A close-up photograph of a man and a woman in a romantic embrace. The man, on the left, has dark hair and a beard, wearing a white shirt and a dark jacket. The woman, on the right, has long blonde hair and is wearing a dark, strapless dress. They are looking into each other's eyes. The background is dark.

BROKEN SLIPPER



TRILOGY

THE EMBRACE

A FORBIDDEN BILLIONAIRE ROMANCE

WALL STREET JOURNAL BESTSELLER

VIVIAN WOOD

THE EMBRACE

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BOOK THREE OF THE BROKEN SLIPPER TRILOGY

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Rachael B, thank you so much for taking on this editing assignment from hell.

Patricia and Heidi — thank you for your wisdom!

This book almost didn't happen because my brain didn't want to cooperate... so thank you to all the readers that stuck with the series! And let's all give a big fat middle finger to burnout!

Calum and Kaia have been really meaningful to me and I'm not quite sure how to let them go. Luckily, there are more stories to be told in the Broken Slipper world! I'll see you then!

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T

he whole world slows down mere seconds before Calum is shot.

My mouth is open as I yell at Crispin.

Calum begins raising his hands, trying to signal something to Crispin.

Crispin's eyes have gone dark as he stares down the barrel of his shiny silver gun. There is a lot of commotion going on around him but Crispin is on an island of his own design.

The air crackles as he squeezes the trigger.

The sound of the gunshot rings through the air for several long seconds. The sheer loudness of it surprises me first. It takes me several seconds to swing my gaze to Calum.

Oh god.

God.

Calum has been hit.

The look on Calum's darkly handsome face is one of surprise. Maybe he thought that Crispin wouldn't actually shoot him.

For a moment, I can't hear anything. My ears pop. My eyes are steadied on Calum, who is currently looking down at his own chest.

At the bullet hole that's punched just to the right of the lapel of his tuxedo.

He twitches, staring at the hole.

When a dribble of his blood appears, I open my mouth, my eyes widening. My heart suddenly thunders loudly in my ears.

As Calum claps his hand over his wound, sound comes flooding back into the world. There are shouts as several men in tuxes tackle Crispin.

Calum makes a wheezing sound as he begins to fall.

That's what sets me in motion. I lunge toward him, shouting his name.
“Calum? Calum!”

By the time I reach him, he's fallen sideways on the marble floor. His eyes are beginning to flicker closed.

“No!” I shout, my hands finding his lapels. “Calum... hold on. Hold on, we'll get you help. Can you hear me?”

He gasps, his mouth opening like a fish's. I move to rest his head on my thigh. I feel the sticky ooze of blood coming from his wound. Pressing my hand over it, I realize that I'm shaking like a leaf.

“911 is on the way!” someone shouts.

I bob my head, my fingers smoothing back the dark hair that's near Calum's face. I should talk to him; that's what I always see people doing on television.

“Calum? You're okay. You'll be okay. You have to be.”

He wheezes again and his eyelids flutter.

“Can you hear me? I'm going to be right here. Okay?” My voice breaks on the last word. “I just found you, Calum. I'm not ready to let you go. Hold on for me. Just hold on...”

I can't be sure, but I think he nods faintly. Cradling his head, I keep talking to him, ignoring the madness of the crowd around me. At one point a lady who is a doctor kneels down beside me and takes Calum's pulse. She presses her hand over mine.

“Hold more pressure,” she says, her voice low. “That's good...”

I don't take my eyes off Calum's face. He looks pale, which scares the hell out of me. “Calum, hang on. Okay? I need you to stay with me...”

That's the moment when the paramedics arrive. “Ma'am? Could you tell us his name?”

I look up at the paramedics, two women in dark uniforms. “Calum.”

“How long has he been down?”

I blink. “I...”

Suddenly, Lucas is there. “About fifteen minutes.”

Both paramedics kneel beside me. One gentle pulls at my hand. “Move back, ma'am. We have it from here.”

“He was shot,” I tell the woman right beside me.

“Okay. Move back.”

My heart bangs against my ribs. “I am keeping pressure on his wound.”

"Ma'am, please move back," the other paramedic says. "We can only help him if you move back and let us work."

Lucas is right behind me, pulling my shoulders back with a gentle touch. I drop my hand and let Lucas pull me away from Calum.

True to her word, the paramedic quickly tears his tuxedo jacket and fancy white shirt stained with his blood away. His bare chest is a shock, his wound a bloody mess. She swipes Calum's chest with an iodine pad and affixes some sort of dressing to the wound.

"Breath sounds are muffled on the left side," the other paramedic says, leaning down to his chest with a stethoscope. "Got an IV in his arm and I'm running fluids. Ready to move him?"

Lucas squeezes me. "We should go to the hospital." He looks at the paramedics. "Can you take him to Mount Sinai?"

The paramedics don't look up from where they are sliding a board beneath Calum's body. "Mercy General is closer. We'll take him there."

I shiver as they raise the stretcher up and begin wheeling it out of the ballroom. Lucas puts a coat around my shoulders. It's only then that I sweep my gaze over the remnants of the gala, the few stragglers and onlookers. Everyone has a concerned frown on their face.

They also seem to be avoiding eye contact with me.

"Come on," Lucas says, tugging me toward the exit. "My car is parked downstairs."

The ambulance doors are closing just as we exit the lobby. I allow Lucas to hustle me into the back of his limo. He tells the driver what is going on. We pull off with a screech of tires.

I start to cry, the seriousness of the situation just beginning to catch up to me. Lucas looks at me, gently patting my arm. "It'll be okay. You'll see."

A strangled laugh leaves my throat. "What? How can you say that? He was shot."

Lucas gives me a careful smile. "Calum is a fighter. Trust me."

A torrent of curses bubble to the surface of my mind. How can Lucas be so cool and controlled?

But I don't say anything. I know that he's just trying to help.

Instead, I lean forward and call to the driver. "Can you drive faster, please?"

Lucas's warm fingers find my bare forearm. "Kaia, sit back and try to breathe."

I shoot him a glare and cross my arms, looking away out of the window. The world rushes by in a blur, so fast that it's hard to tell exactly where we are.

I try to calm myself down, but I'm too agitated. All I can think of is the way that Calum's gaze went right to me when he was shot. The stumbling fall of his body when he went down, so surprised.

Lucas opens a panel on the side of the limo, pulling a bottle of water out. He produces a wad of tissues from god knows where. I watch him, my brain so overloaded that I can't process anything new.

Lucas twists off the cap of the water bottle and offers me the tissues. I look at him, a puzzled expression on my face.

"Your hands," he says.

I glance at my hands, only now seeing that they are stained with Calum's dried blood. A sudden swell of nausea comes over me as I accept the water and the tissues, wiping at my palms.

The odor of Calum's blood rises in the air, making the tight space that Lucas and I are shoved into almost unbearable. Lucas looks away out the window and leaves me to clean my hands of his brother's blood.

By the time that we get to the hospital, I'm vibrating with the need to get out of the car. As soon as the limousine comes to a complete stop, I throw open the door.

"Kaia, wait—" Lucas says.

But I'm already rushing headlong toward the sliding glass doors of the emergency room entrance. I pick up my full white skirts as I sprint inside to a busy information desk.

A nurse looks up at me, raising an eyebrow at my bloodstained dress.

"Do you need help?" she asks.

"Calum Fordham," I shout. "He came in by ambulance and I need to be with him—"

The nurse holds up a hand, trying to calm me down while she types something into a computer. "Okay. Hold on..."

Behind me, Lucas arrives. I see him sweep his gaze around the waiting room to our left, his expression guarded.

The nurse clears her throat. "Are you family?"

I claw at Lucas's arm. "He is."

"I'm Calum's brother," Lucas supplies.

The nurse bobs her head. “Mr. Fordham was brought in twenty minutes ago. He was in critical condition when he arrived. Aside from the...” She pauses, looking at her screen. “Gunshot wound... he also has a collapsed lung. Mr. Fordham has been taken straight up to emergency surgery.”

I pale. “Emergency surgery?”

As I say the words, my eyes fill with tears.

She stands up, ushering us over to the waiting room. “Yes. He’s being taken care of by best thoracic surgeon in the state right now.”

I blink, a tear running down my face. Lucas puts his arm around my shoulders. “How long will my brother be in surgery for?”

The nurse shakes her head. “I have no idea. I’m not qualified to guess. But if you both will wait here, you’ll be the first ones to know about his condition. Okay?”

I turn and bury my face against Lucas’s arm. This can’t be happening.

Calum is the strongest man I know. For him to be hurt shakes the very foundation of everything I know to be true.

Lucas is far more practical than me. “We’ll need updates. How frequent can we get updates?”

The nurse gives him a cool little smile. “Like I said, I will let you know as soon as I know anything.’

Lucas glares at her. “Do you have any idea of who I am?”

The nurse turns on her heel and flounces away.

“Unbelievable,” Lucas mutters. After a moment, he sighs. “I should call the board. Will you be all right here for a few minutes?”

I nod, holding back a fresh round of tears. He gets up, reaching in his tuxedo jacket. And then I’m left all alone in the oddly quiet waiting room.

*W*ithout opening my eyes, I'm awake. I feel strange, like the entire world is wrapped in gauze or cotton wool. It sticks to everything and makes it very hard to open my eyes.

I shift ever so slightly in bed and then I'm smacked with pain.

A searing, ripping pain that radiates from my chest, just above my heart. What is it from?

Balling up my face, I groan. I try to touch the spot that hurts without opening my eyes.

“Calum?”

It’s my brother’s voice. What is Lucas doing in my bedroom?

Opening my eyes is a monumental task. I peel them open and try to focus on the white walls that surround me. Lucas comes into view, hovering, looking concerned.

“What... what’s going on?” I croak. My throat is dry as a desert.

My shoulder throbs.

“Jesus,” Lucas says. “You fucking scared me, Calum.”

I squint at him, trying desperately to string thoughts together. I don’t recognize this room but clearly I’m in a hospital room.

The image of Kaia rushes to the surface. I struggle to sit up.

“Where’s Kaia?” I wonder. “What happened to my shoulder? It hurts.”

Lucas’s brow furrows. He reaches forward and presses me back against the bed. “You were shot, Calum. You’re in the hospital.”

I scrunch up one side of my face, reaching for a memory. All I get is a fuzzy flashback of Kaia’s tear strewn face.

“Where’s Kaia?” I demand.

He looks over his shoulder. “Here she comes.”

Kaia appears in the next moment, as if by magic. Her blonde hair is tousled and she is dressed in oversized hospital scrubs. She has enormous black circles under her eyes and looks as though she’s only recently been crying. She’s holding a Styrofoam cup, her eyes down as she heads through the doorway.

“Kaia,” I call to her.

Kaia looks up, her blue eyes widening. She drops her Styrofoam cup and launches herself toward me. “Calum! Oh god...”

The breath is knocked out of my lungs when Kaia buries herself against my uninjured shoulder. The feeling of comfort is instant, knowing that she’s safe and in my arms. My shoulder aches but I ignore that, leaning closer and pressing my face against her hair.

My heart thuds loudly in my chest. The feeling of holding her close is pure relief.

“I’m okay,” I murmur. “It’s going to be okay.”

She wipes at her eyes, pulling back and looking up at me. “I am so happy to see you awake and talking, Calum. I thought you were dead.” She sucks in a breath, her blue eyes hard on mine.

“Apparently I was shot?” I joke. “I can’t actually remember anything.”

Kaia scrunches up her nose. “Maybe it’s better that way.”

Lucas clears his throat. “The young dancer who shot you is in police custody.”

I nod. “That’s good.”

A sharp pain begins to shoot from my shoulder down my arm. I wince right as a young Black woman comes in wearing a long white doctor’s coat. Kaia blushes and climbs off of my bed, which makes me frown.

“Mr. Fordham, you’re up,” the doctor says, smiling. “I’m Dr. Smith. I was your surgeon. You were hit by a bullet, which collapsed your lung on its way out of your body.”

I flex my arm, sending shooting pain down to my fingertips. “I gathered as much.”

A rueful smile plays about Dr. Smith’s lips as she checks my chart. “Funny. Let’s check out your wound.” She lifts my arm and instructs me to move it back and forth. Then she purses her lips. “How is the pain?”

I shrug my uninjured shoulder. “Honestly? It feels like I got hit by a speeding train.”

She nods, scribbling a note in my chart. “I’ll have the nurses give you something for that. The hospital administration has made it abundantly clear that you are a major donor. So if you have any questions, the nurse will page me to come answer them. Okay?”

My lips curl up. “Sure. Thanks.”

“This machine here adjusts your pain medication,” she says. She waves to an IV pump, demonstrating its use. “Give it a try.”

She hands me the button trigger and I squeeze it. The pump makes a noise. “Ah. Okay.”

“Be careful with that,” she warns. “That is straight morphine. So only use it when you really need it and don’t mind sleeping.”

“Ah. I want to be weaned off the pain medications and all the machines as soon as possible.” I cock my head, beginning to feel tired. “When will I be ready to leave?”

Dr. Smith frowns. “It would be best if you stayed with us for a few days. Two days, if you’re really ready to go.”

I squint at her. “Thank you, Dr...”

She flashes me a cautious smile, looking around at Kaia and Lucas. “Dr. Smith. I’ll be back in a few hours to check in on you.”

She starts to head out the door.

“I’ll be leaving tomorrow!” I call after her.

She shakes her head but doesn’t stop on her way out the door. I can’t help the yawn that bursts free from my throat.

Kaia looks at me with a sigh. “Are you feeling okay? Can I get you anything?”

I yawn again and scoot over on my hospital bed, pulling back the blanket. “You can sleep with me.”

Kaia’s eyebrows leap up. She licks her lips and casts a hasty glance at Lucas. “Calum, I want you to get some real rest.”

I feel my eyelids growing heavy. “Knowing that you’re safe in my arms will help me sleep. Lucas won’t mind. Will you, brother?”

Lucas shrugs, retreating to a chair in the corner. “I have work to do.”

“Come on, don’t make me beg. I just took a bullet for you. Quit being so stubborn.”

Kaia blushes, picking at a thread on her scrubs. “Well, if you insist...”

She climbs in bed beside me. The second I feel her body against mine, I turn so that I’m on my side facing her. She turns too and I pull the blanket

over both of us.

I close my eyes, sheltering her body against my own. My shoulder throbs but it seems faraway; someone else's shoulder, someone else's pain.

I drift for a long time. When I wake again, the sun has gone down. Kaia still sleeps peacefully beside me. I feel a little guilty knowing that she could have been taken from my arms while I was asleep and I likely wouldn't have even noticed.

Using my uninjured arm, I reach over and brush a strand of her hair back from her face. God, I really love this woman. Now isn't the time to tell her... not with my brother here.

But I think I knew when Crispin fired the bullet. My exact thought process wasn't fear-based.

It was that Kaia was worth being shot over. I knew I loved her.

And I'm going to find a way to tell her, sooner rather than later.

"Are you awake?"

My eyes open. I find Lucas leaning against the wall, his expression unreadable. I grimace, shushing him.

"Shhh, Kaia's still asleep. I would rather not wake her yet. What's up?"

His gaze tightens on me. "I'm glad you're not dead."

I rub my face, a little taken aback by that. "Me too."

He tilts his head to the side. "I think we need to talk after you get out of the hospital."

I yawn. "About how I'm not dead?"

Lucas flushes. "About contingency plans, yes. But more than that. We have never quite finished our conversation about Kaia. Or Anita, for that matter."

Hearing Anita's name is like a lash of ice water in my veins. I scowl, dropping my voice even more. "This is not the place or the time, Lucas."

He sucks in a breath, his expression pinching. "I just almost lost you, Calum. If we leave things unresolved for another week, another month, another year..."

I wince, gently sitting up in bed. My shoulder aches so badly that I grit my teeth, willing the pain to pass. "You have my word. Okay? We will talk about whatever you want."

"Yeah?" He looks a little surprised.

"I promise." I move my legs over the side of the bed, looking at all the tubes in my arms. "Do me a favor? Get a nurse. I've got to piss and I don't

want to be hooked up to all this fucking plastic while I do it.”

His lips twitch as he pushes himself off the wall. “The nurses already hate you.”

“Seriously. Go quickly.” I flick my fingers at him a few times and Lucas heads out of my room.

His simple request, that we sit down and talk about everything, sticks in my head though. After I’m disconnected from all the IVs and I’ve finally taken the most satisfying piss of my whole life, I turn that thought over as I close my eyes again.

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“C

re you sure about this?”

Calum looks up at me, his expression brooding as he finishes getting dressed. “I make it pretty clear that I was leaving today, beauty. I’ve already had all the doctors and nurses try to talk me out of it. But you? You’re supposed to be on my side, always.”

My lips tip upward in a smile. “Is that right?”

He shoots me a glare as he tugs a loose sweatshirt down over his head. “Yes.”

I cross my arms and lean against the wall. “You are so damn stubborn.”

“That’s awfully rich coming from you.” He stands up, wobbling for half a second before getting his bearings.

I shake my head, but I’m already pushing off the wall. Lunging forward, I grab his uninjured arm and help balance him.

“This would mean way more to me if you could walk without assistance.”

There is a determined look on his face. “If you can resist making any more jokes for the next few hours, I’ll take you to Paris.”

I smile ruefully. “But then who will I make fun of?”

Calum starts walking toward the door to his room, repressing a sigh. I take his elbow, entwining our arms. To my surprise, it seems like he hardly needs me.

We step out into the busy hospital hallway. No one makes eye contact with us. Calum threw an enormous temper tantrum about not having enough pillows in his room last night and apparently it had lasting effects.

I look up at him as he maneuvers along the hallway. His posture is stiff, his expression dead serious. It is obvious that he's in a great deal of pain.

Another decision that he insisted on making early this morning. No pain medication. Apparently he doesn't want to *feel foggy*, whatever that means. The hospital staff were less than thrilled about that one.

"You can lean on me if you need to, you know."

He smiles coolly but doesn't look at me. He just stares straight ahead. "My legs work fine. I just have to make it to the limousine."

We work our way down the hall, moving slowly. Once we hit the big sliding doors of the hospital and the limo comes into view, I swear he looks relieved.

"Almost there," I coax Calum quietly.

His disgruntled look is more than enough for me.

Our driver opens the door and Calum jams himself into the car, sagging the second he's in. "Ow. Fuck. God, why does everything hurt?"

"Because you eschewed those little white pills that the doctors were begging for you to just take?" I answer.

He glares at me but doesn't retort. What would he say? I just told him the truth.

I run around to the other side of the car, climbing in. The driver shuts the doors, sealing us in. Smiling a little, I scrunch my nose up at Calum.

"You're just an elevator ride away from a buttery soft couch."

He looks at me, his expression unreadable. A few seconds go by. "Thank you for putting up with me. Even Lucas walked out after I got a little tetchy last night."

A laugh bubbles to my lips. "Yeah. You were in fine form yesterday. But... you know. You did literally get shot by my... well, to call him my admirer doesn't quite seem right."

One side of his mouth lifts in a faint smirk. "Are you just being nice to me because I took a bullet for you? I mean, I'll take what I can get—"

I cut him off. My heart pounds. "Stop talking. I may be a fool for saying it... but I love you. Even more than I did before, if that's possible."

He grabs my hand and gives my fingers a tight squeeze. "I would do it again in a heartbeat. A thousand times, a thousand bullets." He sucks in a quick pull of breath. "I love you, Kaia."

My heart slams against the wall of my chest. I lean in and kiss him hard. Then I pull back, looking into his eyes. "Say it again," I whisper.

“I love you, beauty,” he says. “I didn’t think I could fall in love. I thought I was too broken. I felt like a stone on the beach. Unchanging, unmoving, destined for the water to wash over me again and again. And yet, somehow, you shifted something essential in me. You’re so young and talented and bright... and you brought that into the dark cave that was my life. So thank you.”

I’m utterly shocked. Calum isn’t really one for long-winded speeches. Nor is he the type to heap praise on anyone’s head, not even the girl he’s sleeping with regularly.

So for him to come out with his feelings and for them to be so intense... My eyes mist over.

“Oh Calum...” I whisper. “You don’t know how much it means to me to hear you say that.”

His mouth twists bitterly. “I know I’m not the easiest person to date. I’m often cold and merciless because I feel like... like people would treat me that way if the situation were reversed.”

“I’m not just anyone. You know that, don’t you?”

He grabs my hand and brings my knuckles up to his mouth for a quick kiss. “I swear I’m learning.” He sucks in a breath, looking me dead in the eyes. “I can feel myself changing, Kaia. Getting softer. Adapting. But there are going to be some growing pains. I feel like I should apologize for all the things that I’m probably going to fuck up in the future. I don’t want to hurt you.”

I lift up on my tiptoes and kiss the corner of his mouth. “Tell me again. I can’t get over hearing you say it.”

“I love you, Kaia Walker.” One corner of his mouth curls up into a smirk. “I hope you don’t have lofty plans, because I want to anchor you to my side and never let you sail again.”

My lips twist in a moment of sadness. “Yeah? You mean it? You’re not just going to get tired of me?”

He slowly shakes his head. “I don’t think so. I think you’re stuck with me. Hell, I’d get down on one knee and propose to you right here and now if I thought that I could get up again.”

My eyes widen. For several solid seconds, I am dumbstruck. “What?”

Calum glances away. Maybe he just revealed too much and is now rebuking himself. I don’t know for sure, because he’s doing an excellent job of keeping his face blank.

But a muscle does tic in his jaw.

“Isn’t that the dream?” he asks. His voice sounds a little testy.

“Hey.” I give his fingers a tug, When he looks back at me, I smile. “We’re already living the dream. Okay? Every time you say I love you, my heart lifts. I can’t ask for anything more than that.”

He looks away out the window for several seconds. My heart seizes up.

“Did I say something wrong?” I ask, touching his arm.

Calum looks at me, his eyes sparkling so blue that for a second, I can’t breathe.

“Move in with me,” he says.

I bring my hand up to my thudding heart. “What?”

The corner of his mouth lifts into a smirk. “Move in with me. I mean, we can bring the stripper pole too, if you want. But I love you. I want to have you around. And I think that moving in together is the real next step for us.”

I blow out a breath and shake my head. “Calum, maybe we should wait until you’ve really thought about it. I mean, I don’t want to move too fast and have one of us end up getting spooked.”

He cocks a brow. “You had better be talking about yourself. Because if you’re talking about me... I’m not scared. And I don’t want to wait. I know my own mind.”

My lips tip up at the corners. I grip his hand, interlacing our fingers. “You always seem so damn certain.”

“Certainty is very easy to come by when you’re worth over a billion dollars.” He shrugs. “Now are you going to make me ask again?”

I lean close, kissing him on the lips with a deliberate slowness. He tastes familiar now, comforting. Who would have thought that I would ever be comforted by Calum’s taste?

When I finally pull away, I smile at him a little ruefully. “I’ll move in with you, if that’s what you want.”

He shifts closer to me, bring his hand up to cup my cheek. I let him kiss me, give him all the control he wants. He slides his fingers into the hair at my nape, tugging my head back and kissing the exposed column of my neck.

I can’t help the fact that I breathe a little harder and faster at the feeling of his lips as they trace my collarbone and the gentle swell of my breasts.

“Calum!” I warn him. “You’re hurt—“

He growls somewhere low in his chest. “So?”

“So... I asked the doctor when you’ll be able to have sex and she told me it will be at least a week.” The last of my sentence comes out breathy because Calum tweaks one of my nipples.

“Come on, beauty,” he grits out. “I need you.”

He manages to lift me halfway onto his lap with one arm. I shift to face him, straddling him.

“You’re impossible.”

He presses me down against his body. He grinds his erection against me. I’m surprised, though I shouldn’t be.

Calum is pretty much always horny.

Sucking in a surprised breath, I find my body responding to his. My breasts tighten, my pussy grows damp, I find it hard to catch my breath.

“Calum,” I whine. “You’re going to bust a stitch and send us back to the hospital.”

He eases back, his eyes sparkling. “What if I promise not to move too much?”

I squint at him. “How about you just relax for two more days... and then we will see?”

His mouth twists. “You’re really going to go by the book?”

I snort. “I would hardly call three days of rest after getting shot being a strict rule follower. Just... please, Calum? Please take this seriously. Then I swear, you can take me from every angle, every single dirty thing you can think of. My body is yours.”

His eyes tighten on my face. He sighs, grinding against me again. “You’re lucky that I love you.”

My lips twitch. I lean forward, pressing my lips to his. “Funny, I was about to say that same damn thing.”

Calum releases my hair and runs his hand down my back, cupping my ass. He buries his face against my neck, his lips shaping lazy kisses against my sensitive flesh. “Do you have any idea how fucking ready I’m going to be in two days?”

I shiver and shake my head. “No. Tell me.”

He chuckles evilly. “Oh, beauty...”

Calum flexes his hips, grinding against me again. His thick cock is right there, ready for me. I just bite my lower lip and try not to groan.

It’s going to be a long two days.

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I

slip out of bed just before dawn, careful to softly kiss Calum on the cheek. Even in his sleep he frowns and looks fierce. I pull up the soft black comforter and scurry out of his bedroom.

Calum may be laid up, but I don't have such an excuse. Which means today, I have to return to the New York Ballet.

God, I haven't even been on a run for two days. My body will protest the entire ballet class, I bet.

I shower, get myself dressed, and drag myself and my duffel bag to the NYB building. It's past dawn when I climb the familiar broad cement steps. A gust of cool wind makes me realize that autumn is not very far off.

I settle my bag on my shoulder as I open the huge glass door. Looking straight up the massive stone stairs, I spot Ella at the very top.

"Hey!" I call to her.

She turns around and looks surprised to see me. "Hey! I wasn't expecting you for at least another day or two."

I trot up the stairs, ignoring the twinge of protest of my legs. "I wasn't shot, so I figured that my presence would be noted."

She pushes up the sleeves of her huge sweatshirt. "Yeah. Is Calum doing okay?"

I start heading down the hallway toward the dance studios. "He is." I scrunch up my mouth for a second. "He told me that he loved me."

Ella flings her hand out, hitting me on the arm with a thwack. "Seriously? He did?"

Smiling a little, I nod. "Yep. And he asked me to move in. I mean, I lived on the same floor before now. But he asked me to like... sleep in his

bed and move my stuff in his room.”

Ella gives me an owlish stare. “Whoa. You guys are moving fast. I mean, after fucking around for three months.”

Bobbing my head, I hold open the door to one of the dance studios. Ella exhales loudly as she steps inside.

“That’s insane. I mean, the next thing you know, he’ll be asking you to marry him.”

My cheeks flush as I set my bag down and kick off my shoes. “We have a long way to go. I’m barely nineteen... and we’re still dating on the down low for the moment. Don’t forget, no one at NYB can know about us.”

Ella frowns at me. “Umm...”

I pull off my sweatshirt. “I don’t like the sound of that. Who did you tell?”

“Me?” Her eyebrows rise. She presses a hand to her heart. “I’m the soul of discretion. But you might want to check out the Times. Their arts section is...” She pauses, cocking her head. “I think you should see it before anybody else gets here.”

I shoot her an odd look as I bend down and retrieve my cell phone from my bag. “That’s awfully cryptic.”

Ella stays silent, her brow puckering. She sits down and starts lacing up her pointe shoes.

It only takes a minute for me to find the article that she means. At the top is a photo of the New York Ballet’s stage. Two dancers that I don’t recognize are in full costume, their poses inferring movement.

The title stuns me. Are we doing enough to protect our dancers?

Scanning the article, I notice that my name and Calum’s name do not appear together. However, there are several references to ‘highly wealthy patrons who have morphed into hands-on dance instructors’ and implied that there was a young ingenue being coerced into sex. Emma is quoted as saying that she was dismissed and she thinks that was the reason.

My jaw drops.

The worst part of the article is the interview with Basil, where he tells the story of Honor and the previous instructor. Basil doesn’t conflate Honor’s situation with mine... but he does label both situations as being ‘perplexing’.

“Fucking hell!” I say. I look up at Ella. “Bas knows about Calum and me? I mean, I know we had a couple of close calls, but...”

She shrugs a shoulder. "It definitely seems that way to me. He obviously knows something."

I shake my head at Ella, who is looking at me quite carefully while she warms up at the barre.

"This... this is like half lies and innuendo." I shake the phone at her.

She squints and plies. "I figured as much. Although you didn't tell me that Emma had been fired, so... it was news to me.'

I wrinkle my nose. Dropping my phone in my bag, I pull out my pointe shoes. "Sorry. It's been a really crazy week. Like... after Crispin shot Calum, everything I knew flew out of my head. I had honestly forgotten that little tidbit. Sorry."

I quickly finish getting my shoes on and head over to the bar.

"You really don't have to apologize to me. I get it." Using the barre to balance herself, Ella stretches her leg up over her head and pulls a face. "God, my hamstring is so tight."

I smile at her, stretching my arms into the air. "Yeah?"

She gives me a playful pout. "Should I not have told you about the article?"

"No. You did the right thing. The more I know, the better. I'm just wondering what's going to happen now that it is out in the world." A thought occurs to me, making the blood leave my face. "Oh, god. I hadn't even considered dealing with Bas today."

"I wouldn't say anything if I were you. Let Bas come to you if he's so concerned about your protection." Letting her leg down slowly, Ella winces.

I cast an eye over her. "Are you okay?"

She rolls her eyes. "I'll be fine. I just have to dance it out."

My lips curl up. "That sounds like a ballerina's work ethic to me."

"Mhm."

"Oh." Ella winces. "I am also supposed to tell you that Eric got offered a position with the New London ballet..."

My eyebrows shoot up. "He did?"

She nods. "That's the good news. The bad news is that he already left."

My eyes widen. "He what?"

Ella shrugs. "He got the call two days ago and said yes. He didn't even say goodbye to me in person. He just said..." She screws up her mouth for a second. "He said that he noticed that you and Calum were an item. And he

felt like it would be better if he just started fresh. Then he got the call from London..."

"Jesus," I say, shaking my head. "He left because of me?"

"It sounded more like he had an incredible opportunity and he used your situation as fuel for the fire he would need to get himself to London. That's all."

She stretches her leg as high as it will go, as though she hasn't just told me something big.

I turn, catching my reflection in the mirror. While Ella continues to warm up, I can't stop thinking about Eric. I drove him away.

Well, more precisely, my relationship with Calum did. That means that he probably liked me.

Still, I can't feel too bad for Eric. He had plenty of time to pay attention to me. Before Calum, Eric was the one who I was sure was going to take my virginity.

In the end, Calum took it. And I can't say that I'm sorry about that. He's brought me pleasure like no other every time he casts his brooding gaze my way.

I sigh, going into the splits. My mind wanders back to the article.

Namely, how many people will know that I'm the dancer in need of protection.

I should really tell Calum about the article so that he is not blindsided by it. Screwing my mouth to the side, I head over to my bag.

"I'll be right back," I call back to Ella. I scoop up my phone and head out into the hallway, already dialing Calum as I go.

The phone only rings twice before Calum's image appears on my screen. I can see his sleek kitchen in the background.

"Hey," he says, frowning a little. "I have Lucas here with me."

He swings his phone around to show Lucas sitting at the kitchen island, sipping a coffee. I blush for no real reason. Suddenly it seems like my relationship with Calum is serious enough that he would just casually mention that I'm calling rather than just silence a call in front of his brother.

It feels a little weird, I guess.

I smile at Lucas. "Hey..."

Calum moves his phone so that he is facing the camera again. "Just wanted to give you a heads up. You know, in case this was a booty call."

My cheeks grow even warmer. Even though his humor is disarming, I won't let him distract me from my mission. "Calum, I have to tell you something serious."

His eyebrows rise. "Yeah? What's that?"

"There is a story about us in the arts section of the Times. We're not mentioned by name... a blind item, I guess you could call it. But the article doesn't portray our... relationship... in a particularly flattering light."

He turns to Lucas. "Pull the Times arts section up on your phone."

Calum moves over to where Lucas is looking at his screen. "Way ahead of you, brother."

"Are we protecting our ballerinas?" Calum reads over his shoulder. "Who the fuck even told anyone about this?"

"It looks like they have Emma on record..." Lucas says, his eyes narrowing on his screen.

"And Basil," I chime in.

Calum's expression is thunderous. "And they say what? That I'm taking advantage of you?"

I shrug a shoulder. "They say that someone close to the dancers is sleeping with them. And they have Emma on record saying that the stage manager before you left because he was involved in a similar scandal."

Lucas chuckles. "Well, they aren't exactly wrong about that."

I grimace. "I thought you should know."

Calum growls. "I practically singlehandedly support the New York Ballet. I can't believe that anyone has the nerve to fucking talk to a reporter about me."

I squint. "Well, you did just fire Emma."

"For blackmailing me! It shouldn't have been a surprise to anyone involved."

"Let's talk about what this means for your career as stage manager. I think that's the most important part, don't you?"

Calum shoots his brother a black look. "No. I can walk away at any time."

"Who is going to run the NYB without you?" I ask. "You would basically be putting the whole company in Basil's hands. Nothing against him, but I can't see that working out."

"Fuck," Calum mutters. "Emma has really kneecapped us. I actually admire it even though I'm going to make sure that no one of note ever hires

her again. She's done in this town and with ballet.”

I scrunch up my face. “Calum?”

He looks at me, his expression fierce. “Yes?”

“I don’t want you to take the article too much to heart. I don’t feel unprotected.”

He darts a gaze at his brother, a guilty note rippling across his face. “Beauty...” He sucks in a breath. “We should talk about that later.”

My lips curve up. “No need. I just wanted you to know that I am fine.”

Calum exhales, shaking his head. “Heads are still going to roll over this article.”

“We should really talk about replacing Emma so that you can step down,” Lucas says.

Down the hallway, I hear the echo of voices. Probably other dancers starting to arrive. I bite my lip.

“I should go.”

Calum stares at me broodingly. “I’ll have a response to this by the time you get home. This will not go unanswered.”

I nod. “I never doubted you for a second.”

There is an awkward moment where I might have said, ‘I love you’ if Calum was alone. But I spend a few too many seconds thinking about it. I see similar discomfort on Calum’s face.

He clears his throat. “Bye, Kaia.”

He disconnects the call before I can even formulate a response. My shoulders droop just a bit.

Not that I should be surprised... Calum and I are still working out the finer bits of what being together and being in love mean. I make myself pause for long enough to take a full breath.

And then I head back into the studio, my mind full of Calum.

*W*hen we finally have sex three days later, it's like a lightning strike. Hard, fast, and bright.

I can't get enough of Calum.

I get home from dance practice a bit late and make my way to what I think of my apartment. When I step into my bedroom, he's waiting for me. And he looks hungrier than I've ever seen him.

He stands up, arching a brow. "Come here, beauty. I can't wait anymore."

Dropping my bag on the floor, I practically race over and lift my face toward his, waiting to feel his sensuous kiss.

When his tongue slips between my lips, I let out a moan, meeting it with my own. My back arches, my chest presses up against him. He grips my tank top and explores the skin beneath, slipping his fingers beneath the waistband of my leggings. He drags out every moment, an exquisite torture.

He's wearing a black t-shirt and oversized loose pants. I push him onto my bed and he pulls me down with him. He kisses me deeply as he pulls at my leggings.

I'm already toeing off my shoes and shoving the leggings off my body. He growls and grabs my thigh. Draping it across his lap, leaving me exposed. His hand drifts up toward my pussy, kneading and squeezing my thigh as he goes.

When his fingers brush the sensitive skin of my slit, he finds me dripping fucking wet.

"Oh, beauty," he purrs, his voice gone to gravel. He teases my crevice again with the lightest of touches. "You've been such a good girl. Now

relax and let me show you your reward.”

I can do nothing but gasp and nod.

He grins and squeezes my ass as he pulls me on top of his lap. As I straddle him, I can feel his cock between my legs, wrapped in his loose dark gray sweatpants. I’m already wet and I know what he likes; he likes knowing that he turns me on, that he makes me crazy. So I grind against him a little bit, unabashed.

“Fuck, baby,” he says. “Claim me. Show me how bad you want me.”

I bite my lip and make eye contact with him, easing my head back with a low moan.

“Calum,” I gasp. “You don’t know how much I have missed your incredible cock stretching out my tight little pussy.”

Even through his pants, I feel his heated weight, and I’m ready for him to tear off the rest of our clothes and fuck me right this second.

It’s never that easy or fast with Calum, though. He likes to take it slow, to tease and torture me.

His mouth moves from my lips to my jaw and travels to my neck. The light cotton of the tank top’s neckline stops him, and he growls. With one hand, he pulls the tank top up and over my head. He tosses it to the side, giving me an impatient look.

