because I Had You — Shawn Mendes

True Love — P!nk, Lily Allen

Break My Heart Again — FINNEAS

Matilda — Harry Styles

Feel Good — Gryffin, ILLENIUM, Daya

Stand By You — Rachel Platten

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Chapter 1

“I think I got myself in trouble”—Soap by Melanie Martinez

Miles

Oh fuck.

“And I swear to you, Miles, if you don’t pick Brooklyn up in ten minutes, I will keep her here forever.” With that said, Maeve hangs up the phone, not giving me a chance to even respond.

If there’s one thing I never expected to happen, it would be waking up to a phone call from my stepsister, threatening me to take away my daughter (yet again) if I didn’t come pick her up within the next ten minutes.

I live an hour away from Maeve.

My car is dead as well. I know because last night, I got totally wasted and might have accidentally hit a tree with it, and my spare one is in NYC. I don’t usually drive when I drank, but it was an emergency.

That’s the least of my concerns right now.

Remembering the minor car accident from last night brings another wave of dread over me. *Emory.*

I shoot up from my bed, looking through my bedroom, checking the spot beside me last. She’s not here, so that’s at least something.

Sun, Emory’s best friend and Grey’s—my best friend—younger sister called me in tears, begging me to come pick up both of them from a frat party. Sun had stayed with Grey all night, and I was stuck with Emory.

She was wasted, and so was I. And what happens when two people who hate each other to death end up wasted and having to share a bed? Things they sure as fuck should not be doing. Like having sex. Exceptional sex, that did end up badly though, so I do pray I never have to see Emory ever again.

I will have to, seeing as Emory is my daughter's aunt. She's also my ex-girlfriend. And now, brace yourself because you will scream… she also happens to be the twin sister of my dead girlfriend, you know, the mother of my child.

I am so fucked. On a million different levels.

Grabbing a random shirt and some khaki shorts, I sprint downstairs, yelling for my best friend. "Grey!" In case he can't drive me over to Manhattan, I might need to wake up either Colin or Aaron, my other two best friends who happen to live right next door. Wait, never mind. Only Colin is home because Aaron followed his crush to Germany.

Grey is an early bird, so he should be awake by now. I hope.

When I come downstairs, I instantly stop in my tracks. It's not Grey I find in our kitchen, it's Sun. And as it would be, Emory is standing right beside her, stealing whatever chopped up fruit she can find. Well, at least I see that girl eating for once.

If it weren't for my four-year-old living with Grey and me now, we wouldn't have a single edible thing at home, so they're lucky right now. Grey and I usually eat at Colin and Aaron's, though I'm the one who cooks. Always.

Now, no, I didn't learn how to cook because I have a daughter, but because my father used to own a restaurant and taught me from a young age. He's dead though, since a year almost, and that restaurant belongs to me now. I haven't stepped foot in it, but as far as I know, it's doing great without me. It sure keeps my bank account at a good number.

Anyway, even though Sun is speaking to me, my eyes linger on Emory. Hers are on mine too. I'm not sure if she's taking pity on me, which she probably is, or if she's planning my death, which, again, she probably is. Only when Emory rolls her eyes at me and retrieves to stealing fruits do I listen to what Sun has to say.

Only that I wish I wouldn't.

"Seriously, Miles. I am so glad Grey forbids me to lose my virginity to you. I wanted to, but after what Emory told me, I am so fucking glad I haven't. For someone who's known as the campus man-whore, you disappoint."

Of course Emory wouldn't keep her mouth shut. Can she ever? I doubt it. Well, she should be able to given that one little slip-up can easily ruin her image, and therefore her career.

When I glare at her, she shrugs unbothered then brushes her waist-long, ginger hair back behind her shoulders, not even pretending to be sorry. And frankly, I can't be mad about it. I did severely mess up with fucking her, but then I sort of cried. Right after, too.

I should have waited until I was in the restroom, but my brain kind of just shut down entirely when I had realized whom I had just fucked. And honestly, it wasn't even about the fact that she's my ex-girlfriend or Millie's sister, or that she loathes me. It was seeing her face. On special occasions, I struggle looking at Emory enough as it is because her face is identical to Millie's—like their birthday, or other special holidays. You know, the days you'd really want to spend with the person you love. Usually I don't cry looking at Emory, it's been four years, almost five, since Millie has passed, but *that*... it was a little too much for me to handle.

One's already in a vulnerable state during sex and calming down after the high can bring up feelings you never knew even existed. Not some love shit, though I suppose that's possible as well. I mean realizations of the intensity of

certain feelings like not being able to look at that stupidly beautiful face of your ex-girlfriend without wanting to cry.

That sounds really bad. It is. However, sometimes I'm not even sure if looking at Emory is a struggle for me in general or if it's truly because of Millie. I can look at my daughter without wanting to cry, and I can assure you, Brooke has the *exact* same face as her mother.

"Swear to God, Sun, if I hear you so much to *think* about Miles in that sense again, I will tell Mom and Dad you cannot fucking study here," Grey's voice comes from behind me, grumpy and as mad as I've had yet to hear. He doesn't raise his voice, not even at a hockey game, watching or playing. It doesn't matter. Grey does *not* raise his voice. *Ever*.

"Yeah? How about I tell them about all the people you fuck instead of doing your studies like you should?"

"I am twenty-one, Sun. That's the difference. You turned *eighteen* like five months ago!"

Suddenly, I am grateful I grew up as an only child. Stepsiblings came into the picture at an age where I didn't care enough to get to know either of them. And Maeve isn't exactly good to me anyway…

Fuck. Maeve. Right.

"Sorry to interrupt this whole… thing," I say and turn toward Grey. "Can you drive me to Maeve's? It's important and I kind of had to be there—" I look at the clock on our living room wall—"ten minutes ago."

"Sure, uh, let me just get my jacket. And you should probably put on longer pants, love."

I look down at myself, then out the window. It's sometime between the middle and end of December, our last day of University for this year was just two days ago. There's snow everywhere, which is why Grey, Brooklyn—my daughter—and I wanted to go on a trip to L.A. for the winter break. *I fucking hate snow.*

But I do not have the time to change from khakis to anything else.

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Chapter 2

“I saw the signs and I ignored it”—Lose you To Love Me by Selena Gomez

Emory

“Okay, Grey said we can stay for a while longer.” Sun seats herself next to me on the couch.

She’s my best friend in the whole wide world. And the only one I’ve got too. I do have friends, I guess. I’m not some outsider or are hated on by people. It’s just… ever since I lost my sister to death, I shut people out of my life. It’s to prevent losses of the ones I’ve learned to love.

And also because I can never tell who truly wants to be my friend and who’s only there to earn some recognition out of my social media accounts. I’m a part-time model for clothes. Not like the runway kind of model, but I’m in ads a lot, on billboards and websites, that kind of modeling. And well, my social media does pretty well I’d say.

Anyway, my mother once said she thinks it’s strange how my best friend is a freshman whereas I am about to graduate from college. I don’t care, clearly. She’s no less of a human than anyone my exact age would be.

Sun and I met in the halls of St. Trewery. She was a little stressed out with finding her classroom, a bundle of anxiety walking on tiny feet. She’s three years younger than me, making her only eighteen years old. Somehow after I helped her find her classroom, I decided to practically adopt her. She’s mine now. Though, I will miss her cute little face when

I can no longer see her every day because she has school, and I will be done with Uni in a couple of months.

Oh, well, that's what FaceTime is for, right?

The only downside to our friendship is her brother. Grey Davis.

He's not a bad guy, I don't think. But his friends… more specifically one of them. I just can't stand Miles, okay? He's annoying, a heartbreaker and… unfortunately a great father.

No, alright, it's good that he's a great father. Just annoying because I don't want to see a single good thing in this guy.

I mean, he went and dated my twin sister behind my back. Granted, he didn't cheat on me or anything, he just kind of broke up with me over text and a few weeks later started dating Millie. No biggie. Still, I am holding a major grudge.

Being well aware of the fact that you do not talk badly about dead people, I still would like to say; What the fuck did Millie have that I didn't?

We're twins. Look the same, have basically the same voice, same everything. And yet he chose her over me. Maybe he didn't like the fact that I kept dyeing my hair ginger to have at least *one* difference to Millie.

It doesn't matter anymore. It's been like six years since we dated.

And still you hold a grudge.

"Why can't you go back to the house?" Sun hates the sorority house she's forced to stay at, I know that much. The members of Alpha Phi aren't too nice to her, I don't understand why. But you know, they're mostly drama queens with only a few exceptions. Sun is one of those exceptions.

When she doesn't want to stay at the house, she stays with Grey and Miles because it's closer than my house. My parents made me move next door to them, which I only did

because they promised to pay for my expenses and the house itself, so it was a win for me.

I make enough money through social media to live off of, but like anyone would ever say no to a paid-for house? It's the only nice thing they've ever truly done for me.

I don't know how they could afford it, but I didn't care about the expenses back then either.

"Maria said she'll have a guy over and if I show up, she'd hide a snake in my bed."

"The other girls gone too?"

Sun shakes her head instantly. "I don't think so. But ever since Maria's stupid boyfriend kissed me, right before I slapped the shit out of him, she refuses to keep me around."

Right. Like I said, dramatic. It wasn't even Sun's fault; let alone something Sun would ever consider doing. Making out with random people? So not her. I'm sure if she was like that, Grey would beat some sense into her brain. Like he has room to talk.

Despite me not wanting to stay in this house, if Sun wants to stay, I'll do the sacrifice for her. Now, I'd say we should go to my house, but I'm currently getting a new kitchen installed and new flooring, so for the past week, I've been staying with Sun. And I can't go back before next week either.

Guess I am stuck *here* then.

"Now, tell me everything." She hops up on her legs, locking her own fingers together as she waits for a rundown of events from last night. Events that I barely even have recollection of, mind you.

The only thing that truly stuck with me were Miles's tears. I know I was more satisfied from one night with him than I was from a year-long relationship with William—my ex-boyfriend. And knowing that pisses me off even more than just the mere fact that I somehow ended up in bed with Miles King, doing things I would love to end my life for.

But the damn tears ruined it. I know why they were there, and I wish I could say I was mad at him for it. I'm not. I'm not because realizing what had just happened must have been a nightmare to him. I certainly couldn't imagine having sex with a guy who looks *just* like the one I lost to death, who also happens to be the father of my child.

So, yes, I know he was horrified, probably felt guilty and had so many mixed feelings about it… and yet it bothers me. It does because there's a voice in my head saying he probably thought about Millie the entire time. That in his head, I wasn't *me*, but I was my sister. And that thought sure makes my blood boil.

"What's there to tell you?"

Sun rolls her eyes. "He. Cried."

"Yes, he cried. And you know as good as I do why that is." Sun never met my sister, obviously, but I told her how much I hated Miles the first time she said she thinks he's hot, and I might have mentioned my sister in the run. Millie plays a significant role for my hatred.

I press my hands into fists, trying to control the anger that is threatening to consume me. It gets significantly worse when Sun speaks up again.

"Do you think he was thinking about your sister? If yes, damn, you should tell Grey. Or I do. I'm sure Grey would talk to Miles and tell him it's so not cool."

"No offense, Sunshine, but Grey wouldn't. He would slap a hand on Miles's back and laugh."

Sun shrugs. "You're probably right. They could be married for all we know. Have you *seen* them interact? Grey calls Miles *Love*."

Only about a million times on and off campus.

"Do you think they might end up together?"

"No," I answer instantly. "Would be great for every woman out there because they'd be safe from Miles, but no."

Sun sighs. “I didn’t think so either.” She falls back on the couch, letting her legs dangle down now. “I just want Grey to find someone who loves him as much as he loves them back. And in some strange ways, Miles really does love my brother. God knows why.”

That’s one thing I either hate or love about Sun. She loves love, and she cares so deeply about the people she loves, it’s almost like earning yourself a second mother.

“Grey is nice.”

“To *you* he is. To me, to me he’s just Grey. The older brother who rats me out to our parents when I attend parties rather than study groups.”

“He’s just looking out for you, Sunshine,” I try to cheer her up, it doesn’t work. She only looks up at me with a deeper frown.

“My grades are great so far. I’d understand his behavior if I was doing bad in school, but he’s overreacting, overprotecting too.”

Perhaps Sun’s right. I wouldn’t know, I don’t have an older brother who wants to protect me from the world.

She changes the subject. “You, too, deserve love, you know.” She nudges my leg with her foot, laughing when I swat it away. “You deserve someone *so* much better than William. He did nothing but make you sick, Em.”

I look at her, giving her a polite fuck-you look before I flip her off. “William did not *just* make me sick. He loved me.” And now he’s moved on and has a new girlfriend. Yet another model.

“Yeah, so much, he told you, you were fat at least five times a day. Which, FYI, you are *not*, nor have you ever been.” William’s not the only person to tell me that though, but Sun doesn’t know that. My parents, more specifically my mother, made sure to tell me I was getting fat at least twice a day for no reason. And then every time I ate something slightly unhealthy.

“Can we stop talking about William now?”

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Chapter 3

“I’ll do anything for you to see you smile”—
Mockingbird by Eminem

Miles

“MAEVE, I SWEAR TO EVERYTHING HOLY, if you don’t let me inside within the next two seconds, I will call the police!” I keep banging on the door of my sister’s apartment over and over again.

She won’t listen. Older sisters barely do. At least I know Maeve doesn’t… neither do my other siblings. Well, *step*siblings. Neither of them is biologically related to me.

“You’re not doing yourself any good with it, Miles,” she speaks from the other side of the door. Faintly in the background, I can hear Lex, her husband, say something, but I can’t quite make out what it is. “Brooklyn is better off here.”

The hell she is.

Brooke is *my* four-year-old daughter, not my stepsister’s.

I wasn’t even the one to suggest Brooke staying with Maeve. It was that godawful human being who’s supposedly my stepmother. She’s not anymore. Actually, I could cut the ties with all of them as neither of them is my direct family, seeing as my father has died a year ago, so there is nothing that keeps me in touch with them.

Except for Maeve, apparently.

Maeve and I don’t even like each other. I only agreed because it was a little easier for me to handle with college and finding somewhere to place Brooke for the time I’d be in

class. It was the best for my daughter as well. Every decision I've made since she was born, it has all been in favor to her.

And at the time I agreed to Maeve taking Brooke in until I finished college, my father was still alive. I didn't want to cause a scene. He loved his wife and her kids, I never understood how, but it wasn't in my hands to keep him from being happy with them.

Alright, I'll admit, for the first week after Brooke was born, I barely paid any attention to her. I had no idea how to raise a child on my own at the mere age of eighteen, nor did I want to. I blamed my own daughter for my girlfriend's death, even thought about giving her up for adoption, but that changed. Still, I didn't think I could make it through college. I learned to love my daughter and accept the fact that it wasn't her fault Millie died. She's the most important person in my life now. But four years ago, it all looked like my life was falling apart. So getting a helping hand from what was my family did come in fortunate for me.

Well, that is until we skip four years forward and I am now banging on my stepsister's door, begging her to let me see my very own child.

I'm in my last year of college now, and I suppose at the age of twenty-two I am plenty capable of taking care of my own daughter. It's going to be a little more difficult, but I'll manage.

Maeve doesn't have custody over Brooklyn, that one's all mine, obviously. During the weekdays, Brooke usually stay*ed* with her, so I didn't have to take her to school with me. And if I'm being honest, living just barely off campus and rooming with my best friend isn't an ideal living situation for my daughter either. She deserves far better than that and I'll give her that as soon as I can. Brooke has her own room, just not quite big enough for all of her *favorite* toys. But we'll get there once I graduated.

For the past two months, I've already kept Brooke with me. Starting around mid-September, Maeve threatened to try and get custody over my daughter since she's been living with her all this time anyway.

At first, I didn't think she would. But two weeks later, now the beginning of October, she said the same thing again.

In a matter of hours, I've had my daughter moved in with me and Grey. Okay, okay, it took Aaron and Grey a couple of convincing skills and promises that they'd help me out however they could until I eventually caved and moved her in.

I had already picked Brooke up from Maeve's that day, but I gave her to her grandparents and begged them to let her stay there for a while. Naturally they agreed. And thank fuck they did because my only other go-to person would have been Emory Scott. I guess we all know how much I like Emory by now.

It's just… Millie was the sweetest person on earth. She was all sunshine and flowers, the light in my dark, miserable life. She loved to dance in the rain and saw positive in everything.

Just looking at Millie used to make me smile. More so when she ran up to me with anything new she baked and told me to try it. She was always so smiley when I ended up complimenting her baking skills. That's one of the things we had in common: being in the kitchen. We both loved it.

Emory, however, she's the exact opposite. She attracts thunderstorms and thrives on everything bad. For a short while, I was convinced Emory could summon lightning if she tried to. But to top that off, this woman can't cook to save her own life.

It wasn't always like that. When we were dating, I thought she was going to be the woman I'd be with for the rest of my life. Granted, I was fourteen to seventeen years old so I'm not sure how serious those thoughts were.

“I told you, if I had to watch her one more day, I would keep her here!” Maeve yells as I bang onto the door another couple of times.

“You do know this is considered kidnapping, right?” Because it is. “Besides, *you* wanted her here for Maya’s birthday!” Maya is Maeve’s now six-year-old. Obviously, I wouldn’t say no to a goddamn birthday.

“Daddy?” I hear my daughter’s voice come from the other side of the door. She sounds scared, her voice teary.

“Go to your room for a little while, okay, sweetie?” Maeve says, but I just bet Brooke is shaking her head because what follows is, “Brooklyn, sweetie… why don’t you go grab your favorite toy and then we go play together?”

“For chicken’s sake, Maeve!” I am slowly losing my patience here. “If you do not open the fragile-woodly-wooden door…”

I wasn’t kidding when I said I’d call the police because I will. I will call the cops on my own stepsister if that means I will get my daughter back. She is *my* daughter, not Maeve’s. And truthfully, I highly doubt as my *step*sister she has any rights to see Brooke.

Maeve isn’t even Brooke’s godmother. Emory is, and the only other godfathers she has are the three idiots I refer to as my best friends.

“I want to go home!” Brooke cries, and then there’s a thud to be heard. It doesn’t sound like someone hit her, and if they did, both, my sister and her husband, better start saving some money because I will sue them for laying a hand on my daughter. And I promise you, I will sue them down to their last dime.

“This is your home, Brooke.”

Grey lays a hand on my shoulder, causing my head to snap into his direction. I totally forgot he is here with me. “Want me to bulldoze down the door?”

I do, I really fucking do. And I would let him, if I didn’t know Brooke was on the other side of the door and could

get scared. Fuck, she's scared *already*.

I know my daughter, and people raising their voices scares her. She's also afraid of airplanes, and fans. Yes, *fans*. But that's not the point anyway.

"Do you know how to pick a lock?" I ask, offering Grey a rather unsure smile.

He groans, sliding both of his hands down his face. "I swear to God, if I end up in jail because of you…"

"You offered to *bust* down that door."

"Yes, but that was me *offering*, not you *asking*, love."

This guy, I swear. The most annoying best friend *ever*.

Anyway, fast forward two minutes, the apartment door is open, and I get to hold my daughter in my arms again. Another two minutes later, Brooke, and I are far away from the apartment complex.

Brooke is still crying when we stand in front of the car, I hate hearing and seeing her cry more than anything in the world. I don't like it when she's upset, and if I could, I would protect my daughter from everything that could ever cause her pain. Unfortunately, it's impossible.

"I'm not sure I got everything, but…" Grey speaks the second he exits Maeve's apartment complex. He stayed behind to get Brooke's belongings. I don't give a shit about those toys anymore. So then I'd have to go on a shopping spree with my daughter, big deal.

I don't look at Grey, but I don't think he takes it badly because he never even finished his sentence. He doesn't do it either, even when he walks up next to me and lays a hand on my shoulder.

Brooke looks up, still hiccupping with tears running down her chubby cheeks.

I rake a hand through her hair, suddenly wishing I had put it up into a bun earlier or did *anything* that would keep her hair from getting tangled.

"Everything's alright, Brooke," I try to soothe her. It only half works.

“I’m scared,” she sobs into my shoulder.

“I know you were, baby.” *Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.*

I have dealt with a lot of my daughter’s moods in the past four years. It didn’t matter if she was crying from happiness, sadness because her favorite stuffed animal fell off her bed, or when Mr. Fluffles was in the washing machine. Hell, I even sat in front of that thing with her for two hours and watched until she could finally have that bunny back. I dried her tears when she was angry, or when there was a thunderstorm and she would hide under blankets, weeping, or whenever she just shed a single tear. I always knew how to dry them. But right now… Right now I have no idea how to make her stop.

My eyes find Grey’s, he looks just as defeated as I feel. I know he hates seeing her upset as much as I do. Okay, maybe a little less, but he hates it, nonetheless.

Whatever he sees in my eyes must be horrifying enough for Grey to suddenly switch into clown-mode, because what he says next even almost makes *me* cackle. “Brookie, what did the police officer say to the belly button?”

I can feel Brooke shrug, followed by a sniffle.

“You’re under a vest.”

And here I thought I was the dad, with the worst jokes ever.

Brooke looks up, tears still rolling down her face but there’s also a hint of a smile.

Grey hums to think of another joke, though his widened eyes tell me he doesn’t know any more. And that’s where I come in handy.

“What do you call a fake noodle?”

Brooke already knows that one because I drop it every single time we’re eating pasta together.

So she grins at me, throws her hands up into the air and screams, “An *impasta*!”

I dramatically open my mouth as I pretend to be shocked. “You already knew that one?” She nods enthusiastically,

giggling. “Aw, shucks.”

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Chapter 4

“all I did was try my best / this the kind of thanks I get”—brutal by Olivia Rodrigo

Miles

AFTER WHAT MAEVE SAID WHEN WE LEFT, I don’t have any other choice but to take matters into my own hands.

I promised myself I would never go against family, even if she technically isn’t part of mine anymore. Maeve has helped me out when I needed someone, but *once again* threatening me to get custody over *my* daughter officially made me break my promise. Her first threat, I saw as a warning. I didn’t even take it too seriously. Surely, she wouldn’t get custody over Brooke anyway, given that she’s not even family. The second time, I took action but still didn’t think she would actually do it. Now *this*… no, this is the straw to break the camel’s back.

I’m not taking any risks when it comes to *my* goddamn daughter.

Two hours after I got Brooke back, I’m sitting in my lawyers office, holding a sleeping Brooke in my arms while I explain to him everything that has happened over the past twenty-four hours. Starting with the texts Maeve sent me, the call I received in which she said that if I didn’t come pick up Brooke’s toys, she would throw them away, that she would keep my daughter with her if I didn’t get her within ten minutes, knowing I lived at least an hour away. And how it ended up with Grey picking their lock to get Brooke out of there.

I do, however, hold back on the insults Maeve threw at me this entire time. I don't cuss in front of my child, not even when she's sound asleep. Maybe someday I will, but definitely not at this age.

Once my quick but thorough rundown is done, Mr. Berkley lets out a deep sigh as he leans back in his chair. I've never seen him this defeated, and frankly, I don't like this.

Shortly after my father died, and I first came to him, telling him that my "*great*" ex-stepmother refuses to grant me access to my inheritance, he was optimistic that she had no chances to win this case. He was right, I ended up getting paid every single goddamn penny that was rightfully mine, plus almost half as much she had to pay me for the trouble, as well as the keys and papers to the restaurants my father owned.

So I know Mr. Berkley is a good lawyer, yet when he does this sighing and leaning back thing, my blood starts pumping through my veins a little faster.

"This doesn't sound good," I say, my voice shaking with nerves.

He shakes his head. "Let me ask you a question, Mr. King," he says, looking at me far more relaxed than he did ten seconds ago. "If something were to happen to you, who's the first relative DCFS would contact to take in your daughter?"

My lips part, words wanting to leave my mouth but simply won't pass through. If something were to happen to me…? I don't even want to *think* about that, for the sake of my child. She's already lost her mother, there's no need for the universe to throw a deceased father into the mix as well.

"Emory Scott," I answer eventually. "She's Brooke's aunt, her mother's sister."

Mr. Berkley nods, keeping a slim smile on his lips. "Exactly. If she were to say no to taking Brooklyn in, who's next on the list?"

Why are we even talking about this? "Grey Davis."

Another nod. “And I bet you have at least one other person they’d be able to contact *before* Mrs. Remington would get notified, am I right?”

Only two more, Aaron and Colin. My father would have been before Emory, but after he died, that was off the charts. Mitch and Holly—Emory’s parents—would have been before her as well, but I designated Emory as guardian because I figured it is what Millie would have wanted. And then, well, my best friends because my side of the family is either dead, not really in the picture, or not even related to me. Leaving my child with Maeve was never even in the back of my head, so I made sure Brooke is cared for… *if* something were to happen to me.

Then, Mr. Berkley finally decides to explain his questionnaire. “First and foremost, Mrs. Remington has absolutely no right to even file for custody,” he says. “She’s what? Four people behind ones you *designated* to take care of Brooklyn if you passed away unexpectedly. Or something happened to you.” That sounds good? “However…”

Never mind. However’s aren’t good. In most cases at least. In this case, it sure as hell isn’t.

“She might very well tell CPS that you had no intensions caring for your daughter after she was born. They’d obviously have to check out the situation, find out whether that’s true or not. With the right kind of proof, Mrs. Remington might manage to get Brooklyn taken away from you, that is *if* she can provide proof of her accusations. Like Brooklyn’s stay with her for the entirety of her life so far and even so, that’s not enough of a reason to take her away. If CPS finds you’ve abandoned your child, then yes, they will take her away, but they’d need to find proof. Still, your child would be passed down to Ms. Scott first, and after that to your second option if she were to say no. And so on.”

“But that’s not true.” The living situation is, sort of. Brooke was living with me until she was one. I broke down more times than I was really processing life, but that’s not

the point anyway. I was *there*. I sucked it up eventually, knowing even though I lost Millie, I *had* to be there for my child. Even more so now that Brooke has no chance of ever meeting her mother. I had to figure out how to be both, father, and mother.

Only after I picked college back up because I've been told Maeve would help me with Brooke, that's when I agreed on her staying with my *then* stepsister.

I still went to see Brooke daily, and brought her home with me every weekend, unless I couldn't because I was away thanks to hockey, or needed a break from responsibilities for just one night.

"Perhaps not. But it is true that Brooklyn has been staying with your sister for years, and therefore she could make it out to you having abandoned your own daughter to go to college."

"Which *she* told me to do!" I only slightly increase my voice, holding back because Brooke is fast asleep in my arms. Even if I yelled, Brooke wouldn't wake up. She sleeps like a brick. She could fall asleep in a room with blasting music that's to be heard in a whole other city. But I don't want to risk it anyway.

"Besides," I add, "I did see her still. Daily."

"People lie to social services all the time," Mr. Berkley tells me. "I'm not saying there's a *high* chance it might happen, but there *is* a chance that, should your sister speak to social workers and the case gets picked up by a courthouse, the jury would decide in the child's favor, which, in a lot of cases, is to be staying with anyone but the father."

"And why the hell would that be?"

"Well, if Mrs. Remington makes you out to be the kind of father who abandons his child, that's a negative on your part. In addition, you're a single parent with ice hockey and college being a priority. You're only twenty-two, it's possible that they'd see you as the kind of college guy with

commitment issues, not wanting to settle down, despite having a daughter already. But that's the worst-case scenario, Mr. King."

He's got to be kidding me. "I skip out on hockey practice or games for Brooke *all the time*. Ever since I've had her with me, I didn't even go to any parties anymore. And what do they expect me to do? Just marry some other woman after Brooke's mother *died* giving birth? How is it not accepted that I'd rather be by myself than have to go through yet another possible death of someone I presumably love?" I look up at the ceiling, blinking away the burning sensation in my eyes that keeps showing up every time I think about Millie. "Why is this a factor in the first place?" I look back at my lawyer. "A father shouldn't be judged based on being a single parent or not."

"I'm on your side here, Mr. King. I am just telling you the juristic side of the case. If you asked me for my opinion, I'd say you're right. You have *every* right in the book to be heartbroken, even after years of your girlfriend's death. Being single shouldn't make you out as someone with commitment issues, and it shouldn't be a factor in the case. But it *is*, unfortunately. Especially for men. The world is sexist toward women in every single aspect imaginable. But if it's about family matter like custody over a child, chances are the women win. The jury tends to be harder on men when it comes to custody cases. But again, this is the worst-case scenario."

Ridiculous. All this is fucking ridiculous.

My blood is boiling, and if it was possible, there would be steam coming out of my ears like in cartoons.

Knowing I will regret this because it will mess with my head, I still can't stop myself from asking, "What if I got married?"

I wouldn't know to who, or how, but I'd figure it out for my daughter. Fuck, I'd marry the most obnoxious person in

the world, *on the spot*, if that increased my chances of keeping Brooke by my side.

“For legal reasons, I, of course, already have a girlfriend at this moment. So, what if by the time the trial on this case starts, or social workers reach out to me, whatever, I got married to her?” I quickly add, though it doesn’t make much of a difference. In my head, I’m already scrolling through my contacts, finding a potential wife whom I can trust enough to not fuck up.

And as to for the legal reasons, I’m not sure a courthouse would appreciate finding out I got married to keep my daughter with me.

I mean, what kind of sicko would do that anyway? *Me, apparently.*

Mr. Berkley’s eyebrows rise, a shocked expression lingering on his face until he eventually shakes it off. “It’s not a guarantee that the jury would decide in your favor, but it would show you are in a committed relationship and are working toward becoming a family. Or rather you have one. It could very well be that your chances of winning the trial would increase.”

That’s all I needed to hear to have made up my mind. *Increased chances*. Guess I am getting married then. To whom? I don’t know yet, but I better figure that shit out sooner rather than later.

“But before any trial would even start, A CPS worker would come see you, talk to you and your child, check out the situation themselves. If they have any doubts with you, then other steps would be initiated, but before that…”

I barely even listen to him anymore, which probably is a bad idea. I did come here to get help, on a *Sunday*, not to sit here and space out because I’m busy thinking about how I’m going to find a wife while I’m not even in New City because I kind of planned a trip with Brooke and Grey to Disneyland for the holidays.

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Chapter 5

“if it feels like a trap / you’re already in one”—Dear Reader by Taylor Swift

Emory

Maybe the Second-Day New Year’s party I went to yesterday was a bit too much. Though, unless I was drugged by some frat guy, I wouldn’t know why. Usually when I drink, I don’t exactly do it to the point of ending up with a hangover, so why do I have a headache right now? And why don’t I remember inviting someone over to spend the night who would now be downstairs in my kitchen to cook breakfast?

I don’t use my kitchen, ever, and even if I cooked last night—which I sure as fuck did not—it shouldn’t still smell like bacon in my entire house.

When I turn over to look toward the other side of my bed, trying to find out if someone had slept in there, because maybe I did bring someone home last night and it just slipped my mind, I am a little surprised to not find a guy, but a little blonde girl sitting there. I rub my eyes to make sure I am not hallucinating, and when I look at her again, her face is now so close to mine, I almost shriek in surprise.

“Memory!” Brooke still can’t pronounce my name correctly, which, I don’t quite understand how because she *does* say my name, just adds an extra *M* in the beginning. But I kind of like it.

“Hello there, tiny princess.”

Brooke giggles. I open my arms for her, and she immediately leans into me for a hug. I haven’t seen her in

two whole weeks, and I kind of started to miss her. Thank God she's back, but even so, what the hell is Miles doing here?

She must have come here with Miles because my parents don't just show up here and start cooking breakfast. Especially not with Brooke in tow.

When she pulls away from the hug, I notice Brooke holding something cylinder shaped in her hands. It looks like a lip balm, but the only one I have around the house shouldn't be within her reach. "What do you have there?"

Brooke opens her hand, showing me the red lip balm. It's not mine, so Sun must have left it here yesterday.

"Can I have it?" she asks, giving me hope-filled eyes.

If it were mine, she could keep it. However, as this one doesn't belong to me, I can't just gift it to her.

Before some apology makes it past my lips, I notice the little strawberries on the cap of the lip balm. In mere seconds, I've got the balm snatched from Brooke's tiny hands, my heart beating faster than it would after running a marathon.

Brooke is severely allergic to strawberries. And with *severely* I mean she reacts to *everything*. The intake of strawberries, smelling it, strawberries touching her skin. Even artificial scent sends her off. It's why I never, not even if I were to crave strawberries, have them at home. Or even get near them.

To be fair, artificial strawberry scent is nasty anyway, so I really don't mind not buying anything strawberry scented.

"No?" Brooke pouts at me, instantly making me feel bad for taking the lip balm away from her as hastily as I did. "Okay."

"Brookie, you remember what your daddy told you?" I ask her. "About strawberries?"

Brooke nods. Honestly, I'd be surprised if she didn't. Miles tells her about her allergy *weekly*. Poor thing must be tired

of hearing it. But to be fair, she also tends to insist she isn't allergic, so I get why Miles keeps reminding her.

"It's a no-no for me." She shakes her head, keeping her eyes closed as she does. Then they open again, and a bright smile lights up her face. "Daddy always says swraberry makes me really sick."

"Exactly. What you held in your hands would have made you really sick."

"Oh no." The little bits of blond eyebrows she has dip together with concern.

"Brooke, I need you to be honest with me. Did you smell it or applied it to your lips?" I doubt it. If she had, Brooke would already be gasping for air. The smell of strawberries usually doesn't send her off as fast as ingesting it does, so just in case…

Brooke immediately shakes her head.

I hold my pinky out to her. "You pinky promise?"

Brooke mimics me, struggling a little with *just* holding her pinky up. "I pinky pwomise, Memory."

We hook our pinkies together… well, I hook them together, taking her by her word. I've been doing this with her since she turned three, and not once have her promises turned out to be lies, so I do believe her on this one. Still, I should probably tell Miles about it.

After throwing the lip balm into my nightstand drawer, I grasp my phone, then pick up Brooke and carry her downstairs. The increasing smell of breakfast making me nauseous immediately.

Ever since William and I started dating, and he *occasionally* let me know that I should eat less to not gain weight, I've skipped out on breakfast. To be fair, my parents did their fair share of telling me I am fat when I am not all my life as well, so I'm not sure who of them actually caused this.

Now, these days just smelling food in the morning turns my stomach upside down.

The second we reach the bottom of the stairs and I let Brooke down, she runs off toward her father, begging him to let her try the food. He does, obviously.

My eyes land on his body, scanning him. He's dressed all casual, sweatpants and only a loose sweatshirt. I've never really seen him in anything but jeans or cargo pants or his hockey stuff. It's… definitely a new look on him.

"Memory is here, too," Brooke says, and a second later, Miles is turned around and looks at me. I can tell by the way his eyes linger on mine a second too long that he's contemplating to wish me a good morning, so I cut him off even before he attempts to speak.

"You might want to keep an extra eye on Brooke for a while. Sun left her lip balm here and Brooke had it in her hands. It's a strawberry lip balm." I also add that she promised she didn't even open the cap.

Perhaps the first thing I should do is question his presence in my house, especially at eight in the morning, but that can wait a little while longer. At least until I am fully awake.

In seconds, Miles has Brooke seated on my kitchen island, checking her skin for red spots that appear just before her airways clog up. I've witnessed her react once, and I can't say I'd ever want to see that happen again.

It was on her second birthday, back when nobody even knew she had an allergy. My parents got her a birthday cake topped with strawberries. Miles fed her just the tiniest piece, yet moments later her body was covered in big red spots, her face paled and she started gasping for air.

If my cousin hadn't had an EpiPen Jr from her son, I'm not sure Miles would've made it to the hospital in time to save Brooke's life.

The fear on his face, and the way he was still shaking even hours after they've been back from the ER, it almost made me break my promise to never talk to him ever again. I could tell he was mentally beating himself up for not

having known his daughter is allergic, but he couldn’t have known at that time.

He kept strawberries around her all the time, and she never reacted to anything, until one day, she did.

I just wanted to console him, like Millie would have done, but I was still a little too upset with him.

For the rest of the day, Miles didn’t take his eyes off of Brooke. Every ten minutes he would check if she had a red spot on her skin, and when he found one, he would freak out even if it was a simple imprint of her jacket or something like that.

It wasn’t until my parents told him to calm down and promised him she was okay that he began to relax a little.

I’m sure, if that day was horror to me already, Miles must’ve gone through hell and back, then visit hell again every time he saw the faintest of red imprint on his daughter’s legs or arms.

“Miles, she’s okay,” I assure him, though I understand why he’d rather check twice than not at all.

He ignores me, at least until Brooke starts to giggle. “Daddy, I’m okay.”

The breath that leaves his lungs is almost loud enough to wake the dead. He then turns a little, just enough to look at me, still holding Brooke in place so she wouldn’t fall. “Thank you for telling me.”

I nod at him, once, then go to take a seat on one of the barstools. Sitting down, I prop my elbows up on the counter, holding my head up with my hands. “What are you doing here anyway?”

He stays quiet for a short while, debating whether he should tell me or not. But I guess he concluded, since he was already here, he might as well spit it out. “I kind of really need to talk to you.”

“Okay. So talk to me.” I hate it when people beat around the bush. I am a very straight forward person, and I know I can’t expect everyone else to be as well, but that doesn’t

mean I hate it any less when they take hours to ask for a glass of water or something.

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Chapter 6

“I’m reeling in my brain again”—Mr Loverman by Ricky Montgomery

Emory

JUST TWO MINUTES AGO, Brooke ran off to play in the tiny playroom I have for her at my house, leaving me alone with Miles. And he still doesn’t say what he came here to talk to me about. It’s really starting to piss me off.

But, while he isn’t talking, I figure I could at least ask him about what had been occupying my head for the past two weeks. A thought that keeps coming back to ruin my days.

“Did you think about Millie?”

Miles sets down a plate with pancakes and bacon right in front of me on the island top. I scrunch up my nose immediately, wanting to push it away but he glares at me. “Eat.”

“I am not hungry, Miles.”

“Yeah, so Sun keeps saying. You need to eat. You already don’t cook for yourself, and I’m pretty sure I’ve never seen you with food in your hands for years. Especially not since you started dating that snuck-up golf guy.” He slides the plate closer to me then hands me a fork. “So eat.”

I do, at least small bites, very slowly. But only because I want Miles gone, and I doubt he’ll leave before I ate up. Did I mention that I hate Miles King? If not, I did so now.

“Answer my question.” He always avoids the topic of Millie, and I do know why, but still, he owes me an answer, so I won’t just let his silence slide. Not this time.

“Did I think about her today? That’s pretty much given when I so much to look at my daughter and see Millie’s face.”

He didn’t say he sees her *when he looks at* you.

“No, when we had sex. Did you think about her?”

Miles’s eyebrows shoot up in surprise, eyes widening before his expression relaxes at least a little bit. “I’m fucked in the head, Em. But I am not *that* messed up.”

“So you didn’t wish I was her or anything like that?”

He grips the edge of my countertop, his fingers turning white from the pressure. “Nah. I always saw you as… you, Em. I know a lot of people, especially your family, keep telling you to be more like she was. But I never did that. To me Millie has always been Millie, and you were always my Em.”

“‘Your Em’,” I snort. “I always felt like you hated me. Even when we were together.” That’s not exactly true. It only started when my sister made me see things I never did before she pointed them out to me.

“I probably did.” He shrugs but keeps the faintest smile ever on his lips. “I never hated you, otherwise I wouldn’t have dated you.”

“I was fourteen. You can’t count that.”

“Fifteen. You literally turned sixteen a couple of weeks after we broke up. And still, Em, I wouldn’t have stayed in a relationship with you for *three* years if I hated you.”

“Have you been thinking about breaking up with me long before we did?” I never asked for a reason, always just figured he was tired of me and was far more interested in my sister. Not difficult to think if one takes into consideration that he ended up with Millie shortly after. Well, and his text only said, “Breaking up.” I don’t care about it anymore. I just want to know when he “fell out of love” with me because if it was around the same time he started talking to my sister…

He laughs a little to himself, then takes a huge gulp of his water. “Not really. I just thought you got all weird the past couple of months. Did you think about it before?” *Me?*

“Thanks. But no, I didn’t?”

“No, not like that, Em. You got so weird after we’ve had sex for the first time, it made me feel like I did something wrong. Or, I don’t know, like you never even wanted it.”

Oh. Yeah, okay… I did get sort of weird with him afterward, that much I can admit. But that’s Millie’s fault. I never would’ve made it weird if she hadn’t told me Miles was talking about it behind my back every time we did it.

“Your age scared me,” I lie. Not that it could change anything anymore, but I don’t want him to know that Millie plays a huge role in our breakup, or, well, my weirdness that apparently led to our breakup.

But his age *did* scare me. Or the people his age did. He isn’t much older than me, only by a little over a year, which is nothing. Still, at my school, the guys a grade above mine were… intimidating. They were the kind of guys who made fun of you for nothing at all, and Miles was befriended to most of them.

These guys are the only reason Miles and I even met. If they didn’t try to pick on me for my hair color, Miles wouldn’t even have glanced my way. Thanks to my sister, I started to believe he was talking to those guys about having taken my virginity and they made fun of me together. I was a little insecure back then.

And if it weren’t for me, Miles would have never met Millie because she went to a different school.

“Scared you how?” His hands loosen, his fingers no longer white but pinkish again. He has great hands; I only just notice. *Okay, what the fuck?*

“I thought you were making fun of me with your friends.”

“About what?”

I shrug. “I don’t know. Our first time wasn’t exactly the best. So maybe you told them how horrible I was or

something like that. The thought bugged me, so I got weird.” Or something like that.

Miles takes another sip of his water, this time smirking a little. “Em, you were my first time, too, you know? It sucked because neither of us had ever done that. Why would I have told my friends about it? And if I did, I promise you, I made it out to be the best night of my life, which it probably was back then.”

I did, in fact, not know that. Not even considered that to be an option. Granted, I used to listen to my sister a lot. When she said Miles was talking about me, then he was. I believed her. Though, when she suggested I break up with him, I just couldn’t. I loved Miles, at least as much as a teenager knows what love is.

“Well, Millie was a better fit for you anyway,” I say nonchalantly, hoping to get away from *that* topic. It’s the truth. Miles was never really happy with me, which might’ve been because I didn’t take people comparing me to my twin sister all day, every day very well. It made me insecure, and he knew that. Though, he never got annoyed when I cried to him about it. He used to just hold me and tell me I am allowed to be upset about it.

I still think it might’ve annoyed him.

And even at the age of fifteen, I feared Miles secretly wished I was my sister.

Well, or I was just a stupid insecure teenager and didn’t quite yet grasp the fact that Miles had enough problems at home to deal with.

“I thought so too. Not while we were together, but later on.” His head bobs a couple of times. “But then she died.”

“Do you ever plan to get married sometime in the future?”

Where the hell does this conversation come from? Miles and I don’t *talk*. Not like this anyway. We’re not close, we don’t share dirty secrets or have deep conversations, especially not about the other person’s life. This isn’t us.

Just ten minutes ago I wanted to wrap my hands around his throat and squeeze tightly just to get rid of him. But I suppose it's easy to fall back into old habits. *Screw you for that, habits.*

Miles slides a hand down his face, lets out a mix of a groan and a sigh like he doesn't know whether he wants to cry or scream. His blue eyes meet mine, and I'm a little surprised to find his reddened, on the verge of dropping tears.

I don't like this. Not at all.

Consoling people isn't my thing, and even less so with Miles. If he starts crying because of Millie, I will join in because she's still my sister and I do have tears left for her. But I don't cry. I never do. Not anymore.

"I… uh." He clears his throat, then pushes another wave of air from his lungs. It sounds like the kind of blow of air one lets out when they're about to cry and try to suppress the tears. "I kind of always thought I'd marry Millie. I never allowed myself to think beyond that, picture a life without her. And even after her death, I never thought about it. Not until two weeks ago."

"Why two weeks ago?" That's an odd thing to mention. He could have easily said something like he didn't think about it for years and only recently realized he might actually have to move on. Or lie to me and say he isn't considering it. But two weeks? That's specific.

"You know, a couple of days before Brooke was born, Millie had this feeling that something bad was about to happen. She kept insisting that I promise to not lose myself if she were to die giving birth. I turned down her worries and said everything will be alright," he says instead of answering my question. Yet again.

He's never told me this, not sure my parents even know Millie had a feeling she was going to die. Why the fuck hadn't she told *me*?!

Something about the way Miles's voice stays serious and doesn't waver over to sadness lets me believe there is more to the story than he just gave away. But I still don't understand why he's telling me this now. Four years after her death.

"You did lose yourself though, for a little while." Only like the first three months, so I've heard.

He looks past me, into the living room behind me just so he doesn't have to look at me. "She said she'd want me to move on and find someone that fell in love with Brooke first, not me. That way I would be sure whoever I'd end up with would always treat our daughter right, decide in Brooke's favor and not the relationship her and I would have. Like an hour before she went into labor, Millie even said she'd rather me date you than anyone else because then she'd at least know that Brooke is taken care of. And something about if we were to end up together, it was meant to be because there was *no way* we'd ever get close again otherwise."

Millie was always big on love. She'd believe in fate and that everything happens for a reason. But she did draw a thick line when it came to her daughter.

Even during her pregnancy—well… it was the only time she had with Brooke anyway—she would be so protective of her already. Millie wrote lists of how Miles and she would handle the first couple of months, who was allowed to see Brooke in that time etcetera. From the second she found out she was pregnant, Miles was no longer her priority, Brooke was. Sure, Millie loved Miles with all of her heart, everyone could see it, but I guess once a child is in the picture, the significant other takes on second place.

He clears his throat once more, looking at me again. "One of the last things I've promised Millie was that I'd never let anything happen to Brooke or *you*."

"Me?"

“I’m about to break all the promises I’ve made to her, Em.” My eyebrows dip into a confused frown, even more so when I notice the tears building up in Miles’s eyes all over again. “Maeve threatened to have Brooke taken away from me. I talked to my lawyer about it two weeks ago, and apparently, it’s a lot more difficult for a single father to win family cases. Which means I am getting married, I guess. Not sure to whom, but I know she won’t marry me because she fell in love—not in a weird way—with Brooke and wants to help me keep her. She’ll marry me for whatever reason. To use me, probably. Get some fame out of me by using my last name. I don’t know.”

I’m not sure why he is telling me all this, but the pinch in my heart has an idea. “How does that have anything to do with me though?” If Miles is supposed to not let anything happen to me, how does *this* situation break the promise he made?

“Because if all this doesn’t work out and I lose Brooke, you will be asked to take her in. I’m not sure if I’d be allowed to see her still… If I am, you best believe you won’t get around moving me in. If I am not, I cannot be around, and when I leave, there is no way for me to make sure you are okay.”

Which results in him breaking his promise. And him asking some random girl to marry him also breaks a promise he made. Got it.

Then the lightbulb over my head lights up. In order for Miles to avoid breaking the latter promise, I come in handy, seeing as I already love Brooke far more than him.

And finally, I understand why he is here in the first place. He’s not here because he wanted me to eat something or tell me random things about my sister from four years ago. He’s here for a whole other reason.

“What do you want from me, Miles?” I ask, already knowing the answer.

He licks his lips. “I’m not going to ask you to marry me.”

“So then, why did you tell me all this?” I could have lived happily without knowing my sister had a feeling she was going to die.

“Because some part of me is hoping you still offer to do it.”

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Chapter 7

“maybe settle down and I’d make you my wife”—light by Elijah Woods

Miles

I’M SO STUPID. SO FUCKING STUPID.

What sane person asks their ex-girlfriend and twin sister of the dead mother of their child to marry them? Granted, I didn’t ask, but I implied it.

The room is silent, so damn silent I can hear my heart beating in my chest. Even the blood rushing through my veins. If someone were to drop a needle, you’d hear it throughout the entire house.

“For how long?” Emory asks, her voice trembling a little. That’s weird. Emory’s voice doesn’t tremble, not anymore. She doesn’t get nervous, not since Millie died and she had to learn how to get through life without a sister who would stick up for her.

My head snaps toward her, my brain working extra shifts, trying to rewind her words to make sure I heard that right. “I don’t know. I think CPS will have it out for me for a couple of months. So for that while being. I’d say maybe five to six months. But six months sounds too planned, so maybe a little over a year? I guess they just want to see if Brooke is in good hands with me. Apparently being in a committed relationship—”

“One year?” she cuts me off. “I know the deal with the social services. I major in social work, you know, like my

mother used to. But I need to know if it's only going to be one year."

I nod. "One year and a month, maybe? Make it less obvious. Should be enough, not?"

"Sometimes they watch you for *years* still."

"Yeah, but it's not my fault my marriage didn't work out. They'll see I've tried."

Emory takes a deep breath, probably regretting all of the choices she made in her life that ended her up in this position. "Alright. *If* I said yes, when would we get married?"

"In a couple of weeks. End of January? Maybe mid-February. Nobody can know it's fake though. The more people know, the higher the chances that the social workers find out." I shake my head, kind of like I were to shake off stupid thoughts. "I will tell Grey, Aaron, and Colin. So, if you want you can tell Sun, I guess."

"I'll assume my parents can't know the truth?"

I don't have a *great* relationship to Brooke's only living—or present—grandparents, it's an okay-ish one we have. They still blame me for Millie's death, but that's okay, because so do I. And seeing as I already dated both their daughters, have a child with the dead one, and now might get married to the other one… I don't think I'll be on their good side for much longer, even if I'm currently only there with one strand of my hair. Not even that hair will be on the good side anymore.

"I don't know, Emory. But I know for sure Brooke needs to think we're"—I almost gag at the thought—"in love." In case of these stupid social workers thinking it'd be good to question a four-year-old, we need to reduce the chances of Brooke accidentally outing Emory and me. As much as I hate lying to my daughter, but it's the only way. *Do they even interrogate toddlers?* "Sure we can tell them the whole plan. But you know your parents better than I do…" And I don't think it's a smart move to tell Holly Scott, who works for CPS, that we're getting married to fool CPS.

Her eyes close, gathering her thoughts for a second. “They’d get mad,” she says. “You know my mom, she believes marriage is a magical thing and divorce is never an option, so it’s going to be difficult with her as it is. If we tell her we’re getting married and already plan on divorcing, she’d have a heart attack. Also, my mother talks a lot without thinking. I guess it’s safer to just lie to her. And my dad? Once he drank, words spurt out of him like a waterfall.”

“So are you going to—” I swallow the lump in my throat “—marry me?”

She points her finger at me, her eyes narrowed. “I’m not doing this for you. Brooke deserves to keep you in her life. Despite my opinion on you eleven months and three quarters of the year, I do think you’re a great father. And if my presence somehow helps the case, I will do it for Brooke and Millie.”

Not for one second would I have believed she’d ever do that for me.

Emory slaps her hands to her thighs before she stands. “I better pack my bags then. Because there is no way we’d get married in a couple of weeks and still never moved in together.” A shudder of disgust rushes visibly through her body. “And here I was thinking I’d live my single life for a while, but nope, I am getting married to Miles King.”

“I’m not that bad.” Should I be offended? Because I think I should be. Emory knows very well that I am not a bad guy. At least she should know that after having been in a three-year relationship with me.

Emory holds a hand to her head, wincing in pain. “Alright, maybe I’ll take a long bath before packing my bags. I am dying here.”

“You’re being dramatic.”

Emory glares at me, slowly lifting one hand before flipping me off even slower. “Maybe if I wasn’t getting married, I would go out and find myself a rebound, test the theory of sex resolving hangovers and such.”

“You’ll survive.”

“For a whole year? Hell no. My poor vibrator, I swear.”

And here I was thinking I was bad off. I’ve gone months without sex—apart from that one minor slip-up with Emory—, and I am dying here, people. My right hand can only do so much. Not even Grey knows I’ve been basically celibate every now and then since Millie died, everyone just thinks I fuck every hour of the day.

“Emory?”

She nods her head at me. “Miles.”

“Don’t say stuff like that.”

Emory holds up both of her hands, smirking at me. That’s the closest to a smile I have gotten from her in years. “Gets you horny, huh? Thinking about a woman using a vibrator? Or would you rather use it on her?”

I keep quiet, repeating a mantra in my head. *Stay calm, Miles.*

She crosses her arms over her chest, pouting and giving me fucking puppy dog eyes like she’s making fun of me. And knowing Emory, she is. “Aw, doesn’t little Miles get enough attention from the girls around campus anymore?”

Stay calm, Miles.

Her eyes flicker from mine down to my crotch and back up. She then takes a step toward me. “What’s your nighttime fantasy? Doing it in the hot tub? The shower? You seem like the type of guy who would fuck anywhere but the bedroom.” Another step. “Maybe at the hockey arena. Ever tried it? The locker room, with a cute blonde pressed up against—”

I step forward, bringing a hand to Emory’s throat. I don’t choke her or hold her necessarily tight. I would never hurt Emory, ever. Or anyone. But I need her to stop talking, and if this makes her stop, so be it.

It doesn’t.

She gasps but doesn’t tell me to remove my hand from her body. Lifting her face to mine, I slightly narrow my eyes,

bringing my voice down when I say, “Shut. Up.”

Emory bites her lips like she enjoys this. *Holy fuck*. “Do tell, Miles. I bet you’ve done it in public before.” *We* have done it in public before. Not my proudest moment, I admit. Getting caught fucking your girlfriend in a movie theatre at the age of sixteen isn’t exactly something that needs a repetition.

“Emory,” I warn. “If I were you, I’d keep my mouth shut.” She is the last person I’d need to discuss my sexual activities with. Emory and I don’t exchange more than five words a week, for us to speak about *this* shouldn’t be on her mind.

For god’s sake, she is my dead girlfriend’s twin sister, *plus* my ex-girlfriend. We can barely stand each other. She doesn’t need to know what I do behind closed doors, who I do behind them, or what, when, and how I do it. And I sure as fuck do not want to hear about her stuff regarding the topic.

“I do have to say, I never thought choking could be hot, you proved me wrong.”

I retrieve my hand from her throat in mere milliseconds, taking about five steps back. Only then do I find air to breathe again. Sliding a hand down my face, I allow myself to take three deep breaths to calm my nerves.

What the hell is happening?

“Emory,” I grit out, keeping my voice neutral, “Go take a shower so we can go next door and tell your parents. Better get it out sooner than later.”

She rolls her eyes at me. Fucking *rolls* her eyes. “You’re boring.”

“Well, if not wanting to fuck you makes me boring, then I guess I am.” How the fuck did we get here right now? I swear, just a second ago we were talking about a marriage that neither of us truly wants, and now… *this*.

Her hands find to her hips, her head slightly cocking sideways. “You’re so easy to irritate.”

Is this what the next year of my life is going to be like? Emory doing her very best to irritate me in every way possible? Perhaps I should marry one of those puck bunnies instead of her

after all.

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Chapter 8

“get in your places / throw on your dress and put on your doll faces”—Dollhouse by Melanie Martinez

Emory

“If my father had something to drink, we cannot tell my parents today,” I remind Miles. He’s well aware of my father’s alcohol problem, but I still feel like I should remind him.

“I know.”

My eyes fall down to a little impatient Brooke right by Miles’s side. She’s holding on to her father’s hand for dear life but keeps jumping up and down as she waits for the door to open. “Knock?” she asks, holding up her fist, ready to knock on the door.

“Just one second, okay, Brooke?” Brooke nods at her father but keeps her hand ready. He then looks at me. “Are you sure about this?”

No. “Yes.”

Miles rakes his free hand through his wavy blond hair, blowing out a quick, encouraging breath. “*Holy Flying Flamingo*, we probably should’ve talked more about *this*. What are we even going to say?” He looks at me, the usual confidence in his eyes no longer there. “When did our relationship change? When did we decide to suddenly…”

“Stand each other?” I fill in.

“*Love* each other, Em.”

Right. Stupid me. Of course we’re supposed to *love* each other. No one gets married without being in love.

“Okay… I suppose it’s good my parents never knew about William, so we can twist it to be sometime between Brooke’s fourth birthday and now.” William never requested to meet my parents, and truthfully, I wasn’t ready to tell my parents about him either. My mother would’ve insisted on me bringing him to our Sunday dinners, and I wasn’t going to let him ruin those for me too. He controlled my eating habits enough as it is, Sunday dinners were just my family and me. In hindsight, he would’ve fit right in.

I look down to Brooke, finding her still ready to knock on the door. “We did talk on her fourth birthday. My mother still asked me a month later when I suddenly started to like you. So, it’s only logical to name Brooke’s birthd—”

“Now I knock?” Brooke interrupts, already knocking on the door, making a little happy dance while we wait.

Well, I guess that settles it.

I wish I could say telling my parents I am getting married is easy. I wish it was more exciting than scary… and maybe it would be, would I not get married to Miles King. And if I was my sister instead.

A minute later, the door opens, my mother ready to greet Brooke—because she knows Brooke is the only one who truly knocks on the door rather than use the doorbell—but she stops in her tracks when she sees Miles and me. At the same time.

Miles and I entering *any*where at the same time is as rare as seeing a fish in the sky. Not even to my parents’ birthdays do we show up at the same time, even when they said to show up at a specific hour of the day. It’s always different times. The few classes we have together? I show up later than he does. I just don’t like being associated with him in any way. I guess that will change now though.

“Brookie, why is your daddy here with Emory? *Together*.” My mother picks Brooke up from the floor, switching her eyes from Miles to me and back, eyeing us with suspicion.

Brooke giggles and shrugs at the same time. She still doesn't know that Miles and I are getting married, not quite sure if she'd even understand it if we told her. But she would blurt the news out like nothing if she knew.

"Can we come in?" Miles asks.

"Honestly? I don't know. This"—she motions between Miles and me—"never happens. And it's scary. The last time you two were this close, one of you ended up crying." *Miles. Definitely Miles.*

"We need to talk to you and Dad," I say. "Did Dad drink today? Because I don't think we should talk to him if he did."

My mother shakes her head, steps aside so we can enter the house. "He's still asleep. Do you want me to wake him up?"

I take off my shoes, as so does Miles. "No, it's fine. Perhaps it's better if he hears it from you anyway. You know he gets less mad when you're the one breaking news to him."

"Mil-Emory, you are scaring me."

It takes me a good portion of my willpower not to roll my eyes.

Miles and I follow her through the house, into the living room. By the way her shoulders tense once she lets Brooke down and asks her if she wants to play in the backyard for a little while, and then looks back at Miles and me, I know she has a bad feeling about this.

When Brooke's out of earshot, I relax a little, knowing she won't hear any of this. I take a seat on the couch; Miles doesn't, but I suppose he has more reasons to fear my parents than I do. Well, or he just likes to stand so he has a view on the backyard and therefore on Brooke. Either way, I'm good with sitting.

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Chapter 9

“she’s a scar, she’s the bruise and she’s the pain that you brought”—Broken Home by 5 Seconds of Sumer

Miles

We’ve been in this living room for fifteen minutes. Neither Emory nor I have said a word, and Holly just keeps looking from her daughter to me and back, patiently waiting for either of us to speak.

Had someone told me two weeks ago that I’d eventually stand in front of Holly Scott, about to tell her I was going to get married to her daughter… I would’ve laughed in their face. The only Scott I ever planned on marrying is dead, Emory was never even in my thoughts in that sense. At fucking all.

Okay, that’s somewhat a lie. I thought I’d marry her when I was like fifteen or sixteen years old, so that doesn’t count.

But here we are.

For the past fifteen minutes I’d been looking outside the door to the backyard, watching Brooke run up and down the grass. I’m not always grateful that she knows how to keep herself occupied, but right now I really am. I know I eventually have to tell my daughter about the changes in our lives, even although she probably won’t understand much. I want to be as transparent with her as humanly possible, that includes telling her I’m getting married to her aunt. But that isn’t going to happen while I still struggle to tell her grandmother just that.

“I am not getting any younger here, kids,” Holly sighs, tapping her ring finger on her coffee mug. The sound of her wedding ring hitting the mug being the only noise filling the room with sounds.

I look at Emory, but she keeps staring at her mother. I haven’t seen Emory this nervous in a long time, but right now even I can tell she is. She keeps tapping her foot on the floor, picking the skin around her nails.

At least until she stops entirely, drops her hands into her lap and says, “I’m getting married, Mom.”

Holly doesn’t move. She is a smart woman, so I’m sure she knows Emory doesn’t just talk about getting married to *anyone*. She knows Em is talking about marrying *me*.

And I am sure if Emory was Millie right this moment, Holly would be jumping with joy.

“To Miles?” Holly’s eyes move to mine, and although I want to look away, I keep our gazes locked.

“To Miles,” Emory confirms.

“When?”

“A couple of weeks. Nothing big.”

“Why?”

Emory swallows thickly. I move my head to look at her, this time Emory is looking back at me. “Because I love him.” She looks back at her mother, I do the same. “And he loves me.”

Lies. She doesn’t love me. And I don’t love her. Our relationship will *never* go beyond friends ever again if we’ll even manage to become friends. Friendly, I guess, but actual friends, I’m not so sure about that. After we broke up, we couldn’t stand each other anymore. *Love* is far from what we feel for the other person.

“Are you guys out of your *minds*?” Holly stands, walking to the other side of the living room to bring some space between us and her. “Miles, you can’t marry Emory.”

“And why can’t I?” I can admit it’s strange, but not illegal.

“She is Millie’s twin sister!” She leans against a half cupboard, one hand brought up to her face so she can pinch the bridge of her nose. “You can’t just go from one twin to another because the one you were with died, Miles. This is not how it works. Did you look at Emory? They look the same. They’re basically the same person.”

“Please stop comparing them.” Emory is nothing like Millie was. And even if she was, Emory is still very much her own person. They should be seen as two separate people, not as one.

“What about Brooklyn? She’s going to grow up thinking Emory is her mother! She looks so much like Millie, therefore a hell lot like Emory, too. This is insane, do you understand that?”

What the hell does Brooke have to do with any of this? “Brooke knows very well that Emory is her *aunt*.”

“*Stepmother* should you get married.”

“Mom,” Emory says, dragging the word out a little, coming up next to me. Her hand brushes mine, shortly before she intertwines them. “I’m sure Miles will tell Brooke about Millie someday.” *I will*. She already knows some things anyway. “And if she still has questions about her mother when she gets older, she can always ask me too. I am not trying to replace Millie in any way. I wouldn’t *dare* replacing her. But Miles and I had been together even before they met. There were feelings once, Mom. It’s easy to find back together.”

It is easy if the circumstances allow it. Gets a little more complicated when the person you want to be with is dead.

Holly gestures between Emory and me. “Nothing’s easy with the two of you.”

The sliding door to the backyard opens a little farther and Brooke comes running inside. She ignores Holly and Emory, which Holly doesn’t seem to like very much, but I don’t really care. When Brooke stands right in front of me, grinning with one hand clutched over the other like she’s

hiding something in them, I kneel down to her. I don't even bother continuing this conversation because my daughter is more important to me than any stupid discussion.

"What you got there, little monkey?"

Brooke starts to giggle, and that little giggle just so happens to make me forget why I'm here in the first place.

She leans in a little closer to me, looks up at Emory like she's checking if she's watching us or not. When Brooke seems to be okay with our surroundings, she opens her hands and shows me a worm. It had been raining all morning, so there are snails and rainworms everywhere. "*Je peux le garder?*"

I sigh a little, shaking my head. "Brookie, that worm has a family, too, you know? Maybe his parents are already looking for him. Would be unfair to keep him, don't you think?"

Brooke pouts, her eyes getting all teary. "He has a mommy?" I just nod, not knowing what else to say. "Does she miss him?" Another nod.

Now a tear slips down Brooke's cheek, but I'm quick to wipe it away.

I really hate that she's growing up. Not because she won't forever be this little girl that's oblivious to the world, but because I dread the day she starts seriously asking about Millie. She's already starting to understand that something—or rather *someone*—is missing in her life. And although I've always tried my best to be enough for her, tried to be everything she could ever need and not miss someone she's never met; I know Brooke will have questions about her mother. Or when she's older, there will be things she'd wish she'd have a mother to talk to about… which is why I'm really glad she'll always have Emory, even if her and I never speak again.

I guess, Emory will always be the closest Brooke will ever have to a mother, and I really hate that for her, yet at the same time I'm happy she has someone other than me.

I pick her up, standing up myself. “Come, we’ll put him back where you found him, okay?”

“Okay, Daddy. Then his mommy can be happy again.”

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Chapter 10

“I’m a rebound gettin’ ‘round stealin’ from the young”—because i liked a boy by Sabrina Carpenter

Emory

The second Miles and Brooke go out to the backyard, I can feel the questionnaire my mother is about to host coming. And boy, she does not hold back on it.

“Are you out of your mind, Mi-Emory?!”

I suppose I am. But this is all for Brooke, not Miles, so I’m gladly out of my mind.

“Why? Because I actually love Miles?” I almost choke on the word “love.” To think I’d ever be in this kind of situation with *Miles King* again. Yeah, it’s a little messed up. Not a little, completely messed up. Maybe I loved him once, but I suppose at the age of twelve, you just automatically love the guy you start to date. It takes about two hours for you to utter those words, so we can’t really count it when I said those words to *him* once upon a time.

“You do realize marriage is for life, right? You cannot decide you allegedly love him now, and in a week, you no longer have feelings for him. You can’t just divorce him when you get bored!”

Maybe not in a week, but in a year for sure.

“When did this even start? A week ago you told me how much you wanted to kill him for going on a vacation with Brooklyn without you.”

I take a step backward, needing a little more space between my mother and me because I fear her being able

to read the lies off of my face. Though, when I say, “I missed Brooke, Mom. I hated being away from her for two whole weeks,” I’m not lying. She may only be my niece, but I usually watch her for a few hours a couple of times each week. So not having her for two weeks did make me miss her more than I ever thought possible. “Especially over Christmas. We celebrated every Christmas together since she was born. Of course I missed them both.”

“What about a month ago when you were ready to murder Miles for picking you up from a party?”

Yeah, alright. I did kind of keep babbling about how much of a party-pooper he is. “I was mad because I was having fun.”

Or something like that. Sun, like always, called him to come pick me up because I had a *little* too much to drink. I always feel like I’m his sister of some sorts that he has to run after and get out of trouble. And I really don’t like Miles pretending to be my hero. And besides, a month ago, I was still dating William, and he never liked Miles’s presence in my life.

“What about your last birthday? You almost jumped over the table because he said something you didn’t like.”

Fuck. Right. “We had a fight,” I lie. “Besides, that was around the time we only *started* talking. I was still mad at him for a while.”

“So then let’s say you started dating around October or November? It’s *January*. Barely even. The month just started two days ago. And you’re talking about getting *married*.”

“It’s better in the long run,” I try, but obviously she doesn’t buy it.

“What long run? The one to target when you buy yourself dozens of liquor bottles after Miles realizes he does not want to stay married to you?” She shakes her head disbelievingly. “Or the one you make when you come back here in a month, crying because he keeps accidentally mistaking you for your *dead* twin sister?”

“Miles has not once called me Millie, and he wouldn’t dare to.” *Unlike her*. That one I am sure of. Well, I am now after Miles reassured me he’d never seen me like he’d seen my sister.

“Maybe not *yet*. But when you two live together, and he sees you have far more in common with her than he thinks, then he might. He was hopelessly in love with Millie, Emory. One just had to look at him five years ago and one could see. He doesn’t look at you that way.”

No shit. “He never did, Ma. What Millie and Miles had was different to what we have or had. But she is *dead*! So let the guy move on, okay? And besides, it’s better for Brooke anyway. At least that way she has a stepmother who actually *loves* and *wants* her.”

My mother’s face falls, like she somehow managed to read my hidden message through all of this. “You’re not just marrying him because of her, are you?”

I am. Sort of. “No, Ma. I… love him.” The thought of me ever loving Miles makes me want to rip my guts out. Now imagine what me *saying* I would currently does to me. Right. Nothing good.

“Fine.”

“Fine?”

She shrugs. “Yeah. If you believe it’s love, go for it. But don’t come running to me when it doesn’t work out. Or you regret it.”

Considering that I won’t be sad when we get divorced, I won’t come running to her.

She takes a couple of steps forward, and once she stands right in front of me, she takes my hands into hers. “And you’re not just doing this because your sister asked you to?”

I frown at my mother in confusion. “Asked me to marry Miles?” She nods. “Ma, Millie never asked me to do anything. Why would she? She was convinced she’d marry him one day, especially after she found out she was pregnant.”

My mother sighs heavily, relieved. There's something she isn't telling me, is there? Wait, *wait*. Miles told me Millie had a feeling she might die… What if she told my mother and—

"Did she tell you she had a feeling she'd die?" My mother stays quiet, licks her lips, and avoids my eyes. "She did, didn't she?"

Why the hell had nobody told *me*. Millie and I were inseparable. Well, unless she was busy with Miles. Why did she utter those concerns to everyone but her own twin sister?

"Did Millie tell you she'd want me to get married to him, should she die?"

My mother just so ignores my question. "You're going to regret marrying Miles."

"And why would I?" I roll my eyes, ready to leave this house.

"You have a career, Emory. Once you're done with college, you'll be travelling a lot for photoshoots, right? You said you would. With you gone, and Miles on the road, too, because of hockey, there won't be any space for a marriage."

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Chapter 11

“I do the same thing I told you that I never”—STAY by The Kid LAROI, Justin Bieber

Miles

“Poo on a stick!” More or less kid-friendly slurs just so blurt out of me when I read the message on my phone screen.

Colin has a study group meeting this morning. And he was the only one of my friends who was supposed to be off to watch Brooke while I’m in class. Grey has classes too, as so does Aaron and I’m sure his girlfriend does too. But even if Sofia didn’t, I don’t quite trust her with Brooke yet, not without Lily—Colin’s girlfriend—at least.

“Uh-oh,” I hear Brooke’s voice from behind of me, right before she starts to giggle. “Why you mad, Daddy?”

“Yeah, why are you mad, Daddy?” Grey asks, a hint of amusement in his voice. I turn around to glare at him, telling him to piss off with just a stare rather than words. He chuckles at my expression. “Seriously, what’s up, love?”

I look at Brooke in his arms, then make my way over to them to take her from him. Once she’s in my arms, I kiss my daughter’s cheek and walk her over to the kitchen where I sit her on the island counter to do her hair. It’s easier when I don’t have to kneel down for it or bend over to half of my height only to reach the top of her head.

Grey has already brushed it, or so I assume because Brooke’s hair doesn’t look tangled at all, which it usually does.

“Remember how I said your uncle Colin would take you to the park this morning?” I ask Brooke, knowing Grey is listening. I’d rather answer my daughter than him anyway, even if she only understands half of my words.

Brooke nods hastily. “Uncle Co-in always get me an extra gummy bear.” I absolutely hate him for it. Instead of giving her the food I provide for them *both*, he just hands her a bag of gummy bears, ones without any strawberry flavored gummy bears in the bag. Part of me thinks it’s my daughter making him do it because she can be very persuasive. Not with me though, but with my friends. Somehow, they can’t say no to her. Neither can I, but I guess it’s a little easier for me to not allow her everything than it is for my friends.

I lean Brooke’s head back into her neck, just enough to see the front properly while I start braiding one half of her hair. “Yeah, well, baby, we have a change of plans.”

“Last-minute classes?” Grey asks, opening our refrigerator.

“Study group,” I answer. “I will stop by at the Scott’s house and ask if Holly can watch Brooke for two hours.”

“Grammy?” Brooke turns around as much as she can while still sitting, only so she can look at me. But I turn her back around so I can finish off the first braid.

“Yes, little monkey, your Grammy.”

“No.”

“No?” I mean, Holly is still mad at *me* for… getting married to Emory, I guess? It’s only been eight days. But why wouldn’t Brooke want to see her grandma? Brooke loves Holly.

“No, Daddy. Please.” She leans back against me, tilting her head so far back into her neck until her eyes meet mine. And when I notice them filling with tears, I almost say fuck it and decide to stay home with her. But I really need to go to my classes today. “I want to be with you.”

“Oh, Brooke…” I plant a kiss to her forehead, then push her up so she’d sit up straight again. I finish off the first

braid and start with the second one. “Okay.”

“Okay?” comes from Grey, a little choked. “You’re staying home then?”

“No.” I sigh. “I’m taking her to my classes .”

I was always against doing that. Not because I try to hide my daughter from everyone, afraid of what other students might say when they find out I have a child, but because I always thought it would be pure torture for her. She’s four years old, surely sitting in a room with hundreds of people and having to be quiet for hours isn’t going to be her idea of fun.

Okay, and maybe because I’m a little afraid of people’s reactions. But who wouldn’t be?

I mean, I am known as the guy who fucked close to every woman on campus, at least the ones who are my age or above. Seeing me with a child is only going to bring up rumors that I am not ready to encounter, especially not with Brooke around. If she hears any of them…

I barely fucked anyone in four years, but nobody knows that. I tried to fuck my way through college because that way it was less likely for people to assume I was some strange, celibacy-bound guy. Or, well, had a family or something. I couldn’t do it though. And I do have a family. It’s small and consists of Brooke and me only, but it exists.

Again, I am not embarrassed to have her. She’s my whole life, and I love this little girl with everything that I am. But I am afraid of people’s reactions. And I always kind of assumed people would sympathize with me, let me off the hook more easily because I am a single father and my life must be so much harder without a woman by my side, which I did not want. I *still* don’t want.

As a college ice hockey player, people already assume your sex-life is *really* active. With all the puck bunnies, sorority sisters, and fans who just so beg to be fucked, yeah, it’s quite easy to have one too. And I mean, this is college, so even easier.

Keeping up the image of me being a man-whore was easier than having my professors and other students take pity on me. People talk about me in ways that makes seeing me as a family guy impossible, pushing the thought of me having a child far, *far* back in people's minds. That's just what I wanted.

And there's one other thing I was afraid of for years. Brooke could overhear people spiraling about who her mother might be, and then they take a look at Emory and Brooke, conclude Emory must be her mother. Brooke would probably question her entire life. Or… not. But she would have questions.

"*Your* classes?"

"No, Grey, your mom's."

"Very funny." Grey walks around the kitchen, not being able to stand still. "I thought you didn't want to bring Brooke, ever."

"Well, I don't have much of a choice, do I?" I finish off the second braid. "I am not going to make her stay with Mitch and Holly when she doesn't want to, and I can't stay home."

"What if someone doesn't want her there?"

I pick Brooke up and set her back down on the floor. "Do you want to get Mr. Fluffles?" I ask her, she nods and just runs off to get her favorite stuffed animal.

Once she's making her way up the stairs, I turn to look at Grey. "If someone doesn't want her there, they can leave. Other people bring their kids all the time when they don't have someone to watch them."

University really is a funny mix of single people with their minds on sex and alcohol, people in relationships, and others who are already married and have kids. Or… like me, just have the kid, no spouse. Though, I guess I will have a wife pretty soon.

"Yes, but Miles… that's a huge step. You barely like Brooke's presence at practice with *just* the team there. All of them already know she exists, and still you're scared

shitless they might think wrongly of you. Which, they don't, by the way. And on top of that, you're *still* afraid Aaron, Colin, and *I* think badly of you because you have Brooke."

"I'm going to pick up Em," I say, not even commenting on whatever he just said. He's right, I am scared out of my mind. That people judge me. That they look at me like I'm a whole different person. But most importantly, that something happens to my daughter. People are crazy these days, you never know.

And as for Emory, I know she was supposed to move in a week ago, but she kind of wanted a few more days at home, and not so surprisingly, I was okay with that.

"Don't just run away now, Miles!" Grey grabs on to my shoulder, keeping me from walking away. "You know we all love you, right? Neither Colin, Aaron, nor I even once thought you were stupid for knocking someone up at a young age. And we don't pity you."

I raise my eyebrows at my best friend, to which his twitch in an apologetic way.

"Okay, maybe we do pity you. But not because you're a single father."

I sigh. "I know."

"Do you?" he asks. When I stay quiet, he takes my face in both of his hands and forces me to look right into his eyes. "Miles, we do *not* pity you because you have a child."

"Then why?"

"Because you lost the love of your life," he answers without hesitation. "Because it's fucked up that you have to live without the woman you imagined your whole life with. We're sad *for* you."

Now, that's just even more depressing. "Okay."

He removes his hands from my body, then goes to get himself a bowl and some cereals. "How are you going to handle the news when people find out you're getting married?"

Good fucking question. “I don’t know. Do I have to confirm anything? I don’t think so.”

“Well, people know you, Miles. Or they knew your father. They definitely know your last name with those restaurants of yours. And you know Emory has a *few* followers on her social media.” I snort. A few might be an understatement. “That marriage might come good for her. Couples are far more hyped anyway. People just love *Love*.”

“Well, then I’m glad I can help her in some ways.”

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Chapter 12

“people my age make me nauseous”—Is It Just Me?
by Sasha Alex Sloan, Charlie Puth

Miles

“Are you okay?” Emory asks, just as I park the car by the campus parking lots.

“No,” I answer in all honesty. “I can feel them stare already.”

“Nobody’s looking at you, Miles.”

“I am!” Brooke squeals from the backseat right behind Emory. “Daddy, I look.” I look at her through the review mirror, smiling when I find her with her arms up in the air, and a huge smile on her face. Then she suddenly looks down. “Mr. Fluffles fell.” And just like that, she tries her best to pick him up.

“Are you going to pretend you don’t know me, like always?” I ask Emory. We have ethics, English, and psychology together, and in each of those classes, Emory tries her best to pretend she doesn’t know me at all. But honestly, I never minded it either. Not having to talk to her was my ideal idea of a relationship to her.

But Emory surprises me when she shakes her head. “I think you could use someone by your side today. I can do that in ethics, but you’ll have to find other people for your other classes.”

“Thanks, Em. Seriously.”

I get out of the car, already being greeted by three people passing by. One of those people even turns around to

come walking toward me, but she stops when Emory gets out.

“God, your little fan-club is going to be a pain in my ass, especially when they find out we’ve gotten married.”

“Not a fan-club.” I open the door for my daughter, and she comes jumping out. Usually I have to unbuckle her seatbelt for her, but as it seems, she learned how to do it herself. She picks up her bunny, then shuts the door all by herself as well.

“*Qui est cette fille?*” She points toward the open-mouthed brunette, then mocks her. Seriously, Brooke just mocks the brunette’s expression, opens her mouth and gapes back at her like she is gaping at me.

“I don’t know, baby.” I hold my hand out for Brooke, and she immediately takes it. Emory hands me the bag filled with only one notebook and a pen, and the rest is basically snacks for Brooke and everything she might need while we’re on campus, like diapers and a toy or two… or five, extra clothes.

Brooke’s potty trained, she just gets cranky when too many people are around, and then tends to forget to tell me she has to pee. And in order to avoid a mishap, I thought going with her wearing a diaper is better.

The brunette is quick to leave after the shock of her life, and I do have to say, this kind of reaction, I totally expected. Just staring and then running the other way.

I take a deep breath, then start walking toward the building.

Emory, Brooke, and I make it through the halls of St. Trewery without one person stopping us. Most of them just gape at me—mainly the women who always wanted to get into my pants—others ignore my existence completely.

Brooke holds on to my hand for dear life, and every time I look down to her, I find her looking all around herself. Of course she’s curious and impressed. She’s never been here, everything is new, big, and there are so many faces she has

never seen before. And even at the age of four, she knows that a lot of those new faces look at her.

