

KANE BROTHERS BOOK 2



HATE IT WITH YOU



MAKENNA CLEAVER

HATE IT WITH YOU

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To anyone too afraid to let their walls down.

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CONTENT WARNINGS

This book contains explicit sexual content, profanity, and topics that may be sensitive to some readers. In the interest of preserving the reader experience and avoiding spoilers, I have listed all trigger warnings on my website. For a full list of content warnings, please visit: www.makennacleaver.com

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A NOTE FOR READERS

This book is the second installment of the Kane Brothers series. While it can be read as a stand alone, the characters in this story are first introduced in book one, *Fake It with You*.

It is highly recommended but not required, that you read *Fake It with You* before reading *Hate It with You* if you want the full context regarding these characters.

Happy reading!

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PROLOGUE

ALEX

Eight Months Ago

Two mourning doves etched into my skin dance across the back of my left hand. Their movements flow easily as I tap my fingers on the steering wheel to the beat of the music. The bass energizes me for the day ahead as it rattles my bones and vibrates the seat beneath me in my red Mustang.

A few pieces of my hair fall onto my forehead as the cool summer breeze flows through the open windows. The strands continue to tickle my brow as I check the rearview mirror.

Shorter on the sides, longer on top, it's the same haircut I've had for five years now because it's what looks best on me. Fixing the few strands that fell forward, I carefully brush them back into their rightful place.

The only time it's acceptable for my hair to be tousled is after a fight in the ring, and considering my brother mentioned we'd have a couple of guests during this summer's vacation, I'll be damned if I don't look my best.

The forest of evergreen trees rushes past me as I push the speedometer higher, my foot pressed hard against the gas pedal. My mind clears, the sensations of the drive calming my senses as I wind down the narrow road.

A smile spreads wide across my face when my family's lake house appears. The late afternoon sun shines down on the brown rock that cascades across the side of the house. When the lake behind it comes into

view, the bright reflection off the glistening water threatens to blind me through my sunglasses.

My foot doesn't let off the gas pedal as I get closer to the house, already spotting a few bodies standing in the driveway. As I do, the whine of my supercharger flows through the air, mixing with the bass of my music. Revving further, I push the supercharger harder as though I'm the conductor and the sounds are my symphony.

That whine will never get old.

As I get closer to the house, I place a hand on the Kane family belt lying in my passenger seat. It's larger than the one we had a few years ago, but I insisted on one reminiscent of a WWE belt. Considering I've won the Kane Family Games more summers than my brothers can say, I knew I needed something I'd be proud to show off.

Turning down my music just enough that my brothers can hear me, I hang the belt out of the window as I pull into the driveway of the lake house.

When I come to a stop, I throw my body halfway out of the driver's side window, the doorframe cutting into my side as my eyes land on two out of three of my brothers. Leo, only a year away from entering his thirties and four years older than me, looks as youthful as ever, standing near his classic 1968 Mustang.

Theo, on the other hand, looks more mature than he was at his college graduation a couple of months ago. Given that he's three years younger than me, and I spot a glimpse of what looks to be a new Mustang by his side, I have a feeling his newfound maturity is only a front. A scheme to convince our oldest brother to hire him at the family company, I'm sure. How the two women standing next to him fit into that scheme is intriguing to say the least.

My eldest brother by ten years, on the other hand, is nowhere to be found. It's unlike Roman to be late, but knowing him, he's off running an errand to ensure the best stay for all of us. He's never been one not to take care of any of us, something I'm sure we're all grateful for but probably never say enough.

Though I can't wait to see what unfolds between him and Theo this summer. It will be entertaining, that's for sure.

Raising the belt above my head, I shout over the music still blaring through my car, "Ready to lose to me again this year, motherfuckers?" My

smile widens when my brothers exchange a glance before taking a step toward me. Once I hit my teens, antagonizing them became my favorite pastime.

I was eleven years old when we first started coming here every summer. The Kane Family Games quickly formed into a yearly tradition to distract us from the fact that we lost our parents so young. Though when Roman came up with the idea, I'm not sure he expected me to win as many times as I have.

Hence why I have the belt this year. I've held the winning title for three years straight, and I don't plan on giving it up anytime soon, even if Leo has been determined to take it from me.

Before I have a chance to open my car door, my brothers are moving toward me, and fast. I knew they weren't going to let my greeting go without giving me a hard time. I barely have a chance to readjust in an effort to protect my ribs before my brothers' hands are on me.

Hauling me out of the driver's side window, Leo's arms wrap under mine as Theo grabs my legs, both of them tackling me to the ground. The music continues in the background, painting the perfect scene that could easily be set in any award-winning movie.

Leo's hands are quick to restrain my arms as Theo wrestles the belt from me. The smell of freshly cut grass invades my nostrils as I feign defeat, letting my brothers believe they've gotten the upper hand on me.

Laughing, I watch as Theo saunters away with the belt in his hands.

Cocky bastard.

Leo releases my arms and stands to offer me his hand as a peace offering. Squinting, I look up at him, taking his hand as he helps me off the ground.

"Next time, don't talk shit, and maybe we'll give you a nicer greeting." Leo laughs as a chuckle escapes my throat, my hands working to straighten out my clothing.

My eyes scan my clothing for any grass stains as I brush a few freshly cut blades off my dark gray T-shirt, my gym's logo scrawled across the front in red. I do the same to my black shorts and sneakers, a sigh of relief escaping my lips when they come up clean.

"Jesus Christ, you look fine." Leo lands a pat to my shoulder, his reassuring words doing nothing to dampen my concerns over my appearance.

The glare I throw his way prompts his hand to leave my shoulder as he takes a step back from me, smiling though understanding that he hit a nerve.

It isn't until I watch as Theo throws a smug grin my way that I decide I've had enough of letting my brothers have the upper hand. After all, I certainly can't look bad in front of the guests Roman essentially dared Theo to bring with him this year.

Whatever plan Theo has in place, it's not my job to make a bad impression.

Taking long strides, I catch up to Theo, throwing off his balance as I wrap my arm around his shoulders. My moves are swift as I yank him down into a headlock. As usual, he tries to wiggle out of it, but my grip tightens as I fight Theo for the belt back.

He really should take training with me more seriously if it's this easy for me to overpower him. Especially given how tall he is compared to my six-foot-one height.

After successfully wrestling the belt out of his hands, I sling it over my shoulder just as the music from my car cuts out. I don't need to glance behind me to know that Leo is ensuring my Mustang is parked properly. Always the ever-responsible one.

I've been too preoccupied with my brothers to pay any attention to the two guests that have been standing in the driveway watching our display of testosterone. Still gripping Theo, I reach my hand out to the woman who's stepped closer to us. I assume this is the woman who is supposedly his "girlfriend" per the family group chat.

Theo begins to talk, but when his voice comes out gurgled, I loosen my grip. It's enough for him to push free and stand to his full height. He may be taller, but he knows I have years of training on him, so he steps away. I smile at my younger brother.

"Alex, this is Sienna, my girlfriend." Theo's tone comes out clipped, enough for me to know I should back off for the time being. Given the fact that I'm not a *complete* asshole, I oblige.

I reach my hand out, and Sienna meets me halfway to shake my hand. "It's nice to meet you." I throw a glance at Theo, and my suspicions are all but confirmed. They're more than likely not actually dating, but he sure as shit can't take his eyes off her.

I don't blame him. She's certainly his type, with her slim build, darker skin tone, soft facial features, and dark brown curly hair. Her brown eyes

that seem to be locked onto Theo every time she thinks he isn't looking tells me he's her type too. She's cute, and their awkwardness at least assures me that this summer won't be boring.

Sienna looks to her left, the opposite of where Theo stands, and my gaze follows hers.

When my light-blue eyes meet her deep-blue irises, my world is thrown upside down as her beauty threatens to knock me on my ass in front of everyone.

An idiot. That's what I must be for not noticing her sooner. When her eyes stay locked onto mine, a glint of rebellion shining bright, the earth beneath my feet begins to melt away.

Her name. I must know her name.

Wanting to make a good impression, I use my signature line, deepening my tone just a tad.

"And you are? Single, I hope," I say as I reach my hand toward her, punctuating my sentence with my best smile, lacing just enough lust through it to get my message across. Her eyes dart to the two doves permanently inked into my skin before she places her delicate hand in mine.

The moment our hands meet, a jolt of lightning is sent through my body. By the way her chest expands wide at our touch, her lips parting slightly, I know she felt it too.

She shakes my hand once before letting go. "Annoyed with your shitty-sounding car, nice to meet you." Theo snickers beside me as my hand turns cold in her absence. My heart rate picks up at her response, a laugh building in my throat as she seemingly calls bullshit on the mask no one else has been able to crack.

I don't even know her name yet, and she can see right through me. I like her already.

Smirking, I wait to see if she'll eventually give me her name. Though when she finally breaks eye contact, I let my eyes wander before she has a chance to catch me. Something tells me she wouldn't hesitate to land a fist to my jaw if she caught me looking.

Though I'd probably say thank you if she did.

Her brown hair cascades past her shoulders, framing her face in gentle waves that complement the season. Her T-shirt and shorts expose her lightly sun-kissed skin, decorated with tattoos much like mine. However, I'm quick to stop my mind from wondering what other tattoos hide beneath her

clothing. Her thick but toned curves match her short frame perfectly, and I can't help but focus in on the small strip of exposed skin around her abdomen.

Careful, Alex... you're obsessing.

She readjusts under my gaze, the trail of piercings on her ear catching the sunlight just enough to pull my gaze toward her face again. A white flame lights in her blue eyes as her facial features turn up into a scowl as she looks back at me.

If I didn't know any better, I'd think she wants nothing to do with me. Which would be true if she didn't keep glancing at my lips, her body betraying her face as she leans in my direction ever so slightly.

I always did like a challenge.

"Beth, her name is Beth." Sienna smiles as she wraps an arm around Beth's shoulders.

Beth.

Short for Elizabeth, I'd assume, but that's not enough. I need to know her last name. Her middle name. Where she grew up. What her favorite color is. What her tattoos mean. If there are any tattoos I can trace with my tongue.

Stop obsessing, Alex.

Shaking off my thoughts, I smile at the women standing before me. "It's nice to meet both of you."

With a deep breath, I turn toward my brothers, hoping to change the subject and dissipate my newfound obsession. Though it doesn't do much to ease my mind as her name plays on repeat in my head. It takes all my strength to maintain my composure and salvage my first impression, trying my best not to steal another glance at Beth.

I last thirty seconds before losing the fight with myself.

I glance her way only to find her already looking in my direction. Her eyes dart from mine the moment I look at her. I linger long enough to catch her looking back in my direction a second time.

She does her best to hide the reddening of her cheeks as she turns her nose higher when she looks away. A silent "get over yourself" that has me suppressing a chuckle.

Cat, meet mouse.

After a brief conversation with my brothers regarding Theo's newly purchased Mustang, Leo and I make our way to the house. With the others

lagging, I lower my voice as I ask, “Think I have a shot with Beth?”

Leo glances in her direction, then back at me. “Not a chance.”

I burst into laughter with Leo as we enter the house. Though I steal another look behind me as I do, finding Beth once again contradicting her own attitude as she glares in my direction.

When she evades eye contact with me again, the pull between us grows stronger. An invisible force tugs on something deep within me, begging me to get closer to her. It’s far from a familiar feeling, my brain threatening to convince me it’s all in my head, but it’s something I feel deep within my bones.

She’s mine. She just doesn’t know it yet.

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BETH

Present Day

“**S**on of a bitch!” I scream into the void that is my empty bookstore. Throwing the screwdriver I’m holding in my hand down on the floor, I glare at the uncooperative bookshelf pieces lying in front of me. A twinge hits the base of my spine at the aggressive force of my motions, the rug that lies on top of the concrete floor doing nothing to give my tailbone reprieve.

This is the tenth and final bookshelf I’ve attempted to build today, yet it’s no easier than the first. No longer being able to look at the walnut wood pieces, I kick them away from me, surrendering defeat.

The instruction manual ended up on the other side of the room a few hours ago, right around bookshelf number six.

Lying back on the multicolored floral rug I found at a local thrift shop here in Portland, Oregon, I stretch my arms above my head. After blood has successfully worked its way to my fingertips and toes, I bring my knees into my chest, slowly rocking back and forth. The hard floor bites into each vertebra of my spine, but I sigh at the relief brought to my tailbone.

If money weren’t an issue, I would’ve sprung to get all new wood flooring. Along with fifteen custom built-in bookshelves, with intricate details woven into the molding across the top of each, two large sofas, and several reading chairs to spread out across the store.

Sadly, money isn't that easily acquired, and if it were, I certainly wouldn't be lucky enough to know how to obtain it.

So here I lay, on the floor of my soon-to-open bookstore, surrounded by nine slightly crooked bookshelves. The tenth one, currently dismembered, lies next to me.

Unable to withstand the sharp pain in my spine much longer, I force my body into a sitting position with a palpable lack of grace.

The grunt that leaves my lips when I do is a reminder of how often I've skipped the gym these past three months.

Three months.

That's how long I've been setting up my bookstore, and I'm only one month away from opening shop. I'm so close to my goal, and it feels... overwhelming. Terrifying. Distressing.

Seeing as how I'm down to the last few dollars of my business loan, not that I had that much to begin with, I've had to move forward doing everything myself. It's not that building a few bookshelves is a big deal. It's not. Though after taking into account how long my to-do list is, "building a few bookshelves" has become a much bigger task than it first seemed.

The late winter rain has been in full force this past month, so I haven't had a chance to fully scrape off the old "Bitter Bean Coffee House" logo from the window that takes up half of the front door. Two large windows span the entrance of the building on either side of the old traditionally detailed wooden door. The late evening sun shines through the windows as I look at the old half-scraped coffee logo.

Maybe this will get less overwhelming when it's my logo on the door.

On the opposite side of the shop sits the old coffee counter I've turned into the register area. The expanse of the counter, taking up half the store's length, is a little more than necessary for its intended purpose at my shop. Though if I've learned anything these past few months, it's that I need to use the materials already at my disposal.

Another "Bitter Bean" logo is painted on the front side of the extended counter. A reminder that I still need to apply a fresh coat of paint to the store. It should've been the first thing I did, but I've been indecisive about the color.

Taking a deep breath, I'm also reminded that I still need to find a way to get rid of the burnt coffee smell and whatever else I'm smelling. I can't put

my finger on it, but it's close to turning rancid, the smell a surefire way to repel any new customers walking through the door.

Next to the counter are two large wood tables I've sourced, also from a thrift store, to house more books since I couldn't afford the full fifteen shelves I originally wanted. The multitude of boxes of books I've ordered to fill my shop arrive next week, and it's fair to say that I'm nowhere near prepared.

The one thing that's worked out for me so far is the absolute steal of a deal I got on this building. Not only did rent come at a heavily discounted price, but the apartment upstairs was included. On top of that, when I saw that Wi-Fi and utilities were included, I thought there must be a catch.

Thankfully, there hasn't been one.

The building itself isn't in the best shape. I have a long list of things I need to fix around the shop and my apartment, but I refuse to call the landlord. I'll be damned if I do anything to jeopardize my lease agreement or give the landlord a reason to increase my rent.

Also, I haven't technically met the landlord yet.

Last summer, after college graduation, my best friend Sienna and I went on a lake house vacation to help her secure a job. While I wasn't too keen on the idea of staying with four grown men at their family lake house, I went along after she gave me no choice. Though I'd never let her go alone anyway. Given my past, there's no way I'd let her put herself in danger.

Long story short, she ended up falling in love with the youngest of the Kane brothers, Theo, and in the process, I found this place.

Theo knows the owner and was able to hook me up with a lease agreement. He swore that the owner was a good person and he's known them for a very long time. I figured I could trust Theo, so I signed the lease agreement after falling in love with the place.

After months of searching for the perfect home for my bookstore, I knew nothing would beat this, especially not at the price he was offering me.

I officially got the keys in December and have been working hard to piece together this old building for my bookstore since then. It was only last month that I moved into the apartment upstairs once Sienna's and my lease expired, and she moved in with Theo.

It's odd not living with her. Having known Sienna since kindergarten, we've been inseparable since. I'm happy for her, though learning to live

alone has been an adjustment.

Sienna has been to visit a few times, even helping me pick out the rug for the entryway. Her new job at Rose City Designs, working for Graham Emerson, has her putting in a lot more hours than she anticipated, but I'm happy for her. It's strange not seeing her every day, but I know she's happy, and that's not something I'd want to take away. Not to mention, I can shower whenever I want to now. No longer having to live by her strict shower schedule has been a nice change of pace.

Taking another look outside, I find the parking lot is once again empty on a Friday night with the exception of my small sedan parked in front of the doors. Theo said the landlord owns the place next door and lives in the apartment upstairs, but I haven't seen them in the last month.

It's strange, but I don't think much of it. I'm sure I'll meet them eventually. Besides, it's not like I'm looking to make any more friends. Sienna has always been enough for me, and when she's not around, I'm perfectly happy with the company of my books.

A twinge of pain runs through my chest when my mind floats back to the several boxes of books currently piled in my living room that I've yet to unpack. With so much to do in the shop, I've only had a chance to set up my bed, unpack a few utensils, and load my shower with the necessities. One of these nights I'll unpack my personal collection.

Although one glance at the bookshelf parts lying in front of me tells me tonight is not that night.

The rug squishes beneath my knees as I rise to my feet, lifting the bookshelf to its full height after screwing in the last piece. Now standing, I stretch my limbs, a few wavy strands of my hair falling from my messy bun, tickling the line of earrings I have on my ear. Readjusting my sweatshirt and fixing the wedgie my leggings have given me, I make my way to the front of the store, then step back to look at my work. My hands rest on my hips as I stare at the final bookshelf I've built.

A faint smile overtakes me, my body too tired for anything more. I give myself a silent pat on the back as I look at the bookshelf standing tall, slightly less crooked than the others. Though I'm still convinced that any

imbalances with the shelves have more to do with the material itself and not my tool-wielding abilities.

I've helped plenty of ex-lovers, both women and the occasional man, build enough furniture to know how to use a tool properly. I guess that's what I get for going with the cheapest option I could find.

Though my strict diet of ramen noodles tells me I didn't have much of a choice.

Tucking a few loose strands of my hair behind my ear, my attention is brought to how greasy it's become, my scalp begging for a good wash. My stomach growls, fighting for attention as it sends a not-so-subtle reminder of how negligent I've become of my own needs in the past twelve hours.

When the bookshelves arrived this morning, I ran downstairs to pull them inside. Morning tea in hand and a half-eaten donut held between my teeth, I got to work building them. I was convinced I'd finish by lunch.

Turning around, I stare out into the empty parking lot. The sun has long set behind the horizon, painting the sky a dark blue, with a single streetlamp the only source of light in the open area. My stomach growls again, and I decide to give in to my body's demands. Not only have I not showered, but I haven't eaten since I finished the donut. My body is currently taking its revenge as a result.

Deciding to close up for the night, I begin to close the blinds. I probably should've closed them sooner, but I was afraid if I stopped before the bookshelf was done, I'd never finish.

When I move toward the other window, I notice a small slip of paper blowing in the wind outside. It's wedged just between the crack of the door, the white slip shining bright under the glow of the two small lights on either side of the door.

Unlocking the door, I'm slow to open it, carefully grabbing the paper without it falling. Seems strange as I haven't noticed anyone come by with the exception of a few people going in and out of the building next door today.

Not wanting to keep my body waiting for much longer, I throw the slip of paper in my pocket, deciding I'll read it later. For all I know, it could be a bill or a notice from the landlord about my music volume. Neither of which I'd like to deal with at the moment.

Once the blinds are closed, I double-check the door is locked, pulling on the handle a few times just to be sure. Installing extra locks is one item on

the list of things that need fixing around here, and I hope I can get to it soon.

Walking through the staggered bookshelves strewn about my bookshop, I round the tables next to the checkout counter, heading toward the back room door. I hit the lights as I do so, painting the shop in the dark.

Opening the door to my back room that doubles as an office and storage closet, I'm sure to jiggle the handle three times. It's something I've learned needs to happen in order for the door to work, another repair I've had to add to the list. When the door pops open, I'm met with light again. My quaint desk sits to the left, tucked away in the corner. It's another item I thrifted, the scratches on the top of the desk covered by scattered binders, loose papers, pens and this morning's tea mug.

To the right, three large storage shelves line the walls in the shape of a U. They came with the building and I'm more grateful today than I have been these last few months that I didn't need to build these shelves.

Just in front of me sits another door, leading to the back stairwell. Another plus of this place: the apartment entrance is behind the shop. Sure, there's an exterior door, but it's hidden behind the building. Security is one of my top priorities, especially now that I live alone, and given my upbringing...I'm happy it's not necessarily obvious I'll be living upstairs.

Moving into the stairwell hallway, I lock the door behind me. Two similar doors sit on either side of mine, a few feet away. My bookshop is located in the middle of two other businesses, mine sharing a wall on both sides. The business and apartment to the left of my bookshop have been empty since I moved in.

The other business, the one the landlord owns, is some sort of gym from what Theo was able to tell me. If he hadn't, the bass bumping from it every morning gives it away. I pay it no mind as I've blasted my own music as I slowly work on piecing together my shop. So far, I've heard no complaints from the landlord, and I plan on keeping it that way.

I take the stairs up to my apartment one step at a time, groaning at the pain in my legs from sitting on the hard floor for too long.

When I've made it to my apartment, I'm locking the door behind me when the note slips out of my sweatshirt pocket. As it falls to the floor, the folded piece of paper opens, revealing the words written inside.

I'VE MISSED YOU, ELIZABETH.

My hands begin to shake as I reach down to pick up the note. The handwriting looks far too familiar for my liking. Especially considering there's only one person who calls me Elizabeth.

He's in jail. It can't possibly be him.

Shaking my head to ward off the anxiety, I sigh, tossing the note on the kitchen island to my left. My mind must be playing tricks on me. I'm sure this is just some stupid prank or a weird coincidence. Maybe the last renter's name was also Elizabeth.

I make my way to the bathroom to begin preparing for my shower, doing what I can to forget about the strange note and focus on the month ahead.

One more month of hard work and it'll pay off. My bookstore will finally be open, and my days will be spent surrounded by fictional worlds, fictional friends, fictional families. A dream come true.

In my experience, fiction has always been better than reality.

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BETH

I lay here at 4:23 a.m., wide awake, staring at the ceiling above me. Like most nights this past month, I only got a few hours' rest before my body jolted awake again, stress maintaining its control over my bodily functions.

The sun will rise in only a few hours, my bedroom currently covered in darkness. Only the moonlight filtered through the sheer curtains hung on the windows on either side of my bed provides the faint outline of my sparse bedroom furniture.

I've been working nonstop for the past month since the day I fought with the bookshelves to get them pieced together. I haven't allowed myself to rest, and my body is withholding a good night's sleep as punishment.

Today is the day.

My bookstore will officially be open to the public in a short seven hours, so I'm not sure I'll be falling back asleep anytime soon. Nervous isn't a strong enough word to describe how I feel. Anxious doesn't encompass enough of my worries, and excitement threatens to send me into a never-ending spiral toward impostor syndrome.

Sitting up, I fluff my pillow with more aggression than necessary, plopping back down on my bed dramatically when it does nothing to calm the storm of feelings inside me.

One look at the clock sitting on my small nightstand has me sitting up in bed when I catch sight of what's lying next to it. The note that was left on

my door a month ago. I haven't received anything else since, so I've tried to pay it no mind.

Yet something about the note is making it difficult to ignore. Something about it feels familiar.

Grabbing the note, I read it again and again, until I can't stomach the look of it anymore and toss it on my nightstand. It's something I've done more times than I'd like to admit in the past four weeks. I know I should, but I can't seem to throw it away.

Pulling my eyes away from it, I grab my phone, admitting defeat over getting any more sleep this morning. When I unlock the screen, I notice two missed texts from Sienna.

SIENNA

Can't wait for tomorrow! It's going to be great. Theo and I are so excited.

Have you finished unpacking yet? I can help you! We both know how you are with organization...

I roll my eyes, though a smile spreads wide across my face. We can't all be type A like Sienna, but I'm not as bad with organization as she says I am. Although she caught me red-handed with the whole "still needing to unpack" thing. I've been here for months, and boxes are still spread throughout my apartment.

I'm typing out a reply when a loud thud interrupts me. The sound comes from the living room. When I hear it again, I recognize it as someone knocking on my front door. Given the sun isn't up yet, I jump at the sound. Checking the time again, I see that it's now 4:45 a.m., and my heart pounds as adrenaline floods my veins.

Who the hell...

My eyes dart to the note on my nightstand, and my stomach drops. It couldn't possibly be *him*. Could it?

No, he's in jail. Remember?

I hop out of bed, throwing on my pajama shorts and a hoodie from one of my favorite bands with an upside-down house on it. Slipping my feet into my slides, I push past a few boxes to grab the steel metal bat I've set up next to my nightstand.

Thud. Thud. Thud.

Another knock on the door, this time louder. I curse myself when my right hand shakes as I grip the bat harder.

Walking out of the bedroom, I enter the living room. Empty bookshelves line the wall to my left between the door to my bedroom and the door to the bathroom. The only item across from it is my reading chair, as I haven't been bothered to order a new couch yet. Sienna got our old one in our roommate divorce.

Walking toward the dining room, I round a square pillar that inconveniently lives in the middle of my apartment. As I'm making my way to the front door, I stub my toe on the pillar, still not quite used to navigating the layout in the dark.

"Fuck," I say louder than intended, unintentionally alerting the stranger at the door to my presence.

I hold my toe as I hop over to the small kitchen island that sits across from the living room and attempt to gather my composure before checking who is at the door. I'm still holding on to a sliver of hope that he didn't hear me.

"Ellie?" the voice says through the door. It sounds familiar, but I can't place it through the deep breaths I'm taking in an effort to dissolve the pain of my injury.

"Ellie, open up," the authoritative voice booms. Shock overcomes me at the use of my childhood nickname. Only one person ever calls me that, and I should've recognized him sooner. Though the military has a way of changing people.

Dropping the bat on a pile of boxes that sit unpacked next to my reading chair, I all but sprint toward the front door that splits the difference between the living room and kitchen.

Placing my hand on the doorknob, I'm surprised the old, creaky door doesn't fly off its hinges with the sheer amount of force with which I pull it open.

"Benny," I squeal into the hallway at my unexpected visitor.

"Hey, Ellie," Benny beams, presenting that familiar warm smile to me that reminds me of all the rare, good times of my childhood. My younger brother stands before me, backpack strap slung over one shoulder, his military overnight bag hanging from his hand.

His short brown hair looks mussed as he slept on the plane he presumably took to get here from California. Despite being younger than

me, he stands a full foot taller, surpassing six feet, causing me to strain my neck as I look at him. It makes it difficult when I throw my arms around his shoulders and bring him into a bear hug, though I do it anyway.

“Okay, I need air to live.” His voice comes out pinched, and I let go of him apologetically.

Once inside, Ben drops his bags at the front door. After ensuring it’s locked, he takes up a seat at the small kitchen island on one of the rickety barstools I’ve placed there. I work to fill the tea kettle with water and place it on the stove before turning to him.

“Not that I’m not happy to see you, but how are you here? I thought you couldn’t get your leave approved,” I say. I’m pleasantly surprised by his arrival, but I’m worried he can’t afford the trip. Both financially and professionally.

My brother Bennet, known to most by Ben, and to me as Benny, is only three years younger than me. He joined the Marine Corps right after high school and has been stationed in California. I’ve barely seen him since, and most of his leave requests have been denied, so I’m confused as to why this one was approved.

“It got approved last minute. Took the first flight I could out of there to come see you. Figured I’d help out with the grand opening,” He shrugs as he slides a box of day-old donuts his way, taking a maple bar out and biting into it.

“You didn’t have to come visit me. I told you I have this under control. I don’t like you spending money unnecessarily for something like this.” I grab my phone out of my hoodie pocket. “How much was the plane ticket? I’ll pay you back for it.” Ben puts his hand over my phone before he answers.

“Don’t worry about it. The flight was cheap since it was overnight anyway,” he says before taking another bite of his donut.

“Well, that explains why you’re here so early. You almost gave me a heart attack.” He winces at my reply.

“Sorry about that,” he says, his mouth still full of maple donut.

When the tea kettle whistle sounds through the air, I grab two novelty mugs out of an open box sitting next to the kitchen island. Rinsing them out in the sink, I set them on the counter along with two tea packets for Ben and me. Once I’ve dropped the bags in both mugs, I hand him his piping-hot

mug before blowing on mine and taking a small sip. The tea works instantly to calm my senses after the restless night I've had.

"Well, I appreciate you being here. It's nice to see you," I say, placing a comforting hand on his arm.

He scoffs as he looks around the room. "From the looks of it, you could use the help."

I roll my eyes at him. When he goes to reach for a second donut, I grab an apple from the counter and set it in front of him. The eye roll he gives me is almost as good as mine. Then again, he did learn from the best.

"I don't need much help, but I'm sure Sienna would love to see you," I say, taking another sip of my tea and grabbing a donut myself. Chocolate with sprinkles. "I haven't slept much, so I was going to shower and then get a start on the day. Opening is at noon, and there's plenty of prep I need to do before then."

Ben nods, getting up from his seat and stretching his arms overhead. His donut is gone, and the apple remains untouched. His metabolism is one I'd kill for. How he can maintain his slim figure despite eating as much sugar as he wants. Although I haven't been in months, the gym has always been kind to my figure, keeping my thick curves toned as long as I lift heavy.

I guess our metabolism differences are a result of having different fathers. Though unlike Benny, I never knew mine.

"I can help, but first, let me take a nap. That plane was uncomfortable as hell. I had a fucking middle seat," Ben says as he moves toward the living room. He stops, motioning a hand toward the ground.

"Where's your couch?"

"I don't have one yet. Sienna got our old one when I moved here." I finish the last bite of my donut and continue, "You can take my bed if you need a nap. I won't be using it this morning anyway." I motion to the bedroom toward the left.

When he nods and turns toward the door, I notice how tired he looks. His short auburn hair is freshly cut, no doubt having visited his barber yesterday. Anything to keep up with those military regulations. The bags under his eyes reveal how tired he is from his plane ride. Knowing him, those will be gone by the morning, considering he has always been able to bounce back fast from a night of no sleep with only a short nap.

Our differences are stark, his father giving him very different genes than my father gave me. Our mother, on the other hand, passed down enough

genes that we at least look like siblings. We both share our mother's deep-blue eyes and her bright smile. Neither one of us has spoken to her in the past five years.

The thought reminds me of the very small slip of paper sitting on my nightstand. Moving as fast as I can at such an early hour, I rush past Ben to beat him to the bedroom, opening my nightstand drawer and shoving the note inside before he can see.

If he knew I got such a creepy note, he'd only be concerned. Ben worrying about me is the last thing I need. He needs to focus on whatever it is he's doing for the military and on his own life. He's done enough for me as it is.

"What was that?"

I turn around to Ben standing in the doorway, my hand on the nightstand drawer behind me. "Nothing." I reply, "Just don't open the nightstand."

"Ew, I know better than to open someone's nightstand drawer. Nothing good is ever found in those." His response makes me let out a sigh of relief.

Ben falls face-first onto my bed, his feet hanging off as he kicks off his shoes. His eyes immediately close as I move toward my dresser that's opposite the bed, to get my clothes for the day. At least I had a mind to unpack some of my most worn clothing. The rest sit in boxes next to the closet doors to the left of the dresser. I'll get to those eventually.

"I'm gonna shower and then head downstairs. Feel free to meet me whenever," I tell Ben.

A mumbled agreement is all he gets out before he's knocked out for good. Butterflies flutter around in my stomach as I head toward the bathroom, preparing for the day ahead.

A sense of relief flows through me now that Ben is here. As long as he doesn't find the note, it'll be nice visiting with my brother, whom I haven't seen since the holidays.

If he finds the note, on the other hand, that's a different story. He'd want to stay for good, and I don't think I could live with myself if he put his life on hold to protect me.

No, I'll be fine on my own. I have to be.

BETH

I'm sitting at my desk in the back room of my bookstore when Ben decides to join me after his five-hour nap. His heavy footsteps echo through the hallway as he stomps down the stairs toward the back door I've left open for him.

"Alright, I'm rested and ready to help," Ben says, standing in the open doorway. He's holding another donut, presumably the last, and I remind myself to send him on a lunch run later. With only two hours until opening, there's no way my early breakfast will hold me over before then.

Standing from my desk, I slunk over to the storage shelves, my tiredness already taking hold of my body. Looking at my stock of books, I slide a small rolling cart toward me. Another item I got at a steep discount from a different bookstore since they were upgrading theirs.

"I'm not sure I need help with too much, but you can hang out if you want," I say as I start to load up the cart with as many romance books from the shelves that'll fit. That's my store's specialty: romance. I keep them in their stacks of subgenres as I place the books on the cart.

Ben finishes his donut before wiping his hand on his pant leg and grabbing a book off the shelf. Clearly he's intent on ignoring my dismissal of his offer to help. This is usually what he does: I deny help, and he does it anyway. By that factor alone, you'd think he was the older one.

Once the cart is full, I push it through the door that leads out into the bookstore. The sunlight shines through the half-open blinds on the front

windows, painting my bookstore in a warm hue perfect for a spring weekend opening.

I take a deep inhale, my senses becoming overloaded with the smell of the sweet vanilla-scented candle I lit an hour ago. It's taken a candle a day and some serious deep cleaning to get rid of the old coffee smell, but I'm happy it's finally gone.

"It looks great in here." I shoot him a glance from the corner of my eye at his compliment. "I'm serious, it really does." Ben chuckles, and my shoulders relax.

"I know I still have a lot to do, but I've been doing back-end work all week. It was a miracle I even got the bookshelves up." I motion toward the empty bookshelves. With only two hours until opening, it's not a great sign that all bookshelves and tables are empty.

At least the till is set up, though I'm not sure whether the discounts I'm offering will be profitable for me. That's a problem for another day.

"Well, we better get this store stocked then, now shouldn't we?" Ben begins to unload the cart, placing books on the tables near the front of the store. My eye twitches at the sight of the monster romance books being placed next to small-town romance books. Especially when that table was supposed to specifically be for an entirely different subgenre anyway.

"Okay, if you're going to help, you have to at least put the books in the right place," I tell him.

"What do you mean?"

"You have two different subgenres right next to each other. We need to organize by subgenre, here..." I give him the rundown of where everything goes. The table up front is for indie romance books. I was able to thrift a few more tables and now have separate sections for dark romance, small-town romance, and monster romance, with the rest organized alphabetically by author on the bookshelves.

He looks confused when I point out the tables, so I tell him I'll take that on if he can stock the bookshelves. When he agrees, I run to the back to turn on my work playlist, and we get to work filling the shelves.

One hour later, and I'm already exhausted. I hate to admit it, but I appreciate Ben's help, even if I did have to reorganize some of the books. He's not as big of a reader as me, and when he does read, it's never romance.

"You know half of the shit in here is broken, right?" Ben asks me from where he's perched on the front counter.

I've finished putting the cart away and approach him from behind the counter as I shoo him off it.

"What do you mean?" I check the tablet I have set up as my checkout area, inspecting it for any cracks or signs of not working.

"No, not that." He waves off my inspection of the tablet. "I meant this building. It's cute, but is this...sustainable?" He looks around, his nose scrunching up as though it smells bad. Which I know isn't true given the amount of money I've forked out on candles alone this past month.

"It's not that bad. It's cozy. Besides, anything newer and I wouldn't have been able to afford it. I got an unbelievable deal on this place," I respond.

He levels me with a look. "The back room only has one out of three working lights. The thermostat is set to sixty and won't change. Trust me, I tried earlier"—he shudders—"and don't even get me started on the creaky doors or the fact that the shower barely stayed lukewarm for five minutes this morning."

It's true, this place needs a bit more work than I was expecting, but I couldn't pass it up. I still don't know how Theo got me such a great deal on a place like this, but I wasn't going to go off complaining to the landlord about a few cosmetic repairs and risk losing the space.

"It has character. Every place that has character needs a little bit of work." I shrug. "I'll get around to fixing those things eventually."

Ben sighs as he shakes his head. "The lights and the doors I'm sure you can fix. Hell, I'll even take a look at them while I'm visiting, but you'll need a professional for the other things."

I try to hide my wince as I look at my brother. "I don't exactly have the money for a professional."

"What about the landlord? They can fix it."

"I also haven't exactly met the landlord yet." My wince is harder to hide this time.

“You haven’t met the landlord?” His words come out slowly as he processes his shock. I respond with a simple headshake, and he continues, “Doesn’t the landlord live next to you?” The bite in his voice is one I’m not expecting.

“Yes, but I haven’t seen them. Besides, I’m getting such a good price that I don’t want to ruin it. What if they see me and decide to charge more because of my age? Or what if I complain about things needing to be fixed and they bill me for it? I can’t afford any extra charges right now.”

“And your safety? What about that?” he snaps.

Now it’s my turn to level him with a look, although my words are soft as they leave my mouth, in an attempt to reassure my brother. “I’m safe, Benny, you know I am.”

He nods briefly before asking, “You’d tell me if you weren’t, right?”

I’m busying myself with the display of bookmarks on the counter when his softened tone makes me pause.

Looking up at my brother, I ask, “Yes. Is there a reason you’re so concerned about my safety?” I ask cautiously as my eyebrows furrow. He begins fidgeting with his hoodie drawstrings, a telltale sign that he’s hiding something from me.

“Just checking in. That’s all.” He shrugs. When he leans against the counter casually, I decide to drop the conversation for now.

Making my way over to the front of the store, I pull back the blinds, allowing the early spring sunshine to wash over the now fully stocked bookstore. I don’t allow myself to enjoy the moment for what it is before I’m zeroing in on the various empty sticker and bookmark displays that still need to be filled. When my stomach growls, I listen to it, not wanting a repeat of the dreaded bookshelf night.

It only takes me a few strides to get back to Ben. Grabbing my wallet off the counter, I give him his last task of the day. “Here, take my card and go get us some sandwiches”—I hand Ben my card—“and try to be back before opening. I won’t have time to eat once we’re open. Well, if people show up, that is.” After all, it is a Friday, so I’m not sure how many people to expect.

“Okay, but first, give me the landlord's phone number. Let me call them and explain that a few things need to be fixed.” Ben holds out his hand to me, giving me a look that tells me I won’t be getting any food until I give in

to his demands. Opening my phone, I pull up the contact labeled “landlord” and hand it over to him.

Ben enters the phone number into his phone and then takes my credit card from my hand. “I’ll call them on my way to pick up lunch,” he says over his shoulder as he’s walking out the front door. The bells I’ve hung around the handle jingle as he exits.

I’ve begun organizing the bookmarks at the front counter when I notice Ben staring up at the building from where he stands in the middle of the parking lot.

Heading outside, I push open the front door and make my way to Ben.

“You okay, Benny?” I ask, following his gaze to the sign that hangs above the front door of my bookshop.

Ben smiles. “You did it.” He looks at me, his smile growing. “Rosethorne Books, it’s real. You fucking did it, Beth.” He pulls me into a hug, only pulling away when I don’t immediately hug him back.

“Yeah, I thought that was why you were here.” I chuckle at him, his arms still on my shoulders.

“I don’t think it hit me before.” He drops his hands and stares up at the sign again. “I remember you drawing in your notebooks, different names and ideas, different logos... Rosethorne Books.” He motions his hands out, bringing them close and then wide, as though he’s framing the sign. “I never doubted you for a second.”

My eyes fog with the threat of tears at his words, but I hold it together long enough to look back up at the sign. “Rosethorne Books” is scrawled in cursive, with a delicate rose design seamlessly flowing into the “R” of the logo. Something is so satisfying about seeing part of your name on the front of a building.

Elizabeth Rose, owner of Rosethorne Books.

Sighing, I nudge his shoulder with my own. “Thanks for believing in me.”

“It’s easy to do given how we grew up.” His smile softens. The mention of our past hangs in the air between us, and I’m reminded of the note sitting in my bedside drawer. A pit forms in my stomach at the thought of *him* finding me here. That’s quickly brushed aside when my stomach growls.

“Okay, sandwiches, go.” I shoo Ben toward my car as I head back inside.

“I’m proud of you,” he says one last time before getting in the car.

His unyielding support makes the fact that I'm lying to him that much worse. Although I don't think there's much reason to lie in the first place. It's been a month since I got the note, and I haven't received anything since. It probably wasn't even meant for me to begin with.

What I'm focused on at the moment is the fear of disappointing my openly proud brother if no one shows up to my grand opening today. With only an hour left until opening, I head back inside to put the finishing touches on my childhood dream.

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ALEX

An ache is sent through my jaw as Leo's glove collides with my headgear. Staggering back a few steps in the ring, I shake the sweat from my eyes as I reposition my arms. Leo waves his glove at me, coercing me to advance on him. I grunt out a laugh through my mouthguard in response.

My feet are light, my weight staying on my toes as I move swiftly toward my brother. My final step is accompanied by my right glove colliding with his right shoulder. Leo's always been fast, so I'm not surprised when he blocks my second hit to his chest. The motion takes me off balance and leaves an opening for him to get me in the side. A gurgled grunt leaves my lips when his glove collides with my ribs.

Leo's always been one of my stronger opponents, but even he doesn't typically land this many punches on me. We usually pull our punches, never leaving more than a faint bruise where a boxing glove collides with flesh, but the number of hits I've taken today is starting to add up, creating a full-body ache.

I'm off my game. I have been for weeks. I blame my new neighbor for that one. She's the only reason Leo has been able to land so many of his punches. I know this is a situation of my own creation, but I still haven't found a way to approach her.

To tell her that I'm her landlord.

Another blow lands on my headgear and knocks me sideways, sending me against the ropes in the ring, as our timer goes off. Leo works at a downtown restaurant, and he likes to get in a workout before he has to head out for prep. We don't always spar, but today is a big day, and I needed to work out some of my jitters.

As Leo begins to take his gloves and gear off, I follow his lead, working to catch my breath. It isn't until my headgear is off that I hear Leo's fit of laughter ring throughout the gym.

"Where is your head today? You're usually a better fighter than this." He points at me with a cocky grin spread wide across his face.

Sighing, I lean down to grab my water bottle from one of the corners of the ring, handing Leo his at the same time. After taking a swig, I respond, "Just have a lot on my mind lately, but this helped, so thanks."

Leo analyzes me as he takes a sip of his water. "Does it have anything to do with the bookstore I saw next door?"

I never told Leo who was moving in next door, and have kept things vague since he's been visiting. Beth finally got her sign put up yesterday, so this is the first time Leo is seeing it. There's no use in lying. My younger brother Theo tried that with our oldest brother Roman last summer, and that didn't turn out too well for him. I'd rather not repeat his mistakes.

"Maybe." I shrug before turning my back on Leo. I hop down from the ring and move over to the front desk. Leo's footsteps are light and quick with excitement as he trails me.

"Maybe, my ass," Leo says once he's reached the front counter. "It's Beth's bookstore, isn't it?"

I side-eye my brother before checking in one of my regulars who has now joined us at the front desk. "Have a good workout," I say.

Typically, Tiffany or Jake handles the front desk, but neither could open today. Something about finals, but I'm almost positive they both hit up a party last night. I'm just happy I was able to convince Jake to come in later so I can make it to Beth's store opening.

Leo's face lights up at my lack of a response as he lightly hits me on the shoulder. "I can't believe you got her to agree to rent the place from you. That's great, man," he says.

"Well..." I pause, trying to think through how I'm going to tell him.

Leo's smile drops from his face, his tone taking on a serious note. "What did you do?"

“I gave her a fantastic deal on the place. I’m actually losing money from her renting it out. Free Wi-Fi, the apartment upstairs included for basically nothing, but...” I pause.

“But what? Fucking spit it out.” A smile teases my lips at Leo’s lack of patience. It’s moments like these that he reminds me of Roman.

“She doesn’t know that I’m the landlord.”

I expect Leo to start on some lecture, but instead, he stands there staring at me, unmoving, unblinking. By the way, his left eye is twitching, I’d say he’s trying to burn a hole straight through my head with his eyesight alone. Waiting, I pull my water bottle to my lips to take another drink.

As fast as the cool water hits my lips, it’s sloshing out of the bottle when Leo lands a sharp smack to the back of my skull. It’s not hard enough to hurt, but just hard enough to get my attention.

“What the fuck?” I turn to Leo and ask, wiping water from my chin.

“What the fuck is wrong with you? You tricked her? There’s no way she’s going to be okay with this. Not after how much you annoyed her last summer. This is an unbelievable violation of her autonomy and—”

I cut him off before he could continue, holding a hand up. “Let me stop you right there. Before Theo gave her the keys, he tried to tell her, but she refused to listen. Said she didn’t want to mess up the offer I gave her.”

“Theo is in on this too? That fucker.” He says the last part under his breath. “Sienna is going to kill both of you.”

“Probably,” I sigh. “But I’m going to tell her tonight, after her grand opening. Besides, I didn’t annoy her *that* much.”

Leo holds out his hands, touching one pointer finger to the other, and I settle in for the list he’s about to rattle off.

“For starters, you used a douchey pickup line. She hates your car because it’s unnecessarily loud—”

“My car is sexy and you know it,” I snap, unable to help myself.

Leo ignores me as he continues, “Alex, you took a photo of her in her bikini and made it your background photo on your phone.”

I wave off his comment as I shuffle some papers on the front desk, busying myself. “She practically dared me to. Besides, I deleted it, didn’t I? There’s just something about her, Leo. I haven’t been able to get her off my mind since I met her.”

Leo’s eyes widen as they fill with pity, and his tone softens. “Listen, we all know you can get a little... obsessive. Don’t let that extend to Beth. I

don't think she's interested, and I know she won't be happy about this." He places his hand on my shoulder as he shrugs. "Sorry."

I shrug him off. "You don't know what you're talking about."

"Really? Who's talked to her more since this summer? Me, or you?"

"Oh, fuck off." My words come out clipped given the reminder of how the two of them have stayed in touch. They connected this last summer, eventually exchanging numbers, but I can't help the twisting in my gut that happens when I think about Beth's inclination to be so kind to my brothers yet act so disgusted toward me.

I've never been so attracted to a woman who appears to hate me so much. It's been enlightening, to say the least. Though the endless buzzing throughout my body intensifies when I remember I have to tell her the truth today.

"You're an asshole," Leo says.

"Never said I wasn't." I slap Leo on the shoulder, a little harder than I intend at the remembrance of the fact that the two of them are friends.