The only thing between him and my flesh is a frilly pink bralette.

“If you like this bra, you’d better get it out of my way before I rip it off with my bare hands.”

I hesitate and then pull it off, shyly covering myself with my hands. I’m hot for him, that’s for certain. But that only takes me so far.

Calum smirks at my hesitation. “You know that you are probably the most exquisite girl I’ve ever fucked? I love watching you when you’re brazen. My little toy, only a slut for me and me alone.”

He shifts me up above him so my nipples meet his mouth. I feel his fingers digging into my ass cheeks, dangerously close to my pussy, as the warmth of his mouth consumes one nipple, and the other.

I whimper as I feel my nipples harden against his tongue. I want desperately to be lower, to be able to rub myself against his cock again, but he keeps me firmly poised inches above his lap.

It makes me squirm. I’m aching for his touch. His big hands spread my bare ass cheeks apart until I moan.

“Calum...” I whimper. “Please. You’re killing me.”

“Fuck, you’re wet,” he tells me between sucks on my nipples.

“Stop teasing me,” I say, frustrated.

“Is this what you want?” he asks as he lowers me back down.

He slides a finger inside my pussy and pushes his thumb against my clit. I shudder at the surprise of it—and the pleasure of having some part of him inside me.

I can’t bring myself to reply, but I move against his hand eagerly. His hands are deft, with practiced flicks against my G-spot and just enough pressure on my clit to get me halfway to orgasm. But no closer.

I kiss him deeply, eyes squeezing shut. I’m close to grinding on his hand like a heathen.

“Easy, baby,” he whispers. “I am going to make you come when I’m good and ready.”

There is a part of me that thought maybe he’ll just stop. Maybe it is all just a game, a power trip. I ride his hand harder, lifting my head, and offer my breasts to his lips again. He spanks me once on my ass, hard.

“That’s not easy,” he growls. “That’s full throttle. Be patient. Good things come to those that wait.”

I feel a new gush of wetness between my thighs. My entire body is on fire.

“Fuck! Calum, I am trying to slow down,” I cry out. I need him like I’ve never needed him before.

He slips his finger out of my pussy and flips me onto my back. The coolness of the bed is a shock to my skin. He kneels and spreads my legs wide.

“God damn. You are a fucking feast, beauty.”

I allow my head drop back as he kisses his way down my thighs. When he reaches the top of my thigh, he kisses his way across it, trailing his tongue against my sweat-slicked skin. He comes so close to tasting me, really tasting my pussy, and yet he pulls back.

I shake my head back and forth, ready to burst.

“Fuck! Calum, come on!” I cry, pounding my fists.

“What do you want?” he asks me, smirking.

“I want you to lick my pussy,” I demand. Bucking my hips, I’m too excited to pretend I’m anything but crazy turned on.

“God damn. Hearing you say it makes my cock hard as a fucking rock, beauty.” He gives me a dark smile before he lowers himself between my

legs.

Calum spreads my pussy lips with two fingers. I gasp and writhe, pure anticipation at this point. His tongue runs across my clit, firm and slow, before it dips down into the deepest of my folds. I cry out and dig my fingers into his hair to hold him closer to me.

“Oh god. Oh, Calum!!” As he works his tongue faster, I can't stop calling out his name. “Calum, fuck! Right there, don't stop...”

When he slides a finger into me again, I reach for my breasts and pinch my nipples.

“I want to taste you,” I say, unable to take a full breath. He pulls his finger from my body and leaves a flutter of kisses on my clit.

“What about you? Don't you want to come?” he asks. But even as he asks, he's already eyeing my body like a starving man.

“I will. You'll make me come.” I issue it as a challenge. He releases a low chuckle, fisting his impressive cock.

“God, look at you. All spread out, ready and waiting, already wet for me. You want me to fuck you, beauty?”

I swear, I can feel my pupils dilate. “You know I do. I have been waiting for this moment. You know that you can make me come. So fucking do it.”

Calum climbs on the bed, his eyes sparkling as he over me. He fists his cock again and brings it flush against my entrance.

“Just remember that you asked for it,” he mutters.

When he penetrates me, I am shockingly tight. It feels so fucking good. I feel every single inch of him as he thrusts his long, proud cock inside my body.

“Still with me, Kaia?” he asks me.

“Yes, yes,” I breathe into his ear. “Please... I want this. I want you to fuck me. Please, Calum.”

He buries his face in my neck and breathes me in. He takes his time, sliding in and out of my pussy oh so slowly.

When he teases me, lingering with barely his tip inside me, I struggle and demand that he go deep. Every time he slides against my g-spot, I scratch at his back and call out his name. My mouth finds the slick skin on his neck and I mark him with kisses and bites.

I'm not afraid of who will see. This man is *mine*.

“Calum, yes! Don't stop,” I encourage him.

I am so wet it is almost unbelievable. He kisses me, slowing even though I just told him not to.

“Not so fast. I want you to slow it all down. Get on top,” he tells me. “Watching you ride my cock is like every fantasy come to life.”

I bite my lip and nod. He switches our positions in the blink of an eye. On his back, he watches me straddle his hips. My hair has come undone and hangs in knotted waves over my breasts. He reaches up, grabs a fistful of my hair, and pulls on it lightly.

I gasp and look up but he’s already letting my hair go.

“Damn,” he says, his eyes fixed on my tits. “This is fucking perfect.”

I look down and grasp his cock to bring it to my pussy. He moves his hands to my hips.

“Easy, beauty,” he warns me. “It’s been a week since I’ve come.”

I let my weight fall onto him, but he holds me up. I blush again. He seems to want to watch me take his cock into my pussy.

“Please,” I say, looking up at him. “Fuck me. Like really fuck me.”

He pulls me down, hard, onto him. I throw my head back and call out.

My nails dig into his chest and he clutches my ass as I ride him. It’s perfect, the two of us moving as one, our breathing harsh. My tits bounce freely, swaying each time that I move.

Every part of his skin feels like silk underneath my fingertips. My wetness is so intense it drips down between his thighs.

My eyes close tight and I grind hard against him. I’m close, so close.

“Look at me,” he tells me.

I open my eyes, biting my lip.

“I love you. I love you so fucking much,” he says, his dark eyes intense on mine.

“I love you too,” I whisper, my breath coming in gasps.

He pushes himself up and wraps my legs around his back. From here, he is in complete control — and my nipples are once again aligned with his face.

He lifts me and lowers me onto his cock, while he covers my chest in marks that I know will darken to hickeys by tomorrow. I can’t care about that right now; it feels too primal to be marked by him, too fucking good.

I score his back with my nails, marking him in my own way.

My legs are locked around him, his lap soaking with my juices.

“I—” I gasp out. “I’m going to come...”

He can feel my orgasm start to wash over me as my innermost muscles clench. It is enough to push him over the edge and he comes with me.

He grits his teeth. “Oh, fuck...”

When he explodes inside of me, I call out his name. “Calum!”

“Fuck! Kaia, fuck,” he whispers. He keeps rocking his hips, pressing his hands firmly into my back.

I shudder against him as I ride out the last of my orgasm. He kisses my neck gently and makes his way to my lips.

Calum lies beside me, aligning our bodies. He holds me close as I struggle for breath. He’s breathing hard too, but he kisses my neck, my shoulder, the curve of my breast.

Every kiss is a burning brand, a reminder that I’m his. A shudder ripples across my sensitive skin.

I want to beg him to stop, but I also want to have him again, right now. There’s something about him that just makes me insatiable. He looks up at me, then presses a kiss to my lips.

“Ah, Kaia...” he murmurs. He smiles a little and sweeps my hair aside. “What am I going to do with you?”

I grin at him. “I can think of one thing...”

Kissing him, I drag him back for round two.

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I

shift in my seat as the limo takes Kaia and me to the NYB. The healing wound in my shoulder aches.

I rub my shoulder very gently through my black hooded sweatshirt. Kaia looks over, her eyes tightening on my discomfort.

“Are you sure you’re ready to come back?” she asks.

It takes everything in me not to tell her to fuck off. My mouth tugs downward and I glance out my window. “I’m fine. We have talked about this.”

She heaves a sigh, putting up her leggings-clad leg on the seat. “You’ve talked. The doctors think you should rest for another week.”

I grit my teeth. “I gave you a week of rest. You’re not getting any more out of me. I’m nearly insane already as it is.”

Kaia pulls a face at my words. “I’m just concerned about you. After all, you did stop a bullet that was meant for me with your body...”

I hold up a hand, silencing her. “While I appreciate you trying to mother me, Kaia, I have to insist that you quit. I don’t want to be infantilized. And I don’t think that nurturing others is very sweet.”

Kaia frowns. “I’m not infantilizing you, Calum. I’ll save that for my future children.”

I shoot her a sharp look. “You can’t be serious. You’re a ballerina. Children are not in your future for at least ten years.” I make a disgusted face. “If ever.”

Curiosity comes over her expression. “You don’t see yourself having kids?”

I snort. “No. And I don’t know what would change my mind, either.”

She gulps and looks away. “Oh.”

I glance at her. “What, did you expect me to be pressuring you to have kids? Have you met me? I’m a selfish bastard.”

She shrugs a shoulder, still looking away out her window. “We don’t really have to talk about it, Calum.”

I open my mouth to continue the conversation, but she is already rolling the partition down to speak to the driver. “Will you let me out here? I’ll walk the rest of the way.” She licks her lips and glances at me. “We might as well not let the company see us arrive together in your limousine. Right?”

I narrow my gaze on her face. “If that’s what you want.”

The limo pulls over to the curb and Kaia springs out of the car, slamming the door behind her. I stare after her, trying to figure out what exactly I’m being punished for.

Is it the no kids thing? I have no idea.

The driver drops me off at the front steps of the New York Ballet building. I climb them slowly, feeling every minute of my age as I push open the heavy glass of the front door.

I MAKE it up the stairs with a throbbing shoulder. Then I head straight for the dance studios, my mind tumbling over and over the thought of punching Bas squarely in his snoozy little nose.

By the time I find him, my mood has definitely curdled. Bas is dressed in sweats, sprawled out on the floor of one of the dance studios, stretching. He doesn’t even blink as I storm up to him.

“Who the fuck do you think you are? Hm? You go and talk to a reporter about me but you don’t even have the balls to say my name?” I shout.

Bas blinks, panning his gaze up to me slowly. “You’re upset that I told the reporter the truth?”

I grit my teeth. There are students in this room and they are looking between Bas and me. Making inferences, I’m sure.

“I think you’re a coward,” I grate out.

“And I think you’re so obvious. You come in here, demand to be taken seriously in the stage manager role, rip everyone up with your constant criticisms. And then you fuck one of the ballerinas. Tell me, did you decide to fuck Kaia during her audition? Or did that come later?”

“Don’t talk to me about Kaia.” I take a step towards him, my hands balling into fists. “I want to smash your face in right now. The only reason I’m holding back is because Kaia appears to like you.”

“Great.” He scoffs. “Just because you have money doesn’t mean you can just do whatever you want, Calum. I speak for not just myself, but for all the dancers. You need to find a replacement and leave.”

The last of my willpower drains away, leaving me ready to fight. Basil stands up, his body language indicating that this will not be his first brawl. I lick my lips and smile viciously.

“That’s it,” I growl, beckoning him closer. “Just try and hit me. See where that gets you, fuckhead.”

He squares up, circling me. “With pleasure.”

The door to the studio opens. Pretty little Kaia rushes in. “Hey, can I get the key to the shoe closet? Manon is locked—“

She stops mid-sentence, her gaze darting between me and Bas. “What’s going on?”

I drop my hands, shooting Bas a hard glance. “Bas was about to get his ass beat.”

“Yeah, you wish,” Bas snaps. He puts his hands down too. “I’m a brown belt in Krav Maja, asshole.”

I hold up a hand and shake my head at him, focusing on Kaia instead. “What’s the problem?”

Kaia’s gaze slides around the room. She scopes out the dancers huddled in the far corner. “Will one of you come with me? It seems like an emergency of some sort.”

“Show me.” Dropping my bag by the door, I give Bas a hard look. “We are not done here.”

He shrugs, his expression pinched. “Whatever you say, Calum.”

Huffing a little, I walk through the door the Kaia holds open. As soon as we are outside, I glance down at her. “Bas was being a dick.”

She tosses her hair. “I don’t care about that right now. You two are grownups. You’ll work it out some way. I came to grab you because Manon has locked herself in the pointe shoe room. She sounds...” Kaia screws up her face. “Distressed, to say the least.”

My mouth turns down as I follow Kaia to the little room, barely bigger than a closet. I’ve never seen the door closed actually... but it’s easy enough to press the code in the keypad.

I did insist on having the keypad locks, after all.

The door unlocks and I pull it open, exposing dual walls of nothing but different types, colors, and sizes of pointe shoe. At the far end of the small space, Manon is laying across a black leather sofa. Her dark hair is covering her face, but she's obviously sobbing.

She raises her head a few inches, takes us in, and cries even harder. "Just leave me alone!" she manages to wail.

I glance at Kaia with a shrug. "Are you satisfied now?"

Kaia rolls her eyes and rushes over to the other girl, kneeling beside the couch. "Manon? What's going on?"

Manon moans. "They've lost everything. Everything! Even what I was supposed to live on..."

Kaia pats Manon's shoulder tentatively. "Who has lost everything?"

Manon flips her dark hair back and sits up, clearly beside herself. "My family! My dad--" She stops, sobbing for a few seconds before continuing. "My father was arrested today for a financial scam. People—" She hiccups. "People are saying that he's the new Bernie Madoff. My mother... my mother called to say that she would leave him if there was a single cent to be had between them!"

"Oh Manon," Kaia says, exhaling. "That's terrible."

I shift my stance, checking the hallway behind me. A few interested dancers stand on the other side of the hallway, trying to listen discreetly.

I frown at them and they scurry away. Pulling the closet door closed behind me, I watch as Kaia consoles Manon. I'm skeptical at first.

I mean, I've witnessed Manon bullying Kaia on at least three occasions. Kaia is within her rights to walk away and tell everyone the news that Manon will soon be a pariah.

It's what I would do.

But Kaia is much sweeter than I could ever be. She sits next to Manon and pulls her into an awkward hug, murmuring small kindnesses in her ear.

Just seeing that display of compassion tugs at my heartstrings. It just reminds me that there is no one quite as good and kind as Kaia. It also makes me ponder how very different Kaia and I are. Really, it makes me realize that without my money, I would probably not even be in her league.

"Calum, would you call for a car? I think Manon needs to go home."

That sends Manon into a new fit of sobbing. I'm glad when I can step out of the room and dial my driver. As I tell him the situation, I am very

glad to have something to do that doesn't involve Manon's hot tears.

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*T*he sun has barely risen in the New York City sky when I step out of our building. I'm wearing jeans, a black band t-shirt, and a black peacoat to guard against the early morning wind. But as soon as my foot hits the cement, a blast of chilly air almost drives me back in the door.

"Noooo," I whine. "It's so freaking cold. Can't we just go back to bed?"

Calum is right behind me, dressed in jeans and a black fleece. The wind ruffles his hair as he glances at me with a tiny smirk on his perfect lips.

"No. We can go back to bed after this if we want to, though."

I shoot him a glare and cross my arms as he hustles me down the street. "This had better be good. You still haven't told me what we're doing so early."

Calum eyes me. "We're going to a bagel shop a few blocks from here."

I narrow my eyes on his face as I head down the eerily empty street. "I've never had a bagel that was worth getting up at five a.m. Actually, I am not sure that a big piece of bread even sounds that great. I cut carbs from my diet like a millennia ago."

He wraps his uninjured arm around my shoulders and pulls me close. "Isn't this what couples in love do in New York City? Get up early to scarf down a freshly boiled bagel?"

I shake my head at him, smiling ruefully. "Can we do it while staring into each other's eyes?"

"Absolutely," he says. "We should stuff ourselves with a bagel and a schmear. Or, hear me out... We just eat bagels and cream cheese until we are stuffed every single day. Maybe we can get pudgy together."

I grin at him. “You sweet talker. I can’t think of anymore more romantic than growing old and morbidly obese with you.”

He chuckles at that. “Come on, we’re almost there.”

We turn a corner and it’s obvious which place we are going to. Though the sun is just beginning to light the sky, there is already a line that’s ten people long outside a shop ahead.

“So there are other people that are crazy like you. Huh.” I purse my lips.

Calum gives me side eye as we get to the back of the line. “I can’t believe you’ve never done this before.”

I pull away from him, grabbing his hand and pulling it inside the warmth of my peacoat pocket. “I can’t believe you have. I mean, how are you so in shape and then you go and eat bagels all the time?”

He sighs. “I will just hit the gym a little harder than usual today. Besides, there is more to life than being thin.”

“Don’t tell my father that. He would definitely not agree.”

Calum squints. “Isn’t your dad overweight?”

I give a humorless chuckle. “Yes. Being lithe of limb is only a sought after quality in women, according to him. There is no arguing with that kind of ignorance.”

“Hmm.” His brow pulls down as we move up in the line. “And here I thought that family meant that you would be loved, regardless of your appearance.”

A startled laugh bursts from my chest. “Definitely not.”

He looks away for a second, mulling that over. Then he looks at me, his expression serious.

“I love the shape of your body and the way you move. But my feelings for you run deeper than that. I love you for just being you. I hope you know that.”

My heart flutters in my chest. I reach out and spread my free hand across his chest with a smile.

“Thank you. I feel the same way.”

He snorts. “I doubt that very much.”

My gaze turns quizzical. “If your body changes... so what?”

His mouth thins. “I was talking about my wealth. Without it, you probably wouldn’t have even given me a second glance.”

My heart thuds in my chest. My jaw drops.

“You think...” I shake my head and stomp my foot. “You think I care about your money? That’s hilariously wrong.”

His lips twist a little and he looks away, uncomfortable. I move around his body to see his expression clearly. “I’m serious, Calum. If you told me today that we only had the clothes on our backs, I would be fine with that. I love you. I love ballet. Those are the only two things I really need.”

He slides his gaze over to me, making direct and intense eye contact. “Yeah? You could be happy without being a billionaire’s girlfriend?”

I slide my hands around his neck, ignoring the line of waiting people that moves up without us. Right now, my eyes are on Calum’s. I press up on my tiptoes and steal a warm, delicious kiss from his lips.

“Does that answer your question?” I ask softly.

His lips curve upward with amusement as he settles his hands on my waist. “Yes, beauty. It really does.”

A gray haired lady wearing approximately ten layers of clothing comes up behind us. She points her finger to indicate us. “This right here is very sweet... but I need you two to move your asses. Spielman’s only makes hot bagels for the next half an hour.”

Calum rolls his eyes. “Thanks,” he tells the lady.

He turns my hips in his hands and pushes me forward. He leans down next to my ear. “I’m going to fuck you ten different ways to Sunday when we get home. Just be ready for that.”

I bite my lip, blushing and giggling. “You’re terrible.”

He chuckles, his breath hot on my ear. “You love me.”

After waiting in line a little more, Calum steps inside the shop to order. I hang outside because let’s be real, I’m still not nearly as invested in hot bagels as he clearly is.

Rolling my eyes, I step out of the shop. My phone buzzes and I look down at it for a few minutes, scrolling mindlessly through the text messages I’ve missed. I sort of zone out due to the early hour.

It’s not until a dark shape zooms into my peripheral vision that I even look up. When I do, I find myself staring my own father in the face. He looks haggard. He’s dressed in khakis and a polo shirt as always, but his clothes are wrinkled and his thinning hair is a mess as if he has recently been sleeping on it.

He grabs me by the wrist before I even have a chance to open my mouth. “Kaia. I knew it was you.”

My heart beat sounds in my throat. “What are you doing here? How did you find me?”

His face drops into a scowl. “Does that really matter? I'm your father. I'll always be able to find you, no matter where you go.”

I wrench my wrist from his grasp, anger bubbling up inside me. “You have to go. I don't even know why you're here in the first place. I can assure you though that there is nothing that you want here. You've tapped all of the resources that were available to you.”

He snorts through his nose. “Yeah right. You owe me. You'll always be indebted to me. That's the whole reason that people even have children.”

I give him a funny look, shaking my head. I look over my shoulder to see if I can make eye contact with Calum through the glass door. But it seems that he is nowhere to be found. I suppose that is only fair since Calum has done nothing but fight my battles for me for the last few months. I lick my lips and suck in a breath.

“Kaia, I'm talking to you!” my father growls.

Looking my father right in the eyes, I raise my chin.

“I don't know what kind of world you were brought up in. But I do know that the world I live in doesn't allow for you to treat me like this. I might be your daughter, but I am also a person. A human being. I'm not an endless well for you to draw from any time you get thirsty.”

My father runs his hand through his hair, looking distracted. “I need a hundred thousand dollars. And I need it right now.”

I can feel my face coloring. I shake my head and back up another inch. “I don't know what made you this way. But I'm telling you right now. There's nothing else coming to you. I've already given you everything that I have to give.”

His mouth twist. “And your boyfriend? What does he have to give? Because as far as I see it, I own everything that he has. After all, I gave him you.”

I scrunch my face up just as I hear the bell tinkling on the door behind me. I squint over my shoulder and Calum is suddenly there, his eyes hardening as he takes in my father's stance.

“Get away from her.” He steps forward, his hands curling into fists. “If you had any sense at all, you'd be turning around and heading down the street by now. I don't want to fight you but I won't let you lay your hands on Kaia again. This is the end of the line.”

My father scoffed. “You don’t tell me what to do. Just because you have money—“

Calum cuts him off quickly. “Let me tell you something very important. Listen carefully. If I ever see you again. If I ever hear from you again. If Kaia is ever bothered by thoughts of you again, I will *end* you. This is my last fucking warning. After this, you will disappear and never be heard from again.”

My dad sneers at him. “Yeah? I don’t believe you. You’re full of shit.”

Calum drops the bag of bagels that he was holding and as fast as lightning, he is on my father. A quick couple of punches, left and then right, faster than I can even process what’s happening.

My dad’s on the ground just that quickly. Blood is seeping out of his nose and he keens, the sound seeping from his mouth and raising hairs on the back of my neck.

“What the fuck?” he mutters.

Calum calmly picks up the rolled up paper bag of bagels and extends his hand out to me. He looks me in the eye, clearly trying to keep himself in check. “Ready to go?”

I nod, swallowing against the huge lump of emotion that threatens to burst out of my mouth. “Yes.”

“You can’t just punch me and then run off!” My father howls. “You won’t get away with this! You both just two-bit hustlers trying to take advantage of me...”

I don’t look back. As Calum leads me away, my eyes are only for him. Though my heart beats frantically, there is no sadness in me whatsoever.

He squeezes my hand. “It’s okay, beauty. It’ll be okay. We’ll be out of his sight in less than a minute.”

I pull him to a stop. Reaching up to his neck, I press up on my toes and give him a hard kiss. Sweet, hot, searing. A claiming kiss, a branding one.

He is mine.

When I release Calum from my grip, he slides his hand around my waist and urges me onward. But he does lean his head closer to mine, whispering in my ear.

“Later,” he says. “Let’s get out of here first.”

I nod, trying to respect this pitfall of a man who has named himself my protector. He grips my hand again and walks me down the street.

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“Okay, everyone? Can we all come to the center of the room for a minute?” Bas shouts.

I turn around in the dance studio, making eye contact with Ella as we both head over across the hardwood floors. Bas is standing in the middle of the room with an expectant expression on his face. He puts his hands on his hips and swings his gaze around the room.

“All right. I know that a lot of you have been whispering about what you think the fall ballet should be. I know traditionally we have usually done a lighter ballet which will leads us into doing the Nutcracker at Christmas. But I think that we need to expand our resume a little bit. Test our boundaries. So that's why I think that we should do a modern dance interpretation of Romeo and Juliet.”

Immediately, everyone starts whispering to the ballerinas beside them. But Bas claps his hands together and ends the chatter.

“Roles will be selected based on talent. I will email the Alexander version of the ballet to all of you. Study it. Prepare yourselves. We will rehearse scenes four and five nonstop for the next two weeks. At that point, I will hold rehearsals and roles will be handed out.” He pauses, arching a brow as he looks around the room. “There is no room in this company for good enough. No room for coasting. There is only room for excellence and showmanship. Are we all on the same page about that?”

A smattering of people agree with him out loud. The rest of us, including myself and Ella, look at each other with a great deal of uncertainty.

Bas isn't worried about our feelings though. He raises his hands and shoos us back to our barres. "Go on. Back to where you were. Starting with this class, we're going to work through the routines very slowly. Step-by-step..."

I blow out a breath. "Welcome back to the barre."

Ella arches a brow in my general direction but I just shake my head.

"This week... I swear, God is testing me."

Ella giggles a little and takes her place beside me at the barre. For the next hour or so, we go through a series of stretches and then do a few combinations. Nothing that raises my heart rate much, honestly.

I raise my arms and take my place in line to execute an easy combination. A few pirouettes finished with a grand jete. As soon as I finish, I turn to watch Ella. But she only makes it through one move before I hear the most dreaded sound in the entire ballet studio.

As Ella begins her first pirouette, a loud snap echoes through the whole studio.

I get chills at that sound. Every time I've heard that exact sound, it's been a career ender for someone.

I rush over and call her name. "Ella? Ella!"

She is already crying by the time I kneel next to her. She clutches her ankle. I reach out to touch her ankle with gentle fingers and she howls from the slightest touch of my fingers against the back of her foot. On a light skinned dancer sometimes you can tell a tendon injury just from a sudden and spreading bruise. But Ella's dark skin and reaction to my touch makes me think i should just let the professionals handle it.

Bas pushes several dancers out of the way and kneels down on the other side of Ella. "Are you okay?"

"Call a doctor!" Ella shouts.

His gaze travels down to her leg and he visibly swallows. "Okay. Okay. I need some help, people!"

Bas turns his head and zeros in on a student. "Melanie, can you call 911 please? And Betsy, can you run down to the office and let whoever is in there know that we have a medical emergency?"

Ella starts whimpering out loud. I grab her arm, sliding my hand down to hers. She looks at me, her brown eyes wide with pain and shock.

"Why? Why me?" She whimpers through her tears. "It really hurts..."

I can only grip her arm and mutter that she is going to be okay. I carefully pet her head and shoulder until help finally arrives.

By the time that the ambulance crew is lifting her onto a stretcher, her leg is swollen so badly around the back of her ankle that it looks like there is a grapefruit lodged beneath her slick pink tights. As the ambulance crew leaves with her, I make sure to tell them to take her to the best hospital in the area. I rush after them with Bas right on my tail.

He looks over at me, his eyes filled with concern. “Do you want a ride? I’m going over to make sure that everything is taken care of...”

I nod. “Yeah, that sounds like a good idea...”

It’s only when I am getting out of the taxi that Bas hailed that I realize that I’m still wearing my ballet slippers. I hurry to the hospital entrance and look around, trying to decide if my best option is just to wear this pair of shoes out. I guess I don’t have much of a choice, do I?

I try to call Calum, but I get his voicemail several times. That just amps up the frustration and worry that lie just beneath my skin.

I don’t get a chance to see Ella at the hospital before they rush her into surgery. Bas brings me a pair of hospital flip-flops which I take with a sad smile. He and I wait together, holding our breath.

“Did you talk to Calum?” he asks.

I shrug a shoulder. “He’s not answering. I think he and his brother are supposed to be going out on a boat or something today. I seem to remember him saying that he probably won’t be available... I’m glad that Ella is in surgery and not me.”

My mouth turns down at the corners in a slight frown.

Bas nods, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Yeah,” he sighs. “I saw her injury though. It didn’t look pretty. It looked like something that ends careers.”

“Fuck,” I mutter. “I don’t want to hear that.”

“Are you here for Ella Smith?” A nurse asks.

We both look up and say yes at the same time. Shooting to our feet, we follow the nurse as she leads us down the hall to a private room.

As the nurse ushers us into the room, I see Ella propped up on a bed on one side of the room, a doctor in a long white coat standing at the end of the bed. The doctor sweeps back a lock of her long blonde hair, giving us a staid smile as she continues speaking with Ella.

"No, I'm afraid that probably won't be possible." The doctor looks at us, narrowing her gaze.

Ella pushes herself up, groggily locking gazes with me. "Dr. Hart is just telling me my prognosis." She sniffs a little. "She's telling me how I won't dance again."

My eyes widen and I look to the doctor. "Is that true? She's a ballerina by trade. We all are."

Bas clears his throat. "Yes, is it true?"

The doctor gives us the same practiced smile. "I was just telling Ella that a lot remains to be seen. But after this type of injury, it is not common for professional dancers to return to the stage. After an Achilles tendon injury like this one, where the tendon stretches and snaps, it is unlikely that the injured party ever regains full use again. Not to the level of a professional dancer, anyway."

I walk over to the bed and grip Ella's hand, looking down at her. Tears well up in her eyes but she looks away, her throat working.

"I see," is all she has to say.

"What about physical therapy?" I ask. "I mean, that can't be it for her career. She will dance again eventually. Right?"

I look to Bas and Dr. Hart for confirmation. But I don't see the confidence and security that I am looking for mirrored in either of their gazes. Instead, I see a sadness and a kind of surety there, something that I couldn't hope to see.

Ella squeezes my hand hard. I swallow and return my gaze to hers. Her brown eyes are full of unshed tears.

"That's it," she whispers to me. "Can you believe it? That was my last practice with the New York Ballet."

Dr. Hart clears her throat. "Like I said before, we will have to see. Every case is unique."

Patting the end of the bed, she leaves the room.

I take a deep breath and let it out, uncertain. Ella begins to cry. Bas comes around to the other side of Ella's bed, squeezing her fingers. He looks down at Ella's face. When he speaks, his words are quiet, nearly mournful.

"I'm so sorry that this happened to you. I'm at rather a loss for words."

Ella nods miserably. Bas pats her hand and steps back.

“I’ll be right back. I should let everyone back at the ballet no that Ella made it through surgery.” He retreats out of the room, leaving me alone with Ella.

I sit down on the bed beside her. She is silent for a long time. She doesn't look at me but she does grip my hands.

“Ella,” I say softly.

She looks at me. I can see the heavy-heartedness in her gaze.

“Nothing is for certain. You can't despair. Not yet. Not ever, really.”

She blows out a breath. But before she can say anything, a nurse comes in.

“Would you like more some pain medication?”

Ella nods. “Yes please.”

While Ella is dealing with the nurse, I slip out and shoot a message to Calum, updating him on Ella's condition. When I head back in the room, Ella has fallen into a light doze.

*S*quinting out across the water, I spread my legs and plant them firmly. The water makes the floor beneath my feet rock rhythmically. I can hear the ropes creaking, the deck hands calling to one another, the sound of the wind whipping around my head. I shade my eyes against the sun and look out over the seemingly endless sea.

“I could almost see myself leaving everything behind and just taking Kaia on a year-long trip around the world on one of these. Don't you think?”

I turn to look at Lucas and find him gripping the boats railing with both hands. He doesn't exactly look miserable but he doesn't look comfortable either. His frown tells me exactly what he thinks about that plan.

“I don't think that yachting is really my forte,” he admits. “I didn't know until we stepped on this boat though.”

I can't help but grin at him. “No, I guess not. I can't say that I knew before we came though.”

Lucas sighs. “Can we go sit down at least?

I chuckle and nod. “We can. I just wanted to stand at the front of the boat. What's that called, the helm?”

He shoots me a look out of the corner of his eye as he follows my footsteps back towards the shaded area where we were sitting. “I think the helm is where you steer the boat.”

I shoot him glare over my shoulder and collapse onto a very expensive white couch. My brother sits much more delicately, perching himself on a matching white chair.

“Now I think I have to buy one of these boats. Or is it a yacht? Actually, I don't know the terminology about that either.”

Lucas picks up his glass of soda water and takes a slow sip. “Maybe you have to be a billionaire in your own right to stand on one of these things and not feel like you are being turned inside out.”

I snort. “You're a billionaire in your own right by now. Right?”

He shrugs a shoulder and shakes his head. “I definitely don't feel like one right now. I feel like I'm going to puke at any moment.”

I pick up my own glass of whiskey, swirling the couple cubes of ice around in it. I look out over the ocean again and feel more settled than I've ever felt in my whole life. With Kaia at my side, I'm pretty sure I could just live my whole life and never leave this boat. It has some possibilities, for sure.

I sit back and enjoy the sun on my skin. Lucas leans forward in his chair, his expression pinching.

“What are we doing out here, Calum? I mean, other than finding out which one of us was born to be a pirate.”

A rumble of laughter leaves my chest. “I thought it might be nice to get away from the city while we talk about our plans for what is next.”

“Could you be any more vague than that?” My brother grousing. “What you mean, what's next. In life? For the company? For you and Kaia?”

I sip my whiskey and think about how to answer his question. “I feel like they are one in the same. I feel like answering the question of what is next for myself and Kaia, what is next in life... that answers the question of what is next for the company. Doesn't it?”

Lucas looks exasperated. “I don't know. That's why we are here, I guess.”

I gesture to him, flopping my hand over and back a few times. “Nothing critical is going to be decided today. This is just a conversation that will probably lead to another conversation. I just want to make sure that you don't feel left behind when I leave the company.”

His eyebrows shoot up. “Leave the company? What you mean?”

I answer him by shooting him a look. “What do you think I mean? I think we both have known for a while now that my time with the company is almost up.”

“I feel like you could've told me that.” He shoots a hard look out across the water, squinting into the sun.

I give him humorless laugh. “I am telling you, Lucas. That's what I'm trying to do, at least. I'm not springing anything on you. I'm not leaving the company tomorrow. But you done a great job running everything. Now it's time for me to step away. What that will look like exactly, I don't know...”

“Is this because of Kaia?” he asks.

I purse my lips and look at him for half a minute. “It's partially because of Kaia, yes. I want to spend more time with her. When she gets time off from working at the ballet company, I want to take her someplace. Maybe Rio. Maybe the Greek islands. Maybe both of those places. I don't know. But I think the first step to being unmoored is going to be cutting the tethers I created for myself here.” I look at him frankly. “You don't need me. You haven't needed me this entire time that I've been working with the ballet company. Hell, before that even.”

He shakes his head. “I'm always going to need you, Calum.”

“And you'll always have me. I'm always here. I'm as far away as the time it takes to dial a phone. But you don't need me as the face of the company anymore. You can take it in a different direction or make investments that I don't have to give my rubber stamp of approval on. Whatever you want.”

He looks down into his glass, brooding silently. Lucas stays quiet for a solid minute and I lean back with a sigh.

“I'm not going anywhere. You know that. I don't want you to think that just because I am leaving the company that I'm going to be leaving you.”

He looks up at me, his frosty blue gaze so like my own. “Are you sure?”

I nod slowly. “Yep. Completely and absolutely sure. This is really just finishing what I already started. Transferring the rest of the company into your name. Divesting however much money I think I will need for the next few years.” I shrug. “That's it. Sign some documents, start a new page.”

Lucas nods very slowly, clearly digesting what I have told him. “Okay.”

I reuse my eyebrows at him. “Okay?”

He shrugs and nods again. “I won't stand in your way if that's what you honestly want to do. I can't say I blame you at all. You've found someone that makes you happy, apparently so...”

I squint at him. “One day, I'm going to marry her.”

Lucas's lips lift. “I told you that months ago. I saw the way that you looked at her and I just knew. So there is nothing that is too surprising there.”

I wrinkled my nose. “Kaia says that she wants kids. Which is a complete dealbreaker for me.”

He groans. “Why? I mean, you already have everything you've ever wanted. Now that you found each other you can just go live your fairytale lives in your castle in the sky or whatever...”

I chuckle. “I said the same thing to her. I mean, I use less ridiculous language. But yeah, that's exactly what I said.”

Lucas eyes me. “What about Anita?”

Just the sound of her name makes my heart start pitter-pattering against my ribs. “What about her?” My mouth twists bitterly. “I assume that you are still giving her a place to live?”

His cheeks redden very slightly. He nods. “I am. I mean, not because she deserves that. After what you told me... About how you guys... How she demanded sex in return for the luxury we lived in...”

I clear my throat and shift in my seat, looking away. “Yeah, I know exactly what I said to you.”

“Right.” He purses his lips, seeming to consider his words carefully. “So after you said what you said, I was going to put her out on the street. And then the doctor came to me with a terminal diagnosis.”

I blink a few times. “Terminal? Are you sure that Anita didn't just pay the doctor to say that she was really sick? That sounds like something Anita would enjoy.”

