



THE FIGHT

A CLEAR VIEW COUNTRY CLUB NOVEL

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

M U T E

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*For Julia and Hannah.
He finally gets what he deserves.*

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PLAYLIST

Hatef-k - The Bravery
Casual Affair - Panic! At The Disco
Hooked - Sam Short
Volatile Times - IAMX
You're So Creepy - Ghost Town
Aphrodite - Sam Short
SENSITIVE - MOTHICA
I'm Not Yours - The Haunt
KILLING TIME - Jordan Fiction
Fuck You - Silent Child
Cinderella - Mac Miller, Ty Dolla \$ign
Insanely Illegal Cage Fight - Dal Av, Jackson Rose
The Hills X Creepin X The Color Violet - LonelyEve
FIND THE WHOLE PLAYLIST [HERE](#)

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

The Fight consists of triggering themes and subjects, including but not limited to: gore, violence, blood, parental death, and bully aspects. Tropes include stepsiblings, enemies-to-lovers, hate-to-want-you, fighter MC, and a virgin FMC.

Please note: this is a fast-paced story plot-wise, but the actual connection and relationship between the main characters is a SLOW BURN! If that isn't your jam, turn back now.

This story is one of many in the Clear View Country Club shared world. If you enjoy it, check out the other authors' contributions - C. Lymari, Dakota Wilde, A.R. Hall, Daisy Jane, C. Hallman, Selena Michaels, L.K Reid, Laura John, Cassie Lein, and Nikita.

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CHAPTER ONE

SHAY

Sweat drips down my face as the familiar sting of adrenaline pulses through my veins. I wrap my wrist one last time, then move the tape up my palm and in between my fingers, making sure each one is secured but still able to move.

The gym is humming with life tonight. Muffled grunts and distant chatter slink into the locker room. That, along with the smell of leather and metal, lets me know I'm home.

This... this is my home.

Scanning the room, I take in the rows of dented lockers and the worn benches from years of fighters sitting exactly where I am now. They'd all been here, in this same space, going through the same rituals, fighting their own battles—inside the ring and out. For some, it was about money or even survival. But for me, it was about something else. This was my escape, my way of exorcising the demons that wouldn't let me sleep at night.

When my mom died three years ago, I struggled to find my place. I was a kid, barely fifteen, and had just lost the person I cared about the most. Her death made something inside me snap, or maybe that something was lingering below the surface all along, who knows. But the way I learned to cope was to fight.

The high I got from fist meeting flesh was better than sinking my dick into the smoothest, tightest pussy. But once I started really training and

learned my strength and how to harness it? Mmm. There was no coming down.

Clenching my fists one last time, I glance at my reflection in the cracked mirror. The fluorescent lights cast shadows over the sharp lines of my face. My eyes, hard and unblinking with an animalistic edge. My jaw, ticking slightly with the anticipation of what I know is about to happen.

I let myself take a few steps back until my shoulder blades hit the cool steel of the lockers. The chill from them seeps into my bones as I try to focus on my breathing—slow, deep inhales to calm the beast inside of me, but only for a moment.

Reaching into the duffel at my feet, I grab my towel and water bottle. I pat the sweat from my face, then bring the bottle to my lips. As I swing my leg over the bench to sit, the door to the locker room opens, letting a wave of chaotic sound in with it.

Austin walks in, grinning like he just won the lottery. He's one of the few people I've let into this space, into my routine. He knows when to push and when to back off.

"Man, you wouldn't believe the crowd tonight." He smiles, closing the distance between us and leaning against the lockers next to me. "Place is packed, and they're all here for you, ready to watch you put some poor bastard on the mat."

I glance at him with a flat expression but can feel the corners of my mouth twitch. Austin is good at this—good at reading the room and reading me. He knows I don't need some over-the-top pep talk, just a reminder of what I'm walking into.

"Yeah?" I ask, taking another sip of my water. "How many?"

"Standing room only, man."

This has basically become a part of my before-fight ritual now. Austin hyped me up, and I soak in just enough to let my confidence solidify into something unshakable. Not like I really need the help to begin with, but I need the edge—for everyone to believe I'm untouchable, that I've already won before the first punch is even thrown.

"Good." I finally let a half smile show. "More witnesses for what's about to go down."

Austin chuckles, pushing off the lockers, and claps me on the shoulder. "That's what I like to hear. You've got this. Just do what you do best."

I nod and zero in on the fight. "I always do."

He gives me one last look. “I’ll be out there, man. Watching your back.”

I don’t respond, just give him a quick nod as he turns and heads out the same way he came. As the door closes behind him, the silence of the locker room settles back in, but this time, it feels different. It feels like the calm before the storm.

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CHAPTER TWO

BLAIR

Waves rush the shoreline and tickle the tips of my toes as I peer through the lens of my camera. I scoot backward, careful not to make any sudden movements and scare the ruddy in front of me.

It's still funny to me, the amount I've learned about animals and sea life in Saint Bipal since moving here three months ago. I can name most of the birds that frequent the shore, like this ruddy, and even identify the different types of shells I come across. Maybe if I had paid this much attention in school, I would have graduated higher in my class, but oh well.

The shutter of my camera sounds out as I press the button, and the small bird cranes his neck toward me before spreading his wings and flapping away. I sigh and lower my camera, setting it in my lap. He'll be back. They always are.

Leaning back, my hands sink into the warmth of the sand and brace the weight of my body. Over the last few months, I still haven't gotten used to the beauty of this small Florida town. It's peaceful—the swaying palm trees, the bobbing boats in the water, and the sky full of soft pastels. A very stark contrast to the city life I had grown used to.

I wasn't too thrilled about the idea of moving from everything I had ever known, but seeing the excitement on my mom's face when she proposed the idea of beach living made my heart turn to mush. Her excitement practically spilled out of her pores and made me think this really could be the "fresh start" we needed. Only, Dad wouldn't be with us. I try

not to think about him too much because it's still so painful, but I'm scared to forget his face at the same time.

Pushing the thoughts away, I lean my head back and let the dipping sun touch the skin of my neck. It's so warm and humid here, but I like it.

My phone buzzes in my pocket, pulling me from the tranquility I was basking in, and I can already feel the frown lines forming at the edge of my lips. Slipping the device out, careful not to knock the camera from my lap, I glance at the screen and see Hannah's face.

A part of me is relieved it's her, though I haven't gotten a mysterious text from the unknown number since a few weeks after my dad died. I should be thankful that the silent tormentor is gone, and I am. But every time my phone rings, I still worry it's *them*...

Hitting the green bubble, I answer and tuck it between my shoulder and ear. "Hey, what's up?"

"Blair, I need a *huge* favor," Hannah's voice is slightly frantic. The kind that says she's desperate and out of options. "Can you fill in for me tonight as a ring girl? It's at Saint Bipal's gym. I know it's super last-minute, but I'm stuck dealing with my bitch-ass cousins who are here for the summer."

I hesitate and fidget with the camera in my lap. The last thing I want to do is give up my peaceful night for a sweaty gym full of testosterone and aggression. But Hannah's been there for me since I moved here. She took me under her wing and deemed me her new BFF the moment we met in a coffee shop, so I feel I owe her. On top of that, it's not like I really have any plans.

"Yeah, I can do that." My voice carries a hint of reluctance, but I don't give her time to notice. "What time do I need to be there?"

"Like, now." The words tumble out of her mouth, and I can hear the relief in her tone as she sighs. "Doors open in an hour, but you know how it is. I'm really sorry to spring this on you."

"It's fine. I'll head over there now."

"Thank you! You're seriously a lifesaver. I owe you one, big-time. Just head for the locker room in the back-left corner when you get there. My locker is thirteen, and I have some clothes you can wear in there."

"Perfect. I'll let you know how it goes."

We say our goodbyes, and I slip my phone back into my pocket, taking one last look at the horizon. The beach was nice while it lasted, I guess.

I make my way back to my mom's old Honda she lets me borrow, the sand shifting beneath my feet as I walk. Sliding inside, I drop my camera into the passenger seat and start the engine. The rumble pulls me out of my sunset-induced trance as I back out onto the road and head to the gym.

The drive from the beach to the gym isn't long at all. Hell, everything in Saint Bipal is fairly close—maybe thirty minutes tops to get where you need. As I turn off the main road, I follow the bumpy direction of my GPS until the familiar "arrived" sounds out.

I've never been here, but Hannah has told me all about it. They pay her two hundred bucks to walk around a ring in skimpy clothes and hold giant numbers indicating the upcoming round of the fights. Easy money.

The gym is tucked away on the backstreets of town, a place you'd only find if you knew it was there. The outside is unassuming, a gray brick building with a flickering neon sign that simply reads "GYM."

As I park and step out, I can already hear the roar of chatter spilling from inside. Crossing the parking lot, dodging potholes in the asphalt, I take a quick breath before opening the large metal doors.

Inside, the gym is a lot different than the calm I left behind at the beach. The walls are covered in posters of past fights, workout equipment is scattered across the back half, and punching bags hang from the ceiling in the corners. The smell of sweat and metal fills my nose as the sound of conversation and shit-talking circles around me. The place is already packed with more people than I can even count.

The ring is the centerpiece, surrounded by rows of chairs that are already occupied. The mat itself is a bright blue with patches of brown I have no doubt are remnants of old, dried blood.

Pushing my way through the crowd, I head for the left corner where the locker room is. I shuffle inside quickly, letting the door fall closed behind me, drowning out a touch of the noise outside. The space is just as rough around the edges as the rest of the gym. The walls are a dull, peeling beige, with lockers lining one side and a few cracked mirrors mounted above a row of sinks on the other. The air is thick with Bath & Body Works mist and aerosol deodorant. The dim overhead lights flicker occasionally too, casting an almost eerie glow over everything.

I drop my keys onto the nearest bench and steer myself toward the locker with a bedazzled 13 on the front. I pull the door open and find a

PINK Victoria's Secret bag shoved inside, along with some setting powder, a pair of heels, and tampons.

I jimmy the bag from its tight spot, then unzip it. The clothes Hannah left can hardly even be classified as such. A black crop top that's more like a sports bra with "Bipal Gym" across the front and a pair of red shorts that are definitely not going to cover my ass. They're tight, molded from spandex to cling to every curve, and leave little to the imagination. I stare at them for a moment and trace my fingers over the fabric.

Fuck it.

Changing quickly, I look at myself in the mirror. The shorts sit low on my hips, and the top cuts off just below my ribs, leaving my entire midsection bare. I turn slightly and clock that my ass cheeks are most definitely making an appearance, but I'm not mad at it.

As I'm adjusting the waistband, the locker room door swings open, and a man steps in. He's built like a tank with a bald head that glistens in the low light and a permanent scowl on his face. He's got to be a coach of some sort, judging by the way he carries himself.

"You must be Blair," he gruffs out, not even blinking at my outfit.
"Hannah told me you'd be filling in."

"Yep, that's me."

He crosses his arms over his broad chest, studying me. "You know what to do?"

I nod, even though I'm not too sure. It can't be that hard, though, right? I've seen plenty of fights on TV where the girls just smile, walk around the ring, then sit on the sidelines. Piece of fucking cake.

"Good. Just stay sharp, keep your eyes open, and don't get too close to the fighters. Things can get rough *quick*."

"Got it." I force a smile.

Now, he nods before turning on his heel to leave. "Oh, and Blair?" he throws over his shoulder. "This crowd isn't here for a beauty pageant. They want blood. Keep that in mind." With that, he's gone.

CHAPTER THREE

SHAY

As I round the corner away from the men's locker room, the ring comes into view, and my hands start to flex. Other than the fight itself, this is my favorite part.

As I creep toward the ring, my brain starts to shut out the noise around me. Cheers and boos turn into nothing more than muffled static. My heartbeat throbs in a steady, strong rhythm. The constant *whoosh, whoosh, whoosh* is a calming melody in my head.

As I make it to the outskirts, I take a quick look around me. A few familiar faces, Austin's included, poke out in the crowd, along with a few new ones. The ref stands on one side, while the announcer and ring girl are on the other. I clock her tight ass in little red shorts first, then drag my eyes up her body before landing on her face.

Normally, Hannah is front and center on Thursday nights, but this chick is different. Her skin is pale—almost an anomaly since we're in Florida—but her body is banging. Not too toned but filled out enough for a few decent handfuls. Her eyes are piercing too. A deep, rich green like mangrove leaves, with a halo of gold around them. Her auburn hair is long, damn near touching the top of her ass, with soft waves my fingers would love to tangle in.

Her eyes catch mine, and instead of looking away like most people do, she cocks a brow. It's like she's challenging me, asking what the fuck I'm looking at silently, and God does that make my dick twitch.

The announcer's voice slices through her stare, making her break her eyes from mine. Quickly, as he gives another rundown of me and my opponent, she reaches for the card with a number one on it. It looks so big in her hands, but she maneuvers it with ease, holding it to her chest as she steps up to the ring and folds herself in between the ropes.

Her hips sway as she holds the card high and makes a lap around the canvas. The light directly in the center shines onto her hair, making it look like flames on top of her head. I'm so focused on her I don't even think to give my opponent a look until she comes out of the ring and I step in.

He's all muscle, standing in the corner opposite of me. He jabs the air, bouncing up and down lightly on his feet. He's about my height, but his shoulders are bigger. His head is close-shaved, and sweat glistens off it. I would imagine bricks in his hands wouldn't stand a chance, but I'm not impressed. Size doesn't matter here, only skill.

Stepping forward once the announcer is done with yet another spiel, I hear the ref's voice take over, but I can't make out his words or even his face next to me. I'm too focused on the brick shit house in front of me. He extends his fist, a gesture of goodwill, but I don't bump it. I couldn't give a fuck less about pleasantries. I'm only here to fight.

A second later, the bell rings, cutting through all the other noise like a gunshot. My muscles tense, getting ready for whatever impact may be coming, and time almost slows down. Ol' shit house throws the first punch—a quick jab at my face—and I know we aren't even going to last three rounds. He's fucking predictable.

Ducking under his fist, I counter and send a hook into his ribs. Muscle and bone flex under my knuckles with a satisfying thud. He grunts but doesn't back down. *Typical*. Extending his hand again for another hit, he leaves his face open. *Perfect fucking shot*. I keep my left hand in front of my chin, moving just enough to evade his incoming punch, then push my right one out, letting it connect with his jaw.

He's stunned for maybe three seconds, but that's all I need. *Body, ribs, head. Body, ribs, head.* I repeat the mantra in my mind over and over as my knuckles hit every spot. His arms graze me, and at one point, he even gets in a few body shots, but I never slow.

The thing about me? I *never* stop. Once something is in my mind, I'm going to fucking do it. And tonight, this guy just happens to be something. It's one of the reasons I'm a force to be reckoned with in the ring. While

others may have me topped in size and sometimes even strength, what they don't have is fucking speed. Big bodies take more energy to move, so guys like ol' shit house here tire quickly and move slowly.

I don't even realize how sucked into the fight I am until the bell sounds out again, and I move back to my corner. My eyes are still on the guy across from me, his nose and lips now bloody, but when *she* moves in front of me to make her lap around the ring, I let myself get lost in the sway of her hips again.

Austin is in my ear, whispering some shit about how my opponent is about to go down, but I can't even comprehend his words fully. I'm too engrossed with this chick's ass. It's not like me to be so distracted, but fuck. Maybe the sooner I can get this dude on the mat, the sooner I can get this girl on her back. Pretty good motivation for me.

When she exits the ring, I spring back to the center, more ready than ever to end this fight. Ref taps us both, and then the bell rings again. I don't even give the guy a chance to throw any punches this time—not first anyway. I send double jabs right into his stomach, then kick my leg out to connect with his calf.

He does his best to dodge me, but he's moving too slowly. A few more kicks to his legs, and he crumples to his knees. His fists bite into my thighs, but I don't let it distract me. I push through the sting and throw one last punch as he tries to stand.

His huge frame falls backward, his head bouncing off the mat, blood oozing from every orifice. *Fucking KO.*

I give it a second, letting the ref slide down beside him before I celebrate the victory I know is mine. When his hand slaps the mat, I turn toward the crowd and grin. Austin's eyes catch mine, and he tips his head, silently motioning what we already knew—dude wouldn't last.

The crowd cheers, the announcer starts spouting off a quick recap, and all of my opponent's team starts to fill the ring. I take that as my cue to leave. This isn't my first win, so there is no need to stick around for all of the congratulations. Austin is better at that shit than me.

I try to slip away as undetected as possible. Not a hard feat, considering most people wouldn't even dare stand in my way after what they'd just witnessed. But I guess the new ring girl isn't most people.

As I climb out from in between the ropes, she doesn't even bother to move. Her eyes are stuck somewhere behind me, not even paying attention.

I nudge past her, letting my shoulder ram into hers. *Come on, Dollface. Follow me. I know you want to.*

“Watch it, asshole,” she spits behind me, and it makes me smile.

The thing with girls is they’re predictable too. Act like you don’t want them, and they’ll want you. Unavailable and uninterested is like a fucking beacon in the night to them. She may have called me an asshole, but I saw her eyes following me throughout the entire fight. She wants me, and something tells me she doesn’t want to admit that.

“Did you hear me?”

My smile grows, but I don’t turn around. Instead, I keep moving toward the locker room. It’s too loud to tell if she’s following me or not, but I’m not one of the best fighters on the coast because I can’t pick things up. The thing is, sometimes I read people *too well*. I guess that’s what happens when you’re forced to sit, mind your manners, and listen. You pick up tells, signs. All the things people don’t even realize they do.

Like the ring girl. My eyes might not have been on her the entire time, but in those brief seconds they were, I noticed she was tapping her fingers on her thigh. A nervous tic, maybe, or even a sign of boredom. I’m not sure yet, but I’m positive I’ll figure it out.

When I make it inside, the door doesn’t even get a chance to fall closed behind me. She storms in, forcing herself in front of me. “Care to apologize?”

I look down on her with a smirk. “For?”

“Damn near knocking me off my feet.”

I flash her my teeth. “Oh, no. I don’t think I do.”

Her chin juts upward, another tell. She’s trying to appear bigger than she is. “You think because you just beat some guy bloody, you can just waltz around without a care in the world? Not looking out for people you quite literally tower over?”

“You’re feisty.”

“And you’re a dick.”

“Well,” I start, doing my best not to laugh. *So. Fucking. Predictable.* “I have one if that’s what you mean. Is that why you’re here—because you want to fuck? ’Cause if not, I have other shit I need to do, and apologizing isn’t one of them.”

I go to move around her, but she counters, sidestepping in front of me. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me.” I place my hands on her shoulders and force her back to the side so I can move to my locker.

“Clearly, your mother didn’t teach you any fucking manners.” It’s an annoyed mumble, but I still hear it loud and fucking clear.

Normally, there isn’t shit anyone can do or say to get me riled up, but the mention of my mom? Yeah... that does it.

I spin on my heel and close the small gap between us in one giant stride. Leaning down, I make it to where we are practically nose to nose. “Excuse me?”

Now, she smiles—wickedly and full of venom. She’s not playing. “You heard me.” She throws my words back at me.

I don’t know what it is, but the fact she isn’t backing down, isn’t running to cower in a corner, turns me on. I don’t know if it’s the methodical smile on her face or the way her chin hasn’t dropped an inch, but the switch from anger to horny flipped. And it flipped really fucking fast.

I stare into her eyes, counting each little golden fleck. Being this close, I’m picking up every little detail I couldn’t see before. She has an edge—an air of arrogance and... something I can’t even grasp.

I watch as her green orbs move from mine down to my lips, then back again. And there it is—that thing I couldn’t pinpoint. She’s playing me at my own game.

Reckless.

Without holding myself back, I give in. Fuck making her chase me, and fuck whatever it is she said. I crush my lips to hers. Cherry and vanilla dance across my tongue as I shove it into her mouth and battle for the dominance she’s trying to take from me. My hands find her cheeks, and I cup them tightly, but still, she doesn’t back down.

Digging her nails into my chest, she pushes me. Our bodies don’t stop moving until my back hits the wall and her front is pressing into me. I move my palms, skating them from her cheeks down to her shoulders, then let them land on her hips. Gripping her, I lift her off her feet and spin, slamming her into the brick wall.

Her legs move up, snaking around my waist, and I let them stay there. I lean into her, using my body to hold her up as I move my hands again and find her wrists. Everything about this is sloppy and messy, fueled by nothing but bullshit anger and adrenaline.

I clasp my fingers around her wrists and raise them above her head, pinning them to the wall. Our teeth clank, our lips continue to fight, and my dick grows rock fucking hard. Her skin is hot against mine and slick with my sweat and blood from my knuckles.

I don't even know this girl's name, and already, she's weaseled her way under my skin. Or maybe that's just my dick talking. I want to be inside her —no, *need* to be inside her.

Letting her hands fall, I move back down and anchor my hands to her ribs. I inch my fingers upward, breaking the seal of her top from her skin, never tearing my lips from hers. I manage to cup the underside of her tits before the sound of the door screeching open has her planting her palms on my chest and pushing me away.

Her legs unravel as she falls to her feet and wipes her mouth with the back of her hand. Her chest is heaving, but that malice on her face never falls.

“Am I interrupting?” I don’t have to look to know it’s Austin.

Before I can even answer, she slides across the wall and past him, leaving the locker room quicker than she came in.

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CHAPTER FOUR

BLAIR

The morning light filters through the blinds. I'm still in bed, my legs tangled in the sheets, my phone pressed against my ear. I should have been up and getting around by now, but I can't bring myself to leave my little space of safety.

Since my dad died, things for me have been different. Something switched in my mom, and she became a complete helicopter. When we moved to Saint Bipal, though, the reins loosened. She didn't constantly ask where I was or try to keep me on some unrealistic schedule. Instead, she encouraged me to go out, make friends, and experience things.

It was like whatever worry she may have had disappeared. Being here, she felt free, or maybe the grief just wasn't as bad.

And I feel the past three months, that's exactly what I'm doing—living life and trying to not let the hurt hurt as bad. Sure, I can be a little reckless—the fighter from last night proves that—but God does it feel good to be in control again. Control of myself and what I want to do.

He was hot. All stiff muscles and fucking arrogance. Dark hair tousled almost perfectly like he meant to do it that way. And his eyes... fuck. They were so blue and so intense. And the way he moved in and out of the ring with a permanent predatory gaze, like no matter what he set his sights on, he would get. He was strong and broody and so damn intriguing.

The thought of Shay—that's what the announcer said his name was—has me clenching my knees together, and I know that alone can only mean

one thing. He's trouble. His attitude should have told me that already, but something about him drew me in. He seemed so open and willing to kiss me and even go further if I would have allowed it, but nothing else. He's closed off and cold.

Everything that happened happened fast. And then, when I left... he looked so confused and almost hurt? Or maybe that was just his ego. When I made it to the car, I was running on autopilot. Drove home, took a cold shower, then crawled into bed. I'd like to say I slept, but I didn't. Hence why I'm still lying here, listening to Hannah bitch about the cousins who made her miss last night.

"Well, tell me how it went. Did you survive the night?" Hannah's voice cuts through my thoughts and drags me back to reality.

"Barely..." I reply, staring at the ceiling. "It was intense. The crowd, the fight. Everything. It was like being in a different world."

Hannah laughs. "Told you it's wild. But you did good, right?"

"I guess. It wasn't as bad as I thought it would be. Pretty simple. I guess the adrenaline kind of takes over after a while."

"I know what you mean. It's honestly the best part," she giggles. "So, are you hooked yet?"

"Not yet," I say, a smile tugging at my lips. "But there was something. I don't know. It's hard to explain."

"I get it. It's a rush, right?"

"Yeah," I admit, the feeling of last night still buzzing under my skin. "But it wasn't just the fight. There was this guy..."

Hannah's voice rises an octave. "Oh?"

I hesitate because although I feel Hannah and I have become decent friends within these last few months, everyone always gets weird when I tell them I'm a virgin. And if I give her all the juicy details, I know she'll ask why I stopped.

"His name is Shay. He was one of the fighters last night. We didn't really talk, but there was something between us. Like this weird tension."

There's a pause on the other end for a few beats. "Shay Cornell?"

"Yeah..."

"Oh, babe. Don't."

"What do you mean?"

"Listen, normally I say 'do what you gotta do, and do who you want to do,' but not Shay. He's a self-righteous prick with a chip on his shoulder

since his mom died. Like, don't get me wrong, he's hot as fuck, but his demons aren't worth the trouble."

I laugh. "Do what you gotta do, and do who you want to do?"

"Yeah. Fucking YOLO or whatever." Her voice is serious.

"Well, don't worry. There will be no *doing* on my part. We stopped before it went there."

She pauses again. "What do you mean stopped before you got there? Is that all I get? No details?"

I sigh. "He damn near ran me over getting out of the ring, so I said something. When he ignored me, it pissed me off, and I followed him to the locker room—"

"Not the locker room." I can hear the smile in her voice.

"When I got in there, we exchanged some words, then he kissed me. Or I kissed him? I don't even know. I feel it just... happened."

"Nothing just *happens* with Shay Cornell. He's a calculated motherfucker, Blair. I guarantee he wanted you to follow him."

"Regardless, maybe I wanted to follow him too. Like, the thought of being with someone so dangerous—someone I watched just beat the brakes off another guy—it..."

"Turned you on?"

"I was going to say excite me," I laugh.

"Same thing. Why did it stop at a kiss, though? Shay always follows through."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means you aren't the first girl he's lured to the locker room after a fight." I can practically picture her brows rising as she stares at me through her lashes the way she always does when she's being serious.

I groan. "Great."

"Shit happens. But back to the story..."

I roll my eyes. "That's it. We made out a bit, he pushed me up against the wall, ran his hands under my shirt for a second, but then someone walked in. And when they walked in, I pushed him away and walked out."

"Damn, cockblock."

"I was actually thankful. When we kissed, I was ready to go as far as he would. I was in, like, a haze, but when I heard the door, all of that went away, and I realized I couldn't follow through. I don't think I'm ready."

"Don't think you're ready? For what, a one-night stand?"

“I swear if you get weird, I’m blocking you and never talking to you again.”

She doesn’t say anything, just breathes quietly on the other end.

“I’m a virgin.”

“Oh. I don’t know what I was thinking, but that wasn’t it,” she laughs. “So you haven’t been dicked down yet—it isn’t a big deal. It’ll happen when it happens, but I have to admit I’m glad it *didn’t* happen with Shay. You deserve better than him.”

“Is he really that bad?”

“Do I really have to answer that? You met him—I’m sure you can pick it up.”

“I guess. I don’t know. Maybe I’m just questioning shit because that kiss was...”

“I swear if you say magical, I’ll be the one blocking you.”

I laugh out loud. “Whatever. It was something, okay?”

“Yeah, yeah. Just don’t get too tangled up in it. Shay is bad news. He’s cool or whatever, but the moment you let him think he can control you with his dick, it’s over. Just be careful, okay?”