"Why do you do that?" Leo asks.

"Do what?"

"Put on a front like that. You do it with everyone, especially Beth. You were almost insufferable this summer whenever she was around."

"I have no idea what you're talking about." I continue to busy myself with a few loose pens on the desk, hoping he'll move on and let things be.

"You know exactly what I'm talking about. You've been like this since middle school and—"

"Don't. You know I don't like talking about that." Leo stops at the snap in my voice.

"I'm just saying you don't have to put on a front. You can be yourself. Beth might be more receptive if you did."

I look at Leo pointedly. "In my experience, most people prefer the mask to what really lies beneath. I'm sure Beth is the same way. She is a dark romance reader after all." I wink at him, and he rolls his eyes.

"Whatever, just think about it. I probably know her better than you do at this point." His cocky tone has me clenching my fists.

"Don't you have vegetables to chop?" I say, shooing him from behind the counter.

"Yes, I do. Unlike this place, my restaurant actually has customers." He grabs his stuff and smiles at me.

“Good luck today,” he says as he tips his invisible hat to me and exits out to the parking lot.

My eyes scan the gym around me, but I’m not surprised when only one person is working out in the corner. My regular, Jared, has stayed loyal to me so far, and I’m just hoping he doesn’t find the large corporation gym that opened up down the block. Their doors opened to the public at the beginning of the year, and I wasn’t expecting that hit to my business. I’ve already lost half my members and haven’t been able to sign up anyone new in the past four months.

Grabbing a spray bottle and a rag, I start my cleaning for the day, hoping it’ll help work out more of my jitters. It usually helps, though the anticipation of seeing Beth for the first time in months has me more on edge than usual.

I start at the entrance, to the right of the front desk, where two large windows frame the front door, wiping down the door handles first. Working my way to the four cardio machines I have positioned at the entrance, I wipe them down, making sure to wipe the seat on the stationary bike twice.

The ring sits in the middle of the gym. Beside it, opposite the front desk, hangs two punching bags that I get daily use out of. On the other side of the ring, opposite the cardio machines, I have a few benches and free weights. Making my way over there, I wipe down the benches, doing my best not to disturb Jared’s workout.

I usually keep the lights low, with the walls and equipment all black, except for the ring. The base is painted red, with my logo graffitied in black on all sides. I commissioned a local artist to paint the gym’s name, “Fight Club,” in black-and-white letters. To this day, it’s still the best decision I’ve made for the place.

It’s a small gym, meant for fighting and training, and it can only hold so much. Part of me wishes we hadn’t lost so many memberships, but what hurts more is how many personal training clients I’ve lost the past few months. I don’t know if it’s some new fad or what, but clients who were once interested in training like a fighter are now more interested in group classes than anything else. Something only the big gyms can offer, given that fighting training is usually done one-on-one.

I’m sure the business will do fine. Eventually, people will tire of the invisible fees, overpopulated classes, and lack of bench availability. I’ll have my clients back soon enough.

Making my way back to the front desk, I wave bye to Jared as he exits when my phone rings. Picking it up off the desk, I don't recognize the number as I hit the Answer call button.

"Hello?" I ask.

"Hey, is this the landlord for Rosethorne Books? I got your number from Beth." The male voice on the other line speaks, his voice grating in my ears as my blood begins to heat.

Who the fuck is this and why isn't Beth calling me herself?

"Yeah, why are you calling?" I bite out, not caring for the envy that creeps into my voice.

There's a pause on the other line before he speaks again, his tone shifting into something harsh and authoritative. "Beth's place needs some repairs. Actually, a lot of repairs. As you're her landlord, I'd like to request that you get someone out here to fix the issues immediately."

Still no introduction. Irritation storms throughout my veins, as my head continues to spin in regard to why this man is calling on her behalf.

"I'll have someone come out today." I was planning on stopping by *after* Beth's grand opening, but this conversation has me moving up my timeline. If shit needs fixed, I might as well get it over with. Besides, I'd like to find out who the fuck this guy is. He's definitely not on the lease she signed.

"Great, thanks," he says before he hangs up. I don't blame him, considering I usually have better customer service skills than I exhibited, but my skin is crawling with anticipation about who this man is.

I don't exactly have a well-formulated plan, and given the fact that Beth isn't my biggest fan, I know tonight is going to be shit. Maybe I shouldn't have put off telling her for this long. Though if I learned anything from our lake house interactions, it's that Beth loves a cat-and-mouse game. So I certainly couldn't have her moving out before she opened her bookstore. After today, she won't have a choice but to stay through the lease agreement.

Once Jake arrives for his shift, I head upstairs to get ready for Beth's grand opening. I'm sure to be quiet and avoid any run-ins I could have with her. She'll be surprised to see me, but I know Theo and Sienna are going, so hopefully she'll just think I tagged along. Either way, I'll wait until she's locked the doors for the evening to give her the news.

My only hope is that she doesn't try to get out of the lease agreement. Since she moved in, the loneliness I usually feel going to bed every night has been pleasantly interrupted by Beth.

The sounds of her music in the evening blast from her side of the wall, flowing into my apartment. The band she plays on repeat happens to be one of my favorites. The thought of going to bed each night and not seeing her car in the parking lot fills my chest with an ache I don't intend on analyzing at the moment.

Leo's words filter through my mind again as I pick out the perfect outfit for seeing Beth today, meticulously putting the clothing together for my most flattering look.

You can be yourself.

I shake his words from my mind with a chuckle. Being myself hasn't worked out for me in the past, and I don't plan to drop my mask anytime soon.

ALEX

The sky has taken on an orange-and-purple hue as the sun sets behind the buildings. My eyes are stuck on the large sign hanging above Beth's bookstore. "Rosethorne Books." Just like her last name, Rose.

Of course she never told me her last name. The only reason I know is because of the lease agreement.

I take a deep breath as I stand in the parking lot, the events of tonight looming over me. It's been four months since she was given the keys, and I've been anxiously awaiting this moment from the day I heard her move in. I've run through every possible scenario in my head, and I still don't feel prepared to see her.

Looking onward into the bookstore windows, I can see that it's already booming with people. As if the full parking lot wasn't enough evidence that her opening day has been a success. Theo's blue Mustang sits parked right in front of the bookstore entrance. I'm sure he and Sienna arrived early to support Beth.

I would've shown up sooner, though I have a feeling Beth wouldn't be as excited to see me as she was to see them.

Twirling the bouquet of pink-and-white lilies I hold in my hand, I watch as people peruse the bookshelves. The faded green exterior of the center building perfectly frames the warm interior design choices Beth has made. The walnut bookshelves and carefully placed lamps paint the bookstore in a comforting warm glow.

A trio of women stands at the counter, blocking whoever is behind it. It isn't until they say their goodbyes and head out the front door that I'm able to catch a glimpse of her.

Beth stands behind the counter, wavy hair pulled half back, a few shorter pieces falling to frame her face. Dressed in jeans and a casual book-themed shirt, she looks as though she's made to be here. Her glow overshadows that of the sunset as she beams her wide smile at customers as they pass by.

She's breathtaking.

I'm allowing myself a few moments to watch her, appreciating her beauty as she excitedly interacts with customers, when a man about as tall as me approaches her behind the counter. He whispers something in her ear, and it isn't until she lightly touches his arm that my feet take their first step toward the front door.

I'm not sure if it's the same guy who called me, but I don't care. I'd like to find out who this asshole is.

Once I'm at the door, I'm sure to hold it open, allowing a young couple to exit through the door before I make my entrance. As the door closes behind me, the bells hanging off the handle chime and my eyes are pulled in the direction of the front counter.

Beth and I lock eyes immediately. I'm sure to keep eye contact as I watch her expression twist in all directions, her emotions running rampant on her face. Her eyes expand wide before her nose scrunches and her eyes narrow in on me as her lips form a straight line.

She definitely wasn't expecting me.

I'm not surprised by her reaction until I smirk at her. A darkness takes over her expression, a white fire lighting in her blue eyes, similar to the one I saw when we first met. When her lips part, I know she feels every current of electricity flowing through us that I do.

"You actually showed up." Theo's familiar voice grabs my attention from my left. Before I have a chance to move on my own, he yanks me into a corner of the bookstore just to the side of the front door.

"Does she know yet?" he asks me, in a hushed tone.

"No, but I'm telling her today." I shrug my shoulder, as though my plan isn't as big of a hindrance on her opening day as it really is.

"*Today?*" Theo's eyes widen when he asks me the question.

“Yes, today. Don’t worry, I’ll wait until it dies down some, but I had no choice. I guess she needs a few things fixed around here.”

“You need a few things fixed around here,” Theo says, motioning to the top of my head. I swat his hand away.

“You’re in on this as much as I am. You could’ve tried harder to tell her,” I say.

“Yeah, and you could’ve actually fucking told her,” he whispers loudly. Theo looks like he’s about to say something else when Sienna approaches us.

“What are you two talking about? Looks intense,” she says, eyeing us both before interlocking her arm into Theo’s.

“Nothing,” we both say in unison.

Sienna raises an eyebrow at us. “You two are obviously up to something, but I’m not even going to ask. Neither of you better ruin this day for Beth.” She wags a finger at us, and a glance at Theo tells me she’s not messing around.

When the man I saw from outside approaches Beth again, I can’t help myself when I ask, “Who is that guy?” My tone takes on a darker edge.

“Why, jealous?” Theo says with snark.

“No,” I scoff, not believing my own lie.

“Relax, Alex, that’s her brother.” My shoulders ease when Sienna answers my question. Theo and Sienna suppress a chuckle at my expense when I look toward Beth again.

“Oh fuck off, you two,” I say lovingly, brushing them off as I make my way to browse the bookshelves behind them, flowers still in hand.

From what I can tell, this is a romance bookstore. Seems fitting enough for Beth, considering every book she read while we were at the lake house was a romance of some kind. Her organization of the books is enlightening.

For instance, one table showcases dark romance books. Something I noticed she read a lot of during our lake house visit. Running my tattooed hand along the black covers of the books on the table, I steal a glance in Beth’s direction only to catch her already looking at me.

When our eyes meet, hers dart away only to find their way back to mine seconds later. When she looks away for a second time, I look back down at the books in front of me. Anger overtakes her expression again, and I have to suppress the smile that teases my lips at the sight.

She’s always so pretty when she’s pissed at me.

As the sun continues to set, so does the traffic in the bookstore. Patrons begin to leave, as I busy myself by reading the backs of books I haven't already read, trying to find my next read. After all, Beth isn't the only one interested in reading. Hell, I've read three-quarters of the books she has stacked on the dark romance table alone.

When the last customer leaves the bookstore, Beth waves goodbye as she follows them out. She wears a big smile on her face as she flips her Open sign to Closed, leaving only Beth, her brother, Theo, Sienna, and me in the store.

Her brother starts toward her at the same time Sienna does. I watch them from a corner at the far end of the bookstore.

"I'm so hap—" Her brother starts, but doesn't have a chance to hug her before Beth turns toward my direction.

"What are you doing here? I don't exactly remember sending you an invite." Beth places her hands on her lusciously full hips, drawing my attention to her waist. Her book-themed T-shirt turns out to be a crop top, and the slip of exposed skin on her abdomen threatens to be the death of me.

I catch sight of her brother glaring at me from the corner of my eye where he stands beside her, and Theo winces on my behalf. Setting down the book I had in my hands, I'm careful not to bend any corners of the cover and saunter over toward Beth.

Her confident stance doesn't waver even as I get closer, towering over her, given our full foot height difference.

"I got a call. I guess a few things around here need fixing." I shrug, slipping my free hand in my front jeans pocket. Her gaze follows, and I smirk when her cheeks redden further.

"Here, these are for you." I hand her the bouquet I've been holding on to for the last hour.

She grabs the flowers from me and all but throws them at her brother in her rage. "What are you talking about?"

"Oh, so you're the asshole I spoke to over the phone," her brother exclaims, but my eyes don't leave Beth when her blue eyes widen as she pieces it together.

"No..." She breathes. "No, no, no, no, no." She repeats the word as she rushes over to the front desk, frantically looking for something.

“What’s going on?” Sienna asks from my right, looking between Theo and me.

Beth finally finds what she’s looking for, her phone, and with a few presses on the screen, a buzzing sounds in my pocket.

Taking my phone out of my jeans pocket, I answer it. “Alex, your landlord speaking.” I try to hide my smile at the sheer rage that spreads across Beth’s face. I don’t particularly like fucking with people this much, but she’s too damn cute when she’s upset not to.

“Oh, you’ve got to be fucking kidding me.” Beth shouts, hanging up the phone and waving her arms dramatically.

“Did you know about this?” The question comes from Sienna, who is looking toward Theo.

Theo rubs the back of his neck bashfully when he says, “Well...” But that’s all he can get out before looking at me as though I’m going to save him.

Beth joins us again, standing as far away from me as possible.

“Hey, Theo tried to tell you, but by his recollection, you refused to know who the landlord was,” I say, hoping to at least save Theo’s ass. He’s been through enough.

“Obviously I’d want to know if the landlord was *you*.”

“Ellie, who is this guy?” I make a note of the nickname her brother uses for her and wait in anticipation of how she’s going to introduce me. I shouldn’t get such a kick out of this, but every time she yells at me, my cock twitches the slightest bit.

It probably has to do with the fact that even though she’s yelling, she’s had a hard time keeping her eyes from drifting to my lips or my sleeve of tattoos every time she looks at me.

“Theo’s asshole brother.” It’s a simple insult, but I don’t miss the way her eyes dart down the waist of my pants and then back up to my face quickly before looking away from me altogether when she says it.

I reach my hand out to her brother. “Alex, and you are?”

“My friends call me Ben. You can call me Corporal Ashford.” He makes his message clear while ignoring my offer of a handshake. I make note of their different last names. They might be siblings, but I can only assume they share a mother and that’s it. Well, that and their attitude.

When there’s a lull in the conversation, Theo whispers something to Sienna frantically, her only response a grunt before she begins to shove

Theo out of the store. Not before saying a quick goodbye to Beth and explaining that the two of them will be hopping on a phone call later to discuss the two of us.

“You cannot be serious,” Beth finally says, turning toward me once Sienna and Theo have made it to his Mustang. Ben moves toward the front counter, placing the flowers down, only to turn back to me with an even meaner scowl on his face.

“Do you have a vase?” I ask Beth, ignoring her irritation as I focus on the task at hand.

Beth crosses her arms in response before asking, “Why are you here?”

I shrug, making my way over to the front desk. “I told you, I got a call that things needed fixing, so I’m here to help. I also wanted to congratulate you on the opening of your bookstore. I love what you’ve done to the place.” I turn toward her once I’m behind the front desk, giving her a broad smile.

My sentiment is genuine. The previous owner kept the coffee shop pretty dark, but Beth has made this bookstore feel cozy in a way I never thought imaginable. With the warm tones and pops of color, it’s apparent she put a lot of thought and effort into the design.

“Ben, give us a moment.” She turns toward her brother, who looks at her with wide eyes. The two communicate without words, in a way only close siblings can, and he takes off through the back room, heading upstairs. Though not before stopping at the doorway to give me another once-over.

“I’ll be right upstairs,” he says to Beth, eyeing me again before taking off through the back room.

I lean down onto my elbows, next to the flowers on the counter, as Beth approaches, leveling my height with hers.

“You wanted to be alone, huh?” One side of my mouth kicks up in a half-cocked grin.

“Hardly, but clearly we need to talk.” She squints her eyes slightly at me, and my heart rate ticks up at the sight.

I don’t care how long it takes. I’m determined to break down these walls she’s so intently keeping in place.

BETH

My body temperature rises as my blood continues to boil at the sight of Alex in my bookstore. The counter separates us as he stands in my place behind the register. The smirk overtaking his face turns his features into something otherworldly, like he's just teleported out of one of these books.

No man's beauty has ever angered me as much as his does.

This is just like Alex to force his way into a place where he's not wanted. I continue to make eye contact, not wanting it to falter in an effort to maintain my position of authority. This is *my* bookstore after all. Who gives a fuck if he owns the building?

I know I refused to let Theo tell me who the landlord was when he tried, but I never thought it could be *Alex* of all people. A small ache begins to grow in my head as I brainstorm how I can get myself out of this situation.

Not only did he play games with me last summer, all of which annoyed me beyond belief, but his beauty is ethereal. The kind that's dangerous for women like me, for women who don't have the best track record with men.

Especially ones that fight.

It became obvious from the moment I met Alex that he was putting on a show to hide who he truly is. Then I found out he owns a boxing gym, and he basically became the definition of a walking red flag.

I knew last summer that nothing good could come from getting close to a man who hides his true self and has the means to overpower me at any

moment. Especially when men always tend to cause pain. Pushing him away as far as I could was an easy decision to make. What I wasn't expecting was Alex's persistence in trying to get closer to me.

I still haven't spoken when Alex begins to look for something underneath the counter. My eyes drift to the flowers he brought me, pink and white lilies. My favorite.

"What are you doing?" I snap at Alex. My skin continues to heat with rage as I watch his biceps flex underneath the fabric of his T-shirt as he rummages through my cabinets.

"Ah, I knew you'd have one," he says, holding up a vase he found under the counter. There's a small restroom in the back that he disappears into.

Before I can help myself, I say, "You can't go back there. That's for employees only." Clearly, his appearance is throwing me off. I need to address how to get out of my lease now that I know he's the landlord, rather than worrying about what he's doing.

Although with the way his jeans hug his slim hips and the black T-shirt that's doing nothing to hide the very defined muscles of his arms, I can't think clearly. Don't even get me started on the sleeve of tattoos covering his left arm and cascading down across his hand. The design of my favorite flowers, lilies, ends in two birds on the back of his hand.

I wonder if they have a deeper meaning...

Shaking the thought away, I decide I need to get him out of here before I do something I'll regret.

Alex ignores my comment and continues with whatever he's doing in the back room. I throw my hands up in aggravation when I hear the faucet turn on and water starts running. A few moments later, he comes back with the vase half full and a pair of scissors.

"So what'd you want to talk about?" He flashes that devilish smile my way again, prompting me to cross my arms in an effort to hide my racing pulse from him. When his eyes dip toward my breasts, my heart involuntarily skips, and I throw my hands to my sides.

"How do I get out of it?" I ask Alex, slamming my hands down on the counter. He's opened up the bouquet and has begun trimming the stems of each flower.

"Get out of what?" he asks, throwing a glance my way before bringing his attention back to the flowers.

“The fucking lease. How do I get out of the lease? I’m not staying here.”

“Sorry, you’re locked in.” He shrugs as he sets the scissors down on the counter. Gathering the freshly cut flowers, he picks them up and holds them over the vase. My hands meet his, stopping him before the tips of the stems touch the water.

“Can you focus for one second? What do you mean I’m locked in?” My hands still rest on his when his eyes drop to where we connect, the blue of his irises deepening in color when he does.

“If you wanted to hold hands with me, all you had to do was ask.” His smile grows as I yank my hands back, allowing him to fully submerge the stems and continue arranging the bouquet.

I’ve spoken enough, so I wait to see if he’ll address the situation. He takes his time cleaning up before placing the flowers next to the register and finally rounding the counter, giving me his full attention.

“If you want out of the lease, you have to pay for the full year. I gave you an excellent deal, and I’m depending on that money.” He crosses his arms in front of him, and I curse myself for noticing the way his muscles flex with the movement.

“I can’t pay that,” I respond, forcing myself to look him in the eye.

“Then I guess you’re staying, neighbor.” He shrugs as he takes a step toward the door.

“Neighbor?”

“My gym is right next door, and my apartment is upstairs.” Alex leans in to me. “You have excellent music choice by the way.” That smirk overcomes his face again, and I want to smack it off him.

“Didn’t your mother ever teach you not to listen in on your neighbors? It’s not very gentlemanly of you.” My words are fueled by my frustration, leaving my lips before my brain has a chance to process what I’ve just said.

I learned last year that Alex and his brothers lost both of their parents in a car wreck when they were young. Alex was only nine, and his eldest brother, Roman, was nineteen. My eyes widen when I realize my mistake.

Before I have a chance to apologize, Alex grabs my chin between two fingers, my skin heating at his touch.

“I thought we already established that you don’t care too much for ‘gentlemen.’” His voice is low as his eyes narrow in on me. While anger

swims in his light-blue irises, a glint of lust sends a rush of heat low in my stomach. My eyes dart toward his lips at the feeling.

“Thinking about kissing me?” Alex asks in a low, guttural voice.

“Fuck no.” I push his hand off me. He lets go easily as he takes a few steps back, laughing. Alex strolls toward the door, apparently done with this conversation even though I’m left with more questions than answers.

Alex only stops when I call after him, “Hey asshole, you still have that photo of me in the bikini?”

His hand is stalled on the door handle, his only response to my question a menacing smile thrown over his shoulder before he says, “Send me a list of the things that need to be fixed, and I’ll get it on my schedule.” He pulls the door open, the chime of the bells ringing through the air. “Oh, and Beth?”

My answer is short. I’m exhausted from the day, and my voice comes out as a sigh. “What?”

“I really do love what you’ve done with the place. You should be proud. The world could use more safe spaces like this one.” He taps the door lightly with his forefinger, his tone laced with care before he slips out into the night.

His genuine compliment stuns me into silence, and I watch his hips sway as he makes his way next door.

BETH

I'm relieved when I don't cross paths with Alex over the weekend. He's kept his distance, and I'm grateful for the uninterrupted time it's given me with Benny. We've spent all weekend catching up, Ben sharing his unbelievable military stories as he always does, but time has gone by faster than I'd have liked, and he's headed back to California tonight.

I'm also happy we've successfully gone all weekend without another note showing up. Not that there has been more than the initial one. My worries are finally dying down as I come to terms with the fact that it was just a sick prank.

Though I was surprised to find another bouquet of lilies sitting at my doorstep this morning, with a pink note set on top of them.

I saw the other ones looked a bit wilted. These are their replacement. – A

Alex sure does know how to get under a woman's skin.

I'm standing behind the bookstore counter with Ben as I'm staring at the bouquet of lilies blooming from the vase next to the register. I didn't want to accept them, but I couldn't possibly throw perfectly fresh flowers like this away.

"What's this?" Ben asks, picking up a flyer left on the counter.

“Oh, just some group wanting to host their book club here. They came by when you were taking a nap yesterday. You can toss it.” I motion my hand to the trash can under the counter.

Having closed up for the day an hour early, due to minimal foot traffic, the parking lot is painted in an orange hue as the sun descends. The sunset glow filters in through the windows, kissing each book as the light hits it. This is my favorite time of day in the bookstore.

“You aren’t going to take them up on their offer?” Ben looks at me, eyebrows pinched together, and I lose count of the till.

Looking at him, I abandon the till, knowing he won’t drop the subject. “No, I’m not.” When I don’t continue, he raises his eyebrows at me. “I don’t need some group of people I don’t know loitering around in my bookstore. It’s a store, not a place to hang out.”

“Ellie, you had two people come through today, which is one less than you had yesterday. A book club like this could help you get your feet off the ground.” I roll my eyes as he continues, “Plus, you might make some friends out of it.”

“Friends? I already have those.” I wave him off and finish closing out the till.

“You have *one*. Sienna.” When I go to respond, he holds his finger up to stop me from speaking. “And I don’t count because I’m your brother. I’m *forced* to be your friend.” He smiles, both of us laughing when I lightly smack him on the shoulder.

When our laughter fades, I continue, “I don’t need more friends. You and Sienna are enough. Always have been, always will be.”

“Well, that’s sweet, but it’s not enough. Eventually, you’re going to have to learn how to let more people in. I don’t want to be taking care of you when you’re too old to do it yourself.”

“I know how to take care of myself. You know that.” I point at him, emphasizing my words. Hopefully changing the subject, I hand him a fifty-dollar bill.

“What’s this for?”

“Gas, food, water, whatever you need once you’re back on base.” I shrug. I can’t afford to spare the money right now, but I’ve been taking care of him so long it feels wrong not to give him something.

Shaking his head, a laugh escapes his throat when he asks, “How much money did you make today?”

“Don’t worry about it. Take it.” I all but shove the money in his face, and he accepts, putting the bill in his pocket.

After cleaning up the register and locking the cash box in the back room safe, I’m working on turning off all the lights when I ask Ben, “Ready to go?”

“Yeah, but let’s sit for a second.” He motions toward the two mismatched armchairs placed near the front window. “I was hoping to talk to you about something.” I follow him, hesitantly taking a seat in one of the chairs. His serious tone does nothing to tamp down my increasing worries over him.

By the time he takes a deep breath, my heart is pounding in my chest, making it impossible to be as patient as I’d like to be at this moment.

“What is it?” I ask, unable to wait any longer. “Did you get a woman pregnant? Benny, we’ve talked about thi—”

“He’s out, Ellie.” Ben’s tone is soft, his breath ragged.

My heart drops, floating around in my stomach as bile tickles the back of my throat, my breathing becoming harder to control.

“He—He’s what? How?” It takes all my effort to get the words out.

“Got out on good behavior or some shit.” He scoffs, his jaw ticking the way it used to in high school when he was under intense amounts of stress. When *he* was still a prominent figure in our lives.

“Have you spoken to him?” I ask the question hesitantly, not sure how he will respond.

“Fuck no.” His words send a wave of relief through me. “Mom sent me a text and said he wanted to talk to me. I didn’t respond to her either.”

It makes sense, yet I can’t bring myself to say much on the topic. I haven’t spoken to my mom since the fucker went to jail five years ago. He was supposed to serve ten years, but then again, when it comes to crimes against women, men rarely ever serve their full time.

I guess the bruises he left and the words he’d scream weren’t enough to keep him locked up.

The ringing in my ears grows louder as Ben continues.

“He hasn’t tried contacting you, has he?” Ben asks, concern woven through his words.

My gut twists as I answer him, “No, thank god.” The lie leaves my lips easily. Something *he* taught me how to do well. I have no way to confirm it, but now I’m almost positive the note I received a month ago was from him.

“When did he get out?” I ask.

Ben’s brows pinch together. “About a month ago. I would’ve told you sooner, but I wanted to tell you in person and couldn’t get leave approved until this weekend. Why?”

“No reason.” I shrug him off, as I stare at the floral rug beneath my feet. I haven’t received any notes beyond the first one, so there’s no need to alarm Ben right before I drop him off at the airport.

Especially when he’s contractually obligated by the United States government to be in California tomorrow, and I know that if he found out about the note, he’d break the law in a heartbeat.

Ben leans forward in his seat, taking my hand in his. It’s not until our hands touch that I’m brought back to reality, my eyes pulling away from the rug and landing on Ben’s.

“Are you okay?” he asks softly.

No.

Swallowing my feelings, I jump up from my chair, releasing Ben’s hand. “Never better. I’ll be fine. You have a plane to catch, so let’s get going.” I head toward the door, and Ben follows, grabbing his bag on the way. As we exit the doors, the cool night air nips at my skin as a breeze rushes past.

Once I’ve locked the doors, Ben stops me before I can take a step toward my car. “It’s alright if you’re not okay, Ellie. I wouldn’t be.”

His words hit me in the back of my eyes, taking all my effort to fight the prickling sensation and plaster a smile on my face. “Well, that’s you, Benny. Not me. I’m fine. Now let’s get you back to Cali.”

Ben grimaces. “I hate it when you call it that.” The smile that spreads across his face does wonders to lift my spirits.

At least I know I can keep him out of it this time. Whatever happens, he’ll be safe.

Heading toward my car, I take a few deep breaths, swallowing my looming tears as I prepare to face Ben again. He doesn’t bring up the topic again once we are in the car, and we spend the entire ride singing along to our favorite songs together.

If you could call whatever sounds we are making singing. Neither one of us was ever very talented in that area.

Once we reach the airport, I’m quick to throw the car in Park and rush to his side as he opens his door. Pulling him in for a hug, I squeeze until

he's shoving me away, something we've done for years. Though hugging him this time felt like it was less for him and more for me.

"Bye, Ellie. I'll see you for the holidays." Ben calls out as he makes his way to the airport entrance.

I wave bye. The thought of not being able to see him until the end of the year makes my chest ache. Though I'm proud to see the man he's grown into.

"Love you." I call back as people passing by look between the two of us.

He waves his hand, shooing me off as though I'm embarrassing him. "Say it back," I yell.

With an eye roll, he says, "Love you too," before he's making his way through the doors of the airport.

On the drive back home, I turn my music loud, unable to hear my own voice as the bass flows through the speakers just on the verge of hurting my ears. I'm tempted to turn it louder when it's not drowning out my thoughts the way I hoped it would.

When I pull into the parking lot, the single streetlamp barely lights the way, as I park in the space right in front of my bookstore. The only other car in the lot is Alex's red Mustang. Now that he's not hiding from me anymore, it's been parked only a few spots down from mine all weekend, taunting me.

It isn't until I'm grabbing my purse from the passenger seat that I notice the fifty-dollar bill sitting in my cupholder. My eyes brim with tears that I refuse to let fall.

Ben never did like accepting my money.

As I'm putting the money in my wallet, the breeze picks up, causing something on the front door of my store to flutter out of the corner of my eye. I look up, noticing a small piece of paper stuck on the door that wasn't there when we left.

Hands shaking as adrenaline pumps through my veins, I check my rearview mirrors, looking for any signs of movement before exiting my car. When I do so, I move swiftly, keeping an eye on my surroundings as I make my way to the front door. Unlocking the door and moving inside as quickly as I can, I rip the note off the glass, ensuring the door locks behind me.

The ringing in my ears returns when I open the note, and I recognize the handwriting. It's the same as it was on the first note.

GLAD TO SEE YOU AND BENNETT STILL GET ALONG. HERE'S TO
HOPING ALL THREE OF US CAN HAVE SOME QUALITY BONDING TIME
TOGETHER SOON.

The nausea is back as I race through my back room, making my way up the stairs and into my apartment as though someone is actively chasing me. It doesn't help my racing heart when I rush to my bedside table and pull the other note from the drawer.

I was right. The handwriting is identical.

Unable to look at either note any longer, I throw both of them in my nightstand and slam the drawer shut. Part of me hopes my nightstand is a secret portal to a far-off world, and when I open it back up, they'll be gone.

Unfortunately, this isn't a book. Reality isn't that easy.

Heading out of my room, I weave around the boxes spread throughout my apartment as I head toward the one box I need. Tearing it open, I sift through the kitchen supplies until I find my emergency bottle of wine.

I don't bother to find a wineglass. I only open the bottle, pop the cork, and take a long swig of the dark red liquid.

I try to make it back to my bedroom but don't get far before I'm sitting on the living room floor, leaning against a tower of unpacked boxes. The room around me is covered in darkness under the night sky. Only the faint glow of the moon lights a path through the apartment.

A dull ache turns sharp in my head as I try to process the events over the past month. Alex is my landlord and my neighbor. Both notes were left by the same person, the same man who is now out of prison. The man I put in prison five years ago.

As I tip the bottle to my lips again, I savor the sweet tang of the alcohol as it mixes with the saltiness of my tears that I finally set free.

ALEX

The early morning sun warms my back, the rays hitting my skin directly as I opted not to wear a shirt. My body cools when a breeze blows by, hitting the beads of sweat running down my spine as I continue jogging back to my apartment. Breathing in through my nose, out through my mouth, I tighten my grip around the bouquet of pink lilies I'm holding.

It's been a week since I saw Beth at her bookstore, breaking the news I was dreading to give. I've kept my distance, but I noticed the fresh bouquet I left on her doorstep is already displayed in the vase next to her register this morning.

It's a sliver of an opening, but I'm taking it anyway.

I've been working up the courage to approach Beth about the things that need fixing. Especially considering her brother mentioned there were quite a few repairs, and I know it'll take some convincing to get Beth to let me help her.

If I had known the place was in such bad shape, I would've put in the work before Beth moved in. Then again, at least this gives me an excuse to talk to her.

Something about Beth intrigues me. Every time I'm around her, she overwhelms my senses, and I can't get enough of the feeling. Don't get me started on the way she verbally attacks me while simultaneously eye-fucking me. It's something I can't seem to get tired of.

I've made my way into the building, taking the stairs two steps at a time, trying to work through in my head how I'm going to approach Beth. Just as I reach the top of the steps, I hear a shriek come from Beth's apartment.

Flowers still in hand, I run the rest of the way to her apartment door and bang on it, hoping she'll let me in. Hoping she's okay.

My heart pounds in my ears when I hear a loud rushing sound coming from the other side of the door. I pound the wood harder, yelling, "Beth, are you okay?"

A muffled sound comes from the apartment, but I can't make out the words through the thick wood of the door. Taking a risk, I test the doorknob, slowly opening it and letting myself into her apartment when I find it unlocked.

I'll discuss that with her later.

"Beth, it's Alex, is everything okay?" I barely get the words out before another small shriek sounds through the apartment, pulling my attention toward the noise. Setting the bouquet on the kitchen counter, I make my way to the bathroom with an urgency pumping through my veins.

It's now clear as day where the sounds are coming from when my sneaker splashes in a growing puddle of water on the floor in the bathroom doorway.

"Shit...fuck...stupid...fucking...sink..." Beth is grunting out a string of expletives when I reach her. I suppress a chuckle when I find her, moving steadily to help her stop the water gushing out of the bathroom sink pipes. She's planted on the floor in front of the sink, fighting the pipe with all her strength. From the looks of it, the pipe is winning.

I let out a breath I didn't know I was holding at the sight of her being okay.

At least she isn't hurt.

Taking a towel from a nearby rack, I wrap it around the pipe. "Hold on, I'll be right back." Grabbing her hands, I put them in place of mine and rush out of the bathroom door, smiling at the shocked look on her face that I'm here in the first place.

To my surprise, she actually follows my command and stays put.

Water splashes under my feet on the laminate flooring as I step into the living room, the water continuing to pool outside the bathroom. Noticing a few boxes labeled "Books," I take the time to grab them, placing them in

the dining room far from the water, before heading to my apartment to grab my toolbox.

It doesn't take me long to get back to her apartment, and I easily make my way to the bathroom now that a path has been cleared and her books are out of harm's way. Though once I'm back, I'm met with a soaked-through towel, more gushing water, and a scowling Beth.

From what I can tell, there's only a small disconnect in the piping, so it shouldn't be too difficult to fix. Grabbing the wrench from my toolbox, I join Beth on the bathroom floor. I'm thankful I opted to run shirtless this morning so my movements aren't currently restricted by a soaked-through shirt.

Making quick work with the pipe, I secure the two pieces back together, successfully stopping the water flow. A sigh releases from my lips at the sight.

"I had it handled." Beth's words catch me off guard, throwing me into a spurt of laughter I don't care to hold back.

She stands, hands on her hips as she looks down at where I'm still on the floor. Given our height difference, she doesn't have to look far.

I'm still laughing when I stand to my full height in front of her, water sloshing around on the ground at my movements.

"You had it handled?" I ask, waiting for her response.

Her hair is tied up on top of her head, and she pushes a few loose strands out of her eyes before crossing her arms and responding, "Yes, I had it handled."

When her eyes dip to my chest and continue traveling lower, I'm reminded of my shirtless status. When her eyes dip even lower, I do what I can to hide the smile teasing my lips when she notices how low my shorts are hanging on my hips. I don't care to adjust them.

A faint blush spreads across her cheeks, tightening her arms further across her chest. It only presses her breasts together, bringing attention to the fact that her all-white T-shirt is completely soaked through, and she isn't wearing a bra. The cold water does nothing to hide her visibly hard nipples, and my cock springs to life at the sight of her.

Clearing my throat, I turn around, finding another towel on the towel rack and handing it to her, careful of where my eyes land.

She takes the towel from me and covers herself, now aware of how see-through her shirt is. Her reaction is unexpected when the corners of her lips

tick up, and she says, “You ogling me, Alex?”

Matching her smile, I can’t help but say, “You ogled me first.” I’m rewarded with one of her signature eye rolls and a shove out of the way as she passes by me. Her hand burns a brand into my bicep as she does, causing my cock to harden further.

“Shit, my books,” Beth says as she’s exiting the bathroom.

I take a minute to gather myself before looking in her direction again. To my relief, she’s thrown on a sweatshirt. Though the sight of our favorite band’s logo sprawled across the back does nothing to dampen my growing fascination with her.

Beth is checking the various boxes she has around her living room, presumably looking for her books. Crossing my arms, I lean against the doorframe of the bathroom, as I focus all my strength in avoiding watching her thick thighs flex and move, exposed by the tiny shorts she’s wearing.

Not finding what she’s looking for, she looks in my direction. “Where are my books?”

I point to where I moved the boxes, effectively saving her books from the disaster. I smile at the dramatic sigh that’s released from her lips when her eyes land on the boxes labeled “Books” piled in the dining room. No sight of water damage to be found.

The extra water damage caused by the time it took me to move all of those heavy-ass boxes is going to cost me more money than I probably have at the moment, but the current look on her face is worth more than what I’m going to pay to fix these floors.

The moment is short-lived when she turns back to me, a glare plastered on her face again. Although she’s eased up on the intensity of her attitude.

Her face softens when her eyes dip toward my abs again, into a look of defeat. Throwing her hands up at me before slamming them down, she grunts before saying, “Don’t do that.”

“Do what?” I ask, cocking my head slightly, feigning a misunderstanding of what she’s saying.

“You know what. Get the fuck off the doorframe, Alex.” Her eyes darken, and I don’t miss the hint of desperation that escapes her voice when she says the words.

Her shoulders relax when I move off the doorframe, only to tense back up when I take a step toward her.

“As you wish.” My tone is hushed, and her lips part at the sound. Her eyes glimmer with a playfulness I have rarely seen from her at the usage of the phrase from one of her favorite movies. I found out that piece of information when we were all at the lake house last summer.

This conversation has gotten away from me, and when my cock is all but aching for her to touch me, I shake my head, knowing that I must regain control of the situation.

Taking a step away from her, I take on a casual tone as I say, “I have a few training sessions this morning, but I’ll be by later to get a list of everything that needs to be fixed.”

“I can do it myself.” She juts up her nose the slightest.

“Clearly,” I deadpan.

Moving toward the kitchen, Beth begins filling a teapot with water, determined to ignore my current presence in her living room.

Following her, we’re separated only by the kitchen island, the bouquet lying next to a discarded mug of tea. By the steam still coming off the liquid, she must have made herself a mug before the incident.

“Look, I didn’t realize how much needed to be fixed around here. It’s my responsibility as your landlord to fix it. So that’s what I will do,” I tell her in the most serious tone I can muster. Though it slips slightly toward irritation when she scoffs at the word “landlord.”

“Don’t bother, I have a meeting with a lawyer later this afternoon to see how I can get out of the lease.” She avoids eye contact with me.

My eyebrows scrunch together. “You can’t.”

She finally puts the useless teapot down on the counter and looks at me. “No, what I can’t do is stay here.”

“So you found another place then? At the same price? For a better deal?” I challenge her words, knowing the answer already.

When she doesn’t respond, I continue, “It’s my building. Let me fix it. Otherwise, more instances like this will put me out of business, and I’ll be back at Roman’s house. And he has shit taste in music.” The last sentence gets the tiniest smile out of her, and I’m relieved to know I’ve cracked the ice between us.

“I’ll be by this afternoon. I’ll drop some extra towels off before heading to my first training session this morning.” I take a step toward the front door as she nods slightly.

Before exiting, I remember how I got into the apartment in the first place. Turning, I look back at Beth, who I catch admiring the flowers I've left behind. A chuckle gets caught in my throat when she jumps from being caught in the action.

"You know, you should really lock your doors." I tap on the door to emphasize my point. I wasn't going to say anything to her, as it isn't my business, but over the past month, I've noticed two notes left on the front door of her bookstore.

No flowers, no gifts, no packages, only a note. In my experience, a note without a gift isn't usually welcome. Although Beth receiving a welcoming note from someone other than me doesn't please me either.

I couldn't help myself the other night when she left to take her brother to the airport. I knew I was probably crossing a boundary, but I stayed up until she got back—unable to sleep until I knew she made it home safely. I don't know what came over me, but it was late, and I didn't have much brain power left to think through my actions.

When she got home, I watched from my bedroom window, waiting for her to enter her bookstore when she picked a piece of paper off the front door. I wouldn't have given it much thought if she hadn't looked around, then rushed inside with a terrified look on her face.

"Oh, I had to step out this morning real quick and just—" I cut her off before she can give me an excuse.

Deepening my tone, I make my point clear. "Lock your doors, Beth."

A small blush spreads across her face again at my command, and her only response is a nod before I close the door behind me.

BETH

The only thing worse than my bathroom sink exploding on me this morning was the fact that Alex showed up to save the day. Shirtless, leaning against the doorframe, shorts barely hanging off his hips. I hate the way heat pooled in my lower stomach watching him in the doorway as water ran down his exposed abdomen.

Alex's body is adorned with tattoos the same as mine, and I can never keep my eyes from drifting to them anytime he's around. The tattoo of his birth year, etched in Gothic font and sitting just above his right knee, was a gift I hate my eyes for greedily accepting.

The edge of the register counter digs into my side as I lean against it, attempting to read a new release I just purchased. Though the task is proving difficult when my mind keeps wandering back to Alex. The words on the page blur as visions of what his hands would feel like roaming my body float through my head.

I shake the thoughts away, hoping to refocus on the novel in front of me. The only thing more annoying than living *and* working next to Alex is that I've been in a reading slump for months now and can't seem to escape it. Since finding out Alex is next door, I'm lucky if I can get past the first chapter of a book.

The ringing of the front door bells washes over me like a cold shower when a cool breeze flows in from outside. The cold is brief, my skin heating to a burn when I look up to find the tattooed man I'm desperately trying *not*

to think about waltzing into my bookstore. Dressed in dark sweats, a black T-shirt, and carrying a toolbox, he looks relaxed in a way that's too domestic for my liking.

If I had never met him, I'd think he walked right out of one of my favorite dark romance books. My eyes track the way he runs a silver-ringed finger along one of the dark romance books lying on a table as he approaches the front desk. Having no choice but to abandon my book, I mark my place with my bookmark and set it aside.

Alex sets his toolbox on the counter, and I jump a little at the sharp sound of the tools clanking together. His eyebrows twitch when he catches me, but to my relief, he lets it go as he says, "So what's first on the list?"

Reluctantly, I hand him the list I made this morning. Unfortunately, despite a successful opening weekend, business has been slow since. Given that it's a Saturday, I was expecting more traffic to come through this morning. When it didn't, I found every way to busy myself that I could. Making the list was one of them. Although I'm still not convinced that Alex should be the one to help me fix it all. Most of it, I could figure out on my own.

"Are you sure you know how to fix this stuff? I thought Roman was the one in construction."

He's looking at the list when he smiles up at me, a smile I haven't been able to get off my mind since last summer despite my best efforts.

"Roman hates paying for shit." He shrugs and looks back at the list. "He taught us how to fix everything on our own, plus I did a few years with him at Kane Construction when I was saving for my gym."

When I don't respond, Alex looks back up at me. "Don't trust me, Beth?" He winks, and the growing heat in my core is soon replaced by tense muscles as irritation spreads through my body.

"Hardly." I cross my arms. "I could fix half the shit on my own. As long as I'm reimbursed for the supplies."

"I don't doubt you could," he croons.

"Then let me fix it myself."

"No."

"Why?"

His tone is sharp when he responds, as his aggravation grows in accordance with my own. "Just because you *could* fix half this shit doesn't mean *you* should be the one to do it. Let me help you."

I know Alex well enough to know he won't let this go until I agree with him. So I do, allowing myself to focus on more important business matters.

Nodding, I motion toward the back room. "You can start with the stuff in the back. The items down here are more important than the shit in my apartment."

Without a word, he grabs his toolbox and heads to the back room to get started. Not knowing what to do with myself since I still have no customers, I open my book again, only to keep staring at the blurry words on the page, hoping they will eventually turn into something legible.

It's been an hour since Alex began working in the back room, and I've been standing here at the register desk in silence for the entirety of it. Once again, I couldn't focus on my book, so I decided to walk around the store, ensuring all the books were displayed properly, adjusting a few as I went.

That was a mistake, considering I caught a glimpse of Alex in the back room as he lifted his shirt to wipe away a bead of sweat, giving me the perfect show of his abs. If I didn't know any better, I'd say he knew I was looking and did it on purpose. The bastard.

After the show, I decided to hide behind the register counter because apparently I'm now twelve years old instead of twenty-three.

I may have agreed to let Alex fix everything on the list, but I never said I'd talk to him. He tricked me into this situation, and I've never cared too much for men who pull such moves.

Letting out a small cough, I become aware of just how dry my throat is. When the cough worsens, the tickle in my throat growing, I search around for my water bottle. Only to find that it's nowhere in sight, and I have indeed left it in the back room.

I stop to contemplate my choices for a moment. On the one hand, I'm in desperate need of water. On the other hand, if I go back there, I fear Alex will try to start a conversation with me.

For a split second, I contemplate death by dehydration. Ultimately deciding it's not worth it, I head to the back room.

Picking up my reusable water bottle off my desk, I take a large swig, relishing the refreshing liquid as it glides down my throat. I catch sight of

Alex's toolbox on my desk, his tools so perfectly intertwined with my scattered office supplies and a few lingering books.

As though the desk was always meant to be shared.

"Fifty-four minutes on the dot," Alex says, looking at his watch.

"Excuse me?" I ask, Alex's comment pulling me from my desk hyperfixation.

"That's how long it took you to come back here for that." He motions to my water bottle. "Fifty-four minutes. I was wondering how long it would take." He pulls a small smile, and my eyes attempt to look at the back of my head in response.

Leaning against the side of my desk, I look out into my bookstore. I'm positioned right in the doorway between the bookstore and the back room, allowing me to keep an eye on things if a customer shows up.

Although, by the looks of the parking lot, I'd expect the gym has been as empty as the bookstore today.

Alex continues to patch and repair the many cracks and holes along the walls of the back room as I watch him. Not that I'm paying that close of attention to him.

"So why a bookstore?" he asks.

My only response is a shrug as I look out into my bookstore again. I know exactly why, but it doesn't mean Alex needs to know. I should've grabbed my water bottle and run.

Unfortunately, something about watching Alex work with his hands keeps my feet firmly planted.

Alex stops his work and turns to look at me, exhaustion overtaking his face. "Beth, like it or not, I'm your landlord *and* your neighbor. There's no harm in getting to know each other. Be a little neighborly. We're stuck in this situation for the next year after all."

A scoff escapes my throat. "No, *I'm* stuck in this situation. *You're* the one who created it."

"And I will buy you flowers until the day you die to make up for it."