Lucas shakes his head. “I'm pretty god damn sure, Callum. I mean, I can tell. Anita really looks sick. She has lost weight, like a lot of weight. She barely eats and sleeps all the time, according to her caretakers. And I have had four doctors come and examine her, for completely separate opinions. They all gave me the same diagnosis. Anita has very little time left.”

His voice breaks on the last word. I look over to him, realizing that my own hatred of Anita hasn't necessarily affected Lucas's relationship with her. To him, she is still the same woman that cared for him, the woman that used to buy him ice cream sundaes and help him with his homework.

I put down my tumbler of whiskey and reach out across the space between us. Patting his knee awkwardly, I narrow my eyes on his face.

“I'm sorry. I know that she meant a lot to you. Anita wasn't great to me but she always seemed really genuinely fond of you.”

He nods, his expression despondent for a long moment. “Anita did give us a home. But if what you say is true, and I believe you of course, then it was a high price for you to pay. I wish...” He goes quiet for a moment. “I wish I’d known.”

I sit back in my chair, my mouth twisting to one side. “Would that have helped? Or would it have just made things worse for both of us?”

He looks up at me, anger flashing across his expression. “I deserved to know. I lived my entire life thinking that I grew up in a certain kind of setting. And it turns out that I grew up in what amounts to a brothel, essentially. It’s not right. It’s not the same. And I’ve been making all these excuses and giving her all this money that she didn’t deserve.”

I shrug my shoulders. “What am I supposed to say? I’m sorry that I didn’t tell you sooner but...”

He cuts me off shaking his head violently. “No. I mean, I wish things had been different. I wish that Anita had never... touched you... But I can’t be mad at you over something that happened when we were kids. Literally, we were kids.”

He sounds so angry when he says that word, *kids*. I can’t do anything but nod and look at the floor with a bitter expression.

“I know. I know, it sucks.”

“I mean, you didn’t ask for it, I’m guessing. Right?” He meets my gaze this time.

My mouth works for a second. I suck in a breath and shake my head. “No.”

I let that word fall between us. He nods, frowning.

I thought not. He exhales audibly. “Anita is on her deathbed. Or nearly there. The doctors say that she has maybe a week, maybe less. Do you want me to tell her anything for you?”

The thought that she is going to be allowed to have her adopted son, her golden child at her side as she dies really cuts me deep. I shake my head violently, grabbing my whiskey and downing the rest of it.

“No. I think that Anita has taken all of the wind out of my sails. I don’t want to talk about her anymore. Not today, anyway.”

Lucas hangs his head. “I understand. I did I really do.”

Balancing myself for a second, I grab my glass and stand up. “I’m getting get a refill. Do you need anything?”

Lucas can’t even meet my eyes as he shakes her head. “No, I’m good.”

I walk toward the back of the boat, gripping the glass so tightly that I am sure that it will break. In my head, Anita laughs, that same husky deep throated laugh of my teen years. Such a poisoned pill that she gave me.

I shake my head and walk on, my emotions threatening to roil over.

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Calum wakes me in the middle of the night, pressing himself against my back. I roll over and crack an eye open, giving him a perplexed look.

“Are you okay?”

He kisses me, hard and deep, dominating me. He bites my lower lip and hisses. “I need you, Kaia. Come on.”

Barely awake, I try to kiss him back.

Calum is everywhere all at once, his calloused fingers touching my shoulders and my breasts, his hips pinning mine against the bed. I throw my head back as he traces his lips down the column of my neck to the firm lines of my collarbone.

His hand are impatient as he sits me up and readjusts me on the bed. He cups my cheek for a moment and I turn my head, kissing his hand. He rubs his thumb along my lips.

Then I touch his hand, pushing his thumb into my mouth. I suck on it just a little, maintaining eye contact. His brow arches but he also bites his lower lip.

“Fuck,” he grits out. “You like that, beauty? You want to suck my cock?”

I release his thumb from my mouth and lick my lips. “I want to taste you so badly. I want to make you lose control. The question is, can you handle it?”

Calum looks amused. “I think you’re ready.”

Reaching down between our bodies, I find the hard outline of his cock in his pants. I press my hand against it while I moan. “Give it to me, baby. I

want your cock in my mouth.”

He grits his teeth. “Get on your knees if you want it so bad.”

He moves back and I scramble down to the floor. I get on my knees and look up at him, my heart pounding. He smirks as he comes to stand directly in front of me. He’s buck naked and his erection juts out proudly, long and pink and thick.

I lick my lips. I was just talking smack, trying to get my boyfriend excited. But now I want to see what he can handle.

He shifts his hips and runs his hand over his cock, circling it at its base and thrusting. The crown of his cock touches my bottom lip.

“Mmm, beauty,” he utters. “I can’t wait until I fill up your throat with my cum.”

Then he runs his thumb over my mouth again.

I part my lips and run my tongue over the blunt crown of his cock.

He hisses. “Open your mouth, beauty. Stick out your tongue for me.”

Making eye contact with him, I follow his instructions obediently. He fists his cock and guides it to my lips. I kiss his cock gently, making eye contact with him. The last time we did this, looking at him gave me instant feedback and so I stare at him as much as possible.

Tilting my head to the side, I run my tongue against the hot skin of his cock. Calum closes his eyes briefly and exhales softly. He tastes earthy and very male as I keep licking his cock.

He motions for me to place my hand at the base of his cock. “Here. You can put your hand right there. God, fuck!” He closes his eyes oh so briefly. “Yeah, just like that, baby.”

I slowly take his cock into my mouth. I can only take an inch at a time and I watch his facial expressions closely. He bites his lip a lot and struggles to keep his eyes open.

“Fuck. That’s good. Remember to be careful with your teeth. Use your lips to cover them.”

I do just as he says, taking the whole crown in my mouth. His gaze is laser focused on me as I bob up and down on it, taking in a few inches and then more and more of his glorious, earthy tasting cock.

Calum shifts his stance and brings his hands up to rest on the back of my head. He groans a little and then looks down at me.

“God, you are so fucking perfect. Fuck!”

He thrusts once and his thick cock hits the back of my throat. I gag, my eyes watering.

He withdraws immediately. “Sorry.”

I wipe away tears, shaking my head. “You didn’t have to stop.”

He smirks. “I want you to lie on the bed, on your back, your head facing me. Let your head dangle off the bed a little bit.”

My eyebrows lift but I hurry to do as he demands. When I’m in position, he approaches the end of the bed and his cock touches my lips. I raise a hand to fondle his balls and he groans.

“You’re a natural, I swear,” he hisses.

I look up at him and he bites his lip, thrusting into my mouth. For a split second, he slides his cock down my tongue and into the back of my mouth. I tense up, my eyes widening.

His eyes bore into mine. “Fuck, beauty. You’re so fucking hot. Relax your throat for me, if you can.”

He thrusts again and this time I choke. “God damn. I love watching you while you choke on my fucking cock. Can I start moving?”

I slurp, my saliva already making this a wet, messy affair. Calum certainly doesn’t seem to mind though so I just nod, my mouth full of his dick.

Calum looks me in the eye and thrusts deep. My eyes start watering. I gag a little, my hands automatically coming up to grip his hips and pull him away.

He grabs one of my hands and thrusts into my throat again. He also grabs at my breast. “Trust me. Trust me, Kaia.”

I drop my hands to my sides and look up at him, tears running down my face.

“God,” he utters, his eyes slipping halfway closed. “Your throat is almost as good as your pussy, beauty. It’s so hot and wet. And when you gag on my cock, it clamps down tighter than anything else...”

He thrusts again, his cock staying in my throat for long enough that I have trouble breathing. I flex with fingers, burying my nails into the sensitive flesh on his hip. My action only seems to spur him on.

“I’m going to come,” he says. “Fuck, Kaia...”

His hips pump a few more times and he jerks, his cock twitching. I feel the salty slither of hot cum in my mouth and throat. It overwhelms my senses and I gag again, but I keep my tongue stuck out and my throat open.

I'm determined to make this memorable for him.

"Fuck, baby," he says, slowing down. He withdraws from my mouth and I swallow his cum, licking my lips after.

He looks down at me, his eyes full of unnamed emotions. "Do you have any idea how amazing that was? Watching you swallow my cum..."

I smile, still catching my breath. Calum pulls me to my feet, kissing me thoroughly. Then he wraps his arms around me and walks me back toward the bed.

"Fuck," he mutters again, looking at my breasts. "You look so beautiful right now. You already sucked my cock. Now the rest of your body deserves attention."

My hard pink nipples beg for his touch, for him to taste them. My whole body tingles in anticipation of his mouth on my skin.

He puts his hands on my breasts, pushing them together, licking and kissing them both. My back bows, thrusting my nipples out and pushing my head back. I feel that familiar connection in my body, between my neck and my breasts, my nipples and my pussy.

I roll my hips against his, my mouth opening to release a soft moan.

I push eagerly onward, rolling my hips again. Calum has what I lack.

"Fuck. I want you. I want your cock," I gasp. "Don't make me beg for it."

He groans, looking at me. "Fuck, beauty. I've never wanted anyone like I want you," he grits out. "I need your pussy clamped around my fucking dick. I love the way your pussy spasms around my cock when you come. I need to hear you calling out my name."

His gaze is direct and scorching. He is a ravenous fire, threatening to burn me alive. And I am the kindling, stacked and ready, welcoming his spark to my dry tinder. We are so very close to combusting.

"I'm ready," I whisper, writhing against his body. "I'm wet. I'm waiting for you. This pussy is yours, Calum. I am yours for the taking."

His fingers tremble as he slides his hand down my side. I feel so desired, so wanted. And in return, I need him like I need the next breath I pull into my lungs.

I slip my hands down the strong muscles of his lower back and ass, pulling him against my body again. I push up on my tiptoes to kiss him again.

Our tongues dance for several beats.

He frames my breasts with his touch, then slips one of his hands down my ribs, down my belly, to run his fingers along the cleft of my pussy. I close my eyes and moan as he probes the folds of my pussy.

I hiss, sucking in a breath. I part my legs as much as I can, moaning his name.

“Calum... oh fuck...” I writhe against him.

“Oh, beauty,” he whispers, voice gone to gravel. “Spread your thighs apart and let me look at you. You’re so god damn beautiful that it hurts me sometimes.”

He moves back and I spend my legs wide, eager to feel his touch. I’m so fucking wet right now that I could die.

Dropping my head and moving a couple of inches further back on the bed, I moan as his clever fingers find my clit.

“That’s it,” he coaxes, looking down. He puts a little space between our bodies, urging me onward. “Spread your knees wide for me. Show me how good of a girl you can be.”

Calum puts two fingers in his mouth, then drops those fingers down to massage my clit. It feels so damned good, like I’m stretching and reaching for something explosive that is just outside of my grasp. He looks deep in my eyes and controls me with his touch, so that I’m spread open and wet, my heart pounding.

My hips buck against his touch and he chuckles. “Easy, beauty. Let me do all the work.”

I lean back a little, biting my lip and staring at him like he’s a whole damned meal and I’m starving. He rubs my clit with lazy fingers and I quiver, moaning at the sensation.

Calum gets this little smirk on his lips as he looks at me.

“What?” I ask. The way he’s looking at me, like I’m a priceless object and he’s a cat burglar... it’s definitely making me blush.

His smile widens just bit. His fingers dip from my clit to my core, circling and teasing.

“I’m just watching you. Waiting to see you break apart and unravel. I want to memorize every second of it.” He slides one finger into my core, lighting me up from the inside.

“Ah!” I gasp. “That feels so good, Calum.”

He sinks down to his knees. My thighs tense and my knees start to close, but he tuts at me. “Stop. You know that you want to feel my tongue

circling around your clit. Don't fight it."

"Fuck," I groan, gripping the sheets. "Hearing you talk about what you're going to do to me sets me on fire, Calum."

Pulling both hands out to push my knees wide again, Calum starts kissing the inside of my thigh, making a clear path to my pussy. I squirm, an aching anticipation for what I know is coming.

I can feel the excitement building, feel myself growing hotter and wetter every second. His nose tickles the inside of my thigh.

I can't help the moan that escapes my lips when he parts my pussy lips with two fingers, blowing delicately on the too-needy flesh he finds there.

My back arches. I feel like I'm already on the edge and he hasn't even touched me yet.

As he slowly kisses my pussy, I hold my breath and bury my fingers in his hair. When his tongue circles my clit, a moan bursts from my throat.

"Oh god," I say. "Calum, your tongue feels like magic."

He sets up a rhythm, licking and sucking, making me as hot as fire. It feels good to rock my hips against his mouth, to whisper yes when he hits the right spot, to throw my head back and let soft sounds leave my throat.

All the while, he keeps leading me down a path, driving me wilder and wilder with desire, until...

I climax suddenly, violently. Choking, I feel the vibrations deep within my body ripple out to my breasts, my collarbone, my legs, my fingertips, my toes. Calum seems to know how to help me ride out my orgasm, slowing but not stopping his tongue as I come.

"Fuck!" I say. "Calum..."

He is already kissing his way up my body. I turn my flushed face up to him, offering him my mouth.

He takes it greedily, his breath tasting deep and earthy and charged. My own exotic taste. I recognize it by now.

His hands are everywhere, sliding from my shoulders down to grab my ass, then back up to my breasts. Although I just orgasmed, already I can feel my body preparing for more.

"How?" I ask.

He drops a kiss to my shoulder. "How what, beauty?"

I grip his shoulders. "How can I possibly want more? I need more, even though I've just orgasmed."

He laughs against my skin. “That’s because you are perfect for me, beauty. Your body just knows what I want.”

Kissing him desperately, I try encourage him on with my body. I roll my hips against his, grabbing his ass. I cling to his shoulders with one arm as I fumble with his pants with the other, smoothing my fingers down his back to his bare ass.

Calum leans down and kisses me passionately. He pushes me back on the bed more, then takes his cock from my grip and presses the blunt tip against the inside of my thigh. I pull him in with my legs, making him readjust a little until he settles the tip of his length against my slippery core. We both groan in unison as he pushes inside, stretching me out with each inch.

I grip his shoulders, my nails digging into his flesh. His brow furrows in concentration as he works his length all the way in. We both groan at the sensation of my pussy adjusting to his huge cock; being so snugly fit together feels so fucking right.

“Fuck,” he murmurs. “You are so god damn tight, Kaia.”

I try to thrust my hips, eager for more. “I swear, if you don’t fuck me right this second, I’m going to die.”

Calum smirks and starts slow, slowly pumping his cock in and out of me. I start to feel ripples of pleasure as he rocks against me, the sound of his cock filling my wet pussy filtering into the room.

Calum takes my breast in one hand, plucking at the nipple. I start to move in time with him, rolling my hips. Little licks of flame start to unfurl themselves deep inside of me, stealing my breath away.

“Ohh,” I moan. Tossing my head back, I meet his cautious thrusts. He’s being careful with me, but I don’t want that. “I want... *more*. Fuck me harder, Calum.”

He looks down at me, a fierce look in his eyes. I’m unsure what I’ve unleashed in him, more beast than man. But at the same time, I am moving closer to the edge. It won’t take much to make me come.

It feels unbelievably good to move my hips in time with each thrust. I focus on that, letting my eyes drift closed, my fingers reaching for my own nipple. Calum groans and pushes my hand aside.

He shifts our positions, creating a little space between our bodies. I hate that, until he slips his hand down between us and finds the cleft of my pussy.

He brushes my clit, the sensation like a live wire. I suddenly feel electrified, moaning and clutching at his shoulders.

“Fuck!” I cry. “Calum... jesus!”

He rams his cock home, punctuating each thrust by stroking my clit.

“You like this, beauty?” he whispers. “Show me how much of a good girl you can be. Come for me, right now.”

“Calum... I...”

Suddenly, I’m falling down a deep, dark crevasse, seizing up, my whole body shaking and clamping down. Feeling a million tiny jolts of sensation overwhelming my entire system, all at once. My pussy convulses, spasming around his cock.

I lose track of time and space for nearly a minutes, When I come back down to reality, I open my eyes and keep my hips moving, trying desperately to breathe. He hammers his cock home at a blistering pace, his movements freezes as he approaches his own peak.

“Yes. Look at me!” he demands.

Mouth open, eyes glued to his, I can only try to drag in each breath.

“Tell me who you belong to, Kaia!” Calum roars, thrusting into me.

I barely have the breath to answer. “You, Calum. I belong to you. Always and only you.”

“Fuck!” he cries out. “You’re making me come...”

He thrusts unbelievably hard a half dozen times. I feel him coming, feel his cock twitching. The look on his face is one of equal torment and bliss, lasting for half a minute at least. I can only turn my lips up to his once more.

Calum leans down and cups my jaw, kissing me slowly, tenderly. We both struggle for breath as we come down together.

I stand in the bedroom of Callum's luxury apartment, my mouth twisting with disappointment. I try to pull my jeans a little tighter, practically cutting off my circulation to button them. I manage to do up the button but they are so tight that I feel like I have a little gut. Making a frustrated sound, I walk into the bathroom and pull up my shirt, checking myself out in the full-length mirror.

Yup. That's it. I have a gut.

"What the fuck?" I wonder aloud.

I've never had a gut. And suddenly I have a little pooch right here. I push my stomach out and make my gut exaggerated. Not that it really needs it...

"It's gotta be the fucking bagels," I mutter.

Unbuttoning my jeans, I strip them off and replace them with my friendly black cotton leggings, as stretchy as you please. Then I storm into the kitchen, rip open the freezer, and pull out the bag of leftover bagels. This is the only thing that I can think of that has changed recently.

I've been sneaking a little piece of bagel and a little bit of cream cheese every now and then ever since Calum brought them home. But no more. I toss the bag in the trash and then toss the trash bag into the wall chute in the laundry room where the trash usually goes.

I didn't think that I was doing so much damage to my petite figure by eating a bagel every once in a while. But it's apparent that I have.

I head to the ballet shortly after that, still steaming over my weight. Add in the fact that Ella still isn't there during my rehearsal and it all adds up to a

pretty crummy day all around. I work out hard but when I am done, I'm so ravenous that I stop at the kebab cart outside of the NYB.

Not the healthiest choice, certainly. But a fresh piping hot chicken kebab really hits the spot on my ride back from work.

When I get home, I find Calum sipping his whiskey in his office. I avoid him entirely because I'm in such a bad mood. There's nothing that Calum could do or say to lighten it.

Except he sees me and follows me into the bedroom. He seems oblivious to my mood which is lucky for him. When I am changing, he slips in the walk in closet door behind me and ogles me. I shoot a glare at him.

"I'm warning you," I say. "I had the worst day. So I am not responsible for my actions if I chew you out."

Calum's lips twitch. He doesn't listen, of course. Instead he corners me, holding his big arms out until I back up against the wall. He is just shy of pressing his whole body up against mine, the barest inch from full body contact. He cocks an eyebrow and I wrinkle my nose.

"Must you?" I ask. "I still haven't even showered."

He looks at me with the same humor reflected in his eyes as in his facial expression. "Now that you said so, I think I must."

I let out an exaggerated sigh. He takes that for a sign of my giving in and presses his hard body up against my small, soft one. He cups my cheek and turns my face up to him, where his lips are waiting for mine. I sigh into the kiss but my body does relax into his. It's more of a reflex than anything else but I'm glad of it.

He molds his hands over my torso and sighs.

"Have I told you lately that I like the shape of you? I just love this..."

He draws his hands down my arms and rib cage to my hips, indicating my body.

My cheeks instantly flood with heat. "My shape? If anything, I am getting fat. Don't encourage me."

His mouth twitches with humor. "Whatever you're doing, I like it. You seem a little less like you're going to blow away if a strong breeze starts to blow."

My expression contorts and I pull out of his arms, hurt by his words. "I just have to eat better. Work out a little more. Then I'll be back in fighting shape."

“Are you even listening to me right now? Listen, you know that I am all for the athlete body. You know that I know that ballerinas run thinner than most people. I would say that I am pretty much an expert, wouldn’t you?”

Feeling insecure, I pull on a dark oversized coat. “I think you are a little biased. I think you have let love blind you to the truth. And the truth is, I’m fat.”

He shakes his head and rolls his eyes. “You are tougher on yourself than you need to be. This career lends itself to disordered eating...”

“I can only be a ballerina for a few short years. And that’s if I don’t get hurt. I have worked all my life to get to this very point. And I’m not about to let a few bagels stand between me and being successful.”

Calum sighs. “I don’t like it when you start getting bony. I worry about you.”

“And I worry about being judged by my looks. It’s not just a given that I will excel at this job. It’s especially not obvious that I am just so talented that critics will overlook my physical flaws. Quite the opposite, actually.”

He lifts single shoulder in a shrug. “I’m just saying that it’s not all about your weight. You have a lot more to offer than being thin as a rail.”

“Yes, well. You should really save this conversation for years from now. When I am getting really fat.”

His lips twitch. “Are you planning on getting pregnant and popping out half a dozen babies or something?”

I give him a sharp glare. “You make it sound like pregnancy is bad.”

Calum spreads his hands wide and makes a funny expression with his face. “It’s not good. Not if you don’t want kids. Children are great for other people, but not a part of my life plan.”

I heave a frustrated sigh. “I can’t have this argument with you right now. Honestly.”

He takes the last couple of steps between us, his gaze heavy upon mine. I bring up my hands to push at his chest but he traps them and pulls me against him. I can feel the hard ridges of his body as he dominates me with his size.

“Calum... I’m really not in the mood...”

He bends his head down, his lips parting. Those soft lips find the pulse point at my neck and touch it gently. My eyes start to close and I exhale softly. He sucks at that pulse point and my heart starts racing. It may be against my will, but my body has a different opinion.

Even as he turns my lips up to his and kisses me, his words reverberate in my head. I kiss him back, but I'm distracted. And Calum is attuned enough to me to be able to tell.

"What?" he murmurs.

I pull back, looking up at his gorgeous face. "What if I decide that I want to have children? Your children."

He squints at me. "We don't have to decide today. You have at least ten years before you have to make a decision like that."

My mouth pulls down into a frown. I can't help but feel as if Calum is pushing off this conversation, already assured that I won't be upset when he finally tells me no. I take my time and figure out exactly what it is I'm trying to say.

"That may be years from now. But we don't know what's going happen. We're not psychic. Things could change. I just... I want to know that there is a possibility sometime in the future."

He grabs my hand where it lies on his chest and pulls it up to his mouth, kissing my palm. "There is no point in talking about it now. As you say, we don't have the ability to see the future. If the time comes that we have to have this conversation again, will have it. Right now, all I want is to bend you over this bed and fuck you like there is no tomorrow. That's all I can think about."

He turns me around and walks me backwards towards the bed. I look up at him, my arms going around his neck. When he kisses me and pushes me back onto the bed, I am more than willing. But that doesn't stop my mind from going a million miles an hour, over and over the same track.

He doesn't want kids. In my heart of hearts, I know that I will want them eventually.

What does that spell for us and our relationship in the future?

I wish I had a better idea.

O n the ride upstairs to Lucas's Midtown apartment, I glower at the smooth white elevator doors. I don't want to be here. In fact, I want nothing to do with Anita ever again. And yet here I am.

I fidget and jump a little when the elevator dings, arriving at the floor that I selected. My heart is hammering inside my chest even though I know that I'm perfectly safe. But there is still a thirteen year old boy inside of me... And every step closer I take down the hall toward the apartment doors, he only gets louder in the back of my head.

Run away.

I take a deep breath as I knock on the door. Almost immediately, it's opened by a petite nurse wearing pale gray hospital scrubs.

"Hi," I say. I feel like this person is standing between me and Anita, acting as Anita's last defense.

My anger has been simmering on the back burner for so long that it's now at a full boil. I cast my gaze around the room. The nurse doesn't say a word to me. She just backs away from the door with a tiny bow.

I open my mouth as I enter the apartment, about to ask where Anita is.

But she's only thirty feet from me, her hospital bed and a dozen beeping machines all set up in what would be the living room. Her eyes are closed. She looks so small in the hospital bed, wrapped up in a pile of blankets. Even in her sleep, she isn't peaceful. She looks like she is running to somewhere, her arms and legs splayed out across the bed, her face a serious as she ever looks.

When the nurse shuts the door behind me, I jump out of my skin. She says sorry in a hushed voice and I just wave her off.

“Leave us.”

She bows her head. “I’ll just be in the next room,” she says.

Straightening my cufflinks, I smooth my Brioni jacket out as I slowly pace across the room to the bed. Anita stirs in her sleep but doesn’t wake. This is good actually because it gives me some time to digest everything, to think of exactly what I want to say to her.

I drop my hands by my sides as I walk around the bed, my eyes traveling to Anita’s face. She looks old and worn, her skin a strange combination of leathery and pale. My fists clench without any particular thought or feeling. It just makes me angry that she should still be here, still be in my life all these years later.

What gives her the right to die in peace? And why does she need to do it with my brother Lucas so close at hand?

I stalk around her bed for a moment. It seems suddenly as if there is not enough air in the room. I am feeling jittery, feel the anger roiling in my gut. Usually I would vent a little, find a way to let some of this steam escape. But now I don’t have that option.

I look around the room, anywhere but at Anita herself. My hands are clammy as I pull a chair up to her bedside.

As I am taking a seat beside her bed, Anita stirs. She opens her eyes a little bit and sees me sitting there. I must have an intense expression on my face because she looks a little taken aback by my presence.

“Calum?” she gasps. She reaches for an oxygen mask that lies around her neck and presses it to her face for a long moment, sucking in a deep breath. When she speaks again, she sounds strangled. “I didn’t think you would come.”

Just hearing her say my name is disagreeable to me. I clench my jaw.

“Well, here I am. You told Lucas to fetch me. So? What you have to say to me?”

She tries to sit up, pushing herself out of her bed by her elbows. But it seems that she lacks any real strength. She clears her throat, embarrassed at her body’s failure.

“Yes, I wanted to talk to you. I know that we haven’t always seen eye to eye...”

I snort, interrupting her. “No, we have not. We haven’t even been looking at the same screen since I was a teenager.”

Her mouth turns down in a gentle frown. “Is there something that you need to get off your chest, Cal?”

I shake my head at her, unable to believe her audacity.

“You...” I trail off, working up the nerve to confront her. My fists bunch. “I was just a kid. You know that? Just a kid. And you took advantage of me. You took advantage of my mom's death.”

Her eyebrows rise. “Me? I took you in. I took you and Lucas in. Not only that, but I also made you what you are. Without me, there would've been no ballet academy. No career as dancers. No successful adulthood. You owe everything to me.”

I hiss at her. “No one said that you had to take us in. Lucas and I would've found our way just fine without you. But you wanted something. You wanted sex. You wanted companionship. It's just it's disgusting, what you did.”

“We. What we did.” She lifts her chin.

“I didn't have a choice. I was thirteen, for God's sake. I didn't want you. I didn't even know what sex was, not really anyway.” I pause, trying to control myself. “You took something from me. Something that I can't get back. And I will hate you with every fiber of my being for the rest of my fucking life.”

Anita's eyes widen. “You can't hate me. I saved you.”

“I can do whatever I want, Anita. I will tell you that starting my new life, with no mother at my side and a little brother to look out for... Starting my new life and being used by you... It did give me something. An edge, maybe.”

Shaking my head, I give a humorless chuckle.

Her eyes narrow on my face.

“You were lucky to have me. You are lucky to touch me, to taste me.”

I rise from my chair, zooming in toward her face, my temper almost getting the best of me.

“Look at me! Look at how fucking young I am. At least compared with you. If you thought that our age difference wasn't that great, even back then, you can't think so now. I think anyone with their wits about them would say that our relationship was inappropriate at best.”

“So what?” she asks. “What is the worst thing they would call a beautiful woman like me deflowering a clumsy, inadequate virgin?”

“They would call it child endangerment. Or maybe sex with a minor. Some would even call it...”

I stop, unable to bring myself to say the word *rape*.

“Whatever the term, it wasn't my idea. I didn't like it. And I still can't stand to look at you.”

Anita sneers. “You just wanted to get lucky.”

“No.” I shake my head. My hands are clenched by my side. “You can say that however many times you want, but it doesn't make it true. I was a kid. You are an adult. You were promising to take care of me. And you didn't.”

“Yes I did. I took care of you better than anybody ever will.”

I blow out a breath and take a step back. Every instinct I have is screaming at me to hurt her, to take advantage of her the way that she took advantage of me so many years ago. But I can't do that.

I lift my chin and stare her right in the eyes. “You're lucky that I have more to live for than making you pay. I know that I can't do anything right now to make you more miserable, but I can control me. I can decide that I'm done.”

She tries to sit up again but can't manage to make her muscles lift her. “That's it, you're done?”

I take a second to glance at her, to really take in her shrunken frame and her pallor. In the hospital bed just now, she looks so powerless. I half expect her to start screaming as I turn and walk toward the door. I definitely don't expect what she says.

Her frail voice reaches my ears just as I am about to exit the room. “Cal? Wait.”

God help me, I stop in the doorway. I don't turn around but I do hesitate. She must see the way that I am pausing, because she continues.

“I hope you have a good life.”

I turn my head and look at her, my fist clenching. She isn't angry. She is that depressed. She just seems passive and resigned. A first for her, surely.

“Goodbye, Anita,” I tell her in a quiet voice. Then I stalk out of the room, a strange kind of fury simmering in my veins.

As I walk to the elevator, my head and my heart are so full of confusing feelings that I don't know whether I'm going to tear up or punch the wall. But either way, I have said my goodbyes.

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I stand outside the Queens townhouse, looking at the address for the fifth time. 2622 Fisher Lane. The house number is printed in gold letters just above the front door of the two story beige row house. I look around the street, expecting to see my mother's silver Mercedes or my sisters black Porsche. But I see nothing of the kind, nothing except for rows of beat up Toyotas and thirdhand American-made vans.

Pushing out a breath, I climb the rickety staircase that leads up to the plain beige front door. My mom gave me this address no less than three times, so I really hope that this is the right address. I ring the bell, my heart thudding slowly in my chest. I pull out my cell phone and check to see if I've missed a text from Calum. But there is nothing.

Strange that he has gone silent today of all days.

The front door creaks as it opens. I look up and my mom is standing in the doorway, her arms opening wide in the suggestion of an embrace. She is already crying even as I take a step forward and hug her.

"Mom? Are you okay?" I ask.

She doesn't answer right away. Instead she presses her face into my neck, squeezing me around the middle. She's trying not to make any sounds while she cries, which actually seems pretty ridiculous. I pull back from her, cupping her cheek to make her look at me.

A dark bruise under her right eye glares back at me.

"Did somebody hit you?" My stomach sinks. "Oh God. It was dad, wasn't it?"

“Oh, honey.” She gives a watery, exaggerated sigh. “Your father and I had a series of arguments...”

I touch my mom's cheek gently, but she winces anyway.

“I'll kill him.” I look her dead in the eye. “I really will. Where is he?”

She shakes her head a little and pulls me in the door, closing it behind me. She leads me down a white hallway, into a tiny kitchen that looks like it came out of the seventies. Everything is brown and tan, as indistinct as it gets.

“I'm sorry to say that I left your father,” my mom says. She hurries me over to a dingy little dining room chair, ushering me into it. She sits down opposite me and lays her hands flat across the scarred oak table in front of her. “I just wanted to tell you in person. I didn't want you to hear it from anywhere else.”

I reach out and grab my mom's hand, gripping it. “Thank you, mom. But you know you're the only person that ever tells me anything. It's not like I would hear the news from dad.”

She presses her lips into a thin line and frowns.

I cock my head and examine her face. “Did you file a police report?”

Her cheeks redden. “What? No, no. This is a private matter.”

She seems embarrassed by her own face. I expel a breath and remind myself not to yell at her even though she is definitely getting on my nerves just now. The last thing in the world that she needs right now is someone else screaming at her. So I just smile at her patiently.

“Okay, Mom. I just need to make myself very clear on this topic. It's not okay that dad hit you. You know that right?”

My mom looks down at her hands, unable to meet my gaze. “It's one of the reasons I left him,” she admits gently.

I cock an eyebrow. “Interesting,” I say, mostly because I am in uncharted waters right now. This new territory with my mom feels a little dangerous, so I proceed with caution. I look around the room, squinting a little. “Where are we? What is this place?”

“Well,” my mother says. She never lifts her gaze from the table. “I had to leave the house. Your father and I could not come to terms that I could accept. So I came here, because it was the only place... Well, I had to be able to afford it with my savings. And this place was available right away...” She looks up at me, suddenly spearing me with her gaze. “Please

don't tell your father the address. I think he is trying to find it and I don't really want to have to move again."

For second, I open my mouth. Then I close it again, unsure what exactly I'm about to say. "Wait, so you're hiding from dad?"

My mother purses her lips and looks away. "Not exactly. I would just rather you didn't make it easier for him to find us here. I know it's not as fancy as what you are currently living in, but it's all I can afford right now."

I squeeze both her hands. "You know you don't have to worry about money. Right? You know that I would do anything to make sure you were safe."

My mother swallows and looked out a long breath. "I know, Kaia. I know. I'm just tired right now. And your sister is frankly driving me up the wall."

My eyebrows jump up. "Hazel? Where is she? Why isn't she still with dad?"

My mom looks grim. "Your father and I had several arguments, but the most outsized one of them all was one about your sister. I was pretty adamant when I said that your sister wasn't to be married off to some older gentleman that your father owed money to. And Hazel didn't want it either, so we left."

I narrow my eyes at her face. "Wait, Hazel is here?"

My mother sucks in a breath and nods. "Yeah, apparently trying to marry her off to some old mafia connection was a bridge too far for her. When I told her I was leaving your father, she just started packing a bag."

"Wow." I rock back in my chair. "So dad is just on his own now, huh?"

Pressing her lips together, my mom nods. "I'm expecting him to show up here at any moment and throw the world's biggest tantrum."

I give a humorless chuckle. "He'd better not show up here if he knows what's good for him. You have put up with so much of his crap. Now that you've thrown up a boundary, I can't wait to make sure that it's followed."

A door slams somewhere else in the house. I glance over my shoulder and see Hazel slink into the room. She is dressed in a black business suit and her stuck up expression tells me everything I need to know.

She comes in, pushing her purse down on the table and sitting down with a sigh. She crosses her arms and gives me a fiery look. "Absolutely nobody is hiring right now."

My brows rise. "Were you intending to get a job?"

Hazel tosses her hair and rolls her eyes. "Somebody in this house has to. And mom is not exactly interview ready... Even with all the makeup in the world, she still has that black eye."

I squint at my sister. "What happened of fashion school? Actually, what happened to regular old high school? I have so many questions."

Hazel shoots me a glare. "I'm taking some time off. I mean, my parents' marriage is basically falling apart. My dad has gone crazy. I don't see how I have any choice in the matter."

I cross my arms and look between my sister and my mother. "You two can't stay here. I mean, no offense, but your house hunting skills are not the best."

My mom shoots me a dour look. "I had to go somewhere... Time was of the essence."

I consider Hazel and my mother for almost half a minute, biting my lower lip. And then I expel a long rush of air. "I can put you both up in a nice hotel while we try to figure out where you should go in the longer term."

My mom looks a little agitated. "You don't have to do that, Kaia. We can figure something out."

I roll my eyes. "I'm sure that you can. But you don't have to. You can let me deal with some of the financial aspects of it for now."

Hazel sighs dramatically. "I bet you are just loving this, aren't you Kaia?"

She stands up, reaching for her purse.

I spread my fingers across the table, giving her a hard look.

"Sit down, Hazel."

She glares at me but plunks back down into her seat. Taking a full minute, I decide to set some boundaries of my own.

I clear my throat, considering them both. "My help comes with strings attached. The first one being that you will re-enroll in school. The second one being that you will take a job as a hostess or a waitress or a retail position, anything that will maybe teach you a little bit of humility. And the third string is that if mom even thinks about going back to dad, forgiving him for all this shit he's put us through, my support will end immediately."

I look at my mom, staring at her as if I could make her understand the seriousness of what I am saying. My mom frowns a little bit and her mouth twitches. Before she can respond though, my sister is already complaining.

“You and your boyfriend can buy us a million new houses. Why would I need a job if I have you to take care of me?” Her lips twist sourly.

“Because, Hazel. You have treated me like your servant or your personal punching bag too many times. Giving you financial support without teaching you to treat people better would not be helping you at all. I know you don’t understand, but one day, hopefully you will.”

My mom reaches out and grabs my hand, squeezing it. “What if I get back together with your father though?”

I look my mom dead in the eyes. “I’m only offering this support because I think you need it. You deserve it. But dad does not deserve anything. I don’t want to give him another dime. Am I making myself clear?”