But then, she rips her hand away from mine and starts running. Had I not spotted Aaron from a little farther away, I might have gotten a heart attack from it. Thank fuck I saw him a minute ago already.

Brooke runs up to him and wraps her arms around Aaron's legs. He tumbles a little, having not expected someone to *hug* his *legs*. But when he looks down, his head snaps back up and he looks around himself to find me. When his eyes land on mine, his are wide with shock.

I approach Aaron, together with Emory.

"What the heck?" he says and picks up Brooke from the floor because she's waiting for him to do just that.

"Look." Brooke holds her rabbit into Aaron's face, giggling. "I bring Mr. Fluffles."

"That's great, little princess." His eyes stay on me, still keeping a huge question mark behind them.

"Colin has a last-minute study group meeting," I tell him. "I had no other choice."

"Brooke's grandparents?"

Emory sighs. I haven't told her that Brooke basically *begged* me to stay with me and not give her to her grandparents. The only answer she had gotten was a shrug when she asked since when I brought Brooke with me. So when she says, "They're still mad at us," it doesn't surprise me as much. Of course she would think I wasn't going to ask her mother to take care of my daughter for a couple of hours.

I also haven't yet told anyone we'd be getting married…

"At '*us*?'"

I take Brooke from him, seeing as we only have five minutes left before classes start. "Yeah, I'll explain later. It's kind of… a lot. And also, I need to tell *all* of you."

Aaron nods, then looks from me to Emory and back. "Ah, shit. You're getting mar—"

I cover his mouth with my hand, not wanting anyone around us to hear him say it aloud. “Shut up,” I hiss. “Just, let me explain tonight, okay? You’re home, aren’t you?”

“I am.” He crosses his arms over his chest. “But Colin’s on a date with Lils, and Sofia will be over.”

“Colin can postpone said date. This is more important.”

“Does Grey know?”

I nod. I haven’t told him myself, he just guessed it, because if there is one person who knows everything without needed to be told, it’s Grey. I’m pretty sure he guessed it the second I told him Emory would move in with us. “Don’t say anything to Colin.”

“Sofia then? I don’t lie to her.”

“It’s not lying if she doesn’t ask.”

Aaron protests, “It is. I share my whole life with that woman. My thoughts are her thoughts. What I know, she knows.”

Emory snorts. At least I am not the only one who gave up on love. She, too, doesn’t believe in it anymore. “That’s cute.”

Aaron narrows his eyes at her, knowing she’s not being serious. “I don’t like you.”

Brooke in my arms gasps out loud, then slaps a hand to her mouth. “Daddy says we don’t say that,” she whispers. She’s right. I did tell her we don’t dislike or hate people, especially not openly. I had to, okay? There was this one time when I tried putting her in daycare. I picked her up after school and then had been told my three-year-old daughter kept saying she hated everyone there. She had been put in time out this whole time she was there. I could barely believe my ears when I’ve been informed about it. Brooke isn’t the one to randomly hate on people. Or so I had thought until then.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay, Uncle Ron, but don’t say again!”

He holds up three fingers. “Scouts honor.”

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Chapter 13

“no games, no lies”—Do It Better by Zoe Wees, Felix Jaehn

Miles

My nerves shoot through the roof when we enter the classroom. Emory and I, thanks to Aaron, are a whole five minutes late. Which means, when we enter the room, people automatically check who’s the late comer.

Not everyone though, because a whole lot of people are more interested in passing ethics and acing their exams than see what idiot was late, yet again.

However, when you come walking in and a little four-year-old starts talking super loudly… yeah, that gets people’s attention more than it does when you’re just late.

“And then we went on the teacup ride too!” Brooke jumps up in excitement, spinning in a circle to demonstrate Emory just how many spins the teacup did. She’s talking about the teacup ride at Disneyland, by the way.

Everyone’s head turns around, looking at little Brooke by my side, and then their eyes move up my body, I guess. All I can do is stand there, frozen while Brooke is oblivious to the eyes on her. She just keeps on babbling about Disneyland and all the great characters she’s gotten to meet, being especially enthusiastic about the princesses.

“Mr. King,” my ethics professor says, his voice a little stricter than usual. I’ve got to say, Mr. Rooney is usually a great sport, funny, and he doesn’t take things too seriously,

so hearing his *strict* voice almost makes me want to turn back around and leave.

“Sorry,” I apologize. “I… I hope it’s okay I brought her.” And I hope he can’t hear me. There are a good number of rows of stairs between us, and I’m not talking excessively loud. Besides, he can’t just throw me out because of my daughter, right? I mean, sure he can, should she be interrupting his class. But right now *I* am interrupting his class, not Brooke.

“It’s fine, just make sure your sister isn’t too loud.”

There it is, an out for all of my fears. I can easily just nod, accept it like this and have everyone in this room spread the word of me bringing my *sister* to class. It would be less stressful than to deal with all those rumors that will be going around very soon otherwise.

However, it feels wrong. I don’t want to make my own daughter out to be my sister. That kid is half of my DNA, and whoever has a problem with that, whyever they would, they can suck my dick. Not literally.

And now that even Brooke has noticed the attention we’re getting, she all but clings to my leg, basically begging me to pick her up and comfort her. And so I do just that. I pick her up and hold her in my arm.

“She’s my daughter,” I say, hearing the tons of shocked gasps from my fellow students, “but, I will make sure she’s quiet.”

We go to sit down in the last row, far away from everyone else.

↠ ♡ ↞

THIRTY MINUTES INTO THE LESSON and Brooke has gotten used to being here. She no longer just sits on my lap and buries her head into my chest while hiding from the rest of the world. She is now sitting on my lap, using my pen to draw some pictures on the paper I should be using to take notes.

But that’s fine, I’ll just steal Emory’s tonight. Even if she will protest, she has no other choice.

“Daddy?” Brooke whispers, having picked up on the fact that she’s supposed to be quiet.

“Yes, baby?”

She struggles to turn around to look at me, so I help her out there. Once she’s turned around, she reaches her hands up to lay them on my cheeks. “When we go home?”

“A couple of hours.” Brooke must be bored out of her mind. Even I am, and I should be listening to what Mr. Rooney tells us. “Do you want to go to your Grammy’s house?” I could drive her there during lunchbreak, I guess.

Brooke immediately shakes her head. “I wanna stay with you, Daddy.” And just like that, she terminates the opportunity to spend an afternoon with her grandparents. She then struggles a little to turn back around, but when she does, she grabs the paper in front of her and holds up the picture she drew to show it to me, which isn’t necessary because I have been watching her this whole time. “Look.”

“That’s very artistic.” I don’t even know what she thought she drew, but if I had to guess, a blob of black ink with little swirls around it. Maybe.

“Good?”

I nod. “Very, little monkey.”

Brooke goes to show Emory, who also doesn’t quite seem to figure out what she had drawn. “That’s a cute… bee?”

“It’s a horse,” Brooke tells her with a little sad tone in her voice.

Emory reaches into her bag and pulls out a larger case. She opens it, grabs her glasses, and puts them on. “Ohh, now I see it.” I didn’t know she even had glasses.

I look at Emory, then ask her since when she wears glasses. I knew she was basically blind, considering she dated that weird golf-guy, but not *really* blind. As in, she needs glasses to actually see.

“Since I was seven. I just don’t like them very much, so I usually wear contacts.”

I cock my head. “You had glasses when we were dating?”

“Yup.” She pops the “p”, smirking. “You were always bad at noticing me, Miles.”

“I was *dating* you.” I had noticed her, otherwise I wouldn’t have asked her out. And I knew everything else about her, I hope. “You just didn’t care to bring it up.”

“Why would I?”

“I don’t know,” I hiss, keeping my voice down because we are still trapped in a lecture. “Maybe because I was your *boyfriend*?”

“Daddy says I can’t have a boyfriend,” Brooke chimes in, sighing ever so dramatically. Goddammit, she is *four*. Of course she can’t have a boyfriend. She also won’t have one until she’s thirty because… no. Guys are stupid.

Though, I am rooting for her to eventually end up with Colin’s younger brother. He’s her only friend anyway, apart from her cousins. They’re the same age too. I think he’s about a month younger.

I’m not going to lie, I was a little shocked to find out my best friend, the one who’s only a year younger than me, has a *brother* the same age I have a *daughter*.

Emory smiles at Brooke, then boops her nose with one finger. “Because you’re little, Brookie. Maybe when you’re older.”

I glare at Emory, but she doesn’t see it because her eyes are staying on my daughter.

And before I know, Brooke jumps off my lap and waddles over to Emory. She pulls on Em’s hand, then waves for her to lean down so she could whisper something to Emory. But she isn’t quite good at whispering *quietly* enough yet, so I still hear what she says.

“Is Daddy your boyfriend?”

Emory’s eyes snap up, looking at me. And for once, I only smirk at her instead of making some stupid comment.

I still have to tell Brooke Emory and I are getting married. Truthfully, I didn't want to tell her this past week. It's quite ridiculous, I admit. How do I tell my daughter that I am getting married to her aunt? I'm not even sure Brooke understands the whole concept of a marriage, or even knows what that is. Still, I plan on telling her.

Eventually.

But, technically, as of now, I am her boyfriend. Just not in the same sense I was when we were actually together as teenagers. Up until Emory and I get a divorce—after eventually getting married—she's off limits to everyone.

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Chapter 14

“and they all look me up and down like I’m the fucking new kid”—Hell Nos and Headphones by Hailee Steinfeld

Emory

I’VE BEEN CHECKING THE school’s gossip social media account all day, trying to figure out if Clara Alarie has been posting about Miles and the “sudden appearance” of a daughter. But what I come across instead shocks me far more.

Millie has always dreamed of becoming a model one day, but since she’s no longer with us, I figured I should live out her dream for her. I thought, maybe that would make me feel closer to her now that she’s gone, but all I feel is misery, really.

The start was rookie and hard, but then with one post, I somehow got a hell ton of followers, and the numbers just kept on going up. But the more followers I get, the more I feel pressured to post. And I never wanted to become some kind of influencer. I didn’t even want to be a model, or in the fashion industry in the first place. I still don’t, but I am anyway.

At least my Instagram account isn’t made of *only* fancy shoots and modeling.

I post a healthy mix between pictures of me painting, aesthetic pictures of me at the beach or on Times Square—because I am kind of forced to as a model—, fancy restaurants etcetera. But they never earn as much attention as my stories get when I post Brooke.

I never post her face, and there's not one photo of her on my feed. But occasionally, my followers catch a glimpse of her when we're baking cookies or painting together. Again, without a face.

Anyway, when I open the app and see the hundreds of notifications, mostly mentions, DM requests, and new followers, I almost choke on the air I'm breathing.

With my two million followers, I am used to tons of DMs, mentions, and more, but *this*… this is crazy.

And when I go to see in which kind of posts I've been tagged, I want to throw my phone out of the nearest window. It's from an actual news site, which makes this even worse.

"St. Trewery gossip girl (@St.Trewsgossip) confirms, the little girl in Emory Scott's stories is none other than the daughter of restaurant owner Miles King", the first post I click on reads. The second slide to the picture is one of Miles and me walking through the halls, Brooke in his arms. They didn't even blur out her face.

They then go on talking about Miles's restaurant, the one I had no idea he even owned, and then how strange it is that Brooke has never been mentioned before, not even when his father still owned *Rêverie*.

"Miles," I say quietly, not wanting to catch everyone else's attention as well.

We're in the middle of the cafeteria, seated with his friends. They're all shielding Brooke from everyone else's sight while she's munching on her animal crackers. She's sitting on her father's lap, occasionally trying to give everyone around her one of her crackers but does a little happy dance when nobody ever takes them.

"Miles," I repeat, and this time he looks up from Brooke and right at me. I hand him my phone, not being able to tell him about it myself. He takes my phone and skims over the post, then exhales deeply and hands it back to me. Just in

time for one of Miles's hockey team members to walk up to our table.

I don't know the guy's name, but I don't care anyway.

"Dude," he says, squeezing in between Colin and Grey. "I just came from the gym, and I swear to you, five chicks were just standing there, waiting for one of us to come out. They literally *attacked* Ezra and me."

"Attacked?" Miles repeats as a question. "How?"

The black-haired guy dramatically rolls his eyes, mentally going over what happened before he tells Miles. "Basically, this girl Claire or whatever her name is, you know, the one with the school blog. Anyway, she was like 'Wow, Zac, did you know Miles has a kid?' and when neither Ezra nor I responded, she just kept on throwing questions at us about Brooklyn."

"Me, Daddy?" Brooke looks up at her father, pointing a finger at herself.

"No, baby, not you." Yes her.

"Ah, fuck. Sorry. Didn't think that through," Zac—or so I assume—says, earning himself pissed off expressions from Miles, Colin, Grey, and Aaron.

Miles doesn't like it when his friends swear around Brooke. He's not going to forbid it, not that he ever could, but all three of his best friends just kind of went along at some point. Guess his team never picked up on it though.

"Right, sorry," Zac says again, sucking in some air through gritted teeth. "Anyway, I think Clarissa is trying to find you to speak to you herself about the matter."

"You mean Clara Alarie?" I ask, just to know who exactly he's talking about.

He nods. "Have we met before?"

"No." When he's asking like that, he probably has seen my face on the internet a couple of times before. Or billboards.

Zac holds out his hand, ready to introduce himself when Miles interrupts. "Kiss a unicorn, dude." Have to leave it to

Miles, he does know his fair share of creative ways to say, “Fuck off.”

Zac brings a hand over his heart, mouth opened in fake-shock. “Now why would I do that? That poor unicorn.”

Brooke starts to giggle, then reaches for Miles’s hand, brings it almost in front of her face to hide herself behind it. Miles then turns Brooke around, facing him, and she immediately leans into his chest to hide somewhere safer than behind a hand. She’s a little shy sometimes. It’s adorable to watch her use her father as her shield in every possible situation.

“You can have anyone, really, Zachery, but just leave Emory alone, okay?”

Oh, so it’s Zachery then, I guess. Still, I don’t care. For the next year of my life, I can kiss goodbye to even *looking* for an actual partner. Zachery would’ve never been on that list anyway. Not like this.

Zac’s eyebrows quip up. “Okay, but why?”

Miles hands one of Brooke’s animal crackers to her. “She’s my fiancée.”

Oh. Oh, okay. Yeah, he said that. Just… like that. No warning. No—Wow, okay.

Colin seems to agree with my surprise because he spits out his water and starts to cough. “Did you say *fiancée*? As in, you guys are *engaged*?”

Lily—his girlfriend—nudges him with her elbow. “You need hearing aids, I swear.”

As I look at Aaron, he doesn’t seem surprised to hear it, granted, he already figured it out this morning, so of course he’s not surprised. And Grey, he just smirks at *me*, then shrugs and takes a bite of his burger.

“Well, I’m sorry, *mi sol*, but hearing my best friend is engaged does kind of surprise me,” Colin says, seemingly tightening his arms around his girlfriend because she suddenly groans and wiggles around like she’s trying to loosen his grip. But he ignores her attempts, holds her

tighter and averts his eyes to Miles. “When were you going to tell us?”

“Well, I did just now.” He sighs pretty heavily, then rakes a hand through his locks. “We’re going ring shopping after classes. I wanted to tell you tonight, but I guess it slipped out now then. Surprise.”

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Chapter 15

“I say, “today is but a rumor / that we’ll laugh at in a year””—How by The Neighbourhood

Emory

“Oh, my God!” Sun shrieks as she spots me on my way to yet another lecture of mine. I’ve got to be honest; I feel kind of bad having to leave Miles all by himself with an onslaught of people having questions.

At least he’s kind of used to people staring at him all the time. Well, but being looked at because people know you, or because they’re judging you are two whole different things.

“You’re all over the goddamn internet, miss supermodel!” In seconds, Sun shoves her phone right into my face. I see nothing but a blurry mess, but I’ll give her an A for effort. “You’ll probably receive so many job offers now that you’re making headlines.”

I wave her off. “I’m not even sure what they’re so shocked about. So the little girl in my stories is my niece, big deal. Barely anyone knows Miles, outside of St. Trewery and other NCAA hockey teams, perhaps.”

“Uhm,”—her eyebrows rise—“You do know he inherited like a whole ass restaurant chain, right? People know him for more than just hockey.”

“I doubt anyone really knows restaurant owners. And even if, I really don’t understand all of the fuss.”

Sun’s jaw drops but, thankfully, she is quick to recover from her state of shock. “Are you kidding me?” I shake my head. “You’re getting freaking married, Emory Scott. Of

course people are talking about it. Hate to break it to you, babe, but you're somewhat famous. Naturally, people dig into your private life, and also Miles's now. They find out who he is, what he does, *everything*. And then there's this video of him saying you guys are engaged. That is a whole ass big fucking deal!"

Video of him saying—What. The. Fuck. People these days really don't know what the word "privacy" means, huh?

"You could have told me you were dating Miles! I knew something was up when I heard you moan all night long that one time."

Perhaps this would be a great time to tell her I am not actually dating him, that we're only getting married for show… but we're still in public and I do not need *those* news to go around. So for now, I bite my tongue.

"I, uh, I have to get to class. But I'll call you later, okay?"

Sun nods with a smile, then suddenly her eyebrows fall. "Do you always walk around with pieces of paper stuck to your elbow?" She reaches for my arm, then removes the paper from my sweatshirt. She looks at it a little weirdly, then up at me and back down to the paper.

"What is it?"

"'He is the wrong guy'," she says, her frown deepening. I barely see her frown, only ever when she's drunk or gets frustrated with her schoolwork. So *this*, this is strange.

"What are you talking about?"

"It's what the paper says. 'He is the wrong guy'."

I snatch the paper from her, staring at the not so neatly written words. "What the hell is that doing on my elbow?"

Sun shrugs. "You tell me. It's *your* elbow."

"But not my paper? Not my handwriting, and not Miles's either. And it sure as fuck isn't Brooke's. And even so, what is it doing on my *elbow*?"

"I do not know, Emory Rose Scott, hosting a tea party perhaps. It probably invited its other paper-piece friends and baked a cake."

I glare at her, just looking at Sun for a whole ten seconds without speaking at all. “That’s the stupidest joke I have ever heard.”

She hums in disagreement. “Your *fiancé* said worse.”

“To a *child*, Sun. He’s only trying to be funny for his daughter.”

“So now you’re defending him.” Her eyes narrow at me. “You’re shocking me, Miss Scott. I never thought I’d see the day Emory Scott is *in love*. Especially not with Miles.”

Neither did I. And thank fuck it won’t happen either.

↠ ♡ ↞

Miles and I are supposed to meet up at the jeweler, *alone*, but when I stand here, already checking out the rings, I suddenly hear the giggles of a very familiar little girl. Turning around, I get my confirmation that it is truly Brooke’s laughter.

I was off an hour earlier than Miles, and instead of me waiting for him on campus, I told him I’d meet him here because that way I could already check out if I even liked one of the rings they sell. It shouldn’t matter if I like them, I will only wear the ring for a year and then never again. But still, I do have a job as a model, and as a fashion blogger, I should really wear a ring I like and somewhat looks okay-ish. I certainly cannot trust Miles to find a good one.

“Sorry, she wanted to tag along,” he says as soon as he reaches me. Brooke just looks around with wide eyes, not even acknowledging me for once.

“It’s alright.” I’d rather have her around anyway. At least this way I do not have to spend time alone with Miles. “Did anything interesting happen today? At Uni, I mean.”

He lets go of Brooke’s hand, watching her walk away to one of the rather sparkly jewelry. She doesn’t touch anything, quite to my surprise. Brooke’s looking at everything with eyes that almost pop right out of her head.

“Just a few stares and messages from random phone numbers. And maybe a handful of girls who called me names or tried asking questions. So nothing I didn’t expect,” he answers, dragging his last word out in a sigh. “Though, surprisingly, a lot of people thought she’s my sister. Toward the end of the day, Brooke snapped at some guy.”

“Snapped?” That doesn’t sound like her.

He nods, chuckling. “Yup. Guess she’s had it with random people all up in her face all the time. She just told him to leave us alone, but like, that kid straight up *yelled* it. The guy was shocked to say the least.”

“I should’ve been there to see that. That sounds hilarious.”

Miles agrees, I think. “Did you find something you like?”

I turn around, pointing at a silver ring. I prefer silver to gold jewelry, so I didn’t even have to check the gold jewelry for something I might like. I also walked straight past the huge diamond rings, and everything that was *expensive*-expensive. With that I mean the kinds of rings that are unnecessarily high in price, yet still look like a kid designed them.

Okay, and I don’t want to have a ring that’s like a hundred thousand dollars, for me to never wear again after a year. A simple and cute one will suffice.

“I didn’t know how much money I can spend,” I say. But even if Miles had told me a price before, I probably still would’ve chosen this one.

“Well, I do kind of own a restaurant. I guess my bank account can handle a ring.” His eyes fall to where I’m pointing, but before he can comment on how ridiculous the ring looks, I quickly interfere.

“*A* restaurant? You’re really trying to be modest here, Miles. You own *Rêverie*. Thanks for telling me that, by the way.” Rêverie is like a super fancy, French restaurant. With super fancy I mean you need to make reservations about two to five weeks prior, depending on the business of the

months. It’s a five-star restaurant *chain*. I think Rêverie has six restaurants all throughout the U.S., which compared to other restaurant chains like McDonalds isn’t a lot, but for one that reached its peak about two years ago in New York City, it sure is.

“There was never anything to tell anyone. I inherited it when my father died, and still I only took over recently because Maria didn’t want to give the restaurant to me as it was her only stable income. I haven’t been inside the restaurant in years, I barely even take care of it. I don’t know what’s going on there, nor how to even *manage* it. I’m still in college for another couple of weeks, so until I am done here, I won’t even bother checking out the situation,” he says. “Plus, I’m thinking about just selling all of them to someone else. Or the ones not located here.”

“What?” He can’t do that. I mean, I guess when he goes to play for some NHL team, he won’t exactly have time to take care of a restaurant *and* have an ice hockey career, but even so, his father worked so hard to get the restaurants where they’re at now, or so I’d say. Selling them just seems insane.

“Anyway, you cannot be serious, Em.” He now points at the ring I pointed at before. “This is a ring you give to your thirteen-year-old girlfriend as a silly promise ring, not your fiancée as a *wedding* ring.”

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Chapter 16

“I’d marry you with paper rings”—Paper Rings by Taylor Swift

Miles

Emory can’t be serious with this ring. I swear, she chose the kind of ring I would have given Millie at the age of seventeen, had it existed. Okay, perhaps not with the butterfly on it, as she was terrified of butterflies, but maybe a different kind of symbol. Like a heart, or a leaf, dolphin, anything like that.

“I really like the ring,” Em says, looking directly at me.

“It’s plain silver with a butterfly, Em. And the one for me is basically the same.”

She purses her lips. “No, yours has a thicker band with the butterfly cut-out, whereas mine is thinner and has the butterfly on top.”

“Like a promise ring would.”

Emory crosses her arms and taps her foot on the floor. “It’s adorable, and definitely different to all the other rings people usually buy. And if someone asks why you didn’t get me a diamond ring, you can say it’s because I have tons of those thanks to photoshoots I was allowed to keep them from, and because you just knew I love butterflies and I’d prefer this one over a diamond.”

I bring my hands to my head, rubbing my temples. “Fine. I’ll get a—” I stop my sentence when I turn around and one of the employee’s is already standing right behind me, together with Brooke.

Brooke grins widely, then holds out both of her hands, showing me a bracelet. "*Papa, je peux l'avoir?*"

I look at the bracelet, then at the employee. "How much is it?"

"Fifty dollars."

I nod. "Yeah, you can have it." I probably would've said yes even if it was more expensive. "Oh, uh, and we'd like to get some rings."

The woman smiles at me. "Have any in mind?"

"Yes, actually," Emory chimes in, takes a step aside and shows the rings to the woman. "We'd like to have these."

"Oh, great choice for a promise ring," the woman says, still keeping that customer-tending smile on her face.

"See, I told you."

"They'll be our wedding rings," Emory tells the woman, whose smile has now disappeared from her face, replaced by shock. "It's always good to be standing out from the crowd."

"Indeed."

Yeah, standing out wearing a ring my four-year-old would love.

Well, I guess the good thing is I will not have to spend hundreds of thousands on a diamond ring.

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Chapter 17

“don’t know how to escape from this prison”—i can’t breathe by Bea Miller

Miles

“YOU KNOW, I WAS GOING TO ASK YOU SINCE when you speak any other language but English, but today wasn’t the first time I heard Brooke speak to you in French, yet you respond in English,” Emory says just as we exit the car. “Why don’t you ever respond in French?”

“I do. I literally taught her. I just don’t like speaking French with people around that don’t understand a thing. I don’t want anyone thinking I’m talking about them.”

I was born in Gaspé, Quebec, so I grew up speaking French myself. My father spoke English to me as well as French even when we moved to California just after I was born, but I wanted him to be proud that I didn’t waste his French-Canadian genes on my daughter with not teaching her how to speak French. I didn’t have to teach her, we live in the U.S. now, and as I don’t have any other living family members that I talk to—apart from my mother—it’s really not necessary for Brooke to know French.

My mother doesn’t even speak French, she’s from Malibu, has been living there her whole life, is currently still living there. I don’t talk to her a lot, but sometimes I do. Our relationship drifted apart after I moved to New York with my dad at thirteen.

“Did your dad take your mother’s last name after their divorce?” she asks. I shake my head immediately. My dad

would’ve rather burned alive than take her last name.

How did I never tell Emory about any of this?

I go to open the door to the backseats, letting Brooke out of the car.

“I have both,” I tell her. “But it’s easier to go with King than Desrosiers-King.”

“I really thought King was your only last name.”

Brooke jumps out of the car, holding on to her bunny so she wouldn’t drop him. “Daddy, who’s that?”

I look to where she’s pointing at, being confused as hell when it’s our house. And right on the porch, there’s a lady standing, dressed in a black or dark blue suit, holding a folder in her hands.

“*Merde*,” I mutter under my breath, realizing Maeve has actually done it. She really had the audacity to report me to CPS.

“*Ne dis pas ça, Papa!*”

“I’m sorry, baby.” Wow, okay, so I retrieved back to cursing in front of my child now. Just great.

Brooke holds up her arms, Mr. Fluffles in her arms almost falling down but I catch him before the white bunny could hit the dirty and wet ground. “Arms,” she says, clearly wanting me to pick her up, and so I do.

“Until now, I still had my doubts about you being serious,” Emory admits, also looking at the CPS worker on my porch. “Why didn’t Grey open the door?”

Yeah, why didn’t he? He’s at home. There’s light burning in his room. “Guess we’ll find out.” I reach for Emory’s hand, interlacing her fingers with mine. Taking one more encouraging breath, we’re making our way around the car and toward the house.

“Mr. King?” the woman says, meeting us half-way.

“Hi?”

“I’m Iris Decker from the Child Protection Services, Rockland County. I am here because Rockland County has received a concerning phone call and it is my responsibility

to investigate on the matter and assess the safety of your child."

Because thanks to my beloved ex-stepsister, Rockland County now suspects me of either abusing my daughter or neglecting her. Knowing Maeve, probably both.

As much as I want to ask who called—despite knowing who did—, and ask what I'm being accused of, I have seen enough trash TV to know Iris Decker wouldn't give me an answer to my questions. Though I think she has to tell me what I am being accused of? I don't know. Anyway, I'm keeping my mouth shut about it. All I manage to do is bob my head, giving her *some* sign I'm still there, mentally as well.

Iris looks from me to Brooke in my arms and then right next to me at Emory. The curiosity on her face is more than visible.

"This is Emory," I tell her.

Em holds out her hand. "I'm Miles's fiancée." Fuck, yes. Right. I can't believe I forgot to mention the *one* thing why Emory is here in the first place.

"I didn't know you were engaged, Mr. King," Iris says with a smile, shaking Emory's hand. "Congratulations, you two."

"Thank you." Em pulls her hand back, then reaches into my jacket pocket to pull out the keys to my house. While she goes to open the door, I notice Brooke's head resting on my shoulder. And when I try to see if she's just hiding from the stranger in front of us, I realize she's fast asleep.

That kid can fall asleep in seconds, I'm telling you. I do happen to think it's because I don't ever force her to go to sleep at a specific time, so whenever she is tired, she just… sleeps.

The whole concept of forcing a child to go to sleep at eight or whatever time just always seemed stupid to me. Sure, I can tug Brooke in at eight and tell her to go to sleep, but she would just stay awake for quite some time still if she's not tired. So instead she can stay awake until she

eventually is, let her exhaust herself. It's always between six to ten p.m. anyway. Depending on her exhaustion level that day.

"I'm sorry, do you need to talk to Brooke?" I ask Iris, but she immediately shakes her head.

"I was going to, but there's no need to wake her up. Maybe another time."

I let out a sigh of relief, internally at least. I could've woken her up, but Brooke would've been a cranky little toddler then, and I doubt Iris Decker would get *any* answers from my daughter when she's in a mood like that.

What the hell does she want to ask Brooke anyway?

"Alright, well, do you want to come inside?"

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Chapter 18

“you don’t have to prove nothing / you can just be yourself”—No Judgement by Niall Horan

Miles

EMORY IS STAYING DOWNSTAIRS with Iris while I bring Brooke upstairs into her room to tug her in. She’s still very much asleep as I do so, and she most likely won’t wake up. When I change her into her pajamas, she lets out a sigh or whines every now and then, kicking her legs and arms around, but that’s nothing new.

Once tugged in, I plant a kiss to the top of her head and leave the room. As usual, I keep the door open. Her bedroom door used to stay closed at all times, but then the room turned into *her* room, so it stays open now. As so does my bedroom door, just so I could wake up should she call for me in the middle of the night. Or, well, when she sneaks into my bed sometime during the night.

Just as I leave her room, I stop in my tracks, my hand still on the doorknob.

Suspiciously sexual grunts are coming from Grey’s bedroom, answering the question why he hasn’t opened the door for Iris.

I stare at his bedroom door, my hand firmly closing around the doorknob. Not once in my life have I walked in on my best friend. I’ve seen plenty of Grey’s body, but never in my life have I thought I’d have to knock on his door to ask him to be quieter.

So with one last deep breath, I walk over to his bedroom door, knock, and slightly open the door without waiting for either Grey, or whoever he has with him to acknowledge the knock. “Davis?” I say, not poking my head inside the room.

“I picked up Emory’s clothes.”

I almost laugh. “I don’t care. I just need you to be quiet.”

“Sorry!” a female voice yelps with mortification.

“Whatever. Brooke’s asleep, and we kind of have a visitor.” A short moment after those words leave my mouth, I hear the same female voice shriek, followed by a thud. Another second later, the bedroom door swings all the way open.

“Visitor?!” Grey’s eyes are wide open as he looks at me, his chest rising and falling heavily. “Did Emory bring someone?”

Seriously? “Maeve did.”

“Fuck. She really called—” He stops talking and looks behind himself. We both take in the black-haired woman in his bed. She avoids my eyes, trying to disappear by pulling the blanket up right over her head.

“Yeah, so… quiet, please?”

“How old is your daughter?” the black-haired girl suddenly asks, deciding she hid under a blanket for long enough. Two seconds doesn’t seem nearly enough to me.

I don’t look at her, which is my luck because Grey’s reaction is priceless. He rolls his eyes, then stares blankly ahead, right past me. “I swear, I can’t even fuck a puck bunny anymore.”

She gasps, clearly offended.

My eyes travel down Grey’s body, then snap over to Miss Puck Bunny. “Sorry, not much happening in that department anymore. He’s soft like a pillow.”

Grey winks at me, then grasps my chin in one hand, pulls my face down to his and plants a fucking *kiss* to my cheek. Without wanting to, my eyes are back on his dick, and when

I see him getting hard, I almost stumble backward until my back hits the other side of the hallway.

This guy is far too comfortable in his own skin.

“Alright, this is my cue to leave. Keep the noises down. If you wake Brooke, I will personally hunt both of you down.”

That said, I make my way back downstairs, internally trying to find other reasons as to why I can, in fact, not go downstairs. Like, maybe Brooke started crying and needed some comforting. No, that sounds bad, right? But she’s a toddler, toddlers cry.

“Decker left,” Emory says the second I reach the bottom of the stairs. She’s in the kitchen, getting herself some water.

“What?” That’s bad. She didn’t even talk to me yet. I’m pretty sure that’s what she’s supposed to do, talk. Not come inside, look around while I’m not even with her and then leave.

“Yeah. She said it’s useless now that Brooke’s asleep anyway. That means she will definitely try another time.” Of course she will. Dammit. I fucked up.

I walk over into the kitchen, taking a seat by the island. Resting my elbows on the counter, I bury my face right in the palms of my hands. “*Comment ai-je pu être aussi stupide?*”

“English?”

“Just asking myself how I could be so damn stupid.”

Hearing Emory walk, I assume she’s walking away to leave me to wallow in some self-pity. But when I can feel her hand lay on my shoulder instead, I immediately look up because there’s no way Emory just laid *her* hand on *my* shoulder.

“I don’t think you’re stupid, Miles,” she says. “And neither should you.”

“That woman probably thinks I just beat the hell out of Brooke because it took me so long that she *left*.”

Emory tsks. “She asked me how long we’ve known each other, then followed the question up with; ‘Have you ever had experience with Miles in connection to anger-issues?’”

Anger-issues? It just keeps getting better and better. “What did you say?”

Emory smiles lightly. She fucking *smiles*. I don’t think I’ve seen her smile in years. Except on photos, but those kinds of smiles aren’t… real.

Fuck, that shit takes me more by surprise than getting seven chicken nuggets when I only ordered six.

“The truth.”

“That would be?”

“On the ice, but outside of the arena, you barely even get angry.” I do get angry, just not enough to make it everyone else’s business. “I do think you landed a great deal with Iris though. She’s a colleague of my mother’s.”

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Chapter 19

“see you walking round like a funeral”—Cake By The Ocean by DNCE

Emory

THIS IS THE WRONG TIME to overthink my decisions of being here.

Just this morning, my agent called me to *kindly* let me know if I don’t start posting on my Social Media’s again, I will be dropped by the agency. I’ve been hiding in the shadows since the rumors about Miles and my wedding started going around.

Well, *“rumors”* is the wrong term since they’re true. We are getting married. Like, right now.

I’m pretty sure the words “I now pronounce you husband and wife” just left the officiant’s mouth. Thank God Miles and I both agreed on a small thing. It’s just my parents, Sun, and his friends. Oh, and Maeve and her husband with their kid, because the second she found out Miles was getting married, she basically invited herself. I suggested Miles tell her to go fuck herself since she’s the reason he barely sleeps at night anymore, but of course he didn’t do that.

No, seriously. It’s been a little over two weeks since Iris Decker stopped by for the first time, and Miles keeps stressing about what kind of impression he’s made on her. If she thought so badly of him, she would’ve shown up the next day again, probably together with someone from FAR. Or she just would’ve taken Brooke with her right away.

On the first night after I moved in, which is the same day as Iris Decker showed up, Miles didn’t sleep at all. I would’ve

thought it was because of his hatred toward me and the weirdness of me in the same bed as him, if I didn't know he was worrying about losing Brooke.

Even after Brooke snuck right into bed with us, he only held her in his arms all night long. I could hear him talk to her occasionally, and she giggled or spoke back to him in a sleepy voice. But my point is, every single time I woke up, he was awake.

"You may kiss your bride," the officiant says, and suddenly Miles lets go of my hands, then lays both of them on my jawline, pulling me in until our lips meet.

It's not the first time he's kissing me, yet this one feels the strangest of them all. It's the fakest kiss we've ever shared.

Back at the age of twelve slash thirteen when we just started dating, the time we spent together was filled with mediocre make-out sessions, little groping too, and *very* few other things. And then six weeks ago when we ended up in bed together, but those kisses were, well, lust-filled, driven by sex. It didn't mean anything.

This kiss right now, although it's not supposed to mean anything either, it *does* have a meaning. It's quite the big deal, actually, if one had gotten married for love. It's the first kiss I share with my *husband*. That's… something.

"Ew," Brooke shrieks, making everyone around laugh.

We pull apart and Miles immediately turns to find Brooke. I do the same, finding her sitting on Grey's lap, her face pressing into his chest. I'm surprised she's not sitting with my parents if I'm being honest.

"Is that the first time she's seen you kiss someone?" I ask, leaning into Miles a little, keeping my voice down.

"Yup."

Miles takes my hand in his again, leading me somewhat down the aisle, at least until we reach his friends. As soon as we reach them, he lets go of my hand and takes Brooke from a smirking Grey.

“*Tu as embrassé Memory!*” Brooke says, looking at her father with huge, shock-filled eyes.

“Yeah, we’re married now, baby.”

“Like Grammy and Gramps?”

Miles nods. “Just like them.”

Brooke smiles, then her head snaps toward me, yet she leans into her father and whispers, “Is she my mommy now?”

“Emory!” I look away from my freshly wedded husband and try to find whoever has called out my name, only to find Sun come running toward me. Grey lets out a groan, clearly not as pleased to find his sister entering his space. Or maybe he doesn’t like that tiny piece of a skirt she’s wearing.

“Uhm, hi?” I say awkwardly as soon as she reaches me and suddenly swings her arms around my body.

“Oh, my God. The ceremony was *soooo* cute! I cried!” She jumps up and wraps her legs around my hips. “I can’t believe you’re married!”

“Woah, there, Sunshine,” Grey says, peeling my best friend off of my body. “You can’t just jump at people like a monkey.” He sets her down on the floor while I flatten out the folds on my dress that Sun just caused to appear.

“I can, and I will. Besides, Emory is my *best friend*. If I want to sit on top of her head, then I will do so.” Sun puffs out her chest, pursing her lips.

Grey covers Sun’s face with his hand, slightly pushing her a step back. “Sometimes I wonder how you’re already eighteen. You act like twelve.”

“Can I play with Maya?” I hear Brooke ask, shortly before Miles lets her down. She runs off, and he watches her until she reaches Maya on the other side of the backyard, only then does he turn around and force himself to be part of the conversation between Grey and Sun.

“How’s it feel to be the only single one in your friend group?” Sun asks her brother, brushing her hair back behind

her shoulders. “You can already date almost anyone that you come across and like, and you’re still single.”

“Damn, she’s got a point,” Miles laughs, tapping a hand on Grey’s shoulder.

“Leave him alone,” Sofia chimes in, giving Miles a death glare of sorts I’ve never seen before. I haven’t talked to Sofia yet, but I like her already. “Grey just hasn’t been very lucky yet. I’m sure the right person will come soon-ish.”

Miles lays an arm around my body, his hand resting on the juncture of my hip, pulling me into his side. I know this is to appear all in love and happy, but it’s still strange. A touch of Miles’s was the equivalent to stepping onto Lego pieces with bare feet for years. Never have I thought I’d have to learn to be okay with it again. At least this is not forever. In just about a year, I’m free to hate him all over again.

Aaron rests his chin right on top of Sofia’s head, his hands sneaking around her torso. “Kind of rude how we weren’t the first ones to get married, Icicle,” he says, followed by a very exaggerated, deep sigh.

“Nobody’s getting married, except for Miles and Emory.” Lily comes up to us, casually pushing Miles off of me. I can tell he’s about to argue with her by the way his eyebrows rise, but she just holds up her hand right in front of his face before she turns around to look at me. “First of all, holy fuck, you look stunning.”

I smile at her. “Thank you.”

Lily takes my face in her hands like she’s known me all her life. “Second of all, I am so sorry you have to live with that guy.” She nods her head at Miles, only for his three idiotic best friends to start laughing when his jaw drops at Lily’s comment. “Good luck.”

“I will need it.”

This isn’t the first time Lily and I have met, but I never really talked to her before either. But I do know her a lot longer than I know Sofia, which makes this sad, actually.

Whatever, I’m no good with keeping friends or people close to me anyway.

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Chapter 20

“it could change, but this feels like the calm before the storm”—13 by LANY

Emory

For a small wedding, there are a hell lot of people wanting to speak to me.

I spent the past hour having conversations with Miles more-or-less family, you know, the ones that like him even less than I do. If Sofia and Lily didn’t come find me, and dragged me away from Maeve and Lex, I’m sure I’d still be standing there having to listen to all the “amazing” things they’ve experienced with Brooke. Like her first steps and such. Which is total bullshit because Brooke took her first steps in *my* backyard on *my* birthday. Miles didn’t shut up about it all night long, saying it was Millie guiding her or whatever.

“And then I was thinking, what if all three of us just have a movie night. Oh, no, even better, all *four* of us!” Lily says all excitedly, holding on to my *and* Sofia’s hand.

“Four?” Last time I checked, Grey doesn’t have a girlfriend, nor a boyfriend. And if she plans a girlfriends-of-the-guy’s movie night, then a fourth person is not in the picture.

“Yes. Brooklyn can stay with us, that way we can give the guys some time to bond.” She gasps. “Oh, make it five. Sun has to come as well.”

“Aaron will hate that,” Sofia says, grinning.

Lily rolls her eyes very dramatically. “He can suck my dick.”

“If you had one, I’m sure Colin would be the first to do the job.”

Is this what having “friends” is like? Because if so, I’m not sure Sun and I are doing the friends-thing correctly. Sure, I know about her non-existent sex life, and she knows about mine, but you’d never hear either of us actually speak about anything remotely close to it with other people around.

Speaking of her, where the hell is she? She was supposed to be my emotional support animal today, and not disappear and leave me to my guests.

“Why would Aaron hate that?” I ask, hoping it wavers off from the strange sex-talk. “They’re his best friends.”

“Yeah, but I leave America by the end of February, we’ll go long distance then, and he wants to spend as much time with me as humanly possible.” She offers me a very slim smile, one that doesn’t reach her eyes but fills them with tears.

Lily immediately wraps her arms around Sofia, repeating the words “Don’t cry” over and over again, which then results in Sofia starting to cry.

Great, so now I also made one of my guests cry on my wedding… that is surprisingly not the least-likeliest thing to happen today.

“We’ll be right back,” Lily tells me, dragging Sofia inside the house.

At least now I have a minute to myself. Or not, because I have to hunt down our photographer and ask him to send me the raw footage. I know he has a pretty great picture of Miles and my wedding rings, and one right after we say, “I do”. Since I’m being forced to be active on my social media or else they’ll kick me off their agency, I might as well tell my followers about my wedding and actually confirm it. Up until now, I haven’t denied nor confirmed the rumors.

As I try to find the photographer hidden between my family and Miles's friends, a sudden wave of nausea hits me. I bring a hand to my stomach, trying to think of the last time I ate, or rather *what* I ate. I was too nervous to down something this morning, not that I would've done so even if I wasn't.

I must've had half a doughnut because Brooke ate the other half. And… I guess that's it. Half a doughnut all day. Granted, it's only like three p.m., but I've been awake since six.

"Are you okay?" Miles asks, coming up from behind me. He walks around me, taking one of my hands in his. God, all this innocent PDA touching shit is annoying as fuck. I truly understand we have to act like we're head over heels in love, which is why I won't say anything or show my annoyance, but that doesn't make me feel it any less.

"Just a little nauseous," I admit.

"Did you eat yet?" I nod, but he immediately rises his eyebrows at me. "One bite doesn't count."

"I would've had more, had *your* daughter not begged me for the rest of my doughnut."

"DOUGHNUT!" Miles whisper-yells at me, his eyes almost popping right out of his head. "You've had *one* doughnut?"

"Half of it, actually." That's not much better.

He lets go of my hand and takes my face in them instead. He moves in, like he's whispering in my ear. And I bet to everyone around us, it looks like he's sweet-talking me, but what he says is far from it.

"Right now, Emory, I'd really like to kill you."

"Well, you've got a lifetime to try."

His hands slide down, settling on my waist. "You need a lifetime for it? I'd have the job done in a day."

"You need a whole day?"

Miles pulls my hips into his. "Put your arms around me."

I lean back a little, now being able to look into his eyes. "What?"

“Just do it, Em.”

Alright. I bring my arms up, somewhat wrapping them around his neck. Not enough to *hug* him, but enough to just… hold him.

“I talked to your mom,” he says quietly.

“You did?” She didn’t even talk to me yet. Not even a simple “Congratulations” or anything alike. For all she knows, her only living daughter just got married to the approximate love of her life, and she’s not even happy for me.

I can feel Miles move his head up and down. “She thinks I disrespected Millie with marrying you.”

“Of course she thinks that.” Millie was always my mother’s favorite. Shortly after Millie’s death, she even said she’d rather I had died and not her. My mother did say she was grieving, and it just so came out of her on impulse, she didn’t mean it. But honestly, every word said on impulse has some kind of truth behind of it all.

If our lives were switched, if I was dating Miles and had a child with him and then died, my mother would’ve been so happy to hear Millie was going to marry him.

But I’m not her. Never was. And never will be.

“Are you okay, Em? You look…”

“If you say awful, I will *murder* you.” I put way too much effort into looking great today, I will not accept anything but compliments.

“No, you look great, Em. Just… a little green.”

“Green?” I turn my head, trying to see my reflection in the window next to us. It doesn’t quite work that well.

“Not literally, *ma colombe*.”

“English?”

“Means ‘my dove,’ figured I should give you a nickname.”

“I hate it.”

“Fine. *Ma crevette* then.” He shrugs. “Means ‘my shrimp.’ Fits you far better anyway.”

And then I barely have the time to acknowledge what is happening while my guts just so seem to empty themselves out. I hunch over, the little bits of food I had inside me now on the floor between Miles and me… and on his shoes.

I want to die. Right in this moment, I think death seems like a great way out.

“Oh, God,” I gasp. “Miles, I—” I puke again, but instead of Miles stepping away, I can feel him gather my hair together and holding it up. He does move to the side, at least a little bit.

“I’m sorry.” I’m on the verge of tears, and I never am. This is so embarrassing. I’m sure everyone is looking at us, laughing at me and feeling sorry for Miles because I just *puked* at him. *On* him. I puked *on* him.

“Don’t worry about it. Brooke did the same just yesterday.”

Oh, wow. Now I’m on the same level as a toddler… great. I’m glad I know when I have to puke and find a restroom before I do, like every adult does.

“Grey!” Miles yells, then waves him over.

Why am I still standing here?

“Oh, shit. That doesn’t look good.” Even when he reaches us, I don’t dare looking at him.

“Could you have an eye on Brooke for a minute? And send everyone home. I don’t think Emory is feeling that well.”

“You think?” His voice is strained, like he’s holding back a chuckle. He probably is. “Alright, I’ll handle it. Go help your *wife* clean up.”

None of his best friends will let that go, will they? Neither will Sun, but she doesn’t know I only married Miles to help him, and she probably won’t find out either.

I love that girl, but she’s not very good at keeping secrets. Not because she kisses and tells, but because she’s careless when it comes to her words. They just so slip out like melted butter.

“I’ll clean that up later,” Miles says, pointing to the floor.

“Don’t worry about it.” Grey waves his hand around. “I’ll make Colin do it. We made this bet, he lost. Now he’s our maid for the day.”

Friendships are such a weird concept, honestly.

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Chapter 21

“another Friday night tryna put on a show”—Put A Little Love On Me by Niall Horan

Miles

If anyone had told me I’d get puked upon by my wife today, I wouldn’t have believed them for one second. But I guess they would’ve been right.

It’s a good thing I’m used to my daughter puking around me when she’s sick or doesn’t like anything she ate. Yes, instead of spitting out her food like any normal kid would when they don’t like something, she *pukes* it out. Which for once comes in handy because had I not have experience with being puked on, I probably would’ve puked right after Emory did.

“You should take a bath or something. Perhaps it’ll calm you down a little,” I suggest as soon as we enter our bathroom. “And you should eat something, Emory.”

She agrees, already starting to strip off of her clothes. Does she see me in here or am I just hot air to her?

“Could you order in some pasta or something?”

“You don’t like the pizza you requested for today?”

Emory turns on the bathtub faucet. “I do, I just want pasta instead. Or something light like a soup.” She closes off the drain, now letting the water run freely while pouring in some bubble bath stuff. She looks at the bottle, snorting. “Of course it would have glitter in it.”

“In my defense, it was the only bubble bath stuff with a princess on it. If I got one without, Brooke would’ve thrown a

tantrum.” That kid won’t take a bath without bubbles, and if the bottle isn’t princess-themed, then it’s not a bubble bath, according to her.

“What the hell are you wearing?” I ask, looking at a half-naked Emory. She still wears her panties and something that I’m pretty sure isn’t a bra or anything like it. Just two circles that—Oh, wait, never mind. I should’ve known.

She looks down at herself, then up to me. “Nipple covers?”

“Yeah, whatever.”

When the bathtub is almost filled, Emory slides out of her panties and throws them into the hamper, then immediately steps into the water.

I hold my hand out to her, waiting until she hands me those nipple cover thingies because surely she won’t take a bath with them still on, right? After she peels them off, awkwardly lays them in my hand, Emory quickly hides herself underneath all those bubbles.

I turn around and place those nude colored, sticky cover thingies on the bathroom vanity. “I’ll cook, by the way,” I tell Em, because there is no way I’ll order in when I can cook it myself.

“You don’t have to.”

“And you’re insulting me with wanting *take-out*.”

“Exactly.” She splashes some water at me.

I just leave the bathroom.

“LET HER GO!” I hear Grey yell. I hear *Grey* yell. What the fuck?

I sprint right outside into our backyard, shirtless and in just some shorts that I grabbed without looking. I needed out of the suit, especially because of the earlier weak-stomach situation. But my outfit has of no importance right now because hearing Grey yell means something bad happened, which then means I have to run.

And thank god I do because what I see the second I'm out the sliding door almost has me lose every ounce of self-restraint I have.

Maeve is holding Brooke by her arm, and as it seems, tightly enough to make my daughter cry. She's covered in dirt and green grass patches, kind of like someone dragged Brooke over the grass. Or maybe she tripped, it happens. But the way Maeve is holding Brooke, I doubt Brooke was the cause of those stains.

"Daddy!" Brooke cries out the second she spots me.

Taking a step forward, I hear the doorbell ring, adding another factor for me to lose my patience in about a nanosecond. Grey nods at me, then heads inside to check the door, I assume. But him leaving leaves me alone with Maeve, Lex, Maya, and Brooke. Just seeing Maeve's face makes me want to empty my guts out. Such a shame Emory puked on me and not Maeve, to be honest.

"Let her go, Maeve," I say, trying to keep my voice calm. Though, I feel anything but calm on the inside. The anger inside of me gets more with every step I take, and with every second Maeve does, in fact, not let go of my daughter.

As I stand in front of my once stepsister, she still has her hand tightly wrapped around Brooke's arm. *But I'm the one abusing my child, I get it.*

"Do you have any clue what that unruly child of yours did?"

"I don't care what she did, and whatever it is, it's no reason for you to get violent."

Brooke gasps with a loud, painfilled cry. She tries to pull away from Maeve's grip, but obviously she's a little too weak to have any kind of effect.

"She threw dirt right into—"

"I do *not* care," I repeat through gritted teeth. My hands ball into fists by my sides, and I force myself to take a deep breath instead of losing my temper. "Let her go, Maeve."

Maeve shakes her head. "This kid should be—"

“If you don’t let go of my daughter in the next two seconds, ask me what will happen.”

Lex pulls Maeve back just as she lets go of Brooke’s arm. She immediately runs over to me, and I pick her up stroking her hair right out of her face. “*Elle m’a blessé.*”

“*Je sais, petit singe*.”

“You shouldn’t threaten someone, Mr. King,” a familiar voice says from behind me. This day can’t get any worse, can it?

“Leave,” I say to Lex and Maeve, watching them as Lex escorts Maeve into the house, Maya following suit. Then my eyes find Iris Decker’s, a rush of air leaving me.

“Iris.” Grey must’ve left because he’s not around, at least not anymore.

“Did you have a party with your child around?” she asks, not even having the decency for a greeting. “By the looks of your backyard, it must’ve been quite the party.”

“If you count my wedding as a party, then yes.”

“Oh, you’ve gotten married. Today?”

“Yup. So, if you’d like some cake, you’re welcome to just take a slice or however many you want.” I point toward the table filled with food and cakes.

Iris just shakes her head. “So this is Brooklyn?” She steps closer, looking right at my daughter. Brooke turns her head, her face no longer hiding in the crook of my neck but facing toward Iris. “Hello, I’m Iris.”

Brooke shakes her head, like she always does when she meets new people. She’s just not very fond of strangers. God, her nose is still red from crying, her eyes puffy. I just want to hold her in my arms for the rest of her life, shielding her from the cruelty of this world. But I know I can’t, unfortunately.

Iris smiles softly and just keeps on talking about how pretty Brooke’s dress is and stuff like that, trying to get my daughter to speak to her. I really don’t like this. Especially not right now. I’m half naked. Literally. Shouldn’t this woman

suggest me getting dressed before she comes in, talking to my daughter without my permission?

Guess not.

“Do you want to see my new princess doll?” Brooke asks after a while, clearly having warmed up to Iris, which I like even less.

“I’d love to.”

Iris looks at me like she’s expecting me to let Brooke down, but I don’t want to. I should, though, so I do. Brooke immediately runs off to get her new doll.

“Is this the part where you’ll kick me out of my own backyard to talk to Brooke?”

That woman chuckles, then *nods*. “I’d like to have a few minutes with her. Alone.” When I hesitate, she adds, “I know it’s scary to leave your child with a stranger, but it won’t be for long, I promise.”

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Chapter 22

“the world might have a different plan for me and you”—say by Ruel

Emory

My stomach seems to have put itself back together because every sign of me wanting to throw up has disappeared like it’s never been there before.

Shortly after Miles has fled the room, I practically jumped out of the bathtub to go brush my teeth because, well, I guess we all know why. Now I’m back in the warm water, able to relax a little. And I really do need some time to relax.

Today has been a whole lot. Far more stressful than I thought it would be. And definitely far more depressing. I thought if I were to feel bad today, it would be because I’m now officially bound to Miles King for at least a year, with a last name change and everything. I’m no longer Emory Scott, I am now Emory Desrosiers-King. Yes, that thought makes me want to throw up once more.

Anyway, my reason to feel bad today is a whole other one: my parents. How could they be so heartless to me? Neither of them even looked at me, I feel like. It’s a miracle they even bothered to show up. We didn’t speak, they didn’t even wish me luck for my future or anything. They just watched the whole thing and left. I’d love to know why.

But I don’t get a chance to think deeper into it because I barely even have enough time to cover myself up when the

bathroom door just so swings open, and Miles comes walking inside.

“Hello?” I sort of exclaim. He knows I am in here. But Miles ignores me. He just so tumbles inside and takes a seat right in front of the bathtub, his back against the tile. At least he’s looking away, I guess. “Everything alright?”

He shakes his head. I can hear him take deep breaths, every other one deeper than the one before. “Tell me something,” he begs. “Anything. I don’t care what it is, just say something.”

“Uhm…” *Come on, Em, you got this*. “My agent told me he’d kick me off the agency if I don’t post more pictures.”

“Why?” His voice is strained, but not from anger. It’s something else, and I’m not quite sure what it is.

“Well, they make money off of me, right? And if I don’t post, they don’t make money. Well, it’s a little more complicated than that. Either way, I haven’t uploaded a picture in weeks, and I suppose they’re losing their patience with me. So I thought I should hunt down our photographer and ask him for the raw footage of the moment we exchanged rings and stuff.”

Is he even listening? If not, I don’t care, it feels good to let it out.

“I was going to ask you if I can post them, obviously. But I haven’t found the photographer, so I guess I can cross *that* off the list of posts.” Now I have to wait for the edited ones and only then can I upload them. Eventually. “I don’t want to use you, but you would get me more attention. People go nuts over couple content. And family content. Actually, anything that looks picture perfect, really.”

Family content is weird though. I mean, if it’s just the couple, okay, but showing their kids in every single post, that’s so wrong. Especially when they’re young and don’t even know why their parents keep capturing *every* little thing about their lives. Nor can they grasp the fact that millions of people will see them do embarrassing things. I

mean, yes, when they're little it's cute and all, but it won't be cute in a few years when they're older and kids from school see those pictures and videos of them covered in peanut butter or something like that. It's a bullying hazard.

Using one's child for fame is wrong, and nothing could ever change my mind about that.

"You can post my nudes for all I care," Miles says. "Just please don't share pictures of Brooke. Not of her face. I don't want them ending up on porn websites." *Yeah, that happens as well.*

"I'd never." This is also one of the reasons why even before he just said this, I have always made sure her face wasn't in the frame or at least covered up. People these days are disgusting. I even had to *draw* her whole new clothes for some posts because that one time, Brooke was wearing a dress on my story, and I received tons of nasty messages just because they could see her *legs*. *Dis-gus-ting.*

"Miles, what is going on?"

Miles leans his head back, resting it on the edge of the bathtub. A faint sigh leaves his lungs as he hesitates to respond. But he does anyway. "Iris Decker is back. And she heard me threaten Maeve."

"What?" Maybe my ears heard wrong, because I sure as fuck did not just hear Miles say that this social worker lady decided to show up here on our *wedding* day. And there is no way Miles threatened Maeve.

"Yup. She was all 'You can't threaten people' and then acted all judge-y when she saw the chaos in the backyard. I told her we just got married, but that frown just didn't leave her face. And now she's downstairs, talking to Brooke, *alone*. I'm not even allowed to be there. For all I know, this woman just kidnapped Brooke and I'll never see her aga—"

I sit up, laying a hand on his shoulder. "She won't take Brooke away."

“You don’t know that.” He brings his hands to his face, covering it. When his shoulders begin to shake, I honestly don’t know what else to do but rest my chin on his shoulder instead of my hand, leaning the side of my head against his. He doesn’t even pull away, which tells me just how devastated he is.

I couldn’t ever imagine potentially having my child be taken away from me, especially when I know I haven’t done anything wrong. And I don’t even have a child to know exactly what he’s feeling right now, I can only imagine.

Miles may not be the best person, or a picture-perfect father, but he is trying, and he sure is the best father Brooke could ever ask for. I mean, what father would go about and marry someone to higher his chances in actually keeping his child if it came down to it? And he chose *me* of all people to marry. Miles doesn’t even like me.

“Look, that woman might very well still be going to talk to Grey, given that he lives here, too. Potentially my parents, and if needed even your other friends. None of those people want Brooke to be taken away from you. And even if they did, Brooke herself sure as fuck won’t tell Iris that you’re beating her or pushing her away. She may be young and naïve, but she knows you love her wholeheartedly. She knows you care about her. And besides, you have never laid a hand on Brooke, so that’s not to be worried about in the first place, okay?”

The room quiets as he doesn’t respond. At least not to what I just said. “This is so weird,” he eventually mumbles under his breath. “Today has been so fucking weird, *darling*.”

Darling. He’s called me that all the time when we were younger. It’s strange to hear him say that again.

“I agree, but I swear, if you call me that again, I might puke on you one more time.”

“Ah, well, I can live with that.”

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Chapter 23

“fears, can’t believe them”—Lie To Me by Alessia Cara

Emory

“YOU FEELING ANY BETTER?” Miles asks as he comes walking inside our bedroom with Brooke in tow.

It’s been almost a week since our wedding, and still food just doesn’t seem to stay inside of my stomach. I think I just caught a bug; Miles doesn’t agree with me. He thinks it has to be something else because I still have enough energy to stay awake all day, most days, anyway. I am tired a lot, but not to the point of just falling asleep. And I feel okay, it’s just the food that doesn’t want to stay inside.

Today was one of the worse days. Shortly after waking up and being asked to at least eat a bagel, I was hunched over the toilet again. I could barely keep my eyes open either. And so I decided to stay home and not attend my classes.

“Feel better, Memory?” Brooke jumps onto the bed, crawling up and sneaking underneath the blanket with me. She lies beside me, leaning her head against mine.

“A little bit.” As long as I don’t eat, I don’t puke. At least that’s how it’s been today. I threw up after breakfast, and now that I haven’t eaten since, I also haven’t thrown up. I’ll see that as a win.

“*Tu veux aller jouer avec Grey?*” Miles asks, obviously not me. And I’m suddenly so much more appreciative that he barely speaks French with Brooke when I’m around. Had I

not heard Grey's name; I would've thought he was saying something rude about me. It wouldn't surprise me.

"*Non, je préfère faire des câlins avec Memory.*"

"But I'm sure Grey would also cuddle with you."

"Yes?" She sits up.

"Yeah, he's probably in his room, crying because he hasn't seen you all day." I'll lean myself out the window and assume he wants to get rid of her for a second to speak to me. Might be wrong, but that's my guess.

Brooke gasps audibly, slapping both of her hands to her cheeks. She then turns around to look at me. "I'm sorry, Memory, Grey need me. Is okay?"

I nods with a smile on my lips. "Of course, go. He might be devastated already." After planting a quick kiss to my cheek, Brooke jumps off the bed and runs across the room and out the door.

"UNCLE GREY!" We can hear her yell. "I AM HERE NOW!" The door to his bedroom opens and closes again.

Miles quickly closes the bedroom door to our room, then comes walking over to the bed and sets down his bag. He opens it, pulling out a folder. "I made people from your classes give me their notes, or at least let me copy them quickly so you have them."

"You did that?"

He nods a little absent. "Finals start soon, and I'd hate if you didn't graduate with me. That would mean you'd have to drive up here for an hour every morning." Right, because we're moving after graduation.

"Thank you."

"Not a big deal." He throws the folder over to me.

I sit up and open it, just to catch a glimpse to see whether I will be able to read those notes or not. But what I'm more concerned about is the tiny piece of paper that just so falls out. I pick it up, my eyebrows immediately pulling together.

You weren’t supposed to marry him.

I’ll admit. The first note I read, I played it off as a stupid coincidence, figured my seating partner got a note and I somehow had my arm over it and so it stuck to my elbow. But *this*… this cannot be a coincidence.

“What’s wrong?”

I close the folder, letting my hands drop into my lap. “There was a note. I saw one like this before, but I thought it was a joke and not meant for me. This one, however, it seems pretty much meant for me.”

“What does it say?” Miles doesn’t step closer or asks to see the note. I didn’t even think he’d want to know what it says.

“‘You weren’t supposed to marry him’,” I tell him. “It’s a man’s handwriting, I think.” I hold the note up, turned around so he can see. “I guess that’s just William then, trying to scare me. He has a hard time accepting that I moved on from him.”

“Did that ever happen before?”

I shake my head. As somewhat surprising as it sounds, I have not had any encounters with stalkers in my entire life. I thought I did, once, but it turned out to be William pranking me. After he admitted to it, I shrugged it off, thought couples pull pranks on one another, so it wasn’t that big a deal. Surely if he did it once, he’d do it again. But this time it’s just creepy. “I will deal with him later.”

“Aha, okay.”

Aha, okay? Something’s up with Miles. This doesn’t sound like him.

“Did you want anything else?” I ask carefully, not wanting to push him too far even though I wished he would just say it.

I see his body tense at my question. Unsure of why that is, I kind of want to ask why his face paled to the shade of

all-purpose flour, but I bite my tongue and let him speak once he's ready for it.

Miles starts to pace up and down the room, his hands stuck in his jeans pockets. At least until he stops walking altogether and turns to look at me. "When's the last time you've had sex?"

I cock my head. "Why do you want to know that?"

"Just asking."

"I didn't cheat on you, if that's what you want to know."

Miles pinches the bridge of his nose, exhaling so deeply, I can feel it in my bones. "No, I don—Just answer, please."

"Winter break, with you."

"Okay," he exhales. "Before that?"

"Is this twenty questions? Because this is exactly the kind of questions I always expect guys to ask when they suggest playing that game." I never played it, never wanted to either. It's a stupid game for horny teenagers.

"Just answer me, Emory."

I pull my legs up, hugging them. "I don't know. August?"

He snorts. "Wow, okay. William sure didn't date you for your body then."

Is that supposed to be an insult or a compliment? I'm not sure. Either way, I guess it's safe to say I'm supposed to feel offended. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Miles takes a few steps back, his back hitting the door, leaning against it. "You're hot. You know you are. And given that he always commented on your body, I assumed he was in this whole relationship *for* your body."

"Sun talks too much," I say aloud, regretting it immediately.

"She does. Anyway, guess William wanted something else from you then."

"He loved me." I cross my arms over my chest, not wanting to even entertain the thought that William was just using me. We've been dating for quite a while, and yes, maybe he did make occasional comments about how I

should eat less, or work out more, or how I look in general. But even so, he still loved me. I know he did. Our relationship was good if we ignored the whole body-talk.

“Hm, I’m sure he did.”

“What’s this whole questionnaire about, Miles?”

He looks out of the window, avoiding my eyes when he asks, “Is there any way you could be pregnant?”

I start to laugh. A full-on belly laughter. The tipping over kind of laughter.

Me?

Pregnant?

HA! No.

“I’m on the pill,” I remind him. He should know, he asked like three times before we’ve had sex. “And on top of that, we used a condom, Miles. As there was nobody else but you for a long while, the answer is no. There’s no way I am pregnant.”

He slides a hand down his face, then scratches his neck. Relieved. He’s relieved. “Okay.”

“It’s just a stomach bug. People get sick sometimes, you know.”

“Okay.”

“Besides, I’m on my period anyway. Well, it’s like a spo—You do not need to hear about that. Just take my word for it, okay?”

“Okay.”

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Chapter 24

“au soleil sous la pluie”—Les Champs-Elysées by Pomplamoose, John Schroeder

Miles

“Daddy, look!” Brooke pulls on the sleeve of my sweater to get my attention. And so naturally, I abandon my talk with Colin to look at my daughter instead.

Brooke holds up her animal cracker, trying to mimic the sound frogs make. “It’s a frog.”

“It is,” I say, pretending to be all shocked. Then I lean in closer to her like I’m about to tell her a secret and whisper, “You know who loves frogs?” According to Aaron and Colin, she is one hell of a frog fan.

Brooke shakes her head. “Who?”

“Lily.” I point across to table right at her. Now, I know you’re not supposed to point a finger at people but come on. Brooke most definitely would’ve asked *which* Lily I’m talking about, despite only knowing one in total.

“Yes?” She looks up, Brooke’s face gleaming with curiosity. “Do you love frogs, Milly?”

As my heart seems to stop beating, every single one of my friend’s heads turn to me, eyes snapping to my face like they fear me dying right on the spot. And honestly, I might.

Brooke meant to say “Lily,’ I know. Yet hearing her say her mother’s name does things to me. None of them are good.

If Emory was here, I’m sure she, too, would be looked at, or she would look at me. Either way, right now, for once, I

really wish Emory was here with me because then I wouldn't be the only one being looked at. But she's at home, still sick.

"I do," Lily eventually confirms, having had more strength to recover from a shock nobody was prepared for. Though, maybe I am the only one shocked.

Brooke reaches her hand over the table or tries to. "You have it."

"Oh, no, Brooklyn. It's your cracker."

"But I like the elephant more."

"You good?" Colin asks, leaning closer so he doesn't summon the cafeteria's gossip people. Bringing Brooke to St. Trewery with me still shocks people. It's been over a month since they found out, I thought they'd let it go by now. They haven't.

"Yeah." The word comes out softer than I thought, making it sound only half as convincing.

"She wasn't talking about…"

"I know." I stroke a hand through my daughter's hair. At this point, this gesture might as well be a way of mine to calm my own nerves. Brooke's hair is soft, and surprisingly, not tangled at all. "Still weird hearing it."

"Okay, guys, about tomorrow." Aaron takes a seat right next to Sofia, immediately handing her a croissant. I'm not sure where he got it from, but it isn't from *this* cafeteria. "*Red Huts*, tomorrow. Y'all watched the tapes?"

"Dude, we're on the same team. We watched them *together*," Colin reminds him.

Aaron sticks his tongue out like we're five years old again, mocking Colin. "I'm just making sure you guys are prepared. Nate's a great goalie."

"So is Parker." Grey nods toward the cafeteria doors, right to where Parker Griffin is standing, currently talking to about five girls at once.

"Yeah, whatever. Doesn't anyone else think it's weird that practice is off today? I mean, one day before the game?"

Aaron is definitely too hung up on small things that don't matter at all. We're ready for this game.

"Coach's busy," Colin says. "Not sure what he's doing, but he told me he's busy."

I snort. If anyone should know about Coach's plans it would be Colin, you know, the *son* of the Coach. However, as it seems, this time I know more for once. "He's looking at Kindergarten spots for Reece."

Colin gapes at me. "How do *you* know that?"

"Because he told me," I answer. "Actually, he asked me if I had considered any schools for Brooke yet, and when I said no, he invited me to tag along. But that seemed kind of strange, so I respectfully declined his offer."

"Oh, my God. Brooke and Reece should totally go to the same school! At least then they both know *someone*." I mean, I guess that seems plausible. Brooke is shy, at least at first, so I guess having someone around she knows makes sense.

"Daddy?" Brooke stands up on the bench. I immediately reach beside me, making sure she doesn't fall off. She sneaks herself onto my lap, sitting back down, facing me. "When we go home, Memory is okay again, right?" Her eyes are filled with hope, even starting to tear up.

I knew Brooke loved Emory way before we've gotten married, and way before she moved in with us as well. But the past few weeks have shown me a whole new side to their relationship. Brooke actually walks up to Emory and asks her for help. She doesn't do that with anyone else but me. I know Brooke never even asked Maeve for help, and she used to live with her.

"She'll be fine." Hopefully.

"If not, Daddy, you just kiss her and Memory be okay again, okay?"

I don't think that's how it works. "Sure."

↠ ♡ ↞

Grey unlocks the front door at the same time as I let Brooke down to the floor. She immediately runs inside the house but stops in her tracks quickly after. “MEMORY!”

I look at Emory, words just so leaving my brain when I take in her hair. “Did you get a haircut?” Stupid question given that it’s now to her shoulders when her hair used to be down to her waist.

“Yeah, it looks hideous.”

“I love it!” Brooke cheers, almost jumping up Emory’s legs.

“It looks good, Em,” I tell her. It sure is a look. A little unusual for her, but it really suits her. “I take it you feel better then?” If she could go out to cut her hair, and get a roots touch-up, it’s a fair question.

“Uh, yeah. A little. I was at the doctor’s, and the hairdresser was just around the corner, so I took the chance before I delayed it again. My agent doesn’t actually want me to cut my hair, so this is going to be quite the surprise for him.”

I don’t understand why she allows some agency to control her life. I guess she has to stick to *some* kind of rules if she wants to grow as a model, but cutting her hair? That’s like a normal human thing, and she’s not allowed to do it? Stupid.

Besides, I’m pretty sure Emory doesn’t even want to be a model. She’s far more into art than fashion.

“Daddy?” Brooke waves me down, so naturally I kneel down to her. “You have to kiss Memory.”

“What? Why?” I’m pretty sure she’s doing alright, so there’s no need for a “healing” kiss.

Brooke leans in a little closer, whispering, “Because they do on the TV. All the Daddies kiss the Mommies when come home.”

I raise my eyebrows at my daughter. “And who allowed you to watch TV?”

She giggles, falling right into my arms all dramatically. “Uncle Grey.”

Of course he did. “Entertaining Brooke” to him means putting on the TV and praying she doesn’t ask him to play with her dolls together. He would do it, because Grey does anything for Brooke, but he still thinks it’s embarrassing, especially when someone comes walking in on the whole scenery.

I get up, turning toward Emory. She shakes her head, clearly having heard my daughter tell me to kiss her. So, I shrug. “Daughter’s orders.”

Laying my hands on Emory’s hips, I pull her in and before she gets a chance to complain, press my lips right to hers.

This kiss is a little deeper than the one we shared on our wedding day, she even makes a little sound, a mix between the softest of moan I have ever heard, and a sigh. And fuck do I eat that sound up.

That’s not supposed to happen. I am not supposed to find the sounds she makes hot. And they most definitely shouldn’t be giving me a boner. This isn’t good. So not good at all.

Before this could lead anywhere very dangerous, we’re interrupted by Brooke’s giggles. She quickly slaps her tiny hands over her mouth, then runs over to the stairs when I look at her.

“I love you, Daddy!” she yells, climbing up the stairs on all fours like some puppy would. I don’t even get to say it back because Brooke’s gone faster than my mind comprehends anything.

I tug Em a little closer, bring my mouth down to her ear and whisper, “The next kiss you get from me, you better know I meant it.”

Emory steps away from me, nervously fidgeting with her fingers. I’ve never seen her do this before.

“Are you hungry?” I change the topic, being hopeful she might actually want something to eat. But of course she

doesn’t.

“I need to talk to you, Miles.”

She follows me into the kitchen. Even though *she* isn’t hungry, but I know a little blond girl who is. Brooke could eat all day and night long. Especially after a day at University. Must’ve been exhausting sitting around and being quiet for hours.

“Well, talk then.”

Em blows out some air, then takes an encouraging breath right after.

Okay? This is strange, right? Like,… it’s just weird. There’s no way a stupid kiss could’ve shaken her up like *this*.

“You don’t want to divorce me yet, do you, darling? Because I swear, that would be a record of some sorts.”

She doesn’t laugh, but this is Emory, so I’m not surprised. “I, uh…”

“Just say it. I won’t bite you.” Not during normal talks at least. Besides, this is so not the Emory I know. My Emory usually just spits words out without thinking whether they might hurt someone. She lives by being brutally honest.

“Remember how I said I was at the doctor’s?” I nod. Difficult to forget when she mentioned it like two minutes prior. “Miles, it wasn’t like a *normal* doctor.”

I look at her, now confused. “What is a *not*-normal doctor?”

“I was at an OB-GYN.”

Oh.

Oh.

Yeah, I don’t like where this is going.

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Chapter 25

“‘cause, your eyes are filled with questions / but all my answers lead to tears”—Bad News by Johnny Orlando

Emory

“JUST TELL HIM IN ALL CALMNESS,” the internet said. “He won’t take it badly,” they said.

Well guess what dear fellow internet user; if the guy you’re about to break the news to is traumatized from his last experience with it, he will not take the news very well. Even when said in “calmness,” whatever that is supposed to mean.

I think he’s already suspecting where this is going because Miles’s face suddenly drains of all colors, he even drops the spoon in his hands.

“Say it,” he practically begs, his voice small and filled with fear. “I need you to say it, Emory.”

“I’m pregnant.”

“No,” leaves him in a breath. “No, no, no. No.” He sinks down to the floor, rakes his hands through his hair and pulls at the ends of his locks. “You said—And we used—*No*.”

Honestly, I wish I could say I was expecting Miles to react differently; that he would be more supportive or shrug it off like it’s nothing. But this reaction, denying it, not wanting to hear of it, it’s exactly what I thought he would do. It still doesn’t feel very nice though.

“I can’t—” He gasps for air and hooks two fingers into the collar of his shirt, pulling on it. “Emory, I can’t be the cause

of another death.”

I kneel down to Miles, cupping his face with my hands so he’ll look at me when I say, “I am not dying.”

“If you die because of me, your parents will actually murder me. Fuck, *I* will murder me.”

“No you won’t,” I choke out. “And I will not die, Miles. Millie’s death was a complication during her c-section. You know that.”

He bobs his head, taking deep breaths, exhaling even deeper. “What if you have complications? What if you die, Em?” He sneaks his arms around my body, pulling me in closer. “Wha—”

“Don’t think about it.”

“I can’t *not* think about it.”

I’m not going to lie, the first thought I had when that stupid OB-GYN told me I was pregnant, was, “I’m going to die.” For a split moment there, I had counted the months to my death, weighted out if my death is worth birthing a child that I will then never even meet.

I’m not as selfless as my sister was. I want to live, and I’m sorry, but if I have to choose between my own life or the one of my *unborn* child, I will choose mine.

It wasn’t until Dr. Manson asked me if I wanted to get an abortion that I realized I really didn’t want one, unless truly necessary. Like if *my* life depended on it. So I told Dr. Manson what had happened to my sister, and she immediately understood my fears, my reaction to the news. She couldn’t guarantee my life, obviously, but she still said some encouraging words, named numbers that made dying during childbirth seem less likely than I thought. I mean, around 700 deaths each year is still quite the number, but compared to childbirths each year, it’s… okay-ish. I guess the U.S. having the most maternal mortality rate among developed countries is one thing to worry about, but I really shouldn’t see dying as that high of an option.

I am healthy, and an adult. That doesn't automatically make me make it of it alive, but it does give me a slight advantage.

"Em?"

I wiggle out of his hug, just enough so I can look at him. "Yeah?"

Miles takes my hand in his, his eyes staying on my ring rather than my eyes. "Promise me you won't die."

I sigh softly. "I can't promise that."

"I need you to, please." He strokes his thumb over my knuckles, then adjusts my ring so the butterfly isn't all too crooked sideways. "Em, I can't go through it again. I can't have another one of you die. I can't raise another motherless child. So please, please don't die."

"Okay," I whisper. "Miles, I am not going to die. I promise." Not sure if I can keep said promise, but I will try. For my own sake. I want to be alive.

His free hand finds to my stomach, his eyes following. "You don't feel pregnant," he says. I know this is just him trying not to accept the pregnancy, the traumatized part in his brain not wanting this to be real. But how the hell am I supposed to *feel* pregnant?

"I'm like eight weeks along only. So…"

"Right," he breathes. "But you don't look pregnant either."

"Miles, again. Eight weeks along."

He looks up, meeting my eyes. "We have… about seven months to make this right."

My eyebrows fall. "Make what right?"

"We did everything backwards, Em. You don't make a baby, get married, fall in love. That's not the right order."

"Fall in… love?" I almost choke on the word. Fuck, love and I really aren't close friends. The only people I truly love are my parents, Millie and that tiny blond girl who is basically a clone of Millie.

Miles nods. “That’s not the right order. Children deserve more than two parents who barely manage to not kill each other.”

“But one doesn’t plan to fall in love, Miles.”

“No, and I don’t mean *us* falling in love, but we can try to get somewhere where we don’t want to slit the other’s throat when they open their mouth.”

“But you just said—”

He looks up at the ceiling, closing his eyes for a second like he’s gathering his thoughts. When he looks back down he says, “I’m sorry. My phrasing was off. My head’s just all over the place right now. But on a serious note, the chances of us ever falling in love is at about minus a million percent. No need to try anything there.”

That I can agree with. “So, no weapons?” I huff. “Does that mean I have to stop putting poison in every drink I try to hand you as well?”

His eyes are filled with fear, and still he tries to appear like I haven’t just shared awful news with him. “Nah, we’ve got to keep *some* traditions.”

A smile tugs on my lips. Okay, so Miles can joke again, that’s… good. It’s more like him. More like the guy I used to hate; never being serious in a serious situation. But joking Miles seems better than breaking-down Miles.

“We’ve got this, okay?” Miles plants one of his hands on my jaw, the other one stays on my stomach as he looks deeply into my eyes. “We… We can do this. Somehow.”

“Yes, Miles, we got this.” *Somehow*. We’ll have to make it work, I guess we all know that. Being able to coparent is important. There’s no need to put a child through the trauma of constantly fighting parents.

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Chapter 26

“kept me safe and sound at night”—Butterfly Fly Away by Miley Cyrus, Billy Ray Cyrus

Miles

THE MORE LOGICAL THINKING PART in my brain says I should wait a couple of days before I break the news to my daughter… The other half, the one that’s fried right now, this side tells me to just get it over with.