“Okay, *Mom*,” I quip sarcastically. “We’ll catch up more later. I need to peel myself out of bed.”

“Later, sweet cheeks!”

I disconnect the call and throw my phone on the bed somewhere beside me, then pull the sheets up over my head.

“Well, good morning.” I hear my mom’s voice sound out from the direction of the door.

“*Ugh!* I just want to sleep.”

The sheet tugs from my face, and my mom stares down at me with a smile. “Sleep tomorrow. I have some exciting news I want to tell you over dinner.”

I level my eyes with her blue ones. “Mom, it’s like 10:00 a.m. I think I have a while to sleep before dinner,” I laugh.

She shrugs and drops the corner of the sheet she’s been holding. “Fair, but this isn’t a typical dinner. We’re going to head to the Clear View Country Club, so look your best. Maybe wear your hair up. You know I love it up.”

I tilt my head. “A country club? What’s going on?”

Don't get me wrong, we aren't poor, but we aren't really wealthy either. We're comfortable, that's it.

She smiles. "Don't ask questions. You'll see."

She's been this way since Dad died—elusive, mysterious, weird—so this isn't odd behavior, but it still has me scratching my head, wondering what the fuck is going on.

I don't get a chance to ask any more questions before she floats back out of my room and down the hall.

So much for catching some more z's. Guess I better start picking out my outfit and taming my hair now.

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CHAPTER FIVE

SHAY

I walk into the country club, the familiar scent of polished wood and old money hitting me the moment I step through the doors and into the lobby. Everything here is pristine—clean. White marble floors with splashes of gray that look like they've taken hours to polish. Thick, brown furniture positioned perfectly. Even the chandelier hanging above us glimmers with a certain wealth to it.

I've never really felt at home here. Even as a kid, I knew I didn't fit into this world, but my dad? He thrives in it. He knows everyone, and everyone knows him—Henry Cornell, the man who's never lost a case. The man who built his reputation on being untouchable, just like he expects me to be.

"Mr. Cornell, it's a pleasure to have you dining with us tonight," the woman behind the concierge desk speaks, drawing my attention to her before she moves from behind it and stops in front of us.

My dad nods and adjusts the front of his suit. "Thank you, Abigail. Would you mind showing us to the table I've reserved?"

I notice he doesn't really know her name—he just did a quick glance at her name tag, but it's important for people to feel connected to him. It's the reason he shines in his work. His looks help too. He has dark hair like me, but a few gray strands pepper within it, showing his age. His nose is a little wider too, but not enough to notice the difference unless you're really looking at us. His eyes are the same shape as mine, but instead of blue, they're a deep umber.

“Of course. Follow me.”

I let my dad take the lead after Abigail as I trail behind. We move right, passing the Royal Ballroom, as they call it, and enter the Garden Room beside it. Normally, I don’t question my dad. He does his thing, and I do mine, all while collecting a hefty “allowance” for staying out of trouble and minding my manners when he, or any significant public figure, is around. But tonight seems odd.

Of course, we have dinners here frequently. It’s my dad’s choice of location when meeting with city officials or other big public figures, but it normally happens in the Royal Ballroom. To me, it’s just another way for him to throw his dick on the table and show everyone just how powerful he is. The Garden Room is more intimate, though. A little smaller, not as dramatic with the decor, and all around somewhat cozy in a sense. All of the things my father does not exude.

Crystal sconces line the walls, and floral artwork hangs perfectly spaced in thick, bronze frames. Everything is splashed in earthy tones with pops of light pastels—light coral and sky blue, just like most things in Florida, trying to bring the beach vibe inside. The chairs are the same as the other room too, but instead of a deep royal blue, they’re a sandy tan.

Abigail leads us to a small, round table somewhat in the center of the room. It doesn’t stand out since there are numerous others positioned around it, but it still feels out of place. Dad normally prefers a back corner for conducting business.

He takes his seat, unbuttoning his suit jacket as he does, and I take the seat to his right.

“I appreciate you coming tonight,” he remarks, pulling his phone from his pocket, not even bothering to look at me.

“Not like I had a choice, Dad.” And I didn’t. This is just part of being the Golden Boy’s son.

He doesn’t bite at my comment. Instead, he just locks his phone and sets it on the table between us. “Our guests should be here any moment now.”

I nod, but my mind moves elsewhere. All day, I haven’t been able to shake the image of the ring girl from last night. Her lips, her touch, the way she stormed out of the locker room like she couldn’t get away from me fast enough. And that last thing alone is gnawing at me more than I’d like to admit.

“So, who are we meeting this time?” I ask, trying to distract myself from the thoughts of her.

He straightens his tie, a habit of his whenever he’s about to discuss something he considers important. “You’ll see soon enough. It’s... personal.”

That piques my interest. Dad doesn’t do personal. Everything with him is business, calculated and precise. If he says it’s personal, that means there is more to this than another casual dinner at the club.

Before I can press him for more information, I catch Abigail returning with a couple in tow from the corner of my eye. My dad stands, a rare smile pulling at his lips as he steps forward to greet them. I rise as well, more out of habit than anything, and then I turn my head and see *her*.

She’s wearing a black dress that hugs her body in all the right places, the kind that is elegant but has just enough edge to tell you she doesn’t fit in with the country club crowd—and she doesn’t care. The neckline dips low enough to tease but not enough to give anything away. Her hair is up too, different from last night, knotted tightly on top of her head with a few loose curls spiraling down the sides. She isn’t over-the-top, but fuck. She looks hot.

“Shay,” my dad’s voice cuts through the haze, drawing me back to the present. He gestures to the woman standing beside her, the one I hardly even noticed, who is looking at me with an awkward, forced smile. “I’d like you to meet Sylvia Hemmingway. Sylvia, this is my son, Shay.”

Sylvia is shorter than her, but not by much. She has blue eyes and blonde hair too—just like my mom. It’s odd, really. Because after you lose someone, you always try to find the similarities in other people. Sure, this woman isn’t my mother—never could be—but at a quick glance, it definitely has me doing a double take.

I nod, my throat tight as I shake her hand. I barely notice the introduction because I move my attention to focus on *her* instead. It’s just the two of us, and I can tell by the way her expression hardens that she’s just as confused as I am.

“And this is Blair,” my dad continues, his voice smooth and diplomatic, as if he’s introducing business partners instead of people who, until last night, had no idea the other existed.

Blair and I exchange a look. One filled with unspoken questions and a shared sense of dread. Whatever this is, it can’t be good. I can feel it in my

gut.

“Shall we sit?” Sylvia suggests, her voice a little too bright like she’s trying to ease the tension.

My dad moves to pull Sylvia’s chair, so I do the same for Blair. Another habit. When I reach for the back, she does the same, letting our hands brush for the slightest second. It’s enough to send a jolt through me and remind me of everything I’ve been trying to forget today—of last night.

She pulls away quickly, her face blank as she sits down. I settle back into my own chair, my mind racing as a waiter finally appears and takes our drink order. I can feel how stiff Blair is next to me, and honestly, I can’t blame her. It’s odd to see someone from the other side of my life clash with this side—the lawyer’s son’s side.

When the waiter leaves, my dad clears his throat, and leans forward slightly. “I’m sure you two are wondering why we’re here.” His tone is softer, not businesslike as usual.

He pauses briefly and glances at Sylvia, who smiles at him with unsure eyes.

Clearing his throat again, I can tell he’s about to drop a bombshell. He never seems this nervous, like ever.

“As I said, this dinner is personal,” he begins, finally gathering his bearings. And the strong, cold motherfucker is back. “Sylvia and I have been seeing each other for a few months now.”

I blink, the words not registering at first. Since my mom died, he threw himself into his work more than before. Late nights, cases that took him to different states. He’s never even had time for a single date, let alone time to be seeing someone for months. Or has he?

“And we’ve decided,” he continues, “that we want to take the next step in our relationship. We’re getting married.”

Time freezes as his words hang in the air. The noise around me starts to dissipate, and the familiar *whoosh, whoosh, whoosh* of my heartbeat pounds in my ears just like before a fight. I search his face, looking for some sort of sign this is a joke. That he isn’t serious. He can’t be. He was *never* supposed to replace Mom. But there is nothing—just the same impenetrable calm he always wears like a mask.

Blair’s hand, resting on the table, tightens into a fist. Her knuckles turn white, but she doesn’t say anything. I can see the same shock and confusion in her eyes that I’m feeling. This can’t be happening.

“You’re what?” I finally manage to say. My voice sounds far away, even to myself.

“We’re getting married,” Sylvia repeats, her tone softer than my dad’s.

She reaches out to place a hand over Blair’s, but Blair pulls away.

“You can’t be serious,” Blair says, her voice low but clear.

My dad leans back in his chair, clasping his hands together on the table. “I know it’s a lot to take in, but we wanted you both to hear it from us, to understand this is something we’re both committed to.”

I stare at him with a mix of disbelief and anger. He’s talking about this like it’s just another case he’s closing, like it’s just business as usual.

“What the hell are you thinking?” I ask, the words coming out sharper than I intended. “I don’t even know her—they don’t even know us!”

My dad’s jaw tightens. “I’m thinking it’s time to move forward, Shay. To move on.”

“Move on?” I don’t even bother to try and hide my shock at his fucking words.

“That’s enough, Shay,” he all but shouts, drawing the attention of all the people at tables around us.

I shake my head with a laugh. God forbid the prodigal son has feelings.

Blair stands from the table, shaking her head too. “This is too much, too fast.”

Her chest is heaving, and her face is scrunched up like she’s thinking too hard. She goes to step backward to leave the table, and no one can stop her before the impact. A waiter behind her has a tray of something on fire—probably Alaska, Florida if I had to guess. Best dish at the club, but definitely not the best right now.

That single, clumsy step backward has her bumping into the waiter. Within seconds, all hell breaks loose. Blair stumbles, the waiter’s tray goes down, and the tablecloth of the table beside us goes up in flames. Screams pierce the air, and other diners across the room stand and peer over to see what’s causing all the commotion.

Blair hardly looks over her shoulder before she’s bolting away from the mess and running toward the bathroom.

CHAPTER SIX

BLAIR

The bathroom is so different than the rest of the club I've seen so far. The floors are a plain, sterile white, and the tile is cold on my feet as I slip my heels off, trying to regain some sort of composure. My heart is still racing, the remnants of panic still clawing at my chest. I brace myself on the sink, looking at my reflection in the mirror. My eyes are wide, my cheeks flushed, and my hands are slightly trembling.

I'm not angry; I'm just confused. My dad has only been gone for a year. Twelve months. That's not long at all, and to see Mom already moving on is almost concerning. She always said I was the reckless one, but to me, this is fucking reckless.

Marrying a man I didn't even know existed until fifteen minutes ago. Marrying a man whose son I was practically dry humping just last night.

What. The. Fuck.

I close my eyes, letting the cool air in the bathroom wash over me and try to deplete the magnitude of emotions I'm feeling. What does this mean for us? What happens now? What if Shay's dad is as much of a prick as him?

The door behind me creaks open, and I jump, snapping my eyes open to see him in the reflection of the mirror. Shay stands in the doorway, his face a mask of barely contained anger. He doesn't belong here, in this small, clinical space, but his posture and face tell me he's not here to comfort me. Not like I thought he would for a single second.

His fists are clenched at his sides, and his shoulders bob with every deep breath he takes. His blue eyes are hooded and dark—not the same easy haze they had last night. His hair that was slicked back and gelled perfectly is now tousled and messy, a few dark strands falling over his forehead.

“You’re fucking joking, right?” he snaps, stepping into the bathroom and letting the door close behind him.

His presence feels like a wave crashing against the calm I was trying to build—the calm I was trying to regain.

Turning to face him, I take a step forward. If he thinks I’ll be backing down, he’s mistaken. He must have forgotten last night. “You’re asking me?” I laugh sarcastically. “Like I fucking knew.”

He shakes his head. “Don’t lie to me. I know you knew about this.”

“Knew? You think I knew?”

He cuts me off before I can say anything else. “You sick fucking bitch. You were going to let me fuck you. What, is this some sort of stunt to try and drag my dad down? Got a reporter on speed dial waiting to hear the juicy story of how Henry Cornell’s son fucked his own sister?”

My mouth falls open. “What the fuck is wrong with you? I didn’t even know your dad existed until a few minutes ago. Hell, didn’t even know *you* existed before last night.”

My words look like they sting him for half a second before he steps again, invading my personal space. “You’re lying. And that stunt you pulled leaving the table? Nice fucking touch. I see through you and your mom’s bullshit, Blair.” He spits my name like it leaves a bad taste on his tongue.

I raise my hand, willing it not to shake, and put it between us before he can step any closer. “You’re delusional if you think me or my mom have some sort of underlying agenda here, asshole. Let’s get one thing clear: I don’t like you, and by association, I don’t like your dad. I’m not thrilled about this arrangement either, but if you try and say anything bad about my mother, I promise you, I will fucking ruin you.”

“Oh. Did I hit a nerve bringing mommy into this?” He lets his head fall back and cackles before bringing his eyes back to mine.

“Fuck off, Shay.” I don’t even have the energy to go back and forth with him anymore. It’s almost as if he gets off on being a dick—on stomping all over everyone around him. He’s in for a rude awakening, though, because I refuse to give him what he’s so desperately wanting.

“How about you fuck off instead and take Sylvia with you. Because I’ll be damned if my dad tries to replace my mom with yours.”

Now, I laugh. “Oh, is the pretty boy sad his daddy found someone new to fuck? Someone who isn’t his precious mommy dearest?”

My hand doesn’t stand a chance against his broad chest. He steps forward again, quicker this time, and doesn’t stop until the edge of the sink is digging into the small of my back. “Watch your fucking mouth.”

I should take this as my cue to dip out, but I don’t. Shay fucking Cornell is going to meet his match. “Or what?” I whisper, hovering my nose mere millimeters from his.

“Try me and you’ll find out.”

I huff and push him as hard as I can. He barely moves, but a few inches is all I need to slide out from between him and the sink. “If you think I’m scared of you, you’re wrong. Try *me* and see what happens.”

“So much bite for someone so small. I’ll destroy you,” he hisses at my back as I walk toward the door.

“I’d love to see you try,” I throw over my shoulder as I exit.

I only give myself a second to take a breath once the door separates us, but I know he won’t be far behind. Making my way back toward the lobby, I abandon my mom and dinner, then slide my phone from my bra.

Clicking Hannah’s picture, I bring it to my ear and wait.

“Hey, girl. What’s up?” Her voice is too cheerful for the situation.

“Can you come get me? Like, now.”

“Um, okay. Where are you?”

“Clear View Country Club. Do you know where it’s at?”

“Everyone does. I’ll be there in fifteen.”

I end the call before any more words spill from her mouth. I don’t want to deal with the questions yet. Instead, I slip out the front doors and start walking down the ridiculously long drive. Once I make it to the end, I cross through the wrought iron gate and wait.

HANNAH DIDN’T LIE. WITHIN FIFTEEN MINUTES, HER OLD, WHITE IMPALA was pulling up, blasting Ari Abdul. When I got into the car, I held up my

hand, telling her not to even ask. Not yet anyway, and she didn't. Ten minutes later, we were pulling into a parking spot on the beach.

Putting the car in park, she leans back in her seat and raises her hand to flip down her visor. A lone, tightly rolled joint falls down and lands in her lap. Picking it up, she hands it to me, then digs in the console for a lighter.

I bring it to my lips and spark it. I inhale deeply, letting the smoke fill my lungs. When I blow it out, I let all of my frustrations go with it and close my eyes.

“Can I ask now?”

I take another hit and nod.

“Where are your shoes?”

Opening my eyes, I look down and realize I didn't grab my heels when I left. It makes me laugh. “That's it? You want to know where my shoes went?”

She shrugs and pulls her feet into her seat, crisscrossing her legs. Extending her hand toward me, she reaches for the joint. “I mean, you just look kind of trashy leaving such a fancy place with no shoes. I don't really care, I was just curious and figured I'd give the weed a little more time to work into your system before I started really grilling you.”

I roll my eyes and push further into the seat. “You're not going to believe me.”

“Try me.” She takes another pull from the joint, then hands it back to me.

“My mom is getting married.”

“To who?” She raises a brow.

Hannah is the only person in Saint Bipal I've told about my dad. It's not for the fact I don't want to—I love to remember his memory—but how do you bring up a dead parent? On top of that, how do you bring them up when the wound is still so fresh? Twelve months isn't long enough to forget someone. Which brings me back to the bullshit at hand...

I shake my head. I don't even think I can say the words out loud. “I left my shoes in the bathroom.”

“I thought we were past the shoes, Blair. Fuck the shoes. Tell me who momma is shacking up with.”

I let the silence hang between us for a moment. “Henry.”

The corner of her mouth tips up. “He got money? Sounds like a guy who has money.”

“Cornell.”

Her jaw falls open. “You’re fucking lying.”

I shake my head again. “Wish I was.”

“Henry Cornell, as in *Shay Cornell’s dad?*”

“That’s the one.” I point to nothing in particular.

“Oh my God.”

“I know.”

“No. I don’t think you do. This means Shay will be your brother...”

“Trust me, I am aware. So is he,” I let out on a huff.

“Blair, oh my God. You almost fucked your brother.”

I hold up my hand. “*Step, Hannah. Stepbrother.* And please don’t remind me.”

She shakes her head. “That’s really fucked-up.”

I take another drag. “Who you telling?”

The conversation fizzles out, and we sit in a comfortable silence. I’m not sure how long we sit, but by the time I’m finally ready to go home, it’s dark, and I’m high.

This is insane.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

SHAY

I sit in my room, staring blankly out the window. For days, I've been trying to process what the fuck has happened—the dinner, the engagement, Blair. All of it. It feels like some sort of bad dream I can't wake up from. I haven't really talked to my dad since that night at the country club either. He's tried a few times, but what's the point? Nothing I say is going to change the shit he's already put in place.

I've just moved in silence, minding my own business and staying away from home as much as I can. This place is more a museum than a home since Mom died anyway. No one really lives here; we just... exist. Sleek lines, polished surfaces. The kind of place anyone would be proud to flaunt, but it lacks any warmth. Mom took that with her when she died.

A knock on my door snaps me from my thoughts. I don't bother getting up. I already know who it is.

"Come in," I say, my voice flat.

The door opens, and my dad steps in, looking as put together as ever in his tailored designer suit. He stands there for a moment, letting his eyes scan the room before they land on me.

"We need to talk," he says. "About Sylvia and Blair."

I exhale sharply. "What about them?"

"They're moving in today, and I wanted to let you know so you're not caught off guard. They'll be here soon."

I stare at him. "Today? You didn't think to mention this before?"

He sighs with a hint of frustration. “I didn’t want to overwhelm you, Shay. I know this isn’t easy, but it’s happening. Sylvia will be in the room with me, and Blair will be next door to you.”

Great. Things just went from bad to worse. It’s not enough that they’re getting married. Now, they’re going to be living here, reminding me every day of this fucking mess.

I don’t say anything. I just nod.

My dad looks at me for a second longer as if he’s waiting for some sort of response, but I’ve got nothing to say. Eventually, he turns and leaves the room, closing the door behind him.

Sitting there, I let my mind race. Blair. Here. Under the same roof. If it’s so obvious for me to see what she’s trying to do, why isn’t it as clear for my dad? Maybe if I told him she basically let me fuck her, he would change his mind about this whole thing. A scandal like that could ruin what he’s worked so hard to build. It can ruin my comfortable life.

Standing from my bed, I let out a groan. I know I’m expected to play nice, but how is that even possible when it’s clear this girl knows how to push my buttons? Looking at the corner of my dresser, I see her shoes—the ones she left at the country club when I confronted her. I scoff and move to them.

They’re simple black strappy heels. There is nothing significant about them, but I’m about to use them as a *very* significant message. I want her to know that even if it’s been days of radio silence, I meant every word I said. I’ll fucking destroy her.

I pick them up off the ground and hook them onto my fingers before leaving my room. Closing my door behind me, I slink slowly toward the one next door. When I push it open, I see it’s bare, just like everything else in this house. Nothing but a neatly made bed with fluffy white linen, a dresser, and a closet. There are no personal touches. No posters, no clothes, no bullshit from her. Not yet anyway.

Not even bothering to step further into her room, I hang the heels on the handle. She’ll get the message loud and clear, I’m sure.

As I turn to head back to my room, I hear the front door open downstairs and the distant sound of tires on gravel. I step toward the railing and peer out the window positioned above the front door as a small, blue Honda comes to a halt at the end of the steps out front.

Leaning over, I rest the backs of my forearms on the rail and clasp my fingers. My dad is by it in an instant, opening the driver's door.

First, Sylvia steps out. I can see her mouth moving, but I can't make out what she's saying. A second later, Blair is emerging from the passenger side and circling the front of the car. She stops by her mom and surveys around her. Her head swivels as she looks behind her down our drive, then back to the front of the house. Her eyes travel up the face of it, taking in the white brick and large stone steps before they stop when she makes it to the open door and catches my gaze.

She crosses her arms over her chest, not realizing when she does, her tits practically spill out of the thin tank top she's wearing. Her mouth turns into a hard line, and she rolls her eyes, not even trying to hide her annoyance.

The feeling is mutual, Dollface.

I rise up and turn, ready to walk off and hide away in my room, but my dad's deep baritone cuts through the foyer and echoes up the stairs. "Shay, come say hello."

Glancing over my shoulder, I see him starting up the stone steps out front with Sylvia and Blair in tow. Something in his look tells me I need to just shut up and deal with it. As much as I would like to say fuck that, I do what I've been groomed to do. After all, this is *my* house anyway, and I want to let Blair know she isn't welcome.

I move across the landing, then take the steps two at a time. Once I reach the bottom, my Chucks squeak across the marble floor. Sylvia is the first to speak, but her voice is a little too cheerful. Like she's trying to smooth over the tension in the room. "Shay, it's so good to see you again!"

I don't even get a chance to reply before she pulls me in for an awkward hug. My body towers over her small frame, but she still wraps her tiny arms around my waist.

I give her a stiff "that'll do" pat on her shoulder, then pull myself away. "Yeah. Sure."

"I am going to show Sylvia around the house. How about you do the same for Blair?" my dad says, stepping forward and pulling Sylvia into his side like he's trying to help the recoil I had to her.

"I don't need a tour." Blair looks at my dad and raises her hand. "Can you just show me to my room?" It's the first words she's spoken, and already, they're laced with bitterness.

My dad nods. “Of course. Shay will show you.”

He dips his head to me, then starts stepping with Sylvia following closely beside him, giving Blair no option but to interact with me in some fucking way.

When they disappear to the right toward the living room and theater room, Blair finally puts her sights back on me. “Just point me in the general direction.”

I scoff. “Fat chance. Find it yourself.”

Less than five minutes with this chick and I’m reminded again how much I don’t like this arrangement. I’m not going to make any of this easy for her.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

BLAIR

It didn't take me long to find my room after Shay was clearly no help. The heels hanging from the delicate, silver handle was all the indication I needed. Sleeping, though? That's a different story. I holed up in my bare room for as long as I could, but as soon as the sun dipped below the horizon, I came outside by the pool.

Navigating the house was easier when I felt I didn't have to worry about running into anyone. The second floor has a few rooms. Mine, Shay's, and some sort of office. The lower level, though, that's where all the nicer shit is. Kitchen with all stainless steel appliances, two living rooms, a theater room, and a game room. Pretty sure Henry's room is there too, but I didn't go looking for it.

Everything is meticulously clean and shiny too, and any other time, I might enjoy it. Considering the circumstances, though? Not a chance. I'd rather be anywhere but here.

The first night is always the hardest in a new place too, but tonight, it feels extra suffocating. I've never been great at sleeping in new places either. Too many unfamiliar sounds, too many strange shadows on the walls. And now, too many painful reminders that Dad is gone.

Casting the thoughts away, I focus on the silvery glow the moon is casting over the still water of the pool. It's quiet out here, with only the faint whooshing of waves in the distance and the steady chirp of crickets. Pulling

the cigarette pack Hannah gave me from my pocket, I open it and shake out the half-smoked joint and lighter.

Sparking the jay, I keep it in my mouth, inhaling slowly, and lift my camera from my lap. Looking at the world through my lens feels more familiar than what my real life has become at this point. I can choose what to focus on and what to block out. I start snapping, letting the shutter click fill the silence around me.

The reflection of the moon on the water, the way the shadows of the trees stretch across the ground—it's all so calm. Almost enough to make me forget where I am.

Almost.

I take another slow drag of the joint, the smoke curling up into the dark sky. The weed helps calm my nerves just a little. Closing my eyes, I let out a deep breath and try to shake the unease that's settled in my chest since seeing Shay. Everything has changed so fast. My mom and Henry announcing their engagement, us moving in.

I shake my head and raise my camera again, throwing the roached jay to the ground, and get ready to snap another picture, but voices traveling from inside the house have me halting. They're low and muffled by the thick walls, but I recognize them immediately—Shay and his dad.

"You need to remember our agreement," Henry says, his voice dripping with frustration.

"The agreement was between you and I, not them," Shay snaps back. "You dropped this on me out of nowhere, and now you want me to play babysitter too?"

I move from my spot on the lounge chair and pad closer to the glass windows stretching across the back of the house. Since they're floor-to-ceiling length, it gives me an almost perfect view of where Shay and Henry stand in the hall.

I never noticed before, but Shay is nearly as tall as his dad. They have similar features too, but where Henry's hair is all pepper with a few salty strands, Shay's is more of a deep chestnut color. Shay is bigger too—more muscles, more ridges—and I'm sure that's thanks to the fights he participates in. His sharp jaw ticks as he stands face-to-face with Henry, and I can't help but wonder if he feels like he's looking into a mirror of himself in the future.

"If they're going to be a part of this family, she needs to follow the same rules. My reputation can't take a hit. The press is already watching us," Henry bites, raising his hand to reveal a newspaper I didn't even notice he was holding.

It's hard to make out the headline and picture, so I raise my camera and zoom in on it through my lens. Snapping a few quick shots, I lower it, then examine the pictures I took. It's a picture of the mess I caused at the country club. Table on fire, patrons with screaming faces, and Henry standing to the side with his hand on his head.

"Local and widely known lawyer Henry Cornell announced his engagement to a Saint Bipal newcomer yesterday evening, and it seems their relationship is already on fire!" I cringe at the words and move my eyes down lower. A headshot of my mom with her name inked in italic letters accompanies the piece.

As much as I would like to, there is no denying their relationship anymore. All of Saint Bipal knows by now, I'm sure.

Shay shakes his head. "This is fucking ridiculous."

"There is no need for the attitude, Shay. It's not like I'm asking your permission. I am telling you what needs to happen."

The laugh that bubbles from Shay's throat is bitter. "Yeah, I noticed. And you didn't even bother to ask how I felt about it. It's always about you, isn't it?"