Hazel cuts in. “Wait, back to my thing. How am I supposed to go to school and have a job at the same time?”

I shoot her a glare. “Stop being so snotty. That’s what people who grow up without privilege do. They have part-time jobs.”

“But...” she starts to argue.

I push myself to my feet, shaking my head. “Those are my terms. Either get with it or don’t. But if you decide not to do it, let me know before I make any plans.”

My mom stands up, looking at me as if seeing me for the first time. “We’ll do it. Hazel will go back to school and get a job. I’ll get a job too...”

I reach out and touch my mom’s arm. “If that would make you feel better, I think you should. You should make new friends and new contacts.”

Hazel has a bratty expression on her face but she just crosses her arms and stays quiet for once. I look at her, inviting her to retort. But she just sits there glaring at me.

It’s not optimal, but it’s better than what I usually hear from her.

“Go grab your stuff,” I say. “Both of you. I need to make a phone call but after that we should head into the city proper. Then we can make a plan. Okay?”

Hazel nods and looks down at her hands in her lap. My mom steps closer to me and gives me a little side hug, which I turn into a full embrace. Then I step away, already dialing Calum. My heart beats fast for a moment, but I already know that he will be more than understanding about this.

“Hello?” he answers.

Hearing his voice is such a relief. “Calum? I have a story to tell you...” I glance back at my mom and Hazel as I step out of the room. “I think you're going to like it...”

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aia sighs for the hundredth time since we stepped on the plane. She's sitting in a window seat, looking out over the horizon as the sun sinks lower and lower. I'm right beside her, though I did doze off for a while. Scotland is far enough away that it requires some sleep, it seems.

I study her, wondering if I need to draw her attention away from her thoughts. No doubt she is still ruminating over her family issues.

Her honey hair falls down her shoulders, her body is exquisite in the slinky black camisole and black leggings she wears. Simple but elegant. But there is a look on her face, a faraway gazing frown that makes me feel a little anxious. It is catching, apparently.

I reach across her lap and take her hand, tugging it. She startles and looks at me, surprised.

"I didn't know that you were awake," she says, pushing her hair back behind her ears. "I'm sorry. I wasn't trying to ignore you."

I shrug a shoulder. "You didn't inconvenience me in the least. I was just wondering what was going on in your world. It seems like a lot."

Her mouth pulls down into a gentle frown. She sucks in a deep breath and then releases a gust of air.

"I'm just trying to get a handle on my mom leaving my dad. I just... I never thought I would actually happen. And then they only resettled into the Hotel Esquire yesterday morning..." She wrinkles her nose. "It's just awkward timing for us to take off to Great Britain, that's all."

I tilt my head to the side, pursing my lips. "This is the only weekend that you have off for a while. And it just so happens that Keir invited us to

come visit a few weeks ago..." I shrug my shoulders and shake my head. "It's the only time in the foreseeable future that we could both get away from work and Keir would be at home."

Kaia pulls the face. "How do you know this Keir guy again?"

"When I first started IndicaTech, he was brought in as a source of guidance. Keir started several new generation payment systems. FriendPay, for instance. He and I hit it off right away. He has earned several billion more dollars than I have. Oh, and we remain members of the same tiny gentlemen's club."

She raises a brow. "Oh?"

"Yes. Heaven and Hell. It's..." I trail off, pursuing my lips. "How do I even start to describe it?"

There is a measured pause before she speaks up. "Is this one of the strip clubs you hung out at before you met me?"

I swirl the whiskey around in my glass. "Less strip club, more sex club. But yes, that's generally the vibe."

"Oh." She looks down, seeming uncertain. "Honestly, you're the only person I've ever had sex with. The only person I'm interested in, even. So what am I supposed to say to that?"

"Don't be weird," I chide her gently. "I went there a couple of times and found out that it wasn't for me. When I met you, a lot of my priorities changed. Okay?"

She wrinkles her nose. "I guess."

I slides her a sly look. "Maybe I'll take you there some time. If you're good. But you have to let me tell you things without getting jealous."

She rolls her eyes at me but smiles. "You wish I was jealous, Calum."

I give her a devilish grin. "Maybe. It sounds hot."

"I'm more worried about my mom and Hazel. Now there are more people to worry about than just you and me."

I squeeze her hands and then let it go, picking up my glass tumbler of whiskey instead. Taking a sip, I give her my opinion. "It'll be all right. Besides, there is no way that your dad is going to show up out of nowhere. I hired a private investigator to follow him around. And I hired a security team to stay on the floor of the hotel where your mom and sister are. I think between the PI and the security team, your mom and sister will be fine."

She heaves another sigh. "I know. You covered all your bases as usual. Unfortunately, that doesn't settle my nerves." A uniformed stewardess

makes her way up from the back of the plane. “Excuse me. If you don’t mind, we are officially making our final descent as we arrive in Scotland.”

I incline my head and Kaia leans forward within a warm smile. “Thank you,” she says.

I fasten my seat belt as I look at her with a sigh. “You can call your mother when we get to the castle. Okay?”

Kaia looks at me, smiling faintly. “I know. And I know that you just want the best for me. I promise that I’ll try to relax and let this weekend be fun.”

She leans her head against my arm and the plane begins its descent. It’s takes a good couple of hours of driving out of the city and far up into the green foothills of some area. But by the time we are arriving at the Castle, Kaia is practically pressed against the window, her eyes lit up with excitement.

“It’s so beautiful here,” she says. The rolling hills, a little mist, and everything is so verdant...”

“Just wait until you see the castle itself. It should be down this little road, any second now...”

We drive around several twists and turns, going gently upward all the while. And then suddenly we make a turn and Kaia gasps.

Before us rises an actual castle, something straight out of a history textbook.

*M*ade out of light gray stone, the castle has four large turrets and a rather large keep. It's set back into a hill and it looks very intimidating even in the mid-morning light. As we pull around the circular driveway, I stare at the castle, slack-jawed.

"I can't believe that you know the owner of this place," I breathe, pressing a hand against the car window.

Calum squints as he pulls the car to a stop. "Speak of the devil and he shall appear."

He nods to a figure emerging from the front door. Incredibly tall, blond, and broad-chested, he cuts a striking figure indeed.

Calum gets out of the car and I do too. Calum approaches the man, offering him a handshake. "Keir."

He says it in a lilting tone, rhyming it with fire. Keir squints and shakes Calum's hand. "Calum."

Keir swings his gaze around to me, his expression unreadable. "Ye must be Kaia. Welcome to Drumman Castle."

Giving Calum a pointed look, I smile and hurry forward. "It's so nice to be here, Keir. Thank you for having us."

Keir waves a hand. "Think nothing of it."

As he speaks, a little girl with bright red hair bursts out of the castle, running straight into Keir's legs. Keir grunts but doesn't move or otherwise emote.

The little girl grins at us, not shy in the least. "Hello!" she shrieks. "Da said you were coming today and I just gave my minder the slip to come see you!"

I blink. The loud volume of her voice doesn't seem to faze Keir, who drops a hand to the top of her head and sighs. "Calum, Kaia. This is my daughter Isla."

Eye-la. I make a note to remember how to say her name. Smiling, I bend down. "Hello, Isla. How are you?"

She scowls at me. "You talk funny."

Isla shakes her head and turns away, pouting. I look up at Keir, perplexed.

He just drops his big palm on top of her head. "She doesn't care much for women."

Calum sidles up beside me, casually wrapping an arm around my waist. "Are you still having trouble getting good help out here?"

Keir's mouth flattens and he looks off. "Yes. She's scared off two nannies, three cooks, and the butler. I'm sorry to say that leaves us quite short staffed here."

Calum nods, squeezing me around the middle. "I think we will manage."

"Do you need help with your bags?" Keir asks.

Calum shakes his head. "I'll come back down here and fetch them later. In the meantime, show us around your castle, Keir."

Keir turns and walks inside. I take Calum's hand and follow him into the dank, cramped halls of the castle.

"Watch yer head," Keir warns us. We continue down a droughty hallway; Keir ducks at the end of it as he pushes open a big oak door.

Calum ducks too, stepping through the doorway. I follow him, stopping short.

The hall I've just stepped into is nothing short of majestic. Two stories high, flanked by twin fireplaces, it is decorated much like I imagine it was a thousand years ago. There are an identical set of custom made tables that run the length of the hall; each table is set with chairs and decked out in a fine green and white plaid.

I stare up at an enormous iron light fixture that probably weighs almost the same as a car. "Whoa."

Keir presents the room to us, swinging a hand wide. Before he can speak, he's hit with a water balloon from somewhere up above. It splatters across the back of his shoulders and he growls. "Isla!"

I hear the little girl laughing but I can't see exactly where she is. It's not until half a minute later that she pops up on an otherwise hidden balcony that I can locate her. "Catch me if you can!"

She vanishes once more. I glance at Calum, who is watching the drama play out with a tiny smirk on his lips. He whispers in my ear.

"Another reason why I don't want to have my own brats."

I roll my eyes and elbow him in the ribs. He wiggles his eyebrows at me.

Keir clears his throat. "I'll have to call down to Glasgow for a new nanny. Isla is too bright and spirited for just any old babysitter."

I nod, keeping my expression neutral. "Where is Isla's mom?"

Calum shoots me a dark look. I'm not expecting the scowl Keir lobs at me.

"It's just the two of us," he spits out.

I swallow, my brows shooting up. "That must be hard! Um, you know. Doing it alone..."

Keir grimaces and turns around, heading toward the back of the hall. "I'll see you both at dinner."

I make a face at Calum, who waits until Keir is gone to react. Keir disappears behind a heavy oak door and Calum heaves a sigh.

"Wow. I had no idea that the Isla situation had gotten so bad. When I was here last a few years ago, Isla's mother was still here." He squints.

I slide my hand around his waist, looking up to where Isla appeared. Dropping my voice, I say, "I'll wait to ask more about her until we're alone."

He raises an eyebrow at me. I gesture to where Isla could very well still be hiding and Calum understands immediately.

"Well... I think I remember the way to our room. What about we check that out, change clothes, then we go for a run together?"

My lips curve upwards as I smile at him. "You know what's in my heart."

He wiggles his eyebrows. "Always."

Pulling me along toward the back part of the hall, he keeps me close as he starts up the stairs.

*L*ater that night, I leave the great hall and head for the guest bedroom we've been staying in. It's late and I'm tired. It's definitely time to get out of my pretty but uncomfortable dress.

I left the guys sitting by the fire, talking about business. But when I get close to our room, quick footsteps just behind me cause me to turn around, panicking slightly.

I exhale a sigh of relief as it's only Calum. But he is approaching me with a strange glint in his eye, one that makes me downright nervous.

"Hi?" I ask, a flutter already in my stomach.

He smirks. "Where are you going, beauty?"

He backs me into a corner and pushes me against the wall, dropping to his knees. He pulls up my designer dress and rips my panties out of the way, lifting my knee a littlr.

"Calum!" I look down the hallway, never certain that we are truly alone in this place.

My protests are cut short by Calum burying his face against my pussy. His tongue touches my clit. He snakes his hand around to my ass, pressing me against his mouth.

His mouth feels good but I still try to push him away. He doesn't pay attention to what I want. No, he brings my knee up onto his shoulder, spreads my ass cheeks, and penetrates my ass with the tip of his finger.

I clench, surprised at the invasion. But at the same time, my hips rock forward, which I'm sure only encourages him.

He moves back, dropping my knee, and looks up at me. "If you'd rather fuck in private, lead me somewhere now. Because after I get started, I'm not

going to stop fucking your pussy and your ass, come hell or high water.”

His words make me shiver. I can feel my pussy growing wet at the dark promise of a good, hard fuck. I ease by him, grabbing his hand.

He gets up and lets me lead him into the guest bedroom. As soon as the door closes behind us, I turn and kiss him. He grabs my dress and rips it off of my body. I gasp at my sudden nakedness but I love that he just does whatever he wants whenever he wants to do it.

I push my dress off, as impatient as him.

Calum leans down, cupping one breast and pulling the nipple to his mouth. I immediately groan at the sensation of his hot, wet mouth on my flesh. He rolls it around with his tongue, then nips it with his teeth.

“Fuck, baby,” I mutter. “I need to have you inside me. I need your cock stretching out my pussy. I need to feel your hot cum filling me to the brim.”

He looks up at me, his eyes full of heat. “I want your pussy. But I want your mouth too, and your ass. I want everything you’ve got, quivering and ready for my big cock.”

The breath leaves my lungs in an audible whoosh. “God, you turn me on.”

He bites his lip, grabbing my hand and tugging me to the bed. He turns me around and forces me onto the edge of the bed.

“Get on all fours. I want to what I’m about to fuck. I want to taste your ass before I bury my fucking cock in it so deep we both scream.”

Calum’s words excite me. I can feel a slither of moisture from my hot pussy.

I crawl onto the bed and present my ass to him, his for the taking. He looks at it, his gaze darkening with need.

“Fuck, hold on...” He gets up and digs in his suitcase. Then he returns, brandishing what he found. A roll of condoms, a bottle of lube, and a glistening silver butt plug are his bounty. “I am so glad I thought ahead.”

Although it brings heat to my cheeks, I have to laugh at that. “You came prepared, I’m guessing?”

He smirks. “I knew that there was a good chance that I’d talk you into a little anal exploration on this trip. Why not be ready for anything?”

He teases my exposed skin by pouring lube all over my asshole. Then he uses the tip of the butt plug to spread the lube around the puckered entrance.

I gasp, gripping the sheets. It feels so sinful and taboo to have my ass played with like this.

He pushes the tip of the butt plug in for the briefest second. He leans in and kisses my ass cheek, pushing it in deeper.

“God, I love watching your ass take this butt plug. I should’ve brought a fucking dildo...” he mutters.

I can only bite my lip and writhe against the invasion. The sensation of the cold plug against my too-hot ass makes me moan.

“That feels so good,” I admit.

He pushes the butt plug in and pulls it out. I shiver as he tosses the plug aside.

“Damn,” he says, spreading my legs wider. “Look at your perfect ass. Ready to be kissed and fucked, I think.”

“Oh god,” I say, biting my lip. “It’s weird for me to admit this out loud, but I can’t wait to feel your tongue in my ass. And then after that, you can stretch me out with your huge cock...”

He grunts. “Fuck, beauty. You’re making me impatient. But I want to take my time with you, remind you why I’m the best dick you’ll ever have...”

I clench my innermost muscles and bite my lip. “Don’t make me wait too long, baby.”

He places his hands directly on my ass cheeks and climbs on the bed behind me. His lips touch my butt cheeks a couple of times, building anticipation. I feel the wet warmth of his tongue near my ass, circling it very slowly. Then he licks directly over my balloon knot, making me tense up. At the very same time, I realize that my pussy is soaking wet.

I steady myself, arching my back and gently pushing against his face. He groans and kisses my ass.

“Fuck, Kaia,” he murmurs. “You’re so damn hot, baby. Reach up and massage your clit while I fuck your ass with my tongue. And don’t forget to relax...”

Biting my lip, I slip a hand down to my aching pussy and find my clit. All it takes are a couple of the lightest circles with my fingers until I moan. Still, it takes everything in me to force myself to relax.

Calum leans down and I feel his tongue touch my ass ever so gently touch my ass. I gasp and rub my clit harder; at the rate he’s going, Calum

will only have to do this for maybe another minute at the most before I burst.

He spreads my ass cheeks apart with one hand and begins to lick my ass, his clever tongue flicking against the balloon knot. When he pushes his tongue in, I groan so fucking loud and grip the sheets.

“Fuck!”

I tense up for a second, relaxing only when I force myself to. I try to focus on my hand, on my fingers massaging my clit, but my mind keeps straying to his tongue in my ass.

I shudder when he pulls me closer, controlling my movements with his hands on my hips.

“Fuck,” I whisper. “Calum, that feels so good.”

He curls his tongue inside my ass and I almost die from how good it feels. He withdraws his tongue for a long second. “That’s good, beauty. That’s so fucking hot.”

I feel him withdraw, then replace his tongue with two fingers. He slips them into my ass with little resistance and kisses me on my lower back.

“Fuck, Kaia. You don’t even know how hot it is to watch your hot ass take my tongue and my fingers. I’m going to bury my entire cock in this tight little asshole.” He places another kiss on my lower back.

I rub my clit, blushing furiously. “I trust you, Calum. I know you’ll make me feel good.”

“Tell me how it feels to get stretched out, baby.”

I swear, my face is glowing red. But I still suck in a breath as his fingers slide in and out of my ass. “It feels so good. Especially when I rub my clit and think about how you’re going to fill my ass with your big dick. I can’t wait to feel your cum.

“Fuuuuuck. Okay, stay right there.” He pulls his fingers out of my ass and disappears for a solid minute. If last time taught me anything, he’s brushing his teeth so he can kiss me safely.

Determined not to lose momentum, I circle my clit with my fingers lazily.

When he comes back, he taps my ass. “Turn over.”

Wriggling, I comply. I’m taken aback for a moment by the image of Calum, completely naked. He’s all muscle, his cock juts proudly out... and right now, he’s looking at me like he’s going to consume me.

He fists his cock, looking down at me. I spread my legs, biting my lower lip, and touch my clit.

His lips twitch as he regards me. “Fuck, Kaia. Do you know how much pleasure you give me?”

He climbs onto the bed, dragging me down to lie beneath him, and he starts kissing my neck again. I wrap my arms and legs around him, pulling him closer. I can feel his hardness against my thigh, long and hot and throbbing. He sucks at my neck, my breasts, and then he moves lower.

I don’t know if I can even handle his mouth on my clit, but he passionately kisses my thighs and my knees. His five o’clock shadow tickles me in the best way. I open my legs wide for him, spreading my thighs. He makes a growling sound as he kisses my clit, and my whole body is suddenly alive with electric sensation.

“Oh my god!” I cry out, my hands burying in his hair.

Already, I’m bucking my hips against his mouth, desperate for more. He closes his mouth around my clit and sucks on it in long pulls, each one sending ripples of sensation up my spine. My toes curl as he brings his hand up to my pussy and introduces one thick finger. He ever so slowly pushes his finger inside as he circles my clit with his tongue.

I come suddenly, clenching and crying out. His tongue slows, helping me ride out my orgasm. Soon though, he climbs up my body, kissing me hard. I taste the faint flavor of my own juices on his tongue and shudder.

Calum busies himself rolling on a condom and pouring plenty of lube on his cock. He also swipes his lube covered fingers over my still-sensitive pussy and my asshole. I writhe against his touch.

“Get on all fours. I’m about to fuck that pretty little asshole.”

My heart starts pounding. I scramble to roll over and then get on my elbows and knees.

I feel so vulnerable right now, more than I’ve ever been with anyone. I feel like I’m wide open to him, not just literally but figuratively too.

He pulls back a little bit, grasping his cock and positioning himself just so. The blunt tip of his cock presses against my pussy, and I still for just a second. I cast a look back, trying to look at his cock, biting my lip with anticipation of how he’s about to stretch me out.

But he repositions his thick cock at my ass and then pushes inside the barest inch. I gasp, feeling so full of his hot cock. It’s foreign, this fullness. A little scary.

“Fuuuuuck,” he breathes out. Calum grips my hips, his hands squeezing me hard. “You’re always so fucking tight, Kaia.”

He closes his eyes and pushes himself inside, inch by slow inch. I feel like he’s stretching me out, little by little, filling me up and touching every single part of me. It’s a little uncomfortable, even with all the warm up and the lube.

But I know that soon, I’ll be moaning his name and begging for him to fuck me harder.

So I push my ass back, silently asking for more. He works his way in and out, little by little. I gasp, feeling so full that I can’t possibly hold any more. And yet he’s not all the way in.

“Good girl,” he whispers, watching my face. “We’re almost there.”

When he is finally inside me to the hilt, I can hear him exhale a shaky breath. I don’t care that his dick is so big that it hurts a little; I’m too busy being consumed by him, eaten alive.

He kisses my upper back, starting to move his body, withdrawing his cock and then thrusting back in.

“Fuck,” I whisper. It’s intense, this kind of fucking. It feels like pleasure and pain mixed together, the volume turned up all the way. “Fuck, fuck, fuck.”

“Are you good?” he says, slowing a bit.

I nod, breathless. “Don’t stop.”

He nods, thrusting again.

“Ahhh, that’s so good,” he mutters. “Fuck, Kaia. God, you’re so damned beautiful. Your ass feels like fucking heaven.”

He works his thick cock in and out of my ass. I start to forget the discomfort, focusing instead on the pleasure of the wonderful weight of his body against mine.

Calum suddenly withdraws from me, cursing. “I promised you that I would fuck your pussy too, didn’t I?”

He rips off the condom, replacing it with another one. Then he positions his cock at the entrance to my pussy before he plunges inside.

“Ohhh!” I cry out, feeling my innermost muscles clench.

“Your pussy feels so good,” he grits out. “Just like your ass. So hot. So fucking wet. So tight for me.” He takes my hand and guides it down to my clit, rubbing it in gentle circles. “I want to see you come again. Touch yourself. Make yourself explode for me.”

His words send a shudder of pleasure down my spine. He lets go of my hand and grabs my hips, thrusting his cock into me again and again, as hard as he can. I bite my lip as I start to touch myself.

The way he is fucking me now is rougher, coarser than before. I groan and encourage him, pushing back to meet his thrusts. I close my eyes, rubbing my clit, and feeling the brutal way he handles me, ramming into me over and over again.

An invisible spring tightens deep inside me with every thrust, feeding my craving. My fingers help me along, but it's really Calum's cock that makes little ripples of pleasure swell and burst across my body.

He's touching some spot deep inside me, a spot that I seem to be able to angle my body just so to encourage him to hit over and over again.

"Fuck!" I call out. "Calum, don't stop... I'm so fucking close..."

And then I'm calling out his name, screaming it. I leap over the edge, sprawling, falling into a deep ocean of pleasure. He stiffens and growls, filling me with three single, brutal thrusts. I can feel his cock pulsing and twitching inside my pussy.

He pulls me down onto the bed, spooning me, and we lie there for a long time, trying to catch our breath.

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“What have I missed?” I ask as I descend the stone stairs into the great hall.

Kaia and Isla look up at me, from their cozy spot by the hearth. They've put down a number of soft looking blankets and piled themselves on the floor, with a game of checkers between them. Kaia smiles at me.

“Isla and I were just talking a little bit. You're a gross and dirty boy, so you haven't missed anything at all.”

That makes me grin. I look around, casting my gaze about. “I see. Where is Keir?”

Isla looks up from the board game, frowning at me. “When da gets grumpy, he usually goes hunting. I saw him twenty minutes ago so he's probably still in the castle, getting everything ready for that.”

I arch a brow at her. “And why would he be grumpy?”

Her face flushes but she just lifts her chin and gives me a small glare. “I have no idea. I'm just telling you where you can find probably him.”

I frown at her. “I see.”

Isla looks back down, moving one of her pieces across the red and black board.

Kaia makes eye contact with me. “Why don't you go find Keir? I think Isla and I will stay here and try to school each other in checkers. Right, Isla?”

Isla nods without looking up from the board. “It's your turn. Make a move.”

“Patience, grasshopper.” Kaia shoots me a look and gives me the tiniest smirk. Then she turns her attention back to the checkers board, moving one of her pieces.

Isla erupts, laughing. “I knew you were going to do that! I knew it!”

My lips quirk. “Seems like you have this handled.”

I turn and head out of the hall, casually searching the castle for Keir. I find him in a small room toward the back of the castle, cleaning a rifle and looking extremely pissed off. When he sees me answer, Keir holds up a hand.

“Don’t even start,” he says. “Seriously, I am in no mood. I can’t even leave the castle because Isla’s new minder quit. She’d only been here for an hour but Isla has managed to drive her away.”

He picks up a cloth and angrily begins to polish the end of the rifle.

“Kaia is actually watching Isla right now. They seem to get along well.”

Keir looks up at me, sighing. “I don’t suppose she’s interested in moving in with us permanently, is she?”

My lips curve up in a small smile. “I don’t think so.”

He grunts. “You have got a good one there. Very maternal. When you two have your own kids, that will come in handy.”

I make a face at him.

“Christ,” I say. “First of all, we are not going to have any kids. And second of all, I think you need to get out of here for a while. While Kaia keeps Isla busy, I think we should go for a walk outside.”

Keir gives me a sharp look. “It’s almost dark.”

“We are grown-ups. I think will be okay.”

“Should I go check on Isla before we leave?”

“Nope. Come on.” I turn to leave the room.

Keir follows me as I exit the castle through a small back door. Stepping outside into the growing twilight, I take a deep breath of air.

Keir moves past me, heading for the hills to our left. He seems to be quietly brooding, so I just keep my thoughts to myself as we hike the Scottish landscape. It’s chillier than I anticipated as I climb the gently sloping hills, following Keir closely. The moon is already coming up as the sun is going down. Off to my right, the lake gently shimmers.

Keir climbs the hill and stops at the top. We both overlook the large lake that is now immediately below us, spread out like a puddle of blue ink. I come to stand beside him, crossing my arms and looking at him.

“So... how is business?” I ask. It’s not at all what I want to know. But I’ve known Keir for eight years and this is the only way that I know to begin a conversation with him.

Damn, I should’ve brought some whiskey.

He purses his lips. “It’s still going pretty well. I haven’t made that many wild stock purchases lately.” He scrunches up his face. “Actually, it’s been a while since I even logged into the website to check my earnings. I am so preoccupied with Isla that everything else just seems...” He trails off.

After a minute, I take a deep breath. “Well, the good news for you is that you are already a billionaire. Although you wouldn’t know it from your living situation. Why did you move back here with Isla?”

His lips quirk. “Glasgow was too much. There were too many... temptations. Not for me, for Mary.”

That gives me pause. “Mary?”

He gives me a long look. “My wife.”

I squint. “What does that mean exactly? What kind of temptations did the city offer?”

He puffs out his cheeks. “Before I met her, Mary spent a lot of time with a rough crowd. And it seems like for most of the Isla’s childhood, she had really gotten away from it. But in the last year, she was... erratic. I moved us all out here to give her space to recover or whatever it was she needed...” He pauses then shakes his head. “But then she started disappearing.”

My eyebrows rise. I look at Keir, my surprise evident. “What you mean, disappearing?”

He shrugs a shoulder. “I don’t know. Drink. Drugs. Men. Or something like that. I really didn’t want to know the details.”

I let his words sink in for a minute. “She’s gone, I’m assuming.”

Keir nods and nudges some rocks with the toe of his boot. “I woke up one morning to find a note from her. It just said that she was sorry. No information or explanation.”

I nod slowly. “I’m assuming that you already paid a private investigator to look for Mary?”

He runs a hand through his short blonde hair. “Yep. I’ve spent a lot of money on private detectives. I even hired a financial investigator. But they still haven’t turned anything up. She’s a ghost. I suspect that she just vanished back into the same slums I found her in.”

I squint at him.

“So you have no idea where she is? There's no paper trail? No breadcrumbs leading you on a merry chase?”

He looks down and gives a discouraged sigh. “I don't know. I woke up six months ago and she had just vanished without a trace. It's not the first time that she is ever gone missing. But the longest she is ever stayed away was a week. It just feels different this time.”

He squints out across the lake.

“I'm not a parent. You know that. But can I give you some advice?”

He looks at me briefly, cock a brow. “What's that?”

“Your daughter needs you. Or at least, she needs some stable adult in her life to tell her that it's going to be okay. Since I've been here, she's been a real wild child. And I think in large part that's because she doesn't have any rules.”

He scowls at me. “Of course she has rules. The more that I insist on the rules, the more wild she is. I'm telling you, there is no winning.”

“Have you to sat down together? Maybe talked about why her mom left and how it isn't her fault?”

I can't see his expression because he turns his head away, but when he speaks, his words are sharp. “This wasn't the plan. Mary and I had all sorts plans in place. And then she just up and disappeared.”

I exhale along stream of air. “I'm sorry, Keir. I really am.” I pause. “If you need to, you and Isla can move closer to us. Just for a little while until you figure out you next step.”

He looks defeated. “I can't leave Mary. What if she tries to come back and I'm not here?”

Keir sounds broken. I don't know what to say to that, or at least nothing helpful and not sarcastic. So I just give him a one armed hug. He allows it for a few seconds, then moves away.

“You're a good friend for offering,” he says. He looks into the setting sun, his eyes mere slits. “When you and Kaia start having kids, you should have a better plan than the one that Mary and I had.”

I give him a long look. “Don't let Kaia hear you saying that. She has brought up having my kids three times already since we've been together. I'm trying to figure out the gentlest way to tell her that I don't think I should have any offspring.”

Keir glances at me, startled. “What? Why not?”

“I don’t like the idea that I would be totally responsible for a life. Until they’re like ten, they can’t survive without us. Like... what if something happens to Kaia and then it’s just me and a baby I don’t really want?” I screw up my face. “Besides, I know I’m fucked up. I don’t want to pass that down to a child.”

“Being a fuck up is not a genetic condition. Neither is being an asshole.” His lips twitch with a little dark humor.

“Hilarious. I offer for you to move close if you need family and you make a crack about my being an asshole.”

“You walked right into that one.” He blows out a breath. “Seriously though... Those are reasons not to want a family, sure. But have you asked Kaia why she wants to have kids? I bet her reasons are equally as good.”

I shoot him a glare. “Kaia and I just got together officially. Besides, she is barely old enough to vote. She has quite a career ahead of her in the ballet. She has more than enough things on her plate without bringing the idea of motherhood into the mix.”

He holds up his hands in surrender. “You’re the boss. I’m just playing devil’s advocate.”

I look down as the last rays of sunlight fall upon the surface of the lake, glinting brightly. “I’ll race you down to the lake.”

Keir’s eyes light up. “You’re on.”

We both launch ourselves down the hill and our serious conversation is soon forgotten.

“*I*sla!? Isla!”

From across the castle, I can hear Keir’s angry shout. It follows us faintly down the stonework hall. I turn around and glance behind me with a sigh. Calum is right behind me, shaking his head.

“Keir has his hands full with his daughter,” I tell Calum.

Calum nods and transfers the picnic basket into his other hand, taking mine and squeezing it tightly. “That he does. When we went out alone yesterday, I asked him about where her mother went. But I didn’t get a good answer. I mean, Keir can’t expect to just let his daughter run wild.”

We reached the front door just as Keir makes an aggravated sound from far away. This time I don’t even stop. I just wrench open the front door and hold it open for Calum. He raises his brows a little bit as he walks through the doorway. I feel guilty about it, but that doesn’t mean I don’t sigh with relief when I am safely outside.

“That girl is a holy terror. Did I tell you that she went through all of my stuff? When I got up this morning, I caught her wearing that emerald necklace that you gave me. But she lied and insisted that it was hers.”

He glances at me sharply. “You didn’t mention it, no. But it doesn’t surprise me. She filled my shoes with shaving cream and locked me in a spare room when I was exploring the castle.”

“Oh, no.” I bite my lip, glancing back. “Keir is going have to do something about her.”

Calum grabs my hand and pulls me along. “That’s Keir’s problem. We’re on vacation. We’re not responsible for his daughter.”

I smirk a little at him. “She is cute though.”

He shoots me a dark look. “Yeah, if you don't mind her incessant pranks and her pouting anytime anyone tells her no. I'm telling you, that's the worst case scenario for a parent. I know you can't predict what temperament your child is going to have... But that's got to be one of the worst ones.”

“She is a challenge, that's for sure.”

I look up at the castle walls as we pass them, my eye drawn to the varying shades of gray. To my surprise, Calum leads me around the back of the castle. There I find a large lake spread out below the castle, placid and peaceful as you could want. There is a copse of trees only a few hundred feet away and it leads down to the perfect sandy beach.

Calum leads me down to a spot on the shore and lays down a blanket. I look at him, impressed. “Nice work. This is just about the most romantic spot that has ever existed.”

He sets the picnic basket down and smirks at me. “I'm glad that you think so. I wasn't sure how you would fare this far outside of the city.”

I roll my eyes and find a spot to sit.

He sits down beside me and opens the picnic basket, pulling out all kinds of goodies. Champagne, cheese, fruit, meat, and a few little slices of bread. I laugh as he pops the cork on the champagne, and it spills stick sweet wine everywhere. He grins and pours us each a plastic cup full of wine.

He peers at his cup. “I think I made a fundamental mistake by putting plastic cups in the picnic basket. If I could do it again, I would've insisted on champagne flutes.”

I cock a brow at him. “You're assuming that Keir *has* champagne flutes.”

He frowns but nods. “Yeah, that's true. Keir definitely has some weird stuff... But I don't see him drinking a lot of champagne. If I hadn't brought this bottle from New York, we would be high and dry.”

My lips tip upward and I hold my cup out to him. “Well, cheers.”

He holds his cup out but doesn't tap it against my just yet. “What are we toasting to?” he asks.

I squint off across the water, listening to the low lapping sound of the water rising and falling on the shore.

“I'm not sure,” I say. “But it does seem to me that we could toast over almost anything in our lives. I can't think of anything that isn't going my way right now.”

His lips quirk. “That's fair. Well, here's to everything in our lives continuing to go right.”

He clinks his glass against mine and I smile as I take a sip of the foamy champagne. I move over to his side of the blanket, monopolizing his space and resting my thigh against his leg. He doesn't say anything but he does take my free hand. He laces our fingers together. For a while, we just look out over the lake and sit in silence.

A question bubbles up from my chest to my lips. “Am I just content right now? Is that what I'm feeling?”

Calum arches an eyebrow at me. “Maybe. Have you never been happy with your life before?”

I blush a little and slowly shake my head. “I don't think that I have, no.”

He looks thoughtful. “I guess I haven't ever felt that way either.” He casts his gaze over me and sips his wine. “I just feel calm. Is that how you feel?”

I lean my back against his chest and sigh. “Yeah. I guess things are just going well with us. Plus things at the ballet company are going well... My mom is finally out of my dad's house...” I wrinkle my nose. “The only thing I can even complain about is eating too many bagels and putting on weight from that. That's a pretty minor complaint.”

I can feel the reverberation of him chuckling through his chest. “You could stand to gain a couple of pounds, okay? I am as sensitive as any other dancer about weight, but I have noticed in the past that you were...”

He trails off and squints. I turn around and look at him, my lips pressing into a thin line.

“Be very careful what you are about to say.”

He shrugs a shoulder and sets his glass down, caressing my shoulder. “When you first moved into my apartment, I just thought that you were thin as a rail. That's all.

I exhale through my nose and roll my eyes. Turning back around to look out over the water, I shrug my shoulders. “What can I say? I got really into running while we were apart.”

Calum brushes my hair away from my shoulder and places a kiss just at the spot where my shoulder and my neck meet. I shiver, always responsive to every little touch from him.

“We are not apart now, are we?” he murmurs.

My lips curve upward. “No, we're definitely not.”

He places another kiss next to the first one. Then he stills for a moment. I hear him take a deep breath.

“This is getting pretty serious, isn't it?”

I'm a little taken aback by his question. I turn my head so that I can see his face.

“Our relationship?” I clarify.

He nods, his expression somber.

“Well... It's the most serious relationship I've ever been in. But then again, I've never lived with anybody. I've never been in love before. I've never done any of the things that we do on a regular basis. It's all new. It feels intense.” I frown a little. “But maybe it's supposed to feel intense?”

His hand drops down to my knee and he lazily explores the skin he finds there. “It has never been like this with anybody else that I've been with. I think that is unique to us.”

I purse my lips and scrunch my face up. “Still. It feels good. It definitely feels better to be together than to be apart.”

His lips find the curve of my neck again. He whispers against my skin. “It does.”

I shudder at that. I wonder if it will always feel this way. “This intense. This wonderful.”

“God, I hope so.” His lips pause against my skin. “I don't know. I would imagine that we will have our ups and downs. But I can say for sure that I love you. I want to be with you. And I can't imagine feeling differently than I do now.”

My skin suddenly breaks out into goose flesh. “Yeah?”

Instead of answering, he turns my head so that he can kiss my lips. It feels so good and so right, just being with him here, right now. I don't know for sure what the future holds or what kind of challenges we might face. But I do know that with Calum by my side, I feel more than ready for whatever life brings.

*W*e've barely touched down in New York city when I get the call from Lucas.

Picking up the phone call while I am hurrying Kaia into the back of my limo, I answer. "Hello?"

I hear him draw a long breath before he answers. "Calum, I'm calling you from the hospital. Anita died this morning in her sleep."

I slow my footsteps to a halt, pausing with a hand on the open back door of the limo. My heart squeezes uncomfortably in my chest. I don't say anything right away but my brain is abuzz.