All of Brooke’s life I have told her she’d be an only child, that she’d never have a sibling. A sibling for her was never planned, not if I could help it. Clearly, I couldn’t help it.

Well, I did keep it to myself for the rest of the day. During dinner, I let Grey and Brooke do most of the talking. Emory and I were both pretty quiet, I’d say. I’m sure Grey’s suspecting something being off, but he wouldn’t ask. He usually waits until one of us is ready to talk about whatever’s bothering us, and frankly, I really appreciate that about him.

When I walk into my daughter’s room, I find her on the floor, playing with the couple of dolls Grey got her for Christmas. But when she hears the door creak, Brooke immediately turns around and looks up at me.

Brooke’s already ready for bed, but like I mentioned before, I’m not forcing her to go to sleep. So unless she asks me to tug her in or I notice she’s getting cranky because she’s tired, I won’t tell her to go to bed. Sometimes she waits for me to ask her if she’s tired, probably because she’s too engrossed in either playing or watching a movie. Other

times she comes right up to me, telling me she wants to sleep. I happen to think this way of giving her a choice to make her own decisions even at a young age teaches her she can be independent in the future. That she is *allowed* to make decisions.

Tonight it's the former; me having to ask.

I pick her up from the floor, stroking her hair out of her face. "Are you tired, little monkey?"

Brooke nods, then rubs the back of her hand over one of her eyes while she yawns. "Can I go night-night, Daddy?"

"Of course." I carry Brooke over to her bed, gently lay her down and tug her in. She reaches beside her, grasping Mr. Fluffles and clutching him tightly to her chest.

Perhaps this is a bad idea. Telling her she'll be a big sister in a couple of months when she's tired. I should sit her down and tell her, explain it thoroughly. Or maybe I'm just thinking too much about it. There's a high chance she won't even care, maybe she'll just be excited. But there's also a chance she'll start to cry and threaten me to run away.

No. Four-year-olds don't threaten their parents to run away, right? That's a teenage-age kind of thing, isn't it? What do I know, she's my first child. I've never even *babysat* a kid before her.

"Daddy? When we get a pet, can it be a bunny?"

"When did I say you can have a pet?" As far as I'm concerned, I never uttered such a thing.

Brooke grins widely. "Memory say yes."

"Did she now?" I raise my eyebrows, crossing my arms over my chest like that would make her tell me the truth. Brooke's not a liar. Not once has she been dishonest with me, at least I didn't catch it if she was.

So when Brooke nods and reaches for my hand at the same time, I believe her. "She say when after school, we get a cat."

A *cat*? Why not a dog? Cats are so… scratchy. They break everything, and they're jumpy, and they meow.

Dogs are way cooler.

Hold on. I didn't agree to a dog. Or a cat. And I certainly did not agree to a bunny.

"We'll see, okay?" Emory will somehow find a way to convince me though, I just know it. She'll annoy me with it until I want to either bury myself alive, or give in. Or if she could help it, I give in and still bury myself alive.

But either way, there's a much more important conversation we need to have. "Brooke, do you remember when you asked me for a little sister?" It's been a while, so she might as well have forgotten about it.

She nods enthusiastically. That's… good? Right? Enthusiasm. "Then I can play with her. But she not get Mr. Fluffles, right, Daddy?"

I shake my head. "No, he's all yours." Boy or girl, it won't matter, they'll get their own stuffed animal.

"Do I get a little sister now?"

I have the strong urge to sigh but stop myself from doing so. I fear Brooke sensing the turmoil inside of me if it gets out. "Maybe it'll be a little brother."

Brooke scrunches up her nose in disgust. "No, not a brother, Daddy."

"You know"—I take her tiny little hand in mine, stroking my thumb over the back of it—"Emory and I don't know if it's going to be a girl or a boy yet."

Brooke gasps, pulling her hand away from mine to slap it right over her mouth. "Memory is a mommy!"

I chuckle. "She will be. In a couple of months."

And then what I feared would happen, happens. Brooke drops her arm to her side, her face falling into a sad expression. However, what I have to find out, she's not afraid of me abandoning her or anything like that, which I thought would make her upset.

"But why Memory is not my mommy?" she questions in a yawn, barely even keeping her eyes open anymore.

My heart almost stops beating, killing me with a single question. I am not ready to tell Brooke about Millie yet. She knows a few things, not a lot though. Brooke knows Millie has died, but I'm not sure she really understands what that means. She also never really asked about her mother anyway, so I didn't see a reason to force a conversation about Millie onto Brooke.

But for once I really appreciate the fact that she gets distracted easily and falls asleep in record time. Because when I lean down, plant a kiss to her forehead and say, "Go to sleep, Brookie," she doesn't complain one bit.

I stroke the pad of my thumb over the bridge of her nose, watching as Brooke closes her eyes. "I love you, Brookie." I lean forward and press my lips to her forehead.

"I love you, too, Daddy," she mumbles, half asleep already. I smile at her words. She has no idea how much those mean to me, and I'm already dreading the day she will decide that she's too grown up to say them daily. It's alright though, I'll just make the ones she says now count and lock them up for all of eternity. "Night night."

"Good night, baby."

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Chapter 27

“if she with it, then I’m with it”—Grrrls by Lizzo

Emory

My boobs don’t look bigger.

You’d think now that I know I’m pregnant, I’d see a difference to my body. I don’t. Maybe I’m a bit bloated, but that’s it.

Hold on, do boobs even get bigger at eight weeks pregnant? Perhaps I should’ve paid more attention in biology class back in high school. Did they even teach us about that? I doubt it.

I lay both of my hands on my boobs, pushing them up, then turn sideways to look at myself in the mirror from a different angle. I still see no difference.

“Em?” Miles says, sticking his head inside the bathroom then knocks on the door. Wrong order, I’d say.

I stand there, frozen in place, still somehow looking at my husband. God, *husband*, that still sounds so strange to me. “You know, people usually knock *before* they enter, not *after*.”

He shrugs. “Your sunshine friend is here. You didn’t tell her why we’ve gotten married, have you?” Miles looks at my body instead of my eyes, and only then do I realize I am still standing here half naked with my hands on my boobs.

In seconds, I pull my shirt back over my chest and cover myself up.

“No, but I feel like she knows.” She’s been asking me the most random questions about Miles all week, especially

about our *marriage*. Like how we went from hating each other to rushing a wedding and stuff like that.

“She sure does. She’s Grey’s sister. And I swear to you, the entire Davis family has analyzing people in their blood. Sun probably knew you are pregnant way before you did.”

It wouldn’t surprise me. Even though she’s the bubbly kind of person, sometimes naïve, and too kind, she still has this talent to read people, figure them out in just an hour.

“Em, can we talk later? I think we both had enough time to think this whole thing over, and we should have a serious conversation.”

A serious conversation? What does he want to talk about? How to coparent a child neither of us saw coming? Where said child will live after we get a divorce?

Shit. How the fuck are we going to break *those* news to my parents now? My mother will already disapprove of a divorce, will tell us that we can go to couple’s therapy and sort out our arguments like that. Or maybe she won’t be too upset, given that she didn’t even want me marrying Miles in the first place. But a child changes things. Maybe then she’ll try talking us into a marriage neither of us wants.

Well, it’s *our* lives, right? At the end of the day, we call the shots. We decide, not her. But even so, she will forever look at me with disgust more than she does already.

“Yeah, sure. Are you going out?” I ask, taking in his *formal* appearance. He wears an expensive suit, a *Brioni* suit, I’d guess. He wore a similar one to our wedding. I do have to say, he looks good in it. It’s a little tight, but not to the point where it would look odd. I think Miles just prefers his suits tight and not loose, quite the opposite to his streetwear.

For as long as I can remember, I *loathed* Miles’s hairstyle. I didn’t like that he had longer hair than the average man would. He doesn’t neatly gel it back, not that he could even if he tried to. His hair goes over his ears, and I wonder how long it would be if he didn’t have those curls. Probably as long as mine now that I cut it.

He did something different to his hair today. It's not as messy as usual. It looks like he put some effort into his looks today, and wouldn't I be married to him, I'd honestly think he's going on a date. He still could, but he wouldn't cheat on me, even if we're not technically dating.

Did he answer my question? I'm not sure he did, either way, I don't ask again.

"Oh, Miles, I created an application form for you, and I'd like you to fill it out," I say, suddenly remembering said form. "It's in my nightstand drawer, just take it out whenever you've got a minute to spare."

He clears his throat, blinking at me. "An application form?" I nod. "What for?"

"It's a boyfriend application form. I have all of my potential partners take them. Even fake ones." I don't but seeing the look on his face was worth the two hours I spent on creating that thing. "I forgot to have you fill it out *before* we got married, so you'll have to do it now."

He hums, still unsure whether I'm joking or not. "What if you don't like my answers?"

I shrug unapologetically. "Then we'll have to get a divorce, sorry."

Miles doesn't think it's that funny. "Speaking of divorce," he begins, "I don't want us to get divorced while you're still pregnant, nor shortly after giving birth. That seems rude."

I already guessed that, to be honest.

"And I don't want to leave you while he or she is still a literal baby. I want to be a part of that child's life, an *active* part. Not just exist and send birthday and Christmas gifts."

Leaning against the vanity, I look down to the floor, checking out the marble just to avoid his eyes. "It's going to be way over a year then, I take it?"

I don't want to take this child away from Miles. I wouldn't do that, ever.

"We don't have to stay married for longer than we agreed on. But I do would like to ask you to at least keep on living

with Brooke and me for a while longer. Or at least near us, somewhere close by."

I look up, meeting his eyes again. "You don't want to keep the baby with you?" I kind of figured he'd want to for Brooke's sake, just so we wouldn't separate them. Having a sibling and not growing up with them sucks.

"No," he says. "I have my hands full with Brooke. And then hockey as well. And I really don't want to take you away from our child. Children need a mother way more than they need a father."

That's not true. Why does he keep thinking that? A child needs both of its parents. Growing up without a dad can alter a person's brain. They're more likely to turn to drugs and grow up angry. Growing up without a mother affects the child's sense of security. And there are so many more reasons why a child needs a mother *and* a father.

So, both losses have severe downsides.

"We will figure this out when we need to, Miles. It's too early to think about it." I walk past him, done with this conversation.

Making my way down the stairs, I can already hear Sun more or less argue with Grey. I never know what they're arguing about if I'm being completely honest. Sometimes I believe not even Grey and Sun know what they're arguing about.

Then suddenly, they go deadly silent. Either they heard someone come down the stairs, or one of them just brutally murdered the other.

As I round the corner, Grey nods at me in a greeting way. "Where's that husband of yours? He said he'd just go get you and then we'll leave."

"Leave to go where?"

"Looking at houses around Manhattan," he answers. "You know, for when we move there."

Right. Moving. I had planned a whole summer filled with travelling the world, but I suppose my plans have changed.

First, I married Miles King, which still gave me *some* chances I could travel with Sun. But, uh, then I found out I am pregnant, smashing my summer plans between two rocks.

I suppose this summer is now filled with doctor visits, buying whatever babies might need, and taking stupid courses. Do people actually take those pregnancy courses or is that just a movie thing? I don't think Millie went to those, ever. Then again, she was sixteen years old and didn't want anyone to find out she was pregnant in the first place.

"Are you moving in together *again?* With Miles having a *wife*?" Sun asks, her face twitching in either surprise or contempt.

Grey shakes his head immediately. "Nah, but we want to live closer together, you know? Besides, I think Aaron could use the distraction. Instead of drinking himself to oblivion, a few hours looking at houses will do him good."

Will it though? Sofia left America last Friday to go back to Germany. Ever since she's gone, Aaron hasn't done *anything* but drink. I'm telling you; his lips are practically attached to any kind of liquor bottle at this point.

"Are you taking Brooke with you?" I ask to which Grey nods. At least that way Sun and I have the house to ourselves.

"I just think it's stupid that you don't take Emory with you guys. She's supposed to move in as well, isn't she? Emory should *like* where she'll be living."

Sun's not wrong. But unless Miles decides on an area that has a criminal rate higher than some prisons, or the smallest house imaginable, I'm good with it. Somehow, I trust his taste in houses.

"Sorry, we were looking for Mr. Fluffles." Miles comes around the corner, Brooke in his arms. "You ready?"

"Yes." Grey jumps off the barstool, grabs his wallet from the kitchen counter and speeds over to his best friend.

Miles’s eyes linger on mine a little while longer, but then he turns around and heads out the door.

Ever since I told him I’m pregnant, the tension between us is unbearable. We always disliked each other. Well, not *always* but the past couple of years. But recently, this isn’t even hatred, it’s just… neither of us knows what to say. The only times Miles talks to me is when he asks me what I want to eat. When I say I don’t want anything, he spends the next ten minutes telling me how important it is I eat.

And five minutes ago, I guess.

Oh, and yesterday, when I took out my tablet to get back into drawing, he deadass asked me if the tablet wasn’t a little too heavy for me to carry. A stupid *tablet*.

Next thing I know, I’m no longer allowed to wear clothes because they could be “too heavy.”

“I think Alice is a cute name. Or Amelia. Or Bonnie!” Sun suddenly begins to speak. She has a few loose papers lying in front of her on the counter, drawing a table, then fills one side of it in with the names she just uttered. “Or even better yet; Sunny!”

“What?”

“You’re pregnant, aren’t you? So, if it’s a girl, I think Sunny would be a great name option.”

Maybe this is the point where I should question how she knows about it, but like we’ve already established, she probably knew it even before I did.

“I love you, Sunshine, but I am *not* going to name my child after you.”

Sun rolls her eyes and crosses off a name on the list. “Fine. How do we feel about ‘Violet?’”

“I should discuss this with Miles, not you.” Well, *if* we ever have a normal conversation again.

Sun waves her hand around, dismissing my indirect plea for her to stop. “Probably, but we can find names you like and then suggest them to Miles.”

“Or we sit down in the living room and watch a movie while I cry out my entire soul.” Tears are already pricking at the corners of my eyes. When was the last time I truly cried? Probably my birthday because it was yet another one I couldn’t celebrate with Millie.

God, stupid hormones.

My best friend drops her pen, looks up and pouts at me. “I can’t believe you’re actually pregnant. You think it’s going to look just like Brooke?”

I’ve been thinking about this all week long, and every time I think about it, I want to punch myself over and over again. All this makes me feel like I am stealing my sister’s life. Or rather the life she had wished for herself.

I am married to the guy she thought she’d marry. Yes, they have a kid, but she is dead, so technically, *he* has a kid and… well, she doesn’t. Again, with the guy of her dreams. And now here I am, having a child with the very same guy.

To top this of, I got into the modeling career for her. I don’t like it very much, but it’s not like I can change my life anymore if I want to be successful. Sure, I can always go with social work, but having Iris around every now and then made me realize that I don’t think I could ever work as a social worker.

Anyway, will my child look like Brooke? “Probably,” I say. At least them being siblings will be kind of obvious. Oh god, and they’re also going to be cousins. I am so sorry to both of them already.

“Well, good then. That girl is the sweetest little kid in the whole entire world!” Sun smacks her hands onto the counter tops. “Anyway, does that mean your marriage to Miles just got *real*?”

What?

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Chapter 28

“no, we don’t share the same blood / you’re my brother and I love you, that’s the truth”—Brother by Kodaline

Miles

We didn’t find an apartment we liked, and all the houses we *did* like, they didn’t have any other for sale ones around, so they were useless to us. How difficult could be finding four houses on the same street, available at the same time?

Apparently really fucking difficult.

Every house or apartment Aaron entered, I’m sure he left a few tears as a mark of his presence there. The whole four hours we were apartment slash house hunting, he mumbled all about how Sofia should be here, how they should look at houses *together*, find the perfect one they’ll want to spend the rest of their days at. It wasn’t until Colin reminded him that Aaron wanted to make use of his architecture college degree that he eventually stopped babbling about how useless this house hunting is. To him it really is if he plans on building a house for himself in the future.

But then he muttered all about how Sofia and him should plan the exterior of their future house together. Which made all of it just ten times worse because “Sofia won’t be there to plan it all”.

At some point, even my daughter told him to suck it up. Not in those exact words, but she shoved an animal cracker into his mouth and said something along the lines of, “Now

you don’t have to be sad anymore.” It worked for a whole ten minutes.

Sun and Emory are back at our house, having decided to have a girls night with my daughter while I’m stuck at Colin and Aaron’s house, helping my friends deal with an adult child.

Aaron keeps nursing on his sixth beer for the day and keeps asking for stronger liquor. If he keeps drinking like this, I might fear he has a serious problem with alcohol. He doesn’t, I know that much. But this isn’t healthy anyway.

“Suck it up, dude,” I say eventually, seating myself beside him. I’ve had enough with him. From what he has told us, Sofia even told him she wasn’t saying goodbye before she left, just had to go and sort some things out. “She said it wasn’t a goodbye.”

Aaron lets out a gruff, then leans his head against my shoulder. With the bottle attached to his lips, he asks, “Have you ever been in love?”

My heart comes to a complete stop. Neither of my friends ever asked me this question, and I know if his brain wasn’t filled with alcohol and sadness, he wouldn’t have to ask to know the answer. He doesn’t mean to hurt me with his question, and still it stings.

But as I don’t want to see Aaron bawling once again, I bring an arm around his shoulders, patting him in an attempt to console him. “You do know I have a daughter, right?”

“Mhm,” he hums. “But Brooke wasn’t planned, so that doesn’t guarantee you were in love with Millie. And you’re not in love with your wife either.”

My heart aches at the mention of her. It still hurts as much as it did almost five years ago. Everything that reminds me of her just hurts. How could I still possibly miss someone so much? I don’t even feel that way when I think about my father, and I certainly had him in my life way longer than I did her.

Whenever I think about him, I do feel sad, but more relieved because my father was sick. He was in more pain than he admitted to. So when I think about his death, I'm sort of glad he no longer has to suffer. I miss him, deeply. And yes, it hurts, but not as much anymore.

When I think about Millie, my heart squeezes and I can feel the emptiness in my heart she left behind when she died. Just hearing her name makes me feel every beat of my heart, every muscle in my body. And they all start to hurt.

Even four and a half years later.

"Alright," Colin says with an awkward chuckle, walking up to Aaron and almost ripping the bottle right out of his hands. "I think you've had enough."

Aaron disagrees, but he quickly forgets Colin even took the beer from him and turns his attention back on me. "So, Miles, how'd you get over Millie?" He slurps on his words, dragging some out longer than necessary. I'm not even sure he notices.

I didn't. I don't think I'll ever get over her. Emory is the only other woman I can stand being in my life as more than… a quick fuck. And even those I barely have. But I can't tell Aaron that, not now, anyway. "Ah, well, you know," I sigh. "She died." I snap a finger against his forehead, hoping it'll make my response seem less… Less what? Less stupid? Less joking? I do not know. But because I don't want my friends to think her death hasn't affected me at all, I quickly add, "Took some time to adjust."

It's the truth. It did take a whole lot of time to find back to life with both of my feet without her. All for my daughter, but I am here now, right? I can get through my days without breaking. I can even flirt with other women without feeling guilty. Shit, I could even marry Emory without regretting it. *For Brooke.*

"Then you fucked her twin sister," he comments, hiccupping. He slaps a hand to his face like he actually heard himself say what just left his mouth.

I don’t tell him I technically fucked Emory first, neither of my friends ever asked. They know I’ve dated Emory before, but that’s it.

Wait. Do they know Emory is pregnant? I haven’t uttered a word to anyone, and I won’t. Not before Emory and I actually talked about how we’re going to break the news to our friends. Or my friends and her family.

“Miles-y has a type,” he adds mockingly. He almost *sings* the damn words.

“I dated Em even before I was with Millie, Aaron,” I remind him. God, our history is so weird.

“Like I said, you’ve got a type.” Is that so bad? “Blondes with green eyes.” *Oh*. His mouth opens wide, having made some strange connection I’m almost too afraid to ask about. “Do you have a thing for my sister?”

Lily? Me?

HA.

It was fun messing with Colin, I admit. When they first started seeing each other, I knew he didn’t like me in the same room as her without him. My reputation makes it pretty obvious why. But I’d never go for my friend’s girls, or potential girls. Their exes are off-limits as well. And especially *siblings*.

Seeing the vein on his forehead almost pop whenever he found Lily and me in the kitchen together brightened up my days more than I would like to admit. It’s embarrassing how much joy that brought me.

Now he no longer minds it. Too bad.

I shake my head with a sigh.

“For me then?”

Seriously? “I don’t like dicks.”

“Good, because I really don’t like you that way, man. Like, I love you, but I definitely love Sofia way more. And I—”

“Shut up, Aaron,” Grey laughs, now standing in front of our best friend. “You’ll regret all the shit you’re saying right now.” I don’t think he would. Aaron regrets almost nothing.

I’m glad Grey stopped him from talking though. The only people in my life I ever said those three words to are my daughter, Millie, and my parents, but even they barely got to hear it. Well, and Emory when we were dating.

“Do you miss Millie? Because…” I don’t hear the end of his sentence, still stuck at that one question.

Do I miss her?

Fuck, how could I not?

I’m not even sure if I miss her for my own selfish reasons, or because she simply died way too young and deserved to meet her daughter. Definitely for my own selfish reasons. And the other one as well.

Shit, I just miss her. Every single day of my life.

He asks more questions, but Grey is kind enough to answer for me. And the little answers I do provide for Aaron, I don’t even acknowledge at all. I’m not even sure they make sense.

In fact, I barely acknowledge anything that’s going on around me. The next thing I know, Aaron is no longer seated beside me, or in the room at all, neither is Lily. But Grey and Colin are both sitting opposite me, just looking at me like they’re expecting me to tell them some big news.

And once again I ask myself; do they know?!

“Are you okay?” Colin breaks the silence first.

“Yeah.” I don’t sound very convincing.

“Well, Aaron did ask pretty intense questions.”

I pick up my glass of water, taking a sip. “Nothing new to me.”

“Oh, cut the bullshit, Miles.” Grey groans rather angrily. I’m kind of offended if I’m being completely honest. “You may fool the entire world with your macho-play-pretend. You can fool everyone, including your own family. But you cannot fool either of us.”

My eyes switch between Grey and Colin, not sure who to look at. “What do you mean?”

“Seriously? Playing dumb now?” Did Grey get abducted by aliens, and they sent a clone of him, because this man right here is *not* Grey Davis as I know him. “You’ve been stuck in your head this entire week, love.”

“Was not. I’m the usual me.”

Colin raises his brows at me, calling me out on my lies. “We already have one of us losing their mind over a girl. Whatever goes on in your life is usually way worse, so let us help before it gets *even* worse.”

I snort. *Help*? Yeah, I don’t think they can help anything at all.

“Is it Emory?” Grey asks, leaning forward, his arms resting on his legs. “You falling for her already? Is that why you’ve been ignoring her for the most part all week long?”

I gag. “Falling for Emory? Me? Yeah right.” I’d never. Or, well, I’d never fall for her *again*.

“If it’s not that, then what the fuck is it, Miles?”

I lean back and look up at the ceiling. Before I even know what I’m going to say, words leave me. “She’s pregnant,” I mumble, though when neither of my friends reacts, I lift my head to find out whether they’re still breathing or not. Or maybe they haven’t heard me.

They look at me, eyes fixed on my face, their lips slightly parted. It takes a lot to shock my friends, especially with *my* life, yet here we are.

“Pregnant?” Colin is the first to speak. “As in, there’s a whole ass baby inside of her?”

“Technically it’s no—”

“Pregnant!?” Grey blurts out, coughing. “As in, sperm made it through her uterus and fertilized an egg?”

“I wouldn’t have said it li—”

“Pregnant?!” Colin cuts me off mid-sentence. “As in, she is going to be a *mother*?”

“Yes, preg—”

“Pregnant!” Grey looks at Colin like he needs to make sure Colin heard the same thing he did. “As in that one

fucking time you fucking fucked her, you both somehow created a fucking life."

That's a lot of fucks in one sentence.

"It is yours, right?" They both ask in unison, heads snapping toward me.

"Yes, it's mine." Though I kind of wish it wasn't. I mean, shit. No, this sounds so wrong. No matter how I'd twist it, I'd still sound like an asshole.

The point is, I just never wanted another child. Okay, I *did*, before Brooke was born and her mother died. But by now I had crossed that off the list of things I want in life.

Another child wasn't in the cards for me. Especially not with *Emory*.

I'll take care of that child, obviously. I know I'll love him or her like I do Brooke. It just never occurred to me that I'd ever get to raise another child again. I never *wanted* to do it again, not without Millie. Now that the impossible did turn out to be possible, I'm not going to abandon my responsibilities or just disappear. Hell, I'll even take care of Emory in the run, god knows she needs someone to make sure she stays alive.

"Sorry," Grey then says, clearly having realized the shock him and Colin were in. "And why don't you talk to Emory then?"

I sigh, once again looking up at the white ceiling. I come to think this stupid ceiling is like a safe space for me right now. It doesn't look back at me with judge-y eyes or opens its mouth. It's just there for me to look at, gather my thoughts and let me feel like I'm by myself for a moment.

"I guess I'm just…"

"Scared?" Colin fills in for me when I don't continue, even a minute later.

I nod slowly. "Yeah, that."

I feel the couch beside me dip on both sides, but since I know that's only Grey and Colin moving closer to me, I still don't bother to look away from my friend the ceiling.

“Why? You already have a daughter, and you did a great job raising her. Actually, you’re *still* doing a great job.”

I know that. I may not be the perfect father figure, but I do happen to think I’m doing some things right.

“It’s not the parenting part I’m afraid of.” I sit up, my elbows pressing into my thighs as I hold my head up with my hands. “It’s… Emory dying.”

Two hands lie on my back for comfort, and even though I think that kind of consoling doesn’t do much for me, I still don’t want them to stop trying. “I already killed Millie. I can’t be the cause another of them died. I can’t—”

Those stupid hot tears from a little over a week ago appear again, rolling down my… nose?

“You do know you didn’t kill Millie, right?” Colin says in a much calmer, empathic voice than I’m used to. “It was a complication.”

Why do they all keep saying that?

It is my fault. I got her pregnant. If I hadn’t done that, she wouldn’t even have been in that position of life and death. Or… well, death.

“Millie wasn’t even seventeen yet. Pregnant women under the age of twenty are at a higher risk for complications, including death,” Grey states. *Of course he would know that.*

Every time someone asks where Brooke’s mother’s at, I do tell them she’s died. But I also say she was seventeen and not a week away from *turning* seventeen. The only people who know the truth behind her age are Aaron, Grey, and Colin. And, obviously, Millie’s family. But other than that, she was seventeen for everyone else.

I’m not even sure why I keep saying that. Perhaps because Millie never wanted people to know she was only sixteen when she got pregnant.

“Think about it, Miles. Emory could die *any* hour of *any* day. Are you afraid she might just drop dead on you when you’re in the same room as her?” Grey asks. I shake my

head. “Are you afraid she might be dead by the time you get back home?”

“No,” I snap. “But this is different.”

“How is it different?” Colin asks. “You’ve had *one* bad and traumatic experience, and yes, you’ve lost a whole lot that day. But that doesn’t mean it’ll happen again.”

“Exactly,” Grey agrees.

“I mean, don’t take my life as an example, but even if you do, I am still alive, right? I survived it. So will you if anything were to happen to Emory.”

Colin’s life as an example? Yeah, no thank you. He lost not only *one*, but *two* siblings to death. One to suicide, the other to cancer not so long ago.

“Nothing’s going to happen to Emory,” Grey says. “That woman will kick death’s ass if she has to.”

I sure hope so.

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Chapter 29

“a clock ticks till it breaks your glass / and I drown in you again”—Clarity by Zedd, Foxes

Emory

Miles: I know this is random, but do you want to go out tonight?

I’M ALMOST SURE I’VE BEEN staring at the text from Miles for a whole twenty minutes without ever replying.

Did Miles just ask me out? Like, on a *date*? That sounds wrong. Maybe he sent the text to the wrong number, but that also would be weird since we’re supposed to be happily married and disgustingly in love.

I must be taking too long to reply because he sends a follow-up text.

Miles: Brooke’s staying at Colin’s parents’ house. Not for the night, obviously, but she’s on a playdate with Reece, so I thought we could do something together.

Miles: Em? Are you there?

Miles: I can see you’re reading my texts.

Miles: Are you at home?

Emory: Yeah

Miles: “Yeah” to what, darling?

Emory: I don’t know, both.

Just as I hit send, the sliding door to the backyard opens and Miles comes marching inside. I’ve always wondered why he doesn’t use the front door, but I guess it makes sense. He rarely parks on the front side of the house as it takes five minutes longer to drive from and to St. Trewery. So logically, he parks in front of Aaron and Colin’s house, walks right through it, and therefore enters from the shared backyard.

“It’s not a date,” he says, then looks at his phone and back up. “Oh. Well, great then!”

“Where exactly are we going?”

“Pottery-painting.”

Painting? As in I get to hold a brush and paint, *and* I can use that to *paint*? A whole afternoon without having to take random pictures and hope they’re post-worthy. Sounds lovely. Amazing even.

God, I can’t remember the last time I held a real brush that’s not meant for makeup in my hands. Social Media and University steals all of my time away, and if I want to catch some sleep, I will have to give up something. And well, that’s painting.

Painting is a passion of mine I know will go nowhere. It used to calm me down, let me forget the world. It was especially useful after my sister’s death. But now it’s just… there. Or not since I don’t have the time to paint.

“You’re too stressed, and you shouldn’t be stressed. Especially not in your condition.”

“We’re like a month away from graduation, Miles. Of course I’m stressed.”

Miles walks around the table, reaches for both of my hands and pulls me up to my feet. He then lays his hands on

my shoulders and runs them down my arms like he's checking whether I am still in one piece or not. And knowing him, this is exactly what he is doing.

"I'm not made of glass, you know?"

Two hands now settle on either side of my jaw, Miles's thumbs brushing over my cheeks. "I know, but I can't help it."

My body relaxes with a soft exhale, a slight smile tugging on the corners of my mouth. Maybe I should feel bad for myself in some ways, but I don't. Miles is trying to protect me, even if it's a little exaggerated and he does *too* much of said protection. Yet I can't be mad. It annoys me, most of the time anyway. But it's also… nice.

"Go put on some clothes you don't mind getting ruined," he tells me and takes a step back. "Oh, Diego called me earlier."

"What?" Since when does *my* agent have my husband's phone number?

"Yeah, I was just as confused. He said something about you having been too quiet on Instagram again, I think. Basically just told me I should make you post more often. Why do you keep him as your agent, Em?"

Of course Diego would find someone else to annoy with this very thing. I know I've been less active on my platforms. I know I posted less, and whenever I did post, it was just a selfie in bed, or a quick sketch on my iPad. Not one fashion-related picture has been uploaded in good four weeks. The last post was on my wedding day, of my wedding dress. I'm not even sure one can count that as a fashion-related post.

I do, however, post on my story *daily*. I engage with my followers there in form of silly polls or allow them to ask me questions, which I only respond to later that day. And I have to admit, fifty percent of those stories have Miles in them. Partially because those just tend to do *so* much better, and partially because he's just around. It's easy to snap a quick

picture of him during hockey practice, or a game, or when we study together. Or, my follower's favorites, when he's cooking.

Miles doesn't mind. In fact, he reacts to every single one of my stories with him in it, letting me know how handsome he looks in said picture, or how great I captured his ass. I would never admit this to him, but those comments totally make my days. Maybe it's a bit narcissistic and cocky of him, but I know he's just joking. Mostly.

"Well, I need an agent. And truthfully, I'm afraid if I got a new agency, it would look bad on me. Or that my new agency would try to ruin my image."

"You don't even want to do any of this, Em."

He follows me upstairs, always staying close behind just in case I trip so he can catch me with those father-reflexes.

"I don't, but I can't do anything else either. Social work definitely isn't for me. And art won't get me anywhere. Modeling and my online audience is already there. It's a well-paid job, too. Why risk it all when this is secure?"

I walk toward the closet we share. Miles was kind enough to let me use most of it, seeing as I seem to wear more varieties of clothing.

Pottery painting, huh? Sweatpants and a baggy shirt would be nice, plus it would hide the baby belly that I do not have. Yup, I'm kind of still pressed about that. I'm already pregnant and I'm not even showing. Granted, I don't know how much of a stomach I'm supposed to have at eleven weeks pregnant, but I don't care either. I just want to show at least a little bit.

But if Diego finds out I went into public looking like a homeless person—so he insists sweatpants and a hoodie make me look—he'd hold a two-hour long speech about why I shouldn't do that. Something about my image, blah blah. So I guess I'll have to go with something else. A dress, most likely.

“It’s not secure, darling.” It is. I get a good chunk of money for one shoot, and if I ever make it on the runway, I’ll get even more.

I glare at him through the mirror door. “Don’t call me that.”

“Would you rather me calling you wifey?”

“How about Emory?”

Miles grunts disapprovingly. “You know what? I like wifey.”

I just made it worse. “Fine, whatever.” I refrain from rolling my eyes and just open the closet doors, trying to find a dress. “Art is even less secure, by the way. At least I’m already making great money off of modeling and posting on my social medias.”

“You barely post.”

“So? I still make money. Enough to afford a living.”

“And you can’t *try* to make a living off of something you’re actually passionate about? Like art.”

Looking at my dress choices, I simply nod to myself and find my sweatpants instead. Diego can suck my non-existent dick. Or my husband’s if he prefers guys.

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Chapter 30

“you took my broken melody / and now I hear a symphony”—I Hear a Symphony by Cody Fry

Emory

“Remember, if you want clean, streak-free results, do not let the paint dry. I’d recommend three layers of each color, use the biggest brush for the area you want to paint, and always have enough paint on that brush. A thick layer will also help you out fighting against streakiness, and always paint in the same direction. The first coat is going to dry out the fastest as the pottery is very dry, so don’t panic when the first layer doesn’t look perfect. You can begin the second coat almost immediately; this layer will sit on top and isn’t as drying as the first one.”

I already have a vision for what my plate is going to look like. The inside of the plate is going to have oranges painted on it, as well as some leaves so I don’t paint too many oranges. It would just look too crowded. Plus, adding another color is good. The underside of the plate will either stay plain white, or I will give it an orange touch. I’m still unsure about that part.

When I look at Miles, I find him staring at the plate in front of him, his eyebrows scrunched together in confusion. I almost have to laugh. “How does that even make sense?”

“What do you mean?” I ask in return.

“Don’t let the paint dry out, but the first coat will dry out almost instantly?”

“That’s just how painting works, Miles. It makes perfect sense.”

“It does not make perfect sense, wife. In fact, it makes no sense at all.”

“Oh, downgraded me from wifey to wife now, huh?”

He nods, and proudly so. “You don’t deserve the ‘y’ for that comment.”

I sigh extra-long, a little dramatically too. “Alright.” I don’t give a flying fuck what he calls me. I hate each pet name equally.

Turning away from Miles, I reach for the orange color, spilling some on an extra paint palette. As I don’t want my oranges to have a one hundred percent opacity, I will only do one, maybe two coats of them, not thick ones either. I want to see streaks, give it some kind of texture. The edges of my oranges are supposed to be thicker than the middle of them. And so I pick up some paint with my brush, paint one half circle. The edge of the half circle turns out just as I wanted it to, and the inner part is streaky enough as well. However, it does look a little too faint still, and so I repeat the whole thing. And then add the other half of the circle.

I repeat this whole process a couple of times until I have six oranges in total.

Sending another quick glance over to Miles, I’m surprisingly confused to find his plate still empty. Did he even *touch* it? I was expecting to see splotches of color and no real design at all, but this surprises even me.

“Are you okay?” I suppress my laughter.

“Yeah, I just don’t have red paint.”

“You do,” I say and point to the red paint bottle right next to his plate.

“No, this is pink.” He is so stupid sometimes.

“It’s red. The colors are off before they pottery gets cured.”

“Alright, I’ll just go with a different color then.” Stupid. He is so fucking stupid.

↠ ♡ ↞

“Looks like you bathed in paint,” Miles comments just as I finish my masterpiece. It’s not perfect, but that just makes it even better. I seriously can’t wait until we can pick the finished pottery up tomorrow.

Anyway, Miles is not wrong. I am the kind of painter that just doesn’t care where the paint ends up. I use my hands to smudge it around if needed or remove spots from somewhere. And then I forget I have paint on my hands and rake them through my hair, or touch my face, or anything really. I just always end up with paint all over me.

“Thank you, I call it the Emory exclusive. What do you think?”

He scans me, his eyes moving over my entire body before they settle back on my eyes. “A little too many shades of orange.”

Narrowing my eyes at him, I wait until he corrects himself, or until he at least notices what he just said. But even if he does realize, he isn’t saying anything.

“You always got to make fun of my hair color.”

And then he smirks. He fucking *smirks* at me. His arms find over his chest, his head slightly tilting as he hums while looking at my hair. “Nah, the redhead suits you, actually.”

“It does?” The only reason I ever decided to dye my hair red or rather ginger is because I knew Millie would *never* do it. It’s like my attempt in not being compared to her. Only that this earned me more comparisons than ever before.

For the first six months, my mother would constantly say things like; “But Millie would never ruin her hair like you did.” Or “But what’s so wrong in having the same hair color as your sister? Blond suits Millie so much better, so it does you too.”

She no longer comments on my hair, but other things now.

“Yeah.” Miles brings a hand to my head, grasping one strand between his thumb and index before he pulls on it to, probably, pull out some of the dried paint. “It’s… mesmeric.”

“Mesmeric?” I repeat, not quite understanding his compliment. Not one person has ever looked at my hair and forgot they were even staring. “It’s not mesmeric.”

“Enticing then.”

“Enticing!” I blurt out, then quickly slap a hand to my mouth when the other people’s heads turn to look at me.

“Very.” Miles pushes my hair back behind my ear, then leans closer to me. “By the way, you owe me a hockey jersey.”

I quickly look down at myself, my eyes widen at the realization. How the fuck have I not noticed I didn’t put on a sweater of mine, but Miles’s jersey?!

Then my eyes find the orange and green streaks of paint all over the front and the sleeves, that’s the point where my heart sinks right into the floor. I know those jerseys have a *huge* price range. Anything between $15 to $300 is possible. The authentic NHL ones are on the more expensive side of that range. I’m sure Miles’s NCAA one wasn’t on the cheap side either. Especially the one with *his* name on it and *his* number.

“A hundred and five dollars,” he says. “But you know, I also take another form of payment.”

My facial expression must look hilarious because Miles starts to laugh uncontrollably. I don’t find this nearly as amusing. At all.

Only when my hand collides with his chest does he stop.

“I’m kidding, Em.” Miles brings an arm around my body, pulling me right into his side. “I’ve got plenty of those. And even if I didn’t, I’d just buy a new one. It’s not a big deal.”

I have the money, so that’s not a problem. I still feel bad for ruining his jersey though.

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Chapter 31

“she’s driving me crazy, but I’m into it”—Kiwi by Harry Styles

Miles

“That looks awful,” Grey lets me know after we picked up the plates from yesterday.

“Thanks, I made sure to put as less effort into it as possible.” Actually, I thought I did a great job, but whatever. Not everyone can paint shit on a plate like Picasso. Well, that’s not true. Everyone with some artistic skills can probably paint like Picasso; he wasn’t that much of a great artist.

Alright, I guess art isn’t that much about being able to draw a perfect apple or whatever, but the message the piece is supposed to bring across? I don’t know, ask Emory.

“I see. Hers is awesome though.” That it is. “Honestly, I see her more as an artist than a model.”

“Me too. Unfortunately, she doesn’t.” Or so I think. No, actually, I believe she’d totally try to make art a living if she wasn’t too afraid to fail. But I don’t understand why. Failing is better than never having tried. At least that way she can proudly say she gave it a shot; it just didn’t work out. And besides, every single time she posts about her art on her Instagram, her likes go through the roof.

Not as much as they do when I’m on the picture, but I mean, I am pretty great to look at.

No, seriously, some of her digital art posts get more likes than the ones of some photoshoots she did or whatever

fashion post she uploaded.

I don’t think she’d fail. Maybe one day she will see that as well.

“So you’re meeting up with her parents later, huh?” Grey asks as soon as we both seat ourselves in his car. He’s driving because, well, he’s less likely to hit a tree. I don’t hit trees on the regular… just when I drank a beer or two. Or other stuff. I didn’t, not today, but he still doesn’t trust my driving.

I nod, but I don’t confirm with words because my phone lights up and I see the notification on the screen.

Emory sent a picture.

She never sends me pictures. In fact, she barely even *answers* my texts. I come to think she just doesn’t like engaging with me that much.

But boy am I proven wrong when I open our chat and look at the picture.

I really hope she meant to send this to Sun, but then, I also don’t think she’d ever send her best friend a picture like this.

She’s lying on our bed, on her stomach, yet turned to the side so the shape of her body is pretty visible. Emory is wearing my jersey, *again*. But this time it doesn’t go over her thighs. She has it pulled up to her waist, presenting a little skin from her hips up to her waist. Oh, and basically her entire lower body. Her legs are angled into the air, making for an effortless erotic mirror picture without giving *anything* away.

And yet, that stupid picture has my balls tighten, my dick slowly growing harder the longer I look at this picture.

Is it getting hot inside of his car? Because it sure feels like it.

“You good?” Grey asks.

I quickly exit from the picture. “Yup.” Only now that I no longer have the picture opened do I notice she sent a follow-up text.

Emory: How does it look?

Only hot enough to melt every inch of my body.

Miles: Did you send the right picture?

Surely she knew what this picture would do when she sent it, and there is *no* way she would *ever* send me a picture like this unless it was an accident.

We may be married, but we're not in an actual relationship. We don't kiss, don't even hold hands. So sex is off the table, clearly. And that's okay, but what is not okay is this picture. It seriously makes me want to say fuck it to not kissing her, fuck it to not fucking her, and just… do it all. Just rip off that jersey of mine from her body and spend an entire day inside of her. With a few breaks in between, but still.

Emory: As a matter of fact, I did.

Miles: Are you messing with me, wife?

Emory: Depends. Is it working?

Is it working? I'd fucking say so, yes.

Miles: No.

Emory: Didn't arouse you at all?

Fucking hell.

So she really meant to make me want to fuck her brains out.

Emory: Too bad though. I thought maybe I could pay up before we leave, but I guess not.

Pay up?

Oh.

Oh.

The jersey. Had I known she would actually consider it, I wouldn't have uttered those words yesterday. Or maybe that's exactly *why* I said it.

She's been walking around our bedroom in her underwear for weeks, teasing me to the point where I go to take a shower just ten minutes after I already took one.

This woman might be the most beautiful creature on earth, at least to me. Well, and to the other hundreds of horny men in her comment section. But we're not the same. I know her personally, they don't. I have seen her naked before, they haven't. She sleeps in my bed every single night, not theirs. And she's *my* wife, not theirs.

Miles: Are you trying to seduce me, wife?

I can almost see the smirk on her lips right now.

Emory: Is it working?

Miles: No.

"Do you mind driving a little faster? I ask Grey. If I'm lucky, maybe she'll still be in just my jersey and nothing else. I doubt it because Emory just loves to drive me insane, but there is a slight possibility.

"Something up with Brooke?"

"I don't think so, she's with her grandparents anyway. But something's up with Emory." What? It's true. This isn't Emory-like behavior. She could've been kidnapped for all I know.

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Chapter 32

“‘cause it’s not just a figure of speech / you got me down on my knees”—Meddle About by Chase Atlantic

Emory

I POSTED A PICTURE KIND OF LIKE the one I sent Miles on my Instagram. In just a matter of five minutes, the likes, and comments went nuts. It’s kind of scary.

I never went into that direction of posting on social media, never thought I would either. But there’s nothing bad about a picture like this, right? It’s not like I’m presenting my entire ass to the world. It’s a little more erotic, yes, but unlike the one I sent to Miles, this one has his jersey cover me up down to my mid-thighs.

When the bedroom door flies open, and Miles just stands there in the doorway, looking at me, I come to regret my decision to tease him a little bit. Alright, maybe I was hoping it would lead *somewhere*. I guess I’m one of the “lucky” pregnant ones who just can’t stop thinking about sex. And since Miles is my husband and I will not cheat on him, even if this is fake, he owes me that much, right?

No, this is wrong. He doesn’t owe me anything. But fuck do I want it. So badly.

We’ve done this before, one more time won’t hurt anybody.

“Em…” he says softly, takes a step inside and closes the door behind him. “Are you okay?”

Seriously? I am lying in front of him, almost naked except for his jersey, and he’s asking if I’m okay? Weird. He is *so*

weird.

“Perfect, actually.” I slowly sit up, not caring whether I’m flashing him or not. It’s nothing he hasn’t already seen anyway.

Miles leans back against the closed door, crossing his arms, his ankles too. And then a stupid smirk makes its way onto his face. “Pregnancy hormones hitting you, huh?”

“No.” I look away, hoping this will keep him from being able to read the lies off of me. It doesn’t, clearly.

“Is that so?”

I can hear him step closer, and then I feel his hand on my jaw, turning my head, tilting it back so I can meet his eyes. “Positive.”

“So if I offered to help you out, you totally wouldn’t say yes?”

Yes. *Yes, please, offer.* I shake my head. “No, I’m good.”

“Hm.” His hand on my jaw tightens, his fingers pressing into my cheeks only for a slight moment. When his grip loosens again, he moves his thumb to my mouth, stroking the pad of his thumb over my bottom lip, pulling it down. “Then what *do* you want, darling?”

My heart is pounding in my chest, every rational thought leaving me when I open my mouth just that tiny bit to speak but Miles slips his thumb inside instead.

I gasp or shriek a little. Either way, some shocked sound leaves me. I don’t get flustered, ever, and still I can feel the heat rise to my cheeks.

“You’ve got to answer me, wifey.” He leans closer, planting a kiss to my forehead. But when I close my lips over his thumb and lightly suck on it, he immediately stops and looks at me instead.

I run my tongue over his thumb, suck again, only to see the smile creep onto his lips.

Fuck, does he have to have such a good smile? I could swear, if I was wearing panties, they’d probably be drenched right now.

He pulls his thumb out of my mouth. “What do you want, Emory?”

Looking up at Miles through my lashes, I mentally go through a few things I’d want him to do to me right now. Neither of those wishes makes it past my lips though. “Anything. Everything.”

“Lean back.”

“Really?”

Slowly, Miles sinks to his knees. “Yes, darling. Be a good wife and lean back so I can fuck you.” He lays his hands on my knees, keeping his eyes locked with mine when he spreads them apart just as I lean back, propping myself up on my elbows.

“Always a charmer.” I quickly shut up when I feel Miles’s hand trace up my thighs before he pushes up my shirt a little bit, just enough to expose half of my body to him.

He sneaks his arms underneath my thighs, lifting my legs over his shoulders one after the other before he pulls me right down to the edge of the bed. “You're so fucking wet, Em.”

“What are you going to do about—”

His head disappears between my legs, his tongue coming in contact with my pussy with one painfully slow stroke.

“Fuck,” I cuss, my back arching farther away from the mattress, my chest pushing itself into the air. “Do that again.”

He does, even better. This time, he closes his lips around my clit after he licks up my pussy, sucking lightly before his teeth graze against it.

I let out a cry of pleasure, falling onto my back so I can grasp his hair into my hands instead.

Miles alters between gentle licks and hard sucks on my clit. When I push my hips up, he groans and devours me even more.

So much better than my vibrator, for sure.

I pull on his hair, a swamp of heat rising inside of my body. Sweat makes itself visible on the surface of my skin, but right in this moment, I really couldn’t care any less about sweat.

“Miles…” I moan out, my fists tightening, to which I earn myself yet another raspy groan before he pulls one hand away from my waist. His other hand remains on my stomach.

He pushes two fingers inside me, and even *I* can feel myself dripping all over his hand.

“Fuck, Emory. This is so hot.”

My legs begin to shake, my orgasm building up. My walls squeeze around his fingers, a shiver running down my spine as the sweet relief rushes through my body, tickles on the surface of my skin. My ability to breathe leaves me as my body goes numb, stirring up everything inside of me and consuming my entire body like a tidal wave.

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Chapter 33

“feel like I’m always apologizing for feeling”—Anxiety by Julia Michaels, Selena Gomez

Miles

I CAN STILL TASTE HER ON MY TONGUE, even hours later, and I have brushed my teeth before we left to visit Emory’s parents.

Sitting here now, I really wish I would’ve gone further with her. I could’ve, and by the look on her face, I could tell she wanted me to. But something inside my head told me this was wrong, or rather the timing was wrong. And so me and my throbbing erection had made it into the shower instead.

Now we’re sitting in the Scott’s backyard, and I’m trying my best to listen to Mitch and the story about how he got the scar right above his eyebrow for the sixth time in my life. I guess he just loves that story.

But I can’t concentrate on it anymore. Not because I have the *entire* story memorized, but because whenever my eyes travel over to my wife, I’m reminded of her moans and the way she responded to my touch just an hour ago. All because she is still wearing my goddamn jersey. I don’t think I’ll ever be able to wear it again *without* thinking about the noises my wife makes in bed.

Brooke is kneeling by the pond in the backyard, watching the fishes. Thank god I have a good view on her because that girl loves to disobey my wishes when animals are involved. So even though she knows she’s not supposed to get too close to the edge, or try to swim with those fishes, she tries at least every five minutes all over again.

“Brooklyn,” I warn when she reaches a hand into the water, then quickly retrieves it, and turns her head toward me.

“I didn’t touch a fishy, Daddy!”

“And you’re not going to either, right?” She shakes her head, but I don’t believe that headshake anymore.

Maybe a strict and responsible parent would take their kid away from there, but I’m not that. I want her to learn and not punish her. She’s curious, wants to get to know the world. Of course she’s going to try again and again. Good thing the fishpond isn’t deep. She can sit in there without drowning. The water would only go up slightly above her legs in a *sitting* position, not even when she’s standing, so I’m not worried about that. So even if she fell in, she, first of all, wouldn’t drown, and second of all, I would see and hear it happen. I’d have enough time to get her out of there if she didn’t manage to get out on her own.

And how do I know that? It happened before last year on her birthday, and since then, she’s grown a little more.

We’re only here to tell Mitch and Holly about Emory’s pregnancy, but as it seems, that’s no longer necessary because Holly says, “So, Brooke told us she’s getting a little sister?”

Or a brother, but she still refuses to accept a baby brother.

An anxious feeling makes itself comfortable in my stomach, putting up its feet and basically telling me it’s here to stay for a whole while now. Just great.

“We don’t know the sex of the baby yet,” Emory answers.

“So it’s true. Is it Miles’s?”

“No, Mom, it’s from a random guy I met in a bar when I was going grocery shopping.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” Mitch comments, his voice the usual grumpy tone as ever. I think the only person he doesn’t speak to in this tone is my daughter, but only

because Brooke would definitely start to cry. And if there's one thing that annoys Mitch Scott, it's children's crying.

"It is Miles's baby." Why do I know Emory is internally rolling her eyes? She probably would've done it for everyone to see, would her father not have a glass of whiskey in his hands.

"How far along are you?"

"Thirteen weeks."

"Your wedding isn't that far in the past."

"No, but Miles and I were together way *before* we got married, Ma." We weren't. We're not even together now. "Why can't you be happy for me? Just *once*. Just this one time."

"I think you both are making a huge mistake. Your marriage wasn't supposed to happen, and with the way you both couldn't even be in one room at the same time, you shouldn't have started dating in the first place. Your marriage is most likely not going to go anywhere, and now you're pregnant as well. This isn't a reason to be happy."

Wow, okay.

She's right, with the fact that Emory and my marriage isn't going to go anywhere. Not unless we actively try to change things in our relationship. But I mean, I guess we *did* make a step forward. And even if we still get divorced, it's not like this baby won't have us both in its life. We'll still be there.

It might be a little weird for Brooke to be separated from her sibling every other week, but she'll get used to it.

"If I were Millie, you would be crying with joy right now, Mother!"

"Mommy?" Brooke turns her attention away from the fishpond, gets up and comes running over to the table. Yeah, she knows her mother's name. It's all she really wanted to know. It's one of the only things I've told her about her mother, her name.

It was after I picked her up from a playdate with Reece like a year ago. Reece just learned his parents' name and was shocked his mother's name isn't "Mommy". Of course he told his only friend, that happened to be Brooke. And she then all but came running to me asking if my name wasn't "Daddy" and if not, what else it was. She proceeded to first name me for a whole day.

That same day, she asked why she doesn't have a mother, and so I told her, her mother died. I don't think she grasped that concept quite yet, but she still asked about her mother's name. As it seems, she hasn't forgotten it.

I pick Brooke up, sitting her down on my lap. She immediately leans into me for some cuddles. "Yeah, Brooke, your mommy," I say eventually, resting my chin on the top of her head.

"Now look what you did!" Holly speaks a little louder, gesturing a hand at Brooke.

"God, Mom, I did *nothing*. I'm just asking you to be happy for me." Emory looks at me for a second, kind of like she's either asking for backup, or she just wanted to see if I am still present.

I wouldn't leave her. Not in this situation. Not *ever* when she needs me around.

"And I simply cannot accept your relationship. Miles was supposed to be with Millie, not you. He was supposed to have more children with your sister, and not *you*."

Holly does know I do have my own life, right? Even if Millie was alive, there might still be a chance we would've split, and I would've ended up with Emory. Unlikely, but everything's possible.

"Well, breaking news, Mother, my sister is dead. There is no way for him to *ever* be with her. So why can't you just be happy that he *is* happy now. What is your problem?"

"Daddy?" Brooke looks up at me, her eyes teary. She doesn't like conflicts, at all. "*Pourquoi Memory est folle*?"

“*Elle n’est pas folle.*” Emory totally is mad though. But I understand why.

“I don’t want him to be seemingly happy with you. You can’t give him what he needs.”

Huh? Hold on. “And since when do *you* know what *I* need?”

Holly stands, probably to seem more in charge. She’s really not. I am not letting my mother-in-law speak for me, let alone decide what’s good for me and what’s not.

“Come on, Miles. Emory is the complete opposite of what you fell in love with. She has an unstable job. She can’t care for a child. Emory is clumsy and a wreck. There is nothing—”

“I advise you not to finish that sentence, Holly.” How in the ever-loving universe can some parents talk that badly about their children? I don’t even want to think about possible flaws Brooke has, and I’d definitely *never* mention them to her. Unless it’s like a really huge problem and it is truly necessary.

“Oh, come on. As if you have truly married Emory for any other reason but her body. She’s selling it after all.” Holly starts to gather the cups from the table, letting us know she wants us gone. We will leave in just a second. “She’s the closest you have to someone looking like Millie.”

I look at my wife for a short moment, but she’s looking at her own hands, toying with her wedding ring. There’s a wet spot on the sleeve of my jersey, and it takes all of my willpower not to let my anger consume me whole at the sight. No one, not even her goddamn mother, is allowed to make my wife cry.

“Not that you care, but I didn’t marry Emory because she looks like Millie. In fact, that was a great reason for me *not* to marry her. She’s done so much more for me than you’d ever be able to think possible. You have no idea what our relationship is like, because whenever we’re around you, all you do is be mad at us for having found together.” I get up from the chair, taking Brooke with me but still keeping her in

my arms. When Emory looks up, I nod for her to get up as well. We are fucking leaving. “Emory means the world to me, and whether you like it or not, it’s always going to be that way. This isn’t a fleeting thing, we’re *married*.”

“And because you seem to have already forgotten it, Emory is pregnant. So I’d really appreciate it if you didn’t cause her any unnecessary stress. Though, I don’t think you know what *not* causing stress means,” I add.

I grasp my wife’s hand in mine so we can leave. Emory quickly reaches for Mr. Fluffles on the table and thank god she did because my daughter would’ve thrown a whole tantrum if we couldn’t find him later tonight, and I wasn’t planning on ever coming back here. For that rabbit I would, but other than that, the Scott’s will most likely never see my face ever again. Nor my daughter’s.

As soon as we reach my car, Emory stops me from opening the door for her. “You told my parents this wasn’t a fleeting thing.”

I nod, and to delay having to defend myself, I put Brooke into the backseat. Only when I close the door so she wouldn’t hear as much of Emory and my conversation do I turn around to look at my wife. “It’s not a fleeting thing, Emory.”

“How is it not?” she demands. “We’re going to get a divorce, you know we will. We didn’t get married because we’re in love and actually do want our marriage to work out. I’m here to help you get those social workers off your ass.”

“And I am really grateful for that.” Sucking in a deep breath, I continue, “But we’re going to have a child together. And yes, we might very well still get divorced, but that doesn’t mean we’ll never get to talk ever again because we will have to. We will have to learn how to coparent. So no, this isn’t a fleeting thing between us. We’re now connected for life, congratulations.”

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Chapter 34

“what if I, what if I fall?”—Monster by Shawn Mendes, Justin Biebeer

Emory

Wrong guy to get you pregnant, Emory.

I’VE BEEN STARING AT THE NOTE I found in my purse for quite a while now. We haven’t shared the news with anyone except for our friends and my parents. I doubt my parents would dare telling anyone about it, seeing as they’re embarrassed for me to even have married Miles. And Miles’s friends don’t just tell people stuff, especially not about each other.

Sun might’ve accidentally let the news slip out, she’s the most likely one to do so, but I don’t really see her just blurting out I am pregnant. Why would she? Surely she wouldn’t just *randomly* bring it up in a conversation, and nobody would ask about a thing like that, right?

Either way, I suppose the news are out. At least I haven’t seen some gossip websites talk about it yet, so that’s good.

“What do you have there?” Miles asks, whispering because the real-estate guy is currently talking about the building we’re in. Apparently a lot of ice hockey player live here because it’s the closest and fanciest apartment complex to the NYR hockey arena in New York City.

Miles would fit right in. He’s going to play for the New York Ranger after graduation, so it makes sense. Plus, and that’s apparently a huge thing to consider, the guys want to

stay as close to one another as possible. And since this apartment complex has a couple of apartments up for rental, this is like the perfect opportunity for them.

I don't mind it. The apartment is gorgeous so far. The living area plus kitchen is huge. It has four bedrooms, one half-bathroom, four ensuite bathrooms and another bigger bathroom in the hallway. In case a guest wants to use the shower, I guess. And let's not forget the millions of walk-in closets, two of which are in the master bedroom and then one in every other bedroom. Plus two rooms for an office.

It also has quite the big balcony, *and* on the top of this building, there's a pool. This building also has a home-gym for the tenants, as well as a restaurant like a hotel would. It's kind of crazy if you asked me.

"Just another note." I lift my arm, showing him the piece of paper. "This is strange, isn't it? Because all those notes are related to you in some ways."

"Did you talk to William?"

I shake my head. I deleted his number months ago, and since he's not in college anymore, the only way for me to contact him would be showing up to his office. And I am not going to do that. Besides, as much as I'd like to blame him, I think he has better things to do than torment me.

"I'll send some of the guys to talk to him then, Em. I want that guy to leave you alone."

I am yet to tell Miles that I don't think it's him, but what if it *is* William? I can see him being all jealous and stuff of my relationship. Okay, maybe not my relationship, but my happiness. He'd do anything to ruin it. Though, again, I'm not sure he would go as far as stalking me.

"I like the apartment. I think it's definitely big enough for two kids and… us." I mean, four rooms is still a little too much, but with one master bedroom that goes to Miles and me, one bedroom for Brooke and then one for the baby, it's only one bedroom left. "Maybe we could turn the extra room

into something else.” I don’t think we’ll ever need a guest room.

“Like into an art studio for you?”

Art studio… okay, that sounds amazing. Unfortunately that won’t be necessary because I doubt I’ll have much time to even go in there. “No, that would be a waste of time *and* your money.” Since I kind of *have* to follow Miles around for some time, he refuses to let me pay for the rent for the while being. He won’t even let me pay for possible furniture. As I am not going to live with him forever, it makes sense he’d want to pay for his furniture. Still makes me feel bad though.

“It’s neither of those, Em.” Miles sneaks an arm around me, resting his hand on my hip as he leads me back into the living room area. Or I hope this is going to be the living room. It’s a huge open floorplan, like in his house, just as an apartment this time. Very modern. So far, everything’s held in white marble, white walls. Everything’s so bright in here, but maybe we could use a little brightness. “Grey also thinks you should give art a try.”

“You’ve talked to Grey about my profession?”

“No, he mentioned it when we picked up the plates together. He thinks you have potential and should totally try to get somewhere with it.”

“But what if it doesn’t work, Miles? I will have bills to pay someday. I know you won’t let me now, but eventually; I will have to. And if I don’t make enough money from my art, I wouldn’t be able to even afford our child.”

“Don’t worry about money, please.”

“Just because you have it doesn’t automa—”

“Em, please. Let me take care of this. *You.* Let me take care of you.”

Me? That’s not very we’re-getting-divorced like.

“Fine, whatever. I’ll give art a try.” I step away from my husband, no longer tolerating his hand on my body. “But only because I don’t go to photoshoots while being pregnant

anyway.” Not that he’d let me either. Miles thinks photoshoots are stress-hazards, which they are, but still, it’s my job. I guess posting on my social medias will have to do for now.

I have yet to tell Diego I’m pregnant, and once I do, there will be a lot of yelling on his part. I cannot wait.

Some part of me is hoping Miles will be present when I speak to Diego. For some unknown reason, Miles doesn’t like it when people mistreat me. Great example, my parents. He went all out defending our relationship the second I started crying, when he said almost to nothing before.

“Great, we’re taking the apartment then.”

“What about your fr—”

Miles snorts. “They’ll take one here as well, trust me. Well, it’s on Colin, actually. He grew up *too* fancy to be easily impressed.”

“Aren’t you all coming from rich families?”

He winks at me. “Colin’s family is on a different level though. With his father coaching the NYR, his mother being a surgeon. Aaron’s father is rich, but not like Colin’s parents. And Grey’s family, honestly, I’m not even sure what they do. He barely talks about his parents.”

Sun doesn’t talk about their parents either. The only times they get mentioned is when Sun and Grey have a fight going about Sun’s life here and he threatens to have her sent back to California. But even then, they only get mentioned as a threat.

“Yeah, and you just so inherited a whole restaurant chain like it’s nothing.”

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Chapter 35

“we’re not broken, just bent / and we can learn to love again”—Just Give Me a Reason by P!nk

Miles

“When you said we’d make a stop before heading home, I didn’t think we’d stop by at the Rêverie.” Emory gawks at the entrance doors to my restaurant, hysterically shaking her head like there’s no way she would step inside.

“What’s so bad about it? It’s opening in a bit, and I just wanted to check it out.”

“It’s a five-star restaurant, Miles,” she reminds me. “You don’t enter a five-star restaurant in sweatpants and a baggy shirt.”

I look down at myself, then back up at my wife. “We’re not *eating* here. I just want to check out the kitchen, talk to the staff and then we’ll be gone.” At least she’s five-star restaurant ready, but Emory always is, which makes me seeing her in everything but fancy dresses and high heels at home so much better.

“I thought you wanted to sell the restaurants. Why bother getting to know your staff then?”

“Because you’re right. I can’t sell something my father has been working for his entire life. So I might as well find out why he was so passionate about this place.” I never quite understood his love for these restaurant, especially *this* one. He was passionate about cooking, that much I knew, that I can *understand*, but a passion for a restaurant, no, that seems strange even to me.

The Rêverie in NYC was his favorite. Sometimes I believe he loved this one more than he did his only child. Not true, he loved me more but it's about the principle here.

And according to my father, the Rêverie's Chef is the best in all of New York. I doubt it, but I suppose I'll find out.

I don't have a key to the restaurant. Well, I do, just not on me right now. So Emory and I will have to knock on the doors and wait until someone opens up. A few of the kitchen staff should be here already, they have to prep food. And probably a few waiters, the host or hostess as well. There's a lot to do before a restaurant opens.

"That's great. But you could've decided on it *before* we left, that way I could've dressed up nicely."

"You *are* dressed up, Em. And you look great." She's not wearing an evening dress, something all *too* fancy, maybe not even that expensive either. Though, knowing Emory, her clothes are still on the pricy side. She's wearing a red satin long-sleeve blouse, paired with a black skirt and black tights. She's also wearing black high heels that look like nobody should ever be able to walk in them. The heel is made of some letters, probably the brand. That seems like some expensive shit to me.

"I don't believe you." Of course she wouldn't. But someday, maybe she will. In my eyes, Emory has always been one of the most beautiful women to ever exist, even when I disliked her. My attraction to her just always made me dislike her more.

I mean, sure, there was a time when I thought she was stupid and a menace, but I can excuse that. We had just broken up and I started dating her sister. Almost everyone dislikes their ex, right? Right??

Either way, she's always been pretty. And it doesn't matter whether she's all dressed up or looking like she just woke up, she's always beautiful.

Sometimes I'm not even sure if I truly prefer her in baggy clothes because now that she's pregnant, her tighter

clothing-choices show off her belly. That's one thing I still have to wrap my head around. Emory isn't trying to hide her pregnancy, unlike Millie did. I can talk to people about my excitement and Emory won't roll her eyes at me and then lecture me on how inappropriate that was.

Sure, she still hasn't told anyone about it really, but she doesn't owe explanations to people anyway.

"Let's just go inside, okay, darling?"

Emory groans but hooks her arms into mine and allows me to lead her to the entrance doors. As we stand in front of the glass doors—

Hold on there.

She *hooks* her arm into *mine*.

All by herself.

Automatically. Subconsciously, probably.

Shit, that's new. But I think I can get used to it.

I hope.

Anyway, as we stand in front of the glass doors, I try opening it just to see if it's locked. It is. So I knock when I spot one of the staff members lighting up candles on the tables. He looks up, his eyes meeting mine, but he ignores me and goes back to work.

I am not offended because I'm sure they have people in front of the building a couple of times a week before opening hours, begging to enter early.

Emory next to me snorts. "Your staff doesn't even know you."

The older people should know me, or little kid me. I used to hang around here a lot when I was thirteen to fifteen.

"Which is why I'm here." So I knock again, this time with a little more… enthusiasm.

I can see the guy inhale deeply before he plasters on a fake smile and makes his way over to the doors. He unlocks them, then opens it. Not entirely. "I'm sorry, Sir, but we don't open before five."

"I know."

“And this is a five-star restaurant, we have a dress code.”

“I know.”

The guy has dark hair, dark eyes too. He’s about the same height as my wife, maybe a little shorter even. Well dressed for his job, in a rather expensive suit. I couldn’t tell you the brand, but it looks expensive. Emory probably knows the designer just by taking a look at the seams or something like that.

“So then when you know everything, why keep me from doing my job?” he asks, but doesn’t even let me answer before he adds, “Do you even have a reservation? We *only* do reservations.”

“I know that.” People these days, I’m telling you. “Where’s your nametag?” I’m pretty sure the staff is supposed to wear those. My father thought he was very smart when he made his employees wear nametags. When I asked him why, he told me its so the guests can speak to the waiters using their names rather than calling them “waiter”. Something about that being far more polite.

It doesn’t really make sense to me because nobody even really reads the nametags, but I’m not here to question my father’s doings. He did well, clearly.

“Not that it’s your business, but I’m not on duty yet, officially, anyway. So I don’t have to wear it yet.”

“You don’t get paid for”—I gesture inside the building—“preparations?”

He shakes his head. “No. And even if I did, again, it’s not your business.”

“It is, actually,” Emory says, ruining my fun.

“And you are?” the guy asks, his eyebrows raised as he waits patiently.

Emory puts on a smile, holding out her hand. “I’m Emory Desrosiers-King. My husband owns this restaurant.” Oh, fuck, she did that. Emory hadn’t introduced herself to anyone with her new last name yet, let alone called me her husband to anyone but me as more or less of a joke.

I’m not sure why but hearing her say her name followed by my last name brings a wave of pride over me.

After Millie, I never thought I’d ever have a wife. Fake or not, Emory is still mine for the while being. She belongs to me as much as I belong to her.

“Owns… *this* restaurant?” Waiter-guy carefully looks at me, subconsciously taking a small step back.

“Yeah, my father’s André Desrosiers*.* It’s my restaurant now.”

He gasps, and when he finally realizes the way he’s spoken to me before, he *almost* kneels down but quickly catches himself. “I am so sorry, Mr. Desrosiers. I had no idea.”

Okay, well… I think the last time someone called me with *that* last name was when my father was still alive. Like I told Emory before, King’s easier. People can pronounce it, it’s shorter. Also it doesn’t immediately associate me with this restaurant. But hearing it now again, it’s… *quaint*. Yeah, I think quaint fits it pretty good.

“Please, come inside, Mr. Desrosiers.” Dark-haired guy steps aside, gesturing for me and my wife to enter the restaurant. “May I ask what your sudden visit is about?”

I grasp Emory’s hand in mine, interlacing our fingers like it’s what we always do, while I follow the guy into my restaurant.

“I just hoped I could get to know my employees.”

Emory squeezes my hand, I’m not sure why, but still I squeeze back. When I look at her to ask what this was about, I find her smiling, making me forget she even squeezed my hand in the first place.

Emory’s smile is the most excruciating I’ve ever seen, in a good way. Her smiles make me want to get lost looking at her. Her *real* smiles, I mean. Not those faked ones she puts on for her internet life.

The one she’s wearing right now, that’s the kind of smile I just want to take in, stare at, lose every sense of time for.

The way her lips curve, the corners pulling up just that tiny bit because I know she tries not to show that smile of hers. It's devastatingly adorable.

And those lips… don't even let me get started.

I don't know where this urge is coming from so suddenly, maybe because I know what sounds come from them, or what feisty words leave them when she gets all frustrated with me. But I just want to kiss those soft, rude lips until my breath is lost in outer space.

"The kitchen staff is kind of busy with preparations, but I'm sure they won't mind a short interruption. I am Julian, by the way, the host," Julian says, leading Emory and me through the restaurant right into the kitchen.

"It's alright, really."

"Miles." Emory squeezes my hand once more. Again, I look at her, but this time the smile on her lips isn't there. She leans into me and whispers, "Do they have a toilet here? I really have to pee."

I almost want to laugh. That's one of the stupidest questions I've ever heard Emory utter. Do they have a toilet here?… No, of course not. The staff works all evening long and if they have to use the restroom, they'll go do their business behind the building.

"Of course they do, darling."

"Where?"

I look around us, taking in the rather questioning looks from my employees, except for the few people who do recognize me, but I ignore them for now. As I grew up in this restaurant, in some ways, anyway, I know my way around here pretty well. Sure, the interior design has changed, but the layout is still the same.

Somewhere here in the kitchen should be another door, leading to a small hallway which then leads to the employee's only restrooms. They're a little smaller than the ones for the guests, but good enough, that much I know for sure.

I point toward the door to the hallway. “Behind those doors is another door. That’s the restroom.”

Emory looks to where I’m pointing, her forehead creases with concern. Hesitating. “Can you… Can you come with me?”

I turn to Julian. “We’ll be just a minute, okay?”

“Sure but make it quick. Like I said, the kitchen staff doesn’t have much time.”

Perhaps a good employer would come back another time, that’s not me though. Do employers even really *meet* their staff?

I don’t care, not right now. Right now, I’m busy following my wife to the restroom.

Once again, Emory hesitates before we enter the restroom, and once more when we stand right in the middle of it.

“Are you okay?” My eyebrows find together, confusion displaying in my features.

“Yeah.” She nods with determination, but then it leaves her all at once. “Public restrooms scare me. It’s silly, I know.”

I just offer my wife a slim, soft smile while laying both of my hands on her shoulders. “It’s not your fault, Em. Everyone has some strange fears others might not understand, and that’s okay.”

Emory exhales a little heavily, then turns toward the stalls and opens one door. “Can you come inside, please?”

I can’t say I ever thought Emory, my little feisty Emory, would ever fear something so much she voluntarily asks *me* to follow her into a bathroom stall, yet it somehow swamps me with more possessiveness than I was already met with toward her. It may be a strange situation we’re in, and still that strange situation makes me realize what I always should’ve known.

Despite how much I disliked Emory once, I would *always* be there to protect her. I was back then, and I am now, and I

will be for the rest of her life.

“Yeah, sure.” I follow Emory inside the stall. She looks at me a little embarrassed, and I have to say, it’s kind of amusing seeing her this way.

I’m sure I’ve never seen her embarrassed—except on our wedding day maybe—, so I’m truly enjoying this right now.

“Turn around.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I do as she says, turn my back to her. I can hear the sounds her clothes make. Rustling. Different kinds of fabric rubbing against one another.

Her hand suddenly reaches for mine, and I don’t question it when she interlocks our fingers. “I’m sorry,” she whispers, the awkwardness audible in her voice.

“Don’t be, Em.”

Emory tries to pull her hand away, but I just hold on to her a little tighter. She doesn’t fight it, so I know she’s glad I’m doing this, but she’d never admit it to me.

“Miles?”

“Yes, darling?”

“Can you say something? Just… anything. Please.”

I chuckle a little, but then just go on about talking about the first thing that comes up in my mind. “Okay, uh… I still fear that this Iris woman is going to take Brooke away from me. Like, I think the fact that she doesn’t show up all too often is good. And that she hasn’t send someone else to stop by is a good thing as well. But I still have this feeling that something’s not right. I don’t even know why; it just scares me to think about. But what scares me even more than Iris, is the thought of losing Brooke. Also, I’m scared that when we get divorced, Brooke is going to want to stay with you just so she can be around her brother or sister. It may be stupid, but—”

“You’re not going to lose Brooke.” Emory pulls her hand away from mine, and a few moments later I hear the toilet flush. “And I can assure you, if it’s a boy, Brooke will not even think about wanting to move in with me.”

Emory reaches an arm around me, unlocking the door so we can step out. I follow her to the sinks, and we both wash our hands.

“I don’t want to separate them should they not want it. But I can’t… Emory, I can’t lose Brooke.” Well, by the time Emory and I get divorced, *our* child will be like a few weeks old, a few months at most, maybe a year… but if I’m lucky, maybe Brooke won’t even be upset.

Emory shakes off the water from her hands, then turns toward me, closes the gap between us and wraps her arms around my body.

She has *never* initiated a hug with me. Not once in my life. Not even when we were a couple.

My heart makes a little jump that I’m not sure I am fond of.

I close my arms around her, holding my wife tightly to my body while she buries her head into the crook of my neck. I can feel her hands clutch around the material of my sweatshirt, just before she rubs her hands up and down my back. Only then do I realize what she’s doing.

“You’re drying your hands on me, aren’t you?”

“What? No. Of course not.”

“Little liar.”

“I once heard husbands are their wife’s personal pillow, towel, *and* tissue. So live with it.”

Surprisingly, that I can.

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Chapter 36

“type of love that make you wanna wife it”—Like It by Summer Walker, 6LACK

Emory

After Miles had formally introduced himself to the staff, he asked them to let him know if there are any problems with the restaurant. Like gadgets that need to be fixed or replaced, or if they have problems with their payments, hours they work, etcetera.

I think they love him a little for the amount he cares. He did say he wants them to put their preparation hours on their timesheets as they should not stay unpaid.

I’m not sure how much Miles plans to involve himself in his restaurants, especially in *this* restaurant, but his enthusiasm seems promising.

Also, some fucked up part inside of me thinks it’s pretty hot, seeing a side of Miles I have never seen before. The passionate, workaholic side of him. The side of Miles that cares for people he’s never met before. The side that makes him promise his employees more money for the same work. Well, I have seen passionate for a sport. It’s not the same.

I swear, if I wasn’t pregnant, that wouldn’t get me as hot as it does. But unfortunately for me, my hormones are driving me nuts. They’re so intense sometimes, that even one touch of Miles’s makes me want to strip off of my clothes. I truly don’t understand it.

Today is one of those days. Unfortunately.

While Julian gives us a quick tour of the restaurant, I have to forcefully rip my hand away from Miles's because the touch sends tickles through my body. But he keeps interlacing our fingers over and over again, like he can feel the tension it's building, and he doesn't quite want it to die.

I do want it to die. I do because I'm not sure I can take it for much longer.

I get nervous when his thumb brushes over my skin ever so softly. The spot between my legs aching for his touch when he squeezes my hand a little or taps his fingers against my knuckles like he's playing an instrument.

When I pull my hand away yet again, Miles doesn't reach for it again, for once. Instead, he chuckles like he knows exactly what he's been doing. He even has the audacity to sneak an arm around my body, lays his hand on my waist and pulls me so close to him, our bodies are touching.

A shiver runs through me from head to toe, tingling on the surface. I take a deep breath, trying to control the wave of lust that overcomes me when the familiar scent of bergamot hits me. Citrusy, yet spicy. His perfume, Dior Sauvage. It's the same I've been able to smell on him since the second I've known him. He's never switched it up, and I always wondered why. But that's not important right now. What's more concerning than him not wanting to try something new is the fact that the scent of his perfume alone makes me jittery. That I feel my knees weaken.

I can feel my breathing grow heavier, the air becoming thicker. My pulse speeds as I allow myself to imagine what it would be like if Miles and I were in a serious relationship again. What our sex life would be like, more specifically.

He's good in bed, so much I know for sure. Even when he cried that one time, and it kind of ruined the whole thing for me, the sex was still the most brain-numbing, mind-erasing sex I've ever had in my entire life. Definitely a step-up to the first times we've had sex.

Can I just stop thinking about this, please? *Ugh*.

I only half listen when Miles apologizes to Julian one more time for keeping him from doing his job. Julian brushes it off, but of course he would. You don't go around telling your boss it was shitty of them to interrupt. We then say goodbye and make our way to Miles's car.

On the road, Miles and I don't talk. He doesn't put on music either, so it's just him and I, and my intrusive thoughts that tell me it wouldn't be all too humiliating to ask my husband to fuck me. Perhaps it wouldn't be. No, it definitely would be. Or maybe—No. Yes, no, it would be the I'm-going-to-set-myself-on-fire kind of humiliation.

And yet, when Miles reaches his hand over, laying it down on my thigh, humiliation doesn't seem half as bad anymore.

His thumb strokes over my thigh and I immediately squirm under his touch. All of the air in my lungs leaves me the second he slides his hand a little further up, the tips of his fingers inching dangerously close to where I want him the most. *Need* him the most.

Why did I decide to wear tights?

Subconsciously, I spread my legs a little, leaning my head back against the headrest. I turn my head sideways, praying to find an expression on Miles's face that tells me he's as affected by this as I am. But he's just smirking, as always. I bet this is the most fun he's had in his entire life. Getting me horny because it's the easiest thing to do in the world right now.

Screw him.

"*Je veux te faire jouir.*"

"Miles." I gasp when his fingers push against my tights, right over my pussy. "I don't understand." But whatever he did say, it sounded awfully sexy.

"I know." He takes the next exit off the road, the one that leads to an abandoned supermarket. Is it wrong that the thought excites me?

Miles drives up to the supermarket parking lot. It's empty, but of course it would be, considering that it's *abandoned*.

It’s a little creepy, that I admit, and if we lived by *Friday the 13th* rule, it makes it a whole lot scarier.

I mean, Jason Voorhees only ever killed women who had sex, made use of drugs, or dressed a little sluttier; virgins and women who covered up were spared.

That theory wouldn’t even apply to me, seeing as I am most definitely not a virgin anymore, and in his eyes, my choice of clothing would make me out to be a slut.