"Watch your tone," his dad warns. "I'm still your father, and you will respect me."

"Respect? You think you deserve my respect? You didn't respect Mom's memory. It's been, what, three years? And now you're bringing some woman and her daughter into our house like they're part of the family?"

I flinch at his words. It isn't like I had a choice in this either...

"Your mother is gone, Shay." Henry's voice is lower now, more understanding. "And she isn't coming back. I'm trying to move on, to build a life again."

"Build a life again?" Shay laughs. "Yeah... A life they're going to destroy." He flicks the paper dangling from Henry's fingertips, sending it to the floor.

"Goddammit, Shay. I'm trying to do my best here!"

Silence stretches between them, and I feel like an intruder. Like I'm eavesdropping on something private and sacred, but I can't move.

“Maybe your best isn’t good enough.” Shay finally breaks the silence.
“I’m going out.”

My phone buzzes in my pocket and makes me break my stare from the men in front of me. Pulling it out quickly, I hit Answer, then bring it to my ear. By the time I glance back to the window, though, both Henry and Shay are gone.

“Hey. Beach party happening now. You in?” Hannah’s voice pours from the receiver. I already gave her the lowdown on the move earlier today before I abandoned the small home Mom and I were renting, so I’m sure that’s the reason she’s inviting me. She knew I would need to get away.

“Um, sure. I could use a break from this house, but I’m high. Wanna scoop me up?”

“Send me the addy, and I’ll be there!” she squeals, ending the call without a goodbye.

I quickly drop her a pin, then pad inside with my camera in hand to change. As I make it to the top of the stairs, my phone pings, alerting me of a new text. I glance down, sure it’s Hannah letting me know she’s heading this way, but instead, it’s from a number I don’t have saved. Only this time, it’s a Florida area code.

They’re back...

UNKNOWN: Mark my words; I’m coming for you.

A chill runs down my spine as I read it. It’s threatening, sure, but I had been receiving these messages for so long I don’t hold any weight behind the threats anymore. Honestly, I was wondering when I would get them again. Considering the day I’ve had, it’s almost weirdly comforting too. A fucked-up constant in my very fast-changing life.

Shaking my head, I lock my phone and slide it into my pocket, deciding not to give it any more attention. I have enough on my plate already.

Fuck Shay, fuck the random message, and fuck this too big of a house. I’m going out too.

CHAPTER NINE

SHAY

I don't know how long I've been driving, but even the hum of my Jeep's engine can't drown out my dad's words. He's basically asking me to keep Blair in check, like she's just another thing he can shove onto my plate while he plays house with her mom.

I don't even know where I'm going, but I know I needed to get out. I'm a pro at keeping my anger in check, but my dad has a way of testing me. Hell, we test each other. Mom was the ref between us, keeping the peace and making sure there was always a resolution to any problem. But he just replaced her like she meant nothing.

The town streets blur past as I drive, the wind whipping through the open windows and carrying away some of the knotting tension in my shoulders. I really don't want to think about my dad or Blair. I just want to clear my head.

My phone buzzes on the passenger seat, and I glance down, seeing Austin's name flash across the screen. I grab it, hitting the speaker button. "Yeah?" I bark, my tone sharper than I intended.

"Hey, man." He sounds so easygoing. "You sound pissed. What's up?"

I shake my head and tighten my grip on the wheel. "Just some bullshit with my dad. Needed to get away for a bit, so I'm crawling the streets."

"Perfect timing, then," he replies. "There's a beach party going down on the south side. Figured I'd see if you wanna swing by. You can blow off some steam, have a few beers, and relax a bit."

I hesitate for a second. A beach party isn't exactly what I had in mind, but maybe it's what I need—a distraction, something to take my mind off everything.

"Yeah, why not," I say, turning my Jeep toward the beach. "I'll be there in a few."

It takes me less than ten minutes before I'm pulling up to the beach. I park my car on the concrete slab, then lock it as I get out. As soon as my feet hit the sand, I can hear the music already thumping and see the glow of a small bonfire in the distance.

I trek forward, scanning the crowd for Austin as I go. I spot him lounging in a lawn chair across from the fire, talking to a small group of people.

Waving me over with a grin on his face, he raises the drink in his hand. "There he is!" he shouts over the music, sarding from his seat. "Glad you made it, man!"

"Yeah, well, figured it was better than driving around all night," I reply, grabbing a beer from a cooler nearby. "What's up with this party?"

He shrugs. "Just a bunch of us hanging out and celebrating."

"Celebrating what?"

"Fuck if I know. Just felt right to say," he laughs, clearly already a few drinks in. "I mean, I guess we don't really need a reason to let loose, do we?"

I crack the top of my beer and take a big swig. "Not at all."

Austin falls back into his chair and points with his drink across the fire. "Speaking of letting loose, may wanna check on your new stepsister."

I frown and follow his gaze. That's when I see her—Blair. She's on top of one of the picnic tables, dancing like she doesn't have a care in the world. Her movements are uncoordinated and sloppy, a clear sign she's had way too much to drink. She's shouting something over the music, her voice slurred, as everyone around her is cheering her on and snapping pictures and videos with their phones.

"Shit," I mumble under my breath, then turn my attention back to Austin. "How'd you hear about that? About her?" I jut my thumb over my shoulder.

"The dinner at Clear View was posted all over Insta within minutes."

I nod and look down before taking another drink. "Great."

"I mean, can't be that bad, right? Considering the locker room the other night." Austin wiggles his eyebrows.

"That's just what makes it worse. Pretty sure she threw herself at me after the fight because she knew about our parents. And look at her now. You know how my dad is when it comes to our public image."

He shrugs again. "I dunno, man. I wouldn't give two fucks what my dad said if a piece of ass like that was so easily accessible."

"Shut up, dude. You're drunk and not even hearing yourself talk. You know how much money he gives me to be *good*." I make air quotations with my fingers. "On top of that, she's a fucking bitch."

He levels his bloodshot eyes with mine. "Is she really, or is it just you being classic Shay playing the douche to slide into those panties?"

I roll my eyes and laugh. It's hard to even take him seriously right now. "You act like you know me or something."

"Cause I do, you prick. You may be trying to forget about the locker room, but it's exactly what I've been using to beat my meat for the past few days." He strokes the air above his crotch.

"You're sick."

"And you're not fooling anyone but yourself." He throws his empty can into the fire, then raises his hands, palms up, beside him.

"Whatever. I'm going to try and get a handle on her before this is the next headline my dad wants to bitch about."

"Yeah, yeah. So much for relaxing, right?"

I salute him, then turn on my heel. Yeah, so much for relaxing is right.

Pushing through the crowd, I down the rest of my beer and make my way toward where Blair is still dancing on the table. As I get closer, I can hear her better. She's singing along to the music, her words bleeding into the beat, and she's laughing like it's the best night of her life. The closer I get, the more anger starts to settle into my gut, peaking my frustration all over again.

"Blair!" I shout, trying to get her attention over the noise. She doesn't hear me, or maybe she's just ignoring me, so I push closer, finally reaching the edge of the table. "Blair, get down from there!"

She looks down at me, a drunken grin spreading across her face. "Shay!" she shouts back, her voice filled with reckless joy. "Go fuck yourself!"

“You need to get down.” My tone is harder. “You’re making a fool of yourself.”

Her grin falters, and for a second, I see a flash of hurt in her eyes. But then she’s laughing again, throwing her head back. “Why do you care? You hate me, remember?” she slurs.

My patience was already thin, but it’s getting even thinner. “Blair, now. You’re drunk. Let’s go.”

She crosses her arms, pouting like a stubborn child. “No. I’m not going anywhere with you.”

“Fine.” I shrug, then reach up.

Before she can react, I grab her by the waist and lift her off the table. Her skin is warm under my hands, and it has me pausing for half a second. I try to ignore the heat and the want suddenly swirling deep in me and throw her over my shoulder. Fucking Austin. This is his fault. He always has a way of getting in my head and making me think about shit I shouldn’t.

Like how good her body feels on mine right now...

She squeals and kicks her legs, then pounds her small fists into my back. “Put me down, you fucking caveman!”

“Not until we’re off this beach.”

I start walking, her weight shifting with each step, but I don’t slow down. Her hands aren’t even fists anymore, but the hitting doesn’t stop. Her open palms slap me, batting at my back and ass, and her words are a mixture of insults and protests, but I keep going, determined to get her away from here.

When we reach the edge of the beach, I set her down and keep a firm lock on her wrist to make sure she doesn’t run and to help steady her so she isn’t face-planting into the concrete.

She stumbles slightly and glares at me with anger and a little embarrassment. “What the hell is your problem?”

I roll my eyes and drag her to the passenger side of my Jeep. “You. You’re my fucking problem.”

I hit my fob, unlocking the door, then stuff her inside before heading to the driver’s side. As soon as I climb in, she starts ranting again.

“You act like I asked for this. If I’m such a problem, then leave me alone. Let me live my life as far away from you as I possibly can.”

I shove my keys into the ignition and start the car, then peel out, heading back home. “Yeah, because that’s totally possible living under the

same roof.”

She kicks her sandy feet onto my dash, shoes and all. “Whatever. You can act like the reason you’re mad is because our parents are getting married and you feel your mom is being replaced or whatever, but I know the truth.”

“The truth?” I laugh sarcastically. She doesn’t know shit about me or what I feel.

She nods dramatically. “You’re just mad I wouldn’t fuck you. Sucks to suck, Shay, but not every girl wants you in their pants. Honestly, I’m glad it didn’t go further because now I realize what a dick you really are.”

“Me, mad I didn’t get in your pants? Please. I can have any girl I want. Including you.”

She clicks her tongue. “That’s where you’re wrong. I’ve held out for eighteen years already. Think I’m going to fuck that up for someone like you? I can’t even believe I kissed you.”

“Seemed to me you really enjoyed it when it was happening. You can keep lying to yourself, but you can’t lie to me.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Maybe it was a little enjoyable, but you showed your true colors, and they’re fucking uglyyyyyy.” She draws out the last word.

“You don’t know shit about me, Blair.”

“Yeah? Well, you don’t know shit about me either.”

“I know enough to know I don’t like you.”

I make a right and finally turn into our driveway. “And I don’t like you.”

As I come to a stop, she plants her feet back on the floorboard and pushes open the door. “Glad we had this talk. Now, kindly fuck off forever and ever.”

She stumbles out of the car and barely makes it up the steps.

CHAPTER TEN

BLAIR

The night is a blur of the bonfire and shit-talking Shay as I stumble up the steps toward the front door. The alcohol zings in my veins, making the world spin around me. I try to steady myself, but the ground seems to shift under my feet, and I trip, nearly crashing face-first into the concrete below me.

Before I hit the ground, a strong hand grabs my arm and pulls me back. I turn my head, trying to blink through the haze, and find Shay's annoyed face glaring down at me.

"Careful," he mutters, his grip tight as he keeps me upright.

"Get off me," I slur, trying to shake him off. "I don't need your help."

His expression darkens, and his jaw tightens. "Believe me, I'm not doing this for you," he snaps. "I'm doing this so our parents don't see you like this."

I open my mouth to argue, to tell him to just back the fuck off, but he clamps a hand over my mouth, his eyes flashing with irritation. "Just shut up, Blair. You're drunk and going to cause a scene. Just let me get you inside."

I roll my eyes and push his hand off my mouth. "Fine," I mutter in defeat. "Just... just get me to my room."

Licking my lips, I can taste the saltiness from his palm, and it makes me want to puke. I sway on my feet again as we step inside, and Shay's grip on my arm tightens. His fingertips dig into me painfully, but the fight in me is

gone. All I can do is focus on putting one foot in front of the other and not blowing chunks all over the really, really shiny floor.

He leads me up the steps, snaking his arm around my waist and letting me use his body as support. I want to hate it—the way heat dances across my skin being so close to him and the urge to turn into him further—but the truth is, I don’t. Or maybe I’m just way too drunk to realize I hate him and why. I don’t even know anymore.

Why do I hate him again? I mean, sure, he’s a douche, but he’s helping me right now, and that’s kind of sweet. Even if he looks like he would rather be anywhere but here, it’s still sweet. Kind of. Maybe.

I groan as we reach the landing and let my head loll down. This is why I shouldn’t drink around boys who are pretty with terrible attitudes. The “*I can fix him*” is strong in me, and I know it’s only the booze talking. Why else would I care? I’ve stood my ground this long, so I shouldn’t bend now.

When we reach my room, I push the door open with my shoulder and stumble inside. It’s a mess—the result of a rushed unpacking session earlier after the movers came. Clothes are strewn across the floor, a few boxes are half-opened, and my bed is a tangled mess of blankets. At least it doesn’t feel as bare and cold as it did before, though.

Shay nudges the door closed with his foot, then helps me over to the bed. “Sit,” he orders, his tone leaving no room for argument.

I flop down on the edge of the mattress. “I can take care of myself, you know,” I mumble, though I can barely keep my eyes open.

“Yeah, I’m seeing that,” Shay replies dryly as he bends in front of me to untie my shoes.

The thin silver chain around his neck glistens in the light, and I so badly want to reach out and tug it, but I don’t.

“The sooner you’re in bed, the sooner I can get out of here.”

I try to protest again, but my body feels like it’s made of lead, and I can barely move my arms. Shay pulls my shoes off and sets them aside, then looks around the room, searching for something. He spots a pair of pajamas spilling from one of the dresser drawers and stands to retrieve them.

Tossing the shirt to me, he barks out another command. “Put this on.”

Lifting my arms to try and catch the shirt is difficult, so it simply falls into a ball in my lap. I pick it up and fumble with the fabric, trying to find the top.

“For God’s sake, Blair,” he mutters, exasperated.

Stepping back to me, he leans down again and hooks his fingers into the bottom of the shirt I'm wearing. As soon as he tugs it up, I move my arms and clench them to my chest.

"Stop. No one has ever seen me naked, and that isn't changing tonight."

"Don't be stupid. I'm not doing this to check you out. I'm doing this so you can crawl into bed halfway comfortable."

I shake my head as he tries to move my hands. "Shay, stop. I don't want you to see me."

"Blair, just let me—"

"I'm a virgin!" The words tumble out before I can stop them, and once they're out, I'm not even sure why I said them. "I—I've never done anything, okay? So I don't want you, of all people, to be the first to see me naked. Just, just let me do it."

His hands immediately float away from me, and something flashes in his eyes. Almost like he feels bad. "I'm sorry. I wasn't trying to make you uncomfortable."

"Wow. Shay Cornell apologizing to me?" I laugh. "Really rich, considering."

He shakes his head and steps back. "Just put those on." He turns, giving me his back and some sort of privacy.

I don't reply. Instead, I watch and make sure he doesn't turn around as it takes me longer than I'd like to admit to strip out of my normal clothes and slide into the pajamas. "Done."

He turns back around and nods slowly. Stepping back to where I sit, he throws the jumbled blanket to one side, then points to the top of the bed. "Lay down."

The room feels like it's spinning, but I lean back, then scoot myself up the bed. He grabs the blanket he threw to the side and covers me up. It's weird, considering all the shit he's talked, but I almost see a softer side to him. Almost. His eyes are still hooded, and his mouth is a hard line, but his movements aren't rough anymore. They're slow and fluid.

Once the blanket is over my lower half, he looks at my hands. "Rings. Give them to me."

I almost forgot I was even wearing any jewelry. Slowly, I start sliding my chunky silver rings off my fingers and placing them in his waiting hand. "Thanks."

“Blair Hemingway thanking me?” He laughs. “Really rich, considering.” He throws my words back at me.

I just roll my eyes, then let them flutter closed halfway. I see his form move from me back to my dresser, where he sets my rings. It almost looks like he grabs something else, but I’m too tired to care. Turning on my side, I pull the blanket to my chin and close my eyes fully.

I can hear my door open again, but before it closes, I give him one last statement. “You’d be a lot hotter if you weren’t so mean, you know? I get being upset about our parents, but my dad is dead too. You’re not the only one hurting.”

There is a long pause, but he doesn’t reply. Instead, the sound of the door clicking closed is the last thing I hear.

I’m alone again, but for once, I don’t think I mind. I let out a long, shaky breath, my body sinking deeper into the mattress. As I start to drift off, I can still feel the ghost of Shay’s hands on my skin, steadying me in a way I didn’t know I needed.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

SHAY

I close Blair's door quietly behind me, careful not to make much noise. Her words are still ringing in my ears, echoing louder than my own for once. "*My dad is dead too. You're not the only one hurting.*"

I didn't know her dad had died. That's not the type of thing people forget to mention, and I feel a pang of guilt. I've been so wrapped up in hating her and my own shit I never stopped to think about anything she may be going through. Maybe she's just trying to find her footing, like I am.

I run a hand through my hair, frustrated. I don't want to feel sorry for her. I don't want to think about losing a parent either, but I do. I know what that's like, and now that I know she does too, it's harder to hate her. Harder to push her away.

Then there's the way she felt when I carried her out of the party. Her body pressed against mine, her warmth seeping through my skin. I shouldn't like it—shouldn't be thinking about it now, but I am. The memory of her softness, her scent—a mix of vanilla and lavender—lingers in my mind. And the fact she's a virgin...

Leaning my head against her door, I close my eyes. This is messed up. I'm supposed to be angry, supposed to be keeping her at arm's length, but every time I'm near her, it's like I'm drawn to her, like I can't help but get closer. She's my almost stepsister, for fuck's sake. I shouldn't be thinking about her like this.

But damn if I don't.

A part of me wants to shake her, to tell her to just fucking leave and stop making shit so complicated. Another part wants to touch her, though. To press into her, smell her, dominate her.

Shaking my head, I open my eyes and unravel the pair of balled-up panties I swiped from her dresser. They're all lace and cotton, delicate and dainty. Red roses paint the small white triangle of the front, and a bigger, lacy rose makes up the back above the string of the thong.

I can't help but imagine what they look like on her. How they get to hug her hips and touch all of the delicious places I can't. Bringing them to my nose, I inhale. Her scent fills my nose, and something in my chest growls.

I'm not sure why I swiped them. Honestly, it's a bit creepy, but at the same time, I *needed* to be close to her in some way. And a way I don't have to face her is probably best. I almost went fucking feral when she blurted out she's a virgin. No one has ever touched her... never marked her or made her moan. Unless it was herself, and that image dancing in my mind is enough to have my cock throbbing.

I slide my free hand down the front of myself and mimic the picture I'm painting in my head—her small hands dragging down her chest, all the way to her stomach, then dipping into the front of her panties.

I slip my hand into my jeans and shiver with the light touch against myself. The muscles in my stomach flex as I wrap my palm around my length. Slowly, I stroke myself, never letting the image of Blair playing with herself fade.

I think about the look on her face as she strums her pussy. How her mouth falls open and the corner of her eyes scrunch in an almost frightful way.

Base to tip, base to tip—my strokes are steady and easy. I'm thick and heavy in my own hand, and it makes me wonder how I would ever fit inside her. She's so small compared to me.

Fuck.

The image shifts, and instead of her alone, now I'm on top of her, thrusting into her virgin cunt and pinning her arms above her head. Her pert tits bob with every movement and beg to be tasted. I look down and watch where her pussy takes every last inch of me, hungry and wet.

Sounds from the made-up delusion in my mind start to play. Wet skin slapping, exhausted moans, my name tumbling from her lips. It's almost too much, but not enough at the same time.

I move back to the present and focus on my own pace. Running my thumb over the top part of my shaft, I shudder. Precum spills from my tip, and I use it to lubricate my hand. It's sticky and warm, coating my hand just enough to make my strokes a little less abrasive.

Moving the hand gripping her panties, I shove it into my pants too. Quickly, I wrap the fabric around my cock and continue tugging. Her panties are soft and cocoon my length with a new kind of warmth—one that sends me over the edge. My body tenses, and stars dance behind my lids. I come hard and fast, spilling my seed into the front of her panties.

My breath comes out in quick, ragged puffs, but I still don't make a sound. Not enough to wake Blair, anyway. Removing my hands from my jeans, I hold her panties in front of my face. My cum clings to them, staining them, and it makes me smile.

The post-nut clarity comes, and I realize how fucking weird all of this is. But if I have to fantasize about her, I'll make her do the same.

I hang the delicate thong marred with me on her handle, then head to my room.

Sleep tight, Dollface.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

BLAIR

I wake up to the sun streaming through the window, slicing through my room like a knife. My head throbs with each beam, pounding in time with my heartbeat. I groan and throw my arm over my eyes to try and block out the sun. God, I feel like I've been hit by a truck.

As I lie there, my mind starts to slowly piece together fragments of the night before. The party. The drinking. Shay throwing me over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. A wave of embarrassment floods over me. I remember yelling something at him too. Something about being a virgin.

"Shit," I mutter, feeling a rush of heat flood my cheeks. Why would I tell him that? He's already a dick, and I'm sure that will just be more ammo for his arsenal.

Grabbing my phone, I look at the screen for the time, but another message from the unknown number stares back at me. The text is blank. No words, no taunts. This isn't the first time this has happened, and for some reason, it makes me feel almost more uneasy than when there are words.

Throwing the device beside me, I push myself up, the room slightly tilting as I swing my legs over the side of the bed. I sit there for a moment, waiting for the dizziness to pass. The walls are too fucking white, and so is all the furniture, making my head throb even more. My throat feels like sandpaper. I need water. And Tylenol. Lots of Tylenol.

Sliding onto the floor, I crawl over to a half-unpacked box sitting on the floor. It's filled with bathroom essentials from our old house. Digging

through the mess of toiletries and random shit, I finally find the bottle of Tylenol at the bottom. I shake a couple of pills into my hand and swallow them dry, wincing as they scrape down my throat.

Some food might help too, so I decide to head downstairs. Using the bed to pull myself upright, I groan and press the heels of my palms into my eyes. Trying to shake some of the pain away, I move forward. I slip out of my door, then reach behind me to close it when I'm on the other side.

My hand is met with wet fabric. I turn around, confused and a little grossed out by whatever I touched, to find a pair of my panties hanging from the handle like some sort of twisted flag. I unravel the band and raise them with my pointer and thumb to examine what the fuck is on them.

My stomach twists with anger and humiliation when I realize. My heels were one thing, but this is another. Shay's taunting tactics are getting fucking ridiculous.

Without a second thought, I storm next door to his room. I don't even bother knocking; I just shove the door open and barge inside, ready to unleash every last ounce of anger I have.

But Shay isn't there.

I stop, momentarily thrown off-balance by his absence. His room is unexpectedly neat, everything in its place. The bed is made with military precision, the sheets perfectly smooth, not a wrinkle in sight. His desk is organized with a few notebooks and a laptop stacked neatly on one side. There are a few pictures on the wall—mostly him after fights and one of a woman who shares his eyes. His mom, I'm sure. A pair of boxing gloves hang from a hook by the closet too, looking worn and well used.

There's a calmness to the room that feels at odds with the person I know. It's unnerving how meticulous everything is, like he has to have everything under control. I swallow the lump in my throat. As much as I hate to admit it, his room feels safe. It's the last thing I'd expect from Shay, who's done nothing but make me feel like I'm standing on uneven ground from the moment we met.

I shake my head and try to focus. I need to find him.

The gym is a safe bet, considering it's a place he clearly goes to work out pent-up aggression and flaunt his douchiness. Turning on my heel, I leave his room and head down the stairs. I find my mom and Henry in the kitchen, laughing and talking.

Before either of them can say anything to me, I hold up my hand. “I’m in a rush. Can I borrow your car?”

My mom tips her head. “In a rush dressed like that?”

I glance down at my pajamas. I don’t even care. “Yes. So, can I?”

“Here.” Henry reaches into his pocket and pulls out his keys. “Take mine.”

He tosses them to me like some sort of peace offering, but I don’t have time to focus on it. I catch them and turn to walk away, shouting, “Thanks,” behind me.

The stone is warm under my feet when I step outside. I scan the driveway and spot my mom’s car, but I’m not sure which of the other three I have the keys to. I hit the fob, and a honk sounds out from the sleek black Escalade in the back. How am I supposed to drive this big-ass car?

I pad toward it and open the door. I all but have to climb inside. It’s like a fucking spaceship, with screens stretching almost all the way across the dash and creamy leather seats. I reach beside the seat and try to figure out which switch will move the seat forward because at this moment, my feet are nowhere near the pedals. Once it’s finally adjusted, I start the car and back out of the driveway.

Minus hitting a few curbs because I can hardly see over the hood, I make it to the gym without incident. As I pull up, I see Shay’s black Jeep parked right in the front. I pull Henry’s SUV beside it, then jump out with the keys in hand. The cracked asphalt hurts as I step on it with bare feet, but I don’t stop to dwell on it. I have more important things to focus on. Like beating Shay’s ass.

Pulling open the door to the gym, I immediately spot Shay across the way. He’s shirtless, with his focus entirely on the punching bag in front of him. His muscles ripple with each powerful punch he throws, and sweat glistens on his skin.

I march over, my anger finally bubbling over. “What the hell, Shay?” I shout, shoving him as hard as I can.

He barely moves, turning his head to look at me with a bored expression. “What do you want now?”

“First the heels, and now the panties on my door.”

I go to shove him again, harder this time, but he catches my wrists. “Oh.” He smirks. “You found those?”

I jerk my arms from his hold and ball my fists. “Are you serious? What the fuck is wrong with you?”

I don’t give him time to reply before I’m throwing my fists into his body. I land blow after blow, but it doesn’t even seem to affect him. My fists land on his chest, his arms, anywhere I can reach, and he just stands there, taking it, his expression stoic.

“Is that it?” he finally asks, mocking me.

My face scrunches with anger before I throw myself at him again, but Shay moves faster than I anticipate. He waits till I’m out of breath before grabbing me by the shoulders and kicking my feet out from under me. My back hits the ground, and I wince, and then he’s on top of me, pulling my arms up above my head.

“Are you done?”

He’s so close, damn near nose to nose with me. I can feel the heat of his breath skate across my skin. I’m hyperaware of his body on top of mine too. He’s hard, not an inch of softness anywhere to be found. His arms cage my head, and his stomach digs into mine every time he takes a steady breath.

For a split second, my mind goes blank. All I can focus on is the way his mouth moves when he speaks and how nice his lips might feel on mine. I think he has the same thoughts because when I move my eyes from his mouth to his stare, he’s looking at me with the same expression.

The dark blue rim around his eyes is even darker, and his lids are hooded and lazy. His tongue juts out to wet his lips, and he moves in the tiniest bit closer. “Would this be so bad?” he whispers.

I almost say no. What I’m thinking, I don’t even know. It’s hard to rationalize with him so close in my space, but I can see something else in him I haven’t before. It isn’t the normal want to add another notch to his bedpost. No, it’s *need*.

I’m about to give in—to let myself get lost for the briefest second and just enjoy that his mouth isn’t talking because it’s on mine—but the gym door swings open, and with it, all of my senses snap back with it.