Lucas pushes on, sounding frazzled. "Hello? Calum, you gotta say something so that I know that you heard me."

I clear my throat. "Yeah, I heard you. That's... sad, I guess."

I hear him heave a sigh. "It's been a long time coming. I don't suppose that you want to see her or anything, right?"

That gets my heart rate going faster. "No thanks, brother. Do you need me to do anything?"

"No. I wanted to make sure that you knew. Also to ask if you knew of any family she might have had. Otherwise, I think I'll skip the ceremony and the funeral and just have her cremated..."

I exhale. Then I slide into the back seat next to Kaia, closing the back door. I clear my throat, looking over to my girlfriend's preoccupied face. She's looking down at her phone, wholly absorbed.

"Calum?" Lucas prompts me again.

"Yeah. Uh, Anita had some family in California, I think. You might want call them and see about where you should bury her."

Kaia's brow puckers and she looks up, vaguely concerned.

"I'm all over it. Don't worry about it," Lucas assures me.

I glance at Kaia, my brows knitting. "Well, thanks for letting me know I guess."

"No problem. I should get going. I have a ton of people to talk to today."

He hangs up rather abruptly and I frown as I slide the phone into my pocket. The limo pulls away from the curb and I sigh heavily.

"That was Lucas. He called to tell me that Anita died."

Kaia's eyebrows rise. "Who?"

I realize suddenly that I haven't been keeping Kaia abreast of the Anita situation. As a matter of fact, I kept it very quiet. I frown.

"The woman that took us in after my mother passed away." I pause, licking my lips and glancing out the window. "She was also my first sexual encounter."

Silence reigns for half a minute. When I look over at Kaia, she is still blinking slowly.

"So... she was a pretty big part of your life, then?"

"No." I shake my head. "She was..." I glance away again. "It's complicated. But she was pretty abusive at the best of times."

Kaia reaches out and takes my hand, gripping it tightly. She looks at me, her gaze steady on my face. "I'm sorry to hear that she passed."

I shrug a shoulder and look forward, away from Kaia's searching gaze. "Don't be."

Kaia tugs at my hands, drawing my gaze back to her. "Is there anything that you need from me? Anything I can do?"

I shake my head and remain silent. But inside, I can feel a primal scream welling up and pushing at my throat.

Having Kaia mourn Anita would be way too much for me to handle.

The ride home is mercifully quick. I am clenching my fists by the time that Kaia and I get out of the car in downtown Manhattan. She keeps glancing at me nervously on the elevator ride up to the penthouse.

"You sure there isn't anything I can do?" she asks. "Maybe we should talk about Anita a little?"

It takes all my willpower to keep myself from glowering at Kaia. "I think I'm going to go work out. I need to be alone for a little bit."

Kaia's eyes widen but she just nods. "Okay. I'm here if you need me."

Leaving Kaia behind, I change my clothes and head to the now often neglected gym. I drill myself on burpees and free weights and then jump rope until I am drooping with exhaustion. The entire time, all I can think about is the first time that Anita undressed before me. How nervous I was, how guilty I felt, how I couldn't help but feel a little excitement shudder down my spine.

I drop the jump rope to the floor and put my hands on my knees, gasping for air. It feels like my knowledge of Anita's death is a poison in my veins, a toxin, something that I can exercise away. But clearly that's not true.

How have I handled deaths in the past?

Well, I didn't. Why mom's death passed without being mourned. Whatever I felt about my mother was all bundled up in Anita's seduction of me. And since then, I haven't ever had anybody close to me pass away.

I've kept my circle close knit, probably to prevent anybody being able to hurt me.

I shake myself and strip off my light jacket, heading to the shower because it's the only thing I can think of to do. I pass Kaia as I peel off my sweat soaked T-shirt on the way into my master bathroom.

She watches me with worried eyes but I don't know how to communicate the strangeness of what I feel.

Anger.

Anguish.

And even a little bit of sadness.

How do I say any of that to Kaia and have her understand?

I turn the shower on and lean my head against the glass walls, waiting for it to heat up. Kaia appears at the bathroom doorway, her expression unreadable. I glance back at her, giving her a bitter smile.

"You don't have to check on me or anything. I'm a grown up."

She crosses her arms and leans against the doorway. "I know."

Feeling strangely naked, I grab a towel and wrap it around my waist. If Kaia notices my sudden shyness, she doesn't remark upon it. She just tilts her head to the side.

"Can I ask you a question about something you said earlier?"

I can't even bear to look at her so I just shrug, facing the shower wall. If only the damn thing will heat up more quickly, I could get away from these prying questions. But the shower is only just beginning to steam up. So I'm stuck.

“Sure,” I say. I try to keep my expression emotionless even though it's not what I feel inside.

“Earlier when we were in the car? You called Anita abusive. And I was wondering... well, what that means exactly.”

I risk a glance back over my shoulder. Kaia is still there, waiting so patiently. I suck in a deep breath and take a long time to expel it from my lungs.

“Anita was the first woman I ever had sex with. It happened when I was thirteen, just after my mother had died.” I take a deep breath and glance away from her searching gaze. “I don't think it would be considered strictly consensual in today's terms.”

Her eyes widen. She bites her lower lip, clearly taken aback by my statement.

“Oh, Calum... I had no idea. I'm so sorry. That must've been terrible for you.”

I can't even bring myself to shrug. I feel like I'm made of granite, rooted to the ground where I stand. Kaia approaches me, gently touching my arm. I push out a shaky breath, looking at the ground.

“I'm really sorry.” She squeezes my wrist.

“It's okay. I am glad that she is dead, actually. Is that weird to say?”

I feel her hug me delicately from behind. “Does it matter whether I think it is weird or not? In my view, you can feel however you want to feel.”

I lean back into her touch for just a second, then straighten. “I should get in the shower.”

Kaia peers around my shoulder, her eyes scanning my face. “Can I come in with you?”

I ball up my face. “I don't really want shower sex right now.”

“Is that all I'm good for these days? I think you should let me join you just so that you don't have to be alone.”

I heave a sigh and shrug one shoulder. “Whatever makes you happy, beauty.”

To my surprise, Kaia doesn't say a word. She just strips off her dress, throwing it on the cool tile floor. I shed my towel and step into the hot, steamy spray of the water.

She's right behind me, leaning around me to grab the soap. When I don't say a word, she takes the soap and runs it over my shoulders and down my back, down my abs and to my thighs. She is very careful to avoid anything that would be perceived as sexual.

For some reason, that drives me crazy. I'm angry and sad and about a heartbeat away from turning into a raging monster. And here she is, being so gentle, touching me so delicately that I could scream.

I turn with a growl and grab her hands, leaning down and kissing her so fiercely that she gasps.

It only takes two steps for me to pin her against the wall and run my big hands over her breasts, her ass, to pull her leg up around my body and lift her.

When I penetrate her, her body isn't fully ready for me. Her pussy isn't slick with need yet. But she just groans and pulls me down to her mouth, kissing me insistently, thrusting against my cock. I groan and lift her higher, starting to move my hips and thrust back into her.

Fuck, she's so god damn good. So tight. So fucking perfect, moaning my name like an incantation. I worship her, kneeling at her altar, my breath ripped from my lungs again and again in steamy pants. My hands are everywhere, touching her hot wet curves, making her moan like she has never moaned for another man.

“Oh Calum,” she whispers into my neck. “Fuck. Fuck! I’m going to—“

She cries out and shatters into a million tiny pieces, her pussy spasming, bringing me right to the edge.

Just before I come, I feel like I’m engaging in the most pure and holy act. And for a while, I forget everything else in the world even exists. I am so wrapped up in Kaia’s sweet body that I can’t think about anything else.

I

'm walking down the vast, echoing halls at the New York ballet company, my head in the clouds. Specifically I'm wondering how to deal with Callum and his apparently immense grief. I am so sore today after having pretty rough sex four times yesterday. I only managed to escape the apartment by saying that I had to practice my dance moves.

I mean, that is true but also a clear excuse.

So I'm here this morning, even though no one else will probably be here until ten or eleven. Lifting my duffel bag onto my shoulder, I glance up and see Ella's dark head of curls turning down the hallway away from me. I grab my bag and pick up speed as I call her name.

"Ella! Hey, wait!"

Her head turns and then she pauses, scrunching up her face. "Hey. Why are you here? The rest of the company is off this morning."

I run the last couple of steps up to her, checking out her ankle. She is wearing a bulky cast on her lower leg and walking with a pair of crutches. I frown a little.

"I'm just here because I needed an excuse to avoid my boyfriend." I roll my eyes. "I am the worst girlfriend ever. What about you? Why are you here?"

She shoves her hands into the pockets of the big off white, knit cardigan that she is wearing. "I came in to see the director in charge. I don't know if you've met him yet or not? He's named Mr. Park. He's just a temporary fill in for the position, I think."

I shake my head. "No, I can't say that I've met him. Things have been really insane for the last ten days. I barely even know what ballet we are supposed to be performing."

Ella's mouth pulls down and I catch a glimmer of dismay in her eyes. "Oh. I see."

My brow puckers. "Hey, why don't you come hang out with me for a minute while I warm up in the dance studio? You can fill me in on everything that is been going on with you. It feels like it's been forever since we have seen each other."

Her lips twist bitterly but she only nods. "All right. You lead the way."

It's only a minute's walk down the hall to get to the dance studios. I pick the first one, holding the door open for Ella to hobble through with her crutches. I toss my bag down, toeing off my shoes. She drags a chair over from the corner and sits down with heavy sigh.

I sit down and spread my legs out, stretching them gently. I try to put the fact that I weighed myself earlier and managed to gain three more pounds out of my mind.

Ella blows out a breath and sits back in the chair. "The doctors say that I'll probably never dance again. Officially, I mean."

I give her a sharp look. "I was there when the doctor told you that. And she said that it was uncertain. I think you're being overdramatic at this particular juncture."

She shoot me a glare. "I'm talking about my occupational therapist. The doctor that you saw when I was in the hospital was just my surgeon."

I scrunch up my face and stretch the other leg. "Well, you still don't know. There are a ton of dancers with way worse injuries than you that have miraculously recovered."

She scrunches up her nose, looking discouraged. "Let's change the subject," she suggests. "Tell me why you're here again? Something about avoiding Calum?"

I pull a face. "I shouldn't have said that. He is going through some heavy emotional stuff. Someone in his life died. I should be more supportive."

The waistband of my tights is starting to really bother me. I roll it down a little and hope that my discomfort is temporary. Ella cocks her head at me.

"Is Calum like..." She trails off. "Actually, I don't even know what to guess. I still can't get the image of him screaming at our entire dance class

out of my head. How does someone like Calum even express heavy emotional stuff?"

My lips quirk. "Let's just say that we had sex four times in a row yesterday, until we were both exhausted."

"Oh," Ella says. She gives a tiny laugh. "God, are you two perfect for each other or what?"

"Well, I fled here rather than face another day of it. I mean, I love the guy, don't get me wrong. But... I guess I'm just glad that rough sex burns like a ton of calories. I need all the help I can get in that department."

"Ugh, I can't hear a ballerina complaining that she is too fat. It just doesn't compute to me anymore."

I roll my eyes. "You'll change your tune soon enough, I bet."

Ella glances at her watch and frowns. "I have to get going. I have a doctor's appointment soon. I'm going see what they can do about this cast situation. Maybe they can like lighten it or take it off or something." She stands up. "Tell Calum that I said I'm sorry for his loss. If you want to, that is."

I smile at her and wave my fingers. "Be good. I am waiting for the day that you come back to the dance studio, okay?"

She shakes her head but I see her smile as she heads out the door. "See you later," she calls over her shoulder.

I smile and stretch for another minute or so, then start standing up. But as I move my legs, there is a distinct ripping sound. My tights ripped from my crotch back to my butt under my leotard. I freeze and blood rushes to my cheeks.

"Oh God," I mutter as I start to sink back to the floor. This pair of tights is a brand new one, the last of a multi pack of different colors. All the other colors are still intact in my laundry basket.

My eyes fill with tears. This is just the icing on top of the cake for me. First Ella gets injured. Then I found out that Calum is suffering through something that I can't help him with. And then on top of all that, I have gained so much weight that I don't fit into the same tights that I've been wearing all summer.

A sob rises in my chest and wells up, spilling out of my mouth. I hunch my shoulders and wrap my arms around myself, feeling like the fattest and dumbest ballerina ever to grace these halls.

I don't try to fight the tears. Rather I let them come, sobbing irrationally for a little while. It's been some time since I've had a good long cry and this seems like as good a time as any to let it all out.

And that's when Manon opens the door, stepping in. She takes one look at my face, her eyes widening with surprise, and she freezes in place. For second, I sit here and stare back at her, my sobs subsiding somewhat.

Manon looks at me and I can tell that she's trying to decide between asking what is wrong with me or just backing out of the room. Honestly, I hope that she decides to just make herself scarce. But a few seconds later she steps in the studio, closes the door calmly, and drops her bag.

She turns to me, approaching with a cautious look on her face. "You know what I'm going to ask, don't you?"

I sniffle, my breathing all messed up from crying. "You are going ask me what's wrong, I assume."

She purses her lips and comes to sit beside me, pulling her legs underneath herself as gracefully as you please. I can't even look at her, so regal and dark haired and lithe. She wraps her arms around her knees and considers me carefully.

"Lay it on me. After all, I owe you one. Remember when I freaked out and you found me in the shoe room?"

I take a deep breath and give her a tiny nod. "I do. I don't want you to laugh at me though."

Manon's lips curve upward just a bit. "I won't. I swear."

I exhale. "I'm getting fat. Like, measurably fat. As in I can tell by the fact that my clothes don't fit and I can tell by my weight on the scale. I thought that it was just a few extra pounds that I put on... You know. Young love, crazy hours, early morning bagels..."

Her gaze narrows on my face. "I guess so..."

I flap hand at her. "Well, it's not just that. I've been really watching my figure, counting every calorie that goes in my mouth. And yet I'm still putting on weight. It's crazy. Doesn't even make sense."

Manon frowns. "You said new love... You are on birth control, right?"

My heart thuds in my chest. Suddenly, my lips are very dry. I try to dampen them before I speak.

"Well... Yeah. I mean, I've been pretty religious about taking the pill for a few months now." I intake a shuddering breath. "I'm pretty sure that can't be it. I mean..."

She arches a brow. “Really? It doesn't sound like you are sure.”

“It has to be something else. Maybe weight gain from taking the pill or stress or something...” My eyes flit off to the corner of the room as I try to make a list of what could be at the root of my weight gain.

While I'm trying to figure it out, Manon consults her smartwatch. “It's still pretty early. Not even eight. Why don't we just take a pregnancy test to be on the safe side? Or I can make an appointment for you today with the company doctor if you'd rather be safe.”

I frown. “I don't want to bother Dr. Partridge with my nonsense.”

Manon casts her gaze over my body. “It doesn't sound like nonsense. It sounds like you have a legitimate complaint. Why don't you just take a pregnancy test and if that isn't it, we can figure out what the next step is from there?”

I roll my eyes and sniffle. “Where would we even get a pregnancy test right now?”

She gives me a look. “Are you serious? This is a dance company. There are literally a stack of them in the shoe room and in the girls bathroom down the hall... Don't worry, we've got you covered either way.”

I glance at her suspiciously. “Why are you being so nice to me? Are you just doing this because it will give you something to tell all the other dancers about?”

She shakes her head and rises to her feet, offering me a hand. “I hope that you would do the same thing for me if our positions were reversed. That's all. Besides, if Lucas knew that you were in trouble and I did nothing to help you, that would not reflect very well on me.”

I accept her help up, squinting a little. “Wait, are you talking about Lucas Fordham?”

“Yep. Lucas and I are... seeing each other, I guess you could say. And he's told me that you matter a great deal to his brother. So really, you could say that helping you is selfish.” She gives me a hint of a smile.

I cross my arms, suddenly curious. “You're seeing Lucas? Did you guys meet at a ballet or something?”

A faint blush rises in Manon's cheeks. “We... we hang out at the same places, I guess. We are friends. Or friendly, at least...”

I open my mouth to ask another question but Manon doesn't wait around for that. Instead she grabs my elbow and starts hauling me toward the door.

“Come on. There's no use in waiting. Just pee on a stick and then will know if we need to make a doctor's appointment or not.” She looks thoughtful for just a moment as she pulls the door open. “Well, technically I think we will need to make one whether you are pregnant or not. The if we still can't figure out why you are putting on the pounds...”

I slow my steps, my mind whirling. What are the chances that I actually might be pregnant? And if I am, letting Manon know about it is the last thing I want. It really limits my choices if everyone knows that I am carrying a baby.

If I decide that I don't want it, there is considerable embarrassment in having people know that I had an abortion.

I stiffen, resisting her pulling me out the door. “No, it's better if I do this properly and actually go see the doctor. In fact, I think I will just make that appointment right now. Rather than go through all this melodrama, I should just get right down to the source. Don't you agree?”

Manon stops in her tracks, turning and looking at me. “Are you sure?”

“Yep.” I nod, waving at my face. “Totally sure. Also, I'm might be PMSing right now, so...”

Manon rolls her eyes. “Okay. I won't force you. But if this story finds its way back to Lucas's ears, I would like him to hear that I did everything I could to help you in your time of need.”

“You can help me walk down to the doctor's office and leave a note on his door. And then maybe you can teach me that combination I saw you doing the other day... The one that ends with a grand jeté and two super-fast pirouettes?”

Manon smirks and jerks her head toward the doctor's office at the end of the hallway. “Let's go do this and then we can talk about whether or not you can even handle that combination.”

I smirk, composing my face into a careful mask. “I can handle anything you can, Manon.”

She snorts and starts walking. I follow her, my heart pounding and my thoughts scattered.

I come in from a long run to find Kaia on the kitchen floor, playing with her cat and a ball of paper. She looks up, smiling at me. I slow my pace, unable to bear how happy she looks right now. It's almost too much for my heavy heart.

"Hey stranger," she jokes. "You were gone for a few hours. I was starting to worry about you."

"I was just blowing off some steam," I say. "Besides, it looks like you found someone to entertain you."

I nod at her cat, reaching out a hand and rubbing his soft scruff. She smiles at the way that her cat sniffs my hand, suspicion warring with wanting to be petted.

"This is the first time that he has actually ventured into your apartment. I didn't want to make a big production about bringing him over here, but I was starting to worry. Luckily, I walked into the kitchen here and he was staring at me from the countertop."

After getting a couple of strokes in, the cat decides that he's had enough and wanders off.

I sigh and walk to the fridge, pulling it open and grabbing a bottle of water. The sound of the fridge closing sends her cat skittering across the kitchen floor.

She stretches her hands over her head and yawns a little. "I think he just needs a little more time before he is affectionate toward you."

I uncap the water and take a long pull. I toss the plastic cap onto the counter and Kaia's cat bounds onto the counter as well, following the little

piece of plastic. He proceeds to hunt that piece of plastic down and swipes it off the countertop, quickly following it to the floor.

My lips lift a bit as I watch him. “Okay, I’ll admit it. That is pretty funny.”

Her lips curved upward as she watches the cat. “You might not love him yet, but he is a part of the family. Where I go, he goes.”

“The family?” I roll my eyes. “What family?”

Kaia shoots me a look. “You know what I mean.”

For some reason, I can’t help but find her words antagonizing. I shoot her a tiny glare.

“No, it’s obvious I don’t. Why don’t you spell it out? Be very explicit for me because otherwise I might not understand,” I reply sarcastically.

She frowns a little at my tone. Standing up, Kaia scoops up Exupéry and rocks him in her arms.

Seeing her being so affectionate towards another living creature makes my stomach curl. I open my mouth, intending to crack a joke. But instead, the words that pour out sound pointed and sniping.

“What is it with you and that three legged cat? You know he is damaged permanently, right?”

She glares at me, a little hurt seeping into her expression. “I told you. I collect broken things.”

I chug a little more water, leveling the with a glare. “That explains so much about why you’re with me, I guess. You need a little project and I am the biggest, most obvious walking wounded you could find.”

Kaia’s eyebrows shoot up. “What is your problem? I know that you are upset because Anita passed away...”

I cut her off. “I’m not upset about it,” I snap. “I’m just saying that you are probably wasting your time trying to fix that cat. Or fix any of the other damaged things in your life.” I screw up my face. “I should probably include myself. I’m the biggest waste of time in all of your collection.”

She pushes her cheek out with her tongue, looking very aggravated. “Calum, seriously. Don’t talk about yourself that way. It’s hurtful to you... but also kind of hurtful to me. Like it makes me seem like I’m stupid for even trying to be with you. Be serious for a minute.”

My cheeks warm. “I am being serious. I am the most broken person that you know. I am always going to be damaged. I can never have my own kids

because I know that I am already fucked up. I'm telling you Kaia, I am a dead end."

I slam the water bottle down on the kitchen counter and turn on my heel, stalking off toward the bedroom. A thundercloud grows over my head as I strip off my running clothes and I turn on the shower.

The whole time I'm in the shower, I'm thinking of the worst case scenario, of where my life could end up. Hell, I could screw things up even more with Kaia to the point that she leaves me. I could be alone. It doesn't seem very far-fetched as of late.

By the time I get out of the shower and wrap myself in thick white towel, I have worked myself into quite a lather over the fact that I might eventually drive her away.

When I step out of the bathroom, she is standing in the doorway that leads to the hall. Her arms are crossed and she has a look on her face that tells me she is mad.

This is it. This is how it starts. I can feel it. I am going to drive her away sooner or later. No one can love me for very long because of who I am, because of my very essence.

Dropping my towel on the hardwood floor, I stalk into my closet. Kaia follows me, her footsteps all but silent on the floor. I scrounge for a pair of sweatpants and T-shirt to put on, feeling the black thundercloud over my head swelling in size. When I am dressed, I turn around and Kaia is still right there.

"Well?" I growl.

Her lips thin. "Calum, you are normally not exactly a people person. In fact, most people are afraid of you. And rightfully so. But lately, since we have returned from vacation, you've been even more..." She trails off, her face tightening. "Difficult."

I barrel past her, almost pushing her out the doorway when I stalk into the bedroom once more.

"Are you making some point? Or do you just like taunting me when I'm already mad?"

She follows me, touching my inner elbow. Even though I am expecting her touch, it makes me jump. My teeth are set on edge.

I round on her, not even pretending to hold myself in check anymore.

"What do you want??" I demand. "I've given you everything I have to give. Can you not just leave me alone now??"

Kaia withdraws her touch, her gaze growing hard. “I know that you’re going through something right now, Calum. I get that. But I can’t handle it when you’re taking it out on me. Earlier you were taking it out on the cat. You are looking around and lashing out at anyone that’s around because you are hurting.”

I interrupt her. “And? It’s my apartment. It’s my life. If I want to yell at everybody, I’ll damn well do it.”

She shoots me a glare. “It’s not fair to me. I think you should see someone about your grief. A professional. A therapist or a counselor.”

I give a surprise cough. “A shrink? No thank you. I’ll just deal with it like I always have. Eventually, things will even out.”

“And what am I supposed to do in the meantime? Huh? Just fade away and hope you don’t notice my presence? Maybe check into a hotel for a couple of weeks?”

“If I’m so bad, maybe you should. Maybe you should just go. And if you return, please have a better attitude.”

Her eyes widen. “Me? My attitude is fine!” She presses her lips together and shakes her head. “That will not fly with me. You can’t just go around yelling at people. You can’t yell at me. I didn’t even do anything!”

I open my arms wide, gesturing all around me. “You’re in my space! What do you expect?”

She is quiet for a quarter of a minute, clearly fighting her own rising anger. “You know what, you’re right. I am in your space. So I think I will go to get my cat and head back into my apartment until you calm down. When you can talk to me without losing your shit, come find me. Until then I don’t think I want to see you.”

Her final words fall like a hammer to my heart. I stare at her, surprised, as she stalks from the room. Less than a minute later, I hear the door between our apartments slam.

My temper erupts is just then.

“Fuck!” I scream. I punch the wall, putting a fist-shaped hole in it. “God dammit!”

That’s it. I’ve driven Kaia away. Somehow my greatest fear has suddenly reared its ugly head and become true.

J

t's been two days since I've seen Kaia. I took the majority of that time to sulk and generally be self-absorbed. But now I've hit my limit.

That is to say, I realize that I missed her smile and her funny little way of laughing after she hears a joke. Not to mention, I woke up earlier with a raging erection that has stuck with me throughout most of the day.

Now it's seven in the evening and I am ready to get my girlfriend back.

I finish getting dressed, wearing my new tuxedo and finish tying my bow tie. Then I stride into her apartment, a long white plastic garment bag in my hand. She looks up from her iPad when I strut into her bedroom, frowning a little. I toss the bag onto the bed and give her a hard look.

"Get dressed. I'm taking you out."

She arches a brow. "Just like that? No apology? You must think that I've forgiven you already somehow."

I shrug a shoulder. "It doesn't really matter whether or not you have forgiven me. Put the dress on. Get ready. I'm going to take you out and shower you with attention and admiration. You know, in lieu of an apology."

She stands up and crosses her arms, looking irritated. "No."

"No?"

"That's right. I want the apology first. Then we can talk about whether or not I will be seen out with you."

I cross the room and grab her hand, pulling her snugly against my body. She looks up at me and I look dead into her eyes. "I'm sorry. Okay?"

Her eyes tighten. "What are you apologizing for, exactly?"

I sigh silently. “I’m sorry that I am a monumental fucking asshole. I shouldn’t have taken my feelings out on you. I was wrong. I’m sorry.”

Her eyes scan my face. “What about all the things that you said about me being in your space? That’s why I am still over here in my own apartment.”

I wince. “I didn’t mean it. I’m sorry.”

Kaia’s expression softens just a bit. “If you regret asking me to move in, you can just say so. I can move my stuff back in here.”

I cradle her face in my big hands and heave a frustrated sigh. “Please don’t do that. Okay? I overreacted. You obviously have as much right to the apartment as I do. I just... I lost it a little. Again, I am really sorry. And I am glad that you live with me.”

She stares up at me for a few more seconds before I see a gentle blush spreading across the apples of her cheeks. “Are you a hundred percent sure?”

I place a chaste kiss on her lips. “I’ve never been any more certain of anything in my life.”

She sighs quietly and nods. “Okay.”

I slide my hands down to her waist and press her soft body into mine. Although I didn’t mean it to be sexual, the motion turns into grinding my cock against her belly.

“I have to say, I do love making up with you...” I say, looking at her body lasciviously.

“Being in a fight with you stresses me the hell out. I can’t believe you are just over it all the sudden.”

I sweep my palm up her side and cup one of her breasts. “I’m thinking with my dick now. If I just always did what my body wanted me to, we would never fight.”

She rolls her eyes but I can see the hint of humor in her expression. “You have a one track mind. Should I get dressed or not?”

I wiggle my eyebrows at her. “Maybe you should let me watch while you change.”

“You are literally the worst,” she says with a laugh. “Give me a few minutes to wrap up what I am doing and then I’m all yours for the rest of the evening.”

I growl a little at her words and step in for another taste of her unbelievably sweet mouth. Then I release Kaia and move back, raising my

hands.

“I’ll be waiting for you in the living room...” I start walking backwards and she giggles a little, shaking her head me.

When Kaia finally steps into the living room, my jaw drops. She’s wearing a slinky black silk dress that shows off her cleavage and there’s a slit up the side that gives me a sneak peek of her fantastically muscled thigh. My cock instantly goes hard as a rock. She is wearing a simple length of gold chain around her neck.

“Holy shit,” I utter. “Good God. You are absolutely radiant.”

Her smile dims just for a second but she soon recovers. “Thanks. I would guess that based on my outfit, we are going somewhere special for dinner?”

I am too busy ogling her to give her a proper answer. “Uh-huh,” I mumble. My fingers are itching with the need to touch her smooth skin through that silk.

After hustling her into a floor length midnight colored sable, I hurry us both down to the waiting limousine. As the driver takes off, I pull her coat aside and find the side slit in her dress, my fingers exploring and probing gently. Just teasing her skin, nothing more. She bites her lip and looks at me from beneath her long eyelashes, with a mixture of humor and a naughty bit of desire.

When we finally pull up outside the private New York peer, I watch her face as she climbs out of the limo. Her eyes widen as she takes in the site of the scene I have prepared just for us.

Thousands of string lights lead down toward the water line. There I have set up a table for two, laid with crisp white linen and sparkling glassware. Off to the right, a string quartet is set up and as I gather her hands in mine, they begin to play. She looks up at me with such surprise.

“Oh, Calum,” she whispers. “You did this for me?”

I nod. “Just for you, beauty. I hope that it will make my apology mean more.”

Her lips lifts at the corners. Her eyes glitter with what I can only hope is love. “Thank you. Your apology was already heard and accepted, but this pushes it over the top.”

I jerk my head towards the table. “Come on. Let’s celebrate.”

I walk her over to her seat, carefully pulling her chair out for her. She lets me to seat her and smiles as I sit down across from her. I gesture with

one hand and a waiter in full tie and tails sweeps in with the champagne bucket.

I smirk at her as the waiter fills our glasses to the brim. I notice that she frowns a little as she accepts the champagne flute he hands her.

I raise my glass and toast her. "To us."

She looks vaguely uncomfortable as she puts the wine to her lips. Her sip is very quick and she soon puts the glass down and pushes it away.

I smack my lips and frown a little. "What's wrong? Is there something wrong with the wine?"

She gives me a small smile and reassures me. "No, I'm just not really in the mood for it. I have to dance early in the morning tomorrow."

"Well, that's never stopped you before, but far be it for me to tell you when you should and should not drink."

She smiles again and pulls the corners of her mink coat up higher. She changes the subject, using a bright voice. I notice her awkward behavior but I let it pass.

Hell, hasn't she done the same for me time and time again?

"What's for dinner?" she asks.

I raise my hand again and the waiter reappears with two silver dome-topped plates. When he removes the covers with a flourish, he bows.

"Lobster thermidor, filet mignon, freshly shelled peas, and asparagus with lump crab meat."

Kaia brings her hand up to her lips. Her eyes are wide as she looks at the lavish meal before her. "Gosh," she says. "You went all out. I don't think I've ever had lobster thermidor before."

She shivers as she picks up her fork. I frown and turn around to the waiter. "Can we get some heaters set up for the lady? She's shivering."

The waiter bows and makes himself scarce for a moment. I look back at Kaia and see her giving me a knowing smile.

"Do you have to do that?"

I pick up my fork and shrug my shoulders. "I don't have to do anything ever, really. But if it makes you more comfortable, why not?"

She graces me with another small smile and picks at her lobster. Heaters are brought out and pointed at Kaia.

We progress through the meal, making small talk. I can't help but notice the fact that her behavior is really subdued the entire time.

Not to mention the fact that she doesn't eat anything except for a few peas.

I set down my fork, trying not to get angry about it. "Please don't tell me that you are on a restrictive new diet, I say."

She looks up at me, a little surprised. "What? No? I'm just not that hungry. I... I ate right before you came into my apartment."

I squint at her. I'm pretty sure that she's not being exactly truthful but I'm not willing to make a big deal out of it. After all, I am still trying to get back in her good graces.

I beckon to the waiter. "You can take these plates away."

He clears the plates and we are left with a smooth expanse of linen stretching between us.

"I got you something."

I reach in my pocket. Kaia's eyes widen.

She blurts out, "You're not going to propose, are you?"

I frown at her. "Well now I'm definitely not going to," I joke.

She looks so alarmed that I feel a little bad.

I wave her at her. "Relax. I wasn't going to propose. I did get you something though."

I pull a small black velvet box out of my pocket and open it, handing it to her. In it are a pair of priceless teardrop diamond earrings, as big and showy as you please.

Kaia gasps a little bit and her hand goes to her heart. "Oh, Calum..." She looks up at me, her eyes filled with wonderment. "They're incredible. Thank you."

I rock back in my chair, my lips pursing with a dark kind of humor. "What would you have done if I would've gotten down on one knee and proposed to you, I wonder?"

Her cheeks flush. "I just think that we should maybe talk about engagement and what it would be like to be married before you actually do something like that. In my mind, a girl should never be completely surprised by a proposal."

My eyebrows arch. "Is that so?"

She turns an even deeper shade of red. "Yes. That is how I feel."

"Well..." I lean forward and put my elbows on the table, squinting at her. "Let's talk about that, then. I'd like to be able to propose, if the moment seems right."

Kaia blinks at me, looking as surprised as she has ever been. “Oh!” I wait for her to say more, but nothing seems forthcoming
“That’s okay.” I prompt her. “So what are we supposed to talk about, exactly?”

She swallows and looks down at her hands, studying her nails. “I don’t know. I mean... Marriage is a big step. We could talk about the importance of fidelity and honesty. But I think we both know that part. I guess... I’m just wondering what exactly you think the role of the future Mrs. Fordham would be.”

I lean back and throw my arm over my chair. “I don’t know. I mean, I can imagine a hundred different things. I think that it would just depend on what you want. For now, and for the foreseeable future, it would be a big wedding and a change in name for you. I could see you at some point joining multiple charitable boards. But that’s probably years in the future.”

I pause, watching her face. She doesn’t react outwardly so I just push on. “Other than that?” I shrug. “I don’t know. What you want me to say?”

Kaia still doesn’t meet my eye. Her lips thin and she sighs a little. “I don’t know either. I just...”

That’s when I notice that she is trying to hold back tears.

“Whoa, whoa. What’s going on?”

She shakes her head and her lips compress into a tight circle. I sweep around the table, pulling her out of her chair and into my arms.

“What is wrong?” I utter, completely taken aback.

She licks her lips and looks up at me, dashing away tears. “Nothing. Nothing is wrong. Everything is fine. I just... I think I’m just overwhelmed by the talk of marriage.”

Cupping her cheek, I gently lift her head and lower my lips to hers. Her kiss is sweet and sultry, her fingers digging into the lapels of my tux. She pushes up on her tiptoes, desperate to get closer to me. I respond by sweeping her off her feet and carrying her towards the limo, my mind settling on the back seat as where we are going to fuck.

We are too wrapped up in each other to say anything else and that is okay in my book.

*W*e barely make into the backseat of the limo before I start kissing Kaia and trailing my hands down her body. I can't not touch her. I push her coat off of her body, urging her back on the leather seat of the limousine, and move closer.

"I just can't get enough of you," I hiss.

She moans with this breathy little voice that makes me wild and crazy.
"That works out, because I feel the same way."

Shaken to my very core, I drag my thumb across her lower lip, then follow the caress with the press of my lips against hers. She responds immediately, ravenous for my touch.

Fuck.

Echoing her sentiment with an appetite all my own, I press her back against the seat, trailing kisses down her neck. I grab her by the waist and spread her thighs, bringing us together. My mouth descends upon hers, hungry and demanding.

She opens her mouth and grips me with her thighs, drawing me in without a second of hesitation. Her hands slip around my neck, fingernails lightly scoring my tux jacket. I palm one of her breasts, then pinch her nipple, drawing a cry from her lips.

I trail kisses down her jaw, skipping over her neck, and bend down to nuzzle the space between her breasts. I feel her legs wrap around me, her heels digging into the backs of my legs, pulling me as close as possible.

I reach down and hike her pretty dress up, finding her bare underneath. I groan as I rip off her dress, kissing her exposed breasts. I know I'm not being delicate with her, but I'm too entranced to care.

She doesn't seem to mind, her head thrown back. She rolls her head from one side to the other. "Fuck, Calum. Nobody knows how to touch me but you," she whispers.

"You're goddamn right," I say, smirking as I kiss her bare skin.

She starts making these little *ohhh* sounds that slay me me. Every second I'm not inside her I think I die a little.

"Fuck. I need to you her, right this second," I tell her.

She kisses me and I bite her lower lip. She grabs my head and bites me on the neck, which I swear makes my cock pulse.

"Talk dirty to me again," she whispers. Her words are another turn on.

"Fuck!" I grit out. "You are such a bad girl, beauty."

I squeeze one of her breasts hard, and she gasps.

"Bad enough to get punished?" she whispers.

"Ohhh fuck," I say, pushing her down against the floor. I look at her for a second, searching her face. "You don't know what you're offering to me."

She struggles under me, trying to push me off. "And yet, here I am, offering it."

I bring my hand up to her neck, fitting my fingers around the slim white column of her neck. I apply just a little bit of pressure, making her gasp and writhe beneath me. When I release her, she tries to pull me closer for a kiss. I allow it for a moment, but then I pull back. There is much more I want to do to her.