"Until the day *I* die? Pretty sure you got that phrase wrong." I smirk at catching him messing up on his words. It's the least I could do, considering the compromising position he found me in this morning.

"No, I didn't. Women live longer than men. I'll make sure weekly flower deliveries to you are written into my will."

“Oh god, I’ll be stuck with you forever.” I sigh, although a small smile escapes my lips. Alex catches it, a smile of his own spreading across his face.

He stalks toward me, ever so slowly, reaching for a tool in his toolbox when he reaches the desk. He’s stopped just to the side of me, so close that his breath sounds in my ear as we both fall silent. All it would take is for me to move an inch and I’d be touching him.

I hold my breath, avoiding movement for fear of what our connection might lead to.

Leaning down, feigning as though he’s searching for the right tool, he lowers his voice, his words coming out in a breath as he says, “There are worse things.”

As quickly as he’s invaded my space, he’s turning away, carrying a tool in his hand that I don’t recognize, as he walks back to his workstation.

Silence stretches between us as I watch him blatantly *not* use the tool he just grabbed from the toolbox.

Breaking the tension, I return his own question to him. “Why a boxing gym? You a big fan of violence or is it just a hobby for you?”

Alex’s movements come to a halt. When he faces me, he looks as though I struck him across the face. The expression is fleeting, but I catch it before he returns his expression to the smooth, nonchalant one he’s usually wearing. Though something reminiscent of pain glints in his blue irises as he looks at me.

The glint is similar to the one I’ve carried in my own eyes for years.

His tone is clipped as he responds, “Sure, if that’s what you think of me, then let’s go with that.”

Turning his back on me, he continues working. His lack of an answer is reassuring that I did the right thing by not answering his question. If he’s not willing to be “neighborly,” as he put it, then I shouldn’t have to be either.

“Right, well I—” Before I continue, the bells on the front door chime, and I step back into the store at the sound, leaving Alex behind.

“I just need a signature,” the robust deliveryman says as he steps through the door, with a medium-sized box in his hands.

Signing, I take the package from him and say my thank-yous before heading to the register desk. I don’t remember ordering a package, but I’ve

been in touch with a few small businesses that could've sent me some samples to stock in my store.

I'm searching for my box knife when Alex appears by my side, holding it out in his hand for me. I must've left it in the back room. Nodding my thanks, I take the knife from him and tear into the box. Getting packages is like opening presents on Christmas morning, so this is sure to lift my spirits after a no-sale day.

The peanut butter and jelly sandwich I had for lunch churns in my stomach when I inspect the contents of the box. Any smile previously on my face is wiped away by the presence of a reminder of my childhood.

My breath turns manual as I try and fail to remember how to perform life's most basic task. I'm unmoving as I stare at the contents inside, afraid to reach out and touch the objects placed in the box.

Inside the cardboard box is an old, ragged, stuffed teddy bear, along with a note with my name scrawled across the front in familiar handwriting.

The same handwriting as the previous two notes.

The teddy bear is one I haven't seen in years. Not since I was eight years old and it was ripped from my hands. He told me I was too old to have such things.

Once so full of life and color, the caramel-brown fabric has worn, fading over the years. One of the eyes is missing. The cause of the damage is unknown to me, as both eyes were intact the last time this was in my possession. What's most unnerving is the slice in the fabric of the teddy bear across the neck, stuffing peeking out of it as it lies limp in the box.

Bile rises in my throat at the thought of him keeping it all these years.

My fingers curve around the note hesitantly as I attempt to dull the shaking that has begun in my appendages. To my dismay, the shaking only intensifies when I open the note. I do my best to hide the contents from Alex, who hasn't moved from his position beside me. I can't bring myself to look at him, worried he'll ask questions.

A PEACE OFFERING

A fucking peace offering?

I've known this man for the majority of my life and *peace* isn't in his vocabulary. My heartbeat pounds in my ears as I read the note over and over again, the world around me falling away as I stare at the words written

on the small piece of paper. I'm not sure how long I stand there like that, unmoving, before a gentle hand warms my shoulder.

The connection grounds me, bringing me back from an internal spiral I was losing myself to.

"Beth?" Alex's voice is like a feather's brush against my ear. "Is everything okay?"

No, and you're the last person that should be concerned. For all I know, you're just like him.

Hoping he didn't see the note, I pull away from him, grabbing the box as I do so. "I'm fine," I say before pushing past him and throwing the box in the trash bin in the back room.

Meeting Alex back out at the front desk, I explain, "It's nothing. Look, I haven't had a customer all day, and I'm pretty hungry. Feel free to keep working, but I'm going to head up for the night." I kick myself for the slight shake in my voice as I say the words.

Alex's eyebrows scrunch together, curiosity lacing his tone. "Sure, go get some rest. I'll finish up here, and I'll make sure everything gets locked up properly."

"Thanks," I say before grabbing my water bottle and heading up the stairs toward my apartment for the night.

Upon entering my apartment, I remember Alex's command from this morning and promptly lock the doors behind me, ensuring my door is secure. It's usually just a precaution I use at night, but I'm beginning to think I'll have to use these locks during the day as well.

It wasn't just a note this time, but a full package. Sent directly to my bookstore. Maybe I should've checked the return address, but looking into this would only encourage him. He's getting bolder, the progression matching that of my childhood. I don't need to feed into this situation more than I have to.

Sitting at my kitchen counter, I open my laptop. My gut twists as I type in the words "self-defense videos for women" into the search bar. I always meant to take classes, but finding a place I could afford and the time to train was difficult enough that it was never a priority.

A decision I'm now regretting.

I continue my search well into the night, doing my best to pick up a few moves for free courtesy of the internet. Three hours into my search, the

plethora of information becomes overwhelming, leaving me no choice but to close my laptop and go to bed.

Maybe I won't need self-defense. Maybe notes and creepy packages are the extent of what he plans to do. Maybe he really did offer it as a peace offering.

You know better, Beth.

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ALEX

One eye of the mutilated teddy bear looks back at me from its position on my coffee table. A *tap tap tap* echoes through my apartment as my heel attempts to drill a hole straight through my oak wood flooring. The brown leather of my couch creaks beneath the tempo of my leg. A dull pain forms in my head as my brain works overtime in an effort to put the pieces together. My molars lock themselves onto each other as my anger grows by the second.

Who the fuck is sending her a “peace offering?”

After Beth left, I packed up my tools and locked up for her. I had finished the work about twenty minutes before she came to the back room to pick up her water bottle but had decided to keep myself busy until I could get a conversation going with her.

The look on her face when she opened the package told me that I had made the correct decision. She said she was fine, but the way her eyes widened at the sight of the contents and the trembling that worked its way from her shoulders to her fingertips told me everything I needed to know. It was the same as when she found the note on her front door of the bookstore a few nights ago.

She’s scared.

I didn’t think twice when I grabbed the box out of the trash and took it to my apartment. After dumping it out on my coffee table, I took a seat and have been examining the items since. On the surface, these items aren’t

scary. Sure, the teddy bear is a little worn, and the slit across the throat is a small concern, but it's only a stuffed animal. The note itself isn't scary either. So that only leaves one thing as the root cause of her fear.

The person who sent this to her.

I could sit here and theorize *who* this person is all night, but that's not my style. Instead, I carry myself over to my desk, which sits beneath a large window on the other side of the dining room. Beth and my apartments have the same layout, only mirrored. Although mine is a little easier to maneuver, considering it's fully furnished and doesn't have boxes lying around.

Opening my laptop, I begin searching. For what, I'm not sure, but I start with Beth's name. I've searched for it before, and nothing came up as a red flag. Only finding social media accounts that have been set to private, my follow request still going unanswered.

After an hour of searching, I look back at the items on the coffee table again. Beth's scared face and shaky hands flash before my eyes again, and I turn back toward the computer, opening my Wi-Fi provider's website.

I don't want to do this, but I never want to see that look on Beth's face again.

Since I've offered Beth free Wi-Fi in her lease, I can access her search history. I only pull her Wi-Fi history from the past two weeks and make sure I skim the results. In an effort to maintain some of her privacy, I'm only scanning for potential red flags that could provide insight into her situation.

Pretty sure you're the only red flag here.

I curse at the voice in my head and continue my search. Nothing comes up until I reach today's search history. Time-stamped for shortly after Beth returned to her apartment.

Self-defense videos, self-defense for women, tips for women living alone, beginner self-defense classes...

For the past two hours, Beth has been researching self-defense. Part of me is proud of her for taking it upon herself to learn a life-saving skill, and the other part of me can't help but wonder why she didn't come to me.

Because you've been a complete asshole to her, idiot.

The voice in my head isn't completely wrong. Nevertheless, I own a boxing gym, for fuck's sake. I have the perfect layout for teaching her self-defense, and I'm only next door.

Although I should know better than to think she'd want to train with me, especially considering my current invasion of her privacy.

One more glance at the coffee table and I know it's worth it. If she hates me, then let her hate me, but I refuse to see that terrified look on her face again.

My arms reach toward the ceiling, stretching my limbs as I make my way back to the living room. Picking up the small piece of paper, I read the note again. My anger returns in an instant.

Snatching the items off the coffee table, I throw them in the trash near my front door. There's no need to keep these around any longer. Beth especially doesn't need to see them again.

Exhaustion sets deep into my bones, the sun long gone and the moon high in the sky. I trudge back to my desk, working to think through a plan to keep Beth safe. I may not have all the details, or any for that matter, but I refuse to let anything happen to her.

Opening my laptop again, I begin my search for the highest tech cameras I can find, selecting the option that bleeds my wallet dry for overnight shipping.

I'll install these tomorrow, so I can keep an eye on things. Now I just need to convince her to take self-defense lessons from me.

BETH

Still on edge from the teddy bear package I received yesterday, I decided to open my shop up later than normal. From what I can tell, there's no pattern or consistency to his notes. He's merely sending shit whenever he feels like it.

The unpredictability of it all constantly churns my stomach with unease.

Without enough work to keep me busy, nothing has been able to distract me from the fear of knowing another note could show up any second.

When I signed the lease, I was blinded by the low cost and didn't take the time to consider the area's traffic. Or lack thereof.

Alex's gym isn't any busier, but at least he has his regulars. I've seen the same cars pull in and out of here over the past couple of weeks, so I've gotten to learn what they look like. Still, no new cars are pulling through.

Now I understand why the building to my left is empty.

With no customers to tend to, I've kept myself busy reorganizing the bookshelves in my store, only to end up back where I started. To my already slim wallet's dismay, I had preemptively ordered another case of books during opening weekend since I had a decent number of customers. Staring down at the cart full of books, next to the bookshelf filled from end to end with books, I'm hit over the head with my mistake.

Pushing the full book cart back to my storage room, I've given up trying to make space for these on my shelves. I should probably be brainstorming

ideas to get more customers, but every time I sit down to work through my business problems, my mind flashes back to the notes.

No, if I keep moving and keep busy, I keep *him* off my mind. I refuse to let his bullshit get to me.

With so few shelves and so little space in the back, I busy myself by snagging a few empty boxes from the top shelf and consolidating them into one. The result leaves me a sliver of space on the steel shelves in the back for my overstock.

Grabbing a few books from the cart, I reach my full height, placing my weight on my toes as I attempt to put the books on the top shelf. When I do, I'm blinded by a flash in the upper corner of my back room by the door leading to the stairwell. Taking a second look, my stomach hollows out at the sight of what's there.

Who the fuck put a camera back here?

I'm not sure if it's always been here and I haven't noticed it, but...no. It hasn't. Blood pulses through my veins rapidly when I take a step back, looking around the room for more cameras. I don't notice any more in the storage room, so my feet carry me out into my bookstore, searching the top corners of the room.

Unsurprisingly, there are two more, each in opposite corners of the store. My feet land heavy on the floor as I carry myself outside, the bells on my door chiming loudly from the force with which I open it. As I suspected, another camera sits high up in the corner hidden away by the awning that covers the front of my shop. It points directly at the front door where I'm standing.

Heartbeat now in my ears, I do the only thing I'm capable of doing at the moment. I raise my right hand, and I flip the camera off.

If *he* wants to fuck with me, then I want him to know I'm aware. I won't let him get to me. As I head back inside, now acutely aware of the cameras watching my every move, my heartbeat pulses in my throat as I work through all the ways the bastard could've broken into my place.

I knew he was going to get bolder, but I didn't think it would get this bad. I'm not sure if I should go to the police or tell—

I'm gripping the edge of the register counter, my breathing labored, when my phone chimes.

LANDLORD

Well that wasn't very nice.

Son of a bitch.

I should be angry when the text comes through, but the only anger I feel is toward myself when my breathing regulates, and my grip on the counter loosens. It would make sense for Alex to have a key, though I'm not sure why he would install cameras.

At least it isn't him.

I'm typing a response when I notice Alex's name is still "landlord" in my phone, so I make the appropriate changes to his contact before hitting Send on my message.

BETH

You're the one who put up the cameras?

Why the fuck would you do that?

Ever heard of something called privacy?

ASSHOLE

Damn. I was just trying to be a good landlord. Thought you'd appreciate the added security.

BETH

Considering I didn't know they were being installed, I'm not sure how this is supposed to make me feel more secure.

I can't pay you back for them. Come get them.

ASSHOLE

Don't worry about it. 2 for 1 deal.

Besides, I do own the building after all. Just protecting what's mine.

I type out a few different versions of my message before I stop to think. The added security is nice but only if I have access to the feeds. Although I'd never tell Alex I actually like his idea. I also don't love the idea of asking him for anything, even if it is access to the cameras.

ASSHOLE

Here's the link to the camera feeds. Feel free to make your own login.

I can take them down if you want.

I take a moment to think about his offer. With the notes I've been receiving, it isn't the worst thing in the world to have the added security.

BETH

It's fine, thanks.

Clearly, I'm bored out of my mind because I send another text.

BETH

For a second there, I thought you put up cameras to watch me.

ASSHOLE

Who said I didn't?

You are pretty to look at. 😊

BETH

If only I could say the same about you.

ASSHOLE

By the way you were looking at me in your bathroom, I think we both know that you can.

Fed up with the conversation, I slam my phone on the register counter. I knew texting him again was a mistake. Fidgeting with my bookmark display, I turn my back to the camera when my phone goes off again.

ASSHOLE

Crack the screen?

My grip on my phone tightens. At least I know I've given him a proper name in my phone. The asshole *is* watching me.

Teeth clenching, I walk around the register counter to the front of the store. Standing in front of one of the large windows, I look up at the camera tucked away high in the corner.

Pointing at the camera, each word is clipped as it leaves my lips. "Listen, asshole, I'll *allow* you to keep the cameras up, but you don't get to watch me like a fucking stalker."

My phone dings again in response.

ASSHOLE

Aw, but you're so fun to watch.

And I'm bored.

Looking back up at the camera, I throw my hands up. “Then go jack off or something. Your boredom isn’t my fucking problem.” My volume rises with each word.

Another text comes through.

ASSHOLE

Is that something you think about often?

Me touching myself?

I’m about to yell at the camera again when I spot motion in the parking lot out of the corner of my eye.

A young couple stands a few feet away from the front door, looking at me as though they aren’t sure if they should be concerned or terrified. I don’t blame them considering the show I’ve just put on.

Trying to save two potential customers, I turn and face the window, giving them my sweetest smile and a wave. That only prompts them to turn away, booking it back toward their car as though they are afraid I’m only seconds away from chasing them down the street.

I take a deep inhale and a long exhale when my phone dings again.

ASSHOLE

Ouch. Better luck next time.

With another middle finger to the camera, my feet are heavy with each step I take toward my back room. Snagging my current read from the register counter on my way, I plop down in my office chair, sure to turn my back on the storage room camera. Kicking my feet up on my desk, I open my book.

It doesn’t take long for the words to blur on the page in front of me.

Unable to get my mind off the guy next door, most certainly watching me through the camera. Disgusted with myself for the fact that I don’t particularly hate it as much as I pretend to. After all, it’s not the worst thing to have someone watching my back, given my current situation.

Then again, that person is *Alex* of all people. The man with a mask he refuses to take off.

BETH

Ragged breaths escape my lungs, my chest rising and falling as my hardened nipples slide against the thin fabric of my sleep shirt. The chilled morning air flows in through the open window, cooling my upper body that's exposed from the comforter, as I work to bring myself closer to the edge.

The sensation between my legs is overwhelming as a vibration rocks through my core. Lying in bed, with one hand holding the toy between my legs, I reach up with the opposite, fisting my pillow. Arching my back, I'm close yet so far from an orgasm that I fist the pillow harder in my growing rage.

I've never had a hard time getting myself off, and up until my bookstore opened, it was one of the only things keeping me sane. I haven't had many visitors since I moved in at the beginning of the year, but finding out Alex is my landlord has kept me extra pent-up.

Upping the vibration intensity, I refocus my thoughts. Flipping my mind through past sexual endeavors, favorite book scenes, and more, I try everything I can to bring myself closer to the edge.

A bead of sweat forms on my brow as the sensation in my lower back tightens.

I'm so close yet so far when my mind betrays me.

A tattooed hand skating across my breasts, dark brown hair between my legs, those piercing blue eyes peering up at me. Rock hard abs and a V-line

sharp enough to leave cuts on my inner thighs as he thrusts himself deeper into me. His lips on mine as he—

“Oh fuck, Alex.” I come harder than I have in months. If I’m being honest with myself, it’s one of the biggest orgasms I’ve had on my own in probably forever.

I ride the high, enjoying the release I haven’t been able to give myself in days. It isn’t until I come out of that high that I slap my hand over my mouth.

My heart beats forcefully in my ears as I look to my left, the window beside my bed still open from the night before.

The window next to the wall Alex and I share.

Now not only has my mind betrayed me, but my mouth has too. Throwing the covers off my body, I toss the toy onto the opposite side of the bed, hoping it’ll stop incessantly mocking me soon.

Embarrassed and coming down from the high of well... coming, I round my bed to the window, attempting to slam it shut. That is until it gets stuck halfway and I can’t get it closed. Forcing the window down with all my might, my feet almost lift off the floor as I throw my weight into my efforts.

My bare knee scrapes against the rough wall beneath the window and I curse at myself for the mess of this morning.

Maybe he didn’t hear me.

I do my best to ease my racing heart as I lean my ear against the wall of my bedroom that sits between Alex’s and my apartments. I listen for any indication that he’s home, but it’s too hard to focus over the sound of my pounding heart.

It isn’t until I hear a knock on my front door that my pulse comes to a jarring halt.

I’m not expecting any visitors, especially this early in the morning. Straightening out my sleep shorts from where they were riding up, I don’t bother reaching for a sweatshirt when I cross my apartment to my front door.

Still only halfway unpacked, I’m making my way through the boxes when another knock sounds. Whoever the visitor is, they’re impatient.

When I open the door and see who stands before me, my limbs take on a shake from the sudden urgency at which my blood moves through my veins. I’m worried my heart might beat out of my chest when my eyes greedily take in the sight before me.

Alex, shirtless and in shorts, sweat dripping down his perfectly carved chest. A dark brown piece of hair falls forward onto his forehead as he smiles at me.

“I know why I’m out of breath, but why are you?” He asks the question like he knows something he shouldn’t, and I scoff, turning my back on him, hoping he doesn’t follow me.

Shit, did he hear me?

He couldn’t have. Over the last few weeks, Alex has been dropping by to fix a few things around my bookstore and apartment. Though he never comes over without going on his morning run first. He doesn’t strike me as the type of person to have such a strict routine, but he does. I find it intriguing, to say the least.

By the looks of his clothes, he’s been on his morning run, so there’s no way he could’ve heard me if he’s just now getting back.

“The stupid window in my bedroom won’t shut,” I say, gathering myself before turning back toward Alex.

He’s taken a few steps into my apartment, closer to me, our height difference once again overwhelming.

“Oh, is that why you called for me?” His tone takes on a dark edge, the corners of his mouth moments away from turning upward.

My heart drops to my stomach. “I-I didn’t call for you.” Confidence is nowhere to be found in my voice as I stumble on my words.

“Hmm. I could’ve sworn I heard my name come from your apartment as I was getting back from my run.” He points at the hallway, his pupils dilating when the words leave his lips.

He fucking heard me.

He heard me, and he knows I didn’t say his name because the window got stuck. No one calls for help through a *moan*. The asshole wants to play games.

Fine, I’ll play.

Alex’s eyes dart to my waist when I place my hands on my hips, straightening my shoulders as I say, “I have no idea what you’re talking about. But now that you’re here, if you wouldn’t mind fixing the window, it’s fucking freezing.”

His eyes fall to my chest before making eye contact with me again and smiling. “I can see that.”

I don't have to look down to know that my nipples are hard and visible through my white shirt. When he greedily takes a second glance at my breasts, I take the opportunity to look at his v-lines, only to find I'm not the only one affected by our proximity.

When he notices that I've caught him, he clears his throat, pushing past me to make his way to the bedroom.

His current, post-workout state intensifies his scent. He smells like spiced wood on a rainy day, mixed with a hint of leather and something so uniquely *him*.

It's a scent I don't hate, and it only makes me hate him more.

"This window?" He calls from the bedroom, and I make my way back to the scene of this morning's crime.

I nod as I cross my arms, tucking a leg underneath me as I sit down on the edge of my bed.

"These always get jammed. If you pull up on it a tad, you can usually get it shut like—" Within seconds, he has the window closed. Demonstrating the technique for me for future use.

Although, after this morning, I don't think I'll be opening any of my windows ever again.

I'm not easily embarrassed by my sexual endeavors, but feeding Alex's ego when I'm not interested in him in the slightest is not something I care to do.

I'm too distracted by my own thoughts to notice that Alex has gone silent, staring at my disheveled bed. His eyes are locked onto the item I've left sitting out in the open for him to see.

Grabbing the toy off the bed in front of me, I turn my back to Alex as I shove it in my top dresser drawer. Closing the drawer, I lean against the dresser, the wood cooling a slip of exposed skin on my back as Alex watches me.

"What? Never seen anything that big before?" The words escape me before I can think. Something that seems to happen a lot around Alex. Ragged breaths leave my lips once again when he walks toward me, his movements slow but precise.

A hunter sneaking up on his prey.

Against my will, my core flushes with desire, ready to go round two with the very man it needed for round one.

I'm too afraid to move as he approaches me, both of his hands landing on the dresser, boxing me in with his toned arms.

He leans down, his lips brushing my ear as he whispers, "No, baby." A low-timbre chuckle escapes him before he continues, "If that's all you can take, then you and I are going to have a problem."

Pulling back from my ear, he looks at me, his eyes darkening as he stares at my lips. Our bodies are only inches apart. My hard nipples brush against his chest as I breathe. The sensation heats my core to the point of agony, threatening to take control of my body.

Pushing him off me before either one of us can take this any further, I move back toward my bed on the other side of my room. Though the distance doesn't feel like enough when he faces me again. The sizable erection in his shorts is visible, and he makes no moves to hide it from me. My mind loses the battle with my body when I can't pry my eyes from him.

Either my eyes are playing tricks on me, or he's easily twice as big as the toy I so shamefully hid. The only thing that pulls my attention away from his shorts is the rapid motion of his chest rising and falling.

Silence stretches between us as we stand there, breathing heavily, both of us unable to move. My throbbing core is begging for me to touch him while my mind fights for me to stay put.

He's a fighter. A walking red flag. He'll only hurt you.

"Don't you have a gym to open?" I finally say, out of breath.

"Don't you have a bookstore to run?" His response comes quickly, but I'm pleased when it's as breathless as mine.

"Come to the gym later," he says, pulling my attention to his face. My skin cools at the change in subject, thankful this didn't end up somewhere I was going to regret.

"I'm good, thanks." My shoulders relax when my breathing regulates.

"Look, it may not be my place, but the gym can be good when you're a little... pent-up."

My mouth falls open at his directness. "You're right, it most certainly isn't your place."

"Right, so that wasn't my name you said this morning?"

I'm speechless at his words. My only action is to look away, unable to look at the half-naked man who stands before me any longer.

"Stop by the gym later. I'll stay open late for you. It'll help clear your head."

“Who said my head needed clearing?”

He takes a deep breath before continuing, his irritation with me growing. Good, we’re back to normal.

“It’s a neighborly offer, Beth. Working out helps me when I’m stressed. I thought I’d extend the same opportunity to you.” He takes a step toward my bedroom door. “Just think about it,” he says before he walks out. His vacancy is shortly followed by the sound of the front door clicking behind him.

It’s not until I know he’s gone that I collapse on my bed, screaming my frustrations with my body into my pillow.

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ALEX

I had reached the parking lot on my way back from my morning run when I heard Beth moan my name through her open window. The sound sent a lightning bolt of energy straight to my cock. I'm not ashamed to say I completed my run by booking it into the back entrance of the building, taking the stairs two at a time to end up at the front door of her apartment. Doing what I could to control my breathing and calm my rock-hard cock before knocking on her front door.

I'm not sure what I was expecting, but seeing her answer the door in a T-shirt that could barely reach the hem of her short sleep shorts was enough to make any man fall to his knees in front of her.

Thankfully, my legs held me upright. Barely.

I'm still trying to figure out a way to bring up self-defense classes, but I figured getting her over here to the gym would be the first step. It's been weeks, and she still hasn't visited me. The only time I find myself in the same room as her is when I'm fixing something in her apartment or bookstore. Not that I've given her a reason to stop by my gym, but I guess part of me had hoped...

Blurriness fogs my vision when a light smack lands on the side of my head.

"Focus, fucker." Roman laughs in my face as he holds up the two boxing pads I've been hitting for the past ten minutes. Leo laughs alongside him to my right.

Regaining focus, Roman calls out another combo, and I put more power behind my punches this time, effectively driving him a few steps back in the ring.

“That focused enough for you?” I say, breathing heavily from the extra exertion. Considering Roman is a full weight class above me, it usually takes more power to drive him back in the ring than it does Leo. I appreciate the challenge, but it takes more effort for me to focus today given this morning's events.

The orgasm I gave myself in the shower after leaving Beth's apartment couldn't compare to the sight of her curves in the scraps of sleepwear she wore, or the way her nipples scraped against my chest as I leaned over her...

Another smack to my head, a little harder this time, throws me off balance, causing me to stumble back a few steps.

“You call that focused?” Roman and Leo chuckle again, but it isn't their laugh I zoom in on.

A light, airy sound comes from the front entrance, as though someone is fighting back their laughter. I know it's Beth before I look in her direction.

She actually showed up.

“You didn't tell me I'd be getting a show,” she calls from the front desk.

I'm smiling, about to say something, when Leo beats me to it. “Only the best for our lovely guest,” he booms before pulling me into a headlock.

I was too distracted by Beth's cropped sweatshirt and leggings combo to see him coming. When Roman joins in, I know I'm done for. Grappling with my brothers in the ring, I put up a fight before I'm pinned down on my stomach, Roman sitting on my back.

I'm thrown back to middle school when I first started training when Roman says, “Do you yield?”

“Yes, I yield.” I give up the fight, no longer interested in entertaining my brothers with our present company.

Once I'm up, I give Roman a proper shove, embarrassment taking over my actions as I throw off my gloves. Once I snag my water bottle from Leo, I exit the ring as quickly as I can before the two of them gang up on me again. I can feel my brothers' eyes piercing through the back of my skull as I casually make my way over to Beth.

She's talking with Jake as I approach. He's a great employee, even making me laugh from time to time. But when he says something to Beth

that makes her throw her head back with laughter, it takes everything in me not to land one of my fists to his face.

“I was getting Beth here signed up for a membership,” Jake says.

“Which is how much, exactly?” Beth asks Jake hesitantly, holding out her wallet.

“Free.” Beth whips her head around to face me. “No need to pay. Your membership is on me. Count it as an added perk of your lease.”

“I couldn’t—” Beth is cut off when Roman and Leo join us at the counter.

Leo reaches his arm around Beth, in a sideways embrace that Beth has no problem leaning into.

“It’s good to see you,” Leo says, my nostrils flaring at the sight of them touching.

Beth is all smiles when she looks at Leo. “You too. I watched that movie you recommended. It was so good.”

Leo opens his mouth to respond, but I don’t let him when I say, “Right, well, let’s not keep Beth from her workout.” Envy fuels the bite in my tone.

A moment of silence passes between all four of us, the thumping bass of the loud background music the only sound filling the void.

Beth and Roman exchange a friendly nod with one another, and my molars pay the price, my jaw ticking tighter.

“Enjoy your workout,” I say to Beth in a clipped tone.

She takes a step toward me, lowering her voice when she says, “I really can’t accept—”

Softening, I give her a small smile. “I insist.”

With a nod, I watch her hips sway as she makes her way across the room to the free weights. When she grabs a resistance band and begins what looks like an intermediate upper-body warm-up, my smile widens.

At least I know she has gym experience. That’ll make teaching her self-defense a lot easier.

“I know it’s not my place, but I’m not sure we should be giving out memberships for free,” Jake says to me.

“Why? Are you having financial troubles?” Roman’s voice is laced with his usual tone of concern.

I put a hand up, stopping him from continuing, “No, we’re doing fine.”

It’s a lie. We’re far from fine. The mainstream gym down the street continues to poach more of my customers each week, and we haven’t

signed up new members in months. Roman is the last person who needs to know that right now.

“Beth is a family friend, so I’m offering her the family discount. Why don’t you pack up and take off early? It’s almost closing time anyway,” I tell Jake. The ambient lighting in the gym works overtime as the sun outside inches toward the horizon.

I let out a long breath when Jake doesn’t say another word about our financial situation as he packs up and heads out for the night.

“Family friend, huh?” Leo side-eyes me as he takes a swig from his water.

“You’re friends with her, no?” Leo’s only response is a shrug in agreement.

Resting my elbow on the bar-height counter, I look at Roman, waiting for his inevitable questioning.

“Are you having financial troubles that I should know about? It does seem more dead here than usual.” He looks around the gym, noting that it’s only the three of us and Beth left. In months past, I was still kicking people out an hour after closing.

“It’s a slow night.” I shrug, grateful for the music that’s still blasting through the gym, hiding our conversation from Beth.

“I noticed some new cameras too. Anything we should know about?” His line of questioning continues, but this one in particular piques Leo’s interest.

Sighing, I know this is one thing I can’t keep from my brothers. “Beth has had a few interesting...deliveries. I did what I needed to protect what’s mine.”

“What’s yours?” Leo asks, eyebrows furrowed.

“The building,” I clarify, as he nods, the look on his face still unconvinced.

Roman’s voice is laced with concern once again when he asks, “Have you seen these *deliveries*?”

“Not all of them. Only the one she threw in the trash.”

Leo’s eyes widen, shock overtaking his voice as he says, “You’re going through her trash?”

I shoot him a look, my blood pressure rising at his constant assumption that I’m violating boundaries. “If you saw the fear in her eyes, you would’ve too.”

“Sorry. You know you can get obsessive sometimes,” Leo says in response.

“I don’t get obsessive. The fuck are you—”

“Cut it out,” Roman asserts.

Though Leo isn’t wrong. I have been known to get obsessive over things in the past. A strong history of overworking myself in the gym and reading books well into the night supports my brother’s claims. But this is different.

Taking another sip of my water, I continue, keeping my voice hushed, “Look, I don’t know what’s going on. She can barely stand me as it is. I doubt she’s going to tell me who the notes are from if I ask her about it. So when I saw the note for myself, I ordered cameras.” I look pointedly at Leo. “She has access to the feeds too. It’s for security, that’s it.”

Both of my brothers nod their understanding, Roman taking another drink of his water.

“You know to call if you need backup,” Roman says.

“I won’t need backup. I haven’t seen another note in a while. I think he might’ve backed off after the cameras.”

Roman puts a hand on my shoulder, making a point to look me in the eyes when he says, “Call.”

A curt nod is my only response before my brothers and I exchange goodbyes, and they head out for the night.

Locking the doors behind them, I turn off the Open sign. Heading back to the front desk, I take a glance at Beth to see her pushing two twenty-five-pound dumbbells on the bench. My cock dares to spring to life at the sight, but I shake off the feeling as I take a seat, getting to work on closing paperwork for the night.

When the sun is fully set, I look up from my place at the front desk to find Beth stretching in the far corner of the gym. Even here it seems as though she’s trying to put as much space between us as possible.

Her body language this morning, on the other hand, was signaling that she wanted to be as close to me as she physically could.

Having finished up my closing paperwork half an hour ago, I grab a cold water bottle from the mini fridge under the desk and make my way over to Beth.

She looks up at me, taking a headphone out, a silent question written on her face.

“Thought you might be thirsty,” I say, handing her the water bottle, ignoring the reusable one she brought with her.

To my surprise, she takes my offering, unscrewing the cap and taking a sip. I’m thinking of a way to tell her I was impressed by the weight she was pushing without sounding condescending when she gets up and grabs her gym bag from the floor.

“It’s late. I should probably head out for the night.” The words leave her lips, but her feet don’t move. Instead, her eyes keep darting to the punching bags hanging behind me next to the ring.

“Wanna try?” I ask.

A short laugh escapes her. “Oh no, I’m not much of a fighter.”

I level her with a look. “I find that hard to believe.”

“Words I have no problem with. It’s the physical fighting that I...” Something dark crosses her features again. Something similar to the look she had on her face when she opened the box in her bookshop a few weeks ago.

Her training might be more important than I initially thought.

Grabbing a pair of gloves off the edge of the ring, I hold them out to her. “C’mon. What’s one punch going to hurt?” I keep my voice as casual as I can, so as not to scare the flight risk that stands before me.

She looks like she’s about to take me up on my offer before her shoulders slump and she shakes her head. “I’m tired. I think I’m going to head out for the night. Thank you for staying open late for me.”

When she turns to walk away, I say the only thing I can think of. “It’s a good skill to have.” She stops in her tracks. “Self-defense, I mean.”

Turning back toward me, with scrunched eyebrows and her mouth forming a tight line, she asks, “What makes you think I’d be interested in self-defense lessons?”

“It’s a good skill for any woman to have, isn’t it?” I pat myself on the back for my quick thinking. If I know Beth, the moment she finds out that I know about the notes, she’ll run out of here, and I’ll never see her again.

She relaxes, and the corners of her mouth upturn. I breathe out at the sight. "That's true."

"You're right, it is late. Why don't we meet back here at, let's say, seven o'clock tomorrow? I can teach you a few moves."

"You? Don't you have another trainer?" I try not to look offended by her question.

"No, but at least this way, you're getting the best trainer in town."

"Ha!" She pointedly laughs. "I doubt that."

Her bratty attitude boils my blood while simultaneously blood rushes to my cock once again. Fed up with the back-and-forth, I lower my voice, taking a small step closer to her, conveying how serious I am about the subject.

"Be here. Seven o'clock, or I'll go over there and kidnap you myself."

Beth takes another step toward me, our bodies now only inches apart. She challenges my height by staring me directly in the eyes, her blue irises lit by the lights hanging above us. "I'd like to see you try."

I barely catch the hint of a smile on her lips before she pushes past me toward the back door of the gym. Running a hand down my face, I calm myself before following her. I allow for some distance between us, ensuring she's already in her apartment before I head up to mine.

I fall asleep replaying the sound of my name on her lips, the same way I heard it through the window this morning. It's the best I've slept in months.

BETH

I'm not an idiot. Alex was there when I opened the surprise mail from my stalker. I've never been good at hiding my emotions, my face always giving me away. I'm sure Alex saw whatever fear was showing in my eyes. If he didn't, he probably took note of my shaking hands when I read the letter that accompanied the teddy bear.

What surprised me was that when I opened my bookstore the next day, my trash had already been taken out. I assumed Alex would lock up given his lecture on locking my doors, but I wasn't expecting him to do anything else. I can only assume he looked inside the box I threw away.

I haven't received a package since then, but I'm not so naive as to think another one isn't on its way to me.

That's the only thing that has me considering Alex's offer to join him for training today. When I was at his gym last night, I was impressed by the variety of equipment. I was also pissed that his suggestion to work out actually helped release some of the tension my muscles have been holding on to.

It felt good to move my body again and clear my mind. That is, until he brought up self-defense lessons. It's almost as if he saw my search history. I wouldn't be surprised if he was watching that too.

As I stand by the front desk of my bookstore, the cameras watch as I rearrange the bookmarks in their display, getting ready to open. I know Alex watches me through them, checking up on me throughout the day,

given the number of “live” recordings on the camera app, but I’ve gotten used to it.

If anything, I’m starting to find comfort in someone watching over me.

Alex told me to meet him today at seven. It’s currently 7:05. I’m dressed for training, but I still haven’t worked up enough courage to make my way next door. A small part of me is calling his bluff on his threat of kidnapping me.

That part of me has read too many dark romance books.

A larger part of me is too afraid to begin lessons. The part that fears it still won’t matter in the end. Past me was never able to protect herself before, so what would be the difference now?

While I can hold my own in a verbal fight, I have historically frozen with fear in physical ones. That’s the one response that’s never spoken about enough.

Fight, flight, or *freeze*.

I’m the unfortunate one who got stuck with the curse of the third option.

The front door bells chime as I’m still deciding whether or not I should go next door. Alex stands in the doorway, looking as deliciously menacing as ever with his head cocked to the side as he looks at me.

“Good, you’re already dressed,” he says before he stomps toward me behind the counter. He’s referring to the leggings and sweatshirt combo I’ve thrown on this morning in anticipation of this very moment.

I’m not pleased with the way my heart rate ticks up and sends a rush of heat to my core when he approaches me, my eyes landing on his as the blue of his irises begins to deepen in color.

My mind needs to take control of my body once again. Otherwise, I’ll be fucked. Literally.

Before I can protest, Alex tosses me over his shoulder with little effort. One hand gripping my thighs. I faintly hear the jingle of my keys as his other hand reaches toward the counter.

“Put me down, you barbarian.” I land a few fisted hits to his back.

“If that’s the hardest you can hit, then we have some serious work to do.” His breath is relaxed as he carries my thicker frame to the front door, and his lack of effort aggravates me even more. I would’ve been happier if his muscles were just for show.

Accepting physical defeat, I use my greatest weapon, my words. “I see you’ve resorted to copying your little brother.” The reference comes from

the fact that Theo did something similar to Sienna during our water balloon fight last year. Although that situation was more welcome to Sienna than this one is to me.

“Who do you think he learned this move from?” he asks as we exit my bookshop. I wiggle to glance over his shoulder to see what he’s doing. Thankfully, he locks my front door with my keys.

“I could’ve done that myself,” I say.

He’s walking us to his gym when he says, “Stop wiggling around, you’re going to fall.”

“Bite me,” I snap, my irritation at max level.

The sting on my ass comes out of nowhere, sending another rush of heat to my core, my inner thighs tightening in protest.

“Did you just spank me?” I all but shriek.

We make our way inside his gym, my world turning right side up again when he sets me on my feet on a mat next to the boxing ring.

Leaning close so only the two of us can hear, he murmurs, “Yes. And I’ll do it again if you don’t learn to watch that mouth of yours.”

A blush comes over me at his words, my eyes unable to help themselves from stealing a glance at his lips.

Softening his tone, he whispers, “Later, baby. We need to start your training first.” My stomach flips despite my brain’s protest at his nickname for me.

Shoving his shoulder, I scoff at his assumption that we’ll be doing anything “later.” A chuckle escapes him, amused by my frustration with him. If I didn’t know any better, I’d say he likes it when I get mad at him.

Placing my hands on my hips, I bite out each word. “I don’t need training.”

“You do.”

“I don’t.”

“Seeing as how you didn’t even attempt to fight me off back there, it’s clear that you do.” My teeth clamp down at the truth of his words. It happened again. I froze up before I could recognize what was happening. Though I’m not entirely sure I froze out of fear this time.

“Fine. What do we start with then?” I take the hair tie off my wrist and pull my hair into a high ponytail, a few strands falling in front of my face. I could’ve sworn I saw Alex’s throat bob at the sight.

Alex begins to lead me through a warm-up more intense than I expected. When my muscles have properly woken up, I throw off my sweatshirt, my skin relishing the fresh air. Alex is distracted momentarily when I do, taking in the fact that I'm only left in my sports bra and leggings, before he's back to business.

He walks me through the basics, bringing my attention to how little I know about self-defense. As we work through a few palm strikes, Alex stands by my side, keeping his hands to himself as he explains thoroughly how to perform each move. His professionalism is a welcoming surprise. I'm not sure what I was expecting, but after the first ten minutes, I lock in on what feels like a real self-defense training session.

It's the most tolerable Alex has been in months.

"You're picking up on the different moves quickly. That's good. It'll make teaching you more difficult moves easier," he says as we work through a few different beginner moves. Some of them, like the palm-heel strike, I read about online, but Alex teaches me how to actually exert power behind the move.

The groin kick is probably my favorite move so far.

"Thanks," I say, taking Alex's compliment without attitude for once, "I played a lot of sports growing up, so I developed a good sense of bodily awareness." Alex motions to our waters, indicating we should take a hydration break. I oblige, taking a long swig from mine.

"Which one was your favorite?" The question comes out of left field, catching me off guard.

I smile. "Reading. Reading was always my favorite. I never really had a choice in playing sports, though it wasn't all bad, I guess..." I recall the parental pressure I faced growing up. My stomach churns when I remember why sports were so important to them.

After all, bruises are easier to hide when you have the excuse of athleticism to fall back on.

Alex winces. "Did your parents force you into it?"

I hesitate, unsure if I can trust Alex with the true answer. I'm still unsure of that trust when I answer anyway, "My stepdad."

He nods his understanding, though his eye twitches with a follow-up question that is written all over his face.

Stopping him before he can ask it, I say, "Is this an interview or a training session? What's next?"

Alex tosses up his hands, a smile returning to his face. “Alright, I have one more move to show you. It’s a bit more difficult, but if you’re open to it, it’s a valuable move to learn.”

I nod, waiting for his instruction. For the past forty minutes, I’ve felt more powerful and confident than I’ve ever been. I thought learning moves on the internet would be enough, but Alex has shown me more than I would’ve learned from any online video. The power may be going to my head because I find myself hoping that he’ll schedule another session with me soon.

“I have to touch you for this one, is that okay?” he asks, approaching me slowly.

“Yes, that’s fine.” When I give my consent, he moves behind me, his presence all-consuming as he wraps a large, muscular, tattooed arm around my neck, locking me into a loose chokehold.

His mouth brushes the tip of my ear as he begins to instruct me, “If an aggressor catches you like this, what would you do?”

“I-I don’t know.” I struggle to maintain focus as Alex’s scent invades my nostrils. His low-timbre, silky voice caresses my ears.

“Think, Beth. This is one of the most common ways an opponent can catch you off guard.”

I grab his arm, trying to ignore how large his muscles are beneath my fingers as I yank and pull. He doesn’t budge, instead tightening his hold slightly. My fingers begin to tighten on his bicep as my blood pulses through my veins rapidly.

“You won’t be able to pull my arm away. Most aggressors will be cutting off your airway. How do you get out of this?” He keeps asking the question that I clearly don’t know the answer to. His hold on me remains as tight as he can without cutting off my air supply.

Why won’t he just give me the answer?

I struggle again, doing everything I can to pull his arm off me. I shove my hips back, flailing my body like a fish out of water, and with each move he tightens his grip. Never cutting off my air supply but holding his grip tight enough to indicate that I’m doing this wrong.

My nails dig into his forearm and bicep that’s wrapped around my neck. My vision blurs as tears begin to pool in my eyes. I’d assume Alex is barely using 50 percent of his strength on me, and I still can’t get out of his hold. I can’t imagine what all of his strength would do to me.

He's made his point. If he wanted to, he could easily overpower me.

Panic sets in deep within my bones, rattling through me as my lungs take in air, refusing to let any out.

Flashes of a folded-up leather belt blur my vision. The smell of cigarettes and alcohol invades my nose. In only a moment, I'm thrown back to my childhood. The freeze response wraps my body in an ice-cold hug as I stand, unmoving.

It's only a shred of a whisper when I say, "Alex, let me go." My voice cracks under the weight of my memories.

Before I can finish my sentence, Alex is already releasing me. My ears twitch at a faint rustling sound behind me before my water bottle appears in front of my face.

"Drink," Alex says before he pushes the already opened cap against my lips.

As water flows down my throat, it prompts movement in my limbs, allowing me to take the bottle from Alex's hands and hold it on my own. My irregular breathing returns to normal as my mind is brought back to reality, focusing on the man who stands in front of me.

"Where did you go?" Alex's voice is soft, his eyes scanning my face, gleaming with worry as he looks for a way to read my mind.

Fear threatens to plague my very being at the thought of Alex learning of my past. At the thought of him breaking through my walls.

"I have to go." I pick my sweatshirt and keys off the ground, making my way out of the front door of the gym before Alex has a chance to respond. My feet move quickly, knowing it wouldn't take him much to convince me to stay.

Still a few hours until opening for the day, I rush up to my apartment to shower, tearing off my clothes to wash the events of the day down the drain.

As I stand underneath the showerhead, I can't discern the difference between the water stream and my tears.

BETH

Rain pours down around me, hitting my windshield in a symphony of plinks, as I turn off the ignition. Having spent the day touring local bookstores in an effort to do some market research on why mine is so epically failing, I'm left with more questions than answers. Not to mention the exhaustion that has rooted itself deep within my soul.

Grabbing my phone from the passenger seat, I respond to Sienna's texts.

SIENNA

Sorry we didn't find much today.

Your bookstore will be booming with people in no time, trust me!

BETH

I hope so.

SIENNA

I know so. Just give it time.

I'm happy Sienna was able to tag along today, finally getting a day off from her busy schedule at her new job. Supposedly Graham, her boss, is "one of the most inspirational designers she's ever had the pleasure of meeting." I think he's just an asshole who overworks my type A best friend because she cannot say no when her career is on the line.

Then again, I could just be upset over how little I've seen her lately.

Having just dropped Sienna off, I've been out long enough for the sun to set, the only light in the parking lot emitting from the single streetlamp and the two soft glowing orbs in front of my bookshop.

Resting my head on the steering wheel, I take a moment to breathe while listening to the harsh sounds of the rain. If I'm not able to turn this business around by the end of the year, I'm not sure I can stay here. Though, given my circumstances, that might be a good thing.

Looking for comfort, and unable to help myself, I focus on my phone again. This time, pulling up the one text message string I haven't been able to stop reading on repeat for the last week.

ASSHOLE

Are you doing okay?

How about another training session?

I hope I didn't cross a line.

Worried about you.

I'm here if you need me.