I push him off of me and stand. “You’re a pig!” I scream before jogging out of the gym and past the man walking in.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

SHAY

What's the opposite of divine intervention? Because whoever this dude walking in is is just that. Blair was practically putty under me, but just like last time, we're interrupted, and she fucking freaks.

I lift myself off the floor where she left me and start moving toward the door where she is heading, but the man meets me halfway and steps in front of me.

He's tall, with a lean build and a confident swagger that instantly makes him blend in with every other fucking prick in Saint Bipal. He's dressed too sharp for a place like this too—dark jeans, a fitted shirt, and a leather jacket that looks like it costs more than most people's cars. He has a certain air around him too, like he's used to getting what he wants, and I immediately don't like it.

"Shay Cornell?" he asks, his voice smooth like he already knows the answer.

I nod, still glancing past him, watching the door swing shut behind Blair. "Who's asking?"

"Name's Blake," he says, extending a hand. "Blake Monroe. I'm a fight promoter with Orion Promotions, and I've been hearing your name a lot lately."

I don't take his hand. Instead, I cross my arms over my chest and level my eyes with his, tilting my chin up. "Orion Promotions, huh? And what's a big-shot promoter like you doing in a place like this?"

He chuckles, not at all put off by my attitude. “I like to see things for myself. Hear things firsthand. And I’ve been hearing that you’re one hell of a fighter, Shay. A real powerhouse in the ring.”

I raise a brow. “Yeah? And who’s been saying that?”

“People who know talent when they see it.” He flashes a grin. “But I’m not just here for you. I’m curious about this place. The fighters. The setup. There’s a lot of potential here.”

My skepticism doesn’t fade; neither does my annoyance. This arrogant asshole just interrupted something I definitely didn’t want to stop.

“Potential for what?”

“For something bigger than this,” he says, gesturing around the empty gym. “You’re good, Shay. Real good. But fighting in these small gym matches is only going to take you so far. I’m talking about real fights. Sanctioned matches. Bigger crowds, bigger paydays. You can’t tell me you’ve never thought about that.”

I narrow my eyes, trying to get a read on him. There’s something about his demeanor that makes me uneasy. He’s smooth, too smooth, and it feels like he’s just saying exactly what he thinks I want to hear.

“And you’re the guy that’s going to make it happen, huh?”

“Could be.” He shrugs. “That is, if you’re interested. You can be more than just another small-town Florida fighter.”

His words hang in the air, and despite my gut, I feel a flicker of interest. Making my own cash and getting out of here and away from my dad would be pretty fucking great. And making that cash by doing what I love and making a name for myself would be even better. He’s dangling the very big, very shiny, proverbial carrot in front of me, and I can’t help but want to believe him.

I glance over his shoulder again, but Blair is long gone now. There is no point in chasing after her. She’s probably halfway home, and besides, she’ll probably just want to talk more shit anyway.

I shift my attention back to Blake. “What’s the catch? You don’t just show up out of nowhere offering guys like me a shot at the big leagues without wanting something in return.”

Blake laughs again, but there is something sharper in his smile this time. “No catch. I’m just doing my job—finding talent and helping it grow. I get a cut, sure, just like any promoter. But you make money, I make money. It’s a win-win.”

I study him for a moment, weighing his words. It sounds too good to be true, but then again, maybe that's just the cynic in me. "Alright. Let's say I'm interested. What happens next?"

His smile widens as he claps me on the shoulder. "We set up a meeting and talk details. You show me what you've got in the ring—first hand—and if what everyone says about you is true, and I like what I see, we move forward. Simple as that."

I nod, still not entirely convinced but willing to hear him out. "Fine. I'll think about it."

"Good deal. I'll be around, just kind of scouting out the other fighters. Let me know when you're ready to talk more." He steps back, then turns, walking slowly toward the door and bouncing his eyes around the gym.

"Oh, hey, Blake!" I call out before he reaches the door. When he turns to look at me, I continue. "If you're full of shit, I'll find out."

He just laughs, throwing me a wink. "Wouldn't expect anything less from a fighter like you, Cornell."

As he exits, Austin enters with his gym bag in hand, doing a double take as they cross paths. He jogs up to me and motions to the door behind him. "Yo, who was that?"

"Some promoter," I reply, keeping my tone casual. "Says he's with Orion Promotions, looking for talent."

Austin's eyebrows shoot up. "Orion? Damn, that's big-time. Think he's legit?"

I shrug. "I don't know. Maybe. He seemed pretty interested."

He whistles low, shaking his head. "Man, if he's for real, that could be huge. We never get the big shots in here."

"Yeah," I mutter more to myself than Austin. "That's what makes me skeptical. Why all of a sudden is someone like him here?"

He claps me on the back with a grin. "I don't know, man, but don't question it. If he's still poking around in a few days, he'll see you fight, then we can see how legit he is. Just don't forget about us little guys if you make it big."

I snort and shove him playfully. "Yeah, right. Like I could ever forget your ugly mug."

He rolls his eyes. "Whatever. Ready to spar? Gotta get you ready for your next fight, playa!"

"Let's do it."

As Austin pulls his tape from his bag, I glance at the door one last time.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

BLAIR

I've managed to avoid Shay the past few days, keeping myself busy in my room and finishing up all my unpacking. I just need some space to figure things out—figure out what the hell is happening with me. My feelings for Shay are all over the place, and it's driving me crazy. One minute, I'm furious with him; the next, I'm... well, I don't know what I am.

I shove the last few pieces of clothes in my hands into the dresser drawer, then move to my bed and flop down. I still feel out of place here, but at least my room has some semblance of me. Reaching for my phone, I put on some music loud enough to drown out some of my thoughts. Closing my eyes, I let the beat wash over me. For a minute, it works. I almost forget about everything, but then the song cuts off, and my phone starts ringing.

I sit up and look at the screen. It's Hannah. I answer quickly, hoping it's a quick conversation so I can get back to the music.

"Hey."

"Blair Bear!" she squeals. "Whatcha doing?"

I sigh and fall back into the mattress. "I don't like your tone. It sounds like you're about to ask me for a favor."

"Well, I am. Kind of. It's a mutually beneficial favor."

"What is it?"

"There's a fight tonight, and apparently, there is some bigwig promoter in town. The coach is looking for another ring girl. He wants to show off a

bit, you know, make the place look good.”

“And how is this mutually beneficial?” I groan.

“He’s doubling the pay for the night, plus, you’ll get to hang out with me.”

I hesitate, chewing on my bottom lip. The idea of stepping back into the gym, knowing Shay will be there, makes my stomach twist. But money is always good motivation, and maybe it’s time I show him he didn’t get to me—not by the panties and not by this hot-and-cold game he’s playing. I can just focus on the job, then leave right after. Easy.

“Fine,” I finally say. “I’ll be there. Just for the cash, though.”

She cackles through the other line. “Sureeee. I’ll see you there! Fight starts in an hour.”

We hang up, and I let out a long breath. My phone pings again, drawing my attention back to the small screen. The messages have been back for days now, but they’re pretty far and few between. Normally, they’re just a blank message or a generic “I’m watching you” type text, so I just ignore them. What’s the point in replying? I wasn’t able to figure out who it was before, and nothing has come from them. Whoever is playing with me can keep it up because I won’t be indulging them.

UNKNOWN: I'll be seeing you tonight. Better stay sharp.

I roll my eyes.

Standing from my bed, I walk to my freshly organized dresser and pull out some simple black Spanx. I’ll just steal a top from Hannah when I get there. Stripping out of my sweats, I slip them on, then grab my phone and walk out my door.

As I’m making my way down the steps, I start calling out for my mom.

She comes from the theater room and meets me at the bottom. “Something wrong?”

It’s hard not to laugh. After Dad died, she did a one-eighty. She was depressed and paranoid—always assuming the worst in anything and everything. Grief makes you weird, I guess. That changed when we moved here, though. She seemed... at peace. Maybe it was because she’s always dreamed of living on the beach, or maybe it was Henry. I try not to focus on the latter, though.

I shake my head with a smile. I don’t want her to pry if she sees my nerves are a little uneasy. “No. I just need to borrow the car. Heading to the

beach with Hannah.”

She nods with a relieved sigh. “Okay. Keys are by the door. Don’t be too late, okay?”

I kiss her cheek swiftly, then start toward the front door. “You got it.”

Stepping outside, I slide into the old Honda and start the engine. Backing out of the driveway, I do one last mental check, making sure I have everything I need—mainly just my phone—and head toward the gym.

The drive is short, and I feel like I’ve done it a million times already, even though in reality, it’s only been a couple of times. Turning off the main road, I follow the same routine of dodging potholes until I slide into a space and park.

By the time I step out of the car, I can already hear the noise from inside. I follow it, letting it guide me because my feet feel like bricks. I thought I could do this, just ignore all the bullshit and parade around with some numbers for a bit, but now that I’m here, I don’t know.

Pushing the thoughts away, I trek forward and pull open the door. There are more people than last time, most already positioned in their seats, while others mingle, standing close to the ring. I scan the crowd for Hannah but don’t see her anywhere. My nerves kick up a notch. I should have waited outside for her.

I start heading toward the locker room, but then I spot Shay across the gym, talking to the same guy I saw the last time I was leaving. Shay’s eyes flick to mine, and I’m almost frozen in my spot. Even from this distance, I can feel the intensity of his gaze, like he’s trying to figure me out and read my every thought.

Swallowing hard, I force myself to keep walking. I’m not here for him. I’m here to make some money, then leave. As I reach the locker room door, I throw one last look over my shoulder. Shay is still watching me, studying me, with an expression I can’t quite make out. I push through the door and head inside, trying to ignore my racing heart.

I’m barely through it when it slams open behind me again and Shay comes barging through. “What the hell are you doing here?” he demands.

I spin around to face him, crossing my arms over my chest. It’s a feeble attempt at some sort of protection against his gaze. “Not that it’s any of your business, but I’m here to work.”

“Work?” He scoffs, looking me up and down. “Is that your idea of working, walking around in that?” He gestures to my shorts.

I lift my chin. “Yes, actually. You didn’t seem to have a problem with it last time.”

“Yeah? Well, last time, you were just some girl who followed me into the locker room. Now...” He trails off momentarily. “I don’t need the embarrassment tonight.” He changes the direction of what he was going to say. “So why don’t you get your shit and go?”

“I don’t need you or anyone else telling me what I can and can’t do, Shay.” I turn, giving him my back, and start toward Hannah’s locker to snag a shirt.

“You don’t belong here, Blair,” he bites out.

“Yeah? And I don’t give a fuck. I belong wherever I want.”

He yanks me from behind and spins me around so we’re face-to-face, centimeters apart. “Why do you have to make shit so difficult?” His voice is lower, strained.

“Why do you always have to act like you’re in charge?” I shoot back, hoping he can’t hear the hammering of my heart against my chest.

For a moment, we just stand there, glaring at each other, the air thick with tension. Then, before I know what’s happening, he shifts his hands to the small of my back and presses into me, crashing his lips onto mine.

The kiss is fierce and urgent, all heat and frustration. I’m stunned for a second, but then something inside me snaps, and I’m kissing him back. My hands tangle into his hair, and I push into him harder. No matter how close I am, it isn’t close enough. I want to breathe him in, seep into his bones, taste every inch of his skin with my tongue.

His hands move from my back to my face. He squeezes my cheeks between his palms almost painfully, but I get it. He feels the same way I do. Whatever we’re doing right now isn’t enough. For days, it’s been nothing but tension and anger, and now that’s all spilling over and turning into pure fucking need. The fights don’t matter, the shit-talking doesn’t matter. All that matters is our bodies together.

He steps forward, forcing me back, but he never breaks his lips from mine. He tastes like sweat and salt, and everything about him is overwhelming—his scent, his touch, the way his lips move against mine with a desperation that matches my own.

My back hits the lockers with a thud, and it’s almost as if that’s some sort of starting horn for him. He drags his lips lower, kissing my chin, then my neck, as I try and catch my breath. He dips lower and lower, finally

stopping only for a second when he's hovering over the waistband of my shorts. This time, I don't stop him. Fuck what I've said, and fuck everything else. Whatever he wants to give me, I'm going to take it.

Hooking his fingers into the elastic, he yanks them down, exposing the one part of me I've never shared with anyone else. For a second, I'm nervous, but the next, all I want is his lips back where they belong—on me.

Gripping one of my legs behind the knee, he raises it, then rests it on his shoulder. I'm completely exposed and bare, no more fabric or distance separating us. He brings his mouth back to my skin, nibbling and sucking at the tender flesh of my hip before he moves lower.

His tongue dances across my mound before he trails it lower and slides it between my lips. My hips buck forward, searching for more as my mind tries to process what is happening. I've never been this far, but it's like my body knows exactly what to do.

I look down at him as he licks and laps at my pussy with vigor. His brown hair glistens in the dim light, and the muscles of his back flex and contort with each movement he makes. It doesn't take long before my knees are trying to close. Either my body thinks it feels *too* good, or it never wants him to leave, so it's trying to trap him.

Either way, Shay isn't fazed. He reaches up and pries my knee away from his head and continues his feast between my legs. It's like I'm the last thing to eat on Earth, and he's a starving man. No matter how my body moves or tries to get away, he's one step ahead, making sure his mouth never leaves my center.

Seconds later, a ball of fire starts to build in my gut. A few more strokes of his tongue, and it's exploding, sending flames along every inch of my skin. I close my eyes as my knees go weak, and goose bumps break out all over me. Complete euphoria takes over, and I can't help but sag against the lockers.

When I open them, I look down and see Shay staring at me, his chin and cheeks glistening with my arousal. He opens his mouth to say something, but he doesn't get the chance.

The announcer comes over the speakers, announcing the start of the fight, so Shay stands up, studies me for one last second, then leaves the locker room, never even wiping his mouth.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

SHAY

My lips tingle with the taste of her, and my mind is a haze of adrenaline. That moment... It felt like a dream, but I know it was real because my head is still spinning from it. I shake it off, forcing myself to focus on the fight I'm walking into.

As I head toward the ring, I spot Blake standing near the edge of the crowd, watching me closely. When he catches my eyes, he dips his head slightly, a subtle but clear gesture that says *I'm watching*. A chill runs down my spine. It's a reminder of the stakes tonight if Blake is who he says he is.

I nod back, keeping my expression unreadable, then turn my attention forward.

Hannah approaches me with a curious look, her brows furrowed in mild concern. "Where's Blair?" she asks, glancing behind me like she's expecting to see her.

"Back there. She's coming." I almost laugh at the joke only I'll get and jerk my thumb over my shoulder. I don't have time to explain, not with the fight about to start. I push past her and slide under the ropes, trying to lock my focus onto the ring.

It's like standing under a spotlight as soon as I enter, and I get my first look at my opponent. He's already in the ring, stretching his neck from side to side. He's tall and slim, with a build almost identical to mine—lean muscles that hint at both speed and power. His skin shines with a sheen of sweat, and his hands are taped up tight, ready to go. He's got a shaved head

and sharp jawline, with a look in his eyes that tells me he isn't here to play games. And there is something in his stance that makes me think he's experienced. He's new to me, though—I've never fought this guy before.

I size him up, trying to get a read on him. Is he a striker, a grappler? What's his game? He looks fast—maybe faster than me—and I know better than to underestimate him. Every new opponent brings something different to the table, and I need to be ready.

Glancing out the corner of my eye, I see Blair standing next to Hannah just outside the ring. She's watching me, her eyes wide with a mix of emotions I can't quite decipher. When our eyes finally meet, a jolt of something electric runs through me. Maybe it's the lingering feelings from the locker room, or maybe it's a sense of pride that I'm out here in front of everyone, wearing her juices like my own little trophy.

She blushes, her cheeks turning a deep red, and she quickly looks away, trying to hide the reaction. I can't help the small smirk that tugs at my lips. Despite everything—the fight, the tension, the uncertainty of whatever is happening between us—there's something undeniably magnetic about her.

I force myself to turn away and try and push her out of my mind for the moment because I need to focus. Whatever is going on between us, I can't let it distract me. Not here. Not now.

Hannah is the first to step into the ring, the glossy "1" card held high above her head. Her smile is wide and bright, working the crowd as she makes a slow circle along the ropes. The crowd's cheers grow louder, feeding off the energy of the moment. My eyes follow her briefly, but I'm already switching gears, hearing the familiar *whoosh, whoosh, whoosh* in my ears.

She exits the ring, and the ref steps to the center, motioning for me and my opponent to do the same. Meeting in the middle, the tension between us is thick, but I still raise my fists. We bump knuckles, and his eyes lock onto mine. I see a fire there—a determination that mirrors my own.

The bell rings, sharp and loud, and we're off.

We circle each other cautiously, testing the waters. He throws the first jab, a quick right that I easily slip, countering with a jab of my own. My fist grazes his chin, but he's already moving back. He's light on his feet, bouncing with a kind of agility that tells me he's no stranger to the ring.

He steps forward again with a one-two combo, and I dodge the first punch, blocking the other with my forearm. He's fast, but I'm quicker. I

launch a sharp left hook that connects with his ribs, and he grunts, his body shifting to absorb the blow. Before I can move again, he pivots away, creating some distance between us.

His movements are precise and calculated. He's not just throwing punches; he's feeling me out and testing my reactions. I recognize the strategy—he's trying to gauge my timing, my rhythm—because it's my own.

Feinting with my left and snapping quickly with my right, he dodges again, but this time, he comes in close, catching me off guard. His elbow slams into my gut, driving the air from my lungs. I stumble back, my vision blurring for a split second, and he's on me. I block most of his punches, but one slips through, cracking against my jaw. My head snaps to the side, but I keep my footing, gritting my teeth against the sting.

I shake off the hit and retaliate with a hard uppercut that catches him under the chin, snapping his head back. He staggers, and I press forward, launching a series of quick jabs aimed at his face. He blocks and dodges, his defense tight, but I see him falter for just a moment. I go for a roundhouse kick, aiming for his side, but he ducks under it, coming in low.

Before I can reset, he shoots forward, wrapping his arms around my waist and driving us both to the mat. The air rushes from my lungs as my back slams into the canvas. I struggle against his weight pinning me down, trying to buck him off, but he's got a solid grip. His forearm is pressing against my throat, and his knee is digging into my side.

I grunt, twisting my body to break his hold, but he's relentless, keeping me grounded. His technique is good—solid grappling skills I didn't see coming. He's been waiting for this, biding his time until he can take me to the mat, where he's clearly more comfortable.

The crowd roars around us. I shift my hips, managing to create just enough space to slip my leg out from under him. I swing it around, hooking it over his back to gain some leverage. He presses harder, trying to maintain control, but I use his own momentum against him, rolling us over so that I'm on top.

Just as I start to regain control, the bell rings, signaling the end of the round. I push off him and get to my feet, breathing hard, sweat dripping down my face. He gets up slowly, his eyes never leaving mine. This guy is good—really good.

Moving to my corner, I plop down onto the stool Austin produces and take a few sips of water. He mumbles something in my ear, pointers, I'm sure, but I barely hear him over my own heartbeat. My focus is already shifting to the next round.

Now, Blair steps into the ring, holding the "2" card above her head. Her presence is impossible to ignore. She moves with a different kind of grace than Hannah, a natural sway to her hips that draws every set of eyes in the room—including mine.

I clench my fists and force myself to look away, to focus on the fight. But it's harder with her so close. I feel like I'm splitting in two—one part of me here, ready to fight, and the other back in the locker room with her.

Blair finishes her circle, then steps out, giving me the briefest glance before she disappears out of my peripheral.

Moving my eyes back to my opponent, I watch as he bounces on his toes, ready for the second round. I've felt his strength, and I've got a strategy. I need to mimic his moves, throw him off-balance, and make him second-guess himself. If I can get inside his head, I'll have the upper hand.

We move back to the center as the bell rings, and I don't give him a second to think. I drive forward with a series of quick jabs that force him back. He's expecting me to be cautious, to keep my distance, but I'm not giving him that chance. I press him hard, cutting off his space, and mimic his own aggressive style.

I throw a left jab, then a right uppercut, forcing him to stay on the defensive. He's fast, blocking most of my punches, but I can see the cracks starting to form in his defense. He lunges forward, trying to grab me again and take me to the mat, but I'm ready. I sidestep his advance and pivot on my heel, then bring my knee up to his gut.

He doubles over, gasping for air, and I take my chance. I grab him by the shoulders and move him forward, throwing him off-balance. His feet slip, and he crashes to the mat, the sound of his body hitting the canvas loudly.

I'm on him in an instant, locking his arm and pinning him down. He struggles beneath me, trying to wiggle free, but I got him this time. With my free arm, I swing out, connecting punch after punch into his jaw. After the third, his head lulls to the side, and the fight starts to leave him.

The crowd erupts again, a deafening wall of sound, and I hear the ref counting. One... Two... Three...

He's sluggish, barely moving but making sure it's still something to keep him in the fight.

Four... Five... Six...

He's using everything he has left to thrash weakly beneath me, but it's no use.

Seven... Eight... Nine... *Ten!* The bell rings, and I jump off him like he's made of fucking fire.

I look down at him and shrug with a smirk before blowing him a kiss.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

BLAIR

As soon as Shay's off the mat, he blows a mocking kiss to the guy on the ground, and then his eyes start searching the crowd. When his gaze finally locks on me, I feel a strange flutter in my chest. It's almost like he's looking for me.

Before I have a chance to process what that means, Hannah is at my side, tapping my ass and placing the "winner" card in my hand. "Go on. Announce our champ!"

I take a deep breath and step into the ring with my heart pounding. Shay is moving toward me, his expression arrogant and intense. Just as we're about shoulder to shoulder, the guy on the mat stirs and slowly gets to his feet.

I barely have time to react when he starts shouting, slurred and angry. "That was a bullshit call! Ref, you're blind!" he yells.

No one has a chance to stop him before he's lunging toward Shay with a clenched fist.

Everything happens in a split second. Shay moves to the side, and the guy's punch misses its mark. Instead of connecting with Shay, his fist slams into my face with brutal force. Pain explodes across my cheek, and I stumble backward, disoriented, my vision blurred with sudden tears, before I fall to my ass.

Then, chaos.

Shay all but roars and slams into the guy, tackling him back to the mat. His fists fly in a blur, pummeling the poor bastard who hit me. Blood starts to splatter with every hit, and the crowd's cheers turn into shocked gasps.

Austin slides into the ring, desperately trying to pull Shay off, shouting for him to stop, but Shay is lost to his rage. A primal force that can't be contained. Next, I feel Hannah's hands on me, checking my face, but I barely register it. My focus is solely on Shay.

"Shay, stop!" I cry out, my voice shaky from the pain in my face.

He doesn't even hear me, doesn't even seem to see me. It's like he's somewhere else, completely consumed by anger.

I force myself back to my feet and stagger over to him, grabbing his arm. "Shay! Enough!"

Finally, my voice breaks through. He pauses, his chest heaving, his fists still raised. He turns and looks at me, then reaches out and swipes his finger under my lip, smearing the moisture I didn't even realize was there. His hands and tape are bloody, so I can't tell if it's my blood or the guy when he pulls away. But by the way his eyes darken, I have my answer.

Fear flashes across his blue orbs, and suddenly, without a word, he stands up. Shoving Austin away, he grabs my hand and pulls me to the ropes. Quickly, he steps out, then holds them open for me. I don't even get a moment to fully step down before his hands are on me again. Only this time, he lifts me gently and starts carrying me through the crowd bridal-style. The whole gym is staring, whispers and murmurs following us as Shay pushes through them, but I can't even make out the words.

The only thing I can focus on is his face above me and why he's acting this way.

Once we're inside the locker room, he sets me on my feet and starts shoving his stuff into a bag with quick, jerky movements. I can feel the anger radiating off him in waves.

"Get your things," he orders.

I hesitate, still dazed, then start moving toward Hannah's locker to grab my phone and my mom's keys.

"Shay, I'm fine," I say, but I don't even believe my own lie.

"Just get your stuff, Blair," he snaps, his tone leaving no room for argument.

Holding up my hands, I show him my keys and phone. "This is all I brought."

He gives me a curt nod, then jacks his gym bag over his shoulder and steps back to me. Grabbing my hand, he leads me out of the locker room. He doesn't even glance at all the people still milling around. The crowd parts as we walk through, and I can feel their eyes on us, but my eyes are still on him.

When we finally push through the gym doors and into the parking lot, I instinctively move toward my mom's car, thinking I'll just drive myself home. But Shay's hand tightens around mine, pulling me back to him.

"No," he says firmly. "You're riding with me. I'll come get your car tomorrow."

I open my mouth to protest, but then I remember the look on his face in the ring. The last thing I want to do is make him angrier.

He doesn't say anything else. He just leads me over to his Jeep, opens the passenger door, and motions for me to get inside. I climb in, and as soon as I'm seated, he slams the door shut, making me flinch. As he rounds the front of the Jeep, I try to keep my breathing steady. When he finally slides into the driver's seat and starts the engine, the silence between us is thick.

The drive home is short, but the quiet makes it feel agonizingly long. I try to distract myself by looking out the window, watching the palm trees and the blur of the streetlights, but the pain in my cheek makes it hard to concentrate. Every bump in the road sends a jolt of pain through my head, and I have to bite my lip to keep from groaning.

Shay doesn't say a word the entire drive. He just keeps his eyes fixed straight ahead with his jaw clenched tightly. I steal a glance at him, but his face is an unreadable mask. I wonder what he's thinking, if he's angry at me or at himself or at the whole fucking world. But I'm too hurt and too tired to ask.

Finally, we pull up to the house. Shay cuts the engine after he parks and is out of the Jeep in an instant. He moves around to my side before I even have a chance to unbuckle my seat belt. I push the door open, but he's already there, catching me as I stumble out.

"Easy," he coos, steadying me with a hand on my lower back as he leads me toward the house.

We move quietly through the darkened foyer, and I let Shay lead me toward the staircase. He keeps his hand on me as we go up, not letting me go until we reach the landing. I step toward my door, but his hand is back, this time on my waist, leading me to his instead.

The door is ajar, and he pushes it further open with his shoulder, guiding me inside. “Sit,” he orders, just like before, pointing to the edge of his bed.

I obey his command and let my body sag into the mattress. His eyes never leave mine as he unravels the tape from his bloody hands and throws it to the floor. It’s a bit odd seeing him so careless when I know his room doesn’t even have a speck of dust in sight.

Finally breaking his stare from mine, he leaves the room. I can hear water running down the hall, but it stops just as quickly as it started. A few seconds later, Shay is back, damp washcloth in hand, pushing the door closed behind him.

He kneels in front of me and grips my chin between his pointer finger and thumb. “Hold still.”