I move back, kneeling on the seat. My tuxedo is only getting in my way; it's the work of less than a minute for me to rip it off my body. Then I'm bare before her eyes.

She looks at me like a strange god, something to be studied and worshiped. I fist my cock, drawing her attention to it. It jumps and twitches at her glance. She looks up at me, biting her lip.

"Can I taste you?" she asks quietly, seeming unsure.

"Fuck," I huff out a breath. "Now that you said it, you don't have any choice."

She bites her lip and a sly smile appears on her face. She licks her lips, preparing for my taste.

God, could Kaia be any sexier?

I reach down and stroke my cock with one hand. Her eyes twinkle a bit, and she pushes herself up on the leather seat.

"I have been waiting to get a taste of your cock all night..."

She reaches out, brushing her hand along my length. I grit my teeth as pre-cum leaks from the tip of my cock.

“Choke on it,” I say, my own mouth watering. “Gag on my dick, beauty.”

She presses her free hand against my chest, turning me onto my back. I go willingly, trying not to flutter my eyes closed as she moves down, kissing as she goes.

When Kaia circles her wet tongue around the head of my cock, I can’t breathe for a second. She shifts so that she’s on her knees and scoots down, sitting between my legs.

Then she quickly takes almost my entire length into her mouth at once, swallowing me, gagging a little.

“Fuuuuuck!” I cry out. “Fucking hell. Kaia, you’re so unbelievably hot when your mouth is full of my cock.”

Swallowing, I look down at her heart-shaped face. Her pouty lips part as I guide my cock to her mouth. The second I touch my cock to her lips, the sensitive head probing the wet heat of her mouth, I have to close my eyes for a moment.

My dick twitches, and it takes everything in me not to just bury myself in her hot mouth. I put my hand in her hair, gripping it at its base. It is very hard not to just let go and fuck her mouth and throat. She wipes at her mouth, taking a moment to breathe.

“Be still,” she warns. “Try not to move.”

She shifts again, putting her hands on my thighs and opens her mouth once more, taking me in as deep as she can. Her mouth is incredible, her throat even better and so much tighter. I thrust once and she chokes. Her nails bite into my thighs but it doesn’t discourage me in the slightest.

She pulls back, rolling out the velvety tip of her tongue. It caresses the head of my cock and sends tiny lightning bolts of electricity down to my feet. My toes curl.

“Fuuuuuuck,” I whisper. She nudges my hand out of the way, closing her little fist around my cock. My hand tightens in her hair as she sinks her mouth down on my dick again.

She starts to work her head forward and back, fucking me oh so slowly. I groan as she picks up the pace a little, closing my eyes and leaning my head back.

Usually when I'm fucking a girl's pussy, I'm in a position of complete control. I can stop or slow down as often as I want, which helps me to keep from blowing my load before I'm ready. Even with throat-fucking, I am in control more than I am now.

And control is something I desperately need to have, especially now. Especially with Kaia.

I can't scare her off of going down by grabbing her and fucking her throat. And as much as I'd like to cum in her mouth, I know that I can't. It's too much.

"Fuckkkk," I hiss. Her mouth feels incredible, it's going to be hard to restrain myself. "Okay, okay. You have to stop, otherwise I'm going to finish in your mouth."

I gently grab her face and push her back. She sits back on her heels, wiping at her mouth with the back of her hand.

"You taste so fucking good, baby," she says, her eyes scanning my face. She licks her lips. For a second, my eyes are on her mouth, watching her tongue.

Yeah, I would've finished there without a problem.

"Your mouth is incredible." I pin her onto her back. "I just didn't want to come in your throat when your pussy is hot, wet, and ready for me to fucking stretch it out."

She blushes for a second. Pulling her up onto the leather seat again, I switch our positions so that she is below me. I grab her knees and force them apart, leaning down to kiss her breasts. Then I go straight for her pussy, spreading it with two fingers, and licking her clit.

Kaia cries out and buries her hands in my hair, her back bowing. I trace figure eights around her clit and dip my tongue into her pussy, loving the scent and taste of her. Just as she gets worked up, her juices flowing, I press her knees up and lick my way around the tiny pucker of her ass.

"Oooh!" she cries, startled.

I kiss and lick it for a second, penetrating her ass with the tip of my tongue. Then I break away, kissing her inner thighs, kissing and biting her breasts.

"I want you to touch yourself again," I whisper in her ear. "While I'm taking you from behind, I want you to make yourself come."

She nods eagerly and I flip her over. She braces herself on her knees and elbows, showing her pretty pussy and ass to me. I grasp my cock, pressing

the head to her entrance.

“Touch yourself,” I order. She reaches under her body and starts to play with her clit.

I plunge inside her and hear her gasp. She feels so hot and so tight that I have to go slow, otherwise I’ll come right away.

“Oh my god,” she gasps. “Calum, your cock feels so good.”

I grab her hips and use them as leverage while I fuck her, working my cock in and out of her pussy. She begins to tighten her innermost muscles even more as she plays with her clit. I focus, closing my eyes, and try to hit her g-spot every time I thrust.

Finally, she bursts, coming with a shout. I speed up as soon as I feel her begin to spasm, letting myself pound into her like a jackhammer. She cries out my name, which has never sounded better.

I feel my cock start to twitch and pulse as I drive home again and again. I feel like I’m coming like a fucking fountain, her pussy milking my cock for everything it’s worth.

“Fuck!” I shout. “God damn, Kaia.”

I try to suck in breaths, still balls-deep in her pussy. She giggles breathlessly and pushes me back, forcing me to withdraw. Then she shifts her body and pulls me, so that we are both more or less sitting on the seat.

I lean over and kiss her lips, chuckling. “I think I needed that.”

“Me too.” Kaia’s mouth twitches. “I’m mostly thinking about how trashy we are. I mean, we basically just fucked with the driver and the waiter and god knows who else watching the limousine rock.”

I laugh. “They’ll get over it. They are paid to look the other way.”

She pulls a face but I just tug her into my arms, a heavy sigh on my lips. We lie here for a while in relative peace, no words passing between us and diluting our post-coital bliss.

*I*sit in the cramped little waiting room of the dance company's staff physician. It's just a windowless space, tucked between the long echoing halls of the New York Ballet on one side and the doctor's office on the other side. I sit opposite an empty chair, elbows on my knees, waiting. I want badly to bite my fingernails but I don't. I left that bad habit in childhood.

Instead I nibble on my bottom lip. I take a deep breath and try not to think of all the ways that this appointment could go completely sideways.

I could be pregnant. Really, with my job as a ballerina and my boyfriend who isn't at all interested in having kids, that's the worst case scenario. I would have to make a choice there. My career, my relationship, or a clump of cells which will one day become a baby.

And yet, I'm tortured even now just thinking about it.

I lean my head down and press my knuckles into my eyes.

I almost hope that it turns out that something else is wrong with me. It's funny to think that I would rather have a syndrome or a disorder. But if it came down to that or making a choice between a baby, my work, and my life...

The door to the doctor's office opens and Dr. Partridge steps out. He's a tall, stork -like man with a long track record of keeping ballerinas and dancers healthy. He frowns down at a chart, calling my name.

“Kaia?”

I shoot to my feet and smile nervously. “Right here.”

He glances up at me, takes a few seconds to take in my outfit of an oversized sweatshirt and leggings, and then he steps back.

He waves me in with the hand. "This way, please."

It's not the first time I've dealt with the dance company's doctor. The NYB is very careful and thorough about the health of their dancers. I've seen the doctor twice already for minor injuries and I've only been here for a few months.

I hoist my dance duffel bag on my shoulder and shuffle through the door. The office is neatly divided into two parts. One side is a desk with a computer and two chairs facing it. On the other side of the office is an examination table. He points me to the examination table and I head that way, my heart beating loudly in my chest.

"If you please," he says. He leaves through the information in my chart. "Put your bag down and sit on the table for me please."

I lay my bag down and hop up on the crinkly white paper that covers the table. It's a little higher than a chair would be. My feet dangle off the floor and I shiver a little bit.

He doesn't even look up at me right away. "Are you here for another steroid shot for your shoulder? I know it's been a while since your last one..."

"No." I bite my lower lip. "I've been gaining weight pretty steadily for the last three weeks or a month. And I was talking to a friend who suggested that I come here and talk to you. Just to make sure that I'm healthy, you know."

Dr. Partridge squints up at me for a long second. Then he puts the chart aside and nods.

"Okay. That's good idea. Why don't we start by drawing some blood and getting a urine sample from you? Then we can go through some questions that I have."

He is already turning away and walking over to a spare medical cabinet, where he draws out several tubes and a butterfly needle for drawing blood.

I breathe out and look away as he sticks me. As he is drawing the blood, he asks me a million questions.

When was my last period?

Did I change my diet recently?

Have I been tired?

Have I noticed any changes, especially in my urine or stool?

No. I haven't noticed any of those things. Just the weight gain. Almost 5 pounds this month.

His face creases as he looks at me. “ Five pounds is really not that much. Even on a dancer that’s as slight as you... But you are already here, so let’s just check it out.”

He presses a small plastic cup into my hand and asked me to step out into the hallway and go to the restroom. I return and he asks me to wait for the lab results, which should only take a few more minutes. I agree of course and he offers to let me wait in his office.

“I actually need to check a couple of text messages, if that’s okay. I would rather step into the other room in case I need to make a phone call.”

Dr. Partridge nods. “Of course. I’ll call you in when I have your test results. I don’t worry, whatever the situation is, we’ll get you sorted out.”

I can’t even pretend to smile at his assurance. Making my way out into his stuffy little waiting room, I do check my phone. But the text messages I mentioned to the doctor were just a front; I don’t have anything to work on, I just didn’t want to wait in the room with the doctor.

Having to spend the time alone is something I haven’t fully contended with, though. It gives me time to work myself up into a froth over the future of my ballet career. Add in the fact that things are just now starting to go really well between myself and Calum and you have got a recipe for disaster.

Now I understand quite exactly what Honor faced when her choreographer didn’t want her child.

Is it enough that I would try to blackmail Calum and cause a ton of trouble? Maybe not. But maybe if I did intend to keep the baby...

Especially Calum’s baby...

I can feel myself begin to sweat just thinking about that. I don’t have many opinions on abortion, of course. I wasn’t raised with religion in my house. My dad was the final arbitrator of every argument and having a God above him wouldn’t have really suited his purposes.

But the prospects of facing my own abortion, even a very early one that didn’t require surgery... that is really off-putting.

Not to mention the fact that while I didn’t feel that abortion was wrong, I had to question the fact that I would be could into that position. I believe that plenty of women have controlled their reproductive rights in any way they saw fit. But for me, having the baby of a billionaire wasn’t quite like having no choices.

Or was it? I didn’t know.

A painstaking twenty minutes passes. I feel time passing so slowly that it's agony. By the time he opens the door again, I am practically sick with the need to know the results of my lab work.

Dr. Partridge opens the door and beckons me in. "Come in, Kaia. Come sit back on the examination table, if you will."

I do as I'm told, nearly lightheaded with worry. The doctor clears his throat as I sit down.

"I just got your blood tests back. And it does appear as though you are pregnant. You're also quite anemic, but I feel like that's the less important of the two diagnoses."

I dropped my face into my hands, my heart pounding in my ears. I can't think of the right thing to say so I don't say anything at all.

All I can think about is the look of deep disappointment on Calum's face if I were to tell him that I got pregnant.

I mean, that would be the end of us as a couple. He's made that perfectly clear.

I feel vaguely sick inside.

Dr. Partridge is quiet for a moment. "You said you are on birth control."

I nod, too stunned to speak.

"You have to stop taking that right now. Even if you choose not to go forward with the pregnancy, I advise you to take a break from taking the pill. Oh, and use condoms as your method of backup birth control. Okay?"

I nod.

His face crinkles. "Is this a surprise? Or have you been trying to get pregnant?"

I suck in a breath and lift my head out of my hands. Tucking a strand of my hair back behind my ear, I slowly speak. "It was unplanned."

"All right." For his part, Dr. Partridge does have a killer poker face. He just keeps asking questions, not attaching any particular feeling to any answer he receives.

Then again, I have a feeling that this is far from his first patient with a surprise pregnancy. It's got to have happened before at the ballet.

"Well, you have a few options. You can keep the pregnancy. You can terminate the pregnancy as long as it is before the four month mark. Or you can think about it." He refers to my chart. "It says here that the last period you remember having was almost two months ago."

I nod. "Yeah, that seems right. But you know dancers... we don't always have regular periods."

He nods and makes a note in my chart.

I'm still in shock, still trying to figure out how I let this happen. "I took every pill exactly the way that you're supposed to. I set alarms on my phone for God's sake. I did everything right."

Dr. Partridge gives me a careful smile. "Birth control is never one hundred percent effective. Unplanned pregnancies happen to a lot of women. It isn't a big deal unless you want it to be. Okay?"

My eyes widen. Everything he's saying seems like he is just telling me what I want to hear. Still, I nod. "Okay. Thanks, Dr. Partridge."

"I'm going to give you a few pamphlets about your various choices and then we should go through them together. I want to make sure that you feel empowered to make your decision."

Funny, I have never felt quite as powerless as I do right now. My eyes well up and my voice breaks. "Okay."

Dr. Partridge frowns a little and gives me a tentative smile. "It's going to be okay."

I wipe at my eyes, nodding. "Do you think that I could come back and see you tomorrow? You've just given me a lot to think about right now."

The doctor sighs and crosses his arms. "As long as we are very clear about the fact that you don't want to be taking any more birth-control pills. And you should take an iron supplement and a multivitamin. Just for your general health, not for anything specifically pregnancy related."

He pulls out his prescription pad and scribbles on it, tearing off the page and handing it over.

I push myself to my feet, grabbing my bag as I take the script. "I will take them, Dr. Partridge. I promise."

The doctor looks at his watch. "Same time tomorrow?" he asks.

My eyes are brimming with tears. I try to control the quaver in my voice. "That sounds good. Thank you."

I walk quickly out of Dr. Partridge's office and practically run out of the building, trying not to cry.

I

go to sleep, anxious about the choice I have to make. When I wake up, Calum is gone. I roll out of bed and check my phone.

There is a text message waiting for me from a strange number that can only belong to my father.

How he got my number, I don't know.

One hundred thousand dollars will be enough to silence me for now. We should meet to exchange banking info and talk about the next steps we're going to take as a family.

His text makes my stomach drop like a stone. His apparent greed is utterly baffling to me.

It is evident to me that there is no dollar amount that will pacify my father. I don't know if my dad has any idea whether I'm in contact with my mom or not. In fact, I don't know that he would particularly care either way. But there is a little voice in the back of my head, telling me one thing.

If I intend to carry Calum's child, I shouldn't expect my father to act any differently towards his grandchild than he does to words me. He will belittle my kid, make my kid feel like whatever he's doing is not enough, that he can't possibly ever really win.

Everything my father has made me feel for my whole life.

Thinking about that makes me so sad and angry all at the same time. I take a long hot shower and the whole time, rage builds inside my chest.

I like to think that I have become an expert at forgiving my father and ignoring his bad behavior. But the idea that he would replicate that behavior were when he interacts with my kid... that thought just pushes me over the edge.

I turn off the tap in the shower and stand there for a minute, dripping water and making a decision that has been a long time coming.

I have to cut my dad out of my life. Even if I decide not to have Calum's child, I will have someone's kid, someday. And my dad has proven to me that he can never change.

My mind made up, I quickly dress and text my dad back.

Let's meet right now. Meet me for lunch at Sullivan's, one hour.

My dad doesn't respond to the text but I wasn't really expecting a word from him. I put on a little makeup and choose an outfit that really makes me feel in charge, an elegant black pantsuit and a thick gold chain necklace.

By the time I walk into Sullivan's, an upscale eatery, it's been a little more than an hour. I take my sunglasses off and look around the whole restaurant; my father is sitting at the bar, looking right at me with a hard expression.

I am nervous and shaky inside, but I swan over to my father, a smile plastered on my lips.

"You didn't get a table?" I ask.

He glares at me. "This place apparently only takes reservations for lunch. As I didn't have a reservation, I couldn't get a table." He looks around with a dour expression. "This place doesn't even seem that great honestly."

I roll my eyes. "Let me talk to the hostess. I'm sure she can fit us in."

I turn away and my father calls after me. "I already tried everything..."

When I get up to the hostess stand, I smile evenly at the young girl standing there.

"Can I help you?" she asks.

"Yes, I'm using the Fordham standing reservation. Just two people, for lunch."

The hostess his eyes widened a little. "Of course, Mrs. Fordham. I'll just check and see which table you should be at..."

I smile blandly at her, not feeling any need to correct her even though she obviously has the wrong idea about my relationship with Calum. She soon leads the way to a big table in the corner of the restaurant, well lit by the two huge glass windows just behind it. I cock a brow at my father as the hostess leads me over there, gesturing for him to follow me.

When we are seated at the table, I push my menu to the side and fold my hands in front of me on the table. I look across the white linen setting to

my father, giving him that same bland smile.

My father ignores me, burying his face in the menu. “Is it too early for a drink?”

I repress an eye roll. “I’m sure that the waitress will be happy about you ordering one.”

My dad lets his menu drop a few inches as he casts an eye over me. “You seem like you’re in a hurry. Hopefully not too much of a hurry for a drink.”

I fold my hands in front of me. “I’m not really in the mood. Besides, I’m not even old enough to order any alcohol.”

My dad smirks at me. “Ah, that doesn’t matter. You’re with your father! And daddy wants you to get something expensive.”

I give him a grim smile.

“So?” I say, changing the subject. “You want to talk about money?”

He clears his throat and produces a business card, pushing it across the table at me. I peer down to find a bank account and routing number scrawled across the back.

“That’s where you can send it,” my father says. He leans back in his chair, throwing an arm over the back of his seat.

I look up at him, my lips thinning. “I’m not interested in knowing what account you wish was more full. I came here to have a talk with you.”

He has the audacity to look surprised. He leans forward again, his fingers playing with the stem of his water glass. “Oh?”

I look him dead in the eye, my heart fluttering in my chest. But when I speak, it’s slow and sure, my voice steady as can be.

“I don’t want your banking information. I don’t want anything from you, actually. I came here to tell you that as of right now, you can consider our ties severed. I have paid you an exorbitant amount of money by now. And I don’t intend to pay you another cent.”

His expression instantly darkens. “You better fucking do what I tell you to do.”

I raise my hand, stopping him mid threat. “I don’t want to hear it. From here on out, from the moment that I walk out the door of this restaurant, you can consider me a ghost. You can’t call me. You can’t find out where I live and show up on my doorstep. We will not have any kind of relationship. You have made it abundantly clear to me that nothing is ever enough. So I am cutting you off and making a new life for myself.”

He gives an astonished scoff. “What? I don’t think I heard you correctly.”

I place both my hands on the table, fanning my fingers out. “Enjoy your lunch. It’s on me. But that will be the last thing you ever get from me. No more information. No more phone calls. No more text messages. Nothing. I never want to see your face again. Have I made myself clear?”

His face grows redder and redder as I continue my speech. When I am done, he stands up, wrinkling his napkin and throwing it down on the table in front of him.

“This is unacceptable,” he sneers. He leans in closer, pointing at me, spittle flying. “I am your father. You owe me. You’ll always owe me. You wouldn’t even exist if I hadn’t made your mother keep you...”

That gives me pause. Mom was thinking about having an abortion instead of giving birth to me?

It makes sense, honestly. If I had been in her shoes, I might have decided to cut and run instead of letting this monster pull me down.

“You have me to thank for your entire life,” he growls. “All I’m asking for is a little repayment for my hard work raising you.”

I give him a cool smile. “I don’t even know if what you just said is the truth or not. Honestly, I don’t care. Take one last look at me, because you will never see me again. I am taking care of myself now and part of that is cutting you out of my life forever.” I pause, sucking in a breath. “Goodbye, dad.”

I grab my purse and stand up, turning away. My dad lunges at me and grabs my arm but I shake him off and shoot him a look so venomous that he takes a half step back.

“Kaia...” he utters.

I give him a tiny shake of my head and hurry away, my pulse pounding as I go. I hear him call my name again but I don’t look back.

When I step outside, I put my sunglasses on to hide the sheen of tears in my eyes. But I don’t look back. I don’t second guess myself.

My dad is toxic, and that’s not going to change. So I have made my decision and damn if I’m not going to see it through.

*T*ermination of a pregnancy: an in-depth explanation of a medical procedure.

I look down at the pamphlet in my hands, the letters white against a purple background. That doesn't sound like light reading to me. So I readjust my seat in the back of the limousine and shuffle the pamphlets I am holding.

Pregnancy: a glimpse into a fascinating natural process.

I open the pamphlet and begin pouring over the pictures I'm presented with. There is a picture of an embryo in a gestational sac and a drawing of a pregnant woman, with her fully formed baby inside of her stomach.

I feel like this pamphlet is only giving me a partial view. It's not telling me how I will go through hormonal changes, experience my feet swelling, or how bad my morning sickness could be. It's not being brutally honest about how painful labor can often be.

And of course, how can it be telling me the whole truth about how Calum will feel when I tell him about the fact that I messed up and got pregnant? The answer is that it can't.

I stare out the window as the limo gently pulls to a stop at the curb outside the New York Ballet. It's only when the driver gets out of the car and starts walking around to open my door that I hurry to shove the pamphlets in my duffel bag. I slide out of the car and thank the driver, feeling like my head is simultaneously completely empty and yet jammed full of thoughts at once.

As I mindlessly head into the dance studio, I know that what I'm doing now is not good for me. Well, not good for the baby, anyway. I definitely

haven't talked to Dr. Partridge about keeping it and still dancing. But I'm pretty sure that he would agree that my usual schedule of punishing dance classes and running several miles every day would not be the optimal thing for a mother-to-be.

That is, if I am to be a mother. I'm as unsure about that as I am about anything in my life right now.

I'm not as early as I usually am and I find that the dance studio is almost full when I get there. I exhale and toe off my shoes, leaving my duffel bag on the floor of the studio. I need to grab a couple new pairs of ballet slippers. So I had across the wood floor, my head down as I head towards the shoe room.

On my way out the door, I encounter Manon and her flying monkeys. Manon steps back to let me exit the room but her friends are not as accommodating, bumping into me and giving me little glares.

Manon shrugs apologetically but doesn't say anything as I pass. Did I dream our last interaction? It seems that nothing has changed between us lately.

Drawing in a deep breath, I make my visit to the shoe closet as quick and painless as possible. It takes me a couple minutes to hunt down my exact size in three different brands but I am soon on my way back into the studio.

When I open the door, I immediately notice three of Manon's friends crowded around where my bag is on the studio floor. They are looking at the pamphlets I stuffed in my bag.

Jesus christ. How embarrassing.

"Hey!" I call out. I stride toward them, my face growing red. "Hey! What are you doing?"

They look up, their faces full of laughter. One of them, a slender and petite dancer named Marguerite, thrust her hand out and waves a pamphlet at me. "So I guess you're knocked up?"

I bare my teeth at her and snatch the pamphlet out of her hand. "Mind your own fucking business. Don't you have a broom that you should be preparing to ride into the harvest moon or something?"

Marguerite sneers and holds up her phone. "I'm going to tell everybody. Especially the administration. God, can you even imagine how Basil will probably react?"

Out of nowhere, Manon swoops in and stands beside me. “Kaia only has those pamphlets because she went to health services with me and she wanted to make sure that I had all the information I needed to make a decision. I’m the one that is pregnant, not her. Okay?”

Her three friends couldn’t have looked more shocked if they tried. Marguerite blinks ten times as she tries to wrap her head around this new piece of information.

“Wait, so...” She works out what she’s going to say. “Those pamphlets are for you? You’re pregnant?”

“Are you just going to stand there and repeat back to me what I just said?” Manon taunts. “It’s a private matter between me and my doctor. The two of us are dealing with it. Is that clear?”

Marguerite swallows. She glances at her two friends and then nods. “Okay. Sorry?”

Manon is not done. She senses weakness in her quarry and now goes on the offensive, backing her friends up by stepping closer. “You shouldn’t be going through anyone’s private things. Especially not when you still haven’t nailed that combination from three days ago. I would think that you would want to make sure that your side the street was perfectly clean before you started walking around and pointing fingers at other people’s trash.”

Marguerite’s brows lower and she looks angry. But she has learned that you don’t mess with Manon, not unless you are spoiling for a fight, anyway.

She drops the remaining pamphlet on top of my bag and walks away, looking quietly furious. Her two friends follow her, leaving me with Manon. Manon just rolls her eyes at her friends, shaking her head.

“What a bunch of bitches,” she mutters.

That’s the moment when Basil walks into the class, clapping his hands together. “Okay, okay! Places everyone!”

We all hurry to the bar and line up just as we have practiced a hundred thousand times in our lives. I can’t stop myself from spending the first couple minutes of class peaking at Marguerite and her friends. I catch them looking back at me speculatively a few times. But the class soon grows more rigorous, requiring complete focus. I guess for once I am glad about that.

Forty five minutes later, covered in sweat, I finish my last pirouette. Basil is already looking at his phone, distracted.

“Very good,” he calls. “That’s enough for right now. Go home and grab some rest and refuel your bodies. Lots of water, etcetera...”

With that, Basil is already out of the door.

I am already stretching out as part of a post dance class cool off when Manon approaches me. She jerks her head outside, indicating that she wants to speak with me but not in hearing range of everyone else.

I press my lips into a firm line and follow her out of the studio, trying to work up exactly what I going to say.

Should I just lie and deny everything? Should I tell her a little about my situation?

Manon leads me down the hall until we are clear of other dancers. Then she leans against the wall and crosses her arms, looking at me. “What is going on, Kaia?”

I pursed my lips and shrugged. “I don’t know. What is going on with you?”

She shakes her head again. “No, no. My friends found your ‘what do I do if I’m pregnant’ pamphlets. So what’s the deal? Are you expecting?”

I look down and my mouth twist. “Is it crazy that I would even think about telling you anything? God, I miss Ella.”

Her lips twitch. “I won’t tell anyone, you know. But I have to know, is it Calum’s?”

My mouth screws up. I look at her, taking her measure. I can’t think of a way to answer her question that couldn’t come back to bite me in the ass later. So I just favor her with a long look instead.

She rolls her eyes. “Come on. Be serious. You two are definitely full on dating. Maybe even living together. So it makes total sense that I would ask if it’s his baby.”

I swallow. I’m definitely not prepared for her to know all that. “I’m not sure what you think you know...”

Manon narrows her gaze on my face. “What I know is that if Calum finds out that you are pregnant and still dancing, he’s going to be angry, to say the least. If you are pregnant, you have to take care of yourself. Dancing at a professional level is freaking hard and it’s stressful for anybody, even someone that’s not with child. So I’ll ask you again... Are you pregnant with Calum’s child?”

I start tearing up so I look down at my feet, my arms wrapping around myself.

“Yes,” I mumble softly. “It is Calum's. But I don't know if I'm going to keep it. I mean... I just haven't thought it through all the way yet.”

She draws in a breath and lets it out as a sigh. “How long have you known? Since earlier in the week when we talked about the possibility of your being pregnant?”

I shrug a shoulder. “Not long. A couple days.”

“Do you need anything from me?”

I look up at her, surprised. “From you?”

She nods.

“Yeah. I told you, I am trying to get in good with Calum's brother Lucas. And one way I can definitely do that is being nice to his brother's girlfriend. Right?”

I give her a sour look. “I guess that is one way, yes. But I don't need anything from you. In fact, I'm not even sure why I put it out here in the first place. Talking to you is probably only going to encourage your dancer friends to start rumors.”

“Well, they're not exactly rumors, are they?”

I make an exasperated sound and turn away to head down the hall back to the dance studio. But Manon quickly grabs my arm and hugs me back to face her again. “Wait, wait. I'm sorry. That wasn't helpful.”

I pry her fingers off my arm and shoot her a tiny glare. “Definitely not.”

“I'm just saying, if you want to talk... you know, I'm here. I may not be Ella but I am a person that that you can talk to without worrying about it getting back to the whole dance company. I may not be of perfect person, but I know how to be discreet when it's called for.”

I sigh, shaking my head. “I'm not ready to talk to anybody about anything. I'm just... I just need a little more time to process everything. I mean, I would be theoretically giving up my whole career if I were to carry Calum's child. And I haven't even gotten started on the fact that he specifically doesn't want this baby. Or any baby, as far as I know.”

Manon looks at me with a frown. “That's gotta be hard.”

“Yeah, well.” I shrug my shoulders helplessly. “It is what it is. Anyway...” I look down the hallway toward the dance studio. “I should get going. I need to refuel and maybe take a nap. But... thanks.”

She nod. “Of course. I'm around if you need me.”

Giving her a pasted-on smile, I head back toward the studio.

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I

n the early afternoon, I go for a run. It's hot and I am sweating profusely, but I have a lot of things on my mind. Namely, what I should do about the impasse I currently find myself in.

My bullet wound is healing nicely, but every time I lift my arms in an acrobatic ballet move, it's aggravated a little more. I put off my return to the ballet company by three weeks now. At some point, the role of choreographer needs to be filled.

Essentially, I'm running out of time.

Which brings me to the other fork in the road. Obviously I could just decide to leave the company. My position there was only temporary. But in doing so, I would probably be expected to return to my own company. It would only make sense.

But my company is running so well right now without me. I got the latest stock numbers this morning and I can't find a single fault with the way that Lucas is running the company in my stead. He seems to actually be enjoying the work too.

The only question is what will I do if I leave the company permanently and leave the ballet behind the same time? It's unfathomable to me.

When I finish my run and head back up to the penthouse, I find Kaia in the kitchen, looking a little green. I raise my brow and check my smartwatch.

“Is everything okay? Rehearsal is going to start any minute now...”

She nods and pushes a bowl of cereal away. “Yeah. I'm not feeling well, so I just called in sick.”

I frown and walk to the fridge, giving her some side eye. I open it and grab a bottle of cold water, twisting the cap off and then closing the door. I turn and look her up and down.

Aside from looking a little ill, she looks as healthy as I've ever seen her. Her body has filled out very slightly since I noticed her thinness. Her face is a little flushed but it is a becoming look for her.

I take a long sip of the water and purse my lips.

"Dancers don't get days off. The last time that you called out of work was the morning that I was shot. Other than that, have you ever missed a day?"

Her face flushes and she looks down. She shakes her head. "No. But I did go to the company doctor, Dr. Partridge. He gave me the okay to stay home and hydrate myself. I'm sure that with a little bit of rest, I will feel fine."

Something about the way that she says it is not quite right. Like she is fibbing or something, for some reason that is unclear.

I suck in a deep breath and lean against the kitchen counter. Casting my gaze over her body again, I frown.

"Should I just accept your excuse? Is that what a boyfriend would do?"

She glances up at me and smirks a little bit. "Yes. That would be nice."

I nod and take another sip of the water. I push myself off the counter and turned toward the hallway, thinking of how good the shower is going to feel against my skin. But Kaia calls out to me.

"Can we talk?"

I freeze mid-step. The way that she says it, I don't think that anybody could hear that phrase and not be *at best* deeply worried.

I turn around slowly, my brows lowering over my eyes. "About what?"

Her lips thin. "I saw my dad yesterday."

I arch a brow. "After what happened at the bagel shop? Jesus. You should told me. I would've gone with you."

She sighs. "It's fine, Calum. I think I made a decision. No, actually I know I made a decision. I cut my dad off. I removed him from my life, forever."

She lifts her chin after she says that, like I'm going to respond negatively to that news. I walk towards her slowly, touching her arm and drawing her close to my body. I stare down into her sweet little heart-shaped face. She looks up at me with her eyes filled with such anguish.

“Kaia,” I say softly. “That's great. I think you've made the best decision that you possibly could. I still wish you would've called me to be there to back you up. But you have to know that I am fully supportive of any decision that gets your father out of your life forever.”

Her lips thin and she takes a deep breath. “My dad didn't say anything specifically about this, but I think it's likely that he will go to a newspaper about our relationship. I think that the opportunity to hurt me again and get money for the story will be too much of a temptation for him to resist.”

My heart beat thuds against my ribs. I set my water aside and pull her into my arms, cradling her against my chest. “Oh, beauty...”

She puts her arms around my waist and buries her head against my chest.

“Is that why you're home sick?” I asked.

Kaia shakes her head. “No. I am trying to rest and rehydrate. But it doesn't help that my days as a ballerina are probably numbered.”

She sighs heavily and then pulls back a little bit to look up at me. “That means that you probably will be implicated too. When the board of directors of the New York Ballet finds out...”

I slide my fingers through a lock of her honey-colored hair and then cup her cheek. “Let me worry about that. Okay? I will deal with whatever comes my way. After all, I did decide to engage in a sexual relationship with one of their ballerinas. I'm not exactly innocent.”

She looks a little perplexed. “You are not freaking out about this. I thought you would hit the ceiling. Any news about my father usually sends you through the roof.”

My lips twitch. “Yes, well. I am currently at a crossroads myself. I think that my shoulder is healing well, but not as well as it would with complete rest. I think that my time with the ballet company is drawing to a close anyway, so this would only be hastening the inevitable.”

Smart girl that she is, Kaia immediately asks the question that has weighed so heavily on my mind.

“What would you do instead? Would you go back to your company?”

I shake my head a little. “I don't think so. Lucas has done such a great job running everything over there. It wouldn't even make sense for me to take it back from him. I think I should start drawing up the legal paperwork to make his CEO position permanent.”

Her brows rise a little with surprise. “Oh? Then what would you do?”

I look down for a moment. “I’m kind of at a loss. With no dancing. With no business. I would just be a free agent. I could start a business from scratch. I could donate my time to another worthy cause... I just don’t know.”

“Well, that sounds amazing. Lucky you.”

I look up at her, a bit surprised. “Yeah? You think so?”

She gives me a little hug and then lets me go, but holds onto one of my hands. She leads me into the living room, tugging me onto the couch. Then she looks at me with great seriousness.

“Calum, you have worked very hard in your life and gained a great deal of success. Maybe it’s time that you start a new venture. Again, I think that you would be lucky to find a new hobby. And whatever cause you end up investing your time into would really benefit from having you around. I mean, that much is obvious.”

I breathe out a huge sigh of relief, sitting back and lacing her fingers with my own. I squeeze her hand. “I hadn’t really thought of it that way. When you put it like that...”

“Well, I’m glad that we talked about it. It’s good to know that we are involving each other in our considerations for what the next phase of our life could be like.”

I turned my head towards her, scrunching up one side of my face. “It’s going to be really busy. You know? The beginning of starting a business is absolutely bananas. I mean, it took me a solid three years of twelve hour days to get my current company off the ground. You would have to know that going into it.”

She narrows her gaze on my face. “Going into it? You mean considering the relationship that we already have?”

I shrug. “Yeah. I’m just saying, before you encourage me too much, you should know what you are getting into. Long hours, frantic workdays, I would probably be around way less than I am now.”

Her mouth turns down just a bit at the corners. “Oh. Well...” She sucks in a breath and shrugs. “I guess we are not exactly going to be globe-trotting and taking vacations for a while, huh?”

I smirk at her. “We could take a month long vacation before I start brainstorming ideas for a business.”

She glances away. It's clear that my words have brought something up to the surface for her, that she has something on her mind.

"What? Am I being insensitive somehow?"

She shrugs a single shoulder but doesn't turn her gaze back to me. "No, not really."

I heave an exaggerated sigh. "Please don't make me play twenty questions with you. Is this about the ballet company? You may be persona non grata at New York Ballet company for a while. That is, if your father does what we're expecting him to do and goes to the newspaper. But you are connected. You're with me, to begin with..."

She swivels her head back to me very slowly, her lips pressed into a thin line.

"Calum, what if I told you that I wanted to start a family?"

I blink, taken back by her question.

"I would tell you that you have picked the wrong boyfriend," I say, only partially joking. "I mean, I think I've made my position pretty clear. I just don't see how there's room in my life for kids. Enough said."

She looks down at her lap and pulls her hand from my grasp.

"Would it really be too much to ask? Do you think that your life would open up and make room?"

I heave a heavy sigh. "Listen, you are nineteen. That's way too young to be thinking about kids. And I am a selfish jackass at the best of times."

She gives me a sharp look. "I'm serious right now, Calum. I'm not joking around."

I roll my eyes. "Fine. I just think that I don't have any interest. And maybe, maybe if you do, that is something we can address in ten years' time. Assuming that we are still alive, still together, and the world has not ended. Okay?"

A bitter expression passes over Kaia's face. But even as she is staring down at her lap, she nods. "I understand."