The first message came the night of my first and last self-defense lesson. I'm far too embarrassed to go back. It's a skill I know I need to learn, and I certainly felt powerful at the beginning, but I never expected it to be so triggering. The flashbacks of my childhood aren't something I'm sure I want to experience again.

Not to mention, the softness in Alex's voice as he spoke to me in contrast with his rigid muscles is something that I can't seem to erase from my mind. His soft-spoken side was the last thing I expected. It only confirms that certainly no good could come from Alex and me being in close proximity right now.

The mask he wears is one of arrogance, one I can't ever see myself trusting. But in those moments when the mask is pulled away, he's something else entirely. Something that threatens to lure me in and contradict everything I know to be true about men.

He didn't budge when he had his arm wrapped around my neck the other day. It only proves how capable he is of hurting me.

And the mask he wears makes it impossible to read his intentions.

Though that hasn't stopped me from lying in bed each night, typing out various responses to his messages only to delete instead of hit Send.

I tuck my phone and keys into my jacket pocket, unable to look at his texts any longer, his delicate tone of voice playing on repeat in my ears.

There's no reason he should be so concerned about me. No reason for me to tell him what's going on. Especially considering I wouldn't even call us *friends* at this point.

With my stalker guaranteed to leave me another note at some point, it's best if I keep my distance anyway. Especially considering what he did the last time I tried to be happy with a significant other.

When exiting my car, I don't care to use an umbrella or put my hood up and decide to embrace the weather that so perfectly matches my current mood. My eye catches on Alex's red Mustang parked a few spots away from mine before turning toward my bookstore, only to find him standing by the front door.

The awning above the door doesn't come out more than two feet, so he's leaning against the side of the building, painted in shadows as he avoids the rain.

I, on the other hand, stop just short of him, letting the rain fall onto me, washing away the events of the day.

Crossing my arms, I wait for him to say something, but he doesn't. He only continues to stare at me, waiting for me to meet him where he is, beneath the awning.

A chill runs down my spine as the rain picks up, thoroughly wetting my hair. The outfit I've chosen to wear today didn't exactly account for the current forecast. My cropped band T-shirt hugs my breasts tightly, leaving a sliver of skin exposed above the waistline of my miniskirt. The black skirt is tight against my hips, leaving my thighs exposed to the rain as droplets slide down my legs into my knee-high black boots. The only warmth I have comes from my jacket.

The rain is cold with each new droplet that hits my skin, but a heat continues to pool low in my belly as I watch Alex's eyes roam my body.

Lit partially by the soft light hanging just above his head, his features pop against the black jacket and dark denim pants he's chosen to wear. His eyebrows are furrowed, and he's clearly upset with me for not responding to his messages. When I adjust my stance, his gaze darts to my thighs again, a hunger crossing his eyes before it's replaced by concern.

Stop trying to care about me.

“What do you want?” I ask loudly over the sound of the rain. He doesn’t appear fazed by my harsh tone.

“You wouldn’t respond to my texts. I got tired of checking on you through the cameras.” He takes a step forward, joining me in the rain, the droplets instantly wetting his hair, as it frames his sharp facial features in a knee-buckling way. “Are you okay?”

“If I wasn’t, I’m not sure it’d be much of your problem anyway,” I snap.

He takes another step toward me, my words doing nothing to scare him off. “We’re friends, are we not?”

“No.” He’s close enough now that I can smell him, his scent perfectly intertwined with that of the rain.

His mouth forms a thin line as he gently grabs my chin between his forefinger and thumb, lifting it so I’m forced to make eye contact with him. The deep, saturated blues of his irises send another rush of heat through my core, my stomach flipping when he brushes his thumb along my chin ever so gently.

“I can tell you’re not okay. Talk to me.” His tone is more firm now, only egging me on further.

For a moment, I consider dumping everything on him. All the text messages I’ve typed out over the last week flood my brain. I should’ve just texted him that I was fine, but that’d be a lie. I thought about sending a snarky or flirty message, but I’ve been trying to distance myself from Alex, not bring him closer. I was too afraid to send him a message explaining why I froze during training the other day, and I’m not sure he’d care anyway. Even if he did, it’s best if we keep our distance, for both of our sakes.

“It’s not your problem,” I say, unable to find any of the words I’ve repeatedly typed over the last few days. I want nothing more than to go inside, yet I can’t pull my attention from Alex’s piercing blue eyes as I watch rain droplets splash along his cheeks.

He drops his hand from my chin, another chill running through me at the loss of our connection. “What are we doing, Beth? What is this?”

“What is what?” My eyebrows scrunch together at his question.

“This, us.” He motions a finger back and forth between the two of us. “Don’t pretend you don’t feel there’s something here.”

I scoff. “Oh please, there’s nothing.” I wave him off, wanting to step around him, but every cell in my body protests my brain as I stay put.

His breath becomes more ragged, a noticeable shiver overtaking his body as the rain continues to fall. “So that’s it, then? You hate me?” he asks.

“Absolutely,” I bite out, against my better judgment.

“Then prove it.” His voice is laced with a desperation that does nothing to calm the hunger growing inside me. He places a hand on my cheek, those blue eyes connecting with my own as he says, “Kiss me, then tell me you hate me, and I promise I’ll leave you alone.”

I pause, contemplating his offer. I don’t date men. I rarely sleep with men. I certainly don’t like kissing men.

However, if I’m being honest with myself, since meeting *this* man, I haven’t been able to stop thinking about what my lips would feel like on his.

You can kiss a man and still hate him, right?

There’s only one way to find out.

Placing my hand on the back of his neck, I lift onto my toes and pull his lips to mine. His hands slip around my waist as he tugs me forward. The force of his pull throws me off balance, causing my other hand to grab onto his shoulder, his grip on my waist only tightening when I do. When his tongue darts out to tease my lips, I pull back, breaking our connection.

“I—” I stammer over my words.

“Say it,” he says in a low, guttural voice, his eyes dilated as he continues to stare at my lips, which are only inches away from his.

In my experience, men hurt more than they heal. They bring pain, their grip always punishing and never gentle. But when I look at Alex, I can’t help but wonder if my generalized view of men is wrong. Sure, he can easily overpower me, but he never once cut off my air supply.

My mind whirls, at war with itself over the man who stands before me, and I can’t bring myself to say the words. They just aren’t true.

So, against my better judgment, I pull him into me, sealing my lips to his. Consequences be damned.

I hate how effortlessly right it feels.

BETH

Our tongues collide as though they've danced together for years, my body easily giving in when his tongue teases my lips. The rain only adds to the electric sensation as our mouths are slick, sliding against each other, both of us fighting to deepen the kiss.

Alex's hands slide down from my hips to my ass. He squeezes like I'm going to run from him at any moment, but my body does the opposite as it melts into his touch.

The small moan that escapes my throat only ignites him further as he kisses me vigorously.

Rain cools my lips when he pulls back, only to place them on my neck, nipping, biting, and kissing the sensitive skin there. I'm lost in him, blindly following as he moves us, guiding me toward the front door of my bookshop with punishing hands on my hips.

My back on the side of the building next to the door, I barely notice when Alex slides a hand smoothly into my jacket pocket, removing my keys. My hands finding purchase on his chest over the fabric of his shirt. After a few moments, when he still hasn't gotten the door open, my impatience grows.

"Would you open the fucking door already?" I ask, breathlessly.

A swift slap to my ass sends a shiver down my spine, and he says, "What'd I say about that mouth of yours?" Then, to my relief, the front door swings open and he drags me inside, kicking the door closed behind us. He

makes quick work of locking the deadbolt without missing a beat when kissing me.

Since I had closed up shop for the day, the blinds have already been drawn, only a small amount of light seeping in from the parking lot, lighting our way around the books.

Overcome with a heat coursing through my body at the result of my racing heart, I slam Alex against the front window, coming to terms with the one thing I'll never admit to him. I want him. We waste no time tearing off each other's jackets in an effort to explore each other's bodies.

Pulling him in for another kiss, I let my hands roam his rigid muscles as they skate beneath his shirt, butterflies swarming my stomach at the feeling of our skin touching. He does the same, pushing my shirt up further to grab onto my sides with no barriers to our connection.

He touches me as though he's burning his name into my skin.

Alex begins to push me, the hands on my hips gripping harder as he fights me for control. I thrust my hips in an effort to keep him pinned to the window, but when his fingers dig in deep at my sides, the wave of pleasure it sends to my core has my knees buckling. Our kiss breaks when Alex smiles, indicating silently that he knows he's won.

He turns us, pinning me against the bookshelf next to the window, an arm resting against one of the shelves. Towering over me, he rests his forehead against mine as he skates his other hand across my stomach below the hem of my T-shirt.

"Say my name"—his voice comes out low, breathless—"like you did the other day."

"Alex..." I breathe out the warning. I knew he fucking heard me.

He nudges his nose against mine, his arm wrapping around my bare waist, my shirt bunched higher beneath my breasts.

Pulling my body flush against his, he hums, "You were louder than that."

Embarrassment overtakes me as I place both hands on his shoulders, giving him a shove. "You're insufferable." He doesn't budge and only pulls me tighter against him. His hard length presses against my stomach, showing me he wants this just as badly as I do.

"And you're invigorating." He punctuates his words with another kiss. His tongue collides with mine so fiercely it's as if he is a man starved and I'm the only one that can satiate him.

Tired of depriving myself, I reach my hands between us, unbuttoning his jeans, wasting no time sliding my hands beneath the denim.

“Fuck,” Alex whimpers against my lips when I run my hand along his impressive length. He wasn’t kidding when he implied my toy doesn’t come close to his size.

Stealing a few greedy strokes of his length through his underwear, I’m pleased when Alex stops kissing me so he can focus on his breathing. I’m just about to move my hand beneath his underwear when he grips my wrist, stopping my movements.

“Any more of that and I’ll be coming before the fun even begins,” Alex says, breathing hard.

“Have problems controlling yourself?” I ask.

“Around you? Yes, especially when I haven’t had the chance to taste you yet.” Before his words fully process in my brain, he’s pulling back, only to leave me speechless at his next move.

Alex descends toward the floor, kneeling before me in a painfully slow manner as his eyes stay glued to mine. My lips part in an attempt to get more air in my lungs, my heart stopping briefly at the sight of the man on his knees before me.

Grabbing hold of the bookshelf behind me, I brace myself as Alex runs his hands slowly up my bare thighs.

“You *really* need to wear this outfit more often,” he says, eyes now fixed on my legs. By the way his eyes darken as he looks between my thighs, I know the hemline of my skirt has risen high enough to be deemed inappropriate.

I thank past me for her fashion choices this morning.

Alex’s eyes are back on mine again as he leans down, lightly biting my inner thigh. I shouldn’t enjoy it, but the thought of his mark being left on me in the morning has my arousal running down the insides of my thighs.

His hand squeezes my other leg, pulling my legs apart in the process as his eyes lock in on my wetness. My breathing becomes more erratic and harder to control when his hands graze up my thighs, pushing my skirt up my waist and over my ass in the process. It leaves me exposed in only my black lace thong and knee-high heeled boots.

As if that combination alone didn’t make me feel sexy enough, Alex darts his tongue out, lapping up the arousal that has accumulated on my

thighs. The hum that comes from deep within his throat has me gripping the edge of the bookshelf harder.

The taste of me unlocks something inside him. I feel the brief scrape of his teeth along my hip bone as he bites down on the fabric of my underwear. He tugs as I look up at the ceiling, trying and failing to regain control of my breathing. The fabric of the lace cuts into my hip bones as it tears. My head drops back down, eyes landing on Alex again only to find him in a position I wish I could burn into my mind forever.

He's smiling up at me, my torn thong hanging from his teeth, rendering me speechless.

Discarding the underwear, Alex wastes no time throwing one of my legs over his shoulder and burying his head between my thighs.

One lick from him and my standing leg threatens to give out. One of his hands cups my ass cheek to hold me upright as he continues the slow, languid movements of his tongue.

"Fucking Christ, baby. I could come from your taste alone." The muffled words send another rush of heat straight to my core.

"Alex, please," I moan, worried I might collapse if he doesn't fuck me soon.

He kisses me again, rolling his tongue along my clit, a chuckle escaping his throat as he says, "That's how I remember it."

He loses himself, licking and sucking on me with a ferocity that's unmatched by any of my past partners. The feeling is overwhelming, tempting me to give in to my building orgasm.

If only I couldn't stop thinking about his astonishing length. Running my fingers through his hair, I pull his head away from me. His blue eyes darkened. A drunken haze glazed over them, prompted only by my taste.

"Fuck me," I say before that devilish grin spreads across his face.

"Absolutely." It doesn't take him long before he's on his feet again, kissing me so I can taste myself on his tongue.

He only pulls back when I continue to grab at his shirt, as hungry as he is for this. Running my fingers down his bare abs, I admire the ridges of his muscles, but he stops me before I reach the waistband of his boxers.

His tattooed hand gently encircles my throat, bringing my attention to his face. I can't help the smile that spreads my lips wide. His eyes go completely black at the sight, no blue left to be found.

“Tell me you’re on birth control, have a condom, something,” he says, his voice coming out pained.

“IUD.” I grab his waist in an attempt to bring him closer to me. “Now fuck me already.”

Alex takes a step back, removing his hand from my throat to my displeasure. He immediately makes up for it by dropping his pants, taking his boxers with them. His cock springs to life in a way that has my mouth watering. I want to taste him as he did me moments ago.

“Another time, baby,” he says, reading my mind.

I reach down to unzip my boots, but he raises a hand. “Keep them on.”

I follow his command, though he never said anything about my shirt. Grabbing the hemline of the T-shirt, I pull it up, over my head, letting my breasts hang heavy in the black lace bralette. My nipples harden further as Alex takes me in, the see-through material leaving nothing to the imagination.

He’s invading my space again, two strong hands landing on the back of my thighs as he lifts me, my legs encircling his waist when my back hits the bookshelf behind me. He doesn’t give me long to prepare before he’s lining himself up and pushing inside me with his rock-hard length.

The pleasure of the motion mixes with pain, stretching me further than I’ve been stretched before. His movements are slow as he drops me on his length, inch by inch, my breasts grazing his chest with each motion. Once he’s fully seated inside, he stalls, allowing me time to adjust to his punishing size.

“Breathe, baby,” he says before he plants a kiss between my collarbones. A warmth spreads across my chest when he begins tracing his tongue along my collarbones. No, not my collarbones, the two small vine tattoos etched into my skin on my collarbones. He’s tracing the vines, not stopping until he’s touched every tip of every leaf.

His movements do wonders to comfort me as I relax further into him. Any previous pain turning into immeasurable pleasure.

He continues planting kisses to my chest when I grab his firm shoulders, beginning to move my hips desperate for an ounce of friction.

A chuckle escapes him before he slowly pulls out, only to slam into me again. The bookshelf digs into my back, books toppling over with each commanding thrust. He continues the slow, hard thrusts, but it isn’t enough. I reach a hand between us, moving it toward my center. Before I reach

where I need it most, Alex drops me back on my feet, the absence of him more chilling than I care to give attention to at the moment.

I track his movements as he backs up toward a nearby table. After carefully rearranging the books to create a space, he leans against the edge, curling his fingers at me, coaxing me to him. I oblige, moving with such swiftness I hope he doesn't notice.

Unable to help myself, I plant another kiss on his lips when I reach him.

Stopping me after the kiss, he holds his finger up, twirling it in the air as a silent command for me to turn around. Again, I follow orders, realizing there isn't much I wouldn't do given that Alex commands it at this moment.

A small gasp escapes him when I turn around, no doubt his eyes landing on the tattoo running down my spine. The phases of the moon, decorated with delicate stars. It hurt like a bitch when I got it this past winter, but hearing Alex's reaction somehow makes the pain worth it.

Spreading his legs, he pulls me between them, his hands landing on my bra strap while my hips perfectly align with his cock beneath me. He makes quick work of unfastening my bra and tossing it aside. It lands near the matching thong, the set looking as disheveled as I feel.

"This is new," Alex says, running a knuckle along my spine. I shiver at his touch, my hips rocking on his cock, a small moan escaping from both of us at the movement.

Warmth spreads through my core when he leans down, planting a kiss on my spine. "This might be my favorite of your tattoos," he says, landing a hand to my left hip where I have a cluster of flowers cascading across my hip, up my side, and down my leg. "Or this one." He traces it gently. His cock is perfectly lined up with my core, the head teasing my entrance as I throb for more.

He trails up to my collarbone. "Or this one," he says again, running a finger along my clavicle, reminding me where he had his tongue just moments ago.

"Mine's this one," I say, placing my hand on top of his, where the two mourning doves are inked permanently.

He lets out a small grunt when I move my hips as I say the words, my compliment testing his patience. He wraps the tattooed hand around my throat, pulling me back flush against him. His chest meets my back, his warmth wrapping around me like a soft blanket on a rainy morning.

From this angle, I can see the entire corner of my bookstore, lined with bookshelves. Filled with romance, dark romance, and romantasy books alike.

He enters me, inch by inch, painfully slow as he whispers in my ear, "Next time you're reading, remember, none of those book boyfriends could ever fuck you like I can."

I release a moan when he's fully seated inside me again. His words echo in my mind repeatedly as he begins to move.

He must be as desperate as I am because he doesn't move slowly this time. He gives me no time to adjust as he begins moving the moment he's fully seated inside me. Each of his thrusts comes faster and more punishing than the last. His left hand stays put on my throat, while his right hand reaches around, pinching my nipple between two fingers. Moans continue to escape me as I lose sight of my own name, being driven further to the edge.

Rendered speechless by his rhythm, I grab the hand that's on my breast, bringing it to my core. He doesn't hesitate to give me exactly what I need, his fingers moving with precision, showing off his skill. The faint sound of books falling to the floor echoes in my ears, but I pay them no mind when the sensation in my lower spine continues to build.

It doesn't take long before I'm diving off the edge.

As I arch my back, Alex holds my body against his, speaking words of encouragement in my ears, "That's it, baby, like that...oh, fuck." He falls off the edge seconds after me. His cock throbs inside my core as he finishes, amplifying the waves of aftershocks that jolt through my entire body.

We stay like that for a moment, unmoving, as he holds me against him. His hands have moved to wrap around my waist, my hands resting on his forearms, perfectly placed in the grooves that appear specially made for my handprint.

I'm afraid I've lost myself entirely when Alex plants gentle kisses on my shoulder. "That was..." The sound of his voice in combination with my hormones returning to normal levels brings me back to reality.

"Yeah," I say before pushing him off and grabbing my shirt from the floor. Yanking my skirt back into place, I pull the shirt over my head, making quick work of dressing. Alex works to put his boxers back on but doesn't seem in a rush to wear any of his other clothes as he gathers them in his arms.

He joins me by my side as the two of us look at the damage we've done.

Books line the floor, having fallen from the shelves and table, lying in a pile with my torn underwear and Alex's tossed-aside shoes.

"I'll pay for any damaged books," he says, not a hint of a question in his tone.

I look up at him standing to my left, not hiding the smile as I say, "With what money?"

"It's more money than you've got." He winks, and we both chuckle. The ice between us is beginning to warm, a sensation that makes me uneasy.

After placing the books on their rightful shelves, we head upstairs for the night, stopping in the hallway that houses the front doors to our apartments.

"Do you want to come—" Alex motions toward his apartment door behind him, but I shake my head. Not wanting to take this any further than a heated one-night stand.

"I need to get some rest." He nods his understanding before taking my hand in his and leaning down to place a lingering kiss on my knuckles. The move is cliché in practice, yet something about the way Alex does it makes my heart skip a beat.

When he turns toward his door, I watch as his back muscles shift with each step he takes away from me. He opens his door, but before turning in for the night, he stops to look at me one last time.

"Oh, by the way..." My eyebrows raise in anticipation of his words. "Next time, don't wear underwear." That devilish smile returns, and he doesn't wait for my response before he takes a step into his apartment, the door clicking shut behind him.

"There won't be a next time, asshole." I call after him, knowing he can hear me through the thin wood of the front door. Despite my insult, I'm smiling as I enter my apartment, locking the door behind me as I do.

Taking off my boots, I throw them aside, my feet feeling relief as I flatten my heels against the ground for the first time in hours.

I'm riding the high, looking forward to a restful night's sleep after relieving some pent-up energy, when I notice an interesting envelope mixed in with the mail sitting on my counter.

I had grabbed it this morning before heading out for the day but didn't have a chance to go through the stack of mail earlier. Most of the time it's

bills I struggle to pay, and I didn't feel like starting my day on a bad note.

Sifting through the mail, I find the envelope, my address handwritten on the front. When I catch sight of the scrawled handwriting, the E of my name distinctly slanted, my stomach drops, blood draining from my face. I tear into the note, and my hands begin to shake again as I read the words.

BUSINESS DOESN'T SEEM TO BE DOING SO GOOD, BUT REMEMBER
WHAT I TOLD YOU WHEN YOU WERE BENCHED AT THAT BASKETBALL
GAME? JUST BECAUSE YOU'RE KNOCKED DOWN DOESN'T MEAN YOU
CAN'T GET BACK UP AGAIN.

The corners of the note crumple in my hand as I read the dumb words I've heard many times growing up. I was stupid enough to think they were motivational when I was thirteen years old. It's ironic looking back on it now. Especially when the words came from the man who repeatedly knocked me down.

I can't bring myself to save this note. Even if it could be used for evidence later on. I toss it in my trash with trembling hands, unable to stomach looking at it any longer.

Pulling out my phone, I do the only thing I can think of to do at the moment. The one thing that can bring back my sense of control.

BETH

When can we schedule another training session?

I'd like to learn more.

ASSHOLE

Come by anytime tomorrow morning.

I can get you on my regular schedule.

BETH

Sounds great. Thanks.

ASSHOLE

No, thank you 🙄

The text makes me smile, calming my heart rate for a beat. Alex might have the strength to overpower me, but he proved last time that he wouldn't. After tonight, he's proven that I can trust him to train me.

I just hope I won't need to use his training anytime soon.

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BETH

Back at Alex's gym, I'm heavy into another training session. My body aches from the effort I expend as Alex guides me through various exercises. After last night's note, I feel I have no choice but to be back here. Even if it means risking another flashback of my childhood.

I still have moments when my body freezes up whenever Alex shows his real strength. Each time I do, he whispers one simple word in my ear, pulling me back from my memories.

"Breathe," he says to me.

Each time the word leaves his mouth, I do what I'm told and take a deep breath, exhaling out the uncomfortable feelings and refocusing my attention.

My determination must show because he's pushing me harder this session than the last. Teaching me more difficult moves he insists I can handle. After our third round of chokehold exercises, I'm breathing hard and Alex motions to the bench near the sparring mat, allowing us to take a break. I've learned he rarely likes to take those during lessons.

When we both take a seat, Alex hands me my water, asking, "Weekly sessions work for you?" His words come out steady, no sign of him being as out of breath as I am. The bastard.

"I don't think that's something I can afford—"

"Your membership is free, remember? That extends to personal training sessions."

“Thank you,” I say solemnly, taking another sip of my water. “Is this typically a slow time for you?” I motion to the gym around us.

I hadn’t wanted to say anything before, but each time I’ve come to visit, there are only one or two other people in the gym. Given that Alex has offered me a consistent place on his training schedule, I’m starting to wonder whether he’s made special arrangements for me or if he has the opening due to a lack of business.

If Alex’s business isn’t doing well, I’m not sure what that means for my bookstore.

“Business has been in a lull lately.” He shrugs. “Nothing that won’t pick up soon.”

“I’m surprised you don’t offer group classes for self-defense. I would think that’d be huge revenue for you.”

He shrugs again. “I prefer our one-on-one sessions.” His eyes darken when he looks at me, and I do my best to ignore the reminder of just how dark his eyes got last night when he was—

“It was just an idea,” I say, hoping I haven’t offended him.

He hums his understanding, then takes a sip of his water. I watch as a small bead of sweat drips down the side of his face, inching toward his sharp jawline. A dark strand of hair falls onto his forehead when he finishes his drink. The sight makes it hard to catch my breath.

“So how’d you sleep last night?” He nudges my arm with his elbow like an old friend with an inside joke would.

I know he’s hinting at the fact that we had sex, which is probably something we should discuss as two responsible adults would, but I don’t particularly want to right now. The note that was left in my apartment has made it nearly impossible to think about anything else. Even if I wanted to discuss last night with Alex, I’m not sure I could find the words.

My grip tightens on the water bottle as the words written on the small piece of paper repeat in my mind.

“That bad, huh?” Alex says, wincing at whatever look is on my face.

Stammering, I do what I can to save face. “The garbage truck woke me up earlier than I wanted. But it’s fine, I’m just grateful it wasn’t your god-awful Mustang.”

I change the subject, hoping he buys my lies.

“Give it time, you’ll love the car eventually.” He winks at me, pulling a smile from my lips.

“Never.” I scrunch my nose up at him. “I’m not sure how you could love something so *loud*.”

“Says the woman who blasts music in her apartment late at night.” He scoffs.

“At least I have taste,” I say, jutting up my nose, refusing to believe he doesn’t enjoy my music as much as I do.

Air releases from his lips. “I have taste. You want to know why I love that car so much? Let me show you.”

“How?” I ask.

“You busy this weekend?”

“I do have a bookstore to run, you know.” I level him with a look, reminding myself that I eventually need to figure out how to get customers to actually visit my store.

“Yeah, but you have shortened hours on Sundays, right? Let me take you somewhere, show you how lovable my car is.” He smiles, and I’m intrigued by his offer. Though I won’t agree to it so easily.

“Where exactly?”

“That’s a surprise.”

I raise an eyebrow at him. “And what am I getting out of this?”

Making a show of thinking through my question, he taps his forefinger on his chin before responding, “I’ll make a large purchase from your bookstore. Five books.”

“You sure you can read that many books?” I ask, unimpressed by his offer.

“Don’t judge a book by its cover, Beth,” he says, a shameful tone taking hold in his voice.

I take a moment before responding, unnerved by the fact that I’m going along with this in the first place. “Fifteen,” I counter.

“Ten.”

I stick my hand out in an offer to shake. “Deal,” I say as he grabs my hand, giving it a firm shake. We both laugh at the ridiculousness of our deal.

It isn’t until our laughter dies down that I notice our hands are still connected. It’s as though they have a mind of their own and don’t want to let go of one another.

I pull my hand back, standing from the bench.

“I’ll see you this weekend then.” I nod my head in agreement of our deal.

Alex looks up at me, a wide smile lighting up his face, sending me back to last night when he was on his knees before me.

“See you this weekend, baby.”

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ALEX

I would buy every book in Beth's bookstore if it meant she'd come out with me today. Though my wallet is happy that we settled on ten books.

What I haven't told Beth yet is I've already read half the books she stocks in her store, most of them making up the collection I have at home.

I can't wait to see the look on her face when she finally comes over and sees my entire living room lined with bookshelves. Every time I'm in her apartment, I have to resist the urge to look at her personal collection and think about ways to combine it with mine.

Pull it together.

I shake the thought from my mind, clearly clouded by my excitement for today.

Two take-out cups warm my hands as I wait for Beth to answer her apartment door. A tea for her and a coffee for me, purchased from the local coffee shop down the street. It's one of the only things I've been able to learn about her in the past few months.

Well, that and the fact that she doesn't let people in easily. Though I've never been the type of man to back down from a challenge. I just wish I knew how to get her to trust me.

The other night was a start. When she kissed me, I was sure she was going to say she hates me and walk through her bookshop door. When she said nothing and kissed me again, I couldn't help myself. I've been starved, feeding only off the crumbs she's willing to give.

I'm hoping I'm lucky enough that she decides to kiss me again.

When Beth opens the door, I'm overwhelmed with her scent. Vanilla, with a hint of rose and something bold I can't put my finger on. It matches her perfectly.

The early morning sun shines through the windows behind her, framing her in the light. I was sure to go on my run this morning, but it didn't do much in the way of tamping down my excitement when I see her.

"Let's get this over with." Her words are muffled by the ringing in my ears at the sight of her. It's going to be a warm day, and she's dressed for the occasion. She's wearing a tight-fitting tanktop, the cut low enough to show off her collarbone tattoos. Instinctually, my tongue darts out to wet my lips, the memories of her soft lips touching mine flashing before me.

The hemline of her tank top barely reaches the waistband of the skirt that tightly hugs her hips, only a fraction of the tattoo running along her side covered by the fabric. I'm glad to see she took my suggestion of wearing skirts like this more often.

There's only one problem...

I hand Beth her tea, her fingers brushing mine as she tentatively accepts it.

"You can't wear that." Her face twists up in a disgusted look, displeased with my words.

Motioning to her hair, I clarify, "The clip, you'll have to take your hair down." It pains me to say it, as she has a few messy strands framing her delicate facial features, drawing attention to her striking blue eyes and the makeup she's so carefully painted on this morning.

She rolls her eyes before taking her hair down, shaking it out behind her. "Fine, where are we going anyway?"

"That's a surprise," I say, smiling, tilting my head in the direction of the stairwell for her to follow.

After locking the door behind her, she looks at me again. "You know this isn't a date, right?"

"Sure, whatever you say." I shrug and begin heading down the stairs, leaving her behind.

"Alex!" The way she squeals my name kicks up my heart rate. The pace at which her sneakers hit the steps behind me causes me to hold in a laugh.

It's probably the closest thing I'll get to having *her* chase *me* for once. I revel in the feeling.

She follows me outside to my Mustang, continuing to insist that this isn't a date. My only response is a head nod, not looking to piss her off today.

As any gentleman would, I open the passenger side door for Beth. I do my best not to look at her hips when she climbs into the custom racing seats I've installed.

After shutting the door, I run around to the driver's side with a speed that doesn't do much to hide my excitement.

Taking a seat, I glance at Beth, who's still fidgeting with the four-point harness. I chuckle when I notice she can't seem to get the right pieces to connect. Reaching over, I stall my hands just before touching the buckle, waiting for a nod of consent from her before making quick work of fastening her in.

"How much did it cost for all of this?" Beth motions around to the custom interior.

I shrug, now fastening my own harness. "Only the price of parts. I installed everything myself." When she looks at me in shock, I smile in her direction. "Oh, I forgot, I haven't shown you how good I can be with my hands yet."

I hold my hand up to her, showing off the tattoo she mentioned she loved so much the other night. When her cheeks turn pink, she swats my hand away as she looks out the window to hide the smile teasing the corners of her lips.

"Ready?" I ask Beth, laughing.

"As I'll ever be," she breathes in her best frustrated tone, though the blush has yet to wash from her face.

Pulling up the playlist I made special for today, I hit play, the music flowing through the aftermarket speakers I've installed. When the Mustang roars to life beneath me, a sense of calm washes over me as my foot hits the clutch, my right hand working to throw the car into first gear. The bass of her favorite songs reverberates through our seats as we take off toward our destination.

By the end of the day, after what I have planned, Beth will be in love with my car.

“No fucking way.” Beth reaches toward the dash, turning down the music as we pull into our destination.

The local racetrack. A favorite pastime of mine on my day off.

Throwing a hand out toward the windshield, she motions to the track in front of us, and says, “*This* is how you make me fall in love with this car?” Her tone tells me she’s entirely unconvinced.

I’m laughing as I wave to Enzo, the front gate attendant, who I’m happy to say has become a good friend of mine over the years. He’s already opening the gate when he sees me pull the car forward, anticipating my arrival.

Usually on the weekends there’s a line of cars here waiting to get their turn on the track. One call to Enzo earlier this week and he was able to pull off a couple of private hours this morning for Beth and me.

Beth crosses her arms as we slowly inch toward the starting line on the track. Putting the car in Park, I hop out, moving to grab the helmets I’ve stored in my trunk.

“Where are you—” Beth’s voice is cut off by my car door shutting. Her door flies open, and she mumbles something I can’t make out. By the looks of her arms and legs flopping around, I’d say she’s struggling to get her harness off.

A laugh bursts out of me as I shut the trunk, helmets in hand. Making my way to her side of the car, I kneel to her eye level and hand her the helmet I purchased a few days ago.

She stares at it for a second before looking back at me. “You didn’t.”

I smile. “I did.” The helmet is black, covered in red roses, the same type she has plastered on her bookstore logo.

“Need help putting it on?” I ask as she tentatively takes the helmet from me.

“No, I got it. But I’m not sure I’m down for whatever it is you have planned here. I’ve seen the way your brother drives.” She side-eyes me, recalling the car wreck my brother Theo unfortunately got into with Sienna in the passenger seat last year.

Without thinking, I place my hand on her bare thigh, her eyes locking in on our connection. I try not to notice the way her breathing becomes more erratic as I say my words, “I’m a much better driver than my brother, and I come here all the time. If you *really* don’t want to do this, I’ll turn the car around, and we can go home...” I pause, waiting for her to tell me to take

her back. When she doesn't, I continue, "But I thought I could show you how fun my 'shitty sounding car' can be."

Without saying a word, and with a passionate glare my way, she slips the helmet on over her head. Still loose, it shakes slightly when she nods her agreement to my plan. Chuckling, I reach up to help tighten the straps. Her voice comes out muffled by her squished cheeks when she says, "It does sound shitty."

Once I confirm her helmet is secured properly, I lightly pat her thigh. "Whatever you say, baby."

After tightening her harness once more, I shut her door and head back to the driver's side. Settling myself once again into the driver's seat, I buckle myself in tightly.

The shitty sound Beth is referring to is the Whipple supercharger on the engine. What she has yet to discover is how *fast* this thing can go.

Turning off the music, I keep the car in neutral, tap my foot on the gas pedal, and rev the engine a couple of times as I take three deep breaths. It's a ritual I do every time I come here. A habit I picked up from my dad that I have no intention of breaking.

"Ready?" I look at Beth, taking in her bright blue eyes and squished cheeks as she nods, grabbing onto the edge of the seat next to her thighs. I take one last peek at the tattoo she has there before focusing on the track in front of me.

Hitting the clutch, I throw the car into first gear as I lay weight to the gas pedal. My eyes don't come off the track as I shift into second gear, hitting sixty miles per hour in under five seconds. The 2004 Mustang Terminator Cobra roars to life beneath my feet as we take off down the track.

I finish the first lap at half the speed I normally would, letting Beth get used to the twists and turns of the track. My hand switches between the wheel and the shifter with each turn I take as muscle memory takes over.

When we round the last corner, I downshift the car, bringing it to a slow stop at our original starting point.

I let out a deep breath, a smile on my face as I look at Beth, waiting for her reaction. "So what'd you think? Not half bad, right?" I yell through my helmet to ensure she can hear me.

She looks back at me, a newfound glint in her eye as she says, "For such a loud car, it moves kinda slow if you ask me." A hint of a smile shows in

her eyes as she stares at me.

Grabbing the underside of her helmet, I tug her closer to me. “Oh baby, that was only a taste. Ready for more?”

She nods, more excitedly than she did before, despite her obvious best efforts to hide it. Straightening out, I hit the clutch and gas pedal again, throwing the car in first gear as I did before.

This time, I don’t stop in second gear. I shift to third, then to fourth, topping one hundred and ten miles per hour on the beginning stretch of the track. I’m sure to keep my eyes on the road in front of me, but I’m tempted to look at Beth when her sweet laughter fills the car over the roar of the engine.

Her laugh is contagious as it caresses my ears, my cheeks pressing against the inside of my helmet as I smile. My hands work to shift back down to second to take the first turn of the track. We continue down the path, Beth’s laughter spreading warmth through my chest each lap we take.

If it were up to me, we’d continue the track until the sun sets, but I’m forced to come to a slow stop when my stomach rumbles, empty and desperate for the food I’ve packed in the trunk.

The car’s vibrations stop when I turn off the ignition. Pulling off my helmet, I look over at Beth. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you actually enjoyed yourself.”

She fights with the strap under her chin for a moment before removing her helmet, the same as me. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” She looks away, but I catch the hint of a smile tugging at the corners of her lips.

Reaching over, I place my hand on the buckle sitting across her waist, her breath stopping for a moment when I do. Unlatching the belt with minimal effort, I undo my own as I ask, “You hungry?” When she nods, I make my way out of the car, heading toward the trunk to grab the cooler I prepped this morning and a picnic blanket.

“You came prepared.” Beth stands next to the Mustang, arms crossed and an eyebrow raised, as though she’s trying to figure out what my ulterior motive is.

“Always.” I wink at her before heading toward a grassy area to the side of the track. Laying out the blanket, I sit down, patting the seat next to me as Beth approaches. The sun warms my back, the black T-shirt soaking up the rays as I watch Beth take the seat next to me. Her skirt rides up her thighs when she does, revealing more of the floral vines that round her hip.

The sight makes me want to take another bite, desperate to taste her again.

I turn my attention back to the cooler, setting out our food for an early lunch as I try my best to gain control of my hardening cock. I hand Beth the chicken salads I've prepared along with the small bowl of fruit and bottles of water. She pauses, looking down at the food.

"Is this okay? We can get something else if—"

"No, it's fine," she says. "It's nice to have a homemade meal for once. I've been having to live off ramen for the last few months."

Opening the containers, I begin pouring dressing over my salad and ask, "Speaking of, how is business?" I'm cautious when I ask the question, but I can't help myself, given the fact that she questioned my business's popularity the other day.

"Just about as good as yours." She shrugs, her laughter following mine at her jab.

I take a bite of my salad, the rumbling in my stomach finally coming to an ease. A faint breeze wafts by, picking up strands of my hair as we both dive into our lunches, listening to the song of a few birds perched high on one of the nearby evergreen trees.

After we've both satiated ourselves with the food before us, Beth sets down her bowl as she poses the question, "Will you be going to the lake house this summer? I was talking with Sienna the other day. She's excited to go this year. Said she's going to give you a run for your money in the competition."

I laugh at the thought. "No, not this year. I think I'll stay here this summer." I look out to the Mustang, trying to carry a nonchalant tone that doesn't give away the true reason I'm staying in town.

Beth stammers over her words before finding the right ones. "But you go every year, don't you?"

I shrug. "Yeah, but not this year. My brothers will understand."

"Why?" The question is faint, like she didn't want to ask but felt she had to.

My nonchalant tone is nonexistent when I look back toward Beth, answering her question simply, "There are more important things here that need my attention."

My feelings for Beth aren't something I've tried to hide from. I've been falling for her since last summer's trip to the lake house. From the moment

she told me my car sounded like shit, I knew she was someone special.

Not only does my business need me here, but I get the feeling Beth needs me to. Over the past few weeks, I've watched as she looks up to the cameras in her bookstore, never reaching to turn them off. Her shoulders always relax ever so slightly when her eyes land on the lens.

She won't admit it, but she needs me here.

Her reinstated interest in learning self-defense after not speaking to me for a week must mean she received another note. I'm not sure what it said, but after she texted me that night, I combed through all the camera footage looking for anything out of the ordinary.

I haven't found anything yet, but I will. When I do, I'd rather not be two hours away from Beth.

"Do your tattoos have any meaning? Or do you just really love flowers?" Beth is full of questions today. She points at the sleeve of tattoos covering my left arm.

Looking down, I smile, happy to explain the reasoning for them. "My parents." She leans in closer. "The two doves representing them, the two people I've lost." I motion to the lilies etched into my arm. "They were my mom's favorite flower."

Beth's lips part. "White lilies with a pink center?" I nod at her question.

"She had a good eye for flowers. They're my favorite too." Beth smiles, her happiness brightening the mood.

My hand lands on her exposed thigh, lightly tracing the tattoo placed there. Her breath hitches at our connection. "And you? Any meaning behind these?"

She lets out a singular laugh. "No. Not the designs themselves at least. It has more to do with the pain than anything else."

My eyebrows come together, curious about her answer. "You like the pain?"

She's looking down, watching my hand trail her thigh as she speaks softly, "I'm not so sure 'like' is the word I'd use."

Understanding hits me like a freight train. Her eyes stay glued to our connection, almost as if she's afraid to look at me.

Lifting her chin with my knuckle, I say, "I get it. Sometimes when you've been hurt, the only way to get through that trauma is to regain control of that pain."

Her eyes glisten as she shakes her chin from my hold. Looking toward the Mustang, she asks, “Why racing?”

“I just showed you why. It’s fun to go fast.” I lean into her, nudging her shoulder.

She rolls her eyes, pushing me away playfully. “No, I mean it. Why? There has to be something more to it than just that.” She stares up at me, those siren blue eyes silently begging for me to be honest with her.

It’s the one thing I’ve wanted from her from the start. To open up to me and share parts of herself with me. Though I’m not sure I can say I’ve done the same with her.

Given my past, being my *true* self has proven to get me into more trouble than it’s worth, but there’s something about the way Beth looks at me at this moment that’s screaming at me.

You can trust her.

“I was nine when my parents died.” I sigh, beginning the story I haven’t told anyone aside from my brothers. The emotional weight of it lay heavy on my chest. “The world was so... *loud*. I tried everything I could to escape. Every hobby I could find.”

“And you found racing?”

I smile. “Not at first. But once Roman taught me how to drive, I discovered a sense of calm behind the wheel that I rarely found in other activities. You’d think it’d be the opposite given my parents died in a car wreck, but it wasn’t. At least not for me.” I take a deep breath, worried she might laugh at my reasoning.

When she stares at me intently, hanging onto my every word, I look back to my car and continue, “When I’m behind the wheel, it’s just me and the road beneath my feet. Each time my foot hits the clutch, and the gears shift, the world falls silent, and I feel like I can *finally* breathe.”

Beth’s eyes glisten again when I glance back at her. She looks away from me the moment our eyes meet, the action throwing me back to when we first met.

“I can see why you love it.” The words come out quiet, but I don’t stop myself from grabbing her hand in mine when she says them.

“Is that why you fight too?” she asks, staring at our hands intertwined.

A chuckle escapes my throat at the thought. “No, that’s a different story for a different day.” She nods her understanding.

Our eyes both linger on our connected hands before we look at each other again. To my surprise, Beth's blue eyes drop to my mouth before she leans forward, planting a soft kiss on my lips. I weave my hand through the hair at the back of her neck, deepening the kiss. Our other hands are still intertwined as we both squeeze, the rings on my fingers digging into my skin as we become desperate to be closer to one another.

I kiss her softly, with more care than I used the first night we spent together. Before, I couldn't get enough. Now, I want to savor this moment.

She pulls away from me, my lips turning cold from her absence.

"Sorry," she says, her voice shaking.

The timidity radiating off Beth is uncharacteristic. I can't help myself when I say, "You do remember I had my mouth on your pussy not too long ago, right?" I smile at her, our lips only inches apart, my hand still resting on the back of her neck.

She nods slightly. "Yeah, but kissing... it's more intimate."

My eyebrows scrunch together. "And that scares you?"

"A lot of shit scares me." Her eyes finally meet mine, the glistening from before now back in full force as tears begin to pool at the base of her irises.

I soften my tone. "Do I scare you?"

She hesitates, unsure of how to answer before briefly shaking her head.

"Hey." I move my hand to her cheek. "Beth, look at me. I would *never* hurt you." A tear falls down her cheek, and I catch it with my thumb, wiping it away. A pain radiates in my chest at the sight.

"Beth, look at me." I tilt her head, prompting her to look at me as her tears continue to fall quietly. "I'd personally put anyone who laid a hand on you six feet under, and I wouldn't think twice about it, but I'd never hurt *you*. Talk to me."

Something flashes across her eyes, but it's gone before I can catch it. The moment disappears as fast as it came. She pulls away, standing from the picnic blanket as she wipes the remainder of her tears.

"I think we should go. I have a lot of work to do." That's all she says before she makes her way back toward the Mustang.

BETH

To say I'm embarrassed would be an understatement. Today was actually *fun*, not that I'd ever admit that openly to Alex. That is, until I went and ruined it with my crying, which is unusual for me to do in the presence of others.

Even Sienna has only ever seen me cry twice since we were five years old, and Benny, only three times. I'm not blind to the fact that I don't let people in easily. I usually prefer to keep them out on purpose. Yet here comes Alex, tearing through my walls before I have a chance to secure them in place.

Hence why we've been driving in silence since we left the racetrack. He was tolerable today, but I still can't figure out how tolerable signals to my brain that he should be trusted enough that I let a tear slip past in front of him. Though I've barely been holding it together as it is, considering the notes and how frequently I find myself looking over my shoulder recently.

All that talk of him not hurting me, me *actually* believing him, was too much.

"So... are we going to ride back in complete silence, or are you ready to talk?" Alex's question from the driver's seat pulls me out of my dissociation episode. I roll up my passenger side window so I can hear him better. He does the same, anticipating a response from me, I'm sure.

Instead, I look his direction, throwing a glare his way before pulling my attention back to the road ahead of us.

For a weekend, the roadways are fairly clear. Alex chose the scenic route back home. His dark window tint and the tall evergreen trees on either side of the road, providing shade from the evening sun, make it feel as though it's nighttime inside the car.

The silence between us thickens and lingers as we continue down the empty road, morphing into something heavy that has me wanting to reach toward my window button again.

"You're a fucking brat, you know that?" Alex says, shocking me from my slumped position in my seat.

"*Excuse me?*" I ask, not hiding the shock in my voice and failing to hide the slight upturn of the corners of my mouth.

Alex smiles. "You heard me." His hand grabs the shifter, shifting the car up one gear as he accelerates. We don't go nearly as fast as we did on the track, but I grab the edge of my seat as the trees begin to whirl past us.

"Admit that you had fun today." My heart rate ticks up at his stern tone, in much the same way it did when we were on the track today. The same way it did the other night when he was behind me...

My grip on the seat beneath me tightens as heat begins to pool in my center.

Fuck, he isn't even touching me, and he still has this effect on me?

"I'm waiting," Alex says when I continue to stay silent, his hand moving from the shifter to my bare thigh.

He draws languid circles with his fingers on my skin as I fail to regulate my increasingly rapid breath. "I don't know what you're talking about."

He spreads his hand wide on my thigh, inching up higher, short of the hemline of my skirt that's failing to cover me appropriately, given my sitting position.

He squeezes tight enough to send a wave of pleasure through all the nerve endings in my body. "Quit being a brat and admit it, Beth."

"Make me," I grit out, my attention split between regulating my breathing and staring at the strong fingers digging into my muscles.

A low chuckle slips out of him as he inches his hand higher, slipping beneath the hemline of my skirt. Another glance in his direction and I can see he's as affected by our connection as I am. The straining of his cock against the material of his jeans looks painful. When I catch it flex beneath the fabric, my nipples scrape against the lace of my bralette beneath my shirt as they begin to harden.

“Is that a challenge?” The trees continue to whirl by us as we move steadily along the road, Alex keeping full control of the Mustang. After today, I’m not sure I would trust anyone behind the wheel of a car more than Alex.