He starts dabbing the cut on my lip, pressing the cool cloth against my skin with a touch that is surprisingly delicate. I wince at the sting, but he doesn’t pull back. Instead, he moves with careful precision, dabbing the blood and cleaning the wound with a focus I’ve only seen him carry in the ring.

His thumb brushes lightly against my bottom lip, and I inhale sharply at the sensation—a mix of pain and want. His hands are a little calloused from all the hours spent training and fighting, yet his touch is featherlight, as if he’s afraid to cause me more pain. I’m so used to his harsh words, his cold glares, and even the abrasiveness of his kiss. But this... This is new.

My heart starts to pound in my chest, and I’m not sure if it’s from the pain or the way he’s looking at me. I feel exposed under his stare, vulnerable in a way that makes me uncomfortable, yet I can’t look away.

“Why are you doing this?” I ask softly.

Shay doesn’t look up from where he continues to dab my lip. “Because you need it,” he says simply, as if that explains everything, but it doesn’t.

His hand tilts my chin up slightly, and his thumb brushes my jawline. I’m hyperaware of every point of contact, the heat from his skin seeping into mine, the roughness of his fingers a stark contrast to the gentleness of his actions.

My heart beats faster, and I catch myself unable to stop staring at him. I’ve never seen him like this—so focused and so soft. There’s a tenderness in his touch that’s almost disarming. A side of him I didn’t know existed. I catch myself holding my breath and my thoughts spiraling in a direction I never expected. Hating him was easy—fun. Kissing him and wanting to

scrape up against him like a cat in heat, even better. But this? I don't know how I'm supposed to deal with this—the sweet, tender, gentle Shay.

His thumb grazes my lip again, and I shiver, a wave of warmth flooding through me despite the coolness of the cloth.

"Does it hurt?"

"A little," I admit, my voice coming out more breathless than I intended.
"But it's okay."

He pauses for a moment, his gaze finally meeting mine again, and there's something in his eyes that makes my stomach flip—something like concern.

He nods, then drops the washcloth on the nightstand beside us. "Well, that should help for now."

I nod, still trying to process the strange, softer version of Shay in front of me.

He stands and crosses the room to his dresser. Tugging open a drawer, he pulls out a plain black T-shirt, then turns back to me.

"Can I help you, or would you prefer I leave?"

I can't formulate words to answer him. Instead, I just lift the gym tank over my head and wait for him to come back. When he's back in front of me, he leans down, shimmying the shirt over my head, then pulls it down over my stomach, letting his fingers brush against my ribs as he does. The fabric is soft and well-worn. It smells like him too, a mix of sandalwood and something smokey.

"Aren't you going to change too?" It's a stupid question, but I need to fill the void with something.

He nods. "I'm going to go call Austin and make sure everything is good at the gym first. But don't worry. You can sleep here. You need to rest."

I nod, then glance at his pillows. They seem so welcoming and soft.

Like he can read my mind, he reaches for the corner of the blanket and tugs it free, ruining the neatly made bed. I maneuver awkwardly, pulling the rest out from under me, then position myself at the top in the center. When I lie down, he pulls the blanket over me and steps back.

"I'll see you in the morning." And with that, he leaves.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

SHAY

It's been a few days since the fight, but I've replayed it in my head over and over. I won, sure, but it doesn't feel like a victory. Not with how it ended. I shouldn't have lost it, I know that. The second his fist connected with Blair, though, something snapped inside me. The rage, the instinct to protect her—it overwhelmed everything.

I couldn't see anything but him. I didn't care about the rules, didn't care about the ref, and I didn't care about who was watching. I just wanted to make him hurt. Make him regret laying a hand on her.

And I did. I made sure of it.

But now, thinking back, all I can feel is the weight of what actually happened. Austin trying to pull me off, the crowd, people shouting my name, blood on Blair's face... The moment she grabbed me, her voice cutting through the chaos, was like a bucket of cold water. I finally saw what I was doing, saw the fear and confusion in her eyes.

I've been in a lot of fights, but I've never felt anything like that. It wasn't just about winning. It was personal. And that's what's eating at me. I lost control, and for a fighter, that's dangerous.

I don't regret defending her, but the way it ended... I can't shake the feeling that I crossed a line. Blake hasn't called since, and I know he was watching. I guess maybe he's waiting to see if I'm just another hothead who can't control himself when things get real.

I shake the thoughts away. I couldn't give a fuck about Blake right now. If he wants to dip, that's on him. Just goes to show he isn't who he said he was.

I stand in front of the mirror, tightening the knot of my tie. The black suit I'm wearing fits me like a glove—it's one of the nicer ones I own, pulled out only for special occasions, which I guess tonight qualifies as such. My dad's engagement party. *Our* dad's engagement party, I guess.

I stare at my reflection, but my mind isn't really focused on the party or the people who will be there. It's on Blair.

It's strange. A few weeks ago, I couldn't stand her. She was nothing but a disruption, an unwanted complication in my life. The girl who showed up out of nowhere with her attitude, making my life even more difficult than it already was. She was a thorn in my side, a reminder of everything I hated about my dad moving on. And I'm sure she felt the same about me. We were two people forced into the same world and both unwilling to accept it. But now, it's different.

I run a hand through my hair, trying to tame the mess of thoughts running through my mind. Somewhere between the fights, the arguments, and that night, something shifted. I can't pinpoint the exact moment it happened, but I know it did. The way I feel about her isn't the same. I've stopped hating her, stopped seeing her as a source for my problems.

She's still a problem—but in a completely different way.

I think back to the locker room, to the way she looked at me, to the taste of her lips, the feel of her body under my hands. I can't get that out of my head, no matter how much I try. And the thing is, I don't want to. I don't want to forget the way she makes me feel—alive, reckless, and God help me, I want more.

This whole situation is messed up. She's practically my stepsister, and yet I can't stop imagining her in ways that are anything but brotherly. It's like every time I'm around her, I'm drawn in whether I want to be or not. I keep telling myself I shouldn't want her, but that doesn't seem to be stopping me.

I adjust my jacket, staring at my reflection one more time before heading out of my room. Tonight is supposed to be about my dad and Sylvia—their engagement party—but they seem unimportant in my thoughts. All that's left is Blair. How is she going to look tonight? Is she

thinking about me the same way I've been thinking about her? Does she feel the same fucked-up pull, the same tension?

I shake my head and head down the steps, making a beeline to my Jeep so I can head to the club. This is dangerous, this thing between us. It's a risk I'm not sure I should be taking, but at the same time, I can't stop it. Not anymore.

**

The back patio of the club is a goddamn spectacle. The tables are covered in white linens with crystal glasses and small candles. Large flower arrangements sit at every center too. It feels like an endless line of perfectly curated photos. Roses, lilies, white orchids—all arranged perfectly in their glass vases.

I move toward the open bar, then lean against it. Soft music spills out of the speakers, and people I've never even seen before mingle around, every last one of them in fancy suits or expensive dresses. Raising my hand, I signal the bartender and request a whiskey. As he nods and moves to the row of perfectly kept bottles of booze, I feel a clap on my shoulder.

"You're looking good, son," my dad says.

I turn around and face him, but his eyes are on everyone in the crowd.

"Thanks." Although the sting of him and Sylvia together has lessened, I'm still not thrilled about my mom being replaced.

He finally turns back to me. "You know, Sylvia is really going all out with this. Try not to ruin it for her, okay?"

I roll my eyes and reach for the tumbler the bartender quietly placed behind me. "Don't worry, Dad. I'm here, in a damn tux like requested, and keeping to myself. I have no plans to fuck up your perfect little party."

He doesn't reply. Instead, he gives me a weak smile, then slips back into the crowd.

I take a long sip of my drink, the burn of the whiskey reminding me I'm still here despite everything in my gut telling me I'd rather be anywhere else. I'm trying to drown out the noise, trying to ignore how my dad's smile always gets under my skin, but it's hard. Everything seems like a performance, and I'm nothing more than a reluctant participant.

Focusing on the ice swirling in my glass, I try and push it all away. It doesn't even feel important anymore, not like it used to. The patio door swinging open catches my attention from the corner of my eye, and then I see her.

Blair.

The evening light catches her hair briefly as she moves down the steps. She's wearing a dark green dress that fits her perfectly, simple but still elegant. And even from this distance, I can still see the discoloration on her face from when she was hit. Sure, it's covered with makeup, but I can still make it out, and it makes my fists clench.

For a brief second, her gaze flickers across the crowd, but it doesn't land on me. I shouldn't care, but as she moves toward the edge of the patio, standing apart from the group of people in front of her, something shifts. She's not mingling, not laughing or pretending to enjoy herself. She's just there. A little isolated and alone, and I hate how that may make her feel.

I down the rest of my drink, then cut across to where she's standing. I'm not sure what I'll say once I make it to her since we haven't spoken much since the fight, but I don't want her alone.

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

BLAIR

Clear View is an entirely new world tonight. The space is decked out like some sort of fever dream, all pristine white linens, fresh flowers, and champagne. It's like every section of the place has been plucked from a wedding magazine. It's hard to believe it's even real.

People are mingling, glasses of expensive liquor in hand, talking in those soft, polite tones that only come out at places like this. The whole thing feels staged with no warmth, nothing real, just appearances. I glance around, trying to find something familiar, someone I can talk to, but all I see are people I've never met.

I walk to the edge of the patio and stare out again. I know I'm supposed to be here to support my mom, but honestly, it's not my vibe. As I'm about to turn around and hide inside, someone steps beside me from the corner of my eye. When I turn to look, it's Shay.

He looks over me with those impossibly blue eyes and that same broody, intense look he always has. For a split second, I feel that familiar knot in my stomach, but then he does something that surprises me. He doesn't say anything—no snarky comment. He just stands there, and for some reason, it feels different. Like he's not trying to make me uncomfortable or make me feel small like he normally does.

His eyes flicker, but there's no judgment, no typical sneer that usually follows when he's in my orbit. It makes me feel a little less on edge. A little more grounded, somehow.

“Hey.” His voice is low and rough, but with an edge of something softer I’m not used to.

It’s strange. He’s the last person I’d expect to offer me any kind of peace, but at this moment, I find myself—oddly enough—relieved.

“Hey.”

“Wanna say fuck it and get out of here?”

My brows raise a touch. “Is it that obvious I don’t wanna be here?”

Shay shrugs. “Can’t say I blame you. It’s kind of a circus but with fewer lights and fewer acts.”

I laugh and extend my hand in front of me. “Lead the way. I don’t know this place like you.”

He chuckles, then tips his head. “Say less.”

As he starts stepping, I follow. We weave in between all of the tables and people until we reach the end of the engagement party chaos. My heels sink into the grass once we’re off the wooden dance floor that was transformed for all the guests, but I keep moving. Shay does too.

To my left, there’s a tennis and basketball court, and just beyond that is a boat dock, but Shay doesn’t lead us that way. Instead, we navigate right until the grass eventually turns to sand and we’re positioned on the club’s private beachfront. It isn’t insanely massive, but it is blocked from the public with huge, man-placed rocks. It gives us the smallest bit of privacy.

I slip off my heels and hang them on my thumb as we move closer to the water. The sand feels cool beneath my feet as we walk along the shore. The further we get from the party, the more the world seems to quiet down, like everything is slowing and giving me room to think. I take a deep breath, and for the first time since stepping inside Clear View, I feel calm.

I glance at Shay walking beside me silently with his hands shoved in his pockets. His jaw is tight, but there’s something softer in the way he carries himself here.

We walk in silence for a few moments, neither of us in a hurry, with the sound of waves filling the space between us. But then, out of nowhere, I find myself speaking.

“You know,” I start, pausing before I lower myself into the sand. “Everything feels different between us now.”

Shay doesn’t say anything at first, but his gaze stays locked on me as he sits down beside me. There is no surprise on his face, no confusion. Just something like acknowledgment.

“Yeah. I think we both knew it always would be. Between all the shit-talking and fighting, we were never really going to stay the same, were we?”

I shake my head, not trusting myself to say much more because I know he’s right. Things *are* different now. For a while, I thought maybe I could keep pretending—pretending things would stay the exact same way they had been. Me hating him, him hating me. But I knew it wouldn’t last. Between the way my body engulfed in flames when he touched me or the way I would almost seek him out in any form—bad or good—I knew I was doomed. And I guess he felt the same too. The locker room the other night and everything that followed proved that.

“Where do we go from here, then?” I ask, looking into the distance of the waves on the surface of the ocean.

I see Shay shrug from the corner of my eye. “You tell me, Dollface.”

My stomach flutters at the name he calls me. For once, it isn’t something insulting or rude. It’s actually... cute.

“I mean, everything with our parents complicates things, doesn’t it?”

I turn just in time to see Shay smile wickedly. “Well, I’ve never been scared of a fight or a challenge. Guess this just makes things more interesting...” He trails off like he’s thinking, needing a little time to formulate his next statement.

I let his words sink into my skin. Everything in my life since moving to Saint Bipal has moved at one hundred miles an hour. There has been no break, no moment to take anything in. And everything with Shay is no different. One minute, we hated each other, now the next, we’re...

“What does this make us exactly, then?” I ask, voicing the very thought as it came.

He chuckles lowly, then lies back into the sand, closing his eyes to shield them from the sun. “It makes us whatever we want to be. I fight all the time, you know? And sometimes, I don’t want to. And I don’t want to fight with you. Not anymore.”

I’m not sure how to even respond to what he’s saying. A part of me agrees and knows this is how it will always be, but another part of me is scared. What about our parents? What will people say? How does this work? I have more questions than answers, but I don’t want to ruin the moment either.

Shay is finally opening up and laying himself bare in front of me. He's being real—raw.

"What if I like fighting, though?" I roll my eyes and laugh, almost kicking myself. *Why did I say that?*

In one swift motion, Shay's arm wraps around my stomach and pulls me back into the sand with him. As soon as my back hits the warm ground, his fingers lock around my wrists, and he crawls on top of me, straddling my hips, and raises my hands above my head.

Unlike other times, my first instinct isn't to hit him or try and fight and get away. Instead, my breath picks up, and my chest starts to pound with excitement. He leans down, his nose only a hair away from mine. I can smell the alcohol on his mouth from the drink he must have had earlier and feel his breath on my lips.

I stare into his icy blue eyes, not knowing what to say or what to do. I just pause and let myself bask in his figure and the feelings stirring in my stomach.

"Tell me to stop and I will," he whispers, moving at a snail's pace to close the gap between us.

But I don't tell him to stop. His lips press into mine softly. Such a harsh contrast to the normal we once had. There is nothing violent or fierce about how he kisses me this time. Instead, he moves his mouth against mine slowly, savoring every taste I'm giving him. His tongue juts out and swipes across the seam of my lips slowly, and I open greedily, ready to take every single sweet lap.

He unleashes my wrists and plants his hands into the sand by my head. I move mine and cup his face, scraping the pads of my fingers across the slight stubble on his cheeks, then crawl them up his jaw and into his hair. His silky strands feel like they belong there, tangled in my fingers, just like it feels right to have him pressed against me so tightly. Our breaths start to synchronize, and my heart slows.

Everything is so warm and easy. So right.

He breaks his lips from mine, then stares down at me. "I think that's better than fighting."

I smile and shake my head. "Finally, one thing we can agree on."

Shay rolls his eyes, then moves from on top of me, taking his position beside me back.

“Maybe we will get some backlash,” he continues his thought from earlier. “But I think we can handle it. I mean, since my mom died, I’ve dealt with worse things.”

I nod and wrap my arms around my center. “What happened to her? Your mom.”

Shay sucks in a deep breath. “She just had a bad heart. Doctors thought they had caught it soon enough, but there wasn’t as much time as they thought. Treatments and all of that helped some, but we knew what the outcome could be in the end.”

“I’m sorry.”

He shakes his head. “Don’t be. Anywhere life happens, so does death. It’s a hard pill to swallow, but it’s reality. I miss her, but I’m thankful for the time I got with her, you know?”

I nod because I do understand, although I can’t imagine knowing death was coming soon. I didn’t get that with my dad. One day, he was here, healthy as a horse, then the next, he was gone. No signs. No warning. No goodbye. He was just gone.

“And your dad?” Shay asks, dragging me from my thoughts.

“Car accident.”

“Damn.”

I nod again. “Yeah. How it all played out is still a mystery, but I don’t think I care to know. It’s not like it’ll bring him back.”

Shay tips his head. “What do you mean?”

I fist my hand into the sand, trying to focus on something other than what I’m thinking. Talking about my dad isn’t something I like to do. Not because I don’t love him but because it’s still just... hard. I have so many questions, but unlike in other situations, I don’t think I want the answers.

“I don’t know. Cops just said they couldn’t really put together how everything happened. His brake lines were cut, but it didn’t seem like an intentional way, if that makes sense. Apparently, the cut was jagged instead of smooth or something. So everything was still ruled an accident, but no one knows if the lines were cut as a result of the accident or if someone did it before. They ruled it an accident, though, and my mom won’t talk about it.”

“But if someone did do it, you don’t want to know?”

I shake my head. “My dad was a saint. He had no enemies or anything like that. At least, that’s how I knew him, and I don’t want to know

different. I think that's my mom's thoughts too. That's why we just don't talk about it. What's done is done."

I want to tell him more—about the texts and how I have a feeling that maybe they can be linked. But I just watched him beat some guy bloody for touching me a few days ago. I don't want to unleash that beast again.

Shay opens his mouth to say something else, but I cut him off.

"Maybe we should head back now. I'm sure our parents will start looking for us soon."

As I stand, Shay stays planted in his spot for a moment, studying me, but he doesn't make any more comments.

"Yeah," he finally breaks his silence and stands. "I guess you're right. Let's go raid the bar."

I chuckle and push his shoulder, then lead us back the way we came.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

SHAY

It's only been a few days trying to navigate whatever it is Blair and I are, so I don't want to ruin anything, but I can't stop thinking about shit. About what she said about her dad, about the fight where I lost control, and about Blake and how he very well could hold my future in his hands. Especially tonight.

First fight since I taught that douchebag a lesson when he put hands on Blair. Accident or not, it fucking happened, and I hope every hit I laid into him is a constant reminder.

I stand at the edge of the ring, wrapping my hands in tape. The familiar motion and routine grounds me in a sense, but my mind is still a mess. Blake is beside me, leaning against the ropes lazily, but I can see him watching me from the corner of his eye.

"Hey," he finally says as I turn around to face the small crowd that's gathering and stretch my shoulders. "You're not going to let that shit affect you tonight, right?"

I glance at him briefly, then point my eyes back to the crowd, searching out Blair. I find her off to the side, with Austin next to her, just like I instructed him.

"What are you talking about?" I keep my tone casual, but truth is, my head isn't entirely in the game.

"You're not going to break the rules again tonight just because your head's not straight? I have a lot riding on you here, Shay. I even brought in

a few buddies to watch.”

“I’m fine.” The words feel like a lie even as I say them, but it’s easier than trying to open up and explain anything to him.

He doesn’t look convinced. He opens his mouth to say something else, but his gaze flickers to where my eyes have been positioned. Right on Blair.

“Focus, Shay.” He shoves my shoulder, forcing my sights to him.

I nod and look down to my feet, then back up to him. “Right. I got it.”

But even as I move to slide into the ring, I can’t help but take one last look behind me to see her. She isn’t here as a ring girl tonight. She’s just here for... me.

When my feet hit the canvas, the familiar rush of adrenaline hits me hard. I’m floating, letting all of the noise fade into the background, until the bell rings out. Blake’s words echo in my mind: *focus*.

I shake off the distraction, ball my fists, and wait for the first swing.

My opponent comes at me fast, jabs to my ribs, testing my defense. I parry, but it’s not quite right. My reflexes are a step behind, and my mind is still somewhere else, no matter how hard I try to bring it back. I dodge, then throw a hard right hook, connecting with his jaw. It stings my knuckles, but I don’t back down. He stumbles back, but he’s quick to recover.

With every blow I land, my gaze flickers back to where Blair stands. She’s watching, arms crossed, confusion painting her face. She isn’t moving. She’s just standing there, and something about it keeps pulling my focus right to her.

Breaking my stare, I point my eyes back to my opponent. I land another jab to his chest, but my timing is off again. He pushes forward with a clean hook that catches me in the ribs, knocking the wind out of me for a second. I take the hit, grimacing, and immediately go on defense, circling back. *Focus, Shay*—I repeat Blake’s words like a mantra, but my body isn’t listening.

Every time I move, I find myself not caring about standing my guard. Instead, I’m searching for her out in the crowd. Her eyes are still locked onto me like she’s trying to telepathically ask me what the fuck is going on, but her guess is as good as mine.

The punch I throw next misses by a fraction, and the guy across from me takes advantage, landing a sharp uppercut to my chin. My head snaps back, and the sting of his fist radiates through my skull.

Blake's voice rings out from the corner, his tone doing nothing to hide his irritation. "Shay! Get your head in the game!"

I blink, shaking my head, trying to clear the fog. I focus again, forcing myself to engage with the fight, to tune everything else out.

I throw another punch and land it right in his jaw. He stumbles back, and his eyes flash with frustration. Good. I've got his attention again. But as he steps back to recover, I glance over to Blair once more, but she doesn't look at me this time. Instead, she looks away.

The bell finally rings, signaling the end of this round, and I back away, stepping toward my corner.

Blake looks at me through narrowing eyes as he leans in. "You need to keep it together."

"I know."

I can't let shit get to me. Not here. Not in the ring. But as the second round starts, I know it's already too late.

The bell rings again, and I square up. I can feel Blake's eyes on me, but it's still not enough to shake the fog of wherever my head is.

He charges at me this time, faster than before, and I'm too slow to react. He throws a quick combination—left jab, right cross, then a solid hook that catches me off guard. The punch lands clean on my cheek and snaps my head back. The sharp sting vibrates through my jaw, and for a split second, the world tilts.

I stagger, my vision blurring for a moment. I hear Blake shout something, but it's distant and muffled, like I'm underwater.

I steady myself and take a breath. The guy presses forward, sensing my weakness, but I'm not out. Not yet. I clench my fists again, tighten my core, and throw a quick jab to his stomach to create some distance. He stumbles back, but only for a second, and I know I don't have a lot of time to reset.

But the damage is done. My head is still ringing, and my focus? Shattered. Has been since the second I stepped in the ring. I can feel blood from my lip and taste the copper on my tongue. The crowd is a distant hum, but Blair's figure from the corner of my eye? That's sharp, cutting through the haze. I turn my head fully to catch a full look at her again, and everything stops for a second.

The guy takes it as his opportunity to charge forward again, and this time, I don't see the left hook coming. He lands it hard, right under my ribs,

and my breath is knocked from me again. I go down to one knee, gasping for air.

Staggering back to my feet as quickly as I can, my legs shake, and my breath is ragged. I shake my head, trying to clear it, but my opponent is already moving again, bouncing effortlessly on the balls of his feet and taking advantage of the split second I'm off-balance.

I have no time to recover before his fist flies out again, landing right in the same spot he got my jaw earlier. It lands with a sickening crack, and my knees give out beneath me. I hit the canvas hard. Blinking, I try and force my eyes back into focus, but it's hard.

Blake's voice breaks through, though. "Get up, Shay!"

But it's too late. The countdown is already ticking away.

One...

Two...

Three...

I lie there, not even trying to move. The past month has been moving too fucking fast, and I just need a minute.

When the final number is yelled out by the ref, I loll my head to the side and search for Blair. She's still in the same spot as earlier, but this time, her brows are furrowed, and she frowns.

Don't sweat it, Dollface. I needed a break. I try to communicate with my face and a lazy smirk.

Promptly, Blair's figure is cut off, though, and Blake's comes into view. Again, he follows my sights and glances at Blair over his shoulder.

"If you're going to be so easily distracted by pussy, maybe you shouldn't be fighting," he hisses.

I just shrug. I couldn't give a fuck less about him right now. I know I should, but the first fight back didn't feel as good as I thought it would.

Or maybe I just have more important shit to worry about now.

CHAPTER TWENTY

BLAIR

I watch as Shay finally pulls himself off the floor of the ring, then slides out between the ropes. I keep my place as he pushes through the crowd casually, ignoring all the confused looks. When he makes it to the back, I move next to him.

“What happened out there?”

He shakes his head. “Just wasn’t feeling it tonight.”

I raise a brow, but he doesn’t elaborate. Instead, he keeps trekking toward the locker room, grabbing my hand and pulling me behind him.

“Weren’t feeling it? I know I haven’t seen you fight a ton, but that doesn’t seem like you,” I comment as we break the threshold into the locker room.

He drops my hand and shrugs. “I’m good, Dollface. My mind was just other places, is all.”

“Other places?” I ask, crossing my arms over my chest.

He flashes me a smile, then slinks up to me, pressing his chest into mine, forcing me back until my back hits the wall. Suddenly, we’re right back where everything started—where we started.

He moves his face in, hovering his lips just above mine. “Other places.”

Suddenly, I don’t need an explanation because I know exactly what he’s talking about. I should have known. His eyes kept catching mine during the fight, but I didn’t think I could be such a distraction. I mean, the only

difference now is we aren't trying to rip each other apart at every second. Or are we?

Shay's lips brush mine, and instinctively, my hands uncross and move to his ribs, pulling him as close as I can. No, we aren't trying to rip each other apart with our words or insults, but we definitely may be in other ways.

His kiss deepens, and with it, my body turns to mush. It feels so much easier, so much more exciting, to have him this way without the guilt of hatred. His palms press against the wall, framing my head, and I can't help but get giddy. I can taste the blood on his lips and feel the heat of his breath, and it does nothing but make me want to be even closer.

Moving my hands down, I grip his hips and tug. His pelvis nudges into me, and I can feel just how much he wants me too. He's all hard muscles and sweat, and something about it sets me on fire.

Moving one hand, he slides it behind my head, then tangles his fingers into my hair, giving it a soft tug. "Maybe we should move this home," he whispers between kisses.

My eyes open with his words. *Home*. For a second, I forgot all about who we are to one another and the fact we're under the same roof. Now, though? Not at all.

I roll my eyes and push him away from me. "Definitely not going to risk any of this at home. The last thing either of us needs is to give our parents a heart attack."

He lets out a sigh. "Another thing we can agree on, I guess."

As he moves across the locker room, gathering his things, I linger by the door. Peeking through a crack, I notice the crowd has dissipated, and not many people are left. Only two familiar faces stand out. Austin and that weird dude who has been around the gym the last few times we've been here.

Shay moves in behind me, pushing the door ajar the rest of the way, then nudges his chin toward the exit. "Let's go."

As we walk, Austin jogs away from the man and tries to stop us, but Shay just holds up his hand. "Another time, bro. I'm tired."

"Blake wants to talk."

"I don't care. It can wait. I'll call him tomorrow."

Austin throws up his hands as Shay keeps walking. "Dude!"

When we make it to the parking lot, I let Shay open the passenger-side door of his Jeep, then climb inside. I buckle quickly, then twiddle my

thumbs as I wait for him to round the front and climb inside.