"Good. I'm tired of talking about babies. Let's put a moratorium on that subject for about nine and a half years. Until then, I think that we can talk about this until we're blue in the face and not come to a consensus."

She nods, pursing her lips. "Sure."

I frown a little at her. A minute of silence passes before I feel the need to prompt her.

“Are you okay? I mean I know that your ballet career is up in the air at the moment. But I’m telling you right now, it will all work out perfectly fine. You can apply to London or Paris or wherever the hell you want and almost certainly be accepted at any company that you set your sights on. You know that, right?

Kaia smiles at me so wistfully, her hand touching my knee. “I know that. I mean, it won’t be quite the same because I know that they will only accept me because I come partnered with you and you bring a serious bankroll...”

I roll my eyes. “That’s not true. You’re talented. I saw it. Any casting director worth their salt will see it. Just because you date a billionaire doesn’t mean shit. Any ballet company should consider that to be an extra bonus, not a main feature.”

She nods absently. “Sure. Let’s just see how it all shakes out.”

She rises from the couch, heading off toward the back hallway. I watch her go, an uncertain frown on my face. I feel like there is a puzzle piece I’m missing somehow, although what it is I just don’t know.

I sit back on the couch with a sigh and turn my mind back to the question of what I want to do with my life next.

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*T*he next morning, I am on my way out the door to meet Ella when I encounter Calum. He is wearing his running clothes and is just coming in from working out. I flush and can't quite meet his gaze.

I have this secret that's growing in my belly and every second I don't handle it gets bigger and bigger. At this point, I'm honestly not sure what I'm going to do about it.

He's breathing hard still when he comes into the kitchen. "Hey."

That's all he has to say, apparently.

I nod and lift a tan leather Birkin bag onto my shoulder, straightening my dark blue minidress. "Hey."

He narrows his eyes at me, his expression growing a little concerned. "I feel like I said something last night that made things tense between us. The marriage stuff made you look kind of queasy. Should we... I don't know, talk about it?"

I shrug a shoulder. "There isn't anything that I really want to talk about at this moment, so..." I trail off.

"So? I feel like we should definitely have the talk about marriage. If I'm saying that I'm casually ring shopping and you're saying that you don't want to be completely taken by surprise during an engagement..."

Hearing him saying that, being responsive to my needs, is like a knife to my guts. I flinch and bite my lip. I meet his curious gaze.

"I do want to marry you. You have to know that. There are just a few things that I have to settle first."

Calum's gaze tightens on my face. "What things?"

I can't look at him, so I drop my gaze and shrug a shoulder. "I would really rather not get into it at this precise moment."

I know. It's a cop out. I just can't tell him I'm pregnant. Not yet.

"Okay." His gaze lingers on my face. I think he's going to challenge me like he always does, but he surprises me instead. He makes it easy for me, changing the subject. "You're going somewhere, I'm guessing."

I nod, not meeting his gaze. "Yep. Ella has had some ankle surgery and she's recuperating in a rehab facility. So I was just going to go check it with her and see how things are. She seems pretty down."

"Ah." He leans against the kitchen counter.

A thought occurs to me. "Hey, is Keir still looking for a nanny?"

Calum shrugs. "Beats me. I don't know any more than you do. I can call him if that will help."

I sigh and shake my head. "Nah, I just wondered if you already knew. Thanks anyway. I should go."

I turn away and Calum trots a couple of paces toward me, catching my wrist.

"Hey, how about dinner tonight? Just the two of us, anywhere you want? A couple of cocktails, a little time for us to catch up... What do you say?"

My stomach feels like it's made of lead. I lick my lips and give him a hesitant nod. "Sure. Wherever you want. I should be home in a couple of hours so we can talk about it then."

His brow wrinkles a little bit.

"Okay." He moves in close, tugging me against his chest. He slips his fingers underneath my jaw and raises my head, angling my lips to meet his mouth. His kiss is intense but brief, leaving goosebumps across my neck and shoulders. He looks down into my eyes, the blue of his gaze more intense than I've ever seen it.

"I love you," he says.

In that moment, my heart fucking breaks. I look up at him, trying not to tear up or let my emotions show. "I love you too, Calum. So much that it's hard to breathe sometimes. Does that ever happen to you?"

One corner of his mouth tips up in a smile. "Only with you, beauty. It's never happened to me before I met you."

I wrap my arms around his neck and hug him then, hard and fast. He is a little taken aback by the gesture, hugging me hesitantly back.

“Beauty...” he whispers.

I pull away, taking a deep breath and steeling myself. “It will have to wait until I get back. I promise, I won’t be gone long.”

Stepping out of his embrace, I turn and practically flee out of the penthouse apartment. I make it to the elevator before the first tear falls. As I ride down, I tell myself to pull it together, to rein it in. I think that my emotions are just being amplified right now by the fluctuations in my hormones. The information I found on the Internet indicated that I would have some crazy ups and downs right about now.

I manage to get myself under control on my way out to the curb. My limo waits there for me, same as always.

God, how strange is it that I am now used to the fact that someone will drive me anywhere I want to go at any time I feel like it? A few months ago before I met Calum, the idea seemed so foreign to me.

The trip over to Ella's rehabilitation facility is relatively quick. I spend most of it trying not to think about the future, especially not my fetus's would-be future. It's very tempting to imagine myself pregnant and shopping for baby clothes. Or even to imagine myself holding a little newborn, bouncing it on my hip and staring into its eyes.

But every time I catch myself daydreaming like that, I put a stop to it as soon as I can. I tell myself that I haven't made up my mind yet.

And the feeling of cold dread grows in the pit of my stomach.

I get to the hospital that Ella is staying at and head up to the floor that she gave me when I talked to her on the phone earlier. The ward seems light and airy, opening with a big room filled with six or seven patients and their therapists who are coaching them to walk up and down the stairs or helping them with their balance as they move unsteadily along the floor.

Spotting a nurses desk, I head over and ask for Ella by name.

A minute later, I follow the very friendly nurse down a hospital hallway. She stops at Ella's room, knocking on her door for me.

“Come in!” Ella shouts.

The nurse backs away and waves me on. I smile and thank her, opening the door.

Ella is there in a hospital bed, propped up with her leg in a splint. She flips off the TV and gives me a watery smile. “Hey.”

I enter the room, my gaze sweeping the bland beige walls and plain white linens of her bed. “So this is the famous Walker Rehabilitation

Institute.”

Ella wrinkles her nose. “Yeah. I had to have another surgery on my ankle so I figured now was as good a time as any to start physical therapy.”

I nod and pull up a chair to her bedside, taking a seat. “How’s the food?”

She pulls a face. “Gross.”

I arch an eyebrow. “Well, your fairy godmother has arrived. I have a limo and I will get you absolutely anything you want. You want magazines? You want Greek food? You want every shade of nail polish?”

Ella purses her lips. “Pizza?”

I grin at her. “You know it. You want Bellagio’s?”

“Yep. Veggie supreme, extra thin crust.”

I whip out my phone and place the order with the limo driver. “Got it. It should be here in about half an hour.”

She heaves a sigh. “Is the ballet company doing an interesting ballet for fall?”

I scrunch up my face. “We are doing Romeo and Juliet, remember? You were practicing it with us. It’s interesting, but heavier than what we usually do around this time of year. It’s a spring ballet, if anything.”

“Oh yeah? Any word on what role you’ll get?”

I rock back in my chair, giving her a long look. “I don’t think that I should really be worried about what role I’m going to get.”

Ella narrows her gaze on my face. “No?”

I shake my head and look down at my hands in my lap. “No. A lot of things are happening, personal things. For one, my mother left my father. And I cut him off. That means that he will probably take his story about me and Calum to the papers any day now.”

Her eyes widened. She sits up a little and grabs my wrist. “Wait, really?”

I scrunch my face up again. “Yeah. It doesn’t really matter though... Because I just found out that I am pregnant with Calum’s child and he’s almost definitely going to dump me if I keep the baby.”

She blinks, so shocked that it takes her a quarter of a minute to even speak. “What!? Wait, go back. You’re pregnant?”

I nod, unable to meet her gaze. “I went to the doctor and everything. I am definitely knocked up.”

“Oh my God,” she says, clutching at her chest. “You’re not going to... I mean, are you considering termination?”

I look up at her, my eyes filling with tears.

“I don’t know,” I answer softly. “I don’t think... I don’t think I want to. But Calum definitely wants nothing to do with a kid. And being pregnant would end my career before it even starts.”

She exhales a shaky breath. She grips my hand. “If you want it, you should have it. I am of the opinion that if you will love that baby, then that baby ought to be born. I mean, I know that it will sidetrack your career...”

“More like end it,” I say bitterly.

She raises her hands above her shoulders in a perplexed motion. “So what?”

“Did I already tell you about how Calum feels about having a kid? This baby would not be wanted by him.”

She looks at me dead in the eyes. “If you want this baby, then you should have it. And I can’t imagine Calum letting you or his child go hungry, either.”

I wipe away a tear that breaks free and sniffle. “He’s made it pretty clear that his life doesn’t have any room for a baby. He is going to leave me the second I tell him.”

“You don’t know that.”

My heart welled up with hurt. “I do,” I whisper. “I know him. I know exactly how he will react. He will pick a fight and create distance between us. And then he will be out the door before I can say anything else.”

Ella is quiet for a moment. “So what will you do? Will you just terminate the pregnancy, then? That doesn’t seem right.”

Wrapping my arms around myself, I shrug. “No, it doesn’t seem right. But it doesn’t sit any better with me than breaking up what could potentially be the love of my life. I mean... I really, really love him, Ella.”

Ella opens her arms a little and beckons to me. “Come here. I may not be able to give you the answer you’re looking for, but I can definitely give you a hug. And I think that you need it even more than the answer at just this moment.”

Rising out of the chair, I hug Ella. She pulls me down onto the bed and I bury my face against her neck. I cry for a few minutes, my tears wetting her thin white T-shirt. But when I finally compose myself and look up again, she smiles.

“It's going to be okay. You know?”

I give her a watery smile. “You think so?”

“I know so. Trust me.”

I laugh. “Actually, I meant to tell you earlier... One of Calum's friends is looking for a live in nanny. You have to go to Scotland, of course... But after this tense emotional moment, I'm pretty sure that you would rock at taking care of any kid.”

Ella shrugs a shoulder. “Maybe. We can talk about that later. For now, let's just hatch a plan and eat some pizza. Does that sound good?”

I give her a small smile. “That sounds amazing, Ella. I'm so glad I came to visit you.”

She throws her arm around my shoulders and I sit beside her, talking through all of my options for how I'm going to deal with my pregnancy.

I

am in my home office, paging through a few spreadsheets about IndicaTech, when Lucas calls me from downstairs. I pick up my phone and answer.

“Hello?”

“It's me,” Lucas says. He sounds extremely annoyed. “What's with the changing of the security protocol? This guy downstairs says that I have to be invited in or some kind of nonsense like that.”

I shift in my seat and sigh. “Yeah, Kaia is still trying to work out exactly how unexpected guests should present themselves. Come on up.”

I punch a four digit number into my phone and hang up quickly. By the time Lucas comes up in the elevator, I am standing in the kitchen, brewing another pot of coffee.

He stalks into my living area and makes a beeline for the kitchen island. There he sets a smooth, perfectly rounded platinum vase down. I squint at the vase, wondering what the lid is keeping inside.

Lucas doesn't have anything to say about the vase. No, he is still hung up on my security protocols.

“So? What's with the new security guard downstairs?”

I heave a sigh and shake my head. “Kaia mentioned in passing that she has been feeling unsafe recently since she cut her dad off. And since she lives here now...”

“It sounds like you two are on again, then.”

“When were we off?” My lips twitch. “If you must know, we've even talked about the E word.”

He squints off over my shoulder. “Extrapolation? I don't know what the E word is.”

I snort. “Engagement. Apparently she does not think it's romantic when I guy gets down on one knee and hasn't actually talked to the girl in question about... You know, what his expectations are. Some kind of therapy mumbo-jumbo, I'm sure.”

“Hah! Well, at least you know. And I feel like that sets a number of things in motion.”

Leaning over the kitchen counter, I pour myself a cup of coffee. I turn and offer it to my brother but he shakes his head.

I sip my coffee and sigh. “Sometimes I think that Kaia and I speak two totally different languages. It's like she went to a handful of therapy sessions and now she thinks she has it all figured out. To be fair though, nothing that Kaia has said has been wrong.... Still, I don't like it.”

Lucas crosses his arms and leans back against the wall. “So no therapy for you, then? I thought that maybe after Anita and that whole thing you would maybe try to get some kind of...”

He trails off.

I look down at my coffee, my expression growing dark. “I don't need counseling. Sure, I overreact about things sometimes. But who doesn't? I think I'm normal.”

Lucas blows out a long breath. “I don't think that normal is really the right word for what you are.”

I look up at him with a smirk. “Not that I don't love your presence, but is there a reason that you came to visit me on a Tuesday afternoon?”

His mouth turns down at the corners. “Yeah. I came here for that.”

He nods at the vase.

I raise my eyebrows. “Do you want to give me a hint as to what that is?”

His lips thin. “It's full of Anita's ashes.”

My heart grinds to a halt in my chest for a long moment. I look at the vase... Well, urn, really. Although Anita was never once in her life the quiet type, Lucas chose a perfectly bland urn for her.

“God, she seems so small,” I say with a dark sense of wonder.

He just nods. “Yep.”

“Jesus,” I mutter. “What are you doing bringing her ashes here? I mean, of all the people that don't want to see her...”

Lucas drops his head. “Sorry. I just didn't know where to take her. It turns out that she was a witch to her extended family. They want nothing to do with her and told me to dump her remains in the trash. I just felt like...” He shrugs. “I don't know, everybody should have at least a little respect when they're dead.”

“Christ!” I exclaim. “What the fuck? What are we supposed to do with her?”

I turn around and open a cabinet, pulling a bottle of whiskey down. I pour a little into two tumbler classes and then hand one to my brother. “Here.”

He takes a sip quietly, his eyes tracking me as I pace back and forth around the kitchen island.

“She would like this, you know.” He raises his glass. “A toast to Anita. She gave us many things in our lives, most of them pretty toxic.”

I hesitate and then lift my glass. “*Cin-cin.*”

I take a sip of whiskey and it burns all the way down my gullet. I take a quick breath after and relish the burn.

In my heart of hearts, I know that Lucas is right. I know that this moment, the agony of having to mourn her... Anita would live for it.

“So?” Lucas says, looking at me carefully. “Rethinking your stance on therapy yet?”

I shoot him a glare and sip the whiskey again. “Nope. By the way, you can't leave Anita here. You have to take her with you. I never thought that she would ever see the inside of my apartment.”

He frowns and puts his forefinger out, nudging the urn. “I'm sorry. I shouldn't have brought her here. I just didn't know where else to go. It seemed disrespectful to leave her ashes in the car.”

“Want a refill?” I shoot the last quarter of my glass of whiskey and then pour myself another dram.

Lucas hesitates for a second then shakes his head.

“No, I don't think so. I have to figure out what the buck I'm going to do with her.”

“May I suggest storing her at those bus terminal storage lockers? That seems appropriate.” I take another long gulp of the whiskey. It doesn't even burn this time.

Lucas snorts. “She would hate that.”

I slam my glass down and look at him sternly. “Anita is dead. Who cares what she would or would not have liked?”

He gives me a careful look and finishes his whiskey, sliding the glass across the counter toward me. “I think I’ll store her ashes in a safety deposit box until I figure something else out.”

“Maybe you should just dump her down the drain,” I grouse. “You shouldn’t waste another second trying to respect her wishes. Hell, who even knows what her wishes were?”

Lucas crosses his arms. “She didn’t tell you anything when you saw her for the last time?”

I shake my head. “Nope. She did tell me that she wished me a good life. Whatever the hell good that’s supposed to do me.”

He purses his lips. “Anita left most of her fortune to you, in case you didn’t know.”

I look down at my hands where they rest on the counter. They are trembling and I suddenly feel utterly useless.

“I don’t want her money,” I growl.

He lifts a shoulder in a shrug. “So donate it to a good cause. Underprivileged kids or something. Make her death mean something good for a lot of people.”

I glance up at Lucas, beseeching him with my eyes. “Why didn’t she just give her money to you? You were the golden child. I don’t understand her any more now than I ever did when she was alive.”

He pulls a face. “I don’t know. Clearly there was a ton of stuff that I wasn’t a party to. When you told me about her little bargain for taking care of us, I realized that I would probably never understand her way of thinking.”

His smartwatch starts beeping and he looks at it, clearing a notification. “Fuck. If I don’t get moving, I will be late for my final meeting with the Tokyo office.” He looks up at me. “This is the final arbitration of our agreement.”

“I’m glad to say that I have no idea what you’re talking about.” I hold my glass up to salute him. “I wish you luck. I want to say that I’m jealous but we both know that I’m not.”

“Yes, well.” He sucks in a deep breath and scans the kitchen. He doesn’t appear to like what he sees. “When is Kaia getting home from rehearsing?”

I smirk at him a little. “No idea. Why, are you concerned for my well-being all of the sudden?”

He frowns. “Now that you asked me so bluntly, I think I am. I just don't want you to be alone with your grief for very long.”

I wave him off. “What are you talking about? I'm the older brother. I protect you. Not the other way around.”

He nods to my nearly empty whiskey glass. “Do me a favor? Go easy on that stuff. I don't want you to get so drunk that you do something you will regret later.” He pauses, hesitating. “Also, be nice to Kaia. *Especially* if you are going to continue drinking. Okay?”

I scowl at him and drain the last dregs from my tumbler. “Fuck off.”

“That's a funny way of telling me that you love me too.” He picks up the urn with a single palm, hefting Anita as he heads out the door. I glower after him and watch him go.

When the door closes behind him, I pour myself another glass of whiskey. Not quite sure what to do with myself, I wander around the apartment for a while. It grows darker outside, the sun finally beginning to set over the gleaming skyscrapers that mark Manhattan's skyline.

Inside I am just festering, seething, roiling. I'm not even sure why exactly.

Maybe it's because my sanctuary has been compromised today. Or maybe it's because Anita was a horrible human being... but she was also the only caring soul in a dark time in my life. My emotions keep sloshing around inside of me like too much alcohol, one minute rage and the next minute an endless well of sadness.

I break my promise to my brother almost immediately by not tempering my drinking at all. Everything soon grows fuzzier and the world seems to have softer edges than it did before.

It's a little easier to deal with myself now. I don't know how tomorrow will go. I'm just doing whatever I can to blunt the feelings that are simmering inside my body, threatening to rise up and pour out my mouth and nose.

By the time that Kaia comes home, I'm officially sauced. I'm lying on the bare floor in the spare bedroom, my gaze turned toward the window. I'm looking at the twinkle of the lights coming from the buildings around mine.

I hear her voice coming from the kitchen. “Calum? Calum, are you home?”

I try to sit up but gravity soon pulls me back to earth. I groan and roll onto my side.

“Calum?”

“Kaia,” I bleat.

I hear her footsteps coming closer. She flips on the overhead light and then sees the state I am in. Her expression is befuddled.

“Oh Calum... She sighs. “Jesus. Lucas texted me telling me to come home early but there was no way around rehearsal tonight. I see that I should've just called out sick.”

I shrug, or I try to at least. “It's fine. It's all fine.”

Kaia disappears for a moment and then she reappears with a pillow. Kneeling down beside me, she tucks the pillow under my head. “Is that better?”

“It's good.” I hug her leg awkwardly. “Lucas brought Anita here.”

“He did what now?” She cocks her head.

“In an urn. Can you believe it? The bitch finally got here but she had to die first.” A laugh bubbles up from deep in my chest.

“Oh, honey.” Kaia leans forward and brushes my hair back.

I look up at her and am suddenly struck by how pretty she is.

“God you're beautiful,” I blurt out. “You're so beautiful. What'd I ever do to deserve you?”

She frowns a little bit. “Maybe I should get you a glass of water. Does that sound good?”

I shake my head. “No. I want you to say here. I want it to be just you and me. Just us two, together forever. That's what sounds good to me.”

She quietly sucks in a breath. She seems pensive but whatever she's thinking, she keeps it to herself.

I catch her hand and bring it to my chest, trapping it against my heart. “Do you feel that? That's my heartbeat.”

She smiles softly. “I know that.”

I look up at her, admiring her beauty again. “I love you. Did you know that?”

That brings a smile back to her lips. “I did. I have a question for you, though. How did you get so drunk?”

I let out a little laugh. “I don't know. How did you get so pretty?”

She rolls her eyes at me. “And here I thought that we were going to have to talk about serious matters when I got home...”

“What serious matters?” I ask. The world tilts dangerously and I shut my eyes.

She breathes a sigh. “It’ll keep until tomorrow.”

“Are you sure?” I ask.

“Yep.” She grabs my hand and brings it to her lips. Then she lets me go and I hear her getting up.

“Where are you going?” I complain.

“I’m just going to grab us both a glass of water and snag some more pillows. I thought that maybe we could make a bed on the floor. Okay?”

I smile at her. “Okay. That sounds good. You’re too good for me.”

She walks away and I listen to the pitter patter of her feet on the hardwood floor.

I am lucky to have her, I think to myself. I roll onto my back and begin to sink into darkness.

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I

wake to an electronic chime. Cracking my eyes open, I realize that I am still on the floor of the spare bedroom. Beside me is my boyfriend, he is breathing soft and shallow. My phone chimes a second time and I managed to focus my eyes a little more, pulling the phone free from my pocket.

It looks like I missed about seventy five notifications, mostly texts and emails from my friends.

Are you okay? Ella texted an hour ago.

I frown and don't really fully understand her question. But soon enough it becomes clear to me why everyone is suddenly trying to contact me.

My name and face are plastered across the entertainment section of the biggest New York newspaper.

I open my email and read the article from Ella's email. There I am, splashed across the pages of the newspaper. In the photo, I'm at the NYB, dancing with Calum. My expression is pure want; Calum's face is turned towards my and his expression is darker, hungrier.

Above us is the headline that reads, "BILLIONAIRE ACCUSED OF AFFAIR WITH BALLERINA!".

"Shit." I say out loud.

Calum rouses at that, squinting at me. "Fuck." He pushes himself to sit upright. "Oh God. How much did I drink?"

I scrunch my face up and look over at. "You're going to want to have a cup of coffee and a glass of water before I have to tell you bad news."

He cocks his head and groans. "Oh fuck. Is it the company?"

“What? No. Come on.” I get up with a moan. My back definitely didn't appreciate sleeping the whole night on the hardwood floor.

Calum drags himself up and goes the bathroom while I rustle up coffee and water for him. For myself, I skip the coffee and opt instead for a glass of kale and apple juice.

A few minutes later, Calum comes in. He is extremely grateful when I present him with his coffee and water. He carries them both into the living room and collapses on the couch, sitting with his head between his hands. I follow him, sucking in a deep breath.

I have to tell him that we've been exposed. But more than that, I have to tell him that I am pregnant. And that the more I have thought about it, the more I need to keep this baby growing inside me.

His baby.

Looking at him, I cup my stomach and sip a little bit of the green drink in my hand. It tastes so bad but I know it's good for me.

Just like I know that telling Calum the truth about my pregnancy is going to suck at first but be healthy in the long term.

I draw in a deep breath just as he sits his coffee.

“Coffee is magic,” he mutters. “Seriously, I don't know what I would do without it.”

I don't know how to disagree with that so I just make a vague sound of agreement.

“Calum?”

He holds a finger up and upends the entire huge glass of water that I poured for him. When he's done, he makes a refreshed sound and looks at me.

“Okay.” He gives himself a shake. “What were you talking about earlier? Something about bad news?”

I wince. “Yeah. I have two things that I really need to tell you. The first one is that my dad did go to the press. If you find your phone, you probably have a thousand notifications. People reaching out to you, asking for comments on the story.” I scrunch up my face. “They didn't go easy on you at all. It looks very bad.”

He looks up at me, his expression serious. “Are you for real? Show me the article.”

I hand him my phone with the article pulled up. He takes one look at it and curses. “Really? This is the headline that they ran it with? For fuck's

sake!"

I expel a huge breath. "Yeah. It's even more cutthroat than I expected it to be. Also, I thought that we would have a little more warning. Don't reporters even check sources anymore?"

"Oh man." He stands up and hands my phone over to me. "I have to check on the company's stock numbers. I didn't even talk to Lucas about the fact that we are probably going to take a serious hit until this whole thing blows over. Shit."

Before I can say anything, he bounds out of the room, off to hunt down his phone. I frown and follow him, finding him in his office. He's found his phone and also has his laptop open.

"Fuck. Fuck! This is very bad." He runs his hand through his hair. "Oh man..."

Pressing my lips into a thin line, I withdraw and let him work. Really I am just dreading the bigger news that I have to tell him.

I imagine it playing out something like this: I tell him, *hey, I'm pregnant, by the way*. And he tells me without batting an eyelash to get out of his apartment and never speak to him again.

You know, something like that. I drag myself through the shower and into a fresh change of clothes.

Ella texts me again to check in.

Are you okay? Please you just send a smoke signal or something to let me know that you're all right.

Everything is cool, I text her. Well, not really cool. But you know... We are both digesting the news.

After second, she texts back. *About the pregnancy or about the so-called affair?*

I pursed my lips and look towards Calum's office. He is still wrapped up in his world of worry, not concerned about anything outside of that at the moment.

I haven't told them that I'm pregnant. I want to, but this news sort of usurps anything I have to say.

Ella sends me a heart emoji. I shove my phone into my pocket and sit back on the couch, feeling like I am a dam that's dangerously close to breaking loose and flooding everywhere.

Twenty minutes later, Calum resurfaces. He comes back in the kitchen and starts pouring another cup of coffee, shaking his head. I'm not really

paying attention to whatever he's got going on, but he drops something in the kitchen and heaves an exaggerated sigh.

"Can nothing go right today?" he moans. "Seriously. Even the magic coffee beans aren't working anymore."

I turn and look at him, gathering my nerve. "Calum? Could you come in here for a minute?"

He glances at me, his eyes scanning my face. I don't know if he clocks my nervous energy or not but he leaves the coffee and pads into the living room, plunking down on the couch.

"You look serious. What is it?"

I look down at my hands, which are clasped gently in my lap. I suck in a shuddering breath and look him dead in the eye. "I have to tell you something pretty serious."

He looks perplexed. "More serious than the fact that IndicaTech's stock is in freefall?"

I hesitate and then nod. "Yeah. I think it's more serious than that."

He screws up his face. "What is it?"

"I..." My eyes mist over. I suck in another shaky breath. "I'm pregnant, Calum."

He doesn't respond for a minute. The words stretch in the air between us, falling like sword blows. I scan his face, looking for a clue to how he's going to react.

Every single one of my senses is screaming to get the hell out of here.

When he speaks, his voices low and his tone is accusatory. "You said you are on the pill."

I take a deep breath. "I know. I was. I mean... I thought I was safe." My voice cracks. "You have to know, Calum. You have to know that I never expected this to happen."

He narrows his eyes. "No? You didn't just decide that your position as my girlfriend wasn't secure enough?"

My face screws up and tears start pouring down my face. "No! Are you crazy?"

"Then you should have no problem having an abortion," he says.

Like it's the simplest, most obvious thing in the whole wide world.

Like I haven't agonized over my decision for almost two weeks.

I lift my chin. "I've thought about it. God knows that would make everything so much easier. But ultimately, I can't just have an abortion

because my birth control failed.”

His face gets red. “Why? Because it would otherwise be born into all of this wealth and privilege?”

“Because I want it! Okay? I want kids! This is not how I would choose to have my first one... but so what?”

“This is bullshit,” he spits. “I am not some atm for you to use however you want!”

I’m getting so worked up that I can’t see straight. “What about your half of the responsibility for this? I didn’t exactly get myself pregnant, you know. You did a lot of the work to get me in this condition.”

“Hah!” he practically shouts. “You are having an abortion. I’m going to be there at the doctor, making sure you go through with it. This won’t be Honor’s situation all over again.”

I glare at him. “I’m not going to be bullied over something as important as this. And for your information, this? This way you’re treating the mother of your unborn child? It’s unacceptable.”

He rocks back with a low laugh. “What the fuck? What in the everloving fuck?”

I blink, slowly realizing that the man sitting in front of me is not Calum. He’s bizzaro-Calum, Calum in a distorted mirror world.

God, this is going worse than I thought it possibly could. A tear breaks free and rolls down my face. I swipe it away and shake my head. “I swear to you, Calum. I didn’t do this on purpose. I mean... I am going to have to quit dancing professionally. And that is a big change. Not one that I would make casually.”

He gives a disgusted snorts. “Yeah right. I should’ve known. I should have seen this coming. You were a stripper when we first met. And now, it turns out that you’re a whore to.”

I can’t quite believe that he just said that. My jaw drops. “What?”

“You heard me.” He leans in, gritting his teeth. “You did this to me on purpose. And let me tell you right now, I’ll have my lawyers all over your ass so fast that you will think twice before you ever fuck around with someone like me again.”

I stand up stiffly, my mouth contorting with rage. “Fuck you, Calum. I didn’t ask you for anything. I didn’t ask for any of this. All I ever wanted in the whole entire world was to be up ballerina at the New York Ballet. And I

got it... But I got you too, apparently. That was my downfall." I turn away, brushing tears from my face.

As I moved towards the bedroom, his voice follows me. "This isn't over! We're not through talking about this! You not just going to take me to the cleaners on this one..."

I run through the apartment door that leads into what I think of as my apartment. I close the door and fall to the ground, sobbing.

That went as badly as I feared. Between losing that battle and the loss of my beloved job, I've done all the losing today that I ever could. All that I can stand.

I cry until I have no tears left. And then I stand up and call Ella. I need to get out of here and run as far as I can away.

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I

wake up in the early morning hours and reach out to Kaia, only to feel a cool expanse of bed where she usually sleeps. I cast my mind back over and try to think of where she is...

Then I remember why she is gone. It all comes back in a rush.

Her announcement, her pregnancy, me essentially kicking her out on the street.

The feeling of immense loneliness I had right after she left. I watched her walk away, knowing that she wasn't going to come back.

It takes me a few hours to even call my brother and tell him that Kaia ended things between us. In short order, he picks me up in his Mercedes S class and we head to the coast, to the small beach house I own.

As the car climbs the final hill to the house, memories hit me.

Memories of Kaia, seeing this place for the first time.

Of her holding my hand as we walked in the yard, looking at the raging sea.

I swallow a rising tide of loneliness and wonder how exactly I got here.

When the car finally pulls up to the house, I look over at my brother. He has been mostly silent for the entire trip. Lucas gets out of the car without a word to me and I heave a sigh.

I get out and stretch, looking around. The little house is still just as I left it, though it's now colder outside. The foliage has lost its verdant vibrancy and the sand now overtakes most of the driveway.

I follow Lucas into the house, loving the smell of the walnut wood cleaner that the house keeper uses on all the wood in here.

I follow Lucas into the living room and kitchen, eyeing him.

“So?”

He ignores that, walking to the French doors that look out over the sea. I cross my arms. “Out with it.”

He glances at me. “I don’t think that you want to hear what I have to say, honestly.”

“Are you going to talk about whatever is bothering you? Or are you just going to pout?”

He shoots me a glare. “I’m just here to support you, I guess. As usual.”

I frown at him a little and head over to the refrigerator, pulling it open. I find a six pack of the beer I like chilling inside. I don’t even ask, I just hand him a beer.

He studies me while he pops the top. I gesture around the room.

“Go right ahead, then,” I demand. “You obviously have something to say. So what is it?”

His mouth pulls down at the corners. “Later, okay? Let’s just settle in here for a little bit first. I’m going to go grab our bags from the car.”

He sets his drink down, untouched, and stalks off toward the back of the house.

I shake my head and head outside through the French doors. I only walk twenty yards before the well-maintained grass melts away and in its place is pure rock. The dark blue sea swells and crashes against the rocks below me as I walk toward the cliff edge.

I stand still, regarding the grandeur of the ocean.

Mysterious. Enigmatic. Unknowable.

How I wish that I were more like the roiling expanse of the sea that I look down upon now.

My lips twist bitterly. No, instead I am just a chump.

Not everyone can see my soft insides, of course. I work very hard to make my outer shell as hard and spiky as possible.

But Kaia saw it.

She knew just where to hit me so that I hurt. She took advantage of that weakness, that hesitant willingness to be open with her.

As I stand and stare out at the horizon where the seemingly endless blue sky meets the curve of the dark blue water, Lucas joins me.

He looks at me, sipping his beer silently. I scowl at him.

“What?”

He shrugs a shoulder and looks at me, giving me a baffled expression.

“You pulled me out of a work meeting and said that Kaia broke up with you. Then you refused to explain any of the surrounding events. And now I'm here, apparently...” He gives me a look. “It's all your show. I don't think that you have listened to a single word I've said this entire time.”

Glaring at my brother, I look up and let my head fall back. “Is this what it feels like to be alone?”

Lucas sighs. “Are you going to tell me what happened or not? What did she do? I'm one hundred percent sure that she didn't just break up with you out of the blue.”

I purse my lips and raise my arms to the sky. “No... No, she didn't. But she did tell me that she's pregnant.”

Silence reigns for half a minute, long enough for me to slide a glance over at Lucas. He has a dumbfounded expression on his face.

“She told you she's pregnant?”

I give a bark of bitter laughter. “That's right. You heard it here first. I'm going to be a proud father. Fucking hell.”

He squints off into the distance. “So she told you that she was pregnant and then broke up with you? She didn't say anything? That doesn't sound like her.”

I pull a face. “It didn't happen exactly like that.”

He runs a hand over his face and then shoves it through his dark hair. “How about you just tell me what fucking happened and let me make up my own mind about it?”

His sharp tone catches me by surprise. I glance at him, frowning.

“We got up yesterday morning. The story about the two of us obviously broke in the morning papers. I was distracted by that... And then she sat me down and she told me that she is not only pregnant... but that she's keeping it.” I scowl. “End of story. What's so mysterious about that timeline?”

“Calum...”

I glance over at him, my gut roiling. “What?”

“Did Kaia break up with you?”

“She didn't have to. Every single time that we talked about the possibility of having kids, I was very clear with her. I told her that I wouldn't be a good father. Eventually, I told her that we could talk about it again in ten years. That was mostly just to get her off my back, though.”

He looks confused. “So did she say that she planned to get knocked up? I don't quite understand where your anger is stemming from.”

I roll my eyes. “Well, of course Kaia claims that the pregnancy was an accident...”

He cuts me off. “So let me just get this all straight. You dragged me out here after a story breaks about your life that sends our stock prices into a freefall... And you expect me to feel sorry for you because you accidentally knocked up your girlfriend?”

I narrow my gaze on his face. “You are making it sound really horrible right now and I can't even hear it. I just can't.”

He raises his arms and lets out a frustrated shout. “What the fuck, Calum? You're being a complete ass. You realize that right?”

“I'm being an ass? I'm being taken advantage of. I thought that you of all people would back me up on this.”

“That sweet girl told you that you got her pregnant on the same day that she literally *lost her job* at the ballet. But instead of supporting her, you're here whining to me because... What, you think that you won't be a good father? I can't follow your logic. I just...”

He breaks off, shaking his head.

“You are here because you're supposed to back me up. It that not what brothers do?”

He glares at me. “Not when your brother is so clearly wrong. If it's such a big deal, have her sign some legal paperwork or whatever. A prenup, whatever paperwork to curtail her spending around the kid. But for God's sake, stop telling yourself this crazy narrative that Kaia is somehow out to get you. I swear, I will never understand your fixation with your money.”

Lucas throws his hands up.

I growl at him. “What you mean, you don't understand? I haven't signed the papers yet, but you are the next owner of a billion-dollar business. You'd better start understanding it very quickly.”

He looks at me, his throat working. “Kaia loves you. I don't know why she does because you're such a dick to her. In fact, I hope that she gets wise to your bullshit. But for now, that's a simple fact. Not a lot of people in the world can say with absolute certainty that someone loves them.”

“And what about the baby? Huh? Should I just pretend that I'm happy about it?”

He crosses his arms, looking at me with intense anger. “It takes two people to make a baby, the last time I checked. She said that her pregnancy was accidental. I don't know what else to even tell you.”

I turn away from the sea and toss my full can of beer as hard as I can against the house. “Fuck! This just really fucked up my five year plan.”

My brother is quiet for a moment. “What about Kaia’s five-year plan? Or maybe you didn’t stick around to ask her about that?”