When I don’t respond, he moves his hand higher, and I shamelessly adjust in my seat, hoping to close the distance between his fingers and my core. His knuckles brush against my center for a split second before he rests his hand on my thigh again, this time gripping harder.

The movement has me clutching the car door handle in an effort not to soak his seat right then and there.

“No thong this time?” The question comes through gritted teeth as his left hand on the steering wheel tightens its grip. One look at him and his cock is begging to be set free of the prison that is his jeans.

“You told me not to.” My voice comes out hushed, my breath fragmented.

Another squeeze to my thigh and a groan slips from his throat. “Maybe you’re not such a brat after all.” He wraps his fingers around the hemline of my skirt, pushing it up so the material bunches around my waist. It didn’t have far to go considering my erratic movements got it halfway there anyway.

Now fully exposed, he steals a glance before cupping his palm over me, his fingers pointed down at the seat, blanketing my core perfectly. A small groan slips from my throat at his touch.

“Fuck, you’re stunning,” he groans, stealing another glance before turning his eyes back to the road.

My grip on the car door handle tightens, the plastic creaking under the strength of my fingers as Alex slips one finger inside me. A second finger follows with ease as my arousal pools underneath my bare ass and between my thighs.

I spread my legs as far as they can go, providing him more room to give me exactly what I need. Although he doesn’t. He holds back as he barely moves his fingers inside me, never touching me where I need him to.

“Are you always this wet, or only when you’re with me?” Alex’s controlled charm is back, and his velvety voice threatens to send me over the edge.

“I’ve been wetter,” I lie.

I've always thought I was happy with my sex life. Women and occasionally men, never failing to please me and me never failing to please them.

But no one has ever been able to send me over the edge like Alex did the other night. No one has ever made me so wet that I've been left to sit in a puddle of my own arousal.

I hate the effect Alex has on me. Yet I can't get enough of it.

Cold hits my center as Alex pulls his hand away, slipping out of me enough to make me feel hollow before he lands a swift, harsh slap to my core that has me jolting with pleasure in my seat.

"Liar," Alex says, a smirk spreading across his face.

He slides two fingers inside me again, and I let out a sigh as the hollow feeling passes. His touch brings me a level of comfort I don't want to acknowledge at this moment.

"Alex, please," I shamelessly beg after he continues to lazily pump his fingers in and out of me as though we have all the time in the world.

"Admit you had fun," he says, pulling his fingers from me again. This time landing a slap straight to my clit. My impending orgasm continues to build at the base of my spine, my breath now so erratic that I can barely form words.

"It was fine," I say, giving in to him. It was more than fine. I had a fucking blast. Everything he said about losing himself on the road, not thinking about all the noise that's happening in life. Everything falling to silence.

I felt every second of it. When we were on that track, it was only him and me. Nothing else. It was exhilarating. I loved every second.

"C'mon, Beth, it was more than that, and you know it," he says, curling his fingers inside me, coaxing me closer to my orgasm. It still isn't enough.

He continues his movements, as he brings me short of falling over the edge. He does it over and over and over again until I can't take it anymore.

"Fine, I loved every goddamn second of it. Now, Alex, *please*, I'm begging you. I—" His movements cut me off, unable to finish my words as he gives me exactly what I need.

His thumb finds its home on my clit as he falls into an earth-shattering rhythm with his fingers that are buried deep inside me. As we approach a turn, my heart rate spikes given the speed at which we are still traveling.

He'll have to pull his hand from me soon to shift the car, but I'm so close, I'm chasing my orgasm in a race before he has to downshift.

I'm almost there when we hit the beginning of the turn, the road beating me to it. Though Alex's next move takes my breath away.

In one swift motion, without missing a beat, he keeps his hand on my core as his left hand moves from the steering wheel to the shifter, downshifting the car one-handed as we take the turn.

The motion is so effortless, so smooth, so fucking *hot* that the sight of it sends me spiraling over the edge.

My orgasm hits me harder than I'm ready for as my back arches off the seat, my chest straining against the four-point harness, the tightness of it over my nipples adding to the sensation in my core.

Alex's name slips from my lips as he says, "That's it. I got you, baby." He brings me down from my orgasm in a way that's so calming and gentle, tears spring to my eyes again.

When I'm finally done riding the aftershocks, Alex pulls his hand from me, grabbing a few napkins from the glove box to clean up the seat beneath me before he helps me reposition my skirt back over my hips.

His hand rests on the shifter as we cruise at a lower speed the rest of the way back, the evergreen trees trailing behind us.

I don't think twice about it when I place my hand on his forearm, letting it rest there the remainder of the drive.

"I knew you loved it." His words prompt both of us to burst into laughter, a feeling I never knew I had taken for granted until today.

We ride the rest of the way in comfortable silence as I bask in the small moment of peace with Alex in his Mustang.

BETH

As I'm cleaning up my bookstore for the day, the parking lot painted in a soft orange glow, I take another look at one of the cameras in the far corner of the shop. My shoulders relax, the thought of someone watching my back bringing me peace I never thought I'd find. Although that might have more to do with the person behind the camera than with the camera itself.

It's been a few days since our racetrack visit, and Alex still plagues my mind. With so few customers coming in and out of my bookstore each day, there seems to be plenty of time for my mind to drift back to Alex.

His scent lingers in the back hallway in the mornings, and I find myself taking a deep inhale before entering my back room at the start of each day. When I clean the front windows, or work on the table displays, my eyes drift to his Mustang, parked outside, remembering how his hand gripped my thigh. How at peace I felt being with him even when traveling at dangerously high speeds.

The only time I'm not thinking about Alex is when I think back to the notes being left for me. The reminders of my childhood keep me up at night as I await *his* next move. He isn't going to stop at the notes. That I know for sure.

Taking a deep breath, I refocus on the books in front of me on one of the tables near the front door. I'm moving the hardbacks around and refreshing some of the stock when a jingle sounds from the front door. There are ten

minutes left until I close up for the night, but I'm excited about the prospect of a new customer walking through the door.

A book slips out of my hand when I look up and spot Alex standing in the doorway. The sunset behind him surrounds his sturdy frame in orange and pink hues. It plays against his light-blue eyes, which are glued to me.

As he takes me in, I do the same to him. The jeans and T-shirt with his gym logo hug his toned muscles in all the right places. The silver rings, meticulously placed on his fingers, glint in the light above the front door as he taps his bicep. His arms crossed, he leans with his shoulder pressed against the doorframe.

He looks as menacing as ever, and every inch of my body heats at the sight of him, rendering me speechless.

I say nothing as I watch him close the door behind him, locking it securely before flipping my Open sign to Closed. When he shuts the blinds, the natural light fades from the store, causing the small lamps spread throughout to glow brighter in their effort to light the room.

Alex slowly approaches me as his husky voice warms my ears. "You look as good as ever." It takes all my willpower not to kiss him right then and there.

Irritated by my uncontrollable attraction to this man, I ask, "Is there a reason you're here? I didn't think we had a training session until tomorrow."

Alex bends down in front of me, picking up the book that fell out of my hands earlier. He looks up at me, maintaining eye contact as he slowly rises to his full height. My neck strains as my eyes don't leave his. I've never met a man who enjoys eye contact as much as this one.

"We don't. But I thought I'd stop by to uphold my end of the bargain." He shakes the book in his hand. "Would you recommend this one?"

I let out a breath. Right, he's here for the books. That was the agreement after all.

I take the book from his hand, placing it back down on the table. "I'm not sure this would be a good one for you. Given it's one of the darker romances, I'd hate to throw you in the deep end right off the bat." I turn to walk toward one of my shelves that has my stock of lighthearted, romantic comedies displayed.

"You'd be surprised. I've read darker."

My back is turned to him when I stop, a few feet away. I turn to him slowly, sure that I've misheard what he's told me.

"Come again?"

He smiles. "I'd be happy to."

Rolling my eyes, I kick myself for setting him up for that one. "You know what I meant. You *read*?"

He scoffs. "Yes, Beth, I *read*." His tone matches my sarcasm before he takes a step closer to me. "You know, for a reader, you're really bad at judging a book by its cover."

I open my mouth to say something, but when no words come out, I close it. He's not entirely wrong. I can agree with him, but he doesn't need to know that.

Given recent events, I have the small, nagging feeling I may have misjudged Alex at first. Though my misjudgment of him doesn't mean I trust him yet.

He smirks, knowing he's caught me before he moves to one of the darker shelves. The way I've set up my stock, the books progressively become darker in content as you move along the store. In the far-end corner, I have the darkest romances I could find. Of course, that's where Alex chooses to go first.

"I want a good mix. What would you recommend?" he asks, motioning a hand toward the bookshelf in front of him, waiting for me to join him at his side.

I know we had an agreement, but the dynamics of *how* I got this sale do nothing to water down my excitement. I approach him with a suppressed giddiness, ecstatic to close my biggest sale since opening weekend.

Carefully sliding a book from the shelf, I hold it out to him. "This one is a good one about a mafia couple and the good girl next door, who end up in a throuple. The spice scenes are out of this world and don't get me started on the drama."

Alex shrugs next to me, not taking the book from my hand. "Not my thing. Let's stay away from the throuple ones. I don't tend to enjoy those."

His comment catches me off guard as I put the book back on the shelf. A bite laces my tone as I say, "Why? Do you have something against it? Because I think I've made it pretty clear where I stand on the whole 'sleeping with men *and* women' front. Maybe this was a—" Alex cuts me

off by wrapping his hand around my hip, gripping hard as he pulls me into his side.

His tone is low as he stares down at me, a heat in his gaze that matches my own at our proximity. "I'm not one for sharing. That's all."

Understanding washes over me as my face begins to flush with embarrassment, quick to make an assumption about him that turned out not to be true. In an effort to save face, I return his sentiment. "Oh... Good, because I'm not either... Unless it's in books that is."

He smiles, and the sight of him perfectly framed by the dark romance books behind him is a picture I wish I could frame and hang on my wall.

Focus, Beth.

With a slight shake of my head, I move out of his grasp, attempting to make the sale before we inevitably get lost in each other's company as history has proven we tend to do.

Alex watches me in comfortable silence as I pick a few books off the shelves. His presence calms my movements.

Once I've gathered the books, I hold the stack out to him. Given that half of these are first in the series, I've only chosen eight books. It's fewer than our agreed-upon ten, but even this will be a sale worth staying open late for.

"Here you go, these are some of my favorites." He takes the stack of books from me, creating an optical illusion that the books have shrunk in his large hands.

"This is only eight, and four of these are first in the series, right?" he asks.

"Yeah, I figured you could start with the first and see how you like it before—"

"I'll take the whole series."

My mouth falls open. Doing some quick math in my head, that would be seventeen books in total if he did that.

"Alex, you don't have to do that. That's way too much." My tone is soft. The last person I need charity from is him.

Alex pushes past me to set the current stack of books on the front counter before moving back to the shelves to grab the remaining books in the series.

"I'm a fast reader." He shrugs. "Besides, you said these series were your favorites?" He holds the books out to me, as if I need to read the titles to

make sure.

I nod in response, shocked by his determination to make such a huge purchase from my shop.

“Well, in that case, I have no other choice but to read the whole series.” He smiles, moving toward the counter to check out.

Following him, I grab my scanner, slowly scanning each one in an effort to give him enough time to change his mind. He leans forward, resting his elbows next to the stack of books as he looks up at me, like he hates the partition that currently stands between our bodies. I hate to admit that I don’t particularly disagree with that feeling.

Pausing on the tenth book, I look at him. “You don’t have to do this. Ten books is plenty.”

Alex chuckles before he takes the scanner from my hand, his fingers caressing mine, and continues ringing in the rest of the books he has stacked.

“Take it as a thank-you,” he says.

“For what?” I ask, body buzzing as he continues to do what should be my job.

“For the show you put on for me the other day.” He hands the scanner back to me when he’s finished, winking to get his point across.

A smile spreads across my face against my will, refusing to disappear as I bag up his items. He’s just about to take the paper bag from me when I realize I’ve forgotten something.

“Oh, I almost forgot, for every five books, you get a free bookmark.” Excitement oozes from me at the prospect of putting into practice one of the policies I created for my shop. Taking out an organizer I had previously put away as part of my closing duties, I set it on the counter.

“Here, you can pick three of these.” I smile as I motion toward the bookmark selections. My smile falters when I take a minute to think about what Alex had said. He said he reads romance but never indicated how much. Like most men, he probably only reads a few of the popular ones. I’m not sure why he would make such a large purchase from me, but I’m hesitant when I recognize I’m most likely making another assumption about him that will turn out not to be true.

“If you want, it’s not a requirement or anything.” I kick myself at the slight dip in confidence in my tone.

Alex's smile overtakes his face as he pushes the bag aside on the counter. Leaning forward, he rests his chin on his fist, making a show of looking at the bookmarks closely.

"Now, that is a tough decision. Which ones do you think I should pick?" He nods his head to the side, a silent command for me to join him on the other side of the counter.

I follow his command without hesitation.

"This is one of my favorites," I say, pointing at one of the bookmarks in the holder. Alex stands to his full height. Shifting his legs so he's behind me, his hands snap to their rightful place on my hips as his fingers dip below the fabric of my top, skin meeting skin.

"Then I definitely have to have that one." Alex's hips press against my ass as he traps me between himself and the counter in front of me. My eyes drift closed, my senses becoming overwhelmed by his presence warming my body.

He leans down, planting a gentle kiss to my neck followed by the nip of his teeth. I melt into his touch. Relaxing my body into his feels natural when his hardening cock presses against the top of my ass. A suppressed moan escapes me as I lose myself in the sensation.

His lips brush the tip of my ear as he whispers, "You're breathtaking when you talk about your books. You know that?"

That does me in. Without hesitation, I turn in his arms, my hand resting on the back of his neck as I pull him down toward me. His lips meet mine as I kiss him with an urgency I've never felt for anyone else. He does the same, his tongue meeting mine when his hands grip the underside of my ass, lifting me with ease onto the counter.

He adjusts me, pulling me to the edge of the counter so he can press himself against my center. I grapple at his chest and shoulders for more when his hands begin to roam my hips and my thighs over my leggings.

Every time we touch each other, it's like we're desperate to burn the map of our bodies into each other's minds. Every time we kiss, a fire is ignited within me, an effortless passion flowing freely between us that fails to dim. No matter how hard I try to ignore it.

We continue to lose ourselves in the kiss. This kiss is different from the first one we shared a few weeks ago. An invisible pull tugging inside me as he kisses me, no rush to push this further as we take each other in.

“Alex, wait, I need to tell you something,” I say breathlessly as I force myself to pull my lips from his. Despite our connection, whatever this is, something gnaws in the back of my mind that I can’t ignore.

His eyes widen for a split second before they soften and he says, “What is it?” He’s pulled back, though his hands stay glued to my waist. My legs refuse to leave their home wrapped around his hips.

“What you said the other day, about the Mustang. About how the world falls silent around you when you drive. How it centers you,” I continue, painfully aware of my foremost walls breaking down at his sheer existence.

He nods, the corners of his mouth ticking up slightly as he continues to listen intently. His thumbs move back and forth lightly on my waist. The motion is overwhelmingly soft and comforting that I continue with my confession.

“You asked me before why I chose this, a bookstore.” I motion around us to my store. “It’s much the same reason, really. Losing myself in a good book, the world around me falls silent.”

I glance up at him, trying to gauge his reaction before continuing, “But there’s another layer to it too. Books are constant, never changing, predictable. Sure, there are different genres, different stories, whatever. But once the words are written, the words don’t change. The characters don’t change. Their actions don’t change. I can pick up the same book again and again, and the same characters will fall in love, the same characters will be best friends.” I pause as I stare out into the store, looking at the shelves. “Life is unpredictable. Most people never get their happy ending. With reading, especially romance, I know there’s a guaranteed happy ending for the characters. It’s the perfect escape from the harsh realities of the world, and I don’t know...” I shrug. “I guess I wanted to share the love I have for reading with other people.”

Halfway through my long-winded confession, Alex stopped moving his thumbs on my hips. He’s gone silent at my words, causing an itching sensation to run up my spine as I anticipate his next move.

Something I wouldn’t have to do if this were a book. Unfortunately, in reality, I can’t just read the next line and move on with the story. So I’m stuck, staring at Alex, begging the universe to convince him to respond soon.

Finally, his hands squeeze my hips lightly. “That’s beautiful.” There’s a small crack in his voice as he says the words. A silent moment of

understanding passes between us before he leans down and softly presses his lips to mine again.

The softness of his kiss spreads a warmth through my chest that I've only ever read about in books. The feeling is so new that all I can do is mirror his motions, kissing him back with the same gentleness with which he kisses me.

His forehead touches mine as he pulls away. "Thank you for sharing that with me, Beth." His words are simple, but the tender way he says them tells me he's genuine, grateful that I've shared a piece of me with him. A piece of myself that he's quietly promising to keep safe.

Pulling back from the kiss, I snicker, fighting back the prickling sensation behind my eyes. "I thought it was only fair, given what you shared with me."

Taking a step away, Alex pulls me down from the counter, my body clinging to him the same way two magnets are pulled toward one another. He places his knuckle under my chin, lifting as he looks down at me. "I'd love it if you could share more pieces of yourself with me. When you're ready."

Not trusting the tears behind my eyes to stay put if I were to talk, all I do is nod before placing a gentle kiss to the palm of his hand. His silver ring cools my warmed cheek when he brushes his thumb across it, wiping away a tear I didn't notice had been set free.

After spending another moment together in the bookstore, we head upstairs for the night. As we're ascending the steps, Alex's voice sounds from behind me, the paper bag of books crinkling in his hand as he moves. "Do you want to come over for dinner tonight? I know I'm not Leo, but I can make a mean steak."

I'm smiling at his offer, ready to accept, consequences be damned, when I reach the top of the steps, and my eyes land on my front door. My stomach churns, a tingling sensation overtaking my legs when I notice the note taped to the old wood.

Treading carefully toward my apartment, cautious that someone could jump out from behind it at any moment, a bead of sweat forms on my brow.

I rip the note from the door, a scratching sound echoing in the empty hallway. My chest tightens as I slowly open the note, doing my best to control my shaking hands.

I should be used to these notes by now, but I refuse to accept this as my new normal. Especially when I read the words written on the paper, my worst fear beginning to come true.

MAKING NEW FRIENDS, I SEE. CAREFUL, ELIZABETH. IT'D BE A SHAME IF HE GOT CAUGHT IN THE CROSSFIRE.

No, no, no.

Visions of the last time I dared to date a man flash in my mind. It was early high school. My boyfriend at the time found a particularly nasty bruise on my shoulder halfway through a deep make-out session. Unfortunately for him, he was also an athlete, so he wouldn't accept the normal excuse I usually gave when questioned about my injuries.

Next thing I knew, he was being thrown out of the house, landing on his tailbone on the front lawn, put there by my abuser. When I stepped out to check on him, all he had to say was that I wasn't worth the trouble.

He was dating someone else two days later.

I don't know how, but he's watching me. Aware that Alex and I are... acquainted with each other.

What had my lunch turning over in my stomach was how he got this note on my *front door*. My hands tremble as I stare down at the note, questions running through my mind. A loud voice screams at me from inside my head.

He's getting closer.

This is exactly why I can't get close to Alex. I don't know what I was thinking, opening up to him tonight, but by doing so, I've just put him at risk. I'd never wish the hurt that I've experienced on anyone, especially on Alex.

Not to mention the fact that he could deem me "not worth the trouble."

Other than Sienna and Benny, *he's* never let me have anyone else. Afraid that my happiness would ruin his perfect version of a family, always wanting me to fall back into the shadows, using me as a punching bag when his life didn't go the way he planned.

Sienna and Benny were all I was allowed to have. They were the only ones willing to stick around and deal with my circumstances. The only ones kept safe from the same abuse I experienced.

The fucker was always too afraid of Sienna's dad to ever show her his anger, and Benny... Well, Benny is his son, his perfect boy, his *blood*. He always liked to remind me of that last fact. No, he'd never hurt Benny, not in the way that he hurt me at least.

Frank won't leave me alone as long as he believes I'm happy. The moment I put my stepfather away in prison five years ago was the first moment I've felt peace. Now he's out and back to steal that away from me again.

My mind races with flashbacks of my childhood, of my years as a teenager, as my heart rate continues to rise, still holding the note in my hand. The memories serve as a reminder of how far he'd go to hurt me. How he'd hurt Alex without hesitation if it meant getting to me.

I can't expose Alex to this. I can't put him at risk. I can't let him in.

"What's that?" Alex's voice startles me. I jump at his proximity, only inches behind me as he looks over my shoulder, the bag of books crinkling in his hands as his grip tightens.

I turn around to face him, my back now to the door, folding the note and bringing it to my side in an attempt to hide the words scrawled across the paper.

Although looking into Alex's eyes, I can tell he read every word on the piece of paper. An anger like no other burns in his irises, his jaw ticking, and his breath becoming more erratic at the same rate my heartbeat rises.

"It's nothing," I say flippantly, trying my best to hide the shake in my voice. I didn't mean to bring him into this. This is the exact opposite of what I was aiming for.

"What's going on, Beth? Who put that on your door?" The question comes out stern, but not loud. He knows I'm hiding something from him, his desperation palpable as he waits for me to give him the truth.

If I tell him now, Frank will be relentless, as angry as the day he was when he was shoved into the back of the police car. No, if Alex gets hurt because of me, I'd never forgive myself. *Alex may never forgive me.*

"Just a package delivery reminder, looks like I'll have to make a trip to the post office tomorrow." I try to lighten my tone the best I can despite the way this lie is tearing me in two on the inside.

Alex stares at me, his eyes wandering mine, searching for an answer I refuse to give him.

He nods lightly. “Why don’t I cook us some steaks and you can tell me all about the package that’s so important they couldn’t leave it at your doorstep?” He nods his head toward his apartment door, gently calling my bluff.

A voice inside my head continues to scream at me as my body tears itself apart when I give my response. “I’m actually pretty tired. I think I’ll turn in for the night.” I place my hand on my doorknob, averting my gaze, unable to look him in the eye.

I don’t miss the pained sigh he releases when he says, “Right... Well, have a good night, Beth. I’ll see you in the morning for training.”

He turns his back to me, walking toward his door. I’m barely able to release the words from my lips when I say, “Have a good night, Alex.” Before the rustle of his keys can travel down the hallway, I’m inside my apartment, locking the door behind me.

When I finally lay down for bed, my eyes drift closed, with tears streaming down my face, and my heart as hollow as my stomach.

BETH

The note lies heavy in my hand as I sit on one of three thrifted chairs at the round table in my dining room. I bought the furniture from nearby thrift stores whenever I had a spare moment over the last few weeks as I work to finally furnish my apartment.

Though I'm not sure a small dining table, a reading chair in the living room, and a couple of barstools constitute a furnished apartment. Not to mention I've still only unpacked about half of my boxes.

Looking down at the small pile of notes on the table in front of me, I contemplate whether or not it's worth unpacking in the first place. Even if the place is starting to grow on me, it's not a sustainable long-term solution for me to stay here.

A strong knock on my front door has me jumping out of my seat. My brain works overtime to calm my shocked nervous system, reminding me that it's only Alex, grabbing me for our next training session.

I slip the pile of notes under one of the many books lying out on the dining room table before making my way to the door. Narrowly avoiding tripping over a pair of my boots on my way as I grab a sweatshirt off an unpacked box.

A pang of tightness hits my chest when I open the door, and I'm met with Alex's grin. He holds out his hand, a warm cup of tea from the place down the street waiting for me. I'm not sure when he learned it, but he

somehow knows my morning tea order. No doubt flirting his way into that knowledge.

The thought of him flirting with anyone else makes my stomach churn.

Taking a sip, I let the warm liquid calm me from the inside before my eyes snag on the box he's holding. Pointing, I ask, "What's that?"

He motions his hand toward my apartment in a silent question of whether he can come inside. I step aside, opening the door wider, allowing him to enter. With only a few short steps, he's at the kitchen island, pushing an old pizza box and a box of donuts out of the way to set his mystery gift on the counter. He takes a sip of his coffee before turning to me.

"I found another box of these lying around my apartment last night, and I thought you might want to put them up in here." He holds up the box to show me a pack of cameras, the same as the ones he installed downstairs in the shop.

Great, he must be as freaked as I am about the most recent note.

"I've already put up a few in the hallway this morning, and it won't take me long to put up a couple in here if you'd like." His voice trails off, the confidence in his offer wavering.

"Sure, if it'd make you feel better. It is your building after all." I shrug him off, taking a sip of my tea, hoping he'll buy my nonchalant attitude. Though deep down inside, I'm thankful for the offer. The fact that Frank made it to my front door undetected has been making me restless.

"Great, you can never be too cautious," Alex says, opening the box, pulling the cameras out. "I've seen a few things on the news recently, so I thought I'd put more of these up."

"Right, I'm sure if someone broke in, repairs on the building would be expensive." I pause, setting my cup of tea down on the counter, now standing only a few inches from Alex as he keeps his focus on the cameras.

He hums mindlessly. "Yeah, exactly."

My chest tightens at his confirmation that his only concern seems to be the building and not necessarily the people inhabiting it.

I leave it at that as I watch him install three cameras in my apartment. One in the corner of the kitchen, one in the corner of the dining room, and one in the living room.

When Alex approaches my bedroom with the last camera in hand, I interrupt his workflow. "I don't think so."

He looks back over his shoulder at me, a smirk overtaking his face. “What? Afraid another window situation will happen, but I’ll have the evidence this time?”

“No, I don’t trust you not to have that camera feed posted up on whatever flat-screen TV you have in your apartment over there.” I point in the direction of his apartment that shares a wall with mine.

He scoffs, then sets the camera down on a box near my bedroom door. “Fine, but when you eventually change your mind, all you have to do is plug it in, and it’ll work.”

“I won’t.” I take a step toward the front door. “You ready?” I say, perking up my voice. I’m actually looking forward to my training session today. Working out some of my pent-up aggression might improve my sleep schedule, since I barely slept a wink last night.

Alex nods, trailing me out the door, making sure to check the locks before following me down the stairs.

Halfway through the training session, I can’t catch my breath. Alex is pushing me harder than he has before today, more focused than I’ve ever seen him and I can’t figure out why.

“Harder,” he says, slapping the punching bag he’s standing behind as I pull my glove, ready to throw another punch.

I drive force through my arm, letting the glove connect with the bag once again as I’ve done repeatedly for the past ten minutes. Alex only lets out a disappointed sigh when I do.

“What?” I bite out.

“You should be hitting it hard enough that I actually have to work to keep the bag in place. Now c’mon.” He slaps the bag again. “Hit it as hard as you can.”

I punch the bag harder, my irritation with Alex’s focus growing stronger. I wanted to learn a few self-defense moves, not train to be the next MMA fighter.

“Better, but it still needs to be harder.” I punch the bag again, repeating the combo he has me working on. “Don’t lose form, c’mon. Again,” he says, eyes focused on my gloved hands.

His tone is firm, one I've heard him use on occasion with other clients when I've caught glimpses of his sessions, but never with me. Somewhere between the last session and this one, he's become more determined to make me into his next fighting champion.

If I didn't know any better, I'd say he was actually getting frustrated with me.

Thankfully, the gym is sparse this morning with only Tiffany working the front desk, and she's usually scrolling on her phone in the mornings anyway.

I hit the combo again, this time as hard as I can, only for Alex to respond with "Harder."

That's the final straw. My blood boiling, I use my anger to hit the combo harder than I thought I could. Focusing on the bag, I sidestep, bring my leg up, and land a forceful kick to its side, my heel colliding with the bag. The force that runs through my legs sends the bag flying. Alex, standing behind the bag, is thrown off balance, his ass hitting the mat before I can properly catch my breath.

He looks up at me, clearly pleased with the force in which I used, but my blood is still raging. Alex stands as I'm removing my gloves, making my way to the nearby bench for my water bottle.

"That's the power I'm looking for," Alex says beside me. I take a long swig of my water, still working to catch my breath.

Breathless, my voice shaking, I turn to him. "What the fuck is your problem today?"

His eyes go wide. "My problem?"

"Yeah, your problem." I sigh, still working to catch my breath. When he remains steady, it only irritates me more.

"I've been taking it easy on you. I've decided you're ready for some real training," he says it so matter-of-factly as though this was the agreed-upon plan all along.

"I was only looking for a few self-defense tips, not a full lesson on how to fight. I don't need to know any of this shit. I'm hitting more than hard enough." I wave my hand out at the area around us, my aggravation needing a place to go.

Something dark passes through his gaze, his jaw ticking again. He takes a step toward me, his tone seething with irritation. "You want to know why I fight, Beth? For protection. It's a vital skill to have and one you can't

properly perform if you aren't *hitting hard enough*. I thought someone in your situation would appreciate the push."

I'm taken aback by his forwardness. "*My situation?* What do you know about my situation?"

"A lot more than you would think. My parents dying isn't the only fucked-up thing that happened in my childhood. I wish you'd take this more seriously." He sighs, the dark expression in his eyes now replaced with worry.

"I am taking this seriously. I'm here, aren't I?" I throw my hand out to my side. He can't possibly know the details of "my situation" off one note. For all he knows, that could've been left by an old friend of mine as an inside joke.

There's a stale moment of pause that passes between us before he says, "Session is over. We'll pick back up when you're willing to put in actual work." He turns his back toward me, picking up my gloves from the bench and taking them to their rightful cubby on the other side of the punching bag.

Not interested in hearing what he has to say next, I grab my keys and head out through the back room of his gym. I leave the door to the stairwell open as I stomp up the stairs, hoping he hears how angry I am with him.

Once inside my apartment, I take the time to shower, eat a light breakfast, and force myself to read a chapter before I put my book to the side and sit in my rage.

Recently, I made the decision to close my bookstore to the public on Sundays. I wasn't getting the foot traffic I needed, and I figured it'd give me a day to relax, recharge, and hopefully find ways to drum up new business.

As I sit in my reading chair, staring at my empty bookshelves, I'm faced with the reality that I have no idea what I'm doing. Alex and I usually train on Sundays, which take up a good chunk of the morning, but considering this session was cut short, I'm left with extra time I'm unsure of what to do with.

I pick up my book three more times before I decide I'm too pent-up to focus on anything other than my current situation. Taking a look around my apartment, I'm moments away from falling into a deep self-pity party before my eyes land on the camera near my bedroom door. The one Alex never plugged in.

I'm not sure what got into Alex this morning, but maybe he's as pent-up as I am. Maybe he needs to be taught a lesson for pushing me so hard in today's session.

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ALEX

Once I cleaned up from my training session with Beth, I made my way back to my office. The small room is tucked away in the back room of my gym. I've tried to distract myself with mountains of paperwork as Tiffany handles foot traffic for the rest of the day.

In an effort not to be disturbed, I've closed the door and shut the blinds covering the small window carved into the wood. I'm hoping this will allow myself time to focus on my work and get past this morning's spat. I was able to get a couple of new clients in the past few weeks. It's nothing compared to the business I used to see here, but it's a start.

Hopefully these clients will take training more seriously than Beth decided to today.

It wasn't my intention to get so frustrated with her, but I couldn't help it. Knowing how to fight doesn't mean shit if you don't know how to hit *hard* and use force behind your punches.

I'm not going to pretend that I didn't see something that I did. Most would call me observant. My brothers would call me obsessive. I've noticed the notes; I've noticed the look in her eyes and the way she freezes under my hold when we're training.

Beth is scared, much in the same way I was when I was a kid. Despite that, though, I can see the fire in her. All it's going to take is a little ignition for her to reach her full potential. For her to snap out of her freeze response. The same way that I did.

When I read that note over her shoulder the other night, I wanted to do nothing more than find the person responsible. I'd assume the person the note was referring to was me, but I don't give a fuck. What I care about is how quickly Beth pulled back afterward. She's never going to open up to me if this continues.

I thought that taking her training more seriously would help increase her confidence and strengthen her ability to handle whatever she has going on. As I sit alone at my desk, I'm afraid my plan only pushed her away further.

I'm working on my new clients' training plans when my phone pings with a notification. Unlocking the screen, a new camera alert pops up, indicating a new connection to the surveillance app.

That didn't take her long.

Curious, I pull up the camera feeds on my laptop and notice a new feed labeled "Bedroom." The same label I used for the camera that I had left by Beth's bedroom door.

Sure enough, a feed of her bedroom pops up, the side of her bed dead center in frame. I pop in one of my earbuds, and a rustling sound comes from the other end.

"I knew you'd watch me." Beth's laughter sounds through my earbud as she speaks into the camera, out of frame.

After seeing the note left on the front door of her apartment, of all places, the first thing I did when I got back to my apartment was order new cameras. Knowing I would have to put some in her apartment for added security, I specifically selected the ones with a light that indicates when someone is watching the feed.

I like to tell myself it was for her comfort, but I know it was more so for the fact that I knew she'd call me on my shit when my tendencies started to lean a little too obsessive.

I continue watching, waiting to see what her plan is. After all, she plugged the camera in for a reason.

I'm leaning back in my office chair when she finally comes into frame. Her presence makes me jolt forward, bringing my laptop closer to me. I glance at my office blinds, ensuring they are closed along with my door as my eyes drift back to the screen in front of me.

She's wearing the sexiest red lingerie I've ever seen on a woman. The bra perfectly hugs her shapely breasts, the lace fabric doing nothing to hide her deliciously pink nipples from view. The matching underwear and lace

robe leave nothing to the imagination as they hang off each thick curve of her body.

Blood rushes to my cock with an unmatched urgency at the sight of her on my screen as she captures my full attention.

When she doesn't say anything, I grab my phone and type out a text.

ALEX

What the fuck do you think you're doing?

I watch as she grabs her phone from her bed, delicately perching her perfect body on the edge of the mattress. Her lips curve into a slow smile as she reads my text.

Looking at the camera, she responds, "Keep watching and find out." The smirk she gives me has me readjusting my cock in my sweatpants as it aches to be sprung free.

She reaches for something out of frame, her breasts almost slipping free of her bra when she does so. The sight causes me to reach down and grip my own cock in an effort to relieve the building ache.

The midday sun accentuates the tattoos adorning her body. The mix of flowers and stars that cover the side of her hip and thigh, the two delicate vines that decorate her collarbones, and even the small moon that sits right in the nook of her hip, above her thigh. That one is my second favorite, to the one on her spine she's so rudely hiding from me.

Leaning back on the bed, she brings her toy into frame. The same one she used the morning I heard her moan my name. When she spreads her legs, I'm given the best gift of all.

Her lingerie is split directly down the center, giving me a full view of exactly how wet she already is.

ALEX

Fuck, you're glistening baby.

It's all I can type before I have to put a hand on my cock again. Reading my text, she smiles as she stares directly into the camera. Slowly, she runs a single finger up her core before bringing it to her lips, tasting herself completely.

I'm unmoving in my seat as I selfishly take in the show she's so exquisitely putting on for me.

After she's licked herself clean, she takes the toy she holds in her other hand, running it up and down her center a few times, fully coating it in her own arousal. I watch as she brings another hand to her breast, pinching her nipple, letting herself get lost in the moment.

When she looks back at the camera, a brown strand of hair falls in front of her face, her expression lustful as she says, "I hope I can take all of this. It's so much bigger than you." The lie slips easily from her lips.

ALEX

Watch your fucking mouth.

You know damn well I'm twice the size.

If she's going to tease me like this, I can do the same. Pulling my sweatpants down just enough to spring my cock free, I snap a photo. Precum has already begun building at the tip of my cock, Beth's hold on me nowhere near slipping. Hitting send, I tuck my cock back into my sweatpants as I watch her open my most recent photo.

It's faint, but I catch the subtle "fuck" she breathes out when she taps on her phone. Her eyes don't leave the photo as she slowly thrusts the toy inside herself. She pumps it in and out, her eyes glossing over as she loses herself to the feeling. Looking at my photo, she's imagining it's me.

ALEX

You can say my name again, baby.

Don't worry, the window's shut this time.

She sets the phone down on the bed next to her as she looks into the camera again. "You wish," she says.

Fuck, she's stunning like this. In these moments, when it's her and me, the world around us seems to fade. I know she feels it too because it's the only time she allows me to chip away at her walls, brick by brick.

I know what she's doing. Sex is her mask as much as humor and charm are mine. I'm willing to play whatever game she wants if it means getting closer to her. Getting closer to the truth of what she's been dealing with.

ALEX

Show me how you'd suck my cock.

Her response is melodic through my headphones. “Oh, so you’re giving me orders now?”

ALEX

You love it when I give you orders.

“Love is a strong word.” She scoffs, although she still brings the toy to her mouth. Her round pink lips curve around the toy as she begins to suck, tasting herself once again. I grip the edge of the table, breathing through the sensations flooding my body.

I could come in my pants at the sight of her like this, and it takes every ounce of my control to hold myself back from finishing here and now, without even touching myself.

But I have plans for her once she’s done with her show.

When the toy is licked clean, she brings it back down to her center, and I watch as her muscles expand around the toy, her arousal spreading to her inner thighs as she works it in and out of herself the way she likes.

She hits a switch, the faint sound of vibration adding to the symphony of her soft moans. Her other hand reaches toward her clit as she stares down at her phone on the bed, her breathing becoming more erratic as she stares at the photo I sent her.

She’s chasing her orgasm, and she’s doing it fast. Faster than I was prepared for.

ALEX

You brat.

No coming until I get up there.

She lets out a moan, and I can tell she’s getting close. Closing my laptop, I pull up the feed on my phone, my headphones automatically connecting to the feed again just as my name slips past her lips.

That’s about all I can take. I’m watching her hips writhe under her own hands as I continue to type out more messages, making my way out of my office through the door leading to the back stairwell.

ALEX

Don’t.

You.

Dare.

Come.

I'm taking the stairs two at a time as I watch her, my name slipping from her mouth more than once as she continues to touch herself for me.

When I reach her door, I waste no time, pounding on it. I call her name, begging for her to let me inside, but she doesn't budge. My left hand grips the edge of the doorframe, my cock threatening to explode from the show I'm witnessing.

ALEX

Let me in.

My forehead rests against her door as I watch the feed, waiting for her to move, but she doesn't. She clicks another button on the toy, upping the vibration, the hand on her clit moving with more precision as she chases her orgasm.

I knock again, but there's no answer. Before I know it, she's coming. My name explodes from her lips the same way it did so many mornings ago. Her body contorts with pleasure, her core throbbing against the toy as she reaches the ultimate high.

I stand there, leaning against her door, my cock throbbing in pain at the sight of Beth pleasuring herself. My grip on the doorframe only loosens when she moves out of view of the camera.

I place my phone in my pocket as I wait for her to open the door. Waiting for what feels like an eternity, the door handle finally moves. The door swings open shortly after, with a faint squeak sounding from the hinges.

"Oh, hey Alex, what's up?" I don't allow her to say anything more before I'm pushing my way inside her apartment, grabbing her by the waist.

My foot comes in contact with the door, kicking it closed with force before my hand latches the deadbolt behind me. My breathing comes heavy when my attention is turned back in her direction, lifting her as she wraps her legs around my hips. My hand slides to the back of her head for protection when I slam her back against the wall next to the front door.

She's laughing when my lips connect with hers. My tongue draws out the last of her amusement as she intertwines her tongue with mine. Pressing against her, I'm desperate for relief from my cock that's aching to find its home inside her.

Adjusting my hands on her ass, I coat my fingers with the remnants of her orgasm on the insides of her thighs. I'm sent over the edge. Without wasting time, I yank my sweatpants down, lifting her higher for a moment as I do to let my cock free of its prison. Both my hands inch closer to her center, my fingers finding the soaking wet edges of her core as I spread her wide. She moans into my mouth, and it's all the confirmation I need to line my cock up with her entrance and push inside her.

She cries out at the same time a grunt releases from my lips, her warmth coating me entirely, my cock finally finding relief.

After the initial shock, I stay fully sheathed inside her when I land a firm smack to her ass cheek. "Don't you ever disobey me again," I say, my voice rough.

She smiles, as her blue eyes darken. "But your punishments always feel so good." She wiggles her hips in my hold, and I'm forced to take a deep breath in an effort not to unload inside her at the smallest movement.

When she squeezes around me, I set her on her feet, her back still connected with the wall. I've only slipped free of her halfway, and the sight of our connection has me cursing under my breath.

When she looks at our connection, her mouth splitting open, an idea begins to form in my mind.

Lifting her chin, I plant a kiss on her lips before whispering, "Get on your knees."

She smiles before shaking her head. My heart rate increases at her playfulness. I could never have dreamed of a woman as impeccable as Beth.

Stepping away, breaking our connection, I make my way to her reading chair in the living room. I lose my shirt and my pants in the process. Wasting no time, I turn the chair to face Beth, descending into the green plush material. My eyes don't leave Beth's as I watch her eyes track my hips, something dark overtaking her gaze.

She hasn't moved from the wall, her gaze locked in on my cock as it stands tall. I spread my legs wider, admiring her arousal that has fully coated me, before I take my thumb and run it along my length. She watches as I bring my thumb to my mouth, licking it clean.

By the look on her face, she doesn't care so much for the taste of her own medicine.

"I said..." My voice is calm but commanding. "Get. On. Your. Knees."

With only the smallest adjustment of her shoulders, the lace robe she's wearing slides off her body gracefully, falling to the floor. It exposes even more of her curves in the afternoon light filtering in through the sheer curtains she's hung on the windows.

Her striking blue eyes lock in on mine as she lowers herself to her knees. She doesn't say a word as she waits for my next command.

"Crawl."

Her eyes widen, the blue of her irises deepening as heat overwhelms her gaze. My chest rises and falls aggressively as I wait for her to move. Waiting to see if she'll do what she's been told.

When she rests her hands on the floor, my cock pulses with need. Her breasts hang heavy in the red lace fabric that covers them, her nipples pointed sharp, begging to be licked. Her heavy gaze stays locked in on my cock as it flexes with each new step she takes toward me.

When she reaches me, a small shiver is sent down my spine as she traces a hand up my calf and across my thigh, before resting there.

I can't help myself from touching her. I reach down to grab her face, bending to plant another kiss on her lips before whispering, "Now show me how pretty you are when you suck my cock."

My left hand moves from her cheek to the back of her head, gathering her hair with the motion into a makeshift ponytail as she lowers her lips to the tip of my cock.

One long lick from the base to the tip, and my eyes roll to the back of my head. She continues to lick and kiss up my cock before finally taking me into her mouth.

Sucking on the tip, my free hand grips the edge of the chair as my length strains from the building orgasm coursing through my body. She's barely touched me, and I'm ready to burst.

Inch by pleasurable inch, she takes me farther into her mouth, slowly bobbing her head as she does. Then she does something no other woman has been able to before, given my size. She takes me all the way, the tip of my cock hitting the back of her throat as she holds me there for a few seconds, before pulling away and letting me go with a pop from her lips.

The sensation is too much, and I'm desperate to be inside her again.

I pull her up onto me, her legs tucking into the space on either side of my thighs, my hands resting comfortably on her hips as she hovers above my cock.

“Beth, you need to sit down before I lose my shit,” I all but growl at her, unable to take any more teasing.

One of her hands wraps around my cock as she positions herself, lining me up to her opening. Her hands find my shoulders as she begins to lower herself onto me ever so slowly.

Losing all patience, I tighten my grip on her hips, surely leaving bruises in the process. Her mouth falls open in a sense of pleasure when I do. I slam her down onto me, fully seating myself into her deeper than before.

“Alex,” she cries.

“I’ll never get sick of hearing you say my name,” I say.

She begins to move her hips as she works to chase another orgasm, her hair falling onto her shoulders as one of her bra straps falls, exposing one of her breasts.

She looks thoroughly debauched, and I’m not even done with her yet.

Lifting her hips, I slam her down on me again, repeating the pattern until she takes control. She moves on me in a way that begins driving us both mad.

Our hands explore each other’s body in a frantic effort to memorize the curves and dips of one another.

Finding her breasts, I cup each one as I lightly pinch her nipples between my forefinger and thumb. My mouth finds the breast that’s free of the red lace as I swirl my tongue around it, before sucking it into my mouth. She tugs on my hair in response, the sting adding to the overwhelming sensations flowing through my body.

“Fuck, Alex, I’m—” She doesn’t have to finish her sentence for me to understand.

My thumb finds her clit, moving in slow circles as she continues to move her hips on me, sliding up and down my cock in a rhythm that’s sure to make me obsessed with her forever.

She begins to tighten around my cock, the building orgasm in the base of my spine begging for me to release it. Though there’s one final thing I need confirmed before we both dive off the edge. After all, I can only get her to tell the truth when she’s in this state.

“Admit that you love spending time with me.” My pressure on her clit lightens as I slow down our pace, preventing her from reaching her orgasm. The whimper that’s released from her lips sends a jolt of pleasure through me as I throb inside her.

She shakes her head, bucking her hips, trying to chase her release on her own. My grip on her hip tightens, stalling her movements.

“Admit it. Then you get to come.” My voice is strained from my own withheld orgasm.

She looks at me, cheeks flushed, her eyes filled with heat and something else I can’t place.

“I—” she starts, and I give her a few circles of harder pressure on her clit, sucking her nipple into my mouth again as I encourage her to confess what we both know to be true.

“That’s it, baby. You’re so close,” I say against her chest, her breasts engulfing my vision, making it harder to hold back my own release.

“I love spending time with you. I fucking love it, okay?” Her confession leaves her breathless as I wrap an arm around her waist. My smile spreads wide when I give her exactly what she needs, circling her clit with expert precision, coaxing her to the edge.

She loses herself, her back arching into my arm as I catch her from falling off me. Holding her to me, I chase her orgasm with my own, unloading inside her as we fall off the cliff together.

“Fuck, baby, I love it too,” I grit out as I explode inside her, her muscles tightening around my cock and draining me for all I’m worth.

We ride the aftershocks together, Beth still fully seated on me as we do. She buries her head deep into my neck, placing gentle kisses on my shoulder and collarbone as she takes her time coming back to reality.

My fingers run through her hair as I hold her against me. “Let me cook you dinner,” I say in an attempt to make up for the other night.

Her kisses stop, and she goes stiff in my arms, slowly sitting up. Her previous look of pleasure has morphed into one of pain.

She stands, chilling me, leaving me empty in her absence.

Taking a few steps back, she holds herself as though she’s trying to warm her body. “I can’t,” she says softly.

I stand, taking a step to meet her where she’s at, but she takes a step back in tandem with mine. I stop. “Beth, talk to me. What’s going on?”