And why exactly am I thinking about a fictional character right now? One that would want to murder me.

The car stops, and Miles immediately unfastens both of our seatbelts. The hand on my thigh no longer there.

I’m not sure what’s taking over me, but in a moment of confidence, I slide my hand up Miles’s thigh and grope him. My eyes stay on his face, and when he chuckles, and leans back in his seat, I know I didn’t read this whole situation wrongly. Thank God I didn’t.

Given that the first few times we’ve had sex I was far too scared to do anything, I never got a *feel* of Miles. The times I did touch him or had his cock in my mouth, I was more desperate to get it over with than enjoy myself as well.

And the last time we’ve done it, I was a little too needy and drunk to care about anything else, I now mentally tell myself to take my time. So I massage his erection through his sweatpants. He’s thick, hard, and bigger than I remember, at least that’s what it feels like, but I can work with that.

His mouth stands a bit agape when he sucks in shallow breaths, his head tilting back.

I sneak my hand into his pants, touching him without any barrier between our skins. I wrap my hand around his cock, and he groans a little when I stroke him.

His eyes flutter shut; his mouth still open. The sight of Miles being at my mercy is breathtaking. The same guy that usually doesn’t let people tell him what to do, squirming under my touch, being completely under my control, even if

it’s just for a short moment. It does things to me. But most importantly, it makes me press my thighs together, my clit throbbing with need.

He grinds against my hand, desperate for more.

“Just like that, darling,” he says when I give him another long stroke. I slide my thumb over his head, feeling the precum on my skin. He reaches over, his hand back on my thigh but this time he isn’t teasing me. His hand grasps my thigh tightly.

Grunts and groans leave him, and I don’t think I’ve ever heard any sounds quite as arousing as the ones he makes.

Most guys think being vocal is embarrassing, but little do they know, a whole lot of women love those sounds. I am certainly one of them.

His cheeks are a deep shade of pink, and I can feel him burning up. God, I want him inside of me so badly.

“Take off your tights, wife.”

“Now it’s wife again, huh, husband?” I smirk, not removing my hand from his dick.

“Yeah,” he breathes out heavily, his hand on my thigh tightening even more as I pick up the pace of my strokes.

Never in my life have I given a handjob before, I hope I don’t suck at it. I hate giving blowjobs as well, so I’m also not any good there either but for Miles, I’d give it another try.

“I see.” I lick my lips, ready to lean over and push his pants down so I can put his cock in my mouth, but Miles pulls my hand right out of his pants instead.

“Take off your tights.”

“You don’t want me to…”

“Unless you suddenly started to like giving head, Em, no. So take off your goddamn tights or I’ll rip them off of your body.”

I hesitate for a moment.

William always told me how important blowjobs are for the guy, and practically forced me to give him one before

doing anything else. So why would Miles just—

He reaches between my legs, the sound of ripping fabric filling my ears. *Holy shit*.

“Those were my favorite tights.” I don’t care though.

“I’ll get you new ones, darling.” Miles pushes back his seat. “Whatever you want, it’s yours.”

When our eyes meet, his are glazed over with lust, but I’m sure so are mine. He nods me over, and so I move.

I climb on top of him, sitting on his lap, my skirt rolled up. My pussy right over his cock, and I’m sure my wetness is slowly soaking his sweats, but neither of us seems to care. At least I know I don’t.

Miles lays one hand on my hips, holding me up steady as he uses his other one to lean the backrest down as much as possible. And when that’s done, his free hand finds to the other side of my hips. He pushes me down on him at the same time thrusts his own hips up, eliciting a moan from the depths of my throat.

“Miles,” I say, need in my voice.

He ignores my desperate need to feel him inside of me and instead slides both of his hands from my hips to my stomach. His eyes lie on the little bump, so naturally I look down at myself as well. His thumbs caress my skin with the lightness of a feather. A gentle smile tugging on his lips.

“I can still have—”

“I know. This isn’t my first child, Em.”

“Then what is it?” I ask, worried he might no longer want to do this. I’d accept it, of course, but it’d still suck.

He looks up, his eyes back on mine. “I was just trying to imagine you with a bigger belly. Like a nine months pregnant kind of belly. And you waddling all around our apartment, being annoyed as fuck.”

“I will *not* waddle.”

“We’ll see about that.” He winks, then pulls me down to him once more, his lips latching onto my neck as he bites

me carefully, sucks on my skin. His hands find to my ass, squeezing it, hard. I yelp, but it sounds more like a moan.

Rubbing my pelvis against his, I can barely take the space between us anymore, not that there is a lot, physically. I just want to feel Miles as close to me as humanly possible. Funny to think when he was the last person on earth I ever wanted close to me. I suppose the seasons do change.

Slowly, his hands move up my body, cupping my boobs, but that doesn't seem to satisfy him enough. They then sneak underneath the satin fabric, pulling my blouse right over my head. He unclasps my bra, pushing the straps down my arms, throwing it to the backseats and leaves me bare to him.

"You're so beautiful, Emory Desrosiers-King," he says, looking at my face and not my boobs. Offering Miles a smile, one is quick to tug on his lips as well. "I mean it, darling. You're so fucking beautiful. Every single part of you is."

Shit, he really means it, huh? Now that's… awakening butterflies inside of my stomach. A flush creeping up on my cheeks. "Thank you."

As quick as the little moment of cuteness came, it leaves us. He covers my breasts with his hands, and even the lightest brush of his skin over my hardened nipples makes me respond in ways I never thought possible. Screw my overly sensitive body, but at the same time, I totally love it.

"Miles," I say, sounding desperate.

"We shouldn't do this." And still, he doesn't remove his hands from my body.

I scoot a little back on his legs, just enough so I can sit up and push his sweatpants down. He helps me by lifting his hips. Once his cock is freed, he reaches his hand between my legs and pushes my panties aside.

"We shouldn't," I agree, yet position myself right over his erection. My hands lay on his stomach, holding myself up while he makes sure I'm steady by holding me by my waist. With one hand anyway.

His free hand grasps his cock and he gives himself one long stroke, then nudges the tip against my vulva, coating himself with my wetness. “Just… one time.”

“Hmm,” I hum, closing my eyes when he adjusts his cock to my opening. “One time.”

He lifts his hips, pushing the tip of his dick inside of me. I attempt to look at him through half-lidded eyes, my mouth opening with a moan. Once the tip is inside, both of his hands hold me as I sink down on him. With each inch that fills me, my strength leaves me piece by piece.

His cock fills every inch of me, it is painful, but not to the point where it is *hurting*. It is a good kind of pain. The kind that is stretching me, and I know I would get used to his size in a while.

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Chapter 37

“arched back, deep strokes, white wine / weed smoke, that’s my best combination”—Girls Need Love by Summer Walker, Drake

Miles

I SLIDE INSIDE HER ALMOST SMOOTHLY, her slick walls clenching around my cock. She is warm, wet, tight. My favorite kind of combination.

Emory gasps once I’m inside of her all the way, her eyes closing while she takes a deep breath. “Fuck, you’re bigger than I remember.”

“You can take it, darling.” She did before.

She opens her eyes, the greenest eyes laying on mine, glazed over with desire, lust. “Yeah, I can.”

“Well then, go on, Em, fuck me,” I say, pressing the tips of my fingers into her soft skin.

She takes every inch of me so well; it makes me lose my mind. And when she starts to move, my breath gets lost somewhere inside of my body.

I don’t usually let women dominate me. Don’t let them on top. But this woman right here, she could put me on a leash, and I’d probably not even complain about it. She wrecks every single thing I thought made me, me. Makes me reconsider. Rearrange. One part of me doesn’t fit to hers, I’ll amend, bend my own rules for them to match hers.

She leans down, leaning her head against my chest, slowly rolling her hips into mine. If we were in any other

space that wasn’t as small as my car, like… our bedroom, this would be far easier for her as well, but oh well.

“You’re doing great, darling,” I praise when she picks up the pace. Bringing my hands to her hips, I help her out, thrusting up when she comes down. Emory cries out, digging her head a little harder into my chest. Her hand clenches around my sweatshirt, her nails slightly scratching me through the fabric. I’m not going to lie, I kind of wish I was naked so I could feel those nails actually scratching my skin when she marks me as hers.

“Miles,” she gasps, my thrusts becoming more erratic, speed increasing. She no longer moves, but that’s okay.

Her pussy clenches around my swollen cock, squeezing me so hard, it almost drives me over the edge, but I stay strong.

“I know, darling.” I lean my head back. “Fuck,” I curse under my breath when I can feel her bite me. Fucking *bite* me. And I hate to admit that this turns me on even more. Who would’ve thought biting could be hot as fuck?

“I’m—Fuck, Miles… r-right there.”

I push my hips up, Emory’s mouth opening with a gasp right before a moan slips from her throat. “Right there?”

“Mhmm.”

“Come for me, darling.” I thrust inside her a little harder, still not hard enough since rough sex isn’t all *too* good and can cause early contractions, so we’re keeping it… a little more vanilla. Continuing to please us both, I can feel her edging closer and closer to the brick of release and feeling my own impending climax coming.

Her legs begin to shake as I continue to thrust, she cries out my name in response. A few groans escape me as well. *Fuck, she feels so good.*

“Oh, God.” She pulses around my cock, her breathing stopping just as she explodes and goes limp on top of me, completely boneless. Her orgasm triggers mine and I come right inside of her, filling her up with my cum. Heavy breaths

leave my lungs, raspy groans, and grunts as well. Sounds I never thought I'd ever let out if Emory was anyone but her. She just makes me feel… safe. For some very unknown reasons.

I wrap my arms around her body, holding Emory close to me as we're both trying to catch our breaths from a high neither of us has gotten in quite a while. But that just makes this so much better.

Unfortunately for me, this time I am not drunk. This time I know exactly what I did. This time the possessive ping in my heart can't be brushed off as something caused by alcohol.

"This was hands down the best sex in my entire life," Emory mutters, still panting. "You've gotten so much better since our first time."

"Why, thank you, Em." I should be offended, but I'm really not. She's right.

"Seriously, I think your dick was made for me. You fill me up like no one ever could before."

"Good to know." My arms tighten around her body in a way that even surprises me. That fucking possessiveness. Where the hell is this shit coming from?

"You know, those sounds you tried to hold back?" How does she know I tried not to let them out? "They're really hot. And I swear, if it was possible, I'd listen to them every time you're not around and I'd have to make myself come."

Now *that* is quite the interesting information if you asked me. We'll see what I can do with that.

"You kind of fuck like a porn-star." She sits up, sweat coats her skin, a few strands of hair stick to her forehead, her cheeks pink and yet she's never looked prettier.

My forehead creases and I look at my wife with a hint of a smirk on my lips. "Yeah?"

"Mhm. At least this is how I imagined porn-stars to fuck. Really… hot."

I grasp her face in one hand, pressing my fingers into her cheeks but not enough to hurt her in any way. "Oh, so you

like being fucked like a slut?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Treated like a princess all day, but like a slut in bed.”

“If that means I get more mind-blowing sex, then hell fucking yeah.” I don’t think she really listens to me or herself.

A moment later, Emory surprises me when she reaches for her purse on the passenger seat and takes out her phone. I’m pretty sure she just opened her camera app and then… starts recording? “Em?”

She groans but laughs right after. “Sorry, in my mind I already told you what to do.” *Okay?*

“See the windows?”

I nod. “They’re fogged up. Makes sense.”

“Yes, but… you know what they’re good for? My social media.”

“How?”

Emory grins. “Let your wife use you for once.” I still don’t understand, but sure. She can use me however she wants. “I’m going to draw one half of a heart, and you’ll do the same right after, okay?”

“Okay?”

“It’s cute.”

“Yeah, and your followers will know you’ve just gotten railed.”

She shrugs. “I’m married after all.”

I fear her naked body might reflect in the window, so I cover up her breasts. The one on the side of her body that faces the window more than the other, being only able to use one hand. And all that just in time when Emory starts to record once more. She draws the first half of the heart, then waits for me to do the same.

I’ve never drawn a heart in sex-fog, but if that makes her perverted followers realize there’s no way my wife will *ever* be with them, then I’d draw a million hearts on steamed up, condensed car windows if I have to.

I draw my wobbly half of the heart, and Emory starts to laugh, most definitely at my shitty attempt of a heart. She then swings the camera over to my face. I'm not sure what her followers are going to find looking at me, but nothing good, I know that much.

Not knowing what to do, I wink at the camera and shortly after Emory ends the recording, types on her phone, and then throws it into the passenger seat.

She leans down against my chest again, sighing deeply. "Thank you."

"What for?"

"Letting me use you."

Bringing my arms back around my wife, I say, "Anything for you, darling."

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Chapter 38

“when I try to fall back, I fall back to you”—You by Regard, Troye Sivan, Tate McRae

Emory

“Okay, so you’ve had sex with your husband, big deal,” Sun repeats. Yes, *repeats* because this is the third time she’s reminding me that this wasn’t a bad thing at all.

I don’t think it was, and yet the way I acted yesterday still turns my stomach. I was driven by need, and I’m not sure if I would’ve decided to fuck Miles if my hormones weren’t out of control. I want to believe I would have, but some part of me is *very* unsure about it.

But then there’s the part of me that can’t stop watching the video I’ve recorded. The one that got almost a *million* views. On my story. That *never* happens. People really go nuts when they sense sexual content, I’m telling you. And I’m not sure I really like the fact that tons of people have reposted the video of my husband winking into the camera.

God, he has the most adorable wink ever. It’s so innocent somehow, even though winks are anything but innocent. And the smile right after—oh my god. Ovary-explosion.

This video has a spot in my heart I never new existed. I really hate myself for having posted it, but it made me gain a whole lot of new followers.

Maybe I just feel bad that I’ve used Miles, even though he said he doesn’t care and it’s the least he could do. This moment was *ours*. It was just him and me for a short while. The real us.

And I ruined it.

“Miles is handsome, Emory. And he is your husband. If he were my husband, I’d screw him seven ways to Sunday. Plus, you’re having his baby. How much realer do you need your marriage to get?”

I caved and told Sun the real reason behind Miles and my marriage, but she suspected it already anyway. Still, she’s the kind of person who has hopes. Hopes for love. A hopeless romantic.

She sees love in everything, and I simply… don’t. So when she hears about my problems with Miles, she hears something like “I love Miles so much, but I just don’t know how to tell him,” which is the furthest from the truth possible. But that’s Sun.

“I just think I screwed up with him.”

Sun immediately shakes her head, laughing. “Babe, your hormones are messing with you, he knows that. Or at least he should, you’re not the first woman he got pregnant. I bet even if you hadn’t gotten pregnant, he still would’ve screwed you because you’re ridiculously hot. Besides, you’re both in your twenties. Hot twenty-one-year-olds with a sex-drive. Live it out.”

“He’s twenty-two,” I correct. “And don’t remind me that he used to fuck my sister.”

“Why not?” She gasps, slapping her hands to her jaw. “You heard them back then and you so totally got jealous.”

“I did not hear them, thank god for that, nor did I get jealous.” I roll my eyes. “I took Miles’s virginity. There was nothing to be jealous about. If anything, I bet Millie hated *that* fact more than the fact that him and I used to be a couple once upon a time.”

“And then he broke up with you.”

“Then he broke up with me,” I confirm.

“Well, happens to the best of us. But realistically speaking,…” My best friend continues to babble all about my relationship, but I’m no longer listening when my phone

vibrates, and Miles's name pops up on the screen. I open the message immediately.

Miles: Everything alright?

I smile at the question. He's so worried I might not be okay. I could be away from him for a second and he'd ask if everything was okay. It's adorable. Annoying though.

I understand the urge for him to make sure I'm alright, and I can't be mad at him for being worried. Though, sometimes I wish he'd just let me reach out to *him* if I needed anything, and not him asking me every other second.

Emory: I'm good, Miles. How are you?

Just for the sake of it, maybe then he'll realize how ridiculous he's being.

Miles: Now I'm definitely feeling better, thanks. How's the baby?

Emory: Good, I guess? I'm fine, so it should be fine as well.

Miles: Okay. When should I come pick you up?

Emory: I don't know, an hour?

Miles: Okay.

Miles: Are you coming to practice with me? We're just watching tapes today, but I'd still love to have you around.

He'd *love* to have me around?

My stomach is squishing. A good kind of squishing but I hate it anyway.

It’s not allowed to do this having-a-crush type of reaction. I can’t crush on my husband, not when so much is on the line.

And still, I can’t keep myself from typing back.

Emory: Yeah, sure. We’ll meet there then?

Miles: No, darling. I’m still picking you up.

But why? The sorority house Sun lives in isn’t *too* far away from the arena. Twenty-minute walk, max.

Miles: I’ve got something for you.

And my stomach is doing it again. Squishing. Letting butterflies go wild. But this time, even my heart is betraying me. Skipping a beat at the thought of Miles having gotten something for me.

“You’re blushing,” Sun tells me. “Oh, my god! Are you sexting?!”

“What?” I look up from my phone. “No. Ew, no.”

“Yet you are blushing.” Her eyes narrow at me. She crosses her arms over her body, crossing her legs as well. Most definitely to analyze my body language better.

This girl, let me tell you. She’s a handful sometimes.

“So, let me get this straight.” *Oh no.* “You don’t want an actual relationship with your husband.” I nod, slowly. “You two did get you pregnant though, so even if you want to or not, you’ll always have to coparent.” Another nod. “And you fucked.”

“Could’ve said it more nicely, but yes, Sunshine.”

She hums. “I see. And you smile at his texts.”

“I wasn’t smiling.”

“You were. Even blushing.”

“Shut up.”

“You know what? I might tell Miles about that, maybe he’s less blind.”

“Sun, I think this is it. The end of our friendship. It was nice knowing you.” I get up from her bed, but she’s quick to pull me back down.

Her eyes widen with horror. “Oh God, was that okay? I didn’t… hurt the baby or something?”

I laugh. “No, it’s fine.”

“Good,” she says, then slaps her hand right onto my shoulder. Hard.

“Ouch.” I cover the spot she just slapped with my hand, rubbing the pain away.

“You deserved that for trying to break up our friendship.” I probably did. Then my phone vibrates again, and again… and even a third time. My eyes fall down to my phone. “Go on, answer that fine husband of yours.”

Normally, I would glare at Sun for that comment, but I’m too busy opening my husband’s messages.

Miles: I’ll be there at four-thirty. Practice starts at five.

Miles: Em, are you there?

Miles: Emory Rose Desrosiers-King?

Come to think this man hates being ignored.

Emory: 4:30 sounds good. See you later! x

Miles: Not so fast there, wife. I still got this thing for you.

Emory: Well, what is it then?

Miles: **sent a voice note**

I look at the message, blinking and not doing anything else. Miles has *never* sent me a voice note. He never calls me either. He texts, doesn't *speak* unless it's face-to-face.

Miles: Listen to it when Sun's not around.

Oh… okay? That doesn't sound good, does it?

I get off Sun's bed, again, and mumble some sort of excuse that's hopefully something like "I have to pee." It's not *that* unusual for me lately, so it's the most believable one.

Once in the bathroom, I lock the door behind me and hit play, only to get the shock of my life and mute my phone.

This guy just sent me a voice note of him *moaning*.

My mouth stands wide open as I stare at my screen, slowly, *very* slowly turning up the volume. The sound of Miles's heavy breathing fills my ears, the room. And even though I can hear it, I still don't want to believe I actually *am* hearing it.

Walking over to the closed toilet, I seat myself on top of it, needing to sit before my knees might give in and I fall to the floor. Miles would definitely throw me out of a window for hurting myself.

He curses in a raspy voice, grunts and so much heavy breathing making its way into my ears.

I shouldn't listen to this. It's just going to make me horny. But I also can't seem to pause the voice note.

I listen to all two minutes and forty-three seconds, then the voice note stops by itself. He has finished himself, a short moment before the recording ended, but he still kept good twenty seconds of his post-orgasm breathing in.

For another minute, I continue to stare at my screen, not knowing what or *how* to respond. Should I even respond in the first place? It feels wrong to leave him on read.

My thumbs type something. Anything, without me even realizing what I'm typing. And then I hit send.

Emory: Are you trying to kill me?

His response is almost immediate.

Miles: You listened to it now?

Emory: Well, yes. I thought it was an emergency! And then… it wasn't. And

I stand up, feeling the wetness on my panties against my skin. One of the worst feelings ever.

Miles: And what?

And? Oh. I meant to delete that part. *And now I have the strong desire to feel you inside of me again.* I can't tell him that though.

Miles: I'll bring fresh panties of yours when I pick you up. You can change in the locker room.

Emory: What? No, Miles, why? It's fine. I'm fine.

Miles: Yeah, yeah. Whatever. See you in an hour, darling.

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Chapter 39

“keep opinions muted for the hell of it”—shut up by Ariana Grande

Miles

It’s our last game tomorrow. As in our *very* last game. It’s kind of the worst pain related to hockey I’ve ever experienced. I will miss this team so much, it’s ridiculous.

But at least I’ll have a new one, and the same Coach. And the most important players from this team will be on the same team as me still. So that’s at least something. Maybe a fresh start will be good for me.

I took Emory and Brooke into the screening room with me. Coach doesn’t usually allow guests while we watch tapes or discuss game strategies, but he knows Brooke, and he may not know Emory personally, but I’m sure he’s heard a lot about her from my daughter. Brooke talks about Emory all the time, so has Lily told me. And Sofia when she was still around.

Aaron’s no longer drinking himself to his death. Sofia started responding to his messages like three weeks ago, and he’s planning to leave the U.S. in a week when we graduate to reunite with her. I think they’ll be doing the long-distance thing, but if one couple can make it work, it is Aaron and Sofia.

While Coach plays clip after clip from the team we’ll be facing tomorrow, and analyzes every move they make aloud, I’m too busy to listen, focusing on my daughter instead.

Brooke is playing with my wedding ring, trying to poke any of her fingers through the butterfly hole, but obviously none of her fingers fit through it, so she gets a little frustrated. But when she notices that Emory wears a ring with a butterfly on it, her face lights up.

“Memory,” she whispers. “Can I have your hand?”

Emory doesn’t question it, probably thinking my daughter just wants to hold her hand as she wanted to so many times before. But I see right through that little bundle of evil.

“Brooke,” I warn, quietly enough so it wouldn’t interrupt Coach’s rampage about whatever he’s rampaging about.

“I’m looking.” Oh but she’s not. And before I even know, Brooke has turned Emory’s hand around and is now trying to fit the butterfly into the butterfly hole of my ring. “It don’t fit.” Mostly because she can’t *see*.

“This is so boring,” Emory complains, leaning her head against my shoulder. This is the first time since I picked her up from Sun’s that she’s talking to *me*. I think she’s still a little mad that I turned her on when she didn’t want it, but that’s her fault, honestly.

Emory said she would listen to something like that when she’s alone and in need, I just delivered. It’s not my fault she continued to listen to all two minutes and forty-three seconds when she wasn’t technically alone.

“It’s not boring.” It is a little boring, but Emory doesn’t get to talk down my passion. Well, hockey’s not really my passion. It’s a hobby. I love cooking more than ice hockey, but that’s because I love eating what I cooked even more.

“Marsh,” Coach calls out, then puts on a video of Aaron at our last game. “What was that?”

The video plays, showing exactly how Aaron has ignored every single of his teammates to get the puck across the ice all by himself. I suppose he just wanted to have *one* goal made with his name only this season. He’s only had a few with assists, which is normal. The majority of goals are him assisting though. But even assists are good. He’s still a

great player even if he didn’t shoot even one goal, which, again, he did.

Hockey players are cocky though, and I just bet he had something to proof to someone.

“I thought I could do it,” Aaron defends himself. More or less good. “The ice was basically free for me to go solo.”

“It was not.” Coach hits play again. The camera zooms out, showing how Aaron’s been surrounded by three opponents. Even if he tried to, he wouldn’t have made it out with the puck still in his possession.

And so he did something stupid. *Really* stupid.

He just shot toward the goal. From about the middle of the ice. He didn’t hit the net.

“It was worth a try though.”

“We have a gameplan. And you better stick to it tomorrow or I will exchange you for Elijah for the entirety of the game.”

We only have two left defense players: Aaron and Elijah. If Aaron gets pulled out of the game, that means not only that Elijah will have to play the *entire* game, but also that Aaron will not get to be on the ice for our last game together.

“Miles?” Emory whispers, tapping her fingers on mine. Brooke is *very* quick with copying Emory, now tapping my fingers with hers as well.

“Yes, darling?”

“When is this over?”

“When is this over, Daddy?” Brooke repeats, speaking *far* louder than Emory did.

I close my eyes, needing to take a deep breath before I face the twenty-two heads of my teammates who are now looking at the three of us. My eyes stay on safe territory though, right on Grey.

Or not so safe after all.

Grey smirks at me bemused, one eyebrow arched like he’s waiting for me to answer anything he can laugh at. And then winks at me, just before his eyes fall to my right hand.

You know, the one that's holding Emory's in mine with Brooke's on top so she wouldn't feel left out. And then that amused smile of his grows smug.

He nudges Colin in his side, then whispers something that I cannot hear but is definitely something like "Look at their hands," because just a moment later, Colin throws his head back and laughs.

"Colin," Coach warns. He doesn't like it when we have fun. Inside the arena at least. This here, this means business, and Coach Carter sure as fuck doesn't do anything but business between these walls. He doesn't lose, and if he does, he still didn't. He makes us responsible for losing, which, well, we are, but he doesn't see that it's *his* loss as well.

Truthfully, I aspire to be *that* confident; to be able to simply say no to losing.

"Sorry, Dad," Colin responds immediately. He never refers to his dad as *dad* at the arena. Here, Coach Carter is as much his Coach as he is everyone else's.

It must be as confusing to Coach as it is to everyone else because Coach just shakes his head as if to make sure he heard that right.

"Damn, imagine your father being an NHL ice hockey coach. I'm jealous." Aaron crosses his arms over his chest, exaggerating a loud sigh. "Must've been fun at the rink."

"It really wasn't," Colin replies. "Like dude, I vomited on the ice in front of the *entire* NYR team."

"Did you make them sign the frozen vomit?"

"What the f—? No?"

"You really should have. You could've made *thousands* with it."

"Thousands with *vomit?* I don't think so." Colin turns to his dad. "I couldn't have made money off of that, right, Dad?"

Coach pinches the bridge of his nose and shakes his head. "No, Colin. Nobody would've bought that."

“Well, but if I said it was vomit from someone *on* the team…” He tilts his head, opens his arms as if he just found a loophole. “Would’ve been *brilliant.*”

“Who raised you?” Coach asks. “Because I sure as hell didn’t.”

“Hush,” Colin quiets his own father, holding his index finger to his mouth. He then points right at Brooke. “There is a little kid here. Watch your mouth. You wouldn’t swear in front of Reece.” Once that’s off the table, Colin and Aaron return back to their selling vomit talk. *Yikes*.

“Are they always this crazy here?” Emory asks, keeping her voice down.

“Yup. They’ve all opened doors with their heads first a few too many times.”

“Sometimes,” Brooke says, once again, loud enough for everyone to hear. *Gotta love them kids*. “Sometimes I run into a door too. My feet don’t stop me sometimes. And then”—she shrugs—“Boom.”

Kids… they are quite entertaining though.

“Memory?” I hear my daughter whisper this time. She only ever knows how to whisper when whatever she has to say isn’t meant for *my* ears. And still, I can’t *not* listen. “When we give Daddy the present?”

Present? Now I’m intrigued.

“On his birthday, Brookie.” Huh… interesting.

Brooke turns to me. “Daddy, when is your birthday?”

“Only six more sleeps, baby.” Have you ever tried telling a four-year-old in how many *days* something occurs? Because if so, I bet you know they don’t understand a word unless you break it down into how many more times they have to go to sleep.

“Okay.” Brooke snuggles herself into my chest, ready to fall asleep so one day will be over. I’m yet to tell her this is not how it works.

“You know what, guys… Get lost. You’re dismissed.”

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Chapter 40

“I feel your heart start to beat”—Constellation by Jade LeMac

Miles

I TWIST THE BRACELET ON MY WRIST AROUND, my leg bouncing up and down as I listen to these two idiots behind me talking about my wife like I’m not right here.

At least the bracelet seems to take *some* annoyance off of me.

It was my birthday present. Brooke and Emory made it together, mostly because Brooke wanted to, so I’ve been told. They used little pink and white plastic beads. It’s honestly the cutest gift I’ve ever gotten, except that Grey keeps laughing his ass off whenever he sees it.

I admit, thanks to society the word “Daddy”, that my daughter decided fits perfectly on this bracelet, is far too sexualized, but at least *I* know it’s not the case in this scenario. Grey knows it too, obviously, he just finds it utterly hilarious when someone points it out.

Brooke made herself a matching bracelet. Well, Emory made it for her while Brooke told her exactly what to do. Yes, I got all the details out of my wife, surprisingly. Hers says “Brooke” because I never really call her by her actual name. And I honestly doubt it would’ve fit all that well on that tiny wrist of hers.

Even Emory has a bracelet, but hers doesn’t say her name either. Of course hers says “Memory” since to Brooke,

that’s Em’s name. I’m eager to find out when she’ll start calling Emory, Emory.

“She’s pretty hot,” doofus number one repeats for the second time since Emory has been called up on that stage to get her diploma. I’ve got mine already as D comes before S in the alphabet.

Emory wanted to keep her maiden name for school, which I totally understand. Besides, it’s just *one* document that states her old last name, every other document in her life currently proves that this woman is mine. I happen to think Emory Desrosiers-King sounds a lot better than Scott anyway, she seems to have a different opinion on that matter. I don’t care, she’s still married to me.

“Dude, she’s a model. Of course she’s hot,” doofus number two says.

“I’d give anything to fuck her, honestly.” I know a lot of guys think with their dicks most of the time, but actually hearing it with referring to a married woman, that tops every single time I have heard my friends talk about going out just to get laid.

“Same. Maybe we can convince her to go for a threesome. You think she’d be into that?”

“Isn’t she pregnant? She looks pregnant?”

She is. But the gown covers basically *everything*, so saying she looks pregnant while wearing a graduation gown just seems wrong.

“I don’t know, but I heard she got married. I don’t believe it though.”

Breathe in. Breathe out.

Don’t turn around, Miles. They’re just… stupid. Stupid, immature frat guys.

And yet, even though I don’t turn around, I do another petty thing. As soon as Emory makes her way down the stage, I get off my seat. I meet Emory halfway, and her found-together eyebrows tell me exactly how confused she is.

I don’t give her an explanation when she stands in front of me.

All I do is grab her by her hips, pull her right into my body. She doesn’t have a moment to question me, or even a moment to figure out what I’m doing here. Before she could run away or have words leave her mouth, I bring my lips down to hers and just kiss her.

Right there. In front of everyone.

Emory lets out a light shriek, but then lays her hands on my jaw and deepens our kiss. She pushes her tongue right into my mouth, surprising me as much as I must’ve startled her with this sudden kiss.

Her lips are so soft, I never want to leave them ever again. My heart thunders inside of my chest. Pounding. Attacking every nerve in my body like I was caught in a crossfire. And maybe I am caught in a crossfire between what my head tells me and what my heart is begging for.

She tastes like vanilla, almost making me laugh considering that she likes it rough in bed. But I’m glad to know she never changed that much. Even when we were younger she used to taste like vanilla, smell like it as well. She’s always been my little vanilla bean, but I never told her that.

When I feel Emory smile right into our kiss, I pull her even closer to me, accepting the fact that the bullet has definitely hit my head and therefore allows my heart to take over.

I’m not sure how good of an idea it is to let my heart lead the way, but it’s not like I can do much about it anymore. But maybe for once… just this one time, going about this without thinking is going to end better than going at this strategically. Maybe Emory and I both need to just stop the thinking and go with what our gut-feeling is telling us.

“Congratulations on your diploma, Mrs. King,” I say the second we pull apart, even though I never wanted to leave her lips.

“Why, thank you, Mr. King.” She smiles. And damn, that stupid fucking smile…

I take Emory’s hand in mine, leading her to my seat, not caring that she’s actually a few seats behind me. She can sit on my lap; she doesn’t need her own chair.

I sit and pull her down on my lap, my arms closing around her body, her back presses to my front. One hand lies right on her stomach, my thumb subconsciously stroking the tiniest bump. She’s supposed to be seventeen weeks pregnant, and still it looks like *maybe* an average nine weeks. I’m kind of bummed out because of it, but it’s alright, I guess.

We have to spend another thirty or so-ish minutes watching other students get their diploma and listening to another round of speeches. But I don’t listen to any of it because my attention lies on the two frats behind me, waiting for either of them to comment, admit their mistakes.

Nothing leaves their mouths though.

“Miles…” Emory whispers, her voice filled with fear this time. It immediately catches my attention. Looking at my wife, she motions for me to look at the paper in her hands. “That just fell out of my Diploma.”

Another fucking note. Of course it’s another note. One would think they stopped after having been left alone for a few weeks. But nope. There another one is.

You’re still not with the right guy, Emory.

What is that even supposed to mean? Who in their right mind does something like this?

Whoever this is, they know Emory is pregnant. They know she’s married. Who’s sick enough to scare a married,

pregnant woman into… whatever they're trying to scare her into? Leaving me, my guess.

"It's not William. He wouldn't dare writing you another note after the team showed up at his office and threatened him." The team, or more like Grey and Ezra. Ezra told him if he ever so much to thought about coming near Emory ever again, he'd find himself six feet under the ground. Nobody fucks with Ezra. He already looks intimidating as fuck with his six foot four, broad shoulders, and the twenty-four-seven grumpy face. He spent a week in juvie when he was sixteen, so I'm sure he knows his way around dickheads like narcissistic golf guys.

Grey told me William almost cried when Ezra went and broke his favorite pencil. Such a crybaby. But this just proves that William wouldn't terrorize Emory anymore, if he had before. He'd be too afraid to get another precious pencil of his broken.

"At this point, even my parents are bigger suspects than William." Emory crumbles up the piece of paper in her hand.

She leans her head against mine, a heavy sigh leaving her. I hold her a little tighter, just so she knows I'm still here.

I will *always* be there for her.

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Chapter 41

“somethings just aren’t that simple”—4EVER by Clairo

Emory

“Don’t lift that!” Miles almost yells when I go to pick up one of the boxes filled with decorations, I think. Maybe clothes. Or crockery. I’m not sure which one of those this box contains in particular, but that’s not the point anyway.

“And why not?”

“You’re not supposed to lift heavy stuff, Em.” Miles plants a kiss to my temple just as he walks up beside me. He then bends over and picks up the box himself. “Did you pick out decorations for the apartment?”

“Yes.” I was busy almost every single day last week, just picking out décor. Miles allowed me to go all out, of course using *his* credit card rather than my own money. Honestly, this time, I didn’t even care as much about it anymore. He’d still live in the apartment when I move out after our divorce. Which is why I also made sure our interior décor would be… pink.

Yup. Pink.

Well, okay, a *light*, pastel kind of pink. Something cute. He doesn’t know it yet.

I got decorative pillows in pink, fluffy blankets, candles, wall art, even small pink planter boxes. The whole interior is kept white anyway, so a little pink won’t hurt. Also, I’m not sure how smart it was to choose a *white* interior design with

a toddler and a baby due in a couple of months, but I guess we'll see.

The apartment doesn't look like a dark interior belongs in there anyway, so it was the best option to go with white. Grey thought differently, so it's a good thing he doesn't live with us.

"Did you ask your parents about the notes?" He makes his way to the car, stuffing the box into the almost filled-up trunk. We don't take any of the furniture with us, so at least Miles and Grey didn't have to call in a moving team to help. It was just packing and now we're stuffing everything we have into a total of three cars.

Sun is helping us. I would too, but, well, Miles doesn't allow me to help at all. He also won't let me drive. I have a functioning car, but nope, apparently I'm "too pregnant" to use it.

"I have," I answer. "Neither of them had a clue what I was talking about. But honestly, even if they knew, I doubt they'd tell me. They want you gone."

"And here I thought they liked me." He claps out his hands from dust, I guess. Or no reason at all.

"They like you better than they like me." Which lately seems to be the truth. Every time I try to talk to them, all I get is yelled at. My mother is still mad at me for having married Miles *months* ago. And even more pressed about the fact that I'm pregnant.

I shouldn't care, I know that much. My parents can't forever control my life, but they're still my parents. I can't just *not* care.

They've raised me after all, even if I've always been the least favorite daughter of theirs. And liked even less when my sister died instead of me.

"What are you guys doing for the summer?" Grey asks as he comes out of the house, carrying yet another box. How many do we have left?

Miles grunts in annoyance when a suitcase falls out of the trunk. “Don’t know. Chill at home, I suppose.”

“Aaron will be in Germany with Sofia,” Grey lays out his thoughts aloud. “Colin and Lily are most definitely going on *some* vacation. Would be surprised if he didn’t try showing her the world.”

I don’t know either of them too well, but even I’m certain Colin would rather spend an entire summer on planes with the love of his life, laying the entire world out in front of her feet, than waste it on a boring summer in an apartment they just bought and moved in to.

“I’m thinking about stopping by at the restaurant sometimes, but other than that… I guess our summer will be filled with doctor visits and a bunch of times seeing Iris Decker’s face.”

Right, she still stops by every now and then, just to talk to Brooke. She never talks to either Miles or me. One time, she asked to speak to Grey, but that was it. She asked to speak to my parents as well, but I’m not sure she ever did. My mother would be all nosy and ask me tons of questions if Iris reached out to her.

I just bet Iris will show up in a week and ask Brooke all about how she feels, and what she thinks about the new apartment.

Iris uttered her concerns about us moving, the only thing she really talked about to Miles. But honestly, what are we supposed to do? Miles is going to play for the NYR now, he *has* to be somewhat close to the arena for practice, and driving down to Madison Square Garden for what? An hour and a half almost daily just seems like a waste of gas and his time. Time he could spend with his daughter instead, mind you.

“What about you?” I ask Grey, sitting down on the steps to the house. Might as well sit when I can’t do anything anyway.

“Sun and I are flying over to Malibu. Visit the family, you know.”

“Mom is *so* thrilled to see us!” Sun shrieks, practically jumping right out of the house. She seems a little too enthusiastic about their visit because she almost misses a step and trips right down the stairs. She doesn’t fall though, so that’s good. “I wish we could leave tomorrow.”

“You still have classes for another month or so,” I remind her.

“I know, it’s so unfair.” Sun groans, pushing the box in her hands right into Grey’s car. “You know, Grey, you can fly over already if you want. I will follow once I’m done here.”

“No thank you. There’s a reason I never visit them, Sun. Let alone *without* you.”

“Then why bother visiting *this* summer?” Miles asks. Thank god he did because the same question has been in my head as well. “What’s so special this year?”

When Grey doesn’t answer, Sun does so instead. “Dad’s turning fifty. It’s a big deal. If Grey doesn’t—”

“Sun,” Grey warns, clearly not wanting his sister to tell us.

But she ignores him. “If he doesn’t show up, Dad will hate him more than he already does.”

Miles looks at Grey with concern written all over his features. “You didn’t tell me your father hated you!”

Grey brushes Miles off like his father’s hatred means nothing to him. “It’s not a big deal. Just forget it.”

“But it *is* a big deal, Grey. I have my entire life laid out on display for you, and I feel like I know nothing about you.”

“That’s exaggerated and you know that.” Grey opens the door to his car, but he doesn’t seat himself inside. Instead, he props both of his arms up on top of the door and looks at his best friend like he has no care in the world. “You know more about me than anyone in my life. The only parts I never told you anything about is my family. You know Sun,

and you met my brother. That's more people from my family than *anyone* knows."

"So what's the big deal about your family?" Miles asks. I feel like I should leave. I don't want to be in the middle of a fight between two best friends. And looking at Sun, her face tells me she's just as unsure about staying here as I am.

When our eyes lock, hers are filled with regret. She knows she shouldn't have said something. Perhaps she really shouldn't have.

"It's nothing. Just let it go, Miles."

"I am not letting it go." Miles takes a step forward, ready to make his way over to Grey but that's when I wrap my hand around his wrist to hold him back. If there's one thing Miles definitely shouldn't do right now, it's pushing Grey to talk about something he's clearly not ready to talk about.

Miles turns around, his eyes scanning me from head to toe like he's trying to find one spot that's out of place to explain my hand being on his body so suddenly. "You okay?" Concern fills his voice, his frown deepening.

I don't exactly respond. This question always takes me a little while to answer. Is anyone ever truly okay? There's always something to not be okay about. In theory, I am fine. I'm not in pain, except for my sore feet maybe. Or that the side of my belly hurts from all the changes my body is going through.

And maybe the fact that the potato sized baby in my belly is the cause for my sleepless nights recently adds a little to being exhausted all day, which then again, makes me not okay.

My parents are still nagging me about my marriage, *and* the baby. They're still either not talking to me at all or they're being shitshows of parental figures.

He drops to his knees, taking my face in his hands. "What's wrong?"

Tears just so seem to stream down my face when I look right into Miles's eyes and see all of his emotions just so on

display. He doesn’t hide how he feels, not toward his closest friends at least. He cares so deeply about everyone, about me and my well-being.

He looks at me like he’d give me the world, like he’d give me anything I ask him for and I’m not even sure where that’s coming from. Miles looks at me like he’d hang up the moon for me and take me on a ride through the galaxy just so I could touch the stars. He looks at me like I mean something to him, like I’m important. Like he loves me, but not in a romantic way.

That’s far more than my parents have ever given me.

“Don’t cry, darling.” Miles wipes my tears away, or at least he tries to. It seems impossible as they keep on coming. Sobs leaving me like they never have before.

Crying. It’s such a weird concept. Salty drops of water leaving your eyes to express some kind of unwell-being. Or happiness, for some that are very emotional. I don’t get it. Why can’t the human body just *not* cry? Why can’t I be emotional without my body calling me out with shitty tears?

“You’re breaking my heart, Em. Please stop crying.”

“I can’t,” I hiccup. But then the tears suddenly stop. Just like that. Only for anger to take the upper hand. “You did this to me,” I accuse while pushing him off of me. “This is all your fault!”

Miles doesn’t stop trying to get close to me, keeping his hands on my body even if I keep swapping them away. And he’s smirking. Fucking *smirking*. “Yeah?”

“Yes. If it weren’t for you and your stupid sperm, I wouldn’t even be in this crying mess!” I haven’t cried in years. I don’t count my birthdays and my sister’s death anniversaries. Those are special occasions. Those days aside, I never cry. Tears are for the weak and I have to be strong.

“Well, I’m not sorry, Em.”

His words startle me so much, my hands freeze mid-air, mid swapping his away. So he settles them down on my jaw

again, this time not to dry my tears.

“You’re not?”

He shakes his head. “I’m scared shitless, but I’m not sorry.”

So we’re both not sorry it happened then. That’s… quite interesting if I do say so.

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Chapter 42

“every day you’re here, I’m healing”—Symphony by Clean Bandit, Zara Larsson

Emory

When I turned seventeen, I had such a bad insomnia, my parents gave me pills to sleep at night without telling me about it until I was twenty. What they didn’t realize, my insomnia started when my sister died just a couple of days before we would’ve turned seventeen together.

Anyway, back then I thought it was cool to not sleep at night. That pulling an all-nighter was the best thing to ever exist in the world. Being awake when it was dark outside and normal people were fast asleep, it gave me a kick to work, do my schoolwork or *anything* really. Being awake in the middle of the night brought peace to me, knowing I didn’t have to talk to anyone. Nobody was there to disturb me at this hour.

Well, but then I got pills mixed into my drinks for dinner so I’d fall asleep, and that time of my life was over.

That’s when the night terrors started. Those pills made me have the worst nightmares of my life, or my dreams. Whatever it is. They stopped once my parents stopped drugging me, but it left me with one huge fear. Darkness.

It’s back now. The sleepless nights, I mean, not someone putting sleeping pills in my drinks without telling me. Thank god the nightmares haven’t returned.

This time, my sleepless nights are caused by the fetus in my stomach, not by my guilt for still being alive when my

twin sister isn’t.

Any position I try to lie in seems unfairly uncomfortable. Our new bed is a lot bigger than the one Miles used to have. This one could easily sleep four adults if necessary. So it’s not the space I’m lacking to find a position to lie in.

It’s the darkness that’s haunting me. Everywhere I look, I see creatures that I know aren’t there, but my mind keeps telling me they are. I am old enough to know that nothing’s going to happen, and still I am filled with panic.

Looking over to Miles’s side of the bed, I let out a quiet groan. At least that husband of mine is catching some sweet sleep. He’s sleeping surprisingly close to me, despite having enough space to get away from me. But I don’t really mind it anyway. Perhaps I should, but I don’t.

I scootch a little closer to Miles, inch by inch, carefully making my way over until I’m close enough to swing a leg over his body. I’ve seen pregnant women in movies always having some extra pillow, for comfort, I suppose. But I don’t have that, so I’m trying my husband.

It isn’t doing much if I’m being honest, but it does happen to be a little more comfortable lying like this.

I rest my head right on Miles’s bare chest, bring my arm around his body as well and lay my palm on his bare torso.

Miles closes his arms around me, letting me know he woke up. *Thank god.* I feel kind of bad for waking him, but then again, it is his fault I’m in the position to not be able to fall asleep.

That’s not true, we both have equal parts in this, but I like to make it his fault as I have far more shit to go through than he does.

And knowing someone else beside me is awake right now does ease my fears a little.

“Can’t sleep?” he asks. I almost want to murder him for that question.

“I’m trying to, but that won’t be possible if my pillow suddenly started to develop the ability to speak.”

His chest rumbles as he chuckles.

“This is not funny.” I slap my hand to his chest.

“I’m sorry, darling.” Miles covers my hand with his at the same time as I can feel him turn his head to press a kiss to the top of my head. “What time is it?”

I know that one because I checked the time when I woke up. “Around four a.m.”

“Brooke’s not here?”

“No.”

“She’s been sleeping through most of the nights ever since we moved here.” That she has. I’m not sure why that is, but I suppose it’s a sign that she’s comfortable here. Her bedroom certainly is a lot bigger than her old one, though I’m not sure that plays a role. She has far more space now, much to Miles’s dismay because he hates chaos, and more room for Brooke *screams* for more toys to be found in every crook of her room.

“That’s good, isn’t it?”

I can feel Miles nod, though a little hesitantly. “Yeah, sure. It’s just weird not having her sneak into our bed every night.”

“You also think it’s weird she has to go to kindergarten starting this year.”

“Don’t remind me,” he grits out, sounding almost in pain. He hates it, the thought of Brooke no longer being at home all day every day. And I know he worries that she will hate it, but I think it’s good she finally gets to make some friends her age, not just Miles’s friends.

Maybe she’ll hate it at first, given that daycare isn’t for her *at all.* But she’ll get used to it eventually. And she’ll have Reece there.

“I kind of want a milkshake,” I tell him, changing the topic. Brooke’s school enrollment will probably forever be a sore topic to Miles.

“Like right now?”

“Yup.” I love these pregnancy cravings. They’re annoying as hell, don’t get me wrong, but I love watching Miles run to get me whatever I want.

“Where the fuck do you think am I going to get a milkshake from at four in the morning?”

Seriously? “Make one.”

“I don’t think we have anything at home to make a milkshake, darling.”

“We do,” I say with enthusiasm, being one hundred percent sure we do. “We have ice cream here. And milk. And… I don’t know what else belongs inside of a milkshake.”

“Depends on what flavor you want.”

“Strawbe—”

“No.” It was just a test anyway.

I press my head a little harder into Miles’s chest, groaning. “What if I’m craving it?”

“Then it’s still a no. I wouldn’t risk triggering Brooke’s allergy for a stupid craving.” And that Iris lady still doesn’t fully believe he’s a great father. I know *my* father wouldn’t give a shit if I was allergic to something and he’d want it.

Alright, maybe Miles caring about that is simply being a decent parental figure, but it is a whole lot more than what I can say about my own parents. And I know for sure there are other parents out there that wouldn’t care or do even worse to their kids.

“Vanilla milkshake then.”

Miles tries his best to wiggle himself out from underneath me. “Fine. Anything else?”

I turn, then move up the bed until I sit with my back pressed against the headboard. “Fries would be nice.”

“Okay.”

“And sushi.”

“You can’t have raw fish.”

Right. “Fries and a milkshake then.”

“Coming right up, darling,” Miles says and makes his way right out the door.

While I wait for Miles to come back, which might very well take some time since fries aren't done in two seconds, I'm thinking about trying to sleep. But that seems rude, and impossible with the darkness surrounding me. So instead I get off the bed and walk across the hall.

Slowly, I open the door to my art studio and peek inside. I haven't been in there yet, let alone picked up one of the paintbrushes, paints or anything Miles bought for me. This room has everything my heart might desire. Everything art lovers would go nuts over seeing. I am in love with this room, and still it frightens me.

It's all artsy, apart from the dryer rack in one corner that Miles put there yesterday morning to dry off some extra blankets.

The last time I picked up a paintbrush was when Miles took me pottery painting. And before that, it must've been at least a year. Every little drawing I do is digitally, and those are usually just sketches of characters from books or my silly interpretation of a comic version TV character.

Without really realizing it, I have walked inside the room and now find myself sitting by the easel, staring at the one blank canvas that's already ready to be painted on.

I stare at the white canvas, tilting my head like it would make the canvas seem less white from that angle. It doesn't, obviously.

"What am I doing?" I whisper to myself. Laying a hand on my stomach, I bend a little forward to reach for one of the paint palettes. I inspect it a little, taking in every inch of the wooden palette. It lacks color. The one I used to have back when I was sixteen was so used, I could barely even see the white plastic anymore. I had this tick that I never cleaned my palettes.

It got so bad, when I started painting on my desk, my entire desk was covered in acrylics. I didn't put paint on my desk on purpose, it just happened on accident. So after a

while, it had brush strokes everywhere. I loved it, I loved that my desk looked like a color palette. My parents hated it.

Same with my walls.

I always liked colors. I always liked it when my art supplies looked messy. It meant they got used. It showed passion even when it was nothing. And I really, really loved it.

Seeing everything here being so clean and blank, it feels weird and gives me this urge to just throw paint around the entire room.

I pick up one of the oil paint tubes, twisting it around in my hand. Even when I used to paint a lot, I barely used oil paints. I always preferred acrylics because they dry up faster.

Oh what I would give to find my passion for painting again. Just one last time.

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Chapter 43

“and it’s not the first time we’ve gone through this”—3:00 AM by Finding Hope

Miles

I WATCH AS EMORY SWIPES THE brush over the canvas ever so effortlessly. It looks almost majestic.

I have never seen someone paint with such calmness, such elegance, yet so goddamn messy at the same time.

Emory has been painting for quite a while, and honestly, I don’t even remember for how long I’ve been standing between the doorframe, just watching my wife paint. Her back is turned to me, so she hasn’t noticed me yet. But even if she had, I wouldn’t turn around and walk away. I like watching her, but I guess I always did.

Even when we were younger I would watch her paint. It’s been one of my favorite things about her back when we were dating as teenagers. We would go to her house and while I was supposed to do our math homework, she was painting. She’s always been bad at math, so I did the homework for the both of us. Hers was easier because she used to be a grade beneath mine.

I’m sure Emory always thought I was bored out of my mind when I finished our homework early and just watched her, but I never was. I loved looking at her when she was painting. I loved the way her eyebrows curved up or down, the way her tongue darted out of her mouth when she was deep in thoughts.

I’m glad to see she’s still a messy painter. It kind of fills my heart with joy.

“You know I can smell the fries, right?” Emory chuckles, then turns around. Her shirt is covered in paint, but of course it would be. So are her arms and a few splotches of color are to be found on her face as well.

God, she’s so beautiful, I hate it.

“Yeah, sorry, I was… busy.”

A smile tugs on her lips. “Busy watching me.”

“As always.” I walk deeper into the room, right over to my wife. “I think you no longer want the fries. Cold fries are nasty.”

“Good thing I still have my milkshake then.” She takes the milkshake from my hands. It’s surprisingly still a milkshake and not melted ice cream. Emory ignores the metal straw and just starts to drink from the cup while I set the cold fries down on one of the tables in this room.

“You still make that face,” I tell her when my back is turned to her.

“What face?”

“The face that says you have no idea what you’re doing, yet you’re pleased with the outcome.” I turn around, closing the gap between us. Standing in front of my wife, I look down at her, bringing a hand to her face to wipe away the red paint on her cheek. It doesn’t really work, but I try again anyway.

For the first time in ages, I see Emory blush. A blush not from embarrassment. She avoids my gaze as her cheeks heat more and more. I didn’t think I’d have that effect on her ever again.

“Well, I guess some things just never change.” Her voice stays soft when she speaks, only little resentment for me for once. And then she looks at me, her eyes meeting mine filling the space between us with unbearable tension.

We stand in deep silence, well, she sits, and I stand, but the silence is there, nonetheless. The air is brittle enough to

snap. It’s like the little drop of water on the faucet, taking ages until it finally drips into the sink. We keep quiet, just looking at the other, neither of us blinks, neither of us moves. The sound of cars driving outside is tuned out, we can’t usually hear them much, but tonight they’re especially quiet.

They say New York City is the city that never sleeps, yet it seems almost dead when I look into Emory’s eyes. To me, right in this moment, she’s the only person who exists. She’s the only living creature, the only one who can make me feel things that I wasn’t sure were still somewhere within me.

She makes my heart beat in ways that I swore would never happen again. My pulse rises, yet I feel at peace.

Having someone like Emory in my life never felt heavier. Heavy in a good way, though. She feels like more. More to me. More to my daughter. Emory feels like a tight hug in my life, an unselfish, need-to-be-cherished kind of hug. She feels like a summer breeze. Fresh. Warming. Pure.

Just looking at Emory brings feelings into my life that I swore off of. Hope. *Love*. The only form of love I have in my life is the one to my daughter; the love I have for her, and she has for me. That’s it. But Emory… Oh, Emory.

“I guess not,” I finally say quietly, no longer talking about her facial expressions.

I rest my hand on her jaw, stroking my thumb right underneath her bottom lip to remove the little bits of vanilla milkshake on her skin. Emory closes her eyes as I do, carefully nuzzling her head into my hand. I hesitate removing my hand from her body again, not wanting to lose her warm skin on mine. But I do so anyway.

“Miles?”

“Yes, darling?”

“Can I try out the oil paints?”

My eyebrows fall. “Of course, that’s what they’re there for, Em.”

“On you, I mean.” Her eyes leave mine, a little embarrassment sparkling in them that she hopes I do not see. “I want to paint on your back. You’ve got tattoos *everywhere*, but your back is blank, so I thought… it’s okay if you don’t want to. I- I would totally understand.”

“You want to do it now?”

Emory’s face lights up like a Christmas tree. “Can I?!”

“Yeah, sure.” I wasn’t planning on trying to go back to sleep anymore anyway, so might as well.

She walks over to the dryer rack, pulling off a blanket and spreading it on the floor. Gesturing toward it, she tells me to lie. And who am I to disobey my wife?

So I lie down while Emory goes to pick out some colors and gets some brushes, and whatever else she may need to paint on my back with.

If anyone told me a year ago that I’d end up living with Emory, married to her, and we’re getting along well enough for me to allow her to use oil paints on my back, I would’ve probably jumped out of a window to keep that from happening. But right in this moment, having Emory sit on my ass while she runs a hand over my bare back seems pretty right to me.

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Chapter 44

“you are the muse in the back of my mind”—Why by Shawn Mendes

Emory

Miles has quite the comfortable ass to sit on. I’m not sure what I thought it would feel like, but definitely nothing like this. A little bonier, maybe. A muscly ass if you will. Like his back.

From all the times I’ve seen Miles naked, not just for bed-time activities, but from him walking around the house without a shirt all the time, I knew he is muscular. I knew he had abs to die for. But I never paid much attention to his back.

He doesn’t have a body-builder type of muscular back, or even abs. It’s decent but defined. I think that describes Miles pretty well.

Miles’s skin is soft to the touch, perfect for some paint to run over it smoothly.

“You can wash the paint off easily, just use baby oil,” I tell him as I squash some of the oil paint onto the color palette from before, dipping my smaller brush into the pink color. “It’s easier to use oil to dissolve oil.”

“Mhm, you do it then.” I guess it makes more sense that way since he can’t possibly reach his back the way he would have to in order to clean this up. But that’s alright, I suppose. I can do it. I’m the one to make a mess on him in the first place.

“Okay.”

I set the brush down somewhere on the right side between his lower back and the middle of his spine, hearing the slight rush of air escape his lips when the cold from the paint must hit him randomly. I paint the first outline of a rose, a small one, just the base layer, no shading, nothing.

It looks blunt at first, but of course it would. The magic in art only appears after the picture is done. That's when you can *see* it. That's when you can see the feelings, the effort. And up until that point, art will forever be a trust-the-process kind of thing.

As I start the base layer of the second rose, just above the first one but a little over to the left side, I can hear Miles breathing grow heavier, like he's falling asleep while I'm busy painting.

"Miles?" I say quietly, just to find out if he's still awake. If he isn't, that's fine, I'll count it as something good. If he can be relaxed enough around me to fall asleep while I sit right on top of him, he must have some trust in me.

"Yes, darling?"

"Oh, you're still awake." I start the third and last rose, a little closer to the second one. All three flowers will be from a different angle, it's going to make the painting look more… alive. Realistic.

"'Course I am."

"Can I ask you something?" I switch to a different brush, mixing some black into my red to make the color a little darker. Not too much. It's just to add some depth. I'll keep on making it darker though, but for now, I just want it a *tiny* bit darker.

"Anything, Em."

Lifting the brush off Miles's skin for a moment, I look down at myself. My belly still hasn't grown much, but at least it's somewhat visible now. I no longer look like I've just eaten a little too much. "Why did you never try to move on?"

“I… did,” he says, his words leaving him with some weight. “I had to. I just never felt like I needed someone by my side to be happy, you know? I have Brooke. She’s the most important person in my life, always will be. I never thought I would need someone to feel less lonely because that’s what I have my daughter for. She fills in my days plenty as it is, there was never time to get to know someone.”

“But even if you had the time you wouldn’t have tried looking.” He knows this as much as I do. I’ve seen him flirt with women. I’ve watched him get wooed upon at hockey games. I’ve seen the way he sweeps women off their feet just batting an eyelash at them. He’s charming, and not that much of an asshole as I thought he was. If he tried to, he would’ve found someone by now.

“You never allowed yourself to think you could find love elsewhere, is that it?”

“I never wanted to. I thought Millie was it for me, you know? At least until the universe had other plans for me. Besides, I did try dating… it just didn’t work out. Ever.”

“Do you think you will ever find someone?” I start adding some highlights now. “I mean, I think Brooke likes the female attention in your life.”

“Nah, she likes *you* in my life, Em,” he says, and confidently so. “Other women aren’t *you.* You care about Brooke, she knows that. You love her, you play with her even when you’re supposed to be busy. You don’t push her away. You don’t talk to her like she’s a child, which, yes, she is, and still you don’t. You respect her choices, give her some of those in the first place. That’s the difference, you know? Every woman I introduced Brooke to, they spoke to her like she was…” He halts, thinking about words to fill in the blank space.

“Dense,” he finally says. “Like Brooke was this little kid that doesn’t know left from right, or pink from blue. Like she can’t understand a word we say.”

“Yeah,” I speak quietly, just to let him know I’m still listening.

“You’re not like that though. You never were.”

I lay a hand on a free space on his back, just for some balance, and only for a short moment. “I’m sorry, Miles. Really, I am.”

“It’s not your fault, Em. It’s okay. I like my life as it is right now.”

He likes his life as it is *right now*, not *before* this whole thing. *Married to me*. A baby on the way. *Married to me*. Living in an apartment close to Madison Square Garden, about to play for the pros. *Married to me*.

“Did you ever consider having another child?”

He stays quiet for a long while. Long enough for me to switch from white paint to green. Long enough for me to start one of the rose stems. Long enough for me to assume he didn’t hear me ask in the first place.

At least until he speaks.

“I have. But I didn’t like the thought of getting someone pregnant, having to go through this entire thing once again, only to end up losing the mother of my child *again*. And even if that wasn’t on my mind, there’s still the problem with finding a partner.”

“We’re not actually a couple either and still I’m pregnant, in case you forgot,” I remind him.

He hums. “You’re my wife though, so that’s already a difference. And with you, Em… I know I freaked out when you told me, and I’m really sorry I did. But…”

“But?”

He sighs. “You’re solid.”

“Solid?”

“Yes. You’re the type of person that doesn’t lie unless necessary. You just talk. You’re straight forward with everyone—except your parents. When you say one thing, I know you mean it. When you told me you aren’t going to die, I believed you. Whether you can actually influence it or

not, I still believe you. I trust your words because that's just what you make people do. You make everyone trust you. Everyone can count on you being honest. So if you truly believed you'd die, you would've said it."

I start to paint the peddles for the stem, taking my sweet time to come up with literally anything to say. But nothing comes to my mind.

Miles has a way with words that just tend to leave me speechless. He is supposed to be the one person in my life who hates me more than my parents do. He's supposed to be the father of my niece, the one I only tolerate *because* of Brooke. He's supposed to make my stomach turn and want to vomit, not make my heart skip a beat and cause smiles to appear at random times when I just think about whatever he said or did that very morning.

He's supposed to poison my food, not offer it to keep me alive.

Adding a few more shadows and highlights to the flower painting, I am finally done. It's not perfect, but it also doesn't have to be.

Setting the palette down next to Miles and me, I lay both of my hands on either side of his body, taking a look at my wobbly masterpiece. But instead of looking at the paint on his body, my eyes linger on the naked parts of it.

Why does his skin have to be so damn smooth? So… touchable.

Without really noticing it at first, I stroke one finger down his back, slowly letting my nail glide over every ripple of his back muscles.

"Take a picture," Miles suddenly says, bringing me back to reality. "Of what you painted, I mean. I want to see it."

"Okay, don't move." Carefully, I stand up and make my way into our bedroom to get my phone.

On my way back into my art studio, I peek inside Brooke's room only to see whether she's still asleep or not. She is, but of course she would be. Otherwise Brooke would've

already been yelling for her father like she does every morning. That kid wakes up thinking she's starving to death.

Back in one room with Miles, I hover over him as I take a picture of his back, adding another one to the collection of pictures of my husband that I will now be obsessed with staring at when he's not around. But I don't think I'll post it online this time.

This is just for us.

My followers don't need to know everything I do with him.

"I bet it looks good."

"It does," I confirm. "But you look better."

He chuckles.

Oh shit… I didn't mean to say that out loud. *Screw you, mouth*.

"Why, thank you, darling. Glad to know you think I look good."

"Oh, shut up." Since I'm no longer seated on top of him, but standing over him, I use to my foot to kick him. Right on his ass.

"There are some people out there who love getting kicked and slapped, you know?"

Ignoring him, I say, "You may sit up, Mr. King. But do so with caution so you don't get the blanket all dirty." It doesn't matter if he does get paint on the blanket, I already did. And still, Miles gets up carefully, not smudging the paint at all.

He keeps seated on the blanket though.

I hand him my phone, just so he can look at the picture. His eyes light up with some sort of pride when he sees it, just before he looks up at me. "This is beautiful, Emory."

"Thank you."

"Shit, I might get it tattooed."

"What?" I laugh, throwing my head back in my neck as I do. Only to stop when I realize he's being serious due to the lack of *his* laughter.

Looking at him again, my body starts to fill with a weird sensation. Something scary. "Tell me you're joking."

His head shakes. “I like it. It’s hot.” He grasps my hand and pulls me back down on his lap, this time we’re face to face though. My legs are on either side of his body, our faces so close, his nose is brushing mine. I can feel his hot breath roll over my skin, tingling on the surface of mine.

“So you want to walk around with a tattoo that *I* designed for the rest of your life?”

He nods. “I already have something of yours tattooed anyway. So might as well.”

My lips part slightly in shock, and he must notice because it doesn’t take Miles long before his lips are pressed to mine.

Either he took this as an invitation—that is, *if* he noticed my parted lips—or he simply wanted to kiss me. Somehow, I’m hoping it’s the latter.

His tongue pushes into my mouth, brushing mine, gentle but demanding, nonetheless. Miles holds on to my hips, pulling me closer until my body is pressed up against his.

Miles kisses me, again and again.

For the longest time in my life I have always wondered why people said kissing makes you forget your surroundings, that it makes you melt. I never understood how a kiss could ever cause this, until every nerve in my body actually seems to liquefy, every muscle screaming for one more kiss, one more taste of him.

My heart pounds inside of my chest, increasing once more when his hands roam over my body. They’re everywhere, on my back, my sides, my neck, jaw. They keep moving, always, touching me, leaving a trail of fire right on my skin like an invisible mark.

He has some stubbles that rub against my skin, and I know it’s going to be irritated in a bit because I have really sensitive skin, but I don’t care. All I want is for Miles to never stop kissing me. For him to sweep me off of my feet and never let me go again.

When we finally come up for some air, forced to pull apart, my chest is rising heavily and still I want to move

back into him, feel his lips on mine one more time. But before I even attempt to kiss my husband again, I need to know. “What’s the tattoo?”

He smiles, softly, sweetly. “You haven’t noticed?”

“No. Was I supposed to?” I don’t think I have ever done *anything* memorable enough for Miles to get a tattoo of it in reminders of me. And even if I had, it would still be crazy of him to get it tattooed.

When he doesn’t answer, I bring both of my hands to his neck. One to just hold him by the crook of it, and the other to stroke down his skin. My eyes follow the trail of tinier tattoos. One after the other.

He’s got everything. From random shapes to minimalist mountains, waves, tiny stuff Brooke has drawn, a mini version of the first time Brooke tried to spell her name on a piece of paper, you name it, he probably has a tattoo of it. It’s a miracle his back is still bare.

And then I find it. The oddest tattoo I’ve seen on him. A vanilla bean just slightly above his left collarbone. Right on the spot I kissed him first.

I was twelve and we had our first sleepover. It was awkward, but I had the biggest crush on this guy ever, so when he pulled me in for cuddles and my head was pressed to his body, I couldn’t resist the urge any longer. I prayed he didn’t notice, and he never said he did, but clearly, he noticed.

“Why?”

He shrugs. “It was the first tattoo I got.” Really? That’s even weirder. “I was like seventeen, it was maybe a few days before we broke up. Back then I thought it was the smartest thing to do to prove I loved you.”

“Yeah, I always get tattoos dedicated to my boyfriends just before I break up with them.”

“Seriously, you got so paranoid because of me talking to Millie like once a week in the hallway between your rooms, so I believed. I thought this would be a great way to tell you

I didn’t like her like that.” His lips twitch, but this time not because of a smile, but because it may have been true back then, but now, I know him saying he never liked her seems wrong.

“Still you broke up with me. Over text.”

Confusion covers his face. “No. *You* broke up with *me*. Over text.”

“I would never do that, Miles. I know I was shy and stupid but breaking up over text has always been a huge no for me. Besides, you weren’t just talking to Millie ‘in the hallway,’ you were constantly talking to her. She told me,” I say. “She showed me your texts. All the time.”

He leans back a little, blinking a few times before words manage to make it past his lips. “I didn’t even have her number, Em. I only got it maybe a week after we broke up.”

“You’re lying,” I accuse, trying to get off him. If he isn’t lying, that means my sister lied to me, and I would rather not want that to be the truth.

Miles tightens his grip on my hips, not letting me go. “She texted me and asked to meet up in front of her school before seven. Said you still had something of mine, and you asked her to give it back to me. Only after that day did we start talking more frequently. Emory, I never spoke to Millie apart from whenever *you* were there as well. Every conversation Millie and I had while *we*”—he motions between him and I—“were together, you heard it.”

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Chapter 45

“and I will give you all my heart / so we can start all over again”—Over Again by One Direction

Miles

“She lied to us!” Emory leans forward, her head resting on the front of my shoulder. “She fucking *lied* to us.”

“We can’t change it anymore, nor can we confront her about it, so there’s no use in getting mad at her, Em.” I close my arms around my wife, holding her in a hug for comfort.

I hate this knowledge as much as Emory does, but it truly doesn’t matter anymore. Getting mad at a dead person just seems wrong and getting upset over something we can’t change is stupid.

Slowly, I lean us both down until my back hits the floor, not caring about the paint on my skin for any second longer. Fuck the blanket, I’ll buy a new one.

“I know,” Emory mumbles into my shoulder. “It’s just—Wow. I didn’t think Millie would lie like that. Especially after she saw me go through the worst breakup phase of my life.”

“Loved me that much, huh?” I stroke a hand through her short hair. It’s grown a little, but not too much.

Emory props her hands up by my sides, pushing herself up to sit. Right on my crotch. “Shut up.” She rolls her eyes, and then looks at her hand. “Shit, I forgot about the palette.”

Before I get the chance to laugh about her stupidity and the mixture of paint on her palm, she has pressed her hand

to my chest, leaving a handprint behind. I don't care though.

She presses the same palm to another spot on my torso, repeating it until there's no paint left to transfer from her skin to mine. "Are you going to get these tattooed as well?"

I nod, though this time I'm not being serious about it. I like the flower on my back. I've been thinking about what to do with my back anyway, and Emory does so happen to be a great artist. I like her style, the way she alters between comic drawings and realism with a slight twist in it. She could've painted a dick and I probably would've found it amazing.

When her hands finally rest on my abdomen, and she looks down at me with softened eyes, a hint of a smile on her lips, I allow myself just a moment to stare.

I've been looking at Emory for years, ever since I've known her. I've been looking at her, and still I never… *looked*. I never noticed her the way I do now, never acknowledged her the way I should have.

Her hair sits right on her shoulders, her blond roots coming in just that tiny bit. Her lips are pouty, but not all too big. Her cheeks are always a slight shade of pink, like a natural blush, and I know the color barely deepens, but when it does, it's one of the cutest sights ever.

Her lashes are long, and even though she insists on needing mascara to make them visible, I don't think it's needed at all.

Those green eyes of hers, they're even more beautiful when they're directed at me, filled with happiness rather than hatred.

God, I wish I'm at least a little part of that happiness. It doesn't have to be much, just half a percent will do. I just want to be the tiniest part of her happiness. That will be enough for me.

"Why did you hate me?" Emory asks, keeping her voice down, quiet. She doesn't usually fear asking questions, and

still this one is filled with something anxious.

“I never hated you, darling.” I bring my hands to her waist, underneath her shirt just so we touch. “I was heartbroken after, well, I thought you broke up with me. I thought *you* hated *me*.”

“I loved you,” she says defensively. “At least as much as a fifteen-year-old knows what love is.”

“Hm.” I’m only a year and a half older than Emory but hearing her say she was fifteen now sounds pretty… wrong. Alright, she was almost sixteen by the time we broke up. Like a month away from sixteen. Still doesn’t make it sound better though. I mean, I was *seventeen* when we broke up. And *exactly* eleven months and three weeks later, I had a kid with her twin sister.

“It’s never too late to try again, you know,” I say. Perhaps if Millie hadn’t interfered, Why ever she did that in the first place, perhaps Emory and I would’ve never broken up. It seems impossible to me now because I used to think Millie and I were meant to be together. But maybe if Millie hadn’t broken us up…

Looking at it now, I might’ve been Millie’s love of her life, but clearly she wasn’t meant to be mine. It took years for me to realize it, and no, I didn’t come to that conclusion because of Emory. In fact, I think I started believing this when I saw Colin fall in love with a girl who was so close to death, he was probably able to taste it.

Lily didn’t die, obviously, but the whole time he was trying to get her to accept some help, he didn’t know whether he would end up with her. If she’d still be alive at the end of the day. If he’d wake up to news that she had passed.

He still loved her, knowing he could lose her at any point. But she’s alive. She wanted the help in the end and got it. Now they’re happily together, though she still has her off days, I believe.

Their story could've ended in a heartbreak like mine did, but it didn't.

Lily could've been another lesson for Colin, but she wasn't. And so, looking at their relationship, it made me realize that although I loved Millie to pieces, although she will always have a place in my heart and will always be loved by me, maybe she was just a lesson in my life that I had to learn. A cruel one. A really fucking cruel one.

I sit up, bringing my mouth close enough to my wife's, letting our lips brush against one another, yet not quite meet.

"Try again?" she whispers, breathing heavily.

"Let's try again, Em."

Emory closes the space between our lips, enflaming my body, my heart. Making every hair on my body stand, every muscle tense and relax when she lets out a soft hum, a soft moan.

I slide my hands up her body, taking her shirt with me. Inch by inch do I bring her shirt up, giving her enough time to tell me no, to stop me. But she doesn't. So when our lips part, and she brings her hands over her body, I don't hesitate to pull the shirt off all the way.

She isn't wearing a bra, which means her upper body is exposed to me right away, and still my eyes stay locked with hers instead of moving down.

Her breathing grows irregular, switching between deep breaths and shallow ones, and the other way 'round.

"Are you okay with this?" I ask, just to be sure.

"Yes," Emory answers and presses her lips to mine one more time. Sweet and quick, but with so much passion, she might as well have ruptured my heart. "But we've got to make it quick. It's almost five in the morning."

And almost five means we have about *maybe* an hour until Brooke is wide awake and ready to watch her favorite TV show which airs every morning at six.

Not wasting any more time, I sneak an arm around my wife to keep her in a steady position while I turn us around, laying her down on the blanket. I hook my fingers into her shorts and underwear, tug on them, she lifts her hips to make it a little easier for me to take her clothes off. Sliding the fabric down her silky-smooth legs, I throw both pieces of clothing somewhere around the room, not really caring about where they land.

“You know, colors suit you,” Em says with a hint of a chuckle in her voice as I strip off my boxers and kneel back down.

She lays her legs over my thighs, and I grasp her hips to pull her closer to me. Emory lets out a little shriek when my hardened cock pokes her, but she recovers the second I grasp my dick with one hand, give it a long stroke before I slide the head through her slick folds.

Deciding to tease my wife a little bit, I do not push inside her yet, even though I am dying to feel her wet pussy clench around me. I nudge the head of my cock against her opening, push inside of her to an extent, but never enough to enter her.

“You think so?” I smirk, then reach beside me. Most of my body is covered in paint already anyway, so what does it matter now, right?

I dive my hand into the paint on the palette, covering my palm with a variety of colors. Bringing both of my hands together, I rub them together, mixing the colors in my palms while my wife is watching me with wide eyes.

Leaning just that tiny bit forward, I lay both of my hands on her boobs, squeezing them. Emory opens her mouth in protest, but what leaves her instead is a gasp when I slide my thumbs over her overly sensitive nipples.

“I’m going to kill you.”

“And kill the only guy who ever made you come? Doesn’t seem all *too* smart if you asked me.” I let my hands trace over her skin a little more, making sure to leave as much

paint on her body as possible. Once I like my masterpiece, it's time I mark her in *other* ways.

"You… How do you know that?"

"Sun talks a lot."

"I swear, this gi—" I buck forward, pushing my cock inside of my wife. "Oh, holy fu—" I cover her mouth with my hand, muting her.

"You're fucking soaking, darling." I was expecting to be met with a little more resistance when I plunge inside her, but I wasn't.

She moans against my palm when I pull my hips back a bit, then push forward again. Her breasts bounce with my thrust.

Removing my hand from her mouth, I sit up and slide both of my hands underneath her ass, lifting her hips. Emory's hands cling on to the blanket, her lips pressing tightly together in an attempt to keep quiet.

She has a faint handprint over her mouth from the remains of color on my hand, and I would probably laugh wasn't I too busy thrusting deep inside of my wife to hear the muffled huffs and moans that do escape her.

"You're doing so well, darling." I want to kiss her. Her lips, her body, anywhere, really. But I don't want to lie on top of her for a very obvious reason. And still, I can't stop thinking about her lips pressed to mine, our tongues dancing, breaths mingling together. I can't stop wanting to feel the moment her need get so much that she barely even manages to kiss back, or the moment when she comes with her lips attached to mine and every bodily function of hers just stops for a short while.

She arches her back, fisting the blanket even tighter, and for a moment I wish we were holding hands instead.

Fuck, since when do I hold *hands* during sex? I never even kiss my partners. Done it with Em first and stopped right after her as well. Holding hands and kissing is just a level of intimacy I never wanted… except with Emory then, I guess.

Why is this happening?

I don't care. I don't give a flying fuck why I suddenly have the urge to kiss my wife or hold her hand, I just act.

Pulling out of her entirely, I turn us around; me lying down, her on top of me. She's bend over, her lips *finally* attached to mine. Taking her bottom lip between my teeth, I bite down just a little bit not to hurt her, but hard enough to hear that gasp escape from her. She tastes a little like paint, but that's completely my fault. Thank fuck I bought non-toxic paints just in case Brooke were to use them. At least I can kiss my wife without fearing to end up in the ER with some kind of poisoning.

"Miles," Emory cries, desperate to feel me inside of her again. "Please."

"Take whatever you need from me, darling." I grasp her hand in mine the moment she sits up, resting them on her thigh as she uses the other one to reach between our bodies. Wrapping her hand around my cock, she aligns it with her pussy, sinking down, buried to the hilt in one swift motion.

Her hand now lies on my stomach, holding herself up enough not to sway, but that wouldn't happen anyway because before I'd *ever* let Emory fall, I'd catch her.

She rolls her hips, moans leaving her mouth and filling my body with sweet fucking ecstasy. Every single time she comes down, I thrust up, meeting her halfway.

"Fuck, Em. You feel so good," I rasp.

I fit so perfectly inside her, it's like I was made for her. Her tight pussy squeezing my cock, making me see not only stars, but whole ass galaxies, yet she's the only one I ever want to see.

Emory smiles at me, grabbing both of my hands into hers when she tries to pull me up to sit. I'm not sure why she does it, but I still sit up either way. If my wife wants me to sit, I fucking sit.

“Make that sound again,” she speaks against my lips, connecting them as soon as the words leave her mouth.

With a slight chuckle, I now let every damn sound that threatens to leave me out, much to my wife’s pleasure. Should’ve known *that* was going to get her going.

She bounces on top of me, her arms swung around my neck. My hands are all over her body now, feeling every possible inch, burning it into my memory.

“You fuck me so good, darling.”

“Miles,” she pants. “I’m so close.”

I squeeze her ass, and she squirms, tipping over until her head rests against mine. Her kisses stop, just like I knew they would.

Her pussy clenches around my cock, squeezing me so hard I almost lose it. I can feel her soaking around my throbbing cock, dripping.

A couple of thrust later, she collapses against me, crying out my name when she comes on my dick, panting, gasping for air. Legs shaking.

When she clenches around me a little lighter, I feel the heat flood my body, fire burning my senses, making its way through my body to my groin, my balls throbbing as they tighten up and I come right inside of my wife.

I kiss her through my orgasm, slowly continuing to thrust my hips into hers to leave every drop of my cum inside of her. Until my muscles go slack, and my strength leaves me.

“Can we do it again?” Emory asks, still trying to catch her breath.

Fucking gladly. “Give me a—”

“DADDY?” Brooke shouts from most definitely Emory and my bedroom, tears in her voice. I can picture her sitting on the floor, crying because she can’t find me.