After he closes his door and starts the car, I let him back out before I start asking more questions.

“Who’s Blake?”

He glances at me quickly, then turns his eyes back to the front. “He’s a promoter.”

“They have promoters for fights?”

“More like for fighters. Think of him like a talent agent of sorts.”

I nod. “Okay. And he just popped up out of nowhere? Is that normal?”

“It isn’t really uncommon but a little odd for Saint Bipal. We’re small in the fight scene compared to other places.”

“So what does he want, then?”

I can see the slight uptick of his lips as he says the next word. “Me.”

I scoff and raise a brow. “Doesn’t seem like he was too happy tonight, though—about you losing. So, are you sure about that?”

“He’ll get over it. Everyone has their days.”

Don’t I fucking know it. Hell, I’ve seen Shay’s good and bad days. Been the target of both too.

“So what’s his endgame, then? Get you signed or whatever and scoop you away?”

The thought enters my mind as quickly as I say it, and I don’t like the way the words even taste. I feel now Shay and I are at a decent spot. Where we’re going, I don’t know. But I know I don’t want to lose him. Not yet anyway.

Shay laughs. “Don’t worry, sis. We’re family, remember? Even if he does manage to get me a big break, I won’t be going far.”

I gag, promptly forgetting the conversation and the nasty feeling the thought of Shay leaving evoked. “Ew. Don’t ever call me sis again. Fucking nasty.”

He laughs again, making one last turn down our road, then creeps into the driveway.

Most of the lights are off sans the porch light. As soon as the Jeep is in park, I open the door and slide out. I move slowly, letting Shay catch up to my side before I start up the front steps and open the door.

Everything is quiet as soon as we step into the foyer. Mom and Henry must already be in bed. We pad up the stairs quickly, then move across the landing until we’re outside my door.

Even if we're on good terms now, right now feels awkward. Do I go to bed? Do we stay up and talk? The last few nights were different. My mom had me helping with various wedding tasks, so by the time I made it to bed, Shay was already locked away in his room. Now, though? We're both here, just standing, waiting for the other to say something. And for once, I'm speechless.

"I, um—" I start, but Shay cuts me off.

"Sleep with me." His statement is simple, said coolly and effortlessly.

I glance down the hall, making sure no one is watching or listening, even though I know for a fact it's just us.

"What?" I laugh.

"In my bed. Sleep with me."

I let out a sigh. "We can't risk them finding us together tomorrow."

Shay rolls his eyes. "I don't like when you're right."

I shrug and bat my lashes. "But I do."

He studies me for a moment, looking at me down the bridge of his nose with a small smile. "I'll see you tomorrow, then, Dollface."

Leaning down, he presses his lips to mine. As much as I don't want to break the kiss or let him leave, I know we can't do this. Not here.

"Tomorrow," I breathe, pulling away.

I don't even open my eyes. I just reach behind me blindly, grip my doorknob, and turn it, then back into my room swiftly.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

SHAY

I wake up to the usual dull thrum of my alarm. My head is pounding, a reminder of the fight last night but also the mess I'm no doubt going to have to clean up today with Blake. I drag myself out of bed and waste no time heading downstairs, hoping a cup of coffee will help in some way.

The house is quiet, minus the soft voices drifting from the kitchen. When I round the corner, I find Blair leaning over the counter with my dad and her mom on the other side. Her hair is pulled back into a messy ponytail, and she has a cup of coffee in front of her as she listens to the conversation.

I freeze for a moment. It's not like I'm shocked to see her here. She is my stepsister now, after all. Still, it's always a little odd seeing her so at ease in my space. It isn't that I'm not used to it, but lately, everything feels... different.

"Morning, Shay." My dad tips his chin. "We were just telling Blair how we're flying out to LA today. We'll be gone a couple of days but expect you both to be on your best behavior."

I nod and move past them to grab a mug out of the cabinet. "So that total rager I was planning will have to wait?"

Blair chuckles, but my dad doesn't. He's always so fucking stiff.

I just roll my eyes and pour a heaping amount of coffee into my cup. "What's happening in LA?"

"It's my final dress fitting," Sylvia all but squeals.

Blair raises a brow. “Isn’t it bad luck for the groom to see the bride in her dress before the wedding?”

Sylvia shrugs and curls into my dad with a smile. “Traditionally, yes. But nothing about our relationship has been traditional. Since we aren’t planning a honeymoon right away, I figured we could use this as a sort of pre-honeymoon. A mini trip to the big city before we say ‘I do.’”

I gulp my coffee and swallow loudly. “Bring me back a souvenir.”

Discarding my cup into the sink, I try to slip back to the doorway, but my dad stops me with a hand on my shoulder. “Shay. I’m serious. No nonsense when I’m gone, understood?”

Shrugging away from his touch, I nod. “I got it.”

He studies me for a moment, then moves his hand up and grips my chin between his pointer finger and thumb. “Bruised up with a busted lip. Since when does that happen?”

I pull away, turning my head, and catch Blair giving me the same look. Like she’s agreeing and saying, *yeah, what’s up with that?* Only, she doesn’t keep it up. As soon as she knows I’ve seen her, she points her sights at my dad and her mom again, breaking the small silence.

“So, when are you guys heading out?”

Sylvia looks at her watch, dragging my dad’s attention with her, giving me enough time to slip past them.

“Oh! We need to leave now. We’re set to board in an hour.” She gathers her purse from the counter, pats the front of her body quickly like she’s making sure she has everything, then looks at my dad.

“I already have the tickets.” He smiles like he read her mind.

“Okay.” She releases a breath, then moves around the counter to Blair and pecks her head. “Be good. Love you!”

“Love you too.”

As they move toward the doorway, I back up and shuffle toward Blair, watching them as they go. I keep my eyes on the front door until they’re on the other side, and I hear the familiar sound of tires rolling over gravel. When it lulls into a distant hum, I turn to Blair.

“Finally.”

I don’t give her a chance to even reply before my lips are on hers. The bitterness from her coffee is still slick on her tongue, but the cherry from her lip balm is sweet. I push my hands into her hair and curl the tips of my fingers, no doubt fucking up her already messy ponytail.

After a few seconds, she pulls away, planting her hand firmly on my chest. “As much as I like this, doesn’t it feel weird doing this here?”

I glance around the kitchen and then back to her. “I mean, no.”

She laughs. “I don’t know. I feel... icky. Like we’re doing something wrong.”

Now, I laugh. “Cause technically, we are. You’re my sister, duh.”

Blair shoves me hard. “Shut up! I told you not to say that.”

Holding up my hands in mock surrender, I drop my head. “Okay, okay. I tell you what, go pack an overnight bag and get dressed.”

“Forrr?” She draws the word out.

Slinking back up to her, I tilt her chin until she’s looking into my eyes. “I’m going to wine and dine ya, Dollface. If you’re not comfortable here, then I’m going to take you somewhere you can be.”

BLAIR TAKES ANOTHER BITE OF FOOD, THE SOFT GLOW OF THE LAMP casting soft shadows over her face. Honestly, I had no idea where I could take her or what we could do, but I knew getting out of the house was a must. I wanted to be next to her—touch her, kiss her, really *feel* her—but I knew that wouldn’t happen if we stayed home.

A quick call to book a table and room, a few hours of killing time at the beach till it was ready, and then we finally pulled up to Clear View. Only Blair wasn’t excited. It almost seemed she was even more uncomfortable. So, I said fuck the dinner and just snuck us away to our room—private suite, thanks to my dad being a member.

Now, she seems more at ease, pushing her lobster around her plate, talking about shit I can’t even comprehend. It’s been too hard to pay attention. All I can do is stare at her. She’s so fucking beautiful.

“You know what I mean?” Her question snaps me back to the present.

My mind starts to scramble to answer, but I have no idea what she even said. I was too busy counting the light freckles on her cheeks and basking in the glow of her green eyes. Luckily, though, a knock on the door saves me.

Her eyes widen as I stand, and I can’t help but smile. “Calm down. It’s just dessert.”

Instantly, her shoulders relax again as she pushes her plate across the bed and pulls the sheet over her lap.

I open the door and snag the bowl of fruit and bottle of champagne from the room service attendant, then tip him a twenty and close the door.

“I can’t eat any of that. I’m way too full,” Blair comments, holding up her hand as I move back to the bed.

I set the bowl on the bedside table, abandoning it for whenever she’s ready, then pop the cork on the champagne. Luckily, it doesn’t fizz too much, but what does come out, I lap up happily.

“It’s fine. Just have a drink for now,” I reply, passing her the bottle.

As she takes it, I crawl back into the bed beside her and smile as she takes a drink. Her eyes catch mine, and she grins. “You know, I never expected to be sitting in a room, drinking champagne, and feeling so comfortable with you.”

I snatch the bottle back playfully, then bring it to my lips before speaking again. “Yeah, well, don’t get used to it. Remember, you like to fight too much.” I wink

Before I can even swallow the liquid in my mouth, Blair moves to her knees, snags the bottle back, and hurries it back to her mouth. “You’re right,” she laughs, and it’s fucking contagious.

I reach out, trying to take the drink back, but she turns, keeping it pressed against her lips, and pushes her hand into my chest. I don’t stop, though. I drive my chest forward against her palm. She’s already weak from laughing, and the position does nothing to help her.

Her elbow bends, and suddenly, my entire front is pressed against her side. My mouth is only a couple of inches from her cheek, and I’m locked back into the weird hypnosis of staring at her.

Finally, she lowers the bottle and turns to me. Champagne wets her lips, and a drop runs down the side of her mouth to her chin. Without a second thought, I jut out my tongue and lick it up. By the time my tongue hits the corner of her mouth, she opens it, turning her body more into mine.

I grab the bottle from the base, never breaking my lips from hers, and tug. She doesn’t even put up a fight now. She just unravels her fingers from the neck, then slides them to my chest. I drop the bottle, hearing it roll across the floor and not giving a single fuck.

Repositioning, I wrap my hands around her hips and push her back, forcing her flat on her back, then crawl on top of her. I thrust my hips

lightly, letting her feel what she's doing to me. She snakes her legs around me, locks her ankles around my lower back, and cups my face in her palms.

Slowly, I rake one hand up, find the edge of her shirt, and push it up. Her skin is hot under my fingers, and it makes me shiver. Touching her feels so right—so normal. Like, this is how it was always supposed to be.

As soon as my fingers start to fidget with the edge of her bra, her body tenses the slightest bit.

“I can stop,” I whisper against her mouth and move back.

Blair shakes her head quickly and pulls me back to her. “No. I want this.”

Her lips crash into mine again, and although I love the enthusiasm, this is different. I want her to feel comfortable. I want her to be taken care of. She isn't just another fuck. She's special.

I find the waistband of her shorts and run my fingers along it. “Are you sure?”

She freezes but nods. “I’m sure. Can you just...”

I pause and raise up so I can really study her face. “It’s okay. We don’t have to do this.”

She shakes her head again. “I’m just... I’m just scared.”

I lean down and plant a soft kiss on her cheek. “What will help?”

Blair glances around the room like she’s inspecting every corner, then brings her eyes back to mine. “Can we turn off the lights?”

I flash her a quick smile and nod. Rising from the bed, I walk to the wall and flip off the overhead light before moving to each bedside lamp and turning them off as well. Cloaked in complete darkness, I reach my hands out in front of me and step slowly until my shins hit the edge of the bed.

I let myself fall back into it easily and find Blair’s body waiting for me. I slide up beside her and move a little slower. “Just breathe, Dollface. I’ll take care of you. I promise.”

Reaching down, I find her knee, then drag my knuckles up the inside of her thigh. Once I make it to her center, a sharp breath leaves her.

“Good girl. Keep breathing. It’s okay.”

My fingers fidget with the waistband of her shorts, tugging on them as she raises up so I can pull them down. With her bottom half exposed, I lean over and plant soft kisses on her stomach, moving down slowly until I hit her mound. The light dusting of hair tickles my lips, but it doesn’t stop my

pursuit. Jutting out my tongue, I swipe at her folds and relish in the shiver that takes over her legs.

I reposition, scooting further down the bed, then seat myself right between her thighs. Unlike the locker room, I take it much slower—softer. I kiss and lick, savoring every taste that explodes across my tongue. As I knead her thighs, her legs slowly open wider, and her breaths become more ragged. Once she's dripping wet, completely dousing my face, I move up. Using the back of my hand, I wipe away some of her slickness from my lips and chin, then find her face.

"You're really good at that," she whispers, cupping my cheeks in her palms.

"Say the word and I'll do it again."

A low chuckle bubbles in her chest, and she shakes her head. "I want something else."

"And what is that?"

Silence envelops us.

"Come on, Dollface, use your words. Don't be embarrassed."

"You. I want you," she whispers.

I don't even have it in me to reply. Instead, I dip my head and start trailing kisses from her collarbone up to her neck, then to her cheek. I make my way to her mouth and let her taste herself on my tongue, all while running my hands along her hips. Grabbing my cock, I stroke myself slowly for a moment, then rub my length over her center. I coat myself with her slickness, making sure with every stroke I deepen our kiss, letting her know everything is okay.

When my dick is sleek with her arousal, I tease her opening gently, thrusting my hips featherlight. "Does it feel okay?"

She nods without words, but by the way her legs try to close, I don't need them.

"Talk to me, Dollface. I need to hear you."

"Just don't stop. Please," she whimpers.

Normally, I'm used to girls throwing themselves at me and doing off-the-wall shit in bed. This is different, though. Normally, I wouldn't bother, but Blair needs this. *I need this.*

I continue thrusting lightly, only managing to get the tip of myself in. She's turned on, sure, but her nerves aren't letting her relax fully. "I need you to do something."

Her fingers tremble slightly on my chest as she nods and pulls her face back from mine. “Okay.”

“I need you to reach down and touch yourself. Can you do that?”

She doesn’t answer, but her right hand starts moving, slowly raking down my chest until it’s between us. Her knuckles brush my public bone slightly, but there is no quickness, no excitement. She’s simply doing what she’s told. She’s thinking too much.

“Move your fingers faster, Dollface. Touch yourself like I’m not here,” I coach. “Don’t worry about me at all. I’ll talk you through this, okay?”

Her pace quickens, and within seconds, her legs are relaxing the slightest bit again.

“Good girl. Keep going.”

She listens and doesn’t stop, and neither do I. Slowly, inch by inch, I push my cock into her warm, waiting pussy. She’s so tight and smooth. Pure fucking silk. It takes everything I have in me to control myself. I’d love nothing more than to pull back out and slam back in, chase that high I know all too well, but I know I can’t do that.

With me fully seated inside her, Blair stops moving, and a shuddered breath leaves her.

“It’s okay. You just need to adjust to me inside you, that’s all. Is it painful?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “No—not now.”

I nod and thrust softly. Even in the darkness, I can see the shadow of her face scrunch before a whimper leaves her lips.

“Shhh. It’s okay. Keep touching that pretty pussy. Don’t stop, okay?”

She nods again, then starts thrumming her fingers again with one hand. Her other snakes under mine and anchors itself to my shoulder. Every time I move, her nails dig into me, but I don’t mind. The slight bite of pain is enough to keep my ass in check so I don’t lose control.

Finally, her whimpers turn to moans, and I quicken my pace. I lean up slightly, making sure she can keep her hold on me, and find her tits under her shirt in the darkness. I work her flesh in my palms, massaging them, squeezing them, and giving her nipples soft tugs. I’m definitely not used to moving so slowly, but something about it feels even more erotic than anything I’ve experienced.

Blair arches her back, and her hands find the sheets below her. She fists them and cries out quietly, but I need more. “Let go. It’s okay. Let me hear

you scream."

Like my voice is a detonator, she does. Loud, booming moans of her pleasure surround us, and it's all I need to finally come undone. Pulling out, I shoot my seed across her stomach, coating her pale skin and marking her as mine.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

BLAIR

The drawn-out chime of a phone ringing has me stirring under the sheets. The sound pulls me from sleep, but the warmth of the bed and the softness of Shay's body keep me heavy-eyed and unwilling to move. Instinctively, I clench my thighs together and wince at the soreness that vibrates through them.

The ringing stops, and then Shay's voice takes over. "Hello? Yeah, I can be there in a few... Okay... Bye."

I wait for the bed to shift as he stands, but instead, he stays where he is, and I let my eyes stay closed. His arms snake around my stomach and pull me toward him. He's so warm.

"Good morning, Dollface," he says quietly.

"Good morning," I mumble.

I turn in his arms and blink slowly to clear the sleep from my eyes, trying to adjust to the soft light filtering through the curtains. I smile when I see his blurry figure still looking as half-asleep as me.

Snuggling into his side, I press my cheek against his chest. "Who was that?"

"Austin," he replies, voice still thick with sleep. "He and Blake are at the gym and want me to come by. You wanna join?"

I sigh softly. The lingering high from last night makes it hard to think about anything else. "Yeah. I guess we can't live in this bubble forever, right?"

Shay chuckles, and I feel his chest rumble under my cheek. “I guess not.” He places a soft kiss on the top of my head.

The reality of having to go back to how things were—see our friends’ faces, our parents... It feels like a shift back into something I know has been waiting. It’s not bad, but it’s a reminder that things can’t stay this simple forever.

He shifts beneath me, pulling the sheets off us, and the sudden cool air makes me shiver, but it isn’t enough to wake me up fully. I roll out of bed, stretching my limbs as I stand. The soreness in my legs is still there, but it’s a manageable reminder of how close we were last night.

Glancing to the bed, I see the crisp white sheets tangled with splashes of red and immediately feel embarrassed. I knew this could happen your first time, but I guess I was so wrapped up in bliss I never thought to check.

I look over at Shay just in time for him to catch my eyes and see what I’m looking at. Instead of saying anything, he just flashes me a smile and steps toward the bed.

He reaches around me and swipes the sheets, balling them up in his hands. “I’ll keep these.”

My face is already hot with embarrassment, but I feel my skin tick up a few more degrees. “Keep them?”

He nods, not giving me any more explanation. Shoving them into his duffel bag, he throws me a wink, then picks up his discarded T-shirt from the floor and starts pulling it on. I do the same and find my clothes from last night and step into them.

Once we’re both dressed, we leave the comfort of the room and head downstairs, out the door, and into the parking lot, avoiding the valet.

The morning air is thick and hot, but I’ve kind of grown accustomed to it now. The parking lot is nearly empty, making it easy to navigate toward Shay’s Jeep. He leads the way, the sounds of his shoes crunching on the gravel making the only noise between us.

I slide into the passenger seat, buckle up, and glance over at him as he starts the engine. He gives me a small, tired smile before pulling out and heading toward the main road. The ride is quiet at first. It’s comfortable, but there’s a weight between us.

Finally, he speaks as he keeps his eyes on the road. “So... last night.”

He doesn’t pose it as any sort of question, but I feel the need to answer anyway. Things have slowly been shifting between us for days now, and last

night was simply the turning point. We're at a spot now we can't go back from. Not that I want to, but what happens next?

"We can't keep doing that, can we? Our parents are getting married," I finally let out.

Shay nods, still staring at the road in front of us. "I don't want us to be some secret, though. We can't live like that."

I open my mouth to reply. I don't even know what to say, but I can't let silence swallow us. Only, I don't get the chance.

"Let's worry about it later. Right now, none of that matters. We can figure out the logistics another time, but for now, it's just us. Our parents are gone, so let's enjoy it."

I let out a breath and nod. That definitely sounds better to me.

He turns into the lot for the gym and throws the Jeep in park. Sliding out, he rounds the car and opens my door. We walk into the gym and are immediately met with the smell of sweat and metal. Austin and Blake are already there, huddled next to the ring, but within seconds, their eyes land on us.

Austin juts his chin at us and sprints over. He and Shay exchange a few words I can't make out, but I hang back, giving them space. I linger around, crossing my arms over my chest, and try not to intrude on whatever it is Shay needs to do. It was evident Blake was pissed the other night, and I don't want to be a part of that.

The three of them gather at the corner of the ring, exchanging words and hand gestures, but I'm too far away to hear anything that's actually being said. After a while, Shay nods to both of them, then shakes Blake's hand before crawling into the ring. Austin isn't far behind him and slides under the ropes.

As Shay pulls off his shirt and starts stretching his arms behind him, I know he's slipping into fighter mode. There's something magnetic about the way he moves—about the way he so easily shifts gears. His focus and intensity draw me in, and I find myself stepping toward the ring.

Stopping beside Blake, I watch as Shay and Austin start dancing around the ring, throwing quick jabs at each other. As I watch them, Blake steps closer to me.

"So," he starts, crossing his arms over his chest. "How's it feel watching these two go at it?"

I look at him from the corner of my eye but don't bother to turn toward him. "It's impressive. I guess."

Blake nods. "Yeah. Always interesting to see someone get into the headspace of fighting." He cuts himself off, then reaches his hand across his body toward me. "I'm Blake, by the way."

I give him a quick look and shake his hand. "Blair."

"You've been in this mix for a while now, huh? What's it like, really? Hanging around a fighter, living in a world that's all about punches and bruises."

I finally glance at him, a little caught off guard by his question. "It's different, I guess. But honestly, I'm getting used to it. Not sure I'll ever understand the whole thing, but I've learned to appreciate the discipline."

He looks amused with my answer. "Yeah, fighters are a weird breed. But they've got heart. Even if it's a little twisted sometimes."

I laugh and turn back to Austin and Shay. "I've definitely noticed that."

He tilts his head and studies me as I watch the boys. "So, what's your deal with Shay? I mean, you two are, well, you know. *Obviously* together, right?"

I don't even know this guy, and he's already trying to pry. I guess it makes sense, considering who he is to Shay, but it's still fucking weird. "It's complicated."

"You know, it's not easy. Getting into a relationship with someone like Shay, I mean. His world isn't exactly built for someone to just slip into."

I frown but quickly wipe it away. "Seems I slipped in just fine."

Blake shifts on his feet, then glances at Shay and Austin in the ring. "You know, I get that you're here because of Shay, but I don't think you really know what you're getting into."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

He doesn't immediately answer. His gaze stays locked on Shay and Austin like he's waiting for something. "You just don't know what it's like to get close to someone like him."

I shrug, trying to play it off. "I know Shay well enough."

He shakes his head. "If you say so. But if I were you, I'd stay away."

I turn to him fully. "Are you trying to tell me to stay away from Shay?"

He smirks maliciously. "I'm not telling you anything, Blair. I'm warning you—stay away from Shay."

"Or what?"

Before he can answer, Shay and Austin stop moving and jog to the ropes. Blake turns to them with a smile, leaving my question hanging in the air.

“That’s what I’m talking about!” he booms. “That’s what I like to see. Always moving forward, light on your feet. Keep it up, Shay.”

I want to pry more, ask more questions and try and figure out what the fuck he’s talking about, but when I look to Shay and see the smile on his face, I don’t have the heart to ruin his moment. He’s back in the fight with a clear head. So, I stay quiet and smile instead.

Austin lifts the ropes for Shay, and he slides out, bouncing to the ground beside me. As he leans over to kiss my cheek, I look behind him where Blake is standing and see him watching me with intense eyes.

Shay moves to where he discarded his shirt, and in those few seconds, Blake walks up to me, leans over, and whispers in my ear. “Tell Sylvia I said congratulations on her wedding.”

Before I can ask how he knows my mom, let alone her name, he snaps back to his full height. Shay is back by my side and wraps his arm around my waist. “Let’s get out of here.”

I nod, wrapping my arms across my chest a little tighter as I keep my eyes on Blake.

“It was nice finally meeting you, Blair,” he comments as I turn on my heel.

I push into Shay’s side and let him lead me out of the gym.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

SHAY

I walk out of the gym with Blair in tow, the air cool against my face from the sheen of sweat across my brow. As soon as we slip into the solitude of my Jeep, though, I can tell something is up.

Blair keeps her gaze fixed out the window as I start the car and pull out of the parking lot. “You good?”

“I’m fine,” she replies, but it doesn’t sound convincing. She looks at me for a second, then turns away like she isn’t sure how to explain what’s going on with her.

I keep my eyes on the road but reach across the console and grip her thigh. “Did Blake say something to you? I know he was still pissed about the other night, but he’s good now.”

Blake is the only explanation. She was fine when we made it to the gym, but now, as we’re leaving, not so much. The only linking factor is Blake. I get he wasn’t happy with my performance the other day, but he is fine. He scolded me a bit, but I know I’m too valuable to lose. He’ll get the fuck over it.

She nods a little too quickly. “Just Blake being Blake, I guess. I don’t know. He doesn’t seem too thrilled that we’re together. But it’s fine.”

I throw my head back for a split second before snapping it back toward the road. “Blake has no control over me, Blair. He can dislike us being together all he wants, but at the end of the day, he doesn’t matter. What exactly did he say?”

“He was just being weird. Asking questions, trying to figure me out. He was acting like I don’t belong in your world.”

“Well.” I give her thigh another reassuring squeeze. “Too bad Blake doesn’t get to decide where you belong.”

Blair glances back out the window with a weak smile. Suddenly, her words from the other day filter back into my head. “*What’s his endgame? Get you signed or whatever and sweep you away?*” and it suddenly makes sense. I’m sure Blake was just trying to eliminate the very obvious distraction that is Blair, warn her in a way I need to keep my head in the game, but to her, it’s him trying to take me away.

And after last night, I’d like to think that’s really something she doesn’t want.

“You’re worried, aren’t you?” I ask, making my voice a bit softer. “You’re worried Blake is going to take me away?”

She freezes beside me for a split second. “What? No. I’m not worried.”

I don’t buy it. I can feel the shift in the air. Whether she wants to admit it or not, I know.

“It’s okay. You don’t have to hide. I know things are complicated with our parents, with everything. But you don’t have to worry. I’m not going anywhere.”

She rolls her eyes and pushes my hand off her thigh playfully. “You’re so full of yourself.”

Turning into our drive, I throw my Jeep in park as soon as we stop. “Maybe. But you love it.”

The word slips out quicker than I can even think about it, and immediately, I don’t know how to follow it up. That’s fast—too fast.

I hop out quickly, choosing to ignore I even said it and hope Blair didn’t notice. I walk around the front of the car, internally kicking myself, then swing open her door. I don’t want to wait for her to say anything. Don’t want to deal with the embarrassment of rejection or anything else. Hell, I didn’t even know what I was saying before I said it. It just slipped out.

I grab her hand quickly and pull her behind me playfully, leading her inside. Once we step inside, she pulls my arm, stopping me in the foyer.

“Shay—”

“Shh.” I cut her off, sliding up to her, and cup her face in my hands.

I push my lips into hers, swallowing down any words she might say. She doesn’t fight me, doesn’t try to make me stop. Her hands move up and

link around my neck. Jutting my tongue out, I swipe at the seam of her lips. She opens and sticks hers out, massaging mine in slow, soft circles.