“Nothing, I just can’t have dinner with you tonight.” She’s looking at the floor as she says the words, like looking my way would hurt her more than she’s hurting me at this moment.

I grab my sweatpants and slip them on, confused by her sudden need to pull away from me after I thought we were finally making progress. A

hollowness forms in my chest.

I don't bother to grab my discarded shirt or say a word before leaving her apartment and latching the door behind me.

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BETH

Almost two weeks since Alex left me standing in my apartment after the most mind-blowing sex of my life. I can't blame him for leaving. Turning him down for dinner was the last thing I wanted to do, but the moment he asked me the question, my mind flashed back to Frank's note, and I was too afraid to agree.

I can't bring myself to put him in danger.

Lying in bed, I let the cool night air waft in through the cracked window. My body cools, a gust of wind picking up outside and blanketing me with a chill. Only the small lamp on my bedside table lights my surroundings as I stare at the notes in my hands, trying to make sense of it all. Trying to figure out a way I can explain this to Alex without him getting involved. Without Frank finding out.

Why won't he leave me alone?

Out of the corner of my eye, the light on the camera I left propped on my dresser turns on. The same way it's done every night since Alex left me alone in my apartment. The first night, as I lay in bed, I was contemplating whether to unplug it when the light turned on for the first time. Only for a few seconds, as though he was making sure I was okay. Making sure I was safe.

Although I might be exaggerating that last part.

I watch the light on the camera as it stays on, a few seconds longer tonight than on previous nights. I don't say anything. I don't move. I watch

as Alex watches over me from the other side of the bedroom wall we share.

The moment is fleeting as the small blue light is snuffed out, leaving me alone with my own thoughts once again.

The old flooring in my childhood home creaks beneath my footsteps, my heart pumping as I race to make it to my bedroom. Holes in the drywall decorate the hallway, and I narrowly avoid a broken picture frame with my bare feet, stepping on a small shard of glass in my haste. I push past the pain as I make my way down the hallway.

Frank booms after me, whiskey bottle in hand. “You little piece of shit, get back here.” I keep my pace, hoping I’ll make it to my bedroom before he can catch me.

I’m running slower than usual, the hallway appearing to lengthen as I put all my effort into running faster. A sigh escapes me when I finally make it to my door, gasping for air as I catch my breath. Slamming the door shut, I secure a chair underneath the doorknob.

I watch, limbs shaking, as the doorknob begins to turn. Frank jiggles it from the other side. The door shakes as he begins to bang on it repeatedly. I stand motionless in the middle of my bedroom, my eyes locked in on the door. I stay frozen as I watch the door break open. The chair flies across the room, narrowly missing my head.

Two hands grab my arms, gripping with a searing pain that burns through my skin beneath the pressure.

I try to scream for help, but I’m paralyzed, my body unable to make but a whisper of a sound.

“Beth...” My name sounds faintly through the air, my heart banging against my rib cage.

“Beth... you’re okay, baby... I got you...” the familiar voice coos in my ear. A soft, gentle touch replaces the burning sensation in my arms as I’m slowly brought to wake.

My blankets lay heavy along my body, taking more effort than I expect to throw them off me so I can catch my breath. When I finally open my eyes, Alex comes into view, sitting on the edge of my bed, hands on either

side of my arms. His fingers brush up and down my triceps as he calmly waits for me to awaken.

Once my brain recognizes that I'm far from my childhood home, tears spring from my eyes. My arms almost give out on me when I work to push my numb body into a sitting position.

Once I do, I collapse into Alex, squeezing my arms around his waist as he gently runs his fingers through my hair. He sits there quietly as I let what's been building inside me out through my tears.

The nightmare was merely a memory. One I remember all too well. Benny had launched a foam arrow in the living room. It hit Mom's vase of flowers, shattering it on the floor. Frank came stomping in through the kitchen.

Taking the blame was never something I had to think twice about. I couldn't bear to watch Benny take a beating the same way I did. Which only happened when Mom worked overnight, and Frank found himself halfway through a bottle of liquor. Unfortunately for me, that was most nights.

When my tears eventually fade, Alex pulls back only briefly to hand me the glass of water sitting on my bedside table. He urges me to take a sip, and I do. The water works wonders, calming my body from the inside.

"Are you okay?" he asks softly, looking at me with a pain in his eyes I've never seen before.

I nod my head slowly, the words of what's been going on sitting in the back of my throat but unable to escape.

"Do you want to tell me what's been going on?" The question is soft, as he brushes a loose strand of hair from my face.

I try to open my mouth, but no words come out. The answer to the question is still lodged in my throat.

He grabs my hand, squeezing gently, his mouth opening as he begins to speak, but he's cut off. The loud sound of glass shattering booms from beneath my bedroom, amplified by my open window.

My hand tightens around Alex's moments before he stands to look outside. He turns to me. "Stay here." The command is sharp, firm, leaving no room for disagreement when he rushes out of my room, followed by the sound of my apartment door closing behind him.

I'm left frozen in bed before I catch sight of the notes I fell asleep next to. The note threatening Alex with harm comes into view, my once numb

body buzzing to life with adrenaline.

My limbs move quickly to spring me out of bed. Grabbing my steel baseball bat from the corner of my room, I throw on my slides and make my way out of my apartment on shaking legs.

I pause before descending the steps, listening closely for any lingering threat below. The building is quiet, so I press on, moving slowly down the steps and through the open door that leads into the back room of my bookstore.

The hand on my baseball bat tightens when I finally reach my bookstore, one of the large windows now shattered across the floor, pieces of glass covering the books that rest on the table in front of it, a few of them having fallen to the floor in the damage.

I gasp at the sight as Alex stands there, assessing the situation. He whips his head back at me, a look of shock overcoming his face before his eyebrows pinch together and his mouth forms a straight line.

“I told you to stay put.” His voice lowers, an anger seething through his words. Though I don’t think the anger is directed toward me when I notice his grip tighten around the rock in his hand. And the note that’s attached to it.

“Let me see that,” I say, taking a step toward Alex. I rest my bat against the front counter and hold out my hand to Alex as I make my way over to him.

He holds it behind his back, taking a step away. Now it’s my turn to be angry.

“Alex, let me see it.” My voice is firm, unwavering, despite the adrenaline still coursing through my veins.

We stand at a stalemate, his blue eyes searching mine for answers that he won’t find. Eventually, I win our standoff, and he hands the note to me.

My worst thoughts come to life as I read the note.

WHAT'D I SAY ABOUT NEW FRIENDS?

“Tell me what’s going on, Beth. I can help you.” Alex does his best to hide the frustration in his voice, but I can feel it seeping through each word.

“No, you can’t. This is nothing.” I drop the rock, crumpling the note in my hand, unable to look at it any longer.

I was so close to telling him the truth tonight. This note serves as a reminder that I made the correct decision in keeping this from him. I can

admit that Alex has grown on me. But for his safety, I can't admit that *to him*.

"Beth, *please*, I'm begging you..." His voice strains, a glint of pain in his eyes, caught in the moonlight filtering through the broken window.

The pain in his eyes mirrors my own.

"Baby, I want to keep you safe..." He reaches for me, but I reel back.

He may not understand, but I'm doing the same thing for him. Only the distance between us will keep him safe.

"I don't need your protection." I lace a bite into my tone, causing an ache to spread in my chest.

"Don't do this, Beth. Don't pull away from me," he urges. Though I don't miss the small crack in his voice as he says the words.

"Pull away from you? You forced yourself into my life to the point of breaking into my home in the middle of the night." I throw my hands up, hoping to put the focus on something other than the note still crumpled in my hand.

"That's not what happened, and you know it. I'm your landlord. I have a key for emergencies." His eyes darken, though his voice remains calm as mine rises.

"Oh, and tonight was an emergency?"

He's on me in an instant, hands grabbing my waist, my body pressing against his as he fists his hand in the oversized T-shirt that hangs off my body. *His* T-shirt that he left in my apartment. The one I haven't been able to take off.

"You were writhing in pain, Beth. I didn't need to check the cameras because I could hear you through my bedroom wall, screaming for someone to help." Tears prick his eyes the same as my own, though his don't fall, unlike mine streaming down my cheeks. "Ask anything of me, anything at all, and I'll oblige. But *never* ask me to sit back and do nothing when you're in pain." He brings his lips to my cheeks, kissing away my tears. "I would die before I let any harm come to you."

I'm gripping his biceps, hanging on to him for dear life when his last words hit me square in the chest.

I would die before I let any harm come to you.

My worst fears are brought to life by his admission. Hearing that he'd so happily put himself in harm's way to protect me is why I refuse to let him help me.

I pull away from him, my heart icing over as his hands slip from my body.

“I need to clean up,” I say matter-of-factly as I stare out the broken window to the parking lot. Light begins to fill the sky as the sun rises over the horizon.

Alex sighs, his shoulders slumping over in a way that tells me he’s too tired to continue the conversation. Another back-and-forth I’ve successfully won between us, though I can’t say victory feels good this time around.

“I’ll call Roman. We’ll get this cleaned up and fixed today. Go back upstairs, and I’ll handle it.” He doesn’t look at me when he asks me to leave.

There’s no energy left in my body to fight to stay. So I do what he’s asked, and I head back upstairs to my apartment.

I don’t miss the tiny blue camera lights that follow me on my path, or the light that stays on in my living room as I curl up in my reading chair for the remainder of the early morning.

ALEX

Only a day later, and I'm standing outside Beth's bookshop with Roman and Theo at my side. Leo would've been here if he wasn't on some business trip. He's seemed preoccupied lately, and if I didn't know him better, I'd say he was hiding something. Though that's uncharacteristic for Leo if he was. Either way, it's a problem for another day.

Today is the day I get this plywood out and the new window put in. A new window that cost me a fortune and a half, given the fact that I had to overnight it to make sure Beth had a properly secured building as soon as possible. I wasn't going to risk her safety to save myself money.

Sienna's already made her way inside, visiting with Beth. I'm happy she was able to stop by today. Graham has had her so busy, she's only made it a few times since the opening, and her visits have been brief. Other than Sienna and Ben, I'm not sure Beth has anyone else. She's clearly dealing with something, and if I can't get it out of her, I hope Sienna can.

"How much did this cost you?" Theo asks, looking at the new window propped against the side of the building.

"Too fucking much," I sigh, unsure if I should tell my brothers the details of what's been going on. "I got it on a payment plan at least."

"You need help with the payments? Business is doing well. I could—" I stop Roman with a lift of my hand.

“If you so much as think about giving me money, I’ll throw your ass in the ring,” I say, only half joking.

Roman nods his understanding before asking, “How did this happen again?”

I slip my fingers through my work gloves as my brothers follow suit. “Some asshole threw a rock through the window.” I shrug, then motion to the wood indicating we should get to work.

We start by prying the plywood off the window. It ends up taking all three of us when it gets stuck and requires more force than necessary. In our mission to pry it off, it finally comes loose with one final tug, the force of our efforts making it fly out of our hands. It lands on the concrete with a loud thud.

Beth and Sienna jump from inside the bookstore, a small screech escaping both of them at the sound.

Turning to look through the opening, I make eye contact with Beth. “Sorry,” I say, wincing, trying my best to lace charm through my expression. To my displeasure, she doesn’t respond with her usual snarky remark. Instead, she says a simple, “It’s okay,” and goes back to talking with Sienna.

“What’s up with that?” Theo nods his head in Beth’s direction, after clocking the exchange.

Switching out a few of my tools on my belt with the ones Roman brought, I get to work on the window seal. Roman is helping me, and Theo is unpacking the window for install.

“Nothing,” I say, brushing off Theo’s question. I’m not exactly sure now is the time to get into what’s been going on between Beth and me.

“Does this have anything to do with why you’ve put up so many cameras?” Roman asks, intently focused on his work but still engaged in the conversation.

Theo agrees. “I was curious about those. Certainly way more than what was here when the bookstore opened.”

“Nothing wrong with added security.” I shrug.

“Especially when you have people throwing rocks through windows,” Roman adds.

Theo takes a step back to assess the window's opening. “I’m surprised you didn’t want to hire someone for this, as you did with the air-conditioning last summer, Alex.”

I stop working to look at my brother. “I don’t trust anyone else to do it right now.” Without thinking, I glance at Beth, an effort to check in. She’s already looking at me, her gaze dropping from mine the moment we meet.

She pushed me away the other night, not wanting anything to do with me. It had to have been because of the note again. This fucker getting between us is really starting to piss me off.

Though if she really didn’t want to see me, then why wouldn’t she turn off the cameras? She knows I’ve been watching her in her apartment. By the way she looks at the cameras, I know she’s spotted the blue lights. What I can’t figure out is why these notes are affecting her so strongly.

Our connection is undeniable, and our chemistry palpable. The all-consuming pull my soul has toward hers is only possible if she feels this too. The glimmer in her eyes when we first met was enough to reassure me this is something worth pursuing.

Fuck, my chest aches just looking at her.

“Holy shit,” Roman and Theo say in unison.

They’ve caught me red-handed staring at Beth for way longer than a landlord should be looking at his female tenant.

I whip my head back down to the work at hand, hoping my brothers will let it go. Though I have a feeling they won’t.

“You love her,” Theo whispers excitedly, pulling a chuckle from Roman.

I scoff, unable to find a retort to his statement.

“That wasn’t a no.” Theo lifts his nose, a smile spreading across his face as he stands tall triumphantly.

Roman chuckles again as he looks at me, responding with a simple, “Damn.”

Turning to my brothers so my back is toward Beth, in an effort to avoid her reading my lips, I say, “I don’t know anything about love. What I’m focused on is protection. She’s been getting these... notes. I haven’t read all of them, but the ones I have are creepy as shit. Someone’s fucking with her, and when I get my fucking hands on the fucker who thinks he can fuck with Beth, he has another fucking—”

“Breathe, Alex.” Roman’s voice is steady beside me, forming a tight huddle between Theo and me.

Taking a deep breath, I continue, “Sorry, you know how I feel about bullies.”

Theo and Roman nod; no further words are needed on the topic. The incident of my childhood was far too familiar to Roman, and the stories later told to Theo all too horrific for him to want to know the details.

“So what’s the plan, then?” Theo asks, in a serious and slightly worried tone.

“I was hoping Sienna could help with that. She’s like a sister to Beth. I figured at the very least, she could talk to her. God knows she won’t open up to me.”

“I’m glad I brought her with me, then. They’ve needed some time together,” Theo says, looking onward to Sienna. The love in his eyes is sickening at the moment.

“Maybe I’ll pick up some more gym days. I could use a bit of a cut after all that food we ate at the lake house this summer.” Roman says, “We missed you this year.” The last sentence comes out more timid than Roman usually is. A hint of sadness overwhelms his eyes but it’s gone in an instant. Linger only long enough for me to know he might be struggling more with his inner demons than any of us thought.

“You have a key. Come by whenever. This shit is getting worse, and I wouldn’t say no to backup. But Beth is delicate when it comes to this, so be subtle.”

Roman nods, the corners of his mouth ticking up into a smile.

She and Sienna are practically sisters, making her as much our family as Sienna is. Whether Beth wants the protection or not, she’s getting it from all of us.

BETH

“**T**he two of you seem to be getting along,” Sienna says. She’s perched on the front counter, her legs swinging back and forth as she watches the guys work. She looks to Theo with love in her eyes, while I struggle to keep my gaze anywhere but Alex’s direction.

“Barely.” I roll my eyes, a melancholy smile overtaking me at the thought of just how well, and not well, Alex and I have been getting along lately. His words repeat in my head again.

I would die before I let any harm come to you.

“Alright, spill it,” Sienna says, her forwardness making my mouth fall open in shock.

“Damn, one trip away with Theo and you come back a changed woman.” I chuckle.

She laughs with me. “I think it’s more so the break from work than anything else. Graham has me working nonstop. It was nice to get away for once. You could’ve come, you know.”

I wave my hand at her. “Nah, it’s not my place. I only went last year to help you, remember? Plus I have things to do here.”

She perks up a bit. “So business has been good?”

I wince. “Not exactly, but it’ll pick up soon, I’m sure. With the holidays coming up, I’m hoping gift shopping will save my finances for the year.”

Her eyebrows pinch in confusion. “Then what?”

I turn my body toward her, shoulders crouching forward of their own volition. My voice is quiet when I say, "He's out, Sienna."

She jumps off the counter. "He's what?" Her voice is loud, shock overcoming her tone. The level of her voice snaps the guy's attention to us in an instant.

"Talking about me again, sweetheart?" Alex says, a smirk coming over his face. It's the second time he's tried flirting with me, and I can't bring myself to do it back. Not if getting closer to him means harm coming to him. Not if he would willingly take it if it meant I was safe.

I don't so much as look at Alex as I grab Sienna's elbow lightly and tug her to the back room, creating more privacy for the two of us. And more comfort for my chest with Alex out of sight.

Her arms are crossed now, concern overtaking her face as she looks at me intensely.

"Frank's out. Benny told me when he was visiting." My voice is quiet as I get the words out.

Sienna's mouth falls open. "That was months ago, Beth. Why didn't you tell me before?"

"You had just started your new job. I didn't want to worry you. Especially not after everything I put you through last time." My mind drifts back to when Frank first got arrested. Benny was at a friend's house and Frank had beaten me so badly that I barely made it out of the house in time to get to Sienna's, thankful that she only lived a few blocks away. Her parents took one look at me and immediately called the police. When Frank showed up drunk off his ass a few minutes later, John decked him so hard he was knocked out on the front porch until the police arrived.

My mom played the damsel-in-distress card with the police, acting like she didn't know. She did. Benny and I always knew she did. She just didn't care.

I still had bruises by the time prom rolled around. Too embarrassed to wear the strapless dress I'd picked out weeks before, Sienna offered an alternative. So we spent the night in our dresses eating ice cream and watching movies from our early childhood until we passed out on her bedroom floor.

Tears spring to my eyes as I look at my friend. "I remember how much the trial affected your life. Your parents' lives. I didn't want you to have to deal with all of this again."

“Me?” Sienna’s voice is soft as she places a hand gently on my arm. “Beth, I’m worried about *you*, not myself. Have you told Alex anything?”

I look at her, surprised by the question. “What? No, why would I tell him?”

“Well...” She waits for me to interject, but I don’t, so she continues, “With all the added cameras, it seems like at least one of you is paranoid, and no offense, but you’ve never been the best with technology.”

I chuckle. “Yeah, Alex put them up. But he’s a freak, and I think he just wanted to watch me.”

She levels me with a look at my sad attempt at deflection, asking, “Is there something more going on? Has Frank tried to contact you since he’s been out?”

I pause, thinking through my response. Frank is watching me. I don’t know how, but he clearly is if he knows about Alex. I can’t let him go after Sienna too. He might be scared of John, but if he’s drunk enough, that won’t stop him.

Fighting my conscience, I make the decision to lie to my friend. “No, it’s nothing. Nothing I can’t handle at least.” I swallow the tears behind my eyes, straightening out my shoulders. Hoping she’ll buy my fake confidence and we can move on from this.

She nods. “Alright, but tell me the instant anything happens. Or try opening up to Alex. He seems to care about you. Either way, I’m here for you.” She glances out into the bookshop, where the men are still working to fix the broken window. “We all are.”

That’s what I’m afraid of.

BETH

A few weeks have passed since my window was fixed, and I haven't heard from Alex. Not that I expect him to reach out to me given our last conversation, but it's surprising. The tiny blue light still turns on at night when the sun goes down, but this time, the light doesn't turn off like before.

Almost as if he's watching me from a distance, in case I need his help again.

I won't. I can't.

I'm sitting in my reading chair, staring blankly at page eleven of the book I started reading when I first moved in, when my mind keeps wandering to my conversation with Sienna.

Maybe it wouldn't be such a bad thing to tell Alex the basics. Not giving any details away or Frank's name by any means, but enough to get him to stop pressing the issue so much. If he stops, then maybe Frank won't see him as a threat anymore. Then maybe we can go back to what we were.

I'm not exactly sure what that was, but I miss him. Weeks without training, without his snarky remarks, his hands on my body, watching how gently he interacts with the people who visit his gym, is too long a time to go without seeing him.

My leg bounces up and down, my heel repeatedly hitting the floor when my mind mulls over the idea of making my way to his apartment. I heard him get home an hour ago, and my inner turmoil followed shortly after.

It's a risk if I tell him, but it's also a risk if I don't.

My heart pulls in his direction too forcefully to ignore. I can't go another minute without seeing him, face-to-face, so I push forward. Grabbing my zip-up hoodie, I slip my arms through, the oversized material fitting comfortably over my leggings and Alex's T-shirt. The air outside has become nippy with the changing of the seasons, but I still can't bring myself to wear anything other than his T-shirt at night. I worry that if I wear something else, our connection will be forever severed.

Maybe that's for the best.

The voice in my head makes me pause, my hand only inches from the doorknob.

Maybe you shouldn't do this.

The voice becomes louder, but that pull in my chest returns, tugging me toward the door. My hand moves, unlocking the door and turning the knob fully before stepping out into the hallway.

With only a few hesitant steps, I'm in front of Alex's door. My hand raised, ready to knock, but my wrist pauses, unmoving. Still unsure of my choice to come over here.

It is late.

Another tug-of-war between my head and my heart. The more romantic of the two ultimately wins when my wrist moves, and I knock firmly on the hard wood surface.

There's no turning back now.

When Alex opens the door, it takes everything in me for my jaw not to hit the floor. Alex stands before me shirtless, in gray sweatpants. The sweats hanging low on his body, I can see every inch of his defined V-line point straight to the one thing I'm still not sure I'm fully equipped to handle.

His hair is tousled, like he's run his hand through it repeatedly tonight. A few of the dark strands are falling onto his forehead. He either got more attractive in the last few weeks or I forgot how beautiful he is.

The best part? The fucking *glasses*.

"You come over to stare at me all night, or did you need something?" Ouch. His tone packs a bite I wasn't prepared for, but I can't argue with his frustration in this situation.

"Uh, no, sorry." I'm flustered, so preoccupied with whether or not to come over here that I didn't think through what I was going to say. So many

things float through my head until I finally land on, “You wear glasses?” My tone is more breathless than I want it to be.

He opens the door wider, looking up at the ceiling as he waves his hand, ushering me into his apartment. He appears annoyed with my question but, like me, can’t say no to whatever apparent connection is between us.

Walking into his apartment, I’m hit with another surprise. The layout is the same as mine, only flipped, our living rooms and bedrooms sharing a wall. Moving to the kitchen island on the right, I take note of the noticeably nicer cabinets than mine, stained a dark walnut, with a black granite countertop I certainly don’t have. The dark hardwood flooring that runs throughout feels clean on my bare feet, without a crumb in sight.

Dark wood tones, black accents, and a touch of green added by a few plants throughout the apartment give the place a cozy feel I wasn’t expecting from Alex. A sense of safety comparable to what I feel in his arms washes over me as I stand in his apartment.

What catches me by surprise the most is the floor-to-ceiling bookshelves lining his living room walls, no TV to be found. All genres of books are stacked neatly on the shelves, his collection easily twice the size of mine, putting my unpacked boxes of books to shame.

I’m embarrassed he ever visited my apartment, given the state of his.

As I step farther into his apartment, I’m pulled in the direction of the stack of books on the kitchen counter, with a few pens and highlighters sitting next to them. Upon closer inspection, I notice they’re the books he bought from my store a few months ago. When I move to open one of the covers to take a peek inside, Alex’s tattooed hand covers mine, stopping it in motion.

“Is there a reason you stopped by?” His tone is still snippy, but his hand doesn’t budge.

I pull my hand away, shoving it into my sweatshirt pocket, trying to find the courage to begin this conversation.

“I haven’t heard from you in a while. I wanted to check if you were okay.” It’s a shitty start, but it’s all I could get off my tongue.

“If *I*’m okay? We’ve already been over this. *You*’re the one I’m worried about.” His voice cracks, and I take a small step back.

“I told you, I’m fine. I want to thank you for installing the new window so quickly. I haven’t had any more disturbances since, so there’s nothing to worry about.”

“C’mon Beth, you have to give me more than that. At least tell me why someone in your life is terrorizing you so badly that he’s hurting what’s mine.”

What’s his? Right, the window. He’s mentioned that before. That’s why he put up the cameras. I shouldn’t want him to mean something else by that, but I do.

“I’m sorry about the window. I don’t think an incident like that will happen again. I’ve spoken with Sienna, and I’m confident that I have the situation handled at the moment.”

He scoffs a laugh, moving to the living room to sit on the plush sectional placed parallel to the bookshelves. He pats the seat next to him, and I follow, taking a spot a few inches away from where he silently asked me to sit.

When Alex looks at me in the dim lighting of his living room, I finally notice how exhausted he looks. At least we have that in common.

“What do you want from me, Beth?” The exhaustion on his face seeps into his voice.

I sigh, slumping down on the couch. “I’m not sure...” I pause, letting a moment pass for him to interject. When he doesn’t, I’m forced to continue, “We were having fun. I want to have fun again.”

“I need you to tell me what’s going on first.” His words hit me straight to the chest. I can’t give him everything, not if I want to keep him safe.

Turning to him on the couch, I pull my leg up, his eyes dropping to my thighs before coming back to my face. A hint of pain crosses his irises before the exhaustion seeps back in. Maybe this wasn’t the best conversation to have late into the evening.

“There is someone... from my past. He’s a bad man, and he went to jail. He’s out now. The notes are nothing I can’t handle.” The words are forced, my tongue having to use all its effort to pull them out of the darkest parts of me.

He doesn’t look entirely pleased with my answer. His jaw ticks as he stares at me.

He’s up in an instant, moving behind the couch, as though he can’t sit still. “That’s not enough, Beth, and you know it.” Frustration takes over both of us, his chest heaving as mine does the same.

I stand, throwing my arms out at my sides. “That’s all I can give you, Alex. There’s nothing more to say. I have it handled.”

“Bullshit. I’ve seen the look on your face when you get these notes. The way you’re constantly looking over your shoulder. You have it anything but handled.” He crosses his arms, his tattooed muscles flexing. My eyes are unable to take it in even in the heat of the moment.

Rounding the couch, I stand in front of him, only inches apart. His toned chest sits at my eye level. I’m unable to help myself when I reach out and place my hand on the center of his chest. I’ve gone too long without his touch, and my hand ignites when his erratic heartbeat pulses under my fingertips.

Alex grabs my wrist, pulling it off his chest, with the gentle force he wields all too well. His other hand laces through the hair at the back of my neck, tugging to tilt my head up so I’m looking at him. Something dark overtakes his eyes as he stares into mine, his jaw ticking again.

“You have to give me something, Beth. At least tell me why you’re here.”

When he peers deep into my eyes, I have no choice but to give him the truth.

“Because I miss you.” The words come out hushed, unsure of how he will react. Unsure of how I’ll react to finally saying the words out loud.

His only response is to forcefully bring his lips to mine, tongues tangling with each other. He deepens the kiss, tugging on my hair to tilt my head for better access.

I kiss him back, finally coming to terms with my feelings for Alex.

BETH

Our tongues collide in a whirl of passion. My mind clears as his hands roam my body, skating up my shirt to touch my skin. He holds me so tightly that I can't tell where he ends and I begin.

Cold air hits me as soon as he pulls away, my mouth aching to touch his again. He tentatively reaches a hand up, grabbing at his glasses. I stop him before he can take them off, shaking my head ever so slightly.

"Keep them on," I say, pulling his hand away.

His eyebrows pinch together. "You don't mind?" He looks shocked that I would find him anything but heart-poundingly beautiful in his glasses. However, the small hint of lack of self-esteem I'm picking up in his eyes is all too familiar.

I place a gentle hand on his cheek, sure to maintain eye contact when I tell him, "Not at all. I actually find you quite breathtaking in them." The last part slips free of its own will, my hand faltering on his cheek.

He catches my wrist, placing a kiss to the inside of my palm, a smile overtaking his lips. When he looks at me, the lust in his eyes has returned, the blue of his irises almost nonexistent.

"Good, 'cause I can't see shit without them." He chuckles, and I smile with him.

There's the Alex I've been missing.

He pulls me into another kiss, caressing my body once more with his strong hands. Though when he kisses me this time, the way his tongue

gently begins to brush against mine, the soft lingering fingers on my neck, the way he hugs my body against his...

I place a hand on his chest, not yet ready to face what he's trying to tell me with his body language. I decide to go back to what's familiar and what I'm equipped to handle.

"Fuck me like you did before." I look up at him through my lashes, hoping he understands what I'm asking.

His jaw ticks as he stares down at me. "Like I did before?" His tone is sharp, pointed, like he's holding back his frustration.

I nod. "Rough and animalistic? That's what I came here for."

His eyebrows twitch together for a second, his lips forming a straight line, before a darkness takes over his presence. His eyes turn so black, there's no hint of blue left.

His right hand weaves through the back of my hair, yanking my head back as his left hand skates up my throat. The tattoo placed there decorates me so perfectly, as a necklace would.

He leans down, whispering in my ear as his hand lightly squeezes my throat. "Fine, Beth. You want rough? I'll give you rough."

He moves quickly, both of his hands grabbing beneath my ass, lifting me into his arms until my legs wrap around his waist. I'm quick to lose my zip-up hoodie, my body begging to be closer to his. His mouth goes straight to my neck, nipping and licking until he sets me down on the kitchen counter.

Pushing the books aside, he places a hand on the center of my chest, pushing until I'm lying on the counter. My spine cools as each vertebra hits the hard granite, my legs hanging off the edge.

His hands grasp the waistband of my leggings, and he pulls forcefully as he rips them off me, leaving me in only his T-shirt.

He wastes no time, kneeling so his lips are lined up with my center. One lick and my back is arching off the counter. My body missed him more than I realized.

He wraps his arm around my thigh, his fingers digging deep into my muscles, hard enough to leave bruises. The pain turns into pleasure when he licks my core again, flooding my lower stomach with heat.

I prop myself up on my elbow, running a hand through his hair. He looks up at me through his glasses, refusing to give me anything more than a few licks through my center.

“Alex, please, I need more.” I shamelessly beg.

With another hand gripping my hip, he bites my inner thigh, licking and kissing the pain after. The sensations cause another wave to rush through me as I’m brought so close to the edge, yet Alex refuses to give me enough to send me over.

He’s refusing to touch me, keeping his hands firmly placed on my hip and thigh, never giving me enough with his mouth. My core throbs with need as I watch him tease me, over and over again.

“Alex,” I warn through gritted teeth.

The smile he gives me in response is so devilish, it’s devastating.

He finally gives me what I need, all at once. Two fingers plunge into me at the same time as his mouth moves to suck on my clit. His movements are punishing, leaving no question in my mind that he’s frustrated with me.

“Fuck, Alex.” Within seconds, he has me screaming his name, bringing me so close to the edge only to stop seconds before an orgasm takes over.

“Let me come already, asshole.” My voice comes out frustrated, riding the edge of my orgasm, unable to finish due to his incessant teasing.

He pulls back, and a smacking sound flows through the air when his firm hand hits my clit. He stands tall, wasting no time to grab me by the neck and haul me into a sitting position. Even like this, he still towers over me.

“You’ll come when I want you to come.” His voice is deep, the words said against my mouth as my lips ache to touch his. He pulls back before they reach their destination.

“Follow me,” he says before walking away, leaving me sitting on the counter. I watch his back sway as he makes his way toward his bedroom.

I hop down from the counter, heat coursing through my body. My looming orgasm fills my body with an itching sensation, begging for me to follow him.

I hesitate.

I’ve never had a problem with sex in a bedroom before, but with Alex, something about this feels more intimate than he’s willing to let on. I know the game he’s playing.

He won’t quit until each and every one of my walls is torn down. I refuse to be that easy. Though the need coursing through my veins takes over all sense. I could as easily walk out the front door as I could walk through his bedroom door, both an equal distance from where I’m standing.

There's no reason I can't keep my walls up and still fuck Alex in his bedroom. I may have feelings for him, but those feelings are at war with the fact that I can't put him in danger. I can't risk Frank getting to him. This needs to just be sex between us. It doesn't matter how we feel. This can't go further than a physical connection.

For his safety and my heart's protection.

The voice in my head quiets when Alex yells from the other room, "You have three seconds to get your ass in here, or I'll drag you in here myself." My limbs shake with anticipation at his words, my arousal growing between my thighs.

I shove my feelings aside as I take a step toward his bedroom.

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ALEX

My cock strains as I watch Beth walk into my bedroom. An image I've imagined one too many times while touching myself over the past year.

She strolls in, still wearing my shirt, the hemline barely covering the place my mouth was only a few seconds ago. I've already lost my pants, standing before her naked, with my glasses still on.

Given my history with my glasses, I couldn't help but pull her in for a kiss when she said she liked them. They've never been my favorite part of myself. Yet all the names I was called as a kid vanished the moment she told me she thought I was breathtaking.

She knew what I was saying with my body the moment I kissed her. When she pulled back, trying to run scared again, I wanted nothing more than to punish her for the brat that she is. This game of cat and mouse we've been playing has grown old.

Getting her into my bedroom is the first step toward ending the game. Toward turning this into something real.

She wants it too. She's just too afraid to admit it.

I'm standing at the edge of my bed, watching her look around the room. The scowl on her face is more arousing than ever. If I didn't know any better, I'd say she was trying to avoid looking at my cock.

My bedroom matches the rest of the apartment. Having undergone renovations a couple of years ago, I went with a classic modern industrial

feel while still keeping things comfortable. My bed is neatly made, as I do every morning, the dark green pillows perfectly placed and accented by the dark wood headboard. Two matching end tables and a dresser sit opposite the end of the bed where I currently stand. A mirror hangs strategically above the dresser.

It's comfortable, simple, and not much to look at. Which is why it doesn't take Beth long for her eyes to land on my cock. It's throbbing, standing tall, with a bead of precum already forming at the head. The sight of her in my shirt makes my length throb with need.

She wanted rough, and that's exactly what I intend on giving her. With the way she keeps pulling away from me, she's due for a punishment anyway. Maybe afterward, she'll finally tell me what's going on.

"Come here." My voice is calm as I give out my commands. The scowl remains on her face, but she doesn't take long to stand before me.

"On your knees." Another command, and her lips part, begging me to kiss them. It takes everything in me not to kiss her when I say, "Now."

She lazily descends to the floor, her eyes never leaving mine. "Stick out your tongue," I command. She does as I say, as I tangle my fingers through her hair, getting a grip on the back of her head.

Beth like this is a sight to behold. Gripping the base of my length with my free hand, I wipe the head of my cock along her tongue, coating it in precum.

She stays perfectly still, but I don't miss the small moan she lets out the moment she tastes me. Reluctantly, I pull my cock off her tongue, her eyes dropping to my length standing heavy in front of her. Her throat bobs as she swallows what little of me I've left on her tongue.

Lifting her chin, I lean down to make my point clear, my voice softening as I say, "If it gets to be too much, tap my leg, and I'll stop. Got it?"

Her eyes glisten with shock briefly before her lustful haze takes over again as she responds, "Yes."

The second I have her agreement, I stand back up, the hand through her hair gripping ever so slightly as I line my cock up with her lips. She wastes no time opening her mouth and taking me in.

A groan slips free when my cock is warmed by her throat. Her grip on my hips is punishing, payback for all the times I've done the same to her.

Beth does something with her tongue I can't make out, but it ignites all the nerve endings in my body, my orgasm already building at the base of my spine. Knowing I won't last long, I change my grip.

My other hand meets the one on the back of her head. "Fuck, you're perfect." My breathing is harsh, Beth having an effect on me no phenomenon can name.

When she looks up at me through her lashes, her grip tightening on my hips, I move. Thrusting in and out of her mouth with a punishable force, I fuck her. Hard and rough, exactly the way she wanted it.

I slow my pace when she moves a hand off my hip, anticipating the light tap on my leg, but it never comes. Instead, she moves it between her own legs. The moment her hand is out of sight, she moans around my cock, and the vibrations send a lightning bolt of pleasure straight to my spine. The feeling forces me to thrust harder.

The harder I thrust, the harder she moans. Her grip on my hip is nowhere near as punishing as the grip I have on her hair.

"You're fucking beautiful like this." The compliment slips out. I'm already losing control.

One look at her arm and I can tell she's bringing herself closer to her orgasm. The image is all too arousing.

"Don't come." I let frustration seep into my voice. She's chasing her own orgasm as I fuck her mouth, holding my own back. I refuse to come until I'm inside her, when I can feel her release pulling mine out of me.

She moans more, and as her throat opens up, I go farther. When my cock hits the back of her throat, I'm close to being thrown off the edge. I pull back, letting my cock slip free of her lips with a pop.

The moment I do, she's screaming my name. "Oh god, Alex." Her back arches as she chases her own release.

Dropping to my knees, I catch her in time, my hand replacing hers as I rub circles around her clit, drawing her orgasm out for as long as I can before she's pushing me away. Too sensitive to take anymore.

As she's coming down from the high, I finally lift her shirt over her head, exposing her heavy breasts. Wasting no time, I bend down, taking a nipple into my mouth to lightly suck as she comes down from the high.

When her breathing has regulated, I pick her up and carry her to my dresser, where the mirror hangs on the wall, waiting for us.

I set her on her feet before me, grabbing her hips and turning her around in one motion. Staring at her through the mirror, she looks deliciously drunk with lust, my own expression matching hers.

I smack her ass as I say, "You're a fucking brat for finishing like that."

She smiles up at me. "What are you going to do about it?"

With one hand on her upper back, I push her forward, her forearms bracing against the dresser as I grip her hips and line my cock up to her dripping wet opening.

With no warning, I thrust into her, going as deep as I can as her ass sits nicely against my lower abdomen.

Luckily, we have no neighbors other than each other because she screams my name.

I pull out of her, ever so slowly until only the tip of my cock teases her entrance. She looks at me in the mirror, eyes pleading for more.

"Tell me how you missed me again," I command.

She hesitates, so I reach my hand around to her front, pinching her clit between my forefinger and my thumb. Strengthening my tone, I brush my lips against the tip of her ear as I say, "Tell me."

"I missed you," she grits out. I reward her by slamming into her, her expression changing from frustrated to blissful in seconds.

I continue to fuck her like this, thrusting in and out of her as her muscles tighten around my cock. Watching her in the mirror, with each thrust I come to a new realization.

Thrust.

I'd do anything to protect her.

Thrust.

I can't live without her.

Thrust.

I'd die for her.

Thrust.

I love her.

Upon the last realization, I'm unable to control myself. I pull out, needing to be closer to her.

Flipping her around, I lift her so she's sitting on the dresser, wasting no time in thrusting back into her as deep as I can go. I press my lips against hers, her legs wrapping around my lower back as she pulls me closer to her, our tongues colliding.

As she squeezes harder around me, I can tell that she's as close as I am. Bringing my thumb down to her clit, I give her exactly what she needs. Her back arches as I completely lose myself in her.

We both come, holding on to each other for dear life as though we've jumped off a cliff together, and we're the only people who can keep each other safe.

I can't stop kissing her as we come down from the high. Still fully seated inside her, I'm completely lost in everything that she is. I plant kisses on her neck, on her tattoos, her shoulders, anywhere my lips will reach.

Drunk on my own pleasure, I'm unaware of what I'm saying when my lips brush her ear. "Beth, I lo—"

Her hand covers my mouth as she commands, "Stop."

I pull out of her before she can finish the word, taking a few steps back, creating distance between us. Though the distance tears me apart, she's the one with the control.

She has always had control over me.

I'm silent, the right words nowhere to be found as I stand there, kicking myself for my slipup. I can barely get her to tell me what's going on. Telling her that I love her right now won't progress us in the right direction.

When she hops down from the dresser and picks up her discarded shirt, that was once originally mine, I know I've fucked up.

"You can stay, if you want to." I pick my sweatpants off the floor and slide them on as I try my best to keep my tone calm and collected.

She doesn't look at me as she says, "I have to be up early in the morning." Walking toward my bedroom door, each step she takes forms a crack in my chest that has rendered my body frozen. The feeling all too familiar from my childhood.

"I'll see you around." It's quiet, a comment thrown over her shoulder, before she slips out of my room, the front door clicking behind her as she exits my apartment.

I slump down on my bed, and my head falls into my hands as I work through the events of tonight. I've watched the woman I love walk away from me, rebuilding her walls I've worked so hard to tear down this past year.

But I'm not delusional. When she looked at me in the mirror, her face carried the same expression as mine. There's no denying our connection, our *love*.

Tonight, I'll give her space, but tomorrow, I'm getting to the bottom of what's going on. I'll be damned if I let a few stupid notes get between me and the woman who was made to be mine.

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BETH

As if I wasn't shaken up enough by what Alex had *almost* said to me last night, I came back to my apartment to find another note.

This time, sitting on my kitchen counter. My mind was so flooded with worry over talking with Alex that I forgot to lock the door when I left.

The scariest part is that Frank had to have left the note when I was over at Alex's last night. My predictions are proving true. He's gaining confidence and becoming bolder. The fucker even somehow avoided most of the cameras. When I checked the feed, I couldn't spot more than half a hooded figure or a blurry shoulder.

I'm sitting at my kitchen counter, with only a cup of tea in front of me and the note that was left. I read the words again, my eyes straining from my lack of sleep.

MAYBE I WASN'T CLEAR... KEEP YOUR BOY TOY OUT OF THIS, OR
HE DIES.

Frank is watching my every move. Each time I get closer to happiness, he's there, ready to torment me with another note, tearing my life apart.

His inclination for torture is no different from what I experienced as a child. Though this time, he seems more focused on taking any part of my happiness away from me. Before, he would just get drunk and beat me until he was tired.

A knock on my door makes me jump. Too tired for pleasantries, I swing the door open, not surprised to find Alex standing in the doorway, a cup of tea for me and a coffee for him. The action is becoming a habit for Alex.

“What?” I ask, monotone, no energy left in my body.

“We need to talk,” he says, ever more serious.

I open the door wider, allowing him to step inside. “Yeah, we probably should,” I say, having made up my mind this morning about where to go from here.

When I close the door, neither one of us moves. We stand there facing each other in the entryway of my apartment, the living room full of unpacked boxes behind me and the kitchen behind him.

“We need to discuss what happened last night.” He passes me the cup of tea. I take a sip, the warm liquid caressing my vocal cords before I cut the conversation short.

“No need for that. I won’t be fulfilling the remainder of my lease, so there’s no need to talk about last night, or anything else.” I look at my teacup, not wanting to catch whatever expression Alex currently wears on his face.

There’s a pause, the air around us stalling, before he says, “Where is this coming from?” His tone is gentle, but his breath is noticeable, the pace increasing in frequency.

Looking at him, I respond, “I never intended to renew the lease, and after last night, I think it’s best if I find somewhere else to live.”

He shakes his head, taking a few steps toward the kitchen counter. “I don’t understand, Beth. Is this really—”

He stops when he spots the note. The one that, in my tiredness, I forgot to hide before opening the door.

“No, Alex, don’t.” I try to stop him before he can get his hands on it, but I’m too late. By the time I’m close enough, he’s already reading it.

I set my teacup on the counter, watching him read the note, a million expressions running through his face before he lands on one I can’t discern.

He looks at me. “Is this why?” I look away from him, pressure building behind my sinuses, my vision beginning to blur.

“Beth, look at me.” His tone is firm enough that I do as he says. “Is this why?”

I turn away from him, taking a few steps to put some distance between us. “It’s not the only reason, I just...” I can’t find the words to continue as

my voice cracks under the tears pooling in my eyes.

“Beth, you need to tell me what’s going on. I can’t help you if you don’t talk to me. I’m not afraid of these threats. Besides, I’d happily die for you if it meant keeping you safe.”

Whipping around, I throw my arms up at him, tears slipping past my defenses. “That’s what I’m afraid of.” My voice rises, everything I keep buried down boiling to the surface.

“Beth, who is he? Tell me, and I’ll fix this.”

When Alex walks toward me, I take a step back. “It’s my stepdad. He was released from prison shortly after I moved here.” My voice cracks, the truth finally being set free. “He’ll *kill* you, Alex. He’s assaulted people who have gotten close to me before. I can’t let that happen to you. I refuse to let that happen.” Tears flow freely down my cheeks. Alex reaches up to wipe them away, but I move my head, avoiding his touch at all costs.

The pain it would cause knowing it’s the last time he can ever touch me is too torturous to bear.

Wiping away my tears, I look away. “Just go...please. I’m not worth the trouble.” I’m quiet, too exhausted to project my voice for much longer.

“What in the world would make you think that?” His voice is pained, but when he takes a small step toward me, I lean back, doing my best to keep the distance between us.

“Push me away all you want, but I’m not going anywhere.” He turns to grab the note from the kitchen counter before making his way to the door. “I’m going to find a way to fix this. Until then, I’m not taking my eye off these cameras. All you have to do is yell my name, and I’ll be there in an instant. Okay?”

I’m too shaken up to respond, but I nod my head, knowing he won’t leave until I do. Once the door clicks behind him, I collapse onto the floor in a pool of my own tears.

BETH

Unfortunately, Alex has been doing exactly what he said he would do, and that's trying to find a solution to this mess. That also means that I haven't seen him in a week. On the plus side, no further notes have been left for me, and at least with Alex keeping his distance, I know he's safe.

The only reason I know he's still trying to find a solution is that Sienna texted me to let me know that Alex was digging. She didn't give him the gory details, but she tried to visit me a few days ago. I made up a lame excuse about having inventory to get through and that I'd be too busy to hang out. Pushing Sienna away has hurt the most.

But there's nothing I wouldn't do to keep those in my life safe.

Benny still doesn't know anything about what's been going on, and I intend to keep it that way. I know Alex is trying to help, but I'll find a solution myself. I know I will.

I'm currently closing out the till at the end of a Saturday, looking forward to sleeping in tomorrow. With so little business, I know I need to find a way to drive more traffic through the doors, and soon, but it's been the last thing on my mind as of late.

With such a rainy day today, I found some relief as a few customers waltzed inside to seek shelter. The few sales I made today keep me hanging on to hope for the future. That is until I remember I can't stay here.

The sun is setting fast outside as I finish up closing procedures and rearrange the books on my new releases table. I pull out my phone to check for a text message from Alex, but once again, I come up empty. My chest tightens at the lack of text notifications on my screen, but it's for the best. It's what will keep him safe.

I'm still staring at my phone when the bells on the door chime. The only person who visits me at such late hours is Alex. A smile begins to spread across my face, at war with my feelings when I look up, expecting to see Alex standing in the doorway.

My smile is soon replaced by a wave of nausea rolling through my stomach when my eyes land on the man who's decided to pay me a visit.