With a heavy sigh, I pull out of my wife. “Guess not. I’m sorry, darling.” I plant a kiss to her forehead, then gently push her off of me and get up. Picking up my boxers, I

quickly slip into them and walk down the hall, right toward my daughter.

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Chapter 46

“there’s not much that we agree on”—not your friend by Jeremy Zucker

Emory

“I’LL GET THE DOOR,” I let Miles know while I sprint past the kitchen. He’s cooking us lunch, *only* us. Brooke is next door at Grey’s, probably eating all of the crackers and candies she can find.

We meant to pick her up after the gynecologist visit, but Miles figured another extra hour without a child at home will do me good.

“You do that, darling,” he responses, looking up from the stove. He can see the front door from the kitchen, so I know his eyes are following me there.

When I open the door, I suddenly wish we were still at the doctor’s. “Iris.” I smile at her kindly. “Please, come in.”

Just when I thought she wasn’t going to show up again. She hasn’t ever since we moved here, which is three weeks ago.

“Oh, hello, Mrs. King.”

“Emory, please.” I’ve been telling her to call me by my first name for months, she never does. Maybe one day she will. But I do get the feeling she doesn’t like me very much, which doesn’t help Miles’s case.

“Is your husband at home?”

“Right here,” Miles says from the kitchen. I’m not sure how Iris didn’t see Miles, but whatever.

Iris turns toward my husband. He looks back at us, his eyes are on me though. When I roll my eyes in annoyance due to yet another appearance of Iris Decker, he chuckles.

“To what do I owe the pleasure this time, Iris?” Miles turns off the stove and sets the pot aside, just to seem polite.

She makes her way toward him, making sure to look around the apartment rather than my husband. But when she reaches Miles, her attention is on him, fully. “Can we speak in private, please?”

“Whatever you have to say, you can just say it. I’d tell Emory anyway.” He would because for whatever reasons, he just tells me everything ever since we agreed to “try again.” He did before as well.

It’s a little weird between us sometimes. A little awkward tension here and there, but it’s going. Not sure in which direction if I’m being honest, but we’re moving.

Iris lets out a disapproving hum, looks at me with contempt. God, this woman *hates* me.

“I can go,” I say. Obviously Iris wants me gone.

“It’s alright, Mrs. King.” She doesn’t look at me when she speaks. Can’t say I’m upset about it. “Where’s Brooklyn?”

“She’s at a friend’s house. Picking her up in an hour,” Miles answers. It’s more or less of a lie. She *is* at a friend’s house, just not *her* friend’s house.

“I’m glad to hear that. She’s not in daycare, is she? So I don’t think Brooklyn has many friends.”

“She isn’t, but it’s not mandatory anyway.”

Once again, Iris Decker lets out a disapproving gruff. I am telling you; she finds flaws where there are none. A lot of parents don’t put their kids into daycare. A bunch don’t even sign them up for school, homeschool them or let them take classes online. This woman can’t possibly count this as strike god-knows-how-many-she-has against Miles, can she?

“Well anyway,” she begins and leans against the kitchen island like she owns this place. “Are you still planning on starting a pro ice hockey career, Miles?”

Oh, so she can first-name my husband but not me? Wow. Okay.

I make my way over to Miles just to be near him because whenever this woman shows up, I somehow tend to give him strength, or so he said.

Miles pulls me into his side, wrapping an arm around my body. “I am,” he answers with confidence. The same that’s squashed a second later when Iris’s face twitches *disa-fucking-provingly.*

“I don’t think that’s a good idea, Miles.”

“Excuse me?” He squeezes my waist a little, not to the point where it hurts, thankfully. “Why not?”

“A hockey career requires you to be on the road more days than you’d be at home. When you’re on the road, you cannot possibly care for your daughter. Not the way she wishes you would do it. Brooklyn is four years old; she deserves a father who is there for her and doesn’t leave her at home with babysitters or hands her off to friends and family members every other day.”

“With all due respect, Decker,” Miles begins, “other players have kids as well. They’re still on the team, and they still care for their children. It’s not just me. What about all the parents with jobs that require them to travel for work? They’re gone most of the time as well, some of those without the chance of taking their family with them wherever they go. And some of them don’t even have the opportunity to video chat or call because the service is that bad. Are you going to tell them to quit their jobs because they’d be ‘abandoning’ their family?”

“This is not the same. And I’m not trying to—”

“How is it not?”

After a short hesitation, Iris opens her mouth, unfortunately. “Your daughter doesn’t have a mother, Mr. King. While those fathers leave their kids with their mother, you have no other choice but to leave Brooklyn with her

grandparents or your friends. It's not the same as a guardian looking out for her."

She does see me though, right?

"You know *why* my daughter doesn't have a mother? Because said mother *died*," Miles says, his voice louder than before. Angry. "I'm really sorry you have to compare living parents to dead ones just to make a point. It's not my fault her mother died. And it certainly isn't my daughter's. And in case you forgot, I am married. Brooke would never stay with anyone but her step*mother*. Besides, when did I *ever* say I would leave Brooke home while I have to travel for work?"

"Life on the road isn't something for a child. Brooklyn should grow up seeing her friends regularly, having her family around her, and not live her life on planes and busses, or in ice hockey arenas."

"I'm going to fucking lose it," he mutters, but I'm not sure Iris hears it. I think he doesn't even want her to hear it. "So what? If I don't quit, you're going to take her away from me? Is that even allowed? Because I don't think a *job*, a well-paid one as well, has *anything* to do with my child's well-being."

"That's not what I'm trying to say. I am suggesting for you to take a step back and be there for your daughter. You're under radar, you cannot afford mistakes."

Mistakes? His job isn't a mistake, is it?

Miles takes a step back, and when I turn to look at him, I find him with his face averted to the ceiling, taking deep breaths. Only when he calmed himself down does he look at Iris again. "I'm under radar for neglecting my child, aren't I? That's why you're so persistent with wanting me to quit my job. Why you're extra observant about how much time I have left for my daughter, because god forbid me doing the same fucking thing any parent does."

"Child neglect, yes," she finally confirms. All this time she'd been coming for a routine visit, she never said anything, though it's Miles's right to know what he's

accused of. Granted, he never asked. “No regular parent is gone from home five days out of seven. Every week.”

“Do you need a definition for neglection? *Fail to care for properly* as a verb, and *the state of being uncared for* as a noun. Brooke is cared for. I provide her with *everything* she might need,” Miles retorts, the restraint of anger in his voice audible. “I am not violent toward Brooke. I don’t abuse her, never laid a hand on her, never even fucking *raised* my *voice* at her. I do not abandon or leave her alone at home. I do not push her away to some family members either. She’s not in some kind of environmental danger. I am able to take care of my child, so why the fuck are you still on my ass?”

“Mr. King—”

“No. You *owe* me some answers,” Miles interrupts. “I understand this is your job. I understand you have to investigate after Maeve called and dished you some bullshit. And yes, Brooke had been living with my ex-stepsister for a while because I was in college. Want to know why? Because *she* offered it. And I still used every damn free second I had to see my child. I skipped practice to be with her. I dropped every single class I didn’t need to have more time for Brooke. I did every fucking thing imaginable to take care of my daughter. Making her stay with Maeve was the best thing I could’ve done for her at that time.”

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Chapter 47

“will I ever be free? / have I crossed the line?”—All The Things She Said by Poppy

Miles

THAT FUCKING WOMAN.

When did having a job ever counted as neglection or abandonment? Since when does it matter whether I’m working a nine to five job in an office, or travel for work? There are still ways I can care for my daughter. I never said I would leave her behind, not take her with me. It’s just ice hockey, I can bring my wife and kids. So it’s not like Brooke wouldn’t see me anymore at all.

Other families do that or have it even worse with one parent being gone without being able to take their family with them.

Why is it a problem when I have that for my family?

“Brooklyn staying with someone else for a while was never the problem,” Iris says, her eyebrows quipped up, and still somehow her expression gives nothing away. “And there was never a mention of that in the report.”

“Then who reported Miles?” Emory asks, and I’m glad she does because I couldn’t bring those exact words past my lips.

“If it wasn’t Maeve, I should have the right to know.”

Iris shakes her head. “Only if it’s a mandated reporter, which it is not. I cannot tell you who reported you to the department, but the accusations were bad enough to have me still investigate.”

What the fuck. If it wasn't Maeve, then who the hell would report me to the Child Protection Services? "Can you at least tell me if it was a man or woman who reported me?"

"No." Of course not.

"Then please, I'd like to know the full accusations." With Maeve I knew what they'd be. I knew she'd say I was pushing Brooke away and didn't even want her in my life, which isn't true. I knew she would lie and not make it easy for me. But if it wasn't Maeve reporting me, and the accusations are *far* worse than I thought, I'd really like to know what they're about.

"Like I said, neglect. The person said you'd withhold medical care from your daughter, don't grant her access to food. That she's been denied access to your house, and you kept her in the backyard for hours daily because you simply didn't want her nearby. They said that you beat your daughter and that, excuse my words, that you'd sleep around with women rather than take responsibility for your child."

Blinking at Iris, I only *barely* manage not to storm out of the apartment and go… do what? Beat some trashcans? Do the Aaron-therapy and drink myself to oblivion, to the point where I just don't feel a thing anymore?

Running away from this won't make it go away, in fact, it's just going to make it worse. I know that. And still I want nothing more but to take Brooke and Emory and just get the fuck away from here.

"Miles…" I hear Emory say softly just as her face comes into view and her hands reach up to mine. The warmth of her hands on my jaw is only little comfort this time.

"I don't… Em, I don't do that."

"I know." She swipes her thumbs underneath my eyes, only then making me realize tears are running down my face. "I don't know who would say something like that, Miles."

I just want to know whom I pissed off so badly that they'd go about their day while ruining my life. Fuck, they can ruin *my* life all they want, but dragging my daughter into this isn't cool. This doesn't just affect me, it affects Brooke, too. How could anyone be cruel enough to make a four-year-old have to go through this? She already lost her mother, there is no fucking need to make her lose me as well.

"Mr. King, I don't see the accusations being true," Iris says, some sympathy in her voice this time. I look up, meeting her gaze. "But those aren't to take lightly, and I am just trying to do my job here. Your daughter speaks very highly of you in case you were wondering. She wouldn't do that if you were to abuse her in any way imaginable. Kids that fall victim to abuse often—it's not always the case—act scared, and she doesn't. Sure, she's shy around me but that's normal, she doesn't know me. Brooklyn doesn't fear getting in trouble when she says too much, and I've had a lot of cases where four-year-old's were beat to keep quiet. You're doing a wonderful job raising her, or so far I can tell."

So then what the fuck is she still doing here? "But?"

"Like I said, those things that were said about you aren't to be taken lightly. I'd rather check a hundred times and be a thousand percent sure Brooklyn is safe with you, than take her away without a reason just because I wasn't sure she was okay here. Or let her stay when those accusations happen to be true. Brooklyn's well-being is my number one priority. So far, I do not believe you would harm her. However, you do so happen to have very limited time for her."

That's… good, isn't it? That sounds like she's on my side here. Or at least a little bit on my side. "I made more time for her than for college classes."

"So you said, Mr. King. That doesn't change the fact that Brooklyn misses her father. It's normal for a child to miss their parents when they're not around, at least to an extent, anyway. But the things she told me do have me worried that

there is *some* truth to the accusations. And if you'd let me speak, I could tell you what she's been telling me."

That's just ridiculous. "You can take hockey away from me if you must. Honestly, I don't give a shit. If quitting the team means I keep my daughter with me, then fine. I'll do it right now. Still, I don't think my profession has *anything* to do with this. Nor should it have anything to do with this situation. It's just stupid, even more so when suddenly letting your child stay with its grandparents for a day counts as abandoning your child."

"No, Mr. King. That's not what I am saying." Iris blows out some air like it's keeping her from blowing up. And maybe it is. I know I'm not making her stay here easy. "I cannot make you change your profession. You're right, it doesn't have anything to do with the case. However, if you listened to me…"

"I'm sorry. I'm listening."

"Thank you." Iris looks at Emory for just a moment, smiles and then meets my eyes again. "The last time I spoke to Brooklyn, she told me that she likes it when you're at home. Again, that's to be expected. But she also told me that she used to stay with… Maeve, was it? Occasionally." I nod. "According to your daughter, Mr. King, your daughter really didn't like staying there. She told me she's happy to be with you again, but that she hates it when she has to spend time with your friends when you're at the arena. It's obvious you can't stop your life for your child, nobody's asking you to do that. And even if you do decide to continue to play hockey, that's okay. But I am forced to tell you that your daughter wishes more time with you and that she doesn't want to spend hours in an arena watching *you* while she's being watched by your friends."

"Okay, thank you." Is there anything else I could possibly say? This is a lot to take in, and I suppose I now have a decision to make, one that will turn my whole life upside down once again.

For the longest time imaginable my future was set in stone. I'd go pro after college and become a professional hockey player. That was the plan. It was everything I had worked for. But I guess that's to be changed.

"I'm glad you had Brooklyn stay with your stepsister. Parenting isn't about making the best decisions for yourself, but what's best for your child. And if you thought her staying with somebody else while you finished college was what's best for her, then it was. You are allowed to have an education and finish what you started. It was never about you still having been in college."

I hear what she says. I hear the words that leave her mouth, and yet my mind stays on one little portion of it.

Parenting isn't about making the best decisions for yourself, but what's best for your child.

Perhaps she's right.

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Chapter 48

“I’m pretty fucking far from being okay”—Lonely Ones by LOVA

Miles

“*Où allons-nous*, DADDY?

“We’re going to give Reece a visit.” Or she is. I’ve made up my mind. My decision was always the same, even though it took me the entire weekend to convince myself to go through with it.

“Then we get ice cream, Daddy?” Brooke looks up at me with huge, pleading eyes. They’re sparkling a little. God, this kid just loves ice cream. She’s holding on to my hand, trying to keep up with my steps as we walk down the street to get to the Carter’s house. Thankfully it’s not that far from the apartment complex we live in.

“Yeah, then we can go get some ice cream.”

“OKAY!” She jumps up all excitedly, laughing while also somehow humming her current favorite song. She’s been wanting to listen to it all week long. At this point, the whole building we live in might as well be able to sing it word for word. “But without Reece.”

“Yes, little monkey, just you and me.”

↠ ♡ ↞

“YOU’RE STALLING,” Tobias Carter says, tapping his fingers on the marble of their kitchen island.

I've been inside of this house a million times, mostly because of Brooke and her regular visits to Reece.

Telling Coach, or rather my soon-to-be *ex*-Coach, I need to talk to him urgently was the easy part. Telling him that I have to quit before the season even starts is a whole different kind of difficult.

I know Tobias Carter sees a lot of potential in me, otherwise he wouldn't have stuck up to the team owner for me. Without Coach Carter, Aaron, Grey, Colin, and I might have been separated, forced to play for different teams, move across the country. But he stuck up for all four of us. Of course he would stick up for his own son, but that's not the point. If he didn't see potential in me, whether I'm his son's best friend or not, he wouldn't have gone to the lengths he did to get me an offer.

Now having to disappoint him by letting him know that my hockey career apparently ended with my college graduation sucks.

"Spit it out, King. You never knew how to keep your mouth shut, don't start now."

"I always knew how to keep my mouth shut," I say. "I was just never up to do it."

"Whatever." Tobias rolls his eyes with a chuckle leaving him. "Tell me. It can't possibly be that bad."

If only he knew. "I have to quit hockey."

He nods. "Okay. Now… jokes aside. Tell me."

"I wish I was joking. I really do have to quit. I—" Shit. Coming to terms with this by myself is *so* much easier than actually saying it out loud. "This off-season may be off-season for the hockey players, but it's my forever-vacation. I can't play for the NHL."

"You're being serious," an only *too* familiar voice comes from right behind me. I don't even have to turn around to know who this voice belongs to. "Tell me you're joking, Miles!"

Colin slaps his hands on the island counter right beside me. When I look at him, I see nothing but anger. Maybe not aimed at me directly, but he is in shock, an angry kind of shock.

“Not joking.”

“You can’t quit. You don’t fucking quit the NHL!”

“He’s right, you know.” Tobias stays much calmer than his son.

“I don’t have a choice.” Emory tried to weigh out the pros and cons with me last night, there were far more pros for me leaving the NHL early than staying.

“Bullshit. You always have a choice,” Colin almost growls. Fuck, he’s pissed at me for quitting. Damn.

“Yeah, I do. The choice between making Brooke happy or unhappy. I choose to make her happy, sorry.”

Colin sits down at the same time as his father stands. “You have my number if you change your mind, just give me a call, Miles. Thank you for telling me though.”

“You don’t want to know the details?”

Tobias shakes his head. “I have four children. Two of which are dead, but either way, I have four. And thinking back to it now, I could’ve had so much more time for all of them had I not gone the career path I did. I wouldn’t have been around for Eira’s last days had I not stepped back from the NHL for a year, upon *her* wishes, mind you. I love my job, but it’s taking me away from my family. Always did, and it always will until I retire.” Just like that, he leaves the room to probably give me a chance to explain myself to Colin without him around.

Tobias Carter just told me the exact same thing Iris did, only that he speaks from experience, didn’t make me out to be a bad person for wanting to try. If that doesn’t tell me I’ve made the right decision, I don’t know what ever could.

“Quitting the NHL? What are you nuts? Not everyone gets that chance, dude.”

“You don’t think I know that?” Is that really so difficult for Colin to wrap his head around? My decision to leave before I’d regret it was made two seconds after I’ve been met with it. I’d always choose my daughter over anyone or anything. Why can’t he see that? Okay, maybe because I haven’t explained it to him yet, but even so, he should support my decision a little more.

Then again, I am quitting the NHL after having been working to get an offer for half of my life. But even just the offer is an honor.

“Colin, I have a family. You know how difficult it was with Brooke during college. She wasn’t happy being gone from me for days when we were on the road for games, and I wasn’t happy not having her around either. Playing for the NHL means even *more* time away from her. And apart from Brooke, Emory is pregnant. She’s supposed to give birth in September. Hockey season starts up around the same time. I’d have to leave her behind with a newborn. Do you have any clue how hard it is to handle a baby all by yourself?”

Colin shakes his head, then nods but shakes his head again. He was old enough to witness the crying from Reece, granted a year later he moved out to go to college, but still, he knows about the crying. He wasn’t the one to care for him, he doesn’t know how challenging it can get, but he should have some kind of idea.

“You’re not even going to try? Or start a year later? I’m sure my dad would be able to work something out.”

That was never my concern. I knew if I talked to Tobias, he would find a way to allow me to start a year later, but I am no longer eighteen years old. I can’t just put my life on pause to care for a child for a year and then hit play and continue from where I paused. This isn’t college anymore. Being in different states, or even countries is different to being an hour away and able to get to my child shortly.

If something happened to either of my children or my wife and I was somewhere across the country for a stupid

hockey game, I could never forgive myself for that.

“I want to be there for all three of them,” I tell him. “And if being there means having to quit the NHL, then so be it. I still have that restaurant, and it’s not like I hate cooking. Working there allows me to be there for my children and my wife. Being on the road seven to nine months of the year won’t.”

Colin scratches the back of his neck, his eyes draining of anger, replacing with sadness. “We’re still going to be friends though, right? You won’t move away, and we’d never see each other.”

Shit. To think one of my best friends is scared to lose the bond we have just because we’re no longer going to see each other daily at practice. “I’ll still be your neighbor. I won’t be out of the world.”

His head bobs, processing my words. “Taco Sundays,” he says.

“What?”

He leans back in his chair, crossing his arms over his chest. “I demand we build up a new tradition. Taco Sunday. Aaron and Sofia, Grey, You and Emory, Lily, and me. And obviously your kids. Every Sunday we can, we make tacos together and eat them.”

“You’ve got some serious abandonment issues, babe.”

“Take it or I won’t let you quit the NHL.”

Like he could keep me from it. And still, I agree. Under one condition. “If you buy a karaoke machine and think to make it a taco-karaoke Sunday, I will move back to Malibu.”

“No karaoke. Deal.”

Now the only people left to contact are my agent and my lawyer so they can get me out of my contract.

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Chapter 49

“you know my worst, see me hurt, but you don’t judge”—8 Letters by Why Don’t We

Emory

“… We have tried the best we can to prevent this but the circumstances before us are unavoidable and prompted us to sever ties with you.”

Unbelievable.

“If you have questions, concerns, or in need of any information regarding this matter, please do get in touch with me via email at *DiegoPauls@EmovilleAgency.com.”*

This is almost comical.

I knew Diego would go bad-shit crazy when I announce my pregnancy on Instagram without even telling him beforehand. I knew it would have consequences. Also knew that getting pregnant means fewer photoshoot opportunities and less work in general, which, honestly, I’m fine with. I never liked these shoots anyway.

But terminating my contract with Emoville Agency because of it is insane. It is ludicrous.

It hasn’t even been an hour since I announced to the world that Miles and I are expecting a baby. The feedback has been mostly positive so far. Even bigger brands I’ve worked with before congratulated me. And yet Diego goes about and terminates my contract. But of course he would. I’m useless to him now. At least in some ways.

Fewer shoots mean less money for me. And less money for me means *he* gets less as well. Money-driven asshole.

I can't say I wasn't expecting this to happen.

But you know what? I'll find another agency. I know I will. Or maybe I won't because why would I want that? Being bound to another bunch of rules, having other people control my life… it's exhausting. Besides, some part of me was hoping they'd terminate the contract because I truly wanted out.

Anyway, I'm now drinking vanilla sauce because that little kid inside of me clearly prefers the sauce over the ice cream it's meant for. That's not on me. It's not my fault my still unborn child wants vanilla sauce. And if Miles asks where the sauce went, I have an excuse and someone to blame it on. He can't get mad at a fetus.

Speaking of Miles, or rather thinking about him, the apartment door suddenly opens, and my husband comes marching in, wearing a tuxedo. I've seen him wear expensive suits before. I've seen him look fancy and really fucking sexy, but this… oh damn. "Trying again" never made me want to jump off this couch, run into his arms to kiss him, then fuck him nine ways to Sunday more than it does now.

Why does he have to have such a pretty face? Couldn't he be painful to look at? I mean, he *is* painful to look at, but unfortunately only because—No. I cannot think like this.

He's ugly. He's ugly. He's… panties-soaking-ugly.

Hold on, that doesn't make sense. *Ugh.*

"You're thinking about sex, aren't you?" He smirks like he already knows and doesn't even need me to answer.

"Shut up." I lift my glass filled with vanilla sauce to my mouth and take a sip. Oh sweet vanilla, always my friend.

Miles quickly takes off his shoes, then comes walking over into the living room. Standing behind the couch, he leans my head back into my neck just to give me a quick greeting

kiss. “Did you eat anything else today? Anything *but* vanilla sauce, which, FYI, does not count as eating.”

He’s been at the restaurant for two hours before it opened. I guess now that he quit hockey, the restaurant is all he has left. Miles did promise not to stay until it closes though, mostly because he doesn’t want to leave Brooke here with me all evening long, and because he doesn’t want to miss a day of tucking her in. Another reason for him to come home after literally two hours of actual working is so he can make sure I am okay. Some stupid part in my brain hopes it’s not just because I’m pregnant.

I nod. “I ate a few cherries and cookies.”

He lets out a disapproving huff and makes his way over into the kitchen, most definitely to cook for me. Miles does this daily. Cook. I could never.

“DADDY!” Brooke screams as she runs from the hallway right toward her father. She must’ve heard him come home. Miles wants her to keep her bedroom door open, so it’s easy for her to hear us when we talk. And trust me, she hears *everything* when it comes to her father. It could be two in the morning and she’s fast asleep, when he comes home, she hears that. Or so it seems. I can’t actually confirm, Miles hasn’t come home that late yet.

I watch as Miles picks Brooke up and plants kisses all over her little face. She giggles, and when Miles stops she hugs him. I tear up just watching them. To think that anyone out there is trying to split them apart…

Really, from the bottom of my heart, I am praying that Miles will find out who’s trying to get Brooke taken away from him. Not because it would be a relief to know who’s disgusting enough to do that, but because I know Miles will not let this person get through with it just like that. He’s going to find a way to get back at them, somehow terrorize them as much as they are terrorizing Miles right now.

Or maybe he will drop it. Just so he doesn’t have to deal with any more shit. When it comes to Brooke, I never know

which path Miles would actually go.

“Memory and I watched a movie today,” Brooke tells him. “With a princess.”

“Yeah?” Miles looks at me, smiling while somehow his eyes are thanking me. Not sure what for. Watching these movies with Brooke is an excuse for *me* to watch them.

“*Oui*, Daddy. And then we made cookies.”

“Really?”

Baking is forever going to be the only reason for my presence in a kitchen. If I’m in there *cooking*, you best believe the world’s ending.

“They’re here if you want one,” I say, pointing to the coffee table in front of me.

His eyes narrow at me. “Did you poison them?”

“Of course. What, you think I’d stop trying?”

“Glad to hear you’re not,” he responds with that stupid smile still on his lips. He makes his way over to the couch, sits Brooke down before snatching one of the cookies. “Did Brooke eat yet?”

“Yes, Daddy. I eat yet,” she answers, grinning up at her father all proudly.

“Yeah? What’d you have?”

“Memory let me do the egg.”

“Scrambled eggs?” Brooke gives her father a pretty enthusiastic nod. “And she let *you* make them?”

“She insisted you taught her before. I watched, okay? And she did a pretty amazing job.” And honestly, this little girl made a much better job than I ever could.

“I did.” He bites into the cookie, not exactly showing any signs of liking them or thinking they’re gross. I am a great baker, okay. “So, that was dinner then, I guess. Did you eat?” he asks for the second time. “If yes, how much did you eat?”

“Just a little bit.”

“Well, at least something. Em, you have to eat more.”

There’s no use in arguing with him. He’ll keep saying it until I do. I know I have to, okay? I just… can’t. “I’ll try.”

“Okay.” Miles fishes something out of his pocket, then throws the envelope right into my lap. “That was in the mail for you, darling.”

The mail? I checked the mail like an hour ago. Okay, I asked Lily to check the mail when she texted me earlier and asked if I needed anything. I’m sure Miles asked Colin and Lily to check in with me while he’s at work. Thank god they’ll not be around next week.

I like Miles’s friends, I really do. They’re fun and kind, sometimes a little *too* kind though. I really don’t need all of his three best friends, plus their girlfriends stopping by every now and then to see whether I’m doing okay or not. They mean well, I know. I’m also aware that this is just Miles making sure I don’t accidentally die on him, it’s still a little annoying though.

Opening the envelope, I expect it to be the termination of my contract with Emoville Agency, but that can’t be. That’s far too early.

Taking out the paper snippet from the envelope, I honestly contemplate on even reading what’s written on it. It can’t be anything good, I suppose we all figured that out by now.

And still my eyes fall right onto the black ink.

“Miles,” I say quietly, somehow hoping he doesn’t hear me, but of course he does.

“Yes, darling?”

“Did you ever consider that maybe the person who keeps writing me notes is the same person who reported you to CPS?”

I don’t have to look at him to know I have his full attention. Or to know that his eyebrows are either shot up to the sky or drawn together.

“It’s another note then, I take it?” I don’t confirm, he knows the answer. “What does it say?”

“‘How does it feel to watch your life fall apart without being able to do anything about it, Emory?’” I read out to him, feeling the chills run down my spine. It’s the first time that person has said something not related to Miles. Or maybe it is related to him. *His* life is falling apart with all the shit that’s going on, and when he falls, so will I.

“What’s that even supposed to mean?” he asks, taking a seat next to me. Miles takes the paper from my hands, staring at it.

“I—I don’t know. I don’t know why that person is so obsessed with sending me notes or why—”

Miles turns the note over. I never thought to do that before but seeing as there’s yet another note on the back of that paper, perhaps I should’ve done it with all of the other ones.

Now your sister is no longer the only model in your family that failed to become successful.

I stare at the blank ink, *only* staring. My head is blank, there’s literally not a single thought forming. Trying to come at me, that’s fine, whatever, I can deal with it. But dragging a dead person into this… I already knew whoever keeps writing those notes must be sick, but that just tops it once again. I thought it was a needing-a-therapist kind of sick, not a needing-an-exorcist kind of sick.

“Daddy, I’m tired.” Brooke climbs onto his lap, leaning her head against her father’s torso.

Miles closes his arms around Brooke, plants a kiss to the crown of her head then says, “Go brush your teeth, little monkey. I’ll come tuck you in, okay?”

Brooke nods and grasps her little bunny into her hands after Miles sets her down on the floor. She then runs off to

get ready for bed.

Once she's out of earshot, Miles turns to me. "Em, I first thought someone's just trying to mess with you out of jealousy. *This* is not jealousy." He crumbles up the paper and tosses it onto the table.

"It's not."

"I didn't think that person could be connected to whoever's trying to fuck me over, but looking at it now, I'm not so sure it's that impossible anymore." He stands, probably to go after Brooke, but just before he leaves, Miles turns to look at me. And out of nowhere, drops one of the biggest bombs on me ever. "I want you to become Brooke's legal guardian."

Legal guardian? I know I'm supposed to take her in should something happen to Miles but becoming a legal guardian… that's no longer just a hypothetical thing. It's actual responsibilities for a child that is not mine. And while I love Brooke, would do anything to make her happy, I am not sure Miles truly wants this.

"What? Miles. No. She—What about Millie? Do you—"

"Millie is dead, Emory. She won't, *can't* care. We're already married, we're having a child together. And I need someone to be able to make decisions about Brooke when I can't, or I'm, for whatever reason, not reachable."

"Miles…"

"I mean it, Em. She starts kindergarten this year. What if something happens and the teachers can't reach me? Sure, they'll inform you, but you can't make decisions. What if she gets hurt so badly that she needs surgery, but without the permission of a guardian, they won't do shit unless she's unconscious and so close to death, they only need two doctors to sign papers or however that works. So what if they can't reach me and Brooke dies because you couldn't sign stupid papers to get her into surgery and waiting until doctors could decide over her is already too late to save her?"

My heart stops beating at the thought of Brooke in a situation like this. I don't want to imagine that happening. I don't want to entertain the thought of it being possible. "I think you're being paranoid."

His head bobs. "Maybe. But I'd rather be paranoid than lose my child. So, please, Emory. You're the only one I trust enough to make decisions in her favor."

"What happens when we no longer talk, Miles? What happens when you hate me so much that we cannot physically be in one room together without wanting to kill each other? I could turn out to be more of a burden than a blessing." I would never deny Miles anything, not with Brooke. She's not my child so I shouldn't be allowed to make decisions for or about her.

Miles cocks his head, his eyes narrowing. "We already have to work together as a team for one child. Two won't make that much of a difference. Besides, I am not asking you to adopt her or apply for custody. It's just guardianship. I can withdraw my consent if I want to."

Okay, that sounds less bad. "I just want you to be one hundred percent sure about this, Miles."

"We have a few more months to decide anyway. You'll have to have lived with me and Brooke for at least a year before you can apply."

This does not ease my concerns about his sudden desire for me to apply for guardianship. But with a few more months ahead for a final decision, maybe he'll have thought it all the way through.

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Chapter 50

“you’ve been lying to yourself / lie to everyone else”—Lie Lie Lie by Joshua Bassett

Miles

“They’re really great cookies,” I say as I sneak into bed with my wife. I couldn’t say anything before. Not because I didn’t want to but because I was catapulted right back in time to when I first tasted *those*. The exact fucking taste.

I pull Emory closer to me until her back is pressed flush to my front. She lays her head on my arm, intertwining our hands while my other one lies on her stomach, my thumb stroking up and down her belly.

“Thank you.”

“Did Millie give you the recipe?” I mean, I guess the same cookies somehow taste the same, but everyone follows different recipes. Tastes can wary. But they can also be the same.

It’s like cooking. The same dishes can taste differently depending on the recipe.

Emory shakes her head, or at least that’s what it feels like. “No, that’s always been my recipe. Millie didn’t bake.”

“But she did.”

“Did not. She hated getting her hands dirty. So baking cookies? An instant no from her.”

“What?” This doesn’t even make sense. I know Millie or *knew* her. She loved baking. She was the best baker I knew. Every time I came over to their house, she had baked something. Millie would always be so nervous for me to try

what she made because she valued my opinion, always said mine was the only one that truly mattered to her.

There's no way she lied about that.

"Yeah, she never did anything. Insisted on the fact that models are there to look pretty and not actually *do* stuff."

"She wasn't a model though."

"She wanted to be one. Even tried to become one at a young age," Em says, carefully turning around so she's now facing me. Emory swings a leg over my body, her hand finding to my face, just lying there on my cheek. "You didn't know."

"I knew she wanted to start a model career when she's eighteen." At this point, am I even sure I knew her?

"She told you she baked, didn't she?" I nod, swallowing heavily. "She didn't, Miles. That was all me."

"Did she ever learn how to play the violin?" If she lied to me about baking, it wouldn't surprise me anymore if she also lied about her musical talents. Millie always bragged about being a great violinist, but whenever I asked her to play for me, she just wouldn't. Either her violin was broken, or she didn't have it around, so she always said.

I believed her. I did because I never thought Millie would lie to me. She was the sweetest person I knew, there was no doubt in my mind when she told me she was incapable of lying without getting caught.

There were times when she lied to me, but she'd laugh while talking then, it was pretty obvious she lied.

Unless she did that on purpose.

"Millie? Playing the violin?" Emory laughs. "Never."

Liars have tricks, don't they? They're the best manipulators. They know how to make you believe anything. I suppose their biggest lie will forever be that they're not great liars. When you catch someone lying, you think you've figured them out. That you know their tricks. And then comes the day you find out you never did.

“Do *you* play the violin?” I ask carefully, afraid of the answer because I don’t want my suspicions to be true.

Emory shakes her head. “I tried. I took lessons, but they never got me anywhere, so I quit a week later.” Okay, that’s at least *some* relief.

But then if Millie never played the violin, why did she have so many classical music books all around her room? Why did she have music sheets laying around? And what about all those baking books? Nobody would be so determined to keep up a stupid lie that they spend money on things they don’t need.

“Did you never wonder why she kept baking books in her room or music sheets?”

I can feel the hot air graze my skin when Emory exhales deeply. “I’ve never been inside her room for long enough to really look around,” she admits. “She never wanted me there. When we talked, we talked in my room.”

That’s so strange. I can’t be the only one thinking this is odd. I mean, I don’t have siblings, but when my dad remarried and I suddenly had Maeve to deal with, even I let her inside my room when we talked. It wasn’t often, but that’s not the point anyway.

“Did she ever have anyone over? Anyone but me?” I never asked Millie, never cared either. I don’t think anyone ever really asks their partner if they have friends over, that’s just an odd thing to ask.

“Not that I know. Millie liked her privacy, clearly.”

Yeah, clearly. But then why was I allowed to spend time with her in her room when she didn’t want anyone there? Sure, I was her boyfriend, but she wouldn’t even allow Emory inside, why me?

“Where does Brooke sleep when she stays with your parents?” I ask. Brooke doesn’t have a bedroom there, obviously. But I always just figured she’d stay with Holly and Mitch, forgetting that they have two extra bedrooms.

I never asked Brooke where she sleeps because, again, that's a weird question to ask. Something I never worried about. But now I do wonder if Brooke ever entered Millie's old bedroom. I wonder if Mitch and Holly ever showed Brooke pictures of her mother or allowed her to just see the room to feel closer to Millie, perhaps? God, I have no idea if all this even makes sense. Do people enter bedrooms of their passed loved ones to feel closer to them?

"I think my bedroom. They don't usually let anyone inside of Millie's room. I don't think my mom even walks in there. It must be dusty as fuck in her bedroom."

"Do you think we can go there tomorrow? I need to check something." Perhaps I'm just overthinking all of this. Maybe there's an explanation for her lies. Maybe she was trying to learn the violin and was embarrassed to say she's still being taught. Same with baking. I wouldn't know why, but that sounds much better than the alternative.

And perhaps looking around her room will give me some explanation about her tendency for privacy toward her family.

Emory nuzzles a little closer to me. "Sure."

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Chapter 51

“I bought every lie you sold me”—Lie by NF

Miles

“You can’t just show up unannounced.” Holly taps her foot on the hardwood floor, having her arms crossed over her chest, not letting either Emory or me enter the house.

“Mom, Miles just needs to get something from Millie’s room. We’ll leave again in just a few minutes.”

“Your father drank.” Holly looks at Brooke, then back to Emory. “It’s not a good idea for Brooke to be around him today.”

“So keep him away from Millie’s room, Holly,” I say, now getting annoyed. I know technically she doesn’t have to let us in. It’s her house. But Holly has never had anything against random visits, especially when I brought Brooke. “Five minutes, okay?”

“Fine.” She steps aside, allowing us in. “Don’t break anything.”

Ignoring Holly, Emory, Brooke, and I make our way upstairs. I’m pretty sure Brooke has never been inside of Millie’s room, and I’m kind of afraid to take her in there, but at the same time; what’s supposed to happen? It’s a bedroom. Nothing too spectacular.

As I lay my hand on the doorknob, there’s a slight second I hesitate before twisting it. I haven’t been inside of Millie’s room in almost five years. The last time I was in there was the day Brooke was born. We were just chilling and then Millie’s contractions started, and we went to the hospital.

It was a very scary day, and then it got even scarier; finding out she'd need an emergency c-section, being told that there were complications, finding out she's in a coma and will most likely not wake up again.

I never even got to see her again.

Finally opening the door, a wave of dust and very old air hits us right away. There's still a *slight* touch of Millie in the air, but it's mostly just old and smelly.

The first thing I notice when that door is opened all the way is that it looks the same. The purple scarf Millie wanted to wear the day she gave birth is still in the same exact spot on the floor from when I told her it's not necessary. The beige jacket still hanging on her closet door, now dry and no longer wet from the rain. The same pregnancy books splattered all over her room. Our pictures. Stuff I left here. Her bed is unmade, showing exactly how quickly we both rushed out that day. Her drawer still opened from when I rummaged through her stuff to find anything to take with us to the hospital. It looks like someone lives in here, yet the dust says otherwise.

Her walls aren't white anymore, they're slightly yellow now and one spot in the corner by the ceiling looks like it's moments away from molding that's how uncared for this room is.

On the first look, the room is the exact same as I remember, but looking deeper it somehow isn't. And it definitely doesn't feel the same.

"Miles…" Emory lays a hand on my shoulder, but it doesn't help the lump in my throat. "You can tell me what you need, I'll look for it."

I look over my shoulder. "No, it's fine. But thank you." I don't need anything in particular. I just want to know if Millie at least owned a violin, even if she didn't play. And maybe I want to find any clues as to why she would lie to me. I doubt her room could give me an answer to any of my questions, but it's worth a try.

I step inside the room. Slowly. Carefully. It feels like every step I take adds some weight onto me, like a force that just doesn't want me inside.

Brooke runs past me, eager to get on the bed and use it as a trampoline. She loves beds, especially when they're bouncy. And from experience I know Millie's happens to be not only bouncy looking, but it actually is quite the trampoline for a toddler.

However, Brooke doesn't jump up on the bed, she halts right in front of the nightstand table.

Abandoning the thought of looking for any signs that Millie did play the violin, I make my way over to my daughter to see what caught her attention. Only that this might actually give me a heart attack. My eyes land on the picture frame, holding one of the million pictures Millie and I took together. Only that this has always been my favorite.

It is the rawest pictures we've ever taken. Usually Millie tried to look extra pretty in those pictures, even though I kept telling her that it didn't matter because she was always pretty. But this picture… She doesn't wear makeup in it. She's been awake for a solid two seconds when I shot it. Millie still looks sleepy in that picture, but even so I thought she was the most beautiful girl to ever exist.

Seeing the way she looked at me in this picture always brought a smile to my face. Her eyes were filled with love, admiration. Back then I never would've imagined ever being with anyone but her. I never thought there would be a last time I experienced the joy of looking at this picture.

Now, now I don't smile when I look at it. It hurts instead.

I was well aware of my daughter looking so much like her mother but seeing Millie's face and having Brooke right beside it to compare, it's so much scarier to look at. Not scary in an actual *frightening* way, but scary in a how-the-fuck-is-that-possible way.

"Memory!" Brooke shrieks and points at Millie in the picture.

I sit down on the floor next to my daughter, pull her into my body, yet still make sure she can look at the picture. “That’s not Emory, baby.”

“Yes, it is.”

“No, that’s Millie. Your mommy.”

Brooke quickly turns around in my arms, her face scrunched up in a confused and also mad frown. Like she doesn’t know whether to believe me or not. Up until this day, I have never shown Brooke a picture of Millie, so I get that she’s confused.

Her eyes flicker over my shoulder, right to Emory, then back to me. “Mommy?”

I nod, feeling a little piece of my heart break off when I notice the tears in my daughter’s eyes.

“You said Memory isn’t my mommy.”

“She’s not, baby. Millie is.”

Brooke turns away from me, pointing at the picture once again. “That’s Memory.”

I sigh. Maybe this was a little too early for her. Good thing this kid is easily distracted because in a matter of seconds, Brooke has shrugged off the *entire* conversation when her eyes lay on a heart-shaped pillow on Millie’s bed.

She jumps onto the bed, falling back to lie on it. “Daddy, can I keep this?” She holds up the pillow, and when I nod, she brings both of her arms around it and presses the pillow right to her chest. The pillow is bigger than her, so I’m a little worried Brooke’s accidentally suffocating herself. She’s not, her head isn’t under the pillow.

I get off the floor, then look around the room like I know where Millie would keep a fucking violin. I know every inch of this room. I’ve spent almost an entire year stopping by at least once a day, sometimes twice or thrice. Though when I spin around and find my wife standing in the doorway, her gaze fixed on nothing at all yet everything at the same time, her waterworks making themselves useful, finding that

damn violin seems far less important than drying Emory's tears.

"I thought it would be easier." She hiccups as soon as I stand in front of her, my hands on her face, thumbs swiping and swiping underneath her eyes to keep those stupid tears away. But they just keep on coming. And coming. And coming.

"Don't cry, darling." By now even my thumbs are covered in her tears and I can feel them drip down my palms, but I can't stop trying to get these stupid tears to stop. I don't like tears. They mean pain. They're not rainbows and sunshine. They're clouds and thunder.

"Em, please. I can't do this. I can't… *watch* this."

Ever wondered what happens when you start to catch feelings for the one person you never thought you'd ever catch feelings for ever again? But since that's not enough to make a point here, lets add this very person is crying while you're one of those people who can't stand those fucking salty tears. And to top that as well, let's add that your brain is completely fried from seeing those tears. What do you think will happen?

Feeling the urge to console them, maybe.

Feeling the need to make those tears stop, obviously.

Yearning to do *anything*, absolutely anything against those tears. But whatever may that be?

Without thinking, I pull Emory's face to mine until our lips touch. I kiss her deeply, praying with every inch of my body that, by the time we will pull apart, the lack of oxygen made her stop crying.

She tastes salty from the tears, and still it's the sweetest thing I've ever tasted. *Her*. Her lips are so soft against mine. Sometimes I think those lips were made for me, but that'd be a little too smug. On the other hand, this woman is my wife and I do not plan on ever divorcing her, no matter what she may still believe right now, so is it really that smug?

Only when Emory *slowly* starts to melt into this kiss, brings her arms around my neck to kiss me even deeper do I know for sure that she's going to be okay. I no longer feel her tears drip onto my skin, no longer feel or hear her sob, no longer hold a shaking body. She stopped crying.

And thank god she did because my next option would be to crack some stupid dad-jokes that only my four-year-old seems to be finding hilarious. And me. Honestly, they're quite good.

Just after we part, I bring my forehead down to Emory's, keeping my eyes closed for just a second longer.

"You really don't like tears, huh?" Emory closes her arms tighter around my body, pulls her head away from mine and instead burying it into the crook of my neck.

"I really don't," I confirm, feeling a lot lighter now that I no longer have to deal with those stupid salty water drops.

In the background, I hear Brooke gasp out loud before a thud sounds through the room, letting me know my daughter just found something way more interesting than a pillow. And when I turn around, she's heading toward Millie's desk, ready to touch everything, that's when I cut in.

"Brooke, don't touch that." She can look around; I want her to look around. This room is the closest Brooke will ever get to being around her mother, or things that belong to her, but touching those things… I don't know if *I'm* ready for that yet. I mean, I can barely look around myself and try to find something that tells me Millie hasn't been lying to me all this time.

God, this is so stupid.

"I'm sorry, Daddy." Brooke seats herself down on the dust-covered chair, clearly not caring about getting her clothes dirty, but why would she? It's me who has to wash them, not her. "But can I touch that?" She points toward yet another picture of Millie and me, one of the last ones we took together. It's a polaroid Millie pinned to her wall for no reason but to annoy her parents with making holes.

Next to the picture hangs an apartment advertisement. She didn't even need it, really. It was meant for me. When I was eighteen and about to start college, I've been looking around to find something off campus, yet still close enough to her. We would've moved in there together, unofficially since she was only turning seventeen that year, still in high school.

It was the perfect apartment. But after Millie died, I changed my mind and didn't move there anymore. I stayed in Manhattan, no longer went to college, hence why I repeated my freshman year.

Why does everything in here has to remind me of *something*? Can't I just look at those things and not feel anything at all? That certainly would make my life so much easier.

I remove the polaroid from the wall, handing it to my daughter. She smiles at me all brightly, for a moment there making the weird lump in my throat disappear.

"Mommy again?" she asks, not looking away from the picture in her tiny hands.

"Yes, baby."

"*Je peux le garder?*"

"Yes, you can keep it."

Instantly, Brooke holds the polaroid to her chest, not right over her heart but I suppose that's what she was aiming at. She's still smiling at me, at least until that smile so suddenly falls. "I miss mommy," she says like she has *any* recollection of her mother at all. It's quite impossible, but it's still… cute.

"Me too."

"But we have Memory now!" Brooke jumps off the chair, sprinting toward Emory. She hugs Em's legs, giggling. "We have you now, Memory. I never let you leave."

While I try not to listen to my daughter and wife's conversation, I finally gather some courage to look through Millie's belongings. She never had a lot of space in here, despite her room being bigger than Emory's old bedroom.

She has quite a bit of drawer space, but I doubt a violin fits in there, so I go to check her closet first.

When I look inside the closet, the only interesting thing I find is about five of my hoodies that I've been looking for for years. I could take them out and bring them home with me, but I don't. It just feels wrong. But it's good to know I didn't somehow lose them somewhere.

For the next ten minutes, I keep looking in every corner of this room, open boxes that I end up wishing I never opened with the amount of dust that hits me. And it's totally unnecessary as well because these boxes are filled with clothes and more clothes.

The last place I check is under her bed. It's the only space left that is big enough to hide a violin.

Honestly, I'm not even sure why I so desperately want to find one. It doesn't change the fact that Millie has already lied to me about Emory and my breakup. But maybe that's why I want to find some signs that my entire relationship with Millie wasn't just lies.

"Miles," I hear Emory say just as I lie on the floor, trying to see what's under Millie's bed. "I think you might want to see this."

"Just a second." I pull out the only box from underneath Millie's bed, looking at it with confusion when I hold it in my hands. I have never seen this box before, and I used to think I know every inch of this room. "Have you ever seen this box before in your life?" I sit up, placing the box on my lap.

Emory comes walking over to me, sitting down next to me. I give her a helping hand, otherwise she'd take forever.

It's kind of funny, really. Just a week ago she was complaining about her belly being so tiny that she actively has to tell people she's pregnant otherwise they'd think she ate a little too much, why ever she cares about that. Now, she struggles to sit and stand up again because said belly practically grew over night, making her look around five months pregnant.

Once she’s seated, Emory slaps an envelope right on top of the box. “Never seen it, but you should see this.”

It’s a bigger envelope, not like a letter-envelope one. It’s the kind of envelope you use to carry important documents around without folding the papers.

“Where’d you get that?”

“Millie’s desk. Somewhere seemingly hidden between tons of schoolbooks she had definitely never touched, and trashy fashion magazines that *you* definitely never touched.” She leans her head on my shoulder. “Open it.”

I’m not sure why, but my hands are shaking as I pick up the thick envelope. Shaking even more when I open it up. I pull out a good number of papers, the first one already having my lungs protest to keep on breathing for me.

“What in the fiddling fisherman fish stick is this?” It looks like a characteristics table, handwritten. Filled out with information nobody needs, or rather cares about, about *me*.

Some of those are normal information, like my name, age, stuff like that. Then there’s my height, goals in life, things I love and hate. You name it, it’s written here.

“Listens to classical music while cooking,” I read out loud.

“Hence why Millie told you she played the violin, I bet.”

I shake my head, not wanting to believe what I’m seeing here. “Maybe this was just for her, you know? To remember better?”

“I hate to break it to you, Miles, but I doubt it. Who needs to write down what their partner likes or dislikes only to *remember*? I could count all those things down, and I don’t have papers about your life hidden somewhere.”

This is bad. This is so fucking bad.

My heart is racing, aching. It’s doing all sorts of bad things. I’m getting light-headed the longer I stare at those pages.

Coming here was already a bad decision before Emory showed me those papers. Now I’m starting to regret this even more.

With every new thing I learn about Millie, things I should've known of or noticed when she was alive and was around me all day long, it makes me paint a whole new picture of her. I don't want to see her differently, especially not at a point in *my* life where she doesn't have any possibilities to explain herself. Maybe if she was still alive, able to tell me what the fuck all this is about, maybe then I'd be a little more relieved, or happier to have found out. Maybe not happier, but luckier? Anything like that.

But not now. Not anymore.

"Did you know your sister had stalker-like tendencies?" I lean my head against Em's. The same comforting scent of vanilla filling my senses.

"No… Otherwise I would've told you years ago."

"Even though you hated me?"

Emory lays her hand on my thigh, letting out a very heavy sigh. A little extra heavy if you asked me. "Yeah, I guess even though I hated you."

At least that's good to know. I decide to turn the page, ready—mostly anyway—to find out more about myself. But when the page is turned, I am not met with facts about myself that even I didn't notice about me, but with a picture of me… and Millie.

Her face is scratched over with what seems to have been a needle, but I know it's her because that photo must've been taken when she was around eight months pregnant. And I would recognize that green fluffy jacket from anywhere.

I remember that day, at least vividly enough to know that we've been walking around the block for a little while, just so Millie wouldn't sit around all day and do nothing.

With scrunched up eyebrows do I turn to the next loose page, being met with another picture of Millie and me, yet again, her face is scratched out. Once again we're walking somewhere.

“These are like the ultimate stalker pictures… There’s no way Millie took them, Em.”

“Especially with her *in* the pictures.”

“Okay, well, if Millie didn’t put this shit together, then who the hell did?” I ask, myself actually, but the words leave me anyway. “And why does she have them here…?”

“I’m not even sure I want to know.”

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Chapter 52

“he’s abusive, elusive, the truth is he lies”—Devil Doesn’t Bargain by Alec Benjamin

Emory

“Mom.” I drop the envelope filled with information about Miles and Millie on the coffee table in my parents’ living room. “Have you ever seen this before?”

“Is it from Millie’s room?”

I nod. “Yes. And it’s filled with pictures of Miles and Millie, plus information like someone had been watching them for weeks, maybe months.”

I know my sister wasn’t the most innocent person to be alive, despite what Miles might’ve thought. I know she had a strange friend group, mostly drunks and drug addicts. Some of her friends were actual criminals as well. She hung around the wrong crowd, all unbeknownst to Miles. She never told him, clearly.

They didn’t see each other at school so it was easy for her to hide her friend group. And with Millie going to some private High School in New City, while Miles and I went to Manhattan Bridges High School, it was very unlikely he would ever find out in the first place. They wouldn’t meet. New York City is huge and crowded enough to make that unlikely.

“It doesn’t have glitter all over it,” my mother comments, not even bothering to look away from the TV this time.

“I can see that.” Which is also one of the reasons why I *really* want to believe this isn’t Millie’s doing. She covered

everything possible with glitter. Her bedroom walls were even painted with shimmery white paint. It looks nice. Or look*ed*, rather. Now it just looks old and run down. It was well made back then, now it seems shoddy with water damage on the ceiling—god knows why—and all the dust covering every single inch of her bedroom.

I don't quite understand why my mother never even goes in there to clean. But then I think back to how I reacted when I stepped inside the room, how fast my throat clogged up and tears were streaming down my face.

"Maybe it's yours."

"Mom, I think I'd know if I put that shit together." Besides, my stalker tendencies lay by about minus ninety-five-point-eight percent. I just know I'd mess up with liking an old picture or accidentally commenting on a post because I forgot I was stalking, online anyway. In person… I don't stay unnoticed. My body wouldn't let me. I'd cough or sneeze and just like that, my cover is blown.

"Huh. Well, then I don't know either, Mi-Emory."

My eyes close for a moment as I try my best not to let my anger consume me. Why can't she ever take me seriously? I'm used to my parents calling me by my sister's name, so it's not even her almost saying Millie instead of my name that gets me so worked up. It's the fact that if I *was* my dead sister, my mother would've jumped off that damn sofa and tried to find out where the fuck that envelope came from.

"Do you know a friend of Millie's who might know something?" I ask once I have my emotions under control. For the most part, at least.

"Maybe that Caitlyn girl. Millie always went to her when she needed something. Very bad influence though. That girl had 'people,' whatever that means. Millie said so. All the time."

People. *Millie* had people. She had "friends" watching her back, covering shit up for her. God, she had *me* cover things

up for her. Every time Millie did something that would've gotten her in trouble, I vouched for her. I either took the blame or said Millie was with me all day long. She never got in trouble because that girl always had me to back up her stories even when I knew she was lying.

"Grammy, look!" Brooke jumps onto my mother's lap, and so suddenly that woman can avert her eyes at her granddaughter rather than have them stuck to her precious TV.

While Brooke shows my mother the picture Miles let her keep, I notice the vein in her neck pulse, most definitely in anger. Every time I tried going into my sister's room after she passed, my mother had said no. Anything that belonged to Millie, I wasn't allowed to touch. So imagine what three people walking inside a room that hasn't been opened in almost five years, and then finding out the things inside of said room are being given away must feel like to her.

I should probably feel bad for her. But I don't.

"Who gave you that, Brooklyn?"

"Daddy," Brooke answers cheerfully. "Daddy said that's mommy." She leans in closer, whispering, "But I think it's Memory."

My mother would never yell at Brooke, not in the sense she used to yell at me, anyway. Maybe raise her voice, but she wouldn't make Brooke cry, let alone tell her she's wrong. In my mother's eyes, Brooke is a saint. Which, she is. Still, when my mother puts Brooke on her feet and tells her to go find her father, I know she's on the verge of screaming at everyone and everything.

As soon as Brooke is by the stairs, my mother stands and turns to me. Her voice bitter and venomous when she says, "If you don't divorce Miles, I will find a way to divorce you two."

"What?" The woman who kept telling me divorce is never an option; not even when one's betrayed the other, that woman just straight up told me to divorce my husband.

Had she said it a few weeks ago, maybe I would've said "Alright, I'll sign the divorce papers right now," but now I no longer feel that way. Divorcing Miles… I'm not sure why, but I don't feel like doing it any time soon. *Or ever*. No, not *ever*… or, maybe? I don't know.

"He's a bad omen. Look what happened to you. Ever since you married him, only bad things keep coming into your life. First you get married to a man-whore, then he gets you pregnant, makes you fat and undesirable for the runway. Nobody wants to work with you anymore. Now you're getting stalked, and your agency kicked you off, then —"

"I never mentioned that to you," I interrupt. "Mother, how do you know about the agency?" I'll ignore the comments about my pregnancy and it ruining my career, or Miles being at fault here. He's also not a man-whore, or so I start to believe.

"You mentioned it, I'm sure. How else would I know?"

"That's what I am asking you." I have never told her. I didn't tell her because the only person in my life knowing about it is Miles, and he wouldn't go about telling my parents. The ones who are still mad at him for no reason whatsoever.

They used to *love* him before I happened. Before that godawful person trying to ruin his life happened.

"I talked to Diego," she says, now looking at me with guilt in her features. *Fake.* "He asked me to convince you to get an abortion because that pregnancy is ruining your life."

"So it's me then, huh?"

"What do you mean?" She takes a step toward me, but I step back immediately.

"When Millie told you she was pregnant, you were happy for her. Well, not *happy*, but you were supportive. You told her it was going to be alright, that there are millions of teenage pregnancies happening around the world, that she wasn't the only one and it was okay. But I come to you at

the age of twenty-one, telling you the same thing and you start hating me more than ever. You go about listening to my agent tell you I should get an abortion. A fucking *abortion*, Mother!"

"It's too late now anyway," she mumbles under her breath, annoyed with me. With *me.* She doesn't care one bit about my feelings. How my own mother not supporting me makes me feel.

"I'm never going to be good enough for you, am I?"

My mother rolls her eyes, once again trying to step closer but this time I move right to the other side of the room, bringing more space between us than before. "Mil-Emory. Listen—"

"I can never measure up to Millie. No matter what I do, I'll never be good enough. I'll *never* be her, Mom. I can't, and I won't try to be her just so you will like me. I'm not half as pretty as she is. I don't listen to you the way she used to. I don't *obey* you the way she did. That's why you can't stand me, can you? Because I'm not your marionette. No matter how hard I try to please you, I will never be good enough in your eyes because you cannot control me."

"Don't be ridiculous, Mi—"

"EMORY!" I yell at her. "My fucking name is *Emory*. You gave me that name. Why can't you remember my damn name?!"

"I know your na—"

"*Ne pleure pas*, Brooke."

My mother jumps at the sudden appearance of Miles's voice, holding a hand to her heart like his presence truly scared her.

I hope it did.

"*Pourquoi elles crient*?"

"I don't know, baby," Miles answers. I'm not sure what Brooke asked, but judging by the look on Miles's face, he *does* know whatever he claims not to know, he just doesn't want to tell *her*. "Now, stop crying, okay, little monkey?"

He holds her in his arms, wiping away her tears like he's done with mine before. One after the other he dries them, not bothering that both my mother and I are staring at them, watching him.

One thing I've always noticed about Miles, when it comes to Brooke, he'll stop everything to be there for her. He'd probably even find a way to get across the ocean in an hour just to be by her side when she needs him.

It's something I really admire him for. Just watching Miles be a really great father eases something inside of me. Maybe fears that I cannot be a great mother to my child because, clearly, I have no idea how to parent, seeing as mine have done a shitshow in being great ones to me.

And maybe watching him somehow shows me how I want to be with my own child. That I want that kind of connection he has to Brooke. The unconditional love. Brooke knows she can turn to her father anytime, and I'm pretty sure she knows he'd drop everything to get to her. Even at her young age. And that is really impressive, at least to me.

When I was four years old, I was too scared to tell my parents I peed in my bed by accident because they'd yell at me. When Brooke does it, she just tells Miles and knows nothing's going to happen. She knows it's okay.

When I was four and used to get scared from a nightmare, I had to stay awake until exhaustion hit me, and I passed out. There was no way I could've snuck into my parents' bed for comfort*. Unlike my sister.* Brooke doesn't even *sneak* into bed with us, she straight up jumps right on top of her father and demands he hugs her to keep her safe from the monsters that chased her in her dreams. He even stays awake with her when she can't sleep, doesn't tell her to suck it up and just close her eyes.

Maybe that's just being a decent parent, but to me, the way Miles treats Brooke… it'll forever be more than *decent*. It'll always be amazing to me, impressive.

“We get ice cream when we go home?” Brooke asks, making Miles laugh and shake his head disbelievingly.

“Yeah,” he answers, dragging the word out with a sigh. “I guess we can do that.”

“You shouldn’t,” my mother cuts in. She has her arms crossed over her chest, a blank yet harsh stare diverted at my husband. “Do you want her to gain weight?”

“Shut up, Holly. Just… Shut. Your. *Fucking.* Mouth. Can you do that?”

I gasp, not having expected Miles to drop an f-bomb in front of Brooke. He never does. He doesn’t even let that word slip out when he’s so angry that, in a cartoon, his head would be turning red, and steam would come out of his ears. He always holds it back.

“How dare you speak to me like tha—”

“No, it’s not how dare *I* speak to *you* like that. You should ask yourself when you started talking to your daughter like she was a mistake. Like she’s nothing but a burden to you. How dare *you* talk to your daughter like she’s the problem when it’s *you* who causes the problem in the first place,” Miles interjects, keeping his eyes locked with my mother’s. All I can do is watch them, listen, while trying not to run out of the house and never return.

“She was a mistake!” Oh, okay. I guessed that much years ago, so it doesn’t surprise me anymore.

“To you, maybe. Still doesn’t give you the right to talk to her like she’s done something wrong when she hasn’t.”

“In a year or two, you’ll see that this girl causes nothing but problems. You’ll see your marriage as much of a mistake as you’ll end up seeing her as one.”

Miles shakes his head, letting a humorless chuckle slip out. “That’s where you’re wrong, Holly. Because Emory is the best thing that happened to me in a long time. Emory is my life, and I cannot, for the life of me, understand how you don’t love her. I cannot understand how you look at her and see nothing but faults and things that could be fixed,

because when I look at my wife, I see perfection. When I look at her, my whole world stops spinning, and I get lost in some fantasy world in which it's only us. Our family—you not included. There's nothing wrong with her. The only thing that's wrong with her is her mother, but unfortunately she cannot exchange you for a better one."

"Memory is really pretty," Brooke says, grinning at me so widely, it melts my heart. It makes my heart ache in a good way even more than hearing Miles refer to me as "perfection."

"She is, isn't she?" Miles sort of responds to his daughter, looking at me this time. "So beautiful in every way possible."

Ignoring my mother entirely when I pass her, I make my way over to my husband, ready to either cry or leave. Or both. No, just leave. He wouldn't let me cry.

Standing right in front of Miles, all he does is smile at me when Brooke leans a little forward to reach for my face. I'm sure she's seen Miles do that about a hundred times before, hence why she's now cupping my face.

"So pretty, Memory."

"You're going to regret this, Emory," my mother utters, her voice strained and low. A kind of edge in it I've never thought her voice could reach.

I turn toward my mother, just taking in the way she stands there. Tense. Hands balled into fists by her sides. She looks chaotic, the complete opposite of what she used to be before my sister died. She used to be so neat at all times. Rich looking, even though we never had too much money. She always paid attention to the way she dressed, that she looked good. That's not her anymore.

"I am sorry for you," I finally say. "Maybe one day you'll realize that you could've at least had one daughter left in your life. Maybe one day you'll realize losing both of your children wasn't worth all of the hate you spread."

“Sorry for me!” She scoffs, once again ignoring most of my words. She’s looking away from me and at Miles instead. “Let me warn you, Miles. Brooke won’t always be a fan of you. Someday, she’ll hate you, and you’ll hate her back.”

Miles doesn’t even look fazed. “I don’t think she ever will. Maybe go through the phase of not wanting to be seen with me because that’s embarrassing, almost every child goes through that once in their life. But she’ll come around. And Brooke knows I’ll always be there for her. She knows I’ll always love her. So don’t break your head thinking about how my child will hate me when she won’t and start thinking about where you went wrong that your child hates you.”

Brooke doesn’t quite agree with her father, so her face says until she finally opens her cute little mouth. “I don’t be embarrassed, Daddy,” she says, leaning her head right against Miles’s. “I always love you.”

That unfazed expression of Miles’s quicky vanishes and gets exchanged with pride. Right in this moment, I don’t need to be a mind-reader to know that he’s so damn proud of himself for not having given up on her. For having managed to love his daughter so much that she *knows* it.

I’m sure once she’s a little older, she’ll still know it. She’ll always know she’s loved because knowing Miles, there won’t be one single day he will not make her feel loved. I honestly think that she could be in her thirties and Miles would still call her every single day just to tell her he loves her.

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Chapter 53

“you’re part of my entity, here for infinity”—Umbrella by Ember Island

Miles

“…AND THAT’S WHY I THINK WE SHOULD GET A KITTEN,” Emory ends her presentation on “Reasons why we should adopt a cute little kitten. Or two. Or twenty.”

Seriously, that’s the title of the presentation.

“No.”

Brooke next to me slides off the sofa like an old sack of potatoes, groaning. Great, now my wife has made my daughter even more hopes that she’ll get a pet any time soon. I don’t have the time for a pet. Okay, more now than I would if I went pro… but it’s still a no.

“Well, why not?!” Emory’s arms drop to her sides, frowning at me madly. “It’s just a *cat*! They’re cute, and small, and fluffy.”

“AND FLUFFY, DADDY!” Brooke yells, stomping with her feet on the floor. Aaron and Sofia are lucky they’re not at home right now because I bet they’d hear the thuds.

“It’s still a no.” I get off the sofa, ready to do what I always do when I’m met with stress; cook. But as soon as I take one step, my daughter decides to wrap herself around one of my legs like a monkey.

“Pleeeaaasseeee,” she begs, crying. “Daddy, please.”

“No.”

“*Je t’en prie*!”

“Still a no, Brooke.”

“*S’te plaît, s’te plaît*!” She looks up at me with huge eyes, pouting. God, she’s so close to tears, it’s tears my heart in two.

This kid has never begged me for anything. I mean, sure, the occasional “I want candy” kind of begging, but nothing like this. Usually when I say no, she just accepts it.

“*Je n’aime pas avoir á me répéter*.” I really don’t like repeating myself, especially when she’s known basically all her life that she won’t get a pet. They’re so much responsibility, nothing I have ever had time for. Pets need to be cared for, and between having a family to care for, work and a social life, I don’t have time to make a cat feel welcome here as well. I mean, I guess cats are easier to handle than dogs…

No. We’re not getting a cat, dammit.

“But Reece has a cat too!”

“Reece doesn’t have a cat.” I’d know because Colin would’ve complained to me at least five times a day, telling me how unfair it is his younger brother got a pet when he never got one.

Brooke clings on to my leg a little tighter. “Yes he does, Daddy. She always sleep in his bed.”

I look at my wife. “See what you’ve done?”

Emory rolls her eyes at me, then turns away completely. *Seriously?*

“You’re not going to talk to me anymore then?”

She keeps quiet, grabbing her laptop before she leaves the room. Great. Just fucking great.

↠ ♡ ↞

Five hours later and Emory still hasn’t exchanged a single word with me. But the worst part, neither has my daughter.

They’re both hiding in Emory and my bedroom, making sure to stay as far away from me as possible. They’ve

teamed up against me. Can you believe that? My wife and my daughter… teaming *up*. So fucking rude.

I hear them laugh together all the time, but every single time I enter the bedroom, they stop laughing, then pretend I'm not even there. Some part of me is glad to see them bonding, granted, Emory and Brooke *always* had a great bond, but still. I like knowing Brooke is genuinely okay with Emory's presence here. But that doesn't mean they have to pretend like I don't exist just because I won't get them a cat.

An hour ago I decided to run some errands. With errands I mean I went next door and talked to Grey for half an hour before I decided to hit the gym for ten minutes. Ten minutes because I couldn't concentrate and so now I'm standing in the middle of this flower shop down the street.

I've never gotten anyone flowers before. Not once in my life. Not even as a whiny kid did I pick flowers off the grass to give them to family members. And yet here I am, looking at felt like a million different flowers at once.

Why are there so many types of flowers? Who needs those? I mean, some of them are pretty strange. The last flower I looked at deadass looked like a monkey. And this *Rafflesia Keithii* flower doesn't look much better either.

What are some *normal* flowers? Roses, right? Everyone gets their partner roses. Except for Aaron, he buys some purple ones for Sofia all the time. But they don't look very pretty either.

"Excuse me, do you need some help?" a black-haired woman asks just as she walks up to me. I swear the smile on her face isn't because she's trying to appear nice, but because she's laughing at me.

"Does it look like I need help?"

"Honestly, yes. You look a little lost," she answers truthfully, then lays a hand on my arm like she's trying to feel me up in a more innocent way. I know that touch only too well. I've had to get through way too many of those

during college and look unbothered, just to keep up my man-whore status.

But this time, I step away. “I am kind of lost. My knowledge about flowers is non-existent.”

Her smile widens a little as she takes on another attempt of getting closer. “Well, for what occasion do you need those flowers?”

I snort. “Like an ‘I’m sorry I don’t allow a cat in the house’-apology flowers to my wife and daughter.” I could’ve kept it shorter, said some flowers to apologize with but seeing her reaction when I mention my wife and Brooke, that makes using more words worth it.

Surprise and shock crosses the woman’s features. Her brown eyes widening for a short moment before she quickly takes a step back. Another moment later, she plasters a smile back onto her face. “So then, what do they like?”

What do they like is a great question. “You don’t happen to have anything royal looking?”

“What do you mean with *royal*-looking, exactly?”

“My daughter loves everything that has to do with princesses. I’m not sure if there’s like an official flower that screams royal, but if there is, I’m sure she knows it.” Honestly, I wouldn’t be surprised if she did.

“There’s something called a ‘princess flower’. But it’s not really the type of flower you gift to anyone. How about pink roses for your daughter? They look amazing, and they stand for innocence and appreciation. And I think they look very Barbie-princess-like.”

↠ ♡ ↞

I LEFT THE FLOWER SHOP WITHOUT BUYING ROSES. Or any flowers. They didn’t feel right to me. Buying flowers didn’t feel right.

So now I’m back at Grey’s, hitting my head against his island countertop.

“Dude,” he laughs, setting a cup down next to my head. “You’re such a dad.”

“Thanks, I have a daughter and a baby on the way. That’s actually a great compliment, you know.”

He sits next to me on the barstool, laying a hand on my back before slapping the shit out of me. I sit up with a gasp. Then as I reach an arm back to soothe the spot on my spine that this stupid best friend of mine decided to almost break, my head snaps toward him.

“Ouch.”

“You deserved it.” He shrugs. “I mean, Miles, you’re hitting your head on my perfectly polished countertop just because Emory isn’t talking to you. A couple of months ago you would’ve been jumping with joy not having to hear her voice.”

“Shut up.” I let my head fall back down on the marble, groaning.

He laughs. Fucking *laughs*. Maybe I’ll officially make Colin my number one best friend. But he would always choose Aaron over me, more so now that he’s dating Aaron’s twin sister. Aaron would also always choose Colin over anyone else—Sofia excluded. Guess I’m stuck with Grey after all.

“Since when are you in love with her?” he asks.

“I’m not.”

“Alright, keep lying to yourself then. That’s fine.” I can hear him swallow whatever drink he made for the both of us. Probably a coffee or something like that. “Why aren’t you allowing yourself to love her then?”

“Why does your dad hate you?” I shoot back at him.

Without having to look at him, I know Grey is a breath away from storming out of his own apartment. He still refuses to tell me about his family, which only makes me want to know even more.

“This isn’t about me.”

“Give me an answer, and I’ll give you one.” He thinks knowledge is power, which is true, mostly anyway. Grey

doesn’t like being in the dark of things, so maybe this way he’ll bite.

Yes, yes, I know. I should let him go about this at his pace, but with Grey, *his* pace means I can wait until I’m six feet under the ground before I find out the truth. He doesn’t talk much about himself or his problems. In all the years I’ve known him, he’s had maybe two problems I know of. And those were things like not having sharp skates or getting into a fight with some girl’s ex-boyfriend.

“Fine, you go first.”

I sit up in record time, looking at Grey with a mixture of shock and surprise. Then I shake my head. “No, you go first because I know you, Davis. You’ll say yes now, then don’t give me anything after I spoke because you will make me *forget* I wanted details about you.” He has that talent. Quickly changing the subject before having to tell me about his situations.

He grins, knowing I’m right. But then the grin vanishes as he most definitely thinks about his father and what exactly he can and cannot tell me. “He doesn’t hate *me*, just some choices I made.”

“Like? Moving to New York or…?”

“Nah.” He waves me off with a slight *I-wish-it-was-that* chuckle. “Having had *boy*friends.”

Oh.

I don’t know why but I always just assumed his family was okay with it. Sun never seemed to care much, in fact, every time I met her even before she attended St. Trewery, she would show Grey pictures of some guys back at Malibu. His older brother teased him a lot when I met him, but not like in a bad way, just the normal sibling kind of teasing.

“Every time I brought home a boyfriend of mine, my father would leave the house, then spend the rest of the day yelling at me after said boyfriend left. And while I was in a relationship, he would barely look at me. But if I am dating a woman… he is the proudest father to ever exist.” He licks

his lips. “When I’m single, he barely answers my calls because I might have been fucking some guy just an hour prior, or some guy could be in bed with me right now. He never even liked the fact that I was living with *you*. At least not until I told him you were straighter than a ruler with a kid and a girlfriend. I didn’t say she died, just so he’d leave me alone with wanting me to get rid of you.”

I expected everything to come out of my best friend’s mouth right now. Everything but that. “Grey, I am so sorry…”

“Don’t be. It’s fine, really. I’m used to it by now.”

“That doesn’t automatically make it ‘fine.’” I tilt my head a little. “In fact, you shouldn’t be *used* to your father disrespecting you for who you date.”

“I can’t change much about it.”

“So, that’s why you don’t go back home without Sun?”

“Yup. She’s there to talk. My parents don’t talk much to me unless I have a girlfriend. As long as Sun’s around, I at least have *someone* to talk to. And she makes everything less awkward, fills silences with babbling, you know… she’s just being Sun.”

“What about Moon?”

Grey tsks. “He doesn’t utter his opinion. As long as our dad’s there, he’s as disgusted by me as our dad is. The only one who never cared about anything is Sun. My mom doesn’t care, she just wants to see me happy. But with my dad around… unless she wants a divorce, my mother wouldn’t stick up against him. So when he says they’re hating me right now, they’re hating me.”

He clears his throat, blows out one quick breath of air and shakes out his body like he’s ending this conversation with his last words, shaking off every emotion that came to surface. He gets off the barstool and walks to the other side of the island, then opens a drawer and pulls out square pieces of colorful paper. “Anyway, how about we make some paper-flowers since you didn’t buy *actual* flowers? And while we do that, you can tell me all about why you won’t fall in

love with your wife, when you're already head over heels for her."

My phone buzzes, and at the off chance that this text might be from my wife, I check it before giving Grey an answer.

Only when I see who's texting, I'm even more confused.

A random number just sent me a picture. What the hell?

Grey senses my confusion, being behind me in the blink of an eye, looking over my shoulder to see my screen perfectly. "Who's that?" he asks.

"The fuck if I know."

Grey reaches his hand out, tapping onto the message only for the both of us to snort when the picture turns out to be a random dick pic.

Who the fuck would send *me* a picture of their fucking cock?! I've got sent at least two dozens of random nudes from unknown numbers. All from women though. Not *once* had a dude somehow gotten my number to send me one. Okay, it did happen once.

"Damn, love," Grey laughs, "I think someone's tryna fuck you."

Rolling my eyes at my best friend, I let out a heavy breath. Then I remember. "Nah, I think someone's trying to fuck my wife."

It's the only explanation I have that makes sense. Back when I was sixteen and very much in love with Emory, I told her if some guy ever molested her into giving him her number, she should give him mine instead, I'd handle it. It happened *once* about a year later, weeks before we broke up—or rather Millie broke us up.

"Emory?"

"Nah, my other wife, babe," I say. "Of course Emory."

He holds up both of his hands like I was holding him at gunpoint, keeping a smug grin on his lips while I look at him after turning on my chair. When I think he's done being an

ass, he opens his mouth again, “Can you blame that guy? Emory’s really good-looking.”

“Shut up.” He doesn’t mean it. Not in the sense that *he* would fuck my wife if he could. This is just Grey’s fucked up way to mess with me.

He holds a hand right over his heart, pouting. “I promise, Miles-y,” he says mockingly, calling me the same name Aaron does every single time he’s had a tad too much to drink, “I’d fuck you before her any day, love.”

“Glad to hear that.” With my hand on his chest, I shove him away. Or at least I try to. He stops me, covering my hand with both of his.

Grey lets out an ever so dramatic sigh. “Oh, what I would do to you, Miles,” he says. “The things I’ve dreamed of.” He moves closer, giving me a heavy dose of fuck-me eyes.

“Yeah? What’d you dream of?” I ask, curious now.

“I would—” he says through laughter. Grey drops my hand and kneels, holding himself up by resting his hands on my knees, his head pressing against his own arm. “I would—”

I think it takes him about ten seconds before he calms himself, being able to meet my eyes again. “I didn’t think you’d ask that question.”

“Not? What the hell, babe, I thought we were about to fuck.”

He gags. “I’m not letting my dick anywhere near your ass, nor your dick anywhere near mine.”

“Speaking of your dick,” I say, grabbing my phone from the counter. “Can I borrow it for a second?”

Grey blinks at me, taking a couple of shallow breaths. “You’re not seriously considering sending that guy a dick pic in return, are you?”

“I am.”

“Mine?”

“Yeah.” I shrug, then hold up my hand, showing off my wedding ring. “I’m married. The only person who gets send

my nudes is my wife."

He hums while he thinks, then stands and pushes down his shorts. "Fuck it, right?"

Insane. Grey Davis is fucking insane.

Before I snap a picture of my best friend's *soft* dick—an even less pleasant picture—, I look into his eyes when I say, "I'm going to tell her." I don't have to say what I'm talking about; he just knows. I know he knows. He knows I know he knows.

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Chapter 54

“baby, tell me what’s your motive?”—motive by Ariana Grande, Doja Cat

Emory

“YOU LEFT ME!” I hear Brooke scream just after the door to Miles and my apartment opens. “Without saying bye-bye!” I suppose Miles came home then.

“You were ignoring me, Brooklyn.” Oh, calling her Brooklyn now.

Closing the door, Miles limps inside the apartment. Limps because Brooke apparently decided to cling on to her father’s leg like some monkey.

“You were mean to me.”

“You didn’t talk to me.” Which is partially my fault.

“Because I want a kitty, Daddy. Memory tell me I can have one.”

I did say we’d get a pet one day. I never said anything about a cat though, even though I *really* want one. I mean, have you seen their cute little faces?

Stopping in the middle of the room, Miles bends over enough to reach for his daughter. He disentangles her from his leg and picks her up. “You’re not getting a cat, Brooklyn.”

Surprisingly, they both have my full attention. I won’t talk to Miles, not yet. I’m still mad. Who the hell does he think he is to decide whether I adopt a cat or not?

Okay, I did ask him. Actually, I held a whole ass presentation as to *why* we should get one. He still said no.

That fucker. I only asked because some part of me kind of hopes we'll still be living together in a couple of years.

"Trying again" means we're dating, doesn't it? It means all those kisses he gave me, all those swoon-worthy words, they were real. So we haven't just been fake-husband and fake-wife. We've been… husband and wife, minus the love. But that would come eventually, won't it? The giddiness, the butterflies—though, those are already there—, the smiles and secret looks of admiration. Caring. Bonding. *Love*.

It will come.

If I knew for sure I would move out again, live on my own, separated from Miles, I wouldn't have asked. But… again, I am hoping to stay with him. Kind of. I think? Maybe that's just me though. Maybe he doesn't even want me in his life beyond what we had initially planned.

"Daddy? Can I watch my movie?" Brooke asks, and from the looks of it, she's giving her father a severe case of puppy dog eyes. "But when I sleep, can I sleep in your bed today?"

He sets Brooke down to the floor. "You put on your pajama and brush your teeth, I'll get Mr. Fluffles and put on your movie, okay?" Brooke nods and storms off toward her bedroom, he follows her.