My cock perks up with the motion. Traveling my hands down, I grab her hips and pull her closer to me, letting her front press into mine. We're melted together again, and I'm not sure either of us will be able to break away. Not that we would want to.

Her fingers massage my neck as she holds me, and then she breaks her lips from mine and moves them down my jaw. I let my head fall back in her hands, giving her access to my neck and shivering when she licks my skin. I run one hand up to the back of her head, tangling my fingers into her hair and holding her in place. Her lips on my skin does something to my body, and I never want it to end.

Only it does.

The door beside us opens, and immediately, we both jump back, breaking every point of contact.

Sylvia and my dad stand there, staring. My heart sinks to my stomach, and I feel the need to move—to get further away from Blair.

Blair's green eyes are wide, and her pale cheeks are tinted red. I try and mouth, *I'm sorry*, but it's pointless. Suddenly, my mouth is dry, and I can't seem to make my jaw move to work. Now, instead of being locked together in a kiss, we're locked in a haze of what the fuck just happened.

I knew at some point this was bound to happen, but I thought we had more time. Thought we could live in the blissful bubble of bullshit for at least a few more days without having to worry, but I was wrong.

Sylvia looks shocked. Her mouth is hung in a silent O, and my dad just looks angry, standing beside her. I want to feel bad, and maybe I do slightly, but Blair isn't just some girl to me. Not anymore. Whatever it is she and I have is important, and I don't want to lose it.

Not when it just started.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

BLAIR

My heart slams against my chest, and my stomach drops with a rush of adrenaline. Shay is still standing there, just as unsure as me. But we need to break the silence. Someone needs to say something. Anything.

“Um, hi...” I manage to squeak out, but it sounds pathetic even to my own ears.

My mom stares at me for a moment, then bounces her eyes between me and Shay like she’s trying to put together what she just saw. Her lips press together in a hard line before she crosses her arms and finally speaks.

“Blair... What is going on?”

“I—” My voice cracks, and I scramble to try and form a coherent sentence. “We weren’t doing anything. It’s just—” I cut myself off because it sounds so ridiculous. How do I explain this? How do I explain us?

Shay steps forward, holding his hands up. “We—uh. We didn’t mean for this to happen. It just...” He trails off, clearly struggling with words like me. “It’s not what it looks like.”

My mom raises an eyebrow, her arms still crossed, not saying anything for a few seconds as she continues to assess the two of us. The silence stretches on until Henry clears his throat beside her.

“I didn’t expect to walk in on this,” he says, his tone flat, but the disappointment is clear. “There are some lines you just do *not* cross.”

I feel my throat closing up as I struggle to try and find words, but nothing comes. How do I make them understand that this—*us*—isn’t some impulsive mistake or reckless decision? We’re not acting on some whim.

Shay stands straighter, his jaw set, but I can tell he’s just as rattled as me. “I understand this looks bad, but we’re not... we’re not doing anything wrong. We’re just trying to figure things out.”

“Figure things out? She’s going to be your sister, Shay!” Henry booms. “Do you know what this could mean for my reputation? We’ve had this discussion over and over before. Ever since your mom died—”

“Don’t even try to make this about Mom! This isn’t about her!” Shay snaps back, and I jump.

“This is. We had an agreement, Shay. Or have you forgotten? I’ve let your fighting slide, considering it was more legal than other things I was worried about you getting involved with, but this?” Henry shakes his head. “This I can’t let slide. You were supposed to stay in line for three more years. Three years! Then you could cash out your savings, and I would stop paying you to be good.”

“Yeah,” Shay chuckles. “Because paying me to mind my manners so your reputation wasn’t hurt seemed so much easier than fucking talking to me! Right, Dad?”

Wetness hits my cheeks, and it isn’t until I reach up to touch them that I realize I’m crying.

“Boys,” my mom tries to interject, but Shay cuts her off promptly.

“Sylvia, as much as I would love to sit here and argue with you too, it’s clear you’ve both made up your minds already. It doesn’t matter if Blair and I have actual feelings or anything else, so save your breath.”

Shay turns on his heel to leave, and neither my mom nor his dad try to stop him. I feel my heart sink to the soles of my feet, but then instinct takes over, and I’m chasing after him. The heavy door slams behind me as I follow him outside and shout to his back.

“Shay!”

But he doesn’t stop.

“Shay, please! Please talk to me!” I beg, not even trying to hide the hiccups in my pleas.

Finally, he turns around, shaking his head. “I can’t do this, Blair. I’m not sitting around here like some kind of secret.”

I open my mouth to say something, anything, but the words don't come. What can I say? What's left to say? How am I supposed to fix this?

He runs his hands up his face, then pushes them into his hair and tugs with a groan. "This is insane. They don't even care to understand us. It's like we're just... wrong to them."

I step forward and reach for his arm. "Don't do this, Don't leave. They're just upset. They didn't mean it like that. They just—"

He pulls away from me, and his face contorts in anger. "They don't get it. They don't get us. They just see their own fucking version of everything, and I'm not going to stand here and let them make me feel like some kind of villain because I'm with you."

I wince at the venom in his voice, the hurt that's laced with anger. And I get it. I get why he's upset. But I don't know how to fix it. I don't know how to fix any of this.

"I can't—I just can't. I can't stay in this house pretending everything is alright when it isn't."

I sniffle. "Then what about us?"

Shay pushes out a deep breath, then moves toward me. He grabs my arm and pulls me to him slowly. My head goes to his chest, and he wraps his arms around me tightly. The thrum of his heartbeat is blaring and erratic, but somehow, it's calming to me.

"We'll be fine, Dollface," he whispers, kissing the top of my head gently. "I just need to stay away for a few days. Maybe that will make them realize this isn't what they think—that this is real."

I nod and snake my arms around his waist. I know him leaving is probably best so everyone has a chance to cool off, but I feel I've just gotten him, *really* got him, and I don't want to let him go.

"What about me?" I reply, tipping my face up to his.

"You stay here. Don't try to rationalize with them. We'll come up with a plan after the wedding and go from there. Let's not try and ruin their big day and piss them off further."

Nodding, I try and glance away, but he grips my chin between his pointer and thumb. "Hey, don't worry. We'll work this out, okay?"

"I don't want you to leave, though."

Finally, he smiles. "Distance makes the heart grow fonder or whatever the fuck they say."

I roll my eyes and push him away. "When will you come back?"

Shay shrugs. “I’ll pop up at the wedding in a few days. Let’s just keep our distance till then. I’ll stay with Austin.”

“Promise you’ll be back, though?”

He pulls me into him again. “I promise, Dollface.”

I close my eyes as he leans down and presses his lips to mine. Suddenly, everything feels right again. As much as I want to keep him with me and never let him go, though, I know he’s right.

Breaking our kiss, he backs away from me, not turning around until he makes it to his Jeep. I wait until he’s inside and peeling out of the driveway before I turn on my heel and head back for the door.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

SHAY

I pull up to the gym, the engine of my Jeep humming under me, but I barely hear it over the thoughts rushing in my mind. It's still caught in the mess back home—Blair, our parents, all the bullshit that just transpired. I can't remember the last time I felt this frustrated. This angry. I'm pissed, but there's also this gnawing sense of confusion lacing it all too.

Turning my keys, I pull them out of the ignition and step out of my car. I slam the door with more force than I should, then march to the doors. The only thing I can think to do right now is fight. Either a person, a punching bag, or even a fucking wall. I don't care. I just need to get these emotions in check.

It was easier when Blair was there. She has this weird way of making me feel calm without even trying, but as soon as I left her, every ounce of frustration came back. I can't be reckless, though. I need to stay in check. Especially if I want to figure out how the fuck we're going to fix this and move forward.

Making it to the doors, I reach for the handles and pull. Only, they don't open like normal. I try again. And again. And again. Each time, my anger rises even more because the door doesn't budge.

“Are you fucking kidding me?”

I kick the base of the door and step back. Glancing around, I notice the parking lot is damn near empty other than a few cars way in the back. Of

course nothing would go the way I need it to right now.

Turning back around, I head toward my Jeep, ready to drive off somewhere else to work off my anger. The sound of footsteps falls in line behind me, though, and makes me stop in my tracks. Turning back around, I see Blake.

“Gym closed for the night?” he asks.

It feels weird that he’s here, but I don’t question it too much. “Looks like it. I just needed to work off some more steam. It’s been a rough day, you know? Lots of shit hit the fan all at once.”

Blake gives me a quick nod like he gets it. “Yeah. Sometimes you need to get away from everything and just do something.”

I glance over at the locked doors again, still not sure where to go from here. I could drive around, hit the beach, but I don’t want to. I want the gym. I want the sweat, the focus, the clarity.

Blake seems to sense my hesitation and steps forward. “My place is nearby. Small gym setup, nothing fancy, but it’ll work. You wanna come by?”

The offer catches me off guard for a second. I look at him, weighing the options. I don’t really trust the guy fully yet, but right now, I’m not in the mood to turn down the chance to get the anger out of me. *I need it.*

“Alright, fine. Lead the way, and I’ll follow.”

He nods again. “Great.”

He heads for his car, and I head for mine.

The drive to Blake’s place is quieter than I expected. I follow his car through narrow streets, the neighborhood growing more and more secluded the further we go. The houses start to thin out, and the road gets less paved, winding through trees and untrimmed bushes. It’s the kind of area that feels a little off-grid. The kind of place if you didn’t know where you were going, you’d never find it.

Blake’s car slows and pulls into a small clearing, and I follow, parking behind him on the grass. I kill the engine and stare out at the place in front of me. It’s a decent-sized property. The house is a modest one—nothing extravagant or over-the-top like mine, but it’s nice. White-paneled sides, gray shutters, and a porch to match, complete with white wooden chairs. The lights from the inside spill out onto the front porch. No signs of excess here. Just a house that looks lived-in, a home.

Blake steps out of his car and motions for me to follow. I do the same and head behind him toward the garage off to the side. As my shoes crunch along the grass, I take in the rest of the area. I notice a shed further down the property near the water. It's small, old, and seems a little out of place compared to the main house, but its flickering light above the door catches my attention.

I stare at it for a moment, curiosity tugging at the back of my mind. What the hell does he keep out there? But Blake doesn't seem to notice my distraction. He keeps walking, leading the way to the garage.

The overhead door is open, revealing a simple but functional workout setup. There are a few free weights, a heavy bag hanging from the ceiling, a pull-up bar, and a couple of mats scattered on the floor. It's everything I need.

"Like I said," he starts, gesturing around the room. "It's nothing fancy, but it gets the job done."

"I don't mind it. Works for me."

He nods, then steps toward the door and pulls it closed. It seals with a soft thud, and immediately, the space feels smaller. The hum of the lights above fills the silence for a second, and something about that alone makes me feel a little more at ease—a little less angry. The simplicity of it all feels like a relief. A place where I don't have to think about anything except what's in front of me.

Blake walks over to the heavy bag, adjusting the straps, then gives me a sideways glance. "Well, get your blood flowing."

I scoff and step up to it, clenching my fists a few times before I start throwing light jabs.

"Really? You had such a shit day, and that's all you got?" he mocks, stepping up to hold the bag in place.

I shake my head, reaching behind me and pulling the collar of my shirt, bringing it over my head, then throwing it to the ground. "Hold it steady."

Throwing my fist out, I connect with it again. The impact is solid, but the bag shifts with the force, making me adjust my stance. I take another shot, more focused this time, and the bag sways slightly, but Blake doesn't budge.

"Focus on your core," he comments.

I shake my head. "Now's not the time to play coach."

"Good thing I didn't ask, right?"

Ignoring him, I throw a few more punches, each one harder than the last. Maybe it was a mistake coming here if he can't shut the fuck up.

He chuckles, letting his grip on the bag loosen slightly. "Clearly, whatever pissed you off didn't matter too much. You're hitting like shit."

"Don't go there, dude. I just want to fucking sweat," I reply.

I didn't come here to talk or get to know one another. Maybe he missed that memo, though.

"Every moment in the ring or against a bag is a moment for learning. So what made you tick? Maybe if you can harness that shit, you wouldn't be so distracted by pussy."

I throw my fist out again, not even trying to stop it because I know exactly where it's going. Only Blake sidesteps, letting the bag sway in front of his face to take the impact.

He nods slowly. "I knew it had to be that girl."

I shake my head, my chest heaving. "Man, fuck you. You don't know shit about me."

Turning around, I swipe my shirt from the ground, then step toward the door and pull it open. As I march back to my Jeep, I can hear Blake call behind me, but I don't stop.

"This is why you need some training, Shay! You can't get pissed off every time someone brings up your sister!"

Throwing my door open, I slide inside. "Stepsister, jackass!" I yell, then slam the door.

Fuck Blake. Fuck our parents. And fuck this. I need a drink.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

BLAIR

The air feels thicker than normal, heavy with anticipation, as my mom and I stand outside the large doors of the church. I can hear the hum of soft music and the whispers of guests murmuring excitedly. Everything feels surreal.

Mom adjusts the lace of her dress one last time, and her hands tremble slightly, betraying the calm exterior she's been trying to project. She stands a little taller, taking a deep breath as she straightens her veil one last time. I can tell she's nervous—more than she's let on the past few days—and it makes me wonder if she feels the same unease I do. Like this moment, this whole wedding, is a turning point.

I swallow hard and try to ignore the tightness in my chest as the doors finally open, and we start to walk. The truth is, as happy as I am for her, something about today feels off. Watching her walk down the aisle to Henry feels like I'm watching her slip further away. Not just from me but everything that's felt familiar. There's no way around it, though. Things are changing, and I'm not sure how to handle it.

And then there's Shay.

I haven't seen him since the fight with our parents. The last couple of days have been filled with short messages but no real conversation. He hasn't come by, and he isn't at his dad's side like he's supposed to be. Like he promised.

Hell, even the mysterious texts from the unknown number have stopped momentarily.

As we take our positions across from Henry, the music fades, and so does all the chatter. The minister's voice booms through the room, and even though I held out hope, Shay still isn't here. I don't even realize I'm holding my breath until I feel my chest tighten again.

Then, just as the vows are about to start, I hear the creak of the door in the back and footsteps following. I turn my head slightly, and my heart jumps into my throat.

Shay.

He stays toward the back of the room, standing there looking like he belongs but somehow doesn't at the same time. He's late—too late to stand by his dad—but he's here.

I feel a rush of emotions as the vows start. Everything feels like it's moving at warp speed, and the only thing that makes sense is to look at Shay. I try to focus on my mom and Henry, on the vows they're exchanging, but my eyes keep drifting back to him.

The vows continue, but I barely catch the words. Henry's voice shakes as he promises to love and cherish my mom, and I hear her voice crack as she repeats the same. It's beautiful and everything I've wanted for her, but all I can think about is what this means for me and Shay.

He's watching me, eyes locked in all the way across the room. The connection between us feels like it's pulling me closer, daring me to throw caution to the wind. But I can't reach him, not in this room. Not yet. I try and look away, but I can't bring myself to do it.

The ceremony continues, but it isn't until my mom and Henry turn toward the guests that I give them my attention again. They're preparing for their first kiss as husband and wife, but all of the weight I've been feeling doesn't let me focus. It slams into me, and the finality of it all settles over me. I'm supposed to be smiling and celebrating with them, but I'm not. Instead, I turn back to Shay.

He's watching me like no one else exists.

The kiss ends, and everyone begins to clap, but I barely hear it. I stand there frozen, letting Mom and Henry step down and move toward the doors. Everyone files in behind them like ants, but I stay rooted until everyone other than Shay is left.

I finally step down, too, and walk toward the exit, only stopping when I'm in front of Shay. I should be mad at him—angry—but I'm not. I don't even know how to describe it, but all feels right again, being within his orbit.

“Blair—” he starts, but I cut him off.

Throwing my arms around his neck, I pull his face to mine and press our lips together. I relish the taste I've missed so much and finger his locks of hair.

“You almost broke a promise,” I mumble against his mouth.

His lips tip up with a smile. “Almost doesn't count.”

I roll my eyes and push him away. “I really didn't think you'd make it.”

He shrugs and shoves his hands into his pockets. “Well, I did. Unless you ask my dad. I swear the look he gave me when he was leaving said everything.”

I sigh and lean my hip against the pew. “Yeah. Not a great way to show up, considering how you left things.”

I let the statement hang between us. I know him leaving was best, but it doesn't mean it hurt me any less. I think he knows that too.

“I'm sorry,” he says, reaching for my arm and pulling me back to him. “I should've... I don't know, handled things better. I'm a hothead, what can I say?” He grins.

I shake my head. “Most fighters are.”

Shay tips his head. “What other fighters do you know?”

“Shut up,” I laugh. “I'm saying in general. Don't get jealous.”

He buries his face into my neck. “I'll always be jealous over you, Dollface.”

I clasp the back of his head and lean back. His lips feel so good on my skin I never want them to leave. “As much as I love hearing that, I think tonight, of all nights, we should really try and be good.”

“Good?” He snaps his head up and stands straight. “So I'm not getting laid?”

“Shut the fuck up,” I laugh again.

Finally, he releases me. “Okay, fine. I'll be good. But if that's how we're playing it, I think we should head to the reception. Someone is bound to notice we aren't there soon.”

I glance out the doors and see how empty the church foyer is. “Yeah, you're right.”

"I'm going to head to the bathroom. Meet me outside?"

I flash him a smile. "I'll be waiting."

As I go to step away, he shrugs off his suit jacket and hands it to me. "There's a breeze. Put this on."

"Is there really a breeze, or is this some weird way to mark your territory?"

"I guess you'll never know." He winks, turning on his heel, and heads in the opposite direction of the doors.

Crossing the foyer, I step outside the church doors and laugh. There is no breeze to be felt, so I guess that answers my question. The tension that was building in my chest before starts to melt away, and I can't help but take a deep breath. Shay's here, and we'll figure out what happens next together.

I unravel his jacket in my hands and start to wrap it around me, but something starts vibrating in his pocket. I frown, glancing around to see if he's coming yet, but I don't see him. When I pull the phone from his pocket, the screen lights up, revealing an unknown number.

The same number that's been sending me those weird texts.

My stomach sinks.

I don't even hesitate as I swipe to answer it, pressing it to my ear. "Hello?"

At first, there's nothing but a brief, unnerving silence, and then a voice crackles through the receiver. Blake's voice.

"I told you you should have stayed away."

I freeze, the words hitting me like a punch to the chest. My pulse races, and a cold shiver runs down my spine.

Before I can react, I hear the same voice *in person*, clear as day, coming from behind me near the edge of the church.

My heart skips a beat as I spin around. The feeling of dread floods through me as I spot Blake standing there, barely ten feet away. My hands go cold as the phone and Shay's jacket slip from my grasp. But before I can react or even open my mouth to speak, he lunges forward.

I turn to try and run away, but a sharp, quick blow lands on the back of my head. My legs give out from under me, and I reach for the stone wall, but it feels like it's moving further away,

"Shay..." I manage to whisper.

The ground feels uneven, and everything starts to blur. The last thing I hear before everything goes black is the sound of Blake's voice again. Too close. Too haunting.

"I tried to warn you."

Then, there's nothing. No light, no sound, no air. Just darkness swallowing me whole.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

BLAIR

Stepping out of the bathroom, I start toward the foyer, then push open the large wooden doors. I'm expecting to see Blair—she should be waiting for me—but she isn't there.

I scoff and step further outside. “Come on, don't play with me, Blair. We have to go.” I'm expecting to hear her voice or even a giggle, something to give away her position, but there is nothing but silence.

My smile falls, and my brows furrow. “Blair?” I don't even say her name loud enough to be a whisper.

As I take another step, my foot catches on something on the ground. Looking down, I see my jacket crumpled up and my phone lying beside it. I squat down, picking up the expensive fabric with one hand, my phone in the other. The screen is shattered and flickering with black lines.

I glance out to the parking lot and notice there isn't a single car other than mine. No people either, but a spot down the steps catches my eye. Standing back to my full height, I walk toward it, squinting my eyes as I do, trying to make out the dark stain.

My stomach lurches once I'm close enough to see what it is, and I freeze.

My phone and jacket, blood, and no Blair.

My breath catches in my throat, and panic floods my system. I kneel down quickly, touching the spot just to make sure it's real. The liquid is cold on my fingers and sends a shiver down my spine.

No. No. This can't be happening.

"Blair!" I yell out, my mouth working before my brain can even catch up, but there is no answer.

My heart is pounding against my ribs, racing so fast I can't even think clearly, can't even catch my breath. I look around again, frantic, searching the parking lot for any other signs of her, but there is nothing.

I call her name again.

Silence.

Pushing myself to my feet, my gaze still darting back and forth, I run toward my Jeep. Throwing open the door, I shove my jacket and phone into the seat, then reach for my keys in my pocket. My hands fumble and shake as I try to put them into the ignition. Once they're seated, I twist them, then slam the gear shift into drive. My door closes as I peel out of the parking lot.

I tear down the road, my eyes locked on the path in front of me, but my mind keeps going back to the church. The blood. Someone hurt her. She's hurt. *My girl* is hurt.

I have to find her.

I pull into the reception hall parking lot within what feels like seconds and slide to a halt. Without wasting any more time, I throw it in park, then rush toward the entrance. The doors swing open as I step inside.

I scan the room, hoping maybe, just maybe, I'll catch a glimpse of her red hair. The guests are mingling, completely oblivious to my panic, but Blair isn't there. The band is playing through the laughter and chatter of everyone, but I can't focus on it. Everything feels so far away. She's gone, and something is wrong.

Spotting my dad and Sylvia at the front of the room, I march toward them.

When I stop in front of their table, my dad holds up his hand. "Not now, Sha—"

"Blair is gone!" I snap around him.

Sylvia's eyes grow wide as she lays the napkin in her hand down. "What do you mean gone?"

"The church—she was supposed to wait for me outside, but she's gone. Someone took her, I think. There was blood." I can't even think clearly enough to form a coherent sentence, but I don't need to.

The mention of blood is all that was needed to get their attention.

“Shay,” Sylvia starts, but it isn’t her normal cool, easygoing voice. It’s laced with desperation and fear. “I need you to take a breath and tell me what happened.”

I nod, taking a steadyng breath, but it doesn’t help much. The panic is still clawing at me. Sylvia motions for me to sit, but I can’t. I’m on edge, and I know if I don’t act, I’ll lose time.

Quickly, I recap everything I just told them, adding in as many details as I can remember.

Sylvia’s eyes flicker, and she finally stands up, grabbing the train of her dress. “We have to go,” she mumbles. “The text. That fucking text.”

As she rounds the table, I catch her arm. “What text? What are you talking about?”

Tears well in her eyes. “I got a strange message earlier—right before we got here. It said, ‘Consider this my wedding gift.’ I didn’t think much of it and thought maybe it was one of your dad’s colleagues from the firm or something letting me know they’d cover his cases so we can have a honeymoon after all. I don’t know,” she starts to hiccup.

I feel my blood run cold as she speaks. Suddenly, my feelings don’t matter anymore. Sylvia clearly has information, but I can’t get it if she’s crying.

“Sylvia,” I start, rubbing her bicep gently. “It’s okay. We will get this figured out, but you need to tell us more.”

Her face tightens. “I dated this guy years ago—back in high school. His name was Richard Slane, and he didn’t take our breakup well. For years, he would watch me and send unwanted gifts to my house. It had finally slowed down a bit when I married Blair’s dad because he was adamant about going to the cops and making them do something, but the peace was short-lived.”

She pauses to take a breath.

“But then he was back and more violent. He swore he and I were supposed to be together, but anytime I rejected him or ignored him, he would just get more angry. Right before my last husband’s accident, we thought we were finally free, though. The cops showed us a death certificate with his name, age, everything.

“But when my husband died, I’d get these weird messages. They wouldn’t say anything—just blank messages from a number I never had saved. It seemed innocent, but it still made me uneasy, even though I knew Richard was dead. That’s the reason I moved us here. It wasn’t until we

were out of town for my dress fitting that I got another blank message. I don't know how to describe it, but I just had a pit in my stomach. It's why your dad and I came home early, but I haven't received anything since until tonight."

My mind starts to race again, and I can't stop myself anymore.

Looking at my dad, I start walking toward the door. "Dad, now is the time you call in every fucking favor from judges, governors, hell, I don't know. Anyone you can think of to get any information on this dude."

I glance back at Sylvia as they hustle behind me. "Sylvia, I'll drive. You tell my dad everything. Can you describe what he looks like?"

We push out the doors, and I help her down the steps, then into my waiting Jeep.

"He was always changing his appearance, but I have an old yearbook at the house."

I nod and throw the car into park. "Good."

My dad unlocks his phone from the back seat. "I'll have the cops meet us at the house."

I nod again, feeling like I'm running on pure adrenaline. I can't stop moving, can't stop thinking about Blair, about how much time we've already wasted.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

BLAIR

I can barely make sense of my surroundings. It's like my body is floating and my mind is fighting to wake up, but the pain in my head is too strong. Everything is muffled and distant, like I'm underwater. But at the same time, I'm almost hyperaware of the rough leather seats beneath me.

The smell is one of the first things that register—leather and something stale, like mildew. I'm unfamiliar but personal, like someone's old belongings. The air feels thick and heavy in my lungs too, and I can barely take in a full breath without it scraping the back of my throat. My senses are screaming at me that something is wrong. I don't know where I am. I don't know *how* I'm here. But the darkness pressing against my eyelids is too much to fight.

I try to move, to shift, to feel anything that might be around me, but my body is heavy and uncooperative. Something is over my head. Cloth? A blindfold, maybe? I can't see, can't focus. My mind is swirling, and as much as I try and push past the fog, it doesn't work. The dizziness just keeps pulling me back.

The motion of the car makes me feel like I'm about to slip into sleep again. My legs ache, my hands are numb, and when I try and move them, the cold feeling in my fingertips intensifies. I can't remember what happened. Where is Shay? The wedding?

My chest tightens, and panic threads through the edges of my consciousness. Where is everyone? Where is he?

The car lurches suddenly, and the brakes screech in protest as everything comes to a sudden halt. My body jerks forward, but I barely feel it through the weird fucking haze. My heart hammers against my ribs, and the only thing I can think is, why did we stop?

Then, I hear the door open with a creak. The sounds seem so clear now—clearer than anything else. There's a shuffle of footsteps, the scraping sound of shoes on the ground, then a harsh, almost mocking voice cutting through it all.

“Time to wake up.”

Blake.

The recognition of his voice sends an electric shock through me as everything that happened suddenly slams back into my brain. I try to scream, but nothing comes out. I'm not even sure I'm moving my lips. I feel a rush of air against my skin, and before I can even comprehend it, hands grip me roughly and pull me from my seat. The world tilts, and my stomach spins. I try to fight, but the pain in my head only gets worse.

He moves swiftly but unhurried, like he's done this before. Then, there's the unsettling sensation of being lifted in the air and thrown over his shoulder. Blake mutters something, but his words are swallowed by the overwhelming dizziness.