Frank.

I'm frozen. Unable to move or speak, my freeze response renders me motionless in the presence of my abusive stepfather.

He looks worse than I last saw him. His hair has grown out, still greasy as ever, the thin strands framing his wrinkled face as he glares at me, his eyes glazed over from the half-drunk whiskey bottle in his hand. His skin has paled, and his muscles withered. He looks moments from death.

Frank throws his arms out to his sides. "Surprise," he says, dragging out the syllables of the word as though I'd be happy to see him. "Miss me?" he asks, his voice hoarse.

"What are you doing here?" My tone is surprisingly sharp despite the shaking that runs deep through my bones.

He squints at me, displeased with my question. "I thought you'd like to see me after all these years of locking my ass up."

"Get out." I won't entertain his conversation. I want him gone. My heart beats against the inside of my chest, the sound of my blood rushing through my veins clear as day in my ears.

"Not until you pay for ruining my life." He takes a step toward me. As he does, my right foot shifts behind my body, weight going to my toes and my knees softening. An instinct I didn't have before, kicking in. My body remembers my training with Alex even though my brain can barely remember what day it is.

"Get out, Frank," I tell him again, keeping my eyes glued to his movements, looking for any signs of an advance.

He takes a step closer still, pacing back and forth in front of me. "You cost me my entire life, Elizabeth. My wife divorced me, my son won't talk

to me, and do you know how hard it's been to get a job since getting out of prison?"

"Having a hard time finding money to buy your booze, Frank?" I shouldn't have said it, but the words are out before my brain can catch up.

His face reddens. "You always were a bitch." He grinds the words out through his yellowing teeth. In only a few short seconds, he advances. My body still frozen in fear as we tumble to the floor. My back hits the edge of the table as we go, books toppling to the floor around us at the hit.

I grab at his shoulders, forcing my hands away from my body, trying to create any distance I can between us. My body reacts in a panic when he grips my shirt, lifting me up to slam me back down again. I only have a second to prepare and tuck my chin to avoid a concussion.

"I'm going to ruin your life, as you fucking ruined mine," he yells, the smell of alcohol and cigarettes wafting off him.

Something cold hits my ears, and with the way my vision blurs, I know it's my tears. My useless pushes against his chest do nothing to stop him from holding me to the floor. If the past is any indication, I can expect a punch at any second, but I'm too scared, my mind too jumbled to do any real damage.

When my hand comes to his face, he dodges my hit, the action throwing him off just long enough that I catch sight of the camera mounted high in the corner of the room.

It isn't until I see it that I recall Alex's words.

All you have to do is yell my name, and I'll be there in an instant.

My body begins to thaw, yelling as loud as I can. I scream his name. "Alex!"

A sting radiates across my face when Frank lands a hard slap on my cheek. "Yell his name again, and he's fucking dead." He reels his hand back to land another slap to my face, but my brain works overtime, thinking quickly.

The slap enrages me, waking my body up and igniting the memories of my training with Alex. Grabbing at anything in my surroundings that I can use as a weapon, my hand lands on a hardback book on the floor next to me.

With as much force as I can muster from this angle, I slam the spine against his face. A loud crack sounds through the air when the book comes in contact with his nose.

He tumbles off me, grunting in pain. As much as I want to, I don't stop to admire my damage as I push myself off the floor, getting away from him as fast as possible. My feet move quickly, leading the way to the back room.

Slamming the door behind me, I lock the handle, pressing my body against the door as my heart slams itself against the inside of my chest.

Muffled sounds come from the other side of the door, before there's a loud bang. The force from Frank hitting the door shakes my entire body as I use all my strength to hold it shut, in case the lock doesn't work.

He continues to bang on the door. "You fucking bitch, I should've killed you when I had the chance."

Sobs escape my lips as my brain begs the universe to send me the one person I desperately need at this moment.

Alex. Please, I need Alex.

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ALEX

“So she still won’t tell you what’s going on?” Roman asks from his place on the bench. He’s breathing heavily after his last set of bench press. I’ve been standing over him for the last twenty minutes pretending to be his spotter only to vent about my current situation.

My phone is tucked away in my pocket. The last time I checked on Beth, she was beginning to clean up her bookstore for the night.

“All she’s told me is that it’s her stepdad. He went to jail, and she has it handled. I tried to look online, but all the records are sealed. I can’t find any information on him. I’m wondering if I should go over there tonight, see if I can get more information from her. See if there’s a way I can make this stop,” I tell Roman. He sits up on the bench, finally having finished his last set as he grabs his water bottle.

Shrugging, he contemplates my idea. “I wouldn’t push her too hard. Women don’t typically care for that sort of thing,” he says, taking a long swig of his water.

I scoff. “What would you know about women? You haven’t been with anyone since—”

“Watch it.” His tone is firm enough for me to know I’ve crossed a line.

I nod my head. “Sorry,” I say before continuing. “This is stressful. I care about her, but she won’t let me in. She’s worried about these stupid notes as though this guy can *actually* kill me.” I make my way toward the front desk, and Roman is quick to follow me.

“Wait, what are you talking about?” Concern is laced through his words.

I sigh, realizing I’ve let the last sentence slip. The one thing I wasn’t planning on telling Roman about. I know he raised us and everything, but he can get a little overprotective sometimes, especially when someone is fucking with one of us.

“It’s nothing, just a stupid note this guy left saying if Beth told me anything he’d kill me.” My voice is flippant as I’m not worried about this supposed threat.

Roman stares at me, wide-eyed, his jaw ticking so hard I’m worried he’ll crack a tooth. “C’mon, man, you know I can handle myself. It’s Beth I’m worried about,” I say.

Roman’s face relaxes into a smile. “Theo was right. You *do* love her.”

When he continues smiling at me, I give him a shove, frustrated when he barely moves. “Fuck off,” I say, though I can’t help but smile at the truth of his words.

“Maybe Sienna can help?” Roman asks.

“No, I already tried talking to her and she—” I stop talking when a scream sounds from next door. It only takes a second for me to recognize that the scream I heard was actually my name, coming from Beth’s bookstore. I don’t need any more time to process it. It was Beth.

“What was that?” Roman asks, but I’m already on the move.

Pulling my phone out of my pocket, I throw it at Roman. “Cut the cameras.” I yell at him before sprinting out the front door of my gym. The door crashes open with a loud bang as it hits the wall from the force with which I push through it.

I know Roman will be hot on my tail after he cuts the camera feeds.

By the time I’m throwing the bookstore door open, my heart is banging against my chest, adrenaline coursing through my body, causing my hands to shake. Not out of fear, but out of rage from what I find.

Books are scattered on the ground by one of the tables at the front of the store. Blood drips down one of the hardbacks discarded a few feet away. My vision threatens to close in on me at the possibility of that being Beth’s blood.

A quick scan and I can’t find Beth, but my eyes land on a small man banging on the back door. He’s shouting something, but I pay it no mind as I yell at him to get his attention. “Hey!” When he turns around, I’m met

with the face of a withering, middle-aged man. No doubt, her stepfather. The man who's been leaving her notes. The one threatening her.

It clicks for me then, as my brain works to put the pieces together. Her stepfather, who went to jail five years ago, Beth would've only been eighteen. Sienna knows something but won't tell me what. I might not know the specifics of what happened in the past, but one look at him and I know this man is abusive and has a habit of turning that abuse on Beth.

This shit stops tonight.

I stomp toward him. As I get closer, the stream of blood dripping down his mouth from his nose that sits crooked on his face makes me smile.

That's my girl.

Grabbing the man by the throat, I slam him against the wall, and he lets out a grunt as I do. "Did the boy toy come to save the day?" His voice comes out choked as my grip tightens around his neck.

Anger takes over me as I throw him across the room. His scrawny frame flies across one of the tables, books falling in the process. I don't give him a chance to get up as I tower over him, kicking him once before sitting on his chest.

"You think—" My fist lands on his jaw before he can finish his sentence. He's said enough.

Muscle memory kicks in as I land punch after punch, my knuckles growing numb in the process, pain radiating up my forearms. Adrenaline takes hold of my body, his grunts turning muffled as my erratic heartbeat sounds in my ears.

Someone says my name off in the distance, but I ignore it. I land another punch to the man's face, his nose becoming more crooked than before. The grip he holds on my shirt begins to loosen.

"Alex..." Still faint but louder this time as the voice gets closer. Another punch to his nose and his grip releases from me completely, hands falling to his sides.

"Alex." My name sounds clearly in my ears as the sound of my heartbeat fades. The voice booms behind me as two hands grip my shoulders, yanking me off the man.

I'm fighting to get back to the task I intend to finish when Roman stands tall before me. His hands are steady on my shoulders as he holds me in place.

"You'll kill him, Alex. You have to stop." His voice is stern.

“I don’t fucking care.” When I try to push past him, his grip on my shoulders tightens. “Let me finish this, Roman.” I raise my voice, using more force to get past him, but it’s no use. My brother stands tall, a weight class up from mine. If he wants me to stay put, there’s no getting past him.

I’m working to get my brother off me, Roman fighting to calm me down when my name sounds in the air again. Though this time, it’s different from before. This time, the voice sounds scared, with a pitch and tone similar to the one I’ve come to love.

“Alex...” Beth lets out a sob. Roman and I turn our heads toward the backroom door. Beth stands in the doorway, her arms crossed, holding herself for comfort. No doubt any adrenaline she had was causing her body to shake and move into a state of shock.

She’s okay.

My shoulders relax, no longer worried about her stepfather or Roman. A sense of calm washes over me when I lay eyes on her. Shoving Roman’s hands off me, it only takes me a few long strides to reach Beth. When my arms wrap around her, I turn our bodies so her back is to the store, not wanting to expose her to the damage that has been done for a second longer. She lets out a sob as I hold her, her hands gripping the back of my shirt tightly, the fabric just one tug away from ripping.

Roman takes a few steps toward where her stepfather lies beaten and bruised. I watch as he pulls his phone out, no doubt to send the 911 text to our brothers. It’s not a protocol we ever thought we’d need, but I’m so fucking thankful we came up with it so many years ago.

Running my hand through Beth’s hair, I say anything I can to calm her down, trying my best to get her bodily reaction to stabilize.

My grip on Beth tightens when the man begins to move on the ground, though I can’t help but let out a sigh of relief. Roman pulled me off him just in time. Her stepfather tries to push himself off the floor, and Roman is quick to kick him back down, rendering him motionless once again.

“Take her upstairs,” Roman commands. “Theo and Leo will be here any minute.”

Beth lifts her head from where it’s buried in my chest. “No... No Alex, I don’t want them to get hurt, please.”

I lean down, grabbing her underneath her legs, one hand braced on her upper back as I lift her into my arms. Her hands wrap around the back of my neck as I move toward the back door that leads to the stairwell.

“No one is getting hurt. You’re safe now.” I plant a gentle kiss on her forehead before making my way up the stairs.

Using my key, I unlock her door, placing her gently in her reading chair before heading to the kitchen to warm up her teapot. We wait in silence for the water to warm, my limbs still buzzing with adrenaline as I do my best not to look at the state of my hands while I wash them off in the sink.

When her tea is made, I take the warm cup over to her, trying my best to hide my bruised hands behind my back before she can see. Her distant stare and death grip on her mug do nothing to make me feel better.

A loud revving sound comes from outside, muffled through the closed windows of Beth’s apartment. A few strides over to the window, and I catch Theo’s Mustang pulling into one of the parking spots, followed by another car I don’t recognize. Though it’s hard to tell, considering the streetlamps do nothing to illuminate the dark parking lot.

I move back toward Beth, kneeling to her eye level. “I need to go downstairs. I had to cut the camera feeds so I can’t watch you up here. Are you going to be okay?”

Her blank stare is locked in on the floor, her eyes unmoving. Her sobs have finally stopped, but tears continue to slip free as they roll down her cheeks. My body screams at me to reach out and wipe them away, but I’m cautious not to startle her in her current state. The faint red mark on her cheek does nothing to calm my anger.

“Beth, are you going to be okay?” My voice is more stern as I place a hand on her knee, hoping our connection will break whatever trance she’s in. I let out a breath when she finally moves. It’s subtle, but her eyes eventually make contact with mine. She nods her head so subtly I almost miss it.

I give her the best smile I can, given the circumstances. “It’ll only take a few minutes. I need to clean up, and then I’ll be back. Can you promise me you’ll stay here?”

She nods again, but it’s not enough. “I need verbal confirmation.”

“Yes, I’ll stay here.” Her voice sounds so small, so unsure. Something in my chest cracks at the sound.

I stand, making my way to the door mentally preparing to explain this situation to my brothers when Beth says something else, louder this time. “Don’t kill him.” Her voice is surprisingly firm, confident, and sure.

“I won’t.” It’s all I say before making my way down the stairs to meet my brothers.

It’s a promise I’m not confident I’ll be able to keep.

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ALEX

Roman hasn't moved from his position next to the man who still lies on the floor at his feet. I'm leaning back against the front counter, my legs kicked out in front of me, when I watch Theo walk through the door.

My adrenaline was beginning to calm down until I saw Sienna enter after him.

Roman beats me to the question. "Why would you bring her along on a 911 call?" Roman asks, his tone firm and heavy with concern. We had always agreed that if we ever needed to use the call, it'd only be the four of us, so we didn't put anyone else at risk of whatever was going on.

"I insisted," Sienna says before Theo answers. "It's Beth. I need to be here." She turns toward me. "Where is she?" The look in her eyes tells me if I give her anything but the truth, I'll be the next man lying on the ground. I'm glad she's here because Beth needs her.

"Upstairs," I say, pointing through the back door so Sienna can make her way up there. I let out a sigh of relief when she begins to head that way, relaxing when I know Beth won't be sitting upstairs alone.

On her way, Sienna stops in front of Beth's stepfather, still passed out on the floor. Adding to his already brutally beaten face, she spits on him, all three of us flinching at the sight.

"Piece of shit," Sienna whispers under her breath.

“Whose car is that?” Roman asks, looking through the window. “Leo would never get a Porsche.” He’s looking outside, voicing the same question I had when I saw the cars pull into the parking lot.

Sienna’s made her way behind me, stopping just short of the backroom door.

“It’s Graham’s.” My brothers and I exchange a series of confused looks. “I thought you guys called him since he and Roman are friends. I’m gonna head upstairs, though, not sure I want to see my boss outside of work hours.”

I catch Theo out of the corner of my eye, give a soft smile and head nod toward Sienna before the light patter of her feet trails off behind me. Theo and I look at Roman with the same question written on our faces, only for him to respond, “I didn’t call him.”

As if on cue, Graham strolls through the door, holding it open for Leo to make his way inside. None of us say a word, staring at the two of them, together, and in tuxes no less. Graham has always been around, but he’s been Roman’s friend more than anything. None of us have ever spent time with the man unless Roman was there too. It’s interesting to see this pairing, to say the least.

Especially given the fact that Graham isn’t exactly a people person.

Leo clears his throat, glancing at Roman before looking back toward Graham. Graham looks at each of us before finally dropping his eyes to the man at Roman’s feet. It brings all of our attention back to the situation at hand.

Roman sighs. “We need to get this cleaned up. The girls don’t need to see any more of this than they already have.”

Graham slips off his suit jacket, walking ever so gracefully to the front counter to fold it and place it down next to me. Rolling up his sleeves, he turns toward Roman. “I’ll grab his legs, you grab his shoulders.”

Roman nods, unnervingly calm with Graham’s words, like the two of them have done this before. I guess there’s bound to be some skeletons in their closet after twenty years of friendship.

“We’ll get the books,” Leo says, pointing at Theo to help him as Roman and Graham begin to grab the man’s body. I stand useless and without answers, the shake in my hands amplifying as everyone around me gets to work.

“Okay, everyone stop,” I say, holding firm in my tone. “I need some fucking answers before we just clean this up and act as if nothing happened.”

My brothers and Graham stop in their actions, turning toward me, a mix of understanding and pity washing over their faces. The looks only make my anger worse. I don’t need pity. I need answers.

“Theo, what’s his name? Has he hurt Beth? Sienna had to have told you something,” I start with the biggest question of all.

“His name is Frank.” He turns to the rest of the group. “Her shitty stepfather. Recently out of jail.” He turns back to me. “Yes, he’s hurt her, but Beth is going to have to tell you the rest of the story.” It’s not much, but it’s a start for now. At least I have a name.

I turn my attention toward Leo now, the events of tonight becoming all too overwhelming the longer I’m away from Beth. “Why is Graham here? Why are you two dressed like that? And why were you in the same car?”

Leo opens his mouth to respond, looking at Graham for answers he can’t seem to find with his own words. Graham, as smooth as ever, responds, “We were at a charity gala for my non-profit. Leo attended as a family friend so I could appear more appealing to donors.” He’s hiding something, but I accept his answer anyway, unable to take any more surprises tonight.

Roman stares at Graham, his eyes squinting, indicating he doesn’t believe Graham’s excuse either, but he says nothing. I turn to him last, as I ask him, “What the fuck are we going to do about him, Roman?” My voice cracks when I catch sight of my hands, pointing at Frank still lying on the ground.

An unbearable ache spreads through my knuckles, radiating up my wrists, and fear begins to force its way through my body. The same fear I experienced so strongly as a child. When I look down at my hands, my brain catches up to how bloody my knuckles are, unable to discern what’s mine and what’s Frank’s.

Roman’s voice is calm when he takes a small step in my direction. “Graham and I will take care of him. I’ve already sent all the video footage to my phone before I cut the cameras. We’ll make sure he doesn’t see Beth again, alright?”

“She said we can’t kill him,” I say, still unsure of what he has planned.

He lets out a small chuckle at the same time as Graham, the two of them exchanging a glance before Roman turns his gaze back toward me. “No one is going to kill him. Trust us.”

The only person I’m sure hates bullies more than me is Roman, my brother coming to my rescue once again.

Graham and Roman pick Frank up off the floor, Frank letting out a groan as they do. My sigh of relief comes at the confirmation that he’s still alive. Their voices trail off as they carry him outside. My thoughts focus on the sounds of their voices as I stare down at my hands.

“That’s your truck outside, right?” Graham asks.

“Yeah, we’ll put him in the back of the cab,” Roman says. “Since when did you get a Porsche?”

“Since I closed a new business deal, I thought I’d treat myself. We’ll have to test it against your Mustang on the track soon,” Graham replies.

“No way it holds up to my Mustang. I’ll smoke you on the track for sure...” Their conversation continues, but as the door closes behind them, the air around me falls silent.

The pain in my hands grows louder, my hands throbbing so viciously I’m afraid to move my fingers.

Leo sets his jacket on top of Graham's next to me on the counter. He begins rolling up his sleeves, mirroring Graham's actions before he places a hand on my shoulder, leaning over to put himself in my eyeline. I drop my hands, my fingers wiggling at the same time, calming my rising nerves at the confirmation that they aren't broken.

“Let’s get this cleaned up, yeah?” Leo says, voice ever calm. Theo is already at work behind him, making piles of the books that have fallen to the floor and assessing which ones are damaged.

“Okay.” That’s all I can say before I work on helping my brothers clean the mess that is Beth’s bookstore.

BETH

When Sienna walked through the front door of my apartment, I broke down again. The way she held me took me back to that night, all those years ago, when I showed up at her house, much in the same state as I am now. Though now, I have fewer bruises to recover from.

As my tears faded, we moved to my bed, sitting in silence while the guys cleaned up downstairs. I don't have the energy to talk, and Sienna only spoke once to ask if I wanted more tea when she got up to grab herself a mug. The light is dim, lit only by a small lamp on my dresser, the sun long set behind the horizon of the surrounding buildings. The night falls eerily still for some time until a knock on the door disrupts it.

Sienna pats my hand. "I'll go see who it is."

I can only make out a hushed conversation before Sienna strolls back into my bedroom. She stands at the doorway when she says, "It's Alex. He wants to know if he can come in."

I nod, sitting up taller on my bed and wiping away any lingering tears. She takes one step out of the bedroom door, and Alex is quick to follow, already having let himself into the apartment. He's by my side in an instant, holding out a hand to the spot on the bed next to me where Sienna was.

"Can I?" His tone is soft. The blood previously splattered across his face has been wiped clean, and a new shirt covers his torso. His knuckles are wrapped with gauze, the cuts and bruises hidden from view.

I nod again, still unsure where to find the words to respond to anyone.

The bed dips as Alex crawls onto the mattress next to me. He interlaces his fingers with mine, and I let out a breath at our connection.

“Sienna.” The voice belongs to Theo, quietly sounding from the living room. Sienna looks behind her before rounding the bed to my side.

She kneels, grabbing my other hand. “Do you want me to stay?” she asks gently.

I shake my head. “No, it’s late. Go get some rest. But thank you for being here.” I unlace my fingers from Alex’s so I can reach over and pull Sienna into a hug, tears pricking my eyes as she grips onto me as tight as I grip her.

When we let go of each other, she waves her goodbyes to Alex, as he gets up to follow her out to the living room. Another hushed conversation, and I hear the door click, the deadbolt lock falling into place before Alex is by my side again. He intertwines his fingers with mine, brushing his thumb across the back of my hand.

My free hand reaches over, lightly grazing the gauze covering his knuckles. Holding back a sob, I say, “I’m so sorry, Alex.”

His head whips to me, his other hand coming to rest gently on my cheek as he brings my face toward his. “You have nothing to be sorry about. None of this is your fault. Do you understand?” His eyes search mine for all the answers I’ve refused to give him over the past year.

When I say nothing, he drops his hand from my cheek, both of us turning our gazes back toward the dresser on the opposite wall of my bed.

“You asked me before why I fight. If it was the same reasoning I have for racing.” He glances my direction briefly before continuing. I can’t bear to look at him without crying, so I squeeze his hand lightly, urging him to continue.

“As a child, recess was my favorite part of the day. Not for the same reason that most other kids enjoyed it. You know, playing tag, or jumping rope, throwing a ball around. It was my favorite because it was one of the only times I had to read.”

“I’d spend recess with my nose buried deep within whatever book I had picked up from the library that morning, tucked away in some corner of the playground, finding whatever cover I could to protect the pages from the rain.” The corners of my lips turn slightly at the thought of little Alex spending his free time deep within a book the same way I used to do anytime I had a spare moment to myself.

He continues his story, speaking with his free hand as he recalls the events of his childhood. "I never had too many friends. I know I'm a few years older than you, but you know how it was back then: a small kid with glasses, always spending his time with his nose tucked away in a book. A lot of kids couldn't connect with that."

"When my parents died, it was, reasonably, hard on all of us." I squeeze his hand lightly, giving him reassurance to continue, wondering where he could possibly be taking this story. "They passed toward the end of fourth grade. When I started school back up in fifth, I became even more of an outcast. Kids said things here and there before, sure. But it was like it suddenly became a bonding activity for them to pick on me. I was the easiest target to make them feel better about themselves, or look cooler, or whatever the reason is that ten-year-olds are so mean to one another." His grip on my hand tightens, no doubt the words of his childhood bullies plaguing his mind.

"One day, it was pouring rain outside, and I didn't feel like getting called 'four eyes' or 'orphan' repeatedly as kids passed by my usual undercover spot. So I found a nook behind a small shed under an overhang where they kept the gardening tools."

"I was so deep in my book that I hadn't heard the group of boys approaching. They took me by surprise by yanking the book out of my hands. There were four of them, and I watched as they threw the book in a nearby puddle, one of them jumping on it, laughing. When I tried to stand up to get it back, one of the kids pushed me against the side of the shed... That's all it took for the others to have permission to join in."

"What did you do?" I ask, my eyes welling with tears hearing the recount of events.

"I froze." My breath hitches, upset with myself for ever have judged Alex so harshly. I'm shocked someone like him would have such a reaction. "By the time recess was over, I was walking back to class with a destroyed library book, broken glasses, and an eye so swollen that I'm surprised I found my way back to the building at all." He pauses, taking a few deep breaths in an effort to control the shaking that has overtaken him. I reach over with my other hand, fully encasing his as a tear slips free of my eye.

When his breathing regulates, he lets out a small laugh. "Roman lost his shit. Only twenty-one years old, he threatened to take down the entire school board for what had happened. He made sure I went to a different

middle school than the kids who attended the same elementary school. Even though it was most definitely not convenient for his commute.”

“Then he found out that one of the kids’ fathers was someone he had taken on as a client to build an addition on his home. He went to work the next day and immediately ended the deal. It cost him thousands.”

“When I reached middle school, I reinvented myself and never looked back. I lost the glasses and got contacts. I only read in the comfort of my own home, and I started training. Roman found a small boxing gym in town that agreed to teach me even though they didn’t typically teach kids as young as I was.” My heart breaks at his admission while a sense of peace overcomes me when Alex’s mask finally falls away.

He glances at my face, seeing my pitiful expression, and adds, “The change was for the better, trust me. I’m thankful for the training. I fell in love with fighting because it gave me a sense of power and control I had never felt before. Over time, I was able to push past that freeze response.”

“When I found out Roman lost thousands, I lost it. I went to him, crying, unable to control myself. I was angry, hurt, confused. I kept repeating to him, ‘I’m sorry... I’m sorry... I’m sorry.’ But he explained that it wasn’t my fault.”

“I didn’t ask to be beaten. I didn’t ask to be born with shitty eyesight, or to have a brain that’s wired to love reading. I didn’t ask for my parents to die so young...” He pauses before looking at me to continue, my own gaze matching his. He turns to me on the bed, his other hand going on top of mine, our hands intertwined, squeezing each other tight.

“I’m going to tell you exactly what Roman told me. I don’t ever want to hear you apologize for the actions of other people. I don’t ever want to hear you apologize for who you are, or the things you love. Because I lo—” He pauses, clearing his throat before he continues, “I care about you, Beth, in your entirety as you are. You have nothing to be sorry for.”

Tears stream down my face as I look toward his knuckles again. “But your hands— this never would’ve happened if it weren’t for me.”

He shakes his head. “My actions are my own. Besides, you should see the other guy.” I snicker at Alex’s joke, only a half smile reaching both of our lips.

Leaning over, he plants a small kiss on my forehead. “Are you okay?” he asks, his eyes peering into mine. His thumb reaches up as he lightly brushes where Frank hit me earlier, attempting to soothe any lingering pain.

I nod my head, a yawn escaping my lips as the events of tonight finally catch up with my body.

“I’ll let you get some sleep, but I’ll be by in the morning, okay?” He turns away, ready to move off the bed as his hands untangle from mine. Leaving, I’m sure, because I’ve never let him stay the night before. Because I’ve never stayed the night at his place before.

But as he turns his back to me, I can’t imagine anything I’d want less than to spend another night with a wall separating me from him.

“Wait,” I say, grabbing his hand again. He looks back at me as I plead, “Stay... please.”

He falls back onto the bed, his arm reaching over my shoulders as he pulls me into his side. “Whatever you need, baby.”

I don’t miss the way he smiles against the top of my head as I slowly drift to sleep, feeling the safest I’ve ever been in Alex’s arms.

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BETH

I awake to the savory smell of bacon invading my nose. Blinking my eyes open, the faint sound of the sizzle and a few pans clattering around comes from the kitchen. Slowly sitting myself up in bed, I stretch out my neck, the events of the night before rushing back to me.

He came for me. I thought Frank was behind me and that chapter of my life was closed, but last night was a reminder that it isn't. That I need to find a way to move forward while protecting myself.

And the ones that I love.

Sienna had been here last night. Having seen Frank, I can't help the guilt that overtakes me of putting her through this again all these years later. Not to mention Benny will more than likely find out at some point. Though I still can't bring myself to reach for my phone to tell him.

The thought of having to face Alex this morning is overwhelming to say the least.

Pulling myself out of bed, I rub at my stomach where my jeans had been cutting into me all night. Grabbing a pair of leggings from my dresser and my favorite hoodie, I change clothes. The new clothing provides me comfort in more ways than one.

The fact that Frank had his hands all over the shirt I was wearing the night before makes me want to burn it.

With a deep breath, I step out into the kitchen, knowing I'll find Alex behind the pan of bacon. As I make my way over to the kitchen island, I

watch his back flex and move beneath his oversized T-shirt as he tends to three different pans.

Surveying the stove has my mouth watering. An array of eggs, bacon, and hash browns all sizzle as they cook to perfection over the heat. Considering my pots and pans are still packed away in a box somewhere, these must be his. Along with the food, given that my fridge is empty.

“Smells delicious.” My voice is hoarse as I say my first words of the morning.

Alex whips around to face me, abandoning the pans to meet me where I stand on the other side of the kitchen island. He says nothing as he pulls me in for a hug, wrapping his arms around my shoulders, holding me to his chest.

Tears take hold of my eyes as he squeezes me, his grip never faltering. Wrapping my arms around his waist, I do the same, my fists gripping his shirt for support. After a few moments, he loosens his grip, pulling back only enough to allow me to look up at him.

“Hope you’re hungry,” he says with a smirk.

I smile at his casual tone, at how beautiful his face looks in the morning, glasses placed delicately on the bridge of his nose. He must’ve grabbed them when he grabbed the pans and the food.

I nod my head, my chest aching when he releases me from his hold and goes back to the pans, flipping each of the items as they continue to cook.

I take a seat at the bar. The stool cools me, but my heart warms as I watch Alex. I was afraid to come out here, to face him after the events of last night. Afraid he’d push me into talking. Yet he says nothing as he continues to cook us breakfast.

The morning sun lights up the kitchen, Alex having pulled back the sheer curtains from my windows. He looks freshly rested after a night's sleep, ready for the day.

I kick myself for running from this moment over the past year.

Alex brings the pans to two plates on the counter as he dishes up our food. He glances at me a few times as he does so, and the sun catches in the blue of his eyes, forcing me to look away when the feeling in my chest becomes too much at the sight.

It isn’t until I look at the plate of food that I catch sight of his hands. The bandages now removed, a pit forms in my stomach as I take in the rough state of his knuckles.

I'm by his side in seconds as he puts the last empty pan back on the stove. His eyes go wide when he turns to find me standing so close to him. Slowly, carefully, I take his hands in mine.

His knuckles are a mix of reds, blues, and purples. The scrapes on them look like they are moments from ripping open and bleeding again. Some of the scrapes are tearing through the tattoo on his left hand, one of the mourning dove's wings torn apart at the edges. His fingers twitch when I run my thumb along the back of his hands.

The words come out in a sob. "I never wanted you to get hurt. I was trying to protect you. I—"

He removes one of his hands from mine, placing it on my cheek to lift my face up to his. He wipes away one of my tears. "When are you going to understand that I'm the one who wants to protect you?" He leans down, planting a kiss on my forehead. "I'm alright. Just let me care for you."

"What if he comes back?" The events of last night still loom over me, as fear takes over. The possibility of Alex getting hurt again isn't something I can handle.

Alex takes my hand in his, carefully guiding me toward the stools at the kitchen island. I wipe away my remaining tears as we take a seat. He grabs both plates, placing each one of them in front of us. A couple of glasses with water are already on the counter.

Taking my hand in his again, he turns on his stool to face me. "He is never coming back. I can assure you of that. Roman and Graham took care of him." He looks toward the floor, his jaw ticking as he says the last sentence. As though he wishes he could've done more.

Though I saw what Frank looked like. One more punch from Alex and he would've been dead.

"Thank you for not killing him," I say, unsure of what else to respond with.

He nods before continuing, "They dropped him at the police station. Roman didn't leave until he confirmed that Frank would be locked up. Even gave them a USB of the video footage so they'd have all the evidence they needed to charge him with attempted murder."

"But what about you? The cameras were still up when you came in." I can only assume, given the fact that I was barely holding my shit together in the storage room.

“We cut the feeds before I even got through the doors. Frank is the only one getting arrested. And it sounds like this time, it’ll be for good.” He squeezes my hand, an added reassurance that I have nothing to worry about.

Although it might take me a while to adjust to that concept.

“Let’s eat,” he says as he turns toward his plate, grabbing a slice of bacon and ripping off a piece with his teeth.

Taking my fork, I go to dig into the eggs but stop myself, pushing around my food until I can work up the courage to say what needs to be said.

“I never knew my real father. He left when I was a baby.” Alex stops chewing, his movements coming to a still as he listens. “My mom married Frank when I was three. They had Benny four months later.”

I take a deep breath as I prepare to continue, not having told anyone this story since prom night, six years ago when Sienna and I were already halfway through our tubs of ice cream.

“The beatings didn’t start until I was eight. It started small: an extra-hard grip on the arm, and a smack on the shoulder with a little too much force. But then he started cutting me out of photos, yelling at me when Benny did something wrong. My mom was a nurse. She worked long hours, so by the time she came home, she was too tired to care what was happening.”

“Did he ever...?” He trails off, hesitant to ask the question.

“No.” I’m quick to respond. “It was never like that.” I’m surprised when my eyes stay dry as I recount the events of my childhood for the first time in years. “He hated the fact that my mom had a child with another man. That I wasn’t as perfect as Benny, that I wasn’t his *blood*. Things only got really bad when he lost his job, and he thought he could find another one at the bottom of a bottle of whiskey.”

“Jesus Christ,” Alex breathes out, his fists coming to his mouth as he holds one hand in the other.

I can’t help the corners of my mouth turning up as I watch him react the same way to my story as I felt when he told me his.

“It’s okay,” I say.

“It’s not,” he responds.

I nod. “I know. But it’s over now?” He looks at me, as my eyes plead for him to say yes. He stands, only to scoot his stool closer to mine, his arm brushing against my shoulder as he does.

Placing his hand on the back of my neck, he leans down, planting a kiss on my lips before saying, “I promise. It’s over. You will never have to see that man again so long as I’m alive.”

I have no words to match the overwhelming warmth that spreads through my chest. So instead, I pull him down for another kiss, lingering only until my stomach growls.

We both laugh, Alex sitting when he says, “Eat. We have a training schedule to get back to, and you need protein.”

I laugh him off as I take a bite of my eggs, savoring the perfectly spiced food as I run through my training sessions over the last year. I might have initially frozen last night, but for once, I fought back. My body remembered skills I worked hard to learn for so many months. I will never be able to thank Alex enough for the skills he’s given me.

“So you want me to stop by later today?” I ask after we’ve both finished our plates of food.

Alex lets out a low chuckle. “No.”

I look at him, my brows furrowed in a question I don’t need to voice.

“We’ll get back to training soon enough, but I was thinking you could take the week off. Tiffany said she’d cover your store for the week, under my payroll, so you could get some rest.”

I open my mouth a couple of times before I finally find the words. “I don’t know what I’d do. I’ve been working the bookstore for the past year. I’m not sure how to spend my time.”

Alex stands, a smile spreading wide across his face. “I have exactly what you need.” Before I can ask what that is, he’s pulling open the front door to my apartment, exiting into the hallway. Only a few seconds later, he’s waltzing back in, a tall stack of books balanced in his hands as he kicks the door closed behind him.

With a loud thud, he sets the stack of books down on the counter in front of me. A glance at the titles, and I notice that these are all the books he purchased from me all those months ago. Pushing away my empty plate, I pick up the first book from the top of the stack.

“I have a confession,” Alex says, as I begin to flip through the pages, noticing the various pen and highlighter markings throughout the book.

“I’ve read all of these books before. Some of them a couple of times.” Alex’s words send a wave of shock through me.

“What?” It’s all I can say as I process his words. I set the book I’m currently holding down on the counter as I grab for the second, flipping through the pages to find even more written notes, markings, and highlighter stripes.

“I annotated them... for you.” It’s the most hesitant I’ve seen Alex. His usual confidence wavers as he stands tall before me, watching as I flip through the pages of my favorite books. “I thought you could take the week, get some rest, and read through these again, this time with my commentary.” He chuckles at himself.

“This is the most thoughtful thing anyone has ever done for me,” I say, flipping through another book before grabbing another from the stack, unsure of which book to start with.

Alex laughs again. “I’m glad you like them.”

I finally peel my eyes from the books to look up at him. “Like them?” Unable to contain my excitement any longer, I jump up, throwing my arms around his neck. The sheer force I put into my efforts throws him off balance, causing him to take a step back and turn us so that his back is against the counter.

“I love them,” I all but squeal into his ear. His laughter grows at the same rate a smile spreads across my face.

When I finally pull back, he says, “I have to get down to the gym. I have a few clients I’m meeting with today, but I’ll check back in when I’m done for the day.”

I’m looking at the books as Alex holds me in his arms, my hands itching to flip through the pages of each one.

Nodding, I respond, “Okay, see you after work,” as I can’t help but reach for another book.

Before letting me go, Alex gently grabs my chin, forcing my eyes away from the pile of books on the counter. I’m still smiling when he kisses me, his smile matching my own.

“Have a good day, baby. Enjoy the books.” He pulls away from me slowly, like he doesn’t want to leave, but I’m already picking up the stack of books and taking them to my reading chair as he exits my apartment.

“I will.” I call after him, throwing a blanket over me as I dive into the first book.

With the click of the front door, I get lost in the world that’s written before me. For the first time in a year, the words on the page don’t blur.

I'm halfway through the day when I reach the fourth book. I read every note Alex has made in pure awe. I was expecting a few funny comments here and there, but practically every page of these books is annotated in some way.

Flipping through the books, I continue to read more of his notes.

By far my favorite line of the entire book.

This guy is such a loser. She needs to be with the other guy already.

My car is 100x faster than this one.

Say the word, and I'll happily do this to you.

I'm practically giggling and kicking my feet as I read through his comments. The added notes make it feel like I'm reading these books, my favorite books, for the first time again. It isn't until I get around 75 percent of this novel that I notice a pattern in his highlighting.

At first, I thought he was only highlighting random things here and there that he wanted to add commentary on. Picking up a few of the other books, I flip through the pages, checking my theory.

Each commentary line is highlighted in yellow, though there's only one word or phrase he's highlighted in pink. He's saved that color for this specific phrase, though nothing is ever written in the margins. Only the highlight is marked in the book.

Grabbing the last of the books, I confirm my suspicions as I flip through the pages. I slide out of the reading chair and onto the floor, opening each of the books up and laying them out in front of me.

Staring at the books, I read what he's highlighted in pink.

Love.

I love you.

Love. Love. Love.

My heart swells at the sight. In a small way, Alex has shown me his true feelings. The last time I was with him, I had covered his mouth, too afraid of hearing the three words come from him at that moment. Too afraid of what it would mean for us, for me.

But looking at the pages of the books that lay before me, it isn't fear that takes over me.

Instead, I'm filled with a sense of joy, of comfort, of love.

I'm not sure when he'll be ready to try to tell me again, or when I'll be ready to hear it. But I know one thing for certain: I've fallen deeply in love with Alex Kane.

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BETH

It's been a few weeks since Alex gave me the annotated books, and he's checked in on me every day since. Eventually, he convinced me to call Benny, so I did.

Ben was upset as I thought he'd be, itching to visit me, though I insisted he didn't. I haven't received any notes. No rocks have been thrown, there's no reason for him to visit, or to worry. Though he insisted he come down soon, I'm hoping he stays in California for a while. The thought of burdening him with this still upsets me.

Not long after I got back to my daily routine of taking care of my bookshop, a box showed up at my doorstep. Nervous, I opened the box unsure of what to expect, but relief washed over me when I saw it full of books. All of the books that were damaged in the attack were sitting in the box, ordered brand new.

I knew it must've been from Alex, though he still won't admit he ordered them for me.

The rain pours down outside, lightly tapping my living room window as I prepare to head downstairs for the night. Finally getting back into a normal routine, I've decided I'm ready for training again. Or at least, a workout session.

While Alex has visited, cooked me dinner, and held me while I fall asleep in his arms, he's seemed hesitant to push for anything further. A hesitation that I appreciate given my newfound feelings for him. Though the

lack of escalation between us has left me feeling pent-up lately, and I'm looking to blow off some steam.

Heading downstairs, I enter Alex's gym through the back room. It's so late that my bookstore has already been closed for about an hour, and no one is in the gym except for Jake, Alex, and Leo.

My eyes land on Alex immediately. Sitting down on a bench near the ring, I watch as Alex moves with grace and precision, hitting the mitts that Leo holds. Alex's back muscles flex and move under the lighting, creating deliciously dark shadows across his back. His feet are quick, the muscles in his calves flexing, making the tattoos on his legs seem as though they are dancing to the beat of his boxing gloves.

He told me the moment his hands were healed, he'd be back in the ring. I didn't doubt him for a second.

"You want in on this?" Leo calls from inside the ring. Alex turns to look behind him, the smile I've come to love taking over his face.

I wave my hand, relaxing into the bench. "I'm content enjoying the show." Alex's smile widens at my words.

He begins removing his gloves as he says something to Leo that I can't make out. Leo nods as they both exit the ring, Alex hopping down before me, our eyes locked on each other, unable to break the connection. Leo's phone rings in the distance, though I don't bother to look in its direction, my eyes still glued on Alex.

"Alright, I have to take off, you two..." Leo's voice trails off as a chuckle takes over.

"We're good, man. I'll see you later," Alex says to Leo, though he hasn't taken his eyes off me.

Grabbing his things from beside the ring, Leo makes his way out the front door. I peel my eyes away from Alex as I stand from the bench, looking around the dimly lit gym. He must have the lights turned down tonight, creating a dark mood that I find comforting. Alex looks perfectly at home in a place like this.

"I was thinking we could start training again." My voice is uneasy, betraying the confidence I have in my decision.

His eyes squint, asking, "Are you ready for that?"

Nodding, I point at the ring. "Maybe you can show me a few moves in there? I think I'm ready to move on from the mat, given recent events." I chuckle, though the sound comes out pained.

Alex pauses for a long moment, eventually sighing before he moves toward the wall where he keeps the gloves. Picking up a pair, he walks back, handing them to me along with my hand wraps.

“Here, put these on, and I’ll meet you in there. Let me close up first.” When he pushes past me, I climb into the ring. I watch him as I idly put the wraps and gloves on my hands. He says something to Jake, prompting him to pack up his belongings. Alex waves at him as he exits into the parking lot.

Once Alex locks the front doors behind him, he turns to me, my arms resting on the ropes of the ring. “Alright, it’s just the two of us now. Are you sure you’re ready?” His question comes out as a playful challenge.

I knock the boxing gloves together in my hands. “Absolutely.” I smile at him. His laugh sends a wave of hope through me. A wave of hope that things will eventually get better, that I’ll never have to go through such an immeasurable amount of pain again. Though a tiny voice inside my head is still telling me I’m dumb for ever thinking such a thing.

I’m hoping to drown that out with training tonight.

When Alex hops in the ring, he grabs the mitts Leo was holding moments before. Holding them up, he walks me through basic motions and gives me a combo to start with.

“Ready?” he asks.

I nod once. “Don’t go easy on me, Kane.”

His lips turn up into a half-cocked grin. “Never.” He holds the mitts up and calls out the first punch, my core tightening and body shifting as I land my glove on the mitt.

He continues calling punches, as I forcefully hit the pads on his hands after each call. My heart rate increases with each punch, a small grunt escaping my lips. The force feels good behind the weight of my body.

“Good,” Alex encourages as he slaps his mitts together. “Harder.”

So I hit harder, staying light on my toes as I land my glove to the mitt again. Right fist colliding with Alex’s right hand, then my left colliding with Alex’s left. Over and over again, I hit as hard as I can as visions of my childhood flash before my eyes as they start to blur.

Benny breaking a lamp and the resulting bruise on my upper arm.

The time Frank began to yell at Benny, and I stood in his way, taking the beating instead.

My mother not believing me when I tried to tell her when I was fourteen, only stating that Frank was a better man than my father supposedly ever was.

Something wet hits my cheeks as my breathing becomes more erratic, my hits not slowing down but my force weakening from my lack of endurance.

“Hey,” Alex says softly as he drops his mitts, but I keep punching, unable to see clearly through tears fogging my vision and memories clouding my judgment. Alex takes a step back, but it isn’t far enough. Driving force through my right shoulder down to my wrist, I hit him square in the chest. My brain lags on registering that he’s dropped his hands and taken off his mitts before I have a chance to stop my punch.

Alex lets out a small grunt at the collision, and I drop my hands at the sound.

Blinking away the tears, I throw off my gloves, grabbing onto his shoulders to take a closer look at the spot on his chest. “Fuck, Alex. I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.”

His hands wrap around my waist as he dips slightly to meet me at eye level. “Hey, it’s okay. I’m alright.” He punctuates his sentence with a smile that has me pulling away from him in relief.

“Fuck.” I turn away from him, taking a few steps in an effort to catch my breath and stop the tears.

“Talk to me, Beth,” Alex says from the corner of the ring as I continue pacing back and forth in front of him.

I look at him, stopping in the middle of the ring, only a dim light above lighting a small circle around me.

“I’m scared,” I say, finally catching my breath as I wipe away my remaining tears.

“Of?” He asks, his voice calm as he listens.

“Everything. What if he comes back?”

“He won’t,” he says, his voice sure. “Not with me here. He’s never setting foot within one hundred miles of you again.”

I look at the ground. “Don’t make promises you can’t keep.”

His body shifts as he takes a step toward me. “What makes you think I don’t intend on staying by your side?”

At his question, the words I’ve heard my whole life come flooding back in. “Because once you see who I truly am, you’ll leave.”

“And who are you, Elizabeth Rose?” Alex asks, taking another step toward me.

Looking up at the ceiling, I try to avoid another tear falling from my eye as I repeat what I’ve always been told.

“For starters, I’m lazy and incapable of growing a business. My bookstore is already failing.”

He shakes his head slightly. “Determined, resilient, a beginner ready to learn and take on new challenges.”

“I’m messy, disorganized,” I continue.

He takes another step toward me, a chuckle teasing his throat. “Free-spirited, carefree.”

“I’m a bitch, I never know when to shut my mouth.” The words flow free from my lips as I’ve heard them come from Frank’s so many times.

Another step toward me, Alex continues, “Witty, never afraid to speak your mind, strong.”

“I’m a loner. I have few friends, and I never let anyone in.”

Alex is close now as he places a hand on my hip, his fingers brushing the skin between my leggings and sports bra. “Independent and you care deeply for those you do let close. Something I envy about Sienna and Ben.”

I look up at him, as his words fight against the ones in my head, the one phrase I’ve heard my entire life growing louder. “I’m unlovable.”

He places his knuckle under my chin, lifting slightly as he stares down at me. “My heart says otherwise.”

“What are you doing?” I ask him on a breath, the words in my head snuffed out by his.

“Rewiring your brain.” My eyebrows twitch together as he continues, “I’ll spend the rest of my life making up for whatever it is that shitbag instilled so deep within you, because I love you.”