He lets her watch the movie in our bedroom. I know because the next time I look up from my phone, he emerges from our bedroom without her, not quite closing the door like he would if Brooke wasn't in there.

"Are you okay?" he asks, but I don't answer him. I know very well that this is childish, but dammit, I am upset here, people. I wanted that cat so badly.

Looking back at my phone, I just scroll vaguely through my own feed, checking out some comments and replying to them. I am posting a little more art, and it's not *as* much liked as me in lingerie and pictures of my husband and I, but they're not *not* well liked. Half of me believes it's only

because I do happen to have started off with millions of followers, the other half hopes people actually like my art.

My comment section is a mix of everything. People supporting me, others begging me to post Miles more often, other people asking if I ever go back to being me, and then there are the horny bots. Oh, and random marriage proposals. *Weird*.

Miles stands right in front of me, and although I am still ignoring him, he doesn't leave. He just stands there, looking at me. Pretty intensely, too.

"You didn't wear that before I left," he comments.

He's right. While he was gone, I thought it would be nice to, even though I'm not going anywhere, put on a dress and some heels to feel like myself again. It didn't work, but I refuse to change my clothes again. At least not before going to bed, I guess.

Now I'm stuck in a short white dress with white heels that surprisingly don't hurt my feet. They were always my favorite heels because of that. I own them since I was eighteen, and they look brand new, that's how well I take care of them.

Miles kneels down, spreading my legs enough to be able to sit a little closer to me. He grabs my phone from my hands and throws it to the other side of the couch. I still don't meet his eyes though, no matter how badly I want to.

His hands lie on my thighs, slowly moving up to my hips. Then he suddenly yanks me down, pulling my ass to the edge of the couch. He lifts my legs over his shoulders, my hips slightly lifting off the couch. Miles leaves soft kisses on my inner thighs, our eyes now locked. I can feel my heart beat faster, my lungs begging me to keep on inhaling. But the closer his lips get to the spot between my legs, the less I can make myself take breaths.

"Please, darling, talk to me," he begs.

My dress slides up, his thumbs sliding underneath the fabric of my panties around my hips. I don't stop him when

he tugs on them, not hard enough to slide them down my legs though.

“You want to cut off my balls, say the word and I’ll hand you the scissors,” he says right before I can feel his lips press to my pregnant belly. “You want to poison me; just say it and I’ll get you some that’ll kill me.”

I shake my head, but I’m sure he doesn’t even notice because he just keeps on going.

He yanks on my panties, this time hard enough to take them off. “You want me gone, say it, darling. Say the words and I’ll leave.”

My eyebrows fall, eyes filling with tears. I don’t want him gone.

My clit pulses with need when he plants a kiss to my groin. “Yell at me, Em. Hurt me, laugh at me, kill me, any of those, just please talk to me. Punish me however you like, but don’t ignore me.”

He plants a kiss to my pussy, my breath leaving me at once. I whimper when he brings his hands underneath my ass, lifting my hips before he kisses me one more time.

“I need you to talk to me, Emory. I have something really important to say, and I *need* you to talk back to me.”

God, I want him so badly.

“Miles…” I remove my legs from his shoulders, sitting up straight. I bring both of my hands to his jaw, just holding him. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

He lets out a relieved breath, though I’m not sure if it’s because I don’t want to cut off his balls, or because I am talking to him.

“I am falling in love with you,” he says just like that. Without a single warning. Without a mocking undertone or anything. Just raw and honest.

I’m not sure what is happening right now, nor am I convinced he’s truly real because as it seems, my whole world is spinning in circles right now.

My hands loosen, ready to just drop down in shock, but Miles covers my hands with his, pressing them back against his hot skin. “Please, say something.”

“I-What?”

“I am falling in love with you,” he repeats, a little slower this time. “It’s getting so bad, Emory, not hearing your voice actually makes me go crazy. I’m falling so deep that I spent an hour over at Grey’s to make—” He reaches one hand into his suit pocket, pulling out a tiny paper bouquet of flowers “—These. I needed them to be perfect, so it took me a while. They’re not nearly as good as I wanted them to be though. I was going to buy you flowers and apologize, but that didn’t seem right. So I made these. It’s stupid and silly, but—”

“Miles,” I stop him, the tears that once threatened to leave my eyes because of guilt now dripping down my chin, but no longer because I feel guilty. “I love them.” I take the mini paper flowers from his hand, smiling.

They’re not *perfect*, but that’s as perfect as anything could ever get anyway. Some parts of the papers are a little too crooked, too folded like he’s done this a million times just to find the right angle. I still love it.

The red rose paddles aren’t as defined, as curved as a real rose would have them, but I suppose getting curves into a mini rose is almost impossible.

“You do?”

I nod. “I really do.” Those flowers might be the most unique and meaningful gift I have ever received. Even though they’re meant as an apology.

But now that there was enough time for me to acknowledge stupid paper roses, the most important words of his make it back to me. Words that I wasn’t expecting any time soon, or ever again.

“Miles, I don’t know what to say.”

“It’s okay,” he speaks softly, almost whispers. Sincerity in his voice. He didn’t say it just to *say* it, has he? Not like we

did when we were younger. He really means it this time. “It’s okay, Em. I don’t expect you to feel the same way.”

“Then why say it?” I don’t believe in love. Not when it comes to *my* life. But can you blame me?

I watched my twin sister fall in love with the guy I used to date and watch him love her back so deeply that it always made me wonder what I did wrong. My parents loved Millie to death, but they always treated me like a piece of old trash. My ex-boyfriend was only with me for my body, the one he thought he could control by making me feel like shit when I just looked at food; that wasn’t love either.

Love in my life is as impossible as a house built on a cloud.

“Grey asked me why I won’t let myself love you,” he begins. “I couldn’t answer him. I couldn’t give him a reason why because the thing is, I do let myself fall in love with you. I just didn’t know how to tell you. And I wanted you to be the first one I told. So when he asked me that question, the only reason why I couldn’t say anything was because I didn’t want to tell him I was falling for you before I told *you*.”

His hands are trembling a little as he holds mine, and so I know there’s far more to come. More that’s not as easy for him to say as admitting to falling for me.

“I wanted to wait,” he admits. “I wanted to wait for you to tell me first because this is kind of embarrassing.” He chuckles a little awkwardly, but I don’t find this embarrassing at all. “I wanted to wait because I know you don’t love me yet. I know very well that it might still take you months to love me back, and that’s okay. But the thing is, Em, you’re twenty-seven weeks pregnant and I don’t want to watch you die and not having said it at least once. Also, I wanted to be transparent with you, letting you know where my head’s at.”

“I am not going to die,” I remind him.

“I trust you on that.” He swallows thickly, now letting our hands rest on my lap. “For now.”

At least something.

Needing to get away from *love*-talk, I decide to switch to a different topic, or well, *ease* into it now that he’s sort of giving me a way out. “I have a doctor’s appointment tomorrow,” I tell him.

“I know.” Of course he knows.

“I’m just saying because… I have changed my mind. I think I do want to know the sex of this baby. Then we can decorate the nursery appropriately.”

Miles and I initially decided to let it surprise us. I think he only agreed because that way he could still hold out from having to witness Brooke throw a fit should it be a boy. She really doesn’t want a brother. He doesn’t like it when she’s upset, or anyone, really. But with her it’s ten times worse. Sometimes I think he’s about to start crying when he sees her cry.

He gets off the floor, tilting my head up before he bends over enough for his lips to connect with mine. Sweet and soft. Nothing more than a light kiss. “Okay,” he mumbles against my lips.

“Miles?”

“Yes, darling?” He doesn’t move away, just leaves his lips linger so close to mine, that with every move of his mouth when he talks, his lips brush mine over and over again.

“Does this mean you won’t kick me out in a few months?”

“Yes. It means you’re stuck here unless *you* want an out.”

I grin against his mouth. He has to feel it, but he doesn’t comment on it.

“Soooo, can we get a cat then?”

He straightens his back, covering my entire face with his hands before carefully pushing me back on the couch.

Without giving me an answer *at first*, he just walks away. Then he stops by our bedroom door, sighs, and says, “I’ll think about it.”

That so totally means yes.

“Aren’t you going to finish what you started?” I think the whole love-talk just got me even wetter. These hormones are such a curse sometimes.

He smirks. “Do you want me to?”

Do I want him to? I *need* him to. “Unless you want me to make use of your voice note and my vibrator, hell fucking yes.”

“Give me a second to check on Brooke, darling. I’ll be right back.”

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Chapter 55

“holy shit, she worshipping my dick like it’s the Holy Father”—DEVILISH by Chase Atlantic

Emory

I’M BARED TO HIM, LYING ON the couch with my fingers skimming his bare back.

“Keep quiet,” he whispers, taking a quick glance over his shoulder toward our bedroom door. There’s a tiny gap between the frame and the door, so not quite closed but not exactly opened either. Brooke’s fast asleep, but she could wake up any moment. It’s unlikely with her talent to sleep through anything, but still possible.

I squirm when he plants kisses along my jaw, down my neck and over my collarbones. Every inch of my body aches for my husband to do something to ease the need that’s flooding my nerves.

I try to close my legs, eager to lessen the desire that’s overcoming me, but it’s useless with Miles hovering over me, with his body between my legs.

His chuckle comes deviously, telling me just how many fucks he gives about getting me off right in this moment. I can feel him smile against my skin when he kisses a path down between my boobs, running his tongue over my puckered nipples.

“Miles…” I plead impatiently, trying to rub myself against his dick but he just moves his hips away from mine in response.

It’s official. I hate him. I hate my husband. You’d think being married means you get a lot of nerve-wrenching, toe-curling, I-want-to-die-right-on-the-spot kind of sex. It doesn’t. In fact, you just get the wanting to die part from all the teasing. But the worst part is, as much as I dread Miles teasing me, I love it as well.

And the sex with Miles does happen to be nerve-wrenching, toe-curling and mind-numbing, unfortunately. I mean that’s good, great even. But I hate him, nonetheless.

“Miles, please.”

He doesn’t react. Miles takes his sweet time making sure to leave a trail of kisses down my body, over my belly, my pelvis, until finally he reaches the spot he’s needed at the most. But there he just leaves one gentle kiss right above my clit and then removes his mouth from my body altogether.

“Tell me what you want, darling.”

Is he being fucking serious right now? “I want your mouth on me.”

“Where do you want my mouth?” he asks, his blue eyes burning holes into mine. My cheeks heat up. He knows talking about sex has always been one of the hardest topics for me to talk about, so right now, I hate him even more for this.

He lifts one of my legs, draping it over the backrest of the couch, opening me wider for him. Miles then takes my other leg, pushing it off the couch. Lying down in front of me, he dips his head down. I can feel his hot breath fanning over my sensitive skin.

His lips brush against my clit, and I suck in some air. “Here?”

I nod but he can’t see. “Yes,” I gasp.

I jerk when he closes his lips around my clit, his tongue sliding over it. A groan releases from his throat as he tastes me. My chest is heaving, my hands clutching tightly around the pink fluffy decorative pillows.

He devours me, sliding his tongue inside of me, then licking up just to suck on my clit. A moan almost leaves me in full volume, but I am able to cover my mouth with my arm before that happens.

“You like that?” Miles asks, flicking my clit with his tongue. I muffle against my arm in response, pushing my hips up and my pussy into his face. I can feel the vibrations from his chuckle, and for some reasons that just makes me moan one more time.

He sucks my clit back into his mouth, growls when he notices my wetness dripping down. Fuck, we’re going to ruin this couch, but I don’t care one bit.

“You’re going to come for me, Emory?” He pushes one finger inside of me, and I moan, feeling myself clench around his finger like it’s the most precious thing in the world.

He watches as his finger pushes in and out of me over and over again. The wet sound being the only one filling this room with noises along with my heavy breathing, panting.

Miles adds another finger and I cry out against my arm.

“*Fuuuck*, Miles.” I’m panting, the urge to come building with every thrust of his fingers.

“I know, darling.” He withdraws his fingers, pushing his tongue inside of me instead. A cry leaves my lips, my nails almost poking through the pillow from the tight hold I keep on it.

He glides his tongue up my slit, adding the perfect amount of pressure to my clit. His fingers plunge back inside of me, thrusting in and out only a couple of times before the need to come is so close to the edge, that one suck on my clit tips me over.

My muscles tense as my eyes roll back, the sweet bliss of relief washing over me. I’m so far gone up to heaven, I don’t even notice he’s crawling up my body and sliding the head of his cock through my slick folds until I open my eyes and stare right into blue ones.

I smile a little lazily, bringing my arms around my husband's neck before I press my lips to his. I don't care that he tastes like me, that his mouth and nose are covered with my wetness. All I care about is having Miles's tongue in my mouth.

He doesn't let his whole weight lie on me, always holds himself up with his arms.

His tongue swirls with mine, kissing me with passion, love. Sparks light up when our lips connect, my body turning into liquid mush. I could do this for the rest of my life. Just lie here and kiss my husband.

I open my eyes as we part, seeing admiration in his. I want to beg him to tell me he's falling in love with me again, and again, and again. I want to hear him say it one more time. I want to say it back so badly, but I know even if he said it again, I wouldn't get those words past my lips. Not yet, even if it's the truth. So I don't ask.

"You good?" he asks, leaving a gentle kiss on my cheek. I nod, not being able to formulate sentences, or words in general. "Do you want to stop here?"

God, no.

I shake my head.

"What do you want, Emory?" Again with this question.

"I want you to make love to me."

His head dips down until his lips press to mine one more time while he reaches down to grab his dick, guiding himself inside of me.

He fills me up, inch by inch, painfully slow and with caution like he doesn't want to hurt me. Once buried deep inside me, Miles lets out the sexiest, raspiest groan I've ever heard from him. I think I might have just had a little orgasm hearing it.

"Make that sound again," I beg, he laughs. I slap my hand to his back; he laughs even more. "I am being serious here, Miles. As my husband, you have a duty to do as I say. And I demand you do that sound one more time." He doesn't have

to do as I say, I don’t want him to either, but it sure is worth a try right now.

“Is that so?”

“Yup.” I nod with determination. “You vowed to be my faithful partner in sickness and in health. And you may not have read the fine print, but I sure did. You also vowed to make those sexy as fuck noises every time I ask you to.” I take a deep breath, then continue. “So. Make that noise again.”

“What noise?” he asks, already leaning his head down to have his mouth close to my ear. He pulls his hips back, pulling out of me before he thrusts back inside, another of those raspy groans leaving his throat. “This one?”

Oh, I think I just died.

“Mm-hmm,” I hum, satisfied with my ability to make my husband moan into my ear when I ask him to. “Again,” I whisper.

Miles chuckles just before I feel him press his lips against the shell of my ear. “I have never met anyone quite like you, Emory.”

“You’re very welco—” My words die out when he starts to move more frequently, thrusting in and pulling out with passionate, slow strokes. With every push forward, he groans into my ear. With every thrust, I pant more and more, moan quietly.

I wrap my legs around his hips as best as I can, holding on tight with my arms around his neck.

He rolls his hips into me, pulling back and thrusting forward over and over again. Yet he takes his sweet time, keeping it sensual. Miles leaves kisses on my face, mostly my cheeks, nose, and lips. I eat up every second of his affection like it’s the last time he’d show it to me. It won’t be, I know that much, and still I am savoring this moment in my mind forever.

My nails sink into his skin to which he lets out yet another sexy as fuck raspy groan. That stupid groan is almost good

enough to make me come again.

I’m pulsing around his cock, my eyes closing. I am so close to coming, I don’t know how much longer I’ll be able to take this. I just hope he’s close as well.

“I can’t,” I whimper, a tear slipping from the corner of my eye. Miles sees it, of course he would, and then kisses it away. “Miles, I can’t—”

Emotions are overpowering every inch of me, filling my body with ecstasy, my heart with warmth and something that feels awfully a lot like what I thought love would feel like. Something heavy yet light at the same time. Something solid yet flimsy. It’s untenable yet so strong and powerful that I don’t want it to ever leave.

“You can, darling.” He kisses me, over and over again.

I lose my grip on reality, seeing stars where I know are none. I come so hard around his cock, I am walking above the clouds, greeting angels.

“Watching you come is the sexiest sight ever,” Miles mumbles, just before I can feel him finish inside of me.

He closes his eyes and lets out the breathiest of pants known to humankind; the raspiest of moans; the quietest of groans. Miles leans his forehead against mine, breathing heavily. I can feel his heart beating against my chest, in one rhythm with mine.

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Chapter 56

“‘cause there’s a whole lot that’ll make you smile”—
Cry with you by Jeremy Zucker

Miles

It’s a boy.

How in the world am I supposed to explain to my daughter, the very same who will not accept having a brother if her life depended on it, that she is getting a baby brother?

“Are you sure?” I ask Dr. Manson for the third time. She smiles at me kindly, nods, then confirms using her words, but I just ask *again*.

“Mr. King, I am *very* sure it’s a boy.”

“Brooke is going to hate this,” I say as the news finally settle in. Emory has the nerve to chuckle at my misery while peacefully wiping off that gel stuff on her stomach. “Don’t laugh.”

“I am not laughing.” She’s clearly laughing.

“You don’t seem very happy with the outcome,” Dr. Manson notes, though not in a judge-y kind of way.

“That’s not it,” I answer. “I am thrilled to have a boy in the house. I just have an almost five-year-old daughter who’ll have a knife to my throat the second I tell her she’s getting a brother and not a sister.”

Dr. Manson writes something down on a piece of paper, then looks back up at me. “My son wasn’t very ecstatic about finding out he got a sister either. They fight a lot, but I

know they can't live without each other. I suppose that's just what having siblings is like."

"Wanting to kill each other while also loving the heck out of them," Emory confirms like she knows exactly what Dr. Manson is talking about. Well, she probably does. I don't, I don't have any siblings.

"Does that apply to half-siblings?"

"They're still siblings, Mr. King."

"But also cousins." Dr. Manson knows about what happened to Millie because Emory told her. She didn't know Emory's sister was my girlfriend and the mother of my child up until four months into Em's pregnancy when she tried to reassure me for the millionths time that my wife is okay. After that, I caved and told her why every time we came here for check-ups, I was more scared than Emory.

I never saw me losing Millie as worse than Emory losing her, because at the end of the day, we lost the same person. However, I do think it hit me familywise a little harder. Emory has known her longer, yes, but I was supposed to raise a child with her, which then got dumped onto *only* me raising said child.

We equally lost someone, however, while Emory possibly fears *her* dying while giving birth, she doesn't have to worry about potentially raising a child all by herself. Not only would I have to raise another child on my own, I'll lose yet another woman I love. She doesn't fear dying, or at least she never told me she does. I, on the other hand, I worry about it every single day. And I will continue to worry about it until that baby is born and Emory is still talking and breathing. And *alive*.

"It won't matter. I promise. Don't worry about it."

But I do worry about it. What happens when in ten years, Brooke comes home from school crying because her classmates found out her brother is also her cousin? It's all going to sound *so* wrong in the ears of other's. People don't think. They only see a great reason to bully someone and

then they do. Not considering that it will do the other person more harm than anything else.

I can live with people calling me stupid things for having fallen in love with my dead girlfriend's twin sister. I can live with the disgust from Emory's parents. But if my mistake turns out to hurt my daughter, I will not be able to live with it.

Maybe they'll never find out because how would they? Unless Brooke or her brother tell their friends, nobody will ever know.

"So then I'll see you in two weeks, alright?" Dr. Manson says, getting up from her chair. She hands me the paper with Emory's next four appointments.

"I guess."

Dr. Manson says goodbye and leaves the room, closing the door to give Emory a little more privacy while she still wipes away the ultrasound gel.

I grasp a few paper towels and help her reach the parts she struggles to see.

"You're really scared Brooke's not going to like him, huh?" Emory asks, her voice soft. She lets me wipe off the gel, like she does every time we go here. It's weirdly intimate.

"No, I'm scared she'll think I did this on purpose to… I don't know, get rid of her."

"Miles." Emory lays one hand on my cheek, immediately making me look at her. "Brooke loves you. She would never think you're trying to get rid of her."

I grasp her wrist in my hand and clutch it right over my heart, her palm pressing against my body. My heart must go a hundred miles per hour, and I know she feels it because she smiles at me softly. With empathy.

I know she thinks this is about me being scared my daughter might hate him or something alike. But the increase of my heartbeat is because of Emory. Because I love her so goddamn much that it hurts. Because I love her

so much that just looking at her makes me want to stand on top of a mountain and just scream it out into the world.

She doesn’t love me yet, but she also doesn’t have to. I don’t blame her for it either. Honestly, I can’t even believe I love her. But there is one thing I am certain of; it doesn’t matter how long it will take, seven hours or seventy years, I’ll wait for her. I’ll wait because loving someone doesn’t mean pressuring them into loving you back. Loving someone means sacrifices. It means wanting what’s best for them. Waiting.

It's a whole lot of waiting and hoping and praying and going above everything you thought was impossible to make them happy.

Truthfully, seventy years filled with hoping Emory might love me one day is better than seventy years wasted on someone I don’t even want.

So, yes, I’ll wait. Even if it takes my whole life.

“What kind of cat do you want?” I ask, my heart skipping a beat when I watch Emory’s eyes light up as she realizes what I’m saying.

The corners of her mouth tug up into a wide smile and she lets out an excited shriek. “We’re getting a cat?!”

“Only if you tell me what breed you want,” I answer. “Just not one of those naked ones, they creep me out.”

Emory wraps her arms around my neck, repeating the words “Thank you” over and over again. If I had known getting a stupid cat would mean this much to her, I would’ve gotten it months ago.

“A gray Scottish Fold named Purrito.”

“Purrito?”

“Yes!” She gasps. “Or a Siamese Cat named Soup!”

“Em… Soup? Seriously?”

Emory pulls away from the hug, nodding a little *too* enthusiastically. “Maybe we should get two cats!’”

“Maybe I should reconsider falling in love with you. You’re cra—” In seconds, Emory has her lips pressed to mine,

interrupting me mid-sentence.

“You can’t take it back. It’s the law,” she mumbles, still having her lips pressed to mine. She’s not even kissing me.

“Yeah?”

“Yes.”

“Well then if you say so. I guess I can’t take it back.”

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Chapter 57

“all I know is I need you close”—needy by Ariana Grande

Miles

“Miles.” I’m not sure how often she’s called out my name, but my eyes are definitely open now.

I look at my wife through the dark, needing a second to orient myself but that happens rather quickly as this strange fear of something having happened to her is quick to wake me the fuck up.

Her green eyes are staring into mine like the sun, only less brightening at this hour. *What time is it?*

“Are you okay?” I ask, my hands roaming over her body to see if she’s still got every part of it. *She does*.

Emory giggles a little. “Yes, Miles. I am okay. Physically.”

Pulling her closer into my body, I ask, “What’s wrong? Are you hungry? Need to pee?” She doesn’t like going to the bathroom alone at night. Emory’s a little scared of the dark, so I learned in the past couple of months. “You’re not in preterm labor, are you?”

“Miles, no. I’m good.”

I relax a little. Okay. Not hungry, that’s kind of bad but alright. No toilet visit either. And no preterm labor. That’s… good.

She’s alright.

“I can’t sleep.” That’s not too new either. Our son likes to keep her up at night. Fuck. Our *son*. Shit, it still sounds so surreal. I’ll be having a son. That’s… damn.

“You want to walk around for a little while? Just so maybe he will fall back asleep?”

She doesn’t answer me at first. Instead, Emory takes my hand from her hip and lays it right over her belly, waiting. She presses the tips of her fingers against her stomach, teasing that little kid inside of her, then covers the same spot with my palm. It doesn’t take very long until I realize what she’s trying to show me with this.

“He’s kicking you,” I say as a matter of fact.

She nods with a smile, just in time for *me* to feel him kick right against my palm.

I gasp, overcome with some weird mixture of pride and joy. I couldn’t describe the feeling with Brooke and as it turns out, I still can’t. It’s just... That’s my kid in there. Kicking or beating me while still unborn. That’s a huge thing.

“I thought you might want to feel it.”

It’s the first time I could feel it. Emory’s been telling me she can feel him move for a while now, and I’ve honestly been so jealous of it.

“Thank you,” I whisper and press my lips to my wife’s. Gentle and sweet.

Emory turns on her other side, pressing her ass right against my cock. A groan leaves me, and she chuckles because she knows exactly what she just did. So naturally I pull her closer against my body, and for the sake of it, letting my now hardening cock poke her ass.

My hand lies on her stomach, my thumb caressing her soft skin while Emory rubs her ass against me, teasing me.

“Em,” I rasp, burying my face into the spot between her shoulder and neck, kissing it, nibbling on her skin.

“You never filled out the boyfriend application I told you about,” she says while she grasp my hand and leads it down to cover her pussy with it.

I am confused to say the least.

Does she want me to fuck her or talk about a stupid boyfriend application?

“Do I still have to?” I ask, adding some pressure to her vulva, slowly rubbing my fingers over her underwear.

Emory leans her head back against my body, her leg lifting up a little more to grant me more access.

“Yes,” she gasps when I press two fingers over her opening. “Y-you do.”

I try to sit up, but my wife has other plans. Almost *growls* at me for removing my hand from her body. “What? Do you want me to fill out that form or fuck you, darling?”

“The form can wait another day.”

I smile but she can’t see that. God, she’s got me wrapped around her finger, but I wouldn’t want to have it any other way.

How did we get here? How did we go from barely standing each other to me loving the heck out of this woman?

I don’t care how, honestly. I’m just glad it happened.

As much as I’d like to strip Emory off of her clothes, have her laid out naked in front of me and take my sweet time making love to her, it’s the middle of the night and we’ve got places to be in the morning. And if Emory doesn’t get enough sleep, I will be on the receiving end of her bad mood.

So instead of wasting time with taking off our clothes, I push the crotch of her panties aside, sliding my fingers inside her tight pussy. She’s all wet and ready already, and I have my suspicions as to why that is because she sure as fuck didn’t get soaking wet from a few tiny kisses on her neck.

“Did you wake up from a sex dream?” I ask, pulling my fingers out of her just to plunge them back inside.

She reaches an arm back, her hand grabbing onto my thigh, fingers dipping into my skin. “No,” she gasps,

followed by a moan when I press my thumb right to her clit, drawing the smallest of circles.

Okay, maybe I can drag this out just a liiiitttllleeee bit.

"Just got the hots for me then, huh?"

She whimpers, her hips moving as she tries to fuck my hand. "I listened to the voice note."

Of course she did. "For no reason?"

Emory nods, then shakes her head right after. "I planned to—Oh, God. *Miles*."

My breath spirals right out of my lungs at the sound of my name coming from her lips, choked by lust.

My thumb brushes her clit, again and again. Rubbing it. Teasing it. Exploring her body unhurriedly, listening to the soft sounds that leave her, letting them guide the pace in which I thrust my fingers inside her.

"Keep talking, darling," I command. I want to know what she had planned, although I'm sure I already know. Emory doesn't wake me up for sex. She wouldn't *ask* for it.

She'd rather torture herself by trying to get herself off than ask me to do the job for her. That woman might talk freely, but when it comes to sex, she's the opposite of herself. All shy. It's cute.

"What did you plan to do?"

"I—" A breathy sounds slips out of her throat. "I was going to…"

"Masturbate," I fill in for her. She nods lightly, stilling when I press my lips to her neck.

"Well, I woke you up, didn't I? Clearly I wanted *you*."

Stroking my nose along the soft skin of her neck, I breathe her in. She always smells so nice, like vanilla. Always like vanilla.

Planting a kiss right behind her ear, I whisper, "How badly do you want me to make you come?" No matter how desperately she wants to come, I can promise you, I want to be inside her at least twice as bad.

“Miles, please,” she begs, whimpering. So I rub her faster, wishing my other hand was toying with her boobs right now, but I’m good with holding her hand as well.

She squirms beneath my touch, sucking in breaths and releasing them with sweet sounds. I want to feel her come on my hand more than I want my next breath.

I push my hips forward, rubbing my aching cock against her ass. I just want to be inside of her. Feel those slick walls tighten around my dick. I want to kiss her everywhere. Hold her. Fuck her. *Make love* to her.

Emory’s getting close, her pussy spasming around my fingers. I groan into her ear, my breathing heavy. When she moans in return, a rush of satisfaction courses through me. Who would’ve thought my sweet but feisty little Emory would find men’s moans arousing?

“I’m close,” she tells me.

I push into her faster, rubbing her clit, pressing my thumb on the nub. “Be a good girl and come for me, darling.”

Her body heats more with every thrust of my fingers, tensing up. She rocks her hips, riding my fingers.

“Can you feel what you do to me?” I rasp, pushing my hips against her ass one more time.

She cries out my name as she climaxes, almost making me come in my pants. What I’d give to see her face right now…

In mere seconds do I have my cock pulled out of my boxers, given myself a long stroke, pinching the tip hard to give myself a chance to fuck her and not come right away. And then, while Emory’s still coming down from her high, I nudge the head of my cock between her folds and effortlessly slide inside of her.

She’s even wetter than I had anticipated, making an instant wave of pleasure hurtle through my body. My balls tighten, the urge to just come inside of my wife right now so close, I can taste it on my tongue. But I won’t let that happen.

She feels like fucking home, and maybe two months ago I would’ve laughed at myself for even thinking that, but now, now it’s just the truth and nothing but that.

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Chapter 58

“I wanna love you with the lights on”—Lights On by Shawn Mendes

Emory

I JUST BARELY CALMED DOWN from a quite intense orgasm, and Miles is already inside of me, slowly sliding out and back in.

Our hands are intertwined; one by our faces while my head rests on his arm. The other fingers-locked on my hip. His mouth is all over me, and God, what’d I’d give to have his lips on mine instead of my neck, my shoulder, anywhere else he can reach.

He moans into my ear, making me lose my sanity. Though, I guess that one has been gone for quite some time already. With Miles around, I am not able to tell wrong from right. When it comes to him, I want everything he can give me, including the smallest of sounds that leave his mouth when he rocks his hips against my ass, pushing himself deeper inside me.

He’s so big, making me feel incredibly full. Incredibly satiated as well; and still I want more. I’ll always want more with him.

“You take me so well, darling,” he breathes into my ear, leaving a kiss right behind it.

My muscles clutch around him at his praise. I never thought praising was hot until Miles.

“Fuck, Emory.” His hand on my hip tightens, his fingers almost pulling on mine at this point.

I can’t take this anymore.

Beads of sweat roll over my skin, the desire to come again building more and more with every thrust. In. Out. In. Out. I want to scream, cry out his name and forget everything around us. Because right now it's just Miles and me. It's just him making me feel incredibly good. There's no pain in the world, no bad things. Just *us*. Just his cock inside of me, his lips on my skin, our hands locked like we're one.

The pressure between my legs is starting to become unbearable, craving for relief. And with every thrust, every sound that leaves Miles's mouth, it's only getting worse.

He doesn't fuck me hard or generally *hot*. It's sweet and sensual; loving and slow. It's making every hair on my body stand, every muscle tense, every vein fill with ecstasy until the surface of my skin starts to prickle like fireworks.

I'm panting, so is Miles.

"I'm going to come, Emory," he rasps. The hand on my hip leaving me to reach down to my clit, his fingers rubbing me to edge me closer and closer to another climax.

"Me too," I gasp, already feeling my legs shake.

He forces himself deeper into me, a little faster as he chases his own orgasm.

My climax hits me hard, my vision going dark, tuning out the entire world around me. My body shakes, muscles tensing and relaxing all at the same time. Then with one last thrust, I can feel Miles let go, his body sagging against mine just a blink after he pulls me closer if that's even possible. The noises that leave him make my head spin.

He comes inside of me, riding out his high to make sure every bit of his release ends up inside my body, not outside of it. I almost laugh at that. Well, I suppose I can't get more pregnant than I already am.

"If we weren't already married, I think I was just about to beg you to marry me," I admit, laughing through heavy breaths.

"I'll marry you a million more times, darling. So ask away." He nuzzles his nose into the crook of my neck,

clearly just wanting to be closer. At this point, he might as well crawl underneath my skin. Though, metaphorically, he already has.

“Love me that much, huh?”

He doesn’t hesitate to say, “I really do.”

“That’s kind of scary.”

He nods, agreeing. Then he slaps his hand to my ass. “Get up. We’ve got to get you cleaned up and you need to pee.”

Miles and his stupid orders.

↠ ♡ ↞

“How old are you, Memory?” Brooke asks me the second I open my eyes.

The first sight I take in is her cute little face, huge green eyes, and rosy cheeks. She’s still in her pajamas, so I suppose it’s safe to say it’s still early otherwise Miles would’ve helped her change her clothes already.

And then I turn my head, my eyes landing on the flatscreen TV on the wall across from Miles and my bed. Some Barbie movie is playing, but the volume is turned so far down, one can barely even hear them talk.

“Where’s your daddy?” I ask her, only to be met with an upset frown when I clearly have just ignored her question.

And so Brooke repeats herself. “How old are you, Memory?”

“Twenty-one.”

Brooke gasps audibly, her eyes bigger than before. “SO OLD!”

Yeah, thanks for that.

“Daddy said he go away with uncle Co-in and told to stay in bed and keep quiet to let you sleep. Did I keep quiet, Memory?”

Why does she have to be so goddamn adorable? “Yes, thank you.”

Her face brightens up, grinning proudly. “I tell Daddy then, okay? I was good. He can leave me home alone; I am a big girl now.”

“Yeah, you tell him that.” I reach for the remote control on my nightstand, turning up the volume from the TV just a little bit so Brooke can actually hear something.

Brooke then lifts the covers from my body, tossing it away as far as her tiny arms allow it. She stares at my belly. I can literally see her focusing on just staring, and I’m sure whatever thoughts are running through her mind right now, they’re not very happy ones.

“Daddy told me that thing is a boy,” she says with a slight notch of disgust in her voice, pointing a finger at my stomach.

“He’s not a thing, Brooke.”

“I wanted a sister, Memory.”

“I know,” I say in a breath. Honestly, I don’t even know what I would’ve preferred. At the end of the day, I suppose it never mattered to me. He was still going to be my child, no matter the sex.

“But Daddy said when I am nice to him, I can get a *real* bunny!” she shrieks in excitement, then wiggles herself down until she sits around the same height as my stomach is.

She leans forward, pushes my shirt up over my stomach, then just casually places a kiss to my skin. I almost melt into nothing but a puddle right then and there.

“Hello,” she says with her lips pressed right to my belly. “*Je t’aime, mon frère*.” It doesn’t take a genius to know what she just said. I think everyone knows the words for “I love you” in French. And the other part, I’m just assuming she was talking to her brother.

“Teaching him French right from the start, I see.”

Brooke looks up, giggling a little mischievously. “Daddy said to speak French, then we can talk about you, and you won’t understand.”

Of course he would say that. Sounds just like that husband of mine.

“Can you tell Daddy I was nice to my brother? Then I can have my bunny!”

Why do I have the slight feeling she’s going to get that bunny either way? Miles has this thing that makes him incapable of saying no to Brooke unless one hundred percent necessary.

“Of course I tell him. Did you pick a name already?”

She nods. “If it’s the he-bunny, I call him Mr. Fluffles two. And if I get the she-bunny, I call her…” She hums as she thinks, her brain working harder than mine did trying to understand calculus in high school. “Millie!”

“Like your Mommy?” I raise my eyebrows.

Brooke crawls up the bed, her face hovering right over mine when she asks, “Do you know my Mommy?”

“I knew her, yes.”

“She be mad when I call my bunny her name?”

I bring my arms around Brooke, pulling her in for a hug. She hugs me back instantly, at least as much as it works with her lying on top of me for the most part. One of my hands makes its way into her hair, carefully brushing through it with my fingers. “I think she would love that, Brookie.”

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Chapter 59

“there’s always gonna be another mountain”—The Climb by Miley Cyrus

Miles

“Two fucking cats and a rabbit,” Colin chuckles as we leave the second cat breeder’s house.

We’ve already picked up cat number one and Brooke’s bunny. The only pet that was left was the Siamese cat. I picked the one cat that appeared to be rather shy, both times. But to be fair, they both looked at me with those huge eyes, looking kind of cute.

“Emory wanted a cat,” I say like it’s nothing.

“But you got *two* cats. And a fucking bunny, man.”

“Brooke wanted the bunny. Besides, it’s a *dwarf* rabbit.” Emory texted me and said Brooke is so excited to get a bunny, she even talked to her brother. Boy do I wish I was there for it.

Anyway, now I can’t just show up at home without a bunny for her. It doesn’t make a difference whether I get her one now or in a few weeks.

“Yeah, changes a whole lot, dude.” He’s being sarcastic, I know he is. “You’re such a dad.”

I look at my best friend, ready to murder him. “Like you wouldn’t jump to get Lily a pet if she asked for one.”

Colin pats himself on the back, proud to have an answer for me. “She wouldn’t ask because my girlfriend is too mentally unstable to keep herself alive, let alone an animal.”

Should I laugh? Because I feel like he is trying to make light of the situation, but this is serious.

So I don't laugh, but blink. A couple of times. "I thought she's doing better?"

Colin sighs and leans against my car, looking over the hood. "She has her days. Lily no longer actively tries to kill herself, but that doesn't just make everything else go away."

That checks out. "Can I ask you something very personal?"

Colin narrows his eyes at me, unsure whether to say yes or no. He'll say yes, he always does. "Depends. If it's something personal about my girlfriend, then no. About me, ask away."

Colin is about as secretive about anything that has to do with Lily as the FBI. One wouldn't be able to punch an answer out of him. Sometimes I even think he'd rather die than talk about what's going on with her.

He tells Aaron way more than Grey and me, but Aaron is also Lily's twin brother, so perhaps that's why. Or because Colin and Aaron are just way closer than Grey and I are to him. Either way, even to Aaron I'm sure he never tells the *whole* story.

Frankly, I'm not sure if that's a good or bad thing.

"Why'd you do it?" I ask. "You knew right from the start that you could lose Lily any day. So why'd you stick around?"

Colin nods for me to get inside the car, probably to talk without random strangers hearing half of our conversation. And so I open the backseat door, put the cat carrier right next to the other two animals and close the door, then go to take a seat in the front.

As soon as we're both seated, Colin looks at me with an intensity I had yet to witness. "If you tell her that, I will murder you, King."

I hold up both of my hands. “I wouldn’t dare.” I just bet she already knows anyway. Colin’s shit at keeping secrets from Lily.

“Good.” Colin lets out a quick breath, then his eyes soften a little. “That day I first saw her in the arena, it was like I got hit by a million fucking lightning bolts. Just looking at her stirred something up inside of me. And then she was crying, and I had this strange urge to find out why. She didn’t talk to me the way I was used to be talked to by other girls. She didn’t swoon over my existence or ask me for tickets for a game, either ours *or* the NYR. It honestly just felt like she hated me right from the start.”

“So if she seemingly hated you…?”

“Well, she didn’t hate me, obviously. I’m a great guy. I’m un-hate-able.”

“I beg to differ.”

Colin flips me off. “Aaaaanywayyyy,” he says, dragging the word out extra-long. “I was going to *not* get involved after I read her notebook. I wasn’t in the position to do anything about it. She wanted to die, so who was I to stop her, right? Even if I had told anyone about it, I just bet she would’ve found a way to end up dead anyway. So what was the point in it? And with my sister being close to death, I didn’t really care either. But then Aaron got all involved and I just knew if she died, that guy would follow. By that time I didn’t know why, but I had the feeling it would be like that. After I interrupted Aaron and her little coffee date that day, I just knew I had to do *something* for his sake, I was yet to figure out what. When a few days later, she was having a whole ass panic attack over walking into a classroom when she was late, it kind of just snapped in my head. I couldn’t watch her suffer. I couldn’t watch her die thinking nobody cared about her. And so that was the moment I just knew, no matter how much it’ll hurt me in the end, I’d make her last few days bearable. I wanted her to know someone cared,” he explains. “Also, from the moment I saw her first, I

just kept on falling deeper and deeper in love with her, which did *not* help the case at all."

"Did you ever regret it? I mean, *during* those days, not afterward."

He nods immediately, though a little hesitantly like admitting that is the most painful thing he's ever done. "With every day I got to know her better, I started to fear her death more. I didn't want her to die because I loved her, but I knew how fucked up it would've been to say 'Hey, by the way, I love you, Lily. So stay alive because I can promise you, I'll love you enough to make your pain go away.' I couldn't make it go away, no matter how badly I wished I could. And so I kept quiet. With every day we got closer to her goal, I got more nervous and regretted having put myself into that position because if I hadn't, I wouldn't feel that way right now. And then the whole thing with Eira had to happen and I just knew when I got back, I'd have lost Lily. Realizing that made me regret *everything*. But at the same time, I didn't regret it one bit because I knew she had a few good days before her death and that was worth more than my pain. I didn't know how to tell Aaron the truth, but apparently he already knew anyway. Thank god she's still alive because, dude, thinking you've lost the love of your life sucks." He presses his lips together into a *very* thin line, closing his eyes in regret.

"Sorry," he mutters, "I wasn't thinking on that last sentence."

"It's okay." And somehow, it really is okay. Just a few months ago I would've felt bad for myself in this moment. I would've told him it was a shitty thing to say because he just *thought* he lost the love of his life, while I *literally* lost mine. But these days I'm not even so sure about that anymore.

I never asked Colin about Lily. It's been almost a year and I know parts of their story, but I never asked about it that deeply as I did just now. All these months I've admired my

best friend's strength. He's never lost himself even when he lost two siblings and almost Lily as well. He never appeared to have been struggling with any of it. To me, Colin just always seemed like the kind of person who is unshakable. Nothing could wound him.

Sure, I've seen him upset over Eira after she died. I watched him fall apart for a few *hours* and then he was himself again.

So for the first time since I've known him, hearing him admit to having struggled with almost losing Lily far more than I thought, it breaks something inside of me for him. From the bottom of my heart, I am so glad he still has her.

"Would you do it again?" I ask. "I mean, if Lily died and you met someone else, then find out they're also suicidal and—"

"No, I wouldn't." When I look at him, Colin's eyes are filled with tears, but he isn't letting them tip over. "At least I don't think so. I don't know, maybe I would. I just honestly cannot imagine Lily dying. I don't want to. And I don't want to imagine ever loving anyone but her."

"Yeah, I get that." That's exactly how I felt after Millie died. Not wanting it to be real. Not being able to imagine ever having to find someone else to be by my side.

The only difference is, Colin can't imagine it happening. I have to live that reality because it happened to me.

"You know, I'd rather have had little time with Lily than none at all," Colin says and lays his hand on my knee. Why are all of my friends so touchy? "Being with her was more imp—" His phone rings, so naturally Colin stops talking because it could be Lily calling him.

When he checks his phone and picks up, I know for sure it's her, otherwise he wouldn't have picked up right now.

"Hey there, Lilybug," he greets her, all signs of sadness vanishing in seconds. All I can do is watch with fascination when his face lights up like a Christmas tree when he hears

her voice. If that's what being in love looks like, I might have to start carrying a mirror around.

One of the kittens meows on the backseat, the other one joins in immediately. I turn around enough to see the three carrier boxes all lined up. And once my eyes fall onto the first cat Colin and I picked up, he meows again. This is going to get annoying, won't it?

"Woah, hold on there, *mi sol*. What happened? Why are you crying?"

My head snaps toward my best friend immediately. He looks concerned now. He *sounds* concerned.

I don't hear what she answers, but it must be something good because Colin's body sags as he relaxes. And then he rolls his eyes, a smile back on his lips.

Shit, if I thought Emory went through a lot of emotions in no time, this just topped it.

"You're not going to die just because there's a *butterfly* in our apartment. Can't you just go next door until I come back home?"

A butterfly? Seriously?

"Liliana Heaven Reyes, listen to me. You will not die just because there's a butterfly—Lily!"

"Emory's home, if she doesn't want to be alone," I say. With Aaron and Sofia gone, I think Emory is her only other option. They get along well, just not quite best-friend-like.

Colin looks at me, humming. "You could hang out with Emory. Brooke's there—Helllo?" He removes the phone from his ear, looking at the screen with knitted eyebrows. "She hung up on me," he mutters in disbelief.

I lay a hand to his shoulder. *Maybe I'm also quite touchy*. "Happens to the best of us."

"No, you don't understand. Lily hung up on *me*. She doesn't do that. Oh, god. She doesn't love me anymore."

Jocks. They're pretty dramatic. "I'm sure she'll come around."

“She better. We’ve had incredible morning sex and I full on plan to repeat it tonight. But I can’t do that if she suddenly decided to not love me anymore.”

“Just drive.”

“No,” he says in a stern tone.

“No?”

“No.”

“Well, why the hell not?”

“I’m not done talking.” Colin cocks his head, eyes narrowed at me. “I never asked you how you dealt with being a single father out of respect to you, because even though I’ve known you in high school, we didn’t talk so I didn’t think it was my place to come into your life a year later and ask for details. I never asked you anything about Millie. I never asked you to talk about her because I always thought you might need to *not* talk about it, about her. It’s what I did with Aiden. Just not talk, maybe the pain will go away. But sometimes, Miles, sometimes you just need to talk about it, feel the emotions and actually learn how to move on from there. Not just push it all away.”

“I hate you.”

He grins widely, like hearing me say that is a good thing. “Now, go on. Talk. How’d you deal with it?”

Nobody knows the truth behind the first couple of days after Brooke was born. Nobody but my father and Emory.

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Chapter 60

“I had all and then most of you / some and now none of you”—The Night We Met by Lord Huron

Miles

September 2017 — Age 18

SHE’S CRYING AGAIN. She’s always crying.

What even does she have to cry about? She’s a baby. A week-old *baby*.

I’m here all alone because of her. If she hadn’t been born, then I’d still have Millie. Millie would be lying in my arms right now and we’d watch a movie together, joke and be happy.

But no. No, now I have this baby in my bedroom with me. And she just won’t stop crying. But what’s worse, neither can I.

It’s been four days since the love of my life passed. Four days that were filled with more pain and crying, and baby crying than I have ever experienced in my life.

Seven days have passed since I’ve last talked to Millie. Since I last heard her laughter, her voice, her sighs. Seven days since I’ve laughed with her, talked to her, felt with her. Seven days since I saw her, held her hand, felt her warmth.

I didn’t even get to say goodbye.

All because of this stupid crying baby.

“Miles,” my father says with sympathy in his voice when he barges into my bedroom. His features immediately soften when his eyes land on me.

He’s pitying me.

I look back at my father, not laughing like I usually do. He has a funny scar on his cheek that always makes me smile. It's my fault he has it, and we're both always making fun of it. But looking at it now, I don't think it's that funny anymore.

I just feel empty. Like every ounce of life has been sucked right out of me. Everything that was sunny and good left me in a matter of mere seconds, and I could do absolutely nothing about it.

"Miles…" he says again, stepping deeper into my room. He looks toward the baby's crib, sighing as he walks up to *her* instead of me.

I watch when he picks her up, coos at her and talks sweetly to that thing that stole my Millie from me. She stops crying when he rocks her in his arms.

"You need to start caring for her, Miles," my father tells me as he makes his way over to my bed. That thing still in his arms.

"Take her away from me." My voice is strained from the anger I feel, and with every step that thing gets closer to me, the more hate for her consumes me.

I should love her. I *did* love her. When she was inside Millie's womb and her mother was still alive. Now I can't love her. How could I possibly love a baby who has stolen the woman I thought I'd marry in a few years from me?

"She's your daughter."

"She killed Millie. I don't want her here."

My father takes a seat on my bed, still holding that thing in his arms. Can't he just drop her? Maybe she will die, facing the same fate as her dead mother.

No, that's wrong. That's a wrong thing to say, let alone think. She deserves to live like any other baby. She's pure and had no bad intentions, I know that. At least somewhere deep inside of me I do.

"It's not your daughter's fault Millie died, Miles."

I know. God, I know that. But if it weren't for her, Millie would still be alive, which *makes* it her fault. Why won't he understand? "Mine then."

Of course. Of course it's my fault. If I hadn't gotten Millie pregnant in the first place, then she wouldn't have had any complications giving birth because there wouldn't have been a chance for her to give birth. And she'd still be alive.

Oh, God. This is all my fault.

I bury my face into my hands, another wave of tears streaming down my face. It's a miracle I'm not dehydrated yet.

"It's nobody's fault. Complications happen." I ignore my father, at least until he speaks up once again because clearly, that man cannot leave me alone. "Have you called Emory yet?"

My head snaps up. "Why the hell would I do that?" Me calling Emory? Yeah, not going to happen. Her entire family hates me. But of course they would. I mean, I killed their daughter.

"It's her seventeenth birthday, Miles. I know you guys don't get along well but—"

"Millie would've turned seventeen today," I mutter and fall back on my bed. My head hits the wooden headboard, but I don't care. Some part of me wishes my pillow is currently soaking up with my blood and I am moments away from dying. But since my father isn't freaking out, I doubt it.

"Which is exactly why calling Emory might be a good idea."

"She doesn't like me, Dad. Calling Emory to wish her a *happy* birthday four days after her twin sister died because of me isn't a 'good idea'. It's cruel. It's a 'Oh, I killed your sister but, anyway, I hope you're doing good. Also, I feel terrible she's dead, but you know, at least you have a great birthday, okay?'"

My father opens his mouth to speak, but before he can utter something stupid, like an excuse, I cut him off. "What

even was the complication? The doctors wouldn't talk to me because I'm not Millie's family, which is bullshit because we have a daughter together. But no, to those stupid fucking doctors I'm just the stupid eighteen-year-old who got a minor pregnant."

"You were also a minor when she got pregnant, Miles."

I roll my eyes, and once more when that stupid baby in my father's arms starts to cry again. I swear, she doesn't know how to keep her mouth shut.

"Make her stop. *Please* make her stop!" I press both of my hands over my ears, praying it'll sound out the crying. It doesn't.

She doesn't have a name yet. I'm not even sure I'll ever give her one. I might put her up for adoption, it's the best that could happen to her.

I can't be a father. I shouldn't be allowed to be a father. Not without Millie by my side. We said we'd do this *together*, not I do this alone.

My father doesn't even try to get her to stop crying. He just looks at me, our eyes locked and something in his tells me he doesn't plan on making that baby stop either.

He's waiting for me to do it.

I wouldn't know how to even if I wanted to. I haven't picked her up even once since she's been born. I barely even looked at her. The few times that I did pass her crib and allowed myself to take a quick glance, it was only ever a second or two when I went to the bathroom before going back to bed and bawling my entire soul out of my body.

"She needs her father, Miles," I faintly hear my father say, but to be sure, I finally let my hands fall to my sides and ask him to repeat himself. He does.

"She deserves a father who loves her. *You* love her, Miles. We both know you do. I know it's hard to pretend like nothing happened, and nobody's asking you to brush off Millie's death. But you are a father now. You have responsibilities now. You can't cry away your life and hate on

the only being you've got left from the woman you love. I promise you, in a few years, when this little girl will run around the house, asking anyone but her own father for help, you'll wish you would've been there for her. You'll wish you would be the person she turns to because you are her father, not me, not Maeve's fiancé. *You.*"

He lays my daughter down on my lap, then gets up to leave the room. That's when I panic.

"You can't just leave me here alone with her!" My voice comes out shakingly, panicky. I want to yell after him but keep my voice down because she suddenly stops crying.

I look down at the little baby in my lap, my breathing calming the longer my eyes linger on her face.

"Dad," I say my voice fills with fear, still a little unsure of what to do. But when I look up, he's gone. He just left me here all by myself. With a baby on my legs.

Carefully I reach a hand to her face, using my index finger to softly caress her cheek.

She's kind of cute. How didn't I notice that before?

But what am I supposed to do with her? I can't give her a good life. Not for money reasons, I have a big trust fund that could still pay for her college even if I lived off of it alone until then. But I barely know how to breathe on my own these days. There's no way I could ever raise a child of my own, all by myself. Millie would know what to do.

But Millie's not here…

"It's just me and you," I mumble. Her eyes close and I think she might be falling asleep. How can she go from crying to sleeping in mere second? Doesn't she want anything? Like… I don't know, eat? Maybe she needs a new diaper? No, my dad would've told me. And I probably would be able to smell it, right?

God, I don't know. I know nothing about babies or how to raise a child.

How am I supposed to do this?

“You need a name…” Okay, I know I said I’m not naming her because I might give her away. But how could I give up my own child for adoption? My dad’s right, she’s all I have left. She’s all I have from Millie.

Millie wouldn’t want me to give our daughter away. She wouldn’t want me to give up, give *her* up. She would want me to suck it up and be there for this little thing.

I just wish she were here for all of it.

A name. I can do this. I can name her…

What would Millie have wanted? We made a list together, but I know Millie wasn’t sure about any of them. She wanted a meaning. A name that meant something to us.

Like… Brooklyn.

“Brooklyn,” I say, my eyes focused on her face. Trying to figure out if it fits her. It sounds right.

Now that Millie and I can’t move down there together anymore… I can name our daughter after the place we wanted to go to. The place where we wanted to grow old together.

It’s meaningful, right?

Yeah. It’s perfect. It’s… her. Brooklyn. My daughter.

My *daughter*.

Shit. I have a daughter. Like a real ass human baby daughter.

I caress her little, tiny chubby cheek one more time, this time smiling. Fuck, I can’t remember the last time I smiled. Well, a week ago, so maybe I do remember. But that’s not the point.

I carefully pick her up, holding my daughter in my arms for the first time since she was born. She’s so light, like she weighs less than a feather. Okay, maybe not *that* light, but she might as well be.

One of my tears drips onto her cheek, and I swear, a chuckle almost leaves me but then it just gets sucked right back into my lungs, being overpowered by sadness instead.

I fucked up. I should've been there for this tiny human being from the very first second.

She's my daughter, god dammit. I was supposed to love her right from the start. I am supposed to be her protector, shield her from cruelty and not put her through misery.

"I promise you, Brooklyn, I'll try to be the best father to you I can possibly be." I press my lips to her tiny forehead, sealing my promise. "I owe it to you. You already don't have a mother, so the least you deserve is a father who makes you feel like you don't even need a mother." Which, frankly, I think is stupid because every child needs both of their parents. They deserve both of their parents. Good parents. Parents who love their child.

Emory.

Emory should know. I just named her niece, surely she'd want to know, right?

Well, if she doesn't, then she better not pick up that damn phone because I'm already laying Brooklyn back down onto my thighs, reaching for my phone, scrolling through my contacts until I land on hers.

I haven't reached out to Emory in months. In a year, actually. Not after she broke up with me. I called her for her birthday last year, but she didn't pick up, unfortunately.

Just a year ago I had hoped maybe if I called her on her birthday we could talk, and we can get back together. But she didn't pick up. I'm thankful she didn't because if she had, then maybe I wouldn't be having a daughter right now. I wouldn't have found to Millie.

If she had picked up a year ago… Millie would still be ali—

Stop thinking about that right now, Miles.

I've got a lifetime left to mourn Millie, but right now… right now I need to call Emory.

I dial her number, waiting. My nerves are making my whole body shake as I wait for her to pick up the phone. It rings, and rings, and just when I think the call will go to voicemail, she picks up.

“Miles?” She sounds like she’s been crying. She probably has been. But Emory doesn’t cry. She… Okay, maybe she does now. I totally understand. I’ve been crying all week as well.

“I named her,” I say. “I just thought you might want to know.” Admittedly, I’m a little nervous to talk to her right now. For all I know, Emory still hates me. Even more so now, I bet.

But she surprises me a little. “You have?”

“Yes.”

“What’s her name?” Emory asks, the tears in her voice slowly fading away.

“Brooklyn,” I tell her. What if she hates it? Well, she doesn’t exactly have a say in what I name *my* daughter. But I used to really value Emory’s opinions, I think I still do.

“It’s cute.”

“You think so?”

“Yeah.” She sounds a little out of breath.

We both keep quiet, the line seemingly dead but I can hear her heavy breathing. I’m sure she can hear mine as well.

I’m not sure for how long we stay quiet, for how long neither of us utters a word, but I just know someone has to say something. And so I go first. “Em?”

“Yes?”

I take an encouraging breath, not quite sure whether what I’m about to say is a good thing or not. “I know this is going to sound wrong because nothing about today is really great, but happy birthday.”

“Thank you.” Her voice is small again. I just bet she’s tearing up once more.

I may not have siblings, but I can imagine how awful it must feel to suddenly celebrate your birthday by yourself when all your life you’ve had to share it with your twin.

“How are you?” I ask, not sure if I want to get an answer. How is she supposed to be? Certainly not throwing a party,

or even being in the mood for one. Stupid question.

“My dad’s drunk,” she answers. “He relapsed.”

“Oh.” That’s not good. He’s been sober for years, but I suppose losing a child makes you do things like… drink.

I wish I could have drunken myself into a coma just four days ago, but my father wouldn’t let me. He still refuses to give me the keys to his liquor cabinet.

“My mom won’t talk to me. I don’t think she’s even looked at me since…”

“Millie died,” I fill in, hearing my own voice break.

Emory and I haven’t exchanged a single word in over a year. Not even a week ago when Millie was brought into the hospital after her water broke. Or when the doctors rushed Millie out of the delivery room and into an OR instead. Emory just didn’t talk to me. She didn’t even look at me.

“Yeah, that.”

“Do you… Do you want me to come pick you up? We can…” We can what? Cry together in my bedroom just so she doesn’t have to be all alone on her birthday? I don’t think so. “You shouldn’t be alone. We can put our weapons down. Just for today.”

Emory hesitates, but then after inhaling deeply, exhaling twice as heavy, she says, “Yeah… that’d be nice.”

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Chapter 61

“I can be a gentleman, anything you want”—
Boyfriend by Justin Bieber

Emory

MILES HAS FINALLY FILLED out the boyfriend application form.

I have never made a guy do it, and truthfully, I didn’t think Miles ever would. But just a minute ago he had slapped the papers into my hands and left to go to work without a word.

I don’t have high hopes for his answers, but I’m quite intrigued to say the least.

BASIC INFORMATION

1. **Full Length Name:**
   Desrosiers-King, Miles
2. **Age:**
   23
3. **Height**:
   6’6
4. **Birthday:**
   April 6th, 1999
5. **Eye Color:**
   Blue
6. **Hair Color**:
   Blond
7. **Favorite Color**:

Blue?

CONTACT INFORMATION

Just so I can reach out to you.

Phone number*:*
(212) 642-9981
E-Mail:
Miles@desrosiers-king.com
Address:
172 Madison Avenue, NY

GETTING TO KNOW YOU

Y = Yes ; N = No | please color in the box to your answer.

8. **Are you a virgin?** Y □ N ■
8.5. **If no, how many past sexual partners have you had?:**
Five
9. **Do you smoke?** Y □ N ■
10. **Do you use any illegal substances*?*** Y □ N ■
11. **Do you have kids?** Y ■ N □
11.5. **If yes, how many?:**
One daughter and a still unborn son
12. **Do you work out***?* Y ■ N □
13. **Do you currently have a source of income***?* Y ■ N □
13.5. **If yes, what is it?**
I own Rêverie
14. **Do you live on your own?** Y □ N ■
14.5. **If no, whom do you currently reside with?**
You and my daughter

15. **What kind of car do you drive?**
Acura NSX Type S.
16. **Favorite sport / Team?:**
Ice Hockey, NYR
17. **Have you ever cheated on a partner***?* Y □ N ■
18. **Do you cook?** Y ■ N □
19. **Do you have any piercings? Y □ N ■**
19.5. **If yes, how many***?*:
_____
20. **Do you have tattoos***?* Y ■ N □
20.5. **If yes, how many?**
too many

REASONS WHY I SHOULD PICK YOU

21. **What is your idea of a perfect date?** (Notes will suffice)

Sunset picknick, a lot of talking, chemistry?

23. **Explain why I should pick you as my boyfriend.** (One sentence only.)

We're married.

24. **If you have a special skill that might convince me, you're welcome to brag right here:**

I can cook and learned from the founder of Rêverie, that's quite the flex. I'm also the only one who can make you come.

25. **What do you want out of this relationship?**

You.

PAST RELATIONSHIP BACKGROUND

Long-term only.

Start Date:
May 2nd, 2013
End of Relationship:
September 15th, 2016
Were you in love?
I'd say so, yes
Have you been sexually active?
Yes
Why did you break up?
Her sister broke us up

Start Date:
October 3rd, 2016
End of Relationship:
September 20th, 2017
Were you in love?
Yes
Have you been sexually active?
Yes
Why did you break up?
She died

QUIZ ABOUT ME

Let's see how well you know me

26. **What's my favorite color?**
Red
27. **When's my birthday?**
September 24th, 2000
28. **What's my natural hair color?**

Blond

29. **Who do I hate the most?**

Miles King, I know because that's me

30. **What do I hate the most?**

Modeling and being compared to your sister

31. **What do I love the most?**

Painting and getting on my last nerve

32. **What's my favorite food?**

Trick question, you barely ever eat. Loathe food. But if you had to choose, definitely sushi.

33. **What's my favorite thing to do in my free time?**

Get fucked by your husband

34. **What's my full name?**

Emory Rose Desrosiers-King ; former Scott

Thank you for filling out this form! I will be reaching out to you soon!

I'm not sure what I was expecting, but it wasn't that. Of course he would either take the questions *too* seriously or brush them off as a joke.

I try to reach for my phone to shoot Miles a text, but little Purrito is lying on it. He's the cutest little gray Scottish Fold I have *ever* seen. He loves cuddling, unlike Sir Meow. Brooke named the other cat, so unfortunately the second cat's name isn't Soup. Would've been great though.

Sir Meow is kind of rude, to be honest. He's been here for a week now, and every time I look at him, he hisses. Sometimes I think he actively avoids me, but that cat *loves* my husband. It's unfair, so I'd say. I'm more likable than he is.

Either way, I cautiously wiggle my phone out from underneath Purrito, unlock it and open Miles and my chat.

Emory: There’s no way you’ve only slept with five women in your whole life.

Not according to his reputation.

I figured it must’ve been less than what’s said about him, but five? No way.

Miles: Surprise?

Emory: You were supposed to answer honestly.

Miles: I did.

Emory: I don’t believe you.

Miles: I swear, Em. It’s only been five in total. Hard to believe, I know. But it’s the truth.

Emory: That at least explains your awful skills in bed.

Miles: Awful, huh? Didn’t sound like I’ve done such an awful job this morning, wife.

I hate him. I so totally and utterly hate my husband.

Emory: Oh, before I forget. Sun told me about this art gallery next week? It’s a rare one and I’d love to see it.

Miles: Let’s talk about this when I’m back home around six. Gotta get back to work before my employees think they can just not work either.

Six? He just left like thirty minutes ago. It’s currently five p.m. So much to wanting to be more involved in his restaurant.

Though, he did say he doesn't want to be gone for too long with me pregnant *and* Brooke around. But I don't understand why he won't just stay at work until maybe nine? Nine seems like a great time to come back home.

↠ ♡ ↞

"Art gallery?" Miles enters our living room, throwing his phone on the couch beside me. Brooke is in her bedroom, probably playing with some dolls, but it's a miracle she isn't running out here yet. Maybe she hasn't heard Miles come home this time.

"Yes." I smile up at my husband, lifting my face to his. Miles quickly presses his lips to mine before taking a seat.

"When?"

"July twelfth?" The gallery is there for the entirety of the month, but next week sounds good to me.

He picks up his phone, then starts to type. I'll just assume he marks down "ART GALLERY" into his calendar for next week.

"It's in Malibu," I add, knowing this will be a dealbreaker. "But I want to go *so* badly, Miles. It's a once in a lifetime kind of gallery."

He looks up from his phone. "Emory… you're not supposed to get on a plane."

"I know. Well, I still can. I'm not anywhere near my due date yet, It'll be fine, I promise. We can ask Dr. Manson if it's okay for me to go."

This art gallery is really one I've never seen happening before. They're putting up art pieces right by the beach. Obviously with security and everything. But an art gallery out in the open, at a *beach*… I have to see it.

"Plus, if we go, maybe you can visit Grey at home and find out more about his family." Grey and Sun left for Malibu just a couple of days ago. I already miss her to pieces. "I'm

sure Colin and Lily would check on the pets a couple of times a day. So… *please*.” He rubs his temples, sighing.

“Also, I’ve gotten this email about a photoshoot close to the art gallery. I wasn’t going to respond since I no longer have an agency to talk for me, but that shoot is for a good cause. It’s a miracle they even requested me. I have to go.”

“What’s the good cause? Letting you see the gallery?”

I wish. “It’s a very small clothing line for *actual* great maternity wear. The designer just started out, so I think it’s a good thing if I agree because they might get more recognition when people see that I’m the face of their brand.”

“You don’t even want to model anymore, Em,” he reminds me. “Your art is doing great. I mean, it could do better, but you’re not doing too bad.”

I’m not selling any of the stuff I make, so how am I doing “great”? Sure, my posts get liked a lot, but they did before as well. Most of the money I make is from working with brands, advertising their products.

It used to be clothes and beauty stuff. Now I’m doing that *and* art supplies. Yup, I’ve sunken that deep. But at least the art supplies have great quality.

“I just want to do this one thing. Please?”

“Fine. But you take breaks. No overworking yourself. *If* Dr. Manson says it’s okay.”

I can do that. No overworking. That sounds like heaven to me, actually. Photoshoots are exhausting, especially when the photographer just keeps on yelling at you because your head doesn’t sit right? Like, my head is attached to my body, how else is it supposed to sit?

“Daddy!” Brooke suddenly yells, now showing up in the doorway to her room, holding a hand to her stomach. “*Je me sens pas bien.*”

Miles shoots up from the couch, sprinting over to his daughter. “What’s wrong?” Just as he reaches her, Brooke hunches over and pukes.

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Chapter 62

“there ain’t no love like ours”—Lights Are On by Tom Rosenthal

Miles

Well I guess it was a good thing I came home early. On second thought, staying away would’ve prevented my daughter from puking on my feet.

Why do both of my girls just love to puke on me? It’s unfair, really. You don’t see me emptying my guts on them. Perhaps I should start doing it, then they might reconsider and stop doing it to me.

But now that I’ve officially turned into nurse-me, I couldn’t care any less.

Though, having my daughter catch some kind of bug with my pregnant wife around doesn’t seem very good. Especially when said wife plans to fly across the country next week.

Let’s just pray it’s a one-day kind of thing. Toddlers have that sometimes, right? They get sick for one day and then it’ll be fine. I hope.

“*Comment tu te sens?*” I ask my daughter.

“*J’ai mal au ventre*.” Brooke lets out a painfilled whimper, clutching Mr. Fluffles closer to her chest. “And I’m cold, Daddy.”

She doesn’t run a fever, that’s the first thing I checked, so I don’t feel all too bad pulling the blanket over her body.

“Have you been feeling sick all day, baby?” If she has, how the hell didn’t I notice? Why didn’t she tell me?

Brooke shakes her head, her eyes slowly falling shut and barely opening again. I feel a little relieved thanks to her no.

Maybe she ate something bad, but that can't be. We don't have anything at home that went bad, at least not that I know.

"Is she okay?" Emory asks. When I look up I find her leaning against the doorframe, not quite entering the room. She's holding a bottle of juice in her hands as well as a spoon.

"She will be, I hope." She has to. *It's fine. Children get sick. That's normal*.

"It's diluted juice." Emory holds up the bottle in her hand. "My mom used to give Millie and me dilated juice every fifteen minutes when we were younger. When we were vomiting, I mean. Brooke's losing fluids, salts, and minerals, so we should make sure she's getting them. And you can't just feed her solid foods because I guess the chances are higher they'll come right back up."

"Did it help?" I ask, looking from Emory back to my daughter. Brooke lets out another whimper, I want to wrap her up in my arms and hold her until she feels better. "Last time she was sick, I just… I just sat in her room with her for days and watched her sleep."

"For days?"

"Yup. Well, I fed her too, and made sure she drank water. But other than that, she just slept." I couldn't leave her alone, especially because she asked me to stay with her. Maeve didn't want me around for that long, so I brought Brooke home with me. And then… I just watched her all day and night long for three whole days. I don't think I even slept.

Suddenly Emory lays her hand on my shoulder, using me to keep herself steady as she kneels down beside me.

"You shouldn't come near her, Em. What if whatever Brooke has in contagious?"

“Then I’ll catch it either way. If not from her, from you.” She hands me the spoon, then opens the juice bottle, carefully pouring its contents on the spoon.

“Can’t she just drink from the bottle?” I ask because honestly, feeding Brooke spoonsful of juice seems odd.

“Sure, but smaller amounts to begin with are healthier for now. That way she doesn’t overdo it and her stomach might tolerate them better.”

Oh, yeah, okay. That makes sense. I guess.

Gently, I help Brooke sit even though she begs me not to sit her up. She doesn’t even keep her eyes open. My heart’s breaking for her right in this moment. I’m sure even though Brooke is the one who feels weak and sick, I’m in more pain for her. Only Brooke would be able to make me feel bad because *she* is sick.

“*Boit ça,*” I say and bring the spoon to my daughter’s mouth. Brooke shakes her head. “You’ll feel better.”

She ends up opening her mouth, still whimpering in pain, but at least Brooke lets me feed her the juice. After that, she falls back down with a huff, her eyes on me this time. “Daddy, I be okay.”

“Yeah, you’ll be okay.” I just wish I knew where this was coming from. Surely Brooke couldn’t get sick in the three hours I was gone. She was fine before I left.

That’s weird, isn’t it? It’s not normal, I don’t think.

“Miles, stop worrying. She’ll be fine,” Emory tells me. “Let her sleep for a while.” She gets up from the floor, waiting. “Are you not coming?”

I shake my head, not looking at my wife but at my daughter. She needs someone to look out for her right now. I mean, what if she has to puke again? Sure, Brooke now has a just-in-case puke-bucket standing beside her bed, but I doubt she’d use it without me around. And what if she calls for me when she wakes up and I don’t hear her? Then she will cry, and I will feel even worse when I find out.

Or what if this is a really bad case of a flu and I only have a few hours left with my daughter before she dies?

Oh, God. Is that possible? Does this happen?

“Stop thinking about her d-y-i-n-g.” Emory spells out the word to not scare Brooke, should she be conscious right now.

“I wasn’t thinking about that,” I argue. I was. It’s usually the first thing to come to my mind when something bad happens. I can’t help it, it just happens. “I was…”

“Thinking about it, I know you were, Miles.” She pushes me with one hand, not too much, just a little nudge. “Get up. Let’s give her some space.”

Space? No. I know my daughter. When she’s sick, she doesn’t want space. Doesn’t *need* space. She just wants cuddles and sleep. And then she’ll be good again. I know that. “I’m good right here.” On the floor. In front of my daughter’s bed. It’s really uncomfortable, but I’d sit here all week if I have to.

“You can’t do much, Miles,” Emory reminds me. “She’s asleep. Let her sleep it out.”

“I just don’t understand how this happened. Brooke was alright before I left.” God, is it the bunny? Or the cats? An allergic reaction? Shit, do people puke from being around animals when they’re allergic to their fur? I doubt it. An allergy would show itself pretty late as well. We’ve had these pets for around two weeks now. But so did her strawberry allergy…

Mr. Fluffles Two is out on the balcony in his hutch. We keep him there for the summer. The balcony is pretty big which allows for his hutch to be bigger. At least he has some space to hop around that way. We’ll take him inside when it gets colder during the fall and then all winter long. The cats don’t stay in Brooke’s room either.

So this can’t be an allergic reaction. Or maybe it still could be.

“Do people get genuinely sick from bad cooking?”

My head snaps up to her eyes. “What?”

“Is that truly possible? Because I thought it’s just a TV myth that people get sick from bad cooking.”

“What did she have to eat?” Not strawberries, that one I know for sure. We don’t keep anything with strawberries in the apartment. So no matter what she had, it wasn’t *that*.

Emory’s eyebrows scrunch together with a little concern. “I don’t know. Pasta.”

“Pasta?” Okay, I usually prepare food for Emory to heat up in the microwave should Brooke get hungry while I’m gone. But I am certain today’s food wasn’t pasta. In fact, I didn’t cook today at all. Emory was supposed to heat up the leftovers from last night, which also wasn’t pasta.

“Yeah I boiled pasta because Brooke didn’t want casserole. She asked for nuggets, but we didn’t have them, so her next request was pasta. Just plain pasta. And I thought that can’t be difficult, so I boiled them, and she ate them.” She pauses, probably waiting for me to cut in but all I really manage to do is blink. “I think I might have burned them. Maybe I didn’t put enough water because the water was completely gone when I thought they were done. A few single pasta pieces stuck to the pot. I don’t know, Miles. I’m sorry.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose, only slightly relaxing now.

“I should’ve just told her no and given her the casserole. I- Miles, I am so, so sorry. I know I can’t cook. I should’ve just said no.”

At least now I can cross my daughter being deadly sick off of the list. Or maybe not, it’s still a possibility.

“It’s okay,” I say, getting off the floor, even though I’d rather continue to sit here and watch my child sleep. I pull Emory into my arms, hugging her. How can she get so upset about making a mistake? She meant well. She didn’t mean to hurt Brooke with it.

“Emory, it’s fine. Really.” She sniffles, and it takes all of my willpower not to tell her to stop crying. These awful tears

all the time… “It won’t k-i-l-l her, Em. It’s okay.”

We leave the room, but on my way out I look back at least another twenty times. Stopping by the door, I take yet another long glance at Brooke, but not nearly long enough because my wife ushers me into the living room.

“You’ve got to stop thinking everyone in your life is going to die at any moment.” I take it Em found back to *herself*. She takes my hand in hers, playing with my wedding ring. “Okay, technically it could happen, but you still have to stop acting like it’s the first possible option for *every*thing.”

“When did I ever think death was the first option for anything?” I could count a few events, but can she? I doubt it.

Emory clears her throat, obviously ready to count down some times it happened. That doesn’t seem all too good for me.

“Brooke’s first vaccination, you thought she will die because she started crying out of nowhere.”

Okay, I admit, that was a little overreacted. But I was a first-time father. A first-time *single* father. I didn’t know babies cry when they get a shot. She still cries to this day every time she needs one.

“That one time Brooke choked on her formula when she was like six months old. You immediately thought she was going to die.”

“She was coughing like crazy and couldn’t breathe,” I defend myself.

“Her birthday when you found out she was allergic to strawberries. You kept repeating she was going to die for good a minute.”

“Well, she couldn’t breathe. She had an allergic reaction. My fear was justified.” I pull my hand away from my wife, now pointing at her. “And don’t start with any other time she had an allergic reaction, those don’t count. People die from them *daily*.”

“Fine,” she says. “When I told you I was pregnant. You immediately thought I was going to die.”

I narrow my eyes at her. “I have severe trauma, Emory. I am allowed to fear you dying from childbirth, okay? Imagine believing you’re the reason someone died and then that same scenario repeats itself but with a different person. Of course your head’s going to jump right toward what happened the last time.”

“Okay,” she breathes. “I can accept that as an excuse. But still, you *always* make death the first possible option.”

“So what? Then my first thought when something bad happens is death, what’s so wrong with that?”

“You’re unnecessarily scaring yourself. Instead of thinking Brooke might’ve just caught a flu like any other kid, or ate something bad, you go with death. Not everything’s always the one out of a million kind of situation. Not even in your life.”

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Chapter 63

“straight to my head like I’m floating above the clouds”—Malibu by THE DRIVER ERA, Ross Lynch, Rocky

Emory

“You’re here!” Sun shrieks as she comes running out of her parents’ house.

Miles, Brooke, and I have just arrived in Malibu two hours ago, tried checking in to our hotel when that receptionist guy told us they’ve accidentally double-booked our room and the other people arrived earlier. So now we don’t have a room and also couldn’t get another one because they’re completely booked.

Luckily, when I told Sun about the whole dilemma on the phone because we were planning to meet up and I had to tell her I’d run late, she said we should just come to their house. Apparently her parents don’t mind us staying with them for the week.

And holy shit, looking at their house, I no longer doubt it.

“You never told me you grew up in a *mansion*!” My eyes pop out of my head looking at the exterior.

Sun turns around, taking a quick glance at the house. And then she shrugs. “It’s nothing compared to our vacation home in Bali.”

What the fuck?

I knew she came from a wealthy family, and still all of this shocks me.

“The gallery I told you about?” Sun begins, walking toward the car Miles rented to help us get our suitcases. “It’s just around the corner. That’s how I found out it’s there in the first place. You can take a shortcut to get there.”

“What shortcut?”

Sun effortlessly takes one of the suitcases out of the trunk. Did she gain some unexplainable superstrength in the past two weeks because I do not remember her even being able to unscrew water bottle caps when I met her.

“We have a private beach. Came with the house. So just leave through the door toward the beach and follow the path. You can see the gallery from my bedroom window, so you won’t have a problem finding it when you try to get there.”

Maybe I grew up too poor to make sense of all of this here right now, maybe the lights around the house have blinded my *ears* in some ways. But I swear I just heard Sun say they have a *private* beach. As in it is part of *their* property. As in only for them.

“SUN!” I hear Brooke scream the second Miles lets her out of the car. She runs around the vehicle, right into my best friend’s arms.

Sun picks her up and swirls her around, making Brooke giggle.

“I had the flu yesterday,” Brooke yells her. It wasn’t yesterday, and she didn’t have the flu. Turns out, badly cooked meals do, as a matter of fact, make you sick.

I am now banned from the kitchen for life, at least if I aim to cook. Frankly, I can live with that. I didn’t marry a cook for nothing.

“You did?” Sun gasps. “But you’re all better now?”

“Yes!” As Brooke’s feet touch the pavement again, she turns around herself. “Where’s uncle Grey? Daddy said he be here.”

“He’s out with a friend. Or rather out *looking* for him,” Sun tells her, putting on her sympatric voice. A soothing

tone.

“What friend?” Miles asks, closing the trunk. He doesn’t look the least bit impressed by the house. Then again, why would he? Miles grew up in a house similar to this one. Or at least lived in one just like this in New York.

“I’m not sure. He hasn’t really introduced Luan to me, so I’m guessing his summer fling. If he can find him.”

Since I’m not allowed to carry anything heavy—apparently pulling a suitcase behind me counts as well—I hold Brooke’s hand as Sun leads us inside the house.

It takes us about ten minutes to get from the front of the house up to the bedroom, which is mostly my fault because I walk a little slower these days. Or waddle, as Miles would put it. I don’t think I’m waddling.

Miles and Sun carry the suitcases up the stairs, again, me not doing anything. I hate not being able to do anything, or not being *allowed* to do anything. It makes me feel like I’m incapable of living.

“You have an en-suit bathroom right there.” Sun points toward the extra door on one side of the room. “Enough closet space.” She turns around, pointing at a built-in wardrobe. “We have another guest room should you want Brooke to sleep there?”

Miles waves her off. “No, it’s fine. She wouldn’t sleep alone anyway.”

Brooke gets scared a little too easily in places she isn’t familiar with. It took her a whole week to adjust to our apartment after we moved. Granted, she slept through the nights, but falling asleep was a nightmare.

“Okay.” Sun stares into the distance as if to think of anything else to say. Or maybe she’s trying to think of something she might have forgotten to tell us. But she ends up shrugging it off. “My parents are currently out of the house, but I’m sure they’ll come introduce themselves once they’re back. Uhm…” Now she looks a little lost. Or in pain even.