The scent of his cologne is overpowering, being this close to him, and it does nothing but make me want to puke. I try to focus on something else—anything else. His clothes rustle softly as he moves, and the faint crunch of grass beneath his feet. Each step feels like it's pulling me further away from reality.

The air shifts again, and I know we've entered some kind of building. The faint breeze vanishes, and then the sound of a door closing follows us. Every minute feels like an eternity, and it makes my skin crawl. I can't see—everything is still black, and that makes me feel even more uneasy.

Finally, he stops, and I'm shoved into something solid. A chair, I think. My body hits it hard, and I wince with the pain. I don't have time to focus on it too long, though, because just as quickly as I'm thrown down, my arms are yanked behind me. Something cool wraps around my wrists and is tightened in place. Now, I can't even move.

I instinctively jerk against them, but there is no point. Whatever is binding me digs into my skin with every movement.

“Settle down,” Blake mutters under his breath. “You’re not going anywhere, no matter how hard you try.”

I try and steady my breath, but the fear bubbling in my chest makes it hard.

When he speaks again, his voice is much softer, as if he’s explaining something, like he’s trying to make me understand.

“I’ve been watching you for a long time, Blair. Your mom too. I wasn’t going to let her get away with this—get away from me. You see, she doesn’t understand. She never understood me.”

I try and tune him out, but I can’t. His words hang in the air.

Suddenly, the blindfold is ripped from my eyes, and I’m face-to-face with him. He squats down in front of me and continues.

“You don’t know what it’s like to be rejected over and over again.” He shakes his head. “You don’t know the lengths I went for her, and you sure as hell don’t understand what I’ve sacrificed to make her see the truth.”

The way he talks... like his obsession is justified.

“Richard Slane.” He spits the name like it tastes bad. “That’s who I used to be. Your mom tried to get rid of me because she didn’t want me around, but I never gave up on us. Not for a second.”

He stands back to his full height and starts pacing in front of me slowly.

“I wasn’t dead like she thought, though. It’s easier to fake than you would think.” He winks. “I changed my name, my identity. I waited. I watched. And the moment I saw her again, saw how weak she had become to marry a man like Henry, I knew it was time.”

His words don’t make any sense to me, but that doesn’t make them any less terrifying. The room is suffocating. This can’t be happening. I want to scream or fight or move. Do anything to just get away, but I’m stuck.

“Sylvia did a good job hiding you both, but as soon as that paper came out—the one announcing her engagement to Henry—I finally found you both again. But I had to wait for the right moment, fill my time and bide it. For a second, I thought getting close to Shay would help ease her reluctance to see she and I are meant to be, but the wedding... It happened too fast. You, though?” He points at me. “You fell right into my lap. If it wasn’t for Shay being so wrapped up in you, I may not have gotten a chance to get this close.”

He pauses like he’s weighing his thoughts. Then, even more casual than before, he continues.

“Back in school, she always said she never wanted kids. Did you know that? That’s why I figured taking care of your dad for ruining her plans would lead her right back to me. But she ran... Why did she run?”

My eyes get blurry from the tears starting to well in them. “My... my dad?” My voice comes back on a low whisper.

Blake is saying too much and not enough all at the same time. It’s jumbled and messy and broken. Nothing is making sense, but those words rang loud.

He lets out a sigh, ignoring my question and ignoring the sobs I can’t seem to control anymore. “You think I’m crazy, don’t you?”

“I—I—” I stutter, trying to get anything out, but it doesn’t work.

“That’s okay. I don’t really care what you think. Soon enough, you’ll be gone too. She never wanted you, she told me. So, this is my gift to her. My *last* gift before I steal her away for good.”

I feel bile rise in the back of my throat as the panic claws its way up my gut. “You’re insane. My mom doesn’t love you.”

“You say that, but you’ll... well, I suppose you won’t see, will you?” He laughs.

He doesn’t even give me a chance to answer before he’s stepping away and exiting out the door.

Shay. Please find me.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

SHAY

Moving back and forth across the foyer of our house, I try and keep some sort of handle on myself as I keep digging through the last hour, trying to really process what the fuck has happened—what *hasn't* happened. Every time my gaze flicks down the hallway, I know Sylvia is down there in her room, hunting for the old yearbook she mentioned, but the waiting is unbearable.

I want answers. I need answers. I clench my hands at my sides, my knuckles turning white, and try to remain as calm as I can. The image of the church is still so fresh in my mind. My phone just lying there, the blood. Everything. The image replays on a flicker, over and over, and it's all I can think about.

I look over at my dad, who is pacing the same way I am, phone pressed to his ear. His voice is steady, but there's a sharp edge to it that's hard to ignore.

"Yeah, I understand," he says into the phone. "Get me everything you can anyway... Richard Slane, yes. I don't care how old it is. If there is anything in the system, I want it. Who signed the death certificate, cause of death, everything."

He listens for a moment, and I can see the lines in his face deepen.

"Slane," he repeats himself. "Yeah. Aliases, too, if there are any. He didn't just disappear. I'll take whatever you can find."

I'm too angry—too worried—to just keep lingering beside him, hoping some Hail Mary comes about. I move over to the window and pry apart the blinds. It's so dark.

"What?" My dad's voice suddenly rises, pulling my attention back to him. "You're sure? No record at all?"

His eyes flick to me, but he doesn't break from his call. His fingers tap on the side of his phone, and it sounds like a ticking clock as he mutters something else into the receiver.

"Yeah. I'll follow up with you later."

He finally hands up and exhales sharply. "Damn it," he mutters, defeated, then looks at me. "I'm not letting this go, Shay. I'm calling in every favor I have. We'll figure this out."

I don't doubt him. My dad's a damn good lawyer, but right now, not even his best efforts feel like enough. Nothing does.

I turn back from the window and start pacing again as my dad dials another number. This time, his voice is more controlled, more level.

"I need to talk to Judge Matthews."

He continues to speak, but it fades into the background.

Suddenly, the sound of sirens squeals in the distance. *Fucking took them long enough.* I turn toward the door, my feet already moving before I even realize it. Without saying anything to my dad, I rush out the door.

Flashing lights from the patrol cars slice through the night, and in a weird way, it brings me some comfort. The officers step out of their vehicles and adjust their belts, moving across the drive toward me.

"Good evening," the first speaks.

"Not a good fucking evening, Officer," I bite back.

The cop's face hardens, and his tone comes out more sharp. "We'll handle this, kid."

I open my mouth to speak again, but my dad steps up behind me and clamps me on the shoulder. "Thank you for coming so quickly. I'm Henry Cornell. I made the call..."

I drown out the rest of their conversation as my dad starts giving them a rundown of what I feel I've already repeated a million times. The wedding, the texts, Richard Slane, the blood. My brain is short-circuiting with every passing second, but I still don't feel we've gotten any sort of answers—any leads.

The front door opens again, and I turn around. My dad is huddled with the officers at the foot of the steps, still explaining all he knows, as Sylvia steps out with a yearbook in her hands. Before she can reach my dad, though, I jog back up the steps and stop her.

“Let me see.”

Her face is red and puffy, and tears still stain her cheeks, but she doesn’t put up a fight. She hands the book over, then moves to where the cops are.

I start flipping through it in my hands, going down the alphabetized names of every class, hunting for Slane. The photos are old and faded, and every page is fraying along the edges, but I keep turning, keep scanning every face and every name.

Richard Slane.

The name practically jumps off the page when I see it. I run my finger over it, then drag it across the page, finding the corresponding picture.

It hits me like a punch in the gut. My mind scrambles to process, but it doesn’t take long for the truth to settle in. The name isn’t just some distant figure anymore. It’s Blake. It’s always been Blake.

The sick realization eats me whole. All the pieces that didn’t make sense before—him showing up out of nowhere, taking an interest in me—it all clicks into place. A surge of new anger floods me. It was him. Blake has been behind all of this. I should have seen it sooner, but the promise of something exciting clouded all of it. I want to scream.

My hands grip the book tighter as I continue to stare at his picture. I guess some part of me wishes the picture would morph into something else, someone else, but I know it won’t. I am partially responsible for this bullshit.

Slamming it shut, I let it fall to the ground. My hands tremble, and I feel like I’m suffocating in my own skin. *Whoosh, whoosh, whoosh.* The familiar sound of blood rushing in my ears meets me, and I know there is only one thing to do.

I can’t just stand here.

I can’t wait.

I hear my dad calling behind me as I push past him and the cops and start running across the driveway, but I don’t look back. My body is moving on instinct, and that alone is fucking deadly. I reach my Jeep and yank the door open.

Wasting no time, I hurry and start the car, then slam my foot into the pedal. The tires screech across the pavement as I go, and the lights from the house fade into the distance of my rearview mirror.

I won't stop until she's safe.

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CHAPTER THIRTY

BLAIR

The silence in the shed is deafening. Every second that passes feels like an eternity, and my wrists burn from the tight restraints. I try to stay calm, to control my breathing, but my heart betrays me, thudding hard in my chest, a constant reminder of how much danger I'm in.

Blake is still gone, but every second without him in the room feels like a fleeting chance, a small window where I could do something—anything—to get free. But the rope around my wrists keeps me tethered to the chair, and every time I try to move, my body aches like I've been hit by a train. I squint, trying to make out my surroundings, but everything is too dark, or my eyes are still not adjusted. I don't know.

Every part of me screams to get out of here, to fight, to run, but the restraints digging into my skin remind me that I can't. I can't move, and the silence is growing louder, more suffocating with each passing second. The only sound is the faint creak of wood in the distance and the buzz of the single bulb overhead.

And then, a noise. My pulse quickens.

He's back.

I squeeze my eyes shut, not wanting to see the inevitable coming, but then I hear it.

“Blair.” His voice is so low I almost miss it.

Freezing, I open my eyes, then turn toward the door slowly. My body starts to jerk on instinct, and my eyes blur with even more tears.

“Shay.”

My breath suddenly stops as he steps toward me. This isn’t the normal Shay I’m used to. His footsteps are quicker, and I can practically see the tension wrapped around him. He isn’t just angry—he’s fucking pissed.

When his hands touch me, scanning my entire body like he’s assessing me, my breathing starts again. His fingers glide over the rope around my wrists lightly, working the knots and trying to free me. The familiar comfort of his touch makes my heart flip, and the slightest hint of relief washes over me.

For a moment, I let myself believe everything is going to be fine, but then, just as quickly as it came, it’s gone.

The door creaks again, and the sound is louder this time. It swings open with force, and I hear Blake’s voice.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

Everything stops. My heart, Shay’s hands, the fucking world spinning. His eyes are locked on Shay, who turns slowly, like he’s trying not to make any sudden movements to scare the beast in front of us. But it doesn’t last long.

Without a word, Shay rushes forward, his body colliding with Blake’s in a sickening bang. Blake’s initial shock is brief, but he quickly retaliates and swings out his fist hard. Shay doesn’t move to try and block it. Instead, I notice the tick in his jaw as he grinds his teeth through the pain.

Suddenly, they’re nothing but a blur, and the room fills with the chaotic sounds of a fight—the crack of punches, the grunts, and the thud of bodies slamming into the walls.

I scream out. “Shay!”

But he doesn’t hear me.

I strain against the restraints still holding me, the rope burning into my skin with the friction of every pull or tug. I can’t just sit here. I can’t just watch.

“Shay!” I scream again, but my voice cracks and fades into an echo.

Shay lands another punch, but Blake manages to shove him backward, causing Shay to stumble into the corner. Blake advances, swinging out again, and connects his fist to Shay’s stomach. Shay doubles over, and I can see the determination on Blake’s face.

He’s enjoying this. He’s savoring every moment of this fight.

I hate him. I hate what he’s doing to Shay. And I hate that I can’t help.

My wrists throb painfully as I tug at the ropes again. Finally, they give way, and one of my hands slips free. My fingers feel numb, but I don't stop. I yank on the second one, using my fingers from my free hand to tug at the knot at the same time, and finally get it loose enough to slip it out too.

The moment the ropes fall away, I scramble to my feet. My legs feel weak, and the world tilts, but I don't hesitate. I spot a heavy piece of wood near the wall by the door, and without thinking, I grab it. My hands shake violently around it, but I clutch the makeshift weapon with both hands and let my feet move me toward the fight.

As I get closer, I raise the wood above my head. I swing it with every ounce of strength I have, and a crack sounds out in the room. It connects with Blake's back and is enough to stun him. His hands leave Shay, and he staggers back, letting Shay move out of the corner.

Shay gasps for air as he takes a shaky step forward to follow Blake as he moves. His fists move up again, and his body surges forward. Before I can even register what happens, he lands a brutal punch to Blake's jaw. The force sends Blake crashing to the floor.

My heart hammers in my chest as I stare at Shay. He's bleeding, his lip split, shirt torn. But his eyes... They're focused and determined. He's not done.

Blake groans on the ground, rolling to his side to try and stand or gain some sort of composure, but Shay is on him before he can. Shay straddles Blake, clasping one of his shoulders to lay him flat on his back, then unleashes every ounce of rage inside him.

His fists fly in quick succession, all directed to his face. I can't move—can't breathe. I'm completely enthralled by his rage and can't seem to bring myself to stop it. Blow after blow, Blake's face becomes more and more unrecognizable, but Shay doesn't stop.

Blood splatters across the room every time he rears it back, and eventually, Blake's body stops twitching beneath him. Something about seeing him lying there—a literal bloody fucking mess—snaps me out of the haze. I step forward cautiously, almost scared to get too close, and grip Shay by his shoulder.

"Shay. It's done," I whisper, but he still doesn't stop.

His chest is heaving, and his movements are coming slower and slower.

"Shay," I try again, reaching further down to try and grip his forearm.

My palm slides across his skin with the blood, but something about the full contact has him halting. Slowly, his face turns to mine. Blood paints his face and trickles down his cheeks with the tears I'm sure he doesn't even realize he's crying.

"He hurt you." His statement is simple and gruff.

Nodding, I squat down beside him and cup his face in my hands. "I'm okay. We're okay."

He nods slowly, never breaking his eyes from mine, but he stays silent.

Police sirens wail in the distance, and eventually, flashing lights burst through the cracks of the wooden walls. I move my hands to Shay's shoulders and urge him to stand with me, then walk him to the door.

Opening it, I reach down and lace my fingers through his. "We're okay, okay?"

"We're okay," he mimics.

Stepping outside, I'm blinded by the spotlights of the cop cars staggered in front of the shed. I raise my free arm to shield my eyes, but Shay does nothing. He just stands beside me, holding my hand.

"Let us see your hands!" they scream through the speakers of their cars as they screech to a halt.

Like I'm told, I drop Shay's hand and raise mine. "He's inside! He took me!" I yell out, but it isn't loud enough to be heard over the chatter on their radios.

Within seconds of raising my hands, they rush us. One officer wraps me in a blanket and ushers me to the side while two others go to Shay. He isn't even putting up a fight, but they slam him to the ground and jerk his arms behind his back.

"He saved me! He wasn't the one who took me!" I scream, trying to break away from the cop at my side, but it's pointless.

He pulls me forward as my eyes stay locked on Shay. When we make it to the front of one of the cars, Henry and my mom sprint up. Immediately, my mom's hands are on me, running over my face and along my arms.

"Oh my God. You're okay. You're okay!" she cries, but I can't seem to care.

I glance at Henry, then follow his eyes as they travel to the scene behind me—to Shay.

"Henry, please!" I beg, but he's already moving before the last word leaves my lips.

He jogs up to where they're getting Shay on his feet. Just like my mom, Henry's face contorts into sadness as he looks down at his son.

"Shay, you speak to no one, you hear me? Don't say a word. I am going to fix this. I promise I am going to fix this," he blurts out as the cops begin to walk Shay to one of the waiting cars.

Even though I still feel I don't know Henry all that well, something in his voice makes me believe him. Maybe it's the look on his face, or maybe it was the desperation in my plea, but whatever it was, I know he *will* fix this. He has to.

When the cop beside me finally walks away, I throw the blanket from my shoulders and run to where they're loading Shay into the car. Consequences or charges be damned, I can't let him leave me—not like this.

Shoving through the shoulders of the cops, I lean down and press my lips to his hard. I grab his face in my hands and squeeze it, hoping that by some stroke of fate, if I hold him tight enough, he won't go. But I know that's not the case.

He kisses me back, pulling against the handcuffs behind him to try and touch me, but it's pointless. We're so close but still separated.

"I—" I start, biting out words around his mouth, but he beats me to the punch.

"I love you, Blair. I fucking love you."

I nod and shudder with a new wave of tears taking over my body. "I love you too."

I'm yanked back, and the door is promptly closed. Just like that, Shay is gone, but this time, I have no idea when I'll see him again.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

SHAY

The cold air hits me the second I step off the concrete steps of the holding area. I've barely been able to sleep the last few days, my mind replaying everything that happened. Blair, the fight, Blake, the blood. I didn't think I'd be leaving here this soon, but somehow, I am.

The heavy door behind me clanks shut as I walk out slowly. A part of me doesn't want to leave, doesn't want to face the world outside. Not yet, anyway. But the other part of me pushes forward—the part that was so focused on getting Blair back and safe.

Reaching the front desk of the jail, the officer behind the counter looks up at me. It's like he isn't even surprised to see me standing there. He slides a small envelope toward me, and I know it's my belongings. What little I had on me when they brought me in.

"Your stuff. Everything checks out," he states flatly.

I take it and weigh it in my hands. Keys, wallet, and that's it. I tuck it in my back pocket, then press forward.

The door buzzes loudly, and the heavy metal barrier slides open. I step forward, glancing back briefly as the door clatters shut behind me. My heart is racing, and my thoughts are all over the place, but one thing is crystal clear. I'm walking out of here because of my dad. He kept his promise.

The legal talk started almost immediately after I got here. When I was brought in, they hit me with murder charges. I'd done it in the heat of the moment, though. A split-second decision fueled by an anger I couldn't

control, but the law rarely cares about that. My dad, though, pulled the strings, talked to the right people, and painted the picture exactly as it played out—he made them listen, regardless of how brutally I had beaten Blake.

But that's my dad. Henry Cornell. The man who knows the system inside and out and has always played by the book in case he ever needs a favor.

From what I understand, he used his connections to arrange an early release. His team found a way to make it work, proving that the situation with Blake was, at the very least, a case of self-defense under the law. The murder happened in the heat of an altercation, and though Blake had attacked me first, it couldn't necessarily be proven. Not with how I walked away and he didn't. But legally speaking, I acted in a way that could be justified.

That's how he got me out. With a little creativity, some legal maneuvering, and, of course, the reputation he's built over the years. The fact I didn't have a criminal record helped. The fact that he could pull in favors and convince people to look at things differently helped too. He made people see me as someone other than some hothead fighter.

I'm not stupid. I know I should've been charged with more. I know what I did and what happened in that shed. It could have sent me away for years. But Ol' Henry kept his promise and made sure I didn't have to sit in there any longer than I had to, and he made sure I wasn't stuck with a felony that could haunt me for the rest of my life.

When I step outside, the sun is bright, and the air is blistering. My legs feel unsteady, but I keep moving forward. As I step further into the parking lot, the gates close behind me. The sound of the clearing buzzer and then the locks sliding into place echoes in my ears.

I turn, scanning the parking lot, and my eyes land on my Jeep parked over to the side in the back. I start toward it, my footsteps quickening with every step. As I get closer, the driver's-side door opens, and Blair steps out.

She looks the same but different at the same time. Even with the little bit of distance between us, I can still see the black and purple bruises around her pale wrists. She looks happy, though. Happy to see me.

I don't waste another second. I start jogging until I'm in front of her. Grabbing her, I pull her into my arms, then lift her off the ground. She lets out a surprised breath, but I squeeze her tighter, burying my face into her

hair. The scent of her is enough to fill every part of me. Like a drug I didn't even know I needed.

She doesn't speak, but she doesn't need to. Her arms tighten around me, her fingers digging into my back as if she's afraid I'll disappear if she lets go.

I set her down gently but let my hands linger on her shoulders. My thumbs brush against her skin. I just need to feel her—I need to reassure myself that she's real. That she's safe.

"I love you," I start. "I think I've always loved you. But the first time I said it... it didn't feel like enough. It wasn't enough for what I feel for you."

"I love you," she whispers, and I come completely undone.

I pull her back to me and let her legs snake around me. Moving forward, I press her back into the side of my Jeep and anchor my lips to hers. The same desperation and need from the very first time I ever kissed her is back and stronger than ever.

Her hands rake into my hair as mine explore every inch of her body I can touch. Her skin is so hot, so soft. Our lips continue to move, kissing, biting, licking. Everything is sloppy and desperate, but she tastes so fucking good.

Reaching between us, her hands start pushing down the front of my pants. "Right now. I need you right now, Shay," she pants.

I don't fucking object.

Unlocking one hand from her body, I push it between us, then slide my pants down just enough to let my cock spring free. Her small hand wraps around my length and strokes it, base to tip, and rubs it over the front of her shorts.

I finger the leg hole of her shorts, the sweatpant-like material easy to manipulate as I pull them to the side just enough so I can enter her. She's already wet, but given the position and how tight she is, I know we'll need a little more help.

Moving my hand, I hold it up in front of her face. "Spit on my hand, Dollface."

She obeys beautifully, her eyes hooded with lust. I then move my hand back down and coat the tip of my dick.

Once my length is fully wet, I move her shorts again and line myself up. She shifts her hips upward, giving me more access, and I slide inside. Her

pussy swallows me whole and pulsates around me.

“Oh my God,” she whispers against my cheek.

“Are you okay?”

She nods vigorously, bucking her hips lightly. “Don’t hold back.”

As if I could when it comes to her.

I immediately begin to pound into her, pressing her tight up against the side of my Jeep. I move my hand to her ass, sliding them under her shorts to grab her bare skin. The little breathy moans Blair makes have my control snapping, fucking her so hard I just know she’ll be able to still feel me tomorrow. My mouth finds her neck, tasting her sweat and that scent I’d be able to identify even in death. I bite down hard and then smirk at the profanity that falls from her mouth at the action.

“Fuck.”

“Such a dirty mouth,” I murmur, moving my own up to her lips. “I’m going to fuck it later.”

“Shay, please,” she moans, head falling back against the window.

“Please, what?” I ask in a taunting tone, moving one hand from her ass to where we’re joined, thumb brushing against her clit.

“Make me come.”

Like I have to be told twice. I pick up my speed, my thumb circling her clit with renewed vigor. Her pussy clamps down on me, letting me know she’s close. My eyes move from where we’re connected up to her face, where her eyes are closed, beautiful fucking mouth slightly open as she shivers.

“Look at me, Blair,” I demand, and her eyes shoot open. “Look at the man you love when he makes you come.”

Her eyes meet mine, those green orbs filled with an emotion I know all too well because I feel the same thing. “I do. I do love you,” she says in a breathy voice, hitching as her impending orgasm inches closer.

“Yeah, baby, I know,” I murmur, bringing my lips to hers and kissing her hard as I give one firm pinch to her clit.

Like lightning, she falls over the edge hard and fast, milking me for all I’m worth as I swallow down her screams of pleasure. Her teeth clamp down on my bottom lip as her whole body shakes around mine, her walls gripping me so tight I have no choice but to follow after her. I groan out her name against her mouth as I twitch inside her, spilling into her, feeling my cum slip down my dick and over her pussy.

I press myself into her, locking my knees so I don't collapse like a fucking idiot, my forehead resting against hers as our chests heave together. I don't know how long we stay like that before the droning buzz of the jail door goes off. I let out a curse and pull out of her, pushing my dick back into my pants and moving her shorts back into place.

Blair giggles as she drops her legs from around me, feet landing on the ground. "You could've gone back to jail for that, but I would've joined you this time."

I glare at her playfully but can't keep it up for long as I see the joy on her face. "You've been trouble since the moment I met you."

She smirks and wraps her arms around my neck. "And that's why you love me."

Fucking hell, she has me turning into nothing but a pile of mush.

"Yeah, Dollface," I say, pushing a slightly damp piece of hair out of her face. "I do. Now, let's go home."

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EPILOGUE

SHAY

FOUR YEARS LATER

Sweat drips down my face as the familiar sting of adrenaline pulses through my veins...

Four years ago, I didn't know where I'd end up. Hell, I wasn't even sure I'd be alive to see this day, but thanks to Dad, here I am. I've finally made it—I went pro.

After everything that happened with Blake, the wreckage it left, I somehow found a way to turn it all around. I fought and clawed my way out of the darkness, but I didn't do it alone. Blair never let me give up. Not even when the guilt from what happened gnawed at me. She held on tight and never let go.

We're stronger now. The love I feel for her is something I never even knew existed. Four years later, we've built something unbreakable. Even my dad and Sylvia came around. It wasn't the easiest, but after everything we went through, they finally understood. They accepted us for what we are. They see Blair has my heart, and I have hers.

The locker room door opens, and the sounds from the arena flood in. I turn to see who's come in, and the moment I see her, my breath catches.

Her eyes lock onto mine instantly, and a smile tugs at her lips. Without a word, she closes the distance between us and brings her hands up to rest on my chest.

“Good luck out there.” She seals her words with a kiss.

Even now, over a thousand days later, her kiss still causes heat to dance across my entire body.

“You know,” I start. “You’re kind of like my lucky charm. Every time you’re near me, I feel completely invincible.”

Her smile widens, but I’m not done.

“I never want to lose that, so if I win tonight, you have to promise me something.”

She raises a brow. “Promise you something?”

I nod, the words coming out before I can stop them. “You gotta let me put a ring on your finger. You have to marry me.”

Her eyes widen for a split second, then soften. “Are you sure?”

“I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life.”

She smiles again, pulling my face to hers so my lips are hovering above hers. “Then I promise. But only if you win.”

“I’ll win. For you. *Always*.”

Her lips press into mine one last time before the boom of the announcer spills over the speakers. I let my hold on her fall, then grab her hand and lead her out of the locker room. We walk down the hall together, this place much bigger than the gym in Saint Bipal.

When we make it to the ring, she turns and takes a seat in the front row next to Austin and Hannah as I fold myself between the ropes and slide into the ring.

“Ladies and gentlemen!” the announcer starts. “We have a fight tonight you won’t forget!”

I bounce lightly on my feet, jabbing into the air, and start getting my muscles pumping.

“In the right corner, standing tall at six foot two, weighing 215 pounds, Shay Cornell!”

I bounce to the center of the ring as the applause starts, then hold up my left hand. Locking eyes with Blair, I point to my ring finger, then wink.

After tonight, she’s mine forever. I’ll make sure of it.

THE END.

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Yo. It's been over a year since I've done this, so thanks for taking the time to read.

First, as usual, I want to thank my husband. If it wasn't for his constant support and inspiration (he's a total alpha-hole with a cinnamon roll center, okay?), then I don't think I would have ever written again.

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