I bear my teeth and make a frustrated sound. “Fuck you. I’m going for a run.”

Without waiting for him, I turn and walk back into the house. In a few minutes, I am dressed in shorts and a T-shirt, ready for my run. I head out and start pushing myself, running at a punishing pace. Everything that I was mad about earlier still simmers within my blood but there is something new, too. A sense of uncertainty has leaked into my thoughts.

What if Lucas is right? What if I have been thinking about all of this the wrong way?

I run through the winding hillsides, trying to work out exactly what the truth is in my own mind. But it’s not so simple as just deciding what the facts may be.

No, because there is no way of knowing certain things. And because there is no knowing, it requires some degree of trust.

Trust in Kaia, yes. Obviously. But more than that...

It requires that I have faith in myself.

I have to believe that I could be someone’s father. Someone’s rock of Gibraltar.

I would have to commit to be there for someone that I don’t even know. Unconditional support. And I just can’t trust another person that much, even my unborn child.

...right?

It would require faith and trust in another person, but also in myself. I would have to be a source of strength and loyalty and I just don’t know if I have what it takes.

I push myself until I crest a hill and then I slow to a stop, my hands on my knees, unable to drag in enough breath.

Is that what this is all about? Am I lashing out at Kaia because I am afraid that I will not be enough?

As soon as I have that thought, I know that it’s dead on the money. I hold my hands out wide and scream into the surrounding hillside.

“Fuck!”

When will I learn to stop taking every petty grievance I have out on Kaia?

I imagine her right now, crying because of my words.

I did that. I hurt her.

Fuck, it's going to be so hard to undo the damage I have done.

A better question might be, how do I even go about apologizing for yesterday morning's outburst?

I take my time jogging back to the house, trying to work out what I should do in my head. When I enter through the back door, I find Lucas standing in the kitchen, drinking can of beer. He arches a single eyebrow at me.

"Well?"

The back of my neck heats. "I was wrong," I admit.

He purses his lips and nods. "Yup."

I hang my head. "I called her a whore. I told her to get out of my apartment and I called her a whore. There is no coming back from that kind of statement."

He sucks in a breath and exhales it slowly. "I think that you need to reconsider going to therapy. I don't mean this casual once a week goal should either. I mean three or four times a week for a few months at least."

He puts his hands on his hips and looks at me, waiting for my reaction. I shake my head, feeling pretty worthless.

"Do you think that will be enough to win Kaia back?"

He screws up his face. "No. I don't. But you have to do it anyway. You have to not just promise that you'll change. You have to also prove to her that you are doing everything in your power to make it stick."

My face contorts.

"Will you help me?"

It's hard to ask him that question, but it's even harder to face the future without Kaia.

But I want her in my life. I need her. Really I do.

He walks over to me and pats my shoulder. "Yeah, man. I will. You go shower and change clothes and then we will sit down and figure out a plan to keep Kaia in your life."

I look at him, swallowing against a lump of emotion that swells in my throat. "I can't lose her. I don't know how to go back to being alone."

He gives my shoulder a squeeze and then steps away.

“I know. Go shower. Then we will figure out just what to do about it.”
I nod, heading upstairs, my mind on Kaia.

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A week later, I step out of my cab and peer up at a bland beige Manhattan city building. Checking the text message that Lucas sent me earlier again, I confirmed that it's the right address. My heart pounds in my chest.

Since I walked out of the apartment that I shared with Calum, I have been keeping my head down. There have been paparazzi following me everywhere, so after practicing several evasive maneuvers, I headed to stay with my mom in a fancy hotel.

I don't know how to cope with anything. I don't know how to start planning an alternate future, one with no Calum.

A future with a baby.

I was just lying on my back, staring at the ceiling, and wishing everything had turned out differently when I got a text from Lucas.

9-1-1. Come to 4170 Jefferson Street ASAP.

Little fool that I am, I am following his instructions.

"This had better be worth my time," I mutter to myself. But I know in my heart that even if it isn't, I can't do anything about it. I feel weak and powerless without Calum here by my side, propping me up.

My stomach turns as I consider the building. This is the address that Lucas sent me, but I don't recognize it. I furrow my brow and head inside.

I enter the building, taken aback by how simple the lobby is. I assumed somehow that maybe this would be a fancy lobby but it isn't... the floors are made of brown stone and the walls are all a tan color. There is nothing special about this place at all.

I spot the building attendant sitting at a small desk by the elevators. I am a little confused walking up to him. He perks up.

“Ms. Walker?”

My heart beat speeds up even more, pounding in my ears. “That's me...” I say, confused. “Do you know why I'm here?”

He shakes his head. “Nope. I would just told to let you know that Mr. Fordham will meet you on the roof.”

“The roof?” I ask. “What's on the roof?”

He shrugs a shoulder. “No idea. I've never sent anyone up there, to be honest with you.”

I hesitate, my eyes swiveling to the elevators. Lucas didn't give me much information to go on so I am practically walking into this situation blind. I turn back to the lobby attendant.

“This building doesn't have any medical offices in it, right?”

I hate to ask, but it has definitely occurred to me that I could be walking into a women's health clinic that does very discreet terminations.

He frowns. “Not medical doctors... There are a few therapists. Does that help you in any way?”

I give him a reassuring smile. “That's fine, thanks. I should head on upstairs.”

I walk to the elevator and he just bobs his head at me.

The ride up in the elevator is mercifully swift but filled with anxiety for me. When the doors open, I expect one of two things.

Either I will see some dazzling display set up on this rooftop, yet another of Calum's apologies. There is probably a dazzling view or something worth seeing on this rooftop, in that case.

Or perhaps it is Lucas that I am here to meet. Though what he could have to say I'm not sure.

But when I step out of the elevator doors, I see neither.

Instead, I see Calum pacing back and forth on the building rooftop between two air conditioning ducts. When I step forward and clear my throat, he looks up. The expression on his face is so fraught with nerves that it somehow makes me less worried to be here.

If Calum is nervous too, I'm in good company.

He clears his throat as I approach, eyeing him carefully.

He gives me a little bow. “I wasn't sure you would come. Thank you.”

I pull the lapels of my coat tighter around me and cast my gaze over the rooftop. “I wasn't sure that I would, either. Now that I'm here, I'm not quite sure why you asked me to come.”

He jerks his head over to a rickety wooden bench that I didn't see before now. “I'm just glad you're speaking to me. Can we sit?”

My eyebrows arch delicately but I already know the answer. I nod my head and make my way over, perching on one end of the bench.

Calum sits down, sucking in a huge breath.

“I don't know quite how to begin. I guess I'll start with an apology.” He looks at me, pinning me with his gaze. “I am so sorry, Kaia. I know that probably won't go near making excuses for me or my behavior the other day...”

I cut him off. “Calum...” I sigh.

He holds up a hand. “Wait. Please, hear me out. Then you can decide whether you want to leave or stay.”

I scan his face, hesitating. My thoughts are an absolute mess. But honestly, what is the worst thing that he can do right now? After all, I'm already here. I might as well listen to what he has to say.

I cross my arms and lift a hand in a sweeping gesture. “Go ahead. Say what you came here to say.”

He inches closer to me, touching the back of my hand. My lips thin.

I don't make any move to pull away, but neither do I turn my hand over. My heart drums loudly at the very touch of his skin. I swallow and try to keep my face compose in a cool mask.

He clears his throat, looking down at our hands. “First of all, I want to apologize. I'm sorry, Kaia. I was really upset the other day, which doesn't excuse my behavior at all. I said things... I called you names... I blamed you for getting pregnant, which obviously is not your fault.”

He pauses, his mouth twisting to the side. “I know that I am not ready to be a parent just yet. But I have seven or eight months to get ready, to be a good parent and a good partner. And that's what I want.”

I squint at him. “And how are you going to do that, I wonder?”

My sarcasm doesn't go unnoticed, but he merely nods.

“I want to change. I really, really want it. I think I wanted it since before we met, honestly. I've been walking around for so long with all this anger and hatred and fear inside me, compressed down so deep that it's almost a part of who I am.” He looks up at me, his blue eyes glinting. “I knew that it

was a problem before I even ever met you. But in the process of falling in love with you, I've realized that I want more from my life than walking around angry all the time.”

I purse my lips and cock my head. He holds his hand up, signaling that he is not done.

Calum grips my hand, turning it over and stroking my palm. “I can't change alone. You have taught me that. I think that if you went back in time and talk to me several months ago, I would not believe that I am in the position that I'm in. That I'm asking you for another chance. I think I used to flit from one girl to another because it was easier than letting my heart settle down.”

I draw a deep breath. “What you're saying is good to hear. But I don't really see how you're going to change. I see willingness but I don't see a vehicle.”

He squeezes my hand again, reminding me of the connection that runs between us.

“That's actually why we are here. We are on top of the offices of Dr. Lane.”

At that word doctor, my heart rate shoots shy high. “Is this about the pregnancy?”

He shakes his head. “No. Dr. Lane is the psychologist. And he has agreed to see me. Four times a week for the next four weeks. Then we can re-assess my needs.” He squeezes my hand again.

“Please, if you can find a way to forgive me, I swear that I will work hard every day at being your perfect man. And I will use Dr. Lane to dissect why I am so afraid of having a child. By the time that the baby is born, I swear I will have my head on straight. That I promise you.”

He looks so earnest just now, peering down at me.

“Please, say you will give me another chance. It's the last one I will ever ask you for.”

I bite my lower lip, tears misting over my eyes.

“I love you, Calum. I really do.” My voice breaks. “But I can't go through this again. A person can only put up with so much, even for someone that they really love.”

He bows his head low and brings my hand up to his lips. He places a kiss there, lingering for a long moment. When he looks up again, I see a sheen of tears in his eyes.

“Please, Kaia. I love you so much. And whatever you say, I will abide by. Whatever rules you set, whatever boundaries. I will do anything for you. You have to know that.”

I swallow against the lump of emotion that rises in my throat. “You’re saying all the right things. You know that?”

He scoots a few inches closer, his eagerness apparent. “Give me another chance.”

I stare at him, my heart breaking all over again. The tide of my emotions is rushing up and any moment now, it will overrun me, make weak.

For this man sitting in front of me, there is almost nothing that I would not do, nowhere I wouldn’t go.

I already know that I’m going to say yes when I open my mouth again.

I look at him firmly, my eyes searching his. “There have to be rules,” I say. My voice is barely more than a whisper, but he hears me just fine.

The joy and relief immediately apparent on his face is about the most satisfying thing that I have ever seen.

“I love rules,” he says. He glances down and scrunches his face up. “That’s a lie, I hate them. But I can learn to love them.”

I exhale a shaky breath. “You can’t ever raise your voice to me in anger. Never, ever again. For any reason. Any time you are angry, you have to learn to control yourself. That’s my first rule.”

He grabs both my knuckles and brings them up to his mouth, kissing them.

“Anything,” he says. “I swear it.”

I nod. “I don’t forgive you. Not yet. But I am willing to work on things with you. That is, assuming you are serious about seeing a therapist.”

“Absolutely. In fact, I asked Dr. Lane to be in his office downstairs in case you were willing to start right now, this very second. I’m ready to prove myself to you.”

I have to pull one of my hands away to dash away tears that start running down my cheeks.

“Calum, I love you so much. I would do anything for you. As long as you can love our baby too, that’s enough for me. That would make my heart happy.”

He takes a deep breath. “I can’t say that I am thrilled to be a father, especially now, when you are so young. But I will work through it. I will

figure out how to be happy. I will try my absolute hardest to love this baby as much as I love you.”

I wipe both my eyes and Calum stands up, offering me his hand. I slip my smaller hand into his big one and he pulls me up right, stepping in close to press his frame against my body.

It feels endless, the act of kissing him. Without even thinking about it, my hands twine around his neck, my face tips upward, and I press up on my tiptoes. He meets me halfway, his mouth finding mine in a hungry kiss.

Demanding, possessive, searching.

I sigh against his mouth and let him in, let him invade and dominate.

Hell, I welcome it. He tastes sweet but salty, fresh but impossibly deep. My heart slams against my ribs, happy and confused and excited to be in his presence once more.

Eventually, he pulls back an inch, looking down at me. “Should we go? Dr. Lane awaits...”

I slip my arms around his shoulders and give him a quick, hard hug. “I think we should.”

He steps away and tucks my arm against his elbow, leading the way to the elevator.

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I

straighten my tie as the limo pulls up to the graveyard. Kaia reaches out and grabs my hands, leaving it and giving me a reassuring look.

“Are you sure you’re up for this?”

I push out my cheek with my tongue but then sigh. “Dr. Lane thinks that it’ll be good for me. And since I have only been seeing him for three weeks, I think that I should listen to him instead of my inner voice.”

The limo pulls to a stop. Kaia raises her eyebrows.

“What’s your inner voice telling you right now?” she asks.

I smirk at her just a little. “It’s telling me to burn it all to the fucking ground. Whatever that means.”

She smiles at me. “I’m going to be right by your side the entire time. Just say the word and we will leave.”

My lips lift at the corners. “Thanks. I think I’m ready to face Anita one last time.”

Sliding out of the car, I shade my eyes against the early autumn sunlight. Kaia immediately pulls her coat closer to her body, shivering against the cool air. I step closer to her and wrap her in one side of my coat, pulling her close. She has been persistently cold for the last two weeks, her body apparently working overtime to heat the fragile life in her womb.

“I got you,” I murmur.

She shoots me an appreciative look as we approach the cemetery gate. Just up ahead to the left of the gates is a massive mausoleum. The Fordham name is on it, big block letters chiseled into the dark granite.

After a lot of debate, the family crypt is really the only place that Anita's remains should be stored. At least this way Lucas will feel like her body was respected.

I clamp my lips shut and try not to sigh out loud.

As we get closer to the mausoleum, I can make out my brother Lucas. He's standing and talking with a pretty, dark haired girl in a stylish black minidress. Beside them is Kaia's friend Ella, looking elegant as always in her black pantsuit and slicked back dark hair.

As we approach them, Kaia lets go of my hand and hugs Ella, then gives the other girl a quick arm squeeze.

"Hello Manon. I didn't know that you would be joining us today."

Manon gives Kaia a devilish look. "Well, here I am."

Kaia chuckles. "Yes, indeed."

I quickly embrace Lucas, casting my gaze over Manon. When I pull back, Lucas clears his throat.

"Calum, this is Manon. She is... my friend."

I squint at her, a frown appearing on my face. But Dr. Lane put a few rules in place for me today, to make sure that I handle this brief ceremony as well as possible.

One of those rules is not to asked too many questions or to let myself get upset over small things. So I merely incline my head. If Manon notices my reaction, she doesn't seem to.

"Is this everyone?" Lucas asks.

I look to Kaia, arching a brow. She shakes her head.

"My mom and my sister are supposed to meet us here." She checks her phone, her mouth turning down at the corners. "They are five minutes late, though. So I say that we just get started without them."

Lucas leads the charge as we shuffle up the steps and pull open the mausoleum doors. The crypt is well kept, it's lights flickering on as soon as the doors are opened. The wall directly in front of us is a memorial for those that have died. The wall is just smooth gray stone with the names of hundreds of our relatives chiseled neatly in rows.

I wait as long as possible to follow everyone else inside. As I am crossing the threshold, I hear a woman's voice.

"We are coming! We are coming! Sorry!"

I turn and spot two figures hurrying across the graveyard, one making sure not to step on any consecrated ground. That's Kaia's mother, Serena.

Kaia's sister Hazel follow behind, seeming not to care whether she walks over graves or not.

Against my better judgment, it makes me like her a little bit more.

I wait at the door of the crypt until the two women make it up the steps and sweep past me.

Kaia's mother stops to acknowledge my recent loss; she gives my hand an awkward pat and says hello. Hazel doesn't greet anyone and just stands to the side, her expression aloof.

Introductions are made in short order, with Serena insisting on hugging everyone.

Lucas smiles a little sadly. He turns and regards the wall. "Where is Anita's name?"

Manon replies. "There it is. The last entry, Anita Cahill. No date of birth, no date of death. Just her name, plain and simple."

Lucas makes eye contact with me as Serena hugs Kaia. He raises his eyebrows and asks me a question.

"Do you want to start?"

Pursing my lips, I shake my head. "Nope. This is your show. I'm just here to support you. So say what you have come here to say."

He clears his throat, his gaze tightening on my face for a second. And then he turns away, holding out a hand to Manon. She clasps it.

He draws in a long breath.

Lucas clears his throat. "Anita was a complicated woman. There is no denying that. But I remember her best as my second mother, the one who would play hide and seek, the one who would always give me quarters for candy. She did not lead a blameless life. In fact, she was more of a villain than almost anyone I know. But we gather here today to mourn a life passed. Nothing more, nothing less."

He is quiet for a moment. Then he looks up, a tear shimmering in his eye.

He and I make eye contact. Again, he raises his brows, as if he expects me to speak. I have nothing to say, especially not over Anita's newly interred ashes. I shrug, looking instead to Kaia.

She's shivering again and that gives me a reason to open my coat and step up behind her, closing the two sides around her. She glances at me and mouths *thank you*.

My mouth curves up. There is always happiness to be found in the world, as long as she is around.

Kaia's mother clears her throat. We all look at her, surprised.

"I am afraid that I didn't know Anita. I'm only here because my daughter asked me to be. But I will say now that the souls of the dead are looked after by God, their final arbitrator. So maybe Anita find her eternal rest, whether that be among the angels or not."

She sniffles a little, clearly emotional.

Seeing her expressing emotion is hard for me, but I am determined to just let it pass. I don't need to remark on her feelings. And Dr. Lane would be proud that I recognize that.

Instead, I focus on my little family, keeping Kaia and our unborn baby warm inside my coat. That's something real, something I can touch and wrap my hands around when I need to.

Lucas glances around and sighs. "Okay. Well... I guess that's it then. Goodbye, Anita."

I bow my head, unwilling to say another goodbye such a wicked woman.

We turn and amble out of the crypt, all the shading our eyes as we re-enter the bright sun.

Kaia grabs my hand and gives it a tug. I look down at her and she nods to her mom.

I speak up. "Serena?"

Her mom turns around, raising a hand to her chest. "Yes?"

"Would you mind if we talked to you for second?"

I catch Lucas's eye and he grins at me. Apparently he knows exactly what I am about to say to Kaia's mother. Ignoring him, Kaia and I walk with Serena until there is some distance between our party and the rest of the mourners.

Serena wrinkles her brow and looks between us. "What is it? Are you moving?"

Kaia reaches out and grasps her mother's hand. "I'm just telling you because you are my mom and it's only right that you should know. But please be aware that we are not telling people yet."

Kaia's mom's eyes widen. "So you are moving?"

I smile a little. "We are expecting a child," I cut in. "It will be due in the spring time."

Serena's expression of shock is so like Kaia's, it almost takes my breath away. She blinks several times and then brings her hand to her mouth.

"Oh my God. Oh my God! That's... I'm so happy for both of you. Congratulations!"

She immediately hugs Kaia and then hugs me too, hard enough that the breath is almost knocked from my lungs. I grin a little bit at her teary-eyed exuberance.

"Thank you," Kaia says.

I follow that up with, "We are very excited. Aren't we?"

Kaia grins at me, misty eyed already. "Yes we are. We definitely are."

She offers me a kiss, chaste enough given the setting. But I take advantage of it, pulling her in close and kissing her more deeply.

That's the thing with Kaia. There will never be enough kisses. Never be too much sex or too much intimacy.

It turns out, that's what I crave most. I've slowly discovered that in my sessions with Dr. Lane.

It doesn't hurt that I also have a gorgeous girlfriend.

Eventually I am forced to let Kaia go. But I know that as soon as her family is gone, she'll come right back to me, into my arms, intending on staying there forever.

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*L*ooking around the dance studio, I bring my hands around my midsection and rub my belly. I've only just begun to really show. Since I have taken this position as a dance instructor, I still wear the same tights and leotard as when I was a ballerina.

But soon, they are definitely going to be too small for my growing body.

I clap my hands together a few times, calling the class of twelve-year-olds to order. "All right, all right! Can everybody please get settled in your places at the barre? It's time for class to begin."

Tittering and moving easily in their ballet slippers, the students spread out and settle into the barre.

I walk around the room, checking that everyone is at least a few feet from their closest neighbors. "Betsy?" I wave my hand, shooing her backwards a couple steps. "There you go. That's better.

"Thanks Ms. Walker."

I smiled coolly, trying to appear serene. These young girls don't know that it seems like only yesterday that I was their age.

I take a deep breath in and let it out slowly. "Okay, everyone. Let's start with some simple pliés. Can anyone demonstrate first position plié for the class?"

Several hands shoot up. I look around and call on one of the students. "Ashley?"

Ashley puts her feet into first position and then pliés beautifully. It's obvious to me that she has quite a bit of potential. She certainly works hard, which is at least half the battle.

“Okay, I’m going to turn the music on.” I walk over to the little boombox, pressing play. A lively Chopin tune begins to play. I turn to the class and count things off.

“All right! One, two, three, four, and—“

As the class begins to practice their moves, I walk around and point out little mistakes. Someone’s feet are placed too far apart. Another girl’s back is not ramrod straight. Several girls are too wrapped up in the action of pliéing to tuck their tummies like they are supposed to do.

As I walk, I become aware of my tights once more. They chafe against my skin and remind me that tomorrow, I am going shopping for a better fitting pair.

The studio door opens. I turn and see Ella stride in, dressed head to toe as if she is still dancing in the New York ballet.

I lift a brow at her but she just smiles broadly at me and strides into the middle of the room, striking a pose. Then the door opens again and Manon comes in, dressed in her best ballet gear. With her white tights and leotard and her bright red pointe shoes, she cuts quite a figure. She pirouettes down the second row of girls and my class grows confused.

Everyone stops what they are doing and watches Manon.

“Ella, Manon...” I laugh. “We were in the middle of practicing pliés!”

My pleas fall on deaf ears, it seems. Ella and Manon don’t even look at me. In fact, it seems that they have frozen in place.

Just as my smile begins to falter, the door to the studio opens again. Only this time, it’s all the dancers from the New York Ballet. Everyone I’ve danced with, most of them for years. They are decked out in colorful costumes, some of which I even recognize from my time spent there.

Basil comes in next, grinning ear to ear and leaping as high as anyone. Say what you will about the man, but his body is still athletic, his physique still in its prime. I laugh a little, shocked, and bring my hands up to my mouth.

“What is happening?” I wonder aloud. “What is all this?”

No answer seems to be forthcoming. I find that a little frustrating but I go along with it, as it seems that everyone is having a grand old time.

Lucas enters the room, surprising me by being a rather excellent ballet dancer. He’s clearly rusty, but he does a few grand jetés and manages to sweep of bow in my direction before he takes up a kneeling position on the far side of the room.

I look at him and my heart beat starts drumming in my chest.
If Lucas is here, Calum is surely not far behind.

True to form, the last one in the door is the love of my life. Calum enters, dark and dashing as always, quickly executing a combination of jumps and pirouettes that leave me a little breathless.

I clasp my hands together and bite my lower lip, my eyes already misting over.

Calum looks directly at me, withdrawing a single red rose and dancing up to me. He gets down on one knee, handing the rose up to me.

Delighted, I step forward and take the rose from him.

“Maestro?” he calls.

Lucas steps forward, walking to the boom box and plugging his phone in. In seconds, he starts playing some Tchaikovsky. I soon recognize it as a song from Sleeping Beauty, a pas de deux from a scene near the end.

Calum bows to me, extending a hand. I step forward, slipping my hand into his.

“Do you remember the steps to this scene?”

I blush, my eyes locking on him. “I do...” I say quietly.

He grins. “Will you dance with me?”

“Of course,” I say, a little breathless.

His hands settle on my waist. I raise my arms over my head and ready myself. Then we are off, Calum lifting me as though I am almost weightless. I grin at him as I dance around him, pirouetting up a storm. He leaps and I perform a grand jeté.

As he lands, he pulls a light blue ring box from his pocket. He goes down on one knee, looking up at me with the sincerest expression.

I falter, stopping just before him. He takes my hand.

The whole world ceases to exist outside of the two of us.

“Kaia...”

“Yes, Calum?” I say, trying hard not to burst into tears.

He grips my hand. “Let me start off by saying that I know we have had a rough go of it. Things have been a little wild.”

I laugh. “A little, yes.”

“Still. We have weathered the storm together. We have a child on the way. And I think it’s time that we made the last step toward being together.”

He opens the ring box, flashing a huge diamond.

I put my hands over my mouth, my eyes filling with tears. “Are you serious right now?”

“I am as serious as I can be, Kaia. I want you to be my wife. I want to give you my name. I want a happily ever after and I know that you are the only person in the world that can give it to me.”

I burst into tears. “Calum!”

He smirks. “Kaia Walker. No one has ever come close to meaning as much to me as you have. The first moment that we met, you looked right through me. You see me for exactly what I am. You made me love you even though I didn’t want to love anyone. I didn’t think that... that I *should*.”

He pauses, getting emotional. I can see a sheen in his eyes, the threat of tears. “I just love you so fucking much.”

“Hey! Language, please. We are in a kid’s dance class.” I draw in a shaky breath. “But it’s important for you to know that I love you too, Calum.”

He gives his head a shake. “You are everything to me. Please do me the immense honor of saying that you’ll be mine, officially, *forever*.”

In this moment, I find myself too overcome with joy to say anything meaningful. So I just nod enthusiastically, beaming at Calum. “Yes.”

His eyebrows shoot up. “Yes? You’ll marry me?”

I nod, trying not to burst into tears. “Yes!”

He climbs to his feet, pulling me into his embrace. I tip my head up and kiss him hard, my hand on his cheek. He wipes away my tears and turns around, gesturing to everyone.

“She said yes!” he crows.

Everyone cheers. I smile so hard that my cheeks start hurting. He cups my belly for a brief moment and kisses me on the lips again. Then he slides a gigantic, flawless diamond onto my finger.

I don’t care about the ring. I don’t even give it a second thought.

No, I’m too busy staring at my fiancé, disbelieving that this is even happening.

“I love you so much,” I say. “And I can’t wait to be yours.”

He gives me a squeeze. “Forever?”

I grin at him. “Forever.”

I lean my head against his chest and know that he really means it.

S even Months Later

“AGGGHHHHH!” I shout.

I definitely dropped a Dorito from the bed onto the floor. I turn my head but I can’t see it.

I groan again. “This is stupid.” I look down at my engorged belly, my face contorting. “This is why you need to get out, little girl. It’s definitely time.”

I’m a week overdue, as big a the fucking moon. Add to that I’m confined to bed rest until the baby comes and you’ve got the exact recipe for my intense frustration.

Calum pops his head in the bedroom, scrutinizing me. “What’s going on?”

I wrinkle my nose. “Everything is the worst, in case you were curious. I just dropped a chip and I can’t see where it went.”

He steps more fully into the room. It’s evident that he has just been for a run because he’s wearing his running clothes, black Lycra pants and a sweaty white t-shirt. He has an amused smile playing across his lips.

He bends down and picks up the tortilla chip. “Ta-da!”

I scrunch my face up and reach for the chip. He gives me an odd look, pulling it out of my reach. When I make a disgruntled sound, he laughs.

“What, did you want it back or something?” he asks. He walks to the bathroom to throw the chip away. When he comes back, he’s stripped off his shirt, leaving his muscular torso bare.

Immediately I lose interest in the chip. Instead, I beckon to him.

“Come here,” I say. “I’ll forgive you throwing away my Dorito if you come over here and help me with something.”

He purses his lips and looks at me. “What’s that?”

I give him a winning smile. “I’m ready for this baby to come out. I want to wear my freaking engagement ring again. I want to be able to walk around the house. And I’m not even kidding when I say that I want to eat my weight in sushi and drink several huge lattes.”

“Uh huh.” He saunters over to the bed, looking down at me. “I guess decaf just isn’t cutting it?”

I bite my lower lip seductively. At least I hope it’s sexy; I lost all sense of what was attractive the minute I could no longer fit in my maternity pants anymore.

“I read an article online that said that having sex can help jumpstart the process.” I flutter my lashes. “I need you to fuck me.”

Calum blinks, taken by surprise. “Is that... like, okay for the baby?”

I press a hand against my swollen belly. “She’s fine. I’m going stir crazy in this bedroom, though. Besides, it’s been a while since we were intimate.”

He barks a laugh. “It’s been sixty three days since I’ve actually come inside you. Not that anyone is counting.”

I shrug a shoulder. “Your time has come. You aren’t just getting laid, you’re essentially going to be doing god’s work.”

He grins at me. “Well, if you say it like that...”

He moves closer, his eyes telling me just what he intends to do with me. I sit up straight and reach up to him; he kisses me eagerly, nudging me back onto the bed. He kneels over me, his lips roaming to my neck, my collar bone, my exquisitely tender breasts.

“Ohhhh,” I breathe.

He works a finger beneath the sash of my robe, undoing the bow. He carefully pushes the silk aside, baring my body to him.

I feel shy, my hands covering my huge baby bump, but he’s having none of that. He grabs both of my hands, pinning them above my head, looking down at me.

“Do you even know how fucking hot you are?” he asks. He kisses my lips slowly. “I’ve wanted you so bad the last couple of weeks, Kaia.”

Calum releases my hands, pulling down the cups of my bra to expose my pink nipples. He looks at me, maintaining eye contact as he takes a nipple in his mouth. I squirm; his tongue sliding against my nipple feels so damn good.

He moves his lips from my nipple back up to my mouth. I growl with sudden impatience, pushing him to the side a little so I can get my robe off. He unhooks my bra with one hand, and I slide my bra straps down my shoulders, baring my breasts.

“Jesus,” he says, his eyes fastened on my breasts.

I feel shy suddenly, wondering if he’s noticing how my breasts have changed, growing heavy and veiny. But he just reaches out with one hand and cups the heaviness of my breast, awestruck.

“Fuck. Your breasts have literally never looked better. They’re so fucking perfect.”

Now that I’ve got my bra off, I’m only interested in seeing more of him.

“You’re wearing too many layers,” I say.

He pauses for a second, then backs up. It takes him about three seconds to kick off his tennis shoes and strip off his black Lycra pants. I’ve never been so glad to see my own husband’s cock as I am in this moment when he bares himself to me.

Calum stands there for a second, stroking his rock-hard cock, looking at me. And I stare right back at him; he’s all lean flesh and muscle, dark hair and stubble.

I’m not sure how I got so lucky, having such a man’s man want *me*, but I don’t question it.

“How are we going to do this?” he asks speculatively, looking at me curiously. “Doggy style? I’m horny as fuck but I don’t want to do anything to upset *her*.”

“You won’t,” I promise. I bite my lip suggestively and turn over, putting my ass in the air. It takes everything I’ve got to balance myself with my pregnant stomach, but he doesn’t have to know that.

“Grab a few pillows,” he suggests, cupping my ass. “Get comfy.”

I flush and do as he says, because god knows I am uncomfortable ninety nine percent of the time now.

He growls and falls over my back, stopping himself with an arm. He kisses the back of my neck and I shiver. Calum's hands cup my hips, squeezing.

“Mmmm,” I sigh. He peels off my underwear, leaving me bare before him.

Excitement skitters down my spine as his big hands shape my ass. He reaches between my legs, his touch gentle. I suck in a breath as he finds my clit with two fingers.

It feels so incredibly good that I grind against his hand. If I’m horny, it usually drives him crazy.

“You like that?” he says. I look back at him, blushing at the dirty tone of his voice.

“Mhm,” I moan. “Keep touching me.” I grab his free hand and bring it up to my breast. “Touch me everywhere, Calum.”

He just grins and slips a single finger into my pussy. “Fuckkkkk. You’re so wet, beauty. Are you getting ready for me?”

His words make me ache.

“Fuck me,” I demand, pushing my ass back against his hand. “I’m ready, baby.”

“God damn,” he says.

Calum fists his cock in his hand and positions it near my entrance. He rubs the head against my slit, groaning. “Fuck, beauty. Do you know how perfect you are?”

I groan, pressing my weight back against him. I’m actually pretty turned on right now, my pregnancy hormones flooding my brain all the sudden. “Show me.”

He notches his head against my pussy, going very very slow. He only gets the head in before he starts to curse.

“Fuck,” he says. “God damn, it’s been too long since I’ve had you.”

My pussy is so ready for more.

“Oh, god,” I moan, clutching the sheets. “I need you so bad. *Please.*”

He slides home, filling me up all the way. I’ve never been quite so full, but I feel that in the best way possible. I feel him hesitate, so I encourage him.

“Yes,” I moan. He withdraws and begins to plunge back in. I cry out. “Right there, but *harder.*”

“Cool your jets, beauty. I’m trying not to come in three seconds. Maybe I should masturbate first...”

When he starts to withdraw, I grab at him. “Not a chance. Don’t tease me. I need your cock right now, baby.”

Calum flashes me a smirk. “Well, when you put it like that...”

I thrust my ass back against him impatiently. “Calum!” I whine.

He starts up a steady rhythm of thrusting while he reaches around to my front. Calum begins strumming my clit, which sends waves of sensation through my body. I start moaning, using one hand to tweak my own nipple.

“Fuck, beauty,” Calum groans. “I’m not going to last long.”

“Then do it harder,” I whisper. “Fuck me like you mean it.”

He takes my words to heart and starts moving harder and faster. I’m carried away on a raft of sensation, clenching my eyes shut.

It’s not hard to lose myself, between Calum’s thrusts and his clever fingers on my clit. I close my eyes and concentrate on the orgasm building inside me. With each thrust, I get closer until suddenly I shatter, crying out Calum’s name.

He comes just after me, his breathing ragged. I sag, losing the will to hold up my body any longer. Calum chuckles and kisses my lower back before he withdraws.

I turn on my side, looking down at my big belly. I’m still breathing hard. “We must’ve done it wrong.”

He sits up, suddenly alert. “Are you okay? What’s wrong?”

I wave him back down. “Sorry, sorry. I didn’t intend to scare you. I just mean that I don’t feel a change.”

He shoots me a look. “You almost gave my a heart attack, beauty.”

Calum drops a kiss onto my bare shoulder, sliding his arm around my big belly. I lay back, still trying to catch my breath. He traces a pattern around my bellybutton and bites my shoulder gently.

“I think I’ve finished seeing Dr. Lane so frequently,” he sighs.

I glance back at him, surprised. “Yeah?”

He nods. “He said I should drop my sessions down to once per week. He also complimented me on how much progress I’ve made so far.”

It takes some effort to shift onto my back. I glance at Calum, my hand going to his cheek. “I’m so proud of you.”

He looks down and shrugs a shoulder. “Thanks.”

Catching his hand, I bring his fingers to my lips and kiss them briefly.
“You are going to be a good father.”

He glances at me, a little of his apprehension showing. “You think so?”
“I know so. You’re ready.”

He slips his hand over my belly again and gives me a hug. “Thanks, beauty. I am so fucking nervous.”

I smile at him. “You and me both. But between the two of us, we can figure it out. And my mom is eager to help...”

He is quiet for several long beats. “Hey, I was thinking about what we should name our little girl.”

I put my arm behind my head and arch a brow. “Oh?”

Calum inclines his head. “I think the name Charlotte is nice.”

I squint. “After your mother?”

He nods, his mouth turning down at the corners. “Yeah. I mean, I know she had her demons—“

I stop him by putting a hand on his chest. He looks over at me.

“I love it,” I tell him. “Charlotte sounds perfect. Charlotte Fordham is a really lovely name.”

He moves toward me, kissing my lips. “I know I’ve already told you this, but I love you, Kaia.”

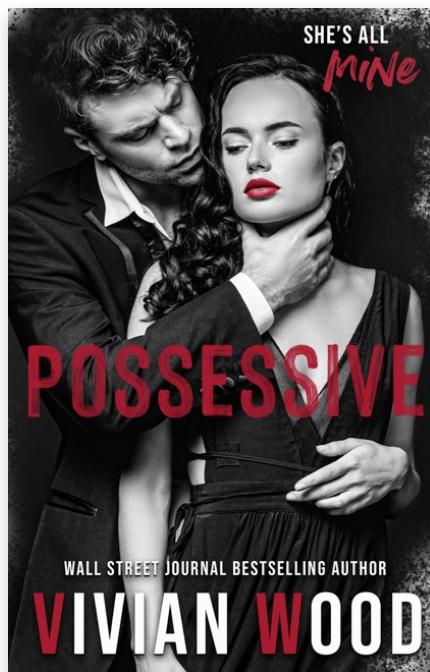
I grin at him. “I love you too, Calum.”

I burrow into his arms, the place that I will stay for the rest of my life.

THE END

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