“We won’t talk about Grey.”

“Okay, good.”

Not talk about Grey? Oh, right. His father doesn’t like him, or at least according to the little snippets I’ve heard on the day we moved.

“One more thing,” Sun says with that signature smile of hers on her face again. “You don’t have a curfew. So, if you want to stay out all night, you can do so. Just call me or Grey when you get back here because I doubt you can get past the security gate without either of us.”

Oh, my God. And I honestly thought the apartment complex was fancy with an entire huge ass entry hall and a concierge, and reception. Or with the extra gym for tenants, rooftop pool, indoor pool, *spa*.

I’m easily impressed, okay.

“We’re having a huge birthday dinner this evening. My aunt and uncle and their two kids will be there. I’m sure my parents would want you there, but if you don’t want to come, that’s fine, they’d understand. Though, I do think Grey would prefer having you guys present.”

“I don’t know if I’m ready to meet the rest of your crazy family yet,” Miles jokes, raising his eyebrows at my best friend. I know he thinks Sun is insane. She is. But a good kind of insane. Besides, Grey isn’t much different. He’s just quieter.

“You’ll hate Kimia, she’s *very* judgmental. But Phoenix could be fun. However, if he brings his girlfriend, then there’s a high chance they will disappear to the beach about ten minutes into dinner.” She pauses. “On second thought, *if* Phoenix brings his girlfriend, then she will bring her sister and she would bring her boyfriend, which might result in their whole family coming, which then will be a whole lot of chaos.”

“Chaos sounds fun,” I say. I’ve always loved chaos. It’s far better than quiet evenings. I’ve had enough of those in my

life. Every Sunday, to be precise. My parents don't talk much, never did, probably never will.

"Well then, I'll be expecting you. Anyway, make yourself at home." Sun leaves, closing the door behind her.

I sit down on the bed, needing to get off my feet for a moment. Those stairs killed me, but I'd never admit that to Miles because if I did, the next time I'd have to get up here, he'd *carry* me.

"How much do you bet that 'small' dinner will turn out to be a ball?" Miles asks, a chuckle in his voice.

"I don't care. As long as I get some food, I will be fine."

Miles's eyebrows quip up in record time, and he coughs at the shock. "Did that just leave *your* mouth?"

"Shut up."

"I'm definitely convinced now. You eating? That's worth more than avoiding Grey's judgmental family."

Okay, we need a topic change here. Talking about eating makes me want to *not* eat anymore.

"Does your mom still live around here?" I ask Miles, suddenly remembering that he used to live here before he and his father moved to New York.

"Yup."

"Are you planning on giving her a visit?"

"I don't know." He walks over to the window, looking outside. "I don't know how good of an idea that would be. I mean, I barely talk to her on the phone. She doesn't know I have a daughter, let alone a wife. Imagine I show up at her house after ten years without seeing her, and suddenly I have a family. I had a million chances to tell her about Brooke, but I couldn't get it out."

"You don't think Brooke would want to get to know her grandma?"

We both look at Brooke, but she's too busy sitting on the floor and talking to Mr. Fluffles to even notice we're talking about her.

"Maybe someday."

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Chapter 64

“that’s my fucking throw up in the bathroom, but still love them”—Best Friend by Conan Gray

Miles

“So, who’s that *FRIEND* Sun told us about when we got here earlier?” I press because Grey won’t say anything. I’ve given him a chance to tell me on his own accord, but he just won’t.

“What friend?” He fixes his tie in the mirror, clearly avoiding me and my question. Or so he thinks.

“You know, your summer fling.”

“He’s not a fling.”

“So you do know who I’m talking about.” Of course he knew right from the start. Grey is smart. Even to the extent that sometimes makes me forget I asked him a personal question in the first place. But not today. Today he will give me answers. I hope.

I sit down on the bed, patting the space beside me.

Brooke is with Emory and Sun, getting ready for dinner. I don’t know why we have to dress up for a birthday dinner, but sure. Why not?

Grey comes walking over to me, taking a seat. He drops his hands in his lap, sighing deeply. “His name’s Luan. I just met him the other day. He’s not a fling. We’re just friends. I think. I didn’t talk much.”

“Of course not” Does he ever? “Mm-hmm. Friends. So, what’s he do, that new friend of yours?”

“He coaches soccer and goes to bingo-night every Friday. Other than that, I have no idea.”

My face scrunches up in disgust. “Soccer,” I repeat, almost gagging. “Clearly that Luan guy has no taste.” Who prefers soccer over ice hockey? Soccer?! Idiots running after a ball, weird.

Because hockey isn’t almost the same thing with a puck, sticks, and on ice instead of grass.

“Did you invite him tonight?”

Grey snorts. “Yeah, right. My dad would murder me if I did. But even if I wanted to, I don’t know where that guy is at.” He slaps his hand on my thigh before getting off the bed, ready to change the subject before I get to query further. “I hope you know what you agreed to, because once we’re down there, there’s no turning back.”

“Except for your cousin Phoenix and his girlfriend.”

Grey turns around, eyebrows drawn together. “Sun talks too much.”

“So, I’m guessing he did bring his girlfriend?”

Grey nods. “Not just his girlfriend. He brought the Storms.”

“Who?”

My best friend winks at me like I seriously have no idea what I’ve gotten myself into.

Why do I have the feeling I’m about to get to know a whole new side to my best friend? Or rather his social circle.

↠ ♡ ↞

“Did it feel weird getting married so young?” Alison asks my wife, still admiring her wedding ring. Apparently she’s the daughter of a well-known CEO, weeks away from taking over the company at the mere age of twenty-three. That’s impressive to say the least.

She’s the more talkative sister. The other one just stares at me shyly, then leans into her boyfriend—Phoenix—to say

something, who then proceeds to ask questions for her. I think her name's Vienna, but I'm not entirely sure about that.

"It was… something," Emory answers.

That I can agree with. Em's and my wedding definitely was *something*. And a whole lot happened that day as well. From marrying the girl I thought I loathed more than Maeve, to getting puked on, to meeting Iris Decker. Yeah, that day was *something*.

"That doesn't sound very promising," Alison laughs a little awkwardly, then quickly looks at her boyfriend and back at Emory. "I'm getting married in a few weeks, so that's really not promising."

"Really?" Emory smiles brightly. "Honestly, the marriage doesn't feel half as weird as knowing the guy I've married."

"Excuse me?" I squint my eyes at my wife, only for them to soften when they travel down her body. Fuck, she looks far too hot in that dress. It's a white summer dress with a daisy-print, nothing spectacular, and still my dick was standing strong in seconds when I first laid my eyes on her earlier. She doesn't wear her contacts today, and those glasses just make her look even cuter than she already is. Which also doesn't really help the whole me finding her too hot to handle thing.

"Miles and I used to really dislike each other."

"So then why'd you get married?" Alison asks, and fairly so. Her boyfriend, or, well, fiancé nudges her in the side, but that girl just waves him off.

"It's a little too complicated to explain," Em lies. The whole thing isn't so much to complicated, I'm pretty sure it's more illegal. Tricking social workers into thinking you're responsible by getting married? Yeah, I think that's not very correct.

"Oh, my God," Alison gasps, then leans closer to my wife. "It has illegal reasons, doesn't it? You know, I can ask my

dad to make those *illegal* reasons legal. I'm sure he'd find a way."

What even is her family? I've been trying to figure that out for the past two hours. They're a whole mix of everything.

Owning a holdings company, being able to—apparently—make illegal things legal. That guy, Mr. Storm, he looks like he's about two seconds away from stabbing a knife through Mr. Li's—Grey's uncle—heart for talking to his wife. Mrs. Storm's nice, though. Their kids, damn, they sure are a mix of everything.

Alison, she seems very classy and professional. But I suppose she has to be if she's about to become CEO of a multi-million-dollar company. She's the oldest, so I'm guessing. Grey told me she's also twenty-three, like me.

Her sister, she's very shy and doesn't talk much. Or at all. She looks about the same age as Alison. Maybe a year younger.

The Storms' son, he's sitting on the floor in the middle of this room playing memory games with my daughter. She seems to like him, from the amount of giggles I can hear leaving her all the time, he must be quite funny. That guy's easily eighteen or maybe nineteen years old. He shouldn't be spending his time entertaining a four-year-old when nobody asked him to do it in the first place.

The Storms have two other kids, but they're not here tonight.

"Bet you wish you didn't come," Grey whispers right into my ear. I do. I really fucking do. But at least Emory's eating something, so that makes it more than fine with me. "Cover me for ten minutes, okay? Luan's here and I need my dad to not see him."

"What?"

"When somebody asks, just say I went to the restroom or something. Thanks." Grey gets up and just leaves. Sun is

busy talking to their parents though, so I'm *praying* I don't have to lie to my best friend's parents about where he's at.

"Daddy, look!" Brooke shrieks loudly, catching *everyone's* attention. She comes walking up next to my chair, I pick her up and seat her on my lap. "Connor teach me how to"—She looks toward Alison—"Hello?"

"She is so cute," Alison says, smiling at Brooke from across the table. "I want to have one of those."

"No," her boyfriend, whom I believe is called Rhys, says. "Not yet."

"I'm sorry if that's an inappropriate question, just don't answer me then, but how old where you when you—" Rhys swings an arm around her shoulder, quickly covering her mouth up with his hand.

"Eighteen," I answer, not having to hear the whole question to know what she was going to ask. It's always the same. They always ask how old I was when Brooke was born. And then, at least that's how it usually goes, they pity me. Ask about my daughter's mother, then pity me even more when they find out her mother's dead.

It's a topic I dread, and yet I always answer the same stupid question. Maybe the part of me answers that feels guilty for not wanting to talk about it. Because not talking about it makes me feel like I am trying to hide my daughter, which I am not. And so I provide people with answers, no matter how much I hate it.

Alison smiles warmly at me. "I'm sure she'll turn into an amazing young woman one day. She's already a sweet kid."

My whole body freezes.

That doesn't sound like pity. It doesn't sound like she's feeling sorry for me or tries to play it down.

"Oh. Did I say something wrong? I'm sorry, I didn't mean to offend you in anyway."

"You didn't," Emory speaks for me, laying her hand down on my thigh. "He's just not used to people being nice about it."

"*Elle a un beau bracelet*," Brooke says to me, then takes my fork and serves herself on my piece of cake.

"*Merci. Votre bracelet est très joli aussi*," Alison responds, to which Brooke then drops the fork on the plate and slaps her hands to her cheeks.

She looks up at me like she's waiting for me to confirm someone else, other than me, just understood her speaking French. I'm honestly not quite sure if Brooke thinks we're speaking some made-up language that only her and I understand. But if she thought that up until now, I wouldn't have wanted to crush her fantasies.

"I made it with Memory. She helped me. And Daddy's, too," Brooke tells Alison in French, probably just to test the waters. She's a smart kid, sometimes too smart for my liking. She grows up so fast and I absolutely hate it.

I mean, she's turning *five* in less than three months.

"Emory?" Alison looks at my wife, confusion drawn over her face. "Aren't you her mother? Why's she calling you by your first—" Once again, Rhys just covers Alison's mouth with his hand, this time sighing as he does.

"Sorry. She got the not-having-a-filter from her father," Rhys apologizes. "Grey told us *not* to talk about your daughter as it's a sore topic or something like that."

Yeah, a sore topic or something. That's right.

Wait.

Grey.

It's been what? Twenty minutes since he left?

My head snaps toward the seat Mr. Davis sat in just a moment earlier, but that chair's empty. *Fuck*. Grey asked me to do *one* thing, and I couldn't even do that.

The only other person on that end of the table I find is Sun. Her eyes aren't as happy as they usually are. In fact, she looks blank, guilt-filled. She stares right ahead toward the house door, and when I follow her gaze, I almost wish I hadn't checked.

I can see Grey through the glass on either side of the door. He's just standing there, looking at the ground while his father yells at him. I don't need to hear his father to know he's yelling; his gestures give it away quite clearly. He's waving around and pointing, looking into the distance, and then shaking his head angrily.

And Grey just stands there. Listening. He's not yelling back, then again, Grey never yells. But he can't just let his father treat him like that. That's not okay.

"Miles." Emory takes my hand in hers, trying to comfort me. I don't look at her, too engrossed in what's happening out there. Why does nobody here seem to care?

"I have to help him," I mumble, but as I try to get up, Emory pulls me back down. My head snaps toward her, in time to see her shake her head at me.

"You can't help. I know you mean well, but you can't help him right now."

"She's right," Phoenix speaks up. "Trying to say something is only going to cause Grey more problems."

"We only came because we knew Grey would be here," Alison adds. "We thought the more people were around, the less of a chance that Mr. Li would yell at Grey, but clearly that's not the case."

Mr. Li?

"So, what about your super I-can-do-everything father? Can't he do anything about it?" If he can, apparently, make illegal things legal, then that should be an easy conflict to handle.

I turn my head and look at Mr. Storm, only to find him staring back at me. *Did he hear me?* Well good if he did, maybe then he'll do something.

But he doesn't seem to even consider doing anything. Mr. Storm just looks at me with a blank stare. No emotions in his eyes or features whatsoever. Jesus, he's more of a brick than anyone I've ever met before in my life.

“Even the most powerful people can’t do anything about homophobia.”

Well that’s not fair. Grey deserves to be treated like any other person. He deserves to be loved by his father, and not have that man hate his own child because of a sexual orientation.

It’s wrong. That is fucking wrong.

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Chapter 65

“you shouldn’t be drowning on your own”—Cold Water Major Lazer, Justin Bieber, MØ

Miles

“Do you want to talk about it?” I ask Grey for the third time today. After that encounter with his father yesterday, Grey has been hiding for the most part of today. And the rest of last night. It’s a miracle he agreed to come to my wife’s photoshoot with me.

The photographer keeps flirting with my wife, but I’m not all too worried about that. She’s literally pregnant with my child. Even if that guy genuinely thought he had a chance with her, I know he doesn’t. He can flirt all he wants with my hot wife, it won’t get him anywhere.

“Nope,” Grey answers. Again.

“You can’t just *not* want to talk about it, Grey. He *yelled* at you. In front of everyone.”

“We were outside, and I know for sure neither of you heard a damn thing.” He stares ahead emptily, watching the photographer take pictures of my half naked wife.

When she told me this was for “maternity wear,” I thought about cute shirts and jeans. But nope. It’s lingerie. I think she tricked me. Just so I’d say yes.

But I don’t care either way. She can do whatever she wants, who am I to tell her no? So then weird, perverted men stare at her pictures. At the end of the day, *I* am the one who’s lying next to her in bed. I am the one who

cuddles up to her at night. I'm the one she has a child with. Not them.

To sum this up, she's mine. And I'm all hers.

"Still," I say, "Grey, he was yelling at you. And from the looks of it, it must've been pretty bad."

"Just drop it, okay? It's fine. I'm fine. It happens. Parents get mad. You get upset with Brooke sometimes as well."

"Yes, but I don't yell at her. I don't make her feel like shit." It doesn't take a genius to know Grey's upset about what happened last night. I just don't understand why he refuses to talk about it.

"I could sit here and tell you all about how awful it feels that my own father is disgusted by me, but it wouldn't change a damn thing, Miles. I know you care about me, and I love you just a little bit more for that, but neither of us can change anything about the situation. I don't want to waste my time talking about my homophobic father when we can talk about much more important things."

I get that. He's right, talking won't help the situation, but it might help his feelings a little bit. Maybe not, I wouldn't know, but it's all I can offer him.

"Like what?"

"You're doing so great, *love*," the photographer praises, loud and clear this time. I've had my suspicions that he's praising the heck out of my wife, but he's always kept it quiet enough for me *not* to hear it.

"Like that. Someone's going after your wife." Grey nudges me in the side, ready to change the topic. Sometimes I really hate that Grey knows how to keep his mouth shut.

He's a great guy. Every single one out of our friend group goes to him first when they have a problem because we all know he won't judge. Because we know he won't talk. We know he won't listen and then tell other people. Grey just listens and helps. He always knows how to help.

For as long as I can think, having a friend like Grey was the best kind of friend I ever thought one could have. And maybe it is. But it sucks when he won't let me, as his *best* friend, in.

It sucks that at times like these, I feel helpless. I don't know how he feels—bet not good—or how he's dealing with everything. And I just want to be there for my friend like he's always there for me.

But alright. If he doesn't want to talk about it, I can't physically force him to.

"That guy is lucky Brooke's with your sister. She would've ripped out that man's hair for flirting with *her M*emory."

Grey laughs. "God, I'd have loved to see that."

"That kid loves Emory more than me, I'm telling you."

"Nah, she loves Mr. Fluffles more than the both of you combined." No arguing that. Brooke slept over at Maeve's house for about two years, maybe two and a half. Without me. Well, I saw her every day still, but that's not the same. That bunny of hers was there though, and she won't go anywhere without that thing either while she would happily go anywhere without me.

It's rude if you think about it.

She's *my* child. I'm a good part of the reason why she's even alive. And she chooses a goddamn stuffed animal over me.

"Who even came up with that name?" Grey asks. "Colin keeps annoying me with wanting to change it into something cooler. Like Sir flap-ear or something."

"That's stupid." Besides, if Colin thinks he could win an argument against Brooke, he should go back to school because someone didn't teach him how head-strong toddlers can be. And if he insults her precious Mr. Fluffles, then it's over for him. And all of humanity, probably.

"I agree. I vote for naming the bunny Grayson. Or better yet, name your son Grayson."

"Not a chance, babe."

“Aw, but it would suit him. I promise.”

Ignoring Grey, I look at my wife, watching as the fake-wind is blowing her hair so perfectly. She laughs at whatever the photographer has said, but I know she’s faking that laughter. When she’s genuinely laughing, or even just smiling, Emory’s eyes crinkle and they get all teary. Not like a crying kind of teary, just happy-teary.

However, right now her eyes are just… eyes. She looks a little bored.

But then Emory looks over to me, and suddenly her eyes fill with joy. Her green irises shining, sticking out more than ever. Her eyes crinkle, glazing over with water like I knew they would.

When I thought she was creating works of art, I must’ve forgotten that she *is* a work of art. She’s the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen. I knew that even when we were younger. To me, Emory has always been the prettier twin, which, I know, seems kind of rude to say. But it’s the truth.

And compared to every other woman on this planet, she’s still the prettiest. She’s still the best woman to ever exist.

“Are you guys having telepathic-sex right now?” Grey asks, startling me for a second. “She’s looking at you like she’s currently undressing you, and you look back at her the very same way. Which, frankly, seems rude because, love, I am here as well. If there’s someone you should be fucking, it’s me.”

Best friends, let me tell you.

“I told her I was falling in love with her,” I admit.

“With your eyes?!”

“No, with words. About a week ago.”

“Ohhh.” Grey pulls out a little notebook from his bag pack, followed by a pen. He repetitively clicks on the pen while opening a free page in his notebook. “Now, tell me. How did that make you feel, love?”

“What in the friction carpet are you doing?” When did he decide taking *notes* might be a good idea?

“You can say fuck. Brooke’s not around.” It’s a force of habit. Cursing in my head is fine, cursing out loud not so much.

“Alright then. What the *fuck* are you doing?” I rephrase.

“Taking notes,” he states the obvious. “I figured in order to keep up with my best friends’ crazy love lives, I should start taking notes so I can always get back to certain points later. Like in a few years when you’re in a fight with Emory over what charity event to go to, I have notes to know exactly who gets to decide because, A) either of you fucked up that one time: *see note page xy*. Or B) either of you chose the last time so it’s the other’s turn.”

I pause there for a whole minute, blinking at Grey. “You scare me,” I finally utter.

He shrugs. “I just want to be thorough. Trying to keep up with Colin and Lily’s relationship is an extreme sport. Aaron and Sofia not so much, they’re just happy. I don’t know how, but they are. And you and Emory? Dude, I could fill a million notebooks just with you asking her whether she ate or not. And don’t get me started on the other details.”

“What other details?”

He groans. “I said don’t get me started on them!”

“But now I’m intrigued.” And a little scared, but he doesn’t need to know that.

“Fine,” he says. “The other details like hating each other and then a few months later she’s looking at you like you hung the moon for her.”

“Not only the moon. The whole universe.” Emory stands in front of us, a robe covering up her half naked body. But she doesn’t look at Grey like she was replying to his words, she looks at me like she’s stating a fact. “We’re done with the photoshoot.”

“I can tell. You’re all covered up.”

“I can continue to walk around in only lingerie if that’s what you want?” She raises her eyebrows in a challenge, daring me to dare her to do it.

I would, but unfortunately we're about to go to some art gallery, and I highly doubt she's allowed to go in there dressed like this. "Go in" is kind of a wrong term to use, but what else would we do? We're outside, but somehow we still need tickets. Expensive tickets, mind you. Expensive tickets means there's a dress code. *Formal*, expensive clothing.

So, no, there is no way I can dare her to walk around in lingerie.

↠ ♡ ↞

I DON'T GET IT. OR I DON'T GET ART.

To my wife those art pieces might mean a whole lot, to me, they're mainly weird shapes and splatters on a canvas. I could've done the same thing and told people to interpret whatever they think it means.

No, seriously. Some of those art pieces cost a fortune and they're just stupid paint leakages. Some even look like the artist just threw the paint bucket at the canvas and called it a day.

How am I, as someone who has about minus ten percent understanding for art, supposed to understand what the artist is trying to tell me with a blue drop of paint on a white canvas? My four-year-old could've painted better.

"Stop bashing the art," Emory says through gritted teeth, her hand squeezing mine in anger this time.

"I am not bashing art. Did you hear me say something?"

"Love, I could hear your thoughts from five rows behind you." Grey catches up with us, holding my daughter in his arms.

Sun and her met us here for the gallery. I had to *bribe* one of the security men to let Brooke in. Apparently children aren't allowed at galleries for safety reasons. I think it's total bullshit and that guy just wanted my money.

But I don't care, I have enough of that. Shoving a hundred-dollar bill down some security guy's throat doesn't

hurt me. What even does he need *one* hundred dollars for? He should've aimed for more. I probably would have gone up to thousands just to get my daughter in here with us.

I don't even want to be here. I hate the beach. Sand gets everywhere, especially when you're wearing a Brioni suit with a need for loafers instead of sneakers. I am telling you, the second we get back to the Davis's house, El Matador Beach will be *in* their house and no longer where it's at right now.

"Daddy, look! That's pretty." Brooke points at a pink canvas. It's literally just pink. Nothing else. Just pink. Okay, there's a *tiny* glitter path in it. But that might as well just have been someone sneezing. I sneezed glitter before, it happens when you have children. You will find that stuff everywhere, even in your own nose.

"It is beautiful," Emory says with sincerity in her voice. I gape at her because HOW?!

"It's pink," I state.

"Yes. But it has a meaning."

"It's pink."

"It's a calming painting," Emory says, still analyzing the canvas.

I repeat once more. "It is *pink*."

"*A Touch Of Youth*," Sun reads out the name of the painting. "I can see that."

Now they're just playing tricks on me, aren't they? "It is very pink."

"But look, Daddy. It has the glitter!"

"Yes, Miles. It has glitter." My wife points toward the glitter in the pink. "I wonder what it stands for. Maybe a reflection…" She hums, thinking. Emory looks at the painting more intensely, emotions that I don't even know existed crossing her features. What the hell is she seeing that I clearly am not? "A Touch Of Youth. Yeah, it's definitely a reflection. The artist wants us to reflect on our childhood.

Maybe think about passions we had, and thought would bring into adulthood. It's…"

"It's golden glitter in pink."

Emory turns to look at me. Her face drained of all those emotions I saw a second ago. "Remind me to never bring you to an art gallery ever again."

Fucking—"Gladly."

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Chapter 66

“I can see the future, it doesn’t look pretty”—Hurt Again by Julia Michaels

Emory

“Is your husband at home, Mrs. King?” Iris asks the second I open the door for her. She doesn’t even greet me. Why does this woman hate me so much?

“He is.”

“Could you ask him to come speak to me, please? It’s important.”

Like she isn’t coming inside anyway. I look over my shoulder, finding Miles still seated on the couch with Brooke on his lap. They’re playing monopoly together, though he’s playing for two since Brooke has no idea what’s going on. She’s just playing for the shiny shoe she decided to use as her game figure.

“Why don’t you come inside? You can tell him yourself then.” I step aside, opening the door a little wider for Iris.

“Thank you.” She smiles at me. *She smiles at me*. That’s new.

“I roll the dice now, Daddy?” Brooke asks excitedly. I don’t think Miles even gets to answer before the sounds of a dice rolling over the board sounds through the room. “FOUR!” she cheers. “One, two, three, four, Daddy. I buy this, okay?”

Miles chuckles. “You can’t, you don’t have enou—Okay. You can buy it.”

“YAY!” She claps her hands together, watching Miles take out the card that belongs to her freshly bought street. He

doesn’t even take her money.

“I’ve never seen a toddler quite this enthusiastic about monopoly,” Iris next to me says, reminding me that she’s even here. How did I forget she’s here in just one minute?

“He makes it fun for her.” Because Miles doesn’t give a shit whether Brooke actually has the money to pay for streets, rent or the other monopoly expenses, he just lets her do and win. Every single time. All the while he plays by the rules. He pays her—which is often given that Brooke buys every street she lands on—he doesn’t pull a get-out-of-jail card when he *doesn’t* have one, unlike her. Also, he never makes Brooke pay rent when she lands on either of his two streets.

“Iris,” Miles says without even looking at her. “To what do I owe today’s pleasure with you?”

“I just came here for good news. Or I hope they’re good news to you.”

Now that catches his attention. Miles looks up, eyebrows raised with anticipation. “Well, take a seat.”

“Thank you.” She walks around the couch on the other side of the board game.

“Hello,” Brooke says, then goes back to rolling the dice and counting her steps. Then repeats the whole thing because Miles isn’t reacting anymore.

I should leave for this conversation as it truly does seem important, but I know Miles would want me here, so I stay. I lay both of my hands on his shoulders, feeling him relax a little under my touch. He always gets so tense when this woman shows up.

“I hear school’s coming up very soon,” Iris says. “Does she already have a spot somewhere?”

Iris really loves starting sore topics, I see. Miles has been trying not to think about Brooke’s first day of kindergarten for the past month, and it doesn’t help that in two weeks, this very day is coming. And now she’s reminding him of it as well.

I’m not quite sure why he’s so afraid of it. Maybe he isn’t even scared. There’s a high chance he just doesn’t like the whole symbolism behind it; Brooke, his innocent little girl, growing up. Perhaps it reminds him that she won’t always find joy in princesses and her well-loved Mr. Fluffles.

“Yeah, together with her best friend.”

Iris nods, still having that unusual smile on her face. Is she on drugs today? I can’t remember a single day she came here *smiling* at Miles or me.

“Reece, right?”

“Yes.”

“He’s already five then?”

He is not, but I suppose with enough money, you can get your kid into everything, even kindergarten when they don’t meet the age-five range yet. Brooke is out of that range as well. Every child born after September first usually starts a year later, but somehow she still got in now. It’s a miracle Miles didn’t wait another year.

Though, I suppose that’s on Reece’s parents.

In order for Brooke to know at least one person at school, she had to start together with Reece. And his parents didn’t want to wait another year.

“It doesn’t matter. At least she will have a friend there. That’s great.”

“Yeah, I guess. What’s the ‘good news’ you have for me, exactly?”

My eyes fall back to Brooke. She’s still just rolling the dice and quietly counting the steps she takes. But she must notice me staring because she suddenly looks up and grins widely at me. “I’m winning, Memory.”

“I can see.”

Brooke stands up on the couch, accidentally knocking over the board game, but she doesn’t really seem to care. She wiggles around in her father’s lap, casually standing on his thighs to reach me. Her hands on Miles’s head like he’s

just a shelf to her, something to hold herself up with. She wouldn't fall. Miles wouldn't let her.

"Can we go pet Mr. Fluffles Two?" she asks me, giving me her pleading eyes. I can't say no to that. Since Brooke isn't allowed to go on the balcony all by herself, she asks either Miles or me to go with her at least ten times a day.

It's cute, really. But not so much anymore when she comes waddling into the bathroom while I'm in the middle of showering just to ask me if we can go pet her bunny.

However, when I look into her big, hopeful, green eyes, how could I ever say no?

Before I even agree, Miles lifts Brooke up and sets her down on the floor. She immediately runs over to the balcony sliding door, waiting—more-or-less patiently—until I've made it over to her.

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Chapter 67

“think I’m reaching my limit”—Exhale by Sabrina Carpenter

Miles

My wife and daughter have just left to go outside on the balcony when the same annoying voice that’s been haunting me in most of me sleeps for the past few months makes it through to me. “I figured you might want an update on your investigation.”

Was she seriously waiting for Emory to leave? If so, that’s stupid. No matter what Iris is about to tell me, I’ll tell Emory anyway.

However, instead of focusing on Iris and whatever she has to tell me, my eyes keep focusing on Emory knelt down in front of the rabbit hutch. She isn’t even doing anything but watch Brooke, and still it makes me want to sprint out there and capture her lips with mine. It makes me want to kiss her until we’re both gasping for air.

Thinking about her soft lips has all the blood in my body pump to the one part that definitely isn’t supposed to stand up right now.

Focus.

Averting my eyes to Iris, my dick immediately deflates. She ruins my mood, and for once it’s useful.

“Update, yeah?”

She smiles. I hate it. “As you know, the investigations on you have been up for quite some time.”

“Yeah.” I also thought I’d get rid of her months ago.

Hold on.

This is the part where she's going to tell me that she's oh so sorry, but to protect my child, she's going to have to take Brooke with her, isn't it?

This is part where Iris Decker is going to tell me that all the efforts I put up, every fucking tear I cried together with my daughter in the past four years and ten months were for absolutely nothing. Because the next words out of her mouth will ruin the rest of my life.

Only that the pain isn't coming.

"I don't see a single reason why someone would *ever* assume Brooklyn wasn't in good hands with you," she says.

My heart stands still, I'm pretty sure. The breath in my lungs leaving flatly, softly. I don't think I've heard her right. It'd be great if I did, but this can't be real, can it?

Because the past two months have been suspiciously quiet. They've been… great, even.

No visits from Iris. No letters to Emory. No ex-stepsister who's trying to ruin my life. No rude comments from Emory's parents.

It's been great. Our lives have been *great*.

My life doesn't do *great*. It only knows okay-ish, and then it goes downhill. All at once. So if this isn't my downfall yet, when the hell is it going to come?

"Are you sure?" I ask just to make sure.

"Do you want me to find something suspicious about you?"

"No!" I snap instantly. "Sorry. I'm just not used to receiving good news." Fuck. This… okay.

I did it. I don't know how, but I did. I get to keep my daughter.

Hell fucking yes I get to keep her. If CPS took her from me, I'd genuinely lose every little drop of faith in humanity I have left in me because I have never done anything to harm Brooke. She's my life. I'd take a million bullets for that little girl just to see her smile. I'd put myself through hell over

and over again if that meant having her in my life. Because unlike what eighteen-year-old me thought, this little blond kid is the best that's ever happened to me.

"Well, I'm sure your life has just taken a turn Mr.—" Emory's phone on the coffee table starts ringing, interrupting Iris. My eyes snap down to see the caller-ID, but when I see it's her mother calling, I wish I never looked.

This is the downfall. I might have won one fight, the most important one, but it wasn't the end yet.

"Do you need to get that?"

I nod, snatching the phone from the table, instantly picking up. "Holly."

"Miles!" she shrieks like she wasn't expecting me to pick up. She probably wasn't, seeing as Holly called her daughter's phone, not mine. "I just heard they're dropping the investigations. Congratulations."

I blink, frozen in place.

What the…

How?

"Miles?" comes through the phone, but I don't react.

I just heard they're dropping the investigations.

She *just* heard it.

She heard it. As in my wife's mother *heard* they're dropping the investigations about *me*. How would she have heard about it?

Without saying anything, I hang up the phone.

"Do you people tell the person who has reported someone the outcome of the investigation?"

"Uhm." Iris clears her throat. "Upon request. But not in the sense of telling them what we've concluded, but rather let them know that the investigation is concluded, and some actions were taken. But those actions won't be disclosed for privacy reasons."

"So if, let's say, a friend of mine reported me, they won't be told that there were no actions taken?"

She shakes her head. “A friend, not unless they’re a subject of the case. Family is a different matter. If they’re a part of the household composition and are affiliated with the allegations made in the report, then they’ll be told in some cases.”

“Okay. So if my… let’s say mother had reported me, she also wouldn’t get to know what you’ve decided? Because she’s not part of all of this.”

“No, she wouldn’t get told a thing.”

So how the fuck does Holly know?!

“Is there *any* way someone outside of this household could know, in this very moment, what you just told me?” I ask, feeling the pressure in my blood rise. I don’t know what I want the answer to be, or if I even want one in the first place.

“There might. One of my colleagues could have been reaching out to the person who reported you to speak to them about giving up false allegations. What they said about you were quite bad things, and there are *no* signs of you doing any of those whatsoever. So we are suspecting this to have been an inaccurate report just to cause you harm. That would be the only way someone other than you and some workers at CPS, Rockland County would know. But we usually don’t go after them as we may never know for sure, so it’s *very* unlikely.”

Very unlikely. Fucking *very un*likely.

“You know my wife’s mother, don’t you?” I’m sure Emory mentioned that sometime before. “Holly Scott?”

Iris hesitates, her lips pressing firmly together. “Yes, she works at my office.”

“Does she know anything about *this* case?” Clearly she does, otherwise this woman wouldn’t know about them dropping the case.

“Not that I know. I don’t really speak to Mrs. Scott, especially not about *my* cases. I wouldn’t be allowed to even if I wanted to.”

Great. Just fucking great. So this either means Holly is looking into my files, or she has some kind of bug planted in this apartment and hears every single thing that’s said between these walls. I am hoping it’s the former. I really can’t deal with being spied upon by my mother-in-law.

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Chapter 68

“unbreak the broken / unsay these spoken words”—
Train Wreck by James Arthur

Emory

“You can’t just pick up *my* phone calls, Miles!”

Can you believe this? Just because we’re married doesn’t automatically give Miles the right to use my phone or talk to my mother when she calls *me*.

And now he’s trying to make me believe my mother, my very own mother, would ever do something so horrible like make false accusations about him. Allegations that could’ve resulted in him losing his child. Her granddaughter.

“I thought it was important,” he says, raking a hand through his wavy blond hair. “You were on the balcony, Em. By the time you would’ve noticed she called, that ‘something bad’ could’ve turned into something even worse!”

He’s right. I don’t even think I’m mad at him for picking up my phone, but more about the fact that he believes my mother would voluntarily put Brooke through the kind of trauma. CPS visits affect children *a lot*. They can affect their mental health, it stresses them. No *sane* person would *ever* report a parent to CPS unless needed.

My mother might have done me wrong. She might have been a horrible mother to me, but she wouldn’t do something to jeopardize the child of her favorite daughter. I know she wants Brooke happy, and she knows Brooke is happy with Miles.

“She didn’t report you,” is all I say, being convinced that’s the truth. Or so I am praying it is. She wouldn’t do that. I cannot believe she would do such a horrible thing.

“It makes sense that she did, Emory.”

“How?!” I grab my pillow from the bed, ready to throw it at my husband in anger, but I can stop myself before I do and just drop it onto the floor. *You cannot get violent. You’re not your father, Emory.*

“How? Holly *hates* me,” he says like that explains it all. It doesn’t. “I killed your sister, Emory. I killed her. It’s my fault she died. Your parents were only ever civil with me because Millie gave birth to their grandchild. If it weren’t for Brooke, they never would’ve talked to me again.”

“That still doesn’t explain why she would do such a thing!” A part of me wants to add that it wasn’t Miles’s fault Millie died, it was a complication nobody could foresee. She went into maternal distress—so I’ve been told—, that wasn’t *his* fault. But another part of me just can’t bring myself to tell him right now.

“Easy, Em. She knows you were to get Brooke. If those people took Brooke away from me, she knew you would be the first person to be asked to take her in. And if Brooke stayed with you, there wouldn’t be one single reason why your mother still had to see me. That also explains why she so desperately wants you to divorce me. With us married, you wouldn’t get Brooke.”

“You’re being ridiculous.” But my mother does know an awful lot about Miles’s situation without either of us ever having explained it or even mentioned it in the first place. “You asked me to marry you because you thought Maeve was going to report you. Who says she didn’t? CPS lies all the time. Iris *had* to pretend she didn’t know Maeve. It could still have been her.”

“I gave Maria a hundred thousand dollars for telling me whether Maeve reported me or not. Maria can’t stand me, but she never once lied to me, especially not when money

was involved," he tells me. How should Maria—his ex-stepmother—even know about this? "Maeve tells her everything," Miles answers my unspoken question like he can read my mind.

"But then who the hell did, Miles?! Because it wasn't my mother. She wouldn't do that. She has two kids of her own, she knows what it's like to lose a child. My mother might be cruel to me, but she wouldn't report you out of revenge for getting Millie pregnant." Tears pool in my eyes, ready to drop down but I just can't let them lose.

He's pacing up and down our bedroom with quick and huge steps, walking off some of his anger. "Maybe this was her plan all along. It may be a reach, but I do think it's possible. Iris didn't show up before we told your mother about us getting married. Only *after* your mother got all upset with us for it. She doesn't want us together, whether it's so you would get Brooke should she get taken away from me, or for any other reason. But either way, why not cause some drama between us because god forbid someone actually loving you. If I lost Brooke, she knew I'd lose myself too and we would *never* work out."

Someone actually loving you.

My heart sinks into the floor. He said it before, sort of and still it shakes up every part of me. "You really love me? Like not just *falling* in love, but *love me*?"

Miles stops in his tracks, his face turning in my direction. His features actually soften when he looks at me, his eyes draining of his anger. He *relaxes*. At least a little bit, for a little while.

"So fucking much that losing you terrifies me as much as losing my daughter. I love you so fucking much, Em, that every single time I look at you, I just feel calm. The kind of calm that's equivalent to feeling sleepy in the middle of the day. Or the calm when you know you're safe and it's just silent. You make me stop worrying about everything for every single minute you're around me."

“Then why can’t you believe me when I say it wasn’t my mother?” The tears that have been threatening to leave me less than five minutes ago finally drip from my eyes, rolling down my cheeks. Miles steps forward, and I know he’s about to wipe my tears away because he hates tears, but I stop him. “Don’t touch me. Not right now.”

“But Em…” He sighs, struggling to watch me cry. “You’re crying.”

“I know. Let me cry.”

“I can’t.” He cups his own face, pressing his fingers against his temples. “I don’t like tears.”

“Explain it to me,” I demand. “Tell me why you think my mother would do such a horrible thing. And don’t say it’s because it makes sense, because to me, Miles, to me thinking my *mother* could ever willingly want to harm someone does *not* make sense.”

Miles seats himself on the floor, avoiding to look at my face. “She’s harmed you all your life. You may not see it as that, but she did. She compared you to Millie from day one. You were never more than a second choice to her. A good parent doesn’t do that. She doesn’t like seeing you happy. All your life, she punished you for being there, and after Millie died, it got worse. I know it did because I was there, Emory. I heard her yell at you when she thought nobody was left at the birthday parties. I heard her yell at you when you got a bad grade, or when you turned down a modeling job and put school first. I heard it. And I can promise you, Emory, that is *not* a good parent. She doesn’t love *you*. So, sorry if I believe she is capable of doing even more horrible things.”

“She loves me,” I argue, though as much as I’d like to be one hundred percent convinced of it, not even my voice displays that conviction. “She would never hurt me.”

Miles looks out of the window for a moment, only to look back down to the floor in front of him. “She has already hurt you, Emory.”

No. She's my mother. She would never… hurt me on purpose. "She just wants what's best for me. She just wants me to have something *real*. She only hates you because I think she knows we're not real."

He looks up, now meeting my gaze despite the tears still freely falling down. "We're married, Em. How much realer do you need us to be before you stop caring about what your mother thinks about us? How much realer do you need your scars to get before you realize that she has *never* treated you like a parent should treat their child?"

"I-I don't have any 'scars'."

"You do. Maybe not physically, but she's been mentally abusing you all your life, Emory. What do you think where your habit of not wanting to eat came from? Not from your stupid model agency, but from the woman who kept calling you fat when you aren't. Where do you think your hatred for being compared to anyone comes from? The woman who *always* compared you to your twin sister, and she still called you ugly despite looking *exactly* like Millie."

Why are we even talking about this? We were supposed to discuss why Miles thinks my mother would report him to CPS, not the mistakes she's made in the past.

"She's my mother, Miles. Her opinion on me will always matter to me. It's not her fault I took them too close to heart and let them hurt me."

He gets off the floor, closing the gap between us. Miles lays his hands on my face, enveloping it with his warmth. I let him. "Yeah, which is exactly why she should have never said those things in the first place. That's not what someone who loves you does." His voice comes out gentle this time, no more yelling. "I may not be the best father in the world, Em, but thinking about doing to Brooke what your mother does to you makes me want to die. I'd rather rot in hell than *ever* tell my daughter she's not good enough, or that she'd have to lose weight so other people would love her, so she could sell her body better. Seeing nothing but your flaws

and pointing them out to you every chance she gets is not love.”

Miles wipes away my tears and I don’t stop him this time either.

“She… loves me.”

“She never showed you love, Emory. Never. Not once in your whole life.”

A sob breaks out from my throat. He’s right, I know he’s right, but I don’t want him to be right. She’s my *mother*. She has to love me. She has to care about me.

I grasp his wrists in my hands, just holding on tight.

“So then, if that’s not love, Miles. What the hell is?”

He leans down until his forehead meets mine. His eyes close as he lets out a thin breath that travels right over my skin.

“What we have,” he whispers. “Feeling free around someone. Not judged. It feels right, Emory. You’re content around me, calm. You’re not concerned about the risks love brings. Knowing you don’t have to go through a bad time by yourself.”

All… the things my mother never made me feel.

“It’s not enough for you, is it?” he asks, lifting his head from mine. Our eyes meet, and although my whole world seems to be nothing but a blur right now, I still see the hurt in his eyes. It breaks my heart.

“I’m here telling you how much I fucking love you, and it’s still not enough for you. You still don’t want to see that love isn’t the same as abuse.” He sighs deeply, painfully. “I love you, Emory King. I love you. I love you. There won’t be one day of our lives that I will not fucking love you. Does that mean nothing to you?”

I blink. Again and again. Hoping that maybe the more I blink, the faster those tears leave my eyes, and I can actually see him. But I’m too late because by the time those tears start to dry up, Miles’s hands pull away from my face and he takes a few steps back.

“Miles…” I say, my voice trembling.

“Do you still think your mother would never be able to cause anyone harm?”

She never showed you love. Never. Not once in your life.

From the woman who kept calling you fat when you aren’t.

She’s harmed you all your life.

I swallow, hard. Do I still think my own mother wouldn’t report Miles to CPS for her own selfish reasons?

“She works at CPS, Miles. She… why would she—I don’t get it,” I hiccup.

“I asked you if you still believe she wouldn’t be able to do it.” He sounds cold this time. Cold. Miles has never been cold to me, not even when he hated me.

“Maybe she… could do it. But I wouldn’t know why she ever would.” He nods his head, slowly backing off. “Don’t leave, please,” I beg.

He halts. “I’m not leaving you, Emory,” he says. “I just need five minutes, okay?” Miles takes a step toward me. And another. And yet another. Until he stands right in front of me again. He strokes his thumb over my cheek, then leans down to place a kiss to the corner of my mouth. “Just five minutes so I can process everything that’s happened today, okay?”

“Okay,” I breathe.

“I’m not *ever* leaving you, Em. I meant it when I said that I love you. Giving up on us now is no option.”

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Chapter 69

“and I fall in love with every breath”—This Is What It Takes by Shawn Mendes

Miles

We haven’t talked in two weeks. Not really at least.

The past two weeks have been filled with silence, the one we used to hold before we’ve gotten married. The one that’s painful when all you want to do is talk to the woman you love.

It’s not that I’m not trying to talk to Emory, because I am. I just don’t know what to say to her. It’s like that night we had a fight, everything in our lives just continued to fall. Our communication stopped, and I’m not sure we’ll ever get it going again.

We have to, dammit. We’re married. I love her. I can’t just give up on her, and right now is a really bad timing for her to give up on me.

She’s expected to give birth in less than a month, she’ll need me by her side for it without a stupid conflict between us.

But today isn’t about either of us. Today is about Brooke and her first day of kindergarten. I could cry just thinking about it.

“Do I look pretty, Daddy?” Brooke asks, swinging her legs back and forth while I’m trying to put on her shoes.

“The prettiest, baby.”

She giggles, stopping when Purrito jumps up on her bed, nudging his head against her thigh. Brooke immediately

starts to pet him. “Is Memory coming too?”

“Yeah.” I don’t have to ask her. Emory wouldn’t miss Brooke’s first day for anything. I know, even if we weren’t married and still had this whole I-hate-you dynamic going, she’d still show up.

“And Reece is going there, too, right?”

“Yes, baby.”

“And I bring Mr. Fluffles?”

“Yes.” She wouldn’t leave without him anyway. It’s her comforter, I can’t just force her to leave him at home, especially on a big day like today.

Someone—definitely my wife—knocks on Brooke’s bedroom door, opening it right after. “Colin asked at what time we’re leaving. He doesn’t accidentally want to be late.”

“Are you ready to go?” I take in her outfit. She’s wearing a summer dress, something wide but cute, paired with white sneakers for once. Guess those are more comfortable than her beloved high heels, especially pregnant.

“Yeah. I might just have to use the bathroom one last time.”

Makes sense. “Ten minutes then?”

“Okay.” She turns around and walks away, like she’s done in the past two weeks. Like I said, we only talk the bare minimum these days.

“Daddy, you have to kiss Memory and then you will be all okay.”

I chuckle a little, just for her sake. I don’t feel like laughing, haven’t felt like it in a while. The only times smiles make it onto my face is for Brooke. “You think?” Kissing Emory won’t just magically fix everything, I know that. But why ruin my daughter’s wild imagination?

It’s bad enough she can tell something’s off between Emory and me.

“Mm-hmm. And then when you kiss, Memory loves you again and you love her and we’re one happy family again. Okay?”

“That’s how it works?”

She nods with conviction. “Just like that.”

“Why, thank you. I might give it a try.”

Brooke shrugs. “*Pas de problème.”*

↠ ♡ ↞

Brooke runs over to Reece the second she hops out of the car. She goes to hug him hello, then gets mad at him for touching Mr. Fluffles.

“You know who I see in them?” Lily says, walking up beside me. “Aaron and Sofia. They acted the same exact way when we were younger.”

I look at my best friend’s girlfriend, thinking about whether to murder her or push her in front of a car for that comment. In hindsight, it’s almost the same option.

I settle on pushing her away just enough to see her tumble, but not enough for her to land in front of a moving car or trip. “That is not helpful at all, Lily.”

“*Gigante!”* Reece yells as soon as he sees his brother exit the car, then comes running into our direction. Brooke follows. But instead of greeting Colin, Brooke comes right over to me.

“Daddy, I don’t want to go in there,” Brooke cries, wrapping her arms around my legs. At this point, I want to say fuck it and just take her back home with me. She can wait another year. However, if I do that, I fear she might never learn how to be away from me and stay with people her age she doesn’t know. She will have to go to school someday, and whether she’ll be five or six won’t change much.

Brooke already hated daycare, which has me worried she’ll hate school even more. But again, she will have to learn to be around people her age, find friends and such.

Somehow I manage to peel my daughter off my legs and pick her up instead. Her bunny’s head hits me in the face

but I’m kind of used to that already.

“It’s going to be alright, okay?” I soothe, caressing her cheek. “I’ll be back in a few hours to pick you up. And then we can go out and get some ice cream. What do you say?”

She shakes her head. Brooke *never* says no to ice cream. “I don’t want to be alone, Daddy.”

“You’re not alone, baby. Reece is here, too. And you’ll make *so* many new friends. I promise.”

She sniffles. “And Memory come pick me up, too?”

I look over my shoulder to my wife. She keeps staying at least three foot away from me at all times recently, but I know she heard my daughter’s question anyway.

“I’ll be there, Brookie,” Emory promises.

“Okay.” Brooke leans closer to me. “Then you kiss Memory, okay? I go to the kindergarten, and you kiss Memory so we can be happy again. Okay, Daddy?”

“I promise.”

Setting Brooke down to the floor, she grins up at me widely. “I love you, Daddy.”

“I love you too.” I kneel down to give her one last hug before I take her inside.

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Chapter 70

“I know we’ll be alright this time”—Perfect by Ed Sheeran

Emory

“You need to stop ignoring me, Emory. Brooke knows something’s up.”

My hands keep shaking as I sit here on our bed, my back against the headboard. We have to go pick Brooke up in two hours. Two hours doesn’t seem nearly enough to talk about *this* now.

I miss Miles, even though he’s always around me. I miss just resting my head on his chest whenever and talking to him like there are no worries in the world. I miss sitting on the kitchen island while he cooks for us, stealing his chopped veggies only to see him scowl at me, knowing he’s glad to see me eat though. I even miss waking him up at night because I need to pee.

I don’t like the dark. It scares me, which is why I always make him come with me. He never once complained. But recently, I don’t dare waking him, I’m not even sure why. He would go with me, I know he would, but some part of my brain is afraid of his rejection. What if he will get upset with me?

What if he hates me waking him up so much that someday, he will snap and tell me he never loved me. Because he loves me now. But I know I am ruining it with not talking to him.

It’s not that I fear his love. God, I think Miles being in love with me is actually the best thing to ever happen to me. But I do fear losing him again, even though I don’t make it seem like I care much about that.

I love him. I love him so much that it physically hurts because I have no idea how to tell him. I can’t just walk up to him and be like, “By the way, I love you too.” That part was definitely way easier when I was thirteen. Back when I had no idea what loving someone meant.

There’s a high chance that I still don’t know what it means. But I am trying here, okay? I know for sure that I love Miles. And how do I know? Not once in my life have I ever craved someone talking to me as much as I do Miles. Not once in my life was the thought of being away from someone so painful that it could make me vomit. Not once in my life has my heart begged me to get up, run into someone’s arms and just repeat those three little words over and over and over again.

And not once have I prayed for a fight to be over.

“Look, if you want a divorce, Emory, just say it. Please. I cannot take this anym—”

“She did it,” I mumble. A part of me prays he doesn’t hear it, but he does. Miles always hears me.

“Who did what?” He comes walking over to me, crawling on the bed to seat himself across from me. His legs crossed, knees touching mine. It’s like he didn’t just say he thinks I want to divorce him.

“My mother,” I tell him. “I called her. I asked how she knew about CPS because I never told her, and I knew neither did you. She said she overheard Iris talk in the hallway to some other colleague, but I questioned that because, despite how little I like that woman, she seemed professional. Surely she wouldn’t walk around talking about your case.” I gasp for some air, having talked too long and too fast in one go. “My mother admitted to having looked into your files because she heard the mention of your name.

But I didn’t believe her, so I yelled at her. I never yelled at my mother. It must’ve startled her as much as it did me because at that point, she told me the truth, Miles.”

“The truth?” He reaches for my hand, just holding it, stroking his thumb over my skin to ease my nerves. It helps. It really helps. Why does it help?

He’s supposed to be mad at me for not talking to him. He’s supposed to hate me for being my mother’s child because that woman quite literally tried to ruin his life.

“She reported you herself. She didn’t want me marrying you and so she reported you because, apparently, the thought of me becoming Brooke’s stepmother disgusted her so much that she’d rather Brooke be gone. Or, well, she hoped it would stress us so much that our marriage didn’t work out and we’d get divorced just a few weeks after our wedding.” My breathing calms a little the longer Miles just holds my hand. I like his touch. I like the warmth of him on me. “I didn’t think she could ever be this—”

“Darling,” Miles says calmly, “breathe.”

I take a deep breath. My body sags with relief when oxygen makes it into my lungs. And maybe because he called me darling again. I never thought I could ever miss a nickname.

“It doesn’t matter anymore, Em. It’s too late. She’s done it. We’ve gotten past it. There’s no need still giving her a minute of our time.”

He’s right. I don’t want to be in contact with a woman who would do something like that. I don’t want to *know* someone like that.

“You’re all I have left, Miles,” I say, feeling the waterworks start. *Screw you very much, hormones*. It frightens me, only having one person I know I can turn to with everything. One person to call my home, my family. “You and Brooke, you’re my family. And we’re going to have a son very soon.” I look at him, even through blurry eyes. “I don’t want a divorce,

Miles. I want you to love me. I want to love you. And Brooke. And this baby. I want it all. I want our family to work out."

One corner of his lips tugs up, his head cocking sideways. "You do?"

"I-Yes. I do."

Miles untangles my legs, lifting each one over each of his thighs before he pulls me right into his lap. "Why?" he asks with his lips almost pressed to mine. I can already taste him on my tongue. God, I just want to kiss him so badly. Just move in, feel the softness of his lips press to mine, feel his tongue mingle with mine.

"Because I love y—"

Miles closes the gap between our lips. He kisses me. And he kisses me. And he kisses me again. Again and again. He kisses me soft and sweet, and I kiss back. Once. Twice. A million times.

A few tears make it between us, but I don't think either of us cares that much. Correction, *I* don't care that much about them, Miles does. I don't know why he loathes tears as much as he does, but it's okay. I don't need to know everything about him yet. We have a lifetime to get to know each other.

"Took you long enough," he says, smiling. "A whole seven months of torture."

"Seven months?"

"Yup. It's been seven months since we've gotten married. Seven months filled with hoping that maybe one day you'll love me again."

He can't be serious. "Seven months ago, you were convinced we'd split up again."

"Nah. That was all for show," he lies with a traitorous grin. "Seriously though, Em. A part of me was hoping this would happen. You've always been the only one I could see myself being with."

"Other than Millie," I remind him. I know he doesn't want to mention her because maybe it's a little weird. But even

so, I don’t want him downplaying what they had for my sake.

He hums, sort of agreeing. “I love you,” he whispers like he only wants me to hear. It’s only me around anyway.

“So much you want to scream it into the world?” I ask. His smile widens because he remembers. Every single time he used to say he loved me back when we were younger, I used to ask him this very question. It was mainly for jokingly reasons, but it meant the world to me every time he said yes.

“Yes, darling.” He gets off the bed, pulling me with him. Miles leads us to the window, opening it. “And I think I might do just that.” He is crazy. But I love it. After taking a deep breath, one you usually take before screaming from the top of your lungs, he doesn’t scream. He turns around to look at me, then whispers, “I love you so fucking much, Emory.”

I grin like a little kid. “What happened to screaming it out for the world to hear?”

“You are my world.”

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Chapter 71

“we never learn, we’ve been here before”—Sign of the Times by Harry Styles

Miles

“I WAS JUST THINKING. If we opened a little earlier, we could fit more guests in a day, which means for money, right?” Fynn, one of the new waiters, suggests for the second time this week. It’s Wednesday.

I sigh. “It also means more money goes into my employees because you will have to work more hours, which then again, doesn’t change quite *that* much in the end.” I think. I still haven’t looked into the expenses of this restaurant or got myself familiar with the whole accountant part in the first place. I have my people for that, so why bother?

Maybe it would be more beneficial. This restaurant makes *far* more money daily than what these people working here earn in a week. And opening earlier would give me a chance to be present more often while still taking care of my wife and children.

“I’ll think about it,” I finally add.

“Sir!” Julian comes barging into the kitchen. He breathes heavily like he just ran a marathon. “There’s a… uh… *problem.*”

“What problem?” I swear, some people just don’t want to understand that they won’t get inside of this restaurant without a reservation. There are at *least* five people requesting a table last minute daily. Sometimes, really rarely

though, they get in when someone cancelled last minute, but when they don't, they get upset. Even try to bribe their way inside.

"Err… your wife is here."

"My wife?" She's supposed to be at home, resting.

"Yes, sir."

I walk past my host, right through the kitchen doors into the entrance hall. Once I reach the main room, I already see my wife standing there. She holds her hands to her stomach, her chest rising and falling pretty heavily.

And when she turns around and spots me, her face pales. "I swear, I said he didn't have to—*Arghh*."

I'm by Emory's side in the blink of an eye, the towel I held in my hand a second ago now thrown over my shoulder. I hold her up, waiting until she straightens her back again. When she does, she laughs at my expression. I would too, I have my eyebrows raised and still the smuggest smile I've ever worn on my lips right now.

"It won't hurt that much, huh?" The amusement in my voice is quite audible. Just yesterday Emory said she doesn't think contractions could actually hurt that much, and every woman who ever gave birth was just exaggerating to make their partner or whoever was with them feel bad for them.

"Shut up." She slaps a hand to my chest. "Yeah, okay. It might hurt more than I thought. No need to be smug about it."

I plant a kiss to my wife's head. "Sorry, darling. Let's get you to a hospital, okay?"

"I can go by myself. I'm a big girl. I can do it and you work—OMG THAT HURTS WHATTHEFUCK!"

"Came here for funsies then?" Slowly, *very* slowly we walk out of the restaurant. Well, I walk, she waddles.

"Just…" She breathes heavily, holding on to me for dear life. "To let you know." She could've called me. How'd she get here anyway? The restaurant isn't too far away from our apartment, but if her contractions started back at home,

then she shouldn’t have walked all the way here just to tell me.

It doesn’t matter anymore, she’s here now.

“Well, tough luck, darling. We’re in this together.”

“But I have all the pain!”

“Yeah, thank god I don’t have it.”

“I am going to—KILL YOU!”

↠ ♡ ↞

I remember the feeling when almost exactly five years ago, the nurses dragged me out of the delivery room, refusing to tell me what’s going on. All they said was that Millie needed an emergency c-section. Any other information was kept from me since I wasn’t her family. I was only her boyfriend. I didn’t have any rights to know about her condition, apparently.

But this time they’re talking to me. But it doesn’t help.

Not at fucking all.

Especially not at a time when they kick me out *again*.

“Your wife needs an emergency c-section,” one of the nurses tells me.

“Your girlfriend needs an emergency c-section.”

“What?” My pulse shoots through the roof, panic rising inside of me. This can’t be happening. Not again.

“We can’t tell you anything else.”

“Mrs. King has a prolapsed cord. To prevent further complications, she will need to have a c-section.”

“Pro-what?” Tears pool in my eyes, and I’m not even sure my heart is still beating at this point.

This is all a bad dream, right? Because I swear this cannot be happening again. Not another c-section that’ll kill the person I love. I cannot do this again.

“The umbilical cord is wrapped around your son’s head, and this can interfere with his oxygen,” she explains.

“It won’t kill Emory, right? She’s going to be alright.”

“The doctors will do everything in their power to keep them both alive.”

That is not very promising. “Can I talk to her before she goes in? I need to talk to her. *Please*.” My voice is shaking, so is my entire body. I don’t think there’s one part of me that isn’t shaking right now.

The nurse looks at her colleagues, probably to see how far along they are with prepping my wife for her surgery. Or something like that, I don’t know what they’re doing, actually.

But my eyes land on Emory instead. She looks scared, those stupid tears running down her face. I wish I could make them go away, but I know I can’t. Not this time.

“The longer we wait, the greater the chances of problems for the baby. Including brain damage and death, sir,” the nurse tells me.

Okay. Yeah, that makes sense. “I can follow her to the OR though, right?” I grasp Emory’s hand in mine, holding it like it’s going to be the last time.

“Yes, sir.”

And just like that, we’re on the move.

“Don’t die, Emory,” I practically beg. “Please, don’t fucking die.” Despite knowing it won’t do anything, I still wipe her tears away. One after the other. Over and over and over again. It’s a little tricky because we’re moving, but I don’t care.

“I’ll try my best,” she says, her voice small, filled with fear. “If you… If you have to decide between—”

“I’ll choose you, Em. I’ll always choose you.” I’m not sure if that’s what she wanted to hear, but I do not care. I want my wife alive.

A slim smile makes it onto her face, but it’s not genuine. “Thank you.”

I kiss her hand. “I love you,” I say, then repeat the same words at least another four times.

“Miles?”

“Hm?”

“I’m scared.”

“Me too.” But she won’t die. She can’t. It happened to me before, it can’t happen again. The universe can’t be that cruel.

“If I die…”

“You won’t.”

Emory shakes her head, still sobbing. “But if I do. Promise me you won’t give up.”

We stop in front of two glass doors. “We have to go. You’re putting your child at danger the longer we wait.”

“Can’t I come inside?” I ask. “Someone’s allowed in the OR with her, right?” Holly went with Millie five years ago, which is why I couldn’t be there. But I can be there with Emory.

“Technically, yes, but the only available OR is very small which wouldn’t give the doctors enough space to operate if there’s an additional person. But I can ask and get back to you.”

“Okay.” I nod, then turn my attention back on my wife. “I promise, Em. But you better not fucking die because I don’t know how well I can hold on to that promise.” I press my lips to hers one more time, kiss her like it’s the last time I’ll be able to do this, just before the nurses roll my wife’s bed away from me, leaving me behind in a way too cold hospital hallway. Together with my fears, a cracked heart, and too many bad thoughts on my mind.

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Chapter 72

“she’s the steady that’ll keep you sane”—She by Jake Scott

Miles

GREY, SUN, AND I ARE SITTING IN THE WAITING ROOM, hoping, and praying for updates.

I wasn’t allowed in, but I expected that. Fate isn’t really on my side when it comes to hospitals.

Brooke’s here as well, which brings me only a little comfort this time around, unfortunately. She’s also busy watching the fishes in the mini aquarium this hospital has in their waiting room. She’s so oblivious to what’s happening right now, and truthfully, I wish so was I.

“She’s going to live,” Grey repeats for the fifth time in what feels like three days. It’s been maybe ten minutes, but to me, it feels like forever. He rubs his hand over my back in an attempt to calm me down, but it’s not working.

Nothing’s working.

Nothing will work unless I’m in one room with Emory again and hear her talk.

“This can’t happen again,” I mumble. “This cannot be happening again.” My leg bounces up and down, all of my nerves have definitely died in the past ten to fifteen minutes. Why does this keep happening to me? It’s like the universe doesn’t want me to have children *and* a wife.

“Not to worry you, but I think your child is more at risk than Emory is,” Sun says, totally helping me out there.

I suppose it’s bad that I’m hoping it is that way. I have no idea what an umbilical cord prolapse is, and truthfully, I didn’t really listen when that nurse told me what was happening. Something about my son not being able to breathe soonish, I think? I hope he’ll be fine, but I also hope my wife survives this.

“Daddy, can we get a fishy, too?” Brooke comes running back to us. She forces herself between my legs, looking up at me. “Grammy and Gramps have fishies.”

Yeah, they do. And she will never see them again. There is no way I’ll ever allow Brooke to visit Holly and Mitch again, not after what Holly did. I could’ve looked past her hatred for me, but I can’t look past her hoping CPS takes my child from me.

“You just got a bunny, Brooke.”

She leans over one of my thighs, groaning. Normally I’d give in, but I really can’t deal with an aquarium at home. That’s too much responsibility. Keeping the water temperature right, and whatever else you need to look out for, that all sounds far too much for me. I’d kill those fishes in a day.

Also, I suppose I have to learn how to say no to her. She can’t always get everything she asks for.

“How was kindergarten?” I ask her, somehow thinking it’ll distract me from worrying about my wife. It doesn’t. Not really.

I didn’t pick her up today, Colin did. He promised to take her and Reece to the park after school because, apparently, Reece wanted to stay home today. I’m not quite sure why he picked her up, actually. He just told me he would. She stayed with him because I had to go to work, and I didn’t want to leave Emory all alone with her because I knew her water could break any day now. And then Grey brought Brooke here, I guess. Probably because he, too, hoped it would distract me.

“We sang the song today,” Brooke tells me. “And we learn the letters.”

“That’s great.”

“I can say the ABC now.”

“You can?”

She nods hastily, straightening herself up again. She then starts to sing the alphabet song, but mostly out of order and with some repeating letters and some completely missing. I mean, who needs those letters anyway, right?

It took me quite some time to learn that song when I was younger as well. It’s fine.

“Damn, that’s actually a great remix.” Grey starts dancing to my daughter’s off-key singing, staying seated though.

“Mr. King?” a woman in scrubs says and stops in front of us. Taking a second, *longer* look, it’s Dr. Manson.

“Yes?” I stand, ready to be told that they’re oh so sorry but my wife hasn’t made it. Brooke clings to my legs like she usually does when strangers intimidate her.

“The c-section went well. We put your wife in a room because she will have to stay here for observation for a few days, but she’s looking good. The baby is good as well, so far no abnormalities. He’s breathing on his own and his brain activity looks normal.”

“Emory’s alive then?” At least that’s what I’m hearing from all this.

Dr. Manson smiles at me. “She’s alive, Mr. King.”

After what felt like years, I finally take a deep breath that actually seems to be going into my lungs as well. Relief washes over me, my entire body relaxing.

She’s alive.

“Is she awake? Can I see her? Them. Can I see *them*?”

“Of course.”

↠ ♡ ↞

EMORY SMILES UP AT ME WHEN I open the door to her room and come walking inside. She looks a little beat down, but I suppose that's normal. To me, she's still as beautiful as ever though.

"Hey," she says and nods for me to come in. Like I would've continued to stand by the door even if she didn't want me inside. She's my wife, and that's *our* son in her arms.

She's alive. Definitely have my confirmation now. I heard her voice. She's talking. She's breathing and holding a baby. Her eyes are open and she's breathing. She's sitting up and breathing. She's… *alive*.

"We're not doing this again," I tell her, then place a kiss to the top of her head. "Ever." I don't need to clarify, she knows what I am talking about.

"I told you I wasn't going to die." That she did.

Looking down, my eyes fall to that little boy in her arms. He's so tiny. I don't remember Brooke being this small, granted, I was barely functioning when she was born or even looked at her properly. But I'm going to make this right with this guy.

I somehow mend my relationship to my daughter, knowing she deserved a better father than one who's around but not really there. She was too young to even realize I had been ignoring her for the first week of her life anyway. But looking back on it now, I would love to beat myself up for it. It was never her fault her mother died, and I shouldn't have let it out on her.

This boy, he's going to have me here from day one. Me *and* his mother. And a sister. And amazing unofficial aunts and uncles.

He looks a little roughed-up, but that, too, was to be expected.

I take him from Emory, even though she's a breath away from arguing with me about it. She bites her tongue though.

“We still haven’t discussed names,” Emory reminds me while I just keep ogling that little baby in my arms. His finger are so tiny. His nose, too. Everything about him is so endlessly tiny.

“Grey thinks we should call him Grayson.” Like I would ever. Cute name, but I am not naming my son after my best friend.

“Funny. Sun wanted us to name the baby ‘Sunny’ if he were to be a girl.”

These two… They definitely stick out from their family.

“So, we can agree on him not being named after either of them?” I rock him gently in my arms, watching with fascination when he moves his features a little while also being fast asleep.

“Did Brooke have a name in mind, do you know that?”

I talked to her about that before, but her only suggestion was “Brookes”, and I don’t think we should go with that one. “Not really.”

“So we have to think of one all by ourselves?” She groans, leaning her head back. “Who allowed me to be a mother?” Knowing fully well that I am very close to spitting out some words nobody should ever utter, she looks up and points a finger at me. “If you say nobody did, and then go with your sperm has decided, I will divorce you right on the spot.”

Now that’s just rude.

I missed her. It’s been what, twenty minutes maybe? Twenty very torturous minutes.

“I wasn’t going to say that.” Not in these words. “What’s the first name that comes up in your head when you look at him?” I hold our son’s little face right to hers, just so she could look at him. But Emory steals our son from me instead.

“Eden.”

“Eden?” Eden. Huh. I mean, I didn’t put much thought into naming Brooke, I just went with what felt right. “Does

that feel right to you?”

Emory nods. “It does.”

“Eden it is then.”

“If you don’t like it, you can say it.”

“If it feels right to you, Em, it feels right to me.” Besides, I can’t think of any better names. The only name stuck in my head is Grayson, and that sure as hell is not even an option.

“I knock now, Uncle Grey?”

Emory and I both look at the door as we hear Brooke speak from the other side of it. I know she’s standing there, holding up her fist, ready to knock. It makes me chuckle.

We don’t hear what Grey answers, but the knock tells us all we have to know. Or maybe it doesn’t because Brooke usually knocks even when she isn’t supposed to yet.

The door opens a split moment later, only Brooke comes walking inside though, so I’m assuming Grey and Sun don’t want to intrude.

Happily walking over to Emory and me, Brooke suddenly stops in her tracks when she notices Eden in Emory’s arms. She then gasps. Loudly. “Is that *him*?!”

She grasps the fabric of my suit pants in one hand, pulling on it to get my attention.

“Yes, baby, that’s Eden.”

Brooke lets go of my pants and takes the two little steps over to the bed. Her hands lie on the mattress as she stands up on her tiptoes to see him better. She’s still too little though. Emory scoots over on the bed, making some space, and so I make it a little easier for Brooke by picking her up and sitting her on the bed next to Emory.

“But he’s little.” Brooke stares at her brother in disbelief, scrunching up her face. “I can’t play with him. He’ll just break my toys, Daddy.”

“You’ll have to wait a couple of… months.” Good thing the concept of time is *still* mostly a mystery to her.

“Okaaayyy.” Brooke turns away from me, looking at Emory instead, then down to her brother once more.

“Hello.”

She waits. Probably for a response that isn’t going to come. But she’s quick to realize and, thankfully, doesn’t need me to explain that Eden, in fact, cannot talk yet.

“Can I touch him?” Brooke asks, not even waiting before she takes his hand, looking at his tiny one like it’s from an alien. “He’s boring.”

Yeah, he is *now*. I’m pretty sure in a few hours, she’ll no longer find him boring but annoying with all the crying. With all the *constant* crying. Oh, God.

Well, I mean, at least my daughter doesn’t seem to hate her brother, so that’s at least one less concern.

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Chapter 73

“why’d you have to rain on my parade?”—This Is Why We Can’t Have Nice Things by Taylor Swift

Emory

“YOU GUYS KNOW YOU COULD’VE still gone to see your boyfriends’—and brothers’—game, right?” It’s Aaron, Grey, and Colin’s first game for the NYR. They probably won’t be on the ice for a long time, or at all. They’re still rookies, so getting some time in might take more work. Or at least that’s what Miles has told me.

“No, it’s fine, seriously,” Lily says for the second time. Lily, Sun, and Sofia offered to stay with me and Eden while Miles went to watch the game together with Brooke. He would’ve stayed home with me and watch the game on TV, but I insisted he’d go for multiple reasons.

Reason number one: It was Brooke’s birthday a few days ago and we didn’t do much because I didn’t feel great, and I also don’t want to be around a lot of people for a few more weeks because of Eden. I don’t want to risk him getting sick. He’s only two weeks old—tomorrow at least.

He felt bad enough not having been able to give his daughter a birthday party. It was small and just with Miles’s friends and Sun, not even Reece came over. So I figured him taking her to a game might be fun. I know she loves watching ice hockey, suppose that’s given when her father dragged her to his own games for quite a while.

Reason number two: It’s Millie’s death anniversary, or remembrance day, whatever you’d like to call it. With her

gone for five years, I think he could use the distraction. One that actually shuts off his brain and not just holds him in their arms, like I would. Today's hard on me as well, but I think I can manage this day better than he can. Five is a big number.

And that's about all the reasons.

"I don't like hockey anyway," Sofia laughs, dropping down on the couch beside me. "Aaron will survive a day without me."

"Oh, I wouldn't be so sure about that." Lily takes a seat as well, but on the floor right in front of the couch. At first I'm a little confused as to why she'd choose the floor over a perfectly comfortable couch, but then I notice her looking at Eden who's sound asleep next to me.

He's got Miles's nose, which is okay, but I kind of wish he'd gotten mine. Noses are a fixation point to be recognized, so quite important. Thank god Miles doesn't have a weird nose. And so far, his eyes are blue, but I know they can still change. And still, you know what I fear now? That Eden is going to look exactly like his father. Who would want two Miles's? Certainly not me.

Well, I guess it's too late for that now anyway.

"I don't think I've seen a single game of Grey's," Sun says and sets the bowl of popcorn down onto the coffee table.

"Eh, no, you did. When I dragged you to a game because Miles made me come," I remind her.

She shrugs. "I probably wasn't watching though. Ice Hockey is as interesting as watching a snail."

"That's not true," Lily vetoes. But of course she would disagree. For some reasons, she actually likes watching the games. She understands nothing, but she likes watching it. I don't *hate* hockey, I just don't really understand the whole love for watching someone sweat and get hurt. So basically *any* sports. It's stupid. "Hockey can be interesting."

"If you actually understand a thing that's happening, perhaps." Sofia snaps her fingers against Lily's head,

laughing. “Aaron tried explaining the rules to me. All I understood was ‘technically you are allowed to hurt people because it’s a brutal sport.’”

I mean, is that not it?

“Are you guys not afraid of what’s to come?” Sun asks, and I have the slight feeling she’s no longer talking about *hockey*.

“What’s to come?” Sofia repeats as another question.

“Yeah. Like, for your relationships. With Colin and Aaron playing pro now, there’s constant media around them. It already frightens me with Grey, and he’s just my brother. I couldn’t imagine dating a guy who’s in the public eye. I kind of fear Grey forgetting he even has a family now that he’ll be travelling a lot and he’ll have people around him all day every day.”

I’m a little surprised she hasn’t uttered those fears to me before. Maybe she didn’t want to burden me with her concerns when I was busy worrying about a stalker and making sure Brooke stays with Miles and me. But she’s my best friend, she should tell me about stuff like that, right?

Lily pouts at Sun, then quickly moves to her side, swinging her arms around my best friend. “Don’t worry about that. I’m sure Grey won’t forget you. He’s a sweet guy, and he cares about you *so* much.”

“I know, but don’t you ever just… I don’t know, fear they’ll change because of the fame?”

Sofia and Lily go silent, both of them exchanging a look with each other that I honestly don’t understand. I’m pretty sure they understand each other though. They’re sad, so much I can read off of their eyes, but nothing else.

This is a conversation I can’t even participate in. My relationship isn’t affected by it. Not from Miles’s side, at least. He quit going pro for Brooke, and I know he doesn’t regret it, but I also know how badly he wanted it. I never thought about what would happen if he didn’t quit. I never thought about whether it would throw imbalance into our

relationship. I was just okay with him leaving all the time. Granted, I also didn't think we'd even stay together, that only changed after a while.

I couldn't imagine being away from my husband longer than a few hours a day.

Is me being known on social media bothering him as much as the thought of Grey becoming a famous hockey player bothers Sun?

He would've said something if that bothered him, not? And he wouldn't have encouraged me to start doing what I'm actually passionate about, seek success with art and not modeling.

Lily sighs heavily then begins to speak but Eden cuts her off when he starts to cry. It's his "I'm hungry"-cry, so I pick him up and get off the couch. "Where are you going?" she asks instead of continuing her sentence from before.

"He's hungry. I'll be back in like thirty minutes, maybe. You can start the movie already, though. I'll join you later."

With that, I walk off into Miles and my bedroom. Even though Eden has a nursery, we keep him in our bedroom for now. I also find it far more comfortable to breastfeed him in my bed rather than some chair in Eden's room.

Seating myself on the bed, I quickly pull out my phone from my sweatpants pocket and open Miles's chat. If I don't ask him about this now, it'll forever haunt me, so I might as well.

Emory: Does stranger on the internet knowing me bother you?

I wait a short moment, just to be sure I don't miss his text. He usually responds quite fast, he does even now when he's supposed to be focused on his friends' game.

Miles: Not really. Where's that question coming from?

Emory: Was just wondering. Sun said she fears Grey changing because of the fame, then Lily and Sofia got all quiet and sad. I thought maybe it bothered you, too, I don't know.

Miles: All three of them will always be stupid idiots. With fame or without. You can tell them that.

Emory: Will do. I love you.

Miles: I love you too, darling.

↠ ♡ ↞

"Text me when you're at home," I say and hug Sun one last time. Lily and Sofia already left ten minutes ago.

The evening went great, except for that one depressing conversation they had, but when I came back from the bedroom the mood was a lot lighter. And when I showed them Miles's text, it got even better. I guess hearing an actual friend of their boyfriends/brothers say they won't change convinced them of it as well.

Now they're about to come back home, so naturally Lily and Sofia left to celebrate the guys' win and Sun has to go back home because she has classes in the morning.

"I will, I promise." I know she will. Sun is the kind of person who actually does send that text because she knows I'll worry if she doesn't. Personally, I'd just forget she even asked me to text her, which is why she texts me and asks if I made it home okay after a while.

I close the door behind her when she leaves, then go to clean up the bowls in the living room, just because I know if I don't do it now, Miles will the second he gets back. Not because it bothers him when our apartment looks lived-in, but because he doesn't want me to overwork myself yet. No

matter how often I tell him that I am not overworking myself, he just won’t believe me.

Gathering the three bowls and four glasses, I carry them over into the kitchen and place them into the sink. This kitchen practically belongs to my husband, so he can do the dishes.

I’m kidding. I’ll do them in a bit, just check out the fridge for a snack first. I haven’t eaten the whole time my friends were here. Food and I still have a strange relationship, but it gets easier with Miles around. Eating around people other than my husband scares me a little, I’m not sure why.

I just open the fridge when there’s a knock at the door. I laugh because this has to be Sun. She probably forgot her car keys again, like she usually does. Sometimes I think she does this on purpose just to get one more hug. I love it, but I would never tell her that.

Walking over to the door, I open it. “Forgot your keys—"

“Hey.”

This isn’t Sun.

Nor my husband.

Nor anyone living in this apartment complex.

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Chapter 74

“I’m ready for the worst”—Panic Room by Au/Ra

Miles

“THAT GAME WAS AMAZING,” Aaron chants, jumping up and down like a little kid. Where does he get that kind of energy from?

“Yeah, because you got more ice time than either of us,” Colin mutters. He’s a little pissed off that his father had him sit on the bench for the entirety of the game. I get it though. If my father was coaching *my* team, did everything in his power to make my dreams come true, and then bench me, I’d be pissed as well.

“You’re just mad because Coach knows who’s good and who‘s not.” Aaron pushes Colin into one of the many plants in the lobby of this apartment complex, laughing. Most of the team went out for some drinks, but Colin, Aaron, and Grey didn’t. Not because they didn’t get invited, I’m sure they did, but I bet they have other plans for tonight.

I mean, this was their first game playing for the pros, and they won. Aaron even assisted a goal. If that doesn’t scream celebratory sex, I don’t know what ever could. Honestly, Grey probably just didn’t go since the other two weren’t going, because I know this guy has nobody at home waiting for him. And he’s still in a bad mood from whenever we got back from Malibu.

We step into the elevator, Colin immediately presses the button to his and Aaron’s floor. I press the one to Grey and mine. It’s funny, really. We’ve been living close to each other for four whole years, I even shared a house with Grey.

Still, riding up the elevator to get home with all three of them here as well seems strange.

Colin and Aaron no longer rely on me for food, so that's a definite change. For four years, I've been making sure neither of my best friends dies of starvation, and now all of us live alone with a partner—Grey excluded—and I don't have to feed them anymore. Except for Grey. He comes over for lunch daily, and dinner… and breakfast. At least some things don't seem to change.