There it is. The confession I’ve been dreading for months. Though it doesn’t hurt as much as I thought it would. It’s not as scary as I thought it’d be.

Instead, my heart flutters at the words, my body buzzing to hear them again. I open my mouth to say what, I’m not sure, but he plants a kiss on my lips before I can get a word out.

When he pulls back from the kiss, he continues, “You don’t have to say it back. Not until you’re ready. I’d wait a lifetime if I had to, to hear you say

those three words.” He smiles at me gently, an unspoken understanding passing between us as he holds me close.

He’s right. I can’t say the words back to him. Not when I’ve just come to terms with my love for him. I’m not ready to say it aloud.

Instead, I do what I can to show how deeply I care for him. Wrapping my hands around the back of his neck, I pull him down to me.

My lips touch his, softly at first before breaking away for a moment, only to be pulled right back to each other again. His hands roam my lower back, dipping to my ass, squeezing gently as he pulls me closer to him. My calves strain as I stretch tall to meet him at his height, him bending slightly to do the same.

My hands roam his body, our tongues colliding in a waltz, our movements slower than they’ve ever been, deeper than ever before. Every time we touch, our bodies cling to each other, working to solidify our connection. I don’t think either one of us will ever get enough.

When I pull back, Alex touches his forehead to mine, both of us smiling as we continue to hold each other.

“You were right,” he says.

“About what?” I ask.

“A kiss like that is more intimate than sex ever can be.” He smiles wider as I laugh, his lips coming to my neck to plant a few kisses there as he pulls me closer.

He nips lightly at my ear, heat rushing to my core at the promise of more before he whispers, “Would you like to have dinner with me?”

“We’ve had dinner together almost every night the past few weeks,” I say, unsure of what he means.

He chuckles. “I meant at a restaurant.” He pulls back. “Would you like to go on a date with me?”

My heart swells as I look up at the man who stands before me, my smile spreading wider than ever before, my past fading behind me as I take the first step toward moving on and say, “I’d love to.”

ALEX

Standing in front of Beth's apartment door, I twirl the bouquet in my hand. Another set of pink and white lilies, matching the very first bouquet I got her for her bookstore opening. Anticipation gnaws at me as I wait for her to open the door.

When I asked her to dinner a few days ago, I was elated that she had said yes. Finally breaking through the walls she's put up is one of my most rewarding accomplishments. Though when I told her I loved her, I wasn't expecting her to try to say it back.

That's why I stopped her. I know she isn't ready to tell me yet. To say it out loud would be admitting it to herself. It would mean that whatever is between us becomes real and concrete. I wait patiently for her outside her door, and I'll continue to wait patiently for her to say those three words.

I have all the time in the world for her.

I've opted for my nicest black slacks, since Leo hates it when I wear jeans to his restaurant. I've paired it with a white button-down shirt, going for a casual look with a few buttons undone at the top, and my black blazer thrown on, left open, over it.

With a few silver rings, my small silver chain, and my clothes hugging me in all the right spots, it's usually a killer look for a date.

Though when Beth opens the door, my outfit is nothing compared to hers.

"Wow," I say, my jaw falling open as I stare at her.

She's curled her hair, the waves falling around her bare shoulders. The thinly strapped burgundy dress she wears is tied at the back of her neck, the form-fitting material hugging every one of her curves, stretching over her hips and flowing to the floor. The dress is simple, paired with small jewelry accents that let her natural beauty and shapely body shine.

She does a small turn. "You like?" she says, smiling.

As she turns, I catch sight of her spine tattoo again, the dress cutting low down her back, barely covering her ass and only a few strands of fabric crisscrossing the phases of the moon etched into her skin. I'm still standing there, unmoving, in awe of her when she turns back around to hand me her coat.

"Could you help me with this?" she asks.

I stay silent as I take her coat, opening it so she can once again turn around and slip her arms into the fabric. When she turns to face me again, I pull her into me. My hand glides along her waist beneath her coat to the bare skin on her back.

I hold out the flowers to our side, shaking them as I hold her close, I say, "I got these for you."

She smiles as she takes them from me. "Thank you, let me put them inside."

After she sets them on her counter, she grabs a small purse and her keys, locking the door behind her.

Turning to face me again, she asks, "Ready?"

I can't help myself when I crowd her, pushing her gently against her door as I rest a forearm against it above her head.

"Or we can skip dinner," I smile slyly at her, leaning down to plant a whisper of a kiss to her delicately glossed lips.

When I pull back, she reaches a thumb up, wiping away the residual gloss that lingers on my lips. Her hand skates down my neck to caress my chest in the opening of my shirt.

"Don't we have a reservation?" she asks, her voice growing husky as she continues to trace her fingers along my chest.

I shrug. "Yeah, but it's Leo's restaurant. We can get a table at any time."

Her eyes dart up to mine, and I catch my mistake, hanging my head as she slips past me to head toward the stairs. "You didn't tell me it was Leo's restaurant." She claps her hands excitedly. "Let's go, I've been dying to try something from his menu. I haven't had his food in over a *year*."

I chuckle as I meet her at the top of the stairs, holding out my hand to her. "Right this way, milady."

She places her hand in mine. "Such a gentleman," she says, throwing a wink my way before descending the stairs.

I've never been happier than I am at this moment.

The one downside to visiting Leo's restaurant? The fact that it's located in downtown Portland. My Mustang hums beneath my feet as I search for street parking. Having been around the block three times now, I'm not sure a spot will open anytime soon.

"Oh, right there," Beth says, pointing at a spot hidden away behind the corner of a building. With the recent time change, the sun has already set, and water droplets are gently tapping against my windshield.

"You're in heels. I can find something closer," I say, knowing the parking space is a block away from the restaurant.

"I'll be fine. Park there. My stomach can't wait another second." She waves me off. Leo did tell me it was going to be a busy night for him, though he'd save me the best seat in the house. So I doubt I'll be finding a parking space nearby anytime soon.

Driving over to the spot Beth pointed out, I park my Mustang. I'm quick to pay for a parking pass and throw it on the dashboard before heading to the passenger side of my car.

Opening the door for Beth, I give her my hand again, leading the way to Leo's restaurant. It only takes a few steps for me to realize how tall her heels are. Our height difference looks almost normal with the shoes she's put on for tonight. She's one of the most athletic women I know but when her hand squeezes mine for the third time in an effort to balance herself on the cracked concrete, I give in.

"Alright, here we go," I say as I stop, dipping down to place my arm under her legs.

She squeals out a laugh. "Alex, what are you doing?" Her arms wrap around my neck as she looks at me, a smile wide on her face.

"We still have half a block to go, and I don't plan on making you walk in those things for a second longer," I tell her as we make our way down the

street.

“You’re so barbaric sometimes,” she says with a smile.

“And you love it.” The words leave my lips before I can process them, her smile faltering when she hears them. Her gaze drifts from mine as she looks toward the direction I’m walking. Thankfully, there are only a few more steps, the silence between us not lasting long before I’m setting her on her feet again.

Beating her to the entrance, I hold the door open for her. “Here we are,” I say. When the smile returns to her face, I let go of the breath I was holding at my previous slipup.

Note to self: stay away from the implications that she loves anything about you. Don’t push her.

I follow her inside, as we both hand our coats to the coat check at the front of the restaurant before making our way to the host.

“I have a reservation under Kane,” I tell the man at the front. As usual, at the mention of my last name, his eyes go wide.

Without checking the list in front of him, he says, “Yes, of course. Right this way Mr. Kane.” Looking back at Beth, I mouth the words “Mr. Kane” at her while pretending to tighten my invisible tie. The laugh that slips out of her grabs the attention of a few people at a nearby table as we follow the host.

It’s no surprise that Beth is turning heads as we make our way to the back of the restaurant, a table reserved for us near the kitchen, tucked away in a corner. Though when a few of the men can’t seem to look away from Beth, my playful demeanor turns deadly as I wrap my arm around Beth’s waist. My hand lowering to rest on her lower back, grazing the top of her ass.

In the most cliché way, I’m marking my territory. Though to say I own Beth is misleading. She’s the one with the power over me as I’m pretty sure she stole my heart the first time I saw her.

“Here you are,” Says the host when we reach our table, placing a couple of menus down.

Beth and I slide into the half-moon booth. She takes a spot on the edge of the booth, where the host has set down the menu, though she’s too far away for my liking. Skating my left arm around her waist again, I pull her toward me as we meet in the middle, feeling more relaxed when her thigh connects with mine under the table.

“Can’t last one dinner without touching me, huh?” Her voice is hushed as she looks at me. The warm vanilla scent of her perfume wrap around me in a way that feels like home.

I shake my head, my voice lowering when I say, “Have you looked in a mirror tonight? There isn’t a single word in the English dictionary to describe how beautiful you look.” Blushing, her cheeks turn red as she looks back toward the menu.

As if on cue, Leo comes out of the door to the right of our table, coming from the kitchen. “Well hello, you’re surprisingly on time, brother.” He pats my shoulder before he turns to Beth and reaches out his hand. “Beth, you look stunning as usual.” She places her hand in his as Leo covers the top of her hand with his other hand.

“Thank you,” she says, not removing her hand from his.

Reaching out, I grab both of their wrists. “That’s enough of that,” I say, as I pull their hands apart, both of them laughing at me as I do. Though I still can’t help it when my arm reaches around Beth’s waist, my hand finding it’s home on her hip.

Leo looks down at our table, clocking the menus. He’s quick to pick them up. “You won’t be needing these.” He tucks them under his arm. “I have everything planned for you tonight. You two sit back and enjoy.”

With that, he’s off to the kitchen again. Not long after, a server is at our table, dropping off two water glasses and pouring each of us a glass of red wine. “Compliments of the chef, Mr. Kane,” he says as he pours the glasses.

When he’s left the table, Beth leans in toward me. “So *Mr. Kane*, you never told me Leo was the chef of *Délicieux*.”

I shrug. “He doesn’t talk about it much. He has issues with the owner, though I think he mentioned something in the group chat about them being under new management. And don’t call me Mr. Kane. Not until I can call you Mrs. Kane.” I wink at her, though the way her eyes dart from mine, and the way she avoids eye contact as she reaches for her wineglass has me kicking myself under the table.

Apparently I’m so in love with her, I have no control over my mouth anymore. That’s the only explanation I have for saying such stupid things toward her tonight.

She’ll tell you when she’s ready. Stop pushing.

Looking around the restaurant, I think through what to say, anything to break the silence growing between us. It isn’t until my eyes land on a finely

dressed man sitting at the bar toward the front of the restaurant that I find the perfect diversion from my previous fuck up.

“Holy shit,” I whisper, staring at the man sitting at the bar.

Considering I practically grew up with the guy, and just saw him a few weeks ago, I’d recognize Graham anywhere.

“What?” Beth asks, her eyes finally landing on mine again.

I nod in the direction of the bar. “See that man there?” She looks toward his direction, and I continue, “That’s Graham Emerson.”

“Sienna’s boss?” Beth asks.

“Well, I know him as Roman’s best friend, but yeah, he’s that too.”

“What’s he doing here?”

I shrug in response. “I’m not sure, but when the guys stopped by to help with... well, to help clean up the bookstore.” I go quiet, trying my best to push past the mention of the night of the attack. “Leo showed up in Graham’s car. They were dressed up, both in tuxes too.”

“Really?” She asks, her eyes growing wide. I smile, having successfully piqued her interest and diverted the conversation to something more lighthearted.

I nod before she continues, “Is something going on between the two?”

I mull over her question for a minute before responding, “I have no idea. I mean, we’re all pretty sure Leo had a small crush on Graham growing up, but I’ve only ever seen Graham date women. He is known as one of the city’s most eligible bachelors after all.”

Beth takes a sip of her wine. “That means nothing. After all, I only ever dated women for the longest time. Now look at me.” She nudges me with her shoulder as she smiles at me.

I kiss the top of her head, breathing in her scent before saying, “That’s true. You may be on to something, baby.”

She places a hand on my thigh, squeezing lightly. “Just don’t pry. Maybe they are friends, maybe they have a business deal, whatever it is, leave them be.”

I side-eye her, as she knows damn well I can’t let this go. Her only response is an eye roll before I pick up my wineglass to take a sip. “Graham has *one* friend, and it’s Roman. He grew up in the foster care system, so he doesn’t even have a family to turn to. The fact that he keeps showing up in the same place with Leo is *notable* to say the least,” I explain.

Beth taps my leg a couple of times as Leo walks out the door again, two salads in hand, ready to serve us our first course of the evening.

"I hope you like your wine selection. It should pair perfectly with this Lyonnaise salad. I hope you two like— What?" he asks when he notices me staring at him, my eyes squinting as I watch him carefully.

Picking up my wineglass again, I motion it toward Graham, who sits at the bar, sipping on an old-fashioned as he looks entirely uninterested in the bartender who keeps checking in on him every few seconds.

"Does Roman know about that?" Leo looks toward the direction I'm pointing, a faint blush coloring his cheeks when he looks back at me.

"That Graham is here? I'm not sure. I thought maybe Roman was meeting him here tonight or something." He plays with the strings on his apron, a bad tell that's never done him favors in our family poker games.

I stare at him, unmoving as I wait for him to explain more.

"He's the new owner, alright? Just bought the place. He likes to linger, to make sure everyone is doing their jobs properly or some shit, I don't know."

"Hmm." I hum, processing his words. "So when the two of you showed up together the other night, that was just *business* then?" I ask, suspicion over taking my tone.

Beth squeezes my thigh again, a silent question for me to stop, but I can't help myself. If something is going on between the two of them, I wouldn't be sure how to feel, considering Graham has a reputation for being a player, and Leo is the most hopeless romantic person I know.

"Yes, now shut up and eat your salad or I'll make sure the main course is a hearty plate of fish."

Beth gasps next to me, our shared dislike of fish threatening to ruin our first date. "Alex, no," she whispers dramatically enough to make me laugh.

I playfully smack Leo in the chest. "I'm fucking with you. If you were dating Graham, of all people, I know you'd tell us." I shrug him off, though I don't miss the way he doesn't respond to my comment as he heads back into the kitchen.

If something is going on between them, then maybe Beth is right, and I need to leave it alone for now.

Beth moans next to me. "Oh my god, who knew a salad could taste so good."

“Hey, I made a great salad for you the other night,” I say, loading up my fork with a bite.

“Yes, but try this one,” she says.

I bring the fork to my mouth and take a bite. The tangy vinaigrette blends with the egg yolk and lettuce, creating a savory blend in my mouth. “Fuck, that’s good.”

Beth nods enthusiastically beside me as she brings the fork to her lips again. I can’t help but watch her brighten each time she takes a bite of the food she’s enjoying. Only hoping that she feels the same when she’s with me.

Beth and I are both stuffed by the time Leo brings out the homemade ice cream, drizzled in chocolate and decorated with strawberries on the side of the bowl.

“Can I ask you a question?” Beth asks as we both dig our spoons through the ice cream.

“I think you just did,” I say, smirking at her as I bring my spoon to my mouth. I’m only brought pleasure when she watches my tongue dart out to collect the remaining ice cream lingering on my lips. Those siren eyes locked in on the motion, hungry for anything but the ice cream.

She looks at me with a pointed look before I say, “Go ahead.”

“How’s the gym doing? I can’t help but notice it’s empty. When I visit, though, I don’t exactly stop by at the busiest times.”

I shrug. “It’s had better years, but I’m sure we’ll bounce back. Why do you ask?”

She sighs. “I’m trying to figure out how to keep the bookstore afloat. I know most businesses run at a loss their first year, but I’m deep in a hole. Any funds from my business loan will run out in the next couple of months. I’m trying to figure out if it’s me, or the area.”

My heart picks up at the thought of her leaving. If she thinks the area is the reason her bookstore isn’t doing well, she’ll have no reason to stay.

I place my spoon down and twist toward her. “The gym isn’t doing well.”

She turns toward me, wide-eyed. “What?”

I shake my head. "I'm losing clients left and right to the big-name gym that opened up at the end of last year. I'm still confident we'll bounce back, but I'm having a hard time figuring out how."

She looks down at the ice cream. The way her eyes dart around, I can tell her mind is running, and I can't help but pry.

"What are you thinking about?"

She looks back at me. "Whether or not I should give unsolicited advice where your business is concerned." She shrugs. "Trying to figure out if it's my place."

I place my hand on her waist, my fingers brushing the bare skin of her back as I lean in closer to her, my voice lowering. "Maybe I haven't made myself clear. It will always be your place to have an opinion where my life is concerned."

Her cheeks redden again, and I squeeze her hip before continuing, "Now tell me, what's your idea?"

Her eyes brighten as she lights up. "I know I've said it before, but you should offer self-defense classes."

I purse my lips, mulling over the idea as she continues, "I can't help but notice that the majority of your clientele are men. I rarely see women visit, and I know self-defense classes can be hard to find. Especially in a place where a woman would feel safe. And..." She stops herself from continuing.

"And?" I'd give anything to be inside her head at this moment.

"And I felt safe with you. I feel safe with you. I think I have since the moment we met, and that's coming from someone with my background. I think you'd be a great teacher, but I also think you could train Tiffany or hire another woman to teach as well." She shrugs as though her idea isn't brilliant and one I never would've thought about myself.

"I love it," I say, smiling.

"It's something the big gyms don't typically offer. That type of specialized training and courses."

"You're absolutely right. Could be something to set me apart."

"Exactly," she says, a little too loud, as a couple at a table near us turns their heads in our direction. When they both meet us with a glare, Beth and I turn to each other, holding in our laugh so as not to cause another disruption.

She sighs when our laughter dies down. "Ready to go home?" It's a simple question but one that sends a buzz through my body at the sound of

her calling our place home.

Nodding, I help her out of the booth. Before leaving, we crack open the kitchen door to say bye to Leo.

“Where’s my fucking fish?” Leo yells into the void that is the busy kitchen.

“Right next to you, Chef,” a shorter woman with blond hair yells back.

“Thank you, Chef,” he yells back. As he looks around, he spots us, hanging out in the doorway watching him move about the kitchen.

With an impressive swiftness, he makes his way to us. Wrapping his arms around both of us, he says, “I love you both, but get the fuck out of my kitchen.”

Beth bursts into laughter as we exit the restaurant. As we grab our coats, I don’t miss the way Graham notices us, avoiding eye contact with me the moment he spots us before eventually getting up from his spot at the bar and moving to the back of the restaurant.

Helping Beth with her coat, we step outside, the cold air hardening her nipples in a way that’s hard not to notice. Picking her up again, I whisper in her ear as we head back toward the Mustang.

“Have I told you how sexy you look in this dress tonight?”

She giggles. “I think you’ve gotten your point across, yeah.”

When we reach the car, I set her on her feet, opening the passenger side door for her, but she pauses before getting in.

“Do you think my bookstore will bounce back?” It pains me to see the hint of desperation in her eyes.

I nod before I choose my words carefully. “I think if you’re willing to open up a little, it will.”

Her eyes squint a little before asking, “What do you mean?”

“I’ve noticed the requests for book club meetups. It seems like a good start for drawing in business, yet you’ve turned them all down.”

“I guess it’s hard for me to let people in.” She gives a self-pitying smile before I continue.

Reaching my hand out, I place it on her cheek, rubbing my thumb across her skin. “You’ve let me in, right?”

With a gentle smile, she says, “I’m working on it.”

“Then maybe you can work on it with the bookstore too. And in the meantime, I’ll take a look at the finances for you and see if there’s anything I can do to help.”

Her smile widens as she leans up to kiss me, before dropping back down to wrap her arms around my waist and resting her head on my shoulder. “Thank you, Alex.”

I rest my lips on the top of her head, wrapping my arms tightly around her as I say, “Anything for you, baby.”

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BETH

Over the past few weeks, while Alex and I have spent most of our evenings together, I haven't invited him to stay the night since the night of the attack. Something about it being too intimate for my body to handle and my brain to comprehend.

Though as we stand in front of my apartment door, Alex looking as deliciously devilish as ever after he's shown me time and time again tonight how much he loves me, I cannot bring myself to fall asleep alone another night.

"Would you like to stay over tonight?" I grimace at my question, the words sounding more juvenile than I anticipated.

Alex smiles wide as he pulls me into him, his hands finding purchase on my bare back where they've been all night. "I thought you'd never ask."

He leans down, as I tilt my head, our lips touching briefly before pulling apart only to be pulled right back together again. He takes my keys from my hand, pushing me against the door as he unlocks it, trailing kisses down my exposed neck to my collarbone until he gets the door open.

Picking me up again, he carries me through the threshold as he kicks the door shut behind him, turning only to lock the deadbolt before walking us to the bedroom. Rain continues to tap softly on the bedroom windows as the moon shines bright through the sheer curtains. When he sets me down, I'm already pulling off my jacket, dropping it to the floor and placing my small purse on my dresser.

Alex pulls back from me as he removes his own jacket, looking me up and down in the dress I've chosen tonight. I don't need to look down to know my nipples are hard, peeking through the dress as I've opted for no bra or underwear tonight.

"You're fucking stunning, you know that?" I'm smiling at the way his eyes darken when I fist my hands in his shirt, pulling him toward me as I crash my lips to his.

The kiss is deep, a hunger flowing through us both. As he trails his fingertips down my spine, teasing the material barely covering my ass, there's a tenderness to his touch I haven't seen. One that's causing heat to pool in my belly and my thighs to become slick with my own arousal.

I slowly unbutton his shirt as he trails his hand back up my spine, moving his lips to my collarbone again, taking me back to our first night together.

When I get to his pants, I'm making work of his belt as he removes his hands from me, only to pull off his shirt before they snap back to their rightful place on my skin. He's playing with the strings holding my dress together as he slowly undoes the tie at the back of my neck.

"You were right, you know," I pant in his ear as he plants kisses on my shoulder.

He hums his question, the tie at the back of my neck almost undone as I finish my thought, "No book boyfriend could ever love me the way you do."

Shit. I meant to say fuck, not love.

My hands are still on his pants button when he stops moving. The tie at the back of my neck is undone, the thin pieces of fabric laying loosely on my shoulders as he pulls back from me.

His right hand laces through the hair at the back of my neck, my heart racing in anticipation of his reaction as his left hand traces my collarbone tattoo. He tosses my dress strap off my shoulder, the material exposing part of my breast as he slowly trails his hand to my other shoulder to do the same.

As he moves his hand back to the center of my chest, his knuckles graze my skin lightly in a way that has me twitching with need under his touch.

He trails his hand further as he takes my dress with it, my breasts springing free of the fabric. His eyes darken when he looks back up at me. "And don't you ever forget it."

He pulls me in for another kiss as he yanks my dress down, the material falling to my feet, leaving me in only my strappy heels.

When he pulls back to look at me, he groans when he sees I've worn nothing under the dress. "Fuck, I love it when you listen."

I'm staring at his half undone pants when he looks down at himself, noticing my gaze. Chuckling, his hands are on me again, grabbing underneath my thighs as he lifts me. His bulge presses against my core for a moment before he throws me onto the bed.

I prop myself up on my elbows as he stands tall over me. The moonlight hitting his tattoos in all the right places. He's slow to drop to his knees, his eyes set on my core as he does, so dark they are almost black.

I watch as he grabs my ankle, planting a kiss to the inside of my calf as his hands undo the strap of my heel. He continues to plant kisses higher on my leg as he slips my foot out of my heel. When he stops his path at the inside of my knee I groan, throwing my head back in agony as he refuses to touch me. Though loving every second he's dragging out.

He moves his hand to my other ankle, repeating the same process as he plants gentle kisses to the inside of my leg while he removes my heel.

"Alex," I groan out when he reaches my knee again.

He smiles against my leg as he wraps his hands around my thighs, pulling me to the edge of the bed.

"Do you need something, baby?" His voice is gravelly and husky as he asks the question.

I nod enthusiastically as my hand grips the hair at the top of his head. "Please," I beg.

It doesn't take him long to plant a kiss to my core that has me throwing my head back in bliss as he finally touches me. His movements start slow, but when my grip on his hair tightens as he brings me closer to the edge, he hardens his pace.

Plunging two fingers inside me, he traces my clit with his tongue, speeding up as he draws me closer and closer to my orgasm. I can feel it building at the base of my spine, though I need more, I need him.

I try to pull him up but he doesn't budge. "Alex, I need you."

He pulls back only to drive his fingers deeper inside me when he says, "Come for me first, baby. Show me how pretty you are when you come undone on my fingers."

His mouth is back on my clit as he finishes his sentence. His deep voice sends me over the edge as my fists grip my comforter, finding some way to hold on to reality as my orgasm overtakes me. My back arches off the bed, but Alex holds my hips still, lapping up every inch of my pleasure as I ride the wave he's sent me on.

As I come down, I lay back on the bed, catching my breath as he leans over me. He wipes my remaining arousal from his bottom lip with his thumb, the sight alone threatening to throw me over the edge again.

Before I can grab onto him, he's taking off his pants, setting his cock free in a way that has me sitting up. From this angle, I'm perfectly aligned to...

"Oh fuck, baby." He breathes out when I sit up and take him into my mouth, unable to hold back any longer from tasting him again. The shock in his voice causes me to moan my pleasure around his cock at the feeling of catching him off guard. Knowing that I have the same effect on him that he has on me.

My blood floods with excitement when he threads his hands through my hair, though I'm filled with disappointment when he pulls out of my mouth instead of driving himself deeper.

The disappointment must show on my face because he looks down at me, taking his cock into his hand as his grip tightens on my hair.

He brushes the head of his cock against my lips as I lap up his precum, greedily taking what I can get from him. When I try to take him into my mouth again, he stops me. "If I let you suck my cock right now, there's no way I'll last."

I look up at him through my lashes, unable to take any more foreplay and in desperate need of anything he's willing to give me.

"I need you closer," I beg, but he's already grabbing me by my waist, throwing me higher onto the bed as he climbs on top of me. Lining himself up with my entrance, he kisses me passionately, our tongues colliding as my hands explore every inch of him that I can reach.

I gasp as he begins pushing himself into me, his size something I'm not sure I'll ever get used to. He pauses every inch to let me adjust as he plants kisses along my neck, one of his hands reaching up to my breast to pinch my nipple as he continues his painfully slow movements.

Not able to take anymore of his slow movements, I wrap my leg around his waist, pulling him all the way inside me. He groans at the feeling, the

sound sending another pleasurable rush of heat to my core.

It doesn't take him long to start moving, pulling out only to thrust back into me. Though this isn't like before. Our bodies are tangled. One of his arms wraps around my waist, supporting my back from underneath me as his other hand squeezes my breast and he trails kisses any place his lips can reach. Our legs are entwined, doing everything we can to close any distance between our bodies.

He pulls out slowly, only to drive back into me with a force that sends a wave of pleasure through my body. His movements are controlled and calculated, threatening to send me over the edge in a way I've never been sent before.

My vision blurs, water pooling in the corners of my eyes. As he plants kisses on my sternum, driving himself into me, my worries wash away, replaced by the safety of the man currently in my presence. My final wall breaks down with the man I love.

"Tell me, again." The words escape my lips in a whisper. When he looks up at me, stalling deep inside me, I know he's heard every word.

He moves his arm from beneath me, placing his hand on my bicep. His fingers trail down my arm as he encircles my wrist, bringing my hand to his lips as he kisses the inside of my palm and then the inside of my wrist.

He looks at me as he interlaces his fingers with mine, bringing our hands down to the bed beside my head as he lowers himself onto me again. He pulls out of me only to grab my thighs to lift my legs so he can drive into me even deeper than before.

Leaning down, he barely grazes my lips as he looks into my eyes. "I love you," he says before his lips touch mine again. A tear slips free when he says the words, my hand tightening around his.

Overcome with love, my heart swells as I grip him harder, moving my legs up even further so he can drive himself deeper into me.

"Again," I whisper against his lips as he continues to kiss me.

"I love you." He pulls back, driving into me again.

Another tear slips free and he removes his lips from mine, kissing away the salty liquid from my cheeks.

A smile overtakes me as I tell him, "Again." my orgasm building in my spine, not needing much to send me over the edge. I can tell by his breathing that he's close too.

He unlocks our hands, snaking both of his arms beneath me as he holds me close. He continues to kiss away my tears as he drives deeper and harder into me.

“I love you, I love you, I love you,” Each time he says it, he punctuates his words with another thrust, never getting deep enough as though our bodies will never be satisfied until our souls are tied to one another for eternity.

He kisses me again, pulling back to say against my lips, this time without my asking, “I love you, Beth.”

I come undone as he does the same. His grip on me becomes punishing as he holds on to me as I scream his name into the night air.

I’m so close, so close to saying it back, yet the words don’t leave my lips.

As we come down, my tears transition from something happy and blissful to disappointment with myself.

He’s still inside me, our legs intertwined again as he watches me, our breathing regulating as tears continue to fall onto my cheeks.

“Hey, are you okay?” He’s so tentative and gentle when he asks the question that I hate myself more for not saying it back when I had the chance.

“Alex, I– I—” He places a finger over my lips before I continue.

“Oh, baby. I know,” Touching his forehead against mine, he continues, “I know. It’s okay, wait until you’re ready.” The relief that passes through me has me relaxing my body in his arms.

He holds me as he grabs a blanket from the bed and throws it over us. Moving so we are lying on our sides, our legs still entwined, we hold each other until we’re fast asleep in each other's arms.

I don’t think I’ve ever loved anyone more than the way that I love Alex.

BETH

A distant knocking sound wakes me from my sleep. Blinking my eyes, I wake to the early morning sun just beginning to shine through my bedroom windows. Alex groans beneath where I rest my head on his chest.

A small twinge in my neck has me sitting up, though Alex grabs at me in protest as I stretch my neck.

“Who is that?” Alex says, eyes still closed.

My hand goes to his arm, worried, considering I didn’t plan to have any visitors today. “I’m not sure.” The shake in my voice is noticeable as my grip tightens on Alex’s arm.

Alex sits up next to me in bed, kissing me lightly on the cheek. “I’ll go see who it is. It’ll be okay.” He yawns as he gets out of bed, slipping on his slacks from the night before. I follow him, getting out of bed as I slip on sweats and a sweatshirt.

“Stay here, I’ll see who it is first,” he says before he exits my bedroom. My leg bounces as I sit on the edge of my bed, breathing as quietly as I can, attempting to hear who is at the door.

The deep vibrato of another man’s voice sounds from the living room, but I can’t make out who it is. The two men speak in hushed tones, interrupted by the loud bang of the door slamming open, the visitor raising his voice. When I recognize who it is, my nervous system regulates, calmed

by the owner of the voice, only for my heart rate to tick up when I realize how angry he is.

“Listen, asshole, you want to tell me why you’re half naked in my sister’s apartment? Last time I saw you, she looked ready to rip your head off.”

I’m on my feet in no time as Benny’s voice trails in from the living room. With only a few strides, I’m standing in the living room, watching as Benny, overnight bag in tow, stands toe-to-toe with Alex, a finger pointed at his chest as Alex would budge from such a move.

Alex has his hands up, taking a step back. “It’s not like that. Come on in, and we’ll make some breakfast.”

Benny cuts him off, slinging his bag off his shoulder and letting it fall to the floor with a thud. “I’m not eating breakfast with you.” A laugh gets caught in my throat as I watch the two bicker over something as small as breakfast. Benny whips his head toward me. “Ellie, are you okay?”

He tries to take a step toward me, but Alex scoffs. “She’s fine.” Before Alex can finish his thought, Benny shoves past him, making his way toward me and dropping his bag in the process.

Benny wraps his arms around me, eyes scanning my face and arms for any signs of the attack when he pulls back from the hug.

“I’m okay, Benny. Really. I fought him off this time.” I do my best to give Ben a soft smile, trying to calm his nerves.

“Are you sure? What if he comes back?” Ben asks, concern shining bright in his eyes. Before I can respond, Alex is doing so for me.

“She’s fine, Benny. I took care of him.” I wince at Alex using my childhood nickname for Ben. He’s always hated when someone else calls him Benny, the same way I hate when other people call me Ellie.

Ben turns toward Alex at a snail’s pace, his cheeks reddening with anger as his fists clench by his sides.

“What the fuck are you still doing here?” Ben bites out the question, taking a step closer to Alex.

Alex, still in protective mode over me given recent events, snaps back, “Making sure your sister stays safe. Tell me, do you have the same tendency toward violence as your father?”

“I do when I find out my sister’s been stalked and attacked and I show up to find some asshole in her apartment.” He motions toward Alex as he takes another step closer to him.

“Benny, back off,” I say, approaching the two of them on their side, hoping to de-escalate the situation.

Ben looks toward me, his face twisted in a mix of anger and confusion. “What is he doing here, Beth?”

I stammer, unsure of how to answer the question. Unsure of what Alex is to me. “Boyfriend” sounds too juvenile and “lover” will only piss Ben off more.

When I don’t answer, Ben turns back to Alex, placing a hand on his shoulder. “Alright, time for you to leave.”

Alex swats Ben’s hand away. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Ben’s hand returns to its place on Alex’s shoulder, more forcefully this time. “I said it’s time to leave.” He begins to push Alex toward the door, my gut twisting at the sight.

“Benny, stop it. I love him,” I exclaim, the words leaving my lips without a thought. Both men stall in their showdown to turn their heads in my direction.

Benny’s eyebrows scrunch together as he pulls away from Alex, the tiredness showing in his eyes from his early flight. Though when I glance at Alex, he’s all smiles, moving toward me as he pushes past Ben.

“This isn’t how I wanted to tell you. I wasn’t sure how to tell you. I—” Alex cuts me off with a kiss, taking my face in his hands as he fuses his lips to mine as though we are the only two people in the apartment.

When he pulls back, there’s a glimmer in his eye. “Finding out you love me while you’re defending my honor? There’s nothing I’d want more.” He kisses me again before pulling back. “I was beginning to think you’d never tell me,” he says with a smile.

“Oh, shut up.” I playfully push him away, but he pulls me back into his side as we turn to face Ben.

“Ew. Someone needs to catch me up. Now.” Benny crosses his arms, looking between the two of us, his lip curling of its own volition each time he glances at Alex.

Sighing, I motion to the two stools at my kitchen bar. “Both of you sit. I’ll make breakfast.” They do as I say, though not before Ben scoots his stool further away from Alex as they take a seat.

When Ben looks at me, that’s when I notice the fear in his eyes. Moving back to him, I throw my arms around his shoulders, bringing him into a hug.

“Are you okay, Ellie?” he asks quietly.

“I’m okay, Benny,” I reassure him.

We spend the rest of the morning in my apartment, discussing the details of the events I’ve been keeping from Benny over the past year. Alex stays by my side in quiet support as I do.

When we’ve finished our food and my story, Benny says, “I’m going to fucking kill him.”

“Trust me, I tried.” It’s the first thing Alex says. Benny’s reaction is a small nod toward Alex, the two sharing some mutual understanding written in testosterone that I can’t decipher.

“I have to open the gym, but I’ll stop by later, okay?” Alex says before standing to take our plates and putting them in the sink.

He stops by my seat on his way out, kissing me on the forehead before whispering in my ear, “Tell me again.”

I smile as I say those three words again. “I love you.”

His grin has overtaken his face when he pulls back from me. “I love you too.”

“Ugh, get a room,” Ben says before he goes back to looking at his phone.

Once the door is shut behind Alex, Ben looks up from his phone again. “I’m not so sure about him,” he says.

Shrugging, I say, “He grows on you.” Making my way back to my bedroom, I call out behind me, “You’ve got dishes.”

As I get ready for the day, it’s the first time I’ve felt excited to work at my bookstore since the day I opened it.

A few hours later, Benny and I are squished together behind my bookstore counter, both looking at the screen on my small laptop as he scolds me over my current business situation.

“How could you let this get so bad, Ellie?” he asks, pinching the bridge of his nose.

I hold out a finger to him. “I was a little preoccupied, alright?” I lace sarcasm into my tone, and he stands down.

“I have a few ideas, but you’re going to have to let me help you,” he says. I contemplate his words. It’s not that I don’t want his help. I worry about the burden it would cause.

I’m still contemplating his offer when Alex walks through the door, the front door bells chiming for the first time today.

“Oh look, your first customer,” Benny says with sarcasm. I shoot him a glare at his tone, then turn back to greet Alex with a smile.

Alex has something pulled up on his phone, all but shoving the screen in my face when he reaches the front desk. “Don’t be mad, but look what I did.” I take the phone from him, looking at the screen, baffled by what I’m seeing.

It’s several emails sitting in Alex’s inbox, all in relation to my bookstore. I look up at him, confused.

“I sent out a few messages, made a couple of social media posts, you know, did some outreach about the bookstore, and those are the replies. Each one of those groups wants to host a book club night here. You have enough interest to book two nights a week, and it’ll only grow from there.”

I scroll through the emails, unsure if what he’s telling me is true.

Benny hums from beside me. “That could draw in a lot of business. Especially with how comfortable you’ve made it in here. I could set up an online shop for you too, and you could post each book club’s monthly book there so others could join in.”

Alex steps forward to stand in front of Ben as Ben shows him the laptop screen. “That’s a great idea. I bet we could index all of these books and set up an online store. We’ll definitely reach more buyers that way if we have in-store sales as well as online sales.”

“Uh, guys?” I say, trying to interject my business into their current planning, but they don’t hear me.

As they continue talking, I close the laptop lid, finally getting their attention. “I’m happy the two of you are getting along, but do I have any say in this?”

They look at each other once before looking back at me, both simultaneously saying “No,” before opening the laptop again.

I roll my eyes but can’t help the smile spreading across my face. Their ideas are good and could help save my crumbling business. I didn’t want to admit it before, but I could use the help, and hearing these two discuss their ideas, I know they are up to the task of helping me succeed.

“Let me go grab some lunch, and then we can get started on setting up your online shop,” Ben says to me after a few moments of brainstorming.

“Great idea. Here, lunch is on me.” Alex pulls out his wallet and hands Ben his card.

Ben waves the card in the air at me. “Now *his* money, I can accept.”

I laugh as Ben makes a quick exit before Alex can take his card back. When the doorbell chimes, it leaves Alex and me alone in my bookstore, the rare Pacific Northwest sun shining through the windows, painting everything in a warm glow.

Alex moves around the desk to meet me where I stand. His hands wrap around my waist. “What was that about?” He asks.

“Just an inside joke.” I smile, bringing my hands up to wrap around his shoulders.

He chuckles before he says, “I got a plan in place for self-defense lessons this morning. We’ll start them next month, and Tiffany thinks we’ll get good traction for them.”

I squeeze his shoulders. “That’s amazing,” I all but squeal into his ear.

He laughs. “No, you’re amazing. I just listened to you.” He smiles, and the sunlight hits his blue eyes in a way that takes my breath away.

It’s then and there that I know I don’t want to spend a single day apart from Alex for the rest of my life.

“Benny will be staying for a week while he’s on leave, but I was thinking...”

“Yes.” Alex is quick with his response.

Laughing, I say, “You don’t even know what I was going to propose.”

“You stay at my place, and he takes yours. Everyone is comfortable, and I don’t have to go another night without you by my side.” He pulls me in closer as he says the words I was thinking out loud.

“Well, since you offered, I guess that would be fine,” I say sarcastically.

He smiles against my lips as he leans down for a kiss, a deep laugh escaping his throat as he says, “I love you.”

My heart is open, and my walls are obliterated as I kiss him back, not hesitating when I say, “I love you too.”

EPILOGUE

BETH

Five Months Later

It's a warm early spring night, the evening sun shining through the windows of my bookshop as I set up the chairs for one of my Friday night book clubs. Almost every Thursday and Friday night has been booked the past few months, and the request list keeps growing. Different book club groups from around town, small and large, want to use my bookshop as their meeting place. It's refreshing to see so many people share the love of romance books that I have.

Not to mention that during Benny's week-long visit, he helped me set up my online bookstore. That's usually what I'm doing when the book club is meeting. I'm packing my online orders and getting them ready to ship out the next day.

Though I'm not the only one who has seen business increase, Alex's self-defense classes have taken off as well. Some women even filter over from the bookstore to his training courses.

He's reassured me that I'm the only client he'll take on a one-on-one basis now.

Both of our businesses are beginning to thrive, with the parking lot almost full every day. The only downside to our newfound success is that it leaves very little room for us to see each other.

The host of the book club walks through the door, and I run them through the current setup for tonight as they unpack their own themed decorations. I let them know I'll be in the back packing orders, and they can get me whenever they need me.

As I'm packing orders, I reflect on the past five months. I stayed with Alex for the week that Ben was here, and the two of them found they had plenty in common as they worked with me to build a solid business plan for the future. Ben even capitalized on my training sessions while he was here, him and Alex laughing as they sparred in the ring.

The two of them exchanged numbers only to send each other a long string of funny videos and memes, though neither had ever actually written a text. It's good they are getting along.

After we said goodbye to Benny, I started sleeping in my own room again. Though that lasted for half a night before Alex was crawling into bed next to me. When I complained about him having a key to my place to use whenever he wanted, he gave me a key to his place the next day.

I've only ever used it to peruse his bookshelves on my days off when he's running training classes.

Sienna was over the moon when I told her that Alex and I had finally made things official. Though we haven't found the time with all of our busy schedules, the four of us have our own group chat so we can eventually go on a double date.

Before I know it, I've finished packing orders for the night, and the book club is packing up their chairs, thanking me for another fun night. A few of them even buy some new books to read for their next book club meeting.

After ringing them up, I lock up the front of my bookshop, the sun slowly setting behind the buildings across the street. I'm making my way to the back stairwell leading up to my apartment when that deep voice catches me from behind.

"And where are you running off to? Off to steal another book from my collection?" Alex says.

I turn to look at him. "Actually, I was going to add some books to your collection this time. I figured you could use a bit of diversifying on your shelves."

He laughs as he approaches me. "I'll gladly read any book you recommend," he says as he brushes a strand of hair out of my face. "Steak tonight?" he asks.

My eyes widen at the promise of Alex cooking steak for us. He's only done it a few times when we've found the time to eat together, and each time, he's made it so good I thought I'd orgasm from the taste.

“Don’t you have a class tonight?” I ask.

He shrugs. “I got Tiffany to cover it. I thought we could spend some time together tonight.”

I’m excited by the proposition, knowing we haven’t had much time together over the past few months, though we’ve never failed to fall asleep in each other’s arms.

“C’mon, let’s go,” Alex says as he guides me up the stairs. Once we’re in my apartment, I take off my shoes, kicking them toward the shoe holder next to the front door.

“I’ll never get used to seeing this place without the mess of unpacked boxes,” he says, closing the door behind him.

I swat his arm playfully as I look around. The boxes are gone, replaced by thrifted furniture and decor. My bookshelves lined against the living room wall, my full collection finally on display. Though I hate to say that it pales in comparison to Alex’s collection, given the fact that he has twice as many bookshelves as I do.

“I’m just going to change, then I can help with dinner,” I tell him. I expect him to begin setting up for dinner in the kitchen, but he follows me instead.

“I love what you’ve done in here. How do you manage to make every room feel so homey?” he says, wrapping his arms around me from behind as I take off my earrings at my dresser.

“Just something I’m born with, I guess.” I sigh sarcastically.

Alex kisses my neck, and I lean back into him, my eyes closing as I breathe in this moment, hoping to burn it into my skin forever.

When I turn toward him, his smile matches my own as I stare into his blue eyes. But when he backs me against my dresser, I say, “Imagine what I could do with a bigger room.”

Alex’s eyes twitch, a light bulb lighting above his head. “I’ll be right back,” he says before running out of the room. The faint click of the front door opening sounds through my apartment, leaving me to wait patiently to see what he’s up to.

When he enters my room again, he’s wearing a hard hat, safety glasses, and carries the same in his left hand. In his right hand, he holds a sledgehammer.

He walks past me, toward the wall that stands between our two bedrooms. Setting the extra hard hat and glasses on the bed before turning

to the wall. Reaching out, he takes a shelf off the wall, leaving a blank spot on the drywall before he turns toward me, setting the shelf and everything on it on the bed.

“I never want to spend another night away from you again,” Alex says. “Tell me you want the same, and I’ll get you a bigger room, baby.”

I’m practically giddy with laughter as I respond, “Yes, please. I never want to spend another night away from you either.”

Alex smiles and hands me the extra hard hat and safety goggles. After I put them on, he lifts the sledgehammer over his shoulder and slams it against the wall, creating a circular dent. Another hit and he’s made a hole going all the way through to his room. Peering over his shoulder, I can see the edge of his bedframe as he hits the wall again.

After a couple of swings, he hands me the sledgehammer, which I happily take. Laughing, I hit the wall a couple of times before my breathing becomes heavy.

“I guess we have some renovations to do,” I say.

Alex laughs. “Here.” He pulls out his phone and snaps a photo of the hole in the wall, then shows me his phone screen, which shows he’s sent the photo to Roman.

He takes the sledgehammer from me, placing it in the corner of the room as I hand him my hard hat. “Let’s make dinner, and then we can come up with a plan to merge our apartments. I always wanted a bigger place anyway,” he says as I follow him out into the kitchen.

“Think of what our book collections will look like sitting on the shelves together,” I say, helping him take out the pans from the cupboard. He never did put his pans back in his own kitchen after he made me breakfast.

His phone pings and he shows me the screen as he pulls up the text from Roman.

ROMAN

Tell me you’re joking.

Alex and I burst into laughter before his phone pings again.

ROMAN

Theo and I will be over tomorrow to draw up some plans.

Don’t put any more holes in the wall before we get there. It’s an old building.

Alex is typing out his reply when another text comes through.

ROMAN

I'm glad you and Beth are happy. Mom would've loved her.

Alex finishes his reply, one that I don't see because I'm too overjoyed with the possibilities of expanding the apartments. I'm bouncing with excitement when Alex pulls me in for a kiss.

He only pulls back long enough to ask me, "So how big do you want our reading room to be?"

Thank you for reading Hate It with You, your support means the world to me. If you enjoyed this book, I would be forever grateful if you posted a review on the platform(s) of your choice. Reviews, posts, and word of mouth go a long way for authors.

Until next time,

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Makenna Cleaver grew up an avid daydreamer with a fascination for storytelling. It didn't matter if it was a TV show, a movie, a book, or a play, she found herself captivated by the characters, plot twists, and settings that made up an unforgettable story. Romance storylines in particular never failed to grab her attention.

She currently lives in the Pacific Northwest with her husband and dog, Scout. Having gone through a few hardships in early adulthood, she's passionate about telling real stories with raw emotions and complex characters that reflect life itself. Although, knowing there's a light at the end of every tunnel, she never leaves her characters without their happily ever after.



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