Brooke's asleep in my arms. Watching a hockey game must've been really exhausting for her but that's kind of a good thing. I've been trying all day not to lose my shit around her. Last year I got wasted, as I did the year before, and the one before that. This year, I watched my best friends' hockey game together with my daughter. No alcohol involved whatsoever.

Emory kicked me out earlier, but truthfully, if she didn't make me go watch this game, I probably would've grabbed a liquor bottle and gotten myself drunk. I'd rather have stayed with her, made it through today with my wife by my side but that just seemed wrong to me.

I'm married and so deeply in love with Emory, that Grey gags at least two times when he's around us, which only makes it weirder if you think about it. I am in love with the twin sister of my dead (ex)-girlfriend. I still mourn her death, I still wish Millie had made it out alive. But I also think that's sort of normal; grieving, I mean.

But spending a whole day mourning Millie together with my wife… No thank you.

The elevator dings, letting us know we've reached the twenty-fourth floor.

"I will see you guys tomorrow," Aaron says with the biggest smile on his face known to humankind. He two-finger salutes Grey and me and then steps into the hallway.

"Kiss that kid goodnight from me." Colin rubs Brooke's back, then follows Aaron out. "The other one too."

Eden’s probably asleep as well. It’s like nine p.m. or something. Though, he could be awake, who even knows?

“We’ll see about that.”

The elevator doors close again, riding one floor up.

Suddenly Grey starts to laugh while looking at his phone, most definitely texting that guy from Malibu. He didn’t laugh in weeks.

“He can’t be that funny,” I mutter. If Grey dares replacing me with that soccer guy, I will no longer provide him with food. May he starve.

“He sent me a hockey meme.”

“Like that ball-guy knows how hockey works.”

The doors open and we walk into the hallway. There’s only the two apartments on this floor, so neither of us ever has to care about strangers listening in on our conversations since nobody gets up here.

“‘Ball-guy’ has a name.”

I roll my eyes. “Mike then. Or something like that.”

“It’s Luan.” *I knew that.*

“Like I said. Babe, he plays soccer. The last guy you dated who played soccer crushed your heart.” I never liked Izan anyway. Kya was fun, but her brother not so much. He was too stuck-up, too paranoid. Sometimes I even thought he was embarrassed to be seen with Grey. They never held hands in public, only ever met at our house. There were a few occasions Grey and Izan showed up together, like at parties or Brites. If they were drunk, they got all touchy, but never sober.

“Love’s a bitch,” Grey says. “Besides, Luan and I are just *friends*. Or we would be if I actually texted him back.”

Did Grey just… no, that can’t be. He doesn’t talk about his problems, I must’ve dreamed that. “I sure hope you are. *Friends*.”

“Jealous?” Grey winks, then unlocks the door to his apartment.

“A little bit.” Grey was the first person to talk to me when college started. We met in the arena first. I was all quiet and held back on making friends because I just wanted to get through my days without any drama. Basically the complete opposite of what I turned out to be known for.

I wanted to get home that day, see my daughter because she was sick. I nearly skipped another first day of college like the year before, but that probably wouldn’t have been great for my records. But Grey, he stood there across the room and cocked his head while looking me up and down, then made his way over to me and was like, “Dude, you look like you want to vomit.”

It made me laugh because he was right. Not just because I *looked* sick, I actually *was* sick thanks to my daughter. And then he asked if I was interested in moving in with him. He didn’t know me. He had no idea if he would like or loathe me.

I contemplated on saying yes because of Brooke. The thought of keeping her around a stranger frightened me, but I feared that said stranger was going to be disgusted by me for it more. Grey was the first person I told about Brooke, said that I couldn’t move in with him because I have a daughter and he all but said, “And I fuck guys, so what’s your point?”

I didn’t understand his point at that time, but a year later I finally got it. We both had a situation going that were seen as “abnormal,” even though neither is, and he tried telling me that.

And as it turns out, saying yes was one of the best decisions I’ve made that year because it gave me the best friend I never knew I needed.

So, if being afraid my best friend might replace me with another guy he randomly met at a beach makes me out to be jealous, then so be it. I’ve got a great friendship to lose here.

“Aw, don’t be, love. You’ll always be my number one asshole best friend.”

“Wow. That makes me feel better.”

He pats me on the shoulder, chuckling. “But like I said, I don’t even text back.”

Oh. Shit, so I didn’t dream that bit. He’s actually trying to talk here, right? “Why not?”

Grey sighs, looking up at the ceiling for a moment. “Because he’s into guys and from Malibu. If my dad sees me with him again…”

Oh, Grey… “Do you like him?”

He shakes his head. “He’s a mystery to me. I can’t quite figure him out so that keeps me… interested.”

Grey not being able to figure someone out is rare, no wonder he’s interested. “You know, you can’t pause your life and let your dad decide who you like. And I don’t mean you should rebel against your dad, though I do think you should, but I mean… you’re a person, Grey. You’re allowed to have feelings, and you’re allowed to date anyone you want. If Luan interests you, don’t waste your time trying to avoid what could turn into something great.”

Grey keeps quiet for a short while, looking at me like he doesn’t know whether to keep this conversation up or shut it down. He decides on the latter. “You know, that’s the smartest thing I’ve ever heard you say.”

I shrug, just happy he opened up all by himself for once. “I have my moments.”

“You’re still making dinner, right? I am starving.”

I push the key into the keyhole of my apartment door, nodding. “I’ll bring some over when it’s done.”

“You’re the best.”

“I know.”

I open the door at the same time as Grey closes his but before I even enter, I can sense something being off. The smell that I’m met with, I know for sure it wouldn’t be inside of this apartment even in a million years.

I don’t go inside, instead I slam the door shut and look down to that sleeping kid in my arms, then panickily turn around and start *banging* on Grey’s door. I have a key, so I could open it myself, but I don’t have enough time to look for it now.

Since Grey has just entered his apartment himself, he opens the door in record time. I speed past him, feeling my blood pumping through me in lightning speed.

I sit Brooke down onto his kitchen island, stripping her down to her underwear, waking her up in the process.

“You still have the EpiPen here I gave you just in case, right?” I rush out, analyzing my daughter’s skin and waiting for stupid red spots to appear. Grey doesn’t ask questions at first, he walks around the island and opens a drawer before sliding the EpiPen over the counter to me.

“What’s going on?” he finally asks.

“Daddy?” Brooke looks confused, but at least not like she can’t breathe.

“My apartment smells like strawberries,” I tell him. “Why in the flamingo loving pink, does my apartment smell like strawberries?!” We don’t have strawberries at home. Not a single thing in that apartment should smell like fucking strawberries. And I know Emory didn’t go out to buy some either.

“I don’t know. But Miles, I think Brooke’s okay.”

There are no spots on her arms or legs, and she seems to be breathing all fine. If she’d have smelled it and it would’ve triggered her allergy, she’d already be gasping for air. I know that, and still I keep checking her arms, her legs, her entire torso. Maybe I’m missing one. Maybe it’s a delayed reaction. I don’t know. But what I do know is that I will not accidentally kill my daughter because I thought she was okay when she wasn’t. And if I have to stand here, staring at her skin and asking Brooke to take deep breaths for another ten hours, I’d do it.

“Do you want me to go over there and check on Emory and Eden?”

“No.” I take a deep breath, then finally accept that Brooke is okay. She’s fine. Maybe her body didn’t realize the smell because she was asleep. Or maybe I was hallucinating. If there would be one day in my life I’d think hallucination was possible, it would be today.

“No?”

“Do you have a shirt for her to wear? Just so Brooke doesn’t have to sleep in her dress.” I won’t take her over there, so she will have to spend the night here at Grey’s. Brooke won’t mind, she has occasional sleepovers with Grey. Not often, but often enough that I know she’s comfortable spending the night here.

Grey gasps a little in excitement. “I bought her clothes.”

I snort. “You did?”

“Yes. I was walking through some store and somehow ended up in the kids-clothing section and I found the cutest things, so I bought them in Brooke’s size. Now I finally have a reason to give them to you.”

“What does ‘some store’ mean?” Knowing Grey and having seen his childhood home, some store could mean anything.

“Li Co. Like I said, just some store. Don’t worry about it.”

Fine, whatever. “Can you watch her? I’ll come back but I have to find out what’s going on over there. If red spots start to show up and she complains about not being able to breathe—"

“I’ll use the EpiPen, then call an ambulance and then inform you, I know. I got this.”

“Just making sure. And remember. Blue to the sky, orange to the thigh.”

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Chapter 75

“oh, girl, you’re such a shit talker”—Backstabber by Kesha

Miles

As I open the door with shaking hands, I realize, it wasn’t a hallucination. When I step inside my apartment, another wave of strawberry hits me.

“Em?” I call out after I close the door behind me. It’s quiet, a little too quiet for my liking. Maybe Emory went for a walk with Eden because he couldn’t fall asleep, but she hasn’t left the apartment in two weeks, and I know she wouldn’t for another two.

Looking around the apartment, at least as far as I can see from where I stand, it seems like I’m all alone. Emory isn’t in sight. Okay, but maybe she’s in our bedroom, she might be taking a nap. The door to our bedroom is closed though. She never closes the door.

The kitchen is empty as well, except for that one basket on the counter. I don’t need to investigate to know that this is the reason my apartment smells like strawberries. I walk over to that thing anyway, grasp it, and make my way to the balcony to keep it outside. I will find a way to get rid of it without having to throw it into our trash. Maybe I’ll accidentally drop it from the balcony at night when nobody’s walking down there anymore. Though, that seems impossible in the center of New York City.

I don’t care. For now, I just want that shit out of my apartment.

Only when I put it down and turn back around to walk inside again, I am no longer alone. But it's not my wife staring back at me.

I close the sliding door behind me, just so neither of us somehow ends up the way I want those strawberries to end up.

When my eyes finally settle on her figure, I don't feel a strange tremor, or confusion. At this point, I don't think anything can surprise me anymore. Not in that way, anyway.

"Why'd you put them outside?" she asks like there aren't a million fucking other questions I should ask her.

"We don't do strawberries here. My daughter's allergic."

"*Your* daughter?" she chuckles, though with a little pain in her voice. "She's *our* daughter, Miles."

"I don't recall you being there, Millie." This has got to be a really bad dream. "I've raised her by myself. So don't go about calling yourself her mother, because I promise you, Emory has been more of a mother to her than you'll ever be."

Millie flinches, hurt washes over her face. "What's her name?"

"Like you care."

I walk past the woman I once thought was the love of my life, not caring to even continue to look at her. Maybe a year ago finding her suddenly in my house would've pulled a different reaction out of me. A little more freaking out and happiness, mixed with confusion and also anger. A whole emotional crossover. But now all I really feel is disgust, an emotion I never thought I could feel for her.

"Why aren't you asking me questions, Miles?" she asks, and I know she's following me into the kitchen. "Why aren't you happy to see me?"

"I am married."

"Yes, I know." She lays her hand on my shoulder, trying to stop me from looking into every possible cabinet, but I shrug her off and continue. I won't take the risk of not

checking every inch of this apartment before letting Brooke back in here. “How could you do that to me?”

A snorting sound leaves me, my head shaking at the ridiculousness of her question. “How could *I* do that to *you*? You mean, move on?” I finally turn around and look at her.

She’s still got her blond hair at waist length. Her green eyes still piercing and deep, but they no longer hold the same effect on me like they used to. She’s a little taller, or maybe it just seems like it because I haven’t seen her in five years. She’s also lost weight, a lot of that.

The image of Millie Scott was burned into my memory. I know every inch of her body like the back of my hand. Looking at her now, it’s still the same but also different. Maybe because I no longer see her with pink glasses covering my eyes.

“You married my twin sister!” She sounds devastated, like she truly cares. But she can’t. That’s impossible and sick if she did.

“Speaking of Emory. Where the fuck is she?” My blood starts to boil at the thought that Millie might’ve hurt her, and that very thought almost manages the impossible; me to actually freak out in this moment.

“In your bedroom, nursing her kid or whatever. What, you think I’d do something to my own sister?”

“It certainly wouldn’t surprise me.” I lean against the kitchen counter, crossing my feet by my ankles. My hands grip the countertops on either side of my body before I let loose and cross my arms over my chest instead. “What are you doing here?”

“I came for you, Miles.” She says it like she means it. “You and our daughter.”

My head bobs as I try to make sense of what she’s saying. But no matter which way I twist it, it never starts to make sense.

She is alive. The woman of whom I thought died exactly five years ago due to complications during her c-section is

alive. How is that even possible?

Did Emory know about this?

“Again, she’s not *our* daughter, Millie. She is *my* daughter.” I look up to the ceiling, drawing in a deep breath before allowing myself to meet Millie’s eyes again.

“I gave birth to her.”

“You also died a few days later, so I don’t see your point here.”

Millie tries to step closer, but she must sense I don’t want her anywhere near me, so she stops in her tracks, even drops her arms. “Well, I am alive.”

“I can see that. Would’ve been great to let me know five years ago.” I don’t know what she’s trying to accomplish with this whole thing here. Millie and I will never happen again. Even if I wanted to—which I don’t—I wouldn’t be able to trust her one bit.

“I couldn’t,” she says, tears now swimming in her eyes. They don’t bug me though, in fact, seeing her cry somehow brings me a little more peace. “Miles, I was sixteen. I couldn’t raise a child.”

“You were almost seventeen.”

“That’s still so young,” she argues. “I wanted to live and not change diapers and teach someone I didn’t even know, how to talk, walk, and Lord knows what else.”

I thought I was selfish sometimes. I could’ve dropped college and be there for Brooke, but I didn’t because I wanted an education, which in the eyes of a lot of people made me selfish. I could’ve let her stay with me this whole time, but I didn’t because I thought she was better off with my sister while I was still bound to school. Holly always thought that was selfish of me because I chose *partying* over my daughter. I never did.

All this time I thought maybe there was some truth to it. Maybe I was being selfish for wanting to still live a little, get an education, play hockey, while also having a child. Now I realize that wasn’t being selfish.

Pretending to be dead to live your life, to get out of responsibilities and letting your friends and family believe you're actually gone… that's selfish. But mostly sick.

I was basically a kid back then as well, of course there were days I wished I could just be normal. Days I wished I didn't have to drive over to Maeve's at least once a day to see my child. But even so I never would've wished Brooke away. I never would've faked my own death to get out of it all. I still managed to make it all work. I got a degree. I played hockey and even got the chance to go pro. I lived.

I *am* living. And I still have my daughter by my side every step I take. I wouldn't want it any other way.

Refusing to talk about Brooke to Millie, I ask a question I probably should've asked the second I spotted her here. "Did anyone know you faked your death?"

Millie sighs, nodding softly. "My parents did. But nobody else."

Of course. So that's why Holly was so disgusted at the thought of Emory and me being together. Not because she thought it was weird, but because the daughter I was supposed to be with was still alive and not dead.

"What about Emory?"

"Like she could've kept a secret." Okay. I'm not sure if that makes me feel better or not. If their parents knew, it's cruel of all three of them to let their only other child believe her sister truly died. But then again, I still don't quite understand how someone can be so sick in the head to fake their own death, for no other reason but to get out of parenting, in the first place. And Emory's parents don't like her, so that shouldn't surprise me.

"You wrote her the notes, didn't you?" That would at least explain the fact that they were all about me. "You do realize that's sick, right?"

"Can you blame me?" *Yes, I can*. "I love you, Miles. You think it was easy for me to leave you behind? You think I *wanted* to leave you behind?"

“Yes.” She did so I can’t say she didn’t want to.

Tears roll down her cheeks, and still I don’t feel the urge to wipe them away. “I thought I’d come back a few years later when I was ready, and you’d be happy to see me. Then we could start over. You, me, and our daughter.”

“*My* daughter, Millie. She is *my* daughter.” Why won’t she understand that? Millie might’ve given birth to Brooke, but that doesn’t automatically make her a mother. She hasn’t been there for Brooke for a single second of her life. Not one. She died. Brooke’s mother is *dead*.

She ignores me. “Imagine my surprise when four-and-a-half years later I find out you’re engaged to my twin sister. You were never supposed to be with her.”

“No, Millie. I was never supposed to be with *you*. If it weren’t for you, Emory and I would’ve never even broken up in the first place.” Her eyes widen in shock, not having expected us to ever find out. “You didn’t seriously think we wouldn’t be able to connect the dots. If I broke up with her via text, which I know I didn’t, and Emory broke up with me the same way, which she also has no recollection of doing, then there’s only one other person who could’ve done it for us. Most likely the same person who lied to me the whole time we were together.”

“I was doing it for you. It was better that way. Emory couldn’t make you happy. She still can’t. She’s just a lousy copy of me.”

A copy… Emory’s not a copy. Never was, never will be.

“I found your stalker files on me,” I say. I’ve been okay with never finding out why they were present, why Millie had a fucking folder on me, but now that I have the chance to find out, why not take it? “What the fuck, Millie.”

“They’re Emory’s.”

“Bullshit.” Why does she keep on lying? What does she have to lose, certainly not me anymore. “Why did you have them?”

“So I wouldn’t forget anything about you.”

“Wouldn’t forget, or rather know everything about me you can use to manipulate me into loving you.” I should’ve known. She knew about things I have never mentioned to her, but back then I thought maybe Emory had told her about them before. “So why the pictures?”

“In case you found the folder. I would’ve told you they’re from someone I know who’s been stalking you.”

Oh, nice. That makes me feel better. “Why did you break Emory and me up?”

Millie clenches her jaw, not wanting to think about it. She was jealous. There’s no need for her to tell me because I can see it on her face. And still I wait for her to say it.

“Because I loved you and Emory just wasn’t good enough for you. I never understood what you saw in her. You needed someone with confidence in your life, not a crybaby.”

Hearing a door creak, my eyes shoot toward the bedroom door, finding Emory looking through the crack. Her eyes are swollen, red-rimmed, nose and cheeks puffy, her face tear stained. Now *that’s* a sight I cannot bear.

“Shove bullshit down my throat all you want, Millie, but if you continue to drag my wife down like this, you might actually find yourself six feet under the ground.” With quick, long strides, I make my way over to my wife. I nudge the door open just so I can approach her properly, then lay my hands on her face and start wiping away those tears.

I don’t know what happened between them when I wasn’t here. I don’t know why Emory didn’t tell me Millie suddenly showed up, or why Emory had time to feed Eden with Millie here, but I don’t care about the semantics either. All I care about is getting those tears to stay away from my wife’s face.

“My God, Miles. You cannot be fucking serious about her. Emory’s a wreck.”

Leaning down to my wife, I rest my forehead against hers. “I love you, darling,” I whisper because I will not give Emory

one single reason to think I believe whatever Millie says. I will not give Millie the chance to ruin Emory and me again.

Emory wraps her hands around my wrists, holding on to me tightly. Her sobs break free, tearing at my heart with fire, burning me. “You can be with her,” she says, quietly, unsure. *Lying*. We all know Emory doesn’t want me to leave her, and I’d never do that either.

“Yes, Miles. You can be with me. We love each other.” Maybe that’s wrong, but right now, I truly wish Millie had died that day. All those years of having wished she was still alive turned around in seconds, wishing the opposite.

We can hear the apartment door open, and all three of us instantly look toward it. I know there’s only a handful of people who can march inside here like they own this place, so I’m not worried.

The first people to stop in their tracks are Colin and Lily, Lily looking far more concerned than Colin. But of course she would. Lily’s the only one of all my friends who knew Millie personally. I think they used to be friends.

Aaron and Sofia are close behind, bumping into Colin and Lily.

Aaron laughs. He has quite the habit of laughing in the worst situations. “Please tell me you’re all seeing that.”

“Is that—”

“Millie,” Lily finishes, her eyes narrowed at her. “You died.”

“Well, clearly I didn’t.” Millie starts to pace up and down the free space between the living room and the kitchen, not getting closer to either Emory and me, or my other friends. She’s trapped, basically.

“What the fuck.” Colin is the first one to enter the apartment all the way, walking up to Millie. He stares at her from maybe a foot away. Once he got a good look and probably made sure she’s actually there, he turns back around. “And here I thought your mother was crazy, *mi sol*. This chick tops it.”

“Can you leave?” Millie asks, more as a demand than an actual question. “I’m here to talk to Miles, not his friends.”

“I don’t want to talk to you.” I interlace my fingers with Emory’s, squeezing her hand.

“Okay, don’t talk then. Just let me see my daughter.” Millie steps closer, her eyes staying on Emory and my interlocked hands. This girl really has the audacity to look *jealous* right now.

“Your daughter?” Aaron laughs. “Hate to break it to you, Millie, but B—”

“Don’t say her name, I don’t want her to…” know. I don’t want her to know. But if Millie’s parents knew she’s been alive all along, why didn’t Holly or Mitch tell her Brooke’s name? “You know her name.”

“I don’t. I never asked.” So much to wanting to get to know Brooke. She had five whole years to ask her parents for Brooke’s name. Five years to ask for pictures and come clean, get involved in her life. But she didn’t care.

“Because all you want is for me to not date Emory, right? You don’t actually want to know anything about my daughter. You don’t want to see her. You don’t want to know her name. All you care about is Emory not being with me. It’s the only reason you even showed up, am I right? The only reason you crawled out of your hiding spot.”

“Miles,” Emory breathes, leaning her head against my shoulder. She wants us to stop fighting, I can tell by the sound of her voice. Emory’s too forgiving. She kicks people out of her life like lighting up fireworks on new year’s, but as soon as it comes to her family, she can’t do that. She cares too much. “She’s here now. We should… just be happy she’s alive.”

“Yeah, Miles. Just be happy I’m alive. Or would you rather have me dead?”

“Yes,” I answer with no hesitation. “I’d rather have you dead, Millie. Want to know why?”

She cocks her head, waiting. Daring me to disrespect her. And I will do so gladly. “If you were dead, then I’d at least still have great memories with you. If you were dead, I wouldn’t question whether I actually loved you, or if you manipulated me into loving you. If you were dead, I wouldn’t someday have to explain to my child that her mother faked her death because she never wanted to meet her. I wouldn’t have to think of you as the most fucked up person I have ever met in my entire life.”

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Chapter 76

“don’t be cautious, don’t be kind”—COPYCAT by Billie Eilish

Emory

She’s alive. Alive and ready to ruin my life all over again.

The shock still hasn’t settled in, I still don’t want to believe that Millie faked her death. That she was even capable of doing it. I still don’t want to believe that my parents knew about it as well. Neither of them told me either, like I’ve never been part of the family.

But she’s here now. Alive and ready to take Miles from me again. All I can do is watch him leave.

Who am I to tell Miles he can’t be with Millie now that he’s got another chance. I’ve only ever been the replacement anyway. The one who was there, looking like the person he lost. The person he loved.

He says he loves me. He says he won’t leave me by holding my hand and being close, but I mean, this is Millie I’m competing against. I have no chances of winning. And honestly, if he has to decide between her or me, he can choose her. I don’t want to be a choice; I want to be a priority. *His* priority.

Millie steps closer to us, not even caring about Miles’s friends, and that they’re watching her every move. What she doesn’t know, if she does one wrong move, those two guys on the other end of us will tackle her in the blink of an eye. No hesitation. Or maybe they’ll send their girlfriends to do it because they’re guys and Millie is a woman. But either

way, it’ll only take one wrong move for her to be pinned down to the ground.

I don’t want this to end up in a huge fight or get the police involved or anything like that. I don’t think Millie is that dangerous. Sure, she could’ve told Miles she didn’t want to be a mother and not fake her death, but that doesn’t automatically make her dangerous, does it?

“If I was dead, Miles, there’d be no chance for us to ever be together again.” Millie lays her hands on Miles’s jaw, but he moves his head away taking a step back, pulling me with him.

“We won’t get back together either way. I am married, Millie. I am not going to get a divorce to be with someone who lies. To be with someone who fakes their own death to get away from responsibilities. Someone who doesn’t give a shit about the child they gave birth to. And even if those weren’t factors, I love Emory. I don’t want to be with you.”

I love Emory.

He doesn’t want to be with Millie. He wants to be with me.

Millie tumbles back like what Miles said is the equivalent to an asteroid hitting her. She holds a hand to her heart, crying. “How can you love a copy of me?”

A copy.

“That’s all I have ever been to you, isn’t it, Millie?” I don’t even expect her to answer. “All I have ever been to everyone in our family.”

She was born a few minutes before me, which, apparently, makes me the unwanted one. Everyone let me feel it, I just never picked up on it. Well, I did, I always hoped that maybe they didn’t mean it. Maybe it was my family’s way of joking. I’m great at making up excuses for my family; everything they’ve done to me, I have an excuse for it.

“You’ve never seen me as your equal, but someone who tries to be you when you are the one who tried to be me?”

“You took on modeling after my death. You never even wanted to do it. I bet you’ve just been waiting for me to die so you could have my life. My career. My boyfriend. My child. You have it all. You have *my* life. You stole it from me.”

Am I the only one seeing the logical reason for all that here? “You *died,* Millie. I don’t have your life, I have my own. This, *all* of this”—I wave my hand around Miles and my apartment—“could’ve been yours if you *communicated* with Miles. If you hadn’t lied to him about who you are. You told him you liked to bake when in reality, you would rather die than touch butter with your bare hands, let alone crack open an egg. You told him you played the violin when we both know you never did. You pretended to be okay with having a child when all you wanted was for that very baby to be gone. I don’t even want to know what else you’ve lied to him about.” I take a deep breath, praying the weird mixture of sadness and anger leaves me soon. “I didn’t steal your life from you, you did that on your own.”

“Like you’ve never told a lie.” She’s completely missing my point here. Has she always been like this, and I just never noticed? I could swear Millie used to be the kind of person who knew everything. She was the first person I turned to when I needed someone.

She was always there… listening… talking me out of my relationship with Miles.

“I never lied about who I am. I never had to tell lies to anyone about me just so they’d like me.”

Miles moves behind me, wrapping his arms around my neck like an armor. Carefully, he pushes me forward, walking us out of the bedroom. He stops every single time Millie doesn’t step back, waiting for her to do so. Only when she does do we continue to walk. Miles is trying to keep a certain distance to her, and I totally understand why. I don’t want her near me either.

I never thought I’d say this about my own sister. *I don’t want her near me*. For five years I’ve wished for her to

somehow come back from the dead. Well, she has, I suppose. And yet instead of being happy, I want her gone.

Once we're out of the room entirely, Miles closes the door. "I don't want him to wake up," he whispers into my ear. It's a miracle he hasn't yet, to be honest.

"I'm sorry," Millie says, not meaning it. "It's not my fault my life wasn't as interesting as yours though. With all of your hobbies and things to do. A little lie every now and then didn't hurt anybody."

"It hurt you," Miles chants surprisingly happy. "I'm not sure how you can't see it, but all you did was make me fall more and more in love with Emory. For the time I thought I loved *you*; I clearly didn't because it was Emory. When all anyone knew about you were things about Emory, then those people didn't like *you*, they liked your sister. That's not her fault, it's yours. Which makes *you* the copy, not her, by the way."

At least one person who understands what I've been trying to tell her.

"You took Emory's naivety for your own benefit."

"I did not." Millie stalks toward the door, but Colin and Aaron stand there, with their arms crossed and raised eyebrows to stop her from leaving. They look like real bodyguards. She groans and turns back around. "Fine. It's not my fault Emory never told you shit about her. It's not my fault you were dating for three years and all you knew about her was—"

"The important things," Miles ends the sentence for her before she could. "I knew what she liked. I knew her dislikes, what made her upset what brought her joy. I knew her favorite songs like the back of my hand, learned them by heart for her as well even though her favorite songs changed daily. I knew how she reacted to crowds and how self-conscious she got when someone looked at her for a little too long. I learned her habits, knew she played with her hair when she got nervous. I knew her eyes would glaze

over with tears when she was genuinely laughing. I knew she got really quiet when she was upset, and that she would set three alarms in the morning because she was afraid to sleep in, even though she never did. I knew the important things, Millie. I could name you her drink and food order in my sleep, and the four just-in-case ones as well. I did then, and I can do the same now. I still know everything I need to know about Emory. Knowing someone doesn't mean knowing about a certain skill they have, one most people have anyway."

I never even realized he knew that much about me. That he paid attention to the small details about me. Especially not back then.

Millie's eyes drop to the floor, no longer able to look at either Miles or me. I don't even feel bad for her, she deserves this. I hate saying this, hate feeling this way about her, but it's the truth.

Millie can't just come back from *the dead* five years after and demand she gets back together with my *husband*. That's not how it works.

"I knew Emory. Even when we weren't talking, I knew her. But I never knew you, Millie. You manipulated me into loving you, and that certainly is not love. Has never been."

She taps her foot on the floor, stalling to say something. "At least I have never been an insecure wreck like her. That must've made it a lot easier for you."

"You took my insecurities to your advantage," I say. "Told me Miles was probably laughing about me behind my back. Told me he's hanging out with other girls who are much prettier than me. All that just to break us up. To make us hate each other so you could have him."

"Not my fault you believed me."

"You were my sister!" I yell, "Of course I believed you."

"I *am* your sister. Not were, *am*."

My head shakes all on its own. "No. You are not my sister. You're someone I don't know."

“And to think I told him to keep an eye on you,” Millie mutters under her breath. “Should’ve known he’d come running back to you the second Miles got the chance to.”

“We should’ve never even been separated.” Which is the truth. I never would’ve broken up with Miles, even when I feared him making fun of me about our sex-life. Every fourteen-year-old is pretty insecure, and my insecurities laid with him secretly making fun of me. I would’ve realized he wasn’t soon enough. And from what Miles told me, he wasn’t planning on breaking up with me either.

She looks at my husband, wearing a smug-ish smile now rather than those fake tears. “You’re telling me you regret having been with me? That this daughter of ours means nothing to you, and you’d give her up if you could travel back in time?”

“Nah, I’d never say that,” Miles answers immediately, and I know he means it. I can’t be mad about it either. Brooke means the world to him. She means a whole lot to me as well. Not even I would want to imagine a world without that little blond girl. “Because compared to you, Millie, I actually love her. I care about my daughter, and I wouldn’t wish her away for anything.”

“Ridiculous.”

“Funny, that’s the first thing I thought when I saw your face thirty minutes ago.”

Did he really? My first thought was “Did I die, and my sister is welcoming me to heaven?”

I did, in fact, not die, and my sister wasn’t welcoming me to heaven either. She was more introducing me to another hell. Or maybe just gave me an out of it. I’m not quite sure which way to look at it yet.

All this here, it did let me know one thing though. Cutting my family out of my life was the best decision I could’ve possibly made. It made me realize, once again, that neither of them ever cared about me. There has only ever been *one* person who truly had, and *has* an interest in me, who wants

me and not my sister. One person who sees *me*. Has always seen me. One guy who cares about and loves me to pieces.

And that person has always been Miles.

He was there for me even when I thought I hated him. He picked me up from parties when I got too drunk, told guys to fuck off when he noticed them getting too close to me and I was visibly uncomfortable. He never denied me seeing my niece even though he could've easily done that.

I so badly wish I could say the same for my family, but I can't. And I won't keep on lying to myself for them.

Miles is my family now. The only one I need, together with our son and Brooke.

That's it. Just them.

"You know, I think it's for the best if you leave," Miles says, nodding at Aaron and Colin. They jump to action, it's kind of hilarious. "Can you tell the front desk to blacklist her?"

"I'll bribe that guy to blacklist her from the entire building if I have to." Colin holds up his thumb while wrapping his free hand around Millie's arm. Aaron does the same.

Millie, very much to my surprise, doesn't fight it. She just lets the guys escort her out like she was being cuffed by cops.

As soon as she's out the door, I finally take a deep breath. Air hitting my lungs like I've been suffocating this whole time. But I don't have much time before my husband ties off my airways with a tight as fuck hug.

"I love you," he repeats, over and over and over again.

"Miles," I force out, not even being able to cough anymore.

He loosens his arms around me just enough to let me breathe. And thank god he does because I might've actually blacked out very soon.

"I love you too."

Miles takes a *tiny* step back from me, his hands coming up to my face. "I'm going to get a restraining order against

her. Who knows, she might try to kidnap Brooke next, just to get me to talk to her."

It wouldn't surprise me anymore. Seems as though Millie would do just about anything to get his attention, even come back from the dead.

"Could either of you possibly take those strawberries with you? I don't know what to do with them." He points out to the balcony. Did he seriously take them out there?

"Sure." Lily walks over to the balcony to get them.

Talking about those strawberries in *here*. "Where's Brooke?" She didn't have an allergic reaction, did she? I was going to make Millie leave them outside, but I feared it would stink up the entire hallway.

"She's with Grey. And she's okay." That's good. God, I could never forgive myself if something happened to her because I was a little too shocked to think about throwing those strawberries out right away.

"Millie tried to bribe you with strawberries." Like that would've worked. Miles might've had a love for those once, but that's a whole while ago.

"You know, I'm kind of glad she tried to. Imagine I walked in here with Brooke in my arms. If I hadn't smelled them before we came in, I would have never brought her over to Grey's. It spared a whole lot of confusion for Brooke."

I do wonder though; would Millie even have cared? To see Brooke. Actually meet her. Or would Miles have been right, that Millie doesn't care. That, even now, she doesn't want to know Brooke.

Guess it'll forever be a mystery.

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Chapter 77

“you’re all I think about when I’m awake / part of every night and every day”—Crazy by Shawn Mendes

Miles

I’VE BEEN STARING OUT of the window for quite a while now.

Hours have passed since Millie suddenly showed up, the shock and realization finally settling in.

She is alive, has been this whole time. And her parents knew about it. All three of them watched me lose myself and struggle to find a place in this world, and neither of them cared enough to come clean.

Seriously, I would’ve understood had Millie told me she didn’t want a child. We’ve had at least ten forever lasting conversations about her getting an abortion, or us putting Brooke up for adoption after she was born. We could’ve found ways to get out of being parents when she didn’t want to be one yet. She was sixteen after all, almost seventeen. It was okay for her to have doubts and not want it. It’s okay at any age to not want a child.

But she should’ve just told me she didn’t want any of it and not faked her own fucking death. Faked being happy about it. I was terrified when Millie told me she was pregnant, I thought my life was over. And I probably would’ve continued to think so, had *she* not been telling me she was excited about it.

It’s weird to think about. Five years ago I thought my life was ending by losing her, and today showed me that it was

all for nothing. All the tears I've wasted on her. All the pain I went through. All the guilt. It was all for nothing.

But there is one good thing about it finally coming to surface. I can now officially say that I have never loved Millie. I loved the idea of her, loved the things she told me. But it was never *her* I loved. Being manipulated into a relationship could never be love.

So basically, all this fucking time, when I thought I missed Millie, it was someone else I missed. Someone who didn't exist. Someone who was pure fiction. And Emory, a whole lot of Emory.

"Miles?" My wife seats herself beside me, talking with caution in her voice as though she fears me breaking if she said one wrong word.

I wouldn't break. There's nothing to break apart for anymore. Millie is alive and that thought doesn't even bring me joy. I am disgusted by her. Disgusted by what she thought was the right thing to do to get out of some responsibilities. Disgusted by the fact that she could so easily lie to me, to her sister, to everyone.

I nod for Emory to lie down, knowing her c-section incision is still tender and stings a tiny bit when she sits. She prefers to lie or stand these days.

Emory scoots her cute butt a little farther away from me, then slowly leans back until her head lies on my lap. She looks up at me, pain filling up her beautiful green eyes.

As she does so very often, Emory takes my hand in hers, just to stare at my ring. "I meant it Miles," she breathes, hurt in her voice. "If you want to be with her, I won't hold you back. Or if you just want to leave in general, I'd understand. My family is pretty fucked up, I wouldn't want to be a part of it either."

"I am not going anywhere, darling." I pull my left hand away from her grasp, resting it just below her boobs instead, then use my other hand to push some of the strands of hair in her face out of the way.

“Promise?” She holds up her pinky finger. I’ve seen Emory get pinky promises from Brooke all the time, but she’s never made me pinky-promise *anything*.

But of course I hook my pinky together with hers. “I promise, Em.”

She lets out a relieved breath, and then her face lights up again.

Her eyelids grow heavy as she yawns. I really didn’t miss being woken up a million times at night by a crying baby.

I take off her glasses. “Try to sleep, darling. It’s late.” Eden’s quiet right now, or at least I don’t hear any sounds coming from the bedroom. I’m not sure if he’s asleep, but I’m assuming so.

“But you’re not okay, Miles. I can’t just sleep.” She yawns again, this time slightly rolling onto her side to press her head into my stomach instead of covering her mouth with her hand. Then she bites me. Just like that.

“What the hell was that for?” I cover the spot she bit with my hand, rubbing away the pain. It doesn’t really hurt, but you know, everyone’s got to be a little overdramatic sometimes.

“Just showing you my love.”

It shouldn’t surprise me.

Bringing a hand into my wife’s hair, I start to gently massage her scalp. “I’m fine, Em. You can sleep,” I say, remembering her only reason not to try to sleep. “It was a strange day, but I’ll be okay. I got you.”

“Not when I’m asleep.”

“Yes, even then. You’re all mine.” I will always have her, I’m pretty sure of that. And even when times get a little rough, I’m no longer seventeen years old. By now, I know who’s worth fighting for and I know how not to give up on the only woman who could ever have my heart.

“All mine,” she mumbles, nuzzling closer to me. Emory tries to wrap her arms around my hips to hold me, then

grows frustrated when it either doesn't work, or it's not comfortable. So I do the only other logical thing.

"Sit up," I say. She does, though a little slow. Without wasting any more time, I get up, lift Emory off the sofa and carry her into our bedroom.

I lay her down, cover her up with our shared blanket. I then sneak a quick glance into Eden's crib. He's fast asleep so I just leave him there before he wakes up.

Quickly stripping off of most of my clothes, I crawl into bed with my wife.

I hold her in my arms, caressing her back with soft touches, listening to her heavy breathing as she slowly drifts off to sleep.

Just lying here with my wife in my arms, a baby sleeping in his crib and my daughter—rather unfortunately—spending the night at Grey's because I refuse to let her inside here tonight, it gives me the confirmation I feared would never come. That I did the right thing. Deciding to quit hockey to be home with my family. Deciding that a fun time on the road isn't nearly as important as spending that time with the people I love more than life itself.

So when I thought I'd regret choosing my family over hockey, I now know I never will because having my two girls and my son around me means more to me than hockey ever could.

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Chapter 78

“you roll your eyes and then smile / ‘cause you know that’s just who we are”—ilym by John K

Emory

“Happy birthday, Memory!” Brooke jumps up on the bed, barely letting me open my eyes before she shoves a tiny box into my face.

“Thank you.” I sit up, blinking a few times to focus my eyes on the velvet box that’s now in my hands. “What’s that, Brookie?”

She shrugs. “Daddy told me to give you.”

Of course, should’ve known that.

I’m about to open the box when Brooke gasps. “Memory, wait.” She’s tapping her hand on my arm. “I have to ask you first.”

“Ask me what?”

She grins a little shyly, her cheeks turning the slightest shade of pink. I can honestly say I have never seen Brooke act this way, not with me, anyway. “I don’t have a mommy, right?”

Well… she does, technically. “No.”

“Good.” *Good?* “Then you can be my mommy, okay?”

What?

My eyes snap down to the box, in seconds I have it open. My heart’s racing like I’m drunk of caffein without even having had a single sip of coffee today.

I stare at the blurry sparkly earrings, a little confused but glad it’s not a ring.

There’s a slight chance I am not seeing this right though.

I drop the box on the bed, get up and sprint out the bedroom to find that husband of mine. Only that when I open the door—the one that’s *never* closed—I walk into a dark apartment, only getting lit up by candles. At least I’m sure they’re candles. I couldn’t name another flickery light source if my life depended on it. Everything’s a little blurry without my contacts in and I forgot to grab my glasses.

Did I enter an alternate reality?

A black shadow makes it over to me—No, wait, that’s my husband. Black shadows don’t have wavy blond hair.

“Miles, just so you know, I can barely see anything, so I’m not even sure if I saw what I saw the right way or the wrong way.” I can see enough to be sure I saw *two* sparkly somethings.

God, they’re earrings. What’s so bad about earrings?! Maybe because, on the off chance that he wants to replace our wedding rings, I wouldn’t know how to say no. I love our rings, they’re unique, at least for a *wedding* ring. But I also couldn’t tell Miles no should he want a better one. One that looks a lot less like a plain promise ring.

“Right,” he chuckles, then pulls something out of his pocket. That something happens to be one of my glasses. I own three just in case. I don’t wear either of them outside, but maybe someday I will.

Miles puts the glasses on my face for me, allowing me to see him in HD. Only that I kind of wish I’d still see him all blurry because at least that way I don’t have to look at that grin of his.

“I hate you, just so you know,” I say because I can. “That’ll never change.”

He leans down and presses a kiss to my forehead. “Oh, I know. I’d be worried if you were like in love with me or something.”

“Yeah, totally weird.” I smile without being able to control it.

For a moment we just stand there, with his hands on my waist and mine on his jaw, looking into each other's eyes. It's quiet, neither of us talks, and Brooke seems to keep it down as well. Though, I can hear the faint sounds of her voice from the bedroom as she sings. Miles probably told her to stay in there.

Eden is quiet as well, which is a little concerning because he seems to be hating every second he has to close his eyes to catch some sleep. But more importantly, he hates it when *I* try to get some sleep in.

Like Miles can sense my fear for a new ring, he says, "I didn't get you a new wedding ring, don't worry."

I relax a little. "So they were earrings?"

"Wow, your vision is worse than I thought," he laughs. I slap him. He deserves that. "They're earrings, darling. Brooke picked them for you."

"She did?" From what I could tell, they looked great. And expensive.

Miles nods. "All by herself as well."

Okay. That's cute. But there's one thing I still don't quite understand. "Why did she ask me to be her mom?"

His eyebrows draw together, confusion covering his features. "I don't know."

"No clue why at all?"

He shakes his head. "Yesterday, she asked me why Eden's your son but she's not your daughter, and I tried my best to explain it to her without giving her *the* talk at five years old. I'm not sure she understood, though. That's all. She never told me she was going to ask you that."

Well, she did. Unless I was dreaming, which I doubt I was.

Miles still wants me to apply for legal guardianship as soon as I can, but it doesn't make me Brooke's mother. Nothing will *legally* make me her mother unless I adopt her, and that's most likely not going to happen. Not unless Brooke is old enough to understand what it means and decides she wants it.

One day, Miles will have to tell Brooke about Millie, and I don't ever want Brooke thinking that I pushed myself between her and her mother.

"We can talk about this later. Right now, I have a wife to spoil with presents." He takes my hand and leads me over into the kitchen. *Always the kitchen.*

Lifting me off the ground, he sits me on the kitchen island. Strange place to hand me a present, but sure, why not? My husband loves his kitchen. A lot more than the living room, apparently.

"How many kids do you want?" he asks, throwing me just a little off-guard.

"What?"

"How many kids do you want?" he repeats. "In total, I mean. Because I need to know how many more times I'm going to have to pray to everything holy to not have you taken away from me."

"Miles, you didn't want any more kids," I remind him. He was the one to say we'd never do this again, not me.

"I changed my mind."

"Hm…" I press my lips into a thin line. Fine then. "Eight."

"EIGHT?!" He coughs, checking his pulse to make sure he's still alive. All I can do is laugh. "Okay, how about four in total, including Brooke?"

"So two more?" That's not eight. I don't want eight children, but I knew if I said a ridiculously high number he would react this way. And he did not disappoint.

"Yeah. I think I can do two more heart attacks, but that's it."

"Alright then. Four seems okay, I guess." I dramatically roll my eyes, exhaling extra deeply.

"Good, because I so desperately want a little girl who looks like you." Miles plants a kiss to my nose, ignoring the little gasp that escapes me.

"You know, technically speaking—"

My husband covers my mouth with his hand, forcing me to stop talking. “I swear, Emory, if you’re going to compare yourself to Millie right now, I will no longer cover your mouth with my hand, but stuff it so you won’t be able to talk.”

Stuff it? I stick my tongue out, licking his palm so he’d remove his hand and let me talk. When he finally notices what I am doing, he chuckles and pulls his hand away.

“Using what?” I ask, smirking.

He contemplates on what to say for a second there. He then reaches behind me, taking one of the bananas from the fruit bowl. “Food.”

I shudder with disgust while he peels open the banana. “I was thinking more like—”

Miles shoves the banana into my mouth, cutting me off mid-sentence. “As much as I’d like my dick in your mouth, darling, that’s not going to happen.”

I bite off the banana and he pulls it away from me, taking a bite for himself.

“You’re not upset about that?” I ask once I’ve swallowed.

Miles immediately shakes his head. “You don’t have to suck my dick for us to have a great sex life, Em. You don’t like it, that’s fine. I am not going to make you do it. If one day you decide you want to try again, be my guest, but you don’t owe it to me. Ever.”

“Okay,” I say in a breath, then reach for his hand to take another bite of the banana just so I can see him smile. I am only a little hungry, but I *am* trying to get a healthy relationship with food, so consider this me trying.

“Can I give you your present now?” He throws away the banana peel and comes back to stand between my legs.

I nod, for once being excited to receive a gift.

Miles hands me a velvet box, similar to the one Brooke gave me but a little bigger. God knows where he just got that one from.

I take it from him with suspicion, still looking at him even when I open the box. But then I look down into my hands,

eyes landing on the silver necklace.

It’s a plain, thin silver necklace with three little diamonds next to one another as a pendant. The diamond in the middle is a little bigger than the two other ones. It’s a beautiful necklace. Definitely a step-up from all the weird jewelry I’ve had to wear for photoshoots.

“There are two diamonds missing.” He knows what I am talking about without going into further detail.

“Nope. That’s what you got the earrings for,” he replies. “All three of our kids on the necklace. Brooke and me as your earrings because we both talk a lot, to the point where you would rather want to cut your ears off than listen to one more second of it.”

He is so weird sometimes, but I wouldn’t want to have it any other way. “Eden and the potential other two will talk a lot as well. They share the same dad after all.”

“You’re right. Might need to get you other earrings then.” Miles presses his lips to my cheek, then takes a step back and starts to unbutton his black dress shirt. “I’ve got another surprise for you.”

“I swear if it’s what I think it is…”

He chuckles, slowly sliding the sleeves down his arms. Once the shirt is off his body, he turns around, presenting the massive rose tattoo on his back. He really got it tattooed.

“You are insane,” I laugh and pull him a little closer to me with my feet, then run a finger along the fine tattoo lines. The roses don’t look as paint brushy as they did when I painted them on, but rather delicately inked, smooth. It does look different from the painting, but close enough.

“Can’t argue that. Now, when are you starting on another design? I still have some space back there.”

I lean forward, resting my forehead against his bare back, fake sobbing for a short moment to pity myself. What have I gotten myself into?

“Aw, don’t worry, darling. That’s not the lowest low in your life. There are still a lot of years to come with me by your side. I’ll probably do some more stupid things that you can pity yourself for.” I don’t doubt it. With Miles King in my life, it will never get boring, so much I can tell.

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Chapter 79

“should probably go and find a therapist / ‘cause you got shit a psychologist can’t even fix”—FUCK YOU by Dashs

Miles

“I’M SO COLD, DADDY!” Brooke complains for the *sixth* time in under twenty minutes.

Winter in New York City seems great from the outside. Okay, maybe also when you live around here. It’s magical to everyone who loves winter and snow. It looks like a winter wonderland, especially in the center of New York City. Everything lights up and overall, it just looks breathtaking.

But I hate snow.

It’s ironic given that I *love* the cold. But I spent most of my childhood years living right next to a beach, so god forgive me for hating snow. It just gets everything wet, and streets look nasty when they’re covered in dirty snow. *I also hate unbearable heat.*

My daughter disagrees with me wholeheartedly. She loves the snow, but she hates the cold and therefore makes sure to annoy me with complaining about it.

“I am *sooooooo* cold, Daddy!!” she almost sings, dragging her feet through the snow rather than actually *lifting* them to walk.

I hold one of her gloved hands, making sure she doesn’t run off when she sees another of those LED reindeers in front of someone’s house. We don’t have a lot of outdoor Christmas decorations at home, so every day since about

the end of November, I've had to walk around the block with Brooke just to watch all the houses.

She loves the lights. I mean, I guess they look pretty but they're just lights.

It's not even anywhere near where we live. Every evening, we take on a thirty-minute car drive just to get to the one neighborhood that just loves to exaggerate with their decorations, and then we walk around *that* block. But I love spending that time with my family.

"Do you want to go home?" I ask, knowing fully well she doesn't.

"NO!" Brooke groans loudly, then quickly slaps her free hand to her mouth when she realizes that she was supposed to keep quiet.

New York City is loud as hell, but there's a difference between constant cars driving past you, or normal conversations on the streets and standing right next to a stroller with a sleeping baby inside and screaming *No* from the top of your lungs.

Over the past couple of weeks, Brooke finally realized Eden isn't *that* boring after all. He cries. A lot. But Brooke figured out if she keeps it down with him around when he's already quiet, then the risks of him weeping is far less.

"I'm just cold, Daddy." She stops walking, so naturally, I do too. Emory comes to a halt as well, but she continues to slowly move the stroller back and forth for Eden's sake.

I exchange a look with my wife, neither of us knowing what to do. Brooke always gets cranky when she's tired, so the logical thing to do is go home. However, if we just went home now, Brooke would throw a tantrum because she didn't get to see all of the houses.

I pick Brooke up, wrapping her up in my arms. It doesn't warm her all too much, but it seems to do the job just fine for now. Brooke leans her head on my shoulder, the pom-pom of her bobble hat brushing against my ear.

We continue to walk but with every house we pass by, my daughter gets significantly quieter. Usually she comments on every house, no matter how often she's seen it already. But by the time we round the corner to get back to where we parked our car, Brooke is no longer saying a single word.

"She's asleep," Emory confirms what I could only assume. She gives me a warm smile and I swear that smile shines brighter than all of the LEDs around us. Every single time I see her smile, I get lost in it. I could've had the worst day of my life at work, but when I get home to see my wife smile, the day's been saved.

When we reach the car, Emory puts Eden in his seat while I try my best to get Brooke inside the car without waking her up. And when both my wife and I are seated as well, I can't help reaching out to grasp Emory's face with one hand and pull her close enough until our lips meet.

I WISH I COULD SAY I AM HAPPY to be at home, but just as I drive up to the underground parking lots, ready to type in the passcode to open the gates to get down, my eyes catch a glimpse of blond hair standing next to the building's entrance doors.

"Oh, for molding cheese's sake," I curse under my breath as I stop the car. I could drive past her and ignore her presence, take the elevator from the garage up and call it a day. But I know the second Emory and I get up into our apartment, we'll receive a call stating that Millie has been trying to reach us.

She's banned from the entire complex. If she steps foot inside, the front desk will call the cops. It's a simple task of theirs, but I feel bad because that happens like twice a week recently.

Neither Emory nor I react to any of Millie's attempts in reaching out to us. We don't want to talk to her, nor do we want to listen to more of her bullshit. She's said plenty back in September.

Honestly, I don't even want to know the whole story anymore. For the first week after finding out Millie was still alive, it was tempting to find out all of her reasonings. I had about a million questions, but not anymore.

To me, Millie Scott has died five years ago.

Emory lays her hand on my thigh, knowing what I've decided to do without me having to say it. "There's no way any judge would *ever* grant Millie visiting hours."

I know that, and I *was* afraid Millie would get them anyway. But just two weeks ago, Millie had *threatened* to take me to court and fight me on custody because I refused to let her see my daughter. The police officers who dragged her away from the apartment complex laughed at her threat, even told me I had nothing to worry about.

And still, hearing my wife remind me of it eases a hell lot of nerves.

"I love you," I say and kiss Emory one more time before I get out of the car and make my way over to Millie.

She stands there, with her hands on her hips, her lips pursed and satisfied with herself.

"Was about time you caved." She taps her foot on the ground, scrunching up her nose in disgust when the snow covers the front of her shoe.

"What do you want?"

"I want to see my daughter." Millie looks toward the car, but she doesn't even try to walk up there. If she really wanted to meet Brooke, Millie had *so* many chances to do it. I wouldn't put it past her to know exactly where Brooke went to school or know at what time we leave for Christmas-light-watching.

Running into someone in New York City seems impossible, but not for someone who has tendencies to stalk. If Millie really wanted to, she would find a way to catch a glimpse of Brooke.

Or she could ask her goddamn parents for a picture. Holly and Mitch have enough.

“Why?”

Millie scoffs like she can’t believe I just asked that. She can be happy that’s all I question because if it were up to me, I’d like to remind her—once again—that Brooke is *not* her daughter. She is *mine*.

I’ve raised Brooke. On my own, mostly.

“She is my daughter, Miles. I want to see her. I have the *right* to see her.”

“The only rights you have as her ‘mother’ are to leave her alone until *she* ever wants to meet you.” I don’t think Brooke ever will. Once I eventually tell Brooke the whole story when she’s a little older, I don’t think she will want to get to know the woman who abandoned her like she was nothing.

And if she does want to meet Millie one day, I am happy to reach out to the Scott’s to make that happen for my daughter’s sake. They won’t ever have any kind of relationship, but should Brooke ever need the confirmation that Millie never wanted Brooke, who am I to keep her from it?

As long as my daughter has no idea what’s going on or has the ability to decide things like meeting her mother rationally, I will keep her away from Millie.

“That’s not fair. How come you get to have her every day and I am not even allowed to see her *once*?!”

“Because I am her father. Because I *love* my daughter and never saw her as someone who ruined my life. Because I didn’t dip out the second she was born and came back once I realized her only parent was now married to my twin sibling.”

She stays quiet for a moment, remorse gleaming in her eyes until anger takes over. “She’s not your daughter. You weren’t the one to get me pregnant.”

My eyes close as I take a deep breath, trying to keep my blood from boiling. *I will not sink down to her level of stupidity*.

“Okay,” I say blankly. “And still I am more of a parent to her than you’ll ever be, so…”

I turn around and make my way back to the car, leaving Millie standing without looking back.

Only when I have my hand on the car door handle do I glance back one last time. “And Millie? If anyone ever finds you near this apartment complex again, you will end up in jail.”

My application for a restraining order against Millie has finally gotten approved. Only took a few weeks because they had to investigate on the matter, but I got the confirmation this morning. She’s no longer allowed to near either me, Emory, or our children within 300 feet.

Harassment and stalking, not sure Millie should be proud to have both in her files at the mere age of twenty-two.

As to Millie’s lousy attempt in scaring me, Brooke is my daughter. For the first time in my life, I am glad my father made me take a paternity test shortly after Brooke was born, back when Millie wasn’t announced dead yet.

I had far more to worry about than my child potentially not being my child, and I was furious with my father, but it definitely comes in handy now.

My father was a little worried Millie might’ve gotten pregnant from someone else and just said it was me because she knew I had money. It wouldn’t have been the first time someone tried to bound themselves to rich people using that specific method.

I doubted she even cared about *that* back then. But now I am really glad I had that stupid test done, despite not having had any distrust in Millie about it. It saves me a whole lot of worrying now.

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Chapter 80

“have I told you lately / I’m grateful you’re mine”— Nothing by Bruno Major

Miles

I CAN’T BELIEVE THIS.

My wife sent me off to get her something to eat, only for me to come back and finding Eden lie on Emory’s stomach, laughing every time she says his name.

Emory and I were supposed to be a team and watch Eden reach his milestones *together*, not her sending me away to experience them on her own.

“Next time, you can cook your own pasta,” I say as I set down the plate on the nightstand closest to my wife.

My son carefully tries to find me, smiling all cutely when he does. His face scrunches up and my heart leaves my entire body at his smile.

“He just started doing it.” Emory taps Eden’s nose with her index finger to get his attention. In seconds, he swings his head around to stare at my wife. “Plus, he loves me more. Right, Eden?”

That kid starts to laugh.

I pick Eden up, hold his face to the height of mine. “Do you prefer your mommy over me?” He can’t answer, but it’s worth a try, right?

He nods. I know it wasn’t a nod-nod and that he didn’t intend to do it. It was just him trying to keep his head up but *fuck*. That traitorous little devil.

I stare at my son, flabbergasted by his audacity. He gets that from his mother. For sure.

“I gave you *life*, mini sir,” I say, earning myself a snort from my wife.

Her eyebrows are raised when I look at Emory. “You did nothing but… well, you know. The rest was all me.”

“Exactly. I did the most important part.” It’s a shame she doesn’t want to see that. “Right, Eden?”

Nothing.

Eden stares at me without so much to *one* sign of a laughter. Not even a twitch.

“Can you put Eden—”

He bursts into laughter. My face falls as I stare into the distance while wondering where the fuck I went wrong with this kid.

He’s four months old and he’s already picking favorites.

Because I am petty, I ban him to the one place I know he’ll hate because it’s far away from his oh so beloved mother. His crib.

Eden doesn’t hate his crib, not when he’s tired, anyway.

He has this hanging crib toy with light-up stars and a moon that *very* slowly spins around in a circle, and he loves watching it. He always tries to reach for either of the stars, it makes him tired pretty fast. The toy hangs too far up for Eden to reach anything yet, but he tries to every single day over and over again.

When I’m back next to my wife, she pretends I’m not even there while eating her salmon pasta. She didn’t eat dinner with us, so I’m glad she’s eating now. However, that doesn’t change the fact she secretly turned *our* son against me.

I lift her face to mine with two fingers, scowling. “You stole my son from me.”

That woman has the audacity to smirk. Like I said, Eden’s just like his mother already. “Does that bruise your ego?”

I nod, holding a hand over my heart. “Very much so.”

Emory sticks out her bottom lip, pouting with fake empathy. “Would back rubs make it better?”

I shake my head, then tilt my head slightly when I think about the offer. Back rubs sound good. “On second thought…” I pull my shirt over my head, throwing it across the room on the floor. That’s a tomorrow problem.

“That’s it?” I ask, watching my wife as she sets her plate aside. There’s like half of it left, but that’s better than nothing.

“Yeah, I’m sorry…”

I push Emory to lie down. Climbing up on the bed, I lie down on top of my wife. Not fully because I don’t want to squash her, but enough to have at least my upper body pressed to hers. My head rests right on her boobs, her arms sneaking around my torso so she can trail her nails up and down my back.

“Don’t apologize, darling. It’s okay. Small steps, remember?” It’s hard finding your way out of unhealthy habits, but it’s possible. And as long as Emory keeps on trying, it’s a win.

I hum into my wife’s chest, more than satisfied with my head on one boob and my hand on the other.

“What would your friends say if they saw you like this right now?” Emory asks in a mocking way.

“I don’t care,” I mumble. “They probably do the same thing with their girlfriends.”

“Act like Mr. Tough-Guy and then want to be babied?”

I nod. “It’s in the boyfriend handbook. Be protective with danger around, get rewarded when you’re back at home in form of back rubs from the one you love.” I don’t think there’s an actual boyfriend handbook out there, and if there is, I don’t want to know what kind of old white man has written it. Perhaps I should write my own, just so I can proof its existence.

Call it: “*How to be a fucking good boyfriend like the ones in books*.” Some boys out there need it.

“So then what does the *husband* handbook say about it?”

“The same thing but husbands get way more kisses than boyfriends.” For a short moment, I lift my head, stretch up enough so I can steal a kiss from my wife only to lie back down like I’ve never moved an inch.

“I see.” Emory chuckles, now pushing one hand into my hair to massage my scalp. God, I don’t want her to stop, ever.

Minutes or hours—probably not hours—pass and Emory’s still giving me the best back rubs of my life. The only sounds in the room are both of our breaths, and Eden’s occasional sleeping noises. If I didn’t feel Emory’s hand move, I’d even think she fell asleep.

“Daddy.” Brooke comes waddling into the bedroom, her bare feet tapping onto the marble flooring so loudly, she might as well be stomping.

I don’t react because I know Brooke’s about two seconds away from jumping up on my back just to make sure I am awake. And if I was asleep, I’d be awake then, so it’s a win-win for her. Even if I react, she’d still jump onto my back or do anything else. *Usually.*

“I think he’s asleep, Brookie,” I hear Em say in a soft tone, still tracing her nails up and down my back. If she continues to do that, I might actually fall asleep in a second.

“But he didn’t even say night-night.” The mattress dips where Brooke climbs up onto the bed, crawling over to me. Even with my eyes closed I know she’s seated right in front of me, staring at me with confusion.

I think in my daughter’s world, she’s the only one who has to sleep because every time she’s awake and I’m not, she makes sure to wake me up. Though, Emory is allowed to sleep, so maybe Brooke just hates *me* being asleep.

Suddenly, I feel Brooke lay her hand on my face before opening one of my eyes herself. “Are you awake, Daddy?”

“No.”

“But you just talked, Daddy.”

“Don’t think I did.” I bury my head a little deeper into my wife’s chest, hearing her sweet giggles. I love Emory’s giggles. And her laughter. And her smiles. And the way her eyes crinkle. And the little dimple that appears on the right side of her face when she does either of those.

And I love her. Just her. Everything about her. Even the fact that she hates food.

“Can I sleep here tonight?” Brooke asks.

I roll over on my back, despite wishing I could just lie here on top of my wife for the rest of my life. Bringing more space than wanted between Em and I, I nod for Brooke to get between us. She does so with no hesitation.

I get up from the bed for a short moment to turn off the lights, but when I come back, I find my daughter all cuddled up to my wife. It’s cute, really.

However. “Now you’re also stealing my daughter, I see.” I get into bed, keeping a safe distance from both of my girls. They both giggle like me being severely hurt over getting both of my children stolen is nothing but funny.

They’re lucky I happen to love all three of them, otherwise I wouldn’t tolerate that behavior.

Brooke turns around, scootching closer to me until she’s close enough to press her head right into my chest. One of her tiny arms drapes over my body, at least as far as it gets. “Don’t be jealous, Daddy.”

“I’m not jealous,” I mutter under my breath. I’m really not. I may pretend to be but seeing Brooke happy and comfortable around Emory is the best to ever happen.

“I always love you more, okay, Daddy?”

Sighing heavily, I finally close my arms around Brooke, peppering kisses to the top of her head. “Promise?”

“*Oui, promis*.”

As my eyes meet Emory’s, I can see the smile on her face even through the dark room. When she notices me staring, Emory mouths, *I love you*.

I love you too, I mouth back.

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Epilogue

“you’re everything I need”—Don’t Deserve You by Plumb

Miles

Four Years Later

It’s one of those rare days where both of my kids are still fast asleep at seven in the morning. The whole apartment is quiet, and for once I actually enjoy the silence.

I love that this apartment is filled with laughter and children’s giggles all the time. That it’s filled with love and silliness. But every now and then I do need a moment to just breathe. To just exist without a screaming kid asking for my attention.

It really doesn’t happen often. Eden’s always awake around six in the morning. Brooke sleeps in sometimes, but nine is still early in my book. Having both kids asleep at seven a.m. is a miracle.

Now it’s only the cats around here somewhere, but I’m guessing they’re asleep as well, which is also a miracle because usually they’d be meowing for some food the second either Emory or I wake up.

My wife is also still asleep, and if I could, I would’ve just stayed in bed, and spent some time all cuddled up to her. But I have breakfast to make because I know that the silence is over in a very short time and then Eden, or Brooke, or both will come to me and ask for food. They don’t ask Emory. Neither would I if I’m being honest.

They’re getting banana pancakes today, something easy. Maybe a few chopped up fruits too.

Just as I’m about to start frying, I can hear the creak of a door being opened. I don’t look up to see who’s woken up, but I realize soon enough when someone wraps their arms around me from behind covering the both of us up with a blanket.

Emory presses her head into my back, sighing. “Come back to bed.”

“Darling, it’s seven in the morning. The kids will be up soon.”

I can feel her head shake. “Brooke was awake an hour ago.”

“Then where is she?” Probably with either one of my friends.

“She asked if she could go meet up with Reece. I texted Colin to see if he knows whether his parents are awake and he said yes, he was about to head out to go meet them for breakfast, so I asked if he could take Brooke with him. He did. She’s with the Carter’s now.”

Okay, that’s not all too surprising. Brooke meets up with Reece a lot. At least thrice a week.

“What about Eden?”

“He’s with Grey for the day.”

I set the spatula down, now wondering what I’m going to do with all this batter. Refrigerate it and use it later, I guess.

“Getting rid of our kids, I see.” I turn around in my wife’s arms, lifting her face to mine before I press a soft kiss to her lips.

“Mm-hmm.” She smiles at me with closed eyes, obviously still trying to keep her sleeping-state.

“Why’d you get out of bed if you’re still sleepy, darling?”

“I missed you.”

“I slept next to you all night,” I remind her.

“Yes, but I was unconscious so technically that doesn’t count.”

Chuckling, I pick my wife up, lifting her into a front piggy bag so I can carry her back into our bedroom.

When I lay her down and try to straighten my back, I can't because Emory keeps her arms wrapped around my neck as well as her legs around my hips. "You never kiss me anymore," she complains, talking complete bullshit right now.

"You and me both know that's not true."

She groans. "Fine. You never say you love me anymore."

Again, bullshit. There hasn't been a single day I haven't said those words to her in three-and-a-half years. Even when we fight, I still make sure she knows I love her.

"What are you trying to accomplish with this, Em?"

Emory drops her arms and legs, lying on our bed like a reckless starfish. I quickly throw the covers over her body to ensure she isn't freezing. It's February which means it's still quite cold. We do turn on the floor heating but Emory's still freezing all the time. It could be seventy-seven degrees in here and she'd still be cold. It's around sixty-four in our bedroom though.

She ignores my question, but I know exactly what she's waiting for. "Are you staying here with me?"

"Yeah."

Emory lifts one side of the blanket for me, quickly covering up my body when I lie next to her. She snuggles up to me, an arm and leg draped over my body. I lay my arm over her body as well, just to hold her close to me.

"Happy anniversary, Em," I whisper, then kiss her lips.

She squeals, pressing her lips so hard to mine, she might as well be trying to push her whole face into my head. "You didn't forget," she whispers as we pull apart.

"I'd never." Last year, we were separated for our wedding anniversary due to my flight getting cancelled. I had to head over to L.A. because of an issue at the Rêverie. I wanted to take my family with me, but unfortunately Brooke had to go to school so we could cross that. I mean, I could've said she

was sick for a day or two, but it felt wrong saying she's sick and then take her to California.

"I decided not to upload an anniversary post today. It's just going to be you and me. All day long. No interruptions. No public appearances. Just you and me in this bed. Watching movies. Eating snacks. Kissing and cuddling. And doing more than kissing and cuddling."

"More, huh?" I smirk. "What's that?"

Emory runs a finger over my biceps, biting her lip. "Like working on child number three."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. I make enough money with my art now, we can afford a third child now." We could even before that, but I give her an A for effort.

I'm happy to see her hard work pay off though. About a year ago, Emory switched from painting to making comics together with Sofia. Emory illustrates them while Sofia writes the stories. She also illustrates special editions for the novels Sofia writes. They're more realistic and less comic like. They still give off the whole book-feeling just certain scenes have an illustration to them.

Her social medias mostly get to see her sketches or random drawing practices.

She still models sometimes, but it's not her main occupation anymore. She has a shoot like once a month, probably just to keep her followers, that have greatly increased, believing she's still somewhat professional. Her main posts now consist of candids of me and the kids—the kids without faces—or random pictures I took of her. And trust me, I take a whole lot of pictures. I like capturing her beauty. I'm bad at it, but apparently good enough to post those pictures online.

"I am so proud of you, Emory," I say between kisses I plant down her neck. "I knew you could do it."

She hums with satisfaction. "I have quite the fanbase at home, they keep me motivated."

“Is that so?”

“Yup. Especially that husband of mine. He’s a great inspiration for my Instagram art.”

“Yeah?” I breathe a little heavier, rolling Emory onto her back. I hover over her, pressing my growing erection against her pussy. “Glad I can help.”

Emory lets out a soft whimper, her eyes setting on fire with the lustful desire that’s burning inside of her right now. But even through her lust-glazed eyes, I can tell how much love she has for me and that’s one of the best gifts I’ve ever gotten.

Emory’s love is the best thing that ever happened to me. I should’ve known it back when we were younger, but at least I came to my senses. And I fully plan on keeping her forever, making sure she’s happy until she takes her very last breath, and I’ll do whatever it takes to make it possible, just to have her look at me like I’ve hung the moon and the stars for her for the rest of our lives.

I’ve hurt her once—granted, without knowing—but I plan on never letting it happen again.

She’s it for me.

My wife.

My world.

My everything.

The End

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Bonus Chapter

“I don’t think we’ll ever change”—Here’s To Never Growing Up by Avril Lavigne

Miles

“Did you know Grey is using our son to impress people on the streets, including his fans?” I ask my wife, not caring about the fact that we’re in the middle of a hockey crowd, trying to get through to the locker room. We’re not technically allowed in there, but I have best-friend-and-neighbor credits.

Yup. Neighbor credits. As we’re still living in an apartment complex with most of the team, I get my fair share of talking to the guys without Grey, Colin, or Aaron inviting me to one of their games, or practice, or parties. They also love begging me to squeeze them in at the Rêverie, which is a lot more complicated than they would ever want to believe.

“Eden’s quite the charmer, so I can’t blame him,” Emory laughs.

“A charmer? He’s the devil.” That kid bites me all the time. Like his mother. But unlike Emory, he bites-bites. Like a piranha. But only me. I swear that’s Emory’s fault.

She gasps, covering one of Eden’s ears with her hand. “Don’t talk about him like that, no wonder he bites you. Right, munch?” Eden nods. Little traitor. He may look like me, has the same blue eyes as me, the same nose—so Emory insists—and my hair, but that little devil is *so* much more like his mother than me.

“Brooke never bit me,” I mutter, then look down beside me to find Brooke smiling up at me. She’s gotten so big. I hate it. Brooke’s turning nine tomorrow, that’s basically the equivalent to me being a grandpa. “Right, baby?”

“*Laissez-moi en dehors de ça*.”

“You’re supposed to be on my side here, Brooke.” Kids, I am telling you. One minute they love you, the next they’re stabbing you in the back, pretending they don’t even know you.

“And you said Uncle Grey would take me out for ice cream yesterday. He didn’t.”

Right. My bad. “He was busy.” Actually, Brooke’s mother boycotted in front of the apartment complex, and I didn’t want to let Brooke out there. Millie still tries to reach out every now and then. I’m not sure why, but it’s not to get to know Brooke. She’s tried to get custody for Brooke, but that backfired big time because of her own mistakes. It didn’t even go to court. Even if she *did* manage to start a trial, she would’ve lost.

I have told Brooke about Millie. And as of now, Brooke has no interest in getting to know her mother. She says Em’s her mother, which, when she first said it, gave my wife almost a heart attack from happiness. Brooke still calls her *M*emory though, that never changed.

“He isn’t too busy stopping by for lunch and dinner every single day, Daddy.”

“You know what? You be mad at Grey for that, not me.” Though it is my fault Grey didn’t take her out for ice cream yesterday. But that’s something Grey can deal with.

We finally make it through the crowd, ready to round the corner to the locker rooms when one of the security guys stops us. “No entry,” he says. “This is team territory only.”

Brooke sighs, pulling her hand away from mine. She crosses her arms over her chest, ready to argue with that guy. Who am I to stop her?

“I am part of the team.”

The Security-guy kneels down to her, which in Brooke's book is disrespectful. She might be eight, but that kid got quite the big mouth in the last couple of years as well. She's still the sweet little girl I raised with a passion for princesses, just not when strangers get in her way.

And someone kneeling down to be on the same height as her, yeah, she doesn't like that. Unless it's me—not when we argue—or Emory. My friends are allowed to do that as well, depending on her mood. If she's mad at someone, then kneeling down and indicating that you're coming down to her level is the wrong move.

"You are? You practice with them?" the security guy asks, mocking a fucking eight-year-old.

Brooke nods. "Sometimes I do." Which is the truth. Brooke picked up ballet at the age of five, almost six, but thanks to Reece begging Brooke to try hockey, she's now also on a kids hockey team, sometimes practicing with her uncles and the rest of the NYR for fun.

"See the thing is, I don't believe you."

"Is there a problem?" Grey's voice makes it through to us just as he exists the locker room. And just like that, Brooke storms past the security guy and right into Grey's arms. Or, well, almost into his arms because she stops herself when she remembers she's mad at him.

"They're not allowed back here," Security-guy says, giving my wife and me a heavy show of annoyance.

"They are. They're with me and the team." Like Lily and Sofia, but they both stayed home today. Something about both of them not feeling great, I think.

"Whatever." He moves out of the way to let Emory, Eden, and me through.

"Where were you yesterday?" Brooke asks as she follows Grey into the locker room. We only ever go inside when the guys are done showering and dressed, just so it's safe for the kids. You'd think they'd run out the second they're

finished here, but nope, these guys somehow love to just sit here and talk.

I still think not going pro was the best I could've done for my family, but some part of me really misses this whole bond I know they have. At least I'm somewhat a part of it.

"Yesterday? I was at home," Grey answer, only to earn himself the grumpiest look my daughter has to offer.

"Aha. Then why weren't we at the ice cream parlor like you promised?"

"Ohhhhh." Colin sucks in some air through gritted teeth. He knows why. "You messed up big time there, Grey."

"There's only one way to rectify this," Aaron adds and picks up Brooke from the floor. He presses his lips to her cheek, and she laughs, then returns the cheek-kiss.

"Double ice cream day!" They both cheer in unison like they've completely teamed up against Grey. They probably have.

Double ice cream day means they go there twice in one day, and Brooke gets double the amount of ice cream each time. She barely manages to finish the usual amount of ice cream, but she just takes it home with her and eats it later.

"Fine," Grey gives in. "Tomorrow?"

"Why not today?"

"Because I have a friend over, little princess," Grey answers.

"A friend?" That's news to me. Grey never has a friend over. It used to be fuck buddies only. He wouldn't tell Brooke that, obviously, but he still never refers to them as friends. Which means there's only one other person. But as far as I know, he's not *just* a friend. "Luan's in New York?"

Can't believe they're still in touch to be honest. They live on two opposite sides of the country, meet once a year for a few weeks, though it's getting a whole lot more recently. They're dating, but they keep their relationship a secret from the public. Brooke knows of Luan, so I'm not quite sure why he didn't just tell her it's Luan who's visiting.

“For a game, yes.” *Yeah, right.*

“Uh-huh. And all this has nothing to do with him moving in with you next January?”

“Leave him alone.” Emory lays a hand on my shoulder. Eden tries to mimic her by laying his hand on Emory’s shoulder. He does that a lot, do whatever Emory does gesture wise. “Your best friend is allowed to have other friends.” *Friends,* but they’re more? Way more.

“Thank you.”

“Daddy don’t be sad, you can always come to my tea parties with Eden and Reece.” Every Sunday, Brooke has an actual tea party with Eden and Reece, just before Taco night. They make Emory bake small cookies, ones that don’t crumble too much so Eden won’t choke on them. She even makes them both dress up with a feather boa and everything. Super fancy.

However, they drink juice instead of tea.

I’m not sure Eden enjoys those as much as Brooke does, but he’s just happy to have someone to play with him. And Reece, he’d even dress up as a princess for my daughter. I’ve got to keep a good eye out for that little fella.

“That’s very nice of you, baby.”

“Enough of the chitchat,” one of the other players says, “let’s talk about the important stuff. Who’s got some tea to spill?”

Did I mention the guy is twenty-eight years old?

“Sofia’s pregnant,” Aaron announces. I choke on my own saliva, having to slap myself to make sure this isn’t a dream.

“No way!” Colin looks at Aaron with huge eyes, as shocked as me. “So is Lily!”

WHAT?!

“Really?” Aaron’s jaw drops. “How far along?”

“Like ten weeks.”

“SOFIA TOO!” They hug each other like this is the best thing to ever happen to them, getting their wives pregnant at the same time.

Why’s everyone pregnant? Emory’s about five months along, and now Sofia and Lily are pregnant as well.

“What in the fish tank is happening?” I ask out loud, but I am mostly talking to myself. Swear to god, if Grey were to say he got someone pregnant, it wouldn’t surprise me anymore.

Actually, it would because I don’t think Luan is able to get pregnant.

“Your friends are trying to up us on the kids,” Emory whispers into my ear, followed by a bunch of naughty things that make my heart stop beating and leave me wondering how I am still breathing despite all this.

The team cheers for them both, but Grey and I stand there in shock. I am happy for Colin and Aaron, no doubt. But what the fuck? When did that happen? When did either of them decide they even wanted to try for a baby? At the same time.

Just two years ago, Lily said she never wanted kids because she fears passing down her depression to them and she wouldn’t want them to suffer like she had. And now she’s pregnant.

Sofia and Aaron doesn’t surprise me all too much. They’ve been planning their whole life together since they were like three. And I am so happy for them, truly. It isn’t always that two childhood best friends end up together. There’s no doubt in my mind that they’ll stay together until they both die at the very same time.

I’m also happy for Colin and Lily, just that one was far more unexpected like we’ve already established.

And still, I go to hug both of them. They deserve a happy family. A happy life.

So does Grey. I know he’s with Luan now, but they barely see each other due to distance problems and because Grey is on the road more often than he’s at home.

“How about some celebratory drinks?” One of the other guy’s suggests.

“Or we meet up at the Rêverie in an hour and make Miles cook for us,” Grey suggests.

“YES!” They all scream, and still my daughter chants the loudest. She eats that food *daily* because I have to cook for her at least once a day, for obvious reasons.

The Rêverie is closed today due to a private event happening this afternoon. It’s a birthday party for some celebrity I’ve never even heard of. But that event ended an hour ago.

I grab my wife’s hand in mine, needing her support here. “You better help me in the kitchen.”

“I’ll just accidentally poison everyone,” she replies.

“That’s fine. Less obnoxious jocks that try to convince me to cook for them at least once a week.” Besides, I’d be worried if my wife didn’t accidentally poison someone with whatever she cooked.

The kids and I have been sick for a day at least once a year thanks to Emory’s cooking. Thank god she lets me do the cooking. I eat most of what she cooks every time because I don’t want to hurt her feelings, knowing fully well she’s aware of how bad it is.

I kiss Emory’s lips, only for Eden to cover his eyes and scream “Ew!” as loud as he can. This will never get old.

So, just to annoy my son a little, I kiss Emory one more time. Not for long though because Eden puts his hands on my face and pushes me away from his mother.

“My mommy,” he mumbles and leans his head against Emory’s, making sure to look at me like I’ve just committed a crime by kissing my wife. In his eyes, I most definitely did.

God, I love that kid. It’s a shame he prefers Emory to me, but I understand. I prefer Emory to myself as well.

“That’s my wife, mini sir,” I remind my son, but he giggles and quickly shakes his head, disagreeing. The disrespect, I am telling you.

But then Brooke wraps her arms around my body, pressing her head right into my stomach. “Don’t be sad,

Daddy. Eventually, Eden will fall asleep and then you can kiss Memory all you want. I won't complain if I see it."

I pick her up, pressing a kiss to her cheek. "You promise?" Brooke grins widely, nodding. She moves in closer, returning the kiss before swinging her arms around my neck like a little monkey.

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